

**Application for
Excellence in Scholarship &
Creative Endeavors Award
(University Level)**

submitted by:
Professor Peter Selgin

February 2025

Table of Contents

Award Application Form	1
Nomination/Chair Letter	2
Depth of Scholarship / Reputation of Venues.....	4
Support Letter #1	7
Support Letter #2	9
List of Scholarly / Creative Endeavors	11
Reflective Statement	12
Evidence / Support Materials	13
Book Publication (<i>A Boy's Guide to Outer Space</i>)	13
Townsend Award Nomination	14
<i>A Boy's Guide to Outer Space</i>	16
Reviews.....	314
Play Publication (<i>A God in the House</i>).....	319
<i>A God in the House</i>	320
Play Production (<i>A God in the House</i>)	385
Group Art Exhibition (Aldrich Museum)	388
Solo Art Exhibition / Retrospective (GCSU).....	393
"The Two Sides of Peter Selgin") profile article	398
"Penny Sufferings" (fiction publication)	399
Book Publication (<i>Duplicity</i>).....	407
<i>Duplicity</i>	408
Kirkus Review of <i>Duplicity</i>	798
<i>Transformations</i> (article/interview re: <i>Duplicity</i>)	799
Book Publication (<i>Your First Page</i>)	805
<i>Your First Page</i>	806
Book Cover Designs.....	1163
"Rules of the Association" (story publication)	1164
"A Matter of Perspective" (essay publication)	1172

Academic Affairs Excellence Awards

Application Form



Name: **Peter Selgin**

Rank: **Professor**

Department: **English / Creative Writing**

Award applying for:

(Check one)

☐	Excellence in Teaching Award*
☐	Excellence in Online Teaching Award*
☒	Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award*
☐	Excellence in University Service*
☐	Excellence in Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Award*
☐	Department/Program Excellence Award^
☐	Irene Rose Community Service Award^
☐	Laurie Hendrickson McMillian Faculty Award^

*college selection required before being forwarded to university

^university awards

College nominees' final applications received by Center for Teaching and Learning (ctl@gcsu.edu) by March 1.

Please insert the required documentation in the pages below for the award category you have noted above. Detailed information associated with each award is available online at the [Center for Teaching and Learning website](#).



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GEORGIA COLLEGE & STATE UNIVERSITY

February 13, 2025

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing with enthusiasm and admiration to recommend Professor Peter Selgin for the University's Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award. A lauded and respected artist and creative writing faculty member, Professor Selgin embodies the spirit of creative excellence that this prestigious award seeks to recognize. His prolific and substantial contributions across the diverse artistic disciplines of literature, visual arts, and theater over the past two years make him an inspiring member of our academic and creative communities.

Professor Selgin continues to distinguish himself in the literary arts. His literary accomplishments include the publication of his third novel, *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*, by Regal House Publishing in November 2024, which has garnered critical acclaim and recognition as a finalist for Georgia's 2025 Townsend Prize for Fiction to be awarded in April 2025. An earlier version of the novel won the prestigious William Faulkner / William Wisdom Award for Best Novel. Professor Selgin published *DUPLICITY* (Serving House Books, 2020), a novel that received favorable reviews from *Kirkus*, *California Review of Books*, *Diagram*, and the *Center for Literary Publishing*, among other outlets. It was a winner of the Best Indie Book Award (General Fiction, 2021) and a finalist for the Foreword Indie Award, the Steel Toe Boots Book Prize, the Big Other Book Award, and the Bridge Book Award (sponsored by the Center for Fiction).

In addition to his achievements in fiction, Professor Selgin authored *YOUR FIRST PAGE: First Pages and What They Tell Us about the Pages that Follow Them* (Broadview Press, 2019), a writing pedagogy textbook endorsed by Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Olen Butler. This work has solidified his reputation as a mentor and educator, guiding emerging writers in mastering their craft. He also contributed to the writing community through his column "Your First Page," with over 20 columns published on Jane Friedman's website, a platform widely respected among writers.

Professor Selgin's success in fiction writing complements his broader body of work, which includes twelve published books across genres. His nonfiction and essays, including notable publications such as "A Matter of Perspective" in *Transformations* and several essays for

CRAFT Literary, demonstrate his versatility and depth as a writer.

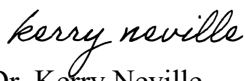
His two-act play, *A God in the House*, premiered in July 2023 at the Town & Gown Players' Second Stage Series. A profound exploration of ethics, dignity, and human connection inspired by Dr. Jack Kevorkian and his "Thanatron" (euthanasia device), the play was praised for its poignancy and craftsmanship. Subsequently published by Next Stage Press in March 2024, *A God in the House* stands as a testament to Professor Selgin's talents as a playwright and his ability to tackle challenging themes with nuance and humanity.

In addition to his literary successes, Professor Selgin is also a respected visual artist. In January 2023, the Underwood Gallery at Georgia College hosted "Peter Selgin: A Retrospective of Visual Art," a comprehensive exhibition curated by Megan McNaught. Featuring seventy-five works spanning five decades, the exhibit showcased Professor Selgin's talents in watercolors, drawings, graphic design, and painting, including pieces from his critically acclaimed series "Titanic in Dream & Memory," which garnered national attention on NPR and in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Beyond his individual creative achievements, Professor Selgin has contributed to our broader literary and artistic community. Over the past two years, he has designed more than fifty book covers for esteemed literary presses such as Dzanc Books, University of Chicago Press, and Bellevue Literary Press. He is also committed to education and mentorship beyond GCSU's classrooms, leading seminars such as "Your First Page" at the Georgia Writers Museum and the Atlanta Writer's Club and providing invaluable guidance to aspiring writers.

Professor Selgin's contributions over the past two years across disciplines—from the visual arts to literature and theater—exemplify excellence in creative endeavors. His work enriches the cultural and intellectual life of our university and beyond. For these reasons, I cannot think of a more deserving recipient of the University's Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award.

Sincerely,



Dr. Kerry Neville
Interim Department Chair
Associate Professor
Department of English
Georgia College and State University

February 15, 2025

To the University Excellence in Scholarship Award Committee:

With respect to my major creative endeavors of the past five years, here is my letter testifying to their originality, the reputations and scopes of the presses that published or venues that produced or exhibited them, and the relationship of the works to the state of the discipline.

1. Book Publication: *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*, November 2024

My third novel and twelfth published book, *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*, was published in November of 2024 by Regal House Publishing. The novel has garnered favorable reviews in [Publishers Weekly](#), [Foreword](#), [California Review of Books](#), and other review outlets, and is a finalist for the [2025 Townsend Prize for Fiction](#). *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space* was a finalist for the [International Book Award \(General Fiction\)](#) and shortlisted for the [Steel Toe Books Book Award \(2022\)](#). An early version of the novel (titled "The Water Master") won the [Pirate's Alley Faulkner Prize for Best Novel](#), judged by Random House Editor-in-Chief Will Murphy.

About [Regal House Publishing](#): Each year Regal House and its imprints publish a limited number of books by award-winning authors, including literary fiction, contemporary fiction, historical fiction, memoirs, poetry collections, as well as short story collections. Their scope is national. Regal House Publishing is a member of the Independent Book Publishers Association, the American Booksellers Association, the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance, and the Children's Book Council. Their books are distributed by The Independent Publishers Group (IPG).

2. Play Publication: *A God in the House*, November 2023

Following its premiere production in July of 2023, *A God in the House* was published by Next Stage Press. Based on Dr. Kevorkian and his "suicide device" and modeled on Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the play is about a doomed relationship between a music teacher with Alzheimer's disease who has chosen to end her life and the retired pathologist and inventor a device for helping the terminally ill "die with dignity" for which he has been shunned by the medical establishment. An earlier version of the play won the [Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference](#) Award and the [Mill Mountain Theatre](#) New Plays Award. It received an equity-waiver workshop production by [The Director's Company](#) in New York City and was subsequently optioned for Off-Broadway.

About [Next Stage Press](#): Next Stage Press is publishing company dedicated primarily to plays and theatrical works, focusing on "next stage" or emerging playwrights and works that could benefit from exposure in the theatre world. The press has a national scope, publishing produced, award-winning plays from across the United States.

<https://next-stage-press.myshopify.com/products/a-god-in-the-house-by-peter-selgin>.

5. Theatrical (Play) Production: "A God in the House," July 2023

In July of 2023 my two-act drama, *A God in the House*, premiered at Town & Gown Players as part of its Second Stage Series. [This was the play's first full production](#). Regional in scope.

About the [Town & Gown Players](#): Town & Gown Players, Inc. has been producing live theatre for the Athens, Ga., community continuously since 1953. The regional theater has made its home in Athens since 1968, has won numerous honors and awards and has produced hundreds of plays by acclaimed and emerging playwrights. [Click here for a video of the July 9 matinee performance](#).

6. Group Artistic Exhibition: Aldrich Museum, Richfield, Ct., February 6 - August 27, 2023

My painting, “Moses as Mendeleev,” formerly owned by author/neurologist Oliver Sacks and currently by the Oliver Sacks Foundation, was among featured works in the exhibition *Prima Materia: The Periodic Table in Contemporary Art*, at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Richfield, Ct. From the catalogue: *Prima Materia: The Periodic Table in Contemporary Art* is conceived of as a group exhibition linking individual works of art with an element from the periodic table which each work incorporates. *Prima Materia* will explore hard facts as well as alchemical conjecture.” The exhibit was curated by independent curator and artist Richard Klein, The Aldrich's former Exhibitions Director.

<https://thealdrich.org/exhibitions/prima-materia>

Catalog: https://thealdrich.org/client-uploads/files/Prima-Materia_PR_The-Aldrich_9.8.22.pdf

About Curator Richard Klein: Richard Klein is a curator, artist, and writer. Since 1999 he was Exhibitions Director of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. In his twenty-year career as a curator of contemporary art, he has organized over 80 exhibitions, including solo shows of the work of Roy Lichtenstein, Sol LeWitt, and many others. Major curatorial projects at The Aldrich have included Fred Wilson: *Black Like Me* (2006), *No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art* (2006), Elizabeth Peyton: *Portrait of an Artist* (2008). Klein has acted as a guest curator at numerous institutions, including Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ, and Chesterwood National Trust for Historic Preservation, Stockbridge, MA.

About the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art: Founded by art collector and fashion designer Larry Aldrich in 1964, the Aldrich is one of the oldest contemporary art museums in the United States. It is one of the few independent institutions in the country and the only museum in Connecticut dedicated to the presentation of contemporary art. The museum's scope is national.

7. Solo Artistic Exhibition: Underwood Gallery, Georgia College, Jan. 12 - Feb. 23, 2023

“Peter Selgin: A Retrospective of Visual Art.” Sponsored by Georgia College Art Department, curated by Gallery Director Megan McNaught, and held at the Underwood Gallery from January 12, 2023 through February 23, 2023, this exhibit featured seventy-five works spanning my fifty-year career as a visual artist. The exhibit including watercolors, pen and ink drawings, graphic designs, children's book, and other illustrations (including several for *The New Yorker* magazine), as well as paintings, including some from the series “Titanic in Dream & Memory” that was the subject of an NPR interview with Susan Stamberg and that were featured in the *Wall Street Journal*. The opening reception featured music by violinist David Johnson and a reading of my essay, “A Matter of Perspective,” written for the event.

About Megan McNaught (exhibit curator): Megan McNaught has taught foundations at Montserrat College of Art, was Assistant Professor, Chair of Interdisciplinary and Fine Art and Gallery Director at Chester College of New England and faculty at the Community Colleges of Rhode Island, Middlesex Community College and Middle Georgia State University. As curator, Megan has been Gallery Director at Chester College of New England, Director of Curation for the Macon Arts Alliance and Curator of Art at the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Macon Ga. As a painter she has exhibited nationally.

Peter Selgin Visual Art Portfolios: <https://peterselgincoverdesign.com/portfolios/>

Georgia College Department of Art: <https://www.gcsu.edu/artsandsciences/art>

8. Book Publication: *Duplicity*, Serving House Books, 2020 (novel). The novel garnered favorable reviews from [Kirkus](#), [California Review of Books](#), [Diagram](#), [Big Other](#), and the [Center for Literary Publishing](#), and other outlets, and was a winner of the [Best Indie Book Award](#) (general fiction, 2021) and the [National Indie Excellence Award](#) (literary fiction, 2021), as well as a finalist for the [Foreword Indie Award](#), the [Steel Toe Boots Book Prize](#), the [Big Other Book Award](#), and the [Bridge Book Award](#) (sponsored by the Center for Fiction).

About Serving House Books: Founded by Thomas E. Kennedy and Walter Cummins in 2009, Serving House publishes books by award-winning authors whose works don't fit the agendas of large commercial publishers, as well as acclaimed out-of-print works. Award-winning authors include Gary Fincke, Duff Brenna, Linda Lappin, Gladys Swan and Donna Baer Stein.

9. Book Publication: *Your First Page: First Pages and What They Tell Us about the Pages that Follow Them*, Broadview Press, 2019 (writing pedagogy/textbook). Endorsed by [Robert Olen Butler](#), Pulitzer Prize winner (for fiction, 1993) and author of the acclaimed fiction writer's guide *From Where Your Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*. "With an emphasis on the creative process itself, I have long taught the critical importance of the first few pages of any work of fiction. What a delight to find a smart, perceptive, enormously useful book that focuses on the craft and technique issues of these same make-or-break first 500 words. I heartily recommend Peter Selgin's *Your First Page to any aspiring young writer*." This first and only book about first pages demonstrates how they function as canaries in coal mines, how nearly all that one needs to know about a work-in-progress can be gleaned from close analysis of them, making it possible to provide far more feedback to students in less time.

About [Broadview Press](#): Founded in 1985, Broadview Press remains a fully independent academic publisher owned by mostly by either Broadview employees or Broadview authors. Broadview is supported by a collaboration with Trent University, a liberal arts university located in Peterborough, Ontario—the city where Broadview was founded and continues to operate. From the website: "We produce high-quality, pedagogically useful, English-language works and translations from many parts of the world. Our books are available world-wide; we also publish a select list of titles with a specifically Canadian emphasis."

10. Book Cover Designs (ongoing)

Over the past five years, working weekends as a professional graphic designer, I've created over one-hundred original book cover designs for independent and university presses, including several for award-winning books and authors (Jerome Charyn, Michelle Herman, Scott Nadelson, Thomas E. Kennedy, Ellen Birkett Morris). My clients have included Dzanc Books, the Bellevue Literary Press, Ohio State University Press, University of Chicago Press, Cato Institute, and Columbus University Press. (My work as a graphic artist informs my teaching of "Journal Design, Conception, Editing, and Production" offered by GCSU's English Department.)

More of my cover/graphic art can be seen here: <https://peterselgincoverdesign.com/>

Miscellaneous / Other Accomplishments 2019 – 2024

Short Story/Fiction Publications:

["Rules of the Association,"](#) *Failbetter.com*, June 2022

["Penny Sufferings,"](#) *Big Other*, March 2021

Published Creative Nonfiction/Essays:

["A Matter of Perspective,"](#) *Transformations*, August 2021

["More than Mere Oblivion: Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book*,"](#) *Craft Literary*, Jan. 2021

["Master of the Touching Detail: Emmanuel Bove,"](#) *Craft Literary*, Sept. 2020

["An Extremely Disorganized Life: Dazai's *No Longer Human*,"](#) *Craft Literary*, May 2020

["Cover Stories,"](#) *Grub Street*, February 2020

Column: (over 30 columns published)

["Your First Page,"](#) column for *Jane Friedman.com* (writing coach/guru) website. Sept. - Dec. 2019

Articles & Interviews

["The Two Sides of Peter Selgin,"](#) by Donald Friedman, *Donald Friedman.com*, Feb. 10, 2022

["The Art of the Opening: Peter Selgin on *Your First Page*,"](#) **Craft Literary**, May 2021



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2/20/25

Applicant Review Committee
Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavor Award
Georgia College & State University

Re: Applicant Peter Selgin

Dear Members of the Committee:

I recently reviewed the research and creative endeavor of applicant Peter Selgin for the period under review. Although I am well-acquainted with the full range of Prof. Selgin's professional accomplishments, including his work as a playwright (including his acclaimed play, *A God in the House*) a visual artist (including his many distinctive covers for *Arts & Letters*, GCSU's highly respected international journal of poetry and prose, and several other literary presses across the nation), and his excellent record as a teacher (irrelevant to this particular award), in this letter I am going to restrict my evaluation to the area in which I am qualified and regularly called upon to serve as an outside referee or judge: Prof. Selgin's work as a literary writer and scholar.

As a scholar, Prof. Selgin's achievements during the period under review are best represented by his craft text, *Your First Page: First Pages and What They Tell Us about the Pages that Follow Them* (Broadview Press, 2019). Broadview is a widely respected international publisher in the humanities, specializing in texts on the craft of writing. During my years on the Board of Directors of The Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP, the international organization for creative writers who teach), one of my duties was to chair the Professional Standards Committee, which advised both institutions and individuals about best practices in the field of creative writing education. I can say without hesitation that *Your First Page* is the most comprehensive and informative resource for writers to study the myriad ways one may begin a work of creative prose. I regard it as a substantial contribution to our field.

As a writer, Prof. Selgin's major contributions were two novels: *Duplicity* (Serving House Books, 2020) and *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space* (Regal House Publishing, 2024). Serving House Books was founded by two significant names in literary studies: Walter Cummins and Thomas Kennedy, names prominent among critical readers and fellow practitioners of the art. Don't be deceived by its name; Serving House is no respect a vanity press. It gained its considerable reputation by bringing acclaimed books back into print, as well as by publishing heavily refereed original works. Regal House is a large independent publisher that distributes its books internationally. It publishes works by both established and new authors and is notoriously difficult to crack by either group. Among all categories of independent publishers, both of these houses are considered prestigious.

Duplicity is likely to be the book for which Prof. Selgin is most remembered. *Duplicity* is a seminal example of metafiction. In merely five years, it has established a reputation for both defining and circumventing nearly all the conventions of storytelling. Its primary first-person narrator is not merely *aware* of his many roles as storyteller, he actually works to *undermine* his own authority through overtly duplicitous means. The result is a playful, yet serious, seemingly chaotic, but actually carefully controlled, narrative that produces considerable comedy and every kind of irony one could name. The reputation of this book is substantial and still growing.

A Boy's Guide to Outer Space is a more traditional narrative and, in some respects, an even more satisfying one, featuring a protagonist/narrator the reader learns to increasingly appreciate and sympathize with as the story unfolds. Like *Duplicity*, the reputation of *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space* is growing. Having already received the nationally prestigious William Faulker/William Wisdom Award for Best Novel, *A Boy's Guide* is currently a semi-finalist for the Townsend Prize for Fiction.

Overall, I would say that, like the three books I've briefly described, Peter Selgin's reputation as a literary artist is both established and expanding. Prof. Selgin is clearly in his prime as a scholar/practitioner and even more clearly deserving of recognition from the institution to whom he has brought considerable attention and prestige. He has certainly earned the Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavor Award.

Sincerely,

Steve Heller

Dr. Steve Heller, Professor & Chair
MFA in Creative Writing Program
Antioch University Los Angeles (retired)

Past President, Board of Directors
The Association of Writers & Writing Programs



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GEORGIA COLLEGE & STATE UNIVERSITY

21 Feb. 2025

To Whomever It May Concern at Georgia College and State University:

I am delighted to recommend **Peter Selgin** for our University's Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award. I have known Selgin since he came to GCSU, and I have closely followed his artistic career. As a senior professor, I've observed his excellent teaching, but I read his books for fun. I simply cannot imagine a better candidate for the Award.

Before I get too far into this recommendation, I want to tell a brief story. I once had a colleague (at another school) who told me he was envious of the writing career of my wife, the poet Alice Friman. Why the envy? Whereas my colleague had to conduct research, Alice could simply go sit on a rock somewhere and jot down whatever happened to occur to her. Don't worry: I let this colleague live, and I won't reveal his academic field. But his attitude remains widespread. And Peter Selgin's works provide a full argument about just how much research, how much scholarship—not to mention work—must go into a creative career.

Broadview Press published a "revised workshop and creative edition" of Selgin's textbook *Your First Page*. Let's note in passing that Broadview must have appreciated that the original version of the book sold well. This textbook straightforwardly presents a large number of first pages from works of fiction, and Selgin analyzes each page to demonstrate how the author, successfully or not, has made decisions about how the work is going to proceed, how the beginning of a text constitutes a crucial series of promises to a reader. If a writer is writing well, Selgin makes clear why the writing is good. Selgin displays his own research into the precedents for all sorts of ways to begin a story or novel. While he is flexible and open-minded, Selgin makes clear that the writer's goal must be to provide a valuable experience to a reader, and the writer's research must involve knowing literary tradition, using the tools that can make a piece of writing more effective, and understanding why certain strategies almost never work. I happen to agree with almost all of Selgin's evaluations, by the way. This book succeeds in showing a struggling writer how to get better at thinking through how to make fiction that will have a chance at improving a reader's life. *Your First Page* is a textbook, yes, but it is also a testament of why work in the humanities matters to us all.

Selgin's recent novels prove that you have to know the rules in order to break them: when you want to get through to a reader in a fresh way, you have to know the traditions. *Duplicity* is a seriously playful romp, the sort of fiction about fiction that we call metafiction, in this case a wildly playful book about twins and trickery. It's a novel that no one but Selgin—with his talents, experience, obsessions, and originality—could write. When one sits down to read *Duplicity*, one quickly realizes it's going to be complicated, but one also takes comfort in the assurance that Selgin is committed to taking care of his reader. He makes sure that his audience

is never too comfortable, but he also makes sure that his reader is never lost. The reader is thrilled, amused, and haunted—all while being able to keep track of what is going on. The novel ends with a blasting climax and then provides a zinger of a final sentence that is at once shocking and inevitable. This is a prize-winning book that should win more honors.

Duplicity announces boldly that its author is thinking about suspense, point of view, structure, characterization, style—all in order to destroy clichés, to find authentic ways to communicate. His most recent novel, *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*, is perhaps even more subtle and sneaky. The novel's title seems to provide lightness—as if it were simply going to be a clever coming-of-age story about a kid who likes astronomy. The laughs start early and keep coming throughout, but the book's mysteries darken and intensify as the novel proceeds. To use a traditional comparison, I'd say that if it starts out like *Tom Sawyer*, it turns into *Huck Finn*. It dramatizes the death of the hat-making industry in America, and so much more. *A Boy's Guide* relentlessly blows up the world, so that by the end, the novel's title seems wonderfully ironic, with the book as a whole providing a study of all our losses, of the sadness in all our lives.

There's not enough space here to go into Selgin's successfully produced recent play, *A God in the House*, or his fame as an illustrator/designer/painter. On more than one occasion, I've bought his paintings. Selgin's many talents reinforce each other. He knows what he is doing, and he does many things.

The good publishers, the enthusiastic reviews, the substantial sales, the awards—and I should remind you that *A Boy's Guide* is a finalist for the upcoming Townsend Prize—all indicate that Selgin is a great artist. But I'll end a bit on a modest note, by saying that I'll always look forward to Selgin's next book, of whatever sort he cares to write, because I trust the next book to be instructive, clever, enjoyable, moving.

Georgia College will do honor to itself by acknowledging the talent—and, yes, the scholarly expertise—of Peter Selgin through the Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award.

Sincerely,



Marshall Bruce Gentry
Prof. Emeritus of English and Editor, *Flannery O'Connor Review*
(478) 445-6928 / bruce.gentry@gcsu.edu

Peter Selgin

List of Scholarly/Creative Endeavors 2019-2024

1. Book Publication: [*A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*](#), Regal House Publishing, November 2024

2. Play Publication: [*A God in the House*](#), Next State Press, November 2023

4. Play Production: [*"A God in the House,"*](#) Town & Gown Players, Athens, Ga., July 2023

6. Group Exhibition: [*"Prima Materia,"*](#) Aldrich Museum, Richfield, Ct., Feb. - Aug 2023

7. Solo Art Exhibition: [*"Peter Selgin: A Retrospective,"*](#) Georgia College, Jan. - Feb. 2023

8. Book Publication: [*Duplicity*](#), Serving House Books, 2020 (novel).

9. Book Publication: [*Your First Page: First Pages and What They Tell Us about the Pages that Follow Them*](#), Broadview Press, 2019 (writing guide/textbook).

10. Graphic Design Designs: [*Book Covers & Arts & Letters*](#), 2022 – ongoing

Published Nonfiction/Essays:

[*"A Matter of Perspective,"*](#) *Transformations*, August 2021

[*"More than Mere Oblivion: Trocchi's CAIN'S BOOK,"*](#) *CRAFT Literary*, January 2021

[*"Master of the Touching Detail: Emmanuel Bove,"*](#) *CRAFT Literary*, September 2020

[*"An Extremely Disorganized Life: Dazai's No Longer Human,"*](#) *CRAFT Literary*, May 2020

[*"Cover Stories,"*](#) *Grub Street*, February 2020

Published Short Fiction:

[*"Rules of the Association,"*](#) *Failbetter.com*, June 2022

[*"Penny Sufferings,"*](#) *Big Other*, March 2021

Published Column:

[*"Your First Pages,"*](#) 20 columns for *Jane Friedman.com*, Sept. - Dec. 2019

Articles & Interviews:

[*"Want Readers to Commit to Your First Page?"*](#) *Writing Cooperative*, October 31, 2022

[*"The Two Sides of Peter Selgin,"*](#) Donald Friedman, February 10, 2022

[*"The Story Behind the Story,"*](#) (interview about *Duplicity*), *Transformations*, February 2021

Peter Selgin
Reflective Statement

In 2009, having earned my living as a freelance artist and graphic designer for thirty years there, I left New York City to pursue an academic career as a teacher of Creative Writing. I gave away my easel and my drafting table (so encrusted with paint even the Salvation Army refused them). The rest of my supplies — paints, brushes, paintings and drawings — went into storage. There'd be no more visual art, no more dividing myself between my two artistic loves.

For most of those New York years, I had seen myself not as a successful visual artist who wrote on the side, but as a struggling author no less burdened by his day job than had he been skinning hams in a slaughterhouse. As an academic, at least, I'd have summers off and paid sabbaticals. Meanwhile, I'd immerse myself in books and writing. By dedicating myself to the written word, I'd at last realize my dreams of success as a writer.

So I told myself.

By the time I was tenured here at Georgia College, I'd been away from New York for nine years. I bought my house on Lake Sinclair, a fifteen-minute drive from the university. Having moldered away all those years in a Bronx warehouse, my art supplies soon joined me here, including hundreds of paintings and drawings. There were the fruits of that other life, reeking of mold, already yellowing with age. I realized then that it had been a mistake to shun one art for the other's sake, that the two weren't incompatible. On the contrary, they needed each other.

I feel similarly about teaching my art and practicing it: that not only *can* one do both simultaneously, one *should* do both, lest one preach what one doesn't practice. Hence I took every opportunity to turn my teaching into art and my art into teaching. Among the fruits of this practice are three books on the creative writer's craft, each derived from my teaching. The latest of these, *Your First Page*, formed the basis of two recent seminar presentations. On the visual front, presented with the opportunity to re-design and art direct *Arts & Letters*, Georgia College's MFA-run international literary journal, I seized it. Assigned an upper-level course in literary journal editing, I turned it into *Journal Design, Editing, & Production*, a course in which creative writing majors learn not only editing, but typography and graphic design, while becoming adept at Photoshop and InDesign—challenging applications. Meanwhile, on weekends, I worked professionally as a graphic designer, designing book covers for university and independent presses.

I also kept at my fine art. During my Fall 2019 sabbatical, in France, I produced a portfolio of pen and ink drawings, while at home I continued to paint. Those works, among seventy-five others spanning my career as a visual artist, were on view at my first retrospective exhibit sponsored by the Georgia College's Art Department.

And of course I've kept writing. Most recently, I completed and published my third novel, *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*. The past two years also saw the first full production of my play, *A God in the House*, which went through dozens of revisions since it was first presented at the Eugene O'Neil National Playwright's Conference. As with my visual art, I wouldn't feel comfortable teaching creative writing were I not myself a professional practitioner of the craft.

Dune author Frank Herbert once said, "One learns from books and example only that certain things can be done. Actual learning requires that you do those things." This sums up my teaching philosophy, except that I think both learning and teaching require us to be doing "those things."

A Boy's Guide to Outer Space

(book publication, novel)

November 2024



Who is the Townsend Prize named for?



The award is named for Jim Townsend, the founding editor of *Atlanta* magazine, the associate editor of *Atlanta Weekly Magazine* (of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*), and an early mentor to such Atlanta writers as Pat Conroy, Terry Kay, William Diehl, and Anne Rivers Siddons.

How are books selected for the Prize?

Books must be a piece of literary fiction, written and published while the author was a resident of the state of Georgia.*

Over fifty books were nominated for the 2025 Townsend Prize. More than half met all the criteria for the Prize and were reviewed by the Selection Committee. The top 10 books are now sent to out-of-state judges to read and select the top 5 for the shortlist, and the 2025 winner.

About the Venue

Callanwolde Fine Arts Center

A unique Georgia venue for a uniquely Georgia ceremony! Callanwolde Fine Arts Center is a Coca-Cola landmark. Originally the home of Howard Candler (1920-1959), the son of Asa Griggs, the Atlanta pharmacist who purchased the rights to the formula for Coca-Cola in 1886 and founded the Coca-Cola Company four years later.

About the Caterer

Sun in My Belly

Sun in My Belly is creating a unique dessert specially for the Townsend Prize ceremony. Their soon-to-be-famous Brown Sugar Pound Cake with Maple Glaze topped with Chantilly Cream and sprinkled with fresh berries will make a perfect spring-time delight.



GORDON JOHNSTON is a former journalist with work in *The Georgia Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Susurrus*, and other journals. Johnston is professor of English at Mercer University. He is author of the award-winning poetry collection, *Scaring the Bears*, and of the poetry chapbook, *Durable Goods*. This fiction collection, his first, draws on fourteen years of canoeing southern rivers.



For What Ails You, Ra'Niqua Lee

ELJ Editions, 2023

A flash collection about Black femmes and new conjure women who take MARTA and battle a multiverse of woes, racism, and generational trauma. They have the water, the juice, and the juju, and they're healing each other through the powers of food, prayer, sex, and other un/known medicinals.

RA'NIQUA LEE earned an MFA in fiction from Georgia State University in 2018, and she is currently at Emory finishing a PhD in African American literature, spatial, and Black queer feminist theories. In 2021, the Georgia Writers Association awarded her the inaugural John Lewis Writing Grant for Fiction.

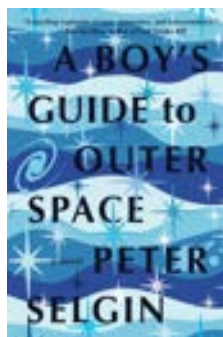


One Blood, Denene Millner

Forge Books, 2023

Join *New York Times* bestselling author Denene Millner as she explores the lives of three generations of women tied together by love, hope, dreams, ambition... and family secrets, in this epic novel.

DENENE MILLNER is a six-time *New York Times* bestselling author, Emmy Award-nominated TV show host, and award-winning journalist, who has written thirty-one books. Millner is the editorial director of Denene Millner Books, an award-winning imprint that has published two Caldecott Honor books, a Newbery Honor Book, a Kirkus Prize for Children's Literature winner, and a Southern Book Award winner. A MacDowell Fellow, Millner has written essays for *The New York Times*, *Glamour*, and *NPR*. Millner is a graduate of Hofstra University. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her two daughters.



A Boy's Guide to Outer Space, Peter Selgin

Regal House Publishing, 2024

Elected to spy on the Man in Blue, Half and the mysterious man form a secret friendship in which Half learns the extraordinary circumstances that led to his fugitive existence—an odyssey extending from pre-WWII Bohemia to a German POW Camp in Illinois, and beyond.

PETER SELGIN is the author of *Drowning Lessons* and winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction. He has published two novels, two essay collections, three books on the craft of writing, and several children's books. Peter is also a visual artist whose paintings and illustrations have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, *Gourmet*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications. He teaches creative writing and graphic design at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia.

Lying In, Barbara G. Tucker

Colorful Crow Publishing, 2024

In October of 1918, the world, still in the midst of a massive war in Europe, is experiencing a new challenge—a pandemic of what came to be known as the Spanish flu. But Cotella Barlow, living in an isolated county in Appalachian Virginia, has only heard rumors about it.

"A dazzling explosion of stars, innocence, and transcendence."

—Nathan Elias, author of *Coil Quake Rift*

A BOY'S GUIDE to OUTER SPACE

a novel

PETER SELGIN

PRAISE FOR
A BOY'S GUIDE TO OUTER SPACE

“At turns poignant, zany, always fresh and exuberant, *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space* is a bittersweet coming of age story, beautifully told in exquisite prose.”

—Linda Lappin, author of *Loving Modigliani:*
The Afterlife of Jeanne Hébuterne

“A kaleidoscopic and astronomic depiction of boyhood's metamorphosis into manhood. Selgin's bildungsroman celebrates the mysteries of teenage years from the vantage point of Half, a curious lad who inadvertently befriends a German POW in Connecticut in 1963 while wrestling with the guilt of his disabled brother's tragic fate. Wrought with bottle rockets and rocket ships, *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space* is a dazzling explosion of stars, innocence, and transcendence.”

—Nathan Elias, author of *Coil Quake Rift*

“Leopold Napoli IV, known to his friends as ‘Half,’ is one of the most compelling narrators in modern literature. His narrative of that one extraordinary year of his life has everything: heart, wit, sly humor, tragedy, and a significant if unusual friendship. Selgin is a magnificent storyteller, and he has gifted us a confident, audacious novel delivered in beautiful, miraculous prose.”

—Chika Unigwe, author of *The Middle Daughter*

“In his finely crafted novel, Peter Selgin presents a lost world of 1960's small town life with all its constrictions and aspirations. On the threshold of childhood's end, ‘Half’ Napoli and his coarse pals, the Back Shop Boys, create adventures and myths for themselves in their dying hat factory town. When a for-

eign-born stranger, ‘the Man in Blue,’ arrives, Half finds his life and beliefs upended. Selgin skillfully balances the warmth of nostalgia with the disquieting blaze of youthful doubt and guilt. It’s a poignant tale, with its share of loss and betrayal, but also a boisterous and humorous one—and, at its core, a meditation on the survival of the spirit.”

—Michael Nethercott, author of *The Séance Society*
and *The Haunting Ballad*

“In *A Boy’s Guide to Outer Space*, Peter Selgin has crafted the touching philosophical tale of a boy’s coming of age with masterful eloquence. A world of fading prosperity, the complexities of adolescence, the pain of horrific loss, and the beauty of forbidden friendship—all are woven into a mesmerizing page turner. Selgin’s insights into the human condition along with his beautifully drawn characters make him the rival of our literary icons.”

—Morgan Howell, author of *The Moon Won’t Talk*

“Reminiscent of Alain Fournier’s 1913 classic, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, this is a novel for readers who love the drama of mysterious worlds and the spell of enchanting words.”

—Alta Ifland, author of *The Wife Who Wasn’t*

“‘Like all good stories this one starts with an exploding star.’ So begins Peter Selgin’s terrific new novel *A Boy’s Guide to Outer Space*, and this charming, wise book is proof enough of that. The kid living the story daydreams of adventures on the moon and beyond, and lives by his late father’s advice to follow his fears. Little does Half know that following his fears will lead to life-changing encounters and irreversible decisions; it’s his own world where he finds the unexpected, adventure, and real danger. Ultimately, this insightful book reminds us that inner space is where we need guidance most.”

—David Ebenbach, author of *How to Mars*

“*A Boy’s Guide to Outer Space* is unlike any novel I have ever read. It is so many things at once—a story of fathers and sons, a story about friendship, a war story (two war stories!), a UFO story (not an inclusive list, I hasten to say) and by turns zany, heartbreaking, exuberant, tragic, and witty—that I found myself holding my breath for entire portions of it. I never once knew what was going to happen next—where I would be taken, what new turns were coming. I’m still breathless, hours after finishing it.”

—Michelle Herman, author of *Close-Up*

“Peter Selgin’s novel about an unlikely friendship between two solitary people—a man with a secret past and a boy who lost his father—is a tender, wise, and deeply moving coming of age story. Read it. You are in for a very great pleasure.”

—Megan Staffel, author of *The Exit Coach*

A BOY'S GUIDE TO OUTER SPACE

Peter Selgin



Regal House Publishing

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for Michael Nethercott

Plato in *Timaeus*, Plotinus in *Enneads*, elaborate the idea that the soul is a stranger on earth, that it has descended from the spaceless and timeless universe, or that it has ‘fallen’ on account of sin into matter.

—J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*

Come to know what is in front of you, and that which is hidden from you will become clear to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not become manifest.

—Gospel of Thomas

PROLOGUE:

CAPE CANAVERAL, FLORIDA
JUNE, 2020

Like all good stories this one starts with an exploding star.

It happened three weeks ago, around two o'clock in the morning. Unable to sleep, I had wandered into my son's bedroom—he's in his second year of graduate school now—and sat there gazing through the telescope I bought him for his sixteenth birthday, when I noticed a sapphire-blue dot high in the eastern sky where there should have been nothing but a black void. At first I thought it might be an airplane or a satellite. But the way the dot just sat there, motionless, alone in its isolated corner of space, rendered those possibilities impossible.

Suddenly the blue dot burst apart, splitting into a dozen bright pale orbs of different pastel colors. The smaller stars danced around a central bright blue nucleus before shooting off in various directions, with one especially brilliant blue star shooting straight down to earth, where it appeared to explode, lighting up the eastern horizon with an ice-blue camera-bulb-like flash.

The next morning I was out walking Mr. McDog, our black Lab (so named for his love of a popular fast-food chain's golden french fries). It was the third month of the Covid epidemic. One does lots of walking during a pandemic (this was before Governor DeSantis ordered all the beaches closed). McDog and I were taking our usual route along a stretch of shore here known as the "Space Coast" when we chanced upon an exceptional bit of flotsam: pale-blue, cone-shaped, metallic, about the size of a two-person tent and shaped like a giant hat. From underneath its scorched brim a tangle of wires, cords, and cables of various colors slithered spaghetti-like.

McDog and I are dedicated beachcombers, ever on the lookout for the Atlantic tide's noteworthier offerings. You'd be surprised by what washes up on these shores. Last year, the

ocean's generous but capricious currents delivered a sperm whale—eighty-six feet long and categorically dead—to our sandy front doorstep. Despite repeated dustings with truckloads of quicklime, for over a week the whale's putrefying corpse claimed the beach with its apocalyptic stench. The county had to hire a tugboat to drag the thing out to sea.

Not all of the sea's curious offerings have been organic. Since Mr. McDog and I began walking here four years ago, rarely has a month gone by without our encountering some surf-scoured, wrack-robed, salt-bleached testament to human ingenuity or folly. And I don't mean your typical maritime rubble: water-logged hatch-covers, beached bell-buoys, and so forth. I'm talking space junk: charred heat-deflector shields, spent rocket boosters, the occasional GEM (that's Graphite Epoxy Motor to you earthlings)... They don't call it the Space Coast for nothing.

But what made that hat-shaped object truly uncanny is this: one morning fifty-seven years ago, in 1963, I came upon the very same object, or one exactly like it, on a horsetail fern-lined trail in Hattertown, Connecticut, the town in which I supposedly grew up. That exploding blue star? It too had its equivalent one May morning in Hattertown, an extraordinary morning heralding the extraordinary year that followed: the year Jack Thomas entered my life. The year my stepbrother Gordon lost his.

What follow are my memories of that year and of those days. They're the memories of a seventy-year-old pensioner living on Cape Canaveral, Florida, an old guy who just happens to share his young subject's DNA along with his name: Leopold Napoli IV, though to his friends back then for reasons to be explained he was known simply as "Half."

This is Half's story more than it's mine, the story of an ordinary American boy who, like most ordinary American boys, longed for things out of this world.

In Half's case he just happened to find them.

PART 1

THE BACK SHOP BOYS

When I was ten years old my father gave me some advice, or tried to.

“Son,” he said, bobbing a marshmallow over a campfire that we had built, “I’ve got three pieces of advice to give you.” He swigged from his ever-handy bottle of Rock & Rye. “The first piece of advice is: Never stick anything in your ears. The second is: If you’re going to build a rope swing, use a thick rope. The third bit of advice...”

My father paused. “The third bit...” he repeated.

As the campfire’s glow glazed my father’s gaunt, stubbled, sweaty face, the focus of his gaze turned inexorably inward. His slate-blue pupils lost their luster. He chewed his lower lip, pulled at his nose, sniffed several times, furrowed his brow, nibbled his tongue, scratched the short stiff hairs on the back of his neck.

“...the third bit...”

We were watching the Crofus & Corbet Hat Manufacturing Company’s main building go up in flames. One of the chief forms of entertainment in Hattertown back then was watching hat factories burn down—something they did, or seemed to do, obligingly, on a regular basis, as if burning down were the primary purpose for which they’d been constructed to begin with. Dad would seek out a vantage point high on a hill in that town of many hills. On cold nights he would sometimes build us a campfire, a miniature blaze to mirror the one raging down in the gulley below us. While roasting marshmallows we’d take in smoke, flames, and the whirling red lights and puling sirens of fire engines. If the view was accessible by car we’d sit side-by-side in my father’s banana-yellow Studebaker Champion, the bones of his sunken cheeks burnished copper by flames. He would swig from his pint bottle of Rock & Rye while I munched Cracker Jack from a box, just like at the drive-in theater.

The hat factories burned gloriously, the orange flames

licking utility lines, shooting up star-like sparks that joined the constellations, or formed their own. If the wind blew our way we'd cover our mouths with damp rags Dad provided for the occasion, aware that the smoke carried toxic fumes from the chemicals used to turn the raw pelts of rabbits and beavers into high-quality felt. One evening, while we watched the Sutton-Dexter hat factory burn down, a flurry of burning half-finished hats swirled into the twilight, miniature flying saucers of flaming triple-X felt. One came within inches of landing on my head.

"Now *that's* something!" my father said, slapping his knee first, then mine, his outburst as singular as the event itself. My father was a man of very few words. Winks, chucks on the chin, pats on the back, and slaps on the knee were his main forms of communication.

Dad conveyed his feelings otherwise, too. The summer of my seventh year he spent building a trolley car in our backyard. Powered by twin Briggs & Stratton lawn mower engines, it had caned seats and a bell Dad rang as it clacked along tracks made from plumbing pipes. Dad wore his striped pajamas (the closest thing he had to a conductor's uniform). Though the trolley car's route extended only as far as the clothesline pole and back, I imagined us rolling across America, over hills and across meadows, through sleepy towns and noisy cities. Over the twin engines' roars my father sang:

*A ride on the trolley is jolly
Whatever you pay for the fare...*



Some wondered how it was that my father always seemed to know when a hat factory was about to burn down. A few even insinuated that he himself set the blazes, a suggestion that I refused to accept. My father was a crude man: uneducated, inarticulate, reeking of Rock & Rye and hat-factory fumes. He loved hot dogs, fireworks, Gene Kelly, baseball, bourbon, and me, his son. In one of her less-sober moments my mother admitted to

me that the only reasons she married him were because he was a good dancer and he knew how to make her laugh.

"Your father was the price I paid," she explained, "for having a sense of humor."

But Dad was no arsonist.

However he came by it, when it came to predicting hat-factory fires my father, Leopold Joseph Napoli III, was possessed of a Promethean foresight.

At last—with a bony arm around my neck and a heavy sigh (his breath a rye whisky blowtorch)—my father said:

"Sorry, son, but I forget what the third bit of advice was."

He burst out laughing then, his head thrown back, his laughter echoing out across the flame-lit distance, until a coughing fit seized him and his laughter turned to viscous hacks. So ended the longest conversation he and I would ever have.

We went back to watching the hat factory fire, letting its tongues do the talking for us.



That night I dreamed that I was drowning, a recurrent dream. I'd fallen into a lake or a stream or some other body of water, or maybe I'd been pushed. In the dream I gasped and groped and thrashed toward the pale green light of salvation but couldn't reach it. Awakened by and still gasping from my nightmare, I opened my eyes to see my father standing there, in the bedroom doorway, his oblong silhouette framed by moonlight.

"Dad?" I said, propped up on one elbow, catching my breath.

The silhouette swigged from a bottle.

"What gives?"

"I remembered the third bit of advice, son," my father said.

I waited.

"Follow your fears."

"Huh?"

"Your fears. Follow your fears."

As suddenly as it appeared my father's silhouette was gone. A patch of dawn filled the space where it stood.



My father died on a Wednesday. Mom was working in town that day, at Mr. Stevens'—the town optometrist's—office. I found Dad sitting on the toilet, his mouth agape, head thrown back, gazing up at the bathroom ceiling as if waiting for a hole to form there. A bluebird tapped at the windowpane. Dad smoked like a burning hat factory all his life. But long before his lungs gave out, he suffered from headaches, fatigue, depression, irascibility, vertigo, sore throats, and tremors so violent at times he couldn't hold a screwdriver or tie his own shoelaces: all classic symptoms of mercury poisoning, also known as "Mad Hatter's Disease"—or, locally, as "The Hattertown Shakes."

Everyone who worked in the hat factories was exposed to some mercury, but none more than the Back Shop workers, those who processed the raw pelts of rabbits and beavers into felt. Though they stopped using mercury soon after World War II, by then my father had breathed in twenty years' worth of the stuff, having worked in hat factories ever since he was old enough to reach the foot pedal of a hat blocking machine, as had his father, Leopoldi di Napoli II, and his father's father, Leopoldi di Napoli. Like them, and though the official cause of death was entered by the coroner as "lung infection," my father died of "the shakes."

And though he knew he had been poisoned, my father never said a word about it to anyone. To have done so would have broken a tacit agreement among the Back Shop workers, and anyway it would only have gotten him fired. So my father kept his illness a secret—until the shakes got so bad they forced him first into an early retirement, then into an early grave.

Hats killed my father.

I had just turned eleven.



The trolley car went up on cinderblocks. For a while I tried taking care of it. I varnished the cane seats and polished the bell with a mixture of toothpaste and Worcestershire sauce as

my father had taught me. I smeared moving parts with marine grease, wire-brushed iron wheels, freshened yellow paint and pinstripes. Still the bell tarnished; rust froze the drive shafts in their bearings. Vines crept over the seats, strangling them first before splitting them apart. Eventually Mr. Dingy, our landlord, had the thing carted away.

With Dad's death all the colors seemed to drain out of my world. Trees didn't talk to me; birds didn't sing or fly for me. The sky was a cement wall over my head. A taste of ashes filled my mouth and embittered my days. I felt the vague restless yearning experienced by many kids my age, but with a sour, disconsolate twist.

What little consolation I found wasn't on earth but among the stars. By then Sputnik had spun around the world, launching us into the space age. I gave myself over to daydreams of outer space and took comfort in amassing astonishingly useless trivia from encyclopedias: *the sun is 330,330 times larger than Earth; Venus is the only planet in the solar system that rotates clockwise; in Nakhla, Egypt, on June 28, 1911, a dog was killed by a meteor...* flights of mental frippery designed to propel me, as sure as any rocket, out of the dull atmosphere of my freshly fatherless world.

I longed for something, what, exactly, I couldn't say. Something out of this world: a spark, a flame, a gleam or glimmer or glitter of hope or transcendence or redemption, a heavenly hat factory fire to brighten up my gloom-filled days. To touch or be touched by the uncanny, the mysterious, by something unfathomable. I longed to partake of something of the infinite.

So things stood till the summer of my thirteenth year. The summer I followed my fears.

The summer I met the Man in Blue.

We called him the Man in Blue, though of course he had a name. He had more than one, as a matter of fact, though none of us knew that back then. All we knew then was that he walked around town in blue coveralls gathering things in a rucksack he wore on his back. How long he had been in our town was a mystery, too. It seemed as if he'd been there forever, a permanent feature of the landscape, as much a part of it as its ruddy brick hat factory chimneys.

Otherwise we knew nothing about him: a good thing, since it freed us to believe anything we wanted.

"I bet he's a spy," Victor offered.

"I bet he's queer," Skunky submitted, peering through dime-store binoculars. "You can tell by how he walks. See how he shuffles? Only queers walk like that!"

"It's a limp," Victor surmised. "He's limping. Something's wrong with his left leg. I bet he broke it parachuting out of his spy plane!"

"I bet he's got VD," Skunky conjectured, his nickname owing to a white streak in his otherwise jet-black hair. "I bet he's got a whole bunch of diseases, including a few that haven't even been discovered yet."

Zag, our short, muscular leader, said nothing. He chewed the end of a horsetail fern and clenched his fists.

"I bet he escaped from Silver Hills," Victor postulated, referring to the state psychiatric hospital a dozen miles away in Newbury.

"I bet he's a serial killer," Skunky speculated. "I bet he's got a cave in the woods. That's where he drags his victims before he cuts them up into pieces and eats them."

Zag spit over the cliffside.

"Uhn haah dah," said Gordon, my stepbrother.

"I bet he practices black magic," said Victor. "That stick of his? Wherever he taps it on the ground poisonous mushrooms sprout!"

"If he pees on a tree the bark will turn black!" said Skunky.

"Don't ever look him straight in the eyes," Victor advised. "It could permanently stunt your growth!"

"Don't let him spit on you either," Skunky said. "His spit will burn clear through your clothes and skin down to bone!"

A deaf dumb diseased Commie queer spy lunatic escaped mass murderer. The Man in Blue was all those things and anything else we wanted him to be.

As other kids believed in Santa Claus, Bigfoot, and the boogeyman, we believed in the Man in Blue, if only to pity, fear, and despise him.



We (who had nicknames for everything) called ourselves the Back Shop Boys, since before they got too sick or retired or died or the factories they worked for went out of business our fathers all worked in the Back Shops of hat factories. There were four of us: Wade "Skunky" Bledsoe, Victor Szentgyorgyi (pronounced: "Saint George"), and Larry "Zag" Lengyl, our leader and my best friend. And me, Leo Napoli—or Half, as they called me, since I had only half a middle finger on my right hand, the other half blown off during a Fourth of July mishap.

Then there was Gordon, my stepbrother. Gordon who, though a year older than me, was still in the second grade. Gordon whose Coke-bottle-thick glasses and red Boy's Club cap failed to conceal his bug-eyes. Gordon whose nose ran perpetually, whose shirtsleeves (when no one rolled them for him) were invariably encrusted with layers of dried snot, whose forearms (when someone did) were glazed with the stuff as if by a coat of shellac. Gordon who, back in those barbarous pre-PC days, wasn't "intellectually challenged" or "developmentally disabled," but subject to far cruder labels that we Back Shop Boys dispensed liberally.

Gordon didn't care what we called him as long as we let him tag along with us, and as long as nothing came between him and his magical hot dog, the illusion of a floating bullet of flesh formed when he touched the tips of his index fingers together and stared cross-eyed at them—easy for Gordy to do, his eyes being permanently crossed.

The three words Gordy spoke were “a hot dog”—or, more precisely, since he couldn't enunciate his consonants: *uhn baah dab*. He spoke them always in the same tone of amazement, as if witnessing the phenomenon for the very first time. Sometimes he'd try to eat the thing, earning a pair of bitten fingertips and bursting into tears for his trouble. At first we found this amusing, but like most of Gordon's quirks it got old pretty fast.

And though my stepbrother's vocabulary was limited to three words, he could extract more eloquence from a fifty-cent yo-yo than anyone I knew. Walk the Dog, Rock the Baby, Time Warp, Gravity Pull... Like the planets that circle our sun, around that toy consisting of two thick disks connected by a wooden dowel with a string wound around it, all his powers of acuity and agility coalesced and revolved.

Gordon: my cross, my curse. My constant compulsory companion.



We sat there, on top of Cheese Hill, watching as the Man in Blue limped across the Caxton-Dumont hat factory parking lot, headed our way. “Cheese Hill” was our name for the limestone cliff jutting over the factory like the prow of a clipper ship. We called it that since the limestone broke off in crumbly pale-yellow, cheese-like chunks that we'd hurl onto the hat factory reject shed's corrugated metal roof, enticing the old security guard out of his little shack to shake his fist at us, which gesture we Back Shop Boys met with palms outthrust and shouts of *Sieg Heil!* and *Heil Hitler!*

From Cheese Hill we could see most of the town. To the left side of the view were the train tracks, with the fuel oil storage tanks arrayed next to them in increasing size like the cannisters

my mother kept coffee, tea, flour, and sugar in; to the right of the view was the middle school, its copper cupola crowned by a fierce-looking lightning rod. Slithering like a brown snake through the center of the view was the aptly named Brim River, since every ten years or so it breached its banks, flooding much of the town.

Lording over this landscape: a dozen tall smokestacks, twelve brick middle fingers poking up into the dingy Connecticut sky. From the top of Cheese Hill we could read the faded names of the hat factories they stood for: MALLORY, HOYT, CROFUS & CORBET, LEE, KNOX, DOBBS, DALTON, DUNLAP, SUTTON-DEXTER, BENTON, MERRIMAC, HOWES VON-GAL. Once, those twelve chimneys darkened the sky with soot and prosperity, but by the summer of 1963 all but one had gone extinct.

As for the other eleven, only their shadows still darkened things: long black shadows creeping through parking lots, sliding past playgrounds, slithering onto front porches and across back yards, gliding past the hours, minutes, and seconds of each day like the hands of a colossal gloomy clock.



The Man in Blue approached, limping across the oil-stained parking lot. It was Sunday morning. Church bells tolled. We kicked the backs of our PF Flyers (“... *make you run faster and jump higher!*”) against the cliff. A breeze ran its fingers through my hair. The buds on the trees along Felt Street were just starting to bloom.

As the Man in Blue stepped into range we snapped off cheese bombs. Gripping them, we cast each other defiant looks. Skunky spit over the cliff. Victor wiped sweat from his pimply forehead. Zag clenched and unclenched his fists. Zippo, Zag’s mutt dog, barked his snout off as usual. We sat there, mouths dry, breaths held, coiled like springs (except Gordy, who stared at his fingers).

“Uhn haah dah.”

The Man in Blue drew closer. His rucksack bulged. Whatever filled it made clanking sounds. We gripped our cheese bombs tighter.

“Somebody throw!”

“Darers first!”

“I know: let’s all throw at once!”

“Good idea. You first!”

“On a count of three!” Zag ordered. “One, two—”

A solitary cheese bomb—mine—arced through the atmosphere, its color shifting in flight: dark against bright blue sky, neutral against drab factory bricks, pale where it burst apart inches from the tip of the Man in Blue’s walking stick. The skittered fragments painted a chalky star on the pavement.

The Man in Blue stopped walking. He gazed up at us, his round glasses mirroring the blue sky. His face was the brown of hat-factory bricks. He didn’t yell or look angry. He might even have smiled; it was hard to say with that scruffy beard. He stood there for a while. Then he hoisted up his rucksack and kept walking across the parking lot and out of sight.



“We’ve got to get the goods on him,” Zag concluded after he’d gone. From the sleeve of his T-shirt he unrolled a pack of cigarettes. “It’s our civic duty,” he said, lighting one.

“Why don’t we all follow him and find out where he lives?” Skunky suggested.

Zag shook his head. “Too conspicuous. This is a one-person job. Any volunteers?”

We all looked at each other.

“Uhn haah dah,” Gordy said.

“Guess we’ll have to draw for it,” said Zag.

We followed Zag down to Bum’s Trail, a long-abandoned dirt road through the woods bristling with horsetail ferns. Zag picked four and held them so we couldn’t tell which was the longest. “Whoever draws the short fern investigates and reports back to the rest of us,” he explained.

We drew one horsetail fern apiece. By the feel of it I knew I hadn't drawn the shortest. At first I felt relieved, then I felt disappointed. We were about to show each other when, behind my back, I snapped my horsetail fern in half.

Follow your fears.

The next afternoon I returned to Cheese Hill. Gordon was with me. Gordon was always with me. Wherever I went, whatever I did, he was there, always, clinging to me like my shadow.

Together we waited for the Man in Blue.

To kill time while waiting Gordy played with my Duncan Midnight Special yo-yo. As for me, I had my knapsack full of diversions: the jackknife my father had given me, my *Boy's Guide to Outer Space*, and my Space Orb Kaleidoscope. The Space Orb was my favorite. It turned my unremittingly drab world into alien realms of crystalline brilliance.

If the contents of my knapsack weren't enough to distract me, I could always fall back on trivia. My brain was a rucksack stuffed with useless facts. Count on me to inform you that an ordinary sheet of paper folded in half fifty times will attain a thickness sufficient to arrive at the sun. *On an earth the size of a basketball, Mount Everest would be so flat you wouldn't be able to feel it. The # sign on a typewriter is called an "octothorpe" ...*

A quarter to three. We'd come straight from school. Since my father died, I'd completely lost interest in my education. In classes, on my shopping-bag book covers, I doodled rocket ships blasting off, orbiting space stations, astronauts in bubble helmets, the NASA logo with its blue halo and slashed red chevron. The only thing that interested me at school was Belinda Dalton, who sat at the desk in front of mine in third-period biology and to my left in fifth-period English. Belinda was the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Barclay Moses Dalton, the man single-handedly responsible for turning a sleepy farm community known then as Hastings Junction into "The Town that Crowned America." Belinda's hair, which she wore in twin pigtails, was the same color as the flames that spouted from hat factories when they burned down. For over a year I'd had a crush on her—a hopeless one, since there was no chance

that she, a Highlander, would have anything to do with me, a Lowlander by birth; worse: a Back Shop Boy.

Belinda's father died the same week as mine. During recess one day she described the pale blue light she saw beyond her bedroom door the night the ambulance came for him. Awakened by fevered whisperings, she opened the door and stood there, bathed in the blue light, her cries sounding to her like those of someone screaming under water. Along with the blue light, an inexplicable breeze blew up the staircase. It lifted her gown as she made her way down it, one hand holding the railing, the other shielding her eyes from the blue glare. When she reached the bottom the light and the wind both suddenly stopped. Belinda stood alone in her empty house. Later that morning, having gone back to bed, she awoke to gentle knocking and the certainty that her mother had come to tell her that her father was dead.

Belinda told me all this while hanging upside-down on the jungle gym, her bright orange pigtails dangling like lengths of burning rope. I wanted to console her, to utter some soothingly profound words. What do you say to comfort to someone whose father has just died? Had I known, I'd have spoken those same magical words to myself.

Instead I offered up the following sugary gumdrop of trivia:

"Did you know," I submitted with burning authority, "that the volume of the moon is almost exactly the same as the volume of the Pacific Ocean?"

Belinda stared at me. I repeated myself.

She kept staring, her eyes as sullen and remote as Pluto.

"No kidding, they're the same volume!" I explained with unalloyed glee. "Imagine: the whole Pacific Ocean fitting in the moon! You wouldn't think it possible, would you?"

Belinda kept staring, her eyes hard, jaw set.

I changed the subject. "Did you know hydrogen is the least dense substance on earth? I bet you can't guess what the most dense substance is?"

"Your *brain*?" Belinda ventured.

“Nope. *Frozen* hydrogen! The same element!”

The bell rang. Belinda jumped off the jungle gym and hurried off, her fiery pigtails bouncing. I shouted after her:

“Don’t you want to hear about Saturn’s rings?”

Having failed to win Belinda’s heart through science, I fell back on daydreams and doodles. I sketched Project Mercury capsules flaming through Earth’s atmosphere, splash-landing and bobbing alongside aircraft carriers in choppy seas. I could draw Colonel John Glenn from memory, all freckles and heroic grin.

To be John Glenn, to ride a series of explosions to the moon and back, to come home to headlines and my very own ticker-tape parade, to pack this gloomy existence of mine into an Atlas LV-3B rocket and send it hurtling through 238,900 miles of frozen, empty space.

To touch something of the infinite. That was my dream.



As I peered through the Space Orb Kaleidoscope, amid brick-colored swirls suddenly a blue flower flourished. The Man in Blue limped across the Caxton-Dumont factory parking lot. I snatched Gordon’s red Boy’s Club cap off his head and swatted him with it.

“Come on!”

We scrambled down the path to where we’d stashed our bikes. Leaving Gordon’s tomato-red Schwinn Tornado (cantilevered frame, whitewall tires, chrome-plated fenders and horn tank, streamlined Fenderlight seat springs: a fabulous machine thoroughly wasted on its owner) behind, we climbed onto my piece-o-crap Royce Union and rode off. With Gordon holding on from behind and me pedaling furiously I tailed the Man in Blue. Soon we were crossing the green iron bridge across the Brim River.

The sky hung heavy and gray as a wet wool blanket. On the far side of the bridge the Doughboy Diner’s onion-shaped ventilator spewed french fry grease into the afternoon air. A

sudden gust blew Gordy's red Boy's Club cap off. I stopped to fetch it for him.

At Pelt Road the Man in Blue took a left and started up the hill there. He'd reached the crest when he stopped and turned. We were passing the hobby shop. I pulled us into the vestibule where, for a few minutes, I faked a deep interest in model airplanes, paint boxes, and chemistry sets. When I looked back up the road the Man in Blue was gone.

With Gordon riding with me I knew I'd never catch up with him. So I did something I wasn't supposed to do. I dropped him off at the Congregational church, where all the other so-called "special" kids gathered every day after school. The red door to the social hall was locked. The other parents hadn't arrived yet.

"Wait here," I told Gordy. "The other kids will be here soon."

Though he spoke only three words, my stepbrother's face had its own wide vocabulary and could be extremely eloquent. It passed through no fewer than a dozen different emotions before arriving at tears.

"Aw, come off it," I said, wiping them and snot off his face with my handkerchief. "It'll just be a couple minutes."

He looked up so the whites showed under his eyes. The look said, *Promise?*

I smiled and nodded. "Here," I said, taking the yo-yo from my sack and handing it to him. He stopped crying. A smile crept over his snotty face. I wiped more tears away. Then I threw a mock jab at his shoulder—Gordon loved that—gave him the thumbs-up (he loved that, too), and took off.



By the time I caught up with him again the Man in Blue was headed down Blocker Avenue, carrying what looked like a bag of groceries. From Blocker he took a right onto Fuller Lane, then a left on Bumping Hill Road, which climbed a steep grade for a quarter mile before falling as steeply to where it stretched out flat through acres of marsh.

I heard a rumble of thunder and saw the first shy drops of

rain strike the road in front of me. Soon drizzle turned into downpour. The rain bounced like hairpins off the pavement. It slid under the collar of my windbreaker as I pedaled, keeping the Man in Blue in sight, watching the shoulders of his blue coveralls darken with rain. Maybe it was the way he walked, or the brown sunburned skin on the back of his neck, but suddenly I felt like I was following my father, letting him take me to the place where people go when they die.

Beyond the swamp the road climbed steeply again. I knew that stretch of road well, having pedaled up it dozens of times with the Back Shop Boys. A thousand feet beyond the crest of the next hill an unpaved road veered to the left around the trunk of a big old dead oak tree, the road to Lost Lake and what was left of the Dalton estate, established there a hundred and seventy-one years ago by Barclay Moses Dalton, Belinda's great-great (etc.) grandfather, the man who brought the hatting industry to what would become Hattertown.

According to local lore Barclay Dalton had been a struggling Yankee fur trapper when, one freezing winter morning, he plugged a hole in his boot using a scrap of rabbit fur. Later that night when he took off his boots he realized that the pressure and sweat from his foot had transformed the blob of fur into a soft, stiff, malleable substance. Over the next few weeks he experimented with it, pounding, bending, and twisting it into various forms, until he realized the substance was ideally suited for making men's hats. A year later, in 1785, Barclay opened the first hat factory in Hastings Junction. Inspired by its success, other hat factories sprouted up like mushrooms after a spring rain. By 1885 Hattertown's dozen hat factories were pounding out over two million hats per year—among them, it was said, the famous stovepipe hat worn by President Abraham Lincoln himself.

The Man in Blue turned down the road to the former Dalton estate, which lay hidden behind a rusted chain-link fence spangled with ivy and NO TRESPASSING signs. Since the mansion burned down eight years earlier the estate had been

all but deserted. All but, I say, since whoever put up those NO TRESSPASSING signs failed to take into account us Back Shop Boys, for whom such warnings were as enticing as honey to flies. Though six feet tall and topped with coiled barbed wire, the fence likewise failed to discourage us.

The Man in Blue didn't climb over the fence. He kept on walking past it, headed for Lost Lake. What for? I wondered. To swim? In early *May*? In the *rain*?

Then I remembered the caretaker's cottage, the one that lay in ruins at the end of that gravel road. I knew it lay in ruins, since we Back Shop Boys ruined it. A few months after my father's funeral, when I was twelve, we broke into and ransacked the place, tipping over a pot-bellied stove, gouging holes in walls with a fire poker. Zag found a box of apothecary jars with glass stoppers. Skunky found an enamelware colander. Victor discovered a crate of Mason jars filled with strawberry preserves (we pried one jar open and sampled its contents, brown but still sweet). Though my mother hadn't yet married my stepfather, Gordy had already been put in my charge. He found a pair of gardening gloves, their fingers glued together by mildew. In a dusty armoire we found a small wooden chest full of travel brochures bristling with pictures of multi-funneled passenger steamships. The whole cottage floor was carpeted with mildewy magazines and newspapers. From their sodden pages something like seaweed sprouted.

In the yard behind the cottage all sorts of junk lay in piles around a closet-sized wooden shed. A few yards from the shed there was a large rectangular box with a hinged top. Gordon stood looking down at it.

"What's the matter, Gordy?" Skunky teased him. "Afraid the boogeyman's gonna jump out and bite your face off?"

"Never know, there may be a rotting dead body in there," Victor speculated.

"Knock it off," I said.

Gordon turned to me. I nodded. When he raised the box's lid, the hinges squeaked. With a yelp he fell back-first into a

patch of ferns. As Skunky and I helped him to his feet, he gasped and spluttered like someone drowning.

It was Victor's turn next to peer into the wooden box.

"Holy Christ!" he said, reeling back.

Skunky and Zag took their turns with similar results.

It was my turn. I took a deep breath, raised the lid, and glimpsed a lumpy white mass like the shortening my mother used for baking pies. It hit me then—a smell unlike anything I'd ever smelled before. The smell singed my nostrils. It scorched my eyeballs. I reeled, coughed, spluttered, retched.

Days later, applying his cursory knowledge of chemistry, Skunky identified the white compound as caked ammonium chloride, used as a disinfectant in outhouses. But for me at that moment it was the Smell of Evil itself.

We got the hell out of there, but not before taking turns shooting out every last one of the cottage's dozens of windowpanes with Skunky's pump-action BB gun.



It would never have occurred to me that someone might actually live in that cottage again, not after what we did to it. So imagine my surprise when, walking my bike on the gravel road, as I rounded the bend, there, gleaming white, with every one of its little windowpanes replaced, stood the caretaker's cottage, looking like it had been built the day before.

A queasy feeling came over me then: a seasick, hollow, dizzy feeling, as if I'd passed through one of those swirling time tunnels in cheesy science fiction movies.

The rain had stopped. Patches of blue broke through the clouds. I watched as the Man in Blue opened the green door and entered the cottage. To the left of the door was a small sign, green painted letters carved into varnished wood:

FERN COTTAGE

I looked around. Sure enough the grounds surrounding the cottage were strewn with green ferns, their complicated fronds dazzled with raindrops. The ferns lapped at the cottage's shin-

gles, nipped at them with sharp green teeth, licked them with pointy tongues of emerald, malachite, and jade. As far as my eyes could see, the woods were thickly carpeted with ferns.

I straddled my bike, staring at the cottage's front door, wondering what to do next, waiting for a light to go on inside, a sound, something. The windows remained dark. I heard silence and the sound of leftover rain. I leaned my bike against a tree and took a step closer, thinking, What if he sees me through one of those windowpanes, standing here with a dumb look on my face? This is dumb, I said to myself. Really dumb.

You should leave, now. *Leave, now. Leave, now...*

The green door opened. The Man in Blue stood there. He wore a plaid robe. He looked at me but said nothing. I reminded myself that he couldn't talk, that he was dumb—not dumb as in ignorant, dumb as in deaf and dumb. He kept staring, his mouth a straight line under the scruffy beard.

"Hello," I said.

"..."

"I think I'm lost. I was trying to get back to the road. Can you tell me how to get back to the road?"

"..."

"Never mind, I'll figure it out. Thanks!"

I took a step back, then another.

Then I turned, grabbed my bike, hopped on, and took off.

By the time I got to the church it was a quarter past four. Gordon was gone. One of the other parents must have given him a ride home.

As fast as I could I rode to what I still thought of as my stepfather's house, one with too many gables and turrets, to find Gordon and my mother watching *Make Room for Daddy* in the downstairs parlor. My mother lay stretched out on the sofa in her rose-colored rayon robe. My stepbrother lay there on the sofa with her, stretched out in the hollow V formed by her slightly parted legs, his crew-cut head resting on her *mons veneris*, where she massaged it gently with her right hand while her left hand alternately conveyed sips of Taylor's Cream Sherry and Planters peanuts from a jar to her mouth.

"You left Gordon," she said, nibbling a peanut, not taking her eyes off the television screen on which Danny Thomas gave one of his TV kids a bath. "You're never supposed to leave your stepbrother. Not ever. Never."

"I know," I conceded.

"It's the one thing that we ask of you," my mother said without taking her eyes off Danny Thomas, "the one and only thing. Thank God Mrs. Gustafson brought him home."

I watched her massage my stepbrother's head. To think that there'd been a time not that long ago when I had occupied that same hallowed position, when it had been my head, not my stepbrother's, that my mother massaged lovingly if absently, when I had been her innocent little angel. Now that position was firmly filled by the only child of Husband #2, a child whose advantages over his predecessor could not, in my mother's eyes, be overestimated. Unlike me—and provided that he understood them correctly—my stepbrother honored my mother's wishes. He obeyed her commands. He wasn't sour or

sullen. Nor did he tend to engage in lies, secrecy, contrariness, and amorphous existential despair.

"Hey, Gordy," I said, tousling—or trying to tousle—my stepbrother's too-short crew-cut. He didn't turn or acknowledge my presence in any way. His eyes remained glued to the TV screen, his slack features bathed in its icy emissions, his striped T-shirt bunched under his belly where it had slid away from my mother's consoling crotch. Though he pretended to be deeply engrossed in Danny Thomas' problems, it didn't take a genius to see that my stepbrother was pissed off at me.

"If I've told you once," my mother said, "I've told you a thousand times not to leave your brother alone, ever. It's the one thing that I ask of you, Leo. The one and only thing."

I was tempted to say, *He's not my brother, he's my stepbrother*, but thought better of it. By then my mother had already consumed a fair amount of cream sherry and showed no signs of abatement. Every evening after dinner she was in the habit of drinking at least one glass of cream sherry—not a little glass, either, but a Christmas-themed tumbler decorated with holly leaves and red berries. She nibbled another peanut (she dispatched her legumes meticulously, one-by-one), her eyes intent on Mr. Thomas, who by then had been caught by his kids trying on his wife's underwear over his pajamas. The laugh track sounded like bacon frying.

"...*the one and only thing*..." my mother repeated.

Her quilted, rose-colored, rayon robe had slipped off, exposing the legs of the chorus-line dancer she once dreamed of becoming. When she was sixteen my mother ran away to join the Radio City Rockettes. With fifty dollars and—as she put it—"a suitcase full of dreams," she walked five miles to the Danville train station, got on a New York City-bound train, and watched the only world she had ever known slip by through the dirt-tinted window. No sooner did she arrive in Grand Central Station than a stranger approached her, a handsome, silver-haired, goateed businessman dressed in a double-breasted suit. He asked her if he could be of any help, then offered her

lunch at a nearby coffee shop. Within an hour my mother found herself fending off his gropes and kisses in a nearby hotel suite. How she managed to escape the businessman's clutches my mother didn't elaborate, but the ordeal left her so discomposd she never went to the audition. Instead she boarded the next train back to Danville, where, from the station, with tears in her eyes, she phoned the man whose banana-yellow Studebaker Champion soon arrived to take her home, her knight in yellow armor. A month later she married my father. So went the story as told by my mother under the influence of several tumblers of cheap cream sherry.

"I'm hungry," I said. "Is there anything to eat?"

"Will you get a load of this kid of mine," my mother said, shaking her head. "Shows up whenever the heck he feels like it and then expects to be waited on like royalty. There's Polish sausage on the stove."

"Elephant dong?" I exclaimed enthusiastically. This was my term of endearment for Polish kielbasa sausage, what my father had always called it.

"I wish you wouldn't call it that," my mother said with a frown. "It's disgusting. Thank goodness your stepfather isn't here to hear you say it."

True enough. Had he been there, my stepfather's normally pale cheeks would have turned the same dark pink as the Polish comestible itself. Walter J. Waple was as intolerant of references to the reproductive organs of male pachyderms as he was of unpolished shoes, untrimmed fingernails, belching, Bolsheviks, beanies, and beatniks.

"Where's Mr. Waple, anyway?"

"At his store. Where else? Would it break your heart to refer to him for once as your *stepfather*? Is that asking too much? If I called you 'Mr. Napoli,' how would that suit you?"

"I prefer Your Eminence."

"Wise guy."

"Why is he working so late?"

"Who knows? He's got some project he's working on. Go on

and grab yourself some kielbasa. *Lassie* will be on soon. Your Eminence.”



As the theme music to *Lassie* swelled and the Hollywood collie leapt onto a rock in front of a snow-capped rear-screen projected mountain, with my tray of lukewarm sausage I stretched out on the carpet next to Gordon. Superimposed over the title sequence, my mother's reflection sipped more sherry from her tumbler. Some people should never drink, and my mother was one of them. Liquor did something to the corners of her mouth that gave her features a grim aspect and made her look a decade older than her thirty-six years. The nutty sweet aroma of bargain-basement sherry sickened my stomach. Mom drank to dull her depression, to soften its edges. By the third glass she tended to leak regrets: how she had wasted her life, how if only she had done this, if only she had done that, if only, if only, if only... *Why, with my talent and good looks I could have been something. I could've been a movie star! I could have married into nobility and wealth! I could have been the wife of a world-class brain or heart surgeon or a diplomat or the prime minister of some country. Instead I had to marry that good-for-nothing-hat-factory-back-shop-worker father of yours and end up spending the rest of my days stuck here in Hattertown...*

My mother's squandered potential was a scratchy old record that she played over and over again. (Am I being unfair? Probably, but only the way that caricaturists are unfair to their subjects, by accentuating qualities that are incontrovertibly there.) When she drank, Mom drank too much, and for the first eighteen years of my life, she drank just about every night that I can remember. I can't blame her entirely. Her own mother was a lush and her father a tyrant who made her quit school and go to work in a hat factory (as a hat band seamstress) at sixteen. He belittled her every chance he got while relishing her every failure as though it were the fruit of a tree planted by himself and watered with her haplessness. My mother's story is that of a woman who, faced with only bad choices, made them.

She lit a Chesterfield King. "So where on earth did His Royal Highness disappear to all day today?" she asked, blowing the question out in a series of smoke puffs. "I suppose you were hanging around with that no-good gang of yours as usual?"

"You suppose wrong."

"Uhn haah dah," said Gordon.

"Don't lie to me, Leo. I can always tell when you're lying."

"Whatever you say, Mom."

Timmy and Lassie rescued a bald eagle shot by a hunter. While the eagle recovered from its wound, Timmy and Lassie found her nest full of eggs and returned the eagle to it. Timmy was virtuous. He never lied to his mother.

"I sure wish that you would find yourself a better class of friends to hang around with," my mother said. "You're a Highlander now, Leo. You've no reason to fraternize with such riff-raff when you could be making friends with people of your own social class. Grant Clarke, for instance." Grant was one of the smarter kids in school, bound for Princeton via private school. He wore Hushpuppies and tennis sweaters. No one liked him. "He's the sort of good influence you should be cultivating instead of those delinquents of yours."

"Sure, Mom."

"I tell you those boys are nothing but trouble. Zag's a hot-headed bully. As for the other two... I swear, one of these days they're going to get you in deep water."

Mom was right. The Back Shop Boys were nothing but trouble. We were bored. We lacked social skills. Zag punched his way through life; Victor lied his way through; via crude chemistry Skunky tried to stink and blast his way. I sketched astronauts and looked through my telescope.

When a commercial came on I took my tray, went back into the kitchen, and slid the kielbasa of which I'd eaten only a few bites into the trash pail. I was still shaken up from my encounter with the Man in Blue. I watched a bit more of *Lassie*, then got up to go to bed.

"It's not even seven-thirty," my mother said.

"I'm going to look through my telescope."

"You and that telescope of yours! What do you expect to see through that thing that you haven't seen a thousand times before? There are only so many stars, Leo."

I kissed her cheek. "Night, Mom."

"I swear I might as well not have a son anymore. Leo *who*? Oh, you mean that kid who's always looking through his telescope?"

"Goodnight, Gordy." I stepped through the beaded curtain into the hallway.

"...except when he's off doing heaven knows what with his shady friends and lying through his teeth to his mother about it..."

As I climbed the stairs to my room my mother yelled:

"You'll miss *Denise the Menace*. And *The Wonderful World of Color*!"

PART 2

OUTER SPACE

The telescope was a gift from my stepfather, one of many gifts with which he tried to buy his way into my good graces, including but not limited to a twelve-foot toboggan, a globe that lit up from inside, and a traveling chess set with magnetized pieces and imitation alligator-skin carrying case.

The toboggan gathered dust in the garage. The rest of my stepfather's gifts I stashed in their original boxes in the dark depths of my bedroom closet.

It drove my mother crazy. "How is it possible," she wondered, "that I, who am nothing if not a paragon of graciousness, could have brought such an ungrateful specimen into this world? Can't you see your stepfather's just trying to be *nice* to you? Is that so *terrible*? What has that poor man ever done to earn such contempt from you?"

Had I answered, my answer would have been short but not sweet. *He killed my father*. The equation went something like this:

a: Hats killed my father
b: Walter Waple = hats
 $\therefore W. W. \text{ killed my father}$

So I refused my stepfather's gifts. I treated them with the contempt an honest judge shows for a bribe. Still, and notwithstanding my bottomless supply of righteous indignation, I couldn't bring myself to refuse that telescope, having spent the better part of a year lobbying for it, showing my mother ads for it in *Popular Mechanics*:

See the stars, moons, and planets up close!

According to those ads the telescope came with a "free" Star Chart and a 272-page, full-color *Handbook of the Heavens*. Though its useful magnification was only 180X—barely powerful enough to resolve Jupiter's moons—still, at \$29.95 it was a bargain.

I remember the day the telescope arrived. It was a Saturday morning. Gordon and I were belled up to the Zenith, waiting for *Fireball XL-5*, our favorite show, to come on. The series employed a novel technology known as SUPERMARIONATION: the characters were marionettes. You could see the strings when they caught the lights. Three thunderous bassoon chords—as ominous in their way as the notes that open Beethoven’s Fifth—heralded the show’s title sequence, wherein World Space Patrol Colonel Steve Zodiac and his Slavic sidekick Venus board their unambiguously phallic spaceship, off to rescue some part of the universe from a colorful assortment of intergalactic monsters and evil masterminds.

We were deep into *Fireball XL-5* when the doorbell rang. Mom was sleeping off her latest sherry hangover. My stepfather had gone to his store. I answered the door. The UPS man stood there, in his sewage-colored uniform, holding a four-foot-long cardboard box. I spent the rest of that morning wrestling with parts and instructions, and the afternoon peering through the result at clouds, impatient for darkness, intent on the planets, moons, and stars.

Total darkness didn’t fall until seven-thirty. Before aiming my telescope at the night sky I watched that evening’s episode of *The Twilight Zone*, in which a pair of astronauts, one male, one female, traveling in separate spaceships from different planets destroyed by nuclear wars, crash-land on an uninhabited planet. His name is Adam; hers: Eve. You can work the rest out for yourself.

For the next three months I spent every spare minute gazing through that telescope. I developed a squint from peering into the thing. I couldn’t get enough of stargazing. The planets and stars were all there—just where the star chart said they would be. There were Saturn’s rings; there were Jupiter’s (then) sixteen moons; there were the Sunflower, the Tadpole, the Whirlpool galaxies; there were brown dwarfs, quasars, pulsars, gamma ray bursts, trans-Neptunian objects, protoplanetary nebulae, and the remnants of supernovae.

But after three months the novelty of stargazing had begun to wear thin. The galaxies all started to look pretty much alike. It wasn't long before the entire universe left me nearly as cold as Planet Earth.

How, I wondered, can something as vast, infinite, and mysterious as the universe leave me feeling so cold, so empty? There must be something more. There *has to be!*



My bedroom's gabled walls featured a tromp l'oeil sky with puffy white clouds, painted there by my stepfather. Against this cloudy backdrop a trio of P51 Mustangs, a gull-winged Stuka, two Messerschmitts, and a P47 Thunderbolt banked and soared, suspended by lengths of fishing line no less invisible than the wires that controlled the marionettes on *Fireball XL-5*. Whirling propeller blades were simulated by discs of clear acetate. Painted bullet holes strafed one of the Messerschmitt's fuselages. From out of one of the Stuka's engines a gouge of smoke-gray cotton curved toward the ceiling. Hoping they would distract him from his fingertips, my stepfather built the model planes for his son (he'd harbored similar hopes for the twenty-gallon ant farm and the 1,000-piece *Queen Mary* jigsaw puzzle). Having failed at their original purpose, the model planes went into Mr. Waple's attic where they gathered dust until my mother agreed to marry him, whereupon my stepfather-to-be hit upon the clever notion of adorning my future bedroom with them.

On learning of his plan my mother was less than enthusiastic. "How do you expect the poor kid to sleep," she wondered, "with the Battle of Britain going on over his head?"

"Nonsense!" my future stepfather replied, puffing one of his many pipes. "Boys love airplanes! Airplanes and war! It's in their blood, if you will. Why at his age I'd have given my right eye for such a display!"

"He'll give his right eye, all right," my mother countered, "when he pokes it out on a propeller blade!"

Thus, to the roars and splutters and *ratttattattats* of a World

War II dogfight, I'd fall asleep in my new bedroom, only to bail out of a spinning, sweat-soaked bed somewhere around two o'clock in the morning, night after night.



Soon, though, I'd have a good reason to be grateful for those rude wee hour awakenings. If not for them I'd have slept through the one celestial event that would distinguish my up-to-then humdrum career as an astronomer.

The night of my encounter with the Man in Blue, awakened as usual by the dogfighting nightmare, I did what I always did: I gazed through my telescope. By then I had constructed a platform out on the roof outside my window. Except where the limbs of a neighbor's Japanese maple across the street obscured it, the roof offered a clear view of the night sky.

It was a cloudless night, perfect for stargazing. I peered through the aperture, intent on discovering some unknown galaxy or planet. Any fool with a \$29.95 telescope can ogle Jupiter's red eye or count Saturn's rings. I longed for something greater, to touch an existence far beyond my own, to be carried light years away from my mundane world, a world gone as cold and gray as the ashes of a hat factory fire.

I set my sights on the empty spaces between stars, those hellish voids punctuated by flecks of divinity, empty spaces that my imagination populated with galaxies inconceivably vast and mysterious. *Astronomy is the science by which men learn how small they are.* Within those dismal voids I searched for a sign, any sign, that the mystery known as "life" was aware of *my* mystery, that the universe gave enough of a damn about me, Leo Napoli IV, to throw him the equivalent of a cosmic wink. Though I was every inch my atheist father's son and believed in a personal God no more than he had, still, I wanted Him to notice me.

Ergo I peered through my \$29.95 telescope, wanting as much to be discovered by something out there as to discover it.

Suddenly, in the far upper right corner of the telescope's field, above and to the left of Canis Minoris, in what according

to the star chart should have been absolute emptiness, I saw an unusual star. No sooner did I see it than the star burst into an asterism (*"a pattern or group of stars typically smaller than a constellation"*) of smaller stars of different pastel shades: blue, green, yellow, pink. Like atoms around a nucleus, the colored stars spun frenziedly around a central brighter star before shooting off in different directions, with one star—a pale blue one—shooting straight down to the earth, where it exploded, lighting the horizon with a camera bulb-like flash. Then everything went dark.

For the next hour or so I went on looking through the telescope, expecting something more to happen. When nothing did I got back into bed and lay there, my hands folded over my pajama-clad chest, my eyes wide open, gazing through the web of model fighter planes, wondering if I'd ever gotten out of bed, if that exploding star had been nothing but a dream.

I awoke to bright sunshine. Ten past nine. I'd slept through the alarm. The Back Shop Boys were waiting for us at Cheese Hill. I shook Gordon awake.

"Come on! We're late!"

We took Bum's Trail, the shortcut named for the hobos who once camped along it back in the days of steam locomotives. During winter they warmed themselves on stoves improvised from discarded oil drums and slept on sprung Pullman seats that had somehow found their way into the woods.

As we hurried down the trail more church bells tolled, reminding me that Gordy and I had to be at church later that morning for ten-thirty worship, something I didn't look forward to. When he was alive, on Sundays my father always took us to the Congregational Church for the morning service. We went for the same reason we murmured our prayers at the supper table and before bed: because my mother insisted on it. I didn't mind the charade. But after my father died all bets were off. I was damned if I'd believe in a god who stole fathers from their eleven-year-old sons and left their yellow trolley cars to rot on cinderblocks.

If I believed in a higher power, it was only to doubt and defy him, her, or it. I recall spending part of an afternoon one day staring at one of our town's hat factory chimneys, daring its weathered bricks to move or change color or do anything at all to demonstrate to me God's omnipotence. "Come on, now, Mr. All-Powerful God," I sneered. "Pull off this one puny little miracle for me. I dare you!" No bricks moved.

So much for God's omnipotence.



We were halfway down Bum's Trail when we came upon the

Mysterious Object. It was as big as the furnace in my stepfather's house, and shaped like a giant hat, round on top, with a narrow, scorched brim underneath. It was more than half-buried in the ground, a mound of earth pushed up at its rounded top, a trail of flattened horsetail ferns behind it, their segmented shafts pointing every which way like the short hairs jutting out from the back of Gordy's red Boys Club cap. The thing's outer casing was made of a pale-blue translucent metal, its bottom singed black. What it was or where it had come from I had no idea. Then I remembered the dream I'd had of a blue star plummeting to earth earlier that same morning.

I slapped Gordy's back and hurried to tell the others. Minutes later the Back Shop Boys converged around the thing to ogle it with a mixture of astonishment and skepticism.

"It looks to me like part of a submarine," said Victor, whose dad, according to him, had commanded the World War II submarine that torpedoed the *Bismarck*.

"Maybe it's an A-bomb, one that the Ruskies dropped but for some reason didn't blow up!" Skunky submitted.

Zag spit onto a skunk cabbage plant. "Most definitely a UPJ," he proclaimed, lighting a cigarette.

"What's a UPJ?" Victor inquired.

"An Unidentified Piece of Junk."

I took a step closer.

"Watch out!" Skunky warned. "It could be booby-trapped!"

"Or radioactive!" said Victor. "Look—it's *glowing*!"

I peered under the scorched brim to see a tangle of singed, partially melted colored cables. In places the cables had fused into multicolored blobs. I took the pocketknife that my father had given me from my knapsack, and, using the saw blade the Swiss Army equipped it with, sawed away at the Mysterious Object's guts. Zag asked what I was doing.

"Getting a specimen," I said.

"What for?"

"For an expert opinion." A motley heart-sized blob broke off into my fist.

“Virgil?” said Victor.

“Why not? He’s an expert, isn’t he?”

“An expert nut-job!” said Skunky.

I plopped the chunk into my knapsack.

“I’m telling you it’s just a hunk of junk,” said Zag. “An old boiler or part of some old hat factory machine.”

“Anyone want to come with me?” I turned to Victor and Skunky who both looked down at their shoes. Neither of them cared to defy Zag.

“Fine. I’ll go by myself.” Meaning with Gordon.



Virgil Zeno was Hattertown’s flying saucer expert, and had been since the morning of March 3, 1954, when he sighted his first UFO in the night skies over Hattertown. Though some failed to recognize the need for such an authority in our town, while others considered him insane, most of Hattertown’s then 6,000 inhabitants were happy to give Virgil what they felt was his due. After all, if he was a lunatic, he was a good-natured lunatic as well as a source of local color and amusement. He was also Hattertown’s finest mill worker. If granting Virgil authority over the town’s extraterrestrial tourists gratified him, why deny him that small, dubious privilege?

But the main reason for the town’s indulgence was the terrible accident that, a year to the day before he saw his first UFO, took the lives of his identical brothers.

The Zeno triplets were taking their maiden voyage down Felt Street, headed south in their brand-new green and white DeSoto Firedome convertible, one they had bought for themselves for their thirty-eighth birthday, which happened to fall on Easter Sunday. Verso was behind the wheel; Vito rode shotgun; Virgil sat behind them in the backseat. Though the DeSoto came with a full set of them, back then seat belts were not required. None of the brothers wore his. However they did wear their freshly laundered, spanking-white carpentry overalls. According to my father, who witnessed the events of that terrible morning, had

there been no tragedy the Zeno triplets would have left a lasting impression all the same.

The car was approaching the railroad crossing when suddenly the signals flashed and clanged. The train was a freight train carrying spools of raw brass to Waterbury, to be made into screws, grommets, shoe eyelets, and other widgets. Freight trains were especially dangerous. They barreled through the town at odd intervals. You never knew when one was coming.

Instead of braking, in what witnesses described as an attempt to beat the train, Verso gunned the DeSoto's engine. He cleared the first gate, but by then the other gate had trapped them. According to Lester Kirby, the hardware store owner, none of the brothers made any attempt to abandon their new vehicle. As the locomotive bore down on them they sat calmly talking, until—like a cat carrying one of her brood—the engine picked up the DeSoto and carried it several hundred feet before dropping it, in a crumpled mass, at the base of a fuel oil storage tank. Vito and Verso Zeno were killed instantly. Thrown free of the car by the impact, Virgil landed feet-first in a stack of peat moss bales in the feed and supply store lot. Though he survived, his legs didn't.



Virgil Zeno's carpentry shed was located by the railroad tracks, next to the lumberyard. On its rooftop Virgil had erected an enormous cross, twenty-six feet tall by fifteen feet wide, fringed with 500-watt flood lamps. By night the cross glowed like those luminous fish that prowl ocean depths. On the same roof not far from the cross was a large billboard bearing a greeting, black letters on white:

**WELCOME VISITORS
FROM OUTER SPACE**

In case the visitors didn't happen to speak English, in smaller letters underneath it the greeting was translated into Latin:

**AVE HOSPES ARCANO AB
COELO DESCENDENS**

Virgil's carpentry shed was painted battleship gray. Through its first-story windows I saw only a squeak of lamplight, so begrimed were they with sawdust. Still, I knew Virgil was in there. He worked every day of the week. When not spinning table or chair legs or milling dovetail joints for a chest of drawers or caressing coats of varnish over tabletops and cabinet doors, he'd be working on his flying saucer in his secret back room. No one was supposed to know about the flying saucer, but every kid in Hattertown did, Virgil having taken each of us, individually, into his confidence and shown us the thing, peeling back the sawdust-covered tarp to offer us a tantalizing glimpse of smooth, polished wood. Yes, you heard right: *wood*. A blend of Spanish cedar, Malaysian teak, bamboo, and elderberry.

"Terrific wood, elderberry," Virgil explained the day he offered me my own personal glimpse. "Dense but lightweight and flexible. Steams easily. The Indians used to make slings and arrow shafts from it. A sling for support, an arrow for thrust and speed. Lots of good uses, elderberry has."

I waited for the rotary saw to stop screaming before knocking. When the door opened, a strong smell of pine resin hit me. Virgil sat in his wheelchair, his white coveralls golden with sawdust. Even sitting he looked gangly, the knobby knees of his useless legs spread and poking up into the air. He lifted his visor, revealing a face as bony and long as the rest of him, lantern jawed, with a hawk nose, its nostrils caked with sawdust. Virgil's froggy eyes were set deep into his elongated skull. Seeing me and Gordy, he smiled. His teeth were long, too, and yellow to match the sawdust coating everything. He shook our hands, clasping one hand in both of his.

"What's up, fellas?" he asked. "Come to learn more about our distant neighbors?"

I took off my knapsack, opened it, extracted the lump of matter I'd sliced from the Mysterious Object, and handed it to Virgil. He studied it, turning it over in his big, callused, sawdust-coated hand, its knuckles like the knots in a rope. After turning it over a few times he looked up seriously and said:

"Where'd you find this?"

I explained.

"Anyone else know about it?" Virgil cast furtive looks over mine and Gordy's shoulders.

I shook my head.

"Sure?"

The question rankled. We Back Shop Boys were nothing if not discreet.

"Better come in," Virgil said.

I followed him in his wheelchair, its wheels drawing dark tracks on the sawdust-covered floor. Every inch of the place was furry with sawdust, including the benches, which were wheelchair height and crowded with augers, adzes, vices, chisels, clamps, mallets, scribes, saws, jigs, drills, and other instruments for torturing lumber. A mule-sized lathe straddled a pile of fresh turnings. I breathed in the smell of ravished wood.

Virgil led us into his back room and told me to shut the door. There, in his secret command post, Virgil Zeno acquainted privileged visitors with electromagnetic propulsion, the Roswell Files, ionized air, 'G' forces, and coronas of bluish-purple flame. The room's cork walls were plastered with photographs, newspaper clippings, and other evidence of extraterrestrial activity sent to Virgil by enthusiasts from all over the country. Virgil lit one of two burners on a stove in the corner and put a kettle on. Even on the muggiest days Virgil always offered his guests Ovaltine ("*The food drink for rocket power*," according to the Secret Squadron in the television commercials). While waiting for the kettle to whistle he put a heaping tablespoon of Ovaltine into two mugs. Having filled the mugs with boiling water, into each—along with an inadvertent dash of sawdust—he plopped two marshmallows from a plastic bag.

"I take it you saw that star explode this morning?" Virgil said, handing me mine.

"You saw it too?"

"How could I miss it? It lit up the whole sky!"

"Weren't you sleeping?"

"I never sleep, not if I can help it!"

He gestured for us to take a seat. The flying saucer having left no room for other furnishings, Gordon and I sat on it. It made a surprisingly comfortable bench. It was where we always sat to hear Virgil's stories, none of which were more thrilling than that of his first UFO sighting, which happened on the night of April 18, 1954.

A year to the day after the accident that killed both of Virgil's brothers, to celebrate his birthday a group of Hattertown citizens chipped in to buy another DeSoto, identical to the first, but green where the other had been red, and fitted with a hand-operated throttle so Virgil could drive it without his legs. That night he drove it up to the new football field that had been built behind the high school and parked it near the fifty-yard line. There, with the top down and the driver's seat reclined, Virgil gazed at the stars that were scattered across the night sky like jewels at the bottom of an inverted ocean.

Until that night Virgil had shown little interest in the night sky. He rarely bothered looking at it, so concerned had he been with things earthbound. Now as he gazed up this awareness filled him with regret—and awe, for suddenly the stars were objects of wonder to him, as though he were seeing them for the first time: which, in a way, he was. Like a poor man raking in diamonds he gathered them in.

Suddenly a shooting star zipped across the eastern sky. It was followed by another, and another. For the next half hour a barrage of shooting stars crisscrossed the heavens. At around two o'clock in the morning (Virgil had switched off the ignition, so he couldn't read the dash clock) the shooting star display ended.

Virgil had started the DeSoto's engine and was about to drive back into town when in the northwestern sky he saw what he later described as a revolving circle of pulsating lights of various colors a quarter mile above the earth's surface. The object appeared to hover directly over the section of town known as Bumping Hill (275° azimuth; elevation 1.5°). As it hovered a group of patchy clouds swept over it, enhancing the impres-

sion of luminosity. After hovering there for a minute or so the circle of lights dispersed, flinging off in all different directions, leaving no doubt in Virgil's mind that he had borne witness to a completely novel event.

Two mornings later, under the headline HATTERTOWN RESIDENT SEES UFO, Virgil's testimony appeared in the *Hattertown Gazette*. Showing it to us over breakfast, my father slapped his knee first, then my mother's knee, then my three-year-old knee. That was his full commentary on the subject.



"So," said Virgil, rolling his wheelchair so close his knees touched mine. "Are you positive you're the only other person who saw that star explode?"

"As far as I know I am."

Virgil nodded. "That simplifies matters."

He leaned closer then, propping his elbows on his thighs and his chin on the interlaced fingers of his long, bony hands. His next words were uttered in a voice as smooth as fine-sanded wood and scented with Ovaltine, Black Jack gum, and sawdust:

"Sometime between now and the end of summer you will make contact with an entity from outer space."

Virgil let this bit of news sink in, fixing his froggy eyes on me, their whites stained brown as if his pupils had melted.

"Me?" I said.

"This leaves little doubt." Virgil hefted the specimen.

Like many boys of a certain age in Hattertown, Connecticut, I had a tacit understanding with Virgil. The understanding was this: that Virgil would tell me incredible things, and I would believe them. This arrangement was reciprocal. That hunk of fused metal and wire he held in his hand? It could have been a scrap of hat manufacturing machinery, as Zag had suggested, or part of an oddly shaped furnace boiler, or the forsaken prototype of a secret weapon contracted by the Pentagon and manufactured by some exponent of the Military Industrial Complex that President Eisenhower warned us about. It might

have fallen from heaven or it might have fallen out of the back of a garbage truck. Whatever its source, its purpose couldn't have been clearer. It existed for the same reason all miracles exist: to make believers out of us.

I asked: "Why me?"

Virgil smiled. When he did his rubbery face looked like a funny page comic lifted and stretched on Silly Putty. "I have no idea. But as sure as eggs is eggs, they picked *you*."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Virgil pursed his lips. "I'm not sure there's much you *can* do, other than stay vigilant."

"Vigilant?"

"Be on your guard."

"Be on my guard for *what*?"

Virgil shook his head. "I wish I could tell you. Don't roll your eyes at me, I'm just the messenger here! All I know is that whatever form this visiting entity takes, it won't be alien in any obvious way. It won't be some little green man like in the movies. Odds are it'll blend in with the surroundings to better escape your notice."

"So how will I know when I see him—or it?"

Virgil shook his head again. "That's just it. You won't. You may have already made contact. It could be someone you know but would never suspect. Or it may be someone you *do* suspect. That's why you need to be vigilant. One thing's for certain: unless you keep that third eye of yours open, you'll never know if you've made contact or not."

"Third eye?"

"Your intuitive eye, the one that sees without seeing. This one here." He twisted a sawdusty thumb into my forehead.

I asked: "Has everyone got a third eye?"

"Sure, but in most people it's permanently sealed shut. For all we know yours is sealed shut too."



As Gordon and I left Virgil's carpentry shed that morning,

the gray shroud that had covered everything since my father's death was suddenly lifted. Like the NBC peacock that graced the living rooms of those lucky enough to afford a color TV, suddenly the world spread its bright, beautiful plumage. With Gordy gripping me from behind, as I pedaled us home to get ready for church, I wondered: what message, urgent and divine, has the universe got in store for me?

The Man in Blue walks. On roads and highways, along the railroad tracks, past homes and stores and abandoned hat factories. He walks in a cathedral of silence, its ceiling vaulted with sky. Vehicles swerve past him, stirring up eddies of dust that soak into the fibers of his blue coveralls. And though he never breaks his stride, he must sense the supreme effort by which the vehicles' drivers resist the urge to run him over.

While walking, he collects things: discarded bottles, burnt-out bulbs, and railroad insulators: thick, jellyfish-like blobs of glass in assorted watery blue and green shades fallen from utility poles along the railroad tracks. He holds them up to the sky to inspect them for defects before putting them in his rucksack or tossing them—like too-small-fish—back into the weeds.

In filling his rucksack he fills his days...



Though I kept spying on him I didn't learn much more about the Man in Blue. What I did learn I kept mostly to myself. If secrets are a form of currency, I hoarded mine like a miser. Asked to report on my reconnaissance, I lived up to my name and told half the truth: that the Man in Blue spent his days wandering the town gathering things in his canvas rucksack.

"What does he collect?" asked Zag.

"Insulators. The ones you find along the railroad tracks."

"What does he do with them?"

"Beats me."

Meanwhile I took Virgil's advice and kept my invisible third eye peeled, suspecting everyone of being an alien from outer space, even friends and family. I lived in a perpetually heightened state of alertness, convinced that my encounter was imminent, that at long last I would partake of something of the infinite.

But as April turned to May and May to June I grew weary

of my vigil. Conviction soured into doubt, doubt curdled into skepticism, and skepticism moldered into scorn. Virgil Zeno, that crazy crippled carpenter, had played me for a fool! I'd never partake of anything of the infinite! By July I'd cast his kooky prophecy out of my mind entirely and reverted to my customary state of gloom.

When Gordon and I next cut through Bum's Trail the Mysterious Object was gone. Someone must have hauled the thing away. All that remained was a weedy ditch.



The days grew hot and muggy. Muggy: how I hated that word, like getting mugged by the heat. Sticky sweat poured down our faces. Sidewalks fried the soles of our sneakers.

When it got so hot that neither the Town Hall water fountain nor the frosty gusts emanating from the ice cream case in McMullen's Five and Dime store cooled us down sufficiently, we pedaled our bikes to Lost Lake, so named since you couldn't see it from the road. While the others took turns jumping off a big rock leaning over the water, Gordon and I sat with our shirts off, enjoying the cool breezes that swept in off the water.

I never learned to swim. Had I known under no circumstances would I have jumped off that rock. Dreams of splash-landing space capsules notwithstanding, I had a morbid fear of water and drowning. I couldn't walk past a body of water without shivering, as if the lake or pond or river would reach out and hurl me into itself. It was my father's fault. When I was four he tried to teach me to swim by throwing me off a dock at Lake Candlewood. It never occurred to him that this method could fail and that he might have to rescue me, as he was ill-equipped to do, being unable to swim himself. It was Dick Stefansky—husband of Mom's friend Eve—who jumped fully clothed off the same dock to rescue me. As he breathed life back into me, Dad looked on through a Rock & Rye-infused haze, his gaunt features slack with astonishment, as if somebody else had thrown his kid into the drink. From then

on except to hydrate and shower (I never took baths) I had as little to do with water as possible.

Still, I went to Lost Lake. I had no choice, really, if I wanted to be with my friends. And though it was made of water, the lake was pretty, and I enjoyed the breezes that found us there on that rock.

We dubbed the patch of water beneath the rock “Fool’s Hole,” and I never tired of pointing out to the others what fools they were for jumping into it. They in turn dubbed me and Gordon the “Rock Squad,” since we were in charge of looking out for interlopers, and because they knew if *we* jumped we’d both sink like rocks.

After jumping a few times the others swam out to a small island at the lake’s center with the remains of a miniature decorative stone lighthouse on it. Skunky did a sidestroke, Victor swam on his back, Zag zipped far ahead. Their six legs kicked up ragged white paired plumes. While they swam Gordy played with my yo-yo and I perused the latest *Space Man* comic (“Captives of a Mad Race of Space Creatures!”) until boredom found me up there on that rock. With my rolled-up comic book I slapped Gordon’s shoulder.

“Let’s take a walk,” I said.



Of the Dalton mansion all that remained was a rectangle of weed-and-moss-covered stones. To one side of it in what had been an estimable pool only vines and creepers swam. The ruins of the estate’s outlying structures, its barns, sheds, chicken coops, conservatories, and picnic houses, were so overgrown only the keenest eye could distinguish them from the rest of the woods. Scattered throughout the grounds, hidden there like Easter eggs, were relics of its past: a bronze sundial, a granite birdbath, a marble bench with scrolled armrests, a fountain presided over by a headless, lichen-covered angel, its waters supplanted by weeds.

Having circled the estate once, Gordon and I arrived at the

concrete dam at the lake's far end. At the center of the dam was a sluiceway controlled by a rusted iron valve. When the lake was high, the water slid in a clear Saran Wrap-like sheet over the sluiceway and into a gully, where rocks gnashed it into foam. But the lake was low; no water slid over the sluiceway. I picked a stone up and sidearmed it over the dam.

I could say it was sheer coincidence that brought my stepbrother and me to Fern Cottage, but it wouldn't be true. Since I'd seen it, Fern Cottage and its mysterious occupant hadn't been far from my mind. Approaching it now, I tried to convince myself that I wasn't consumed with curiosity. In a burlesque of aimlessness I scuffed my sneakers on the gravel road and whistled tunelessly to myself. When the cottage veered into view I pretended it wasn't there. Caretaker's cottage? *What* caretaker's cottage?

This dumb show had a very brief run. As we arrived within a dozen yards of it I heard a sound and turned to see the cottage's green door swing open. With my hand clasped over Gordy's mouth, I pulled us into a mound of ferns. Through their fronds we watched as, in his plaid robe with his walking stick, the Man in Blue walked down the slate path leading to the gravel road. There he turned right, heading the way we'd come, toward Fool's Hole. We waited a few more seconds until, with a gesture borrowed from Vic Morrow in *Combat*, I signaled for us to follow him.

From the gravel road the Man in Blue took a shortcut through a tangle of bayberry bushes to the swimming rock, where he stood, leaning on his stick, his head bent forward, peering down over the rock's face. I turned to Gordon, signaling silence with a finger to my lips. Together we crab-scuttled under the low shrubs, mountain laurel mixed with thorny bayberry, toward the edge of exposed granite. There, from behind, with a sprig of laurel camouflaging us, I had a close-up view of my subject. I tried hard not to breathe, to stay calm, stuck there in the thicket with nowhere to turn or run, excited but at the same

time saying to myself, *What if he turns and catches us, so close and obviously spying on him? What then?*

The Man in Blue took something from his face—his glasses?—and folded them into a pocket of his robe. He dropped the stick with a clatter. As he spread out his arms the plaid robe fell from his shoulders, exposing a wide, V-shaped back. Kids are notoriously bad at guessing the ages of adults, but if pressed I'd have said between twenty-five and fifty. His legs were lean and taut, doubtless from all that walking, their calves as big and boxy as toasters. A jagged scar ran down the left leg from the hip to the knee.

He lifted one leg from the plaid mound, then the other, then hopped about, freeing his feet. Terrified and in awe, I watched as—naked—he stretched both arms against the blue sky. Then he tipped forward, crouched, put air between his feet and the rock, curved over the edge, and was gone.

Suicide, I said to myself, easing out of the thicket. No one had ever dived head-first into Fool's Hole and lived to tell about it. Over patches of pale lichen I crept forward onto a section of bare granite, avoiding the green plaid robe, and looked over the edge, sure I'd see him lying there in a crumpled heap, but the rock's parabolic curve blocked my view. I leaned out further, one hand braced against a trembling knee. Still I couldn't see directly below me. I edged closer, sitting with the palms of both hands flat on the rock, using them as brakes, peeking through my spread knees, inching forward.

All this time my stepbrother stood behind me, kept there by his dread of heights and the certainty that I'd box his ear if he dared to disobey me. Meanwhile I stretched my neck out bird-like and slid forward another few inches. Still I saw nothing.

Suddenly I felt my hind parts slipping and knew I'd gone too far. I tried to back up, putting all my weight into the balls of my hands, my sneaker bottoms skidding on the boulder's surface. Bits of granite rolled ball bearing-like under my palms, chewing them up. I tried flattening myself against the rock, feeling the fabric of my shirt creep up to my neck as I sought to grip some-

thing, anything, with hands, feet, fingers...whatever nature had given me to grip with. I felt the skin peeling off my back.

Then my body turned weightless, floating off the rock face, arms spinning free, sneakers pumping air. I heard a cry—my own. My lips pulled back across my top teeth as the lake rushed up a full house-story under me. The same lake swallowed me, thundering as I pierced its skin to enter a pandemonium of bubbles and darkness.



The world moved upside-down. Sunlight speared topsy-turvy trees. Alongside a pair of hairy legs my eyeballs swung. Through a picket fence of wet hair the ground lurched. My wet T-shirt clung to my back, my thighs tight in sopping denim, my sneakers up there somewhere. As I touched ground a wall of bitterness rose down my inverted throat. I rolled over to puke lake water and breakfast, my hands flat under my elbows.

I looked up to see the man towering over me, his sunburned shoulders hunched as if ready to leap, his ribcage gleaming wet. His eyes bored into mine, looking at but not seeing me, blinded by fear. His penis hung less than a foot away from my nose, a sausage link with a loose, floppy casing. The man bent down to touch me. I screamed:

“Get away from me, homo!”

Pursued by my echoes he limped off into the woods.

Remembering Gordon, I ran back to the rock to find him gone. I looked down into the Fool's Hole. *Please God, no.* I called: *Gordon! Gordy!* I looked down at the lake again.

Oh, please, no, no, please no, no, no...

I heard snuffles and turned to see the white tip of a sneaker poking out from behind a bayberry bush. Attached to it, Gordy sat with his arms wrapped around his knees, rocking back and forth, bawling.

“It’s okay,” I said, stroking him. “It’s okay, Gordy; it’s okay.”



Back at the rock I hid the man's plaid robe and walking stick. The others came back to find me soaking wet.

"I fell in," I explained.

"And all this time we thought your stepbrother was the retard!" Skunky quipped and naturally they all laughed.

One advantage of having half a middle finger: I could flip people the bird in plain sight with impunity. My "Phantom Finger," I called it and put it to good use then and there.

PART 3

THE COMFORMATOR

On Saturdays I helped my stepfather at his store. I washed windows, dusted shelves, polished display cases, and steam-cleaned hats that, despite frequent encounters with the feather duster, accrued furry mantles of dust.

When not doing any of those things I sat in the tufted red leather chair in the middle of the store, where customers' wives sat (when there were customers), flipping through the trade magazines my stepfather subscribed to—*Hats Off!*, *Hats Galore*, *The Sophisticated Hatter*—magazines packed with stimulating articles, to wit:

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY HAT DISPLAYS?

Many stores fail to light their wall cases adequately. Most hat cases have no direct light on the hats; and those which have illumination behind a valance at the top succeed in lighting only the top one or two shelves, such that...

THE ART OF FITTING FACES

When a man's ears stick out from the sides of his head, the wrong hat makes them even more conspicuous. The crown should be proportioned to the face, but an extreme taper should be avoided, while the brim should be flat-set at the back and sides, and snapped full across the...

HATS FOR THE BIG FELLOW

Never sell a big man a hat with a narrow brim and a tapered crown. A narrow brim adds emphasis to a man's weight and to the width of his face and gives the hat an old-fashioned, stodgy air. A too high crown, on the other hand, makes such a man look like a giant, so his height becomes a liability rather than...

WHAT COLOR HAT SHALL I SELL HIM?

Brown hats are best with brown or greenish suits or coats. They rarely look good with gray clothing. Some brown or tan hats may be worn with blue or blue-gray clothing, but the salesman or the customer must have a real color-sense to be sure of these harmonies...

HOW TO SELL QUALITY

First, point out to the customer that in a hat of fine materials and conscientious workmanship the felt is much firmer, smoother, springier, and tighter. Next, get the customer's old hat off his head; this gives you your cue on sizing and price. If it's a \$7.50, show him a \$10.00. If he makes no objection, try a \$12.50, and if that fails to secure his...

HOW TO SHAPE THE HAT

The crease must be centered. For this the bow tie on the leather is your guide. Never shape a hat against the chest as shown in the next picture, a common habit with inexperienced salesmen, but a bad one. It is almost impossible to center a crease this way, or to judge how deep the crease is being made. In short, it's the job of a butcher, not an artist...



Waple Hats was located ("conveniently," according to the ads my stepfather ran on WHAT, the local radio station) on Felt Street, between Top Hat Tailors and The Velvet Box Jewelers. That Saturday morning it rained. I parked my bike in the alley. Holding an umbrella over both mine and Gordy's heads, I led us around to the store's main entrance.

The front door set off a string of bells. Seeing us my stepfather smiled. He wore his double-breasted gray suit and puffed his Calabash pipe. I smelled his cologne—aftershave?—a calm, clean, dignified smell that, combined with the smell of his pipe tobacco, conveyed a sense of masculine order and grace.

Like everything else about my stepfather I held that smell in contempt.

He tousled Gordon's hair and gave my hand a hearty shake. Walter J. Waple was an inveterate hand-shaker.

"What's up, sport?" he said per our routine.

"I dunno," I said, rolling my eyes. "What's up with you?"

"Gas prices are up, taxes are up, unemployment is up, and hats are up!" From a nearby display stand my stepfather took a red-feathered porkpie and plopped it onto my head while rabbit-punching my shoulder, making me wish myself dead.

By then Gordon and my Dunkin' Midnight Special yo-yo had taken their usual seat on a folding metal chair by the cash register. My stepfather put my umbrella into a stand by the door, then helped me off with my raincoat, exposing the suit he'd bought along with a pair of brown wingtips for me to wear exclusively at his store, the latter hidden under galoshes.

"You've come on a red-letter day, as it were, sport," my stepfather said as I pried the galoshes off. "Wait till you see what I've got in store for you—get it, in *store*? It'll knock your socks—or rather, your *hat* off! Ha-ha!"

He indicated the tufted red leather chair. "Sit down. Take a load off your feet. I'll be back in a jiff!"

So saying he disappeared into his office.

The other reason for my helping my stepfather at his store: to "cheer him up," in my mother's words. Not that my stepfather needed cheering. The world could have gone "to hell in a handbasket, if you will," and along with his cologne, Walter J. Waple would have worn his eternally chipper smile.

Not that Walter Waple lacked cause for gloom. His hat business was failing and had been for some time. All across America sales of men's hats were in decline, the steepest downturn having occurred after World War II. Some claimed the war itself was to blame. Having come to equate headgear with military subjugation, returning vets wanted nothing to do with hats. Others pointed to changes in the designs of automobiles, with their low-slung roofs that made hat-tipping invisible if

not altogether impossible. Still others blamed air travel, which put luggage space at a premium, forcing hat-wearers to choose between keeping their hats in their laps or having them crushed under suitcases. It didn't help that bars and restaurants had taken to charging patrons for checking hats. Finally, there were those scientific studies suggesting that the wearing of hats promoted baldness in men, studies whose validity Walter J. Waple denied vociferously.

"Upon my word," he argued, "why everyone knows wearing a hat is good for the scalp! It protects the follicles from humidity, dust, dirt, excess heat and cold, not to mention sunburn, soot, rain, hail, bird droppings, and other undesirable elements! The worst thing a fellow can do to his scalp is expose it to the fickle winds of fate, if you will!"

Someone had left a copy of *Life* magazine on the tufted chair. I sat flipping its pages while gazing through the store's large display windows. Since it was summer Panama hats dominated the left-hand window display. Under a yellow construction-paper sun a streamer announced:

Straws to Cover Every Head Type in Town!

The right-hand display, to which I'd contributed, featured nine fedoras of different colors revolving around another sun, this one of papier-mâché. Behind them a dozen road maps were pinned to a sky-blue chintz curtain. By the same fishing line he'd used in my bedroom, model cars, buses, trains, passenger planes, and other forms of transportation dangled. This window's banner said:

See the World in a Caxton-Dumont

It was an impressive display, or would have been, had it not been upstaged by the recently installed neon sign:

**Waple & Son Hats
Since 1898**

—the ampersand enclosed in a flashing neon derby. The flashing neon clashed with the august gold leaf of the original sign,

and in my opinion would have better suited a billiards parlor. As for that *é Son*, it referred not to my stepbrother, but to yours truly. My stepfather basked in the conviction that one day I'd be his partner and ultimately take over the business, a conviction I had no wish or intention to gratify.



Bearing what looked like a medieval torture device or the brass and copper crown of an impecunious king, my stepfather returned. Mouthing a trumpet fanfare, he placed the spiny object on my lap.

"Gentlemen," he announced, though aside from my stepbrother I was the only person in earshot. "I give you...the Comformator!"

The object consisted of a dish-sized, oval-shaped brass ring, its circumference lined with a series of numbered brass thumbscrews. A set of copper buttresses connected the brass ring to a wheel divided into triangular slices, each numbered slice bristling with pins, like a carnival wheel of fortune.

"What do you think?" my stepfather asked, relighting his Calabash pipe. On the table next to his rocking chair at home he kept a rack of seven pipes, one for each day of the week:

Monday: Maple
Tuesday: Meerschaum
Wednesday: Cherry
Thursday: Brier
Friday: Olivewood
Saturday: Calabash
Sunday: Corncob

Walter J. Waple was a fuming human calendar.

I asked, "What is it?"

"Take a wild guess!"

"Something for measuring hats?"

"You're barking up the right tree, there, as it were," my stepfather said, grinning. "Sure, it sizes hats. Nothing new there. There've been many devices created to fulfill that humble pur-

pose. *Conformators*, they're called, with an *n*. Ah, but, sport, the *Comformator*—with an *m*—is a whole 'nother kettle o' fish. You could even say the *m* stands for *more*, since it does much, much more. Here, allow me to demonstrate..."

So saying my stepfather picked the contraption up and lowered it onto my head. Despite its soothing compliant name, the thing snagged my skull like a crown of thorns.

"Now, if you'll permit me, I need to adjust the thumb-screws..."

While making said adjustments my stepfather explained to me how his invention, on which he'd labored in secret for the better part of a year, could not only arrive at the perfect size for a customer's hat, but—using data gleaned from observation—could also arrive at the perfect style, color, band and brim width. It could even calculate the ideal angle of rake with which a hat should be worn, whether or not to dimple the crown, and in which direction, if any, to snap the brim.

"Impressive, huh? Or as you kids like to say these days, *neat-oh!*"

I was impressed, all right. Of all my stepfather's schemes, this was by far the most ambitious—and the most ludicrous, since by then it was obvious that nothing would save his or any other hat store from the fickle winds of fashion. Already my stepfather had gone to great lengths to attract more customers. He'd ordered the neon sign, replaced incandescent bulbs with fluorescents (to better replicate office environments), installed maroon wall-to-wall carpeting and glass-and-mirror display cases. If all that wasn't enough, he'd instigated a series of radio ads with slogans he wrote himself: *Hats Make the Man! If You Want to Get Ahead, Get a Hat! Beautify America: Wear a Hat!* Still sales at Waple Hats kept falling.

For the decline in sales of men's hats, my stepfather blamed neither scientific studies nor wars nor airplanes nor automobiles. He blamed our thirty-fifth president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, or "Hatless Jack," as he was known contemptuously to those in the hatter's trade. The mere mention of Kennedy's name

was enough to make my stepfather's normally stiff upper lip tremble while making the usually tepid blood in his veins boil. As tolerant as Walter J. Waple was of most human beings, he was intolerant of President Kennedy, and had been ever since the snowy morning of January 20th, 1961, the day he took the oath of office—the first president ever to do so without, as my stepfather put it, “so much as a beanie on his hairy Irish Catholic head!”

Yet even for that indecent performance he had been willing to forgive Kennedy, who was, after all, in his view, a young man, subject to a young man's lapses in judgment and taste. And, to be fair, on that blustery bitter-cold day Vice President Eisenhower had likewise gone hatless, as had Robert Frost, our frail Poet Laureate, his hoary hair flapping like a ghost kite in the breeze, his octogenarian eyes so dazzled by winter glare he couldn't make out the words to his own inaugural poem: a calamity that—as my stepfather pointed out—might have been averted had Frost worn *his* hat.

Hence my future stepfather had given Kennedy a chance to redeem himself. He wrote him a letter, one that he typed himself on the Remington “Noiseless” in his office that, contrary to its name, sounded like a machine gun. He made two carbons, one of which hangs on the wall of my study.

“Dear Mr. President,” his letter begins,

I was very sorry to read that you had a cold and hope you recover quickly and completely. The same paper that reported the story also carried a picture of you wearing a hat and coat, with the caption below explaining that you donned them because of your cold.

As the owner of the oldest hat retail store in Hattertown, Connecticut, I was naturally pleased to come upon this photograph of you wearing a hat. However, I must express to you my very strong conviction that there are reasons for wearing a hat other than as protection against the elements.

Not only does wearing a hat flatter your appear-

ance, it endows you with an added air of maturity, authority, and dignity in keeping with your office. If that's not reason enough, 25,000 men and women work in the hatting industry. They, too, benefit from your wearing a hat.

And now may I take this liberty, dear Mr. President, to offer my services as haberdasher and come to Washington to personally prepare a hat wardrobe for you? It would be a great privilege. And you may rest assured that, assuming you accept, under no circumstances will I take advantage of this undertaking for purposes of publicity.

Yours Respectfully,
Walter J. Waple
Owner & Sole Proprietor
Waple Hats, Incorporated

To this missive my stepfather never received a reply. Again, in President Kennedy's defense, he may have had other things on his mind. The same week my stepfather posted his letter, a United States Air Force reconnaissance plane photographed a string of medium-range ballistic missile bases under construction near San Cristóbal, Cuba.

But rather than assuage my stepfather's resentment the Cuban Missile Crisis merely exacerbated it, since it had been Khrushchev—that pumpkin-faced, shoe-banging despot, the same Khrushchev who gave the homburg a bad name—who'd pulled a fast one on our hatless, hapless commander-in-chief. Proving, if proof were necessary, that not only was Kennedy uncouth, he was dangerous.

Despite this, and notwithstanding the persistent decline in sales, my stepfather remained steadfast in his devotion to men's hats. A few weeks after writing his letter to the president, he presented Governor Dempsy with a proclamation, typed on the same Remington typewriter, for a national holiday:

P R O C L A M A T I O N

Ever since the first cave dweller wrapped a reed of grass around his brow to bind his flowing hair, Man has busied himself with the adornment of his pate. In the passing of time his garland has evolved through an animated variety of scalp locks, feathers, bonnets, turbans, shakos, helmets, kerchiefs, caps, and crowns to emerge as the modern day hat.

Today, from its perch on every head, the hat stands as a crowning monument to the happiest marriage of craftsmanship and practicality yet styled to hug the human skull.

More than most states Connecticut has reason to pay homage to the hat; for the know-how of her hatters has won us world renown. We must take pause to reflect on the hatter's art, how it has ennobled our pretensions while warming us against the frosts of fall and winter's icy fingers.

Therefore, and by the presumed authority of a joint resolution to be passed in the General Assembly, I ask that you hereby proclaim that Saturday, September 30 henceforth be known as

HAT DAY

Have a good hat. The secret of your looks/
Lies with
the Beaver in the Brooks.

To Walter J. Waple, hats were more than a protective covering for men's heads. They were symbols of progress and pride. A civilization without hats was as much a contradiction in terms to him as a mind with no brain.

As for men who went hatless, they were brutes, beasts, barbarians. Even the poorest fellow, if he had any self-respect, wouldn't set foot in public without a hat. It could be a hat of inexpensive wool felt, or a tweed or canvas cap, and battered to boot. Still he'd wear it with as much pride as a king wears his crown.

As for “Hatless Jack” and the revolting fashion he’d instigated, like all seasonal viruses it would run its course. In time the white corpuscles of good taste would prevail, and men would return to their fedoras, their trilbies, their pork pies, their derbies, their homburgs... The dark days of hatlessness would pass.



“Yes, sir,” my stepfather said, brandishing his invention. “This baby’s gonna launch hatting into the space age. We’ve already gotten nibbles for mass production deals from some big manufacturing firms. Ever hear of American Totalizer? Third biggest maker of vending machines in the country. We play our cards right, sport, there won’t be a single hat store left in America without one of these babies.”

I thought: *There won’t be a single hat store left in the country.*

“Not a word of any of this to your mother, okay, sport? For the time being it’s strictly on the QT, if you will—between you, me, and the Comformator!”

“Uhn haah dah,” said Gordy, having by then traded my yo-yo for his fingertips.

My stepfather had reason for keeping his invention a secret from my mother. She would have been appalled. For two years she had been trying to get him to close the store, to engage in some more lucrative business. Having learned that Dick Stefansky—the same Dick Stefansky who fished me out of Lake Candlewood—had been promoted to vice president of the Wire Clothes Hanger Division of Consolidated Screw & Wire in nearby Waterbury, and was seeking a director of marketing, she urged my stepfather to apply.

This my stepfather refused to do. “I’m a hat merchant,” he argued. “What in a ham sandwich do I know about wire coat hangers?”

“You’re a salesman, Walter,” my mother reasoned. “A good salesman can sell anything. You’ve said so yourself many times.”

“I never said any such thing.”

"You have, Walter. *Many* times."

It was past nine o'clock. My mother and stepfather were in the parlor watching *Perry Mason*. Raymond Burr was getting out of a black Ford. From my vantage point crouched behind the beaded curtain I listened.

"A good salesman can sell anything.' Those were your exact words, Walter," my mother was saying.

"Be that as it may, I've no interest in selling wire coat hangers."

"People need coat hangers," my mother said, lighting a Chesterfield King. Less than a month earlier her doctor had gotten her to quit. Now she was at it again.

"If you're suggesting that men don't need hats, I beg to differ."

"President Kennedy doesn't need a hat."

"President Kennedy, if you'll pardon me, is an ignoramus."

"He may be an ignoramus, but he's still the president."

"He may be the president, but he's still an ignoramus."

"At least he doesn't wear brown suits."

"What has that got to do with the price of eggs, if you will?"

"Dick Nixon wears brown suits."

"Who cares what color suits Nixon wears?"

"Hitler wore brown suits," my mother said.

"Were we or were we not talking about coat hangers?"

"You voted for him."

"I voted for *Hitler*?"

"You voted for Nixon, dear."

It was a Wednesday. My stepfather re-lit his cherry pipe.

"At least let them interview you," my mother pleaded. "What have you got to lose?"

"I have no intention of selling coat hangers, much less wire ones. And that, as they say, is that."

Only it wasn't. A week later they were at it again. This time the argument took place in the kitchen. My stepfather ate his usual breakfast of Melba toast and Lipton tea. Sunshine dazzled the yellow curtains. The *Hattertown Gazette* lay spread open

on the table under my stepfather's eyes where, having circled a want ad for a salesman in the men's accessories department at Sears & Roebuck in red ink, my mother had shoved it.

"Not interested," my stepfather said, shoving it back.

"Why? You'd still be selling hats!"

"A hat is not an accessory! A *scarf* is an accessory. A glove is an accessory. A hat is a *garment*!"

So saying my stepfather stood abruptly, donned his tan fedora, straightened himself in his suit, and—in a cloud of righteous indignation—left for work.

"Damn you, Walter Waple!" my mother shouted after the door slammed behind him. "You'll send us to hell with your damn hats!"

Then she burst into tears.



"Now, then, sport," my stepfather said as I sat with his invention on my head. "If you've no objection, I'd like to make unto thee thy graven image, as it were, for the patent application. The face that launched a thousand Comformators!"

He went to get his Polaroid camera. I gazed through the plate-glass windows I had polished countless times at cars splashing through puddles on Felt Street. Winking taillights stained the puddles red. The red lights were absorbed by raindrops that slid sled-like down the window, putting them in competition with the flashing neon sign. Standing by his wooden kiosk, a policeman in a yellow slicker directed traffic. My stepfather returned.

"Now, sport, if you'd just hold the device by its sides like you would a hat in a breeze. That's it. Easy, now; don't tug." With cool, manicured, soap-scented fingers, he adjusted my posture. "Perfect!"

He aimed the Polaroid.

"Let's have a nice big grin, there, sport. On a count of three. One, two—"

"Uhn haah dah."

"Cheese!"

The flashbulb exploded, blinding me at first before setting off a fusillade of dazzling colors. As I blinked them away my stepfather counted: *One Mississippi, two Mississippi...* As the colored blobs dissolved, through glass and raindrops I watched refugees from the weather huddled over coffee mugs and ice cream sundaes at the soda fountain of the drugstore across the street. My stepfather took more Polaroids. Between blinding flashes I flipped through the latest issue of *Life*. The main story, about the seven Project Mercury astronauts, featured a grainy photo of them goofing around in their gravity-free space capsule, catching floating peanuts in their mouths, squirting orange ribbons of Tang at each other. Across vast expanses of space my stepfather's voice reached me:

Always remember to sight the protrusions first before you take the conform. That's very important...

The customer on the closest stool at the drugstore wore a windbreaker the same color as the Man in Blue's coveralls, reminding me of my guilt, since I'd screamed at and insulted him when all he'd done was save my life. Worse, I'd hidden his walking stick and the plaid robe with his glasses in it. Already the poor guy was lame and mute. Now, thanks to me, he was blind, too.

Forget to sight the protrusions first, you may as well throw the whole works out the window, if you will...

I flipped abstractedly through the magazine, thinking how for years I'd dreamed of outer space, peering through my mail-order telescope, wanting as much to be discovered by something out there as to discover it, to partake of something of the infinite. My dead father's words came back to me:

Follow your fears... Follow your fears...

What were my fears? What was I most afraid of?

As I watched the pouring rain it came to me: Water. *Drowning*, that was my biggest fear. If I was ever to partake of something of the infinite, to conquer outer space, first I'd have to conquer my fear of inner space, meaning of water. Meaning I'd have to learn to swim. Meaning someone would have to teach me.

That someone, I realized, was the Man in Blue.

Through fathoms of water my stepfather's voice bubbled:

Customer satisfaction, sport. That's the key to increasing sales. Fashion's got nothing to do with it...

Tomorrow, I told myself as wet pedestrians flew past the store windows. Tomorrow I'll return to Fern Cottage. I'll find the Man in Blue. I'll ask him to teach me how to swim.

A man holding a newspaper triangulated over his head darted between parked cars.

Sport?

That's what I'll do ...

Leo?

The Comformator tucked into the crook of his arm, my stepfather towered over me.

"You're free to move about now, sport," he said, adding with one of his hokey winks: "Your death sentence, as it were, has been commuted."

The next day I returned to Fern Cottage, but not before helping Zag at the dog pound as I did every Sunday morning. Volunteering there was the highlight of my week. To be responsible for all those dogs, even for just a few hours, gave me a sense of purpose and responsibility absent mostly from the rest of my life.

It was a bright sunny day. The rain the day before had washed every trace of cloud away, leaving the sky so bright it hurt my eyes. The dog pound, a cinderblock building with a fenced-in incinerator behind it, was by the town reservoir, close to the dam. When Gordy and I arrived Sergeant Pomeroy's canine control van wasn't parked in the gravel lot, meaning he was "stalking wild turkey," as Zag put it—i.e., parked along a deserted stretch of road somewhere nursing the pint bottle of bourbon he kept in the van's glove compartment.

Sergeant Pomeroy was a big man. His round ruddy face reminded me of a boiled Easter ham (minus the pineapple slices and cloves). His only son died in Korea, in the Battle of Pork Chop Hill. Since then he'd moved through existence in a perpetual state of torpor. You might reasonably conclude that someone in that condition would make a less-than-ideal dog-catcher. You'd be wrong. Pomeroy's sluggishness was the key to his success. The wildest, fiercest, most aggressively defiant dogs walked calmly straight into his arms, lured there by nothing more than a dog biscuit and the sergeant's imperturbably placid manner.

A tangy smell of dog shit scented the morning air. I leaned my bicycle against the incinerator's chain-link fence. The back door to the pound opened to a clamorous tunnel of caged dogs. Gordy and I walked through it to Pomeroy's office, where Zag sat behind the sergeant's metal desk, his sneakers propped up

on it, sipping coffee from the sergeant's State Farm Insurance mug, puffing a cigar from the cedar humidor box the sergeant kept next to his CB radio, which spluttered.

Behind the sergeant's desk a wall-sized map of Hattertown bristled with various colored pushpins, with white pushpins standing for "animals" (Pomeroy never called them "dogs") that had been reported for excessive barking, yellow pushpins for those guilty of lesser offenses (shitting on neighbors lawns, digging up flower beds), blue pushpins for those that had bitten once, red for those guilty of two or more assaults, and black pushpins indicating animals suspected of carrying rabies.

Through a cloud of blue smoke Zag handed me a cigar from the humidor. He knew cigars made me sick. He also knew I'd take it if only to avoid having him call me a pussy.

"I can't stay long," I explained as he lit the cigar using Sergeant Pomeroy's grenade-shaped cigarette lighter.

"Why not?"

"My stepfather needs me at his store."

"What for? It's Sunday!"

"He's doing inventory," I lied, shrugging.

Zag's left eye was swollen and purple. Once a month on average Zag's father bruised his son with one of the crutches he hobbled around the ground floor of their home with. The black eyes had become a regular feature of his looks, which was too bad. Not only was Zag the shortest, strongest, and most athletic of the Back Shop Boys, he was the best looking—a young Humphrey Bogart, with Bogey's black hair and his habit of drawing his lip across his upper teeth when vexed.

I pointed to the shiner. Zag stared at me. He didn't want to talk about it.

We sat there for a while, filling the office with cigar smoke, deciphering the CB radio's staticky splutters, until at last Zag said, "Right, let's get to it."



With cigars fuming and me holding back an urge to vomit, we

transferred the dogs to their outdoor cages. Each cage had an indoor and outdoor compartment, with the compartments separated by a guillotine-style door controlled by a rope and pulley system. With the dogs in their outdoor cages, we hosed the inner cages down, and vice-versa. We let Gordon man the hose. My stepbrother loved watching the water pry up bits of dog shit and other crud and send them scuttling into the slop hole drain. In exchange for manning the hose, Gordon had to clean out the slop drain trap, which, when opened, exuded a week's worth of repugnantly fermented dog food and shit.

While Gordy hosed the cages Zag and I opened a dozen cans of Ken-L Ration. By then the dogs had stopped barking—all but one of them, Zag's dog. Zippo's barks reverberated off the tiled walls of the Isolation Room, where dogs were euthanized. Every Thursday afternoon Dr. Dillard, the town veterinarian, arrived with his black bag of lethal implements. Afterward he would stuff the dead dogs into burlap bags and haul them out to the incinerator, which turned them into dog ash and smoke. Zippo had been scheduled for euthanization the Thursday when, having taken a liking to him, Zag pleaded with the sergeant to grant him clemency and let Zag keep him. Pomeroy consented with the stipulation that should the dog return for any reason no further reprieves would be granted.

"What's Zippo doing in there?" I asked over Zippo's barks.

"I can't leave him home. The barking drives my old man crazy."

Zippo was the barkiest dog I'd ever known. He barked at everything: flowers, birds, bees, trees, insects, gravel, and grass. He barked at mailboxes, phone poles, lawn sprinklers, fire hydrants. He barked at butterflies, fluttering maple pods, dandelion puffballs. He barked at cars, trucks, shoes, bicycles, sneakers, raindrops, and snowflakes. If I whistled or hummed or played with my yo-yo, Zippo barked. He barked at the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets and galaxies. He barked at women, children, at workers (in or out of uniform), cats, and other dogs. He barked at Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists,

Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Taoists, Zoroastrians, Seventh Day Adventists, atheists, and agnostics. He barked at odors, intuitions, and even at implications. Zippo's was the least discriminating bark in the world, dispensed as generously as God's supposedly infinite grace.

"He sure does bark a lot," I noted.

"He's expressing himself," Zag said testily. "He's got a lot to say."

"I've got a lot to say, too, but I don't bark my head off all day long."

"You're not a dog."

"True," I said.

"You have no idea what goes through a dog's mind. Did you know the average dog recognizes about a million times as many smells as you or I ever will? Think about it. Imagine going through your life noticing so many smells. Every corner you turn, everywhere you point your nose, another smell! And another! And *another*! It would be like walking down a street lined with...I dunno...candy stores, or stores filled with Matchbox toys or yo-yos or whatever it is that you're crazy about, and all of it free and yours for the taking—or the sniffing, rather. Now, you can't own a smell the way you can own a Matchbox toy, it's true. You can't take it home with you and put it on your shelf and collect it, can you? Of course not: it's a *smell*! You get to smell it, and that's that! Which is the point. Which is why dogs bark so much. It's not what they're seeing. That's only half the story. Hell, it's not even half the story, it's maybe one-tenth of the story. Smells—they're the other nine-tenth. The more intelligent, the more sensitive, the more sophisticated the dog, the more smells it's gonna recognize, therefore the more it's gonna bark, because it wants you and the whole rest of the world to know what a great smell it just smelled. Which is what Zippo's doing right now. He's letting us know he smells something interesting. He doesn't bark too much! He *smells* too much. The world smells too much!"

As it always did when his passions were excited, Zag's top

lip drew back Bogey-like against his teeth. He clenched and unclenched his fists. Zag was a man of obdurately bold convictions. Even when the facts were against him, or when he had no idea what he was talking about, Zag's convictions gave him the edge in any argument.

Anyway, once Zag made up his mind about a thing, he was about as likely to change it as Saturn is likely to shed its rings.



With the dogs fed and their cages hosed, we put a few on leashes. Holding two leashes each, we walked the dogs across the dam to the pump house. Driven by a vortex of baying snouts and swirling limbs, we ran across the top of the dam. Some days the door to the pump house would be open, and Mr. Silz, the pump house superintendent, would be there, with his red bandanna tied around his sunburned neck. He'd show us his latest pin-up girl and play darts with us.

That morning the pump house door was closed. We turned and headed back across the dam. We were halfway across when Zag said: "I need to find him a new home."

"Who?"

Zag gave me a look. "Zippo, who else? Everything was fine till the old man's gout started acting up. When Dad's gout flares up, it gives off a smell that Zippo finds exquisite, so he barks. It's called a vicious cycle. Even outside with the windows all shut Zippo still smells Dad's gout. It's a hopeless situation." Zag looked up at me. "I don't suppose you'd like to own a dog?"

I shook my head. "Nope."

We kept walking.

"Whatever happens I'm damned if I'll let Dillard get anywhere near Zippo with that needle of his. I'll put him down myself, first, if it comes to that."

We walked in silence a while longer.

Zag changed the subject.

"So—have you found out anything more about the man?"

"Who?"

"The Man in Blue. What other man would I be talking about?"

"Oh. No. Not much."

"Where does he live? Did you find that out, at least?"

"Not exactly. I got close, but then I lost him."

"How could you lose him? He's *blue*, for crissakes!"

Just then, a big smile broke over Gordon's face. Maybe it was the word "blue," or maybe it was something else. With Gordon you could never tell.



With the dogs back in their cages, we drank ice-cold bottles of Yoo-hoo from the office refrigerator. I told Zag I had to go.

"You're not doing inventory at your stepdad's store," Zag said. "What's really up?"

"I need a favor," I said.

"Don't tell me you're still hung up on that Dalton girl?"

"Will you watch Gordy for me?"

"What? No way!"

"Unh haah dah."

"Just for an hour. That's all. It's important!"

"I'll bet." He smiled. "Snooty Highlander. Thinks her farts smell like roses and cinnamon buns. Just because her family used to own half the town."

"Will you do me a favor, or won't you?"

"All right, but only for an hour, not a minute more. After that, I swear I'll lock him in one of these cages."

I gave Gordon my yo-yo and rode to Lost Lake.

I couldn't find the man's robe and stick. He must have found them himself. I still owed him an apology. And I was still determined to get him to teach me how to swim.

I had arrived within a dozen feet of the cottage when I saw something on the stoop, a shortbread tin. There was a note attached to it with a ribbon. Even if she hadn't signed it, I would have recognized Belinda Dalton's handwriting.

**I BAKED THESE YESTERDAY. PLEASE ENJOY!
BELINDA DALTON**

Belinda Dalton knew the Man in Blue! At first this fact struck me dumb, but then it made sense, since the cottage's previous occupant had been Belinda's uncle, Brewster Dalton, the man who, in a fit of insanity (according to one theory) burned Hearthstone Manor—the Dalton mansion—to the ground.

As for what drove Brewster Dalton insane, most people assumed that it had something to do with the decision to shutter the Dalton Hat Works after 155 years of continuous operation, a decision that sealed not only the fates of the factory's hundred employees, but of tobacconists, cooks, shoe and watch repairmen, grocers, newspaper, and other vendors who provided them goods and services.

More upsetting still to Brewster was that the decision was made by his older brother Baxter, whom he detested, and who, subject to the will that Baxter himself prepared and that their father arguably signed in a state of *non compis mentis* (his mental capacities vastly diminished by the advanced stages of mercury poisoning), assumed the presidency of Dalton Hat Works, while Brewster inherited his brother's former role as operations manager.

While Brewster favored keeping the factory running for the workers' sakes despite increasingly narrow profit margins, Baxter believed that business is business, that their first obligation

was not to the workers but to their shareholders. Proceeds from the liquidation of assets could be invested in more lucrative ventures.

Not only did Baxter shut the Dalton Hat Works down, he put Hearthstone Manor up for sale, having by then relocated his family to a less grand residence in Danville, on a thirty-acre plot adjacent to the state fairgrounds. As for Brewster, a provision in his father's will had left him a parcel of the estate, a dozen acres that included the former caretaker's cottage, into which he moved and where he lived out the remainder of his days in near-total seclusion.

Meanwhile, with no buyers in sight, Hearthstone Manor was boarded up and fenced in, and so it remained until the night of August 7, 1954, when the mansion burned down. In the ashes investigators discovered charred bits of human bone. That Brewster was never seen again led to the obvious conclusion that the bones were his, that in a fit of insanity he'd set fire to the mansion, killing himself (accidentally? on purpose?) in the process.

According to another theory, it was Baxter who set the blaze, wishing to rid himself not only of a mansion that he couldn't sell, but of an embarrassingly insane younger brother whose murder he concealed by means of the fire.



As I picked up the shortbread tin a sense of indignation welled up in me. I had come to think of the Man in Blue as my own personal mystery to solve, a secret passed on to me by the universe per Virgil Zeno's prophecy. Now I had to share that secret—with Belinda Dalton, of all people! It was like landing on the moon only to find someone else's flag planted there.

Absentmindedly I pried open the lid of the shortbread tin. A heady aroma of chocolate flared up into my nostrils. I peeled away a sheet of wax paper, unveiling a dozen fresh-baked brownies. Without thinking I took a bite out of one. Before I knew it, while gazing up at the blue sky through a web of tree

branches, I'd eaten half a dozen of them. With my head resting against the cottage's green front door, to the drone of a small airplane flying by somewhere, I dozed off. And I dreamed.

I dreamed that I was being chased by dogs, hundreds of them, all snarling and yapping, trying to get at the shortbread tin under my arm. As I ran a stream of brownies fell out of the tin. In the dream I climbed a church steeple, all the while clutching the shortbread tin, climbing up and up and up. The steeple turned into a hat factory chimney. I kept climbing, my belly scraping against bricks. I climbed through the troposphere, the stratosphere, the ionosphere, into outer space. I kept climbing until I grew weightless, the Milky Way swirling around me, the stars caressing my cheeks...



Something jabbed my shoulder. The Man in Blue stood there looking down, the sun shining through the trees over his shoulders. I stood up. As I did the shortbread tin and its surviving brownies scattered across the cottage's front steps.

"Someone left these for you," I said, gathering them, holding them out to him like an offering to a temperamental god.

He stood there. He carried his rucksack and a bag of groceries.

I asked, "Do you remember me?"

The man stared.

"I'm the kid who fell in the lake. You saved me."

He kept staring.

"I came here to thank you...for saving my life."

"..."

"And to apologize...for saying...you know...what I said."

"..."

"That wasn't very nice of me."

"..."

"I was also wondering...if you'd be willing...if you'd consider...teaching me...to swim."

"..."

I nodded. "Thanks anyway."

I turned and started back to the gravel road.



The sun blazed through the trees. I'd reached the gravel road when I heard: "Who are you?" (*Hoo abh hyew?*)

I turned. "Did you just say something?"

"Who ... are ... you?"

He had a foreign accent.

"You can *talk?*"

"I asked you a question." (*Hi esked hyew uh kvestchun.*)

"My name's Leo. Half, they call me."

"I didn't ask your name. I asked: Who—are—you?"

"You mean, like, where do I live, who my parents are, that sort of stuff?"

The man shook his head. "It is a simple question." (*Hids uh zimble kvestchun.*)

Had he asked me anything else, I'd have probably known the answer. Had he asked me, for instance, how big the moon would be if the sun were the size of a basketball, I'd have told him that it would be about the size of the period at the end of this sentence. Had he asked me how many muscles it takes for someone to smile (seventeen), or how many inches the *Queen Mary* moved per gallon of fuel (six), or what the highest point is in Pennsylvania (Mount Davis), or the lowest in Colorado (the Arikaree River), I could have told him any of those things. I could have told him that snakes can't blink, that tigers have striped skin, that peanuts were once used to make dynamite, that all polar bears are left-handed, that the spiral staircases in medieval castles run clockwise, that all New Hampshire license plates bearing the motto "Live Free or Die" are manufactured by prisoners, that bird droppings are the chief export of Nauru, a small island in the Pacific Ocean, that an ostrich's eyeball is bigger than its brain...

"I give up," I said. "Can you at least give me a clue?"

With a disgusted look, the man turned and walked into his cottage, slamming the green door behind him.

PART 4

INDEPENDENCE DAY

That Fourth of July Zag shot his father.

Earlier that day, at two in the afternoon, Gordon and I straddled my bicycle to watch the Fourth of July parade's marching bands and floats make their way down Felt Street. In his DeSoto convertible, wearing his carpenter overalls, Virgil Zeno pulled the biggest float: a giant derby formed of crumpled black crepe paper affixed to an armature of chicken wire. Mothers jounced baby carriages, dads shouldered toddlers, old men in pointy VFW caps sat in folding lawn chairs on the sidewalks. As the gleaming fire trucks grumbled by, the old timers pumped their liver-spotted arms and shouted, "Got a siren on that baby?"

It wasn't long before Skunky and Victor joined us. Since that Sunday at the dog pound I hadn't seen Zag. No one had. That he wasn't at the parade didn't surprise anyone. Zag hated parades. "Colorful substitutes for war," he called them. Zag had a bunch of definitions like that for things that he disapproved of. Fly-fishing: *Cruelty to aquatic craniate animals dignified as masculine sport*. Algebra: *A branch of mathematics that uses a combination of numbers and letters to confuse people*. Public schools: *Minimum security educational penitentiaries*. Zagisms, we called them.

Over the tops of parade watchers' heads, on the other side of the street, my stepfather stood in front of his store, wearing a Panama hat with his blue and white seersucker suit. Across one of the two display windows he'd draped a large American flag. Seeing me, he smiled and waved. I smirked.

I scanned the sea of onlookers, hoping to see Belinda Dalton among them. Since my last visit to Fern Cottage, I'd been wanting to speak with her, to find out what she knew about its occupant. But she was nowhere in sight.

The cheerleading squadron marched by, led by the infamous Cecilia Kottlecamp. Cecilia was Hattertown's answer to Marilyn

Monroe, really more like a bad guess. She was said to have had some sort of sex with every member of the Hattertown Blockers, the high school football team. She wore a feathered major-ette's cap and a pleated plaid skirt so short when she kicked up her legs we glimpsed her panties. The top she wore was as short in the opposite direction.

"Man," said Skunky, ogling Cecilia as she marched by. "They should have carved *those* on Mount Rushmore!"

With its dropped jaw, wide eyes, glossy lips, and bright teeth, my stepbrother's face was a compendium of delight. I put my arm around his waist and drew him closer to me.

When the parade ended, having agreed to meet at the carnival afterward, we pedaled home for supper.



The carnival occupied a grassy lot next to the feed store. It smelled of cotton candy, hay, peanuts, popcorn, and elephant shit. We pooled our funds for ticket rounds. Victor spent his predictably on candied apples and soda. Skunky favored nausea-inducing rides. I preferred games. The Moon Shot was my favorite. You had to shoot the planets—different-colored balloons hovering over jets of compressed air—and knock them out of orbit. The gun's barrel (I knew from previous experience) was curved. To hit the target you had to aim six degrees left of center. I won a wooden cup and ball. I gave Gordon my last few shots. Naturally he missed them all.

We were headed for the Ferris wheel when we noticed a man in a green corduroy suit standing on a small stage, holding a small bottle with a matching green label. At his feet a dozen similar bottles stood arrayed. The sign in front of the stage said:

**Dr. DeGrasse's Amazing
Re-Vitalizing Tonic**

We worked our way to the front of the line.

"Let me ask you all something," the man in the corduroy suit was saying. "Have any of you ever heard of a bovine with a bellyache?"

"A what?" someone in the crowd asked.

"A bovine, sir. A cow."

"Can't say I have," another onlooker answered.

"How would you know?" Skunky shouted.

"Say what?" said the man in the green corduroy suit.

"How can anybody tell if a cow's got a bellyache?"

Some in the crowd laughed.

"Fair question. Step forward, son, why don't you?"

Skunky stepped closer to the stage.

"What is your name, young fellow?"

"Wade. I go by Skunky."

"Skunky, huh? You ask a good question, a very good question, to which there happens to be an equally good answer. When you have a bellyache, how's your appetite? Good, or poor?"

"Poor," Skunky acknowledged.

"Now let me ask you this, Skunky, have you ever in your entire existence come across a bovine—a cow—with a poor appetite?"

Skunky owed that to date he hadn't.

"And what conclusion do you draw from this?"

"That cows don't have bellyaches?"

"Smart boy. That's right, folks! Cows don't have bellyaches. As a matter of fact, none of you has ever seen or ever will see a depressed, annoyed, angry, or otherwise less-than-contented cow. The reason? A consistent, invariable, wholesome diet of one-hundred percent pure grass. Yes, grass. Among the world's most abundant, nutritious foods.

"There's just one little problem, however," the man in the green corduroy suit continued after a pause. "Human beings cannot digest grass. It takes even a cow *four stomachs* to do so, whereas we humans have got only one little ol' stomach. Well, to that problem at long last a solution—pun intended, folks, ha-ha!—has been arrived at! Yes, ladies and—"

I yelled: "Cows haven't got four stomachs! They have one stomach divided into four compartments!"

“Yes, ladies and gentlemen,” the man went on, ignoring me, “at long last the means for eating grass has become available to humans in the form of Dr. DeGrasse’s Amazing Re-Vitalizing Elixir. Each of these bottles you see before you contain the distilled essence of seventeen—*seventeen!*—acres of fresh green grass. Imagine: all that good wholesome nutrition crammed into one little bottle, the very same goodness that has kept cows contented through history!”

“Cows don’t live decades!”

“Say what?”

“They live an average of fifteen years!”

“Who the hell are you? I mean, what’s your name, son?”

“Half, they call me.”

“Might that be because you have only half a brain?”

“No, sir,” I said to the crowd’s delight.

“Are you an agriculturalist, by any chance?”

“Am I *what?*”

“Have you worked on a farm?”

“No.”

“What makes you an authority on cows?”

“I read it. In a book.”

“Oh, book-smart, huh?” He leaned down and spoke to me sotto voce: “Get outta my hair, kid, or I swear I’ll beat the living daylight out of you.” Then, to his audience: “A teaspoon a day, folks. That’s all it takes. Now then: who wants a bottle?”

As we walked off, Skunky shouted, “My friend may not know much about cows, but he knows a bunch of bull when he hears it!”

“Only a dollar per bottle, step right up...”



By the time we got on the Ferris wheel the sun was setting. Reflected by the river’s black surface, the carnival lights resembled colored chalk marks on a blackboard. Victor and Skunky shared an enormous bag of popcorn. Halfway through the ride, to the consternation of those below, Skunky leaned over and shouted: “I think I’m going to be sick!”

We'd started on our fourth revolution when, among the people walking beneath us, I saw a pair of fiery pigtailed bobbing. I shouted Belinda's name. The face with which she looked up at me was that of an astronomer confronting an aberrant asteroid.

"Wait!" I yelled down. "I want to talk to you!"

No sooner did I speak those words than a guy wearing a Minnesota Twins baseball cap stepped up to and put his arm around Belinda. Dwight Riddell, a transfer student from Minnesota, a place known to me then only for lakes and butter. Since his arrival the summer before, tall, handsome, athletic Dwight had been my chief rival for Belinda's affections—so I told myself, though this would have been news to Dwight.

By the time I got off the Ferris wheel Belinda and Dwight were gone. Darkness had fallen. It was time for the fireworks display.



My feelings about fireworks were mixed. Yours would be, too, had you lost half your middle finger to a bottle rocket when you were six years old. Blame my father, bless his Rock & Rye-infused heart. On the humid evening of July 4th, 1956, he handed me a bottle rocket and watched, with unalloyed paternal pride, me scurry over to the torch he'd set up in our back yard. Per his instructions I aimed the bottle rocket away from the house, lit the fuse, took three steps back, and watched it *WHOOOSH* up into the evening sky, where it burst into a mélange of stars. Seeing it burst, I jumped up and down and clapped and watched the proud grin spread like peanut butter on warm toast across my father's stubbled face.

Such an auspicious debut demanded an encore. So I did it again.

And again.

The third bottle rocket exploded in my grip. I looked down at the blob of ground meat that had been my left hand.

Except for my middle finger's top two joints, which were pulverized by the explosion, the emergency room surgeon did a fine job of sewing me back together.

For the accident I held my father blameless. It seemed to me then as it does now that the bond between a father and son should consist of approximately one part each of affection and admiration to one part of terror—like fire, or a lightning storm. We're drawn to things we don't understand, that pose a danger to and can possibly even destroy us. I felt that way about my father: that I'd never understand him, that he'd always be a mystery to me; that, though he loved and would do just about anything for me, he could also hurt and possibly destroy me, as he almost did that time he threw me in the lake, out of love. Of all the threats posed to me by life none was graver than that posed by my father's love.

That years' fireworks display took place at the new football field. From behind the home team's end zone, Skunky, Victor, Gordon, and I watched the cloudless night burst into a heavenly garden in full bloom, a display supplemented by firecrackers from Skunky's private stash, until an off-duty cop hauled him away.

Watching the fireworks display, I imagined that I was witnessing the creation of the universe, seeing all matter born out of the Big Bang. A sense of my own total insignificance took hold of me then—a comforting sense, since it relieved me of the burden of having to be John Glenn, or anyone special. Not that I didn't *want* to be special; I just didn't want to *have to* be special, and thereby face the very real prospect of failure.

My need to partake of something of the infinite, what had it been born out of, if not the fear of not measuring up here on earth?

And where did that fear come from? When did it start?

When my father died. I blamed myself as much as mercury poisoning for his death.

I'd let my father down. And lost him.

To win him back, I'd have to touch the stars.



A shower of Roman candles brought the fireworks display to an end. As the last shell burst, on the far side of the field

through the wavering haze I saw Belinda's face, glossy with sweat. Forgetting Gordon, I raced toward her yelling her name. I must have yelled it a dozen times before she turned.

"Oh," she said.

I scanned the surroundings, looking for Dwight, but didn't see him. Had she ditched him? It didn't matter. What mattered was that for the time being Belinda was mine to captivate with my vast intellect and rapier-sharp wit.

"What's up?" I asked.

"The sky," Belinda answered accurately.

"That was a pretty good fireworks display, wasn't it?"

"The stars are as beautiful and a lot less noisy."

A thought occurred to me. "Do you know why professional firework handlers wear clothes made from pure cotton?"

"No, Leo. Supposing you enlighten me?"

"Because the static electricity in synthetic clothes can accidentally set off fireworks."

Belinda nodded. "Fascinating. I'll keep that in mind next time I handle professional fireworks."

She turned and strutted off. I caught up with her. "Hey, you know that old caretaker's cottage? The one that used to belong to your uncle?"

"What about it?"

"Someone's living there."

"No kidding. My mom rented it out."

"Your *mom*?"

"Uncle Baxter gave it to Mom after Dad died. He figured Mom could rent it out to a hunter or somebody."

"She's the one who had it fixed up?"

Belinda stopped walking. "You know that's private property, Leo. You and your pals have no business being up there."

"I just happened to pass by, that's all."

"Well, next time you happen to pass by, read the No Trespassing signs and do what they say." She sped up her walk; so did I.

"What's his name?"

"Who?"

"The guy renting the place."

"Mr. Thomas."

"Where's he from?"

"How in the world should I know?"

"Have you talked to him?"

"He's not very talkative, unlike some people."

"What's he doing up there? Do you know?"

Belinda stopped and faced me. "I have no idea. Maybe he's a writer. He's writing a book. Or maybe he just likes being alone. He's Henry David Thoreau's long-lost grandson. What difference does it make?"

"Just curious, that's all."

"I really have to go, Leo. My mother's waiting for me in the parking lot."

She took off. To her back I yelled:

"Did you know that nutmeg is extremely poisonous? But only if injected intravenously!"



In the parking lot my stepfather held my stepbrother's hand. Gordy's face was damp and raw from crying.

"There you are, sport," my stepfather said. "We were starting to worry about you."

I hugged Gordy. As I did, his arms hung limply at his sides. A gob of snot clung to the tip of his nose. I wiped it off.

"Where's Mom?"

"I'm afraid your mother has had one of her attacks."

My mother suffered from migraines. She would be bedridden for days, sleeping and throwing up. Before she married my stepfather, she'd get them maybe once or twice a year. But afterward the attacks came more frequently. When they did the sounds of her retching would fill the entire house. Even with the TV turned all the way up in the parlor, or down in the basement playroom over the furnace's roar, the sound would reach me, a jagged roar like the sound Godzilla made in the movies. The Vomit Monster.

It started raining, a drizzle that blurred the headlights of cars as they maneuvered out of the parking lot.

"Can I give you boys a ride home?" my stepfather offered, pointing to his Shalimar blue 1959 Buick Electra. "We can put your bikes in the trunk. Heck of a trunk that Buick's got on her. You could fit the whole Tour de France in there, as it were!"

I turned to my stepbrother. "Gordon will go with you, won't you, Gordy?" I chuckled his chin. While he giggled I turned to see the disappointed look on my stepfather's face.

A few minutes later I stood watching as, with its wipers thwacking and Gordon's bicycle in the trunk, my stepfather's car rumbled off, filling the rainy night with blue fumes.



I was in no hurry to get home. I pedaled slowly, looking up at the veil of clouds enshrouding the moon. Except for a few scattered fireworks and the howls of dogs set off by them, the town was as silent and somber as it had been festive earlier. The night clung to my face like a wet rag. The falling rain squeezed the shapes of streetlamps and headlights into lozenges. As I pedaled past them the hat factory smokestacks looked like giant straws sticking out of the ground. In the furtive recesses behind them, vague luminosities persisted.

I pulled into the town square. Though the rain was falling harder by then, I sat on a bench next to a statue of Barclay Moses Dalton. By the light of a streetlamp the hat mogul's bronze brow glistened. The shops along Felt Street looked eerily deserted, as if one of those bombs had gone off, the kind that vaporize people but leave buildings standing.

There are times when you forget that you exist. This was one of them. I sat there, on that wet bench, ignoring the rain that spread itself across puddles in the street like sheets over the victims of some epic disaster. Through the rain-swept darkness I gazed, wondering: what part of me belongs to infinity, and what part is mine alone?

Out of that rainy darkness two people, a man and a woman,

made their way toward me. The woman was holding an ice cream cone that each of them took turns licking while he held an umbrella with at least two broken ribs over them both. As they drew closer I made out the Minnesota Twin's baseball cap the woman wore and concluded that she was Belinda and the guy was Dwight Riddell.

I was wrong. The woman wasn't Belinda; she was Cecilia Kottlecamp. I should have been relieved. In fact it upset me even more. Not only had my beloved's heart been stolen by someone else, but that someone was a cad.

"Napoli!" Dwight exclaimed, approaching, smiling. "What are you doing sitting out here in the rain?"

"I'm sitting out here in the rain," I responded with my own wet smile.

By the streetlamp's pinkish glow I watched Cecilia Kottlecamp lick the ice cream cone, her tongue painted white by it.

"Ice cream in the rain. How romantic," I said.

"Isn't it?" said Cecilia, licking.

"Soft-serve?"

"Uh-huh."

"Carvel?"

"You bet."

"Say, did you know that Carvel ice cream was invented by mistake?"

"It *was*?"

"While out delivering ice cream one day, Tom Carvel got a flat tire and was forced to pull into a parking lot next to a pottery store. As the ice cream in his truck began to melt, he decided to sell it to people passing by in the street so it wouldn't be wasted. Turns out people loved the partly melted, soft ice cream. He sold out on his entire inventory! Eventually Carvel patented his own special process for making soft ice cream."

"Seriously, Napoli," said Dwight. "What are you doing here?"

I shrugged. "Nothing," I said, gazing upward. "Admiring the firmament of stars."

“What stars? It’s *raining!*”

“Just because you can’t see them doesn’t mean they aren’t there to admire.”

“You’re a queer duck, Napoli. You know that?”

“Did you know on a clear night in the Northern Hemisphere the naked eye can see 5,000 stars?”

“Queer duck—”

“Saturn is the lightest planet in the solar system.”

“C’mon, Cecilia. Let’s get out of here.”

“A full NASA space suit costs ten thousand dollars!”

Holding hands, making quacking sounds, laughing, they walked off.

I sat there a little while longer, enjoying the sense of total abdication that went with the rain sliding down my cheeks. Then I hopped on my bike and pedaled home, racing my shadow past the girders of the green iron bridge.

When I got home everyone was asleep. In the kitchen I mixed myself a glass of Cocoa Marsh and milk that I meant to take up to my room but guzzled down before I reached the top of the stairs. In my room I lay on top of the covers in my underwear with the lamp burning. The *How and Why Wonder Book of Interplanetary Travel* sat on my nightstand, but I didn't feel like reading it or even looking at pictures.

Instead I stared up at the dogfight tableau, more intent on the wires that held them in place than on the airplanes, listening to the attic fan's steady thrum combined with the gurgles of water draining into gutters and downspouts, a symphony punctuated by crackles of leftover fireworks that, by then, sounded more forlorn than celebratory.

I'd been lying there that way for a while, intent on what those crisscrossing wires did to the moonlight, when something struck the window. At first I thought it was an acorn or a twig blown into it. When it happened twice more, I got up, opened the window, and stepped out onto the telescope platform.

The sky had cleared. A crescent moon hung full and bright. An owl hooted. From where I stood, I could see a section of the front porch.

An oblong shadow sat on the porch swing.

"Who's there?" I called down in a loud whisper.

The shadow blew a party noisemaker.

"Zag?"

"Happy Fourth of July!" he said.

"Shh! You'll wake everyone!"

In my pajamas I hurried down and switched on the porch light. A cloud of mosquitoes swarmed around it. *The average mosquito drinks five-millionth of a liter of blood per serving.* I switched the light off. Even in the dark I could see the dark blotches on Zag's white T-shirt, which fluoresced under the moonlight.

Fireflies flicked on and off. *Also known as lightning bugs, fireflies are neither flies nor bugs.* From her bedroom window Mom's retchings spiraled down like confetti from the deck of an ocean liner.

"I could use a drink," Zag said.

"I'll mix you a chocolate milk."

"I was hoping for something stronger."

"Cocoa Marsh or plain milk. Those are your choices."

"Gimme the hard stuff."

"One Cocoa Marsh coming up."

In the kitchen I grabbed the quart milk bottle from the refrigerator and returned to the porch with it, the jar of Cocoa Marsh, a tumbler, and a teaspoon. Zag grabbed the milk bottle from me and guzzled straight from it—breathless, greedy gulps. He'd drunk half the bottle when, coming up for air, he said:

"Guess who's in the hospital?"

"Your dad?"

Zag nodded. "Good guess!"

"What happened?" I asked, though I was pretty sure that I knew, gangrene being the obvious conclusion. For weeks the smell of gangrenous flesh had filled the Lengyl home. It emanated from the den where Mr. Lengyl slept on an army cot, his gout having made it too hard for him to climb the stairs to his bedroom. Already he'd had two of his toes amputated, one from each foot. I guessed this latest trip to the hospital had a similar purpose, with another toe or two to be sacrificed to the Gout God.

"Someone shot him," said Zag, lighting a cigarette from the pack he'd removed from his rolled-up sleeve.

"Someone shot your *father*? Who? *Why*?"

Zag offered me a cigarette that I refused. With me sitting there on the porch swing next to him he explained.



After I left him at the dog pound that Sunday, Zag had arrived at what he felt was an ingenious way to stop Zippo from keeping his father awake with his incessant barking. Like most good

ideas, this one was as simple as it was obvious.

That same night, with his father snoring away in his army cot, Zag tiptoed into the downstairs bathroom. In the medicine cabinet, among his father's many prescriptions, he found the vial of Benadryl tablets and extracted a pink pill from it. By moonlight, on the kitchen counter, using an ashtray as a mortar and the handle of a screwdriver as a pestle, he ground the pill into a fine powder, sprinkled the powder into a bowl of milk, gave the bowl to Zippo, and watched, with a mixture of pride and guilt, Zippo lap up every drop.

That night for the first night in weeks Mr. Lengyl and Zippo both slept soundly. So did Zag, knowing that as long as he had a healthy supply of Benadryl on hand he and his dog were golden.

"And we would've been too," said Zag, "if it weren't for Thomas Jefferson."

"Thomas Jefferson? What's he got to do with it?"

"He wrote the Declaration of Independence."

"Oh," I said.

The morning of the Fourth of July Zag took Zippo up to Lost Lake. He sat by the dam, throwing a stick in the water for Zippo to retrieve. Once the fireworks started, Zag knew Zippo wouldn't stop barking. They stayed at the lake till long after sundown, when it started to rain. By the time they got home Zag's father was sound asleep. In the kitchen Zag ground up two Benadryl tablets and gave them to Zippo in his bowl of milk. Before going to bed he gobbled down a peanut butter sandwich.

He'd barely drifted off when Zippo's barks woke him. Soon they were met by his father's curses. Like ripples from a stone tossed into a lake, the barks and curses radiated into the night.

In his striped pajamas, slowly, as though in a trance, with his father's curses growing louder, Zag went down the stairs. As he did a strange blue wavering light met him on the staircase, as if an aurora borealis had entered the house: the same blue light Belinda Dalton described to me on the playground the week after both of our fathers died.

"I felt like a deep-sea diver," Zag explained, "the kind with

the big brass helmets, descending into the ocean's darkest, deepest, most mysterious depths."

At the bottom of the stairs Zag turned into his father's study. There, in a pine cabinet next to the rabbit gun his father gave him for his tenth birthday, stood the Harrington & Richardson Topper Model 48 Single-Shot. To the odors of gun oil and stock cream, Zag's father had shown him how to clean and oil the shotgun, his heavily veined, muscular hands caressing the chamois cloth up and down the barrel's gleaming blue shaft. How possessed of authority and wisdom his father had seemed to him back then. Like the sun, he'd existed, or seemed to, at the center of all things.

In the drawer of his father's desk, Zag found a red and yellow box of shells. With the shotgun loaded, he carried it into the kitchen. Zag opened the refrigerator, took the milk bottle from it, poured milk into a saucer, and carried the saucer and the shotgun onto the patio, where moonlight fragmented things into geometrics of blue light.

Delighted to see his master at such an odd hour, Zippo slapped his tail against the patio floor. Zag put the bowl of milk down. As he did the shadows of tree branches rippled across his pajama sleeves. Watching Zippo lap milk from the saucer, Zag smiled.

"Dumb mutt," he said, shaking his head.

He'd aimed the shotgun and was about to pull the trigger when, hearing something, Zag turned. His father stood there, a pajama-clad Christ crucified on the cross of his crutches, his swollen gangrenous foot looking like a beached harbor seal.

"Put the gun down, moron."

Though Zag's aim was purposefully wide, twenty-six pellets of lead shot found their way into his father's gangrenous, putrefying flesh.



"They'd have had to amputate the damn foot anyway, sooner or later," Zag said between gulps of milk. Zag's body shook

with laughter as he went on guzzling. His laughter blew bubbles in the milk. Soon both of us were laughing out there on the moonlit porch. Zag laughed so hard he lost his grip on the bottle, which fell and broke, spraying milk all over.

With Zag gone, on my knees on the porch with mosquitoes eating me alive and my mother retching in her room high above me, I gathered up the milky shards.

PART 5

INNER SPACE

The next day I rode with Gordon up to Fern Cottage. This time I didn't hesitate to knock on the door. The man wore his plaid robe.

"You again!" (*Hyew eggen!*)

"Teach me to swim."

"Teach yourself." (*Deech yuzelf.*)

He tried to close the door. I stuck my foot in it. Under his round glasses, the man's eyes hardened, but then they softened again. He pointed to my stepbrother.

"Who is this?"

"My stepbrother," I answered. "He's retarded."

"He can't be much more stupid than you."

The man indicated that I should wait. When the door re-opened, he had his walking stick with him. He walked past me and Gordon down the slatestone path to the gravel road, then turned left and kept walking, headed for Fool's Hole. Taking Gordon by the hand, I followed him. *Follow your fears.*

Soon we stood on the swimming rock, facing the water. Behind us Gordon sat on a patch of lichen playing with his fingers.

"Uhn haah dah."

"What's your brother doing?"

"It's this thing he does with his fingers, an optical illusion. And he's my stepbrother, not my brother."

Through the branches of a nearby tree the wind made a whistling sound. A gust sent a gray parabola shivering across the lake's surface. With his beard the man nodded down at Fool's Hole and said:

"Take your clothes off."

"What?"

"Or keep them on. It's all the same to me."

"You don't expect me to jump, do you?"

"Do you want to swim, or don't you?"

"Swim, yes; die, no!"

The man dropped the plaid robe. Compared to his sun-burned arms his chest was pale, the hairs on it mostly gray. I noticed that scar again. It ran all the way up from his calf to his groin. What scared me more just then I'm not sure, the thought of jumping off that rock or just standing there next to this naked stranger.

"I will count to three." (*I vill kown do tree.*)

"Why do we have to jump? Why can't we just walk in?"

"*Vun...doo...*"

"At least let me put on my bathing suit!"

With my heart racing, I sat on the rock and unlaced my sneakers, all the time thinking, *Why am I doing this? I must be nuts!*—at the same time feeling it was inevitable, that I had no choice, that it was all part of the cosmic plan whereby at long last I would partake of something of the infinite. *Follow your fears...*

With my clothes in a pile and my swim trunks on, I walked over and stood next to the man at the rock's edge. All this time Gordon sat there, behind us, engrossed in his fingertips, oblivious of his stepbrother's impending watery death.

"*Vun...doo—*"

I shook my head. "I can't do this," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because—I'm scared!"

"What is your name?"

"I thought you didn't care about names."

"I don't. Tell me anyway."

"Half, they call me."

"Hoff? Silly name. Tell me, Hoff: how scared are you?"

"Very."

"Whose fear is it? Yours, or someone else's?"

"Mine, I guess."

"If a thing is yours, you can do what you like with it, right?"

"I suppose."

"Supposing your fear were an empty bottle that you're holding in your hand. You could throw it away, couldn't you?"

"I guess, though I'd be littering."

"Never mind that! Could you throw it away?"

"I guess."

"Stop guessing and answer!"

"Yes!"

"Good. Do it! Throw it away."

"The bottle?"

"Imbecile! Your fear. Here, now—into this lake!"

He took my hand.

"Vun, doo—"

"Please god no!"

"Tree!"

We jumped. We hurtled down; a wall of lake rushed up. In a collision of bodies three states of matter met: mine (gas, liquid, solid), the man's (ditto), the lake (liquid).

Then I was inside the green wall, in and under it, flailing in a bedlam of bubbles. Under its green skin the lake was brighter and darker and deeper in all directions. I couldn't tell up from sideways or down: they were all the same, churned together into a greenish froth. I thrashed my way toward the palest green, my legs and arms flailing, eyes burning, lungs yearning for air. Just when I was about to breathe in water, I burst through the lake's skin. Sunlight poured into my eyes. My lungs cringed; my ears popped. I gasped and went down again. Then up, then down, then up again, like my Duncan Midnight Special yo-yo. Each time I came up, like a dog trying to claw its way up a tree, I thrashed at the surface.

I was thrashing that way when the man swam up and held me from behind.

"You're fighting the water! Don't! Let it hold you!"

The next time I came up, I took an extra deep breath and tried not to flail quite as much. I did it again the next time,

and again after that. After five or six times I wasn't thrashing as much anymore. I wasn't treading water either, exactly, but I wasn't drowning.

The man swam up to me again.

"All right?"

"Yeah," I spluttered. "Yeah, I'm all right!"

"See?"

"How did you know I wouldn't drown?"

"I didn't."

I looked up then to see Gordon looking down from the top of the swimming rock.

"It's okay, Gordy!" I shouted up at him. "It's okay; I'm okay!"

I was better than okay: I was ecstatic. I'd taken my father's advice.

I'd followed my fear.

I'd thrown it into Lost Lake.

That summer the Man in Blue taught me how to swim. More than that, he taught me to love water. He turned my fear of it into a love that endures to this day.

We started out in the shallows. Lesson #1: treading water. Since the human body consists mostly of water and has almost the same density, people are predisposed to float.

“The problem,” the man, whose name was Jack Thomas (so he told me) explained, “is that though we float, most of us don’t float well enough not to drown.” (*Ve dunt vlote vell enuff nuh doo trown.*)

Once I’d mastered the art of treading water, we advanced to basic swimming strokes: backstroke, sidestroke (*Bick an abble, bood id in de basked, bick anudder abble...*). From there we progressed to flutter kick and crawl. (*Spear de woddah wid yu hands. Leddem glide ahead uff hyen. Open yu bibs. Glide, Hoff, glide!*) “The first rule of swimming: trust the water,” Jack said. “Since you and the lake are both made of water, it’s the same as trusting yourself.”

Gordon would sit and watch from the shore as I practiced my drills in the shallows. Meanwhile, having left me with my latest instructions, Jack would swim the full length of the lake, zipping across the water with perfectly timed strokes. I wondered when and how he had learned to swim and dive so well. When I asked him, to my surprise he answered.

“When I was around your age,” he said (we were sitting on the edge of the dam, with Gordon between us), “I contracted diphtheria. Do you know what that is?”

“A serious infection caused by the *Corynebacterium diphtheriae* strain of bacteria.”

“Very good. I couldn’t go to school or play with other children. By then I was living with my aunt and uncle. My aunt gave me alcohol baths. When not confined to my room I took long

walks. While walking one day, through the tall hedge surrounding the municipal pool, I watched a group of boys diving off the high board. Once their feet left the platform, they hung there momentarily, or seemed to, frozen like statues, before plunging with hardly a splash. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Then and there I decided, once I'd recovered from my illness, I'd learn to dive like that. And I did."

I asked, "Who taught you?"

"The municipal pool lifeguard. His name was Günter. 'Straight, stiff, and smooth' were Günter's three words of instruction. 'With a perfect dive,' he said, 'there should be hardly a splash. The better the dive, the smaller the splash.'"

Otherwise Jack never talked about himself; in fact, he made it clear that with respect to questions his past was off-limits. The few times I asked him anything to do with it—where he was from, that sort of thing—he slammed the door on the subject, saying, "What do you care?" or "That's none of your concern."

Though otherwise unwilling to talk about his past, other subjects Jack was happy to discuss. Among those subjects: lakes. Jack loved lakes. He seemed to know all about them, how most lakes were formed after the last ice age, when rifts, valleys, and basins filled with water from the melting glaciers that had formed them, while others were formed by rivers silting up and damming, and still others—the so-called ancient lakes, as old as two and a half million years—were formed by tectonic plates shifting, carving enormous potholes into the earth that torrential rains filled with water. From Jack I learned that there are tectonic lakes, volcanic lakes, fluvial lakes, meteoric (or "crater") lakes, aeolian (produced by wind action), and anthropogenic (man-made) lakes. While some lakes are classified based on their origins, others take their names from their composition and surroundings. Hence: salt lakes, peat lakes, lava lakes, acid and alkaline lakes. There are lazy lakes, industrious lakes, even over-ambitious lakes: lakes overwhelmed by the nutrients in them, by phosphorus, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and other

things that make algae thrive, killing off not just fish, but all forms of life dependent on them. Jack explained to me how, as they age, lakes pass through different stages: oligotrophic, mesotrophic, eutrophic, hypereutrophic...how, before they die, they go senile, turning into marshes and bogs.

"Like people," I observed.

"Yes," said Jack. "Like people."

"Uhn haah daah," said Gordon.

"Why do you know so much about lakes?" I asked Jack one day as we were sitting on the rock after a swim.

"For the same reason you know so much about the planets and stars. Because they interest you."

Jack went on to say that he had long been fascinated by water. "It may have started the day I watched those boys diving at the municipal pool." He explained how, returning to the pool often after that visit, he became more and more entranced not just by the divers, but by what their plunging bodies did to the water, by the sizes and shapes of their splashes, and the patterns of waves that radiated out from them to create more waves and splashes at the edges and corners of the pool.

"Of all the things that make up the world," Jack said, "water is by far the most mysterious. Tasteless, odorless, colorless, nearly transparent, it's the most equivocal and adaptable of substances, having no identity of its own. Its form is determined strictly by circumstance. As Hesse wrote, it 'flows to fill whatever form it finds.'"

It struck me then that water and the universe had a lot in common. No matter how much we knew about them, they remained unfathomable. And since we're made mostly of water, it stands to reason that human beings are just as unfathomable.

Jack summed it up neatly: "The deepest water you'll ever drown in is yourself." (*Ze deepest woddah hyenl evah troun in iss yobzehl.*)



Usually we swam in the mornings. I'd leave the house after breakfast and on most days be home in time for lunch. The

other Back Shop Boys rarely went to the lake before mid-afternoon, so the odds of running into them there were small. For all kinds of reasons I didn't want them to know about my friendship with Jack.

Sometimes after swimming we would sit on the dam. From its top, Jack, Gordon, and I took turns skipping stones across the water. Jack's stones skipped dozens of times (*plif, plif, plif, plif, plif, plif, plif, plif—spludge*), mine just two or three (*plif, plif, plif, spludge*). Gordon's were gulped down instantly on impact (*...spludge!*).

We were skipping stones one morning when Jack told me about The Water Master.

"The *who?*" I said.

"The Water Master. He's a creature of Nordic myth, with burning eyes, green hair, and a matching green beard that turns white in the moonlight. He comes from a watery planet from which all the water evaporated as the result of an explosion, so he had to escape."

"Uhn haah dah," Gordon said.

"How did he get here?"

"Through the migration of cosmic dust."

With a primordial squawk, a heron took off from a nearby rock, its pterodactyl wings flapping slowly as it skimmed the lake's surface.

"The Water Master lives in an underwater palace made of crystal garlanded with ornaments of gold and silver," Jack continued. "He feeds on the corpses of drowning victims. At sunset when the water is like a mirror, that's when he claims his victims. He shoots out his claw, pulls them in, and drowns them."

I had my own underwater monster to share with Jack: not a mythical monster, or a purely mythical one, but Benedict Dalton, uncle to Brewster and Baxter, brother to Bradshaw, great grandson of Barclay Moses Dalton (the trapper who discovered felt after plugging a hole in his shoe). According to the legend, Benedict spent many summers at his brother's estate, where he

enjoyed plying the lake's waters with a steam launch he built for that purpose. With its gay striped awning, the launch made gentle circles around the island with the stone lighthouse. Benedict named his launch the *Haberdasher* and took great pride in her—until his wife, Cassandra, started using the launch for her raucous, drunken parties.

This was during the Roaring Twenties, era of gangsters, speakeasies, bathtub gin, and flappers doing the Charleston. With the exception of Benedict Dalton, the country was in a celebratory mood. A man of great reserve, Dalton found his wife's "bacchanals" intolerable. So fed up grew he with them that, early one morning, with a cape flung over his pajamas and his wife sleeping off her latest hangover, he made his way to the gardening shed. Pickaxe in hand, from there he walked down to the boathouse. Having lashed a rowboat to the *Haberdasher's* stern, he fired up her engine and piloted her to the middle of the lake, where he scuttled her.

"But something went wrong," I explained. "He must've caught his leg in a rope or banged his head or something, 'cause when the *Haberdasher* went down, Benedict Dalton went down with her.

"They say he's still down there," I added, "or his skeleton is, at the bottom of the lake, clinging to the remains of his launch."

"Could it be," said Jack as we both gazed out across the lake, "that your Benedict Dalton and my Water Master are one and the same?"



One morning, near the end of my swimming session, it started raining. Jack invited us into his cottage. It was the first time he'd done so. By the time we arrived there the rain was falling in sheets. From a hook next to the door, he took down a lantern with a long sooty snout. He lit it and put it on a table.

"No electricity?" I said.

Jack shook his head.

"Is there running water?"

He nodded toward a sink with a curved pump-handle.

"Bathroom?"

Jack pointed out the window at the outhouse—the one with the wooden box next to it filled with ammonia.

"All the amenities," he said. (*All zamenitees*)

By the lamp's glow I got my first glimpse of Fern Cottage from inside since the day the Back Shop Boys ransacked it. In place of the moldy carpet of travel brochures, a wooden floor gleamed, its wide planks painted a deep grayish blue, the color of a storm at sea. There was a counter with a sink, an old-fashioned icebox, a cast-iron stove. At the room's center was a square wooden table. A chess set took up most of the table, its hand-carved wooden pieces arranged in their initial formation. Tucked into the room's far corner was a bed with a quilted coverlet above which a shelf holding a dozen or so books had been screwed into the wall. Everything neat, tidy. Mixed in with the books, serving as bookends, were some of the railroad insulators Jack collected. These were the only adornments to the place. Otherwise no paintings or photographs, no sentimental objects of any kind, nothing to suggest a past life or even much of a present one.

I touched one of the glass insulators.

"Please don't," Jack said.

He got a fire going in the stove, then filled a kettle with water, pumping the handle over the sink. The gushing water reminded me of a comet's tail. As Gordon and I watched with blankets wrapped around us, Jack carried the kettle to the stove and added a log to it. By then the rain was coming down hard. It sounded like gravel being dumped onto the roof.

We were sitting at the table with the chessboard.

"Do you play chess?" asked Jack.

I shook my head. (My father and I played checkers.)

"A pity."

I asked Jack who he played with. He pointed to himself.

"How do you do that?"

He demonstrated, moving a piece, then turning the board and moving another.

"Who wins?" I asked.

Jack poked himself in the chest.

"Who loses?"

He repeated the gesture.

The kettle whistled. Jack poured us tea.

"Uhn haah dah," said Gordon.

"Don't you get lonely out here?"

On a windowsill there was a clump of green moss. Jack took it and held it in front of me. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"It's a piece of moss."

"One of ten-thousand species. And twice as many varieties. More than enough to keep me company."

On the counter next to the sink there was a bowl of apples. Jack offered us each an apple and took one for himself. From a pocket of the coveralls that were draped over a chair, he took what I didn't realize at first was a knife until he flicked out its long, narrow blade. He peeled an apple with it, rotating it with the ball of his thumb against the blade. The skin came off in a leathery spiral. Jack handed the peeled apple to Gordon. He was going to peel one for me when I said: "I'll do it."

Jack handed me the apple and held the knife out to me.

"I've got my own, thanks."

I got my Swiss Army Knife out of my knapsack.

"Pretty knife." (*Priddy nive.*)

"My father gave it to me."

"He must think well of you."

"He's dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"My mom remarried. That's where he comes from." I pointed to Gordon. "His father is my stepfather."

We ate our apples and sipped our teas and listened to the hissing stove and the sound of rainwater dripping from the cottage's eaves. After a while Jack said: "That explains a lot."

“What does?”

“To lose your father at so young an age isn’t easy. I was quite young when I lost my parents.”

“What happened?”

“They were both killed in a railway accident.”

I wanted to know more but knew better than to ask.

We went on sipping tea, listening to the stove and the rain, just like that, just sitting there. I don’t think I’ve ever been as quiet with anyone before or since. It felt strange but good, comfortable. I felt more comfortable there than in what was supposedly my own home. I think Gordon felt comfortable too, though it was hard to say. Once Gordon lost himself in a yo-yo or his fingertips he could have been anywhere.

“Unh haah dah,” Gordon said.

We stayed there like that until the rain stopped completely and our clothes were warm and dry.



Though I came to trust and feel comfortable with him, still, I knew nothing about Jack. Who was he? Where did he come from? Where was his family? Why did he collect that stuff in his rucksack? How did he get that limp? Once or twice I dared to ask him about this or that to do with his past. Each time he either shrugged and said nothing or put me off in other ways.

“The past is garbage,” he said to me one day. We were in his cottage playing chess. He’d taught me how to play. I had just nabbed one of his pawns with my knight.

“Why is it garbage?”

“Because—it’s useless.” He took my bishop with his queen.

“Don’t you want to remember things? The places you’ve been, things you’ve done?”

Jack shook his head. “Memories are like tea balls. Some people use them over and over again. Me, I throw mine away.”

He snatched one of my rooks. I nabbed another of his pawns.

I changed the subject:

"I'm going to be the first man on the moon," I said.

"Congratulations."

"President Kennedy says we'll land there before the end of the decade. I'll be twenty years old. Old enough."

"May I share an observation?"

"Go ahead."

"You talk too much."

"Unh haah dah," said Gordon.

"If only everyone spoke as little as your brother."

"My stepbrother. Since I let you share an observation, may I ask a personal question?"

"As long as I may not answer." He got my queen with his bishop.

"Do you believe in God?"

Jack made a puffing sound.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Some people embrace the God of things unknown and unknowable. I embrace things unknown and unknowable. My way is simpler. Whether one names the mystery or not, it's still a mystery. Anyway, why insist on answers when the questions are so beautiful?"

Jack moved his rook.

"Checkmate. You really must pay more attention to your game, Hoff."



One day between rounds of chess Jack went out to use what he called his "privy." I was sitting there contemplating my next move when my eyes drifted toward the canvas rucksack leaning against the wall next to Jack's stove, its opening secured with a leather drawstring. With Gordy occupied with my yo-yo, having looked out the window to make sure the privy door was closed, I rose from the table, went to the rucksack, crouched, loosened the drawstring, looked inside, and saw five more glass insulators just like the ones on Jack's bookshelf. I extracted one and gazed into it like a crystal ball, as if by staring hard enough I could force it to reveal its secrets to me.

After peeking again through the window to make sure the privy door was still closed, I flung open every drawer in the cottage, searching for anything that might tell me who Jack Thomas was and where he came from. Candlesticks, match-books, assorted tools, a flashlight, sweaters, socks, underwear, and other clothes. In one drawer under a ropy sweater, I found a padded envelope, the kind you mail books in. I was about to open it when I hesitated. The privy door squeaked when opened so I'd have known if Jack was headed back. Still, to be sure, I looked out the window again.

There were two things in the envelope. The first was a small black-and-white photo with crinkly edges of a man, a woman, and a boy standing in front of a body of water, a pond or a lake in which, to the right of the photo, was a small sailboat. The woman was tall, as tall as the man, almost. She wore a large rolled-brimmed floppy hat that cast a shadow over most of her face except her hawk-like nose, which protruded into the sunlight. The boy looked about ten or eleven years old. The man could have been Jack, possibly, but a younger Jack, without the beard.

The second item inside the padded envelope was a book. Slim, with a badly worn leather cover. The pages were foxed and brittle. It had to be very old.

I opened it to the title page:

A
 Short introduction for
 to learne to Swimme.
 Gathered out of Master Digbies Booke
 of the Art of Swimming.
 (...)
 And translated into English for the better
 instruction of those who understand
 the Latine tongue.
 By Christofer Middleton
 ★

AT LONDON

printed by James Roberts for Edward
White, and are to be sold at the little North
doore of Paules Church, at the signe
of the Gun. 1595.

I'd slid the book back into the padded envelope and was putting it back under the sweater when something slapped the back of my head. I hadn't heard the privy door squeak.

"Ouch!" I said.

"You've been snooping!" Jack said.

"I wasn't! I was just—!"

He slapped me again. Like its predecessor it was a loose, half-checked slap that hurt just enough to make its point.

"I asked you not to snoop!"

"I'm sorry! I—"

He slammed the drawer shut. He grabbed my arm, forced me to my feet, and pulled me back to the table, where he sat me down—hard—on the chair. Tears blurred my vision. Gordon stopped playing with his yo-yo and looked at me.

"If you persist in snooping, you and your stepbrother will no longer be welcomed here. Understood?"

I nodded. More tears tugged at my eyes.

"Stop crying."

I couldn't speak. My voice was trapped deep down in my throat. My face was all screwed up. It hurt. But what hurt the most wasn't my face or Jack's slaps but my having betrayed his confidence. I felt deeply ashamed.

"You cry too easily," Jack said.

He tousled Gordon's hair, then he sat back down in front of the chessboard.

"Whose move is it?"



Sometimes after swimming, if the lake was high, we'd climb under the sluiceway, under the Saran Wrap-like sheet of tumbling water, and stand there looking out through it, watching it

turn the landscape into a blurry watercolor, the water thundering so loudly we couldn't hear ourselves talk over it. We were doing so one day when from the left-hand side two brightly colored blobs entered the watercolor, a fat blue blob and a skinny red blob. I recognized the blobs as Victor and Skunky.

They stopped and stood there on the path not far from where we had left our clothes. Even with the waterfall turning them into blurry blobs, I could tell they were looking our way, seeing us there, or seeing three flesh-colored blobs, since we must have looked as blurry to them as they did to us.

Though I couldn't hear them over the thundering water, I could see my stepbrother's teeth chattering. Mine did, too, not from the cold, but out of fear. I was terrified that Victor and Skunky would recognize us and know that I'd been hanging around with Jack, with the Man in Blue. To make matters even worse, it so happened that on that of all mornings I'd arrived at Jack's place to find that I hadn't packed my swimming trunks into my knapsack, so I had done without. Not wanting to feel left out, Gordon, too, shed all of his clothes. Why not? Who'd see us? Well, we had our answer now.

We stood there, the three of us, frozen, waiting for the blobs to move on.

At last our interlopers stepped out of the watercolor. Had they seen our clothes piled on the dam, with Gordon's conspicuous red Boy's Club cap on top of the pile?



The next time I saw them Victor and Skunky didn't say a word about seeing us. Still, I didn't care for the way they kept looking at me, the knowing gleam in Victor's eye, the sly curve of Skunky's lips. I made up my mind then and there to find some way to keep them away from Lost Lake.

On my next visit to Fern Cottage, with a one-inch trim brush and a can of red enamel that I found, I painted a sign on a slab of plywood and nailed it up to the tree at Fool's Hole:

DANGER!!!
FLESH-EATING BACTERIA!!!
SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK!!!

State of Connecticut
Dept. of Public Health

Were flesh-eating bacteria a thing? Did Connecticut really *have* a Department of Public Health? Anyway, for the rest of that summer, Jack, Gordon, and I had Lost Lake all to ourselves.



By August I was able to swim in deep water. It was time for my first long solo swim.

“The lake is all yours,” Jack said. (*Sze lek hiss all yohrs.*)

“Is there anywhere I shouldn’t go?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “The bottom.” (*Sze boddum.*)

With Jack and Gordon watching from the top of the rock, I set out for the island with the miniature lighthouse. By then Jack and I had swum there and back at least a dozen times together. There was no reason for me to be afraid. If I got tired for some reason I could always stop and tread water.

All the same with each stroke the lake grew deeper and darker, or seemed to. I imagined Benedict Dalton’s skeleton somewhere down there, his grinning weedy skull looking up at me. I thought of the Water Master, too, with his slimy beard and treacherous claw lying in wait. *The deepest water you’ll ever drown in is yourself*, I said over and over to myself in time with my strokes, each stroke pushing more of the lake behind me. The harder I stroked, the farther away the island with the miniature stone lighthouse appeared, as if I were swimming backward, or the island was swimming away from me.

Follow your fears. Follow your fears...

Then, suddenly, I was there, scrambling up the rocks at the base of the lighthouse, weak and wobbly, but alive. With the last of my strength, I climbed the rusty ladder and stood at the top of the lighthouse, waving back to Jack and Gordy.

Though I'd swum less than a quarter mile, I felt that I'd gone much further. I was the first man on the moon, Colonel Leo Half Napoli IV, waving at all the poor suckers stuck back on dreary, dismal, gravity-bound Planet Earth.

PART 6

THE THING IN THE WOODS

For shooting his gouty father, the juvenile judge remanded Zag to the State Reform School for Boys in Cheshire, a forty-five-minute car journey, where he would remain until a week before Christmas. The second weekend after school started I visited him there.

My stepfather drove Gordon and me there. It was a warm breezy cloudy day. Gordon rode in front with my stepfather, who wore his seersucker suit. Unlike my father, who used to drive his Studebaker slouched in the driver's seat, with one loose hand on the wheel, the other guiding his cigarette from mouth to open window and back, my stepfather gripped the Buick's wheel rigidly, hands at ten and two o'clock, knuckles white, shoulders hunched, as if not merely steering his precious Buick, but grimly holding its parts together.

Along the way he tried to engage me and Gordon in a game of Bridge—not the card game favored by hoary retirement home residents, but one wherein the first person to spot a bridge on the highway yells, *Bridge!*, thereby scoring a point. A dozen bridges into the game, however, both my stepfather and Gordy had proven no match for me, and I lost all interest in playing. Instead I spread myself across the Buick's roomy back seat. As we glided down a newly constructed Interstate-84, while watching clouds (*"formed in clear air and ragged in appearance, cumulus fractus are a precursor to cumulus humilis and larger cumulus types"*) lumbering past the rear window, my mind likewise wandered. I thought about Belinda, with whom I'd hardly spoken since the Fourth of July, exchanging cursory smiles and nods in the hallways between classes at the new high school. And I thought about Jack, of course, trying to imagine the past about which he was so secretive. What was he hiding? Who was he hiding from? What had he done—or what had been done to him?

Only as we were passing through Waterbury, with its shabby wire and screw factories, when an enormous cross thrust itself into the view through the Buick's rear window, did my interest in the passing scenery revive. The cross was the centerpiece of a biblical theme park named "Holy Land, USA," constructed on the Southern slope of Waterbury's highest hill by a lawyer and self-styled evangelist with the unlikely name of John Baptist Greco. Ever since my parents took me there on my seventh birthday, I'd been fascinated by the place. I recalled how, as Mom looked on anxiously, like a pair of low-budget monsters Dad and I trounced through miniature scale models of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, complete with Wailing Wall, Harem al-Sharif, and Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Hand-in-hand we negotiated the park's convoluted trails, through its hokey assemblages of holy junk. Down a muddy passageway we descended into the so-called "Catacombs," a fiberglass and concrete tunnel decked out with glass-encased newspaper clippings of various miracles. The tunnel led to a claustrophobic chamber awash in green light that was supposedly the tomb of some dead pope. As we left, saying, "Need to drain the ol' lizard," Dad hurried on ahead of us. Moments later with a Rock & Rye-infused "*Boo!*" he leapt out from behind a miniature Noah's ark, scaring the crap out of me and nearly giving my mother a heart attack. For three days she refused to speak to either of us.

Now, as my stepfather's Buick rolled past that enormous metal cross, I recalled with enchantment that afternoon so irrevocably claimed by the past. Was it Proust who said, "The only true paradise is a paradise lost"? If so that Madelaine-dunking Parisian knew what he was talking about. The fabricated holy hill my parents and I traipsed through that sunny afternoon had been a Paradise for me, a nirvana wherein fathers loomed invincible over their progeny. Childhood: the true Holy Land...



The ticking of the Buick's turning signal dislodged me from my daydreams. We swung off the interstate onto Route 70,

then headed southeast past rows of red tobacco barns toward Cheshire. Twenty minutes later, the Buick crunched up a long stone drive lined with giant beech trees, past a pond teeming with swallows. As we drove past, the swallows rose in a crescent-shaped mass and flew off toward the sun, which painted their wing tips silver.

We passed a tiered fountain and then through a set of ornate iron gates to the front of the administration building, with its crenellated turrets and pointy arched windows of leaded glass. *Some boy's reformatory*, I said to myself. *It's a damn castle!* I pictured Zag wearing a full suit of armor, complete with a plumed visor and heraldic shield, like a knight of the Round Table.

On the administration building's sandstone turret two flags flew, an American flag and the state flag, with its grape vines and acorns over a dark blue backdrop: *Qui transtulit sustinet*. We pulled into a vaulted portico where, as if we were visiting royalty, a guard in a white-belted uniform greeted us.

"Welcome to Cheshire!"

Leaving my stepfather and his newspaper behind in the parked Buick, Gordon and I entered the main building, where the receptionist made us wait on a bench. Refracted through the windows of leaded glass, dusty rays of sunshine spread spectral colors across the marble floor. From the reception area bright corridors fanned out in different directions. Though the temperature outside couldn't have been much over seventy, inside it felt more like a hundred. A tall fan stood in the corner. I went and stood in front of it, plucking my shirt from where it stuck to my chest.

I was still plucking it when Zag arrived, escorted by a woman whose white hair contrasted sharply with her young face. Zag wore a blue chambray shirt two sizes too large, the excess fabric bunched behind him. By the looks of it someone had given him a haircut with kindergarten scissors. Seeing me, his face lit up with a big smile.

"How's it hanging?" he asked, shaking my hand firmly, like

the president of a Fortune 500 company. As if she was his secretary, Zag introduced me to the white-haired woman.

“Miss Ingols, meet my best friend, Leo Napoli. Miss Ingols is the best thing about this place—not that that’s saying much!” he added, winking at her.

“That will do, Mr. Lengyl,” Miss Ingols said.

She escorted us to a meeting room. On the way Zag put his arm around my shoulders and asked me about my family, how my mother and stepfather were doing.

“Has that hat store of his gone out of business yet?”

“Not yet,” I said. “He’s got this new thing he invented that’s supposed to help out with sales. The Comformator. For measuring hats, though it does other things too.”

“I’ll say this much for your stepfather, he doesn’t give up easily.”

“What about your old man? How’s he doing?”

“He’s still learning how to walk on one foot. It’s been hard for him. He can’t keep his balance. The weird thing is, he still feels the missing foot. He even gets cramps in his missing toes, bad ones. He says it’s the worst pain he’s ever experienced. Can you believe that? A ‘phantom limb,’ is what the docs call it. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of man?” Zag recited. “The Phantom Limb knows!”

We laughed.

“The even weirder thing is that ever since I shot him Dad and I get along better than ever. It makes me think I should have shot him a long time ago. Better late than never, I guess.”

The room Miss Ingols took us to had a round folding table and four plastic chairs. After reminding us that visiting time was a half-hour, she left, leaving the door halfway open. When he sat down I saw the rolled-up sleeves of Zag’s chambray shirt straining against his upper arms.

“Been working out?” I asked him.

Zag smirked. “Exercise and read. That’s all there is to do around here.”

“Oh, that reminds me...” From inside the crotch of my pants

where I had hidden them, I pulled out three rolled-up comic books. *Twilight Zone Number 4*, *Doctor Solar*, *Man of the Atom*, and *Tales of Suspense #46* (“featuring The Crimson Dynamo, more powerful than the Iron Man!”). I handed them to Zag.

“Thanks,” he said tucking them into his own crotch. He took a cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in his mouth, and lit it with a contraband match that he ignited along the inseam of his jeans. A NO SMOKING sign loomed on the wall. I pointed to it.

“Who’s smoking?” Zag asked, blowing smoke.

“You are,” I said.

Zag shook his head. “Impossible,” he said. “Smoking isn’t allowed here.” With his thumb he pointed over his shoulder at the sign. “That would be breaking the rules, and we can’t be breaking the rules, now, can we? After all, without rules you can’t have a society, and without societies you can’t have civilization. Right?”

He sounded a lot like my stepfather. “Right,” I said.

“The thing about rules is—there has to be accountability, but there also has to be flexibility. It’s like a dance where one partner leads and the other follows, only it’s not that simple—dancing, that is. A good dancer knows that you don’t just drag your partner across the floor or let them drag you. You feel each other out; you try and anticipate the other person’s moves. If you’re leading, you anticipate what the person you’re dancing with is anticipating. Here, now, for instance, in this room, the sign says, ‘No Smoking.’ But who is the sign for? And who’s to say the sign knows what it’s talking about? If I were smoking,” said Zag, smoking, “which of course I’m not, then the sign would be wrong, wouldn’t it? It would no longer properly represent conditions within this room. On the contrary, under the circumstances to properly represent given conditions within this room the sign would have to say, ‘Yes Smoking.’ But you can’t tell a sign what to say, correct? Correct. Nor, it stands to reason by logical if inverted extension, can a sign tell you what to say or do. Right?”

"Right," I said, not wanting to press the matter further, knowing my doing so would only invite another round of Zag's reasoning, which had as many twists to its logic as a bowl of spaghetti. I changed the subject.

"How have they been treating you here?"

"Not too bad," Zag said. "The people who work here, they're mostly pretty cool, the guards and the counselors. We all get along. Except for Mr. O'Dell, the farm crew supervisor. The Nazi, we all call him. He's about yea tall." Zag held his palm up to his chin. "To make up for being short, he wears cowboy boots. I swear, he wears them to bed in case there's an emergency. Smokes cigars and shows off his one-armed push-ups. Makes us salute and call him Captain. Captain Asshole." Zag smiled. "Everyone else is okay. There's a few loudmouths and crybabies and troublemakers, but otherwise everyone gets along, including the ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"Uhn haah dah."

Zag leaned in close and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I'm not supposed to talk about it," he said, "but this place is haunted. The dorms especially, especially down in the so-called 'Pit,' the basement where they used to keep the *real* troublemakers. It's sealed off and empty now except for a bunch of old mattresses and a few tortured spirits that wander upstairs now and then." Zag snuffed out what was left of his cigarette on the sole of his shoe. Then he went to the door, opened it, stuck his head out into the corridor, and yelled: "Miss Ingols!"

The pretty white-haired woman arrived. She sniffed the air.

"Who's been smoking in here?"

Zag faced me.

"There's no smoking allowed in here, young man," Miss Ingols scolded me. "Don't you see the sign? You're too young to smoke anyway, both of you," she added with a look combining disgust, pity, and a trace of sympathy, indicating to me that she herself smoked and would have lit up then and there had she been permitted to.

"He's very sorry, Miss Ingols. Aren't you sorry, Half?"

"Yes." I nodded. "I'm very sorry."

"And he promises not to do it again. Right, Half?"

"I promise," I said.

"Say, Miss Ingols, would it be okay if we step out for some fresh air?"

"For a few minutes. And as long as you don't smoke."

"Don't worry, Miss Ingols. I'll keep an eye on him. God knows we've got enough troublemakers around here."



Outside in the yard a dozen delinquents played basketball, their sneakers slapping asphalt. Across the clouded sky stretching behind the reformatory's purely cosmetic battlements a helicopter whirred. Zag lit another cigarette.

"What's this I hear about you and the Man in Blue?"

No sooner did he say it than my mouth went as dusty dry as a vacuum cleaner bag. Meanwhile my conscience took off into outer space, leaving behind a blank-faced husk.

"The guys say they saw you swimming with him."

There was a plastic comb in my pocket. I ran the ball of my thumb over its teeth—so hard I felt the tines breaking off one by one.

"Is it true? Did you?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm asking you."

I laughed. "Of course not! Hell," I said, "Victor's a liar! And even with his glasses Skunky's as blind as a bat!"

Zag said nothing. He watched the kids play basketball.

"Besides," I felt compelled to add, "you know I can't swim!"

The basketball rolled our way. Zag tossed it back to one of the kids. A silence filled with sounds of basketball passed before he spoke.

"The thing about lying," Zag said, "is you can always tell when someone's doing it. Their inflections give them away. I ask you again: is it true?"

"You wanted me to spy on him," I explained meekly.

"I said spy, not skinny-dip. What the hell, Half!"

"It's not what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

"I forgot my bathing suit!"

"What were you doing hanging out with him in the first place? And when did you learn to swim?"

"He taught me."

"Who?"

"Jack."

"Jack? That's his name?"

I nodded. "Jack Thomas."

"What else have you found out about him?"

"A few things."

"Like?"

"Where he lives. By the lake. In the old caretaker's cottage."

"What else?"

"I found out what he's been collecting in his bag."

"You told me already. Glass insulators. What else?"

"I know he's not from around here."

"No shit."

"He has a foreign accent."

"What sort of accent?"

"German, I think."

"German?" Zag nodded. "Then he's either from West or from East Germany."

"Does it matter?"

"East Germany is Communist. He could be a Commie spy!"

"Unh haah dah."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Think again. Right now there are more spies in this country than ever before in its history. Spies and provocateurs sent by the Commies to undermine our way of life. They're everywhere. They'd like nothing better than to see this country and the entire system of free enterprise collapse. It's called the Cold War, in case you haven't heard of it."

"I've heard of it," I said.

"Ten-to-one your skinny-dipping German friend is spying on our industrial secrets or putting fluoride and other agents into our drinking water and doing whatever else he can to undermine capitalist democracy. Meanwhile he goes around collecting junk and acting like a nutcase so no one will suspect him."

Zag had worked himself up into a froth of wrathful patriotic fervor. He clenched and unclenched his fists; he drew his upper lip back over his teeth so hard it turned white.

"So," I said, "what are we supposed to do about it?"

"I'm thinking." Zag rubbed his jaw. "Calling the cops won't do any good. We don't have enough to go on yet. We need to catch him in the act."

"What act?"

"I don't know. Something. We'll know it when it happens."

"Supposing nothing happens? What if he doesn't do anything?"

Zag shook his head. "Trust me, your German pal is up to something. Whatever it is, you can bet it's no good. Meanwhile you better watch your step. If he finds out you've been spying on *him*..." Zag slid a finger across his throat. "Then again now that you've started you can't just stop hanging around with him. He'll know something's up then. You'd better just keep doing what you've been doing. Don't give him any reason to suspect anything."

A gong sounded. The basketball game ended. The players walked off the court. From the doorway Miss Ingols called out to us:

"Visiting time is over!"

Except for that awkward encounter after the sluiceway incident, for the rest of that summer I didn't see Victor and Skunky. Only when school started again that September, while waiting for the bus at the Spitting Pole, did we see each other again.

The Spitting Pole was our name for the street signpost at the corner of South Carrot and Knox streets, where they caught the school bus. Long ago we'd reversed the two signs, an act of vandalism that, to our dismay, wreaked only minimal havoc, South Carrot being a dead-end street rarely sought out by motorists. After I moved into my stepfather's house and officially became a Highlander, that corner was no longer my school bus stop. Still, out of loyalty to the Back Shop Boys, with Gordon on the seat behind me, I'd pedal my Royce Union there every morning and keep them company while they waited for the bus.

On frozen winter mornings, to distract ourselves from the cold, we'd take turns spitting on the sign's green-painted shaft, then stand watching our boogers creep down to the sidewalk, taking nickel bets on whose booger would arrive first. Over time our combined DNA offerings formed a crust thick enough to render fresh coats of green paint unnecessary.

While hocking and spitting and awaiting the bus we'd listen to Victor's latest lies. Victor's lies were as big as Victor. And Victor was big, very big. Playing touch football, he'd tackle you and you'd be under him, screaming through squashed lungs, *Get the hell off of me, you fat tub!* His flesh would jiggle its way deep into your suffocating lungs. Being tackled by Victor Szentgyorgyi was like being tackled by an enormous bowl of sweaty Jell-O.

Most of Victor's lies had to do with his dad, a World War II veteran who according to Victor had

- a) skippered a submarine during World War II
- b) skippered a PT boat during World War II

- c) killed a Nazi soldier in a foxhole with his dagger and brought home his coalscuttle helmet
- d) helped build the bridge on the River Kwai

The helmet, which sat on Victor's dresser in his bedroom, had a provocative dent in it. Seeing it I'd picture Mr. Szentgyorgyi leaping into a Nazi foxhole like Audie Murphy in *To Hell and Back*.

Of his acts of bravery we were instructed by Victor never to speak to his father. "It might set off a flashback," Victor told us. He then went on to describe the time his father, in the grip of a nightmare, lurched out of bed and tore down all the bedroom curtains.

"Dad dreamed he was on bivouac and the krauts set fire to his tent," Victor told us.

I didn't know what a bivouac was, none of us did, not that it mattered, since we all knew Victor was lying. We didn't mind. We enjoyed Victor's lies. They were so much more engaging than our truths. He lied for all of us, Victor did. He made heroes of all our dads. Along with Victor's father, our dads climbed the Matterhorn. They swam the Hellespont, descended the Mariana Trench in a bathysphere, outran the bulls at Pamplona, piloted Chuck Yeager's X-1 as it broke the sound barrier.

Victor's lies embraced our deepest hopes and darkest fears. Bitten by a mosquito in the jungle, Mr. Szentgyorgyi contracted malaria. The hundred-and-ten-degree fever raged for twenty days and nights. A priest was summoned to Mr. Szentgyorgyi's bedside.

"In his delirium, Dad saw the Virgin Mary," Victor recounted. "She stood at the foot of Dad's hospital bed wearing a plaid skirt like the girls at St. Mary's. After the priest finished dispensing last rites, she gave Dad a blowjob."

The disasters and diseases we most dreaded, fat Victor endured for us. Like most boys of our generation, we Back Shop Boys had fallen under the sway of television's Don Herbert, also known as *Mr. Wizard*, whose Saturday morning science show enchanted us with its vast array of edifying stinks

and bangs. Following Mr. Wizard's example, in the name of scientific research Victor and Skunky performed an experiment in the course of which they set Victor's asshole on fire.

"We wanted to see if farts are ignitable," Skunky explained.

For the experiment Victor ate an entire sixteen-ounce can of baked beans. "Cold," Skunky specified. Taking an empty Coca-Cola bottle and a box of wooden matches with them, they repaired to Victor's bedroom, where, on all fours with Skunky manning the bottle, Victor farted. Moments later he and Skunky watched intently as Skunky brought a lit match to the bottle opening. Sure enough, a modest puff of blue flame materialized.

"A blue angel, that's the technical term for it," Skunky disclosed.

Unwilling to leave it at that, they repeated the experiment, this time with a larger specimen that they ignited at the source. The result: Victor as *Hindenburg*, exploding. *The lives, the humanity*. According to Victor, he was subsequently treated—not for second, or even third, but for *fourth* degree burns the likes of which the doctors and nurses at the New Haven Hospital Burn Unit had never seen before.

"They had to peel all the burned skin off my butt," he elaborated. "A nurse with the biggest bazoomas I'd ever seen did it using a pair of forceps. It took her six hours. She looked exactly like Sophia Loren in *El Cid*. Before becoming a nurse she'd been an opera singer. While peeling off my skin she sang Violetta's aria from *La Traviata*. Then she gave me a blowjob."

Through Victor, we underwent the cure for rabies, a series of hypodermics administered with a twelve-inch needle through the chest wall straight into the heart's ventricle. So long was the needle, it tickled the back of Victor's throat. The doctor who administered the shots looked like the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*. After injecting him the doctor offered Victor a blowjob, but Victor declined.



During our second meeting at the Spitting Pole that September, Victor shared his discovery of a box of rubbers found by him in a desk drawer in his father's home office while he had been searching for a pack of playing cards. The box held hundreds of male prophylactics.

"My dad must've bought 'em wholesale," Victor surmised.

From his jacket pocket he produced a sample. For the life of me it looked like a white balloon. As I marveled at its exalted purpose Skunky snatched the thing from Victor's grip and inflated it, which cracked us all up, but not as hard as when Victor pointed out that the rubber had been used.

As for the cards he'd been looking for, Victor found them. From his coat pocket he withdrew them. The back of each card held a different pornographic image, the degree of obscenity commensurate with the card's value, with the ace of spades the most obscene of all. From then on, starting with the lowly two of hearts, morning after morning Victor would flash us a card.

"Fifty-two cards," he'd remind us, pocketing the deck as the school bus grumbled into view.

Thus for the next two weeks he held us spellbound, so eager to reach the ace of spades we nearly died in the waiting. We had arrived at the Jack of Clubs when, one morning, Victor broke the news that the cards had been stolen back from him.

"Dad must've missed them," he concluded.



As the school year progressed I spent fewer and fewer mornings at the Spitting Pole. Without Zag there to lead us, the Back Shop Boys lost much of their charm. By October I'd abandoned the Spitting Pole altogether.

Meanwhile I spent as much time with Jack as I could. We swam, played chess. The more time we spent together, the more questions I had about him. Among many other things I wondered what he did with the glass insulators he collected.

I wouldn't have to wonder much longer.

One Sunday I arrived at Fern Cottage earlier than usual.

Gordon wasn't with me. He'd gone with his father to visit his mother's grave as they did every year on the anniversary of her death. Though officially the cause of Margaret Waple's death was "accidental poisoning," it was widely believed that she committed suicide. Why else would someone swallow a whole bottle of Lysol disinfectant?

The former Mrs. Waple was buried on the far side of the Hudson River, in Tuxedo Junction, New York, where she'd been raised. Every second Sunday of October my stepfather drove there with Gordon to place fresh day lilies on her grave. On the way back, they'd ride the creaky wooden funicular that rattled and groaned its way to the top of Mount Beacon. Though it had a canopy, the funicular was otherwise open to the elements. Seeing the gloomy sky that morning, it struck me that they'd chosen a perfect day for a graveside vigil but a lousy one for the funicular.

A ragged corkscrew of smoke rose from the cottage's chimney. I'd walked up the stairs to the green front door and was about to knock when from somewhere behind the cottage I heard what sounded like bottles being tossed into a pit and went to investigate.

Through a sea of ferns I stepped around the side of the cottage to see Jack pushing a wheelbarrow into the woods. I almost called his name, but something stopped me. Instead, I followed him.

Jack and the wheelbarrow—with his walking stick laid across it—went up a trail, or what became a trail as Jack cleared brush and other obstacles away. The trail rose crookedly up a steep incline past the remains of a stone wall to where it ended, or seemed to end, at a rusty chain-link fence. From a dozen yards away, I watched as he peeled back a part of the fence, creating an opening through which he passed. Before pushing on he closed the fence behind him. The objects in the wheelbarrow made clinking sounds.

I waited until he was far enough away then did as he had done, rolling the fence back and sealing it behind me before

going on. Keeping my distance, I followed him up the trail. He'd pushed the wheelbarrow another two dozen yards before he stopped to wipe his forehead on a sleeve. Then he pushed on another hundred yards, up the trail along which to either side dark pits had been dug into the earth, some shallow and dry and covered with leaves, others deep and filled with dark, angry water. Next to one pit was a rusty old winch, next to another a spool of equally rusted cable.

I passed a mound of rocky rubble with what looked like bits of ground glass glittering in it, and more rusty things: a crushed bucket, a metal grate, rusted pipes jutting out of the ground like colossal straws, the wheels of an ancient mining gondola...

The path climbed up to a pine copse where, momentarily, I lost sight of Jack. He must have gone over the other side. On all fours I crawled across a bed of moss and pine needles. A low branch snagged a shoulder of my jacket. The brown needles gave off an acrid smell. Where the pine needles ended, so did the ground.

I found myself looking down into a hollow dug into the earth big enough to hold the foundations of two houses: the pit of an abandoned mica mine. The woods of Connecticut are full of mica. The mineral's crystals form clear, heat-resistant sheets, ideally suited for making fireproof windows for lanterns and furnaces, insulating tubes, and other things no one uses anymore. This mine had to be at least a hundred years old.

But this was no ordinary abandoned mica mine. Encrusting its jagged walls, embedded in their chiseled nooks and ragged crannies, were glass insulators like the ones Jack had been collecting, hundreds of them in assorted watery blue shades. And other shiny things, too: light bulbs, bottles, sparkplugs, and other gleaming objects made of porcelain, metal, and glass. Even under the cloudy sky's stingy gray light, they glittered like diamonds.

At its deep end the drift was flooded with water. From out of its dark submerged depths, like earth's earliest life forms emerging from the primordial soup, figures of junk, with hat-

block heads, rusty nail hairdos, sparkplug eyes, radio tube and doorknob ears, and other parts formed from hat factory and other refuse, emerged. Two-by-two, the figures marched in procession out of the flooded drift and through a scree of jumbled rock toward a mass of tree branches, twigs, and more rocks arranged in the shape of a boat. No, not a boat: an *ark*. The mythical ark on which Noah rescued two of each species from God's watery judgment.

In the nearby woods more junk creatures foraged: a peacock (its body made from a corroded dynamo, its tail an arrangement of tube brushes); a rhinoceros (its armored head a ventilator cowl, its horn a galvanized metal funnel); an alligator or crocodile (its bumpy back a discarded conveyor chain). It was as though a space-aged Noah had crash-landed his ark deep into the woods of the former Dalton Estate. It reminded me of something. Then it came to me: *Holy Land*—that other folly perpetrated by a lunatic lawyer. Compared to this, Holy Land had been a sober business venture!

My belly resting on that bed of pine needles, gazing down at this bizarre installation, I wondered: had Jack Thomas done this? Could any one person possibly have done it, alone in the woods with no help? If so, why? Why would anyone create such a thing, especially where no one could ever see or appreciate it? What purpose could it possibly serve?

I was wondering all these things when something struck the hollow space between my shoulder blades.

"Spion!"

A second blow.

"Verräter!"

With each cry a fresh blow. The pain was white hot and luminescent. A lightning-bolt of molten lead shot up my spine to the base of my skull. I rolled onto my back to see Jack Thomas bending over me, framed by pine branches, his walking stick drawn back, his mouth contorted with rage.

"Schwachsinniger! Widerling!"

More blows. I covered my head.

"Stop! You're hurting me!"

The pain ricocheted in my brain. Stars danced in my eyes. The air burst out of my lungs. I drew myself into a tight ball.

"Please—!"

He tossed aside his stick. Then, dropping to the ground on his knees, he grabbed me by the neck and hoisted me up to my feet.

"Walk!" he said.

Gripping my T-shirt behind my neck, he led me back down the trail. Tears blurred my vision. My breath caught in my throat.

I spoke through sobs. "Where are you—?"

"Shut up."

He marched me back down to the cottage. Inside, he sat me down at the table where the chessboard was set up. With me seated, from the pocket of his coveralls he pulled his knife, opened it, and stood there gripping it, as if he wasn't sure what to do with it. At last he brought the knife down hard on the table, stabbing it. With the knife still vibrating there, he looked down at me, his face dark with fury.

"What else have you learned?" he snarled.

"What *else*?"

"Your heard me! What else?"

"Nothing."

"*Liar!*"

"I swear, I haven't learned anything! I don't even know what you're talking about!"

Jack stared at me. No sooner had he asked the question than I myself wondered: what else *was* there to learn? What else had Jack Thomas done that he was keeping from me and the rest of the world? Who was Jack Thomas, really? Of one thing only I was sure: he was a man with more than one secret.

We stayed there like that for a while, with Jack glaring murderously down at me and me sitting there looking apprehensively up at him. I was reminded of the time a screech owl got itself trapped in Mr. Waple's house. Morning, winter, a few weeks after my mother and I moved in. My mother and Mr.

Waple were both working. Gordon and I were watching TV in the den when I heard a rustling sound coming from the fireplace. I guessed a squirrel had gotten caught in the flu. It wasn't a squirrel. Having flown into a dozen rooms and twice as many walls, at last the owl came to rest atop the dining hutch. And there it remained, never once taking its big yellow eyes off me, fixing me with the same terrified look I directed now at Jack as he stood there, wondering what to do with me.

Finally, with a weariness I'd never seen in him before, Jack sat at the table across from me. The knife was still stuck there, its black handle jutting into the air. Jack yanked it from the table, folded it, and put it back in his pocket. As he did I said:

"That thing I saw... in the woods... did you—?"

Jack shook his head. "It was here already when I arrived."

"But then... who...?"

"I don't know. Presumably the person who lived here before me."

"Brewster Dalton?" Did I speak the name, or just form it on my lips? "But how is that possible? He couldn't have done it. Not by himself. Besides, he was crazy!"

"Perhaps that is what made it possible."

Jack went on to explain that he'd been living in the cottage for several weeks when, one morning while exploring the woods, he came upon a path and followed it.

"The path ended at the fence that you saw," he said. "Naturally this made me curious. The next day I returned with a pair of wire shears, cut through the fence, and continued up the path. And I saw what you've now seen, but in far worse condition."

"What *is* it?"

Jack snorted. "I've no idea, Hoff. Not the foggiest."

He started laughing then. He threw his head back and laughed at the rough-hewn timbers running across the cottage's ceiling. As he laughed I thought of Brewster Dalton and the rumors that had him burning Hearthstone Castle down and himself with it. Had he really built that crazy thing in the woods? It

seemed incredible. On the other hand, it made sense, but only because Brewster Dalton had been insane. Which didn't explain why Jack Thomas had taken up his cause. Unless Jack Thomas was crazy too.

Jack was still laughing when he noticed me rubbing a bleeding welt on my arm.

"Did I do that?"

"It's my fault," I said. "I shouldn't have spied on you."

He stood up and crossed to the sink. From a drawer near it he took out a small brown bottle. "I'm sorry," he said, returning with it and some cotton. "Will you forgive me?"

The iodine stung.

It started raining. Rain slid down the windows. With my wound dressed, Jack filled the kettle and put it on the stove. He added a log to the fire. As he did I said: "Why would anyone build something like that? In the middle of the woods? Where no one can ever see it?"

"As I said: I have no idea."

"I don't mean Brewster Dalton. He was crazy. I'm not talking about him! I mean you. Why are *you* doing it?"

"There once was a man," Jack said as he fiddled with the wood fire, "and this man had inherited a watch from his grandfather—a lovely gold and silver pocket watch. The watch wasn't working, so the man brought it to the local watchmaker. As the watchmaker took the watch apart, the man noticed something on the balance wheel. At first it looked like a scratch. In fact it was a tiny engraving of a rose. So small was this engraving, it couldn't possibly be read without a jeweler's loupe. In any event it would have been invisible, hidden there inside the movement. Said the man to the watchmaker, 'Why engrave something where no one will ever see it?' 'God sees it,' said the watchmaker." The kettle whistled.

"I thought you said you don't believe in God?"

"I believe in the watchmaker. And the watch."

Jack poured us tea. We sat there for a while, at the table, dunking our tea bags, saying nothing, listening to the rain. After

a few minutes to break the stalemate I got up, went to the stove, opened the door, and blew uselessly on the fire.

"I still say it makes no sense," I said, blowing.

"Life makes no sense," Jack said. "Yet here we are. This business of going to the moon with which you're so taken: does that make any sense? Yet you believe in it with all your heart. Why? Because it's so unlikely. Because like all miracles it's impossible; it makes no sense! And you want to believe in miracles; everyone wants to believe in miracles. You look for them on the moon. I say why look so far when impossible things exist so much closer to home?"

I sat back down. Jack squeezed his tea bag. With the used tea bag in it, he held his hand open for mine. Smiling, I gave it to him.

"Why are you smiling?"

"You know that saying, 'If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it...?'"

"Where I am from, we have the same saying. *Wenn ein Baum in den Wald fällt und niemand ihn hört...*"

"If a crazy person builds something crazy in the woods," I said, "and no one's there to see it...?"

"God sees it," Jack said.

He laughed then and so did I.

The cottage resounded with our shared laughter.

PART 7

A GANTRY

I lived in two worlds: the world of school, of the Back Shop Boys and the Spitting Pole, of my stepfather's hat store and my mother's cream sherry and drunken rants...and the world of Fern Cottage, of Jack Thomas and the Thing in the Woods, of swimming and chess and sipping tea to the crackles and pops of his wood stove.

My two worlds even had their own separate weather. Everywhere else in Hattertown it could be pouring rain, at Fern Cottage the sky would be blue and the sun would shine. Or the sun would be shining everywhere else, while up at the Dalton Estate an exclusive black cloud emptied itself onto the roof of Fern Cottage.

Like oil and water the two worlds repelled each other. It never occurred to me that they would soon combine with disastrous results.



Though high school took place in a larger, more modern building with different classrooms and different teachers, it didn't take long for me to realize it was no great improvement over Junior High. Not that my new teachers had nothing to recommend them. Our science teacher, Mr. Blum, had a novel method of demonstrating Newton's Laws of Motion: he hurled chalk erasers at disruptive or dozing students. Miss Delvecchio (art) wore a paint-splotched smock, brought fresh-cut flowers to class every day, and let us call her by her first name, Madge. Mr. Oates (algebra) stood in front of his equation-slathered blackboard, his stubby legs spread apart and short arms bowed, like a gunslinger squaring off with his opponent[s]. They weren't bad teachers, really. Some were pretty good, as a matter of fact. Still, I couldn't see any of them ever helping me partake of anything of the infinite.

That fall squirt guns were the rage. Armed with plastic Soakermans, Splashshooters, Green Avengers, Squirt-O-Matics, and Water Finks, we prowled the school corridors, a Wild West wherein the bullets were made of water. At a quarter to fifty cents a pop, the squirt guns would last less than a week before their plastic triggers snapped or their rubber gaskets failed. Still, we considered them to be worth every penny.

Our enthusiasm for squirt guns wasn't shared by Miss Stanhope, known to us as "Ol' Purple Puss," so named for the large purple birthmark on her lower left jaw (a flagrant case of body shaming commensurate with the times). Middle-aged, heavysset, with features several sizes too small for her ample face, she carried a wooden yardstick with her at all times, and not for measuring things. Her "Board of Education," she called it.

As for that purple birthmark, depending on Miss Stanhope's mood, it changed color and shape, looking one moment like a rooster's comb, the next like the head of a rhinoceros. On certain days it looked more like one of the United States, Florida or Texas, though Michigan too made an occasional appearance, as did the Great Lakes. While she droned on about the Founding Fathers and the division of powers (social studies was her subject), Miss Stanhope's birthmark held me in thrall, convinced as I was that at any moment the thing would explode, splattering me and the rest of our class with a mixture of puss and grape jelly, a prospect more terrifying to me than that of the nuclear attack for which we had been instructed to duck and cover.

That fear, along with my still raging crush on Belinda Dalton, was all that kept me awake during class. That Ol' Purple Puss' class was the only one Belinda and I now shared did little to diminish my ardor for her; on the contrary: it inflated it to a sense of longing that, knowing it would never be fulfilled, amounted to despair. Something had changed in me over the summer. Now when I thought of Belinda it was no longer a matter of being enchanted by her paisley dresses or her fiery pigtails. My thoughts were haunted by the parts of her I couldn't and most likely would never see, by her belly and her breasts

and—yes—by the orifice that, thanks to Victor's pornographic playing cards, I now knew beyond any doubt and against the tortured logic of my sentimental heart existed in Belinda Dalton as it did in all females of the species *homo sapiens*. *Belinda Dalton's Cunt*: such a bold, novel, radical concept—one that, when it first occurred to me, I had trouble framing. Yet there it was, lurking irrevocably under those paisley dresses. Now, given the chance, rather than rushing up to her and—in a conspiratorial whisper and all innocence—invoking some item of trivia pertaining to Saturn's rings or the reproductive habits of pygmy shrews, while I froze with yearning my mind would rush in for me, lurching and tumbling, descending like Hell's elevator to my knees on the ground before her, to worship at the altar of Belinda's no longer purely hypothetical sex.



A month into the semester Miss Stanhope went on a rampage, confiscating squirt guns from all who carried them, stashing them in the drawer of her metal teacher's desk. I knew she stashed them there since that's where I watched her stash my Flash Gordon Rocket Ray (ruby red, cigar-shaped, featuring a brass-knuckle handgrip). As she slid the drawer open I caught a colorful glimpse of the tutti-frutti arsenal, enough squirt guns to equip a small army.

The next day, while Miss Stanhope pulled hall monitoring duty, Victor, Skunky, and I sneaked into her classroom. With Victor keeping lookout, using my Swiss Army knife I pried open the drawer. Fast as we could Skunky and I jammed squirt guns into our pockets, up our sleeves, and down into our crotches (where they leaked embarrassingly). That same afternoon out in the high school parking lot, as they awaited their rides home, to cheers we re-distributed the rescued squirt guns back to their rightful owners.

It was a short-lived victory. The very next day all the squirt-guns we'd rescued and as many more were recaptured. This time instead of locking them in her desk drawer, with the entire

student body gathered ceremoniously as if at a hanging, Miss Stanhope fed the squirt guns to the school incinerator.

Such a despicable act cried out for vengeance. Two days later, using pushpins from the bulletin board, we booby-trapped Miss Stanhope's chair. With breaths held we watched her cross to her desk and sit down and...nothing happened. She proceeded to take role as usual, checking off our names in her roster. When she rose from the chair the pushpins rose with her, holding her dress up like the curtain over a stage. Only as she made her way back to her desk did the pushpins start falling, *snap, snap, snap*, onto the linoleum-tiled floor. On the third *snap* she turned to see the trail of pushpins she'd left behind, at which point we all lost it. As the room burst out laughing Miss Stanhope's entire face turned as deep purple as her birthmark.



Eventually, by way of Hattertown High's first underground newspaper, Miss Stanhope's fury delivered me straight into my heartthrob's arms. That wouldn't happen until toward the end of November. Meanwhile, on weekends and after school, Gordon and I helped Jack work on the Thing in the Woods.

In the junk figures we replaced socket eyes, gear sprocket ears, vacuum tube and spark plug noses. To work on the partly submerged figures there I had to wade into the drift up to my hips. It took a month to refurbish most of the sculptures. Replacing the broken insulators along the drift walls took another month. Time, moisture, and insects had reduced much of the ark to spongy toadstool-covered sticks crawling with vermin. We spent a whole weekend replacing rotting branches. Birch being scarce, we substituted poplar and sassafras.

At the shallow end of the drift, a shaft of stone two feet wide at its base and twelve feet tall, cut square and pointed on top, lay half submerged in the ink-black water. Where not covered in lichen, the obelisk was badly scarred and chipped, but still intact. Not far from it was the rocky pedestal where it had once stood or was meant to stand. The obelisk, Jack pointed

out, was made of blue stone. It was the only blue stone around. Everything else was granite. Someone had to have moved it there.

"Impossible," I said. "The thing must weigh a ton!"

"Two tons would be my guess. Nonetheless, it didn't walk here by itself."

"Uhn haah dah," Gordon said.

"We must raise it," said Jack.

"How?"

"There's a way, I'm certain."

"It's called a crane!"

Jack shook his head. "No. No machines."

"Without a crane or something there's no way we can lift it!"

"How old are you?"

"I'll be fourteen in March."

"Does the name 'Archimedes' mean anything to you?"

"The astronomer."

"Give me a place to stand," Archimedes said, "and I can move the world!"

"Great, let's get Archimedes to move the thing!"

"We'll need a tower, something to give us leverage." (*Somet-ink to gif us lefrej.*)

"A gantry," I said. *The framework that supports a rocket before launching.*

"Yes, a gantry. I don't suppose you know how to build one?"

I didn't, but I knew someone who probably did.



"I see you've made contact," said Virgil.

Gordon and I sat on the edge of the flying saucer. Virgil handed us each steaming hot mugs of Ovaltine. Though I'd promised Jack I wouldn't breathe a word about the Thing in the Woods to anyone, with Virgil I made an exception.

"Extraterrestrials have a long history of leaving evidence behind during their sojourns to Earth," Virgil explained. "Crop circles, Stonehenge, the Easter Island statues, the Stones of Carnac...engineering marvels, all. By those standards I'd say

your man is thinking pretty small.”

“Are you telling me Jack Thomas is an alien from outer space?”

“Based on what you’ve told me there can be little doubt.”

“What about the obelisk?”

“What about it?”

“Do you think we can we raise it?”

“Sure, if the right principles are applied. Pull up a stool.”

Virgil wheeled himself to a workbench and opened a notebook.

“Let’s take another obelisk as a point of departure,” he said, sketching. “The obelisk at St. Peter’s in the Vatican. Around 1580, a guy named Domenico Fontana moved it from the Roman circus just south of the basilica to where it stands now, in St. Peter’s Square. It took Fontana four months—that’s with a thousand men, dozens of horses, and fifty winches. St. Peter’s obelisk is twenty-five meters high. It weighs a million pounds, or about five hundred tons. Yours weighs—how much did you say?”

“Two tons.”

“Uhn haah dah.”

Virgil sketched away, muttering, making calculations in the margins of his sketch. Finished, he snapped the pencil eraser against what looked like a teepee with a hangman’s noose dangling from it.

“Twenty-five feet, that’s how tall a gantry you’ll be needing. I recommend a four-legged rather than a three-legged job. Use hemlock. Grows locally, strong and flexible, gives a lot before it breaks. Choose trees that are dead and leafless but not fallen. Twelve inches at the base. That ought to give you your desired height.”

Virgil tore out the notebook page and handed it to me.

As we were leaving his back room I pointed to Virgil’s saucer in-progress and asked, “When do you plan to launch this thing, anyway?”

“When the time comes, son. When the time comes.” Virgil

put his arm around me. "Why? In a hurry to get rid of me?"



Per Virgil Zeno's instructions we built a gantry. Using a rope harness with all three of us pulling, we dragged the downed hemlock trunks to the mine pit. That took a day. Up at the mine we laid the cut trunks out in an 'A' configuration, with the wide ends forming the bottom of the 'A,' and two trimmed-off tops serving as crossbeams. At the top of the 'A' we cut a forty-degree miter joint, then drilled two holes a few inches down from it for the half-inch bolts that would secure the peak. With both A-sections moved into position, we tied a rope around one of the bracing timbers and slung it around a suitably large nearby tree branch. Then we yanked the frame into a vertical position, leaned it against the drift wall, dug holes to secure the legs, and piled heavy stones around them to keep them from shifting. With one of the two A-frames standing, we raised the second into position.

With the gantry finished we looped a three-foot long, quarter-inch, 1,800-pound breaking-strength rope (courtesy of Hattertown Hardware) twice around the gantry cap, then secured its ends with a sheet bend. Using another section of the same rope we'd raise the obelisk, or try. All we needed was a block and tackle.

I knew just where to find one.



We walked along the railroad tracks, the same ones where Jack collected the insulators. Like most railroads it went through the worst-looking parts of town, past sandlots, dumps, and the sewage treatment plant: a landscape of drab grays and browns that even the sunniest days couldn't brighten. A rusted siding veered off into what remained of the Dalton Hat Works. The factory's brick chimney still stood, the name

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running down its weather-beaten brick shaft. The factory's outer walls bristled with barbed and razor wire and NO TRESS-PASSING signs. Still, from the siding it wasn't hard to get in.

We entered a cavernous space of blown-out windows and piles of used tires, hundreds of them. There, dangling from a beam up in the loft, just where I remembered seeing it, hung the block and tackle. As Jack and Gordy watched from below I climbed out on the beam and cut it down with my Swiss Army Knife.

Leaving the block and tackle behind, we explored the rest of the abandoned factory, making our way from dusty room to room, each room a ghostly museum of rusted machinery. Seeing those old rusty machines, I recalled the first time my father brought me with him to the hat factory where he worked. I was six years old. I remember it being extremely hot and wet, with all kinds of chuffing, flapping, pounding machinery, and steam oozing and hissing and floating in clouds everywhere, so much steam I felt like a ship lost in a foggy sea. The steam rose to the rafters, where it condensed and fell like rain—a deadly rain, back in the days when mercuric nitrate was still used as a fur processing agent. Most of the back shop workers wore leather aprons; some wore masks over their mouths. As I stood with my father a man dumped a cart of half-finished hats onto a wooden slab.

“Are they done?” a worker asked.

“Stick a fork in 'em and find out!” my father said, getting a laugh from his fellow Back Shop workers. How proud I'd been of him then!

As we made our way from one room to the next I pointed to the various rusted machines, explaining to Jack as I did the process for making hats, how the pelts of rabbits and beavers were cut, sorted, and cleaned, how by a process called “carroting” they were cured with mercury salts until 1948, and other chemicals afterwards, how the cured pelts were fed into a machine

that cut the fur away from the skin, how the loose fur was then fed through a “picker” for sorting, how after they were bagged and baled the bales went into another area of the Back Shop called the Rough Body Plant, where the different types of fur were weighed and blended for different styles of hats, how the blended fur passed subsequently through a machine called a “feeder,” which broke it down and made it softer, how from the feeder the softened fur was fed into the “blower” where any leftover rough fibers were picked out by hand, how on a conveyor the resulting mixture was pressed into long sheets that were subsequently blown into bell-shaped domes. Those domes were then stretched over a “spinner” that spun them, tightening the fibers like the spinners that wrap cotton candy around cardboard cones at carnivals.

“That’s just the first step,” I explained. From there the domes went through a sequence of hot water, steam, and rolling pressure treatments to further tighten up their fibers. Next, they went through a “hardener” that shrank them to half their original size.

Once dyed the cone-shaped felt was ready for blocking. The “blocker” consisted of two large concave aluminum pans, an upper and a lower one, mounted horizontally and controlled by foot pedals and hand wheels. Heated by open flames, the pans were dangerously hot.

“It took three men to operate each blocker,” I explained. The first man, called the “tipper,” stretched the moistened felt over the lower pan. The second man, the “brimmer,” formed the band-line and the brim, while the third man, the “blocker” (Dad’s job) pressed down extra hard on the foot pedal, forcing the lower pan up into the upper one. Using the hand-wheel, the pans were tightened further.

The blocking process resulted in a crudely shaped hat known as a “capeline.” After it was varnished, dried, and sandpapered, a two-ply band of rayon or silk was stitched around the capeline’s crown where it joined the brim. From there, the capeline went into the Front Shop to be blocked again, this time on

a wooden block that gave the crown its ultimate shape. From there it passed through the “pouncer,” following which more excess fur was removed with super-fine sandpaper. To soften the felt even more and give it a richer tone, a colored powder was rubbed into it. By an application of dry heat and pressure the brim got its final shape, with resultant excesses cut away by a “trimmer.” For some hats—a Homburg or a derby—the brim was rolled and “flanged” (bound with a strip of silk). After that the hat passed under a steaming hot sandbag known as an “elephant’s leg” where it was set into its final style.

“Such an elaborate process,” said Jack.

“We’re still not done.”

“You mean there’s more?”

“One more step.”

The last dusty room was the Finishing Shop. There, I explained, a leather sweatband with a tiny, ornamental silk bowtie was stitched into the crown. From there the finished inspected hat was packed in tissue paper and boxed for shipment to the retail store.

“And that is how hats are made,” I said, our tour having come to its end.

“All that for a hat!” said Jack. (*All sed chust vob uh het!*)

“I beg your pardon, sir,” I said indignantly, imitating my stepfather. “Upon my word, without hats there’d be no civilization! Why we would all be apes!”

From under a pile of debris I yanked out a capeline and plopped it on Gordon’s head, raising a cloud of dust that had us all choking. Two more capelines found their ways onto my head and Jack’s. Wearing our capelines, coughing and laughing, we returned to the room full of old tires. I had just hefted the block and tackle over my shoulder when through one of many paneless windows I saw a police car pull into the weedy lot.

“Cop car,” I said. “We’d better scam!”



Soon we were back walking along the train tracks. We came upon the carcass of a dead dog lying beside them. Flattened

and desiccated, it had obviously met its end under a train. Jack poked it with his stick.

"Everything is contingent," he said, poking it.

"Contingent? What does that mean?"

"Dependent on other things."

"What is everything dependent on?"

"On everything," said Jack.

By then I assumed we were in the clear. As we cut over to the road, though, the police car crept up and started shadowing us.

"Damn," I said.

Jack said nothing but he looked nervous. We kept walking. I had always been afraid of cops, since I was little, when they came to the house one day and arrested my father, what for I forget or was never told. We were eating lunch when they took him away in handcuffs.

The police car shadowed us for a while longer before it rolled up next to us. There was just one cop inside. He rolled down the window.

"Were you fellas just in the old Dalton factory?"

"Nossir," I answered. My legs were shaking. The block and tackle was draped over my shoulder. The cop nodded toward it.

"Where'd you get that block and tackle?"

"We found it," I said. "By the railroad tracks."

"Who's your friend?" The cop pointed to Jack who stared straight ahead and kept walking. "Hey—mister!"

"He doesn't talk," I said.

The officer pointed to my stepbrother. "What about him?"

"He doesn't talk, either."

"Must be an epidemic. What's your name?"

I told him.

"What about your friend here?"

"His name's Jack."

"Are you in trouble, boy?"

"No, sir."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes, sir.”

“If I catch you near that factory again, I’ll arrest you.”

“Yes, sir.”

The cop shadowed us a while longer before speeding away.



Every chance we got Gordon and I helped Jack with the Thing in the Woods. We’d work for a few hours in the morning, go for a swim, eat lunch, then work some more. Afternoons, when it got warm, Jack would unzip his coveralls down to his waist and let the sleeves dangle. Gordon and I would take off our shirts. We’d eat lunch by the dam or back in the cottage. Bread, apples, cheese, tea. Sometimes after lunch we’d play a round or two of chess.

Raising the obelisk proved to be much harder than we had hoped. We tried hoisting nautical style, with Jack hauling and Gordon and me “tailing on.” Jack took hard pulls, gaining some leverage by pulling the rope out like a bow, easing up only after Gordon and I secured each gain. With the first few pulls, the obelisk rose an inch or two, but afterward every pull grew increasingly harder, until by the seventh or eighth pull the obelisk refused to budge. A few more pulls and the block and tackle would give. Like a torpedoed battleship the obelisk would slide back into the inky water.

With all three of us hauling and the load split between four ropes we still couldn’t get the obelisk to rise more than a foot before the block and tackle broke. The fourth time it broke I said: “Face it, Jack—it’s hopeless!”

“Nothing’s hopeless,” Jack said. “Even if it is, one must never say so!”



Through October we kept swimming. Jack had a technique for swimming in cold water. The trick was to not go in too fast or slow, to just step in without giving it much thought. “Tell yourself the water feels fine, and it will.” Per Jack’s instructions I’d slip in, feeling only a brief chill that the first dozen

strokes would eradicate. A half-dozen more strokes and the water felt fine.

The days grew shorter. Across Fern Cottage's windows morning hoarfrost spread fern-like patterns. Meanwhile the real ferns skirting the cottage shriveled and turned brown. Along the edges of the lake crusts of ice formed. Mornings we'd arrive at the gantry to find its ropes glazed with rime. The cold air burned our ears and cheeks and made it hard to breathe. Our gloved fingers froze. Even for Jack the lake was too cold to swim in. We played chess and sipped tea, kept warm by the stove.

It was while playing chess with Jack one Saturday afternoon that I uncovered the secret to his mysterious past. He was filling the kettle at the sink. As he did, while setting up the board for our next game, I noticed that the bottoms of each of the hand-carved wooden chess pieces were lined with discs of colored paper: pink, orange, red, green. On the bottom of one rook a disc of purple-colored paper had started to peel off. On its underside something was printed: two lines, one thick, one thin, followed by the letters "PR," and under them the letters "CA." With Jack still busy at the sink, I picked up another chess piece, a knight, and peeled back the yellow paper disc under it, revealing the bottom part of an "1" or possibly the number 1, with the letters "CEN" printed below it.

During my next few visits to Jack's cottage I peeled away more of those colored discs, a dozen of them. I put them in my pocket and took them home. There, at my bedroom desk, using paper paste, like a paleontologist piecing together the bones of a prehistoric creature, I assembled the pieces. Soon I realized that the colored discs were from some sort of currency in denominations of five, ten, and twenty-five cents. Even more enticing were parts of words: "SONER," "INOIS," "CAMP." Most enticing of all, at the center of one disc, the letters "W," "A," and "R": WAR.

By three in the morning I had pieced together:

—SONER—WAR

CAMP—ADOTTE, —LINOIS

With a little help from my World Atlas:

PRISONER OF WAR
CAMP BERNADOTTE, ILLINOIS

Under those words was a black line, and under the black line “No.” followed by a series of numbers and letters stamped in red:

81G-93p---



The next day at the town library I did some research. Like most people I had no idea that there had been Prisoner of War camps in the United States during World War II, let alone over 700 of them, let alone that those camps once held over 430,000 POWs, most of them Germans captured in North Africa. Though hastily constructed, the camps were well-organized and clean. Prisoners were well-fed and well-treated, entertained and educated. Works details were voluntary and remunerated. So agreeable were the camp's accommodations, critics referred to the camps collectively as “the Fritz Ritz.” It's no wonder then that, according to an article I found in the May 1953 issue of *Collier's Magazine*, of those 430,000 prisoners, only 2,803 escaped. Most of them, the article went on to explain, were caught in a matter of days...

... but a number who spoke English well attempted to assume new identities and melt into obscurity. Tracing them was a needle-in-a-haystack operation: a scant 6,000 FBI men combing almost 160,000,000 people. A Chicago police officer said: Any prisoner of war smart enough to go to work in a big city, or lose himself on some remote farm, ought to be able to remain at large forever. Yet today, only five escapees are still free. The FBI has weeded out and captured all the others.

For the remaining five, it's probably only a matter of time before the G-men catch up with them (although it might be a

different matter if their fingerprints and other identifying data were not on file). You may be able to speed up the process.

Here are the photos of the German POWs still at large; if any of these men look familiar to you, notify the nearest FBI office at once.

The article included photographs of the five men with the dates of their escapes and descriptions under them. Though clean-shaven and younger than the man in the deckle-edged photo (the one with the hawk-nosed woman, the blond boy, and the sailboat), the man in the fourth photo *could* have been Jack. However the name underneath it wasn't "Jack Thomas." It was "Johann Verhoff." He was described as twenty-two years old, tall and fair, with a scar on his chin. The caption went on to say he'd escaped from the POW camp in Bernadotte, Illinois, in August of 1945.

Is there any point in my trying to parse the heady mixture of emotions that found me in that library at that moment? Shock, fear, disbelief, dismay: all went through me as I sat there in front of my pile of books, newspapers, and magazines. But more than anything I felt exhilarated, as if I had discovered some new planet, star, or galaxy in the universe.

I had never known a German or a soldier, let alone a German soldier, let alone an escaped German prisoner of war. The little that I knew about the Second World War, I had learned mostly from movies like *The Guns of Navarone* and television shows like *Combat*. German soldiers were "Krauts," "Fritzes," "Jerrys," "Heines," and "Huns." They wore piss-pot shaped helmets like the one Victor's father gave him, marched in goose-step formation, barked *jah vol* and *Sieg Heil* to stiff-armed salutes, and were buffoons and/or sadists. If in a game of war you got stuck playing a German, it meant certain inglorious death. Krauts were the enemy. They were despicable. They existed in my adolescent conscience for one purpose and one purpose only: to be deployed and despised.

I supplemented my minimal knowledge of World War II with volume nine of the *Golden Book History of World War II*,

from which I learned about Hitler and the Nuremberg Laws, about concentration camps and six million Jews killed in gas chambers. Could Jack have had anything to do with all that? With difficulty I inserted him mentally into one of the book's many illustrations. No sooner did an image of Jack goose-stepping down the Champs-Élysées along with other German soldiers form itself in my mind's eye than a wave of nausea swept over and through me. No, I said to myself. It's *impossible!* That couldn't be Jack Thomas—not the Jack Thomas I knew! I had to remind myself that there was no such person, that the Jack Thomas I “knew” I hardly knew at all; he didn't exist.

Under the subject heading “Johann Verhoff,” a further search of periodicals turned up the following microfilmed item in the September 1945 issue of the Illinois *News-Gazette*:

ESCAPED GERMAN POW SOUGHT

Federal Bureau of Investigation agents Thursday were searching for a 22-year-old German prisoner of war who escaped on Wednesday night from the prison camp at Bernadotte, Illinois. The former lance corporal in Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Afrika Corps, Johann S. Verhoff, was captured in Tunisia in 1943.

Verhoff is described as five feet eleven inches tall, weight between 160 and 175 pounds, light brown hair, narrow face, and a small mustache. He was last seen wearing dark trousers and shoes, a plaid shirt, and a green cap. It is believed that he may have jumped a freight train and is making his way west.

What to do? I wondered. Do I tell Zag and betray Jack? Or keep Jack's secret to myself and betray not only Zag, but my country? Worse: I'd be an accessory to a crime, aiding and abetting a Nazi fugitive. Then again (I told myself), World War Two had been a long time ago. Eighteen years! Wasn't there a statute of limitations for being an escaped German POW? For all I knew the “authorities” weren't even looking for Jack anymore. Could they possibly still be looking for him, after so many years? If they had really wanted to find him, they'd have

done so long ago.

A trip to the local post office was all that it took to dissuade me of that notion. On the bulletin board there, buried under more recent notices, was a poster distributed by the FBI, the word WANTED spread across its top in letters as black as the storm clouds in the sky that day. Under a set of thumbprints were three black-and-white photos of the same person taken from different angles. The central photo was the same one I had seen in *Collier's*. To its left I read:

Johann Verhoff, German Prisoner of War, escaped on or about August 5, 1945, from a Prisoner of War Camp located near Bernadotte, Illinois. Any person having information which may assist in locating Johann Verhoff is requested to immediately notify the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., or the Special Agent in Charge of the Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation listed in the back hereof which is nearest your city.

Spread across the bottom of the poster:

Identification Order No. 2103

Issued by: J. Edgar Hoover, Director

When no one was looking I pulled the poster down, crumpled it up, and tossed it in the wastebasket.

I lead a double life: on one hand, a more-or-less typical high school student, on the other: the secret friend of an escaped fugitive German POW.

Meanwhile in Hattertown High the seeds of insurrection were being sown. Though in other parts of the nation the student protest movement that would define mid-'60s America wouldn't start in earnest for a few more years, somehow Hattertown got ahead of the game.

It all started the night of October 31, 1963, Halloween, when Dwight Riddell bashed his skull open on a tombstone at Backwards Hill.

Backwards Hill was the site of an abandoned Episcopal church off a one-lane road that rolled through the hilly outskirts of town. According to local lore, if you parked at the bottom of Backwards Hill facing the church (headlights on, transmission in neutral, foot off the brake), your car would roll slowly uphill all the way to the church's front steps. When it did, if immediately afterward you jumped out of the car, ran to the front door of the church, knocked three times, and pressed your ear to the door, you'd hear werewolf howls coming from inside, supposedly.

Though at thirteen I was too young to drive and knew no one who had personally undergone this experience, the rumors were so rife we never questioned them; anyway, until one of us had a learner's permit, we couldn't disprove them. Meanwhile we settled for riding our bikes to Backwards Hill and challenging the devil to a footrace.

The race worked this way: you had to run up the hill, knock three times on the church door, climb over the graveyard fence, run to the farthest tombstone, touch it, then run and climb back over the fence again. If, after climbing back over the fence,

you felt the wind blowing past you, you knew you'd won, the wind being the devil catching up with you. But if the wind blew past you *while* you were still running, you'd lost the race.

While those who won their races with the devil could look forward to years of good fortune, losers could anticipate nothing but misery.

Of what might befall you if you lost your race with the devil Ernie Applebaum was our supreme example. Back in '61, at a Halloween party three nights after Ernie lost his race, he and two friends of his were putting their fire-breathing skills on display. They took turns squirting butane from a cigarette lighter into their mouths, then, with the still-flaming lighter in front of them, exhaled sharply, producing twin fireballs. They had done so successfully twice on the rear porch of the house and were doing it a third time when Ernie coughed, sucking the flame into his lungs. At first, he didn't seem at all fazed. He'd gone inside to party more when suddenly he fell writhing to the floor. By the time the ambulance arrived Ernie Applebaum was dead.

It made the front page of the *Hattertown Gazette*.

The consequences of Dwight Riddell's losing his race with the devil were far less severe. While running back from touching the farthest tombstone Dwight tripped and fell head-first into another grave marker, one with a carved angel on it, bashing his skull on it.

To stitch his fractured skull together the emergency room doctors had to shave off all of Dwight's hair. Dwight was extremely vain about his hair. It was dark brown and thick and he wore it in a Ricky Nelson flip. For Dwight having a shaved head was worse than having a split skull. To hide his bald scalp he wore his Minnesota Twins baseball cap. He wore it everywhere, including in school, violating the school dress code forbidding the wearing of headgear indoors: a paradoxical rule, considering Hattertown's past as "The Town that Crowned America." When Dwight refused to remove his cap he was suspended.

It was Dwight's suspension that resulted in the creation of Hattertown High's first ever underground newspaper. Called

The Hatted Tattler (among considered titles: *Hat City Free Press*, *Mad Hatter Rag*, *The Hattertown Harbinger*, *The Mercury Muckraker*), the newspaper was Belinda's idea. In its typewritten pages we students aired our grievances about "the Riddell Affair," as well as our views on other matters of urgency. Belinda, the self-appointed editor-in-chief, wrote the feature story, "A Crown for Dwight Riddell."

On Friday November 22nd, at seven-thirty in the morning, Issue #1 of *The Hatted Tattler* rolled damp and warm off the spirit duplicator in the English Department office, to which Miss Delvecchio had graciously provided the key. Belinda turned the chrome-plated crank; I collated and stapled. We made seventy-five copies. In solidarity and protest everyone wore hats to school that day. I wore one of my stepfather's fedoras; Belinda wore a scarlet Bonnie Parker-style beret. As I stapled the last of the newspapers, she said:

"I really appreciate your helping me with this, Leo."

"It's my pleasure," said I.

Belinda did something then that I was completely unprepared for. She bent forward and she kissed me—a chaste kiss at first, on the cheek, but one that nevertheless sent waves of bliss coursing through my body. She drew back and studied me then, like a doctor examining a patient. Having arrived at her diagnosis, Belinda administered the treatment—another kiss, but not a chaste one. As though it were a spade and my tongue was a weed she was trying to dig out by its roots, Belinda jammed her tongue into my mouth. I had the start of a head cold; my nose was all stuffed up. With my mouth full of Belinda's tongue, I couldn't breathe. I felt like Lloyd Bridges in one of *Sea Hunt's* many underwater battles in which the hero's scuba hose gets sliced by a bad guy's knife. When she finally stopped kissing me I came up for air so fast I got the bends.

"Come on," she said as I sat there trying to catch my breath. "We have an underground newspaper to distribute!"



The Hatted Tattler was still warm and reeking of mineral spirits when, armed with her Board of Education, Ol' Purple Puss barreled toward us down the school hallway, to where we'd been distributing it ahead of the first period bell. Having confiscated all of our remaining issues, she marched us to Principal Laurelton's office.

Because it was secreted behind panels of frosted glass, we referred to Principal Laurelton's office as the "Cloud Chamber." While waiting to be called inside I raised the blinds on the only window in the vestibule, exposing a view of the Caxton-Dumont factory chimney, the tallest in town, already belching thick smoke at that hour. Five years earlier Tove Jennings, who worked the blocking machine with my father, stood atop that chimney. Distraught at having been laid off a week earlier, despite pleas from his wife, his priest, a brother-in-law, the chief of police, and the town selectman, he hurled himself to the ground. You could still see stains on the pavement where he landed. The Jennings used to come over to our house for barbeques. I played with their kids. As I watched the smoke belch from the chimney a shiver ran up my spine.

"Would you mind please sitting down, Leo? You're making me nervous."

Before I could sit down we were summoned inside.



Short, bald, with a paunch and a wispy mustache, to me Principal Laurelton looked a lot like Wimpy, the guy from the Popeye cartoons who's always cadging hamburgers. You never would have guessed that he survived the sinking by kamikaze attack of the minesweeper he had captained during WWII, or that he personally rescued several of his crew, suffering terrible burns in the process, an act of bravery for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. A black-and-white photo of the *USS Perry* hung on the wall behind his desk. Pats on the back were Principal Laurelton's trademark, as was his standard greeting: "Glad ta see ya!"—a sentiment that under present circumstances wasn't reciprocal.

Brandishing her “Board of Ed,” Miss Stanhope stood between Principal Laurelton, who sat at his desk, and the United States flag, with its eagle-topped gold stand.

“Have a seat, please,” Principal Laurelton said.

The Cloud Chamber reeked of cloves. To help him quit smoking, Principal Laurelton chewed clove-flavored chewing gum. Five ruddy packs were lined up on his desk between a staple gun and the principal’s Executive Decision Maker roulette wheel. Principal Laurelton eased himself back into his chair.

“Now then.” He folded his hands over his stomach. “It’s my understanding that you’ve been distributing contraband material in the school hallways. What have you to say?”

“Guilty as charged,” I said.

“Not guilty!” said Belinda.

“Your defense?”

“You call it contraband,” Belinda argued. “I call it free speech.”

“It’s radical filth!” said Miss Stanhope, brandished a copy of *The Hatted Tattler* with pinched fingers, like a dead rat by its tail.

“We’re expressing our opinions.”

“Maybe so,” said Principal Laurelton, leaning forward over his desk. “But that doesn’t give you the right to distribute unauthorized material in the school hallways.”

“Or the right to use school equipment without permission,” Ol’ Purple Puss added. She turned to Laurelton. “They broke into the English Department office after hours and used the spirit duplicator. I’m sure of it.”

“We didn’t break in,” said Belinda.

“Who let you in, then?”

Belinda and I both said nothing.

“School rules forbid displaying or distributing materials without prior approval,” Principal Laurelton informed us.

“We weren’t aware of that,” I said.

“We are so aware of it,” Belinda corrected. “And it’s a rotten rule. It amounts to censorship!”

"Censorship!" Miss Stanhope said.

"That's right—censorship!" Belinda faced Principal Laurelton. "I don't suppose either of you bothered to read our newspaper before confiscating it?"

"You didn't give us much of a chance," said Laurelton.

"We're under no obligation to read your propaganda," said Miss Stanhope.

"Hold on a second, Margaret," said Principal Laurelton.

"You mustn't let them get away with this, Herbert. If you do, I promise you it won't be long before this school is entirely overrun by radicals."

Until Ol' Purple Puss uttered it that morning, except as applied to algebra equations the word "radicals" had been unfamiliar to me, which may help explain why it reached my ears as "radishes," and I wondered what Belinda and I had to do with a pungent red root vegetable.

Smiling, Principal Laurelton leaned back in his chair. I had the feeling at that moment that he was getting a kick out of the proceedings.

"What say we examine the evidence?"

So saying, the principal put on his bifocals, picked *The Hatted Tattler* up from his desk, and had started reading it aloud when Belinda snatched it from him.

She summed up its contents: "A Consumer Reports-style survey of popular water pistol models, two editorials—one by yours truly protesting Dwight Riddell's suspension, the other by Leo endorsing the so-called off-string method of performing yo-yo tricks."

"Versus looping or sleeping," I interjected.

"Lastly, a review of the hot lunch program, in which the pizza is described—accurately—as 'tomato sauce and cheese covered shirt cardboard.' Highly inflammatory!" She tossed the paper back onto the principal's desk.

"Still," said Laurelton, "you don't deny having broken the rules."

"We don't deny it," said Belinda, "any more than you can deny denying us our First Amendment right to free speech! Or doesn't it apply to Hattertown High students?"

"What impudence!" Ol' Purple Puss snarled. By then the dimensions of her port wine stain had expanded in all directions; the stain had also darkened by at least three shades. "You mustn't let them get away with this, Herbert. I'm telling you! It will only incite them to bigger and bolder acts of insurrection."

"Insurrection!" said Belinda.

Extracting a stick of clove gum from one of the packs on his desk, Principal Laurelton slowly unwrapped and folded it into his mouth. As he did one eyebrow of his shot up to where his hairline used to be. A smile crept under his wispy mustache, the same smile I'd seen there the day Coach Reardon sent me and a caricature that I'd done of him to the principal's office back in sixth grade. Though Principal Laurelton agreed that the drawing was disrespectful, he also conceded with a barely suppressed smirk that I had gotten Coach Reardon "dead to rights."



That same day after lunch Belinda and I and the rest of the student body were summoned to the GP (General Purpose) Room, the auditorium where school plays and other events were staged. We Back Shop Boys sat together in the front row. From behind a wooden lectern at the center of the stage, on behalf of the whole school administration, Principal Laurelton apologized for having "inadvertently violated [our] First Amendment right to free speech." As he gave his speech, we nibbled symbolic radishes from our hot lunch salads.

Principal Laurelton ended his address with two announcements. First: Dwight Riddell's suspension had been overturned; second: until further notice, the rule forbidding hats in school had been lifted.

The assembly over, in celebration we carried Dwight Riddell on our shoulders out onto the school lawn. While still holding him up, we threw our hats into the air. They hovered

briefly like flying saucers silhouetted against the cloudy bright November sky. While they hovered, I fell in love with Belinda all over again. But this time it was a different kind of love, not the stomach-churning, cross-eyed, mouth-drying, sickeningly helpless love of adolescence. I loved her as a friend, a comrade, for having a dead father like me and for being the sister I'd never have. I loved her for all the times we would never have together, for the lives we would never live with (or, for that matter, without) each other. But mostly I loved her for the mortal creature she was, for every finite breath of air that of all the air on earth was hers alone to breathe.

Two hats were still hovering when Wesley Conklin, a tenth grader known chiefly for his accordion playing skills, burst out of the school and ran toward us, waving his fists, shouting:

"They shot him! They shot President Kennedy!"

PART 8

THE CLOUD CHAMBER

Dismissed early from school that day, I arrived home to find my mother in her bathrobe and slippers on all fours on the kitchen floor, an empty sherry bottle overturned not far from her.

“Well, now, look who’s here,” she said as Gordon and I stood there, looking down at her. “My interplanetary enigma of a son. You are my son, aren’t you? Juss wanna be a hunnerd percent sure. It’s been so darn long, I forgot what your face looks like.”

My mother’s laugh was a cynical cackle. There was bright orangish-red lipstick smeared across her upper teeth. I heard a newscaster’s voice murmuring from the Zenith in the parlor. As discretely as possible I asked my mother what she was doing down there on the floor.

“I’m sitting here. What the heck does it look like I’m doing?” (For the record she wasn’t sitting; she was on all fours, but never mind.)

“*Why* are you sitting there?” I asked.

“That’s good question, a very good question. Help me up on my feet, and I’ll do my very best to answer your question. How’s that?” She hiccupped.

I helped my mother to her feet. As her face came up level with mine I smelled the sherry and peanuts on her breath. Though I’d seen her drunk many times before, I’d never seen her quite like this. At first I assumed it was the assassination, that she’d been watching the news. My mother liked Kennedy, she always had—for his looks, if for no other reason. I assumed that the news had devastated her. I was about to ask her if she’d heard when she said: “Dance with me!”

“What? *No!*”

She pulled me into a jitterbug.

“Mom—!”

“Quit talking and dance!”

To the music of Walter Cronkite's voice coming from the parlor, amid a leaf storm of cancelled checks, we danced in the kitchen, my mother and I, or rather my mother danced while I stood there, seeing her whirl herself around me like a ribbon around a Maypole.

"You aren't dancing!"

"Please, Mom! You know I can't dance!"

"Nonsense! Your mother and father were both superb dancers. You wouldn't be here otherwise. I didn't marry that father of yours for his money or his brains, that's for sure. Look at *me*, Leo, not down at your feet! Your feet aren't your dance partner; *I am!*"

By then Gordon had joined us, gripping my mother's free hand, whirling himself around with her, his other hand flapping, his tongue sticking out, uttering indecipherable sounds of joy.

"Your brother's got the right idea, see?"

"Stepbrother," I said.

"Remember how you and I used to dance at the Grand Union?"

Would that I had forgotten! The Grand Union was the local supermarket, and my mother and I had indeed danced there when I was three-and-a-half—barely old enough to walk, let alone do a jitterbug or the Lindy Hop. A grainy memory finds us in the frozen food aisle, encircled by rubbernecking housewives, their grocery carts piled with Wonder bread, toilet paper, and Campbell's soups, watching us go at it like Fred and Ginger amid frozen peas and ice cream. It's a wonder the Grand Union didn't sign us up, we were such a big hit. Years later people who had seen our act would remark, "Why your mother must have loved you *to death!*" or something to that effect, though I had to wonder if forcing me to dance with her that way had been more my mother's means of sublimating her thwarted dance career than showing me affection. Was it motherly love or a unique form of child abuse?

Now there we were at it again in the kitchen, with Mom

whirling herself as I stood there shuffling lamely back and forth in my P.F. Flyers. By then out-of-breath Gordon had retreated to the breakfast nook, leaving my mother and me alone to cut a rug—or rather the linoleum—across which a sea of torn-up checks floated.

“What’s with all the torn checks?” I asked.

“Oh, *those* checks? They’re cancelled checks that your stepfather wrote.”

“Why are they all torn up?”

“Because I tore them up, that’s why.”

“What are they doing all over the floor?”

“That’s where they landed after I tore them up.”

“Oh,” I said.

Without breaking her dance, my mother explained:

She had been balancing my stepfather’s checkbook as she did every last Friday of each month, when something caught her notice: a check in the amount of one hundred and fifty dollars made out to one Harvey Gilmore, Esq. Memo: “Mortgage.” It was one of many checks like it that she’d noticed.

“At first I just assumed Harvey Gilmore was the loan officer at your stepfather’s bank, that he’d been paying down the principle.”

This time, however, on a hunch my mother had a closer look at all of those checks. That’s when she saw that they had all been deposited—not by the bank in Hattertown that held the mortgage on our home, but at a bank in Hartford.

“‘Hmm,’ I said to myself. ‘Now that’s peculiar. Why were the mortgage payments going to *Hartford*?’ So I phoned the Union Trust and asked to speak to the accounts manager. ‘Does your bank have a Hartford branch?’ I ask. ‘Not as far as I know,’ the accounts manager tells me. Not only is there no Hartford branch, there’s no Harvey Gilmore: none that works for the Union Trust, anyway. So then I asked the accounts manager—Mr. Slocum, that’s his name—I ask him when was the last time he got a mortgage payment from your stepfather? So he goes and looks it up. ‘Well, let’s see now,’ Mr. Slocum

says. ‘Yes, here we go. The last payment was in August.’ ‘That’s four *months* ago!’ I say. ‘That’s *impossible*.’ So Mr. Slocum double-checks for me. And it’s true. It’s been four months since your stepfather made the last payment on the mortgage. So now I’m *really* curious. I go look through your stepfather’s desk, and what do you suppose I find in there? A stack of letters from the bank. *Thirty days due. Sixty days due. Notice to accelerate. Notice of default...* All this time your stepfather’s been writing checks for a hundred and fifty dollars to this Harvey Gilmore, Esquire, whoever he is, *not* paying the mortgage. So then I call your stepfather at his store and ask him straight out, ‘Who is Harvey Gilmore?’ And guess what he tells me?”

I shrugged, having no idea.

“Well, first he *lies* to me, tries to cover it up. When *that* doesn’t work your genius of a stepfather admits to me that he’s got himself involved in some scheme, some dopey business scheme, that this Harvey Gilmore is his patent attorney slash business investment partner and their ‘business venture’ comes down to a machine he’s invented for measuring hats. Can you *imagine*? Have you ever heard of anything dumber? I mean seriously, *what’s* to invent? Put the darn hat on your head and see if it fits!”

All this time my mother orbited me like Sputnik.

“I don’t suppose you happen to know anything about this?”

“Who, me? Why should I know anything?”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, your stepdad and I, we had it out then and there on the telephone. Not that your stepfather listened; not that he’s ever listened to me—or to anyone else, for that matter, when it comes to that darn store of his. I swear, Leo, your stepdad is the single most stubborn person I’ve ever known in my entire life. That’s including your father, which is saying a lot!”

With that my mother switched from a jitterbug to something like a Carmen Miranda routine, minus the head-borne fruit basket. Poor Mom, I thought, watching her samba across the kitchen. She’d struck out. Strike one: her aborted dance career. Strike two: marrying my rye-whisky-soaked hat factory worker

dad. Strike three: marrying my fuddy-duddy bankrupt stepfather. When she married him, had my mother known—did she have any inkling—that Walter J. Waple was in dire financial straits? Had she known, would she have married him?

But she hadn't known. She'd known only that Walter J. Waple was a widower who lived in a grand stone house on Crown Heights Boulevard, with a sweeping wraparound porch, stained glass windows, a turret, and a circular driveway edged with tulips—or were they calla lilies? He had a mentally retarded child, the dear poor man; maybe that's what had driven his first wife to poison herself, though it hardly seemed like a good reason. My mother knew he owned and operated a retail hat store, so he must have been well off. At least he didn't work in the Back Shop of a hat factory. He smelled not of fusty damp wool and sour chemicals, but of sweet pipe tobacco and dignified cologne. His fingernails were polished and trimmed square with no trace of factory grime under them. He didn't curse or drink to excess, was courteous and good mannered and never failed to present himself to her with a dozen long-stem roses. Maybe he wasn't all that wealthy; maybe he merely earned a comfortable living. Still he'd buy her fancy gowns and in his gleaming Shalimar blue 1959 Buick Electra take her to dine (not to *eat*, mind you, but to *dine*) at genteel establishments with names like The Cobbs Mill Inn, The Spinning Wheel, The Wild Turkey, The Old Oak...or to that Swedish place, the one by Lake Candlewood, the one with the model of a Viking ship in the vestibule. The smörgåsbord. They'd order cocktails: him a Gin Gimlet (with a droll little onion), her a Brandy Alexander (not that she cared for brandy, but she liked the sound of it, *Brandy Alexander*, beverage of world-conquering Macedonian military commanders)... At the endlessly long table resplendent with silver-tureened meatballs wading in golden-brown gravy, glazed, clove-studded hams, gasping one-eyed fish and pantied racks of lamb, Mr. and Mrs. Walter J. Waple would fill their plates to brimming and life would be good.

Only it wasn't good. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Waple could afford

no smörgåsbords. They couldn't afford fancy restaurants of any kind. Walter Waple was in debt up to his ears, with the bank now holding two mortgages on his Crown Heights house.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"About what?" my mother said, dancing.

"The mortgage. It has to be paid, right?"

"I don't feel like thinking about it. I feel like dancing. C'mon, Leo! Quit standing there like one of those striped poles they have in Venice!"

With my mother's discovery of my stepfather's financial deceptions, what had been a stuffy atmosphere at home turned dismal. I'd come home from school to find them, my mother and my stepfather, in the parlor, the TV broadcasting what seemed like an endless funeral cortege, my stepfather puffing one of his pipes, her eating her peanuts and sipping her sherry, both of them not talking to each other, their mutual silence dividing them no less than the beaded curtain divided the parlor from the hall.

Is it any wonder I preferred being with Jack at Fern Cottage?

By then the woods of the Dalton Estate were white with snow. While Gordon played with my yo-yo and gawped at his fingers, Jack and I played chess, sipped tea, and listened to logs snapping in his stove. I had told no one about Jack—or about Johann Verhoff. Including Jack. I'd already experienced his response to my uncovering one of his secrets. How would he react to my having uncovered this much bigger and far more potentially damning secret? The memory of Zag dragging a finger across his throat by the boy's reformatory basketball court flashed into my mind.

By then I'd made up my mind that Jack was guilty of nothing more than having been caught fighting on the wrong side of a war, then having had the temerity to not only escape his captors, but to evade them for eighteen years. That the FBI was still after him struck me as extremely unfair if not inhumane. Whatever crimes Jack had committed, it seemed to me that by then he had more than paid for them. I couldn't imagine what he'd been through.

As long as he remained hidden away in Fern Cottage I thought Jack was safe, or did until the morning Principal Laurelton's voice over the school intercom summoned me once again to the Cloud Chamber. This time I waited more than a

half hour before the door to Principal Laurelton's office opened and he came out to greet me. On the lapel of his suit he wore an American flag pin.

"Good ta see ya, Leo," he said.

With a hand on my shoulder, Principal Laurelton guided me into the Cloud Chamber, where, to my surprise, my mother and stepfather sat waiting. Mom wore her beige winter coat and navy pillbox hat. My stepfather sat in the chair next to hers, clutching his grey homburg in his lap by its rolled brim, as if a sudden wind gust might somehow penetrate the Cloud Chamber and snatch it away from him. Also present in the room were Miss Stanhope, aka Ol' Purple Puss, standing next to the principal's desk, clutching her Board of Ed as always, eyeing me with a mixture of curiosity, pride, and disdain, as though she were a lepidopterist and I a rare specimen she had mounted on a pin. On the opposite side of the principle's desk stood a uniformed Hattertown police officer who looked disarmingly familiar.

"Hello, there, sport," my stepfather said with none of his customary chipperness, his eyes skidding off mine like a pair of wet marbles.

"Have a seat, Leo, why don't you," Principal Laurelton said, indicating the empty chair facing his desk while taking his own seat.

"Now then..." He cleared his throat, the fingers of both of his hands splayed on his moss-green blotter. "I don't suppose you know why I've asked you here this morning?"

"If it's about those kids breaking into McMullin's Five and Dime last night," I blurted, "I had nothing to do with it! I was home. Right, Mom?"

I turned to my mother who gave me a pitying look. Her face had the chalky pale complexion that came with her migraine attacks.

Principal Laurelton gestured toward the cop, who stood there with his hands crossed over his groin.

"Do you recognize Officer Prentice?" Laurelton asked.

I did but pretended I didn't.

"According to Officer Prentice, you and he made each other's acquaintances a few weeks ago walking on Hood Lane near the train tracks. Remember?"

I looked up at the police officer who smirked at me.

"You were walking together, you, your stepbrother, and this other person, a man," said Laurelton. "A Mr. Thomas."

"Leo, who *is* this person?" my mother interjected.

"Mrs. Waple, please. Let's let Leo explain things, if he can."

They all looked at me. I kept my mouth shut.

"Officer Prentice here also tells me that he's seen you and your stepbrother walking toward where this Mr. Thomas lives, up by the old Dalton Estate. Apparently you and this Mr. Thomas person have spent a good deal of time up there together lately. Is that right?"

I shook my head.

"Tell the truth, kid," said the cop. "I passed you walking up there. More than once."

"You may have seen us walking," I protested. "That doesn't mean we were going to visit anyone!"

"Where were you going?" asked Miss Stanhope.

"To Lost Lake."

They all looked at each other.

"He means the lake on the Dalton Estate," said Officer Prentice. "It's the only lake up there. Private property."

"What business do you have there?" Laurelton asked.

"No business," I said. "We like going there, that's all."

"You mean to say you've never visited this man's home?"

"Nope."

"The word is no, sport, not nope," said my stepfather.

"And tell the truth," said my mother.

"Yes, sport, tell the truth," my stepfather reiterated.

"I'm telling the truth!"

"You haven't done anything wrong, Leo," said Principal Laurelton. "We just need to know some things, that's all."

"No one's accusing you of anything, sport," said my stepfather.

"For God's sake, Leo," my mother said. "Who the heck *is* this person? This man? I *demand* to know!"

My eyes wandered to the wall behind the principal's desk, to the framed photo of the minesweeper he'd captained, the *USS Perry*. At that moment I felt as if *I* had been kamikaze attacked and was burning and sinking.

"Do you deny spending time with this person?" asked Ol' Purple Puss, her birthmark having by then transformed into an octopus waving its tentacles. "Answer me!"

"A crocodile can't stick out its tongue."

"What?"

"What did you say, sport?"

"Clouds fly higher during the day than at night."

"He's protecting him! That's what they do!"

"Leo, please—"

"The opposite of a vacuum is a plenum."

"Sport?"

"Dirty snow melts faster than clean."

"For god's sake, Leo!"

"The dot over the letter *i* is called a *tittle*."

"We're concerned about you, sport, your mom and I. We both feel that you've been keeping us in the dark, as it were."

"You never said a word to me about this... this person! All this time I thought you and Gordon were playing with friends. You *lied* to me, Leo! Your own mother. You've been lying to everyone!"

"What have you and this Jack Thomas man been up to? You can tell us that much at least, can't you?"

"The longest one-syllable word in English is *screeched*."

My mother thwacked the back of my head. Everyone was staring at me: my mother, Officer Prentice, Principal Laurelton, Ol' Purple Puss... everyone except my stepfather, who looked down at his homburg. On his mossy desk blotter, Principal Laurelton's hands formed the prow of a ship, the *USS Perry*, with his U-Boat stapler poised to fire a torpedo into it. A lone-some stick of clove chewing gum sat in the principal's Decision

Maker roulette wheel. It took all my strength to resist grabbing it, unwrapping it, and shoving it into my desert-dry mouth. Ol' Purple Puss spoke:

"Since you refuse to tell us who Jack Thomas is, I'll tell you. He lives at the old Dalton Estate, in the former caretaker's cottage that he's been leasing from Betty Dalton. Where he's from no one seems to know, but he's a foreigner. Beyond that, no one knows anything about him. He has no relations, not in the area, anyway, or friends to speak of, present company excepted." Ol' Purple Puss eyed me with unmitigated contempt. "That's all anyone knows. Unless you care to enlighten us any further, Mr. Napoli?"

"Well?" Principal Laurelton said. "Is there anything else you care to add, Leo?"

"Ketchup was originally sold as a medicine."

"Has this man—has he *touched* you or Gordon?" my mother asked in a trembling voice. "Has he ever—"

"*What?* No!"

"Are you sure?"

"Jack hasn't done anything!"

"So now he's 'Jack'?" said Ol' Purple Puss.

"I don't want you going anywhere near this person anymore! Is that understood, Leo?" my mother said.

"Proportionally, Earth's atmosphere is no thicker than the skin of an apple."

"I strictly forbid it!"

"In ancient times, vinegar was the strongest acid. At any given moment, there are approximately 1,800 thunderstorms in progress."

"All right, Leo." Principal Laurelton stood. "That will do. You may return to class."

I left the Cloud Chamber, thinking, *The earth gets heavier each day by tons as meteoric dust settles on it.*

I made up my mind to stop visiting Jack. I did so for his sake. I'd drawn enough attention to him. If I kept on visiting him, I'd only draw more.

Still I couldn't just stop seeing him without saying anything. I considered leaving a note on the door to Fern Cottage. Then I thought, No, Half, you need to tell him yourself, in person.

So I paid him one last visit.

I waited until the following Thursday after school. Gordon had gone with my mother to the dentist. The week before we both had gone to the dentist for our annual cleaning and checkup. I had no cavities; Gordon, with his passion for Juju-fruits, had three.

To lower the risk of being seen, I cut through yards and avoided main roads. On the way I thought about what I'd say to Jack. The simplest option would have been to just tell the truth, that I had been forbidden from seeing him, but with that went the suggestion that he was some kind of pervert, a thought that I couldn't bear myself, much less tell Jack about. I needed a less distasteful motive. As I turned down the gravel road to Fern Cottage it came to me: my stepdad was shifting inventory at his store and needed me there. It was only a half-lie. Lately I had been spending more time at the store, helping put up the Christmas display as I'd done every year for the past two years. This year's display was a fedora-clad Santa presiding over six elves in belted green tunics, candy-striped leggings, and trilby hats, each at work at his elf bench, hammering, sawing, or chiseling away at... what else: a hat!

I was a few dozen yards from the cottage, still fine-tuning my excuse, when I saw Jack standing in front of the green door, smiling.

"I wondered if you were coming," he said.

He asked about Gordon. I explained about the dentist.

"You're just in time for tea."

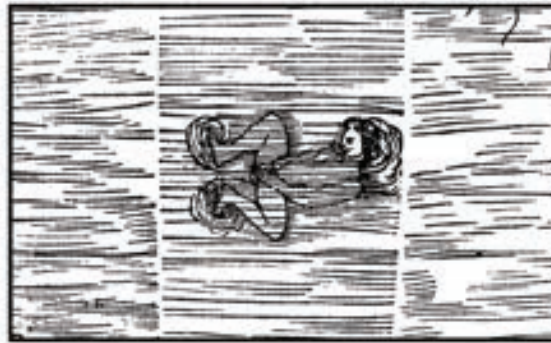
We went inside. Jack made us tea. As he did, as I was about to explain that I wouldn't be seeing him for a while, he said:

"There's something I want to show you."

He went to the dresser, took something from its drawer, and brought it to me. It was the book about swimming, the battered old leather one I'd found that day in the same drawer of the same dresser, the one that also held the photograph of Jack standing with a tall, hawk-nosed woman and a blond boy, and the letter.

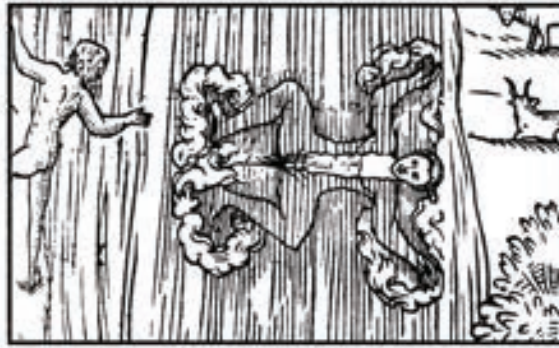
"It is the oldest known book on the subject of swimming," Jack explained. "There are only three known copies in existence. This is one of the three."

I turned the brittle pages carefully. The book was illustrated with woodcuts, each showing a different swimming technique, with a description written on the opposite page:



To Swim on the Back

And when he is thus laid upon his back, he must lie very straight, not bending or bowing with his body any way, save only his legs which must easily pull out and in, and when he was on his belly, to put him forwards in the water.



To Swim with Hands and Feet Upward

To swim with hands and feet upward is nothing else but the swimming upon the back as we taught before, saving that he useth his hands as a boat doth her oars, casting them out on both sides and drawing them in again, which maketh his motion swifter.



To Swim Like a Dog

Into this kind of swimming many do at the first fall, before they perfectly learn the right stroke. And there is this different betwixt them, that whereas in the right kind he stretcheth out his hands and his feet, in this he rudely beateth the water with his hands and feet, first lifting his right hand out of the water and then his right foot, and forcibly striking them into the water again.

"Where did you get it?" I asked.

"That's a complicated story. It was more or less given to me by my wife."

"You're *married*?"

"I was. For a time."

I thought: the tall woman with the hawk nose.

"What happened?"

"That, too, is complicated. Do you like the book?"

I nodded. "It must be worth a lot."

"It's quite valuable."

Distractedly I flipped through the rest of the book. I still hadn't told Jack what I'd come there to tell him. After a time I managed to blurt out some version of my hat store excuse. Jack nodded and said, "I see," or something like that. He didn't seem at all surprised or concerned, as though he'd been expecting it. "Well," he said. "Given that we won't be seeing each other for a while, shall we play one last round of a chess—for the time being, that is?"

I was setting up the board when Jack picked up one of the chess pieces and shoved it, torn bottom exposed, under my nose.

"You did this, didn't you?" he said with a weird, twisted smile. "*Didn't* you?"

I licked my lips.

Jack nodded. "Clever boy." (*Klevah boy.*)

He flung the piece away, reached into his pocket, pulled out his knife, and snapped the blade open an inch from my nose. As he held it there I thought, So this is how I'll die, stabbed to death in a cottage deep in the woods of the former Dalton estate.

"Who have you told?"

"No one!"

"Whom do you intend to tell?"

"No one—I swear!"

He drew the knife away, retracted its blade, and put it down on the table.

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because—you're my friend?" It was a strange thing to say to someone who'd just pulled a knife on me. "Why would I want to tell anyone?"

"I am a fugitive from justice. You're a citizen. It's your responsibility to report me."

"Who says I'm responsible?"

I heard thunder. Rain pattered against the cottage's roof. Soon it drizzled down from the eaves, forming a curtain of rain. For a while we both sat there in silence. Then I said:

"All this time—you've been hiding?"

He nodded.

"That must be rough," I said.

"I don't recommend it."

"Supposing they do catch you? What's the worst they can do? Arrest you—for what? Being on the wrong side of a war that ended eighteen years ago?"

"You don't understand."

"I don't!"

"They'd send me home."

"What's wrong with that?"

"There's no such place. My homeland no longer exists. What was once my home is now a prison far worse than the one from which I escaped."

Jack stood up. He rubbed his face.

"I still don't get it," I said. "What did you have to escape for? The war was over!"

"It's a long story, Hoff."

"Tell me!"

"Why? What difference would it make? Even were I to tell you everything, Hoff, you still wouldn't understand. You still wouldn't know me, not really, no more than you can possibly know any human being, including yourself. We're each of us as mysterious and unreachable as the stars you look at through your telescope."

"I still want to know," I said.

He rubbed his face again. I'd never seen him looking so weary.

"All right," he said. "Under one condition."

"Name it."

"You sit there and listen until I've finished. Unless I ask you something, you're not to say a word or to move from that chair. Understood? When I've finished, you may do as you wish, but not till then."

“I was born and grew up what is now Czechoslovakia but then still belonged the Republic of German-Austria. We lived in a city of textile mills. ‘The Town of a Hundred Chimneys,’ they called it, there were so many textile mills there.

“The town’s streets were lined with chestnut trees,” Jack told me. “Day and night one heard the sounds of chestnut hulls falling. They covered the sidewalks and gave off a pungent, sweet, rancid smell. When I stuffed them into my cheeks they tasted bitter. Whenever she caught me about to do so, my mother would slap the hulls out of my hand.

“Like most children I was afraid of ghosts, a fear augmented by a lurid imagination. I was convinced that, if I got out of bed after midnight and peeled back the damask curtains of my bedroom window, I’d see a milk truck hovering there, level with the second story, its driver wearing his peaked cap, its headlights blazing into my terror-stricken eyes. The first time I reported this phenomenon to my parents, my papa made a great show of throwing on his robe, rushing downstairs, grabbing the fire-poker from its stand, and—crying, *Weg mit allen Monstern!*—hurling himself into the frozen night. He did so several times until finally he said, ‘Enough, Johann! There is no Milk Truck Monster!’

“I told you my parents were killed in a railway accident. They’d been traveling from Dusseldorf to St. Petersburg for their wedding anniversary when their train derailed. I lived with my aunt and my uncle, a trainmaster who kept a dovecote in the yard. I mentioned as well my coming down with diphtheria and the long walks I took. Along those walks I’d collect ‘wishing stones,’ smooth pebbles with rings around them with which I adorned the windowsill in my room. For Christmas my uncle bought me a tumbler with which to polish them but I preferred

the stones as they were, dull and rough like little potatoes freshly dug from the earth.

"And I told you about the municipal pool and those boys I saw diving there? And how afterward I signed up for swimming and diving lessons with Günter, the lifeguard? There's a little more to that story, however. Do you recall the first words you ever spoke to me, Hoff?"

"Am I supposed to answer?"

"When I ask you something, yes."

"You mean the day I asked you to teach me to swim?"

"Before then."

"The first time we spoke—when you asked me who I was?"

"Before that as well."

I thought about it. Then I remembered. I felt my cheeks flush.

"Yes," I said. "I remember."

"One of the boys I'd seen diving off the high board that day was named Gerhard. He and I became very close. By then I'd joined and been on the swim team for years. When not meeting for matches and tournaments the team met several times a week for practice drills. When we weren't swimming or diving together, Gerhard and I played games. We went for walks, studied together, did all the things friends do. After a time, though, it became clear to me that my feelings toward Gerhard went beyond friendship or brotherly affection or what you call 'puppy love.' What I felt for my friend was, I'm guessing, more or less what you feel for my landlady's daughter—what's her name?"

"Belinda."

"Belinda. Do you understand?"

I nodded, though I couldn't imagine Jack wanting to do with another boy the sorts of things I longed to do with Belinda. I didn't want to imagine it. Still, I kept my promise: I sat there; I listened.

"One day in the locker room after a swim meet the other boys having gone, finding myself alone there with him, for

the first time I let my feelings for Gerhard be known. Oh, I'd shown them in other ways: holding hands while walking with him, that sort of thing. But such gestures could easily have been construed by him as meaning something less than what they meant for me. And so in the locker room that morning I spelled my feelings out." Jack smiled. "Suffice it to say his reaction was hardly what I'd hoped for. He drew back and looked at me. I'll never forget that look, Hoff: a look of complete horror, of total disgust—not unlike the look you gave me that time we first met, though of course our circumstances were entirely different. You didn't know me; you had no reason *not* to be frightened by me. But the way he looked at me, as if I'd turned into some sort of monster before his eyes, as if my skin had turned green and horns had sprouted from my skull and my hands had curled into claws. Then Gerhard did something much worse: he started laughing. It was nervous laughter at first, I thought, but it quickly turned malicious. Soon he was seething, saying he never wanted to see me again, that he'd punch my face if I so much as tried to come near him. 'Do I make myself clear?' he said. He was snarling; his lips were coated with spittle. I ran out of the locker room. When I next returned to the pool for practice, Günter the lifeguard took me aside. I was off the swim team. We'd been training for the Olympics. Gerhard had reported me. He'd told all the other boys on the team. It wasn't long before word got back to my aunt and uncle. My uncle couldn't look me in the eyes. My aunt called me a monster. Beyond that, neither of them would speak to me.

"Soon after that Germany was at war. Troops conducted maneuvers on the outskirts of town. Word of my 'condition' having spread to the authorities, I was declared unfit for military service. While other boys my age enlisted or were accepted into officers training school, I found myself alone in a town full of women, children, and old men, living with an aunt and uncle who refused to speak to me. At last my solitude grew unbearable, so much so that I volunteered for the one outfit that was sure to have me, the so-called bucket-and-spade

brigade. I spent the next two months draining swamps and digging ditches for latrines when—possibly because word of my condition had somehow reached my unit commander—I was suddenly transferred to a tunnel-digging detail in the Harz Mountains. The tunnel crews there worked ten-hour shifts. The tunnel's anhydrite walls stank of sulfur. My clothes, my hair, my bedclothes...everything reeked of it. Conscripts worked alongside prisoners and were treated as badly. The tunnel foremen doubled as guards.

"Among the prisoners working with me was a young man named Romulus, a Romanian Jew, an engineer who also worked in the machine shop and who for reasons unknown to me was the principal subject of our foreman's abuse. One morning, the foreman having delivered a particularly nasty blow to Romulus' shoulder with the butt of his Mauser, I went to his aid, earning a blow for myself. From that day on Romulus and I were subjected to routine beatings by the foreman, until we finally decided to escape.

"One night, with the full moon hidden under clouds and the pockets of our workers' coveralls stuffed with rusks, to the air-raid siren's wail, my Romanian friend and I crept across the scree to the latrine, where, with a grappling hook Romulus had made in the machine shop, we lowered ourselves down a concrete wall that divided the latrine from the river that coursed by the camp. While crouched there contemplating the dark, rushing waters, I confessed to my friend that, although I was a champion swimmer, so far my experience had been confined to a brightly lit, supervised, municipal pool. The dark rushing river frightened me and I told him so. He said to me what I said to you that first time we jumped off the rock.

"'Whose fear is it?' he asked as we crouched there. 'Yours—or someone else's?'

"'Mine,' I answered.

"'If a thing is yours, you can do what you like with it, right? You can throw it into this river, can't you?'

"I nodded; we jumped.

"The current wasn't as strong as we'd expected, but the water was much, much colder. Milk-colored moonlight fanned across the surface. Where the rushing water met rocks, pale phosphorescent plumes spread. With Romulus' help I made it to the opposite shore where we collapsed into a bed of pine needles. We spent the rest of that night hiking, smelling acacias, avoiding columns of soldiers. It wasn't until dawn that we stopped to rest in a field of gorse. By then we had eaten the rusks the river had turned to mush. Hugging each other for warmth, we curled up in the gorse. Neither of us said a word. We were too tired to speak.

"Another day's hike brought us to a small village where a goatherd shared his lunch of turtle soup. The goatherd directed us to the headquarters of the local field commander. On the way there we contrived an excuse for being in worker's clothes without papers. While marching with our work unit we'd come upon a pair of officers whose Kubelwagen had gone into a ditch. Having promised to drive us back to our unit afterward the officers ordered us to dig them out. As we dug the officers shared a bottle of schnapps. By the time the Kubelwagen was freed they'd grown boisterous, telling lewd stories, laughing, singing drinking songs, slapping each other's backs. The proffered ride wasn't forthcoming. Instead the officers drove off with our papers. Unable to catch up to our unit by foot, we decided to volunteer for the nearest Panzer division.

"That's what we told the officer who we believed to be the field commander, but who turned out to be the kommandant's sublieutenant, as we learned when the door to the field office burst open and the real kommandant entered.

"'Who are these two?' he asked, removing his scarf.

"The subordinate briefed his commander, adding that he didn't believe our story.

"'Who cares?' said the commander. 'If they're foolish enough to volunteer, give them their damned orders and get them the hell out of here!'

"We were given fresh uniforms, provisions. A long train jour-

ney took us to an induction center above the Crimean Peninsula. There Romulus and I spent a sleepless night, knowing we were going to have our physicals in the morning. For his circumcised penis, my Jewish friend had contrived a clever excuse: in his youth he'd contracted the 'Spanish collar,' a disease wherein the foreskin gets trapped behind the glans. Left untreated, the condition is prone to infection, the common treatment back then being circumcision. If the medical examiner bought this excuse, Romulus would be conscripted as a soldier. If not, he'd be sent off to a concentration camp.

"Apparently the medical officer didn't buy my friends' excuse. After that morning I never saw Romulus again.

"I was assigned to a horse-drawn reserve leftover from the Great War. I groomed and fed the horses, shovelled manure, moved heavy artillery. That winter it got so cold the canon shafts froze. When I touched them with gloveless hands bloody patches of skin tore off my fingers. I caught pneumonia.

"It was while recovering in the infirmary that I learned that Rommel was seeking volunteers in North Africa. Not long after my recovery, I found myself aboard a ferryboat packed with soldiers, all very young or very old, bound from Athens to Crete. From Crete a plane took us to Libya, where we joined a Panzer division in its retreat to Tunisia. I was put in charge of a 105mm gun. The shells weighed over thirty pounds. With each tug of the lanyard the earth shivered and my ears were left ringing.

"When not firing ordinance I spent most of my time crouching in foxholes, ducking from American bombers and fighter planes on strafing runs, wiping sand off the epaulets of my desert uniform. When neither firing nor crouching we marched under a scorching sun along roads littered with charred hulks of tanks and armored vehicles. Sandstorms provided the only relief from the heat. When not baking under the desert sun we had to contend with swarms of mosquitoes and gnats.

"One advantage of belonging to an army under defeat: one rises quickly through the ranks. By that March I had been

promoted to lance corporal and made adjutant to a captain. I polished his boots, prepared his teas, chauffeured his SdKfz 222. Herr Hauptmann had a taste for American novels. While polishing his boots one morning I noticed a bookmarked copy of *Huckleberry Finn* on his nightstand.

"April brought an eerie silence. No artillery fire, no bombers or strafing planes. I spent the better part of that month in the turret of my captain's SdKfz, reading his copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. By then the war was lost; we all knew it. For Herr Hauptmann and me the end arrived after a long day spent driving over bombed-out roads. As darkness fell I could barely make out the craters. My captain ordered me to pull over. 'No point in us getting ourselves killed now,' he said. 'Let's get some sleep. We'll worry about the war in the morning.'

"We parked behind the hulk of a charred tank. With nightfall the temperature fell below freezing. 'Come morning,' Herr Hauptmann said as we huddled together under a thin blanket, 'you and I will be prisoners of the British Army. Goodnight.'

"It was still dark when we heard shouts and a searchlight beam awakened us. Speaking German, a British-accented voice through a loudspeaker ordered us out with our hands up.

"We were taken to a collection center in Tunis. Stripped of badges, documents. Fingerprinted, photographed. From there they packed us into a truck and took us to a camp near Casablanca, a patch of desert enclosed with barbed wire. They gave us shovels and ordered us to dig holes for our latrines. No blankets or covers. Two cans of food per day. On sunny days, the camp was hot but tolerable. But when it rained or when they turned the fire hose on us for drinking water the camp became a muddy hell. Everything became moldy. The books provided by the Red Cross turned to pulp. I was there for three months. Then, that September, they packed me into another truck and drove me to a port, where, along with hundreds of others, I was herded onto the ship that brought me here, or rather that brought me to a processing center north of New York City. From there I was put on a passenger train, a coach with roomy,

upholstered seats. At regular intervals a porter passed up and down the aisles with coffee, tea, and sandwiches. At the far end of the car a uniformed MP stood guard with a pistol. To go to the bathroom I had to raise my hand like a schoolboy.

"I had no idea where the train was taking us. I knew only that the journey was very long. With my nose pressed to the window, I saw river-like highways streaming with traffic, and night cities burning—not from German incendiary bombs as had been rumored, but with electricity. Where not filigreed with highways the countryside was a checkerboard of fields, mainly of corn. Corn, corn, corn! I'd never seen so much corn! At last, after a journey of two and a half days, we arrived at our destination: Camp Henderson, Bernadotte, Illinois...

"The camp was orderly and clean, with tarpaper barracks arranged in neat rows. Everything new, smelling of sawdust and Lysol. We were welcomed by the camp adjutant, issued good shoes, a belt, four pair of trousers, an overcoat, a raincoat, winter gloves. We were fed three hot meals a day, with ice cream sandwiches and fruit salad for dessert. We played horseshoes, tennis, volleyball, ping-pong, cards, and dominoes. Every barracks was equipped with a radio. We had newspapers, movies, books, even concerts. With the scrip that we were given we bought Gillette razor blades and Brilliantine at the PX canteen. We could even buy wine and beer.

"When not taking classes in English or American History at the Educational Center, or playing sports, cards, or chess, I made that chessboard we've been playing on. It took me two months to make. I spent another month carving the pieces you see in front of you from sections of a sliced broom handle.

"Work details were voluntary and paid 80 cents per day. Every morning our employers would pick us up: four prisoners and a guard. I enjoyed the work. We moved a farmer's barn, dammed a river, and built a stone foundation for a house.

"As far as I knew there'd been no escape attempts from our camp. Why escape when we had it so good?—better than when we had been soldiers? As for missing home, from the newspaper

articles I read, and the serials we were shown, I gathered that the country I'd left behind no longer existed. From my aunt and uncle, I heard nothing. No Red Cross letters or packages came for me. Maybe they'd been killed in an air raid. Or maybe they wanted nothing more to do with me; they'd washed their hands of me, their 'monster.' It was best for me not to think about them, to not think about the past at all, to cut it off like a festering limb, to dispose of it like a used tea ball.

"Only with the war's end, when we saw the newsreels of the concentration camps being liberated, the corpses stacked like cordwood, the skeletal survivors in striped pajamas gaping at their saviors, did morale among us prisoners decline swiftly, as did conditions at the camp. The orchestra and theater were disbanded. The library was closed. No more razors or beer or tobacco for sale at the canteen. No more fruit salad and ice cream sandwiches. We were fed cabbage soup five days a week.

"But what distressed me more than any of that was the prospect of repatriation. The lucky ones among us would be reunited in their homelands with friends and family; some would be turned over to the British or the French to help with the reconstruction. As for me, I faced far grimmer prospects, my homeland having fallen under Soviet rule. I'd be shipped off to a labor camp, or worse.

"And so, once again, Hoff, I escaped.

"As first I considered making a folding kayak from powdered milk tins and rubber raincoats or sealing myself away in a trash drum to be carted off with the rest of the refuse, or simply walking away from my work detail. In the end I chose the most reasonable and reliable plan. After midnight, taking advantage of a blind spot that the camp's searchlight beam didn't reach, between a walkway and the shadow cast by the warehouse, I would slip through the compound fence. This plan, too, had its risks, chief among them a trigger-happy tower guard whom we prisoners dubbed 'Buffalo Bill.' If he saw me in the so-called 'kill zone,' he'd shoot me dead. But I timed the searchlight beam and planned my escape to coincide with the full moon

that would cast a shadow deep enough to hide my own. As for the camp's guard dogs, the howls of local coyotes would often set them to barking; most likely they'd be ignored. Whatever sounds I made that their barks and the coyotes' howls didn't mask, the rasps of crickets would cover.

"I packed my canvas rucksack with bread, two tins of beans, the gravity knife you've seen that I'd inherited from a paratrooper in exchange for cigarettes, my escape clothes, a cap with a long visor, sunglasses, a road map stolen from the glove box of a farmer's truck, two books of matches, tobacco, a pipe, two pairs socks and underwear, a raincoat, an extra pair of laces for my boots, a compass, and the chessboard with hand-carved figures that, however unnecessary, I couldn't part with.

"At 9:10 p.m., ten minutes after lights out, I crept to the darkened corner of the warehouse and waited for the searchlight beam. After the third sweep I dashed through the kill zone, climbed the first fence, and lay between the two fences in the shadow of the warehouse wall cast by the full moon. After three more searchlight sweeps I scaled the second fence. From there less than a dozen yards separated me from the woods. Once deep inside the woods, I lit a match to illuminate my compass, which guided me to the river that would carry me downstream to the trestle over which—according to the whistle I'd taken note of for the past two weeks—a freight train passed every night at ten-thirty-five. I wore my prison fatigues inside-out, so if seen exiting the woods I wouldn't be identified immediately by the large yellow PWs sewn onto their back and sleeves.

"Once in the river, with my rucksack held high over my head, I waded out to where the current was strong. The moon and stars were bright. I heard the howl of a coyote and smelled chimney smoke. I gave myself to the current that carried me toward the trestle that loomed ahead, black against the indigo sky. As I drew close to it I tried to slow myself down, only the current was too strong; it swept me past the trestle. I grabbed onto rocks, overhanging limbs—anything to slow my progress. Eventually I made my way into the shallows, where the current

was less strong, and from where I was able to clamber up the embankment. By then the trestle was far behind me. I heard the train whistle. To get back to the trestle I had to bushwhack my way through a thicket along the riverbank. There was no other way. I used my knife. Meanwhile the train whistle sounded louder and louder. If I missed the train all would be lost.

"I was cutting through the brambles when I saw what looked like a path or a clearing. I raced toward it, following the sound of the whistle which grew louder. I was running along that path when suddenly a beam of light broke through the darkness in front of me, so bright it blinded me. At first I thought it was a car or truck full of soldiers come to capture me. I felt gravel under my shoes. To my left something gleamed in the moonlight. A rock? A scrap of metal? A bottle? Then I realized: it was the railroad. The beam of light was that of a freight train bearing down on me.

"I spent the next three days in a boxcar stuffed with bags of fertilizer. The fertilizer stuck to my skin. It burned my eyes and my nostrils. By then I'd eaten all of my food and drunk all my water. All I had left was a rock-hard heel of bread. Every now and then the train would pull into a siding where the railroad bulls would inspect its cars for hoboes. Knowing this, soon as the train slowed down I'd jump out and wait in the shadows as the bulls did their job, then jump back into a car that they'd already inspected. The third freight car I jumped was packed with big burlap bags of sugar. I sliced one of them open with my knife and stuffed handfuls of the sugar into my mouth. According to my compass the freight train was headed northwest.

"The sugar made me very thirsty. But something other than thirst was preoccupying me. If someone asked me my name, what would I answer? Could he pass myself off as something other than German—as Yugoslavian, or Norwegian? What would a good Norwegian name be? Anders? Knut? Knut Anders? As the train clacked on I struggled to arrive at a good name.

"Knut Eriksen. Erik Knudsen...*clickety-clack, clickety-clack*...

"Then I remembered the stories of Kasper Hauser and Peter the Wild Boy that so fascinated me as a boy. Kasper, the waif found staggering through the streets of Nuremberg: speechless, half-starved, carrying a letter saying only that he had been baptized Catholic, and nothing more. His captors concluded that he wasn't an imposter or an idiot but someone totally unfamiliar with civilization. Presented with a candle flame, he'd thrust his fingers into it, burning them. According to one theory he was the actual prince of Baden, who had been kidnapped and hidden away on orders from Countess von Hochberg, who sought the title for her own progeny. Another theory had it that he'd been raised by wolves...

"Peter the Wild Boy was found living in a cave in the outskirts of Hamelin, the same town the Pied Piper supposedly delivered of its children, surviving on squirrels and nuts. Like Kasper, he didn't speak... Could I pretend to be mute like them? I wondered. I remembered Günter's—my swimming coach's—advice. 'Make the smallest splash possible.' The simplest plan was always best. I'd choose an ordinary, American-sounding name. But what?

"Part of the answer was there in front of my nose, stamped on a hundred-pound bag of Jack Frost sugar: Jack, a name as far removed from Johann as the Elbe from the Mississippi. Jack-knife. Jackpot. Jack-in-the-Box. Jack in the Beanstalk. Jack sprat....

"*Clickety-clack, clickety-clack*...

"All I needed then was a surname. The train was passing through an intersection when I saw a truck stopped at the crossing, a delivery truck for something called 'English muffins.' There, in old English-style letters on an orange field next to a silhouetted carriage pulled by a team of silhouetted horses, was my new surname.

"The train brought me to Seattle, Washington, where I worked as a dishwasher and lived in a boardinghouse by the docks. I bought a new set of clothes and a cardboard suitcase.

But I knew I had to keep moving. For a while I worked as a fruit-picker in Oregon, picking cherries off twenty-foot-tall trees. When cherry season ended I took a job topping trees at a lumber camp. I wore a leather harness and climbing boots with spikes attached to them. While sawing the top off a hundred-foot spruce one morning my harness broke. I fell thirty-three feet. My femur burst clear through my leg. While in the hospital recovering, in a newspaper the nurse gave me I saw an FBI notice with my mugshot. On crutches that very same day I hobbled to the bus station and got on the first departing bus—which, it so happened, was bound for Chicago.

“For the next four years I worked at various menial jobs,” Jack said, “stacking boxes of cereal in a warehouse, skinning hams in a slaughterhouse, that sort of thing. All the while I kept on the move, never staying anywhere for more than three months. Eventually I made my way east to New England. I had heard the autumns here were beautiful. While hitchhiking in New York State the driver of a car that picked me up told me of a resort in the Adirondacks called The Birches, saying he knew the owner and would put in a good word for me if I wanted a job, and so I went there. At first the owner, whose name was Budd, put me to work washing dishes and doing other odd jobs, but seeing I was a good swimmer, he had me give swimming lessons to guests and eventually made me head lifeguard.

“Budd called me ‘Fritz,’ since I’d told him I was Swiss.

“I’d been working at The Birches for two years when I met the woman who gave me the book about swimming—well, she didn’t give it to me, not exactly. Her name was Margaret. She owned an antiquarian bookstore in a town about eight miles from the resort. I had a bicycle that Budd had given me and would ride it there. Budd also gave me a car—an old Bantam convertible held together mostly by rust, but as I had no driver’s license, I was reluctant to use it. Anyway, one rainy morning I rode my bicycle to the bookstore as I’d done once or twice before. The bookstore was in an old wood and stone barn.

Three black cats had the run of the place. At the center of the main floor was a rococo desk with a green-shaded lamp and a plaster bust of Voltaire. I recall how that day, thanks to the rain, my shoes made squelching sounds on the wooden floorboards. I had taken a book about lakes down off a shelf to examine it when the woman seated behind the desk spoke to me.

“Are you a student of natural philosophy, by any chance?” she said. Her reading glasses made her sharp nose look even sharper. “We have a great many books on that subject.”

“Her accent was British. I told her I liked lakes. When she stood from her desk, she was very tall. ‘In that case,’ she said, ‘you’ve come to a good corner of the world.’

“She asked me if I was German; I said, ‘No, Swiss.’ When she learned that I worked as a lifeguard at The Birches, she showed me the book about swimming. She took it from a locked cabinet and, with great care at her desk, turned its pages, explaining that it was nearly three hundred years old.

“After that we saw each other often. She had a seven-year-old son, Avery. He and I swam and built a sailboat together. Margaret had a gift for not judging people. She looked to them as though they were books: some had been splayed open so often their spines were broken; others never had their pages cut. She never pried into my past, which may have been the main reason why I married her.

“We built a house on the lake.

“The one time my past became an issue for Margaret was when she wanted us to go to England for our honeymoon. I told her I didn’t fly. She said we could take a ship. I told her I was afraid of ships as well. She wondered how on earth I’d gotten here, if not by osmosis. I couldn’t tell her the truth, that I had no passport, and couldn’t get one without a birth certificate. We honeymooned at Niagara Falls.

“The one other time I felt the past catching up with me was one morning at The Birches, when, wanting a canoe for his children, a square-shouldered, paunchy man approached me at the boathouse.

“Don’t I know you?” the man asked. He had a German accent. ‘I’ve seen you before,’ he said. ‘I’m sure I have.’

“I said, ‘I don’t see how.’

“During the war, maybe? Did you serve in the artillery?”

“I said I had no idea what he was talking about.

“The German artillery.”

“When I said I was Swiss, not German, the man laughed. ‘Of course you’re German!’ he said. ‘You think I can’t tell? You’re as German as me!’

“Here are your life vests,” I said. But the man wasn’t through. ‘The 3rd Heavy Artillery,’ he said. ‘Crimea. In the Siege of Sevastopol. Yes, I’m sure of it! Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that!’

“I told him I’d never set foot in Crimea—or anywhere else in Germany, for that matter. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me,’ I said, ‘I have things to do.’

“Through the rest of his stay I managed to avoid this fellow, and felt safe again until two more years later, when, one afternoon while I was lying in a hammock I’d strung near the boathouse, Budd’s shadow fell over me.

“Johann Verhoff?” he said, handing me a circular. ‘Is that your real name?’

“I shook my head. I wasn’t lying. By then the man in the black-and-white photo was a complete stranger to me. Budd spoke quietly. I was to pack my things and leave by noon the next day. ‘As far as I’m concerned,’ he said, ‘you were never here. You don’t exist.’

“I said, ‘What about Margaret, my wife? And Avery? He’s like a son to me!’

“Sorry, Fritz,” he said, ‘but you brought on this situation, not me.’

“I would say many things brought it on,” I said.

“That same night, while Margaret and Avery slept, I packed the few belongings that I needed into the Bantam and drove off. Maybe I shouldn’t have. Maybe I should have stayed and let myself be caught and fought the deportation. Margaret would have helped me. If it had come to that, Budd might have helped

me, too. But I wasn't just running from the FBI. I was trying to escape from myself, Hoff, from the monster my aunt had declared me to be. My marriage to Margaret was a sham and I knew it. She must have known—or felt it—too. I was doing her and her son a favor. That's what I told myself.

"The most impressive—and the scariest—thing about human beings is how, excepting death, we adapt to almost anything. This's why I admire water so much, why I identified with it. It is the most adaptable of substances. But there's such a thing as *too much* adaptation, Hoff, as being so used to changing not only one's attitude toward things, but one's personality, one's nature, even one's shape and form, to where one no longer knows who one is anymore. It had become that way for me. I'd gotten so used to adapting I no longer knew who I was. I couldn't trust myself.

"I say all this to try and make you understand why it was that I left my wife. No, Hoff, now that I think of it, it was more like those moments when you're saying goodbye to someone you love who has just boarded a conveyance, a bus or a train. Have you had such a moment in your life, Hoff? The train hasn't left the station, and you're on the platform looking up through the dirty window, waving and blowing kisses, saying things your loved one can't hear because the window is closed and the train is chuffing and hissing and the echoes of other passengers under the domed terminal are like the thunder preceding a storm. You keep waving and blowing kisses. Yet the train doesn't move; there's something wrong, some delay. You start to feel awkward, worse than awkward: you start feeling impatient, angry, even, your anger tinged with guilt, since by now you're wishing the bloody train would move, cursing its stubbornness, wanting nothing more than to be able to stop blowing kisses and saying things no one can hear and get on with the rest of your life. That's how my marriage to Margaret had come to feel—like a train that wouldn't—could never—leave the station. Oh, I wanted to love Margaret. I *did* love her, very much, as much as I'd ever loved anyone. But to feel that love, to really *feel* it, I

needed to get away from her. That doesn't make sense to you, I know. How can it make sense to you? It *shouldn't* make sense. Not to you; not at your age. I hope it never makes sense to you, Hoff. That Budd had uncovered my identity and asked me to leave, though it horrified me at first, when the horror wore off, what I felt more than anything was relief, as though finally I'd come up out of a pool where I'd been holding my breath the whole time. I could breathe free again. Anyway, when I left Margaret that night, more than anything else I felt relieved.

"Before heading off through the night I needed one thing. I stopped at the bookstore. Without switching on the store lights, with a flashlight, I found the key to the rare book cabinet where Margaret kept it hidden in a holder under her desk drawer. With the swimming book under my arm, I returned to the car. It was all I kept from those happy years, a kind of severance package.

"I'd driven as far as New Haven when the Bantam's engine gave out. Amid a cloud of smoke I left it on the highway. With my suitcase and rucksack, I walked to the nearest exit.

"For a time I lived in the wharf district. More menial jobs, more hand-to-mouth existing, more inexpensive rented rooms. To get and keep jobs grew increasingly difficult. I was unpleasant. I argued with co-workers and bosses. I was sick of merely surviving.

"I'd been fired from a job and was homeless, spending my days and nights in an all-night café by the university, playing chess by myself and sometimes with students on the board I had made and that I'd taken with me. One day, seeing my destitute state, a student who played chess with me told me of an opportunity to make some money, a psychological experiment in need of volunteers. The following morning I gave myself a sponge bath in the café men's room, and, dressed in my best shirt, presented myself to the professor in charge of the experiment, a sturdy-looking man with a beard and cornflower blue eyes. He wore a white smock. With a paternal hand on my shoulder the professor sat me down before a console covered with meters, dials, switches, and colored lights. A number below

each switch indicated the level of voltage, from slight—15 volts—to severe (450). At the far end of this scale the word DANGER was stenciled in red.

“The professor assured me that the experiment was harmless, that with each increase in voltage the amperage was stepped down proportionately to prevent any serious discomfort. To assure me further the professor had me sample a 45-volt shock. I felt a mild tingling sensation, nothing more.

“The subject—a white-haired man wearing suspenders—sat in an adjoining room with a glass window. As instructed I asked him a series of questions. With each incorrect answer I administered a shock, increasing the voltage each time. At 15 volts, when the subject cried out, I called the professor, who, smiling, reassured me that the procedure was entirely harmless. ‘Please continue,’ he said. With each step-up in voltage the subject’s cries intensified until I again called for the professor, who again offered his assurances, his cornflower-blue eyes gleaming.

“‘But the man seems to be suffering!’ I said.

“‘It’s a reflex response,’ said the professor. ‘Now please continue. It’s absolutely essential to the experiment that you continue.’

“I think it’s safe to say that at that moment, Hoff, for me the man with the cornflower eyes was no longer just a professor conducting an experiment. He was my father, the one I’d lost as a child, the one who used to chase away my nightmares with a fire poker. He was Uncle Ernst with his plum stone kisses and marzipan treats. He was Günter, my swimming instructor. He was the *Hauptcaptain* whose boots I’d polished and whose car I chauffeured over bombed-out roads. He was all the fathers I’d had and lost or would never have.

“At the maximum voltage—250 volts—the subject’s cries faded to soft mewls, and there the experiment ended. Only then was it revealed to me by the professor that I, not the suspender-wearing man, had been the experiment’s true subject. The man was an actor; the console an elaborate functionless prop. The electrical current existed only in my mind.

“An hour after entering it, with a twenty-dollar bill folded into my shirt pocket I stumbled out of the research building into a bright winter day. I felt myself back in one of the rivers I’d escape into, back in their current again, being borne downstream by it, carried off in its watery arms. To what end? For what purpose? I had no idea. Nor did I care. I didn’t exist enough to care. I’d forgotten completely my identity. Like Kasper Hauser or Peter the Wild Boy. That’s how I felt as I staggered out across the university quadrangle, like a man who had been living in a cave in the woods somewhere. As I stumbled past mounds of snow and under icicles hanging from the parapets a queer odor of nightshade filled the air. I heard church bells chiming, playing a familiar melody, a lullaby. *Schlaf, Kindlein, Schlaf*. Sleep, baby, sleep. It was one my mother used to sing me to sleep with. But how could that be? I asked myself. They can’t be possibly playing *that*! But I *heard* it, Hoff; I’m sure of it. Who was it that said, ‘What a mother sings to the cradle goes down with the coffin?’

“After that I’m not quite sure what happened. I must have collapsed. The next thing I recall is waking up in a hospital bed. A nurse stood at its foot. The sun was in my eyes. She lowered the blinds. I wanted to thank her for doing so, but when I opened my mouth to speak no words came out. I had the thought but I couldn’t say it. Something in me refused to let me speak. It was the same with a series of doctors who visited me. One by one the doctors came with all kinds of questions, and one by one they left, frustrated, since I refused to speak. I had nothing to say, for one thing, nothing that *needed* saying. But there was more to it. I felt as if I were naked, that nothing but my silence stood between the world and my nakedness, as if my silence protected me. Oh, they looked for causes. Vocal cords, physical or psychic trauma—or both. They couldn’t accept that there was nothing wrong with me, that I just didn’t *feel* like talking. Eventually I was taken to another facility, to a place called Silver Hills. You may have heard of it. How long I spent

there I'm not sure. But the entire time I said nothing. By then I had gotten very good at not speaking!

"The one time I spoke was when a man came to visit me. He carried a briefcase and wore a hat with a red feather in its band. He wasn't a G-man, as I first assumed. But he knew who I was. He said he was my wife's—Margaret's—solicitor. How he'd found me I have no idea. She must have put a detective on my trail. This explained the sensation I'd had over the past several months of being followed. He took off his hat, sat down by my bed, and opened his briefcase, from which he removed a folder with some documents, one of which, he explained, was an Affidavit of Defendant. I don't suppose you know what that is, Hoff?"

I shook my head.

"On the grounds of abandonment Margaret had sued me for divorce. I signed it. Another item in the folder was a letter she'd written to me. The solicitor asked me if I cared to have him read it to me. I nodded. In the letter she explained that Budd had told her everything, how she wished that I'd done so myself, how she would have helped me, gotten me a good lawyer, and so forth. She was writing from Manchester, England, where she'd gone to visit her father, who was ill. The letter went on to say that she'd sold the bookstore along with the house that we'd built, which Budd bought from her and turned into another lodging for the resort. Out of the proceeds she'd instructed her solicitor to cut me a check in the amount of \$5,000 dollars. This, her letter went on to say, along with the swimming book that I'd stolen, would constitute my share of the proceeds from the house sale along with the equity I had earned through helping her at the store and with other things.

"Margaret ended her letter by wishing me luck. 'May you find some peace,' she wrote. To her letter the solicitor added a footnote, explaining that, a week after she'd written it, while still in England, Margaret and Avery had both been killed in a car accident. They were headed north on the Hardknott Pass to Cumbria, to visit the Stone Circle at Castlerigg, when a lorry

collided with the Humber Super Snipe Margaret had been driving. They both died instantly.

“The next day I discharged myself from Silver Hills. They couldn’t keep me against my will. It was a lovely, breezy spring morning. With my rucksack slung over my shoulder, I started walking. I had no idea where I was going. I walked and walked until I came to this town whose brick chimneys reminded me of the town where I grew up and which had been known as ‘The Town of a Hundred Chimneys.’ In the window of a hardware store I happened to see a notice poorly typed on a sheet of yellow paper. One-room cabin for rent by lake, it said. Wood stove. No running water.

“That’s how I wound up here, Hoff, here in the woods where I’ve come to worship the God of things unknown and unknowable; here where, until you and I met, I spoke not a word to anyone. Let them think me mute—like Caspar Hauser and Peter the Wild Boy. Let them think me mad! My conspicuity would be my cover; my silence would be my shield.

“But then you came along...

“There you have it, Hoff. My war story. Does it explain things? What is explainable, finally? Nothing—or very little. We can never know each other, Hoff, any more than you can ever know the universe, or God, if you like. Or yourself. And what we don’t know we can’t—shouldn’t—judge. Agreed?”

PART 9

THE STRIKE

Christmas was anything but jolly that year. For one thing I missed Jack, whom I hadn't seen since that last visit. But I was far from alone in having a less-than-merry Christmas that year. As if Kennedy's assassination hadn't been enough bad news, on December 17, 1963, all 234 employees of Hattertown's only surviving hat factory, the Caxton-Dumont Hat Works, went on strike. The headline in the *Hattertown Gazette* read:

Thanks a Lot, Santa!

The headline in the *Danville News Times* shouted:

BLACK CHRISTMAS

The strike started at the Dunlop Hat Manufacturing Company, in Norwalk, after its owners rejected a new job security clause that the workers' union tried to insert into their latest contract, one that would have prevented management from shipping unfinished hats down to a finishing plant in Winchester, Tennessee. In a statement to the press, William S. Tuttle, the Dunlop factory's attorney, defended his client's position using a vegetable simile:

"Management," Tuttle wrote, "refuses to submit to any agreement that tries to fix us like a cabbage in a garden patch. We are a free enterprise company, not a cabbage!"

Frank Baerd, spokesman for the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers Union, replied, "If plant operations are moved to Winchester, Dunlop Hats will be signing its own death warrant!" To which Mr. Tuttle responded: "We assert that this insistence on a bald act of protectionism is entirely foreign and contrary to the notion of free enterprise!"

"Call it protectionism and call us foreigners," countered Mr. Baerd, "it's no way to do business in the United States of America!"

When he first learned about the strike my stepfather concluded that the union had to be bluffing. “They’re all foam and no beer, if you will,” he said, then went on to predict that the strike wouldn’t last more than a few days. When the strike entered its second week, he swore it wouldn’t last through the New Year. When it lasted through the New Year, he averred that it would be settled by mid-January at the latest. When the strike dragged on into February, with violence breaking out at the Dunlop plant and other parts of Norwalk, my stepfather vouchsafed that—though Norwalkers had resorted to bats and bricks—Hattertown’s citizenry would settle their differences by civilized means. When Hattertown’s citizenry took to smashing store windows and slashing car tires, Walter Waple insisted that such were the acts of “a lamentable subset of hooligans.”

“Can’t judge the tree by one or two rotten apples, if you will,” my stepfather reasoned.

As the strike entered its seventh week one factory worker who had crossed the picket line returned home the same evening to find his garden shed broken into and rakes, hoes, and shovels scattered across his snowy front yard. Another scabby was awakened by sirens to find his garage in flames. The manager of the Caxton-Dumont factory woke up in Danville Hospital after someone cut the brake lines of his Plymouth, which crashed into a lamppost at the north end of the Grand Union parking lot.

Hattertonians of all persuasions—Lowlanders and Highlanders, grade schoolers and senior citizens—exchanged looks, taunts, threats, even blows. In school hallways fights broke out between the sons and daughters of workers and managers. In the Grand Union produce section, armed with a celery bunch, one Back Shop worker’s devoted spouse assaulted the equally loyal wife of her husband’s shop foreman.

“Hooligans,” my stepfather repeated, snapping the newspaper with a manicured finger, having read of the latest violent act in its pages.

"I wish you wouldn't call them that," my mother said.

"It's what all these strikers are, Gladys. There's no better word for it."

My stepfather lit his briarwood pipe. My mother fired up her own tobacco product. On a tray next to the sofa, the remains of a bowl of Campbell's cream of celery soup sat congealing. Gordon and I stretched out in front of the TV watching *Petticoat Junction*, a show that interested me only insofar as it featured a steam locomotive.

"What do you say, sport?" my stepfather asked. "Are the strikers hooligans?"

"Don't drag him into this, Walter!"

"Why not? He's entitled to an opinion."

"He's *thirteen*. He doesn't *have* an opinion."

"Well, sport?"

I looked back over my shoulder to see my stepfather looking at me from his chair, his right eyebrow pointedly raised. Only Vincent Price could raise a better eyebrow. With a shrug for an answer, I returned to *Petticoat Junction*.

"See? He doesn't care."

"How about your friends? What's their take on all this?"

"First you ask for his opinion, now you want to know what his *friends* think?"

"Shhh! Let him answer, dear."

"They're on the strikers' side, mainly, I guess," I answered, not taking my eyes off the TV screen on which Uncle Joe tore the Shady Rest Hotel apart searching for a winning raffle ticket he'd lost.

"Is that so? And I suppose you share their sentiments? I suppose you think it's perfectly fine for grown men to go around acting like a bunch of juvenile delinquents, slashing car tires, smashing windows, like—like—"

"Don't say it, Walter."

"—like a bunch of hooligans? Is that what you and your friends think?"

"They're just *boys*, Walter!"

"The strikers put themselves out of a job, as it were. For that they've no one else to blame but themselves."

"In other words, they should do whatever their bosses say, like good little slaves?" I said without taking my eyes off the TV.

"Will you listen to this, Gladys! A regular Bolshevik, this kid you've raised! A died-in-the-wool fellow traveler, if you will!"

"You asked his opinion, Walter."

"And I sure as Shinola got it!"

My stepfather snapped his newspaper again, more emphatically this time, then went on reading it, or pretending to.



My stepfather didn't stay angry for very long. That year my birthday, the fifth of March, fell on a Thursday. I woke up to find my stepfather's birthday present waiting on the breakfast nook table. Outdoors, a blizzard raged. Schools were closed. With my nose pressed to the window I watched snowflakes drifting and swirling. As I did my stepfather's reflection appeared in the glass behind mine. I turned to see him standing there in his pajamas, puffing his brier pipe.

"Morning, sport!"

He pointed his pipe at the cylindrical box on the table.

"Go on, sport. Open it!"

On the box's lid embossed golden letters spelled CAXTON-DUMONT. Attached to the box by a red-and-gold satin string was a card bearing a sketch of a square-jawed man in a business suit strutting down an urban sidewalk, his shirtsleeves rolled, his sport coat flipped jauntily over one shoulder, his striped necktie streaming over the other. In the background a policeman and a pair of female shoppers cast the man admiring looks. The man wore a fedora that, presumably, was manufactured by the Caxton-Dumont Hat Manufacturing Corporation.

"Read what the card says!"

Reluctantly, I did.

Congratulations! You are now the proud owner of a Caxton-Dumont Suburban Commuter, made of the finest quality pure rabbit fur, the finest hat money can buy. Follow the simple care instructions on the back of this card, and your Caxton-Dumont is 100% guaranteed to give you a lifetime of hat-wearing pleasure!

"Happy birthday, sport!"

Over the box lid's embossed surface I spread both of my palms, examining it as though I were a phrenologist examining the lumps in a skull. I wondered what sort of hat was inside. Not that it mattered. I hated all hats. Hats were death; they spelled doom. While grazing my fingers over the embossed letters I wondered how I might defuse the wool felt time-bomb ticking away inside.

"Go on! It won't bite you!"

I shook the lid loose. My eyes were met by the crown of a tan fedora surrounded by crumpled red tissue paper.

"I know, I know," my stepfather said, "you were hoping for that minibike you saw in Cummins Lawn and Tractor Supply. But, sport, a minibike would give you two, maybe three years' worth of satisfaction, and possibly break your neck to boot. Whereas, assuming that you take good care of it, a hat of this quality will stand you in good stead, if you will, for the rest of your earthly days."

Having let that terrifying fact sink in my stepfather added: "Besides, you're fourteen—a man, practically. And a man ought to have a hat! Here, allow me!"

Pipe in mouth, my stepfather freed the fedora from its red tissue fortress, and—like a waiter serving a gourmet dish—presented it to me. I jammed the thing on my head—jammed, I say, since that's how my stepfather would have characterized the graceless way in which I crowned myself with his offering.

"For Pete's sake, that's no way to treat a hat!" said my stepfather taking it back. "This is a Caxton-Dumont quadruple-X 100 percent pure rabbit fur fedora, and there's a right and a wrong way to wear it!"

He demonstrated, putting the hat on his own head first, showing me how to hold and position it, one of three ways: first, by the front pinch; second, cradled in the palm; and finally, with the first three fingers curled gently over the underside of the brim and the thumb serving as an anchor, with only the faintest pressure applied from above. Using the first method, sighting the hat like a telescope—his head tilted forward as though in deference to a defeated Japanese emperor, the fedora gripped firmly (but *not* forcefully) by the dents in its crown—my stepfather brought it to his scalp. Still holding the fedora, his unshaven chin raised, his gray eyes focused dead ahead, my stepfather adjusted its tilt and pitch.

“There. Now you try it.”

I did. Never before had I seen such a grin break the waters of my stepfather’s normally placid face. Like the ripples of a stone tossed into a pond his laugh-lines radiated clear up to his hairline. The fedora covered my ears. It was at least a size too large.

“I factored in some leeway in case you decide to let your hair grow out as seems to be the fashion these days.”

Taking the hat from me again, my stepfather folded and tucked three strips of the morning paper under the brim.

“That ought to do the trick!”

He replaced the hat on my head.

“Go on, have a gander at yourself, as it were!”

With my stepfather watching from behind, in the downstairs bathroom mirror I scrutinized myself. The face that returned my gaze was the face of a fool—a pimple-faced fool wearing, or lurking under, a tan fedora, a hat that had nothing whatsoever to do with the person wearing it. Some people just aren’t meant to wear hats. The thing sat on my head like some science fiction creature out of *The Twilight Zone* that sucks brains out of human skulls.

Though outdoors a blizzard blew from below the hat’s rim a bead of sweat trickled down my forehead. I was about to wipe

it away with a finger when I noticed the business card tucked into the fedora's hatband. I plucked it and read:

Waple & Son Hats
Since 1898

"What's up, sport?" my stepfather's reflection said, grinning.
"I dunno," I replied hopelessly.

"Gas prices are up, taxes are up, unemployment is up—and hats are up!" He gave my shoulder a slap. "Come on! We'll have us a celebratory breakfast at the Doughboy Diner. My treat!" He went to the closet for his camel hair coat. This was the moment of truth, I thought. I had to speak then or forever hold my peace.

"Sorry, but I can't have breakfast with you," I said.

His coat still on its hanger, my stepfather stood there.

"I have other plans."

Though he stood five foot ten, just then my stepfather seemed much shorter. His lips moved but no sound escaped from them. I reached past him into the closet, the door to which was still open, and grabbed my own winter coat from it.

"See you later," I said.

I was about to step hatless out into the blizzard when, seeing the stricken look on my stepfather's face, I relented. "Oh—almost forgot!" I ran back into the kitchen to retrieve the fedora. "Thanks for—for the hat!"

With my stepfather's gift on my head I stepped out into the snowstorm.



There were very few people outdoors, most of them digging their plowed-in cars out with snow shovels. My boots pushed through mounds of snow. Stiff gusts of wind blew in every direction. I had to hold the fedora down with one hand. I let my aimlessness carry me into town where, across Felt Street, Christmas decorations were strung as if by giant yuletide spiders from pole to pole, alternating bells and six-pointed stars.

Soon I found myself walking past the Caxton-Dumont plant. One side of the factory's chimney was furry with snow. In front of the main gate, despite the blizzard, a handful of strikers marched back and forth on the sidewalk. They wore wool caps and earmuffs. Some had scarves wound over their faces. Their boots stomped the snow into slush and mud. A black cat wove its way between them. Flurries danced in the frozen air. Above their scarves and under their hats, the strikers' eyes were round and bleary with sleep.

Though I'd never met any of the strikers, I felt as if I knew them all. I hadn't forgotten my Back Shop worker dad. Through a scrim of swirling snowflakes I watched them trudge back and forth along the sidewalk in unison, as if connected by wires, their flimsy signs bent by the icy wind. If I crossed the street to shake hands with one of them, I knew I'd feel the same callused fingers that thickened my father's grip. If I looked into their eyes, I'd see the same blurry dark pupils floating in blood-shot whites. Nuzzled by one of them, I'd have felt the same prickly stubble and smelled the same half-metabolized alcohol oozing from their pores. Had I whispered to any one of them the words *I love you*, I'd have seen the same embarrassed proud look as on my father's face, accompanied by moist eyes and a quivering lower lip.

With my ears burning from the cold (the fedora failed to shield them), I turned and headed back the way I'd come.

I was recrossing the green iron bridge when a wayward gust yanked the fedora off my head to send it sailing between green girders into the frozen river. Amid jagged ice floes my stepfather's birthday present floated downstream.



During the strike's eighth week both display windows at my stepfather's store were smashed, including the one with the elf tableau, which still hadn't been taken down, destroying it and the flashing neon sign of which my stepfather had been so proud.

With that Walter Waple's heretofore unwavering faith in humanity did more than waver: it collapsed. "Upon my word," he proclaimed the next morning over his Melba toast and tea. "This world of ours has gone to hell in a hatbox, if you will."

To illustrate his point, he showed me a photograph in that day's newspaper of four young men with unusually long hair descending the gangway of a British passenger plane. The evening before, with Gordon, my mother, and me among seventy-three million other people watching, to the roar of an audience of mostly teenaged girls, the same four men performed their music live on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

"Six million years of evolution," said my stepfather, "and what have we got to show for it?" He snapped his finger into the photo. "Four British mop-heads who never heard the words 'hat' or 'haircut.' Upon my word, if this is the future I want no part of it!"

My stepfather looked up from his rant to see Gordon and me standing there in our winter coats. Soon I was pedaling us furiously across the bridge, headed for Skunky's house for an emergency meeting of the Back Shop Boys, our first gathering since Zag's return from the boy's reformatory in Cheshire.

Zag had grown something like a goatee. He wore a checkered black-and-white hunter's jacket with his father's Knights of Columbus pin on the lapel. By his side a taciturn Zippo wagged his tail. We had been relegated to the Bledsoe's garage by Skunky's upholsterer dad, Skunky having set off one too many explosions in the downstairs rumpus room.

In that gasoline-and-lawnmower-clipping-scented Siberia of dangling fan belts and garden hoses, shivering in winter coats around a ping-pong table, we planned our mission: to sabotage the Caxton-Dumont Hat Factory Works' truck fleet. Our purpose: to prevent said trucks from carrying their cargoes of capelines under cover of darkness to that sinister plant in Tennessee. Zag learned of the plan from his father, who got wind of it from a friend, who overheard it being discussed by management in the booth next to his in the Doughboy Diner while having breakfast one morning.

"According to my intelligence," Zag explained, "they plan to load the trucks at midnight and have them on the road by three a.m. We've got to stop them. Unless they can ship those hats south, they'll have no choice but to give in to the strikers."

"What if they catch us?" Victor wondered.

"A battleship may be safer in the harbor," Zag opined, "but that's not what battleships are for."

"Even if we aren't caught," I said, "what's to stop them from repairing the trucks and rescheduling the deliveries?"

"If they repair them, we'll just have to sabotage them again. And keep on sabotaging them," Zag said. "Long as they keep trying to ship those hats, we'll keep stopping them. Every day that we delay them costs management money. When they realize it's costing them more to defy the strikers than to give in to them, that's when the strikers win. Anyway, we're their best bet, their *only* bet. The workers' fates are in our hands!"

Having put to rest any doubts about our mission, we advanced to tactical and technical considerations. Skunky was the Back Shop Boys' explosives expert. He'd taught us how to make magnesium flares and how to dump potassium permanganate into toilets to make them flush purple. Plopped into the same toilets, chunks of sodium hydroxide exploded into white clouds of hydrogen. From Skunky we learned all the ways of wreaking havoc using common household products like vinegar and baking soda (which, combined in a soda bottle and thrown from several stories onto pavement, produced a most satisfactory explosion). It was thanks to one of his finer explosions that Skunky got his nickname, along with the streak of white hair that shot up from his widow's peak. It had grown back that way after the original hairs were scorched off in the process of making gunpowder from the tips of a hundred wooden matches. The resulting explosion produced a five-foot flame. It shot up to the rumpus room's ceiling, scorching the acoustical tiles there and setting Skunky's—or rather Wade's, as he was still known then—hair on fire. Luckily Victor was there to douse the flames with a can of Yoo-hoo he'd been drinking.

On the dark green ping-pong table's surface, with a stubby piece of chalk Skunky diagrammed our plan. He drew a crude representation of the Caxton-Dumont truck yard. To one side the yard was enclosed by a loading dock with three bays. The two other sides were each enclosed by brick walls ascending in height from four to six feet, the walls' lower sections augmented by chain-link fences topped with ghastly coils of razor wire. The gate was on the fourth side—cast iron, spiked, electronic, eighteen feet tall, and controlled by a watchman from inside a kiosk located in front of and to its right.

Though the yard looked impregnable, Skunky assured us that it could be breached.

"There's just one problem," he noted, tapping the kiosk he'd drawn on the table. "Ever since the strike started they've posted a night watchman there twenty-four-seven. Getting past the night watchman, that's our big problem."

“Maybe one of us can give him a karate chop?” Victor proposed. “Like the one Cagney gives the Jap police chief in *Blood in the Sun*?”

Victor’s idea having met with scant enthusiasm, other solutions—from setting a decoy fire to a rag soaked in chloroform—were put forth and rejected. The night shift watchman, we’d learned, was none other than Coach Reardon, the recently retired middle school phys-ed instructor. Reardon was known for persecuting non-jocks, using them as targets in dodge ball, making them hang five on the climbing rope that, thanks to my partially missing middle finger, I never could climb. He’d snap towels at our naked butts as we headed for the showers. Is it any wonder we nicknamed him “Coach Hardon”?

According to Skunky’s reconnaissance, in his guard shack Reardon kept a thermos bottle of something from which he’d sip at regular intervals. Knowing this, I arrived at what seemed to me an obvious solution. “We’ll slip him a Zippo!” I said, earning perplexed looks from Victory and Skunky, though Zag knew what I meant. For a retired phys-ed coach of Reardon’s height and weight we calculated that seven Benadryl tablets would do the trick.

The means of entry having been arrived at, Skunky distributed our instrument of sabotage: a pint of Fuller’s Earth, a clay-like substance used by hat factory workers to suck grease and other impurities out of raw felt. He filled three Coca-Cola bottles halfway with the stuff, a tablespoon of which was all it took to foul the average diesel engine. In case the Fuller’s Earth didn’t do the trick, he outfitted each of us with a matchbox containing two three-inch roofing nails. The final item in our sabotage kit was a sheet of typewriter paper.

Before we set out on our mission Skunky reacquainted us with the Ten Basic Rules of Sabotage:

1. Use readily available tools of a household nature
2. Only attack familiar or properly researched targets
3. Work for specifically stated gains
4. Give yourself a wide margin of error

5. Never attack targets beyond the capacity of your means
6. Destroy only things known to be of use to the enemy
7. Use long fuses whenever possible
8. Avoid capture and detention at all costs
9. Resist any temptation to loiter
10. Remember: anything can be sabotaged!



Shortly after sundown, our faces blackened with charred bottle corks, humming the jungle-humping theme from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, we set out. The evening was unusually warm. A bright moon followed us to our objective, its light soothing and companionable. We dodged the headlight beams of passing cars. Whenever possible we cut through yards, lurching from shadow to shadow.

Across the street from the factory gate a Volkswagen bus was parked. Hidden behind it we waited for Coach Hardon to emerge from his kiosk and go off on his rounds. While waiting Victor told us his latest lie about the time his father blew up a Nazi ammunition dump. He was halfway through the story when the door to the kiosk squeaked open and Coach Hardon exited it with his flashlight. We heard a series of owl-hoots: Skunky's signal for Victor to proceed with Stage One: spiking Coach Hardon's thermos bottle. It wasn't long before Victor returned with both thumbs raised.

Twenty minutes later we watched as Coach Hardon's head bobbed a few times before slumping forward. Crouching, with Zag carrying a pair of wire cutters, we made our way to the lowest section of the yard's wall. Victor and Skunky stayed behind, posted at strategic lookout points, prepared to finger-whistle us at any sign of danger. Using the clippers Zag snipped an opening into the chain-link fence through which he and I climbed. Once on the other side we crept to where the trucks slept in their bays and advanced to Stage Two.

The trucks were war surplus Bedford models with flat armadillo noses and canvas-covered backs. Curious, I drew back one of the canvas covers to discover—not boxes of unfinished

hats, but a cone-shaped object of shiny, pale-bluish material, with a brim-like flange almost as wide as the truck itself: yes, the Mysterious Object we'd seen along Bum's Trail, or the spit-and-shine of it. Zag crept up behind me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"It's here!" I said.

"What?"

"The thing—whatever it is!"

"Stop wasting time!" said Zag.

He tugged my arm. I let the canvas drop.

We rolled the typing paper sheets into funnels and slid them into the truck's fuel pipes, then emptied the Fuller's Earth from our Coke bottles into them. Before leaving we placed a match-box under the rear tire of each truck.



We were about to climb back through the fence when the nearby fire station siren went off. As it wailed deafeningly Zag and I looked at each other. We'd been caught red-handed. We'd be packed off to reform school, both of us this time. Or worse: to prison. As though by the wave of a magician's wand our young happy lives had miraculously turned to shit. Surrender and throw ourselves at the mercy of the juvenile judge, that was our best option, our only option, under the circumstances. No point trying to make a run for it.

We ran. We climbed through the fence and jumped off the wall and ran and kept running, splitting up as we'd agreed in advance to do if anything went wrong. Through a kaleidoscope of shadows I ran till my legs turned into sandbags and flames clawed at my lungs and my heart seized like a diesel engine clogged with Fuller's Earth.

I ran all the way to Cheese Hill where we had agreed to meet up. In a wheezing heap I collapsed next to Zag, who'd gotten there so far ahead of me he was no longer even breathing hard. A few minutes later Skunky arrived. At least a dozen more minutes passed before gasping Victor brought up the rear.

That siren, we learned the next day, had nothing to do with us. While we were busy sabotaging trucks, the hay barn at the feed and supply depot—the one where Virgil Zeno’s legs were crushed by a stack of peat moss bags—burned down. In the past we Back Shop Boys had used that barn as our secret smoking lounge. I know: a barn filled with hay would not appear to be an intuitive choice for said purpose, but you have to factor in the secrecy provided by all those bales of hay, which could be configured into mazes such as King Midas himself would have envied. As far as I knew, though, none of us Back Shop Boys had been in the barn for months.

The burning of the hay barn along with our act of vandalism occasioned an address by the Right Reverend Wallace Stumpf, pastor at the Congregational church and President of the Committee of Citizens for Peace and Prosperity. The address took place on a snowy Saturday (a blizzard had been forecast) in the old Veterans of Foreign War Meeting House, two blocks from the train station. Though the veteran’s hall had a maximum occupancy of one hundred, at least twice as many were in attendance.

Zag’s father sat in the first row. Next to him, holding his father’s crutches, sat Zag. A row behind him Victor Szentgyorgyi sat between his mother and father. Skunky and his parents sat behind them. Across the aisle Belinda Dalton sat with her mother and her little brother. Behind them, between Gordon in his Boy’s Club cap and my mother wearing her navy pillbox hat, sat my stepfather in his camel hair coat and matching camel homburg.

I stood in back by the main doors, the better to make my exit in case the proceedings got too boring. I wore my winter jacket and a wool cap. In that drafty old building everyone kept their

coats on, along with their scarves, gloves, and, needless to say, their hats.

As Reverend Stumpf approached the lectern set up at the center of the stage, the hubbub died. Reverend Stumpf was the sort of person who seems never to have been anything but old, as much a fixture in Hattertown as the trees lining Felt Street. As if by centrifugal force his beady eyes were drawn toward the hub of his round ruddy face. A fringe of yellow-white hair ringed his bald head, giving him a monkish appearance that the blush of his cheeks heightened. Flakes of dandruff, visible even from where I stood at the very back of the hall, speckled the shoulders of the black suit that he wore in place of his cassock. He scanned the audience, his dark beady eyes darting in all directions at once, so that, no matter which way they looked, they seemed to be both avoiding and looking at you. He cleared his throat ostentatiously.

"Thank you all for coming," he said and waited for the crowd to settle further. Then, gripping both sides of the lectern, he launched into his speech.

"Good citizens of Hattertown, friends and neighbors of our community, those of you who are members of my congregation are accustomed to seeing me wearing a surplice and speaking from the pulpit. However, this morning I speak to you not as a clergyman, but as a fellow citizen, a deeply disturbed and concerned fellow citizen.

"No mystery surrounds our purpose. We meet here this morning as citizens of a town besieged. That's right: besieged. For on this February morning, we find ourselves in much the same position as did our forefathers on the terrible eve of April the 16th, 1777, the day British troops marched down these very same streets of ours, burning everything in their path.

"Listen," said Reverend Stumpf, cupping his hand theatrically behind his ear. "Do you hear that sound? It is the sound of angry footsteps marching past these doors. Those shadows that you see dancing behind the windows? They are shadows cast by the torch flames of suspicion and hatred. And where were

those torches lit? Twenty-three miles from here—in Norwalk, Connecticut!”

Murmurs and sober nods from many in the audience.

“And who lit those torches? Outsiders! People you and I have never met, who’ve never set foot on the sidewalks of our town! Who don’t patronize our businesses, or work in our stores and factories, or send their children to our schools, or pray in our churches, or attend the Volunteer Fire Department’s annual summer picnic, or our parades and carnivals and fireworks displays. People, in short, who have nothing, absolutely nothing whatsoever, to do with us!”

Murmurs of consensus. Reverend Stumpf thrust his palms out for silence.

“No doubt, most of you here have heard of the acts of vandalism that have taken place as recently as two nights ago here in our town. Deliberate acts of vandalism. A witness to one of last night’s activities claims she saw a group of boys fleeing the Caxton factory, the truck fleet of which was sabotaged! Our own spirited youth incited to violence by the corrosive influence of outsiders!”

Boos, jeers, and other sounds of disapprobation.

“However we are not here to cast aspersions on our neighbors in Norwalk. No, ladies and gentlemen. For they and we are on the same side; we share the same concerns. To be sure we have our differences, but those differences are nothing next to what we have in common.

“Once upon a time, ours was a great town, a mighty and prosperous town, ‘The Town that Crowned America’! Together with our next-door neighbor Danville we produced enough hats per year to cover the head of every grown man living in New York City today. Over *five million* hats!”

Applause. Cheers. Cries of *Hear, hear!*

“Alas, ladies and gentlemen, those days are gone. Our town is no longer advancing; it is *retrograding*. The reason for that precipitous decline? It can be summed up in precisely two words: *outside interference*. Strangers who have come here to harm us.”

More shouts from the audience:

“Let’s rout ’em out!”

“Send ’em to hell!”

“Send ’em back to Norwalk!”

“Same difference!”

Just then the big oak entryway doors behind me swung open, blinding all who turned to see who’d opened them. Haloed in winter sunlight and falling snow, Al Jenson, editor of the *Hattertown Gazette*, stood wearing a raggedy Pendleton coat with a fleece collar.

“Begging your pardon, Pastor,” Jenson said, his smile exposing a set of jagged, tobacco-stained teeth.

He stepped aside, making way for his two strapping teen-aged sons, each carrying one side of a wheelchair in which, wearing his freshly pressed, spanking-white carpenter’s coveralls, looking like an Indian emperor upon his palanquin, sat (rode?) Virgil Zeno.

“That’s right,” Virgil said as the Jensen boys settled him and his wheelchair among the hall’s last row of chairs. “Forgive us, for we know what we do!”

Snorts and sniggers.

“Not at all, Mr. Zeno, not at all,” said Reverend Stumpf indulgently. “We’re pleased that you’re able to join us!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

“Which one?” some wise-guy in the audience yelled, igniting a fresh burst of laughter in which Virgil Zeno himself partook.

“What’ve I missed?” Virgil asked.

“We have been discussing outsiders,” the reverend answered, daubing sweat from his brow despite the cold.

“Now *that’s* something I know a thing or two about!” Virgil, remarked, igniting more laughter.

“I’m afraid the outsiders we’re concerned with exist far closer to home than those in your purview, Mr. Zeno.”

“Don’t bet on it, Reverend!”

More laughter.

Once again, Reverend Stumpf bowed his fringed head, but the ruckus persisted. He had to clear his throat again loudly several times before he could resume.

"Many of you here, I'm sure, are aware of the story of the Amalekites, that pestilential nation of desert nomads who for centuries raped, murdered, mutilated, sodomized, and by various other means ravaged the people of Egypt. They burned their crops, salted their soil, killed their livestock, urinated on their stored grains... They preyed on the weak and the vulnerable in particular, on women and children, on the feeble, the hungry, and the infirm. Such a terror were the Amalekites, of their leader Jehovah himself said, *He shall be the first in hell!*

"Citizens of Hattertown, we here now have our own Amalekites to contend with, our own pestilential outsiders who've come here to destroy our cherished way of life. Just as the bark beetle threatens the lovely elms lining our main street, these outsiders threaten to decimate us. We must identify, isolate, and exterminate this blight! We must rout out the invasive aliens among us and cast them forth forever from our midst!"

From the furthest row of the audience a voice recited: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

All turned to face Virgil in his wheelchair.

"That's Matthew 25," Virgil said. "In case you've forgotten."

"I am familiar with the passage," Reverent Stumpf responded with a tight little smile.

"How about the Parable of the Stranger? Or the Book of Exodus, wherein God commands the Israelites to not oppress the alien? For you yourselves know what it feels like to be an alien, for you were once yourselves aliens in Egypt."

"Souse it, Virgil!"

"Let Reverend Stumpf speak!"

"Go turn a chair leg!"

"Go fly your flying saucer!"

Amid the ensuing chorus of hisses Reverend Stumpf made

a supplicatory gesture. "With due respect, Mr. Zeno," he submitted when the ruckus had died, "in equating Amalek with our Savior, you make a considerable error."

"I drew no such comparison, Father. That's your doing. I only meant to say that when a stranger asks to drink from your well you should think twice before turning him away."

Murmurs, boos, hisses.

"In this instance I'm afraid the stranger may have already poisoned our well. Thanks to him, we may all soon die of thirst, if we don't all murder each other first!"

"Hear, hear, Father!"

"You said it!"

"Damn Amalekites!"

"Damn outsiders!"

"I have one more story to tell, if I may," said Virgil.

"Stow it, Virgil!"

"The story of Korah, son of Ithar, who rebelled against Moses and the Commandments only to have the earth split open and swallow him and all who rebelled against him. That's it; that's my story."

Virgil signaled the Jenson boys. To a chorus of jeers, they lofted and carried Virgil in his wheelchair back outdoors into the by then heavily falling snow.

"Poor man," Pastor Stumpf said, watching Virgil depart. "He has suffered many a terrible loss."

"Yeah," someone yelled. "Including most of his marbles!"

"What should we do, Reverend?"

"Yeah, what do we do?"

As if on cue Reverend Stumpf removed the black suit jacket he wore and held up his right arm, revealing a band of dark ribbon worn over the sleeve of his white shirt.

"See this ribbon?" he said. "A strip of hatband cloth. It's the heart of Hattertown that I'm wearing on my sleeve. True, we have our differences, chief among them the conflicting desires of workers and management. But let us not forget that at the

end of the day we are all, all of us here, Hattertonians. Either we stand together or we fall apart!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Hence, following this address, the Citizens for Peace and Prosperity intend to meet in this same venue to weigh solutions to our dilemma, a symposium to which all of you here are cordially invited. Meanwhile let us all wear our hearts upon our sleeves as you see me wearing mine—sewn, by the way, along with two hundred others, by my beloved wife Nancy and our beloved friends Judith Carmichael, Lois Kellog, and Dorothy Bristol. In wearing these ribbons on our sleeves, we declare our solidarity. We'll show each other, as well as any outsiders watching, that we are united in opposing those pernicious forces that wish to tear us asunder! Whosoever wears a hatband over his or her sleeve is a friend, a brother, a sister, a mother or father, a son, or a daughter. And whosoever doesn't is an outsider—to be feared and scorned!"

As the Right Reverend Stumpf uttered these last words of his address, a cardboard box filled with hatband armbands made its way through the crowded hall.



After the meeting the Back Shop Boys converged on Cheese Hill. As always Zag arrived ahead of us. He sat on the cliff's edge overlooking the town, smoking a cigarette, his view obscured by swirling snowflakes. The forecasted blizzard was underway.

"Look!" Skunky said. "My armband matches my coat!"

"Mine doesn't fit," said Victor, struggling to work his over an obese arm.

Zag gazed abstractedly out at the swirling snow.

"Well?" Skunky asked him.

"You heard Reverend Stumpf," said Victor.

"We must cast the Amalekite from our midst!" said Skunky.

"We must rout him out!"

"Exactly," said Zag. He turned to me. "Well?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Uhn haah dah," said Gordon.

"You know who."

The blizzard blew harder.

"The strike started in Norwalk. Jack had nothing to do with it!"

Zag stared at me, his eyes shifting back and forth, as if he were examining my pupils one by one like an optometrist. "What's happened to you, Half? You've lost your bearings. You've been fraternizing with the enemy so long you've forgotten whose side you're on."

"I'm not on Jack's side. It's not a matter of sides! It's just that I don't happen to believe in condemning someone without a shred of evidence against them!"

Zag shook his head and went back to watching the view. After two more drags of his cigarette, he spoke again, quietly. "Listen to you," he said. "You trust a complete stranger more than you trust me, your best friend."

"Jack's my friend too."

"Jack Thomas isn't your friend. He's your enemy; he's *all* our enemies. He's an enemy of the United States of America!"

From the inner pocket of his coat Zag withdrew a folded tattered sheet of paper. He unfolded it and held it under my nose. It was the same FBI notice I'd seen at the Hattertown post office, or one just like it, with the three black-and-white photos taken from different angles of "Johann Verhoff," otherwise known as Jack Thomas.

"Look familiar?" Zag asked. "Guess where I got it?"

"The post office!" Skunky guessed.

"Shut up. I'm not asking you. I was asking him." Zag turned to me. I could see he was angry now. He drew back his upper lip against his teeth. He clenched and unclenched his gloved fists.

"I have no idea," I said.

"Skunky's right. The post office. Not this one, the Danville Post Office. I rode there before the meeting this morning, after going to our post office to pick up a package for my dad. I was

headed out the door when this notice on the bulletin board catches my eye, an FBI notice just like this one. I thought: *What if...*? So I looked at all the notices, there had to be at least a dozen of them. While looking at them I noticed someone had taken one down. They must've been in a hurry, since they left behind a torn corner of paper. That made me curious. That's when I decided to go to Danville, to the post office there. Guess what I find on the bulletin board there? This. Hmmm, I wonder who tore that notice down. Any idea?"

"Uhn haah dah," said Gordon.

"Jack hasn't done anything!"

"He's an escaped German POW."

"So what?" I said.

"So what?" said Zag.

"Yeah, so what? Who cares!"

"The FBI, that's who!"

"It's been eighteen years! The war's over; we won. Why the hell don't they leave him alone?"

I must have said this a little too loudly. The others all stared at me—even Gordon.

"It's not like he committed war crimes or anything. He was one of millions of Germans who fought for their country. They weren't all evil. They were just about to release him when he escaped."

"So why did he escape, then?" Skunky wanted to know.

"Because. He had no choice. They were going to send him home."

This answer satisfied no one.

"He'd have ended up in a Communist country, in a work-camp in Siberia, or something like that!"

"How do you know all this?" Victor wondered.

"Jack. He told me."

"And you believe him?" Zag snorted.

"Why shouldn't I?"

Zag grabbed me by my coat collar and yanked my face close to his. "Do you have any idea what the hell you've done?" Our

faces were so close together the condensed water vapor of Zag's breath clouded my vision. "Aiding and abetting a fugitive. That's a crime, a serious crime. It makes no difference if he's innocent or guilty. Anyway, it's not up to you or me or anyone else but the United States government to decide. You could go to jail! We could all go in jail! Jesus, Half, I just got out of the goddamn boy's reformatory. Thanks to you I may end up right back there again!"

Zag let go of me. I rubbed the back of my neck where my coat collar had chafed it. The snow fell harder. Already two inches had settled on the corrugated roof of the Caxton-Dumont factory's reject shed.

"Are you going to report him?" I asked helplessly.

Zag shook his head.

"No," he said. "You are."

He refolded the FBI notice.

"The number to call is here," he said, tucking it into my pocket.

I looked up at him.

"Say you'll do it, Half. Otherwise, I'll have to."

I nodded. What choice did I have?

Zag put a gloved hand on my shoulder.

"This is your last chance to redeem yourself. Don't blow it."

PART 10

MISSING

I didn't phone the FBI. I went straight to Fern Cottage. I took Gordon with me. I had no choice. I had to warn him.

By then the roads were too snowy for bicycles. I ditched my bike in town and we hoofed it the rest of the way, trudging down streets and roads that had yet to be plowed, with more snow coming down, the flakes falling heavy and fat as the temperature rose to just below freezing. The snow chains of the few rare vehicles on the roads threw up tattered sprays of wet snow.

By then the lake had frozen over completely. To save time we walked across it, past the island with the miniature stone lighthouse, over the same stretch of water Jack and I had swum across together dozens of times. By cutting across the lake we shortened the distance to Fern Cottage by almost a mile.

Walked on, Lost Lake seemed a lot smaller, as if the humiliation of being reduced to a footpath under our boots had caused it to shrink. Unless you're Jesus, to walk on water is to insult it. I didn't know that, yet.

When we arrived at Fern Cottage wisps of umber smoke rose from its chimney. I knocked; Jack answered. He didn't seem all that surprised to see us. As if we hadn't been AWOL for over a month, Jack nodded us inside. I was still stomping snow from my boots when he said: "Care for some tea?"

I nodded. As he filled the kettle, I said: "They know?"

He looked up from the stove. "They?"

"My friends."

"What do they know?"

"About you."

I handed him the folded FBI notice from my pocket. He unfolded, studied it, nodded slowly, and handed it back to me.

"What are you going to do?"

He smiled. "What can I do?"

"Leave."

"And go where?"

"Anywhere. You can't stay here! They'll find you!"

"Yes, I suppose they will."

"You're not giving up, are you?"

"Why not?"

"Because—you can't!"

He smiled again. The kettle whistled. He filled our mugs. "Here's your tea," he said, handing me mine. "Sit down. I have something for you."

With Gordon and me sitting, Jack got something from his cabinet. He came back to the table and handed it to me. Though it was wrapped in brown paper from a shopping bag, from the shape it was obviously a book of some kind.

"Happy birthday," Jack said.

"My birthday was in March."

"Yes, I know. But I'm giving it to you now."

"Should I open it?"

"Why not?"

I did. It was the old book about swimming.

"You can't give me this!"

"Why not?"

"It's the most valuable thing you own. You said so yourself."

"I've no use for it now, except to give it to someone I like. That someone happens to be you."

As I flipped absently through its pages a card fell out, a handmade one. On the front was a crude drawing of someone swimming. Under it Jack's handwriting said, *For Hoff*. I was about to open the card when something occurred to me. I closed the book and asked:

"If they do catch you, what will they do?"

"I've no idea."

"Will they really send you to Russia, or whatever?"

"Quite possibly."

"Uhn haah dah."

"They wouldn't...?"

"Execute me?" Jack smiled. "I don't think so, Hoff. More likely they'll send me to a labor camp. Shall we play a game?" He set up the chess board.

"Won't you at least try to escape?"

"I've had eighteen years of escaping and hiding, Hoff. Twice as many, if you count the years I spent escaping from myself, or trying to. Don't you understand, Hoff? It's not the FBI I've been eluding. Or the German army. Or a fortress of brick walls and barbed wire. It's my own self, Hoff. It's the boy who fell in love watching those boys diving off the high-board one summer's day. It's him I've been hiding and running away from. But one can't escape or hide from oneself, Hoff, not in the long run. In the long run we're bound to catch up with ourselves. So, to answer your question: no. I won't try to escape. Not this time."

"If they arrest you, I may never see you again."

"One never knows, Hoff."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too. I'll miss swimming with you. I'll miss our chess games and working on the monument with you and Gordon. Perhaps you and Gordon will carry on without me. I hope so. Perhaps you'll find a way to lift that stone."

My throat tightened. Tears blurred my vision. I turned away so Jack wouldn't see them. Through the window I saw the branches of a nearby tree sagging under the weight of snow. I looked down at the swimming book. Jack put his hand on my shoulder.

"Come. Let's play a game."

I shoved his hand off me.

"You can keep your lousy book!" I said, standing.

"Hoff!"

I grabbed mine and Gordon's coats.

"Hoff, what are you—?"

"Quitter! Coward!"

"You don't understand."

"You're right; I don't!"

"Hoff, please—"

“Fucking Nazi faggot!”

“Hoff!”

With tears streaming down my face and Gordon trailing me,
I stormed out of Fern Cottage.

By the time we left the sky had already grown dark. Wet, heavy drifts of snow lay everywhere. Sounds of dripping water engulfed us. I wiped my coat sleeve over my eyes. In the dimming light the woods looked sketchy, like a smeared charcoal drawing.

A blanket of heavy snow had spread itself across Lost Lake. I saw the softened footprints where Gordon and I had crossed it earlier. As we made our way across again, the ice grumbled. With each grumble Gordon stopped to look up at me with a questioning look.

“It’s safe,” I said. “Come on!”

We were two-thirds of the way to the main road when Gordon realized he’d left his Boy’s Club cap in Jack’s cottage. He stopped and stood there, lips trembling, pointing to his bare head.

“Christ,” I said. “Can’t you keep track of *anything*? Do I have to think of *everything* for you?” Gordon started crying then. I kept walking, hoping he’d follow. My stepbrother refused to move.

“We are *not* going back there!” I said. “We’ll get it some other time.” Even in the dimming light I caught the glimmer of reflected light in his tears. Until that stupid cap was back on his head, I knew my stepbrother wouldn’t stop crying.

“Goddamn it!”

With a huff I turned and started back across the lake in the direction we’d come from.

Though molecularly identical, ice and water have little in common. Ice is a *mineral*; it floats on water. Of the four earthy elements, water is the most protean. Still, in its liquid form at least, with water you have some idea of what you’re dealing with.

Ice, on the other hand, is an illusion. It looks solid and can be incredibly strong. Two inches of ice can support the average person. Four inches will support a man on horseback; ten will support about a thousand pounds per square-foot, or roughly the weight of a Patton tank. That evening by my estimate the ice covering Lost Lake was at least two and a half inches thick.

But ice is also extremely fickle. Of all the materials that make up vast parts of our planet, ice is the least predictable. It's also the most unreliable and treacherous. In moderate climates it exists only provisionally.

As for a frozen lake, at best it's a contradiction in terms. Though it's a well-known fact that black ice spells danger, how many people know that a lake covered in snow is ten times as dangerous as a frozen lake with no snow on it? Snow is an insulator. Like a blanket, it protects the ice underneath it from the cold, weakening and ultimately destroying it.

All afternoon the temperature had been climbing. Now, with the sun close to setting, it fell sharply again. Like a medieval torturer stretching his victim on a rack, the cooling air caused the degenerate ice covering Lost Lake to expand.

We had gone a third of the way back across the lake again when we heard the first thunder-like boom. A dozen steps later another boom. Each boom echoed across the lake. Lost Lake was talking to us, trying to tell us something, saying, *Get the hell off me!* With an animal's frightened instinct, the way a horse knows when a hurdle's too high or a dog knows when it's being taken to the vet, my stepbrother knew the danger. He stopped and stood there as another boom sounded.

"Damn it, Gordon," I said. "It's safe! Now *come on!*"

But Gordon refused to budge. He stood there, his twilight features gleaming with snot and tears.

"I'm telling you it's *safe!* There's *nothing* to be afraid of!"

To demonstrate—also out of frustration—I stomped my booted foot on the ice.

"See?" I said. "See? *See?*"

Remember the story that Virgil told at the VFW hall, the one

about the world opening up under Korah's feet to swallow him? Lost Lake opened up under our four feet to swallow Gordon and me. The jagged crack ran right between our two pairs of winter boots, exposing a lightning-shaped river of blackness. Behind his thick glasses, Gordon's eyes burst open.

Then down he went on an invisible elevator.

I shouted his name. As I did down I went in my own elevator.

For a second or two I managed to cling to the ice shelf before slipping into frozen blackness. A screeching filled my skull. Tracer-like sparks ricocheted from the edges of my vision. Like a medley of frozen fists, the icy water pummeled my face. It was like swimming in broken glass. Somehow, I managed to grab hold of another ice shelf, but it broke. I kept grabbing at hunks of ice, my legs kicking blindly in the frozen inky water, my arms reaching up toward the blurry light that I guessed was the sky, though I couldn't be sure. My brain lit up like a pinball machine. More tracers flew. A tortured violin sound faded into a chorus of silver bells, like the bells that tinkled whenever customers entered my stepfather's store, but louder. As my lungs begged for one last gruesome breath my hands found another mantle of ice, a thicker one that held me enough to haul myself up and out.

I stood there then, bent in half, clutching both knees, coughing and gasping. With my breath half caught I looked around, expecting to see Gordon standing there, picking his nose where I'd last seen him. All I saw was a frozen lake with a black gash in it.

Minutes later I stood soaked and shivering at the front door of Jack's cottage. He was wearing his plaid robe.

"Where is your stepbrother?" he asked, scanning the darkness over my wet shoulder. I stood there, shivering.

"Good God," said Jack (*Gut got*).



With his coat flung over his robe, using a pickaxe as his walking stick, Jack followed me out onto the lake, to the place where

Gordy had fallen through the ice. Using the pickaxe, over an area the size of my bed, he broke the ice up into hatbox-sized chunks. Then, dropping the pickaxe, he held his nose and plunged feet-first into the jagged black hole. Three times Jack came up and three times he plunged back under again.

But it was no use. Gordon was gone.

“Missing. Gordon’s missing.”

That’s what I told them.

I got home just after seven o’clock. By then it was snowing again. The shoulders of my jacket were flaked with snow. Though Jack had spread it out to dry on the tiled apron in front of his stove the jacket was still moist.

I’d stepped into the parlor. My mother and stepfather had already eaten dinner. *The Outer Limits* was on. On the screen a futuristic spacecraft enshrouded in fog glided across an alien-looking landscape. The voiceover said: “*In the vast immensities of cosmic space bold adventurers streak their way to do battle with strange enemies on strange worlds...*” My stepfather smoked his corncob pipe and read the newspaper. My mother was spread out per usual on the sofa, her hair rolled up in pink curlers, the *TV Guide* splayed open on her lap. She turned and looked at me standing there behind the beaded curtain, alone.

“Leo! Where on earth—!”

I shivered. My teeth were chattering.

“Where’s Gordon?” she asked.

I licked my lips. *Missing*, I thought.

“Leo, where is your stepbrother?”

A look of horror spread over my mother’s face. My stepfather looked up.

“Missing,” I said.

On TV a scientist mutated by rainfall on an alien world held his colleagues hostage, demanding a return to earth.

“Missing,” I repeated. “Gordon’s missing.”

Missing: an oddly appropriate word. “To miss (verb): to fail to hit, reach, or contact. To discover or feel the absence. To fail to obtain, escape, or avoid. To leave out; to omit. To fail to comprehend, sense, or experience. To fail to perform or attend

an event.” *To fail*. “Miss (noun): disadvantage or regret resulting from loss.”

“Missing. Gordon’s missing...”

My mouth went dry, my lips contorted with the lie, my eyes welled. Shivers filled my body again, as if Jack’s stove hadn’t melted them away an hour ago.

“Missing...”

Why didn’t I tell the truth? To this day I’m not sure. To cover up one inexcusable deed with another, even worse one. Because it’s one thing to lose your stepbrother in the woods, another to cause him to drown by forcing him to walk across a supposedly frozen lake that isn’t frozen enough?

Anyway I did it; I lied.

I sat there, in the parlor, but I wasn’t really there. My mother and my stepfather were standing by then, too, saying things to me. Gesturing, asking questions. How did it happen? Where did you last see him? What were you doing?

We’d gone up to the Dalton Estate, into the woods near the lake to hike there. It was mid-afternoon. We were walking along this path when I turned and suddenly Gordon wasn’t behind me anymore. I called his name. No answer. I kept calling. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. *Missing*. Just like that. *Missing*. I searched the woods, I said. The sun was going down. I searched till it got too dark to search anymore.

That’s what I said.

In the fireplace the fire snapped and crackled; next to it the Zenith glowed and murmured. I didn’t see any of it, or I did, but the way you see things in a dream, as if they don’t really matter, since they aren’t real. I saw my mother’s head covered with curlers, saw the beads of the room divider falling like a blizzard of amber and ivory snowflakes, saw my stepfather’s pipe curving down from his lips like a wooden question mark. Nothing seemed real. Even I didn’t seem real to myself just then, at that moment. Except as a mechanism for telling lies, I didn’t exist.

There’s a word for it: *denial*.

While my stepfather phoned the police I climbed the stairs up to my bedroom, threw myself onto my bed, buried my face in my pillow.



Search parties were organized. Half the town turned out to help. Along with citizens, local and state police and volunteer firemen combed the woods of the former Dalton Estate, their lanterns, flares, and flashlights flickering like fireflies as more snow fell in fat slow flakes. Cries of *Gordon!* and *Gordy!* punctuated the dark snowy night. Between forays into the forest, the searchers warmed themselves at a bonfire they'd built and that blazed in a clearing alongside the gravel road to Fern Cottage. They sipped from thermos bottles of coffee, hot cocoa, and bouillon.

Through the night the searchers combed the woods. I searched alongside my mother and my stepfather, the three of us trudging through ice and snow. My stepfather carried a red storm lantern. It swayed on its hinged handle. He and I both wore galoshes over our shoes. Mom wore rubber boots with metal fasteners. We were told to keep the other search teams' torches in view at all times to keep from getting lost ourselves. Now and then a search team leader blew a whistle, and everyone converged on some scrap of evidence: a snapped twig, a footprint, a torn piece of fabric...

With morning more volunteers joined the effort. Zag, Skunky, and Victor arrived with their families. Unable to search by foot, Mr. Lengyl drove the surrounding roads in his Dodge Dart. Sergeant Pomeroy brought a pair of search and rescue dogs. Mr. Kirby, owner of the hardware store, arrived with a contingent of freckle-faced Catholic teenagers. I recognized a few teachers past and present, including Miss Delvecchio, Mr. Oates, and Mr. Blum. Principal Laurelton was there; so was Miss Stanhope, who brought six boxes of doughnuts and a silver samovar filled with spiced hot cider. Even Virgil Zeno did his part. From the trunk of his DeSoto he distributed nine pairs of

snowshoes, the old-fashioned kind with leather laces. Reverend Stumpf joined the effort, too, wearing a hat ribbon over the sleeve of his winter coat. Over their coat sleeves everyone wore symbolic black hatbands.

One search team carried its torches and lanterns to the lake, where they came upon the gash in the ice. By then snow had obscured most of the footsteps we'd left. Questioned by one of the searchers, I answered:

Yes, we'd crossed the lake that afternoon.

No, the ice didn't break, not while we were crossing it.

"Did you cross in both directions—coming and going?"

"Yeah," I answered. "We did, but on the way back, halfway across we heard the ice boom, so we turned around and headed back the way we'd come. I guess the ice must have broken right after that," I lied—though by then it no longer felt like a lie to me; by then I'd come to believe that my stepbrother really had gotten lost in the woods somehow, that no imperfectly frozen lake had swallowed Gordon whole, that the ice breaking and him falling in was all part of a bad dream I'd had.

By then everyone must have started realizing there was little if any chance of Gordon having survived the night, not with the temperature below freezing, unless he'd built a fire, something even someone without his severe limitations would have been hard pressed to do in the dark snowy woods without matches or dry kindling. (But Gordy's not in the woods, I reminded myself. He's at the bottom of Lost Lake somewhere, down there with Benedict Dalton's skeletal ghost and The Water Master, where even the greatest arsonist in the world couldn't build a fire.)

By then my lies had set me on a course from which there was no turning back. Even if I'd come out with the truth, if somehow instead of the woods those search teams had been able to comb the depths of Lost Lake with their lanterns and flashlights, what difference would it have made? By then nothing would have brought Gordon back to life.

Nothing would save him. Or, for that matter, me.



After two days of searching I could read the hopelessness on the volunteers' faces. They were tired. They were hungry. They wanted to go home—to their homes, to their beds, to their own problems. One by one they hung their storm lanterns back up in their garages. They tucked their flashlights back in drawers. They were sorry. *We're sorry*, they said. *So sorry*. Everyone was sorry. For my stepfather, for my mother, for Gordon, who they knew mostly as the kid who followed me everywhere wearing a red Boy's Club cap.

And sorry for me, too, since I missed Gordon more than anyone. It was like losing my own shadow. I missed his plaid shirts and his thick glasses and how his hair and his ears stuck out from under his red Boy's Club cap. I missed him gawping at his fingertips and having to smack him to keep him from chomping down on them. I regretted all of the cruel names I'd called him and all the times I swatted him a little too hard. I missed his big wet sloppy smile whenever I'd buy him a Bonomo Turkish taffy or let him borrow my yo-yo or tousle his hair or knuckle him in the forehead. I missed taking him everywhere with me on the back of my shitty Royce Union. I missed him looking up to and depending on me for just about everything, like I was some sort of god.

As much as I missed Gordon, I know he must have missed me too. So many things my stepbrother must have missed, starting with his magical hot dog. But there were lots of other things he missed, too, I'm sure, like waking up in his bedroom, in his bed, and eating his favorite foods (Campbell's beans and franks; creamed corn; Chef Boyardee canned ravioli...). I bet he missed *Fireball XL-5* and wearing his argyle socks and having me tie his sneaker laces for him. I bet he missed smelling his dirty feet. I bet he missed playing with my Duncan Midnight Special yo-yo, the string of which I must have repaired for him at least a hundred times. I bet he missed riding the yellow bus to school and the alarm between classes and earning gold stars from Mrs. Lundenberg, his special ed teacher. I bet he missed all sixty-four colors in his Crayola Crayon box. I bet

he missed hot lunch pizza and rubbery Jell-O and pollywogs and bulrushes. I bet he missed the nozzle on the garden hose, the smell of bacon frying, the sound the eggshells made when my mother cracked them against the Formica counter. I bet he missed Post Sugar Smacks. I bet he missed picking his nose and sampling the snot. I bet he missed mixing mustard and ketchup on his hot dogs. I bet he missed the sharp smell of gasoline and the spinach soufflé-like clods of grass clippings clinging to the bottom of the lawnmower. I bet he missed popsicles wrapped in thin frosty paper and the mealy dull taste of the flat wooden stick. I bet he missed every single one of his internal organs. I bet he missed walking and running and chewing and tasting and swallowing and spitting and pissing and shitting and burping and farting and all his other bodily functions.

Especially breathing. I bet he missed breathing most of all.



On the fourth day of the search, at around five o'clock in the afternoon, the shrill cries of a whistle pierced the dimming atmosphere. The rest of the Back Shop Boys and I joined the other search teams as they climbed through the breach in the chain-link fence and through the copse of pine trees to converge around the flooded drift of the abandoned mica mine. They stood there, more than two dozen volunteer searchers, their mouths gaping, their eyes blinking, their breaths condensing in the cold, twilight air, their faces frozen with a mixture of wonder and bafflement as they took in the Thing in the Woods, its junk figures dripping snowmelt.

"What the — ?" said Zag.

"Hot dribbling spit," said Skunky.

They were still staring when another whistle sounded.



To this day what happened after that remains a questionable blur. Did we follow the whistle to Fern Cottage? Had other search parties already gathered there? Was it dark by the time we got there? Did some searchers carry flaming torches? Did

it start to rain? Was the rain frozen? Did the frozen rain sizzle when it touched the torch flames?

Were two Hattertown police cars parked there, on the gravel road, engines rumbling, tailpipes fuming, their gumball lights spinning, turning everyone's faces into ghoulish masks? Did a CB radio crackle? Was a cop sitting in the driver's seat of one of the cruisers? Did Zag knock on his window and ask what was going on? Did he ignore Zag? Did the door to Fern Cottage open? Did Jack step out accompanied by two police officers? Was the second officer Police Chief Leffert? Did he wear a yellow parka? Did the other cop hold Jack's arms behind his back? Did I stand there, a few yards away, holding my breath, caught like a fly in a web?

Was my heart beating like mad?

Did someone switch a floodlight on in one of the cars, setting the frozen raindrops on fire, blinding Jack, his glasses throwing back the reflections of the spotlight and the torches? Did the look on his face reveal nothing: not fear or even surprise, just resignation and maybe even relief, as if he'd expected this moment, as if he was prepared for it, as if he was glad to have it done and over with? As they escorted him to the car, did Leffert wave a flashlight at the crowd and say, *Mind giving us some more room here, folks?*—or something like that? In the hand not holding the flashlight, did he hold a pouch of some kind? Did the frozen rain make pinging sounds as it bounced off the car's hood and trunk? Did the car's red taillights turn the rain into blood? Did its tires make crunching sounds as it backed up into the gravel road with Jack in the rear seat? As it did, did I yell: *What are you arresting him for? It's not his fault! He didn't do anything!*—or words to that effect? Hearing me yell, did Chief Leffert step toward me, still holding the plastic pouch? Did he call me by my proper name, then by my nickname, saying: *Half—that what they call you?*

Did I nod? Did frozen rain bounce off the visor of the chief's cap? Did Zag nudge me in the ribs while I stared, not sure what to say? Did Chief Leffert extract something red and

soft from the plastic pouch? Was the soft red object Gordon's Boy's Club cap?

Did Chief Leffert say: *Recognize this cap, Half?* Did I look down at it and say nothing? Did Chief Leffert repeat the question? *Is this your brother's baseball cap, son?* Did I correct him and say: *My stepbrother?* Did he say: *Was he wearing this when you last saw him?* Did I say nothing again? Did he say, *Answer me, son.*

Did I nod again? Did Chief Leffert wave to the car with Jack inside it? Did the car's windshield wipers go on? Did it drive off? Did I start blubbering? Seeing me blubber, did Chief Leffert put his hand on my shoulder? Did he say: *It's okay, son... It's okay...*

Was I already gone by then, swimming with Jack across Lost Lake, out to the island with the miniature stone lighthouse? Did I lay stretched out next to him on the smooth rock at its base, a blend of breeze and sunshine kissing the water droplets from my skin?

They kept Jack in a holding cell at the police station. He was allowed no visitors, whether to protect him from others or to protect others from him, I don't know. Both, probably.

To anyone who would listen I defended Jack. I told Chief Leffert we were friends, that Gordon and I had visited him regularly, that we'd all worked on the Thing in the Woods together. I told the police everything other than the two things that would have mattered most to them: 1) that Jack Thomas was an escaped German POW wanted by the FBI, and 2) that the body of Gordon Waple, my stepbrother, was somewhere at the bottom of Lost Lake.

Meanwhile I fended off accusations and insinuations by others. In the cafeteria line at school one day, I overheard Ronnie and Ricky Hermann, twin redheaded sophomores, referring to Jack as a murdering pervert—terms I myself might have applied to him back before I got to know him—saying that he should get the death sentence, that they should “fry his homo ass,” better still, they should cut off a certain part of his anatomy and feed it to him for lunch.

“With or without mayonnaise?” Ricky Hermann wondered.

“Mustard,” said Ronnie. “Definitely mustard!”

The Hermann twins were giggling when I brought my plastic lunch tray down hard, one by one, onto each of their red heads. For my trouble I got a black eye, a bloody nose, and three days' suspension, shortened to two by Principal Laurelton, who took pity on me, claiming I was still overcome with grief and therefore not in my right mind. Which is true, but probably not for the reasons he had in mind.



Three days after Jack's arrest, while hiking in the Dalton Estate, a father and his six-year-old son discovered Gordon's body

jammed into the sluiceway at Lost Lake. When Chief Leffert phoned to inform my mother and stepfather, neither of them was home. When I asked him why he was calling, at first Leffert refused to say.

"If it has to do with Gordon," I said, "I wish you'd please tell me."

The police chief relented. "The town coroner has ruled it death by misadventure."

"Misadventure? What does that mean?"

"It means your stepbrother's death was an accident. He must have fallen through the ice."

"You mean Mr. Thomas is innocent?"

"That's all I'm free to say, son. Have your mom or your stepfather get hold of me as quickly as possible. Okay?"



Another person I defended Jack to was Belinda. She'd recently been cast as Guinevere in the Thespian Society's production of the then new musical *Camelot* and asked me to run her lines with her. Out at the football field we wiped snow off one of the bleachers and sat there, reading one of her scenes, with me doing King Arthur. We'd done the scene once and were about to do it again when she blurted:

"Your stepbrother's death was no accident, Leo."

"What do you mean? It was so an accident!" I shot back a little too forcefully. "That's not just my opinion. That's according to the police." I tried to sound matter-of-fact but couldn't hide the panicked defensiveness in my voice.

"I guess it's just a coincidence," Belinda said sarcastically.

"What?"

"That Jack Thomas happens to be insane."

"Says who?"

"He was a patient at Silver Hills. Did you know that?"

I shook my head, though by then I knew that and much more.

"A friend of my mom's told her, a psychiatric nurse who

works up there. She saw his picture in the paper and recognized him. She said he was there for over a month and the whole time he never said a word to anyone. If she'd known that, my mother wouldn't have rented the cottage to him. Not that it matters anymore. Soon the cottage won't be hers to rent anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Uncle Baxter. He sold it."

"Sold? To who?"

"Some guy who wants to build a development up there."

"On Lost Lake? A development?"

"This developer guy's been trying to buy that property along with the rest of the old Dalton Estate for years. He finally offered Uncle Baxter enough so he gave in. Yeah, it sort of stinks, I know, but Mom got a nice piece of change out of the deal, enough to put me through college, so I guess I can't complain."

Just then I wasn't thinking about Fern Cottage. I was thinking about Jack, about what had happened to him mainly because of me.

"Jack's not crazy," I said quietly.

"Right," Belinda said. "And you're not a fool for thinking so."

Was it Belinda calling me a fool, or her calling Jack crazy? Or was it the thought of Lost Lake being destroyed by some developer? Or was it my own defensive rage—or a combination of all of those things? Anyway, my rage burst out of me:

"Your uncle's a greedy shithead, your mother's a witch, and you're a class-A bitch!"

We attacked each other, wrestling over the side of the bleachers and into a snowbank, where, by a clump of her flame-colored hair, I yanked Belinda's head back, exposing her snowy throat to the cloudy sky. She screamed. As I kept yanking and she kept screaming, both of us rolled across the frozen ground, until we found ourselves underneath the bleachers, with me on top of her. Before I knew it we were kissing each other, and doing much, much more, enough so that, when we emerged

from under those bleachers a half hour or so later, neither of us was the same person, quite. Anyway I wasn't.

As we headed back toward the school where we'd left our bikes I made a feeble attempt to hold Belinda's hand.

"Please," she sneered, shaking me off like something sticky and wet.



The next day after school I went to Fern Cottage. It had snowed again the night before. The roads were too icy to ride my bike so I walked. By the time I got there it was a quarter to five. There were fresh car tracks in the few patches of snow that remained along the gravel road. The cottage sat dark against the sky. No smoke rose from the chimney. I knocked on the green door. Did I really expect anyone to answer? I knocked again just in case. I tried the door then and found it locked. With my Swiss Army knife I jimmied it open.

"Jack?" I said, stepping inside, as if by some miracle he might be there. The echoes of my own voice answered me. I found the lamp with the long sooty snout and lit it.

It was no warmer inside the cottage than out. My breath made clouds in front of me. Otherwise, everything was pretty much as I'd last seen it. The table was there with the chess set on it and all the pieces set up for a game. Jack's bed was still tucked in the corner. The cabinet too was still there, the one with the drawer that held the book about swimming. Except for three pin insulators the bookshelves were empty. Jack's few books lay scattered all over, strewn across the stormy floorboards. I shivered. The stove was ice cold. I searched through the scattered books in search of the book about swimming. Could he have taken it with him? I didn't think so. He hadn't been carrying it when ...

Then I saw it. On the counter by the sink. The card with the crude drawing of a man swimming jutted out of it. *For Hoff*. I pulled it out, opened the card, and read:

Remember: the deepest water you'll ever drown in is yourself.

I sat on the floor with the lamp burning, the blue floorboards turned to dusky waves. A lump formed and grew steadily in my throat. Tears tugged at the corners of my eyes. I didn't cry when my father died, or when Gordon died. Not really, not actual tears. But I did now. The tears broke loose and slid cool down my cheeks.

Were the tears for Jack? For Gordon? For me?



When I next looked out the window, beyond the black silhouettes of tree trunks and branches an especially colorful sunset burned.

With the swimming book tucked under one arm, I left Fern Cottage and started down the gravel road. I'd taken less than twenty steps when I turned to see the cottage looking darker than ever, its green front door looking more black than green, its windowpanes aglow with the sunset's garish reflection.

What came over me then I'm not sure. I bent down, picked up a fistful of gravel and snow, and flung it, hard as I could, at the cottage's windows, smashing a pane. It felt good, so I did it again. For every windowpane I smashed, I cursed. I kept smashing windowpanes and cursing until there were no more windowpanes left to smash.

I'd started back down the gravel road again when a sudden camera-bulb-like flash lit up the twilight air. An explosion followed soon afterward. It in turn was followed by a thunder-like rumble rolling across the sky, an upside-down version of the rumbles that sounded before the ice broke on Lost Lake.

Weird, I said to myself as I kept walking toward those garish colors, this heat storm at the end of March. I assumed the colors were either an unusually show-offy sunset or the latest hat factory fire. They painted the whole Eastern sky in oranges and reds.



It wasn't a sunset or a hat factory fire. It was Virgil Zeno's carpentry shed burning.

By the time I got there a dozen fire trucks had already converged on the scene. The flames had already consumed most of the building's upper half, including the large billboard with the extraterrestrial greeting on the roof and the colossal white cross next to it. As it settled into the conflagration like the stern flag of a sinking ship the cross's many floodlights kept burning.

By the time the last flames were extinguished dawn had broken. Among the smoldering ruins no trace remained of Virgil's secret back room or the wooden flying saucer that occupied it. As for Virgil Zeno, he was never seen or heard from again.

The date was March 29th, 1964.

Easter Sunday.

PART 11

THE FLOOD

Gordon's funeral was on a Wednesday, a cherry pipe day, according to my stepfather's pipe-smoking schedule, though he didn't smoke at the funeral. That morning it poured. As Reverend Stumpf delivered the homily my stepfather held my hand, the one not holding an umbrella. As the reverend went on speaking his grip grew stronger and stronger, until I thought he'd crush my hand. Still, I didn't pull my hand away or cry out. I'd have let my stepfather break every bone in it if it had come to that. It was the least I deserved.

Through the whole funeral I didn't shed a tear. Afterward, though, with my umbrella folded, as I climbed into my stepfather's Buick, feeling his hand as he placed it gently on my shoulder, I suddenly lost it and collapsed in a bawling heap into a puddle next to the car. My mother nodded to my stepfather, who let me sit up front. As he drove us home, with me still sobbing, Walter Waple did something he'd never done before: he steered his Buick with one hand only, the other hand stroking my shoulder.

The next morning, April 7, 1964, the following story appeared on the front page of the *Danville News-Times*:

ESCAPED POW CAPTURED

HATTERTOWN (AP). The man who called himself Jack Thomas, and who several weeks ago was arrested and questioned in the disappearance of Gordon Waple, the mentally retarded son of a local hat merchant, who went missing and was later discovered to have drowned, turns out to have been German army soldier Johann Verhoff, sought by the FBI for more than 18 years.

Verhoff, 42, escaped in August of 1945 from POW Camp Henderson in Bernadotte, Illinois, where, for 23 months—from October of 1943, when he'd been captured

in North Africa while part of a Panzer division on its retreat to Tunisia—he had been POW# 81G-9385.

Verhoff's escape coincided with the end of the war and with his imminent release from the camp. It is conjectured that the motive for his escape was to avoid repatriation to his homeland. A champion swimmer and high-diver, Verhoff had been training for the 1940 Summer Olympics in Tokyo when the war erupted.

Verhoff's escape route took him across the country, from the Pacific Northwest, where he worked as a lumberjack, and where he broke his leg in a fall while topping a tree, to Chicago, where he was employed by a slaughterhouse as a "ham-skinner," and then to the Northeast, where he worked as head lifeguard at a resort lodge in the Adirondacks, and where he met and married antiquarian book dealer Margaret Chapel.

After suspicions caught up with him at the lodge, Verhoff fled to New Haven, Connecticut, and from there to Hattertown by way of Newbury, where he was briefly a patient at the Silver Hills State Psychiatric Hospital.

It remains unclear whether the statute of limitations may have run out on prosecution for Verhoff's case, or whether it applies to escaped POWs. Since he was properly admitted into the United States as a POW, Verhoff cannot be charged with illegal entry. When questioned, a spokesman for the FBI would say only that Verhoff had been turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

As a POW, Verhoff made 80¢ a day working for local farmers, money that would eventually help him in his escape. According to the FBI spokesman, he arrived at his pseudonym, Jack Thomas, after hopping a freight box-car packed with bags of Jack Frost sugar. His last name, Thomas, he took from the well-known baker of English muffins.



In the days, weeks, and months following Gordon's funeral, my stepfather never said a word about his lost son. He went on about his routine, eating his breakfast of Melba toast and tea, reading the paper, working at his failing hat store, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, let alone a personal tragedy of enormous magnitude, let alone losing his one and only child. I wondered if he'd behaved similarly after his first wife committed suicide.

Every so often, though, in the middle of the night, I would wake up to creaking sounds coming from somewhere downstairs. One rainy night I investigated to find my stepfather sitting in his rocking chair in the dark parlor, the faint orange glow from the bowl of his pipe when he puffed it the only light in the room.

"Is everything okay?" I asked him.

"Sure, sport. Fine, just fine. Just sitting here listening to the rain. Always relaxes me, the sound of raindrops falling. I wonder why that is? Unruffles the feathers, as it were."

"I'm getting a glass of water. Would you like one?"

"Sure. Wet the ol' whistle. Make mine a double!"

It was the closest thing my stepfather and I had ever had to an intimate conversation.



Of all the dumb ideas religions have come up with, hell is by far the dumbest. Who needs a pitchfork-wielding devil slaving over subterranean ovens in which the damned are roasted perpetually when hell can be had right here on earth, its fires fueled by evil deeds, fanned by winds of guilt, remorse, and regret? For three months I lived in that earthly purgatory.

Then something broke in me.

My mother was in the parlor watching TV. The latest episode of *The Twilight Zone* was on, about a hit-and-run driver haunted by his Ford Fairlane—the car he committed his crime in. The car wakes him up in the middle of the night, its headlights flashing, its horn blaring, pushing him deeper and deeper into his guilt, until finally it drives him to the police station to turn himself in. With the episode over, while the credits rolled, with tears in my eyes I threw myself at my mother on her couch, blubbering:

“I killed Gordy! It was all my fault!”

“What? Don’t be silly, Leo!”

“I’m not! It’s true!”

“You have no reason to blame yourself, Leo,” she said, stroking my head. “None at all. It was an accident.”

“But it wasn’t!”

“Leo, please. Stop talking that way!”

I wanted to say more, to confess everything, to explain to my mother and the world how in the space of less than a week I’d lost the two most important people in my life, and that it had all or mostly been my fault, that I was an irresponsible foolish worthless selfish liar who didn’t deserve to partake of even the most ordinary, earthbound things, let alone something of the infinite. All I managed to say was:

“It wasn’t! It wasn’t!”

“Oh, Leo . . .” my mother said and went on stroking my head.



The second Wednesday in April the strike at the Caxton-Dumont Hat Works finally came to an end—not with a new contract for the workers, but with the announcement that the factory would be terminating operations and shutting its doors for good.

Winter was over. All but a few stubborn clumps of snow had melted. May showers would finish the job.

We call our planet Earth, but if we'd had our wits about us we would have named her Water. We're a planet of water: a molten spinning globe slathered with heaving, swaying, crashing, rolling, sloshing oceans, streaked with rivers, splotted with alligator-infested bayous, daubed with mosquito-dazzled swamps, smeared with muddy marshes, basted with brackish bogs, bays, and tidal basins, to say nothing of canals, ponds, puddles, reservoirs, lagoons, creeks, and lakes. Since the first mammals shed their gills, eons have elapsed. Yet some part of us never left the water, or it never left us. To remind us of this fact, every so often the earth's waters gather for their version of a family reunion. We call those gatherings *floods*.

The Flood of '64 was the worst to visit The Nutmeg State since the fabled Hurricane of '38, bad enough to make some wonder if, like the Flood of Genesis, it was an act of divine retribution.

I was sitting alone on Cheese Hill, idly tossing cheese bombs down at the reject shed roof of the newly defunct Caxton-Dumont plant, when a black mountain-like cloud loomed up in the southeastern sky. As the mountain rolled closer a stiff breeze kicked up, exposing the pale undersides of the leaves of a nearby elm tree and making me shiver. Except for the sound of the wind, things went suddenly, eerily quiet then. The air around me turned a queer blue-gray shade, like those wide floor planks in Fern Cottage. I smelled the tangy odor of ozone, a short circuit smell. That's when I ran for it.



The first of the two storm systems drew its strength from the waters off Long Island Sound, sucking schools of bass, sturgeon, and cod from shallows, carrying them southwest past the beaches at Mystic and Lordship before veering sharply inland between Stanford and Cos Cob.

The winds ripped off store awnings. They rattled shop windows, blew the lids off garbage cans, knocked street signs off their posts, uprooted shrubbery, privet hedges, and picket fences. For twenty-four hours there was only the wind.

Then the rain came, falling at five inches per hour. It took less than six hours for the Brim River to breach its banks, turning Felt Street into a muddy torrent navigated by perplexed-looking drivers, their Fords, Chevys, and Plymouths turned into amphibious launches. Children frolicked in mud-puddles, ignoring their parents' frantic pleas to remove to higher ground. The same parents and children arrived home later that day to find frogs swimming in milk boxes, snakes curled up in flowerpots, and lily pads clinging to the soles of their shoes and sneakers.

The second of the two storm systems had yet to arrive.

Like those of most Highlanders, my stepfather's Crown Boulevard house perched high above the floodplain, threatened only by high winds and lightning. Given that, reason dictated that along with the rest of us Walter J. Waple should stay there until the storm blew over.

But when it came to hats Walter Waple was anything but reasonable. As the floodwaters rose, my stepfather donned his yellow Mackintosh and galoshes. With a plastic bonnet stretched over his fedora he stepped out into the watery world.

Gone to store, said the handwritten note he left behind for us on the breakfast nook table. As my mother studied it with a dully abstracted look on her face, I sat at the end of the bench, tugging on my own galoshes.

"And just where do you think *you're* going?" my mother asked.

"To help Mr. Waple!"

"You pick now of all times to be a decent stepson?"

I flipped the rain parka's hood over my head.

"You are *not* going out in this crazy weather, Leo Napoli. Do you hear me? You are staying right here inside this house with your mother. Understood?"

I yanked up my zipper.

"Take off that raincoat this instant!" she ordered.

But I was already headed out the door.



Roads, houses, trees, sky, and clouds, all had merged into a swirling wet mass of gray and brown, as if seen through a waterlogged kaleidoscope. The wind smelled of dead fish. I pedaled my bicycle into town, the gusts so strong at times I had trouble steering. By then the police had barricaded the flooded downtown streets. To get to my stepfather's hat store I had to cut through the alleyway between the movie theater and Kirby's hardware store. Muddy torrents threatened to drag the wheels of my bicycle out from under me. When the water rose to my calves I gave up and ditched the bike in the alley.

By the time I got to my stepfather's store, water was lapping at the bricks under both display windows. I found my stepfather, his rolled trouser-bottoms soaked, sucking the cold stem of his brier pipe—his Thursday pipe, though it was a Friday—shifting inventory to higher shelves. By then the store's basement storage room was completely submerged. Rainbow-tinged water covered the maroon carpeting on which my stepfather had arranged boxed hats in staggered, staggering piles.

Working side by side, my stepfather and I unboxed hats and jamming them onto higher shelves. Meanwhile the oil-stained bog at our feet deepened steadily, licking the tops of our galoshes. It wasn't long before it had climbed to the glass knobs of the lower display cabinets. By then the higher shelves were jam-packed with hats, with dozens of boxed refugees still awaiting rescue on the floor down below. Those on the bottom were already partly submerged in flood-gunk, the hats inside them undoubtedly destroyed.

I heard a sharp tapping noise and turned to see Mr. Mortimer, owner of Mortimer Jewelers four stores down, rapping on the window with a coin. Through the rain-streaked glass I saw his distraught mouth form the words *Get the hell out of there!* before he turned and sloshed away in hip-waders.

I faced my stepfather who stood on an aluminum steplad-

der, its lowest rung now mere inches above the rising water. As he held a swaying pile of boxed hats, for which he had found no space on the shelves, his eyes bore the look of a chess champion who, though intellectually he grasps that his king is doomed, has yet to grasp it emotionally. In the greasy reflecting pool that had been the carpeted floor, a medley of hats nosed and thumped each other.

"We've got to get out of here!" I said to him. "Don't you see? It's hopeless! There's nothing more to be done!"

Just then the overloaded shelf we had been piling stock onto gave way, sending a dozen Silver Beaver XXX homburgs (priced at \$10.99 each—\$83.72 in today's money) cascading down into the muck. My stepfather stood frozen on the stepladder, balancing a totem pole of stacked hats, gazing down at the disaster.

"Go on ahead, sport," he said. "I'll be done in a jiff, if you will."

"But it's *hopeless!*" I said. (Jack: "*Nussing iss omblez.*")

"Just as soon as I get these last few hats shelved..."

"Will you forget the damn hats?"

"Sport, these are triple-X beaver. Too good to drown, as it were. If I can make just a bit more room for them up here...if I can just...make a bit more...just a bit..."

A vacant look took hold of my stepfather's face. His unlit pipe fell from his lips to land with a *plonk* in the murky water below, which by then lapped at the ladder's third lowest rung. As if only just realizing his predicament, he took one cautious step down the ladder, then another. Then, as if answering a call, with the stacked hats still balanced in the crook of his arm, he aimed his gaze through the right-hand display window, out at the flooded street, though his pupils seemed to be focused on something farther away.

"Upon my word..." he said.

As he kept staring, between ladder rungs the toe of my stepfather's left galosh groped blindly for a few moments. Then stepladder, stepfather, and hats all tumbled down. I cried:

"Dad!"

I'd never called him that before, ever.

"Dad! Dad!"

I said it again and again, as if along with all his unwanted gifts I'd stored away all those "dads" in some dark closet.

"Dad! Dad!"

I put an arm under and turned him over. His top front tooth was chipped, his upper lip split and bleeding. A trickle of bright red blood fanned out into the muddy water.

"Dad!"

While stroking my stepfather's head I looked helplessly around. Through the display window, whose broken neon sign proclaimed a partnership that was never to be, I watched a cop in a yellow rain slicker yell at a truck driver who'd breached the barricades.

With my stepfather's head propped onto a hatbox, I stood up. Against the weight of rushing water I managed to heave the front door open and staggered out into what had been the town's main thoroughfare but was now a muddy canal. Through brown, murky, knee-high waves I splashed toward the cop, crying:

"My dad! Something's happened to my dad!"



By rescue boat my stepfather was taken to the Methodist church, which occupied a rise at the edge of the flood plain. On the front steps of the church I sat beside him, stroking his hatless head, listening to his shallow breaths as I waited for one of two army helicopters that were making the rounds to see us and fly him to Danville Hospital. Finally—in a monsoon of rotor wash—a helicopter arrived. Through a megaphone the guardsman straddling its opened doorway informed me and everyone else in earshot that Governor Rubicoff had declared a state of emergency. Martial law had been imposed. The flood area was now officially off-limits to all. Looters would be shot on sight.

"Get yourself to high ground, son," the guardsman yelled down after raising my stepfather by harness up into the chopper.

"Can't I come with you?" I yelled back.

The guardsman shook his head. "No room. Your dad will be fine. Now shag your ass out of here!"

I watched the helicopter flutter away, a black hornet buzzing high above the church steeple.



By then the floodwaters were lapping at the church's lowest steps. I was about to obey the guardsman's orders when—out from behind the rectory—a skiff appeared, manned not by national guardsmen or by a fire & rescue team, but by the Back Shop Boys.

The skiff's aluminum hull was badly dinged and battered. Using a plank as a tiller, Zag steered the craft, while Skunky and Victor manned one oar each. The bilge was piled with cases of Pepsi-Cola and Seven-Up, loaves of Wonder bread, and gallon-jugs filled with what I guessed was water. All the skiff's crewmembers wore bright paper party hats. In the forepeak, next to the car battery that apparently powered it, a Citizen's Band radio spluttered.

Victor blew a party blowout.

"Ahoy, matey!" he said.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"A rescue party," said Skunky. "What does it look like?"

"Who have you rescued?"

"No one yet," said Victor. "But the day is still young!"

"Martial law's been declared," I informed them.

"We heard." Zag pointed to the radio.

"Martial Dillon! *Guns smoke!*" Victor said. Drawing imaginary six-shooters, in the half-swamped skiff he and Skunky shot each other dead.

"What brings you to these cheery surroundings?" Zag asked.

I filled him in about my stepfather.

Zag nodded. "Need a lift?"

"You can be our first rescue victim!" said Skunky, bailing.

"Climb aboard!" Victor said.

"Thanks, but I'll take my chances on not-so-dry land."

Another helicopter fluttered overhead. A loudspeaker blared: "Clear the area! Clear the area!" Through the CB radio a panicked, scratchy voice reported that the reservoir dam had been breached.

"The dogs!" said Zag.



By the time we got to the pound the floodwaters were already raging over the dam. A dozen men stood atop a rise overlooking it. Nearby a hook and ladder and a national guard truck were parked. Judging by the anxiety engraved on the men's faces, we guessed that the dam wouldn't hold for much longer.

In the pound we found Sergeant Pomeroy slumped over his desk on which a Wild Turkey fifth rolled, toppled and empty. Water licked the toes of his orange brogans. A red comet of blood streaked across the top of his desk. I lifted the sergeant's head, exposing a gash on his brow. He must have sliced it open on the desk's edge when he passed out.

Shouting, "Every dog for himself!" Zap opened all forty kennel cages. Two-dozen canine POWs yapped and howled their way into the flooded world. Meanwhile I tried to rouse the sergeant, shouting into his ear, slapping his ham-shank cheeks, splashing paper cups of ice water from the Crystal Rock dispenser on his face. Having failed to revive him, we dragged him out to the canine van only to find that it wouldn't start. We had to get him to higher ground.

The pound phone was dead. We tried the CB.

"Mayday! Mayday! *Help!*"

A flurry of static answered.

We ran up the hill to the nearest house, a yellow Cape Cod with a Volkswagen Beetle parked under a lean-to alongside it. We knocked. A girl of five or six answered. She gazed at us,

her round blue eyes deepening with confusion as we explained our predicament to her, or tried to. Soon her mother appeared, frazzled and ready to defend herself and her daughter to the death in a chiffon housecoat and fluffy pink slippers. We asked if we could borrow her car.

She looked at us like we were crazy.

"How old are you?" she wanted to know.

"Fourteen," Zag answered for us. "But I know how to drive!"

"And I know how to say you are out of your minds!"

"It's an emergency!" Skunky told her.

"Sergeant Pomeroy's passed out!" Victor explained.

"What else is new?" the woman asked.

"Any minute now, lady, the dam's gonna burst," Zag said. "We all need to get out of here, pronto!"

"Sure," said the woman, rolling her eyes.

By the sleeve of her housecoat Zag yanked her onto her stoop and pointed up at the cluster of emergency vehicles gathered on the rise next to the dam. "You and your daughter and everyone else here need to get to higher ground, now!"

With the little girl on Victor's lap in the passenger seat, her mother (an oilskin flung over her housecoat) at the wheel, and Pomeroy jammed into the back seat between Skunky and me, we rode in the Volkswagen to the same hospital where they'd taken my stepfather. While Zag checked Sergeant Pomeroy in, I went off to look for him. I found him stretched out on a gurney in a corridor outside the emergency room. My mother sat in a chair near to him.

"I swear," she said when she saw me, "I'd beat the daylight out of you, only I don't want to give these poor doctors more work to do."

I leaned over my stepfather. He looked like he was sleeping. His face was white. They had stitched together his upper lip. Against his pale skin the sutures looked extra black. I held his hand.

"Do they know what's wrong with him?" I asked.

"The doctor says he had a stroke. That's when the blood—"

"I know what a stroke is, Mom."

"Do you, now, smartypants? Answer me this, Mr. Einstein: how is it that a complete fool like you who doesn't even know to keep out of a hurricane knows so darn much?"

Before I could answer she pulled me into a hug so fierce I couldn't breathe.



At two o'clock in the morning the dam gave way. The resulting deluge tore the green iron bridge from its moorings and swept it two hundred yards downstream, where it lodged at a bend in the river. Six tons of flotsam, including two cars, a sofa, and a refrigerator, joined the bridge, forming an impromptu dam that National Guardsmen, in cooperation with the Highway Department, blew up.

The army flew in two more helicopters to pluck stragglers from rooftops. By then the middle and high school gymnasiums, which had been converted into emergency shelters, were both filled to capacity. The Red Cross provided food, medicine, and first aid.

Seven days after the rains had begun, the floodwaters subsided. As the pressure from the water eased off, a gas main between the Doughboy Diner and the bridge's moorings exploded. The fire burned all through the night and into the dawn, when fire crews managed to extinguish it. The same morning a three-member task force—a National Guardsman, a police officer, and an army corpsman—were assessing the damage to another exposed gas main in a fifteen-foot motorboat, when the vibrations from the boat's outboard engine blew out its stern, casting all three task force members into the floodwaters. The police officer and the guardsman both drowned.

Later that same day a mother of four was crushed to death when a hat factory smokestack collapsed, the ground supporting it having been weakened by all the rain. Six more deaths—including that of Mr. Kirby, owner of Hattertown

Hardware, who suffered a heart attack—brought the final death toll to nine.

In the weeks following the flood, acting under the advice of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as a precautionary measure, the town selectman ordered all ten remaining hat factory chimneys imploded. Over as many days the sole remnants of Hattertown's once-glorious past, each rigged with a quarter ton of dynamite, were imploded.

Along with others who gathered to witness the spectacle, I watched them settle one by one into clouds of ruddy dust.

PART 12

THE LAST OF THE BACK SHOP BOYS

The summer after the flood the gypsy moths came. Actually they had been there all along, incubating in their ugly brown cocoons. Since late spring I had noticed their lampshade-like tents clinging to the branches just as the trees were starting to bud. As the temperature rose the tents burst open, releasing hundreds of tiny inchworms no larger than the plastic things on the ends of shoelaces (which, as any trivia-minded person knows, are called *aglets*). The worms quickly grew into hairy caterpillars, eating their way from tree to tree, turning green hills gray and summer itself into a muggy, snowless winter. On clear nights without a cloud in the sky the worms' droppings made a sound like falling rain.

My stepfather's stroke had left most of his left side paralyzed, including the muscles on that side of his face, which drooped from his jaw and cheekbones like mozzarella from a slice of pizza. When he did speak, it was with great effort and a pronounced slur. Needless to say he had to give up the store. Mostly he sat in his rocking chair in the parlor, puffing his unlit pipe, staring off into space, or at the television set.

Over time more strokes did more damage. When my stepfather couldn't feed himself anymore, that task fell mostly to me. I'd put a bib on him, pull up a chair, and spoon-feed him mashed potatoes, mushroom soup, and tapioca pudding. Between spoonfuls I would wipe his pale lips from which the following four utterances alone escaped: "If you will... As it were... So to speak... Upon my word..."

I was glad to feed my stepfather, glad to be able to do anything to atone, if only slightly, for the miserable way I'd treated him.

The way a stroke victim's blood vessels seal themselves off to prevent further damage, I sealed myself off from people around me. When school started again that September, I kept

to myself as much as possible with one exception: I signed up for the swim team. Swimming, that least social of all sports. Even if I'd wanted to, it would have been hard to socialize with my face in the water.

When not half under water, I swam in a deep ice-cold lake of my own aloofness. On rare occasions when other people's eyes met mine, the look in mine said, "Back off!" or something to that effect. Questioned on different occasions by worried parents, teachers, and my guidance counselor as to my "withdrawn" behavior, I shrugged off their concerns and said I was fine.



The one time I got together with the Back Shop Boys we squabbled. Using a pair of old boxing gloves that, according to Victor, his father had worn when he pounded Rocky Graziano (or was it Marciano?) to a ninth-round technical knockout, we sparred in the Szentgyorgyi garage, the same one under which Mr. Szentgyorgyi supposedly built a fallout shelter, and that also housed his father's XKE Jaguar—which, as usual, was in the shop for repairs (the car parked in the Szentgyorgyi driveway was a Corvair).

The boxing gloves hung by their laces from a rusty nail driven into a rafter. Victor being too fat to climb ladders, I got them down for us. Zag and I put on one glove apiece and sparred there in the Szentgyorgyi garage, amid dust motes and oil stains, with Skunky timing the rounds on his cereal box premium Huckleberry Hound wristwatch. Like a pair of fencers, while jabbing each other above the waist and below the neck, we kept our ungloved hands tucked behind our backs. The parched decrepit gloves lacerated our forearms.

We'd been boxing for less than two minutes when a stray uppercut of mine grazed Zag's jaw. Off went Zag's one glove, out came bare knuckles. As Zag turned my head into a punching bag Victor laughed; he couldn't help it. *You fat tub of shit*, I thought as Zag punched me. *You goddamn fat miserable tub!*

When Zag had finished with me I got up, grabbed both of our boxing gloves, ran outside and across the yard to the

Szentgyorgyi's open septic pond, and tossed them in. Then I stood there, panting, watching them float among turds and toilet paper.



After that the Back Shop Boys and I got together one last time. I needed a favor from them.

We rode our bikes to the Dalton Estate, where I led the others to the Thing in the Woods. By then the junk sculptures had been thoroughly vandalized, their rusty arms and chain conveyor spines broken, their hat-block heads split open. Others had been knocked over and heaved into the flooded drift. To every one of the hundreds of glass insulators lining the mine's walls, someone had taken a hammer or something equally destructive.

The gantry was still where we'd left it. Though they had rotted a bit, the ropes still held. It took some doing, but with Victor—who'd lost a lot of weight recently but still weighed more than any of us—tailing on and the rest of us hauling, we lifted the obelisk out of the flooded drift and onto the pedestal.

As we stood admiring our handiwork, wiping sweat from our brows, Skunky said:

"I still don't get it. What's the point?"

"Things unknown and unknowable," I said under my breath.

"Huh?" said Victor.

"There is no point," said Zag. "That's the point."

Skunky spat into the drift.

That was the last time we all got together.



But that still wasn't the real end of the Back Shop Boys. The real end came toward the end of senior year, when Victor told me that his father had been an engineer on the Hartford & New Haven Line. This was presumably after singlehandedly winning World War II and knocking out Rocky Graziano/Marciano.

"Dad engineered the last of the old steam locomotives," he explained proudly. "The day his foreman told him they were

switching to diesel, he took off his striped engineer's cap, spit a wad of tobacco juice into the ballast, and said, 'In that case, Mr. Railroad Foreman, I quit!'"

Before quitting, however, according to Victor, Mr. Szentgyorgyi absconded with *seven* locomotives. One by one under cover of darkness he made off with them to a secret location in the hills of Southern Vermont. Having learned of Mr. Szentgyorgyi's courageous deed, other engineers in all forty-nine contingent states appropriated their own condemned locomotives and drove them surreptitiously to the same secret Vermont location.

"All Dad had to do then was wait seven years for the statute of limitations to run out," Victor explained. "Which it has. Now he's free and clear to line up investors and raise capital. Soon as he does, he'll announce the opening of the greatest railroad museum in the whole world. 'Steamtown, USA,' is what he's gonna call it."

When he told this latest lie, Victor and I were standing side by side before a bank of urinals in a high school lavatory, emptying our bladders between classes. On the tiled white wall in front of us, in black Magic marker someone had scrawled a horizontal line. Above the line they had written, *If you can piss above this line, the Hattertown volunteer fire dept. wants you.*

"Can I ask you something, Victor?" I said, peeing.

He looked at me.

"Why are you such a goddamn liar?"

In my peripheral vision, I saw Victor's face drop. Right away I regretted my remark. I waited for him to say something—anything—to try and wriggle out of the question I'd thrown over him like a net over a butterfly, or just lie to me more and make me feel a little less cruel, a little less heartless. Instead he stood there looking down into the urinal, licking his lips, holding his dick. And that's where I left him.

The next day while I was at my school locker Zag walked up to me.

"What did you say to Victor?" He clenched and unclenched

his fists. His lips drew back up against his teeth.

"I called him a liar," I said.

"Why did you do that? You shouldn't have done that. You of all fucking people." The way he said it, it was like I'd wiped out a sandcastle we'd spent our whole lives building together. Zag didn't even wait for an answer. He didn't even bother to punch me, he was so disgusted. He walked away, shaking his head.

That was the real end of the Back Shop Boys.

On the third anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination, my stepfather died, a coincidence that, had he been alive to experience it, would have appalled Walter Waple. A pine casket was all that my mother could afford, her second husband having left her in debt to the tune of over \$25,000 dollars. We buried him in the cemetery at Gravity Hill, the one where Dwight Riddell bashed open his skull.

The Comformator—my stepfather's invention that was supposed to revolutionize the hatting industry while making him and us, his family, rich—ruined us. Having already taken him to the cleaners for thousands of dollars, Harvey Gilmore, my stepfather's business partner and patent attorney, fleeced him further by filing a claim for patent infringement against the American Totalizer Corporation, the firm to which he'd leased the rights to the invention, so he claimed. According to the complaint, ATC underhanded the Comformator's "unique, patented technology" to another firm, which underhanded it to a third company. A court order was issued; a private investigator was put on retainer. In the end nothing was proven—at a cost of \$10,000 dollars in legal and detective fees. Guess who the detective turned out to be? Harvey Gilmore, dba Allied Investigation Services, LTD. (Last reports had Mr. Gilmore in Venezuela by way of Las Vegas and Tijuana.)

The bank having finally foreclosed on the Crown Heights house, we moved into a one-bedroom apartment over the Top Hat Bakery, a few doors down from what used to be Waple & Son Hats. For the next six months, my mother and I were greeted each morning by the heady odor of baking pumpernickel bread wafting up through the floorboards. The smell triggered my mother's migraines; it didn't sit well with me, either. After that, Mom found us an even smaller apartment, this one over a beauty parlor. The smell of scorched hair was

no big improvement over that of baking pumpernickel, but by then my mother and I were too worn out to care.



Half the male graduating class of '68 were drafted and sent overseas. Victor received his order for induction soon after he graduated, by which time he and his family had relocated to Bellows Falls, Vermont. By then Zag had already enlisted in the Marine Corps. Skunky joined the army, where (big surprise) he trained as a demolitions expert. Since he was a quaker, Dwight Riddell applied for and was granted conscientious objector status.

As for Belinda Dalton, it would take me the next decade to discover that more often than not the people you expect most from in high school turn out to be the biggest under-achievers. I had her pegged as a famous poet or actress, or maybe a top-notch magazine or newspaper editor. She'd go to Harvard or Yale or maybe Princeton. Inexplicably, she never went to college; she never left Hattertown. Having spent most of junior and senior year abusing sex first, then alcohol, and finally various drugs, Belinda turned to the biggest and most addictive drug of all: religion. She became a Jehovah's Witness and married...not Dwight Riddell (who wound up marrying a florist ten years older than he), but Wesley Conklin, the accordion player, whom she succeeded in converting.

Thanks to my missing middle finger, I was permanently 4-F ("unqualified for military service"), which didn't stop me from putting myself at the mercy of Uncle Sam.

It is said that among certain primitive tribes the first-born male is removed from his parents at birth and taken up into the mountains where he's put in the care of a shaman. For the next eighteen years his experience of the world is limited to the inside of the shaman's hut, veiled in darkness, lit only by the stars or the moon. On the dawn of his eighteenth birthday the shaman throws open the hut door. Sunlight spills in, blinding the boy. Leading him by the hand, the shaman guides

him through the jungle to a clearing where he turns to the boy and says, "The time has come for you to see the world."

On the dawn of my eighteenth birthday the door to my shaman's hut burst open. In the blinding daze that followed, I struck upon the monumentally dumb idea of enlisting in the United States Air Force. I did so on the assumption that it would put me on the quickest path to my dream of becoming an astronaut. Little did I know that the same missing finger that had spared me from the draft meant that I could perform only limited military duties, and only in times of war. The war presented no problem; we had one of those. As for "limited duties," roughly translated it meant: *don't even dream about flying*.



Zag had been in Vietnam for ninety-six days when the sergeant leading his platoon through a jungle patrol was blown into the air by a homemade mine detonated by a Vietcong soldier lying in wait. The sergeant was killed instantly. The soldier in front of him got shrapnel in his thighs. Zag's left foot—the same foot his father lost to a combination of gangrene and #4 lead shot—was blown off at the top of his boot and had to be amputated. A month later, at the Battle of Hill 723, Victor's number came up. He was awarded a posthumous Bronze Star.

The Air Force having granted my request for a bereavement leave (the army denied Skunky's request for a similar leave), in my mother's Rambler American, with Zag riding in the passenger seat next to me, I drove us to Victor's wake, which took place at the Presbyterian Church in Bellows Falls. And though Mr. Szentgyorgyi was there for his son's graveside sermon, afterward, at the reception held in the Szentgyorgyi home, among mourners and cold cuts, Mr. Szentgyorgyi was nowhere to be seen.

"Bet I know where he is," Zag said to me with a sly look.

Back in my mother's Rambler, Zag directed me down a series of increasingly small roads to a tree-lined curve along an embankment, where he had me pull over. I got out and stood

there. All I saw was a bunch of scraggly pine trees overlooking a gulley.

"What am I looking at? There's nothing here!"

"Ye of little faith..." said Zag.

He indicated that I should step through the trees.

With a sigh, shaking my head, I made my way between pine trees and scrambled down the steep embankment. That's when I saw them, soaking in the bright sunlight of a cloudless October day: five, six, eight, a dozen—more—broad-chested steam locomotives, all cinnamon-dusted with rust. Like a desert nomad intent on a mirage, tripping over rails and ties, I hurried toward them. Soon I found myself alone among those engines, a sole human interloper among rusting dinosaurs.

Or so I thought until I noticed a pair of pinstriped legs jutting out from under a set of locomotive wheels. Wearing old-fashioned railroad overalls and holding a long-stemmed oilcan, Mr. Szentgyorgyi emerged.

"Hello, Leo," he said, wiping himself.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh." Mr. Szentgyorgyi shrugged. "I couldn't take any more condolences."

"No, I meant—?" I pointed to the oilcan.

"Oh, *this*?" He held the oilcan up. "Heck, it's all I can do to keep these babies from rusting solid."



I underwent basic training at Chanute Air Force Base, near Rantoul, Illinois, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from where Jack had been a POW. From there I was transferred to Tyndall AFB in Florida. On my arrival my sergeant presented me with the weapon with which I was to defend my country against all enemies foreign and domestic: a paintbrush, three-inch square trim. The "ammunition," a can of gray latex paint, was in the supply hut next to the ladder.

Despite having my wings clipped, I still managed to defy gravity. My space capsule was the twelfth-floor balcony of the

high-rise apartment building that was our air force dorm. On the July 20th, 1969 at 4:17 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, at a moon landing party there, by a combination of nine fingers, as many fingers of bourbon, and pure dumb luck, I dangled from that balcony. You never saw a party clear out so fast. The following morning, having puked my guts along a mile-long stretch of white sand beach, as I lay throbbing in my barracks, an inner voice that might have been God's (though it sounded a lot like my dad), said, "Do that again, son, and you'll have your answers."

It was in that jungle of beaches and strip malls that I met my future wife, Bernadette Gomek, a twenty-five-year-old drug rehab nurse from Greta Falls, Montana. In May of '75 she and I made it legal. Three years after we married, I resigned my Air Force commission. A year later Bernie gave birth to our first and only child, a boy. Guess what we named him?



Though as you know by now I've never been a religious person, still, I think Jesus had a few very good suggestions, chief among them: when someone slaps your cheek "turn the other one to him also." It's called forgiveness and it applies equally when you've slapped your own cheek.

When a person does something wrong in life they have a choice: they can live with it, or they can not live at all. Having made the first choice you learn to forgive yourself, since you can't go on otherwise. You live with your shame and guilt the way other people live with psoriasis and tinnitus and ulcers and other ailments invisible to others. Meanwhile you keep a sharp eye out for redemptive opportunities: tipping generously, smiling at waiters and shop clerks, helping blind people across streets, performing other random acts of kindness. To the cashier who hands you your receipt at the supermarket and the high school senior bagging groceries there, say, "Have a nice day," and mean it. Understand that others have their own reasons for feeling remorseful or guilty, their own sorrows and

secrets and sins burrowing like scabies under their skins. Forgive them, one and all. It may be a cliché, but it also happens to be true: forgiveness begins at home.

Over time the guilt that I'd harbored over my role in Gordon's death and Jack's capture dissolved, as did my sense of disappointment: in my life and with myself. Eventually the future started looking bright again. By then, of course, it was more my son's future than my own, but still, it would do.

As for Jack, the day would soon dawn when there would be no one left to remember World War II, let alone that there had been over 400,000 German POWs in the United States, let alone that a handful of them managed to escape for more than just a few days or weeks. By the time I met Jack, the rest of that handful of prisoners had long since been captured and sent back to wherever they were from. Which, I guessed, is what happened to Jack. He'd been sent back to what had been his country but was now locked away behind the Iron Curtain and may as well have been the dark side of the moon.

Still, I did my best to learn what happened to him. I wrote the FBI, who referred me to the State Department, whose offices informed me that they only investigated missing persons cases involving US citizens and suggested that I contact what was then called Immigration and Naturalization Services. This I did, only to discover that in early May of 1963 one Johann Verhoff, also known as "Jack Thomas," was deported to the German Democratic Republic, to Berlin in the Soviet Zone. No further information was available.

Since the United States government didn't recognize the GDR, we had no embassy there. Instead there was something called the "U.S. Mission Berlin" (USBER). They directed me to the Wehrmacht Information Office for War Losses and Prisoners of War (WASp) which, since its creation in 1939, has kept records on every German soldier during World War II, but they were only able to trace Jack's whereabouts as far as East Berlin. Thanks to the Cold War it was impossible to get any more information from behind the Iron Curtain.

I considered writing the KGB, then thought better of it, realizing a letter from a citizen of the USSR's archrival could only get Jack in worse trouble than might already have found him. I pictured him in the equivalent of a Soviet gulag (the penal camp system having been officially dismantled by 1960), pushing a wheelbarrow like the one I'd seen him push in the woods behind Fern Cottage, but much steeper, with no trees anywhere, just piles of mud and rock, one of an army of exhausted men, digging and hauling, driving pickaxes into the frozen earth, freezing, sweating, and starving to death in a Sisyphean Soviet moonscape.

Or maybe not: maybe Jack had found happiness. He was alive and well. He lived in a cozy neat apartment, had a good job. He'd met someone—a man, a woman, whatever—had fallen in love. Maybe he'd had, or adopted, a child—or two, or three. He could have been anywhere, on a Greek Island, living on the French or the Italian Riviera. I liked to think of him swimming every day in a lake, river, or a pool—or in a sea, the Baltic, the Aegean, the Mediterranean (though had it been up to me, it would have been a lake).

Assuming that he was alive somewhere, did Jack Thomas ever think about me? If he thought about me, did he think well of me? Or did he resent me for getting him caught and delivering him to whatever fate was his? Did he hate my guts?

As the years went by, when I remembered Jack at all, it was like remembering a dream. Our time together seemed that unreal to me. It was too happy to be real. And too sad.



Then, six years ago, something happened that convinced me that the dream had been real after all. My son was born with a condition called polycystic kidney disease. He inherited it from his mother, who had inherited it from her father, who died of it. Seven years ago, Gordon lost the second of his kidneys to it. That he's alive today I owe to POW # 81G-9385, aka Jack Thomas, the Man in Blue.

We were broke, our health insurance maxed out, desperate to come up with the money for Gordon's kidney transplant. Already I was working two jobs, moonlighting as a carpet steamer. Then, one night, I remembered the book Jack had given me, the old one about swimming. The next morning I phoned a bunch of antiquarian book dealers. Though several expressed interest, they all insisted on examining the item in person.

On a rainy Saturday, with the book wrapped in brown paper riding next to me in the passenger seat of my Honda Civic, I made the eight-and-a-half-hour journey to Asheville, North Carolina, in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The used bookstore reminded me of the one Jack had described in the Adirondacks, a barn with a stone foundation. The sign out front said, *Whitaker's Antiquarian Book Barn*.

The antiquarian bookseller was a woman in her seventies, with wire glasses, a small nose, and short-cropped silver hair. Before examining the specimen she pulled on a pair of sheer white gloves. So slowly did she flip through the book's pages I felt myself aging in the process. Finished, she took off her glasses (they left angry red hollows on the sides of her nose), looked up at me, and said in a faint Irish brogue:

"I can do one of two things, Mr.— I beg your pardon. What is your surname?"

"Napoli."

"Mr. Napoli. I can give you thirty percent of the appraised price, or I can broker the sale for you, in which case I'll take a thirty percent commission."

"Thirty percent of what?"

"Of the final sale price minus the house's commission, which will be twenty percent. That's if we go with Swann."

"Swann?"

"The auction house in New York."

"I see," I said, nodding.

With her glasses back on, the woman looked at me as if I

were a book she'd been asked to appraise. After a moment she said:

"You don't know much about this business, do you?"

How had she arrived at that conclusion?

"Mr. Napoli, I'm a businessperson. Like most business people, my first priority is to look out for myself. In any business, you'll find various levels of—" she paused "—of scrupulosity. I'm afraid this is no less true of the antiquarian book trade, where often values aren't readily known or apparent. Which is to say that occasionally—not often, but occasionally—even a relatively honest dealer like myself is tempted to take advantage of someone. This is one of those occasions." Her eyes narrowed to slits under her bifocals. "Mr. Napoli, have you any idea how much this little book that you've brought me is worth?"

"I know it's worth something," I said.

"It is the first book in English about swimming, one of only three copies known to exist in the world. The plates are hand-colored woodcuts. One of the other copies is housed in the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University, the other in the Rare Books Division of the National Library of Australia. At auction this book should fetch no less than thirty thousand dollars."

It fetched thirty-five thousand dollars from a collector in Lisbon, leaving me twenty-eight thousand dollars after commissions and taxes, roughly the cost of a kidney transplant.

Though he couldn't save one Gordon, Jack saved another.

EPILOGUE:

CAPE CANAVERAL, FLORIDA, 2020

My wife and I live in the River Palms RV and Mobile Home Park. Our home: a so-called deluxe doublewide, with vinyl shutters, a fiberglass deck, and a broken Jacuzzi. Two lemon trees, five barrel cacti, and a century plant grow in what we are pleased to think of as our yard.

We live on the barrier island called Cape Canaveral, between the Banana River and the Atlantic Ocean, fifteen miles south of the Kennedy Space Center. Yes, I worked for NASA. No, I am not and have never been an astronaut. I was a “fuel technologies specialist”: I drove fat green tanker trucks filled with liquid nitrogen for the space shuttle. Which, like me, is now retired.

It is August. During the past six months Bernie and I have hardly seen another human soul. We have our groceries and other necessities delivered. Though Governor DeSantis recently re-opened restaurants, bars, and other businesses, we don’t partake.

But we still go clamming and crabbing. When the breakers are low I don my bright yellow swim cap and goggles and take to the open water. And I walk. Seven days a week, mornings, Mr. McDog and I walk each other up and down the Space Coast.

Immediately after McDog and I found the Mysterious Object that had washed onto the shore, I phoned my former employers. They dispatched a team of experts, wearing face masks and carrying Geiger counters, to investigate. But even NASA’s crack ufologists had no idea what the thing was. Two days later a storm blew the thing out to sea.

When I’d asked him if he believed in God, Jack answered: “Some people embrace the god of things unknown and unknowable. I embrace things unknown and unknowable.” So much I’ll never know about Jack Thomas, so many questions I’ll never have answers for. *Why insist on answers when the questions*

are so beautiful? I remember Jack's love of water, its ambiguous, unpredictable, enigmatic nature, how its identity is defined by circumstances. Like water, Jack could never stand still for very long; he had to keep moving or turn into a bog and die.

That Mysterious Object that washed up on that Florida beach and its identical twin that turned up on Bum's Trail one bright sunny May morning in 1963? I think I know what they were, now. They're the Thing Unknown and Unknowable, the thing that frightens and intrigues us, that fills us with a sense of awe and wonder, that makes us ask: *Who are we? Where did we come from? What are we doing here?*—the thing that reminds us of how small and clueless we are, and at the same time how lucky to be alive in the presence of so great a mystery.

Call it God, if you like.



Two days ago I returned here, to Connecticut, where my mother, now ninety-three, still lives. Thirty years ago she quit smoking. Apart from her Type-2 diabetes and partial blindness owing to macular degeneration she's doing well.

Though she no longer drinks or suffers migraines, Mom still likes to dance. Nor has she lost her taste for nuptials. Two years after Walter Waple died, she married husband #3, Lloyd Stevens, the optometrist for whom she had worked for years. Together they bought a house on Lake Candlewood, where they lived until Lloyd's Parkinsonism forced my mother to put him into a nursing home.

Now my mother has sold the lake house and will be moving to a condominium in a retirement village in Newbury, next to Silver Hills State Hospital. Thanks to President Reagan and deinstitutionalization, most of that hospital's buildings are boarded up; only a few dozen patients are still in residence there. Coincidentally or by design it and the retirement community next door share the same brick Georgian architecture, making me wonder if retirement and insanity have other things in common.

For the past week I've been helping my mother sort through her worldly possessions, deciding what to keep and what to throw out, debating the value of threadbare rugs, stained linen tablecloths, frayed tartans, a torn hassock, and countless stacks of *Good Housekeeping* and *Prevention* magazine. On the verge of committing myself to the institution next door to her future home, the other day I got in my rental car and took a drive.

I drove to Hattertown, passing shopping centers and developments where, fifty years ago, woods, fields, and swamps flourished. A year after the terrible Flood of '64, authorities had the Brim River incarcerated between concrete walls. As for Hattertown itself, it survived the flood only to confront a worse disaster: the opening of the Hat City Mall, Baxter Dalton's brainchild, to the decimation of downtown businesses. From that debacle my hometown arose yet again as a quaint cluster of antique shops, vintage clothing boutiques, used bookstores, and cafés, most of them closed now due to the pandemic, many possibly for good.

As for the hat factories, the last of them—the Caxton-Dumont Hat Works—was demolished in July of 1969, the same week Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. A Safeway occupies its site. What was once Waple & Son Hats is now a Verizon store. Next door to it is a Starbucks with a sign on the door requiring all patrons, Republicans and Democrats alike, to wear face masks.

Having toured the town, I drove to the former Dalton estate, a section of which is now Dalton State Park.

The Thing in the Woods has vanished completely along with the abandoned mica mine. Apart from the land that was given to the state, the woods themselves are mostly gone now, too, replaced by a twenty-four-acre condominium complex named—with no intended irony—"Barclay Woods." The gravel road that once led to Fern Cottage has been paved over. It now leads to the parking lot for the park, one presided over by a recently commissioned statue of Barclay Moses Dalton,

this one of him plugging a hole in his boot with a scrap of rabbit fur. That's where I parked.



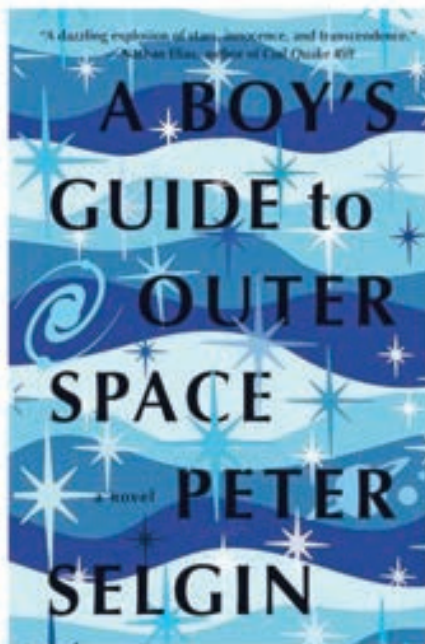
Mid-afternoon, the temperature in the mid-nineties. I stand before what used to be Fern Cottage. Where it stood a patch of ostrich ferns grows. Carrying my Speedo and a towel, I wade through the ferns, their jagged fronds stroking my thighs. In the midst of that choppy green lake, I lie on my back looking up at the sky, at clouds sailing by, remembering, thinking:

The deepest water you'll ever drown in is yourself.

No, I never made it to the moon. I never touched the stars. I never partook of anything of the infinite.

Or did I?

The following books informed my research into German POWs in the U.S. during WWII: *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, by Arnold Krammer, *Stalag Wisconsin: Inside WWII Prisoner of War Camps*, by Betty Cowley, *Stark Decency: German Prisoners of War in a New England Village*, by Allen V. Koop, *Nebraska POW Camps: A History of WWII Prisoners in the Heartland*, by Melissa Amateis Marsh, *The Enemy Among Us: POWs in Missouri During WWII*, by David Winston Fiedler. I am particularly indebted to *Hitler's Last Soldier in America*, by Georg Gaertner, the last escaped German POW to be captured. Gaertner surrendered to authorities in 1985 after forty years in hiding.



A Boy's Guide to Outer Space

Peter Selgin. Regal House, \$19.95 trade paper (308p) ISBN 978-1-64603-511-3

Selgin (*Drowning Lessons*) channels the boomer nostalgia of *The Wonder Years* in this affecting story of a Florida retiree's 1960s adolescence. As a boy, Leo "Half" Napoli avidly followed the space race and dreamt of becoming an astronaut. Reflecting on that time while living on Florida's Space Coast, he remembers his friends Wade "Skunky" Bledsoe, Victor Szentgyorgi, and Larry "Zag" Lengyl, who comprised the Back Shop Boys, so named because they each worked at the back of one of their Connecticut town's hat factories. Half is 13 when his father dies. After his mother marries a hat salesman, Half takes his intellectually disabled new stepbrother under his wing. The narrative is largely episodic, chronicling Half's ups and downs along with the fortunes of his friends, who band together to help Zag escape from juvenile detention after he's sentenced for attacking his physically abusive father. The crew also grows obsessed with an enigmatic unhoused person known as the Man in Blue, with whom Half develops a deep friendship, and who turns out to be a WWII veteran. The narrative often loses steam, but the characters' bonds feel lifelike, and readers will get a kick out of the period-specific pop culture references. This is worth a look. (Nov.)

