Spring

Flower Pots

Spring brought with it the bathroom stink of fertilizer. I liked the heinie smell of the bone-meal that people put on the grass — another reminder that the *bad* thing (what you didn't like) was almost always *good*. I liked the terra cotta flower pots that people, including my mother, used — the hole in the bottom of the pot, the little hump it left on the smooth dirt after you packed the dirt inside the pot and turned the pot upside down, and gently, tenderly, pulled the pot up, leaving behind, in the soil, the smoothly formed image of the interior of the pot. At the florist's in Kensico the pots were lined up in rows on the shelves, just as they appeared in the pictures of Mr. McGregor's garden in *Peter Rabbit*. As with so many other things, it wasn't the pots themselves that I liked, it was the pots *and* what was connected with them: the color of the terra cotta *and* the rich, wet, dark, soft, dirt-smelling earth that went inside them *and* the flower that grew in that earth *and* its smell *and* the organic smell of the greenhouse or neighbor's potting shed (I seem to recall one in the woods below Wall Ave.) — all this, plus the special clothes people put on when they did gardening — wide-brimmed hat, overalls, gloves, workman's shoes — was the meaning to me of the words "flower pot". The sound of the words were also part of it: "-ot", with its abrupt stop appropriate for something that was kept in a place like a workshop. The flowers that grew in flower pots were only a small part of the story for me.

Spring also meant the return of the smell of fresh air, or so at least it seemed to me. The vanilla smell (sometimes with a trace chocolate) of pure, fresh air, the smell of blue sky — I marvelled that something from the world of Nature could ever smell so good. After all, Nature hadn't been designed for us. All through my life, this smell has made me think: well, you can't say that *every-thing* is bad. And then there was the preparation of the soil. I was almost always merely an observer, because the feeling was (and possibly it was the truth) that I didn't have the skill to do the job properly. First the hoe had to be energetically applied, chopping into the hard surface of the dirt, then breaking up the clods. But you couldn't just leave the dirt all jumbled up like that. No, you had to get the rake and make it all nice and smooth, and to this day I can see in my mind's eye the furrows coming into the leveled soil, hear the clinks of little stones on the metal tines of the rake, hear the quiet sound of the rake moving through the dirt, all the while marveling how something so orderly, so *good*, could be made out of mere dirt.

Easter

Easter wasn't quite as exciting as Christmas. (For one thing, there were fewer presents.) My mother dyed the eggs the night before; then on Easter morning she and my father hid them around the yard and in the flower gardens. Then my brother and I started the search, helped by occasional hints from my father when he saw that we were not going to find some. "There's one!" Both of us beside ourselves with excitement when we saw the blue-dyed egg nestled in the damp, fresh, green, grass of morning, I experiencing the rush of that rarest of feelings for me, *I am all right!* I can still see the blue Easter egg tin foil containing chocolate, the miracle of blue and red and dark yellow egg shells, some with a little decal showing an Easter bunny or maybe a cartoon character or a country scene, in the green grass outside, the shiny, green cellophane grass in the straw basket where we put the eggs we had found, the sulfurous aroma of the hard-boiled eggs once the shells were cracked open.

Slip-ing the Windows

But spring also brought with it a tedious chore, namely, having to "Slip" the windows. Slipit

was a lubricant to make windows move up and down more easily. The pink orange jelly came in a jar. You got a wooden stick, put a rag over one end, dipped the end into the jelly, then rubbed it up and down on the metal runners inside the window. Then you attempted to repeatedly raise and lower the window. If this was difficult, you applied more Slipit, repeatedly raised and lowered the windows again. Over and over, until the window moved relatively easily (as determined by my mother). It was a task I hated to the very depths of my soul. My parents may have paid me a few cents for each window, but that didn't change my attitude toward the work.

Summer

Polio

In the summer, along with hay fever, thunderstorms, heat, and humidity, came the fear of polio. We knew that sooner or later we wouldn't be allowed to go to Pleasantville Pool. Rye Pool was even worse, because it was where the city kids went, and, as everyone knew, they tended to carry more diseases because they were lower class, hence wild. So as I slap slap slapped around the wet concrete of any pool in my bare feet and little bathing suit — hopefully the folds would not show my penis; you always had to watch out for that when you went on the diving board — I wondered about the unseen life in the water: what were they doing now, the polio viruses? Were they working according to a master plan? Were some of them on my skin now? Or did they tend to only go after the city kids, who didn't matter so much?

It is hard to explain to those born after the development of the polio vaccine the fear that swept suburban neighborhoods in the summer in those days. My mother would sometimes say of someone — a distant relation of a friend — that they would "have to go into an iron lung". We saw pictures of these poor souls in *Life* magazine, and for a while I wasn't sure if the person was still actually alive, or if the lung was their coffin. But even worse, as far as I was concerned, was the prospect of having to wear a brace for the rest of your life, not only because the kids would laugh at you, but also because I had the idea that the shiny metal at the joints was to hold a rod that they drove through the bone of your joint (since the joint could no longer move). Apparently it didn't hurt once they had done it, but what was it like when they were drilling through your elbow or your knee?

But going to Pleasantville Pool, which required driving, since it was several miles from Valhalla, meant that we could get ice cream at the dairy next door. The place smelled of raw milk, rancid milk, like the rags in school — bad but good. I remember the wet floors, the freezing cold (or so it seemed), the silver milk cans, the rich ice cream eaten as I walked with my mother along the hot asphalt road with the trees on both sides.

Hay Fever

Along with thunderstorms and the threat of polio, summer brought hay fever. I often woke up with my eyes stuck together by a kind of crusty snot. "Ragweed", my mother always said, and I soon learned that these were the plants with yellow and white cakey flowers that looked like cauliflower and that grew in fields of grass. The yellow ones were worst, according to her. I had to wash ("bathe", in my mother's phrase) my eyes with boric acid. This was done with a blue glass cup shaped to match the contour of the eye socket. I liked the color of the glass, it made me think of lakes and oceans. And blue glass was a solid you could look through! She filled the cup with the mixture of boric acid and water, I held my face down, fit the rim into my eye socket, then, pressing it there, quickly tilted my head back. I had to keep my eye open so the liquid could soak

in everywhere, which until I learned it, always seemed to force me not to breathe. An instinctive assumption, perhaps: that to see under water means that you shouldn't breathe.

In addition to eyes that stuck closed, there was the ever-present threat of sneezing. I would sneeze four or five times in quick succession, worrying each moment where the air for the next sneeze could come from if I didn't have time to breathe. Then the wiping of nostrils with an already soaked handkerchief as the tears streamed down from my eyes. Then waiting for the next attack. I knew that all this was just another affliction of mama's boys.

At night I had to sleep on a a special pillow — softer and thinner than a normal pillow — that was made from some kind of synthetic fiber that didn't collect dust.

Fireflies

Certain pleasures I cannot deny: fireworks, parachutes, airplanes, Christmas, and fireflies. Fireflies would come out on humid summer evenings, winking on and off a green-white light that seemed marvelous to me. And we would chase after them, catching them in our cupped hands. Was it the same glow-in-the-dark stuff as on the badges we ordered from the radio shows? How could there be a light which you couldn't shine on something? Why didn't it shine more, like a real light? Why did they wink on and off like that? I wondered why you couldn't use them instead of light bulbs — just fill big jars with them. I asked my father some of these questions, and he gave his calm, measured, answers — something about phosphorescence — which I didn't understand. Which was the way it should be: the explanation of something as strange as this shouldn't be comprehensible. We collected them in canning jars with holes punched in the lids, so they could breathe, putting some leaves in for them to eat. Then, at the encouraging of my mother and father, we eventually let them go.

Fireflies and ladybugs were the two "good" bugs. The verse made it clear that ladybugs had a hard time of it:

"Ladybird, ladybird
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone..."

Fall

Fall meant raking leaves, a task I hated. Most of the time my father insisted that they not be burned, but instead be put in the pile behind the back fence, near the path leading to Clinton St., where they were supposed to rot and turn into soil, but where, instead, they seemed to be preserved, wet and dark and shiny, year after year. Once in a while, somehow, as a special treat, I suppose, I was allowed to burn them in the front gutter, and then the air was filled with delicious smoke. Dead leaves also provided us with another source of make-believe tobacco. We would crumble them into the bowls of our homemade pipes. A persistent thought, as I piled the leaves in the gutter, was: suppose a kid were lying under the pile, and a car came and, not seeing him, parked on top of him. What would it be like to be crushed by the front wheel of a car?

Another onerous task of fall was hanging storm windows. I see my father, cigar in his mouth, lifting the large, heavy wood-and-glass rectangles, and with difficulty finding the hooks in the window frame on which they were hung. It was clear he didn't enjoy this work. I can't recall what my particular task was in it.

On Thanksgiving, we went through a ritual which I always tried to make be what I felt it ought to be, namely, something happy, but which it never was. With the house filled with the smell of turkey and my mother's sighs (so that we would all know how hard she was working to make the day a success even though no one appreciated it), there was, first, the lighting of the balsam incense in the chimney of a little toy log cabin, which my mother always urged me to do. The roof lifted up like a lid, the little round pellets of incense being kept inside. You put one in the chimney, then lit the pellet with a match. Immediately the air was filled with a delicious pine smell, which I loved. I imagined the cabin being in the cold woods, all the trees bare, but I inside around my fire, everything made of wood.

At some point, my mother lighted what she called "the hurricane lamp": a lamp that to me looked like the kind of lamp they must have had in whaling ships, with its old-fashioned, kerosene-lamp-shaped glass chimney and its shiny brass base. It had a candle inside, and when the yellow glow of the flame reflected from the brass, I thought of the sea stories I had read, and of the captains snug in their warm cabins.Then, in the afternoon, an hour or so before dinner, my father and I went for our walk in a little patch of woods south of the Village along the Bronx River Parkway, or more correctly, he went along with me. I had as my Gadget an alarm clock winder, which I imagined being able to use like a cigarette lighter to start twigs burning. The weather was usually cold and gray, it always seemed about to rain. The pine needles were all brown, the little shrubs and small trees barren. I asked him if there were any turkeys in the woods. He would patiently explain that no, they needed much bigger woods to live. (I would try to make myself feel that it was *good* that there were no big woods there.) I walked down along along the little creek which was the Bronx River, he waiting patiently on the bank above. The day was barren and empty. I felt that it shouldn't be and that the reason was that I hadn't arrived at the right thought, the right feeling that would make it as happy as it was for other people.

For him, it went without saying that being able to build a fire in a fireplace — doing it properly — was something everyone, well, every man and boy, should know how to do. I can see him kneeling before the open, ash-smelling fireplace, his knees cracking, since he was heavy, and he didn't often kneel, his cigar in his mouth, face red, emitting occasional sounds of effort, as he wadded up the newspaper, sheet by sheet, and placed it between the andirons; then came the kindling; then the one or two logs. It was all done deftly, as an engineer would do it. And, of course, the fire always burned once he lit it (underneath, so the flames could ignite the kindling). Afterward, but only when necessary, he turned the logs, expertly, with the poker. If I wanted to put on wet wood or green wood, freshly cut from one of our projects in the woods, he would say, simply, "No, no, you make it smoke." (Sometimes, during the day, when there was no fire burning, my brother and I would stick our heads inside the fireplace, pull down the damper, and look up the chimney and see the sky at the other end. "That's where the smoke goes!")

Of course, only my father could carve the Thanksgiving turkey. When it was time, he would walk around to the end of the table where my mother had placed the turkey in its glistening brown skin, and then he began to sharpen the carving knife. For this he used a long, thin metal sharpener that reminded me of a type of file he had in the basement called a "rat-tail file", except that the surface of this was less rough. The handle was black, and had a circular silver guard, as on a sword, at the upper edge of the handle. The handle of the carving knife was a warm, polished brown and yellow bone (which made me think of candlelight) with marks in it showing it had been carved, and had a slight curve so that it could be held more comfortably. With only an occasional glance at what he was doing, as though he had all this memorized, my father ran the shiny blade of the carving knife down the sharpener, one side of the blade down one side, the other side

down the other, quickly, deftly, again and again, perhaps turning the blade sometimes for some mysterious reason, producing a precise metallic sound — *wheet!*, *wheet!* — that told you that this blade was going to be *sharp* when he was done. