

*Childhood*

# **GENIUS WITHOUT GENIUS:**

**The Autobiography of John Franklin**

**Vol. 1: Childhood through “The Music Days”**

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## Birth and Infancy

I was born at 7:37 in the morning on Monday, Sept. 14, 1936 in Gotham Hospital in New York City. My mother often told me, when I was growing up, that the umbilical cord had been wrapped around my neck as I emerged from the womb, and that Dr. Fried had to use forceps to pull my head through “the opening”, as she called it, hence the scars near my temples (now hidden by hair and beard). The scars are not at the same level, suggesting that Dr. Fried must have been in a hurry. Given what was to follow, my reluctance to come into this world — into the worst century in human history — was perfectly understandable.

*The Timetables of History*<sup>1</sup> tells us that in 1936:

- F. D. Roosevelt was reelected President by a landslide;
- King Edward VIII abdicated the English throne in order to marry Mrs. Wallis Simpson and was succeeded by his brother, George VI;
- Mussolini and Hitler proclaimed the Rome-Berlin Axis;
- German troops occupied the Rhineland;
- Elections in Germany gave Hitler 99 percent of the vote;
- Germany began building the Siegfried Line;
- The Spanish Civil War began;
- Hirohito was named Premier of Japan;
- Trotsky was exiled from Russia and settled in Mexico;
- Boulder (Hoover) Dam was completed;
- Dr. Alexis Carrel developed an artificial heart;
- Margaret Mitchell won the Pulitzer Prize for *Gone With the Wind*;
- Dale Carnegie published *How to Win Friends and Influence People*;
- Eugene O’Neill won the Nobel Prize for Literature;
- Sigmund Freud published his *Autobiography*;
- A. J. Ayer published *Language, Truth, and Logic*;
- Popular songs included: “It’s De-Lovely”; “Whiffenpoof Song”; “I’m an Old Cowhand (from the Rio Grande)”; “Is It True What They Say about Dixie?”; “I Can’t Get Started with You”; “Pennies from Heaven”;
- Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* was produced;
- The Ford Foundation was established;
- The Olympic Games were held in Berlin; Jesse Owens won four gold medals;
- Max Schmeling handed heavyweight contender Joe Louis his first defeat;;
- Bruno Richard Hauptman was convicted of kidnapping and killing the Lindbergh baby;
- Samuel Barber wrote the “Adagio for Strings”.

1936 was also the year when the great classical music station WQXR (“The Radio Station of the New York Times”) first began broadcasting.

At the time of my birth, my father was 44 , my mother 30 . They had been married the year before . Both were Swiss-German immigrants, my father having come to this country in the twenties. At the time of my birth, he was the president of the Borsari Tank Corporation, a small

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1. Grun, Bernard, based on Werner Stein’s *Kulturfahrplan*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1982

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civil engineering firm in New York City. He and my mother lived in Valhalla, New York, about 20 miles north of New York City in Westchester County.

My mother was born July 5, 1905 in Solothurn, Switzerland, the daughter of a man who would later become a professor of astronomy at the University of Berne, Herr Professor Sigmund Mauderli, who, we later heard incessantly from her, each year had to “do the calendar” for Switzerland. To this day I don’t know what that meant, since it seemed, first of all, a trivial task, and, second of all, it obviously could be done by one person for the entire world. She had two brothers, one a salesman for a pharmaceutical company in Berne, Switzerland, the other a well-known doctor catering to rich tuberculosis patients at a sanatorium in Montana (which she pronounced “*Montahnah*”<sup>1</sup>), in the mountains near Geneva. My mother always drew a distinction between sanatorium and sanatarium. Good people, quality people, because of their enormous responsibilities, or because of how much they had sacrificed for the family, sometimes had to go to a sanatorium, where they could receive the rest and care they deserved. Lesser people, e.g., the Common People, who were often a little crazy anyway, sometimes were sent to a sanitarium. (The two terms are, according to the dictionary, synonymous.)

Among other endlessly repeated stories about my grandfather, one was that whenever he bought a chocolate or other sweet for his children, he noted the cost down in a little notebook, telling his children that when they were grown up, they would be expected to pay him back. And yet my mother always spoke with reverence of “Papa” (pronounced “Boppa”). Her parents were always beyond criticism.

My father was born June 24, 1892, the son of a school inspector in the little rural town of Wangen-an-der-Aar, near Berne.

Both of my parents had received good Swiss educations, which required the learning of four languages: German, French, Italian and English, the first three being the native languages of various cantons throughout the country. They spoke English with a Swiss accent. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger<sup>2</sup>, they pronounced the name of the state, “Kollyfornia”. Chicago was “*Sheekahgo*”. The dialect known as Swiss-German (“*Schweizerdeutsch*” in German, but pronounced something like “*Shveetzadoitsh*” in the dialect), was spoken by many Swiss, but was not considered of sufficient status to be taught in the schools. They spoke it occasionally. I remember “nye, nye” for German “nein, nein” (no, no); “*üppis*” for “etwas” (something); “*gooett*” for “gut” (good); “*hatzig*” for “herzig” (cute); “*zwo*” for “zwei” (two); “*yigh, yoh*” for “Ja ja” (yes, yes). I remember that sometimes she would say, laying one hand tenderly on the side of my face, and looking down at me with concern, “*Blaiche müseli*”<sup>3</sup> (pale little face). My being pale always seemed to her to be something to worry about.

But *Schweizerdeutsch* was not a pretty language. The idea of writing and publishing literary works in it was considered radical.

By the standards of those times, my mother had married “late”. The official story in the family was that my father, who had studied under her father and been given part-time student employment by him (cleaning up the observatory or some such) had let it be known that he wanted to get married again. He had already been married once, to a woman in Oakland, Calif., but was then divorced (my mother always shook her head and held her finger to her lips when she mentioned that my father had been married before, because this was not something to be talked about). What

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1. Just as she pronounced “banana”, “*banahna*”.

2. Austrian-American who was governor of California, 2003 — 2010

3. I am not at all sure of the spelling here.

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we *could* talk about was how my father had insisted on paying for the education of his first wife's two daughters by *her* previous marriage, even after his divorce. The real story, as my then-wife speculated in the seventies, was probably that my grandfather was becoming worried about having this unmarried daughter on his hands, and so had called in the I.O.U. on my father for the favors the good Professor had done him when he was a student.

In any case, I was born barely a year after they were married. "Your father always wanted boys", my mother used to say. And so she made clear she had started out on the right foot. Her mother came over to stay with her during the final weeks of her pregnancy and for several weeks thereafter. They went out for dinner at Maxl's, a German restaurant in North White Plains, some five miles or so from the little town of Valhalla, where they lived. I remember it from my teenage years as a place of dark wood, smelling of beer. A feature of the place was that every night the management got the patrons to join in on a nonsense song, the "Schnitzelbank"

*"Ist das nicht ein Schnitzelbank?  
Ja, das ist ein Schnitzelbank..."*

Years later, at least, the words were printed on a light brown cloth scroll, which was unrolled as the song proceeded.

Their first home was in "the bungalow", a little house adjacent to the home of the Rev. Conro, a well-known minister in Valhalla. Renting such a small house was made acceptable to my mother by the fact that it belonged to a man of reputation. My mother became friends with his daughter, who taught second grade in Valhalla Public School No. 1, and who became, when I was about six or seven, the first woman toward whom I experienced real sexual desire, since she had the biggest breasts of any woman I had seen up to then. She too had a past, having been married and now no longer being married (I never learned what had happened to her husband). Occasionally, when I used her married name, which I think was Friedhof, my mother would shake her head and tell me I should say "Miss Conro", because we tried not to talk about such things.

For a long time after my mother and father had moved out of the bungalow, she occasionally took me over to Miss Conro's house. I remember the Reverend only vaguely: an old man with wispy white hair, glasses, and that old-man delicacy which ministers always seemed to have — he looked (I can say now) rather like Carl Jung in his old age.

In 1939, my mother decided to "go home" for three months, which meant, visit Switzerland. She took me with her, no doubt to show me off to the relatives. The trip took place in the summer — she always spoke of the trip as having taken place "when you were two".

Photographs show my doting grandmother with me in her lap on the porch of their flat in Berne, some sort of white wooden latticework with dark leaves in the background.

A kind of epiphany occurred while I was being taken on a walk in Berne or perhaps in a nearby city. It consisted of a sudden — how can an adult describe such a thing? — a sudden awareness that there was something extraordinarily special and important about the following three things: cobblestones, a certain kind of tar smell and a certain pine smell (probably juniper, I now realize) — an awareness that seemed to be a message from an entirely different realm than the one we live in. Later, the sound and smell of a horse walking on cobblestones became added to these things in my mind: I am looking at the horse's back legs from the rear, I see and hear the swish of its tail as it delicately, uncertainly, places its metal horseshoes on the slippery, rounded surfaces of the cobblestones.

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“Then, quite apart from all those literary preoccupations, and without definite attachment to anything, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and seize from them, but which, despite all my efforts, I never managed to discover. As I felt that the mysterious object was to be found in them, I would stand there in front of them, motionless, gazing, breathing, endeavouring to penetrate with my mind beyond the thing seen or smelt. And if I had then to hasten after my grandfather, to proceed on my way, I would still seek to recover my sense of them by closing my eyes; I would concentrate upon recalling exactly the line of the roof, the colour of the stone, which, without me being able to understand why, had seemed to me to be teeming, ready to open, to yield up to me the secret treasure of which they were themselves no more than the outer coverings. It was certainly not any impression of this kind that could or would restore the hope I had lost of succeeding one day in becoming an author and poet, for each of them was associated with some material object devoid of any intellectual value, and suggesting no abstract truth. But at least they gave me an unreasoning pleasure, the illusion of a sort of fecundity of mind; and in that way distracted me from the tedium, from the sense of my own impotence which I had felt whenever I had sought a philosophic theme for some great literary work. So urgent was the task imposed on my conscience by these impressions of form or perfume or colour — to strive for a perception of what lay hidden beneath them, that I was never long in seeking an excuse which would allow me to relax so strenuous an effort and to spare myself the fatigue that it involved. As good luck would have it, my parents called me; I felt that I had not, for the moment, the calm environment necessary for a successful pursuit of my researches, and that it would be better to think no more of the matter until I reached home, and not to exhaust myself in the meantime to no purpose. And so I concerned myself no longer with the mystery that lay hidden in a form or a perfume, quite at ease in my mind, since I was taking it home with me, protected by its visible and tangible covering, beneath which I should find it still alive, like the fish which, on days when I had been allowed to go out fishing, I used to carry back in my basket, buried in a couch of grass which kept them cool and fresh.” — Proust, Marcel, “Combray”, in *Swann’s Way*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, pp. 229-230.

Only rarely in my life have I experienced anything like that epiphany: it happened once in the late nineties when I was walking up Tunnel Rd., past the Claremont Hotel, in Berkeley, California. I was suddenly overcome with the feeling that everything is opened up, in bloom, everything is related to everything else: I knew how this shadow was related to that house over there and to this smell of the wind, and that everything was perfect exactly as it is. A chain link fence, shiny green-leaved bushes behind, the leaves crowding through, old tall trees along the sidewalk, a curving wrought iron fence painted black or dark green, brick houses with stone framed doors, blue sky, tufts of cloud — I could feel cobblestone streets in my feelings, everything was new, all full of excitement, anything could happen. I knew immediately that I was experiencing an attenuated version of my original experience in Switzerland when I was two years old, even though no cobblestones or cedar bushes were present. I know to the very depths of my being that no argument, no analysis, no explanation, will ever be able to convince me that these sights and smells did not, however briefly, put me in contact with something beyond our waking consciousness.

To this day, a cobblestone street is for me entirely different from all other streets. Each cobblestone is unique, yet all are the same — the mystery of that. There is a story in each cobblestone: the story of where the stone originally came from, when and how it was given its final shape, the way the workman put it in its assigned place (what was the workman’s name? where

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did he live? did he have a wife and children?). You have to walk carefully over these individual rocks, each with its own personality. Each stretch of a cobblestone street says, “And then this is what it is like to go here...”

We returned home on the German ship, the *Bremen*, on what must have been one of the last voyages the ship made, because after the Germans invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939 and the British declared war on Germany, “the German ships mostly took refuge in neutral ports or, when intercepted, scuttled themselves...The great German liner *Bremen*, after sheltering in the Soviet port of Murmansk, reached Germany only because she was spared by the British submarine *Salmon*, which observed rightly and punctiliously the conventions of international law.” — Churchill, Winston, *The Gathering Storm*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA, 1948, pp. 425-426.

The one thing I remember about the voyage is an afternoon when I was sitting with my mother in a glassed-in area with white latticework where they served afternoon tea. Suddenly this racket — it sounded like hoarse, tinny, barking — came at us from all sides. The scene is clear in my memory: the cold gray sea air, the white frames around the glass windows, the dark gray wood floor planks, people in coats. Everyone became silent. My mother sat stiff and attentive. Later she told me the reason: “Hitler was speaking”. They broadcast his speeches on German liners no matter where the liners were.

Around 1939 or '40 my parents moved from the bungalow to a bigger house at 34 Wall Avenue in Valhalla. It had a path along one side made of smooth, white, gravel. The sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel, mixed with the smell of juniper bushes, became another one of those deeply important things which I couldn't explain, but which I sensed lay outside of the normal world I lived in. My father's main interest at home seemed to be the eradication of poison ivy, in particular, the eradication of it from along the walk, where it invaded from the adjacent wooded lot. One afternoon he built a fire, did a great deal of pulling of the stuff out of the ground, and burned it. The next days were the first time I saw him brought down by something, because the smoke had spread the oils all over his body, not only over his entire face and arms, which had been bare, but through his clothes. He wasn't even able to walk down the stairs, and instead had to come down by sitting on each step. He accepted it without complaining, and I seem to remember even a smile, as though to express, “Well, I did something silly, and now I'm paying for it.”

I too was allergic to poison ivy in those years. Applying calomine lotion was a frequent activity: the pink, strong, camphor smell, the ice cold sting on the little blisters, the drying to a cakey crust afterward, the at times irresistible pleasure of scratching the blisters until they broke and a watery liquid leaked out. Eventually, I outgrew this allergy, to the extent that one day, in my early fifties, while on a Sierra Club hike, I took it into my head to show off a bit, and crushed some poison oak leaves between my fingers, then rubbed them vigorously into my upper arm. The women in the group were shocked, thought me crazy, and made it clear that I had now stepped out of the category of Potentially Interesting Man. I announced, “Come back next week and we'll see if I'm immune to poison oak!” I considered it a rather bold scientific experiment, and was angry that they didn't admire my courage. In any case, no rash developed, but I didn't bother going back to show them.

When I think of Wall Avenue, I also think of one afternoon when I was in the living room, possibly playing with some toy cars or with a game on the carpet. My father was sitting in his easy chair, “figuring”, which meant, working on some sort of engineering drawing on his clipboard. There was no one else in the room. The living room was in the front of the house and had a large window that looked out over the lawn, across the Avenue and then across the grass and

bushes on the other side, which were on top of the steep, wooded hill that descended to Kensico and the Bronx River Parkway far below. The window faced west, and I remember a deep red sunset glow beginning to spread across the sky. I felt melancholy, as I usually did in those years, though of course I didn't know the word, but I also felt that something important was going on, that I was part of something important, that this was an immortal afternoon.

## The 1939 World's Fair

In the summer of 1939 we went to the World's Fair at Flushing Meadows in New York City. The theme was "The World of Tomorrow". I will begin with Carl Sagan's memory of it:

"The 1939 New York World's Fair — that so transfixed me as a small visitor from darkest Brooklyn — was about 'The World of Tomorrow.' Merely by adopting such a motif, it promised that there would be a world of tomorrow, and the most casual glance affirmed that it would be better than the world of 1939... The sleek and clean 'tomorrow' portrayed by the Fair was appealing and hopeful. And something called science was plainly the means by which that future would be realized.

"But if things had gone a little differently, the Fair could have given me enormously more. A fierce struggle had gone on behind the scenes. The vision that prevailed was that of the Fair's president and chief spokesman, Grover Whalen — former corporate executive, New York City police chief in a time of unprecedented police brutality, and public relations innovator. It was he who had envisioned the exhibit buildings as chiefly commercial, industrial, oriented to consumer products, and he who had convinced Stalin and Mussolini to build lavish national pavilions. (He later complained about how often he had been obliged to give the fascist salute.) The level of the exhibits, as one designer described it, was pitched to the mentality of a twelve-year-old.

"However, as recounted by the historian Peter Kuznick of American University, a group of prominent scientists — including Harold Urey and Albert Einstein — advocated presenting science for its own sake, not just as the route to gadgets for sale; concentrating on the way of thinking and not just the products of science. They were convinced that broad popular understanding of science was the antidote to superstition and bigotry; that, as science popularizer Watson Davis put it, 'the scientific way was the democratic way.' One scientist even suggested that widespread public appreciation of the methods of science might work 'a final conquest of stupidity' — a worthy, but probably unrealizable, goal.

"As events transpired, almost no real science was tacked on to the Fair's exhibits, despite the scientists' protests and their appeals to high principles. And yet, some of the little that was added trickled down to me and helped to transform my childhood. The corporate and consumer focus remained central, though, and essentially nothing appeared about science as a way of thinking, much less as a bulwark of a free society." — Sagan, Carl, *The Demon-Haunted World*, Random House, N.Y., 1995, pp. 403-404.

But my father was clearly excited about it — it had to do with engineering. To get to it, we drove on long parkways, with grass down the middle, trees alongside. Trees and grass and cement and asphalt were Important even though I knew I would never be able to understand why. This was the future. This was modern. The symbol of the Fair was a white sphere (called the perisphere, I learned many years later) at the base of a 700-foot white obelisk (the trilon), both, I imagined, made from a kind of snow-white marble. I don't know if this symbol actually existed at the Fair, or if it was just used in publications about the Fair, but I remember the peculiar feeling it gave me, since it always seemed to be shown in the brightest sunlight, and made me think it was

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something of the same order as the rings of Saturn. In my mind's eye I see the sphere and obelisk surrounded by vast, perfectly mowed, green lawns.

The only other thing I remember now is an exhibit, like a puppet show, about tobacco, with little mechanical men moving to show the process by which tobacco was grown and harvested.

The spell, the excitement, of new technology (although we didn't use that word) was in the air in our house, not only because of my father's interest in the World's Fair, but also because of the things that he brought home from the office and which he called "gadgets", as described below in the section of that name. We could actually call remotely distant people using the telephone.

Once in a while — once a year or so, if that — the possibility of making a long-distance call to Switzerland would come up. It is hard for people living in the age of the Internet, and even in the age of routine international calls, to realize what a special event such a thing was in the early forties. You made an *appointment* with the other party, by letter, for the actual call. You decided on the exact time — so difficult when they were at a different time of day than you were! — and then exactly at that time, you placed the call, through a (live) telephone operator. The operator would call you back when the connection had been made. Then, since the other party was *so far away*, and the connection was bad, you had to shout into the phone, and listen with all your might so you could hear them. And the expense: astronomical. (Many dollars a minute.) Or at least that's what my brother and me were told.

## Valhalla

I spent the first seventeen years of my life in the town of Valhalla, N.Y., which was located about 20 miles north of New York City, in Westchester County.

In the early days...Indians of the region traveled over [what was originally known as Otter Trail, but today is known as West Lake Drive], coming from the Hudson River area to trap otter for their valuable pelts. In time Indians vanished from the area, and during the Revolutionary War names like Major André and General Washington rang through the hills and plains which became battlegrounds of our war for independence. In those days we were known as Wright's Mills, eventually Old Kensico, and finally Kensico. The tiny village, now submerged under the water at Kensico Reservoir, had its general store, its church, and a number of happy homes. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, New York City began its enormous task of providing a water system for its millions. Though a large portion of Kensico was converted to a reservoir, that portion of the area known as 'The Lower Neighborhood' remained and became the center of present day Valhalla.

The year 1889 marked an event of significance for our old timers, and, as it turned out, for our present inhabitants. Purchase of land for what became Kensico Cemetery caused some confusion to both the railroad and the mails. It seems that we had the name Kensico affixed to both the station and the cemetery, and a number of residents decided such must not be the case. A Mr. Quinn and a properly constituted body proposed and effected a change of name from Kensico to Valhalla, the well-known place of rest assigned to Norse mythological heroes. We believe we are actually indebted to Mrs. Howard Kinch for the proposal and subsequent adoption of this most praiseworthy name.

By 1902 the community had grown to proportions requiring fire protection. In that year the Valhalla Fire Department #1 was organized. As was the custom in those days, good old Dobbin was at the front of the hose wagon, the singular piece of fire equipment owned by the company. The fire alarm, a rail struck by a sledge, was primitive in comparison to our modern sirens, but it was



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effective enough to call forth those brave, energetic men who would follow their horse drawn equipment to the conflagration.

1909 marked another year of significance for Valhalla. With New York City's initial construction of the dam there came hundreds of laborers and other employees into the area. As construction of the dam lasted several years, many of our men and their families who had come to work found Valhalla a place to call home. We are blessed with a large number of descendants who are children and grandchildren of those men and women who entered our village nearly seventy years ago.

No events of great note occurred over the next few years, although some American doughboys arrived on the scene during World War I. It was their duty to guard Kensico Reservoir from any possible sabotage. Their departure after the war left Valhalla quiet until 1927. In that year the Bronx River Parkway, the world's first landscaped parkway, was extended through Valhalla. The importance of the highway system, along with the rail system, added considerable stature and economic assistance to our little community. Shortly thereafter, in 1931, the dangerous railroad crossing was eliminated when the bridge crossing the parkway was erected. — Valhalla Public Schools, *Valhalla Heritage: A Bicentennial History: 1776-1976*, 1976, pp. 9-10.

At home we called Valhalla “the Village”. My mother would ask, “Where were you?” and I would reply, “In the Village.” European friends of my parents who visited our house would point out that Valhalla — which my mother pronounced “Vahlhahlah” — was the name of the Viking heaven.

It is difficult to separate legend from fact in finding how the community got the name of Valhalla. However, the most consistent stories indicate that the United States Postal Department asked Mr. A. J. Kinch, the first postmaster, to name the post office to be established in the Kensico railroad station building in 1861. Mr. Kinch's wife, a student of literature and mythology, suggested the name ‘Valhalla’. The village itself was still known as Davis Brook, the railroad station was called Kensico station, mail was being sent to Valhalla post office, and the Kensico Cemetery railroad station was located just north of the village at its present site! The confusion became so great that a Civic Committee proposed that a new name be chosen by the community, especially since the village of Kensico itself was soon to be inundated [by Kensico Reservoir]. It is most generally agreed that Mr. Xavier Reiter, a French hornist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, a Wagnerian devotee, suggested that the post office name of ‘Valhalla’ be adopted. Eventually this suggestion carried over several others and the black and gold signs ‘Valhalla’ appeared on the station in 1904.” — Valhalla Chamber of Commerce, *Valhalla: The Best Place to Live by a Dam Site*, 1995, p. 8.

There was no doubt in my parents' minds that a village like Valhalla was the correct place to live. *Cities* were where the Common People lived. My mother would say, “Oh, I wouldn't want to live in the City” (which always meant New York City). People who mattered didn't live in the City (although they certainly worked there).

Valhalla was and, as far as I know, still is, a typical middle-class small town in the suburbs of a major metropolitan center. It was a railroad suburb, not an automobile suburb, in that the vast majority of fathers who commuted to New York City from it did so by train. In fact, I never heard of any father actually driving to his job in the City. It just wasn't done. I don't know if it would be correct to call it a bedroom community but certainly a significant proportion of the adult male residents, among them my father, earned their living in the City. The Bronx River — which was

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really only a creek — ran through the center of it. On the far side of the River was, first of all, the Bronx River Parkway, and then, up a slight rise, the Valhalla train station of the New York Central line. There were only two pairs of tracks, one for trains coming from the City, the other for those going to it. Up a steep embankment immediately beyond the tracks was a section of town which I probably didn't set foot in more than a few times in the seventeen years I lived in the town. Several kids I went to grammar school with lived there. If I had been asked what I thought of the people who lived in that part of town, I probably would have said, in so many words, that it was a place for people who had dirty faces.

The town consisted of a single main street called Broadway, with stores on one side, and trees along the River. Its entire length was probably not more than four blocks.

I will first describe the stores as I remember them. Then I will give the much more detailed description which was sent to me in Aug., 2003, by George Schmitt. He was the younger brother of Nancy Schmitt, a classmate of mine in grammar school who I remember had freckles and reddish hair, which she wore in bangs.

There was Cesari's grocery store (which my mother pronounced "Sezahrees" but which Florence, my babysitter, who was Italian, pronounced "Sezayrees"). Here my mother shopped occasionally, when she "needed something" and didn't want to wait for the weekly delivery from Gristede's in White Plains. My memory of the store is of busy, friendly Italians serving customers from behind an overcrowded counter. Stuff hung from the ceiling along most of the aisles. Mr. Cesari knew all his customers by name.

Then came the barber shop, then came Mr. Hilliard's drug store. Next came a candy store that, unlike Mrs. Donovan's, next to Public School No. 1, up on Columbus Ave., also sold plastic trinkets some of which became Gadgets, and also plastic and metal water pistols, and kites. Then came Stier's Delicatessen, which was on the corner of Cleveland St. and Broadway.

A few doors up Cleveland St., on the right, was the volunteer Fire Dept. On the opposite corner from the small grocery store was the C K Restaurant, where we, that is, my brother and I, were not supposed to go. The reason was never made clear by my mother: she wrinkled her nose when the subject came up, indicating that it was a place where the Common People went, a place that was like a *diner*. I went there anyway, of course, just to see what it was like: there was a lunch counter running the length of it, and (at least in memory) a middle-aged woman with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, squinting from the smoke as she wiped the counter top with a rag. If you turned left as you entered, you went up dark stairs to a bar in back where, it seemed, men with deep, gravelly voices were hunched over a dark wood bar. The place always smelled of cigarette smoke and alcohol.

On the same block on Broadway was the newspaper store where my father bought *The New York Times* and my brother and I bought comic books and gum. The store was run by a tall, thin old man who never said much to anyone. Farther down was a hardware store, and then Pfister's Lumber Yard.

Following is the description of the Village as recalled by George Schmitt and his sister Nancy in Aug. 2003. I have slightly edited his email. The reader will see that there are several discrepancies between what I remember, above, and what George and Nancy remember. Part of the reason may be that George was three years younger than me. In any case, I am deeply indebted to George and Nancy for taking the time to provide this, and other, information about Valhalla in the forties.

Starting from the bridge across the Bronx River Parkway and the railroad tracks and going

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south on Broadway:

On the Parkway side was a cannon surrounded by grass.

On the other side was:

the firehouse, then

a residence (that of Irene Cost), then

Pierce's Garage, then

Valhalla Place where the Rooneys lived (also Frankie Reilly), then

Kensico Cab Co. (a bus garage), then

Risher's little store, then

Andy Campbell's garage, then

Madison Ave.

Across Madison Ave. was:

Dr. Ryan's office (which was on Madison Ave), then

a little store which might have been a dress shop (it was later taken over by a lawyer,

J. Arthur McNamarra), then

the bank (located in a big building that originally housed the Post Office), then

a doorway to apartments upstairs, then

Cesari's Market, then

the barber shop, then

Hilliard's Drug Store, then

Valhalla Cleaners (originally the A & P grocery store), then

a driveway to the rear of the stores, then

Aeillo's candy store, then

Stier's Delicatessen (an entrance to apartments was around the corner), then

Cleveland St.

Going up Cleveland St. there was, on the left-hand side:

Cesari's house, then

the minister's house, then

a church, then

another house, then

Eddie Ackart's house, then

the old firehouse (back off the road).

Going up Cleveland St. there was, on the right-hand side:

the C K building with the restaurant and bar (the external door to the bar doorway was on Cleveland St.), then

a beauty shop, then

the Valhalla Public Library, then

Flaharty's real estate office (upstairs were apartments), then

the new Post Office, then

a driveway (to provide access to the backs of buildings on Cleveland St. and Broadway and to the entrance to Pfister's lumber yard and garages for apartments on

Broadway), then

an old firehouse, then

Lennard's house, then

## *Childhood*

Salvo's house, then another house, then  
the old school house, now an apartment house.

Returning to Broadway, and continuing south from Cleveland St. there was, on the  
left-hand side:  
the C K building on the corner, then  
Valhalla News (owned and operated by old Mr. Dolan , who died in the mid-fifties. His wife  
and two kids (boy and girl) then took over), then  
a barber shop, then  
a shoe maker (in the fifties it became Bill Phleiderer's Variety Store), then  
an alley, then  
Gilbert Nelligan's real estate office, then  
a door to apartments, then  
Joy Cesari's liquor store, then  
Tillo's hardware store, then  
an alley, then  
Hammond's candy store, then  
Pfister's Lumber Co. (which later became Henrietta's Luncheonette).

After Pfister's there was a semi-circular stairway that went up to North Kensico Ave.,  
where there was:  
a two-story apartment building (the old lady who owned the building lived in a cellar  
apartment), then  
two houses (the cellars of these were used by the Lumber Co. to store lumber), then  
a small house that was set down and back off of the Ave. (Barry Ellrodt's house), then  
farther up the Ave was  
the Banks' house, where the three Banks brothers lived (Donald, the oldest, Noel, and  
Norman, the youngest); they had a chicken coop.

The green Mt. Pleasant bus — small by today's standards — ran along Columbus Ave. on its  
way from Pleasantville to White Plains and back. According to rumor, Grace Beard, the beautiful  
blonde who lived next door to us, was in love with the handsome blond driver named Smitty, who  
had wavy hair and a moustache. We took the bus to go to Village, a distance of only a mile or so,  
or to go to White Plains, perhaps five miles farther. A distinct memory of my childhood is stand-  
ing at the foot of Elm Street endlessly waiting for the familiar square green front with the two  
round headlights to appear just after it had turned onto Columbus Ave. from Lakeview Ave.  
Slowly it came toward you, perhaps stopping once or twice. Then, as it pulled up with a sound of  
air brakes, the doors opened and you climbed up the steps and were greeted with a friendly hello  
from Smitty if he happened to be the driver that day. You dropped the fare into a glass box which  
had a lid with different sized holes in it for the different sized coins, he watching how much you  
put in. If you only had a dollar bill, he would make change, using the changer that was mounted  
on his left, below the window, or, sometimes, which he carried on his belt. The coin changer  
intrigued me. How could the machine always slide out just one nickel or dime with each press?  
Some kids, especially paper boys, had coin changers of their own. When a lot of coins had col-  
lected in the bottom of the glass box, Smitty would press a lever on the side, and the two halves of  
the bottom of the box would open downward, and the coins would fall into a lower part of the box

to be automatically sorted. I think they then appeared, each in their separate cylinder, on the side of the box, so that Smitty could replenish the supply in his coin changer.

On rare occasions, at the street right before Stotz's Garage, The Midget would climb onto the bus. We knew him by no other name. He was not a dwarf, which is an abnormally short person with a normal-sized head; he was a perfectly-proportioned miniature human being. He lived in a white house on the corner; it had a full front porch, and there were a couple of big trees in the front yard. We had no idea how old he was or what he did for a living, or if he worked at all. He was always immaculately groomed, with neatly-barbered dark hair slicked down and parted in the middle. He always wore a dark suit and a bow tie. His facial skin was wrinkled, so that I thought of him as a prematurely old child. He lived with an elderly woman who was almost never seen, and who the kids said was his mother. He would say hello to the driver in his miniature voice, reach up to put his money in the fare box, then climb up onto the seat behind the driver, going through the same effort as a child, since the bottom of the seat was at the height of his chest.

On one of the roads to White Plains was a sign announcing that Washington had slept there. I barely noticed it, never went in to see the place, hadn't the slightest interest in finding out why he had slept in that particular place and not another. Likewise, although I was deeply interested in the Wild West, and played cowboys and Indians at every opportunity, and wanted most of all to be a Mountain Man, I very seldom thought about the Indians who, we were told in school, had once lived in the area. The land clearly belonged to people who lived in houses. They controlled the world we lived in.

## **14 Elm Street**

Around 1942, we moved to 14 Elm St., into a house designed by my father and Mr. Berker, a Swiss architect. My mother spoke of it as being "Colonial". It had wide gray shingles, a fact my mother never allowed me to forget (they seemed far more important to her than the roof or the walls), and was situated in a 100 by 110-foot yard, another fact my mother never allowed me to forget: I: "How big is our yard?" She: "A hundred by a hundred and ten. Oh yes." Almost all of the yard was a lawn, the front lawn shaded by a grand old elm tree.

I still remember our phone number, which of course I had to memorize in case I got lost: White Plains 6-5865 R. For a while we had a party line, which meant that sometimes, when you picked up the phone, you would hear someone else talking (almost always a woman). Once or twice my mother would tell them they had been talking too long, that we had to make a phone call. A party line was cheaper than a private line. Later, for reasons I can't remember, our number was changed to White Plains 6-7087. I remember these numbers easily after sixty years even though I sometimes forget the code numbers I have to punch in to get my voice-mail each day. The house was located at one end of Shelley Ave, at the top of the small hill that was Elm St. In one direction, Elm St. descended to Columbus Ave., in the other, to Wall Ave. Shelley Ave. and adjacent streets were called "Shelley Park". The definition of a mile, when I asked my parents, was given as the distance from our house to the Village.

The design of the house was straightforward and engineering-like — after all, it had been designed by my father. On the right-hand side, as you faced the house from the street, was the garage (room for one car, which is what most families had in those days), and a little storage loft above. If you walked up the concrete path that led from the driveway to the front steps, then went up the three steps to the little porch (which measured perhaps five by five feet), then went inside, you were in a small hallway with a built-in bench and a phone on the shelf above it. On the left

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was the living room, which led to the dining room in the back of the house. Leading off the dining room on the left was The Porch, and on the right of the dining room, The Den. Then, coming toward the front of the house, you were in the kitchen. Then came a small stairway leading down to the garage and the basement stairs, then the front hall again. On the second floor were a bathroom and three bedrooms: my parents' bedroom on the far left of the little hallway that led from the stairs, my brother's and my room on the far right. Immediately to the right of the head of the stairs was the guest room. My first memory of being sick — apparently when I was three or four — is of lying in bed in the guest room. I don't know why I had been put there, since my brother hadn't been born yet, and thus was in no danger of catching my illness. My mother kept a thick steam pot with camphor on the nighttable. I would have to inhale the fumes periodically, according to some schedule of hers.

The house had steam heat, which was normal for those days, at least in houses like ours. The radiators were built into the wall; in front of each radiator was a white metal panel, flush with the wall, and a grating across the upper quarter through which the heat emerged. I forget now where the knob was that adjusted the steam flow into the radiator: perhaps the panel could be opened somehow. Throughout each winter, the temperature in the house was always comfortable.

Some time after we moved into the house, my father had a narrow stairway to the attic built, at the head of which was a little alcove. The attic proper had a plain, board floor, the boards laid at a 45-degree angle across the floor joists, and black, puffy insulation bags hanging between the roof beams. In summer the attic was insufferably hot. After standing in it for just a few minutes, sweat would be rolling down your face and back. I always tried to convince myself that if I were any good, I would be able to play up there and enjoy it. My parents would say of the attic, "It's insulated", so for me that meant that this couldn't be real heat, ordinary heat, because my father had insulated it. Like all attics, ours was used for storage, but in comparison to most attics, it was immaculate, with everything in boxes placed where my mother wanted it. My childhood toys were stored up there. And window shade rollers. And the badminton net and poles. Later on the alcove was finished so that a desk and chair could be put in it. By the end of the forties, the basement was also finished: my father's workshop was relegated to one side, the center and opposite side were enclosed and became the Play Room. Its walls were covered with a yellow-brown imitation wood surface, with indentations to suggest old wood, the floor was dark green and red linoleum tile. I have never been in a room that was less conducive to play than the Play Room. It was always cold, it echoed, blue-green light from the overhead fluorescent lamps glared down — I always thought of it as a room that only my mother could like. Even in summer, I was reluctant to find relief from the heat by spending time in that room.

A small bathroom was installed at the left of the foot of the stairs, with a little alcove which became the only place I was allowed to polish my shoes.

In the wall to the right of my father's workshop, about two-thirds of the way up, was a little opening barely three feet high that led into the Little Basement, also of that height, where things, but not lots of things, were stored. You could never stand up in it, of course, and instead had to scuffle along in a kneeling position, watching that your head didn't bang into the overhead beams. Later, we kids would use it as a club house and secret hideout.

On the right of the opening was the washing area, with its big sink and the Westinghouse washing machine. (Clothes were hung out to dry on a tree-like aluminum framework in the backyard (I am not sure what it was called. It had a center pole which went into a receptacle in the ground, and ropes strung between the metal "branches" to hold the clothes, which were held in place with clothespins from a basket. When the laundry had been taken in, the apparatus was

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folded up and stored in the garage or the basement. Our neighbors the Beairds used a clothesline to dry their clothes: a long rope running around pulleys at either end, so that Mrs. Beaird could reel out the wet laundry from a window in the house, then reel it back in when it was dry.) The Porch had a flagstone floor which my mother kept waxed to a shine. “Not on the flagstone!” — the words were said in reference to just about anything that could spill. In the summer, my father put up the screens around The Porch. The door from the back of The Porch to the yard had a pneumatic cylinder near the top to pull it closed. It made a dutiful, obedient hiss each time. There could be no slamming of this door, and no accidental leaving it open to let flies and mosquitoes in. Three wooden steps, painted gray, led down to the back yard. They went thunk, thunk, thunk, under your feet as you stepped down. On the Fourth of July, people sat on them to watch our fireworks. There were comfortable outdoor chairs in the corners of the porch, and a table for eating on against the dining room wall. The Porch was always cool in the summer, the floor always cold when bare feet touched it. My mother would say, as she was finishing preparing lunch or a snack, “Do you want it on The Porch?”

Once, in the middle of winter during WW II, we heard a noise there, opened the door, and saw a shivering black and white dog. I immediately wanted to take it in and have it for my pet, but my mother refused. I’m not sure that she even allowed me to take it into the house. I pleaded with her, promised I would take care of it entirely by myself. No, she said, it will become frightened of the air-raid sirens (which occurred at most once every week or so). This had always been her reason why we couldn’t have a dog. I told her I wouldn’t let it become frightened, I would hold it and comfort it when the sirens went off. This conversation took place as the animal lay there, whimpering and shivering. I lost the argument and next day I had to put it in a box and accompany her as she drove it the pound.

(My father, on the other hand, seemed to like dogs. Whenever one of them happened to come up to us while we were on a family walk, and I gave it only a token, hesitant, pat on the head, for fear of being bitten, he would always say (these may not be his exact words), “You have to scratch him behind the ears. They like that,” and I would make an attempt to do that.)

My mother may have disliked dogs, but she hated cats, “because they kill the birds.” When no birds could be heard, it was always because of the cats. One of her reasons for refusing to live in any city was that there are no birds. On the left-hand side of the back yard, near the fence, was my mother’s rock garden, and part of the litany of daily life was her telling us not to walk on it. Next to the rock garden was a narrow gap in the fence that we could squeeze through to get to the path that led down to the Old House, before it was torn down and all the trees and bushes removed for the Mirante’s house. Near the gap in the fence was a vaguely conically-shaped boulder sticking up out of the ground. I would walk past this boulder, chewing Wrigley’s Spearmint or Doublemint gum, and saying to myself, “Go here...go here...go here.” It was a little ceremony of being perfect, and it had a deep and mysterious importance for me.