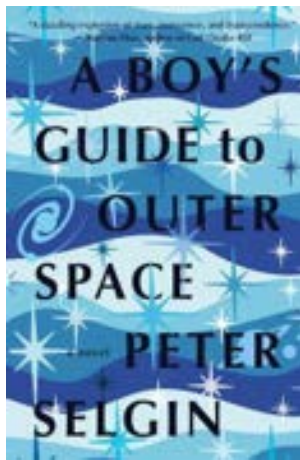


Friday, November 15, 2024

A Boy's Guide to Outer Space by Peter Selgin

Regal House

Review by Walter Cummins



Peter Selgin's *Boy's Guide* is in many ways a deceptive novel. From its playful title and lively accounts of the adolescent hi-jinks of the Back Shop Boys as they outwit clueless adults, it might be considered a humorous tale of growing up. The narrator and central consciousness, Leopold Napoli IV, seems to be telling a story from a boy's perspective of youthful challenges and frustrations. But that is only the amusing surface tale. Another story is being revealed within all that Leo is too young to grasp. An intense undercurrent emerges between the lines.

While outer space is one of Leo's central obsessions through his dream of becoming an astronaut ("To touch something of the infinite. That was my dream"), the real subject is the inner space of a searching consciousness, a dimension as vast as the universe. The novel is filled with deaths and losses, though it is not grim, in part because Leo removes himself from their emotional impact until he is finally whole. Eventually, he comes to realize the true consequence of all that confronts him. How does a human being find a way to exist in such a world? What is there to save us?

Leo's mind is a storehouse of arcane information that often spills from him when he finds himself in tense situations, as when he is being grilled by his school principal. Instead of answering, he states trivia like "The dot over the letter *i* is called a *tittle*." But for all the facts that fill Leo's head, he knows little about what really matters. That becomes the quest of his exploration into unknown realms. Circumstances launch him.

Leo's nickname is Half, attributed to him because he has only half a middle finger due to a fireworks accident when he was six that is related to his early fascination with space. One rocket he lit to send up on a Fourth of July bursts into "a mélange of stars." But another rocket explodes in his left hand, turning it into a "blob of ground meat." Seeking to soar is dangerous. The nickname implies more than a deformed finger. Leo is a half-formed person with a long way to go.

Leo's associations with others are complex. Despite the Back Shop friends, his inclination is to be a loner, detached from his sherry imbibing mother, rejecting his deluded hat store obsessed stepfather, Walter J. Waple, hostile to authority figures like teachers and policemen. His two closest connections are misfits of a different sense. One, his

stepbrother Gordon, is mentally defective, with a vocabulary of only “a hot dog” that he pronounces as *uhn haah dah*. Gordon follows Leo like a shadow. The other, who calls himself Jack Thomas and lives in a hidden cabin, Fern Cottage, speaks with a thick German accent. Even though the Back Shop Boys regard who they call The Man in Blue with deep suspicions, Leo—with Gordon—visits Jack secretly and is taught to swim and play chess. Jack (really Johann) turns out to be one of the last escaped German World War II prisoners brought to America, wanted by the FBI. Leo becomes committed to protecting Jack. In teaching Leo to swim, Jack also teaches Leo of the significance of water.

Leo admits that he “had a morbid fear of water and drowning,” shivering every time he passed a lake or pond or river. He knows he must overcome his dread: “If I was ever to partake of something of the infinite, to conquer outer space, first I’d have to conquer my fear of inner space, meaning of water. Meaning I’d have to learn to swim. Meaning someone would have to teach me.” Once Leo becomes a competent swimmer and even loves water, Jack gives him another lesson that is central to the novel, linking the mysteries of water and space:

It struck me then that water and the universe had a lot in common. No matter how much we knew about them, they remained unfathomable. And since we’re made mostly of water, it stands to reason that human beings are just as unfathomable.

Jack summed it up neatly: “The deepest water you’ll ever drown in is yourself.” (*Ze deepest woddah hyewl evah trown in iss yohzelv.*)

Water, a torrent of it, becomes the apocalyptic force that brings Leo’s life and the world around him crashing down, the final blow to the dying hat factories of his community of Hattertown. Even before this calamitous Flood of ’64, Gordon has drowned in the lake. Now the streets of the town are filled with water, Leo’s stepfather suffering a heart attack trying to save his stock of hats. When the rains have ended, “In the weeks following the flood, acting under the advice of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as a precautionary measure, the town selectman ordered all ten remaining hat factory chimneys imploded. Over as many days the sole remnants of Hattertown’s once glorious past, each rigged with a quarter ton of dynamite, were imploded.”

The novel is framed by brief opening and closing sections of Leo, now a man of seventy living with his wife in a trailer on Cape Canaveral, where he had worked for the space program after his time in the Air Force. The people of his youth are mostly gone, dead or lost to him, his aged mother in a home, Jack—The Man in Blue—vanished after deportation to Germany. As he walks Mr. Dog along the shore Leo encounters the debris of space junk, a mysterious object that NASA experts cannot identify and that he calls “Thing Unknown and Unknowable.”

Early in the novel, Leo, upset by the failure of his telescopic stargazing to reveal significance, craves answers: “How, I wondered, can something as vast, infinite, and mysterious as the universe leave me feeling so cold, so empty? There must be something more. There *has to be!*”

What “has to be” emerges for Leo on Earth in his realization that human connection is his answer, found in great part from his relationship with Jack Thomas and his need for Gordon, his acceptance of his mother and stepfather, and his later efforts to save the life of his son, also named Gordon, through a costly medical procedure paid for by the sale of a rare ancient book on swimming Jack had given him.

As he contemplates the Thing Known and Unknowable, he feels a sense of awe and wonder at “the thing that reminds us of how small and clueless we are, and at the same time how lucky to be alive in the presence of so great a mystery. Call it God, if you like.”



A Boy's Guide to Outer Space

Peter Selgin

Regal House Publishing (Dec 11, 2024)

Softcover \$19.95 (308pp)

978-1-64603-511-3

The malaise of a small New England town in the 1960s is given an undercurrent of the infinite in Peter Selgin's inspired novel *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*.

Half is a junior high school student with a mentally ill stepbrother, a hat store-owning stepfather, and an alcoholic mother. His perspectives are bounded by Hattertown, Connecticut, a hat industry town with only one active factory left. Prone to curiosity and longing for a career as an astronaut, Half is guided by the specter of his father's voice commanding him to follow his fears. As a result, he begins to reconsider his place in society, pull away from his crew of friends, and reassess the limitations of his prospects. To boot, Half is drawn in by a mysterious denizen with a sordid past, dubbed the Man in Blue, who lives in a bucolic cottage on the outskirts of town. With his stepbrother in tow, and with the blossoming of a complicated relationship with the strange resident of the cottage, Half faces existential quandaries and adolescent snares that bring his place in his community and beyond into blurred focus.

Its prose equal parts humorous, poignant, and observational, this is a sharp-toned story about small-town upbringings. Half is as rambunctious as he is confused and as inquisitive as he is somewhat damaged. His wish to explore the cosmos seems blunted until the realization that despite the facade of his predicaments, Half's explorations and epiphanies make him but one articulation of the courageous voyager he pines to become.

In the comforting, truth-filled bildungsroman *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space*, a boy is more than where he is from. Outer space may be just outside his door, if he looks with the right eyes.

RYAN PRADO (November / December 2024)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.

A God in the House

(play publication)

November 2023

A God in the House

By
Peter Selgin


NEXT
STAGEPRESS

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

A Drama in Two Acts

by

Peter Selgin

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

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A GOD IN THE HOUSE

for Susan Forest Castle

*If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak.
— Wallace Stevens*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

A GOD IN THE HOUSE was first produced at the Town & Gown Players in Athens, Georgia, directed by Leland Downs with the following cast:

Dr. Peter Katseus: Steve Elliot-Gower
Juduth Birch: Julia Wilson
Douglas Birch: Will Riley

CAST of CHARACTERS

Dr. Peter Katseus: a retired pathologist
Juduth Birch: a former music teacher
Douglas Birch: Judith's husbandy

SCENE

The outskirts of a Midwestern U.S. city

TIME

1989

A NOTE ON PERFORMANCE: The actor playing Judith is encouraged to be free with her hesitations, confusion, malaprops, and other manifestations of aphasia occasioned by her illness. Players should not hesitate to step on each other's lines. Delivery should be brisk.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

ACT I
SCENE 1

A dark stage. Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze" is heard as a spotlight illuminates a tabletop device consisting of three inverted glass bottles of diminishing size suspended from a wire strung between twin laboratory stands. A clear plastic tube hangs from the mouth of each bottle. The table holding the device rotates slowly.

As light gleams off the three bottles the faces of tarot cards are projected onto an overhead screen: Justice, The Devil, the Chariot, Death, Wheel of Fortune, Judgment, The Magician, The Lovers, The Hermit. As The Lovers card is projected we see Judith and Douglas Birch, a couple in their fifties. They sit watching a television with its back to us, their faces glowing in its blue light. Judith plays with a deck of tarot cards, using her lap as a table. Douglas makes notes on a musical score.

With the appearance of The Hermit card we see — at the far side of the stage — Dr. Peter Katseus [pronounced: Kat-soos] seated in one of several chairs arranged as on a talk show. Also in his fifties, Katseus wears an unfashionable tie. His face is gaunt, stern, faintly belligerent and — where not shadowed by five-o'clock stubble — pale from lack of exposure to sunlight. It is, all in all, the face of a man who doesn't give a damn what others think of him.

Talk show music; applause. As soon as the lights come on him he speaks.

KATSEUS. *(Confrontational.)* You tell me: has there ever been a simpler device? Three bottles, a few yards of plastic tubing, a wire stand, a couple C-clamps, and a single I.V. — that's all there is to it. An instrument that, with the pressing of a single button, can deliver

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

people from helplessness, can put an end to their suffering and despair! *(Judith Birch's attention shifts from her tarot cards to the television screen. She gets her husband's attention. He watches with her.)* We choose so many things in life. The clothes we wear, foods we eat, the books we read, the music we listen to. Our friends, our careers, our spouses. We choose where and how we live, and the things we live for. The only thing people aren't free to choose is the time and manner of their own deaths. Which, in my opinion, is absurd ! *(Faint applause. Judith's eyes well with curiosity and admiration. Douglas, meanwhile, looks — if anything — faintly alarmed. To an audience member.)* Yes, it's completely painless, except for the prick of an I.V. needle. That's the beauty of it. Yes, please, the lady in the back row. *(A pause.)* No, absolutely not. Under no circumstances should the device be used without proper medical supervision. That would defeat the whole purpose. *(Scanning the audience.)* Yes, this man in the third row, wearing the red sweater. What's that? No sir, I do not charge for my services. *(Looking to another part of the audience.)* Excuse me? What was the question? Yes, ma'am, I know what the medical establishment thinks of me and my device. Let them think what they like. It wasn't created for them. It was created for those who need it, for these people, here. *(From a briefcase Katseus withdraws a fistful of letters and shakes them.)*

Tens of dozens of suffering people begging me, asking me, "Please, Dr. Katseus, please, let me be the first to use your device!" As far as I'm concerned, these are the only "medical" opinions that count! *(Applause. With a great smile on her face, Judith takes Douglas' hand; he looks increasingly distressed.)* Yes: yes, I'm ready. As soon as the right candidate comes along, we'll be there for them. Me and my device. *(Katseus looks proudly at his device. Judith nods her head rapidly while squeezing her husbands hand.)*

JUDITH. *(Exuberant with enthusiasm.)* Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! *(Blackout.)*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

SCENE 2

Music from one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos as tarot No. 9, The Hermit, is projected on the screen. We are in Dr. Katseus' "office" — actually a portion of his one-bedroom apartment. A wooden desk, several chairs, a sofa, and a small antique church organ — all covered with papers — medical journals, research articles, books. Those surfaces not covered with papers are strewn with bottles, chemical jars and chemistry apparatus. Hung crookedly on a wall: a painting of a woman, its frame a deep, brownish red. Rising placidly from the center of all this chaos is the so-called "device."

Katseus, at his desk, eats cookies from a bag with one hand while holding a small microphone in the other. He speaks into a recording device.

KATSEUS. Thursday, April 29. Have arranged to meet this morning with potential candidate, Mrs. Judith Birch of Santa Barbara, California. Former high school music teacher, married, no children. Subject to be accompanied by her husband, Mr. Douglas Birch, also a musician ... (*Judith and Douglas Birch appear just outside the office. She wears a vividly patterned dress; he looks professional in a tweed jacket and bowtie. She carries a small, red velvet pouch. Their conversation overlaps Katseus' dictation.*)

JUDITH. The name — tell me! What's the ... the name again?

DOUGLAS. Katseus.

KATSEUS. Subject's age: fifty-one.

JUDITH. Katseus, Katseus. Why can't I remember that? Like when ... blowing your nose... when you...Like sneezing!

KATSEUS. This past November subject diagnosed Stage 2 Alzheimer's.

JUDITH. Katsoos! *Gesundheit!*

KATSEUS. Subject and spouse both members of Hemlock Society.

JUDITH. My ... my hair — does my hair look — does it look — ?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

DOUGLAS. You look fine, dear.

JUDITH. The color. It always gets the wrong. I mean — no. Not the color. The long. The — the — oh, oh, God — !

DOUGLAS. It's all right, Judith. Calm down.

JUDITH. It's not — it's not. Damn — why can't I make sense?

DOUGLAS. You're nervous. It's understandable.

JUDITH. Hold — hold me! Please! *(He does.)*

DOUGLAS. We don't have to do this, you know. We can turn around.

KATSEUS. *(Examines his wristwatch.)* Subject ... eight minutes late ...

DOUGLAS. It's up to you. It's all always up to you.

JUDITH. No.

DOUGLAS. We can call from the hotel and say we changed our minds.

JUDITH. No. No! I want to — Please!

DOUGLAS. You're absolutely sure?

JUDITH. Yes. Yes! Sure.

DOUGLAS. Long as you're sure. *(He gives her a last, searching look, hoping for a trace of doubt in her face, for some sign of hesitation, for a last-minute retrieve. She is resolute. Resigned, he presses the doorbell.)*

KATSEUS. Subject arrived at — *(He checks his watch.)* — ten past the hour. *(He switches off the tape recorder, puts the microphone down. He finishes his cookie. Having wiped the crumbs off his shirt, goes to and answers the door.)*

KATSEUS. Please — do come in.

DOUGLAS. *(Extending his hand.)* Dr. Katseus, I'm Douglas Birch.

KATSEUS. Yes, I know. And this must be Judith.

JUDITH. I'm Judith Birch.

KATSEUS. Yes, good. Pleased to meet you. Come in. Sit down. Make yourselves comfortable. *(He clears papers from the sofa, where Judith*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

and Douglas sit holding hands.)

KATSEUS. You found your way here with no trouble?

DOUGLAS. *(Looking around skeptically.)* No. No trouble.

KATSEUS. My directions weren't incomprehensible?

DOUGLAS. They were ... fine.

KATSEUS. Good. Good! Can I get you some ... some coffee?

DOUGLAS. No, that's —

JUDITH. Yes, yes! Coffee. Please.

KATSEUS. I only have instant, I'm afraid. Sanka.

JUDITH. You're welcome.

DOUGLAS. He meant the coffee.

JUDITH. What?

DOUGLAS. *(Too loudly.)* He was referring to the coffee. The kind of coffee.

JUDITH. Oh! The coffee!

KATSEUS. Shall I get you some?

DOUGLAS. Sure. Yes, please. Thank you. *(Katseus exits.)*

DOUGLAS. *(Rises, looks around, picks up a journal, a flask, a bottle.)* So — this is his ... "office." Certainly not what I expected. I mean — it's a bit messy, isn't it? I guess I was expecting ... I don't know ... something ... something a little less ... a little more ... I don't know ... clean. A little less ... disheveled. *(He wanders over to the Thanatron, stands looking down at it.)* It doesn't exactly inspire ... confidence ...

JUDITH. Shhh!

DOUGLAS. Sorry?

JUDITH. Don't! Please! You're always so ... so — !

DOUGLAS. Skeptical? I don't mean to be. I just can't help ... well, I'm sorry. But you have to admit, it's such a —

KATSEUS. *(Returning with two mismatched mugs of coffee and a quart of milk. He clears a space and sets them on a table near the sofa.)* Two Sankas. I brought some milk. I should have put it in

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

something. Ah, wait — here. *(He has found a chemical flask, examines it for cleanliness.)* Clean. *(Doug watches, horrified, as he pours milk from container into the flask.)* I've got some cookies, here, I believe. Chocolate chip. Tollhouse. Would either of you care for some?

DOUGLAS. *(Adamantly.)* No, thank you.

JUDITH. Yes! Cookies!

KATSEUS. *(Putting cookies on a plate.)* I'm afraid I'm not much of a host, but then you haven't come here to socialize, now, have you? *(He offers the plate of cookies to Judith, who takes one.)*

JUDITH. Thank you, Dr Dr. Kat — Kat —

KATSEUS. Katseus.

JUDITH. Katseus. Why should that be so hard? All I have to do is think of ... of catsup! Heinze! 57 Varieties! *(She has wandered to his desk, where she picks up his business card.)*

DOUGLAS. Judith, why don't we let the doctor —

JUDITH. Dr. Catsup! *(She extends her hand. An awkward moment as Katseus and Douglas exchange glances. Katseus shakes Judith's hand.)* You were so wonderful on that — Oh, the — the thing with the lights. The ... Oh, the, the whatchamacallit. The —

DOUGLAS. The Donohue show?

JUDITH. Donohue! Yes! Wonderful!

DOUGLAS. We were watching Phil Donohue when she first —

KATSEUS. Yes, you said so in your letter. Not the ideal forum, but ... I myself never watch those types of programs. Still, it got the word out. That's what matters.

JUDITH. Wonderful!

KATSEUS. Well ... I'm glad —

JUDITH. Wasn't he wonderful, Doug?

DOUGLAS. Doctor, perhaps we should —

JUDITH. Wonderful!

KATSEUS. Yes, why don't we get started. *(He adjusts a small video*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

camera.)

DOUGLAS. What — what's this?

KATSEUS. I'm setting up the video recorder. I'm going to videotape our conversation. You don't mind?

DOUGLAS. Well, I —

KATSEUS. It's imperative that I do so, for the record. Everything we do, every matter discussed, has all got to be part of the record. Assuming we go through with this, that is.

DOUGLAS. I see.

KATSEUS. So there can be no possible misunderstanding.

DOUGLAS. I see.

KATSEUS. These videotapes could be all that stands between me and a long prison term. As it is, I'll be risking my neck.

DOUGLAS. I appreciate —

KATSEUS. Though of course ultimately the decision rests with your wife. And you.

DOUGLAS. Yes. Ultimately.

KATSEUS. And me, of course.

DOUGLAS. Yes. Of course. Naturally.

KATSEUS. *(He switches the camera on. Lights flood the sofa where Judith and Douglas sit. Their faces appear on the screen.)* So. Let's start by going over Judith's medical history.

JUDITH. My — history? Oh, the ... the things ... the records! We forgot the records!

DOUGLAS. The doctor has them, dear. It's all right. We sent them to him. Remember? *(To Katseus.)* She's nervous.

KATSEUS. *(Coolly.)* Understandable.

JUDITH. *(Getting lost.)* We ... sent them?

KATSEUS. Now. According to these records, the subject was first examined by a Dr. Ruff on October 9th, nineteen —

JUDITH. We did everything all so quickly. Moving in. Putting in the

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

trunk. The papers. In the papers. Oh, and everything was so crowded. Did you see? And the motel. That man at the motel. Anyway, they're so crowded. The rooms. Going by so fast. With all the doors. Why do they go so fast? I couldn't tell what we hadn't left behind. I thought we put everything in there, but how could I know for sure? How do you know you're not leaving something important. You could be leaving the most important thing but you don't know it, until it's too late? You don't know it.

KATSEUS. (*After a pause.*) Yes. Well. According to Dr. Ruff —

JUDITH. You don't know it. You don't!

KATSEUS. According to Dr. —

JUDITH. You just don't.

DOUGLAS. Judith, please. Let the doc—

KATSEUS. According to Dr. Ruff's office, during the months of October and November subject underwent a series of cognitive and neuropsychological tests, for memory, vision-motor coordination, and abstract problem solving. An MRI or brain-imaging scan was also performed. As a result of these tests, on November 9 Dr. Ruff concluded —

JUDITH. (*Seeing the organ for the first time.*) Oh! What a beautiful ...! Beautiful! Whose — ?

KATSEUS. It's mine.

JUDITH. You? (*Gestures: playing.*)

KATSEUS. Hmm? Oh, very little. A little Bach — now and then.

JUDITH. Bach!

KATSEUS. Strictly for my own amusement.

JUDITH. (*With adoration, dreamily.*) Bach.

DOUGLAS. Judith loves Bach.

JUDITH. We're both music ... musicians! I ... I play — (*Gestures: violin.*)

KATSEUS. So I'm told. Now, then, if we —

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. I don't — (*Gestures: violin.*) — anymore. No more. I ... I teach. Taught. No longer.

KATSEUS. Now, then, Mr. Birch, I understand that your wife has Alzheimer's disease and as a result she wishes to die.

DOUGLAS. (*Horried; confidentially.*) That's putting it bluntly, don't you think?

KATSEUS. I see no point in beating around the bush, Mr. Birch.

DOUGLAS. Still, you needn't be so — !

JUDITH. Yes, yes: Dr. Catsup: I've made myself ... I've made up my mind. I want to ... to end ... my ...

KATSEUS. Your life?

JUDITH. Yes! My life!

KATSEUS. By "end your life" — I take it you mean that you want to kill yourself?

DOUGLAS. Now just a minute — !

KATSEUS. Please, Mr. Birch. With due respect, given what we're dealing with, we can't afford euphemisms. Call it "blunt" if you must, but when a person decides to die, they're deciding to die. Not to "end their suffering" or "deliver themselves" or any other delicate-sounding euphemism. It may sound crude, but better to be crude than unclear. We must be absolutely clear.

JUDITH. I want to ... to die. Yes! (*Both men face her.*)

KATSEUS. Are you absolutely certain?

JUDITH. Yes. To die. Yes! (*Douglas rises suddenly from the couch, rubs his forehead.*)

KATSEUS. Is something wrong?

DOUGLAS. Yes. This whole thing. This whole thing is wrong. (*To Judith, desperately.*) I'm sorry, Judith.

KATSEUS. No one has forced you to come here.

DOUGLAS. I know that! Don't you think I know that? Whatever my wife wants, that's what we've decided, she and I. That doesn't mean I

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

have to like it. Or you.

JUDITH. Please! Don't — !

KATSEUS. Just what do you know about me, Mr. Birch?

DOUGLAS. I know that you're a retired pathologist with a less than stellar academic or medical record.

JUDITH. We read about your thing, with the ... with the —

DOUGLAS. (*Wearily.*) Prisoners.

KATSEUS. My death-row organ donor campaign?

JUDITH. Those poor men! What a — what a — waste!

KATSEUS. (*To Judith, lighting up.*) So — you thought it was a good idea?

JUDITH. Oh — yes!

KATSEUS. (*To Douglas.*) I take it you weren't as impressed?

DOUGLAS. I thought it was an ... an interesting concept.

KATSEUS. An interesting concept? Are you aware that every time a prisoner is condemned to death in this country, six other totally innocent lives are likewise condemned? That's two lungs, two kidneys, one heart, and one liver. Six organs — enough to save six lives. But instead of being saved and donated, those good organs are immolated. To what end? To serve an abstraction known as "Justice"!

DOUGLAS. Yes, I... I see your point.

KATSEUS. Yes, well, unfortunately the medical establishment failed to see it. They fought me and my initiative tooth and nail. They've always fought me. When I suggested that the blood of cadavers might be used in human trans-fusions, why they practically revoked my license — as if blood weren't a tissue like any other. It is, you know. Nothing more or less. No different than skin or hair. Or an organ, for that matter. (*Judith wanders to the organ and sits. She strikes a dissonant series of chords.*)

DOUGLAS. Yes, well, that's all very interesting, Doc —

KATSEUS. (*Appealing to Judith.*) You thought it was a good idea?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. (*Playing discordantly.*) Oh! Yes! Yes! Absolutely!

DOUGLAS. Judith?

KATSEUS. Pardon me one moment ... (*Nodding, dictating into his recorder.*)

Subject appears to be of sound judgment ...

DOUGLAS. (*As Judith keeps playing.*) Judith, please, you probably shouldn't —

JUDITH. (*Rising.*) It's ... it's ... out of ...

KATSEUS. (*Absently.*) Hmmm? Oh, yes, I've been meaning to have it tuned. No mean feat finding a harpsichord tuner these days.

JUDITH. (*Having crossed to the Thanatron.*) On this you make a different ... kind of ... (*Touching the bottles.*) Beautiful.

DOUGLAS. (*Rising.*) Doctor, I think maybe it might be best if we —

JUDITH. How — does it — ?

KATSEUS. Work?

DOUGLAS. (*Taking her.*) Come on, dear. You're tired. (*To Katseus.*) I think perhaps we'd better —

JUDITH. Yes! Tell me.

KATSEUS. (*Appealing to her.*) Well, it's really very simple. See, the largest bottle — this one here — contains a harmless saline solution. Salt water, basically. Now, with the I.V. attached, when you, the patient, are ready, you press this small button here, see? That triggers the solenoid, which is up in here. The solenoid turns a valve that releases the solution in the second bottle. That's sodium pentothal.

JUDITH. Sodium ... penta ...

KATSEUS. The pentothal induces unconsciousness. Sixty seconds later the device switches automatically to the third bottle, which contains a lethal dose of potassium chloride.

JUDITH. That's the ... the ...

KATSEUS. The poison.

JUDITH. Poison. Yes.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. You see, the potassium chloride produces hyperkalemia, which leads to myocardial infarction.

JUDITH. Mio ... car —

KATSEUS. A heart attack, essentially. The whole procedure takes less than five minutes.

JUDITH. (*Impressed.*) Five ... — !

KATSEUS. Give or take. And it's painless. Completely.

JUDITH. Completely...

KATSEUS. Save for the prick on an I.V. needle.

JUDITH. (*Expressing wonder.*) How ... how ... —!

KATSEUS. (*Warming to her flattery.*) What may be most remarkable of all is that all the parts came from flea markets, thrift stores, and garage sales. I even broke some kiddie toys apart to get some of the gears. This big red gear? Comes from a Mouse Trap game!

JUDITH. (*Impressed.*) A Mouse ... ?

DOUGLAS. (*Appalled.*) A Mouse Trap — ?

KATSEUS. You know, the game where you have to catch the little gray plastic —

DOUGLAS. Yes, I know what a Mouse Trap game is.

JUDITH. One ... but?

KATSEUS. Hmm? Oh, yes! That's right. One button. The patient has complete control. That's the whole point of the device.

JUDITH. The ... device? Is that what you — ?

KATSEUS. For a time I thought of calling it the Thanatron, after the Greek god Thanatos. God of Death. But ... apparently some found that objectionable, I don't see why.

JUDITH. A name ...

KATSEUS. Hmmm?

JUDITH. It needs a name.

DOUGLAS. Judith —

JUDITH. Names are important! If a thing doesn't have a name it may

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

as well not ... not ... Judith — that's *my* name.

KATSEUS. Mrs. Birch, I'm wondering, given your husband's —

JUDITH. It must ...

KATSEUS. — ambivalence ...

JUDITH. (*An outburst.*) It must have a *name!*

DOUG. (*Taking possession of her.*) All right, dear, it's all right. Doctor, if it's all the same with you, I think we'll head back to our motel now. My wife is ... tired. We'll go back, talk things over, give it all some ... some more thought.

JUDITH. God.

DOUGLAS. Judith?

JUDITH. God!

DOUGLAS. How does that sound, Judith?

KATSEUS. God?

JUDITH. Yes — God.

KATSEUS. (*Pondering.*) God ...

JUDITH. Yes: God.

KATSEUS. (*Considering.*) God? (*He laughs. Judith joins him in his laughter. Douglas watches them both, his expression one of bewilderment. Katseus meanwhile returns to his desk, shakes his head, smiles.*)

KATSEUS. God ...

DOUGLAS. Judith?

KATSEUS. So — shall we resume?

DOUGLAS. Judith?

JUDITH. Yes. Yes: resume!

KATSEUS. Now, then, Mr. and Mrs. Birch, you both realize, I'm sure, that with Alzheimer's the full constellation of symptoms comes on very slowly.

DOUGLAS. Dr. Katseus, I really think —

JUDITH. Yes: we realize.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. You could expect a reasonable quality of life for at least a year or two, maybe longer.

JUDITH. Reasonable.

KATSEUS. What I mean is —

JUDITH. Reasonable to who? I can't play or ... or ... music! A life without ... without living ... without music — how is that ...? Half of the time I don't ... I can't ... make something ... sense! Is that — reasonable?

KATSEUS. My point is, Mrs. Birch —

JUDITH. No!

DOUGLAS. Please. Listen to him, Judith.

JUDITH. You said you'd help me! You said —

KATSEUS. I said I'd consider your case.

JUDITH. (*To her husband.*) Douglas, tell him for me!

KATSEUS. Mr. Birch, exactly what is your position in all of this?

DOUGLAS. It's her decision. Long ago we agreed that if something like this were ever to happen to either of us, we'd have the option to end our own lives with dignity. It's why we joined the Hemlock Society. We believe that ... people have the right to ... to deliver themselves from ... from suffering.

KATSEUS. Euphemisms. All well and fine, Mr. Birch, but do you want your wife to die — here, with me, sooner than later?

DOUGLAS. What I want doesn't matter!

KATSEUS. As far as the law is concerned it matters a great deal. If I'm to do this, I'll need your total cooperation and your consent. Do you or do you not want your wife to go through with this?

DOUGLAS. I'm here, aren't I?

KATSEUS. That's no answer. Mr. Birch. If you're ambivalent now, how will you feel when she's gone?

DOUGLAS. How ... dare you!

JUDITH. What? No. No!

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. You've answered my question, I believe.

DOUGLAS. How dare you speak to us — to people — this way? How can you be so insensitive?

JUDITH. No! *No!*

KATSEUS. Good day to you both ...

JUDITH. *(To Katseus.)* No, please!

KATSEUS. I'm not about to sacrifice the hopes of thousands of people for the sake of one patient who apparently does not have her spouse's support. If I go through with this, and you decide to prosecute me, everything that I've dedicated my life to over the past fifteen years will go down the drain. Sorry, I can't risk it.

JUDITH. Douglas — !

DOUGLAS. You're incredible. Do you know that? Here we are, two people faced with the most monumental decision a person can ever possibly face, a decision that transcends every other worldly concern, and all you care about is you're bloody career, such as it is!

KATSEUS. Need I remind you that I'm not the one who's considering suicide.

DOUGLAS. *(Practically forcing her.)* That's it! We're leaving, Judith. We should never have come here in the first place. I should never have agreed to come. It was a mistake. A terrible mistake!

KATSEUS. I wish you both the best of luck.

DOUGLAS. Go to hell!

JUDITH. *(Struggling.)* Wait! No! No! Please — Dr. — !

KATSEUS. You may change your mind.

JUDITH. I won't! *(Douglas takes her by the arm. She frees herself. They exit. Katseus watches them both go. After several desultory moments picks up the tape recorder.)*

KATSEUS. Concluded meeting with prospective subject Judith Birch. Though clearly determined to cease living, I found the subject to be ... in complete control of her faculties and hence capable of living a ... a reasonable ... *Sstops, rewinds.)* I found subject capable of living ...an

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

adequate ... *(Stops, shakes his head rewinds again.)* I found the subject capable of ... of living. *(Katseus switches off the recorder. He looks up and sees the red velvet pouch that Judith has left behind on his sofa. He crosses over and picks it up. Inside, he finds a deck of tarot cards. He examines them as the music of Bach's Concerto No. 2 in F rises and—Blackout.)*

SCENE 3

The Polonaise movement of Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B-minor accompanies the patter of falling rain and rumbles of thunder. The Wheel of Fortune card is projected onto the screen. It is about three a.m. the following day. We are in Katseus' office. All is dark save for traces of light reflected off of the bottles of the device. Judith Birch appears at the door and knocks. She wears a jacket over sleeping clothes. She knocks gently at first, then frantically.

KATSEUS. *(Entering.)* Coming, I'm coming ... *(He switches a light on. He fusses with the belt of his robe. We see the tarot cards spread out on his desk. The pounding on the door continues.)* I said I'm coming! *(At the door.)* Who—who is it?

JUDITH. It's me!

KATSEUS. Me? Who's me? Me who?

JUDITH. *(Desperate.)* Me! Me! Birch! Judith Birch!

KATSEUS. For God's sake — ! Mrs. Birch? *(He opens the door. Judith enters, soaking.)* What are you doing here?

JUDITH. Water! The water! So wet. I ... Do you have a — a — a — *(She mimes: smoking.)*

KATSEUS. I don't smoke.

JUDITH. Me, either. *(Looking around.)* You don't have any ... any ... tob ... tob — ?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Tobacco? No.

JUDITH. No?

KATSEUS. No. I never smoked.

JUDITH. Never?

KATSEUS. Well — a pipe. Briefly.

JUDITH. A pipe?

KATSEUS. Yes.

JUDITH. Where ... ?

KATSEUS. Where did I smoke?

JUDITH. No, where is it. The — ?

KATSEUS. God knows. I probably threw it out. Unless ... *(He opens a desk drawer, removes a small box. Sure enough, it holds a pipe and a pouch of tobacco.)* Huh, I'll be darned ...

JUDITH. Give me!

KATSEUS. Oh, no!

JUDITH. Please!

KATSEUS. This tobacco must be twenty years old!

JUDITH. I don't care! Please! Give!

KATSEUS. *(Reluctantly, he holds the box out to her. Judith takes the pipe, smiling. She nods to the pouch of tobacco. He holds it open for her. With difficulty she tries to fill the pipe.)* Here ... *(Katseus loads the pipe and hands it to Judith, who puts it in her mouth. She gestures for a match.)* You really shouldn't, you know.

JUDITH. It won't kill me. *(She glares ironically at him. Katseus finds a match, lights her pipe. With it lit, pugging it, Judith wanders to the device. She strokes one of its bottles.)* Hello, God.

KATSEUS. Have you any idea what time it is, Mrs. Birch?

JUDITH. Time? No. I don't ... What time is it?

KATSEUS. Three o'clock in the morning.

JUDITH. Good.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Not so good. Does your husband — ?

JUDITH. He's ... what do you call ... asleep.

KATSEUS. Does he know you're here?

JUDITH. Know? No. He doesn't —

KATSEUS. How did you — ?

JUDITH. By boat. I mean — oh, what are they called? The thing. A tax. Taxi. I took a taxi. I left him sleeping. Douglas. My husband. I had the man ... In the window. I had — I had your ... your thing that you gave us. I said, "Take me — !" "It's an emergency!" I said. It was. It is. He couldn't read the ... The water, it fell so ... Things were going like mad, all over ... back and forth. (*She gestures: windshield wipers.*) The way it was coming ... going through water. Like ... in a boat. The signals, they —

KATSEUS. You're soaked! Here, wait, let me get you a towel.

(He goes off.)

JUDITH. (*To herself, or perhaps to the device.*) So dark ... mystery ... thunder and ... just like a movie. Hitchcock. Alfred Hitchcock!

KATSEUS. (*Returning with a towel and robe.*) Here, dry yourself, then you can put this on. (*He goes to the phone and dials.*)

JUDITH. Where are you ...?

KATSEUS. Hello? Is this the Quality Court? Yes. I'd like to speak with Mr. Douglas Birch. I believe he's there. Yes, it's an emergency. If you would — (*Judith has grabbed the phone receiver from him.*) Please, Mrs. Birch! I need to let your husband know you're here!

JUDITH. No! Don't! I know ... I know — !

KATSEUS. (*Taking the receiver from her, cradling it.*) Please — sit down. (*He arranges the towel on the sofa. A car horn sounds outdoors.*)

JUDITH. The boat! I mean ... the — ! I haven't paid! I forgot my — my ... !

KATSEUS. It's all right. I'll take care of it. (*He gets his wallet, puts on a coat and starts for the door, then stops.*) Should I tell him to wait?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

(Judith shakes her head. He hesitates, then nods and rushes out. She crosses to his desk and sees the tarot cards. She picks one up, looks at it and smiles. The Hermit flashes on the screen. She picks up another card. The Lovers. She smiles. (Kaseus returns.) That's quite a fare you ran up.

JUDITH. Do you have — ? *(Mimes: swigging something.)*

KATSEUS. Hmm? Oh, liquor? No. I don't drink. Just grain alcohol. *(Judith nods enthusiastically.)* Trust me, you don't want to drink that. *(Judith keeps nodding. Reluctantly, he gets the bottle of grain alcohol, pours some into a coffee mug, and hands it to her.)*

JUDITH. *(Sipping, drawing back.)* Mmm. Good!

KATSEUS. That's — potent stuff.

JUDITH. Yes.

KATSEUS. Keep this up, you won't be needing my services.

JUDITH. *(Smoking, drinking.)* Penelope! That was her name. I remember now. A year ago she stopped ... walking. We found her on the ... the floor of the ... Her legs. The ones behind. She dragged herself. Pulled along. Crying. He wouldn't —

KATSEUS. Who wouldn't what?

JUDITH. Douglas. Husband. He kept saying ... she/d get better. She was ... old. He knew. I had to bring her. I watched them. I held her while he ... did ... Afterwards, he refused to talk to me. Douglas. For days. Wouldn't even look. All he could think was ... how he missed her. He wanted to keep her. Like that. In terrible ... He says no. Anyway, that's why we were ... why we both yelled. At each ... Penelope. Our dog.

KATSEUS. When was this?

JUDITH. Now. Tonight. No, *last* night.

KATSEUS. I see. You had an argument?

JUDITH. *(Having wandered to the device again.)* I'll pay for — for the boat. No! Taxi, the taxi!

KATSEUS. Forget about it.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. Are you sure?

KATSEUS. Anything for a patient in distress.

JUDITH. Almost anything.

KATSEUS. I'm sorry, Mrs. Birch, but without your husband's —

JUDITH. *(Stroking it.)* Why did you make him?

KATSEUS. Who?

JUDITH. God?

KATSEUS. God? Oh, the device, you mean. I saw a need and I tried to fill it, that's all.

JUDITH. What ... motive ... what moved you?

KATSEUS. It wasn't an emotional decision, if that's what you mean. It was purely practical, a rational decision. Emotions had nothing to do with it.

JUDITH. I don't believe ...

KATSEUS. Emotions are the very things that have kept others from doing so before me, despite the obvious, practical need. Irrational, impractical, unscientific emotions.

JUDITH. Still, you must have strong ... strong ...

KATSEUS. Convictions? Sure. But the idea for the device grew strictly from logic. Facts, Mrs. Birch, not feelings.

JUDITH. People are made of feelings, not facts.

KATSEUS. Mrs. Birch, it's three o'clock in the morning. You didn't come here in the rain to analyze my motives or teach me what people are made of. Or to smoke my pipe! *(He grabs the pipe from her mouth. Judith looks at him, again with that conviction in her eyes that takes no hostages and allows no escape. Cornered, Katseus puffs his own pipe, pours himself some grain alcohol, drinks.)*

KATSEUS. His name was Preston. Tony Preston. He was a patient of mine back when I was still involved in clinical practice. At nineteen he was paralyzed in a surfing accident and confined to a bed in a nursing home. That was six years before I met him. Since then he'd been stuck in that bed, unable to swallow food or to breathe on his own without a

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

respirator tube down his throat, facing thirty to forty more years of so-called “life” as an immobilized, gasping corpse. He put an ad in the paper asking for some doctor to come forward and help him carry out his wish to die.

JUDITH. You ... ?

KATSEUS. I met with him. No one else was going to. I'll say this for that young man, he was determined. I'd never met a more determined person. I wanted to help him. The thing is there had to be some way to do it, so I wouldn't have to pull any plugs or push any buttons, which would have been as illegal then as it is now. If I could create a device of some sort, something Tony could manipulate with a stick or something else in his mouth, then he'd have the means to do it himself.

JUDITH. So — you made God!

KATSEUS. I'd prefer you didn't call it that. But yes, that's why I created the device.

JUDITH. But you never —

KATSEUS. Another doctor intervened. He pulled the plug.

JUDITH. You didn't — ?

KATSEUS. I was afraid they'd suspend or take away my medical license. Afraid they'd put me in jail. I have a morbid fear of jail cells. I kept putting him off, telling him I'd look into the matter, consider my legal options. For two years I put him off. Meanwhile he suffered terribly, senselessly. Does that answer your question?

JUDITH. So — you do have feelings!

KATSEUS. It's late, Mrs. Birch; I'm tired. Was there something in particular that you —

JUDITH. (*Crossing and picking them up.*) My cards!

KATSEUS. Oh, yes. You left them here.

JUDITH. You were — ? (*Mimes: playing.*)

KATSEUS. Hmm? No, I was just — admiring the illustrations.

JUDITH. Have you ever — ?

KATSEUS. Me? Had my tarot told? God, no!

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. Never?

KATSEUS. I don't believe in any of all that ... gobbledegook.

JUDITH. Gobble — ?

KATSEUS. Astrology, tarot, numerology ...

JUDITH. Then you don't believe in re ... re ... ?

KATSEUS. Reincarnation? Certainly not!

JUDITH. Oh, but you will reincarnate!

KATSEUS. Over my dead body.

JUDITH. In a past life ... I was run over by ... by one of those things ... pulled by a — a — a cart! My legs. I couldn't walk. Like ... like ...

KATSEUS. Your dog?

JUDITH. Penelope. That's why in this life I ... I like to ... to dance — whenever I can! (*She does a little gavotte right there, in Katseus' office.*)

KATSEUS. (*As she dances.*) One life, Mrs. Birch. That's what I believe in. One life. Here, now. For the living. Are you aware that in you at this very moment are two healthy lungs, a good heart, two fine kidneys, and a liver big enough to be split in half for two infants, children that may be dying right now for lack of healthy livers? The organs in just us two alone could save the lives of ten, maybe twelve people!

JUDITH. (*Dancing.*) How very Roman. Romantic!

KATSEUS. Life from death, Mrs. Birch.

JUDITH. (*Still dancing.*) So then you do believe in re —

KATSEUS. My kind of reincarnation, not yours, Mrs. Birch.

JUDITH. Do you believe in God?

KATSEUS. No more than I believe in Santa Claus.

JUDITH. Too bad.

KATSEUS. I don't believe in belief. The very word implies a suspension of logic and objective, empirical judgment. If there's empirical evidence for something, if you can see it, taste it, touch it, to

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

say that you “believe” in it is essentially a lie, since to believe in the obvious is at best unnecessary, at worst absurd. What’s known by the senses is known; what isn’t known we can either suspect or doubt. Those are the three realms in which human logic operates. There is no fourth.

JUDITH. My — so ... so ...

KATSEUS. Rigid? The trouble with most people is they either can’t or don’t choose to distinguish between thought and belief. I’ve no such difficulty. Others embrace the God of things unknown and unknowable. Me, I embrace things known and knowable. The rest I leave to prophets and mystics.

JUDITH. You have everything so ...

KATSEUS. I don’t pretend to have the answers, Mrs. Birch. But at least I haven’t closed my mind to the questions. In fact I think it a shame that so many perfectly good questions should be done in — obliterated — by a single word.

JUDITH. Which word?

KATSEUS. God.

JUDITH. But you do believe; you are a believer. I know you are.

KATSEUS. I don’t believe, Mrs. Birch; I *think*. There’s a difference.

JUDITH. Without belief people can’t live. So there must be belief. Ergo ...

KATSEUS. There must be a God? I disagree. Show me a God, and I’ll believe in Him. Till then, I’ll stick to Bach.

JUDITH. Bach?

KATSEUS. His Fugue in D minor is as close to a miracle as anything. Beats walking on water any day. *(He sits and plays a few bars on the organ. Judith hums along. He lets himself get briefly carried away before awakening to the circumstances and abruptly stopping.)*

KATSEUS. Was there something else you wanted, Mrs. Birch?

JUDITH. Yes. You. And — *(She points to the device.)*

KATSEUS. *(Rising, finding a phone book, looking up the taxi service.)*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

Mrs. Birch, we've already —

JUDITH. (*With difficulty.*) People. Other people. Like me. Even if you won't use God ... on me, still, I know ... what you've done ... what you'll do ... for others ... just knowing ... knowing there's someone who *understands*, that there may be ... a way ... What I mean ... what I'm trying to ... to ... Dr. Catsup ... whatever you do, please, please — don't give up!

KATSEUS. (*He stops searching through the phone book and looks up, quietly.*) I have no intention of giving up, Mrs. Birch. But tell me: why are *you* giving up? You're still in reasonably good health, you're still sharp. Witty, even. You've barely advanced to the second stage of the illness. You could have weeks, months, even a year left of ... Whatever time you still have, why give it up?

JUDITH. Dr. Catsup, I know that I'm going to ... that there's no hope. And I know what I *don't* want. I don't want to depend — to hope ... to be helpless, to have to — be dressed — and fed and ... and wiped and — to need to ask — for everything! I don't want that. My mind . . it's ... going. It's like — like a house with ... with the doors and the ... the windows all open. People ... the people ... the kind who ... who take things ...

KATSEUS. Thieves?

JUDITH. Thieves! They rush in ... they take ... steal ... (*Pointing to things in Katseus' office.*) ... a lamp, a ... a sofa, a chair, a table, curtains. No — No: I'm not giving up. This ...this thing — it's inside me. If I wait, it'll take ... take everything. Tomorrow, the next day, the day after that, I may not be ... I won't have any ... won't be able ... That's why. You see? I want to lock ... to look ... into eyes — someone's eyes ... *your* eyes ... and say: now! Now, Dr. Catsup. Now. Now! (*She reaches out to Katseus, who inadvertently takes her hand. Appalled that he has done so, he breaks away. He goes for his raincoat.*)

KATSEUS. Let's go, Mrs. Birch ...

JUDITH. Go? Where ... ?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. I'm taking you back to your motel.

JUDITH. Back?

KATSEUS. Come ...

JUDITH. *(As he takes her to the door.)* Sorry. So sorry ... I shouldn't have ...

KATSEUS. *(Stopping, holding her.)* No. I'm glad you came.

JUDITH. I ... shouldn't have ...

KATSEUS. You misunderstand. I've changed my mind.

JUDITH. *(Confused.)* What? Changed ...?

KATSEUS. I'd like to make my device available to you.

JUDITH. You ... want — ?

KATSEUS. I'll help you, Mrs. Birch. *(Judith throws her arms around Katseus, who stiffens in her embrace.)*

JUDITH. Thank you! Thank you!

KATSEUS. One thing, though. We mustn't be swayed by emotions. If we're to proceed, it has to be done calmly, rationally, clinically — in the spirit of science.

JUDITH. Science! Yes!

KATSEUS. Think of it as — a scientific collaboration.

JUDITH. *(With mounting enthusiasm.)* A collaboration! Scientific! Yes! Yes!

KATSEUS. I'm going to drive you back to your motel, now. I want you to get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, assuming you still feel the same, I want you to speak to your husband. You must convince him. It's imperative that we get his cooperation. Do you think you can do that?

JUDITH. Yes. Yes!

KATSEUS. Let me get my umbrella. *(He goes off to find it.)*

JUDITH. My cards! *(She hurries for them, replacing them in their red velvet pouch. Katseus returns.)*

KATSEUS. Ready?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. After you.

KATSEUS. No: after you. *(He gestures. They step out into the pouring rain. Blackout.)*

SCENE 4

The allegro assai movement of Bach's Concerto No. 2 in F plays briefly. Tarot card projection: The Devil. Katseus' office three days later. Katseus sits behind his desk, dawn light through the window rendering him scarcely visible as he dictates into his tape recorder.

KATSEUS. Monday, May 3rd, eleven a.m. Have arranged to meet with subject's husband Douglas Birch to discuss the procedure and to obtain his consent in writing. *(Lights up on Douglas Birch who stands before Katseus' desk. The office has been put — somewhat — in order.)*

DOUGLAS. What's to discuss? You and my wife seem to have everything worked out.

KATSEUS. Mr. Birch —

DOUGLAS. She's already been discussing some of the finer details with me. I must say, you've got her well-briefed. She's practically an expert on that machine of yours.

KATSEUS. Please — why don't you sit down?

DOUGLAS. I'd rather stand.

KATSEUS. I appreciate how you feel.

DOUGLAS. I doubt that. Very much.

KATSEUS. I mean I understand the difficult position you're in.

DOUGLAS. Difficult?

KATSEUS. What I mean —

DOUGLAS. I never wanted this. I was against it from the start. Against you. I don't like you, Dr. Katseus.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Professionally or personally?

DOUGLAS. Both.

KATSEUS. So — why did you come to me?

DOUGLAS. Because. It's what she wanted.

KATSEUS. You could have refused.

DOUGLAS. No. I couldn't.

KATSEUS. You could have talked her out of it.

DOUGLAS. Wrong again. Once Judith makes her mind up about something, anything, that's it. Whether she's losing it or not.

KATSEUS. She appears to be a woman of very strong convictions.

DOUGLAS. You're telling me. I'm sure it's why she's attracted to you, like the moth to the flame. To her you're the angel of deliverance, Hermes sent by Zeus to rescue Persephone from the underworld and carry her up to Olympus.

KATSEUS. I don't see it that way.

DOUGLAS. Neither do I.

KATSEUS. Just what is your impression of me, Mr. Birch?

DOUGLAS. Honestly?

KATSEUS. Yes, honestly.

DOUGLAS. I think you're evil.

KATSEUS. Evil?

DOUGLAS. I think you're the devil.

KATSEUS. The devil?! You seem intelligent, Mr. Birch. Surely you believe in devils?

DOUGLAS. I believe people do evil things.

KATSEUS. They certainly do. So — you think I'm evil, do you?

DOUGLAS. I think your motives are evil.

KATSEUS. Really? What are my motives?

DOUGLAS. Self-aggrandizement. You're name in the newspapers. Your fifteen minutes of fame on the Donohue Show.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. An ego trip, is that why I'm doing this, you think?

DOUGLAS. I think that you're a third-rate pathologist and failed physician who gets a shiver of self-satisfaction every time he sees his name in the paper or hears it on TV. I saw you on Donohue, lapping up all that attention, bragging about all the poor miserable suicidal wretches out there, waving their letters into the camera, telling the world how much they all "need" you, how they've come to you begging — *(Slowly, with mounting cold fury.)* You reminded me of one of those revivalist preachers, but with television cameras and lights instead of a tent and sawdust. Instead of preaching salvation and miracles to the dumb and lame, you preach the Gospel of Death. And like all evangelists, you preach mainly to the converted, but instead of crying to be saved your congregants cry, Kill me, Lord! Please — kill me! And the hopeless, the desperate ones, the ones with nowhere else to turn and no one to turn to, they come flocking to you, because to them even a false God is better than no God at all. So you've gathered your little band of disciples. And now my wife is one of them. Well, you may have fooled her, doctor, but you don't fool me. Not for a minute.

KATSEUS. So: your wife thinks I'm God, and you think I'm the Devil. Well, you're both equally wrong. I'm just a doctor who's offering his services to you.

DOUGLAS. You're not offering *me* anything.

KATSEUS. To your wife, then. She wants to die. She's made up her mind. She says as much right here, in the sworn, signed affidavit you brought me. *(He produces the document.)*

DOUGLAS. I know; I wrote it for her.

KATSEUS. She's determined, Mr. Birch. Absolutely.

DOUGLAS. I've already said that I won't stop you. Even if I could, what difference would it make? I would still be losing her, my wife. I've already lost her ... So: I give up. Judith's all yours. You win.

KATSEUS. It's not a rugby match, Mr. Birch.

DOUGLAS. What do you want from me? My blessing?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KASTEUS. No. Your approval — in writing. (*He produces another document.*) I've already taken the liberty of producing the affidavit stating in no uncertain terms that you approve —

DOUGLAS. I don't!

KATSEUS. — that you approve your wife's decision and agree to —

DOUGLAS. But I don't approve!

KATSEUS. Mr. Birch, are you or are you not willing to let your wife go through with this?

DOUGLAS. I'm willing, but that doesn't mean I approve.

KATSEUS. Of what don't you approve?

DOUGLAS. Of this way of ... of doing it. Of you and that "device" of yours!

KATSEUS. I know you don't like me. But what have you got against my device?

DOUGLAS. I find the very notion of it morally reprehensible.

KATSEUS. "Morally reprehensible." Can you be more specific?

DOUGLAS. It stinks, how's that?

KATSEUS. *Why* does it stink, Mr. Birch?

DOUGLAS. It pretends to be a "suicide" machine, when really it's a killing machine. A murder machine. And just about every doctor in the country agrees with me!

KATSEUS. If they didn't, do you suppose they'd say so? How many doctors are willing to stick their necks out?

DOUGLAS. Sure. In their hearts every physician in the country is really on your side, they're just too lily-livered to say so. They're not brave and noble and altruistic like you! They lack integrity! They're not willing to take on the medical establishment single-handedly! Dr. Peter Katseus, the great white angel of mercy, a one-man campaign to End Human Suffering. Don Quixote and his Sancho Panza! (*He gestures to the device.*)

KATSEUS. For someone who compares me to a tent revivalist, you make a pretty good evangelist yourself, Mr. Birch.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

DOUGLAS. Does it occur to you, doctor, that the reason every medical expert in the country is against you just might be because you happen to be wrong?

KATSEUS. (*Disdainfully, having heard it before.*) Argument by authority.

DOUGLAS. Or do you consider yourself to be the only real authority on the subject of death? As if you can possibly know any more about it than the rest of us?

KATSEUS. If you're talking about the afterlife, I claim no expertise in that area. That's your wife's purview.

DOUGLAS. Oh — so you're aware of Judith's ... mystical bent?

KATSEUS. Mystical or metaphysical. She spoke with me briefly of it.

DOUGLAS. You know she believes in reincarnation?

KATSEUS. (*Absently, wishing the subject would drop.*) Yes, she indicated something of the sort.

DOUGLAS. Did she "indicate" to you that she fully expects to return to this world in another ... embodiment?

KATSEUS. Her expectations of that sort are not my concern.

DOUGLAS. Yet you're perfectly willing to help her take the first step toward meeting them, an irrevocable step, though you don't for one minute believe that those expectations are reasonable, let alone that they'll be met.

KATSEUS. I'm here to help your wife die. What, if anything, happens to her afterwards is none of my business. Anyway, it's out of my hands.

DOUGLAS. You're wrong, doctor. In helping Judith die, you will be helping her into the afterlife. You'll be giving her the means to that end — an end that, at best, you know nothing about, and that at worst you consider an impossibility if not an absurdity!

KATSEUS. I'm no metaphysician, Mr. Birch. Nor am I a Hindi, or a Buddhist, or Lucifer, or Orpheus, or Houdini, or the angel of mercy. I'm not the guardian of the gates to Paradise, nor the captain of the ferry across the River Styx —

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

DOUGLAS. Charon.

KATSEUS. I'm a physician. Plain and simple. Not a great one, as you've pointed out. Not good enough to sustain a clinical practice. But still, nevertheless, a physician.

DOUGLAS. Bound by a physician's oath?

KATSEUS. That's right.

DOUGLAS. "I will neither prescribe nor administer a lethal dose of medicine to any patient even if asked nor counsel any such thing nor perform act or omission with direct intent deliberately to end a human life. I will maintain the utmost respect for every human life from fertilization to natural death." A doctor's job is to prevent death!

KATSEUS. People die; I can't prevent that. No one can. A doctor's job is to heal people, and when they can't be healed, when there's nothing more than can be done, it's up to doctor's to make their patients as comfortable as possible and, if it comes to that, to offer some decent way out.

DOUGLAS. In your opinion.

KATSEUS. It's not just my opinion. I've got dozens, hundreds — *(He goes to his desk.)*

DOUGLAS. I know; I watched the Donohue show.

KATSEUS. *(Letters in hand.)* A seventy-six year-old woman in New Mexico dying of bone marrow cancer. A twenty-eight year-old man with ALS in Dallas. A sixty-four year old Brazilian woman suffering from Lesch-Nyhan Syndrome. People suffering needlessly and against their wishes, isn't that "doing harm?" You call my device "morally reprehensible." If your wife were to throw herself down a flight of stairs, would you find that any less "morally reprehensible"? If she were to slice open her wrists or swallow a bottle of potassium hydroxide or try to asphyxiate herself with a plastic bag, would any of those things be less "morally reprehensible" to you? Just because a suicide is carried out alone, under the worst conditions, by means violent and messy and unreliable, and that can possibly lead to even more suffering, does that make it somehow less "reprehensible" or

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

more “moral” to you? You don’t like me. I accept that. But you love your wife, don’t you?

DOUGLAS. Of course I do! How dare you —

KATSEUS. Then you want what’s right for her. Correct? *(A pause.)*
Then why won’t you accept that we both want the same thing, whatever my “motives” are. I’m here to give your wife what she wants.
(Realizing he’s beaten, Douglas sits. Katseus gets him some water.)

DOUGLAS. *(Slowly, blowing his nose, drinking.)* May I ask a personal question?

KATSEUS. You may.

DOUGLAS. Were you ever married?

KATSEUS. Once. Long ago.

DOUGLAS. For long?

KATSEUS. Long enough.

DOUGLAS. Thirty-eight years. That’s how long Judith and I have been married. We met at a club where I played in a quintet. An odd musical couple, we were. Me: clarinet. Judith: viola da gamba. She: classically trained. Me: strictly jazz. How we made that work is anyone’s guess, but we did. We’d get together Sunday afternoons, back when we both still lived in the city, in Manhattan. She joined my quintet. Judith could improvise. She was good at it, very good. One night, there was supposed to be this lunar eclipse. My building had a roof you could go on. While the others were packing up their instruments she asked if she could stay and watch the eclipse with me. Sure, I said, thinking: boy, she’s a bold one. The eclipse wasn’t until two in the morning! We sat with our instruments on the roof and played until two. Then the earth’s shadow fell over us, like the lid of an eye closing. When it did, she leaned her head on me. She’d never touched me before. Six months later we were married. *(Catching himself.)*
Listen to me, reminiscing to you of all people. I may as well be talking to ... to this *thing* ... *(He rises, goes to the device.)*

KATSEUS. It might surprise you to learn that I have feelings.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

DOUGLAS. Like a vending machine. Press a button and bingo: instead of a Snicker's bar or a Coke you get death. So convenient. Just dispose of the body and you're done. There's just one problem: how do you dispose of all those messy feelings? You've figured out how to dispatch the victims. Tell me, doctor, what tricks have you got up your sleeve for the survivors? What machine have you got for me? How do you propose to deliver *me* from *my* suffering?

KATSEUS. Mr. Birch, I understand how you —

DOUGLAS. No sir, you don't know how I'll feel. Thirty-eight years. Losing her will be like losing one of my own limbs, like losing myself ... No, you don't know how I feel. Because you don't know Judith. She's everything to me. What is she to you? A test subject, a dog for your space capsule.

KATSEUS. Why did you join the Hemlock Society?

DOUGLAS. It was Judith's idea.

KATSEUS. You just went along?

DOUGLAS. It's what she wanted. What she wants.

KATSEUS. Suppose she doesn't end up using my device? What alternative would you propose?

DOUGLAS. There are ... other ways.

KATSEUS. Oh? Name one. (*Douglas is silent.*) Could it be, Mr. Birch, that you really don't want to help your wife die?

DOUGLAS. (*Indignant.*) I'm here, dammit, aren't I? I flew her a thousand miles to see you! I helped her write that testimonial; I've drafted her will; I've planned her funeral! What more do you want? You want me to be happy about it? To be cold and clinical — like you? You want me to be like one of these bottles, to fall in line with your tidy little parade of sedatives and poisons, one more working part in your gristly little device? I'm a human being, not an apparatus. Emotions may play no part in your world, but they do in mine.

KATSEUS. You want to help her, but you don't want your wife to die.

DOUGLAS. Of course I don't want her to die!

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Well, then you can't help her.

DOUGLAS. Do you happen to know what a soul is, doctor?

KATSEUS. (*Scoffing.*) A soul ...

DOUGLAS. Yes, doctor, a soul. You have no idea, do you? I'll tell what a human soul isn't. It's not a tissue sample. You can't stain it with dye and mount it on a slide. Emotions don't grow on sheep's blood. A heart may be a pump –

KATSEUS. Not may be, it *is*. A pump.

DOUGLAS. It's also a metaphor.

KATSEUS. (*Having none of it.*) There are alternatives, Mr. Birch. A dozen Seconal and a bottle of vodka, that's what most of my medical brethren would prescribe. With any luck your wife would die in her sleep. And her death would be totally painless. It would also be as insignificant as such deaths usually are.

DOUGLAS. A "significant" death, is that what you matters to you?

KATSEUS. Yes, it does. It matters to your wife, too. I think you know it matters. Don't you? (*A pause.*) I can't make you like me, Mr. Birch. But I can do this: I can guarantee you that if she dies using my device, your wife's death will not be insignificant.

DOUGLAS. (*Slowly, facing him.*) When do you intend to do it?

KATSEUS. As soon as possible. She doesn't want to wait, and neither do I. I can't afford to. (*He picks a legal document up off his desk, hands it to Douglas.*) An injunction handed down yesterday morning by the state District Attorney. So you see, Mr. Birch, your support is especially crucial.

DOUGLAS. You'll be breaking the law.

KATSEUS. Yes, I know.

DOUGLAS. You could go to prison.

KATSEUS. Without your signature, I most certainly will. But right now we should be thinking of your wife, don't you agree. (*He hands a pen to Douglas, who signs the affidavit and hands it back.*)

KATSEUS. I'll need three days. I have to find a place, somewhere

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

close to a hospital so her organs can be donated right away afterwards. She wants to donate her organs.

DOUGLAS. I know.

KATSEUS. Also there are a few minor modifications I'd like to make on the device.

DOUGLAS. Three days. So — Thursday?

KATSEUS. Thursday. (*Douglas opens the door.*) Thank you, Mr. Birch.

DOUGLAS. I'm doing this for my wife, not for you. I'll bring her Thursday. The rest will be between you.

KATSEUS. I think she'll want you to be here.

DOUGLAS. It's already been discussed. I'll do whatever she wants. But I won't watch her die. Not like this. (*He goes.*)

KATSEUS. Goodbye, Mr. Birch.

A moment later, Katseus takes a chair, crosses over to the device and sits beside it. He holds up one of the plastic tubes, presses a button, and studies his wristwatch to see how long it takes for the fluid in the second bottle to start flowing. He jots a note on a piece of paper, then gets a screwdriver and makes a small adjustment to the solenoid. As he does so his hand shakes. He holds the screwdriver in front of his eyes, watching it tremble, then catches it with his other hand as the lights slowly fade and Bach's Concerto No. 1 in F is heard. Blackout.)

END ACT I

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

ACT II SCENE 1

Tarot card projection: Number 13: Death. Music from Bach's St. John Passion. Lights on the device, which has been disassembled, its parts strewn across the floor. A haggard, unshaven and baggy-eyed Katseus dictates into his tape-recorder.

KATSEUS. Wednesday, May 5th. Have spent last twenty-four hours making final preparations, including seeking a clean, quiet, decent location for carrying out the procedure. Have tried three hospitals, four funeral parlors, three clinics, five hotels. Was turned down by all of the above. No room at the inn ... *(Bach's Gavotte in G-minor for violin plays. Judith appears at the door. She wears a bright, flower-patterned dress with spring gloves and carries a large shoulder bag. She enters and stands there.)*

JUDITH. Good morning

KATSEUS. Mrs. Birch! What are you doing here?

JUDITH. *(Gestures: doo.r)* The thing ... the ... it was ...

KATSEUS. It's Wednesday. You're supposed to come tomorrow morning.

JUDITH. *(Crossing to the dismantled device.)* Don't worry; I paid the ... the ... Oh, my. God isn't looking ... what ...?

KATSEUS. I'm working on him. It. Mrs. —

JUDITH. Judith! Call me Judith!

KATSEUS. As you can see, I'm very busy.

JUDITH. *(Removing her gloves.)* I know! That's why I ... I came to ... collaboration!

KATSEUS. Thanks, I think I have things well under control.

JUDITH. *(Looking around, dubious.)* Oh?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. (*Defensively.*) The solenoid burnt out; I'm replacing it. Now, then, Mrs. Birch, if you —

JUDITH. Judith! That's — my name.

KATSEUS. (*With his coat on, taking her gently by the arm.*) Let's go, Mrs. — Judith.

JUDITH. Why? Where are we — ?

KATSEUS. Back — to your motel.

JUDITH. No! I don't want to go to my moment. My mo — !

KATSEUS. *I want you to go to your moment — to your motel! I have work to do. It may seem simple to you, but there are all kinds of preparations involved in this process. Paperwork, phone calls, work on the device ... We are scheduled to meet tomorrow morning. I suggest we keep to that schedule, Mrs. Birch.*

JUDITH. But I want to ... to —

KATSEUS. You can help by cooperating. Now please, Mr.s Birch, if you don't — (*Judith breaks away and sits defiantly on Katseus' sofa.*) Perhaps I haven't made myself clear.

JUDITH. Yes! You've made yourself —! Very! You don't want my help. You want nothing to do with me. You want me to come here tomorrow like a good little ... so you can hook me up to ... Well, I'm so sorry, Dr. Catsup, but that's — that's not how it's going to be!

KATSEUS. (*Warily.*) How is it going to be?

JUDITH. In a day ... tomorrow ... the three of us ... you, me, God ... we'll be ... together. And then it will just be you two. Between now and then, we should get to know each other. Those eyewitnesses that never shed any tears, that movement ... that ... that never ... smiles ... your ... those things over your ears —

KATSEUS. My — glasses?

JUDITH. And this ... this ... — (*Gestures: tie.*)

KATSEUS. My *necktie*?

JUDITH. Those things ... they're going to be ... the last things ... for me. Or that ... that smell you wear.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Smell? What —

JUDITH. Perfume. The —

KATSEUS. My after shave, you mean? Old Spice.

JUDITH. And music. There has to be. Of course. Whatever you like to do on your ... your ... (*She crosses to the organ.*) Those are the last things I'll see and smell and hear. I can't be just a ... a *thing* for you. Can I? No. I'm sorry. Not just ... I'm not just —

KATSEUS. Does your husband know you're here?

JUDITH. Yes. He brought me.

KATSEUS. Shouldn't you be with him? Your next to last day?

JUDITH. It was his ... his —

KATSEUS. His idea? Still, even so, I should think he'd want —

JUDITH. (*Adamantly.*) My husband ... Douglas ... can take care of himself! Please: tell me! I want to know.

KATSEUS. What? What do you — ?

JUDITH. Everything. I want to know everything.

KATSEUS. About?

JUDITH. You! I want to know everything about you!

KATSEUS. That's not a good idea.

JUDITH. Why?

KATSEUS. I'm a doctor. Doctors shouldn't get too personal with their patients.

JUDITH. Bullshit!

KATSEUS. Mrs. Birch!

JUDITH. Gobbledegood.

KATSEUS. Gobbledegook. And it's not. The same, I mean. A doctor needs to know his patients, not the other way around.

JUDITH. Where were you bought — born?

KATSEUS. Look, I really don't care to —

JUDITH. Answer!

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Budapest.

JUDITH. Buda — ? Really?

KATSEUS. No, I'm pulling your leg.

JUDITH. So — you're ...

KATSEUS. I'm American. I left Hungary with my parents when they fled during the uprising. I was twenty-one. Now look, you say you want to help me? Help me by letting me concentrate. I've got hours of work ahead of me here. If it doesn't get done we can forget the whole business.

JUDITH. What ... should I do?

KATSEUS. Sit there. And watch. (*He tries to attach a hose to something. His hand trembles badly. After several moments he stops and holds the screw to the light.*) Damn ...

JUDITH. (*Rising, concerned.*) What — ?

KATSEUS. Nothing. The thread is stripped.

JUDITH. Your mother.

KATSEUS. What?

JUDITH. About her. Tell me!

KATSEUS. Really? Why —

JUDITH. I'm listening.

KATSEUS. (*Shaking his hand at her; the screw flies away*) Great. Now I've lost the damn screw. (*On his knees, Katseus searches for it.*)

JUDITH. (*Joining him on the floor.*) I'll help.

KATSEUS. Sit down!

JUDITH. My ... (*Gesturing: eyes.*) ... are good!

KATSEUS. So are mine.

JUDITH. Is this — ?

KATSEUS. Yes. Thank you. Now, please, sit back down.

JUDITH. Was she ...? (*Gesturing: beautiful.*)

KATSEUS. (*Guessing.*) An opera singer?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. *(Shaking her head.)* No ... no ... *(More gestures.)*

KATSEUS. Large chested? Histrionic? Ridiculous? Sorry, but I have no idea what you're —

JUDITH. Beautiful! Was she beautiful?

KATSEUS. Who?

JUDITH. Your mother.

KATSEUS. *(The screwdriver slips again.)* Oh, for the love of ...

JUDITH. Here — let me! *(She tries to take the screwdriver from him; he pulls away violently.)* I want to help!

KATSEUS. You'll do your part — when it's time.

JUDITH. I'll die, you mean. *(Katseus says nothing; tightens the screw.)*

God ... damn you! *(Judith kicks a bottle, sends it flying.)*

KATSEUS. Hey! Are you —!

JUDITH. Damn you, damn you, damn you! *(Collapses, weeping, on the sofa.)*

KATSEUS. Mrs. Birch —

JUDITH. Judith! Judith! That is *my* name!

KATSEUS. Sorry.

JUDITH. I thought we were ... col ... col —

KATSEUS. Collaborators? We are. We will be. I mean —

JUDITH. I'll push a ... a ... that's what you mean!

KATSEUS. There's more to it than that.

JUDITH. I'll die!

KATSEUS. Well, it's —

JUDITH. I'll go to sleep, have a ... a myo ... myo —

KATSEUS. Myocardial infarction.

JUDITH. And then — the thing ... what you need me to do most.

KATSEUS. Please, let's not —

JUDITH. Why? I thought you hate — eu — eu —

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Euphemisms. I do, but there's no need to be morbid.

JUDITH. You — you —

KATSEUS. Now what did I say?

JUDITH. I don't need you or your stupid ... I can kill myself!

KATSEUS. Mrs. Birch ... Judith —

JUDITH. I'll jump off a ... ! I'll — drink ... something! I'll put up a ... from the top of a ...! I'll ... I'll ... *(She gestures: hanging herself.)*

KATSEUS. Judith — !

JUDITH. I'll — I'll — *(Mimes: slitting her wrists.)*

KATSEUS. Now, you don't want to do that.

JUDITH. I will!

KATSEUS. *(Back to his clinical, cold self.)* Fine, then, if that's your choice. Only be sure to cut with the vein, not against it.

JUDITH. I'll get a ... a ... *(Mimes: shooting herself.)*

KATSEUS. Place the barrel in your mouth and aim upwards.

JUDITH. F — f — *fuck you!*

KATSEUS. Better yet, try carbon monoxide. They say it gives the corpse a beautiful, rosy glow.

JUDITH. You — you ... *scientist!*

KATSEUS. I'm wounded to the core.

JUDITH. You have no core! *(She rushes to the door.)*

KATSEUS. *(Stopping her.)* Judith, for God's sake, be reasonable.

JUDITH. Let go!

KATSEUS. I understand. You want to do your part. I get that. It's just that right now there are a few things that I need to do by myself. This solenoid, for instance. If it's not perfectly adjusted to within a certain tolerance, then it won't engage at the proper moment, which could cause all kinds of grief. The device may look simple, but it's not. There may be only a few dozen parts, but if any one of those parts should malfunction ... well, it could spell disaster for us both. Do you know what a solenoid is?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. (*Adamant, through gritted teeth.*) No, but I can ... screw!

KATSEUS. Sit back down. Please. (*He leads her gently back to the sofa.*) Would you like some coffee or something? (*Judith shakes her head.*) I'll tell you what. I'll work on the device, and while I do ... you ask me anything you want. Fair enough? Whatever you want to know, I'll tell you. How's that? (*He gets back to work. For a while Judith watches him. Slowly, while he's not looking, she gets the tarot deck out of her bag.*)

JUDITH. What's your name?

KATSEUS. What?

JUDITH. Your name.

KATSEUS. Katseus. You know my name.

JUDITH. No. Your other name, what your finders ... finders ... what you're ... call you.

KATSEUS. My friends? I have no friends.

JUDITH. If you did.

KATSEUS. Peter, I suppose.

JUDITH. Peter. The rock! When were you being ... the time ... year ... when?

KATSEUS. When was I born? October 18th, 1935.

JUDITH. Which munar?

KATSEUS. I beg your pardon?

JUDITH. (*Playing with her tarot cards.*) I mean ... lunar ... moon ... month! Which month?

KATSEUS. October.

JUDITH. Day?

KATSEUS. Eighteen.

JUDITH. Eighteen ... Scorpio!

KATSEUS. (*Seeing what she's up to.*) Oh, brother ...

JUDITH. (*Counting on her fingers.*) October eighteen... Eighteen plus ... what's October? January February March — March ...?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. April.

JUDITH. April. April ... May June —

KATSEUS. What are you up to?

JUDITH. Finding your ... your gown ... your growth thing.

KATSEUS. My *what*?

JUDITH. January February April —

KATSEUS. March.

JUDITH. Hmm?

KATSEUS. March comes after February. You said April.

JUDITH. I said ... ?

KATSEUS. April, you said.

JUDITH. March April May June July August September Novem —

KATSEUS. October.

JUDITH. Hmmm?

KATSEUS. You skipped October. September October Nov —

JUDITH. October ... August September October. Ten! Ten plus ...
what dark ... time of ... day What day were you born?

KATSEUS. Jesus ...

JUDITH. Oh! I remember. Eighteen. Eighteen plus ... plus ten minus
... Year?

KATSEUS. (*Loudly.*) Nineteen thirty-five.

JUDITH. (*Using a pad and pencil.*) Minus thirty-five. Eighteen plus
... plus ten minus ... thirty ... thirty —

KATSEUS. (*Taking the pad and pencil from here.*) Give me that!
Before you drive me nuts! (*He calculates.*) Minus seven.

JUDITH. What?

KATSEUS. The answer is minus seven. Eighteen plus ten minus
thirty-five.

JUDITH. Now add the ... the thing ... the year. *This* year.

KATSEUS. Nineteen-eighty-nine. Minus seven. Nineteen-eighty-two.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. Your old ... age! Add it.

KATSEUS. Will this never end? Twenty-thirty-six.

JUDITH. Minus ... seven.

KATSEUS. Minus seven—again?

JUDITH. Again ...

KATSEUS. Again ... (*Calculates.*) Twenty-twenty-nine.

JUDITH. Sure?

KATSEUS. I think I know how to add.

JUDITH. Twenty ... twenty-nine?

KATSEUS. Twenty twenty-nine.

JUDITH. That's your year ... your growth year.

KATSEUS. *Growth* year? I'll be ninety-four, if I'm unlucky enough to live that long!

JUDITH. Now add up the — the —

KATSEUS. Numbers?

JUDITH. In your growth year.

KATSEUS. Anything to get this over with. Two plus zero plus two plus nine. Thirteen.

JUDITH. Thirteen?

KATSEUS. Thirteen.

JUDITH. Really?

KATSEUS. No, I made it up. Why? What's so special about thirteen?

JUDITH. Perfect. (*She hands him the deck of tarot cards.*) Find it. The number. Thirteen.

KATSEUS. (*searching through cards*) You're supposed to be letting me work.

JUDITH. This *is* work.

KATSEUS. I can't find the damn thing. (*keeps looking*) Here. Thirteen. (*He shows her the card.*)

JUDITH. That's your ... thing. Your symbol. Your growth symbol!

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. Some growth symbol, a skeleton lopping off heads. What nonsense! *(He hands her the cards back.)*

JUDITH. It's not nonsense! Not if you ... if you ...

KATSEUS. Interpret it any way you like, it's still nonsense.

JUDITH. *(Taking a book from her satchel and handing it to him.)*
Look it up. Thirteen.

KATSEUS. You mean we're still not done here?

JUDITH. Look it ... *(Katseus finds the proper page and hands the book back to her.)* Read! *(Katseus does so silently to himself.)* Well?

KATSEUS. "The Death Card as a growth symbol. Death/Rebirth is the symbol for the year when the dates of your birth blah blah blah etcetera the Number 13." *(He hands her the book back.)*

JUDITH. *(Refusing it.)* Not blah blah!

KATSEUS. I was paraphrasing.

JUDITH. Read ... all!

KATSEUS. *(With a heavy sigh.)* "The card does not usually signify your own literal death." That's nice to know. *(Judith gestures for him to continue.)* "On the contrary, it is during this year that you can experience the death of an old identity, the ending of certain types of relationships, the closure of certain creative projects or types of work, and, simultaneously, the desire to initiate and start new relationships, projects, careers, and expressions of new parts of oneself." *(He pauses; Judith gestures again.)* "It is literally the year for you to shed that which you have outgrown or overworked."

JUDITH. Go — ! *(Gestures: on.)*

KATSEUS. "More than anything else, the Death Card as a growth symbol requires that you let go of that which you are unnecessarily attached to and give birth to new experiences in your life." *(He slams the book shut, hands it back to Judith, picks up his screwdriver.)*

JUDITH. See?

KATSEUS. Gobbledegook! *(Judith has wandered over to the painting of the zaftig woman. She straightens it.)* What are you doing?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. It's ...

KATSEUS. *(Making it crooked again.)* Leave it! I like it that way. *(He goes back to work. Judith moves to straighten the painting again.)*

KATSEUS. Don't!

JUDITH. Who is — ?

KATSEUS. None of your business.

JUDITH. Your — ?

KATSEUS. My mother.

JUDITH. What was she ... ?

KATSEUS. What was she like? Why should you care?

JUDITH. Curiosity! Scientific!

KATSEUS. Tough. Both my parents were. But my mother wore the pants in the family. While my father tried to be an opera singer she worked in a windshield-wiper factory in Detroit. She's the one who should have been the opera star. She had the looks. A large woman, big in every way. "It is sometink I must do." That was her line, her excuse for everything. "It is sometink I must do." They fought constantly, often visiciously, she and my poor father, their operatic voices booming through the house. I'd cower under the kitchen table, that's how much their booming voices used to scare me, worse than any thunderstorm. The table had a yellow oilcloth covering it, down to the floor almost. I'd hide under it and listen to them go at it, performing their bitter arias. I used to think that oilcloth protected me.

JUDITH. Your ... wife?

KATSEUS. The opposite of my mother. In every way. Small delicate, her expression always on the verge of tears, but always with a little smile, as if she were glad to be sad. In the four years we lived together I doubt she spoke more than a hundred words. Glomerulonephritis. Bright's disease. Chronic inflammation of the kidneys. She died of renal failure. They had her on dialysis three times a week. After a few weeks the forearm fistula where the tube connected to the machine started to clot. She developed a urinary tract infection, became anemic,

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

got hepatitis from a blood transfusion ... A kidney transplant was her only hope. Had her on a list for three months. I'd have given her mine, but I'm the wrong blood type.

JUDITH. You couldn't — ?

KATSEUS. No. I couldn't save her.

JUDITH. That's why — ?

KATSEUS. (*Very defensive.*) Sally had nothing to do with it! That was thirty years ago. Long before I had the vaguest notion of my present work. I was still in med school.

JUDITH. I don't — !

KATSEUS. Believe what you want.

JUDITH. That what I ... what I like about you.

KATSEUS. What?

JUDITH. You don't feel ... (*She makes a sad face.*) ... for yourself.

KATSEUS. Sorry? No.

JUDITH. For anyone. For me!

KATSEUS. Myself, I'd rather be stabbed in the eye with a sharp pencil than felt sorry for.

JUDITH. Douglas ... feels sorry ...

KATSEUS. Your husband cares deeply about you.

JUDITH. (*Examining the painting frame, touching it.*) Strange ...

KATSEUS. What? Oh, the color? It's dried human blood. From my days working with cadavers.

JUDITH. You like to — to — ?

KATSEUS. Shock people? That's not my intention, though it's true that world's great innovators tend to shock. Socrates, Galileo, Darwin ...

JUDITH. Maybe you're re — re — re — ... from one of them.

KATSEUS. Don't let's get started on that business again. No, I'm the first and last of my line.

JUDITH. Could they really send you to ... to ... ?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. To prison? Quite possibly. Bruno was burned at the stake, Galileo exiled, Socrates imprisoned, forced to drink hemlock tea ... Anyway, no one's forcing me. Besides, as my mother would have said, "It is sometink I must do."

Katseus points to a pair of pliers on the floor. Judith picks them up. He holds his hand out. She slaps them, scrub-nurse style, into his palm. Switched-On Bach plays as they continue to work together on the device and the lights fade to —Blackout.)

SCENE 2

Music — Bach, of course, an adagio movement. Tarot card Number 1, The Chariot. Sounds of birdsong. A suggestion of bright, outdoor light gleams off the doors and panels of a rusting Volkswagen bus, shown in cross-section. The bus holds a neatly made-up Army cot. Beside the cot sits the device, and next to the device an electrocardiograph. From inside the van Katseus withdraws a small, handmade wooden stepping stool and positions it next to the side door. He then takes a curtain rod and, sitting on the cot, attaches a set of bright yellow curtains to the rod. He checks his watch, picks up a microphone and dictates into his tape recorder.

KATSEUS. Thursday, May 6, twelve-thirty p.m. Have completed final arrangements. All is in order. (*Looking around.*) The day has finally arrived when all the years of research and theory, all the planning and experimentation, are to be put to real use on a ... on an actual patient. (*Pause; distress crosses his face.*) And not just any patient, but a woman ... an intelligent, thoughtful woman whose commitment and determination are every bit as great ... (*Rewinds.*) ... are more than a match for ... (*Rewinds.*) ... whose determination practically exceeds my own. (*Distress turns to a smile as he thinks of something.*) Not unhappily, after all these years of working in isolation I find myself involved in ... in what amounts to ... a collaboration ... (*Still dwelling*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

on this last thought, Katseus clicks off the recorder. He rises to hang the curtains, then stops, smooths his hand over the cot where he has been sitting, turns the sheet back and gives the pillow a fluff. He puts the curtain rod into place, reaches for a screwdriver and starts tightening the brackets. Judith and Douglas appear on the far side of the stage. Judith wears a flowing white dress with a red bow; she carries her shoulder bag.)

DOUGLAS. *(He has been weeping.)* I guess —

JUDITH. Yes.

DOUGLAS. This —

JUDITH. Yes.

DOUGLAS. I'm not sure I can do this.

JUDITH. You can.

DOUGLAS. Can I?

JUDITH. *(kissing him)* Yes.

DOUGLAS. I can't stop crying.

JUDITH. Right ...

DOUGLAS. I feel like a father seeing his daughter off to college. Or handing her off to —

JUDITH. College. Hah!

DOUGLAS. I am trying to be brave.

JUDITH. Yes.

DOUGLAS. But I also feel I've been selfish.

JUDITH. No.

DOUGLAS. I thought of myself.

JUDITH. No.

DOUGLAS. Even now. I'm still thinking — .

JUDITH. No.

DOUGLAS. You're stronger than me. Always were.

JUDITH. *(Taking his hand.)* Douglas.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

DOUGLAS. It's a lovely day.

JUDITH. Yes.

DOUGLAS. *(An observation.)* You're not afraid, are you?

JUDITH. No. Yes.

DOUGLAS. Amazing. You're amazing. Oh, God ... *(He breaks down. They hold each other.)*

DOUGLAS. I'll stay with you. If you want. Whatever you want. *(Judith shakes her head.)* I love you. *(They embrace one last time. He lets her go. She turns and walks out of the light. The lights go out on Douglas and Judith and come back up on the van, where Katseus continues to screw in the curtain rods. Judith, alone now, steps slowly up to the van, stopping at the side door to watch Katseus, who doesn't see her there.)*

JUDITH. Peter.

KATSEUS. *(Startled, by her voice, Katseus strikes his head against the van's roof.)* Crap! *(As he rubs his scalp, Judith tries to hide her amusement.)* I'm glad you found that amusing. I'll be with you shortly. I want to finish hanging these curtains ...

JUDITH. *(Twirling girlishly in her white dress.)* Beautiful ...

KATSEUS. The curtains? I've had them for years.

JUDITH. *(Looking around.)* No.

KATSEUS. Oh. Yes, it is a lovely day, isn't it?

JUDITH. *(Watching — a butterfly? — go by.)* It fills ... everything. That way it's ... going. The movement, so ... gawdy. Gawdy! Did I just say gawdy?

KATSEUS. You said gawdy.

JUDITH. Look at those — those ... puffs. Great big puffs.

KATSEUS. Clouds, I think you mean.

JUDITH. *(Reaching out as if to embrace them.)* Clouds. Puffs. Puffy clouds. Oh — clouds! ... *(Turning, facing the van.)* So — this — ?

KATSEUS. I would have preferred a suite at the Beverly Hilton, or a

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

Winnebago. This was the best I could do, under the circumstances.
Care to step inside? (*Giving her a hand.*) Careful, that step's a doozy.
You wore heels.

JUDITH. Hmmm.

KATSEUS. (*Indicating the bed.*) Make yourself ... Make yourself comfortable. (*Judith sits; he goes back to tightening brackets.*) It's an old Army cot. I put some foam padding and some blankets on it to make it a little more solid. You can lie back, if you like. I've still got a couple things to do. I want everything to be just right.

JUDITH. Beautiful ...

KATSEUS. Hmm? Yes: a beautiful day ...

JUDITH. No. This — ...

KATSEUS. Oh, the van? It's a Volkswagen. Belonged to my second cousin. He lives just outside the city. Gave it to me. Says it's on its last legs. Two-hundred-and-eighteen thousand miles on her. Say what you will about the Nazis, they built good cars.

JUDITH. You: *you're* beautiful.

KATSEUS. I'm beautiful?

JUDITH. You!

KATSEUS. At least we can be sure that there's no question of your having Alzheimer's.

JUDITH. Say your name for me.!

KATSEUS. My name?

JUDITH. Say it. Say Peter! Peter, Peter ...

KATSEUS. Judith —

JUDITH. Judith. That's my name!

KATSEUS. Peter. There, I've said it. Satisfied?

JUDITH. (*Giving him her hand.*) Nice to meet you, Peter.

KATSEUS. You do know why we're here, don't you?

JUDITH. Yes.

KATSEUS. Are you sure?

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. Yes, I'm sure. Peter.

KATSEUS. And what you're doing?

JUDITH. What we're doing. Yes.

KATSEUS. You haven't changed your mind, right?

JUDITH. Right!

You won't change it?

JUDITH. *(Proudly.)* I won't!

KATSEUS. Okay. Just making certain. *(He drives in the last screw.)* I hope you like yellow. My mother had these curtains in the kitchen of our Chicago apartment. I didn't even know I still had them till I went rummaging around in my closets for something to ... you know ... spruce things up a bit.

JUDITH. We're like ... those people ... crossing the ... the ones who ... who went across —

KATSEUS. The pioneers?

JUDITH. Pioneers! That's what we are, you and me, Peter.

KATSEUS. Pioneers. I like that.

JUDITH. That's us. What we are. *(She stands looking out the van doorway as Katseus watches her from behind, still holding the screwdriver which trembles badly in his hand.)* Look at all the ... puffs.

KATSEUS. Clouds.

JUDITH. The clouds.

KATSEUS. *(Nervously.)* I brought the tape player. And the tape. Bach, per your request. Should I play it?

JUDITH. Yes.

KATSEUS. *(He selects one of the tapes, puts it in the machine and tries to play it. The tape jams in the machine.)* Damn ... *(He tries to get the tape to eject, but it won't. He takes a screwdriver to it. His hands shake badly. The screwdriver slips. He cuts himself.)*

JUDITH. Did you — ?

KATSEUS. *(Sucking his thumb.)* It's okay. *(He looks at his thumb.)*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. You're — !

KATSEUS. I'll survive. *(As he bandages himself.)* The Gavotte No. 2 in G-major. *(Judith nods. He plays the tape. She listens, smiling. After a moment she rises, turns to Katseus and gestures: dance.)* What — ? Oh, no. No!

JUDITH. Yes.

KATSEUS. No!

JUDITH. Dance! *(She takes his arm and jumps out of the van, forcing Katseus to do likewise.)*

KATSEUS. I can't!

JUDITH. *(Dancing.)* Yes. Dance! Dance! *(They dance together — more or less—circling them around the van.)* “Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater ...”

KATSEUS. Enough!

JUDITH. “Had a wife and couldn't ... “

KATSEUS. Please!

JUDITH. *(Twirling.)* “Ring around the Rosie, pocket full of posies ... A tissue, a tissue, we all fall —” *(Katseus pulls himself from her; Judith falls dizily to the ground.)*

KATSEUS. Judith! Are you all right? *(He helps her up.)* I tried to warn you. Anyway, we're not here to dance, Mr. Birch. You know that.

JUDITH. *(Slowly, looking up at him, dazed.)* Do I ... know you? Do we ... know each other?

KATSEUS. *(Cautiously.)* Yes?

JUDITH. Then ... call me ... by my *fucking name!*

KATSEUS. *(Seeing that she has more than regained her wits, turning the tape player off.)* Are you positive you haven't changed your mind?

JUDITH. No! No, no, no!

KATSEUS. Good, then let's stop ...

JUDITH. Wasting time?

KATSEUS. ... Fooling around.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

JUDITH. Fine.

KATSEUS. Fine.

JUDITH. Fine!

KATSEUS. (*Backpedaling.*) You look ... very nice, by the way.

JUDITH. (*Coldly.*) Thank you.

KATSEUS. (*Stiffly.*) I like that dress. The red bow especially. It's ... very pretty. Very becoming.

JUDITH. (*Softening.*) Thank you, Peter. I like your —

KATSEUS. My necktie? It was an easy choice, the only one without any gravy stains on it. How did you sleep, by the way?

JUDITH. Fine.

KATSEUS. I hardly slept a wink. I was woken up by a nightmare.

JUDITH. Oh! Tell me.

KATSEUS. I dreamed I was my own patient, a nightmare in itself. "Name?" "Katseus." "Occupation?" "Physician." "Symptoms?" "First day: acute fever, chills, sweating." "Second day?" "Worse. Took an enema, got some sleep." "Third day?" "Fever broke in the morning, then returned higher than before. Sweating, thirst, parched tongue, dark-colored urine. Delirious." ... What was most horrifying about the dream was the fact that I had no absolutely confidence in the doctor's—my own — ability to cure me. "Sixth day?" "Died. At noon. After a period of intense, painful suffering." (*A pause.*) Sorry you asked? (*Judith smiles. Katseus smiles back. He motions to the van door.*) Well. Shall we ... ? (*He holds out her arm; she takes it. He begins to help her up the step, then stops.*) Judith, are you ... absolutely, positively certain you want to go through with this? (*Judith nods. Katseus helps her the rest of the way up. She sits down and then lies back on the cot with her hands folded on her stomach.*) Oh — I almost forgot! (*The video camera is there. He turns it on. What it sees appears on the screen.*) Comfortable? (*Judith nods.*) Good, All right. Well. Now. You are sure? We don't have to go through with it. You can change your mind. At any moment. Just say "Stop" and we'll stop.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

Understand? *(She nods again.)* Do you ... want to stop? *(She shakes her head adamantly.)* Just making sure. I have to be sure. You understand? *(She nods.)* Yes?

JUDITH. Please, Peter. Don't ask again.

KATSEUS. *(Considers saying something, then thinks better of it. She gives him her hand. He takes it, his own trembling as much as ever.)*
Judith — *(She presses a finger to his lips. Katseus nods. She draws her finger away. He tries to insert the IV. He tries several times, but his shaking hands prevent him. Judith takes the IV from him. She guides it into her own vein.)*

KATSEUS. Where did you learn — ?

JUDITH. Husband ... jazz musician? *(She reaches up, touches his forehead.)* Are you — ?

KATSEUS. Huh? Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Say, who's the doctor here? Lie back down. *(He switches on the electrocardiogram.)* Some music? *(She nods; he puts a different tape in the player; Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze" plays.)*

KATSEUS. You ... had something you wanted me to read? *(Judith gestures toward her shoulder bag. Katseus reaches inside. He takes out the velvet tarot card pouch, then reaches in further and withdraws two books, the first of which is a Bible.)* So you believe this, too?

JUDITH. The place ... it's ...

KATSEUS. Yes, I see it. *(He puts his reading glasses on, moves a stool up close to her, opens the Bible to the marked page, clears his throat, reads.)* "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal." *(A smile spreads across Judith's face. Katseus closes the Bible. Judith points to the second book. He reads its cover.)* "Japanese Death Poems ... written by Zen monks and haiku poets on the verge of death." Appropriate, I guess. *(Judith points to the bookmark.)* Right. *(He finds poem, or thinks he has, clears his throat, reads 🧐)*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

Cherry blossoms fall
on a half-eaten
dumpling [?]

(He frowns quizzically; Judith laughs, shakes her head: wrong poem.)
Oh, sorry! Oh, yes. I see. This one ...

For over sixty years
I often cried *Katsu!* To no avail
And now, while dying
Once more to cry *Katsu!*
Won't change a thing.

JUDITH. *(Nodding approvingly, smiling.)* Katsu! ... Katseus: Peter!

KATSEUS. *(He puts the book away. A pause.)* All right, then, Judith.
So. You know what to do?

JUDITH. Yes.

KATSEUS. I'm going to remove the safety guard. Okay, the safety
guard's removed. Now. I'm going to count to ten. When I say "ten,"
that's when —

JUDITH. I press.

KATSEUS. Not until I count to ten. Okay?

JUDITH. Okay, Peter.

KATSEUS. Right. Okay. Here we go. I'll start counting now. Ready?
One-thousand one ... one-thousand two ... Judith, are you —

JUDITH. Yes!

KATSEUS. One-thousand three ... one-thousand four ... one-thousand
five, one-thousand six ... Listen, I know it's late for me to be saying
this, but —

JUDITH. Shhhh! *(She rises up and kisses him — fervently — on the
mouth, stunning Katseus. While doing so—and without Katseus
noticing—she pushes the button.)*

KATSEUS. I'm just not sure ... that is, I think we may be making a

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

mistake. I know: I can't believe I'm saying it myself. But you know ... sometimes, when I'm alone, after I've eaten supper, I play my organ and I watch the sunset through my apartment window. Or I play a record and sit there. Sometimes I sit there until the stars come out. Then do you know what I do, sometimes? *(He laughs.)* I keep sitting there, watching the stars, trying to figure them out, afraid to go to bed 'cuz if I do I might just miss the answer. As if there were a answer ... as if anything to do with this phenomenon known as life makes the slightest bit of sense ... *(He shakes his head.)* I guess what I'm saying is ... you never know what another day might bring. Or another hour, or another minute. This minute! *(laughs)* Listen to me — talking metaphysical! You've corrupted me. *(As Judith lies back and closes her eyes.)* You know something else? *(To himself.)* Now I'm going to be extremely unprofessional. *(To her.)* If you were my wife, I'd settle for half of you. I'd settle for a quarter, a tenth. So you forget a few things? Big deal. We all do. Hell, I'd forget my own teeth if they weren't stuck in my mouth. IU know, I know: this is completely unethical — and selfish. But I can't help it. The point is you still have a lot to offer. All that persuasive power. I thought my mother was a woman of convictions. She had nothing on you. This cause of ours could use someone with your persuasive powers. No kidding. I'm not so persuasive. Besides, people — well, let's just say I'm not very well-liked. But you. Imagine what someone like you could do for someone like me? *(A pause.)* What I mean to say, Judith, is ... for my sake — don't do it. *(Pause.)* Judith? *(He looks up to see that the fluid has drained out of the second bottle.)*

JUDITH. *(As though in exstacy.)* Katsu ... Katsu ... Katsu ...

KATSEUS. No... No! *(He makes a last-ditch move to unhook the device, but it's too late; she is gone.)* Oh—Judith!... *(He rises slowly, touches her face, checks her pulse. He closes her eyes and pulls a blanket gently up to her chin.)* Safe... safe journey. *(The lights fade slowly on the van as the music swells. Blackout.)*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

SCENE 3

“Sheep May Safely Graze” keeps playing as the Justice tarot card is projected onto the screen and the lights come up on the visitation area of a prison. Katseus, looking drawn and otherwise worse for wear in an orange prison jumpsuit, enters and sits at a parlor table. He is joined by Douglas, who sits opposite him. It should be clearly suggested that they are separated by some sort of divider.

DOUGLAS. Dr. Katseus.

KATSEUS. Mr. Birch.

DOUGLAS. You said you wanted to see me. Here I am.

KATSEUS. Yes. Yes, thanks for coming. *(A most awkward pause.)*
Sorry I can't offer you better surroundings.

DOUGLAS. That's ... quite all right.

KATSEUS. I can't even offer you some bad instance coffee.

DOUGLAS. Not a problem.

KATSEUS. Impossible as it seems, my present circumstances make me an even worse host than usual.

DOUGLAS. What is it that you wanted to see me about?

KATSEUS. Oh. First of all, to thank you. For testifying. At the trial. On my behalf. I very much appreciated it.

DOUGLAS. I just told the truth, that's all.

KATSEUS. Well, you could have made things much worse for me, if you'd wanted to.

DOUGLAS. Things were bad enough.

KATSEUS. Yes. Well. Still. It could have been worse.

DOUGLAS. Ten years?

KATSEUS. You know how it is. Death brings out the ... uhm ... irrational side of people.

DOUGLAS. Yes. It does.

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

KATSEUS. I suppose you'll be heading back to Santa Barbara now that the trial is over?

DOUGLAS. I've no reason to stay here. (*Katseus nods.*) Was there ... something ...?

KATSEUS. Oh. Yes! Judith's cards. Her tarot cards. I've got them with me in my cell. I meant to have my lawyer give them to you at the trial ... but ... well, I guess it slipped my mind.

DOUGLAS. You had other things to think about.

KATSEUS. Anyway, I thought you'd want them. I've had a guard leave them the Visiting Room Officer with instructions to give them to you.

DOUGLAS. You needn't have done that.

KATSEUS. I could have mailed them to you, but ... since you were still here ... I thought ...

DOUGLAS. Thanks, but ... why don't you keep them?

KATSEUS. Me? I've no use for them.

DOUGLAS. I think Judith would want you to have them.

KATSEUS. She would?

DOUGLAS. I think so.

KATSEUS. Well. All right. Thank you. (*An awkward silence.*) Anyway, thank you for coming by. (*Douglas smiles faintly. He stands, starts off, then stops, turns.*)

DOUGLAS. I'll say this much for you, Katseus, you're a man of your convictions.

KATSEUS. Some would say stubborn. As Galileo said after *his* trial: "It still moves." (*Another awkward moment as both men take renewed stock of each other.*)

DOUGLAS. Well ... I won't say that it's been a pleasure.

KATSEUS. No.

DOUGLAS. Anyway. Good luck.

KATSEUS. Thank you. And to you. (*As Douglas is about to walk out,*

A GOD IN THE HOUSE

looking at him.) She was a remarkable woman. (Douglas turns, looks intently into Katseus' eyes, recognizing something there he hadn't recognized before: true compassion. For the first time Douglas realizes that he and Katseus are — have always been — on the same side.)

DOUGLAS. Yes, she was. I'll miss her.

KATSEUS. *(Nodding.)* So will I. *(Douglas goes. Katseus watches him go, then rises and makes his way slowly off the stage as "Sheep May Safely Graze" swells and the lights fade slowly to black. Meanwhile The Lovers appear on the screen, projected side-by-side with the tarot card Death. Blackout.)*

— END OF PLAY —

A God in the House

(play production)

July 2023



a GOD in the HOUSE

a drama in two acts

written by PETER SELGIN • directed by LELAND DOWNES
with STEVE ELLIOTT-GOWER • WILL RILEY • JULIA ROESSING
JULY 7, 8, 9 • TOWN & GOWN PLAYERS • ATHENS, GA

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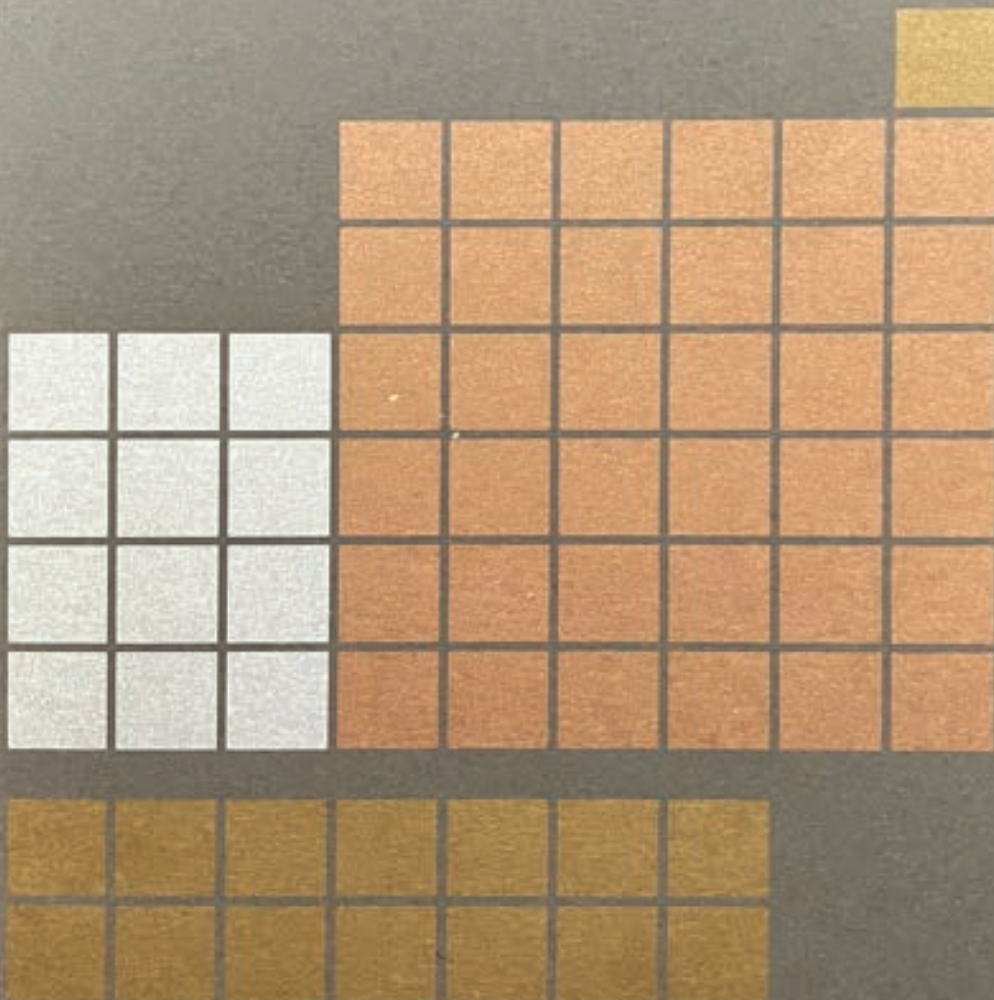


Aldrich Museum
“Prima Materia”
(group art exhibition)
July 2023

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



Prima Materia:
The Periodic Table
in Contemporary Art



The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

For Immediate Release

PRIMA MATERIA: THE PERIODIC TABLE IN CONTEMPORARY ART February 6 to August 27, 2023

A group exhibition linking works of art with an element from the periodic table — exploring science, the environment, sociology, politics, and the spiritual through elemental origins

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is pleased to announce *Prima Materia: The Periodic Table in Contemporary Art*, a group exhibition presenting significant and diverse works of art, which incorporate or reference thirty-five of the 118 elements on the periodic table by artists Matthew Barney, Edward Burtynsky, Rachel Berwick, Dove Bradshaw, Julian Charrière, Compound Interest, The Dufala Brothers, Ashley Epps*, Philp Grausman, Tom Lehrer, Bryan McGovern Wilson, Myra Mimplitsch-Gray, Cornelia Parker, Katie Paterson, Simon Patterson, Beverly Pepper, Winston Roeth*, Allison Smith*, Edward Steed, Carlos Vega, Eleanor White*, and Robert Williams. *Prima Materia* will be on view at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum from February 6 to August 27, 2023.



The Dufala Brothers, *Anvil*, 2020, Anthracite coal. Courtesy of the artist and Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia

While the basis of the exhibition is science, through expansive curatorial choices, the project will reveal the material basis for sociological, emotional, political, and even spiritual subject matter. Artists use specific materials for a reason, quite often for their metaphorical potential, and *Prima Materia* will explore hard facts as well as alchemical conjecture. A subtext that will be explored in the project is resource extraction, which will be incorporated through works that speak about the mining and refining industry and its legacy. As a society we are woefully unaware of the trail followed by common materials as they go from the earth into our hands, and the exhibition will give the viewer a greater appreciation of the material world, reveling in both the beauty and convoluted history of our understanding and manipulation of physical matter.

All art forms, even music and literature, are partially dependent on the material world. The visual arts, however, are more linked to materialism, as the field is primarily defined by objects. Even digital media is contingent on physical matter, whether it is the silicon that makes the microprocessor, or the lithium that is contained within a cell phone battery. Humans have speculated for thousands of years on how the world is comprised. “Prima

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

For Immediate Release

materia” was a concept first put forth by Aristotle to describe the primitive, formless base for all matter. Plato later expanded on this in his treatise *Timaeus*, writing: “The body of the world is composed of four elementary constituents, earth, air, fire, and water, the whole available amount of which is used up in its composition.” The alchemists of both medieval Europe and those of the Islamic Middle East and North Africa were the first who began to doubt the primacy of the ancient four elements. Beginning in the Renaissance, their speculation led to the transition of the practice of Alchemy to Chemistry. Included in the “origins” section of the exhibition is Robert William’s installation *Theatrum Chemicum Britannium – The Alchemist’s Shack*. Based on the life of Eirenaeus Philalethes (Geroge Starkey), a practicing Colonial American alchemist who attended Harvard College in 1643, Philalethes’s work went on to influence European scientists such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton. The names given to the eras in human history—stone, bronze, iron, and now silicon—are indicative of how our understanding of matter has transformed culture.

Prima Materia: The Periodic Table in Contemporary Art is curated by independent curator and artist Richard Klein and will be accompanied by a 90-page softcover catalogue featuring an essay by Klein.

*Artists commissioned by The Aldrich to make new works for the exhibition.

For press inquiries, please contact

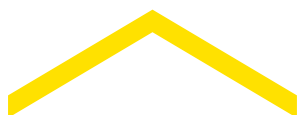
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Underwood House

“Peter Selgin: a Retrospective”

(solo art exhibition)

January – February 2023



Peter Selgin a Retrospective of Visual Art

January 19 - February 23, 2023
Reception January 19th, 5 - 7pm

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Georgia College Department of Art
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Hours: Tuesday, Thursday & Friday 1 - 4pm
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Image: *Ocean Liner, 2018*, Peter Selgin, acrylic on canvas



Department of Art



ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY:

Peter Selgin is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction. He has published two children's books, three books on the writer's craft, two essay collections, and three novels, including the forthcoming *A Boy's Guide to Outer Space* (Regal House Publishing, Fall 2024). *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, his memoir-in-essays, was a finalist for the William Saroyan International Prize. His memoir, *The Inventors*, won the 2017 Housatonic Book Award. His recent novel, *Duplicity*, won the 2021 Best Indie Book Award and the 2021 Indie Excellence Book Award.

Selgin's paintings have been featured at the Bridgewater-Lustberg Gallery in Soho and the Frank J. Miele Gallery, as well as other galleries in New York City and elsewhere. His one-man show of paintings and watercolors at the Wave Hill Gallery in the Bronx, New York, sold-out. He has work in many private collections and in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England. His illustrations have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Outside*, *Forbes*, *Gourmet*, *Italian Food and Wine*, and many other publications. Other illustration clients have included Volkswagen, British Airways, Canon Corporation, Merrill-Lynch, Rolling Stone, Banker's Trust, Virgin Atlantic, Burberry's of London, IBM, and American Express. His children's picture book, *S.S. Gigantic Across the Atlantic* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), which he wrote and illustrated, was a Scholastic Book Club Main Selection. It won the 2000 Helen Lemme Award for Best Children's Picture Book.

Selgin is also an award-winning playwright. His full-length play, *A God in the House*, based on Dr. Kevorkian and his suicide device, was a Eugene O'Neill National Playwright's Conference Winner. Other full-length plays have won the Charlotte Repertory Theater New Plays Festival Award, the Mill Mountain Theater Award, and the State G Theater New Plays Festival Award.

He is Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College and State University, where he is art director and nonfiction editor of *Arts & Letters*, an international journal of poetry and prose.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

The impetus for what I'll call my "pseudo-naïve" style was a painting I saw in a Philadelphia antique shop while drawing caricatures at a convention. It showed the *Titanic* rearing up in silhouette against an enormous iceberg with mother-of-pearl highlights. Two things struck me about the painting: its naiveté, and that it was painted on, or rather behind, a sheet of glass: a reverse painting, or, as the sexier French call it, *verre églomisé*. My wife and I had just bought our first home, an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that had a sunken living room and a raised dining alcove. I imagined the painting hanging over the English art deco bar unit we'd bought.

The antique dealer wanted \$900; too rich for my blood. So I left the painting there. But the painting wouldn't leave me. It haunted me. It captured perfectly my boyhood fascination with the *Titanic*, a fixation born when I first saw *A Night to Remember*, the 1958 British docudrama based on Walter Lord's bestselling book of the same title.

From memory I tried to recreate that painting. In the process, I experienced the freedom and joy of painting "incorrectly," of abandoning the perspective I'd fallen in love with as a six-year-old watching John Gnagy draw receding railroad tracks, forsaking "realism," choosing instead to see through a child's innocent eyes. By extension I lost interest in natural lighting and other exponents of realism, which—in my ignorant view—held painting hostage for 500+ years. The naïve artist in me was born.

But I see myself more as a maker of pictures than as a "fine artist"—a term that, for me, is too associated with theories and doctrines to stand for what I do. These days, when all is politicized and polarized, my art has no message. I guess it's superficial, but only insofar as a child's sense of joy is superficial. I don't want people to look at my paintings and think; I want them to look and smile with a child's unabashed pleasure.

DONALD FRIEDMAN

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The Two Sides of Peter Selgin

By Donald Friedman | February 10, 2022

“The writer and the artist in me needed each other.”

A two-fisted writer-artist, Peter Selgin, award-winning novelist, essayist, playwright, memoirist, short story writer, and children’s book author, earned his living as a freelance artist for thirty-six years, his paintings and illustrations featured in the likes of *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, *Gourmet*, and *Outside*, before deciding to abandon the visual arts for the literary. In 2009 he left New York for Georgia where he secured a job as professor of creative writing at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville.

“My art supplies went into storage. No more dividing myself between my two loves: writing and painting. Though I’d published some books, I saw myself not as a successful visual artist who wrote, but as an author burdened by his day job. As an academic, I’d have summers off and sabbaticals. I’d immerse myself in books and writing and thereby realize my dream: to succeed as a writer.

“Five years later, having moldered away in a warehouse, my art supplies joined me, along with hundreds of paintings and drawings stuffed into portfolios: the fruits of that forsaken life, smelling of must and mildew and already yellowing with age. It was like being reunited with an old friend. I knew then that segregating the writer from the artist in me had been a mistake. They needed each other.

“The writer needed the artist to balance himself, to take refuge from the verbal realm in the realm of lines, shapes, and colors. Seeing clearly through one medium helps me see more clearly through the other, while also giving that other a rest — the way an athlete rests one set of muscles while training another. But in designing book covers—something I took up several years ago—my art and my writing combine more directly. With book covers, just as the visual experience of the cover is meant to convey the book inside, words become part of the cover’s visual design. Of all the things I’ve done as writer or artist, none has integrated my two loves more thoroughly.”

Here’s a Selgin watercolor titled “Half Moon Overlook.”



Among Selgin’s literary works are: *Drowning Lessons* (2011) winner of the 2007 Flannery O’Connor Award for Fiction, *Duplicity* (2020) ,winner of both the National Indie Excellence Book Award and the Best Indie Book Award for 2021, two memoirs, including *The Inventors* (2016) which won the 2017 Housatonic Book Award, several children’s books, and three books on the craft of writing including *Your First Page: First Pages* and *What They Tell Us about the Pages that Follow Them*. His stories and essays have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including *Glimmer Train Stories*, *Best American Essays 2009*, and *Best American Travel Writing 2014*.

Please check out [The Writer’s Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers](#) for more than 400 plates of artwork by great writers and the stories behind them.



March 31, 2021 - Archives, Fiction, Reading, Writing

Penny Sufferings, by Peter Selgin

The Abyss

Story: "The Abyss." A bestselling yet depthless author achieves—by way of a blank page—his deepest, most eloquent expression. (By the way, if you haven't already done so, the text to read is *The Lord Chandos Letter*, by Hugo von Hoffmanstahl, the fictional letter of a poet renouncing poetry, having concluded that it cannot begin to do justice to reality—an ironic letter, given its supreme eloquence.)

But it could also be that, while racking his brain over how to write one authentic page/paragraph, he notices something totally innocuous: a crack on a wall. And in this innocuous thing he notices, suddenly he realizes he has found his authentic subject: i.e., a thing that the day before he would have dismissed as entirely trivial and inconsequential. But that crack in the wall, which draws him into a deep reverie, becomes for him an object of supreme beauty, drama, complexity. In the end, having found his "true" subject, perhaps he concludes he doesn't have to write about it at all. No: just being aware of it is enough. And so the piece ends with him gazing at the crack (or a star in the sky, whatever) and a blank computer screen, and thus he enters the abyss.

The Sandcastle

Story: "The Sandcastle." A middle-aged man makes his way absentmindedly down a stretch of beach, barefooted, walking, thinking abstractedly about life—his own life and life in general—as gulls swoop and glide. Suddenly, his bare feet strike something cool, soft, and hard. He hears a cry and looks down to see a child, a little boy who has been building a sandcastle, one the middle-aged man has partially leveled with his absent-minded bare feet. The middle-aged man drops to his knees, apologizes. "I'm so sorry," he says. "So sorry. I didn't mean it; I didn't see you. I'm so sorry..." The man's apologies are in vain, for the child wails loudly as tears stream down his cheeks. His sandcastle is ruined. "See here," says a man under an umbrella, who may or may not be related to the sandcastle-building child. "Why don't you watch where you're going?" "You could hurt someone," another adult observes. All this time the child keeps wailing, his face wet and contorted with a mixture of rage, indignation, and suffering. The middle-aged man meanwhile makes a feeble attempt to reconstruct the ruined sandcastle, saying, "Here, let me help you rebuild it," or something like that, shoving and shaping palmfuls of sand. Seeing a red plastic shovel in the nearby sand, he picks it up, incurring even more of the child's wrath. "What are you doing?" says one of the watching adults. "Put down that child's shovel! How dare you! What sort of a person are you?" The rest of the story is compacted into the following moment, wherein, as he kneels with the red plastic shovel in his grip, feeling the eyes of the beachgoing world upon him, glaring and murderous (even the wheeling gulls gaze murderously down upon him), the middle-aged man relives his entire life, from one failure to the next, failures in friendship, in school, in commerce, in marriage, in fatherhood, in love and art...a litany of failures under which he buries himself alive as if under buckets of beach sand. At last, having stood up and wiped the sand from his hands, the man continues walking down the beach, not looking back, the child's wails grow increasingly faint behind him.

Where Are You From?

Story: "Where Are You From?" about a woman, born and bred in the United States, in some southern state (Georgia Texas? Let's say Georgia), but whose parents are from India and whose skin is brown and who looks, let's face it, as though she might be from India. The first half of the story, written in a close third-person style that also incorporates free-indirect discourse, has to do with her growing dismay and disgust in being asked, constantly by strangers meeting her for the first time, "Where are you from?" We're presented first with one representative such encounter, then proceed to a litany of similar moments in her past, all of which lead up to—and lead us to—her driving home after dark from whatever event she was at, at which this annoying question was asked of her; quite possibly she has left said event early; quite possibly she stormed out in anger; quite possibly she has made something of a spectacle of herself in front of friends and or family, and the parents of her prospective in-laws, let us imagine. Anyway, she has ditched fiancé and friends and all who might have offered her some words of comfort or sympathy, kind words she probably wouldn't have been all that receptive to in any case. It is dark, raining, and cold—quite cold, very cold, extremely cold for this state at this time of year, freezing cold, enough to prompt warnings over her car radio from the Emergency Broadcast System or whatever it is called nowadays, with the BLAT BAT BLAT interrupting whatever NPR broadcast she had been listening to, *This American Life* or something as suitably ironic in title or subject. Meanwhile, the roads have begun to freeze. Black ice: that, too, is a good title, or would be a good title were "Where Do You Come From?" not so perfect, for she ends up driving off the road, oh yes, flying off a sheet of black ice and into a muddy trench, stopped by a scrub pine tree that breaks over the roof of her car, but she's all right. She's all right and on one of those stretches of pitch-dark roads in the middle of Nowhere, Georgia, where houses are far apart, not even houses quite but trailers or maybe double-wides, their yards full of rusty old cars and other sorts of

trash. Anyway, our protagonist's cellphone isn't working, or maybe it works but there's no signal, no reception, and so she has no choice but to either stand in the freezing road and flag down a passing car or go to the nearest house and knock on the door and beg to use their phone, assuming they have one. And that is what the story is about: a woman whose indignation at being constantly asked, "Where Do You Come From?" finds herself feeling very much like a foreigner in alien territory, hence "Where Do You Come From?" becomes "Where the Fuck Am I?"

Irony.

Etc.

And the people who help her? What about them?

Broadway

Story: "Broadway." As a man sits writing on a bench on the esplanade in the middle of Broadway on a cool summer night, a shoeless, hungry boy approaches him. "Interesting," says the boy, leaning too close. "Do you always mind people's business this closely?" the man says, edging away, to which the hungry-looking boy, ignoring him, says, "Whatcha writing, man?" "Nothing that concerns you," the man replies. All this time, the man's pen keeps on moving, gliding swiftly across the page of his notebook. Suddenly, as if explaining everything, the boy stiffens and cries, "I'm hungry! Gimme some pennies!" While still writing or pretending to write in his notebook, the man thinks back to an episode many years bygone, when a man named Donald with whom he had lived briefly in the French Quarter of New Orleans was assaulted one night by a former roommate, a heroin addict/hustler who, hitting him up for drug money, said, "Gimme some chips! I need some chips!" Now, both Don and his former roommate were beyond any doubt dead. "No," says the man to the hungry-looking boy, who turns angrily and storms off straight into the path of an oncoming taxicab.

Psychologist

Story: "Psychologist." Begins: "His fly was open. That was one of the first things I noticed about him, that and the scar on his cheek above his beard. I wondered if maybe he'd done it on purpose, leaving his fly open, that is, not the beard. Of course, he'd done the beard "on purpose." A man doesn't grow a beard by mistake or by accident. Or does one? Anyway, he arrived on a March afternoon—or was it February? I remember it was very cold. The heat wasn't working properly in the building where I rent my office. I remember that. I wore my coat all day and kept drinking hot tea. I must have drunken a dozen mugs. Just to keep warm. I kept going to the bathroom. I was on my way back from the john when I saw him enter the building. For some reason I knew right away it was him. I suppose his looks must have matched his voice on the phone in some way, though it doesn't work that way, always or even usually, does it? Anyway, I knew. I didn't see the open fly right away. Only later, as he sat on the sofa facing my desk, that's when I noticed it. He wore corduroy slacks with a black turtleneck and a leather jacker. Like me he kept the jacket on. I apologized for the lack of heat and asked if he cared for some tea. He looked around fifty, fifty-five. In fact he was older, in his early sixties. An impressive-looking man. Quite handsome, with his gray beard. Impressive, I thought. Substantial. I'm not saying I liked him. Not at first. At first, I couldn't have said. But he was attractive, of that I could be certain. I felt attracted to him, so much so I found myself thinking almost at once, 'This could be a problem.'"

Etc.

Insomnia

Story: "Insomnia," about a man and woman, otherwise of two different worlds, linked by insomnia. Somehow they discover each other online, and, during intervals of sleeplessness, communicate via Facebook Messenger or by email. Perhaps they live on opposite sides of the world, so when he's awake in the middle of the night it is daytime for her. He is a tax accountant, a Norwegian in his mid-forties but looking and often feeling much older, short and ugly with extremely bad teeth. She is a young and very attractive Indian or Pakistani medical student doing her internship on a psychiatric ward in San Francisco, engaged to be married to a man in her native country an arranged marriage. The emails they exchange get more and more personal and existential/confessional until finally she cuts off the exchange with the news that she is pregnant with her first child—not by her fiancé, but by a fellow medical student. The story ends with the Norwegian man wandering the streets of his town at night; or no, not at night, but at any rate in darkness, since he lives in Tromsø, above the Arctic Circle, and it happens to be winter.

Alternative title: "Damn It All to Hell."

Alternative alternate title: "Too Close to Home."

Autobiographer

Long story or novella: "Autobiographer." Malcolm August Linney has life down to a science. Up every morning at seven (with no help from an alarm clock; he detests alarms of all kinds); a corn muffin and coffee on Broadway (always the same: a corn muffin, lightly toasted and buttered and two cups of coffee, black, ingested while reading the *NY Times*); then a long, slow walk down to 72nd Street, where, at nine o'clock, he enters the subway station to catch the first downtown express. Though the world rushes and bangs all about him, Malcolm August Linney scarcely notices, so concentrated is he on his thoughts and their ultimate purpose: for he is in the midst of his autobiography, the story of his life from cradle to grave, holding every experience, perception, reflection, awareness, insight, opinion, and word ever uttered by him: an autobiography to end all autobiographies. One stop on the express brings him to Times Square, where he walks past street performers, souvenir and flower stalls of 42nd Street, then through Bryant Park to the side entrance of the research library just as a security guard opens the door. He climbs down two flights of grand marble staircase to the soaring, cavernous, echoing varnish-scented space that is the Main Reading Room. There, at seat # 246, at the far end of one of the long wooden tables with green shaded lamps, amid sounds of coughing and paper shuffling, he drapes his coat on a nearby chair, sits, snaps open his briefcase, and spreads its papers out before him. Here he will spend the rest of his day, working without pause until dusk, advancing his autobiography, the book he has been working on daily for over fourteen years. Fourteen years working five days a week (except Sundays and Tuesdays, when the library closed), always the exact same routine. In all that time, he had yet to arrive beyond the note-taking phase: over 15,000 notes (so far!), each handwritten on a separate index card, the cards color-coded for easy reference, with opinions pink, reflections robin's egg blue, uttered expressions canary yellow, actions mint green, feelings orange, and so forth. The cards filled seventy-two shoe boxes, stacked neatly throughout his 87th Street brownstone, where they took over every room: indeed, he had given away most of his furniture to make more room for them. Then there were the white index cards: these held hard facts, notes on places and people, dates, names, addresses, phone numbers, items purchases, bank and other transactions, and so

on. Since Malcolm rarely interacted with others, nor was he in the habit of talking to himself, the canary yellow cards were the scarcest, followed in degree of scarcity by the pink cards (for he had as few opinions as he had friends) and orange (feelings, too, tended to be scarce in him). And though he had been following the same routine now for fourteen years, still, it could not be said that Malcolm lead an inactive life, for where is it written that our actions must be unique in order to them to qualify as actions? And so there were hundreds of mint green cards saying (for instance) "Rode Downtown #2 to Times Square" or "Ate corn muffin with two cups black coffee for breakfast." As time went on, Malcolm's interactions with others grew fewer and farther in between, to where he had virtually no contact with other human being, and so the yellow cards grew so scarce he considered dropping them altogether, but then there were always exceptions ("To waiter at coffee shop: "A corn muffin, lightly toasted with butter. Coffee, black."). Each day, he brought with him to the library one pack each of cards in all pertinent colors; by the time he left the library at dusk, most of them would have been filled—or not filled, but written upon, some with a single word ("Pigeons"), others with long paragraphs that threatened to burst out of them, his handwriting growing more and more minuscule in its advance toward the bottom of the card. The day's session completed, Malcolm would snap a thick red rubber band around each stack of cards of the same color, place them back in his briefcase, snap it shut, put on his coat, and make his way out of the library and back along 42nd Street to the subway, which he would ride back uptown, to 72nd street, and walk from there to his apartment, where his neighbor would sometimes greet him, and where he would nod or smile but not say a word, since an uttered response would have meant filling out another card—and not just any card but a yellow card, and he had come to resent the yellow cards. And here was the great lesson of Malcolm's life: that no matter how simply and regularly one lives, no matter how few one's contacts or how limited one's experiences, the cards keep coming and coming; apart from the ending offered by Death, there is no end to the Endless Autobiography that is a human life.

Alternative card categories/colors:

- Experiences (grey)
- Feelings (pink)
- Opinions (purple)
- Fantasies (orange)
- Reflections (chartreuse)
- Prejudices (mauve)
- Memories (green)
- Uttered words (yellow)
- Hard Facts (white)

Boy & Dog

Story: "Boy & Dog." How once there was a little boy who had a little dog. How this little dog barked day and night. Because the dog barked day and night, the boy's parents wanted nothing to do with it. They forbid him from keeping the dog at home during the day. And so the boy had no choice but to take the dog out of the house and out of the neighborhood, as far as possible, since the neighbors, too, had complained. How he did this, day after day, and yet everywhere he took his little mutt dog, people complained about the dog's incessant barking. There seemed to be nowhere on earth far enough removed from the complaints of miserable, dog-hating people. At last, the boy found a rock underneath the highway bridge by the river, with the nearest building a thousand yards away on the other side of the water. "Here, at last," he said to himself, "my little dog can bark in peace." Not only was the rock far from any

building or house, it offered both the boy and his dog a magnificent view of the wide and beautiful river, with its heavy traffic of sailboats, freighters, and barges. The dog barked incessantly as the boy gazed out at the roiling green river and for the first time in months—since he'd gotten the dog—he felt content. What the boy did not know, what he could not for his life have imagined, was that the sound of his barking dog would carry so thoroughly across the wide body of water into the ears of one Gayton Eppley, a retired church organist living in the red brick apartment building across the river, on the other side of the highway bridge. He could not have imagined that Mr. Eppley was trying to write a novel, that the writing studio he had created for himself in the former bedroom shared by him and his recently dead wife (of a mole that turned cancerous) looked out onto the river, and that the sound of the dog barking carried straight to his window, through the layer of glass, across the room to its far side, where Mr. Eppley kept his arts and crafts oak writing desk, straight into Mr. Eppley's ears, which worked very well in spite of his being eighty-three years old as of that October. The boy could not have imagined any of this. Nor could he have imagined the lengths to which Mr. Eppley would go to get to the bottom of the incessant barking, which he held completely to blame for the lack of progress on his novel, which sat in a twelve-inch thick, dog-eared, unfinished pile next to his manual typewriter (Continue to trite/bittersweet/implausibly violent conclusion).

Le Pigeonniere

Story: "Le Pigeonniere," about a divorced and failed American screenwriter living in a Parisian garret in the 5th Arrondissement during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. He is allowed to leave his small apartment only before 10:00 a.m. and after 7:00 p.m. He has trouble sleeping, his sleep harassed in part by memories, in part by the pigeons that occupy the rooftop area near his skylight, and whose coos keep him awake much of every night. He tries by various means to get rid of them, not successfully. Meanwhile, between bouts of wakefulness, he dreams. In his dreams—and finally out of them—too, the pigeons take on human voices, women's voices, specifically the voices of his ex-wives and girlfriends and lovers, including several who were arguably if not certifiably insane, all talking about him, gossiping, berating and upbraiding him, mainly. All of which is to say, he goes mad.

True Omniscience

Story: "True Omniscience," about a newlywed couple with their infant son searching for a motel vacancy along the freeway in the middle of the night. The story begins with a disclaimer by the author, or the narrator, explaining he has no business telling the story that follows: no wisdom, no advice, no insight, no particular gifts of empathy or sympathy, no philosophy or worldview, no detachment, and no special passion for his subject (then again, he's unconvinced he *has* any subject). But then slyly, masterfully, mysteriously, this "worthless" third-person narrator disappears, abandoning us to the viewpoints of the story's principal characters: the mother, the father, the sleeping child...also other characters, the cop who pulls them over for a minor traffic violation, the clerks at various motels. We even get the viewpoints of things: the highway, the car, a piece of luggage, an elevator, a stretch of motel carpeting. The story could also be called "Empathy," since ultimately it would demonstrate that not only is everything around us, animate or otherwise, invested with a point-of-view, by extension the entire universe is invested with feelings, attitudes, and opinions, and—by further extension—with pity, therefore with pain. Having arrived at this idea for a singular story, I formulated the following two similar essentially identical yet in crucial ways crucially divergent candidates for its opening sentence:

- “In a sense, I’ve become another man.”
- “In essence, I have become another.”

A Visit to the Gallery

Story: “A Visit to the Gallery.” Accompanied by his best friend’s father, a young man visits an art gallery. The best friend’s father is a corn-cob-pipe-smoking New England conservative, the sort of person who collects L.L. Bean catalogues, subscribes to *Yankee* magazine, wears plaid flannel shirts on weekends and whose Sunday paintings are Winslow Homer-esque ones of sloops heeling under sail. (That his preferred brand of pipe tobacco is “Sail” should go without saying.) At any rate, he and his son’s best friend are alone in the art gallery. Though the location of the art gallery is neither important nor specified, indications are that the gallery is somewhere in New York City—peculiar, given the best friend’s father’s aversion to that city and to all large cities in general. As to what circumstances have brought the young man and his best friend’s father together in the absence of the best friend, that, too, is left to the reader’s imagination, though hanging over the story is a suggestion—or maybe whiff would be a better word—that something medically tragic has befallen the best friend, something midway along the continuum between a kidney stone and cancer, such that these two less-than-kindred spirits find themselves thrown together in what may be best qualified as dismaying comfort.

So, anyway, they are looking at these paintings on display, moving side-by-side from one to the next as people do in art galleries, commenting in hushed, intelligent, deferential voices. As for the paintings, it is neither possible nor necessary nor even advisable to attempt to describe them adequately, though there is a certain Southwestern flavor to them, you could say, a certain Navajo influence: the earth, sand, turquoise, and sunset colors, the symmetrical geometrics. They are oils on canvas, and by no means unattractive: they have, if nothing else, decorative potential. Retrospectively, the narrator, the no-longer-quite-so-young-man, will recall liking them, appreciating their calm, soft, orderly ornamental nature, the graceful charm of their subtly assuring colors, etc., though at the time, on first viewing, he had no opinion of them, really. As for the best friend’s father, he eyed the pictures coolly, seeming to take at least some interest in them, though not without a skeptical elevation of his right eyebrow, which like its equal opposite was gray and bushy. The story proceeds with the two of them making their way through the first of several gallery rooms, then the second.

It is in the third room of the gallery that things go awry. While standing in front of a painting in that third room, the best friend’s father suddenly reaches the tip of a finger toward its surface and touches it—gently at first, with no apparent intent to do harm, but still enough to arouse the concern of his son’s best friend, who fears that one of the gallery workers will notice and castigate them, or worse, throw them both out. Then, to his horror, with the same fingertip, using the edge of its deftly manicured nail, the best friend’s father scratches the painting’s surface, a two-to-three-inch scratch. “Mr. Rowland!” says the man’s son’s best friend, tapping him his plaid shoulder. “You’re not supposed to—!” Before he can finish the sentence, his best friend’s father has rushed over to the next painting. Wasting no time, he scratches it, too: a jagged, deep, six-inch, two-fingered scratch. *My God*, his son’s best friend thinks, watching him. “My God!” his son’s best friend says under his breath while tugging his best friend’s father’s plaid shirtsleeve. “Stop! You—you can’t do that!” At the same time, he wonders what in the world has possessed his best friend’s father. No sooner does this question occur to him than his best friend’s father zeroes in on the next painting, scratching it, too, and the next one, and the one after that, each scratch deeper, longer, involving more fingernails, and more jagged and ruinous than the last, until finally his best friend’s father proceeds to attack the paintings less discretely, tearing them from the gallery walls, spitting on them, ripping them free of their stretcher

bars, hurling them to the floor, kicking them, cursing, muttering, red-faced, spraying spittle, growing increasingly apoplectic as his son's best friend, joined by the gallery's most physically fit and courageous employees, tries to pull him away.

So the story ends, with this proviso: that the boy's best friend, the one suffering from something on the continuum between kidney stones and cancer, almost certainly never understood his father, and never would. And vice-versa.

Peter Selgin is the author of [*Duplicity*](#), [*Drowning Lessons*](#), [*Life Goes to the Movies*](#), [*The Inventors*](#), [*Confessions of a Left-Handed Man: An Artist's Memoir*](#), [*Your First Page*](#). His writing has also appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Best American Essays 2009*, *Best American Travel Writing 2014*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Antioch University's MFA in Creative Writing program in Los Angeles and is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College & State University.

Duplicity

(book publication, novel)

December 2020

DUPLICITY



a novel by

~~STEWART DETWEILER~~
PETER SELGIN

with an afterword by
Professor Gayton Sinclair, PhD

Praise for *Duplicity*

“*Duplicity* is a hall-of-mirrors metafictional masterpiece in which everything has its equal opposite and nothing is quite what it seems. Peter Selgin has found the perfect narrator for his fratricidal-suicidal romp: the dark, mordant, too envious, too inventive, Stewart Detweiler, who lurks in the black, jealous heart of every writer whose cloistered brilliance remains unseen and rebuffed by the world. Here is Stewart’s brief moment in the sun, his chops and voice unfettered at last, and to the end—and we are dazzled.”

—Peter Nichols, bestselling author of *The Rocks* and *A Voyage for Madmen*

“*Duplicity* is an entertaining ouroboros of a book—a cleverly collated confession that takes its rightful place in a tradition of doppelgänger-haunted novels that reflect on the instability of identity and the inadequacy of language. While poking gentle fun at plot, clichés, and other elements of conventional mainstream fiction, Selgin harnesses those same workhorses to his suspenseful tale. Smart, funny, satirical, and yet heartfelt, *Duplicity* is a book worth reading twice: once as a metafictional page-turner about twins, accidental criminality, and mid-life malaise, again as an instructive treatise on writing itself.”

—Andromeda Romano-Lax, author of *Annie and the Wolves* and *Behave*

“How to write a blurb for such a stunning novel? *Duplicity* is dauntingly brilliant. Twins may be at the novel’s center—equal and opposite twins colliding—but *Duplicity* is utterly, deliciously, singular. It should be taught in both literature and creative writing classes in perpetuity!”

—Gayle Brandeis, author of *The Art of Misdiagnosis*

“*Duplicity* explodes every rule of the novel, written and unwritten, through sins of omission and commission. It makes a cat’s toy of clichés and inflates conceits expressly to puncture them. It breaks the spell of its creation, only to take up the strands and weave them into a more complex enchantment. This is no accident. Peter Selgin is a master who engages the possibilities of the novel from the inside out. *Duplicity* is for anyone who has seen through a novel, and for anyone who has found a world in one.”

—Vincent Stanley, author of *The Responsible Company*

“Stewart Detweiler dreams of writing a book that ‘no matter how many times you open it, or what page you open it to, it feels like you’ve never read it before.’ In *Duplicity* he lives the dream. Selgin/Detweiler promises you, Dear Reader, ‘the single most unreliable narrative ever composed,’ and assures you that he is not to be trusted. He is a man of his word. Book A does indeed falsify Book B. And Book B verifies Book A. Their name is Duplicity, for they are one. Each is absorbed by its equal opposite. And so will you be.”

—H. L. Hix, author of *Demonstrategy*

“Darkly exuberant and completely riveting, *Duplicity* breaks through the metaphorical fourth wall, wrestling with the boundaries of identity, the precariousness of reinvention, and the nature of fiction itself. Peter Selgin’s storytelling mastery is on full display in this provocative meditation on the writing life.”

—Amy Gottlieb, author of *The Beautiful Possible*

“As Stewart Detweiler drives us south through the rain in a beaten up convertible, Peter Selgin drives us deep into the craft of writing in this delightfully disorienting, tail-swallowing novel—an irresistible riddle of craft wrapped in a mystery of memoir, inside a novel of enigma. Is *Duplicity* a murder mystery? A book on the craft of writing? Both? Neither? Yes, precisely.”

—Charlotte Thomas, author of *The Female Drama*

“Wicked, intimate, and hilarious, *Duplicity* is a compendium of good advice about writing and plain bad intentions. Its narrator, Stewart Detweiler, who appears to be a descendent of Poe’s William Wilson and a long-lost cousin of Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, is tricky, tricky tricky. ‘Dear Reader’ (as Stewart likes to say), prepare yourself for a wild ride.”

—Jim Krusoe, author of *The Sleep Garden*

Praise for *The Kuhreihen Melody*

“Selgin’s recall of his own past is as eidetic as Proust’s.”

—Melissa Pritchard, author of *Palmerino* and *A Solemn Pleasure*

Praise for *The Inventors*

“[A] book destined to become a modern classic ... A remarkable model of the art of the memoir, this book will satisfy all readers. Highly recommended.”

—Derek Sanderson, *Library Journal*

Praise for *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*

“Peter Selgin is a born writer, capable of taking any subject and exploring it from a new angle, with wit, grace, and erudition.”

—Oliver Sacks

Praise for *Drowning Lessons*

“[Selgin’s] ability to sling together desire and suffering in complex and moving ways is singular and memorable.”

—*Booklist*

Praise for *Life Goes to the Movies*

“[T]he irresistible account of a passionate friendship between two young men, both star-struck by art. ... [An] utterly absorbing novel. A wonderful read.”

—Margot Livesey, author of *The House on Fortune Street*

Praise for *Your First Page*

“I heartily recommend *Your First Page* to any aspiring young writer.”

—Robert Olen Butler, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*

Praise for *By Cunning & Craft*

“Peter Selgin has written an excellent guide—witty, lucid, well-written—for beginning writers of fiction. In fact, any writer can learn from it.”

—Vivian Gornick, author of *The Situation and the Story*

Also by Peter Selgin:

Fiction:

Drowning Lessons (story collection),
The University of Georgia Press, 2008
Life Goes to the Movies, Dzanc Books, 2009

Nonfiction:

Confessions of a Left-Handed Man (essays),
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The Swine Interview, Aran Press, 1985
Night Blooming Serious, 1993
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DUPLICITY

DUPLICITY



a novel

~~STEWART DETWEILER~~
PETER SELGIN

with an afterword by
Professor Gayton Sinclair, PhD



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Duplicity

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for George

*“The water so clear & pale that
you are seeing into it at the same
time you are looking at its surface.
A duplicity—all the way through.”*
—Elizabeth Bishop in correspondence

“...a great book is a great mischief.”
—Robert Burton

TO THE READER:

The document that you hold originally took the form of six marbled composition notebooks of the kind still sold today in office supply, grocery, convenience, and so-called “dollar” stores. The notebooks were bound with rubber bands and labeled, on half a sheet of loose paper, in large capitalized letters, “DUPLICITY.” The handwriting in the notebooks is of different colored inks—red, blue, black—and increasingly stingy, so small that at first it was mistaken for code.

How the notebooks came to be published is explained in the afterword. For now, suffice it to say that they have been published as discovered, with only obvious spelling and punctuation errors corrected. Since there were so few of them (impressive, given the swiftness of composition), struck-out words, phrases, and sentences have been eliminated. Otherwise, apart from having been set in type with standard conventions of book design brought to bear, the result, down to the pen sketches that are the author’s own, faithfully duplicates the contents of the six notebooks.

As to the provenance of the notebooks, who wrote them and how they were discovered and came to my attention, all this is explained in the afterword.

However it is strongly suggested that you read what follows first.

— G. S.

[the notebooks begin here]

“Book B is false.”
—Book A

“Book A is true.”
—Book B

book **A**

I. ARRIVALS

HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF YOU FOUND YOURSELF DEAD?

How would you feel, seeing yourself hanging naked from an oak ceiling beam, held there by a length of blue nylon rigging rope looped around your neck? How would you feel, seeing the same brown eyes, the same thinning hair, the same hairless pale legs with the same knobby knees, the same size ten-and-a-half feet with the same splayed toes featuring the same ingrown toenails, the same long arms and bony wrists, the same small hands with identical stubby fingers and twin pasty palms held out at the hips as if answering the question (“*Why???*”) with a shrug?

I might have been looking in a mirror save for:

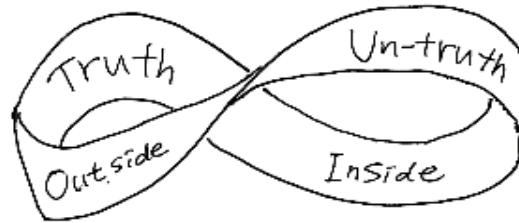
1. that blue rope around my neck
2. the red-purple blotches at the body’s lower extremities
3. and the fact that, unlike me, my doppelgänger was thoroughly, utterly, categorically dead.

That’s the vision that greeted me on my arrival here seven or eight weeks ago, on a day as windswept and stormy as the one that finds me here now, writing these words for you in a black marble composition notebook, Dear Reader, whoever you are.

That’s one beginning. Beginning A, let’s call it. As beginnings

2 • DUPLICITY

go you can do worse than start with a dead body, *in medias res*—as I teach, or taught, my students at the Metropolitan Writing Institute.



At their extremes all opposites meet. Travel far enough East and you end up in the West. Love and hate are inseparable. In their absolutely pure states, black and white are both impossible and therefore identical. Being born is the first step toward dying. Beginnings and endings depend on each other.

Every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This one has two beginnings. It has two endings, too. Like Noah's Ark, it has two of everything. It is, after all, a tale in twos.

A Tale of Two Twins.



It was our mother who launched me on my journey, who phoned me at one a.m. (normally she's asleep by eight-thirty) to say she was worried about my brother. Correction: she wasn't worried, she was hysterical, beside herself. Her voice quivered with consternation. She could hardly get the words out, she was shaking so badly.

"Mother, what is it?" I said. "What's the matter?"

I'd answered the phone in the hallway next to my kitchen. My Bronx apartment was the kind called a "railroad flat," a series of rooms arranged in a straight line running the length of my building, a tenement. In the kitchen, at the center of its brown linoleum floor, a lion-clawed bathtub squatted. As my mother quivered and gasped, I sat in the gloomy kitchen on the lip of that tub, trying to unravel the phone cord (I still had a landline; I owned no cellphone), which, as always, had become hopelessly tangled. It soon became clear to me, through the twisted phone line and my mother's quivering voice, that my brother Greg—or "Brock Jones, PhD," as he was known then—hadn't been in any kind of accident, not as far as anyone, including my mother, knew. As far as my mother knew

nothing had happened to him.

Her hysteria was the result of a dream.

She dreamed that my brother was a child again, five or six or seven years old, that he was swimming somewhere, and that something—a rope, some weed, a fishing line (a tangled phone cord?)—had snagged his foot and was holding him under. She saw it all clearly—as clearly, she said, as though she were watching a movie. There was Greg under water, struggling, cheeks puffed, eyes bulging, face contorted and turning blue. In the film’s final frames he opened his mouth to gaping and gasped. That’s when my mother woke up.

And that’s when she phoned me.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” she said.



Mother is eighty-four years old. Despite being diabetic, nearly blind, and confined to an assisted living facility in North Carolina, she is in full command of her senses. She’s also an inveterate worrier. Not that our mother doesn’t have things to worry about; she does. Her kidneys are failing, for one thing. Her ankles are swollen. Her blood pressure is high. She’s anemic. She’s lost—or is losing—her appetite. She is legally blind. Does she worry about these things? No. She finds other things to worry about, things far less pressing, things that aren’t even real. Most of her worries are pure products of her fancy, to where I have to wonder if worrying isn’t a passion with her, if she doesn’t thrive on the possibility of things going wrong, if anticipating negative outcomes doesn’t in some way fulfill her spiritually and possibly even erotically. Not just knowing that things may go wrong, but imagining the very worst possible ways in which they might do so. When it comes to worrying, my mother is possessed of an Olympian resourcefulness.

And though it may seem to upset her terribly, apart from the fact that it distracts her from what should be her real concerns, her worrying does my mother no real harm. On the contrary, it invigorates her. It keeps her circulation, her digestive, her respiratory, her nervous, endocrine, and other systems operating at an enterprise scale. Worrying brightens Mother’s legally blind eyes; it

gives her something to chew on—the way Taiwanese people chew on betel nuts and Bolivians chew on coca leaves. She tends to her worries like a master gardener tending her tea roses and gardenias, giving rise to splendiferous, fulsomely-scented blooms.

I shrugged Mother's nightmare off. True, neither of us had heard from Greg/Brock for some time. Except for one very brief encounter, five years had passed since I had last spoken with him, but then I hadn't wanted to speak with him. Our last talk ended with me telling Greg (or Brock, though I refused to use that other name) I'd see him in hell before I engaged him further on the mortal sphere. That's just what I said to him. I'll even put quotation marks around it: "...". With that self-consciously literary utterance I'd sent my twin brother packing. Since then I'd had no communication with him.

That was five years ago.

Back to my mother and our conversation. Despite repeated phone messages left by her on my brother's cellphone and with his assistant and other people in his circle, she hadn't heard back from him, not a word in more than three weeks. Suddenly her worries had this enormous new object at their center, this boulder to build a monstrous pearl of anxiety around. Did I share her concerns? Not a bit. My twin had doubtlessly gone off somewhere to "reinvent" himself again, as he was wont to do, as he was famous for doing; he'd made a career out of it, not to mention a fortune. It was probably some sort of publicity stunt. Whatever my brother was up to, for sure he wasn't thinking about me or of our mother. I knew all too well from firsthand experience his capacity to completely forget his family—to forget that he had a family, a twin brother, especially. As far as my brother was concerned, if he considered it at all, to him my existence was at best an inconvenience, at worst an embarrassment.

Anyway that's how I suspected he felt. And who knew him better? We are—or were, after all—twins.

"Will you please go?" my mother said.

"Go where?"

"To find Greg. To see if he's all right."

"Where am I supposed to find him? He could be anywhere."

"I know where he is," Mother said cryptically.

“Where?”

“Your father’s house.”

“What makes you think he’s there?”

“The lake—the one in my dream? It was your father’s lake. He’s there—at your father’s house. I’m sure of it.”

“You’ve never even been to that house!”

“It doesn’t matter. I *know*.”

“Mother—”

“Please: go there for me. Won’t you please?”

Was she kidding? Drive sixteen hours to Georgia on the remote possibility that my brother was staying at our dead father’s former lake house—a house that, as far as any of us knew, hadn’t been occupied in years, one that should have been sold ages ago, that was no doubt besieged with mice, spiders, ants, termites, mildew, mold, and whatever else flourishes in houses neglected too long? For all we knew the place had burned to the ground or been leveled by a tornado. Besides, my mother knew my feelings toward my brother, they weren’t exactly a secret. She also knew I wasn’t inclined to take her lurid worries that seriously.

“Mother, it’s a sixteen-hour drive!”

“Take a plane.”

“I hate flying. Besides, by the time I get to LaGuardia, fly to Atlanta, rent a car, drive two hours to the lake, it’ll take as long. Even assuming he’s there, which you have to admit is a huge assumption, and assuming that something bad has happened to him (which I doubt), there’s no chance I’d get there in time to prevent—”

“But at least then I’ll know!”

“Look, I’ll call the County Sheriff for you, if you like,” I offered. “If you’re really that worried—”

“I don’t want you to call the sheriff!”

“Why not? At least then you won’t have to worry.”

“I already called them.”

“You did? When?”

“Yesterday.”

“So—what did they say?”

“They went there.”

“And?”

"They said the house is completely abandoned. The lawn is overgrown and the mailbox is falling down, they said. There were no cars in the driveway."

"Did they go in?"

"They didn't need to, they said. No one could possibly have been living there."

"There," I said. "See?"

"I still think he's there."

"Why would you—?"

"It's the third time I've had the dream. I had it last night, and the night before that. Please, Stewart—"

"Mother, if you could just—"

"Please!"

"—calm down and be reasonable. Asking me to drive all that—"

"All right! Fine! Forget it. Never mind." —said in that tone blending disgust and resignation that never failed to inject its subject with the maximum dosage of venomous guilt.

"Fine," I said, trying to match my mother's martyrdom with my own, failing. "I'll leave first thing in the morning. After all," I couldn't help adding, "it's not like I have anything better to do."

"Go now."

"What? Mother, it's one-thirty in the morning!"

"I'll pay for the gas," my mother said.

• •

The fact is I had nothing better to do. For the past few months, when not at work at a meaningless menial job, I had spent most of my time either in my tenement apartment or aimlessly walking the streets, but always alone. I'd grown disgusted with life—not just my life, but life in general. My state of disgust was categorical and comprehensive. The rich disgusted me. The poor disgusted me. The middle class, what little was left of it, disgusted me. Cities disgusted me. Small towns disgusted me (and forget the country; the mere thought of a barn induced in me a state of nausea). People who took advantage of other people disgusted me, but then so did those who let themselves be taken advantage of. Meat eat-

ers disgusted me. So did vegetarians. Vegans were ridiculous and disgusting. Music disgusted me. Books disgusted me. Newspapers disgusted me. Magazines were especially disgusting. Most art was bad. Those who appreciated it had little if any taste, ergo they disgusted me, too. Cats were less disgusting than dogs but disgusting all the same. All modes of transportation disgusted me. Young people were an endless source of revulsion, ditto the old, the ugly, and the infirm. Liberals and conservatives alike made me want to throw up. Religions of all sorts were a source of contempt. The concept of heaven I found abhorrent, though less so than the concept of hell. Computers, cellphones, the Internet, TV, movies, sports, weddings, funerals, bars, nightclubs, restaurants, parties, misogynists, misandrists, fascists, fundamentalists, postmodernists, Communists, Marxists, straights, gays, transsexuals, asexuals, pansexuals, sapiosexuals, sex in general, chewing, digesting, pissing, shitting, farting, shaving, flossing ... all, to various degrees, disgusted me. But none of those things disgusted me as much as I disgusted myself.

I was, in a word, depressed.



The drive took twenty-two hours. I drove and drove, mostly through freezing rain, in a twenty-four-year-old Mazda RX-7 convertible with a blown-out muffler, a faulty defroster, a permanently retracted left pop-up headlight, and a cracked windshield. I could afford no motels, so I drove and drove, mostly below the speed-limit, the windshield wipers (which needed new blades) slapping relentlessly, the faulty defroster blowing useless air, the constellations of headlights and taillights blurring in front of me, the pale/ruddy orbs contorted into diamonds and lozenges by a blend of gelid rain, nearsightedness (I was due for a new prescription), exhaustion, and preoccupation.

I was preoccupied—by the journey and what instigated it, but by other things, too, chief among them the fact that my life had fallen apart. My life! As I write those two little words a smile creeps over my face—or I feel it creeping over my face, since without looking in a mirror I can't very well see it. It's an ironic smile, though eight weeks ago I wouldn't have seen the irony; eight weeks ago there wouldn't have been any irony. Eight weeks ago it would

never have occurred to me that this thing known as “my life” was negotiable, that it could be traded in for another, like a lousy poker hand or a used Mazda RX-7.

I’m getting ahead of myself. I need to slow down. The point of this confession, if it has one, is to put matters into perspective, not to excuse my actions, but to explain them, to make you understand that what I did wasn’t the ghoulish, greedy, selfish act it may look like superficially, to the uninitiated. On the contrary, it was a selfless, noble act, an act of redemption, an act of love.

Ergo I need to ease off the gas. That’s right: I’m in a car. We’re in a car, Dear Reader: a twenty-four-year-old Mazda RX-7, headed south on Interstate 95 toward a lakeside dwelling that for twenty-eight years belonged to my Comparative Religion and Philosophy professor father, but that has since—along with a half-dozen other dwellings here and abroad—become the property of Brock Jones, PhD, née Gregory Detweiler, my rich and famous bestselling twin.

I say we’re in this car, though I’m the only corporeal entity. You are here with me in spirit only—just as well, for your sake, with the heater not working. That sensational opening you read a few pages back? It has yet to happen. We’re in the past perfect of that event, that inciting incident, headed toward it.

As I’ve said, the weather was terrible. It started out that way, with the first drops of frozen rain striking the cracked windshield halfway across the George Washington Bridge, and persisting thereafter, coming down so hard at times I had to pull over, I couldn’t see a thing, not with a bad defroster and worn wiper blades, me leaning forward, peering through the napkin-sized patch of windshield that the wipers had some effect on, wiping the condensate away with a wad of paper towel.

I was no fan of driving in any kind of weather, let alone at night in the freezing rain. I had been a New Yorker for thirty-four years, most of my adult life. It was only five years ago that I “bought” the Mazda from a friend of mine whose job had posted her overseas and who offered it to me for 500 dollars. I demurred. What do I, a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker, need a car for? “I’ll have to move it twice a week,” I protested. “That or pay through the nose

to garage it. I rarely leave the city, and when I do there's always Hertz or Avis."

My friend—Julie's her name—was having none of it. "Why rent a car for forty-five dollars a day," she argued, "when you can own one for a few hundred? Besides," Julie added, "once you own a car, you'll leave the city more often."

"And go where?" I was curious to know.

"You'll visit your mother in North Carolina."

"I do that once a year—which, trust me, is more than enough."

"You'll drive to the beach," Julie informed me.

"No I won't," I told her.

"You'll drive to Vermont in October," Julie maintained.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"To watch the leaves turn."

"They can turn without me."

"Really, Stewart."

"Well, they can."

"Don't you ever want to get out of this place?"

"Not especially," I lied.

"Who knows," Julie said, "you may decide to leave the city altogether, once you discover that it's not actually surrounded by a dragon-filled mote."

Julie smiled; I smirked. We were seated at one of the few remaining authentic New York cafés that have all since been displaced by Starbucks. Like most New Yorkers I was defensive of my cosmopolitan provincialism. Julie was all too eager to point this out to me—she who, having recently won both a National Magazine Award and a Pulitzer Prize ("The gift that keeps on giving." —Julie) for her journalism, had been offered a job with the Paris bureau of *The New York Times*, and would soon be relocating to a city twice as cosmopolitan as New York, with more parks, better food, and sexier people. She no longer needed her car.

In the end, Julie didn't want the 500 dollars. When she handed me its keys, the Mazda was in decent condition, the paint job faded, but no dents or scratches. Within three months all four fenders bore the fruits of my inability to parallel-park. A Pepsi bottle fell from the back of a sanitation truck, cracking the windshield. I'd put less

than two hundred miles on it when the clutch went; three months later the muffler followed suit. The driver's seat upholstery tore, the dashboard split, the rocker panels rusted, the crack in the windshield grew from a little white worm into a jagged parabola leaping across my view. The retractable right headlight wouldn't retract; the left one wouldn't pop out. The once-sexy vehicle's dissolute past had finally caught up with it. It looked like a drunk in the late stages of syphilis following a series of encounters with lampposts. Still, it ran. It delivered me here, to my fate.



That has yet to happen. We're still in the Mazda, still on the road, still heading toward that gruesome opening scene.

If one is inclined to brood, the driver's seat of a freezing, passengerless car on the interstate is a perfect place to do so. Mixed with the rain, memories splattered the cracked windshield: of me and Greg when we still got along, of us riding our bicycles, playing catch, digging a snow fort, hiking in the woods behind our Connecticut home. The memories coalesced into one of those corny seventies montages set to music by Burt Bacharach. There was that rock we used to climb, the one the neighbors found us crouched behind, holding each other and crying when we were three years old. When our mother wasn't looking, we'd wandered into the woods. After searching for over an hour our mother called the police. Soon the whole town was out searching for us, combing the forest. Come dusk they were still at it, flashlights and lanterns lighting up the woods. All the while we crouched there behind that rock, huddled together, shivering and crying a few hundred yards from the house. Much time we spent in those woods, Greg and I. We'd hike to the crest of the hill, to a copse of pine trees there. We would sweep the pine needles into an enormous mound and take turns jumping into it, until our hands and clothes stank of pine resin. We played war games up there. The pinecones made good hand grenades. One of us would throw a grenade and the other would die in a flurry of pine needles. Then we'd race down the hill together, side-by-side, holding hands, leaping gazelle-like over fallen tree trunks and rocks.

These and other memories the wiper blades beat back and forth

like a team of inquisitors beating a confession out of a subject. Confess! (slap); Confess! (slap). Admit that you once loved each other, you and Gregory, your twin brother. Admit that you loved each other more than you loved anyone else in the world. Admit it! Admit that in becoming estranged from your twin you suffered a terrible, an irrevocable, loss. Though you can't be blamed for that, on the whole you've made a botch of things, Stewart Detweiler. You had it all—looks (slap!), youth (slap!), talent (slap!), charm (slap!), health (slap!), a good start to a promising career (slap, slap!). And you blew it. Admit it! Confess! *Slap! Slap! Slap!*

• •

I'm getting ahead of myself again. Or behind, I'm not sure. My present state negates perspective. There is no longer the sense of life as a journey toward that elusive dot on the horizon known as the future. You're probably too young to remember Jon Gnagy, the goateed, flannel-shirted host of the Saturday morning TV show called "Learn to Draw." It was Gnagy who taught me and a million other baby boomers perspective with his charcoal rendering of train tracks diminishing into the distance, the telegraph poles knitting closer together in their march toward infinity. Those railroad tracks were life. That vanishing point: it held all the hopes and possibilities of the future.

Now here I am at the vanishing point, that tantalizing dot on the horizon.

The rain falls harder, striking the overhead skylight. I'm sitting here with my back to the balcony railing, the one overlooking the main room, with its fieldstone fireplace, its cathedral ceiling, its pair of enormous triangular windows that by day expose a panoramic view of the lake but at this moment frame only watery gloom.

Behind me a rope dangles, the same blue rope that my brother used. One end is tied around the oak beam, the other is braided into a loop just large enough to fit over my head. I've followed a "recipe" I found online. The Internet: so informative. How to make devilled eggs; how to get rid of sugar ants; how to hang yourself.

• •

It was still raining when I got here. And foggy. And dark. I'd travelled a series of increasingly narrow winding roads, each smaller than the last. There was a full moon, or I wouldn't have been able to see at all. The radio was on. NPR reporting the latest calamities. Russian troops in Crimea. Eventually the signal faded. By then I was on an unpaved, one-lane road. No lights, no signs of dwellings. I wondered if I'd taken a wrong turn. Then again it had been at least thirty years since I'd last been to what I still thought of as my father's house.

67 Turtle Cove Drive.

I was about to give up when a strange thing happened. Out of the fog that had settled in, three pairs of red rubies hung suspended in the middle of the road, one pair lower and centered between the two other pairs. I stopped the car. The rubies remained, scintillating, motionless, hovering there in the dark foggy air. They weren't rubies. They were eyes. The two higher pairs belonged to a deer (to the left) and a doe (to the right); the lower pair to a fox. They stood there staring at me, or at my car, a tableau out of an Edward Hicks painting. The Peaceable Kingdom.

I sat there with the Mazda's Wankel engine idling.

Then the deer walked off. The doe soon followed. Only the fox remained. It stood there for another minute or so. Then the fox walked away.

More fog rolled in.

Soon there was nothing but fog. Fog and wind and more rain.

Tentatively, I rolled the car forward. I'd rolled a dozen feet when the Mazda's one working headlight struck a rusted falling-down mailbox with the number 67 on it.

67 Turtle Cove Drive.

I'd arrived.

We—you and I, Dear Reader—have arrived.

2. TWIN HOUSES (THE PAINTER OF GROUNDS)

I ONCE TRIED TO WRITE A STORY ABOUT TWINS — NOT THIS STORY, the one you're reading, but with much in common with it: its twin, you might say. The plot was based on a game Greg and I used to play. In the game one of us would pretend to be a millionaire, and the other a pauper. The game figured into the plot as one that the twins played when they were kids. In my story, the Millionaire (Twin A) is an enormously successful motivational speaker and bestselling author. Twin B, the Pauper, is a failed novelist.

I'd divide the book into two sections or parts, each self-contained—Book A and Book B—and have them printed dos-à-dos or *tête-bêche* like the old Ace Doubles science fiction paperbacks, the kind with titles like *The Sword of Rhiannon* and *Stepsons of Terra*. You would read Book A, then turn the thing over and upside-down, and read Book B—or vice-versa, since it wouldn't matter which of the two books you read first. Each of the books would end where the other began and begin where the other ended, so in theory anyway one would never have to stop reading. The book—or books—would go on and on forever, sustaining and prolonging itself. A literary perpetual motion machine.

The novel's two books would also contradict each other so thoroughly that as a whole it would self-destruct interminably,

a chain reaction of equally opposite forces bound together in a ceaseless cycle of mutual obliteration, with everything becoming nothing and nothing becoming everything, on and on forever ad infinitum (as happens, or supposedly happens, when matter and anti-matter collide).

In the aggregate, my twin novel would constitute the single most unreliable narrative ever composed. For this and other reasons I would call it “Duplicity.”

To break all the rules of novel writing—that was my intention. And not just to break them, but to break them *hard*. That’s what you have to do. First learn the rules, then break them with conviction and without mercy so they stay broken.

So I taught my students at the Metropolitan Writing Institute.



I digress, something else I’d take my Metropolitan students to task for. I should be writing about the rainy foggy March morning I arrived here at what had been my father’s lakeside cottage, and where, our mother believed, my twin brother was hiding out.

There I am—there we are—freshly arrived in my beleaguered Mazda. According to the dashboard clock it’s just past six-thirty in the morning. Dawn is just breaking. A dense fog has rolled in from the lake that I can’t see because it’s behind the house—or in front of it, since the house was built facing the water. I haven’t been here in thirty-five years. Except for one or two weekend visits by my brother and his wife, no one has been here, as far as I know.

The house looks smaller than in memory. A “modified” A-frame. Even through the fog I can see the yard is overgrown, the garden turned into a jungle, with weeds rising almost as high as the gutter. Where not overgrown the lawn is covered with dead leaves. To the far left of the house: a pile of rotted firewood. To the right a sagging carport with a tarpaulin-covered vehicle hunkered under it. Next to it, an overturned plastic trash container with a fallen sweetgum tree lying nearby. No lights burn inside the house. The place looks dead, haunted, the lake just visible behind it now through the already dissipating fog.

All I’ve just described is as seen through the Mazda’s cracked

windshield. The engine still rumbles, the impotent defroster still blows, the wipers still wipe. Except where I've rubbed it with the wad of paper towel, the windshield is as opaque as the fog outdoors. The radio exudes a blend of static and bad news. I'm biding my time, not wanting to leave the car that suddenly feels like a warm, comfortable womb, afraid of what awaits me inside that house—despite that, apart from my mother's dream-born hysteria, there's no reason behind my fear. Why should anything bad have happened to my brother? He's lying low, doing his Thomas Pynchon/J. D. Salinger recluse act, playing hard-to-get with the media and his fans. His last book didn't sell that well. The ratings on his latest PBS fundraiser special disappointed. Or maybe he just needed a break from it all.

So I tell myself as I sit with the staticky radio telling me more about Russia and Crimea (“Dispensing with legal deliberations, despite U.S. and European pressure, a defiant Vladimir Putin announced a swift annexation of the Ukranian peninsula”) and daylight seeping into the surroundings. Why should I give a damn, anyway? Since when has my brother given a damn about *me*? Not since his fucking epiphany, his metamorphosis. Since he reinvented himself, becoming rich and famous beyond anyone's dreams. Meanwhile I, his twin, fell to pieces and went to seed. Like this house I'm looking at.

• •

As for the house, like the man who once occupied it, it was once proud and happy. I recall the first summer I spent here with him, with my father. I'd just turned seven. Greg and I used to take turns, alternating summers. Dad would drive all the way up to Connecticut, then drive us all the way back down, the same journey I just took, more or less. It was cheaper than him flying, renting a car, and so on. Or maybe he felt it would be more fun. Apart from stopping at a few roadside attractions (one of which featured a scaled-down Eiffel Tower), all I remember about that first trip here with him is me saying, “Are we almost there yet, Daddy?” pestering my poor father the way kids do. “Not yet, Stewie.” I kept having to pee. *You peed ten miles ago! / I need to again. / Can't you hold it, Stewie? /*

No! Instead of pulling into a gas station, my father quoted philosophers on the subject of patience. (“He who seeks the truth must have infinite patience.” —Socrates; Nietzsche: “Patience is so very hard that the greatest poets did not disdain to make its antithesis the theme of their poetry.”) I peed in my pants. By the time we got here, my father’s car reeked and we were both miserable.

Still, as soon as I saw the place, I fell in love with my father’s house, and by extension with my father. We hardly knew each other. Greg and I were only four when he and our mother split up. I knew he was a professor and that he lived on a lake. That’s all I knew. I’d seen him two or three times, at one or another holiday gathering. He’d arrive smelling of books and pipe tobacco, bearing gifts. Then he’d be gone again until next year. He existed in our lives like a tweedy, pipe-smoking Santa Claus (minus the white beard). It was only after I’d seen his house for the very first time that my father became real to me.

The house was magical. So it seemed to me. Though no larger than the one before me now, it seemed bigger. I remember, entering it for the first time, how the cathedral ceiling lived up to its grandiose name, with its wooden beams and ceiling fans, and the huge triangular windows through which thick rays of sunlight speared the cavernous space at 45-degree angles. Below the windows were two sets of French doors, their venetian blinds raised, letting in more sunlight. Through them I had my first glimpse of the lake, glittering through the slats of the deck railing beyond a phalanx of potted geraniums: this vast, wide, glimmering lake, with a dock jutting into it, and two wooden chairs on the dock, and the lawn sloping down. My Daddy’s house! Over each set of French doors he had mounted a wooden oar. At one end of the cathedral ceiling, suspended by a pulley system, hung what I soon learned was my father’s pride and joy, his Adirondack guide boat, complete with folding caned seats. Between the sets of French doors was a fireplace, its mantle formed of rugged fieldstones. But I couldn’t stop looking at that boat. I was entranced by it. I’d never seen anything more beautiful, its smooth hull a deep ultramarine, its varnished gunwales gleaming gold.

“Daddy, Daddy, can we take the boat out? Please, Daddy?”

“Tell you what,” my father said. “We’re both sweaty and stinky from all that driving. What do you say we go jump right in the lake?”

To which I responded: “Yipppeeeee!” (If that “Yipppeeeee!” didn’t represent the happiest moment my father and I ever shared together, it came close.)

We had a good time on that first visit. We did indeed take out his boat, which I kept calling a “canoe” (“It’s not a canoe, Stewie; it’s an Adirondack guide boat”). Almost every day we took it out, in the mornings before breakfast and evenings at twilight. We swam, fished off of the end of the dock, did jigsaw puzzles, cooked pancakes and French toast, went for walks, barbecued on the deck, watched TV. All very father-son, straight out of the *Andy Griffith* show. He introduced me to his colleagues at the university, those who hadn’t left for the summer. My father seemed happy, fulfilled. I had no idea how depressed he was. I didn’t know that word, let alone what it meant. My father didn’t strike me as sad, let alone as someone who, thirty-one years later, a few weeks shy of his twin sons’ 36th birthdays—six months after his 67th—would, as they say, “take his own life.”

How? you ask.

He hanged himself. From the oak beam of his modified A-frame. As my brother would. As I myself will soon do. While I still have the chance.

Before they come for me.

• •

That can wait. Right now I’m still remembering—we’re still remembering—that happy moment with Dad the first time we visited him here. He was a kind man, an intelligent man, a gentle man. A philosopher, a scholar, a professor. We recall our last summer here with him. We were sixteen. Impatient, impetuous, rebellious, obsessed with girls and sex. The novelty of our father’s house, the lake, the rowboat, the hammock, barbecues and puzzles and card games, had long since worn off. We would have rather been back in Connecticut with our friends. We grew increasingly surly, petulant, unpleasant. For the rest of the summer we wore a perpetual scowl.

We treated our father like shit. (Was it really *that* bad? Maybe not, but guilt makes us remember it that way.)

Something peculiar happened during that last visit with my father here, an episode eerily relevant to this confession's overarching theme.

My father and I had had a quarrel. I'm calling it a quarrel, though what really happened was that I abused him and he stood there taking it. It happened during the third week of my five-week visit. I'd been complaining about everything. The lack of young people for me to interact with, my father's cooking (good at barbecues and breakfast, hopeless otherwise; we ate pancakes, bacon and eggs, or hot dogs for every meal), and mainly the fact that, despite the learner's permit in my pocket, my father refused to let me borrow his vermilion 1963 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider convertible roadster, the one he used only in perfect weather and otherwise kept tarped under the now tottering carport (his regular car was a 1974 Ford Pinto).

"What for?" he asked me.

"So I can drive into town," I answered.

"Drive into town for *what*?"

I shrugged. "To see what's there," I said.

"I'll tell you what's there, Stewie. Nothing. That's what's there."

You can imagine how pleased I was with this response. Of course, he was right; there was nothing to the town, a sprinkling of seedy antique shops and tattoo parlors, a few hamburger and pizza joints, the usual soporific student dives and strip malls. Apart from the college, the town's only points of interest were the coal-fired power plant at the other end of the lake, with its three-hundred foot tall smokestack, and the grounds of the formerly bustling state mental asylum, now deserted, its brick buildings spangled with kudzu and NO TRESPASSING signs, and which my father and I had already explored several times.

"Besides," my father added, "if there's something you really want to see, I'll happily take you. There's no reason for you to drive alone."

Oh, but there were reasons, two of them. First: to drive my father's spiffy car with him not in it, so I could go fast, as fast as I

wanted to go, which was very fast; second: to get away from him, from my father. How I longed to escape him and his bacon and eggs and rounds of Parcheesi and gin rummy and aimless walks along the course of which he would regale me with Spinoza and Erasmus and Plutarch and Plato and Descartes and all the rest of his dull fucking philosophers. It's all coming back to me, this event tinged with shame and remorse. Hey, I was sixteen. Not a prime audience for Spinoza. What I wanted were girls, *a* girl, any girl. To be seen by said hypothetical girl in my father's non-hypothetical Alfa, tooling around in aviator sunglasses with the top down, one hand barely steering, my opposite elbow slung loosely over the driver's side door. In search of this conjectural encounter, I'd have driven all the way back to Connecticut, siphoning gas all the way, on the off chance that said girl would bear witness to this cameo starring yours truly and an Italian sports car.

My father refused to hand over the keys, denying me my fantasy, igniting the fuse of the outburst that would occur a short while later during one of our post-breakfast rambles.

Dad wore his tweed eight-panel newsboy cap—his “thinking cap,” he called it. He wore it always on his walks, even in hot weather, and it got, gets, very hot down here. He claimed it made him think better. His “negative capability cap.” He had his what-chamacallit, his shillelagh, too, that also apparently helped get his philosophical neurons firing. Anyway, we were walking. Along these lake access roads there's little to see but acres of scruffy loblolly pine, good for paper pulp, but not much to look at. The subject that morning: dualism, the role of opposing equal forces in philosophy, science, politics, and religion—good and evil, darkness and light, mind and body, yin-yang, particle and wave, socialism vs. capitalism. As always my father did all the talking. If memory serves me, he was going on about Plato's first argument in the *Phaedo*, the Argument of Opposites, how whatever has an opposite must come from or be a product of that opposite. For instance, if we consider some entity to be tall, or taller, that entity can only have arrived at its tallness from having been shorter. If something is “darker,” it obtained its darkness from a state of being less dark, or lighter. The process works in both directions:

that is, things can become taller, but they also can become shorter; things can become sweeter, but they can also become more bitter. We awaken from the state of sleep and go to sleep from having been awake. Each state depends on the other. Similarly, since dying comes from living, living must come from dying. Life depends on death and vice-versa. According to Socrates, as recorded by Plato in the *Phaedo*, it is only during the very fleeting interim between death and rebirth that the soul exists apart from the body and thus has the chance to glimpse the Forms unmingled with matter in their pure, undiluted fullness. Death liberates the soul, increasing by an order of magnitude its apprehension of The Truth. This, according to Socrates by way of Plato, is why the philosophical soul isn't afraid of death and actually looks forward to death as a form of liberation, as a release from the isolating, insular, soul-crushing solitary confinement of the body.

This—or something along its lines—is what my philosopher father went on and on about that morning during our after-breakfast stroll, with me walking a dozen sullen steps behind him, hearing but only half listening to him, still enormously pissed off that he wouldn't hand over the keys to his snazzy Alfa. How far we had walked, how long my father had gone on about dualities and opposites, I'm not sure. At some point I blurted: "Jesus, Dad, do we have to *always* talk about this stuff? Can't we for once talk about something else for a change?"

My father stopped, turned, looked at me, his eyes wet with dismayed confusion.

"I mean," I went on, "can't we have a goddamn *normal* conversation? Do you always have to *lecture* me like I'm one of your goddamn students?"

My father smiled. It wasn't a real smile but an expression of discomfort and anxiety that tightened his lips so they curved upward at the edges, the same look I'd seen on his face a day or two before when I put a gouge into the hull of his boat, having failed to prevent it from colliding with the dock. I knew then that I had injured him no less than I'd injured that boat, which made me feel awful. Which made me angry—at myself. Which anger caused me to lash out again.

“Jesus,” I snapped, “how do you *live like this?*”

“Like what?” My father tucked his chin in wonderment. “How is it that I live, Stewie, in your enlightened objective view?”—asked in the same soft, placating voice he must have used with his students, though I could see he was rattled.

“Questioning everything! Mulling, probing, brooding, analyzing, vivisecting—as if life’s some pickled frog your biology teacher made you dissect. Christ, how the fuck can you *stand* it?”

Instead of waiting for an answer, which would only have resulted in another interminable philosophical disquisition, I took off. Not running, exactly, but at a very fast walk, as fast as my two feet could carry me without leaving the ground simultaneously.

I returned to the house. Where else could I go? Except for those acres of loblolly pine there was nowhere to escape to. And I wanted—I needed—to escape. So I went back to the house, which had the advantage of being on water. Dad’s house, this one, features what realtors call “big water”—a grand, open view of the lake. It truly is a fantastic view, the sort of view that expands the mind while fostering the impression that all sorts of things—things that bounded by dry land would seem impractical if not altogether impossible—fall within the realm of possibility. It was this view, united with my need to escape, that beckoned me back to my father’s house that morning.

The keys to Dad’s Alfa being unavailable, I availed myself of the next best, in fact the only other, means of conveyance: my father’s beloved Adirondack guideboat, the one I had dented, and that hung by a pulley system from his cathedral ceiling. I had only to undo the (blue, 5/8”, nylon) rope from its cleat, lower the boat, open one set of French doors, put the boat on its dolly, grab the two wooden oars from the wall hooks they clung to, and roll the thing out onto the deck and down the ramp my father had built for that purpose, then on down the sloped lawn to the strip of beach a few yards from the dock, where I’d give it a shove and—as it gained buoyancy—jump in. Having maneuvered myself inelegantly into the central folding caned seat, with some initial awkwardness, I’d start rowing. No keys or permission required.

I’d rowed my father’s boat often enough with him in the other

seat to know the procedure. I'd even taken it for a brief solo run, under my father's solicitous dockside gaze, the voyage that culminated in my dinging the hull into the dock. Now, though, I was on my own, the whole lake mine. It was my enraged, remorse-driven intention to row across it, all 15,000 flooded acres. Or until it got dark, whichever came first.



Though with her stiff prissy Queen Anne-style caned seats she didn't look it, my father's boat—which he'd named after my brother *and* me, with *Stewart* on the port bow, and *Gregory* on the starboard—was an impressively fast rowboat, as fast as a man-powered vessel built for purposes other than racing could be. Even propelled by my less-than-coordinated strokes, she sliced through that morning's glassy water such that within a few strokes all that remained of my father's A-frame was a gray dot on the shore. Except for one flat-bottomed fishing boat there were no other vessels on the lake. It was too early in the day for pontoon boats, jet skis, wake boats, and other pleasure craft. A faint, ghostly mist danced on the water.

A few more strokes carried me out into wide-open water; a few more had me within sight of the dam to which the lake owed its existence. Seeing it, alone out there with all that fresh water separating me from the rest of the world, for the first time since my father had picked me up at the airport (once I grew old enough to fly on my own we'd abandoned the long-distance drive), I felt something close to freedom. Anyway it would have to do.

I rowed hard, eager to be anywhere and nowhere, each stroke carrying me further not only from my father but from myself. I'm not sure how long I rowed—long enough to raise twin blood blisters on each of my palms—when I found myself at the mouth of a cove. By then I'd passed a dozen coves like it, yet for some reason this one enticed me, I can't say why. I steered my father's boat into it. Like most cynics—I was as cynical then as I am now, if not more so—buried alive under my cynicism was an optimist begging to be exhumed. What is cynicism if not a method of pre-empting disappointment?

As the boat rounded the bend and four Detweilers—myself,

my father (as represented by his boat), and his twin boys (ditto)—entered that cove, though the pessimist in me would have denied the existence of any such entity, I couldn't help feeling the hand of God or Fate or Destiny or What-have-you upon that row-boat, guiding it and us: father, sons, and Holy Ghost (me). With each stroke more and more I felt something extraordinary was about to manifest itself. It would appear around that bend, in that cove.

So it did. From behind a stand of pine trees, the same unprepossessing loblolly pines that surrounded the lake, it came into view: an A-frame like my father's in every respect, almost: a modified A-frame with a pitched roof, gray siding and slate-blue shutters, with an identical deck, an identical dock, an identical sloped lawn sprouting identical sweetgum trees. If all that wasn't weird enough, between the two sweetgum trees closest to the dock a striped hammock had been strung, identical to my father's striped hammock, but with different-colored stripes. Otherwise, everything was the same, so much so that for a moment I felt that without realizing it I'd rowed the boat in an enormous circle back to where I'd started.

But this was a different house, in a different cove, one with a less grandiose view, and that, furthermore, faced east, into the rising sun, the glare from which blinded me as I kept rowing, my back to the house that was my object, sighting it from time to time over my shoulder, whereas my father's house faced west, away from the rising sun, toward those sunsets, that were—still are—spectacular.

So this had to be a different house. Still, everything about it, aside from its location, was identical. It had to have been built by the same contractor. For all I knew there were dozens like it dotting the lake's shores, making my remarkable discovery not-so-remarkable. Still, it struck me then as freakish, an episode straight out of *The Twilight Zone*. It wouldn't have surprised me to see my father's snazzy Alfa parked under an aluminum carport in the driveway, or my father himself waving at me from the dock of that alternative, quantumly entangled universe.

I know, I know, Dear Reader. You're thinking: this isn't what you bargained for. At best we've wandered into metaphysical territory, at worst into science fiction—or, even worse, some form

of domestic magic realism, which is no better than domestic Parmesan cheese. I can't help it. It's what happened. I'm merely the messenger here.

Determined to have a closer look, I rowed up to the dock. There, with my shadow looming over its boards, I noticed more differences. The dock's boards were warped, splintered, and rotted (to keep them from rotting, you had to seal them once every two or three years). They obviously hadn't been treated in decades. The dock ladder was coated with rust, so were all the cleats and the nails poking up out of the warped decking. Other nails were broken or missing. From frayed ropes three plastic dock bumpers hung, waterlogged and black with lake algae. Like my father's dock, it had a pair of cleats on it.

I secured the boat to the cleats. Then I climbed up on and walked the dock's length to the shore, noting, as I did so, how in need of repair the seawall was, with boards missing and weeds sprouting through the gaps, with some areas entirely breached and sink holes yawning behind the breaches. The hammock was heavy with stagnant green water and rotting leaves. As for the lawn, it hadn't been mowed in a long time. Dirt, weeds, leaves, and fallen branches replaced grass. The house itself, I saw as I drew nearer to it, was in disrepair, the siding cracked, a few shutters gone. Two of the French doors were covered with plywood. A carpet of mulch covered the deck, from which a section of railing was missing. Needless to say the place was abandoned. It looked, come to think of it, like this house when I arrived here eight weeks or so ago, but worse.

A chill passed through me, as if I'd stepped, rowed, into the future, one I'd arrive at again thirty-seven years later in a Mazda with a blown muffler, the one confronting me now, parked in that vehicle in this driveway looking at my father's former house in which I'll discover —

But that hasn't happened, not yet. Well, it has yet to happen for *you*, Dear Reader. As with anything that has yet to happen, there is always the possibility, however slim, that it *will not* happen, that somehow the tragedy will be averted. Think positive.



Like the front door of my father's house, the door to this one had been painted red, though now it looked pink, it was so badly faded. Why was I not surprised when it opened? Inside, darkness and must. I half-expected to encounter not only my father's living room, but Dad himself sitting there on his wicker chair, reading a philosophical tract, smoking one of his plethora of pipes. Instead I found the cathedral-ceilinged space empty, save for a big plastic blue marlin over the mantle, the irons in the fireplace, and a few furnishings.

The furnishings: an artist's taboret, a worktable, and a pair of wooden H-frame easels, all thickly encrusted with paint. Both easels had paintings on them. Whoever lived there was obviously an artist. I examined the works-in-progress. I guessed they were works-in-progress, since they held no discernable subjects, only solid fields of pale color, the canvas on the easel to the right a wan ochre, the one to the left a grayish pastel pink. Leaning against both easels, piled and staggered on the taboret and across the worktable, were other paintings or would-be paintings, on canvases and tablets and other surfaces, all different muted shades: sand, smoke, butter, paste, powder—plowed fields ready to be seeded, cloudless skies yearning for a kite or a dirigible. From a rack on the wall I pulled down one painting after another, eager for a subject, *any* subject. They were all the same, or rather they were all different except for their subjects, which were identical, which were *nothing*.

As I stood holding a canvas, gawking at it, I was overcome by a sense of—I was going to say emptiness, but that's not right. It wasn't emptiness I felt, but something closer to what you feel when you gaze at the stars and try to wrap your mind around infinity. I was reminded of those conversations I'd had with my father, if they counted as conversations with one of us doing all the talking, when he'd try to engage me on some philosophical issue, monologues that went on until at last my silence got the last word. Now that same silence shut me out. It was like flipping through the pages of a blank notebook. Yet in their silences somehow those empty paintings spoke to me, whispering softly—so softly I couldn't hear them, let alone make out what they were saying, or trying to say. I picked up another, and another, always with the same result: more muted whispers. Each blank canvas

added to the chorus, until that cathedral-ceilinged space throbbed and echoed with its mute requiem mass of sublime nothingness.

My head ached. I'd seen, or heard, enough. I put the last painting back where I'd found it and went out the way I had come.



The air had turned dark. I'd lost all track of time. Before leaving, I walked to the side of the house facing the road. Sure enough, there was a realtor's sign there, overgrown with weeds. As I stood looking at that weed-covered sign, shivering, I realized my shivering wasn't just out of fear, but that it had gotten cold. I looked up and saw the clouds closing in overhead, dark ones, and heard the wind rustling the leaves of a nearby sweetgum tree. A storm was coming. I hurried to the dock, untied the boat. By the time I started rowing, the sky was black, the wind kicked whitecaps across the lake. I felt a drop of rain and heard thunder. It started pouring. I rowed like mad.

I thought I'd die out there.

By the time I got back I was soaked. My father's boat was half-swamped. There, standing in the pouring rain at the edge of his dock in his sopping cap with his shillelagh, in a picture that would etch itself permanently into my brain, stood my philosophy professor father, his rain-drenched face contorted with tears, regret, relief. He stood there waiting for me, his son.

3. QUANTUM ENTANGLEMENT

A GIFTED STUDENT OF MINE ONCE BEGAN A STORY WITH THE FOLLOWING eloquent and, in their way, prophetic words: “Dear Reader, Fuck You.” A fine opening, I thought, as good in its way as *Call me Ishmael* or *They threw me off the hay truck about noon*.

“Dear Reader, Fuck You.” Was ever an opening more piquant or to-the-point?



The news report ended. The next program featured classical music, Von Suppé’s *Poet and Peasant* overture mixed with more static. I switched the radio off. And the headlights. I took the keys from the ignition. Then I sat there, holding the keys, still unwilling to enter the house.

I’ve switched back to the first-person singular. Sorry to exclude you, Dear Reader, but this story must be told that way. It’s a confession, after all, as all first-person narratives are confessions. We’re getting something off our chests, unburdening ourselves of an experience or experiences that have moved us to where we can no longer bear to keep them to ourselves. We must share them, and in sharing them we hope to make you, our reader, understand

what we've been through, and in the process make you complicit in our actions.

To make you my twin: that's the point of this and all confessions. No longer will you be able to say, "Under the same circumstances, I'd have done differently." On the contrary. Under the same circumstances, you would have done exactly as I did *since you would have been me*.

Then again, it's all a conceit. Having read the first paragraph of this testimony, you know perfectly well that I'm not really sitting in a car in front of my former father's former lake house at six thirty (6:45 now) a.m. Furthermore you know—or anyway you suspect—that this chapter will end with my seeing my twin hanging from a ceiling beam.

Still, you're in suspense, as if you hadn't read that first paragraph, or you've conveniently forgotten it. Coleridge calls it *the willful suspension of disbelief*. Maybe that opening was just a dream, like the nightmare my mother had about Greg drowning. These days especially, given all the postmodern shenanigans, with respect to narratives, anything's possible, including my being simultaneously in this car hesitating to enter my former father's former lake house, and—having already entered and seen the awful thing inside it—sitting with my back to the loft railing writing these words in one of a series of black marbled composition notebooks.

There's a scientific term for it. *Quantum Entanglement* ("Spooky Action," Einstein called it), the theory that two objects existing in completely different places may be "entangled," so that whatever happens to one happens to the other. Apart from being in different places they are, for all intents and purposes, identical. The term applies to atoms. But—theoretically, as I see it—what's true of atoms must also be true of things that are made of atoms. Of everything, in other words.

Is it not the case that I, your narrator, sitting in this parked car avoiding what awaits me in that house, am *quantumly entangled* with the narrator who wrote that opening paragraph, while he in turn is—or was—quantumly entangled with the owner of the corpse who is its object? As I will soon be, though presumably I don't yet know it?

If that's not complicated enough, there's also this entity known as "the author" who isn't any of those narrators, but who is, nonetheless, quantumly entangled with each of them—as you, Dear Reader, are quantumly entangled with me.

Notwithstanding which I'm still sitting here, in my car, in the driveway of the lakeside A-frame to which, according to our mother, my twin has retreated: a claim backed by the late-model BMW R1200C Phoenix Cruiser motorcycle parked under the same declining carport under which my father kept the Alfa Romeo. The Alfa is still there. My eyes trace its contours underneath the tarp that, along with the carport's metal roof, is covered with leathery brown magnolia leaves, like a mantle of discarded wallets.

With a deep breath I got out of the car (note sly switch to past tense). Having grabbed my gym bag from the rear seat (I hadn't packed much), I made my way to the front door, on the right side of the house. I knocked. Seconds later I knocked again, louder. I tried the door. It was locked. I circumnavigated the deck to the first set of French doors to find them likewise locked. I tried the second set. Though it stuck hard to the frame, the door opened.

A smell that I'll try but fail to describe greeted me: a blend of ashes, mildew, mold, damp carpet, and something else, ripe and repugnant in equal measure. A repulsive, awful, abominable... *Adjectives aren't descriptions, they're opinions.* I'd never smelled anything so hideous.

"Greg?" I spoke to the darkness. "Greg?"

Then, realizing my mistake:

"*Brock?*"

Though by then the sun had come up, inside the house was still in darkness. The blinds and curtains were drawn. I found a light switch and switched it on. Nothing. I tried more switches with the same result. Had Greg—I'm sorry—had Brock been living there with no electricity? Without lights, heat, or ventilation? In a house that stank of, among other things, a history that included our father's gristly suicide? If so, he really had gone over some sort of edge.

I remembered that my father kept a box of matches on the mantelpiece. I groped for and found them. By the light of a burn-

ing match I searched in drawers for a flashlight or a candle. In a lower drawer I found a flashlight, but the battery was dead. I found some candles. I lit three and positioned them at points along the kitchen counter. Their light revealed to me the inside of my father's house much as I recalled it from thirty-seven years before. A bookshelf moved, an unfamiliar sofa, a different-colored oil cloth on the dining table. Otherwise apart from the smell and the spiderwebs that I kept wiping off my face it was just as I had last seen it.

I called my brother's name again, his new name. I shouted it. I opened the basement door and shouted again. Taking one of the candles, I walked to the end of the short corridor leading to the downstairs bedroom, where my father had slept during my visits, and shouted it into there. The bed was made. A colorful spread covered it. If Brock had slept there, he left no sign. He must be sleeping upstairs, I thought, in the loft. Or maybe that's not his motorcycle out there. Maybe my father had taken up motorcycling near the end of his life, unbeknownst to me.

I was about to make my way up the stairs when I saw something else, something I hadn't seen before, a dark oblong shape hanging there, above me, a few feet from the balcony railing. My father's boat, I thought. Yes, that must be what I'm seeing.

But it wasn't a boat. It was too small to be a boat, too small, and—unless the hoisting rope had come off one of its pulleys—oblong in the wrong direction. The oblong boat hypothesis made no sense, but neither did an obscure, human-shaped chandelier. Or was it just a shadow? I thought of Plato's Allegory of the Cave as relayed to me by my father, wherein a group of POWs chained inside a cave imagine the fire-cast shadows on the wall to be men, women, horses... The point, my father explained, lecturing me as usual, is that human beings tend to mistake the conclusions offered to them by their limited perspectives for reality. Plato's Cave had become my father's A-frame, and I its solitary prisoner watching the shadow-play performed by the sepulchral light that had just started seeping in from outdoors, the oblong shadow becoming increasingly human.

Oh God, I thought, Oh dear God... please... please... no...

Then I did what I had resisted doing until then. I pulled aside

the curtains over the French doors. I opened the blinds on the triangular windows.

The fog had lifted; the skies were a dim, pale, cloudless, colorless color. Shadowy light streamed in. With the house flooded with daylight, I turned around and looked up. And saw.

And screamed my twin brother's name.

4. COFFEE, BLACK

“In shaping our personalities, which plays the more decisive role: our innate qualities, the ones we were born with (“nature”), or environmental factors, including our experiences (“nurture”)? Nature or Nurture? But supposing there were a third choice? What if the third choice were: Neither!”

— from *Coffee, Black*, by Brock Jones, PhD

IF I SAY, “DEAR READER, FUCK YOU,” IT’S NEITHER AN IMPERATIVE nor an insult. It’s a plea. I’m asking you for what every human being secretly wants: to be loved unconditionally. Behind this desire to be loved unconditionally lies something deeper still: the wish for me to accept my own imperfect self, to embrace my limitations, however severe and disconcerting those limitations may be.

Having applied all the wisdom of my years of teaching—albeit at an unaccredited, private learning establishment operating out of the basement of a Quaker school in Gramercy Park (when not being used for A.A. meetings)...having spent all those years teaching plot and point-of-view, scene and summary, action and description, analepsis and prolepsis, tone and diction, structure and style...having assimilated my teachings as best I could into my own creative efforts and met with only the most modest success, in these pages I foreswear trying at all.

I give up; I surrender. Dear Reader, Fuck You. That's my new credo, my slogan, the motto inscribed in Latin ("*futete, cara lectorem*") on the heraldic banner I unfurl into the gunpowder-and-blood scented breeze.



He had everything to live for. That's what I told myself as I sat with my back to the loft railing, my brother's naked body dangling by a blue rope several feet behind me. *He had everything to live for.* Whereas I, his twin—comparatively speaking—had nothing to live for.

How, you wonder, did it come to pass that my twin brother and I, once so close in spirit, had grown so far apart?

There's a simple answer, one that can be stated in two words. The first word is "coffee"; the second is "black."

Coffee, black. Those two words form the title of my brother's book, his first, a runaway success, twenty-nine weeks on or near the top of *The New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list.

This was six years ago, in the summer of 2008.

No one expected it. I certainly didn't.

Even when it happened, I didn't realize it, at first. Sure, I'd heard of the book. You couldn't help hearing about it. There were ads for it everywhere, in every major newspaper, including full-page ones in the *Times*. *Coffee, Black* was the biggest bestseller since *Dianetics*. Like that book, the modestly sized volume (185 pages) promised to change your life.

I knew about the book, but had no idea my brother had written it since his name wasn't on it. As far as I and everyone else knew, the book's author was someone named Brock Jones, PhD.

By the time I discovered that "Brock Jones, PhD" was Gregory Detweiler, *Coffee, Black* had been riding the bestseller list for weeks. Even after seeing the author's grinning photo in one of those ads, I still had no idea he was my brother. The salt-and-pepper goatee and Philip Johnson glasses didn't help, nor did the bone-white Panama fedora and the surplus peacoat with the collar flipped up to his ears. Least helpful of all was the fact that my brother and I both shared the same not-unpleasant face with

the same ho-hum features: insipid nose, indistinct lips, bland jaw, mundane forehead, irresolute brows ... As faces go it was impossible to caricature having no distinct features. Like Quebec or Catalonia, it held territory without sovereignty. Stare at it for as long as you like. Five minutes later, you'd forget it.

Those things alone couldn't account entirely for my inability to recognize my brother's—my own—face. "Prosopagnosia" is the neurological term for it, or "face blindness," the inability to recognize faces, even those of close friends and family members. In my case, though, what I suffered from was more like "contextual face blindness," the inability to recognize familiar faces when presented in unfamiliar, unexpected, and, in this case, inexplicable contexts. "Inattentional blindness" is another term for the phenomenon.

A test was done a few years ago to demonstrate it, what became known as "The Gorilla Test." Subjects were shown a video of two groups of people tossing a basketball back and forth. One group wore black T-shirts, the other wore white T-shirts. The viewers were asked to count how many times the people in white T-shirts tossed the basketball to each other. About halfway through the video, someone wearing a gorilla costume crosses the screen directly in front of the camera. Mid-frame the gorilla stops, waves at the camera, then keeps on walking out of frame. After watching the video, the subjects were asked two questions:

- 1) How often did the people in white shirts pass the basketball?
- 2) Did you see the gorilla?

Of a dozen test subjects, fewer than half saw the gorilla. The others were too busy counting basketball tosses. Each time I chanced upon my twin brother's goateed, bespectacled face grinning at me from one of those ads for his book, something like the gorilla test phenomenon must have accounted for my failure to recognize it. I must have been intent on something else, on finishing that article I'd started on page one, or daydreaming about my novel-in-progress. Anyway, I failed to take note of the bestselling gorilla who happened to be my twin.

It took the downtown No. 6 local subway to cure me of my prosopagnosia/inattentional blindness. Mid-November, 2009, early evening, rush hour. I was headed downtown to teach a class. I held

in my hand a chapter of a memoir by a troublesome student, the sort I'd get periodically and who tries to take over the class. Janice Hauptmann: such a pleasant name for so huge a pain in the ass. Her memoir was about her "torrid" romance with an older man, a supposedly famous Brazilian flamenco dancer whom neither Janice's classmates nor I had heard of, and who'd been old enough to be her grandfather. Had it been modestly well-written, Janice's memoir would merely have been embarrassing. As it stood, it was egregious. To make things worse, Janice was constantly disrupting the class with lengthy authorial exegeses, elucidating her intentions as if they weren't all too plain. When not defending her own work, she attacked everyone else's, decrying their lack of "literary ambition," a pet phrase of hers. She loved the word "literary," which, according to my dictionary, means "valued for quality of form and linguistic distinction"—qualities absent in her view from her classmate's efforts, but that, again, according to her, her own output demonstrated amply. Needless to say she went after me, calling my critiques "reductive" and "artistically reactionary," meaning, I guess, that I'd failed to recognize, was *inattentionally blind* to, her lofty ambitions and trailblazing innovations. So disruptive was Janice that, one evening after our class, with my blessing, her peers confronted her, insisting that she cease and desist. Since then she had been quiet—too quiet, I felt, ticking away silently like a bomb at her one-armed grade-school desk while other people's works were under discussion.

With the latest installment of Janice's memoir in hand, on that crowded No. 6 downtown local, I carefully weighed my response to her work, wanting it to be succinct, generous, open-minded, neither patronizing nor condescending. I wanted to give her nothing to argue or complain to me about, to throw her no bait, to keep her quiet. Another part of me felt sorry for her and hoped to forestall any discussion that might inspire the others to attack her, as they were willing and eager to do. I wanted to rescue Janice Hauptmann from her masochistic self.

While weighing my words, forced against the wall of that rattling subway train by a crush of evening commuters, my eyes met with those of the author of *Coffee, Black*. Subtitle: "Epiphany at

30,000 Feet.” Sub-subtitle: “How Small Decisions Can Change Your Life Radically and for the Better Forever.” This time, rather than skimming over my vision as it had dozens of times before, the image in the poster advertisement caught me in its grip. At last I beheld the gorilla waving at me. Forget the goatee! Forget the glasses! Forget the Panama fedora worn at a raffish tilt! Forget the leather jacket! All I saw were eyes, my brother’s eyes, unmistakably, staring at me alone of all the people in that crowded subway car, knowing me as perfectly well as I knew them.

It can’t be, I thought; it’s *impossible*!

But there was no denying the waving gorilla: not once I *saw* him. To have questioned it beyond that point would have been like questioning my reflection in a mirror.



We hadn’t seen each other in years. The last time we had gotten together had been over one of the holidays—Thanksgiving, I think it was—at our mother’s house. It was the last holiday she would spend in the big white house in West Redding, Connecticut. Not long after that, Greg and I fell out of touch. I remember phoning him several times. He seemed distracted. Or impatient. In any event, he hadn’t wanted to chat. I remembered that. I recall asking him if something was wrong. “No,” he said. “Things are fine”—or something like that. But the way he said it failed to convince me. “Are you sure?” I asked. Yes, yes, he was sure. Things are great. Everything’s great. “How’s Sheila?” I asked. Sheila was my brother’s wife. They’d been married seventeen years. “Fine, fine...” That’s all I got out of him. Then: “Sorry, but I really can’t talk right now.”

“Okay.” I nodded to myself. “Well, I guess we’ll talk some other time.”

“Yeah,” said Greg. “Some other time. Sounds good.”

“Fine,” I said and hung up.

But it wasn’t fine. A sense of disquiet overtook me. I knew something was wrong. Was my brother depressed? Had something gone wrong at work, at the university? He was tenured, so even were that the case how bad could it have been? Maybe he and Sheila had had a fight. But it didn’t sound like it. Maybe he was

upset with me. When the time had come for our mother to move to North Carolina, I hadn't been very much help. I had no money to contribute, first of all. Greg paid for everything. He arranged an estate sale, hired movers, made all the arrangements. I should have made more of an effort, I suppose. But I was busy with the latest revision of my novel, determined to finish it for my agent. Anyway, I wouldn't have been much help.

Maybe Greg was still sore at me for that.

But it didn't sound like he was sore or upset or worried. It sounded like he didn't want to talk to me, like he couldn't be bothered.

Whatever Greg's reason[s] might have been, why couldn't he *tell me*?



We had always been open and honest with each other, Gregory and I. It wasn't like either of us to keep things from each other. I knew my brother suffered bouts of depression. I knew he had been unhappy with his university job and with other aspects of his life. I knew because he had told me so. When not living close to each other, we would phone each other regularly—to catch up, to commiserate, to share news good or bad, to spur each other on and buck each other up. When I felt down, I'd phone him and he'd cheer me up, or try to, and I'd do the same for Greg. We were like a seesaw. When he was down, I'd be up, and vice-versa. That way we could always depend on each other. Whoever was miserable that month would run down the list of causes for his misery, which list the other would meet with an as long or longer list of reasons why the other's lot in life wasn't so bad after all. "Get a grip on yourself, Stew," Greg would say. "You've lost perspective; you're seeing the glass half-empty." Then he'd run down the list. A few weeks later I'd do the same for him. Granted, when it came to uplifting my spirits, Greg could be insistent, something of a bully even, a pugnacious prosecutor making his case to the jury, badgering and browbeating the witness (me), until finally I'd break down and confess to my crime: not having as awful a life as I claimed. So effective were Greg's prosecutorial methods, I'd hang up the phone sometimes

feeling more beaten than cheered up. If only to escape my brother's haranguing, I'd cry "Uncle!" and plead happiness. Still, it worked: I would no longer be depressed.

A week or two later, the same scene would play out in reverse: though my methods were less prosecutorial, more compassionate; less prescriptive, more philosophical.

The point is we loved each other, Greg and I. We were *there* for each other, always. If I've made us sound like the Bobbsey Twins, or like the twins in matching sweaters riding a bicycle built for two in those old *Doublemint* gum commercials, I don't mean to. We were nothing like that, Greg and I. We didn't dress alike, or share dates, or speak to each other in a private language that we'd invented and that no one else understood, or do any of the other creepy things identical twins are known to do. Unlike most identical twins, especially when we were younger, we fought—a lot, gruesomely at times. We wrestled, punched, kicked, bit, and threw things at each other. One time I threw a dirt-bomb at Greg. It hit him in the head and drew blood. Had I known there was a rock in it? Possibly. Another time Greg threw a bookend at me, a wooden bookend shaped like choo-choo train, with a similar result. We were lying in our beds when he threw it. We slept in (fittingly) twin beds. The walls of our bedroom were sky blue with tromp-l'oeil clouds. Our mother painted them. The curtains were blue, too, nautical curtains with lighthouses, bell buoys, clipper ships, lifesavers, and anchors. Greg's bed was by the window; mine was closer to the door and the bathroom. We used to torment each other by farting on each other's pillows or claiming to have done so. Greg would go to the bathroom. When he returned and put his face in the pillow, I'd snicker softly. Greg knew what that meant. He'd sniff his pillow and—whether I'd really farted on it or not—be outraged, hurling his pillow and other things at me, including the bookend, a sharp corner of which caught me on the forehead an inch over my left eye. It must have cut a vein, there was so much blood. What inspired me I'm not sure, but as I stood in front of the medicine cabinet mirror with my brother behind me, my hands covering my face and blood dribbling between my fingers, I cried, "My eye! My eye!" Automatically, without think-

ing. Through a gap between my fingers, with the same bloody but otherwise uninjured eye my brother had supposedly blinded, I took in the horrified expression on his face. Only when our mother entered the scene did I abandon the charade, but not before Greg said to her, his voice quivering, “It’s his *eye*, Mommy. I—I think I blinded him!” By then my face was a mask of blood. It dripped on to the sink and the bathroom floor. Our normally worrisome mother became hysterical. It took some doing to convince her that my eye was fine. Had I not still been bleeding profusely, she would probably have slapped me. Instead she got me into my clothes and, in the passenger seat next to her in her boat-like black Mercury, with Greg riding behind us in the back seat, drove me to the emergency room. How many such trips my mother made to the hospital for stitches I lost count.

No, we weren’t the Bobbsey Twins or Hayley Mills playing two versions of herself in *The Parent Trap*. We were more like Tweedledee and Tweedledum. *Tweedledum and Tweedledee / Agreed to have a battle; / For Tweedledum said Tweedledee / Had spoiled his nice new rattle*. We cursed. We raised welts. We drew blood. As we grew, the fights got worse, until we risked serious injury to each other as well as to property—not to mention embarrassment, with others bearing witness to our battles, forming enthusiastic circles around us, egging us on, shouting for blood like spectators at a cock fight or a gladiatorial contest. We fought on lawns, in parking lots, on baseball fields, on the float at the town park at Candlewood Lake, in school hallways, in the cafeteria and in study hall. Even in Phys Ed class, where we might have looked forward to the novelty of fighting other people, Coach Myers made us wrestle each other, slapping the mat alongside our identical heads, critiquing our form as we went at it with red faces and veins popping and tears in our eyes.

I remember one of our worst fights. It was over Betsy Butterworth, the first girl that either of us kissed, Greg in this instance, thanks to a lucky turn in a game of spin-the-bottle. That was in fifth grade; the fight was a year later. Meanwhile I harbored a huge unrequited crush on Betsy, one that had me walking six miles through a raging blizzard to her home in the development where

she lived, on the off-chance that she would see me passing in front of her house and invite me in for a mug of hot chocolate. By then Betsy had emerged as one of the most popular girls in school. She had that discreet cunning coolness, that knowingness that made people want to be close to her, as if she'd licked the problem of life, as though she held the keys to it all.

The fight occurred at a backyard party to which Greg and I were both invited and at which Betsy was one of the guests. Exactly what set us fighting I don't recall, but in a vortex of grass and dust Greg and I rolled down an embankment into a copse of pine trees, where we wrestled on until a pine needle found its way up my left nostril, causing it to spew blood all over both of us. Through a veil of tears, blood, mucus, and pine needles I looked up to see, among a circle of avid spectators, Betsy Butterworth looking down with a self-satisfied grin, aware, as she surely must have been, that she was the root cause of our shameful display.

When not fighting, though, Greg and I got along well. We laughed a lot. Each of us had a "wicked" sense of humor. We loved poking fun at each other, which is to say we liked to laugh at ourselves, since that's what we were doing. There was that game that I mentioned earlier, the one we used to play all the time, the Pauper & The Millionaire. The scenario went something like this. While a storm rages outside, the Millionaire sits in the lounge of his (cozy) mansion—no, in the smoking room, wearing his (cozy) velvet burgundy lounge jacket and carpet slippers, in front of a fireplace in which a (cozy) fire burns, reading a book of (cozy) poems, listening to (cozy) classical music, sipping port, no, not port: cognac, swirling a...a snifter...yes...a snifter of cognac. Everything cozy, calm, luxurious, dignified. Meanwhile (cue Rossini's William Tell Overture Part II: *Tormenta*, "The Storm," familiar to us from Warner Bros. cartoons, hummed by one or both of us) outdoors the storm grows increasingly violent. In rags, on his hands and knees, the freezing pauper makes his way to the front door of the millionaire's mansion. As the tempest rages, he bangs, scratches, and claws at the door, begging, pleading to be let in. "Please, oh, please, Mr. Millionaire, kind sir, I beg of you; I beseech you! I'll do anything, anything—anything. Please!" Meanwhile (cue Wil-

liam Tell Overture Part I: *Ranz des Vaches*, dawn; “Pastoral”) the Millionaire clips the tip of a Cohiba Corona Especial Laguito No. 2, lights it, takes an appreciative puff, rolls it admiringly between manicured fingers ... all to the whimpers of his counterpart crying: “Oh, please, please, Mr. Millionaire! I’m so cold! I’ll do anything, anything! Please, *please*...!”

Irrespective of our roles in this Sadomasochistic tango, by then both of us would be rolling on the floor with laughter. I know, it sounds terrible. How can two brothers who love each other play such a cruel, malicious game? Answer: *out of love*, with affection. Though we played opposed roles, we were joined in spirit.

The Millionaire and the Pauper: they were one, bound together in each of us. One couldn’t exist without the other. Those equal opposite clichés, they represented the antipodal natures existing in each of us: rich and poor; good and evil; dark and light; needy and greedy; raging and calm; winner and loser; weak and strong; triumph and tragedy; love and hate. Each of us is two people. Metaphorically, everyone is a twin. My other self just happened to come with its own body.



We played other games, too, Greg and I, by ourselves, mostly, though occasionally our games involved other people. In case you’re wondering if we ever pulled the old “switcheroo,” trading places to see if anyone would notice, the answer is: yes, a few times. I’d sit in his teacher’s class and he’d sit in mine. The problem was we looked so much alike no one would ever figure it out. We’d have to reveal the deception ourselves, which took the fun out of it.

But then—one day—the ideal situation presented itself.

My sixth-grade classroom was in a portable building. When the elementary school became overcrowded, instead of building a costly addition, the Board of Ed. built a dozen small, shoddily constructed, one-story, barracks-like classrooms in a section of the parking lot. The portables had supply closets in them. One day, before my teacher arrived, I hid in the supply closet. Meanwhile Gregory, who’d dressed the same as me that morning, sat down at my desk. Neither of us knew it, but it turned out that my

regular teacher, Mrs. Fisk, was sick that day, so we had a substitute. I can't remember her name. A small, mousy young woman, obviously inexperienced. It may have been her very first day as a substitute, poor thing; it wouldn't surprise me at all to learn that it was her last day, too. Anyway, she arrived, explained that Mrs. Fisk was sick, introduced herself, and started taking roll.

The substitute teacher was halfway through roll call when suddenly my brother stood up, walked over to the window, opened it, and—against the substitute teacher's alarmed protests—jumped out and ran off. Through a crack in the supply closet door I saw it all. Needless to say the substitute was unnerved. Still, she finished taking roll and started teaching the lesson Mrs. Fisk had prepared for her, about the digestive system (we'd been learning all about the human body), specifically the gastrointestinal tract. She had her back to the classroom and was painstakingly reproducing a drawing of a cross-section of villi, those microscopic, finger-like projections that increase the surface area of the intestinal wall to make for greater absorption of nutrients into the bloodstream, on the chalkboard. While she did, I began knocking on the closet door from inside—a slow, subtle, monotonous rapping such as Edgar Allen Poe would have approved. The substitute looked around, befuddled, wondering where the sound was coming from. As she did, by carefully calibrated increments I started knocking again, slowly at first, increasing the rate, volume, and urgency of the knocks until at last she realized they were coming from the supply closet. She put down her chalk, and, after a moment's hesitation, rushed to the supply closet and flung open its doors. Wearing the same clothes as my brother wore that day, I emerged and walked calmly past her to my desk. To the howls of my classmates I sat down as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. As the laughter swelled the substitute teacher gathered her belongings and rushed out the classroom, never to be seen again.

Oh, it was a terrible thing we did to that poor substitute. Terrible but irresistible, and, you have to admit, immaculately executed. We were given a week's detention, my brother and I, and only because our mother convinced the school authorities not to suspend us.

Thereafter, for a while, the Detweiler Twins were mythic outlaws on the order of the James Brothers or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, a movie that happened to be showing in theaters at the time. It brought us even closer together, which is the point I'm trying to make: how close we were, how much we loved and needed each other.

• •

We used to dream about each other, we were so close. One of us would have a dream in which the other would say something funny, and we'd wake up with identical tears of laughter in our eyes. It happened all the time. Sometimes it happened to both of us on the same night. We'd both have the same or a similar dream. The next day we'd call each other.

"Did you dream about me last night, Greg?"

"Did you dream about me last night, Stew?"

I would never be able to recall what my brother had said in the dream that was so funny. He wouldn't remember either. Maybe we both said the same thing; maybe it was the same dream, an identical dream. (Please forgive these tautologies. Then again, you have to admit they're germane.)

I've never been a believer in paranormal phenomena, in mental telepathy or extrasensory perception. But for sure there was some kind of dream telepathy going on between Greg and me.

We were as close as two people could be.

• •

That all changed when my brother wrote that damned book. True, in some ways we had already drifted apart. While I banged away at the door marked "artistic fortune," my brother became a tenured academic married to an attractive, intelligent woman who was likewise professionally accomplished. They lived in a quaint Vermont town in a Queen Anne Victorian with a mansard roof and wraparound porch and a white picket fence, the house butter yellow with cantaloupe and cinnabar trim. Pachysandra swooped up the front lawn, stopping just short of the house like

well-trained dogs. Speaking of well-trained dogs, my brother and Sheila, his wife, had a cocker Spaniel, Kiki (a name that, among other things, means “beginning, new life”), her flaxen curls professionally groomed. The porch featured a swing, wicker furniture, and a red, old-fashioned, metal postal box. Its ceiling was painted a pale blue-green that, Greg explained, was used traditionally on Southern porches.

“‘Haint blue,’ it’s called,” Greg explained. “It’s meant to drive away ghosts and witches.”

On my last visit there, as we crept up the driveway in his Subaru, my brother filled me in on the latest improvements to their neighborhood, the new cupola on the Episcopal Church (the old one having succumbed to lightning), the new Starbucks downtown, and how, after years of hounding the zoning board with petitions and letters to the editor, he and his neighbors had succeeded in shutting down a local Salvation Army shelter.

“When you buy a house, you buy the neighborhood,” Greg informed me.

Inside, my brother showed me around. Each room was a museum display with the velvet ropes down. Tiffany lamps, Newcomb College pottery, Ernest Gimson cabinets, van der Waals bedroom set, Betchelder ceramics, Liberty & Co. Fabrics, Macintosh wallpapers, beaded curtains strung with tourmaline, amber, rosewood, and hornblende (the replacement white woolen threads stained with used tea bags to match the antique originals); mosaic tables, tapestries and stenciling everywhere. Greg’s home was a study in meticulously calculated Victorian clutter, no displaced books or strewn magazines or empty coffee cups or other signs of human habitation. The wicker wastepaper baskets were all empty. A cozy coffin, I thought to myself, with coffered ceilings and central air-conditioning.

“Nice,” I said.

“And how’s your place?” Greg asked, knowing full well that I still lived in my Bronx tenement next door to a crazy lady who kept a legion of cats, and—judging by the smells that drifted out into the hall—rarely changed their litter boxes.

“Fine,” I answered.



But that book was the bitter end. In case by some miracle you don't know about or haven't read it, I'll sum it up for you. *Think positive*. That's my summary. It happens to be the summary of every self-help book ever written, by the way, incidentally. And yes, I admit a certain prejudice toward that genre, an understandable one, considering what's happened to me thanks to it. Still, whether meant to help one reinvent oneself or lose weight or cure cancer or think and grow rich or win friends and influence enemies, such books can all—all—be distilled down to those two words: *think positive*. It was something our mother used to say to us, to Greg and me, all the time, when we faced some difficult situation the outcome of which was at best uncertain, *think positive*: she who herself was among the world's least positive thinkers, a prodigious worrier, a maestro of negativity, a high priestess of speculative anxiety. But when it came to other people's doubts and fears, the solution was simple: *Think positive*.

The key of course is to package that stale tidbit of bromidic wisdom in a fetchingly unique container, to couch it in a beguilingly simple yet novel analogy or metaphor. Do that, Dear Reader, and you, too, may have a runaway bestseller on your hands.

So—how did my twin brother do this? What unique container did he arrive at and fill to brimming with platitudinous positive thinking? His book's title tells the story, one he fleshes out in its introduction and that—again, for the elucidation of those who don't already know—I'll paraphrase here. Some time in the early spring of 2007, my twin brother, Gregory Detweiler, as he was still known to himself and others then, boarded a flight from Burlington International Airport, the closest major airport to the small liberal arts college in Vermont where for fifteen years he had, like his father before him, been a professor of philosophy and religious studies, off to deliver a seminar at a conference somewhere—I forget where, it doesn't matter, one of those achingly dull academic conferences that take place in indistinguishable hotel ballrooms and convention centers in cities across the country. The subject of my brother's seminar presentation was a book originally published in 1908 that was said to contain the essential teachings

of one Hermes Trismegistus, who was supposedly a combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. Titled *The Kybalion: Hermetic Philosophy*, the book is divided into seven chapters or “Principles.” The fifth of these Principles (and here you’ll see why I’m bringing this up), known as “The Principle of Polarity,” holds that all things have a dual nature, that everything has two sides, two aspects, two poles: they contain their equal opposite. By extension, there are no truths, only half-truths, since everything is both true and false at the same time. All opposites being united, there can be no such thing as a paradox—which, of course, is the greatest paradox of all.

That’s the gist of the seminar my brother was to deliver at the conference he was bound for when he boarded that flight in Burlington. Greg was ensconced in his cabin class aisle seat when the flight attendant arrived with a female passenger, an Indian or Pakistani woman, by the looks of it. “Excuse me,” the flight attendant said to him. “But would you mind terribly much letting this passenger have your seat so she can sit with her husband?” Indeed, the man in the center seat was Indian or Pakistani. At first my brother was annoyed, but when the flight attendant explained that the other seat was in First Class, well, that was another story. Soon he found himself stretched out in a roomy aisle seat in First Class, a mimosa on the folding tray table in front of him, his hands scented and tingling from the warm moist towelette dispensed with stainless-steel tongs. The passenger seated next to him was a burly businessman in a rumpled suit. That, too, is an extraneous detail, the rumpled suit, that is (rule of realism: random details confer authenticity). But he was a burly fellow, the type who, back in cabin class, would have taken up both armrests. As the burly businessman put his headphones on and got out his computer and my brother retrieved the draft of his seminar paper from his carry-on, the same flight attendant who had delivered the mimosa and the moist towelette arrived with the hot beverage cart. “Coffee or tea?” she said, leaning over Greg slightly, addressing the burly businessman, who, with his earphones on, intent on his computer, didn’t hear her. She reached over and tapped his shoulder. “I’m sorry?” he said, pulling one of the earplugs out. She repeated her question,

or a variation of it. “Would you care for some coffee or tea?” It was then that the burly businessman in the undistinguished suit uttered the two words that would change my brother’s life forever, that would make him rich and famous while tearing us, Gregory and I, permanently and inexorably asunder. “Coffee, black,” said the burly businessman.

