Meals

We were supposed to wash our hands before eating. My mother, and sometimes my father, would say: "Did you wash your hands?" I: "Yes." They: "Let me see." I would hold out my hands. They: "They don't look washed to me." I: "I washed them!" They: "I didn't hear any water." I, petulantly, with a sigh, giving up an argument I could never win: "I'll go back and wash them again." Of course, what we — my brother and I — would do then was to go to the bathroom and simply run the water for a few seconds, maybe move our hands back and forth in the stream so it would sound like something was being washed in it. We were experts at not washing our hands properly. Just enough to get rid of dirt that could be seen. If no dirt could be seen, then we would simply allow the stream of water to briefly touch our finger tips, then wipe our hands on a corner of the towel where the dirt wouldn't show so much.

Breakfast

My father was often in a rush in the morning. I remember the smell of toast and coffee and then, afterward, the even more interesting smell of stale coffee grounds. Sometimes my father's and mother's breath smelled of coffee. It was the smell of adult things, of business. When my father bit into a piece of crisp toast, it was always with a big crunchy sound. By God, you knew he was eating *toast*. He ate it like Wallace in the claymation film *The Wrong Trousers*, although, not being an expressive man, he didn't say something equivalent to "Cracking toast[1], Gromit!" You could hear the sound of the toast being ground into pieces in their closed mouths as they chewed it thoroughly. They certainly practiced what they preached ("Chew your food before you swallow!"). When my father put butter on his toast, he held the toast in one hand, positioned on his outstretched fingers, then swept the butter on with broad strokes of the butter knife, as though he were putting cement on a brick. We often had Swiss cheese in the morning: Ementhaler or Gruyere. Ementhaler looked like normal Swiss cheese, with big holes. It was shiny, almost greasy. The rind tasted moldy, but sometimes I ate it anyway (it tasted like what I imagined the inside of a cheese barrel tasted like). Gruyere came in a circular box, each piece wedge-shaped, wrapped in silver foil, with a different picture in white, yellow, and red, of some Swiss country scene on the label, the pictures corresponding to the different types of Gruyere in the box. At first I was suspicious about such cheese, since it was soft and had a heinie smell. But then I grew to like it (bad equals good) and would badger my mother to get more.

My brother and I typically had orange juice, cereal and toast for breakfast. The cereals were usually Wheaties (Breakfast of Champions), Rice Krispies (Snap! Crackle! Pop!), and they really did make something approximating those sounds, I was always surprised to find), Cheerios (then called "Cheerioats"), Puffed Wheat, and, my favorite, Puffed Rice, which also made a crackling sound in the milk. I loved to pour sugar on the cereal because of the promise of spooning up the sugar-soaked milk at the bottom of the bowl. Sometimes my mother cut a banana onto the top, drawing the knife blade through the cylinder of fruit, the slices plopping onto the cereal, releasing the odor of banana ("It's good for you!"). She never cut her thumb, even though her thumb was what stopped the knife after each slice! Where did she learn such a thing?. The idea of bananas and Corn Flakes intrigued me. The banana acquired the taste of something it wasn't, namely, something crackly, and the corn flakes acquired the taste of something they weren't, namely, a banana. As I chomped away at this crackly food, I read the backs of cereal boxes, jam jar labels

1. That is, "cracking good toast".

— whatever was in reach that had words on it. I can still remember some of the ingredients they always gave:...niacin, iron, riboflavin...water, sugar, preserves... .

Ovaltine was a drink I was supposed to love, and should have loved, because it had chocolate in it and was advertised on the Captain Midnight radio show, but I never could bring myself to like it because my mother and the ads on radio all said it was good for me.

Dinner

I remember lamb chops, mashed potatoes, peas, glasses of milk. My mother would sigh as she dragged herself back and forth to the kitchen so we would know how hard she was working, how much she was suffering in order to please us. She made sure we knew the effort she had made to get a good piece of meat, how the butcher had cut it especially for her, how expensive it had been. We ignored all this, of course.

The eating of dinner officially began with my father cutting the pumpernickel, which, unlike the packaged bread we ate (seldom white, almost always pumpernickel, although white bread with lots of peanut butter and grape jelly was an after-school snack that almost made life worth living) — the pumpernickel came in a bag, and was round, with a strong brown flaky crust, and dark brown bread inside. My father would hold the loaf, or the part of it that was left from the last meal, against his chest, then dig the knife into one side, his thumb on top of the loaf, yet he never cut himself! The wedge-shaped piece he cut off he handed to my brother or me. Then another, with a sawing motion. I thought of this as the way a European cuts bread.

Sometimes, when my brother and I asked my mother what we were going to have for dinner, and she said "cheese soufflé," we would say, "Oh, no!" The brown hot crust, the soft, almost gooey yellow interior. It was always too hot when she served it. We regarded it as a kind of intermittent punishment that we had to endure, like spinach and liver.

One of my favorite dinners was stewed tomatoes on toast, which for some reason always reminded me of sweaters. If you had asked me why, I would have said, "Because of the seeds in the tomoatoes", although I would have had no idea why the seeds produced that association. With sufficient nagging from my mother, I could be made to eat rhubarb on toast, but I was always suspicious of it. (A fragment of dialogue from a movie or radio program that the kids used to quote stayed in my mind for some reason: "Think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?" "Not if it's in cans, 'twon't.") She seemed to enjoy cooking lamb chops, mashed potatoes, and spinach. I had an early revulsion to fat, and would carefully cut it away from the lamp chops and steak when she served it. I would do the same with bacon. I loved mashed potatoes with gravy and specks of pepper in it. From an early age, I observed that, after you had eaten asparagus, your pee smelled funny.

Among the foods my mother considered important was calf's liver. I hated the stringy fibers in it, and the dark, thick, metallic taste. It tasted like virtue. Furthermore, I had learned somewhere, possibly in school, that the liver processed the body's waste products, so I was really eating something that had to do with shit. The only thing that made it tolerable, year in, year out, was that she served it with a light gravy.

I would watch her grind meat for meat loaf, the spaghetti-like strands coming out through the holes in the metal disk in the grinder. Sometimes she let me turn the handle. But she always warned me not to eat raw meat because you could get worms.

They used a standard argument of the time to get us to eat: "Think of all the starving children in Europe." Like every child, I suppose, who has ever been told that, I thought, "Then why encourage us to eat? Isn't that an argument for our *not* eating, and instead giving the food to the

starving children?" I may have raised the question but I recall nothing in the way of a reply. If there was one, I'm sure it was essentially "Stop talking back!"

A frequent dessert that I always liked was applesauce. It was easy to eat, often a little cold from the refrigerator, and I liked the brown color. Basic stuff.

When she made chocolate pudding, I always got to eat all the chocolate I could scrape out of the mixing bowl. Chocolate pudding or strawberry shortcake always meant whipped cream on top, which she had to make herself. Cream with lots of sugar went into a large bowl, then I had to churn it with an egg beater until it was the right consistency. Then she spooned the whipped cream into a thick cloth trapezoidal-shaped canvas bag about six inches in height with a serrated conical metal opening at one end. She spooned the whipped cream into the bag then held the nozzle over each dish of butterscotch pudding (which I especially loved) or chocolate pudding or strawberry shortcake (which I also loved), and squeezed the bag so that a thick snake of whipped cream came out with grooves along the side in it from the serrations. She swirled it around the top of the dish to make it look pretty. Sometimes she let me do this. The reward was being allowed to lick the wooden spoon that she had used to load the bag, and to eat as much of the whipped cream as I could scrape out of the bowl.I don't remember her baking a cake, although she baked countless apple pies, in the Swiss style, meaning, without a crust over the top. We understood that this was the better way, that American pies were somehow inferior, less good for you, because they had a crust over the tops of the apples. And once in a while we had what I think was called a "coffee ring" — a kind of coffee cake containing raisins, and with white sugar frosting dribbled on the top.Her specialty, however, was brownies, and I loved them, both in the making — we were allowed to lick the wooden spoon containing the brown, sweet, batter — and in their final form: the brown crust, the soft, thick, moist interior with fragments of crunchy walnuts, the wonderful chocolatey smell — she would put them in a round, red tin, I think left over from some Christmas. We would ask if we could have a brownie, then pull the tight-fitting lid, with its gold edge, off, choose the biggest one, reluctantly put the lid back on. And then, soon, "Can I have another?" and if she thought we had been good, the answer might be yes. She was clearly proud of her brownies, and the truth is, I have never tasted anyone else's that were as good as hers.

Under the carpet at my mother's end of the dining room table was a buzzer. It was perhaps four inches in diameter, and consisted of four brass leaves over a rubber pad. I can't remember how they got the wire to the kitchen. The buzzer was for important occasions when my father brought business acquaintances home for dinner, or for when someone visited us from Switzerland. My mother could press the carpet over the buzzer with her foot. The buzzer would sound in the kitchen, and that would tell whoever she had hired to help with the cooking that it was time to serve the next course. In writing this now, I suddenly can't help thinking of the anxiety of the poor soul in the kitchen, trying to keep everything hot, yet not allowing it to be overdone, all the while waiting for that damn buzzer to ring. My brother and I liked to annoy my mother by stepping on the buzzer in the middle of the day. When we had guests, the dining room table had to be extended. With obvious nervousness, my mother and the woman she had hired had to remove the old, ordinary table cloth, revealing the nice, polished, top of the table, which we never otherwise saw, and then, carefully, do things underneath and then somehow pull the leaf out and draw it back until it settled in place more or less at the same level as the main part of the table, although you could always tell there was a bump, a ridge, with the result that not everyone was eating at exactly the same level.

The kitchen, like the rest of the house, had been designed by my father, and my mother often told me how special it was because he had designed it in the form of a U, so that everything was

easily accessible: on one side was a short counter top, then the stove with hood and fan to draw away the smells of cooking, then more counter, then at the horizontal part of the U a double sink above which was a window looking on to the side yard and over to the Beairds', then more counter curving around down the other arm of the U, then the refrigerator, then, around the corner, the ironing board closet. Cabinets were all around except at the window. At the open end of the U was her desk where she did the bills. One could walk straight through the kitchen at the end where her desk was.

Sometimes we listened to the news or to music from the radio in the living room. The "Air on the G String" from Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 3* has always been associated in my mind with beef soup and news reports of World War II.

I remember virtually none of the dinner conversations that took place during those years, but I do remember that one time I had brought up a subject that involved my being in a dangerous situation — perhaps I had expressed my desire to be a wilderness explorer, and my mother had put her hand to her mouth and remarked with grave concern about what might happen to me, that I might become lost — and my father, to my utter amazement responded, "No, I think John would keep his head." His words were a source of encouragement to me forever after, including on the two or three occasions when my life was indeed in danger.

Restaurants

Eating at home, except for Sunday dinners, was something I did out of habit, with no particular awareness or pleasure other than that of relieving hunger. But going out to restaurants was entirely different. I liked the gravy smell of restaurants. Probably my favorite was Ebersole's Restaurant on Mamaroneck Ave. in White Plains, a few doors from E. Post Rd. With every meal, they served a trio of condiments in a silver serving tray (which always seemed ice cold!). One of these condiments was a delicious pickle sauce that I ate by itself, whether or not there was something to put it on. It tasted both tart and sweet, pickley and sugary. My mother sometimes used the promise of a lunch at Ebersole's to get me to consent to endure the boredom of shopping at Gristedes grocery store nearby.

Then there was Schrafft's, on Main Street in White Plains, with Mrs. Hartmann to wait on us. She was old (that is, gray-haired), and always dutifully polite to us, especially to my mother — not like a waitress at all, but more like a mother who didn't have children to serve at home any more, and so had decided to come to a restaurant and serve people there. We sometimes went there for a holiday dinner. We sat near the middle wall in the front part, or along the side. What I liked about Schrafft's was the atmosphere of important people, and the white mashed potatoes that were served: always with lots of gravy. You could see the specks of pepper in the potatoes, and taste them. They gave the potatoes a sharp, pointed taste that somehow went with the importance of the people there.

When my mother took me to New York City, perhaps so she could go shopping at one of the Big Stores, there was another Schrafft's, where important businessmen had oysters for lunch along with cocktails — a strange amber-colored liquid in a glass, with a red cherry. I heard they were called "bluepoint oysters", and as a result I imagined each oyster, in its iridescent shell, to have a blue marble-like ball inside the gray, cold meat. I would watch the businessmen bending over their tables, the waitresses bringing the silver tray containing the gray oysters on ice, and the red sauce (from the desert, I for some reason imagined) and the cold pieces of puckery lemon.

The businessmen, talking about terribly important things having to do with skyscrapers, I was sure, would then slurp down the oysters without hardly noticing them.

Schrafft's introduced me to the the strange phenomenon of the revolving door, which always seemed to demand thinking about. I had no idea at all why anyone would have invented it, and yet they were definitely fun to go through. Why, you could go around and around and stay inside the door as long as you liked! I assumed they had been invented for special places, like office buildings and restaurants, to make them seem all the more special. But you had to be light of foot. If you stumbled, the partition behind you was at your back, pushing you along anyway. No mercy. So it was a kind of athletic challenge, on top of everything else.

I loved the pads on which waiters and waitresses wrote down your order. I loved the *idea* of them. The paper had green or black lines, with a place at the top for the date. The pages folded over the top, behind the pad. The waiter or waitress stood there with pencil poised, then wrote very quickly (how were they able to do that?), jabbing the pencil point into the paper when the order was done. They had a pocket to carry their pads in. "Ein Block" is the German name for a pad like that, and it seems a much more appropriate name than ours. It all seemed so wonderfully official, orderly. The man who came to read our gas and electricity meters had an even more official pad: his was metal at the back! To be allowed to write on paper that had metal behind it! Well, that was because he was in charge of metal things (pipes, wires).

Sundays

Sunday Drives

On Sundays, we sometimes went for walks or drives. But that was after breakfast, and after my father had read the *New York Times*. I would ride with him to the Village, where he would buy a copy at the newspaper store. The enormous weight of the paper, and the smell of the ink (the smell of important new information about government officials and foreign countries and other things no boy could possibly understand) made it clear that this was a paper meant for my father. Once in a while, for my brother and me, he bought one of the papers that had comics — the *Jounal American* or the *Herald Tribune*, I think. Or we might be allowed to buy a comic book, nothing cruel, maybe Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse or Blondie or the Gumps or Gene Autry or Captain Marvel or sometimes Archie Andrews which I bought only as a last resort.

And then my father sat in his chair in the living room, reading the paper. Neither my brother nor I could understand how anyone would want to read such a dull paper. So we would lie on the living room floor and read the comics until it was time for our drive. During this time my parents always turned on the broadcast of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I was fascinated with the announcer's deep, resonant, perfect speaking voice. To be so good that your voice became like that! I thought, they have found the answer out there in the West, and they are all Doing the Right Thing, whereas I am not.

(I have to mention another radio voice that I can still hear in my mind's ear after more than 60 years. It was the voice of the announcer who said that a program (which one I have forgotten) "is brought to you by the Equitable Life Insurance Company of the United States". (Actually, he probably said "Assurance" but I didn't hear the subtle difference.) The resonant, serious tones left no doubt in your mind how important the company was — like classical music, and the Encyclopedia, and above all, my father.)

Throughout the War, you had to have ration stamps in order to buy gas. But since our car was only used to drive my father to the station a mile away in the morning, and for our Sunday drives, I can't recall our ever not having enough stamps for gas.

We probably drove to many different places, but I only remember three: one in White Plains, not far from the County Center, where we walked along the Bronx River, another in Park Lane Road, in the rural area on the other side of the Reservoir, and the third in Scarsdale.

The Bronx River walk was along a park that had been laid out next to the River (which wasn't really a river but only a small creek). There were low cement bridges at intervals. Of course, like all parents, ours walked too slowly, and talked instead of looking at everything. My brother and I would run off, racing each other, then come running back, then run off again.

"Can we go to Park Lane Road?" we would ask my father, when it was clear that he hadn't made up his mind about where we would go. That was without question the favorite destination for my brother and me. It was an asphalt road in the wooded residential area on the other side of the Reservoir, a place with grass and thick green trees on both sides of road, and an occasional house behind a fence. But the main appeal was nothing more than the fact that there was water running in the cement gutter by the side of the road, something that we never saw in the gutters near our house except during rainstorms. More important, we were allowed to play in it. My father stood by the side of the '36 Ford, smoking his cigar, the little pebbles on the asphalt crunching under his leather shoes, or sometimes he sat inside the car, while we floated toy boats in the rivulet, or piled twigs to make a dam. I sensed he was amused at the intense fascination that a little running water in a gutter held for his two sons. The water flowed into a cement pipe which ran under the road. Perhaps the mystery of that pipe was another reason for our fascination with the place, this opportunity to get close to water in a unique form: water running down a gutter in the middle of a sunny day, and then *under* a street that cars went on! When I say the name of the road, I can still see the house across the street from where we played, behind a tall, wooden, weatherbeaten fence, a few low trees all but hiding it from view. Who lived there? What did they do during the day? What was it like?

But more often than not, these drives sooner or later wound up in exclusive areas like Scarsdale because my mother wanted to "look at the homes". She would ooh and ah over the mansions — vast piles of gray stone and timber with steep roofs, set back from the road behind trees, surrounded by that hush which things owned by the rich always seemed to have: She would whisper to my father, "*Oh, Hermann, das ist so schön!*"[1] And my father, always the practical engineer, would reply "Who's going to pay to heat it?" just as, when we went to a restaurant, the first thing he checked was whether the tables wobbled or not, because to him that was the first indication of the quality of the food. I am convinced that, as a result of those drives, I have all my life believed that I could be happy if I could live in a beautiful house. I become small and twisted with envy when I go on one of the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association's annual tours, in which we can actually walk through some of the most beautiful houses in the Berkeley Hills. I feel like a man who has lost an arm but who, once a year, goes to see a concert pianist perform; or a man with no legs who once a year gets to watch a marathon. The yearning and longing is as great as any I have felt for a woman I couldn't possibly possess. The thought of people moving casually through beautiful rooms, talking to each other about books and paintings and the important events of the world, having dinner together in a big dining room with a fire in the fireplace, candles on the table, bottles of wine, the wood furniture and floors gleaming — the sense of being in, sur-

1. [...that is so beautiful!]

rounded by, protected by, something that is superbly built, strong, excellent, and that I will never be able to have — this, can, and does, send me into the depths of depression for days afterward. I try to restrain myself from taking walks in neighborhoods with such houses, but it is no use. When I see, on a cold November evening, an illuminated window in a distant house that is set back from the road, I know I could write volumes on the lives of the people I imagine living there. In the fall, when the smell of wood smoke is in the air, the only way these neighborhoods become endurable is if I am running. Then I can match the heroism of my effort with the grandeur of the buildings and feel that for those moments we are equal.Once in a while, my father would heed our pleas to go to "the airport", or to "Armonk". This treat is described in the section, "Planes and Parachutes".

In the summer, we would sometimes go to Lake Waccabuc or Lake Mahopac. At Lake Waccabuc, we would rent a rowboat, which my father then rowed to various interesting spots on the Lake. There was a channel we went through, with greenery on both sides. And an inlet we only went to the entrance of, never venturing very far up. It might have been the mouth of a stream, I don't know. All I remember is the greenery close overhead, as in a jungle. As my father rowed, I attempted to do my own version of fishing, which consisted of poking a stick into the water and trying to spear a fish with it. When we were in sufficiently shallow water that I could reach the bottom, I thought that I was touching a fish's back, and would proclaim this accomplishment to all.

We always pronounced Lake Mahopac, "Lake *May*opack" , but much later I learned that other people, Americans who supposedly knew the correct pronunciation, said, "Muh*ho*pack". There is a picture of my father holding me in front of a piece of white trellis at this lake resort. They had speedboats and once in a while my father would give in to our pleading and have the boatman take us for a ride. What struck me most of all was that the boat deck *looked like a piece of furniture*, it had the same look of stained, polished wood. It was as though someone had brought a big fancy chair up to the dock. This meant that speedboats were, in a mysterious way, the same as chairs and tables in the house, and yet at the same time they were allowed to be in water, and to go roaring across the surface of the lake, spewing white foam out behind them. To be able to know how to drive a speedboat seemed to me all that anyone needed to be completely happy. To have a piece of equipment to make go— a steering wheel and handles and buttons and dials which you had to look at every few seconds —that was all you needed!

Thinking now of the pronunciation of places in my childhood, I remember that we always pronounced "White Plains" as "Why *Plains*". I sometimes found myself contemplating what the name might actual refer to. I had heard somewhere that the city was so named because the land was covered with snow in winter, but this was incorrect:

"To early traders it was known as 'the White Plains', either from the groves of white balsam which are said to have covered it, or from the heavy mist that local tradition suggests hovered over the swamplands near the Bronx River."[1]

I think there was a sign along one of the main roads from Valhalla that invited visitors to a house where Washington had slept at the time of the Battle of White Plains (Sept.-Oct. 1776).

Years later, when I had my driver's license, I became aware of the names of other towns: for example, Port Chester, near Long Island Sound. I don't recall ever visiting it, but only now do I realize how, as with White Plains, we never thought about what the name might actually refer to.

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1. "White Plains, New York", Wikipedia, Nov. 17, 2009

We pronounced it "*Port* Chester", not "Port *Ches*ter," which would have made more sense if we had thought of it as being a port.

Sometimes, on Sundays, we went to the florist on Kensico Ave. in Kensico, not far from where this road met the Bronx River Parkway. I think some branch of the Centi family owned it: there was a father or two and several sons around, loading and unloading huge sacks of fertilizer and topsoil. We parked the car on the gravel in front, or sometimes drove down the driveway one side of which was the greenhouse. Trucks were parked in various places, piles of fertilizer in the warehouse area in back. We went up the wooden steps from the driveway into the office. Old plank floors, everything smelling of fresh dirt and growing things and the shit smell, the dirty socks smell, of fertilizer. From here you could step into one of the steamy hothouses, where hoses ran everywhere, and there was always the sound of dribbling water, the plants all lined up as though begging for attention. There was a corner table of scarred ancient wood in the office, where they put the plants that they brought in on flats from the hothouse. All this was under the matter-of-fact control of the burly men in dark gray shirts.

My mother always knew what to buy, and would never buy anything unless it was exactly what she wanted. Yet she made a point of being friendly to Mr. — and to the workmen (who always treated her deferentially).

Sunday Dinner

In the afternoon was our Sunday dinner, one of the important events of the week. Sometimes, if I pleaded in just the right way (you could never know exactly what that way was, because sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't) my father would allow me to have a glass of water with a little wine in it. This was very special, because it meant that I was, briefly, like him. If it was a white wine, usually Christian Brothers, it made the water look oily. I always seemed to smell the cork in the wine. My mother would look on anxiously, working her index finger on her thumb and saying, with a frown, "You make him drunk!" But my father just looked on with (I thought) a certain amount of pride that his son was growing up.

I have no recollection of dinner table conversations, but I do remember that sometimes, when my brother or I piped up with something after our parents had been talking for a while, my father would look at the one who had spoken, and say, with mock surprise and a faint smile, "Another country heard from!"

During dinner, which took place around two or three in the afternoon, we would listen to John Nesbitt tell stories on WQXR, the classical music radio station in New York. I know now that it wasn't so much the stories as the sound of his voice that entranced me. It was a quiet voice that made you stop doing whatever you were doing and listen. One of the stories was about a farm boy who each day would lift this one calf, until, eventually, he was able to lift up the grown cow. I took this for a true story, so convincing was Nesbitt's voice. When I was 58, I found that it wasn't an original story after all:

"The received story of Milo, who by daily lifting a Calf, attained an ability to carry it being a Bull, is a witty conceit, and handsomely sets forth the efficacy of Assuefaction." — Sir Thomas Browne, *Enquiries into Vulgar and Common Errors*, in *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, The University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 366.

Another story was about Houdini. He had been lowered through a hole in the ice in the middle of a frozen lake, his arms and legs in chains. He was able to free himself but when he got to the surface, he found that a current had carried him away from the hole. He would have certainly drowned had he not discovered that the midday sun had caused the ice to rise a few inches above

the surface of the water, providing him with enough air to breathe so that he could search for the hole, which he eventually found. To this day, the image of him floating with just his nose above the water, the white roof of ice overhead, is as clear as it was when I first heard the story. And to this day, the question remains in my mind: how did he know which way to swim to the hole?

With dessert, we often had nuts, in particular walnuts, which my father had to crack open with the silver nutcracker that looked like a pair of pliers, except that the jaws were on the inside. (He would sometimes make a face to show how hard it was to crack open the shells.) During these years, I found out much later, he was working on what in civil engineering were known as "thin shells", i.e., thin, smooth, concrete roofs that spanned large spaces, e.g., in airports. (Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes were another approach to the same problem.) My father published a paper on the subject, and it begins by calling attention to the remarkable strength of walnut shells, then goes on to show how this strength is achieved in Nature, and how the technique can be adapted for engineering use. I am sure that the ideas presented in the paper arose as a result of his reflecting on the effort required for his Sunday duties with the nutcracker.

The Sound of Sunday

I can't neglect to mention the *sound* that Sundays had (and Saturdays too, I think). Spring, summer and fall, the lazy, eternal, quiet of the weekend was made present to us by the sound of the guns from the gun club that practiced somewhere in the misty hills beyond Kensico Ave.

> "Somebody is shooting at something in our town —
> A dull pom, pom in the Sunday street."
>
> — Plath, Sylvia, "The Swarm"

You could hear the popping of the guns when you stood at the far end of Wall Ave., near the grassy area that led, over a stone wall, to MacShane's. I remember once crossing Kensico Ave., on the other side of MacShane's, then climbing up through the woods, the blackberry bushes, then onto an upward sloping dirt road. There were open fields, stone walls, perhaps a rundown house. Once or twice I think I, or one of the kids, found a spent shotgun shell up there, but we never found out where the gun club was, never saw anyone firing a gun. And yet the peaceful sound of the guns was present throughout all the Sundays of my childhood.

Baby Sitters

My most frequent baby sitter was Florence Centi. Even though she was a teenager, we got on well. She was fond of me, humored me, called me "Peetsie Boy"[1]. She liked to agree with things I said. We talked about popular music, which I hated, even as a little kid. She always smelled of peppermint from her chewing gum. I liked the way she chewed gum. She chewed it in an interesting way, creatively, sometimes with a forward movement of her upper teeth over the lower. She knew how to make it snap in the back of her mouth, which to me was one of the things, like running with ankles going from side to side, that made girls different but appealing. She had gold in her teeth, I could see it when she laughed. At that age I thought it was an advantage, since it enhanced your smile. She had a strong New York accent. She would say, "It's in my pocka book", instead of "pocket book".

1. The reason for this name will be revealed in a later edition of this book.

She unbuttoned her sweater with only one hand, her hand walking quickly up the row of buttons. I always used two hands, and couldn't understand how she could do it her way (and never bothered to try to figure out why, much less ask her). I assumed that she did it her way because she was American, I — we in our family — did it our way because we were Swiss.

She taught me a song which I think was then popular on the radio, the lyrics of which were sung in an Italian accent:

"Whadya do-a John?
I poosh-edy poosh-edy truck..."

A few times, in the kitchen I tried to see up her dress. Our relationship was that free that I could allow myself to do such a thing. I had no idea what was up there. I crawled around the kitchen floor as she backed away and pressed her dress to her legs and told me to stop. But she wasn't really angry at me, just a little shocked.

I was fascinated by her lipstick. What did it feel like to have it on your lips? Was it like Chap-Stick? How come women were able to make it go on so perfectly, without smudges, conforming precisely to the outline of their lips? I noticed that after they had applied it, they would press their lips together, which, I assumed, was to make it go into the lips, so it wouldn't wear off so soon. What did it taste like? Candy? Peppermint gum?

I envied women all this extra stuff: chewing gum, lipstick, peppermint flavor, long hair, jewelry.

She always commented on my long eyelashes. "Oh, any girl would give anything to have them." She was the first of many women to say this, and it didn't do anything for my masculine self-confidence.

Florence was from Kensico, the Italian section of town, which was populated with descendants of the laborers who had built Kensico Dam. Kensico was down in the valley, not far from the Bronx River Parkway, along which ran the Bronx River. We lived on top of one side of the valley. Kensico was below us socially as well as physically, because it was populated by "the Italians" as my mother always called them, sometimes with mild contempt. Many worked in Kensico Cemetery, across the Parkway. The attitude in our house was that that was their proper domain, since, as everyone knew, Italians were good laborers and gardeners. For many years we had one take care of our lawn. His name was Jim Montesano. He had a big mole on the side of his nose, always wore dark blue denim work clothes, big shoes, neatly laced, with soft souls, and spoke with an Italian accent — "Gotta picka da crabgrass. Izza no good. Too mucha. No gooda let it grow. Gotta picka." You could see his gold tooth when he talked. He smelled of sweat, but to me it was a good smell, mixed with the delicious smell of cut grass and lawnmower oil. My mother regarded him fondly because he obeyed her and was conscious of his inferior position relative to her. He worked in the Cemetery during the week and did our yard on weekends or in the evenings after his Cemetery work.

The appeal of lawnmowers to me began with watching him cut our grass. Here again it wasn't the lawnmower as a machine that attracted me, it was his pushing it, walking along behind it in his neat workman's shoes, the oily wooden roller, the way the wet grass stuck to the machine, the smell of oil on the crusted metal surfaces, the shining, silver edges of the mower blades, the way the grass flew out behind the mower, and the neat geometric line of the cut vs. uncut grass. The official, razor smell of fresh-cut grass — all is as it should be. All was one. At some early age I

was given a toy mower. The blades were green, the wheels yellow. The handle had a red knob on the end, not the usual pair of handles. I knew it didn't actually cut the grass because it was a toy, but that seemed unimportant as long as the curved blades went around when you pushed.

Sometimes, when Jim or my father had left the real lawnmower unattended, I would I try to push it, my hands up over my head on the handles, feet slipping and sliding on the grass. I couldn't budge it. If my father saw my struggles, he would sometimes try to lessen them by putting a little oil in the holes on each side of the blade. Each hole was covered by a little cap held down by a spring. You had to lift the cap and then stick the narrow end of the oiling can spout inside and press the bottom a few times with your thumb. That made a funny tin can sound. "It goes better", my father would say.

I sometimes asked why we didn't get a power motor. The answer was that my father didn't want one — something about the noise and exhaust fumes. But the real reason was that my father believed that whatever could be done by manual labor, should be done by manual labor. Thus it was much better to make a gun out of wood than to buy one at the store. To me this was yet another example of the hard truth that was was *good* was always what you didn't want to do.

My parents and I engaged in an endless debate over whether it was better to rake up the grass cuttings afterward. Since I was stuck with the job, and hated it, I argued that it was better to leave them so they would fertilize the lawn. But usually my mother or my father argued that if left on the lawn, they would choke it. Later, we got a bag that could be attached to the rear of the mower, and which would catch the grass as it flew out from under the blades, thus saving you (me) all that raking. Actually, it was a piece of flat sheet metal that was attached to two little protrusions at the rear of the mower. Canvas sides were held up by a hook that you put over the handle of the lawn mower. Then, whenever I had to mow the lawn, the question merely was, "Should I use the bag?" Of course, now there was the nuisance of having to stop every once in a while to empty the bag over the white fence — usually on top of the pile of old leaves that never seemed to decay — but it certainly beat raking all that grass.

Over the years, when I have owned houses, and have had to cut the lawn, the same question has arisen in my mind. Usually I have decided in favor of the fertilizer. But to this day I don't know what the current expert opinion is on the subject, and on what if any scientific studies it is based on.

Another baby sitter I had was Carol Rolfes, who lived on Wall Ave. I was never sure if there was an "s" on the end of her name, so sometimes I pronounced it one way, sometimes the other, and sometimes with the "s" so silent that it would have to be right either way. She was more serious than Florence, and fatter. We sometimes argued over crooners. Even at the age of seven or eight, I hated them, as I hated most popular music. She loved them. We argued at home or as we walked down Elm St. hill.

The Burden of Being Swiss

The Swiss are a lot like the Jews, except they have no sense of humor. Other than that, I imagine that growing up in a Swiss family in the thirties and forties wasn't much different from growing up in a Jewish family then or later. Throughout my life, most of my Jewish friends have thought I was only kidding when I told them I was not Jewish. (That's funny, you don't look not Jewish.)

My mother always seemed compelled to remind me that I was Swiss, even though I had been born in America. An early present — if we can call something which we didn't want and can't

refuse, a "present" — was a black Swiss cap, like a beanie, with silver and gold embroidering on a cloth that was like black velvet, and, in spite of myself, I liked the way the thread looked against that background. Somewhere in an album is a photograph of me, looking rather shy and uncomfortable, wearing this cap and holding a Swiss flag, another reminder of the old country which was periodically pressed before my awareness with a stern admonition never to forget where my ancestors came from. I always had to remind myself — and the kids in the neighborhood — that no, the Swiss flag was *not* the same as the American Red Cross flag, it was in fact just the opposite: white cross on red background. The kids also needed to be reminded again and again that no, Switzerland was not Sweden.

My mother would talk about her life as a girl living in the apartment at 8 Fellenbergstrasse, in Berne, where she grew up, and how her mother would hit the ceiling with a broom handle when the people upstairs made noise. This must have referred to a time when they lived in another apartment, because when we went to visit them in 1950, their apartment was on the top floor. My mother would tell how she played piano, her brothers played violin, and they would have little concerts.

She said her family had taken in a starving German girl in World War I, who then worked as a maid for them. She said this in a way clearly intended to make me understand that, despite what Americans are taught in school, the Germans weren't all bad, that the Swiss helped their German-speaking kind. Oh, yes. (This was apparently a common practice among the German-speaking Swiss, who, while remaining officially neutral, sympathized with the Germans because they were of the same culture.) Although my mother naturally wanted us to be impressed by the extraordinary generosity of her parents, what I sensed, though I couldn't have put it into words at the time, was how she liked the idea of having someone come into the family's control who was not in a position to be anything but deeply, humbly, thankful. In talking about Switzerland, my mother always told us that Switzerland had no resources. That's why they became watchmakers and chocolate makers. (My mother was in charge of propaganda at our house. But she never mentioned their also being Europe's bankers.)

I also heard endlessly the story of Wilhelm Tell, how the tyrant Gessler hung his hat in the market square and required people to salute it, how William Tell refused, how he was then sentenced to shoot the apple from his son's head.

Whenver I acted American — talked about movie stars or baseball stars, or about how much I loved chewing gum, or when I used slang words — my mother would half close her eyes and put on her artificial smile which in this case said, "We mothers understand when a boy inadvertently hurts his mother by wanting to do things the Common People do. But we try to understand it, and tolerate it, until he is old enough to understand how much he has hurt his parents, who come from a much better country." I wondered why, if Switzerland was so great, my parents had come to the U.S. in the first place. I explained it to myself as another instance of The Code (explained below under "Not Normal!" on page 74): never do what you like, always do what is more painful.

My Parents' Friends

For all my parents' rigid Swiss conservatism, they had a fringe of eccentrics among their friends. One of them was Eddy Beckert. He had been a sugar salesman in New York City (I don't know how my father met him) but in his forties had developed first chronic fatigue, then various illnesses. He came upon a book by Herbert M. Shelton (possibly *Health for the Millions*, but I am not sure) who believed that the secret of good health lay in eating "fruits, nuts, and green, leafy

vegetables". He started following Shelton's diet, began to feel better, and decided that he should change his way of life completely. So he bought a farm in the Catskills and became a farmer. Soon after he married a woman named Elise.

We kids were allowed to call him "Eddy" or "Uncle Eddy". With his country moustache and deep voice, he looked and sounded like the actor Keenan Wynn. In the summer, we would go up to visit him. I remember that it was always unbearably hot and reeking of straw and cow manure. I tried as hard as I could to like being allowed to visit a farm — I felt I owed it to Uncle Eddy because he was such a nice guy. He would let me drive the tractor sometimes along the side of one of the hills, both of us leaning to one side as I tried to keep it going in the right direction. He always brought fruit juice with him and every once in a while we would stop and have some in the blazing heat. My parents often pointed out to me how extraordinarily healthy he was, how he was able to do a full day's manual labor even though he was already in his fifties.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't like visiting the farm. My normal depression reached new depths. I had never known loneliness and alienation such as I felt there. For one thing, I was afraid of cows. For another, I hated the stink of the barn and the barnyard. Everything was too strong, too rich: the smells, the animals, the heat, the thick, unpasteurized milk (Shelton told his followers not to pasteurize milk because it destroyed nutrients or some such). I usually had a headache the entire time of our visit. The rickety farmhouse had soft wallpapered walls. Outside was dirt. No trees.

Across the pasture behind the farmhouse was a river where my brother and I would sometimes go to get near something that we felt more comfortable around, namely, water. Sometimes we visited in the fall, when instead of it being too hot, it was too cold, and instead of being too rich, it was barren. I remember going down to the river in the afternoon as the sun was setting, walking among the tall, dead, brown grass next to the bare black trees, watching the black river. Black and red, the color of the end of the world.

A few years after he started farming, Eddy bought a John Deere tractor franchise in the nearby town. Eventually he was so successful that he began to be considered a force in the community.

Right about the time they had their first child, a boy, Elise lost her hand in a corn grinding machine. I remember when we went to visit them the following year seeing the naked, obscene stump, which she didn't attempt to cover. It was perfectly smooth, and she used it as best she could in her household tasks.

I think I wrote to him once, many years later, and got a cordial reply from this man who was then growing old but still stuck to his faith in Shelton's teachings.

Then there were Otto and Carlotta Kuntze. (The name was pronounced "*Koont*say".) Again, I have no idea how my father met them. The Kunzes, as we usually referred to them, were puppeteers who lived and worked in New York City, and who visited us each Christmas. Otto was a stocky, opinionated German with a gruff voice. His wife was tall, slim, soft-spoken, gracious. I think she was South American, but clearly from the aristocracy. In memory, she always seems to be wearing a long, brown, dress. We had two treats in store for us when they came to visit: Carlotta would cook chile con carne, which I loved. I asked her why it was called that and she explained that it meant chili with meat. They would also bring their wooden merry-go-round which was driven by candlepower. They would set it up in the living room, carefully assembling it, with its ancient wooden figures, and carved canvas arches, then place the candles inside and light them. The rising hot air would push against the blades of a horizontal windmill at the top, and cause the whole thing to turn. We always oohed and ahhed at how it silently it went around.

The Kuntzes also brought a few of their puppets, and would work them for us, having them move and of course supplying the voices. There was something old-worldly, old-fashioned about the puppets. You had to try a little to see them as lifelike. The Kunzes put on performances for various companies, including banks, I assume to liven up meetings. They also made movies. But they were never as famous as Bill Baird, a puppeteer whose name was known to some of our neighbors and some of the kids. He was famous; the Kunzes weren't.

I think it was Mr. Kunze who first told me about the idea of stop-motion, which at the time was beginning to be used to create animated films. I think George Pal was a leader in this innovation. Mr. Kunze explained that the arms and legs of a wooden or plastic figure were placed in a fixed position (if he explained how this was done with marionettes, I no longer remember it) and a picture taken. Then the arms and legs and position of the body were moved slightly to a new fixed position, and another picture taken, etc. When all these pictures were projected on a screen at an appropriate speed, the figures were seen to move.

A frequently told story about Mr. Kuntze was that, when he was a young man in Germany, he had been a trumpet player. One day he decided to practice outside and went to a woods in order not to bother other people, or be bothered. After a while, some men appeared and forced him to go with them. It turned out that he had unfortunately chosen a woods that bordered an insane asylum. He was assumed to be an escaped inmate.

The old man became more and more cantankerous with age. When something came up in conversation that he didn't agree with, he would wave his hand dismissively and say, "Ach, das ist *hoom*boog." [1]I think my mother said he was starting to lose his hearing. He argued with his wife in our presence. Eventually, in old age, they got divorced, or so I seem to recall my mother telling me.

Another friend, or at least acquaintance of my father, though I don't remember him coming to our house, decided in middle age that the most important thing people could do was plant trees. So he wrote and self-published a book on the subject and spent the remainder of his life promoting his belief.

Another visitor, not particularly eccentric, was Mr. Schwab, who was Swiss. He was a bald, shy, slim, man in his late thirties I suppose, who always seemed to be appreciative at being invited to our house, and showed it by being nice to us boys. I think he was an accountant, a fact that would be stated in a certain way by my mother in a manner that said, "There is nothing wrong with being an accountant, though, of course, it is a kind of genteel failure, since it is not being an engineer."

Then there were the Müllheims, a couple about whom all I remember is that Mr. Müllheim had black hair. We went to their house for dinner. During the course of the meal, something happened: a storm entered the air. My parents and I left, but all the way back home, my mother's agitation was all too obvious. The Müllheims had apparently done something unforgiveable. Had they suggested that Democrats weren't all bad? Or that Scarsdale was a nicer town than Valhalla? I have no idea. I can only remember my mother's scowl for days afterward. I am sure I asked her what had happened, and I am sure I received no explanation. My father, as always, kept his feelings to himself.

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1. "Oh, that is humbug!"

But without question the two friends of my parents which my brother and I liked the most were Gus and Claire Schwager — to us, always Uncle Gus and Aunt Claire. They came to visit us once or twice a year, and they were special. Uncle Gus wasn't really an uncle, simply a friend of my father's since they had been students together at the Zürich Polytechnikum, which was probably why my parents chose him to be my godfather.

Uncle Gus was an electrical engineer and in fact owned a power company in Portland, Oregon. I had no idea what kind of a power company it was, much less how a man could own one: I assumed only governments owned power companies. He had a Swiss accent, and to this day I can hear his deep voice say my name: "Peetder", with the pronunciation that all my parents' Swiss friends, and for that matter, my parents themselves, gave my name. But it was special when he said it. Claire, his wife, had a slight Irish accent. My mother used to say, with that slight shake of her head and pursing of lips that conveyed to us that we don't talk about such things because they show what exclusive people we are to have such friends and we don't want the neighbors to know, that Claire was of Irish nobility and furthermore was a psychiatrist. Woman psychiatrists were very rare in those days, but my mother made clear that Claire gave up her practice after she married Gus (a proper woman doesn't maintain a career when she has a husband). They had no children, I don't know why, since I can't imagine a better father than Gus. Photos of me during those years show a boy whom women tend to describe as "sensitive" — serious-looking even when dressed up as a pirate, or riding in a sailboat at Cape Cod. But there is one photo of my brother and me sitting on the arms of a lawn chair on either side of Uncle Gus, and our delight is all too evident. No one can miss the contrast between the other pictures, and the pixie-ish smile I have in that one. When Gus and Claire came to visit, everything was special, we were happy, we couldn't wait till he arrived. He was that rarest of adults, one that you could laugh and joke with, and, most important, although I'm sure we couldn't have put it into words, he treated us like men. That was what made us feel so good. He always made us feel as though he was taking us into his confidence, that we men had an understanding. We loved him for it.

We also loved how sophisticated the two of them were. They drank *cocktails*, sometimes called "highballs". I don't know how I knew this, because at our house I doubt if they were served anything but a glass of Christian Brothers sherry (although that was still called a cocktail). I seem to remember that Claire smoked cigarettes — long, special, cigarettes, the kind that only people who knew about the world could buy — people who knew how to smoke properly, with the tap tap of ashes into the ashtrays without even thinking about it, while they were talking, whereas we, or at least I, would have been unable to talk at all if I had had a cigarette; it would have taken all my concentration to work it properly, to smell the delicious smoke and hold it between my index and middle finger and pretend not to think about it.

The peak event of a visit from Gus and Claire was "The Spoon Trick". It went as follows: first of all, my brother and I had to be in bed. My brother on the other side of the room. My mother turned out all the lights except for the nightlight in the wall socket. Gus then entered the room holding an ordinary milk bottle and a teaspoon. He put the bottle on the carpet near the foot of my bed, and dropped the spoon inside. Then he backed up several steps, crouched down, raised his hands, asked if we were ready, teased us with a warning that he might not be able to summon the magic power this time, then stared intently at the spoon, held up his hands, fingers spread, in the manner of all magicians about to work magic, and began slow back and forth movements of his hands to radiate the power into the spoon. We held our breaths, eyes fixed on the spoon in the bottle, which was illuminated with the orange light of the nightlight.

Nothing happened. The power wasn't working. He paused, said he'd have to try again. His hands poured more energy into the bottle. Suddenly, the spoon moved: just a jiggle, but it definitely moved. Then it was still. Then it moved again. Now, slowly, with a kind of jerking movement, as though this were all new for it, it began to rise, to struggle, upwards in the bottle, clinking against the side. Up, up, Oh God, the power was just able to keep it moving, until the handle end of the spoon was just emerging from the top of the bottle. Then the spoon sank down again, and stood where it had before.

I suppose he performed this trick for us four or five times, over a span of a couple of years or so. I don't know. But I know that my brother and I racked our brains trying to figure out how he did it. We didn't want to let him get away with having such power, we weren't about to allow him to get the better of us by getting us to believe that he really had such power. Each time, we put new requirements on him. "OK, this time stand up!" "OK" — and we really thought we would have him this time — "don't move your hands!" But still the spoon rose in its jerky way to the mouth of the bottle. "Stand far away!" He moved all the way back to the wall of the bedroom, and still the spoon rose.

Eventually, under our relentless pleading, perhaps taking pity on us, one year he told us how he did it. His face changed, a kind of compassion seemed to come into it. He was the Wizard of Oz stepping out from behind the screen, almost ashamed that such a simple ruse could have had such an effect on two young boys. He explained that the trick was simply to use a piece of black thread with a small wad of chewing gum on the end to hold the thread to the top of the spoon. The other end of the thread he held between his teeth, which was why he could still make the trick work even with his hands behind his back. As I write this now, I find it hard to believe that the gum would have held that well. Perhaps he glued the string to the metal, but what glue in those days would remain fastened to metal? In any case, the Spoon Trick was one of the many reasons why we loved Uncle Gus.

Tonsils

When I was five, there suddenly began to be talk of my "tonsils": something was wrong with them. They were apparently located in the back of my throat. I think Dr. Hecht, who had an office near White Plains Hospital, was brought into the case. Perhaps Dr. Gardner, our regular doctor in Valhalla, had recommended him. (Dr. Gardner with his glasses and carefully brushed-back dark hair, his trim moustache, his black bag and serious, efficient manner — my mother told us later that Dr. Gardner had made a lot of money on the stock market, but that during World War II he accepted payment in vegetables from the Italians in Kensico. I wondered about this, because no one had difficulty finding a job in those days, even the women, like Florence, earning good money working in the defense factories.

Dr. Gardner made my mother uncomfortable by remarking that the third nipple I had on my chest, below the one on my right-hand side (I am not sure that he actually called it a "nipple" — he probably sensed that in a Swiss family, the men do not have nipples) was proof that I was descended from the apes.

Whenever I had to go for an appointment at Dr. Gardner's office in the front of his house just off Railroad Ave., my one overriding fear was that he might decide I needed an injection. And sometimes my fears were justified, and I saw his impatience as I whined and screamed and tried to get away. I think I first heard the word "autoclave" from him. He explained that his shiny instruments were put into the boiling water to sterilize them. I wondered how the medical profes-

sion ever came up with such a strange word for boiling in water to kill germs. What did it have to do with cars? What did "clave" mean? (To this day, I have not looked up the etymology.)) In any case, a decision was made: the tonsils would have to come out. I would have to have an *operation*, and that meant I would have to go to the hospital. I think it was decided that my adenoids would be spared (I had no idea what adenoids were, except that they seemed to located higher up in the back of my throat, or my nose).