At the other end of the back yard fence were the lilac bushes, which my mother pronounced, “the lye-locks”. I hated them throughout my childhood because of the way she fussed about them and talked about them even though they didn’t seem to require much care. Only late in life was I able to appreciate their aroma and blue color. In the morning, lying in bed, I would listen to a strange sounding bird whose song always reminded me of a mournful ocarina. *Coo-eeh Coooh, Coooh-Coooh*. I never found out what it was. Probably a mourning dove. Finding out the names of things belonged to the adult world, and I wanted no part of that.

On the sideboard in the dining room was a hygrometer, a little house with an old witch inside. When a storm approached, the old witch came out of her house. My mother explained that this was

because a hair inside contracted or expanded, depending on the moisture in the air. I had no curiosity about how the thing actually worked — how something as insignificant as a contracting hair could actually make a wooden figure move in and out of her little house. I took it for granted that it was the same order of business as governed the living room furniture. — something from that world of adults which boys couldn't understand and which was boring anyway.

“When Santorio found a knowledge of atmospheric humidity useful in treating diseases, he invented a simple hygrometer. A cord was stretched horizontally on a wall, and from its center a ball was suspended. Increasing moisture in the air tightened the cord and caused the ball to be lifted. The amount of the lift was registered against a vertical scale inscribed in the wall.” — Boorstin, Daniel, *The Discoverers*, Random House, N.Y., 1983, p. 373.

## Neighbors

When I asked, “Which way is North?” my father would always reply that it was straight down Shelley Ave — straight ahead from our front door. When I got a compass — probably as part of some premium being offered by a radio show — I checked and found that once again he was right.

In any case, our next-door neighbors on the west were the Beards: Mr. and Mrs. Beard, their older daughter Grace, and then Bob and Barbara who were in that group I referred to at home as The Kids. “Where are you going?” “To play with the kids.”

Mrs. Beard's father was Mr. Baum, an old man with sunken cheeks and a gravelly voice whom we didn't see very much. According to a phone call with Barbara on 12/20/03, he was born in Missouri and had come to Valhalla around 1910 or 11. He was a stone cutter all his life, and became a foreman of stonecutters working on Kensico Dam. He contracted silicosis, and so was retired when we were growing up. He may have lived there in an attic room, I'm not sure. The only reason I remember him was that, next to their front sidewalk was a big, black stone with moss on top which Bob and others in the family said was a meteorite that the old man had found somewhere in the hills. I understood that a meteorite was a rock that had fallen out of the sky after wandering through outer space. They said it contained iron. It seemed to me a particularly boring rock, with an ugly brown coating over parts of it, the rest looking like something that had been in a furnace. Even stuff from outer space is boring, I thought. I sometimes stopped to look at it in my daily goings back and forth between our house and theirs. I wondered if it really could have come from outer space, and how long ago the old man had found it.

Their dog Laddie was always barking as he ran back and forth on the end of the leash that was attached by a ring to a cable stretched several feet above the ground, like a clothesline, down the length of their back yard. Getting them to keep the dog quiet was an ongoing battle on the part of my parents. They would call the police, nothing would be done. For some reason their complaints had no effect on my relationship with Bob and Barbara, or with their parents.

The Beards had a horseshoe court in their back yard, and on Sunday, old men would turn up and play. We were never quite sure where they came from. The clank of horseshoe against iron stake is one of the sounds that for me means a peaceful, eternal, summer afternoon.

We sometimes tried to play horseshoes but the massive shoes were too heavy for us to be any good at it. (But once in a while one of us would shout “*Ringer!*” Other times, we had to measure with the width of the open end of a shoe to see if a throw had landed close enough to the stake to make a point.)



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West of the Beards were some people in a white house (we seldom saw them), then, at the end of Elm Street, the Rupps. Mr. Rupp was a young-looking, athletic German with Gladstone-Gander<sup>1</sup>-type curly hair who was always nice to us kids, despite the fact that he and his wife had no kids of their own. My mother said he was an excellent skier — naturally, since he was a European — and that he and his wife went away on skiing weekends during the winter. They kept to themselves in their little house at the end of the block with the ceramic dwarf on the front lawn.

Our next-door neighbors on the east were the Thomases — I can't remember who lived there before. They moved in when I was in my early teens. I remember saying to the kids, when news came that a new family was going to move in, "I'm going to be the first at their front door to say hello!" I think because someone said there was a guy our age in the family. But what a strange remark! It arose from my constant need to be liked. The son's name was Richard. His father, another German, was in the interior tile business or some such. He was more typical of what I thought of Germans as being: a bit stout, kind of loud, and, rumor had it, a very severe father.

At the eastern end of Elm St., at the corner of Columbus Ave., lived the Pinchbecks. The son Vance was a classmate of mine. He had dark hair and was a handsome guy. I admired his supremely self-controlled manner. He seemed to work at it every moment: no smiles except when he decided something was truly funny, no expression of emotion, no shouting, everything he did, from the way he handled a pencil to the way he handled tools, was done deliberately, with the least excess motion. The word wasn't in use then, but in the modern vernacular, Vance was definitely cool.

Across Columbus Ave. were the McGuinness's. The son was in school with me. My mother told me that their daughter had to go into a convent after "an unhappy love affair", meaning, I gathered, after the guy she was in love with, decided not to marry her. Some girls had it tough, I thought. One false move and their life was finished.

On the two corners of Elm St. and Shelley Ave. lived the Pedersens and the Pattersons. Mr. Pedersen worked for the telephone company, I think. They had a daughter, Joy — God knows how old she was; I suppose a teenager when I was still younger than twelve; all I can remember is that she was thin and that she ran in that funny way that girls ran, with her ankles going from side to side — she was my first object of study of that phenomenon.

Mr. Patterson looked like a Hollywood actor from a Western: he had white hair and a clipped moustache and spoke in a deep voice. He worked for the New York Times, where his job was to do the "continued on page ..." lines on the bottom of articles — at least that's what Bobby Wilkins, his grandson, who also lived in their house, told me once. I assumed without questioning that, for something as important as the New York Times, they would need a person just to do that simple task — that is how important the New York Times was.

At the bottom of Elm Street hill on the west side was the start of Wall Avenue. One of the houses there was the Moser's. Mr. Moser, an officer in the American Legion, as will be described later, gave me my first job as a musician. Across the street from them were the Lachmans. The story was that their son or some relative was Whitey Lachmann, the major league baseball player.

Next to the Mosers were the Rolfes. Carol Rolfes, a girl I remember as being a little overweight, and hence warm and mother-like, was one of my baby sitters. (I was never sure if the

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1. Gladstone Gander was a character in the Donald Duck comics of the day. A cousin of Donald, he was a dashing figure, a man-about-town with an eye out for get-rich-quick schemes. He was always lucky, despite the fact he was annoying and undeserving. He wore a black bow tie, a vest with big gold buttons, and white spats. His curly hair was always slicked down, and went in small waves from the front of his forehead to the back.

name was Rolfe (so that the family would be the Rolfes) of if the 's' came built into the name itself, so that she was Carol Rolfes and the family was also the Rolfes.)

Farther north, up the little Wall Ave. hill, were the Oechsles. Their daughter Regina was older than me and was doing well: my mother would make sure I understood that. (In 1996, at the age of 91, my mother remarked that they were her "closest friends" in the neighborhood, which probably doesn't have a grain of truth to it. I don't know what dislodged memory fragment made her make such a remark. Maybe they were Swiss. I remember that Mr. Oechsle was bald and wore rimless glasses, like my father, though he was thinner, faster, more weasel-like — at least in memory.)

If there was anything like a "leading family" in Valhalla, it was probably the Pfisters (more Germans!). They owned a lumber company — Adolf Pfister & Sons — in town. (I always liked the combined smells of concrete and tar paper around the place. They said "Important work is going on here!") The Pfisters' son and daughter had a reputation for being "wild" and, as we were told had been inevitable, it eventually caught up with them. Betty was generally considered the most beautiful girl in town. According to what my mother told us, she and her brother and other kids had been tearing down the Bronx River Parkway a mile or so from the Village in their black convertible (surely the devil's form of transportation) laughing and carrying on, when something happened and the brother lost control and the car crashed. I think she said at least one person had been killed. A terrible accident. And this was the worst: Betty's face had been badly cut. There was a question whether she had lost her beauty. Days, weeks of silence as the town absorbed the scandal of these teenagers who belonged to the best family. What now seems like months later, there was word that Betty had been seen on the street, presumably still with a few bandages. Then more sightings occurred and, miracle of miracles, it seemed that the surgeons had been able to restore her face to its former beauty. Once and only once I passed her on the street after the accident, walking along Columbus Ave. between the Village and Public School No. 1. I think I smiled, nodded, and I think she smiled back and said hello. She was absolutely gorgeous. I thought: if you are that beautiful, and that rich, not even a car accident that kills some of your friends can do you any permanent damage. It just doesn't happen.

## **My Brother**

My brother David (his middle name was Herman, after my father) was born in February, 1940. Adults often said, when my mother told them the names of me and my brother, "Ah, biblical names." This gave me a sense of reassurance. At least I had that much going for me.

I remember no preliminary announcement of his arrival, no explanation, nothing except my father saying to me, as I was standing in the front hall, with a strange flush in his face, that my mother would be at the hospital for a few days and then I would have a baby brother. Something like that. When the baby arrived — I think Feb. 24 was his birthday — my attitude was pretty much what it would have been if she had brought home a package from shopping. Sometimes it was a roast or a new item of clothing or something for the house, so why not a brother? I don't think I felt any jealousy. It just seemed an interesting thing to bring home, except that, in this case you didn't go to a store, you got him at a hospital. Later I found out that she had suffered two miscarriages before having him.

A nurse was hired to help take care of him. She was referred to simply as Nurse Ross. I remember her as a severe woman. One day she dropped my brother on the floor, my mother said, but fortunately he landed on the rug. Nurse Ross was fired immediately.

Although I am a man of monumental hatreds, there are very few things in my life that I regret with such great anguish that I can hardly bear recalling them, but one of these is the way I treated my brother as we were growing up. People tell me it is common for older brothers to be cruel to younger ones, but that is no consolation, especially considering what later happened to him. I can barely force myself to write these words now. I was merciless in my mockery of him — his slowness and awkwardness, his sometimes not being up-to-the-minute about something we older kids were doing. I was merciless in my mockery of his being a little overweight, calling him “fat” again and again. The truth is that he was a happy, friendly kid, not a troublemaker or complainer. His only wish was to be allowed to be part of our gang and he had to endure the scorn, initiated by me, of our not wanting “David tagging along” with its pretended threat of his telling our mother what we were doing. What has been observed many times in the mentalities of the weak and fearful, was true of me: with everyone else (except, of course, my mother), my one concern, my one goal, was to be liked, but toward the one person in the world who wanted me to like him — a person whom you would think I could sympathize with more than any other, and toward whom I would above all not want to inflict the kind of anguish I endured at the hands of others — toward this person, I was completely without restraint in my lack of feeling and in my determination to make him suffer.

## **My Father Early Life**

My father was born and raised in the small Swiss town of Wangen-an-der-Aare, a few miles up the Aare River from the country’s capital, Berne. He used to tell us how one of his childhood duties was to milk the family cow every morning. Apparently his family also had bees, which he had to take care of. In any case, despite my complete lack of interest in anything to do with farming or animal husbandry, bee-keeping is for me special, an activity distinct from all other things connected with farms, and the reason is that my father, or possibly my mother, quoting my father, spoke of it with admiration. His father had been a school inspector. My mother always made sure to add that he was “beloved by all in the district”, just as her father was beloved by all his students and my father was beloved by all the employees in his company.

The story went that, when it came time for him to go to college, his father looked at which professions — or at least which engineering professions — were most in demand, and came to the conclusion that the answer was “civil engineering”. So that’s what my father studied, at the prestigious Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (always referred to as the “Zürich Polytechnikum”), despite the fact that he had always wanted to be a mechanical engineer. (He used to say that, if he couldn’t have become an engineer, he would have become a garage mechanic.)

In Switzerland, at least in the early 1900s, every male from age 18 on had to put in several weeks each year serving in the Swiss military. Since my father was studying civil engineering, he was made a pontoon engineer. My mother always pronounced the name in Swiss dialect when she mentioned it: “He was a *pontoneer*”. These engineers were responsible for building pontoon bridges across rivers for the Army (I thought: what a great idea! a bridge made out of boats!).

When he first came to this country, he worked in the West on various civil engineering projects — dams, and at least one tunnel — some of which will be described later. I remember him telling me about how he used to volunteer to fight forest fires, and how at night the firefighters dug shallow trenches and slept in them because the earth was still warm from the fire.

## Childhood

Some time in the twenties, while he was working for Thebo, Starr, and Anderton in San Francisco, he married a divorcee with two daughters. Her name was Nellie Annie. I don't know her previous married name, or maiden name. My mother said she was ten years older than he and that that was why the marriage "didn't work". She told me, when she was in her early nineties, that my father and his first wife had lived on "Chabot" in Oakland. She didn't know if it was Chabot St. or Ave. or Ct. — all three exist — but as a result there was a possibility that, during the previous eight years, I had been jogging past a house that my father once lived in. Then my father and his wife moved to a house in the Berkeley Hills, specifically, at 1107 Miller Ave, as I found out from the Alameda County archives when I was in my sixties. The details will be given at the appropriate time in this book.

My mother always made a point of telling me how generous he was with the two daughters, sending them money for school even after the divorce, and how they used to telephone even after my father and mother were married, in 1935.

In 1934, my father was made president of the Borsari Tank Corporation, headquartered in New York City. The owners were two Swiss, a Mr. Labhardt and his wife. My mother hated Mrs. Labhardt, I think because Mrs. Labhardt made it clear that she was, in effect, one of my father's bosses and that therefore his wife ought to show due humility toward her, which, of course, infuriated my mother. Mr. Labhardt visited us sometimes — I only recall his wife being with him once — and my brother and I always liked him. He was a modest man, tall, handsome, with gray at his temples; had a deep voice and spoke with the Swiss accent that most of my parents' visitors seemed to have. He was always nice to us kids, by which my brother and I meant (if someone had asked us) that he treated us with respect, man to man.

I seem to recall my mother finally revealing, years later, and very reluctantly, that my father earned \$12,000 a year. If that was his salary in, say, 1945, the equivalent, in 2016, would be about \$160,000. But this seems rather low for the president of a profitable, if small, engineering firm, so I suspect he was earning the equivalent of closer to \$200,000 a year.

### **The Best Engineer I Have Ever Known**

To this day, my father remains the best engineer I have ever personally known. I am not sure but that one reason he chose to live in Valhalla was the presence of Kensico Dam, which he clearly admired. "The largest earth and stone structure of its kind" is a phrase that lingers in my memory: probably it is from a postcard, but it may have been uttered by my father when we talked about the Dam. He was also the best craftsman I have ever known. Everything he did, he did the right way. For us kids, craftsmanship was the last thing we had on our minds. We wanted to get things working as fast as possible. If something needed fixing or adding to on a derby racer, we grabbed a hammer and nails, the bigger the better, and started banging away. Len Lindholm's racer was a masterpiece of this brute force carpentry. Every joint was full of big nails, some hammered in straight, some bent. All of this visibly pained my father. Like all good craftsmen, he had a fundamental love, or I should say *respect*, for materials — for metal and wood and even plastic. He taught me about grain in wood, and that if you want to saw a piece of wood in the direction of the grain, then you use a rip saw, but if you want to saw it across the grain, then you use a cross-cut saw. In either case, you should always round the edges (using the right file) of boards you have just cut. He explained how plywood is much stronger than an ordinary board of the same thickness because it is made of sheets of wood that are glued together so that the grains run in opposite directions.

“You should put it together with *screws*,” he would say to me as I banged away in a fury of impatience and often of rage. But that didn’t just mean starting a screw and then somehow getting enough torque into a screwdriver to make the screw go all the way through the first piece of wood and into the second. It meant doing the job right: drilling a pilot hole (of the right size, as dictated by the size of the screw) all the way through the first piece of wood, then drilling a small starter hole in the second piece, then countersinking (with a countersink) the first hole, then using a woodscrew with a flat head that would go into the countersunk part and thus lie flat, if not actually a little below the surface of the wood. All of which took more than a lifetime — far more time than any kid was able to spare. And you had to repeat this process for each screw!

But the thing I was most in awe of about him was his patience. He never got mad when things didn’t work. The truth is, I cannot recall a single time when things did not work for him. Which doesn’t mean that they always did, but that correcting and trying again until they did work were so much a part of the process for him that you couldn’t tell the difference. For me, it was always a question of being judged by the things I attempted to do. Every activity I engaged in, but especially working in the workshop, had only one purpose, namely, to determine — to allow the things I was working on to determine — if I was any good or not, in other words, if I had a right to go on living. The judgement was always present and it was almost always negative. So whenever I worked on something, I was always desperate, and always on the verge of flying into a rage over my ineptitude. Even well into adult life there were times when I would scream at something that had frustrated me, break it into pieces with a hammer, throw it on the floor, shouting, “You son-of-a-bitch, I’ll fix you, you son-of-a-bitch!” and actually believe in the deepest recesses of my soul that I was in fact punishing the thing.

This boundless, at times uncontrollable, rage at not being able to do something that others can do has continued to old age. For example, when I am doing mathematics, I am utterly baffled at those who can remain calm when things don’t work for them. What do they know that I don’t? How can they endure the anxiety during those moments of knowing that their failure to be as fast as others might mean they have no reason to live?

I am not at all sure how much of the responsibility for these feelings can be laid at my father’s feet. He certainly never mocked my efforts. I remember how it pained him when I mistreated metal — “You wreck the threads!” — or when I took shortcuts, e.g., didn’t drill the pilot hole and countersink it before I screwed two pieces of wood together, but instead grabbed the nearest nail and just started hammering. Like most kids, I held the hammer near the head while I was pounding a nail. Time and again, he patiently told me to hold the hammer near the other end of the handle, saying that it works better that way. (From my college calculus courses, I gathered that the reason was that it gave you greater torque — that is, increased the force at which the head struck the nail. But it also made it more difficult to hit the nail.) He also instructed my brother and me always to hold the blade of an axe or hatchet horizontally and facing *outward* when we walked, or, God forbid, ran with it. Never inward.<sup>1</sup>

My father had made clear that, when you cut a branch off a tree, you were supposed to put tar on the wound, or, rather, a special kind of black paint that he had. So that was the price of the fun of cutting off the limb. More drudgery. I tried to force myself to do it, almost never did (even though I liked the smell of the paint). My father always did.<sup>2</sup>

During our trip to Switzerland, when I was thirteen, I began thinking that, to me, he was like one of the Alps. Just as it made no sense to question a mountain’s grandeur, so it made no sense to

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1. I seem to recall this lesson being repeated later in Boy Scouts.

question my father's excellence. Nowadays, we would say that he didn't attempt to make the world of tools and building things friendly and appealing to me. He never put his arm around my shoulder and said, perhaps with an affectionate squeeze, and a sense of humor, something like, "Now, young man, let me help you with that. I know how much you want to get it finished and start using it, and I promise I won't ask you to make it perfect. But still, you don't want it to fall apart either."

His tools were always clean and well-oiled. Mine, then and thereafter, always seemed to become covered with brown rust even if I did oil them (and I usually didn't). Yet I wanted mine to be oily and darkly shiny like his. I had the idea that the reason they weren't was that I didn't use them all the time. He would reluctantly let me borrow tools for our hut-building projects, but he always insisted on their being brought back. He would check after several days. He had painted silhouettes of each tool on the backboard of the bench, then driven in nails to hold the tool in place. I had to put each tool, cleaned, back where it came from.

Perhaps one reason for my love of abstractions is that there is no need for all this extraneous work with them: no sawdust, no splinters on them. In a computer program, you never have to worry about whether the pieces of metal and silicon in the integrated circuit chips fit together properly: if the program fails because they don't, that is not your fault; you haven't failed as a programmer. I hated the *weight* of material things, all the things that could go wrong, and that you couldn't just fix them in your mind. Nails came out of boards, nails and screws bent when they hit other nails and screws that were already in the boards, paint peeled, everything took so much time.