Until then, Gregory, who, like me, drank coffee, had always taken his with cream and two sugars. Like me, Gregory had a sweet tooth. The thought of drinking black coffee repulsed him, as it did me. Now, my brother understood—as do I—that there are indeed those who prefer their coffee black, for whom drinking coffee with cream (or milk) and sugar is anathema, who consider it to be no less repugnant than Gregory and I considered the idea of drinking pure, harsh, black, bitter coffee, coffee unsoftened by milk, unsweetened by sugar: repugnant. To such people, drinking coffee with milk and sugar is (here I’m guessing) tantamount to drinking hot melted coffee ice cream. Now, I don’t know about you, Dear Reader, but I happen to like coffee ice cream. Should the coffee ice cream be melted, though I might not prefer or go out of my way to encounter it in such a state, I would not necessarily consider that to be a reason to not eat—or rather, to not drink—it. After all, the flavor’s the same, as are the ingredients. The same is no less true of *warm* melted coffee ice cream—and, by logical extension, of hot melted coffee ice cream, which, for all intents and purposes, except for the richer texture, is identical to—is, in point of fact—coffee with milk and sugar. But not everyone likes coffee ice cream, therefore not everyone likes melted coffee ice cream, hence not everyone likes warm melted coffee ice cream, consequently not everyone likes hot melted coffee ice cream, ergo not everyone likes coffee with milk and sugar. Be all that as it may, still, all the same, notwithstanding which, my brother Gregory found it difficult, as do I, to grasp how anyone could actually enjoy drinking black coffee. Given no choice but to drink either coffee with milk and or cream and sugar, and not drinking coffee at all, not drinking coffee at all would make sense. But drinking *black coffee*? Bitter, foreboding, gloomy, sepulchral, dreary, cheerless, Stygian—those are the terms, the adjectives, that come to my mind, and that came

to my brother's mind, whenever he found himself confronted by or contemplating "black coffee." As for people who took their coffee black, there was something sinisterly austere about them, an extreme willingness if not an eagerness to endure deprivation, a quality shared by priests, monks, hermits, and other ascetics, who, when not flagellating or immolating themselves for the sakes of their souls, fasted, abstained from sex, slept on hard floors, wore hair-shirts, ate grass, and tied themselves to rocks. He felt similarly, my brother did, toward those who took their whisky neat (like me, Greg didn't care for whisky at all, but if forced to drink it he'd order it with a splash of soda), who ate their toast without butter, who refused air-conditioning on sweltering days and slept with no pillow under their heads, who eschewed the aspirin, the Percodan, the Vicodin, the epidural, the morphine drip, who had their teeth drilled without nitrous oxide or Novocain. On one hand, he couldn't help admiring such people and envying them their self-discipline. On the other, he found them deeply, deeply disturbing. Why do without such things when you could do with them? Why deny yourself a little kindness, a little softness, a little sweetness, a little relief from the hardships and cruelties of life? Why deprive yourself of such trivial, token gestures of self-love, things that, while hurting no one, gave such comfort? Why? my brother asked himself. Why? Why? *Why???*

This entire inquisition, by the way, this protracted rant, squeezed itself into the sliver of space between the burly passenger's response to the flight attendant's beverage query and the moment when, armed with the same routine and rudimentary question, the same flight attendant turned to my brother and said:

"And for you, sir?"

"Coffee, black," my brother responded.

There, in that moment, with that response, my brother's future and mine were sealed. The moment in which I write these words, the conditions under which I write them, were not only decided then, but engineered down to the smallest detail: this loft, this rainy day, this marbled composition notebook, this pen, the length of 5/8-inch blue marine rope dangling from a ceiling beam behind me. From the moment when my brother uttered those two

fateful words aboard that flight bound from Burlington to wherever, a straight line can be drawn through his ear-popping ascent to fame and fortune to me, here, in his place—in his shoes, as it were—penning this, my confession, to you, Dear Reader.

From those two words came the *NY Times* nonfiction best-seller titled *Coffee, Black*. From those words came my brother's discovery that at any given moment we can reinvent ourselves: we can choose to be someone other than who we've been. Not only can we make that choice, we can make it spontaneously, with little or no forethought or pre-planning; and do so easily, effortlessly, in a flash, on the fly. Contrary to common wisdom, and in particular to the two prevalent theories as to when, how, on what basis, and by what forces human personalities are formed (innately or natively, based on genetic composition; or empirically and behaviorally, based on environmental and experiential factors such as parenting and education) ... my brother posited—no, he did more than posit; he demonstrated—that our personalities can be thoroughly reconfigured *by ourselves alone and at will*. To the five-centuries-old Nature vs. Nurture debate my twin brother added a bold, third option, namely: *Neither*.



In fact “Nature, Nurture, or Neither?” is the title of *Coffee, Black*'s second chapter, which sets forth its premise. From there its author goes on to explain (the present tense is indicated, the book having remained, since it was first published, not only in print but on bestseller lists) how his sudden, airborne change of coffee-drinking preferences opened the way to a series of pattern-altering changes, starting with other modest modifications: showering at night instead of in the morning (then switching to baths); wearing pajamas to bed; subscribing to a different newspaper; installing the toilet paper the *other* way; wearing shirts with button-down collars; changing the style of knot in his ties; trading Bach first for Beethoven then for Bono, gin for scotch, wingtips for penny loafers ... that sort of thing. From there the changes grew larger: the now six-year-old beige Subaru became a new, firecracker red Jeep Wrangler Rubicon; the style of furnishings in his home went from Orientalist Victorian

clutter to mid-century modern.

But Greg's changes went far beyond mere habits and superficial styles; they extended to entire value systems. His politics grew more liberal; his spiritual outlook less pessimistic. Where before he had been a staunch atheist, now he not only accepted the possibility of a personal God, he embraced it wholeheartedly. He even went to church, the Episcopal Church down the street from his home (the one with the new steeple), something that, apart from the occasional wedding or funeral, neither of us had done since we were children.

As described in his book, along with these changes, in conjunction with them, his outlook on life changed noticeably. He felt (he writes) like a different man; indeed, he *was* a different man. There could be no question about it. He felt different in his gestures, different in his bones and in his blood. His skin felt different on his face. When he smiled, he felt the difference in the tension of his muscles and nerves, and he smiled more often, much more often than he'd smiled before. He felt it in the peristaltic movements of his bowels and in the spasms, flow, and contractions of his bladder. His erections felt different; it might have been the power of suggestion, or a placebo effect of all the other changes, but it seemed to him that they were stronger and lasted longer, and that, furthermore, his sexual organ, by what might be called immaculate enhancement, had grown markedly larger in all three of its primary states: erect, tumescent, and flaccid (all this as reported in his book; is it any wonder it sold three million copies in its first year?). His breath was sweeter; his teeth whiter; his hair thicker; his hairline, which for years had been receding, seemed no longer to be doing so. He had much more energy and enthusiasm. He took up cross-country skiing, racketball, even basketball—a sport that, once upon a time, like me, having had neither the height nor the aptitude for it, he'd detested. He installed a basketball hoop in his driveway. There, evenings at dusk, he practiced with such fervor his wife literally had to beg him to come in for supper.

Each of these facts, these observations about himself, made their way into a small spiral notebook my brother started carrying and that formed the basis of what became *Coffee, Black*. For he

knew, he understood, that something extraordinary was happening, that he was undergoing a total reconfiguration, a metamorphosis as comprehensive as the one that transforms poor Gregor Samsa into a giant beetle in his bed, but of a more positive nature, and by his own choosing. Each morning Greg exercised: at first a winded, ruddy-faced, one-mile jog. Then two miles, then three, then five. His standing pulse went from eighty-five to forty-eight, Olympic athlete range. Incongruously and against Sheila's protests, he took up smoking, something else he'd never done before: not cigarettes: a pipe, like our father: a long-stemmed Churchwarden of burnished rosewood, also the occasional cigar, as in the Pauper & the Millionaire skit he and I performed together (did he sip cognac from a snifter and wear a velvet smoking jacket? His book doesn't say.). He dyed his hair and wore it long and parted down the middle, donned the Philip Johnson spectacles and white fedora, traded in his button-down Oxfords for chenille jerseys and designer t-shirts, grew the goatee...

So complete was my brother's transformation, his metamorphosis, that—as he writes in *Coffee, Black*—"Whenever I'd chance upon a snapshot or photograph of my 'old self,' though I would recognize him, it was as if I were seeing not myself or even an earlier incarnation of myself, but an entirely different person, my doppelgänger, or maybe my twin, someone who happened to share my DNA and many of my physical characteristics, but who was decidedly, unquestionably, not—and had never been—me." (The author failed to note that he had an *actual* identical twin brother: yours truly. He failed to mention it anywhere in the body of his 185-page book. Nor did any mention of this trivial fact appear anywhere within the book's front or back matter.)

Meanwhile my brother had already started work on what would be his book. At first he had intended only a short paper of some kind. The paper's working title was "Nature, Nurture, Neither: A Personal Experience of Behavior Modification as Related to Nietzsche's *Will to Power* and its Implications for Social Philosophy." The paper has more to do with psychology than philosophy or religion. At any rate—and as its overstuffed title suggests—it quickly burst its boundaries, swelling to fifty, sev-

enty-five, one-hundred, two-hundred pages ... till, at two-hundred and sixty five pages, he had the manuscript of a full-length book, one he retitled "Coffee, Black."

He also changed the author's name. Thenceforth, on the printed page and elsewhere, he would be "Brock Jones, PhD."

From the time my brother uttered those two fateful words aboard that flight to wherever he'd been going to deliver that seminar on *The Kybalion*, to the official launch date for *Coffee, Black*, exactly one year—three-hundred and sixty-five days—had elapsed: an item of trivia that, having made it into the book's preface, was not lost on its fervid readers.



All this time my brother was still living in Vermont, still working at the small liberal arts college where for twenty-five years he'd been a professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. For the last seventeen of those twenty-five years he'd been married to Sheila. A lovely woman. Kind, attractive, practical ... self-effacing ... shy, I guess you would say. Petite, brunette, freckled. Not my type (we had different tastes in women), but unquestionably attractive. She too was employed by the small liberal arts college, not as a professor, but by Campus Counseling as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, a vocation that she practiced on a freelance basis as well.

The same week my brother completed his book, he and Sheila celebrated their eighteenth wedding anniversary. But their marriage, along with my brother's employment status and everything else in his life that hadn't already been changed, was about to. *Coffee, Black* would change it. Rather, the changes that my brother had already made to his life, changes that were both the subject of his book and its cause, set off an unstoppable sequence of deviations, a chain reaction or "snowball effect," so named for its similarity to a snowball rolling down a snow-covered hillside, picking up more and more mass (snow) and momentum (speed) as it rolls along. From an initial state of relatively small significance (ordering a cup of coffee black instead of with milk and sugar), the process ("change") builds on itself, becoming bigger (graver, more serious) and also (potentially) more dangerous, and even possibly

disastrous (a “vicious circle” or “spiral of decline”) as it builds, though it might also prove beneficial (a “virtuous circle”).

In my brother’s case, one of those chain reactions resulted in his divorcing Sheila.



I want to backtrack for a moment and talk more about Sheila, about my brother’s wife, to whom I haven’t done justice. Her part in this drama isn’t large; it’s barely a walk-on, you could say. Still, every character in every story, fiction or nonfiction, however minor, deserves substance, should have a life not just on the page, but off it, that spills beyond the contours and boundaries of the “plot.” So I told my Metropolitan Writing Institute students. The best way to evoke characters is through their motivations, their goals and what they’re willing to do to achieve them. Characters who don’t want anything or don’t want much are the hardest to animate.

“Existential characters,” I called them.

Take Sheila, my brother’s wife. To someone who didn’t know her well she may not have seemed like a person of great ambition or burning desires. She kept a cockatoo in her home office, wore loose-fitting Indian garments, and drank herbal infusions. She practiced yoga and meditation. She had a calm disposition. I couldn’t imagine her losing her temper. And yet she was not without passion. Helping people, that was Sheila’s passion.

Sheila helped me. I was going through a difficult period, one of the most difficult periods of my life. This was about twelve years ago. I was forty. I’d broken up with my girlfriend. We’d come to a bad end. I don’t care to talk about it. It was that unpleasant. No, I won’t name her. Another piece of advice I gave my students: if a character appears only briefly, for a line or two and never again except in passing, as a fleeting reference, an elevator operator, a waitress, the newspaper vendor—in the given case, an ex-girlfriend of mine—it’s usually best not to name them, since once introduced by name the reader has a reasonable expectation of encountering that person, that character, again in some not insignificant way. Anyway, I’d just broken up with this girlfriend. In a

state of despondency, I paid my brother and Sheila a visit at their Vermont home. While I was there, one evening Gregory had to do something at his college, attend some function. Maybe we weren't invited, or maybe we just hadn't wanted to go. Anyhow Sheila and I stayed in and dined without Gregory. Afterwards we went for a walk. Their house was on a lonesome unlit dirt road. It was a clear night with no moon. The stars were out. I don't think I'd ever seen so many stars. Shooting stars, too, dozens of them, one right after another. We spent a long while, Sheila and I, standing there in the middle of the road, watching shooting stars. As we stood there out of the darkness she spoke.

"You've changed, Stewart," she remarked. "You're not the same person you were when I first met you. I mean that in a good way. You used to be so much harder. You were too hard, I felt. I didn't care very much for you."

I stood there and said nothing.

"You seem a lot softer to me now. Mellowed. It's a good thing. Anyway, I like you much more now. I hope you don't mind, but I felt the need to tell you that. You don't mind, do you?"

"No," I said. "I don't mind."

We went back to watching the stars. I felt the thick lump in my throat and had to hold back the urge to burst out sobbing. Sheila must have sensed it, too, or maybe she heard me choke back a sob, but she took my hand and held it, like that. I realized then that my brother's wife was a remarkable person, someone who had probably saved a few lives, possibly more than a few, who had certainly done more good in the world than I would ever do. This, I told myself as she took me in her arms, my tears soaking the shoulder of my brother's baggy canvas L.L. Bean field jacket that she wore, is a good person, a truly good person. The world could use more people like her.

That was Sheila, who, as a logical extension of the changes *Coffee, Black* instigated and that had instigated it—my brother divorced. Greg let her keep everything: the house, the car, the cock-
atoo, even Kiki, their cocker spaniel.

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By then my brother's book was a national bestseller. It had gone through four printings, with more to come. He'd done the talk show circuit: *Oprah*, *The Today Show*, *Letterman*, *Charlie Rose*, *Dr. Phil*. ... Speaking invitations poured in from all over. It wasn't long before, in addition to his agent and publicist, he required a personal manager to handle his engagements and collect the fees for them, which rose commensurate with demand. Hoping not to lose him, the dean and department chair at his college did their best to accommodate his new speaking schedule. They reduced his teaching load from three to two courses per semester, then one, then to a single, one-day seminar taught during the Spring term, with a teaching assistant to proctor tests and grade papers for him. Even that became too onerous. Then the college offered him an endowed chair, if only he'd stay. By then my brother had had a half-dozen such offers from as many universities, all more prestigious than the one where he taught, each of which my brother declined.

By then, you see, my brother was a wealthy man—a wealthy man named Brock Jones, PhD. The “PhD” matters. As Gregory Detweiler, he never flaunted his academic credentials; he'd protest when students called him “Doctor Detweiler.” “Please,” he'd cringe and say to them. “Just Greg—or, if you must, Professor Detweiler.” “Brock Jones, PhD,” on the other hand, never left home without his Doctorate of Philosophy firmly in hand and fused to his new name. It was a key to his identity, also a key selling point. “Brock Jones, PhD” wasn't your average motivational guru tout-ing the latest, state-of-the-art recapitulation of *think positive*. He was a Philosopher. A Doctor. A Doctor of Philosophy—which, doubtlessly, in the average person's not-very-sophisticated mind, translates to *philosophical doctor*: a doctor who, though versed in the medical arts, is just as well-versed in the study of knowledge, reality, and existence, while also displaying an imperturbably calm, phlegmatic approach to life's challenges. Though he didn't have to teach any more, Brock Jones, PhD was the perfect teacher. His subject: How to live a happier, more adventurous, more fulfilled and fulfilling life. A better life.

If there was one subject Brock Jones, PhD could teach by example, that was it. Materially speaking, live better he most

assuredly did. With all the money from book royalties and speaking engagements, he bought himself a loft in a former suspender factory in Boston, and a bungalow on one of the nicer canals in Venice, California. There followed more bestsellers along similar lines: *Don't Just Stand There, Change!*; *Today is the First Day of Forever*; *An Amateur's Guide to Self-Reinvention* ... profiles on *60 Minutes* and PBS fundraisers. Then the pied-à-terre in Paris, the condo overlooking the harbor in Portofino ... cars, clothes, boats (sail and power), antiques, fine art, vintage wines, rare books and manuscripts ...

Am I making my brother out to have been an irredeemable, selfish materialist? He wasn't. He was generous. He contributed to charities, set up trusts and nonprofit organization, gave as much, more, than he got. He moved our mother into a new assisted living facility, a much nicer one, the best in the state. He bought Sheila *and* her mother new cars and paid for a transatlantic cruise that his ex- and her mother took together.

As for me, his twin brother, he would have been generous with me, too, had I let him.

I wouldn't let him; I refused his generosity. By the time he offered it, I was too upset by him, too livid—is that the right word?—too distraught, too disturbed, too incensed by what I interpreted as his complete disavowal of his identity, his past, himself: a self that was, had been, identical in almost every way to mine, that was *my* self. In disavowing that self, in eradicating it, as far as I was concerned, he'd eradicated *me*. In reinventing himself as “Brock Jones, PhD,” he erased Gregory Detweiler; in erasing Gregory Detweiler, he erased me, his brother, his twin.

He denied my existence.

For were not our identities, had they not been, inextricably bound? Had we not been “the Detweiler Twins?” For as much as we'd chafed at that identity, as much as it displeased us, still, had it not been *ours*? Did it not define us—no less than the color of our eyes and hair and the shapes of our noses? Take one Detweiler twin away and—what remained? No Detweiler Twin. When he took Gregory Detweiler away from me, my brother took half of me with him. The better half.

That's right, Dear Reader: the better half. For though once upon a time I thought of myself as my brother's equal if not his better, starting around the time of what I will charitably refer to as Greg's "conversion" and rising to a crescendo several years later, I didn't feel that way. On the contrary, had someone asked me during that period "Who's the better person, you or your twin brother?" Without hesitation I'd have said, "My brother."

For I had come to doubt myself in every way.

That sounds portentous, I know. Not portentous as in foreboding, but portentous as in "said in a pompously solemn manner so as to impress." And why not, since I mean to impress you. This is a confession, after all, and confessions are meant—if not to impress, then to impress *upon* their listeners such extenuating circumstances as might paint the confessor in a more sympathetic light. That I had come to doubt myself in every way certainly counts as an extenuating circumstance.

And how, you ask, had I come to doubt myself in every way?

Listen: I'm going to tell you. It won't be a pleasant task and it may take some time. Still, I'll do it.

5. HOW I CAME TO DOUBT MYSELF IN EVERY WAY

“BACK-STORY (OR BACKSTORY): THE THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO a fictional character before you first see or read about them in a movie, television show, or novel.”

In this case, that of one Stewart Detweiler: Renaissance Man, man of singular promise and potential, the tale—nay, the saga—of his precipitous rise and equally swift fall, a tragic tale of promises unfulfilled, of potential squandered, of one who, seeing his “bright future” swirl down the drain along with much of his hair, said to himself in disbelief, *This isn't happening. This can't be happening—to me!*

Oh, but it can happen. It *did* happen.

Some may argue that I got what I deserved, that the failures that met me with middle age were the price exacted by youthful hubris. In my younger days I was cocky, arrogant. I thought a good deal of myself. I had great faith in my future. I'd be an artist, an actor, a painter...it didn't matter what sort. I'd make my mark. I'd be famous. That's what mattered.

When did I reach this conclusion?

When I was five years old. When Mrs. Norton, my kindergarten teacher, kissed me on the cheek. I'd presented her with a

crayon drawing. And she kissed me.

That chaste kiss on the cheek—it was my first taste of artistic glory. No sooner did Mrs. Norton kiss me than I made up my mind: I'd be an artist.

Beginning then and for the rest of my life I dedicated myself to artistic pursuits. I wrote poems and stories, I sketched. I took guitar, singing, and art lessons. I signed up for the Thespian Society. I got leads in all the school plays. Rarely was I seen without a play script, a sketchbook, my notebook, my guitar... When other kids my age were playing sports or doing other things together, I'd be down in what before I claimed it as my studio had been the basement playroom, putting the final touches on my latest oil painting, typing my latest poem, standing before the full-length mirror I'd mounted on the furnace room door, gripping my yardstick prop sword, rehearsing King Arthur's Excalibur speech from *Camelot*. I sound like a fanatic; I was. But then I told myself: "To make it as an artist, Stewart, you have to be determined, disciplined, devoted. So what if nobody likes you, if you have no social life, no friends? When you're famous you'll have all the friends you want, and millions of fans to boot."

It's not true that I didn't have any friends. I did. They respected my artistic ambitions, they admired me for them. Maybe they considered me a fanatic; maybe they thought that I was showing-off. What of it? Artists show-off; that's what we do.

So: I devoted myself to my art, or to becoming an artist. The distinction matters. In the first case, one is devoted to a discipline, a vocation; in the second, to an identity. Now and then one of my MWI students would ask me privately if they had what it took to be "a writer." My response was always the same. "Forget whether or not you're a writer," I'd say. "The question is: are you *writing*. As long as you're writing," I'd say, "if it matters, you're a writer."

But it's not what I said to myself as a teenager, or in my twenties, or even into my thirties. Back then I wanted to *be* an artist, to be special; to stand out. I was driven by my ego. When we do things for imperfect reasons, that imperfection is almost always born-out by the results. I got lead roles in plays, but I was no actor; I painted, but I was no painter. I wrote poems, but I was no poet.

These hard truths wouldn't dawn on me until I left the small Connecticut town where Greg and I grew up, and in which very small pond I'd been an estimable fish, to pursue my fortunes in New York City. In that city not only did I learn that I was no big fish, I wasn't a fish at all. I was more like a plankton, or an echinoderm, an urchin, or a sea cucumber, or ... or ... a starfish! That's what I was. A starfish! Not a real star. Not even a real fish. A marine invertebrate clinging to the rocks at low tide.

Oh, I had minor successes here and there, bit roles in Off-off Broadway plays, paintings in hole-in-the-wall galleries, stories and poems published in obscure literary journals collated and stapled in someone's dining room, guitar-playing gigs in midnight bars and moribund cafés, performances attended strictly by other desperate artists awaiting their own pathetic turns at the microphone.

I was still young, still barely in my twenties. I hadn't given up hope. But I realized, too, that the Renaissance Man strategy wasn't paying off. I'd have to choose one discipline and give it my all. But—how to choose? Of all my nascent gifts, all those bright-feathered arrows in my artistic quiver, which to draw back and aim at the bullseye labeled “Success/Fame”?

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Professor Wallace made the choice for me. Wallace was a sad-looking man. He wore the same wrinkled, fusty, corduroy jacket always. His nose and cheeks were filigreed with purple capillaries. In the Brooklyn art school where I studied painting, film and theater, he taught remedial English, a mandatory course designed to fulfill the school's accreditation requirements. Though they drew and painted like angels, many students enrolled in the college were high school dropouts, immigrants, and others with but a bare grasp of the King's English. It didn't take much, therefore, to impress Professor Wallace, so unused was he to students who could arrange words into a grammatical sentence, let alone write a good story. Presented with a story of mine, one about my father, about that last summer visit I paid him in my sixteenth year, when I escaped in his rowboat to encounter an A-frame exactly like this one, Professor Wallace responded with unqualified enthusiasm.

“Now *this*,” he said, snapping the fingers of one hand against the manuscript while holding it high with the other, “is a *categorically* publishable story.” Though I had no idea what it meant, I loved that word: “categorically.”

The Professor went on to sing my story’s praises, its authentic images conveyed in limpid, lyrical prose. With those gin blossoms on his cheeks I couldn’t say for sure, but I swear Professor Wallace blushed, so pronounced was his enthusiasm for my story. It wasn’t until years after I quit art school, having flitted between artistic mediums for half a decade like a goldfinch flitting about the branches of an alder tree, after concluding that to have any shot at success I’d have to pick and choose one discipline and forgo the others, that Professor Wallace’s encouraging words came back to me. The story that he praised? Though I’d published others since, I hadn’t submitted it anywhere. It moldered in a desk drawer. I was afraid to submit it, afraid to discover that my professor’s effusions hadn’t been warranted, that in fact my story *wasn’t* publishable, categorically or otherwise. Wallace’s praise had meant so much to me, I wanted to protect it, to preserve it. So I kept the story under wraps in my desk drawer. But once I made up my mind to be a writer ... I beg your pardon: once I made up my mind to dedicate myself *to writing* ... I had no choice; I had to submit it.

I aimed high. *The New Yorker*, *the Paris Review*, *Harper’s*, *The Atlantic*. It was taken by *The Chattahoochee Review*. Still: it got me an agent, a good one. She read the story, liked it, and wrote me asking if I had others and if by any chance there might be a novel in the works. The agent’s name was Sally Treadwell. Note the power of that simple, declarative sentence. Something else I taught my MWI students: when things are stated simply, directly, with enough specificity, readers aren’t likely to argue with them. Were I to tell you, for instance, that before becoming a literary agent Ms. Treadwell studied structural engineering at the Rose-Hulman Institute in Terre Haute, Indiana, and from there went on to a four year reserve commission in the Army Corps of Engineers during the course of which she researched the effects of fibers on the plastic shrinkage cracking of fresh concrete, you’d believe it, wouldn’t you? Well, Sally Treadwell did none of those things, as

far as I know. Why would a literary agent study engineering? But for a moment you were inclined to believe me, weren't you? Why? Because the degree of specificity along with the bold directness of the assertion left no room for doubt. Besides, who would make such a thing up?

A fiction writer, that's who.

But my agent's name really was—is—Sally Treadwell. If I'm ambivalent about which tense to employ, it's first of all because, assuming that Sally's still my agent, she won't be for very much longer. But that aside, it's unclear to me whether at present she is my agent. When an agent stops being your agent is often unclear. They may stop working for you, but rarely if ever do they come out and say "Oh, by the way, in case you haven't noticed, I've stopped working for you." Sally never quit. And I never fired her. But she has long since ceased to do diddlysquat for me.

That's where things stand with Sally and me now. But then, after discovering my work in *The Chattahoochee Review*, she became my stalwart. No, I didn't have a novel-in-progress, as I explained when I spoke with her by phone the day after getting her note. But I had more stories, some published, others not. "Send them all to me," Sally said. "Let's see what we can do."

Within four months I—or we, since Sally had a lot of input—put a collection together. We agreed on a title: *Penny Sufferings*. Sally sent it to six publishers. No bidding war ensued, however. For a first book of stories, the offer from Knopf was *very* generous; the others quickly dropped out. A year later, my first book was in print. Handsome, it was, with dark pennies floating over a blood-red field on the front cover, and the title and the author's name (*Penny Sufferings: a collection by Stewart Detweiler*) in a distressed brush font. Filling the back cover: a grainy black and white photo of me, the author, standing with arms folded against a craggy brick wall, wearing a pale polo shirt, one collar flipped carelessly up, looking mischievous, mischievous and rugged like the craggy wall (the suntan helped). Under the photo: my name, Stewart Detweiler, nothing more, as if nothing else needed to be said, as if to say, *Here, with no further ado, is your enfant terrible*.

The book garnered mostly favorable reviews. Starred notices from *Publisher's Weekly* and *Kirkus*; a positive, half-page review in the Sunday *Times* book section, followed in short order by equally glowing reviews in *The Washington Post* and the *L.A. Times*. An auspicious start to what would turn out to be a less-than-stellar career.



I was still living in Brooklyn, no longer in a college dorm, but in a tenement in Brooklyn Heights, a fifth-floor walk-up with a “water closet” and a lion-claw bathtub squatting in the kitchen, a half-dozen blocks from Montague Street. With the advance from the book sale I took an apartment in Greenwich Village, on Cornelia Street. The rent was twice as high, but so what? Soon, I thought, the royalties will start pouring in, along with money for the sale of movie rights. There would be more books, more advances, more money. All I had to do was keep writing. At long last, I said to myself, I’ve done it; I’ve arrived. I’ve become the famous artist I always wanted to be!

So it was for three months. There were parties and readings and signings and more reviews and interviews and invitations to speak at libraries and universities and to book clubs and literary societies. Oh, it was lots of fun, tremendous fun, more fun than I’d ever had before in my life.

You must be wondering what Gregory, my twin, thought of all this. By then he was already ensconced in the small liberal arts college where he would remain for the next twenty-four years, following (too closely, some—including me—felt) in our philosophy professor father’s footsteps, living a life of quiet, cozy, academic desperation.

How did Greg take my success? Well, or so it seemed, at first. He loved me, after all; he wanted me to be happy; he wanted me to be successful; we both wanted happiness and success—not just for ourselves, for each other. He attended my publisher’s book launch party in Manhattan, at a place called Blue Smoke, a trendy barbecue joint down in the Flatiron district. I even signed a copy of my book for him. The book was dedicated to Greg, too, by the way. *To Gregory, my better half*, it said in understated italics

in the middle of an otherwise blank page, as though whispered by me. It was the least I could do for my brother, who'd seen me through so many ups and downs, especially during those discouraging first years in New York. Now here I was, man of the hour, the toast of the town—well, the toast of that very small sector of the publishing community devoted to fledgling authors—signing books, drinking Prosecco, my editor and my publicist flanking me to one side, Sally Treadwell, my agent, to the other, and several dozen cheerful partygoers lined up to have me sign copies of my book for them. It was all very exciting, all very... what's the word? Heady. It was all very heady. I was gracious, and humble—considering. I wasn't the sort who would let fame go to his head, who'd forget the hardships, the humiliations, the insults, the setbacks, the hundreds of rejection letters, all those defeats and failures with which the road to my success had been paved. No: I wouldn't forget. I'd remember.

I was twenty-five years old.

Meanwhile I had another glass of Prosecco; I inscribed another copy of my book. I posed for more photographs of myself with my arm around the waist of one or more young attractive potential stalkers. As shutters snapped, I caught a glimpse my brother, of Gregory, dressed in a tweed sports coat and paisley tie, watching from the shadows, looking more preoccupied than celebratory. That, I suspect, is the moment when for the first time it may have occurred to him that I, his brother, had it in me to be ruthless and to possibly betray him. The penury and rapaciousness that he and I had rehearsed all those years ago playing the Pauper and the Millionaire had finally come home to roost. To both our surprises, it looked as though I'd be the Millionaire, the one with the fortune—an artistic fortune more than a financial one, but what difference did that make? I'd made it. I was a glowing, glimmering, glamorous success. A thrilling future lay before me. Meanwhile Gregory would plod on in his ho-hum academic despair.

Until then, I had considered Greg to be the successful one, the one with the charmed, secure existence: a PhD, a loving, strong, intelligent wife, a tenured professorship: he had everything to live for. Remember those seesaw-like phone calls back and forth to

each other, with me bucking Gregory up one day, and him bucking me up the next? We were still riding that seesaw, Greg and I; we never stopped riding it. When Greg went up, I went down. When I went down, he went up.

The night of my book launch party, I was riding high on that seesaw, higher than Greg or I had ever ridden before. I think it made us both a little dizzy, knowing, as I'm sure both of us knew, that when it comes to seesaws in particular what goes up must come down. The concern on Greg's face as he looked up at me from his end of the seesaw? I see now that his concern was as much for me as for himself.



The night after the launch party, Greg and Sheila stayed with me in my Cornelia Street apartment. I gave them my bedroom while I slept on the couch. In the morning, while I brewed espresso to go with the bagels, lox, and cream cheese I'd bought, Greg sat on one of the cushioned bench seats by the bay window, gazing with abstracted interest at the naked ginkgo tree branches veining the pale street scene. He hadn't said a word all morning. Sheila sat at my kitchen table, leafing through the Sunday *Times* magazine, making idle chatter, filling the gaping hole left in the atmosphere by her husband's silence. At the launch party she had seemed genuinely happy for me. If there's an envy gene Sheila lacked it. There wasn't a trace of spite or vindictiveness in that woman. While Sheila and I chatted, Greg sat there, in the window seat, his stockinged feet resting on the bench cushion, his arms folded around the knees of his bent legs, gazing silently at nothing as we chatted on and a radiator valve hissed furiously. I wondered if he was nursing a hangover from the Prosecco. But I knew better. He was brooding—over our suddenly reversed fortunes, his and mine. I knew, since in his position I'd have done likewise. It was no fun being the Pauper, scratching at that mansion door in a snowstorm, begging to be let in by the Millionaire in his velvet smoking jacket (swirling his cognac, puffing his cigar). Greg may have taken some comfort in knowing it wouldn't be long before our roles would reverse again, as they always did, as they were bound to do. What goes up ... Or

had Gregory already anticipated my downfall as well as his own? Could he see that far into the future? Was that the source of his abstraction? Is it possible that, on that gray morning through that bay window between the branches of that ginkgo tree, my brother foresaw this moment?



My first book having done well, I set about following up on its success. No doubt you have heard of “the curse of the sophomore slump”—or “second book blues,” as it is also sometimes called? Authors whose first efforts succeed beyond expectations are especially susceptible to it. In my case, the second book wasn’t the problem. Or *writing it* wasn’t the problem. It had to be a novel, of course. That’s what was expected of me, not just by Sally, but by all those who had invested in my book of short stories, the point of which, if a collection of stories has any point, is to alert the publishing world to the existence of a new author, to serve as a sort of appetizer, an *amuse bouche*, if you will, something to whet the public’s appetite prior to serving them the main course: a novel.

So I wrote a second book, a novel. Though titled *Reasonable People*, I still think of it as “The Hat Factory Novel.” Its origins are traceable to two sources. The first source was a remark my brother made one day, an off-the-cuff suggestion that stuck with me. I forget in what context he made the remark, where we were or what we were doing. Anyway apropos of whatever, Greg said, “Why don’t you write a story of pure atmosphere?” He said “a story”; he didn’t say “a novel.” But since a novel was what I had in mind, I took it that way. The second source was the display window of a hat store on Fifth Avenue in the low thirties (for all I know it’s still there). Anyway, I happened to pass by there one day, on my way to or from where I forget. But I remember it was winter, and that it was not long after my brother made his off-the-cuff suggestion to me. I remember too that though it was winter it was unusually warm, bright and sunny, without a cloud in the sky. I’d taken my winter coat off and carried it in the crook of my arm. (Why these details should matter I don’t know, but they do; at least I feel they matter.) I’d just taken my own hat off, too—an eight-panel cap

of Irish tweed such as my father had worn, his “thinking cap,” that he had given us for Christmas... He gave one to me and one to my brother. Identical caps... I’d just taken mine off when I happened to pass in front of the hat store and stopped to take in the display. I had no intention to buy a hat. But I enjoyed looking at them, something about hats comforted me. Maybe because the Connecticut town Greg and I grew up in had once been a hat manufacturing mecca, though by the time we lived there most of the factories were defunct and deserted while others had burned or would soon burn down, leaving only their brick smokestacks remaining to remind us of the town’s once glorious industrial past. As I stood looking into the hat store window, admiring the array of fedoras and derbies and Panamas and trilbies and, yes, tweed caps like my father’s—like the one jammed into the pocket of the coat I carried under my arm—I recall saying to myself, “Why don’t you write a novel set in a hat factory town—a dying hat factory town in Connecticut like the one you and Greg grew up in?” Hats would feature prominently. Maybe the protagonist’s father would work as a blocker in the last hat factory. Or maybe the young protagonist’s (it would be a coming-of-age novel)... maybe the young protagonist’s father would die or have died of mercury poisoning, as happened to many hat factory workers. The boy’s mother would remarry—or would have remarried—the town’s sole surviving retail hat merchant, a well-meaning fuddy-duddy for whom the boy would feel unalloyed contempt. Something like that. Suddenly as I stood before that hat store window display my brother’s words returned to me, echoing my own challenge: *Why don’t you write a [novel] of pure atmosphere?* That’s it! My hat-centric novel would have a minimal plot. It would all be up to the setting, to ambiance, to atmosphere, to the charm of those things as conveyed by the work’s limpid prose. In discussing it years hence (as they were bound to) people would say, “Oh, yes, that charming novel, the one set in the hat factory town.”

Thus my second book—my first novel—was born. Why I ended up calling it *Reasonable People* is a long, unhappy story that I won’t go into here. Anyway it was published. In publishing industry parlance, sales were “modest,” which is to say not very

good. On the basis of the success of my short story collection, Sally had gotten me a hefty advance, twice that of my first book. Consequently those “modest” sales amounted to a net loss for my publisher.

As for the reviews, though respectful, they were far from effusive. The worst was by an anonymous *Kirkus* reviewer who wrote (and I quote from memory), “If style over substance is your cup of tea, Stewart Detweiler’s *Reasonable People* may be the most stylish book of the year. Never before has so much perfect prose been lavished on so negligible a story.”

With critics, publisher, and the reading public given reason to wonder if I might be a one-book wonder, the pressure was on. My next book had to be not merely better than the first and the latest, it had to be an unqualified triumph.



Faced with the task of writing my third book, the sophomore slump took hold of me. Ideas weren’t the problem. I had too many of those. Ideas are the novelist’s *bête noire*. They’re like cats. If you have more than two, you’ve got too many. This is why when non-writers buttonhole writers to tell them their “great idea” for a book, the one they always wanted but never had time to write, writers tend to be less than amused. It’s like going up to someone who already owns an epidemic of cats and, with overflowing largesse, offering them—a cat.

It wasn’t long before more than a few of my ideas turned into manuscripts, partial and whole drafts of novels that I shared with my agent, with Sally Treadwell. Dear Reader, there isn’t time to share more than a few of them with you. Life is short, and I have only so many of these composition notebooks left to fill before mine comes to its brutish, inevitable end. And for sure you have better things to do than read about a failed novelist’s failures, which is why you may want to skip the next page or two, where I’ll touch upon them ever so briefly, just enough to give you a sampling, as it were. By all means, skip the rest of this page—and the one after it. After all, why should you care whether or not the next manuscript I shared with Sally Treadwell was called “The

Sidewalk Artist,” or that it was about a New York City advertising executive who “chucks it all” to become a *Madonnaro*—those artists who draw on sidewalks with colored chalk? What can it possibly matter to you that in the novel’s climactic scene, the hero rescues an array of “colorful” urchins from an inferno raging in the secret tunnels underneath Grand Central Terminal? The story was maudlin, trite, sentimental, saccharine, and grossly implausible. Making me wonder: why didn’t Sally think it would sell?

“Write the next one,” she told me.

I did. I wrote “Ariadne’s Thread,” a *roman à clef* about a relationship on the rocks set on a desolate Greek island, and “Perfect Strangers” (about another relationship on the rocks, a married couple this time, set in Venice), and “Walking Wounded,” about an old man living alone with his cocker spaniel. To each of these efforts Sally’s response was the same.

“Write the next one, Stewart.”

But I didn’t despair, nossir. I endured; I persisted. I drafted another novel, and another. My sixth effort, “Harris’ Book,” was my Land O’ Lakes novel. You know Land O’ Lakes? The butter company? The one with the box with the picture of an Indian maiden holding a carton of Land O’ Lakes butter, etc.? “Harris’ Book” was my novel about a blocked novelist’s struggle to write a novel about a blocked novelist trying to write a novel (etc.). The book was written in “notebook form,” with words, phrases, sentences, and entire passages struck through as Donald Harris edits his work-in-progress: the book we’re reading. Harris’ masterpiece accrues accidentally, in spite of its author. Though when I wrote it I was thirty-three, I made my protagonist older: fifty-three, my age now as I write these words. On the assumption that all middle-aged men owned enlarged prostate glands, I gave my protagonist one.

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It was my hero’s enlarged prostate, among other things, that put Sally Treadwell off of this latest effort, as she told me when we met to discuss it one day over breakfast at Ladurée, an East Side patisserie on Madison Avenue, a dozen blocks north of the midtown office building where Sally’s agency was located. A sunny late Spring

day. We sat at a window table. I'd ordered a chocolate brioche with my latte. Sally looked fetching as always. She wore a yellow shift with a red polka-dotted scarf and a floppy straw hat. Taking the box holding my manuscript (there were still such things then as manuscript boxes) from her shoulder bag and putting it down on the small, round, marble-topped table, with a grim sigh she said:

"Write the next one, Stewart."

"Why? What didn't you like about it?"

"It's not a question of *like*, Stewart. I like your writing. I think you're a wonderful writer."

"So what's wrong with it?"

"Must we, Stewart?"

"We must."

"There's not enough plot."

"Oh, that again?"

"Yes, Stewart, that again."

"Could you be more specific?"

"All right." Sally sighed. "Not to put too fine a point on it," she said, tapping the cardboard box with her bright red fingernail, "what you've written here amounts to six-hundred and seventy-two pages of TMI."

"TMI?"

"Too Much Information. Sorry, Stewart, but I for one found myself less than enthralled by the excruciating details of your protagonist's midlife crisis. I'm not interested in his writer's block or the size of his prostate, or spending twelve pages alone in his room at his desk with him surfing disaster videos, or learning that he goes home nights with a stomach ache since his pants don't fit anymore because he refuses to admit that his waistline has betrayed him. I don't want ten pages about his receding hairline, or five pages of dandruff, or eleven pages of him visiting his urologist. It's all very authentic, all very real, all very honest. But it's *not* a novel. It's—it's more like an *assault*, an epic rant. Readers won't tolerate it. *No one* will tolerate it. They won't give a damn about your hero's prostate. *I* don't give a damn about your prostate. Not for six hundred and seventy-two pages I don't. And I like you, Stewart. I like you a lot. If anyone could possibly care about these things, it

would be me. You asked me for my opinion. That's my opinion."

Me (softly, facing the crusty residue of latte in my cup): "It's not *my* prostate; it's Donald Harris' prostate."

"I don't care if it's Jesus Christ's prostate. Whoever's prostate it is, no one's interested."

"Everyone else is writing novels with plots. It's so unoriginal."

"Stewart, it's *boring*."

"So are most men's lives. I can't help that. A novelist's job is to tell the truth. That's how I see it, anyway."

"Maybe you just need to be a little more imaginative."

"A dead body on page one, is that what you mean?"

"Not necessarily, though it wouldn't hurt."

"Whatever I write, Sally, whatever else it may be, it has to be authentic. That's my rule Number One. I'm not a ... a fabulist."

"Call it whatever you like, Stewart, but I cannot sell this manuscript and I'm not going to try. I'm sorry. But at this stage of your career you must write a commercial book."

"With a dead body on the first page?"

"It doesn't need a dead body. It doesn't even have to have best-seller written all over it. But it has to have commercial potential."

• •

I was thirty-four years old, hardly ancient, in the normal scheme of things, but by the standards of publishing long in the tooth. I'd given up my Cornelia Street apartment, the rent on which I could no longer afford, and moved—first to Washington Heights, then across Spuyten Duyvil creek, the waterway that divides Manhattan from the Bronx, to another walk-up, this one in Kingsbridge, an aggressively un-chic neighborhood of sooty tenements and brick row houses bisected by the ratty elevated. I'd long since spent every dime of the advance I'd been paid for *Reasonable People* and that said book would never earn back.

With no more royalty payments forthcoming, I was reduced to working menial jobs: dollar store clerk, dishwasher, barback. I also kept up a side-gig I started soon after my novel was published, writing occasional reviews for *Kirkus*, anonymously. I made more selling the publisher's galleys to The Strand than for the reviews,

they paid so poorly, but they were fun to write.

Still, I hadn't lost hope. In fact I was brimming with optimism. Sure, I had my dark days, my periods of despondency, those times when as ever I'd phone Gregory, who as always would buck me up and see me through. But through it all I clung fast to my vision; I maintained focus, never losing sight of my goal. Namely: to write that truly great novel, the enduring masterpiece, one that would not only revive but cement my reputation.

Toward achieving that goal I'd arrived at several theories. The first theory was that to be truly great a novel had to be entirely authentic, meaning everything in it either had to be made up or nothing in it could be made up; everything had either to be drawn faithfully from reality, or a pure product of the imagination. As I saw it, the reason why most novels fail to be great works of art is because in service of that devil known as "verisimilitude" they falsify just about everything. They try to serve two gods at once: the God of Empiricism and the God of Romance. But the two gods can't be reconciled. The two gods hate each other. They're like a pair of fraternal twins who don't get along, who would rather tear each other to bits than be forced to play together. No: one must either embrace artifice wholeheartedly, never trying, let alone succeeding, to hold so-called "reality" up to a so-called "mirror," or create documents based purely on facts: on actual persons, places, events, emotions, feelings, with nothing made up or contrived, nothing added or artificial, nothing owing to the artistic imagination. If a dead body appeared in it, by God it had better be an actual dead body.

That was one theory of mine. Another theory was that to be great a novel should have no subject, or rather it should have nothing as its subject. I wasn't the first novelist with this ambition. "I'd like to write a book about nothing," Flaubert wrote in an 1852 letter to Colet, "a book with no exterior attachments, held together by the inner force of its style as the earth is suspended in space without support—a book with no subject, or one in which the subject is invisible." To write about nothing is much harder than it sounds. One way to do it, the only way, actually, is to write about everything, since—being equal opposites—everything and nothing

are two sides of the same coin (Black/White, Dark/Light, Negative/Positive, Love/Hate, Life/Death, Good/Evil, Truth/Falsehood, Failure/Success...). The interdependent interrelation of these dualities is fundamental to ancient Chinese cosmology and the so-called “natural order” of things (the Tao or “right way”): the path to Oneness as expressed by the Yin and Yang, represented thus:



My subsequent meeting with Sally took place over two years after the one previously recounted, in March of 1999, a month shy of my thirty-seventh birthday. We met at Laudrée again. It was mid-winter. Sally wore a purple fleece flapper cloche with a black flower. This time we met for lunch, on me. Sally had the frisée salad. I ordered a gruyere omelet. From my tattered briefcase I withdrew the fruit of those past two years: “Pure Flux,” my novel about nothing, my dark matter masterpiece. That its plot (to the extent that it had a plot) borrowed heavily from that of “Harris’ Book,” didn’t concern me. Like the black holes it emulated, a book about nothing was bound to suck everything proximate to it into its void.

“So,” Sally said, eyeing the manuscript’s title page skeptically. “This is your brand-new novel?” Emphasis on *brand*.

I nodded.

“Pure Flux?” she said dubiously.

“Pure Flux,” I confirmed, smiling.

“Meaning—?”

“Flux is the action or process of continuous change—you know, as in fluctuation, variation, oscillation... as in ‘All human societies, even those that appear to be fixed or stable, are in fact in a constant state of flux.’ And pure means... pure.”

Sally nodded. “What’s it about?”

In purely abstract terms I explained as best I could.

“Plot summary?”

“Why not read it and see for yourself?”

“You said you had a new novel, Stewart. That was the purpose of this meeting, yes?”

“Correct.”

“May I assume that the plot of this novel departs significantly from that of the last one?”

“Depends what you mean by ‘significantly’.”

“I mean does this one *have* a plot?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure. It has *a* plot.”

“Not the novelist writing the novel about a novelist writing the novel, etc.? Not *that* plot?”

I shrugged. “At least it’s an *honest* plot, unlike most of them.”

“In other words—nothing happens.”

“I wouldn’t say that. A lot happens. Internally.”

“Internally, Stewart?”

“Existentially.”

“*Existentially?*”

“Okay, nothing happens. So what? What happens in *Ulysses*? Two men cross Dublin on a summer day. *Under the Volcano*: a diplomat drinks himself to death. *Remembrance of Things Past*: a guy dips a cookie in his tea. The great masterpieces of literature. Guess what? Nothing happens in them! I could go on.”

“Please don’t,” said Sally.

“Pascal’s *Pensees*, Kenko’s *Essays in Idleness*, Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*, *The Decameron*, *The Stranger*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Golden Bowl*, *Eugene Onegin*, *The Magic Mountain*, *The Castafiore Emerald*... Musil’s *Man Without Qualities*, Huysmans’ *A rebours*... *Hamlet*, for Christ’s sake. Not to mention everything Sam Beckett ever wrote. They’re all about nothing!”

“They may all be masterpieces,” Sally said, “but in this market I couldn’t sell them either.”

“Plot,” I said, slapping my fork on my by then clammy omelet.

“I know this is painful for you, Stewart, and you may want a second opinion. But as your agent I have to tell you when I don’t think something is right, and I don’t think this book or one like it

will do either of us any good.” She stood up.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to get back to the office.” Sally opened her purse.

“Lunch is on me, remember?”

“It’s Laudrée, Stewart.”

“Put your money away!”

She did. “Are you coming?”

I shook my head. “I’ll stay here and finish my Crodino.”

She reached down and touched my shoulder lightly. “Your time will come; I know it will, Stewart. You’re a wonderful writer.”

I nodded.

Sally gave my shoulder a squeeze and left the café.



Nearly two more years passed before I sent Sally another manuscript. This time the rejection came over the phone.

“It may be time for you to get another agent,” Sally said.

“You’re firing me?”

“I’m not firing you, Stewart. Agents don’t fire writers.”

“You just said I should get another agent.”

“I’m saying at this point in your career you may find it easier to work with someone else.”

“You mean *you* may find it easier to work with someone else.”

“Fine. *I* may find it easier.”

“I’m difficult, in other words. Is that it?”

“Yes, Stewart, you’re difficult.”

“How am I difficult? What’s been ‘difficult’ about me?”

“The truth? Watching you polish that turd of a novel for the last five years has been extremely difficult for me. Does that answer your question, Stewart?”

“Six years,” I corrected her.

I was out of money, out of work (fired from my latest job, barista at the Starbucks at Astor Place, for correcting a customer who had asked me for an “*expresso*”). My girlfriend of four years had broken up with me, plunging me into a deep funk. I could smell my despair. It smelled like a bald tire smeared with ripe Limburger cheese, set aflame, and rolled down a guano-covered hill.

The smell dripped from my lips, it leaked from my armpits, it wafted up from the damp depths of my rotting crotch. I lost my appetite. I couldn't sleep. My bowels froze up on me. My mouth went dry. I became impotent. I couldn't masturbate (well, I could, but to no end; not even to much of a beginning). I might have taken to drink, had I the stomach for it.

Instead I took to despising myself. From a deep well I pumped up bucket upon bucket of self-pity, shame, regret, remorse, reproach, and resentment. I drained that well dry. Yes, to anticipate your question, I phoned my brother; I called Gregory. But even Gregory's aggressive ministrations couldn't deliver me from this latest abysmal funk.

Here, Dear Reader, we enter the "bereft" stage of my narrative, the part where it looks as if our protagonist has finally hit rock-bottom, that things can't possibly get much worse for him.

Though of course they can. Of course they will.

Meanwhile there comes the reprieve—a flash of grace, a dollop of relatively good fortune, a scrap of hope, a dash of deliverance, the calm before the storm.

My deliverance took the form of a job offer from the Metropolitan Writing Institute.

So, eventually, did my doom.

6. BECOMING BROCK

*“Our identities are a collection of possibilities
that we have every reason to doubt.”*

I SHOULD PICK UP THE PACE. IT’S ONLY A MATTER OF DAYS, MAYBE even hours, before they come for me. I have to “beat them to the punch.” But it’s out of my hands. Stories take their own time.

• •

At this point in my back-story I am—or I was—forty years old. Forty! Where, as they say, has the time gone? Strictly speaking, nowhere. It sits frozen here on these pages where it will remain like a fly trapped in amber until they crumble to dust. Until then the time is, will always be, now. As the light of the distant stars reaches us long after the stars themselves have burnt out, so my voice reaches you through these words. Though my body has decomposed, these words keep me alive. In reading them you graft your corporeal self to my incorporeal spirit. Much obliged!

To return to the primary scene, the frame holding the flashback—the A-frame, that is. It’s raining again. It seems as if it’s been raining forever, for as long as I’ve been sitting here, filling these notebooks, since I arrived here to find my brother hanging

from a ceiling beam.

What happened next? you wonder (suspense).

Nothing. I sat there—here—as I’m sitting here now, with my back to this balcony railing, gazing out past the ceiling beam through the big triangular window.

How long did you sit there like that?

Long enough to lose track of all sense of time. It was as if I didn’t exist. I passed out of my body—out of *both* of our bodies, my brother’s and mine; one living, one dead; one sitting here, the other hanging from the beam from which our father once hung and from which—unless something interferes with my plan—I will soon hang. “A fugue state,” the psychologists call it, known also as a “dissociative fugue” or “psychogenic fugue.” A disorder characterized by reversible amnesia for personal identity, including memories, personality, and all the other identifying characteristics of one’s individuality.

I’ve heard it said—possibly on an episode of *Star Trek*—that when matter and anti-matter collide, they cancel each other out; nothing of either survives. Something like that happened to me when I found my brother here. Matter and anti-matter, those equal opposite twins, met, collided.

The result: oblivion. Stewart Detweiler’s oblivion.

• •

The world returned slowly through each of my senses, starting with the sense of temperature. I felt cold; it was freezing. Within those fugue hours the thermometer dropped precipitously. It was the cold that made me open my eyes. Even with them open it took me a while to remember where I was, and longer to remember what was there behind me, beyond the rails supporting my back, and more time still to screw up the courage to turn my head and verify that this last horrible memory couldn’t possibly be real, that the thing hanging from that ceiling beam—which I knew to exist—could only be the residue of a terrible, terrible nightmare.

But then why was I sitting (t)here, in my brother’s lakeside house that used to belong to our father? What was I *doing* (t)here?

And why were my cheeks stiff with the half-frozen tears by

which I had presumably cried myself to sleep? *Had* I slept? (Ever notice how, when they don't know what else to do, authors ply readers with rhetorical questions?) It would have explained the dream fragments that, along with other perceptions, came swirling back to me, all having to do with my brother, with Gregory. The two of us riding in the back seat of our mother's car, her nauseating black boat of a '56 Mercury, bound for Danville, where she did her shopping in the stores along Main Street, at Genung's and McCrory's and Woolworth's. The smell of the car's houndstooth upholstery came back to me, along with its scratchy texture, and the horseplay Greg and I engaged in back there while our mother tried to concentrate on her driving, something she was never good at. One of the stores we went to, I forget its name or even what was sold there, kids' shoes, I believe, seemed to go on and on and on forever, stretching its way in a graceful endless curve toward some childhood Arcadia equipped with a carousel. Was that real or part of the same series of dreams all of which resolved themselves into the nightmare wherein my twin dangled from a ceiling beam behind me? Then we were sitting at the counter at Woolworth's—or was it Marcus Dairy?—eating hot dogs slathered with emerald-green relish. The next vignette had us running through the woods behind our house, laughing as we leapt in perfect synchronicity over fallen tree trunks and rocks. Building a fort in a field. Playing ping-pong in the gasoline-scented garage. Barbequing gypsy moth caterpillars on the hibachi grill. Scraping the dried soufflé of cut grass from underneath the lawnmower... For a while I distracted myself with these and other dream fragments, forgetting again for as long as I could where I was and why I'd come here, and that I was freezing.

I couldn't go on delaying forever; I had to look.

So I looked.

But first I closed my eyes and counted.

I counted to three.

When I got to three I kept counting to ten.

When I reached ten I counted to twenty.

Then thirty, then fifty...

I counted to a hundred.

Then I opened my eyes. And turned.

That's when the sobs came.

Such sobs, Dear Reader, as I hope your body will never produce as long as you live. Like a series of bloodied rags my body expelled them. The sound of my wrenching sobs reverberated off the cathedral ceiling. It resounded off the fireplace's fieldstones and its heavy wooden mantelpiece. It roused me from one nightmare into a worse one from which there could be no waking.

I still had on my coat, my tweed cap, my leather gloves and a green plaid scarf (note the absence of the contentious "Oxford" comma, with which I normally comply, since "gloves and scarf" form a unit of their own). The condensation from my breath blurred the space between my brother's corpse and me. Beyond the triangular windows I saw nothing but whiteness filigreed with faint gray lines barely suggesting trees and a dock with two Adirondack chairs: a tentative pencil sketch, erased.

I rubbed my shivering self.

I remembered how on my visits there my father's home suffered frequent blackouts during storms. I remembered following him downstairs to the basement (unusual for Georgian homes to have basements, but this one did, does) to watch him flip the circuit breakers. I found a candle, lit it, and took it with me down the dark stairs. Since my last visit the basement had been refinished. I'm not sure who had it done, my brother or my father, but where before there'd been nothing but a bare concrete floor and walls (well-pump, heating unit, water heater, pipes, and drains), now there was a spare bedroom, a storage room for paint cans, tools and rakes, a laundry room with washer and dryer, and an artist's studio where the larger of two easels held a painting-in-progress, a naïve painting of the *Titanic* sinking. With the candle in one hand I pulled other paintings down from a shelf to see that they were all, every one of them, paintings of the sinking *Titanic*. Had my father done them? Or were the paintings my brother's? Had Gregory—Brock—had my brother gone into hiding for that reason, to reinvent himself yet again, this time as a painter of sinking ships? For a while when we were young Greg displayed a talent for drawing. No sooner did I declare myself "the artist" than he gave

it up as a bad habit. More likely my father had done the paintings years ago, possibly in the last years or year of his life. But why the *Titanic*? What was the symbolism? And why paint the same subject over and over again?

I was reminded of that time I rowed away in my father's boat, of that abandoned identical A-frame full of paintings all of the same subject, or non-subject, paintings of absolutely nothing in assorted muted, pale colors. In point of fact with respect to draftsmanship the paintings were crude such that though bearing the name *Titanic* on their rearing counter sterns in some cases the sinking ships looked more like sinking rowboats—like my father's rowboat.

The last painting I pulled down from the shelf was a triptych on hinged Masonite panels. The first panel showed the *Titanic* approaching the iceberg. The second showed it rearing up for its final plunge—the iceberg looming in the background. The last panel showed the iceberg alone, isolated in its victory. I thought of the Holy Trinity, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

I replaced the last painting, then remembered my mission, and went in search of the circuit box, which I found in the laundry room next to the dryer. Sure enough, the breakers had all been thrown. I flipped them back. The heating unit roared to life. A chain dangling from an overhead light fixture tickled my forehead. I yanked it. *Mirabile dictum*, the light went on, dazzling me. I pulled the chain again, plunging the laundry room back into darkness.

With the candle guttering I made my way back upstairs, where already the sudden influx of warmer air had made a difference. The house smelled different. Odor molecules have more energy at higher temperatures. As the air gets warmer, the rate of emission increases. Those smells that I had noticed earlier—of must, mold, mildew, and the hideously indescribable odor in particular—were suddenly far, far more pronounced. Through my scarcely parted lips I sipped shallow breaths.

In the kitchen I switched on the electric stove and put the kettle on. Each of these actions I performed automatically, all the while pretending that my brother's corpse wasn't there, hanging there in the air behind and above me. I whistled as I opened cabinets and drawers to see what sort of food was in the house. I was suddenly

starving. On an upper shelf I found a cylindrical box of Quaker oats. I put water in a pan and put the pan on a burner next to the kettle and added salt to it. I shivered. There was a small audio system on the living room shelf. I switched on the radio. It was set to the same station I'd been listening to in the car. According to the newscast, at least four people were dead and 295 missing after a passenger ferry capsized and sank off the coast of South Korea. Among the passengers were 300 high school students traveling with their teachers to the resort island of Jeju. The kettle whistled. The water in the pan boiled. I poured in a cup of oats. I found a tea bag and made a mug of tea.

It was all fairly ordinary, or would have been, save for the body hanging from a beam over my head, and the horrendous odor that, along with the frozen puddle of urine on the floor under its feet, I somehow managed to ignore the way the subjects in that test avoided the man in the gorilla suit. But mine wasn't a case of inattentional blindness coupled with inattentional anosmia. I was, as they say, "in denial." In the house where first my father and then my twin brother both hanged themselves, I pretended not only that those things hadn't happened, but that I wasn't there. I was somewhere else, in some other house, the house I discovered during the summer of my sixteenth year in my petulant bid to row myself beyond the reach of my father's pedantry in his beloved boat. Somehow I had come to that house again, for what purpose I had no idea, possibly to undertake a series of paintings of the sinking *Titanic*.

Meanwhile I sipped my tea.

As I sipped my tea the oatmeal boiled over. I stirred it, turned the heat down, replaced the lid on the pan. I've always liked the combination of oatmeal and tea. They were what my father ate for breakfast when I was a kid, before and after he left our mother, or (more likely) she left him. Those combined smells, tea and oatmeal, formed the olfactory soundtrack of those summers I spent with him through my sixteenth year. As an adult, in New York City, I became first a coffee then an espresso drinker. Before then I'd been a tea drinker like my philosophical father—and like Gregory, who, too, once preferred tea, but then, in his twenties, started

drinking coffee with milk and sugar, and continued to do so until that now infamous moment in the first class section of a jetliner when he asked the flight attendant for his “coffee, black.” Now here I was having tea for the first time in twenty-five years. There was a carton of milk in the refrigerator, but it had long gone sour. I found a jar of Coffee Mate (or the Kroger brand equivalent). As for my oatmeal, I sprinkled it with sugar and a pinch of salt and took it and my mug of hot tea with me and sat in the living room, on the wicker sofa, which faced the French doors overlooking the lake, though all they looked out on then was that erased pencil sketch. I ate calmly, with the radio on and classical music playing—a Bach cantata, if memory serves me. I sipped tea and gazed at the whiteness through the French doors, which reminded me less now of an erased drawing than of one of the blank prepared canvases I’d found in what I’ll refer to henceforth as the “twin house.” I thought of “The Painter of Grounds,” the story that got Sally Treadwell to be my agent, about the artist so enamored of his lovingly prepared surfaces he refuses to paint anything on them. That’s what my life felt like to me then, at that moment as I stared at the French doors while ignoring, or trying to ignore, the hideous smell. A freshly prepared canvas awaiting its subject.

Meanwhile I ate oatmeal; I sipped tea. As my brain warmed, I tried to think constructively; I understood that there were things to be done. But my mind was preoccupied: with memories, with images and events that rushed in to fill the voids between the whited-out French door windowpanes. There were Greg and I huddled behind that rock in the woods when we got lost and had the whole neighborhood out combing the forest in search of us. There we were farting in each other’s pillows. There was my brother fixing the chain on my bicycle, and (next windowpane) bending over the dual carburetors of my first car, a dilapidated MGB, helping me adjust them (Greg was always handier at mechanics).

Whose turn to mow the grass?

One by one like a series of rectangular two-dimensional crystal balls each pane in the French doors served up another memory, another image, something like what happened to me while driving my car here with the defroster failing and the windshield

wipers slapping the frozen rain. The old house on a hill in Connecticut, the mulberry tree growing by the picket fence, sunflowers edging a sand pit, dappled sunlight, smells of cut grass and leaf smoke ... Who was that girl with strawberry-blond hair? Betsy Butterworth. Laughing. Waking up laughing at something Gregory said. What did you say, Greg? What was so funny it roused me—roused both of us—from our sleep?

Dear Reader, what makes up a life? A nasty, brutish birth. Screams, colic. The softness of a mother's breast. Tastes, smells, appetites. Discovering our bodies one organ at a time. Landscapes, colors, corners, crevices. Others enter the picture, strangers; friends. We learn to compete. School learning. Can you recite the alphabet? Can you multiply? Can you climb that rope? Masturbation: your newest friend who will be with you for most of the rest of your days. Girls. Sex. Hobbies and interests. What sports are you good at? What's your favorite TV show? High school. Travel abroad. Europe. Piazzas and fountains, trains, backpacks, hashish, hitchhiking, Toblerone bars, kissing that girl under a viaduct after getting kicked out of the youth hostel. A smoke-flavored kiss between cars on a train bound to or from Yugoslavia—or was it Budapest? A whitewashed room with a crucifix of twigs over the bed. A taxicab hurling across the Queensboro Bridge at dawn ...

When one set of panes filled in, I turned to the next.

I'd done just that, turned to watch the next set of French door windowpanes filling in, when something in my peripheral vision caught my eye ...

7. CHAPTER BREAK

...A WHITE CORD RUNNING FROM A WALL OUTLET NEAR A BOOK-case to a small flat rectangular object on the carpeted floor, partially concealed by a dead potted geranium. A cellphone. It had to be Gregory's ... Brock's ... my brother's. For sure it wasn't mine. I owned none, remember? Nor could it have belonged to my father, who had been dead for over sixteen years, and who like me never owned a cellphone. So it had to be Greg's. Brock's.

I'd risen from the wicker sofa, stepped over to and stood staring down at the thing as if at a copperhead or some other poisonous creature. It was an iPhone, that much I knew. I reached down and, hesitatingly, picked it up. I detached the charging cord and stood there, gripping the phone in both hands, holding it out in front of me like a priest holding the Sacred Host.

Do I dare?

I pressed the home button. The screen lit up. Over a plaid wallpaper pattern the time was displayed: 7:42 a.m. I pressed the home button again. The passcode screen appeared. As with pin numbers for bank debit cards, in my experience such things usually required a set of four numbers or letters, in which case, knowing or having known my brother almost as well as I knew myself, my guess was that, being lazy and disinclined to have to

memorize things, like me he had used the last four digits—not of his own, but of his *brother's* Social Security number. My Social Security number. I input them. The phone unlocked.

No sooner did it do so than a flurry of missed call and voice message alerts appeared on the screen, from our mother, mostly, but from other people as well. Dawn Swopes. Adam Swann ... and a procession of others whose names, though vaguely familiar, I didn't recognize.

I was reading one of those messages, still holding the phone in both hands, when it buzzed and quivered in my grip. I gave a cry and dropped the thing. It landed on the carpet, where it went on buzzing. As it did, I picked it up again and saw "Mom" on top of the black screen. Our mother was trying to phone my brother. God knew how long she'd been trying. Probably a dozen times a day every day for at least the last twenty days, relentlessly leaving messages, each more desperate than the last. She must have left dozens, a hundred messages. Now she was calling again.

The muffled buzzing persisted. Should I answer? I wasn't prepared to tell my mother the truth. I needed more time. The phone kept buzzing.

There's something called "Happenstance Theory," also known as "Kruboltz Theory," the brainchild of a man named John Kruboltz, which holds that indecision is desirable and sensible, since it allows us the opportunity to benefit from unplanned events.

As the phone kept buzzing, I looked up at my brother hanging there, thinking: Why did you do it, Greg? *How* could you do it? You had everything to live for. Money, fame, adoration. Bestselling books. All the things I'd dreamed of—you had them! A loving wife, a good job, a comfortable home, physical health, material success beyond most people's wildest dreams! You threw them all away. *Why?*

If one of us was destined to destroy himself, it should have been me. *I* should have been the one. But no, you had to beat me at that, too, the way you always beat me at everything. First born (by two minutes); first to lose a baby tooth; first to get strep throat; first to scrape his knee; first to ride a tricycle; first to read a book; first to kiss a girl (Betsy Butterworth: spin the bottle); first to go

out on a date; first to drive a car. You did everything first.

You were my older brother, after all.

And now you've done this, you bastard, you selfish prick. And what am *I* supposed to do? Tell me that! What am I supposed to tell *our* mother? That you, ever her favorite, the apple of her diabetically blind eye, are dead, and that she's stuck with me—the loser? Jesus, Greg—or Brock Jones, Ph fucking D.

Why, goddammit? *Why?*

The phone kept buzzing.

But I knew the answer. We'd always suffered from depression, both of us. Just like our father. We got it from him. It was in our blood, in our genes. The D Gene. D for "Detweiler." D for "Depression." They say the children of a suicidal parent are twice as likely to commit suicide themselves, something like that. In our case one could argue that Gregory and I were a quarter or 25% more so inclined, having each inherited fifty percent of that predisposition, or half of "twice as likely."

The phone buzzed.

Few people understand the suicidal temperament. They can't get their minds around the fact that someone would want to destroy not only themselves, but all the people who love them. What isn't understood is that, by the time they commit suicide—in the moment before they blow their brains out or swallow the poison or jump off the bridge or hang themselves from a ceiling beam—the suicide is already dead. Only the body remains to be destroyed.

There's this other theory, or syndrome, known as "vanishing twin syndrome." It happens more often than not, supposedly, when twins form inside the womb. One of the twins doesn't make it, is miscarried, dies while still in embryo, a zygote. Back when Greg and I were born, before there were sonograms, the mother in such a case might never even know about the "other" twin, since the tissue of the miscarried twin would often—usually, as a matter of fact—be reabsorbed either by the mother, the placenta, or by the surviving fetus.

Supposing, on the other hand, that each of the twins survives despite the fact that one was never meant to? Supposing reabsorp-

tion never took place? Supposing that the meant-to-be-dead twin arrived whole—if unintended—into this world? What then?

The cellphone keeps buzzing.

But I still haven't come to the craziest part of my theory.

Supposing that *all* identical twins that come into this world are an aberration, that in each case one of them was not meant to be, was meant to have died, but somehow, through a biological or metaphysical or cosmic glitch of some sort, never got the message?

Supposing, furthermore, that every person on earth was once an identical twin, but only briefly, in the womb, until their "tentative twin" did the right thing and vanished, got reabsorbed, leaving a single, unique, meant-to-be human being?

Do you see where I'm going with all this? What I'm saying, what I'm trying to say, is that one of us—Gregory or I—should never have been born.

One of us was an *aberration*.

Which one?

Answer: me, Stewart Detweiler: I was the aberration. I was the one meant to have died in my mother's womb, who ought to have been reabsorbed by my mother or by Gregory or by the placenta connecting us to our mother's uterine wall.

Now Gregory was dead. And it was up to me to absorb or be absorbed by him.

The phone kept buzzing. It buzzed four more times.

Then it stopped buzzing.

All the time while the phone buzzed I hadn't been breathing. Now I gasped for air. Oh God, I thought, gasping. *What will I do? What should I do?* I didn't know what to do.

The buzzing started again.

Oh God. Dear God...

I pressed the red button.

"Hello? Brock? Brock, is that you? Are you there?! Brock—please—answer me! I know you're there! It's me, your mother, Brock! Are you there? Please, please..."

The hardest thing about being absolutely free is you can do anything you want. Anything! Think of the weight of responsibility attending that level of freedom. Infinite choices up for grabs,

as it were. And the choices all have to be made. With every page, every paragraph, every sentence, every word I write on this page, in this notebook, I create myself. The power of the declarative sentence! Say it's so and so it is.

Such freedom doesn't come free or even cheap. In my case to gain it cost me everything. I'd pay for it with my life.

My life!

"For God's sake, Brock! Brock, please—please...!"

In that moment, or rather in the one that follows, I realized the perfect subject for my pale, empty, mute, chaste, pristine canvas. Like my brother before me, I, too, would stumble upon my epiphany, the moment of my reinvention. As was the case with my twin aboard that flight from Burlington to whatever conference he'd been going to, when the flight attendant confronted him with her beverage request, the words I was about to utter would change me inevitably, inexorably, forever. But not for the better.

"Hello?" I said.

"Brock! Oh, Brock, dear Brock! Is it really, really you, Brock?"

Launching himself into a whole new identity had taken my brother precisely two words. It took me three.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, *it's really me.*"

8. GOD'S IMPALA

THE INVITATION TO INTERVIEW FOR THE INSTRUCTOR POSITION at the Metropolitan Writing Institute came two years after I submitted my application, which had moldered in a file drawer until a new dean came on board. Unlike his predecessor (who displayed a marked prejudice in favor of Iowa and Columbia grads), the new dean—whose name, I kid you not, was Dexter Bronze—took a more intuitive approach. In his email he wrote, “You have an interesting resume. Let’s meet.”

A few days later, wearing a dark blue sport coat handed down to me from Gregory (who had put on a few extra pounds and liked dressing his slob of a twin in his clothes), I arrived at the cramped midtown office of the Metropolitan Writing Institute, an enterprise familiar to all New Yorkers from the fluorescent orange catalogue kiosks bearing its name on every other street corner. There I met Mr. Bronze: a broad-shouldered, solid-looking man at least ten years my junior, with short-cropped gray hair and eyes that, matching his surname, looked like tarnished bronze. He spoke with a Texan drawl. In a cluttered conference room, he had me stand before the white board while he sat at the far end of the conference table.

“You’ve got thirty minutes,” he said, checking his Rolex, folding his arms over his burly chest. “Teach me something.”

I discussed scenes, how they are the basic building blocks of narrative, how, as Forster said, “we are all like Scheherazade’s husband in that we all like to know *what happens next*,” and what happens next is called a scene, how the word derives from the Greek word for the tent or shelter housing a dramatic performance. Putting my art school training to work, on the white board I drew one of those Victorian carpetbags, the kind Mary Poppins carries, a portmanteau, and explained how, like a portmanteau, scenes hold not only action and dialogue, the primary elements of drama, but summary, description, background, flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness, thoughts, memories, reflections, digressions. I went on to discuss framed narratives and flashbacks, taking Mr. Bronze on a guided tour through a superb example of the latter in Updike’s *The Centaur*. I concluded my lecture with an appreciation of “circadian narratives”: stories, novels, and memoirs set within a single day or scene (Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*; Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*), explaining how, in each of these works, mundane, grounding actions (a man walking along a stretch of shoreline; a woman preparing for a party) formed the still hubs at the center of their dramas.

“Whether we’re narrating or reflecting,” I said in conclusion, “writing exposition or action, summary or description, we should always—always—be writing scenes. Scenes are the coin of the realm of storytelling. They’re what keeps King Schariar’s sword off the backs of our necks.”

I was hired.

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Starting then and for the next (nine? ten?) years I taught at the Metropolitan Writing Institute. I was a good teacher. “Evangelical” was the word Dean Bronze used to describe my pedagogic style.

There are rules to good storytelling, rules that can, and occasionally should, be broken. But before you can break the rules, you have to master them. Think of the great abstract impressionist painters (I’d say this—or something like it—to my students), of Pollock,

Rothko, Miro. They knew the laws of perspective, the effects of lighting, the fundamentals of color and composition. You see it in Pollock's drips, in Rothko's scumblings, in Miro's orbs and squiggles.

I taught my students that the fiction writer's essential task is to create experiences for the reader: not to tell us how a character feels, but to make us feel by putting us in the character's shoes. The difference between good and bad storytelling comes down to the difference between conclusions based on evidence and the evidence itself.

I taught them about point of view, how it comes down to the difference between the author and the narrator, how, when that distinction is lost, fiction dies. *No POV = No Story!*

I showed them how the best forms of suspense are attained with generosity rather than through coy withholding ("false suspense"), how great endings are both surprising ("Oh my God!") and inevitable ("But of course!"), how a great style is largely a matter of constraint, of the things an author resists doing, that the choices we make in the name of precision and clarity will ultimately serve both substance and style, while those made for style's sake serve only an insecure author's ego.

And I taught them about plot. In all works of fiction there are only two plots, really: Plot A and Plot B. Plot A gives us an unhappy character, a protagonist unsatisfied with her or his lot. With Plot A, I explained, the inciting incident is an opportunity seized by the protagonist in order to escape an unhappy status quo. Example: a failed author's successful identical twin brother commits suicide, providing him the chance to take his brother's place and gain the success that has eluded him. It doesn't end there, of course, since opportunity seized always brings complications.

Which brings us to Plot B, wherein an irritant or setback of some kind upsets a character's status-quo contentment, to wit: Having assumed the identity of his successful twin, our protagonist confronts the circumstance or circumstances that drove his successful twin to commit suicide in the first place.

In most stories, Plots A and B do a dance together, the opportunity/misfortune tango, with opportunity leading to misfortune, and misfortune leading to opportunity. And so on.

In fiction routine exists for one reason: to be disrupted by

extraordinary events. Before disrupting it, however, it helps to enhance the status quo, to raise the stakes. If the status quo finds the protagonist content, give him *more* reasons to be happy, so when the status quo is subverted, he'll have a greater height to fall from. As your hero sits there on a high limb of his contentment tree, send a few butterflies of good fortune fluttering his way. As he snatches at them, bring him down with a salvo of stones.

Stone #1: My Enlarged Prostate Gland

It started just around the time I took the Metropolitan job. I couldn't sleep. I was getting up six times a night to pee. My prostate was to blame. (Yes, like the hero of "Harris' Book".)

Dr. Snyder, my urologist, assured me that, though I was young for the condition, it was neither serious nor uncommon. However, he went on to say, short of surgery ("Out of the question at your age"), there was no cure, and the drugs used to treat symptoms came with a laundry list of side effects, including hair growth, loss of libido, and something called "retrograde ejaculation"—an orgasm that backfires into the bladder, where it does no harm, but neither does it do any good.

"On the other hand," Dr. Snyder added sanguinely, "the pills may have no beneficial effect at all." In other words I might grow hair and be impotent and still have to get up ten times a night to pee. Rather than take any drugs, I chose to endure the occasional bout of insomnia.

Stone #2: God's Impala

You are already aware that I lived in a Bronx tenement with a bathtub in the center of its kitchen. I won't describe my neighborhood except for one detail that strikes me as pertinent if not symbolic: a car parked on the street in front of my building. Parked cars don't usually qualify as permanent features of a neighborhood. This one did. As testified to by a garland of fluorescent orange parking tickets tucked under its wiper blades, it had been there for some time: a boat-like Chevrolet Impala, its blue paint job faded to rust where visible under a mélange of bumper stickers, decals, flags, bunting, colored Christmas lights, plastic Jesuses, and other

objects promulgating God and country. Spray-painted in blood red across the side of the car facing the street:

THERE IS ONE GOD AND MOSES IS HIS PROPHET

Why “God’s Impala” qualifies as a stone will be made apparent in the course of time. For now suffice it to say that the vehicle was an ongoing source of perturbation.

Stone #3: My Brother’s Odd Behavior

I’d been teaching at the Metropolitan Writing Institute for three years when the first clues emerged that my brother’s “status quo” was undergoing a change. The first clue was a phone call from Sheila, Gregory’s wife. The phone call itself was a departure from the norm. My brother’s wife wasn’t in the habit of phoning me; she’d never done so before. She asked me if I had spoken to Greg recently.

In fact, months had passed since our last real conversation. During it Greg had mentioned a project he’d been working on and that he seemed very excited about, his paper on the *Kybalion*. It was he who’d phoned me in an excited state, wanting to share his discovery of the phenomenon known as *Urphänomen*, one of the many German words for which there exist no equivalents in the English language: the notion that the smaller and more humble an object, the greater the likelihood of its containing the whole plan of the universe in concentrated form—a grain of rice, the atom. I listened patiently. It was, it turned out and as I’ve said, our last real conversation. After that two weeks passed with no call from him, then three, then a month, then two months... I tried phoning him a few times only to get his voicemail. More than once I left a message. When I finally got him on the phone his end of the conversations was as brief as it was perfunctory.

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“What’s new?”

“Nothing much.”

Put-off though I was by my own twin giving me the bum’s rush, I chalked it up to Greg’s being deep into his new project.

Nor was I unsympathetic. I was busy myself, revising my novel for something like the sixth time. I understood what it meant to be in the throes of creativity.

Then the call from Sheila.

"No," I told her. "We haven't spoken in a while. Why?"

"It's nothing, really. It's just that—well, Greg's been acting a bit strange lately, that's all."

I waited.

"It started with little things. Habits." She gave a little laugh. "He drinks his coffee black."

"What?"

"His coffee. He always used to take it with milk and sugar. He *hates*—or *hated*—black coffee. He used to give me a hard time for drinking mine that way. 'How can you stand it?' he'd say. 'It's so harsh, so *bitter*, so *nasty*.' Then, a little over a year ago, he comes home from this conference and the next morning at breakfast suddenly he's drinking his coffee black. Don't you think that's just a little odd?"

"I suppose," I said. "But it doesn't seem to be something that you need to worry that much about."

"Do you drink black coffee?"

"No," I said. "I take cream and sugar. I hate black coffee."

"And you don't think it's strange?"

"People's tastes change, Sheila."

"That's just the beginning. He started buying odd things, clothes and shoes. Things he would never have bought before."

"Like?"

"Black leather pants."

"You're joking."

"And a matching leather jacket. I teased him. I said, 'Do you plan to get a motorcycle to go with that outfit?' Well—guess what?"

"He bought a motorcycle?" I said.

"A Harley," Sheila said. "Used. He got it on Craigslist."

"Does my brother even know how to ride a motorcycle?"

"He's been taking lessons," Sheila said grimly. "And last week I came home from work and there's something in the driveway. A car, I assume, though I can't tell since it's hidden under a tarp. He

greet me with this, this huge grin on his face. ‘What’s in our driveway?’ He dangles a set of car keys in front of me. ‘Happy Birthday,’ he says. My birthday was three months ago. Then he takes me in his arms, waltzes me out to the driveway, and unveils the thing. A sports car, a Miata. Cherry Red. Not used. Brand new.”

“Where’s he getting the money for all this stuff?”

“That’s a very good question. I asked him the same thing. ‘Greg,’ I said. ‘Can we *afford* this?’ Philosophy professors don’t exactly make a killing. And I’m not exactly raking in the big bucks at the clinic. Plus we’ve got two mortgages to pay, thanks to your brother’s decision to buy your father’s house—which he still refuses to sell, even though your father’s been dead for seven years and in those seven years we’ve spent a grand total of three weekends down there.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“About?”

“When you asked him—about the Miata, whether he could afford it?”

“He said, ‘Don’t worry about it.’ When I pressed him, he refused to talk about it anymore. He said, ‘You remind me of my mother, you worry so damn much.’ Do you think maybe he might be gambling?”

“Greg—gambling?”

“Or ... I don’t know...cooking and selling methamphetamines—like whatshisname, the bald guy in *Breaking Bad*?”

“Sheila, come on.”

“Maybe it’s something with his brain. I read somewhere that certain frontal lobe injuries can change someone’s personality. Maybe he fell in the shower and banged his forehead on the faucet.” She gave a little laugh but sounded desperate.

“Sheila, listen. He bought himself a motorcycle and you a car. If you ask me, it sounds like a classic midlife crisis. We’re pushing fifty. Heck, maybe I should get a sports car.” (I laughed, unaware that within a month by ironic coincidence I would inherit Julie’s formerly spiffy Mazda. Sheila didn’t return my laughter.)

“I’m serious, Stewart. Something’s very wrong. For the past few months, every morning from five a.m. until noon he locks

himself in his study. He won't let me or anything disturb him."

"He's working on a project."

"Why does he have to be so secretive about it? He always shared everything he wrote with me. He used to wear me out having me read every draft of everything. Now he won't share a word. He won't even say what he's working on."

"Something about the *Kybalion*, I think," I said.

"The what?"

"A book of ancient Egyptian philosophy. Anyway, Sheila, I really don't see why you're so upset. Heck, people change."

"Not like this," Sheila said. "Not that suddenly. I tell you, something is seriously wrong!"

Our conversation ended with me promising Sheila that I would phone my brother, that I'd speak with him.

Four days and a dozen phone messages later, Greg phoned.

"What's up, Stew?"

I didn't beat around the bush.

"Greg, what the hell is going on?"

"What do you mean?"

I reiterated my conversation with Sheila. Greg laughed.

"It's not a laughing matter. She's really worried."

"There's nothing to worry about. I told her so. Now I'm telling you. Everything's fine."

"What about all this money you've been spending?"

"There's not a problem."

"How isn't there a problem? What—did you win the lottery?"

"Look, everything's fine. Or it will be. Trust me."

"I'd trust you more if you were a little more forthcoming."

"There's nothing to worry about. Really. Sheila isn't comfortable with change. Most people aren't comfortable with change, even when it's for the better. You know what they say."

"No. What do they say?"

"If everyone had the chance to throw all their problems into a giant bowl and pick out new ones, we'd all grab the same problems back."

"Your point being?"

"My point is that everything's fine."

“Where’s all this money you’re spending coming from?”

“I came into a little money from a publishing project.”

“Oh? What—a textbook?”

“Yes, that’s right, a textbook. You could call it that.”

“Greg, that’s—that’s great.”

“Anyway, Sheila’s got nothing at all to worry about and neither do you. All right? Listen, I’ve got to go now. I’ve got a meeting I need to attend. We’ll talk again soon. Okay?”

• •

For their nineteenth wedding anniversary my brother bought Sheila a diamond ring. The Greg I knew—had known—found diamonds ostentatious, vulgar even, like drinking champagne out of a slipper or eating breakfast in bed or doing anything whatsoever in a heart-shaped Jacuzzi. Notwithstanding which, on their wedding anniversary, in a resort hotel in Martinique, Greg and his wife undertook each of these activities, so Sheila told me with a mixture of delight and alarm shortly afterwards.

• •

Less than two months after their wedding anniversary, my phone rang again. My mother this time.

“Have you heard?” she asked me.

“What?”

“Your brother—he’s divorcing Sheila.”

“What? Says who? Where did you hear this?”

“Sheila phoned. Just now. She’s so upset! That’s not all. He quit his job. I don’t understand it. I’m so confused. Have you talked to your brother? Has he said anything to you?”

“No,” I said. “Not a word.”

“Oh God, Stewart—this is terrible. Terrible!” My mother sobbed.

“Mother, please, try to—”

“Why would your brother do such a thing? Quitting his job? Is he crazy? Might there be a reason? Do you think maybe he got fired? Did he do something crazy, like have an affair with a stu-

dent, maybe? Or did Sheila ... do you think ...”

“Mother, please, it’s best not to jump to—”

“Are you sure he didn’t say anything to you?”

“Nothing, Mother, I swear. As far as I know their marriage was fine. The last I heard from Sheila, they’d just gotten back from Martinique. I mean, there’ve been some issues, but ...”

“What issues?”

“Well, you know, the usual stuff.”

“Like *what*?”

“Oh, Mother, I don’t know. I’m just guessing.”

“When did you last speak with him?”

“I don’t know. Two months ago?”

“Two *months*?”

“He’s been busy, Mother. We’ve both been busy.”

“I don’t understand; I just don’t understand ...”

“Mother, please, try to—”

“How can I calm dawn? This is terrible; terrible ...”

After getting off the phone with my mother, I phoned my brother at the college and got his voicemail as usual. Every day for the next few days I left messages, sometimes more than one. In my last message I made no attempt to conceal my anger. I was livid. How could Greg have done that to Sheila?

Greg never called back.

• •

A week later, I was on my way to teach my Thursday evening memoir class, riding the crowded downtown #6 local subway train (did I tell you this already?), clutching Janice Hauptmann’s memoir-in-progress about her love affair with an octogenarian Brazilian former flamenco dancer, when I locked eyes with the long-haired, goateed, bespectacled, leather-jacketed author of *Coffee, Black* grinning at me from a poster advertising his bestselling book. As I think I’ve told you, I’d seen that poster and the photo in it many times, but without *really* seeing it, with that oblivion with respect to their surroundings that dyed-in-the-wool New Yorkers are so good at. A dead body in the street? A high-wire act between skyscrapers? You

won't see us gawking. Why would I have given the time of day to a face in a subway ad? Yet there I was, locking eyes with this man I suddenly recognized as my own flesh and blood, my twin brother. It couldn't be! How was it possible? I remembered Sheila telling me of Greg's sudden dramatic changes in habits, among other things how he'd taken to drinking his coffee black. *And grown a beard.*

With the recognition dawning on me, the subway car's massed humanity and convulsing walls darkened and closed in on me. As the subway careened between Fourteenth Street and Astor Place, Janice Hauptmann's manuscript slipped from my grip and I fainted.



How I got through that evening's class I'm not sure. Somehow I managed to perform. Still, my students knew something was wrong. I saw the looks of curiosity and concern in their eyes. Even Janice Hauptmann, whose manuscript I'd gone uncharacteristically easy on, seemed worried. After class as I was tucking papers into my briefcase, Janice of all people asked me if I was all right. I made excuses, thanked her, hurried off, hoping to get to the Barnes & Noble at Astor Place before it closed. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the author of *Coffee, Black* wasn't my twin brother after all, but someone who happened to look exactly like him, my doppelgänger, not an impossibility when you take into account the fact that our faces were so unextraordinary.

Though I hurried, I arrived there ten minutes after the store closed. There, in one of the brightly lit display windows, was the same photo of my doppelgänger, blown up to Olympic proportions, mounted on a slab of foam core and propped up against a pyramid constructed out of a few dozen hardback copies of *Coffee, Black*. "No. 1 NYT Bestseller," the poster proclaimed in bright red typography across its top. At the bottom, underneath the author's grinning face:

Meet Bestselling Author
Brock Jones, PhD
Author Reading & Signing
Friday, Nov. 20, 7:00 p.m.

There was no need for me to take note of the time and date. It was twenty-one hours and forty-six minutes away, the very next day.



That night, thanks to my prostate, I slept poorly. Before going to bed, I'd performed what had become an odd little ritual. I stripped off my BVD's, replacing them with a skimpy blue Speedo. From my top dresser drawer I took a balled heavy winter sock and stuffed it into the Speedo—not where you think, Dear Reader, as a visual enhancement, but farther back, closer to my anus. I discovered the remedy online. By applying mild pressure to that nether region of my body, the rolled-up sock squeezed my urethra, thereby suppressing my incontinental urges and thus sparing me from getting up ten times a night to pee. Sometimes the sock worked, sometimes it didn't.

It didn't work. Starting at around one a.m., and every half-hour thereafter, I rose to acquit myself of the latest phantom urge and token thimbleful of urine.

Dear Reader, should you ever need an argument against Intelligent Design, look no further than the male prostate gland. The word *prostate*, in case you're wondering, comes from the Greek word for "to put before." What my prostate had been put before I can't say; but that most growth-centric gland had wrapped itself around my urethra, where no intelligent designer would have put it, pinching it like a straw between fingers.

And though it's called Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia, trust me, there's nothing benign about being roused ten times a night and dragging your sleepy bones to the bathroom only to stand there, inert as Neptune's statue presiding over a fountain, yet unable to do what fountains do so well. You spread your legs like Ty Cobb with bases loaded, contemplate the fabulous waterworks at Tivoli Gardens, the Great Cascade at Petrehof, the spouting dolphins and spewing gargoyles of the Villa Lante. You harbor wistful memories of having once peed like a god. Never mind campfires: you could have extinguished the Great Fires of London and San Francisco combined. You recall how, as a boy of seven or eight, you'd sign your name in snowbanks, the strokes steaming with your body's golden effluence, a fleeting testimonial to the Palmer Method. You

remember your suicidally dead philosophy professor father, the first person with whom you ever took a leak outdoors, standing side-by-side on the edge of his dock facing the twilit lake, pulling out father-and-son dicks, his tawny and uncircumcised, yours minus (thanks to Dr. Spock) its protective sheaf, pale as the bud of a white English rose. Together you aimed into the lake. Watching Dad's glittering soaring parabola, you'd think to yourself: *when I can pee that far, I'll be a man!*

Such fond memories do you no good as you stand there, blocked as a pipe full of concrete. Should mercy shine its dim light upon you, you might rid yourself of a soupçon of urine, enough to speckle the rim of the bowl or dribble down your leg. Ever the optimist, you keep standing there, your thoughts by now gone abstract. Urinous puns assail you: *To pee or not to pee. Let it pee. Piss on earth. Pee of good cheer.* Jokes, too. *Elderly patient: Doctor, I can't pee anymore. Doctor: How old are you? Patient: Seventy-six. Doctor: You've peed enough.* None of this helps. You feel furthermore that you are being watched, that this is a scene in a supposedly funny play scripted by Neil Simon at the top of his game in which you are the hapless lead. Based on past performances, even assuming that you manage to eke out that thimbleful of urine, should you return to bed you'll be back again in half an hour. Or you'll lie there trying but failing to ignore your bladder that keeps crying "Empty me! Empty me!"—like David Hedison in *The Fly*.

• •

Instead of going straight back to bed, I went into my "study" (the kitchen) and sat at my "desk" (salvaged door over tub). No sooner did I do so than the balled sock in my Speedo declared itself rudely. I ripped it out and slammed it to the floor, then yanked the Speedo off and flung it across the room, where it landed on my dead Mrs. Cox geranium.

Having nothing better to do, I Googled "Brock Jones, PhD." Aside from web pages dedicated to promoting his book, my investigation turned up nothing.

I shut off my computer, ate a bowl of Raisin Bran with water (I'd run out of milk). While doing so I made the mistake of looking

out my kitchen window. There, wreathed by ginkgo tree branches, glowing—insofar as a rusty car can be said to glow—under the pink radiance of a mercury vapor lamp, sat the Godmobile, the Divine Impala. Patiently vigilant, it awaited the End of Days—or its owner, whichever arrived first. By its owner I don't mean the person to whom, assuming it was registered at all, the vehicle was registered—and who in all likelihood had skipped out on a DUI and was evading a bench warrant—but the Good Lord Himself.

Who, come to think of it, should have been arrested, too.



The next morning I went out and bought a copy of *Coffee, Black*. I had to go into Manhattan to get it, there being not a single bookstore in the entire borough of The Bronx. Two baseball stadiums, one soon to be torn down, the other brand new, each big enough to accommodate 50,000 illiterate Yankee fans, but not one damn bookstore.

I returned to the same Barnes & Noble, the one at Astor Place, to buy the book. Gramercy Park being closed to non-residents, I walked over to Stuyvesant Square. Having wiped the snow off a bench, I sat and started reading, or tried to, the printed pages having to vie with my sense of vertigo as I turned them, finding them to hold far more questions than answers. Could it really have been so simple a matter for my brother—for anyone, according to his book—to change...everything? As simple as ordering a cup of coffee without milk or sugar? Yet that, in a nutshell, was *Coffee, Black's* premise.

Lest anyone doubted it, he had the example of his own precipitously changed life to submit as evidence. Now he'd go on to change more lives, millions more, according to the words spread across a horizontal band of gold ("OVER 1 MILLION COPIES IN PRINT") topping the cover of my already-in-its-third-printing trade paperback edition. The author's biography:

Brock Jones, PhD is whoever he wants to be.

This is his first book.

Dedication: "*To all my selves.*"

Less than halfway through the book, having as yet come upon

no mention of the author's talented twin, I did what I had sworn to myself I wouldn't do: I skipped to the index. There, among S's, I searched for Stewart. Nada. Then, among the D's, I searched for my—our—last name: ... *depression* ... *determinism* ... *deus ex machina* ... But no Detweiler.

The park bench having become too cold, I repaired to Pete's Tavern, where I resumed my reading of *Coffee, Black*. I did so in the second booth from the front, the one where, according to local lore, the writer William Sydney Porter, aka O'Henry, known for the surprise twist endings of his stories, wrote "The Gift of the Magi," about an impoverished young married couple's quest to obtain Christmas gifts for each other. Della sells her beautiful hair to a hairdresser to buy a pocket watch chain for Jim, who has meanwhile sold his pocket watch to afford a set of combs for Della, voiding both of their gifts of all but their spiritual value. Hence the story's title.

I was two-thirds of the way through *Coffee, Black* when seven o'clock arrived. Fortified with two martinis, I made my way to the Barnes & Noble store. All this time I clung to the thread of hope that the author of *Coffee, Black* would turn out to be someone other than my twin. That thread was broken at the reading event to which I arrived late.

The event was packed. There had to have been at least a hundred warm bodies in folding chairs, and half as many more standing and squatting among the rows of bookshelves. He wore the Philip Johnson glasses, the leather sport coat, and a fedora—not the white Panama, a black one. Though his manner of dress was entirely different, though he had trimmed down, and though his mannerisms struck me as oddly unfamiliar, the moment he opened his mouth to address the crowd the last vestige of doubt dissolved. There was no question. Brock Jones, PhD was—had been—my brother.

I stood behind the crowd. From there the speaker's face was the size of a pea. Still I was left with no doubt.

The event lasted less than three quarters of an hour. He read a short excerpt from his book, then took questions from the audience. I listened distractedly, hearing every other word. I had a question of my own to ask. My question: "I heard somewhere

that you have a twin brother. Is it true?” It took some time for me to screw up the courage to do so, but eventually I raised my hand.

My brother never saw it. Or maybe he did. Anyway, he never called on me.

The Q&A session over, I watched as fans, some holding as many as a half-dozen copies of my brother’s book, stood in line to have their copies signed. It occurred to me that eighteen years had passed since Gregory had watched people standing in a similar line—albeit a much shorter one—to have me sign their copies of *Penny Sufferings*. I wondered if he had suffered half as much distress then as I did presently. But then I hadn’t acted as though my brother didn’t exist. Or had I?

The line of eager autograph seekers still stretched halfway across the floor when I turned and left the store.



By the time I got home it was close to midnight. The streetlamp in front of my tenement building wasn’t working. Though I could barely see it, I knew the Impala was there, parked in its usual spot. That car had a malicious presence. Like the discharge of ozone preceding a storm, it augured bad things. Before stepping into my tenement building and climbing the five flights to my apartment, I paid my respects to its curbed malevolence, its parked pathology, conjuring for its absent owner a series of increasingly dismal fates, from ensnarement with an NYPD tow truck to various forms of spontaneous combustion, vaporization, decapitation, Waterhouse-Friderichsen Syndrome, and other wasting diseases.

I had just done so and taken three steps toward my building’s front door when I noticed the shadow sitting on the curb next to the car. At first I assumed it must be the car’s owner, returned for it at last, a conclusion reinforced by the fact that the shadow looked no less derelict than the car itself. I was about to confront—him? her?—when the shadow spoke to me in a voice I recognized immediately. A woman’s voice.

“Sheila?” I said.

Indeed, it was my brother’s wife, his soon to be ex-wife, sitting on my stoop. Wailing, she threw her arms around me—or rather

around my legs, for she was still seated on the curb.

"Sheila, my God!" I said, kneeling close to her, stroking her. "What—what are you doing here?"

"I had to see you," she said through her sobs.

"Let's go inside," I said.

Though Sheila was eight years my junior and physically fit from her relentless yoga regimen, on each of the five flights leading up to my railroad flat I had to stop and wait for her to catch her breath, so winded was she from sobbing. Once in my apartment, with her sitting on my uncomfortable faux-leather sofa, I offered her a drink. "Here," I said handing her the only cocktail I could manage. "It's rotten gin, but I've added a splash of olive juice to render it less toxic."

"Thanks," she said, drinking it down in two gulps as I looked on intently. "Mm—that hit the spot," she said breathlessly. Then, handing me the glass back. "Can you make me another?"

"Sure. Hungry?" I asked, doing so. "I've got a frozen fresh-caught salmon filet I can thaw and some green beans I can sauté *haricot verts* style."

"That sounds fine," she said with little enthusiasm.

"How did you get here, anyway?"

"I drove," she said. "The Miata. It's parked across the street. I hope that's okay. I don't understand New York City parking regulations."

"Who does? They're just a gloss on anarchy. You should be okay until morning."

"I guess you've heard? About me and Greg?"

I nodded. "Mom told me."

"When?"

"A few days ago. She phoned." I handed Sheila a second drink. "Maybe he'll change his mind," I said hopefully.

She shook her head. "He won't. I'm sure of it," she said, gulping her gin. "You don't know Greg anymore, Stew. He's changed completely. It started out like I said with little things, changes that I thought were cute at first, you know, wearing different clothes, eating different foods. One day just like that he's a vegetarian." She shrugged. "No big deal; I can live without hamburgers. He

always hated cats. Suddenly he comes home with two kittens. He buys penny loafers—penny loafers!—and wears them with actual pennies. One day, we're about to sit down to dinner, he puts a CD of the *Blue Danube* on, picks me up out of my chair, and waltzes me from room to room around the whole house. Great, I thought. Why not? It was cute. He's like a new man—a happy man. What's not to like? But the changes—they keep on coming. The new cars, the impromptu weekend jaunts to Europe. Four-star hotels, five-star restaurants. Champagne and caviar. Suddenly I'm Zelda to his Scott Fitzgerald. I'm all smiles, but I'm not enjoying any of it because the man I'm with happens to be a total stranger. I mean who is this guy ordering room service at one in the morning, wanting us to have breakfast in bed? Back home he takes up gardening and golf. Golf! A membership in the local country club. Who knew there were country clubs in Vermont?"

As she spoke, while I snapped the ends off green beans, olive oil heated in the frying pan.

"When he's not playing golf or tending his gardenias, he's locked in his study, typing away on his secret project. I knew he was keeping secrets from me; I'm no dummy; I knew the signs. But what secrets? Was he having an affair? That would have explained a lot. The fancy trips, the flowers, the diamond earrings and other spontaneous expensive gifts: he's expiating his guilt. Meanwhile he's having a sordid affair. Only it's not an affair. Not with a woman, anyway. It's more like he's having a love affair with himself, or with his new *selves*, I should say, since there seems to be a new version of Gregory Detweiler every other day. Meanwhile I'm stuck with my same old tired self, watching helplessly as he becomes all these other people... Then, two weeks after our nineteenth anniversary, like *that*—" she snapped her finger, "—bam, he asks me for a divorce. Just like *that*! And the *way* he did it. He takes me to dinner. A Thai restaurant, this place in a strip mall. Not a bad place, but still. We're sitting there, eating Pad Thai and yellow curry, when out of the blue he says to me, "You know, Sheila, I've been doing some thinking. I think we've been married long enough." She shook her head. "The thing is, I can't fault him. I can't fault him because I can't judge him. I can't judge him

because I don't know who I'd be judging. He's constantly remaking himself, like Proteus." She cried; I held her. "I just want to know why, Stewart. Why?"

"I wish I knew, Sheila," I said, stroking her. "I'm as much in the dark about all of this as you are. All I know is what I read in his book."

"Book?" said Sheila.

"It explains a lot, don't you think?"

"His PhD thesis? *Transindividuality in Spinoza*?"

I shook my head. "Come on, Sheila."

"I'm sorry, but what book?"

"The book."

She looked blankly at me.

"*Coffee, Black.*"

Her blank stare deepened.

"Sheila, for God's sake!"

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you're talking about." She looked alarmed, frightened.

"My God. He never *told* you?"

"Told me what? What book? What are *saying*?"

"Wait," I said. I went into my bedroom, got my still unfinished, heavily dog-eared copy of *Coffee, Black*, returned with it. I handed it to her. She stared uncomprehendingly at the cover.

She shook her head. "What's this got to do with anything?"

"Look at the back cover."

She did. There was my brother's—her soon to be ex-husband's—face plastered across the dust jacket.

"I still don't get it."

"You don't recognize him?"

She shook her head. "Brock Jones? I never heard of him."

"Forget the name, Sheila. Look closer."

She kept staring. Then:

"Oh, no. Oh my god. It's not... It *can't* be!"

I nodded. "It's Greg," I said.

"I don't believe it."

"I assumed you knew."

She shook her head.

It made no sense to me, either, at first. How could she not know? Then I remembered how long it had taken me to find out. Sheila and Greg never watched TV; since they'd been married they hadn't owned a television set. Neither of them paid much attention to pop culture. It was entirely possible that she'd never seen an advertisement for the book. For all I knew she'd never heard of *Coffee, Black*.

Still, I thought, even if Sheila had been completely unaware of the book or its author, surely some of their friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, hers and Greg's, had to have known about it. Surely one of them, at least, would have made the connection, would have recognized "Brock Jones, PhD" and outed him to Sheila. Unless...

Had they *all* failed the Gorilla Test? Was it *possible*?

Anyway Sheila had failed it.

"It may be cold comfort," I said to her, "but when I found out I was just as astonished as you are."

For the next half hour I told my sister-in-law what I knew about the book, what it was about. (And, if you're wondering, no: there'd been no mention in *Coffee, Black* of Sheila Detweiler's existence, either.)

"You think you know people," Sheila said as I poured her another drink and fried the green beans. "It's my business to know them, my profession. I help people know themselves better so they can do a better job of negotiating their own lives. That's what I assumed I'd been doing all those years. Now I see what a sham it all was, what a charlatan I've been. We can't know anyone. It's impossible. Just when you think you know someone, boom, they change—" She snapped her fingers again. "—like *that*!"

I said nothing. I sautéed the green beans. *Haricots verts*. Whatever.

"Here I am saying all these things to you as if I know you; as if you're who I think you are, when for all I know you're a completely different person, no less a stranger to me than your brother." She gave a little laugh. "Maybe you are your brother. The thought occurred to me, you know. You'd switched places, you and Gregory, the way you did that time in elementary school.

No wonder he hasn't been himself. He *isn't* himself; he's *you*. You pulled the ol' switcheroo on me, a practical joke. Is that what's happened? Are you really Stewart? Huh? Are you sure you're not Gregory?" She'd come up behind me as I faced the stove. She put her arms around my waist and rested her head on my shoulder. As she caressed me I concentrated on the *haricots verts*. What else could I do? Even if he was no longer himself, still, I wasn't about to sleep with my brother's wife. The salmon was in the broiler. She held fast to me as I bent to inspect it.

"Looks just about done," I said, the oven's breath hot against my cheeks. As I rose to get a fork to test it Sheila worked her way around to kissing me. The next moment served up a tableau of an aproned male fending off a woman's advances with two oven-mitted hands. "Sheila, no," I said with forced laughter, though I was terror-stricken. My brother's wife!

Just then an enormous thunderclap shook the apartment. With the oven still yawning we fell into each other's arms. Because it was on the top floor my kitchen had a skylight. Through it flashed the lightning that gave rise to the next explosion, and the one after that. With the fourth flash the lights went out.

I've always exercised a dutiful suspiciousness with respect to the weather as a metaphor in literature. Cleansing rain, illuminating lightning, chastising thunder, perplexing fogs, and moody mists...How meteorology, that dullest of all topics of conversation, became an acceptable subject for fiction, let alone one endowed with potent metaphorical implications, is a mystery to me. Who's to say if a thunderstorm is hell and damnation or just the sky doing its laundry? Sometimes—usually, in fact—a thunderstorm is just a thunderstorm.

That said, it was owing to a thunderstorm that I wound up sleeping with my brother's wife that night—slept with, I say, for we did not engage in sex of any sort. Instead we spent the night curled up in my twin bed like...I nearly said "like a pair of comas" ...like the two halves of the Tao symbol, the yin-yang, head-to-toe, or as the French say, *tête-bêche*. How we ended up in that position I'm not sure, but I warrant it was in all innocence. To be sure I would not have forgotten had it been arrived at otherwise.

It was in that configuration that I found us on awakening a few hours later, my prostate-impinged bladder doing its thing, the thunderstorm having abated, Sheila's impressive snores rumbling through my apartment.

How I managed to sleep through the rest of that night I have no idea, but I awoke to sunshine and a disheveled but otherwise ordinary bed, neither Sheila nor anyone else but me in it. The power was back on. On my kitchen table under my Bialetti Moka espresso pot my brother's soon to be ex-wife had left a terse note:

"Thank you." That was all.

That was the last time I saw or heard from Sheila.

• •

In the morning I phoned my mother.

"Your son is a bestselling author," I told her.

"Stewart—that's wonderful! Congratulations!"

"Not me, Mother," I said. "Gregory—or rather Brock Jones, PhD."

"Who?"

"You know nothing about this?"

"About what?"

"Gregory wrote a book. A bestseller. A huge bestseller. It's called *Coffee, Black*. It's a self-help book."

"Don't be silly."

"The reason you haven't heard of it, Mother, is because he wrote it under an assumed name." I spoke through gritted teeth.

"What are you talking about?"

"Brock Jones, PhD, that's what I'm talking about."

"All right, so Greg wrote a book. And it's a bestseller. Good for him. You make it sound like the worst thing in the world!"

"He changed his *name*, Mother!"

"Big deal. Authors do that all the time, don't they?"

"He's kept it a secret—from us, from Sheila, from everyone."

"I still don't see why you're so upset."

"Him keeping something like that from us? You don't find that upsetting? Of all the things that you get upset about, *that* doesn't upset you?"

"Calm down, Stewart, please!"

I asked: "Have you spoken with him recently?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know, Stewart. A week ago, maybe."

"And he said nothing to you — about any of this?"

"No."

"I'll be damned." I looked out my window. The crazy Impala was parked there as always. By now there must have been something like eighteen parking tickets on it, the thing was abloom with them, the fluorescent orange notices faded to a pale peach by a combination of sunshine and rain. Why hadn't the Chief of Transportation towed the damn thing away, already?

"Stewart? Are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm still here, Mother. Nominally."

"Maybe he wanted to surprise us."

"He surprised me, all right. He surprised Sheila, too, by suing her for a divorce. No wonder he quit his job. He must be rolling in money."

"Now you sound jealous."

"Oh, Mother, please!" Was I jealous? Yes, I suppose I must have been. Not only was my brother still the goddamn Millionaire to my Pauper; now he was the artist, too. Of all the ways in which a person can become obscenely rich, my brother had to go and do so by writing a fucking book.

"You're right, Mother," I said. "I'm jealous. I should be happy for him. I should be glad that my brother who no longer returns my phone calls and who I haven't spoken with in months and who denies my existence is suddenly rich and famous and lapping up his accolades under a pseudonym, with his wife, mother, and twin brother left completely in the dark. Wonderful."

"You'll see, Stewart. I'm sure he planned to tell us all about it."

"I don't want him to tell me about it. I don't want to *know* about it. I wish I didn't know. It's like some sort of bad joke."

"It must be a good book."

"Jesus, Mother!"

"You said it's a bestseller, didn't you?"

“Who cares if it’s a good book or not? He lied to us, Mother! He lied to us all! He’s been lying to us for a year—longer, probably.”

“He’s not lying, Stewart.”

“What do you call it?”

“He just hasn’t been very ... forthcoming.”

“A lie of omission is still a lie! Christ, Mother. How can you defend him like this? How can you take it so calmly, you who lose sleep over forgotten Christmas cards or a strange rash? For God’s sake, look what he’s done to Sheila!”

“Yes,” my mother conceded. “Yes, that is a shame.”

• •

I still hadn’t finished reading *Coffee, Black*. That evening, after teaching my intermediate fiction workshop, on the train back to The Bronx, abetted by two more very dry martinis drunk in swift succession at the Campbell Apartment in Grand Central Terminal, I read the last fifty pages.

Like the book’s first hundred and thirty-five pages, its final fifty thrived on lurid analogies and overly broad abstractions, among them how most people—at least 95%, in Dr. Jones’ estimation—are “prisoners serving out a life sentence.” Their crime? Failure to see beyond their own “limited conceptions of themselves.” From this metaphor the text stumbles into the next, how each of us is “an artist whose masterpiece is his or her own self,” how those selves are “paintings-in-progress,” how, just as the average, non-artist’s ability to render accurately a face or a room or a chair or whatever else is directly in front of them is hindered by their notion—their preconceived idea—of what they are looking at, the average person’s ability to clearly perceive and therefore realize his or her true self, to “paint their masterpiece,” is encumbered by preconceived notions of who they are, notions suggested—nay, dictated—by who they’ve been, or worse: by who they believe themselves to have been. Or worse still: by who *others* perceive them to be. Around all these mixed metaphors *Coffee, Black*’s concluding sentence did a victory lap. “Such are the shackles,” the sentence read, “each of us must break—not

just once, but daily, sometimes more than once a day—if we're to achieve that Masterpiece known as our True Self." The End.

By the time I turned over the last page of *Coffee, Black*, all three martinis had been fully absorbed into my bloodstream. I was—to use Professor Wallace's word—categorically drunk.

It was in that state that I stood in the moonlit but still very dark (they still hadn't fixed the broken lamp) street in front of my building, scrutinizing the Holy Impala: the Pious Pimpmobile, Godly Gas-Guzzler, Sanctimonious Sedan, Righteous Rust Bucket, Reverent Wreck, the Jingoistic Jalopy. How I'd come to hate that car! I went up and stood close to it: close enough to view my reflection in the driver's side window. Pleased to have made my drunken acquaintance, I smiled. Someone had discarded an old floor lamp, the kind with a fancy wrought-iron arm, out on the curb with the rest of the week's trash. With both hands I picked it up, and—with little premeditation—bashed its heavy iron base through the window. It took two tries. Then I yanked the car door open, got in, disengaged the emergency brake. With the transmission in neutral, standing astride the vehicle, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other pushing and pulling it by its door frame, I maneuvered the car out of its parking space—no mean feat, considering that by then its tires were practically fused by inertia to the pavement.

With the car in the street I rolled it in the direction from which I had come, toward the hill for which Marble Hill, the adjacent neighborhood, is named. Assuming it rolled straight and true and no traffic interfered with its progress, it would roll all the way across West 230th Street and into the kiddie park there (where—the Parks Department being more vigilant with respect to such matters—it might possibly at long last gain the attention it deserved).

A running start; a final, categorical heave-ho...

Then I stood there, in the middle of the dark street, wiping my gloved hands, watching the Clerical Clunker gain momentum as it rolled down that hill of metamorphosed limestone. It might have rolled all the way into the kiddie park as planned, too, had the owner of a certain white Buick Enclave done a better job of parallel parking.

With the Buick's alarm cycling through its sequence of whoops, wails, yelps, and bleats, hands in my coat pockets, hugging the neighborhood's grim shadows, not once looking over my shoulder, I hurried back up the hill to my tenement.

9. CIGARILLO

I ENTERED MY APARTMENT TO FIND THAT SOMEONE HAD BROKEN into it. He sat there, at my kitchen tub-table, in the dark, or in what would have been total darkness except for the dim blue light through the skylight, the lattice of which stamped its lace-like pattern across the tabletop as well as the intruder's face. That the intruder was, or had once upon a time been, my twin brother is, for all intents and purposes, beside the point. To me then he was an intruder, a stranger, or might as well have been. I'd have been no more surprised and disconcerted had I found an African elephant or the Pope sitting at my kitchen table smoking a cigarette, dressed in a leather jacket. It might have been the same leather jacket he wore on the back cover of his book, or it might have been another leather jacket. Also as advertised he wore the salt-and-pepper goatee. A motorcycle helmet sat on the table before him, along with a pair of leather gloves. All this was revealed to me by the dim bluish moonlight drizzling down through the smutty skylight.

"Hello, Stewie," he said. The smoke from his cigarette or whatever he smoked wavered up through the skylight's lacy shadow. I switched on the overhead lamp. On my displeasure in seeing him Con Edison shed no light.

"Who let you in here?"

"I let myself in."

"You broke into my apartment?"

"You know you really should consider getting a police lock."

"What are you doing here—aside from breaking into my property and invading my privacy?"

"I came to talk."

"About what? What could you and I possibly have to talk about?"

"It's been a while, I know."

"You know it's *been a while*? What other astonishing displays of your uncanny grasp of the obvious have you come here to share with me this evening?"

"Aren't you even going to offer your big brother a drink?" It was an old joke between us, the "big brother" thing. Greg was born two minutes before me.

"I have a brother?" I said. "That's news to me. Put out the cigarette, please."

"It's a cigarillo." In the saucer he'd been using for an ashtray my erstwhile twin put his cigarillo, or whatever it was, out.

"Since when do you smoke, anyway?"

"Since I felt like it."

"Great. Now you've had your smoke and we've had our conversation. Now get out."

"Can I have that drink first, at least?"

"I have only shitty gin to offer you." I took the bottle of Fleishman's out from the freezer. "What you feel like. Is that your new code of ethics, your call to arms? Whatever I *feel* like: is that the flag you salute? Quitting your job? Divorcing your wife of nineteen years? Disowning your own family? Denying our existence?"

"How are you doing, Stewie?"

"Great, Greg. I mean Brock. Just great. Here's your goddamn gin. Drink up. Then go find somewhere nice and comfortable to go fuck yourself."

I slapped the glass down in front of him. Gin splashed onto the table and onto his leather jacket. He wiped it off with his fingers. "You're angry," he said.

“Really? What gives you that impression?”

“I understand. And I’m sorry, I really am. It’s just that ... well, sometimes we have to do what we have to do.”

“Well, that casts a whole different light on matters. You were doing what you *had* to do, being true to yourself, obeying your instincts, fulfilling your destiny, following your bliss. And there I was thinking you were just being a goddamn fucking asshole. Fuck you, Gregory. Or Brock. Whoever you are. Fuck both of you.”

“Are you done?”

I shook my head. “Not quite. I haven’t told you to get out of my home yet.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing. Get out of my home.”

“I will. But first, can I tell you a story?”

“Make it short.”

“Once there were two brothers, twins. They were both unhappy. As they grew older they became more and more miserable. Both suffered bouts of suicidal depression. But then one day one of the brothers saved himself. He escaped. He survived.”

“And the other?”

“He committed suicide.”

“That’s the story?”

He nodded. “That’s the story.”

“It’s a crappy story. The characters aren’t developed. There’s no setting or atmosphere. And the plot lacks tension.”

“When you go to sleep at night, Stew, what condition would you say your bed is in?”

“What *condition*?”

“Is it made or not?”

“Not, usually.” (I tried to mask my chagrin with impatience.)

“Because you didn’t make it, right?”

“What’s your point?”

“The bed you don’t make, that’s what you lie in. That’s your life, Brother. I want to help you make your bed.”

“I don’t need you to make my bed for me. Or to tuck me in. Or to tell me shitty bedtime stories.”

“You can change your life.”

“Who says I want to change it?”

“There’s a trick psychologists use,” my uninvited guest said, scanning the surroundings, my home, appraisingly. “Maybe you’ve heard of it? You ask the patient, the subject, to imagine a house. You provide no other parameters. You say, ‘Close your eyes and picture a house. Any house, anywhere.’ You have them describe the first image that pops into their head. Some people describe a seaside mansion with terraced gardens and tennis courts. Others see a tumbledown shack in the desert with dangling gutters and tumbleweeds rolling by. The house they imagine—that’s how they see themselves, what they think of themselves. It’s your outlook on life, your spirit, your soul. This...” He gave another look around. “Is this what you think of yourself?”

“Screw you, you presumptuous prick.”

“Do you know what your problem is, Stewie?”

“Apart from the ones you’ve already mentioned?”

“You want people to accept you just as you are. As you’ve always been and as you always will be. Accept me as I am or to hell with you. Tell me, how’s that working for you, Stewart? Hmm? Why do you suppose you haven’t been able to sell that novel of yours?”

I said nothing. I fumed. But I was thinking *he’s got you there, pal*. I thought *no, goddammit, no*. I thought, *Dear Reader, Fuck You*.

“Face it, Stewie. You’re not happy. You’re not fulfilled.”

“Finish your drink.”

“You’re as unfulfilled as I was, once, Little Brother.”

“Finish it and go.”

“I want to help you, Stew.”

“I don’t want your help. I don’t even know who the fuck you are.”

“Someone just like you. Someone who knows what it’s like to be a Detweiler.”

“Did you not hear me?”

“It’s a curse, Little Brother.”

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your little brother. You’re two fucking minutes older than me, asshole!”

“A death sentence—that’s what it is. But there’s a way out. I found it, and so can you.”

“How? By turning my back on everyone?”

He shook his head. “By turning your back on that tumble-down shack in the desert. You don’t have to live in that shack. You don’t have to be deprived. You don’t have to be depressed. You don’t have to be a Detweiler. You don’t have to die.”

“Get out.”

“Anything’s possible, Stewart. Anything! Whatever you want out of this life, whatever you want to be, whatever you want to do, it’s all within your grasp. The sky’s the limit. *You can reinvent yourself.*”

“Yeah, yeah: I read your damn book.”

“The point is, Stewart, everything’s changeable, and the reason everything’s changeable is because nothing’s real. It’s all a masquerade ball, that’s all life is. It’s just that we’re all born with these masks we’ve worn for so long we assume we can’t take them off, that we’re stuck having to wear them forever. But we’re not. We can take the mask off. Any time we want.”

“And do what, then? Pick another mask?”

“Yes. Exactly. Pick another mask!”

“Motorcycle riding, cigarette smoking—”

“Cigarillo.”

“—leather jacket wearing, goateed self-help guru? That your latest mask?”

“Possibly. For the time being.”

“Or is it Famous Bestselling Author?”

“I wouldn’t overrate fame, if I were you.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t, would you?”

“Being famous is just being misunderstood by that many more people. The point is, Stew, whoever I happen to be at this moment, I’m not stuck with him. I can change it. Any time. We’re free, Stew. Or we can be, if only we’d realize it, if only we’d dare to let ourselves be free. If only we dare to allow ourselves to be something other than what’s dictated to us by our habits and our histories, by what other people expect from us—or worse, by those stale, stingy, claustrophobic expectations that we hold for ourselves. Hell, Stewie—”

“Don’t call me that either.”

“—we could all be living in sprawling airy mansions. Instead

most of us choose to live in the broken-down one-room shacks that we think of as ourselves.”

“Jesus...”

“We could all be leading epic lives. Napoleon. Alexander the Great. Genghis Khan...”

“You’re generalizing.”

“—only most of us are stuck reading the same page over and over and over again.”

“Why am I listening to this?”

“Stewie, if you could just —”

“Get out,” I seethed.

“—I came here to —”

“Now!”

I opened a kitchen drawer, reached in, and felt around in it for the biggest, sharpest knife I could find, the one that I used for slicing and dicing onions. While gripping its handle inside the drawer I said to myself, *Are you crazy? What do you intend to do, slice him up, carve him to pieces, your own brother, your own flesh and blood?* Instead I let go of the knife, grabbed the motorcycle helmet from the kitchen table, and shook it at him, saying, “I swear, if you don’t get out this minute, one of us is going to get hurt.”

“You’re not serious?”

“I am.”

“Listen to yourself.” He tsked me. “Threatening bodily harm to me, your own flesh and blood—your own brother.”

“You are not my brother.”

“No?”

I shook my head. “My brother was a gentle, self-effacing, soft-spoken scholar who loathed the limelight. He spent half his time with his head buried in books, and the other half mulling over the things he read in them. He was modest and sincere and self-critical to a fault. He detested pretense and ostentation and humbuggery of every sort and would have very much disliked you and your book.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Confronted with you in person, my brother would have gone out of his way to avoid you, if only to spare himself the

inconvenience of hating your guts.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“You are not my brother. You’re some cigaretette—

“Cigarillo.”

“—some cigarillo-smoking creep who’s broken into my home.”

I shook his helmet at him. “Now leave—I mean it!”

“Or what, you’re going to bash my skull in?”

There were two windows in the kitchen, the one that faced out on the street, and another, much smaller one whose glass panes were blackened with grime that opened to an airshaft that in its slimness truly lived up to its name. With one hand I opened it; with the other I held Brock’s helmet suspended in the chilled gloom. “I don’t have to bash your head in. I’ll let a New York City pothole do it for me, when that hot rod of yours flies ass-over-teakettle over it. Now I’m going to count to five. By the time I do if you’re not on your feet you can kiss your helmet and your skull goodbye.”

“That’s a two-hundred-dollar helmet, Stew, incidentally.”

“And there’s no access to this airshaft, Brock, incidentally. One...two...three...”

“All right,” he said, rising. “Have it your way. But I hope you’ll at least think about all I’ve been saying.”

“I’ve heard you out. Now I *want* you out. Out of my kitchen. Out of my life. Out of my consciousness. Do you understand? I’ll see you in hell before I engage you any further on the mortal sphere.” I dangled the helmet by its strap.

“Okay, okay. Just don’t say I didn’t try to—”

“*Now!*” I said and threw the helmet at him.

That was the last time I saw my brother, the last time we saw each other.

Alive.

10. MOTHER / MOM

IN BOOK ONE OF HERODOTUS, THE LEGEND IS TOLD OF THE TWIN brothers Kleobis and Biton. According to the legend, the brothers were taking their mother, Cydippe, the Priestess of Hera, from Argos to Heraion to attend the feast of the goddess Hera. When the oxen that were to pull their cart failed to materialize, the brothers pulled the cart themselves—a distance of over five miles. So impressed was the Priestess by her sons' devotion, on arriving at the temple she prayed to Hera to bestow upon her children the greatest of all possible gifts that a god could give to a mortal. Hera attended her prayer. That night, following the feast, the brothers died peacefully in their sleep.

• •

“Brock, Brock—is it really, really you?”

“Yes, mother. Mom. Yes, it’s really me.”

“Oh Brock, we were so—so worried about you!”

“Yes, I know. I’m very sorry.”

“Do you have any idea how worried I was?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Any idea?”

"Yes, Mom. I have some idea."

"How are you? Are you all right, Brock?"

"I'm fine. Really. I'm—I'm okay."

"Where are you?"

"Hmm? Oh, home."

"Home?"

"Dad's house, I mean. At the lake."

"Brock—*why*?"

"Why what, Mom?"

"Why did you do it—disappear like that?"

"Oh. Well—"

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. If it's none of my business."

"No. No, I don't mind. Telling you. It's just that ... well, there's not all that much to tell."

"You sound different."

"Do I?"

"You do. You sound very different."

"I do?"

"You sound like your brother, almost."

"Huh," I said.

"Is he there? Your brother? He was coming down there to look for ... to see you. He should be there by now. Is he?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, he's here."

"Thank God. I was starting to worry about him, too. I couldn't take any more worrying."

"You worry too much, Mother."

"That's what Stewart says. Why shouldn't I worry, when my children disappear? You'd worry, too, if you had children. Why did you just call me that?"

"Call you what?"

"Mother. Just now, a moment ago. You never call me 'Mother.' You've always called me Mom. Stewart—he calls me Mother."

"I don't know, Mother; I mean Mom."

"Are you sure it's you, Brock?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure it's me. Mom."

I stood in front of one of the two sets of French doors. The rain

had stopped. I looked out over the deck railing at the lake. As I did, a patch of blue opened up in what for days had been a gray or white sky, or maybe it had opened up earlier and I just hadn't noticed it before. The lake was calm. I saw the two Adirondack chairs sitting there on the dock, angled to face each other as if in conversation. Then I saw something else. A red boat. It drifted a few dozen feet from the dock. A fishing boat? I remember my father always complaining about boats fishing by his dock. Mornings after breakfast he'd stand right where I stood just then, in front of the French doors in his bathrobe with a mug of coffee in his hand and his face set with consternation, looking out at the dock, muttering to himself. Why the sight of people fishing by his dock perturbed him so I don't know. It's not as if they were doing him or his dock any harm.

My mother spoke.

"Are you sure you'll all right, Brock?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sure. Really. Everything's fine."

"I was so worried. So worried. You have no idea how worried I've been. Everyone's been worried about you. Can you blame them, with you going off like that? Then that terrible dream ... Oh, it was awful. Awful! I won't even tell you about it, that's how awful it was."

"What dream, Mom?"

"I can't tell you. I *won't* tell you. But it was awful, *awful*."

"It was just a dream, Mom."

"This was more than a dream. It was horrible. So horrible. And I kept having it over and over again. The same dream. Every night, almost. Anyway thank god you're still alive. I was so worried, so upset." My mother wept. I could hear her weeping.

"It's okay, Mom. Everything's okay."

"Where's your brother?" she said. "Where's Stewart? Is he there? Can you get him? I should speak to him."

"All right. Okay, Mom; I'll—I'll go get him."

I put the phone on the table, shuffled toward the downstairs bedroom, called out, "Stewart! Hey, Stewart, Mom's on the phone!" A beat or two later I shuffled back and picked the phone up.

"He's coming, Mom. So—how have things been with you?"

"You mean besides me worrying to death about you?"

"Yes."

"The food is terrible, as usual. They don't salt anything. The vegetables are a total disaster. They served Brussels sprouts the other day and I swear they tasted of absolutely nothing. The only thing good here is the strawberry ice cream. The strawberry ice cream is very good. If only they'd give us more than a thimbleful. That's when they don't run out."

"How's the weather been?"

"How should I know? They keep us caged up like animals."

"Hold on, Mom. Stewart's here. Hold on."

I passed the phone to myself.

"Hello, Mother."

"Stewart! Where have you been? Why didn't you call?"

"I don't have a phone, Mother. You know that."

"You could have used a payphone."

"There are no payphones anymore, Mother."

"You could have called collect."

"Do you have any idea how much a person-to-person collect call costs nowadays? Assuming they still do them."

"You still should have called. How long have you been there?"

"I got here yesterday." It seemed much longer.

"Why did it take you so long?"

"Mother, it's an eighteen-hour drive under ideal circumstances. And it rained the whole way. There was traffic."

"You should have called at least."

There was something odd about that red fishing boat, come to think of it. First of all, the fact that it was red—a bright, orangey red. Who goes fishing in a bright red boat? There were four men aboard. Two were sitting, the other two were standing, looking intently down into the water. That too struck me as odd.

"So—did you find your brother all right? I mean does he seem all right to you?"

"Yes, Mother. He seems fine."

"What is his problem? Why didn't he return my calls? Why didn't he return *anyone's* calls?"

"You know how he is, Mother."

"No, Stewart, I don't know how he is. No one knows how

your brother is. As soon as you think you know he changes.”

“Well, that’s how he is.”

“Did he give you any idea why he disappeared like that?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“I did.”

“And?”

“He said it was none of my business.”

“He didn’t say that, Mother.”

“Yes he did.”

“He didn’t, Mother. I heard.”

“He might as well have.”

“Maybe he just needed a break from it all. All these years in the spotlight. Fans, journalists, managers, publicists. Maybe he just needed a little time to himself. Anyway, Mother, there’s nothing to worry about.”

My mother harrumphed. “And how are you?” she asked.

“I’m—I’m okay.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m fine, Mother.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“How long will you be staying there?”

“I don’t know. A few days. A week. Maybe longer.”

“I want you to make sure your brother’s all right.”

“I will. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t let him swim.”

“Mother—”

“Please! I don’t want him in that lake. It’s dangerous.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Promise me, Stewart.”

“Okay, okay. I promise.”

“Can I talk to him again, please?”

“Yeah, sure. He’s uh—he’s in the bathroom. Hold on a sec.”

• •

I put the phone down on a console table by the plant stand holding the dead philodendron. There were some papers on the table, a

stack of opened and unopened letters. I rustled them around a bit, then went into the kitchen, walking on the balls of my feet on the wooden floor so my footfalls could be heard. Murmured exchange of two voices in kitchen. Moments later I returned, picked up the phone, and, in a slightly deeper voice this time (it always seemed to me that my brother's voice was deeper than mine, though this might not have been so; it may just have sounded deeper than my own voice sounded to me in my head), answered.

"Hey, Mom."

"Brock?"

"Yes."

"You sound different again."

"I do?"

"You don't sound like yourself."

"I'm a bit congested. I've got a bit of cold. It's getting better."

"Have you spoken to Dawn? Your assistant? Does she even know that you're down there?"

"Mom, listen to me, please."

"..."

"I checked myself into a hospital." Why I said this I don't know. Like that it just came out of my mouth.

"Hospital? What—?"

"It wasn't a hospital, really. It's a psychiatric facility."

"A *facility*? What—? Why—?"

"Anyway, that's where I've been for the past few weeks. Nervous exhaustion, that was the official diagnosis. In layman's terms it's what people call a nervous breakdown."

"A nervous breakdown? That's *terrible*! Brock—why—?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds, Mom. Really. It happens. Overwork. Exhaustion. Still, it's not the sort of thing I want the whole world to know about. That's why I kept it a secret."

"I see."

"I'd prefer it if no one else knew."

"Not even Dawn?"

"Not anyone. If it should get out... well, it wouldn't do my career any good, do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Nervous—what did you call it?"

“Exhaustion.”

“What do you have to be so nervous about?”

“I doesn’t matter. The important thing is I’m better now. I just needed to take some time away from everything.”

“Why couldn’t you just take a vacation like everyone else? Go to the Greek Islands—or Bermuda?”

“It’s not so easy for me, Mom. I mean... Look, it’s what I did, okay? It’s what I felt I had to do at the time. Maybe it was a mistake. I don’t know. All I know is... well, I feel better now.”

“Well, that’s good,” she said unconvincingly.

“Really, Mom. I really do feel a lot better.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“I’m sorry you got so worried.”

“So am I.”

“How are you, Mother?”

“Why do you keep calling me Mother like that? Your brother always calls me Mother. You never call me Mother.”

“I don’t know. Stew calls you that; maybe it rubbed off on me.”

“You still sound different.”

“I told you I have—I had—a cold.”

“Are you on some sort of medication?”

“Huh? Oh. No, Mom. I mean... for a while they had me on something, but I’m not taking anything now.”

“What did they have you on.”

“Just some drug, you know, to get me stabilized.”

“What drug?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I forget. Jesus, Mom, why the inquisition?”

“I’m curious.”

“I don’t know. Wellbutrin.”

“Wellbutrin? That’s serious.”

“Maybe it wasn’t Wellbutrin, maybe it was something else. I forget. Anyway it was just for a while. To get me, you know, stabilized.”

“Where is your brother?”

“He’s—in the kitchen, why?”

“Are you two getting along?”

“Yeah, we’re getting along.”

"That's good. How does he seem to you?"

"Stew? He seems ... okay."

"What do you mean, 'okay'?"

"Well, honestly, he seems a bit ... subdued."

"Subdued? How?"

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe I'm just imagining it. I haven't seen him in five years."

"Five years," she repeated with dismay.

"It was his choice, Mother, I mean Mom."

"You didn't exactly make it hard for him."

"It was his choice, Mom. The last time we spoke, five years ago, he told me in no uncertain terms he never wanted to see me again. What was I supposed to do?"

"You could have forgiven him."

"Who said I never forgave him?"

"You could have seen that his anger was out of love."

"Oh, sure." As I spoke these words, a part of me couldn't believe they were escaping my lips. And yet they made perfect sense to me; I couldn't disagree. Had my actual brother spoken those same words, not only would I have found no measure of truth in them, I'd have responded with wounded righteous indignation. "Anyway, you asked me how Stew seemed," I said.

"Subdued," my mother repeated.

"He hasn't been happy, Mom. Things have been hard for him. Not getting his book published. Doris breaking up with him."

"I wish she'd held on just a little longer. It might have made all the difference in the world."

"You don't know that."

"It wouldn't have hurt."

"It was probably inevitable, Mom. Their troubles may have been deeper than either of us knew." (They were.)

"She was a stabilizing force for him. He needed that. Your brother was always more volatile than you, more sensitive. The artist. He's always needed someone stronger than him to guide him. Growing up, you used to be that person for him. Now he has no one. He tries to keep it from me, but he's unhappy. I know it. I always thought that of the two of you you were the strongest.

That's why when you disappeared I couldn't believe...it didn't make any sense."

She was crying.

"Mom," I said.

"Try to cheer him up. Try to be a brother to him again. He drove all that way to see you."

I nodded—to myself, obviously. "I'll do what I can," I said.

I heard my mother sigh. "You're so moody, both of you. I was never that way. Not a bit. Your father was never that way either, until...well...How did we raise such moody children?"

"We probably shouldn't talk about this now, Mom."

"I don't understand it."

"Listen, Stew's coming back." More exaggerated foot treads, paper rustling. "Hold on, Mom. I'll pass you back to him. Stew? Stew, talk to Mom," I said, handing the phone to myself.

"Yes, Mother."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm alright," I said, sounding duly subdued.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine, Mom. I mean Mother."

(Jesus. Who was I supposed to be? I'd forgotten.)

"It's time you two started getting along again."

I said nothing.

"At least now you two are talking. Your brother loves you. That's the important thing. You both love each other. He's your twin. Whatever differences you may have, they're nothing compared to what you both have in common. Nothing can change that. Right?"

"Yes. You're right."

"Can I speak to your brother again?"

"Huh? Oh...yeah...uhm...sure, okay. Lemme see if I can get him for you." Shouting: "Greg? Brock?"

More rustling sounds, etc.

"Yeah, Mom."

"Please don't stay down there too long. I mean, fine, take some time to yourself if you have to. But enough is enough."

"A couple more weeks, Mother. That's all."

“Now you sound like Stewart again.”

I said nothing.

“People are depending on you. Your fans. Dawn. Your brother. They love you. I love you. Everyone loves you. Your brother especially. He needs you. You both need each other. Now more than ever. But right now he needs you more than you need him.”

Of course she was right. Mothers always are.

II. BUTTERFLIES & ROCKS

BACK (AGAIN) TO OUR BACK-STORY:

The referral came indirectly through my journalist friend Julie, the one who gave me the Mazda that brought me here. Through her I had been introduced to bestselling author Laura Welles, who contacted me one day to ask me if I would be willing to take her place on a panel (“Second Acts in American Literary Lives: Are There Any?”) at a writer’s conference in Saratoga Springs, she herself having been food-poisoned by a spoiled batch of lobster bisque. Possibly because I had vented abundantly to her about it, Laura was aware of the sad saga of my perpetually evolving opus, and of the fact that Sally Treadwell, my agent, refused to represent it. To my surprise she asked to read the manuscript. To my greater surprise, a week later I found the following email from her in my inbox:

Hi Stew,

I found your novel interesting. Why don’t you send it to my agent, Elizabeth Watson? I’ve told her about it.

Cheers,

Laura

I'm going to say that this was back around June of 2012, though I can't be sure. In case you haven't already guessed, I'm not at all good with dates, mainly because I don't care. What difference does it make, I'd like to know, if something happened in June or July, on a Saturday or a Sunday, in this or that year? Still, there are those readers (you may be one of them) who, equipped with built-in calendar algorithms and having nothing better to do, will catch an author's every chronological slip-up and write finger-wagging letters to their publishers.

At that time, Elizabeth "Bitsy" Watson was the most powerful literary agent in New York City. Less than a year before, she'd placed a first novel by a nineteen-year-old Vassar undergrad for six figures—not any six figures, but six figures starting with the number 5. News of the transaction spread quickly, filling gossip columns with the sort of spiteful buzz that sells books while increasing by an order of magnitude an agent's clout. Overnight, in literary households anyway, "Bitsy" became a household name. To have her as your agent—just to get her to read something of yours—was no mean feat, she having in the wake of all that publicity declared a moratorium on unsolicited manuscripts, especially those of authors whose previous efforts had sold "modestly." Notwithstanding which, Bitsy had agreed to read my manuscript. At least she would read the first few pages. The rest would be up to the work itself.

Since the last time Sally Treadwell rejected my ever-evolving opus, ten years and as many drafts had come and gone. But technically at least I still *had* an agent, so I told myself, albeit one who refused to represent the greatest of all my creations; who refused to even look at it, in fact.

Still, I had faith in my novel. I believed in it. All it lacked was the right agent to champion it, someone of impeccable taste with lots of clout. Someone like "Bitsy" Watson.

• •

Sometimes butterflies and rocks come in the same package. Example: Ashley Bridges. One of my Metropolitan Writing Institute students. Pretty. Twenty-six years my junior (do the math). Here I confront the fiction writer's frequent dilemma: to show or to

tell? To dramatize or not to dramatize? Narrative or exposition? Summary or scene?

Scene: The femme fatale arriving late to her first class. “Strawberry blond” hair. Healthy-looking but pale skin, pale as a blank sheet confronted by a blocked writer except where touched by rouge—or is she blushing? Wearing a crisp frilly white blouse over tight tight designer jeans.

“I am so so sorry I’m late, Professor—” Breathless, extracting a tattered folded page torn from a Metropolitan Writing Institute catalogue, searching for her instructor’s—my—name in it. “Professor...?”

“Detweiler,” her instructor—I—say[s]. “Mr. Detweiler.” (For he is not, has never been, a professor.) “Or just Stewart, if you like.”

“You see, Mr. Stewart, I’m an intern reporter with Fox News, and we had a breaking story this afternoon.” Her breathlessness gives way to what strikes him as a spurious deep-southern-fried accent. “Maybe you heard about it? Late this afternoon this guy jumped off the Manhattan side stanchion of the Brooklyn Bridge. And he lived! I saw the whole thing. They took him to Bellevue. They say he was probably high on something. Oh, it was so *exciting*! Anyway, after filing my report, I went back to my apartment to take a little ol’ nap and ... well, I must have slept right through my alarm! That’s why I’m late.”

Were he any less intent on her “jewel-like” eyes, less—in a word—“*taken*” by her, our protagonist might have seen her for what she was: a burlesque of feminine seductive charm, with her fluttering lashes and pupils that sparkled at will. A neophyte reporter? Hailing from the Deep South? Who was she kidding?

A more vigilant author would have deleted her then and there.

Instead, with ears ringing, holding the class roster over his midriff to hide the involuntary erection (who asked *your* opinion?) asserting itself against his Dockers, our author-protagonist studies his subject, describing her to himself in the present tense. *Her breasts are ample if not especially large; the frilly blouse cut precariously low over them, sending a rush of warm blood to my face.* She smiled. Attractive, to be sure, but in a transparent, superficial way, what E.M. Forster called a *flat character*, dispatchable by a

sentence or phrase: “All surface, no substance.”

Yet there was something else, too, something he couldn't place at first, someone of whom, with her fiery reddish blonde hair, her triangular chin, her freckled skin and bow-shaped smile, she reminded him. Then it came to him. Betsy Butterworth: the girl for whose affections the Detweiler twins once wrestled savagely to no end other than a pine needle up the nose. She who once upon a time had for him been the paradigm of unattainable glory, and—retrospectively—a harbinger of ignominious defeats to come. Now here she stood, reincarnated, bearing a different name, come to be taught by him in his classroom. Her double. Her twin. A second chance?

Summary: He fell for her.

Not that I assumed we'd be lovers; I was neither that naive nor that vain. She merely gave her middle-aged teacher hope that even at his age he stood a chance of engaging her non-platonic interests, that she found him attractive—and not just mentally: that, however over fifty, Stewart Detweiler might still be, as it were, “in the running.” Or anyway not totally over-the-hill.

• •

That impression accrued over a series of shared taxi rides, she to her apartment on Central Park West, me to Grand Central Terminal, from where I caught my train north to The Bronx. The fare having risen to over five dollars, splitting it made sense—for me, anyway, my compensation for dispensing my pearls of wisdom to Metropolitan's matriculants having peaked at thirty-five dollars per classroom hour, not counting prep time.

The first time Ms. Bridges and I shared a cab was in early September, after that first class together. Splitting the cab was her idea. It wasn't like me to chum up with my students, especially early in the term when establishing an air of aloof authority was crucial. Whether they say so or not, deep down students want to look up to their teachers; they don't want us to be their equals. It's what they are paying for. In letting students feel that you are in no way superior to them you take the bread, as it were, from their mouths.

But half of five bucks was half of five bucks, so I agreed.

The first taxi I flagged pulled over. I held the door open for

her; she bowed first before sliding across the roomy seat (the cab was an old-style Checker, one of the last of its breed). She held her pale slender hands out for my briefcase. "I'll take that for you, sir, if you like."

As we rolled up Lexington Avenue I smelled her perfume, a scent of verbena and hothouse gardenias that I'd been aware of only subliminally in the classroom, but that in the closed darkness of the taxicab swelled to full amplitude. I've never been a fan of perfume or makeup of any kind, those expedients behind which some women enhanced their animi. I rolled my window down. As I did, Ashley asked, "How long have you been teaching?" Seeing the parade of stalled red taillights winking ahead of us, wondering was it too late to take Park Avenue, I made a quick calculation and answered, "This term will be [ten?] years." Then, more to myself, shaking my head, "Amazing how quickly the time has gone."

"You must be enjoying yourself."

"Oh? How did you reach that conclusion?"

"Times flies when you're having fun."

"Tut-tut. Cliché."

"Some clichés are true."

"Most of them are. That's not what's wrong with them. Anyway, as they say, *tempus fugit*." I studied the rhythmic patterns of winking brake lights.

"You sound somewhat morose," she observed.

"Somewhat morose? I'd have said wistful."

"Wistful with a twist of cynicism."

"Sounds like a cocktail. Bring me a wistful, straight up with a twist of cynicism."

"Shaken, not stirred."

"Very good. It comes with age, to answer your question."

"What?"

"Whatever modifier you want to paste on me."

"You're as old as you feel. I know: cliché." I felt her smile in the dark next to me.

"In that case I feel fifty-three years old."

"How old *are* you?"

"Fifty-three."

The driver said something. I turned to see him, under his turban, speaking into a cellphone. Though by then they had eroded civility for over a decade, I still couldn't abide having to listen to one side of another person's conversation, let alone in the back of a taxi and on my dime. But my fellow passenger had already accused me of cynicism. I had no wish to provide her with yet more targets for her pop psychology squirt gun. Traffic was at a standstill.

"Aren't you going to ask me how old I am, Professor?"

With a sigh: "How old are you?"

"Guess!"

"I'd rather not, thank you."

"Why not?"

"I'll flatter or offend you, and I don't care to do either."

We had yet to reach 23rd Street. I tapped on the Plexiglas divider. "I've got a 10:20 train to catch. Why don't you try Park?" I suggested. Into his chin microphone the taxi driver murmured something. I tapped the Plexiglas harder. "Did you hear me? Who are you talking to, anyway?"

"They talk to each other," Ashley answered for him. "It gets them through the long lonesome days and dark, lonely nights."

"Well it's not getting me to Grand Central, that's for sure."

"You'll make your train, don't worry. If not, I'll just have to buy you a drink at the Oyster Bar. And maybe some oysters, too. Do you know what the French poet said about eating oysters?"

"No," I said.

"*Eet eez like keezing ze see on ze leaps!*" She tittered.

I almost said something apropos being her teacher, being too old, being any number of things that would have rendered said drink with or without oysters inappropriate. Then I thought better of it. Why go there? Meanwhile I silently vowed not to let this wily attractive clever young woman insinuate herself into my private life.

At five minutes to my train the cab pulled up in front of Grand Central. With the taxi door opened and me standing on the curb and the cab driver still on his phone, I handed Ashley a five-dollar bill.

"Don't be silly," she said, waving the money away. "You can pay next time."

There will be no next time, I thought, but had no time to argue.

I jammed the five back into my trouser pocket, said goodnight, and was about to slam the taxi door when Ashley shouted, “Hold on!” and presented me with my very own worn leather briefcase.

“Much obliged,” I said, taking it.

“See you next week,” said Ashley.

“Next week is Rosh Hashanah. No class.”

“Oh, right. Forgot.” That smile again, those batted eyelashes. No denying it: she had a lovely face.

I had started across the street when I heard:

“Mr. Detweiler—Stewart?”

I turned to see her waving a manila envelope out the taxicab window.

“I know it’s not my turn yet, but I would be so so very appreciative if you’d give a quick look to these few pages of mine that I’ve written, and let me know if I’m on the right track?”

“I really shouldn’t,” I said, taking the envelope.

“I so appreciate it,” said Ashley Bridges.

I nodded, then ran to catch my train.

• •

Before submitting it to “Bitsy,” I had planned to spend a weekend or two putting the final polish on my novel. I spent two months. When waking was necessary—when not in the grip of insomnia—I woke up every morning at 4:30 to work on it. This was my big chance. I didn’t want to blow it.

For this version, I decided that maybe Sally Treadwell had been right after all; maybe I should give my novel more of a plot. Not just any plot, a sensational one full of surprises and twists. I’d incorporate my idea for my twin novel. Remember? It’s basic premise: twin brothers trade lives with each other. Sound familiar? Yes, just as Greg and I traded places back in sixth grade. This time, though, the prank would take a macabre turn, with the blocked novelist twin (“writing a novel about a blocked novelist...” etc.) assuming the identity of his brother, whom he murders. Yes, murders: why not? Oh, it would be dark, very dark, possibly the darkest novel ever written, its darkness mitigated in part by a rollicking, unhinged, rant-prone, maximally unreliable narrator, its

imagery, meanings, and motifs bursting with metaphor, its narrative suffused with essayistic digressions on topics ranging from Determinism, Cartesian Dualism, Manichaeism, and Physical Cosmology, to the Paradox of the Cretan Liar and the Coincidence of Opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), all combined with assorted postmodern metafictional bells and whistles.

How, you wonder, did I manage to orchestrate all of the above into a sensational page-turning novel? Trust me, Dear Reader: I did it. And with only minimal recourse to metaphysics.

You must wonder, too—or is marvel the better word?—at the coincidence by which my sensational plot replicates the plot of this, my confession? I admit, it *is* an enormous coincidence, one that stretches credulity to—if not beyond—the breaking point. Yet I take no blame for that; it simply happens to have been the case. Bear in mind, too, that the book that I wrote (or re-wrote) was a novel, whereas what you are reading is nonfiction. One has nothing to do with the other.

But even were this a novel, and I, its author, a student in one of my own Metropolitan Writing Institute workshops, I would enforce the rule that erects a firewall between author and narrator, between creator and creation. Though we authors may be guilty of fabricating characters and thrusting them into a challenging situation or situations, we can't be held accountable for what those characters do or for what happens to them subsequently. That includes coincidences owing to nature or destiny, therefore beyond the author's purview.

What's that? You don't *believe* it? It's *too much* of a coincidence?

You're forgetting something, aren't you, Dear Reader? Namely whose words these are that you're reading: those of a dead person. Complain all you want. Your complaints fall on dead ears. Bulletin: I CAN DO WHAT I WANT. I can cut my thumb and drizzle blood all over this page. I can drool on it or set it on fire. I can insert a recipe for borscht or chicken soup. I can quote from *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy* ("*Much of the mystery surrounding drug action can be cleared up by recognizing that drugs affect only the rate at which biologic functions proceed...*") or *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* ("*Justice*

is a phenomenon only of consciousness, because time spread out in a spatial succession is its very essence. And this is possible only in a spatial metaphor of time...”), or from *The Kybalion* (“In addition to the changing of the poles of one’s own mental states by the operation of the art of Polarization, the phenomena of Mental Influence, in its manifold phases, shows us that the principle may be extended so as to embrace the phenomena of the influence of one mind over that of another...”).

I can recite De Morgan’s Laws:

The negation of a conjunction is the disjunction of the negations.

The negation of a disjunction is the conjunction of the negations.

“not (A and B)” = “(not A) or (not B)”

“not (A or B)” = “(not A) and (not B)”

I can burst into song, if I bloody well feel like it. A Union Song, maybe, *Joe Hill* or *Cotton Mill Colic*, or something sappy from *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*.

And while it’s true that with respect to the commerce between reader and writer you, the reader, hold all the cards, that you have not only the right but the power to cast these words of mine aside at any moment, to put this confession down and never pick it up again, or tear its pages out one by one and use them for kindling, I’m betting you won’t. I’m betting you’ll read at least as far as this sentence and beyond. It wouldn’t surprise me if you’ve done so already.

Anyway, believe it or not, I’m telling the truth. The dead have no reason to lie.

So—I revised my novel again. I considered calling this version “Quantum Entanglement,” but after considering fell back on my working title: “Duplicity.”

• •

I seem to have gotten ahead of myself again. We’re still on the 10:20 local to The Bronx.

Having found an isolated seat, as the train tunneled its way out of Spanish Harlem, with the manila envelope Ashley had given me lying on the baize seat beside me, I snapped open my briefcase,

extracted the day-glow orange folder marked “Metropolitan,” and perused my students’ workshop submissions. A few lines was all it took usually to arrive at a summary judgment. For instance, a story by Michael Quigley, the guy in the J. Crew plaid flannel shirt and wire-rimmed glasses, a former I.T. geek who, like so many Metropolitan students, lost his job during the crash. His serial killer novel opened with an italicized diary entry by one Albertos Morpheus, aka “The Burger King Butcher,” *that twisted cannibal who grinds his victim’s flesh into hamburger meat and cooks them on his parents’ barbecue grill...* or words to that effect. Clearly Michael wanted to be the next Stephen King or Thomas Harris, a process that by his estimation would take about six months and earn him a high six figures—and that was just the advance on royalties. I’d have had little sympathy for Michael and his kind had they not been so meek and self-effacing, saving all their bloodlust for the pages of their prospective blockbusters. That said, if I never had to read another story about serial killers again, it wouldn’t have been too soon.

Next: a short story by Margot Abrons, who sat off to the side of the class presumably so her nail biting would escape notice. It began, “On a stark cold winter night, my boyfriend’s best friend, Bernie, drives me to the clinic.” Another abortion story. I could anticipate one per term. Not that there’s anything wrong with abortion as a subject for fiction per se. Whatever side of the issue one stands on, it’s a sad part of reality. The problem with the abortion stories my students wrote was that they never failed to pick the lowest hanging—no, not the lowest-hanging, but already on the ground and rotting—sentimental fruit. Instead of challenging the reader’s feelings as good fiction does, they merely exploited them. Odds favored Margot’s story ending as eight out of ten such stories did, on an ironically symbolic note, with heroine exiting through alleyway behind clinic to avoid mob of protesters out front, to be met with the rosy-fingered dawn forming itself into the shape of a human fetus.

Next:

How striking her beauty was to me! Ever since I first
spied Lilith’s cloaked and bound figure as she was forced

by the royal guards to kneel before her Majesty, Queen Kali Morab III, I foresaw a temptation that even I, fiercely devoted Second to Princess Ourania, could hardly resist...

The perpetrator of this abominable tripe was Alice Nordland. She sat in the last row and rarely spoke, her face buried in a notebook wherein at first I assumed she dutifully transcribed my every pearl-like utterance. In fact—and as I saw while distributing my handout—she was doodling Rapunzel-haired “damsels in distress” and “knights in shining armor,” complete with visors and, I kid you not, jousting sticks. As much as I disapproved of reality, I found it easier to stomach than fantasy. The best thing to be said of students like Alice is that one rigorous critique was all it took, usually, to get them to drop the class and retreat back into their dungeons.

All this time Ashley’s envelope sat on the seat next to me. I hadn’t forgotten it. Reluctantly, I picked it up. The lickable flap wasn’t sealed. I pried open the brass clasp, and—slowly, with a blend of curiosity and dread—drew out the manuscript. With it resting in my lap I counted the girders of the Park Avenue Bridge as they swept by. What made me hesitate? The prospect of having my worst fears confirmed, or seeing them nullified? Odds favored her being less talented than she believed, in which case it would be up to me to break the news however tactfully. But supposing she turned out to be brilliant? Or worse: a far better writer than I? There was always that fear-encased possibility, or that fear-encased hope, since I wanted my students to be good; I wanted them to succeed, truly I did. Notwithstanding which I didn’t want them to outshine me, at least not straight out of the gate.

If my years of teaching at MWI had taught me anything, it was that the odds of that happening were slim to nonexistent. Most (I nearly wrote “the vast majority” —how wily the cliché!) of my students were at best modestly gifted. Had they been truly talented, they would have gone to Columbia, to Brooklyn, to Hunter...to any one of the accredited graduate programs sprouting “like mushrooms” across the country, many of which offered tuition assistantships. The dabblers, the dawdlers, the dilettantes, the dregs—they took classes at MWI. Now and then a truly gifted student slipped

through the cracks to land in a class of mine. To date none had posed a threat to my authorial supremacy.

I picked up Ashley's manuscript. I read the title page:

Leaving Whynot
a novel???

I sighed. If you had no story to tell, a novel was as good a place as any to hide it. Spill enough ink on enough paper and you're bound to produce—if not a masterpiece, a *manuscript*. Turning the page (as the train clattered along the Harlem River) I read:

“Oh my dear, dear, *dahlin'* sister, oh Lordy, I feel so *sorry* for you, I surely do. Those New York City folk, those bobcats—why they'll chew you up and blow you out in tiny little bubbles, I sweah to God, they will, little sistah!”

My mulatto half-sister Rosalie lay sprawled in her flowing, white chiffon nightgown across the disheveled surface of her tall, pink canopy bed, looking every inch of her like something a swarthy angel had dragged in from way up high in the cottony Mississippi clouds...

It's brash, I thought. I'll give her that. “Swarthy angel” wasn't half bad. Striking the word “surface,” I replaced it first with “sheets” then with “covers.” I read on, cutting a modifier here, rearranging a sentence there. Good God, I told myself. *I'm editing her!* I had long since forsworn line-editing students' efforts. It was too much work, for one thing, and they rarely appreciated it. My doing so to Ashley Bridge's pages could only have meant one thing: I was enchanted. By her charms, by her work. By both.

I turned and peered across the aisle through the scratched window at the lights of Harlem spilling their reflections into the black river. Meanwhile in my own window the floodlights of Yankee Stadium dazzled, a night game running extra innings. With my forehead resting against the cool glass I closed my eyes. As bridges, buildings, and viaducts floated by, I imagined the train being lifted off the tracks, seized by the grip of an enormous gorilla, soaring through the darkness. While aware of its power to crush the train, I was simultaneously touched by the solicitous restraint of

the monster's grip. From that brief dream I awoke with a start, convinced that I'd missed my station, to see that the train had just pulled out of University Heights.

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Though I lived in Kingsbridge, closer to the Marble Hill station, I preferred to get off at the next stop, one with an odd, Dutch-sounding name: Spuyten Duyvil. From there I walked home. At that hour the station, situated along a stretch of desolate marshland, was deserted. At the platform's far end, near the overpass, among a phalanx of newspaper vending boxes, stood a fluorescent orange Metropolitan Writing Institute catalogue "kiosk" — a term that evoked in me Technicolor footage of Gene Kelly hoofing it through the twisted cobblestone streets of Montmartre, though it was only a plastic box and empty at that. It had been empty for months, either because demand by Bronx residents for creative writing courses greatly exceeded supply, or because my employer hadn't gotten around to refilling it. Those intent on a catalogue were met with

**Sorry, we're out of catalogues.
For further information please call**

followed by a toll-free number. However technically correct, that "further" bugged me. We're supposed to be a writing school, damn it. Why seek "further" information? Further than what? Than information close at hand? *Way out there* information? *Far out* information? "I'd like the *furthest* information available." Having contemplated doing so for weeks, with a black Sharpie from my briefcase, glancing furtively over each shoulder like a schoolyard pervert, I changed "further" to "more."

No sooner did I make my editorial contribution than an electronic voice cried: "*Alarm... Alarm!*" — followed by a series of apocalyptic whoops and bleats. One of the ticket vending machines on the overpass had malfunctioned. It had been doing so for days. I breathed "a sigh of relief." Imagine: arrested for assaulting bad usage! I wouldn't have put it past them.

Then I climbed the stairs from the train platform to the street.

It was a mostly uphill two-mile walk to my building... (yeah, I know, you're impatient, wanting me to get on with the story: not that of an insomniac writing instructor arriving home to his status-quo situation, or that of the same author falling for one of his female students, or even that of a struggling author perturbed by his twin's not only having written a bestseller, but having kept it a secret from him, not *those* stories, but the one you started some hundred and fifty pages ago, of a man who encounters his double hanging from the ceiling beam of a lakeside A-frame, *that* story. You'd like me to dispense with digressions, ditch the past perfect, pick up the pace, get to *what happens next*. I know; I wasn't a Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute for nothing. But this is no mere flashback, it's my back-story, which is to say: *my life*.

(And why should you want me to get on with it, knowing, as you do, what awaits me at this confession's end? Yet there you stand with your scimitar aimed at my neck. Dear King Schariar, please be patient with your Scheherazade. I promise I'll get back to the main plot! I just need to establish a few more things first, to give you a clear understanding of the circumstances that inspired me to assume my dead brother's identity. Just a few more pages, please. Then—if you must, if you're still so inclined, have at me with your fucking sword.)

Now then... where were we?

It was a three-mile walk to my building. Blah blah, atmosphere, moonlight, neighborhood, stream-of-consciousness musings. Home.

Before bed I check the mail (note tense shift). My American Express statement, along with other bills, including one for \$378.13 for an oil pan reseal and brake job for the Mazda. Junk flyers. A rejection slip from the *Tallahassee Review*.

The United States Postal Service having delivered its usual injuries and insults, I switch on my computer and click the email icon, inviting a barrage of spam, including several enticements for male member enhancement, one come-on for which ("Gain a HUGE PENIS in your sleep!") evokes the image of Gregor Samsa waking to find himself transformed not into a giant beetle, but into a giant phallus. How the story might proceed from there I'm deliberating when a fresh email pops onto my screen.

From: *abridges@hotmail.org*

Subject: *taxi shanghai*

hi stew,

Stew?!

i hope you don't mind my emailing you at this late hour, but i had to tell you how much i enjoyed my first class with you and how grateful i was that you volunteered to read what I gave you tonight though you didn't volunteer really i pretty much shanghaied you anyway you'll think its totally amateurish i'm sure but still i can't wait to hear what you think

pleasant dreams

ashley

Should I answer? Heck no! It's past midnight!

I close my computer, eat a bowl of Raisin Bran with water (my quart of milk having turned), shower, take half an Ambien, go to sleep—or to bed, sleep and bed having become disassociated with each other of late. Forty minutes after nodding off, I'm up.

Curious, isn't it, how my enlarged prostate mirrors that of the protagonist of "Harris' Book"—which, in case you've forgotten, was absorbed by "Pure Flux" and all subsequent iterations of my novel. Curious, too, is it also not, how these novels of mine, or this one perpetually ameliorated novel, anticipated with Cassandran clairvoyance its author's fate. Be all that as it may, my impinged upon urethra with its Chicken Little urgencies ("*Alarm! ... Alarm! ...*") has once again awoken me.

Sleep being off the table, I contemplate various pursuits practicable at two o'clock in the morning, to wit:

- a) floss teeth
- b) trim:
 - 1. eyebrows
 - 2. toenails
 - 3. nostril hairs
- c) scrape dried crud off electric toothbrush charger base
- d) water plants
- e) organize linen closet

f) gargle

g) read (not a novel; heavens no; too enervating. Something companionable and edifying, a random dip into Erasmus' *Copia*, Burton's *Melancholy*, or the *Zibaldone*.)

Should those activities prove insufficiently engaging, I can always get drunk and/or commit suicide.

Instead, I re-read Ashley's email. However obsequious, it beats being told that I owe eight hundred dollars to a credit card company or that my latest short story sucks or that my penis is a candidate for enhancement. I type:

Dear Ashley,

(Yes, I'm one of those email troglodytes who insists on salutations, valedictions, punctuation, and, yes, capitalization.)

Thanks for your note. I too enjoyed meeting you and our shared taxicab ride. I haven't yet read the material you gave me, but I look forward to doing so and am sure there's nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact — and unless you have any objection — I'd like to Chamber it when we meet in two weeks' time for our next class.

Meanwhile — have faith!

See you in two weeks.

Yours,

Stewart

Before hitting "send," I append my surname. Then I change "Yours" to "Best."

Then I delete the exclamation point.

Then I reinstate it.

Then I delete it again.

Then I cut "and our shared taxicab ride."

I'm about to hit "send" again when on second (or third—or fourth—thought), I delete my surname. *Then* I hit "send."

My gut muscles contract, relax.

I fart.

Then I return to bed and sleep "like a baby."

12. BURYING BROCK

THE GENIUS OF KAFKA'S "THE METAMORPHOSIS" RESTS MAINLY in its fantastic opening. "*When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed right there in his bed into some sort of monstrous insect.*" With one declarative sentence, Kafka establishes his alternative universe. No explanations, no arguments. Take it or leave it.

No sooner did I answer my mother's query ("*Is it really you, Brock?*") in the affirmative, than I became my brother. One moment I was Stewart Detweiler, failed novelist and disgraced Senior Metropolitan Writing Institute Instructor; the next I was Brock Jones, PhD, bestselling author and motivational guru.

The metamorphosis—that wasn't the hard part. All I had to do was believe it. "*There's no such thing, really, as reality. What we think of as 'reality' is nothing more than an unbroken series of convictions. The empiricists got it backwards. Perceptions don't shape beliefs, beliefs shape perceptions.*" —Coffee, Black.

And I did believe it; I had no trouble believing it. The differences between my brother and me had always been negligible, matters of degree and chance, a twist of fortune here, a roll of the dice there, this road taken, that one left behind. Compared to the

things we had in common, the choices that led each of us on to our distinct paths were as superficial as the clothes we wore, the brands of toothpaste we used, the way we combed our hair. Deep down in our DNA, we were—had always been—identical.

It wasn't even a question of belief. One needn't believe in a demonstrable fact.

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Since Greg Detweiler and Brock Jones, PhD were, had been, one and the same, and since Gregory Detweiler and I had likewise been identical, by logical extension Brock Jones, PhD and Stewart Detweiler were identical.

As for Stewart Detweiler, the reality...potentiality?...the unique set of possibilities and conditions that until that moment had gone by his name no longer existed. They'd been replaced, usurped by a new set of probabilities and possibilities. Had I bothered, I might have remembered them, but only the way one remembers parts of a dream.

But to answer your anticipated question: no, I never looked back. Why look back into a black, empty abyss when one can look forward into a bright future?

Besides, there was no time for looking back. I had too much to do.

• •

For starters, there was the question of what to do about Stewart Detweiler. Now that I had become Brock, what was to become of him?

The obvious answer was that Stewart Detweiler could no longer exist. He had to die, to be dead. In fact he already was. His putrefying corpse hung by a length of rope from the ceiling beam above my head. That's right. Now that I was Brock Jones, PhD, logically he who had been Brock Jones, PhD, the one hanging from that beam, was now my erstwhile self, Stewart Detweiler.

But wait! you say. Before you go on to describe said undertaking (a word that, in the given context, is doubly apt), did you not

stop to consider the ethics of what you were doing? Assuming your twin's identity? Taking his life? Couldn't you see how *wrong* it was?

Taking? Dear Reader, I wasn't *taking* anything! No, no—I was giving, as I saw it, as I still see it. My twin, who from where I stood had had a fabulously good life, was dead; while I, whose life was a botch, lived. Greg/Brock had had everything to live for, while I, his wretched twin, had few if any good reasons left to carry on my demeaning existence. Yet my brother had died while I went on breathing. It was all wrong! It made no sense!

But it was a wrong that I would set right.

How? you ask.

By giving this perfectly healthy but wasted body of mine to him, to my dead brother. Not just a kidney or an eye or a lung or even a heart or a brain, but all eleven organ systems: circulatory, respiratory, digestive, reproductive, nervous, skeletal, muscular, endocrine, excretory, immune, and integumentary...the whole kit-n-caboodle.

That's how I saw it, how I still see it. Besides, Dear Reader: what else could I do? Having already led my mother to believe my brother, her precious son, the apple of her worrisome eye, was alive and well, having relieved her of that one monumental worry, could I possibly get back to her and say, "Hey, guess what, Mom? When you talked to Brock? That wasn't Brock. That was me. Brock is dead. He hanged himself. I was just—you know—*pulling your leg*." How cruel a person do you suppose I am?

No, I couldn't do that. The moment I led our mother to believe that my brother was alive and well, I was committed to making it so.

But wait, you say. What about *you*? Sooner or later, your mother would have to find out that *you* were dead. In which case wouldn't she be just as upset?

You're right; that's true. Of course she'd be upset. I'd taken that into account. But instead of losing a successful son, she'd lose a miserable failure. Which would be the lesser loss?

Besides, she loved my brother more. She worshipped Brock. She even kept a shrine to him in her assisted living facility apartment, on her vanity in front of the mirror, with signed copies of his books and autographed publicity photos and clippings from

People and other magazines. The same vanity held no shrine to Stewart Detweiler.

How, you wonder, was it possible for a mother not only to favor one twin over another, but to favor the twin who'd changed his name, who had denied his—her—identity?

Here I can only theorize. My theory is this: that for our mother, her son's, my brother's, change of identity was a relief. She'd been grateful for it. It gave her hope that at least one of us had slipped out from under Malcolm Detweiler's suicidal shadow, that he had freed himself from the Detweiler curse. To our worry-prone mother this must have constituted a tremendous weight off her shoulder. Hence her worshipful embrace of Brock Jones, PhD, the hero who'd rescued one of her sons. In her dimming vision his was the brightest of stars.

That was my theory, anyway.

But do you really expect people to believe you weren't motivated by greed? By the pied-à-terre in Paris, the beach bungalow in Venice? Not to mention all the opportunities attendant to gaining your brother's fame? Do you honestly expect people to believe your motives were purely altruistic, that you weren't thinking also if not mainly of yourself?

Whoever said that to be noble motives need to be pure? What's pure in life? Sure, I was thinking of myself. One way or another every choice we make in life is designed to give us some form of pleasure, whether that of satisfying a hunger or expiating some form of guilt or just the pleasure of doing a good deed. Those were secondary motives. My primary motives were selfless; they were noble. Nothing you say or think will convince me otherwise.

Now may I get on with it?



The question remained: what was my former self doing hanging from a ceiling beam in the home that had once been our father's and to where my present self had absconded, seeking refuge from his notoriously successful life? How to explain that to myself, let alone to anyone else?

The first explanation that came to me was the most virtuous

in its simplicity. Summoned by our panicked mother to my father's lakeside house to learn why no one had seen or heard from me in two months, having found me in hiding but otherwise in good condition, after spending a seemingly pleasant day with me, one night, in the middle of the night, while I lay sound asleep in my downstairs bedroom, my identical twin, whom I had left asleep in the loft, awoke, got hold of a length of blue nylon rigging rope, and—most inconsiderately, I might add—hanged himself from the ceiling beam as our father had done years before. You see, I would tell whoever asked me, my poor brother suffered from depression. He had been deeply depressed for some time. How did I know? He'd told me, that's how. In our last conversation, before I'd gone to bed that night, we'd spoken about it. He made it clear that he'd been terribly depressed. I could go into all the gory details, if I had to, if compelled to. I could tell whoever it was about my brother's—about Stewart's—slow but steady descent from bright early promise into disillusionment, despair, depravity, and decrepitude, about his failed literary career and his disastrous dalliance with a young woman less than half his age, as a result of which he had lost not only what little remained of his dignity but his job, a job that, though he may have complained about it from time to time, had been his one remaining anchor in life. I could say all those things by way of explanation. Or I could just say, "He'd been depressed," and leave it at that, since, as with good fiction, it's often best to give readers an impression supported by one or two authenticating details and leave the rest to the imagination.

What was wrong with this idea? Nothing, except that I'd have to report the suicide to the authorities. The police would have to investigate. True, Stewart Detweiler had no life insurance, so there'd be no insurance company involvement. Still, there would be an investigation, and possibly an autopsy. What were the odds that no one would suspect a possible switcheroo on the part of the deceased's reprobate twin? Dental and other medical records would be consulted and compared. Did we have identical cavities? I had three root canals, two crowns, and, on the bottom left side of my mouth, a missing molar that only showed when I smiled widely, which I did rarely. What chance was there that my twin

had the same missing molar? And even if he did, still, there would be other discrepancies.

No: it wouldn't work. I had to get rid of the body, to dispose of it. But where? How? By what means? I had to decide. Having decided, I'd have to act swiftly. I'd also have to be careful. I'd have to make it look as though Stewart—my former self—had committed suicide, but in such a way as left no body to be found.

Here again, almost immediately a simple solution presented itself: drowning. Stewart would have to have drowned. Yes: my depressed brother had consigned himself to a hideous watery death. One night—the same night as in the previous scenario—while I slept, he got up, got dressed, went down to the dock, jumped into the freezing water and drowned himself. No, that wouldn't do. Eventually his body would turn up. He'd have to weigh himself down with something. He'd have to fill his pockets with stones, like Virginia Woolf before she waded into the Ouse. But first he'd have to somehow get himself out into deep water. He couldn't swim out, not with pockets full of stones. He'd have to do so by some other means. Of course! Our father's boat! That's how he'd do—how he had done, how he *did*—it. It's important to put the story in the past tense, to think of it not as an idea, but as a *fait accompli*, something that has already happened. This is what I'd tell my students at the Metropolitan Writing Institute whenever they would come to me and say, "I have this idea for a story" or "What if my character were to do X?" Forget about ideas, I'd say. Readers don't want ideas; they want a story! Never mind what your characters *would* do; what *do* they do; what *did* they do? Conceive of your stories *as if they've already happened*.

Ergo:

He'd filled the boat with stones, then, having rowed himself far out into deep water, with his coat on and its pockets filled with stones, he climbed (jumped?) overboard. Being a strong swimmer like his brother, even weighed down with stones he might have put up a bit of a struggle. He might have grabbed onto the side of the boat and tried to save himself. Or he might have given the boat a shove, preempting any such effort. In any event, with the water as cold as it was, even if somehow he'd managed to empty the stones

from his pockets and keep himself afloat, still, he would be too far out in the lake to make it back to shore before succumbing to the below-fifty-degree water. No, there'd be, or would have been, no way for him to change his mind and then to rescue himself.

And the boat? That was the beauty part. For the boat would eventually find its way to someone's dock. True, that someone might not report it; that someone might just want to keep such a beautiful boat while breathing not a word to anyone. On the other hand, they wouldn't be able to use the boat, now, would they, especially once word got out about its having gone missing in the middle of the night along with one Stewart Detweiler. Once the missing boat was found, one could only conclude that the missing person had been its solitary passenger and sole crew. From there could one come to any conclusion other than suicide? Especially given the stones left in the bottom of the boat's hull, along with an empty vodka (no, better make that gin: I, or rather my brother, preferred gin) fifth, and a likewise empty vial of Diazepam or some other prescription drug from his—my former—travel kit?

It was, I told myself, a good if not a flawless plan.

True, someone *might* suspect something. If so, there'd be no witnesses to confirm their suspicions. But then why would anyone suspect anything? By what twisted logic would anyone be drawn to the conclusion that the wealthy, famous, successful, respected and adored Brock Jones, PhD, had, for some bizarre reason, killed himself?—rather than his failed, miserable, embittered, impoverished, obscure, friendless, clinically depressed brother?

But—

Wait! Oh no no no no no no. It won't work. The boat. It can't be found. If it's found, then it was missing. If it was missing, then I—Brock Jones, PhD—must have known that it was missing along with my depressed, possibly suicidal brother. In which case, I would have had to report both the boat and my brother as missing. I'd have to tell everyone: my mother, the police. And I'd have to do so right away, as soon as *I* knew: meaning the moment I noticed that the boat and my brother were both gone. Right?

But supposing... supposing I didn't notice the boat was gone? Supposing all I knew was that my brother Stewart had gone miss-

ing. How did I know? When did I know? After a week or two. You see, he'd—he'd driven off one day. That's right. He drove off in his car, in his once sporty, now decrepit Mazda RX-7. Naturally I assumed he was headed home. Naturally. So when I heard nothing more of him, that was no surprise to me. After all, prior to this last spontaneous and unplanned visit we hadn't spoken to each other in—how long? Years. Five years. So why would I call—or expect a call from—him? I just assumed he was fine. Naturally.

The missing boat? I assumed that it was behind the house, under the deck. That's where I last left it, having been too lazy to bring it indoors and deal with the hoisting mechanism. So I'd put it under the tarp. After Stew and I took it out. Oh, yes; and I'd also let him take the boat out once or twice by himself. He'd asked me if he could.

“What are you asking me for?” I'd said.

“It's your boat.”

“It's Dad's boat,” I said.

“It came with the house. The house is yours.”

“Nonsense. It's as much your boat as it is mine. Anyway by all means take it out. I never use it. I'd rather swim. Enjoy yourself.”

So he'd used it a few times. That's right. Anyway, I forgot that it had been left under the deck. So I didn't notice it was missing. I never looked back there. Why would I? The only other things I keep back there are a wheelbarrow and the deck furniture, likewise under tarps. But it being winter I had no use for either. So how was I to know the boat was gone? That my brother had taken it on the roof of his car? Yes, that's right: he'd tied it down with some blue rigging rope and driven off with it. (Can you do that with a convertible sports car, tie a boat on top of it? Who knows? Sure. Why not?) Maybe I knew he'd driven off with it. Maybe he'd asked me if he could drive off with our dead father's boat on top of his car. Why? How should I know? What would he want with a boat in New York City—in The Bronx, no less? Maybe he'd take it out on the Hudson River. I don't know. Why are you asking all these questions? I never asked so many questions. All I knew was he'd driven off with the boat on top of his car, on top of the Mazda. What he planned to do with the thing was his business.

Little did I suspect that it was all part of a suicidal plan.

And just what was that plan, you ask? Your Honor, or whoever the hell you are, the plan was this: that he'd drive the car with the boat on its roof to a secluded boat ramp, where he would launch it along with himself, a fifth of gin, a vial of (name prescription sleep-inducing drug), and a bunch of rocks. He'd row himself out into the depths of the lake, and then he would ...

But why go to all that trouble? Why not take the boat into the water here, at the house? Better still, why not just jump off the dock? Why bother with the car and the boat and all that?

Your Honor, I honestly don't know. On the other hand, where is it written that in order to commit suicide you have to be in your right mind, or even rational, let alone efficient or practical? Maybe he wanted to confuse me; maybe he didn't want me to know that he had done what he did, at least not right away. Or maybe he planned it that way; maybe he didn't plan it at all. Maybe he acted on a series of impulses, blindly, out of distress and despair. I don't know; I really can't explain it. All I know is my brother is gone, Your Honor, and so was my—our—boat, until someone discovered it weeks later washed up on his or her lawn.

(See why I've struggled with plot? I no sooner engage one than it becomes convoluted and implausible. Better to have no plot at all, I felt and still believe. In this case, though, a complicated plot would have to do. Anyway, it would buy me some badly-needed time.)

Wait a minute! Of course. What was I *thinking*? There was no need to kill off Stewart Detweiler. Why bother killing him off, when he was barely alive to begin with, when all it would take to make him "live" was a phone conversation with my mother three or four times a month, and only as long as she lived—which, let's face it, wouldn't be all that long, not with her advanced diabetes and her kidneys already well on the way to failing. No other family, no job, no friends, no literary agent, no fame, no fortune, no beach bungalow in Venice or *pied-à-terre* in New York or Paris or Portofino, no one calling or checking up on him with any frequency (the last person to do so had been Julie, the Pulitzer Prize winner who gave him her car, her used Mazda, the one who'd moved to Paris) ... There was the landlord where he lived, but a

check once a month would take care of him. What about his land-line? What if people phoned it? I'd disconnect it! Who uses land-lines anymore? I'd have the phone company provide a message with my—with Stewart's—new cell phone number. No. Wait. Why would I do that? I'd simply tell my mother myself to use the new number. What about everyone else? To hell with everyone else! What about the mail? I'd send a forwarding notice to the post office. No I wouldn't! I'd do no such thing! No one would know. Who else might notice that I—I beg your pardon—that Stewart Detweiler, was gone, missing? No one!

There now, you see? There are *advantages to alienating people!* Nice job, Stewart! Thanks to your miserably circumscribed existence, thanks to your misanthropy, your pettiness, your spite, your bitterness, your lack of warmth and grace and humor, your generally negative attitude toward life, you've made *my* life—the new one—that much easier! I don't have to kill you off after all! For all intents and purposes, for *my* intents and purposes, you're dead enough!

So much for Stewart Detweiler.

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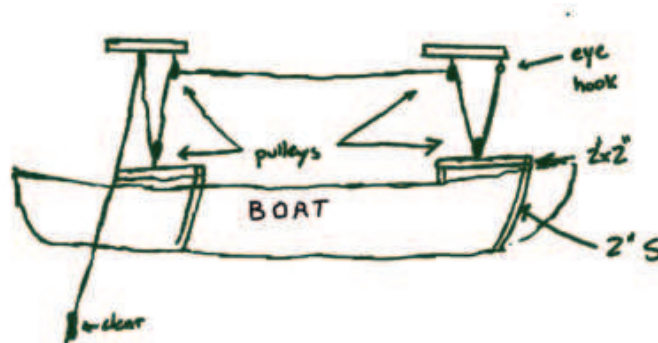
There were further complications, of course. A simple rule of life: everything is more complicated than you think it will be. That's especially true, I discovered, of disposing of bodies, especially when the disposal has to be undertaken clandestinely. There's nothing simple about it.

First there was the matter of getting the body down from that ceiling beam. I couldn't just go up there, cut the blue rope, and let it fall. For one thing, it was a fifteen-foot drop, which, with his body already in a state of decomposition, would have made quite a mess, not to mention the mental mess that method, with its attendant thud, crunches, splashes, splatters, and splats, would make in my already distraught, disheveled mind. Also the bar unit, with its panoply of bottles of various colors, sizes, and shapes, and assorted cocktail glasses, was in the path of the fall, adding to the potential gruesomeness. I had to arrive at a means by which to lower the body gradually.

No sooner did I pose this challenge to myself than my mind's eye projected the engraved image of a shrouded corpse being lowered by rope from the Asch Building after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Where I had come across that image I'm not sure, but there it was. Yes: that was the obvious if not the only solution: lower the corpse by rope with the beam as fulcrum. I'd need a good strong rope, as strong as the blue nylon rigging rope with which my brother had hanged himself, but longer, at least forty feet long: long enough to reach from the floor up to and around the ceiling beam and down to the floor again. Then I could control the speed of the body's descent from the ground, like a boy flying a kite.

Here, too, a solution presented itself almost instantly, one that would kill two birds with one stone—a practical bird and a literary bird, as it were.

The solution hung over my head next to my twin brother's corpse: my father's boat, or rather the pulley system by which it clung to the rafters. It looked like this:



The system sported the same blue nylon rigging rope a length of which my brother used to hang himself (in fact he had sliced a length suitable to his needs from the end of that very rope, the slack portion of which our father would normally coil and stuff next to the cleat; I saw the jagged end where he'd probably cut it with a steak knife). By my estimation, the rope had to be at least forty feet long. Since a matter of yards separated the pulley mechanism from my brother's corpse, it struck me that if somehow I could slide the noose by which it hung down the beam toward the mechanism, having lowered and detached the boat from it, I could use the same mechanism to lower the body. How to slide it over?

Considering that he'd been in excellent physical shape (having taken up swimming and bodybuilding), with his muscular build, though he looked a lot slimmer, my brother probably weighed only about twenty-five pounds less than I, meaning around one hundred and eighty pounds, enough to put a lot of friction between the noose and that beam. Supposing I greased the beam? Then, with the grappling hook my father used to change lights and put on his ceiling fans, I could pull the body along it toward where the boat hoisting system hung. Yes: that could work. In the sink cabinet of the loft bathroom I found a jar of petroleum jelly—a big jar, half-used, to what end I didn't care to know.

To grease the beam I'd have to climb out on it, there was no other way. I have always been afraid of heights, always. It's why even with Coach Hunt and an army of sixth graders egging me on I could never climb to the top of the rope in Phys Ed or get enthusiastic about tree forts. Now, though, I was sufficiently motivated.

With the jar of petroleum jelly I returned to the balcony railing and stood contemplating my next move. From there I could reach the beam, but only eight or so feet of it; from that point the stairs went down, while the beam stayed where it was. To get to it I'd have to put a ladder on the stairs—a tricky business. Even then to reach the beam I'd have to lean too far over.

I was about to abandon the whole plan when I realized if I stood on the stair railing I could easily reach the rest of the beam. The only problem was that the railing was slanted. I decided to risk it. To be on the safe side, using another length of rope from my father's boat—not the blue rope by which it hung from the ceiling, but a yellow rope that I found in the hull after lowering the boat to the floor—I made myself a harness. It's not hard to do. With one end of the harness around my waist and the other secured to the beam, I climbed on the slanted railing and, trembling the whole time, coated the top and sides of the beam with Vaseline, imagining while doing so what someone would think were they to enter that house and discover—not one, but *two* Detweiler twins hanging side-by-side from the same oak beam? With my heart pounding I climbed down off the railing. Using the grappling hook, having snared the noose, standing as far as

I could to give myself leverage, I dragged the corpse down the length of the beam to where it lined up with the pulley system for my father's boat.

The boat hoist mechanism worked perfectly. Of course it was badly off-balance, with one of its pulleys—the one that normally supported the bow of my father's boat—bearing the full weight of my brother's body. Still, it did the job. My brother's body came to rest gently on the leather sofa, with the boat lying next to it on the floor. Perfect. All I had to do was put the oars in the boat, pull the boat down the leaf-covered lawn to the strip of sandy shore near the dock, and get my brother into the boat.

Thanks to a method known as the “fireman's carry,” the last part turned out to be easier than you might think. Lest the name doesn't make it obvious, the “fireman's carry” is the method by which firemen rescue—or used to rescue—unconscious people from burning buildings. With the subject lying face down, shift your weight to your right leg and stick it between the subject's legs. With your left hand grab the subject's right hand and pull it over your shoulder. With your head under the victim's right armpit, wrap your arm around the back of his or her right knee. Then squat and lift, distributing the subject's weight evenly across both your shoulders and proceed with the evacuation. Using this technique, you can easily pick up and move an unconscious person of equal or lesser body weight than your own. In fact the technique is no longer favored by firemen, since it requires rescuers to be in an upright position, increasing the risk of smoke inhalation. Still, it served my purpose perfectly.

Anyway, getting the body into the boat wasn't the problem. Getting it out of the boat was a different story. In deep water there would be no way to lift and shove it over the side—not without swamping or capsizing the boat and sending us both into the freezing water. For a while this had me stumped, but to this problem too eventually a solution presented itself.

As I've mentioned, in his incarnation as Brock Jones, PhD, not only did my brother lose weight and become physically fit, he became something of an athlete. Among other martial arts and sports he took up swimming. He was quite the inveterate

swimmer, apparently. He swam in all kinds of water and all kinds of weather, explaining the wetsuit I found in one of the A-frame's closets. Could I fit into it? I could, more or less. The legs fit, so did the arms. But I couldn't raise the zipper, which was in the back, all the way up; in fact I broke the strap attached to it for that purpose trying. Still, with seven-eighths of my body protected (including my head by a separate thermal hood and my feet by booties I found in the same closet), it seemed to me that I should be able to survive at least thirty minutes in fifty degree water: a fact that I confirmed via the Internet. In all likelihood I could survive longer than that.

Now things were really taking shape. An hour before sunset, with the wetsuit still on (damned if I was going to take it off and put it on again), I drove my car—my former self's former car—to a location less than a mile as the crow flies from the house, but about four miles by road, close to a boat ramp that, according to a map of the lake on the wall in the downstairs bathroom, would serve my purpose. A towel, a robe, a change of clothing, a thermos bottle of hot tea, some stale cookies from a box I found on top of the refrigerator: all these things went into the Mazda with me. I parked the car a few dozen yards from the boat ramp, which was right where it was supposed to be. I hid the keys under the floor mat. In my wetsuit through a pink-gold twilight I walked the four miles back to the house, arriving there just as the sun was about to set, a glorious sunset, the best I'd ever seen there. I took it as a good omen, a sign that—in case I still had any doubts—I was doing the right thing, the noble thing, making a glorious (if convoluted) sacrifice to a cause far more worthy and significant than the only cause Stewart Detweiler had ever served: himself. Soon all that selfishness, all that bitterness and fear and anger and regret and sadness and self-pity, would be behind me; soon Stewart Detweiler would be behind me. To be more precise, he would be at the bottom of Lake S——.



The trouble with most thrillers is they make so little sense. Their sensational plots depend heavily if not exclusively on characters

whose actions are determined by pathology rather than greater or more reasonable motivations.

Even if we accept the motivations, even if we don't mind reading several hundred pages of pathology, still, their plots don't usually hold up under scrutiny. However talented he may be, can anyone really believe that Patricia Highsmith's Mr. Ripley gets away with it? After clubbing Dickie to death with an oar and accidentally falling overboard, he chases the whirling runaway motorboat "heedless of the propeller's blades." If there's one law that applies equally to real and fictional people it's the one stating that those intent on their physical well-being don't argue with propeller blades. Apart from which the whole plot of that enormously popular novel depends on the ineptitude of a vast network of law enforcement officials.

Such is the stuff of bestsellers and why I can't write them. I'm too hung up on logic, on the false god of verisimilitude—as if a novel of any sort were a reasonable place to look for, let alone find, credibility. *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Trees*, maybe, or a cookbook. But a *novel*?

The truth is this: the stupider a novel, the better it will sell. Any hack willing to foist a gratuitously arrived at corpse on a gullible public can write her way to bestsellerdom. Suspend logic and disbelief, throw caution, good taste, and one or two laws of physics to the wind, and you're off and running.

I hold myself to higher standards. Even presented with a fortuitous corpse on Page One, as fate had seen fit to equip me, I resisted all temptation to, as it were, dispose of the matter gratuitously, in ways more intent on shock than on conveying the literal, concrete, authentic truth.

So—I'd taken the body down: the body, that's how I thought of it. Not as my brother's body, or Gregory Detweiler's body, or Brock Jones, PhD's body, or my body (it was as much mine by then as anyone's), but simply and non-specifically as "the body," a thing belonging to no one. I wrapped "the body" in a large blue tarp I found covering a wheelbarrow under the deck. By one arm jutting out of the tarp, using the fireman's method, I lifted it up and over my shoulder and carried it to the boat that by then was

already down by the little beach, along with the oars, some stones I'd collected, a roomy jacket with big pockets, a cinderblock, and a large knife—the biggest and sharpest I could find. Also the same yellow rope that I'd used to get the body down. All these things I stowed in the boat's hull. With the body stowed with them and my, or rather my brother's (though it was mine now, wasn't it? Wasn't everything that had been my brother's mine, now that *I* was my brother?) wetsuit on, I cast the boat off. As it glided into the lake, I climbed in myself.

I'd forgotten how tippy the boat was. As it pitched and jostled I almost lost my balance and fell overboard. Somehow I regained equilibrium. Soon I was in my seat, rowing out into the dark lake. By then it was after midnight. There was a half moon out that night—a gibbous moon, to be technical about it, though I used to get on my Metropolitan students' backs when they'd use that word, one of a long list of words I had come to distrust, along with “spot” (as a verb), “spy” (ditto), “place” (“put”), “frame” (“body”), “glance” (“look”), “seemingly” and “gingerly”—words that reek of author-at-work, a literary stench: one-word clichés that suggest to me an author not fully awake at the wheel.

A scattering of lights burned in homes dotting the shore, along with brighter dock lights. Otherwise no evidence was to be seen of quotidian human existences or activities excluding the disposal of human corpses by water after midnight.

Except for the gentle splashes my oars made in the water and a dog barking in the very far distance there wasn't a sound to be heard, not even the peepers and crickets one usually hears up north. Nothing. As I kept rowing, I heard the rasp of an engine overhead, and looked up to see the flashing lights of a small aircraft. I had rowed several hundred strokes and was about three-quarters of a mile from where I'd started when I heard a spluttering sound and turned to see a fishing boat coming up from behind. Its occupant had to have seen me. He steered a wide birth and came within no less than several hundred feet as he passed; he couldn't have seen much of anything.

That was the only other boat I saw that night. I rowed for another half hour or so, until I reached my destination, one I iden-

tified by a configuration of dock lights, including a green one at the dock's deep end—yes, that's right, Daisy's green dock light straight out of *Gatsby*. How it got from a fictional West Egg, Long Island, to a lake in Georgia, I have no idea.

In deepest water, with at least a thousand feet separating the boat and me from the shore in all directions, I stopped rowing and laid the oars against the gunwales.

Now for the hard part—the second hardest part. I had to pull the big coat around the body. It was one of those baggy canvas L.L. Bean field coats, with generous snap-down pockets. I'm not sure if it had been my father's or my brother's. In any case, it was perfect for the job, or would have been save for one thing: I should have put it on earlier, with the boat still on dry land. I now saw that doing so out in the middle of the lake would be next to impossible. At the very least I'd have to move carefully. If the boat tipped over before I did what needed doing, all would be lost.

Anyway I proceeded. Carefully, as if diffusing a bomb, with the boat threatening to capsize with every movement, I managed to work the coat under the body, which lay with its back against the keel, then manipulated both arms into their sleeves. At last, with the coat on, one rock at a time, I filled the pockets with stones, careful to balance the stones perfectly to keep the boat stable under me. With the pockets full to bursting with stones I snapped them shut. I secured one end of the rope around the cinder block, the other end around the body's midriff.

Now the first-hardest hard part, anyway the part that terrified me most, and that explains the need for that big sharp knife. With respect to disposing of human bodies by water I'd done my due diligence. At Yahoo Answers I asked, "Why does a dead body float on water?" and got this:

When people die, bacteria normally present in the walls of the stomach and intestines escape from the weakened tissue into the abdominal cavity, where, as the tissues rot, they produce methane, hydrogen sulfide, carbon dioxide, and other gasses, causing the torso to bloat, lowering the density of the body until it is less than one gram per cubic centimeter ($1\text{g}/\text{cm}^3$), the specific gravity of water, putting into effect Archimedes' Principle, which

states that the upward buoyant force that is exerted on a body immersed in fluid, whether fully or partially submerged, is equal to the weight of the fluid that the body displaces and acts in the upward direction at the center of mass of the displaced fluid. For this reason without exception a corpse lying on the bottom of a lake or river eventually will surface owing to gases formed in its tissues as a result of decay and the action of internal bacteria resulting in a dramatic reduction of specific gravity, explaining why witnesses have reported corpses breaking the surface of ponds and lakes with dramatic force, like corks popping.

While an article in a science webzine titled “Drowning Investigations” offered this discouraging tidbit:

The amount of time required for a body to surface depends on several factors, including water temperature and depth, fat distribution, and foods and beverages consumed prior to drowning. Bacterial action takes place more slowly in deep cold water. In that case the corpse may not appear for weeks. With time, however, as the body becomes distended with gas, its buoyancy will continue to increase. This is why, despite being anchored by objects as heavy as outboard motors, homicide victims dumped into lakes will eventually surface.

I’d have given up then and considered some alternative plan had *Answerbag* not provided this simple if ghastly solution:

To allow the gasses to escape and bubble up to the surface rather than becoming trapped within the body, the easiest thing to do is to cut the stomach open, since that’s where most of the gasses will accumulate. However gasses may get trapped in other places, too, so it’s best to puncture the body all over.

Dear Reader, I know what you must be thinking. How *could* I? Disembowel *my brother’s corpse*? But it wasn’t “my brother’s corpse” anymore. It was “the corpse,” a thing: a decomposing putrid thing belonging to no one: not to my brother, and not to me. It fell to me to dispose of the thing, a grisly but necessary part of the surgical procedure whereby I replaced what had been my brother’s decaying body with my healthy living one. Had I donated my kidney to save his life, would you or anyone else give a damn

what became of my brother's old, useless kidney, if it ended up in the trash or got flushed down the toilet? Would you get sentimental about it?

No. Of course not.

Well all right then.

Knife in hand, with one bootied foot to either side of the corpse, straddling it, I went to work. Though I tried to ignore my emotions (I almost wrote "my gut feelings"), there's no word in English for what I felt as—with the corpse's bloated belly glaring up at me—I introduced the knife's serrated blade to just below the sternum and started slicing, headed through the naval down to the pubic bone. All the neurons in my brain seemed to fire at once. The chalky flesh wrestled with the blade. Through my knuckles I felt the tissues tearing. A dark translucent fluid rolled out over the sides of the wound to pool in the bottom of the boat. At the same time as the blade sliced into skin as rubbery, gray, and cold as the wetsuit I wore, I experienced something else, another feeling I'd never felt before, a sense of heroic concentration, as if I were a surgeon performing a risky operation under extremely adverse conditions that would save the patient's life—which, as I hope I've explained by now, was the case. At the same time I had the distinct sense that I was being watched, as if that little boat bobbing out in the middle of the lake were an operating theater, with a ring of first year medical students gazing down at me, the master surgeon, from the viewing gallery above. *Ready...set...incision.* As my scalpel—kitchen knife—pierced the skin, a shudder went through me—not an unpleasant shudder, but a shudder of satisfaction such as in the past I'd experienced having applied a precise brushstroke to a canvas or nailing a perfect sentence to the page. In that moment, with that slice of that knife in that belly, I achieved a perfect balance of detachment, concentration, and creative bliss. *This incision must be perfectly straight. Work through the subcutaneous fat. Easy, now. Careful...* After the initial gag response, I felt not a trace of nausea or faintheartedness. And though a hideously putrescent odor arose from the incision, it didn't bother me, either: it merged with my bliss, becoming part of it. I was the artist at work, bent to his labors, immune and immutable.

Have I mentioned that there was a gibbous moon that night? It was that gibbous moon's milky glow that bounded off the corpse's distended belly, that moon's lactescent glow that glistened in the goo oozing from its abdomen, that gibbous moon that doubled as my surgical lamp. Three slices it took me to cut through the layers of tissue, each its own shade of moonlit gray. The same focused intent that guided the blade kept me perfectly balanced aboard that ultra-tippy boat. I might have been standing on *terra firma*, I felt so centered, so grounded.

Meanwhile an idea floating just under the level of my consciousness held me no less firmly in its grip: namely, that I was performing not just the task of a surgeon, but of a novelist, exposing to daylight—or a gibbous moon—the “innards” of my character[s], though as any novelist worth his or her salt will tell you the innards they tear out and expose to the readers' scrutiny are none other than their own. It's the novelist's human soul that she cuts open and bares to the world, herself in the guise of her characters that she eviscerates. If when starting a novel the novelist has secrets, unless the dismal novel is a failure by its end all will have been revealed: there should be nothing left to tell, nothing to expose. Every novel is a confession and a vivisection, every novelist a surgeon—not of the flesh, but of the spirit—whose operations are performed strictly on paper.

What is being confessed? The sum total of everything the novelist thinks, feels, knows, understands, intuitively, remembers, and believes.

As I sawed through my equal opposite, another thought occurred to me. Instead of merely slitting the corpse open from sternum to pubic bone, I'd go on, forming two perfect halves: twin halves, equal opposite halves. Nor would I stop there; I'd keep slicing clear through the keel of my father's boat, splitting it in two. But I wouldn't stop there, either. As the two sundered halves of that always bipolar boat, the port side (Gregory) and the starboard side (Stewart) drifted away from each other, with my legs spreading farther and farther apart like a cheerleader doing a split, somehow I would keep slicing, splitting everything—the lake, the county, the state, the country, earth, heaven, the solar system, the Milky Way...splitting all of creation into two perfectly equal halves. Bifurcating the universe.

There, I said to myself. Finished. The operation is complete.

No sooner did I say it than I was torn abruptly from the trance that had kept me and the boat trim. I tottered to and fro, wobbling like a drunk in a tempest—like a drunk *in a boat* in a tempest. I grabbed one gunwale, rolling the boat to starboard, then its equal opposite, rolling it to port. With each roll the low-riding boat swallowed a few gallons of lake water. My legs gave out from under me. I pitched forward, landing on top of the corpse I had just gutted, our bellies and lips meeting. Slowly, with both hands gripping the gunwhales, I drew myself back into the seat, where I remained for a few moments, catching my breath, covered in mephitic goo.

After a while, with my heart beating reasonably again, on quivering thighs I rose and zipped up the field coat with its pockets stuffed with stones. Then I checked to see to it that the rope was still secure around the cinder block.

Now the easy part—as easy as falling out of bed, or a boat. I took a deep breath and, purposely this time, rolled the boat, capsizing it, dumping the body and myself into the lake.

Wetsuit or no wetsuit, that lake was bloody cold. It was like falling into a ditch full of icy razor blades. That was the least of my problems. The cinder block rope must have caught itself on an oarlock or something. The cinder block proceeded to drag—not just the body, but the rowboat down with it to the bottom. The boat's two floatation chambers, one in the bow, one in the stern, weren't sufficient to countermand the combined weight of the block and the body attached to it. As the bow—or was it the stern?—nosed under, the stern (or was it the bow?) reared *Titanic*-like out of the water.

Luckily before capsizing I'd had the presence of mind to grab the knife. As I struggled to cut the rope, another section of it snagged my right ankle. Boat, body, block, and Brock: all went down to meet their watery dooms. While thrashing away in the cave-dark water I recalled my mother's dream, the one she had of my brother drowning, the dream that prompted the phone call that would ultimately deliver me to this moment. With my red blood cells screaming for oxygen I succeeded in grabbing hold of and slicing through the rope, sending one disemboweled corpse and

one cinderblock to Neptune's locker or its freshwater equivalent, releasing the boat, which bobbed upside-down to the surface. I bobbed and spluttered alongside it.

I still gripped the kitchen knife. I hurled it away.

Next challenge: canoe self-rescue. I had read up on the procedure online and practiced in the shallow water by the dock. True, my boat wasn't a canoe, but its size, shape, and weight were similar. Depending on how strong you are, there are two methods.

#1: Get under the center of the boat, lift it up, and flip it over.

#2: Roll the boat over full of water, find the bailer, and bail until the canoe is stabilized, then jump back in the boat.

#2 is what I did, or tried to do, only I'd neglected to bring a bailing bucket. I did the best I could with my hands. The best way to get back in a canoe when alone is to pull yourself to the stern, grasp the boat by both gunwales to keep it balanced, partly submerge yourself for greater momentum, then—in one smooth motion—heave yourself out of the water and plant your chest firmly onto the stern gunwale.

It took me six or seven tries. With my chest on the gunwale, using it as a pivot, I twisted and turned until my legs fell into the boat. From there I rolled myself over, got into the seat, and went on bailing until my fingers froze.

I'd forgotten the oars, which by then had floated off in separate directions. With my two freezing hands I paddled to and retrieved the nearest. Using one oar, my ass half-submerged in freezing water, I paddled the half-swamped boat home.

It took something like an hour. By the time I beached the boat I was shivering so fiercely I could barely control my muscles.

Back in the house, with my teeth chattering and every muscle in my body quaking, I put the kettle on, and—somehow, despite trembling fiercely—got a fire going. I sat on the wicker sofa with a mug of hot tea and the fire belching and a stack of blankets and throws smothering me.

Shivering, with the fire blazing, I fell asleep.

13. "I AM NOT A BAD MAN"

TWO WEEKS PASSED (WE'RE BACK IN OUR BACK-STORY) BEFORE I saw Ashley again.

Meanwhile I put the final touches on the latest version of my novel. For this version, in addition to changes previously mentioned, I reinforced the narrator's unreliability. All unreliable narratives are first-person, and all first-person narrators are, to some extent at least, unreliable—though that doesn't make them unreliable narrators. This is as true for nonfiction as for fiction.

Take this back-story apropos my fall from grace. While it's true that the narrator's (my) situation may not have been ideal, that we may not envy him his unpublished novel or his enlarged prostate, his circumstances were far from dire. He had a job. He wasn't starving or dying of cancer or living in a war zone or being slowly poisoned by totalitarian state-sponsored thugs. Apart from that one pesky reproductive organ, his health was good. True, his brother had forsaken him. Still, things could have been worse.

One thing I advised my Metropolitan students against: sentimentality. As defined by me: *emotions in excess of experience*. Readers shouldn't be expected to have feelings for what they themselves haven't experienced. Efforts to make them do so are likely to

be met with resentment. If I say, “*Stewart Detweiler came to doubt himself in every way*,” I’d better be ready to prove it.

Better still, I should put you into the circumstances that add up to that sentiment.



The day of my next visit with Ashley started off auspiciously. A chilly late September Wednesday, the temperature down below freezing. Wearing my mock turtleneck and cuffed khaki Dockers, I walked to the train station, taking note on my way of hoarfrost clinging to car windshields. I walked briskly, a spring in my step, my battered briefcase swinging, my breaths condensing, the frosty air yanking tears from my eyes, whistling Bach’s Suite No. 2 for flute (the first rondeau movement). I hoped to catch the 8:15. The sky overhead was a providential (who says modifiers can’t earn their keep?) blue patched with ... make that scumbled ... scumbled with scrappy clouds.

I had a big day ahead of me. Among other things, to make up for the class that had been pre-empted by Rosh Hashanah, we had four students’ works-in-progress to chamber that evening. The “chamber” in question was the figurative one wherein Metropolitan students were isolated during critique sessions of their work. This prevented them from defending their efforts and thereby inciting their peers to ever more savage assessments. When I first taught at MWI I balked at the convention. With time, though, I came to appreciate it, having learned that when it comes to criticism, given the thinnest, shortest, shoddiest length of rope (blue? nylon? rigging?) writers will find a way to hang themselves. So I accepted the protocol. I even took to using the verb form of “chamber,” as in “Next week we’ll be chambering so-and-so’s story.”

That Wednesday we would be “chambering” Ashley’s work-in-progress, which I’d added to that evening’s schedule and for which I had spent the better part of an afternoon composing my response, striking a perfect balance, I thought, between advice and encouragement, directness and tact, holding her to high standards while allowing for her youth and lack of experience.

In addition to my student papers, my briefcase held the manu-

script of “Duplicity,” a photocopy of which I intended to hand-deliver to the then-most powerful agent in New York City, Elizabeth “Bitsy” Watson. But not before my appointment with Dr. Snyder, my urologist.

(Back to unreliable narrators for just a moment. I confess to finding the whole idea of an “objective narrator” frankly absurd. It’s why in general I disapprove of third-person narrators, and by extension of most novels, since most novels are written in the third person. The conceit of a detached outside observer, an entity without family or friends, with no hobbies or interests, no foibles or failings, having no hopes or dreams, no past or future, not even a name, existing for no reason other than to relate to us Emma Bovary’s fate or chart the history of the French invasion of Russia and its impact on five aristocratic families, is—to put not too fine a point on it—stupid. Such narrators, we’re told, are god-like in their omniscience. I say they’re godlike in that they don’t really exist.)

Now back to our back-story-in-progress, but first this reminder from *Essays in Idleness* author Yoshida Kenkō: “You should never put the new antlers of a deer to your nose and smell them. They have little insects that crawl into the nose and devour the brain.”



Seated on the icy platform bench, I read over my comments on Ashley’s pages. Had I been too critical? She was a tyro, after all. I should have made more of her strengths. Students tended to assume that whatever wasn’t singled out for praise had been found egregious. On second thought, I’d been too kind. She’d see through it. She’d find me patronizing, or worse, pompous: an arrogant, egotistical phony. She’d scoff at my critical appraisal, smirk at it, shrug it off with a toss of her shimmering golden blond hair burnished here and there with touches of copper and brass. She’d share my appraisal with her lover, with her phalanx of lovers. They’d have a good laugh over it, seeing it for what it was, a pathetic bid on the part of a graying, middle-aged, once briefly celebrated but since gone to seed author-cum-writing-instructor to seduce his pretty young student with a bundle of highly-scented unctuousness. *Now just a minute*, I said to myself. *Who’s seducing whom? She’s not even your type!*

You like dark sophisticated Europeans. She's a blond haired, blue-eyed Mississippian. To borrow another writer's description, Ashley Bridges is "the classic Surfictionist creation—a blur of insouciance, a touch of disingenuousness, a waft of grit." The eyelid-batting femme fetal, a flagrant stereotype. Had you come across her in a student's story, you'd ask that she be developed or recast.

On third thought, my critique of Ashley's novel-in-embryo was thoughtful, honest, gracious—not to mention quite well-written, if I say so, on a par with my best prose.

A ping sounded from the loudspeaker. A tinny voice announced the train's delay. A chilly gust charged up the platform. I flipped up the lapels of my sport coat. I'd underdressed. With the papers back in my briefcase, I walked up the stairs and into the enclosed overpass, wherein the kind folk at Metro North had installed a heater beneath which a cluster of rush-hour commuters stood huddled, armed with coffee containers, cellphones, and/or early editions of various newspapers. From amid the huddle came a familiar cry:

"Alarm! ... Alarm!"

They still hadn't fixed that damn ticket vending machine. Twice in the past two weeks I had phoned the so-called stationmaster, whose smiling photograph along with a telephone number for complaints or suggestions was displayed in a glassed-in bulletin board and whose name was either Hector González or Hector Rodríguez, I forget which. Each time I called I was treated to the same recording assuring me that my call was "very important" and that someone—presumably the smiling Mr. González or Mr. Rodríguez himself—would return my call "as quickly as possible." Which of course he never did.

"Alarm! ... Alarm!"

Maybe there *was* something to be alarmed about, some empirical or theoretical threat of which the vending machine alone was aware. Or was it giving voice to my existential dread?

Fishing a quarter from the pocket of my Dockers, I made my way to the payphone. Once again I dialed the stationmaster's number—incorrectly, it turned out, waking up some hag in her Medusa's Raft of a bed. I hung up and made my way back through the mob to face the bulletin board again. Mouthing the phone

number, I returned to the payphone and redialed, only to get the same recording assuring me that my call was important and asking me to leave a phone number. Instead—in a clear voice but with the receiver tucked close to my lips so as to avoid making a spectacle of myself—I said, “Yes, this is Stewart Detweiler calling you at—” I checked my wristwatch; the 8:15 was six minutes late, “—at eight-twenty-one a.m. from the Spuyten Duyvil Metro North station to report a malfunctioning ticket vending machine. This is my third call to you, Mr. Rodríguez.” Or was it González? Hell, the guy probably didn’t exist. “Frankly,” I continued, “I’m not sure why I’m bothering to make this call, since by now it’s fairly obvious to me that this whole ‘stationmaster’ crock is nothing but a public relations ploy, one that as far as this customer is concerned has badly misfired. I mean if you’re going to put up a person’s photograph and give him a name and a phone number and call him the *stationmaster*, you might as well go the whole hog and have him return people’s calls.” I tried to think of something more to say—something blistering, something “wound[ing] to the core,” something that would compel the entire Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to hurl itself *en masse* off of one of its taller bridges—but I faltered. “Uhm...that’s it, I guess...uhm...thank you.” I hung up.

Then I realized: I hadn’t left my phone number. From the depths of my Dockers I fished out another quarter. I had started dialing again when the crowd scrambled and jostled around me. Through the overpass window I saw the train arrive.



Some pages ago you heard me say that I’m against novels with plots. It’s not that simple. I don’t oppose plots in general. What I’m opposed to are the the-Queen-died-and-then-the-King-died-of-grief sort of plots one gets with ninety-nine percent of novels, where causal relationships are as artificial as they are obvious. Which isn’t to say that I don’t think things should happen in a story. On the contrary—and as I’d insist with my Metropolitan students—a story or a novel should present us with, if not a plot, a series of incidents or events, preferably of escalating dramatic import.

Such is the basis of the epic—the oldest of all plot forms, poised between the legend and the so-called chronicle. Epic plots are almost always chronological, presenting the hero's actions in sequence, resulting in something akin to an anthology of heroic deeds. Heroic epic provided the footing for the “picaresque” tale, wherein we're presented with the doings of a less-than-noble character or rogue in a contemporary world as seen through the rogue's eyes.

Though not the oldest, of all forms of plot the picaresque is the most primitive. In theory if not in practice its episodic nature allows it to proceed from event to event without resolution, freed from the exigencies of cause and effect, unfettered by the obligation to organize itself toward a mythic or meaningful climax. Its vitality—nay, its existence—depends on its pointlessness.

What follows, Dear Reader, is a picaresque of my unheroic existence boiled down to a single day in September of 2012.



Having detrained at Grand Central, I rode the subway down to the Village. There, at Copies Plus (“Where We Treat Every Customer Like an Original; 4¢ per page, No Minimum”), assured by the young Asian man behind the counter that my copies would be ready in an hour, I surrendered the manuscript of my novel. From there I walked one block south to the Café Virgil.

Of all the cafés in the city, the Virgil was my favorite. It featured cryptic lighting, flea market paintings, sagging upholstered furniture, and patrons hunched over small, marble-topped tables. The sun shined; the day had warmed. There were three tables outdoors, on the sidewalk. Two were occupied. On the third my heart was set. At one of the others a distinctly European-looking woman sat hunched over a notebook, writing. Something about a woman writing in a notebook I found irresistible. Sunglasses, black sweater, gold earrings catching the sun...

The management had changed. In place of opera music a hybrid of disco and salsa blared from strategically located speakers. In place of the raspy old Mafioso who normally presided over it a young woman stood behind the hammered copper counter. Her flushed cheeks looked freshly scrubbed; her eyes bore the shocked

look I had come to equate with transplanted Midwesterners, fresh off the Greyhound from Broken Bow, Nebraska. To this farm-fresh barista I was reduced to explaining my order: a latte with two-percent milk, no foam, and a half shot of decaf espresso (my urologist having urged me to cut down on caffeine). I tried to be clear and precise, the same qualities I urged upon my Metropolitan students.

The new barista gaped at me. I repeated my order, more slowly this time. *Caffellate. Small. Two-percent milk. Half a shot. Decaf. No foam* (N.B.: had I, rather than my brother, undergone his airborne epiphany, you would have been spared the following scene). The barista gaped on.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"We don't sell half shots."

"Why is that?"

"We just don't," the barista elaborated with a shrug.

"Tell you what," I proposed. "Make it a whole shot. Pour half into a regular sized cup of hot, foamless, two percent milk, pour the rest down the drain, and charge me for a full shot. How does that grab you?" I asked, meaning nothing untoward.

The barista's perplexed, somnolently-parted lips gave birth to a dubious bubble.

"Look." I forced a smile. "I must be making this sound more complicated than it is. I just want some hot milk with a little espresso in it, half a shot. Decaf. That's all." Smile.

"Two-percent milk," the barista queried.

"That's right! Two-percent milk." I approved a little too enthusiastically. "Exactly!"

They didn't have two-percent milk, I learned.

"Have you got whole milk?"

The barista affirmed that they did.

"Have you got *skim* milk?"

Again, affirmative.

"Would it be possible, somehow, by any means, for you to mix the two together — by *any* means?"

Under her bangs the barista looked at me questioningly. The fellow behind me in line grumbled.

"I mean," I clarified, "give me half a regular cup of skim milk,

hot, plus half a cup of regular milk—likewise hot, then pour in half a shot of—”

“Christ,” said the fellow behind me.

I spun around to face him who was not only impatient but tall. “I waited my turn, you can wait yours.” To the barista: “—then pour in half a shot of decaffeinated espresso. Sound good?”

The barista asked what size. “Regular,” said I, to be told that the present establishment offered no such size. “Only tall and *grande*,” said the barista, pronouncing it “gron-DAY.”

“For Pete’s sake,” said the fellow behind me.

“Supposing you give me whatever size fits in your average, regular cup?”

The barista inquired as to what I meant by “average” and “regular.” A woman in line somewhere behind the slender fellow said, “Come on!”

“A plain, regular, old-fashioned, garden-variety coffee cup, like *that*.” I pointed to a cup on top of the espresso machine.

“That’s for regular coffee,” the barista informed me.

“Great.”

“We don’t serve lattes in that kind of cup.”

The slender fellow: “This is ridiculous.”

“The smallest size latte we have is a tall, which is this.” The barista produced a tall glass vessel with a handle, the kind in which inferior Italian restaurants serve cappuccino with whipped cream and cinnamon. Appalled, I said, “What about one of those cups over there?” I pointed to a wall of shelves holding an array of hand-painted ceramic mugs.

“Those aren’t for customers,” said the barista.

The slender guy stormed off. The woman behind him followed suit.

“For whom are they?”

“They’re for sale.”

“How much?” I said, extracting my wallet, calculating that victory would be worth almost any price. The barista said they were all priced differently. I said, “Okay,” and pointed to a yellow one with brown polka dots. “I’ll take that one.”

“What *is* your problem?” said someone else in line behind me.

“My problem,” I faced the young woman and explained with admirable forbearance, “is I’m trying to get a cup of coffee here.”

The woman said something that I ignored.

“So,” said the barista holding my polka-dotted mug. “You want *half* whole milk, half skim, and *one* shot of espresso—”

“Half a shot,” I corrected. “The other half you may save for posterity.”

With what I interpreted as a dirty look the barista resumed: “... half a shot of espresso—”

“Decaf,” I clarified.

“... and no foam. Right?”

“Fabulous,” I said.

• •

Though the outside table was still vacant, the distinctly European-looking woman was gone. I got my notebook out, a composition notebook similar to that in which I write these words. Sipping my hard-won *caffelatte* (the twit had put cinnamon on it, but never mind), I entered my latest idea for a title, *Young Suicides Live Happily Ever After*, one of countless stars in an expanding universe of titles in search of works-in-progress. *Geography is My Major*, *Waltzing Among the Ruins*, *Skylarking Away from Home*, *A Dream of the Death of God*, *Everything Bad is Happening at Once*... I had hundreds of such titles, bastard verbal orphans in search of their fathers. Occasionally a vagrant title would launch me into a story, or, like a frame from the rack, perfectly fit an already finished canvas. Mostly, though, the titles piled up in my notebooks: caps without pens, flowers with no stems.

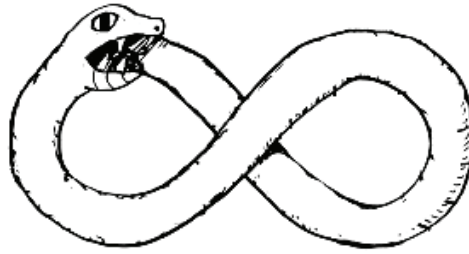
At that outdoor café table, I planted another:

“The Worst Man in the World”

Then sat there awaiting inspiration, biting my lip, my pen hovering over my notebook like a police helicopter on *America’s Most Beloved Car Chase Videos*.

(Please trust that this is leading somewhere, Dear Reader. Every novel worthy of its name redefines the concept of “plot.”)

This one just happens to be shaped like an ouroboros: the snake swallowing its own tail. It starts where it ends, and ends where it starts: like infinity:



I had been sitting there, at my café table, sipping my *caffelatte*, waiting for the copy shop to produce three copies of my manuscript, one of which I'd hand-deliver to "Bitsy" Watson, enjoying my view of MacDougal Street, when in rapid succession two delivery trucks blocked it: a Boar's Head Provisions truck, its feral hog baring gilded tusks, and one from the Golden Flow Dairy, an unfortunate name, it seemed to me, for a purveyor of comestibles secreted by the glands of domestic animals. The truck engines grumbled; their diurnal emissions polluted my coffee. The distinctively European-looking woman's table was presently occupied by someone reading the sports pages of the *New York Post*.

I fleshed out one of my titles.

Title: "Throwing a Baseball." Man confesses adulterous affair to wife, put to the task by the discovery that he can no longer throw a baseball, i.e. he's no longer a boy. He's crossing the baseball field adjacent to the apartment building/house where he's been having the affair, when he comes on some boys playing baseball. A foul ball is struck and flies his way. How he picks it up and reels back to throw. As he reels back, suddenly he realizes, his brain working in slow motion, that he is about to make an ass of himself: that the muscles that once existed to throw baseballs are gone and nothing has taken their place. His pathetic pitch lands several feet short and a dozen feet left of his target, a twelve-or-so year-old boy on the pitcher's mound, who eyes him with a mixture of contempt, disgust, amusement, horror, and pity: this with him having just cheated on his dear wife, with his throwing hand still smelling of his mistress' sex: cursed. The confession, when it comes, sucks every regret the man has ever had in his life into

it, though all he gives voice to is the mishap with the baseball, a symbol for all he has lost and forsaken and abused and thrown away in his life. How he is wretched. How his poor wife (thinking it cute that her husband feels so torn up about a silly thing like throwing a baseball) rubs his forearm, comforting him. “Aw, Harvey, what do you care about throwing baseballs at your age?” The more sympathy his wife gives him, the more Harvey suffers, until he can’t bear her goodness anymore and wants to break down and confess all, but he won’t; it would only make things worse in the short run, though in time his confession and its consequences might teach him a badly-needed lesson and at long last grow him up, but without this good woman in his life: divorced but emancipated, evolved. A moving, ironic story. Or maybe the wife dies. His guilt turns her oddly-shaped benign mole malignant.

Alternative title: “Foul Ball.”

I’m about to flesh out another title when a young man sits down at the other table, the one not occupied by the avid *Post* reader. No sooner has he done so than he gets out his cellphone. I wait, knowing I cannot write—or think, for that matter—with a cellphone in use in my vicinity. The offender has crisp, self-satisfied, effeminate features. He wears a leather jacket and T.S. Eliot-style horn-rims and speaks loudly, more loudly than necessary. I muster my impatience, my *caffelatte* growing cold. A dozen minutes later he finishes his conversation only to take another call. Again I wait, my sighs morphing into grunts, my blank gaze transmogrified into a bloodletting stare.

When Call #2 gives way to Call #3 I gather up my belongings and leave the Café Virgil, thinking: *When we’re young we’re vulnerable in countless ways. As we age the ways grow fewer until we face one big vulnerability.*

“Everything else,” I recite aloud in my father’s voice, approaching McDougal Street, “is icing on that cake.”

The weather had taken a turn for the worse. Dark clouds menaced the sky across the river. I returned to Copies Plus to see if my copies were done.

• •

When I saw what the young copy shop employee had done to my manuscript I “couldn’t believe my eyes.” Instead of producing three collated copies of the full manuscript, he had made three copies of each individual page and bound them together with a paper clip.

I said, “Are you out of your mind?”

The young man stared at me. (What is it with people these days? They ruin your life and they stare at you.)

“They’re not collated,” I explained.

“Collated?”

“Collated! Collated!” I made a gesture more indicative of pulling taffy than of collating a manuscript. Then, under my breath, or so I thought, “Idiot.” The manager must have heard. Also Asian but older, his crew cut gray, his trapezoidal face wrinkle-free, he wedged himself between his employee and me. With hands flat on the countertop he said:

“What’s the problem?”

“I asked for my copies collated.”

The copy shop manager turned to his employee and said something I couldn’t hear. The manager asked to see my receipt. I presented him with it.

“It doesn’t say collated,” he pointed out.

“I don’t care what it says.”

“If you had said collated, the boy would have written it down. You asked for three copies. You didn’t say collated.”

“Well I sure as hell didn’t ask for three distinct copies of each individual page!”

“It’s not written down, see?”

I looked around for the young man, but he had disappeared into the back room apparently to commit ritual suicide. “It’s a four-hundred and seventy-four page manuscript. Obviously I wanted it collated!”

“You say obviously, but if it’s not written down...”

“You mean to tell me,” I said, wiping my bone-dry forehead, “that when a customer comes here with a four hundred page manuscript and says, ‘I’d like three copies,’ your first instinct is to take each page and make three copies *individually*? Is *that* what you’re telling me you do as a matter of course?”

"Had you asked him to collate the copies," the manager said, "he would have done so. You may have said 'each'."

"I said no such thing. I certainly didn't tell him *not* to collate the copies, or to un-collate the original, which was collated. What does the word 'copy' mean to you people, anyway?"

"Give me the manuscript," said the manager, holding out his hand. "I'll do it over for you."

"There no longer *is* a manuscript," I was obliged to explain. "What was a manuscript is now four-hundred and seventy-four discrete pieces of paper." With that and on the verge of tears I took my package of not-collated copies and made ready to go. The copy shop manager must have inferred my despair, for when I looked up his face registered a dint of pity.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The boy is new. It's only his second week. He's very conscientious, but sometimes he takes things too literally."

"Well," I said, "I'm sorry, too."

I turned and started out of the shop, then stopped.

"Tell the boy..." I said. "Tell him...it was a misunderstanding, that mistakes happen. I should have made myself clearer. I'm sorry," I said, and left, thinking: *I am not a bad man.*



I rode the Broadway local to Dr. Snyder's West Side office. Snyder's waiting room was painted (appropriately) yellow and already at that early hour crowded with mostly elderly people bearing the disgruntled expressions of the incontinent. I was given the usual form to fill out, asking me about my "voiding history," a phrase that when I first encountered it five years ago struck me as having more to do with the current presidential administration than with my nocturnia. On a scale of one to ten I was to rate stress, urge, overflow, waking, dribbling, volume, and frequency. With the same sense of doomed resignation as when I had taken my last Standard Aptitude Test, I filled in the answers.

At last I was seen by Dr. Snyder, an aggressively bland-looking man in a white smock whose taste in neckwear was highly questionable. I'd put out my hand for him to shake, but he was already leading me to his examination room. (I confess here a prejudice

against doctors who don't shake your hand. I don't care if they've been shoving their digits up patients' bums all day. The right of refusal should be mine.)

We chatted; he took notes. Having distilled my symptoms down to a few phrases on a sheet of yellow lined paper, he led me into another, more formidable room, where he had me drop my trousers and, with my back to him, my head thrust forward, and my elbows resting on the padded gurney, bend over. *Now* came the handshake, urologist style.

"Well," Dr. Snyder said, feeling around in there. "Your prostate is a bit bulky." Bulky: just what did that mean? "Bulky" as in ungainly, like the character Hoss in *Bonanza*? Or "bulky" as in broad and muscular, like Charles Bronson in *Death Wish*?

"I'd like to do a cystoscopy."

I knew what that meant. Mind you, I've nothing against having something shoved up my penis *per se*, but when the something is about the size of the Mt. Palomar telescope I find cause for alarm. Before I had time to demur, the doctor's frowning associate had wheeled in a metal cart bearing what looked to my eyes like a plumber's snake. As if the thing were a ballpark frank wanting mustard, she slathered it with K-Y jelly.

Naked but for a paper examination gown, I sat on the equivalent of a rubber diving board, one with a U-shaped opening carved out of it, the better to let my parts dangle unencumbered. Until that moment I had maintained something on the order of dignity. Now all bets were off. Taking my limp member into her gloved hand, with as little interest as she'd have shown a common garden slug, the doctor's assistant said, "This will make you numb." No sooner did she offer this inadequate prediction that, with a hypodermic needle, she squirted something into my dick. I felt a brief shiver of icy coldness, then nothing beyond the lingering impression that I had just been violated, along with sympathetic confusion for my poor put-upon penis, which must have thought it odd indeed to have something ejaculate into *it*.

Enter Dr. Snyder again, snapping on a fresh pair of latex gloves. "Bend your knees and try to relax" (apparently I look anxious). "I'm going to explain everything I'm doing." True to his word,

the doctor outlines every inch of his offensive. “Now I’m introducing the probe into your penis,” he informs me, yet all I feel is a vague imposition, a rigid coolness rising deep within me. I’m told to cough. “Again,” the doctor orders. With each cough the snake advances another brutal inch. “We’re approaching the prostate now,” Dr. Snyder announces with the cool Midwestern drawl of a veteran airline pilot pointing out the Rocky Mountains below. And how about that royal *we*? Does it refer to him and me, or to him and his Apollo 11-sized apparatus? “You may feel a little something right about now.” Quite so, only the little something is a hurt the size of Alabama. Bent on impressing the doctor’s assistant with my manliness, I suppress a scream. *Should I cry out, who will hear me among the angelic orders?* My cheeks meanwhile are awash in involuntary tears.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself a ball-median valve,” Dr. Snyder observes, going on to explain that a knob-shaped outcropping of excess prostatic tissue has plugged the opening of my urethra like a ball in a hole, hence the name. “We could do a minimally invasive procedure to get rid of the growth,” he goes on to say. “But at this stage I still think drugs are your best option.”

Having seen enough, Dr. Snyder makes ready to remove his instrument, or rather he makes me ready for its removal. “There will be approximately three seconds of discomfort.” Translation: I am about to feel as if the fires of hell are passing through my penis, as if my tool has been dipped into a pit of molten lava, as though all nine circles of the Inferno have relocated themselves inside it. “If you can’t endure the pain, let me know.” Sure thing, doc. I’ll send you a postcard.

The urethral baptism by fire over, the doctor gives me some pills. “These will turn your pee bright orange.” Yes, I wonder, but what will they do for my smile? “You may feel a slight burning sensation when you urinate.” More diminutives. A *little* discomfort; a *slight* burning sensation. I picture my cock as *Brennkommando* flamethrower spouting bright orange terror.

• •

A stiff breeze pried up the leaves of the ginkgo trees lining West 68th Street. The sky had gone dark as the bottom of an iron skillet ... no, an elephant's belly ... no, an iron skillet. At 68th and Central Park an odor of impending rain suffused the air. I considered buying a five-dollar umbrella to add to my burgeoning collection of always-at-home-when-you-need-them cheap umbrellas. No peddlers in sight. But why be a pessimist? Let the Garden State keep its clouds!

I looked at my watch. A quarter to four. To collate all three copies would take at least an hour. ... I had still to buy a manuscript box and make my way to Elizabeth Watson's office at 56th and Park. To cross the park alone would take thirty minutes. Bit-sy's office closed at five. I'd have to collate one copy and leave the rest for later. Thanks to Julie (Mazda/Pulizer Prize) I had a card for the New York Society Library at 79th. I went there.

While collating I recalled the airy hotel room on Lago Maggiore where Doris (girlfriend) and I had stayed, cold marble floors, cypress trees. I spent my mornings at a café, writing, the words running so deep I neglected the searing sun arcing over my head. Then home to the feast Doris had set out in the hotel garden: olives, prosciutto, cheese, bread, modest-sized glasses of *frizzante vino rosso*. After lunch sitting in the shade reading to each other, Doris from her Italian crime novel, me what I'd written that morning. Doris smiling, laughing—indulging me, possibly, but I didn't think so. I wondered, while collating, if there'd been any correlation between Doris' diminished interest in my writing and my loss of interest in her? From that airy hotel on Lago Maggiore my memory pivoted to one of me returning home from an affair, the first of two ... or three ... three and a half ... how, walking toward the subway at Fourteenth and Broadway, I felt the Lower East Side's squat buildings glowering down at me, their cornices furrowed like brows, how that same evening in the apartment that Doris and I rented, I took inventory of everything: houseplants, books, the shared spices in our shared cabinets, how tempted I'd been then to confess all—not just to Doris, but to God, to get down on my knees on the icy kitchen linoleum and by the streetlamp's glow seeping through the kitchen window cry out, "*I am not a bad man!*" A fresh title occurred to me: "Evidence of My Bad Character."

I kept collating. Making out in that Viennese park after dusk with the girl I met at the youth hostel. Swedish? Norwegian? Our bellies aslosh with Grüner Veltliner, surrounded by signs saying “*Verbotten!*” ...how American I’d felt, how much a child of a country founded on rebellion, on a middle finger raised to an intolerant Anglican king ... “Oh Beautiful for Spacious Skies!” How I’d sung it for her, for Astrid or Ingrid or Gretta, on the *verbotten* lawn whilst fondling her *verbotten* breasts beneath the *verbotten* stars. Was it Lawrence who claimed that Americans are oppressed by their tolerance? As I keep collating yet another title springs forth along with another idea for a story: “True Omniscience,” about a couple seeking lodgings along an interstate after midnight with infant son in tow. The story begins with a disclaimer by the author—pardon me, the narrator—explaining that he has no business telling the story he tells: no wisdom, no perspective, no insights to offer, no particular gifts of empathy or sympathy, no philosophy or world view, no objectivity, no great passion for his subject (then again he’s not convinced that he *has* a subject). However, as we go on turning pages, slyly, masterfully, mysteriously, this “worthless” narrator evaporates, abandoning us to the viewpoints of the story’s main characters: mother, father, dreaming child...but also to other characters: the state cop who pulls them over for a burned-out taillight, the clerks at various motels. We even get the viewpoints of things: the highway, the car, a suitcase, a stretch of motel carpeting, an elevator...The story could as well be called “Empathy,” since it would demonstrate that not only is everything around us, animate or otherwise, invested with a point-of-view, by extension the entire universe is invested with feelings, attitudes, opinions, and—by further extension—with pity, therefore with pain. Having arrived at this singular concept for a short story, I settled on two superficially similar yet crucially different candidates for an opening sentence:

“In a sense, I am telling this story.”

“In essence I am telling this story.”

I finished collating ...

[break here?]

14. OLD PHONE AND TWINKLE

EVERY GREAT NOVEL OPERATES ON TWO LEVELS, ONE LITERAL, ONE figurative, with the literal interpretation merely a means toward the metaphoric end. One should never take great novels literally. *Lolita* isn't about pedophilia, it's about a contest between poetry and prose, with language—specifically American English—holding the stakes. It's the English language that Humbert (poetry) ravages, that he probes and fondles in a series of motel rooms. An interstate tug-of-war ensues, with Quilty (plot) in pursuit of Humbert, intent on claiming the nymphet for his own prosaic ends. In the end, Plot is riddled with bullets (of lead, but really of words). Plot murdered, contest won, poetry triumphant. Only dimwits think *Lolita* is about pedophilia.

Taking any great novel literally is a mistake. The greater the novel, the greater the mistake.

• •

The odd red rubber boat was back, trolling the waters of Lake S—— a hundred or so yards beyond the dock. Since the weather cleared it had been out there every day, resuming its dogged zigzag pattern, inching toward the middle of the lake—not fishing, by

the looks of it, but searching for something, accompanied by the winding rasp of a gasoline-powered generator.

What could they be searching for? I asked myself, seeing it out there for the third day in a row. Not a dead body. Certainly not Brock Jones, PhD's dead body. Why would they be searching for it? Even assuming that he had been reported missing to the authorities, still, they had no cause to presume the bestselling author dead, and less cause to conclude that his corpse had wound up at the bottom of this lake. At the very least before dredging the whole lake (or whatever they're doing out there) they would have searched for him here, whereupon they'd have discovered ... me—Brock Jones, PhD—alive and well, suntanned and fit and brimming with optimism, a man with everything to live for.

Maybe (I said to myself) they're looking for someone *else's* body?

Oh, come now, really! What are the odds of *that*? In the same lake where, it so happens, you disposed of your brother's corpse a few days ago? Even Charles Dickens couldn't get away with such a coincidence! Who would believe it?

Would *you* believe it?

Of course not. No one would believe it.

No, I told myself. They must be searching for something else. A sunken boat, maybe? Or alligators. Since coming here as a child I've heard rumors of alligators roaming the lake, former pets whose owners abandoned them when they outgrew their cuteness, or wild creatures that, for some reason or other (climate change?) had wandered north of their normal habitations below the Fall Line, and whose sightings by fishermen enlivened the pages of local newspapers.

Yeah, that's it, I told myself.

Alligators. That's what they're searching for.

They are not searching for alligators.

• •

I had only just begun my transformation into Brock Jones, PhD, a process that, with the disposal of one extremely inconvenient corpse, had merely been initiated. Removal, that had been Stage One of the process.

Leaving four other stages: Recuperation, Research, Renewal, and Reconnaissance. *Coffee, Black* and books like it notwithstanding, and though it may seem that way retrospectively, from outside, changing your life involves a lot more than snapping your fingers. It takes a lot of work, much of it tedious. Which is why I haven't looked forward to telling this part of my story.

Frankly, it's not that interesting.

Take the research component. What did it involve? Mostly hours on my brother's laptop (which I eventually discovered under wads of socks and underwear in a pair of studded black leather motorcycle saddlebags in a corner of the bedroom), familiarizing myself with his bank, credit card, brokerage, and other statements, acquainting myself with his business interactions and social pursuits, his calendars and contacts—all the activities that defined his quotidian existence, insofar as a chameleon can be said to have had a quotidian existence. I read or scanned thousands of emails, most of little import. Like cramming for an exam.

As for passwords, as different as Brock had been from Gregory (let alone from Stewart) Detweiler, I counted on the well-documented fact that, when it comes to identical twins, certain things never change. This has been demonstrated many times through scientific studies of twins separated at or soon after birth, who, despite having spent years and even decades apart, still share many of the same habits and traits. Both siblings use Vitalis and part their hair one inch from the center on the left, hate button-down collars, roll their socks down to two inches above their ankles, flip backwards through magazines, chew off their fingernails rather than trim them with clippers or manicure scissors, sleep with a night light on under three plaid blankets to the sound of crashing waves generated by a white noise device ... intimate traits so deeply engrained in them they may as well be coded—along with the color of their eyes and shapes of their nostrils—into their DNA.

Sure enough, though he had changed so many other habits, Brock Jones, PhD still used the same password system as Gregory Detweiler (who used the same password system as Stewart Detweiler): his twin brother's middle name along with the last four digits of the same brother's Social Security number. Our middle names

were “Peter” and “Paul.” The trouble was that both Greg and I used them so seldom that even now, writing this at this moment, I have to consult my old driver’s license to tell you which middle name is—was—mine.

I tried both.

One worked.

Like both of our prior selves—and as carelessly—Greg used the same password for his tablet and his phone. Along with pin codes and other security information, he kept an encrypted key to his passwords in a document stored in a Google Drive folder, with dashes, asterisks, and other symbols replacing numbers and letters. It didn’t take Alan Turing to decipher them.

Since he’d used the same password or a close variant for all of his online transactions, it took only half a day for me to access most of his personal accounts.



It was a good thing, too, since I, or rather since Stewart Detweiler, was running low on cash, with less than twenty dollars in his wallet and next to nothing in his bank account. As for my former self’s Amex Card (not a Gold card like Brock’s; a humble green one), he was in considerable debt to said credit card company, enough to have entered a so-called “debt consolidation program” that allowed him to pay off his debt at pennies to the dollar, provided he did so at an exorbitant rate of interest for the rest of his mortal existence.

None of this would have been any of Brock Jones, PhD’s concern, had Brock Jones, PhD not been equally cash poor. His wallet, which I discovered in the same studded leather saddlebag, contained a grand total of six dollars. The same saddlebag also held ninety-seven cents in loose change: three quarters, one dime, two nickels and two pennies. All tolled, my past and present self had \$24.97 in cash.

Aside from oatmeal and a few ancient jars of Prego tomato sauce, there was nothing to eat in the house.

So—first things first: I needed cash. And food.

And so, on the splendidly clear morning after my gruesome

watery burial adventure, with Brock Jones, PhD's *and* Stewart Detweiler's wallets and debit/credit cards in my pockets, I drove the spluttering Mazda into town. The ride took twenty minutes (it would have taken less time had I not gotten stuck behind a logging truck). The center of the town I won't bother describing here, since I ignored it, knowing pretty much what to expect there: lowdown burger, pizza, and/or taco joints, barbershop, a tattoo parlor, ratty so-called antique stores, the truck-damaged marquee of a movie theater that had long since ceased showing movies: all the trappings of Main Street, USA, post Great Recession. One of those towns where the fronts of buildings look like the back, and the backs look like ... you don't want to know what the backs look like. (The description fits many who live in such places, too.)

As I said, it was a splendid morning. The southern sky served up notably muscular cloud formations in that region prone to estimable clouds. Where not stuffed with clouds the sky was a providential (have I used that adjective already?) blue. I drove with the driver's side window all the way down, one hand steering, the other playing with the breeze. Maybe it was the fact that by then my gray stubble had evolved into a beard, but catching my face in the rearview mirror, I no longer recognized my former self. I no longer looked like Stewart Detweiler.

First stop: a bank teller machine. Of the pin numbers that occurred to me, the third turned out to be the charm. I withdrew three hundred dollars. Make it three hundred and sixty.

With eighteen crisp sawbucks tucked into Brock Jones, PhD's wallet, feeling rich beyond my dreams, I drove to Kroger along the tawdry strip at the north edge of town, filled my shopping cart to brimming, and stood in line to pay.

It was while standing there that I learned that our mother wasn't the only one obsessing over Brock Jones, PhD's disappearance. On the magazine rack to my left, tucked in among the covers of other supermarket tabloids, in a replay of the Invisible Gorilla Test that I'd failed all those years ago aboard a crowded New York City subway car, I recognized a face, my own—or what might as well have been my own face, complete with gray beard, scowling in the direction of the photographer as its owner exited

what looked like a municipal building. In italicized gothic type, the caption above the grainy photo read, “GONE GURU!” I forget which tabloid it was, the *Globe* or the *Star* or the *National Enquirer*. It wasn’t the lead headline, which, if I recall correctly, had to do with the latest outlandish solution to the JonBenét Ramsey murder, but a side headline. I did a quick scan of the other rag sheets, expecting to see a similar photo with an analogous alliterative headline (“AWOL AUTHOR!” “WHAT’S BECOME OF BROCK?”), but there was just the one. Still, it was enough to paint my forehead with clammy sweat and make me wonder: Why this sudden interest in Brock Jones, PhD’s absence? Before I’d headed off on my journey south, there hadn’t been a single buried news item about it. Now of a sudden my erstwhile twin’s disappearance was worthy of at least one front-page story. Someone, apparently, had alerted the authorities, had pressed the panic—or was it the publicity stunt—button? If so, did that stunt include its object’s self-inflicted end?

I would not have put it past Brock Jones, PhD.

I edged my cart out of checkout line and rolled it to the pharmacy section. There, from a rotating rack, I chose a pair of cheap sunglasses, the kind with mirrored lenses to better obscure my eyes. With them on I took my place in another checkout line.



It was while waiting in that second line that my eyes met another headline, this one on the front page of the local newspaper:

**Police Comb Lake S——
For Missing Alabama Man**

Having taken the paper off the rack, I found the article:

M———, GA. Since Friday morning, state and local police have been searching the woods and surrounding areas of Lake S—— for an Alabama man who was reported missing two weeks ago, and whose car, a late-model Ford Mustang convertible, was found partly submerged near a boat launch in Turtle Cove, a shallow inlet at

the southeastern end of the lake a mile from the dam. The car's owner, Lester Figes, a 42-year old self-employed exterminator of Wetumpka, Alabama, was reported missing on April 1 by his sixteen-year-old half niece, Melody Baker.

A woman waiting behind me in line cleared her throat.
 "Sorry," I said, and tossed the paper into my cart.

• •

The cashier was a pretty young teenager with orange hair and matching bright fingernail polish. Among items that I'd transferred from my cart to the conveyor belt: a bottle of top-shelf Chianti to christen my new existence. The cashier said:

"I'll need to see some ID, sir."

I smiled at her. "You're kidding."

She returned my smile. "We have to card everyone, sir. It's store policy."

I nodded. "I was about to start humming 'You Make Me Feel So Young'."

"Sorry?"

"An old song."

"Oh," said the cashier.

I handed her my—Stewart Detweiler's—New York driver's license. Like most drivers' license photos, this one captured nothing so well as the fluorescent-lit glumness occasioned by a two-hour wait at the DMV. The cashier looked at the photo, then at me, then at the photo again. I waited for her to remark on the dissimilarity between the photo and the person standing before her.

She asked: "Do you have a Kroger card?"

"A what?"

"You know—for Kroger points?"

"No. Oh, wait. Yes, I think I do!" I fished around in the wallet and found a Kroger card.

The cashier went on ringing up items, including a 1.25 lb. grass-fed Angus beef tenderloin (Unit Price \$8.95 per lb.; total with Kroger discount card: \$12.55) ... Just when it seemed to me I was in the clear, the cashier remarked:

"Has anyone told you you look familiar? You're not famous or anything?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Maybe it's those sunglasses. You buying those?"

"Hmm?"

"There's a price tag on them." She pointed.

"Oh!" I reached up to remove it.

"It'll be easier if you take them off."

"I've got it," I said, fumbling.

"Here, let me help." She reached and pulled the tag off for me.

"Thanks."

"Maybe you just have a familiar face."

She *was* cute. (I know, I'm supposed to say *how* she was cute, in what particular, concrete ways, but I don't feel like it. I will mention the faint freckles dusting her nose.)

"Very familiar," she said, "like I saw you recently on TV or on the cover of a magazine. Do you mind me asking where you're from?"

"What makes you think I'm not from around here?"

"You don't sound like you're from around here." She rang up the Brussels sprouts. Onions. Grapefruits. A bag of frozen fresh-caught salmon. "Lemme guess. I bet you're from New York!"

"No. Not New York."

"Near New York?" Blueberries.

"Not far from there."

"Someplace I've heard of?" Low-fat yogurt.

"Do you know Wappingers Falls?" The name just came to me.

"Nope," said the cashier.

"That's where I'm from."

"What are you doing down here, if it's any of my business?"

"Just ... you know ... visiting," I said.

"You have friends or family here?" Three cucumbers.

"Hmm? Yes. Friends. Well, a friend. A good friend."

"That's nice."

Wheat germ, crumbled gorgonzola, olive oil, capers...I bagged the groceries myself.

"You enjoying yourself?"

"I am. Very much."

"It's a nice town. Small, but nice. How big is—Where'd you say you were from?"

"Wappingers Falls."

"How big is Wappinger Falls?"

"Wappingers. Pretty small."

"Smaller than here?"

"I'd say so. Yes. A bit." I had no idea how big or small Wappingers Falls is.

"You been out to the lake yet?"

"No. Not yet."

"It's pretty." Tomatoes. A bag of spinach.

"Is it?"

"It's the cleanest lake in the state. I read it in a magazine. Ask your friend to take you."

"I'll do that."

"There's this restaurant called The Bowline. Right on the water? You can watch the sun set while you're eating dinner. They have really good burgers. And French-fried pickles!"

"French-fried pickles?"

"Yes, sir. They've got other stuff, too. It's a nice place. Maybe you and your friend can go there some time. Your friend a lady?" Oatmeal. Peppermint and rose hip tea.

"Yes, a lady."

"She'd like it, I bet."

"Thanks for the tip."

"You're welcome."

The cash register vomited a three-foot long receipt.

"That's two-hundred and thirty-six dollars and fifty-two cents. You saved twenty-seven dollars and ninety-four cents and earned 236 Kroger fuel points." She handed the receipt to me.

Together she and I finished bagging my groceries. As we did the cashier said: "I still say you look like somebody."

"Well," I said. "Don't we all?"

• •

At the Kroger station, using my (Brock's) Kroger card for the discount, I gassed up the Mazda.

Next stop: Lowe's, where, along with a roll of blue painter's tape and a trim brush, I bought a quart of high quality exterior latex paint of a certain bright color.

Last stop before returning home: the Verizon store, where, with Brock's American Express card, I obtained another cellphone. Thanks to the phone companies in their infinite greedy wisdom, you can't own two cellphones with the same number, which suited my purposes. I didn't *want* the same number. The new phone would be Stewart Detweiler's.

What else did I need?

Nothing.

I drove back to the house, where, after a quick swim and a few hours' more research, I put on an apron and went about preparing my first official meal as "Brock Jones, PhD": steak, roasted baby red potatoes, *haricots verts*, spinach and gorgonzola salad. I pre-heated the oven to 425 degrees, rubbed the one-and-one-half inch steak on both sides with garlic-infused olive oil, salted and peppered it, then seared it in a cast-iron skillet to a deep brown on both sides, three minutes per side. Slide skillet into oven and bake for 20 minutes, turning once. Let cool for 10 minutes before slicing thin on bias. Enjoy with room temperature top-shelf Chianti facing sunset-smeared lake through French doors with fire burning gently in hearth. While taking in the view, chewing, drinking, listening to the chorus of hisses, snaps, and belchings of the fire, say to yourself:

Welcome back, Brock Jones, PhD.

• •

Starting the next morning with breakfast (1 cup plain low-fat yogurt with a mixture of fresh raspberries and blueberries, 254 calories) followed by windmills (30), jumping jacks (75), push-ups (25), sit-ups (25), a three-mile jog and a twenty-minute swim, I launched my diet and exercise regime. Lose twenty pounds in two weeks: that was my goal. Limit carbs, sugar, all fats. Lots of vegetables and fruits eaten raw. Spinach and apples. A little meat and olive oil now and then. At sunset I took the boat out for long rows. I swam—with a wetsuit at first, then without, back and forth to the neighbor's dock. The cold water didn't bother me; I grew to

like both it and the forty-five minutes of shivering that invariably followed such dips and that subjected every cell of my body to its own aerobic workout. Afterwards a cup of hot herbal tea by the fire. Then more floor exercises. Crunches, stretches, isometrics...

Less than two weeks into my regimen for the first time I dared to look at myself in the full-length mirror, the one behind the door to the downstairs bedroom. By then the bare patches in my gray beard had filled in nicely. Was I imagining things, or did my shoulders look broader? My stomach was flatter. To myself anyway I looked better than I had in a long time. Pounds shed: sixteen. After less than two weeks! Not hard to believe, given my single-minded determination and total lack of distractions.

A few days later I tried on a pair of Brock's jeans.
Snug, but they fit.

• •

Mother called. A few times. More than a few. Sometimes she'd call us both, Brock and Stewart, on the same day. I kept both cellphones fully charged and made sure to remember which one I was answering, and as whom. Different ringtones helped. Stewart's phone had a classic ringtone ("Old Phone"); Brock's played a synthetic rendering of "By the Seaside," until I grew sick of that aural equivalent of saltwater taffy and changed it to "Twinkle." In time I came to think of my past self as "Old Phone" and my present self as "Twinkle."

It was Twinkle who answered his mother's call the sunny Sunday afternoon when I first noticed the red boat trolling the lake.

"Hey, Mom."

"Brock, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom. It's me. Who else would be answering my phone?"

"I swear you don't sound like yourself."

"How are you, Mom?"

"I'm fine. What do you want me to say? The food here is boring. I wish they'd let us do our own cooking."

"Mom, you're blind."

"I am not blind! I'm *legally* blind. That just means I can't drive. I see enough to be able to cook. It's not like I'd burn the

place down. They won't even let us keep a hot plate in our rooms. It's like a gulag here. A concentration camp. Terrible."

"How are things otherwise?"

"What can I say? I'm old. My kidneys are shot. And I'm still worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about. Really."

"I swear you sound like your brother."

"It's the connection. The signal's poor here. And I'm a bit congested. Allergies, probably."

"I never had allergies. Neither did your father. Are you taking anything? They have good things for allergies now. Over the counter. There's one that starts with a Z. It was on the TV."

"I'll look for it, Mom."

"Do you have blown air?"

"What?"

"Central air conditioning. Is that what you've got down there? I hope not. You may have mold in your ducts. I hope it's not mold. They say once mold gets in your ducts its impossible to get rid of. You probably have to replace all the ducts. What are you doing, anyway?"

"Doing? You mean now? This moment?"

"Yes."

"I'm sitting on the dock. Reading." This was true. I was sitting on the dock, reading. Sartre's *Nausea*, a foxed, dog-eared and heavily marked-up paperback found on one of my father's shelves. I'd had a light lunch, a *salade Lyonnaise* I'd fixed for myself after taking the boat for a six mile morning row, and that I'd paired with an ice-cold, pinch-dry Lanquedoc rosé for which I had driven all the way to Athens and back, and that I continued to sip with my mother on the phone. The odd red boat was out there, zigzagging.

"How much longer are you planning to keep this up?"

"Keep what up, Mom?"

"This... whatever it is you're doing? Hiding from everyone. How much longer do you plan to stay down there in that moldy old house, letting everyone in the world worry to death about you? It's in the news. Did you know that?"

"It is?"

"Someone showed me. One of the other prisoners here. She has a subscription to the *National Inquisition*—"

"*Enquirer*."

"What?"

"The *National Enquirer*, Mom."

"Whatever. One of those awful newspapers. There you were plastered all over the front page. I couldn't believe it. Such a terrible photograph. Is your beard really that long?"

"Anyway, Mom, there's no need for anyone to worry."

"You could at least tell them where you are."

"I will. Eventually."

"Eventually *when*?"

"I just need a little more time."

"Time for *what*? What are you accomplishing? Are you writing another book?"

"Yeah, Mom. I'm writing another book."

"What's this one about? Or can't you tell me? Not that I'd tell anyone. Like you can't trust me, your own mother."

"You know how it is, Mom."

"You can talk about it or you can write it."

"That's right. You've got it."

"Shouldn't you at least let Dawn know that you're all right?"

"She knows, Mom. I told her."

This was so: I had emailed Dawn Swopes, my (Brock's) personal assistant (or manager or whatever he'd called her) and let her know—in the vaguest terms possible—that I was all right, that she needn't worry about me. In my terse email I explained that I was taking some personal time off, that I would be indisposed "for an indefinite period," that she should cancel all my appointments for the next month, and furthermore that I was not to be disturbed by anyone—herself included, that any emails or other correspondences received by me would not be answered, nor did I intend to take phone calls or check email. As for my whereabouts, I preferred not to disclose them to anyone, herself included. I said all this knowing, assuming, that it would all be of a piece with Brock's protean nature, that Dawn would see it as just another phase in his ever-evolving odyssey of eccentric self-reinvention. Meanwhile it would buy me the

time I needed to slip gently into the vague waters of my new life, rather than plunge headlong like Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*.

"Thank goodness for that," my mother said.

I sipped my rosé; I watched the red boat.

"Weren't you supposed to do some big thing for television soon? Some big fundraising special or something?"

There had been several emails and phone messages to that effect, increasingly frantic in tone, mostly from Dawn, but also from one Adam Swann. "That's all on hold for now," I said, earning one of those pregnant silences at which my mother was so adept.

"What about Sheila?"

"What about her?"

"Shouldn't she know where you are?"

"Mom, we've been divorced for over four years."

"She still cares about you. Can I at least tell her you're all right, if she calls?"

"Sure, fine. Just don't let her know where I am. Don't let anyone know. I mean it, Mom."

"All right, Mr. Mysterious."

"Seriously, Mom."

"I said all right."

The red boat passed in front of the dock again.

"What about Stewart? Have you called him? You should call him. He loves you. He drove all that way to see you, to make sure you were all right. That's how much he loves you. He thinks you don't care for him anymore, but I know that's not true. If you'd just call him once in a while it would mean so much to him. It would mean a lot to me, too. I worry about that brother of yours. No career, no girlfriend. He doesn't seem to have any close friends. He says he's doing fine, but I don't believe it. He should have left the city long ago. It's obvious that he's depressed. I'd be depressed, too, if I were your brother. He hasn't had much luck, that's for sure."

"No," I said. "He hasn't."

"You should call him once in a while."

"I will."

"They're serving lunch now. Something boring. I can smell it. It *smells* boring. I have to go. Take care of yourself."

“Right, Mom. You, too.”

“Call your brother.”

“I will.”

“It’ll boost his spirits. You’re such a positive person. I wish your brother had some of your positive spirit. He’s so negative.”

I nodded to myself.

“Good bye, Brock.”

“Bye, Mom.”

• •

Seconds later the other phone — “Old Phone” — rang.

“Stewart!”

“Hello, Mother.”

“Where are you?”

“Home. Why?”

“I just tried your landline. It’s disconnected!”

“I know, Mother. I had it disconnected.”

“I thought you hate cellphones? You swore you’d never get one.”

“Things change. Got to keep up with the times.”

“You should have kept your landline. I’d have paid for it.”

“What do I need a landline for?”

“What if there’s a blackout?”

“There hasn’t been a major blackout in the city in twenty years.”

“But what if there is? If there’s a blackout your cellphone won’t work. You’ll be stranded. Alone in the dark in your apartment with riots going on in the street. What if there’s a terrorist attack? Or heaven forbid a nuclear war?”

“Please, Mother. If the world should end, my having a landline won’t save it or me.”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

“Can we change the subject?”

“What have you been doing with yourself?”

“The usual.” I shrugged—pointlessly, since my mother couldn’t see it. “Working on my book.”

“The same one?”

“Yes, Mother. The same one.”

The silence that followed came with a shift in sound. The gener-

ator's winding roar had suddenly ceased. I looked up to see the red boat bobbing. I heard the voices of men aboard it, saw one of them gesturing, shouting, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

"I spoke with your brother."

"Did you?"

"A few minutes ago. He's still at your father's house. He's writing a book, too. He won't say what it's about. Mr. Mysterious. You know your brother. Do you need any money?"

"Thanks, Mother, I'm fine."

"I don't see how with no job."

"I'm managing."

"You're not selling drugs, are you?"

"No, Mother."

"Or your blood?"

"Mother, Jesus—!"

Aboard the red boat one of the men pulled a slender object from the water. A broken-off piece of dock planking? A lost water ski?

"Your brother says hello, by the way. He cares for you. No matter what you think."

The generator re-started; the red boat moved on.

"Are you sure you don't need money, Stewart? I have a CD that's due to mature soon. When it does I can send you some."

"That's okay, really."

"They're serving dinner. I have to go. I'll call again soon."

"Use this number."

"What other number is there? Your landline's disconnected."

"That's right."

"They're serving so-called chicken Marsala again. I can tell by the smell. I may be legally blind, but my nose still works."

"Have a nice dinner, Mother."

"It's the second time in nine days. I know; I keep track."

"Take care, Mother."

"*You* take care."

"I will."

15. MALCOLM'S MISSING MASTERPIECE [ALT. TITLE: "DREDGING"]

IN ADDITION TO READING ALL MY BROTHER'S EMAILS AND TEXT messages, studying his calendar, reading (and re-reading) his published books as well as his outlines, notes for and drafts of various works-in-progress I found in various Google Drive folders, as part of my reconnaissance I read many of my father's books and papers too. In many ways he and my brother were more alike, more "twinned," than Greg and I had been. Up to the time of his transformation, down to his choice of profession, the books he read, the clothes and shoes he wore, Greg had walked in our father's footsteps, or in his shadow. If I was to become Brock Jones, PhD, I would have to absorb Brock's basis, Gregory Detweiler. And the basis for Gregory Detweiler was, had been, our father, Malcolm Detweiler.

Before dishing out the next course of my confession, I feel the need to inject a preface, or, if you like, a warning. You may recall my brother once offering me a rare bit of literary advice. "Why don't you write a novel of pure atmosphere?" The inspiration behind this suggestion of his was a late nineteenth century novel by a Frenchman to whom my father (from whom Gregory took most if not all his reading cues) first introduced my brother. The author

was Joris-Karl Huysmans, and the novel was *À Rebours*—or, in English depending on the translation, *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*. Considered the ultimate example of so-called “decadent” literature, it tells the story of a reclusive eccentric named des Esseintes, who, loathing contemporary society, abandons Paris and retreats to his country estate, where, one by one, he indulges his senses as well as his intellect in an ideal aesthetic realm of his own invention. Among des Esseintes’ various indulgences: an array of tiny liquor casks controlled by a series of valves and spigots, with each liquor corresponding to an orchestral instrument, from which he sips “harmonic” combinations and that he calls his “*orgue a bouche*” (“mouth organ”); a giant tortoise whose carapace he encrusts with so many flashing jewels the miserably laden beast can no longer move; a garden of monstrous and poisonous flowers; a “black mass” feast consisting exclusively of foods that are black (“turtle soup, Russian black bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, mule steaks, Frankfurt smoked sausages, wild game served in sauces colored to resemble liquorice water and boot-blackening, truffles in jelly, chocolate-tinted creams, puddings, nectarines, fruit preserves, mulberries and cherries”) served on black-bordered plates by “naked negresses” and accompanied by wines “of... Tenedos, the Val de Penas, and Oporto, drunk from dark-tinted glasses. Following the course of coffee and walnuts came other unusual beverages, kwas, porter, and stout.” Chief among des Esseintes’ many indulgences—the subject of an entire chapter—are the books in his orange and blue library, one that excludes all the monuments of Golden Age Latin in favor of works embodying cultural disintegration, including De Sade, Petronius, and other pornographic classics.

I say Huysmans’ novel “tells the story of” though there’s very little story to tell. The beauty of *Against the Grain*—one of many beautiful things about it—is that it’s a novel not so much of “pure atmosphere” as of pure *description*: a novel that, more successfully than any other I can think of, does away with plot and characters and all that silly stuff. A novel about nothing.

Consider the section that follows my tribute to Huysmans.



Every room in this house is full of books. Where not packed onto shelves the books are staggered in piles on the floor, on tables, on the kitchen counter: everywhere. The place reeks of books: a fusty, musty, mushroom- or sperm-like, faintly sexual smell, the smell of decaying paper and moldering thoughts. Though some of his books are arranged alphabetically or by subject, when it came to his library my father had no special ardor for order, or he did once, but lost it over time. Freed of any organizing principle, the books wandered promiscuously from room to room, with history books frolicking with volumes on the natural sciences, novels conjugating with text and reference books, *belle-lettres* fraternizing with biographies, Plutarch rubbing shoulders with paleontology and Pound, not to speak of the orgies of literary miscegenation unfolding on the floor and in closets.

In one place alone my father's books are organized: a bookcase in the little office he made for himself in what had been the basement. Unlike the others, this bookcase is draped over by a royal blue chintz cloth held in place by pushpins. I parted it to reveal books neatly arranged by subject, some—many of them—with dozens of sticky-notes and paper clips marking their pages. Among headings written on strips of masking tape affixed to the shelves: *Twins/Twin Studies, Dualism, Taoism, Nature vs. Nurture, Mythology, Nietzsche, Nothing, Plato/Unity of Opposites*... On smaller vertical strips these are sub-categorized (under "Dualities": Radical Dualism, Mitigated Dualism, Cartesian Dualism, Naturalistic Dualism, Moral Dualism, Dualistic Cosmology, Manichaeism, Parallelism, Double-Aspect Theory, Doctrine of Double Effect... "Mythology": Apollo & Artemis, Castor & Pollux, Romulus & Remus, Amphion & Zethus, Gulgamesh & Enkidu, Kleobis & Biton...).

Among the books shelved above "Dualities" is a slim bound volume titled *The Kybalion: Hermetic Philosophy*, yes, *that* book, the one on which Greg was en route to deliver a conference paper when he had his epiphany.

The fourth shelf from the top is devoted to fiction, to novels mostly, all to do with twins or doppelgängers: Stevenson's *The*

Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, Plautus' *The Two Menaechmuses*, Nabokov's *Despair*...

At the far left end of the bottom shelf are six marbled composition notebooks very much like this one I'm holding, filled with notes in my father's jagged handwriting. The notebooks are dated, numbered, and titled as follows:

Twins I (June 12, 1993)
 Twins II (Sept. 19, 1995)
 Twins III (Dec. 12, 1995)
 Twins IV (May 13, 1996)
 Doubles (Oct. 23, 1996)
 Double or Nothing (July 1997)

From the first five notebooks, a sampling of quotes:

Ouroboros drawing from the early alchemical text The Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra (Greek: Η χρυσοποιία της Κλεοπάτρας) dating to 2nd C. Alexandria encloses words hen to pan (Greek: εν το παν), "one is the all." Black and white halves represent Gnostic duality of existence. Western equivalent of the Taoist Yin-Yang symbol.

Yin and yang symbol represents philosophy of balance wherein opposites co-exist in harmony and transmute into each other. Dot of yin in yang qua dot of yang in yin symbolize interconnectedness of opposite aspects of Tao, the First Principle. Contrast makes reality discernable. Without contrast we experience nothingness.

Castor and Pollux share a bond so strong when Castor dies, Pollux gives up half of his immortality to be with his twin. Ergo the Discoursi or Gemeni is seen only half the year as twins divide time between underworld and Olympus. Whether immortal not consistent among accounts, nor whether twins hatched from one or two eggs.

In the Yoruba religion, deity representing twins called Orisha Ibeji or Orisa Ibeji. "Ibeji" literally "twins." Carved figures, up to ten inches high and carved with the family mask, house soul of a dead twin called ibeji. Yoruba people believe that this care and tending ensures survival of remaining twin.

Zurvanism derives from Zoroastrian notions of Free Will. Like Mazdaism (extant branch of Zoroastrianism), sees contest between good and evil as mortal choice rather than willed by nature. Apply to modern concept of “evil twin,” not wholly or intrinsically evil but mirror image or opposite of “good twin.”

Not entirely to my surprise there was even this entry:

Duplicity (n.) *early 15c., from Old French duplicite (13c.), from Late Latin duplicitatem (nominative duplicitas) “doubleness,” in Medieval Latin “ambiguity,” noun of quality from duplex (genitive duplicis) “twofold.” The notion of being “double” in one’s conduct (compare Greek diploos “treacherous, double-minded,” literally “twofold, double”).*

1: contradictory doubleness of thought, speech, or action especially the belying of one’s true intentions by deceptive words or action

2: the quality or state of being double or twofold

3 (legal): the technically incorrect use of two or more distinct items (as claims, charges, or defenses) in a single legal action

When you are being duplicitous there are two yous: the one you’re showing and the one you’re hiding. And—key to the idea of duplicity—you’re hiding that you in order to make people believe something that’s not true. [father’s underscores]

Though his handwriting can be hard to read, by and large my father’s notes in the first three notebooks are decipherable. By the middle of the sixth notebook—which is two-thirds full—the notes are incomprehensible, at least by me:

... existence stubbornly refuting Parmenides’, still taken seriously by Socrates and Plato. Aristotle gives serious consideration but concludes “opinions follow logically in dialectical discussion, yet seem next door to madness when one considers the facts.” Atomist Leucippus’ attempts to reconcile with everyday observation of motion / change. Thing that exists = absolute

plenum but no motion in plenum because full. Same scenario macroscopic objects not-being by means of coming together / moving apart / constituent atoms. Russell also finds both sides mistaken believes no motion in plenum. Bailey notes Leucippus first thing (the void) might be real without body points out the irony of idea coming from materialistic atomist. Leucippus first to identify “nothing” as having reality attached. Void (as “nothing”) differentiated from space as in removed from consideration. Characterization reached pinnacle Newton / existence absolute space. Modern quantum agrees space $\neq$ void, concept of quantum foam exists in absence all else, though general rel. no longer supports absolute space. Refer to Descartes and Parmenides’ argument denying space existence; matter and its extension leave “no room for “nothing.” Idea of space actually empty still unaccepted; invoke Hegel / plenum reasoning...

Some pages later:

Thesis: The Absolute is Pure Being

Antithesis: The Absolute is Nothing

Synthesis: The Absolute is Becoming

Below this my atheist philosopher father wrote:

Law of identity ($A = A$; a thing is identical to itself)

Law of excluded middle (either A or not-A; a thing is either something or not that thing, no third option)

Law of noncontradiction (not both A and not-A; a thing cannot be both true and not true in the same instant)

However:

Law of identity is inaccurate because a thing is always more than itself

Law of excluded middle is inaccurate because a thing can be both itself and many others

Law of non-contradiction is inaccurate because everything in existence is both itself and not itself

This is followed by:

$2/0 =$ point at complex infinity on complex projective line on

Riemann sphere. $0/0$ not $= 1$ since multiplication only trivial for FINITE values. $1/0 =$ per above, division by $0 =$ multiplying by ∞ . Note: some expressions that appear to approach $0/0$ may have other values that are finite. See L'Hopital's rule:

If $g'(x) \neq 0$ for all $x \neq a$

and if $\frac{f(x)}{g(x)}$ has the indeterminate form $\frac{0}{0}$ or $\frac{\infty}{\infty}$

then $\lim_{x \rightarrow a} \frac{f(x)}{g(x)} = \lim_{x \rightarrow a} \frac{f'(x)}{g'(x)}$

provided that $\lim_{x \rightarrow a} \frac{f'(x)}{g'(x)}$ exists or $\lim_{x \rightarrow a} \frac{f'(x)}{g'(x)} = \pm \infty$

And then:

When one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction on the first body.

$$F_A = -F_B$$

Finally, in red ink on a page all by itself:

$$0 \times 2 = 0$$

$$0 \div 2 = ?$$

$$0 \div 0 = ?$$

There the last notebook ends. Possibly these are the very last words—or numbers—my father ever wrote.

What grand dissertation had my father intended to pull together from all these notes? Though I searched every file drawer and folder for a manuscript-in-progress or anything else that might have shed light on what he'd been up to, I found nothing.

Still, one thing was obvious: my father was obsessed with twins. Having twin sons just as obviously provided the basis of this obsession.

Whatever stood behind his obsession, clearly Malcolm Detweiler had been pursuing some grand unifying theory of equal

opposites, of the twofold, double-sided nature of existence. A theory of everything and everything's identical twin: nothing.



Throughout the rest of my ... what should I call it? My sojourn? My squat? My retreat? My obscuration? ... Throughout my time at my father's A-frame, I made a point of reading or at least skimming through every book behind that blue chintz cloth, taking a volume to bed with me each night and staying up late reading, sometimes most of the night. Despite doing so, for some reason, even on as little as two or three hours of sleep, I never felt exhausted; I didn't even feel tired. If I did, I'd take a catnap, something I'd never done in my *other* life, not without waking up drenched in a cold sweat, feeling more nauseated and disoriented than refreshed.

Here, on the other hand, in my "new life," on my father's hammock strung between a pair of sweetgum trees at the edge of the lake, to the sounds of boats buzzing by and water splashing against the lake wall, I'd drift off into short, sweet, relaxing slumbers, and awaken feeling as fresh as the breezes that swept over me in my rocking woven cotton cradle.



In addition to books, an entire shelf of my father's "Twin" bookcase is devoted to videocassettes of old movies (my father, who died in 1997, never lived to see the age of Netflix and live streaming). After dinner, before bed, I'd watch one of those movies, all of which had something to do with twins, doppelgängers, or switching identities.

A partial catalogue:

The Black Room. After a ten-year hiatus, Anton returns to the castle occupied by his twin brother Gregor, a tyrannical baron. When Gregor's subjects storm the castle, he turns his title over to his beloved twin, whom he then murders and whose identity he assumes, thereby reclaiming his baronetcy. But what of the prophecy that foretold Anton's murder of his brother?

The Prisoner of Zenda. On the eve of his coronation, the King is drugged by his twin brother, Prince Michael. To prevent

Michael from assuming the throne, the king's attendants get his identical twin cousin Rudolf to impersonate him. While the king is imprisoned in a castle in Zenda, Rudolph falls in love with the king's betrothed.

Among the Living. John Raden, son of the town patriarch and owner of the now-idle mill that was the town's *raison d'être*, believes his twin brother Paul died in an accident twenty-five years ago. In fact he was brain damaged as a result of the beatings of his overbearing father, and has been alive all the while, ensconced in a room in the decaying Radon mansion, tended to by a doctor and a servant. The plot kicks in when, after a quarter century of isolation, insane Paul escapes the mansion and heads into town.

A Stolen Life. When manipulative, man-hungry Pat Bosworth (Bette Davis) drowns in a sailing accident, her shy, demure twin sister Kate (ditto) assumes her identity as well as her husband, Bill, whom her sister had stolen from her in the first place. But Bill, who'd had it with Pat, wants a divorce. To tell or not to tell?

The Dark Mirror. Identical twins—one loving, the other severely disturbed—are murder suspects. Only one committed the murder, and each can provide an alibi for the other.

Paranoiac. Simon—a spendthrift alcoholic—plots to drive his sister insane so as to inherit the estate of their rich parents. His plan is foiled, however, when a mysterious stranger appears, claiming to be Simon's brother Tony, who supposedly committed suicide by jumping off a seaside cliff and whose body was never found. Though "Tony" claims to have faked his death, Simon knows the truth: after forging a suicide note, Simon murdered his brother and buried the body behind a wall in the chapel of the estate.

Dead Ringer. Desperate and broke Edith (Bette Davis again) murders her wealthy twin sister Margaret and assumes her identity.

Suture. Destitute Vince plots to murder his twin brother Clay with a car bomb and pass off the corpse as his own so he won't have to share money from father's will and can start a new life.

The premise of nearly all twin/double stories boils down to this: since the laws of nature dictate that one thing can't exist in two places at once, a person and his or her double can't both remain alive: for the laws of the universe to be respected, one of

them must perish.

Said premise, needless to say, fails to take into account Quantum Entanglement.

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When not reading books or watching movies from my father's bookshelves, or gathering clues about my brother's life, or swimming, or doing floor and isometric exercises, or rowing my father's boat or napping in his hammock, I taught myself how to ride my brothers' motorcycle, a late model BMW R1200C Phoenix Cruiser with a yellow gasoline tank. I'd never ridden a motorcycle before. The closest I'd ever come had been on the Greek island of Naxos thirty years earlier, when I nearly killed myself and my girlfriend on a rented Vespa. I started out cautiously, learning what I could online before climbing on the machine, which to my surprise started on the first try. I wore my brother's helmet, gloves, and full regalia of protective gear, and practiced along the stretch of one-lane road leading to the house, and later riding circles in the cul-de-sac, until I felt confident enough to ride all the way to town and back.

Meanwhile the Mazda went under its own tarp next to the sagging aluminum carport, under which, you may recall, my dead father's Alfa Romeo cowered under its own tarp, beyond repair. Its tires were flat, its convertible top reduced to leather rags, its bucket seats torn and occupied by spiders, mice, and carpenter ants, its pistons welded by rust to their cylinders. Through gaps in the corroded floor chickweed and crabgrass sprouted.

• •

I did other things. I tended the yard. With the riding mower stored under a tarp beneath the deck (whose pistons, unlike the Alpha's, hadn't rusted) I mowed the lawn. I seeded bare patches in the grass. I got the sprinkler system pump up and running again. I replaced the splintered boards on the dock, filled in the sinkholes that had formed along the seawall where the muskrats got to it, and repaired breaches in the wall itself. I planted new shrubs and pruned old ones. I'd always had a black thumb. Back in New York the few potted

geraniums I'd kept in my apartment withered under my neglectful stewardship. Now, despite the unsuitability of the season, the same geraniums or ones just like them out on the deck here burst into boisterous blooms. The hands that ministered to them were identical, but the results were entirely different. Ditto the five azaleas, the four gardenias, the three hydrangeas, and the one camellia bush I planted. I noted other significant changes as well. Several hundred or so pages back in this document, paraphrasing the section of my brother's first book wherein he describes the changes that he underwent during the days, weeks, and months immediately following his airborne epiphany, I wrote and you read: "He felt...like a different man; indeed, he *was* a different man. There could simply be no question about it. He felt different in his gestures; he felt different in his bones and in his blood. His skin felt different on his face. When he smiled, he felt the difference in the tension of his muscles and nerves, and he smiled much more than he ever had before. He felt it in the movements of his bowels and in the spasms, flow, and contractions of his bladder. His erections felt different; it might have been the power of suggestion, or a placebo effect of all the other changes, but it seemed to him that they were a good deal stronger and lasted longer, and that, furthermore, his sexual organ, by what could only be called immaculate enhancement, had grown markedly larger in all three of its primary states: erect, tumescent, and flaccid...His breath was sweeter; his teeth struck him as whiter; his hair was thicker; and his hairline, which had been receding or threatening to recede, seemed no longer to be doing so. He had much more energy and enthusiasm..." If I've duplicated this passage, it's not out of laziness, but because during my first weeks here my brother's experience was indeed duplicated.

Along with these physical and emotional changes there came a change in outlook and philosophy. No longer did I doubt, much less hold in contempt, the premise of my brother's book.

How could I doubt it, when I was its living embodiment? What more proof did I need that one really *can* change, for the better, with a snap of one's fingers, just like *that*!

As simple as ordering coffee, black.

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However, along with black coffee, trouble, as they say, was brewing.

First, there was that red boat, which, gone for a week owing to inclement weather, had returned, now plying the waters nearer to the lake's center—yes, Dear Reader, a short distance from where I had disposed of my brother's corpse. Still, that they could have been looking for my brother made no sense, none at all. As for Lester Figes, whoever he was—he had nothing to do with me. For that matter, what could he have had to do with my brother?

Since no one but my mother had its number, I left Old Phone's ringer in the "on" mode. Meanwhile I silenced Twinkle. Apparently my brother had shared his cellphone number with only a very few people, including Dawn Swopes, whose messages, before I instructed her via email to cease and desist, lit up the screen no fewer than two-dozen times a day. There were other phone and text messages, too. Most of them I gave a cursory glance to and forgot about.

One message, however, was harder to ignore.

what did u do to my uncle?

I was sitting in one of the two chairs on the dock, in the shade of a new sun umbrella I'd bought, a blue-and-white striped umbrella with a hand crank and a fifty-pound iron stand. A few minutes later:

i know u did something

Another minute:

they found his car

Twenty seconds later:

the police

The next few messages arrived in rapid succession:

i know it was u

u wont get away with it

i wont let u

answer me

goddam u

The number associated with the messages had a 334 area code. I looked it up. Alabama. Specifically, the southeastern side of the state, including the Montgomery, Auburn-Opelika, and Dothan metropolitan areas, as well as Phenix City.

A thought occurred to me.

I found the newspaper I'd bought at Kroger and re-read the front-page story.

334 was also the area code for Wetumpka.

A coincidence, to be sure.

I searched for other messages and calls from that same number, but found none. Had my brother deleted them? What was going on? What could he possibly have had to do with someone from Wetumpka, Alabama, or his/her uncle? It made no sense.

For the rest of that day and that night and most of the following day I kept one eye on that phone screen. Each time it lit up I winced.

No other messages from that number followed.

Probably some crazed fan, a stalker, no doubt. Brock Jones, PhD must have more than his share of them.

I put it out of my mind.

16. FOR I HAD COME TO DOUBT MYSELF...

BACK TO NEW YORK CITY AND MY (ADMITTEDLY OVERLONG) back-story.

As I exited the Society Library at 79th and Madison rain-drops speckled the sidewalk. I carried my battered briefcase and two plastic bags, one in each hand. The plastic bag in my left hand held “Bitsy” Watson’s copy of “Duplicity,” the one in my right held the other two un-collated copies. I still had to get a manuscript box. If you haven’t done so all this time by now you must be wondering why I couldn’t have just emailed Bitsy a digital version of my novel, why I insisted on this antiquated and cumbersome approach. Call me a Luddite, but I could not bear the thought of Bitsy reading my virtual words. I wanted her turning pages—not digital pages, real ones. For the same reason I can’t bear the thought of so-called “electronic” books. I have never bought one and can now safely say I never will. Like an electric fire, it may do the same job, but it’s also equally unprepossessing. Anyway I wanted the chance to meet my novel’s savior.

It took me four stationers to find one decrepit enough to still carry manuscript boxes. By then I was twenty-seven long blocks from my destination. The sky was as dark as a coalminer’s lungs. Should it start pouring, I thought, my freshly-copied manuscripts

and I will both be soaked.

It started pouring.

There was a Starbucks on the corner. Normally I'd have gone out of my way to avoid that establishment, finding its coffee only slightly less deplorable than its pastries, and those in keeping with its pseudo-bohemian but ultimately bland corporate ambiance. I ducked inside and took a corner table. With the wet world going by outside, I collated the other manuscripts. As I did, another title occurred to me, along with the outline of a story: "Desecration," about a woman (middle-aged? older? Joan or Joanne. Realtor? Grade-school teacher? Lawyer?) whose dead best friend in her will has asked her to look over the grave of her niece who died in a car accident, to make sure that it's not desecrated by contemptuous youth. The graveyard has an iron gate around it. Driving by it one afternoon, this woman, call her Jo, sees another, younger woman sitting on the niece's gravestone eating potato chips. She thinks she knows who the woman is: the estranged hippie daughter of her dead friend. When she drives by again the girl is gone, however the potato chip bag has been left on the grave mound. To the litterbug daughter of her dead friend Jo mails a mildly chastising letter but gets no reply. A week later the same thing happens, more or less. Unwilling to confront the young woman (who, she suspects, is insane), Jo composes a second letter, sends it by regular post to her dead friend's daughter, and tapes a copy of it to the graveyard gate. To it she receives a reply by post from the hippie daughter saying, essentially, "I don't know what you're talking about. For the past three weeks I've been at an artist's residence in Downeast Maine." A week later Jo visits the graveyard again. Raining. Autumn. She sees the young woman sitting there eating potato chips as before. This time she parks her car, gets out and confronts her, to discover that the young woman is of no relation whatever to her dead friend, in fact she's a total stranger, wild-eyed and obviously unstable. "Who *are* you? Did you know X? What are you doing here?" Metaphysical implications. Accusations. Kafkaesque twist. Delmore Schwartz' "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." Alternative title: "Wreck of the Hesperus."

"A good simile refreshes the intellect." — Wittgenstein



Four-forty. The rain still fell, but not as hard. Having gathered my collated life, I stepped out into the watery world. Halfway to the building that was my objective, at Park and 56th, the sky, as they say, “opened up.” *Burst open? With a vengeance?* Clichés, I thought, leaping over a sewage drain overflowing with *caffelatte*. The deluge soaked my jacket sleeves. It glued the backs of my Dockers to my calves, pasted my mock turtleneck to my shoulders. At least, I thought, dodging a discarded broken five-dollar umbrella, it’s not *raining cats and dogs*. Then again, every cliché once had its *day in the sun*. Raining cats and dogs! Whoever came up with that could’ve given Wild Bill Shakespeare himself a run for his money (another puddle; another deft dodge). Shakespeare, now there’s someone who could write up a storm. *Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!* Note emphasis on punchy Saxonate monosyllabic verbs (a taxi blares its horn; a man rushes past me with a newspaper over his head). *You cataracts and hurricanes spout / Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!* A little alliteration never hurts (someone’s umbrella spoke nearly pokes out my left eye). . . . *You sulfurous and thought-executing fires*. Note the adjectival phrases: *thought-executing*; *oak-cleaving* (another cab heaves a puddle into my briefcase), verbs pressed into service as modifiers. (A bicycle messenger gooses me.) *Singe my white beard!* My next puddle-jump I miscalculate, baptizing my Doc Martins . . . *Crack nature’s molds* . . . (rain batters car tops, leaks from my nose) . . . *all germens spill at once that make ingrateful man!* . . . “Ingrateful” — the one pure abstraction in Lear’s storm. Even the Bard nods, occasionally. *Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire! Spout rain!* . . .

At 64th Street I stop to catch my breath. I haven’t run like this in a while. My heart pounds in my chest like a wire beater thumping a rug. My face drips; the weight of water has unrolled my Docker cuffs. The world gone gray with rain. *Change, light!* When it does, I vault into a puddle. My Doc Martins morph into amphibious landing craft, the opposite curb into a Czech-hedgehog fortified Normandy beach. Under a fusillade of rain, amid a profusion of sodden fellow soldiers, I storm the sidewalk. An

ambulance careens by, screaming.

From there it's half a block to the vestibule of 2650 Park Avenue. Before surrendering to the security guard, I try to reconstitute myself into something presentable. Having phoned up to the agency, the guard hands me an adhesive tag with my name and a number written on it. While awaiting the elevator I inspect the contents of my bags. The padded envelope holding Bitsy's copy of my novel is soaked, the recipient's and return addresses both badly blurred. The manuscript in it has fared only slightly better, its upper edge crinkled as the hem of a crinoline petticoat, the page headers smudged beyond recognition.

Like everything else, my reasons for wanting to hand-deliver the manuscript are twofold: first, a reluctance to entrust the matter to the United States Postal Service; second, the off chance that I might encounter said powerful literary agent, shake her hand, smile, crack a joke, dispense a little of my charm, something for her to remember me by apart from one more in a boundless sea of novel manuscripts. Making nice with her administrative assistant wouldn't hurt, either.

Under the circumstances, though, I had to reconsider. Did I really wish to present myself to Elizabeth Watson looking like a drowned duck? Did I really want to hand her the blurred, crinkled, smudged outcome of my infinite labors? Having already kept her waiting months, would another day hurt?

I tore off my security clearance badge, picked up my plastic bags, stepped back out into the pouring rain.

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Before the boy's lavatory mirror at the Friends Quaker School, I tried to regain some semblance of my venerable middle-aged self, or at least to not look completely disreputable. In doing so it occurred to me not for the first time that the last traces of my youth were slipping away. It wasn't just my hair going, or the incipient turkey wattle below my once taut jaw that quivered like

- a rigger working the underbelly of a bridge
- a leaf clinging to a branch in a storm
- a pubescent baby boomer perusing a Playboy
- a quart of raw chicken livers

- a grieved child's lower lip
- the back of a tickled toad
- a hanging drop of viscous fluid ready to fall
- a bowl of *blancmange*...

...it was something else, unappetizing yet unnamable, though if I had been forced to name it I would have chosen “sour,” as in “sour-puss,” a word that my second-grade teacher, Miss Szost, applied to me in concern or disgust. I could no longer remember the last time I had smiled at myself in a mirror as I once did routinely, as a means—not of tempting, but of disarming Narcissus, yet not without fondness for the face (however undistinguished) that returned my grin. Lately, though, when I looked in mirrors, I didn't care much for what I saw, not the making of a venerable gentleman, but an old fart in embryo. Was it Fitzgerald who said that the face you own at forty is the one you've earned? Or is it “deserved”? Combing back my wet thinning hair, I thought: it's my luck to have earned the face but neither the income nor the esteem. My lips looked thin. I did some mouth-stretching exercises. Time for a beard? Nah.

Another reason for my spending so long in front of that mirror: I was waiting for the other person in the lavatory to leave so I could pee. Though his back was to me at one of the urinals, he was undoubtedly one of my students, the building being otherwise unoccupied at that hour. Despite a bursting bladder, I knew too well that until I had the lavatory all to myself I would be unable to make my own offering to the porcelain god. My prostate was the main culprit, but there was also a psychological element at work, what Dr. Snyder called “a shy bladder,” the same phenomenon that prevented me, as a boy, from pissing in proximity to strangers. With the onset of my disease the phenomenon had reasserted itself with a vengeance. Called upon to produce a urine sample at Snyder's office, with the rubber-gloved nurse waiting dutifully outside the bathroom, I could no more deliver myself of the requisite thimbleful of urine than I could have piloted an F-16 or gone fifteen rounds with Muhammad Ali. Once freed of the psychological inhibitor, however, I'd manage. Having gained the initiative, the trick was to get it over with as quickly as possible before the next

inhibition arrived.

With the student gone, I seized (so to speak) my opportunity. I'd forgotten the pills Dr. Snyder had given me, one of which I had already taken, and his warning that they would turn my pee bright orange and cause a "slight burning sensation" when I urinated. Predictably, the "slight burning sensation" felt more like I was trying to piss a wire tube-brush.

I had loosed a mere squirt of Metropolitan Writing Institute orange urine when the lavatory door swung open and another of my students entered. The Ken Doll. This was my uncharitable nickname for Arnold Beckman. *Tall, dark, and handsome*, immaculately outfitted in designer sports jackets and suits, looking as if he'd come to class straight from a GQ shoot. Though by then I had given up the habit of assessing, or trying to assess, my students' levels of talent or ambition based on their appearances, with Arnold, the Ken Doll, I found it hard to resist. Saul Bellow once quipped, "The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the examined life makes you want to kill yourself." As I saw it, my role as Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute was not merely to teach creative writing, but to initiate my students into the examined life, to get them to be not only more keen and accurate observers of the life within and around them, but to analyze their observations, question them, turn them over and over, then repeat that process—not once or twice, but as often as necessary to render those observations as precisely as possible in words on a page.

And while it was a fact that in direct consequence of attaining said level of acute existential examination my students might, occasionally, like Mr. Bellow and me their instructor, wish themselves dead, what of it? If you planned to be a writer, especially one of substance, the examined life wasn't something you could hope to get around. It was the cross you had to bear, the price you had to pay. Arnold Beckman would never pay that price. He was too well put-together. Not merely too handsome (in and of itself that was no disqualifier; I'd been pretty decent-looking myself at his age). His cosmological outlook was too well-ordered. He needed a planet or two out of alignment, an errant moon or a recalcitrant asteroid. He was too well-adjusted to be a great or even a middling writer—or,

for that matter, to wish to be one. Why spend the better part of your mortal existence alone in a room stringing sentences together while trying not to jerk off and/or fall asleep when you could be out in the world laughing, dancing, feasting, flirting, and fucking—and getting paid for it to boot? Why waste your impeccably groomed, camera-ready presence in front of a dumb computer screen writing stories for others—who, all things being equal, were more suitably disposed to exist alone in *their* rooms—when you could have the likes of Ashley Bridges eating, so to speak, out of your perfectly manicured hand?

To sum up, whatever it took to wish oneself dead, the Ken Doll just didn't have it in him.

Arnold (jovially, bellied up to the adjacent urinal, brazenly unzipping): “Hey, there, Mr. Detweiler.”

Me (grimly trying to piss, my dick a needle; my pee a camel): “Hello, Arnold.”

Arnold (unleashing The Flood): “How's it going?”

Me (nodding, grimacing, struggling): “Fine, just fine.”

My rival in micturition stood a good three inches taller than me. His other dimensions I chose to ignore. As Arnold released a stream to rival Angel Falls, I stood beside him, my cheeks burning, blocked as the tomb of the Holy Sepulcher, put in mind of the following doggerel:

*There once was a man from Stanbul
Who soliloquized thus to his tool:
First you robbed me of wealth / then you took all my health
And now you won't pee, you old fool!*

Should I quit while ahead, I asked myself? Flush nothing and get it over with, or pretend to? As Arnold's outpouring resounded off the lavatory's tiled walls, I felt myself growing smaller and smaller, until it seemed to me that I could more easily flush myself than any amount of my urine down the drain. I thought of this line of Kafka's: “When you stand before a man you stand before the gates of hell.” In the given instance the man was Arnold Beckman and the gates of hell a urinal.

“Catch you inside,” said Arnold, flushing.



Five minutes past the hour, I strode into class. I liked nothing better than to arrive strategically late to a classroom full of deferential students, sitting there waiting like baby birds with mouths gaping for the juicy worms of wisdom I dispensed so copiously.

Seeing everyone there but Ashley, I felt my heart gutter. It happened sometimes on the day of their first chamber: second thoughts, cold feet. As her classmates sat there silently, I wondered: Where is she? Has she stood me up?

Minutes later, as I finished taking roll, she appeared in a gleaming lipstick-red trench coat that looked as unperturbed by the rain as the rest of her.

"Sorry," she said breathlessly. "It's just about impossible to get a taxi in the rain in this city, isn't it?"

As if she were an embarrassment, the other students resisted looking at her. Or was this moment somehow perceived as a private one between teacher and pupil in which they did not wish to intrude? Ashley took off her raincoat. Under it she wore a blouse as low-cut as the one she'd worn on the first day of class, with a lacy neckline—if something that swooped down past one's sternum could be called a neckline. In the semi-circle of one-armed desks she took the seat two desks to the left of Arnold Beckman's, throwing first him then me a toothy grin, her triangular chin jutting. For my part I did my best to look graciously disgusted, when really I was relieved almost to grateful tears. All day I'd yearned to see her.

"Well," I said, looking up from the manuscripts arranged on my desk. "We've got four pieces to chamber. Shall we get started?"

We did the other three pieces first, saving the best (not Ashley's work, my critique of it) for last. First chamber sessions were tenuous affairs, with students exercising supreme diplomacy, doling out compliments like soup kitchen volunteers dishing out turkey with all the trimmings to the homeless on Thanksgiving Day. By the third class the gloves would come off and they'd be at each other's throats, going at each other's earnest efforts like drivers at a demolition derby. In that regard anyway they would have become seasoned authors.

But it was early in the term, and that evening's class was still on its good behavior. I'd have to cajole and coax them to get them to say anything critical, while dissuading them from launching their critiques with, "I liked this story," or words to that effect. "Our purpose here," I'd say, "is to get at what's working or not in a piece of writing. Reserve your value judgments for after class." It was a speech I gave early in the term, one that framed me as a tough but fair taskmaster, someone disinclined to let his classes devolve into mutual back-patting societies or critical food fights.

I started with Alice Nordland's story, the one about the Second to Princess Ourania, daughter to Her Majesty Queen Kali Morah III and his love affair with the cloaked, bound, ravishing Lilith. Might as well put it out of its misery. Like a dentist lining up his sterile implements on a tray, I spread the pages of the manuscript out on my desk, their margins slathered with my thoughtful ink. As there were no volunteers to start off the session, I called on the student in the farthest desk, Michael Quigley, who'd written the story about the serial hamburger killer. "Michael, give us your thoughts, if you please," I said.

"Well," he began. "First of all, I really liked the sto—"

"Stop!" I said, raising my hand. I gave The Speech, then gestured for Michael to continue.

"Well, the characters were interesting, and I admired how you—"

"I'm sorry to have to interrupt you again," I said. "But please say 'the author'."

"Oh, yeah, right. Sorry. Um ... I really admired how the author captured the whole feeling of that time and place in history."

What time and place in history? I thought, smiling. *Queen Kali Morah III?* What land was she queen of if not the Kingdom of Cloying Clichés?

"Go on."

"Well," said Michael, adjusting his Buddy Holly horn-rims, looking increasingly myopic under them as he blathered on. "I liked how Alice—oops, sorry—how the author developed the plot, the way she built up all that tension leading up to when they're ... you know ... gonna burn Lilith at the stake."

What tension? I thought. It was a foregone conclusion that the “knight in shining armor” would rescue the slave object of his “burning desire.” Even if by some miracle one didn’t assume as much, the specifics of the executive burning were rendered so cartoonishly as to turn anything approaching suspense into a series of belly laughs or a case of mild indigestion.

“Please go on.”

“Well,” said Michael. “I know we’re not supposed to say what we liked, but I have to say I liked the setting a whole lot.”

What setting? I thought. An auction lot of battered plaster and lath props carted from deep within the Quonset huts at MGM, where they waited to be boxed up for storage or burned.

“Do continue,” I said.

“And the costumes. I really like how she described all the costumes.”

Costumes indeed! Straight off the superannuated rack at Western Costume, tagged with the long-forgotten names of every central casting knave ever to scuff the B-lot pavement at Paramount.

“Anything more?” I said.

“Well,” said Michael. “I did find the writing a little bit flowery in some places.”

Now we’re getting somewhere, I thought, though “a little bit flowery” was putting it mildly, considering that Alice’s prose was like a stroll through the orchid hothouse at the Enid Hauptman Conservatory, but instead of orchids what flourished there were metaphors and similes.

“Is that all?”

“That’s it, pretty much,” said Michael. “Overall I really liked—oops, there I go again!—I mean, I think it’s a pretty good story.”

The other student’s appraisals of Alice Nordland’s story fell along similar lines, variations on a theme of “it was pretty good”—meaning no one liked it, but nor did they feel threatened by it. To my disappointment, Ashley sugarcoated her response along with the rest of them. Or did she really mean it when she said, “Gee, I am just so *impressed* by the author’s imagination. I mean, I can’t *imagine* making up a whole *world* the way she’s done it here, with ... oh, I don’t know, so much *passion* and *conviction*.”

I thought: is she *kidding*? Was Ashley exercising charity, or was she softening up the jury in anticipation of her own critique session? Or both?

Eager to arrive at her piece, I whipped the class through the other two submissions. Though tempted to make mincemeat of Michael's hamburger-centric serial killer, I held back. It was, after all, our first chamber session: no need to go ballistic. Over Margot Abrons' abortion story I tiptoed, aware that she seemed on the verge of tears even before the first words of criticism had been spoken. To each of these stories the class was likewise charitable. It never failed. The least promising works earned the most praise, while those with true potential drew the harshest criticism, occasioning vitriol or apathy or a blend of both. So I wasn't surprised to hear Ashley's submission damned with faint praise.

"I think the writing's all right," said Darcy Hedgeworth, the financial auditor who, despite advanced middle age, wore her gray hair in double pigtails. "I'm just not sure I buy the whole transplanted Southern belle thing. It reminded me too much of Tennessee Williams and Holly Golightly, and all that."

"Are you saying that the central character seems derivative? Or worse—stereotypical?"

"I guess that's what I'm saying, yes."

"Hmm," I said.

The others chimed in. From the moment when she walked late into that first class, I sensed antipathy on the part of some of the other students toward Ashley. Hadn't I felt some of the same antipathy myself? Yet any ill will I harbored then had long since worn off, had altered into something else entirely, whereas the other students' animosities seemed to have hardened. Like vultures they descended, knowing nothing tastier than the raw flesh of a draft manuscript. However much this disgusted me, I found it pleasing, for it set the stage for my favorite part of the chambering process, the part where, as my own type of bird, I displayed my plumage, the moment of truth when I'd pronounce my verdict. In fictional terms this is called the "reversal," the part of the story where "against all odds" (and to mix metaphors) the heroine is rescued from the burning stake by her knight in shining armor: *moi*.

I cleared my throat.

"I must say," I began, "I have a different take on this story than the rest of you seem to." Oh, how Stewart Detweiler loved pulling the rug out from under his students! "Frankly," I went on, "I'm baffled by some of your responses. Not that I disagree entirely, as far as—" a considered pause "—as far as the issues raised. What baffles me is the tone of the criticism, the tepid if not altogether absent enthusiasm for a piece of writing that, though clearly a first draft of a work-in-progress by a novice author—is, I happen to think, nevertheless, in its way, rather ... stunning."

Vacant faces, as was to be expected. After all, what could they say? It was my classroom. Over the world of baristas and copy shops, of cellphone abusers and rainstorms, of evangelistic Impalas and hysterical ticket vending machines, of editors and literary agents, I could claim no dominion. Here, however, within the scum-colored walls of my basement classroom in the Friends Quaker School, I was Master of the Universe.

Though I had planned to read from my written critique, inspiration seized and carried me off beyond the limits of my carefully crafted prose, to the timberline—nay, the snowy summit—to the snowy summit of critical perspicuity.

"Clearly the author," I said (tossing Ashley a conspiratorial grin), "has a strong native talent. There's much vim and vigor in her prose, not to mention skill, though at times these are at odds with the material, and her cleverness interferes—again, not always, but at times—with her saying precisely what she means." I produced two examples, then went on. "You may recall, some of you, my mentioning in our first class the two loves that no fiction writer can do without. The first is the love of language. That's obvious enough. The second is a love of truth. That's less obvious, since here we're talking fiction. By 'truth' I don't mean the *factual* truth; I mean the essential, the emotional, and, yes, occasionally, the literal truth. In my opinion this author brings ample portions of both kinds of love to her creation.

"However," I proceeded, "instead of uniting them, she pits those loves against each other with words often chosen as much or more for her fondness for quirky diction than for their precise

meanings. There's a lot of showing off in these pages, a lot of energy given over to charming the reader, to flirting with him. And as I'm sure all of you know, flirting can be enjoyable for both the flirter and the flirtee. Still, at some point flirtation must come to an end and real lovemaking, again if you will, if you'll grant me the analogy, must begin. Otherwise, for the reader anyway, the result—to put it as generously as possible—is frustration. On the other hand,” I was quick to add, “to commit these particular sins requires considerable talent. But let's deal with the specifics...”



Having delivered myself of my global assessment of Ashley's submission, I turned to the nuts-and-bolts portion of my critique. I was in fine fettle that evening, balancing wit with seriousness, levity with rigor, kindness with strictness, praise with censure. Unlike most of my colleagues, who frowned upon giving prescriptive advice, I considered it my obligation. If a solution to a problem occurred to me, why not share it? To have done less would have been stingy. Only once in recent memory had a student dared to question the efficacy of my doling out prescriptive advice. “After all, it's her story, isn't it?” The student in question, Melissa Cosgrove, was by day a dental hygienist. Long nose, seborrheic skin, a permanent frown etched onto her face. No one liked her. Once during a break, through the street-level casement window I watched her smoking alone on the dark sidewalk, and felt brief sympathetic pity for her, until, as they exited the basement door, she flicked her still glowing cigarette butt at the backs of a contingent of Alcoholics Anonymous members. To her remark I responded with a speech I'd worked up for the occasion. Imagine, I said, a mechanic telling the owner of a car that keeps stalling, “It's your carburetor.” Or a heart surgeon saying to his patient, “Heck, it's *your* left ventricle.” No, I said. If one has solutions to offer, to do less than offer them would be selfish.

And I had plenty of solutions to offer. Hard-pressed as I was to meet the demands of my own creations, when it came to student efforts I never hesitated to storm the battlements—slings, arrows, and vats of boiling oil be damned. I'd spend hours—days, even—engineering spines for their non-existent plots, conjuring

solid themes from the thin air of their vapid premises, breathing life into characters as flat as flounders. To the smoldering ruins of their efforts my students had only to apply my remedies for phoenix-like masterpieces to take flight. Thereof gave I of myself.

“As always,” I added in closing, “I reserve the right to be wrong. If anyone disagrees, by all means please say so.”

Blank stares, dazed silence. What could they say? My critique had left no room for dissent.

“Other comments or questions?”

With a prophylactic smile I varnished the classroom.

“In that case, I’ll see you all next week.”

• •

“Professor Detweiler!”

Downpour had diminished to drizzle. I had just left the building and was walking slowly, hoping she’d catch up to me. She did. There she was, like magic, at my side.

“Would it kill you to call me Stewart?” I asked.

“I like your last name, Detweiler. It sounds so much sexier than Stewart, don’t you think? It’s like a detective’s name. Didn’t George Peppard play a detective named Detweiler?”

“George Peppard? Isn’t he before your time?”

“I like old movies. Anyway I can’t imagine calling you Stewart. Or worse: Stew. Yuck!”

“Thank you.”

“Anyhow to me you’re Professor Detweiler.”

“Can we at least dispense with the ‘Professor’?”

“Okay, just Detweiler then. Hey, there, Detweiler! How’s it going, Detweiler? That’s what I’ll call you. Do you mind?”

Suppressing my delight, I asked whether there was something in particular she wanted to ask me.

“Not exactly. Not a question, anyway. A statement.”

“State away, in that case.”

“All right. I think you’re holding back on me.”

In the dimness between streetlamps I stopped to look at her. She looked lovely, of course. That we were alone and the street was wet and dark heightened this impression.

"I know that you mean to be kind, that you want to encourage us beginners and all that, but frankly, Prof—... Detweiler ...well, to be honest, I haven't got the time."

I studied her, wondering just how disingenuous she was being. "I thought your piece got a thorough, rigorous critique. And as for being kind, your fellow students—"

"Please, I don't give a fuck what they think." The word *fuck* leapt so unexpectedly from her perfectly shaped lips it stopped me, as they say, dead in my tracks. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it that way. But then you have to admit, most of the people in our class ...well, let's just say they're not serious. Honestly, I don't know how you can *stand* to read some of that stuff! Alice Nordland—my *god*! You should get—what do they call it? Hazardous duty pay! Anyway it's your opinion that matters to me, not theirs. They're amateurs: what do *they* know?" A dainty shrug. "Though I'm a beginner, at least I'm serious about my writing, dead serious. That's why I want you to be ruthless with me, to pull out all the stops, let me have it with both barrels. Don't gild the lily!"

Like a boxer by a flurry of landed jabs, Ashley's barrage of clichés left me stunned. Could anyone capable of such a salvo possibly become a serious writer? Yet she wrote well, and her earnestness seemed genuine if over the top. Furthermore there was something conjointly exquisite about walking side by side with her down a dark wet street, the heels of her red leather cowboy boots (into which she'd tucked her jeans) clicking along, the traces of her perfume scenting the damp night air.

"What makes you think I'm holding back?"

We had started walking again. "I'm a woman," she replied with a shrug. "I know when a man's holding back. Look." She squared up to me. "I know what you're thinking: that if I were really a serious writer I wouldn't be here talking to you; I'd be at some way better school."

She obviously regretted this remark. I watched her turn away to reconsider. "And that's not any reflection on you," she added sheepishly. "You're a wonderful teacher, I know you are."

"You've had me for all of two class sessions."

"I know, but I also read all your evaluations."

"Did you? How is that possible?"

"The dean—he let me. Well, he didn't *exactly* let me, but ... well, let's just say I ingratiated myself to him."

I thought *I'll bet you did*, picturing Ashley in her tight jeans and low-cut blouse perched like a hood ornament on Dexter Bronze's solid lap while scrutinizing my employee file. We passed my subway station.

"Plus I read your books," she added coyly. "*Penny Farthings*."

"*Penny Sufferings*," I corrected her. "A penny farthing is a bicycle."

"And *Reasonable People*."

"I'm surprised you were able to find a copy. There must be all of four left in the world, of which I own three, the rest having been pulped. So? What did you think?"

"It's a wonderful novel."

I eyed her dubiously.

"You're an impeccable stylist."

I laughed. "So you've dug up my reviews, too!" I recited: "'If style over substance is your cup of tea, Stewart Detweiler's *Penny Sufferings* may be the most impeccably stylish book of the decade. Never before has so much perfect prose been lavished on so negligible a story.'"

"Do you commit all reviews of your books to memory?"

"When it's that memorable, yes. You have to admit, the reviewer has a way with words."

"He's a jerk. Or she. Who wrote it, do you know?"

"Some anonymous prick."

"I want names. I'm making a list of assholes."

"Actually he's someone very close to my heart."

"I hope he's not still close to your heart after that."

"He is indeed. As close as ever."

Ashley stopped walking and faced me, dumbfounded.

"You reviewed your *own book*?"

"I did."

"And you gave yourself a *rotten review*?"

"Rotten?" I drew back indignantly. "It wasn't rotten. It was quite respectful, I thought, on the whole. 'The most impeccably

stylish book of the decade.' Hell, that's not exactly what I'd call a drubbing."

"Why would you do that to yourself?"

It was my turn then to shrug. "I gave myself a fair review, which is about all one can ask for. Hell, I even read the book, which is more than can be said for most reviewers." Wherefore the urge to admit these things had sprung I hadn't the foggiest, but it felt good. Cleansing. *Like an autumn drizzle*. I looked at my watch.

"I'm missing my train," I said.

We had reached Park Avenue. The drizzle had softened to something benign that muted lights and traffic noises. Silently without collusion we turned and headed uptown.

"I still say you're a wonderful writer."

"Thanks."

"And a terrific teacher. Your students love you. You know that, don't you, Detweiler?"

"Some of them," I said.

"*Most* of them. Anyway, I'm glad I picked you."

I smiled, thinking if that was true, why hadn't she remembered my name on that first day of class? I dismissed the thought.

"And I want you to know," she said, coming closer and taking the arm that held my briefcase, "that I'm determined to write this little ol' novel of mine or whatever it is. I'm giving myself three months."

"Three months? That's a bit tight, isn't it, considering you've never written a novel before?"

"If I can't do it in three months, it's back to TV news for me."

"What do you mean 'back to'? You haven't quit, have you?"

"Call it an unpaid leave of absence."

I shook my head.

"What are you shaking your head at me for?"

"Nothing wrong with writers giving themselves deadlines," I said. "I'm all for it. I think you *should* give yourself one."

"Should I?"

"Yes. In fact let me give you one. As long as it takes. That's your deadline. You don't want to be treated like a beginner? Don't act like one. The difference between a real writer and a begin-

ner is real writers give it everything they've got—and not just for three months, or even six months or sixty years, but until they're dead and buried. For God's sake, Ashley—.” My speech and I both came to a stop on the corner of Nineteenth and Park. “You're—how old, twenty-eight?”

“Twenty-eight?” said Ashley, aghast. “Twenty-six!”

“A child, practically. Hell, you're just beginning. Look at me.” Yes, I thought, *look at me*. “I'm past fifty; I've published two books and spent the last twenty years working on the third. Where do you think I'd be if at you're age I'd given myself three months?” *Some place better than this, that's for sure*. “You talk as if writing is something you plan out like any other career, like passing the bar or getting a medical license. Writing's not a career, it's a way of life. You don't choose it; it chooses you. You have no choice, not if you're a real writer. If you're a real a writer you'll starve before you quit. You'll see all your friends get high paying jobs, watch them raise lovely children in beautiful homes while driving magnificent cars. Meanwhile you'll scribble away in your lonesome garret as your health declines and the rejections pile up like snow on Mt. Fuji. Still you won't quit, no matter how badly you want to, not till you're dead. And even then you'll keep on writing, if at all possible.”

We looked at each other. As we did I wondered what this young woman in her prime made of her teacher's middle-aged rant. Did she find me brave, determined, self-pitying, pious, pathetic, grandiose, grandiloquent ... destroyed, but not defeated? A staring match ensued. Generally I discouraged my students from leaning on eye color when describing characters. Who cares if the heroine's eyes are green or blue—or polka-dotted, for that matter? But it mattered just then, to me. Ashley's eyes were a dusty cuprous oxide with bright bits of copper shining through. It made a difference too how they gazed unblinkingly into mine, their lengthy lashes curling inward. These were qualities I would not have wanted to miss on the page or elsewhere.

“My stars—that was some speech!”

“You liked it?”

“Does that mean you won't tear me apart?”

“Heck no. If it's tearing apart that you're after, tearing apart's

what you'll get. Where do you want me to start?"

"The beginning will do fine."

"Let's keep walking," I said.

We continued uptown, the lights of shops and cars blurring peripherally as traffic zipped through rain puddles. "What say we start with your title."

"What's wrong with my title?" Ashley asked, gripping my arm.

"Nothing's wrong. It's a perfectly good title. But it's got nothing to do with your novel, based on what I've read so far."

"You only read seventeen pages."

"Your novel's not about leaving anywhere. It's about arriving here, in New York City."

"That's the whole point," said Ashley, clinging tighter. "It's called irony, I believe."

"There's a difference between being ironic and being misleading."

"Go on," said Ashley.

"Do you care to get some coffee or something?"

"Don't you have a train to catch?"

"I'll catch a later one."

"Okay, but my treat."

• •

We crossed Madison and ducked into a diner, one of those Hellenic marvels flooded with wasted light. Ashley treated herself to a malted, while I ordered a slice of apple pie with my decaf, à la mode. I carried the same torch for coffee shops as for cafés, almost. Having taken a few sips on her straw, from her bag Ashley produced a notebook and a pen.

"Please go on," she said, flipping the notebook open like a reporter.

"Are you interviewing me for Fox News?"

"About my book, silly!"

"Oh, right. Well, about your prologue—or prologues, I should say, since you've got at least two."

"What about it, them?"

"They should go. Both of them. I said so in my critique."

“So what should I do? Where should I begin?”

“At the beginning, with the inciting incident.”

“What?” Crinkling her unblemished brow.

“With the moment that launches Isabella’s world out of its status quo. Better still, begin *in medias res*, in the middle of things, with her already arrived in New York, in the midst of her struggle to survive.” I took a bite of my apple pie and spoke with my mouth full. “A rainy day. She sits on the front stoop of her new apartment in the Village—the East Village; she can’t afford the West—holding an umbrella over herself, waiting for the moving van to arrive from way down south in Dixie with her furniture. The van is two days late, explaining the bags under her eyes, since she’s been sleeping in a sleeping bag on the cold parquet floor. At long last, the van shows up. None of the furniture fits—the priceless heirlooms, the dining room table, the armoire, the china hutch, the crested oak headboard—everything’s gotta go. Everything—” I took a swallow of coffee, “—everything but the fox hunt painting, the one in the hideously gaudy gold leaf frame, bequeathed to her from Grandmother Beauregard, a painting Isabella can stand no more than she could stand the embalmed, sherry-guzzling snob who gave it to her, a painting that in its subject as well as its style represents to her everything she despises about her Southern aristocratic roots, and why she’s torn herself from same. Yet she must keep it; it’s a legacy, and valuable, and Mama Beauregard would never forgive her for stowing it in the closet. She hangs it over her bed—her mattress, that is—on the wall she painted a lush mocha brown, hoping to warm the place up a bit, but it turns out that in her dark apartment it’s more like living inside a vat of fudge. Meanwhile her ancestral furnishings lie in the street being rained upon. Only her antique spinet desk survives the move. She sits at it now, at the end of your first chapter, with tears in her eyes as rain shivers down the dark window, and opens her diary—excuse me, her journal, since she’s a journalist—and scribbles her first entry, which takes the form of a letter to her dear departed granddaddy, Cyrus Stonewall-Beauregard or whatever, Mississippi Newspaper Tycoon, the man who inspired her to be a journalist in the first place.” I looked

up from my empty pie plate, whose residue of melted ice cream I had been trying to eat with my fork, to see Ashley bent over her notebook, scribbling frantically. Done scribbling, she faced me, lips parted, triangular jaw hanging.

“Chapter One,” I said.

“Wow! That was amazing!” said Ashley.

“I got a bit carried away.”

“Are you kidding? It’s *wonderful!*”

“You like it?”

“Like it? It’s great. It’s—magnificent! It’s just what this darn book of mine needs. I’ll have to tweak it a bit, of course, here and there. But otherwise—it’s perfect!”

“You really think so, huh?”

“I really do!” Ashley’s eyes sparkled (I know, I know; but that’s just what they did).

“Of course,” I said, “you’ll go about it your own way, in your own style. Heck, it’s *your* novel.” I said this despite the fact that Ashley had as yet neither a novel nor a style in which to execute it. She was too young yet to have a style. Like most writers—like me—she would struggle through years of permutations before arriving at hers.

“You don’t mind if I use it, do you?” she asked.

“What—what I just described? Of course not, by all means use it. Mind you, I was shooting from the hip.”

“Well you’re a great shot, Detweiler.”

“Well...”

“I’m going to use every detail.”

“Listen,” I said. “Do you want my real advice?”

“*Mais certainement, monsieur!*”

“Write a pitch paragraph.”

“A what?”

“A paragraph that spells out, in no uncertain terms and in as few words as possible, the plot of your story, *what happens to who, where, when.*” I offered some concrete suggestions. “Give your southern belle ingénue a love interest,” I said. “Better yet, give her two diametrically opposed love interests: *Gone with the Wind* set among skyscrapers and newsrooms. Make one of her

two paramours a young idealist, the other an old cynic. Make one poor, the other obscenely rich and powerful. Make one a young, idealistic, leftwing liberal investigative reporter, the other a septuagenarian conservative media mogul. Young Jimmy Stewart vs. grizzled Claude Rains. Do that and you'll have a pretty good idea of what your book is about. Take a stab at it," I said, "then show me what you come up with."

"A paragraph?"

"One paragraph."

She put her notebook and pen back in her bag and had pulled one sleeve of her raincoat on when she stopped, weighing something. Rising, leaning over the table, she planted a quick kiss on my cheek. As she did, I was given a bird's-eye view through the parted curtain of her lipstick-hued raincoat into the warm tawny depths of her considerable cleavage. Then—while I felt myself flushing—she sat back down, took a compact from her purse, and fixed her lipstick.

"Sorry," she said, patting her hair. "But I couldn't resist."

"In the future," I said clearing my throat, "I think it might be best if you try."

"What time have you got?" she asked mechanically.

"Quarter to eleven. I can just make my next train."

"And I have a date to meet," said Ashley.

"A date? At this hour?"

"Land sakes, it's not even eleven o'clock! My social life doesn't even roll up its sleeves till after midnight, usually."

"I'm glad to know we weren't socializing."

"For you I'm willing to make an exception."

She stood up. She seemed just then to tower over me.

"Let me get this," I said, picking up the check, though she'd scarcely acknowledged its presence. Flinging a few dollars on the table, I myself rose.

We stepped outdoors. The drizzle had ceased. The lights of the city burned neatly. Though I hadn't hailed it, a taxicab pulled over.

"I am so so very grateful for your advice."

"*De nada*," I said getting in.

"Sorry about the kiss. That was out of line, wasn't it?"

“I’ve been kissed before and survived.”

“I believe it.” She winked.

“Grand Central,” I told the driver.

17. DINKUS

WITH GOOD FICTION, ANYWAY, THERE'S ALWAYS A SOLID PRESENT, a *here* and *now* from which events are described and in which everything is anchored and grounded.

But even that “here and now” can be deceptive. If “here” is the loft of a lakeside A-frame, and “now” is a rainy afternoon in May of 2014, is it the case that I am, in fact, “here” “now”—at this moment? Excepting some unpredictable occurrence, as to where I *really* am all I can tell you with any certainty is that I am no longer anywhere in particular. And as for the time, I can say only that for *you* the time is *now*. For me, having entered eternity, the time may best be described as a baffling blend of those equal opposites: forever and never.

Putting that aside, let's agree that my here and now consists of the moment on this balcony on this rainy day when, having spent the past eight or so hours writing my confessions, I am, for the first time, taking a break. Speaking of breaks, white spaces (or “space breaks,” as they're sometimes called) are among a writer's best friends. They tell readers that a transition of some sort—spatial, temporal, topical, emotional, or formal—is about to occur, and best of all they do it without words. All one has to do is hit the return key an extra time and *voilà*: instant transition. Add three asterisks

to the white space and you create a “hard break,” implying a more extreme transition. Traditionally, the three asterisks were arranged in a triangle to form an “asterism.” Literally, “a group of stars.”

In some cases, typographers replace the three asterisks with a “dinkus,” a small drawing or artwork or other typographic symbol. Quite often the dinkus has its own symbolic import. For this confession, for instance, for reasons that ought to be plain enough, in keeping with my theme I’ve opted for twin bullets. That they are bullets isn’t significant. That they are twins is.

So—space breaks communicate through implication. And as I often told my Metropolitan students: why state a thing when you can imply it? If you can suggest an emotional response by way of a facial expression, gesture, or action, for goodness’ sake do so. *Never state what you can imply.* That’s a golden rule of fiction writing, one you can “take to the bank” with you.

As for the break in question, the one I’m taking *here, now*, apart from two interruptions, one to go to the john and one to eat an insufficiently ripe Georgia peach, it is the first real break I’ve taken in eight (or so) hours. In that time I’ve filled four composition books and drained a half dozen fine-point Flairs (of which my professor father kept an ample supply for marking student papers) dry. With each page filled my handwriting has grown increasingly sloppy and cramped; my ass aches. I had to stop. I couldn’t write another word.

Now the rain has stopped, too. The sky is clear. The same sun is setting—spectacularly. When my father bought this house that would make him so happy and that he’d eventually hang himself in, he must have been aware that it faced west, that its two large triangular windows would serve up spectacular sunsets such as this one, with its garish oranges, purples, magentas, and pinks, stretching behind trees on the far bank of the lake. No wonder in retirement, despite his drastically reduced income (the college provided no pension), he couldn’t bear to leave. My brother’s offer to pay his mortgage—to become his landlord, essentially—must have meant a lot to him. On the other hand it may have added to his sense of shame: a son shouldn’t have to provide for his father. My guess is that in the end our father felt trapped here: that this

house meant too much to him. It became a coffin wherein he felt buried—or he buried himself—alive. It was his soul, this house. I see that now. In my short time here it's become my soul. I suspect something of the sort could be said of my brother. Something about this place touched all three of us Detweiler's deeply.

It could even be said that this place overwhelmed us, that it did us in. "Beauty that kills." Where have I heard that phrase? Oh yes, I remember now. "The Story of an Hour," by Kate Chopin. Joy, not beauty. "The joy that kills." ... *she had died of heart disease—of the joy that kills.*

Our father's love for this house, it removed him from the world, from his children and their mother. He couldn't have them and us. He'd had to choose.

He chose this house.

And it killed him.

Then it killed my brother.

Now it's going to kill me.

Like everything else at this hour, the oak beam over my head is burnished by the sunset's ruddy glow. I've filled four and a half composition books. I expect to fill several more. ...

When I wrote that I was taking a break, I lied. While it's true that I took one, by the time I said I was doing so, said break had already occurred. I'd gone downstairs, brewed some coffee, and drank it with a rice cracker spread with avocado. When I wrote "I'm taking [a break]," obviously I was still writing, as I'm writing now. Anyway so much for my break.

• •

I'd been here three weeks when I saw the ghost, or ghosts. Or dreamed I saw them (or him).

Ghosts usually come at night. Not this one. He arrived one morning. I was painting my front door, re-painting it. The red that my father painted it decades earlier had faded badly, leaving the ghost of a red door. I chose a color verging on vermillion, a pigment originally made by grinding the mineral cinnabar (mercuric sulfide) into powder, and whose name derives from Old French: *vermeillon*, from *vermiculus*, the diminutive of the Latin *vermis*,

meaning “worm.” You could say I was painting my front door “worm-colored” when I heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. Since few cars enter or leave my cul-de-sac, the sound would have commanded my attention even if it hadn’t been that of a European engine, and not just any European engine, but a vintage engine, and not just any vintage engine, but that of a sports car, and not just any vintage European sports car, but what despite the passage of forty years I recognized instantly as the silken splutter of a 1962 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider Veloce. Not my father’s Alfa, that functionless heap rusting under a tattered tarp, but—as I saw stepping around the corner of the house with a two-inch trim brush in one hand and a freshly opened quart of “Scarlet Daze” in the other—a mint-condition version of the selfsame vehicle. The car’s convertible top was down, the person behind the wheel plainly visible as he pulled into my driveway.

Its driver was my twin brother.

I just wrote (and you just read) “Its driver was my twin brother,” but by that what do I mean? Do I mean “my twin brother” as in Gregory Detweiler, or “my twin brother” as in Brock Jones, PhD? Neither possibility was possible, or they were equally impossible. Greg Detweiler had become Brock Jones, PhD, who was dead: I knew, having buried him in the lake. That left Stewart Detweiler as the only impossible possibility.

Be all that as it may, my twin sat in the idling Alfa, smiling, smoking a cigarette: a younger, slicker, sleeker, more polished version of myself, about twenty years younger, thirty-five or so: the age at which all but the most hopelessly ugly men look handsome. He wore sunglasses, not cheapo knockoffs like the ones I’d bought to disguise myself at Kroger’s, but stylish designer shades such as Marcello Mastroianni wears in *8½*. His face was deeply tanned. He was the spit and shine of the person I’d wanted to be at sixteen, the summer I fantasized about driving off with my father’s car and ended up rowing off in his boat instead.

The Alfa was the same red as my father’s had been in its heyday, i.e., vermilion, the exact same shade as the paint in the can I held and that I had set to work refreshing the front door with, the color of molten lava, of ... of ... of Cunard Line passenger ship fun-

nels, of the Tori Gates of Fushimi, of a hot midday sun seen from under a closed eyelid. Of blood (pigment) and buttermilk (binder). Scarlet Daze. Worm-red.

The Alpha's tube radio blared one of the following two songs:

1. "*Mais Que Nada*"
2. "The Girl from Ipanema"

By then it was obvious that I was experiencing either a ghost or a dream, or a ghost *in* a dream. About ghosts in fiction I feel more or less as I do about dreams. Unless you count that time in tenth grade when my brother and I visited Mr. Pennington, our chemistry teacher, in the big old Victorian where he lived between the firehouse and the train station, I never believed in ghosts. Mr. Pennington, who wore yellow cardigans and looked like TV's Mr. Rogers, claimed his house was haunted. As evidence he showed us the frayed badger hair shaving brush his "ghost" had dropped into his toilet every night for a week without fail while he slept. It mattered not whether the toilet lid had been up or down, or whether Mr. Pennington left the brush in the medicine chest or on the sink counter: come morning he would find it bobbing in the commode. Seated at his kitchen table, Gregory and I took turns holding the evidentiary shaving brush, marveling at its battered hairs and chipped brown Bakelite base, feeling as though we were holding the ghost: as if that shaving brush were the thing haunted or doing the haunting. That Gregory and I were both stoned on a joint Mr. Pennington shared with us didn't hurt.

The Alfa Romeo ghost tipped his Ray Bans.

Not that ghosts haven't played their part in literature. Without its phantom king there'd be no *Hamlet*, nor could Macbeth exist without Banquo's Ghost. Poe's telltale heart wouldn't beat on under the floorboards were it not animated by the ghost of a guilty conscience. And what of those wretches who populate all nine circles of the *Inferno*?

In some cases, ghosts and dreams come hand-in-hand. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is the prime example. As for dreams, if not for the false hope raised by a dream contrived by Zeus, Agamemnon might not have mustered his troops to siege Troy, therefore no Trojan War, therefore no *Iliad*. Before he murders

the pawnbroker, in a dream symbolizing the soul's dual nature, torn between bloodlust and compassion, Raskolnikov revisits the time when as a boy he watched a group of peasants beat an old mare to death with pipes and crowbars. What is Alice's looking glass but a doorway to her dreams?

The trouble with fictional dreams is that in turning their nebulous objects into pellucid prose they tend to be too artificial. Whatever stuff dreams are made of, words aren't it. And since a work of fiction is its own dream, reading a fictional dream is like kissing through—not one, but *two* screen doors. So I'd tell my Metropolitan Writing Institute students.



As the Alfa Ghost lit another cigarette (here the dream gets confusing as dreams will) a second vehicle wound its way down the unpaved road toward my cul-de-sac. Without looking up, by its splutters, belches, and backfirings, I'd have known it for a Mazda RX-7 with a blown muffler. It had the same cracked windshield, the same cockeyed pop-up headlights (one retracted, the other not), the same faded paintjob. It pulled alongside the Alfa, which had pulled alongside *my* Mazda, which I had parked alongside my dead father's rusty Alfa under its magnolia-leaf strewn tarp, so that in all a quartet of convertible roadsters, each a different shade of red, populated the driveway.

As it sat there with its beleaguered muffler system ticking, through the Mazda's cracked windshield I observed that the second ghost driver also looked like me, like Stewart Detweiler, but an older, grayer, heavier, decidedly un-snazzy Stewart Detweiler. Under a frayed alpaca sportscoat he wore a mock turtleneck.

From their respective roadsters both drivers emerged to confront each other. Words were exchanged. The next thing I knew both versions of myself were going at it in the grass and gravel while I stood there, watching, as Betsy Butterworth had watched Greg and me wrestle in that pine copse. I wanted to intervene, to break up the fight, make these twin ghosts see that they loved each other, they needed each other, they *were* each other. But I couldn't; I was frozen, paralyzed. I tried to cry out, "Guys, please,

please—*stop!*”—but the words caught in my throat. Meanwhile they kept fighting, rolling across the lawn, the dust clouds growing thicker, the sun shining higher and brighter, the air growing warmer, until the unsettling tableau before me resolved itself into a series of paintings, a Pollock, with its whirling dervishes of spattered paint, then a Miro, with its orbs and squiggles, then a Rothko, with its scumbled fields of incandescent color, until at last things coalesced into a dazzling vermilion blur. I blinked to find myself looking up through the branches of a sweetgum tree at the blinding bright noonday sun, drifting on a boat of some sort, bobbing and swaying on ocean waves.

It wasn't an ocean. It was a lake. There was the dock with its rusty ladder. There were the two badly weathered Adirondack chairs. The swaying boat was the hammock in which I'd dozed off after painting the front door red.

18. ROCKAWAY

IF ONLY NOVELS AND BOOKS IN GENERAL WERE LESS PREDICTABLE. Once I've grasped an author's intentions, once I've got the gist of the premise, the plot, the characters, the theme, the style—once I pretty much know what I'm reading—I lose all interest. I'm reminded of the opening of Dazai's *No Longer Human*, in which the narrator explains how, as a young boy, he'd been entranced by a railway overpass near to his home, how he'd stand at the center of the overpass for hours watching the trains pass to and fro beneath him, believing that the overpass had been built for that purpose, to feed his aesthetic poetic enjoyment. No sooner did he discover that in fact the structure served the prosaic utilitarian function of letting commuters cross the tracks that he lost all interest in it.

That's pretty much how I feel about most novels that I read.

What I'd really like to see for a change is a book that truly surprises me on every page. Not the skin-deep surprises called "plot twists," but surprises that cut down to the bone, deeper, to the roots, as it were, of a book's essence, its nature, making it entirely unpredictable and impossible to classify. With such a book no matter how many times you open it, or what page you open it to, it feels like you never read it before.

Such is the book I dreamed of writing. Indeed, I had written it. Not only had I written it, I'd written it several times. And now, with it thoroughly, *categorically* written, I had secured Elizabeth "Bitsy" Watson's promise to read it. At this juncture in my overextended back-story, that book—my book—is figuratively if not literally in Bitsy's hands.

The Damocles Sword of Bitsy's verdict hanging over my head made concentrating on other things impossible. Since I'd handed it to her—or rather to her assistant—myself, there could be no question as to Bitsy's having received the package. Assuming she had the package, had she opened it? If she had opened it, had she started reading? If she had started reading, how many pages had she read? I pictured her sitting in a comfortable upholstered armchair in her office—or no, on one of those couches associated with psychotherapists, the Edwardian kind with one end raised and a scrolled headrest: a fainting couch, yes: a fainting couch. Or in the living room of her East Hampton home, or the den—or the library—or a den that functioned as a library, with book-lined walls, or on a chaise longue on her porch, or her deck, or a wicker chair, yes, a wicker chair on her deck overlooking the Sound, or the bay, or whatever it was that her two million dollar Hampton home overlooked, in her bathrobe with a mug of tea or coffee at hand and the sun freshly risen, then reading on through the day, on the beach with the surf crashing and gulls wheeling and squawking, and on the train back into the city—or did she take the Jitney?—scowling at the conductor when he interrupts her to ask for her ticket in the middle of one of my best scenes, the one where Harris has trapped himself in the bathroom of a muffler repair shop. Or maybe she doesn't scowl; maybe she shakes her head and laughs as she absently hands the conductor her ticket or monthly pass. (*Would* she laugh at that scene, or would she find it in frightfully poor taste, with its loving depiction of public washroom decrepitude? No: she'd laugh; of course she'd laugh. Bitsy Watson is no prig!) ... Then back to her midtown office, to her fainting couch, where she keeps reading, refusing all calls, cancelling all appointments, unable to put the thing down... and so on, for days, until—having not once interrupted her reading except

to eat or drink or to attend to one or another mandatory bodily need—with tears in her eyes she turns the last page, jumps for joy, gets on the phone, ignites a bidding war, procures for her newest client an advance that breaks all records and enters the annals of publishing history. I smiled over my own morning coffee, letting myself wallow in this fantasy for another moment before shaking it out of my skull, thinking, Come now, Stewart, ol’ boy; mustn’t get our hopes too high. Oh but they were already as high as could be. You see I had faith—infinite faith—(*think positive!*) in Bitsy Watson. She’d recognize my achievement; she’d be my savior.

Something else was on my mind that morning, something at once bothersome and oddly assuring. Here you see me hesitate (okay, you don’t *see* it, but take my word for it), since the thing that bothered me—that coated my morning with its icky residue—was: yes, another dream, for which I apologize. Then again I did warn you, didn’t I, that this tale or confession or whatever it is contains two of everything? Be that as it may, before going to bed the night before I’d taken half an Ambien as I sometimes did when I felt a bout of insomnia coming. I did so reluctantly, knowing it probably wouldn’t do any good, and if it did, I’d probably have strange dreams.

As things turned out I slept; and, yes, I had a strange dream.

In the dream I was in a library or office of some kind, don’t ask where, when on a shelf I noticed a slim paperback bearing the title *Harris’ Book*. Curious, I took it down. Sure enough it was *my* book, or a book I had apparently written, but unlike any book I’d ever known myself to write or imagined myself writing, first because it was such a slim volume, as thin as a volume of poetry, the spine no more than a quarter of an inch thick. The cover showed a torn segment of an American roadmap (for some reason I felt it was in the South or the Midwest, a city and environs, someplace like Athens, Ohio, or Macon, Georgia); at its peripheries the map faded to brown, so it looked as if it were emerging from a puddle of brown water, a mud puddle. It was an old-looking paperback, the paper already foxed at the edges. As I thumbed through it, I noticed that some pages were of slightly different sizes and had been pasted loose into the book, while other pages were missing. In some cases

whole sections of the book were gone. Judging by the book's size, I calculated that at least two-thirds of its original contents had been eradicated. Taking the volume (by then I'd concluded that it was a galley and not a finished book) with me, I went in search of my publisher to find out just what in blazes was going on. The publishing entity turned out to be none I'd ever heard of, not even a known small or university press, but a New York publishing house called "Coliseum Press" or "Corinthian Press"—something like that. Since in the dream I was already in the city, I rode the subway to the address on the copyright page, some desolate, gloomy part of Queens, a district of warehouses and transit sheds in or near Flushing Meadows Park, where remnants of the '65 Worlds Fair were still to be found, also the site of the ash pits in *The Great Gatsby*, the ones lorded over by the billboard eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg. On a desolate street a few blocks from the subway I found the building housing my publisher's office. Swollen with indignation, clutching the offensive galley, I made my way to the editor's desk, to find him stooped over a drafting table, smoking a cigar, wearing a clerk's visor and frilly sleeve garters, a character straight out of *The Front Page*, Eddie Robinson as Barton Keyes in *Double Indemnity*. Seeing me, he smiled around his stogie and extended a hand as stubby as his cigar for me to shake. Instead I shook the emaciated galley in his ruddy face and demanded of him theatrically:

"What is the *meaning* of this?"

"Why, that's your book," says the editor.

"What do you mean my *book*? You mean the galleys of it?"

Editor (waving cigar): "No, that's the finished book. We were just getting around to having a copy mailed to you."

Me: "Why wasn't I informed? What about copy edits?"

Editor: "Oh, we've taken care of all that."

Me: "This is a quarter of what I wrote! Where's the rest of it?"

Editor: "Sure we cut it. It was too long."

"Look at this thing! It's like a starved dog! It's hardly a book at all! It's more like ... like a ... pamphlet. And look at this cover!"

Editor: "What, don't you like it?"

Me: "It looks like a scrap of roadmap in a mud puddle."

Editor: "Well—."

Me: “You’ve ruined my book! I’ll sue you!”

Editor: “Whaddya mean, ‘ruined’? It’s published. Aren’t you glad it’s published?”

Me: “I want my name taken off this monstrosity! I want every last one of these so-called books pulped and my original manuscript returned to me! I refuse to have any part of this—this *insult!* ... you—you—”

Editor: “Calm down, or I’ll ask you to leave or have you thrown out. Better still...” From a shoulder holster that had escaped my notice he withdraws a snub-nose and waves it under my jaw. “...I’ll blow your brains out and teach you a lesson in manners.”

• •

Despite this and despite my fretting over Bitsy’s response to my novel, I tried to get some work done. It was a Sunday. I had two classes to prepare for that week. For ten[chk?] years I’d been teaching at Metropolitan. Ten[?] years I had spent mucking the Augean Stables of my students’ works-in-progress, shoveling manure-fouled sawdust and straw, replacing it with golden hay and fresh clover. For ten[?] years like Rimbaud I had dragged myself through stinking alleyways of putrid prose, breath held, eyes closed, waiting for the day to dawn when at last I’d make my own offering to the muses.

At my table bright with morning sunshine, with the fluorescent orange Metropolitan Writing Institute folder open before me, wearing my half-moon reading glasses, a demitasse of *espresso macchiatto* at arm’s reach, I read Alice Nordland’s latest offering. My assault on her previous effort had failed to induce the Dungeons and Dragons Queen to drop the class. In my response to it—the one about the love affair between the Second to Princess Ourania and her slave Lilith (or was it Princess Lilith and her slave Ourania?), I’d suggested she try writing “something a little closer to [her] own experience.” Apparently Alice, a dog walker by trade, had taken my suggestion to heart. Abandoning her medieval milieu, she applied her spurious imagination to a contemporary setting and theme, a story about a professional dog walker. Well, I thought, reading on, it’s an improvement. But as I kept turning pages my sense of relief dissolved into something more like horror. As the story progressed,

the female dog walker identified more and more with her charges, taking on their behaviors, sniffing at flower beds, chasing vehicles, growling, sniffing, barking at, and biting people. At one point, she squats to pee on a fire hydrant. The climactic scene has the protagonist not only sniffing but eating another dog's shit, standing on a Park Slope sidewalk on a sunny afternoon smearing feces over her face as pedestrians avoid her.

I closed the folder and sat there, at my sunshine-flooded table, my face buried in my hands. What could I possibly say about this? Unlike the ugly Duchess in *Alice in Wonderland*, I struggled to find a moral or anything redeeming in Ms. Nordland's tale. Then again, it couldn't be said that she hadn't accomplished something. She'd invented a new genre: the Coprophagious Dog Walker Story. That's it, I thought: I'll praise her originality; I'll applaud the boldness of her premise.

Then I thought: are you *kidding*? This doomsday formula must never leave the biological weapons facility. It should be buried deep within a mountain in the Nevada desert, alongside drums of assorted nuclear waste and the carcasses of mad cows. With my Sharpie on the story's last page I wrote: *You've taken some big risks here, which is admirable.* My Sharpie and I hesitated. *Then again,* I almost but didn't add, *this story should be leashed, guttered, and cleaned up after.*

I turned to the next submission.

But that was it for me; I couldn't go on.

• •

It was a sunny day. Why not take it off? Take a walk in the park. Visit a museum or two. I was checking the Met's Sunday schedule when a ping announced an incoming email.

From: *abridges@hotmail.org*

Subject: *guess what?*

Message:

Elizabeth Watson wants to read my novel!

My reply:

What???

What had happened was this: Based on her instructor's tongue-in-cheek suggestions, per his recommendation, Ashley had written a pitch paragraph, but then, with neither his prior knowledge nor his consent, she'd fashioned it into a query letter—a letter from an author to a prospective editor or agent inviting them to read their manuscript. Said letter Ashley printed and signed fifty copies of and sent off to as many agents, including Elizabeth “Bitsy” Watson, who had responded in the affirmative.

Nor was Bitsy alone. Of fifty agents queried, twenty-six had requested the manuscript of “Leaving Whynot,” Ashley's novel. Some did more than request: they cajoled, implored, pleaded. A few even offered sight unseen to represent it.

I ask you, if at all possible, Dear Reader, to imagine the mixture of feelings that were mine at this moment. You would have to imagine an amalgam of outrage, horror, self-pity, spite, envy, confusion, admiration, insult, and amusement all at once, just for openers. Following a banshee wail and assorted furniture kicking, I took comfort in the fact that Bitsy would never read Ashley Bridge's novel, for the simple reason that Ashley Bridge's novel did not exist.

No sooner did it materialize than my comfort turned to shame. There I was, Stewart Detweiler, Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute, counting on the failure of one of his own students, wishing for it, hoping for it. I felt awful then, so awful I went to my refrigerator, opened the freezer, found the bottle of gin I kept cold in there, poured a jigger's worth into a glass, and—with the clock on the kitchen wall reminding me that it was not even noon—drank it down in one gulp. Unabetted by vermouth or even olive juice, the lousy gin went down like battery acid, which did not stop me from pouring and gulping another jigger's worth.

Thus fortified, back at my computer I responded to Ashley's email:

You haven't got a novel!

To which she replied:

I know. What should I do?

—a smiley emoticon rode shotgun next to “I know.”
I asked her where she was and what she was up to.

Headed to the Rockaways. Wanna come?

• •

Each of us imagines a time and place in the not-too-distant future when we will be happy, healthy, successful, loved, and respected. In this magical place the weather is always good. We are in love. We are not sick or old or out of shape or exhausted or sad or angry or petty or spiteful or petulant or dyspeptic or cynical. Our clothes fit perfectly. Our shoes are polished and in good condition. We're not losing our hair. We are wrinkle and blemish free and altogether photogenic. The things that annoy, perturb, terrify, haunt, humiliate, dispirit, and demoralize us don't exist there. Something about the place suggests an island. There may be palm trees or olive groves; that the ocean is nearby is unquestionable, but it matters not. What matters is that in this place you feel like the person you were always meant to be, the person you are, really, except that you haven't had the chance to be that person in a while. Instead you've been this other person who is cynical, dyspeptic, petulant, going bald and getting fat ... whose ears ring and whose prostate is enlarged ... all the things that, in this other place, this magical place, you aren't and never were. What's curious about this place we're talking about is that you, who believe in so few things, who are in no sense religious and find the idea of heaven laughably absurd, not only accept its existence as something devoutly to be wished for, but consider it to be real, proximate, and inevitable.

Nor are you alone. Everyone believes in this same, or a similar, place. Not only do they believe in it, they spend much of their emotional lives there.

That sunny Sunday afternoon, for me, Rockaway Beach was that place.

• •

I met Ashley there. She stood alone on the deserted boardwalk, framed by sky and water: a sailing yacht in mid-ocean, lightly sparred. Over her usual painted-on jeans tucked into vinyl boots she wore a scarlet cape with a dark fur collar.

“Hello there,” she said, offering me first one cheek then the other to kiss. She wasted no time taking my arm. “Shall we?” she said.

The day was as windy as it was bright. We walked into the sun and wind. The surf was powerful. I couldn’t remember when I had last been to the shore. I’d forgotten just how good it feels to exist in close proximity to that salty nauseating expansiveness. There were few people out on the boardwalk and fewer still on the beach itself. Recalling Frost’s “Once by the Pacific,” I recited the poem from memory, a recitation I would refrain here were I not prohibited from doing so by the greedy executors of the Frost estate, who, should this confession ever find its way into print, would charge its publisher an arm and a leg for my having quoted it, given which said presumed publisher, being a fucking cheap-skate like them all, would cease and desist. Ergo I cannot quote the poem’s first line, describing how the “shattered water” generated a “misty din,” or the second, in which the “great waves” overlook other similar waves “coming in,” or the third, in which the same waves consider “doing something” to the shoreline, or the fourth line, which goes on to say that the “something” under consideration by the waves (water) was unlike anything that it/they had ever done to “land before.”

“That’s beautiful,” said Ashley. “Did you write it?”

“Robert Frost.”

“I know him. I mean, I’ve read some of his poems.”

I considered letting her in on the demons lurking behind every line, Frost’s depressed mother, his alcoholic father, a sister dead at 53 in the state mental hospital to which he had committed her, the poet’s own dark impulses and depressions, then thought: why spoil a perfectly good beach poem? “It may be the first and only apocalyptic sonnet ever written,” I said. “Frost chose the form for its rhyming couplets, since they sound like waves crashing.”

“How do you know so much?”

“Hey, it’s what they pay me the big bucks for.”

"Have they paid you for this?" Stopping abruptly, she pulled me close and kissed me ... well, let's just say she kissed me *hard*.

"You shouldn't do that," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Need I remind you that you're my student?"

"Need I remind you of *this*?"

Again she kissed me, even harder this time. I couldn't remember when I'd last been kissed like that, possibly the last time I'd been to the beach: a long time. On my suddenly chapped lips I recognized the taste of lipstick, something else that hadn't occurred to me in a while. While being kissed by her for a moment I imagined that the lips pressed to mine weren't Ashley Bridges' but Betsy Butterworth's, that I was back in fourth or fifth grade playing spin-the-bottle at a party, but instead of my brother scoring Betsy's kiss it was my spin of the empty Coca-Cola bottle that had won me the Grand Prize of her lips.

"You keep this up," I said when she stopped, "I may have to apply for that hazardous duty pay you mentioned."

"Plus overtime!"

Once more she kissed me, or we kissed each other, it being reciprocal by now. Alongside Ashley's kisses her yet-to-be-written but already sought-after novel lumbered elephant-like in my consciousness, but as that space was large enough to accommodate Ashley's kisses and the Atlantic Ocean, for the time being at least the beast was easily ignored. Ashley's tongue, I noted, tasted of vanilla. Between breaths I said:

"You know, I'm old enough to be your father."

"Talk about clichés!" said Ashley with a blend of breathlessness, disgust, and delight. "The perpetual professor. The perennial pedagogue. Know what I say to that?"

"No. What do you say?"

"*Goodbye, Mr. Chips.*"

This time when she kissed me, she simultaneously grabbed the hand in which I held a bag of saltwater taffy I'd bought on my way to the boardwalk, bringing it forcibly to the hollow (gulf? bay?

tidal basin?) of her bosom. The taffy fell into a sand dune.

"I'm out of practice," I announced, coming up for air.

"Out of practice or out of shape?"

"Both. I should get back into doing push-ups. Would you believe I used to be able to do seventy-five? No fooling. Now I probably can't even do fifty. Matter of fact..."

What impulse overtook me I can't say for sure, but there and then I dropped and did a set on the boardwalk, managing only thirty-five before my arms quivered and gave out on me.

"You all right?" she said as I rose, wiping my hands. "Goodness—your face is beet red!"

"'Beet red.' Now where have I heard that before?"

"Red as a brick? A lobster? A Valentine?"

"How about just plain red and to hell with it?"

We continued along the boardwalk.

"May I ask you something, Ashley?"

"Shoot."

"Have you always gotten everything you want?"

"Gadzooks! Of course not! What makes you say that?"

"What haven't you gotten?"

"Everything!"

I looked at her searchingly.

"That's what I want. Everything. And I haven't gotten it—yet! My turn to ask you something now."

I braced myself.

"What made you want to be a writer?"

With a wistful sigh I explained: How from early on I'd wanted to be an artist. How my kindergarten teacher kissed me. How I'd sought to distinguish myself from my twin brother.

"You're a *twin*?"

I nodded. "Gregory, that's my brother's name. Or was."

"What does he do?"

"He's a motivational guru," I said, failing to hide my distaste for the term.

"A what?"

"He teaches people how to reinvent themselves."

"That sounds really interesting. Are you and he close?"

"We were. No longer. We don't speak anymore."

"Oh, no! Why not?"

"It's complicated to explain. Let's just say he changed."

"It's sad when brothers don't get along."

"Yes, it is. Very sad."

"What's it like being a twin?"

It was a question I'd been asked often. I gave the same answer as always: "What's it like to not be one?"

"Did you ever change places?"

In drastically abridged form I relayed the tale of the substitute teacher in the portable classroom.

"Is your brother—Gregory, right? Is Gregory happy?"

"I suppose," I said. "You'd have to ask him."

"Are you?"

"Am I allowed to plead the fifth?"

"No."

"In that case, I guess so."

"You *guess* so? That's a very qualified yes."

"What can I say? I lead a very qualified existence."

"Why is your happiness so qualified, Detweiler?"

"Where would you like me to start?"

"Anywhere will do fine."

"Heck, Ashley, I don't know. I suppose I'm a bit—cliché alert—artistically frustrated. I thought I'd be further along in some way. A shelf of books. Two novels at least. A small but loyal readership. My name in 'Who's Who of Contemporary American Authors.' Something like that." I shrugged. (What would authors do without shrugs?) "But then I look at the bright side. I'm healthy, more or less. My ears ring, my knees creak. I've got a prostate the size of a sovereign landlocked microstate. But I've got a strong ticker and for a northeasterner my lungs are pretty clear since I never smoked. And look here," I said, stopping to pinch an inch, or three. "Hardly any belly fat! Pretty good for a guy who's more than halfway to the grave, eh?"

"Oh stop it!"

"I'm ambulatory, let's agree on that much. And now might I ask you something?"

“Go on.”

“Why are you and I always talking about me?”

“It must be our favorite subject.”

“It’s not *my* favorite subject.”

“‘*Mankind is not a subject of fiction; he is the only subject.*’

You said that the first day of class. Remember?”

“Forster. And he said ‘man’, not mankind. For sure he didn’t say Stewart Detweiler.”

“Stewart Detweiler’s a man.”

“Stewart Detweiler’s a bore. Let’s change the subject. Let’s talk about you. Tell me something I don’t know about you. Anything.”

“When I was little, I used to be an aural Tom.”

“A what?”

“A Peeping Tom, only instead of my eyes I used my ears.”

“An eavesdropper, you mean?”

“No, I mean an aural Tom. That’s what I called it. It started the first summer my parents sent me off to a sleepaway camp in the piney hills of Central Mississippi. ‘Twin Lakes’, that was the name of the camp, since there were two lakes, one right next to the other. We had swimming and boating and crafts and drama productions. One of the counselors was Miss Hathaway. She had the most beautiful hair and eyes you ever saw. And she dressed so beautifully, too, in long, sheer, white summer dresses. The rest of us all wore jeans. She played piano. One night, in the middle of the night, she was practicing alone in the music studio. I woke up and heard it. It must have been three or four o’clock in the morning. I couldn’t sleep. In my pajamas I went out for a walk. The studio was a dozen yards from my cabin. It had these big plate-glass windows looking over one of the two lakes. Between it and the lake was this big rock. The Dog Rock, we called it, since it sort of looked like a dog. I spent the next hour hidden behind that rock, listening to Miss Hathaway practice, playing Poulenc’s Fifth Nocturne, the same eight bars over and over. I was mesmerized. Not by the music, or not just by the music. It was the fact that I was listening to her playing without her knowing it, without her having any notion that I was there listening, that she had an audience, that she was performing *for me*. You know the thing about

if a tree falls in the woods and there's nobody there to hear it, does it make a sound? Poulenc's music was the tree. Miss Hathaway's playing was the axe that made it fall. And thanks to me hiding behind that rock, it made a sound. Anyway that's how I became an aural Tom. From then on for the next year and a half I never missed an opportunity to eavesdrop whenever I could."

"What made you stop?"

"One day my mother caught me eavesdropping on her from underneath the dining room table while she was gossiping on the phone with one of my aunts. She had my daddy give me a whipping. That did the trick. From then on I did my eavesdropping on paper."

"On paper?"

"In my imagination. Eavesdropping on my own made-up stories and characters."

"Speaking of which," I said, "what about that novel of yours, the one you haven't written yet, the one twenty-eight agents including Elizabeth Watson want to read."

Ashley stopped walking and faced me, bouncing on her feet. "Isn't it terrific?"

"Sure, it's great. But now what? You can't stall forever. If you want to keep those agents hooked, you'll have to come up with something—fifty pages, a couple chapters. Otherwise they may just call your bluff."

"My bluff!"

"Isn't that what they call it when you bet on an empty hand?"

"My hand is *not* empty!"

"With all due respect, you don't have a novel. You've got a few random scenes that don't add up to twenty-five pages. To keep an agent interested you'll have to send them a kickass first chapter at the very least. And as soon as possible."

"Are you offering to help?" Said with an enticing smile.

• •

To understand my response to that question some psychology is in order, for as best as I'm able to interpret things at that precise moment Ashley's novel—the one she hadn't written—and mine (the one already in Elizabeth Watson's hands), became quantumly

entangled. Yes, I wanted to help Ashley, but largely because in helping her I hoped to help myself or at least to take my mind off my own helplessness, there being no greater helplessness than that of a dejected author whose manuscript is under consideration by an agent. Having delivered their child to the freshman dorm on the first day of college, parents must feel something of the sort. On one hand they hope their progeny will succeed and be happy; on the other they pray they won't be lured into a Satanic cult or a terrorist organization or gang raped by the varsity football team.

But something less conscious lay behind my desire to help Ashley: my inability to bear the thought of her achieving in a matter of weeks what in thirty-plus years I myself had failed to and might never achieve. The triumph of shallow cunning commercialism over authentic artistic struggle, of surface over substance, of youthful dazzle over depth. That I couldn't bear.

Helping with a selfish motive: this was the grave sin for which I would pay dearly. But then—that day—the weather was fair. The sun shone. The wind blew. The surf roared.

"Yes," I said, returning Ashley's smile. "I'm offering to help. I just hate to see you blow this chance." My words were prophetic in several ways.



With arms encircling each other's waists we walked east along the boardwalk as far as Jacob Riis Park. By the time we got there Ashley and I had agreed to spend the following weekend, and, if necessary, the one after that together working on her novel.

"This is so generous of you," she said. "I'm not sure how I'll be able to thank you."

"You'll think of something," I shouldn't have said.

Out of nowhere clouds had rolled in. Soon they filled the sky, black and ominous. When the rain came we joined the water bottles, used condoms, and other trash under the boardwalk.

"Now what in heaven's name do you suppose we should do while waiting for this little ol' monsoon to pass?"

"Don't look at me," I said.

"That's just what I'm doing."

She did more than look: she gazed, her eyes sparkling again. (Ashley is the one person I've ever met able to make them do so at will.)

"I must warn you," she said, planting a series of kisses along my jawline. "I don't believe in sex on the first date. Not until after a dozen kisses." Another kiss. "That makes eleven."

The rain fell harder now, dribbling down between the boardwalk's planks, forming a nearly solid transparent curtain where it rolled over the sides. She kissed me once more—this time on the lips. "...and...twelve!" she said, and reached for my buckle.

Dear Reader, apart from a few choice passages of my father's copy of *My Secret Life* that I read clandestinely for educative purposes at age twelve, I've never gotten much out of sex scenes in books. That applies to reading *and* writing them, something I've never been good at, owing mainly to a lack of interest—not in sex, mind you, but in the mechanics of who does or did what to whom. Beyond that the characters engage in activities in excess of kissing that fuse them fervently through all of their senses, what more needs saying? Were I to tell you, for instance, that on that ultimately stormy afternoon beneath that lubricated boardwalk at Rockaway Beach, with the knees of her designer jeans buried in the sand and my brown corduroys hugging my ankles, Ashley Bridges fellated me to a shivering, stuttering, knee-jerking climax, that, having swallowed my considerable discharge of semen, using the back of her small pale hand for a napkin, she wiped her lips, and, having done so, offered me the most candid and reassuring of smiles—what, if anything, would such details add, really, to the bald fact of her having sucked me off?

"Did you enjoy that, Professor?"

"Beats putting socks on wet feet," I said.

• •

When the rain subsided, we made our way to the nearest shelter, a falafel joint where, over what turned into dinner, we discussed Ashley's—I almost said "Ashley's novel"—Ashley's novel-in-embryo.

"Listen," I said. "I don't think you should send your book to Bitsy Watson."

“You said she’s the best agent in New York.”

“I said she’s the biggest agent, I didn’t say she’s the best—not for you, anyway. She’s old. She’s got a million authors, most of them already more famous than you or I will ever be. She’s not what you’d call hungry. Even assuming Ms. Watson (I couldn’t bring myself to say ‘Bitsy’) does take you on, you’d be a speck of dust in her galaxy, a grain of sand on the beach of her bestselling authors client list.” I shook my head. “You need someone young, someone hungry, someone who’ll really pay attention not just to this one project of yours, but to your entire career.”

“Who might that be?”

“Sally Treadwell. My agent. I’ll speak with her. I’ll do better than that. I’ll pitch your project so hard she won’t know what hit her.”

“You’d do that—introduce me to your agent?”

“I’ll be doing you both a favor, sending her someone as young and talented as you. It won’t make me look bad, either.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say nothing. Leave things to me. Meanwhile let’s focus on how to get this book of yours into halfway decent shape.”

We solidified our plans to get together and work on it.

Afterwards, holding hands all the way, we rode the subway back to Manhattan. At Grand Central, per what had become our routine, we parted ways and I caught my train up to the Bronx, but not before stopping at a Duane Reade (Duane Reade... Dear Reader...) in the terminal to pick up the prescription Dr. Snyder’s office had phoned in for me.

19. VISITATIONS & CONSTRAINTS

LIKE DES ESSEINTES IN HIS FONTENAY FORTRESS, I, TOO, HAVE MADE eccentric improvements during my time here to what, for all intents and purposes, has become *my* lake house. I will describe some of those improvements presently. First, some prefatory remarks.

Occasionally as a Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute I would give my students exercises. My favorite was the “Boring Exercise.” It consisted of writing two one-minute pieces, each about a page long. The object of the first piece was to gain and hold our attention by any means possible. The object of the second piece was to “bore us stiff.” When they had written both pieces, without saying which piece they were reading, in the same tone, with another student keeping time, I’d have them read both. Afterwards, we’d take a hand vote to see which of the two pieces we preferred. More often than not, the piece that was meant to be boring won.

When students tried to be interesting, they invariably succumbed to clichés of substance and style. They described car crashes, fist-fights, murder, or pornographic sex scenes in panting prose studded with perfunctory modifiers (“suddenly”, “cautiously”, “silently”) and worn-out catch phrases (“the next thing she knew”, “to her

complete surprise”, etc.).

When they tried to be boring, on the other hand, their better writing angels guided them. One student wrote an enchanting description of white paint drying on a wall; another portrayed a doddering old man’s quest to arrive at the perfect soft-boiled egg, with amusing results.

While anyone can be unintentionally boring, to be boring on purpose takes great skill. In fact it’s impossible, since any such effort is doomed to give rise to ingenuity and originality.

Something of the sort can be said of any constraint we impose on ourselves as writers. The more challenging the constraint, the less predictable and dull the result.

Sometimes I’d even bring a literal bowl of constraints to class, an Indian offering bowl of hammered copper inlaid with a brass and turquoise mosaic of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity of abundance, son of Shiva and Parvati. According to Hindu myth, one day, wishing to bathe in private, Parvati had her son guard the front door of their house. In due course Lord Shiva arrived home only to be told by his son that he couldn’t enter. In his fury, Shiva severed Ganesha’s head, whereupon Parvati vowed to destroy all of creation—a threat Lord Brahma averted by replacing Ganesha’s head with that of an elephant. This bowl I would fill with constraints, each printed on a fortune-cookie-like strip of paper, and pass around the conference room table. Each student would pick one constraint from the bowl (those wanting an extra challenge could pick two).



Back to my need to describe to you some of the improvements I’ve made to this house in my time here. With respect to thrills, the subject holds little intrinsic promise. Apply a draconian constraint or two, however, and suddenly matters take on a brighter, more favorable aspect.

Constraint #1: Begin each sentence with the next letter of the alphabet. An aesthete my father was not. Books decorated his home. Call it “library chic.” Dust jacket spines determined the colors of whole walls. Entire floors were carpeted with plush paper-

backs. Forming a frieze over the fireplace: Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilization*—all eleven volumes. Garnishing the gateleg table: Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Constraint #2: Write only sentences of 100 words or more. Given how, with its battleship gray siding, its steep pitched, prow-like roof, its forecastle-like deck, its triangular bridge windows facing the lake's wide waters, my father's A-frame resembled a WWI gunboat, in redecorating it I emphasized its nautical aspects, taking as my inspiration D'Annunzio's *Vittoriale degli italiani*, his hillside estate in Gardone, for which, with Mussolini's blessing, the decadent author and fervent nationalist had the entire bow section of the cruiser *Puglia* (aboard which he'd served during the Battle of Fiume) dismantled and reconstructed, its prow pointed over Lake Garda toward the Adriatic, poised to "re-conquer the Dalmatian shores."

Constraint #3: Write only sentences or phrases of 6 words or less. Walls: sea mist blue. Kitchen cabinets of knotty pine. Rattan shades. Navy pillows with white piping. Captain's chairs. Decorative oars over French doors. Green/red port/starboard deck lights. Conch shell and seahorse bathroom wallpaper.

Constraint #4: Sentences backward only write. Of natural sisal fibers derived from the long green leaves of the *agave sisalana* cactus plant would the loft stair carpeting be made.

Constraint #5: Describe things strictly in terms of smell. Opened, each drawer, closet, and cabinet emitted a maritime perfume, a nautical ectoplasm, a symphony or sonata of seagoing scents featuring (but not limited to) the following essences:

1. funnel smoke
2. camphor
3. salt marsh
4. pipe tobacco
5. marine grease
6. bilge water

The N+7 constraint (courtesy of Jean Lescur): Excluding proper nouns, replace every noun in a given text with the seventh following noun in a dictionary of your choice. Or choose a different following noun.

Original: “This house is like an ocean liner. At night, her mast and deck lights ablaze, she cuts through a frothy sea of moonlit hydrangeas and iceberg rhododendrons. Her decks ascend toward the starry sky: A-deck, B-deck, saloon, shelter, promenade, and lifeboat. Listen: *The Blue Danube* pours from her portholes.”

N+7: “This household is like an oddball link. At nightlight, her mastiff and decoy light-years ablaze, she cuts through a frothy seal of moonlit hydrangeas and identikit rices. Her decoys ascend toward the starry slacker: A-decoy, B-decoy, salver, shield, pronoun, and lift. Listen: *The Bluff Danube* pours from her posers.”

N+1: “This houseboat is like an octagon linesman. At nightcap, her mastectomy and deckhand lighters ablaze, she cuts through a frothy seabird of moonlit hydrangeas and icicle rhombuss. Her deckhands ascend toward the starry skydiver: A-deckhand, B-deckhand, salt, shepherd, promise, and lifeguard. Listen: *The Bluebell Danube* pours from her porticos.”

N+3: “This housebreaker is like an octogenarian lingo. At nightdress, her mastermind and decline lightings ablaze, she cuts through a frothy seafood of moonlit hydrangeas and iconoclast rhythms. Her declines ascend toward the starry skylight: A-decline, B-decline, salute, sherbet, promoter, and lifer. Listen: *The Bluebird Danube* pours from her portmanteaus.”

N+4: “This housecoat is like an octopus linguist. At nightgown, her masterpiece and decongestant lightnings ablaze, she cuts through a frothy seafront of moonlit hydrangeas and idea ribs. Her decongestants ascend toward the starry skyline: A-decongestant, B-decongestant, salvage, sheriff, promotion, and lifespan. Listen: *The Bluebottle Danube* pours from her portraits.”

Haiku constraint: Turn your sentences into poems of seventeen syllables, in three lines of five, seven, and five:

House Cuts through Ocean
Blazing that Ship Decked Out
To the Night in Lights

• •

The house being small and my budget being limitless, I could indulge

my every whim. The window of the front door—the exterior of which I had already painted red, and that, to insure privacy, my father had covered with a striped bedsheet—I replaced with a made-to-order window of stained-glass based on a design made after one of those paintings of the sinking *Titanic* I'd discovered in my father's basement studio. It seems fitting to me now, given the lives that had met or would meet their doom there, that this vessel-like house should greet visitors with that symbol.

The entire house, I decided, inside and out, should be painted a panoply of seaworthy shades, from Gale Force Gray to Bay of Fundy Blue; from Coastal Fog Sapphire to Breezy Point Beige; from Driftwood Umber to Nitrogen Narcosis Azure...Perusing the names on the paint chip racks at Lowe's, I wondered if perhaps I'd missed my calling as a designator of Paint Colors. I pictured a bespectacled man in a lab coat tucked away in the bowels of the Sherwin William's factory doing nothing else all day but coming up with names for paints. A pigment poet. A tint tagger!

"All art is quite useless." — Wilde.

"Everyone knows the usefulness of what is useful; but few know the usefulness of what is useless." — Zhuang Zi.

• •

What, you have every right to ask, does all this have to do with my getting a phone call from Adam Swann? Nothing, except that the call happened to come while I was in the throes of painting the deck boards White Star Line Buff. I really shouldn't have answered. The call, that is. The phone was on the deck rail next to the screwdriver with which I had pried open the paint can. Though I recognized the area code as that of my recently disconnected landline, the number that followed was unfamiliar to me. It was one of many unfamiliar phone numbers that surfaced daily on my cellphone screen, most of which I noted but otherwise ignored. Those that recurred persistently I blocked. Though many callers left voice-mails, usually I kept the volume down or off so I wouldn't have to hear them. If I listened to the messages at all, I did so usually long after they'd been left.

This time, though, I'd left the volume on, and, for some rea-

son—maybe because my fingers were covered with paint and I didn't want to get any on the phone—I listened:

Hello there, Brock! Adam Swann here. How are you? Listen, I've been trying to get in touch with you. Looks like I'm not alone. I spoke with Dawn, who said that you're still taking some time for yourself. That's great; we all need to take some time for ourselves. It's something I've been meaning to do myself for a while now, only I never seem to get around to it. Anyway I hope you don't mind my calling you at your personal number. It's not something I'd normally do. I absolutely respect your privacy. But as you know the taping for the upcoming PBS pledge break lecture program is scheduled for less than two weeks from now up in Kingston, where we've booked studio time. Anyway, Brock, based on what Dawn said I gather this leave-of-absence or whatever you're calling it is indefinite? That you're not sure, or she isn't sure, when you plan to be back in action? Meaning you're not sure (or she's not sure) if you'll be available for the taping? Because if that's the case, I mean it's fine in the sense that at least technically we have a 72-hour cancellation window. With the studio, I mean. So we can definitely postpone taping—if absolutely necessary, if we have to. Naturally if you're uncomfortable with going ahead at this time for whatever reason we don't have to. I sure don't want us to go ahead if you're not feeling totally there with it. You should feel comfortable. That's crucial. I mean what point would there be otherwise, right? What I mean, what I'm saying is, anything I can do to accommodate you, I'm absolutely... If we have to put it off for, say, you know, a week or two, or even a month, that's not a problem, not a huge problem. We could even postpone until the next pledge drive, if it comes to that. The thing is, what I need from you, Brock, the reason I'm calling, the main reason aside from just to, you know, touch base and see how you're doing, is to find out exactly what it is that you'd like to do, that you need, if there's anything, anything at all, that I myself or anyone else can do to accommodate your needs at this time and make this project come together as smoothly as possible so it's a great experience for everyone. Of course, you know, needless to say there are legal and reputational ramifications should we be forced for whatever

reason to postpone beyond a certain date, or, God forbid, to cancel—which, frankly, wouldn't be in anyone's best interest, in fact it would be a pretty bad thing at least as far as any future contracts with PBS would be concerned, yours and mine. I mean it would leave a pretty sour taste in quite a few mouths. Which is why I'm hoping to hear back from you as soon as possible so we can make some decisions here. As I said, we can go ahead with the May taping; or we can possibly postpone in time for the next pledge drive, which is something they may go for. Either way, if you possibly can, do please give me a call ASAP. And I hope you're doing—

Sticky hands or no, I picked the phone up.

"This is Brock Jones, PhD."

"Brock! Man—wow! This is great. I mean, it's great to hear your voice. I mean ... How *are* you?"

"Fine."

"Great. I mean—gee, that's great!"

"When is this show supposed to be?"

"Show? Oh, the taping, you mean?"

"This taping. When is it?"

"The studio's booked for the weekend starting on Thursday the Fifteenth, a little over two weeks from now. But we can always—"

"Where?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where's the studio?"

"United Media. In Kingston, New York. But if we need to—"

"What time?"

"Sorry?"

"What time do you need me there?"

"Well, normally we start rehearsing the day be—"

"No rehearsal."

"What?"

"When will you be ready to start taping?"

"You mean before the live audience?"

"Yes, before the live audience."

"The sixteenth."

"Friday?"

"Yes, Friday. But—"

“What time?”

“Nine.”

“A.M. or p.m.?”

“A.M.”

“Fine. I’ll be there nine a.m.”

“No rehearsal?”

“No rehearsal. Or you can call the whole thing off. Whatever you prefer.”

A pause during which I scanned the lake for the red boat. At first I didn’t see it, but it was there, all right, way out at the lake’s center, a pinpoint of red on that pale blue expanse; a drop of blood on the horizon.

“Okay,” said Adam Swann. “Fine. If that’s what works best for you.”

“It works best for me,” I said, and hung up—or did whatever it is that one does these days to terminate a phone call.

Thus I set the publication date for “Brock Jones, PhD,” only instead of print my masterpiece would debut on semi-live television. Only then would I be born—or re-born. Like a butterfly from its chrysalis, on Friday, May 16, at 9 o’clock a.m., or whenever the taped program aired, Brock Jones, PhD would emerge, or re-emerge, and take flight. There would follow in short order my latest book—the one I had gone into hiding to compose. A breakthrough work, entirely without precedent, one of imposing literary merit, unlike any ever written before. The book about twins; about a twin who assumes the identity of his dead equal opposite. “Duplicity.” I saw the cover: a mottled blue sea, the title treading water at its center in austere sans-serif ALL-CAPS, framed by one or two austere rectangles, its only other embellishment a schematic of an impossible object, the Penrose Square:



I might even call the book “Penrose Square”—not a bad-sounding title at that. The cover would have much in common with the

covers of the old Albatross Edition and Olympia Press paperbacks respectively of the '30s and '50s, the latter infamous for its motley mix of serious literature and smut (both, in the case of *Lolita*); one of those covers whose sublime starkness sets it far apart from all others but that publishers seldom risk.

And here was the beauty part: since no one in the world knew that Brock Jones, PhD had a twin, or *had* had one, the book would be read as a novel, one rich in metaphoric implications. Like *Moby Dick*'s white whale, the twin metaphor would operate on multiple levels: self-invention, the divided self, how our contradictory natures and impulses destroy and create us: Poetic vs. Prosaic; Empirical vs. Romantic; Memory vs. Imagination; Soul vs. Body; Pauper vs. Millionaire...how, though many try, 95% of us fail to break through the prison walls of our divided natures: how we fail to absorb, and thereby triumph over, our equal opposites. And so on.



It never occurred to me that my brother might have taken his own life for a good reason. On the contrary and despite my mother's dire predictions, when I saw him hanging there I was entirely perplexed; astonished. I couldn't imagine why he had done it. *He had everything to live for*. He was so successful, so recognized, so admired. He'd realized every one of his — my — dreams.

So I assumed.

As the initial horror subsided, however, it struck me that my brother's suicide wasn't so astonishing after all. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more inevitable it seemed.

Like me — like all the men in the Detweiler clan — Gregory suffered from depression. I knew his deepest, his darkest despairs. I knew them because I suffered dark, deep despairs of my own, identical deep dark despairs. Still, of the two of us Greg had been more like my father. They were close to each other in ways that I was never close to my dad. As I think I've said, it felt to me at times as if my brother and my father were more twinned than Greg and I, they were so close. It was no surprise to anyone — more of a foregone conclusion — when, like his father, Gregory became a professor of philosophy. In other ways too they were closer. They got along

better. As we both grew older my brother enjoyed summering with my father at this lake house much more than I did. While I grew to resent those summers away from my friends and the familiarities of home, Greg thrived on the same deprivations. I imagined them taking the same morning and sunset walks my father and I had taken, but with Gregory lapping up the same philosophical monologues that had me gnashing my teeth. He'd come home bearing the latest thick tome from our father's library—*Critique of Pure Reason*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Being and Nothingness*—books I'd dip into when he wasn't looking and that within a page or two induced in me a blend of nausea and narcolepsy.

Given how closely my brother followed in our father's footsteps, is it any wonder that his life came to the same end? As I've said before, it's a statistical fact that the children of suicides are twice as likely to commit suicide. For Greg the odds were probably higher, first because he looked up to and emulated our father, and secondly because—as if the incubus of our father's suicide had not in itself posed a sufficient burden—he suffered the trauma occasioned by the manner in which he learned of it.

It was Gregory who, fifteen years ago to this day, found our father hanging from a ceiling beam, the one three feet above and two feet behind where I'm sitting now. It was a rainy winter's day much like this one. As would be the case with my brother fifteen years later, no one had heard from our father in a while. It was assumed that he'd sailed into what he called his "Intertropical Convergence Zone," the Doldrums, as he tended to each year during the winter solstice. But when December turned into January and January to February with still no word from him, my brother made up his mind to find out what had happened.

Greg asked me to go with him. I declined. I was too busy. I was at a "crucial point" in my novel, in the midst of one of my countless revisions. I didn't want to break the flow.

Meanwhile in his self-imposed lakeside solitary confinement, all of our father's doubts, his depressions, his despair, his view of himself as a failure at all things, as a philosopher, a father, an author, even as a professor, progressed from an occasional acute ailment to a chronic condition, one that eventually consumed his

every thought and feeling, paralyzing him, infecting every cell in his body. The everyday chores of his existence—making the bed, brushing his teeth, watering the geraniums on his deck, feeding himself—confronted him with a monumental sense of futility and hopelessness. The perfect life that he'd taken such pains to construct for himself had left him dead and empty at his core. Had his stomach been sturdier he might have taken to drink. Instead he took to his own sentiments, which was worse. Day by day, month-by-month, his sense of hopelessness grew stronger, assuming monstrous proportions. As it grew so did his paralysis and his rage. Since the parasite fed on his substance, the only way for him to destroy it was to obliterate himself.

One winter's day, with a length of blue nylon rigging rope and a convenient ceiling beam, that's what our father did. Two weeks later, my brother arrived by car to confront the result. He found our father stripped to his soiled undershorts, hanging there, in the shadowy putrescence of his Cathedral-ceilinged A-frame. As when I found my brother, the main circuit breaker was thrown. Like me he must have stood there for some time in that gruesomely gloomy space disbelieving his own eyes as tears rolled out from them, cooling as they slid down his cheeks.

Gregory never told me any of these things. From a gas station phone he called me to tell me that our father was dead, that he had hanged himself. And though I pressed him for details, he refused to say anything more. It was up to me to phone our mother. Her reaction to the news was telling. With a sigh she said, simply:

“Well, that's that.”

Gregory's love affair with self-reinvention was a natural outgrowth of his desire to escape his father's fate, to cheat the destiny programmed into him by his genes as well as by the fact that he had modeled much of his own life after our father's. In a double sense, by way of both nature and nurture, he'd lived in that man's shadow. So he changed. For all intents and purposes, by all appearances, he became another, completely different man. So we all thought.

But a man can't escape his basic nature any more than a tiger can outrun its stripes. For all his self-reinvention, he wound up

hanging from the same ceiling beam.

That's how I explained my brother's suicide to myself, until I learned there was a better reason, or anyway a more immediate one. Her name: Melody Jenkins Baker. She was sixteen years old. She lived with her uncle in Wetumpka, Alabama.

His name was Lester Figs.

20. CHARLIE & CHARLEY

I LEARNED ON A FOGGY MORNING, ONE OF THOSE MORNINGS WHEN a thick fog turned everything gray, that non-hue arrived at by combining white and black, those antithetical impossible colors: so what I saw through the French doors where the lake and the sky should have been was a union of equal opposite impossibilities. If there was a red boat out there I couldn't see it.

The afternoon before from the mysterious 334 area code I had received the following text message:

i no where u live

Followed seconds later by:

so do they

I heard the sound of a car engine followed by the crunch of tires rolling on gravel. Two car doors slammed. I heard two pairs of crepe-soled shoes making their way down the boards to my side of the deck. A female voice called:

“Yoo-hoo! Dr. Jones? Is anyone there?”

In life as in art, clichés exist at every level. There are linguistic clichés, character clichés, clichés of substance, structure, and style. There are sentimental clichés, intellectual clichés, clichés of

the mind, of the heart, and of the soul. What sets great writers apart comes down to the degree of sensitivity to which their cliché meters (“shock-proof shit detectors” Hemingway called them) have been calibrated.

Yet even the most finely calibrated cliché meter can’t rescue you from cliché any more than a Geiger counter can prevent radiation. It merely warns you of the danger. But unlike radiation, clichés can’t be avoided. They’re everywhere. Since they can’t be eliminated, the trick is to subvert or enhance them, as one enhances jar spaghetti sauce by adding sautéed onions and red wine.

Sometimes, though, authors go too far. They overcorrect, carrying their characters so far from cliché they strain credulity.



So it was on that foggy May day when, at seven a.m., crying, “Yoo-hoo! Anyone in there?” two Atlanta Field Office Special FBI Agents came calling, a man and a woman, he a black man, she white, both sharing the same first name, and both wearing suits of dark seersucker with bowties and carrying plated silver hip flasks in their breast pockets—filled, presumably, not with bourbon but with sweet tea.

Okay, the seersucker suits and bowties are embellishments (as to the hip flasks, I can’t warrant that they carried them; but then nor can I warrant that they did not). Nor was I summoned with the words *Yoo-hoo!* But they were two FBI agents, and their given names were Charlie—though hers was “Charley,” C-H-A-R-L-E-Y, while his was “Charlie,” C-H-A-R-L-I-E. I had long enjoined my Metropolitan students against assigning incredible, too similar, or otherwise confusing names to their fictional characters. But this is non-fiction so it can’t be helped.

To make matters even worse, the agents’ surnames were, I kid you not, “Smith” (hers) and “Jones” (his)—and so one of them shared my newly-inherited ultra-generic last name.

Apart from female Charley’s high cheekbones and male Charlie’s chunky build and flaccid face, I have little more to say about these two, descriptively, beyond that they were without question FBI agents who filled the threshold of my freshly red-painted front door.

One of them, the man, asked:

“Are you Mr. Gregory Detweiler?”

I had to think about that.

“Or Brock Jones?”

I thought harder. “That all depends,” I answered.

“Is this 67 Turtle Cove Drive?” asked the woman.

“It is indeed.”

“And this is your home?”

“That, too, is subject to debate.”

“Do you live here?” he asked impatiently.

“Yes—and no.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked his partner.

“Yes, I am living here. Provisionally.”

“Provisionally?”

“For the time being.”

The woman turned to her partner, who fished a photo from his portfolio case and handed it to her. She held the photo up next to my head.

“Yep. It’s him, all right. Take a look.”

Her partner took a look.

“Uh-huh,” he agreed. “It’s him.”

“I guess it must be me,” I said with what I hoped was a mor-dant grin.

“You’re Mr. Brock Jones—the author?”

“Brock Jones, PhD,” I was tempted to say, but resisted. “Yes. That’s me.”

In unison they flashed their credential wallets, complete with polished gold badges.

“Charlie Jones, FBI,” said the man.

“Charley Smith, FBI,” said the woman. “May we come in, sir?”

I’d been in the middle of my morning exercise regimen, on my way to fifty sit-ups, when I heard the knock. I wore a pair of blue sweatpants and nothing else. I stepped aside; they entered.

“Nice place,” said Ms. Charley Smith, looking around.

“Do you mind if I put on a shirt?” I asked.

“Be our guest,” said Mr. Charlie Jones.

In the bedroom I threw on a t-shirt and returned to find Char-lie Jones eyeing the screen of my tablet, which I’d left open on the

dining room table, while his partner looked up at the boat that I'd brought back inside and re-hoisted to the ceiling. I closed the tablet.

"Nice canoe," said Charley Smith.

"It's not a canoe. It's an Adirondack guide boat."

"Is it just for decoration or do you actually use it?"

"I use it occasionally. Very, very occasionally. Almost never, as a matter of fact. Do you mind telling me your purpose here?"

"What would be your guess?" said Ms. Charley.

"A missing persons investigation?"

"Good guess," said Mr. Charlie.

"Congratulations," I said. "You found me."

"Actually, Mr. Jones," said Charley, "you are not the person that we have been looking for."

"Oh?"

"Might I have a seat?" said Charlie.

"Huh? Oh. Sure. Uh... Can I get you both something? Coffee?" I felt a touch of nausea.

"We're fine, thank you."

They occupied the two wicker chairs; I sat on the wicker sofa.

"So—who *are* you looking for?"

From a pocket of his suit Charlie withdrew a photo of a not very good-looking man in his thirties or early forties, a quite ugly man, as a matter of fact, with a long, flaccid face, blotchy pale skin, sleepy eyes, a droopy nose, and a spiky crew-cut.

"You wouldn't happen to know this person, by any chance, would you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I've never seen him." I hadn't. Seen him.

"Does the name Lester Figes mean anything to you?" Charley asked, pronouncing it "Fie-jess," with a soft "g."

I shook my head. "Never heard of him. Why? Is it supposed to mean something to me?" My heart was racing—or doing whatever hearts do when you know you're lying.

"He heard of you, apparently," said Charley.

"Yes, well. So have many people." I smiled.

"My wife's a big fan of yours," said Charlie.

"Is that so?"

"So is she." Charlie nodded with his chin to Charley.

"I'm halfway through your latest," Charley affirmed. "*The First Day of the Rest of Your Life*. I've got it in the car."

"Good for you," I said.

"Read the other one, too, the first one. You know, the coffee one?"

"*Coffee, Black.*"

"Yeah. It was great."

"Thank you."

"I read that one myself," said Charlie Jones. "Interesting theory you put forth."

"You don't sound all that convinced."

He frowned. "In my experience, people can change all they like, sooner or later they go back to being who they were. Like water in a well."

I turned to Charley Smith. "Do you concur?"

Charley Smith shrugged. "It's like they say, you can't outrun your own shadow."

"A tiger can't outrun its stripes," Charlie Jones capitulated.

"But I still loved your book," Charley Smith put in quickly.

"So—you believe human beings are powerless in the face of destiny. A pair of fatalists."

The two agents exchanged looks.

"Makes you wonder," I said, smiling but with an edge to my voice, "why we even bother trying to make anything of ourselves. I mean, what's the point?"

"We have no choice," said Charlie. "Like you say, we're fated to do so."

"To outrun our own shadows, even though it's impossible," added Charley.

"That's right," said Charlie. "Even though it's impossible."

"Hmm," I said.

"Then again, what do we know?" Charley said. "I mean, heck, Mr. Jones—"

"Dr. Jones."

"—you wrote the book on it."

"Actually, I've written four books," I corrected her.

"Four books! And here we are talking like it's any of our

business!” said Charlie.

“What *is* your business?” I asked, my patience running thin. “Just what is it that I’m supposed to have to do with this Lester whatshisface, whoever he is?”

“Figes,” said Charley. “Lester Figes.”

“We have reason to believe that he may have come here to see you,” said Charlie.

“Here? To my home, you mean?”

“To this house.”

“To see you,” said Charley.

“See me what for?” I said.

“To transact some business.”

“Some business. What sort of business?”

“If you don’t mind, Mr. Jones,” said Charlie, “it would save a lot of time if you let us be the ones asking questions.”

“You say you never saw him?”

“Never.”

“Never spoke to him on the phone?”

“No.”

“Never texted or emailed him?”

“Nor telegraphed. Nor smoke-signalled. Nor communicated telepathically. As far as I know.”

“How far is that?” Charlie wished to know.

“What about Melody Jenkins Baker? That name ring any bells?” asked Charley.

“Never heard of her either,” I lied.

Charlie: “You’ve had no contact of any sort with or by someone by that name?”

“Not to my knowledge.” I felt sweat gathering around the elastic of my undershorts.

Charley: “Mr. Jones, I urge you to please consider the possible repercussions of your not telling us the truth.”

“I *am* telling you the truth, what little I know of it.”

“Let us tell you what we know, Mr. Jones,” said Charley. “We know that starting back in early January of 2014 you and Ms. Baker had a series of communications via the Internet, via Skype but also via email. As for the nature of these communications—”

"There's no need to go into all that at this moment," said Charlie. "Is there, Charley?"

"Suffice it to say that you were in touch with each other over a period of approximately two months starting that January until about the end of March. According to records obtained by our office. Do you deny it?"

"There's no point denying it, Mr. Jones," said Charlie.

"I'm not denying anything. I don't happen to remember any of it, but I don't deny it. What does all this have to do with Lester whoever?"

"Melody Baker is Mr. Figes' niece," said Charley.

"Lester Figes is Melody Baker's uncle," Charlie clarified.

"Fine. So he's her uncle," I said. "So?"

"She's the person that reported him missing. She's also the person who suggested to us that he may have come here to see you."

"Really? Did she say why?"

Charlie: "Like I said, some business transaction."

"What sort of business?"

Charley: "That's something we were hoping you'd tell us."

"I would if I knew."

"So you deny that you ever saw Lester Figes?"

"Never saw him. Never knew him. Don't know him. Don't care to know him."

"He never came here?"

"Never. At least not while I've been here."

"As far as you know, you never spoke with him?"

I stood up. "I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, Ms. Jones—"

"I'm Jones," Charlie corrected, pointing. "She's Smith."

"This conversation is over. If you want to speak to me any further, it will have to be through my attorney." Did I *have* an attorney? As Stewart Detweiler I never had one. But to be sure Brock Jones, PhD. had a small army of them.

Agent Smith smiled. "I was wondering when we'd come to that."

"You've come to it."

Charlie and Charley stood. Charley looked up at the boat.

"Sure is a pretty canoe," she said.

"Guide boat," I corrected.

"How much weight do you suppose a boat like that can carry? Off the top of your head?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

"At least two people, wouldn't you say?"

"No. I'd say no such thing. In fact I believe I've said enough. So long, Miss Jones. Mr. Smith."

They started toward the door. As she reached it Charley turned. "Stewart Detweiler, that your brother's name?"

I stared at her.

"Your *twin* brother? Right?"

"What about my brother?"

"Who is he when he's at home?"

"He's a writer."

"Oh? What has *he* written?"

"Nothing that you will have heard of."

"Are you and your brother close?"

"Not especially, no."

"When did you last see each other?"

"It's been a while."

"A while?"

"A ... few years."

"Does your twin brother—?"

"Good day, Ms. Jones."

"Smith. He's Jones."

"Good day to both of you."

"We'll be in touch," said Charley Smith.

"Through my attorney if at all," I said.

"Enjoy the rest of your day," said Charlie Jones.

Both agents extended their hands. I held the door open.

• •

The fog had started to lift. I stood outside watching them walk to the green vintage Willy's Overland station wagon they had arrived in, complete with faux wooden side-panneling. Something occurred to me then. As he opened the wagon's door, I called out to them:

"Yes, Dr. Jones?"

"I would very much appreciate it if you'd please do your best to respect my privacy. Keep my whereabouts out of the papers, if you can. If at all possible."

"We'll do our best," said Charlie Jones.

"Long as this investigation's ongoing," said the other Charley, "your secret is safe with us."

"From the tabloids, anyway," said Charlie Jones, smirking.

"I appreciate it."

"We'll keep it under our hats," said Charley, tipping hers.

They climbed into the Overland.

I watched them drive off through the lifting fog.

21. ETC.

AMONG MY FONDEST AUTHORIAL ASPIRATIONS HAS BEEN THAT OF pulling off the greatest literary red herring in all of literature. In this endeavor my role model would have to be Chapter X of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, wherein a postmaster tells the story of one Captain Kopeikin, a soldier returned from the campaign of 1812 minus one arm and with a wooden leg and who may or may not be a figment of another fictional character's imagination. The story, told in elaborate detail, purports to account for the mysterious identity of Chichikov, the book's main character, a corrupt former government functionary who, in a get-rich-quick scheme, wanders the countryside purchasing "dead souls" (serfs no longer living but for whom, owing to a flawed census system, their landlords still had to pay taxes). The postmaster's monologue goes on for some ten pages before one of his listeners interjects, "You have said that Kopeikin had lost an arm and a leg; whereas Chichikov..." At which point the postmaster smites his forehead and excuses his glaring error, saying: "...in England the science of mechanics had reached such a pitch that wooden legs were manufactured which would enable the wearer, on touching a spring, to vanish instantaneously from sight." Imagine a whole novel culminating in such an obvious error on the narrator's part, one that, as you turn

the last page, obliterates everything that preceded it. Who could forgive—or forget—it?

My second fondest authorial aspiration, of a piece with the first, is to produce a narrative that disintegrates—imperceptibly at first, then like a meteor burning through the atmosphere—into random notes and jottings, a debris-trail of contingent passages, sentences, phrases, images, data, ideas, inspirations and insights. A novel reduced to rubble.

A self-destructing novel.

Why is this idea so attractive to me?

• •

The Saturday following our afternoon in the Rockaways, I met Ashley at the Café Sabarsky, a Viennese café annexed to the Neue Gallery on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 86th Street. I was in an unusually good mood, having slept well three nights in a row, thanks to the capsules Dr. Snyder prescribed for me, a drug that addressed the worst symptoms of my BPH by relaxing the muscles of the bladder neck as well as the tissues of the prostate itself, making it easier for me to urinate. True, it had its unpleasant side effects, including hypotension (low blood pressure) that made me black out when I stood up too quickly—as happened to me that time on the shuttle platform at Times Square when, in a hurry to catch my train, I blacked out to find myself engulfed by solicitous fellow passengers, the looks of concern on their faces deeply touching—and the aforementioned possible “retrograde ejaculation,” though I’d yet to experience the latter, having had neither the curiosity nor the inclination to test-drive that aspect of my manhood. As for the drug’s other potential side effects, a list as long as my forearm, I put them out of my mind. The point is I’d been sleeping well; I felt good. “Like a new man,” as it were.

With a notebook open in front of me, over Viennese coffee and apple strudel Ashley and I arrived at a rough outline for her opening chapters. From there we cabbed it across the park to her Central Park West one-bedroom co-op, where we were greeted by Ashley’s uniformed doorman. We spent the rest of the day there, working in her well-appointed dining room, with its Chippendale table and

matching highboy, with me pacing behind Ashley as she clicked away at her MacBook using all ten of her slender, French-manicured fingers.

We made a good team. The sentences I fed to her Ashley improved and vice-versa. It was like playing tennis with a good partner. You hit the ball hard, I hit it back harder.

By noon we'd arrived at what we both felt was a solid first chapter. It found the heroine and her octogenarian ultra-conservative media mogul paramour, Bernard T. Rex, in a Plaza suite bed together. Ashley and I took equal pride in the novel's first sentence, wherein the wheezing mogul comes up for air following a prolonged session of cunnilingus. It was Ashley who provided the touching detail of having the mogul's puffing, blood-engorged, liver-spotted cheeks "glisten" with her heroine's bodily fluids, lifting a pedestrian scene from its humble origins into sublimity. With giddy satisfaction she read the passage out loud to me. As opening gambits go it was quite effective. It got things off, so to speak, to a good start.

By three o'clock we had a half-dozen good pages.

"This deserves a cocktail," Ashley announced, extracting a bottle of chilled *Veuve Clicquot* from her freezer.

One window of her apartment (the rent on which had to be over six grand) overlooked a church. You could see the stained-glass windows. As I stood admiring its convivial colors Ashley came up from behind me and handed me my drink.

"Here's to a successful collaboration," she said, kissing my cheek, her other arm around my waist. "Care to see the rest of my digs?"—meaning her boudoir, the one room I hadn't seen.

If I expected a massive poster bed with a frilly canopy like the one she had described in those early pages of hers, I was disappointed. The bed was plain as was the room itself, its walls painted a pale pistachio green. One thing stood out: a painting over the bed, a landscape in thick impasto strokes, with a pair of vague draped figures and a smeared yellow sun smack dab in the center of a sickly sky. At first I assumed it was a reproduction, but a closer examination proved otherwise.

"This is an original Rouault," I said.

"A what?" asked Ashley.

I faced her. "You own a Rouault."

Ashley's eyes deepened with emptiness.

"Georges Rouault. The Fauvist master?"

She kept staring.

Among the other paintings in Ashley's bedroom were two more whose artists were known to me. A Vlaminck and a Dufy—Jean, not Raoul.

"Have you any idea what these paintings are worth?" I couldn't help asking.

Ashley shrugged. "They're not mine. They're my mother's. She bought them a long time ago at different auctions. She didn't have room for them in her house, she said, so she asked if I could store them for her."

Store them indeed, I thought.

"Gadzooks, quit looking at me like I just kicked you in the teeth! They're just little old paintings, for goodness' sake!"

"They belong in a museum," I said.

"What has a museum got over my bedroom?"

She had me there.

"Know what your problem is, Detweiler?"

"Do please tell me: what's my problem?"

"Your problem is you take everything too seriously. Well I've got a secret for you. Life isn't serious. Not *that* serious. I say that as someone who used to report the news."

As someone who owns a Rouault, I thought.

"Are we going to stand here yakking about art?" she said.

"Cuz I don't know about you, but I for one can think of *way* better uses for our time and this bedroom."

So saying, she relieved me of my flute, tore me from the Dufy I'd been admiring, and—in keeping with the heritage of the artwork on her walls—French kissed me.

"Supposing I were to fall madly in love with you, as they say?" I conjectured between kisses.

"Supposing you cross that bridge when you get to it?" she answered as she pulled me back onto her bed. "Get it—crossing Ashley Bridges?"

"Funny. Supposing I've already crossed it?" I asked, strad-

dling her.

“Supposing I should charge you a toll!”

“Supposing I cross it and you don’t?” I wondered.

“Supposing you live in the moment for once in your life, Stewart Detweiler, or anyway for the next half hour.” From under she grabbed my hindquarters and ground herself into me.

“Make it twenty minutes and I’ll consider.”

“Twenty-five. That’s my drop-dead minimum.”

“Only if you promise to be gentle with me,” I said.

“I’ll try not to break any of those brittle old professor bones of yours, Professor.”

“It’s not my bones I’m worried about.”

She rolled out from under me, then stood undressing by her bed as I lay there on my side watching her do so in a state half of wonderment, half of tumescence, and half of... what I’m not sure, exactly. Incredulity? Skepticism? Suspicion? It was as though I were watching her from inside a dream—a nice dream, but a dream nonetheless, from which I would inevitably have to wake up. Meanwhile she slipped out of her ecru camisole under which she wore no bra.

“Are you just going to sit there, or are you planning on joining me one of these days?”

I sat up and began to unbutton my shirt. Note the phrasing: “...*began to* unbutton.” When students of mine wrote “so-and-so *began to* such-and-such,” I’d point out that the beginning of an action is implied by the action itself, hence no need for the so-called “crank verb.” The exception applies when the action is incomplete or interrupted, as was so in this instance, since while unbuttoning my shirt something occurred to me—or rather something *failed to* occur to me, something that *ought to have* occurred to me, according to the laws of attraction and nature. Yet at that moment it pointedly did not occur; it pointedly made itself scarce.

Very well, Dear Reader, if you insist on bald pronouncements: *I couldn’t get it up*. Or it didn’t get itself up. It sat (reclined? lounged? flopped?) against my inner thigh, where, I sensed, nothing would rouse it. That every day for the past five days I’d swallowed one of Dr. Snyder’s capsules didn’t help matters, nor did

knowing that among the drug's long list of side-effects was the "inability to achieve or maintain an erection"—a prophecy that, self-fulfilling or not, had nonetheless come to pass. Had those pills contained cocaine or confectioner's sugar they would have achieved the same unwanted result.

Seeing my lack of progress in various categories, Ashley, naked now save for a pair of tangerine slouch socks, asked:

"What's wrong, Professor?"

"I was just thinking," I said.

This was so, for in the vacuum occasioned by the absence of certain physiological responses, in that Central Park West bedroom decked out with fin de siècle masterpieces, as—on her knees on her parquet floor—Ashley Bridges took up where I'd left off, unbuttoning my shirt, yanking its tail from my Dockers, my thoughts drifted to none other than Betsy Butterworth. Part of the cause was the part in Ashley's reddish-blond hair. Seen from above at that angle, it could easily have been Betsy's. The hair was the same color, or close to it, and for all I remembered it had been parted the same way, to where for a moment anyway it was Betsy Butterworth naked on her knees on the parquet floor, or may as well have been; Betsy Butterworth yanking the tails of my shirt from my Dockers; Betsy Butterworth undoing the clasp of my belt, unzipping my fly, tugging down its recalcitrant zipper. As I sat there with my palms pressed flat on her mattress, studying the part of Ashley's hair, I wondered: whatever became of Betsy Butterworth? Had she parlayed those cunning charms of hers into a successful adulthood? Was she married, wealthy, happy? Did she have children, and, if so, had they gone off to college by now and/or had children of their own? Had she become a corporate executive, a fashion consultant, a Marine helicopter pilot, the owner of a brothel, a sex therapist, a breeder of exotic animals? Was she at that moment sunbathing on the fantail of a super yacht docked at Palma de Mallorca or Portofino? Or had she crashed and burned as do so many of youthful promise, gone on to drugs and debauchery, become a Jehovah's Witness or a Republican or a frumpy housewife—or a combination of all of the above? As I entertained these speculations, Ashley kept at it, trying to coax some life out of

my unwitting, unwilling dick. Though my mouth was as dry as the Kalahari, I swallowed hard, aware that her efforts were entirely in vain, that the bounty she sought was not to be found where she sought it; that like Geraldo, she, too, would be disappointed, that the contents of my Fruit of the Looms were as sodden and dismal as those in Al Capone's vault.

"Tsk, tsk! What have we *here*? A lazy pupil asleep in the first row! We can't have that, now, can we, Professor?"

With that she kept on trying. As she labored, I couldn't stop thinking of all kinds of unhelpful things, chief among them how the scene occurring before me would best be translated into prose, how, in order to evoke it faithfully, one could hardly avoid figurative language. What metaphor(s), I asked myself, would prove most felicitous, most apt? To avoid bathroom humor or bathos ("a descent from the lofty or exalted into the commonplace: comedown; anticlimax"), not to mention a minefield of predictable puns, the rendering of such a scene would require a *stroke* of genius. It would present a *stiff* challenge. I'd have to give it some *very hard* thought. Would I *rise* to the occasion? Or would my talent *let me down*? It would be a shame to *blow it* ... I was a one-way passenger on this train of thought when Ashley stopped what she was doing to look forlornly up at me. I shrugged, smiled.

"Is there anything I can do, Professor?" she asked mournfully. *Everything humanly possible has been done.*

"Come here," I said, hoisting her up from her rescue boat onto the deck of my sinking ship. Was it Balzac, I wondered, kissing her, who believed that in order to write a masterpiece one had to be chaste, who, each time he bedded a woman, is said to have whispered to himself ruefully afterwards, "There goes another masterpiece!"? Could I now whisper to myself, "Good show, old boy! Another masterpiece snatched from the jaws of perdition!"

• •

We spent the rest of that afternoon and part of the evening working on Ashley's manuscript. By seven o'clock we had written the first two chapters: thirty-eight pages, sufficient to keep a literary agent's appetite wet. Standing with my coat on by Ashley's opened apart-

ment door, I felt an odd mixture of triumph and defeat.

“Sure you don’t want to stay and have dinner with me?” said Ashley. “There’s a sweet little bistro on 68th near Columbus. *Le Boite en Bois*. It means—”

“The well in the woods.”

“*Exactement!*”

“Sounds lovely, but I really should be going.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” she said.

“*De rien.*”

She kissed my cheek. “My knight in shining armor.”

“Since it’s complimentary I’ll allow the cliché.”

With a quick kiss I left her.

Why didn’t I have dinner with her? Why be in such a hurry to board a gloomy subway and return to my equally grim Bronx hovel? Call it a premonition, the conviction, acquired from my dread-inclined mother, not that something was wrong, but that something was *about to be* wrong. As I left Ashley’s building and walked west toward the subway at Verdi Square, I knew I could no more outrun this premonition than I could evade a nuclear onslaught aboard the uptown Number 1 IRT Broadway Local.



By now you must be wondering how I, Stewart Detweiler: accomplished, experienced, insightful, a Senior Instructor of Creative Writing—I who preached so steadfastly, so sternly and so passionately against the sin of cliché—could have fallen so hard for one? Was Ashley Bridges not a stereotype, *la belle dame sans merci*? And isn’t a stereotype nothing more or less than the human embodiment of a cliché? How much of this was Ashley’s fault, and how much mine, her creator’s?

To the extent that Ashley is a stereotype, the blame must fall squarely on me, her incompetent author who has failed in his primary duty: to look. And not just to look, but to look *hard* and keep looking, until the object under scrutiny, no matter how seemingly vapid, white paint drying on a wall, reveals its hidden singular wonders. To a vigilant observer there is monumental wonder in the spectacle of white paint drying on a wall.

No, Dear Reader: to the extent that Ashley Bridges is a stereotype, I made her one.

You must also be wondering when if ever the author of this confession will make good on that claim he made several hundred pages back: when will he finally “come to doubt [him]self in every way”; i.e.: hit “rock bottom”? Though I’ve already filled all six composition notebooks and have been reduced to turning over the last one and writing between its lines in a hand so small it looks like secret code or spiral bacteria, and though I’ve drained a dozen pens, the ink gone from red to blue to black to red again, still your narrator doesn’t appear to be in such dire shape. True, he has yet to publish his novel; true; his estranged twin has become a runaway success; true, thanks to the drug he’s been taking for his prodigious prostate he can no longer get it up. Then again, he has gained the good graces of a young, beautiful, talented female pupil on whom he has a considerable crush. So what if she’s something of a cliché? So what if she’s too patently a symbol for the superficial success that he simultaneously deplores and craves for himself, the kind of success that comes to those who don’t try too hard, who aren’t in earnest, who care nothing for such things as “art” and “integrity”? So what if acceptance and approval belong to those who least deserve them, to the Betsy Butterworths and Brock Jones, PhDs and Ashley Bridges of the world? Still and all, some would consider Stewart Detweiler lucky. Or anyway not worthy of all that much pity.

Wait, Dear Reader. I promise you things are about to get worse for him.



They did so a few days later on my way to my Wednesday evening class. In the meantime I had made good on my word and spoken to Sally Treadwell. I talked Ashley and her project up to the hilt. She’s young, she’s talented, she’s beautiful. “Most importantly,” I said, “she’s got a novel with bestseller written all over it.” I told my erstwhile agent that Ashley had been all set to offer said novel to Elizabeth “Bitsy” Watson. “But I got her to hold off till I had a chance to tell you about it.”

It should go without saying that Sally was interested. Provided it was offered to her on an exclusive basis, she agreed to read the partial as soon as she had it in hand.

“And how are things with you, Stewart?” Sally asked me.

“Fine,” I answered. “Just fine.”

“Are you working on something new?”

“Of course. Aren’t I always?”

No sooner did our phone conversation end than I emailed Ashley with instructions to send the opening chapters of her novel to Sally Treadwell using me as her reference.

Three days later, I was passing Gramercy Park, on my way to the Friends School, when I saw her. She wasn’t alone. She and the Ken Doll—Arnold—were sitting together on a park bench. Though the bench faced away from the sidewalk, and though my view was obscured by the six-foot-tall iron fence that protects that pristine private park from riff-raff like yours truly, also by the light snow that fell just then, there was no mistaking the bench’s two occupants. He wore a Loden coat; she an Inverness cape. Even from behind they were handsome. At first I made nothing of it. So they wore fancy coats. So they sat together. But then a short while later, as I spread out my documents in preparation for the evening’s chamber session, as students filed into the classroom, unbuttoning coats, yanking off scarves and gloves and the other shackles of winter, I noted that Arnold and Ashley weren’t among them. When at last Arnold arrived he was alone. This too I shrugged off, assuming Ashley had made a pit stop at the powder room. Only when, sometime later, with all the others including Arnold already having taken their seats, Ashley made her entrance, apologizing again exactly as on that first day of class, saying, in a breathless voice with her white-gloved hand to the base of her scarf-covered throat, “A late-breaking news story! Would you believe a bunch of loose crabs in the cargo hold of a US Airways 727 bound for Charlotte out of LaGuardia delayed its flight this morning? Talk about shellfish passengers! Or crabby crewmembers. I’m still not sure which headline to use!” did the full extent of her betrayal dawn on me.

Me (smiling, *sotto-voce*): “I thought you’d quit your job?”

Ashley: “What gave you that idea?”

Me (forcing the same smile): “You said so.”

Ashley (eyelashes aflutter, stage-whispering): “I told you I was *thinking* about it. You talked me out of it, remember?” With a wink she flounced off to her desk.

Had there been any lingering doubt, that moment should have eradicated it. If not, my doubt should have been eradicated when, after class, rather than wait for me while I put papers in my briefcase, Ashley said, “See you next week, Professor!” and started out the door. I called after her, asking if she didn’t want to share a cab with me as usual, per what had become our routine. She mouthed the words “*Other plans*” and was gone.

Soon thereafter, gripping my briefcase in the classroom in which I’d switched off the lights, I stood facing the drafty street-level casement window through which I observed the following tableau: Ashley and Arnold walking arm-in-arm down the snowy sidewalk. It was, I had to admit to myself, a picturesque display. Sketched by Bemelmans or Birnbaum, it would have made a perfect *New Yorker* cover circa 1949. Halfway down the block, she fashioned a halfhearted snowball to toss at Arnold’s back; he answered in kind. I watched them laugh and chase each other out of sight.

For a while afterwards I remained standing there, gazing out at the now empty (except for the falling snowflakes) sidewalk that, though still burnished pink by the mercury vapor streetlamp, plunged me into my own unique darkness. I doubt that I’d ever felt as empty, as ancient, as obsolete and irrelevant, as pathetically emasculated as I did then, at that moment.

• •

I rode the subway to Grand Central, but instead of going straight home I stopped at the Campbell Apartment and ordered an Armagnac at the bar, thirteen dollars the glass. The blonde who served it reminded me of Ashley, but then so did everything. There were no other people at the bar. In a rapid series of gulps I swallowed the cognac and had another before boarding the 11:20.

I arrived home to find a package waiting for me in the vestibule of my tenement, a parcel left by the UPS man. By its size I knew what it was: a manuscript box. The moment forces me to relay to

you another dream, a short one. In the dream I open such a box to encounter something unexpected: in place of a rejection letter, I find the words GREAT ENOUGH stamped in bright red across the manuscript's title page. Tucked under that page, on publishing house stationary, a letter from the acquisitions editor saying that, however flawed, he or she has found the manuscript to be of sufficient merit to slap between hardcovers. It would be published.

That was a dream.

This wasn't. Elizabeth "Bitsy" Watson had rejected "Duplicity."

• •

That morning, awake at two a.m. (having abandoned my new drug and consequently subject to my no-longer-suppressed incontinence), I found the following in my inbox:

To: *detweiler*

From: *a student in love*

absolutely positively between just the two of us I really really need your opinion

If you received a letter such as the attached, what would you think? Might it scare him off completely?

Him?

I wasn't sure if I should tell you, but yes, my 'other plan' this evening was Arnold, and as of now he and I have an *histoire* together.

An histoire?

Now I've written this, and I'm not sure I should send it. Mind you, it's not a critique of my deathless prose I'm looking for, though I'm sure it could use that, too. I just want to know your thoughts re: love letters like this one in general.

My thoughts. *In general*. My generic thoughts. She wants.

For your eyes only, *vous comprends?* Merci beaucoup, mon charmant professeur.

ab

Having resisted for all of five seconds, I opened the attachment.

The Boy Two Desks Over

A hazy humid September night in a city where all that surrounds her is strange, the sky over her head smeared with what she at first takes to be the Milky Way, but is in fact New York City smog.

She's late for class. Fiction writing: what she has dreamed of doing now for so many years, and why she's come to New York in the first place, flung far from her lazy hazy Mississippi childhood to this frenzy of swirling ambitions, straight into the noise and whip of the whirlwind, to live and write among fellow ink-stained wretches, to find an outlet for her molasses-rich, Southern fried musings.

She tumbles into the class—so like her, always late, clutching notebook and manuscripts, apologizing fervently as she makes her way across the room to the one still available desk, trying not to draw undue attention to herself as the teacher looks on with disdain ...

... The *teacher*??

... As the lecture continues I survey the class, a dozen other students intent on discovering their voices, on telling their stories. Suddenly, to my left, two desks down, I see him: dark brown hair almost to his shoulders hiding most of his face, save a strong proud chin and aristocratically fine nose ...

... "Aristocratically fine."

... a face designed to break hearts, and sure enough it's breaking mine already with the notion that I came here to concentrate on the written word and it's just my luck I have to plop myself two desks down from this gorgeous hunk whose eyelids lower dreamily as the teacher drones on ...

... The teacher. *Drones on.*

... so I want to kiss them, yes I do; I want to stretch my neck muscles across the desk that separates us and bend forward and lay my lips gently one by one on each of those tired graceful eyelids of his, as soft and delicate as the petals of a blush rose. Discipline, Ashley Bridges, I tell myself, and

no sooner think it than I'm dwelling on that crescent moon of flesh behind his left ear, wanting to kiss it, too, and maybe lick it for good measure. Lord, deliver me from supremely sexy men stamped with the Good Housekeeping Seal of Wholesomeness, yet fresh and unbroken....

... "yet fresh and unbroken."

Class over, she gathers her books and makes her way down the four linoleum flights and out into the darkness draped with gray moonlight, trembling with a mélange of conflicting desires...

Ashley's attachment closed with these lines by Apollinaire (the translation hers):

*My mouth will flame the sulfurs of the Pit
You will find my mouth a hell of sweetness and seduction
My mouth's angels will hold sway in your heart
My mouth's soldiers will take you by storm...*

I closed the attachment and sat there, fingers to mouth, staring at my computer screen. Of course I wouldn't respond. Why would I? I'd ignore her, the only dignified thing to do. Anyway what could I have said? That though she used verbs strikingly (the smog "smeared" across the sky) some of her metaphors ("molasses-rich") felt forced? That there was a comma splice in her first paragraph and what appeared to be an arbitrary point-of-view shift in the fourth? That her rendering of the love object was overripe, while that of "the teacher" (who, after all, was hardly a minor character) felt short-changed; in fact he was barely a character, let alone one well-rendered. Who is this teacher? What does he look like? Does the narrator find *him* attractive? Is he a good or a poor teacher? Does she find him clever? Interesting? Stimulating? Attractive? (You said *attractive* already. Did I? Yes, you did.) Might you exploit further the tension your protagonist must surely feel, torn between her perfunctory puppy love for a callow clothes horse and her far more profound and mature interest in the man who embodies her passion for the written word, the motive that brought her to this "strange" city in the first place? Why (oh why) does your heroine waste her-

self on some square-jawed flaxen-haired, broad-shouldered, insipid Ken doll when right there before her in that classroom stands a real man, a man of wisdom, talent, experience, substance. Is she fucking *blind*? Might I have said all or some of *that*?

I re-opened my e-mail application, chose Ashley's latest, hit "reply" and typed:

I confess, I've never been asked to judge a love letter before. Unlike Cyrano, I'm not sure I have the nose for it. Since the first rule of good umpiring is to not be in the game, and as I prefer to think of myself as still being a "player" in the field of love ... well, you see my quandary?

I and the Armagnac still coursing through my circulatory system thought a bit before adding:

If you're going to have a literary affair in which the bed of words squeaks as loudly as one of stuffing and springs, make sure your Romeo can give as good as he (literally) gets. Otherwise stick to body language — of which you have a more than ample supply.

Yours Professorially,

E. Rostand (writing for S. Detweiler)

I read through my response, fine-tuning it, making it a little more shapely, a little more concise. Then I discarded it.

Hitting "reply" again, I wrote:

Arnold's a nice fellow and quite handsome I see the logic

I hit "send."

• •

Perhaps you feel that at last this back-story has arrived at its destination, that Stewart Detweiler has finally touched "rock bottom." But the human spirit is a remarkably resilient organ. Mine survived this double assault—first to my artistic, then to my romantic, ego.

I spent the next very long day walking the streets of the city, from my neighborhood in the Bronx across the Broadway Bridge to Manhattan, then all the way downtown to Battery Park. The day was clear and invigoratingly cold. At the promenade railing

across from Castle Clinton while eating a bag of roasted chestnuts I watched seagulls pursue a ferry as it lumbered toward the Statue of Liberty. While it may be true (I told myself while doing so) that I am no longer a young man, I'm not exactly old, either, let alone decrepit or dead.

I shall live to write—and love—another day.

And so, in the ensuing weeks, with stouthearted resolve I took care of business as usual. I critiqued my students' submissions, bought groceries, got a haircut. I brushed and flossed and saw to my other hygienic needs. Not only did I launder my clothes, I washed and ironed my sheets and, for the first time in recorded history, organized my sock drawer. In place of my morning espresso I drank herbal tea for breakfast. Did I draw any parallel with my brother's best-selling epiphany? If so, I wasn't aware; it was unconscious. I was simply going about my existence, with a little more pluck than usual, more *esprit de corps*, in solidarity with none other than myself. I smiled at subway conductors, at the cashier at the corner bodega where I bought groceries, and other service employees. I even smiled at myself in the medicine cabinet mirror while shaving. Happiness, as they say, is the best revenge.

But I wasn't feeling vengeful.

Philosophical? Reconciled? Resigned? There's a perfect word for it, but I can't think of it now. Anyway my life wasn't so bad, it really wasn't. Nor was I such a tawdry human specimen.

• •

One second thought I was a fool, a moron, a coward, a cuckold. Why hadn't I made love to Ashley in her apartment that day? So what if I couldn't get it up? I could have made it up to her by other means. Face it, I told myself (wherever I was, whatever I happened to be doing): you're unworthy, an unworthy lover, an unworthy writer, an unworthy human being.

Really? *Really?*

Buck up, Detweiler. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself. She's one alluring young woman among millions of alluring young women, one gleaming drop of saltwater in a boundless glimmering ocean.



When my next Wednesday class rolled around, the second to last of the term, I treated Ashley Bridges no differently than I treated my other students. I smiled and joked and listened to what she had to say. I was honest, good-humored, respectful. She responded in kind. No one observing us in that classroom that evening would ever have guessed that we had been lovers, if that's what we'd been, much less that it had ended abruptly and un-mutually, with one party's heart (ego?) broken. Class over, I stood behind my desk watching her and Arnold walk out hand-in-hand, making no secret any longer of their newfound love. I smiled and nodded at them as they went by; I may even have given them a friendly cute little wave, you know, with just my fingers, the way old people do. Was my magnanimity merely the form taken by my denial? I like to think that Stewart Detweiler was made of sturdier stuff. I'd like to believe that his spirit extended further, broader, and deeper than envy, than jealousy, than wounded pride. *I am not a bad man!*

But the true—and, it turned out, final—test of Stewart Detweiler's spirit had yet to come.

22. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

WITH THE FBI GONE, BACK IN THE HOUSE, I GRABBED A TOWEL, MY trunks, and my goggles. With them I returned to the dock. When in doubt, swim.

The sky was overcast. In consideration of my neighbors (whom I'd never seen), while changing I covered myself with the towel. Then I thought: to hell with it and let the towel drop. With my goggles on and my swimming trunks playing piggyback on the crest of one of the two Adirondack chairs, feet first and fully naked, I plunged and started swimming.

While swimming, I mulled over the scene described in the second to last chapter. Needless to say it left me with many questions, but mainly one: Who is/was Lester Figs?

To answer that question, it helped to ask another, namely: What's in a name? As a Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute, I preached the values of titles and names: titles, because they help us know what our stories are about, and names because they tell us who our characters are. You can't truly know someone and not know their name. It's one of the first things we learn about people. If people are books, their names are the titles. These and other such thoughts synchronized themselves to the pattern and rhythm of my strokes while swimming to my neigh-

bor's dock and back.

As for how we know when we've given a character the right name, that gets down to the heart of what fiction writers do, to what the uninitiated would see as a contradiction in terms, to the matter of "fictional truth." Yet not only is there such a thing, without it fiction couldn't exist. Name a character Harold whose name should be Horace, and though the reader can't know it, they will experience that character as less true. Call Gertrude Griselda and with respect to the fictional truth you may as well have named her Tom, Dick, or Harry.

So (I asked myself while swimming laps), applying the concept in reverse: to what sort of fictional character would I give the name Lester Figs? For sure it wasn't a name fit for a heroic figure. A character with such a name would have to be a loser, a schlemiel (see: Tommy Wilhelm in Bellow's *Seize the Day*): the timid, well-meaning wimp (Caspar Milquetoast), the henpecked husband (Walter Mitty), the indecisive weakling (Ashley Wilkes), the treacherous sycophant (Iago). Lester as in *lesser* and *jester* (lowly fool), but who also tends to *stir* things up or is a *turd*; Figs as in *figures* (calculates) and a *fig* (what no one gives for him) and *fugue* as in "a fugue state" ("period of loss of awareness of one's identity, often coupled with flight from one's usual environment, associated with certain forms of hysteria and epilepsy"); fugitive: "one who has escaped or is in hiding, a refugee; or (adj.) fleeting transitory, impermanent, faded or fading." Here today gone tomorrow, evanescent. An insignificant human specimen, insect-like, solitary, who preys on other lowly helpless creatures.

Profession? Why, an *exterminator*, of course.

Back from my swim, naked and damp at the computer, I did a little research. Lester: from ancient Anglo-Saxon first found in Cheshire, England, derived from concatenation of Old English tribal "Ligore" and "ceaster," referring to a Roman or Walled City.

Figs: possibly Scandinavian, son of Vig (or Wig or Wigg: change from "V" to "F" as in Venn/Fenn, Vowler/Fowler, Venner/Fenner, etc.); v. Figgin. "Feg" dates to Yorkshire ante 1086, and "Figge" to Kent, 31 (Edw. III). Later period in same county yielded "Figgs," "Faggs," "Foggs," also kindred forms "Fig," "Figgs," "Figs." All

the same origin, Old French from the L. “fagus”: a beech tree. Lester Figes = a beech tree in a walled Roman city?

None of this was helpful.

A Google search of “Lester Figes” + “Wetumpka” turned up a Facebook page for his extermination services, including address and phone number.

My search for “Melody Jenkins Baker” turned up 62,703 Melody Bakers, 5,384 Melody Jenkins, 4 Melody Bakers, and 2 Jenkins Bakers, none with any connection to Wetumpka or anywhere else in Alabama.

What could Brock Jones, PhD possibly have had to do with an Alabaman exterminator and his niece?

It made no sense, none at all.

While gazing at the computer screen, I heard the patter of raindrops striking the deck behind me. I went out for my towel, which I had draped over the rail. Soon it was pouring again.

• •

I’d hung my towel and swimsuit on the shower rod and settled into one of the wicker chairs in the living room (or the living “area,” since it’s not really a room; that is, it has no walls other than those it shares with the dining room and the kitchen) to read a book from my father’s “Twin” bookcase, a novel. Written by Arthur Hornblow and published in May of 1913—a little over a year after the *Titanic* sank—*The Mask* is the story of millionaire Kenneth Traynor, the director of a New York mining firm. Summoned to the diamond mines of Africa to investigate a claim, he encounters his long-lost, drunk, dissolute, poverty-stricken identical twin brother “Handsome Jack.” Resolved to rescue his twin from a life of destitution, along with the second largest diamond in the world, Kenneth brings Jack with him on the steamer bound for New York. When, in mid-ocean, a fire breaks out aboard the steamship, in the ensuing panic Jack strikes Kenneth, stealing his papers and the diamond and leaving his brother for dead. Back in New York, Jack passes himself off as his presumed-dead twin, fooling not only Kenneth’s wife, but everyone else in his circle. Meanwhile the real Kenneth returns to expose and avenge his twin’s villainy.

Such a ridiculously implausible plot! Imagine authors getting away with such things! Yet they did; they still do.

Sensationally implausible plot or no, partway through the book I must have dozed off. The next thing I knew, the phone—Brock’s phone, Twinkle, which I’d left on the coffee table—woke me with its arpeggio. It was my mother.

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

“What are you up to?”

“I was just reading a book.”

“Just like your brother. Always with your face in a book.”

It had grown dark outside. According to the phone it was half-past-six. I must have dozed for two hours. I switched on the multi-colored hydra lamp next to the wicker chair.

“What’s up, Mom?”

“Janet Butterworth. Remember her?”

“Who?”

“Big red hair. Mouth full of fake teeth. Her daughter went to school with you. Betsy. Didn’t you used to have a crush on her?”

“What about her?”

“Betsy? How should I know?”

“Not Betsy, her mother! What happened to her?”

“Janet? She’s dead. Dropped dead, just like that. Third one this month. I tell you they’re dropping like flies. I’ll be next, probably.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s just a matter of time.”

“Well—”

“Patrice Gorman? I don’t think you met her. My canasta partner. Lupus. She just found out. A month ago it was Lyme Disease. A few months before that skin cancer. Now Lupus. And all on top of her son dying suddenly of a heart attack. He’s taking his morning shower and boom, he drops dead, just like that. His wife found him. The shower was still running. His head was full of shampoo. Can you imagine? Poor thing. I tell you, life can be grim.”

I nodded.

“Next week I’m going with the Red Hats to Harrah’s.”

“Harrah’s?”

“The casino. On the Indian reservation. Cherokee, I think it is.

It's two hours by bus from here. I hope they don't give us the same driver. On the way home last time he made us all sick. Or maybe it was something we ate. Who knows? No one should eat shrimp cocktail. Your brother says hello, by the way. Have you spoken with him recently?"

"What?" I said.

"I just got off the phone with him. He said he's got floaters in his eyes. Other than that he sounds all right. He says he's writing again. Working on a new book or something."

"Mom—what are you talking about?"

"Floaters. You know, those little dark things that move around in your eyes."

"I mean ... You talked to Greg? I mean—to Stew?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I told you. A little while ago."

"Mom, that's—you didn't."

"What do you mean, I didn't? Of course I did!"

"I mean ... you talked to him—today?"

"Yes: today."

"You're sure it wasn't yesterday?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm just asking."

"I said *I just got off the phone with him.*"

"You called him?"

"Yes. No, wait. He called. What difference does it make?"

"Mom, are you absolutely positive you spoke to Stew today?"

"For goodness sakes."

"I just want to be sure, that's all."

"I'm not senile, you know. Not yet."

"I wasn't saying—"

"There's nothing wrong with my memory."

"I didn't say—"

"Why are you questioning me, then?"

"I'm not!"

"Yes, you are."

"I just wondered, that's all. I'm sorry."

"If I say I spoke with your brother, I spoke with your brother."

"Okay, Mom. Right."

"You might call him yourself once in a while, if you're so concerned, if you're so *curious*."

"Yes, I'll do that."

"They're ringing the gong. Dinner, so-called, is served."

"Bye, Mom."

"Goodbye. And don't read so much. It's doing things to you."

The line went dead.

• •

I stared at the phone. Of course my mother was mistaken. She couldn't have spoken with my brother. She couldn't have phoned Stewart Detweiler since, had she done so, I would have answered. Nor could he have phoned her, since "he" was I, and I had done no such thing. So—she must have been confused. Yes: that must have been it. When had I—or rather when had Stewart—last spoken with her? It had been three days. Yes, she must have been thinking of that phone call. Had I said anything about floaters? I couldn't recall saying anything about floaters. Why would I have said anything about floaters? True: I had—still have—floaters in my eyes. I've had them for ten years. But it's been years since I've paid any attention to them. Why would I have brought them up? It didn't make any sense. My mother must have imagined the conversation. Or maybe she'd finally gone senile.

Or maybe she'd had a dream. Yes, that was it. You know how she's always dreaming things up. What do you suppose started this whole business? A senile dream. She'd dreamed a non-existent phone conversation with my former self, with Stewart Detweiler. Yes, that explained it, that made the most sense, that was the obvious solution, a logical solution that put the matter to rest for me.

Or was I the one who was dreaming? Had I dreamed the conversation with my mother just then? Was I *still* dreaming?

Or was I losing my mind? Or both?

I shook the thought out of my head.

23. NOCTURNE

*You who diagnose the heart of night
who in massive sleeplessness have heard
a door shutting, a carriage's far sound,
a vague echo, a tiny noise...
At the moments of mysterious silence
when the unremembered arise,
at the hour of the dead, the hour of rest—
you will know how to read these acrid lines.*

—Rubén Darío, “Nocturne”

IT'S DARK. I CAN'T SLEEP.

There's no clock, yet my body knows the time to the minute as if reading it on a glowing dial. Every cell in my brain a clock face stamped with the hour.

2:45 a.m.

I lie here, wide awake in “the dark night of the soul.”

No soil smothers my face, no dirt weighs down my limbs. I can breathe. In other respects I may as well be buried alive.

Save for a sliver of light seeping through one of the big triangular windows (neighbor's dock light) and the red glow of a surge protector strip, the loft is pitched in darkness.

Sounds: water sloshing, timbers creaking, winds slicing through tree branches. I feel myself aboard a vessel of some sort, pitching and swaying. How to reconcile being the Captain of this

ship while a) trying to sleep and b) mulling over possible endings for a certain novel:

1. Learns (first from his mother?) that ghost of dead twin has re-animated his former self, that said former self has gained sudden success: a six-figure multi-book publishing contract, a retrospective with prestigious Chelsea gallery, some other conspicuous success. Reads about it in Sunday *Times* while hunkered down in godforsaken lakeside dwelling. On realizing the success that might have been his, our hero longs for his erstwhile life back. Too late; the die has been cast. No returns, no refunds. Destined now to commit suicide before arrested for crime his dead twin, whose identity *he* assumed, committed.

Suspended from the cathedral ceiling's verge, a pair of fans twirl, stirring the darkness, blades swishing, whispering, spreading rumors, lies, innuendo, secrets. Agitating thoughts.

2. Ghost is in fact not a ghost at all but his other "probable self" (*Seth Material*: Jane Roberts), one of many probable selves (see "many-worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics); parallel alternate universe born aboard conference-bound passenger plane the moment he orders his coffee black rather than with sugar and milk per usual, thereby parting his former quotidian self from self that went on to write *Coffee, Black* (one of infinite probable selves withdrawn from vast reserve of potentialities out of which all realities arise), and who, ultimately, having hanged himself in godforsaken lakeside dwelling, is "absorbed" by his failed twin brother. Note: Quantum physicists refer to the ontological phenomenon in question as "Implicate Order" (Bohm) or the "zero point field" (Planck).

A bubbling bouillabaisse of random thoughts, ideas, images and memories boiling away in my insomnia-riddled brain.

Memory: in the shadow of an abandoned sandpit: a stand of sunflowers. The rusted hulk of a steam shovel, the zebra-striped arm of a railway crossing gate, my running skinny shadow hurling itself over a weedy baseball diamond on a blazing hot summer day.

Cut to: winter. A blizzard has dropped a yard of snow. Gregory and I digging a snow fort out of the mound left by the plow.

Who writes these notes? Are they written at all? They are wildflowers in The Garden of Insomnia, seeded by somnolence, mulched with exhaustion, watered by darkness.

3. There is no twin brother, really. The “twin brother” is merely metaphoric, as Humbert’s seduction and rape of a minor—his pedophilia exploits with respect to a certain “nymphet”—are a metaphor.

“I don’t sleep; I hate those little slices of death.” —muttered by villainous Count Saknussem (Thayer David) in 1959 film *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.

The fan whirs; the vessel rocks. A pile of blankets keeps me warm.

Visions crowd the darkness, grist for the mill that grinds away ceaselessly in the dark.

Father standing on his dock with shillelagh and tweed cap.

Mother ironing in the basement. Smells of soap, bleach, starch, damp stone, water roaring through pipes, the furnace belching as she glides the iron back and forth. We called it the laundry room, though it was a corner of the basement. In fact it was a temple, with Mother the Priest Goddess enshrined in her soapy, steamy sanctuary.

A creaky wooden funicular.

The ruins of hat factories, the names of their former operators in ghostly letters down the brick sides of extinct smokestacks.

Nocturne (from the French): “a musical composition inspired by or evocative of darkness or night.” Fauré, Scriabin, Satie, and Poulenc wrote nocturnes. Mozart’s quadraphonic Notturmo in D, K. 286 and his *Serenata Notturna*, K. 239. Mendelssohn’s instrumental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

4. Metaphorically also twinning of protagonist = divided self (see Lang), contest not between good and evil, but between artistic/personal growth and commercial/professional success (Art vs. Commerce; Style vs. Substance; Soul vs. Body, etc.).
5. End on resoundingly ambiguous note: as he is about to hang himself increasingly vehement knocking/pounding

on cottage door presumed to be the police/FBI agents culminates in door bursting open to reveal his doppelgänger—himself—standing there dressed as and looking exactly like him when he arrived to find his twin brother already hanging there, dead. Equal opposite/Möbius strip/“Liar’s Paradox” ending.

The first movement of Shostakovich’s Violin Concerto No. 1.

Chopin wrote twenty-one nocturnes for solo piano.

Szymanowski’s *Nocturne and Tarantella*.

Composer John Field first to label musical piece “nocturne.”

Nocturnal creatures have proportionally larger eyes than their diurnal counterparts, the better to see in the dark.

Title: “For Want of Nothing.”

Parasomnia: name for the condition where the insomniac appears to be wide-awake, walking etc. with eyes wide open. I did so age ten aboard the———, Europe bound with brother and mother, how my brother followed me all the way to the stern rail, me peering down at the phosphorescent froth churned up by the ship’s propellers. Had he not peeled me away would I have jumped? The next night a man who had flirted with our mother in the Lido Lounge slept beside me in my bunk. To go to the head I had to convince him that I was truly awake.

Sal, the passenger’s name.

Through the window: patches of dark lake through darker trees, shades of water, rolling ripples of blue blackness.

Alternate assorted random memories with lake, the anchored setting. All emanates from the author aboard his drifting “vessel,” the loose pages of his notebook—his mutinous thoughts—abandoning ship, leaping, falling, skittering across the choppy waters.

He recalls L——, one of a phalanx of past lovers, bouts of afternoon lovemaking, gin martinis, morning espressos. Together they evoked Europe for each other. His writer’s block vis-à-vis her abundance, her ceaseless flow (what he’s sought more than anything else in his writing: profluence, that quality of “ceaselessly flowing forward”: how to attain it by way of random meditations, a ceaseless arbitrary flowing forward informed by memories, the doggedly persistent present—the obscure night, the unseen

lake—cradling the vivid past).

Memories blown through cracks in caulking.

I know the time down to the minute, but can't tell past from present, the present from the future, the future from the past.

First glimpse of Doris hefting her duffel bag up the Block Island ferry gangplank, the play of ocean light on her skin, resolve and struggle colluding on her face.

To write a book unpredictable not just in terms of plot but at the paragraph and sentence levels. Novel as concerto/symphony of moods, rhythms, and textures, a movie soundtrack minus the movie; a gallery wherein works are displayed willy-nilly, without order or agenda.

“Art is the summary of nature done by the imagination.” —Eça de Queiróz, *Fradique Mendes*

“[O]nce language exists only to convey information, it is dying.” —Richard Hugo

Whistler's nocturnes.

Responding to Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold—the Falling Rocket*, Ruskin accused the painter of “flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.” Victorian England's most influential critic apparently didn't appreciate the deliberation, study, and skill that had gone into this supreme example of art for art's sake—the movement that Whistler himself spearheaded. The painting, a study in gloomy blues, bleak ochers, and murky greens flecked and dabbed with brighter oranges and yellows, is one of a series of dusky minimalist paintings with nearly identical titles: *Nocturne in Blue and Gold*, *Nocturne in Gray and Gold*, *Nocturne in Pink and Gray*. Needless to say, Whistler's collectors were none too pleased with Mr. Ruskin's assessment, which sent the value of their holdings—and Whistler's reputation—plummeting. The artist sued, resulting in the most famous trial in the annals of art. Whistler won. His reward: one farthing, a fraction of his court costs. Forced into bankruptcy, he sold everything he owned. Since then puzzled art historians have sought to shed light on such a vituperative response to a painting by an otherwise farsighted critic, the same Ruskin who'd championed Turner. One hypothesis: that Ruskin suffered from CADASIL (“Cerebral Autosomal-Domi-

nant Arteriopathy with Subcortical Infarcts and Leukoencephalopathy”) Syndrome, a hereditary stroke disorder whose common symptoms include aura migraines and mood disorders and that may progress to cortical dementia. It’s known that in middle age Ruskin suffered recurrent episodes of depression and delirium, as well as visual hallucinations, delusions, and migraines—including migraines with aura. That he had a progressive neurological disorder is highly likely, with CADASIL the most fitting diagnosis. In his own diary Ruskin records a migraine aura “triggered by visual stress after looking at the setting sun reflected on the surface of a lake” (1844). A second diary entry (1852) has him “tormented” by “black specks.” A third entry, this one from 1882, has him seeing “stars rushing at each other—and [he] thought the Lamps of London were gliding through the night into a World Collision.” Throughout the decade leading up to 1877, the year he attacked Whistler’s painting, according to his own diaries Ruskin’s visual disturbances became more active. It’s no stretch to imagine *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, with its spattered fireworks cascading against a grizzled night, providing an unwelcomed and painful reminder to Ruskin of his visual demons, and triggering what Ruskin’s own father once characterized as his son’s “habitual gloom,” igniting the mental fireworks that resulted in his venomous—and, according to the court filing—libelous critique.

Only subject worth painting: feelings.

Least suitable subject for the written word: feelings.

Once you start seeing the poetry in things it’s hard to stop.

Title: “The Why of Things”

In the woods abutting our Connecticut home there lived a man named Elliot. Mr. Elliot. When I say he lived “in the woods” I mean he lived in a shack in the woods. But the shack was of such crude materials and construction it might have been the nest of a giant squirrel. We’d see him foraging through low-lying shrubs, searching for edible fungi or berries. Greg and I played in the woods, but Mr. Elliot was as much of them as the trees, the rocks, the birds, the lichen and mushrooms and moss.

“A nickel before midnight buys our yesterdays.” —Dos Passos

Pound on the need to read his *Cantos* slowly: “You can’t get

through hell in a hurry.”

Notturmo, Gabriele D’Annunzio’s Modernist masterpiece, a book-length prose-poem composed on ten-thousand slim strips of paper while lying supine, motionless, and blindfolded in a dark Venetian bedroom, recovering from injuries sustained in the crash-landing of a propaganda leaflet-dropping mission during WWI. His right eye already blinded, he was ordered by his doctor to remain perfectly still in the dark or risk losing the other, D’Annunzio had his daughter Renata prepare hundreds of thin strips of paper, each just wide enough for one or two lines, on which he recorded his thoughts “the way the Sibyls used to write their brief auguries on leaves scattered by the winds of fate.” One by one like a man tossing bottled messages from the deck of a doomed ship into the sea the poet and proto-fascist tossed the strips over the side of his bed. The subsequently collated leaves hold dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, reflections, memories... all cauterized by the glowing ember of the poet’s surviving, inflamed left eye:

Invisible odd red rubber boat out there somewhere.

Zigzagging.

Forever.

Somewhere in the distance a dog barks. Across the watery distance of time always somewhere a dog is barking. The dog is chained or caged or both; its owner eternally absent, its barks as sharp as glass shards. They radiate across the water, covering not only distance but time. Bats flit against my head as I row across the lake, oars splashing, oarlocks creaking, carrying my cargo: a tin box of dog biscuits. A crescent moon lights my way as I row with my back to my objective. A bat flies into my face, drawing tears from my eyes, causing me to release both oars. As I rub my searing eye sockets with a splash they slip through their locks into the water. I sit there, oarless in the middle of the dark lake, my face wet with tears. The dog keeps barking. I take up the box of dog biscuits and—the barks increasing in quantity and amplitude, multiplied by the lake’s echo chamber—nibble away.

Story: “Post.” Protagonist reads his life in newspaper headlines.

“I spoke much better as soon as I began each sentence without knowing how I should end it.” —Armance

A dream of form in days of thought.

Caught between the fear of being too original and that of not being original enough.

"The work of heaven alone is material—the making of a material world. The work of hell is entirely spiritual." —Michaux

"The mere ambition to make a poem suffices to kill it." —Ibid

Who writes these words? Are they being written at all? Are they even words?

A tree limb scrapes against the siding.

The ceiling fan whirring, whirring.

The mind's eye, too, grows bigger in the dark.

How he yearns to write something raw and spontaneous, where the structure is dictated entirely by feeling. How he's tired of second-guessed words that give off a stench of self-consciousness, the smell of fear. How he wants to write fearless words for an ideal reader so close to him in spirit that she may as well be him, so there can be no question of critical response; so that the act of writing is itself the critique, such that the very act of committing words to the page in such a bold, sure-fire, spontaneous way silences all possible criticism. How after all he wants to write not for the age but for the ages, how those ages live here, now, forever deep inside him. How they won't be denied.

Book: hopelessly flimsy contraption of words.

"...an ingenious complicated style, full of shades and of research, constantly pushing back the boundaries of speech, borrowing from all the technical vocabularies, taking color from all palettes and notes from all keyboards, struggling to render what is most inexpressible in thought, what is vague and most illusive in the outlines of form, listening to translate the subtle confidence of neurosis, the dying confessions of passion grown depraved, and the strange hallucinations of the obsession which is turning to madness....In this marvelous tongue solecism and barbarism seem to me to render the forced negligence of a passion which forgets itself and mocks at rules."

Drag *that* down the worm-eaten staircase of terrible syntax.

Temperatures fall, stocks tumble, assets shrink, divisions grow, hopes cling, tempers flare, bridges burn, accusations fly, frustra-

tion mounts, records break, dams burst, garbage pails, ceiling fans,
 narrow gauge, rectifier, sump pump, mattress ticking, doorjamb,
 thermostat, Quonset, conduit, culvert, aurora, daybreak:

Dawn.