The operation would be performed in White Plains Hospital, a big, white, building in the Moderne style on — Ave. I don't recall being particularly frightened and I think that one reason was that my mother and the doctors kept telling me that after it was all over, I would get an ice cream. I remember having my own room, my mother of course hovering over me, holding my hand, clearly worried about what was happening to her son. I remember nurses, a doctor going in and out of the room. The hour approached. People talked more rapidly, there was lots of "It won't hurt"s, "You won't feel a thing"s, I'm sure. Then men in long hospital gowns lifted me onto a bed that rolled. I had to remain lying down as they pushed me down a long corridor. (I don't remember if surgeons at that time wore green or white. In memory, they wore green, but that may be due to the influence of more recent TV shows and movies.) Since I wasn't in any pain, I thought it was all kind of neat.

They wheeled me into a large room. Lights with parabolic-shaped silver shades were hanging from the ceiling. Men in face masks were looking down at me. Friendly voices. The strange, hospitally smell in the air stronger now.

A few more words, and then one of the friendly masked voices above me said, "Now we're just going to put this here..." and something black was lowered over my face. It smelled of rubber, smelled like electricity, but also had the hospital smell. The voice said, "Now count backwards from a hundred, can you do that?" Thinking back on it now, it seems unlikely that at age five I had the skill to count backward from 100, so I think he must have helped me. "100, 99, 98" I think he waited after each number to give me a chance to think of the next number — to kind of bring me into it like a game. And as the counting proceeded, I saw in the blackness a quick angular man with red sparks at the end of the pointy back of his head, and at his hands and feet. He looked like something out of Walt Disney. He was throwing fiery balls or darts of some kind or lightning bolts at fiery tenpins at the other end of what must have been a bowling alley. When the missiles, whatever they were, hit the pins there was a roar and sparks would shoot up, all this taking place in the solid black darkness that was like the inside of a steel mill. As he threw his lightning bolts, he kept repeating, "See me...*shoot*? See me...*shoot*?"

It was all so strange that I hardly had time to be afraid. I remember saying "97", then the next thing I knew, I was back in my hospital room with a sore throat, and my mother was telling me that soon they would be bringing me the ice cream. It was delicious, cold, vanilla, ice cream and even though it made my throat hurt even more when it hit the back of my throat, it made it all worth while.Years later, when I was taking music lessons at Mr. Salvo's, whose house was only a few blocks from the Hospital, he told me that a girl at the Hospital had died while having her appendix removed, the surgeon having made a mistake of some sort. I thought, so it was by sheer luck that I had survived having my tonsils out!

"How Do You Feel on a Day-to-Day Basis?"

I have always felt that anyone who writes an autobiography should include an internal weather report that answers the question, "How do you feel on a day-to-day basis?" In my case, a

number of metaphors come to mind, but the most accurate is probably this one: I feel as though I had been born with an incurable case of the flu — endless headaches, fever, chills, runny nose, cough — that is not quite severe enough to kill me but is severe enough that I always wish that each day were my last. Apart from occasional moments of pleasure, usually connected with listening to classical music or talking to someone who is interested in books and this kind of music, or, in old age, looking at beautiful houses, this is how I have felt all my life, including from earliest childhood. It is as though each day I wake up knowing I have been sentenced to die the next day, but that a committee is meeting that day to decide if the sentence should be carried out. Sometimes their decision is yes but they change their minds in the very last minute only to renew their deliberations the next day. Since earliest childhood it was completely clear to me that I had no inherent right to be alive, that the only way to *gain* that right was by feeling as bad as possible and accomplishing great things. (Not one or the other but both.) On dark, gray, cold fall and winter days, I would walk up Elm Street and look at the bare, black, tree branches sticking up into the sky and try to figure out what could possibly be the reason for so much gloom. It was a gloom that reached into the very core of things: stones, trees, earth, water, houses. It was the real nature of the world, I might have said, had someone asked me. Everything was futile, boring, and my job was to endure it and, if possible, make it worse.

Or, to use a different metaphor: Throughout my life I have felt as though each day all but the absolute minimum amount of air is supplied to me. Sometimes even that is cut off, and when I know that I am suffocating and won't live another minute, then they let in a little more air, and I can keep going for another minute, another hour. But I know that they will cut off the air supply again, probably just when I start to believe that they won't. (I know why Sylvia Plath entitled her book *The Bell Jar*. A bell jar is a glass enclosure from which the air can be removed.)

As a child, I felt that there was only one way to save myself from this dreadful day-in-day-out feeling, and that would be to live either as a humble Swiss woodcarver or as a hermit inside a stone cave that I had chiseled out of granite. If I were a woodcarver, I would sit outside my cabin in the mountains (the Swiss Alps), carving figurines of old women bent under their load of firewood, like the one we had on the mantelpiece. My mother would be inside the cabin, scrubbing, and I would be happy to have nothing to do but my carving. I would use no special tools but instead perform miracles with an ordinary pocket knife. I would be Simple.

Or, if I lived in the cave, I would have no possessions except for a few blankets, a wooden table with a candlestick, some matches, a few clothes, a can for water, and nothing else. The cave would have a single, thick glass window, somehow set in a groove in the rock so it would be airtight. When I looked out the doorway, all I would see would be blue sky. I would have chipped out my room with the simplest possible chisel, a few fragments a day. The enormous labor that went into creating it would help make the room immortal. I would live on rich, homebaked bread and spring water and do nothing all day but realize the infinite importance of the fact that rock and sky *exist*.

"Here we may perhaps remark that the regularity of a habit is generally in proportion to its absurdity. The sensational things, we do as a rule only by fits and starts. But the senseless life, in which the maniac deprives himself of all pleasure and inflicts the greatest discomforts upon himself, is the type that alters least. Every ten years, if we had the curiosity to inquire, we should find the poor wretch still asleep at the hours when he might be living his life, going out at the hours when there is nothing to do but let oneself be murdered in the streets, sipping iced drinks when he is hot, still trying desperately to cure a cold. A slight impulse of energy, for a single day, would be

sufficient to change these habits for good and all. But the fact is that this sort of life is almost always the appanage of a person devoid of energy." — Proust, Marcel, *The Captive*, vol. 5 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1956, pp. 49-50.

The cave would be on top of a hill or peak. When I see in a TV nature show granite peaks, e.g., in Alaska, as filmed from a helicopter, I immediately start wondering how many millions of dollars it would cost to build a place there where I could live. Workmen could be flown in by helicopter and suspended in front of the rock cliff while they worked. Inside everything would be smooth, with a fireplace, and thick windows, and TV, while on all sides, for hundreds of miles, there wouldn't be a single human being. The place would be inaccessible except by helicopter or by a rope ladder I would drop down the side of the peak. Only the most skilled mountain climbers could get to the lower end of the ladder. Being able to afford to make a place like that is for me reason enough to work night and day to become a millionaire.

Not Normal!

My mother told me that, before I went to kindergarten, I had the habit of standing in the gutter in front of our house, head cocked to one side, saying "Hello" to every passerby. If they didn't respond, I would keep repeating it until they did.

I often had an impulse to look at and think about things that clearly needed no thinking about. For example, what could be more obvious than the surface of streets? In our neighborhood, the streets were all concrete, with shallow gutters on either side and tar between the sections of concrete. In the summer the tar got soft and would stick to your shoes if you walked on it in the heat of the day. Sometimes you could see bubbles in it. The concrete wasn't absolutely smooth but instead had horizontal streaks, as though put there by a broom when the concrete was wet. I assumed at an early age that this was done to give tires traction. But why did they put tar between the cracks in the cement? Why not have a single piece of concrete the whole length of the street? When I looked at the streaks in the concrete, I wondered what it would be like to be small enough to live down inside one of those little valleys. Maybe it would be like living in a pueblo. Then you could make war on the people in the next little valley. But you could also have caves in the concrete, drill further in, maybe go all the way down to the dirt below.

From the very earliest age, I felt that everything was alive[1] — stones, grass, trees, furniture, toys, houses — all were alive and lonely and mute. But if you were nice to something, say, an abandoned barn, it would feel happy briefly. I screamed whenever my mother went to kill a fly. She remarked on this with amusement in later years. But it was completely clear to me how the fly must have felt, how hard it must be trying to understand how there could be these patches of air which you somehow couldn't fly through (namely, windows). How desperate it must feel to get back to its own kind, how terrified it must feel when it suddenly realized that someone with a great big fly swatter was trying to smash it flat.

By the time I was eight or nine, my single worst fear, apart from losing my current Gadget, was that I wasn't normal. I suppose one source of this fear, as of most of my fears, was my mother, who would say, with a frown, regarding some kid in the neighborhood, or the son or daughter of an acquaintance, that they were "not well-adjusted" or, even worse, "not normal", or, worst of all (tapping her finger to her head) "not right". You knew then that *that* poor bastard was

1. In other words, already at an early age I was an anthropopathist.

going to have a hard time of it. Sometimes she would say, " I wonder if he is normal..." That too meant the poor guy had no future.

I had no doubt that normal was the most desirable thing of all to be, because it meant not only that you would be accepted at home but far more important that you would be accepted by the other kids. Later on, when I was trying to become a great intellectual, and I caught myself coming up with an idea that many others had thought of, I would hate myself for being so normal.

"'My dear sir!' he exclaimed. 'I am of the opinion that life on this earth is intended, generally speaking, for original people; only they have the right to live. *Mon verre n'est pas grand, mais je bois dans mons verre*, someone once said. You see, don't you,' he added in a low voice, 'what pure French pronunciation I have? What's it to me if your head's leonine and roomy and you understand everything, know a great deal, keep up with the times, but you've got nothing at all that's uniquely your own, uniquely special, uniquely personal! You'll be just one more lumber-room of commonplaces with which to clutter up the world — and what sort of enjoyment is to be derived from that? No, at least be stupid, but stupid in your own way! At least have your own smell, some personal smell! And don't think my demands as regards this smell are formidable...God forbid! There's a bottomless pit of such kinds of original people: wherever you look you'll find one; every man alive's an original person in that sense — except that I haven't happened to be one of them!'" — Turgenev, Ivan, "The Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District", in *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1979, pp. 191, 192.

But in those early years it was different, and what I wanted the most was to be like others.

Various things were wrong with me from an early age. I was too skinny, as my mother frequently reminded me. There was one compensation for this, and that was that it made my biceps, such as they were, stand out when I made a fist. The sight of those bumps on my upper arms impressed the kids (they considered the contrast of such apparent muscles on such skinny limbs to be hilarious) and so they soon gave me the nickname of "Wheaties" (from the ads: "He eats his Wheaties! Breakfast of champions"). Speaking of biceps, I should remark in passing that it was very important to roll the sleeves of your T-shirt in just the right way, so that your arms would look as tough, as "rocky" as possible, the term being derived from Italian slang, I think, and meaning a tough guy. All the older tough kids kept cigarette packs in their T-shirt sleeves, as sailors did.

Somewhere I learned, possibly because I asked why the little toe is so small, and what an appendix is (appendicitis could happen to you at any time, we kids thought) — I learned that our little toe and our appendix were vestigial organs, which meant that they were dying away, and soon our offspring wouldn't have these organs at all.

Even though the upper part of my body was too thin, my thighs were too fat. The worst thing in the world was to have too fat thighs, because they made you look like a girl, which meant you were a fairy. I carefully rolled up the ends of my shorts in neat cuffs in the belief that if they were rolled just right, they would make my thighs seem thinner. (Baggy shorts down below your knees made you look like a fruit.)

According to my mother, my "color" was often a cause for concern. After an illness, she would say, "He has a good color". "His color has come back." But at other times she would say, "Er hat ein bleiche müseli" [He has a pale face, this in what I assume was Schweizerdeutsch, "ble-

iche" being pronounced "blighg", with a hard "g": I am not sure of the spellings here, but I remember the sound of the words very clearly].

I was too short. But I compensated for that by being a good runner — not a fast runner, but one who could outlast most of the other kids in long runs. And similarly for bike riding. Whenever endurance of pain became a criterion of success, I was unbeatable.

My ears were just borderline not sticking out too far. Whenever I put on a woolen hat in winter, my mother would make sure it came down over the *outside* of my ears, so as to press them tightly against my head and perhaps train them to be a little flatter than they were.

But I must not fail to say, in this long list of deficiencies, that my mother (and other women throughout my life), always commented favorably on my blue eyes and, as I have mentioned above, long eyelashes. I wasn't at all happy that these were the only features I had going for me, but better something than nothing.

My head was too big. It reminded Gerry Donovan of a dome, and so he used to squeeze the back of my head and call me "Domer". Sometimes he would say, "You're such a *head*!" I dreaded haircuts that would make the back part of my head more prominent and show it sticking out at the back. Looking at it in a mirror, I was shocked at how big it was. I don't remember the first time I used two mirrors in order to see my head from the back, but I do remember the horror I felt, and it was even worse later when, in my early twenties, the spreading bald spot was clearly in view. It was like looking at a scab that never heels, or at my worst-bitten fingernails.

Prior to high school, the haircut that all the kids considered the best to have, was a crew cut, also called a "brush cut". But it had to be perfect Not square so that the hair stood straight up and the barber just ran his electric razor horizontally across the ends, making you look like a fruit, (even though that is now Bart Simpson's style). It had to be rounded at the sides, so that it looked like a rounded square when looked at from the front. Then you had to brush it back, to shape it, keep those corners round. I brushed my hair again and again, looking at it in the mirror from all sides.

I liked smells I shouldn't like: the coffee smell of dirty feet, the smell of my own farts. (It would be decades before I read Montaigne and found that he said the latter was probably a common trait.) I was interested in the way my stools looked, and wondered why, sometimes, there seemed to be little pieces of walnuts in them, even when I didn't remember having eaten any walnuts.

I sometimes thought of things that made me sick, e.g., spiders in whipped cream. I imagined eating several spoonfuls of whipped cream and then looking down at the spoon and seeing long black legs moving in the white, some too short because I had bitten them off and swallowed them, then the spider's head emerging, two small glistening green eyes looking around, searching for the villain who had cut off its legs so that he could be killed with a poisoned bite delivered deep inside his stomach, after the spider had crawled into his mouth and down his throat.

I refused to vomit, despite the fact — or, probably *because* of the fact — that my mother always wanted me to whenever I felt nauseous. I hated it, fought it, tried to control it through thought alone, even though I knew that Nature was wise in trying to make me get rid of what was causing me to be sick. Not the least reason for my refusal was the thought of the bad breath that would follow. In later years, I never could understand how, in the movies, the guy never had bad

breath afterward. A few minutes after he had spilled his guts into the toilet from drinking too much, without so much as rinsing his mouth, he would be kissing his girl friend.

I fought tooth and nail against enemas, which, for some reason, my mother always had faith in as step one of the way back to health. I screamed even before I felt the dread liquid filling my insides. I had no idea what it was except that it was soap of some kind, designed to "clean me out". Having her give me an enema was the ultimate humiliation, worse than any punishment she or my father ever thought up.

When I was about ten or so, I suddenly developed an obsession about not getting enough sleep. What had always been pleasant enough and easy enough for me, now suddenly became impossibly difficult to accomplish, and after the lights had been turned out and I had lain in bed for several minutes, I would suddenly sit up and begin shouting, "I can't go to sleep! I can't sleep! *I won't be peppy enough for school! Oh, God, I won't be peppy enough!*" repeating the last phrase over and over as my mother came in and attempted to comfort me. This was the first time I can remember in which her concern seemed genuine, and in which she genuinely didn't know what to do. Over and over I screamed it, sitting up in bed, "*I won't be peppy enough, Oh God, Oh, God, I won't be peppy enough!*" Eventually, I suppose, I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

A year or so later, I began another obsession. I had noticed that, if I turned my head slowly from side to side, a slight click could be heard at the base of my skull. It wasn't in the least painful, but I could hear the sound quite clearly from the inside of my head. I tested for the phenomenon whenever I felt I could get away with turning my head from side to side without being noticed. Soon, at home, my mother would be greeted with sudden shouts, indeed screams, of, "*It's clicking! It's clicking.*" She tried to understand, she put her ear close as I caused the sound to occur, but she couldn't hear it. I then would try to see how long I could go without causing it, keeping my head almost fixed in one position. But sooner or later I would forget this rule, and suddenly, perhaps even in the course of conversation, I would notice the sound again, and grow desperate. Needless to say, I fought my mother's wanting to take me to a doctor for fear of what he would find. The phenomenon continued, I think, till my mid or late teenage years, then gradually disappeared.

Like many neurotic kids at least of that time, I was terrified of leprosy. Perhaps I had learned of it in a comic book, I don't know. But whenever I had nothing better to do, I would carefully look for white spots on my skin. If I found one, say, from a scab that had healed, I would look at it, and with the sweat breaking out on my forehead, would think to myself, "This is it. Soon there will be other spots. Soon my arms and hands will be covered with these white spots. Then a crust will grow on my skin, my skin will become like a lizard's, then my fingers will start to drop off, then my hands, and my arms. But it won't hurt! I will slowly become a multiple amputee but it won't hurt!" (I had somewhere read that the leper felt no pain as his limbs dropped away.)

By the time I was ten, I had created an explanation for why I always felt so bad, namely, that I had been selected to accomplish a great thing but only at the greatest possible cost. The great thing would probably remain unknown to me. To know it clearly would render it less great. To succeed, much less to feel proud and happy about myself, was the worst possible thing I could do

— it meant being like the Italians and the other Common People, and hence doomed not to succeed at the great thing. Ordinary success was for losers.

I came to call this whole set of beliefs *The Code*. Whatever was boring, painful, stifling in the loneliness it made you feel, was good, and in conformity with The Code. You could be sure that whatever you hated to do was what you should be doing, because that would lead to the special greatness. The Code said that it is better to choose something so difficult you can't succeed at it, something that will come close to breaking you, than to succeed at something and receive the world's applause. The only joy you are allowed is joy at the realization you have endured even greater hopelessness than you thought possible.

To try to escape The Code, for example, by committing suicide, or by deliberately getting sick and dying, or to find a reason for not following The Code, was only to prove yourself unworthy, and doomed to failure.

"[One] of the twin ideas that fuel Naipaul...[is the] conviction that the only valuable life is one that is shaped by the anguish of aspiration and that is engaged in a struggle against 'the void of nonachievement.' There is no magical way around this obstinate psychological truth, he tells us, no shortcut: 'Identity', he observes, 'depends in the end on achievement.'" — Merkin, Daphne, "Suffering, Elemental as Night,", review of Naipaul, V. S., *The Writer and the World*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 1, 2002, p. 11.

The Code gave me one thing that made up for all the misery it brought me, and that was the unquestioned belief in the power of will power. From the very beginning, I had no doubt that with enough will power (though I don't think I knew that term until years later), I could accomplish anything. *You simply do not give up*. That was the secret. Writing this now, I am inclined to give credit for this idea to my father, though I don't recall him ever lecturing me on it. But something about his personality, his way of conducting his life, convinced me that this must, and *should,* be an unquestioned rule.

I was always in a state of anxiety over *how bad I was capable of feeling*. On cold, fall days, say a Saturday or Sunday, the feeling of hopelessness and doom became almost overwhelming when I went biking up behind Route 22. There was a small farm near the road, with lots of apple trees and a cider press. In the fall, they sold cider, which I think my parents sometimes bought on our Sunday drives. But I would ride up the road that switched back from 22, past the weather-beaten wooden buildings, and smell the apples, see the farmer moving in his slow, purposeful way across the dirt drive, going who knew where, who knew why? Then I would pedal up past other small clapboard houses by the side of the road, each a home, with, perhaps, a mother placing a decoration on a shelf, or calling her kids for lunch, an American mother, who was happy, and had a clear, girl's voice.

And yet, at other times, smelling apple juice in the fall when I was running was to me sensing a trace of immortality. In summer, the smell of apples meant high adventure: trees to be climbed, sour apples to be bitten into.

If you went far enough along that road above Route 22, you eventually came to Rye Airport. The road, or at least *a* road, went above the airport buildings. There was tall grass on either side, bowed down by the cold wind. Hardly anyone was in sight. The metal of the buildings was gray with cold. The planes were lined up as though already in hibernation. Only rarely did a plane land, or did one taxi slowly to one of the empty runways. And I would look at this scene, and at the macadam of the road, and the little stones in the dirt on the side before the grass began, and try to fathom what all this bleakness and emptiness and uselessness could possibly mean. Why had I,

of all the people in the world, been given this hopelessly difficult problem to solve? Who could figure such a thing out? How could I even find out where to begin? Or find out what I had done wrong to be saddled with such a burden in the first place?

The most terrifying of all my abnormalities was the experience of "becoming two people", which I began to have even before my father died, but which became much worse in the grim years up till about age 17 or so, when I had developed ways of stopping the thoughts as soon as they started. But I remember in particular one day when I was 14 or 15, a gray fall Saturday on which I had been commanded by my mother to rake leaves in the front yard. I worked away at the task, hating every minute of it, when the thought occurred to me — intruded itself into my mind — that there is an I, John Franklin, but there is also an I who is aware of that I, so there are at least two I's. But there is also this third I who knows, for example, right now, that there are these two I's, and so now there are at least three I's. The terror on that fall afternoon arose because for a few moments I didn't know which I I really was and therefore didn't know, as I did in the past, which I to use to control the other I's, or at least which I to use to try to stop thinking about these I's altogether. I threw down the rake and ran into the house, screaming that I couldn't rake leaves any more. "*I'm becoming two people, Oh, God, I'm becoming two people!*"

Here again, my mother's helplessness did not make me angry, perhaps because she seemed genuinely at a loss, and because she spoke immediately of getting a psychiatrist, or calling Mrs. Laubner. It is no exaggeration to say that a central preoccupation of my teenage years was figuring out ways to avoid starting down the path toward madness that began with the realization that there were two, three, four, ... me's, and that it was *easy* for me to become unable to grasp which me was thinking this.

Interesting Peculiarities

And yet I must not fail to mention two things that were not terrifying. One was what the medical profession would probably call "childhood tinnitus" — a quiet hiss in my ears that I sometimes noticed when I was in a silent room. For some reason, it didn't bother me. Instead, I would spend time listening to it, calling it, to myself, "the sound of my ears", or, the "sound of my hearing". It seemed interesting that the organs that could hear sound, and could be aware of the lack of sound, themselves had their own sound, one that you hardly noticed, but that lay underneath everything you heard.

The second thing was far more interesting: it was the ability to have lucid dreams, that is, dreams in which I knew I was dreaming, and could make the dream go the way I wanted it to. This is described further in chapter 5 of this Volume, under "Dreams".

Things You Can See Through

It is hard to describe the effect that transparent objects had on me in those early years. A transparent, red marble (which we called a "puree"), any colored glass ornament for a key chain, an amber or green plastic dog, but most of all, jewelry, seemed impossible: how could you *see* inside something solid? I would start wondering what would it be like to live *inside* something transparent like that — in the warm green or blue perpetual afternoon light. To live in green air or yellow air or the ice cold clarity of a diamond, to live in a city inside a gemstone, where it was always blue, like underwater, or always red, like inside a fire in a fireplace, or like a perpetual

sunset. I asked the same question when I saw colored lights on cold, gray fall days or in winter, e.g., a blue parking light at night. People take care of you if you are a lightbulb! I would swing on the swing in the backyard, listening to the Col. Bogey march in my head, and look at this large red puree I had, see how the sun glinted off its surface, yet how red and cool it was inside, and try to figure out (with the help of the music) how such things could possibly be.

The questions remain to this day. I still stop sometimes and look in the windows of jewelry stores, still try to figure out why the sight of gems touches something in the pit of my stomach, still try to find words for what I am seeing. Frozen beauty. Frozen love.

The Long Prayer

One afternoon, lying in bed in the room near the Beairds'side of the house, I decided to say a long prayer to God. I sang a little melody as I talked to him in my mind. The melody was as near to something crazy as I could imagine: it had to be different, unlike ordinary melodies, because I wanted it to be all mine — I wanted it to show God how original I was. I remember the melody had wide intervals, even today it would be described as sounding "modern", "abstract". Without a trace of fear or anxiety, I opened my heart to God and told him that I would accomplish great things. I felt full of confidence that I could do it. I would give anything to know the exact words I spoke in my mind. The prayer went on for many minutes, and after that, for a while, I was happy.

Games and Sports

There were really three types of games and sports when I was a child: those I hated, those that were merely time-killers, and those that had a mysterious quality of *importance* which I could recognize immediately, but which I couldn't then explain, and indeed have difficulty explaining now.

Note: this section might be more boring than others in this book because I have tried to be as accurate and complete as memory allows in describing the various games and sports we played. I have done this in the belief that the details of these activities might be of interest to the future, and I do not know how well historians of our time are recording such details.

Games I Hated

I hated the sports that the other kids liked — baseball, football, basketball (the last, especially) — in other words, American sports, because they required skill, which you either had or didn't have. I liked sports and games in which will power counted, and the ability to endure prolonged pain, as in running and bike riding, and in which cleverness and being one jump ahead of the other kids counted, as in playing guns. Even though I have been ashamed all my life of my low IQ, I have always been confident of my native cunning, have always felt I could have been a successful jewel thief or safecracker.

Baseball

But sooner or later, you had to play at least baseball and football or else no one would like you. And baseball, apart from when it was played at picnics or with the girls, meant hardball[1]. I thought from the start that it was crazy to play baseball with such a hard ball. I thought that standing there while a kid with none too good an aim threw a rock-hard ball as close to you as he could,

was crazy. I still do. You could stand clear of someone who was swinging a bat, but you couldn't always dodge a ball that was thrown at you by a pitcher, or that was hit right at you when you were playing the infield. I tried to argue myself into believing that the ball *should be* that hard, and that if baseball were really as dangerous as I imagined, more kids would have been hurt, but I couldn't convince myself. For some reason that I never understood, although I seem to remember something about his having a permanent injury, the kids allowed Donovan always to get a walk: he stepped up to the plate and immediately went into an absurdly deep crouch, then began raising and lowering his upper body all the while wagging the end of his bat menacingly, as though signalling to the pitcher, "C'mon, c'mon, I'm gonna smash it down your throat." The pitchers, who were also in on the secret, made lacklustre efforts to pretend to try to throw strikes, but almost always they pitched the ball too high, which was understandable considering how far down he was crouching and considering that he was a constantly moving target. After the perfunctory four pitches, Donovan threw the bat aside and loped to first base.

I wondered why the baseball rules made things so difficult. Why not use a wider bat? Why not a paddle? My father said words to this effect once. Why not use tennis balls instead of hardballs? They were soft, and couldn't hurt you. But The Code made clear the reason why they used a hardball and then tried to hit it with a skinny bat. The Code was everywhere, and yet sometimes it seemed sort of stupid. But I liked thinking of the ball at the moment it was hit by a really good hitter, how it must be squashed almost flat at the moment of its being hit. Something that hard being *flattened...* There was something exciting about the fact that you were allowed to hit the ball as hard as you could — you could be violent! — but only with something that made hitting the ball as difficult as possible (the bat was not only narrow, it was round instead of being flat). There was a moral for childhood here: you can do anything you want provided you do it with extremely limited means.

And then there was the fundamental question as to what the goal of pitching really was: if the goal was to let the batter hit, then why throw the ball so fast, much less use curve balls, spit balls, knuckle balls? Why not throw a nice, slow, straight pitch right in front of him? Or why not just walk up to him and hand him the ball and then run quickly backward to the pitcher's mound, holler, "OK!" and let him hit it just as he would if he were hitting pop flies to the field during practice. But if the goal was *not* to let the batter hit, then why not have the catcher dart out from

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1. For historical interest, I should mention how we decided who would be on each team, or in other words how we "chose up sides". (This was long before the days of Little League.) Two kids stood at the center of the group of players. A bat was tossed, vertically, handle-end up, to one, who had to catch it with one-hand. He held the bat vertically. Then the other kid put his fingers around the bat and moved his hand down as tightly as he could on top of the other kid's hand. Then that kid did the same to the other kid's hand, and so on, up the bat, until there was no more room for a hand on the bat. I seem to remember some business about the potential loser being given the chance to try to grasp the top of the bat with his fingers, and if he could, then he became the winner, but I am not sure about this. In any case, the last kid holding the bat then got to choose the first player; the other kid could then choose any player from those remaining, and so on, back and forth, until everyone had been chosen. The worst players, of course, always got chosen last.

I should also mention that when two kids wanted the same thing — the use of a certain mitt, or the use of a certain tool in hut-building, or the privilege of going first in a game, etc. — the decision was often reached through "odds or evens". "Choose you for it!" one or both kids would say. One would then call out "Odds!", which meant that the other kid was "Evens". One of the kids would then count, "One, two, *three*!" whereupon both kids would swoop a hand down and forward, as though pitching a softball, and at the end, put forth index finger or index finger and middle finger. If the total number of extended fingers was even, then Evens won; otherwise, Odds won. Typically, the decision would go to the player who won two out of three times, or four out of five.

behind the batter, then give you a signal when to throw the ball to him? If the batter were required to stand in the batter's box, and not look around, there would be no way he could ever hit the ball. So which one was it?

I even had difficulties holding the bat right. I forget: let's see: if you are right-handed, the left hand is supposed to be below the right hand. Or is it the other way? I never could get it straight. When I got it wrong, which was not infrequently, someone would shout something about hitting cross-handed, or whatever the term was, always terminating with, "You'll break your goddamn wrists!" I hadn't the slightest idea why, and dared not ask why.

As far as hitting the ball was concerned, the rule, often repeated, was "Step and swing!" or "Step into it!". This meant, as the ball was flying toward you, moving your left foot forward and then swinging. Why moving your left foot forward improved your chances of hitting the ball, I never bothered to ask.

And then there were the mitts. Given how hard the ball was, and how fast it could be traveling when you went to catch it, why didn't everyone have a catcher's mitt? Catcher's mitts had tons of padding in the center, covering the palm of your hand. All the leather in the ordinary mitts was where it was least useful, namely, over the lower part of the thumb, and around the fingers. But you caught the ball in your palm, and there were only two pieces of leather covering that part of your hand — usually thin, worn pieces at that — with no padding in between. True, there was what was called webbing between the thumb and index finger, and theoretically you were supposed to try to catch the ball in the webbing, but only first basemen did that consistently. As far as I could see, most players caught the ball most of the time in the palm, where there was the least amount of padding. If they were skilled, they knew how to "take the steam out" of a fast-moving ball by pulling their hand back just as the ball reached the mitt. The thought occurred to me, "Why not stuff some cloth or pieces of leather behind the leather in the palm area of the mitt, so that the ball wouldn't hurt so much? Who was to know?" And I have always considered it a sign of my fundamental lack of courage and, yes, intelligence, that I never went ahead and did this. There is no doubt in my mind that it would have given me at least a little of the self-confidence — the sense of self — that I perpetually lacked in childhood and beyond.

While I am on the subject of baseball mitts, I should mention an affectation that to this day makes me think that the game is for phonies: I am referring to the little ritual of touching the ball to the inside of the mitt before throwing it. What possible reason can there be for doing this? The player fields a grounder or catches a fly, and then, more often than not, before he throws it to someone in the infield, he touches the ball to the inside of the mitt. Why? Is it so that the ball can say goodbye to the mitt before being separated from it for an indeterminate time?I also considered it an affectation the way that Joe Dimaggio ran in from the outfield at the end of a half-inning: that shuffle, both forearms level, that gave Joltin' Joe his nickname. You had to be cool like that.

I suppose I played every position once, except first base, which I never played because I was too short. But because I was so poor a player, I usually wound up in right field, which meant that, apart from standing at bat, the only time I had to worry about the ball coming near me was the rare occasion when someone hit a pop fly in my direction. My ploy was the same as CharlieBrown's in the *Peanuts* comic strip: when the ball was hit within a range that I knew required I make an attempt to catch it, I would make a *tremendous* attempt, but one that managed not to actually place me *under* the ball, so there was no chance it could actually come in contact with me. Then, with the kids screaming, in the last moment I would dive for the ball and miss it (to the groans of my teammates) and then curse myself loudly as I picked it up and threw it to the infield. Well, they couldn't say I didn't try.

I felt even worse about my incompetence when I read, in a comic book, about the major league player Pete Gray, who at the age of six had lost his right arm in an accident. He learned how to toss the ball in the air after catching it in his left-hand mitt, or how to let the ball roll up his arm when he fielded a grounder, then quickly remove the mitt and throw the ball.

Yet I liked the *idea* of baseball. I liked to look at the ads for mitts and balls and catcher's masks in comics or on the backs of Wheaties boxes. I liked the look of the hard white ball with its dark-red or black cross-stitching. I liked the kind of excitement that a baseball seemed to contain. The big mitt, the smell of the leather, the smell of linseed oil if the mitt was being properly cared for, the webbing, the fact that there was a way for a skilled player to catch the ball, in the webbing, or on the padded part of the center, so that it didn't hurt (a way for those who knew how), the way the white ball with its stitches looked when it was in the mitt in the pictures on the back of the Wheaties boxes — it was all *one thing*. I liked to watch a baseball hit high when someone was hitting flies to people in the field, the way it suddenly became a very tall *thing*. The way it went up that high even though the hitter had only swung the bat in an arc of a few feet. In comic books or other books or the backs of cereal boxes, baseball was great. As long as I didn't have to play it.

But I kept trying. I somehow acquired a book on playing the game. All I remember of it now was that it said that when fielding a grounder, you should kneel sideways to the direction of the oncoming ball, so that if you missed it, it would be stopped by your legs, and not go through as I would if you crouched with legs wide apart and mitt in front of you, in which case if you missed it, it could go right under you. I tried the recommended way several times, found it unnatural and, much worse, that it seemed the way a girl would try to field a grounder. The other kids, in their exasperation, moved me from one position to the other. For a while, I tried catching, but the idea of crouching down just low enough so that a kid swinging a wooden bat didn't smash in the side of your head with it, seemed to me crazy (and still does today). The result was that I always took up a position too far behind the batter, and didn't catch some of the pitches. I was only rarely successful in reaching second base when a runner on first tried to steal[1]. The ball always fell short, and then I had to endure a chorus of moans and curses from my teammates in the field: "Oh, come on, Franklin. Jesus. Throw the fuckin' ball. (Christ, let's get a *catcher* in there.)" Then I tried pitching. I liked the challenge of making the ball go exactly where you wanted it to, and, if I pitched the ball at a slow enough speed, I could often get it within the strike zone. But the thought of having the ball driven back at me so fast I wouldn't have time to dodge it — that it could be driven right down my throat, that it could be hit so hard it could *stick into my forehead!* — that made me throw as many bad pitches as good. It was clear to all that my main concern was not: getting the batter out, but: presenting as small a target as possible for the line drive he might hit back at me. Once or twice, really quite rarely, a batter did line one right back at me, and I was surprised at how automatically my reflexes made me duck or stand aside (but certainly not try to *catch* the ball!).

Baseball was an American sport, and therefore something that belonged to Them, not to me, or our family. But since every kid had to have a team he rooted for, I had chosen the Giants; my favorite player on the team was Johnny Mize. The only reason I can give for having chosen the Giants is that the tough kids, the all-American kids, all rooted for the Yankees, and so I had to choose another team. Our neighbors, the Beairds, listened to the games on Saturday afternoons,

1. First basemen sometimes kept the ball concealed in their mitt. The pitcher would pretend to start his windup, but as soon as the player took a lead off the bag, the first baseman would nail him.

on a portable radio on a wooden bench in their back yard. All the announcers seemed to have Southern accents and the all-male twang of men who had a good opinion of themselves (and therefore were doomed to have no value). I hated the sound of the crowds, the idiotic cheering. It was all too American, too common, too full of pleasure in the wrong things. Later in life, it also became intolerably boring. I have always thought that if I were ever taken prisoner by a foreign power, and threatened with having to listen to, or watch, baseball games eight hours a day, I would gladly tell my captors anything they wanted to know.

Football

Football was equally bad. Sometimes we played touch, but more often tackle. The only fields I can remember playing on, since the school grounds were all asphalt, were a vacant lot off Wall Avenue, and the huge open lawn at MacShane's, off Columbus Ave., just opposite the Aerators. Along the road in front of MacShane's property was an old-fashioned stone wall. In the middle of this wall was the entrance to a long, straight, dirt driveway. On both sides of the driveway was a treeless, vacant lawn of thick, mowed grass like steel wool. On the north side of this lawn was a grass field which, for reasons we never quite understood, would sometimes catch fire. We could see the smoke from our house, and when we heard the fire engines moving in that direction, we all raced down Shelley Ave. and then through the side-yard of one of the houses on — St. and then onto MacShane's enormous lawn. And there, on the other side, in front of the sheets of orange flame, would be the silent firemen, in black, with water tanks on their backs, moving slowly back and forth, watering the fire.

The MacShane house was a hundred yards or more from the road, on top of a slight hill, under several trees, with a place for turning a car around in front of the house. There was a separate garage, also under a couple of trees. The house itself was a sprawling, rundown, homey place I wished I lived in. I imagined a big family, with a regular-guy kind of mother and a father who loved to have his kids underfoot. I don't recall any MacShane kids in school. We never saw the family, who apparently didn't mind our playing football on their immense lawn. I often wondered what kind of people would live so reclusively in a house like that, and keep such a huge lawn mowed for no apparent purpose.

Most of the time, we played football without shoulder pads or other protective equipment, since such equipment was considered a luxury. I had two fears about football: one was that, in performing a diving tackle (which I always wanted to do — for a moment, you are flying through the air), my neck would be broken as I wrapped my arms around the ball carrier's legs; the other was that my finger would be broken when I held the ball for a place kick. The first fear was easy to deal with: simply don't do flying tackles; grab the guy around the waist and pull him down. The other was not easy to deal with. Since I was no good at anything else, the kids would keep trying to put me to work holding the ball for place kicks. But in the very last moment before the kicker's shoe reached the ball, I would remove my finger. The ball would start to fall over and the kicker, if he didn't stop in frustration, would typically send it skittering across the grass and out of bounds. It got to the point where routinely, before any kicker began his short run to the ball, he would shout — "It's not going to hurt!" "I won't kick you!" — but it didn't convince me. I would try to hold my finger on top of the ball till what seemed like the very last fraction of a second, but then I would pull it back. The groan would go up from the kicker as his foot sent the ball skittering, "Oh, Christ, he moved his finger! *He moved his goddamn finger*!" They usually

allowed the kicker another chance. Once in a blue moon, I was able to keep my finger in position through the entire kick. They were right: it didn't hurt at all. But the next time, I'd take it away again.

But there was one thing in football that I really wanted to do, really had fantasies about doing, and that was, to catch a long pass while running *away* from the thrower. I don't know where I picked up the idea, since there were no TV sports in those days. Probably from the sports news that was part of the News of the World that was shown in movie theaters prior to the main feature. But to run down field and then, with arms outstretched, grab it as it came *over* your head! — now that was something.

Skiing

Next to baseball and football, the sport I hated most was skiing, though I probably wouldn't have admitted it then. In fact, I was middle-aged before I realized just how miserable I was whenever I had to go skiing. My parents encouraged me to learn to ski because it was a Swiss sport. When I was around five or so, they bought me a pair of little skis with rounded tips. These, they explained, would be less likely to put an eye out if I fell forward. I skied around the yard at our house at Wall Ave. and then at Elm Street, but since the ground was too flat to coast, I soon lost interest. Later I got a longer pair of skis and used them on the trail in the woods below Wall Ave. The trouble was, they were really cross-country skis. They had only a single strap for the boot to go into. ("Boots" in those days were our name for galoshes, which was too much a Momma's boy term, that were made of rubber and had metal wire fasteners in front which you hooked into place, then locked by pressing down on a metal tab. They were ugly but they kept your feet dry.) The heel easily skidded off the ice that accumulated on the skis where your heel rested . But The Code said that if I were really any good, I would somehow learn to keep my heel on the board no matter what angle the skis were at. Eventually I gave in and used the homemade version of clamps which the kids had developed, namely, pieces of inner tube tied to each toe strap and running around the heels of our boots, with another piece attached to that piece and going over the top of the boots. This was enough to let us go off the ski jump we built out of packed snow on the hill above Bronx River Parkway, below Clinton Street.

The fact that once in a while — if the snow was right and the kids were in the mood to pile it up on the side of the hill — you could go off a ski jump, was the only thing that made skiing worth while. Because for a moment you could experience the same ecstasy in your stomach as you did when you leapt off a swing (or when an elevator started moving downward). For a moment you were *flying* — doing the one thing that you wanted to do more than anything else. You came down the hill, crouching low, aiming the ski tips as best you could for the little gouge in the piled snow, the little far-too-steep upward ramp, you heard the scrape of your skis on the snow, felt the cold air in your face and then suddenly, the scrape stopped, there was only the air rushing past your face, your skis weren't touching anything. Your stomach got the feeling of concentrated happiness it had when you left the swing at its highest point, and then, before you knew it, there was the dull slap of ski boards on snow, and the sound of them scraping over the snow again was in your ears as you put every ounce of concentration into keeping your balance.

Then, at the bottom, you pulled your boots out from the rubber clamps, picked up the skis, tried to balance them on your forearm like ungainly packages, and trudged back up the hill to do it again.

Later on, we heard there were places called "ski resorts" upstate, I think one was called Pine Mountain or Catamount. All it had was rope tows, but that was state-of-the-art in those days. You could ski all day for $4.50 or so. For the first few years, I liked the the camaraderie of skiers that you felt at this resort, and then later on at Dutch Hill and Big Bromley, in Vermont. But by the time I was in my late teens, although I still couldn't admit it, I hated skiing more than any sport I was forced to participate in.

Time Killers

Contrary to what old people and psychologists like to believe, most of children's play is simply a way of killing time. There is nothing to do, so you try to find something.

Games With Knives

I liked mumblety-peg, which I could play acceptably well. A group of us would be standing around, not knowing what to do next, and someone would reach into his pocket, take out a pocket knife, and say, "Let's play mumbley-peg!" (that's how we pronounced it; nor was it ever said as though the words were capitalized) or else one of us would just sit down and start going through the moves. Normally, you knelt on the grass and first tested if the ground was soft enough by stabbing the blade into the ground a few times. Then you began:

The first move was: knife flat in palm, blade pointing forward, toss knife up so it rotates 270 degrees towards you and lands with the blade stuck vertically in ground. Do this with each hand.

Next, make a fist, backs of clenched fingers facing up, lay the knife between fingers and palm of hand, blade sticking out over the thumb, then sweep the hand in the direction of the blade, up, around and straight down, driving the blade into the ground. Do with each hand.

Next, hold hand out horizontally, fingers extended toward the front, put handle between index and second finger, blade pointing forward, toss knife up so that it rotates 270 degrees toward you and ends up with blade stuck vertically in ground. Do with each hand.

Next, Spank the Baby: hold hand flat, palm down, position blade between index and second finger, handle extending on thumb side of hand, then spank down on handle, simultaneously letting go of blade, so that knife flips over and blade sticks vertically in ground. I think we only required this be done with one hand, the spanking hand being the right one if you were right-handed, left if you were left-handed.

Next, stand up, holding knife by blade, and throw it so that knife rotates at least once and blade sticks into ground. Do this seven times succession.

Finally, stand up, grasp right earlobe with left hand if you are right-handed, opposite if you are left-handed, put other hand, holding knife by the blade, through the loop so formed by arm and body, and flip knife downward so blade sticks in the ground.

These were the moves as best I can remember them.

Another knife game was Territory, in which you drew a square a foot on a side in the dirt and then threw a knife so that the blade stuck in the ground in the square. The direction of the blade determined a line which you drew across the square. You then claimed whichever side of the line gave you the largest amount of additional territory and erased other lines of yours so that it was clear how much territory you now had . The game proceeded until one player had no territory left. However, the person who had the lesser amount of territory also gained an increasing advantage in that what he did have was harder to get the knife to land in.

I also tried to learn to throw knives and axes the way they did in the cowboy movies and the comics, where the good guys would perform incredible feats. They could pin just the bad guy's *sleeve* to a wall without even causing him a Flesh Wound! The Indians would often Just Miss a good guy with one of their almost-expertly aimed tomahawks. Knife- and ax-throwing became an ongoing, idle preoccupation. I held the knife by the blade — not the knife that was my Gadget, but a knife I could risk breaking the blade of — and tried to make it turn over the exact number of times necessary to have it stick in the wall. This very seldom happened. Instead, the handle hit the wall, often at the exact opposite end from the blade. I had the intelligence to wonder what the effect of the much heavier handle had on the rotation, in mid-air, of knife and handle, but had no idea how to arrive at an answer. Some kids were better than me at throwing knives. Real, *balanced*, throwing knives were available through the comics. These were made of one piece of metal, with rectangular handles and blades that that swelled out before coming to a point, why I don't know.

I tried to throw the knife underhand, because in this case it seemed possible to get it to stick without the blade turning. This idea also came from the movies and comics, where a bad guy would throw a knife this way — it was sneakier, dirtier, since he could just be standing there, glaring at a good guy, then, with an almost imperceptible flick of his hand, shoot a hidden knife into the good guy's stomach.

Throwing an axe or hatchet and getting it to stick into a wall or a tree was even harder, I suppose because here the disproportion between the weight of the handle and the weight of the head was so great. How did you get it to turn over in a regular fashion like in the movies, where the Indians somehow made it always rotate just once?

Marbles

Marbles, for me, was as important as mumblety-peg, even though I could never figure out how to shoot a shooter well. The game probably doesn't need any explanation, but for those who never played it: you drew a circle several feet in diameter in the dirt. You dumped ten or twenty marbles inside the circle, toward the center, and then took turns trying to hit them by firing a marble from the circle. I can't remember now whose marbles went into the center. Maybe each put in an equal number. The skill lay in firing the marble. One way was to bend the index finger so that the shooter was pinched between end and the base of the finger, then place the second joint on the ground and shoot the marble by pressing the thumbnail against the marble and flipping it forward. Some kids used the joint of the thumb instead of the thumbnail, soon developing a callus on the joint. Another way was by placing the shooter between thumb and side of index finger then squeezing until the shooter leaped forth. The first way was more painful after a while, because of the pressure on the thumbnail, not to mention the joint of the thumb. I usually tried this way for a while, then weakend and used the second way. The best player in our neighborhood was John Del Bagno, who lived way up in the streets on the other side of Columbus Ave, near the Russian house. He used the first method and got extraordinary power out it, often blasting two or three marbles out of the circle with a single shot.

We carried our marbles in our pockets or in an old sock — in my case, one of my father's. Needless to say, the shooter was the marble you lavished most care and attention on. Del Bagno's were always pock-marked but devilishly fast in his hands. I, needless to say, always chose a transparent red shooter, considering it a kind of second Gadget and often carrying it in my pocket, regardless whether a game was in the offing.

Trading Cards

Another time-killer was playing with trading cards. These came with the card-size pieces of Topps bubble gum we bought. Most had pictures of sports stars, mostly baseball players, but earlier they had full color scenes of World War II battles. One card I remember clearly was red and yellow and blue, and showed sailors beside a sinking aircraft carrier, the sky filled with exploding shells and Japanese Zeroes. The sailors were surrounded by burning oil, they had their arms raised pleading for help that you knew would never come in time as black shark fins cut through the water around them. "The Pornography of Death" someone once titled an essay, and we were introduced to it at an early age.

Each kid might have a stack of cards several inches high. There were two popular games: in one, you held a card between fingers and thumb and then with a forward motion at about thigh level, caused it to rotate as you let it go. If it landed face up, then the other person had to do the same and make his card land face up. If he did, he took both cards. If not, you took both. The other game was tossing them at a wall. Whoever got closest, took all the cards that were tossed. (We also played this game with coins, in which case it was called "Pitching Pennies".)

Shooting at Things

We spent a lot of time shooting at things. I always liked breaking floating bottles with a slingshot. We would go to the Reservoir, find a discarded bottle, throw it a few yards out, then see if we could hit it. Sometimes we just threw rocks at it. We could pretend that big rocks were artillery shells, the bottle a helpless ship, and the exciting question was how long it could survive, and whether we could sink it without breaking it, by just getting enough water inside. When I finally got a BB gun (and, in fact, a BB pistol as well) we would use those, although they usually weren't powerful enough to break a sturdy Coke or milk bottle.

Getting permission to be allowed to have a BB gun was a major ordeal for all of us kids, and especially so for a boy in a Swiss family. The standard way to get a gun, after you got permission, was by selling seeds — perhaps Burpee's or the American Seed Co.'s, I'm not sure — because if you sold enough (and, I think, added some cash) they sent you the gun as a prize, or "premium". So we went through the dull plodding work of going door to door with the seed catalog, all the while remembering the picture in the catalog of Red Ryder holding a Winchester 73, which looked exactly like the Daisy Red Ryder Air Rifle below it.

Some of the kids — the ones who had good parents, as opposed to strict parents — were allowed to have real guns. Len Lindholm, for example, had a shotgun, which he used to hunt crows, as I have described in the section, "The Kids" (chapter 3). Pete Smith, who lived up behind Franzl's, a little German restaurant on Columbus Ave., just north of the Aerators, was allowed to have a .22, which he used to hunt for rats or muskrats along the creek below his house.

We were not the only ones who were interested in shooting things. The woodlands along Columbus Ave., beyond the Aerators, were invaded in the fall by the deerhunters from New York City. We could hear them as we went about our business. We made jokes about how, if you listened carefully, you could hear the arrows bouncing off the branches overhead. As with the weekenders who littered the fields around the Reservoir, we had nothing but contempt for these city people who invaded our woods, imagining them to be loaded down with expensive gear though they were dumb and ignorant when it came to knowing anything about the woods. One time I was making my way through the sticks and trees on the side of a hill, the other kids some distance behind me, when I heard a commotion. I went back and found out that one of the hunters had fired an arrow that had come dangerously close to hitting one of the kids. He thought the kid was

a deer. After that we made a lot of noise when we were in the woods in deer season, usually along the lines of, "Hey, you dumb fucks, don't hit us!"

The lucky kids might have shotguns, but I at least was allowed slingshots and BB guns. The best slingshots were the Whamos you could order from the comics. The story was that a Whamo firing a ball bearing could go through an ordinary dinner plate without breaking it — it would just make a hole. I don't remember if I ever had one of these superior weapons, but I do remember making many slingshots on my own. We constantly kept an eye out for tree branches with the right kind of fork. Then it was a simple matter to cut it, take it home, saw a groove in the top of each leg of the Y, wrap pieces of inner tube through and around, tie them with strong twine, then tie the other ends to a leather or chamois pouch. I would go out and, with BB gun or slingshot, shoot birds. I can't remember what I did with them when I hit them. The point was to kill them and thus prove your marksmanship.

When we went to an amusement park, I always liked the shooting galleries the most, especially those that had machine guns. The attendant had a long rod containing shells. Somehow he made the shells go into the gun. These guns, unlike the ones on the B-17s in the movies, had a large black plastic button in the back of the gun, not a trigger, which you pressed while holding the handles on either side and aiming at the enemy planes that moved past at the far end of the gallery. I was bothered by this lack of authenticity, wondering why, if they could actually make a machine gun that kids could shoot, they couldn't add the last item of realism.

Paddleball

In school, every once in a while, someone would bring out a paddleball: a paddle made out of thin plywood with a small red rubber ball attached to the center by a long rubber string. The idea was to see how many times you could hit the ball. The record for us, as I recall, was several hundred. The sound of the bat hitting the ball, over and over again, was always sure to draw a few onlookers between classes.

Playing With Fire

A good way to fight boredom was to light a fire. The smell of burning newspaper, for some reason, always made me feel there might be hope after all.

Normally we just struck a match (paper or wood) to start a fire. But we were intrigued by ways of starting firs without matches. For example, we all knew that you could get paper to burn by focusing sunlight on it using a magnifying glass. At Mohawk Day Camp, Scott McLeod told us about a more sophisticated variation of this technique: you bent the end of a wire into a little loop, put a drop of water in it, and then used that as a magnifying glass — in other words, you made fire with water! But I never saw it work.

All of us kids knew about how Indians started fires with a bow and a stick, since it was described in the Boy Scout book: you wound the string of the bow around a round stick of a foot or so in length, put one end of the stick in an indentation in a board, held the upper end with a flat, round piece of wood with an indentation in the under side, then sawed back and forth with the bow until the indentation in the board began to smoke. Supposedly the Indians could also start a fire by just twirling the stick between their palms. I never bothered even to try either of these because I assumed it required hours of steady effort.

My father considered it a mark of a man to be able to build a fire in a fireplace, and he was a master at it, as I have described elsewhere.

When we built a fire in a vacant lot, or in the woods, we usually didn't trouble ourselves about putting it out. But sometimes, just for the hell of it, or when we had built the fire somewhere we shouldn't have, and thought we heard adult footsteps approaching, we sometimes resorted to the only portable means we had for putting out a fire, namely, pissing on it. I rather liked the smell of urine steam except if it came off of logs that had been originally been wet from the rain. For some reason, that made the smell unpleasant.

Most of the time, our combustible materials were wood, leaves, or newspapers, but once in a while, in the fall, we would burn cattails which grew along the little stream in the meadow on the other side of Columbus Ave. We dipped the frankfurter-like ends in kerosene, then touched a match to them. This produced a velvety orange flame that curled around the cattail and produced thick, greasy black smoke. We walked around holding the burning cattails aloft in imitation of torch bearers in the movies.

Orange-Peel Flame Throwers

Anything to kill time, even when you were doing something else, like eating an orange[1]. Someone told me that if you doubled a piece of orange peel, then squeezed near the bend, a thin spray of juice would come out which, if you held a burning match near it, would burn. I didn't believe it at first but, sure enough, it worked. We did this casually, habitually, using either a lighted match or a cigarette lighter. The droplets of flame leapt forth like minature napalm.

There was also a rumor that you could make a match flare up by blowing a fart on it. I never put this rumor to a test. In my teens or early twenties, I learned from someone — incredibly, I think it was a girl — that if you struck a match, that would conceal the smell of a fart.

Smoking

And then there was smoking, which was irresistible to me from the start — long before I had anything that actually could be a source of smoke and that I could put in my mouth. I began with Tinker Toy sticks, some of which were just about the same size as a cigarette. The fact that, for the time being, I would have to settle for invisible smoke was no great problem, nor was the fact that the sticks had a slit in each end for inserting cardboard for windmill blades. I loved the smell of the wood after sucking on it and chewing it. I held it exactly the way adults held a real cigarette, between my index and middle fingers. I knew that you had to leave it in your mouth for a few moments while you drew the smoke in, then you removed it, and didn't blow out smoke right away, not if you were a real man. Then you let it out while talking or while pretending that you weren't thinking of smoking at all. When I watched an adult smoking, I could never understand how they could just sit there, talking, the cigarette between their fingers. Why doesn't she take a puff *now*? How can she stand not thinking of the cigarette all the time?

Later, we made pipes in my basement shop: we cut a thick branch to the right size, then with brace and bit drilled out the hole for the tobacco. Then, with a smaller bit, drilled a hole in from the side at the other end. Then we cut a smaller branch for the pipestem, and using the longest drill I could find, drilled a hole down its center, possibly from both sides if the drill wasn't long enough to go all the way through from one end. Then we shaped the one end to fit in the hole in

1. There was even a skill associated with such a lowly task. If you were feeling particularly moral, i.e., in the mood to do the Right Thing (e.g., not waste any food), then after you had scraped out of each half of the orange as much of the juicy pulp as you could with your teeth, you turned each half inside out, which brought the remaining pulp into evenly divided prominent pieces which could easily be eaten one at a time. All that was left was the rind, the inside white and clean as a whistle.

the pipe bowl, and shaped the other to resemble as closely as possible the mouthpiece of my father's pipes. We twisted the pipestem into the bowl and were all set. (One pipe I made out of hardwood didn't work very well. I still remember the difficulty, the disappointment, associated with that white wood.) For tobacco, we used dried leaves which we found in the woods. Sometimes we tried Indian tobacco, mainly because of the name. It grew in the Field and was more granular than leaves. Failing everything else, we smoked bits of newspaper.

We made cigars by rolling up a piece of newspaper so that you could draw air through it. Then we lit the end and smoked that, the smoke biting our eyes.

I remember quite clearly my first cigarette. Several of us were sitting on a blanket in the middle of the Field below — Ave. Someone had finally managed to steal some cigarettes from his parents. Maybe it was me, since my father kept a pack of Camels or Lucky Strikes in the cabinet in the living room, along with his pipes. The big moment came. We smelled the rich, wonderfully evil tobacco in the package. We pulled the cigarette out of the pack, carefully placed it between our lips. (Tapping it to pack the tobacco better was far too advanced at this point.) "Gimme a light!" The sun shone down on the wiry green afternoon grass, we kneeled there, and after several tries, the match going out each time, and uncountable puffs, I finally got the smoke inside my mouth. It was like eating a chimney. I kept trying. I got a little dizzy. Wow, so this is what you're supposed to like! Days, weeks, later, the next challenge was presented: to inhale. The first few times, I thought the kick in the back of my throat would knock me off my feet. To do this *and* pretend it didn't bother you, in fact, that you didn't even think about it — well, no wonder everyone thought that anyone who could that was a real man.

But to be OK with the kids, in particular Richard Thomas, you had to inhale properly, which meant not holding the smoke in your mouth and then breathing deeply through your nose, as girls did, but drawing it down into your lungs, holding it there for a few seconds, then slowly letting it out, preferably with some of it coming out of your nostrils.

Furthermore, it went without saying that you would also master the French inhale, which consisted of taking the smoke into your lungs, then letting it out but at the same time breathing in through your nostrils so that it would go up your nostrils and circle around back to your throat.

We smoked whatever brands we could get our hands on, typically Chesterfields, Lucky Strikes, Old Golds, Pall Malls, Philip Morris. This last company sponsored a radio program and featured a guy at the beginning with a high-pitched midget voice, "Call for Philip Morrrreeess!"

Most of the time we lit our cigarettes with paper matches. A few kids had mastered the art of cupping their hands so the flame wouldn't go out in the wind. Another trick was making a cylinder out of the match cover, then sticking the burning match up inside. You could then lower the end of the cigarette down to it and most of the time light it easily even in a strong wind. Sometimes someone had a cigarette lighter. The Zippo type made a nice metallic clank when you flipped open the top. Then you had to flick the flint wheel with your thumb several times before it would light. ("It's out of fluid!" — a common remark after many tries and still no flame.) The lighting of a cigarette and the perfume smell of the lighter fluid were part of the sensual appeal of smoking. (But in winter, I hated the stink of tobacco smoke on woolen gloves, or on the leather on the palm side of these gloves.)

Cowboys in Westerns could light a match with one hand. With a wooden match, this was relatively easy: you just held the match vertically and then flipped your thumbnail across the head. With a paper match it took considerably more dexterity. Of course this was long before the days when makers of paper matches began putting the striking surface on the *back* side of the packet,

apparently in response to reports of persons striking the match on the front side and accidentally setting all the matches on fire.

I remember a guillotine device to cut cigarettes in half. But when you put your finger in it, and pushed down on the blade holder, your finger wasn't cut.. I have no idea how this worked . Some readers may remember that in the film *Shot in the Dark* (Peter Sellers playing Inspector Couseau), Chief Inspector Dreyfus had one of these guillotine devices to cut the ends off his cigars. However it did not have the protective device that our cigarette cutters did, and so the Chief Inspector, once again driven to distraction by the antics of Clouseau, and explaining his torments to Clouseau's assistant, who listens patiently — the Chief Inspector thinks he has put the end of his cigar in the device. He bangs down on the wooden holder of the blade. There is a long pause, then the Chief Inspector says quietly to the assistant, after a brief throat clearing, "Hercule, would you please summon a doctor? I seem to have cut off my thumb."

My mother never actually caught me smoking, but when she understood that I had taken up the habit, her motherly greeting at the end of the day — holding me at arm's length and looking fondly into my eyes and asking how I was — became essentially a cigarette-smoke-detection routine. She: "I have dinner ready. (Sniff, sniff) Have you been smoking?" I: "No." She, bending forward to smell my clothes. "I think you've been smoking." I: "No I haven't." She: (Sniff, sniff) "I can smell it." Etc.

Exploring Old Buildings

I liked exploring old buildings because they reminded me of buildings in the Westerns. The smell of old wet wood had a special kind of hopelessness about it. In the corner lot behind our house, before the Mirantes built there, was a place we called The Old House. I don't know what it once had been but now it was a unique thing in our lives, a completely abandoned house, a place that no one lived in, and that no one knew who had lived in when it had been occupied. It was an object left in our midst by the past. It was padlocked but we found a way to get inside. All the wood on the inside, as on the outside, was unpainted gray. The inside had a ancient, musty smell of damp wood. Along the left side was a kind of rectangular pit which must have been a place to park a car or, who knows, maybe a horse-drawn carriage. If you somehow climbed up out of the back half of this pit, you were on the floor of a room at the back of the house. There were maybe a couple of other small rooms on that floor, and then nothing but beams and a partial ceiling overhead. All gray and silent, with a few shafts of sunlight coming through the cracks and holes in the outside sheathing. The place was so quiet, so remote from anything resembling human life, that we were at a loss what to do with this treasure that our cleverness had allowed us to enter. Why was it not used? What had been in there? Why was it abandoned? It wasn't frightening, just strange. We had nothing to grasp it with, as we would have had if a parent had told us who had once lived there, or even who now owned the land.

Tinker Toys, Erector Sets and Tattoos

On rainy days, we played with Tinker Toys, or the Lincoln Logs, the Erector set, or we made tattoos. Of Tinker Toys I remember the smell of the white wood, and endless pushing of sticks into holes in wooden wheels, and making what the instructions called a *windlass* (a word we never came across anywhere else), in which you put trapezoidal-shaped cards into the slot at the end of short sticks, then put the other end of each stick into a hole on the edge of a wheel, giving you a windmill. The tattoo images came in sheets you bought at the Five and Ten. The images were everything from anchors to boats and planes and panthers and daggers and flowers (no

naked women). You moistened the part containing the image and then carefully slid off the now-slimy picture onto a piece of paper, from which you transferred it to your wrist or to a piece of white paper. Another type could be ironed onto white undershirts.

Board Games

Regular checkers, Chinese checkers and Monopoly are the only ones I remember. Monopoly was to become an obsession years later when I went to camp, but not now For some reason, I remember in particular the little shiny cast-lead battleship token, which was the one I always chose. I was puzzled that the sides of the bow sloped outward, instead of inward. Was that the way the bows of real battleships were? There was a sliver a flake of metal left over from the casting process, — the lines were not clean.

Playing Detective

Sometimes, usually after I had read about a detective in a book (I recall one titled something like *Emil and the Detective*), we looked for clues with a magnifying glass. However, we operated exactly the reverse of the way they did in the stories. There, a crime occurred and the detectives looked for clues to solve it. In our case, we looked for clues that would reveal that a crime, or at least something worth investigating, had taken place. The challenge, we felt, was to figure out the crime once you had the clue. We sometimes found a hair, but since we didn't have a crime we were trying to solve, it was just a hair. Mostly we found pieces of lint, and dust, unless the vacuum cleaner had just gone over the carpet. Never any blood. Like just about everything else we did, it was an activity doomed to frustration and boredom.

Fishing

Fishing was a good time-killer. We indulged it in the Bronx River and the Reservoir.

Some of the tackle stores sold nightcrawlers. They came in white cardboard ice cream containers. The dealers put some sort of wet grass, maybe seaweed, and old newspaper, inside to keep the worms moist, but whatever it was, it stank. We kept the containers in the garage. Sometimes we put them in the bottom of our tackle boxes and forgot them until after the tackle box had been in the sun for several hours, and the stench of dead, decaying worms, reminded us.

Another source of nightcrawlers was the back lawn. We would spray the lawn with the hose in the evening, then wait till after nine or so, and go out with a flashlight and catch them as they were halfway out of their holes. On the bristly wet lawn, we snuck up on them, trying not to make any vibration in the ground. When we spotted their shine, we had to kneel and move fast enough to grab one end and haul them out of the hole they were desperately trying to escape into, and do it without tearing them in half. They were wet, and, to my mind, often very big, several inches of wiggling muscle and what seemed to me a kind of beard underneath, a serrated roughness which they held onto your finger with.

But I hated having to put worms on the hook. You reached into whatever you were carrying them in, got one, then stuck the hook in about the middle of their squirming body, then worked the point down their center a little ways, then allowed the point to come out. The barb kept them on the hook, and the pain made them keep up a constant wiggle, a curling, agonized attempt to push away the metal, to wrap around it so they could climb up and away from it. I couldn't stop thinking about the pain of having a piece of thin sharp steel run down the center of your backbone. And the worms couldn't cry out, all they could do was frantically twist and tie themselves in a

death embrace around the hook. *Please, please, don't do this to me and I'll love you forever.* But I had my manhood to think of.

Then a couple of lead balls on the fishing line to weight it, or a few sinkers pinched on, you dropped the line in with a plop, and the rock bass and sunnies and blue fish — the generic term I believe was *panfish* — soon came over to investigate and sample the wares, the rock bass like grumpy old men, their downturned mouths always chewing because there was nothing else to do. It was always easy to catch these fish; they measured between three and I suppose, for the rock bass, eight inches or so.

When we ran out of worms at the Reservoir, we sometimes used grasshoppers for bait, since the fields around the shore were full of them. But I was even more squeamish about putting a grasshopper on a hook than I was about worms. You had to hold the things between thumb and index finger, their legs moving frantically, then, when you put the hook into their thorax, a thin, chocolate-brown liquid would come out, until the legs were still.

Sometimes we used lures to catch fish. In my fishing box I had, along with the hooks and sinkers and swivels and leader, several of these: a Daredevil, with red and white stripes on one side, shiny silver on the other; a Hula Dancer, with a big, permanently open red mouth, and a kind of fringe (the skirt) attached to the back; this lure you were supposed to not reel in but to jerk, so that it made a kind of *plop* sound, then you let it float while the hula skirt spread and undulated in the water; and a Jitterbug, white underneath, dark green with black spots on top, and a spoon-shaped piece of metal on the front to make it wiggle through the water, which, if the speed were great enough, made a sound like a small motor (or someone swimming the accursed crawl stroke).

The only bass I ever caught I caught with the Jitterbug. One cool evening I had taken my tackle-box over to the Reservoir, to the shore at the edge of the little meadow behind the construction shed. I tied on a swivel, then hooked my Jitterbug to that and cast it out as far as I could. Did this several times. And then, after only a few seconds of turning of the handle on the reel, the plug wiggling its way toward shore through the green brown water, I saw — or at least in memory I saw — the bass take it as it leaped out of the water.

Heart thumping, I reeled it in as it fought much harder than a rock bass, got it on shore, took out the measuring scale and found it was only 11-1/2 inches long. Half an inch too short! Well, there were no wardens around, and God only knew when I would catch another one, so I brought it home. My mother agreed to cook it if I would clean it, so, with great repugnance, I managed to cut the head off and remove the guts. Like the sunfish and rock bass, it smelled like concentrated lake water. Afterward, I remember thinking what an enormous amount of work this had been for just those few bites. Surely this couldn't really compete with just going to the grocery store.

Exploring the Bushes Around Neighbors' Houses

From an early age, other people's houses had an inexplicable attraction for me. The people inside were important, what they did inside their houses was important. They knew how to do the right thing, and knew what the right things were. And yet it was impossible to know what these things were.

On a hot summer day when there was nothing else to do, and I was feeling brave, I would explore the bushes around neighbors' houses, would crouch down among the cool green shiny leaves, smell the juniper bushes, feel the coolness that was given off by the stone of foundations, smell the cool musty smell that came up from cellar windows, think about these impenetrable walls, the mysterious, private, unknown lives of the women inside.

Toy Boats

You could relieve the boredom of taking a bath by playing with boats. The two boats I remember were a plastic yellow and white one which had a chamber in the back with a hole into which you put a couple of Alka Seltzer tablets, then pressed a plug into the hole. The boat was moved forward by the gas from the tablets bubbling out of two underwater holes in the back. I think it was a present from my father.

Another one was a metal boat which came with a little flat metal pan that contained wax and a wick. You lit the wick, slid the pan under a flat metal boiler in the back of the boat. The flame heated the water inside the boiler, forcing it out through holes in the back. The flexing of the metal plate of the boiler from the heat made a sound like a motor. Another present from my father.

Of course, it didn't require that I take a bath in order to make these boats go, and often I would just operate them from outside the tub.

There were also various sailboats with plastic sails you could blow on to make the boats move, and several plastic cabin cruisers.

Button on a String, Clown on a String, Jumping Beans, "The Bather"

We all knew how to run a piece of string through the holes in a large button and tie the ends, then put a couple of short sticks as handles through each end of the resulting loop, center the button, and swing the button over and around a few times to twist the string. Then, by alternately pulling outward on the handles and relaxing the tension, the button could be made to spin in alternate directions. The toy stores sold an improvement on this idea in which, instead of a button going around, the wheel at the center generated sparks, like a Fourth of July pinwheel.

There was a toy somewhat along the same lines that I remember clearly: two thin rectangular sticks of wood perhaps eight inches long and ¾-in. wide, with a horizontal piece connecting the pieces at about mid-length, but allowing the sticks to pivot on its ends. At the upper end of the pair of sticks were several pieces of string that went through the body of a jiggling clown. You held the lower ends of the pieces in one hand, like the handles of a clamp, and when you alternately squeezed and released the two pieces, the little clown made somersaults.

Then there were Mexican jumping beans, dark brown/black, looking like lozenges. As I recall, whatever position you put them in, they bobbled there without falling over.

From the *American Boys' Handy Book* (pp. 356-357) I learned how to make what the book called, "The Bather". You tied a knot in one corner of a handkerchief, then put the knot between your index and middle fingers and wound the handkershief around the fingers so that only the finger ends were not covered. If you then walked your two fingers across the surface of a table, it looked like a comical figure. "...the knot on top will be at once recognized as the bather's head, done up in a handkerchief or towel to keep the salt water out of the hair. If among the company there be any who are familiar with the scenes at seaside summer resorts, they will be convulsed with laughter."

Boy and Girl Scout Projects

Every once in a while we would see older kids pacing the streets — I mean walking along, counting the number of paces they took — and we knew they were working on Boy Scout and Girl Scout projects.. To this day I haven't the slightest idea what they were doing, but there they were, walking along, sometimes in twos, talking and whispering to each other, with notespads and pencils.

Girls' Games

Hopscotch, Bean Bag

In the early grades of primary school, at recess, because of my indifference to the sports the other kids played, I was sometimes reduced to playing with the girls: hopscotch, and even, sometimes, jump-rope. I considered playing these games part of my mark as an outsider: that I engaged in these feminine activities was proof of my courage.. The other guys apparently thought, God knows why, that I didn't merit being called a fairy, or getting beaten up. In first and second grade I also played bean bag occasionally. The teacher often participated. The cloth bags were full of large, hard, dried, shiny black beans which had a white dot at one end. They hissed like a rattlesnake rattle. We would stand in a circle and toss the bag to each other. The game gave me ample opportunity to practice Being There While Not Being There: on the one hand I had to seem to be enjoying myself (especially since a teacher was present) and on the other I had to worry about the tough kids deciding that enough was enough, and Franklin had to be beaten up for acting like a fairy.

Bouncing a Ball

Of far more interest to me was bouncing a ball — or, to be more precise, thinking about the various ways that the kids bounced a ball. The girls did it with a cupping of the hand. They brought their hand up and over and down, holding the ball before throwing it vertically toward the pavement. It seemed to me both graceful and cheating. Others bounced a ball by merely catching it each time, raising it with a wrist motion, then throwing it back down. It seemed, to all of us, to be too crude to simply slap the ball down each time with the flat of your hand. Later, when I attemped to master dribbling a basketball, the degree of concentration required to bounce the ball properly, take steps properly, keep an eye on the other players, and plan your next move, soon made me decide it wasn't worth the trouble.

I remember in childhood that a *striped* ball, whether wooden or rubber, was an object of fascination for me, probably for no other reason than the dazzling pattern the stripes made when the ball was rolled or thrown in a way that caused it to spin.

A game that I think my parents, or one of their Swiss friends, gave me consisted of a cylindrical wooden cup with a vertical handle extending below it. One end of a two-foot string was fastened to the bottom of the inside of the cylinder, the other to a red wooden ball. The idea was to hold the cup by the handle, and then swing the ball in such a way that it would go up and land in the cup.

Jacks

Sometimes I allowed myself to play a girl's game even apart from recess. The girls would sit on the Fetzer's lawn walls, or front porch, which was cement, or in the gutter in front of their house, and chatter away as they bounced a little red ball and swept up jacks between its bounces. They seemed to do it without really thinking, without looking. Sometimes, half kidding, they would invite me to join in, which I did, briefly.

My Bravery

Despite this occasional curiosity about girls' games, I had a secret pride and confidence in my bravery, especially if that meant enduring pain over a long period of time, and in my ability to avoid injury in falls. Perhaps this pride was what allowed me to play girls' games at all. I felt

that I was meant to be a stunt man because of my "ability to roll", as we put it then. (I think we got the term from movies about paratroopers, who when they hit the ground had to roll in order not to break their legs.) I always felt confident about my ability not to hurt myself when I tripped or when I fell off my bike or fell while skiing or when jumping from a low branch on a tree.

Making Valentines

Each year we wrote our names on a slip of paper and put them into a hat (or box, or paper bag). The hat was then passed around and each student had to reach in without looking and draw out a name. The student then had to make or buy a Valentine for that person. There must have been two hats, one with girls' names and the other with boys'. But even apart from the Valentines we made for other students, we made hearts, an activity that at least some of the boys regarded as strictly for girls. We all knew the trick of folding a sheet of paper in two, then cutting half a Valentine heart out with scissors, then unfolding the paper and having an almost perfect Valentine shape, which you could draw on to decorate. Another skill that every one had to master was how to draw a Valentine heart with an arrow going through it. You had to show the little tear in the paper where the arrow went in, then draw the shaft and arrowhead below, so it would look like the arrow had really come out behind the heart and extended down.

Paper Airplanes

Among the mischievous time-killers was making and throwing paper airplanes. We usually called them "gliders". There were two types: one shaped like a long, narrow V, the other more rectangular, looking like a flying wing. God knows how many of these each boy made in the course of his primary school education. We could make one in a few seconds and often, when the time was weighing heavily, and all you had before you was a written-on piece of notebook paper, we automatically folded a glider. They were best thrown during a sufficiently large school assembly, when it would be difficult for the person in charge to tell who threw it. Or they could be thrown in the halls or down the stairwells during change of classes. Or on the school grounds after school. Or off the Dam, although the updraft was usually too strong and would send them tumbling.

Staying Cool

On hot summer days, we looked for places to be cool. These included: the ice room at Stotz's garage, where the milk was kept, and drugstores. I loved drugstores because they were almost ice cold and because they smelled of perfume and medicine (sex and safety). I could almost swoon when I walked past a drugstore on a hot day and smelled the gust of cold air that blew out of the open door. The smell wasn't so much perfume as face powder. I imagined it as the pink kind my mother had in her compact, and which was sold by middle-aged women with far too much makeup who stood behind glass counters amid lots of mirrors.

Drugstores were the site of chocolate sodas and Cokes and chewing gum (Wrigley's Double-Mint and Juicy Fruit being my favorites). Drugstores always had a cool marble counter where you could sit and for a few minutes know what real happiness was. Mr. Hilliard ran the drugstore in the Village. He was an old man who looked exactly like a druggist in a Norman Rockwell painting, with rimless glasses and all. Apart from the usual varieties of ice cream and standard sodas, his counter offered some kind of green transparent soda, possibly made with grenadine. In my mid-teens I would go into Hilliard's to read science fiction. It seemed exactly the right place

to read about a white city floating in mid-air above an enormous green lawn on the planet of a remote star at some remote time in the future.

Mr. Hilliard sold Dixie cups, and on a hot summer day, the first scrape of the flat wooden spoon down the middle of the ice cream, right between the chocolate half and the vanilla half, then the sucking it onto your tongue, made life almost worth living. After a while, the spoon became wet with spit, and acquired a nice woody taste. Frosticks — the staff of life — were available from Mrs. Donovan. Ah, the crunch of the brittle chocolate covering when you first bit out a nice mouthful! Then the working your way through it. You licked the stick clean, didn't want to leave even a trace of vanilla ice cream on it, and soon got that wet woody taste again. Sometimes we just walked around with the wet stick in our mouths, biting it, rotating it, until the wood began to split apart.

Cokes were available at Stotz's garage. They were in a large red Coca Cola ice box. I forget how exactly we paid for them and retrieved them. Maybe we just put in our coins, pressed a metal button, and down would come the bottle, *clunk!*, into a receptacle where you could grab it. On a hot summer day, a Coke could pull you through the next miserable hour. Oh blessed cold thick green glass bottle! Some of the glass was frosted white not from ice but from the glass having been chipped away through months, perhaps years, of re-use. Inside was the brown see-through liquid. I could never glug it down like some kids did, without taking a breath, but no matter. A swallow or two then lower the bottle as the sweat ran down your face. Sanctuary. Reason for living.

Only one soda could surpass Coke, and one reason may have been that it was so rare. I am speaking of creme soda. To me it was sent from heaven. It was a birthday cake in liquid form. How did they get that flavor? I wondered? What kind of cream was in it? Was it vanilla?

And then there was root beer, which I regarded as a fallback when you couldn't get Coke or creme soda.Another way to get cool was to go swimming. The public pools in Pleasantville and Rye were not dependable as swimming places because of the polio scares. And it was more fun to swim illegally anyway, e.g., in the Reservoir off of Rte. 22, or in the quarry in the hills beyond the Dam. I seem to remember a kid named Anderson living up there, in those woods and craggy hills and tall grass. The quarry was so well hidden that we could only find it if Anderson came with us. The shore was sharp-cornered rocks that we had to climb over barefoot, the water brown-green and ice cold, so cold that sometimes we couldn't bring ourselves to go in above our ankles.

Jokes

A joke I remember from a comic book was the following. A guy on a country road asks a farmer, "How far is it to...", naming a town. The farmer replies, "Twenty miles as the crow flies. "The guy then says, "But suppose the crow has to walk and push a bicycle."

Village idiot jokes were always popular. "Why did the idiot throw the clock out the window?" "Because he wanted to see time fly." "Why did the idiot drive his car off the cliff?" "Because he wanted to test his air brakes." A guy asks an idiot who is crawling around at the base of a street light, "What are you doing?" "Looking for my watch." "Where did you lose it?" "On 2nd Street." "But this is 1st Street! Why are you looking here?" "Because there's more light here." I have remembered this joke all my life because I always felt that it contains a deep and important idea.

Rock, Scissors, Paper

Someone counted "One, two, three!" and each of two players stuck forth either a clenched fist (representing Rock), or the extended index and second fingers of one hand (representing Scissors), or outspread fingers (representing Paper). Then the winner was decided on the basis of the rules: (1) Rock breaks Scissors; (2) Paper covers Rock; (3) Scissors cut Paper. All other possibilities were considered ties.

Electric Trains

Electric trains were a toy my parents assumed I would like. Or rather, they were a toy that I was supposed to like, and therefore not really a toy, or at least one whose potential as a source of pleasure was always tainted. Furthermore, it wasn't just any kind of electric train that I was supposed to like, but Lionels. Unfortunately, they had a third rail down the middle, and therefore didn't look realistic at all. I much preferred American Flyer, which had two rails, like real trains, but which I had only seen in store windows and in catalogs. To this day, I don't know why my parents insisted on Lionels. I can only think of two possible reasons: (1) that my father considered them better designed, from an engineering point of view, than American Flyer (I do remember something about the latter being "flimsy" because they only had the two rails), and (2) that someone important had decreed that Lionels were better — perhaps my mother had read somewhere that they were preferred by intelligent boys, or that they made boys intelligent.

We had a figure-eight track that my father mounted on a piece of 3/4-inch plywood that must have measured something like four by eight feet. One Christmas, they gave me a transformer with handles sticking up that you pushed forward and back to control the speed of the train — two handles so that you could independently control two different trains. There were also two plastic tabs that you could push forward and back to control the intensity of the headlamp on the locomotive, and to control other lights on the board. Later Christmases brought additional accessories for what was called the "train set": a crossing gate that raised and lowered automatically when the train approached and passed, a little watchman's house from which the watchman emerged when the train approached, and then into which he retreated, with a snapping closed of the door, when the train had passed. The engine had a more-or-less realistic-sounding whistle — a mournful *whooo*, *whooo* — that you could sound via a control on the transformer. I suppose there were also a few papier-mâché hills, and a few tin or plastic houses. In memory, the things I liked most about electric trains were the racket they made, the electric smell of the engine wheels, and the red lights on the crossing gate and the watchman's house — the bright, red, warm balls of light that you just knew you could live inside of, if only you were small enough.

Real Trains

Real trains were much more fun. The tracks ran along the far bank of the Bronx River. For some reason, our preferred spot for minor mischief was a few hundred yards north of the Valhalla train station. The minor mischief consisted of simply putting a nickel or penny on the track before the train came. There was, of course, the excitement of staying close to the track until the train was near. Along it came, the enormous heaving, chuffing machine. When the last car was disappearing down the track, we would retrieve the now shiny, flattened coin. We often walked along on the ties between the tracks when no trains were coming. I wondered what would happen if my foot got caught in the ties when I was alone. I think I remembered from the movies that it was possible to lie as flat as you could in the roadbed and the train would simply pass over you. But suppose the way your foot was caught would prevent your lying that way. What was it like to see

that enormous engine making its way toward you when you were unable to get out of its way? What would be your last thoughts? What did it feel like being torn in half by all that heavy steel? Did you for a moment realize that the lower part of your body was no longer attached to the upper part? Did you think, in the midst of the unbearable pain, as the blood came pouring out from where your waist had been, "Those are my legs over there! They're mine!"

We frequently dared each other to hop a ride on a passing freight train. At times, the cars went by so tantalizingly slowly, that it seemed nothing could possibly happen to us if we grasped the side of one of the metal ladders, and just pulled ourselves up so we could get a foot on the lowest step. What could happen? If we missed, we would simply fall down onto the gravel, maybe roll down the embankment to the River. And yet, as far as I can recall, none of us ever made the attempt. One reason may have been that we would then face the challenge of getting off the train. That couldn't be done when it was passing through the Valhalla train station, because we would be seen by the stationmaster. So we would have to ride to some point between the Valhalla station and the North White Plains station. But by then, the train might be moving too fast for us to jump off. And so we stuck to putting coins on the track.

Once in a while, we would see a workman's handcar go by on the tracks, or hear it from a distance, *putt-putt-putt-putt*... the guys sitting or standing on the little car. How odd to have such a primitive engine when there were steam engines! Couldn't they get a bigger, quieter engine? In Westerns the guys had to pump themselves on these things using using wide handles.

Comic Book Movies

Every once in a while the comics would carry the makings of what I believe is properly called a "zoetrope", though of course they didn't call it that in the comics. The title instead was something like, "Watch Mickey run!" There was a strip of squares, each with Mickey Mouse in a slightly different position. Instructions told how to cut out the strip, paste it onto a piece of cardboard, bend the cardboard into a circle, cut a slit halfway down the cardboard at the start of each square, and then somehow mount the whole thing — I have forgotten how — on a vertical pivot, so that when you spun the cardboard and looked at it, you would see, through the slits, Mickey Mouse running! I tried to love the thing, tried to find it fascinating, but never could. It was nothing compared to the cartoons in the movies. But it was good for killing, say, fifteen minutes or so on a rainy afternoon.

16 mm. Projector Movies

At some point, my parents bought a 16 mm. movie projector for my brother and me. We had a few films: the only one I recall was an Abbott and Costello, I think on some adventure out West involving a stagecoach. The projector was set up in our barren, cold Play Room, and I remember viewing that film over and over when there was nothing better to do, trying to like it, since I enjoyed the two comedians in real movie theaters. Our parents had tried to do something nice for us in buying the projector, my mother encouraged us to watch our two or three films, but it was no use: it was thoroughly boring. Perhaps the need to rewind the film at the end of every viewing had something to do with it. I don't know.

Collecting Buttons for Beanies

Most kids had a beanie that they wore occasionally. Its main value was that it was where you pinned the buttons you collected — round, metal things about the size of a nickel with a pin in the back and cartoon characters typically on a white background on the plastic top. I always loved the

colors of the characters: red, blue, yellow, black. The buttons were like white candy. I think they could be bought at Five-and-Ten-Cent stores, but some were available only by sending away to radio shows. Tom Mix offered what were called "decoder buttons". On the under side was a message, and at the end of some programs, the announcer would tell the members of the Tom Mix Club what was going to happen in the next episode by naming a sequence of the buttons.

Roller Skating

One of the dumbest time killers we had available to us — I felt so then and still do now — was rollerskating. This was still the time when a roller skate had four wheels, long before some genius had asked the obvious question, Why not just two wheels? And not only four wheels, but four metal wheels, so that even coasting down the "smooth" concrete of Shelley Avenue was a teeth-chattering, leg-numbing experience. Only macadam surfaces, like that on the upper playground at Valhalla School No. 1, gave anything approximating a smooth ride. But on the streets, your legs below the knees soon went numb from the vibration. I remember thinking how stupid it was to put little metal wheels on skates. Why not bigger ones, with inflatable tires, just like bicycles? But girls didn't seem to mind the vibrations, and could be seen, at least some of them, gliding gracefully over vast stretches of concrete, arms outstretched, like skaters on ice.

Trying to Be A Ventriloquist

I always had an eye out for something I might be good at, something that would give me a *self*. The comics had ads for method books that would teach you things like "how to throw your voice for fun and profit!" I think I sent in for one, followed the instructions, convinced absolutely no one that there was someone talking from inside the toy box over there. The kids, even my mother, would smile, say immediately, "Your lips are moving!" in a manner that said, "If you could do that *without* moving your lips, and if you could make your voice sound as though it were somebody else's voice coming from somewhere other than your mouth, you might have a real future ahead of you!" I may have tried it with teddy bears or the odd puppet, but the reaction was always the same. Some of the ads offered a device that you could put in your mouth to help throw your voice

Twirling a Lasso

In the Westerns and the comics, the hero, who tried to avoid actually killing bad guys, preferring instead, e.g., to shoot their pistols out of their hands, would often — as though to demonstrate the full extent of non-lethal means of bringing criminals to justice — would often lasso bad guys as they attempted to run away. (I don't recall a cowboy hero ever using a lasso on cows, even though, in real life, they were the only thing it was ever used on.) As I recall, Hopalong Cassidy was the real master at this. Furthermore, for amusement, he would twirl the lasso in front of himself, the lasso itself about a foot above the ground, and kept horizontal by the circular motion of the rope in Hopalong's expert hand, which was held at about chest level. I tried this countless times with the soft, worn out clothesline we used as lassos. The loop never held. I was immediately turning a hank of limp rope dragging in the dirt. The thought may have nagged at the corner of my mind that for one thing, maybe the guys in the movies had stiffer rope, with more hairs sticking up so it didn't slip through the eye in the rope as easily.

Coloring, Drawing, Cartooning

Coloring in coloring books was a first-class time-killer when I was a child. It was clear what was to be done — color things the way they were in reality — and the materials were easy to use and had an interesting smell.

We also made pencil drawings of our own and then colored them. The houses that we drew this way had the same appeal to me as colored light bulbs and the cardboard houses we later built from kits, in that they invited you to imagine going inside. You could imagine climbing through the roundish windows and then sitting inside the wax-smelling red walls with the wax-smelling green grass growing outside, and the spikey orange sun shining overhead.

Perhaps drawing shouldn't be classified as a time-killer because I placed too much hope in the possibility of my having talent, and thus in drawing giving me a reason to remain alive. But I had absolutely no ability at drawing a face that looked like anyone. I couldn't get a face to look round, I couldn't draw an upper arm that looked like a woman's or a man's, I couldn't draw girls, couldn't get their breasts right.

Until the age of six or seven, drawing meant drawing with crayons in our coloring books. I always wished I knew what the correct color was supposed to be, I mean, the one that publishers of the coloring books *wanted* us to use for each thing. I liked the waxy, oily smell of the crayons, but I didn't like the speed at which they turned blunt from use. In the back of my mind I wondered what a house that you had colored really was. You could certainly imagine people inside, could imagine yourself walking and playing on the green grass all around the house, could imagine how warm the yellow sun with the orange spikes all around it would feel. On the other hand it wasn't a real house because, for one thing, it was colored with crayon, whereas real houses were colored with paint. Furthermore, the house in the coloring book was somehow situated *in* the paper, whereas real houses were out there, in the air, standing. So what kind of a house was it, in the coloring book?

But I had two successes, if that is the right term, in my attempts at drawing. The first was a drawing of a giant biting the legs off of a helpless boy. I showed it to my father. He was not pleased at all. In fact it was clear that he was deeply troubled that his son should come up with a drawing like that. The second was a drawing of a stick figure whose limbs I carefully thickened by repeatedly going over them with pencil. Between his legs, I added a short, downward, thickened line. I showed the result to my mother. She too was not pleased. In fact, she was shocked, and demanded I get rid of my obscene creation right away.

The comic books offered home study courses in cartooning, one of which I sent in for. They gave you a little instruction book, and a plastic stick figure whose limbs you could position any way you wanted. The book then explained how to make drawings by copying the figure and then filling it out, putting flesh and clothes on the limbs. This and other methods explained how to draw a face by beginning with an oval, then drawing a faint line down the center where the nose would go, then a faint horizontal line for the eyes. But because this was a method, because it was a contrivance for people who couldn't just sit down and make a drawing that looked like someone, I turned away from it in disgust. Following a method would never make you immortal.

Looking Through the Stereoscope

Usually at the urging of my mother, we sometimes spent a few minutes looking through the stereoscope, a gift from some Christmas or other. You put a card with two side-by-side photos of, say, the Grand Canyon, or Niagara Falls, in its wooden holder, then, while squinting through the

lenses inside the black viewer, moved the holder back and forth on its stick until, Ahhh!, you could see how deep the Grand Canyon really was. My father explained how it worked: the two photos were taken by cameras a few feet apart, so that the images were an exaggerated representation of what your eyes would have seen. But the thrill didn't last. Once you had gone through the pictures, and marvelled at how deep and far and beautiful everything looked, there was nothing else to do. Also, the whole apparatus seemed vaguely old-fashioned. Perhaps the real reason I felt this way was that it was something my parents were enthusiastic about.

Wild Berries and Peppermint Leaves

Nature was something in school books. All we knew were things that you did outside. Buttercups held close to the skin, if they caught the sun right, would shine a yellow glow on your skin, like a little flashlight. In summer we were always on the lookout for blackberries. Just about any activity, including the pursuit of enemy soldiers or Indians or pirates, would come to a halt if blackberry bushes appeared along some dusty path — e.g., along the path to Cove 22, where there were wild, tangled, complicated bushes. We would carefully climb in over the thorns, and kneel or sit among the bushes, eating one berry after the other, squinting at the tart, juicy sweet taste. The fat little globes on some of the berries, despite their patina of light brown dust, seemed bursting with juice (I worried that they might be hiding a worm) and yet they also had a slightly woody taste, I suppose from the whiskers that grew between them. With the bees going by, and cicadas keeping time in the heat, we sat and ate and talked. Sometimes we brought a can from home and filled it. My mother put the can in the refrigerator and then served us the berries for dessert, covered with cream which we promptly covered with sugar.

Next to Phil Fink's garage were some peppermint plants, gray with summer dust. When things were slow, and we were trying to figure out what to do next, we would take a few of the leaves, wipe off the dust and chew them, reminding ourselves that this was where they got the flavor of Spearmint and Doublemint chewing gum.

And sometimes we would come upon pussy willows, a plant I always regarded as absurd: what could possibly have motivated Nature to make a plant with little gray tufts of fur on the ends of its branches? What *good* were they? What bird or animal would find such a thing appealing? Or, if they were meant for us human beings, then what were we supposed to do with them?

Talking Pig Latin and Idic

We talked in Pig Latin — "Ow-hay Are-ay Ou-yay?" ["How are you?"] "Oh-ay, I-ay am-ay ine-fay." ["Oh, I am fine."] "Id-day Ou-yay Oo-day Oor-yay Omework-hay?" ["Did you do your homework?"] "Oh-nay..." ["No..."] — and then later also in Idic: "Y-idic-oo Idic-ahr G-idic-oing T-idic-oo G-idic-et Idic-in T-idic-oo T-idic-rouble..." ["You are going to get into trouble..."]

Playing With "Helicopters"

At a certain time of the year, when I don't remember, what we called "helicopters" fell from the silver maple trees. They were seeds with a kind of propellor-blade attached, so that, when the seed fell, the blade whirled around, slowing the seed's descent and allowing the wind to scatter it farther than it would have if the seed merely fell to the ground. You could put one of these seeds in the upturned palm of your hand, then flick it off with the other middle finger, and away it would go, into its helicopter descent. I suppose the thought may have passed through our minds once or twice that Nature must be awesomely intelligent to have figured out a way to make trees make helicopters.

Printing

For some birthday or other, I got a printing kit, consisting of pink rubber stamps, one for each letter and number, and an ink pad. This was supposed to provide an amusing diversion for children, I suppose, while encouraging them to learn to spell. For me, the interest value, even on a rainy day, lasted about five minutes.

Wood burning

And then there was the wood burning kit, which came with boards with designs to be burned into them. There was a raised black plastic circular part on the handle, so your fingers wouldn't contact the hot metal rod directly, and a piece of cork around the underside, why I don't know. The rod was always way too hot, you were almost assured of burning your fingers as the fragrant wood-smoke curled up from the end of it. You pressed the rod into soft wood, moved it slowly to make lines, letters. The instructions showed you impossibly-difficult things you could burn into a pece of flat wood There were different types of rod — chisel-shaped, pointed, etc. — that could be screwed into the handle (once the one that was in there had cooled down!) I always thought it was a waste of time burning indentations into wood, but I did it out of boredom, out of vague hope that it might save me.

Playing With Yoyos

Along with skill at paddle ball, skill at playing with a yoyo was pretty much a *sine qua non* among the kids in our neighborhood, and it was definitely one of the best time-killers. We considered Duncan yoyos to be the best, but we would test our skills with any make that happened to fall into our hands. Yoyos were made of wood or plastic. Some of them came in bright colors, some with iridescent material on the sides. The basic moves as I remember them now all derived from making the yoyo "sleep", which meant allowing the yoyo to unwind to the full length of its string, and then somehow being made to spin in the loop that the string made around the axle. The basic form of this move was simply letting the yoyo fall vertically until it was near the toe of your shoe, and allowing it to spin there, until, with a jerk of the wrist, you caused the string to again wind around the axle, sending the yoyo back up into your hand. A brief version of sleeping could be achieved by shooting the yoyo straight out at waist height, then snapping it back into your hand. A variation of this move was called Walking the Dog. Here, you got the yoyo to sleep near the floor, but then let it touch the floor, so that it tried to roll away in front of you. Then there was Rock the Baby, a move I never learned. It consisted of getting the yoyo to sleep, then raising it up and at the same time working your fingers down along the string until the still spinning yoyo could be suspended and swung back and forth in a kind of cage constructed with your fingers. Another variation on sleeping was called Around the World. Here you shot the yoyo out as hard as you could, got it to sleep, then whirled it once around in a vertical circle, and made it snap back into your hand.

Whistling

To be able to whistle properly was important among the kids (meaning, of course, the boys). Different types of whistling were suited to different occasions.

Your basic loud, obnoxious whistle, used at ballgames and to accomplish the cheering function in general was accomplished with lips drawn wide in a kind of grimace, the tongue formed into a shallow groove. I never could do this.

Another way was to bring the tips of your index finger and thumb together, put them into mouth, possibly against tongue and blow hard. If done right, the result was a piercing screech. The normal way was the one used to whistle a tune. This gave the most control, the clearest tone.

A softer whistle was achieved was achieved by holding the teeth closer together than in the previous way, with the tongue pressed against the back of the teeth, and the air expelled over the top of the tongue.

Of course there was the normal whistle through pursed lips. This was used to produce actual melodies.

Then there was the imitation ocarina, which I have described under "The Kids", in the subsection on Peter Christ.

We also made whistles by placing a green grass blade along the length of the inside of one thumb, then laying the other thumb on top of it in parallel, pressing the thumbs together and raising them to your mouth and blowing to set up a vibration in the blade. Difficult, at least for me, and not reliable. The sound was piercing and ragged.

Cracking Your Knuckles

Another important, casual skill was that of cracking one's knuckles. Peter Christ could go through all ten of his fingers, either yanking the fingers straight and getting a bone crack each time, or doing a burst of bone cracks by crushing the fist of one hand with the other hand. In either case, the girls would wince when they heard it (that was the point — to see whom we could bother) and we would all laugh.

Spitting

Several varieties of spitting were practiced.

There was normal spitting, in which a blob of saliva was held inside your pursed lips, then expelled with a quick sticking out of your tongue and burst of air pressure. A variation was to emit saliva by air pressure alone.

Another form was to accumulate some saliva, then close your teeth and emit a spray through the cracks between your teeth by holding your tongue against the back of teeth, air pressue already being built up there, and suddenly withdrawing your tongue. Vance Pinchbeck, who lived in the house on the corner of Elm St. and Columbus Ave., was adept at this. He would punctuate his conversation with these sprays.

To "hawk one up" meant to snort some nasal mucus into your throat then spit it out in a big glob, accompanied by the appropriate vulgar sound: "*toooooo!*"

Standing On Your Head

We stood on our heads, tried to do handstands (I couldn't; some of the girls were very good at it indeed; we tried to see their panties when they went over), cartwheels (I was able for a while) and then forward flips (I think I half-did a few, then landed on my back once and called it quits).

Sewing Your Fingers Together

And then, when class had become intolerably boring, or you were at someone's house and there was nothing interesting to do and it was raining outside, you could find a needle somewhere

and sew your fingers together: put a thread through the hole, and then push the point of the needle just under the surface of the mostly dead skin on your finger tips, and pull the thread through, then do the same on the next finger tip and keep going back and forth until your finger tips were neatly sewn together!

Important Games

Now we get to the games that had a deep significance for me, games that had a quality of immortality about them. There was a call to play these games, and to be fully involved in them, not as with the mere time-killers.

Playing in Cemeteries

Some of the happiest memories of my childhood are of playing in cemeteries. I never had the least fear of these places. In fact, because of the manicured lawns, and the trees and flowers, they seemed much more full of life than the streets, not to mention school buildings, where I had to spend most of my time. The white statues and marble walls gave me the same feeling as the pictures of Greek and Roman statues and temples in the Encyclopedia Britannica. I felt that, because they were white, and made of stone, and yet represented people, or angels, they were trying to tell me about a life in which people always did good for an extremely important reason, that in that life the sun always shone and the sky was always blue and the grass was always green and the statues were all white and people only thought about this good that was all that mattered in the world.

We played in Gate of Heaven and Kensico cemeteries[1]; we raced over the lawns, biked along the paths. We read the names on the tombstones. Someone said Lou Gehrig was buried in one of these cemeteries, but we never found out where. But in fact, all sorts of famous people were buried there, including, in Kensico, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Ayn Rand, Lou Gehrig, Danny Kaye, and Tommy Dorsey; in Gate of Heaven, Sal Mineo, Jimmy Cagney, Fred Allen, Dutch Schultz, and Babe Ruth. We tried to see the bodies inside the little mausoleums, but never could. We assumed that anyone who could afford a stone house like that after they died must be rich, so we imagined bankers and their wives being inside. Jim Montesano, who did our lawn for us, worked in Kensico Cemetery. Perhaps his personality — that of a sunny, content peasant — helped dispel any fears we might have had about ghosts.

Gate of Heaven had another feature that we made use of, namely, a large pond that was full of catfish. The pond lay between the railroad tracks and the base of the long hill that was part of the cemetery: bare green lawn near the bottom, then a few gravestones, then more and more as you went up the hill toward the trees. Presumably the grassy area was extra space that the cemetery held available for future graves.

On a hot summer day, you could throw a line into the pond and almost immediately you had one of these ugly dark-gray-brown fish on the end of it. Their whiskers weren't really whiskers but were part of their skin, which to me made them unnatural and thoroughly repugnant. Nevertheless, we had heard that catfish were good to eat, and so we took at least a few of the ones we caught home with us. I don't remember ever cleaning one, and I can't imagine my mother subjecting herself to the task, so I don't know if I ever ate any.

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1. During the writing of this book, I learned that there was a Jewish cemetery, Sharon Gardens, between Kensico and Gate of Heaven, but I don't recall ever hearing about it.

Of course, we worried openly about what exactly was in that pond water, since it collected all the water that drained down from the graves. We thought of the fluids from the dead bodies and tried to convince ourselves that it was safe to eat the fish we caught because the ground would have filtered out all the lethal stuff. Some of the kids may have pointed out that Catholics buried their dead in metal coffins, and these couldn't leak, but still I always felt a bit queasy about that pond.

Epics

Throughout my childhood, I lived in a series of ongoing epics of my own creation. They were usually about mountain men, pirates, or people lost at sea. They were my own literature and mythology. I would play Raft in the den, using cushions for rafts that we had tied together after our ship had sunk. Someone was always falling off, always about to slip out of reach, but in the last possible moment, I would be able to rescue them. I delighted in creating near-hopeless situations, or actual deaths that turned out not to be deaths at all. Late in life I found out that other kids, in a different time and different place, also knew about these adventures:

"...the good old game of Rafts — a game that will be played till all the oceans are dry and all the trees in the world are felled — and after. And we were all crowded together on the precarious little platform, and Selina occupied every bit as much room as I did, and Charlotte's legs didn't dangle over any more than Harold's. The pitiless sun overhead beat on us all with tropic impartiality and the hungry sharks, whose fins scored the limitless Pacific stretching out on every side, were impelled by an appetite that made no exceptions as to sex. When we shared the ultimate biscuit and circulated the last water-keg, the girls got an absolute fourth apiece, and neither more nor less; and the only partiality shown was entirely in favor of Charlotte, who was allowed to perceive and to hail the saviour-sail on the horizon. And this was only because it was her turn to do so, not because she happened to be this or that. Surely, the rules of the raft were the rules of life..." — Grahame, Kenneth, "A Saga of the Seas" in *Dream Days*, *The Penguin Kenneth Grahame*, Penguin Books, 1983, N.Y., p. 136.

My mountain man epics would go on, in my head, during the school day. After school I could continue them as soon as I could get to the woods. I read and re-read a book titled, I think, *The Long Rifle*[1]. I had no doubt that the best way to live was as the hero of the story lived — alone, in the endless wilderness, with a long rifle, powder horn, pouch of lead ball ("ball" was the plural when you were a mountain man), hunting knife (always razor sharp), buckskins, squirrel-skin cap (in memory, not coonskin), moccasins. Everything about this life was clean, immortal, everything depended on nothing but Long Rifle's skill, and, of course, his extraordinary eyesight, and ability to hear and recognize sounds that no one who hadn't spent his life in the woods would have any idea of. I knew by heart the steps that went into loading a flintlock rifle: first just the right amount of black powder was deftly poured into the muzzle, then a ball was wrapped in a square of soft chamois and forced down the length of the barrel with the ramrod. Even now, when I watch the film, *Jeremiah Johnson*, which is about a mountain man, I think to myself, *This is all you need!*

Cars and Trucks

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1. "*The Long Rifle* was the first of a series of books starring Andy Burnett, a boy who runs away from home in Pennsylvania to become a mountain man in the West. The book was published in 1932[, and written by] Stewart Edward White (1873-1946)." — J.S.

Playing with toy trucks and cars had the deep meaning that, ever since I first heard Ravel's *Mother Goose*, I have been convinced he was feeling when he wrote this work. I spent hours creating adventures around a few plastic soldiers and cars and toy trucks on the carpet, or on the blanket of my bed, or in the patch of dirt, in the flower bed near the stone wall, that we were allowed to play in. I would build an underground house, put a cardboard roof over it, put the plastic man inside and regard him as a friend who just happened not to move and who just happened to be made of plastic. I would try to imagine what it was like to be him, to live there, or to be hidden behind a ruffle near the floor of the sofa. I had a windup tractor with rubber treads that could climb up cushions, or dirt mounds, its little engine whirring. The tracks it left in the soft dirt were all a boy could hope for, perfect replicas of the real ones we saw behind the tractors where new houses were being built.

My fascination with cars and trucks extended, of course, to the ones that adults used. Farting away with excitement, I could have spent the rest of my life watching the tires of a big truck on the snow as the truck slowly pulled away, printing out the image of its ornate tread, the tires black on white in the cold, the tires crunching on the snow. The most intimate of all sounds! Then there were car tracks in the snow, and in slush. The muffled clatter of tire chains. How was it possible that a car could drive across another pair of car tracks, when this was impossible with railroad tracks? The look of a completely inflated tire on snow or cement: the tire had air in it, and therefore should be squashed a little, but wasn't. It was a perfect tire.

And oil trucks, the chain dangling down, dancing, clinking, on the pavement surface. We understood the purpose of the chain was to ground the truck so that a spark wouldn't set off a fire or explosion in the oil. But I couldn't see why a spark would run down to the cement, which wasn't metal.

And the junk man, with his cowbells on a string across the back behind the cab.

And the garbage truck, with flattened cardboard boxes around the load, to hold in the garbage. I envied the garbage truck workers being able to jump off the truck and swing back on *while it was moving*. You had to be special to be allowed to do that. These workers had the unique privilege of being able to *ride on the running board* of the garbage truck. They didn't have to sit inside where it was safe. They could ride along with one leg dangling down over the road and no one yelled at them.

In bread and bakery trucks, the dashboard was almost horizontal, and long and wide enough to seem like a desk. In fact, the driver kept his pad and pencils on it, that's how important his work was! He had an office you could drive around in!

And the milkman, who drove *standing up*, so he didn't have to waste any time or energy getting up before he turned and grabbed the wire basket inside the little door behind the cab, put in the required cold bottles of milk and cream and packages of butter, bounded down onto the street and up the front walk of the house, then around the side of the garage, opened the little milk box door in the back of the garage, placed the contents of the basket quickly and neatly inside, then raced back, bounded up into his cab, tossed the wire basket into its place, resumed his standing position, intently facing forward in his moveable office, pressed down on a pedal on the floor, and was off to the next house. My mother only had to go down the few steps from the hallway near the kitchen, open the door to the little hallway to the garage, cross it and open the milk box door with its brass latch. No need to go outside when it was cold. (One of many minor conveniences that my father had thought of.) We watched how the ice man went about his work, how he climbed down from his ancient truck, threw back the dark canvas cover, then chipped the blocks of ice with a big chisel, then sunk the tongs of a huge compass-like thing into the glassy block and

swung it up over his shoulder. We had a refrigerator, so we never needed ice. The Beairds did, as I remember.

In spring, bulldozers began pushing the fresh new brown soil. At the end of the day, when the workmen had gone home, we walked in the hard-packed, shiny tread marks, and marveled at the phenomenon of shiny dirt. Even now, as an old man, when I see men shoveling away the extra dirt after a bulldozer or earthmover has finished its work along a piece of street I know that this is fundamentally important work.These men have a purpose in life.We ran our hands over the big metal dinosaur tractor treads which were caked with dirt, the whole machine now motionless and silent. We marvelled at the thick steel of the steam shovel scoops. We climbed into the cab if the door wasn't locked, pretended we could move the levers and make this monster work for us.

We envied the men who who were allowed to work these controls all day. We watched the operator swinging up into the cab, which was like an office.Whenever there was the slightest opportunity to pretend that something was a steering wheel and that we were driving, we always managed to find a way to make it have a *hand* gear shift that came out of the steering column, which was much more impressive than the old-fashioned gear shift on the floor. Furthermore, the hand shift had to have a big silver button in the end, as it did in Jumbo's taxi (though we had no idea what the button was for). We laughed at the way old people drove, especially rich little old ladies, who were barely able to see over the dashboard because they were so short (being old). Yet their ancient cars were always flawlessy maintained, always shiny, like pieces of furniture, which is how they drove them, slowly, carefully, around corners. Mr. Wolfe, who lived on Wall Ave. drove his ancient car with his wife seated by his side.

Caves

Of course, like all boys, we were always on the lookout for caves. At first, we believed that there was a real possibility we would find one somewhere in the neighborhood, or up by the Reservoir. But as the years went by, we resigned ourselves to the truth. Yet, as it happened, there was a cave within walking distance of our house. I think one of the kids who lived near it told us about it. It was right next to a building we called The Old Barn, on the back side of Clinton St., where it wound down toward Kensico, and this building, unlike the strange abandoned house in the woods behind our backyard, was a place you could sink your imagination into. It had a real carriage parked inside, with the two shafts for the horses in front resting on the floor, and the old leather still on the seats, though it was cracked and peeling. But you could climb up on it and sit there and imagine what it had been like to really drive the horse that was pulling it. The Barn was ideally suited to my silver six-shooter cap gun, described below under "Playing Guns", because, since the gun looked like the ones that cowboys used in the Westerns, it seemed to find its proper surroundings among the old wagon and other paraphernalia in the Barn. Here, everything was dusty and brown and old, and as the sun slanted through the windows overhead, you could climb up to the loft and shoot down.

A few steps from the Barn was an old tree, then a rock crack in the rocks that nevertheless fit our definition of a cave. I doubt if it was more than six or eight feet deep, and so low that even we kids had to stoop to get inside. But — and this was the crucial test — you could get inside when it was sprinkling or raining outside and actually *not have any drops hit you*. (As I recall, it often had a faint smell that, no matter how much I fought the idea, seemed to be that of urine. I didn't want to believe that someone was using a cave merely as a place to take a leak in.)

Playing Guns

"Whadya wanna do?" "I don't know. Let's play baseball." "Nah, not baseball. How about Guns?"

A very important question before we began the game (we seldom called it "Cowboys and Indians") was which Western hero we each would be. "I'm Gene Autry!" "I'm Hopalong Cassidy!" "No, I want to be Hopalong Cassidy!" "You can be Tom Mix." "I don't want to be him." "OK, be Roy Rogers." "OK." On rare occasions I wanted to be Buffalo Bill. But I liked Gene Autry. For some reason I didn't much like Roy Rogers, who, incredibly, is still alive as I write this (late spring, 1997). Tom Mix, who had a radio program, was my favorite hero. But sometimes I was a bad guy. It was often a matter of whim as to whether we wanted to be a good guy or a bad guy: we could be Jesse James or one of the Younger brothers, e.g., Cole, who was often preferred because of his unusual name. Billy the Kid was seldom chosen as I recall, but I did read and re-read a paperback about him I bought at the news store in the Village, despite the big words. (I remember the cover was brown and white — a boring cover with, I think, only a silhouette of the Kid.) The text was dry but it killed time and I was interested in understanding, from the inside, this famous killer.

Had you asked me in the years between ages five and ten what I wanted to be, the reply would have been immediate: a cowboy. If you had asked me why, I would have described sitting around a hot, orange campfire, smelling the blue smoke that rolled up from the burning black wood. I would have talked about the smell of coffee emerging from one of those speckled, blue-enameled coffee pots they always used in the movies. I would have described the pleasure of eating beef on a stick, the juice dripping down onto the hot round stones around the campfire. I would have described the clouds of brown dust that were sent up by the horse's hooves (and by stagecoach wheels), the pleasure of looking back at your horse's dust as you galloped along a trail. I would have described the crunch of stagecoach and wagon wheels, I would have described the deep blue sky. I would have talked about the look and feel of pock-marked gun metal, the rich, sweet smell of gunpowder. I would have described how magnificent it was to sleep on the desert — like sleeping on a beach.

We kept these things in mind as we played. We were horse and rider both, using the peculiar, running, shuffling gait so hilariously portrayed in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. We favored paths through the woods that were dusty, so we could look down and see our dust, however wispy and inferior it was compared to the clouds sent up by the horse's hooves in the movies.

I won't say that playing cowboys *required* that we wear a cowboy suit, but at the very least we felt that we needed to have one that we could wear at any time. After endless pleading, I was allowed to order one, I think out of a Sears catalog. This was during the summer vacation. I sat on the curved gutter in front of my house, waiting, day after day, for the mail man. Sometimes other kids waited with me. And then when the anticipation had long since ceased to be bearable, the mailman stepped from his truck, scrutinizing the label on a large package, and came over and handed it to me. The pants (chaps) had a leopard pattern, and were made of a sticky, olive drab material with an odd, plastic smell. The broad leather belt had a big silver buckle on the front. There was a red cowboy shirt and a *vest* (very important).

Again in imitation of the cowboys in the movies, we wore dungarees (we rarely called them "jeans") when we didn't wear a cowboy suit. Dungarees were supposed to stand by themselves (I don't know where we picked up that idea, though apparently it was true of Levi's original dungarees). I was never able to get mine to do that. You were supposed to walk bow-legged (from years in the saddle), the dungarees ideally having acquired the same shape. I never had cowboy boots, but once in a while I would meet a kid who did. I knew from my books why the boots had

high heels, namely, to hold the cowboys' feet more securely in the stirrups. (Therefore cowboy boots were not the same as women's shoes, and saved you from being queer if you wore the boots.) Later, beginning in my early teens, seeing drugstore cowboysand hillbilly singers, all of whom wore cowboy boots, I began to wonder if all these guys really rode horses. Did they all just sing in their spare time away from the ranch? If most of them had never been near a ranch in their lives, as rumor had it, then their bowlegged walk, in imitation of cowboys who spent all day in the saddle, was fake. Ever since, whenever I see a guy wearing cowboy boots, I immediately mark him as a phony, a loser.

I had almost no idea what became of the cattle that the cowboys were always herding. I knew that the animals were driven "to market", and I had heard of the "Chicago stockyards", and for all I knew, the animals just spent the rest of their life milling about in the cattle pens. I suppose I would have answered, on a test, if my life depended on it, that in reality the cows wound up in the slaughterhouse, but I never thought of that — I never thought to question how the killing was done, whether it was humane. We had wallets made out of "cowhide", which I knew came from a cow, but I never gave any thought to how the cowhide got from the cow to my wallet.

We copied the movies. Sometimes we made a half-hearted attempt to look for tracks (footprints) in the dirt, but that was hardly necessary, since the kids always made so much noise shouting and crashing through the bushes, that we could always find them. We knew that you could hide your tracks by walking in streams. I would think about this when playing along the Bronx River, but I didn't bother to make the effort, since, first of all, the ability of the kids to detect footprints on the ground was so poor that it wasn't necessary. Also it would have meant getting my pants wet and arousing the wrath of my mother, and it would have meant stepping on the rocks and squishy things on the bottom of the stream.

A very important question was whether you should put on your six guns with the handles pointing backward or forward. In some of the comics, the heroes — e.g., the Cross-Draw Kid — wore their guns with the handles pointing forward. I couldn't understand how you could get your guns out of their holsters faster by having to reach across and grab the gun on your left side with your right hand, and grab the gun on your right side, with your left. I made many attempts to draw both guns in this way, but they were always slower than the normal way, i.e., handles pointing backward in the holsters, and drawing the right-hand one with the right hand, the left-hand one with the left. We tried to imitate the lasso tricks we saw in the movies, in which the cowboy made a loop several feet in diameter, then, holding his arm forward, turned the rope so that the loop went around and around near his feet. Our clotheslines were never stiff enough for that. Once in a blue moon I could succeed, with enough tries, in throwing a loop over a fence post, or over a kid's head, if he stood still long enough. Never when he was running away, like the cowboys did with the bad guys in the movies.

But playing guns meant not only playing cowboys and war, but also playing pirates. In the woods behind the Martinis, where there were a number of pine trees almost regularly spaced, we cleared away the pine needles, built a fire, and made it the inside of our pirate ship. We made swords out of long slats of wood, with a short cross-piece nailed on, carrying them thrust down through our belt, ready for instant use.

I always felt that running was the one sport that I truly belonged to, the sport that was truly meant for me. Until high school, however, none of us kids thought of running as a sport. It was simply something you did to get to wherever you wanted to go, fast, if you didn't happen to have a bike or if where you wanted to go was across fields. Between the ages of five and ten, I already had the conviction, based on experience, that I could outlast any of the other kids, even though I

couldn't beat them in sprints. If it came down to enduring bleak pain for a long time *all alone*, I would always win. (This applied to bike riding as well.) That was my honor, my pride, and I knew it with strange kind of certainty. But although I could endure more pain than the other kids, I also knew, with certainty, that the secret to running long distances was to try to *reduce* pain. My rule was: "Run at a pace that you feel you could keep up all day."

Making Guns

In my father's workship in the basement, I made numerous guns of wood, including, with his help, and, I think, a Saturday morning course in wood shop, a Thompson sub-machine gun, complete with the round ammunition holder cut out on a jigsaw, and handgrips with indentations for the fingers. Having the right gun was important. It had to fit what the kids would accept and also your own special individuality. You were constantly weighing these things. Is this the right gun?

I would find a piece of board which had once had once been a quarter of a square that had had a big circle cut out of the center. It was obvious that you could look at the piece as a pistol, one tapering end for the handle, the other for the barrel. Sometimes I shaped a piece of wood like this further, sometimes not. I made several pistols, gluing the pieces that were to represent the cylinder onto the sides, cutting and then carving the rest. I whittled one miniature pistol out of single piece of pine. It was only a few inches long and the trigger guard was way too small to get your finger inside, so I was never satisfied with it. I made a 30.06 carbine, which was the rifle we most admired, because it was the one that cowboys used, firing it from their horses. It had a piece of heavy wire bent to look like the handle that the cowboys flipped with the back of their gloved fingers to put a new cartridge into the chamber. I don't think any of us ever had the strength to do that with the BB guns we later got. It was simply too hard. We envied the way the cowboys in the movies always did it so effortlessly.

But I didn't make all the guns I used. For example, I had a blue plastic automatic which I used for a time, even though the two molded halves didn't fit together evenly, and even though it had a noticeable plastic smell.

Cap guns were popular, in fact, were a necessity among all the kids. My favorite was a revolver which had a real cylinder for which you could buy disk-shaped caps with perforations that fit in place on the cylinder. In each of the six sectors of these disks, there was a powder blister that was much larger than those on the rolls of paper tape for automatics. I think I got my parents to give me this particular gun for a birthday. It was a real six-shooter. When you pulled the trigger, the whole back of the cylinder flared orange, the delicious gunpowder smoke was everywhere, and your ears went silent for a moment from the bang. Because the blisters of powder were larger than those on the roll caps, they made a louder bang. At night in particular you could see the brief blaze of flame as the cap exploded. I kept this gun carefully cleaned and oiled, loving the smell of the musky, honey-colored oil that came from the oil can in my father's workshop. I tried hard to convince myself that I could feel the handle bucking in my hand (well, at least a little) when I fired , like the guns in the hands of the comic book heroes.The other cap guns looked like automatics. The powder blisters on the rolls of paper tape looked like blue dots or bruises every half inch or so. They made a snap sound, not the bang that the circular caps of the revolver made. But since they were on a long tape, you could fire more of them before you needed to reload.

I couldn't get enough of bullets and shells. Mostly, all we ever got hold of were shells, e.g., from .22 pistols, with the little nick in the back where the firing pin had hit the brass, although once in a while someone — Jackie Ray, for example — would open his grimy hand and show a

real .22 cartridge, not yet fired. There was occasionally talk of putting one of these cartridges in a vice in the basement, then getting a nail, placing it against the back, and hitting the nail with a hammer, the nail thus acting like a firing pin. We knew that this would would fire the bullet, and I guess we had enough sense to realize that there was no telling where the bullet would ricochet, or what damage it might cause, so, as far as I know, no one actually tried this. In games of guns, the kids wanted most of all to have dum-dum bullets in their guns, because we heard that these spread apart on entry into the body, and made a big hole coming out the back.

The Lone Ranger program once offered a silver bullet as a premium, which you could take apart to put a message inside. It also had a compass inside the top.

Getting the Sounds Right

Every kid, or, I should say, every *boy*, had to be able to imitate the sound of guns for all those occasions when we weren't using cap pistols. We never said "bang, bang!" of course. Only sissies and little kids would do that. For pistol shots, we made bursts of a raspy sound in the back of the throat. For rifles, the same, but muffled by closing the lips more, and puffing out our cheeks, to get as close as we could to the sound of rifles on the Lone Ranger and Sergeant Preston radio programs. For explosions, which always had to sound as though they were coming from a distance (why I don't know), we would puff our cheeks and then explode out a burst of air between all but closed lips. For even bigger explosions, we omitted the raspy sound altogether. Machine guns were imitated by a between-the-teeth rush of air that would be turned on and off rapidly with the aid of the tongue or, more commonly, a kind of nanny goat vibration in the throat. Some kids never mastered the latter; they couldn't get the vibration to go automatic. You could hear how they were trying, and it made the whole thing ridiculous. Who could pretend to be killed by a kid who couldn't even make his gun sound right?

The trouble with all these sounds were, they weren't loud enough. Authentic but too soft. Sometimes, in exasperation, we just shouted, "Pow! Pow!" But every gun battle, every ambush, had a lot of "C'mon Bob, I got you" when the other kid refused to fall down after we had pumped him full of lead. We tried to make up rules for how many shots had to hit you before you were actually dead.

Riding Bikes

When we become adults, we forget how machines of any kind appeared to us as children. When we are young, machines *and* their colors *and* their shininess *and* their sounds *and* the way they look when they are being used *and* how we feel when we use them *are all one*. Take bicycles, for example. My first bike was a three wheeler, black and white, with a fat front fender and blocks on the pedals so my feet could reach them. (I am not sure that training wheels had been invented then, but in any case I didn't use them.) After that came two-wheelers, with Schwinn being the standard. It wasn't the mechanism in itself that fascinated me, nor was it the ease of transportation it afforded, or the speed at which you could go, or how far you could go compared to walking, nor the look of a shiny new bike, with white and blue glossy paint, and shiny chrome, but all of these together — sight and sound — whirr, click, crunch of tiny gravel under tires, speed, blur of thin shiny spokes. I considered it one of the deep mysteries of this life that a bike tire rolling slowly over a smooth pavement could continually look "the same" — the degree of swelling out of the tire remained constant — and yet be the result of something that was continually moving, namely, the rotating tire.

In books I had seen pictures — old-fashioned black-and-white drawings — of 19th century Victorian bicycles, which were called "velocipedes", with a huge front wheel and a tiny rear wheel and a thin, very tall, very erect man riding it wearing a top hat. I thought it absurd that the early inventors could get the wheel sizes so wrong, but on the other hand I wanted to know what it was like to ride a bike like that, I wanted to live in that other age, on a city street with trees planted in square holes in the pavement, and curved wrought-iron black railings along the sidewalk, and steps leading up to row houses. I imagined the tall rider stopping and leaning his bike against a tree, going up the steps and entering the house, for what purpose it was impossible to know. I wanted to live when everything was perfect, when people always did the right thing, when every movement that each person made each day was precisely and exactly the movement they should make. Now it was time for this lady to walk along the sidewalk in her long, old-fashioned dress and holding a parasol. Now it was time for that gentleman to come cycling by on his big-wheeled velocipede. Now it was time for the horse and cab to stop, just as they were doing, in front of the steps of the house.

Bikes were important to us, first, because they were our chief means of transportation. But they also had other qualities that attracted us, or at least me. The whisper of their shiny spokes as they went by, the crackle of little pebbles under the tires when someone was just starting off, say, to go home, the glistening chrome wheels that supported the tires, the silvery, silent metal. When a bicyclist went casually weaving down a street, it seemed as if he were thinking, "... go here, go there, I point and make my line..." I would look at the drawings of the velocidpedes and get a special kind of feeling. Although I never would have been capable of putting it that way at that age, these bikes were art objects, they created a certain feeling in me.

Bicycles made girls more intriguing. The way that girls always had to be careful that their skirts didn't fly up, the way girls nervously steered a bicycle, staring straight ahead, arms straight out, hands gripping the handgrips, jerking the handlebars first to one side, then the other to maintain their balance. The way girls stood on the pedals sometimes, stiff-legged, a little unsure of themselves in such a daring maneuver, and thus making themselves all the more maddeningly desirable. The glint and quiet whisper of the silvery spokes on a summer's afternoon when a girl rode by, the way a girl would cautiously ring the little bell on her girl's bike (which had no bar, for reasons that none of us understood, but which added still further to the appeal of girls on bicycles).

I wondered how the thin spokes could hold up all that weight. Did the axle push exactly straight down on them, so that that way they were strong? Later a kid told me that in reality the center axle *hung down* from the upper spokes. I considered that a kind of miracle.

"By seventh grade we thought balloon tires were for girls or sissies. Only black English style 'racing bikes' (Rudge or Raleigh) and Sturmey Archer gears (three) were cool." — J.S.

I would be transfixed watching someone riding a bike with a tire that had too little air. In response to my question why thin tires took higher pressure (60 lbs per square inch) to be inflated than balloon tires, which were fatter, my father tried to explain that a larger surface area required fewer pounds per square inch for a given degree of tire inflation, while a smaller surface area required more pounds per square inch because the surface area was smaller. I didn't understand.

Some guys seemed to pedal without effort, even uphill; others, like me, always had to labor. Sometimes we considered bikes as horses, but feet alone were better if you wanted to pretend you were on a horse, since then you could go on dirt and across fields.

Every kid wanted to have a motorcycle. We wanted to have an engine *that loud* between our legs, and be able to make it go faster or slower by turning the handgrips on the handlebars, not by

simply pressing on a pedal on the floor, as in a car. We wanted to have to roll the giant machine forward off its stand and then turn those handgrips and push with our legs before leaving in a cloud of dust and a deafening roar, one foot hanging down, ignoring the foot rest, the toe almost but not quite on the pavement (how did motorcycle riders know how to do that? what casual bravery they had!), then off to dodge between cars and to lean into curves as we took the curves at the maximum possible angle before the wheels slipped out from beneath us and caused us to sprawl on the speeding cement with (of course) our arms over our heads as we went with the fall. The nearest we could come to this was to attach playing cards with clothes pins to the front and rear forks of our bicycles in such a way that that the spokes would hit them and make a sound like a motor, which at least you could hear down the block.

Riding Scooters

Scooters were of minor interest compared to bikes. They were too slow, and you had to work too hard to get anywhere. The one scooter I had that I remember was dark red, with streamlined covers over the front and back wheels. Like most scooters, it had a brake lever at the rear of the flat riding board. When you wanted to slow down, you felt for it by moving one of your feet backward, and then pressing down on it with your heel. I think this did nothing more than cause a piece of metal to rub against the rear tire.

Swings

Among the supremely important activities for us was swinging on swings. The reason it was so important was that it was connected with flight. Jumping off the swing as it reached its maximum height in the forward direction was almost like parachuting: it gave you (we felt, or at least I did), however briefly, the feeling of what it was like to bail out of an airplane. For those few brief moments you were falling, you were in the air longer than at any other time of your life. You were flying.

Sometimes, we merely attempted to swing as high as possible, without jumping off. This could be done either by sitting on the swing seat or standing on it. You "pumped yourself" as high as you could by movements of your legs. Trying to swing as high as possible raised the question which to this day I do not know the answer to, namely, is it possible, with enough pumping alone, but no one pushing you from behind, to swing yourself entirely over the top of the bar supporting the swing? We argued this off and on. My belief now is that the answer is no.

The swing in our back yard was suspended from what looked like a horizontal wooden ladder, with two vertical ladders on each end, and additional wooden supports. The Fetzers had much bigger swings Theirs were suspended from a gray pipe supported by a tripod of pipes on each end. The seats, which were rubber, were hung, not from chains, but from metal rods linked together via holes in each end. These swings were hard to get going, but once you did, you were really up there, could really get the funny feeling in your stomach at the top of each swing forward.

Sometimes, on our swing, I would just sit and contemplate a transparent red marble in my hand, try to fathom the answer to the question how is it possible for something solid to be transparent, and listen to and sing the Col. Bogey March playing on a radio somewhere.

We would jump up, grab the bar at one end, and try to go hand over hand to the other. On days we were feeling particularly brave, we would climb up to the top of the ladder, and attempt to walk the length of it, our feet on the side rungs.

Playing in the Woods

When I said to my mother, "I'm going to play in the woods," that meant the woods behind the white fence in the back yard. Only a boy would call such a small plot of tree-covered land, a "woods", since it measured no more than 110 feet by perhaps 50 or 60 feet. But from the size and density of the trees, in particular the size and age of the cherry tree, I imagine it showed what the land looked like before the houses came.

So, to orient the reader: behind the house was the back yard, all smoothly-mowed grass, with a couple of small trees near the Thomas's side. Then came the fence, a snow-fence painted white. At the end of the fence near the Beairds, where the fence curled around and stopped, were several boulders that were the start of the low stone wall separating our yard from the Beairds'. Climbing over the boulders was how you got to the Beairds' back yard, and to the woods, and to the path that led through to Clinton St. The path became the grass-covered driveway on the left of the house on Clinton St. that was occupied by a family whose name I no longer recall. I think they had a big dog, and so we rarely used this means of getting to Clinton St. We never spoke to them.

The border of the woods extended for about fifty feet or so along this path, after which was a large vegetable garden belonging to the people in the house.

On a hot summer day, the woods were a kind of green mansion: dark, cool, with grape vines hanging down, and a path running in parallel along the fence, at the end of which was an open, dirt patch where we dug the Trench I have described elsewhere.

Playing in these woods meant, apart from using them as a venue for games of guns, climbing trees, in particular the cherry tree, described below.Then there were the woods below Wall Ave., where we built the hut on stilts. I remember one time standing in a glade in these woods, looking at the trees, feeling awful as usual, and suddenly being overcome by the fact that there was no reason why all this should be there in the first place. There was no reason why *I* should be there. Perhaps, if I had known something of the history of the place, going back to the Indians and before, I would have been less anxious. Or, if I had been older, and been able to listen to the right piece of classical music while standing there, I would have had the explanation, the meaning, whose absence so frightened me at that moment. (Fauré's *Requiem,* Op. 48, e.g., would have provided the meaning of the sewer pipes up at Mayfair Acres that we crawled around in.)

The much larger woods along the Reservoir we called the Pine Woods.

Climbing Trees

But above all, the woods gave you the opportunity to climb trees. This was the one thing I did with confidence — with all the feelings that are supposed to make youth the happiest time of life. Like jumping off the swing, climbing trees was an approximation to flight, except that this one put you at the altitude you might have been able to achieve if you had sufficient magic either to just will yourself into the air (as in dreams) or to stumble upon, through random trial and error, exactly that one combination and precise arrangement of pieces of wood, paper, canvas, metal, twigs and who knows what else that would turn out to have the property of flight. In the woods behind the house there was a big cherry tree which not only was the tallest tree in the woods, but also had delicious cherries — fat, soft, deep-red, dust-coated, with a pit inside that could be *phtooied* in any direction down through the branches and leaves. Growing next to the cherry tree was a grape vine, and one year I crawled out on a branch and tried some of those. They were hard, round, glaucous, and very bitter. Soon, they gave me itchy bumps all over my body, an affliction that my mother or the doctor diagnosed as hives.

I would climb to the very top of the cherry tree, which put me at about the level of the peak of the roof of our house, sit in the fork where a limb branched away from the main trunk, and eat cherries and look out over the other houses — look across toward the Reservoir in the hazy distance and, in the opposite direction, across the valley of the Bronx River and over to Grasslands and the smokestacks above the county prison's laundry. (Why such huge smokestacks were needed merely to carry away the steam from washing clothes I never understood, but that's what we were told the smokestacks were for). On a summer day, I would think my metaphysical thoughts, although of course I didn't know that word then. Why is everything as it is? Could it be a little different? Could the smokestacks be a little farther apart? I wondered why, oh why I was denied the ability to fly over to Grasslands or anywhere else purely on the power of my thoughts. Or was there a thought that I just hadn't thought yet that would enable me to do this? How could I find out what that thought was? I tried as many as I could, each accompanied by the maximum of yearning, wanting, willing, that I could muster. I was not precociously scientific, but precociously self-conscious.

Years later, I knew there had been someone else like me in his love of climbing trees, namely, Robert Goddard, who is said to have been inspired to develop rocket ships by watching Fourth of July fireworks from high up in a cherry tree.

Anything to do with climbing I was interested in. I loved to watch linemen climb telephone poles, I envied them being given straps, belts, spikes that enabled them to climb without need of branches. I loved the creak of the leather as they went up, the sound of the spikes crunching into the wood, the way the men would flip their belt strap up, then climb a few steps, then flip it up again. To be able to climb for a living! The smell of creosote on telephone poles was the smell of officialness because telephones were important and belonged to people no one ever saw but who knew how to make them keep working.

Candy

Given all our current problems with kids taking drugs, I don't suppose there are many people who seriously propose banning candy from school kids, but let me tell you: it would be a bad idea, because candy was the only thing that enabled some of us to get through our childhood. The prospect of buying a piece of candy or having an ice cream was often the only reason we were able to force ourselves through the boredom and dread of yet another school day.

The only candy that was allowed in our house (with one exception) was, of course, Swiss chocolate, which, strangely enough, despite the fact that it was my parents who were extolling it, I did enjoy. But the few times a year when a package arrived from Switzerland ("From Home") — Toblerone, prism-shaped; Helvetia in its red and silver wrapper; Lindt with the picture of nuts on the sky blue wrapper — were not nearly frequent enough to keep you alive.

The one exception was candy my parents bought when they went to the Pix Theater once a week or so to see a movie. That evening I would have to have a baby sitter. But I knew that the next morning there would be a box of Walnettos waiting for me, which they had bought at the candy counter. The candies came in a box the sides of which were only half as high as the candy itself. The top was covered with cellophane, so that you could see the rectangles of candy lined up inside. They tasted like walnuts, and I loved them. Sometimes there would be a roll of Lifesavers, which were a special candy because the peppermint ones really did look like life savers: the lettering on the top made them seem official, as though issued by the U. S. Navy. I think there were also embossed ropes on the candy, which made me think of Cape Cod. The peppermint ones

stung your tongue and filled your nostrils with raw, fresh, ice cold smell. The red, green, yellow ones — cherry, lime, lemon — were another case of that impossible-to-understand miracle, solid objects that you could see through. But here they were also another kind of miracle: colors you could taste. I loved the lemon smell of the lemon ones, and the same smell from lemon lollipops. Pure, astringent, tart, sweet, candy lemon.

All other American candy my parents considered a tool of the devil. I had the distinct feeling when I was around five that to have a piece of chewing gum would be to voluntarily destroy my life — in that instant become, irrevocably, one of the Common People and therefore have no reason to remain alive. But late one afternoon, at a birthday party at Frank Fetzer's house, someone, I think a group of girls, got hold of a pack of Juicy Fruit gum and offered me a piece. I think a girl was playing piano inside the house — in a dark green room with yellow-brown light coming from a lamp — playing a piece I have always remembered, though I only recently connected it with its title: Chopin's *Heroic Polonaise*, Op. 53. It seemed to be a call to bravery and to girls that was coming from somewhere else, perhaps only from inside the music — well, not to *girls* but to a special kind of girl whom I couldn't even imagine but who would want to do the heroic things I wanted to do. I told the girls at the house that I wasn't allowed to chew gum but that I'd run home and ask my mother if it would be all right just this once. I doubt if my mother consented, but I decided to throw my life away anyway, and so, at the tender age of five, I had my first stick of chewing gum. I unfolded the silver wrapper, looked at the strange gray-brown rectangle with its delicate coat of powdered sugar, smelled the delicious smell of artificial colors and flavors — not the smell of real fruit, but of real, artificial, bad-for-you, make-believe fruit — put it in my mouth and went through the awkward business of folding over the stick and flattening it using my tongue and the roof of my mouth, and thus slowly converting it to an orthodox wad of gum. I thought it was absolutely delicious. I felt the glow that can only come from the descent into delinquency and sin and the excitement of throwing your life away. To this day, when I think of transcendent experiences of my childhood, one of them is chewing a stick of Juicy Fruit gum.

Perhaps already by then I had gotten into the habit of watching other people chew gum. Girls did it with lips closed and a sideways movement of the jaw, because this was the polite way, the smooth way, the way that said, "I am so expert at chewing this gum that I don't even think about it, but I wish you wouldn't watch me the way you are because it is vulgar." On the other hand, the Common Girls, and I'm afraid this includes Florence, my baby-sitter, chewed gum with a lot of opening and closing of the mouth and snapping of the gum (a skill that took me — what? years to learn), so that you could hardly concentrate on what was being said over the deafening racket. Some guys, mostly older ones, chewed it with their mouth closed, like a cowboy chewing tobacco. I think I preferred open mouth chewing because then you could get a whiff of the ginger-ale smell that seemed to emerge from all gum that was being chewed.

Our dealer, to use a modern term, was Mrs. Donovan, the grandmother of my classmate, Gerry Donovan. She ran the Candy Store right across — Ave. from Public School No. 1. She was Gerry Donovan's grandmother, although he didn't like to acknowledge that. She lived alone in the back of the store. You went up the three concrete steps and opened the door. When she heard the front door open and your feet clump across the floor, she would come out from her room in the back, dragging her lame foot. A dreadful sound. Despite her name, she was German, and had what to me was a hideous German kind of ugliness: big lips, a wrinkled face, a few whisps of hair hanging across her forehead, her hair in a bun at the back, like my mother's. She was one of those people I would come across again later in life who manage to keep the world in a state of uneasiness by always being in a bad mood. She would lean her big, crippled body against the counter,

and watch you survey the candies in the glass box on the counter. "mmYes?" she would ask, even though it was clear you had not made your choice. Finally you'd say, for example, "Three B-B-Bats and a Frostick". She would reach into the box, and with thick old German fingers, grasp the candy, then turn on her good foot and open the cover of the ice cream cooler and reach down and bring up the Frostick. She would slide them across the counter with a sigh and speak the price, all this done in a way that said, "Yes...yes... This too is part of the burden I bear."

Each kind of candy and ice cream had its own pleasure. In the case of Frosticks — which we also called "frosty dicks" — it was, first, the pleasure of biting through that crackly chocolate on the outside, the pieces breaking up like ice floes in the movies, then getting the creamy vanilla ice cream inside. Then sucking the ice cream smooth, to an edge, as you progressed. Then sucking every last bit of ice cream off the wet-wood-smelling stick. On a hot day, it seemed to us that we could smell the chocolate of the Frosticks in the cool air-conditioned breeze that emerged from candy and ice cream stores (not Mrs. Donovan's, though, because she didn't have air conditioning).

Bubble gum was in a class by itself. Bazooka eventually won out, although it was shaped like a lozenge, not like a baseball card, but Yankee for a while was a contender, plus the top brand, Topps. Originally, the gum was sold in flat pieces the size of the baseball and war cards that came along with it. There were linear indentations in the gum so you could break off a single piece. The gum was pink and covered with powdered sugar. It was like a magical, sweet, chewy, plastic. Needless to say, my mother was shocked by it. Ordinary chewing gum was vulgar enough, but a gum that enabled you to blow big pink bubbles that broke and then stuck to your face — this expressed the truly shocking commonness of American culture to her.

None of the later brands could compete with Topps in its rosy pink color or in the quality of the cards you found inside. There were scenes of World War II, which was then being fought (see "Trading Cards" on page 88), but also scenes of earlier historical battles.

Bubble gum also came in speckled candy gum balls which you bought out of machines for few cents each. Sometimes you got, in addition, a "prize" which was usually a charm for a charm bracelet — a little plastic golden dog or blue baseball mitt or green six-shooter.

The perpetual challenge was to blow a big bubble. You stuck your tongue into a wad of the gum, pushed it out past your teeth, then into the open air, then exhaled carefully, breathing in through your nose to get more air. If a hole appeared in the bubble, you sometimes could keep blowing hard for a while and postpone the collapse. If it burst with a snap, and your lips were dry, it stuck to them, or to the skin below your nose. The other kids stood around, cheering you on. As it got really big, there were lots of oohs and ahs. Sooner or later, of course, your success would turn to failure. Then there would be a soft splat and the wet, rubbery gum would settle back on your face, sometimes hanging from your eyebrows. You had to carefully peel it off, stuffing each sheet back into your mouth, then when it was all back in, chewing it into a consistent wad for the next attempt.

And there were B-B-Bats, rectangles of candy on a wooden stick that was little thicker than a tooth pick. I loved the pink ones, I think they were called "strawberry", though I doubt if anything remotely resembling real strawberries were among their consitituents. And Devil Dogs, practically heaven on earth: a kind of soft chocolate bread about the size of a Hershey bar but with rounded ends and a creamy, white, sweet filling. Life gained meaning briefly when I could get at that filling. And Smith Brothers cough drops: black, hard, with rough edges, which tasted like licorice and that we ate like candy, whether or not we had a cough. The two doctors depicted in a 19th century woodcut on the box presumably were the brothers. It was good to know they were

doctors. Luden's cough drops and Pine Brothers' lozenges were plastic-like, honey-colored; you could chew them. There were popsicles and creamsicles. Popsicles were merely frozen fruit juice, probably artificial, the most popular flavor by far being orange, with perhaps lime (tasting like a cold, wet, frozen version of lime Life Savers) being second. After you finished a popsicle, the stick was still wet and you got that smell of wet orange and wood, a smell that would linger as you chewed and sucked on the stick afterward until it splintered. Breyer's ice cream had a peppermint leaf design on its cups. These were Dixie cups, with a little tab you pulled up in order to lift the cover off the vanilla and chocolate ice cream inside, which you ate with a wooden spoon they supplied with the cup. The insides of the covers had photos of Hollywood stars, covered by a translucent wax paper that had to be peeled back: Buster Crabbe, Tom Mix, Gene Autry, Barbara Stanwyck, Rita Hayworth, Veronica Lake.

There were little wax figures — bottles, cartoon characters — which contained a sweet syrup. White wax, red or green fluid inside. You bit off the end and then drank the delicious, sweet syrup out of the interior. Then you chewed the wax, which retained some of the syrup taste for a while.

And there were Cokes, practically the staff of life, a basic part of our diet. No matter how hot the summer day, a Coke would give you the strength to survive it. The exterior of the Coke bottles had a permanent frosted look from the bottles being banged together for so long. Eich's Garage had Coke machines. Furthermore, in summer it was always dark and cool where the machines were, just inside the garage proper, with its masculine smell of oil and engines and rubber. The cement floor was so coated with years of grease and grime and oil that it seemed like a kind of hardened dirt.

Strangely enough, even in that remote time, the idea of recycling had entered the brains of Coca Cola executives, with the result that Cokes were a source of cash for us, because the stores would pay us I think it was two cents apiece for empty bottles. On summer weekends, the City people came up to Valhalla to picnic around the Reservoir. To us, they were "the New York City Jews", or "the kikes" as we normally referred to them, the terms being interchangeable, since we felt that people as obnoxious as they were — loud, with big families and who actually *liked* to live in the City (a sure sign of evil in itself) and who furthermore had those dreadful New York accents — deserved whatever name we felt like giving them. Since they were all slobs, they threw their Coke bottles away when they had emptied them, and so during the week we could collect them in paper bags and bring them to Eich's Garage to collect our reward.