Nevertheless, my parents took it for granted that I would want to grow up to be an engineer. One Christmas or birthday when I was about ten they (or maybe it was Uncle Gus, whom we will meet later) gave me a book with a title something like *The Young Electrical Engineer*. It had a picture of a happy boy on the cover with some device he had made. I wanted as little to do with the book as possible. The words were too big, it all seemed unbelievably dull and just the kind of thing that would come from the world of adults. They were setting me up, they had my life all planned, and I was damned if I would go along with it. I wish I had the book now, just to see what I considered then to be too difficult.

At an earlier age I got a fake tool kit with a little hammer that was too light to hammer anything, and a drill that wasn't meant to drill, and a saw that didn't cut, and a screwdriver that didn't fit any of the screws within reach, and a T-square and a miter box the purpose of which I couldn't guess. (Why were the slits in the box (which wasn't really a box) at an angle?) The tool handles were made out of light blond wood, the box they came in out of a thin white wood whose smell I liked.

I was furious that I couldn't figure out how to make myself have my father's love of tools, his love of making things with one's own hands. For me, if something broke or didn't work, that meant the decision as of now was that you didn't have a right to go on living. When people spoke of the pleasure of doing things with their hands, that meant that, on top of everything else, they had found a way to make this misery pleasurable. It seemed impossible to me, and I took this as further proof of how far I was from having any worth. I was furious at my impatience to get things

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2. Toward the end of the 20th century, research revealed that "the sealers seal in bacteria and fungi and give them a protected place to establish themselves. In addition the solvents cause further injury. Current practice is to clean wounds up smooth and not use any sealant." — bamboo@localnet.com, quoted in GardenBanter.co.uk, 7/25/11

done, filled with rage and self-contempt that I couldn't bring myself to take my time the way my father did. Of course, the truth was that I hated having to go through all this torment of *building things*. How could there be pleasure in waiting to find out the world's judgement of your worth? How could measuring and sawing and cutting and finding you had measured wrong and repeating the whole process and then hammering and praying — how could this possibly compete with racing down the brick road on the other side of the Dam, risking going over the side on the big turn, or hitting one of the concrete posts which were only inches farther apart than the width of your racer that you went through at the very end? How could laboring in a basement possibly compare with speed and danger?

All the magazines we got were kept in a wooden magazine rack in the living room: *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Reader's Digest*, and, of course my father's engineering magazines. I often tried to figure out how to like his magazines, but couldn't. My favorite magazine was *Life*, because of all the interesting pictures. I simply couldn't find where the interest was in gears and washers and tubing, and the deadly serious, boring prose written about these things. On one of his shelves was a dark blue binder in imitation leather labelled "Molybdenum and Steel" in silver letters. I had no idea what the first word meant. I only knew it was Important. So was "Manganese", another term I heard or had seen on a binder. These were his things, and not for little boys.

My remoteness from all things pertaining to engineering was all too apparent when, every once in a while, it would be time for my father to "look at the blueprints", meaning, of course, the blueprints of the house. This happened when some change to the house was being considered. The blueprints were kept in a large cardboard tube somewhere, I never knew where, but when they came out, my father would unroll them, and place them on the dining room table, or on the table in his den. He would have to put something heavy on the corners because the blueprints were always trying to roll back up. He brushed invisible dust from the surface by way of getting ready for this important work, and then he and my mother, and possibly Mr. Berker — the architect who had worked with my father in designing the house — would talk over the blueprints (sometimes called "the plans") in serious voices. I would be allowed to look at the prints before they were put away again. They had thin, white, straight lines on a dark blue background (I knew there must be an important reason why they are not ordinary black pencil lines on white paper). The arrows were thin and sharp. Here and there were peculiar symbols: a "c" with a big "L" superimposed on it<sup>1</sup>. The blueprints didn't show a picture of a house. They showed what the house really was, behind the scenes. They showed the house *spirit*, in all its severity: side view, front view, top view. No fun here. This was another serious matter which only an engineer could understand.

I have a set of the prints in my closet containing his marks in that precise, forward-slanted, sharp-cornered handwriting of his. They seem to be corrections or minor changes. I don't know when they were made, other than that it was in the forties.

My father hated waste of any kind. When I made drawings (usually attempts at comic books) and threw aside the sheet as soon as I was dissatisfied with it, he would say, "You waste paper!" I was supposed to use both sides of each sheet always, as he did with his yellow quad-ruled pads. Economy in all things. He hated to see anything thrown out, whether it was a piece of wood or metal, or even a jar from the kitchen. "Don't throw that out! You can always use it." or "Save that! It might come in useful some day." It might be a holder for papers or a piece of string or

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1. As I learned many years later, it is the engineering symbol for "center line".

## Childhood

wire or something I had found on Parklane Road. There was a wide shelf under the work bench where we were supposed to put all the scrap wood. I admired this thrifty quality of his. To me, it was another sign that he was a great man.

He was always the practical engineer. When my mother oohed and ahed over a beautiful house on one of our Sunday drives, say, to Scarsdale, he inevitably replied, "Who's going to pay to heat it?" He would say, when I left a door open in the house: "We're not heating the outside!" When we went to a restaurant, the first thing he did was check if the table wobbled or not. If it did, the food had two strikes against it even before it was served. On the other hand if the table didn't wobble, the food was probably going to be good. I have inherited this table-wobble sensitivity from him, particularly if I go to a coffee shop to study. I cannot study, or even just read, if the table I am sitting at wobbles. I become angry at the coffee shop owners that they haven't understood the importance of such things. My contempt for the masses comes to the fore — for the non-intellectuals, the ordinary jerks, who don't care about such things because they never open a book.

We spoke of "Daddy's inventions", but these were divided into two distinct classes: one was the important inventions that we never understood — things with tightly stretched wire wound around long rods, model dams made of wood and glass in the garage — and the other class was his amusing inventions, like the waterwheel he built one summer. The wheel itself was perhaps a foot-and-a-half in diameter, and consisted of two circular boards which he had cut out on the jigsaw, mounted on an axle which in turn was mounted on a pair of wooden supports. Around the perimeter of the wheel he had put plastic spoons — red, blue yellow, white — that he had gotten from my mother. In a piece of wood mounted to the rear of the base of the wheel was a hole where you stuck the nozzle of the garden hose. When you turned on the water, the water struck the spoons and the wheel spun and threw spray in all directions — beautiful to see in the sunlight of a summer's day.

Evenings and weekends, my father worked in the basement — in The Workshop — building models for his inventions. He was often up till one in the morning, and still able to be on the train at eight. With his Robert Burns cigar in his mouth, he patiently drilled and filed and assembled and tested. (One time I think my mother was badgering him to give up his cigars. I heard him grumble, as he and I were getting into the car, "I have to have *some* fun.") Often he had to put threads onto the ends of steel rods. This he did with a tap and die, using the metal lathe he had bought and was clearly proud of. Steel cutting steel. The little oily filings dropping down. All this done with his traditional slowness and infinite patience. The rods were for his prestressed concrete inventions. Wires would be wound around them and twisted and then, in actual practice, though not in the models, when they were released, they would attempt to snap back to their position of least tension, pulling the concrete in a vortex toward the center in the process and thus making it stronger. Or sometimes the rods were simply put under tension until the concrete hardened. Their attempt to return to their normal length would pull the concrete in on itself. So we were told, though I can't remember if he did all this explaining or if it was my mother (I doubt it) or the guests who visited us over the years.

Later on, he built model dams in the garage, constructed out of two-by-fours, plywood, glass panes, and wire. He actually had water running through the model.

He published several papers in civil engineering journals, papers which were called "definitive" in his obituary. One of his papers begins with the question of why walnut shells are so strong, and then provides an answer which he developed into an idea for designing thin shells for covering large spaces. To this day I do not have a complete collection, much less a complete list,



still less a complete understanding of these papers, which I am guessing numbered between six and ten. Nor do I know how many patents he had when he died. All this has remained my mother's territory. Ever since his death she has berated me for not taking an interest in his work, and as a result I have avoided taking an interest in his work.

My mother said that, when he was in California, he was invited to be a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. All he would have to do was complete a Ph.D. He replied that his published papers should be an ample substitute for a Ph.D. thesis. The school replied that no, he would have to complete further work under the school's auspices. To which, apparently with no regrets, he replied thank you but he didn't have that kind of time to waste, a decision I admired him for in my own later battles with the academic establishment.

I never got the sense that he was in a race with others in his field to publish first. Perhaps he was so far ahead of them that he didn't have to worry. His philosophy seemed to be: out of the countless interesting things in life, I have chosen to work on these ideas. I take my time, do things right, and when I have results I am sure of, I offer them to the journals of my profession. He has been for me, all my life, the ultimate argument against the forces of academicism, the ultimate proof that one can work independently and produce work that is as good or better than what is done in the university.

Once in a while he had to go on a business trip. Most often this seemed to be to St. Louis, and although in the early forties he took the train, he began flying as airline travel became more popular toward the late forties. He sent me a postcard showing one of these planes. We assumed he was risking his life, and were always thankful when we heard that the plane hadn't crashed, though, at the same time, there was the feeling that it would be an exceptional airline indeed which permitted one of its planes to crash when it was carrying Herman Franklin. (Being killed in an airline crash was reserved for the rabble.) Sometimes, no doubt at my mother's prompting, since I am sure his mind was on other things, he would send me a card or a letter from the city he had travelled to. At Christmas, wooden boxes containing scotch, which he never drank, plus wine, all expensive and special looking, would arrive from the companies that his company had done work for during the year.

He was a man without pretensions. Even though some of the kids would sometimes refer to us as "rich", we lived in a house similar to the others in our neighborhood, except that it was better designed and built, and the reason for that was that it had been done under his supervision. He never did anything in order to make him, or us, look more important or wealthy. His unspoken philosophy was: you acquired a wife, had children, built a comfortable house, did excellent work on the job, and put your money in the bank. It was that simple. His only personal expenses were for tools.

He had no interest in religion. His philosophy of life was expressed in a few brief sayings: "God is the good in you"; "Whoever doesn't work, doesn't eat"<sup>1</sup>; "A winner never quits, a quitter never wins"; "If you live a good life, you have nothing to fear", which he would always tell me when I asked him about death. He was not inclined to be sympathetic about the melancholia of childhood. One day I stood at the top of the stairs to the basement as he was busy in his workshop, and told him, "I have nothing to do." He: "Practice your penmanship."

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1. In my sixties, I learned that this goes back to the rise of the bourgeoisie in the 16th century and was aimed against what was perceived as the idleness of the priests and monks (Weber, Eugen, *The Western Tradition*, PBS TV series). In my sixties I also learned of "... Lenin's dictum 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat.'" — Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*, Harper and Row, Publishers, N.Y., 1985, p. 91)

Both my father and my mother were Republicans. I remember my mother often shaking her head angrily about “that awful Roosevelt”. Yet, at the same time my father was a World Federalist, which he (and my mother — this much she seemed to understand) explained to me was a group that believed there should be a single government for the entire world. When they explained it to me, it was always in the tones of, “Of course, it’s obvious, but it will take some time yet for the world to realize it.” In later years I was rather proud of this belief of his. Once or twice he went to a World Federalist conference, and may have given a speech or a paper on a couple of occasions. I am not sure.

For much of my life, I was almost apologetic about his success, since discussions of immigrants always centered on migrant workers and people who were on welfare much of the time. I felt that he was an immigrant who had had an “unfair advantage”, having come to this country with an engineering degree. In my old age I have fortunately outgrown this shameful, unhistorical view of America’s promise. The United States was, once, not a place where you could go and be taken care of by the government, but a place where you had a chance to make the most of yourself. Period. Nothing more, nothing less.

### **His Physical Characteristics**

My father was about six feet tall, with a bit of a pot belly. He had white, wavy hair, and was bald on top, except for a few strands in the front, like those that are all that remain of my own hair on top. My mother said that one of his colleagues always said his baldness was caused by his wearing hats. He wore rimless glasses. (During the War, I couldn’t help thinking that the wire ear pieces on the side of his head made him look like a Nazi.) When we went to Cape Cod, and he wore his black cloth bathing suit with the white belt and silver buckle, his belly was noticeable, and I was a little embarrassed about it. He had extra flesh around his nipples, and I remember thinking sometimes — surprisingly, without any particular shame — that this made his chest look like a woman’s. The thought that there might be something feminine about him because of this simply didn’t arise, given his strength and stature in the world.

He had strong hands with skin that seemed to me lightly tanned, although he spent next to no time outdoors. I remember the thick, blue rope-like veins on the back of his hands. I was always struck by how deep in the sockets his eyes seemed to be when he removed his glasses.

If a thunderstorm came at night, or if I heard a noise, sometimes my parents would let me crawl into bed with them. They had twin beds with a nighttable in between. I was well into adulthood before I learned that married couples sometimes both slept in the same bed. Had someone told me they did that when I was a child, I would have thought it not only odd, but a little dirty, not in the sexual sense, but in the sense that their flesh might touch, or their feet might smell and then the other person would have to endure it. When they let me come into bed with them, it was like having a mountain on either side. I remember my father’s smell, which is hard to describe now: it was the smell of pajamas, and shaven beard (lingering smell of Mennen’s shaving cream), and skin with a vague odor of sweat, but nothing in any way repellent. He never used a deodorant, of course. He smelled like, well, a father.

Once, when he and I were walking across the little bridge over the Bronx River in the Village, I think on a Sunday morning, on the way to buy the *New York Times*, I suddenly became concerned at his growing old. Maybe we had just seen an old man, I don’t know. But I asked him if he would have to start walking with a cane soon. He reassured me not. But still, his white hair, bald on top, suddenly made me think that he was old.

## His Speech

Like my mother, he spoke grammatically correct English with a Swiss accent. And, of course, he also spoke German, and Schweizerdeutsch, the dialect of German spoken in Switzerland, although he spoke the latter very rarely, as I recall. He might have been able to get around in French, but I am not sure.

His pronunciation of English was not quite flawless. For example, he said “cloths” instead of “clothes”: “Don’t do that. You wreck your cloths.” He said “Ved-nes-day” for “Wednesday” — never “Wensdee” as my baby-sitter, Florence, pronounced it. I seem to remember that, like my mother, he pronounced “Tuesday”, “Chooseday”. He had also picked up somewhere the habit of asking, instead of “What did you say?”, “What was that number?” When he answered the phone, he said something closer to “Hellow?” than “Hello?” To this day, I can hear him pronouncing the word that way.

## His Sense of Humor

For all his dedication to his work, he still had a sense of humor. I remember that he liked the joke in a magazine, possibly the *Reader’s Digest*, about a Frenchman who visits our country, takes an auto tour, is asked how he likes U.S. roads, replies he likes them fine except for those designed by Monsieur Detour. Another joke I remember him enjoying was the saying, regarding pelicans, “His beak holds more than his belly-can”.<sup>1</sup>

My mother told me that once, during a drought, he asked the waitress at a restaurant in the City, “Could I have a glass of water? It rained today.”

He told me the even-then old joke, “I opened the window and in flew enza.”

Once he told me with a laugh about a guy he knew, European presumably, who pronounced “Niagara Falls” “Neeahgara Falls”.

## His Daily Schedule

He typically got up around 6:30 or 7:00. He seemed always to be in a good mood in the morning. I never saw him naked, only with his long white underwear on, with the buttons that went all the way up the front. He would sit on the edge of the bed to put on his socks, which were always long, gray businessman’s socks that my mother rolled up before putting into the drawer, so that he could place the ball against his toes and pull the sock onto his foot, unrolling it as it went. He shaved next, using the downstairs bathroom. Why he didn’t use the upstairs one, or why I have forgotten if he did, I don’t know. I liked to watch him. First he carefully opened his straight razor, then took one end of the long leather strop in his hand, the other end being permanently attached to the wall on a swivel, then he went back and forth over the surface of the leather, turning the blade over every for each pass. I was amazed at his ability to slide the paper thin edge

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1. Herb Caen, the *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist, informed his readers on Dec. 1, 1992 (p. D1), that the saying was coined by Dixon Lanier Merritt (1879 - ?), and that it goes, “His *bill* can hold more than his bellican.” Or rather, “...*will* hold...” Here is Merritt’s verse, which is titled “The Pelican”:

“A wonderful bird is the pelican,

His bill will hold more than his belican.

He can take in his beak

Food enough for a week,

But I’m damned if I see how the helican.” — quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2nd edition, p 337

## Childhood

across the leather like that without cutting into it, and at how he was able to turn the blade to exactly the right position on the return stroke, and do it so fast. Then he would test the edge with his thumb. He would run his thumb *along* the edge of the blade, whereas I, and all the kids, tested a blade by running our thumb *across* the blade, so you could feel how feathery it was: the more feathery, the sharper. It made me wince to watch him. Yet he never cut himself. Then he lathered himself with the shaving brush and a big mug of soap. (This is the inspiration of the cover picture on the book I self-published in my late forties.) Then began the scrape of the blade against the bristles of his beard. I liked the rough sandpapery sound. All this danger, the nearly invisible hairs, the smell of the Mennen's shaving soap in the steamy bathroom, he scrunching his chin forward, keeping his eye intently on his work, the flecks of white shaving soap, like snow, that remained when the operation was done. Then, precisely and swiftly, he wiped the soap from the blade on a piece of folded toilet paper, the black cut hairs showing precisely in the white of the foam.

On one such occasion the subject of speed had somehow come up, and I think he mentioned that the fastest thing in the world — I don't think he said "universe" — is the speed of light. I remember thinking for a while, and then, as he was leaving the bathroom, I piped up, "I know something that's faster! The speed of a thought going from my head to my arm when I want to move my arm!" That seemed instantaneous to me; you never had to wait for your arm to move once you decided to move it. He shook his head and said, no, that was slower than the speed of light. But I sensed he liked my attempt to think about such a thing.

Then back upstairs, where I would watch him get ready for work, taking the items, one by one, from the top of the tall bureau with the doily on top opposite the foot of his bed, and put them in his pockets: wallet, change, pen knife, handkerchief with his embroidered initials, mechanical pencils. Sometimes he played the harmonica during this process, his repertoire consisting of a couple of old Swiss folk tunes (*Da-da-dum*, *dah*, *dah*, *diddle-dum*, *dah dah*...), and sometimes he sang one which he clearly enjoyed, and which to me sounded like "Save-eddy-save-eddy-save-eddy-save-eddy son of gate..."

He would complete his morning ablutions by blowing his nose, which he did in a manner that was all business: instead of using just one hand, as I did, and squeezing the hanky around the nostrils, he used two hands, in a way that I could never duplicate, holding the sides of the hanky against the side of his nose. Whenever I tried it that way, the snot would fall right through the opening between the two sides. He would give a sharp blast, maybe some shorter ones, then shake his head from side to side a few quick times in the handkerchief, then smartly remove the handkerchief, wad it, and looking off into the distance put it into his back pocket. Then he had breakfast. Sometimes, afterward, when he was in a hurry, he lit a cigarette. Then he put on his hat — a fedora — and coat and drove to the station in Valhalla (or my mother drove him), where he took the train to New York. It was a 45-minute trip on the express. Sometimes there was a discussion beforehand about whether he should take the local or the express. Perhaps it was simply a question of the time when each type of train left the station in Valhalla — the local came earlier, but if he took the later train, it would be an express, which would get there faster and so compensate for the time lost in waiting for it. In any case he had another 15 - 30 minutes walking and subway time to his office. He worked till around 5, then reversed the process, coming home around 6:30 or so.