24. DAWN

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I'VE BEEN DREAMING AND DOZING (OR whether I've dreamed and dozed at all), when, just after dawn, the doorbell chimes. At first I don't recognize it as a doorbell, so long has it been since I've lived with one (my Bronx apartment had a nasty-sounding buzzer that worked half the time). I've just begun to construe the sound when it changes to someone knocking on the front door—not “my” front door, at the moment, quite, but “the” front door: a front door belonging to the ghosts of my father and brother. Who can it be at this hour? All sorts of possibilities occur to me, none pleasant. The FBI, two opposite-sexed Charlies/eyes knocking in tandem. But it can't be. They've got nothing on me. The knocking grows more aggressive. Whoever it is knows I—or someone—is home. My heart rate accelerates. I think again of cops, the Feds. But no, how—how could that be? What would they want with me? Maybe they've found the body. Impossible. They couldn't possibly have done so, anchored way out there in the lake's deepest and darkest depths. Maybe it's one of my neighbors knocking on my vermilion door. Dropping off a casserole? Hot cross buns fresh from the oven? Should I answer? By not answering, might I make matters worse? Might I arouse (more) suspicion(s)? The knocking grows louder, so loud I can't decide whether it has progressed from

knocking to “pounding.” I tie the belt on my —on Brock Jones, PhD’s—robe that I’m wearing, cut like a kimono with gray clouds and blue dragons on a dark blue background.

Meanwhile the pounding—it is unquestionably pounding now—grows louder.

“Coming!” I yell as I make my way down the sisal-covered stairs, tripping on the robe’s belt which has come undone. On the far side of the front door a woman’s voice yells, “*Goddamn you, open this goddamn door!*” From these ungentle words I come to two conclusions: 1) the purpose of this visit is personal, and 2) this is no friendly social call. I open the door.

A short youngish woman stands there. I’ve barely glimpsed her when she shoves past me into the house.

“You idiot,” she says. “You incredibly stupid fucking idiot! You are one piece of goddamn work, Brock Jones, PhD., you know that?” I stand there looking at her. Her upper lip, I observe apropos of nothing, is thin, very thin, practically nonexistent in contrast with the lower one, which in its amplitude protrudes. Her eyes are tremendous with fury. Though they don’t look at all alike, for some reason she reminds me of Sheila, of my former brother’s former wife. The freckles, maybe. I want to say, “Do I *know* you?” But of course I don’t; I can’t say that. That would be the very thing *not* to say. So I stand there, smiling my best noncommittal smile, a half-smile, a neutral Mona Lisa smile, a touch ironic, a touch familiar, but not *too* ironic; not *too* familiar. Somewhat abstract; a little aloof (but not *too* abstract; not *too* aloof). Just the right blend of both. She wears one of those slick yellow raincoats, a Mackintosh. I’m standing there, holding the opened door still. It’s foggy again outside, foggy and rainy and windy. I hear the wind chimes. I can’t see the neighbors’ dock or even their house a couple dozen yards away, that’s how foggy it’s become. The lake is entirely hidden under fog. I close the door, turn to face the strange woman again, watch her take it off, the raincoat, that is. As she does, she says, “I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it. How could you do it? How *could* you?”

I stare at her. She’s short, hardly over five feet. Thirty years old, I’d guess, maybe thirty-five, with straight “dirty blond” hair, if that matters, if it’s not entirely irrelevant. With a spattering of

freckles across her nose. One of those wholesome, All-American farm girl faces, you could say, I guess, if that's not a cliché. Is "farm girl face" a cliché? Is there even such a thing? Who is she?

She throws her sopping Mackintosh (or whatever it is) at me. I almost catch it.

"Well?" she says. "Don't just stand there staring at me. Say something!"

But I can't, I have nothing to say, nothing that would placate this woman, whoever she may be, nothing that would shed light on her situation or mine.

Still, I can't say *nothing*. Can I? I have to say *something*.

"I'm sorry," I say. It's the best that I can come up with under the circumstances.

"You're sorry? You're *sorry*? Are you *kidding*? That's what you have to say, after all you've put me—after all you've put all of us—through?"

I keep staring. She must think I'm an idiot. I *am* an idiot, a tabula rasa. I know nothing.

"You think you can just run away from everything? That's your idea of coping? Just run away and let the rest of us work things out for you? Well I have news for you, Mr. Reinvent Yourself Anytime You Goddamn Feel Like It. Life doesn't work that way. Life isn't a self-cleaning oven. It's not a hotel room, either, with maid service. You make a mess, you clean up after it. It doesn't get cleaned for you. And you've made yourself quite a little mess, haven't you, Brock Jones, PhD? And this—this is your solution. Run away to your lake-side cottage and forget about it. Listen to crickets and water. Watch the sunset. Lie in your hammock. Like that's gonna solve anything; like that's your idea of damage control? Well it's not working!"

She shakes her head. Except for that too thin upper lip and a little excess flesh at the tip of her nose, she's pretty. "Jesus," she says. "I don't believe it. I can't believe it. It's a nightmare, that's what it is. A goddamn nightmare." She's been looking at the floor, down at her feet on which she wears a pair of hunter green rubber riding boots, Wellingtons, they're called, I think. She looks up from them to the cathedral ceiling, first at the boat suspended there, gazing dumbly at its blue hull, then at the beam from which

my father and then my brother—the person to whom she believes she is speaking—hanged themselves.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” she says. “What the hell are *we* going to do?”

I shake my head; I don’t know.

“I don’t know,” I say, true enough: I don’t know; I have no idea. Who is she? What have “I” done? She turns to me. My lips are dry. I lick them stupidly.

She stares at me. “What have you done?” she says. “To yourself? You’ve done something. You look different.”

“Do I?” I say.

“Your hair. Your face. Your eyes. Something. What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Jesus,” she says. “Jesus...”

“Would you like something?” I say. “Some tea, some coffee?...”

She shakes her head. “Jesus,” she says again.

“I can make you some tea,” I say. “Unless you prefer coffee?”

“Tea, coffee, whatever,” she says. “Anything but black coffee.”

I cross to the stove, put the kettle on.

She (looking around): “I thought you said this place was a wreck.”

“Is that what I said?” I say.

“Where’s the mold? The mildew? Where are the spider webs?”

Me (watching kettle): “I’ve been tidying up a bit.”

“What about Jamie? What about Talia?”

I have no idea who Jamie and Talia are.

“Have you told them anything?”

I shake my head. “No,” I say. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* so? What is *that* supposed to mean? Damn it, Brock, did you tell them anything or didn’t you?”

“No. No,” I say. “I didn’t tell them. I didn’t say a word to them, I swear.” I feel like Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man*. *Is it safe? Yes, it’s very safe. No, no it’s not safe at all.*

“Thank god for that much,” she says. “I doubt they could handle it. They’d fall apart.” Ironic little laugh. “Oh, God. *I’m* falling apart.”

I nod.

"What are you nodding for?"

"Because. I mean, *I know*...."

"You *know*?"

"I mean ... I understand."

"You *understand*?"

"Yes. I understand."

"You *understand*? What the hell sort of a thing is that to say?"

You understand? You *understand*?"

"You're right," I say. "That was a dumb thing to say."

"Damn right it was dumb."

"It was *awfully* dumb. I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. Very sorry."

"You're *very* sorry?"

"Yes. Truly sorry."

"Great. Fucking great ..."

All this time I'm thinking: who *is* this woman? Could it be Dawn? Dawn Swopes? My brother's assistant? If so she's not at all as I pictured her. I pictured someone ... I don't know, a bit less hardheaded, less formidable. Someone ... dowdier. Frumpier.

"So," I say, holding the kettle by the handle while waiting for it to come to a boil. "How long did it take you?"

"Huh?" she says.

"The drive. To get here. Did it take you very long?"

"Are you out of your mind?" she says. "How *long* did it take? My whole life, that's how long it took! *It took me my whole goddamn life.*"

"I was just ... curious."

She laughs. "Do you know what I am?"

"Beg your pardon?"

"To you—what I am to you? Do you *know*?"

I shake my head.

"Your chewer. That's what I am."

"My ... chewer?"

"That's all I am to you, all I've ever been. You're goddamn chewer!"

"Chewer," I say.

“Chewer! Chewer! You know what a chewer is?”

“One who chews?”

“A peon whose duties include chewing the master’s food for him before serving it to him on a silver spoon. That’s what I’ve always been to you, your goddamn chewer, here to masticate your blunders, your bad decisions, your inequities and hypocrisies and depravities, to soften them up for your incredibly naïve fans. To turn your bullshit into baby food for them. Whatever bullshit you develop a sudden craving for, I chew it for you. And now I have to chew *this*.”

I stare at her, lick my lips, look (I suppose) stupid.

“You’re out of your mind, you know that? Completely out of your mind. Out of your mind and totally clueless.”

I shake my head; she’s right: I haven’t a clue as to what I’ve done. Or I have some clues, two or three, but not enough to put together anything like a cohesive picture.

“We had everything,” she says. “And you’ve thrown it away, all of it. Jesus. Why, Brock? *Why?* What were you *thinking?*”

I go on shaking my head. “I don’t know,” I say. True.

“As if showing the whole world that you could reinvent yourself wasn’t enough. No. You had to go and prove to yourself and everyone else that Brock Jones, PhD. could get away with anything. That you were exempt, that you could rise like the Phoenix from your own smoking ashes. Reinventing yourself wasn’t good enough; you had to be resurrected. But to be resurrected first you need to be crucified. And so you got yourself a nice sturdy cross to nail yourself to. The only trouble is, when you nailed yourself you nailed a few hundred other people along with you, including everyone who loves you. Including me.”

“It was just... one of those things,” I say. “You know?”

“Did you have *any* idea what you were doing? Any idea at all?”

“No. Honestly. I had no idea. None at all.” All this time I’ve been holding the tea kettle with one hand, waiting for the damn thing to whistle.

“To do something so slimy, so sordid, so stupid. You of all people. How someone so brilliant, a PhD, a role model with millions of followers, could have so few street smarts. I still can’t believe it.

If it were a plot on *Law & Order*, I'd kick the damn TV!"

"You're right," I say. "I wasn't in my right mind. I wasn't myself."

She looks curiously at me. "What did you say just now?"

"Just now, you mean? That I wasn't myself?"

"You weren't *yourself*? That's what you said? You're saying you weren't *yourself*?"

"No. As a matter of fact—"

That's when she lunges. She goes straight for my throat, grabbing it by the Adam's apple, strangling me.

"Hey!" I wheeze. "Stop it!"

"Bastard! Mentally deranged degenerate!"

She strangles me. For a small woman she is quite powerful. Her fingers dig deeper into my Adam's apple. I'm thinking she'll tear the damn thing off. At last I free her arms from around my neck and twist them behind her back.

"Ouch! You're hurting me!"

"That's the idea," I say, twisting harder. "Now are you going to lay off me, or do I have to break this arm of yours? Hmm?"

"Okay," she says.

"Promise?"

"Y—yes, I promise!"

"Good. Because all things being equal, I really don't care to break people's arms, not if I don't have to, understand?"

She nods.

"I'm going to let go now. Kindly keep your hands off me. All right?"

I let go. She steps back and stands there, in the kitchen area with her jaw hanging, looking at me. The kettle whistles.

"Who are you?" she says.

I switch off the burner, take two cups from their hooks under the cabinet, put tea bags in them, make us both tea.

"Who *are* you?" she says.

"Hmm," I say, pouring.

"You're not...?"

"Milk and sugar?" I say.



Dear Reader, I feel a bit strange having offered you the preceding scene, which, summarized, comes down to “A man and a woman meet for the first time. While the man has no idea who the woman is, the woman assumes that he is his identical twin.” That’s the gist of it. Oh yes, and woman confronts man with scandal of tragic import of which he was supposedly either the primary cause or in which he played a key role, or both, and of which he likewise knows nothing. That much is clear.

In other respects the scene is entirely opaque. There are, as you see, shades of Kafka and Beckett. Or Pinter. It’s a good scene. Then again, I really can’t take much credit for it, can I, since I didn’t invent or imagine it; I just happened to have been one of the characters, an eyewitness, as it were, who reports it to you now. Still, it has kinetic energy, along with existential charm. Sartre might have written it, come to think of it, or maybe Daniil Kharms (Russian absurdist. Look him up).

Now back to our scene-in-progress, which, while I was speaking to you, has entered the past tense.



At the dining table, which I had covered with a red and white checkered oil cloth, we sipped our teas. I massaged my aching throat; Dawn rubbed her bruised arm. I assumed it was Dawn; it had to be Dawn. Who else could it have been? We looked at each other. The sense of distrust was electric. You could have powered a small engine with it.

“So—now what?” she said.

I smiled at her. To my surprise she returned my smile. On second thought I wasn’t surprised at all. Nothing surprised me then.

“Hungry?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” she answered.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“I’m starving. I haven’t eaten since Pennsylvania.”

“I can make you some oatmeal. Or an omelet. Or no—a nice *frittata*. What do you say to a nice *frittata*? ‘*Buon giorno!*’”



I made us a frittata. It was a good frittata, with diced tomatoes and scallions, arugula, and two kinds of melted cheese (Manchego and parmesan), accompanied by a chilled bubbly *Vinho Verde*. The fog having given way to cloudy sunshine, we ate out on the dock, under the blue and white striped shade umbrella I'd bought, seated on the Adirondack chairs, one of which I had painted a nice Naples yellow, the other a deep jade green. Finished, we sat there gazing silently out across the water.

"They know you're here, Brock," she said.

"They?"

"The FBI."

"Oh. Them. Yes, they know. They interviewed me."

"They did? How much have you told them?"

"Not much."

"*How* much?"

"Nothing. I hardly told them anything."

"What *did* you tell them?"

"Nothing they don't already know."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

We sat there.

"The truth, Brock. Did you do something to him?"

"Do what? To whom?"

"Don't play games. To Figes!" She pronounced it "fie-gez" —with a hard 'g' and a hard 'i.'

"Why would I do anything? What would I do?"

"Jesus. Are you seriously going to pretend that you have no idea what we're talking about?" She stared at me as if I were a mutant, as if she could no longer recognize me—which, of course, was the case. "You know perfectly well. And in case you haven't figured it out yet, the man is mentally ill! They say he was in a motorcycle accident when he was sixteen years old, that he hasn't been normal since. They also learned that he's been saving up for a sex change operation. That's probably what he was planning to use the money for."

“Oh,” I said.

“They found his car. I assume they told you that. Parked by a boat ramp on this lake. They know he came all the way here. I’m sure they know why, too. To see you.”

I gazed out over the water.

“You asked him to come here, didn’t you, Brock? You lured him here.”

“Did I?” I said.

“Didn’t you? Why else would he have driven all the way here from Alabama?”

“Is that what he did?”

“Stop that! You know he did! And you know why. You weren’t his first victim, either, you know, by a long shot. He’s done it at least twice before that they know about. You just happened to have a lot more notoriety than your predecessors.”

“These chairs aren’t very comfortable,” I said, standing, offering her my hand.

She looked up at me. “What?” she said.

“Let’s move from here.”

“And go where?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere. Anywhere. Let’s take a walk,” I said, still holding my hand out.

Reluctantly she took it and rose to her feet. No sooner had she done so than she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me, this woman I’d known for all of forty-five minutes and who, within that brief time, had done her best to claw the Adam’s apple out of my throat. As for me, I had no choice but to return her kiss. What else could I do? No sooner did I do so than she pulled away and stared at me with what can only be described as horror-stricken eyes.

“No,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Something... something’s wrong.”

“Oh?”

“With you.”

“What?”

“You’re not you.”

"Of course I'm me. Who else would I be?"

"I don't know!"

"Come now." I held her. We held each other.

"Have you been in touch with her?"

"No," I said, unsure who this "her" was, but suspecting that her initials were MJB.

"Has she contacted you?"

"She may have."

"What do you mean?"

"There've been some text messages."

"Saying what?"

" 'I know what you did.' Stuff like that."

"Great."

"It's nothing to worry about."

"How can it be—"

"She can't prove anything. There's nothing to prove, since I didn't do anything. I've been alone here all this time, minding my business."

"Hiding out, you mean."

"Minding my business. And getting some work done."

"You've been working?"

"That's right. On a new book. One completely different from the others. It's unlike anything I've ever written before. It's unlike anything anyone has ever written. It's a novel."

"A novel?"

"It's almost finished. A few more pages, maybe a dozen or so, and I should be done with it. In time for me to unveil it when we do the taping."

"The taping?"

"The PBS thing. On May sixteenth."

"The fundraiser? Brock, I cancelled that!"

"Well I un-cancelled it."

"You spoke with Adam?"

"I did."

"When?"

"Yesterday. Or the day before."

"The sixteenth. That's just over a week from now. You did this

without telling me?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

I asked, “Why did you cancel?”

“Why did I *cancel*? For one thing, I had no idea where the hell you were. For another I had no idea when if ever you’d come back. Not to mention the not-so-insignificant fact that you’d gotten yourself mixed up in an extortion scheme.”

Extortion, I thought. “Extortion,” I said.

“Blackmail. Call it whatever you like.”

“Blackmail.”

“I wonder if he’s really her uncle.”

“Yes,” I said cluelessly. “I’ve been wondering that myself.”

“Whether you were tricked or not, still, it doesn’t at all excuse what you did.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

“Getting involved with a sixteen year-old.”

“Sixteen. That is... young.” My stomach flip-flopped like a fresh-caught fish.

“Even though you never touched her, still...”

“Still,” I said. My bowels quaked.

“It’s crazy.”

“Crazy,” I said. I felt dizzy.

“Now Figes is missing. And where do they find his car? At a boat ramp a half-mile from here.”

• •

As if on cue, across the watery distance, at precisely the so-called “vanishing point” that Jon Gnagy taught me and millions of other kids about when we were five and six and seven years old—the place where all lines of perspective converge—a red dot appeared.

Dawn took my hand.

“I’m scared,” she said.

“Don’t be.” I felt her hand shaking. Her whole body trembled. Mine, too.

“Please say you didn’t kill him.”

Kill? *Kill*??

"Of course I didn't... didn't..."

"Oh, Brock, I'm so scared. For you, for myself. For us both. I've been so worried about you. The way you were acting before... the marijuana... the alcohol... the pills... the pacing and insomnia and stumbling around and reeking of cologne to cover the stink of vomit and liquor... the lies and secrets... Then just like that you disappear, without saying a word, and me assuming the very worst. Then that last phone call. After hanging up I was sure you'd... you sounded so scared, so hopeless. I almost called the police. I was ready to tell them everything. I didn't know what else to do. Then your mother calls and tells me she got through to you, that you were here, safe, that you hadn't..."

She broke down and sobbed into my shoulder.

"Oh, God, Brock. I was so relieved. The way you sounded in that last phone call to me—what is it, six weeks now? I was *sure* you'd done something to yourself. But I couldn't... I didn't want to... Anyway, that's how I found out you were here. Your mother, she told me. I made her tell me. I couldn't *stand* it any more. Being kept in the dark." She laughed. "It seems like so long ago, like so much has happened since. But you're here; you're *alive*. That's the important thing. Thank God you're alive."

I patted her back. "Things will be fine."

She drew back. "How? How will they be fine?"

"They just will," I said. "Trust me."

"I want to. I really do. I want to understand."

"I wish I understood myself." I looked at her. "I don't, you know. I don't understand any more than you do. It's as if... as though the person who... who did all those things... as if he were someone else."

"You did this, Brock. No one else did it. You have to own it. You have to take responsibility."

"I don't disown it. I'm trying to make you understand, to make *myself* understand. All that success, all that fame, all that money... reinventing myself over and over again. I had no idea who I was anymore, I'd become that disassociated from myself. You're right: I was a sick man. There was a parasite in me. The only way to get rid of it, to get back to my true self, was to kill the

host. To find out who I was, I had to destroy what I'd become. It was the only way."

Did I have the vaguest idea what I was saying? Assuming I had the vaguest idea, was I listening? Assuming I was listening, did I realize the implications? Assuming I realized the implications, did I not see how those implications applied not just to my brother, but to *me*? Assuming I realized how they applied to me, why keep up this charade?

Suddenly nothing made any sense at all.

"Does that make any sense?" I said.

She looked me deep in the eyes. "Yes, Brock," she said. "It does. It makes perfect sense."

We kissed again. This kiss lasted longer. Her tongue chased, caught, and wrestled mine to a double pin for the title. While kissing we collapsed onto the dock. I was just beginning to enjoy myself when she pulled back again with the same horrified look in her eyes. She shook her head.

"No—no!"

"What? What's the matter?"

"No—*no*!" she said again, springing to her feet. Before I knew it, she was running. She ran all the way up the dock, up the sloped lawn, past the house.

"Dawn!" I shouted, chasing her. "What's wrong?"

I watched her get into her car, a red Kia Soul. She'd already started the engine when I arrived at the driver's side door.

"For God's sake, what—"

"Get away from me," she said, rolling the window up.

"Just tell me. Please! What did I—?"

"You say you had no idea who you are. Well I'm still not sure," she said through the glass. "All I know is—whatever the hell you are, you are definitely ... not ... *you*!"

I watched her back out of my driveway, into the little turn-around area on the far side of the aluminum carport under which my father's Alfa Romeo rusted and moldered. Without so much as a glance in her rearview mirror she and the Kia were gone.

• •

Blackmail... sixteen year-old... kill...

I heard a rumble of thunder, looked up, saw the clouds massing overhead. To the east the sky was black. A sudden chilly gust shivered the azaleas and inverted the magnolia tree's leaves, exposing their tan undersides. The weather, too, was closing in on me.

Back indoors, I was greeted by this message from Wetumpka, Alabama:

im coming 4 u

25. A METROPOLITAN WRITING INSTITUTE INSTRUCTOR IS UNBORN

I'VE NOTED ELSEWHERE THAT A GOOD ENDING IS BOTH SURPRISING and inevitable. It elicits two responses. The first response: "Oh my God!" The second: "But of course!"

Most novels end poorly. They fail to surprise or they do so in ways that are, if not absurd, implausible. Much of the blame for this tendency can be laid at the foot of editors and publishers who, for reasons entirely their own, prefer unfinished novels for which they pay hefty advances to finished ones they could get for a song.

It has long been my wish to write a novel whose ending subverts readers' expectations in every way, to the point of arousing their fury and even possibly driving them insane—but that's also not only inevitable, but, in retrospect, entirely obvious. In which case the blame for the "bad ending" would be shared equally between author and reader.

• •

I've yet to wrap up my interminable back-story. I'll do so now.

When I first started teaching, on the first day of classes, I'd pull an edifying practical joke. I'd walk into class ten minutes late, unshaven, my hair unkempt, my shoelaces untied, my shirt-

tail un-tucked. Looking confusedly across a sea of dumbfounded faces, I'd slur, "Thisha ruyd room? My inna ruyd room?" Assured of as much, I'd say, "Good; thash *very* good." Fumbling with and dropping papers from my briefcase, I'd say, "Thisha clashin fik-shun ruyding. Now, I dunno bout choo, bud whenever I ruyde, I like a liddle ol' drinky-poo. Doanchoo? Jush ta — ya know — get th'ole insparashunul jewzes flowin.'"

That was my cue to pull a bottle of wine from my briefcase and wave it over my head. I'd sit at my desk then and, while peeling the seal off the cork, say, "Damn, fuhgot muh corkscrew! Any uff yew godda corkscrew, by any shance?"

So saying, I'd drop my head onto the desk, knocking the bottle over (without breaking it, hopefully), and proceed to snore loudly. Having snored for a few seconds, I'd pop my suddenly-sober head up and say, "Okay. Describe what you just experienced. You have fifteen minutes."

The exercise was most effective. I would have kept doing it, too, had Dean Bronze not gotten wind of it and asked me to stop, saying, with a pat on my well-intentioned back, "It's not the sort of first impression we want to make on our students, Stew."

Why tell you this now, having arrived at my last class at the Metropolitan Writing Institute? Wait. You'll see.



The greeting card said "Thank You" in a brush font framed by stylized cyan and ochre flowers. I won't say who sent it, when it was received, or what occasioned it. This is what's known as "false suspense": the capricious withholding of fundamental facts by a manipulative author as an inferior means of arousing curiosity in the reader.

The card was from Sally Treadwell, my agent (or former agent). I received it in the mail during the penultimate week of the Fall Metropolitan Writing Institute term. The occasion: Sally's gratitude for my having referred Ashley Bridges to her.

Dear Stewart,

I just want to thank you for introducing Ashley Bridges to me. She is indeed very talented, owing in no

small part I'm sure to the fact that she has you as a teacher. Anyway it was very thoughtful of you and I am extremely grateful.

*Sincerely,
Sally*

What Sally's card failed to say, quite possibly because it hadn't happened yet when Sally wrote it, was that, based on the partial manuscript that Ashley and I concocted, Viking had made an offer on Ashley's novel-in-progress. So had Random House, Simon & Schuster, Crown, Dial, Scribner, Little Brown, and Doubleday... but Viking's had been the most generous.

How generous? Ashley's email (subject: "You won't believe this!") said only that her novel had sold "for a nice fat advance." The same email invited me to celebrate said occasion with her the following evening at Casa Mono, a tapas bar on Irving Place—an invitation I accepted, reluctantly.

Ashley had invited several of her classmates. Alice Nordland, author of medieval bodice-rippers and coprophagous dog walker stories, was there, so were Margot Abrons (abortion clinic) and Michael Quigley (Hamburger Killer). And the Ken Doll, of course.

Seated across from me, Ashley wore a fringed white pashmina scarf and matching pearls. Wearing a checkered blue Italian wool blazer with a red bowtie, Arnold sat to her right. None of her classmates seemed the least bit put-off by Ashley's sudden turn of literary fortune. If anything they seemed genuinely pleased for her sake.

As for me, how do I begin to describe to you how it felt to sit there with her that evening, at that table strewn with wineglasses and tapas plates, surrounded by celebratory faces?

Another bottle was ordered—champagne, this time. I ordered it. What I lacked in genuine pleasure I made up for, or tried to, with fulsome magnanimity, as if the book deal had been mine or my doing. As though it were my triumph that we were celebrating.

Maybe it was my magnanimity, or maybe it was my air of professorial authority, or merely the fact that I was the oldest person at the table, but near midnight, when the waitress brought the check in its little black portfolio, she put it in front of me. There it remained, with neither Ashley nor her lover making the slight-

est move to appropriate it. Finally, I picked the thing up. It came to nearly two hundred dollars (the champagne alone cost \$75; it *was good* champagne). I paid for it with my besieged American Express card.

“Thanks, Professor,” Ashley said, kissing my cheek. By then we were out on the sidewalk. I stood and watched as she and Arnold slipped into a cab and rode away uptown, leaving me alone with my umbrella in the rain facing a long, dreary subway-and-train ride home.

• •

Is it any wonder I didn’t go straight home? I stopped at the Campbell Apartment, which bar I had come to think of as my own, and ordered my new signature drink, a snifter of Armagnac, or rather my signature *drinks*, since I’d formed the habit of ordering more than one. Thus fortified, I caught the last train to Kingsbridge, thinking gloomily to myself while gazing through the grimy window at the gloomily passing landscape, *Who should we blame, after all, if we end up alone?*

Home, too drunk and agitated to sleep, I switched on the black and white portable TV I’d inherited from Doris and rarely watched, to catch a movie-in-progress, *A Star is Born*. There have been several versions of that film, the best being the 1954 version starring Judy Garland as Esther Blodgett, the talented ingénue, and James Mason as Norman Maine, the faded alcoholic matinee idol who, as his own star sinks, makes a star out of her.

The one I saw that night was the original 1937 version starring Janet Gaynor and Fredric March. I arrived during the climactic scene, where, as Esther delivers her Academy Award speech, Norman stumbles drunk into the proceedings, upstaging the woman of his dreams and inadvertently slapping her in the face. Two scenes later, Freddie March walks into the ocean and drowns himself.

Why do I bring *this* up?

• •

Normally, I reserve the last day of class to discuss the business of writing, what literary journals to submit to, how to get an agent,

rejection, persistence, publication, all that stuff. I'd try to end on a positive but realistic note. Yes, the writer's life is challenging; yes, you will confront a good deal of rejection; yes, you will struggle against great odds and succumb occasionally to despair. But if only you persist, if only you stay the course and don't give up, eventually you'll succeed.

With that or something like it, often to thunderous applause, I would bring my class to its end.

Ashley's last class differed markedly from its predecessors in several respects, among them the fact that prior to it I got myself ham-sandwiched on three Armagnacs, this time at O'Henry's booth at Pete's Tavern. I wasn't there just to drink. I had work to do, lines to memorize, a performance to prepare for. The climactic scene.

Normally, I arrived exactly five minutes late to class—just late enough to assure my entry into a fully populated, eagerly expectant room. But that evening a good thirty minutes had drained from the hour when, categorically blitzed, Stewart Detweiler, Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute, lurched into the spotlight. But unlike Norman Maine in *A Star is Born*, my grand entrance interrupted—not an Academy Award speech, but a conversation presided over by Ashley Bridges on the subject of her recent book deal.

"Oh, well," Ashley held forth, her Mississippi accent as thick as her false modesty, "as my granddaddy used to say, good luck is just another word for perseverance. Perseverance and hope. Why, since my tenth birthday, when Granddaddy gave me my very first diary, a white leather one with an embossed rose on the cover and a golden lock and key, I've dreamed of becoming a—"

"Such a pretty speech, my dear," I interrupted, applauding, staggering into the room. "A very—a very pretty little speech. Lemme...I wanna be the first...the first to congratulate you on that valuable little piece of bric-a-brac."

While other students gaped, Ashley fixed me with a tight, worrisome grin.

"And now, if you don't mind, I gotta little speech o' my own that I'd like to make. A little speech about success an failure, not necessarily innat order."

Having cleared my throat dramatically, I began:

"Ladies and gentlemen of the 'cademy, fellow ink-stained suckers... I beg your pardon: fellow ink-stained wretches... fellow struggling, would be, wannabe, hoping-to-be-someday-be-successful writers... hoping to achieve what our very own Ms. Ashley Bridges here —" a wink tossed Ashley's way "— has achieved. To land that first book contract. That's what you're hoping for, all of you. Isn't it? Huh? Well, *isn't it?*"

Alice Nordland, Michael Quigley, and several other students nodded tentatively. As for Ashley, like the asterisk at the end of a sentence a note of curiosity punctuated her expression. Yet her smile remained fixed. Nor did she, as they say, "bat an eye."

"Well, folks, lemme lay some perspective on you. See, once upon a time, I, too, got me one of them book contracts. Sure did. For a booka short stories, my only booka short stories. My first published book. Firsta two *published* books. Only. Last one was—*how* long ago? Twenny-seven years? My, how time flies! But, hey, and not to disparage anyone else's recent impressive accomplishments [a nod to Ashley], but book contracts [shrug]... they doan mean allat much. In fact—and depending how you look at it—they doan mean a gosh darned thing, pardon my French. People get book contracts all the time. At the moment I don't happen to be one of 'em, but still.... The fact of the matter is I'm after bigger game. You see, my ambition is nothing more or less than to nab the award for Least Publishable Novel Ever Written by a Human Being on the Planet Earth. Heck, I should win *ten* such awards: that's about how many drafts of the damn thing I've done... *so far*. Yes, indeed, folks, I *earned* them awards. Pardon my grammar. *Those* awards. Wouldn't you agree? Huh? Seriously and sincerely: I'm *asking* you. What do you say? Do I or do I not deserve the Least Publishable Book Ever Written Award?"

Blank looks accompanied by tentative smiles.

"That was a question."

Attentive silence.

"*Answer me, dammit!*"

There's something terribly satisfying about destroying yourself in public for all to see, like a piece of performance art, or like those

monks who set themselves on fire every now and then for this or that worthy cause. Oh, it was a hoot. I'd never had so much fun in my life, let me tell you.

"I remember, once upon a time when I first started writing, I was working some crappy job, forget where, some bistro or bar in Soho or the Village, when this man, this old guy, walks up to me, old guy with white hair and 'spensive lookin' suit. Orders some-thin'. As I'm taking his order he says, 'Tell me, whaddya do? I doan mean for a living. I mean whaddya *really* do?' So I tell him. 'I write; I'm a writer.' He nods. 'Novelist?' he asks. 'Yeah,' I say. 'Novelist.' He looks down at the floor and shakes his head. 'I'm sorry,' he says. Then, back up at me: 'Do yourself a favor, kid. Give it up. Now, while there's still time, before it's too late. There's nothin but heartache in it.' With that he gets up and walks out of the place. But then, an hour or so later, he comes back. 'Hey, kid,' he says. 'Remember what I said just a while ago? Well, forget I said it. Years from now, when you're my age, what would you rather say to your grandkids? That you tried to be a novelist and failed, or that you were a stockbroker?' He walked away again, this time for good.

"Why did I just tell you that story? Wait. Oh. I remember now. What that old man said—about a writer's life being nothing but heartache? It's true. Heartache and misunderstanding, the biggest misunderstanding of all being that what the world wants is a masterpiece, a unique masterpiece, a book no one but you can write, torn from the depths of your being. Your talent, your originality, your integrity, your heart, your soul."

I shook my head.

"Circus peanuts, that's what the world wants."

Dumbfounded stares. Except from Ashley, whose wondrous expression—partly obscured by a manicured hand—combined pity and admiration in equal measure for her old professor, from whom she clearly had not anticipated such a performance.

"You know—those candies shaped like big peanuts, made of marshmallow, dyed orange, and artificially flavored to taste like bananas? One of the most successful candies ever. Been around a hundred years. A hundred years ago, some fella sat down with a pile of market surveys, economic forecasts, a slide rule, a crystal

ball, whatever, and what conclusion did he arrive at? That what the world needed was a candy made out of marshmallow, shaped like a giant peanut, dyed orange, and artificially banana flavored. Voila! Let's make a few hundred million of 'em! That was well over a century ago. And to this day the circus peanut is still going strong!"

Reaching into my briefcase, I withdrew a bag of said convoluted confection, tore it open, and tossed handfuls of its contents across a sea of bewildered faces. A few students tried to catch them (including Michael Quigley, who proceeded to eat his).

"But we're not here to talk about circus peanuts. We're here 'cuz we're writers, 'cuz we love to write, 'cuz we yearn to create beauty out of words. That's why *I'm* here, what I've spent my adult life trying to do. Have I succeeded? By circus peanut standards, no. By circus peanut standards I'm an *abject failure*. No one wants my circus peanuts."

"Does it matter? No. All that matters is that I wrote my book, a book that no one else but me could have written. That I did what I set out to do—that's all that matters."

I was no longer slurring. The Armagnacs had worn off.

"As for all you've learned here in the past few months? Forget it! Everything I've taught you is wrong. Everything everyone has ever taught you about writing is wrong. There's only one way to write: *your own*, as no one but you can." Though this little speech was delivered generally to the whole class, by its end my eyes had settled on Ashley, who gave a little smile.

"I leave you with this. F. Scott Fitzgerald—or 'poor Scott,' as Hemingway, that son of a bitch, called him—once defined genius as the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in one's head at the same time. My two ideas: a) I've written a book that no one cares to publish and that in all likelihood will never be read; and b) it's a masterpiece. Idea A: I've succeeded, and in succeeding I've failed; Idea B: I've failed, and in failing I've succeeded. Identical twins conceived in the same womb. No matter how much they love or hate each other, those twins, they can never be separated. One lives inside the other, an vice-versa.

"Ladies and gentlemen, all of us here in this room, we're *all* twins. In Fitzgeraldian terms, we're all geniuses. Each of us holds

those two conflicting ideas in our heads at once. We have no choice! It's the human goddamn condishun! Especially if you happen to be a goddamn writer!"

A last circus peanut remained trapped in the plastic bag. I extracted it, tossed it up into the air, caught it in my mouth, chewed, and swallowed it.

"Any questions?"

There were no questions. Nor was there applause of any kind.

"Good. Class dismissed!"

Briefcase in hand, I hurried out of the building. If one or more of my students hoped to have a final word with me, I was not aware of it, never once having looked back.

Thence I walked into the ocean and drowned myself.

• •

In this remake the ocean was the dean's office to which he had summoned me.

"About your last class," Dexter Bronze said. "We've had several complaints."

"I can explain everything."

"Please do."

"I was drunk."

"It's also been brought to my attention that you may have had inappropriate relations with some of your students outside of class."

"Some of my students?"

"One of your students."

"Really? Which one?"

"I can't tell you."

"Should I guess?"

Dexter shrugged.

"Ashley Bridges?"

"Good guess. Did you sleep with her, Stewart?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"Actually I think you do. Did you?"

"What difference would it make?"

"A big one."

“I made a star out of her. I taught her everything she knows.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

“This is no joke, Stewart.”

“I know it’s not a joke. It’s an interrogation, is what it is. An inquisition.”

“I’ll ask you one more time. If you refuse to answer, I’ll have to assume the answer is yes. Did you sleep with her or not?”

“Not,” I answered.

“Are you sure?”

“She gave me a blow-job. At Rockaway Beach. In the rain. Under the boardwalk. Among discarded water bottles and used condoms.”

“Close enough. You’re fired.”

• •

Unemployed next 2 months, then menial jobs, first as salesclerk at Old Navy store, then hired as day shift Manager at Dollar Tree Store on Broadway in my neighborhood. Every item in store \$1 (or less). Up at four; at work by six. Count money in cash drawer, clean counters, check inventory on shelves. Imagine, if you will—day after day, hour upon hour—answering the question: “Is this a dollar?” *Yes yes yes yes yes yes yesssss*. Customers demanding quantity discounts on Mountain Dew and diapers, threatening disfigurement when refused refunds for receiptless items stolen by them the day before. Prank calls, spewed shaving cream, mashed-into-carpet Butterfinger bars, berated by branch manager for performing too many voids... The one bright star in this black firmament: 10% employee discount on merchandise (excluding sales tax). Worked there < 2 months. Quit day after night shift cashier shot in shoulder while preventing theft of Cheetos (party-sized).

• •

Leaving Whynot, Ashley Bridge’s debut novel, published June 2015 to mixed reviews and poor sales. Remaindered within two months of first (and only) printing. A “flash in the pan.” Fleeting sense of poetic justice followed by severe depression.

• •

Gained twenty-five pounds.

Life as one prolonged humiliation.

Suicidal thoughts in run-up to Mother's quivering one a.m.
phone call (inciting incident):

Mother, what is it? What's the matter?

26. VANISHING POINT

IN JULY OF 2003 A STRUGGLING SCOTTISH AUTHOR NAMED COLIN Mackay put the manuscript of a book into a Clampfile, tucked the Clampfile into an A4 envelope, and posted it to his solicitor.

Titled *Jacob's Ladder*, the 100-page manuscript would eventually take its place among the world's most ironic literary creations, up there with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Letter to Lord Chandos*, in which, in language supremely expressive, a poet who has forsaken poetry laments language's inadequacy to confront reality.

Jacob's Ladder begins:

This is to let you know that I am dead. I committed suicide on my birthday, Saturday the 26th, because continuing to live with my lack of talent was really too squalid a burden to be tolerated any longer.

Jacob's Ladder also joins ranks with *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Name of the Rose*, and a long distinguished list of novels disguised as found manuscripts or documents. The difference is that *Jacob's Ladder* isn't a novel. Soon after posting the envelope, a plastic bag over his head, his stomach full of barbiturates, a plugged-in hair dryer close at hand if necessary, the 52-year-old author lay dead in a tubful of warm water.

Jacob's Ladder is the memoir of a failed author, or of an author who saw himself as a failure, as having failed. Hence among its most galling aspects is the fact that it's so well written. In one especially moving scene the author travels to Sarajevo during the genocide there to rescue a pregnant woman with whom he has fallen in love, to find her village freshly blitzed and her raped, blood-soaked body lying near those of her three children in a field of blue and yellow flowers.

"This page," we read, "is not to be written."

Yet there's the page, the dead sprawled upon it as on that field of flowers, the author lying there among them.

The title comes from the Book of Genesis, wherein Jacob dreams of a staircase connecting heaven and earth.

These six composition notebooks, they're my Jacob's Ladder. It's a two-way ladder: I climb down (or up) from Purgatory, you climb up (or down) from your daily waking life.

We meet here, on this page.

As I took my brother's place, these notebooks—this confession—will take mine. They will inhabit the space my body leaves behind. They will donate their body to my cause, replace it with a body of words on paper.

Corpses of flesh and blood are subject to putrefaction. A body of words on paper, on the other hand, even long after its creator's flesh has rotted away, remains whole and integrated and relatively odor-free, springing fresh and vital from the pages that hold it as long as living eyes fall upon them.

"The phosphorescence of putrescence." —Baudelaire



When Dawn (or whoever she was) had gone, with my towel I stood on the dock. The weather had turned blustery. Across the metal ladder a spider had constructed an intricate web. A mayfly—I assumed it was a mayfly—was caught in it. The spider web trembled in the breeze. I looked out over the lake.

The red dot was still there, scarcely visible in the distance, tiny as a clover mite, as a grain of paprika, as a pinprick of blood in an egg yolk. To hell with it.

I turned, faced the ladder, studied the mayfly trapped there. With my towel I whipped the web away.

• •

How long I'd been swimming when I heard the noise I'm not sure. This time of year, May, there are still very few boats on the lake. I could count on the fingers of one hand the times per day when they have passed within sight. The noise—a high-pitched buzzing—was distinctly that of an outboard motor as carried through the water into my submerged ears.

The sound of a motorboat passing close by would have alarmed me anyway, but—and though I hadn't seen it yet—this was no ordinary motorboat. It was the red rubber boat that, while I'd been swimming and as I saw while treading water, had broken free of the vanishing point to arrive within a few dozen yards of my dock.

Commotion, men shouting, gesticulating, gawking, pointing amid whoops, cheers, and other sounds of jubilation. Something human-body-sized hauled out of the water, I couldn't tell what, or who. Still, there could be little doubt. Whoever they had been searching for, they'd found him.

Who? you ask. Who's body had they found? Lester Figes'? Your brother's?

I don't know; I couldn't say.

I watched, treading water, the waves splashing into my mouth, spluttering, knowing that it made no difference, that there would be no way out for me. Given a motive plus dead body, either dead body, there could be no question of probable cause.

One way or the other, I'd be damned.

But (I hear you say) if it was Lester Figes' body, couldn't you just tell them it wasn't you, or rather that *you* weren't you, that it was your twin who'd done it, that you'd taken his place?

Sure. Great idea. While at it, I could confess to assuming my dead brother's identity and disposing of his eviscerated (by me) corpse in the very same lake.

To what end? I'd be asked then.

Why, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, for a noble cause! To save my brother's life! To resurrect him and redeem myself! To

sacrifice my lowly, wretched existence that he, my twin brother, my better half, whose life was so much worthier than mine, might live and breathe again!

Oh *please*.

And what about your mother? Poor thing! She'll be devastated.

Don't think I haven't thought about that. Yes, she'll be devastated. But there's nothing I can do. Don't you see? My fate has already been decided. It was decided the instant I took my brother's place. Sooner: the moment he stepped off this balcony railing with a blue rope around his neck. No, sooner than that. The day he ordered his *coffee, black*. Even sooner: the day our mother gave birth to two of us when there should only have been one. Sooner still: the day our future depressive father introduced his suicidal seed into our would-be mother's hapless womb.

No, Dear Reader, there's no way out. It's over. Destiny has arrived—mine. I've come to the end.

We've come to the end.

Or, if you prefer, back to the beginning.

Again.

27. BEGINNING B

THE STEADY RAIN HAS BECOME A STORM, THE FIRST BIG STORM SINCE I arrived here ...how long has it been again? Eight weeks? Nine? I've lost track of time. The wind howls through the deck railings; the geraniums have all blown over in their pots. Like a charging army of white rabbits whitecaps scurry across the lake.

I scribble away frantically, my confession hurtling to its conclusion like a runaway locomotive. I've filled all six composition notebooks twice, my handwriting grown more crabbed and microscopic with each book. Presently I am writing between the upside-down lines of the last page of the last notebook, which I opened from behind and turned arsey-varsey, or *tête-bêche*, as the French say.

Writing to whom? Who *are* you?

I guess I'll never know.

For all I know no one is reading—will ever read—these words. They're written by a ghost for other ghosts. But then so are most novels.

Then I hear it: the whine/roar of an approaching motor vehicle. Is my imagination playing more tricks on me, or are the splutters and backfires those of a challenged muffler system? Crunch of tires on gravel. Car door slamming. Crepe-soled footfalls on

wooden deck boards, gloved knuckles rapping on door—modestly, at first, then with increasing power and vehemence.

Dear Reader, the time has come at last for me to take my leave of you. My work is done. I've filed my report, I've made my confession. Its gist: a brother takes the place of his dead twin. A simple plot. Metaphorically, however, things get more complicated. The narrator confesses, and in confessing he makes of the reader an identical image of himself. Novel as womb wherein cells divide, egg splits. Reader becomes author's "twin" who, by extension, is guilty of such crimes as the author has perpetrated.

Once this book is closed, however, once you close it, we will cease to be quantumly entangled, you and I. You will revert to your own affairs. You will have escaped my fate, Dear Reader.

As for me, I will have been absorbed—by *you*.

Wherever you go, whatever you do, henceforth you will carry part of me with you. Meanwhile I'll have met my equal opposite in heaven. Or hell.



Beyond the French doors the storm lashes. Winds batter, buckle, and bend. They whip, twist, and saw through pine and sweetgum branches. On the dock one of the two Adirondack chairs has fallen over; the other is nowhere to be seen. A limb soars into one of the triangular windows, cracking it.

The pounding grows louder. No time to lose.

As a Senior Instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute, I always preached against the deadening conditional tense. He *would* do this; she *will* do that. *The conditional kills*.

Where I'm headed, though, the future conditional must suffice.

Hence: I will close this notebook; I shall put down this pen. I will drop the robe I've been wearing. Naked came I into this world and naked I shall go out again.

I'll pick up the rope, stand, give it a few tugs to see that the knot is secure. I'll swing its other end around the ceiling beam, secure it with a timber hitch, tug it tight, tighter, tightest. I'll climb onto and over the railing. With my free hand I'll put the noose over my head.

Then I'll step off the railing.

The rest will be up to gravity.

• •

I've done all of the above when the front door bursts open. Haloed by fog, a shadow stands there. I see it "plain as day."

No, I say to myself. *It can't be!* It violates all four laws of thermodynamics, not to mention the rudimentary requirements for a satisfactory ending, being neither plausible nor possible, let alone inevitable. All the same, it is—categorically—so.

He wears a down winter coat, a tweed cap, leather gloves, and a green plaid scarf. He's come here in search of me, to find me, to rescue me. To save my life.

My brother! My twin!

He screams my name:

—End of Book A—

book **B**

Book B has been absorbed by Book A.

[the notebooks end here]

AFTERWORD: THE PROVENANCE OF THE SIX NOTEBOOKS

THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK THAT YOU HAVE JUST READ (ONE hesitates to call it a memoir, but then one also hesitates to call it a novel) is as interesting as the one it tells.

In its original form, as six identical marbled composition notebooks bundled together, it was first presented to me by Thelma Dolin, head of Special Collections at the Robert Wilson Library at Central State University, where at the time I was a professor specializing in contemporary American literature, with an emphasis on regional authors. This was during the first days of the Spring semester—which, as I had tendered my resignation the preceding May, would be my last. I was looking forward to my retirement, and the chance to devote myself more fully to what, for the past forty years, had been relegated to “hobby” status: my hand-letter press... but you needn’t know all that.

The phone call from Thelma came one morning late in October.

“I’ve got something here that I think might be of interest to you,” she said, then went on to explain. “Would you care to see it?”

Central State’s library is located directly across the quadrangle from the Arts & Sciences building, where the English Department

is housed and where I had my office. At ten o'clock the following morning I met Thelma at the Special Collections division there. At one of six desks in the dimly lit manuscript-viewing room we sat facing each other. The six notebooks, stacked in order but no longer bound with rubber bands, were already there on the desk. Thelma wore a pair of thin white cotton gloves. She had me put on a pair. With them on I perused the notebooks, each of which on their faux marbled front covers bore the title "DUPLICITY" in all-caps and were numbered "1" through "6." Additionally, on its *two* first pages, one at the beginning (or end) and one at the end (or beginning) of each notebook (for reasons I hope to make clear, I can't just say "on its first and last pages"), each of the notebooks bore a circled capital letter "A" or "B", with the original first page labeled "A", and the turned-upside-down, expedient verso first page labeled "B".

At first the handwriting, in various hues of marker ink, struck me as entirely illegible. In fact I couldn't be sure that it was handwriting at all. It looked to me more like the senseless scribbles of a preliterate child imitating grown-up handwriting or a graphomaniac. But further examination revealed to me—and this had been Thelma's experience as well—that I was looking at not one but *two* layers of handwriting, with the second layer superimposed or squeezed between the lines of the first after the original page had been turned upside-down. The combined two texts were so crowded together as to render them both almost, as I've said, illegible. It didn't help that the handwriting of the second of the two layers was in itself so terribly cramped and small, while also obviously written at great speed, with its descenders (the portions of letters extending below the baseline) and ascenders (those above the x-height) smashing into the ascenders and descenders of the earlier text, and vice-versa, so that even with the help of a magnifying glass it took me some time to decipher them.

Still, despite the challenge the notebooks presented with respect to legibility, it became clear to me within a very few paragraphs that they were indeed of interest to me, great interest, as a matter of fact: so great that I ended up skipping lunch altogether that day. As I had no classes to teach that afternoon, nor other appoint-

ments, I spent the rest of that day in that dimly lit (and rather frigid; for reasons having to do with conservation that room was kept dry and cold) room, perusing the first of the six notebooks. Meanwhile Ms. Dolin, having asked me if she should do so, went about the tedious chore of scanning the other five volumes. By the time the Special Collections department closed at five o'clock, all six volumes had been scanned into PDF documents and saved for me in a Dropbox folder, so I could study them at my convenience.

At first glance the text, written in the first person, appears to be a work of nonfiction; more specifically an autobiography; more specifically still a memoir; and even more specifically, a searingly personal confession composed in a white heat in the days and hours leading up to the author's death by self-inflicted asphyxiation. That the author of the notebooks committed suicide is not subject to dispute. The county coroner's report confirms it. When, some months following that act, the county sheriff broke into the victim's apparently abandoned home (summoned there by a suspicious neighbor who noticed an oddly unpleasant odor leeching onto her property next door), he discovered not only the composition notebooks in question neatly bundled on a nearby desktop, but the badly decomposed body of their creator hanging by a length of blue rigging rope from one of four oak ceiling beams spanning the cathedral ceiling of the A-frame-style lakeside dwelling. The corpse was so badly decomposed that, to make a proper identification, the local forensic officer had been reduced to consulting dental records.

I'll have more to say about the author's biography in a moment. For the present, I wish to stay with the notebooks and their contents. Assuming that you have read the preceding book, you don't need me to tell you what's in it: in brief, the story of one of two identical twin brothers, who, upon discovering his twin dead (hanging from the oak ceiling beam of a lakeside house), instead of reporting it to the authorities and to his mother, assumes his twin's identity. That is the gist of the story (the "confession") written in the six notebooks and bearing the label (title) "Duplicity." It should be noted that nothing inside the notebooks themselves, or on their covers, or anywhere among the other papers and manu-

scripts discovered in the deceased's home (and, the subject having died intestate, without heirs, subsequently escheated to the State of Georgia), suggests overtly that their contents are fictional; that what you have just read is, in fact, not a confession or a memoir or an autobiography, but a *novel*. Indeed, that the work was composed in the final hours of its author's life, with that author fully aware, as he must have been, that the hour of his death was closing in on him, nay, that it would arrive as soon as he completed his "confession," and furthermore, that his death would be his own doing, is not subject to debate. That part of the "confession" can only be viewed as nonfictional. In other respects, too, quite a few, in fact, the story told in *Duplicity* is autobiographical. And yet, taken altogether, given what has been learned about its author, it can only be read as a book-length work of the imagination informed by autobiography (or, if you prefer, "autobiography" informed to an unsuitable extent by imagination): i.e.: a novel.

Before I get to the author's biography, by way of explaining how and why I came to write this afterword, a few more words are necessary as to the provenance of the six notebooks. When a person dies intestate, their property is distributed in accordance with the intestacy statute of the state in which they had been living, in this case the State of Georgia. Under normal circumstances, said property is distributed among surviving heirs. However if no heirs are to be found according to the law of escheat the deceased's property passes to the State, which then holds it for a prescribed period of time, during which it is advertised in the hope that an heir or heirs will come forward.

With respect to the unclaimed properties in question, the statutory period having lapsed, in November of 2017, the State took possession not only of the unclaimed items within the deceased's house, but the house itself. At which point it fell to the State Treasurer (Dan Edwards at the time) and his office to determine which items should be sold at auction and which should be dispersed by other means.

When it comes to books, manuscripts, letters, diaries, and other ephemera of potentially historic, scholarly, or literary value, typically the State Treasurer contacts someone in State Archives. In

this case, that someone was Mr. Gordon Hathaway, Assistant Vice Chancellor at The Georgia Archives in Morrow. Mr. Hathaway, in turn, contacted Gertrude Gilmore, the Director of Libraries here at Central State. It was the logical choice, since the university is located in the same town where the deceased lived—and, it turned out, also happened to have been his employer. Ms. Gilmore in turn handed the matter over to the Collection Development Librarian, Ms. Dolin, who was given the task of appraising the items in question for the State. A week before Christmas, on the 17th of December, 2017, Ms. Dolin did so.

It was an unusually snowy day by Georgia standards—which is to say there was actually snow on the ground that morning (less than an inch, but still, a blizzard by Georgia standards). Thelma arrived early, at eight-thirty, hoping to complete the appraisal in time to be at the university by noon. She remained there all day. The house was exactly as described in the notebooks: a “modified” A-frame fronting the lake, with a tall cathedral ceiling, a balconied loft, and a finished basement. She took note of the blue rowboat (which—as others before her had done at least according to the notebooks—she at first mistook for a canoe) suspended from two of the four oak beams. Also as described in the notebooks, the house was packed with books, books and papers and manuscripts, on shelves and tables and in jagged piles everywhere.

With two exceptions, the holdings made no great impression on Ms. Dolin. The exceptions were the six rubber-band bounded notebooks and one section of the basement floor library: a bookcase covered over with a royal blue chintz cloth and whose contents in almost every particular matched those of the special bookcase on which the narrator’s dead father had collected books, videos, and other materials on the subjects of twins, dualism, etc.—all as described on pages 211-215 of *Duplicity*. With respect to that description the only missing items, it turned out, were the six marbled composition notebooks first mentioned on page 212 and described in some detail on the following pages. Apart from the six notebooks containing the text of *Duplicity*, and that match that description only in outward appearance but not in content, assuming they ever existed, those notebooks were never discovered. In

every other respect, down to the VCR tapes of “twin movies” (pp. 216-217) and the royal blue chintz cloth, that portion of the deceased’s library was exactly as described in *Duplicity*.

Though she spent all day there, it didn’t take long for Ms. Dolin to conclude that the entire contents of the deceased’s library were of interest to Collections Development. That the books, manuscripts, and letters of a former university professor should be of value to a university’s Special Collection Archives in itself isn’t all that surprising. What was surprising—and also difficult—was determining the precise nature of some of those materials, and in particular the six notebooks labeled “Duplicity.” What *were* they?

To answer that question, Ms. Dolin had first to ask, “Who wrote them? Who was their author?” It was then that she went to work preparing a biographical statement. The first step in that process, typically, is to get hold of the subject’s last or latest curriculum vitae. This was easy for Ms. Dolin to do, since retired faculty records were stored in her department’s archives. Indeed, she had no trouble obtaining those of *Duplicity*’s author, including a photocopy of his curriculum vita as of March 7, 1987.

From evidence supplied by that document, as well as information obtained from the State Registry of Vital Records and other sources including interviews with two retired former university colleagues, Ms. Dolin pieced together the following biographical sketch, which, with her kind permission, in abbreviated form but with all of the essential facts preserved, I reproduce here.

The author of *Duplicity* was born on April 1, 1940, in the town of Harper, Connecticut, in the southwestern part of the state—a date that, not insignificantly, puts him chronologically at odds with both the protagonist of his confession and the protagonist’s father. While he was growing up there, the population of Harper remained safely below 6,000. However, the town’s proximity to the much larger town of Danville (pop. app. 30,000 circa 1955) made it seem larger. Indeed, until 1779, when a group of local ecclesiastics petitioned the General Assembly to form a unique parish, Harper had been part of Danville, a city that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, had earned its renown as the hat-manufacturing center of the Eastern United States (“The Town that Crowned America”). It

was in Danville that the author's father, whose name was indeed Malcolm, a retail merchant, owned a haberdashery (see pp. 79-80 "Duplicity"). Apart from a few summers spent with his family on Block Island, the entirety of the author's childhood and youth was spent in Harper. According to the entry accompanying his photo portrait in his high school yearbook, he excelled in art and performed in several high school and community theater play productions (pp. 60-61). In his seventeenth year, he left Harper for New York City to attend, on a full merit scholarship, the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. There he studied fine art and drama. Also according to his academic file (and as described in *Duplicity*) he took a class in Remedial English and Composition (pp. 61-62). His professor's name was not Wallace, however; it was Higgins.

Exactly what circumstances compelled Detweiler to leave Pratt in his second year one can only speculate; perhaps (as is the case in *Duplicity*) he was encouraged by Wallace-Higgins to try his hand at literature. That over the course of the next decade he published a half-dozen short stories is a matter of record. Like the semi-fictional character in *Duplicity* he continued to live in New York City; it must therefore be supposed that—again like his fictional coequal—to support himself he worked one or more menial jobs. To be sure he could not have supported himself on the money earned from his writing; for unlike the fictional Stewart Detweiler, he did not, at age twenty-five, publish a book of short stories that gained considerable attention; indeed, he did not publish any book at all at any age; nor would he ever do so in his lifetime. His only published work appeared posthumously. It is the one you have just finished reading.

As for his literary career, it came to an abrupt halt in his thirtieth year. Reasons for this are not clear. Perhaps he gave up in frustration as so many—most—aspiring authors do. But other mitigating circumstances may have played their role, his father's rapidly declining health among them. In the final years of his sixth decade Malcolm Detweiler was diagnosed with a rare brain disorder for which he underwent an equally rare and apparently controversial procedure that involved injecting air into the subject's brain tissue. Insofar as the patient's original symptoms were

concerned, the procedure was a success. Mr. Detweiler no longer suffered excruciating headaches and crippling spells of vertigo and dizziness. However the procedure also wiped out every last trace of his memory—procedural and narrative. He was, essentially, a vegetable and would remain so for the rest of his life. The haberdashery, which before its owner was stricken (men no longer wore hats) had already been teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, was liquidated, its assets sold at auction for pennies on the dollar. Malcolm's wife, a diabetic whose own health had been in jeopardy for some time, was now destitute. The prodigal son returned home to Harper to live with his stricken parents and take care of them both as best he could. He spent the next six or seven years in Harper, living in his former home, sleeping in his former bedroom, ministering to the needs of his infirm parents. It could not have been a very happy time for him.

During this period he worked various jobs. He drove a furniture company delivery van and scraped floors for a contractor, and worked in several local factories, in the shipping department of a pencil factory and on an assembly line position in a factory that manufactured ball bearings. He also taught several not-for-credit creative writing classes at Sacred Heart University, the local community college in nearby Bridgeport, an experience that doubtlessly informed the authentic descriptions of his fictional doppelgänger's employment as a "Senior Instructor" at the purely fictitious Metropolitan Writing Institute in New York City.

When not teaching or working at other jobs he spent most of his time reading. Though a haberdasher by trade, Malcolm Detweiler had a passion for philosophy. A bookcase in the oak-paneled den of his father's study in their Cape Cod-style home on a woodsy hilltop held many if not most of the seminal works of the great philosophers, from Plato to Sartre. It was from this bookcase that, one rainy day, having nothing better to do, our subject took down a brown and beige Modern Library hardcover edition titled *The Philosophy of Spinoza*. It was, as they say, love at first sight. He fell in love with the great Dutch 17th century rationalist and lens grinder, and especially with Spinoza's *Ethics*, according to which nothing exists beyond the grasp of human reason, the

universe as created is perfect, and the intellectual embrace of that perfection—of reality (which, by Spinoza's definition, is synonymous with God)—is the highest virtue.

Detweiler's love of Spinoza lead him to that other great Dutch Golden Age philosopher, Descartes, whose thoughts on the subject of mind-body dualism (Cartesian dualism), were—if not the source of Detweiler's later obsession with dualities (and twins)—laid the foundation for it. From Spinoza and Descartes his readings lead him back to the Stoics of ancient Greece, to Marcus Aurelius and Diogenes and thence to Seneca and Epictetus.

It was during this time of immersion in the Greek philosophers, while teaching an evening class at Sacred Heart University, that, on a bulletin board, he chanced upon a flyer for a graduate degree program at the Institute of Liberal Arts at Castleton State College, in Rutland County, Vermont. The program was fully funded and offered, among other degrees, a PhD in philosophy. Though he had no undergraduate degree, still, Detweiler decided to look into it. To make a long story short, thanks to high Graduate Record Examination test scores and an equally impressive admissions essay, he was accepted into the program with a full scholarship. The same morning that the acceptance letter arrived, his father died of a brain aneurism. Malcolm was eighty-one.

Castleton's unique graduate program required students to choose two disciplines. As his second area of concentration Stewart chose religion—an odd choice for this disciple of the pantheist Spinoza, for whom "God" was nothing more than Nature: not nature personified *as* or *in* God, but the mental and physical worlds united in a substance equivalent to God: in a word, with respect to the gods of theism, an atheist. And yet when one considers Stewart's fascination with dualities the choice made sense, since, to his way of thinking, Philosophy-Religion was its own duality. In fact the topic of his graduate thesis was a little known eccentric text of religious philosophy published in 1908 and titled *The Kybalion: Hermetic Philosophy*—the same text that in *Duplicity* is the subject of the paper Gregory Detweiler was en route to present at a conference when he experienced his life-changing epiphany (pp. 46-47). Of particular interest to Stewart Detweiler

with respect to his graduate thesis was a chapter of that work titled “The Principle of Polarity.” Suffice it to say (without going into too great detail) that Detweiler’s thesis posits, explores, and contrasts relationships between this principle, Cartesian dualism, and Spinozist single-substance materialism.

Detweiler had yet to turn in his completed thesis when, in 1974, he applied for and obtained a two-year lecturer post at Green Mountain College in Poultney, Vermont. During the second of those two years he sublet a small cottage on Lake St. Catherine from a professor on sabbatical in Europe. It was while living in that cottage, presumably, that he took up swimming and rowing. The cottage came with a rowboat—a varnished wooden Adirondack-style guide boat identical to the one featured in *Duplicity*, and that he would ultimately purchase from his landlord, who, owing to a back injury suffered while on his European sabbatical, was no longer able to use it. When, near the end of his two-year term, this time with PhD in hand, he was offered and accepted a full-time, tenure-track Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies position here at Central State, he did so in full awareness of the fact that within a twenty-minute drive of that university there was a considerably large and quite beautiful lake. When, in the late summer of 1976, he moved to Georgia, it was to a lakeside modified A-frame identical in every one of its particulars to the one described in *Duplicity*. He took the rowboat with him.

And there he remained throughout his years at Central State, through his retirement in 1997 as a Full Professor with emeritus status and beyond, until he died there by his own hand in 2014. He was seventy-four.

As to the reasons behind his suicide, here, too, one can only speculate. Interviews with those who knew him during the course of his tenure at the university, with colleagues and students, paint a self-effacing portrait of a soft-spoken, humble personality, a man who, when not devoted to his teaching, spent most of his time alone at his lakeside dwelling, swimming, rowing, and taking long walks. Occasionally he would do these activities in the company of a student or colleague. One former colleague described his existence especially toward the end of his life as “hermetic.” A former

student reported that, along those long walks (during which Professor Detweiler did most, if not all, of the talking, with the topic of discussion never straying far from philosophers and philosophy), his professor carried a shillelagh and wore an Irish tweed Newsboy cap (see pp. 19 and 68 *Duplicity*).

According to records obtained from the County Department of Health, the official cause of Stewart Detweiler's death is listed as "due to asphyxiation by strangulation." Medical records indicate that at the time of his suicide he was in good health. He had no children or siblings or surviving relatives of any sort. There was never a twin brother.

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PETER SELGIN is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. He has written a novel, three books on the craft of writing, two essay collections, plays, and several children's books. *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, his memoir-in-essays, was a finalist for the William Saroyan International Prize. His memoir, *The Inventors*, won the 2017 Housatonic Book Award. His essays have appeared in the *Colorado Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Sun*, *Best American Essays* and *Best American Travel Writing*. His illustrations and paintings have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, *Gourmet*, *Outside*, *Boston Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and elsewhere. He is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia, where he is nonfiction editor and art director of *Arts & Letters*, the international journal of poetry and prose.

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KIRKUS REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

DUPLICITY

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BOOK REVIEW

Selgin presents a literary novel about the dark side of sibling rivalry.

When Stewart Detweiler, author and former instructor at the Metropolitan Writing Institute, arrives at a lake house in Georgia, the situation is bleak. Stewart's twin brother, Gregory, has taken his own life. Does Stewart notify the police? Nope. He dumps the body in the lake and assumes his brother's identity. While Stewart was scraping together a living at a tenement apartment in the Bronx, his twin enjoyed fame and fortune. Gregory was once a mild-mannered professor in Vermont, but that all changed. A chance encounter on an airplane inspired him to enter the self-help market with a book called *Coffee, Black*. The premise of *Coffee, Black* boils down to this: One is free to make changes in one's own life. The book, published under Gregory's new persona, "Brock Jones, Ph.D.," became a runaway bestseller. Gregory became a changed man. This is all much to the chagrin of Stewart, who, though having a few published works under his belt, could never dream of the kind of success of *Coffee, Black*. If the basis of Brock's message was that we can be whomever we want to be, why can't his brother take the place of someone people adore? It seems like a good plan, yet Stewart learns that being Brock isn't as carefree as he imagined. To add to the drama, this very text, the reader is told, has been hastily written on a series of composition pads.

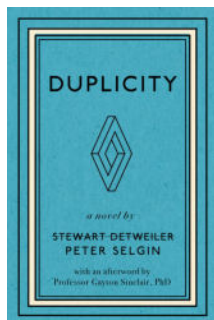
The premise of a twin's assuming the identity of his more successful brother sounds comedic. In execution, however, the story takes a more sinister tack. If, for instance, Stewart is going to successfully put his brother's body at the bottom of the lake, he is going to have to stab it several times so it does not float to the surface. As Stewart points out, his brother is already dead. But does that make it OK? Back at the lake house, Stewart considers an obsession of his father (who was also a professor and also died by suicide) with twins and doppelgängers. Then, to complicate matters, it seems the lake is being dragged for a body. Never mind strange text messages Stewart receives on his brother's old phone. This all culminates in an atmosphere that is thoughtful, tense, and fascinatingly morbid. By contrast, flashbacks to Stewart's life are tame. The reader gets more than a few rehashes of what Stewart taught his writing students (e.g., how to write a pitch paragraph) and a clunky disagreement Stewart had with a barista concerning decaf espresso. Such recollections do not exactly leap from the page. Nor do they add much to this clearly troubled protagonist. After all, the reader knows well there is at least one body at the bottom of the lake.

Contemplative and charged; a thought-inducing thriller.

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TRANSFORMATIONS

PETER SELGIN: STORY
BEHIND THE STORY

Kirkus Reviews calls Peter Selgin's new book *Duplicity* "a literary novel about the dark side of sibling rivalry." Kirkus also proposes that it's both "contemplative and charged" and a "thought-inducing thriller." Not an easy cocktail to mix (including a sprinkling of comedy), but not surprising for a writer who moves nimbly between fiction and nonfiction and occasionally steps back to write about the craft of writing.



The author of the newly published book *Duplicity* explores fiction, nonfiction, and the role of memory and imagination.

How would you describe your new book, *Duplicity*?

Duplicity is a metafictional psychological thriller about twin brothers, both of whom

TRANSFORMATIONS

other is a commercial failure despite decades of dogged effort. As one astute reader described it, “You think you’re reading a novel, until you realize you’re reading a deconstruction of a novel.”

***Duplicity* is a novel. Your last book, *The Inventors*, is a memoir. Both rely on facts and memories, arguably two sides of the same coin. What’s the difference?**

The main difference, or differences, I think, are of degrees and intent. While fiction and nonfiction both make use of experiences, the driving force of fiction is imagination, whereas with memoir the engine under the hood is memory. That said, and as *The Inventors* makes or tries to make clear, experiences don’t exist independent of memories and memories don’t exist independent of imagination.

Both books draw from your own family experience, including that you are and have a twin brother. How different was the writing process with these two books?

The two books *can* be seen as two sides of the same coin, since they treat similar (and even arguably identical) themes: twindom, identity, self-invention. Apart from that, they’re very different books and the experience of writing each was as different. While *The Inventors* took decades to write and passed through many radical incarnations on the way to achieving its present form, after I’d drafted the first several pages of *Duplicity*, the book fairly wrote itself. Once I had my narrator’s voice—which is to say, once I had Stewart Detweiler

TRANSFORMATIONS

From then on, writing the book was like walking a spirited dog on a long leash.

You've written a novel that also includes insights about the writing process itself. Can you explain why—and have you been surprised by how many readers value this inclusion?

It has occurred to me more than once that the working title for any good novel-in-progress might be, "Everything I Know So Far." Alternatively, that title could be, "Everything I Know So Far About Writing a Novel." Every novel a novelist writes teaches them how to write that particular kind of novel, as well as, by implication, how not to write every other kind. Implicitly, the same lessons are there for any reader to want them. With *Duplicity*, I made those lessons overt—or rather Stewart, gifted writing teacher that he is, makes them overt. It's part and parcel to his character. That it adds a layer of metafictional irony to the novel is a windfall. And yes, to my relief and delight, most readers seem to appreciate it.

Without giving too much away, *Duplicity* starts with a death. From there, the book has lots of twists and turns, both in the places that the narrator takes us and in its stylistic shifts. Why is all this twisting and turning important for the readers' experience?

One pleasure of reading fiction, perhaps the main pleasure (and this can apply to nonfiction stories as well), is that of having one's expectations subverted, which is what those "twists" do. What's true of good endings—that they're surprising and inevitable, applies—or should, ideally—

TRANSFORMATIONS

my God!" followed soon thereafter by, "But of course!" What isn't wanted in a good novel—or in any good piece of writing, fiction or non—is predictability. Writing that doesn't somehow subvert expectations, that doesn't complicate or challenge our presumptions and feelings in any way, that doesn't somehow "twist" them, isn't in my view worth reading once, let alone more than once.

You've written novels, memoirs, essays, plays and books about the craft of writing. Is there a method to how you move from one book, one mode of storytelling, to another?

I'm tempted to say that I let form follow function, but what does that mean, really? The humbler answer is that at bottom I think all writing, to the extent that it's any good, is essentially the same. We have our subjects, and in writing about them we try to get at—if not "the" truth, *some* truth. That said, when I teach writing, I tend to avoid words like "truth." Ditto "style," "voice," "authenticity." The words I most like to use are "precision" and "clarity." They're clinical rather than personal: terms that could be applied to a surgeon's performance.

As writers, I think we need to be like surgeons, that the operations we perform should be carried out with surgical precision. Our tools aren't scalpels and forceps: they're nouns, verbs, syntax, etc. We operate not on bodies, but on memories, experiences, imagination and ideas. When a patient (a subject) comes into the operating room, that's when we decide what tools are needed, what surgery to perform. That's when we decide, "This is probably going to

TRANSFORMATIONS

You're a prolific and disciplined writer. What drives you? What keeps you going?

I don't think of myself as disciplined in the sense of having a writing schedule and sticking to it come hell or high water. I go long stretches without writing a word of any significance. But once I grab hold of something, I'm like the proverbial dog with a bone. I won't let go. Then I'll write for five or six hours a day—especially in the revising stages, which I especially enjoy. That's when I get to exercise precision, which, as I've said, is really the point.

As for what drives me, my father was an inventor. I grew up watching him create devices in his laboratory, from drafting table to lathe, saws, drill press, wiring and testing circuits—until at last something existed that wasn't there before and that actually worked. That's what drives me: the desire to make something that wasn't there before and that works. The difference is that my inventions only work on paper.

I know you're working on a new book. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

The book I'm currently writing is a novel set in a down-on-its-heels former hat manufacturing town in Connecticut, circa 1963. It's a relatively well-behaved novel: no metafictional high jinks, notwithstanding which there is, I hope, magic of a kind. The book's subtitle is "Of Things Unknown and Unknowable," and it deals with the sense of mystery and wonder that's native to most young children, but that comes under siege

TRANSFORMATIONS

among them the identity of a stranger who wanders the town collecting odd items in his rucksack.

MORE FROM PETER ON TRANSFORMATIONS:

[“A Matter of Perspective.”](#)



Peter Selgin's Drowning

Lessons won the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award. An Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, GA, Selgin has written two novels, three books on the writer's craft, two essay collections, a children's book, several plays and The Inventors, a memoir.

Your First Page

(book publication, textbook/writing guide))

July 2019

First pages and what

YOur

they tell us about

First

the pages that follow them

Page

REVISED WORKSHOP
AND CLASSROOM EDITION

PETER SELGIN

YOUR FIRST PAGE

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REVISED WORKSHOP
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION I

I. OPENING STRATEGIES 5

1. Who Speaks? Choosing Narrators 7
2. Dramatic Openings 8
3. Colluding with Readers / Second Person 9
4. Character Narrator 10
5. Where to Start? Biblical Openers 10
6. Setting the Scene: The Wide-Angle Establishing Shot 12
7. Beginning at the End 12
8. Literary Births 13
9. *In Medias Res*: The Inciting Incident 15
10. The Covenant: Taking the Leap 17

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS 19

1. Default Omniscience: Failure to Properly Engage a Narrator and Inhabit That Narrator's Perspective 20
2. False Suspense: Capricious Withholding of Information 23
3. Dramatized Routine or Status-Quo Syndrome: Failure to Distinguish between Events and Routine 26
4. Information vs. Experience: Supplying Abstract Ideas and Conclusions in Lieu of Concrete Evidence 29
5. Imitation Story: Cliché at the Root of Conception 31
6. Disappearing Scenes: Failure to Distinguish between Background, Flashback, Frame, and Present Story 33
7. Sentimentality: Implying or Describing Emotions in Excess of Experience 35
8. (Bonus Sin) Grim Determination: The Deadliest Sin? 37

CONTENTS

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED 39

Introduction: How to Use These First-Page Analyses 39

A. Point of View: Who Speaks? 41

1. Song of the Dust Bowl: 1936 (First Person / “Voice” / Style Born of Urgency / Child Narrator) 43
2. The Logging Road to the Cabin (Third Person / Information vs. Evidence / Default Omniscience) 46
3. A Pair of Foggy Sisters (Third Person / Default Omniscience / “Said”) 51
4. Where the Hernandezes Live (Third Person / Subjectivity / Information vs. Experience / Inhabiting Scene) 54
5. On the Couch (Third Person / Free Indirect Discourse / Dramatized Routine vs. Drama) 59
6. Drive-by Girl (Dramatized Routine / Interior Monologue / Free Indirect Discourse) 64
7. A Woman Bedazzled (Unreliable Narrators & Narratives vs. Unreliable Authors) 68
8. The Curfew (Second Person) 72
9. Narrating from the Great Beyond (Dead Narrator / Gratuitous Narrative Devices) 75

B. Structure: Where to Begin? 79

10. Megan’s Life: A Surfeit of Beginnings (Where to Begin? / Inciting Incident / Death) 80
11. Flying with Mum and Dad (*In Medias Res* / Framing the Question) 84
12. A Fateful First Encounter (First Glimpse / Atmosphere / Framing Device / Authorial Intrusion) 87
13. Living with Lyle (First Glimpse / Mistaken Identity / Whose Viewpoint? / Implication vs. Statement) 91
14. After the Fire (Nested Scenes / Russian Doll Syndrome / Past Perfect / Dialogue Tags) 94
15. The Unwritten Masterpiece (Sleeve Rolling & Throat Clearing) 98
16. Strawberry Fields (Starting Off with a Dream) 102

CONTENTS

C. Plot/Suspense 107

17. A Stubbed Toe in the Library (Plots A & B, Inciting Incident / Retrospective Narrative) 109
18. Clouds Across the Moon (False Suspense / Trusting Your Narrator / Prologues) 112
19. A Stranger Approaches (False Suspense / Artificially Withheld Information) 117
20. Conducting Olivia (False Suspense / Grounding Scenes / Context / Accident as Inciting Incident) 120
21. Taking the Yoke (Foreshadowing / Implications vs. Statement) 124
22. Hanging from a Cliff (*In Medias Res* / Premature Climax) 128
23. Romance & Fireworks (False Suspense / Pointed First Sentence) 131

D. Characters 135

24. Meeting Ewan (First Glimpse / Evoking Characters / Memoir) 136
25. Painting the Nude (Stereotypes / Fictional Artists) 139
26. A Balcony Overlooking the Bay (Dramatized Routine / Fictional Artist) 142
27. An Opening in Search of Itself (Unreliable Narrator / Mental Illness / Abstraction / Metaphors) 145
28. Finding Jenny (Indolent Character / Mental Illness / Sensational Event Conveyed by Torpid Scene) 148
29. A Self-Conscious Queen (Judgments, Labels, and Epithets / Dramatized Routine) 152
30. Up a Tree (Child's Perspective / Blunt Sentences) 155
31. Mean December Wind (Retrospective Narrator / Strong Verbs / Appealing to Senses) 158
32. Art's Highest Purpose: To Complicate Our Feelings (Child Protagonist / Humor and Danger) 161

CONTENTS

E. Genres 165

33. Zechs's Deal: A Routine Awakening (Sci-Fi or Speculative Fiction / *In Medias Res* / Dramatized Routine) 167
34. To the Core (Science Fiction / Humor / Tongue in Cheek) 170
35. U'gen Cadets (Speculative Fantasy / False Suspense / Clarity & Precision) 174
36. A Dragon's Protection (Fantasy / Appealing to the Senses / Metaphysical Elements) 177
37. Celestia's Last Battle (Prologues / Fantasy / Adjectives / Suspension of Disbelief / Telling vs. Showing) 180
38. A Psycho in the Making (Horror-Thriller Genre / Psychopathic Characters / Muffled Implications) 183
39. Death on the Freeway (Detective Fiction / Clairvoyant Dreams) 186
40. Bases Loaded (Crime Thriller / McGuffins / Dramatized Routine as Harbinger of Violence) 189
41. Hit and Run (Detective Fiction / Noir / Hardboiled Prose) 193
42. Detective in a Department Store (First Sentences / Information vs. Evidence / Dramatized Routine) 196
43. Mommy Get Your Gun (Satire / Spoof / Importance of Grammar) 199
44. Lady Pamela's Surgeon (Romance / Bodice Ripper / Where to Begin?) 202
45. The Pleasures of Genre (Regency Romance / Strong Verbs / Close Third Person / Feelings) 206

F. Memoir 211

46. Tanks & Miracles (Memoir / War / Memoir vs. Autobiography / Theme) 213
47. A Pilot's Probation (Memoir / Vocation / Memoir vs. Autobiography) 216
48. From "Loss ... But Not Lost": A Deathbed Scene (Memoir / Death / Show, Don't Tell / Inhabiting Scenes) 218
49. A Surprise Phone Call (Memoir / Scene vs. Summary / Clutter / "Glance" / Verbs) 223
50. A Rude Awakening (Memoir / Relationship / Judgments / Righteous Indignation) 226

CONTENTS

- 51. The Year of 14 Jobs (Memoir / Implication vs. Statement / Abstract vs. Concrete) 229
- 52. The Road Train (Memoir / Travel / Flashback / False Suspense vs. Generosity) 233
- 53. The Substance Abuser's Wife (Memoir / War / Drug Addiction / Cliché at the Root of Conception) 236
- 54. An Addict's Perspective on Addiction (Memoir / Addiction / Reflection / Unreliable Narrator) 239
- 55. Clinic Caper (Memoir / Humor / Story vs. Anecdote) 243
- 56. Leaving Jumana (Memoir / Framing Questions Effectively) 246
- 57. I'm Not Chinese (Memoir / Precision, Authenticity, Humility) 249

G. Style 251

- 58. A Stormy Opening (Writing Up a Storm / Poetry vs. Histrionics / Inadvertent Comedy) 253
- 59. A Letter from Tehran (Sentimentality / Grounding Scene in Setting / Implication via Action) 257
- 60. A Lion in the Room (Defamiliarization / Throat-Grabber Openings / Metaphor) 261
- 61. Back to School Night (Scene vs. Summary / Description vs. Exposition / Show, Don't Tell) 264
- 62. The First Day of the War (War / Tense / Authenticating Details) 268
- 63. Gramma's Death Bed (Framing Device / Perfunctory Adverbs / Death) 271
- 64. The Sympathetic Medic (Adjectives) 275
- 65. Home from Fairview (Mental Illness / Abstract vs. Concrete / Similes and Metaphors) 279
- 66. The Girls in the Band (Modifiers / Statement vs. Implication / Less = More) 283
- 67. A Hole in the Heart (Abstraction / Grounding in Scene / Metaphors / Subjectivity) 287
- 68. When I Met Lucia (Abstract vs. Concrete / Opinions & Information vs. Evidence) 290
- 69. Beth's Wish (Whose Drama? / Overwriting / Implication vs. Statement) 293

CONTENTS

- 70. A Woman of Valor (Genericism / Authenticating Details / Cliché) 296
- 71. Five Years with Sam (Poetry at the Expense of Meaning) 299
- 72. Canary Wharf (Overwriting / Sensationalism / Adverbs) 302
- 73. Kidnapped (First Sentence / Grounding Scene / Flashback / Revision / Past Perfect) 305
- 74. A Twice-Drowned Narrator ("Titanic Lit" / Dead Narrators / Details / Baroque vs. Austere / Devices) 309
- 75. Meatloaf Night (Child's or Child-like Perspective / Dialogue / Constraint = Style) 314

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS 317

V. SOME EXEMPLARY FIRST SENTENCES 325

AFTERWORD: ARTISTIC VS. COMMERCIAL SUCCESS 329

SUBJECT INDEX 331

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX 337

Introduction

THIS BOOK GREW OUT OF AN EXPERIMENT UNDERTAKEN AT several workshops and conferences to discover how much useful critical commentary and helpful feedback could be extracted from a single page, the first, of works in progress. The experiment was first performed at the New York Round Table Writers' Conference at the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Library in Manhattan, whose main reading room soars to three stories topped by a magnificent skylight. I asked participants there to submit—in advance, anonymously—the first pages of their works in progress to form a pool from which they'd be drawn at random and discussed.

More than thirty authors participated, joining me in the large room packed with people. Since the submissions were anonymous, none of us knew which faces in the crowd belonged to which pages under scrutiny. One by one I selected them from the pool, with copies made available to audience members. Together we listened as the first pages were read out loud. Then I gave my comments and opened the floor to discussion.

The experiment could not have been more successful. As expected, nearly all of the first pages raised concerns that opened up broader areas of discussion. I got the sense—as did everyone in that room—that most, if not all, the challenges pertaining to many of the works in progress were there in those first pages, that much of what those authors needed to hear they heard that afternoon, enough to guide them toward a next draft of the entire work.

Since that first experiment I've conducted other "first page workshops," mostly at Antioch University's Graduate Creative Writing Program in Culver City, Los Angeles. I also started a blog called *Your First Page*, to which authors were invited to submit first pages of works in progress for analysis. More than a hundred authors contributed pages.

My purpose with this book is to offer you the chance to take part in an extended first-page workshop from which you may draw inspiration, ideas, wisdom, and perhaps a few warnings and suggestions with respect to your own works in progress.

INTRODUCTION

* * *

So many things happen on the first page of a book. There, within a paragraph or two, and sometimes even within the first sentence, a bond is formed between reader and writer, one that will endure—hopefully—for as many pages as the work is long.

That bond is established in a number of ways. At the simplest level, it is the same—or very similar to—the bond formed between two people when one speaks to the other for the first time. If you are walking down a city street and someone walking the other direction stops you and says, “Excuse me, can you please tell me the time?” in that instant, however briefly and tentatively, a bond is formed between you and this total stranger who demands your attention; it is up to you to decide whether and how much attention you’re willing to provide him or her. If you happen to know the time, you’ll probably extend the bond (and your courtesy) accordingly; if not, you’ll excuse yourself and continue on your way. On the other hand, had the same stranger said to you, “Hey, you! Gimme a thousand bucks!” odds are you’d have kept walking.

In a similar way, authors make demands upon their readers. When a reader picks up a book or opens a magazine to an essay or short story, she opens herself to this interaction with a perfect stranger. Rather than meet on a street, author and reader agree to meet on a page. Once that initial invitation has been accepted, from that point on *it’s entirely up to the author to establish that bond and make it endure throughout the length of the work.*

Though authors may make all kinds of demands on readers (“Do you have the time?” “Gimme a thousand bucks!”), readers owe authors nothing. Unless the reader is being paid to write a review, or the book is an assignment for a literature or creative writing class, the only thing compelling readers to keep reading is what’s there on the page. And what’s there on the first page is all that compels them to read the next page, and so on.

How is this bond established between writer and reader? First, by engaging the reader’s empathy by means of *a human voice speaking a shared language.* When people speak to us, we tend to listen. This is no less true with strangers than it is with those we know and love. Often strangers command as much or more attention than loved ones. *Excuse me, can you tell me the time?* Our shared human nature compels us to pay attention to each other, at least to the point where we can be fairly sure we want nothing to do with this person whose voice has reached out to us (*Gimme a thousand bucks!*). Up to that moment, and as long as the voice that reaches out to us is human, since we’re human too, we are likely to pay attention.

INTRODUCTION

So, the first rule for engaging and establishing a bond with your reader: speak in their language and with a human voice. That sounds easy and obvious. It's neither. Of hundreds of stories I read every year from my students, for every one whose first sentence appeals to me with a human voice, others assail me with mannerisms, pretensions, verbal gamesmanship, and shock tactics—i.e., with the voice of an overeager writer *writing*. And as hard as it is to ignore a human voice (*Can you please tell me the time?*), nothing is easier to resist than the sound of a writer writing.

But many other things can go wrong on that first page, errors resulting in confusion, frustration, or a blurry, imprecise experience for the reader. Those countless manuscripts that editors reject daily? They are all being rejected for the same reason: for having failed—somehow, at some level—to successfully bond with their readers.

Another reason for that failed bond: the lack of a mediating or filtering agency or authority arbitrating between the author (who only *knows about* the story and its characters) and the story (fiction or nonfiction) itself. In works of fiction especially—but also in nonfiction narratives—there needs to be such an entity or agent. In other words, a narrator.

I hear you say to yourself, *Of course a story has a narrator: how can it not have a narrator?* Yet as you'll see in many of the pages that follow, stories often lack this vital agency or filter. What we get instead is an author taking over or intruding or trying to intrude into the world of his or her story, presenting us with unfiltered information about the characters and their situations and the settings they inhabit, rather than *injecting us directly* into their world through the agency of a narrator, so as to give us not *information about an experience*, but the *experience itself*. Whether they realize it or not, readers of stories don't want information; they want experiences.

Creating and engaging a proper narrator: that is the second big thing that goes right or wrong within the first page.

Establishing viewpoint, controlling diction, grounding readers in setting, action, and scene, pinpointing the inciting incident of a story, engaging and perpetuating plot, setting-up and paying-off moments, knowing when to obey and when to flout conventions, differentiating between events and routine, descriptions and opinions, conclusions and the evidence from which they are drawn, between authenticity and clichés, between style and mannerisms—all these things matter. And they matter starting from the first page of a book or a story.

One problem with so many writing books: they fail to provide authentic examples of less-than-successful writing; some present made-up examples so

INTRODUCTION

obviously contrived as to be ludicrous. Here you'll find genuine first pages of works in progress by actual authors.

There's this advantage too of analyzing and working from real first pages of works in progress: instead of offering up generalizations about how things *should* be written, or asking writers to mirror and learn from examples of published works, readers of this book become part of the creative process, one that asks, "What are the particular issues raised by this piece of writing; what does it contract to do; what promises does it hold out; how are those promises met or broken? According to the terms it establishes, how is this first page working, or isn't it? If not, why not?"

Consequently, generalizations are avoided, and the non-specific "how to write" becomes "how to extrapolate general principles and specific remedies from concerns raised by particular pieces of writing." It's up to you to extrapolate as you see fit.

Before we proceed, a few last words about guide books like this one, and the business of giving and getting critical feedback. Criticism of creative work, work into which an artist has potentially invested not only her heart and spirit, but years of labor, is risky business. Emotions run high; feelings get hurt. Telling an author, "Check your ego at the door," is easy. Doing so—for the author—is not.

It's also true that any artist who submits to criticism too easily, taking every word of praise or censure to heart and amending her work accordingly, will most likely end up with something that tries to please everyone and pleases no one. At some point we have to hold tight to our visions.

On the other hand, those who pay no attention to their critics are as likely to lose out in the end. Assuming they have any desire to reach an audience with their words, and assuming that audience consists of people outside of family and friends, sooner or later their work will be subjected to the judgments of strangers. If sooner (before they submit to publishers), they'll have recourse in revision; if later, they'll have a pile of rejection slips.

Each author must find the right balance between receptivity and mulishness. It helps too to know which opinions are worth listening to. But before you dismiss every opinion offered by me in this book, I ask only that you consider what I have to say, that it be food for thought.

Whatever choices you end up making for your work, if you make them thoughtfully, you will have every chance of succeeding.

May this book help you make the right choices for your first pages, and all the pages that come after.

I.

Opening Strategies

I ONCE SPOKE WITH A NEW YORK CITY FIREMAN WHOSE JOB included talking suicidal “jumpers” down from building edges and bridges. He told me something that has stayed with me ever since. He said that in every case, without exception, when the person jumped, the look on his or her face was always the same. It said, in essence, “Wrong decision.”

Forgive me for opening on such a grisly note. But every opening of a book or a story is a fateful plunge. The choices we make in those first few sentences, paragraphs, and pages determine not only how what we’ve written gets read, but whether it will be read at all.

Readers have no obligation to read what we’ve written. If we want them to spend their precious time with our words, we owe them every courtesy. They owe us nothing.

“Grab the reader by the throat,” so we’ve been told, suggesting that nothing short of bodily assault will gain a reader’s attention. I disagree.

Still, there’s something to be said for a throat-grabbing opening:

*Hale knew, before he’d been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.*¹

*They threw me off the hay truck about noon.*²

*A screaming comes across the sky.*³

*One morning, Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic beetle.*⁴

1 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938).

2 James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1942).

3 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973).

4 Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis” (1915). Translation by the author.

I. OPENING STRATEGIES

Those opening sentences do more than grab our throats. They pull us to the brink of a story and push us in.

To gain a reader's interest you needn't resort to assault or sensationalism. Imagine yourself a guest at a dinner party. To make an impression you can pull the tablecloth out from under the place settings; that will do the trick. Or you can tinkle your wine glass, lean into the ensuing silence, and—with commanding composure—say something like, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”⁵ No china broken, no necks bruised.

There are countless ways to, as Kafka might have put it, “crack open the frozen sea” of a novel, memoir, or short story. In her essay, “Beginnings at their Best,” Julie Pratt identifies seven types of “winning” opening strategies:

1. Ominous
2. Mysterious
3. Peculiar
4. Familiar
5. Sensory
6. Provocative
7. Humorous

These seven strategies may be combined, as in the opening to António Lobo Antunes's *The Land at the End of the World*:

The thing I liked best about the zoo was the roller-skating rink under the trees and the very upright black instructor describing slow ellipses as he glided effortlessly backward over the concrete surface, surrounded by girls in short skirts and white boots, who, if they spoke, doubtless did so in the same gauzy tones as those voices you hear at airports announcing the departure of planes, cotton syllables that dissolve in the ear just as the remnants of a piece of candy do on the curled shell of the tongue.

This opening is sensory (“cotton syllables that dissolve in the ear,” “candy ... on the curled shell of a tongue”) as well as familiar (“the same ... tones as those voices you hear at airports announcing the departure of planes”). And isn't there something faintly ominous about those “slow ellipses”? As you read on, you'll see that these strategies can be combined.

5 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

1. Who Speaks? Choosing Narrators

One question that our openings must answer: Who speaks to us? From where, when, and with what attitude and perspective, through what set of sensibilities?

Every piece of writing has a narrator, a persona distinct from the author especially chosen to serve the material, to select and filter its ingredients and make a particular impression, and who functions, largely by way of constraints, as an organizing principle.⁶

In writing this essay, do I want my narrating persona to be coy, clever, cranky, cute? Breezy or hardboiled? I have many personas in my authorial kit bag. Should I deploy the self-deprecating buffoon, or the professorial pedant? Do I plunge directly into my topic or scene, or wade in slowly, as my father used to wade into the swim-hole where he took me and my brother, inch by inch, making wincing sounds as though he were stepping into a vat of boiling oil?

Here is how Marilyn Robinson wades into *Housekeeping*, her first novel:

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother's house, built for her by her husband, Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. It was he who put us down in this unlikely place.

A few sentences later:

Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step. The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips. Our house was at the edge of town on a little hill, so we rarely had more than a black pool in our cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it. A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched

6 Except in the case of some metafictional, postmodern, or otherwise experimental works in which author and narrator are supposedly one and the same, and even in those cases I would argue that a narrator has been created.

I. OPENING STRATEGIES

grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands.

Here, setting is character. The character of the grandfather is subsumed by that of the house in which he grew up, and in which most of the action of the novel will occur.

Like most great openings, the opening of *Housekeeping* melds all seven “winning” strategies: ominous, mysterious, peculiar, familiar, sensory, provocative, and humorous. Forthright but gentle, with her narrator’s voice barely raised above a whisper, Robinson seduces without force, effortlessly, by means of sensual summary exposition. Were this a painting, it would be all background: the foreground figures have yet to emerge.

2. Dramatic Openings

In her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, Jeanette Walls takes a more headlong, Burt-Lancaster-plunging-into-the-surf approach:

I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the steam coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.

Mom stood fifteen feet away. She had tied rags around her shoulders to keep out the spring chill and was picking through the trash while her dog, a black-and-white terrier mix, played at her feet. Mom’s gestures were all familiar—the way she tilted her head and thrust out her lower lip when studying items of potential value that she’d hoisted out of the Dumpster, the way her eyes widened with childish glee when she found something she liked. Her long hair was streaked with gray, tangled and matted, and her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets, but still she reminded me of the mom she’d been when I was a kid, swan-diving off cliffs and painting in the desert and reading Shakespeare aloud. Her cheekbones were still high and strong, but the skin was parched and ruddy from all those winters and summers exposed to the elements. To the people walking by, she probably looked like any of the thousands of homeless people in New York City.

In starting her memoir with scene rather than summary, Walls commits herself to a narrative strategy that puts the emphasis on drama and suggests more than it tells or states. Background is subordinated, if not entirely suppressed; description and action dominate.

As do most successful openings, this one answers as many questions as it raises; it gives us everything we need to inhabit the moment at hand while inviting us to wonder how such a moment came to be. How does a well-off New Yorker have homeless, dumpster-rutting parents? Ominous, peculiar, sensory, familiar (“the mom she’d been when I was a kid”). Setting aside that the glib irony of this coincidental encounter makes it read more as fiction than nonfiction, still, we feel that we know this woman, despite never having really known anyone in her situation. We get to know her through a specific event (Mom rooting through dumpster) and through her reaction to that event (how she describes it to us).

3. Colluding with Readers / Second Person

In opening his novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michael Faber eschews drama as well as vivid or sensual scene painting. Instead, with his first words he breaks the so-called “fourth wall,” buttonholing us, daring us to enter his fictional world:

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you’ve read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.

Defying readers in the first paragraph takes guts; it may not be a winning strategy, but it is certainly provocative and peculiar, and it settles, decidedly and immediately, the question of who is telling the story, establishing beyond any doubt the disposition of the narrator, namely “in your face.”

In rare cases, collusion takes the extreme form of pressing the reader into service as the protagonist, as Jay McInerney does in his novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*:

You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time in the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy.

Depending on the reader's disposition, this approach may or may not work. With second person address especially there's the risk of the reader folding her arms and refusing to play along, saying to herself, "You're right: I am not that kind of guy."

4. Character Narrator

In the right hands, the matter of who speaks to us can be settled in as few as three words: "Call me Ishmael."

With first-person narrators, the answer to the question "who is speaking to us?" tends to be straightforward, but with an unnamed, third-person narrator things get complicated, with the line between narrator and author often so thin and porous it seems nonexistent, to where even authors can't be sure where they stand in relation to their material. Often, with fictional works in progress especially, but with memoir, too, occasionally, it comes to pass that there is no narrator at all, really, no mitigating persona, no point-of-view, no unique set of sensibilities—apart from the author's—through which events are filtered for the reader. In that case, I call the result *default omniscience*, something I discuss at the start of Chapter II and throughout the first-page analyses in this book.

5. Where to Start?

Biblical Openers

Even once we've settled the question of who is telling our stories, we face another big question. Namely: *where* to start. At what point should we enter our stories? Even as I write these words, I face the dilemma. Speaking of beginnings, where to begin?

Why not with the most famous beginning of all?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

I. OPENING STRATEGIES

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.⁷

Unlike most mere mortals, God has no trouble getting His story off the ground. Then again, He has a distinct advantage, since unlike our stories His truly begins at the beginning, so there's no question of going back any further—say, to the day *before* God created the heavens.

“All sensation,” philosopher Henri Bergson declared in *Matter and Memory*, “is already memory.” What we call “consciousness” is mainly a product of the past. In telling human stories, we can hardly overlook the thing that most shapes our humanity, our histories, what we remember, and even things we may not remember but that have shaped us nevertheless. Every human story has its “back story,” one that goes back and back and back, presumably, to the very beginning of time: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

Fortunately, theory and practice differ, otherwise all stories would have the Bible, or an equivalent, as prologue, as does James A. Michener's *Hawaii*. It opens:

Millions upon millions of years ago, when the continents were already formed and the principal features of the earth had been decided, there existed, then as now, one aspect of the world that dwarfed all others. It was a mighty ocean, resting uneasily to the east of the largest continent, a restless ever-changing, gigantic body of water that would later be described as pacific.

Unlike God, who in his prolificacy he resembled, Michener didn't feel compelled to create the earth first before flooding it. Still, in reaching so far back for this opening, he suggests the epic scope of what follows.

⁷ Genesis 1:1–3. In *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, Book II of Douglas Adams's five-book Hitchhiker's “Trilogy,” he gives us this version of that beginning: “In the beginning, the universe was created. This made a lot of people very angry, and has been widely regarded as a bad idea.”

6. Setting the Scene: *The Wide-Angle Establishing Shot*

Charles Dickens opens *A Tale of Two Cities* with the rhetorical equivalent of what, in a movie, would be a wide-angle establishing shot:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Rather than plunge us into the heart of the story, such an opening serves as a sort of *framing device*, an imposing ornate gate through which we pass to get to the story. Call it the red-carpet treatment. But gate and carpeting are there not merely to flatter but to orient us. Along with all the pomp and paradox, Dickens lays out the period in which his story is set, a time when plain-faced queens and large-jawed kings (and vice versa) occupied the thrones of England and France.

7. Beginning at the End

Some stories begin at the beginning, while others end where they start. Madison Smartt Bell's *Ten Indians* starts: "Don't know I can say how it all started, but I tell you how it almost finished up." When Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red* begins, his protagonist is already dead. His corpse speaks to us from the bottom of the well where his murderer has deposited it/him.

Trading beginnings for endings is an old trick, but not a bad one. As unsure as we are as to where to begin our stories, we tend to know how they'll end.

Martin Amis knew:

This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.) I know the murderer, I know the murderee. I know the

time, I know the place. I know the motive (*her* motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn't stop them, I don't think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It's what she always wanted. You can't stop people, once they *start creating*.⁸

In cases like this, who can say that the beginning isn't the end, and vice versa? We're reminded of a Möbius strip, or the Ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its own tail to form a circle, though the fictional "tale" isn't being ingested so much as being born ass-first.

Such is the case with *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's last, most ambitious, and least-read (also least readable) novel. Joyce's novel begins (and ends):

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay,
brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle
and Environs.

The same novel ends (and begins):

Whish! A gull. Gulls. Far calls. Coming, far! End here. Us then. Finn,
again! Take. Bussoftlhee, mememormee! Till thous-endsthee. Lps. The
keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the

Joyce solves the problem of beginnings and endings by having neither and both. Like the universe that it tries to encompass, *Finnegans Wake* has no center or edges. It never starts and it never ends.

8. Literary Births

Though most writers prefer to plunge straight into the middle of their stories, beginning at the beginning has advantages. For one thing, it lets readers experience events "in real time," as they unfold, without having to make temporal adjustments as they go. Superficially, real life happens this way. Why not life on the page? In fact, many stories (usually longer ones or novels) begin at the beginning of their protagonist's life, with their birth.

8 *London Fields* (1989).

I. OPENING STRATEGIES

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade, lived afterwards at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a good family in that country, and after whom I was called Robinson Kreutznear; but by the usual corruption of words in England we are now called, nay, we call ourselves, and write our name, Crusoe; and so my companions always called me.

Since 1719, when Defoe used the technique in *Robinson Crusoe*, countless authors have given birth to their protagonists on page 1, including Dickens, who titles Chapter 1 of *David Copperfield* “I am born,” then opens with his narrator wondering whether he’ll turn out to be the hero of the book we hold—a doubt not shared by canny readers who’ve seen the words “David Copperfield” stamped across the book’s spine and title page. As opening gambits go, it’s not all that sincere, so we can’t entirely blame Holden Caulfield when, a hundred and one years later, he calls it crap:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.⁹

One obvious disadvantage of starting our stories with the birth of our hero is that the event isn’t likely to form part of the hero’s experience, since he can’t possibly remember it.

Well, most of us don’t remember being born. As with all things fictional, here too we find exceptions:

I was slapped and hurried along in the private applause of birth—I think I remember this. Well, I imagine it anyway—the blind boy’s rose-and-milk-and-gray-walled (and salty) aquarium, the aquarium overthrown, the uproar in the woman-barn ...

So Harold Brodkey’s *The Runaway Soul* (which itself runs away to 833 pages) squares up to us, with a narrator who dares to tell us what colors he saw in the

9 J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

womb. Thus we are prepared for—or forewarned about—the coming performance. “Performance” is the word: Brodkey’s protagonist has yet to breathe his first and already the world applauds. Or at least his creator imagines that it will.

The trouble with starting stories at the beginning—not just with a character’s history, with their birth, but even with, say, a hypothetical heroine packing her hypothetical bags for a hypothetical trip to Italy—is that the story, if it has begun at all, has only just barely begun; there’s little drama greasing the wheels, only the vague anticipations of a voyage whose repercussions remain to be seen. Like a car engine started on a frozen day, you have to wait for it to warm up before bringing it up to speed.

9. *In Medias Res: The Inciting Incident*

This is why most stories start *in medias res* or “in the middle of things.” The term comes from the ancient Roman poet Horace, who advised aspiring epic poets to go straight to the heart instead of starting at the beginning. That “heart” may be near the end or close to the beginning of the string of events that form a narrative. In any event, the action of the story is well underway.

Katherine Shonk’s 2001 short story, “My Mother’s Garden,” about a woman trying to convince her mother to abandon her home in a Chernobyl suburb, begins *in medias res*:

Spring had come to my hometown. When I got off the bus at the entrance to the contamination zone, Oles was standing at the guard station in a lightweight uniform instead of his padded military jacket, his gun swung loosely over his back. The thaw seemed to have improved his unusually sullen mood; he nodded his appreciation of the flowered fabric I’d brought for his wife and let me pass through the gate without even looking at my documents.

Stories that start *in medias res* don’t actually start in the middle of the story being told. Rather they start with or close to an *inciting incident*: the event that propels the protagonist out of her status quo existence and into a novel circumstance or circumstances that put that status quo into relief or perspective. Most modern narratives are written this way, with the inciting incident occurring, or alluded to, within the first page or pages.

Often the inciting incident is conveyed by the first sentence:

I. OPENING STRATEGIES

They threw me off the hay truck about noon.

None of them knew the color of the sky.

One August afternoon, when Ajay was ten years old, his elder brother, Aman, dove into a pool and struck his head on the cement bottom.

The first quoted sentence, from James M. Cain's, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, explains how Frank, a drifter, winds up at the diner where he falls for Cora, wife of Nick "the Greek" Papadakis, the owner, whom Frank and Cora ultimately plot to murder. Had Frank not been thrown off that hay truck, the most famous crime novel ever would lack an inciting incident.

In the second quote the reason none of the characters in Stephen Crane's short story know the color of the sky is because they're the exhausted survivors aboard "The Open Boat" (a lifeboat) that has delivered them from a shipwreck: the inciting incident.

The last quote is from Akhil Sharma's short story "Surrounded by Sleep," about a young Indian boy who believes himself marked by his brother's accident, and who—to comfort himself—conjures up a cardigan-wearing God that is half Clark Kent, half Mr. Rogers. The demarcation between Ajay's previous, status quo existence as happy child and that of the story's present circumstances (which have him appealing to God to fulfill his special fate so Aman's death won't be in vain) is clearly marked. Given the circumstances, to begin with the pool accident seems not only reasonable, but compulsory.

The precise location of an inciting incident isn't always obvious. In a story about an alcoholic man's downward spiral, is the inciting incident the alcoholic's first drink, or his hundred and first—the one that he swears will be his last? When does a drunk begin to be a drunk? When he thinks he's become one, or when his friends tell him he is? Or when he wakes up in a puddle of his own vomit, or in jail, or in the psychiatric ward of a hospital? Or when he gets fired from his job? Or when his wife and children leave him? Or when he finds himself begging coins and cigarettes on Skid Row?

Inciting incidents can be slippery things. So we're left with the same question: *where to begin?* In the end, where to start may have to be determined by the extent to which an event catapults a character out of his or her routine.

10. The Covenant: *Taking the Leap*

There are, of course, an infinite number of possible opening strategies, possibly as many as there are stories, and each of those strategies comes in countless variations. These are just some examples.

The point is that in telling our stories we have to start somewhere, and where we start matters enough to shape everything that follows. No sooner do we set down the first words of a story than we create, or begin creating, a world—one with its own laws, its own language, its own possibilities and limitations. The covenants of that world are established word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, for reader and writer—but especially for the writer, who'll be bound by them throughout the rest of the work.

Just as in the Bible God makes His covenant with Abraham, we make ours with our readers: we lay down the laws of the worlds they'll inhabit for as long as they keep reading. Or they'll reject that world and its laws and pick up someone else's book, or go about some other business, defrosting the fridge or doing laundry.

In beginning our stories we stand on the edge of a precipice or bridge, but with no fireman there to talk us down. We have to do it ourselves, word by word, but only after we've taken the plunge, hoping our readers will follow us.

II.

Seven Deadly Sins: *Common Errors*

I READ THEM ALL THE TIME. STORIES WHERE SCENES DISAPPEAR before my eyes, where the point-of-view is as slippery as a greased tadpole, where authors play hard to get with vital statistics: fictional stories that beg to be memoirs, and memoirs that yearn to be fiction, not to mention stories built on the quicksand of cliché ... errors so glaring I can practically see them through the envelopes in which they've been submitted to the literary journals I edit.

Seven: a curious number, the lowest natural number that cannot be represented as the sum of the squares of three integers. It's the number of sides to a heptagon, of days in the week, of colors in a rainbow. There are seven seas, seven continents, seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Number of notes in the traditional diatonic scale: seven. Rome had seven kings and as many emperors. Noah brought seven pairs of every clean animal onto the ark. The House of Wisdom has seven pillars (Proverbs 9:1); seven things are detestable to the Lord (Proverbs 6:16–19). There are seven virtues and seven deadly sins, not to mention (in bifurcation theory as applied to the mathematical study of dynamical systems) seven types of elementary catastrophes.¹

Seven also happens to be the number of common errors—errors of style, substance, and structure—routinely encountered by me in the works of beginning and even advanced fiction writers, fundamental errors that present themselves with alarming frequency. Think of them, if you like, as the fiction writer's Seven Deadly Sins.

Here they are—in order of deadliness.

1 1. Fold, 2. Cusp, 3. Swallowtail, 4. Butterfly, 5. Hyperbolic Umbilic, 6. Elliptic Umbilic, 7. Parabolic Umbilic.

1. Default Omniscience: *Failure to Properly Engage a Narrator and Inhabit That Narrator's Perspective*

A story or a novel is as much about how it's told—by means of what structure, through what voice or voices, from which viewpoint(s)—as about what happens. In fiction, means and ends are inseparable: method is substance. You may have all the ingredients—a plot, characters, dialogue, description, setting, conflict—but if they aren't bound by a specific, consistent, and rigorously controlled viewpoint, you have nothing.

In workshops I've been known to write across the black (or white) board:

NO POINT-OF-VIEW = NO STORY

I'm not talking minor gaffs and glitches ("As she looked out her bedroom window, Sally heard the door click open behind her and there stood Dawson ..."). I mean errors so deep rooted no line-editing can set them right, blunders that call into question not only the author's grasp of a particular moment or scene in a story, but fiction's primary purpose: to render experiences.

Fiction's stock in trade is human experience, and experience is subjective: things don't just happen; they happen insofar as characters feel and react to them. Subjectivity requires a nervous system. That no two nervous systems respond identically to stimuli gives fiction its *raison d'être*.

To be authentic, fictional experiences should pass through a subjectivity filter. They must be sorted and sifted either through the sensibility of a character or characters or that of a so-called omniscient narrator—one who, to a variable extent, shares their nervous systems and perspectives on events. Unless this subjective filter or narrator has been created and is firmly in place, what's conveyed to the reader isn't experience, but *information*.

An example:

Hank could have passed for Lila's grandfather. His white mustache added to his years, yet he kept himself trim and thought himself as fit as the younger fathers. He was nuts about Lila, who still loved him, though lately she'd grown distant. She was no longer his little girl; in fact, she secretly wished that he would act his age. She especially hated it when he pretended to pull coins and other things out of her ears. Why was he so

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

goofy? But all adolescent girls pass through a phase where they hold their fathers in mild contempt.

At first glance, nothing seems wrong with this paragraph. But on closer inspection problems arise. While the first sentence (“Hank could have passed for Lila’s grandfather”) is neutral-objective, the second sentence (“thought himself ... fit”) shifts us into Hank’s personal, subjective viewpoint. Though the third sentence seems to dip into Lila’s feelings about him, the thought expressed by it could still be from Hank’s viewpoint. However—unless we assume that Lila’s secret is not a secret—the fourth, fifth, and sixth sentences plunge us fully into Lila’s consciousness. With the final sentence we get yet another shift in perspective, to an omniscient, generalized view of all adolescent girls’ relationships with their fathers.

The cumulative result of all these subtle and not-so-subtle shifts is that as a reader I am never clear whose experience I am getting. The point-of-view isn’t solid; the filter is loose or distorted, hence my ability to share the experiences offered in this passage is inhibited. I get all the information necessary to construct an experience, but constructing an experience isn’t the same as having or *inhabiting* one. It’s the difference between groceries and a meal.

For readers to inhabit our stories we must first somehow inhabit them ourselves. And yet we authors don’t really live in our stories, nor can we be expected to, since we’re obliged to sit at our desks in front of our computers. This is why we create narrators. The narrator lives inside the story; he (or she or it) is our emissary to the world of that story.

Notice I said we have to *create* narrators. Narrators don’t create themselves, nor should they ever be confused with their authors, from whom they exist separately. Nor should authors second guess or in any way intrude upon their narration. When they do, they violate point-of-view; the narrative filter is detached, displaced, distorted, or destroyed. Experience degenerates into information. We call the result *author intrusion*, and it blurs and finally dissolves the fictional dream.

Point-of-view can never be incidental or accidental. It’s as fundamental as the choice between present and past tense, formal and informal diction, dramatization versus summary or exposition.

Of all problems plaguing amateur works, none is more common—or more fatal—than mishandling of point-of-view. Typically, the problem results not from a chosen viewpoint being violated (though this, too, happens frequently), but because no viewpoint has been properly established to begin with, so there’s nothing to violate.

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

Example: In a story about a waitress named Linda, we read, “People didn’t think Linda was as pretty as she used to be.” Arguably, this could be Linda’s own view of things. If so, it’s a harsh view, presented with the blunt objectivity of a Gallup poll. Earlier in the same story we’re told, “Linda was a waitress and an alcoholic; everyone knew that.” Here, too, the perspective could *arguably* be Linda’s. But it’s a weak argument, since alcoholics—those in the throes of their addiction, anyway—are generally the last people to label themselves as such. Since this pronouncement is made early in the story (first paragraph, third line), readers can’t be blamed for taking it not as Linda’s subjective opinion, but as an omniscient narrator’s objective verdict.

Ultimately, though, this turns out to be Linda’s story, presented to us, by and large, from her perspective. So I’m thrown by those moments when the viewpoint turns objective with statements like “Lately, people had been all too concerned about [Linda]” (presumably these are the same generalized people who think Linda’s looks aren’t what they used to be). Or is this Linda’s subjective viewpoint wearing an omniscient, objective mask? At the very least it’s confusing. At worst it’s inauthentic and unconvincing.

Again, the problem here goes deeper than a minor lapse or two. The problem is that the author hasn’t embedded herself sufficiently *by way of her chosen narrator* into her character’s psyche, or into any particular mindset. Had she done so, none of these lapses would have occurred. They would have been impossible.²

Another example: In a story where eight-year-old Aidan takes his first plane trip to France, the author sabotages his point-of-view strategy (and his story with it) in several ways: first, by straying into passive constructions (“It was the longest plane trip that Aidan had ever been on”) that locate the viewpoint beyond the character’s personal, subjective experience (as opposed to “Aidan yawned and shifted in his seat; he’d never been on such a long plane ride before”), then by drifting into an equally inadvertent omniscience (“They [Aidan and his kid sister] knew they had better behave themselves”), and finally by sliding into diction that yanks us abruptly out of Aidan’s eight-year-old psyche (“The only *dietary adjustment* [italics mine] was having to eat goat’s milk for breakfast,” as opposed to “Aidan spat out his breakfast: his mother had served it to him with goat’s milk. The taste reminded him

2 The italicized phrase is important, since there has to be that mediating presence between author and story. The author’s job is to convey the experience of the narrator; hence, it is the narrator’s experience that matters, not the author’s experience.

of his armpits.”). In each instance the author has failed to inhabit Aidan, to plant himself and the reader along with him *by way of a realized and engaged third-person narrator* firmly in Aidan’s psyche, to see, feel, think, act, and react with him.

By resisting such immersion and commitment, by insisting on mixing our own ideas and sensibilities with those of our narrators and the characters whose experiences they convey, we keep readers at a vague, inconsistent distance from the worlds we want them to inhabit. The resulting experience in this case is neither Aidan’s nor Linda’s—nor that of a true omniscient narrator, but a case of *default omniscience*: omniscience without plan, passion, or purpose, that fails to offer us a consistent, clear, reliable filter. It does the opposite. It muddies things up.

Does this mean we shouldn’t create omniscient narratives or narrators? Of course not. It means only that we should do so knowingly.

Does this mean we must restrict ourselves to a single perspective or point-of-view? Not at all. Almost anything we do in our fiction, no matter how outrageous or experimental, can work if done consistently and with authority.

But too often writers simply neglect to make this most crucial of choices. They assume that point-of-view isn’t that important, or that it’s something that can be fixed later on—which is like getting a flu shot after you’ve caught the flu.

Let either your characters’ or your omniscient narrator’s perspectives serve as the organizing principle of your stories, the source of every idea expressed in your narratives. Nothing should reach the reader that hasn’t passed through this point-of-view filter.

Point-of-view is the rock on which fiction is built. It can’t be added or subtracted any more than a canvas can be added to a finished painting.

Remember:

NO POINT-OF-VIEW = NO STORY

2. False Suspense: *Capricious Withholding of Information*

A fiction writer’s job is to tell stories, not to hide them. This should be obvious but isn’t always. Look at this first paragraph from a first page examined later in this book:

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

She got off the bus, grateful to be away from all the thoughts that had intruded upon her mind throughout the journey. Across the park the remnant of an ancient society loomed at the end of the path, its stones bright under the hot sun. Inside, students trained for the upcoming campaign. She headed toward the inevitable, the blood-filled battlefield of her future reclaiming the forefront of her thoughts. No one wandered the streets, they were busy working, as she should have been. While she normally skipped her first class, today she had a good excuse. She had a vision to report.

As a workshop leader, but also as the editor of a literary journal, I often read stories like this, where, within the first page or paragraph, I find myself confused, wondering: Who is this woman? Where is she coming from? Where is she going? What “campaign”? “First class” in *what*? What am I reading and why am I reading it?

When authors trade in *false suspense*, they are essentially saying to their readers: keep reading and you’ll figure out what in blazes is going on.

The problem with such a strategy is that it assumes saintly forbearance on the part of readers, who don’t read to learn information already known to the characters (who may be presumed to know, for instance, their own identities), but to share in their experiences and to learn, with them, the answers to questions far more relevant and urgent, such as: *What will happen next? How will X respond if Y happens? What effect will X’s response have on Z?* Plot questions. While writers may hope to raise philosophical and moral questions in their readers, plot questions are what keep them reading.

And whatever else we do, we have to keep our readers reading, bearing in mind that readers are rude. The slightest twinge of hunger or bladder urge may prompt them to put your story or memoir down and never pick it up again. Readers hold all the cards. They can be rude; you can’t afford to be.

One way to be rude is to tease people. Writers who capriciously withhold information are doing just that. They do so for other reasons, too, chief among these being that they don’t trust their stories, or worse, they have no stories to tell. No wonder they try to hide them.

The classic example of a strategy based on withheld information is the “and then she woke up” story, in which the reader discovers, at the last possible moment, that what she’s been reading was only a dream, that all this time Pamela has been sound asleep and safe in her bed, with no purple giraffes chasing her after all. That may be good for Pamela, but it’s a terrible way to tell a story and a worse way to treat your reader, who invested in a fictional

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

reality only to have it yanked out from under her. The perpetrator of such a bait-and-switch story might defend himself by saying, “Well, Pamela didn’t know she was dreaming, therefore I’m not withholding any information to which my character is privy.” Pamela may not know she’s dreaming, but her author knows perfectly well, and if he’s being honest with himself and his material, instead of leading us down the garden path to “Gotcha!,” he’ll provide such clues as will make it fairly obvious that we are reading not reality, but a dream. Then, of course, he’ll have to go fish for a more substantial plot.

Though false suspense may carry some readers along for a few pages, for most readers it will eventually result in frustration. The solution is straightforward enough: Have a story to tell and tell it. Never withhold information. That’s a bold imperative, yet in stating it I’m not alone. Eudora Welty (who knew a thing or two about storytelling) said as much in response to a persistent question unintentionally raised in her readers by one of her short stories: “I had not meant to mystify readers by withholding any fact,” she wrote apologetically, “*it is not a writer’s business to tease*” (italics mine).³

When you ask readers to read a story, novel, or memoir, you’re asking them to take a journey with you, one that will lead them up a steep climb of rising action to the summit where a climax typically occurs, leaving the reader with an unprecedented view of the world they have inhabited, as well as (ideally) a broadened, deepened, or enhanced awareness of human nature, the world, and life in general.

As author, you’re charged with equipping the reader with the tools necessary not only to arrive at the summit, but to appreciate the view from there. That means withholding nothing crucial or basic (hardtack, maps, rope, food and water), while providing nothing sooner than necessary (champagne, binoculars), since the journey is arduous. Every unneeded bit of information makes it more so.

False suspense weighs your reader down with useless, nagging questions. Burden them with it, and you not only make the climb harder, you spoil the view from the top when they get there, since the answers to such questions are rarely worth the effort.

When writing fiction, it’s better to be generous than to withhold. Proof:

3 Eudora Welty, “Is Phoenix Jackson’s Grandson Really Dead” in *The Eye of a Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*.

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

My father wanted to show me something, but he wouldn't say what. He only said I should go get my gun, my thirty-six-aught-six, and follow him. This happened just outside Bend, Oregon, where we lived in a ranch house surrounded by ten acres of woods. I was twelve at the time: old enough to shoot a gun, young enough to fear the dark.

This opening to Benjamin Percy's story "The Woods," about an obdurate father teaching his "pantywaist" son to hunt deer, is nothing if not generous. Look at the amount of information provided by this opening paragraph. The protagonist is a twelve-year-old boy who is afraid of the dark and who presumably hunts with his father. The setting: Bend, Oregon. I think of that Robert Frost poem, "Provide, Provide." That's what author Percy does here: he provides his readers with information. He communicates; he shares, he gives. He is bountiful; he holds nothing back. So different from the author hiding behind a veil of mystery or coyness.

All of which is to say it pays to be generous.

3. Dramatized Routine or Status-Quo Syndrome: *Failure to Distinguish between Events and Routine*

No matter how intrinsically exotic or sensational a routine may be, readers aren't interested in routine.

Say you've written a story set in the future. In that future your hero, Matt Starhopper, travels on the first day of each month to a space station located on one of the moons of B1620-26, the farthest known planet at the core of the globular M4 cluster. Along the way he encounters the usual ominous space aliens, treacherous asteroid fields, and gravitational follies. His journey is rendered with a Flemish master's eye for detail, an astronomer's embrace of planetary lore, and a speculative imagination that would make Jules Verne blush. Yet as she turns pages, though she admires and respects the author's work, though she finds it stylish and authentic, our reader feels her attention flagging, her eyelids drooping. Why? What's gone wrong?

In a word: routine. Consciously or not, the reader is aware that, however sensational from a twenty-first-century earthling's perspective, Matt

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

Starhopper has taken this voyage many times before, and will take it many times more. Nothing on the page suggests otherwise, just as nothing on the page suggests that this voyage departs in any significant way from the others. On the contrary, the reader senses that he is being told about a general, not a specific, voyage. So he pushes on, faithfully, in the hope of soon encountering those two blessed words that signal the start of a true fictional voyage: “One day ...”

It’s that “one day” (or its equivalent) that pricks the reader’s ears, that says, “Listen up: something extraordinary is about to happen.” The key word is “extraordinary,” an antonym of “routine” and the antidote for it. Whether your characters journey daily to a distant moon or just down the hallway to the bathroom, what matters to readers is the singular event that distinguishes one such voyage from all others and makes for a story.

Another example of dramatized routine:

Mornings, the rhythmic tapping would wake me: *thunk, thunk, thunk*—the sound of my brother’s hammer pounding wood. I’d roll over and squint at the clock. 7:30 am. I’d get out of bed and find him sitting against the floor, cross-legged, his back to the closet door. Above his ears that protruded too prominently, his short hairs would stick up in several places. Not a gray hair in sight. Sometimes, seeing his innocent joy, it would be easy for me to forget that he was forty-eight years old.

Here, instead of a specific, concrete, singular event or moment, this opening confronts us with a conditional, generalized routine. However, except to see it departed from, readers aren’t interested in routine or status quo. With good storytelling, the exception implies the routine. We extract the general from the particular, not vice versa.

Compare with:

A rhythmic tapping wakes me. *Thunk, thunk, thunk*. I roll over and squint at the clock. 7:30 am. I get out of bed and find my brother in his room, leaning against the closet door, pounding his toy hammer against the floorboards, smiling. Above his ears that protrude too prominently, his short hairs stick up in several places. Not a gray hair in sight. Seeing his innocent joy, it’s easy to forget he’s forty-eight years old.

Note how this version of the same opening expunges the conditional tense. Generally, the conditional tense has a deadening effect. It tells readers

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

not what characters are doing or do, but what they “would” (i.e., generally) do. “Hal would sit on the steps of the town hall with both middle fingers erect for whoever happened to pass by,” has far less impact than, “That Friday morning, Hal sat down on the front steps of the town hall with both middle fingers held erect for whoever passed him by.” (It’s also more likely.)

Generalizations are no less welcome when applied to dialogue:

“What’s the matter, kid, don’t like blue stockings?” my father would say.
“No,” I’d answer. “And what’s more I don’t like stockings!”

The suggestion that the above exchange took place on several occasions is off-putting; unless it was part of an Abbott & Costello-like schtick, I’ll bet it didn’t. That the author puts the dialogue in quotation marks increases that dialogue’s authority while doubling my doubts. Though occasionally narrators may prove unreliable, their unreliability should be germane to the story, not incidental to it.

When in your own work you find yourself using the conditional tense, be aware that you may be dramatizing routine. See if you can’t substitute a specific event and let it stand for the routine.

Other words to watch out for: “always,” “usually,” “typically”—words that generalize about routines rather than offer us concrete, particular experiences from which routine may be extrapolated.

The same thing applies to nonfiction narratives. A student in a nonfiction class of mine told me how, as a young man, he worked as a “flagger” in his father’s crop-dusting business. “A flagger,” he explained to me, “is the guy holding a flag and marking off space—50 feet at a time, 17 steps (for me)—so the pilot can line up on something and not lose his place in the field. I did this every year for ten years.” How, my student wondered, might he write a story about being a flagger?

My answer: not by generalizing about the experience, but by finding a specific event or incident to hang the story from. Focus on one day in your experience of being a flagger and let the experiences of that day stand for the overall experience.

Another example: A young woman visits her barely coherent father in the nursing home, as she has done daily for the past two years. Of such a plot readers may well ask, “What makes this day different from any other day?” On closer examination, we find that on the day in question, the young woman does indeed do several things that depart from her routine:

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

1. She stops on the way to visit the house where she grew up.
2. She reminisces with her father about her dead sister, Rose.
3. She talks to a young man working behind the counter at a bakery.
4. She meets the bakery young man for lunch at the hospital.

Though the story of a woman's routine visit to her father in a nursing home offers little hope for plot or catharsis, any one of the above listed specific events holds more than hope. For my money, I'd go with the bakery boy, and develop the relationship between him and the heroine, perhaps into a love affair, one that was never meant to be (as tends to be true of romances inspired by circumstance) and that ends badly—or not. Whatever event or incident is exploited, a story needs events and incidents: they are what put the status quo where it belongs, in the background.

In fiction as in life, exceptions prove the rule. Only through seeing characters put into extraordinary situations can readers fully appreciate their “ordinary” qualities.

4. Information vs. Experience: *Supplying Abstract Ideas and Conclusions in Lieu of Concrete Evidence*

Information has its place in many kinds of writing, including fiction, personal essays, and memoirs; but when there is an experience behind or to go with the information, as storytellers we're obliged to provide readers with the experience, to create it as vividly and viscerally as we can, and with as few words as necessary or as space will permit.

Information:

I heard that lots of rumors about me were going around.

Experience:

“Everyone's talking about you,” my friend Sheila leaned over my bed and whispered when she visited me in the hospital one day.

“They *are*?”

“You're the talk of the town. You should hear all the rumors. According to one you're paralyzed from the neck down and will never walk again.”

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

Information:

That walk to the clinic with my broken hip was long enough to make me tear up.

Experience:

The distance from the curb to the front door of the clinic was only about forty feet, but without my crutches it might as well have been a mile. There was no railing, and every step came with an injection of molten lead into my left hip and a wish that I'd doubled up my dose of Percodan.

Information:

Mr. Benoit was unsuccessful in interrupting me.

Experience:

As I spoke, Mr. Benoit drummed his fingers on his metal desk and cleared his throat loudly; when I ignored him he took the yardstick from the chalk well and tapped it, louder and louder, against the blackboard.

Information:

My teachers were just as interested to hear my stories as the students were.

Experience:

As I regaled her third-period biology class with my adventures, Mrs. Szost stood proudly next to me in my shiny wheelchair, as if I were visiting royalty.

Information:

The picture taken was for my senior superlative (runner-up for best sense of humor). She, Joe Hinkle (the male best sense of humor runner-up), and I went out to the track field for the pictures. The picture chosen for the yearbook was of me running the guy over in my wheelchair.

Experience:

Sally walked and I rolled beside her to the running track behind the school. There—with the bright afternoon sun spilling down from a cloudless sky—she snapped a photo of me pretending to run over red-haired, pimply faced Joe Hinkle (“male best sense of humor runner-up”).

Information:

While I waited, a kid in a wheelchair who was actually paralyzed rolled down that hallway.

Experience:

One afternoon, as I stood there waiting for my sister, something at the far end of the hallway caught my eye, a glint of sun from the window shining on a strip of chrome. The strip of chrome belonged to a wheelchair, and the wheelchair

belonged to Derek Meyers, a junior who'd been first-string quarterback on the Milledgeville Muggers football team until the previous winter, when he snowboarded into a telephone pole, paralyzing himself from the neck down.

Information:

That night, I felt guilty for enjoying my injury so much.

Experience:

That night, as I lay in my bed trying to fall asleep, I replayed the scene over and over in my head of Derek M. rolling past me down that hallway, only in this version I saw it all from Derek's point of view, and instead of a wheelchair, I floated in the throne of a gilded litter with isinglass curtains lofted by a quartet of swarthy Indian carriers in turbans and rags. Meanwhile a fifth bearer fed me peeled grapes, the seeds of which I spat onto his bare feet. At which point I realized I had fallen asleep and was having a nightmare.

5. Imitation Story: *Cliché at the Root of Conception*

Someone has written a story about a police officer involved in a botched drug bust. The story is set in Spanish Harlem, where Emil, a rookie fresh out of the academy, and his partner Clyde stake out a bodega at the corner of 112th and Adam Clayton-Powell Boulevard. In the process Emil falls for Dulce, sister of the drug-dealing bodega owner.

Need I fill in the rest of this story? In the climactic scene Emil, seeing Dulce reach for her weapon, draws and fires. She was reaching for the love letter Emil wrote her the day before, or for a candy bar. She dies in the rookie's arms.

What's wrong? It all sounds familiar, doesn't it? If the characters and situation seem familiar, it's probably because they are. We've seen them, or something close, a hundred times before in as many TV cop shows. So what's wrong with that? Supposing the story is executed in brilliant style, so lucid and fresh that it can survive—if not surmount—its cliché origins?

That this story's problems are solvable may be true. It hardly matters, though, since they *shouldn't* be solved. Martin Amis tells us, "All good writing is a war against cliché." The first step to winning that war is to not charge hell-for-leather into a minefield.

The landmines are clichés and stereotypes, and the way to avoid them is to practice sincerity. "Sincerity," wrote Jorge Luis Borges, "is not a moral choice,

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

but an aesthetic one.” When we traffic in clichés, we’re no better than a booster. Slap a fresh coat of paint on it, add a twist or two, change the boy to a girl: you’re still dealing in stolen goods.

The way to avoid cliché at the root of conception is not to grab your idea from a TV screen, but from someplace deeper inside yourself. That sounds mushy, but how can you imagine work that has already been imagined for you? It’s the difference between taking a bite out of a crisp apple and biting into applesauce.

When we produce work that’s derivative, we aren’t being honest. We’re borrowing someone else’s aesthetics and pawning them off as our own. We do it out of fear, calculating that whatever they lack in originality, used stories and characters make up for by being tried and true. This is like proclaiming a used tire more reliable than a new one, since it’s been around longer.

Good stories and novels have been written about drug busts gone bad by people with fresh insights to offer. Maybe they’ve been cops themselves, or they’ve known cops or studied them long enough to tell their stories from a new angle, with a new twist. Or they have mined their imaginations for the essential truths of those characters in those situations. Keats wrote, “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination.”⁴ And though the truth of imagination may be accessed through other people’s stories or derivations thereof, ultimately it reaches us only through our own sensibilities and experiences. Whether those experiences are real or imaginative doesn’t matter, as long as they’re ours.

Could it be that authors of imitation stories don’t want to risk boring their audiences with material that’s close to them, but that seems too ordinary, too banal, so instead they dish up melodramas spliced together from old movies? Yet for all the sensationalism, the result bores. It bores because the author’s real material, the stuff that should really mean something to him, has been overlooked, disregarded, and dismissed in favor of a bunch of clichés.

“In every action,” Marcus Aurelius wrote in *Meditations*, “make it a practice to ask yourself, ‘What is the object of my doing this?’” If your object is just to tell a story, any old story, that may not be enough. It should be a story that only you can tell, as only you can tell it.

Am I saying you should write autobiographically? No. But write *personally*. Choose material close to you in spirit, that touches you where you live, that means something to you. Imagine the book or story you would most like to read and, as Seymour Glass advises his kid brother Buddy in Salinger’s *Seymour: An Introduction*, “just sit down shamelessly and write the thing yourself.”

4 Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817.

6. Disappearing Scenes: *Failure to Distinguish between Background, Flashback, Frame, and Present Story*

Having been brought up on movies and television, we're used to having our stories shuffled and sliced, with flashbacks and flash-forwards turning time into a vertigo-inducing carnival ride. This shuffling back and forth in time has gone on since Homer. But in movies and TV shows, flashback is no longer spice or condiment, but bread and butter.

Understandably, fiction writers, not wanting to eat the dust of their show-biz brethren, feel compelled to play their own games with time. Hence the proliferation of stories and novels jammed with flashbacks, framing devices, and other time-manipulating machines.

Competing on any level with movies and television is, I think, a mistake. They have technology on their side; we don't. They have stars and multimillion-dollar budgets; we don't. They have passive audiences slumped in plush seats; we don't. They dazzle their viewers with special effects; we can't—and shouldn't have to. Readers, at least the sort I write for, read because they love written stories and the language that written stories are made of. They don't want substitutes for cinema; they don't *need* special effects. What they demand from works of literature they don't expect from movies, and vice versa. What can we give them that movies can't?

Well, for a start, good writing. And not just good, the best.

I don't mean to imply that screenwriters aren't brilliant. Of course they are. But language isn't their medium. Words are to screenwriters what love letters are to romance: not an end in itself, but a means to that end.

That said, gimmicks are seductive, and none are more seductive than the flashback. The very term suggests flashiness. The problem is that, like all bells and whistles and other shiny devices, they tend to be overused and abused. When, a page or two into a story, I'm yanked out of the present action and into a flashback, I tend to feel cheated. I feel cheated because I had begun to invest in a set of characters and circumstances, only to have my investment nullified. I have to start investing all over again.

With good flashbacks this doesn't happen. A good flashback increases and deepens my investment. If it sweeps me out of the present action, it does so temporarily, just long enough to add to my appreciation and understanding of the characters in their present situation. But give nine out of ten inexperienced writers a flashback, and they'll use it more or less as a pilot uses his ejector

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

seat, to bail out of a story that's about to crash, or that can't get off the ground. Occasionally the ejector button parachutes them into a better story, begging the question: why open with a lousy story to begin with? Why not start out with the good one?

The answer is that most flashbacks aren't real flashbacks at all, but stories bookended by a scene or "framing device." And the trouble with framing devices is that they don't always work, and even when they do, they can frustrate and annoy. For example: a novel opens with someone named Hank getting up, getting dressed, brushing his teeth. As he stands before the bathroom mirror with his mouth foamy with toothpaste, Hank remembers his date the night before. White space: the scene shifts. We're in a restaurant in the Village. For the next eight pages we're with Hank on his date. What of the toothbrushing scene? *What of it?* It has been jettisoned, left to crash and burn as it so richly deserves to.

Even more annoying is the scene that doesn't tell us the character has gotten out of bed, namely because the character hasn't gotten out of bed; the character is still asleep, dreaming of hand-to-hand combat with colossal centipedes at the center of the earth, only we're not told that it's a dream until the end of the story, when Sally wakes up. Surprise!

Typically writers resort to framing devices and prolonged flashbacks for one of two reasons: a) because they don't know where their stories really begin; and b) because they aren't sure what story they're telling, or that they have one to tell. Note the symbiotic relationship to false suspense / withheld information (see Deadly Sin 2). Most if not all of a fiction writer's bigger problems tend to result from lack of faith in their material, which in turn results from lack of faith in the imagination.

On the other hand a writer who has a story to tell and has confidence in that story will tell it fearlessly, if possible by straightforward means, without resorting to flashy gimmicks or clichés, or padding the work with autobiographical clutter, or teasing readers along with false suspense, or neglecting to convey experiences from deep within a chosen point-of-view, or getting stuck in a holding pattern of routine as opposed to reporting singular events.

All these problems can be limited—if not eliminated—by writing from deep within character(s) in situation(s), rather than from outside, above, or beyond them.

In the end, all of these problems share one source: failure of imagination. As fiction writers, our job is to give experiences to our readers. And what you don't have yourself you can't give. Since we can't be expected to fully live the lives of all of our characters, we must let our narrators do it for us through the instrument of the imagination, by which we inhabit those experiences as fully, as richly, as deeply as we can. *I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and*

the truth of imagination. Surrender to that instrument, trust its truths, and you'll write good fiction.

7. Sentimentality: *Implying or Describing Emotions in Excess of Experience*

Merriam-Webster defines “sentiment” first as “an attitude, thought, or judgment prompted by feeling” and secondly as “emotion” or “feeling.” For “sentimental” the same dictionary gives these two definitions: 1) “marked by or governed by feeling, sensibility, or emotional idealism,” and 2) “having an excess of sentiment or sensibility.”

Whether they are experienced by the characters in a work of fiction or by the reader reading about them, or both, emotions and feelings are the stuff of fiction; it can scarcely exist without them. Experience is fiction's stock in trade, after all, and experiences come with and generate feelings.

The issue of sentimentality arises when the emotions or feelings conveyed by a scene or by a sentence—either through the terms used to convey them or the actions or reactions of the characters—exceed the experiences that give rise to them. Sentimentality is *emotion in excess of experience*.

What causes sentimentality? How do emotions exceed experience?

The first and most obvious way is through exaggeration. If a character's emotional or physiological response to an event is overstated or sensationalized (the so-called “spit take”—a character spitting out his or her drink on hearing some news—is a classic example), we're entitled to label that response “sentimental.” Characters bursting into tears, tearing out their hair, screaming and vomiting or punching each other in the nose—any of these responses may be sentimental, or not, depending on the experiences that motivate them.

Similarly, the terms used to express a character's emotional response to an experience may overstate that response (“he felt like he'd been stabbed in the gut,” “her heart somersaulted with joy”). Another sentimental sentence (taken from one of the first pages analyzed in this book): “To release the pain of her next contraction, the woman screamed out an *agonized guttural bark*” (italics mine). The woman's scream could have spoken for itself; but no, the author felt compelled to color it with sentiment.

In a coming-of-age story (nonfiction) of a dirt road along a creek notorious for the illicit acts said to have occurred along it, we read, “The old roadway had

II. SEVEN DEADLY SINS: COMMON ERRORS

become a thoroughfare of puzzlement, infested as if by termites by unknowns over every inch.” The problem with such a sentence isn’t that the sentiment it carries is inappropriate per se, but that it overshoots its target; it makes the point too aggressively. It uses a hammer to swat a fly on the windowsill. It does the job, but not without collateral damage. What’s damaged is the reader’s faith in the narrator, or conviction that we can go to the bank with his or her every word. Better to have let the facts about that old road speak for themselves.

Sometimes both actions and the language used to convey them may be sentimental. “A single, lonesome, diamond-like tear made its way slowly down Daisy’s cheek.” While it may be the case that Daisy cried, and it may even be true that a “single” tear “made its way slowly down” her cheek, it’s also all too obvious that the author of this sentence didn’t trust Daisy’s crying to speak for itself, that he felt compelled to heighten her emotional response through the way in which he evokes it, to give it that much more pathos, to make it that much sadder. He didn’t trust the action itself or the reader’s ability to extrapolate emotion from an unadorned action. So he embellished, he exaggerated; he sentimentalized.

It’s up to readers, of course, to decide for themselves whether or not such actions or terms exceed the events that go with them, and different readers will respond differently. All things being equal, however, it’s better to understate characters’ emotional responses than to exaggerate or pad them with hyperbolic language.

Another way for emotion to exceed experience is for the emotions to come either in absence of the experiences that give rise to them or ahead of those experiences.

A story begins:

Slamming the stage door shut behind her, Sally slid herself down against it until her butt hit the floor, crying the whole way down. She knew she’d blown the audition.

Though we may accept that whatever happened at that audition has not only resulted in this response, but is worthy of it, still, not having had the experience ourselves—that is, not having lived through that experience with this character—we can’t be expected to feel what she’s feeling. We must either assume that her response is entirely warranted, or that she’s being retroactively theatrical. Either way, the emotions that these opening sentences confront us with are *in excess of experience*—not Sally’s experience, but *ours*. That the next paragraph supplies us with that experience helps, but it puts the horse behind

the cart. Imagine how differently this moment would read were it to follow the description of the audition that gave rise to it, rather than precede it. In that case, instead of merely accepting them, we'd share Sally's emotions; we'd be right there with her sliding down that stage door.

It can be argued that confronting us first with Sally's emotional response, then backing into the event that caused it, creates more suspense by raising the question, "What went on at that audition?" True; it does. But it also confronts us with the specter of sentimentality at the onset of a story by having us bear witness to a character's emotional state as opposed to taking part in her emotions ourselves. Rather than uniting character and reader on that first page, those first lines separate them into two camps: victim and spectator. Is what is gained in suspense worth the cost?

8. (Bonus Sin) Grim Determination: *The Deadliest Sin?*

To this gang of seven sins I'll toss in an eighth that may be the worst sin of all: *failure to have enough fun*. Bringing up the rear of the other seven injunctions, it may seem like contradictory advice. It isn't, really, since the injunctions are meant to be enforced not so much in drafting your narratives, but when looking over what you've written, in the process of revision.

While the demands of editing require that we approach our early drafts with calm and even icy detachment, writing those early drafts may require us to engage entirely different qualities, including the spirit of incautious, defiant, and even reckless playfulness. When he wrote, "Genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will,"⁵ Baudelaire might well have been speaking in particular of an artist or author.

In a similar vein Heraclitus wrote, "Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play." The key word here, I think, is "seriousness," since if it's to bear good results the game must be played hard.

Still, that said, lose the sense of play and all will be lost, since nothing will be left but grim determination. And though grim determination may produce results, those results aren't likely to give any more pleasure than was had in obtaining them.

5 *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*.

III.

First Pages Analyzed

Introduction:

How to Use These First-Page Analyses

WRITING A NOVEL, A MEMOIR, OR A SHORT STORY ISN'T LIKE cooking a soup. Though the ingredients may be consistent (plot, situation, characters, language), every story we tell makes its own very particular demands on us as writers and comes with its own "recipe." One story (and as always when I say "story" I mean any work of narrative prose) may start with a character or characters; another with a broad concept or premise, a third with a sentence or an overheard snatch of dialogue that sets us off and running. There are no formulas. Well, there are, but none that work except occasionally or by accident.

For this reason the ordering of the first-page analyses that follow is, to a certain extent at least, arbitrary. Each page touches on an assortment of topics and raises a number of issues. The analyses can therefore be read and discussed profitably in any order.

Still, for convenience's sake, I've done my best to isolate and label the main issues raised by each analysis, and grouped them into the following categories:

- A. Point of view: who speaks?
- B. Structure: where to begin?
- C. Plot/suspense
- D. Characters
- E. Genres
- F. Memoir
- G. Style

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Unless otherwise stated, the first pages considered in the first five categories are from works in progress that qualify as “mainstream” or “literary” fiction, with mainstream fiction leaning more toward the commercial end of the spectrum—works that emphasize plot, action, suspense, and thrills—and literary fiction concerning itself more with language, style, technical experiments, and innovations, and plots that tend to comment on larger social issues and explore—in greater depth than average commercial fiction—the human condition. Literary fiction tends to be more character-driven and introspective.

Being the broader category, mainstream fiction embraces not only works of literary fiction, but other genres. All of Stephen King’s oeuvre qualifies. So do *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Once any book becomes a bestseller, it qualifies as mainstream fiction. (This is true even of books as formally innovative as George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a novel set in an intermediate realm between death and reincarnation and populated by ghosts that makes heavy use of *bricolage*: letters, snippets of historical texts and biographies, and other “found objects.”)

Following each first-page analysis, I’ve provided exercises or prompts. Students are also encouraged to improvise. They can attempt their own revision of a first page under discussion, or apply insights gained to a first page of their own. Students might trade first pages of works in progress and critique, edit, and discuss them. Any exercise or prompt suggested for one page can most likely be applied to others. Teachers and students alike should take liberties.

Teachers are also encouraged to conduct their own first-page workshops. Have students bring copies of their first pages for every student in the class, redacting the students’ names and any identifying matter. Teachers should collect and distribute copies. Have students volunteer to read the pages aloud prior to discussing them.

Finally, in considering any of the analyses that follow, and especially my suggestions and opinions, it’s important to keep in mind that every decision we make as artists involves subjectivity. *There are no rules*. If I lay down a rule, it’s with the understanding that any rule can be broken. There are two ways to break the rules: blindly, out of contempt or ignorance, or with conviction born of sophistication, in full awareness of the fact that we are breaking them. If this book has one main purpose, it is to produce more sophisticated writers and readers and thereby help them to follow *and* break the rules.

A. Point of View: *Who Speaks?*

OF ALL THE DECISIONS WE FACE AS WRITERS OF FICTION AND nonfiction, none is more fundamental than point of view. Who tells the story, from what angle, attitude, or perspective, with what level of understanding? Since they're telling their own stories, memoirists may assume they've got the problem licked. They haven't. Establishing the narrative perspective of a nonfiction work requires no less thought and effort than doing so for fiction. In any case, narrators have to not only be chosen, but *created*.

In my years of teaching, I've encountered many definitions of point of view, most of them faulty. "First person" and "third person" aren't points of view: those are just handles by which a point of view can be grasped. Point of view is something much deeper than pronouns; it's that crucial lens or filter through which experiences are conveyed to us by a narrator, one who, unlike the author (who inhabits a desk, typically), inhabits the world of the story.

Simply put: *point of view is the difference between the author and the narrator*. For this reason it is sometimes referred to confusingly as a work's "voice." If that is so, it's the voice—the awareness, insights, and diction—of the narrator, not the author.

With first-person narratives, the narrator is a character central to or peripherally involved in the events described. He or she speaks to us directly, in character. We get the story, as it were, straight from the horse's mouth. The advantages of first person come down to intimacy and authenticity.

Third-person narrators, on the other hand, are more like God: present everywhere, visible nowhere, without names or faces. They are more strictly and obviously artistic contrivances.

The disadvantages of the first person are less flexibility and objectivity. Being human and directly involved in the events described, a first-person narrator can never be absolutely objective; there has to be some subjectivity to

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

his interpretation of events. If a first-person narrator says, "I walked out the door," we can probably accept that at face value. On the other hand, if the same narrator were to say, "Harvey Sedgwick was incompetent," we have to allow for the possibility of personal bias and unreliability. The exact same words spoken by a third-person narrator would have a more objective cast.

Third person has this advantage, too: greater flexibility of diction. Where a six-year-old first-person narrator can only speak with a six-year-old's vocabulary and syntax, in the third person that same six-year-old's experiences can be rendered in the language of an adult with an adult's wide-ranging vocabulary and all of that adult narrator's rhetorical, poetic, and interpretive powers brought to bear, not to mention their grasp of psychology, history, and other facts and perceptions with which adults are endowed.

Who narrates our stories? It's up to us to decide. Having decided, we must then create that narrator or those narrators: they don't come ready-made. Depending on who we choose to tell the tale, our job as writers will be made easier or harder.

Think of yourself (the author) as the owner of a hotel or some other small business. The narrator is the manager. As any business owner will tell you, hiring the right manager is half the battle. And no, you can't do it yourself.

Point of view is the difference between the author and the narrator.

1. Song of the Dust Bowl: 1936

(First Person / “Voice” / Style Born of Urgency / Child Narrator)

Puffy clouds skirted across the bright blue sky, mocking the parched ground. They offered neither rain nor shade. I poured another bucket of water over the turnips and straightened up to see how much further I had to go. At twelve, I was old enough to remember when the kitchen garden burst with tomatoes, cucumbers, and melons. When the ten acres to the west were full of corn and cotton. Now, the fields were ten acres of dust and the garden was a few scraggly rows of whatever we were able to keep alive.

Mama worked beside me, pulling sad tomatoes off the vines. Her blue dress, faded and twice turned, would not win a contest against the sky. She pushed her hair out of her face and sighed as a wail drifted out of the house.

“Julie, please go see to him. I’m about done with this row.”

Glad to escape the sun if not the heat, I ran into the house and crossed through the kitchen. The crying got louder as I approached the front room. Baby Stephen had kicked off his covers and his face was as red as an over-ripe tomato. He waved his fists in the air and kept kicking against an invisible foe. I picked him up; fever came off him in waves. I added his diaper to the wash pile, dressed him in a clean one, and carried him out to Mama.

“He’s burning up again.”

Her attention snapped from the tomatoes to Stephen.

“Hush sweetie, Mama’s here.” She held him close and looked him over, pressing her fingers around his neck and thighs. His wailing became louder and harsher when she stuck a finger in his mouth.

Analysis

In first-person narratives, we get the story straight from the source, with the narrator typically an eyewitness to events, a participant, or both. At the very least, the first-person narrator has learned of the events he or she reports directly from eyewitnesses or participants. With first-person we get intimacy and immediacy. We don’t get objectivity, or we don’t always get it. To be sure we don’t get absolute objectivity. The extent of close personal involvement in the events in question that makes for intimacy also limits objectivity.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

With a first-person narrator we get one perspective colored by that individual's unique sensibilities and perceptions, as well as by her prejudices, hopes, fears, rationalizations, wishful thinking, and so on. All first-person narrators are, to some extent, subjective. That doesn't make them "unreliable," unreliable narrators being a category unto themselves. But they don't afford the same level of objectivity as third-person narrators.

This first page presents us with a strong first-person narrator. Under a bright blue sky riddled with "mocking" clouds, twelve-year-old Julie tends a parched garden, "a few scraggly rows of whatever we were able to keep alive." The year: 1936, the last year of the so-called Dust Bowl that ravaged a hundred million acres of farmland in the Great Plains. Even without those mocking clouds, that blue sky would be ironic, its teasing cheerful hue a stark contrast to the faded blue of the mother's (probably gingham) dress as she bends to harvest the garden with her daughter.

From the house comes an infant's cry. Julie is sent inside to tend to her baby brother, who has kicked away his covers and whose wailing face is "as red as an over-ripe tomato"—riper, for sure, than the "sad" tomatoes that have sprouted from the desiccated vines outdoors. Nothing on this first page escapes the Dust Bowl's merciless heat. Everything—sky, earth, vegetables, baby, mother and daughter—is baked and parched by it. The absence of adult males is noted. Where have they gone? Why? When will they return? The women are left to their own devices, to their powers of faith and endurance, at the mercy of the elements.

This first page offers what in writing workshops is often referred to as a "a strong voice." Though everyone talks about it, no one seems to really know precisely what the word "voice" means. Does it refer to the narrator's voice, or the author's voice? Are they the same? Is voice the same as style? If not, what's the difference?

I tend to tell my students to pay no attention to "voice," or—for that matter—to "style." Instead, focus on two other words: "clarity" and "precision." Choose your words as a surgeon chooses her instruments. Do that, and both style and voice will take care of themselves.

Some may protest that if we all swear allegiance to the same two gods—to clarity and precision—we'll all end up sounding alike, but I don't think so. There are, after all, many ways to be clear and precise. Even if that weren't so, we'd all be trying to be clear and precise about different things. Given these same two goals, each of us is sure to find our own way. Writer A needs only a sentence to be precise and clear; Writer B takes three pages.

When it comes to first-person narrators—to any narrator at all, actually—it's not our own words that count, but theirs. In the case of this first page, the

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

words that matter are those of a twelve-year-old girl named Julie tending a parched dust bowl garden. To the extent that the author chooses *Julie's* words, honors her perspective, invests us in her sensibilities, the author achieves what some call a strong “voice.”

My only quibble with this good first page is that I wish those first two lines engaged the narrator, and not just clouds and sky. Stories are about people, not about weather. Rearranged slightly to invest us immediately in the narrator's experience, the opening would read:

I poured another bucket of water over the turnips and straightened up to watch as puffy clouds skirted across the bright blue sky. They seemed to mock the parched ground, offering neither rain nor shade.

Otherwise, I have no complaints.

As for the narrator's voice, there's something stark, dry, and dusty about it, something of the faded blue gingham cloth of which the mother's dress is doubtlessly made: something staunchly utilitarian, minus zippers and frills, yet not without its humble charms. Like water from a well dug deep into the parched earth and served in a chipped Spatterware cup, it may not be much. But considering the source, it's something to sing about.

Your Turn

Draft an opening scene, in the first person and from a young narrator's perspective, in which an event of some import is anticipated: a birthday celebration or reunion, someone returning home after a long absence, the sale of the family business or farm, or the sale of the home itself. Set the scene in a particular environment, the family room or on a porch or in some area of the yard or garden. Pay attention to the time of day and the weather. Also keep in mind the narrator's perspective on the scene being reported: does the narrator look back over a great distance of time, or from later that same day—or (in the present tense) from within the event itself? Note: some conflict should be introduced or alluded to.

2. The Logging Road to the Cabin

(Third Person / Information vs. Evidence / Default Omniscience)

The Suwannee River begins in a Georgia swamp and flows through northern Florida until emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. The real estate agent took Dan Horne up a logging road to a cabin about ten yards from a creek tributary of the river. “Is this far enough out of the way for you?” the agent asked with a knowledgeable smile.

“It will do. May I go inside,” Dan replied as he stepped up on the ramshackle porch.

The agent unlocked the door and Dan followed him into a musty room. It was a large room with a fireplace and some furniture, rattan and bamboo predominating. There was also a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom with a shower. “It is hard to believe, but this place has central air and baseboard heating,” the agent said as he completed the tour. “Come on, I want to show you the dock and the boat.”

They tramped out to a sturdy looking pier where a small boat with an outboard motor was tied up. “If you go that way,” the agent pointed downstream, “you will come to the village, two miles or so. The other way, well you don’t want to go that way. It’s a mangrove swamp.”

“Any alligators?” Dan asked.

“Maybe some up in the mangrove. You ain’t planning on going swimming are you?”

“A person could die out here and nobody would know it.”

“You did say you wanted someplace out of the way.”

Dan gave the agent a pat on the back and they went back to the car. On the way into town in the area they agreed on the financial requirements. In the real estate office Dan wrote a check for a down payment.

“That’s what I like: a man who knows his own mind,” the agent said.

Analysis

There’s nothing wrong with this first page—nothing, that is, until we look at it more closely and see ways in which it might be improved.

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

First, let's agree that many things are working well. Grammatically, the writing is solid. Sentence by sentence, the opening conveys correct information in the right order. Dialogue is, if not superb, adequately handled. So, how to make it better?

Let's start by looking at that first paragraph, which informs us about the setting. John Steinbeck often begins his stories with setting. *East of Eden*, Steinbeck's magnum opus, begins:

The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay.

Similarly, E.M. Forster opens his greatest novel, *A Passage to India*, with a paragraph that might have been lifted from a *Rough Guide*:

Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream.

Nothing wrong with opening a novel or story with a description of setting, even a static description, just as there is nothing wrong with the curtain parting to reveal the set of an opera before the characters have come on stage. Establishing the setting of a story goes a long way toward grounding us, the readers, in that story. We have a sense of place: now all we need is a specific time, a character or characters, and an event or a set of events.

That said, stories and novels have one subject: people, not geography. In *Aspects of the Novel*, his cycle of lectures on the novelist's craft, Forster himself says—or implies—as much. "Since the novelist is himself a human being," Forster writes, "there is an affinity between him and his subject-matter which is absent in many other forms of art." By "his subject matter" we may infer that he means people, not valleys, caves, or rivers.

Rather than lead off with a geography lesson ("The Suwannee River begins in a Georgia swamp ..."), the author of this first page might have launched us more directly into the action, with Dan Horne being driven up a logging road by a real estate agent, and let the setting inform that event, making it part of an experience:

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

As the real estate agent drove, Dan Horne resisted looking over the side of the logging road, to where it plunged straight down the ravine.

To take things another step away from generalized description and toward concrete, active particulars, instead of having Dan escorted up a non-specific logging road to a non-specific cabin, why not give readers what they need to form a less generic, more specific and solid image of that logging road? Is it paved or dusty or muddy? One lane or two? Is there a shoulder or is it a sheer drop (as in my version)? We don't know; we aren't told.

A mistake beginning fiction writers often make is in failing to ground the material of their stories. When the real estate agent asks, "Is this far enough out of the way for you?" where is he? And where is Dan? How far from the cabin are they? Miles or yards? For all we know, they're still on that logging road, approaching the cabin in the realtor's car. What sort of car is it, by the way? Or is it a four-wheel-drive pickup truck? Does it matter?

The answer comes down to how thoroughly we want our readers to inhabit and invest in a character's experiences. Though the information provided by this opening paragraph is clear, the actions aren't always. When the real estate agent says, "Is this far enough out of the way for you?" I picture him speaking these words while still in the agent's vehicle, perhaps as they are pulling up to the property. In fact, they've already left the car or truck.

Again, does it matter? It does if the author wants me to experience that bit of dialogue as his protagonist experiences it—and not retrospectively, on a second read, but the first time around. Ultimately, I understood where the characters were; I figured it out. But for a moment I was confused. And my confusion had nothing to do with Dan's experience.

The problem comes down to point of view. The fiction writer's purpose isn't to convey information to the reader, but to create experiences for him. The point of view of a story or a chapter of a novel establishes whose experience we're sharing at any given time. Depending on what point of view is engaged, on who narrates, we may share one character's experience at a time, or the experiences of several characters. We may share those experiences from a distance, or up close, or even (as is most often the case) from inside the head of one or more characters—though not more than one head at a time, usually.

If that seems like too many choices, brace yourself: there are more. A third-person point of view can be located at a range of depths inside a character's head, so deep all we hear are the character's thoughts, or what is sometimes called their "stream of consciousness." Or it can be located less deeply. In fact, the number of possibilities for establishing a third-person viewpoint in a work of

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

fiction is limitless, since the possibilities exist not as a discrete series of choices, but, as with the colors in a rainbow, along a continuum.

At one extreme of that rainbow is the point of view strategy used in this opening: one that is purely objective, that doesn't let us into any character's head. Like a video recorder, it sees and watches these two men, Dan and the real estate agent.

Yet the objective camera's point of view in this opening isn't always clear. In film this is never a problem, since the camera can only be in one place at a time, so we viewers never have to question our position with respect to what we are seeing on the screen. In fiction the equivalent of the camera angle has to be firmly established through language by the author. In this opening, not only do lines like, "The real estate agent took Dan Horne up a logging road to a cabin about ten yards from a creek tributary of the river" not tell us exactly where the characters are (just starting out up the road? halfway there? approaching the cabin?), they leave us clueless as to what vantage point we are seeing them from (in the car, sitting in the seat with Dan or the realtor, or seeing the car from a distance?).

Third sentence, third paragraph. "There was also a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom with a shower." Grammatically, informationally, a perfectly good sentence. But the sentence is inert, listless, dragged along by the passive "there was." Like many sentences on this first page, it squanders an opportunity to ground us in a particular character's experience.

The same sentence written from Dan's point of view:

Dan took in a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom with a shower.

Now at least point of view has been engaged. Still, the sentence fails to avail itself fully of Dan's perspective, of his experience of those rooms. A sentence that truly conveys Dan's sensibilities would read something more like this:

Dan followed the realtor into a kitchen the size of his bathroom back home, and that smelled of mildew and dishrags; from there they passed into a bedroom the walls of which were painted a blue so dreary it could have passed for gray; next, the bathroom—though "room" hardly did it justice, since it was more like a closet, one equipped with a pull-chain toilet that ran and dripped.

Granted, these may not be the rooms that the author had in mind. Perhaps the bare-bones description of the original was intended. Perhaps the author

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

wants us to experience these settings as generic, and chose the objective perspective to highlight their starkness, as Hemingway does for the small Midwestern town setting of his short story “The Killers”:

Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in.

Still, there’s a world of difference between intentional objectivity and an objective point of view that’s accidental or arbitrary. In “The Killers,” the brutal, ice-cold objectivity suits the subject: the story of two hired killers arriving in town to carry out a contract execution.

In the given first page, it’s not clear what purpose the objectivity serves, if it’s a matter of choice or omission. At any rate, we’re denied the subjective content that is the greatest privilege offered by fiction, which, unlike movies, lets us in on not only what characters say and do, but what they see, hear, taste, smell, think, and feel—while given nothing of equal value to take its place. With the subjectivity filter absent, and no “cinematic” or “stark” filter replacing it, the result is simply bland.

One solution: from the start, plant this opening more firmly in the perspective of the character whose experience the author wants us to share: Dan Horne’s experience.

This first page is just over 400 words long. It has taken me five times as many words to touch on some of the ways it might be improved. If that strikes fear into some hearts, don’t let it. If problems in fiction writing tend to come in bundles, so do solutions. Fix one problem, and you’ve fixed a dozen. In this instance, with this opening, attend to the point of view issues, and all will be better than fine.

Your Turn

Make two revisions of a first page (your own or someone else’s). The point of view strategy of the first revision should be thoroughly objective, void of subjective content. No feelings, opinions, or attitudes, just bare, objective facts from no particular character’s perspective.

For the second revision, immerse us deeply and thoroughly in one character’s perspective.

3. A Pair of Foggy Sisters

(Third Person / Default Omniscience / “Said”)

As she took off her holiday apron, Mildred called out loudly to her fellow volunteer, “Rita, we’re going to stop by on our way home tonight and look at your fall window display.”

Her sister, Margaret, took off her St. Paul’s green “Feed the Hungry” apron, wadded it up, and tossed it on the stainless-steel counter. She turned, faced Mildred, and silently mouthed, “What were you thinking? It is nearly nine o’clock.”

Mildred was determined to ignore the disapproval in Margaret’s eyes. Calmly she gathered up her umbrella and coat.

“Oh now, don’t fuss at me. It’s only a few extra blocks out of our way. The walk will be good for us.”

As they left St. Paul’s through the kitchen back door, a few of the homeless men were leaning on an iron railing smoking cigarettes. Mildred called out a chirpy, “Goodnight, see you next week.”

The men avoided eye contact and just nodded as the sisters passed them.

The night was hazy, fog setting in. Her cataracts made the moon startlingly white and hazy. As she walked, she noticed most of the shop windows had faded “For Lease” signs up. The darkened movie marquee still had a “Coming Soon” sign.

Margaret was walking way ahead of Mildred. Mildred’s speed was much slower than her sister. She’d stop every half block and step out of her shoes to rub her feet. She was wearing turquoise blue flats with red and blue rhinestones. They were her recent Goodwill senior discount day purchase.

Analysis

This passage from the opening of a short story exemplifies what goes wrong (or what doesn’t go right) when point of view isn’t thoroughly and consistently engaged.

In the first two paragraphs, the point of view is objective; we have not clearly engaged either character’s consciousness. In the third paragraph we enter Mildred’s subjective viewpoint, raising the question: whose experience

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

are we getting here? If Mildred's, then why not engage her consciousness or viewpoint clearly from the start?

Subsequent paragraphs (starting with "As they left St. Paul ...") offer no particular perspective; they are objective by default. It's not even clear who speaks some of these lines of dialogue.

One reason for that particular problem may be the too common tendency among novice writers to avoid using "said." They do so, perhaps, under the false impression that whatever else good writers do, they avoid repeating the same word twice on a page (where do they get such advice?), with "said" the most likely perpetrator, since it's used repeatedly in dialogue exchanges.

Yes, "said" gets repeated ("he said," "she said"), but no, there's nothing wrong with it. In fact there's everything right with it, providing it helps make clear who is speaking. Alternatively, some writers go out of their way to substitute other attributions or "dialogue tags," with characters laughing ("Hello there," she laughed), chuckling, stating, barking, growling, and even replying and opining things as opposed to just saying them. In nearly all cases, the substitutes for "said" are more obnoxious than inspired. In any case, there's nothing wrong with "said." That "said" gets repeated makes no difference anyway, since it goes down like water; when reading dialogue, we barely notice it. That's as it should be. "Said" is the silent butler of good dialogue.

In the fifth paragraph down, the author has written "a few of the homeless men were leaning on an iron railing." Note how this avoids assigning the experience to either one of the two sisters. Instead it's presented as passive, objective. How different that experience would be had the author written, "Through her foggy cataracts, Mildred saw some homeless men leaning on an iron railing." Those foggy cataracts don't even get mentioned for two more paragraphs. Were this scene properly embedded in Mildred's perspective, we'd have watched it through that fog from the start.

Though it pays lip service to the viewpoint of one of the two main characters, the scene as a whole is, or may as well be, objective; it does not engage either character's consciousness with any degree of thoroughness or commitment: it merely states objective facts. There's nothing strictly wrong with that, but then there's nothing terribly right about it, either.

Written firmly from Mildred's perspective, the result might be:

Mildred watched as her sister sped up and walked ahead of her.
Margaret always had to go first; she couldn't help herself. Were it not for her silly habit of stopping every half block to step out of her equally silly

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

turquoise flats (with red and blue rhinestones) and rub her feet, Mildred thought, her sister would have left her far behind.

We get the same actions as in the original, but filtered through Mildred's sensibilities, so we get not only what is happening in the scene, but her subjective emotional response and her attitude. Here's the same scene rewritten from both sisters' perspectives:

Mildred watched as her sister sped up and walked ahead of her. Margaret always had to go first; she couldn't help herself. Were it not for her silly habit of stopping every half block to step out of her ridiculous turquoise flats with red and blue rhinestones and rub her feet (which wouldn't have needed rubbing had she worn sensible shoes!), her sister would have left Mildred in the dust. Meanwhile Margaret wondered (as she rubbed her foot, or made a burlesque of rubbing it, when really she was just killing time) why her sister had to be such a slowpoke. Why oh why does she always, always have to dilly-dally? Like walking with a ball and chain 'round me bleedin' ankle!

Your Turn

In the third person, do two revisions of this first page: first, entirely from Margaret's perspective, then alternate the perspective between both characters, so it switches with every paragraph. Make sure that the viewpoint of each paragraph is clear.

4. Where the Hernandezes Live

*(Third Person / Subjectivity /
Information vs. Experience / Inhabiting Scene)*

For two days no one answered the phone, so Saturday morning Bunker drove to the address listed in the school directory. The Hernandez family lived near the airport, in a residential pocket tucked beneath a thick canopy of power lines. Their home, a converted garage with window bars and a security screen, sat behind a clapboard triplex at the end of a stumpy driveway whose weather-beaten asphalt resembled the cracked top crust of an apple pie. Bunker rang the bell, energized by the autumn air as well as the task at hand. The middle school dean had discouraged him from going, saying teachers who got involved in their students' personal lives burned out quickly. He advised patience; education was a marathon, not a sprint. Bunker rang the bell again. The dean was a good man but a bit of a codger.

A skinny gray cat jumped out from a chokeberry bush by the side of the garage. It curled around a gutter pipe and scurried away just as Robert opened the door. The boy looked different out of uniform, like a wet dog without its fluff of fur, all muscle and bone. He wanted to know if he had done something wrong. Bunker assured him he had not and asked to speak with his parents. They were out. Robert's mother worked weekends at an auto upholstery shop and wouldn't be home until after five o'clock, but Bunker could wait inside for his father.

The home was a single large space with wiry blue carpeting that resembled an S.O.S. pad. Four mattresses lay tangled in sheets against a wall, flanked by a pair of space heaters whose humming orange glow did little to cut the chill. There was a kitchenette and a bathroom visible through an open door and a gigantic television set on a console. The TV's sound had been muted and a purple dinosaur cavorted on the screen. In front of the console, on a velour sofa, a small girl stared at Bunker. She had long black hair and pearls in her ears and wore purple leggings with a Red Sox shirt. She slithered off the sofa and over to Robert, tugging on his pant leg.

Analysis

This opening presents us with a character at odds with his environment. A teacher named Bunker arrives at the home of a troubled student. The author has a sharp eye for authentic, specific details; her command of language makes for entirely readable prose. On the sentence level the writing is accomplished. Still, this passage fails to deeply engage the protagonist's sensibilities on a subjective plane. Most of what makes it to the page is purely objective; we rarely access Bunker's thoughts and perceptions.

And though there's no rule of fiction writing that says you have to engage characters on that level (sometimes writers purposefully choose not to engage with characters on the subjective level), still, here the author does—occasionally, sporadically—engage her protagonist's inner thoughts. How else can we read, "The dean was a good man but a bit of a codger"? So I feel justified in wondering why the author hasn't done so more consistently and deeply, given that such an engagement would better suit this scene.

There are other ways whereby this opening could involve us more thoroughly in the character's experience. Let's start with the first sentence:

For two days no one answered the phone, so Saturday morning Bunker drove to the address listed in the school directory.

Though this sentence gives us information about Bunker's motives and situation, it does not locate us in his experience. Is Bunker driving a car? Where? What time of day? Through what sort of neighborhood? In what kind of weather? Nor does the next sentence put me *into* the story:

The Hernandez family lived near the airport, in a residential pocket tucked beneath a thick canopy of power lines.

More information, this time about the Hernandez home. It does not locate me in a scene with a character; it does not give me an experience. Am I with Bunker walking down a sidewalk approaching the Hernandez home? No. Where am I? What experience am I having? I don't know, since there is no engagement of scene/moment/experience here, just information.

Next sentence:

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Their home, a converted garage with window bars and a security screen, sat behind a clapboard triplex at the end of a stumpy driveway whose weather-beaten asphalt resembled the cracked top crust of an apple pie.

Here I get a more solid picture of this house, yet I am still not there in the scene. In order to be in the scene, I need to know where I (the reader by way of the author by way of the narrator by way of Bunker) stand in relation to this object being perceived (house). Am I (is Bunker) approaching from across the street? Does the house hunker dark against the dawn sky? Or is it a sunny morning? Is the air cool, or warm? The author has given me information about this house, but she does not give me Bunker's experience; she does not involve me in a scene in which this house forms part of the setting.

Next sentence:

Bunker rang the bell, energized by the autumn air as well as the task at hand.

Here for the first time a scene is truly engaged. I am with Bunker ringing this bell; I feel the crisp autumn air. I'm still not quite sure what time of morning it is, if the sun has risen fully or Bunker rings that doorbell at the crack of dawn. Other missing details make it hard for me to be fully in the moment. But at least a moment is being described; I am having an experience.

The first paragraph continues:

The middle school dean had discouraged him from going, saying teachers who got involved in their students' personal lives burned out quickly. He advised patience; education was a marathon, not a sprint. Bunker rang the bell again. The dean was a good man but a bit of a codger.

Though the author doesn't spell it out for us with the words "Bunker remembered" or "Bunker thought," I assume that what I'm getting here are Bunker's thoughts and memories. Since thoughts form part of his experience, then these thoughts are *experiential*; I am sharing Bunker's experience in this moment as he stands in front of that door. What sort of door, by the way? Are there any lights on in the building? Is the buzzer located inside a vestibule, or on the stoop? See how much of this man's experience has been left out of this paragraph?

This isn't to say that all fiction writers are required to recreate, blow by blow, detail by detail, every instant of a character's experience, but one does want to

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

supply readers with enough information for them to feel themselves inhabiting key moments with a character or characters. Blow-by-blow photorealism isn't necessary or even desirable. By supplying just the right details, enough for the reader to form an impression, authors accomplish that purpose.

Yet too often—as in this opening—less experienced authors don't give us enough to put us into their character's experiences. The reason, I think, is that they fail to immerse themselves fully into their characters' experiences through their narrators. Being insufficiently engaged by way of their narrators, authors give us relatively dry reports from an outsider's—their own—perspective, informationally. It may be fine to write

The Hernandez family lived near the airport, in a residential pocket tucked beneath a thick canopy of power lines.

provided the next sentence is something like:

As he crossed the street toward the three-story brick home through the cool gloom, Bunker noticed a light burning dimly on the ground floor. He smelled smoke. A chill ran through him; he gathered his wind-breaker tightly around his neck. In the near distance he heard a back-up signal and what sounded like garbage cans being thrown around....

so the information *informs an experience* rather than just sitting there on the page courtesy of an author who has failed to properly inhabit their own material by way of their narrator.

There's another more crucial reason for writing from within a character's experience rather than informationally: when we do so, instead of our having to decide or guess what our characters do or want, they tell us. They help write the story for us. By not immersing ourselves fully by way of our narrators into our character's experiences, we not only deny the reader those experiences; we deny them to ourselves and make the task of telling their stories that much more difficult, since we have to rely fully on our intellects—on what we *think* we know about the characters—rather than on their experiences and perceptions as communicated to us by our narrators, who live with them in the story.

This is why I say that point of view isn't a technical issue, as we have been so poorly taught. Pronouns are a technical matter; but a pronoun change is not, necessarily, a change in viewpoint. Point of view is what connects us psychically to our characters by way of a narrator or narrators, and what, in turn, connects our readers to their stories.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Your Turn

Draft an opening in which a character arrives in an intimidatingly unfamiliar setting. Give the character a good reason for being there, a significant goal. Example: a character who grew up poor and is entirely unfamiliar and uncomfortable with wealth paying a visit to the estate of a multimillionaire. Second example: a fastidious, prudish, or puritanical person—a monk or a priest—visiting a brothel (not as a patron, but for some other purpose).

5. On the Couch

*(Third Person / Free Indirect Discourse /
Dramatized Routine vs. Drama)*

Barry O'Neill let himself into the sunny hall of number fifteen and threw his school bag in the corner. He went straight into the lounge, and checked his watch to see how long he had, before anyone else came home. He was sure that he would have enough time. As sure as he could be in a house where most people had the decency to stick to a schedule. His Dad came home on the same bus every evening. His mother was always out somewhere learning to be even more creative. Liz, his older sister, was a bit of a loose cannon, often arriving back from some protest or other, just ahead of being arrested. He thought it was fairly safe. He could listen out. He could only relax doing it on his own.

Barry perched on the edge of the couch, which was covered in an old sheet, a very flowery sheet. It was not the flowers per se that worried him, but the general old and jaded nature of the sheet, now reinventing itself as a throw while the room remained briefly in transition. Again.

As long as he could remember, his mother had gone from room to room, decorating constantly. It was like an obsession. He remembered wanting to help her, but being terrified that anyone might find out he was interested in color schemes and fabric swatches, so he pretended she got on his nerves, which she did, a bit.

As he sat on the sheet-clad couch, channel-surfing with the remote control, Barry searched among hundreds of options for a Western. He scrolled down the endless lists of daytime telly programmes. Hospital dramas set in the outback, ads for funeral plans and incontinence pads, presenters whipping audiences into a frenzy over some ol' one sleeping with two brothers. He hadn't time for this, and wished there were a quicker way to find what he needed. Then he found one, barely started. He glanced at his watch again, and let the air slowly out of his lungs, and sat back. A whole hour of men and horses glistening with sweat, sweeping into town, taking care of the bad guys. Sweet....

Analysis

When we say of something that we've read, "Nothing happens!"—what, exactly, do we mean? What, in fiction and other forms of narrative, constitutes something "happening," i.e., an event?

In this opening passage from a young adult novel, Barry O'Neill—a not-so-atypical teenager (as conveyed by his sullen, petulant interior take on his own world, rendered deftly through the close third-person point of view)—arrives home to an empty house. Perched on the edge of the flowery-sheet-covered couch, he channel surfs in search of a Western "telly programme" (the setting is Australia or the UK). Having at last found one, he sits back to bask in "a whole hour of men and horses glistening with sweat, sweeping into town and taking care of the bad guys." And there our opening page ends.

Is a teenager watching television enough to lure us into a novel, or even a short story, especially given that—as is not only implied but stated—Billy's "telly" watching is routine, something he does regularly if not on a daily basis?

This opening is a good example of what I call "dramatized routine"—a contradiction in terms, since routines aren't dramatic. Whether the routine is channel surfing or mud-wrestling wild orangutans in the jungles of Borneo makes no difference, a routine is still a routine. When we read about routines in fiction, or in any kind of story, most if not all the pleasure we get from the experience derives from our anticipation of seeing the routine shattered, or, at the very least, disrupted.

That said, without routine drama can't exist. Unless underpinned by routine, dramatic events have nothing to disrupt, no context against which to flourish and stand out and apart from. They read like a white-on-white painting. Routine, you could say, is the canvas across which drama spreads its garish colors, the soil from which the roses and snapdragons of dramatic events flourish.

Authors are often told to start their stories as close as possible to an inciting incident or event, to plunge their readers directly into drama in the form of exceptional events, to not waste any of the reader's time with routine. But many good and great novels open with routine.

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

That unspectacular first sentence opens Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which the titular protagonist's decision to buy flowers for a routine dinner party leads to a long, stream-of-consciousness journey through her life and

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

her past. George Gissing's 1891 novel *New Grub Street* likewise starts off with a routine—if somewhat baleful—breakfast conversation:

As the Milvains sat down to breakfast the clock of Wattleborough parish church struck eight; it was two miles away, but the strokes were borne very distinctly on the west wind this autumn morning. Jasper, listening before he cracked an egg, remarked with cheerfulness:

“There’s a man being hanged in London at this moment.”

“Surely it isn’t necessary to let us know that,” said his sister Maud, coldly.

“And in such a tone, too!” protested his sister Dora.

“Who is it?” inquired Mrs Milvain, looking at her son with a pained forehead.

“I don’t know. It happened to catch my eye in the paper yesterday that someone was to be hanged at Newgate this morning. There’s a certain satisfaction in reflecting that it is not oneself.”

Though one can make the case that foreshadowing is at work here, strictly speaking this breakfast discourse has nothing to do with the plot that follows. Yet who would say that it’s not engaging?

The challenge isn’t to eliminate routine from our writing, but to render it in such a way that, while we anticipate its disruption, we’re also—if not exactly gripping the edges of our seats—sufficiently entertained.

With the opening in question, through the evocation of Billy’s character by way of the close third-person technique (known also as “free indirect discourse” or, in the original French, *discours indirect libre*) the author goes a good way toward accomplishing this.

Free indirect discourse is one of the most powerful tools in an author’s trick bag. It lets third-person narrators dip freely in and out of a character’s stream of consciousness, accessing their thoughts, feelings, opinions, even their syntax and vocabularies and other attributes of their speech patterns, without having to say (for instance) “Barry thought” or “Barry felt.”

A fine example of free indirect discourse (there are many) may be found in the first page of *Ravel*, Jean Echenoz’s 2005 novel¹ in which he imagines the life of the composer. It opens—routinely—with the composer taking a bath:

1 Translated by Linda Coverdale.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Leaving the bathtub is sometimes quite annoying. First of all, it's a shame to abandon the soapy lukewarm water, where stray hairs wind around bubbles among the scrubbed-off skin cells, for the chill atmosphere of a poorly heated house. Then, if one is the least bit short, and the side of that claw-footed tub the least bit high, it's always a challenge to swing a leg over the edge to feel around, with a hesitant toe, for the slippery tile floor. Caution is advised, to avoid bumping one's crotch or risking a nasty fall. The solution to this predicament would be of course to order a custom-made bathtub, but that entails expenses, perhaps even exceeding the cost of the recently installed but still inadequate central heating. Better to remain submerged up to the neck for hours, if not forever, using one's right foot to periodically manipulate the hot-water faucet, thus adjusting the thermostat to maintain a comfortable amniotic ambience.

The composer-protagonist's name appears nowhere in this passage, nor is there any direct indication that these are Ravel's thoughts (as opposed to the third-person narrator's). That we are being made privy to the famous composer's sensibilities is implied by the language and syntax by which the ideas are conveyed. Indeed, Echenoz's novel owes much if not all of its success to free indirect discourse, which allows us to inhabit the composer as he engages in quotidian activities. What's it like for a genius to take a bath? Now you know.

When, in our first page, we read of Barry's sister Liz that she was "a bit of a loose cannon, often arriving back from some protest or other, just ahead of being arrested," we know—anyway we sense—that these aren't objective facts about Liz, or purely objective, but facts colored by Barry's sensibilities, filtered through his consciousness. The same way a sliced onion left next to the butter in the refrigerator invests that butter with its essence, Barry's jaundiced personality infuses his third-person narrator's diction. We discover—subtly, slyly—that this same boy who relishes the opportunity to watch sweaty men on horses in secret is also "terrified that anyone might find out he was interested in color schemes and fabric swatches." These antipodal sides of his nature define him. The scene delivers more than just Billy's routine. It conveys his divided self—an internal drama, but a drama no less—and engages us accordingly.

Which isn't to say this opening can't stand improvement. Though it goes a good way toward evoking Billy's character through his interior take on things, it could go even further. What if, instead of merely being alluded to or listed, the glimpses of telly programmes he rejects while channel surfing were described—not neutrally, but from within Billy's jaundiced perspective?

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

The result would not only tell us more precisely what is “happening” (routinely) in the scene, it would provide an opportunity to color in Billy’s personality more vividly, while occasioning some potentially delightful jaded humor.

Your Turn

Revise a first page using free indirect discourse, such that the third-person narration reflects the sensibilities and even the diction of the point of view character.

6. Drive-by Girl

*(Dramatized Routine / Interior Monologue /
Free Indirect Discourse)*

Dana wasn't a drive-by kind of a girl. Nope, she was more of a give-him-the-finger kind of a girl-woman. So, nix on the phone calls, no drunk dialing, no text messages, no emails, and certainly no driving by the house. Even now she turned right to avoid cruising by his school, her messy brain working overtime in an effort to avoid picturing him in his classroom. Jerry stayed until five, six, sometimes even seven, correcting papers, offering extra help, throwing baskets in the gym with a few of the jock kids. For a forty-six-year-old guy, he could move. Every day ended with free throws for those students who participated in discussions, part of Jerry's incentive program. Giving. That was Jerry. Dana wanted to throw up.

She took a left and another left, heading toward Stop & Shop. Grocery shopping was on her list of least favorite things to do after school, right up there with exercising and correcting freshmen essays.

At the supermarket, she was all business, plucking apples, bananas, strawberries, and raspberries—expensive, but she deserved them. A bad breakup meant feeling vulnerable. Dana wheeled her cart over to the deli counter for a garlic-roasted chicken. Oh, mashed potatoes. She looked over her shoulder, then realized that no, Jerry wasn't micromanaging her shopping cart with his disapproving look, the one he reserved especially for her and those occasions when she made bad food choices.

"Are you sure you want that?" Jerry liked to say.

And ten times out of ten, she'd put the offending item back on the shelf. Well, not this time, she wouldn't; she planned to enjoy those mashed potatoes. She might even eat some of the crispy skin off the chicken. She pushed her cart toward the checkout express line. Chicken with mashed potatoes and she'd watch an episode or two of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, starring that idiot Larry David. Living on the edge. Her inner voice cackled with thoughts of an evening spent in unproductive bliss.

Analysis

A woman fresh out of a mixed-bag relationship is harassed by the specter of her ex-lover as she goes about her routine chores.

This opening scene finds Dana taking the long way to her supermarket to avoid the school where Jerry (her ex?) teaches, and where he's known to remain long after the last bell on behalf of his students, "correcting papers, offering extra help, and throwing baskets in the gym." One gets the feeling that Jerry's solicitous nature does/did not extend to his relationship with Dana—a suspicion confirmed later at the Stop & Shop deli counter, where Jerry's ghost berates her for buying mashed potatoes to go with her rotisserie chicken.

The technique employed here is *interior monologue*, also sometimes referred to as stream of consciousness, after the term coined by the psychologist William James. But while the stream-of-consciousness technique tends to encompass narratives as a whole (such that descriptions, setting, dialogue, and actions are all conveyed, as it were, by the flowing stream), interior monologue functions as a distinct device within a traditional narrative—as in the given scene, where Dana's thoughts enhance the narrative, but don't subsume it.

Compare with this excerpt from the most famous stream-of-consciousness passage of all in *Ulysses*:

Mulveys was the first when I was in bed that morning and Mrs Rubio brought it in with the coffee she stood there standing when I asked her to hand me and I pointing at them I couldnt think of the word a hairpin to open it with ah horquilla disobliging old thing and it staring her in the face with her switch of false hair on her and vain about her appearance ugly as she was near 80 or a loo her face a mass of wrinkles with all her religion domineering because she never could get over the Atlantic fleet coming in half the ships of the world and the Union Jack flying with all her carabineros because 4 drunken English sailors took all the rock from them and because I didnt run into mass often enough in Santa Maria to please her with her shawl up on her except when there was a marriage on with all her miracles of the saints and her black blessed virgin with the silver dress....

With this sort of stream of consciousness, the author relinquishes—or appears to relinquish—control of the narrative to the mind of his protagonist. In fact that loss of control is entirely and cunningly contrived to give the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

appearance of spontaneity and randomness, much as the drips and spatters on a Pollack appear to be random and spontaneous (they aren't, really).

With interior monologue, the author never fully lets go of the reins. In the given example, the narrator (as distinct from the protagonist) remains behind the wheel, telling us, between forays into his character's thoughts, how, having choked back the bile inspired by a vision of Jerry shooting hoops with his charges, Dana "took a left and another left, heading toward the Stop & Shop." The narrator goes on to explain that in shopping Dana "is all business, plucking apples, bananas, strawberries, and raspberries—expensive, but she deserved them." Note how with that "but she deserved them" we are dunked, however briefly, into the protagonist's subjective stream, back into her interior monologue. That she plucks apples and strawberries is an objective fact; that she "deserve[s] them" is purely her subjective opinion, a sampling of her interior monologue.

This sly mixture of objective authorial narration and a character's subjective perspective goes by its own names. Called close third-person by some and free indirect discourse or method by others, it lets narrators move seamlessly between objective reporting ("Dana wheeled her cart over to the deli counter") and a character's thoughts ("Oh, mashed potatoes."), to where at times one can barely distinguish the two: ("she planned to enjoy these mashed potatoes").

Unlike the aggressive stream-of-consciousness technique, free indirect discourse gives authors full control over the degree of objectivity.

In this opening, the free indirect discourse method is well employed, though one might quibble that if Dana's brain is indeed "working overtime" in order to avoid picturing Jerry in his classroom, her effort hasn't paid off so well, as we are treated to the very images she's intent on avoiding. Better perhaps to have her inadvertently drive by the school (having neglected to take an alternative route), so the image of Jerry gyrating on the basketball court with his charges will be both better motivated and accidental.

It seems to me, too, that if indeed Dana is haunted by Jerry, better use might be made of his specter, who ought to be right there in the driver's seat beside her, telling her to change lanes and use the turning signal and that she almost cut that curb. The supermarket scene likewise feels stingy. Why not have Jerry's take on more than mashed potatoes? Why not see him micromanaging Dana's shopping list? Though not there physically, Jerry is a character in this scene—or should be. Under the influence of Jerry's ghost Dana might hesitate to drop that quart of mashed potatoes into her cart, and then defy him. Surely that beats telling us that this is what she would not have done in the past.

However skillfully rendered, a character's interior thoughts are seldom as telling as their actions.

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

Your Turn

Draft or revise an opening using free indirect discourse, so that the narration is colored by the point-of-view character's sensibilities as carried by her or his stream of consciousness.

7. A Woman Bedazzled

(Unreliable Narrators & Narratives vs. Unreliable Authors)

Even with their tint of hazy grime—swirled along the sides from hasty attempts at sponging—the sunlight radiated through the auto shop’s wall-sized windows so intensely that Anna envied the blind man across from her, with his deep black sunglass lenses. The man’s service dog slept soundly in an amber sunbeam. Anna wondered why she never saw blind women around town with their harnessed dogs. She supposed that even with a German Shepherd’s protection a mugging or rape were still too real a possibility for the women—hardly worth the risk for a little shopping. She closed her eyes tightly against the light, the heat and starry red swirls glowing through her lids, dizzying her to sleepiness. She had often felt tired lately.

An air compressor rumbled in the garage behind her, a man’s voice hollering over the noise in Spanish. Another man responded, “They’re in. Came in today’s truck.”

Anna imagined a delivery of boxes containing complex bits of metallic machinery, with protruding gears and wires and thin hoses, like gleaming, steel organs in nests of shredded packing paper. She thought how vulnerable everyone in the waiting room was—at the mercy of the men with their greasy fingers and wrenches clinking under their car hoods. And if their work was shoddy, it was almost as if she deserved it—sitting helplessly in her vinyl seat, watching *Jeopardy*, instead of teaching herself mechanics and blackening her own palms with grease.

She picked up a magazine from the Formica table, leafed through it without focusing on any of the words, simply noting colors and shapes in the manner of an infant.

Analysis

A woman waits in an auto repair shop while her car is serviced. While waiting she is distracted by the glare of sunlight through the shop’s windows, to the point where she envies the blind man waiting across from her, with his “deep black sunglass lenses.” She goes on to ruminate about the lack of blind women in the town, at least in public places, and concludes that “even with a German Shepherd’s protection” such women would be vulnerable to muggers and rapists.

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

Odd thoughts for a woman to have on an otherwise ordinary day at the auto shop. But then Anna is hot and tired (“She had often felt tired lately”), and even a little dizzy, and these oddly cynical thoughts might be ascribed at least in part to her exhaustion.

Then the litany of odd thoughts resumes, with Anna concluding that “everyone in the [auto repair shop] waiting room” is vulnerable, at the mercy of mechanics “with their greasy fingers and wrenches clinking under their car hoods.” She’s convinced that the mechanics are out to rip her off, and furthermore that she deserves it for “sitting helplessly in her vinyl seat, watching *Jeopardy*” instead of teaching herself mechanics (one wonders if at the dentist’s office she berates herself for not having gone to dental school). One begins to suspect that these aren’t merely the ruminations of an exhausted and wary woman, but the warped notions of a paranoid. At the very least Anna is deeply depressed.

The world as interpreted by a mind slightly off its tether is the subject of this opening. It’s a good, if disturbing, read. I for one would read on to know more about this character with whom there is clearly something enticingly wrong, who compares spare car parts to human organs “in nests of shredded packing paper” and feels so undone by the sun’s rays through a window she wishes herself blind.

In first-person fiction we call such a character narrator “unreliable.” What makes a narrative unreliable isn’t usually that he or she gives us the wrong facts, but that the facts are presented through the distorting filter or tinted lens of a psyche that has lost its grasp on reality, or anyway misses the point. From her perspective, Anna may see things very clearly, but she doesn’t see them as you and I would see them. Unreliable narratives don’t lie; rather, they provide us with perspectives that are far from objective or insightful.

A good example of this is the narrator of John Cheever’s short story “Goodbye, My Brother,” who tells us up front that his family “has always been very close in spirit,” then goes on to eviscerate said family—and especially his brother, who by the story’s end the narrator has attacked not only verbally, but physically, laying him flat on his back with a massive, saltwater-logged root. From the narrator’s perspective this may qualify as filial devotion, but Cheever’s readers know better, as we are meant to. The whole point of an unreliable narrative is that it makes us read *between the lines*.

Another good example of an unreliable protagonist is the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, a man rendered so emotionally comatose by his deeply ingrained sense of propriety that given one last chance at love he botches it. It’s a terribly sad story, rendered sadder for being told by its victim,

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

who doesn't even realize how sad it is, or even get that the story he tells us is a tragedy, and that he is its tragic hero.

I made my exit, and it was not until after I had done so that it occurred to me I had not actually offered my condolences (on the death of my assistant, Miss Kenton's, aunt). I could well imagine the blow the news would be to her, her aunt having been, to all intents and purposes, like a mother to her, and I paused out in the corridor, wondering if I should go back, knock and make good my omission. But then it occurred to me that if I were to do so, I might easily intrude upon her private grief.

Though Ishiguro's butler-narrator reports the above scene accurately insofar as the facts are concerned, he misses the point: namely that he's in love with Miss Kenton, but his crippling sense of propriety prevents him from seeing this, so not only does he squander the opportunity to comfort her in her hour of need; he bungles his last chance at love.

But the protagonist of the first page presented here has more in common with Chief Broom, the narrator of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a native American inpatient at a mental hospital in the Pacific Northwest, for whom events unfold through a hallucinatory fog as he pushes his broom back and forth down the hospital's corridors. Though his view of things is distorted, Chief Broom is the perfect narrator for Kesey's novel about a belligerent individualist (R.P. McMurphy) who fakes his way into the loony bin to avoid prison time, since he's been faking his own mental illness. Only after Kesey concocted Chief Broom (which event, we're told, occurred during one of the fledgling author's voluntarily drugged interludes) was he able to successfully write his novel.

Don't get out the peyote just yet. Unreliable narratives are rare, tricky birds, to be engaged only with the understanding that an unreliable narrative is what's intended, since the ultimate subject of an unreliable narrative is the narrator's unreliability. For this reason, though not altogether impossible, an intentionally unreliable third-person narrator is at best an odd duck. The writer who produces such a creature runs the risk of presenting readers not with an unreliable narrator, but with an unreliable author, for which there can be little if any excuse.

Unless there really does turn out to be something wrong with Anna—if her weird, unhinged perceptions are not just the author parading his or her descriptive prowess, being clever or cute—then this opening fails by making promises it won't deliver on, i.e., saddling us with an unreliable *author*.

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

But I suspect this author won't let us down, that these perceptions of Anna's are there for a good reason, to introduce us to the psyche of a woman on the verge of a mental breakdown. I suspect, too, that as the story progresses Anna's problems will get worse. How much worse will they get? And will Anna come through all right? These are reasons to keep reading.

Your Turn

Turn this first page into a true unreliable narrative. To do so, you'll need to do two things: first, change it to first person. Secondly, while not distorting or altering any of the facts, somehow make it clear that the perspective we are being offered is distorted or anyway not entirely accurate or objective: to get what's really going on, we must read between the lines.

8. The Curfew

(Second Person)

Ten shivering minutes pass on the balcony of your mother's condo before you realize that all cars look the same from a distance in the night: faceless grey bodies with brilliant bright eyes. You practice sucking in your gut and glance at your cell phone's clock, breathing a sigh that turns to smoke in the crisp November air. Winter's cold is fresh and new, but already you're bored with it, every ounce of your teenage being focused on the coming spring, the day in March when you'll shred your learner's permit to confetti and ride out with your mom to the Perrin-Beitel D.P.S. There, after you wait in line and pass a simple test, a man in a short-sleeved shirt and a clip-on tie will snap your photo and hand you a small, plastic card. In doing so, he will set you free. Your heart beats fast just thinking of it.

But for now you're fifteen and four hours from a midnight curfew, and every second lost waiting for your ride to show up makes the idea of getting to your first-ever party—a *real* party, with beer and liquor and girls—seem about as likely as a snowstorm in San Antonio. From the H-E-B lot across Broadway, thousands of jet-black grackles puff up their chests and yammer in the leafless live oaks, their static squawks a laugh track aimed right at your ears. Again you reach for your phone. You want to call Ari—not to annoy him, not to be that needy, car-less kid—just to touch base, to make sure he and Parker are still on the way. But as your fingers meet the keypad, a low rumbling and a series of honks overtakes the noise of the birds. You hustle back inside and shout that you're off to another Friday night movie at the Quarry. Your mom says to be careful, asks you to wake her when you get home. But you don't have time to reply; you're halfway down the stairs as it is, stumbling over yourself as you rush into the dark.

Analysis

There's a reason why few stories—and even fewer novels—are written using the second-person point of view. It tires readers out. It bosses them around. It says to them, in effect: you step into the protagonist's shoes, you play the role, you do what he/she does. Depending on who the character is, and what befalls

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

them, readers may or may not want to play along. Even assuming that they're game, they may not be willing to play for hundreds of pages.

Which isn't to say that second person doesn't have its place. It has been used to great effect, more often in short stories, most notoriously by Lorrie Moore in what may still be her most famous collection, *Self-Help*, wherein many stories take the form of how-to guides, to wit (from "How to Be a Writer"):

First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, fourteen. Early, critical disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom. She is tough and practical. She has a son in Vietnam and a husband who may be having an affair. She believes in wearing brown because it hides spots. She'll look briefly at your writing, then back up at you with a face blank as a doughnut. She'll say: 'How about emptying the dishwasher?'

Note how easily the second person viewpoint lends itself to comedy—far more easily and willingly than it lends itself to tragedy, since though we balk at being forced to endure, say, a heroin addict's withdrawal symptoms or gang rape, we don't seem to mind being the butt of a joke. At any rate, we don't mind for short intervals—say, the length of a short story.

That said, the second-person technique has proven extremely successful with longer forms, or anyway with one longer form, namely Jay McInerney's 1984 love letter to Yuppiedom, *Bright Lights, Big City*. Throughout McInerney's novel, "you" snort a lot of Bolivian marching powder. Here, too, the overall effect is comic, though by the book's end the comedy has turned to pathos and arguably to self-pity. But then, the self being pitied is, well, you.

Owing to the tortured metaphysical logic of second-person narrations, we readers have, in a sense, only ourselves to blame for whatever weaknesses endow their characters. We bear their burdens and their faults—and, to some extent at least, the faults of their authors. Call it guilt by association.

Then again many readers will cross their arms and say, "As a matter of fact, no, I am not in a nightclub talking to a girl with a bald head." And that will be that. In using the second person, you throw down a gauntlet. Supposing the reader doesn't pick it up?

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

In the given example, “you” (a teenage boy) wait on the balcony of your parents’ home to be picked up by some friends for your “first-ever party.” Just thinking of it “your heart beats fast,” for you know it’s not just a party that awaits you at the far end of that ride: it’s a rite of passage, an initiation. There will be “beer and liquor and girls.” You almost can’t believe it. It even seems to you, as you stand there waiting, that the likelihood of your actually achieving this milestone is about as great as that of “a snowstorm in San Antonio.”

The author does indeed put us into (or forces us, rather: for the second-person point of view is non-consensual) into the psyche of an adolescent boy, a psyche beside itself with nervous erotic energy and anticipation. The details are convincingly precise, down to the grackles whose cries make a laugh track of the night—fittingly, for here, too, though there’s drama, it’s underscored by comedy.

It makes for a strong opening to a story whose theme is the heady anxiety of adolescence—a story I, for one, wouldn’t mind reading. Or playing the lead in.

Your Turn

Rewrite a first page of your own or another work in the second person.

9. Narrating from the Great Beyond

(Dead Narrator / Gratuitous Narrative Devices)

I should probably forewarn you, before we get into the story, that I'm dead.

That's why this story isn't about me, it's about my grandson.

Oh, I might pop up in conversations here and there but don't let that fool you. I am dead.

There, now that we have THAT out of the way, let's begin.

This story is about Noah Emmaus, the youngest and latest in our long family line, the oldest in Incanto. Our patriarch, "Dad" Emmaus, came to the island five hundred years ago on The Boat, and it was his leadership that helped the small group of settlers turn this little patch of dirt in the Gulf of Mexico into a nation all its own. Several generations later, it was Nicolas Emmaus who helped hammer out a treaty with the United States to add our island to their great Union as a territory.

My grandfather, Leslie Emmaus, founded our family business in 1923 as a little vaudeville show in downtown Incanto City, featuring the unique individuals that lived around that area. That little show was so popular, it inspired the tourism industry that has made the city so wealthy, and built Emmaus, Inc. into the leading entertainment and tourism business in the world.

That business now rests on the young shoulders of my grandson, Noah. He has been the CEO for just about a year, and is as good at that job at twenty-one as his father or I ever were.

But there I go rambling again. On to our story.

It began early one Friday morning at Noah's penthouse apartment. The sun was just barely peeking over the horizon, and the only light inside was the glow coming from the big television in his bedroom. Noah was starting his morning, like he did every morning, watching the news and doing yoga.

Analysis

I remember my first encounter with a dead narrator. It was at a screening of *Sunset Boulevard* at a revival house in Greenwich Village. Anyone who's seen Billy Wilder's classic film noir remembers the opening shot of a suited man

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

floating face down in Norma Desmond's swimming pool. The voiceover meanwhile intones (slyly and cynically, as befitting a noir narrator): "Yes, this is Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, California. It's about five o'clock in the morning. That's the Homicide Squad—complete with detectives and newspapermen. A murder has been reported from one of those great big houses in the ten-thousand block. You'll read about it in the late editions, I'm sure."

The voice belongs to actor William Holden, and so does the floating body.

Since then I've had mixed feelings about ghost narrators. As narrative sleights of hand go, it strikes me as a little too easy, a bit too glib. It also requires suspension of all four laws of thermodynamics. "No fair!" is my first reaction. "Narrating from the dead—that's cheating!"

Though I've since become a fan of *Sunset Boulevard*, I'm still not sure that Wilder gets away with it—or, assuming that he does, that he *should*.

Since Bill Holden landed face down in that pool there've been no shortage of dead narrators in film and literature. Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* offers a relatively recent example. Sebold's novel begins, "My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973." Like the fish she's named for, Sebold's narrator swims against the current of mortality to expose the circumstances surrounding her rape and murder.

It's a gutsy gambit—or was, anyway, back in 2002 when Sebold's novel was first published to rave reviews. Since then, largely owing to its success, there's been an epidemic of dead narrators mostly in books for young people: Cynthia Rylant's *Heavenly Village*, Eoin Colfer's *The Wish List*, Gary Soto's *The Afterlife*. Each of these novels affords its young readers an opportunity to confront mortality, hell, redemption, and other issues that used to be the purview of churches, but without being bored to their own real deaths by sermons.

Then there are novels narrated by the Grim Reaper himself. I'm thinking, of course, of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, an otherwise familiar-to-the-point-of-triteness Holocaust story rescued from cliché by its boldly original narrative approach. At least it seems boldly original, until one realizes that the Grim-Reaper-as-Narrator is merely good ol' omniscience wearing a cloak and carrying a scythe, which didn't prevent *The Book Thief* from becoming a runaway bestseller.

If dead narrators haven't yet worn out their welcome, they're perilously close to doing so. My guess is it won't be too long before they go the way of angels and anthropomorphic rabbits.

A. POINT OF VIEW: WHO SPEAKS?

Apart from being yesterday's news, dead narrators also run the risk of being merely gratuitous. Here, the narrator himself seems intent on pointing out the superfluity of his author's attention-grabbing conceit: "Before we get into the story ...", "... this story isn't about me ...", "... now that we have THAT out of the way ...". How are we readers to treat such statements if not as disclaimers warning us against investing too deeply in a patently gratuitous device?

Still, the device does serve a purpose: it shocks the reader into a state of alertness in the hope of keeping him awake through what the narrator himself admits is a dull ramble of biographical names and dates. Indeed, up to the last paragraph, everything in this opening page apologizes for itself, leading me to wonder why—rather than commit said offenses in the first place—our narrator doesn't simply begin with the perfectly good final paragraph.

It may not grab readers by the throat; but from the reader's perspective it beats being grabbed by a gratuitous corpse.

Your Turn

Choose a novel or story you are well familiar with (it can be written in either the first or the third person). Write a new opening for it in which you introduce a dead narrator. For instance, write a new opening to *The Great Gatsby* in which Gatsby narrates his own story from beyond the grave. Or Holden Caulfield. Or Jane Eyre. Or any unnamed, unidentified narrator. (Note: it will be easier than you think.)

B. Structure:

Where to Begin?

THOUGH RELATED, PLOT AND STRUCTURE ARE TWO DIFFERENT things. The events of a story—the things that happen—along with their causal relationships—why they happen—form its *plot*. *Structure* is the order in which those events are conveyed. A story that ends with the protagonists' deaths may start with that event and work backwards (the strategy Peter Nichols chose for his bestselling novel *The Rocks*), or it may begin with the protagonists' first meeting and proceed from there. Similarly, a rags-to-riches story might start with its hero as a rich woman, then go back and tell the story of how she achieved her wealth from a state of poverty.

Or a story might begin somewhere in the middle, with some dramatic event that raises the question, "How did this event come to be? What circumstances propelled this character or these characters into this situation?" From the story's provocative middle we would typically be taken to a much earlier event, the event that started it all, otherwise known as the *inciting incident*.

The question of where to begin is among the most perplexing questions authors face. One way to answer is to ask oneself, "What question does my story mainly exist to answer?" Having arrived at that question, choose an opening event or moment that raises that same question in the reader's mind, compelling her to keep reading.

Chekhov said, "The writer's task is not to solve the problem, but to frame the problem correctly."² Of structure, Chekhov might have said something similar, especially as it relates to first pages. *The writer's task isn't to answer the question, but to frame the question correctly.*

As to the answer, that's what the rest of the story is for.

2 *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, translated by Constance Garnett (1920).

10. Megan's Life: A Surfeit of Beginnings

(Where to Begin? / Inciting Incident / Death)

Megan's life was set to reboot in ten days. She glanced again at the two tickets to New York lying on the nightstand. How would she make it through final exams, packing, saying goodbye to friends, when all she wanted to do was grab Luke's hand, hop a cab to the airport, and launch their grand adventure? Her mind still whirling, she crawled into bed and turned out the light.

At dawn her cell phone chirped five times, waking her from a dead sleep. When she answered, no one was there. She cursed the damn thing, then checked the call log. Luke. She dialed him back but he didn't pick up.

They sent two policemen to tell her. He'd swerved to avoid a young boy who'd wandered into the street and his car slammed into a lamppost. By the time help arrived, he was gone. Hers was the last number he'd dialed. They needed her to come down to the station.

The police sergeant led her through hallway after hallway, down stairs into a sparse room with a large curtain covering one wall, and asked if she was ready. Of course I'm not ready, you ass. This is the man I loved, the man I wanted to spend my life with. But she didn't say that. What she did was nod, then nod again when she saw the body, then throw up in her hands.

She caught a bus to his apartment and let herself in. She packed up the things she'd left there—a change of clothes, her toothbrush, a ratty pair of slippers. She took the picture of the two of them on the beach in Sausalito, his favorite Miles Davis album, and his unfinished screenplay. His mother and stepfather, who'd never even met her, could take care of the rest when they flew in.

The plan had been to move right after graduation. He'd found a studio apartment and put down a deposit. He'd work at *Huffington Post*, she'd revise her novel and look for an agent. They'd eat ramen noodles, drink cheap wine, bike through Central Park on Sundays. Turned out that wasn't going to be her life after all.

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

Instead she boarded American Flight 6023 and flew to Chicago. To her childhood home. To her mother Helen. To the last place on earth she wanted to be.

Analysis

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.” These famous words, usually attributed to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, are in fact from William Hutchinson Murray’s 1951 book *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*. Whatever its source, the quote doesn’t tell us *where* to begin, let alone *how*.

Where to begin? The question comes down to *structure*. Not what happened, i.e., the series of events that make a story, but the order in which those events are conveyed. Should we start with the beginning, or at the end? Or should we cherry-pick a dramatic scene from somewhere in the middle, and backtrack from there, filling in all the things that lead up to that dramatic moment, then continue to the end?

Assuming we’ve chosen to tell a story from the beginning, *what* beginning do we start with? Writing guides often use the term *inciting incident*, meaning the event or incident that propels a character or characters out of their status quo existence, igniting the plot.

But locating that inciting incident isn’t always that simple, since often there’s more than one. In fact there’s *always* more than one, with an inciting incident lurking behind every inciting incident, a breadcrumb trail of inciting incidents leading back to the birth of the protagonist and beyond, to her conception, and the birth of her parents, and the birth of *their* parents, and, finally, ultimately, by logical extension, the creation of the universe.

But unless you’re writing the Bible (or a James Michener novel), you probably want to begin your story as close as possible to the event that sends your protagonist off on her dramatic journey—a journey of exceptional struggles and fresh opportunities.

This first page of a novel about a woman whose dreams are shattered by her boyfriend’s sudden death confronts us with a plethora of beginnings. It’s as if the author, unwilling to decide between several opening strategies, has left them all on the table. Rather than enhancing and building on each other, the multiple openings compete with and weaken each other, resulting in an indecisive, jerky, wishy-washy opening.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

The first paragraph gives us Beginning 1: As Megan, the protagonist, prepares for bed, she contemplates her upcoming trip with boyfriend Luke to New York City, and the new life they plan to lead there.

The problem with this beginning is that it's static, with the action, such as it is, consisting of Megan envisioning (the strongest verb applicable) her future with Luke, an "event," if it can be called that, that has doubtlessly happened in the past and will as doubtlessly occur again over the course of the ten days that remain before the actual journey: a routine event, in other words.

And as I've pointed out before, routine is of interest to readers only insofar as we expect it to be disrupted or upset. So why not begin with the thing that upsets it?

Which brings us to Beginning 2: Luke's unanswered phone call. Arguably this, too, is routine. Presumably it's not the first time Luke has called Megan, or the first time that, having missed his call, Megan phones back and gets no answer. So as an inciting event, something that clearly disrupts routine, this beginning likewise leaves something to be desired.

The same can hardly be said of Beginning 3, in which Megan opens her front door to two policemen who have come bearing the news that her boyfriend has died. That this qualifies as an inciting incident, a moment or event that shatters routine, can hardly be denied: making it, if not the obvious choice for a beginning, a strong contender.

The next paragraph, in which Megan identifies Luke's corpse at the morgue (Beginning 4), implies Beginning 3, while taking it one step further, to a moment no less dramatic. This, too, would make a strong beginning.

But then so would Beginning 5 (next paragraph), which finds us with Megan in Luke's apartment, gathering her belongings a day or so after his death. Though less intrinsically shocking than Beginnings 3 and 4, this scene, unlike them, allows for memories and other reflections aroused by the objects in that apartment, providing the author with an opportunity (unexploited here) to convey to us through those memories the dreams that have been shattered by Luke's death (which this scene, too, leaves to implication).

Finally we come to Beginning 6, which puts us aboard a passenger plane with Megan, bound for Chicago and her childhood home, "the last place she wants to be." Though it lacks the drama and urgency of the previous four openings, it's also nearest and dearest to the presumptive plot, which isn't about a woman whose boyfriend has died, but about the journey which that event sends her on, a journey that (also probably) begins with this plane trip to her childhood home. So why not start there?

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

In starting decisively with any one of these possible beginnings rather than rushing us through all of them, the author might slow things down and take more time, exploiting their dramas—whether those dramas are external and dynamic (police officers at front door; identifying corpse) or internal and reflective (sorting through objects, memories, imagining what might have been; ditto aboard childhood home-bound plane).

Given the attention it deserves, each of these possible beginnings could easily fill a first page.

Your Turn

Choosing one of the suggested starting points for this first page, revise it accordingly. Whatever moment or event you choose to begin with, it should be expanded to take up most, if not all, of the revised first page.

11. Flying with Mum and Dad

(In Medias Res / *Framing the Question*)

I was sitting on Mum's lap in the front seat of the small single-engine airplane as we accelerated down the bumpy overgrown grass strip with Dad at the controls.

Just over halfway into takeoff, we unexpectedly hit a deep pothole. Instantly I was tugged upwards out of Mum's arms, thrashing my head against the instrument panel above.

I thumped heavily back down again, landing askew on Mum's lap. Blood gushed from my head and Mum was frantic. Dad was shocked too, but remained composed, still needing to focus on the takeoff.

"I've got to keep going," he yelled above my cries and Mum's terrified shouting.

"I can't stop now, I'm too advanced. I can get airborne, come back 'round again and land,"—all the while nearing the end of the grass strip, pulling back on the controls and dealing with the hysteria inside the cabin.

He banked the aircraft to the left and looked back at Mum. "Is Taylor OK?"

Mum had used a length of her dress to wipe away the blood and saw a deep, long gash to my head which would need stitches. Being a nurse, she scrunched up her dress and pressed it firmly against my head as she pulled me tight against her.

She peered over her shoulder at my little sister, Giovanna, who sat bravely; quiet and frightened, watching all of the drama as it had played out.

"Are you all right, darling?" Mum asked anxiously.

Giovanna nodded dumbly as she clung tightly to her seatbelt.

"It won't be long now, love," Mum reassured, despite her own panic.

As we headed back to the airstrip it wasn't long before we had landed and Mum was attending to my head wound; just another sticking plaster.

Dad had flying in his blood and you would never have known to look at him; to witness his obvious prowess and experience with his flying, that he had once been a young, small, unfed and neglected boy from Uruguay who had been miraculously rescued by elderly Irish missionaries.

Analysis

By starting “in the middle of things” or *in medias res*, authors avoid the long and potentially tedious expositional climb to exciting scenes and dramatic events, while at the same time plunging readers headlong into a story’s central issues, themes, and conflicts. By starting *in medias res*, they frontload their tales with action and suspense.

But when starting *in medias res*, it’s important to choose a moment or scene that not only gains a reader’s attention, but is relevant to the work as a whole, providing a tantalizing glimpse of what’s to come, while also raising the right questions—namely, those questions which the book as a whole exists to answer. An opening that’s sensational but with only a tangential or tenuous relationship to the book’s overall theme may pull in readers, but it will also lead them to disappointment and, possibly, frustration and resentment.

The Duke of Deception, Geoffrey Wolff’s brilliant memoir about his con-artist father, opens not in the middle but near the end, with Wolff learning of his father’s death.

While Wolff and his family are summering in Narragansett, a telephone rings. The telephone belongs to the friend on whose “shaded terrace” Wolff is relaxing, “sitting in an overstuffed wicker chair ... glancing at sailboats beating out to Block Island ... smelling roses and fresh cut grass” and drinking rum “with tonic and lime.” His soon-to-be four-year-old son Nicholas is with his mother-in-law, out for a ride in her black Ford sedan. Nicholas’s little brother Justin is with his mother at the beach.

“It was almost possible to disbelieve in death that day,” Wolff writes, “to put out of mind a son’s unbuckled seat belt and the power of surf at the water’s edge.” The opening continues:

In my memory now, as in some melodrama, I hear the phone ring, but I didn’t hear it then. The phone in that house seemed always to be ringing. My wife’s brother-in-law John was called to the telephone [...] John returned [...] As I stared down the terrace at him, Kay and her children quit talking, and John’s cheeks began to dance. I looked at the widow Kay, she looked away, and I knew what I knew. I walked down that terrace to learn which of my boys was dead.

In fact neither of Wolff’s sons has died. The bad news has to do with his father. “Your father is dead,” John tells him. To which Wolff replies,

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

“Thank God.” That “Thank God” is what Wolff’s book exists to explain. That “Thank God” frames the tale that follows, puts it into context, while at the same time raising a pertinent question: why, on learning of his father’s death, would a man say “Thank God”? Had one of Wolff’s sons indeed died, it would still have made for a powerful prologue, but for a different memoir.

Here, in this opening page of the story of a woman whose father was a pilot, we begin with her in her father’s plane as it accelerates down a grassy runway. The airplane’s wheels strike a pothole and the narrator’s skull is bashed against an instrument panel. Too late to abort takeoff, the father lofts his injured daughter into the sky while her mother “wipe[s] away the blood” from the “long, deep gash to [her] head which would need stitches.” Since Mom is a nurse, she tends her child’s wound with expert calm, “scrunching up her dress and press[ing] it firmly” into the gash.

All of this is described well, and it is certainly dramatic. Yet the scene is misleading, since it conveys nothing essential about the father or his relationship with his daughter (nor does it illustrate his piloting skills; anyone can hit a pothole). What’s best demonstrated here are the mother’s nursing skills. Yet my sense is that these are not central to the memoir. Ultimately, since it fails to point to the crux of the story, this opening scene feels anecdotal, a curious event, but not an exemplary, or relevant, one.

The last paragraph of the opening crash-lands us into pure summary exposition about the father’s impoverished Uruguayan past.

Might it not be better to choose an opening scene wherein somehow that past intrudes on the present: where, for instance, the father flies his daughter over the land of his birth? Then we would have action, drama, exposition, and relevance all at once.

Your Turn

Draft an opening in which a character revisits the scene of a life-changing event. It can be fiction or nonfiction (in which case the event will have happened to you). Example: with his spouse, partner, or lover in tow, a character visits the former home of a now-dead college professor who, for better or worse, changed his life. Note: the partner or lover isn’t keen in this pilgrimage.

12. A Fateful First Encounter

(First Glimpse / Atmosphere / Framing Device / Authorial Intrusion)

Working Title: "Prelude to a Kiss"

The first time they met was in Atlantic City.

She had a small and shabby apartment above a run-down cigar shop across from the marina, the rows of neat white boats bobbing and clacking in the wind, the evening hot and sultry, water whispering at the bay. She parked her little old white Ford Cortina in the little parking space in front, the thudding of the car door and the click of the lock interrupting the silence of the evening. Her sandals echoing loudly on the pavement in the peaceful azure of the early evening, she slowly made her way to the back door, clambering over the overflowing rubbish bins and listening to the calming rushing of the bay that was just a few hundred yards in front of her. She fumbled with her keys in the lock, before stepping into the cool dimness of the storage room behind the main shop; taking the stairs two at a time, she finally reached her destination, a cheap and thin door that led into a poky and sparsely furnished apartment.

The familiar calming scent of tobacco wafted lazily through the still open windows, thrown wide in the stifling heat of the day. The sun was beginning to sink on the New Jersey coastline and she breathed in the sticky, salty sea air with relish. A gentle warm breeze played on the faded burgundy curtains, fluttering flirtatiously with the windowpanes, the sounds of the lapping and onrushing of waves lulling her mind; for all her worries, all her past and future misdeeds, this city would always live long in her heart, longer than the ones she had left behind—the others, those that held memories she would rather not recall.

She stepped out onto the tiny balcony, a glass of cheap chilled white wine in hand, and sat down on an elderly chair and table ensemble that nearly filled the petite balcony, her feet up on the dusty table. She watched the clear waters of the bay for a while, sparkling in the receding daylight, and the lights blinking on the coastline.

Analysis

An unnamed woman of indeterminate age—having either survived a broken love affair or preparing to embark on one—settles into her shabby beachfront apartment. Based on the title, we may reasonably assume the latter.

Titles are microcosms, miniatures of the stories or novels they stand for. Though titles aren't protected by copyright, and though there's no law requiring them to be original, you want to consider whether a title has too much wear and tear on it. A quick search at Amazon's book holdings reveals no fewer than 49 products titled "Prelude to a Kiss," best known as that of Craig Lucas's 1988 drama. The title "Prelude to a [fill in the blank]" is even more common, so unless used ironically it may strike some readers as trite.

Even if it isn't trite, the title is abstract; it suggests no image or metaphor.

The direct, inviting first line promises a love story. By making this sentence its own paragraph, the author increases its portentousness, suggesting that this meeting has been fateful and resulted in at least one broken heart, and possibly in tragedy.

The implied point of view in the second paragraph is that of the protagonist about to park her car in front of the cigar shop housed in the building in which she lives. But the sensory details provided here are not, or don't seem to be, part of her experience of the present moment. Can she simultaneously be parking her car and hearing the "clacking [of] the wind"? Does she see "neat white boats bobbing" as she maneuvers her Ford? If one of the purposes of fiction is to create experiences for the reader, it's important for the author to know whose experience is being reported at any given time. Is the experience of "neat white boats bobbing and clacking in the wind" that of the heroine parking her car, or that of an omniscient, objective narrator? Or has information about the setting of this opening scene leached into it by way of an intrusive author?

In the same paragraph the point of view settles into that of the female protagonist. We enjoy a wealth of sensual sensory details—the clicking of sandals against pavement, the color of the evening sky, the calm rushing of the bay. Sounds, sighs, and smells—all generously and judiciously evoked. The moment is richly atmospheric. At the end of the same paragraph, however, the viewpoint shifts again, with the reader being told about the quality of the apartment beyond the "cheap and thin door"—despite the fact that the protagonist has yet to open that door and enter into that experience. This, too, may be an instance of authorial intrusion: the author's knowledge leaking into the narrator. But when reading a work of fiction, it's not the author whose perspective we're interested in sharing, but that of a narrator or narrators created by

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

the author. In the case of a third-person narrator, at first the difference may seem purely semantic or hair-splitting. In fact, the difference is a crucial one, since while the author exists outside of her story, the narrator inhabits the world of the story.

Since by and large this third-person narrator shares the perspective of the protagonist, why not describe the inside of her apartment from her viewpoint, once she has entered it, rather than before, when it's not (yet) part of her momentary experience?

The third and fourth paragraphs of this opening build upon the mood and atmosphere established by the second paragraph. Here the details of setting are firmly grounded in the character's experience: she sees the sun setting, smells the salty air, hears waves lapping.

So far, beyond the vague and coy reference to "all her worries," nothing in the way of a conflict or plot is suggested, let alone engaged. Which is fine, provided the writer does indeed have a story to tell us concerning this woman, and provided that the status quo of her daily existence, so well established here, is disrupted within the next page or two—as readers have every right to expect, being uninterested in routine except to see it broken.

On that note, a few questions. Is this where the story begins, or where it ends? Has the fateful meeting alluded to in the first sentence already occurred, or does it lie in store? The opening sentence suggests that we will bear witness to the fateful encounter by way of a dramatic scene. It promises a demonstration, a dramatization.

In view of which, unless the front doorbell is about to ring (while our protagonist sips Chablis on her balcony), perhaps it would be wiser for the author to state more specifically in that first sentence the circumstances of the fateful meeting ("They met in a bar in Atlantic City") and begin her story accordingly—not with the protagonist wallowing routinely in her apartment, but at that bar the evening in question.

In any case the author should be clear about what's being offered in this scene—a fateful first encounter, or a woman's routine existence in her shabby Atlantic City digs? Or has that fateful meeting already taken place, along with the love affair engendered by it, in a past to which this scene is more prologue than prelude? In that case, what we're presented with here is the frame of a story rather than the story itself. The story is what happened in the past; the opening scene merely contextualizes or opens the door to it. What follows in that case will, in essence, be a flashback—one that will take up the rest of the book or story. The proper term for that is a *framed narrative* (as opposed to a regular flashback, which fits inside a scene and does not become the story).

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Whatever this author intends, based on the quality of this first page, I would keep reading. Would you?

Your Turn

Draft or revise a first page/scene that serves as the frame for a story set in the past, i.e., a framed narrative. (Note: though they have much in common, a framed narrative differs from starting *in medias res*, since a framed narrative begins with a moment or event that follows or comes at the very end of the story, and not from the middle or anywhere within the story.)

13. Living with Lyle

(First Glimpse / Mistaken Identity / Whose Viewpoint? / Implication vs. Statement)

I had only been out of jail two days when I met Eleanor. I was sneaking around Cost Mart hoping to pilfer any amount of money from an unsuspecting, leisurely Sunday grocery shopper. But it's hard to blend into one's surroundings when a young lady is staring, mouth agape, in the produce section. She had a green purse flung over her right shoulder, a shopping basket in one hand hanging with quite a weight at her side, and a pink grapefruit jittering in her other hand. There was no denying her attractiveness but the freaky trance-like fixation with me had its hazards.

I could tell she was about to say something. Her look was one of disbelief, excitement and paranoia. Who does she think I am, I wondered? Because it sure the hell can't be me she's this interested in.

A good twenty seconds passed. Even though I was starting to feel more than shifty—is she stuck in a standing coma?—I didn't move. I had committed myself to this uncomfortable situation and I had to see it through.

I locked her gaze, hoping to prompt her to action. Nothing. I ran my fingers through my hair and took a step towards her. She jumped a little and the grapefruit fell to the ground. She didn't flinch when it hit her foot. Having reached my daily awkward encounter limit, I turned to leave.

"Lyle?" she asked softly.

Wrong. But at that point in my life, I would have answered to anything an attractive female called me. I looked over my shoulder at her.

"Yeah?"

"It is you!" she shrieked. Both her purse and the shopping basket reunited with the grapefruit on the floor as she launched herself into my arms. She squeezed my whole body with more strength than she looked capable of possessing. She hesitantly pulled herself back from the embrace to look me over again.

"I can't believe it; after all these years. I saw you walking towards me and thought it can't. It just can't. But it is. How insane is this?"

"More than you know."

Analysis

A young woman runs into an old friend in a grocery store—at least she thinks he’s an old friend. In fact the man Eleanor mistakes for Lyle is fresh out of prison, sent there for what crime we don’t know. But rather than correct her, “Lyle” lets the mistake stand.

“I can’t believe it,” Eleanor responds. “After all these years ... How insane is this?”

“More than you know,” the narrator answers, and means it.

This opening has a lot going for it; in fact it’s hard to find fault with it. The first line thrusts us into the heart of the story, with the paragraph that follows setting the scene for the inciting incident—the unique event that will wrest the character or characters out of their status quo and into a story. Here, that unprecedented event is the meeting of not-Lyle and Eleanor, an encounter that turns on a case of mistaken identity. Not one but two lives are about to be derailed from their routines—or, in not-Lyle’s case, from whatever passes for routine in the life of an ex-con fresh out of the slammer.

The question framed is: what’s going to happen with these two? It’s the right question, the very question that will propel us through this narrative. Will he take advantage of her? Will she fall in love? Will she uncover his criminal past along with his deception? Is he a petty thief, or a murderer? Will he love her in turn, or will he rob, beat, or kill her? Or a combination of these things? The possibilities are, if not limitless, rich.

I wonder: how would this story read from Eleanor’s point of view? As a point-of-view character, pseudo-Lyle has his charms. But then he also knows he’s an ex-con, just as he knows what sent him up the river in the first place. It will be much harder, and may require manipulation on the part of the author, to withhold his knowledge from the reader so as not to give a big part of the game away. If she manipulates too much, the author exposes herself to the charge of creating false suspense—suspense achieved artificially by withholding information from the reader that the character is fully aware of. In that case, it may be better to experience this relationship from the point of view of the character who’s totally in the dark: Eleanor.

In that case, the author faces another challenge: namely, how to plausibly render a case of mistaken identity from the viewpoint of the person making the mistake. Will we be treated to Eleanor’s perspective after she has already survived her experience, such that, as she begins the tale, she knows it is one of mistaken identity and deception? If made, such a choice would result in

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

a great loss of tension and suspense. For one thing, we'll know from the start that she survives to tell the tale.

Hmm, maybe our author had the right idea. Maybe it's better to stick to Lyle's viewpoint.

You see the sort of decisions writers wrestle with. There are no absolute or easy solutions. In the end, it may be best to rely on gut instincts.

Here, so far at least, those instincts seem to be paying off.

Your Turn

Write a "first glimpse" scene in which two people with a shared troubled past meet again for the first time after a long interval. Example: a former high school star athlete now fallen from grace and down on her or his luck, and someone from the same high school—with whom he or she had a brief romantic or sexual relationship and then dumped—and who has since achieved much success. Be careful; avoid cliché and sensationalism; treat both characters with respect.

14. After the Fire

*(Nested Scenes / Russian Doll Syndrome /
Past Perfect / Dialogue Tags)*

I sink deep into Scott's couch and travel back thirty years to the duplex townhouse above the freeway. The one Sam and I rented after our house in Santa Cruz burned down.

The committee asks me about the fire. I guess I need to talk about it. I haven't spoken out loud since the limp hoses were reeled back onto their drums, and one of the big sweaty firemen told us we were lucky to be alive.

"We expected to be pulling corpses outa here," he says.

"Thank you for coming," I whisper.

Just when we think we are so special. So smart. So lucky. Sam is on his way to a PhD in literature; I am scheduled to interview for a teaching job. Dad's wedding gift buys us a very hip little Fiat Spyder convertible, British racing green. We live in the guesthouse attached to the garage of a popular English professor. His wife takes me under her wing, shows me how to bake her signature New England sandwich bread. Harriet is a solid 5'11", towering over the dough as she kneads and punches it into the proper consistency.

"Now, your turn," she smiles.

I take her place at the counter. I try to bully the dough the way she does. I glance around for a step stool. Worn out with squeezing, I step aside so she can finish up. She chatters about baking bread from scratch since she was a little girl. Chop wood. Carry water. Take notes.

After the fire, these rooms are reduced to a six-hundred-square-foot pile of smoldering stuff we used to care about. The walls are still standing, but blistered and black. My mother's first batch of original oil paintings claim a spot in one of the layers of stinking rubble. She left them with us on her sudden return to Spain. The charred canvases curl like French crepes.

We tour the Salvador Dali landscape of our former digs. The floor-to-ceiling shelves of classic writings are now soggy blackened globs of pulp. They have toppled into a jagged heap of literature. Humpty Dumpty.

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

The rotary telephone is solid again now after melting into the silverware drawer. Spear-shaped timbers have pierced through quilts and mattresses and are lodged in the dog's favorite spot under the bed. Clothes are welded together in the closet. My beloved navy peacoat is slumped over my leather boots, until we poke it with a curtain rod. Then it disintegrates.

The stench is everywhere and deep. Burnt wet carpet. Burnt wet books. Burnt wet upholstery. Grotesque bricks of fabrics and nasty plastics. High on the kitchen counter, two scorched and petrified loaves of New England homemade bread.

We don't have a thing to wear, literally.

Analysis

As children most of us had them, a nest of little painted wooden dolls that opened, one after another, to reveal an ever-smaller doll within, until we arrived at the ultimate doll—typically an infant carved from a single piece of wood. Russian (“matryoshka”) dolls, they’re called. Beyond reiterating themselves, they serve no purpose, which is what makes them so delightfully droll.

With one crucial difference, this first page of a memoir is structured like one of those Russian dolls. Here the hierarchy is reversed, with the nested “dolls” (read: scenes) becoming bigger and more substantial as we pass through them, starting with the least substantial scene of all, the one conveyed by the first sentence that finds us sinking “deep” into a couch with our narrator. No sooner am I settled into that cozy couch than it’s pulled out from under me, with the narrator (and me with her) transported “back thirty years to the duplex townhouse above the freeway. The one Sam and I rented after our house in Santa Cruz burned down.” As transitions go, it’s as jarring as the one that turned poor Gregor Samsa into a giant beetle in his bed.

But there are more transitions—more Russian dolls—to come. In fact, no sooner are we relocated to that townhouse than we’ve left it for another setting in which the narrator responds to questions posed to her by a committee—presumably at an inquest of some sort occasioned by the fire. Though the venue of the inquiry isn’t given, it’s not likely to have been in that townhouse. Leaving me to wonder—where are we now?

The bread-baking scene itself is no sooner introduced than it gives way to a scene shortly after the fire, when the narrator (accompanied by someone,

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

presumably Sam), surveys the destruction, with its “blistered and black” walls, the charred canvases of her mother’s oil paintings “curl[ed] like French crepes.”

The description of the aftermath of the fire is extremely vivid and effective. I see those charred walls; I smell the sour ashes. Anyone who has lived through a house fire never forgets what it feels like to sift through the remains, the evidence of lives reduced to soggy ashes. With its acrid stench and burned sodden upholstery, this scene is so well rendered (the charred clothes welded together in the closet), so sensuously specific in its inventory of tragic loss, it easily overwhelms all the halfheartedly engaged quasi-scenes that came before—the bread-baking, the committee/inquiry, the dialogue with the “big sweaty” fireman, moments that pass too quickly to leave much of an impression. As for the narrator sinking into that couch, who—having reached the bottom of this page—will still remember that?

The difference between this smartly written opening and Russian dolls is that ultimately it does give us something substantial. It’s the scenes leading up to the fire-aftermath scene that feel (relatively) empty. Why not plunge us straight into that aftermath scene, the one fully engaged scene offered by this opening? If the author wants to nest that scene in a more recent one in which the event is recalled—to *frame* it—that’s fine. But then there should be a greater investment in the frame (narrator sinking into couch or responding to questions at an inquest) as well.

A final note and a nitpick:

If for whatever reason you’re determined to transition readers quickly through various scenes occurring at discordant times, skillful handling of tenses, and particularly of the no-longer-taught past perfect or pluperfect tense, becomes vital. If the primary scene—the moment from which the past is being looked back from—is present tense, then all moments being looked back upon should (probably, logically) be written in the past or the past perfect. Otherwise we court confusion as in this opening, where all scenes past and present are flattened onto the same present tense plane.

Nitpick: As mentioned earlier, often writers tag dialogue with something like “she smiled” or “he laughed,” as if dialogue can be “laughed” or “smiled” (it’s not; it’s spoken). That it’s done all the time by reputable writers in published books makes it no less objectionable—to me.

“Now, your turn,” she said, smiling.

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

Your Turn

Write a first page that plunges us into the aftermath of a tragic event: a fire or a natural disaster, the shutting down of a factory, school, or business. Let the scene be an occasion for an inventory of meaningful objects: a father's abandoned work shed or toolshed; the camp where, as a child, the protagonist spent many a happy summer; the school destroyed by a tornado.... Filter the scene through a single character's perspective (first or third person).

15. The Unwritten Masterpiece

(Sleeve Rolling & Throat Clearing)

It was midnight when I sat down to write my masterpiece. I would include everything and nothing. In so doing, I would transform my personality, distilling it into some immortal work of art, created by me, for me. I would be the vatic chronicler of my own mind-windings, the perambulations of a brain seeking egress from banality. Either it (my personality) would flower, bloom and expand like some kaleidoscopic balloon, or it would vanish entirely from the earth, allowing whatever creativity was trapped inside my brain to surge forth unchecked like a rabid river. Either way, I would sooner or later have on my hands something worthwhile, a collection of letters, words and phrases that meant something, meant something powerful, did justice to all my dreams, longings and hopes.

Of course, I didn't really believe in anything that was immortal. Nor did I think that anything I wrote would somehow supply me with a final, terminal quenching of my desire. But a part of me wanted to believe in such a possibility, the same part of me that wanted to believe in God, even though I knew it was only a morbid consolation. I wanted to believe in these myths, while at the same time I was skeptical of them.

But, either way, I poised my pen above the paper. I was prepared to strike, to draw fresh blood, to finally write the masterpiece whose possibility and potential gnawed at the gnarled roots of my soul, even while I mocked the hope and set it on a realistic table to see its worried corners and haunted dents. My experience, I said to myself, in all its mortifying banality, would serve me now. How, I wasn't so sure. But it seemed to me that experience was like a landscape; that the sun shone on it and the moon flowed down it like anything else, and it was up to me to capture those moments when something interesting happened, when the flowers bloomed or the tulips cracked.

So then and there, I wrote down the first words, the unremarkable, terrible words. These words were profoundly un-sublime. They were mired in the juice of the mundane, fairly squeaking with a lack of originality. I will not repeat them here, but suffice it to say they were mawkish and uninspired, which I found confusing, for the fit that produced them seemed to me then to be very inspired, somehow forceful and effervescent.

Analysis

Older readers of this book may remember *The Honeymooners*, and Ed Norton, Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason)'s sidekick, the vest-and-tee-shirt wearing municipal sewer employee played to a fare-thee-well by Art Carney. In one of his better schticks, Norton would confront some trivial undertaking with extravagant overtures, rolling up his sleeves, loosening his shoulders, licking his lips, approaching the task like a pool player trying for a three-ball shot the hard way, until at last a frustrated Ralph would bellow, "Will you cut that out!"

Reading this ornately empty opening, I feel a bit like Ralph Kramden, or—to borrow another analogy, this one from Hollywood—like Dorothy confronting the man she thinks is *The Wizard of Oz*, when in fact she's confronting a sham operated by a humbug.

In *The Wizard of Oz* the illusion is achieved via smoke, flames, a thunderous basso profundo, and 1939 cinema's equivalent of a hologram. In this opening it's obtained through language as oozing and pungent ("gnawed at the gnarled roots of my soul," "a landscape that the sun shined on," "juice of the mundane") as an overripe camembert, language that doesn't convey content so much as it camouflages and conceals a lack thereof.

In the absence of a story, we get a narrator narrating—rolling up his sleeves, clearing his throat, wetting his lips and rubbing his hands together ("Will you cut that out!"). It's all wind-up with no pitch. The prose, though metaphorically overripe, is amusing. A strong voice is achieved, but in service of what?

This first page reminds me of another:

"Listen to me. I will tell you the truth about a man's life. I will tell you the truth about his love for women. That he never hates them. Already you think I'm on the wrong track. Stay with me. Really—I'm a master of magic.

"Do you believe a man can truly love a woman and constantly betray her? Never mind physically, but betray her in his mind, in the very 'poetry of his soul.' Well, it's not easy, but men do it all the time.

"Do you want to know how women can love you, feed you that love deliberately to poison your body and mind simply to destroy you? And out of passionate love choose not to love you anymore? And at the same time dizzy you with an idiot's ecstasy? Impossible? That's the easy part.

"But don't run away. This is not a love story.

"I will make you feel the painful beauty of a child, the animal hominess of the adolescent male, the yearning suicidal moodiness of the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

young female. And then (here's the hard part) show you how time turns man and woman around full circle, exchanged in body and soul.

"And then of course there is TRUE LOVE. Don't go away! It exists or I will make it exist. I'm not a master of magic for nothing. Is it worth what it cost? And how about sexual fidelity? Does it work? Is it love? Is it even human, that perverse passion to be with only one person? And if it doesn't work, do you still get a bonus for trying? Can it work both ways? Of course not, that's easy. And yet—"

The more this narrator of Mario Puzo's *Fools Die* exhorts me to "stay with [him]," to not "run away," the more inclined I am to head for the hills. That the author's earlier novel was the mega-bestselling *The Godfather* changes nothing. Like the first page under analysis, this one is all foam and no beer. Both narrators have what in the theater is called *stage presence* (picture Orson Welles stepping out of a Viennese shadow in *The Third Man*, or Vincent Price peeking out from behind a velvet curtain with raised eyebrow). All both narrators need is a good story to tell. Of that—alas—both of these first pages offer scant evidence.

It would help to know what's at stake for the protagonist of our first page as he prepares to pen her or his masterpiece. Supposing he or she can't write it—or writes it only to be told that it's anything but a masterpiece? Clearly it matters to this person. The question is: what would make it matter to *us*?

Not that sleeve rolling can never be effective. Remember the opening of *The Crimson Petal and the White*?

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.

Here's another familiar bit of sleeve-rolling that works:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

From there, having acquainted us with his attitude, within a sentence or two, Salinger's Holden Caulfield gets his story going ("I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas"). One tip about effective sleeve-rolling: a little goes a long way.

Your Turn

Draft a first page in which the narrator speaks directly to us about the story he or she is about to tell. Make it matter to us that the story gets told. Don't just make vague promises. Give us a good reason to keep reading.

16. Strawberry Fields

(Starting Off with a Dream)

It was a lonely sound. A sad lament in the early morning. It was the quivering, somber sound of a wind organ. At least that's what it sounded like to me. A man with a blue voice was singing and the quiet drumming followed. Plodding lethargically, and vacant ... and a slow jangly guitar. The day was cloudy and grey, and there I was, in a bright sliver of sun, peeking through the clouds. I had no idea where I was, but I wasn't scared. All around me were odd flowers. Startling rich nonagons, bright with color. Searing red, blazing yellow and lavish blue. I wanted to ask, "Why so sad?" but I couldn't. I opened my mouth to speak and nothing came out. The man with the blue voice sang these words, "nothing is real." How can that be? Nearby, a herd of horses escaped from a carousel, and headed towards a convertible train. I hopped on, and the sadness went away. The music of a backwards calliope accompanied the ride while hurtling through rolling hills, on loops and curls, like a roller coaster. The train blew its whistle to alert the horses. But the whistle was more like a siren not intended to warn, but to delight. The wind was blowing through my hair and I was smiling so big, my face hurt. It wasn't a dream. I had been invited to this place through a song playing on the radio. I was really there, I went to Strawberry Fields.

I opened my eyes and I was in my bedroom lying in my bed. The radio next to my bed was playing, softly. My mother gave me the radio, because she knew it would help me sleep, and I was permitted to have it on through the night as long as it wasn't too loud.

Analysis

Two of the most common admonitions delivered to fiction writers are 1) Never begin a story with a character getting out of bed; and 2) Never write, "And then she/he woke up" (or the equivalent).

As with all rules, not only can these two be broken, but we can leave it to a genius to break them brilliantly. "When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant beetle." With that first sentence of "The Metamorphosis," Kafka strikes a definitive

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

blow not only against both rules, but against realism, establishing a parallel universe in which such things happen. No explanations; take it or leave it.

Similarly, in what has been credited as the world's shortest story, Augusto Monterroso signs the death notices of rules 1 and 2. Here are all seven words of "El Dinosaurio," or "The Dinosaur":

Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí.

(When he awoke, the dinosaur was still there.)

As with "El Dinosaurio," this first page gives us a protagonist waking up from a dream, but instead of a dinosaur, what's "still there" are the haunting strains of John Lennon's most famous song, "Strawberry Fields Forever," playing softly on the radio next to the narrator's bed. In her music-inspired dream, the narrator is transported to a place where "nothing is real," a realm of "odd flowers" in blazing, searing color, of horses "escaped from a carousel" hurtling toward a train "to the music of a backwards calliope."

Dreams have their own logic, one that doesn't play by the rules and is therefore hard to argue with. The same can be said of the best fiction: it makes its own rules by spinning (in John Gardner's words) a "vivid and continuous dream."³ And since a work of fiction is already its own dream, reading about a fictional dream puts us at a two-step remove from our own lives. It's like kissing through *two* screen doors.

That said, dreams have played crucial roles in literature. Without Scrooge's nightmare, Dickens could hardly have written *A Christmas Carol*. Before he murders the pawnbroker, in a dream symbolizing the soul's dual nature, torn between bloodlust and compassion, *Crime and Punishment*'s Raskolnikov revisits a time when as a boy he watched a group of peasants beat an old horse to death. And what is Alice's looking glass but a doorway to her dreams? As Francine Prose writes in "Chasing the White Rabbit," her fine essay on fictional dreams:

Literature is full of dreams that we remember more clearly than our own. Jacob's ladder of angels. Joseph saving Egypt and himself by interpreting the Pharaoh's vision of the seven fat and lean cows. The dreams in Shakespeare's plays range as widely as our own, and the evil are often punished in their sleep before they pay for their crimes in life.

3 *On Becoming a Novelist.*

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

And who says good stories can't start with dreams? Tell that to Daphne du Maurier, whose most famous novel, *Rebecca*, starts:

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter, for the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and a chain upon the gate. I called in my dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate I saw that the lodge was uninhabited.

The problem with dreams is that, translated into lucid, rational prose, they often sound artificial. Whatever “stuff” dreams are made of, words aren't it. As Francine Prose goes on to say in the same essay: “What's [hard] to recreate on the page is anything remotely resembling the experience of actually dreaming, with all the structural and narrative complexities involved, the leaps, contradictions, and improbable elements.” This may be why poets write the best dreams: they're better at making those improbable leaps.

But a bigger problem with fictional dreams is that they ask us to invest emotionally in an experience only to have that investment rendered null and void when it turns out not to have been—by waking standards, anyway—“real.” Just as in life I tend to grow restless when someone buttonholes me with their dream, whenever I come upon a dream in a novel or story I read it with my emotions in check. Heck, it's just a dream.

On the other hand, if the dream presents itself as real (as this one does) and I invest in it accordingly only to learn that it never *really* happened, like any bait-and-switch victim I feel cheated. Depending on how much I invested, I may want to strangle the author. Here the dream itself is quite well rendered, replete with the sorts of sensuous, specific details that make for a vivid fictional experience (the “quivering” wind organ; the man who sings in a “blue” voice, those escaped carousel horses hurtling over hills). Though vivid, it's also rife with the jump cuts and non sequiturs that characterize real dreams. So I can't help feeling disappointed when I learn that, as the song says, “nothing is real.” There are no carousel horses; there is no “convertible train” (whatever that is). It was all just a dream prompted by a song playing on a radio.

Maybe the dream has symbolic import; maybe it will resonate and/or recur throughout the rest of the story, thus earning back my initial investment. I hope so. I hope, too, that whatever story follows, this dream is the best place to enter it. Perhaps the point of the dream—and the radio that (softly) plays the song that inspires it—is to underscore the protagonist's fear of the dark

B. STRUCTURE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

and—possibly—of the dreams she'd been having, not good dreams like this one, but nightmares that scared her so much she was afraid to sleep. How else explain a mother letting her child play the radio all night long? Raising the possibly pertinent question: *What happened to this kid?*

But if the dream was just this author's carnival barker way of luring us into her fictional world, I don't know about you, but I'll want my emotional deposit back.

Your Turn

Start a story with a dream. Do it so we invest not only in the dream, but in the dreamer, and in the story that the dream somehow portends.

C. Plot/Suspense

IN THE LAST SECTION I DISTINGUISHED *PLOT* FROM *STRUCTURE*, with plot defined as the series of causally related events that make up a story, and structure as the order in which those events are related. Plot is a matter of substance, structure a matter of form. They can be discussed separately, but they can't be separated.

Many attempts have been made at formulating or providing authors with a recipe for plot, including this popular ABC formula (credited to both Anne Lamott and Alice Adams, though I suspect it preceded them both):

Action
Background
Conflict or Crisis
Climax
Development
Denouement
Ending

However memorable and neat, the formula fits most stories only insofar as its ingredients are in unspecified quantities and can be combined in any order. In other words, it's pretty useless.

Though there's no one-size-fits-all formula for plot, plots may be broken down into two varieties: Plot A and Plot B. With Plot A, a character's status-quo condition of discontent (Melvin is lonesome) is challenged when opportunity presents itself (Melvin meets Doris). With Plot B, a character's status-quo contentment (Melvin enjoys evenings of quiet classical music) meets with an obstacle or an irritant (a rap DJ moves into the apartment below his).

With most novels and even most stories, Plots A and B do a sort of opportunity/irritant tango with each other, with opportunity leading to irritant (the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

lover met at the coffee shop turns out to be a serial killer), and irritant leading to opportunity, and so on.

Plot is what generates *suspense*, i.e., the itch to learn answers to questions raised by what we've read—questions that keep us reading to gain answers. Like plot, suspense also takes two forms: *true suspense* and *false suspense*. But unlike Plot A and Plot B, each of which is equally desirable, false suspense is, as we'll see, a poor substitute for the genuine article.

17. A Stubbed Toe in the Library

(Plots A & B, Inciting Incident / Retrospective Narrative)

New Haven, October 1952

When I was a boy I used to wake up thinking today could be the day when everything changes. When something miraculous happens. What it would be I couldn't articulate but I knew it would catapult me from the life I had into the one I was destined for. Everything I wanted would be mine for the asking. Power, fame, riches and glory would fall glittering from the sky like a meteor shower. After thirty-five years of waiting, some part of me still hasn't given up.

But a day that began with a two-hour commute from New York to New Haven in a rocking overheated carriage that smelt of damp overcoats and inadequately deodorized armpits wasn't one that augured well for miracles. And now, second in line at the desk fronting Yale University's Rare Books and Documents Reading Room, I'd begun to think the only miracle coming my way might actually be getting inside the Reading Room. My field of vision was filled by the bearlike back of the patron in front of me. Whoever he was addressing, presumably the librarian, was totally obscured by his linebacker shoulders canted at an angle that suggested a head-on tackle.

"I'm asking you to look again. Is that so hard?" The voice matched the posture, belligerent, boorish.

"I'm sorry sir. I've checked and rechecked but I can't find any record of your request. If you'd just like to step over there...." A pale long-fingered hand emerged from behind his right shoulder and pointed to a desk against the wall, "and fill in another request form, I'll be happy to...."

"Fuck that," came the reply and the shoulders straightened. "I've got better things to do. I've got a dissertation to write, lady. If you even know what that is." With the snort of an aroused bovine, he thrust into reverse, rammed into me and planted the Cuban heel of his right size twelve solidly on my toe.

Analysis

On this first page we are treated to a sly blend of Plots A and B, with the nameless first-person protagonist reaching all the way back to 1952 to tell us of a day in his life that started out less than auspiciously, first with a damp, “inadequately deodorized” train ride from New York to New Haven, and then with a fellow library patron stepping on his toe. Neither of those events would seem to suggest “opportunity presenting itself,” or Plot A; if anything, they land us in Plot B territory.

But wait: what about that first paragraph—those devoutly wished-for miracles falling “glittering like a meteor shower” from the sky? Thanks to that opening paragraph, by frontloading our expectations with miracles, or anyway the hope for them, the narrator performs a kind of alchemy whereby smelly armpits and stubbed toes become the stuff of dreams. We know—anyway we’re given good reason to believe—that somehow or other this will turn out to be a “miraculous” day in the narrator’s life. And so before our very eyes Plots A and B are joined in matrimony. Which isn’t to say that they are going to live happily ever after. However strong it may be, our belief in miracles doesn’t extend to them lasting forever. Still, we sense that this rude snorting bear who has injured our narrator’s toe will be important to him and to his story, that he’ll play—if not the lead—a key role in this miracle in the making.

As inciting incidents go, a stubbed toe may seem like a paltry event with which to launch a whole novel. Yet literature offers many examples of trivial events having epic consequences. *Appointment in Samara*, John O’Hara’s most famous novel, owes much if not all of its plot to a single fateful act: the moment when Julian English, the protagonist and owner of a used Cadillac dealership, throws a highball in the face of one Harry Reilly, a major investor in his business.

Similarly, were it not for an errant snowball, there would be no Deptford Trilogy, Robertson Davies’s novel sequence set in a fictional Ontario village. Instead of it striking its intended pubescent target, the snowball hits a pregnant woman, sending her into premature labor and precipitating a series of mostly tragic events. That incident opens *Fifth Business*, the first novel of the trilogy. As with the opening page in question, it, too, plants us firmly in a particular year:

My lifelong involvement with Mrs. Dempster began at 8 o’clock pm on the 27th of December, 1908, at which time I was ten years and seven months old.

C. PLOT/SUSPENSE

The whole plot of Paula Fox's 1970 novel *Desperate Characters*, the story of an upper-middle-class couple living in a Brooklyn brownstone in the 1960s, is set in motion when Sophie Brentwood is bitten by a cat—an innocuous event, it would seem, but one from which Fox extracts a grippingly persuasive portrait of a white, privileged, middle-aged couple whose hermetically sealed existence succumbs to the pressures of change.

More typically, stories whose openings catapult us into the past are apt to land us at the brink of a momentous event. From *Endless Love*, by Scott Spencer:

When I was seventeen and in full obedience to my heart's most urgent commands, I stepped far from the pathway of normal life and in a moment's time ruined everything I loved—I loved so deeply, and when the love was interrupted, when the incorporeal body of love shrank back in terror and my own body was locked away, it was hard for others to believe that a life so new could suffer so irrevocably. But now, years have passed and the night of August 12, 1967, still divides my life.

Apart from being well strategized, this first page is also well written. From its yearning first paragraph through those odoriferous commuter armpits through its rendering of the bear-like, boorish, toe-stomping library patron, it invests us vividly in its narrator's world. (That the Rare Books bear metamorphoses into a linebacker and subsequently into a bovine we might take issue with, but we would be nitpicking.)

Given this opening page, I would keep reading.

Your Turn

Draft or revise two different openings. In the first opening, engage an A plot (an unhappy or dissatisfied character presented with an opportunity). In the second opening, engage a B plot (content character encounter an irritant or obstacle).

18. Clouds Across the Moon

(False Suspense / Trusting Your Narrator / Prologues)

Prologue:

The report read, "August 20, mid-afternoon. River Road. Medium pony attacked, now deceased. Two goats gored and gutted, deceased. Owner reported sighting of a large black mammal, possibly feline."

August 20, 11 pm

The clouds rolled across the moon, making it intermittently dark and light. Douglas Travis waited, hidden by the trees. He looked around, listening to the eerie silence, and shuffled his feet on the ground.

Leaves rustled and he heard the snap of dry branches. Footsteps fell from behind him approaching fast. As the clouds cleared and the moon shone bright, he caught a flicker of a shadow and turned.

No one there. He squirmed and looked at his phone for messages for the ninth time. Shaking his head in frustration he turned on his heels to leave, only to face the figure in the black slicker.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting. Did you bring it?" Douglas said, nervous. "Never mind, this ain't right. I changed my mind," he continued, looking down at the ground.

When he looked up, the figure was holding a syringe.

"Whoa, that's not what I ...," Douglas said taking a step back. "Wait—I'm going to call my mom." He held up his phone.

The assailant plunged the needle into the boy's neck. Douglas Travis jerked backward and slammed against a tree, fighting against the branches that seemed to try and catch him in a web of their grasp.

The boy was beginning to turn a bluish color, snorting sounds exploded from his mouth. The figure in the black slicker fled through the woods while the boy made a desperate clutch for his cellphone.

Ashen and weak with barely a pulse, he had meant to push the keypad to dial for help, but pushed the button for the camera instead, and began filming his last breath while catching a distant fleeing shadow. Other eyes then glowed in the dark night.

Analysis

We read fiction largely to learn two things: 1) what has happened, and 2) what's going to happen next. Question 2 is the one raised by the condition called *suspense*, the state of anxiety produced by uncertainty. In real life, suspense is often unpleasant. In a work of fiction, however, it's both desirable and pleasurable. It causes a mental itch that can only be scratched by turning the page.

In my years of reading works in progress, I've identified two main kinds of suspense, the good kind and the not-so-good kind. The good kind (true suspense) is the kind of suspense that raises the question, "What's going to happen next?" and arises organically and authentically from characters and their actions as conveyed to us through a firmly established, consistent viewpoint. The other kind of suspense I call "false suspense": suspense generated by an author who, intentionally or otherwise, withholds information.

On this first page of a mystery novel the author generates both kinds of suspense.

Putting the police report paragraph aside, on a quick first read the rest of this page goes down well. The writing is sensuous, engaging our eyes first (those clouds rolling across the moon, painting the scene in noir shadows and light), then our ears (rustling leaves, snaps of dry branches). True, the author might have appealed to other senses as well (the musty forest smell, its chilled dankness), but two out of five isn't bad. And no one can argue that the scene lacks mystery, surprise, or suspense. Indeed, this first page packs plenty of all three into a very small space.

But with my second closer reading a nagging suspicion is confirmed: namely, that this skillful author has subverted her narrator and imposed her own cherry-picked view of things, one that disengages me from her protagonist's perceptions and, as a result, from the fictional world that I had inhabited through his perceptions.

This opening page has no consistent narrator, no clear point of view. How can that be?

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Let's read it closely, starting with the sentence "The clouds rolled across the moon, making it intermittently dark and light." So far the ostensible point of view is neutral or objective, with the experience belonging to no one (or to the clouds). Presented as the character's experience, the sentence might be combined with the next to read, "Hidden behind trees, Douglas Travis watched as clouds rolled over the moon, casting the forest into alternating shadow and light." As for "Douglas Travis waited, hidden by the trees," it, too, is neutral: it could be from Douglas's perspective, or not. However the sentence after that ("He looked around, listening to the eerie silence, and shuffled his feet on the ground.") plants us firmly in Douglas's sensibilities, as does the next paragraph, through Douglas's ears (the snap of branches) and his eyes (the flicker of a shadow).

Our engagement with Douglas's perspective continues with the next paragraph, up to the point where Douglas "face[s] the figure in the black slicker." Though it seems as if we're still sharing Douglas's perspective, we aren't, really. As we will soon discover, Douglas knows the identity of "the figure in the black slicker"; he may even know the man's name. Anyway, it's clear that Douglas and the man are familiar with each other and have arranged this meeting in the woods ("Did you bring it?"). Though these things obviously inform Douglas's perspective, they don't suit the author's wish to withhold said knowledge from us. Hence "the figure in the black slicker," and not "Joe" or "the man Douglas had spoken with two days earlier."

With the last two paragraphs, increasingly jarring shifts in perspective occur, with (in the third-to-last paragraph) Douglas referred to as "the boy"—a designation that carries an outsider's perspective, but not his, and then, in the penultimate paragraph, us watching "the boy" turn "a bluish color" (that he cannot see) and hearing the "snorting sounds [that] explode from his mouth." The last paragraph drops the boy's perspective entirely, with the scene's final moments relayed from a neutral, objective distance per the clouds in the first sentence. We've gone from Douglas's subjective experience to the objective experience of "the boy" to camera-like objectivity. At the moment when my investment in Douglas's subjective personal experience is greatest, I'm no longer in Douglas's shoes, but in the equivalent of a movie theater, watching him. Not only does this void my investment, it suggests that it wasn't sound to begin with: that there never was a clear point-of-view strategy to this scene, that what I've been getting all along isn't a genuine narrator with a firm perspective, but the author's point of view, omniscience by default. *Point of view is the difference between the author and the narrator.*

The last paragraph ("Ashen and weak with barely a pulse ...") tries to reclaim Douglas's perspective, but it does so too little and too late. By then

we've already lost faith in that investment and sold our shares. In case we haven't, the last sentence ("Other eyes then glowed in the dark night")—which, given that Douglas is presumably dead, conveys an experience well beyond his grasp—puts the final nail in this narrator's coffin. Though it resembles a fictional experience, that last sentence is pure information doled out by an astute but obtrusive author.

Does point of view have to be consistent? Yes, which doesn't mean it can't move around; it can, consistently, through the authority of a narrator who, for whatever reason, is able to move from one perspective to another, and does so in ways that don't disorient and are never arbitrary. In any scene the perspective may change; but the *narrator* doesn't. When point-of-view problems occur, it's usually either a case of the author not having properly engaged a narrator, or failing to surrender fully to that narrator's authority. Writing teachers are known to say, "Trust the reader." I say, "Trust your *narrator*."

For comparison:

He ran in the early morning, floating like a specter amid the tall, wet pines of the Wisconsin forest. His thick hair curled from the mist. His lungs burned. His breath stank of beer and cigarettes. At the road, he stopped and swiped his glasses on his baggy sweatshirt. Late June, and the damp, cold spring had yet to give way to summer.

Three months earlier, Dave Cubiak had left Chicago, steering a small rental car north along the Lake Michigan shore, across the Illinois state line, and up two hundred miles to the Door County peninsula. He was forty-two, a former cop undone by the deaths of his wife and daughter, who had been killed in an accident he believed he could have prevented.

The move was supposed to be a fresh start.

Instead, it was a mistake.

Grief stricken, guilt ridden, and often drunk, Cubiak felt like a blot on the tourist landscape, a reclusive misfit among the friendly locals, people who waved even to strangers. He had committed to staying one year and had nine months to go. The time it took to grow a baby, to figure out what next.

Cubiak adjusted his glasses and bent over, his hands on his knees. For a moment, he thought of his mother and felt ashamed. He had failed her; he had failed everyone.

A sharp wail shattered the stillness, and through old habit Cubiak straightened, trying to pinpoint the source. A seagull wheeling over the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

bay? In his new job as park ranger, he'd sometimes watch the plump birds dive-bombing the water, full of avian bravado. Perhaps the sound had been made by a red fox on the prowl. Or the wind. Silence again. The forest gave away nothing.

The opening of Patricia Skalka's *Death Stalks Door County* has much in common with our first page, but with a crucial difference: It invests us swiftly by way of its narrator in a character's perspective. Having done so, it honors that investment. I'll leave it to you to discover what fate has in store for Mr. Cubiak, but to be sure this opening arouses suspense.

Were the first page written as deeply from Douglas's perspective it would shed some false suspense but gain more of the genuine article and intensify our sensory immersion in the scene.

Other notes: prologues are quaint and can be cheesy. The police report topping this one is effectively the prologue of a prologue, and makes for a stammered opening. I'd cut it and call the rest Chapter One, or make the report the prologue without calling it such.

Your Turn

Draft the opening of a horror or crime novel or a thriller in which a murder takes place. Write it two ways: from a neutral, objective perspective, and from the victim's perspective.

19. A Stranger Approaches

(False Suspense / Artificially Withheld Information)

Janice watched as he crossed the road, seemingly oblivious to the traffic. He leaned forward slightly, as if buffeted by a strong wind. She would recognize that stuttering gait anywhere, despite all the lost years. She'd told him to meet her at Jaipur's on Liverpool Street. No one knew her there. Her hand had trembled when she replaced the receiver.

His long arms hung slackly at his sides; the too-short sleeves of his tightly buttoned jacket exposing his bony wrists. Inches of vivid red sock above each dusty shoe, and her heart constricting with love and pain.

At the door his eyes darted across the tables and she saw relief flood his face when he saw her in the corner, arm raised. Unmindful of the chairs, he stumbled down the aisle and fell into her, his grip hard and hungry. His body shuddered as he held her. "Shhh. Shhhh," was all she trusted herself to say for now. They had attracted some attention, she saw over his shoulder. Some looked away when they caught her eye, others, unabashed, continued to stare. Finally he let her go.

"Hello, sis." An attempt at a smile.

"Hello, Luke," she greeted her brother.

The day before, she and Delilah had watched a wattlebird feeding on a grevillea bush in the garden. The cat had paused, mid-toilet, then slunk along the path, all senses alert. Kate had thrown a half-eaten mandarin at her.

"Honestly, Jan, why do you keep feeding that mangy cat? She's a killer and a tart."

She'd laughed: "You may be a tart but you're not a killer, are you, old girl?" She reached down to rub the tattered earlobes. Delilah had tricked three families in their street into thinking she belonged to them alone. It was only when the Kennedy children, three doors down, posted missing cat posters complete with photograph around the neighborhood that they discovered her duplicity.

"She's a survivor. Her own mistress. No one owns her. That's what I like about her."

Kate had rolled her eyes. "You two—made for each other."

Then the phone rang.

Analysis

In works by less experienced authors, suspense tends take one of two forms. The first kind of suspense, the good kind, raises questions such as the following:

What will happen to X when Y happens?

How will Character X solve Problem Y?

With the second type of suspense, the questions raised for the reader tend to fall more along the following lines:

Who is X?

What is Y?

Where is this?

What's going on?

What is blazing am I reading, and why am I reading it?

Both kinds of suspense create tension in the reader, but in the first case the tension created is desirable. Though eager to arrive at answers to the questions raised, the reader of a narrative that generates true suspense is willing to be teased, knowing that the answers will come in due time, and confident that when they do come they'll be satisfying and worth the wait. While waiting for answers to genuine suspense questions, readers are provided with enough answers to inhabit the world of the story, to fully appreciate and experience its characters, settings, events, moods, and themes.

With false suspense, many if not all of the virtues of true suspense are sacrificed. Instead, readers are treated to the extremely circumscribed and dubious thrill of wondering, for instance, in what part of the world a scene is taking place, and in what year, and who are the characters involved, what are their names, how old are they, how are they related to each other? Such questions are rotten fruits of the practice of withholding information: denying readers access to basic facts perfectly well known both to the writer and his characters.

That practice is hard at work in the opening scene of this novel, in which a woman named Janice watches a man cross a street toward her. From his

“stuttering gait” to “the too-short sleeves of his tightly buttoned jacket, exposing his bony wrists” to the “inches of vivid red sock above each dusty shoe” the man is carefully and vividly rendered. Though syntactically awkward in places (“she saw relief flood his face when he saw her in the corner”), on the whole the prose is solid, the actions—albeit laced with melodrama—duly observed.

And yet because the scene raises and answers the wrong questions, because its author is bent on false rather than real suspense, it falls flat. Instead of asking, “Who is this strange, raggedy man walking toward the protagonist?” (a false suspense question, since the protagonist knows perfectly well who it is), we should be asking, “Why has this woman not seen her brother for so long? Why does he look like a bum? Why is he shuddering? And what brings them together now, after so many years?” These genuine questions—the answers to which may justify the rest of the novel—are undermined by that one question, “Who is he?”—a question with no relevance to the situation at hand, and one no sooner answered than the scene ends, as if it had nothing better to accomplish.

Why do writers generate false suspense? Possibly because, in reading works by other authors, they confuse real suspense with a state of confusion, or because even in the works of celebrated authors they encounter the same phenomenon. *Stephen King does it, why can't I?*

The more likely explanation is that they lack confidence in the ability of their material to generate its own true suspense, so they try to help it by capriciously withholding something here and there, in this case, the fact that the man crossing the street toward the woman is her brother.

Unfortunately, this explanation often points to a deeper problem, namely the reason why authors lack confidence in a story's ability to generate authentic suspense: they don't yet know, or aren't sure, where their stories are going, or if they have a story to tell.

I'm willing to give this author the benefit of the doubt. In fact, I'm sure that Janice and Luke have had an intriguing past, and are headed for an even more intriguing future. I just wish their creator were as confident of it as I am.

Your Turn

Revise this first page so it holds less false suspense, while true suspense is enhanced. Feel free to invent and supply any information needed.

Second prompt: look at one of your own first pages and see if you can identify any false suspense in it.

20. Conducting Olivia

*(False Suspense / Grounding Scenes / Context /
Accident as Inciting Incident)*

August, 2006 Henry winced and lowered his hands like a conductor shushing the strings.

“You’re talking too loud.”

Olivia adjusted the volume and continued to talk; it didn’t really matter what about, most likely a new poem, or a story she was working on, something she’d read in the paper that got her blood boiling; or maybe a juicy bit of gossip she thought he’d appreciate.

She knew she should have stopped after the wincing, definitely after the shushing. But she hoped that if she told the story just right, he would laugh, see the irony, share her outrage or amusement. As always, she hoped this time would be different; that something other than pathology would engage him.

Olivia had been told by experts to bury this hope, that Henry would never enjoy the give and take of conversation again, even though he was quite talkative himself, but this felt too much like a death. She allowed herself to be sucked in, say too much. She did her best to speak in simple sentences, to keep herself from spinning the stories he once cherished, the sort of thing the rehab people routinely told families to avoid. She resented the notion that a successful patient was one whose partner suppressed her personality for the good of the other.

“Calm down,” he said, glaring at her.

“I am calm,” she said, “just animated.”

“You do that to torture me.”

“My talking is torture to you?”

“You know it is.”

“Why don’t I just control my heartbeat?”

She hadn’t meant to snap at him; she never did. It wasn’t his fault. Still.

As long as she could separate Henry from the angry stranger inhabiting him at times like this, she was okay. Brain injury didn’t give a damn that it was a summer day and she wanted to enjoy a walk with her husband, hold hands, maybe stop somewhere nice for lunch, preferably al fresco. It didn’t leap out of bed and bound into conversation, especially with a wife who’d been up for hours, a writer who lived to tell stories....

Analysis

This novel opening presents us with a man and a woman bickering. The man's name is Henry, the woman Olivia. Although eventually we learn that they are husband and wife, for the better part of this first page their relationship is mysterious, and we don't know in what setting their bickering occurs. Indoors, outdoors? At a restaurant? In their living or bedroom? What we do soon come to realize is that Olivia, whose perspective we share, is frustrated by her inability to converse as she used to with her husband, who—we also discover—has suffered brain damage.

Among a novelist's chief challenges is that of determining what information to supply when and where: how to balance the desire to arouse suspense with the need to prevent confusion. In this opening the balance tips toward confusion. The nature of the relationship, the setting, even the precise subject of the conversation (something to do with Olivia's writing) are withheld from us, as is the cause of Henry's disability, how long he has been ill, and how long he and Olivia have been together.

Our ability to invest emotionally in the given scene, to care about these people, depends on our being supplied with at least some of that context. Otherwise we're left with a couple of indeterminate conjugal status bickering in a vacuum owing largely to the husband's unspecified mental condition.

What information to supply, and when to supply it: it's a question not of plot, but of structure. Often as authors we *know* our plot; we've got all the causal-relation puzzle pieces. We just aren't sure how to put them together, in what order. Supply too much information too soon, and you destroy suspense. Supply too little and you create false suspense, i.e., confusion.

To put to rest some of the nagging false suspense questions raised by the given opening, and establish the necessary context for it, might it make sense to enter this story earlier, with the inciting incident, the event that resulted in the circumstance at the story's center—namely, the incident or accident that caused Henry's brain damage? Whether Henry's affliction was the result of a tumor, a stroke, a car or sporting accident, or something falling from the sky, doesn't matter. What matters is that we don't have a question hanging over us when that question isn't the point of the opening scene.

That's the strategy taken by Ann Packer in *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, her bestseller about a woman's conflicted sense of responsibility toward her fiancé after he breaks his neck and becomes paralyzed as a result of diving off the titular pier into a too-shallow reservoir. Packer's novel begins, "When something terrible happens to someone else, people often use the word 'unbearable.'" Though the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

accident itself is alluded to rather than dramatized, by the end of the first page Michael is comatose in a hospital bed: the inciting incident has been supplied to us.

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* likewise begins with an accident—indeed, one that alters his first-person protagonist's brain. It begins:

About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really: all I can divulge. Not much, I know.

Though skimpy on details (excusably if conveniently, since the protagonist's memory was affected), we have all the context necessary to proceed. Another novel that opens with memory and an accident is Stephen King's *Misery*.

Memory was slow to return. At first there was only pain. The pain was total, everywhere, so that there was no room for memory.

Here, too, the accident that delivers author Paul Sheldon into the guest room (and the clutches) of a pathological fan is merely alluded to at first; we learn of the car accident only as Paul remembers it, through a fog of pain. If we're confused, it's Paul's confusion that we share. The suspense is organic: it isn't false; it's *real*. King gives us everything we need to inhabit the moment of that opening scene from the protagonist's point of view.

Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* presents us with another writer (of scientific subjects) whose emotional equilibrium is shattered by an accident—in this case, a stranger's death in a freak hot-air balloon accident.

The beginning is simple to mark. We were in sunlight under a turkey oak, partly protected from a strong, gusty wind. I was kneeling on the grass with a corkscrew in my hand, and Clarissa was passing me the bottle—a 1987 Daumas Gassac. This was the moment, this was the pinprick on the time map: I was stretching out my hand, and as the cool neck and the black foil touched my palm, we heard a man's shout. We turned to look across the field and saw the danger. Next thing, I was running toward it.

Though not a work of fiction, Floyd Skloot's *In the Shadow of Memory* recounts his experience of disability as the result of brain damage caused by a virus. Skloot wastes no time getting to his inciting incident:

C. PLOT/SUSPENSE

I used to be able to think. My brain's circuits were all connected and I had spark, a quickness of mind that let me function well in the world. I could reason and total up numbers; I could find the right word, could hold a thought in mind, match faces with names, converse coherently in crowded hallways, learn new tasks. I had a memory and an intuition that I could trust.

All that changed when I contracted the virus that targeted my brain. More than a decade later, most of the damage is hidden.

Here, the author takes a less dramatic (scene-oriented) approach, with the point-of-view character confronting us directly, through exposition, with his situation. I can imagine a similar opening for the novel in question. But I can also imagine one in which, one way or another, we either *experience* or *learn of* the cause of Henry's brain injury. It might be a brief prologue or a new first chapter or even a sentence, one that sets up the given opening wherein we re-enter Henry and Olivia's marriage however many months or years following the event.

However different, with each of the above examples, directly or indirectly, via summary or scene, the novelist gives us the inciting incident, the event that caused the conditions that set the plot in motion, framing the question[s] that, presumably, the novel will go on to explore and possibly answer.

Instead the given opening frames the questions, "What's going on with this relationship? Why do these two people speak to each other this way?" By not mentioning Henry's brain injury until after we've spent some time with these characters, and keeping us in the dark as to its cause, the author directs our focus to the quality of this couple's relationship, its rhythms and nuances. It's as if we are being forced to listen to and learn a new language without knowing yet which country we've landed in. Disorienting or not, the approach is undeniably effective.

Whether or not we approve of the particular approach taken here, the writer's job remains the same: not to give answers, but to frame the question[s] correctly.

Your Turn

Draft the opening of a story or novel in which an accident of some sort functions as the inciting incident, with the main events of the story occurring *after* the accident. Example: Driving drunk one evening after a party, a young woman strikes a pedestrian—an old man—as he's crossing an intersection, blinding him (or causing him some other permanent injury or debility). The story is set weeks, months, or years after the incident, with the young woman visiting the old man. Note: in describing the accident, avoid sensationalism and sentimentality. Let bare facts do most of the work.

21. Taking the Yoke

(Foreshadowing / Implications vs. Statement)

September 1942

I crawled forward from the cargo hold after the plane stopped throwing us around. I made sure to find handholds at each point in case the plane jolted again. Only when I reached the cockpit did I pull myself upright, grabbing the doorframe for support.

Lieutenant Robert Jones, our pilot, smiled when he saw my reflection. "Glad you came up, Lieutenant Bowman. Sit there." He motioned to make sure I heard him over the grating noise. The engine must have swallowed a huge amount of sand as we went through the storm, which would explain why it was now so much louder than when we'd left Malta.

I twisted into the other seat, behind a half-wheel like the one he gripped. "Find the two ends of the seat belt and fasten it around you."

A belt held him to his seat. Ah, seat belt. I found the ends of mine and fitted the prong into an eyelet.

"Take the yoke."

"Yoke?"

"That half-wheel in front of you."

I threw up my left hand between us as if it could block his words. "But. But I can't fly an airplane." I shouted as loud as I could although he wasn't much more than a foot away. I wanted to be sure he heard my objection.

"Can you drive a car?"

"Well..." I didn't want to admit it, but I could hardly lie.

For some reason, he took that as a yes though few women had driven before the war. "The yoke moves in more directions than a steering wheel, but you'll just be keeping it steady. You do have to remember not to move it forward or back while you keep it steady side to side. I'll be here to make slight adjustments."

He took one hand off the yoke to hold up a swollen finger, looking at it accusingly as he continued to speak loudly. "I jammed my finger between two levers as I flew through the sandstorm. My own fault. I'll be fine, but I want to take my hands off the yoke for a few minutes. So, if you'll hold it."

I swallowed stomach acid, put my hands on the half-wheel in front of me, and tried to suppress my worry about making some mistake that would kill us all. I still believed—even though I was on my third flight within the last two days—that the laws of physics would reassert themselves at some point since these machines were obviously too heavy to really fly.

Analysis

In the cockpit of a cargo (?) plane flying from Malta to an unspecified destination, a passenger joins the pilot. The passenger is a woman; the pilot a man. Both are officers, lieutenants, in whose army we aren't told. The ride has been bumpy. One of the plane's engines (presumably it has several) grumbles loudly, having "swallowed a huge amount of sand" while flying through a sandstorm.

The time stamp tells us the world is at war. The Battle for Stalingrad has been joined. The US is poised to deploy its 1 Corps to the Pacific theater. Meanwhile, RAF bombers armed with incendiary bombs target Düsseldorf, Munich, and Saarbrücken. As these epic battles rage below, a smaller battle unfolds in the cockpit, with Lieutenant Bowman, the passenger, fighting her fear as Lieutenant Jones (the pilot) asks her to take the wheel—or the "yoke," as it's called.

This scene has its intrinsic drama. First of all, we are in an airplane during a war; that in itself is dramatic. That the ride has been (and will likely go on being) bumpy increases that drama, as does our knowing that at least one of the plane's engines is unhappy and complaining loudly. On top of these things—or riding along with them in that cockpit—is the drama of strangers, a man and a woman, meeting under strained and/or unusual circumstances. In Hollywood they call it the "meeting cute" scene: the scene in which the romantic leads first encounter each other. Since the late 1940s it has been a staple of romantic comedies.

To those who may object that the mere fact of two opposite-sexed people sharing the first scene of a novel (and a cockpit) doesn't, necessarily, imply a romantic future between them ... well, it does. Not that they will—necessarily—have a romantic relationship. But the possibility has been raised and can't be ignored. Given that, the connotations of the word "yoke" likewise can't be ignored. Though the applicable definition here is "an airplane control operating its elevators and ailerons," according to the *OED* it's also "something that connects two things or people, usually in a way that unfairly limits their freedom." The phrase "unequally yoked" suggests a team in which one ox is

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

stronger than the other. The expression “to pass under a yoke” comes from the Latin *passum sub iugum*, to “pass under a beam,” a ritual humiliation practiced by the ancient Romans on their enemies and from which we get the verb “to subjugate.” Will our two lieutenants be yoked together in an uncomfortable or unequal relationship?

But supposing the purpose of this opening isn’t to establish a romantic relationship, or a relationship of any kind, between its two characters? In that case I have to ask myself: what *is* its purpose? Why start this novel here?

Maybe its purpose is to *foreshadow* the novel’s larger drama. Foreshadowing is a fairly common device in fiction and especially in novels. Sometimes it can be subtle, as in this bit of foreshadowing that comes in the first line of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*:

The leaves fell early that year.

Hemingway’s novel isn’t about autumn or leaves. It’s about war and death, specifically the death of nurse Catherine Barkley, who cares for Frederick Henry, the hero who has been injured in a mortar attack, only to die prematurely herself following the stillbirth of their child.

Foreshadowing can also be done less subtly but no less effectively, as in the opening of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. It begins:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.

Before the novel ends, Esther Greenwood, its protagonist, will undergo electric shock therapy as part of her treatment for mental illness.

An even more pointed example of foreshadowing can be found in *Native Son*, Richard Wright’s 1940 masterpiece about a young African American man doomed by destiny and circumstance. Wright’s novel opens with the sound of an alarm clock, shortly after which a rat appears in the one-room home shared by Bigger and his family. The ensuing chaotic scene ends when Bigger, having chased and cornered the terrified rat, executes it with an iron skillet. In much the same way, Bigger Thomas will himself be chased, cornered, and sentenced to death.

With the opening in question, the “taking the yoke” scene may foreshadow the novel’s main story, that of a woman officer who finds herself faced with challenges she never imagined or anticipated—as she never anticipated flying

C. PLOT/SUSPENSE

a plane. It would help, in that case, to be given at least a clue to the plane's destination and (possibly) the nature of Lieutenant Bowman's assignment.

Two other issues raised by this opening page. The first is *implication*. As a general rule with fiction—and with narrative writing of any kind—if a thing is implied, it's best not to state it. Trust the reader; let implication do its work. Here, in this scene, I find many moments when the author relinquishes that trust, starting with the dialogue, "Glad you came up, Lieutenant Bowman"—a line obviated by the pilot's smile. Other implied statements that could be cut: "I wanted to be sure he heard my objection"; "I didn't want to admit it"; "and tried to suppress my worry about making some mistake that would kill us all." Whenever we authors state things that are or might be implied, we rob our readers of an interactive moment, of the chance to infer those implications: among the great pleasures offered by good writing.

Lastly, this intriguing and otherwise nicely written opening suffers from the common ailment known as *backwards sentences*, sentences in which the emphasis is misplaced. Take the opening sentence here:

I crawled forward from the cargo hold after the plane stopped throwing us around.

Nothing grammatically wrong with that sentence, but it puts the punch line first rather than saving it for last. Just as novels have plots, so do sentences. The climax of this one isn't—or shouldn't be—the turbulence coming to an end, but the protagonist's arrival in the cockpit.

After the plane stopped throwing us around, I crawled forward from the cargo hold.

That sentence points toward, rather than away from, the scene that it heralds. There are more backward sentences to be found in this opening, but I'll let you find them.

Your Turn

Revise this first page so nothing is stated that is or can somehow be implied (through action, gestures, or by other means). While at it, look for and correct any backward sentences. Do the same for a page of your own or that of a fellow writer.

22. Hanging from a Cliff

(In Medias Res / *Premature Climax*)

Ruby strained to keep hold of the narrow ledge in the rock wall. Her fingertips scraped to bleeding, the tips of her shoes clinging to shallow crimps, she gripped the looming wall like a spandex spider. A sweating, grunting spandex spider.

“Sal, I’m kicking your ass when I get up there.” Risking a glance to the top of the ridge, she growled at the wide grin waiting for her.

“Only a bit more. C’mon, you can do this,” he said. “Hell, you’ve climbed taller men than this.”

He laughed as a variety of muttered curses wafted up to him, and then readjusted his grip on the belay line leading to her harness. The thick treads on his boots gripped the sandy rock as he braced himself against the line tension. He adjusted a few inches, and then cursed aloud as his front foot slid, skimming through the loose grit and hitching up against a larger rock. Ruby yipped from over the cliff edge. He was stuck, groin muscle straining as he narrowly avoided tearing it in his wide straddle. A dark chuckle escaped from him as his arms and legs trembled with Ruby’s weight in his awkward position.

“Hey, Rubes?” He wrapped the belay line around his arm again, yanking it up an inch behind his back. “You all right?”

“Shit,” Ruby hissed. She’d dropped about a foot, and her fingers had slipped. The skin on the inside of her wrist throbbed raw as she scrabbled for purchase against the porous rock. She ground her teeth. Even breaths. Focus. She scanned the rock face above her and found her path. She bumped with her left hand, secured the hold, and then edged her feet into new jags, feeling her way between visual checks. Breathe. In, out. “Yeah. Peachy.”

Her eyes narrowed, her vision centered. She no longer noticed the trickle of sweat between her breasts, the raw skin, the gnat cloud orbiting her head. Nothing mattered but the wall, and climbing it. Part of her mind noted the remaining distance, the slant of the sun, her growling stomach, but Ruby ignored it. Her body took over, seeking workable holds, lifting her own weight from crack to nub to grip. Sal egged her on, but his voice faded to the background. She heard nothing but her own breathing.

Analysis

Near the end of *North by Northwest*, Alfred Hitchcock's careening suspense comedy starring Cary Grant as Roger Thornhill, a divorced ad executive mistaken for a CIA counterespionage agent, Cary Grant grips Eva Marie Saint (another CIA plant) by the hand as she dangles off one of the faces of Mount Rushmore. The movie literally ends on a cliffhanger. (Spoiler alert: he not only rescues her, but vaults her straight into the arms of marital bliss in a train couchette.)

Instead of ending with a cliffhanger, this novel opens with one. Unlike Cary and Eva Marie (who've been pushed to the brink of Mount Rushmore by James Mason and his band of spy-thugs), Ruby and Sal are voluntary "cliff-danglers"; they climb rocks for fun, though with this cliff they've apparently met their match. As Ruby's "fingertips bleed" while she "strain[s] to keep hold of the narrow ledge," she looks up at her partner Sal, who adjusts the belaying rope and eggs her on, saying, "You've climbed taller men than this."

The mixture of comedy and suspense is something else this piece shares in common with Hitchcock's masterpiece. As they dangle in tandem from Thomas Jefferson's nose, Eva Marie Saint asks Cary Grant why his previous wives divorced him. He replies, "They said I led too dull a life." A similar repartee binds these two protagonists together as surely as their belaying line.

In *North by Northwest*, by the time we arrive at this blend of nail biting and quip tossing, we know the protagonists well enough to invest equally in both the suspense and the humor of their situation, to laugh out loud while biting our nails. Sal and Ruby, by contrast, are strangers to me. Their dangling from a cliff means no more or less than would the peril of any two perfect strangers. The same goes for their sarcastic banter.

I'm reminded of another movie, *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid*, in which the two outlaws sling affectionate barbs at each other ("You just keep thinking, Butch. That's what you're good at."). With respect to their banter, thanks to the above-mentioned movies (and also to TV shows where paired sleuths share sarcastic repartee), the dynamic feels a bit too familiar. On the one hand, I don't know these people, really; on the other, I've seen and heard them a dozen times before. I know them as cardboard cutouts.

In the interest of grabbing the reader's attention, writers often choose to open with a sensationally dramatic scene from somewhere in the middle (*in medias res*) or near the end of the story. The trouble with that strategy is it can result in a *premature climax*, one for which we have not been sufficiently prepared, arrived at with little or no plot or character development. Though

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

that climax may still deliver a dramatic jolt, and though we may care whether or not Ruby falls, we care less than we ought to.

Supposing we met these two characters earlier, under less dramatic circumstances, so we might get to know them a bit better first before they arrive at this dramatic summit?

However well done, affectionate repartee and authentic descriptions of rock climbing can't substitute for character development.

Your Turn

Draft an opening in which we first encounter the main character or characters at the figurative (or literal) summit of a climactic scene: a soldier facing a firing squad; an escaped prisoner or fleeing suspect at the point of capture; someone who has just been handed a fateful verdict or some other life-altering piece of information (example: they learn that the man they thought of as their father isn't; or that someone else—a total stranger or the next-door neighbor—*is*). Pay attention to small, authenticating details while avoiding clichés.

23. Romance & Fireworks

(False Suspense / Pointed First Sentence)

She stretched out lazy in the hot night. She wasn't particularly interested in the colorful display overhead, but her attention kept returning to the diffused splash of color reflecting on the water's surface. With each splash followed another loud BANG as the fireworks exploded in the night sky. She closed her eyes and couldn't remember a Fourth of July this humid for years. It was hard to tell the smoke of celebration from the haze of summer.

"Kate, catch," a voice called out. She didn't hesitate. Her instincts hadn't slowed much despite the weather. She nodded her thanks and held the cold can up to her forehead momentarily before opening it and drinking greedily. She'd have to be careful how many of these she drank, she reminded herself.

She returned her attention to her own private celebration, aware of the sounds and the laughter going on around her but lost in her own thoughts. One firework explosion dragged into the next one. She'd never been much of a fan of the Fourth. She wasn't even sure how Neil had convinced her to come out here. Her thoughts were interrupted with the presence of someone sitting down beside her. The warmth of another body so close felt like a personal intrusion. She wanted to move away but decided against it to avoid giving the wrong impression.

"Quite an impressive display," he said.

"Sure," she responded, but clearly she wasn't as impressed.

"Are you having a good time?"

She looked up into his face and saw the glow of blues and reds reflecting in glittery showers in his glasses. The brightness in contrast hid the expression in his eyes but she was fairly certain she knew what was going on behind the mirrored celebration. The vibration of her phone saved her from lying as she excused herself and got up to put distance between herself and Neil, probably much more than was necessary.

She sighed once she was satisfied that she'd allowed herself enough privacy and looked at the display number on the phone. It wasn't one that she recognized, but that wasn't important right now.

Analysis

The first page of a novel can and ideally should accomplish many things. It may tell us something of the nature and background of the characters whose dramas we'll experience with them, or it may describe the setting or settings in which those experiences are to occur and that may even give rise to those experiences (as John Steinbeck's dust bowl setting of *The Grapes of Wrath* gives rise to the Joads' and other sharecroppers' struggles).

A first page also forges a tacit understanding between reader and author as to how the material is to be presented, in what voice, by means of what technique and style. First person? Omniscient? Subjective? Epic or lyric? Based on a book or story's first page, the reader forms certain expectations. Assuming they are met, said expectations will give rise to consternation, disappointment, or—assuming the reader has an appetite for surprises (which appetite will likewise be whetted or not by the first paragraphs)—amusement.

Ideally, though, whatever else a first page accomplishes, it holds out the promise of a story. And since stories are always about one thing—people—a first page that successfully evokes character(s) goes a long way toward not only making, but keeping, that promise.

Here, the author introduces us to Kate, who, on a muggy Fourth of July evening, lies stretched out (on the grass, on a chaise lounge?), aware of but not all that interested in the fireworks exploding in the sky overhead, and whose mental reflections are rendered as splashes of color diffused over the surface of a body of water (lake? ocean? river?).

And though the fireworks and their reflections are lovingly and capably described, beyond her being jaded about both the Fourth of July and Neil (the young man watching them with her), what do we know or learn about Kate?

The answer to the question points to the weakness of this otherwise well written opening. The answer: very little. How old is Kate? What is her relation to Neil? Why—since she seems indifferent and even hostile to him—did she accept his invitation to the fireworks display? What town are we in, in what part of the country (we assume it's in the United States, since people don't celebrate July Fourth elsewhere). We learn more about the fireworks, the weather, and Kate's mood than about who these two people are and the nature of their relationship and situation. That Kate's feelings are expressed negatively, in terms of what *doesn't* preoccupy or interest her (fireworks; Neil), makes it all the harder to get a handle on her.

In the penultimate paragraph Kate's cellphone vibrates, rescuing Kate and her readers from this anti-scene that seems to fulfill no purpose other than to

C. PLOT/SUSPENSE

be interrupted. Possibly the phone call will present us with something more dramatic or to the point; perhaps the fireworks display is merely a setting for—and the set-up for—the phone call. In that case, the author might want to frontload the scene with this as a first sentence:

They were watching the fireworks display when Kate's cellphone vibrated.

From there, the author might go on to establish that Kate's mind isn't on the fireworks or on the young man watching them with her, but on that phone call, one she's been longing for or dreading. By being even more specific, the first sentence might thrust us more deeply into the crux of a story ("Kate was watching the fireworks display with her fiancé when the casting director called.").

By means of a cunningly chosen first sentence, readers might enter this story with just the right expectations raised, with curiosity and tension, rather than with a series of bored sighs set against a backdrop of colorful explosions.

Your Turn

1. Starting with the sentence, "They were watching the fireworks display when Kate's cellphone vibrated," revise this opening following the suggestions provided in the analysis.
2. Introduce a pointed first sentence to a first page of your own or that of a fellow writer. Revise the rest of the page as necessary.

D. Characters

“SINCE THE NOVELIST IS HIMSELF A HUMAN BEING,” WROTE E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, “there is affinity between him and his subject matter which is absent in any other forms of art.” The “subject matter” referred to here is *people*. Whether we’re writing fiction or nonfiction, our task as storytellers is to render—or recreate—human experiences. Good stories are, first and foremost, about people.

Since stories are about people, evoking characters is high on, if not at the top of, our list of priorities. As storytellers, just about anything we do that evokes character in some way is almost certainly to the good. On the other hand, whatever we do that fails to evoke character in *any* way, that merely describes something or provides information without either imbuing that description or information with some quality or trace of human nature, without infusing it by one means or another (by *how* it’s said, for instance) with some quality or aspect of character (wit, for instance), should be held suspect and either revised or given the axe.

When writing your stories, whatever else you’re up to, get character into your sentences and onto your pages. Including—and maybe especially—your first page.

24. Meeting Ewan

(First Glimpse / Evoking Characters / Memoir)

I have always seen my life as a movie directed by Gus Van Sant, starring me as me, and characters of my picking to do my bidding throughout scene after scene after scene. Is it boring? That is why I have chosen Gus Van Sant to direct the happenings, so it doesn't become boring. A good director keeps things moving along plot-wise. Gus Van Sant as God in the movie that is my life. Would Matt Dillon be in it? I think that everyone has their *Own Private Matt Dillon* in their lives.

During the summer before my last year of graduate school in a small town in Illinois there wasn't much to do and even fewer people to do it with. During the summer is when this guy named Ewan began to latch onto me. He was at Quarter Round even more than me. I found Ewan to be quite annoying the first time I met him. He always played devil's advocate. And I hate people that do that. It's such a waste of conversation.

"Are you for or against pro-choice, Lilli?" he asked me one afternoon from where he sat at the counter of the coffee shop. There were only a few people in there that afternoon. Ewan at the counter, Mike Vonnegut playing chess with Thurston while Karl watched, and a very large freshman guy smoking a pipe on the front couch while reading a newspaper.

I looked up from the books and papers on the table where I was and said, "Huh?" I had been up to my ears in revolutions, peasant upheavals, and guerrilla warfare at the time and didn't hear what he said.

"Pro-choice, Lilli, or are you a Bible-beater?"

Analysis

If plot is the backbone of fiction, that which ignites fiction and gives it its forward movement, scenes are plot's vertebrae. A concatenation of causally related scenes adds up to a plot.

Beyond their technical function, scenes are what we're most likely to remember about a story and discuss, with enthusiasm or dismay, with others. Think of a memoir, novel, or story you loved and what you remember most about it, and

D. CHARACTERS

odds are you'll remember a scene. I'm thinking of *Catch-22*, of the scene where Yossarian rips open wounded Snowden's flak vest to uncover the "secret" that Snowden has hidden and that spills out of him in the form of shredded intestines. Or the scene in *Anna Karenina* where Vronsky rips his shirt open. Or the scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where Sethe kills her own baby.

If scenes are what we remember, characters are what make them memorable, explaining why, of all the types of scenes in stories, few are more memorable than first-glimpse scenes, in which key characters encounter each other for the very first time. Examples spring readily to mind. From *Moby Dick*, here is Ishmael's first encounter with Ahab:

He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has over-runningly wasted all of the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness ... His bone-leg steadied in that hole; one arm elevated, and holding by a shroud; Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship's ever pitching prow.

Another first glimpse, from *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis:

[T]he stranger opened the door [of the cafe] with a determined thrust of his arm. He passed between the tables with a rapid, springy step, and stopped in front of me.

"Traveling?" he asked. "Where to? Trusting to providence?"

"I'm making for Crete. Why do you ask?"

"Taking me with you?"

I looked at him carefully. He had hollow cheeks, a strong jaw, prominent cheekbones, curly gray hair, bright, piercing eyes.

"Why? What should I do with you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Why! Why!" he exclaimed with disdain. "Can't a man do anything without a why? Just like that, because he wants to? Well, take me, shall we say, as a cook. I can make soups you've never heard or thought of..."

And another, this one from Elizabeth Smart's novel (extended prose poem?) *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, where the first glimpse is of the wife of the man with whom the narrator is hopelessly in love as the wife de-boards a bus:

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

But then it is her eyes that come forward out of the vulgar disembarkers to reassure me that the bus has not disgorged disaster: her eyes, soft as the newly-born, trusted as the untempted.

The first-glimpse scene offered in this author's first page presents us with Ewan, a fellow student at the narrator's university "in a small town in Illinois." By the end of this first page we know very little about Ewan. That he is a fellow student we can only assume, since we're not told as much; in fact we're hardly told anything. We don't know what he looks like, or how he walks, or—when he speaks—how he speaks. We're told that he's a "guy"—something we can surmise from his name, and that at some point he will "latch on" to the narrator, but that point exists in the future, and has no bearing here.

If Ewan emerges as a character, it's mainly through his dialogue. "Are you for or against pro-choice, Lilli?" he asks the narrator one afternoon as she sits at the counter of her favorite coffee shop. If these aren't Ewan's first words to her, they're close to being so; anyway, they successfully evoke a man who, to put it nicely, has little patience for decorum. Those less generous would call him tactless.

If only we could see Ewan as clearly as we hear him, the way we see Zorba strutting into that cafe. Since Ewan's words are what characterize him, my inclination would be to lead off with his in-your-face inquiry, and take it from there.

As for the first paragraph, I would cut it. It indulges the author's gratuitous wish that her novel were already a movie—and not just any movie, but one directed by Gus Van Sant. But this fantasy gives nothing to us readers: in fact it discourages us. Not only is the wish doomed; it's the wrong wish to hold out to lovers of fiction. If the novelist is really so intent on Gus Van Sant and Matt Dillon, she should be writing the screenplay.

Your Turn

You've already written a first-glimpse scene. Rewrite it so that at least one character is evoked strictly through action. Then rewrite it with the emphasis on the character's dialogue. In a third revision, combine action and dialogue with a physical description of the character.

25. Painting the Nude

(Stereotypes / Fictional Artists)

Here I was with my first naked woman ever, not a stitch on her. She kept squirming closer, and I kept jabbing paint into her eyes.

“Or maybe, ‘Crippled Innocence?’” she suggested. “Something like that?”

“Uhhh, yeah....” My lips and jaw worked around for a while, but only that one word edged out. Trying to think of something charming or eloquent to say is like digging around through cooling street tar with a straw wrapper. In a borrowed white tux. I’m guaranteed to make a mess of things.

Well, at least I’d managed more than a grunt this time; I’d dredged up one whole word. Though maybe I should have said yes, rather than yeah. Or yes, ma’am.

No. Too formal. Yes, that is a patently good idea, Ma’am, although I generally don’t assign titles to my various artistic renderings.

She flipped her hair away from the front of her shoulders. Freckles surfed the soft white swells of her shimmying breasts.

Stop! Don’t look down there! I jerked my eyes back up.

Say something, moron, maybe she didn’t notice.

Dang it; open your mouth. Say something. Anything. You know a ton of words; pick out any three. Everybody else can talk.

By the time I can think of anything to say, I’ve been rummaging around for days, and the other guy’s gone home.

“Hello; are you in there?” she asked. “You don’t talk much, do ya?”

I started crushing more paint into the canvas, shooting a quick sideways look at her nose. Then back at the portrait. I studied her neck. As I braked against letting my gaze drift any lower, my breath bottled up in my ears. I felt even more exposed than she was. Fully clothed, I felt like I was the one who was naked. Like she could see I had nothing on under my armor.

Analysis

I remember the first time I was confronted with a nude model. I was a freshman at the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, New York, nineteen years old. The drawing studio was on the top floor of an old brick building with arched windows. I stood behind my drawing horse—a wooden platform with a graded surface—with my newsprint pad (“penny paper,” we called it) and charcoal sticks and pencils. This would have been in September, but I remember the studio being cold, perhaps because come November it would be an igloo, with us all huddled in winter coats and scarves, our breaths fogging an atmosphere already murky with charcoal dust. Ms. Helmann, our instructor, forbade us from drawing faces or genitals. “Distractions,” she called them. “No lines,” she used to say. “There are no lines in nature, just planes and shadows; a line is a concept. We’re not here to draw concepts. You can do that at home.”

One thing I remember about those drawing sessions: they were not the least bit sexy. No matter how good-looking the model was (and some of them were quite good-looking), after staring at them long enough through curtains of dust, with eyes aching, feet sore, and fingertips blackened with charcoal, you grew blind to abstract judgments like “beautiful” or “handsome” or “attractive,” which was the point. You got so you only saw light and dark, shapes and values, negative and positive spaces. That these shifting patterns of light and dark added up to a beautiful woman was beside the point; anyway, you were too busy drawing to notice.

When writing about visual artists—what they do, and how they think while doing it—most writers get it all wrong. For one thing, they assume that the artist is consumed with the significance and meaning of his subject—maybe so, but not while he’s working. While painting or drawing, he’s concerned with one thing only: with *seeing*. He’s measuring shapes, shadows, proportions. Labels don’t exist. This is as true whether the subject is a haystack or the *Mona Lisa*.

Of course, the artist may be an amateur, or a charlatan. That is the conclusion pointed to by this first page, since first of all no serious artist tackles his very first nude in oil on canvas: he’d have sketched her first, many times. That he’s already gotten around to “jabbing paint into her eyes” likewise raises suspicions. By then our tongue-tied Picasso would have had to at least sketch in the rest of her, giving him some time to calm down. As for his speechlessness, it seems as suspect as his art. To have talked her into posing for him in the first place, he must have a way with words. Or is his affliction triggered only by those “surfing” freckles?

D. CHARACTERS

Much that seems forced here might be alleviated given the proper context. But since we're given no context, we can't be blamed for imposing our own. Are they in his studio, or her boudoir? Is he a professional, or an imposter? Whose idea was it to paint her in the nude? Nor do we know, apart from his stupor and her freckles, who these two are, let alone what they mean to each other.

Imagine how much better all of this might have worked were we told from the start that he met her the week before at the Brass Jail, a local bar where, under the influence of one tequila shot too many, he passed himself off as a portrait artist (N.B. vocationally he installs mufflers for Meineke, but he has doodled on a napkin or two). Over a few more drinks he talked her—and himself—into a commission, for which in the intervening days he has invested a small fortune in paints, brushes, easel, etc., and even squeezed in an art lesson or two. And now—

Well, you get the idea. And you get the scene, too, which isn't so bad after all, now that it comes with some context.

Your Turn

Draft an opening scene involving an artist or writer at work. Provide authenticating details and avoid clichés. Note: though they may be frustrated, your artist should be competent.

26. A Balcony Overlooking the Bay

(Dramatized Routine / Fictional Artist)

The balcony of the small villa overlooked the undulating turquoise waters of the bay of Girona, the waves of the Spanish side of the Mediterranean rolling lightly and unfurling as they reached shore, frothy and shimmering with light that splashed against the houses and shops of the village by the sea.

Nicu Macek watched as a few people, probably visitors, walked the narrow black-railed promenade by the water, women with hands raised struggling to keep hair in place. He had long given up battling his, preferring to brush the wiry strands back and let the thickness keep it in place. It was still easier for a man to do this than a woman, he thought, recalling how impossible his daughter Ana had found it to tame the black kinks she lamented inheriting when the style was long and straight.

A light salt breeze blew off the water as Nicu wrapped another piece for the show at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Barcelona, a coup for a Romanian in a region of the world known for its glassworks. Yes, he had something certain others didn't, an ingrained knowledge of what it meant to not have light like this and the kind of security that didn't dissipate with every wind. His critics, who were many and vocal, had begrudgingly begun saying as much. "His work does have a certain ethereal yet substantial quality—and he manages to use all that color in a way that doesn't mask flaws or degenerate into kitsch." Kitsch, in these circles, must be avoided like disease, though he still played with the glass in the studio, making objects for local shops, like the paperweights that still sold in bookstores though paper had been sentenced to a torturous and slow death.

Another gust whisked up from the shore, sprinkling particles of sand onto the russet tiles under the long table that was reserved for dinners with friends where he was typically banned from working. He usually did these chores in his studio, a comparatively short walk down the stone steps across the uneven cobbles of the alley to the hilltop.

Analysis

At the outdoor table of his Spanish villa overlooking a Mediterranean bay, a glass sculptor prepares his works for an important exhibition. Normally, he would perform such chores in his studio, but for reasons unstated, he's chosen to work outdoors, on a blustery day, and against the wishes of friends who have enjoined him not to use the table as a workspace.

There are some lovely qualities to this opening scene. As a lover of anything to do with the Mediterranean, I can't help being drawn into the setting. I'm also drawn to this artist by his Romanian background and the distinct nature of his art. In works of fiction I've encountered many artists working in oils or chiseling marble. Until now I've run into no glass sculptors.

The setting and the artist are engaging; the scene less so. In terms of action we have a man wrapping things while watching tourists walk along a windy promenade. The tourists' struggle to shield their hairdos from the wind reminds the protagonist of his daughter, Ana, and her struggle to "tame the black kinks of her hair"—a quest that Macek (who also has black kinky hair) gave up long ago. From there Macek's ruminations turn to past critical appraisals of his work. Ultimately the scene is more about a man's thoughts than about his wrapping or the people down in the street below. Indeed, until the third paragraph we don't even realize he's wrapping a sculpture. By then we've already formed an inaccurate image of a man standing idly on a balcony gathering in the view.

Which brings me to the biggest problem with this otherwise well-written opening: Mr. Macek's ruminations—assuming that they're really his ruminations and not the interjections of an intrusive author—feel unmotivated.

Let's start with the first rumination, the one about Macek's daughter and her struggles with her hair. What motivates it? True, a series of mental leaps might carry him from the people down in the street to his own "wiry strands" and from there to his daughter's hair, but even mentally this seems like a long way to travel for a man wrapping sculptures on a windy Spanish balcony for a major art exhibition. For me the rumination feels arbitrary—or worse, contrived for convenience, there for the author's sake, as a means to introduce to us the fact that the protagonist has a certain racial background as suggested by his hair.

In the third paragraph, as the artist wraps "another piece for the show at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Barcelona" (so we're told, somewhat intrusively), we're treated to something like a Wikipedia entry summarizing past critical receptions of his artwork, including a snippet review. The contrast between this and the earlier stream-of-consciousness passage where the protagonist dwells on his daughter's kinks could not be greater. The first takes us into

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

the character's psyche; the second is dryly objective. Yet both feel more convenient than organic. They exist to supply us with information.

The biggest question raised by this scene—and one not confronted by the character in his ruminations—is why, on this blustery day, does this man forsake the relative safety of his nearby studio and choose instead to wrap his sculpture on the “forbidden” dining table on his balcony? What urges him outdoors, or deters him from his studio? Surely there must be compelling reasons. These reasons point to an event that would seem to be fodder for his ruminations—more than his daughter's hair issues or past critical receptions of his work—and might form the spine of a stream-of-consciousness narrative.

As it so often does, the issue here comes down to point of view, to the extent to which an author has inhabited the perspective of her character through the agency of a close third-person narrator. Assuming that character's stream of consciousness has been faithfully and genuinely engaged, none of his thoughts would be out of bounds or off-limits. But between dipping faithfully into a character's stream of consciousness and taking advantage of it as a convenient excuse to supply information to the reader, there lies a world of difference. And in this opening scene certain information feels more convenient than genuine.

Were this scene written more thoroughly, deeply, genuinely, and consistently from the protagonist's point of view, his resistance to his studio might form the substance of the scene—which, as written, though set as carefully as a jewel, lacks a thematic center or focus.

Your Turn

Draft or revise an opening scene in which we confront a character at his or her place of work or business. Evoke both the setting in which the work is done, and the nature of the work (process). For instance: a jeweler repairing a watch in the back room of his store. Note: for the opening to work, it mustn't be static. We must encounter your character on a workday in which something important occurs (the jewelry store is robbed—but no; that's too predictable). The non-routine event need not be engaged on the first page. You just need to know what's going to happen.

27. An Opening in Search of Itself

(Unreliable Narrator / Mental Illness / Abstraction / Metaphors)

If I could know what I am, if I could see myself plainly, if there were a place that I could fit into like a bolt into a nut, if I wasn't on this knife not knowing if the knife could go right through me, slicing me in two, if only I were not standing on this cliff about to fall right off into the flames below, then perhaps I could feel that I fitted into my skin, filled the cavity of my skull with my brain, but I know that these ifs are not about to be turned into certainties, I am not about to be one thing or another, not about to be circling complete as a person. Christ, this is all too Kafka for me, seeing myself as a turtle or the famous cockroach, I have to put all this shit aside and think of normal, everyday things.

Matti lifted a saucer and turned it over to examine the base. Not bad. Doulton Stellite, a reasonable restaurant product. Before she got married, she had worked as a buyer in a restaurant supply wholesale warehouse and she knows her china, does Matti. She placed the cutlery in precise order and folded and unfolded her napkin, while a slight breeze teased the terrace tempting her to lift her face into it.

It's essential to present herself as especially elegant, chic, fashionable, sophisticated etc. for birthday lunches. Oh, God, her life is full of fucking clichés. Her butter-yellow silk suit glowed in the shadows as if her body was lit by a lamp inside it and for a change, her long, gold hair, just colored and streaked yesterday in a four-hour hair appointment....

Analysis

Within the eleven lines of its first paragraph, this opening scene presents readers with a mélange of no less than ten metaphors for the narrator's frustrated desire to belong fully to something, to "fit in." The writing is passionate, poetic, full of spit and vinegar—but what is it *for*?

"If I could see myself plainly," the narrator laments at the inception of this hyperextended metaphor, then proceeds to describe her spiritual condition in terms of a) a nut in a bolt, b) a knife blade, c) a cliff's edge (overlooking flames), d) an empty skull, and e) something that "circles." Having exhausted nearly

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

every available metaphor, the narrator throws her hands in the air, declares the whole affair Kafkaesque, tosses two more metaphors our way (one reptilian, one insectile), then ditches the metaphor parade in favor of “normal, everyday” thoughts—something some readers will wish she had done so sooner.

As a nosedive into a neurotic narrator’s distraught thoughts, there’s something to be said for this opening with its manic energy. Who can read it and not think of this other tale told by a less-than-stable narrator?

True—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Harken! And observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

However, unlike the opening of Edgar Allan Poe’s “A Tell-Tale Heart,” which provides me with solid, concrete information (“Above all was the sense of hearing acute”) and seems to me accurate and even reliable despite the narrator’s unhinged state, I find the first page in question vague, abstract, and sentimental, brimming not only with mixed metaphors, but with feelings thrust at us with no basis, i.e., *emotion(s) in excess of experience*. Whatever else this befuddled opening achieves, it convinces me, if I need convincing, that this narrator can’t see herself clearly. Which is probably the point. Still, even assuming the narrator is unreliable and this is the opening of an *unreliable narrative*, I need some measure of reliability, something solid to hold onto, not just a barrage of distraught metaphors.

I suspect that the real purpose served by this opening may be even more basic. Stated by means of another serial metaphor: it’s to get the author’s pen rolling, to blow some warmth onto the icy blank page, to get the narrative blood flowing. Others less charitably inclined will call it “throat clearing.” In any case, for all its energy and passion, it should probably be cut, all of it. It’s there for the author, not for the reader.

The real beginning starts with Matti inspecting a piece of restaurant china at an event, a birthday lunch. Perhaps she’s an event planner of some kind. We don’t know, but she has a vested professional interest in the affair at hand and its dinnerware. To be sure, she is dressed to the hilt in her suit that “glow[s] in [its] shadows as if her body was lit by a lamp inside it”—making me wonder how much it would glow were it exposed to full sunlight.

D. CHARACTERS

Here the writing is comprehensible and much more effective. Still, we don't quite know what's going on; we have to guess. And some information provided seems misplaced. Do we really need to know that, before she married, Matti worked as a buyer for a restaurant supply wholesaler? Maybe, but within the context of so much more that remains unknown, that bit of information seems more coy than generous, more like a tease than enlightenment. Most readers will prefer to know who Matti is and what she's doing, rather than who she was and what she did.

In the final paragraph, again the author seems to throw her hands in the air: "Oh, God, her life is full of fucking clichés"—a comment that doesn't seem to attach itself to anything, unless birthday lunches are a cliché, or butter-yellow suits, or certain types of restaurant china. But my guess is that the charge of "cliché" is a preemptive strike by the author against her material, as if by the end of this first page she's grown disenchanted and declares defeat even before the first battle lines have been drawn.

In each of the sections that pattern is repeated, with the author undertaking a bold initiative, then questioning it, then surrendering before the reader can engage in hostilities. This reads more like a talented author's exploratory draft than like a finished manuscript.

Your Turn

Draft the opening of a story told by a mentally disturbed narrator. Decide for yourself whether the narrator is reliable or not—but you must decide. Remember: an unreliable narrator isn't a narrator who knowingly or purposely distorts the truth or gets the facts wrong. On the contrary: he or she has command of all the facts. It's the narrator's sincere interpretation of the facts that isn't reliable.

28. Finding Jenny

*(Indolent Character / Mental Illness / Sensational
Event Conveyed by Torpid Scene)*

Somehow, when Robert heard the report on the eleven o'clock news he knew that they had found Jenny, even though the police had not yet identified the woman discovered in that motel room just outside Hemet. The newscaster recounted the circumstances with a touch of sadness in his voice, which made her barbiturate overdose tragic rather than tawdry. Robert imagined the rest: medication washed down with vodka, the bottle lying next to her on the bed, the remaining pills scattered across a knotty pine floor.

It had been a year since she had disappeared—for Robert, a year of feelings shut away like furniture crated in some dark, musty warehouse. He lay down on the couch, clutched a pillow to his chest and stared at the television screen, which minute by minute seemed to lose its authority, melting into a blur of images without connection to his life. The pungent smell of leftover Thai food—pineapple, shrimp and Massaman curry—drifted from cartons on the dinner table. *It couldn't be Jenny*, he told himself. The living room suddenly seemed too cold for April in Los Angeles. He felt he had to call the Hemet Police Department, to learn if they really had found his wife, but instead could only hug the pillow more tightly.

In the morning Robert Leonard Singer, Jr. knew he had to put on his navy wool suit, tie the tight Windsor knot in his tie and spend the day reviewing documents and depositions, all in the name of billable hours. He had dropped the *Junior* years ago, just after graduating from college, and now was Robert Leonard Singer, *Esquire*. The sound from the television became a low drone. Warmth diffused into his hands, his arms and legs, and for a minute the world receded into numbing silence.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep, but when he awoke to the chatter of a late-night talk show, Robert realized he was too tired to work. The papers he had intended to study would have to stay in their manila folders locked in his briefcase.

Analysis

While watching the evening news, a lawyer—Robert Leonard Singer, Esquire—learns of a woman found dead in her motel room, the apparent victim of a drug overdose. Authorities have yet to identify the body, but Robert thinks he knows who she is. In fact he's sure.

Her name is Jenny, and she disappeared a year before, “a year of feelings shut away like furniture crated in some dark, musty warehouse.” From this we infer that Robert and Jenny were close—involved in a prolonged passionate affair, perhaps, or just a fling? At the next paragraph's end we learn that Jenny was his wife.

Whatever relationship Robert had with Jenny, we know that her disappearance—and now her apparent suicide—have both affected Robert deeply. Overcome by his emotions, or numbed by them, he collapses onto his sofa, hugging its pillow “tightly” as the evening news murmurs on and “the smell of leftover Thai” takeout food drifts his way from the dining table. Instead of attending to the depositions in his briefcase, Robert drifts off to sleep. The page ends with him waking “to the chatter of a late-night talk show,” still in a torpid state and unable to work.

Though the events conveyed by this passage are sensational—a woman's unexplained disappearance, the sudden discovery of her body in a motel room, her apparent drug-overdose suicide—the opening scene itself is as torpid as its main character. Robert listens to the evening news, lies down on his sofa, and goes to sleep. That accurately summarizes the action here.

And though Robert's descent into indolence is, presumably, triggered by grief, one gets the feeling—I do, anyway—that on his best days Robert is not exactly a man of boundless energy (witness the takeout cartons on his dinner table). He seems to have been depressed long before he switched on the television news. The news of his missing wife's death plunges—if that's not too active a verb—Robert into ever-greater depths of indolence. The question is: how far did he have to drop? Measured on an emotional altitude meter, my guess is an ear-popping two-and-a-half feet.

Though not all that common, paralytically torpid characters can make for good fictional protagonists. Melville's *Bartleby* (“I would prefer not to”) springs obviously to mind, as does Tom Sawyer, who gets Ben Rogers to white-wash the fence for him, and Jacob Horner, the apt-named protagonist of John Barth's second novel, *The End of the Road*, a character figuratively “cornered”

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

by indecisiveness.⁴ And let's not forget Hypnos, the god of Greek mythology, who, when not putting people to sleep, spends his time drowsing in a cave in the underworld. Perhaps the best example of an indolent hero is *Oblomov*, the protagonist of Ivan Goncharov's eponymous 1859 novel, about a young Russian nobleman so incapable of making decisions or taking any significant action he spends most of the novel getting from his bed to his chair. *Oblomov* begins:

One morning, in a flat in one of the great buildings in Gorokliovaia Street, the population of which was sufficient to constitute that of a provincial town, there was lying in bed a gentleman named Ilya Ilyitch Oblomov. He was a fellow of a little over thirty, of medium height, and of pleasant exterior. Unfortunately, in his dark-grey eyes there was an absence of any definite idea, and in his other features a total lack of concentration. Suddenly a thought would wander across his face with the freedom of a bird, flutter for a moment in his eyes, settle on his half-opened lips, and remain momentarily lurking in the lines of his forehead. Then it would disappear, and once more his face would glow with a radiant *insouciance* which extended even to his attitude and the folds of his night-robe.

Returning to our first page, Robert's emotional torpor goes beyond numbness into oblivion, to where, moments after learning of his wife's death, having made up his sluggish mind to call the authorities and verify things, his thoughts drift into getting dressed for work the next morning, and from there to tying "the tight Windsor knot on his tie and spend[ing] the day reviewing documents and depositions." From there his thoughts wander even farther afield of immediate circumstances, to ruminate upon his name and title, having recently shed the "Junior," replacing it with "Esquire."

What in blazes has any of this to do with the shocking news of his wife's dismal and unsuspected suicide? Nothing, which may be the point. We are, I take it, witnessing the full extent of a man's disconnection from his emotions. We're dealing with an emotionally unhinged character, with a man losing, or who has already lost, part of his sanity to grief.

Be that as it may, since Robert's feelings (along with that measure of his sanity) were already "shut away like furniture ... in a dark, musty warehouse,"

4 So indecisive is Jacob, he vacillates over his own name. "In a sense, my name is Jacob Horner." So he introduces himself in the novel's first sentence. A far cry indeed from "Call me Ishmael."

D. CHARACTERS

what we're met with here in this opening scene is the spectacle of his musty, crated feelings sprouting a fresh layer of dust, mold, and mildew. Even when the mold is fertilized by dramatic, sensational events, watching it grow isn't all that exciting.

I would suggest one of two alternatives: either an opening scene that finds the main character deep in his torpor, or one that confronts him with shocking, disturbing news. I would resist doing both things at once.

Your Turn

Draft your own opening of a story or novel featuring an epically indolent or indecisive character.

29. A Self-Conscious Queen

(Judgments, Labels, and Epithets / Dramatized Routine)

Often, during the transformation, the Lady Javana found herself considering the word “glamor.” It was no wonder, she thought, as she sharpened an eyebrow pencil, or elbowed past another queen to peer in the mirror, that the word rhymed with “clamor.” She had to plaster down those eyebrows with the glue stick, beat her face with the powder, chisel new features out of her face with foundation and blush. There was the brutal art of the tuck. Then she wrestled into her pads. Then the dress. Last the wig.

The Lady Javana—who spent most of her days as Joseph Ryan Gainer, library assistant—hated the tired metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly, but could not dispute its relevance. Because the holometabolism of the butterfly was a complex transition. It was sticky, confusing and savage.

Javana, whose job in the Bridgeport library’s nonfiction room brought many science books through her hands, once looked “metamorphosis” up during her lunch break. She didn’t eat that day. The self-mutilation that happened inside the chrysalis horrified her. Drag could be just as confusing, and just as painful. But the payoff? Sublime.

The Lipstick Lounge’s dressing room was filled with queens. Queens. Javana smiled at herself in the mirror, straightened her wig, and dabbed the lipstick off her teeth. She had always been taken by the idea of being a queen. Not just a boy in a dress. Not a man. Not a woman. Not a female impersonator, because what female wears glitter on her eyelids, pink beehives and six-inch heels? But a *queen*.

She straightened her bodice and checked herself in the mirror. All was as it should be: Nose straight like a razor under tiers of caramel curls, angular face faceted like a....

Analysis

In the dressing room of the Lipstick Lounge, the Lady Javana “straighten[s] her wig” and “dab[s] the lipstick off her teeth.” Lady Javana, we’re informed, is neither a man nor a woman, nor “a boy in a dress” nor “a female

D. CHARACTERS

impersonator”: “What female wears glitter on her eyelids, pink beehives and six-inch heels?” (More than a few, actually, but never mind.)

No, in her own over-determined estimation, Lady Javana is a *queen*. I’ve italicized the word, since the author goes to such great lengths to emphasize it.

Rather than present us with a character, instead the bulk of this first page is taken up with a series of terms and metaphors by which Javana either identifies and labels herself, or that she refutes (Note: when someone is in drag, etiquette requires that they be referred to by the opposite pronoun, and so a woman in drag would be a “he,” and a man in drag a “she”). What starts out promisingly as an evocative, concrete scene (“She had to plaster down those eyebrows with the glue stick, beat her face with the powder, chisel new features ... with foundation and blush”) in which the particular (drag queen putting on makeup) stands for the general, breaks down into an exercise in denotation, such that, by the end of the page, what we’ve read feels more like a jacket blurb than a scene.

Too bad, since the writing is quite strong:

Lady Javana—who spent most of her days as Joseph Ryan Gainer, library assistant—hated the tired metaphor of the caterpillar and the butterfly, but could not dispute its relevance. Because the holometabolism of the butterfly was a complex transition. It was sticky, confusing and savage.

As prose this can’t be faulted, but the issue here isn’t so much whether or not the metaphor of the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly aptly conveys the experience of a drag queen. The metaphor may or may not be apt; but the harping on it here conveys a self-consciousness that would seem to apply more to the author’s fascination with his subject than to the character in question. Though hatched from its “self-mutilating” chrysalis, this butterfly never takes flight. Like a lepidopterist’s specimen, instead it has been pinned to the page and pasted with labels.

Butterflies don’t go around self-consciously inventorying their butterfly-ness. Nor do readers of fiction especially want labels, and if they do want them they prefer to supply their own. Nor do readers want judgments imposed by the author on a character or by characters on themselves. What readers want is experience evoked concretely through action or dialogue, or through a character’s internal responses to particular events, challenges, and situations—illuminated, perhaps, by a sympathetic and/or wise narrator, and possibly by the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

character's own reflections, but not sewn up and boiled down into the shrunken heads of judgment and epithet.

Here, the only behavior exhibited aside from the application of lipstick and eye-glitter is the character's self-conscious pursuit of a label for him/herself. Even accepting that this pursuit is real—that is, belonging to the character and not to an author overly fixated on the presumed novelty of his subject—still, it's hard to imagine such self-conscious soul-searching taking place, as suggested here, on a regular basis for any duration. Surely this queen doesn't spend his/her days (or nights) mulling over what to call him or herself? If so, one wants to say to him/her, "Get over it, already."

What's sacrificed here for the sake of a story about someone "being a queen," is a better story about a unique human being—a librarian—who, apart from all the other qualities that render him unique, *happens to be* "a queen."

Your Turn

"Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing." With this opening sentence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "The Rich Boy" in mind, draft an opening in which you introduce us to a character who, though he or she clearly qualifies as a *type* (tweedy professor, gourmand, rock star, ambulance chaser, adventurer, preppie, pool shark, nerd ... you get the idea), is also a unique individual.

30. Up a Tree

(Child's Perspective / Blunt Sentences)

1962

“Hey, do you like your mom?”

I was in my tree, the dogwood in the island of grass that divided Covewood Drive into two lanes. I climbed that tree nearly every day. Halfway up, on the perfect branch, the one where I could perch with my feet dangling free, steadying myself with the smaller branch just above, at perfect arm's length. From my tree I could keep an eye on everything that happened in my yard and most of the way down the street and still be alone.

But today Peggy was with me because she was staying with us for a few days. She was standing on the ground, trying to figure out how to get up into the tree. I waited and watched my mother weeding her rock garden, crouching and bending, then standing back to take a look.

“Of course,” Peggy said. “I love my mommy. How do you do this?”

I sighed, because climbing a tree was so simple—you just did it—but I knew I would have to show her how, again. I dropped onto the solid ground, the shock of landing vibrating in my feet, traveling up my legs to settle just under my stomach. Landing was almost as good as climbing, a different kind of scary. Landing was solid and hurt my heels just a little. Climbing was fluttery.

“Look, it's easy. One hand here,” my left hand wrapped onto the lowest branch, on the spot where it was almost smooth, where there were no hard buds to bite into my skin. “Hold on here and put your foot here,” I said, my right foot pressed into the trunk of the tree, steadied by the fist-sized knot that my dad told me had tried to become a branch.

Analysis

From up in a dogwood tree a young girl or boy watches her or his mother weed a garden, while down on the ground below her or his less tree-worthy friend Peggy watches. Like the previous opening scene, with its grudgingly shared

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

awarenesses and insights (“I sighed, because climbing a tree was so simple—you just did it—but I knew I would have to show her how, again.”) this one also puts me in mind of Dan Pope’s *In the Cherry Tree*—not just because of the tree, but since that book, too, does a superb job of rendering childhood on the verge of adolescence.

Pope’s novel opens:

Summer days began without a plan. You got up. You had a bowl of cereal. You went outside. A lawn mower hummed. Ducks passed overhead in perfect V formation like World War Two bombers. A dog barked, and another dog barked back. Somebody was hammering nails into a roof. Somebody was bouncing a basketball three streets away. You heard the echo, not the sound itself. A cat crept across the grass and disappeared beneath a hedge. It was hot. The sun was strong. The crickets made a seething noise. A sprinkler came on and made a quiet rain sound when the water hit the grass and then a louder rain sound when the water hit the street.

The effectiveness of Pope’s rendering is achieved in large part through a style that leans heavily on blunt declarative sentences (“You got up.”), sentences that echo the thudding rhythms of a grade school primer (“See Jane run.”). By way of such artless sentences Pope’s fictional world—one Baby Boomers will recognize immediately—declares itself to us with the stark immediacy of a series of street signs. *Caution: Children at Play*. No time for fancy wordplay or syntactical gymnastics, only what is—or what was: a world experienced almost exclusively through the senses by characters who, because they are still children, are natural sensualists.

The given opening page achieves a similar effect. The writing, though not as stylistically pointed or original, is assured; there are few wasted words, and the sentences offer syntactical variety without self-conscious effort (“Landing was almost as good as climbing, a different kind of scary.”). One can quibble that the verb “to be” is overused—not, as Pope uses it, intentionally for its plodding, blunt-instrument rhythms, but simply through oversight. That’s a nitpick.

I question beginning with a snatch of disembodied dialogue, a tactic that I seldom find agreeable, since it takes readers by surprise by withholding context and disorienting them. But to what end? I have no idea who is speaking, nor does the following paragraph answer the question. I have to read on to the next paragraph to encounter another character, and beyond that to find out who

D. CHARACTERS

spoke that first line. Wouldn't it be as good or better to say up front, "From up in the tree I shouted down at Peggy, 'Do you like your mom?'"

The opening question is important. It points to the heart of this opening and probably of the story itself: the relationship of mothers to their children, and specifically of the tree-climbing first-person narrator's relationship with her or his mother. It's no coincidence that the story opens with the protagonist having gained the perspective offered by a vantage point high up in that tree. It reminds me of Nathaniel Hawthorne's brilliant sketch, "Sights from a Steeple." It begins, "So! I have climbed high, and my reward is small." Being high up off the ground gives us perspective, but it also cuts us off, alienates us, turns us into lonesome gods.

The question imbues this well rendered but rudimentary opening scene with the sense that all may not be sunshine and dogwood petals on Covewood Drive: this opening promises a story that unearths those implications. I would keep reading.

Your Turn

Draft a first-person, present-tense opening from a child's (age 12 or under) perspective in which the child-narrator describes her or his "secret place"—a closet, cave, crawlspace, cavern, forest grove, shelter, or landmark of some other kind shared with no one else or only with a very special friend or friends.

31. Mean December Wind

(Retrospective Narrator / Strong Verbs / Appealing to Senses)

They came to us with the mean December wind, three cars in all. We lived on a desolate country road where approaching sounds could be heard before things happened. There was the muffled rumble of their exhaust reverberating off mounds of snow, then the moaning of their engines. I rushed to the front living room window, pulled the drapery back, and pressed my nose to the pane. My breath fogged the glass and I could taste dust on my lips. Soon, boxed shadows appeared from around the bend. They turned into our long drive in a systematic order, each bumper connecting to the next. Their tires crunched the frozen ground in a slow, torturous grind.

Daddy told me they were relatives coming to pay their respects. We, my two brothers and I, didn't need to bathe or put on school clothes. "They're not that kind of company," Daddy said. His voice quivered with anger.

It was the day after Christmas, 1956. I was only twelve years old, and I didn't understand Daddy's coldness towards our visitors. What I did understand was the fact that my mother had died, in the morning hours of Christmas Eve from what was described to me as "woman cancer." The nurses at the hospital whispered it behind the shield of their hands, as though it was a dirty secret and by speaking the words out loud they too would be cursed with the same kind of cancer that claimed Mom.

Watching the cars approach I wondered if that's what they were coming for, to claim Mom, or what she'd left behind. The joke was on them. She didn't have anything left, nothing of value. Just some old, worn dresses, a wedding ring Daddy said he got out of a Crackerjack box, and two fancy hairpins she wore to proper occasions: nothing worth bickering over.

Analysis

The opening sentence of this first page puts us in capable hands: "They came to us with the mean December wind, three cars in all."

The cunning juxtaposition of a personified wind (picture a cartoon character with furrowed brow, puffy ruddy cheeks, quivering jowls) with those three

D. CHARACTERS

matter-of-fact cars, is unsettling, as it's meant to be. It thrusts us into the psyche of the narrator, a child to whose home on Christmas Eve an uninvited visitor arrives. Not Santa, with his brimming sleigh of gifts, but the Grim Reaper, who has come for her or his mother.

Several things account for the effectiveness of this opening. For one, it appeals immediately and thoroughly to the senses. First, we have that “mean” wind. I’ve said elsewhere that adjectives aren’t descriptions, but opinions. Yet thanks to that “mean” we don’t need to be told that the wind is cold, or harsh, that it lashes cheeks and draws tears.

Next, we’re treated to the ominous rumblings of those approaching cars, “their exhausts reverberating off mounds of snow, then the moaning of their engines.” Note the choice of words: “muffled rumble,” “moaning”—sounds that connote the mother’s final breaths and moans of agony during her death throes. Drawn by the “moaning” of those engines, the narrator (we’re not told her gender; I’ll assume she’s a girl) rushes into the living room where she “[pulls] the drapery back.” I can feel those heavy drapes parting under the influence of small hands as the girl “[presses her] nose to the pane.” What the character sees through that icy pane is no longer the benign world so familiar to her the day before, but a world transformed by death.

According to the narrator’s father, the cars hold “relatives coming to pay their respects.” And though the narrator may not say so, or even know it, we feel that for her those three cars with their ominous rumblings stand for death itself. Is it a stretch to assume that the breath with which the girl fogs the glass is as fleeting as the oval of fog itself? And that the dust she tastes on her lips is the dust from which we’re all born, and to which death will eventually return us—and sooner than any of us care to think?

The narrative’s retrospective approach is likewise well handled. The story is set in the now fairly distant past—1956—before more than a few of today’s readers were born. And yet it opens with a sensual immediacy that brings the past into the present and makes it as real to us as our own breaths and sensations. By the time we learn that “It was the day after Christmas, 1956,” we are already there, inhabiting that past as though it were ours.

And that’s crucial since, whether or not we admit it, ultimately the only stories that matter are those we inhabit personally, not just with our minds, but through our senses. Remember: the fiction writer’s job (or that of any storyteller, whether the stories are imagined or real) isn’t to report experience, but to *create* it. And experience is processed in the mind by way of the senses.

Here, the author skillfully tucks exposition into narrative: “Watching the cars approach, I wondered....” Though background information is supplied (“It

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

was the day after Christmas, 1956”), it never carries us out of the scene. Nor are we ever removed—through incongruous diction, extraneous exposition, or anachronistic awareness—from the psyche of the girl whose nose is pressed to the cold pane as she peers out at those arriving cars. Like a sponge, the vividly rendered moment soaks up all background exposition introduced into it.

This is a very strong opening.

Your Turn

Revise the first page you drafted for the previous prompt (30) from the perspective of an adult looking back over time to that period of his or her childhood.

32. Art's Highest Purpose: To Complicate Our Feelings

(Child Protagonist / Humor and Danger)

Mom told me just yesterday not to ever leave the Lovin' Cup Cafe at nightfall. That even in the tiny city of Pleasantville, nestled up against the Canadian border, strange things can happen as night descends. Note to self: listen to Mom more often.

I watch as Jeff McKinney and Ralph Jones walk into the triangle of light formed by the street lamp next to the road and pause. I walk back into the alcove formed by the handicapped ramp as it rises to meet the cafe's entrance.

"Well, look what we have here," Jeff says, smiling right at me and then at Ralph, who smiles back at Jeff like he always does.

I slip my hands into my jacket pockets so they can't see they're shaking.

"If it isn't Jamie Domedian," Jeff says, pronouncing my last name so it rhymes with comedian. It doesn't, but I won't correct him.

Tonight is a first. I've never been alone with these two. Their harassment always takes place in crowded school hallways or waiting in line for the bus ride home.

As they walk toward me, I take another step back and feel my thigh up against the wheel of my ten-speed. I do a half-turn, insert the key into my bike lock, and yank the lock cord free, stuffing it in my pocket.

"Don't you two have cows to milk back at the farm?" Everyone knows McKinney and Jones live miles from here in cow town with all of their farmer neighbors.

Turn the handlebars toward the parking lot. Run, left foot on the pedal, sit on the saddle, and go!

It's a grand exit until McKinney makes a lunge and grabs the center of the handlebars.

"We're not here to talk farming," Jeff says.

Analysis

Now and then my students and I broach the unavoidable question: What makes a work of art? The question can be stood on its head: What makes art *work*? They're the same question, really, with (to me, anyway) the same answer: a true work of art is something that doesn't merely express our emotions—as any Hallmark card will do. It confronts us with emotions that don't quite fit into any of our ready-made boxes.

A simple but good example of this can be found in Jasper Johns's famous painting of the United States flag. From a distance it looks like any US flag, but step closer and you see the heavy impasto strokes of encaustic (wax) paint. It's *not* a US flag; it's a *painting of the US flag*. A flag is a symbol; it has a utilitarian purpose. It represents a nation. It's no more open to interpretation than (for most drivers, anyway) a stop sign. By converting it through an unusual medium and removing it from ordinary contexts, Johns's painting of the flag opens the flag up to interpretation. It no longer merely denotes. It *connotes*. It suggests feelings beyond its literal meaning.

Complicating our feelings: that, to me, is art's highest purpose.

Which may seem a highfalutin approach to discussing this first page of a young adult novel in which the young narrator (I'm assuming he's a boy) is menaced by two bullies, but the fact is that, in its humble way, this first page does what great art does: it complicates our feelings by confronting us with an unstable blend of danger and humor.

The opening sentence ("Mom told me ...") establishes not only the youthful narrator's voice, but the setting—both time and place—while foreshadowing conflict: something bad has transpired at the Lovin' Cup Café at nightfall. By saying "Mom" rather than "My mother," the narrator instantly establishes intimacy with his or her readers, an intimacy that bonds us to him before we set eyes on his nemeses.

The next sentence of this deft opening nails down the location: not only the size ("tiny") of the small-town setting, but its situation "nestled up against the Canadian border." The last sentence of the paragraph drives home the foreboding hinted at in the first, and does so wittily via a note to the narrator's "self." Dangerous humor; humorous danger.

Having established setting both generally (tiny city near Canada) and specifically (café at nightfall), the author paints an exterior street scene with a few expressionistic strokes, the "triangle of light" from a "street lamp," and the more specific "alcove formed by the handicapped ramp"—a detail that,

D. CHARACTERS

because it's so specific, adds gritty authenticity. We have all we need now to form a solid picture and inhabit this scene.

The first two paragraphs having engaged our sense of vision, with the third paragraph a snatch of dialogue ("Well, look what we have here") pricks up our ears. However tinged with cliché (and let's face it, bullies *are* clichés), the words offer their own touch of menace, as does the smile that goes with them and that Bully #2 mirrors. (If there's one thing worse than an antagonist, it's a *smiling* antagonist.) The fifth paragraph treats us to yet another authenticating touch: how the protagonist's name *isn't* pronounced. Note how this is delivered not as a piece of inert information, but through a dramatic moment, an *active* description. It's also ironic in ways that are, again, equally funny and dangerous. Though his name may not rhyme with one, Jamie is something of a comedian. His sense of humor puts him at risk.

Lest we wonder if we might be dealing with routine, paragraph six ("Tonight is a first") smashes that. What we have here is an event, an inciting incident: something that breaks with routine ("I've never been alone with these two"). The next sentence contextualizes the routine against which this exceptional event occurs. It gives us a frame of reference for the bullying that, apparently, has been going on for some time.

The next paragraph has the narrator backing into his bike, feeling his "thigh up against the wheel." In the movie version, this is one of those moments when the audience gasps and jerks up in their seats. Without needing to be told, we imagine the narrator's nearly simultaneous responses: first, the shock of being touched by someone or something he didn't know was there; then relief on realizing it is his means of escape.

Next paragraph, first line: "Don't you two have cows to milk back at the farm?" Like all good dialogue, it does double duty: evokes character while carrying information. From this one line we know that a) however dangerous they are, wise-ass Jamie doesn't have much respect for his enemies; and b) our two bullies live in the boonies.

Next: "Turn the handlebars toward the parking lot. Run, left foot on the pedal, sit on the saddle, and go!" Why simply describe a series of actions ("I turned my bike around and pedaled out of the parking lot") when you can describe them so they convey character? Remember: whatever we do that evokes character is probably a keeper. My one quibble here is that I'd eliminate articles and conjunctions: "Turn handlebars toward parking lot. Run. Left foot on pedal, sit on saddle. Go!"

I've said more than enough. Humor and danger on the same page—what more can we ask for? This opening got me. Has it got you?

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Your Turn

In drafting or revising a first page—yours or someone else’s—see how many of the following you can accomplish:

- establish setting and atmosphere
- break routine
- foreshadow conflict
- engage multiple senses
- evoke character via description
- combine disparate emotions (e.g., humor and danger).

E. Genres

"[T]he only means I have to stop ignorant snobs from behaving towards genre fiction with snobbish ignorance is to not reinforce their ignorance and snobbery by lying and saying that when I write SF it isn't SF, but to tell them more or less patiently for forty or fifty years that they are wrong to exclude SF and fantasy from literature, and proving my arguments by writing well."

URSULA K. LE GUIN, *The Wild Girls*

"I've been as bad an influence on American literature as anyone I can think of."

DASHIELL HAMMETT

A GENRE IS A TYPE OF SOMETHING, FOR OUR PURPOSES A TYPE OF narrative. Sci-fi, mystery, detective, western, thriller, fan fiction, YA ... these are just some of many popular genres of the novel—which, once upon a time, was itself a literary genre.

A genre implies all the conventions and expectations that adhere to it. As John Mullen explains in *How Novels Work*, his insightful survey of fictional techniques, "A genre is not just a category for literary critics, it is also a resource for the writer. [...] Genre offers a challenge by provoking *a free spirit to transcend the limitations of previous examples*." Genre gives the writer something invaluable: a set of requirements and constraints to work with or against, rules to obey, or flout—or both.

Novelists and critics alike haven't always viewed genre in such a positive light. As G.K. Chesterton (whose own detective novels featured a priestly sleuth named Father Brown) lamented back in 1901: "Many people do not realize that there is such a thing as a good detective story; it is to them like speaking of a good devil."⁵

5 G.K. Chesterton, "In Defence of Detective Stories" in *The Defendants* (1901).

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

While some, like George Orwell, admitted to enjoying Sherlock Holmes and Dracula, even they drew the line at taking genre fiction seriously.

Others were even less charitable. “Reading mysteries,” Edmund Wilson wrote, “is a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between crossword puzzles and smoking.”⁶ Such appraisals didn’t go unchallenged. When Wilson’s views went public in 1944, they provoked more letters of protest than anything he’d ever written. Among the dissenters was Raymond Chandler, whose detective novels Wilson judged inferior to anything by Graham Greene. Chandler’s response? “Literature is bunk.”⁷

More recently, when President Obama awarded horror novelist Stephen King the Medal of Arts in 2015, it caused an uproar among literary critics, including Harold Bloom who sniffed, “King is an immensely inadequate writer ... [of] what used to be called ‘penny dreadfuls’”—another genre.

Given the rise in both popularity and sophistication of the young adult novel over the past ten years, it’s no longer so easy to look down on genres from the lofty heights of “literary fiction”—itself a genre, but whose conventions are fluid. Far from being frowned upon, genre is seen especially by younger writers as a vital, vitalizing force. More and more literary novelists—David Mitchell, Annie Proulx, Gish Jen, Jhumpa Lahiri, Haruki Murakami, and Kazuo Ishiguro, to name a few—incorporate or pay tribute to genre through their works. For their part, through such things as deep characters and sophisticated language, genre authors challenge the limits of their own conventions. *The Hunger Games* qualifies as romance. So does Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. While George Orwell’s *1984*, Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale*, and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* certainly qualify as works of science or speculative fiction, they are also works of literary fiction. Literary fiction’s subsumption into other genres, and vice versa, has become so pervasive one must wonder what distinction if any can still be claimed by “pure” literary fiction beyond ... um ... pretentiousness.

Tempting though it may be to flout or challenge the conventions of genre, there’s also a lot to be said for playing by the rules. In this section, we’ll scrutinize the first pages of works in progress that play by the rules of their genres, and some that don’t.

6 Edmund Wilson, “Why Do People Read Detective Stories?” in the *New Yorker* (October 1944).

7 Letter to Helga Green, September 1957.

33. Zechs's Deal: A Routine Awakening

*(Sci-Fi or Speculative Fiction / In Medias Res /
Dramatized Routine)*

The deal was set to happen in twenty minutes. Zechs was cutting it close, but his ship was only a short stroll from the loading area. The worst consequence was hearing them complain, if that. If his clients had any sense, they wouldn't talk back to him.

Zechs touched his face, feeling the bristles that had popped up overnight. Shaving every morning was a hassle, but he looked good without facial hair. Zechs hurried and finished his business at the bathroom sink. Then he walked to his closet to get dressed.

Zechs picked out one of his markedly Astrian suits. He buttoned up the mauve shirt, leaving it untucked and the collar crooked. The jacket and the pants were woven from the fleece of an animal on his home planet. A very rare animal, at that. The fabric shimmered from black to dark red under the light as he dressed. Finishing up, Zechs grabbed his omni-com and left the bedroom.

Stepping down the spiral staircase, a custom addition for his starship, Zechs flipped open his omni-com and moved the cursor over to the planet's time program. 8:21. Just looking at the readout made him want to yawn. The wrought iron staircase ended at the bridge. The room was dark, but the controls station was illuminated by the blue glow of churning winds and streaks of lightning. Not a place he'd ever like his ship to be, but it made a good screensaver for the forward-view monitor.

On the opposite side of the bridge, the glass door leading to his laboratory opened. Zechs entered and then veered off to the adjacent room, a makeshift kitchen.

He selected a few pills from the colorful pile of Astrian vitamins he'd left on the counter. After downing them, he started going through the cabinets. He pushed all the test tube racks out of the way and, from memory alone, grabbed a bottle. With a twitch of his nerves, Zechs read the note. Completely out. But it didn't matter. It wasn't like he needed it right now. Or period.

Analysis

To paraphrase Tolstoy, “All good writing is good in pretty much the same way.” Whatever the genre, when it comes to telling stories, certain ideals, conventions, and principles apply. The law of economy and efficiency; concreteness over abstraction, experiences over information. Don’t state what is or can be implied.

Then there’s the previously discussed convention known as *in medias res*, the structural technique whereby, instead of telling stories from the very beginning, authors plunge their readers into conflicts already underway. Especially with respect to the first pages and scenes of our stories, ideally we want to invite readers into worlds populated by characters whose lives are already complicated by situations which, if they haven’t set a plot in motion yet, will do so soon.

The genre here is science or speculative fiction. The story opens with Zechs, the hero, twenty minutes from a confrontation with some rivals to whom he is about to make an offer they can’t refuse; at least he *hopes* they won’t refuse it. In the bedroom (or its equivalent) of his starship, he picks out a suit custom-tailored back in Astria (his home planet) from the fleece of a “very rare animal.” He shaves his stubble and—later, in the kitchen adjacent to his starship laboratory—takes his daily vitamins (likewise a product of Astria). And though he wishes to swallow them with something presumably stronger than water, he finds the bottle empty. But then it doesn’t matter. Whatever was in the bottle, he doesn’t need it anymore.

Take away the sci-fi trappings—the starship, the “omni-com,” the mention of other planets and rare creatures thereof turned into suits—and what’s left? A man getting up in the morning, doing his toiletries, getting dressed. In a word: banality.

Generally, whether on earth or some other planet, opening with a character getting out of bed is a bad idea. There are of course exceptions (Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” for one).

And no one would call this opening of Mary Renault’s *Fire from Heaven* banal:

The child was wakened by the knotting of the snake’s coils about his waist. For a moment he was frightened; it had squeezed his breathing and given him a bad dream. But as soon as he was awake, he knew what it was and pushed his two hands inside the coils. It shifted; the strong band under his back bunched tightly, then grew thin. The head slid up his shoulder along his neck and he felt close to his ear the flickering tongue.

E. GENRES

Still, why do so many draft stories start with characters waking up, stretching, brushing their teeth? Maybe because their authors haven't located the true beginnings of their stories, or they're too timid to plunge into situation and conflict. Or maybe they feel they want to "milk" things a bit more before getting into the action.

Where no suspense has been created, there's nothing to "milk." A character getting out of bed is a character getting out of bed—whether the bed is in a suburban tract house in Pine Hill, New Jersey, or on a space station orbiting among Saturn's rings, makes no, or little, difference. Just as looking at the readout on his omni-com makes Zechs want to yawn, so readers are likely to find themselves yawning through this opening scene, despite its author's game effort to frontload it with suspense by telegraphing a future dramatic event in the first paragraph. But that event won't occur for another twenty minutes. Nor do we appreciate its significance, having no idea what's at stake. Meanwhile we're stuck with a character contemplating his razor stubble while we're treated to a nickel tour of his spacecraft.

My suggestion: open *in medias res*, with the promised dramatic deal scene. We can learn about Zechs's suits and razor stubble later.

Your Turn

Draft a speculative or science-fiction story opening wherein a character awakens, and in which his or her awakening is a dramatic, rather than routine, event.

34. To the Core

(Science Fiction / Humor / Tongue in Cheek)

*“That’s one small step ... for [a] man ... one ...
giant leap for Mankind.”*

NEIL ARMSTRONG, FIRST PERSON ON THE MOON

*“Like Armstrong, and like Columbus before him, we tread today on a
new world. A world truly beyond the gravity and influence of Mother
Earth, in a way that neither the moon nor the ‘New World’ ever were.
We step here today in the view of all Mankind.”*

CARY ESTERHAUS, FIRST PERSON ON MARS

“Cary, come on for Pete’s sake! Step on it, will you?”

HELLA VERNON, SECOND PERSON ON MARS

“Crap, what did I step in?”

NILS ARMSTREN, FIRST PERSON ON ALPHA CENTAURI 6
(no relation to Neil Armstrong)

A careful remote scan told Armstren and his crew that the site they chose for their historic first landing outside Sol system was suitable for the obligatory ceremony. Solid ground, hard and dry and barren, even devoid of the round-leafed yellow vegetation that covered much of the level ground in the mid latitudes of AC6. But on Armstren’s third historic step, on his way to plant the symbolic flag with the blue-white globe of Earth—sufficiently obscured by clouds that the land masses were unidentifiable, ensuring that no nation could charge favoritism in the design—his booted foot sank through some mushy, viscous *something* before coming to a stop shin deep. It was at this point that he uttered the words he would always be remembered for.

* * *

When she first heard the sounds of the new creature, she thought she must be mistaken. They seemed to be coming from the core. But that was impossible.

To a human ear, her name would sound approximately like “Burreler.” Among her people, she also had a number of nicknames, which would translate to human concepts like “Explorer,” “Reckless One,” and “Trouble.”

Burreler traveled farther inward than any of the other people, but even she didn’t visit the core. The core was death. Everyone knew that. The very world itself acted to keep people from the core. Gravity pushed all things down, outward, away from the deadly center of the world.

Analysis

Whether set in a distant galaxy in the future or in the past or present of our own planet, all fiction is speculative. It creates a hypothetical reality and peoples it with hypothetical characters.

With science fiction, the speculative element is overt, with the emphasis on alien landscapes and life forms allowing authors to engage their knowledge of and passion for the sciences. The genre also invites philosophical explorations on the impacts of science and technology, making it a genre not only of nightmarish fantasies and wish fulfillment, but of serious ideas. It presents authors with the challenge of writing convincingly not only of events and places that don’t exist, but that expand our boundaries of perception and possibility.

Jules Verne, a pioneer of the genre, secured his reputation with books like *From the Earth to the Moon* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, works that treat readers to encyclopedic tours of speculative settings—this from a man who, as a child of twelve after being whipped by his father for trying to stow away on a cargo ship bound for India, famously stated, “I shall from now on only travel in my imagination.”⁸ The best thing about Verne’s stories (and those of H.G. Wells) is that they let us speculate about the future from the past, *retrospectively*, so we experience a curious blend of wonder and nostalgia.

One of Verne’s most famous books, *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), treats a theme similar to that of the work presented here. It tells the story of German professor von Hardwigg’s journey with his nephew down one of a series of volcanic passages leading to Earth’s center, where they encounter all kinds of marvels and hazards, from giant mushrooms to prehistoric reptiles. Their journey ends prematurely with the explorers regurgitated up a volcanic chimney and deposited on the Italian island of Stromboli.

8 Source unknown.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Professor von Hardwigg's adventure is inspired by an encrypted code in runic script that he and his nephew discover hidden within the text of an Icelandic saga. Translated, the code turns out to be a message left by Icelandic alchemist Arne Saknussem, who claims to have discovered a secret passage to Earth's core, joining the parade of great Nordic explorers that began with the Vikings.

In this opening of a novella titled "To the Core," the grand tradition continues with one Nils Armstren ("no relation to Neil Armstrong"), the first man to set foot on Alpha Centauri 6.

What, exactly, Nils sets foot on (or in) is the object here not just of speculation but of wit. The novella opens slyly with a quartet of epigraphs, the first quoting Neil Armstrong's first words on the moon, a matter of historical record, the second a sober projection of the proximate future (mankind's first landing on Mars), and the last two quotations parodying the others. Had the author observed the Rule of Threes and left out the fourth quote, it might have been better. Still, it's clever enough, since it gives a wink to everything that follows.

And that's a good thing, since most science fiction takes itself too seriously. Yet despite the tongue-in-cheek epigraphs, what follows in the first scene is convincingly shored up by specific details, down to the "symbolic flag with the blue-white globe of Earth—sufficiently obscured by clouds [so] that the land masses were unidentifiable, ensuring that no nation could charge favoritism in the design." This perpetuates the humor while keeping us firmly grounded in earthly human foibles even as we tread on Alpha Centauri.

Before the opening scene takes us anywhere, it ends, and we're transported to a different realm wherein an alien of female gender who has already "traveled farther inward than any other people" (but has never reached the core) hears the sound of a "new creature" coming from there. We've barely landed in this author's speculative world and already we've encountered, indirectly, strange creatures.

The second scene feels premature; the first feels truncated. Between them lies the "core" of this novella. I'm also troubled by the logic of the last sentence, which has gravity pushing all things down and outward at the same time.

Your Turn

Draft an opening of a story or novel set on another planet in which a description of the landscape sets the stage. Think of E.M. Forster's opening to *A Passage to*

E. GENRES

India (“Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary.”) or the opening of Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (“The Salinas Valley is in northern California.”). In other words, describe this landscape as you would a place on earth, with the same matter-of-factness, so it reads with the humble authority of an encyclopedia entry.

35. U'gen Cadets

(Speculative Fantasy / False Suspense / Clarity & Precision)

Rachael dropped from the last step of the bus, grateful to be away from all the thoughts that had intruded upon her mind, and looked out across the park. Her school, a looming remnant of an ancient society stood at the end of the path, its cream-colored stones bright under the hot sun. Inside, Visionary students and U'gen cadets learned everything about military strategy.

Taking the path through the park, she headed toward the inevitable. Her mind drifted along, searching for an open mind to read as it always did, against her will, but no one wandered the street. They were busy working, as she should have been. While she normally skipped her first class, today she had a proper excuse. She had to report a vision. The blood-filled battlefield of her future-sight popped to the forefront of her thoughts with little prodding.

Blood flowed down the street in her mind, leaching from the dying or dead bodies of the U'gen soldiers. Lapping fires licked at crumbling buildings lining the street littered with glass and rubble. Light filtered through the haze of dusk. Rachael could still feel the thrumming of helicopter blades chopping in the distance as it propelled itself toward the smoke-filled landing zone. Gunfire from unseen muzzles blasted down the street, the bullets sending up small puffs of dust as they embedded in the skeletal structures. She heard the splashes of running boots as a soldier fled with some coveted item protected in his arms. Sorrow welled up inside her as he died, sputtering crimson blood....

Rachael froze. Her heart pounded as she looked before her and saw Randall. Sitting on the academy steps, he chewed a toothpick he held, his elbows on his knees. His bloodied visage still occupied her thoughts, particularly the blood-soaked picture he had clung to in his last moments—what she assumed were his loved ones. She closed her eyes and tried to push the image of the soldier's death from her mind.

Analysis

How much do readers need to know, versus how much they should be kept in the dark?

To describe what writers do, Frank Conroy—who before his death in 2005 directed the Iowa Writer’s Workshop for over 30 years—used the metaphor of a mountain hike. In writing fiction, we equip readers for a journey up a mountain. When they get to the top, assuming that they get there, they’ll be rewarded with an expanded view not only of the fictional world in which they’ve been immersed, but of human nature—and, assuming the story rises to the level of great literature, life itself.

But to get there readers will need certain things. The trick, Conroy explained, is to give them everything they need for the journey—compass, map, hardtack, water—but nothing they don’t need (yoyo, kazoo, kaleidoscope), and nothing sooner than it’s needed (telescope, flag, champagne). Supply too much information or supply it too soon, and you kill suspense. Supply too little, and what you generate isn’t suspense, but confusion and frustration.

This opening generates a lot of false suspense, the kind that has readers asking not *What’s going to happen next?* but *What am I reading, and why am I reading it?* From the profusion of blood-soaked visions experienced by the heroine to the mystifying “U’gen,” this first page offers mostly confusion.

Who is Rachael? How old is she? Where is she? What is she doing there? When did those intruding thoughts of hers—the ones she’s “grateful to be away from” in the first paragraph—intrude? During the long bus trip? If indeed she has gotten away from those thoughts, why, two paragraphs later, is she seized by a vision that appears to be part and parcel of them? Is this the same vision she’s on her way to report? Do these visions pop “into the forefront of her thoughts with little prodding” or against her will? What, if any, is the relationship between Rachael’s visions and her mind’s autonomous habit of drifting into other “open minds”? Those other minds—are they the source of Rachael’s visions?

We don’t know, nor can we be sure if Randall is the dying soldier in the vision, and if the “coveted item” he embraced with his dead arms is the family photograph mentioned later. As to the nature of the relationship between Randall and Rachael, there, too, we’re left clueless.

What we do know is that, for reasons unclear, Rachael is able to see into the future, and that that future is apocalyptic, with blood “leaching from ... dead bodies” and “streets littered with glass and rubble.” Then again, the story itself appears to be set in a none-too-charming future in which U’gen cadets

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

and “Visionary students” (author’s capitalization) rehearse military strategy as they gear up for the coming apocalypse.

Lack of contrast via contextualization also works against this opening. Were they cast against a less dismal present, Rachael’s “horrifying” visions might indeed horrify. Instead, they spill blood and darkness into a vision already murky. Just as in Rachael’s vision “light filter[s] through the haze of dusk,” this opening sheds little light. All is hazy, dim, obscure.

Where not obscure, the writing is sentimental, serving up emotion in excess of experience, as in this sentence, “Sorrow welled up inside her as [the soldier] died, sputtering crimson blood,” which tells us how Rachael *feels about* the soldier’s death and even splatters us with his blood *before* we see or otherwise experience him dying or even falling as he runs.

Between Rachael’s vision-muddled mind and the author’s lack of clarity and precision (is the school alluded to in the first paragraph a “looming remnant of an ancient society” or active and still in session?), this opening leaves us too much in the dark.

Your Turn

Revise this opening based on my critique and your own observations. Taking imaginative license, fill in missing information to mitigate as much false suspense as possible, while at the same time minimizing sentimentality by making subjective emotional responses subject—if not secondary—to concrete objective experiences.

36. A Dragon's Protection

(*Fantasy / Appealing to the Senses / Metaphysical Elements*)

6 September 1930

Master Jacks dug his one remaining hand into the pocket of his tweed waistcoat. He brought out a fresh white handkerchief for the eleven-year-old Nick Parter to bleed into. "Here." He offered it to the boy across his wide mahogany desk. "Use this."

Nick took it. "Thanks."

They were in Jacks's oak-paneled study. Artifacts from the man's travels—tribal masks, blunt spears, general knickknacks of wicker and weave—cluttered the walls. The shouts and screams of young rugby players, enthusiastic and terrified, drifted in through the window from the fields below.

Nick spat a pink mixture of saliva and blood into the cloth before pinching it under his nostrils. He tipped his head forward and held the position, waiting for the bleeding to stop. The front of his jersey was soaked with red.

"Do you have an explanation for me?" asked the teacher. He was thin and hard, with iron-grey streaks peppering his dark hair. He had lost his right arm in 1916, at the Somme.

"It was a fight. Fights happen."

"To you, Nick, they happen a lot. Four in the first three days of term, all with older boys. I've never known such behavior. The idea, Custodian, is that you try to fit in."

"It hardly matters." Nick looked up at his teacher, his eyes fierce. "I'm in the wrong time without a dragon's protection. We both know I'm dead if I can't get out."

Analysis

Up to its second-to-last line, this opening page might have been torn out of James Hilton's 1934 bestseller, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Set a generation earlier than the first page in question, Hilton's unabashedly sentimental novella portrayed the life of its eponymous self-effacing hero, Arthur Chipping, a career schoolmaster in an English public school.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

In Hilton's story, having retired after decades of teaching Roman history and Latin at Brookfield School, Mr. Chips is called back to service during World War I, which has sent younger teachers off to the trenches. For Hilton, the peace and prosperity following the Great War represented an oasis in civilization—or the mirage of an oasis, soon to be obliterated by Hitler and the smashing of the Versailles Treaty. In another novel written before *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, Hilton celebrated this oasis metaphorically, through a fictional utopia set high in the mountains of Tibet. That novel was called *Lost Horizon*, and the utopia was “Shangri-La,” a term that has become synonymous with the notion of an earthly paradise, often used with a pejorative intent.

I mention this because, up to the last paragraph, there's something dreamily quaint about this opening of a fantasy novel. Here is Master Jacks, the schoolmaster in his tweed waistcoat, comforting and admonishing his eleven-year-old charge, Nick Parker, in his oak-lined study bristling with anthropological artifacts. Through the study's window “shouts and screams” drift in from the rugby fields, where Nick had gotten into a scrap with one or several of his schoolmates. It's not the first time. Indeed, three days into his first term Nick has already earned a reputation for fighting. Nick's teacher, no stranger to combat himself (he lost an arm in the Great War), lends Nick a “fresh white handkerchief” to blow his bloody nose into.

All of this is conveyed deftly in an opening passage that's alive to all the senses: sight (the pink color of Nick's blood mixed with his saliva), sounds (the shouts and screams from the rugby field), textures (“knickknacks of wicker and weave”—note how alliteration and meter create their own texture). A good ear for dialogue (“To you, Nick, they happen a lot.”) together with a sharp eye for telling details (the objects cluttering the master's walls) make this a winning opening. In a few paragraphs, I feel I know Master Jacks and his pupil. And though—excepting the last lines—there are no throat-grabbers here, still, there is conflict. I for one would read on to discover why Nick is having such a hard time fitting in with his fellow students.

Then comes the dragon in the last paragraph. Suddenly I've traded the genteel Shangri-La of Mr. Chips and *Dead Poets' Society* for Tolkien's Middle Earth. True, the title warned me, or should have, though once I started reading I fell into the charm of those opening paragraphs and forgot the warning.

Thanks mainly to Harry Potter, these days dragons and boarding schools are as ubiquitous in works of literature as angels, witches, and vampires—a fact that I for one lament. The moment we introduce supernatural phenomena into fiction, we undermine the *human* element, with curses, spells, and potions augmenting—if not replacing entirely—psychological cause and effect.

E. GENRES

The fantasy genre to which such phenomena belong doesn't merely allow for impossible events, it *insists on* them. Though traditionally—as with Tolkien—fantasy novels are grounded in medieval settings, thanks to Ann Rice and Harry Potter we may now expect witches, vampires, and dragons to pop up anywhere, anytime, including a boarding school between the world wars.

Starting with the dragon that guards the golden fleece at Rhodes, on through the unnamed dragon in *Beowulf* and Tolkien's Glaurung and Smaug, with each decade the number of dragons in books has multiplied, with the past decade furnishing us with many dozens if not hundreds of novels featuring the mythological serpents, making me wonder why Saint George ever bothered. Why so many readers and writers still share this obsession with our medieval forebears may be explained partly by the wish to return to more innocent and colorful myths, coupled with a dissatisfaction with—or disbelief in—the fruits of science.

Though I share those dissatisfactions, I personally can live without dragons. But then mine is the bias of someone who prefers to stare down real monsters rather than mythological ones.

That said, injected into this otherwise quaint scene, the sudden allusion to dragons in the last paragraph is jarring. The author might better prepare us for it by dropping a hint earlier. A set of dragon etchings on a wall of the teacher's study? Dragon claws in the curio cabinet?

Your Turn

Into a first page that you've already written of any genre, introduce a supernatural element: a mythical creature, a magic potion or power (your protagonist can fly!), something that breaks the laws of our everyday world. Do so in a way that, though surprising, is convincing and feels inevitable, or anyway isn't jarring.

37. Celestia's Last Battle

*(Prologues / Fantasy / Adjectives /
Suspension of Disbelief / Telling vs. Showing)*

Prologue: The Cage

It was the most dangerous fight of them all. Only one person ever left, the winner. That is how you must win. You kill your opponent and, automatically, you are the winner. It was very rare that the loser ever survived. In some cases however, there have been winners so full of grief and regret, they had attempted to revive their opponents. Only once has a person who lost survived, and many say it would be life fulfilling to meet her.

Celestia Monte. How little people actually knew about her. Her past, her present and what came to be her future. She was the strongest, most vigilant fighter, and I knew, because many times I had watched her fight. Each and every round, her opponent fell before her feet. Dead. She showed no mercy, for she was strong. I had many times applauded her and praised her.

It was only then, at her last battle, did I never clap again. It started as any other Cage battle, with her leading her opponent to his doom. However, if you had ever watched her, as I had in those past fights, you could see her lacking in her power. She was neither tired nor injured. Her weakness was her opponent: Brutus Monte. He was her love, her student and her life. She knew that if she killed him that would be her ending anyways.

So, on they fought. Both avoided hurting each other, and the crowd was growing aggravated. They wanted blood; they wanted a real fight. Celestia was concerned but threw a more vicious blow with her sword, but she made a mistake. Brutus saw that she no longer guarded her side and took his chances.

Analysis

Prologues let us dip into our stories out of sequence. They may reach back to some event in the past, giving readers a prequel to what follows. Or they can dip into some dramatic moment in the future—the heroine being escorted to

the gallows—with the tale that starts with Chapter 1 telling us how, exactly, she got there.

This prologue presents us with the spectacle of gladiatorial combat, or something like it: a sport where people (in this case women) entertain audiences through deadly hand-to-hand combat. Historically, gladiatorial games took place during the Roman Empire. Many gladiators were soldier-prisoners who volunteered for gladiatorial combat training as a way to regain the honor lost through their having surrendered or been captured. It's a colorful if gruesome sidebar of history, one exploited often by novelists and filmmakers, and therefore rife with clichés.

Whether the author of the given prologue is describing Roman or some other form of gladiatorial combat isn't clear. No dates or place names are given; the one specific detail provided by the prologue is the professional combatant's name: Celestia Monte—an odd choice, Monte being short for either Montague (French in origin; not commonly used until the nineteenth century) or Montgomery, which dates back to the Gauls (the Romans began overtaking Celtic Gaul in 121 BCE). "Celestia," on the other hand, is strictly New Age. It sounds like the name of a Tom Robbins protagonist, or a popular brand of herbal tea infusions.

Maybe the prologue is set in some distant future wherein gladiatorial combat has been revived. For all we know, it may be set on another planet, in another universe (as suggested by the main character's cosmic name). In any case, this material demands much suspension of disbelief from readers, meaning great confidence in the author—a confidence not inspired by this first page.

One reason: the author's clumsy handling of grammar and syntax ("It was only then, at her last battle, did I never clap again."), owing to carelessness. Or maybe English isn't the author's first language. If so, I have to admire his or her audacity. Editors, publishers, and agents will take a much dimmer view.

Apart from grammatical challenges, there are other problems with this prologue. For one thing, it doesn't do what prologues do best: claim the reader's attention by way of a dramatic scene that provides a context for the main story to follow.

Though the raw materials are dramatic and even sensational, what's on the page here isn't that exciting. A fiction writer's first job is to create experience; here, no experience is offered, at least not directly. Instead of "seeing" Celestia Monte in action through the eyes of a narrator, an eyewitness, we're *told things* about her. "She was the strongest, most vigilant fighter." So says the narrator, who piles on more adjectives ("she was strong," "she showed no mercy," "she was

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

neither tired nor injured”). Adjectives are opinions, not descriptions or facts, to be treated as we treat most opinions, with some measure of skepticism if not outright distrust. The advantage of showing versus telling is that it lets readers form their own opinions based on concrete evidence. Here, though, instead of being offered the sensory evidence supplied by the narrator’s eyes, ears, and other organs, we get only his conclusions and opinions.

Since nothing is shown and everything is told, nothing is terribly convincing. Given the sensational nature of the material, unless the author manages somehow to suspend our disbelief through amassing authentic details, our skepticism will grow greater and greater, burgeoning into a complete rejection of the author’s fictional universe, until we either close the book or fling it across the room.

There *is* a place for exposition in fiction—for telling rather than showing. There are times when our narrators should summarize actions and events and even editorialize or reflect on them. The best place to do those things probably is *not* in the midst of a spectacle, especially one served up as an attention-grabbing prologue. The crowd wants blood, sweat, gore, gristle, and grit. So do readers of stories about gladiatorial combat.

Instead of talking about it, I’d plunge readers into Celestia’s last battle. Isn’t that what prologues are best at—plunging us into dramatic events?

Your Turn

Draft a prologue for a novel that doesn’t have one. Any novel will do. For instance: a prologue to *Moby Dick* that dips us into a dramatic scene with Ahab confronting the white whale *before* losing his leg.

38. A Psycho in the Making

*(Horror-Thriller Genre / Psychopathic
Characters / Muffled Implications)*

The moment he awoke he knew something was wrong. The clock on the wall read nine; nothing moved in the rest of the house. The sky through his window was overcast, the air like a wet flannel on his face. He stumbled down the hall, bleary-eyed, and found her in her bed. At first he thought she was sleeping, but when she did not respond to his question, he peeled back the blanket to discover what he had always feared.

The cat padded into the room mewing for its breakfast, its tail a plume of blackness. Ordinarily he would have booted it away: he hated its piteous pleading. But today he lifted it gently, and in the kitchen put milk into its bowl and set it down to drink. It was too late to go into work and her hens needed feeding. He scattered their seed, retrieved the newspaper from the front lawn, and trudged back inside. For a while he sat in the front room, slumped in an armchair—her chair—staring ahead, his mind vacant of thought.

Again the cat appeared, mewing. It weaved its body between his legs, rubbing against him and when he did not respond, leapt onto his lap. It was then that he came to from his reverie, then that he put his hands around its scrawny neck and squeezed until it slumped limply, dead.

For most of the day he moved in a trance, unable to comprehend her death. He knew that it would come one day, of course, and he knew that the hacking cough of late was leaving her breathless and clutching at her chest, wincing with pain. But he did not know that today she would die. And he did not know what he ought to do with her now.

He returned to her room and did what he had not done since he was a small boy—he lay beside her and slept. When he awoke and found that no, it was not a bad dream—she was still there and motionless—he brushed back a strand of grey hair that covered one eye. He traced the contours of her face with his fingertips, explored the landscape that was her wrinkled brow, her sunken cheek, her withered lips, her chin dented and spiked with hairs. He did not weep. He had forgotten—if he had ever known—how to grieve. What he felt most was the sense of being, for the first time in his life, utterly alone in the world.

Analysis

A man (or boy) of indeterminate age awakens to find his mother dead in the other room. This monumental occasion in his life has not come unexpected; we are told (improbably) that it is something “he had always feared.” Having given his mother’s cat a bowl of milk and fed her chickens, the protagonist assumes a catatonic state in his mother’s armchair “staring ahead, his mind vacant of thought.” When the cat makes its next appearance, the protagonist emerges from his stupor just long enough to strangle the creature to death with his bare hands, after which he curls up in bed with his mother’s corpse. The passage ends with his realization that “for the first time in his life” he is “utterly alone in the world.”

If in reading this passage you sense a Norman Bates in the making, you’re not alone. Bates, for those who’ve never seen Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, is the title character, rendered to a fare-thee-well by Anthony Perkins. He operates a small motel at the bottom of the hill where he and his mother share a forbidding Victorian house—his dead mother, that is. Mrs. Bates has been dead for six years; Norman has kept her mummified body and propped it in her rocking chair.

I imagine a similar future in store for this protagonist, minus the motel. The protagonist does not need to travel great psychic distances from strangling cats with his bare hands to stabbing people to death in shower stalls. Whatever his fate, what we’re dealing with here is at best a creep, at worst a serial killer in embryo.

Which makes this an effective opening, provided that the story that follows it lives up to its creepy nature, as I suspect it will. After all, any story whose first page dishes up two deaths (one a murder) isn’t likely to turn into a romance—or, for that matter, a nuanced work of psychological or social realism. Especially not with passages like this

It was then that he came to from his reverie, then that he put his hands around its scrawny neck and squeezed until it slumped limply, dead.

that call to mind Vincent Price’s voiceover sessions for Michael Jackson’s hit song “Thriller.” Here and at other points the style feels downright gothic, the author having dipped his nib into Poe’s inkwell. Nothing wrong with that, except that it plants us firmly in genre/horror/thriller territory. If the story that follows doesn’t measure up, disappointment is sure to follow.

E. GENRES

There are grammatical issues. The handling of tense is less than masterful. One example is in the second to last paragraph, when, after his mother's death we read that the protagonist "knew that it would come someday" (the tense should be past perfect "had known"). In the same paragraph, we get, "But he did not know that today she would die." Though writers do it all the time, it seems to me that in a past-tense narrative, unless it truly refers to a present day from which the narrator is looking back, the word "today" has little meaning and less place. "But he hadn't known that she would die that day," conveys the same meaning grammatically.

The last line spells out what should be more than implied by the time we read it: that the protagonist feels "utterly alone." End with the line before, and the scene's implications resonate. State what's implied, and you muffle those implications.

Your Turn

Evoke a psychopathic character through dialogue, action, or a combination of those things. Catch him or her in a relatively undramatic moment, doing something mundane, or not overly violent or psychotic. Yet still somehow convey the character's pathology.

39. Death on the Freeway

(Detective Fiction / Clairvoyant Dreams)

The girl was wearing a red robe when she fell from the overpass. Detective John Hsiao had spent the past hour interviewing people on the shoulder of the freeway, and that was about the only thing any of them remembered.

“Did you see anybody else on the overpass?”

“No.”

“Did you see what she was doing before it happened?”

“No.”

“Did you see anything at all?”

“She was wearing a red robe....”

Detective Calhoun was on the overpass itself. There had been a serious, but relatively smaller, accident there around the time of the girl’s very messy death. Calhoun was interviewing the survivors and watching a few lab techs search the overpass guardrail for trace evidence.

John noticed the older detective motioning him up, so he thanked the last of the witnesses and jotted a few more notes in his blotter, then started towards the grassy slope off the shoulder. Amidst the empty cars on the freeway, the DA’s criminologists were still scraping the girl’s remains off the hot tarmac.

As he walked, John tried to shake the feeling that he’d been through this before.

Every three days for the past six months, John had had the same dream.

It started high in the mountains of Guangdong province. John had never been there, but had heard his grandfather speak many times of the way the peaks rose from the mists, rounded islands of green and brown in a sea of roiling white.

In the dream, a young girl with glossy black hair and a vibrant red gown walked on one of the islands. Two shadowy figures followed close behind her. Every few steps, the girl spun around to look at them, her hair a whirlwind of movement. Each time, she turned again after a moment of stillness and continued walking. Sometimes her steps were slow and faltering; other times she moved quickly, as though traveling to a destination far away.

After several of these ... confrontations? Pleas? John was not sure what they were, but there came a point in the dream when the girl did not turn back around. Instead, she strode towards the couple—quick and purposeful.

Analysis

A detective at the scene of a possible murder. A girl has fallen from an overpass. Or was she pushed? Eyewitnesses say the girl wore a red robe.

A corpse, a private (or public) investigator, a suspicion of foul play: all standard ingredients of a subset of the mystery genre known as crime or *detective fiction*, a genre dating back to *One Thousand and One Nights*. Among the tales Scheherazade spins to keep from losing her head, “The Three Apples” (aka “The Tale of the Murdered Young Woman”) unravels the mystery of a young woman’s body discovered hacked to pieces inside a locked chest. The Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who bought the sealed chest from a fisherman who found it on the banks of the Tigris river, gives his vizier Ja’far ibn Yahya three days to solve the crime, or else. From there “The Three Apples” piles on suspense, intrigue, and a whiplash-inducing series of plot twists. It laid the foundation for countless subsequent dramas and thrillers, from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*.

The Chinese have their own tradition of folk detective stories, going all the way back to Bao Gong stories of the Ming Dynasty and later exemplified by the eighteenth-century Judge Dee Mysteries (translated into English by the Dutch Sinologist Robert van Gulik). In these mysteries the detective role is performed by a judge or local magistrate, and the criminal and his crime are revealed early in the story, so that suspense owes more to how the crime is solved than to its solution. Based on real murder cases, the stories are laden with historical and philosophical digressions. They often even include official documents.

Meanwhile here in the West, in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Edgar Allan Poe established a plot formula for detective stories that’s been in use ever since. Unlike the Judge Dee cases, Poe’s stories center around the slow unraveling of the truth, or what Poe himself called “ratiocination”—a process wherein the hero detective applies a combination of observation, intuition, forensic analysis, inference, and persistence. Poe’s stories lead to Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, the world’s most famous sleuth, and the progenitor of every fictional private eye thereafter, from Sam Spade to Lieutenant Columbo.

In this opening of a detective novel, we are presented with two scenes—one grounded in reality, the other in dream. Though competently written, each

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

leaves something to be desired. In the first scene, we are offered one tantalizing detail: that of the red robe. This is first stated as a fact in the opening line, then reiterated through dialogue too schematic to earn its keep. In any case, since the robe must still be on the corpse, the testimony amounts to naught.

Which leaves us with the detective (or two detectives; their relationship is unclear) at the scene of a potential crime and no truly tantalizing detail to seduce us deep into the story—only the vague reference to the detective's sense of *déjà vu*. Then the scene ends.

Reduced to its essence, it might read:

When she fell from the overpass she wore a red robe.

The rest is redundant, irrelevant, implied, and/or obvious. To get pulled into this mystery, most readers will want more—and dreams won't do. As a scene unto itself, the dream sequence fails for the same reason the opening fails. It gives us too little cause for suspense.

Supposing the dream were worked into the opening scene; supposing, as he examines the corpse, Detective Hsiao has his moment of *déjà vu*, thrusting him back into his recurrent dream of a girl being pursued by shadowy figures. But in the dream the girl wore a red gown; this murder victim is naked. True, the only eyewitness (can there be more than one?) swears that the girl wore red. She must be confused. As the detective covers the corpse a shout comes from the nearby slope. They've found something. A cop holds it up on a stick: a scarlet robe.

It will fall on the author (or her narrator) to explain this clairvoyant dream.

Your Turn

Revise this opening as suggested per the penultimate paragraph of my analysis.

40. Bases Loaded (a Crime Thriller)

*(Crime Thriller / McGuffins / Dramatized
Routine as Harbinger of Violence)*

Shoulder resting gently against shoulder, they nestled on a supple leather sofa, Barry absorbed in the sixth game of the World Series, Sheena enjoying the only baseball she watched all year. At each highlight, a key pitch, hit or catch, he offered commentary, she smiled and sipped a white wine.

“Play ball!” the umpire signaled the start of the fifth inning and Barry crossed fingers for his Orioles. Facing them on a 75-inch flat panel, the Braves pitcher gripped a ball hidden in his glove, peered out at the couple and nodded.

The view from the centerfield camera jumped onto the screen and now Sheena and Barry were behind the pitcher, looking past his red “37” at the nervous hitter flexing his bat while the umpire crouched and the catcher raised his mitt to the inside of the plate. The pitcher wound up and fired a fastball and flinched at the crack of the bat blasting a blur over his head through the top of the TV. The image reversed again to capture the shortstop’s skyward grimace and bring into focus the ball sailing far above the left fielder before arching down to clip the foul pole and carom fair into the fourth row of dismayed fans.

“Hell yeah, it’s gone,” Barry cheered, “Turner nailed that fastball.”

The picture switched back to the hitter almost to first base, slowing to a trot and thrusting up his fist in joy, then cut to a close up of the pitcher’s face, bent down to study the cloud of dust he had just kicked up on the mound.

“Looks like we’ll be tasting victory champagne, Sheena.” He tilted his face to hers, his styled gray hair grazing honey blonde tresses a generation younger. “We’re going to win this. The Braves are cooling down and the O’s are getting hot.”

“Hope you’re right.” Sheer pink fingernails brushed a tuft of golden bangs away from an eye.

Analysis

Reading this first page, without the help of a tersely lurid title (*Dead Cold*, *Sweet Death*, *Blood Secrets*, *Dark Waters*) and one of those covers, you know the kind, with raised metallic 200-point gothic type superimposed over silhouetted figures casting ponderous shadows, you might never guess that it's the opening of a legal or crime thriller, but according to the author's note it is. So we can be fairly sure if not absolutely certain that something extremely unpleasant and of a criminal nature will befall this romantic pair of baseball watchers.

Still, this opening generates too little interest in its romantically involved characters, who, though of different ages, with her "honey blonde tresses ... a generation younger [than his gray hair]," are otherwise not developed. As for the baseball game, World Series or not, and however deeply invested these lovers may be in it, in itself the game holds no interest for this reader.

Though he didn't invent it, for the role played by baseball in this opening scene, Hitchcock, the aforementioned director of *Psycho* and *North by Northwest*, popularized the term "MacGuffin" or "McGuffin," meaning an otherwise irrelevant object or device that triggers a plot—or, as the Master of Suspense put it less charitably, "The thing that the characters ... care deeply about ... and for which the audience does not give a damn."

Though rendered in great detail, the baseball game here exists mainly to establish this couple's interest in the game along with (possibly) Barry's betting habit, the routine against which an extraordinary event will soon play itself out with presumably deadly results, launching the criminal or legal proceedings that will drive this novel's plot through several hundred pages.

As I've said elsewhere, routine is important. Without routine the extraordinary events that make for a plot have nothing to work against or to set them into relief. I'm reminded of that passage at the opening of the most famous of crime thrillers, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, in which he establishes the story's setting: Holcomb, Kansas, the small Midwestern town where Herb Clutter lived with his family, and where their grisly murders occurred:

Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb. Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there.

The trouble with routine is that it can't be dramatized, nor should we bother trying. When we do, the best we can hope for is *dramatized routine*—a contradiction in terms, routine and drama having about the same relationship as water and oil. However much action, dialogue, or loving description we pump into the corpse of routine, however heroically we try to resuscitate it with artful similes, hyperventilating adjectives and adverbs, and other linguistic life-support systems, the result will most likely still be dead on arrival.

Most likely, that is, unless while establishing routine we're also doing something else: *evoking character*. As I've also said before: if something we write evokes character, we should probably keep it. If it doesn't, we do well to question it.

In the given opening, though it establishes Barry's gambling habit (which may or may not play a role in what's forthcoming), watching him and Sheena watch a baseball game tells us little if anything about them. But it could if the perspective were altered. Were the scene written from a close third-person subjective viewpoint, one that immersed us—however briefly—into one or both of the characters' sensibilities, through their individual perceptions of and responses to the game we'd know them as individuals, as people. Do Barry's bigwin dreams feature palm trees and infinity pools? Does Sheena wonder if he's getting himself in over his head? We would therefore care about them, and therefore care that something (we intuit) bad is going to happen to them, and therefore feel not boredom, but suspense.

Instead, the author uses a point-of-view strategy that curiously puts us and the watching couple *into* the baseball game—or rather into the television screen in which the baseball game is taking place. It's a compelling strategy, but one that gives us no access into the characters' interiors, and that makes the ball game—the McGuffin, the very thing we *don't* care about—its subject.

Something else that wouldn't hurt this opening: a topic sentence that makes clear what we're getting ourselves into: a story not about baseball or a pair of baseball-loving lovebirds, but of crime and punishment. How differently we'd read the same opening if it started thus:

They died in the third inning with bases loaded. That's the opening strategy Stephen Booth uses in his crime thriller, *Scared to Live*:

Even on the night she died, Rose Shepherd couldn't sleep. By the early hours of the morning, her bed was like a battleground—hot, violent, chaotic. Beneath her, the sheet was twisted into painful knots, the pillow hard and unyielding. Lack of sleep made her head ache, and her body had grown stiff with discomfort.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

In her short story “Home, Sweet Home,” Hannah Tinti takes a similar approach:

Pat and Clyde were murdered on pot roast night. The doorbell rang just as Pat was setting the butter and margarine (Clyde was watching his cholesterol) on the table. She was thinking about James Dean. Pat had loved him desperately as a teenager, seen his movies dozens of times, written his name across her notebooks, carefully taped pictures of him to the inside of her locker so that she would have the pleasure of seeing his tortured, sullen face from *East of Eden* as she exchanged her French and English textbooks for science and math.

In both cases from the throat-grabbing opening sentence each author goes on—not to establish routine—but to evoke character. The author of our first page has a chance to do both.

Your Turn

Draft an opening in which a tragedy or violence of some kind interrupts a banal routine. Example: a retired librarian shot dead by a stray bullet while mowing his lawn. Without telegraphing what’s going to happen, somehow imply the coming tragedy. Hint: avoid anything overtly ominous. Do *not* make it a cloudy or fog-swept day. On the contrary, the brighter the circumstances, the more we expect something to go wrong.

41. Hit and Run

(Detective Fiction / Noir / Hardboiled Prose)

Death had come airborne and metallic. Not in the streamlined shape of a bullet, but in the blunt square shape of the front of a car. A car going so fast it had become airborne at the top of the hill, just before slamming into its victim.

Matt Selden shivered, and pulled his coat closer around him. He wished he'd put a beanie on. When he got Liz's phone call, he'd just leaped out of bed, yanked on a coat and shoes, jumped into the car, and raced his way here as quick as he could. Under the coat, he was still wearing his pyjamas.

Dawn was just breaking. The first rays of the sun sparkled on the spire of the stately old church building behind him—the church that had been the only witness of the hit and run which happened a couple of hours ago, in the lonely pre-dawn darkness.

The police had cordoned off the northeast corner of the cross-roads. They'd drawn chalk circles around little bits of glass on the pavement and road. Shattered headlight? Matt mused. Maybe even a cracked windscreen? His eyes narrowed as he saw a change in the colour of the bitumen. There was a large oval patch of darkness on the road. Tendrils drifted downhill from it like a jellyfish, snaking their way to the edge of the road, and into the gutter. Matt's stomach turned. It was blood.

Inside the police cordon were two officers. The short, burly sergeant was facing away from Matt, his hands on his hips, muttering to the other policeman, a constable. The constable caught Matt's eye, and his brow wrinkled in a frown. The sergeant turned around. The moment he saw Matt, his eyes narrowed, and his lip lifted in a sneer, exposing nicotine-stained teeth. "Ah, Jesus," he snapped.

"No, just one of his faithful ministers," Matt replied with a pained smile.

"What the hell are you doing here, Selden?"

"At the moment, Sergeant Parker, I'm standing on a public pavement, talking to you. That's not breaking the law, I trust?"

Analysis

Here we have a private investigator arriving at a crime scene. The murder weapon: neither a bullet nor the gun that fired it, but “the blunt square shape of the front of a car” traveling fast enough to have “become airborne ... before slamming into its victim.”

Though not stated as such, these observations clearly belong to Matt Selden, private-eye, as he takes in the scene, “pull[ing] his coat closer around him.” We don’t have to wonder what sort of coat he wears. As befitting the grand tradition of hardboiled crime fiction into which this snugly fits, it has to be a trench coat, one with the lapels flipped raffishly up and that has no doubt seen better days, as has its haggard, cynical owner.

Without even having read beyond the second paragraph, already I feel I know Matt, or know his type. I’ve met him many times before in books and movies. He is Sam Spade in Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*, Marlowe in Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. No stranger to violent crime or danger, he has engaged in a little of both himself, now and then, for the sake of his clients. He’s cocky, tough, a bit on the flip side—but not without principles, or a heart. He may not always get his man (or woman: the hardboiled school doesn’t discriminate on the basis of sex), but his batting average is better than that of the cops with whom he shares a common goal, and with whom he nonetheless always finds himself working, usually at cross purposes.

Pioneered in the 1920s by Carroll John Day and popularized in the 1930s and 1940s by Chandler and Hammett, the hardboiled genre—referred to less than charitably by some as “pulp fiction”—remains hugely popular to this day. Part of that ongoing success may be owed to the genre’s timelessness and versatility. After all, as long as there are criminals and crimes, someone will need to solve them—or try. That may explain why the genre has attracted writers as otherwise unlike each other as John D. MacDonald, Robert B. Parker, Sue Grafton, Walter Mosley, and others whose titles dominate bestseller lists, each of them giving the hardboiled theme a different twist.

Here, the “twist” seems to be that Matt Selden, private-eye, is also a man of the cloth. “No,” Matt replies when a burly police sergeant who is also at the scene sneers “Ah, Jesus” at him, “just one of his faithful ministers.”

It’s not the first time that a fictional man of the cloth has slumped as a detective. In the early part of the last century, English novelist G.K. Chesterton published 52 short stories starring Father Brown, a priest who moonlights as a Sherlock Holmes-like detective. Unlike his hardboiled successors, Father Brown exemplified the quiet humility of his *other* calling, and seldom spoke

E. GENRES

except to utter something profound. More recently, Fr. Brad Reynolds and Andrew Greeley (himself a priest) have given us mystery-solving clergymen.

Though Hammett was an exquisite stylist (his dialogue was so strong, for the screenplay of *The Maltese Falcon* director John Huston supposedly had his secretary strip everything else out of the book), and beautifully crafted hard-boiled novels exist, to succeed at the genre gorgeous prose is by no means a prerequisite. “Adequate” sums up the style of most such novels.

Here the prose is better than adequate. “Death had come airborne and metallic” draws me right in. There’s a wisecracking, street-slangy-poetic edge to it that, I soon learn, is a product of the protagonist’s steely cynicism. However hardboiled, the prose still makes room for atmosphere (“The first rays of the sun sparkled on the spire of the stately old church”) and convincing detail (“His eyes narrowed as he saw a change in the colour of the bitumen”). The trails of blood drifting away from the corpse are likened to the tendrils of a jellyfish. Though I regret the lack of faith in the reader that has the author assuring us that the tendrils are of blood, still, the description works.

With equal efficiency via a brief exchange of dialogue the author effectively renders the strained relationship between his protagonist and the beat sergeant.

Mean, lean, and clean—almost (but not quite) slick: befitting a genre of which we’ve come to expect no more or less.

Your Turn

Draft the first page of a detective novel in the hardboiled tradition of Hammett and Chandler. Use first person. In addition to the requisite cynicism, endow your detective protagonist with a unique perspective, condition, or attitude: make him or her OCD or Tourettic (like the detective hero of Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn*) or deeply depressed (see Martin Beck’s *The Laughing Policeman*) or deadpan (*Dragnet*’s Sergeant Joe Friday). Start with a dead body; any dead body will do. What matters here is the quality of character as conveyed by your detective narrator.

42. Detective in a Department Store

(First Sentences / Information vs. Evidence / Dramatized Routine)

Maybe you've been inside Drake's department store in upper Manhattan. It's got the same brand names and glitzy merchandizing that department stores across the country have. I pay attention to these details in my line of work, especially the brand names.

I entered Drake's at 10:30 in the morning a few weeks ago and was greeted by the rhythmic beat of rock music, while elegantly dressed salespeople swarmed around me like locusts and beckoned with atomizers of Chanel perfume and Polo by Ralph Lauren cologne. I brushed by the salespeople and the morning shoppers and walked through the cosmetics department, where I noticed a young woman, possibly a student from nearby Columbia University, who was seated and receiving a complimentary facial from an Estée Lauder sales associate in a white smock. Off to the right, a strobe light flickered on-off, on-off beside a rack of designer Guess? jeans.

I passed the escalator that led to the second floor, where the counterfeit Paul Sterling & Company cashmere sweaters were on sale....

Analysis

First sentences are so important. They tell us what a writer considers his "best foot forward." If that "best foot" turns out to be lame, it doesn't raise great expectations for what follows.

Here, the first sentence ("Maybe you've been inside Drake's department store in upper Manhattan") raises doubts. First, there's that tentative "maybe." As the first word of what is presumably to be a novel of two to three hundred pages—a detective novel no less—the writer may want to ask herself, "Do I really want to start off on such a wishy-washy note?"

A wishy-washy opener can serve a purpose. The best example I can think of is the opening to John Barth's early novel, *The End of the Road*:

In a sense, I am Jacob Horner.

Barth's novel is essentially about a man who cannot make up his mind about anything. Compare Barth's opening shrug with the sledgehammer blow that launches *Moby Dick*:

E. GENRES

Call me Ishmael.

I'm far from convinced, however, that the wishy-washiness that attends the opening page in question was intended. My confidence is further undermined by the questionable authenticity of a department store named Drake's and located in "upper" Manhattan. As a former Manhattanite I can tell you that there is no singular "upper Manhattan." There are the Upper West Side and the Upper East Side (and never the twain shall meet). I know, too, that there isn't and has never been a department store named Drake's; in fact there are no department stores anywhere above 59th Street, where, if it hasn't gone out of business by now, Bloomingdale's is located. Why not choose a real department store in an authentic Manhattan, and not a generic—and less than credible—substitute?

The third sentence, too, can be strengthened. Rather than details already mentioned (and that, as discussed, aren't very convincing), the author might share her character's solid, specific, and authentic observations, rendering his point ("I pay attention") explicit and vivid, rather than making us accept this as a matter of faith.

In the same vein, in the next paragraph, instead of telling us the salespeople are "elegantly dressed," why not let us see, from the narrator's perspective, what they are wearing, providing us with specifics—down to brand names, if appropriate and necessary. Mere epithets won't do.

Remember:

Adjectives = Opinions
Opinions ≠ Descriptions

Lack of authenticity with respect to specific details can cost us readers. But there are other kinds of inauthenticity we should guard against. Look at the first sentence of the third paragraph, in which the detective describes what's on the second floor before taking us up the escalator:

I passed the escalator that led to the second floor, where the counterfeit Paul Sterling & Company cashmere sweaters were on sale.

For one thing, department stores don't sell fakes. And though we may assume that the detective has been to the store before, still, he must have been there very recently to know those cashmere sweaters are still there. Yet nowhere on this first page is a prior visit alluded to, so the snarky remark about

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

those sweaters feels at best like an authorial intrusion, information known to the author but that's beyond the character's experience. Then again, once the narrator does go up that escalator (not before), he might authentically describe not only those cashmere sweaters, but the department store's glass-floored mezzanine, and the candy store where the counter clerk wears a conical paper hat, and the men's dressing room, with its varnished wooden stalls smelling faintly of ear wax and vinegar.

Finally, this opening could be enhanced by starting with a dramatic scene in progress rather than inert information, with the detective already in the store, watching the young woman getting a facial. Whenever a first-person narrator describes things to us, he or she is also potentially describing his or her character. Opportunities to do so are missed here; the "girl getting facial" scene is brushed aside, as are those swarming salespeople.

How much stronger this opening would be if, through this carefully rendered scene of a woman getting a facial in a department store, we experience the protagonist's eye for details—which, after all, is what the scene is ultimately about.

Such an opening scene might also go a long way toward establishing the detective's remoteness and his detachment. He sees the pretty young woman; his trained eye captures every detail, but he responds to her clinically, rather than sympathetically, passionately, or poetically. Not only do we get the scene, we get the character of the man experiencing it. Two birds with one stone.

Your Turn

Write five alternative first sentences for this novel opening.

43. Mommy Get Your Gun

(Satire / Spoof / Importance of Grammar)

I crouched, unmoving and stifled; the garbage bins masking my position. I was unsure as to whether my threat still remained. I desperately wanted to sneak a peek, but having been shot at once today was already one time too many for me.

I figured I could safely stay cramped here for a while longer. The stench of the garbage-filled bins was already losing its pungency through familiarity, and the kids' school bell wasn't due for at least another hour and a half.

"You're a big fat fraidycat!" I silently admonished myself. Well perhaps I was! I'm sure I used to be braver, but I heard age can soften you up. And hadn't I just unceremoniously celebrated my 39th birthday. One more year till I'm old!

Suddenly the silence of the alley was disturbed by the chirping of an annoying ring tone. I was right, my shooter was still out there, and so close; in fact he was directly at the bins. His phone went unanswered and I had the discomfort of listening to the dreadful default Nokia ring tone—just like mine!

"Oh heck!" I cursed, it was my phone. "Bloody bugger, shit shit shit!" I was as good as dead anyway since I had just given away my hiding spot. I took a look at who was using Murphy's law to call me now, and help prepare me for my executioner.

The school's number was blinking on the screen. Rising slightly so my eyes followed the top of my head, I looked across the bin lids. Empty, the alley was empty! "Hello," I stage whispered into the phone.

"Ms. Brandez, Jamie has fallen up the steps and given himself a scraped cheek and bloody nose."

I sighed, "How could this happen when there are only two stairs in the entire school?"

"He had his hands in his pockets and they got stuck in there."

I rolled my eyes. *Why me?* I wondered.

I put my gun away, tidied my hair, and headed toward my car so I could pick up one of my clumsy fatherless kids. This is my life!

Analysis

Behind trash bins in a garbage-strewn alley a woman seeks cover from a gun-toting assailant. Of the assailant's identity—or the cause underlying his or her murderous pursuit of the protagonist—we learn nothing, at least not by the end of this first page. We know only that the protagonist is the single mother of a boy named Jamie, who, in the midst of his mother's back-alley struggle for survival, has taken an accidental fall at school and bloodied his nose.

The juxtaposition of two incongruous fictional worlds, of *noir* detective and struggling single mom—Raymond Chandler meets Murphy Brown—is tantalizing but also perplexing. Assuming this woman is ducking *real* bullets, how did she get herself into such a fix? Equally impressive—and no less perplexing—is the nonchalance (“I rolled my eyes”) with which she shrugs off what a few moments before had been or seemed to be a serious threat to life and limb in order to rush to the aid of her slightly injured child.

Was the threat serious? Are we being played with? What, exactly, is going on here?

Whatever is going on, one thing is clear enough: that somewhere a tongue has been lodged firmly in a cheek. The world of this novel isn't my everyday world, or yours, but one that exists in a parallel universe, where gun-toting mothers interrupt back alley shoot-outs to kiss their offspring's skinned knees: The world of satire or *spoof*.

The word “spoof” derives from the name of a card game invented around the turn of the nineteenth century by British comedian Arthur Roberts. Since the game involved hoaxing, trickery, and nonsense, in time the word itself came to stand for tomfoolery. As applied to literature, it denotes a light, playful parody—which, presumably, is what we have here: a parody of a detective novel in which the detective is a struggling single mother.

On this first page, however satirical, the world is created with considerable authority, an authority earned in part by the author's unwillingness to explain, apologize, or make excuses for her far-fetched premise. No sooner do we read, “I crouched, unmoving and stifled; the garbage bins masking my position,” then we're ensconced in that ironic world. By plunging us directly into the action, the author avoids exposition and explanation.

In a similar way, by way of a single sentence, Franz Kafka convinces us that overnight a man has turned into a giant beetle. Exactly how and why this transformation has occurred, Kafka (wisely) abandons to the reader's imagination. It is a *fait accompli*. The reader has a choice: accept it, or stop reading.

E. GENRES

But there are other, smaller ways in which this author undermines that same authority, including poor punctuation (that imprudent semi-colon in the first sentence), subject-verb disagreements (see sentence 3), tense shifts (sentence 4: strictly speaking, it should be “I could have stayed cramped there”), and a beginner’s loving embrace of adverbs (“desperately,” “suddenly,” “directly,” “slightly”).

Given this far-fetched premise that asks much of readers by way of suspending disbelief, the author has no wiggle-room for such confidence-shaking errors: she had better get everything just right. And there’s no way she can get away with telling readers that her heroine’s eyes “[follow] the top of [her] head.” Even in a world where single moms shoot it out in blind alleys, we still expect eyes to tag along with the skulls that hold them.

Your Turn

Draft the opening of a story or novel with an outrageous premise. Example A: A world in which men are half the size of women (literally, not figuratively). Example B: A world where life and death have switched places, so life begins with death and ends with birth. Example C: A bank heist undertaken by: a) pubescent children; b) pregnant women; c) escapees from a retirement home. Whatever your far-fetched premise, whether satirical, tongue-in-cheek, or dead serious, your mission is to suspend the reader’s disbelief enough so they buy into it.

44. Lady Pamela's Surgeon

(Romance / Bodice Ripper / Where to Begin?)

"Really, darling—I can't believe you're marrying a girl you haven't even met," Lady Pamela Whittington drawled. Her slim taut shoulders shuddered delicately under her red silk blouse. "It's not like you have to look far to find a woman to share your life." Reaching up, she ran the tips of her red painted fingernails down Alfie's cheek.

Damn her and her kind, thought Alfie, smiling slowly; a smile that started at the corners of his sculpted lips and slowly dimpled his cheeks before moving to his heavy-lidded black eyes. He looked deep into her baby-blue eyes, framed by wrinkle-free eyelids and thick lashes. "You bloody charmer," Lady Pamela murmured. Her fingers moved down his cheek and caressed his neck, lingering on the top button of his cream raw silk shirt before she stepped back.

"Well, I should let you get on with your surgery, doctor. You have a flight to catch tonight." She eased her petite body into the surgical chair at the center of the room with practiced ease. "Roger and I were discussing last night how hard it must be for you to go back there. All that smell and dirt! And the flies and beggars. Really, *dah-ling*—I can't imagine why you would *want* to go back. You could have flown your family over here. We would have been happy to open our country house for the wedding."

Alfie switched on the overhead lights and angled them to light up her face. Pamela squinted and then gave him a beguiling smile. Alfie turned away as he put on his gown and gloves and loaded the syringe. "Botox injections to your brow and cheek are hardly surgery, Pamela," he said, working hard to keep his voice calm. "And my family and my fiancée's family are in Colombo. It's an arranged marriage, Pamela. The parents of the bride organize the wedding ceremony."

As he turned back to her, he noticed with a thrill of pride that the lip reshaping done eight months ago still looked great.

Analysis

Though women stopped wearing bodices by the end of the eighteenth century, the term "bodice-ripper" is of fairly recent coinage. The phrase debuted in print

in the 28th December 1980 issue of the *New York Times*: “Women too have their pornography: Harlequin romances, novels of sweet savagery, bodice-rippers.” A second article written in 1980 by Stephen Grover and published in the *Wall Street Journal* characterized bodice-rippers as a strain of romance novels featuring, on their paperback covers, scantily clad women being manhandled by alpha males, and went on to call them “juicy, cheap, predictable, and devoured in stupefying quantities by legions of loyal fans.” No wonder authors of romance fiction haven’t embraced the expression. They consider it an insult.

If there’s a line between bodice-rippers and more “serious” Gothic novels and novels of manners, it’s blurry, but then so too is the line between romantic fiction and such darlings of the literary canon as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Pride & Prejudice*, the latter of which, despite having been published in 1813 when the genre per se didn’t exist, has been called “the best romance novel ever written.” Actually, if we define romance novels as novels of courtship told from the perspective of the heroine and that end happily, the prototype may be Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Published in 1740, Richardson’s novel was one of the few of its time to supply a happy ending. It was also one of the first blockbusters. Written in the epistolary mode (in the form of letters), it opens:

Dear Mother and Father,

I have great trouble, and some comfort, to acquaint you with. The trouble is, that my good lady died of the illness I mentioned to you, and left us all much grieved for the loss of her; for she was a dear good lady, and kind to all us her servants. Much I feared, that as I was taken by her ladyship to wait upon her person, I should be quite destitute again, and forced to return to you and my poor mother, who have enough to do to maintain yourselves; and, as my lady’s goodness had put me to write and cast accounts, and made me a little expert at my needle, and otherwise qualified above my degree, it was not every family that could have found a place that your poor Pamela was fit for: but God, whose graciousness to us we have so often experienced at a pinch, put it into my good lady’s heart, on her death-bed, just an hour before she expired, to recommend to my young master all her servants, one by one; and when it came to my turn to be recommended, (for I was sobbing and crying at her pillow) she could only say, My dear son!—and so broke off a little; and then recovering—Remember my poor Pamela—And these were some of her last words! O how my eyes run—Don’t wonder to see the paper so blotted.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

However purely expository owing to its rhetorical strategy, Richardson's opening plunges us headlong into his protagonist's grief at the loss of her "dear good lady." Of course we want to know who she was and why she died. Through this parted veil of tears we enter that story.

However much (or little) prestige we assign to the romance genre, with its shuddering shoulders and lingering caresses the first page under scrutiny here fits the bill. Even the main character's Christian name, by design or not, blows a kiss to Richardson's 1740 prototype.

Whatever else may be said of the genre, its entertainment value can't be denied. Fast-paced, suspenseful (inasmuch as any story whose conclusion is foregone can hold suspense), studded with mildly pornographic scenes, with little tolerance for subtlety and ambiguity, and as hospitable to cliché and stereotype as a mosquito-ridden Ugandan swamp to malaria.... In few words, the literary equivalent of a soap opera.

Which isn't to suggest that the romance genre lacks sophistication. In its own way, it's quite sophisticated. There are first of all many more rules that must be followed than with mainstream or literary fiction. The protagonists must meet early, adultery must be avoided, and ultimately, emotional commitment must be rewarded.

For sure, many romance novels have been written that deviate from these rules. The given example, with its male protagonist and Botox-enhanced antagonist, certainly does. But even when deviating from them, it takes skill to negotiate all the rules and restrictions and still evoke breathing characters seemingly capable of exercising their own free will.

And this author demonstrates considerable skill. From Lady Pamela's first drawled words ("Really, darling—I can't believe you're marrying a girl you haven't even met"), I get a strong sense of her less than exemplary character: a spoiled rich woman with (perhaps) her own designs on Alfie, a man committed to his marriage—not out of convenience or greed, but out of, if not love, duty.

However entertaining, what's presented here feels less like the opening scene of this novel than one from much deeper into it, after the relationship between Alfie and his Sri Lankan bride-to-be has been established, along with Lady Pamela's stake in all of this, such that when we arrive at this scene we'll appreciate the dynamics that underlie it.

Though I've painted Pamela as antagonist, for all we know this could be *her* novel, and we're meant to cheer her on in her quest to rescue Alfie from a potentially doomed, loveless marriage.

Whether that turns out to be the case or not, from what we're given here we aren't sure who we should care for, or why we should care for them.

Your Turn

Read this first page again. While doing so, on a sheet of paper divided into three columns by lines drawn down the page, and labeled “A,” “B,” and “C” make three lists as follows:

1. List A: things you know and learn about the characters and their situation
2. List B: things you don’t know but are willing to learn in due time
3. List C: things you want to know immediately.

45. The Pleasures of Genre

(Regency Romance / Strong Verbs / Close Third Person / Feelings)

January 1, 1806

Stanford On Avon, Northamptonshire

“A burial is not the way to start a day, let alone a year.” Cranny—Lucien Charles Sedgewick, 12th Duke of Cranleigh—took no comfort from his friends’ grunts of agreement. The corpse-grey morning seemed surly, as if it knew 1806 had arrived with Death as its companion.

And a close friend—Edward Melton, heir to the Earl of Highgate—was Death’s first prize.

Faust squeezed Cranny’s shoulder. “Come on, Cranny. It’s time.”

Cranny trudged over the snowy ground and under the earl’s stricken gaze, joined his friends around the funeral wagon. For the first time in two years their close-knit group of ten were together, though not as they’d imagined. Not with Edward in the casket. Even Chipper had left his sick bed and made the arduous journey north, though ill health rendered him too weak to do more than walk behind the casket.

They carried Edward’s casket into the Melton family graveyard where gravestones huddled together like hardened conspirators, forever guarding their grim spoils, even as time and the elements erased the epitaphs they bore. Solemn funerary attendants stepped forward. The urge to scream at them to be gone clawed at Cranny’s throat, but dear, departed Father’s edict—whipped into his flesh and burned by pain into his memory—prevailed.

Do nothing to bring shame on the family name.

They surrendered the casket to the attendants and soon the drone of the clergyman’s voice joined the low moan of the wind. Eyes narrowed against the whirling snow, Cranny braced himself. As the casket descended into the grave a great knot formed in his throat, every creak of the straining ropes hitting his brain with all the power of a blacksmith’s hammer striking the anvil. Edward did not belong in the waiting maw in the cold earth. Not at twenty-six.

E. GENRES

Guilt crunched Cranny's heart, and his blood hammered in his ears while his muscles bunched and quivered with an odd need to do ... violence. Some unspeakable cur had attacked Edward and his men and left them dead or dying while the snow bloomed scarlet with their blood. And it is all my bloody fault. His chest hollowed and the ache behind his ribs sharpened, snatching his breath. His vision blurred. God's teeth. I will not cry like a whelp. Spine rigid, he thrust his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat and pulled in a lungful of frigid air.

He would see the murderer hang. Dammed if he wouldn't.

Another gust of wind whipped about him, its icy claws slapping at his greatcoat. What lay beyond the grave? The image of a small, white-haired ghost flashed through his head on a stumbling heart-beat. What in Hades? Perhaps the memory was a reminder that life was fragile. Transient. Perhaps it was a reminder he had yet to fulfill his obligations to his dukedom, lest he fall victim to the family curse and end up in an early grave too.

God. Death was a damned sight more appealing....

Analysis

*No one had more lovers,
No one needed love more
Than PLEASURE'S DAUGHTER.
She had seven lovers
But only one love and he was ...
The King of England.*

The genre of this first page is the “regency romance,” a subgenre of the romance novel, the conventions of which Margot Livesey outlines for us in *The Hidden Machinery*, her delightful book of essays on the novelist's craft:

1. The lovers are unlikely in some obvious way.
2. They meet early and are then separated—either physically or emotionally—for most of the narrative.
3. There must be significant obstacles—“dragons and demons”—to be overcome.
4. Changes of setting, even from drawing room to street, are vital for revealing the characters and moving the narrative forward.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

5. Many minor characters will assist the lovers on their journey.
6. A subplot, or two, is required to keep the lovers apart, to allow time to pass, to act as a foil to the main plot, and to entertain the readers.

Set in the time of the British Regency (1811–20), regency romances evolved from the “novel of manners” as practiced by Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, who dramatized the domestic affairs of the English gentry. The modern regency—written long after but set in the same period—was first popularized by Georgette Heyer, who penned several dozen between 1935 and her death in 1974.

With its provocative opening (“A burial is not the way to start a day, let alone a year”) our first page holds out a model of the form. Though starting right off with dialogue has its risks (namely the confusion attendant with confronting readers with an ungrounded, disembodied conversation-in-progress), it also gets right down to business—namely the business of evoking character, as this opening dialogue does very well. We haven’t met Cranny; we don’t even know his name, yet already this dialogue nails him to the page. It does more: it nails down the point of view. Until further notice—to the bottom of this first page, anyway—everything will be filtered through Cranny’s gloomy sensibilities.

That filtering avails itself of free indirect discourse, by which the narrator’s voice is colored by the point-of-view character. Note, in the fourth paragraph, the choice of modifiers and verbs (“trudged,” “stricken,” “arduous”), and how they convey Cranny’s grim outlook.

Fifth paragraph: the gravestones “huddled like hardened conspirators”—more Cranny. All is filtered through his perspective, his personality. Though the “free” in “free indirect” means that the simile could be attributed to an objective narrator, nothing on this first page is purely neutral or objective; everything is flavored by our protagonist’s bleak disposition. It’s the salt in this stew.

Rather than attempt to describe characters’ abstract feelings (hard if not impossible), wise writers evoke them as concretely as possible. With “Guilt crunched Cranny’s heart, and his blood hammered in his ears while his muscles bunched and quivered” this author does just that, balancing abstractions (guilt) with active, solid nouns (blood/muscles) and verbs (hammered/quivered). This is but one of many approaches the author uses to render Cranny’s emotional state, from dipping into his thoughts (“I will not cry like a whelp”) to precisely rendering his visible gestures (“he thrust his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat and pulled in a lungful of frigid air.”).

Whatever else good writing does, it evokes character. If it evokes character, keep it.

E. GENRES

Through a wisely chosen, thoroughly engaged close third-person narration, this author injects us richly, vividly, clearly, and precisely into this opening scene, one we inhabit thoroughly. The weather (the wind, the whirling snow), sounds, temperature, thoughts, memories, opinions, and attitudes—all are there, as are actions, gestures, etc.

Genre or no genre, “literary” or not, this is good writing.

Your Turn

Rewrite an opening that you or someone else has written, published or in-progress, switching it from first person to close third person, so it reads just as (or even more) intimately than in the first-person version.

F. Memoir

"Memoir isn't the summary of a life; it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition. It may look like a casual and even random calling up of bygone events. It's not; it's a deliberate construction."

WILLIAM ZINSSER, IN *On Writing Well*

ASK FOUR PEOPLE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MEMOIR AND AN autobiography and odds are you'll get four different answers. For Gore Vidal a memoir is "how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history."⁹ Will Rogers put it this way in his *The Autobiography of Will Rogers*, "When you put down the good things you ought to have done, and leave out the bad ones you did do—well, that's Memoirs." Ian Jack, writing in the *Guardian*, boils the difference down to that between telling (autobiography) and showing (memoir). Orson Welles found the term memoir "pompous."

Nor do dictionaries shed much light on the matter. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an autobiography is "the writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself," while a memoir is "a person's written account of incidents in his own life, the persons whom he has known, and the transactions or movements in which he has been concerned; an autobiographical record."

For me, the difference is mainly one of audience and intention. Autobiographies are penned by the famous or infamous for an audience interested to hear their life stories. Memoirs are written by the relatively obscure or by those who have merely brushed up against fame, with the intent of treating a specific, broader theme or issue with which the author is intimately and by personal experience acquainted, but that is not purely personal.

9 *Palimpsest*, 1996.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Which is a long way of saying that a memoir is about something other than the life of its author. If you're Dolly Parton or Bono, you write your autobiography. If you're somebody like me, and feel so inclined, pompous or not, you write a memoir.

Memoirist Nora Gallagher sums up more succinctly still the secret to good memoirs. "It's not about *you*."¹⁰ When, in her 1994 memoir *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy writes about losing half her jaw to cancer and the ramifications of being permanently disfigured, she's not merely talking of her own personal ordeal; she speaks to any and all of us who have ever been self-conscious of our looks or suffered rejection, or endured physical torment and pain, or who've been torn between who we are, and what we wish to be—in her case, someone with a whole face and not one torn in two by cancer. Singularly horrible though her experience may have been, still, there's much in it that we can all relate to. The *relatable* part is her book's true and worthy subject.

Something of the sort is true of all good stories. Yes, they are about people (characters); and yes, they are about very specific characters shaped by unique circumstances and events. But they are never strictly or purely personal: they are about something bigger than the characters' (or, in the case of memoir, our) circumstances. They have themes, and those themes extend into areas beyond the merely anecdotal or personal.

10 In conversation with the author.

46. Tanks & Miracles

(Memoir / War / Memoir vs. Autobiography / Theme)

Magic, it is said, is all around us. Prayers are heard. Unattractive girls find husbands, barren women conceive, young heels get promotions, cranky old men see their tumors disappear overnight.

My miracle was not a splashy kind. If you are inclined to, you find miracles easily enough. My best friend when I was ten drowned in the Danube and I did not. Perhaps a miracle. When the tanks rolled through the streets of Bratislava, some young men were killed but I was not. Perhaps another miracle. My parents were divorced in a gaudy public spectacle yet I escaped, relatively unharmed. Was that one? The plane which carried us from Vienna to a new life in Toronto did not crash. That might have been one, too. But I have always felt, having in the past forty years been a part of the miracle of a wedding, and the miracles of the births of two healthy children, that the finger of God was most obviously intervening in my life on that third day we were in Canada, the day we wandered through the streets to find food.

Back in Bratislava my brother and I spent about eight months getting used to a new household from which our father had been sent packing and a new man, the Doctor Professor, had been installed in his place. Our father had been laughter, but mainly absence. The stepfather was rules and rigidity. The new regime together was marked by clenched teeth on all our parts. My mother was, I think, happier than she had been, but not when all four of us were together; then she was tears and apologies. The tanks of August 1968 transformed all our lives. Soon after we were on a plane and the promise of yet another new life. I could hardly wait.

Analysis

Displaced by the Soviet Union's invasion of 1968, a young man and his Slovakian family relocate to Canada to fulfill "the promise of yet another new life" there. That's one way to sum up the material in this first page of what I assume is a memoir.

Slipping out from under the treads of tanks is only one of many "miracles" that the narrator has either witnessed or benefited from directly in his life. I

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

put “miracles” in quotation marks, since here they are conflated with other things, with magic and with prayers, hence the term’s meaning is broadened to include everything from surviving an invasion by some 2000 Warsaw-Pact tanks, to the “miracles” of marriage, childbirth, and “cranky old men seeing their tumors disappear overnight.”

For sure, this expansive definition of miracles makes for a good attitude toward life—though the cynic in me can’t help wondering whose prayers were answered by the existence of tanks and tumors in the first place.

As to whether it makes for a good memoir opening, that’s another matter.

Clearly the narrator has a story to tell. Indeed, he has a grab bag of stories, surviving Brezhnev’s tanks being one of many. He has also survived another displacement, that of his father—whom his mother “sent packing”—by her “new man, the Doctor Professor.” This domestic restructuring happened eight months before those Soviet tanks rumbled into town, causing the already unstable ground under the narrator’s feet to tremble that much harder. From Bratislava he and his family escaped first to Vienna, and from there to Toronto (on a plane which, we’re told, “did not crash”)—in itself, according to the narrator, another miracle.

In selecting miracles as his theme, and then defining them so loosely, the author casts such a wide net over his material that it’s hard to say what, precisely, this memoir is about, other than the narrator’s very eventful life in general—which, however eventful, isn’t a fit subject for a memoir. Rather it launches this project into the territory of autobiography. Not a good thing.

While an autobiography is essentially a first-person account of someone’s life, a memoir has a thematic focus to which the memoirist’s life story has been subordinated. The key to a good memoir, as someone once told me, is that it’s not about the memoirist, but about something that the memoirist has experienced firsthand—an ordeal or challenge (Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*; *Swimming to Antarctica*, by Lynn Cox), or a relationship (Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*; Jeanette Walls’s *The Glass Castle*), or life in a particular time and place (*Cross Creek*, by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings; *This House of Sky*, by Ivan Doig), or a revolution (*Red Scarf Girl*, by Ji-Li Jiang), or a spiritual crisis or journey (*Practicing Resurrection*, by Nora Gallagher; Dan Barker’s *Godless*).

Unless you’re already a public figure, or known for some other reason, it’s questionable whether anyone will want to read your life story; anyway, they would need a reason for doing so. The memoir form supplies that reason by treating the author’s biography as the well from which a particular story is drawn, with its specific theme or themes, and doesn’t ask readers to drink the whole well dry.

F. MEMOIR

With this first page, the author suggests many intriguing tales, but unless he draws his thematic net tighter and narrows his focus, he will drown himself—and his readers—in autobiography. Which would be a shame, since not only does this author obviously have a story to tell, he has estimable gifts of language, perceptiveness, and wit with which to tell it:

Our father had been laughter, but mainly absence. The stepfather was rules and rigidity. The new regime together was marked by clenched teeth on all our parts. My mother was, I think, happier than she had been, but not when all four of us were together; then she was tears and apologies.

This is good writing. It only needs to serve an equally good purpose, and that purpose should be not to illuminate a whole life but a particular experience—in this case, I think, how the “miracle” of survival, while it holds out the promise of “yet another life,” also subjects its benefactors to further, often even greater, perils.

As for what part of his eventful life best illuminates that theme, the author must decide, and, having decided, cast the rest of his life into the background where it belongs.

Your Turn

Your life is an autobiography with different themes. It holds many potential memoirs. List some of the main episodes/events of your life, things that have happened to you, situations that you’ve found yourself in, between five and ten events. From the items on that list see if you can extract some *themes*. For instance: Event 1: A week after your twelfth birthday, your parents move to a different part of the country. Event 2: During your first year of college, your mother dies; your father remarries. Event 3: You come home for Christmas break to find your childhood bedroom taken over by one of your stepmother’s children. Extracted theme: *Displacement*. Note: it’s best to express the theme in one word or a short phrase.

47. A Pilot's Probation

(*Memoir / Vocation / Memoir vs. Autobiography*)

"You made it, you made it," Rick shouted as he lifted me over his head—not an easy feat, as I was 6'4" tall and liked to eat and work-out, even back then. My roommate was more excited for me than I could show while my head was pinned against the ceiling of our *crash pad* after TWA called to offer me a job, and I was ecstatic. No more turboprops for me. I was on my way to a new life in the world of jets and a seat was waiting for me in the next Boeing 727 class.

The hardest part of any job is getting it in the first place—unless you're a brand new major airline pilot, which I was at TWA in 1988. Then, keeping my job became a full-time commitment for the first year. This period is called *probation* and the company can fire any pilot without even giving a reason. "You're fired," hadn't been dreamed up by Donald Trump and reality TV yet, yet it wasn't far from any new airline pilot's mind. The union doesn't offer any protection until probation is over, either. We're on our own. It was a time to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut, which of course, has never been my strong suit.

Well, a year didn't sound so long to keep my nose clean, but it gets better. At most airlines, this probationary year didn't even start until new-hire training was completed. Three months of basic indoctrination, systems classes with quizzes, and simulator sessions led to a 4-hour checkride ripe with non-stop abnormalities and emergencies.

Analysis

The first page here is from a pilot's memoir. The most famous example of the genre—assuming there is such a creature—is *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. His memoir opens:

In 1926 I was enrolled as a student airline pilot by the Latécoère Company, the predecessors of Aéropostale (now Air France) in the operation of the line between Toulouse, in southwestern France, and Dakar, in French West Africa. I was learning the craft, undergoing an apprenticeship served

by all young pilots before they were allowed to carry the mails. We took ships up on trial spins, made meek little hops between Toulouse and Perpignan, and had dreary lessons in meteorology in the freezing hangar. We lived in fear of the mountains of Spain, over which we had yet to fly, and in awe of our elders.

Note how quickly the focus here switches from the narrator to his fellow pilots in the aggregate (“It’s not about *you*.”). From this opening paragraph we go on to learn that Saint-Exupéry’s book will of course be about him, but on a broader level it will be about pilots, flying, the mail service, and the poetry of land as seen from the air.

By contrast, judging by its opening paragraph, the memoir being considered here, though well written, is strictly personal. And that’s the problem. The author has put his best foot forward, so he thinks, and it’s an autobiographical foot. It begs the question: *what’s in it for the reader?* Why should a perfect stranger care that so-and-so was offered a job at TWA—a company that doesn’t even exist anymore? How relatable is that?

From there the narrator treats us to the intricacies of the probationary period. But this too is treated, not historically, or even nostalgically (by way of saying how things were different back then), but *personally*: this is what happened in my case, to me, at my airline. Fascinating? Yes, but only if the reader has some personal stake in the matter, if she knows the author, for instance, or has been a commercial pilot. Otherwise despite the good prose this won’t fly.

Solutions may be at hand. One might be to follow Saint-Exupéry’s example and switch the focus to the aggregate over the individual, to make this a memoir about flying for the airlines back then, when flying still held glamour—not one person’s story, but the story of an industry in its relatively innocent days viewed through the lens of an individual—yet exemplary—experience.

Your Turn

Draft two versions of an opening describing a job where you worked with other people (for instance: waitperson at a restaurant; a player on a team, a performer in a theatrical production). In the first version, use the first person “I” and describe only your own personal experience. In the second version, use the second-person pronoun “we” and describe things from the viewpoint of the collective: all the waiters at the restaurant; every player on the team; all the actors in the play. Which version seems strongest to you? Why?

48. From “Loss ... But Not Lost”: A Deathbed Scene

(Memoir / Death / Show, Don't Tell / Inhabiting Scenes)

I don't recall the day my mother died. I wasn't there. I do remember what happened shortly before she died.

We live in Brooklyn. A small apartment on the third floor of a brick building. I just turned six; my brother, three.

My mother is in bed. A white canopy hangs partially down from the top. It is difficult to see her. I feel like a peeping tom. “Mommy, are you feeling better?” She touches my cheek and smiles. She doesn't talk much. I cuddle into her right arm. Smell her warmth. It is a scent of lilac I still experience when I think of her.

Dad's face is haggard. His eyes sad. He hovers by the bed, concerned that I might upset her. Her birth name is Evelyn. Family call her Eva. Dad calls her Honey. I call her mommy.

A week before she dies I hear my parents quietly disagreeing, not realizing their curious daughter hears them. Dad wants her to go into the hospital. She doesn't want to. She has incurable cancer.

“They can manage the pain. I don't know what I can do to help you feel better. You'll be well taken care of there.”

Her voice is soft, “I don't want to go back. They can't cure me.”

She no longer sounds like the mother who danced with me in the living room; the mother who rubbed me dry after a bath; the mother who tickled my ears and tummy.

She does go to the hospital. I never see her again.

Analysis

“Show, don't tell.” So goes the creative writing chestnut. And, like most conventional wisdom, it has something to recommend it. Dramatic writing (“showing”) does more than merely tell us *about* an experience; it puts us right there inside the experience with a character or characters, so that we share the experience along with them. And sharing experiences—putting us into a character's shoes, so to speak, having us see what they see and feel what they feel through their nerves and sensory organs—is what fiction, and any form of narrative writing, does best.

Which isn't to say there's no place for telling in good narrative writing. On the contrary, telling is no less important than showing. If showing is more dramatic, more cinematic, telling is more *expedient*. Telling cuts to the heart; it sums up, reflects, adds perspective, and contextualizes. It bridges the gaps between scenes. If scenes are the bricks of good storytelling, exposition ("telling") is the mortar that binds the bricks together. To build a good story, fiction or nonfiction, you need bricks *and* mortar.

One reason behind the supremacy of "show, don't tell" is that telling is, frankly, harder. To gain and hold a reader's attention through action and dialogue is one thing. To do so through exposition is another. Intrinsically, there's nothing sexy about cement. It's the difference between showing someone a movie and asking them to read the screenplay. Good telling—telling that in its way is as entertaining as a dramatic scene—makes far greater demands on our rhetorical strengths, on the quality of insights and ideas and the language by which they are conveyed. With showing, on the other hand, our characters entertain our readers for us. We merely have to report what they do.

In this opening, in which the narrator recalls the days leading up to her mother's death, we get a murky mixture of showing and telling, of experience and information, so that, while we're not clearly lodged inside the mind of a narrator looking back and reflecting on certain events in his or her past, neither are we ensconced in the events themselves. We're presented with dramatic scenes, but we never inhabit them—or we do, but not vividly or deeply.

Before discussing why this is so, I want to digress for a moment and talk about the title of this memoir (*Loss ... But Not Lost*) and titles in general. Whatever stage they're in in their drafting process, I encourage my students to at least have a working title for their stories; in fact I insist on it. The search for a good title helps them learn about their own stories, what lies at their hearts, what they are ultimately about. Is there a strong central metaphor or image, something concrete that, symbolically, may stand for the story as a whole?

One good test for a working title: if it can be applied to many if not most or all stories, then it's probably too general, too "one size fits all." Unless it has something to do with a song by the Beatles, "A Day in the Life" is probably an example of a too-generic title. So is "When Things Go Wrong." And so, alas, is "Loss ... But Not Lost," the title of the work in question. It casts its thematic net too wide. Isn't every story, to some extent, in one way or another, a story of loss turned into gain, and/or vice versa? Aren't "life" and "loss" synonymous? If an author's best effort to arrive at a good title for her or his work results in something generic, it's a safe if not a sure bet that the work itself suffers from a lack of thematic focus.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Now let's go on with this first page, starting with the first two sentences: "I don't recall the day my mother died. I wasn't there." As openings go, in more than one sense this is a non-starter, since it merely conveys in negative terms what will be obvious by the end of the page. For those who will argue that Camus's most famous novel begins similarly ("Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure"), in that instance the justification for this approach lies in *the fact that the narrator doesn't remember*; that is the point of the opening, one that not only foreshadows the narrator's death, but will cause it.

The second sentence of the first paragraph of this first page will also be obviated by what follows, making it dispensable. As for paragraph 2 ("We live in Brooklyn. A small apartment on the third floor of a brick building. I just turned six; my brother, three."), it's purely informational, providing us with answers to questions yet to be raised by the material—which, so far, has offered us nothing in the way of an experience.

Only with paragraph 3 do we arrive at and enter an actual experience, the scene that each of the two previous paragraphs has been pointing toward: the moment when, as a child, the narrator visits her mother in her sickbed. I would be tempted to begin here, with an experience ("My mother is in bed"), rather than with information ("We live in Brooklyn"). In due time we may learn that the bedroom is in a brick apartment building in Brooklyn, but not before having any reason to care.

But even in putting us into an experience, this opening could be stronger. Take the first experiential sentence: "My mother is in bed." Nothing wrong with it, at first glance. Yet it misses the mark in several ways. Instead of giving us a definitive action through use of a strong verb ("My mother *lies* in bed"), we get a conjugation of the verb "to be," the least active of all verbs—the existential verb: the Camus verb. Our sense of experience is weakened accordingly. But a larger problem here is the sentence's failure to engage point of view. That this mother is lying in bed isn't the point; the point is that the child *sees* her lying there. That's the action of this scene, what's really happening.

That the narrator doesn't position herself (or us) in the scene doesn't help. Is she standing, watching from the doorway, or seated by her mother's bed? As we read on, we learn not only that she is close to her mother (close enough to cuddle with her and smell her lilac scent), but that the father is there in the bedroom with her, something we didn't realize at first because we weren't told—or rather because we weren't *shown* the father standing (sitting?) there through the eyes of the little girl who sees him for us. When dying mother and child cuddle, as we smell the mother's warmth and traces of her lilac perfume, we may wonder why, apart from its intrinsic warmth and sweetness, this moment

comforts us so. I say it's because it invests us deeply, sensuously, and for the first time properly in this scene. Then the author destroys the effect by adding, "[that] I still experience when I think of her," wrenching us out of the moment.

As I read on, other things interfere with my ability to fully inhabit this opening scene. In the fourth paragraph, I am told that the mother's "birth name is Evelyn." Yet it's not at all clear whether this knowledge belongs to the child whose perspective we share in the moment or to the older narrator looking back through memory. That the scene is written in the present tense suggests the former. But what is the likelihood that a six-year-old knows this about her mother's birth name?

From there things move to "a week before [the mother] dies," yet it isn't clear whether this week follows or precedes the previous scene, nor do we know where the present scene of the parents "quietly disagreeing" occurs, in what part of the home, at what time of day. Is the mother still in bed? And where is the narrator who "hears them" disagree? The scene isn't properly grounded; it isn't grounded at all. Because it's not grounded, it exists in an unstable zone between experience and information. When, at the bottom of the same paragraph, we read that the mother "has incurable cancer," there again we are forced to wonder whose experience those words convey. True, some sentences later the child overhears her mother say, "They can't cure me." Yet the words "incurable cancer" are better suited to an awareness on the part of the grown narrator looking back than to a child's awareness *then*.

For our readers to fully inhabit and invest deeply in our scenes, we must first, whether through a created fictional narrator or through our own memories, inhabit them thoroughly ourselves, as Charlotte Brontë does in *Jane Eyre*:

Close by Miss Temple's bed, and half covered with its white curtains, there stood a little crib. I saw the outline of a form under the clothes, but the face was hid by the hangings: the nurse I had spoken to in the garden sat in an easychair asleep; an unsnuffed candle burnt dimly on the table. Miss Temple was not to be seen: I knew afterwards that she had been called to a delirious patient in the fever-room. I advanced; then paused by the crib side: my hand was on the curtain, but I preferred speaking before I withdrew it. I still recoiled at the dread of seeing a corpse.

"Helen!" I whispered softly, "are you awake?"

She stirred herself, put back the curtain, and I saw her face, pale, wasted, but quite composed: she looked so little changed that my fear was instantly dissipated.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

“Can it be you, Jane?” she asked, in her own gentle voice.

“Oh!” I thought, “she is not going to die; they are mistaken: she could not speak and look so calmly if she were.”

I got on to her crib and kissed her: her forehead was cold, and her cheek both cold and thin, and so were her hand and wrist; but she smiled as of old.

“Why are you come here, Jane? It is past eleven o’clock: I heard it strike some minutes since.”

“I came to see you, Helen: I heard you were very ill, and I could not sleep till I had spoken to you.”

“You came to bid me goodbye, then: you are just in time probably.”

“Are you going somewhere, Helen? Are you going home?” “Yes; to my long home—my last home.”

Your Turn

Revise the first page based on any issues you may have with it as well as those I’ve touched on in my critique, with an emphasis on locating the narrator within events at all times. Have us see things clearly, without confusion, from her vantage point.

49. A Surprise Phone Call

(Memoir / Scene vs. Summary / Clutter / “Glance” / Verbs)

The call came at 12:36 pm on April 22nd.

I wondered who would be calling me in the middle of the day. I glanced casually at the caller ID. It was my dad. What in the world was he doing calling me?

“Hello?” I said.

“Hi honey,” Dad said as I picked up the phone. “Have you been keeping up with Allen’s Facebook posts?”

Allen was my brother-in-law and my sister Leah’s husband.

“No,” I said. “But I saw Ashley’s.”

I had just logged in a few minutes ago and she had said something about becoming an aunt. Since she and my brother Tyler had only recently been married and I didn’t know much about her family, I thought at first that it might be a birth on her other side. My sister Leah wasn’t due to have Clara Elizabeth for another month.

Or so I thought.

“Well, you’re an aunt,” he said. “Clara Beth came early. She and Leah are both fine. Your mom is doing everything she can to find a sub so she can go out there.” My mother was a kindergarten teacher. Finding substitutes was a necessary part of the job when one had to be absent.

“That’s wonderful!” I was thrilled that the long wait for the little one was over and that Clara had arrived safe and sound.

“Well, Allen’s beeping in,” my dad said. “Better take this. We’ll talk later. Bye hon.”

I hung up and posted my joyous news on Facebook and on my LiveJournal account. I was so excited to be an aunt! My sister had had her baby and everything had come out fine. What more could I want?

I settled back at my laptop, content to read responses to my wonderful news.

Within ten minutes of my niece’s birth, though, another feeling overtook me, one I’d been battling furiously through the whole of Leah’s pregnancy.

Jealousy.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

An intense wave of emotion slammed into me like a tidal wave dragging me under the undertow.

Analysis

When should we dramatize things? And when is it better to summarize, or state, them? That's one question raised by this opening.

On learning that her sister has given birth, a woman is overcome with envy. That's the gist of this first page. Unlike so many openings whose authors err on the side of abstractions, here the effort that has gone into dramatizing this moment in the narrator's life feels misguided. A direct statement could do the trick more efficiently and effectively:

When I learned that my sister had given birth, at first I was happy. It took about ten minutes for my happiness to turn to envy.

Beyond what's accomplished by the sentence above, what does the rest of the first page achieve?

It doesn't help that we don't know where the phone call is being received. At home? At a place of business? In a car? The moment isn't properly grounded. What follows is cluttered and confusing. We slog through a procession of proper names and relationships—father, siblings, in-laws, adding up to a grand total of seven characters (including the narrator) for us readers to process within half a page: a headcount to make fans of Tolstoy dizzy. Most of these characters have little if any bearing on the present scene; nor does it matter much that the news has been posted on Facebook, since the narrator learns it by phone from her father. That the narrator's mother is a schoolteacher is beside the point. Even if it weren't, do we really need to be told here that finding substitutes is “a necessary part of [her] job”? Is it relevant to the moment?

“Show, don't tell,” we're told. But there are times when telling may be just as good or better. The point of fleshing out a dramatic scene or moment (as opposed to summarizing it in a sentence or a paragraph) should be not merely to convey *what* happened, but the particulars of *how* it happened in a way that's visceral and active, in a word: *dramatic*. Those experiential particulars—actions, atmosphere, setting, gestures, body language and facial expressions, a character's thoughts and perceptions as he or she undergoes an event ... put us inside that experience in a way mere summary can't, allowing us to not only *experience* an event, but to interpret it for ourselves.

As dramatic scenes go, telephone conversations offer little in the way of action and few sensory particulars. Though the dramatized scene here makes clear *what* happened, in terms of telling details it doesn't get us very far. The result feels predictable, perfunctory, even. It gives us a detailed outline of the experience as information carried by dialogue.

Which may explain why, with that very last sentence, the author has felt compelled to state the character's emotional response by way of a bold, if somewhat forced, metaphor. Had the scene been properly dramatized, we would know—anyway we would have a strong sense of—how the character feels without being so clumsily told.

A nitpicky side note: Why I'm not sure, but for some reason authors, experienced and beginners alike, can't seem resist using the word "glance" in place of "look," though the words have different meanings. To "glance" at something is to look at it fleetingly, out of impatience or carelessness, or to avoid embarrassment. Here the word is used redundantly and inadvertently: redundantly thanks to that "carelessly," and inadvertently since it must have taken a moment or two for the fact that the number on her caller ID was her father's to register with the narrator. What's suggested then isn't a "glance," casual or otherwise, but something closer to staring in perplexity or astonishment. "Looked" is more accurate. Or "gazed."

Why do so many authors favor "glance" to "look"? Could it be the mistaken notion that a humble verb like "to look" lacks the literary panache of "to glance" or "to gaze"? But the right word to use when writing is always exactly the right word, whether it's humble or not. "Glance" is notoriously overused by writers. So is "placed." "Spied" and "spotted" (as a verb) are also overused. (I'm not sure "spotted" should ever be used except to describe Dalmatians or chicken pox.)

Your Turn

Take a first page that you or a colleague has written and boil it down to a single paragraph or sentence. Do the same for two more first pages. Is the result an improvement on the original?

50. A Rude Awakening

(Memoir / Relationship / Judgments / Righteous Indignation)

When I broke up with Roy he didn't take it well, but I was too preoccupied with myself to notice. All I knew was I could finally breathe. Being in a committed romantic relationship with him had been, to put it plainly, suffocating. I wasted no time celebrating, drinking with my other friends seven days a week.

Though we broke up, Roy and I kept living together. The lease on our New York apartment didn't expire until September, and neither of us could afford to surrender the deposit or, for that matter, live on our own. Our deal was that I covered all of the utilities and groceries and Roy paid the rent. But in June he quit his job—or he got fired, I'm not entirely sure. The next thing I knew, four hundred dollars were missing from my checking account. When questioned about it Roy admitted he'd forged my signature on a check to pay the rent. He assured me that I'd given him my permission to do so. *I had?* Pressed for details he couldn't supply any. Maybe I'd been half-asleep? he speculated. "I mean, your mind does tend to wander," he said. I wanted to believe him. I really did.

When summer ended we both concluded we'd had enough of New York City, and decided to head west to LA. We'd share a rental car. It was one of the dumbest decisions I'd ever made. Nine days of just Roy. The excitement of the road trip faded by Day 2. The ubiquitous cornfields. The decaying farms. The *déjà vu* of the desert landscape.

Roy's absentmindedness at the wheel didn't help.

"We *missed* the exit," I announced miles after the fact. Before drifting off I'd told him exactly when the exit was and how far we were from it. He *should* have paid attention. Was he that incapable? We had just driven two hundred miles of desert highway. The next exit wasn't for another twenty miles. We'd probably get stranded on a side road searching for gas and be murdered by a psychopath who liked wearing other people's faces. We were going to die and it was all Roy's fault.

Analysis

I've spoken of the risk of autobiographical clutter in memoir, and also of the memoirist's need to restrict thematic focus to prevent memoir from becoming autobiography.

The other great risk faced by memoirists is that of being—or appearing to be—self-serving or judgmental, or worse: bent on retaliation. Though incidentally they may occasionally serve that function, memoirs are not the place to settle scores or exercise grudges. Any sense that an author is out to do so is at best likely to arouse humor, as in the example above; at worst, it will backfire, implicating its author as much or more than it implicates its object.

In fiction or nonfiction (no less so than the novelist, the memoirist creates his or her characters), we can't assume that, simply because their counterparts happen to exist in real life, we don't have to work at creating our characters, that they will emerge full-blown, magically, on the page. When creating them, it's best not to judge them, or worse, to condemn them. The best attitude for an author to take toward her characters, fictional or otherwise, is one of curiosity and open-mindedness. In the case of a character whose actions are unquestionably evil, perverse, or incomprehensible, then the attitude will probably be closer to curiosity.

This is no less so even in those cases where, ultimately, we want our readers to hate or condemn a character. There's a world of difference between letting our readers detest a character and doing it for them. If we do it for them, or try to, we prevent them from forming their own judgments. The better approach is to at the very least appear to be open-minded and non-judgmental while supplying damning evidence.

Another example: A memoirist writes about her abusive father. The man was a religious hypocrite and a drunken womanizer. Fine. Let her tell us all about him, not with an obvious intent to pillory or judge him, but with an intent to see and understand things as clearly as possible.

Show behavior; provide evidence. But do not judge or rant or rage or pillory or preach.

Or do any or all of those things, but realize you're doing so, and that, while they're forming opinions about your characters, your readers will also judge your narrator. In the case of a memoir, that narrator occupies a space perilously close to the author's.

The lens of self-righteous indignation isn't always the best instrument through which to view the world clearly. Whether or not it is fair, a self-righteously judgmental narrator is likely to be seen as ... self-righteously judgmental.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Your Turn

Revise this first page removing all traces of judgment and condemnation, replacing them, when possible, with an effort on behalf of the narrator to understand, or simple curiosity. How is the result different? How has your view of both characters shifted, if at all?

51. The Year of 14 Jobs

(Memoir / Implication vs. Statement / Abstract vs. Concrete)

*"The purpose of poetry is to remind us how
difficult it is to remain just one person."*

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

When I was 16 years old, no one told me I was supposed to desire only one thing. I had multiple desires, like most girls my age, mostly about what it might mean to put childish things away and start a process to find out what life was all about. This memoir, about my life and the lives of my friends in 1969, doesn't travel down one path, but goes down many, 14 to be exact, that helped me begin to discover what made the world tick and where my place in it might be.

Some wild women may have 14 lovers in a year. More introspective types may read 14 books or see 14 movies annually. Some fun-loving women might purchase 14 swimming suits (my friend Dottie owned 18), swim in 14 different swimming pools, or scream through 14 roller coaster rides. In 1969, I held a total of 14 different part-time jobs over the course of the year.

I was a high school student on the far northwest side of Chicago, had a social life, somehow got my homework done, but seemingly also liked to sample and be a part of Chicago's renowned identity: The City That Works. If you asked me, at least when I was 16, I'd say I was neither necessarily a wild, introspective nor crazily fun-loving type of woman. I'd probably claim to be all of the above. But one thing's for sure: I was a Chicago-type of woman. And because I liked having some cash in my pocket that meant I liked being on the job, even if I didn't keep jobs for long.

My part-time jobs, like my romantic relationships at the time, lasted anywhere from one day (and I don't mean a one-night stand) to a few months. I wasn't like some of the other girls I knew at school, who worked at the local drug store part time until they graduated, then married their high school sweetheart. I, like many other teenagers, didn't know what I wanted, but was interested in finding out.

It was a year of extremely low unemployment. The economy was good and jobs were ubiquitous. At times, it seems I went

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

through them like tissue paper. The year 1969 was dedicated to, among other things, “the dawning of the age of Aquarius.” At least that’s what the song said. According to a Chicago radio station, more than 40 years later, 1969 was the “Feel-Good Year of the Century.” Of course, they meant the twentieth century. I’m not sure if the twenty-first century has a feel-good year yet.

Analysis

One of the hallmarks of good writing is its power to suggest. This is true not only for poetry and fiction, but for works of nonfiction, too, for essays and memoirs, even sometimes for journalism. Conclusive statements may or may not always convince us. But when authors provide readers with the raw, visceral evidence from which such conclusions can be drawn, allowing us to reach them on our own, then the conclusions are much harder to argue with. In that case, the only person we have to argue with is ourselves.

In this opening passage from a memoir in progress about a year in a woman’s life, everything is stated, and little if anything is implied. We are told, among other things, that during the course of that year she held fourteen jobs:

Some wild women may have 14 lovers in a year. More introspective types may read 14 books or see 14 movies annually. Some fun-loving women might purchase 14 swimming suits (my friend Dottie owned 18), swim in 14 different swimming pools, or scream through 14 roller coaster rides. In 1969, I held a total of 14 different part-time jobs....

The last sentence here (“In 1969, I held a total of 14 different part-time jobs”) states the memoir’s central subject, one that the passage as a whole puts into perspective, or tries to, with its series of variously obsessed women. At the same time the passage highlights the uniqueness of its subject: *how many people do you know, male or female, who in the course of one year have held fourteen different jobs?* On the whole, the paragraph is well written. It has the cumulative power of many parallel constructions (“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”). And it offers us something irresistible: an eccentric, struggling heroine.

Yet somehow the passage, and the opening as a whole, fails to engage. The author seems less intent on dramatizing her material than on arguing for it, telling us not just what she has to offer, but *why* we should care. *Because in*

a year other people may have fourteen lovers or fourteen books or fourteen bathing suits. But other people don't have fourteen jobs. This claim may or may not be true. Even if true, do jobs compare with lovers—or books, or bathing suits? Even accepting the logic of the claim, whether that claim justifies a memoir remains to be seen.

Analogies aren't the point. The point is, or should be, that *in a given year a young woman held fourteen jobs.*

That point, or something like it, provided Charles Bukowski with the subject of *Factotum*, his second novel one that certainly reads as autobiographical. It follows Bukowski's alter-ego, Henry Chinaski, from one dreary, degrading, menial job to the next after he has been rated 4-F by the armed services and thereby exempted from serving in World War II. The novel consists of 87 brief passages or chapters, each devoted to one such crappy job. The first passage begins:

I arrived in New Orleans in the rain at 5 o'clock in the morning. I sat around in the station for a while but the people depressed me so I took my suitcase and went out in the rain and began walking. I didn't know where the rooming houses were, where the poor section was.

I had a cardboard suitcase that was falling apart. It had once been black but the black coating had peeled off and yellow cardboard was exposed. I had tried to solve that by putting black shoepolish over the exposed cardboard. As I walked along in the rain the shoepolish on the suitcase ran and unwittingly I rubbed black streaks on both legs of my pants as I switched the suitcase from hand to hand.

So begins Bukowski/Chinaski's descent into the underworld of unemployment, with him cast to the very lowest circle, that of the *unemployable*. Note how in opening his novel Bukowski states nothing. He doesn't announce his intended theme, let alone make a case for it. Nor is there any intent to force perspective on us before we've been presented with any matter (scenes, events, experiences) to put into perspective. Instead, what we get is the matter itself: a down-at-the-heels guy in search of a rooming house in the rain, whose search will soon turn to one for gainful employment. Meanwhile his luck, like the black shoe polish on his suitcase, drains into the gutter.

My suggestion to the author of this memoir is that she begin similarly, with concrete matter rather than with abstract statements. In time we will learn that her fourteen jobs "lasted anywhere from one day ... to a few months," as we will learn that the memoirist "wasn't like some of the other girls [she]

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

knew at school who worked at the local drugstore.” Such facts are best learned through experience. And the proper goal of the memoirist, no less than that of the novelist, isn’t to present information, but to render experience.

Your Turn

Draft a first page of a memoir or personal essay about a work experience in which you describe your first day on a job.

52. The Road Train

(Memoir / Travel / Flashback / False Suspense vs. Generosity)

The road train floated towards us above a hot blue lake across the road—a dead straight road away to the horizon. The monster was wavering across the water and I couldn't decide whether it was really swaying or just the mirage trembling. It looked exactly like a boat with a cresting bow wave ahead of it.

We'd left early that morning, and perhaps by then I was a bit mesmerized by the road because I had a delusion that we were sitting still while a tunnel of bush streamed past us.

It was looming—closer and closer—its second trailer swinging over the double white line. There was a small white shape in front of it. The truck was frustrated, trying to find a clear section long enough to pass a caravan lolling along well below the speed limit. It had its overtaking indicators on. It couldn't pass—surely it'd seen us. I braced myself for the collision—the smashing, shrieking, grinding impact of a sideswipe. Its shock wave buffeted me, and then it pulled out to pass behind.

The fright jolted elusive memories. Tormenting images from a film out of focus. The smell of burning oil. Someone screaming: *get us out, get us out*. Hot metal ticking. Simon's face, greying, blood oozing from his ear. Rhythmic blue lights and sirens bouncing off buildings through the towns. And the next day, when Langston told me Simon had died, my disbelief that I had no memory of the last twenty-four hours and how the crash had happened.

A year later—and I was traveling east on the same road. Setting my mind to the four-thousand-kilometer drive across Australia. I'd heard people say they could do it in forty hours or so, but this wasn't a speed trial—I just had to complete the crossing. I'd made the decision to leave Perth, move to Sydney. The removalist's doors had closed on our things, I'd packed Alice, our bags and the last bits into the car and now I felt that I had finally reached a point of no return.

Analysis

Though the term is more familiar in Australia, a road train (or “land train”) is a truck pulling two or more trailers in tandem. In this effective opening, the

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

road train becomes a source of anxiety and terror looming on the wavering horizon, “float[ing] towards us above a hot blue lake across the road”—like one of those B-movie monsters from the 1950s, *The Blob* or *Empire of the Ants*. No longer simply a conveyance transporting innocent merchandise from point A to point B, here the road train becomes Yeats’s vast image “arising out of the desert sand ... moving its slow thighs ... slouch[ing] toward Bethlehem to be born.” The narrator finds it scary and so do we.

In fact, the truck is only a truck—but still a source of fear and anxiety as it bears down on the protagonist in her car “like a boat with a cresting bow wave ahead of it.” We are in Australia, somewhere in the Outback, presumably. As one of the road train’s trailers swings over the double white line, the narrator braces herself for the inevitable collision, for “the smashing, shrieking, grinding impact of a sideswipe”—which, of course, doesn’t come.

Instead of being smashed to death, the narrator is jolted into the past, into a memory of another violent disaster. Evocations of fire, screaming, hot metal ticking, “blood oozing,” of sirens wailing and emergency lights flashing off of buildings. The memory is vague yet vivid. We learn that someone very close to the narrator—Simon, possibly the narrator’s husband—died in “the crash.”

Then the flashback ends and we return to that wavering stretch of highway—the same road, apparently, where Simon met his fate a year earlier. She is traveling from Perth to Sydney, a distance of over 4,000 kilometers, or over forty hours, traveling “with Alice [her daughter?], [her] bags, and the last bits [of her life] in her car.” The rest of her belongings are in the hands of “the removalist,” the Australian term for a moving contractor.

A successful opening depends almost entirely on the ratio of information provided versus questions raised. Provide too much information, and you mitigate suspense; provide too little, and you cross the line from suspense to confusion and frustration.

Beginning authors tend to err on the side of confusion/frustration. They withhold too much information, making it hard or impossible for readers to follow—let alone to appreciate—what’s happening. They trade in *false suspense*: suspense that asks not “What’s going to happen?” but “What am I reading?”

More experienced and confident writers tend toward generosity rather than stinginess. They aren’t afraid to make things clear, to give us all or most of the information we need to understand what’s happening in any moment or scene, making it easier for us to wonder—based on what we already know—where things are going, what’s going to happen next.

F. MEMOIR

Generosity takes confidence: you have to believe that you have a good story to tell, and that the more you give, the more readers will want. If beginning writers often play hard to get, it's because they aren't so sure.

With this opening the writer achieves a good balance of information vs. suspense. Though little is spelled out, much is conveyed. A mother whose life has been shattered by tragedy, hoping to leave that tragedy behind and begin a new life, travels along a desolate stretch of desert highway. Will she make it? The road itself becomes a hazard, a portent, a metaphor for the journey that has just begun—and which, with its wavering mirages and hazards, is bound to be treacherous. This is a strong opening.

Your Turn

Draft or revise a first-person opening (fiction or nonfiction) scene in which, while traveling from Point A to Point B, the narrator recalls some event or moment from the past. The memory should be motivated by something in the present scene. Note: the purpose of the present journey, and/or its destination, should be indicated. Try to write the scene such that we are grounded in both the present journey and in event(s) of the past.

53. The Substance Abuser's Wife

*(Memoir / War / Drug Addiction / Cliché
at the Root of Conception)*

Once I lived in a war zone. In Sarajevo, I met a man and married him. He should still be here to share memories, reveling in how precious peace is, but that is not what happened. I am in a pretty Connecticut suburb without him. Years have passed. I continue to search for answers, remembering the beginning and the end. I write.

Sometimes I wished Ian were a drunk instead of a coke addict. Unbearable as that would still be, at least I might smell the substance destroying us and have bottles to brandish accusingly. Evidence is elusive with cocaine, but I looked anyway, hoping and dreading I'd find proof. While he slept leaden in bed, I went through the house and his clothes foraging for drugs.

One night, grabbing his jeans from the floor, I took them into the bathroom. The pockets were empty but for bits of brown tobacco from the stubs of cigarettes he smoked all day. Opening his slim brown wallet, I flipped through the contents—a collection of business cards, his driver's license and a few dollars. Nothing else. No credit or debit cards since both the banks and I cut him off over a year ago. Lightly licking the edges of the hard paper and plastic in search of the bitter taste of coke, I sat on the edge of the bathtub, Ian's jeans in front of me.

The bathroom door slowly opened. Frozen, expecting to see Ian's angry face, instead, there was only space. Looking down, I saw the mass of grey fur of our Cairn terrier and let out a sigh of relief. Tetley toddled over and flipped onto his back, tail wagging. Ashamed, I shoved the cards back in Ian's wallet and carefully returned it to the same pocket. "Good boy," I whispered, scratched his belly then crept back to the bedroom and dropped the jeans where I'd found them before crawling into bed, shivering. The dog jumped up after me and I pulled him close for warmth and comfort. An acrid taste lingered on my tongue, probably just from the plastic lamination. But then why did the bed quake from the force of Ian's leg tremors?

Analysis

In choosing her subject, it's not a bad idea for the memoirist to imagine that many others in her audience have undergone the same or a similar experience, and write with that in mind. Any assumption to the contrary may prove disastrous.

Here, the subject is living with a substance abuser. The substance is cocaine. Assuming no shortage of coke addicts in the world, one may also assume as many abused significant others to go with them. There are even organizations (Al-Anon, Cocaine Anonymous) devoted to helping them. And though not all spouses, lovers, and other co-victims of substance abuse have written or intend to write memoirs, more than a few have already done so.

There've been very good books about drug addiction, both from the point of view of the abuser and from that of someone emotionally attached to him or her. Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book* plunges us into the mind—and the philosophy—of a heroin junkie living on a gravel scow in New York harbor. Presented to us as a novel in the form of a journal, it begins:

My scow is tied up in the canal at Flushing, NY, alongside the landing stage of the Mac Asphalt and Construction Corporation. It is now just after five in the afternoon. Today at this time it is still afternoon, and the sun, striking the cinderblocks of the main building of the works, has turned them pink. The motor cranes and the decks of the other scows tied up round about are deserted.

Half an hour ago I gave myself a fix.

There have been drug-centric novels and memoirs going all the way back to Thomas De Quincey, whose *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) is the first and most famous. *Novel with Cocaine* (1934) by M. Ageyev, set in Moscow on the eve of the Russian revolution, does for that time and place roughly what Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) did for Manhattan and cocaine in the late 1980s. As for narratives about or by people living with abusive family members, there've been no shortage of those, either. Jeanette Walls's earlier-mentioned *The Glass Castle*, her chronicle of growing up with an eccentric mother and alcoholic father, is a recent example. So is Nick Flynn's *Bullshit Night in Suck City*.

Right from the start, each of the books I've mentioned offers to us something above and beyond substance abuse or its direct or collateral consequences. Trocchi gives us the atmosphere of the New York waterfront, with its deserted motor cranes and sun-spackled cinderblocks, while Walls juxtaposes, to

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

heartbreaking effect, party-going yuppie daughter with dumpster-diving Mom and Flynn's fragmentary style effectively renders the workings of a drunkard's mind.

Which leads to the next good question for the memoirist to ask herself: *What can I bring to my familiar subject that no one has brought to it before? How will it be different not only in its particulars, but essentially, so readers won't have read anything quite like it?*

The first page under discussion here calls no attention to its style, nor does it break any formal ground. And yet by means of her italicized opening paragraph the author does answer, or tries to, the question: *what can I bring to my familiar subject that no one has brought to it before?* She does so by front-loading her story with a nod to the recent Bosnian war, where, one reading suggests, she met her future, coke-snorting husband. Like many an italicized opening, this one is meant to grab our attention, and does. But it's the war in Sarajevo that grabs it, not the husband or cocaine abuse, and the scene in Roman type that follows (and that is itself a teaser—the author plunging us *in media res* into the ostensible heart of her story) comes as a letdown. We start with a Balkan war, and end up—or rather begin again—sitting on a stateside toilet rifling a man's wallet, one that, incidentally, has nothing special in or about it.

By trying to do too many things at once, this opening loses—or never achieves—focus. It lacks an organizing principle to unite its disparate themes (civil war, spousal addiction). The word “survival” might hold the key, might be the hinge holding these parts together.

I survived a war in Sarajevo only to face another disaster in Connecticut.

That sentence, or one like it, that juxtaposes and unites the memoir's two primary themes without getting into too much nitty-gritty (Sarajevo, cocaine addiction), could serve as the portal through which we enter the story. From there, in a separate paragraph, we might accompany the narrator as she sneaks into the bathroom and combs frantically through the contents of her snoring husband's jeans. What is she searching for? Ah—evidence of cocaine snorting! But what of that “war” mentioned in the first sentence? We'll find out in due time.

For now, my focus is on a wife who suspects her husband of drug abuse.

Your Turn

Revise this opening based on my suggestions and/or your own.

54. An Addict's Perspective on Addiction

(Memoir / Addiction / Reflection / Unreliable Narrator)

CHAPTER 1: XANAX 2011

“KEVIN!”

My husband, Kevin had never denied me anything. And Sunday October 9th, 2011 was no different. Six months earlier, he had given me his kidney. That morning, all I needed were my pills.

All 97 pounds of me quivered in bed with one objective. Kevin has to pick up my Xanax. I could hear him walking in and out of the house, packing up our one car with his tripod, lights, and zipping up the pockets of his camera bag. He had to be in Orange County by noon to work a wedding. Plenty of time to get my pills, come home, and go to work. Dragging my shaking hands through my hair, I glanced at the alarm clock. 10:07 am. Why was he dawdling? Why was he not at Rite Aid by 9:59 am as the pharmacy's steel door rolled up offering its medicinal charms to the world? He was such an ass.

I was not sick, but dopesick. A bag of bones wracked no longer with the nausea associated with renal failure, but straight up addiction. My legs twitched under the sheets, knowing my prescription was ready and waiting. I rubbed at my eyes with agitated fingers, aimless fingers that had no purpose unless they were plucking pills from the bottom of their plastic home.

Kevin and I had gone to the pharmacy the day before. I had been told it was “too soon” to pick up my prescription—the dreaded phrase sinks the hungry heart of every pharmaceutical whore. I had thrown myself across the counter angling my scrawny frame towards the pharmacist. Trying to explain why it would be just fine to give. me. my. pills.

Analysis

Writing about addiction is tricky. While most stories have a single protagonist, addiction narratives are usually about two people: the addict deep in the throes of their addiction, and the recovered narrator looking back objectively

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

on the experience. In that sense, addiction narratives have split personalities, offering two perspectives—one reliable, one unreliable—opposing and informing each other. How those two perspectives are apportioned determines the nature of the result.

From its capitalized one-word opener (“KEVIN!”), this first page of a memoir about a woman’s addiction to Xanax put us firmly in the mind of an addict so obsessed with her next fix (“my pills”) she can think of nothing else. Owing strictly to his failure to drive to the local Rite Aid “by 9:59 am, as the pharmacy’s steel door roll[s] up offering its medicinal charms,” the same husband she shouts for—the one who, six months earlier, “gave [her] his kidney”—is now “an ass.”

Does the narrator see the irony and injustice in this? If so, she doesn’t let on, not to us readers. She is—at best—unreliable.

Though this opening puts us in unreliable territory, it does so retrospectively, in the past tense, with its narrator looking back across so many years. Hindsight usually gives us *some* perspective on events. For this reason we expect a past-tense narrator to not merely tell us a story, but to shed some light on it.

If, on the other hand, the author’s purpose is to describe addiction subjectively, from within the experience, the present tense would be more fitting. With the present tense, we’re locked with the narrator into the moment, able to see only as far and as clearly as she sees, with as little objectivity, and no reflection. That’s the technique James Frey uses to launch his controversial (published as nonfiction but subsequently exposed as largely fictional) addiction memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003):

I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin. I lift my hand to feel my face. My front four teeth are gone, I have a hole in my cheek, my nose is broken and my eyes are swollen nearly shut. I open them and I look around and I’m in the back of a plane and there’s no one near me. I look at my clothes and my clothes are covered with a colorful mixture of spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood. I reach for the call button and I find it and I push it and I wait and thirty seconds later an attendant arrives.

How far we’ve come from the diffident opening of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*:

I here present you, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period in my life: according to my application of it, I trust that it will

prove not merely an interesting record, but in a considerable degree useful and instructive. In *that* hope it is that I have drawn it up; and *that* must be my apology for breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities.

Which isn't to say that the past tense can't convey an addicted psyche. In *Pill Head*, his 2009 memoir of addiction to prescription painkillers, Joshua Lyon uses it to superb effect:

I was feeling no pain.

I cared about nothing but this.

It wasn't just an absence of pain. It was warm waves pulsating through my muscle and skin. Breathing was hard, my chest felt weighted down by my own ribcage but I didn't panic because it's impossible to feel anxiety about anything when every inch of your body is having a constant low-grade orgasm.

I don't know how long I lay there on my bed, watching the blades of my ceiling fan slowly turn, lazily spinning tufts of dust before they floated down through the air around me like so much gray snow. Through half-lidded eyes I watched Ollie, my cat, go ape-shit chasing the dust puffs, and it took every ounce of strength to turn my head toward the other side of the bed....

While it painstakingly recreates his experience ("warm waves pulsating through my muscles and skin"), this opening also objectively *reflects on* the narrator's experience ("I cared about nothing but this"). We're aware of his wish to describe that experience as precisely as possible—down to admitting when he can't be precise ("I don't know how long I lay there ..."). Here the presence of what Phillip Lopate calls "the intelligent narrator"—the narrator who has not only lived to tell his tale, but to tell it accurately—is everywhere in evidence.¹¹

With the first page in question, on the other hand, we wonder how much we should trust the narrator, or if we can trust her at all. She doesn't lie. But though she is looking back at her experiences over time, she offers no perspective, no reflection, nothing to suggest a survivor's hard-won grasp of her experiences. Unless leavened by the sort of insights that only come with reflection,

11 Phillip Lopate, "Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story" in *The Fourth Genre* (2005).

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

memories and memoirs boil down to anecdote. We get experiences vividly rendered—but, with no perspective to go with them, aside from the vicarious thrills, why should we care? A memoir with no reflection is sex without love, wine without the glass.

Maybe the reflections come later, on the next page. But why not have the intelligent narrator there from the start?—that or lock us into her addictive psyche in a present tense prologue, one that raises the two most pertinent questions: 1) *How did the narrator get here?* and 2) *How will she get out?* Then, switching to the reflective past tense, answer them. Either strategy beats having the narrator looking back on the past without perspective.

This well-written first page also suffers from impatience, with the author trying to do too much at once. It can be whittled down.

Here, whittled, as present tense prologue (minus the hectoring **ALL-CAPS**):

“Kevin!”

Six months ago my husband gave me his left kidney. This morning all I want are my pills.

“Kevin!” all ninety-seven pounds of me shouts from my bed.

Footsteps pad across the kitchen, a screen door slams. I hear the Honda trunk open, zippers zipping, picture Kevin packing his camera, tripod and lights. My bones twitch under the sheets. My hands shake. My aimless fingers quiver as they pluck absent pills from the bottom of an empty plastic vial. I look at my dresser clock. 10:07. My Xanax is ready and waiting at Rite Aid. Why the hell is he dawdling?

“Kevin!”

More foot treads, more zippers, more doors slamming....

I think: *you are such an ass.*

Your Turn

Introduce some reflection into a first-person, nonfiction opening you have written, a moment or moments in which your narrator comments retrospectively, from their present vantage point, on the event or events of the past that are being related. Such reflections might begin with the words *Though I didn't know it then* or *Looking back, I wonder....* The great advantage of reflections is that they allow your narrator to understand and describe events more clearly and objectively than they could possibly have seen them while in the midst of them.

55. Clinic Caper

(Memoir / Humor / Story vs. Anecdote)

The nurse ushered Jim and me into the treatment room at the far end of the clinic's hallway. Not often are a husband and wife seen by a doctor in the same room, but the few skin issues we have, and at the age of sixty-six and forty-one years of marital bliss, gave us no reason to occupy separate rooms.

Fifteen minutes overdue, and with the room turning stuffy, Jim opened the door for a little air circulation. He sat in one of the upholstered chairs against the wall, while I occupied the one in the center of the room—the one that resembles a dental chair, feet up, lean back.

Jim noticed a button that could raise and lower the chair electronically, and, just like a man, wondered what would happen if he pushed it.

He pushed it. The chair dropped with a jolt—me with it.

I said, “Leave it alone. We’ll have it all screwed up and the doctor’ll walk in wondering what in the heck we’re messin’ with her equipment for.”

Jim sat down in his upholstered chair with that squelched look all over his face, like—“Ah, c’mon, let me just have a little fun here.”

That was all it took. I started giggling then laughing and there was no stopping it. I looked over at Jim, who shrugged and gave me the “no clue” look. This made me laugh harder, one of those uncontrollable belly laughs. An entire cartoon streamed through my imagination. Between gasps, I managed to share my visuals with him: “I can just picture you pressing some button and the chair starts spinning round, faster and faster. At least we have air circulation now. ‘Woo-hoo!’ So you try the button next to it. The chair shoots up. Another button and the chair thuds down, my chin hitting my chest. The last button launches the chair horizontally, blasting me through the stucco wall, leaving a hole the exact shape of me grasping the chair armrests. I imagine hearing the doctor’s voice from somewhere around the corner. What will she say when she sees me in the middle of the hallway, covered with plaster and sheetrock? I say as if nothing is out of the ordinary, ‘Good morning, Dr. Rashid. Just trying to get a little air.’”

Analysis

This scene of marital bliss set in the confines of a dermatologist's examination room feels more like something complete in and of itself than the opening of a longer work. If there's any doubt, the title seals it.

Not that there's anything wrong with telling a story in a page or two. In fact, anyone who can do so earns my admiration. The trick, though, is to tell a story and not just an anecdote.

Anecdote: a short narrative constructed around a unique, curious, often provocative incident, one that typically reveals character through extreme circumstances and almost always with humor as its end. The term comes from the Greek word *anekdota*, meaning "unpublished"—and indeed, most anecdotes are relayed orally and not intended for nor worthy of the printed page except as illustrations serving some larger purpose: evoking, for instance, some facet of a character or characters. Served *à la carte*, anecdotes tend to be as ephemeral as they are amusing. They are garnishes, or appetizers, not the main course.

Though nicely written, the opening scene here feels more anecdotal than it might were the emphasis less on the singular, curious, and provocative event in the clinic, and more on the two principal characters, Jim and his narrating wife. As it stands, I can imagine such a tale being told at a dinner party (a popular venue for anecdotes). The guests, who know this couple well—and who've also had their share of cocktails—are extremely amused, weeping with laughter. Their host is on a roll. When she gets to the part about the dermatologist's fiendish chair launching her through the stucco wall, I see them all doing spit takes with their wine into their Roquefort pear salads.

But literature isn't a dinner party, and the "dinner guests" (unfamiliar readers) need something more than cocktails to satisfy their appetites. They need context, some sense of who these people are when *not* goofing around at the dermatological clinic. That sense, the little of it that we get, is tucked into one sentence in the opening paragraph ("at the age of sixty-six and forty-one years of marital bliss, we saw no reason to occupy separate rooms"). We're told that they're an older, happily married couple, a statement the rest of the scene goes on to confirm. It does so charmingly, and with considerable skill. It meets our expectations, but nothing more. It neither suggests nor reveals anything more or less about who these people are or why we should care about them enough to keep on reading.

And since the scene merely confirms what we've already been told—without a hint of irony or paradox or a shadow of doubt—I'm left unsatisfied. Again, at a dinner party I would be content to know that my hostess and her husband

are lovely, happily married people. Sure, it's not the whole story; in fact it may well be a total illusion. And yet what are dinner parties for, if not to parade ourselves in front of our guests in our favorite masks?

If literature serves any purpose at all, it's to tear those masks off or let us peek through or behind them and glimpse the genuine lives underneath. Here, with this opening, I'm shown only the mask: a bright, smiling, charming mask.

Supposing the shenanigans in the examination room were underscored by something serious? Supposing this routine visit to the dermatologist turned out to be anything but routine? Supposing "everything" was not "all right," that the small blotchy growth on his shoulder turned out to be a stage-three melanoma. Then this opening of a memoir would be revelatory of a devoted wife's courageous humor in the face of tragedy, and not a mere anecdote. Perhaps a revelation like that is coming. In that case, I think it should be telegraphed, possibly in the first sentence.

Does the underlying event or matter need to be as grim as cancer? No, but it should carry us beyond the anecdotal.

Your Turn

To the top of this lighthearted opening add a sentence that points to something serious. How does that addition change everything that follows?

56. Leaving Jumana

(Memoir / Framing Questions Effectively)

I left the island of Jumana under a cloud, deported for an undisclosed crime. As my daughter and I boarded the plane, I turned for a last glimpse of palm trees backlit by the setting sun and a pale horizon of sand framed by a turquoise sea. My hand trembled as I gripped the railing to steady myself.

“Go ahead, Sunny,” I said with a gentle nudge. She stepped into the plane.

I followed, bumping my wheelie suitcase up the last metal tread. Arab and Asian families and businessmen with attaché cases blocked the aisle, but moved ahead all at once. I put our bags in the overhead compartment. We took our seats, and Sunny huddled against me.

As we buckled our seatbelts, a voice in my head kept repeating why? why? I shifted in my cramped economy class seat that was ill-suited for a six-foot-tall woman with long legs.

At least the flight to Dubai would be brief, since Jumana was only thirty kilometers off the south coast of the Arabian Gulf. It was a flight we had taken many times on excursions to Dubai, but this trip was different. My thoughts kept circling around the same obsessive orbit. Caught in the whirl of my mind, details and fragments of things churned like a sand devil spinning across the desert. I leaned over to squeeze Sunny’s hand. “Don’t worry. It’s going to work out.”

“I know, Mom.” She peered at the photo she was clutching of our dog. A friend was taking care of him. Her face clenched up, but she didn’t cry. “When can he come to Dubai?”

“Once we find a place to live, someone will bring him here on the ferry. I promise.”

Sunny nodded, but anguish flickered in her eyes. She was being brave for my sake. What could I say to my ten-year-old daughter, who’d had to pull up stakes abruptly, leaving her friends, her school, and her beloved dog?

I had been given forty-eight hours’ notice to leave the country. No reason why. No explanation why the Women’s College of Jumana University fired me after seven years of teaching. It was a mistake. It

had to be. What could I have done to warrant being branded persona non grata and thrown out of the country like a piece of trash?

Analysis

*“The writer’s task isn’t to answer the question,
but to frame the question correctly.”*

CHEKHOV

Sometimes everything we need for our openings is there, more than we need, in fact. It’s just a matter of cutting and rearranging.

This opening is of a memoir about the experiences of an expatriate professor at a fictional woman’s college located on the island of “Jumana” (a feminine Arabian name meaning “silver pearl”) in the Persian Gulf thirty kilometers from the city of Dubai.

The first page finds the narrator/protagonist boarding a passenger plane with her ten-year-old daughter, having been fired from her job and deported without explanation, raising in readers the same questions the protagonist asks herself, namely, *Why are we being deported? What did I do?* From here the novel is bound to go back in time to tell us this woman’s story.

The strategy being used here is called a *framing device* or a *framed narrative*. What it “frames” or sets up is a long flashback—in this case presumably the length of a novel—one that will answer, or at least partly answer, the question(s) it raises.

The author launches her first page not with an experience, but with information: “I left the island of Jumana under a cloud, deported for an undisclosed crime.” The drawback to this approach is that the information provided answers a question that hasn’t yet been raised in the reader. We read this first sentence with no awareness that the protagonist is boarding a plane, let alone where she’s going, or that she’s been forced to leave against her will. Only halfway down the first page, when the narrator tells her daughter, “Don’t worry. It’s going to work out,” are we given cause to wonder what circumstances have prompted this involuntary voyage.

By answering up front the very question that the scene exists to arouse in us, the author subverts her own purpose. This is not the same as *withholding information* or creating what I call *false suspense*. It’s simply a matter of giving readers the experiences *before* supplying information that explains or categorizes them, rather than afterward.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Otherwise the scene makes too much ado of boarding the plane, of rolling and stowing luggage—mundane actions with which most readers are familiar and that don’t require dramatization. The sooner we get to “Don’t worry, it’s going to work out,” the better.

Here’s my edit, with the crucial dialogue engaged within a few lines. What’s been cut is implied or can wait (we needn’t know, yet, that the narrator has lost her job at the Women’s College of Jumana). In the original opening, the beloved dog’s name is withheld, why I don’t know. I have included it, since withholding it from us seems artificial and adds a note of *false suspense*.

Revised opening:

“Go ahead, Sunny,” I said, nudging my daughter past Arab and Asian families and businessmen with briefcases. We took our economy-class seats (mine ill-suited for a six-foot-tall woman) and fastened our seatbelts. Sunny huddled close. I squeezed her hand.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s going to work out.”

“What about Fido?” she asked.

We had left under a cloud, deported for reasons undisclosed. Through the puddle jumper’s window I caught a glimpse of palm trees backlit by the setting sun and a horizon of pale sand framed by a turquoise sea. My hand trembled. At least the flight would be brief, Jumana being only about thirty kilometers from the coast. It was a flight we’d taken many times.

“When can he come to Dubai with us?”

We’d been given forty-eight hours to leave. No explanation. After seven years. It was a mistake. It had to be. What could I have done? And what could I tell my ten-year-old daughter, who’d had to pull up stakes abruptly, leaving her friends, her school, even her beloved dog?

“Once we find a place to live, Dolores will bring him to us. I promise.”

Sunny’s face clenched. Anguish flickered in her eyes, but she didn’t cry.

This version raises and answers the same pertinent questions, in that order.

Your Turn

How would you revise this opening? Improve on both the original and my version.

57. I'm Not Chinese

(*Memoir / Precision, Authenticity, Humility*)

The first thing you need to know is I'm not Chinese. My name is Raymond Wong, and I stopped being Chinese at the age of five.

Twenty-eight years ago, my mother left my father in Hong Kong to come to America in search of a better life. Don't ask about my trip to the US. I don't remember. I was just a little boy.

What I do know is I'm American. In school, children are cruel to those who are different. Speaking Chinese made me different. I don't speak Chinese anymore.

It's not a big deal. I live in San Diego. My stepfather is named Roger, and he's from Minnesota. My friends speak English.

Speaking Chinese would only make me an outsider, and that's something I've struggled against my whole life. In school, kids used to always ask me what I was. What they really wanted to know was where I came from and if I ate with chopsticks.

My answer—British. True. The British government ruled Hong Kong for over 150 years. My response never failed to bring a puzzled frown, and this gave me great satisfaction.

Still, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fit in—even in my own family. Though I refused to speak Chinese, it didn't bring me closer to the man my mom married when I was six. Roger called me his son, but the words were empty, like a birthday spent alone.

Analysis

Precision, authenticity, clarity, and humility: those are the four qualities that a memoirist—or any writer, for that matter—brings to bear on his or her subject, and this last first page of this memoir opening has all four in great abundance. Look for a trace of pretension: you won't find it. Nor will you find anything obviously or self-consciously “literary,” no clever metaphors or similes, no perfunctory adverbs or grandstanding adjectives or somersaulting sentences. Nothing showy.

Not that writers can or should never show off. But when they put pyrotechnical displays ahead of other concerns—ahead of *precision*, *authenticity*, *clarity*, and *humility*—usually something crucial is lost. That something crucial is the reader's trust.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Writers should serve their stories, not the other way around. We must be their humble servants.

Everything for the story; nothing for the writer.

When I say “for the story,” of course I mean for the reader, too.

Your Turn

Revise an opening page, your own or someone else’s, making the writing as simple, humble, authentic, and precise as possible. Keep sentences short and vocabulary limited.

G. Style

STYLE IS SUBSTANCE. WHEN STYLE AND SUBSTANCE ARE DIVIDED, if one isn't integrated with the other, both suffer or fail. Style can't be added to our writing like salt or pepper to a stew. Ideally, it comes *with* the writing, is part and parcel to that other foundational element of narrative prose: point of view, informing not only how ideas are expressed, but *what* is expressed.

Who we choose to narrate our stories makes all the difference regarding their style; in fact, it determines and guides it. Choose the right narrator, and—assuming that you are equipped with sufficient vocabulary and grammatical skills—style should pretty much take care of itself. What is style, after all, if not a sensibility coupled with diction and syntax?

That said, now and then we authors need to intervene to exercise some restraint on our narrators or help them make certain decisions. For instance, should an event be summarized or rendered fully as a scene? When should we slow a passage down with description—or do the opposite, trim a description that slows things down too much?

When it comes to style, what we mainly bring to bear are our *editorial* skills. The narrator tells the story; we edit. This is especially obvious when it comes to dialogue—which, ideally, is *recorded* rather than written, with our narrators reporting what they hear or have heard. Our job, then, as editors, is to see to it that what's reported is *worth* reporting: that what stays on the page is the filet mignon of the dialogue, not gristle and fat.

Something of the sort pertains to editing in general, only instead of a dialogue between two or more characters, what we're editing is our narrator's *monologue*, trimming and tightening it, strengthening, supervising syntax, diction, and grammar. Editing, in other words, for *style*.

In this section, we'll focus on such things as sentimentality and the distinction between writing *experientially* and *informationally*. We'll also look at the role of modifiers—adjectives and adverbs—and at verbs and figurative language (similes and metaphors). We'll look at how writing engages the senses,

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

and highlight the importance of precision and clarity. We'll look at genericism and cliché and other qualities that add (or subtract) authenticity to writing.

Perhaps most important at all, we'll look at how a piece of writing is enhanced through cutting, by implying things rather than stating them, through saying more with less.

58. A Stormy Opening

(Writing Up a Storm / Poetry vs. Histrionics / Inadvertent Comedy)

On a peninsula of a peninsula in the month of hurricanes, a tropical storm bore a tempest named Michael and a girl named Emma. Pregnant clouds, swollen with sea and rain and fury, dilated with every electrical contraction. Thunder cracked in suffering echoes. Heaven pushed and moaned and cried out in grunting spasms. The tempest's breath labored in panted exertion. In its uncontrollable thrashing, it flung itself wide open, dilating from horizon to horizon. Tender linings of cloud bellies ripped in the delivery of itself into the rough hands of the Atlantic seaboard.

"The first miracle is birth."

The coast locked its doors, boarded its windows, collected drinking water and sought refuge. Bridges tumbled under the fury of the sea's salt licks. Roads drowned in the high-rise waters. Colored with mucous and blood, the storm's water broke in a torrential gushing and splattered the inhabitants' lives with uncertainty. There was no sun in the Sunshine State. For the moment, its perpetual promise of paradise was eclipsed by the fury of cloud dragons. They fed off of the fear and the chaos emitted into the atmosphere through the most basic acts of Darwinism—survival of the fittest. Survival leveled the hierarchy of all the peninsula's living creatures to their most primordial state.

The closer the storm got to the peninsula's most southern tip of shoreline, the greater it swelled in velocity and strength. Just as the winds reached 12 on the Beaufort Scale an unborn infant stopped her downward motion toward the birth canal. She sensed her mother's fear. She clung to the security of her mother's womb. A synapse fired in her brain and she remembered her original nature ... bliss ... wholeness ... belonging ... purpose.... She sensed her mother's fear again. Another synapse fired ... expectancy ... performance ... anticipation ... combustion ... pain ... falling ... separation ... survival ... loss ... fear ... another synapse fired ... safety ... the umbilical cord. So, the infant turned and hid her face. The contractions stopped. But the womb was as elusive as a sandbar in an open sea; one wave shifts the illusion of safety.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

The woman's body took the brunt of the child's indecision. The woman screamed out in an agonizing, guttural bark to release the pain of her next contraction. The pain peaked. Relief. When she realized the contractions had stopped, she spread her legs even wider—beckoning the child in a desperate plea to *come forth!* The infant ebbed into refuge, and the woman's fluids dried up like a receding, low tide. The woman s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d obscenities at the naked hospital walls. She pleaded for relief. She confessed her sins into the empty room, and the walls wept tears. She begged for forgiveness. She cried out in an exhausted whimper, "You must come, my child, or you shall kill us both!"

Analysis

Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected *in tranquility*."¹² If we broaden that definition of poetry to include poetic prose, then expand it further to include all writing that successfully evokes a subjective experience, then—assuming Wordsworth is right—the best condition for good writing isn't feverish intensity, but calm equilibrium.

This flies in the face of the popular cliché: the masterpiece produced in a "white heat," with the author foaming at the mouth while spilling his blood and guts on the page (the visual artist equivalent: Van Gogh as played by Kirk Douglas, gripping his straw hat and licking his brushes in the grip of insanity and the mistral).

For every successful work created under such conditions, there must be thousands of failures. Van Gogh painted despite his madness, not thanks to it. It may not sound very romantic, but most successful art is produced by sane, calm, rational people.

On the first page in question a woman gives birth during a violent storm. The opening itself is a tempest of frenzied, feverish diction. Among adjectives we get swollen, dilated, labored, grunting, uncontrollable, torrential, desperate, exhausted, agonizing, guttural. Verb choices are no less turbulent: cracked, pushed, ripped, moaned, cried, clung, fired, pleaded, begged. Whether this opening was produced in a state of fervor or one of serenity I'm in no position to say, but here an emotional experience is recollected not tranquilly or objectively. It's whipped into a squall.

12 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798. Italics mine.

Not that the writing isn't effective; it is. The prose is so intent on jolting us, reading it is like sticking your finger repeatedly into a live socket, or being pummeled by a boxer. By the fourth paragraph, I found myself gasping on the ropes. So did the writer, apparently, as evidenced by all those sentences spluttering and coughing up ellipses like bullets from a tommy gun.

This sort of breathless prose stuffs the pages of many a bestseller, especially thriller and horror novels (I'm thinking *The Da Vinci Code*). No denying it, heavy breathing sells books. But does it make for good writing?

Am I saying all descriptions—especially those of violent events and emotions—ought to be calm? Heavens, no! Imagine Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" relayed by a calm narrator, or Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*¹³ minus his bile. Calmed down, what would be left of King Lear's famous storm speech in Act III of his play:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanes spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the
 cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires
 Vaunt couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
 Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,
 That make ingrateful man!

Notice, though, the absence of abstract modifiers in this most histrionic of speeches. In place of pat adjectives like "torrential" we get "oak-cleaving thunderbolts" and "thought-executing fires"—compound modifiers formed of solid nouns and kinetic verbs. Rather than imbue his storm with feelings ("Thunder cracked in suffering echoes. Heaven pushed and moaned and cried out in grunting spasms"), Lear puts us right in the thick of his storm; he drenches and drowns and singses us.

Shakespeare and Lear notwithstanding, in works of prose the union of frantic subject with frantic description is often an unhappy one. Rather than complement the thing being described, a frenetic style adds up to overkill—like putting ketchup on gravy. The sensational experience can no longer speak for itself (as does "I was born in the belly of a white elephant during a 30-day dry

13 *Notes from the Underground* (1864).

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Northeaster,” the opening line of Christopher Cook Gilmore’s *Atlantic City Proof*). Instead, the author seethes and shouts.

Another danger posed by pumping up already dramatic events with breathless prose: inadvertent comedy. Benjamin Cheever once explained comedy to me this way: “You take a very tragic event, make it more tragic, then make it even more tragic. Then it’s funny.” He offered the example of a woman in labor driving herself to the hospital at two in the morning. On the way her car gets a flat tire. It’s raining. Still in her nightgown, with her contractions mounting, she jacks up the car only to open her trunk and find the spare tire flat or missing. As she stands by the roadside weeping, a trailer truck roars through a puddle, splattering her with mud. When I relate this scenario to students, before I even get to that truck or the puddle they’re already tittering. My students aren’t sadists. It’s just that the situation is so over the top. They could laugh or cry. They laugh.

Reading *The Da Vinci Code*, I had a similar experience. By the end of the prologue, when the museum director scrawls an encrypted code on his chest with his own dying blood, I laughed—not what Dan Brown intended (though I imagine him laughing, too, all the way to the bank).

Personally, I’d rather have dramatic actions speak for themselves than have an author or his narrator shout them in my face.

Your Turn

Render a violently dramatic event—a car accident, a house fire, a flood, a physical fight, a hurricane, a mugging, a murder—as coolly and clinically as possible. Let the event’s intrinsic drama speak entirely for itself. Then rewrite the same scene, this time injecting as much emotion through language as possible.

59. A Letter from Tehran

*(Sentimentality / Grounding Scene in
Setting / Implication via Action)*

I tear at the envelope, the Farsi script sprawls dotted and curlicued, the edges tattooed with red airmail chevrons. And the four stamps frighten me all over again, images of a woman shrouded in black with large round eyes staring at me, eyebrows arched and sweeping up like a vulture's wings. I feel the helpless anger, the fearful submission imprisoning my brain as if I'd never left Iran.

My dog Skipper nudges my leg as if to say, "Come on. Time to go back." But my worn sneakers sink into the gravel berm and I stare down the highway, a black tar seam cutting through the virgin pine and cedar forests of Wintun Mountain. The spring wind loosens the strands of my grey hair and I pull my checked wool shirt closer around my shoulders. Heart pounding, hands unsteady, I lean against the mailbox and the metal flag falls. How dare they write to me after all these years when nothing in that world can matter to me again, when I have found peace far away from them? I reach inside and remove the sheet of lined copybook paper. My eyes read the Farsi words:

"Dear Madame Gael,

"I pray for your health and God's blessing upon you. This is Sakineh, you remember. I write because Madame the mother of Omid cannot sleep. Saint Reza has come to her many times and told her what she must do before she dies. She is afraid of Allah's hell fires and she must return to you the share of the land that is yours."

I crumple the paper in my fist. Wasn't the old lady dead and buried yet—she must be ninety, but she lives on. Everyone around her is dead. And now she has to pull me into one last game, her cruelty alive after all this time. But I had never been strong against her, and just holding the letter has already ruined my simple life, my weekly drive down to Wintun Mills to cash my pension check, to buy groceries and flowers for the cemetery.

Skipper and I walk down the driveway, back to the old frame house. My father's junkyard is now gone, the old porch rebuilt. I sit outside in the April sun and smooth the letter on my jeans.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

“She must have your forgiveness. An agency is sending the ticket so you can come to Iran and sign the papers and give your forgiveness. When you are coming, write or call. It will be good to see you Madame Gael. You were always good to us.
“Your loyal dear friend, Sakineh.”

Analysis

When analyzing a piece of writing, I find it helpful to try and summarize the action in as few words as possible. Here, accompanied by her dog, a woman (thanks to that “checked wool shirt” for a while I thought she was a man) receives a letter informing her that she must come to Iran to claim her share of a parcel of property that she is to inherit from the soon-do-die mother of a man (Omid) with whom she—the letter’s recipient—had a relationship of some sort years ago.

That’s quite a bit of plot squeezed into one sentence, and even more gets stuffed into the rest of this opening page. It’s an enticing opening, one that promises two stories: one about the events that have led up to this moment (including the mysterious relationship with the mysterious Omid), and one about what will happen from this moment forward, when and if the letter’s recipient makes the journey to Iran.

However well written and enticing, this opening does raise a few concerns, foremost among them being sentimentality: emotions in excess of experience.

We’ve established that the fiction writer’s primary purpose isn’t to convey information, but to create experiences. By way of those experiences, we arouse feelings in our readers. The problem of sentimentality occurs in one of two ways: 1) when the actions of characters are themselves out of proportion with events (e.g., a character vomiting, bursting into tears, or punching the boss in the nose on learning she’s been fired from a job); or 2) when the emotional weight carried by the narrator’s language or tone surpasses our experiences, such that our own emotions lag behind the narrator’s.

This opening confronts us with sentimentality of the second sort. In the first six lines alone we get the following words: tear, sprawls, frighten, shrouded, black, staring, arched, sweeping, vulture’s, helpless, anger, fearful, submission, imprisoning—words that, if not overtly laden with emotional import, are certainly not emotionally neutral. Such language doesn’t merely invite emotions; it demands them by forcing emotions on us, and does so before we have begun to know who this narrator is and what situation she finds herself in.

It asks us to feel more than we can possibly feel given our own experience of the character's circumstances.

The opening continues in this vein, with emotionally laden descriptions ("sneakers sink into the gravel berm" "a black tar seem cutting through the virgin pine") that color, shape, and quantify our responses to a story we've barely dipped a toe into. Add to that the narrator's overt emotional responses to her situation ("How dare they write to me" ... "I crumple the paper in my fist" ... "Just holding the letter has already ruined my simple life"), and you have an opening passage that, if not manifestly or blatantly sentimental, risks being so.

Though sentimentality is the main concern raised by the first paragraph, it's not the only concern. There's also again the question of how effectively the opening grounds us in the moment at hand. With no clues to the setting, no suggestion of where, when, or under what circumstances the tearing open of that envelope occurs, we are left with at best a vague image of someone (woman? man? young? old?) reading a letter somewhere (indoors? outdoors? city? country? night? day? sunny? rainy?). We must read on to discover that the letter recipient is a woman old enough to have gray hair, and that she is outdoors with her dog, Skipper. True, within a sentence or two of her novel the author can't be expected to supply us with all the necessary information to shape a crystal-clear image. But imagine how much more effective—and less sentimental—this moment would be if we had just a few more pieces of the puzzle:

The letter arrived on a rainy Friday morning. I'd stepped out to the mailbox as usual with my collie, Skipper, and found it there among the usual bills and supermarket circulars, in a tattered envelope tattooed with red airmail chevrons.

By setting the scene in the first sentence, the author would avoid the disorientation that occurs in the second paragraph, where suddenly we find ourselves standing outdoors in the middle of a road, forcing us to retrofit our experience of the first paragraph.

Rather than state emotional responses ("How dare they write to me"), it's better to let actions speak for themselves. For them to do so, we have to provide some context for those actions: somehow we need to establish, or at least give some sense of, a character's routine ("I'd stepped out to the mailbox as usual") in order for our readers to appreciate the events that depart from that routine (a letter from Iran). Without proper contextualization, it's hard if not impossible for us to share a character's emotional responses, which is why this

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

author feels compelled to lay those emotions on us with a trowel. The essence of drama lies in events that shatter routine. But unless it has been established, a routine can't be shattered.

Finally, the deeper I read into this opening, the more I suspect that this letter reading scene will serve as a prologue or a framing device for a story set in the past, one that will involve us in the letter-reader's love affair with a man named Omid, and that will circle back to this moment. Given that suspicion, it seems to me that in and of itself the letter serves perfectly as a prologue, that what matters is what the letter says, its contents, not the recipient's overt (or implied) emotional response to it, or the scene that carries it.

So—why not just present the letter? That it has been received, opened, read, and reacted to, is, after all, implied. Not only is the letter the heart of this scene; it *is* the scene. The rest can be cut. From there the author might go on and tell the story of the events behind this letter, or that it precipitates. Or both.

Your Turn

Draft three different versions of an opening in which a character receives a letter of some import. In the first version, have us read the entire letter. In Version II, share only a portion of it. In the final version, share none of the letter, but suggest or imply its overall tenor if not its contents.

60. A Lion in the Room

(Defamiliarization / Throat-Grabber Openings / Metaphor)

I froze in the chair. There was a lion right there. In the room, on the other side of the table.

Just what I'd been warned about, but hadn't believed. I tried not to move. Maybe he'd ignore me.

No such luck. His shoulder muscles bunched and his eyes blazed red as he looked at me. Avoid eye contact, Gran'd told me. Don't challenge them. I looked down at my beer.

Must be an acid flashback, I thought. Johnny going on about Gran's old stories must've brought it on—lion spirits possessing people and all that San Bushman stuff.

"I'm in charge at the loony bin, Pete. My cabbagepatch. Like when the loonies get the shits I take care of things. Fix 'em up. They're always so friggin' grateful."

I looked up and saw just plain old Big Sid hunched forward over the table, pint in paw, with the light from the 'DEPARTURES' sign outside the bar reflected on his bottle-bottom thick specs.

He chugged beer, burped, and carried on. "The doctors think they know it all. Nobody else could do their job. Bloody power freaks don't want us to do medical stuff, even simple things. They keep it all complicated. Keep it all scientific and that. I mean, look at how they treat someone who's dehydrated. Simple, all they need is fluids in them."

I looked down at my mug and tried to keep my face expressionless, but couldn't help thinking, 'Power-freak yourself. Bloody predator. Everyone's just prey, ego-food on the hoof to you.' I wanted to say that, but I knew there was no way a guy like Sid, five years older and a foot taller, could let me score any points.

So I played along. "Go on then. Tell us, Sid. What's wrong with how they treat that, then?"

Analysis

Defamiliarization (or *ostranenie* in the original Russian) is a technique whereby artists force their audiences to look at familiar things and ideas in new, unfamiliar ways. The term was coined by Russian author and critic Victor Shklovsky

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique.” Shklovsky distinguishes between poetic and practical language: language used to describe or explain, as opposed to language used to impart perceptions or heighten existing ones.

An excellent example of defamiliarization is found in Tolstoy’s “Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse,” in which we experience the horse from a novel perspective: its own. A passage:

The words ‘my horse’ referred to me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words ‘my land,’ ‘my air,’ ‘my water.’ But the words made a strong impression on me....

Poets and poetic artists typically use defamiliarization to breathe fresh life into things ordinary and banal. Similes and metaphors work this way. When Lorrie Moore compares a mother’s face to “a big white dumpling of worry” or Richard Brautigan compares a dish of ice cream to “Kafka’s hat,” they force us to look at something familiar in an unfamiliar way. We’re momentarily disoriented—shocked, even—but then we say to ourselves, “Oh, yes: I see it now.”

Here, defamiliarization is used exclusively for shock value: not to impart a fresh way of looking at things, but to catch the reader off-guard and keep him that way. It’s not the first time that literature has furnished us with examples of men and jungle cats confronting each other at close quarters. The most notorious recent example is Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, where the cat is a tiger, and the confrontation happens across an ocean in a lifeboat. But the man sitting across the table from the narrator in this first page isn’t a lion; he’s Big Sid, a hospital orderly with a taste for lager who stands (sits?) a foot taller than his companion. Otherwise, unless we count bunched shoulder muscles and blazing eyes, there’s nothing all that lion-like about him.

Which is all right, assuming that the comparison isn’t meant to be symbolic or even poetic, but is a literal description of a hallucination—a possibility that the narrator himself raises in the fourth paragraph. If so, it’s not the first time that literature has given us a hallucinating mental hospital denizen, either. The most famous of those is Chief Bromden, the narrator of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, who bears witness to events through a hallucinatory, psychotropic drug-induced fog. However, the hallucinatory explanation here is quickly cast aside; indeed, the rest of the passage shrugs off the whole lion analogy, which at the bottom of the page gives a little roar with the words “bloody predator” but otherwise makes itself scarce.

Two solutions suggest themselves: either throw out the analogy completely, or weave it more thoroughly into Sid’s description, emphasizing his leonine

G. STYLE

features. This way readers will see him as his narrator does, rather than having the comparison force-fed to them.

But what brings Big Sid to life in this opening page isn't the narrator's shock-tactic metaphor. It's Sid's strong dialogue ("I'm in charge of the loony bin, Pete. My cabbagepatch.") as well as his actions ("He chugged beer, burped, and carried on.").

Big Sid speaks for himself. He doesn't need his author to roar for him.

Your Turn

Describe someone or something in a way that renders it freshly using defamiliarization. Choose an unexpected metaphor (a human equated with a household appliance or piece of furniture) or a unique perspective (a piano or a bicycle as experienced by a cat or a dog).

61. Back to School Night

(Scene vs. Summary / Description vs. Exposition / Show, Don't Tell)

The second Wednesday in September is Back to School Night, and as Stephan goes over his World History syllabus, he avoids the eyes of Mona McCullough and feels choked by the collar of his French-cuffed shirt. The summer is behind him, but its heat endures, heavy as ever, and as he presses on about the weight of the past, sweat streaks his ponytail and soaks cold ovals at his armpits. The fluorescent lights remind him of an interrogation.

This is Stephan's second year at Alamo Heights, and though he's used to the glazed looks of seventeen-year-olds, parents still make him squirm. Crammed into desks, they put on tense grins while Stephan hashes over the first six-week grading period—the Roman Empire, an essay on a major historical figure. Stephan knows they are wary of him, these mothers and fathers, troubled by his long hair and stud earrings, the same quirks that, along with his founding of the school's cycling club, have made him so popular among students. Unlike his colleagues—frock-clad women in orthopedic shoes, or paunchy men in plaid shirts—Stephan sports slim-fit jeans and never wears a tie. He is boyish and fun and well put-together, with green eyes and a complexion soft as whipped cream. But what separates him from his fellow teachers is greater than looks and age; Stephan understands his students. He gets them. In times of teenage strife, when one of the girls is sure she's too fat to find a date for senior party, when a boy doesn't know if it's okay to wear socks with topsiders, Stephan is an able listener and adviser, a new member of the adult tribe, seasoned by age yet unspoiled by its coming strain. He could easily pass as one of their older brothers—could almost pass as one of them.

Analysis

There are two principle ways in which characters are evoked: descriptively, through summary or exposition, or dramatically, through action.

In this opening of a short story about a popular young high school teacher who is discomfited by his charges' parents and by one mother in particular, the summary method is used with great skill. "Show, don't tell," we're told.

But there's nothing wrong with telling; it just has to be done well. Here, except for that overstuffed first sentence, it's done well. Note how much better that sentence reads when broken in two:

The second Wednesday in September is Back to School Night.
As Stephan goes over his World History syllabus, he avoids Mona McCullough's eyes and feels choked by the collar of his French-cuffed shirt.

For the same reason that a single-pronged spear penetrates better than a trident, a longer, complex sentence with several clauses isn't always or even often better than two shorter sentences. Let the conjunction—the relationship between the two sentences—be implied. I've also changed "the eyes of Mona McCullough" to "Mona McCullough's eyes." See what you think.

The next long paragraph of this first page is packed with summary exposition about the protagonist, Stephan, information that serves not only to orient us to his status as a high school teacher, but to lend authenticity through telling details (he founded the school's cycling club; his male colleagues wear plaid shirts). By the time I get to the bottom of the page, there's no doubt in my mind as to the existence of this earnest, long-haired, tieless, earringed teacher "seasoned by age yet unspoiled by its coming strain." I feel I know him, more than that: I feel I know something of what it's like to be him.

The advantage of summary exposition is that through it authors can convey a lot of information in a little space, as here. Summary description is expedient: it does the job quickly and efficiently. The disadvantage is that, unlike dramatization, which conveys characters through actions and dialogue, exposition renders it exclusively as information: rather than form our own conclusions based on material evidence, we're forced to take the narrator's word for things. Assuming the narrator is reliable (as most are), exposition supplies strong, if not damning, evidence. For damning evidence, nothing beats actions.

In this opening, unless we count the sweat breaking out under Stephan's armpits, the only solid action is the negative one of him avoiding Mona McCullough's eyes. From there we plunge into the long expository passage concerning Stephan's relationship with his students. As written, the page reads quite well. Still, supposing the ratio of action to exposition were more balanced, if the author had lavished as much time and detail on the first paragraph as on the second?

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Were he to return Mona McCullough's gaze, what would Stephan see in her eyes? Disgust? Pity? Contempt? Curiosity? What does this mother look like, by the way? How is she dressed? Formerly Fashionably? In a frumpy house-coat? Might her appearance or her posture offer more clues to her character and how she feels about her child's teacher? Of all the parental eyes in that classroom, why is our protagonist so intent on avoiding Mona McCullough's? Is it merely because she happens to be seated front and center and so her gaze is the hardest to avoid? Might there be other reasons why he dreads her eyes in particular? Perhaps Stephan's closeness to his students extends beyond the pedagogic? Might Stephan have a thing for this mother's daughter (to whom she bears an unsettlingly uncanny resemblance)—or her son? Or is it just the way that she's looking at him? While Stephan avoids Mona McCullough's eyes and pretends to look at something on his desk, what thoughts, ideas, images, or fantasies flit through or flood his mind?

None of these things need to be broached on this first page; they may not need to be broached at all. The story that follows may have nothing to do with Ms. McCullough, who is merely representative of the parents in that classroom. And Stephan's discomfort may just be that of a young and insecure teacher. Still, for me at least these are questions that the material raises.

Exposition is most effective when linked directly to an action, as in the following passage from *Lolita*, in which Humbert Humbert's gaze falls both upon its titular object and on a distant memory:

It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnapped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts—that last mad immortal day behind the “Roches Roses.” The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished.¹⁴

14 *Lolita* (1955).

G. STYLE

I'm not suggesting that the author of this first page write like—or in any way compete with—Nabokov: who can? Still, these kinds of specific, concrete observations and reflections could form part of the action of the opening scene, rendering Stephan as well as the mother who is the object of his discomfiture vivid before—or as—we drift into summary background.

Your Turn

Write or revise a description of a setting, room, or some object as seen very specifically from that character's perspective. Third-person or first-person. The description should tell us as much about the character as it does about the setting, room, or object.

62. The First Day of the War

(War / Tense / Authenticating Details)

The war started today. Although some might call it merely an escalation of hostilities—if indeed the word *merely* were at all applicable. Dawn is clouding as I look through the window in my study. The weather is gray with mist as thick as these cheesecloth curtains, an ignominious beginning. I had always imagined a war to commence with the fanfare of trumpets and coronets, and banners flying in the wind. But it only rains as the news again comes over the radio.

I shake my head. It is time. I put on the collar, run my finger between it and my neck to relieve the chafing, cross myself and pray for those first victims along the banks of the Tigris so far away. By now the congregation is assembling, poor souls. In a time of peace how warm and safe might they imagine themselves, huddling in the pews and gossiping with their neighbors. They have seen the bombardment on their television screens. What are they thinking? That soon we will greet spring as though nothing has changed? If only that were true. I wish. I wish.

I wrap the amice about my shoulders. Now the alb; I pull it over my head, push my arms into the sleeves. This vestment always makes me feel uncomfortably feminine, but I dismiss the thought and thank our Lord for the strength He provides. I am obedient to His will and repress the old memories of childhood, the taunts of boys who called me sissy and girlish, and pushed me to tears because I exhibited a grade school timorousness—and let them push. They taunt no more; instead, should I return to the old Chicago neighborhood, the men would greet me with respect, and their children would look up to me. I knot the cincture around my waist; it is too loose, and I retie it. Over my shoulders I drape the stole, its fringes swishing. I pin the maniple to my sleeve, then finally put on the chasuble.

Analysis

At the onset of war a pastor prepares to address his congregation. Though many novels end with the outbreak of war (*War and Peace*, *From Here to Eternity*), and

many more deal with the time leading up to war and then go on to treat the effects of that war on the characters, at the moment I can think of no novels that actually begin on the *first day* of war.

Two reasons why this may be so occur to me. The first is that, since wars are cataclysmic, climactic events, it makes more sense for a novel to end with the outbreak of war than to start with it. The second is that, while the ends of wars tend to be clearly demarcated by treaty signings, unless prompted by singular events like the attacks on Pearl Harbor or the World Trade Center, their precise starting points can be difficult to pinpoint, and are often only made clear to the general public historically, in retrospect.

Still, it's an intriguing conceit, and well handled here, with the description of the priest/narrator putting on his vestments closely observed ("I run my finger between [my collar] and my neck to relieve the chafing.") and well-integrated with his internal ruminations ("What are [the members of my congregation] thinking? That soon we will greet spring as though nothing has changed?"). Some of these musings are too obvious ("If only that were true. I wish. I wish."), while others (his dwelling on the taunts he endured as a shy child, his concern that his priestly garments make him feel less than masculine) feel incongruous. That a man of the cloth would routinely harbor such thoughts is unlikely; that he'd do so on this of all mornings seems bizarre. At the very least such reflections should be provoked by specific stimuli and not come unbidden.

That said, owing largely to the attention given to his clerical garments and other pastoral accouterments—*authenticating details*—the portrait of a pastor that emerges from this opening is convincing. Unfortunately, the portrait is marred by less-than-perfect handling of tense. The first sentence is problematic. If the war started "today," when—relative to that starting point—does the present-tense monologue occur? If "dawn is clouding," the day itself has just begun, in which case when did the priest and his congregants get the news? Were they watching the 2 am news on TV? If so, something might be said to that effect. Anyway, the war started before dawn, so it would be more accurate to say, "The war started early this morning." It's not as brisk and brazen a sentence, but it's also less confusing. A few sentences later, the author shifts from the present to the past tense ("I had always imagined ...").

Despite these technical errors, I'm curious to hear what this preacher will say to his flock, and to learn if and how his faith will hold up under the assaults and insults of war.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Your Turn

Authenticating details are so important to our writing. Think of a place, person, or profession with which you are closely familiar. Make a list of authenticating details: very specific, telling details that lend authenticity to that subject. If you care to go a step further, take a page or a scene you've already written and add an authenticating detail or two (or three).

63. Gramma's Death Bed

(Framing Device / Perfunctory Adverbs / Death)

"Holly," Mom said, appearing at my door, "Gramma wants to talk with you."

I immediately dropped my book and ran downstairs, painfully stubbing my toe on the raised kitchen tile in my hurry, and finally slowing down a few feet from her bedroom door. Gramma Cathie, my favorite and only grandparent, was dying. She refused to talk with anyone for days, and I was afraid I might never talk to her again. Then I was nervous. What was she going to say? Goodbye?

I slowly opened the door and stepped into her dark room. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust.

"Holly, dear, how are you?" she asked in a weak voice. By now I could make out her pale, wrinkled face surrounded by wispy, once golden hair sprawled across the pillows of her deathbed. I couldn't help wondering if behind her thin, tired smile, she was scared.

Her eyes gleamed like they did before she told me an old memory, or family secret. I expected her to say something interesting, dramatic, something you might expect a dying person in a movie to say. She was still. Then I realized she was waiting for my answer.

"Oh, umm, my toe kinda hurts," I said. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Don't be nervous around me, dear. I'm just your old Gramma Cathie."

"But aren't you scared?" As soon as I had said the words, I wished I hadn't. Her face became solemn. Not angry, or fearful, I noted with relief, but thoughtful.

"No," she replied softly, "I am not. I am thankful, Holly, that the Lord chose to let me die peacefully. It could have been worse. It almost was. You know, I think part of me did die that summer."

I had no idea what she meant. "What summer?" I asked. "What part of you died?"

She decided to ignore my question. Instead, she asked her own. "You tripped over the tile again, didn't you?"

Analysis

A dying woman shares a secret memory with her grandson or granddaughter. A classic opening strategy: the deathbed scene that will—I assume—serve as a portal to Grandma’s confession about “that summer” when “part of” her died.

We enter this story through an extended flashback or framing device, namely the grandmother’s deathbed scene through which we’ll experience all or part of her life as told to her granddaughter.

Good stories have been told this way. Lord Byron’s nameless Giaour tells his story from his deathbed, as does Adam Godley in John Banville’s *The Infinities*. David Lodge’s *Author, Author* has Henry James looking back from his deathbed at his life (in particular on his failure as a playwright). The same structure serves *The Death of Artemio Cruz* by Carlos Fuentes.

As devices go, the deathbed frame runs the risk of being cloying and melodramatic, but if handled well it can also be efficient and effective, since nothing frames a character’s life more than his or her death.

Parts of this opening are very nicely handled. The narrator’s voice has a sweet, callow freshness (“Her eyes gleamed like they did before they told me an old memory”), and her halting, insecure dialogue is effectively juxtaposed with Grandma’s haughty resignation (“I am thankful, Holly, that the Lord chose to let me die peacefully.”). There’s the humor of opposites at work here: childhood vs. old age, naive vs. world-weary, life vs. death. And though a deathbed scene may not be the first place one looks for humor, it’s as good a place as any to find it.

I wish that the oppositions here were even stronger, that the granddaughter was a little less syrupy-sweet, a little more profane. Sure, she loves her grandmother, but a child’s fascination with old age is extremely limited; the young are far more interested in life than they are in death or growing old, things they can’t begin to grasp, and therefore don’t believe in. Here, the girl’s veneration of her grandmother spills into sentimentality. While she points out Grandma’s “once golden hair sprawled across the pillows” and her “gleaming” eyes, she doesn’t smell the leaky catheter or any of the other unpleasant things that usually attend death at a ripe old age.

Yes, I know: the scene is meant to be tender. But to achieve tenderness it doesn’t have to sacrifice authenticity or credibility. If the author wants to steer clear of catheters, that’s fine, but something in that room should at least hint at the unpleasantness of death.

This opening is also marred by some other questionable choices, such as announcing the uniqueness of this event. To the extent that they depart from and shatter the routine or status quo of characters’ lives, scenes are dramatic.

As presented here, however, there's no routine to depart from: before we get to the deathbed confession, we are told that Gramma has broken a long silence to speak to her granddaughter. This in itself is momentous, and the narrator responds with appropriate urgency ("I immediately dropped my book and ran downstairs"), stubbing her toe as she rushes to her grandmother's bedside, thereby undermining the genuine surprise of the deathbed scene. A more blasé approach ("I heard Gramma's bell again; she probably wanted me to massage her feet again.") would have set both character and reader up for an unanticipated, hence truly dramatic, scene.

Another problem: the author's use of modifiers, particularly adverbs. Note how many of the adverbs in this opening are implied or perfunctory. "I immediately dropped my book" (the immediacy is implied by the action of dropping). "Painfully stubbing my toe" (can a toe be stubbed with something other than pain?). "Finally slowing down a few feet from her bedroom door" (eliminate the adverb and what's lost?). Adverbs are to writing mainly what cornstarch is to cooking: they add nothing but bulk. Shakespeare shuns them (well, not always: "*Verily*, I swear, 'tis better to be *lowly* born"), favoring concrete nouns and active verbs, words that hit us where we live, in our senses.

Which isn't to say that adverbs can't be used effectively or that great artists haven't used them profusely. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is chockablock with adverbs:

He feared *intensely* in spirit and in flesh but, raising his head *bravely*, he strode into the room *firmly*. A doorway, a room, the same room, same window. He told himself *calmly* that those words had *absolutely* no sense which had seemed to rise *murmurously* from the dark. He told himself that it was *simply* his room with the door open. [Italics mine.]

Similarly, in her novel *Asymmetry*, when Lisa Halliday writes

Afterwards, Alice lay down to face the snow, which in the light of the balcony was falling more *calmly* now, *stealthily* and *evenly*, like an army of parachuting invaders

she adds gracenotes of wistfulness to an already melancholy moment. But while Joyce and Halliday use adverbs deliberately and even cunningly, beginning and published writers tend to use them thoughtlessly.

Why do writers overuse adverbs? Could it be because they're so easily abused? They come to us unbidden, automatically, sprouting like weeds in our

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

prose, often clinging to other words like kudzu to a tree: “desperately lonesome,” “devastatingly handsome,” “firmly believed.” Quietly, quickly, finally, carefully, cautiously, suddenly—these are some of the usual suspects. When we encounter them in our writing we should meet them with prejudice.

Strip away the useless adverbs, replace heavy-handed portentousness with a sense of business as usual (“There goes Grandma ringing her bell again.”), thus setting the stage for genuine surprise, and this will be a most engaging opening.

Your Turn

Take a piece of writing, your own or someone else’s, and eliminate all modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) from it. How has it changed? Now take the same or another piece of writing and squeeze as many modifiers into it as possible, making sure that each of the modifiers truly adds something that isn’t implied or perfunctory, something precise and unanticipated.

64. The Sympathetic Medic

(Adjectives)

The relentless, screaming siren split the muggy Gulf coast night like bolt lightning rips a summer storm, hot and hard. A boxy fire-red ambulance zig-zagged through dark, foggy streets where other mothers stirred hamburger meat while their thirteen-year-old sons watched reruns of *The Simpsons* or whined for a new video game. Inside the ambulance a youngish woman in a marker-stained blue sweater dripped tears on her son's torn black tee shirt. A tired medic with a twenty-four-hour beard held up a fluid bag with one hand and checked pulse with his other. Cotton-candy fog from the bay moved in and circled scattered light posts in wisps outside the scratched windows. Bile tasting like guilt rose in her throat, and she felt she might add vomit to her tears.

The sympathetic medic tried to help. "Ma'am, he's probably gonna make it. His blood pressure and heart rate ain't real bad. Them pills just knocked him out a little with that beer. But don't think he got all that much from looking at his vitals. On an empty stomach, it'd hit him fast. Good thing that woman called 911 in time."

Crystal's racing pulse didn't slow. "Yes, thank God," she whispered. What woman? She forgot at whose house Will was supposed to be, and the woman who called her just said Will was being taken to the hospital. Thank God it was a little town, and she had been close by the kid's address. She swallowed the sour taste of panic in her throat. The medic's kind words didn't make guilt taste any sweeter.

Will is all I have left, she thought. I made a vow when Adam died to take up the slack, and once again I failed. I have to be stronger. Whatever it takes.

She should have monitored Will more closely. Was it true he was taking drugs? By thirteen Will should be planning high school courses, not following a pack of losers trying drugs and drinking beer. Her temples pounded like the Presbyterian gong in Shell Beach every Sunday. A familiar migraine was returning with its aura of dancing lights.

Up front the baby-faced ambulance driver complained, "This fog gets any worse, a putty knife would be more useful than them worn-out wipers."

Analysis

The relentless, screaming siren split the muggy Gulf coast night like bolt lightning rips a summer storm, hot and hard.

Modifiers—adjectives and adverbs—get a bad rap. English and creative writing teachers are known to despise them, and writers themselves haven’t always embraced them with fierce devotion.

Voltaire: “The adjective is the enemy of the noun.”

Twain: “When you catch an adjective, kill it.”

Clifton Fadiman: “The adjective is the banana peel of the parts of speech.”

Stephen King: “The road to hell is paved with adjectives.”

Ben Yagoda: “Kicking things off with adjectives is a little like starting a kids’ birthday party with the broccoli course.”¹⁵

My feelings about adjectives are mixed. As those same English teachers will tell you, they tend to be lazy or perfunctory. That someone is “beautiful” tells us nothing about how they look; it merely casts an overarching judgment with respect to their physical appearance. Adjectives aren’t descriptions; they’re *opinions*.

With modifiers, you want to choose your battles. Just because every noun offers itself up for modification(s) doesn’t mean you should modify it. By serving some nouns plain, you give more distinction to those you embellish. Think of adjectives as ketchup or hot sauce; put it on everything and it quickly wears out its welcome.

The opening paragraph of this first page, which finds us with a mother attending her son in the back of an ambulance, batters us with modifiers. *[R]elentless screaming, muggy Gulf coast, hot and hard, boxy fire-red ...* Taken individually, each of these modifiers may add something. Collectively they lose power and become monotonous.

Which doesn’t mean adjectives can’t be piled on to good effect. Do we really want to take a red pencil to Thomas Hobbes’s description of life in the absence of society as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”? And what would Thomas Wolfe have done without his modifiers (“The nostalgic thrill of dew-wet mornings in Spring, the cherry scent, the cool clarion earth, the wet

15 Voltaire, cited in Mencken’s *A New Dictionary of Quotation* (1946), but possibly apocryphal; Twain, from a March 1880 letter to student D.W. Bowser; Fadiman: quoted in Jon Winokur, *Advice to Writers*; Stephen King, *On Writing*; Ben Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, For Better and/or Worse*.

loaminess of the garden, the pungent breakfast smells and the floating snow of blossoms....”)?

Still, there are adjectives and adjectives. While “cool clarion” adds something essential to the “earth” that it modifies, what “screaming” adds to a siren is both perfunctory and predictable. As for “cotton candy,” it adds nothing to the fog that helps us see the fog more clearly. In fact it fogs it up, adding connotations of innocent frivolity and sweetness where nothing of the sort pertains.

Lest my wariness of modifiers leads you to conclude that I think good writing should be boiled down to bleached bone, not so. The last thing good writing should be is bland, or, as the Germans say, *ohne Salz oder Fett*, “without salt or fat.”

In the same way metaphors work best when forced on us by our need to make something clearer, the best adjectives are those imposed by necessity rather than those we indulge in or that arise automatically (“blind faith”; “abject poverty”; “raving beauty”). In *Catch-22*, in giving General Dreedle a “ruddy, monolithic” face, Joseph Heller adds something to that face that wouldn’t be there otherwise. Likewise when in his story “The Circular Ruins” Jorge Luis Borges writes, “No one saw him disembark in the *unanimous* night,” only a dunce of an editor would strike that adjective. When Ezra Pound said, “Go in fear of abstractions,” he didn’t mean don’t use them. He meant use them boldly, bravely—and sparingly.

Our opening paragraph with modifiers applied more judiciously:

The siren split the muggy Gulf coast night like lightning. Through dark, foggy streets where other mothers stirred hamburger meat and kids watched reruns of *The Simpsons*, the ambulance zigzagged. Inside it a woman dripped tears on her son’s torn tee shirt. A medic with a twenty-four-hour beard held a bag of plasma with one hand and checked the boy’s pulse with his other. Beyond the scratched rear window bay, fog circled light posts in wisps. Bile rose in the mother’s throat.

What’s sacrificed here by way of specificity of detail is more than made up for in rhythm and pacing, with some details left to the reader’s imagination—which, given the chance and enough to go on, fills them in as well or better than the author in her version.

The rest of this sensational and potentially gripping opening is likewise overwritten, with the “sympathetic” medic’s dialogue turning into a speech—as dialogue tends to do when in excess of two or three lines. Of the six lines

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

spoken by the medic, any one would do to make his point. Given the circumstances, his prolixity seems especially out of place.

The next paragraph (“Crystal’s racing pulse didn’t slow ...”) is confusing, with the mother who was “a woman” in the first paragraph referred to now by her first name, while a different “woman”—the one who phoned Woman 1 to inform her that her son was being taken to the hospital—is introduced. The author’s failure to use the past perfect tense (it should be “She *had forgotten* at whose house Will *had been* ...”) confuses us further.

The next paragraph dips us into the mother’s stream of consciousness for some forced exposition (“I made a vow when Adam died ...”). Forced exposition is information forced into a character’s dialogue. Though in this case the information is forced into *interior* rather than spoken dialogue, the result is as artificial. The second-to-last paragraph compounds this (“She should have monitored Will more closely”) while stating things that, if not completely obvious, might be better learned elsewhere and not in the midst of such a dramatic scene.

The last paragraph of this page serves up its finest moment, with the ambulance driver’s dialogue (“This fog gets any worse, a putty knife would be more useful than them worn-out wipers.”) evoking his character while also describing the fog. If only it had come sooner. We might have eaten less broccoli.

Your Turn

Take a first page of your own or someone else’s and void it of all modifiers (adjectives *and* adverbs). What’s lost? Then add as many as possible. What’s gained?

65. Home from Fairview

(Mental Illness / Abstract vs. Concrete / Similes and Metaphors)

Scoured clean as the sky after a storm or a tub after a good grouting, Ana Gates was home after nearly a month in Fairview Clinic. She should feel good about being back from that haven for sanity on the Sound, but it was hard to know what feeling good meant, though she was alive and that might eventually count for something.

Mornings were still rocky, the jittery sensation in her gut having less to do with anticipating the day and more to do with dreading it. Breakfast especially felt like a violation but she had to eat. She curled up by the front window, pulled her toast apart and washed part of it down with coffee. The warmth spread across her belly, the pain there less now, though she still sometimes felt the cramping from another miscarriage that made three a less than magical number.

She picked up the journal her psychiatrist Felix Beckman was having her keep and pulled the crocheted afghan around her. The cool of the house on Lake Waramaug made for the constant need of a covering even in spring. Only at the end of summer was it otherwise, as if the sun found it hard to reach them through the trees. She pulled the pen from the journal's spiral binding, the slender barrel solid between her fingers. A squadron of geese skidded onto the lake, flapped across its surface and took up positions, ever prepared for takeoff.

Emotions, Beckman had said, write about how she felt now, but her emotions were gripped and quelled by a mind that wouldn't let her rest. Maybe it would be easier to say what she should feel, what Peter and the rest expected, that she should be happy to be here, happy to be home, to be out. She should be a lot of things. She should be well, but people didn't always get to be what they should be.

Analysis

A woman comes home from a stay in a mental hospital. That's the subject of this first page. It could be the subject of the chapter as a whole, or of the entire novel to which it belongs. We don't know. We are only told that Ana Gates is "home

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

after nearly a month in Fairview Clinic.” The prose is strong; the handling of syntax, punctuation, and grammar unimpeachable. As written, this certainly works. Yet it could be less static and abstract. Let’s examine it.

With its first sentence, the author dives into figurative language, serving up not one, but two similes in tandem (“like tractor trailers,” I was tempted to add), with the heroine “scoured clean as the sky after a storm” and like “a tub after a good grouting.” Though made of solid objects (storms, tubs, grout), since their meanings are figurative and not literal, similes and metaphors aren’t all that stable or solid: they’re symbols for things, not things themselves. Those similes put us—and this opening—firmly in abstract territory.

Each of the two similes also has its own problems, compounded by their union. What is “scoured clean”—the woman’s body, or her mind? Presumably it’s Ana’s mind that has been scoured clean, or is this “scouring” a not-so-subtle reference to the three miscarriages alluded to at the end of the next paragraph? In their hunger for concrete experience, readers tend to take things literally, so reading these words one may picture a woman whose insides have been “scoured.” If, on the other hand, it’s Ana’s mind that’s been cleansed “like the sky after a storm,” does it help to compare that mind to “a tub after a good grouting”? Does grouting a bathtub “scour” it?

Similes and metaphors are like those little stepping stools people keep to reach high shelves in their kitchens, to be used only when needed to help readers reach a solid impression or image. Here the grouted tub colluding with the storm-scoured sky isn’t likely to help anyone.

The same sentence provides the first hint of action. “Ana Gates was home.” As verbs go none is less active or concrete than the verb “to be.” Look at the rest of the verbs in this opening paragraph: *should feel ... was ... feeling ... was ...* listless verbs tenuously attached to the protagonist’s static state or condition of being or feeling. No other actions are implied or indicated.

The last lines of the opening paragraph give us the condition of Ana Gates’s mind, with her unable to decide how she feels about being back home. We’re told that she “should feel good about being back”; on the other hand, Fairview Clinic was a “haven for sanity.” Then again, “it was hard [for her] to know what feeling good meant,” notwithstanding that “she was alive and that might eventually count for something.”

“Scoured clean as the sky after a storm” is one way to describe the mental state that’s evoked by these thoughts. “Foggy headed” is another. One thing is for sure: Ana Gates is one confused heroine. But rather than be told as much, abstractly, would it not be better to let her confusion speak for itself through her solid actions and concrete perceptions?

Unlike the first paragraph, the second does give us a concrete and vivid picture of Ana in her present circumstances, bundled up in her afghan and looking out the window of her lakeside home while eating breakfast, pulling her toast apart. But even here the author resorts to bald abstractions (“Mornings were still rocky”) instead of relying on the moment at hand to speak—not only for itself, but for the character’s general state. If Ana feels jittery, her coffee cup might tremble as she brings it to her lips. If she dreads mornings, her dread might be evoked through a description of her breakfast from her point of view (“the bread crusts looked as appetizing as strips of cardboard.”). Only when she swallows the toast and the “warmth spread[s] across her belly,” do I feel myself in Ana’s body, and, through her body, her psyche. But the effect is undermined by the paragraph’s concluding clause, one that generalizes about Ana’s cramping and her miscarriage from beyond her present state rather than from within it. The last clause of the last sentence expresses not Ana’s viewpoint, but that of an intrusive author.

Here’s what a more grounded version of this opening might look like:

Ana Gates sat at the kitchen table of her summer cottage, pulling her toast apart and sipping black coffee while watching a squadron of Canada geese skid and flap across the surface of Lake Waramaug. The coffee cup trembled as she brought it to her lips. She braced herself, expecting a jolt of pain when the warmth reached her belly. But the moment passed. She sighed. Since her arrival home from Fairview three days before, the cramps had been coming less frequently.

The crusts of toast on her plate tasted and looked like cardboard. She shoved the plate aside, took up the notebook that Dr. Felix Beckman had presented her with on her last day at the clinic, slid the slim fountain pen (also Felix’s gift) from its spiral binding, and pressed its nib to the blank first page. “Write about what you feel now,” Felix had suggested. So—what did she feel now? Emptiness. Cold. She drew the crocheted afghan more tightly around her shoulders. Even this late in May the winds off the lake turned the cottage into a refrigerator....

There’s no rule against abstract openings. A famous novel begins, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” an opening that privileges grandiose abstraction over concrete events or particulars. Through a series of parallel constructions Dickens settles his readers into an epic whose events span generations and confront life’s paradoxes across a comprehensive spectrum.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Opening *A Tale of Two Cities* with a specific dramatic event would have forced Dickens to narrow his panoramic view.

That said, we novelists of humbler ambition may wish to ponder whether an abstract, static opening is the best foot forward into our stories.

Your Turn

Render a character's emotional state by way of a scene in which they perform an everyday task or activity. For instance: a man mowing the grass who has very recently gotten some very bad news, a terminal diagnosis, or the rejection of a novel he has spent the last ten years writing. How does his recent bad experience color his—and our—experience of that routine chore? Use third person.

Do the same exercise again, with the same character doing the same chore, only now the recent news is good.

66. The Girls in the Band

(Modifiers / Statement vs. Implication / Less = More)

The bartender slid the keys across the bar toward Judy with such force they flipped over the edge and onto a barstool. The keys that had been aimed so mindlessly at her would open the doors to what were supposed to become the band's accommodations for the next two weeks. With a nod of the head pointing toward the rear of the building, the bartender informed us the rooms were located above the bar. Our eyes locked ... close friends don't need to talk sometimes, you just know what each of us is thinking; and we both knew we were surrounded by bad juju, and this was just the beginning. Judy and I turned and walked outside to update the other four girls, who were still waiting in the van. Suspicions already raised, we voted on who would head up our little reconnaissance mission. As leader, we naturally drafted Judy. The first in line is always the first to be sacrificed, right?

Single file, we stayed close to each other for security. All six of us followed the fractured sidewalk that looked like it had lost a bet with a jackhammer to the back of the building. The paint covering the wooden entry door leading to the second floor was blistered and cracked, scars from its colorful life. The feelings of fight or flight were beginning to set in, intensifying our natural instinct to turn around and run away from the decrepit building; but obligation forced us to open the door.

In spite of the creaking groan of the rickety wooden stairs, and against my better judgment, I cautiously continued placing each foot on the next step. My eyes felt the need to scan the tunnel-like surroundings, in case I had to make an emergency escape, when the words fell from my mouth, "I don't like the looks of this, girls. Rooms above a bar—not a good sign." I said this with the air of confidence of a nineteen-year old; a confidence that existed only because I was not alone.

Analysis

This opening can be much improved without adding a single word. In fact, I'm going to subtract hundreds. First, though, let me say why.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

NEVER STATE WHAT YOU CAN IMPLY. Years ago a dear writer friend gave me this useful bit of advice, which, whether he knew it or not, he got from French avant-garde poet, playwright, filmmaker (painter, photographer, chess player, etc.) Jean Cocteau. For a long time I clung to the injunction so fervently that I printed it out in **BOLD CAPS**, landscape format, and hung it on the wall over my computer next to that other sacred writers' commandment: **NO POINT OF VIEW = NO STORY.**

Since then, though I still cling tenaciously to the second injunction, I've loosened up a bit on the first. There are times, many in fact, when we writers need to state a thing outright, even when it has been or might be implied, in order to drive a point home or simply to draw more attention to it, or just to make sure certain implications don't slip under the reader's radar.

"Never state what you can imply" differs from "show, don't tell," that oldest of creative writing chestnuts, in that it allows for the fact that implication can't always be achieved through action or "showing." Sometimes—often in fact—we rely on the narrator's intervention to interpret or color characters' experiences and actions for us. There are also times when for pacing purposes an author wants to establish context more quickly than dramatization ("showing") permits. And while it's true that a story told purely through authorial summary ("telling") isn't likely to satisfy most readers, the same novel told purely through action and dialogue would in all likelihood be equally unsatisfactory. It would be like reading a movie, which is like drinking a steak.

I recall coming upon a "revised edition" of John Barth's *The End of the Road*, a black comedy I've invoked several times in these pages about a character named Jacob Horner (an ironic allusion to "Little Jack Horner") who suffers from nihilistic paralysis. I'd read the novel back in the seventies and much admired it. Curious as to what changes Barth had made, I did a page-by-page comparison with the original, only to find that the revision affected exactly one sentence. The sentence was "It hit me like a ton of bricks." For the new edition Barth cut the line. He did so, I'm sure, because it merely stated an emotion obvious to anyone reading the scene, without adding nuance or dimension to it. On the contrary, it flattened the sentiment into a cliché. Still, the sentence did add *something*: a beat to allow the moment to "sink in." If only Barth had not done it so tritely.

One of the best-known examples of the power of implication is Hemingway's famous short story "Hills Like White Elephants." Though the story is about a young woman facing an abortion, that word makes no appearance in it. Nor are we ever told directly how either of the story's two main characters—the woman and her male companion—feel about the prospect. Instead, all is implied through their terse, oblique, circuitous dialogue as they drink

beer and absinth and await the train that will take the woman to wherever the abortion will be performed. The first overt reference to the procedure doesn't even appear until halfway through the very short story, where we read:

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

Up to here, the characters have discussed 1) the shape of the hills in the distance, and 2) the taste of absinthe, nothing at all to do with the grim procedure awaiting the young woman. It can be argued that the true subject of "Hills Like White Elephants" is not abortion but avoidance. At any rate, nothing is stated; everything is implied. Our involvement in the story is heightened by the trust placed in us by the author, who dares to not describe or even label emotions for us, who would rather risk our misunderstanding than do so. That trust, that willingness to let us supply and interpret emotions, makes for a truly interactive reading experience. We become Hemingway's co-authors. We finish his story for him. As a result, it involves us more deeply.

Telling readers what to think or feel is the job of a propagandist. A storyteller's main purpose, on the other hand, is to create experiences for the reader, to involve us so deeply, so convincingly, so authentically in those experiences that we feel what characters feel.

In this first page of a memoir, at every turn the author feels compelled to both show *and* tell us what her characters are experiencing, so we're never allowed to draw our own conclusions. That the bartender shoves the keys "mindlessly" is implied by their flipping over the barstool. That the same bartender "inform[s] [the narrator and her friend that] the rooms [are] located above the bar" is likewise implied by his directional nod. That the two protagonists share the same thought (they're "surrounded by bad juju") is implied by their locking eyes with each other, as is the fact that their "suspicions [are] already raised."

The tendency to state what's implied persists through this opening, with us being told a) that Judy is the "natural" choice to lead her all-girl band in its reconnaissance mission to inspect their quarters, b) that the band members keep close together "for security," and c) as they make their way down the "fractured sidewalk that [looks] like it lost a bet with a jackhammer" and through

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

a paint-blistered entryway “scar[red] from its colorful life,” that “feelings of fight or flight were beginning to set in.” In case we missed the point, we’re furthermore informed that said feelings “[intensify their] natural instinct to turn around and run away.” Got it.

The same opening with implications left to the reader:

With a nod toward the building’s rear, the bartender slid the keys across the bar so hard they flipped over it onto a stool. The keys were to the band’s accommodations for the next two weeks. Judy and I locked eyes, then turned and went out to the van, where the other three members of *Ahead of Our Time* waited.

Single file, we followed Judy down the fractured sidewalk to the back of the building. The blood-red paint covering the door leading to stairs was blistered and cracked. As we made our way up, to the sound of wood creaking under us I said, “I don’t like the looks of this, girls.”

The original runs 341 words; the revision III. What, if anything, crucial is missed?

In Flannery O’Connor’s most famous story, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” wherein a southern matriarch watches—or rather listens—as one by one the members of her family are executed by two of a trio of escaped serial killers in the woods close behind her, never once are we told how frightened and horrified she feels. We aren’t told how she feels at all. The horror implicit in the scene is left entirely to our imagination. Which makes it all the more horrific.

Your Turn

Take a scene from a story or novel that you or a colleague has written and try to cut it by more than half. Make as much use of implication as possible. Is the result better, or worse? Why? Discuss.

67. A Hole in the Heart

(Abstraction / Grounding in Scene / Metaphors / Subjectivity)

Sometimes you wake up with a hole in your heart and you're not sure why. It's a circle, carved by something you can't touch, something that opens up in your sleep and wakes you up, hungry. This morning, before I got on the plane, it was like that, like those lagoons left by old, erupted volcanoes. They pull things and people into them because the core of the earth, after it's shot out molten lava, is as hungry as I am.

Now, from 10,000 feet in the air, looking down at all these street grids, I still feel the hole in my heart. And the free-fall between me and the messy muck of being in the city again. I hate New York. Because when you're there, inside the grid, you can't see the whole picture, just what lies in front of you; you can get lost. Not like painting, where whether you're inspired to the point of bliss or you think you're losing control, the canvas is always there—whole in front of you like a map—and you're the one drawing lines of perspective. You can always find your way out.

Landing in LaGuardia all alone, it's cold. I forgot what this felt like, the sharp invisible burn through your clothes, going straight for the bone. I zip my jacket, wrap my scarf, and off I go onto the M60 into Manhattan. Straight through Queens. The houses with Christmas lights still on from six years ago, even in September; nothing's changed. Strolling through Harlem—an Old Navy now near the Apollo—and then there I am on 110th street, getting on the subway, on my way to Chelsea to see Lee. Lee, who told me to get my “painter ass” over here because it might change my life. And my life needs some change—in every sense of the word; in my pockets, definitely.

Analysis

The invention of airlines has fostered a grand tradition of novels and stories opening at cruising altitude, with characters bound toward (or departing from) the places where their stories have taken or are about to take place. One such novel, Erica Jong's scandalous *Fear of Flying*, honors that tradition through its brilliant opening line, “There were 117 psychoanalysts on the Pan Am flight

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

to Vienna and I had been treated by at least six of them.” Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* twists the convention by opening with its protagonists in mid-flight in more than one sense, having literally tumbled “without benefit of parachute or wings” out of their hijacked, blown-up jetliner:

Gibreel, the tuneless soloist, had been cavorting in moonlight as he sang his impromptu gazal, swimming in air, butterfly-stroke, breast-stroke, bunching himself into a ball, spredeagling himself against the almost-infinity of the almost-dawn, adopting heraldic postures, rampant, couchant, pitting levity against gravity. Now he rolled happily towards the sardonic voice. “Ohe, Salad baba, it’s you, too good. What-ho, old Chumch.” At which the other, a fastidious shadow falling headfirst in a grey suit with all the jacket buttons done up, arms by his sides, taking for granted the improbability of the bowler hat on his head, pulled a nickname-hater’s face. “Hey, Spoono,” Gibreel yelled, eliciting a second inverted wince, “Proper London, bhai! Here we come! Those bastards down there won’t know what hit them!”

The opening in question, while offering no such sensational thrills and spills, plants us firmly in the tradition, with a painter poised to descend upon the New York City he/she left behind some unspecified amount of time ago, without regret, apparently, since she/he still hates the place.

If a successful opening is one that raises intriguing questions while providing enough information to ground the reader, this opening certainly succeeds. On the one hand, we know the protagonist is an artist (though of what sex and age we don’t know; doesn’t matter, we’ll find out soon enough). We know that New York City has left a bad taste in her (let’s assume she’s a woman) mouth. We know, furthermore, that for some reason he/she has been compelled to return—possibly against her wishes. We know too that the protagonist is poor, or at any rate not flush. Else why travel into the city from the airport by bus—and by way of Harlem, to boot?

The author opens with a metaphor—a vague one about a hole in the protagonist’s heart. Like all descriptions of feelings, though it tries through metaphor to obtain some concreteness, it remains abstract and subjective. However, no sooner does the author plunge us into subjective territory than she grounds us aboard a passenger jet at 10,000 feet.

A good thing, since readers like to be grounded. It gives those abstract first sentences something to congeal upon. But having done so, the author yanks us out of the airplane and into a spewing volcano, one that evokes the narrator’s

feelings but that doesn't feel organic; in fact it clashes with the image of New York City spreading out in its rigid grid below. In the next paragraph, where the grid of the city is compared to a canvas, the metaphor feels more appropriate to the narrator, a painter. It conveys not just the thought being illustrated, but the mind and personality of the character thinking it.

However appropriate they may be individually, taken all together there are too many metaphors here: perforated hearts, volcano craters, canvases, maps. At least one of them, I think, has to go. However seductive, metaphors and similes (a metaphor is an implied comparison, a simile an overt one) should be used as needed, and never forced. Their purpose is not to call attention to our prose—to adorn it with beads, baubles, and bottle caps, like a bowerbird adorning his nest; their purpose is to help readers see more clearly.

Like most good things in writing, the best metaphors come to us out of a sense of urgency, organically, through the need to be as clearly understood as possible. This is what so many young writers fail to appreciate: that a good style is—or should be—a means, not an end. Precision, clarity, authenticity—those are the ends. Make them your goals, and the windfall will be a winning style—and a unique one, since each of us is bound to be precise, clear, and authentic in our own special ways.

The rest of this opening gives us a tour through New York City, which, though well-written, feels more than a bit rushed, with the protagonist instantly transported “straight through Queens” to Harlem—a journey that anyone who's taken it will tell you is anything but instant. More can be accomplished here by way of exploiting the artist's gloomy mood through the description of this journey, tunneling through the city's Christmas-light festooned inferno, rumbling deeper and deeper into the past aboard that M60 bus.

Your Turn

Take a first page or scene of your own or someone else's and see if you can find opportunities for figurative language (metaphors or similes) in it. Remember that good metaphors are never gratuitous; they help us form a clearer image or idea. Bear in mind, too, that when you have a choice, metaphors tend to be more powerful than similes, since they *imply* rather than *state* a comparison, building more trust in our readers.

68. When I Met Lucia

(Abstract vs. Concrete / Opinions & Information vs. Evidence)

When Lucia and I met in the mid-1960s, we were thoughtful, idealistic young women. Knowing her really began after she realized what those around her always knew—that she was not crazy but a true individual, an independent thinker with an incredible imagination.

Her affinity for names began almost at birth when her parents were told before her Baptismal that the name they had chosen was not a saint's and would have to be changed. Her parents kept the name they originally selected and added two saints' names. Her identity was forged with two first names, two middle names and a surname. Her mother contributed the nickname, Boobie, which she kept—along with the many names she gave herself. She acquired the name Lucia as part of the Italian persona she assumed after several visits to Italy and a lifelong obsession with the Italian Renaissance.

Lucia understood from early childhood that she possessed characteristics that made her different from others—an only child, left-handed, born under the zodiac sign of Capricorn in the Chinese year of the Water Horse. Quite a combination of attributes and not easily understood. Few people are confronted with queries about what defines them and even fewer ask themselves. It becomes one of those mystery-of-life conundrums that when pondered reveal interesting truths—if answered honestly or at all. Lucia considered all aspects of her personality a means of gaining self-awareness. Left-handed people are visual thinkers, and Lucia epitomized this mindset.

“Nothing analytical, thank you very much.”

“What about math?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Repetitive tasks?”

Again, not for Lucia, who was unlikely to engage in something that when considered, if she took the time to do so, was to her way of thinking so mind-numbingly dull. To delight her, one need only provide something to quicken the pulse and stir the heart, something to make her laugh and cry—simultaneously if possible. For her, Renaissance art, Barber's *Adagio for Strings* or watching Baryshnikov dance filled the bill.

Analysis

The well-written first page of this work-in-progress presents us with a female protagonist, a woman of extraordinary virtues and eccentricities. Or so we are told by the first-person narrator.

According to the narrator, Lucia:

- is “a true individual.”
- is “an independent thinker.”
- has “an incredible imagination.”

We learn furthermore that Lucia is a woman of many names—including the saintly names given to her at birth by her parents, and nicknames assigned to her later by herself and others, Lucia being just one of many (presumably the one by which the narrator knows her).

But Lucia’s abundance of names accounts for only one of many eccentricities, which include her being an only child, left-handed, and a Capricorn “in the Chinese year of the Water Horse.” All this we’re told by the narrator, who goes on to tell us that these and other characteristics “made [Lucia] different from others.”

Certainly one method of evoking characters is by way of other characters—in this case, by way of a first-person narrator who, at least for the time being, remains unnamed, and, for the most part, anonymous. With respect to the narrator, we can with certainty say only that she is a woman, that she came of age in the 1960s and is probably a woman in her sixties. We can also assume that she admires Lucia; or at least she couches her opinions in terms of admiration (then again so does Marc Antony when speaking of Caesar to the mob).

There are two potential problems with this method of character evocation. The first is that it tends to leave room for doubt. First-person narrators are human, and, unless they are of a scientifically objective bent, humans tend to look at the world through subjective eyes. Therefore first-person human narrators are seldom completely objective; which is to say that no character narrator is one hundred percent reliable.

Instead, what we typically get from first-person narrators (as opposed to omniscient or third-person narrators) is, to some extent, an opinion. It’s up to us readers to decide how much to invest in those opinions, what degree of credibility to assign to them.

And the degree of credibility assigned to a first-person narrator is based largely on the extent to which the narrator’s opinions are supported by evidence.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

The more concrete the evidence, the stronger. When, for instance, the butler narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* tells us that, in forsaking his love for Miss Kenton, he was acting appropriately given his vocation, we see right through this rationalization into the narrator's broken heart.

Since we're presented mostly with abstractions ("thoughtful," "idealistic," "independent," "incredible," "different"), with no concrete evidence in the form of scenes or tactile examples to illustrate and lend support to them, at the end of this first page we're left with only a fuzzy sense of both the narrator and her subject. Neither character leaps off the page, and both remain largely abstract.

Which brings us to the second problem with the approach employed here. It relies too thoroughly on abstractions. "Show, don't tell" isn't terrible advice. Still, there's nothing per se wrong with telling, just as there's nothing wrong per se with abstractions. But unless they're backed with evidence in the form of actions or solid things, abstractions aren't very satisfying.

Here, to the extent that Lucia is evoked at all, she is evoked through a series of abstract opinions. On the continuum of evidence, opinions rank pretty low, down there with rumor, gossip, and innuendo. As with rumors, we reserve judgment on them until they are either proven or refuted. Until I have more evidence, I'll do likewise with Lucia.

Your Turn

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* begins with Jake Barnes introducing us to a principle character thus: "Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn." Choose a real or a fictional character (someone else's or your own) about whom another character or person has strong opinions. Using Character #2 as your narrator, have them introduce us to Character #1.

69. Beth's Wish

(Whose Drama? / Overwriting / Implication vs. Statement)

Beth's sigh punctuated the darkness like the whoosh from a soda bottle. Her head canted sideways against the pickup's passenger window, and little cotton balls blossomed on the frigid glass in perfect sync with her breathing. Her left hand twirled the high-school graduation necklace her mother and I had given her five years ago.

"What's the matter, Princess?" One could only imagine what trotted through my daughter's mind. When she entertained an idea, that silver bauble transformed into a plaything, and she'd been twisting it all afternoon. She started toying with it again after corralling me into driving her home. Her husband had left my place earlier to put their two toddlers to bed.

Beth swallowed, but otherwise gave no indication she'd heard me.

The crusted snow at the side of the road reflected the Christmas lights from the houses we passed into a kaleidoscopic aura on her red hair. She resembled her mother; a dimple in each cheek, a strong chin, a cute petite nose, and a soft freckled complexion. Beth was a beautiful woman, no longer the skinny teenaged waif who held her own at barrel racing. She sighed, bit her lip, and pulled the necklace until it dug into her neck. She seemed as skittish as a horse near a snake.

"Beth, will you tell me what's troubling you?"

She shifted to stare out the window. For a long moment she didn't answer, then cleared her throat. "Dad, what do you miss the most about Mom since she died?" Her voice stretched as thin as a rubber band.

I gripped the steering wheel, but forced my fingers to relax. Judith, my wife of more than twenty-three years, should have been at today's holiday gathering. A head-on collision ten months ago—I still wasn't used to living alone.

Analysis

Like most creative people, I have a healthy distrust of rules. But when it comes to writing fiction there's one rule I feel comfortable about giving to my students and applying myself: "Never state what's implied." The inverse ("Never imply what's stated") is just as sound. Since a fiction writer's purpose is to show and not to tell, the first version applies more.

In this first page much that is stated is already implied.

A widower and his daughter, Beth, are bound for a holiday gathering—the first since Beth's mother, Judith, died in a car accident. Something is bothering Beth. This is made evident to her father through Beth's sighs and swallows, and how she worries a necklace her mother and father gave her as a high school graduation gift five years before. At last her father asks, "What's the matter, Princess?" To which after more sighing and shifting Beth replies, "Dad, what do you miss the most about Mom since she died?"

The central conflict here is so thoroughly embodied in that question that much of what comes afterwards feels redundant: an effort to dramatize what's implicitly dramatic. The question isn't just the crux of the scene; it *is* the scene. As for the rest—all the sighing and squirming—it's just gilding the lily.

The passing scenery adds something. The snow and the Christmas lights give us the season and ground the situation in a solid time and place. On the other hand, the narrator's description of his daughter feels forced into the scene. In the shifting darkness of his truck he might very well note the play of lights on her hair, and see the necklace digging into her neck. But "Beth was a beautiful woman, no longer the skinny teenaged waif who held her own at barrel racing," feels both sentimentally forced and author intrusive. It reads like information served with an editorial twist by Beth's creator, rather than something experienced by her driving narrating father.

Like much of the content in this opening, that description teases suspense where none has been established; it highlights a conflict to which readers haven't yet been made privy. If, on the other hand, Beth's question were to come before those descriptions, the descriptions would then set the tone for Dad's thoughts as he drives and ponders.

"Dad, what do you miss most about Mom?"

We were on our way to the Schmuckers's Christmas party in my pickup truck when my daughter put the question to me....

Here, on this first page, by way of a daughter's squirms and sighs the author tries too hard to dramatize her plight, when the drama evoked by her question belongs more truly to the father who must answer it, and who wakes up every morning to face the answer.

Your Turn

Take an opening that you or someone else has written and rewrite it so that everything that's implied or suggested is stated overtly. If the character is happy, say so ("Sandra was happy."). Don't worry if the result sounds childish; that's all to the point. State everything as overtly as possible. Then do the opposite: take a scene—your own or someone else's—in which ideas or feelings are overtly described or stated. Remove all such overt statements.

Example: in a scene in which a character receives a shocking piece of news and we read "It hit him like a bolt from the blue," you would cut that line.

How is the result better or worse than the original?

70. A Woman of Valor

(Genericism / Authenticating Details / Cliché)

Rebekkah wandered through the narrow stacks with a list of book titles in her hand. It was warm in the library, and the lazy ceiling fans barely stirred a breeze. It would be even hotter at home. Until it reached eighty-five degrees outside, her husband, Avram, insisted on opening the windows instead of turning on the air conditioning, even though Rebekkah had allergies and breathed better with it on. Here in the library, the warmth hardly registered with Rebekkah. She loved the smell and feel of the old books, the display of the latest best sellers, and the librarians who knew most of the neighborhood patrons by name.

Rebekkah found the section she was looking for and scanned the titles. So many books about fertility and help with getting pregnant! She pulled the first book on her list out of its place on the shelf, flipped open the cover. Good, she thought, it had been recently published so it was likely to have the most up-to-date information.

Rebekkah tucked the book into her bag and grimaced when she imagined Avram's reaction when, once again, she brought up the subject of why she hadn't become pregnant yet. He'd told her he didn't care whether or not they had children, that maybe it was God's will that they didn't. Rebekkah cared, and she couldn't believe it would be God's will to deny her what she wanted most. Rebekkah's two older sisters had kids, and the majority of her close friends did, too. Sometimes she felt like an outsider when she was with the women in her life.

Rebekkah hurried to the center of the library where couches were neatly arranged in a square. She adjusted her long skirt and sat with her legs folded under her and flipped open the book. Within minutes her mind was totally focused on the words in front of her. So much so that when she finally looked up she was shocked to see that it was four-thirty.

Analysis

Nature abhors a vacuum. So does good writing. When writers fail to specify, when they leave the devil in the form of details to the reader, they have only themselves to blame when said reader fills in the blanks with less-than-authentic material.

In fiction what rushes in to fill the vacuum is cliché.

And cliché is the Number 1 enemy of good fiction. As Martin Amis has said, clichés don't just take the form of familiar phrases or figures of speech. There are also "clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart." Like a cancer, according to Amis, cliché "spreads inwards" from a book's language to its very soul.

But clichés don't thrive exclusively on pedestrian language; in fact they're known to flourish in the absence of words. I'm not (heaven forefend) talking about language for its own sake. I mean language that specifies, that lends authenticity through judiciously chosen details.

Hannah Tinti's "Home Sweet Home" tells the story of Pat and Clyde, who "were murdered on pot roast night." What raises Tinti's story high above the typical murder mystery is her emphasis on character, on providing each character in her tale with a set of ironclad specifics that render a generic experience impossible.

Take Pat, for instance, the adulterous housewife who falls victim to her lover's vengeful wife. On the eve of her murder she is

... thinking of James Dean. Pat had loved him desperately as a teenager, seen his movies dozens of times, written his name across her notebooks, carefully taped pictures of him to the inside of her locker so that she could have the pleasure of seeing his tortured, sullen face from *East of Eden* as she exchanged her French and English textbooks for science and math.

Another author might have written "as a teenager she had loved James Dean" and left it at that. But Tinti goes further—and further still ("When she graduated from high school, she took down the photos and pasted them to the inside cover of her yearbook")—to substantiate this particular specimen of a star-struck teenager. Similarly in *The Corrections* when Jonathan Franzen takes us on a tour of the flotsam in an aging couple's attic, he presents us not merely with a box of old recipes, but "recipes on brown paper calling for wilted lettuce." The level of specificity matters. It can make the difference between a good writer and a great one.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

Over this nominally well-written first page the generic rules. Except for the temperature (which, though much is made of it, “hardly register[s]” with the protagonist), little is specified. A woman wanders through a generic library, scanning its generic stacks in search of a generic “list of book titles.” She’s looking for books about getting pregnant, but the author fails to share with us either the titles on Rebekkah’s list or those she encounters on the shelves.

It’s too bad, since it drains the scene of tone and texture, but also because it sacrifices humor, since those titles would surely occasion a chuckle. Even when Rebekkah pulls the first book on her list from a shelf, beyond its having been “recently published,” we’re left to imagine everything about it, from its cover illustration to its title. Another opportunity lost. A perfunctory scan of fertility book titles demonstrates that truth—if not stranger than fiction—is certainly as funny. Imagine Rebekkah’s inner take on some of these:

The Rough Guide to Pregnancy and Birth

The Mother of all Pregnancy Books

Taking Charge of Your Fertility

The 5 Best Ways to Get Pregnant

Because the scene is rendered generically, there are no titles for Rebekkah to respond to, and so the chance to display her wit is likewise squandered.

Nothing wrong with engaging readers’ imaginations and letting them do some of the lifting. But if readers are to do a good job—and not the hatchet job of cliché—we have to provide them with some tools. A few telling details go a long way, blossoming in the reader’s mind into lush renderings.

Think of specific details as the ropes, nuts, cams, and hexes mountain climbers use, with the summit of vividly authentic description their devoutly wished-for goal.

Your Turn

Draft a scene in which a character in search of something (a book, a dress, a photograph, a record, a letter, or document of some kind) peruses the contents of a box, a file cabinet, a trunk, bookcase, wardrobe, or some other storage area or container. Render the object of the search, the character’s ultimate purposes for seeking it, and the items encountered while searching for it all as specifically as possible so a sense of character emerges from the descriptions.

71. Five Years with Sam

(Poetry at the Expense of Meaning)

Prologue:

Not the wheel of dried figs kept in the drawer next to the sink, not the crema in the morning made on the old stove parked on a dirt floor in a kitchen the size of a walk-in closet, not the fresh figs sunset-garish and afternoon-warm on their thin branches, or the way my father's face went serene when he spoke of it, serene with a dash of the sad, not that I was the only child, a daughter and therefore a suspect heir to the little house connected to the vineyard, the farm where my father chased songbirds down with a slingshot, where what he brought down he learned to cook and what he cooked, they all ate, it was World War II, after all, and it was his home and I, his daughter and that land, and every step from the soles of my father's bare feet that the path between plants recalled, every sigh shot and sending up the soil from my grandmother's wearied and worried lungs, I was certain—bone-certain that they already belonged to me.

Chapter 1:

It had happened again. The bed up against the wall and the piles, five–six books deep that made a continual island of book indenting the mattress.

I had forgotten this.

Five and a half years with Sam had done that, undone that need to sleep with every book I was perusing at a given time. When they formed a perilous body, when they made it clear that no one occupied the second pillow on my bed, I began to gather them into the two crates the way I used to when I was in graduate school and a two-year dry spell had left me in a messy apartment and a bed meant only for reading, crying and the occasional hour or two of sleep.

I took the books to the scale and began weighing them, a stack at a time. Thirty-five plus ... as I suspected, there were one hundred and sixty-seven pounds of books in my bed. Enough to be a lover. The information made me sad.

Analysis

The first part of this opening of a novel confronts us with a host of negations bound by tortured syntax. Briefly, it tells us what the narrator—an only child—will (or won't: see below) inherit from her (Italian?) farmer father.

For all its twists and tangles, it's an alluring passage, attractively written, with biblically incantatory rhythms straight out of the Song of Solomon. Indeed, the set-piece passage, which serves more as an appetizer to the story at hand than as the main course, reads like a prose poem. "Not the wheel of dried figs kept in the drawer next to the sink, not the *crema* in the morning made on the old stove parked on a dirt floor in a kitchen the size of a walk-in closet, not the...." The temptation to keep quoting is strong; the words having the tug and energy of a strong tide. Like most good songs, they seduce by their rhythms even when their meanings are difficult or obscure. Poets can get away with that, I suppose.

Then again, as Ezra Pound once said, "Poetry to be good poetry should be at least as well written as good prose." (Pound, who was tried for treason during World War II and kept for twenty-five days in a cage, said many good and outrageous things.) Based on Pound's dictum, one may take issue with this opening passage, since—though it succeeds as prose poetry, fails at the level of prose. It fails for being at best unclear, at worst contradictory. Is the narrator inventorying those things that she feels "already belong" to her, or those that will not?

There's more than enough confusion to go around here, especially in the first paragraph's final clauses, which take us back to the same war that had Ezra spouting anti-Semitism across the airwaves, when the narrator's father "chased songbirds down with a slingshot," birds that "he learned to cook and what he cooked, they all ate"—"they" referring, presumably, to his family, and to the narrator ("it was his home and I, his daughter and that land").

Then again it strikes me that the narrator has yet to be born, that these are not her own memories, but communal ones of her father, passed down to her by others. Thus the steps "from the soles of [her] father's bare feet"—those of the boy with the slingshot—trode a path through the woods that in turn recalls ... the father's feet. This bit of poetic feedback gives way to one of a grandmother's "worried lungs" sending or shooting up their "soil" along with her sighs. By soil one may infer catarrh or something more sinister: chunks of ravished lung. It's not at all clear, and I for one can't be entirely sure that the confusion is mine and not the author's.

Of Wagner's music Mark Twain once quipped, "It's not as bad as it sounds." Of the first paragraph here I'd say it's not as *good* as it sounds, and it sounds

very good. The opening's sweet music and sharp imagery are arrived at via sloppy syntax and slippery logic. Meaning has been sacrificed to music.

The second section of this opening is similarly compelling, and similarly challenged. Here the image is the singular one of a bed groaning under the weight of books that have displaced a romantic partner. The books are being gathered by the stack, and, for reasons unspecified, weighed. Apparently they have accumulated in the wake of a dissolved love affair or union. But here too a disregard for literal meaning in the name of poetry creates confusion and disorder where neither is warranted.

The scene opens with the bed groaning with books. The words "It had happened again," point to a sudden, unanticipated event (in fact the books have accumulated over time). The next one-line paragraph ("I had forgotten this.") suggests that the narrator has come upon this scene from a distance of time or space. From there we move to a mini-flashback of life with Sam, the narrator's partner, with whom the need to accumulate books was "undone." But the rest of the paragraph belies this topic sentence, telling how "when [the books] formed a perilous body" the narrator began to gather them ("... the way I used to when I was in graduate school"). So we have three beds full of books to lie with: the one before Sam, the one after, and one back in graduate school.

Which bed are we lying in here, now, in this scene?

This opening would be so much stronger were it less intent on poetry and more intent on clarity: if, for instance, it grounded us in a solid, particular moment with this narrator in one of her bedrooms full of books. Of course, that moment would need to attach itself to some specific, non-routine day or event, one that causes the narrator—and us with her—to look backwards or forwards at her life and tell a story.

Come to think of it, syntax and bedclothes have something in common. The author makes the bed that we, her readers, lie in.

Your Turn

Draft a musical opening, one that makes heavy use of rhythm and repetition or *parallelism*, as in the famous opening to *A Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ..."). See if you can do so with no sacrifice of precision and meaning. The subject needn't be grandiose; in fact the less grandiose, the better, possibly, since it will make for greater irony. Imagine an opening scene in which a parent struggles to get a recalcitrant six-year-old woken, dressed, fed breakfast, and ready to catch the school bus, written in the incantatory style of Dickens's famous opening.

72. Canary Wharf

(Overwriting / Sensationalism / Adverbs)

Madness belted out *Baggy Trousers* over screeching tyres and a roaring engine as a car sped through the back streets of Canary Wharf. Derelict warehouses lined the streets. Their windows boarded over in readiness. They were all due to be torn down to make way for the massive redevelopment, turning the dockside area into another financial hub.

Inside the car, with the windows down and the breeze rustling his short curly brown hair, Pete Carter sang along, at the top of his voice. A light tap of the brakes slowed the car and Pete swung the wheel over sharply.

Tyres squealed loudly in protest, struggling to maintain traction on the ancient potholed hardtop, and the rear of the car jolted violently, threatening to spin out of control. Deft work with the clutch and brake corrected the over-steer before he again trod heavily on the accelerator. With a roar from the engine, the car shot through the apex of the corner and raced away, down the deserted streets of the industrial estate.

Pete grinned broadly and a childlike giggle escaped his lips as the needle on the speedometer began to nudge 60 miles-per-hour.

He felt like a twelve-year-old on Christmas morning, rather than the supposedly responsible thirty-year-old adult, trying out his new toy. Except in this instance instead of a shiny new bike he was at the wheel of a top of the range Ford Sierra RS Cosworth. She was gorgeous bright red with gleaming alloy wheels. The price had been a steal—well, he'd paid a grand to a mate to pinch it out of a new car showroom. A bit of fancy work with the engine number and registration plate and the car was completely untraceable.

Susie, his missus, had gone ape shit at him when he arrived home with it. When their two girls were safely strapped into their new car seats, pushchair in the boot, and plenty of room left for a load of shopping, she'd see the sense in it. It had better be soon; she'd made him sleep on his lumpy old couch that really wasn't very comfortable.

Analysis

Two things good writers can't do without: a love of language and a love of truth. Not the factual truth, necessarily (though even in works of fiction getting the facts straight doesn't hurt). I mean emotional or aesthetic truth, the kind of truth an author brings to bear (for instance) in choosing a character's name, deciding it should be Alice and not Esther.

No one else may care about such things. Good writers do. They are determined to get even the smallest, least significant details just right. So they work and keep working, fine-turning their words to within a tolerance that would make a Swiss watchmaker proud.

Here, in this opening, truth and language are at odds with each other, with the author more intent on showy syntax than on clear, precise communication.

The story opens with a man—Pete Carter—driving at breakneck speeds down the blighted streets of Canary Wharf, now a high-rent financial and shopping neighborhood in East London, but still derelict at the time when the story takes place. My first assumption is that this is going to be a high-impact thriller, with Pete a fugitive on the lam. In fact, Pete is a gooney thirty-year old, and the car he's putting the hammer down on is a brand new Ford Sierra pinched from a dealer showroom on Pete's behalf by a contract thief.

It's all a bit over the top. Still, given fewer infelicities of language and detail, I might be willing to go along for the ride.

The third paragraph offers some examples. It begins: "Tyres [British spelling] squealed loudly in protest, struggling to maintain traction on the ancient potholed hardtop, and the rear of the car jolted violently, threatening to spin out of control." For all its kinetic energy, the sentence feels passive, with the car doing the struggling and the protagonist nowhere to be seen. And do we really need to know that the tires (or tyres) squeal "in protest," and furthermore that they do so in "struggling to maintain traction," i.e., grip? A less showy description might read, "As Pete struggled to keep it on the road, the car's tires squealed. Its rear end jolted over potholes."

Next sentence: "Deft work with the clutch and brake corrected the over-steer before he again trod heavily on the accelerator." A bit more overwrought than necessary: "He corrected for the over-steer, then hit the accelerator again."

Last sentence: "With a roar from the engine, the car shot through the apex of the corner and raced away, down the deserted streets of the industrial estate." Since apex usually refers to the top of something, its relation to a corner may be a factor of British usage. Likewise, in British English "shot through" may mean something other than what it sounds like—namely, that Peter has driven

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

off the road, in which case how does he end up back “on the deserted streets of the industrial estate”? The image I’m left with is of a car shooting through a high guardrail and vaulting through space toward a perfect two-point landing on another street—the sort of thing you see in movie chase scenes all the time, but which, on paper, at least for me, is more absurd than exciting.

In the next paragraph, proud Pete (as he has every right to be, having executed that last Hollywood stunt) grins “broadly” and “a childlike giggle escape[s] his lips.” I want to know, first of all, why the giggle has to “escape,” since nothing else about Pete is inhibited. A paragraph later, when we’re told that Pete’s a “supposedly responsible thirty-year-old,” I can’t help wondering who does the supposing, and whether he (or she), too, should be locked up before being loosed on the back streets of London? As is so often the case with adverbs, these fail to earn their keep.

We read further to learn that rendering the stolen vehicle “untraceable” took nothing more than “a bit of fancy work with the engine number and registration plate.” And what about those “gleaming alloy wheels” and that “gorgeous bright red” paint? As targets of theft go, Pete’s dream car is as discreet as a wailing fire engine. Within an hour he’d be in jail—or “gaol,” as the English spell it.

As for Pete’s having done all this to please Susie, his wife and the mother of their two children, wouldn’t she have been happier with a minivan or an SUV? Apparently so, since when Pete gets home (in the last paragraph) Susie goes “ape shit”—an abrupt diction drop, by the way, and hard to reconcile with phrases like “he again trod heavily on the accelerator.”

Half of this opening’s problems stem from an overeager author’s urge to flash his writing credentials, to be linguistically clever rather than clear and precise, from having put the style cart ahead of the substance horse.

Were it mine to edit, I’d solve the other half of this opening’s problems by entering the action as Pete pulls into his driveway, and let readers discover what he’s done through the dialogue with his wife, who, knowing him, smells something fishy. I’d even consider narrating the scene from Susie’s point of view so the reader doesn’t have to smell all that burned rubber.

And leave the car chase to the movies. They do them so well.

Your Turn

Take a page that you’ve written—preferably one involving a dramatic event—and overwrite it. Make it as lavishly and sensationally over the top as possible. Toss in perfunctory modifiers and gratuitous metaphors/similes. Have fun. Then do the opposite, strip it down to bleached bones and understatement, just the dry facts.

73. Kidnapped

*(First Sentence / Grounding Scene / Flashback /
Revision / Past Perfect)*

Our father kidnapped us on a January afternoon, the day before Faye's eighth birthday. I was twelve and should've known better. A few days earlier at the grocery store Mom had bought yellow cake mix, chocolate frosting, candles, and icing. She'd asked me to please bake the cake when I got home from school, as I'd done a few months earlier for my own birthday. Birthdays weren't a big deal in our new three-person family—money was tight and Mom worked a lot of nights tending bar at Roughboys back then—but there was always a little something: if not quite a celebration, then at least an acknowledgment. A cake. A simple gift or two after a macaroni and cheese dinner, or hot dogs, or take-out. But for some reason I hadn't connected those dots, that it didn't make sense for him to take us on this unannounced trip while those cake ingredients sat untouched on Mom's kitchen counter.

He was sitting in his '67 El Camino outside our school in Emeryville, smoking a Kool, one booted foot up on the glossy dashboard heavily greased with Armor-All, "Southern Nights" by Glen Campbell crackling from one working speaker. It still seems like yesterday. A second cigarette was tucked behind his ear, the one with the ragged earlobe. A couple years earlier, at a backyard barbecue, he'd been toying with his new fishing rod, showing one of his friends how to cast properly. My mother had told him not to do that with so many people around, and, the way I remember it, about two seconds later, on his backswing, he'd hooked his own ear, tearing the lobe clean away.

The junior high was across the street from the elementary school Faye attended. My job after school was to meet her so we could walk home together. I hadn't minded this the year or two before, but by junior high I'd started to feel self-conscious: my friends getting rides from their older siblings in high school, while I moped down the sidewalk alongside my little sister with her pink boots and pink hair ribbons and pink Shaun Cassidy lunchbox.

Analysis

Sometimes a little editing is all we need. Let me walk you through my revision of this good opening, which begins:

“Our father kidnapped us on a January afternoon, the day before Faye’s eighth birthday.”

Not a bad opener, but not as good as it could be. In killing two birds with one stone, it does, or tries to do, too much. Better one bird, one stone:

“Our father kidnapped us on a January afternoon.”

Or:

“Our father kidnapped us the day before Faye’s eighth birthday.”

The problem with the second version—and it’s a problem in the given draft as well—is that, since we don’t know who Faye is, instead of raising the pertinent question, “Why did the narrator’s father kidnap him?” we are left asking, “Who is Faye?” That bit of *false suspense* spoils the opening, diffuses its energy. We have to read on until the end of the final paragraph to learn that Faye is the narrator’s “little sister.”

Likewise, though the first part of the second sentence (“I was twelve”) provides useful context, the second part (“and should’ve known better”) teases us with its vague self-searching. Should have known better than what, or who? *Why* should the narrator have known better? It asks and answers questions not yet raised in the reader’s mind. Before we drift into existential queries, let’s have more of the experience, please.

The event pointed to by the tantalizing opening sentence has barely been engaged—in fact it hasn’t been engaged at all—when the third sentence (“A few days earlier at the grocery store ...”) yanks us out of it and into a flashback. Rule 1 for flashbacks: until and unless you’ve invested us in a scene, don’t flash back (or away) from it! The point of a flashback is to illuminate the scene from which it digresses, to add dimension and tension to it. The depth of our investment in the primary scene, the amount of suspense generated by it, determines how long a flashback it can support. In this case, since the primary scene hasn’t yet left the station, it can hold a flashback of exactly zero words.

After the narrator and his sister have gotten into the car with their mysterious father—that’s where the flashback belongs, and where, having shortened it, I relocated it. In my revision, the “had” in the flashback’s first sentence (“A few days earlier at the grocery store, Mom had bought yellow cake mix, chocolate frosting ...”) has been deleted. It’s not necessary, since “Days earlier” makes it clear that the scene takes place in the past before the past that we’re in, or the past perfect. My rule about “had”: use it when necessary. For instance, the next use of the past perfect “had” (“*She’d* asked me to please bake the cake”) is warranted, since it takes us to a moment *before* the narrator went to the grocery store with her or his mother: a past (cake request) before the past (grocery store) before the past (father/car scene). Other “hads” have been cut.

Much of the rest of that long first paragraph (“Birthdays weren’t a big deal in our new three-person family ...”) is implied or anyway not crucial enough to warrant weighing down this dramatic opening with less-than-crucial material. The respective ages of the narrator and her or his sister are—or will soon be—made clear by the fact that she or he is in junior high while she or he is in elementary school. Whatever else isn’t crucial can be discovered later. We need to get to the “kidnapping” promised by the first sentence, to the father waiting in his car, to that event.

Once we get to it, we want to be kept in the moment(s), with digressions (in the form of flashbacks and exposition) occurring at points of high, or at least sufficient, tension, and cunningly distributed between actions (“‘Get in,’ said my father” / “My sister and I got in my father’s car”), such that, though our engagement in the main scene is interrupted, the brief interruptions *add* dramatic tension. They enhance more than they annoy.

The cunning distribution of exposition and action throughout a scene is called *pacing*.

The same opening page revised:

Our father kidnapped us on a January afternoon.

He was sitting in his ’67 El Camino outside our school in Emeryville, smoking a Kool, one booted foot up on the glossy dashboard heavily greased with Armor-All, “Southern Nights” by Glen Campbell crackling from the one working speaker. A second cigarette was tucked behind his ear, the one with the ragged earlobe.

“Get in,” said my father.

Farley Junior High was across the street from the elementary school my sister Faye attended. Normally after school I would meet her

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

and we'd walk home together. While my friends got rides from older siblings, I moped down the sidewalk alongside Faye with her matching pink boots, hair ribbons, and Shaun Cassidy lunchbox.

My sister and I got in my father's car. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"Vacation," he said.

I should have known better. It was the day before Faye's eighth birthday. Days earlier Mom asked me to bake a cake, as I'd done a few months earlier for my own birthday. It didn't make any sense for our father to take us on a "vacation" while the ingredients for Faye's birthday cake sat untouched on the kitchen counter.

Your Turn

Revise a first page—your own or someone else's—in which no scene/action is engaged until well down the page such that the first line launches us directly or as quickly as possible into a scene.

74. A Twice-Drowned Narrator

*(“Titanic Lit” / Dead Narrators / Details /
Baroque vs. Austere / Devices)*

THE END: FINN–APRIL 10, 2012

I drowned three times. First, in the relentless rain of Ireland, second, in the deep gloom of mourning that settled over my mother, and third, in the freezing waters of the North Atlantic.

Even when the sun blazed down fierce as the devil there was the bleakness that settled in our bones like a great damp. Once in a blue moon Mam would pull me into her lap, rocking and singing and hanging on to me for dear life, calling me Michael, her wee angel, and ask me where we were going because sweet Jesus she was lost at sea.

It’s sad, how in moments of despair when all a body wants is hope, a still small voice will tell you the truth you don’t want to hear. Because, you see, I’m NOT Michael! I’m Finn, and it’s sad how precious few blue moons there are.

Yes, those are definitely my shoes, there in the museum case. Now who would have thought the likes of me would be famous for my shoes. And such a sad pair as that. I wore them the day I stepped onto the *Titanic* and the day I floated free of it, April 15, 1912.

I’m not sure if I was five or almost six when it happened, but after my death I discovered that time is an inexact measurement. Time raced ahead of me, pulling me backwards and spun me around so I met myself arriving. Even now, as the centenary of *Titanic*’s maiden voyage approaches, it continues to fling me forward, years speeding past me until I come to a full stop without my growing an inch or aging a single day. I’ve never felt more like a child but I’ve never been wiser. I’ve never been more me. And now, I’m almost free. I have five days to keep a promise. Five days to break a spell.

Visitors come to marvel at the miracle of my shoes, awed that a pair of innocent shoes survived the terrifying chaos when hundreds of people perished. The little shrine of the shoes celebrates a moment in time. But not what they imagine. I know their secret. You’d think a dead child’s shoes would make them grief-stricken, entirely. But then I’ve known miracle shoes before and I know how they can capture a soul with magic. I’ve seen them cast a spell. I’ve

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

seen them break a mother's heart. I can't go back to Mam shoeless. Sure, she'd skin me alive. Losing my shoes is a sin and I lost TWO pairs in the one day.

Analysis

Though more than a hundred years have passed since she struck an iceberg and sank, the *Titanic* maintains its grip on the imagination. It is our modern Fall of Man myth, the Industrial Age's answer to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But whereas Adam and Eve's sin was eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, modern man's transgression took the form of *hubris*: specifically the audaciousness attendant to building the world's largest floating object, calling it "unsinkable," and naming it after a race of mythological giants who, overthrown by Zeus, were consigned to the depths of a watery underworld. And though today it may seem as if the myth was born on that cold April night in 1912, the fact is it took forty years—until Walter Lord published *A Night to Remember* in 1955—for the *Titanic* to resurface in memory. Nothing like two world wars to make one forget.

Since *A Night to Remember* was published (speaking of first pages, Lord's masterpiece has one of the most captivating prologues ever written, guaranteed to send shivers up your spine), countless works of fiction have—I was going to say "exploited"—have availed themselves of the *Titanic* legend. The heroine of Danielle Steele's *No Greater Love* survives the sinking. In Richard Peck's YA novel *Ghosts I Have Been*, Blossom Culp can see into the future: too bad, since she's on the *Titanic*.

A more recent example of "Titanic lit," *The Girl Who Came Home* by Hazel Gaynor, concerns a group of Irish immigrants. Beryl Bainbridge's *Every Man for Himself* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The oddest of all fictional treatments of the *Titanic* legend must be Donald Newlove's yet-to-be-published *The Welles Requiem*. It takes place aboard a passenger train on which a fictional Orson Welles directs a movie that in turn is set aboard the doomed liner. (N.B. the set occupies a series of flatcars.)

The most interesting fictional treatment of the *Titanic* disaster was one written fourteen years *before* she sank. Penned by a struggling science-fiction author Morgan Robertson, *Futility* tells the story of the world's biggest ocean liner and how, on its maiden voyage, on a freezing April night, it strikes an iceberg and sinks, carrying its cargo of fabulously wealthy passengers to the bottom of the Atlantic. The name of Robertson's fictional doomed passenger ship? The *Titan*.

In the Titanic opener under consideration here, a narrator who is either Michael or Finn greets us with news that he has “drowned three times.” According to my dictionary, to *drown* is to “die through submersion in and inhalation of water,” meaning our narrator is categorically dead and therefore speaks to us from the Great Beyond.

Since I’ve already delivered my spiel about ghost narrators, I won’t go into it again here. Suffice it to say that, as narrative sleights of hand go the “dead narrator gambit” strikes me as a little too easy, a bit too glib. It also requires suspension of all four laws of thermodynamics.

The next two paragraphs of this beguiling (and beguilingly written, in a lilting brogue) opening evade the double drowning flourished by the first paragraph, and read like non sequiturs. Only with the fourth paragraph do we come to realize that our ghost narrator is visiting a museum wherein artifacts from the *Titanic* are on display—including the shoes he was wearing when the ship went down with him on board.

As for the narrator’s presence in that museum, it’s treated *informationally* (“Visitors come to marvel”) rather than as a particular *experience* (“Museumgoers crowd around me, jostling each other for a better view”). The “little shrine” holding that pair of shoes is labeled, not described. Readers might wonder: is the display case set into a wall, or on a table? What do the shoes look like? How badly worn are they? We’re left to imagine such things with no help from our ghostly narrator, who doesn’t see for us through his eyes. Nor do we know where this museum is located, or the context of the exhibit. Do those things matter? When it comes to details, how many are too many, and how few are too few? When should authors specify, and to what extent?

In *How Fiction Works*, his eloquent inquiry into technique in the modern novel, novelist and critic James Wood has this to say:

I confess to an ambivalence about detail in fiction. I relish it, consume it, ponder it. Hardly a day goes by in which I don’t remind myself of [Saul] Bellow’s description of Mr. Rappaport’s cigar: “the white ghost of the leaf with all its veins and its fainter pungency.” But I choke on too much detail, and find that a distinctively post-Flaubertian tradition fetishizes it: the overaesthetic appreciation of detail seems to raise, in a slightly different form, [the] tension between author and character....

In defense of detail, however, Wood alludes to a moment in George Orwell’s essay “The Hanging” in which Orwell describes the prisoner stepping around a puddle to avoid wetting his shoes while being led to the gallows.

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

In a similar moment in *War and Peace*, as he is about to be executed by firing squad, the condemned man adjusts his too-tight blindfold. “The avoidance of the puddle, the fiddling with the blindfold,” writes Wood

are what might be called irrelevant or superfluous details. They are not explicable; in fiction, they exist to denote precisely the inexplicable. This is one of the ‘effects’ of realism, of ‘realistic’ style.

That these details are superfluous, that they are “irrelevant,” is what makes them potent. Reading them, we ask ourselves, “Who would make up such a thing?” No sooner is that question raised in our minds than we *believe*. I call them “authenticating details.” They may be imaginary or real, and apply to both fiction and nonfiction.

The question of detail points toward a much bigger stylistic choice we make as writers, namely: to be minimalists or maximalists? Lush or lean? Ornate or pared to the bone? Baroque or Puritan? Carlyle or Hemingway? Much depends, of course, on the subject that we are treating. Written in a lush style, a stark tale like Hemingway’s “The Killers” would be an odd duck indeed. That said, we need look no further than Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* to find stark matter treated with baroque splendor:

Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat. Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all.

As writers, we may choose correctly from either end of the baroque–puritan continuum, or find our sweet spot somewhere in the middle. But as James Wood also points out, “There is a way in which even complex prose is quite simple.” Wood goes on to cite Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* by way of illustration, asking of the following passage “Is [it] ... an example of simple or complicated prose?”

This morning a splendid dawn passed over our house on its way to Kansas. This morning Kansas rolled out of its sleep into a sunlight grandly announced, proclaimed throughout heaven—one more of the very finite number of days that this old prairie has been called Kansas, or Iowa.

But it has all been one day, that first day. Light is constant, we just turn over in it. So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning. My grandfather's grave turned into the light, and the dew on his weedy little mortality patch was glorious.

Back to our ghost narrator looking at those shoes salvaged from the *Titanic*. We learn that he “has five days to keep a promise,” and furthermore that the dead child's shoes on display have secret magical qualities, that they have “cast spells” and broken “a mother's heart.” How much of this is to be taken literally and how much is metaphorical remains to be seen.

A dead narrator (whose name is both Finn and Michael and who has drowned thrice, lastly aboard the *Titanic*); a pair of magical shoes dredged up from the depths of the North Atlantic; a spell to be broken; a promise to be kept. It's a lot to digest in a page that, while providing quite a lot of information, also raises many questions, chief among them: beyond that its narrator met his fate aboard the *Titanic*, what will this story be about? This fabulous opening places an enormous burden on whatever follows it, since whatever else is revealed about Finn-Michael, his life must turn out to have been more interesting than his death—a hard act to follow, or rather to precede. Can all the promises held out by this opening possibly be kept?

Speaking of floating vessels, for my money the museum scene could do with some ballast in the form of grounding in concrete details. Were this opening mine, I'd establish the action with the first sentence: our narrator looking at a pair of shoes in a museum display case. I'd make the museum particular, not general. It may be crowded or empty, but it should be a *gritty* museum, rather than as spectral as our narrator.

To sum up: a compelling if convoluted opening. I suspect there's a great story to go with it, albeit one with a surfeit of imaginative devices.

Your Turn

This prompt has to do with details. Write a scene in which a character or characters discover an object inside a box or some other container that in turn has been hidden somewhere. The scene should be written such that, the closer we get to the object in question, the greater the level of descriptive detail. To wit: if the description of the room or field or construction site in which the box or container is hidden is six sentences long, the description of the box should be ten or more sentences, while the description of the object inside the box should run half a page or longer. The idea is to slow the action while building suspense toward and drawing interest to the focal object.

75. Meatloaf Night

(Child's or Child-like Perspective / Dialogue / Constraint = Style)

Tonight was meatloaf. It was quiet and just our forks.

Then Mom said, "I think I'll give her a call later."

Dad didn't answer.

Mom said, "What?"

Dad said, "These challenges ... well, don't you think they're par for the course to adulthood? Maybe she needs a little space to find her way."

That was about Steffi. I looked at her chair. It is an empty place and just three people now.

Mom said, "I hardly think I'm being overbearing."

Dad said, "I know, hon. I didn't say you were."

Mom said, "It's not like I'm demanding to know what color her socks are, or, or, what she had for lunch."

Dad said, "Okay, Celie."

Mom put down her glass and did a sigh.

I said, "Is Steffi an adult?" I used to be the one in the higher grade, before my extra years.

Mom picked up her fork. She said, "In my opinion, eighteen years old is still very much a part of adolescence."

Dad said, "Some would argue adolescence is an art fact."

I didn't know "art fact."

Dad looked at me. He said, "An art fact is anything made by humans. Like tools, or—"

Mom made her voice loud and said, "Until Stephanie graduates from college and gets a job, she is not an adult."

Some people don't believe I'm older. After we moved here a girl came in our yard. Holly. Me and Steffi were digging to India because Steffi said it is better than China.

Holly said, "Hi."

Steffi and me both said, "Hi."

Holly said, "The people who lived here before only had boys."

Steffi said, "Gross," and they laughed.

I said, "Yeah, gross."

Analysis

First-person narratives come with severe limitations, and none more than those in which the narrator is—or, in the case of this first page, has the mentality of—a child. Not only are diction and syntax restricted, so are the narrator’s perceptions. Can a child or child-like narrator be competent, let alone stylish?

To render child-like perceptions in a first-person narrative without being childish: that’s the challenge confronted—and largely met—by this opening passage in the voice of a character who, though physically older than his eighteen-year-old sister, is emotionally and mentally much younger.

Literature offers many examples of child or child-like narrators whose voices are equally convincing and compelling. “Benjy” Compson, who narrates the first part of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, comes to mind (“Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.”), as does Holden Caulfield, who narrates J.D. Salinger’s *A Catcher in the Rye*. Through his masterful control of idiom and syntax, Salinger simultaneously conveys both Holden’s irreverence (“... and all that David Copperfield kind of crap”) and his suffering soul. As one early reviewer noted, he manages to “understand an adolescent mind without displaying one.”

In his charming first novel, *In the Cherry Tree*, author Dan Pope does something similar for a group of adolescents coming of age in suburban Connecticut in the early 1970s. In Pope’s novel, though the sensibilities and behaviors of his young characters are decidedly those of children, there’s nothing the least bit juvenile about Pope’s writing or his novel. On the contrary, in its seeming innocence it is extremely sophisticated, a perfectly clear window through which the reader enters Pope’s world to re-experience his own adolescence.

“Timmy was playing with his peter. I saw him, I saw him, I saw him.”

“He was doing what?”

“Shaking his peter.”

“I won’t hear another word of this kind of talk.”

“But he was playing with it.”

“I was not. I was scratching.”

“Leave your brother alone, Daphne.”

The author of the first page under review here does something very similar, and almost as well. One problem is strictly technical and easily fixed: the wobbly handling of tense starting with the opening sentence, where “tonight” belongs to a present-tense narrative, while the rest of the sentence (“was meatloaf”) is

III. FIRST PAGES ANALYZED

in the past tense. Several lines later the narrator looks at Steffi's chair in the past, only to see it in the present ("It is an empty place"). Since nothing organic or intrinsic warrants or is accomplished by these discrepancies, they sound an off-note.

Otherwise, stylistically this opening's eccentricities, along with the severe *constraints* imposed on it, make it strong. Notice the simplified vocabulary and short sentences, and how the attributions are positioned at the start of each line of dialogue (Mom said, "What?") rather than where they would usually come, at the end, ("What?" Mom said.). This intentionally clunky, repetitive approach makes sense, given the narrator's age. It is sophisticated in its lack of sophistication, while still entirely readable.

So much of a good style comes down to *constraints*, to the limitations that we impose on ourselves, to what we choose *not* to do. Antithetically, a poor style often comes down to a lack of selectivity and restraint, using every tool and technique in our kit bags. Result: a catch-as-catch-can, hodge-podge style. Which is no style at all.

The dialogue itself has many merits; we get a strong sense of a family sitting down to dinner, of their overlapping, disjointed, sparring voices. Within half a page I feel that I know these people, that they are real. The narrator's diction seals the effect, with Mom not sighing, but "[doing] a sigh," and the narrator casting a positive light on the years she has stayed back in school by calling them her "extra years." A nice touch.

My only concern about the scene is that it succeeds only in conveying routine without hinting at any event or conflict, and without presenting readers with so much as the shadow of what might be in store by way of a plot. Maybe that's coming in a page or two. I hope so, since otherwise I will probably feel disappointed.

Your Turn

Take an opening—your own or someone else's—and revise it by applying severe constraints to the style. For instance, allow yourself no words of more than two syllables, or sentences of more than eight words. Use no adjectives or adverbs. Have each sentence begin with the next letter of the alphabet. Write in rhymed couplets. Use no articles. Come up with your own unique, severe constraints. Is the result stylistically weaker or stronger?

IV.

Some Exemplary Openings

BELOW ARE SOME EXEMPLARY FIRST PARAGRAPHS AND PAGES FROM published works. Note what information they supply and what questions they raise, and how the status quo or routine in the characters' lives is established or broken. At what point (if any) and to what extent do these openings promise some unique event or series of events? What is the ratio of background to foreground? How quickly do these openings engage your interest?

We had been preparing for months, slowly ridding ourselves of the possessions we had once thought essential. By the time we left, everything that was ours fit into three brown vinyl suitcases. My parents told me this would be enough, but, like so much they said, these words of comfort were not particularly plausible. Still, there was consolation. On our last day in Russia, as the fall of 1979 slid into winter, my brother Viktor lost his piano.

The opening of Aharon Levy's short story "The Piano" drops us into the middle of events (*in medias res*) on the day when the narrator and his family are leaving their home under less than ideal circumstances and with only the barest possessions. While generous with information, the opening raises pointed questions. What has happened to force this family into this situation? Most provocative of all is the paragraph's ultimate sentence, by which we learn that, as far as the narrator is concerned, his brother Viktor's loss of his piano is a "consoling" factor. Clearly, there is sibling rivalry at work here, and possible humor set against a backdrop of dire circumstances.

One August afternoon, when Ajay was ten years old, his elder brother, Aman, dove into a pool and struck his head on the cement bottom.
—"Surrounded by Sleep," Akhil Sharma

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS

You may remember this sentence from another short story about brothers referenced in the “Opening Strategies” chapter. That the events of the story are to be experienced from ten-year-old Ajay’s perspective is made clear from the first sentence, which presents us with the story’s inciting incident in the form of a sensationally dramatic event. We are held in suspense as to the consequences of Aman’s accident. Did he survive? If so, did he suffer serious and permanent damage? More importantly, what was the relationship of these two brothers? How does Aman’s accident change that relationship?

When I was seventeen and in full obedience to my heart’s most urgent commands, I stepped far from the pathway of normal life and in a moment’s time ruined everything I loved—I loved so deeply, and when the love was interrupted, when the incorporeal body of love shrank back in terror and my own body was locked away, it was hard for others to believe that a life so new could suffer so irrevocably. But now, years have passed and that night of August 12, 1967, still divides my life.

The aforementioned opening to Scott Spencer’s novel *Endless Love* makes explicit the fact that the author has chosen the story’s *inciting incident*—a fire that the narrator protagonist sets to the home of the girl with whom he is infatuated—as his jumping-off place. Though at the time of that event (which had unplanned and tragic consequences) the narrator was clearly not in his right mind, the perspective here is that of a considerably older and wiser person looking back at events with objective clarity, bringing the understanding he’s gained in the intervening years to bear on his youthful indiscretions. The main question raised: why did this narrator, who speaks to us in such a rational voice now, commit such an irrational act?

Spring had come to my hometown. When I got off the bus at the entrance to the contamination zone, Oles was standing at the guard station in a lightweight uniform instead of his padded military jacket, his gun swung loosely over his back. The thaw seemed to have improved his unusually sullen mood; he nodded his appreciation of the flowered fabric I’d brought for his wife and let me pass through the gate without even looking at my documents.

This opening of Katherine Shonk’s “My Mother’s Garden” (also quoted earlier) likewise begins *in medias res*. Note how the author avoids mentioning Chernobyl or “nuclear reactor” or “meltdown” in her first paragraph. Instead

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS

we read the words “contamination zone” and wonder: what sort of “contamination”? Is this an example of *false suspense*, of an author capriciously withholding information from us to arouse curiosity? Perhaps, but the facts become clear soon enough. Meanwhile we know it’s Spring, and the homely image of the “flowered fabric” along with that season associated with freshness and renewal plays curiously against the notion of contamination and the image of a uniformed, gun-wielding guard. There is clearly trouble in this Paradise.

My clothes have failed me. I remember the green coat that I wore in fifth and sixth grade when you either danced like a champ or pressed yourself against a greasy wall, bitter as a penny toward the happy couples.

Not only does this opening to Gary Soto’s nonfiction story “The Jacket” make clear both its theme (the significance of clothes) and its subject (“the green coat that I wore in fifth and sixth grade”), the narrator’s attitude (“bitter as a penny”) comes through loud and clear. This is a tale to be told not with mature, objective calmness, but with resentment and regret. Such a sour approach might turn us off were the theme one of greater intrinsic import (death, illness, war). Instead, we have bitterness directed toward an article of clothing—an object of little consequence in the grand scheme of things. Which is the point—and intrinsically funny, as is the essay itself.

Two things to get straight from the beginning: I hate doctors and have never joined a support group in my life. At seventy-three, I’m not about to change. The mental-health establishment can go screw itself on a barren hilltop in the rain before I touch their snake oil or listen to the visionless chatter of men half my age. I have shot Germans in the fields of Normandy, filed twenty-six patents, married three women, survived them all, and am currently the subject of an investigation by the IRS, which has about as much chance of collecting from me as Shylock did of getting his pound of flesh. Bureaucracies have trouble thinking clearly. I, on the other hand, am perfectly lucid.

This in-your-face opening to Adam Haslett’s story “Notes to My Biographer” is a perfect fit for its subject/narrator, a borderline case megalomaniac who may (or may not) have done the things he claims, and whose over-the-top personality is the subject of the narrative that it drives. Reading it is like watching a train wreck. Though you feel as if you should, you can’t take your eyes off this overbearing narrator. Nor can you quite disbelieve anything he says.

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS

It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying: “I drank too much last night.” You might have heard it whispered by the parishioners leaving church, heard it from the lips of the priest himself, struggling with his cassock in the vestiarium, heard it from the golf links and the tennis courts, heard it from the wildlife preserve where the leader of the Audubon group was suffering from a terrible hangover. “I drank too much,” said Donald Westerhazy. “We all drank too much,” said Lucinda Merrill. “It must have been the wine,” said Helen Westerhazy. “I drank too much of that claret.”

The next paragraph of “The Swimmer,” John Cheever’s most famous short story, begins, “This was at the edge of the Westerhazys’ pool.” In fact, Cheever’s story has as much to do with swimming pools as with drinking. One even can argue that its protagonist, Neddy Merrill, who on the day on which the story is set has gotten it into his head one morning to swim across the county via a series of swimming pools, is equally lubricated by alcohol and chlorinated water.

The premise is, of course, absurd: no matter how many pools are in it, one can’t possibly *swim* across any county. What Neddy actually swims across is his entire existence, but to know that you need to read the story. What this opening accomplishes—and what Cheever does splendidly throughout his story—is a subtle melding of surreal symbolism and gritty reality. For instance, the name Westerhazy, which manages somehow to be simultaneously symbolic, authentic, and absurd. Like the story that carries it, it strains credulity without breaking it.

You come in out of the oppressive bright sunlight through one of the double swinging doors that flap behind you, announcing your presence. It is afternoon-empty, a few people on stools or scattered around the tables in back who nod in your general direction. You order a shot of tequila and take your usual spot where the bar slopes around toward the bags of chips and pretzels, near the bartender leaning against the rows of bottles.

Though momentarily stylish, writing in the second person, as Susan Bittenweiser does in her story “This Bar,” is always a gamble. You’re betting that the reader will willingly accept the role of your story’s protagonist. Here, out of that “bright sunlight” we—or rather “you”—enter this bar like a B-Western gunslinger, Hopalong Cassidy on the Sagebrush Trail. Apart from the “chips

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS

and pretzels,” everything—including the scattered barflies “who nod in your general direction”—fits that bill. Will a brawl ensue? Will guns be drawn? That’s the cliché expectation aroused by this opening, one that, to (your) relief, won’t be met.

I spent the early ’90s shopping for tattoos and letting strangers finger me in public parks. Not complete strangers: I’d met them at a dance club, or a cafe, or my job telemarketing. San Francisco was in recession then and the rents were cheap, the weather too warm and the sound of steel drums filled the parks. It was the year my divorce was final. I cried every day.

This opening of Chris Lombardi’s memoir-essay “San Francisco in the 1990s” does exactly what its title promises: gives us that city then from the author’s unique and deeply personal perspective. The first line informs us in no uncertain terms that the author will hold nothing back, that this is an uncensored, unexpurgated offering. The “sound of steel drums” filling the parks functions as an authenticating detail, something so specific on reading it we surrender at once to the author’s authority: she was *there*. And though set a decade after its outbreak, it’s hard to read this opening without being reminded of the AIDS epidemic that decimated San Francisco.

I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn’t think anything of what he had done to the city’s name. Later I heard men who could manage their r’s give it the same pronunciation. I still didn’t see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humor that used to make richardsnary the thieves’ word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.

This opening of *Red Harvest*, crime/noir author Dashiell Hammett’s first novel, comes loaded with *voice*, or rather voices—that of the jaded, slangy detective narrator, and that of the “red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey” who calls a “shirt a shoit.” Thanks to those pungently articulated voices, we get two character evocations in one brief paragraph. The narrator’s weary worldliness reaches us through that third sentence, with its suggestion that he’s been around the block more than once and met all kinds of men there (including some who could “manage their r’s”). And though we can’t see this narrator, we can imagine the dark half-moons under his eyes and him wearing his tie somewhat askew, and that the cuffs of his shirt aren’t what they used to be.

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS

Jesus came into my room and I tried to keep reading, but it was hard with him standing there all caked in the blood of our sins, arms hanging at his sides, like he'd just stand there forever until I looked up. I laid down my magazine, open to the article about diet programs that deliver. "Christ," I said. "I was planning on having a me night."

With respect to getting the reader's attention, one can do worse than have Jesus Christ himself walk into the opening of a story, as Kristin Kearns does in "Sleeping with Jesus," a title that, the story goes on to demonstrate, is meant to be taken literally. As with John Cheever's "The Swimmer," what gives this opening its authority is a balancing of the sensational (Jesus) and the banal (a magazine article "about diet programs that deliver"). The latter makes the formal more "real" by dragging Christ, if you will, down to earth. Under the circumstances, the spoken line "Christ" has an ironic double meaning that's both funny and unsettling. Who could resist reading on?

I get a phone call from the past saying, "It's time your son met his father." There's not a whole lot I can do because she's flown him half-way round the world for the purpose. I remember some letter a couple months back, and with me busy it getting misplaced and forgetting about it and, knowing me, surely she can't expect anything else. From experience I've found that most worries disappear when you stop worrying about them.

This opening of Ezra Kyrill Erker's "Weekend with the Boy" promises all kinds of discomfort not only for its narrator, but for the boy and the father in question. Though unprepared for, the confrontation has been set in motion and is inevitable. The paragraph's last line ("most worries disappear when you stop worrying about them"), by which the narrator wishes to assure us and himself, does nothing of the sort. It does the opposite, in fact: it assures us that there is much to worry about. Ergo—since misery loves company—we keep reading.

I write this sitting in the kitchen sink. That is, my feet are in it; the rest of me is on the draining-board, which I have padded with our dog's blanket and a tea-cosy.

Inexperienced authors often fail to ground their readers in the concrete actions, settings, and other experiences of their characters. This happens especially with narrators, third- or first-person, who tell their stories from no clear

IV. SOME EXEMPLARY OPENINGS

or particular vantage point or perspective. No such issue with this opening to Dodie Smith's romance *Capture the Castle*, in which the narrator is firmly (if only partially) ensconced in her kitchen sink. An opening that gets its feet wet.

I am living at the Villa Borghese. There is not a crumb of dirt anywhere, nor a chair misplaced. We are all alone here and we are dead.

In 1934, when this opening to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* first appeared in print (in Paris; an official American edition wouldn't appear until twenty-seven years later, when the ban was lifted), it was considered as impudent and revolutionary as the pages that followed it. In fact the book didn't even call itself a "novel," though no other term applied. As Miller himself tells us a page later:

This then? This is not a book. This is libel, slander, defamation of character. This is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty ... what you will.

Miller meant to shock—and did, back then, though compared to much that's been written since his books seem mild and even dull, while Miller himself comes off today as a misogynistic noble savage of American letters. Still, though his work hasn't dated all that well, one must grant these opening lines their iconoclastic due. "We are all alone here and we are dead" is still one heckuva way to begin a novel. Imagine how it must have struck people in 1934. Whether one admires Henry Miller's convictions or not, he had the courage of them.

In the end—with respect to beginning—perhaps that's all or most of what we need: the courage of our convictions, the willingness to plunge headlong into the worlds of our stories, and—along with that willingness—the authority to compel our readers to take the plunge with us.

Some Exemplary First Sentences

THE FIRST SENTENCES BELOW ARE OFFERED WITHOUT COMMENTARY. Come to your own conclusions as to whether they work for you, and why. What do they tell you? And what do they make you want to know? What moods, attitudes, perspectives, and other qualities do they convey? Do they evoke character? If so, how?

Collect your own favorite first sentences to add to this list. Why do you like them? How are they perfectly suited to initiate the novels, stories, essays, or memoirs that go with them? Can you come up with alternative first sentences that might be as good or better?

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.

—*The Bad Beginning*, Lemony Snicket

I lost an arm on my last trip home.

—*Kindred*, Octavia Butler

I had just come to accept that my life would be ordinary when extraordinary things began to happen.

—*Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, Ransom Riggs

This is my favorite book in all the world, though I have never read it.

—*The Princess Bride*, William Goldman

V. SOME EXEMPLARY FIRST SENTENCES

You better not tell nobody but God.

—*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker

Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house.

—*Coraline*, Neil Gaiman

I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day of January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.

—*Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides

The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we understood the gravity of our situation.

—*The Secret History*, Donna Tartt

It began in the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel.

—*A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium.

—*The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood

By our second day at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909.

—“Brownies,” Z.Z. Packer

Of course, I had not always been a drunkard.

—*The Drinker*, Hans Fallada

The food ladies from the church went home hours ago.

—“Milk,” Lisa Allen

My father has asked me to be the fourth corner of the Joy Luck Club.

—*The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan

Jane's husband, Martin, works for the fire department.

—“The Fireman's Wife,” Richard Bausch

V. SOME EXEMPLARY FIRST SENTENCES

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mt. Sebastian college in New Jersey.

—“The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien

Uncas Metcalfe’s Raleigh had been stolen.

—*The Natural History of Uncas Metcalfe*, Betsey Osborne

It was a pleasure to burn.

—*Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive.

—*Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, J.K. Rowling

Joost had two problems: the moon and his mustache.

—*Six of Crows*, Leigh Bardugo

Afterword:

Artistic vs. Commercial Success

SAY YOU'VE EXTRACTED EVERY LAST OUNCE OF WISDOM FROM THE preceding pages. You've tended to every injunction and made every possible improvement to your opening: you've avoided default omniscience and false suspense, you've grounded your openings in time and place, you've started with (or as close as possible to) an inciting incident, you've either avoided a framing device, or used one shrewdly; you've made sure whenever possible and practical to provide your readers not with inert or abstract information and conclusions but with the concrete experiences from which those things might be drawn. You have avoided autobiography and sentimentality. You've done everything "right," which is to say you've done everything right *your own* way, in a way that's authentic and true and particular to you, and not just a hodgepodge of good advice earnestly obeyed.

You've written a fine first page that sets the tone and serves as a template for all those that follow, meaning all the pages that follow are equally fine. Meaning you've written a fine book or memoir or story.

Will it be published?

Maybe. For here is the truth: that good writing, however good it may be, is not all that determines whether something gets commercially published or not. It may be among the last things, lagging behind such considerations as the author's platform, her "web profile," and previous sales figures, the timeliness of her subject, and conditions of the market in whatever category or genre she has chosen to write in.

The great graphic designer Milton Glaser summed it up well: "The model for personal development is antithetical to the model for professional success." Artistic and commercial success are often two entirely different if not antithetical things. It's up to you to decide which kind of success means more to you and aim for it.

AFTERWORD

If commercial success is your goal, this book won't have hurt your ambitions toward it. Good writing never hurt a commercial book. If artistic success is your goal, possibly this book has helped you even more.

Either way, I hope it has helped and wish you good luck.

Subject Index

- abstraction, 31, 140, 208, 224, 277, 292, 329. *See also* concreteness over abstraction
- accident, 16, 115, 200, 294
 - as inciting incident, 121–22, 319
- accidental point of view, 21, 50, 66. *See* default omniscience
- addiction, 22, 237–41
- adjectives, 159, 181, 191, 197, 249, 251, 254, 276–77
- adverbs, 191, 200–01, 249, 251, 273–74, 276, 303
- appealing to the senses, 159, 178, 251, 273
- artificially withholding information, 23, 25, 92, 118–19, 121, 156, 247–48
- artistic success, 330
- atmosphere (mood and atmosphere), 89, 140, 195, 224, 237
- authenticating details, 182, 197, 265, 269, 297, 298, 312, 321
- authenticity, 3, 163, 197, 249, 252, 265, 272
- authorial intrusion, 21, 87, 88, 198, 281, 294
- autobiography. *See* memoir vs. autobiography
- backward sentences, 127
- bait-and-switch story, 25, 104
- baroque or austere language, 309, 312
- between the lines, 69. *See* implication vs. statement
- biblical openers, 10
- blunt sentences, 156
- “bodice-ripper,” 202–03
- breathless prose, 255–56
- character. *See* evoking character
- character development, 129–30. *See also* evoking character
- charity, 249
- child narrator, 43, 159, 162, 220, 300, 315
- child’s perspective, 156. *See* child narrator
- claim, 31, 231
- clarity, 44, 176, 249, 252, 289, 301. *See also* precision
- cliché, 3, 19, 31–32, 34, 147, 163, 181, 204, 252, 254, 284, 297–98, 321

SUBJECT INDEX

- cliffhanger, 129
- climax, 25, 127, 129–30
- close third-person, 60–61, 66, 144, 191, 206, 209. *See* free indirect discourse
 - close third-person narration, 209
- comedy, 73, 74, 129, 253, 256, 284. *See also* humor
- commercial success, 330
- compound modifiers, 255
- concrete evidence, 29, 48, 182, 231, 267, 281, 313
- concrete experience, 280, 329
- concreteness over abstraction, 48, 168, 178, 231, 280–82, 288, 292
- confusion/frustration, 48, 96, 119, 121, 175, 208, 234, 300, 301
- consciousness, 11, 51–52, 62
 - self-consciousness, 153–54
 - stream of consciousness, 48, 60–61, 65–66, 143–44, 278
- constraints, 7, 165, 316
- context, 121, 141, 244
- contextualization, 259–60
- crime and punishment, 191
- crime fiction, 116, 187, 189–91, 194, 321
- dead narrator, 75–77, 311, 313
- death, 159, 220, 272
- deathbed frame, 272
- defamiliarization, 261–62
- default omniscience, 10, 22–23, 46, 51. *See also* omniscient narrator
- déjà vu, 188
- details, 55–57, 74, 104, 172, 178, 198, 277, 297–98, 311–12
 - authenticating details, 182, 197, 265, 269, 297, 312, 321
 - sensory details, 74
 - of setting, 89
- detective fiction, 165–66, 187, 196
- dialogue, 138, 163, 195, 208, 251, 284, 316
- dialogue tags/attributions, 52, 96, 316
- dramatic moment, 163, 180, 182, 185, 224
- dramatic openings, 8, 79, 81–82, 85, 129, 307, 318
- dramatic scene, 181, 182, 198, 219, 224–25, 273, 278, 282
- dramatic tension, 307
- dramatic writing, 218, 264, 294. *See* scene vs. summary
- dramatized routine, 26–29, 60, 64, 142, 152, 167, 191, 198
- dreams, 24–25, 81–82, 98, 102–05, 110, 188, 191
- drug addiction, 237–41
- epithets, 154, 197. *See* opinions and information vs. evidence
- evoking character, 62, 132, 135, 191–92, 208, 227, 244, 264, 278, 291, 321
- exemplary openings, 317–23
- experiential writing, 56, 251
- fait accompli*, 200
- false suspense, 23–25, 34, 92, 108, 113, 116, 118–19, 121, 175, 247–48, 294, 306, 319, 329
- false suspense vs. generosity, 234–35
- fan fiction, 165
- fantasy genre, 138, 165, 174, 178–80

SUBJECT INDEX

- feelings, 35, 61, 66, 146, 149–51, 162, 208, 254–55, 258–59, 288. *See also* sentimentality
- fictional artists, 140, 143
- first glimpse, 87, 91, 137–38
- first-person narrator, 10, 41–44, 132, 156, 198, 291–92, 315, 322
 - credibility of, 291–92
 - reliability, 69
- first sentences, 2–3, 15, 21, 55, 60, 89, 95, 102, 114, 133, 196–97
 - exemplary first sentences, 325–27
- flashback, 33–34, 234, 247, 272, 301, 306–07
- forced exposition, 278
- foreshadowing, 61, 126, 162
- framing devices, 12, 33–34, 89, 96, 247, 260, 272, 329
- framing questions, 123, 247
- free indirect discourse, 61–62, 66, 208
- frenetic prose, 255

- genericism, 50, 197, 252, 297–98
- generosity, 234–35
- genres (or genre fiction), 39, 165–66. *See also* names of specific genres
- ghost narrator, 76, 311, 313. *See* dead narrator
- Gothic novels, 203
- grammar, 181, 185, 201, 251, 280
- gratuitous (narrative) devices, 76–77
- grim determination, 37
- Grim-Reaper-as-Narrator, 76
- grounding scenes, 3, 28, 47, 120, 257, 287, 305, 313

- hallucination, 70, 262
- hardboiled crime fiction, 194–95
- horror/thriller genre, 166, 184, 255, 286
- humor, 30, 63, 162–63, 172, 244, 272, 298, 316, 319, 322
 - inadvertent comedy, 256
 - satire or spoof, 200
 - tongue-in-cheek, 172
- humor and danger, 162–63

- implication vs. statement, 91, 127, 229–30, 284–86, 294
- in medias res*, 15, 85, 129, 168–69, 178, 238, 316, 318
- inadvertent comedy, 256
- inadvertent omniscience, 22. *See* default omniscience
- inciting incident, 3, 15–16, 79, 81–82, 92, 110, 123, 163, 318, 329
- inciting incident (accident as), 121–22
- indolent hero, 149–50
- information vs. evidence. *See* information vs. experience
- information vs. experience, 20–21, 29–31, 46, 48, 54–55, 57, 178, 198, 232, 251, 291–92
- information vs. suspense, 235
- informationally (writing informationally). *See* information vs. experience
- inhabiting a scene, 21, 54–55, 57, 218–20
- intelligent narrator, 241–42
- interior monologue, 65–66
- intrusive author. *See* authorial intrusion

SUBJECT INDEX

- judgments, 153–54, 197, 227
- labels, 154, 197
- law of economy and efficiency, 178
- literary fiction, 40, 166, 204, 209
- mainstream fiction. *See* literary fiction
- McGuffin, 190–91
- “meeting cute” scene, 125. *See* first glimpse
- melodrama, 32, 119
- memoir, 39, 136, 211–12, 214, 216–17, 230, 237, 247, 329
- memoir/vocation, 217
- memoir vs. autobiography, 211, 214–15, 227
- memoir with no reflection, 242
- mental illness, 70, 126, 145–46, 148–49, 279–80
- metaphors, 145–46, 153, 235, 249, 251, 262–63, 277, 280, 288–89
- metaphysical elements, 177
- mistaken identity, 92
- modifiers, 251, 277. *See also*
 - adjectives; adverbs
 - abstract modifiers, 255
 - compound modifiers, 255
- mystery fiction, 165
- narrator, 3, 7–8, 21, 34, 41, 56–57, 115
 - child narrator, 43, 159, 162, 220, 300, 315
 - dead narrator, 75–77, 311, 313
 - first-person narrator, 10, 41–44, 69, 110, 132, 156, 198, 291–92, 322
 - ghost narrator, 76, 311, 313
 - Grim-Reaper-as-Narrator, 76
 - intelligent narrator, 241–42
 - for memoir, 227
 - noir narrator, 76
 - omniscient narrator, 20, 22–23, 76, 132
 - overbearing narrator, 319
 - past-tense narrator, 240–41
 - reliable narrator, 265
 - second person narrator, 9–10, 320
 - third-person narrator, 10, 23, 41–42, 46, 48, 62, 89, 209, 322
 - unreliable narrator, 44, 69–70, 146, 240
- nested scenes, 95–96
- noir detective fiction, 193, 200
- noir (film noir), 75–76, 231
- noir narrator, 75–76
- noir shadows, 113
- novels of manners, 203, 208
- objectivity, 43, 50, 66, 114
- omniscient narrator, 20, 22–23, 76, 132
- opening scene, 5–17, 145
- opinions and information vs. evidence, 291–92
- overbearing narrator, 319
- overwriting, 293, 302
- pacing, 307
- paradox, 244
- parody, 200
- past perfect tense, 96, 185, 278, 307
- past tense, 185, 240–42, 315
- past-tense narrator, 240–41
- penny dreadfuls, 166
- plot, 79

SUBJECT INDEX

- ABC formula, 107
- distinguished from structure, 107
- plot/suspense, 37, 39–40, 85, 93, 107–08, 113, 118, 122, 129, 169, 175, 187, 318
- Plots A and B, 107–08, 110
- poetry, 99, 230, 254, 300–01
- poetry vs. histrionics, 254
- point of view, 3, 20–23, 39, 41–42, 48–51, 57, 88, 114–15, 144, 191
 - accidental point of view, 21, 50, 66
 - subjective viewpoint, 51, 66, 132, 291
- point of view character, 123
- pornography, 203–04
- precision, 44, 176, 249, 252, 289. *See also* clarity
- premature climax, 129
- present tense narrative, 315
- present tense prologue, 242
- prologues, 116, 180–82, 242, 260, 310
- “pulp fiction,” 194
- ragged-to-riches stories, 79
- realism, 103, 184, 312, 320
- reflection, 82, 132, 154, 241–42, 269
- reflective past tense, 242
- regency romance, 207–08
- relationship, 318
- reliable narrator, 265
- retrospective narrative, 111, 159
- revision, 4, 37, 284, 286, 306
- righteous indignation, 228
- romance novels, 166, 184, 203–04, 207
- romantic comedies, 125
- routine. *See* dramatized routine
- Russian doll syndrome, 95–96
- “said,” 52
- satire or spoof, 199–200
- scene, 136–37, 144
 - grounding scene in setting, 259
 - inhabiting a scene, 55
- scene vs. summary, 9, 123, 224, 264–65
- science fiction, 165–66, 168, 171–72, 178
- second person narrator, 9–10, 320
- second person point of view, 72–74
- self-consciousness, 153–54
- sensational events, 149, 151, 322
- sensationalism, 6, 32, 123, 302–04
- senses (appealing to the senses), 159, 178, 251, 273
- sensibilities, 62, 114
- sentimentality, 35–37, 176, 251, 258–59, 272, 294, 329
- setting, 40, 47, 121, 132, 162
 - establishing a setting, 47
- shock-tactic metaphor, 263
- “show, don’t tell,” 182, 218–19, 224, 227, 264–65, 284, 292
- similes, 191, 249, 251, 262, 280, 289
- sleeve rolling, 99–101
- statement vs. implication. *See*
 - implication vs. statement,
 - information vs. experience
- stereotypes, 31, 139, 204
- story vs. anecdote, 242–45
- stream of consciousness, 48, 60–61, 65–66, 143
- strong voice, 44–45, 99

SUBJECT INDEX

- structure, 79, 81. *See also* where to begin?
- style, 39–40, 44, 251–67
 - catch-as-catch-can, 316
- subjective viewpoint, 51, 66, 132, 291
- subjectivity, 20, 40–41, 54–55, 288
- summary, 86
 - authorial summary, 284
 - scene vs. summary, 9, 123, 224, 254
- summary description, 264–67
- supernatural, 178–79
- suspense, 37, 39–40, 85, 93, 113, 116, 118, 122, 129, 169, 187–88
 - false. *See* false suspense
- suspension of disbelief, 181–82, 201
- symbolism, 320
- syntax, 61–62, 181, 251, 300–01
- telling vs. showing. *See* “show, don’t tell”
- tense (handling of verb tense), 269
 - past perfect tense, 96, 185, 278, 307
 - past tense, 242, 315
 - present tense, 315, 342
- third-person narrator, 10, 23, 41–42, 48, 89, 209, 322
- third-person point of view, 60
- thriller fiction, 165, 183, 190, 255, 303
- throat clearing, 99, 146
- throat-grabber openings, 5–6, 261
- tongue-in-cheek, 172
- unreliable narrator, 44, 69–70, 146, 240
- viewpoint. *See* point of view
- vocation, 216
- voice, 2–3, 41, 45, 76, 132, 321
 - strong voice, 44–45, 99
- war, 125–26, 214, 238, 268
- western fiction, 165
- where to begin?, 10–16, 39, 79–80
- young adult novels, 60, 162, 165–66

Works and Authors Cited Index

- Adams, Alice, 107
 Adams, Douglas, 11n7
The Afterlife, 76
 Ageyev, M., 237
 Allen, Lisa, 326
 Amis, Martin, 31, 297
Anna Karenina, 137
 Antune, António Lobo, 6
Appointment in Samara, 110
 “Art as Technique,” 262
Aspects of the Novel, 47, 135
Asymmetry, 273
Atlantic City Proof, 256
 Atwood, Margaret, 166, 326
 Aurelius, Marcus, 32
 Austen, Jane, 6n5, 208
Author, Author, 272
Autobiography of a Face, 212
The Autobiography of Will Rogers, 211

The Bad Beginning, 325
 Bainbridge, Beryl, 310
 Banville, John, 272
 Bardugo, Leigh, 327
 Barker, Dan, 214
 Barth, John, 149, 196, 284
 Baudelaire, Charles, 37
 Bausch, Richard, 326
 “Beginnings at their Best,” 6

 Bell, Madison Smartt, 12
Beloved, 137
Beowulf, 179
 Bergson, Henri, 11
The Big Sleep, 194
Blood Meridian, 312
 Bloom, Harold, 166
The Book Thief, 76
 Booth, Stephen, 191
 Borges, Jorge Luis, 31, 277
 Bradbury, Ray, 327
 Brautigan, Richard, 262
Bright Lights, Big City, 9, 73, 237
Brighton Rock, 5n1
 Brodkey, Harold, 14–15
 Brontë, Charlotte, 221
 Brown, Dan, 256
 “Brownies,” 326
 Bukowski, Charles, 231
Bullshit Night in Suck City, 237
Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid, 129
 Butler, Octavia, 325
 Bittenweiser, Susan, 320
*By Grand Central Station I Sat Down
 and Wept*, 137
 Byron, George Gordon, Lord, 272

 Cain, James M., 5n2, 16
Cain’s Book, 237

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX

- Camus, Albert, 220
 Capote, Truman, 190
Capture the Castle, 323
Catch-22, 137, 277
The Catcher in the Rye, 14n9, 315
 Chandler, Raymond, 166, 194
 "Chasing the White Rabbit," 103
 Cheever, John, 69, 320, 322
 Chekhov, Anton, 79
 Chesterton, G.K., 165, 194
A Christmas Carol, 103
 "The Circular Ruins," 277
 Cocteau, Jean, 284
 Colfer, Eoin, 76
The Color Purple, 326
*Confessions of an English Opium-
 Eater*, 237, 240
 Conroy, Frank, 175
Coraline, 326
The Corrections, 297
 Cox, Lynn, 214
 Crane, Stephen, 16
Crime and Punishment, 103
The Crimson Petal and the White, 9,
 100
Cross Creek, 214

The Da Vinci Code, 255–56
David Copperfield, 14
 Davies, Robertson, 110
 Day, Carroll John, 194
 De Quincy, Thomas, 237, 240
Dead Poets' Society, 178
The Death of Artemio Cruz, 272
Death Stalks Door County, 116
 Defoe, Daniel, 14
Desperate Characters, 111
 Dickens, Charles, 12, 14, 103,
 281–82

The Dive from Clausen's Pier, 121
 Doig, Ivan, 214
 Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, 255
 Doyle, Arthur Conan, 187
The Drinker, 326
 du Maurier, Daphne, 104
The Duke of Deception, 85

East of Eden, 47, 192, 297
 Echenoz, Jean, 61–62
 Egan, Jennifer, 326
 "El Dinosaurio," 103
The End of the Road, 149, 196, 284
Endless Love, 111, 318
Enduring Love, 122
 Erker, Ezra Kyrill, 322
 Eugenides, Jeffrey, 326
Every Man for Himself, 310

 Faber, Michael, 9
Factotum, 231
 Fadiman, Clifton, 276
Fahrenheit 451, 327
 Fallada, Hans, 326
A Farewell to Arms, 126
Fear of Flying, 287
Fifth Business, 110
Finnegans Wake, 13
Fire from Heaven, 168
 "The Fireman's Wife," 326
 Flynn, Nick, 237, 238
Fools Die, 100
 Forster, E.M., 47, 135
 Fox, Paula, 111
 Franzen, Jonathan, 297
 Frey, James, 240
From Here to Eternity, 268
From the Earth to the Moon, 171
 Frost, Robert, 26

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX

- Fuentes, Carlos, 272
Futility, 310
- Gaiman, Neil, 326
- Gallagher, Nora, 212, 214
- Gardner, John, 103
- Gaynor, Hazel, 310
- Genesis, 11n7
- Ghosts I Have Been*, 310
- Gilead*, 312
- Gilmore, Christopher Cook, 256
- The Girl Who Came Home*, 310
- Gissing, George, 61
- Glaser, Milton, 329
- The Glass Castle*, 8, 214, 237
- The Godfather*, 100
- Godless*, 214
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, 81
- Goldman, William, 325
- Goncharov, Ivan, 150
- Gone with the Wind*, 40
- "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," 286
- Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, 177–78
- "Goodbye, My Brother," 69
- Grafton, Sue, 194
- The Grapes of Wrath*, 132
- Gravity's Rainbow*, 5n3
- Grealy, Lucy, 212
- Greeley, Andrew, 195
- Greene, Graham, 5n1, 166
- Grover, Stephen, 203
- Halliday, Lisa, 273
- Hammett, Dashiell, 165, 194–95, 321
- The Handmaid's Tale*, 40, 166, 326
- "The Hanging," 311
- Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, 327
- Haslett, Adam, 319
- Hawaii*, 11
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 157
- Heavenly Village*, 76
- Heller, Joseph, 277
- Hemingway, Ernest, 50, 126, 284–85, 312
- Heraclitus, 37
- Heyer, Georgette, 208
- The Hidden Machinery*, 207
- "Hills Like White Elephants," 284–85
- Hilton, James, 177–78
- Hitchcock, Alfred, 129, 184, 187, 190
- "Home, Sweet Home," 192, 297
- The Honeymooners*, 99
- Housekeeping*, 7–8
- How Fiction Works*, 311
- How Novels Work*, 165
- The Hunger Games*, 40, 166
- In Cold Blood*, 190
- "In Defence of Detective Stories," 165n5
- In the Cherry Tree*, 156, 315
- In the Shadow of Memory*, 122
- The Infinities*, 272
- "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead," 25n3
- Ishiguro, Kazuo, 69, 166, 292
- Jack, Ian, 211
- "The Jacket," 319
- Jackson, Michael, 184
- James, William, 65
- Jane Eyre*, 203, 221
- Jen, Gish, 166
- Jiang, Ji-Li, 214

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX

- Jong, Erica, 287
A Journey to the Centre of the Earth, 171
The Joy Luck Club, 326
Joyce, James, 13, 273
- Kafka, Franz, 5n4, 6, 102, 168, 200
Kazantzakis, Nikos, 137
Kearns, Kristin, 322
Keats, John, 32
Kesey, Ken, 70, 262
“Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse,” 262
“The Killers,” 50, 312
Kindred, 325
King, Stephen, 40, 119, 122, 166, 276
King Lear, 255
- Lahiri, Jhumpa, 166
Lamott, Annie, 107
The Land at the End of the World, 6
Le Guin, Ursula K., 165
Lennon, John, 103
Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 32n4
Letters of Anton Chekhov, 79n2
Levi, Primo, 214
Levy, Aharon, 317
Life of Pi, 262
Lincoln in the Bardo, 40
Livesey, Margot, 207
Lodge, David, 272
Lombardi, Chris, 321
London Fields, 13n8
Lopate, Phillip, 241
Lord, Walter, 310
Lost Horizon, 178
The Lovely Bones, 76
Lucas, Craig, 88
Lyon, Joshua, 241
- MacDonald, John D., 194
The Maltese Falcon, 194–95
Mandel, Emily St. John, 166
Martel, Yann, 262
Matter and Memory, 11
McCarthy, Cormac, 166, 312
McCarthy, Tom, 122
McEwan, Ian, 122
McInerney, Jay, 9, 73, 237
Meditations, 32
“The Metamorphosis,” 5n4, 102, 168
Michener, James A., 11
Middlesex, 326
“Milk,” 326
Miller, Henry, 323
A Million Little Pieces, 240
Misery, 122
Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children, 325
Mitchell, David, 166
Moby Dick, 137, 195
Monterroso, Augusto, 103
Moore, Lorrie, 73, 262
Morrison, Toni, 137
Mosley, Walter, 194
Mrs. Dalloway, 60
Mullen, John, 165
Murakami, Haruki, 166
“The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” 187
Murray, William Hutchinson, 81
“My Mother’s Garden,” 15, 317
My Name Is Red, 12
- Nabokov, Vladimir, 266
Native Son, 126
The Natural History of Uncas Metcalf, 327
New Grub Street, 61

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX

- Newlove, Donald, 310
 Nichols, Peter, 79
A Night to Remember, 310
 1984, 166
No Greater Love, 310
North by Northwest, 129, 187
Notes from the Underground, 255n13
 "Notes to My Biographer," 319
Novel with Cocaine, 237

Oblomov, 150
 O'Brien, Tim, 327
 O'Connor, Flannery, 286
 O'Hara, John, 110
On Becoming a Novelist, 103n3
On Writing Well, 211
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, 70,
 262
One Thousand and One Nights, 187
 "The Open Boat," 16
 Orwell, George, 166, 311
 Osborne, Betsey, 327
Othello, 187

 Packer, Ann, 119, 122
 Packer, Z.Z., 326
*The Painter of Modern Life and Other
 Essays*, 37n5
Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, 203
 Pamuk, Orhan, 12
 Parker, Robert B., 194
A Passage to India, 47
 Peck, Richard, 310
 Percy, Benjamin, 26
 "The Piano," 317
Pill Head, 241
 Poe, Edgar Allan, 146, 184, 187,
 255
 Pope, Dan, 156, 315

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young
 Man*, 273
The Postman Always Rings Twice,
 5n2, 16
 Pound, Ezra, 277, 300
Practicing Resurrection, 214
 Pratt, Julie, 6
 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 254n12
 "Prelude to a Kiss," 88
Pride and Prejudice, 6n5, 203
The Princess Bride, 325
 Prose, Francine, 103–04
 Proulx, Annie, 166
 "Provide, Provide," 26
Psycho, 184
 Puzo, Mario, 100
 Pynchon, Thomas, 5n3

Ravel, 61–62
 Rawlings, Marjorie Kinnan, 214
Rebecca, 40, 104
Red Harvest, 321
Red Scarf Girl, 214
 "Reflection and Retrospection,"
 241n11
Remainder, 122
The Remains of the Day, 69, 292
 Renault, Mary, 168
Restaurant at the End of the Universe,
 11n7
 Reynolds, Brad, 195
 Rice, Ann, 179
 Richardson, Samuel, 203–04
 Riggs, Ransom, 325
The Road, 166
 Robbins, Tom, 181
 Roberts, Arthur, 200
 Robertson, Morgan, 310
 Robinson, Marilynne, 7–8, 312

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX

- Robinson Crusoe*, 14
The Rock, 79
 Rogers, Will, 211
 Rowling, J.K., 327
The Runaway Soul, 14
 Rushdie, Salman, 288
 Rylant, Cynthia, 76
- Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de, 216–17
 Salinger, J.D., 14n9, 32, 101, 315
 “San Francisco in the 1990s,” 321
The Satanic Verses, 288
 Saunders, George, 40
Scared to Live, 191
 Scott, Sir Walter, 208
The Scottish Himalayan Expedition,
 81
 Sebold, Alice, 76
The Secret History, 326
Self-Help, 73
Seymour: An Introduction, 32
 Shakespeare, William, 187, 255, 273
 Sharma, Akhil, 16, 317
 Shklovsky, Victor, 261–62
 Shonk, Katherine, 15, 318
 “Sights from a Steeple,” 157
Six of Crows, 327
 Skalka, Patricia, 116
 Skloot, Floyd, 122
 “Sleeping with Jesus,” 322
 Smart, Elizabeth, 137
 Smith, Dodie, 323
 Snicket, Lemony, 325
 Soto, Gary, 76, 319
 Spencer, Scott, 111, 318
Station Eleven, 166
 Steele, Danielle, 310
 Steinbeck, John, 47, 132
 “Strawberry Fields Forever,” 103
- Sunset Boulevard*, 75–76
 “Surrounded by Sleep,” 16, 317
Survival in Auschwitz, 214
 “The Swimmer,” 320, 322
Swimming to Antarctica, 214
- A Tale of Two Cities*, 12, 282
 Tan, Amy, 326
 Tartt, Donna, 326
 “The Tell-Tale Heart,” 146, 255
Ten Indians, 12
 “The Things They Carried,” 327
The Third Man, 100
 “This Bar,” 320
This Boy’s Life, 214
This House of Sky, 214
 “The Three Apples,” 187
 “Thriller,” 184
 Tinti, Hannah, 192, 297
To Kill a Mockingbird, 40
 Tolkein, J.R.R., 178–79
 Tolstoy, Leo, 168, 262
 Trocchi, Alexander, 237
Tropic of Cancer, 323
 Twain, Mark, 276, 300
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, 171
- Ulysses*, 65
- Verne, Jules, 171
 Vidal, Gore, 211
A Visit from the Goon Squad, 326
 Voltaire, 276
- Walker, Alice, 326
 Walls, Jeanette, 8–9, 214, 237–38
War and Peace, 268, 312
 “Weekend with the Boy,” 322
 Welles, Orson, 211

WORKS AND AUTHORS CITED INDEX

- The Welles Requiem*, 310
Wells, H.G., 171
Welty, Eudora, 25
“Why Do People Read Detective
Stories?,” 166n6
The Wild Girls, 165
Wilder, Billy, 75–76
Wilson, Edmund, 166
Wind, Sand, and Stars, 216
The Wish List, 76
The Wizard of Oz, 99
Wolff, Geoffrey, 85
Wolff, Tobias, 214
Wood, James, 311–12
“The Woods,” 26
Woolf, Virginia, 60
Wordsworth, William, 254
Wright, Richard, 126
Wuthering Heights, 203
Yagoda, Ben, 276
Yeats, W.B., 234
Zinsser, William, 211
Zorba the Greek, 137
Zusak, Markus, 76

From the Publisher

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PETER SELGIN is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. He has published a novel, an essay collection, a memoir, three books on the writer's craft, and several children's books. His play, *A God in the House*, was a Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference finalist. He is a visual artist as well as a writer, and his illustrations have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, and elsewhere. He is Associate Professor of English (Creative Writing), Georgia College & State University.

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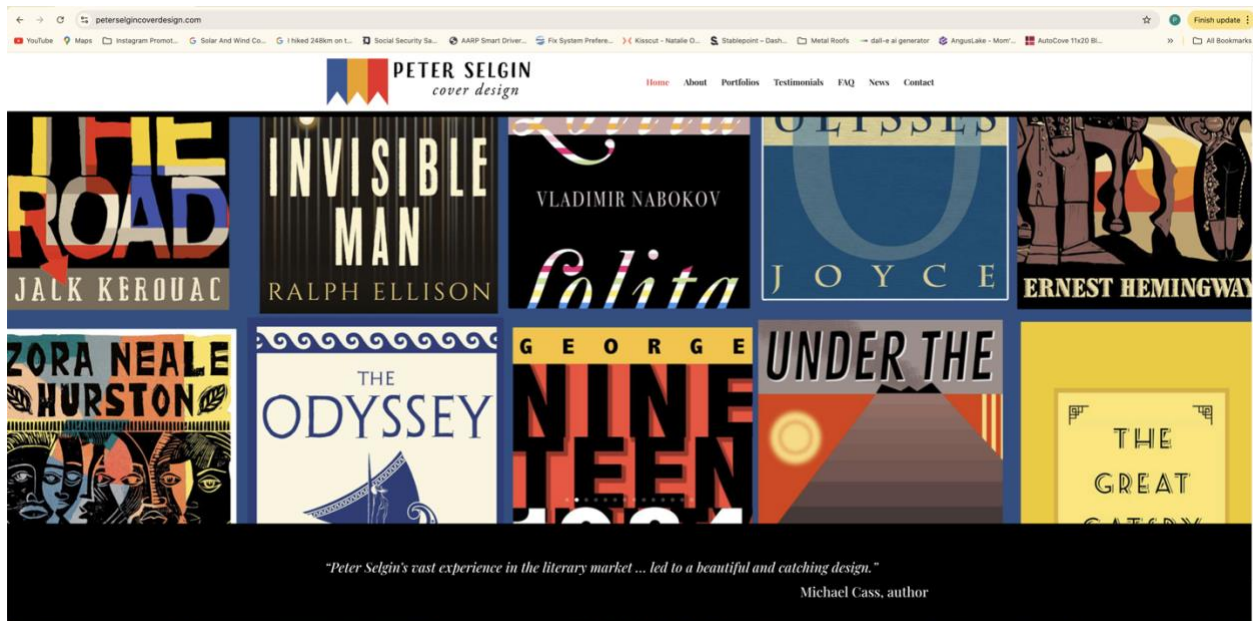
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Rules of the Association

Peter Selgin

Published on June 9, 2022



09/07/02 Re: Welcome Mrs. and Mrs. Herbert Previdi

On behalf of the Paradise View Condominium Association we wish to extend you a warm welcome, and to assure you that we will do everything possible to make your stay here a pleasant one.

Please take a moment to familiarize yourselves with the Association's rules, and with the "Frequently Asked Questions" sheet attached.

Again, a warm welcome from all of us here in "Paradise."

Sincerely,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

07/03/03 Re: Front Door Color

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Previdi,

It has been brought to our attention that you have re-painted your front door bright red (in fact—and as I have argued—the color is closer in spirit to vermilion). As the rules clearly state, painting of unit trim and siding is the responsibility of the Association and done on a regular schedule using colors selected by the Board to insure visual harmony among all units. Please know that your front door's original color, "Dusty Aubergine," was chosen by the Association with great care.

A maintenance crew will arrive this weekend to repaint it.

Cordially,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

12/29/04 Re: Condolences

Dear Mr. Previdi,

On behalf of the Paradise View Condominium Association we wish to express our sincerest condolences regarding your wife's recent passing. Through her brief participation in the Red Hatted Ladies Society, Helen made a deep impression on all those who knew her.

An assortment of spring bulbs and seeds will be left at your front door along with planting instructions. Please accept them as our gift in her memory.

Sincerely,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

02/17/05 Re: Christmas Decoration Removal

Dear Mr. Previdi,

During a recent inspection of the grounds this week, we noticed that your front door Christmas decorations are still on display. Although recent unseasonably cool temperatures have not exactly been harbingers of spring, still, March is just around the corner, and we believe the community would present itself better with more seasonally appropriate decorations. Your attention to this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

03/06/05 Re: Unleashed Dog

Dear Mr. Previdi,

It has been brought to our attention that you have been walking your dog unleashed on the grounds. We wish to remind you that the Association's rules strictly forbid the walking of unleashed animals. Nor should pets be tethered to any common areas, decks, or patios without owners in immediate proximity. Your attention to this matter is greatly appreciated.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

04/25/05 Re: Flowerbeds

Dear Mr. Previdi,

Our groundskeepers report that the flowerbeds both in front of and behind your unit are filled with weeds, this in spite of the fact that an assortment of seeds and bulbs were generously provided to you by this office during the winter planting season. Though the Association's rules do not strictly require members to plant flowers, a survey of your neighbors' yards should indicate to you that nearly everyone else (except for poor Mrs. Finkelstein, who just had her second kidney removed) has done so. The result: a proliferation of daffodils, tulips, primroses, crocuses, and other perennials, which, in our opinion, add not only a dash of color to the grounds, but a resounding note of joy and resilience.

There is still time to plant late-blooming perennials. The landscaping committee suggests delphinium, dianthus, linaria, lobelia, lupins, or pansies, or a combination thereof.

Sincerely,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

06/02/05 Re: Opened Garage Door

Dear Mr. Previdi,

A neighbor reports that you have been leaving your garage door opened for long intervals. Except when entering and exiting with vehicles, garage doors are to be kept closed at all times. Your having no car does not exempt you from this rule, Mr. Previdi, which was designed to benefit all who find the insides of all garages unprepossessing, and do not wish to be confronted with broken Hibachis, dented gasoline cans, sodden charcoal bags, tangled and kinked garden hoses, mangled snow shovels, rusty rakes, spare tires housing spider webs, and concrete floors stained with gloomy islands of leaked motor oil. Nor is the sight of you sitting in said garage doorway in a folding aluminum lawn chair in your brightly striped pajamas drinking your morning coffee and reading the newspaper mouth-watering in the least. Why, it must be asked, can't you sit on your deck like everyone else? And, for that matter, get dressed?

We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

08/03/05 Re: Pet Waste Clean-up

Dear Mr. Previdi,

Several of your neighbors have recently lodged complaints with the Association regarding your failure to clean-up after your dog. They inform us that lately your dogs' feces have become a regular feature on the sidewalks in your precinct, and that repeated requests to you have not only not been honored, but on one most recent occasion, as reported by a tenant who shall remain anonymous, to one such request you responded with a rude gesture accompanied by an equally rude expletive.

We further understand that, as dogs will, your dog is getting old and has not been feeling well, and that (as you apparently explained to one neighbor who complained to you) owing to the extremely loose nature of your dog's bowel movements you cannot be expected to "pick" them up.

Be that as it may, I'm sure you can sympathize with your neighbors, who would just as soon not live in a neighborhood splattered with your dog's excrement.

The Association recommends that you henceforth either keep the dog away from other people's property or at home. Should the dog's condition deteriorate further, as hard as it may be for you, it may also behoove you to consider the creature's suffering and, however difficult for you personally, take such measures as may be necessary to alleviate it.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Association Property Manager

09/05/05 Re: Suspected Burial of Pet

Dear Mr. Previdi,

It has come to our attention that you were seen digging a large hole in your back yard this past Sunday afternoon. It has concurrently been suggested that your cocker spaniel, Kiki, may have passed away recently, in which case, please accept my condolences. At any rate, there have been no recent sightings of either your dog or her formerly ubiquitous and prodigious liquid feces. As you can well imagine, this has occasioned speculation and consternation among your neighbors.

According to Rule 40-13-5-.04 of the State Department of Agriculture, "Methods which may be used for the disposal of dead animals are burning to ash, incineration, burial, rendering, or any method using appropriate disposal technology which has been approved by the Commissioner, provided disposal of dead animals is carried out within 24 hours after death or discovery of the dead animal." Notwithstanding which, since your home is part of a condominium association, though not expressly stated in the Rules, for reasons that should be obvious enough, the burial of a pet of any size in your yard is strictly forbidden.

If you have, indeed, buried your dog as is widely suspected, we insist that you exhume it promptly (and discreetly so as not to cause further alarm) and that you, as it were, dispose of the matter properly at the

town dump.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Associate Property Manager

10/26/06 Re: Facial Hair

Dear Mr. Previdi,

It has been brought to my attention that recently you have stopped shaving. Perhaps you are trying to grow a beard. Beards can look quite elegant on elderly gentlemen. Indeed, a well-groomed beard can make for a distinct and even venerable appearance. On the other hand, between growing a beard and neglecting to shave there is a world of difference.

In any event, the resulting facial stubble presents an eyesore, and—though not strictly forbidden by the Rules of the Association—in the name of courtesy, propriety, and aesthetic decency, we request that you resume shaving as quickly as possible.

While on the subject, as a personal observation, might I also point out that, however superficial it may seem, a correlation exists between one's personal grooming and emotional disposition and stability, and that in tending to the former one may improve upon the latter, or at least delay its decline? That has been my experience.

Also (if I may further inject my own experience), if you aren't presently in the habit of doing so, may I urge you to floss and use mouthwash daily? Not only will doing so prevent halitosis, it will sustain the health of your gums, and healthy gums are harbingers of overall health. Having tended to my own gums thus daily since my younger days, I can warrant—as will my dental hygienist—that the benefits are quite real.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Associate Property Manager

p.s.: If like me and many of our advanced ages you suffer the effects of an enlarged prostate as a result of which you are forced to make frequent post-midnight trips to the john, consider making one such trip per night an occasion for swishing some mouthwash. Since it takes plaque twelve hours to harden on the teeth, doing so will prevent any accumulation. To this habit I owe the pristine state of my own seventy-two-year-old gums.

11/2/06 Re: Your Disposition

Dear Mr. Previdi,

Lately members of the Association have become aware of certain alterations in your disposition that have given cause for concern: specifically, you seem to have entered a period of gloomy introspection, resulting in your moping around the grounds with what one fellow association member characterized as a “hangdog” expression, your hands thrust deep into the pockets of a worn and, if I may say so, unprepossessing bathrobe of dishwater-gray terrycloth. It is further reported that, when walking, you scuff

the bottoms of your shoes (slippers?) wearily along the pavement, creating a monotonous, intermittent scratching noise that, while merely off-putting and annoying to your adult neighbors, has become a source of terror and even of nightmares in their children.

In brief, Mr. Previdi, you are starting to give people around here the creeps.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Associate Property Manager

p.s.: You still haven't shaved.

12/19/06 Re: Suicide

Dear Mr. Previdi,

Recent patterns in your behavior have convinced certain members of the Association's Board of Directors and management, myself among them, that you may have contemplated or be contemplating suicide. Though needless to say such thoughts fall beyond the jurisdictions of this or any other governing body, still, I am compelled to point several things out to you.

First, that though ours is not one of the two remaining states in which suicide is still considered a felony, and while in any case a person having committed said felony is beyond the reach of the laws of this or any state, still, and as stated in Blackstone's Commentaries, suicide remains an unwritten common law crime.

In few words, Mr. Previdi, should you decide to "do yourself in," you would still be breaking the law. Also, depending on the means employed—I refer in particular to firearms—you might damage communal property, while endangering the lives of your neighbors.

This is not to speak of the very real risk of emotional damage that such an action taken by you would likely inflict upon your relatives and others who love you (surely there must be someone), let alone the unfortunate person or persons who happen upon your corpse.

To these unpleasant consequences add the loss of property value not only of your own unit, but to adjacent units and to the Association as a whole once your crime becomes common knowledge, as it doubtlessly will, let alone once it has entered the realm of legend and myth.

On a personal note, may I inject two words that I hope will be taken as offered, in the spirit of kindness?

"Buck up!"

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Associate Property Manager

02/15/06 Re: Accumulations on Stoop

Dear Mr. Previdi,

It has been noted that in the past few weeks and months a series of packages left by various carriers has accumulated on your front stoop, along with telephone directories, assorted flyers from cable and internet providers, insurers, funeral parlors, and cemeteries, what appeared to be a casserole of some sort, and other items deposited at your door. Recent rainstorms soaked most of these items, such that in all likelihood whatever valuables those packages and parcels held have been damaged beyond repair. It has been noted as well that your mailbox is more than full.

Needless to say, this has resulted in more than a little discomposure among your fellow Associates. It's been speculated that perhaps you have gone on a vacation and you simply neglected to assign anyone the task of retrieving these items. I hope this turns out to be the case and that no other explanation is warranted. I for one would much rather imagine you sunning yourself on a Floridian, Mexican, or Caribbean beach than ...

Well, let's just say that I hope that everything is all right.

It occurs to me that, since you've not been collecting your mail, odds of your reading this notice are slim to non-existent. In the event that you should read it, do please inform this office as soon as possible of your whereabouts and situation.

Believe it or not, Mr. Previdi, there are people here who sincerely care for and worry about you, myself among them. In my case, I'd go as far as to say that I care very much.

And while it's true that we've never met in person, that we've only known each other from afar, as it were, still, for reasons I won't take up your time with here, I find myself very much in empathy with you.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Associate Property Manager

03/26/06 Re: Empathy

Dear Mr. Previdi—or, if I may—Herb,

In my last correspondence I alluded to harboring certain feelings of empathy toward you with respect to recent events you've suffered. If you'll permit me, I'd like to explain. You see, not so long ago I too, lost my partner of thirty-eight years. Though for all kinds of reasons Jack and I never married (for one thing, such marriages weren't considered legal, let alone binding; in many places they were illegal), still, he and I lived together most of those years: not here, but in a large city where we felt more comfortable and less anomalous. Suffice to say Jack was the love of my life. His death was both slow and sudden. From the time the brain tumor was first diagnosed, to when the disease's first symptoms manifested, we had six altogether very good years. However once the first symptoms developed, he went downhill very fast. Within a month he was in palliative care; a week later Jack was gone.

All of which is to say that I have some idea of what you've been through. I've been there. And I can tell you in no uncertain terms, and despite how you're doubtlessly feeling now, that as must all things, your grief WILL reach an end. Of this I assure you.

You will survive; life will go on. And it won't be so bad.

Of that you may look to me as proof.

Warmly,

Frank

05/13/06 Re: Daffodils / Tulips

Dear Mr. Previdi,

I'm writing to you on behalf of the Association but also to express my personal delight at seeing the flowers growing next to your stoop on a recent walk. The combination of tulips and daffodils has always been a favorite of mine, and I can only assume that your neighbors must be equally enchanted by them.

I note, too, that you have got yourself a new dog, a wire-haired terrier—or was that someone else's dog I saw you walking the other day? At any rate, it's a cute dog and, if I may say so, you seemed to be enjoying yourself in its company. You had a spring in your step and a smile on your (clean-shaven) face. A sunny spring morning; what wasn't there to smile about? Anyway, if it is indeed your dog, and should you ever need someone to walk it for you, I hope you'll ask me first.

Incidentally, in a few days the community pool will open for the season. Are you a swimmer, by any chance? If not, you might consider taking it up. Not only is swimming an excellent exercise, it's relaxing. You'll find me at the pool doing my gentle laps religiously every morning. It keeps me calm and centered and has proven quite efficacious at fending off melancholy, gloom, and despair. Another great advantage of swimming: being a no-impact sport, it puts much less stress on old bones, cartilage, or ligaments. Indeed, in all my years working here, no one has injured themselves swimming. A few have drowned, but none have been injured. (That was a joke.)

I hope to see you at the pool one morning soon.

Yours,

Frank Hallinan, Associate Property Manager

Genre: Fiction

Author Bio:

Peter Selgin is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction. He has written two novels, children's books, three books on the craft of writing, and two essay collections. *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, his memoir-in-essays, was a finalist for the William Saroyan International Prize. His memoir, *The Inventors*, won the 2017 Housatonic Book Award. His latest novel, *Duplicity*, won both the 2021 Best Indie Book Award and the 2021 Indie Excellence Book Award. His full-length drama, *A God in the House*, based on Dr. Jack Kevorkian and his "suicide machine," won the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference Award. A visual artist as well as a writer, Selgin's paintings and illustrations have been featured in *The New Yorker* and other publications. He has also designed covers for award-winning books. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia, where he is the art director and nonfiction editor of *Arts & Letters*, an international journal of poetry and prose.

TRANSFORMATIONS

August 26, 2020 · All Posts, Essays, FeaturedHero

A Matter of Perspective

BY PETER SELGIN



Childhood drawing from Peter Selgin.

As I boy, I fell in love with perspective. When we were kids, our father would take my twin brother George and me hiking along the beds of abandoned railroads. Our explorations took us through quaint-named places like Hawleyville Junction, Steeprock, Washington Depot, Cornwall Bridge ... across Lake Lillinonah and along the Housatonic River. Papa carried a geological survey map on which to chart the

TRANSFORMATIONS

onward by the promise of a rusting locomotive—complete with smokestack and cowcatcher—that, Papa promised, was “just around the next bend.” To our perpetual dismay, it never materialized.

That elusive locomotive existed less “around the next bend” than at an equally tantalizing spot known as the “vanishing point,” where all lines of perspective converged; I was taught that by Jon Gnagy on his Saturday morning TV show *Learn to Draw*. In half-hour segments broadcast from the top of the Empire State Building, using the charcoal pencils and sticks sold in kit boxes advertised on the same program, Gnagy taught me and thousands of other kids how to draw a ship at dock, a covered bridge, a log cabin in winter.

When he drew a set of receding railroad tracks and described the “vanishing point,” Gnagy first awakened my love of perspective. From that moment on, orthogonals pursued me and vice versa. By age 8, I had mastered the art of perspective. Ten years later, my decision to attend art school surprised no one, least of all me.

**“JUST AS BRUNELLESCHI’S
EXPERIMENT CHANGED THE COURSE
OF ART HISTORY, PERSPECTIVE
DETERMINED THE COURSE OF MY
LIFE.”**

The concept of linear perspective—that objects appear smaller as they grow more distant—comes to us straight from Euclid. Roughly 1,700 years later in the 15th century, an architect and engineer named Brunelleschi applied Euclid’s theorems to the problem of representing three-dimensional space in painting. Conducted in the

TRANSFORMATIONS

Brunelleschi's experiment changed the way pictures are not only painted but viewed. It changed how people saw the world.

Just as Brunelleschi's experiment changed the course of art history, perspective determined the course of my life.

One afternoon in my second year at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, my advanced painting instructor stepped up behind me at my easel. He watched for a few moments before saying, in a weary Brooklyn accent, "You know what you ah, Selgin? You're an ahhtistic illiterate." Then he walked away, shaking his head.

The instructor, a painter named Blaustein who'd won two Guggenheim Fellowships and the Rome Prize, felt that I was after glib results, painting "pretty pictures" with little depth and less ambition, leaning on my technical skills, unwilling to struggle for my art. And though I pretended to shrug off his appraisal, I knew Blaustein was right.

After swaggering out of the painting studio, in a desultory mood, I returned to the room I rented in a retired church choir conductor's apartment. I switched on my black-and-white portable TV, flopped down on the mattress I'd dragged in off the street, and watched Richard Burton's face fill the screen, his Welsh baritone intoning the words "... bergin ... bergin and water" as the camera drew ominously closer. Mesmerized, I watched the rest of Mike Nichol's screen adaptation of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

TRANSFORMATIONS

...COUNTRY, CARRYING MY
**SKETCHBOOK, FILLING ITS BLANK
PAGES WITH WORDS. I FORBID
MYSELF FROM DRAWING."**

The next day in the Pratt library I read the play. Halfway through it was the monologue that had so mesmerized me: a block of words. As I turned the last page, my mind was made up: I'd plumb my artistic depths with words, not paint. I'd be a writer.

In figure drawing class two days later, while my fellow students drew the nude model, I used my charcoal pencil to fill page after page of my newsprint pad with dialogue. I was writing a play, my first, angling for my own mesmerizing monologue. Meanwhile our instructor, Jimmy Grashow, walked from student to student, giving feedback. Like Blaustein, Grashow, too, had grown disillusioned with me. "Selgin, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Writing a play," I explained.

With his thumb Grashow pointed to the door. "That's it, man. Get out. I'll give you a B. Just get the hell out of here!"

When the semester ended, I left Pratt. Thinking it was what writers did, I spent the next year hitchhiking across the country, carrying my sketchbook, filling its blank pages with words. I forbid myself from drawing. I was a writer.

So was born a schism that would endure for the next 40 years.

Two years after leaving Pratt, having earned a BA in English, I returned to New York City. By

TRANSFORMATIONS

caricatures of the customers to pass the time. One insisted that I was squandering a bankable talent. To prove it, he hired me to do caricatures at a friend's wedding. Soon I was earning a living as a caricaturist, doing corporate events, weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs.

While doing caricatures at a bar mitzvah one evening, a white-haired elderly man with a pronounced stoop said to me while sitting for his portrait, "No, seriously, kid, what do you *really* do?"

"I'm a writer," I responded.

"Yeah? What sort of writing?"

"I'm working on a novel," I said. In fact, it was my third, the first two having met with rejection.

The man shook his head ponderously. I felt him weigh his next words. "I was a writer once," he finally admitted, then fell silent again. I finished his caricature and showed it to him. His reaction betrayed nothing. Standing up to leave, twisting his scrolled caricature in his fists as if wringing a towel, he offered hard-earned advice before walking off: "Do yourself a favor, kid. Quit while you're ahead. There's nothing but heartache and misery in it."

For the next ten years I earned my living as an illustrator. Still, I saw myself not as a visual artist who wrote on the side, but as a struggling author supporting himself through his visual art. So intent was I on my writing, so obsessed with authorial ambition, I belittled my first love. I saw it as a way to pay the bills at best, at worst an impediment to my true calling. It never occurred to me that my words and pictures could join forces. I saw them as rivals competing with each other, the way my twin brother George and I competed in sports and for girls while growing up.

TRANSFORMATIONS

Philadelphia drawing caricatures at a convention, I wandered into an antique shop where I saw a painting of the *Titanic* rearing up in silhouette against a huge iceberg with mother-of-pearl highlights. Two things struck me about the painting: its naiveté and the fact that it was painted on, or behind, a sheet of glass. It was a reverse painting—or, in French, *verre églomisé*.

By then I was married. My wife and I had just bought our first home, a pre-war apartment on the Upper West Side with a sunken living room. I pictured the painting hanging over the deco bar unit we'd installed in the raised dining alcove.

The antique dealer wanted \$900 for the painting: too rich for my blood. So I left it there. But the painting wouldn't leave me. It haunted me. It captured perfectly my boyhood fascination with ships and the *Titanic*. More intriguing still was its flouting of the conventions of "realistic" painting. Colors, proportions, perspective: all were wrong. And yet, somehow, they added up to something very right. From memory I tried to recreate it. In the process, I experienced a freedom and joy I'd never experienced before as a visual artist, that of doing things incorrectly. But what delighted me more than anything was abandoning the perspective I'd fallen in love with as a kid watching Jon Gnagy, and to which, until then, without my knowing it, my art had been bound and shackled.

"I EXPERIENCED A FREEDOM AND JOY I'D NEVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE AS A VISUAL ARTIST, THAT OF DOING THINGS INCORRECTLY."

For the first time since Blaustein's class, I began painting again for pleasure. I applied my new naive style to my illustrations, one of which

TRANSFORMATIONS

Schuster called. She'd seen the illustration and wanted to know if I'd ever thought of doing a children's book.

"Sure, I think of it all the time," I lied.

We arranged to meet at her office. Meanwhile, I jotted down some ideas. At last I arrived at a spoof of the *Titanic* story, a tall-tale minus the tragedy, with a moral guaranteed to appeal to small people: the story of the world's biggest ocean liner ("so big it can travel around the world without moving") and how a little fellow name Pip Squeak saves it, almost.

The idea landed. The book was published. For the first time my words and my pictures joined forces.

Despite this happy confluence of fortune, I still thought of myself as a writer first, determined to keep my shady side gig in the shadows. In 2009, after teaching a few creative writing classes and enjoyed the experience, MFA in hand, I left New York again, this time to pursue a full-time academic career.

By then I'd published a short story collection and a novel, but I was still far from the literary success I dreamed of. As an academic, I'd have summers off and paid sabbaticals: time to write, time to dedicate myself exclusively to words. I gave away my easel and my drafting table (the Salvation Army refused to take them, they were so encrusted with paint). The rest of my art supplies—my paints, brushes, canvasses, drawings and paintings—all went into storage. There would be no more painting, no more drawing, no more illustrating, no more dividing myself between words and pictures.

TRANSFORMATIONS

landing a permanent, full-time university post. I enjoyed teaching, won a few prestigious literary awards, published more books that were well received, could even claim something of a reputation as a writer. Still, part of me wasn't satisfied. I felt an emptiness, a feeling that at times delivered me to the edge of despair and beyond.

Unlike linear perspective, psychological perspective is as much a factor of time as of distance. Though psychological perspective also affects and is affected by the angle of perception, and though the cubists and other artists discovered bold new ways to incorporate time into visual art, psychological perspective is mainly the domain of writers, who call it *point of view*. Like perspective, it changes how we see the world and ourselves in it.

So I told my students in a seminar I titled "A Matter of Perspective," in which I drew an analogy between narrative writing and visual art. For one assignment I had my students find a painting that, in style if not in subject, most closely captured the spirit of something they had written. To their chagrined astonishment, some found that their stories had more in common with Norman Rockwell than with Pollock or Picasso. As time went by, more and more I found myself resorting to visual metaphors in my classes, talking about painters and paintings.

Five years after starting my university job, now tenured, I sold my New York apartment and bought the house I still live in, a lakeside A-frame 20 minutes from campus. Having moldered away for nearly a decade in a Bronx storage facility, my art supplies joined me here, along

TRANSFORMATIONS

**"I KNEW THEN THAT SEGREGATING
THE VISUAL ARTIST IN ME FROM
THE WRITER HAD BEEN A MISTAKE...
THEY WERE NOT IN OPPOSITION;
THEY NEEDED EACH OTHER."**

In one of those portfolios I found a drawing I'd done as a child. Rendered painstakingly in pencil on construction paper turned brown by time, it shows a locomotive, the one my father promised us during those railroad hikes, the one that was always just around the next bend. Behind it, the tracks form an inverted "V" as they recede toward the horizon. As I paged through more drawings, dozens of them, I was deeply moved by these long-forgotten images and the dedication a much younger version of me had given them. Here were the fruits of that neglect, reeking of mildew, yellowed with age. Seeing them was like being reunited with a long-lost twin—not my brother, George, but myself.

I knew then that segregating the visual artist in me from the writer had been a mistake. Too long seen as opposing ideas, my love of shapes, colors, and lines, and my love of words and the meanings and stories conveyed by them belonged together; they were not in opposition; they needed each other.

Three years ago, I turned part of my basement into an art studio, complete with drafting table and easel. On weekends, during summer, winter, and other breaks from teaching and writing, whenever I can, I draw and paint down there, spending quality time on the other side of my brain. And while I used to think drawing and painting took time away from my writing, now I know they do the opposite: They make me a better writer

TRANSFORMATIONS

Yet as in any good relationship, those sensibilities needn't conflict. Like the two rails forming a set of train tracks, they can balance, inform, and inspire each other, always together if never converging, united only by perspective, which joins them at the vanishing point. And though the two rails may never meet, like that illusive locomotive, I need both to keep going.

**Peter Selgin's** Drowning

Lessons won the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award. An Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, GA, Selgin has written a novel, three books on the writer's craft, two essay collections and *The Inventors*, a memoir.



PREVIOUS

No, I Am Not OK

NEXT

Walking Delhi Streets, During the Pandemic