On stormy nights we waited for him at the living room window or the little hall window. "He is late," my mother would say, obviously worried, coming every once in a while to look out the window. He had driven to the Village that morning, in the '36 Ford, but no '36 Ford came up Elm

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St. My brother and I stood at the living room window, looking, looking, for the smear of headlights on the drops on the window. And then, finally, as we knew must eventually happen, because it was my father, a car came up the hill, slowed, turned carefully into our driveway. “He’s here!” We watched him get out of the car to go and open the garage door. We clambered down the back stairs next to the kitchen, raced through the little hallway and opened the door to the garage to greet him. “Dad!”<sup>1</sup>

Then he had dinner, and afterward turned on the radio which stood in a corner of the living room below the bookshelves, and sat in his chair near the door to the dining room. Later we got a Stromberg-Carlson, but at first the radio was another model, several feet high, of dark wood, with ornate carvings. In the center was the little orange dial, tilted back, with faded numbers and short straight lines. You adjusted the station by turning the knob underneath. He always listened to WQXR, “the radio station of the New York Times”. For him, there was good music, namely classical, and then there was everything else, which was not even worth discussing. “Why don’t you play some decent music?”, I remember him saying once in passing as I listened to what we then called hillbilly music.

With WQXR playing classical music, he did his figuring; Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings* and the second movement of Haydn’s *Surprise Symphony* always makes me think of him sitting there with his clip-board and quadruled blue-lined white or yellow paper and thin mechanical pencil and slide rule, making drawings, with their shafts, wires, nuts, bolts, for his inventions or for the tanks and dams which his company built. He smoked his pipe or cigars as he worked.

For me, to this day, WQXR, the announcers’ voices, the music, is the sound of the smoothly running engines in the engine room: the sound means that the world is fundamentally good and safe and important and immortal. For me, classical music is a form of engineering.

Then, around 10 p.m. he might go down to the basement and work in the workshop till 12 or 1, then go to bed. This went on, or so it seemed to me then, seven days a week, with maybe a little time off on Sunday afternoons.

An orderly life of steady, eighteen-hour days.

Many, many years later when I read some of John Cheever’s Shady Hill stories, I couldn’t help thinking how different my father had been from the commuters that are the characters in so many of these stories. Like them, he took the train to New York each morning, and back each evening, but I can’t imagine him having any interest in drinking cocktails after work, except, perhaps, if a meeting with a prospective customer gave him no choice. I certainly can’t imagine him playing tennis in the evening, or going to parties. He was an entirely different being.

He was never out of work, and in fact from the moment he set foot in this country, he had good engineering jobs, culminating in his becoming president of the Borsari Tank Corp. in New York City. Even though I was only born in 1936, and thus was still a child when the Depression ended, I have no recollection of that disastrous time for the U.S. economy: I never saw a beggar on the streets, never heard about a neighbor being unemployed, never heard my parents speak about it. The Depression was something I learned about in books years later.

On a Sunday afternoon in the summer he might sit on one of the lawn chairs in the back yard and have a beer — Budweiser, since his company had the contract to build brewery tanks for them. It was probably on one of these afternoons that I had my first taste of the beverage. My mother made her inevitable half-urgent protests. “Oh, no, Hermann. You get him *drunk*...” He

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1. Strange that I am not sure if sometimes we called him “Daddy”.

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may have said something to the effect that he wasn't going to give me enough for that. But then he handed me the long, conical beer glass, and carefully poured, from the brown Budweiser bottle, a few thimblesful of the straw gold liquid. Bubbles came out of the inside of the glass, it seemed, and made their busy way to the froth above. I raised the glass to my lips. The cold liquid smelled like bread and ginger ale. I noticed how silent everything had become (John was about to take his first drink of beer! *Jesus Gott!*), I felt the warm sunlight on my cheeks, saw the blue sky above, green grass all around, then allowed some of the bubbly gold to flow into my mouth. I thought immediately, It tastes like breaded snow! It hurt the back of my throat when I tried to swallow — made me try not to swallow. Then I tried another swallow, and that went a little easier. My mother shifted nervously in her chair, worrying aloud about the danger of it all, my father sat calmly, perhaps saying a few reassuring words to her. Then afterward, the cold, bready taste still filling my mouth, I sat back with a sheepish smile. Now I was a man!

Sometimes on Saturday he took me to his office. His secretary was Miss Sullivan, a tall, willowy, gracious woman, who liked me and who was another of a long line of women I wished were my mother. She wore a perfume which made me think of pink powder in a gold compact. Thinking of her now, with her blonde hair just starting to turn gray, and my father standing next to her, I feel happy; I imagine that they were “good together”; I would have been a much happier man all my life if I had known for certain that he was having an affair with her, because he deserved that kind of loving tenderness.

He introduced me to Al Aldravandi, one of his draftsmen. My mother had said several times how my father had given him a chance to learn the draftsman's trade, and how he had done well, out of appreciation, of course. He was a youngish man, and seemed eager to make a good impression on my father by shaking my hand warmly.

At evening meals, my father sat at the head of the table, my mother at the foot, my brother and I on opposite sides, I facing the window to the back yard. Marshall McLuhan once said that what we regard as the most valuable things of a past age include those things which were most common, most taken for granted then. Certainly the conversations around the dinner table when we were children rank among these. What did we talk about? Or, I should say, What did *they* talk about?, because, as my father used to remark, if he wasn't really angry, when I or my brother were making too much noise or talking too much at the dinner table, “Children should be seen and not heard”. I always understood “seen” as “scene”, that is, children should be part of the background, as in a play. Sometimes, when I piped up with something at the dinner table, he would announce, with a frown and mock seriousness, “Well, another country heard from.” Sometimes he and my mother would talk about things we kids weren't supposed to understand. My mother would get that serious, this-is-just-for-us, expression on her face, half shake her head to make the children's curiosity go away. Usually, they would resort to German, which they knew we couldn't understand. When they came out of this period of public privacy, my mother would signalize the return with a command: “Stop playing with your food!” or “You didn't wash your hands. Go wash them now.” “I did wash them.” My father: “Go.” I went, but instead of washing my hands properly with soap, I merely wiggled my fingers under the tap water, then washed the soap with water, so it would be wet in any inspection that might soon follow. The trouble was that picking up the soap and passing it under the tap water left residues of soap on my fingers, and so it had to be washed off, with the result that I wound up washing at least my fingers, if not my hands, with soap after all. You couldn't win.

My father always had his briefcase with him. It was firmly in his hand when he left in the morning and when he came home at night. “He works on the train”, my mother would remark. It was at the side of his chair in the evening when he worked. Sometimes I asked to look inside it. It had a strong smell of leather. The brass fastener on the side was on a leather flap. When the fastener was placed into its receptacle, there was a solid, no-nonsense click. That means closed! I liked the clicking sound that the fastener made when it was unfastened and bounced on the receptacle. Inside were his papers, perhaps an engineering magazine — *Machine Design* or *Engineering News Record* (the last word of which, in my mind, I always pronounced as *Record*) — and the pad of white or yellow paper with blue quadruled lines, the top sheets always having his drawings and calculations: drawings of gears, odd-shaped engineering parts composed of half-circles and straight lines. His handwriting always seemed to me the essence of an engineer’s: leaning to the right, sharp, precise, European. At an early age I had a vague idea that perfectly proper people made their letters perfectly vertical; weak, timid, people, possibly destined to become fairies, allowed theirs to lean to the left, and strong, real men always had theirs sloping to the right. His writing had almost a triangular quality; pointed; with very little roundness. The briefcase also contained his sliderule, which he had had for many years — a Dietzgen, I think, inside a brown leather case with a flap that fit inside a leather loop. The white plastic was yellowing, some of the black numbers and lines were almost worn away, the plastic window was becoming a little hazy. But he used it, as he sat in his chair, as though it were part of himself, sliding the center stick to a position, moving the plastic window, frowning, then writing the number on his pad.

Usually, he smoked Robert Burns cigars. But sometimes, when he was sitting in his chair figuring, he would smoke a pipe, and when he was in a hurry, as in the morning sometimes, he would smoke a cigarette: Chesterfields, Lucky Strikes, or Camels. He kept his pipes in a circular pipe rack, the tobacco in a purple-brown metal cannister. I loved to open the lid and drink in the warm, friendly, moist smell of the tobacco. He had a pipe that was actually white — a souvenir of the 1939 World’s Fair, I think — with a design that became clearer as the bowl grew warmer. When he sat in his living room chair figuring, I would notice how he sometimes held his pipe not by the bowl but by the stem, with his index finger over it, the stem resting on the curled fingers and thumb below. He held the pipe in one position, frozen, as the point of his mechanical pencil moved over the paper, sometimes not writing, apparently just checking the numbers he had already written, sometimes making a drawing of a mechanical part or a piece of cement, and I would notice how the smoke curled slowly, languidly out of the mouthpiece of the pipe. It was going backwards! It should be going out of the bowl! Such were the miracles that were possible when my father was in charge.

## He and I Gadgets

Even before I was five years old, my father would every once in a while bring home something from the office for me. He called these things “gadgets”, and my heart would start thumping when, reaching into his pocket, he would say, “I brought a gadget for you,” or “I brought a do-hickey for you.” The first one that I remember was a shiny, round piece of metal perhaps an inch-and-a-half in diameter that looked like a World War I infantryman’s helmet, or (as I much later might have described it), like a high-hat cymbal in a jazz band. I felt as though he were handing me some of his power when he gave me one of these things. One day it was a piece of cloth which he explained was really made of glass. I rubbed my fingers on the smooth material, couldn’t believe it. He said it was called “fiberglass”. Another time it was a ball-point pen. “It writes with-

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out ink”, he said, meaning, of course, that you didn’t need to dip the point into a bottle of ink. My brother and I immediately started scribbling, writing, with this amazing device. We couldn’t believe that a tiny ball, rolling against some kind of solid ink, could write like that. He showed us that the ink dried immediately. As long as you didn’t press *too* hard, you could run your hand over what you had just written and it didn’t smudge at all. (Well, hardly.) These miracles came from his world. Another time he brought us a polaroid device and tried to explain that when the invisible lines in the two flat pieces (the “planes”) were at right angles to each other, the light waves couldn’t get through. But when they were parallel, they could. (At about this time, one of the radio shows — the Lone Ranger or Captain Marvel — were offering a premium — I think it was called the Polaroid Ring — that made use of the same phenomenon.)

Another time he gave me a gyroscope, and showed me how, once you pulled on the string to make the wheel spin, it could stand on its tip at almost any angle and not fall over! You could feel the invisible force that prevented it from falling. The gyroscope looked like a miniature version of the globe in the living room. Without the slightest faith that I could ever find out the reason why, or understood it if I did, I kept wondering why it didn’t tip over. It came from his world, that’s why. You had to spit on the end of the string to get it through the little hole in the shaft, then turn the shaft to wind the string around it. The harder you pulled the string, the faster the wheel turned and the harder it was to make the whole thing fall over. You could balance it on your finger, or you could clamp a nail into the vice on the workbench, and balance the gyroscope on the point (there was a little indent in the beebee on one end of the gyroscope’s vertical axis.)

One day he brought home a toy called a “Slinky”. This was a helical spring of shiny, thin, flat, metal coils perhaps four or five inches in diameter. You held one end on a top stair — for us, usually the top of the stairs leading to the basement — drew the other end down onto the next stair and let both ends go. The spring then slowly walked down the successive stairs, end over end, with a little rustling metallic sound as the upper strands descended onto the ones immediately below. My brother and I were fascinated by it. When we were bored, one of us was sure to exclaim, “Get the Slinky!” We could hardly believe that such a thing was possible. How could a piece of metal have a mind of its own? How did it know where to place its free end at each step?

Then there was a tool that shot sparks out of the tip (I no longer remember what its purpose was) — little bolts of purple lightning that filled the air with what I thought of as a wonderful smell of concentrated fresh air but which was, as my father told me, without further explanation, ozone.

And a flashlight that had a curved cylindrical piece of transparent plastic about the diameter of a pencil at the front, instead of the normal glass lens. The cylinder was several inches long, but the light somehow knew enough to flow down the inside of the plastic and only emerge from the end. Miraculous.

Then there were magnets. But these you could also buy in the 5 & 10 Cent Store. You could feel the honey that pulled them together when opposite poles were close to each other, and the anti-honey that pushed them apart when the poles were the same.

My father carried a pocket watch<sup>1</sup> on a little gold chain that hung in a graceful curve outside the watch pocket of his dark suit (I cannot imagine him wearing a wrist watch), and so my life became complete, briefly, when somehow I bought or had given to me, a child’s version of the same, with a cover that snapped closed. I thought, if you have a pocket watch to carry with you, then you have nothing to worry about. Your life consisted in taking out your watch, pressing the

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1. which I still have, in a safe deposit box at the bank



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little pin that made the top flip open, looking at the watch face (the time never changed unless you changed it with the little winder), then snapping the lid closed, putting the watch back in your pocket, and patting it to be sure it was safe, then going about your daily life until you knew it was time to take out your watch again, snap it open, look at it, snap it closed, put it back in your pocket.

Once in a while, my father would let me use his lathe, a new one which he clearly considered special, so I doubt if he ever allowed it to be used for wood. I remember it had a big dark red plastic knob that you pulled out a ways and moved up or down to change the speed of rotation. He may have shown me how to cut a few curls of metal from one of his metal rods. I'm not sure why he needed a lathe, since he could always put threads on the end of his metal rods using a tap and die, which was a manual device.

We were allowed to use lathes in Saturday wood shop. It was assumed we would think that using a lathe was a peak shop experience, but I didn't get much out of it. Seeing the shaving curl up was fun, but after all what was a lathe? Something that went around and around which you held a chisel against. Big deal. Furthermore, in the case of a metal lathe, it had to do with the most boring stuff in the world, namely, metal. And yet, because my father considered it so important, it was. Boring was good.

Some time before I was five, I got the idea that I would be safe if I had a Gadget with me at all times. I also found that a Gadget didn't need to come from my father. I could find my own. I soon became expert at recognizing what things could and couldn't be Gadgets. Some I have described already, but the most important ones were the following.

There was a little green plastic dog I bought in a Five-and-Ten, and which I kept wrapped in a aluminum foil chewing gum wrapper. The dog had a string through a little plastic hole in its back. I would rub my finger over the striations in the plastic that represented fur, would ponder for the thousandth time the miracle that transparency was — that I could look *inside* the green material that this little guy was made of. I had long talks with him, made sure he was with me throughout the day. It made me *all right*. Unfortunately, I also used to take him into the tub with me in order to allow him to participate in the endless adventures I was always imagining, and one day, suddenly, I couldn't find him underneath the suds. I frantically felt along the bottom of the tub, along the flat buttons of rubber in the rubber mat at the bottom. It was like losing a part of my physical body. I drained the water. He wasn't there. Maybe he had gone down the drain! Unbearable to think of. Maybe he was on the bathroom floor! Maybe in my clothes, maybe in my room! I tried to remember every movement I had made from the time I had undressed for the bath, but he was lost. For days, weeks, I was even more miserable than usual.

Another important Gadget was the alarm clock winder I have described — important because of its connection to fall, to dead gray wood, to cabins, fires, and Thanksgiving.

But pocket knives were the Gadgets that I came to feel had the greatest power. However, here the problem of perfection arose. The knife not only had to be the right *kind* of knife, but it also had to have nothing wrong with it. The spring holding the blades had to be strong, so that you could just barely open the blade with what was left of your bitten thumb nail. One pocket knife which *could have* been perfect had a handle with faulty sides: they were held in place only by metal tabs at each end and this allowed the handles to move slightly when you pushed on them with your thumb. (Which was a shame, considering that they had an interesting brown and yellow marbled design that suggested sunlight flickering through leaves on the earth, or a tiger prowling.) Sometimes it was possible to push hard but just not hard enough so that sometimes they wouldn't

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move, and you were safe. But the constant testing to see if they pushed too easily to make the knife worthless, or if they really had to be pushed hard before they moved, made the knife not a real friend.

Then, with all knives, there was the sharpening problem. I had two whetstones for the purpose, both given to me by my father: a small one that I carried in its oily box in my pocket, and a larger one, for heavy sharpening when the blade was really dull. The main blade had to be perfectly sharp at all times, sharpened the way my father had instructed, namely, by holding the knife flat so that the blade, when sharpened, would taper, in a straight line, from the back of the blade to the front, like a wedge; not like a chisel, with a sudden angle near the edge, which was the way Americans sharpened a knife. My father's way was correct because it was much more difficult. Ideally, the blade should be so sharp that the edge almost curled away, like a thin metal shaving. It should feel like feathery paper when you ran your finger across it.

The most important, and the most powerful, Gadget of all was an electrician's knife I had bought, I think, through a mail-order catalog. I still have one similar to it in my tool box. It was a two-bladed pocket-knife with a dark brown, wooden handle, which always seemed to give off a subtle woody smell, especially after I had cleaned and oiled the knife. On the back side it had a thin screw-driver blade. I kept this knife on a leather strap — always using the same hole for the little buckle — which was about 3/8-inch wide, hanging slightly in front of my right rear pocket. One day I noticed a cut half-way through the strap. I had no idea how it got there. I thought that maybe some kid had tried to cut the strap in order to steal the knife. The cut was less than halfway through, so I kept using the same strap. But, just in case the strap broke, I always made sure the knife hung down vertically into my right rear pants pocket.

One cold, gray, fall day I went over to the Reservoir, which meant going down Elm St., crossing Columbus Ave., then cutting diagonally across the Field. I may have gone down into the ditch where there was sometimes stagnant water and you could be out of sight and build a dam. Then who knows where I went: along the white cement road that ran in front of the Buildings where the Reservoir's water processing machinery was located — buildings that could never be understood because they were the creation and working habitat of engineers. Then perhaps up the road towards Reynolds Airport, then perhaps down into the Pine Woods. Several hours of walking, meandering, being Davy Crockett, playing mountain man, thinking of things to cut with my knife.

I had the habit of checking that it was there. But then, as I was walking across the front lawn of our house around four or five that afternoon, and I felt for the familiar strap, I realized it wasn't any longer. I felt in my pocket, thinking the strap might have broken and the knife had dropped, as it was supposed to in such a case, into my back pocket. But it wasn't there, nor was it in any of the other pockets. I went tearing into the house, screaming, "The knife is gone! I've lost the knife!" My mother, bending over her pots in the kitchen, hadn't the slightest idea what I was talking about. I went running out of the house, realizing the enormous search that lay ahead of me in the waning daylight. Until it was dark, I attempted to retrace my steps, trying to remember everything — yes, I climbed down the ditch here, lifted those rocks and threw them into the water to try to fix the dam — yes, I crossed the cement road about here, walked across that part of the Field on the other side — but how can you possibly find a knife in that tall grass? then — did I go around the back of the Buildings, or was that a couple of days ago? — then into the pines, the ground was smooth, I must have stuck to the dirt path, yes, maybe — soon it will be night and *the knife will be out here alone!* With tears streaming down, I searched until I couldn't see any more. I doubt if I slept the entire night.

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My mother and father asked the usual useless questions: “When was the last time you had it?”, “Where did you lose it?” For days, in a panic I cannot describe, I went over and over the half-remembered leisurely idle events of that afternoon. Did I try to make a willow whistle? No...can’t remember. What could have caused it to drop from its strap? Was it the cut? But the strap was still strong, I had tested it again and again. This was without question the worse loss of my life. I cried more over that knife than I did over the death of any human being later on. No rejection by a woman, not even those rejections that brought me to attempt suicide, has ever been worse than that loss. For weeks I imagined the knife lying somewhere in wet grass, not knowing where I was, trying to figure out a way of telling me where to find it, yet knowing that was impossible. In succeeding months and years I thought of rust eating way at it, the steel slowly dissolving into the earth. To this day I wonder if some fossilized remnant might not still exist somewhere, inches down in whatever remains of the Field, or in the loam of the Pine Woods. I wonder how my life would have been different if I had never lost that knife, that friend.

To this day, it is no exaggeration to say that the one constant in my lifelong depression is the fear of losing things. Kafka’s story “The Burrow” describes my state of mind exactly. Despite unrelenting efforts to file all my papers, to keep my books organized, to put all my possessions in places reserved for them, every few months or so, I discovered that *something had been lost*. One thing (out of thousands) I had forgotten to check would never again be mine. A book I had had since my youth was suddenly missing. Did a visitor to the house take it, making a solemn promise to themselves (which they forgot to keep) to bring it back as soon as they had finished reading it? (It was a book they have been wanting to read for years, but just never got around to buying.)

My most frequent dream concerns the loss of luggage or items of clothing, despite my having taken every precaution not to lose them. I have spent entire nights searching for a lost suitcase, lost shoes, my lost car. There is a permanent geography in these dreams, which I is described in the section “Losing Things” in the second-from-last file of this book (not volume). In real life, the loss of a cheap ballpoint pen or mechanical pencil I have used for many months, is the occasion of days of mourning. I imagine the object trying to cry out to me to tell me where it is, yet not being able to because it is an object. (Stroke victims know what I am talking about.) I think how awful it must be to be a pencil and suddenly not be in the knapsack where you belong. But if I later find the lost item, I am suddenly that rarest of things for me, a (briefly) happy man; the sun comes out, I am (briefly) a human being.

Jewelry was eligible to be a Gadget by virtue of the fact it was a solid you could look inside of. In other words, it was capable of the impossible. I had no idea what enabled it to do that and I had no interest in finding out. What I had an interest in was in using that power, in thinking about the miracle itself. What was it like to live inside the stone? What was it like to live inside a crystal world that was always blue, or always red, like a perpetual sky, a perpetual end of day? I loved to look at jewelry in show cases in stores, or in the drawers of my mother’s dressing table near the bedroom window. Among other items, she had some American Indian jewelry made of jade. There were little holes in the stones, as though made by sand. I assumed it was a sign of the Indians’ poverty. *What does it mean?* That was the question that jewelry posed. Yet at the same time I had to fight against any impulse to decorate my fingers beyond what was allowed by the masculine code of the day, lest I become a fairy. But I avidly read the ads in the comics that offered all sorts of men’s signet rings (whatever “signet” meant). I simultaneously wanted the flash and specialness of a ring with a stone on my finger, and didn’t want to see myself weakening in that direction. When I did wear a ring — some milky green plastic thing we made in shop — I spent most of my time trying not to think about it, trying not to look at it from all angles. Once,

on a trip to Whitestone Mountain in the Adirondacks, my parents bought me a souvenir ring with shiny, embossed lettering on the side. That made the lettering seem official. Whatever it said, whatever name it was, it now was clearly Important.

Some of the premiums I sent in for to radio shows, e.g., Tom Mix's Whistling Ring, became Gadgets. (When I lost that ring, I had no reason to live until they managed to find another one and send it to me, even though it was long after the offer had expired.) A cheap imitation gold watch on a chain, with hands you could set, became a Gadget for a while. The little noise the gold chain made as I let it coil down onto the plastic face of the watch, for some reason intrigued me. Perhaps for no other reason than that it reminded me of the gold watch and chain my father carried in his vest pocket.

Some things never became Gadgets, only potential Gadgets. For example, a silver skeleton head, made of shiny cast lead, hollow inside, like a mask. I think it had a top hat. Then there was a glow-in-the-dark skeleton head of white plastic, with the seam running vertically where the two halves had been put together, and a little ring on top where you could put the key chain through. Its surface was not smooth, and had a strange bathroom smell, no doubt from the radioactive substance it was painted with. But that round, white, bald, plastic skull had an effect on me, I just wanted to keep looking at it without knowing why.

I never outgrew my need for Gadgets, except that later it wasn't things but activities that served the purpose, or held the promise of serving the purpose: first whittling, then playing jazz, then, writing, then, much later, mathematics. In all of these, as with knives, the only question was: was it perfect — meaning, could I perform the activity with such perfection that it could make me safe? The answer, invariably, was no.

### Algebra

I had heard the word *algebra* several times and so one evening, as my father was sitting in his living room chair, figuring, I asked him, "What's algebra?" He stopped writing, and gave me an explanation of which I only remember that he said that, as an example, " $a = 1, b = 2, c = 3$ ". And I thought that was a neat idea, this linking up of letters with numbers. " $a = 1, b = 2, c = 3$  — makes sense!" I pursued it no further, believing I had a pretty good understanding of algebra, which seemed to be a simple, easy subject.

He sometimes used the expression "in the limit", or simply "the limit". I liked the sound of the word. I think he mentioned that it came from a subject called "calculus". I was sure it was something I could never understand.

### A Gesture of Affection

I remember only one physical gesture of affection from him, and that occurred when I was about four or so. I had come down with a severe illness, what it was I no longer know, and probably didn't know then. I was lying in the bed in the guest room, which was diagonally opposite their bedroom at the time. He came home from work — I remember it was still light, so it must have been in the summer — and I heard him talk to my mother briefly, presumably asking how I was. Then he came into the room and sat down on the bed, talked to me for a while, and began stroking my forehead. It felt very good. I closed my eyes, hardly able to believe that his calculations, his algebra had concluded that I deserved such special attention from him.

### Activities Together

Once, after days of pleading, I was able to get him to take me camping at Pound Ridge Reservation, about 15 miles northeast of Valhalla, not far from Bedford Village. I don't remember how I heard of it. We slept on the ground in one of the stone lean-tos. I was on the one hand beside myself with happiness that he would actually come camping with me — I had an idea of what this was costing him in time away from business and his inventions — but on the other hand, I was constantly worried that something might crop up that would make him decide to call it off. For a while it seemed there was a smell of urine in the lean-to. I immediately urged him to notice that it was an old smell, and only in the corner. We slept on the soft dirt in the center. What did we talk about? No doubt I asked him for more details on Jim Bridger, the mountain man he liked to read about when he was a kid. What else did we talk about? I would give anything to know.

Without question, the best trip was when he took me with him on a business trip to New Bedford, Mass. This made me extra special. We went by train, and had to sleep in the Pullman car. Flying was still rare in those days, although he would sometimes fly to St. Louis where his company had a project. But I know that he also took trains on his business trips. I remember sitting at night at the window, looking out at the moon, and at the shining rails. My bed, like a shelf, was waiting nearby, but I was allowed to stay up and enjoy the miracle of long-distance train travel.

He took me with him to inspect the beer tanks his company was building for Budweiser in New Bedford. Someone opened a door, and we stepped into a room some ten feet high lined with shiny black tar. He talked to a man, answered questions, everything seemed to be all right. I couldn't get over the idea of a *room* full of beer. I asked him several times if they really were going to fill the room up with it. He assured me they were. That was how they stored it.

And then, afterward, knowing that I liked to read a book about whaling that I had somehow acquired, he took me to the whaling museum in the town. I can still see the ship in the center of the main exhibition hall. In retrospect it must have been a scale model, but at the time I really thought I was looking at an actual whaling ship. I tried to imagine myself sleeping in the tiny bunks, spending my days crawling through the tiny passageways with the huge ocean always just outside.

Sometimes, on Saturday mornings, he took me with him to the hardware store. He liked Sears Roebuck on Martine Ave. in White Plains because the salesmen knew their stock and he could talk to them. I would follow him down the long aisles with their smell of oily, old, store floor and something vaguely like mothballs. I was bored stiff but I tried to force myself to be interested, knowing that he was honoring me by asking him to go with him. He always seemed to know what he wanted. He bought pipe, screws, nuts, bolts, other things. He took his time, holding in his hand now this pulley, that accessory for the lathe, that other new kind of pliers. He had great admiration for the Vise-Grip wrench, thought it an idea that demanded respect, and taught me how to use one: you adjusted in advance (by experience, or actual trial) how tightly you wanted the jaws to hold, then just squeezed the handles closed and the jaws locked in place!

But I never liked hardware stores. I always felt a sense of failure whenever I entered one. I can still remember one time going into the one in Valhalla at the end of the village, near Pfisters. I went in perhaps out of boredom, perhaps out of a desire to make an attempt to come to terms, figure out, why I always felt so bad in hardware stores, hating myself for not loving the pipe elbows, screws, nails, the wealth that was spread there before me. How could you be so bad as to be depressed by such things? What possible reason could there be for not liking them? I stood there in the aisle as though in an existential trance. Why? Why? Sometimes he would play catch with me on a summer evening after supper. We would play on Shelley Ave. He could throw the

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ball so high, I thought it would go out of sight. (A tennis ball I am sure, not the hated baseball.) I would race to catch it, then throw it back. I was excited beyond expression at his doing this with me, but also constantly worried he would lose interest.

We went to the movies together several times. He liked Laurel and Hardy, and he actually invited me to see a few of their films with him at the RKO Theater in White Plains. Probably as a result, Laurel and Hardy are, for me, always funny, always beyond criticism. He also got a kick out of Ben Turpin, who was famous for his crossed eyes. He always laughed when he mentioned his name. (I found out during the writing of this book that Turpin took out an insurance policy that would pay him a large sum if his eyes ever became *uncrossed*.)

But most of all I wanted him to see a Western with me. Now, the reason may have been that the best Westerns — Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, the Cisco Kid, Hopalong Cassidy,... — were shown in the Strand Theater, a decrepit, smelly, hole-in-the-wall on an alley behind Loew's Theater on Main St. in White Plains, and I had been forbidden to go into the place without my father.

In any case, after weeks of the most expert, patient, cajoling, I finally got him to agree to see a film at the Strand with me. I scanned the seats in the dim light and found one that was less lumpy, with the stuffing not coming out quite so much, and fewer knife marks on the back of the seat in front, and said, "See? here's a good one!" While we waited for the film to start, I pointed out to him that the floor wasn't sticky *everywhere*, and that not all the seatbacks had bubble-gum stuck to them, and that the smell was not so bad and besides, it was simply because the theater was so old. I pointed to several other fathers with their kids. I'm sure that if I saw a guy with a broom and dustpan, I said, "See? they come and clean it!"

Throughout the film I was on pins and needles worrying that he might decide to walk out, and so I would whisper to him, "See?, there's almost no killing!", and "The bad guys aren't really that bad!", and then, "See! The good guys won in the end!"

Somehow, he managed to endure it.

Once in a while — and I am ashamed to admit this — I would ask him, in precisely these words, "Is I a good boy?", hoping that the error of grammar (that an innocent good boy might make) would induce the answer I was hoping for. Or sometimes I would ask, "Is I a schatzelie?", the word being the diminutive of *Schatz* (dear, treasure), and the word my mother would use on the rare occasions when I was in her favor, or to indicate what I would be if I did precisely as she asked), and sometimes I would ask, "Am I perfect?" And my father would absently reply in the affirmative, not quite understanding, I am sure, why a boy would ask such a thing.

One year, when I was still in primary school (which we called grammar school), the school decided to have a father/son dinner. The big question was, of course, would he have time to go with me or would he be on a trip? But, no, he seemed to feel it important that he attend this function with his son. Once again, as when he had stroked my hair, I felt amazed and thankful that the mysterious unknown calculations had decided in my favor. I can only remember the two of us sitting near the aisle in the school auditorium, listening to welcoming speeches. After, they served dinner, I guess in the cafeteria. I think he said a few words to neighbors he recognized. I was on pins and needles hoping that nothing would displease him, most of all that I wouldn't say or do something he disliked.

## **His Recreations**

He had no recreations except picking crabgrass and occasionally bowling (which, in vague memory, he tended to do on Wednesday evenings). True, In spring and early summer he also waged war on Japanese beetles and caterpillars, but this could not be considered “recreation”. It was a serious business. He put out jars with green lids that had holes in them. The jars contained some sort of liquid, as I remember, into which the beetles would fall. It smelled like mothballs and kerosene. It took me a little effort to regard these creatures as our enemy, because I liked the green, shimmering, iridescent color of their wings. Caterpillars were different. They built nests in the forks of trees. The outside of the nest was soft, cottony, white, like fibrous snow, or snowy gauze. The inside was teeming with caterpillars that bristled with coppery hairs. They had green blood, as you saw whenever you squashed one. You could smell the nests from several feet away. My father’s weapon against them was fire. He had a metal rod with a tube running back to a can of kerosene (I am not sure of this). Then, wearing gloves and his hat, he would walk up to the nest, hold the rod up, press a trigger, and a fire would ignite at the end. He then held it to the nests and burned them to a crisp. (It was made clear to us that the caterpillars were so damaging to flowers and trees that it was OK to burn them alive.)

He often remarked how absurd he thought the game of golf was. All that effort to hit a little white ball and then chase it all over the course. He considered a weeder with a serrated edge, one that you swung to cut tall grass, a much better application of standing somewhere in the grass and swinging something, than a golf club. He would get my mother and brother and me to work with him on the crab grass, a job I hated. Bending over, his face red, puffing on his cigar, his strong fingers wrapped around the crab grass, he pulled it from side to side in order to break the roots, then out it came and into the pail it went. Sometimes, bending over, he would fart in his effort, and everyone would pretend not to hear it.

My brother and I got paid by the pail and we joked with him about not pressing down the weeds, so that the pail would fill more quickly. Crabgrass was his personal enemy, but he didn’t like to use pesticides. When we complained, he told us to use the hand weeder, which you drove into the ground next to the crab grass, the forked edge of it cutting through the roots. He always emphasized how important it was to pull them up by the roots. No good to just rip off the top part. Dandelions were easier, because there were fewer of them, and your accomplishment was more obvious — no more yellow flowers in the lawn. But crabgrass was a hopeless, never-ending task on a lawn the size of ours.

He refused to use pesticides on the lawn. Everything had to be done right, meaning, the hard way. Whenever we cut a limb from a tree, which I looked forward to and enjoyed, he always insisted that not only did the limb have to be cut close to the trunk, but the wound had to be painted with a black tar-like paint he had in the basement, which meant walking all the way down to the basement, prying open the top of the can with a screwdriver, washing the stiffened bristles of a brush in turpentine to loosen them (the brush was kept in a can partially filled with turpentine but still got stiff) and then carrying the can and the brush all the way upstairs and out to where the limb had been cut, and then carefully painting the tar on, then walking all the way back down to the basement, putting the lid back on, sloshing the bristles in the turpentine in the can, maybe wiping them off with a piece of newspaper, then putting the brush in the can. Intolerable labor when all you wanted to do was cut a branch! To this day I have never put tar paint on the wound after cutting a limb but, for that matter, never have I ever seen an arborist do it. So my father was even more correct than the professionals in this matter.

### His Literary Tastes

I don't know what his literary tastes were, but, having had a good European education, I am sure that in his youth he had read, willingly or not, at least some of the German classics. I never knew him to read a non-engineering book, or talk about literature to my mother. I do remember him saying how he liked the poetry of Edgar Guest, which was published in some of the newspapers: *The New York Times* or *The White Plains Reporter Dispatch* (I suspect the latter).

### His Taste in Music

For my father, there was only one kind of music worth listening to, and that was classical, which he turned on every evening when he came home. (He would always tell me, when they played *The Light Cavalry Overture*, "You can hear the horses!" (Da-da-dum, da-dah, da-da-dum, da-dah, ...))

I assume he liked opera because he and my mother listened to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts every Saturday afternoon during opera season. My mother told me that when he was a student in Zürich, he could only afford a seat in the highest balcony, and so that is where he first saw Wagner operas performed.

### My Mother Her Religion

When I went to bed at night, my mother would come up to say goodnight and to make sure I said my prayer. She thought that the traditional one —

"Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take"

— was inappropriate for children because it suggested they might die in their sleep. Instead she had me say a German prayer of which I only remember a few words of the last lines:

"...und der lieb' Gott im Himmel  
Wird auch bei mir sein."  
[...and the dear God in Heaven  
will also be with me.]

Her fastidiousness extended even to the Lord's Prayer. We were told not to say, "Our Father, *which* art in Heaven," because that would suggest that God is a witch. We had to say "*who* art in Heaven."

When I asked her in what religion she had been raised, she always said her family was Old Catholic, and made sure I understood this was entirely different from being Catholic, which is what the Italians were. She didn't like all that ceremony they had. She said this with her girlish smile and raised eyebrow that signalled that this wasn't the kind of thing boys can understand: I should just take her word for it. As a result, to this day I haven't the slightest idea what Old Catholic really meant.

I frequently asked her about God and religion, in particular, why I should believe what it said in the Bible. She said — and I remember the scene exactly, she standing in the kitchen, my father



sitting in the dining room — that if people didn't all believe in one religion, there would be chaos. People had to be told that Christianity was the one true religion and that all others were heresy, because that was the only way to keep order. Which amounted to the rule, I vaguely realized: If it is necessary, then it must be true.

“...it is not necessary to accept everything as true [said the priest], one must only accept it as necessary.’

“‘A melancholy conclusion,’ said K. ‘It turns lying into a universal principle.’” — Kafka, Franz, “Before the Law”, in Kaufmann, Walter, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, The World Publishing Company, N.Y., 1963, p. 130.

“...man seeks to worship what is established beyond dispute, so that all men would agree at once to worship it. For these pitiful creatures are concerned not only to find what one or the other can worship, but to find something all would believe in and worship; what is essential is that all may be *together* in it.” — Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, “The Grand Inquisitor”, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett, Random House, N.Y., 1950, p. 301.

For many years, even into adulthood, though due also, no doubt, to influence from the Catholic kids in school, but also from the things she said about religion, I believed that the history of the Catholic Church *could not have been different*, that the heresies were pre-destined, by God, to be heresies and to fail to be accepted as true, and that what became orthodoxy was in fact what *had to* become orthodoxy.

### Her Physical Characteristics

Her most distinguishing feature for me, when I was young, was that she wore her hair in a bun<sup>1</sup> at the back of her head. This always struck me as odd, and in later years always marked a woman, whether she was a Hollywood actress or just someone my parents knew, as being *like* my mother. When I heard about Ilse Koch, the concentration camp commandant's wife who made lampshades out of the skin of some of the camp victims, I always thought that she must wear her hair in a bun at the back of her head.

A picture taken shortly after she was married shows a woman who would have been clearly identified as European. Her features seem, at least to me, to resemble her father's.

I got the impression she was never satisfied with her physical appearance. I remember her leaning close to the mirror in the bathroom, squinting, as she plucked hairs from her eyebrows with a pair of tweezers, and also from her chin and from the skin above her upper lip. I remember her intense concentration at this task: clearly it was crucially important to get rid of those hairs. Her varicose veins were also a major concern. I remember how blue and ropey they looked under her white skin. She wore special, heavy stockings, and eventually, I believe, had an operation to fix the problem. I heard a lot about varicose veins in my childhood.

She was about as tall as my father and always seemed to me physically strong. In fact, once, when I wanted to say something nice to her, I could think of nothing except the size of her arms. So I went to her and said, “You know, other boys have mothers who are kind of weak and ladylike but you are strong. You have strong arms.” I recall she was pleased, no doubt more at the mere fact of my trying to give her a compliment than at the compliment itself. But it was the best I could do.

If someone were to ask me, “Did she ever compliment you?”, my answer would be, “Only once that I can remember. When I was around twelve, as she was putting freshly-washed clothes

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1. called a “chignon”, I think

in my closet, she remarked, quite spontaneously and off-handedly, that I was “good with clothes” — I think those were her words, though they may have been something like, “You don’t wear out your clothes,” or something similar. In any case, I remember her tone of voice also clearly saying, “That’s one good thing I suppose I have to say about you.”

### Her Speech

Like my father, she spoke grammatically correct English with a Swiss accent. The only error I can recall her making was when, in praise of a certain food, she would say, “Oh, that is a delicatessen!” (a delicacy). She usually gave foreign words their original pronunciation: “matinee” she pronounced “motteenay”. She pronounced the name (“Pfister”) of the family that owned the lumber co. in town, “Fister”, not “Feyester”, as everyone else did. In at least one instance, her accent led her to confuse two words. I remember hearing her say, regarding the price that someone was charging for something, “Try to chew him down”, she apparently not realizing that the phrase was “Jew him down”. (But maybe she knew the correct phrase, and I just misinterpreted her pronunciation of the word.)

She used the word “hatzig”, meaning “cute”, to describe, e.g., the Hummel figurines — little porcelain statues of children, humble woodcutters, hard-working old women, that were made by some nun in a convent in Austria or somewhere.

Her epithets were limited to “Mein Gott!” [My God!] “Lieber Gott!” [Dear God!] “Jesus [pronounced “Yessus”] Gott!” and “Ach, das is furchtbar!” [Oh, that is terrible!].

### Shopping

She always knew what to buy and what not to buy whenever she dragged me along with her to go shopping, for example, to the florist’s in Kensico, or to Gristede’s grocery store or to B. Altman’s in White Plains. Macy’s was not acceptable for a reason I was supposed to understand from the way she wrinkled her nose, namely, because, like Bloomingdale’s, it was too much concerned with pleasing the Common People. I was always amazed at her authority, at the way she questioned the clerks, at the way she would dismiss a product with that sound she made that meant, “Terrible. Oh, how ugly.” Other stores I heard her mention favorably were Bonwit Teller, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman. But these were “exclusive” stores, for rich people — people who lived in Scarsdale. Nevertheless, I am sure that my mother, like most upper middle class women, dressed to go shopping even at B. Altman’s.

I liked the way all the clerks in the grocery stores snapped the paper bags open so they could put the vegetables or wrapped packages of meat inside. My mother always had her shopping list made up ahead of time, and then drew a line through each item as it was purchased. Shopping was a serious business. No place for nonsense.

At Gristede’s, the butcher (which she pronounced “bootcher”) always seemed to understand who was boss when my mother came shopping. Wiping his hand on his rumpled, brown-streaked apron, he would say “Yes, Mrs. Franklin. And is this your son? Fine looking boy. Now what would you like today? Some nice lamb chops?” Then she discussed the various cuts of meat with him, and whether he would give her the best cut. He always seemed to tolerate her good-naturedly and provide her with the obedience she demanded of anyone she dealt with. Then, apparently without even thinking very much, he would get the piece of meat out from behind the showcase, and, still talking to her, still smiling, take out his cleaver and start making expert chops at it: perfect cuts that removed the fat but left the juicy red part (which seemed like a kind of plastic to me). Then he put a piece of meat-colored paper on the scale, lifted the meat onto it, and my

mother and he would wait for the scale dial to stop moving. Then, since it was a little more than she had ordered, he would nod (after all, she was Mrs. Franklin) and, still talking, fold over the sides of the paper, all nice and neat, then so quickly you could hardly follow, loop some string from somewhere under his bench around the package first this way, then the opposite way, then cut it exactly, who knew how, tie it and hand it to her with a smile and a “There we are, Mrs. Franklin.”

In those days, a housewife often did her grocery shopping by telephone. My mother would make up a list of what she needed, then call Gristede’s in White Plains, or Cesari’s in the Village (the name was pronounced, in Valhalla, even among the Italians, not, *chezari*’s, as it would have been in Italy, but *sezairée*’s). She would draw a fierce line or two through each item after it was ordered. A day or two later, the Gristede’s truck would pull up in front of the house, and a young guy in a brown uniform would get out and carry the bags of groceries in (through the back door, of course) up the three or four steps of the back hall and into the kitchen.

No doubt as a result of seeing her in action — and I haven’t even described what it was like to go shopping for shoes with her — to this day I am unable to shop for anything except books and records, the only two things about which I am completely self-confident in my choices. The only way I can bring myself to buy dress clothes or shoes is by getting help from a Personal Shopper at Nordstrom. I always make an appointment with the same one — a pleasant, helpful, attractive woman, in other words, a woman who is the direct opposite of my mother. Even so, I put off this kind of shopping as long as I possibly can — for years in fact. I pay the cleaners to patch and repair my clothes until the Korean woman behind the counter, in the nicest possible way, can’t help pointing out to me that I am spending a fortune keeping these old clothes repaired, when for a few dollars at Ross I could get new ones. But I explain to her that (a) I can’t stand to throw anything away because everything I own is part of me, and I am part of it, and (b) I can’t stand the anxiety of shopping. Two of my woman next-door neighbors have even offered to act as my Personal Shopper and come with me to the store, so embarrassed are they to see me walk around in my patched pants.

### Her at Home

My mother had no doubts about how to raise kids: first and foremost, they needed to be controlled. I remember arguing with her about this, saying, in so many words, that not all kids were bad all the time, that it was good for a kid to be allowed to do things on his own once in a while. But neither I nor anyone else was going to break her conviction on this subject (or any other). I don’t recall ever being spanked, but I do recall far preferring that punishment (and telling her so) to what she typically doled out, namely, punishments that extended over days, sometimes a week, e.g., not being allowed to go out after supper, not being allowed to ride my bike.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, whenever I would boast, perhaps purely in jest, about something I had done, she would say, automatically, “Self-praise stinks”. About this quotation a reader has commented:

My father often told a very similar story. When he was a little boy excitedly describing to his (German) mother some success he’d had playing baseball at school, she would stop him cold by saying “self praise stinks.” He told this story so often I felt that it must have had a real effect on him. It certainly contributed to my view of my grandmother as a very grim and stern

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person. But your quotation made me wonder if this wasn't a common German saying, so I Googled "self praise stinks" and found that it's the first line of a little three-line poem:

"Self praise stinks,  
a friend's praise limps,  
a stranger's praise rings like a bell."

[Eigen-Lob stinkt,  
Freundes Lob hinkt,  
Fremdes Lob klingt.]

I bet Teutonic children in the Victorian years heard this little rhyme a lot, and these mothers were just repeating the first line, in their minds alluding to the whole thing. To me, the whole poem is actually much more moderate than just the first, harsh line by itself, but your mother and my grandmother may not have been aware of that. — Randall Goodall

As I have mentioned, whenever, at the dinner table, she wanted to talk to my father about something she thought the children shouldn't hear, she would speak German. Throughout my life, even into my old age, she needed to reassure herself about my inability to understand the language, this even after I was able to read German newspapers and novels and even Goethe's *Faust* and Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. When I visited her, she would bring out some ancient letter that someone had written her perhaps thirty or forty years ago, in which there was a line or two of praise for her, and then holding it between her fingers say, "I received a wonderful letter from him. Oh, yes, he was very fond of me. It was nothing more than that, you understand. Oh, no, we were just very close. I could let you read it — can you read German?" In addition to German, English, and Schweizerdeutsch (the Swiss dialect of German), she spoke French fluently, and also a little Italian. My parents made no effort to teach my brother and me Swiss dialect, which in a real sense was their native language, but which they regarded as inferior: they told us several times that it was not even a written language, that there was no literature written in it. (I learned many years later that that is not quite true.) But in fairness, I must say that neither my brother nor I had any interest in learning this dialect.)

Not surprisingly, despite repeated attempts throughout my life to at least be able to speak German comfortably, I still cannot. Perhaps some of the blame can be laid at my parents' feet, or at least at my mother's, since throughout my life, German was supposed to be the language I was not meant to understand. When I meet a young, bilingual couple who are bringing up their children in both languages, and when I see how easily and naturally the children alternate between the two languages, I always think of Marlon Brando's line in *On the Waterfront*: "I coulda been a contenduh!"

My brother and I had our chores, which, naturally, we hated. We had to do the dishes a certain number of times a week, washing or drying them as the case might be. We had to make our beds. We had to pick crabgrass. We made sure she knew how much we hated these tasks which, as far as we were concerned, were meaningless work that didn't really need to be done, or which my mother was perfectly capable of doing herself, and whose sole purpose was to make us into proper young boys. Once in a while we would have to hold the yarn for her while she wound it into a ball. I did this with complete contempt for the fact that yarn didn't come in balls to begin with. Why didn't she put the yarn on two sticks sticking out from something, or the top of a chair? My

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father could have made a yarn holder for her. We would have to hold the bedsheets so she could fold them. I thought, why not lay the sheets on the carpet and fold them yourself?

In later years, after she learned to drive, she used the '49 Ford, the black Mariah, to come and look for us whenever we failed to come home at the time she had laid down. I would try to keep my mind on the baseball or football game we were playing, or try to escape — just start running across the fields — but it was hopeless: I would turn a corner and as if she knew my every move in advance, there would be that black car slowly following me, she scowling behind the wheel. I would hide in some bushes, wait till I was sure she was gone, head back to the game, and suddenly, there would be the black Ford, slowly coming up behind me. Sometimes she would call the police and have them come and get us. My lifelong feeling of her demonic power came, I am sure, in large part from those memories of her relentless tracking us down at evening, as inescapably as the judgement of God.

Like all Swiss women of her generation, she was obsessed with cleanliness. Her first judgement about a neighbor or indeed anyone the interior of whose house she had seen was usually: “But they are messy,” with that we-Better-People smile and wrinkling of her nose. This was the main reason she didn't like Mrs. Beaird next door: not only did she smoke cigarettes, and not only was she nice to the kids who came into her house, but she obviously didn't worry constantly about how clean her house was. My mother often remarked how appalling it was the way Americans littered the ground along the roadside. She told us about the Swiss forests, how they were immaculate, with never a can or a piece of paper to be seen.

The house had to be aired once a week or more, lest it contain any offensive smells. My mother opened the front door, and I think the door to the back porch, and maybe the back door. She walked around the house with a frown and a preoccupied expression that showed how seriously she took this important task.

It seemed to me she was always scrubbing. She would use her fingernail to scrape a crust or piece of dried something off the kitchen counter as she cleaned it with her rag. There were pads that women strapped to their knees for kneeling on the floor. I don't know if my mother ever wore these, but certainly Mrs. Laubner, the woman who helped my mother with the cleaning, did. Whenever we came into the kitchen while my mother was cleaning, or even if she knew we were in another room where we could hear her, she would start sighing with effort, with the suffering of it all. “A mother's work is never done” is a saying I remember coming from her and from my father, who I am sure just echoed it to please her and keep her at her tasks. She wore rubber gloves when she washed the dishes, making clear to us that otherwise the day-in- day-out exposure to all that hot water and soap would make her skin become chapped and rough.

She had a habit, when she came out of the bathroom, of snapping her girdle — pulling on it through her dress, I assume to get it better adjusted, then letting it snap into place. I considered it an incredibly vulgar gesture, and still do. Difficult as it may seem to believe, it was years before I realized that the smell that sometimes remained in the bathroom after she had left, was the smell of her farts and shit. I thought it was a “special smell” that I, as a mere boy, could not properly understand. At those moments when she was leaving the bathroom, and I was waiting to go in, she had that same expression on her face as when I disagreed with her about something, or questioned her: that smug, we mothers-have-to-tolerate-the-questions, -the-innocence, of children look. Even though we leave our smell behind, we know it is not what boys might think it is; but we tolerate them, we forgive them for their not knowing what we know.

She wrote frequently to her parents in Switzerland. She would sit at her desk in the living room, near the doorway to the front hall, and write with a fountain pen and Waterman's ink.<sup>1</sup> I

sometimes sat at the dining room table and tried to imitate her. Writing seemed to be the making of a kind of jiggly motion of the pen as you moved it across the paper, then, after you reached the edge of the paper, you came back and started the same motion near the original edge and repeated the process a little way lower. Writing wasn't so hard! I got sheets of paper and imitated her, making wavy lines across the paper. Why, I could write faster than she could! Hard to understand why one would keep doing this, but, adults knew things that we kids didn't. Then she would write the name and address — “Herr Professor Sigmund Mauderli, 8 Fellenbergstrasse, Berne, Switzerland.” — on the tissue-paper-thin light-blue air mail envelope that had the words, “Par Avion” (by air) printed on the outside.

When she wrote a check in her folding booklet of checks, she would tear it out and wave it in the air to dry the ink, sometimes blowing on it. She always wrote the date and amount of the check and the person it had been written to, on the little stub that remained after the check had been torn out.

Her garden was, like her children and the men and women who worked in stores, something to be controlled. She spoke, in her Swiss accent, of the hollyhocks, and petunias, and pansies, and flox, the *booshes* (bushes), the Elm Tree in the front yard, the *pluespruce* (blue spruce — there was always a warning about damaging it when I was flying model planes in the yard), the *lilocks* along the back fence, the hydrangeas — all of them her possessions, and far beyond anything a son could understand.

I truly do not think she was capable of taking pleasure in the pleasure of others — certainly not in that of her children. When, after untiring efforts, I had finally been able to get her to agree to let me do something she had initially refused permission for (go over to a kid's house or play baseball after dinner), she would always say, “...but I don't want you to make a habit of it...”. Her grudging approval took all the pleasure out of what you did, except for the pleasure of doing what she disliked or hated. Even the anticipated pleasure of a good dinner after a day of running around, was dampened by the way she watched you and said, as you pulled back your chair at the dining room table, “Did you wash your hands?”

She was never idle. When she wasn't cleaning, she was cooking. This too was a serious business, accompanied by many sighs. But when she was baking, I got to have a little fun. I loved the smell of vanilla. The brown liquid was like sweet medicine that was fun to take. Sometimes she made whipped cream, and whipping it was my job, as I will describe later, under “Meals”.

When her other duties allowed it, she would sit and knit or crochet. She held her index finger crooked, to guide the yarn. I was amazed at how fast she could go, the plastic knitting needles clacking away, going up and down. It seemed (and still does) amazing that the result of such actions could be something that was a kind of intricate weaving— a sweater, cap, little blanket for someone's infant child. She did excellent needlepoint, and all her life demanded praise for it. She would have her needlepoint work framed. Many years later, when I was married, she would say, “I sent you two pictures. Did you get them?” “Yes.” “I worked very hard on them. One is a truck, the other a car.” “Yes, I know, they are beautiful.” “I'm not sure you appreciate them.” “I appreciate them. I will hang them in my room.” “Well, I hope so. They are very unusual. I hope you will keep them.” “I will keep them.” “I sent one to Jeffrey [my son] but he never responds.” “I think he's rather busy.” “He should like it, I spent a long time on it.” “I'm sure he does.”

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1. To this day, I remember the smell of that ink. I am reminded of it by, for example, Bernstein's Red Wine & Garlic Italian salad dressing, and by Domaine des Tours, 2001, Vin de Pays de Vaucluse Red Rhone Wine

## *Childhood*

I see her also darning socks, the needle in her fingers as she tugs the thread taut, the darning egg inside the sock. Nothing was ever thrown out. Socks, shirts, underwear, all were expertly repaired. Despite the fact that my father was president of a small engineering company and earned a salary “in five figures”, as she put it, she even saved every scrap of hand soap in a little screen container with a handle: you put the container in a sink of hot water and shook the handle back and forth to generate a few suds, and thus did not have to pour fresh soap flakes out of the box.

But she also had a dressmaker, Mrs. Del Negro, who lived in White Plains, not far from White Plains Hospital. Periodically, she had to “go to Mrs. Del Negro”. Sometimes she dragged me along. Like all those who dealt with my mother, Mrs. Del Negro seemed eager to please her, eager to meet her demands. In memory, I see her little apartment at evening, with the red sunlight coming through the windows, the rooms filled with clothing and the smell of Italian cooking and the sound of Mrs. Del Negro’s accent and laughter as she tried to soften my mother’s seriousness. I hadn’t the vaguest conception of, or interest in, what a dressmaker actually did, other than that it had to do with fulfilling my mother’s wishes regarding clothes. The fussing over hems and “taking in” (something always had to be “taken in”) made no sense to me. It was more of the incomprehensible, irrelevant world of adults.

One cold, gray, fall afternoon, I asked my mother if I could go down and walk around while I waited for her to be finished. She said yes, and so I walked idly along several streets, this part of White Plains having both office buildings and residences. I came to a playground with a tall, anchor fence around it. The nearby courts were empty, but several courts away two or three kids were kicking a ball back and forth without much enthusiasm. There were no passersby on the sidewalk, there was virtually no traffic. I looked past the tops of the buildings at the gray sky, which had a tinge of pale red beyond the buildings. And I remember suddenly becoming convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that everything was meaningless and empty and without purpose.

### **The Need for Perfection**

From kindergarten on, it was clear that being the best in the class was the most important thing in the world. That terrible burden had been placed on me. Had I asked my father what I should do in school, I’m sure his reply would have been something along the lines of: “Learn. Do your homework. Practice your penmanship.” But for my mother, going to school and getting A’s was the way you earned the right to go on living. I don’t think I ever heard words like “learn” or “understand” cross her lips in this context. Getting A’s meant pleasing the teachers — or rather, it meant having the teachers dote on you because you pleased them better than any other student.

John Holt describes the extraordinary ability of performance-oriented children to read a teacher’s cues, so that the children appear to be understanding when in fact they are not understanding. I was adept at that. I haven’t the slightest doubt that if, on Monday, Miss Conro, my second-grade teacher, had told us that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and given an explanation, say, by counting up 2 units from 2 and showing that we thus arrive at 4 units, but on Tuesday had taken me aside and said, “‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ is for the average student, the Common People, not for special children like you. The truth for children like you — the truth that will get you an A on your report card — is that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , and special children will understand why this is so.” — I have no doubt that I would have accepted this completely, and from then on always written that  $2 + 2 = 5$ .

Once, when I brought home a report card with all A's, and was obviously quite proud of it, my mother looked it over, beaming, but then said, with that shy, girlish smile of hers, "But it's not all A+'s, is it." I was crushed. But at the same time I was immediately filled with the belief that maybe, just maybe, I could deliver that kind of a report card, too, in the same way that a young swimmer who has swum the length of the pool underwater, an effort which he feels, on bursting through the surface, has taken him to within an inch of dying of suffocation, might suddenly be told that, if he expects to accomplish anything at all, or at least stay on the team, he will have to swim a length and a half underwater — "Yes, yes, I can do it, I'll learn to breathe the oxygen in the water through my *skin* if necessary!"

Her obsession with intelligence at times made her ridiculous. During World War II, she used to say, when I would talk about how much I wanted to be a pilot or a soldier<sup>1</sup>, that she hoped that instead I would go into Intelligence. She hadn't a clue what Intelligence actually involved, but the word to her indicated it was where the smart boys from good families went. But even though I knew that achieving perfection was the only way I could escape the constant depression I lived in, I was stubborn and rebellious throughout my childhood. Time and time again she would say "You never listen. You always have to do things your way," and then with a sigh, "I'm afraid you will have to learn the hard way." I am sure that my lifelong hatred of anyone presuming to tell me how to learn something had its beginnings in those years. To this day it fills me with rage that anyone should be so presumptuous. Or that anyone should presume to know how much I need to learn at any given time.

But she was equally demanding of herself, particularly when it came to decorating the house. The paint had to be flawless, the colors had to match perfectly. I remember a big fuss being made once about organdy curtains. The ladies all thought these were a matter of life and death, apparently. I made it a point of not finding out what organdy curtains were (to this day I don't know), or what any of the other things were that were obviously of such importance to her: e.g., why maple furniture was obviously good, and mahogany was awful, or why Christian Brothers sherry was good (I assumed that the reason was (a) it had "Christian" in the name, and (b) it was the sherry that my father's customers and important businessmen gave to my father at Christmas). Or why a certain color was just awful in the living room whereas another, which looked pretty much the same to me, was obviously the right one.

### The Need to Confess

It would be wrong to say that my mother insisted that I confess every wrong and possible wrong to her, because I don't remember her ever saying that. It is just that I knew that the only way my wrongdoings could be forgiven, in fact wiped from the slate, was by confessing them to her. In the rare moments when I felt good toward her, I would scour my memory for things I could tell her, including "bad thoughts". It wasn't even necessary to be specific, as long as I said it with sufficient shame: "I had bad thoughts yesterday." She: "Well, as long as you tell them to me..." meaning, "tell me that you had bad thoughts."

Writing this now, so many years later, I am certain I never told her about sexual thoughts I was having, for example, about Miss Conro, and so the truth is that now I no longer remember what I told her. But I strongly suspect that the conviction, which I have had since I was thirteen

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1. Whenever I mentioned war, sooner or later she would say, with her almost shy, I-know-you-don't-want-to-hear-this expression, "In wars, when soldiers are facing death, they always cry out for their mothers."



and first kept a diary (at my mother's suggestion) that somehow the worst could be warded off if I only confessed my fears to someone, is rooted in my mother's siren song of the value of confession.

I wasn't content with the idea that all would be forgiven as long as I confessed it. One afternoon my mother was sitting in the upstairs guest room, sewing. I was in the bedroom I shared with my brother, doing something.

“And so, as kinsmen met a night,  
We talked between the rooms,”

— Emily Dickinson, “I Died for Beauty”

I had tried to conceal something unimportant from her, and she had doubted me, and kept probing, until she got me to admit the truth.

“A mother always knows”, she said, with a little laugh that said, “Boys like to imagine that they know more than their mothers, or that they are smarter, or that they should be allowed to have their own opinions, but that is just their immaturity, their childish foolishness.”

“Not always,” I said.

“Yes, always.”

“I'll bet I could hide something if I really wanted to.”

“You may think you can hide it, but it's always written on your face. I can see it.”

“Not *always*,” I said. I was determined not to give up, even though I knew it was hopeless.

“No matter how hard a boy may try to hide something from his mother,” she said, with the same laugh, “his face always shows it.” She appeared to be thoroughly enjoying our little contest, no doubt because she considered my protests so futile. (Maybe around this time the Second Dilemma, which I will describe later, began to occur to me.)

### Her Reaction to Some of My Early Ideas

One day — I think I was around eleven — I told her that I had discovered what “good” was. I remember we were in the kitchen, she sitting at the little built-in desk. I was particularly proud of myself as I said it: “Good is that which we desire to be continued.” I was especially proud of the “that which” because it sounded like the language of the Encyclopedia. She hadn't a clue what I had just said. She smiled, and said words to the effect, “Well, sometimes boys like to believe they know more than their mothers.” I tried to get her to see that I had really discovered something important, but it was useless.

Another occasion on which I was proud of my insight occurred soon after the death of her father. She sat in a lawn chair at the corner of the house, near the back door, reading the letter containing the news, and crying. I was playing, or running around, or doing something, but every time I passed by, she was still there, holding the letter, looking off into the grass. It seemed obvious to me that grief was not only for the other person, but that it also made the grieving person feel better. So I told her this. She immediately became angry, berated me for even thinking such a thing. I tried to explain in language that must have been rather remarkable for an eleven or twelve year-old boy. I tried to get her to understand that she wouldn't cry if it didn't make her feel better, and therefore... but it was useless.

## The Two Dilemmas

The First Dilemma of my childhood was that, on the one hand, it was *essential* that I seem to be on the Kids' side and against my parents and teachers. Otherwise I would be a Mamma's Boy. But on the other hand, I had the Code to adhere to, which meant that it was *essential* that I be on *its* side. (The Code demanded that I always do the most painful, the most difficult thing, and such things came from the world of adults.) So, with the Kids, I had to make sure they saw how much I considered my mother an enemy, and with her, I had to obey while at the same time making sure she saw how much I hated doing it. And this became a basic rule of survival in general: always pretend to be what they want, but pull back as much as you can in the opposite direction. Wherever you are, don't be there.

The Second Dilemma was the question of Being Perfect, a natural outcome of her obsession with my grades and my confessing every wrong I committed. Around the age of eleven I thought of it in these terms: if God wants us to be good, then, since he is God, this must mean he wants us to be perfect. That means that every moment of our lives there is a perfect thing to do, one and only one thing which, if we do it, will make us perfect, and if we don't do it, will make us not perfect. But how can we know what that perfect thing is? Here I was, standing on the second floor hallway in early afternoon on a sunny day. My arm was where it was at that moment. How should I move it in order to be perfect? I had no doubt that I was supposed to know the answer to the question, not only at that time, but at every time it occurred, and the fact that I didn't only proved how questionable my right to go on living really was. This Dilemma only seemed to confirm the unimaginable power of God. A being that could set such requirements before you, must certainly be all-powerful. And yet I could imagine what it would be like to Be Perfect every moment of the day — could imagine the timeless feeling of it — and even though I could not have put it into words at that age, I sensed that one thing that kept me from this experience was that I thought too much about myself — I was dirty with self-awareness.

The two Dilemmas may have been one of the causes of the terrifying experience of “becoming two people” which I began to have a few years later.

## My Brother's and My Hatred of Her

My brother and I always hated my mother. I cannot remember a time when we didn't. (Later, when he was a teenager, his feelings toward her seemed to change.) We called her “the Witch” and then, when I had learned the word, “the bitch”; also “the old hag”, “the monster”. We used these terms as naturally as if she had captured us and spirited us away. When he was still less than six years old, I taught him to say “Fuck you”, and we used to crouch in the flower garden below the window-sill of the den when she was sewing, and he would shout, “Fut you!” I naturally laughed at him for his imperfect pronunciation, but nevertheless encouraged him to repeat it.

If someone had asked me then — some adult I could trust and speak honestly to — “Do you hate your mother?” I would have answered, “Sure!” But I don't think I articulated this feeling to myself until my teen years. She was simply this inescapable burden that had been placed on my brother's and my life, an ever-present nuisance, an endless source of criticism and of orders we hated to obey. She was my birth defect, my hunchback which no operation could cure.

Both my brother and I envied other kids' mothers, especially Mrs. Beaird. I tried to figure out why we had been given this bitch and all the other kids had been given nice mothers. The best possible mother I could imagine was Claire Schwager, Uncle Gus's wife. I probably would have taken Uncle Gus as my father as well, since he seemed to enjoy life more, and be more sophisticated, than my father, if not as creative. Next, I probably would have chosen Miss Sullivan, my

father's secretary. But only Alec Gray's mother made me think twice about the blessing it would be to not have the mother I had been given.

### Some of Her Stupidities

She was a fundamentally stupid woman *except* in two areas: psychology, in which she possessed a demonic genius, and interior decoration, in which she always showed a distinct, if limited, talent. In keeping with her upbringing as the daughter of a professor, she always regarded the vast majority of humanity as deserving little more than contempt unless they happened to be working for her and demonstrated the most obsequious behavior toward her. Whenever someone said something nice about the Chinese, for example, she would pretend to consider it briefly, then interject, "But they're dirty. Oh, yes. The Chinese are a dirty people," adding something about Grosspapa having always said so. I used to look at Chinese people on the street or in restaurants, trying to see where the dirt showed, but never could. On hearing that Jews had been allowed into a hotel in Cape Cod, where we went on our summer vacation, she would say "Ach, Hermann: diese *Juden*. Ganz *furchtbar*." [Oh, Herman: these Jews. Just terrible.] She would always point out that, apart from being greedy and having no manners, they were "so *clannish*. And they always take over. Mr. Nickerson *will not* let them into the Old Harbor Inn. Oh, no. They are not allowed in the better hotels in Chatham." The Italians were "common", meaning that they were primarily interested in pleasure, and hence would never get anywhere in life. The French were too sophisticated, and in particular far too interested in you know what. Her squeamishness about anything connected with those parts of the human (or animal) body that had anything to do with sex or elimination of waste went to the point that, when we recited "Little Bo Peep", she would tell us, with her smile, that it was better to say *bringing* their tails behind them, instead of *wagging*, because people of quality didn't like to think of tails wagging, it was a little bit dirty.

Regarding anything negative — bad manners, the upstart poor, a murder, a setback in World War II — she would say "Ach, das ist *furchtbar*. Ganz *furchtbar*." ["Oh, that is terrible. Just terrible."] When she particularly hated a woman, and in particular a woman who was clearly proud of her sexual attributes, she would say, "Ach, sie ist eine *Hure!*" [Oh, she is a *whore!*]

My mother and father were Republicans, so in the 1940 presidential campaign, they were for Wendell Wilkie. I remember a parade in White Plains, I standing on the curb of Mamaroneck Ave., the marchers with banners going by, I shouting with the other people, "We want Wilkie! We want Wilkie!" Whenever I mentioned Roosevelt at home, the response was always, "Oh, no, we don't like him!", or "That awful man!". My mother would speak of "his awful wife". They never explained why he and his wife were so bad. But my parents' political opinions had little effect on me: I liked Roosevelt; liked his smile and his jaunty cigarette in its cigarette holder, liked the way he seemed to be able to take care of things. After Roosevelt died, my mother called Truman "that haberdasher". I kept having to ask her what the word meant. She replied that it meant that he sold hats and men's clothes, her tone making it clear that that put him at the very bottom of the human scale.

Communism she dismissed completely because it meant that she would have to share her toothbrush with other people. Neither she nor my father had any use for popular music. Whenever she heard Louis Armstrong sing on the radio, she would give a scolding smile and say, "He can't sing!", as though she wondered, "Why do they let someone who can't sing be on the radio?"

Sometimes we went for a walk in the Conro's neighborhood, way up in the thicket of streets on the other side of Columbus Avenue. One street we walked on overlooked Kensico Dam Plaza and the village of Valhalla. On this street was a house which my mother called "the modern

house” or, sometimes, “where the Russians live”. It was perched right on the edge of the steep drop-off to the valley. It was white, looked like a box, but some of the walls had curved parts, which made the house special. In my mind I see a sunny interior, windows everywhere, a view of the Plaza and the woolly tops of the trees in the hills in the valley, a gold bar running around the edge of a glass-topped dining table, the Russians, terribly sophisticated, European, members of the aristocracy, serving cocktails, smoking foreign-smelling cigarettes in long holders, speaking with accents that no one could acquire except by having suffered enormously while at the same time managing to stay rich. Sometimes, when I hear the alto saxophone in classical music, as in Jacques Ibert’s *Concertino da camera for alto saxophone and eleven instruments*, I think of that house.

On that same street we once passed a brown wooden garage at the far end of a driveway. Some boys were working on a shiny blue car — a “roadster” it might have been called in those days. It had silver all around the radiator and the headlights and the windshield. The engine was running, making a great noise as the kids bent over it, talking excitedly. My mother was shocked at this scene of boys working on a *car*! Suddenly, I felt a great sense of evil — that I was in fact looking at a scene from Hell, was watching three kids on their way to damnation and not caring about it, which made the terror only worse. Many years later, when I saw the cartoon “Toad of Toad Hall”, I thought immediately that Toad’s ferocity at the wheel of his roadster expressed what I remember seeing that day.

### Her Recreations

Her only recreations were playing cards and listening to the Metropolitan Opera on Saturdays with my father. She tended the garden, but Jim Montesano, our Italian gardener, did most of the work. Naturally, I avoided anything to do with it. During the war we had a Victory garden: tomatoes, lettuce, radishes, other vegetables. She was by no means a card player at heart. She did it reluctantly when the Canasta craze spread through the suburbs and it was generally considered to be a game for ladies of the upper middle class. She and Miss Fornro, an English woman from Mayfair Acrss, would play together. She had nothing but contempt for bridge, considering it a game that only common women, that is, middle-class American women, played.

She and my father listened to the opera in the living room on Saturday. The most pretentious voice on radio, that of Milton Cross, explained the plots to the members of the upper middle class gathered around their radio sets. Whenever Wagner’s *Lohengrin* was performed, and I happened to be passing through the room, I had to listen to my mother prompt my father to explain the story and, in particular, that it concerned a woman named Elsa (her first name was Elsy). She had somehow acquired a set of correct opinions about famous opera singers of the day: “Oh, Melchior, well of course...” And similarly for Jüssi Björling and others I have forgotten. (To this day, I can hear Milton Cross’s voice saying the name *Bidú Sayão*<sup>1</sup>.) These were international figures (all Europeans) whom only those in the upper middle class, especially those Europeans in the upper middle class, could appreciate. Oh, yes. Other singers were unpardonably bad, although these matters could not be explained, and especially not to little boys. To this day, the one form of classical music that means nothing to me, is opera.

Sometimes, when she heard me practice an old German tune from one of my exercise books, she would sing a few lines of the lyrics ,

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1. A Brazilian soprano who was with the Met from 1937 to 1952.

“Du, du, liegst mir in Herzen,  
Du, du, liegst mir im Sinn...”  
[You, you, lie in my heart,  
You, you, lie in my mind...]

The only other music I remember her enjoying was waltzes, a piece or two by Handel, and anything played by the pianist Dinu Lipati, who was handsome but had the sad expression and pale skin of a man carrying a fatal disease (I think it was tuberculosis), and who died young. When a certain passage in Franz Lehar’s “Gold and Silver Waltz” began — dahhh, dah-dah-dahhh, dah-dah-dahhh, dah-dah-dahhh, dah-dah-dahhh, dahhh, dahhh, dahhh-dah-dah-dah-dahhh — or the waltz in Richard Strauss’s Overture to *Die Fledermaus*, she would always put her hand to her heart and sigh and half-sing along for a few measures, as though recalling glamorous long-ago nights in old Vienna. This may well be the source of my life-long contempt for Strauss waltzes. She also sighed and put her hand to her heart when she heard Handel’s “Largo” from his *Xerxes*, played on the radio. But when they played Honegger’s *Pacific 231* (a short film dramatizing the music, and using real trains, was shown in the movie theaters), she shook her head: this was not the kind of music that a real composer of classical music would write.

### **My Mother’s Relationship with My Father**

It used to be a common technique of psychiatrists to ask patients with sexual problems to imagine their parents making love. I was never able to carry out this request, and assumed for many years it was only further proof of the depth of my neurosis, if not of my latent homosexuality. Then it gradually dawned on me that patients with this difficulty might be expressing an insight that the psychiatrists hadn’t thought of, namely, that the lovemaking of their parents was so dull, so unexciting sexually, that it simply was beyond the patients’ imaginative ability to reconstruct it in any kind of detail. Given some of the things my mother later said about sex, I suspect this was true in my case.

My mother and father always slept in separate beds — twin beds, with a narrow aisle between them at the head of which was a nighttable with lamp and a round clock with silver frame and large, old-fashioned numbers and ornate pointers on the edge of the hour and minute hands. The clock had two faces, one on each side. I never understood why. After my mother’s death, I took it for cleaning to a specialist in old clocks, and asked him why anyone would design a clock with two faces. He said so that a couple that slept in twin beds would each be able to have a clock face on their side. Later, a clock radio was added to the nighttable.

I don’t remember a single display of affection between my parents, although my mother sometimes called my father, *Schatz* (“dear” — literally “treasure”). I remember only one time when my father was visibly angry with her. They were arguing in the dining room, his face was red, and I saw the bones beneath his cheeks moving, which I assumed was from the effort of his trying to control his temper. He raised his voice, said something about, “I will not be told ...” I am certain he never struck her, never used profanity against her. On the other hand, I wonder if, fundamentally, each didn’t simply regard the other as a special kind of equipment for going through life as a member of the upper middle class. The woman took care of the house and the children, and made sure that proper dinners were served when friends or business associates of her husband came to visit, the man went to work to provide the money for this.

My mother always followed what my father said. He must have had great admiration for the civil engineer Othmar H. Ammann, who designed three of New York’s famous bridges, the

George Washington Bridge (completed in 1932), the Triborough Bridge (1936), and the White-stone Bridge (1939), because whenever my mother mentioned his name, she gave it the full German pronunciation, *Ah-mann*, in a reverent tone that made it clear that this was a man who could do no wrong.

### **My Mother's Relationship with Other People**

My mother was a living example of the characteristic that Churchill saw in Germans when he said they are either at your throat or at your feet. Those in authority, especially her parents and my father, were beyond criticism.

The most important person for her apart from my father, was her father — Papa, pronounced “Boppa” — the leading astronomer in Switzerland and director of the Berne Observatory. During the War (the second one), it always struck me when I looked at photographs of my grandfather, that, with his little moustache, he strongly resembled Hitler. Time and again she told of how he had to calculate the calendar each year, how the nation waited for him to complete this important task. I could never comprehend why it was even necessary. Why didn't he just buy a calendar in a store? What was there to calculate? You could figure out the day of the week that each day would fall on as long as you knew the number of days in each month, and the day that New Year's fell on. To this day, I don't know what my mother was actually referring to.

Those who were in any kind of subordinate position to my mother had exactly one choice if they wanted to avoid her wrath, and that was to be obsequious toward her. Once, she had a black woman do housecleaning for her for several weeks. She would always tell us how admirable she was. But then again, that is how most of the good darkies were. “So simple. Oh yes, no need for anything fancy. They never ask for much.”

She was, as I think is clear, suspicious of other people. One of her tests to determine if a visitor was to be invited back to the house, was to see if they did any “snooping”, which meant looking into rooms that they didn't need to look in. This also applied to kids I invited over. If she saw them being curious about how we lived, I had my work cut out for me as far as being allowed to invite them back was concerned.

And yet, she wasn't incapable of genuine compassion. There was a Tante Kathi who suffered from multiple sclerosis most of her life, was confined to a wheelchair, wrote sometimes to my mother. My mother always made sure that we understood how awful life was for the poor soul, how brave she had been throughout her long ordeal.

### **Mrs. Laubner**

We didn't have servants but my mother always had several women to call on for cleaning and baby-sitting and, when my father had important business guests, to help with the cooking. Mrs. Laubner was a German woman who came on Thursdays to clean the house and do the laundry. She had fled from Germany with her two kids, Gerhard and Melina, just before the War. I don't know if I ever knew what happened to her husband. She had what to me seemed a German smell: a combination of the smells of a primitive perfume, detergent, and clean sheets. She wore her hair in a bun at the back of her head, like my mother. (In my mind, all women who spoke German wore their hair like that.) She had rough hands, I remember, no doubt from years of washing clothes in strong soap. She spoke with a strong German accent, and she had a habit of adding *mm* suffixes to many of her words: “John-*mm*, you should pick up your clothes-*mm*.” “Don't be

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home late, your mother will worry-*mm*.” I think the sound was her Americanization of *nicht*? used as a rhetorical request for assurance that she was making herself understood.

During the War, everyone was supposed to hate Germans, but my mother made sure my brother and I understood that Mrs. Laubner was one of the *good* Germans because she had run away from Germany, and so we must never direct our hatred toward her. But as far as I was concerned (as with the act of sitting in the back of the classroom with the dumb kids), I was again living dangerously, having one of the enemy in our very house, which was further confirmation that I was special.

I often had to go to the Laubner’s house on Clinton Street, just a few blocks away, to bring Mrs. Laubner our laundry. Her son Gerhard was good with radios. He could fix anything. He knew where to touch and where not to touch underneath the chassis, knew all about *speaker coils* and *capacitors* and, for all I know, even knew how a *superhetrodyne* worked. In my mid-teens, when I got the idea that learning about radios might save me, I once or twice asked him to help me with a problem, which he did. But he was shy, and not articulate, so I never learned anything from him.

Later, Mrs. Laubner got an apartment on Martine Ave. in White Plains. Sometimes, on Sundays, we went there for dinner. Whenever we talked about going over to her house to visit, and Mrs. Laubner asked me what I wanted for dinner, I always had the same reply: “Red cabbage!” *Roter kohl!* I loved the sweet and sour vinegary taste, and could have eaten this vegetable, prepared this way, by the bushel. She also served thin slices of beef, covered with gravy, and mashed potatoes. The sweet vinegary smell of the apartment smelled to me like a *German* bathroom — heinies, fat bottoms.

Unfortunately, when Gerhard was in his late teens, he got a girl pregnant, and, because she demanded that he marry her, he fled to Florida. He remained there, at an address known only to his mother, while the girl and her mother tried to find him. They apparently threatened to sue Mrs. Laubner for withholding the address, and maybe actually did. In any case, at the age of twenty or so, Gerhard had become a fugitive. He made his living in Florida repairing radios, my mother said.

Still later, Mrs. Laubner moved to a house in Thornwood or Hawthorne, several miles north of Valhalla. My mother used to make my brother and me come with her when she drove there to bring the laundry on a cool summer evening. I remember the house as being on the side of a low, grassy hill, reached by a dirt driveway from the main road. A few trees grew near the house and there was a little pond, with a few ducks, below the house in front. The place was utterly depressing. My brother and I sat, bored, waiting in the car, maybe walking disinterestedly around the pond, which the adults wanted us to be excited about. I would think to myself: What is the purpose of all this? This dusty driveway, this rust brown house, this gray pond, all this meaningless green grass...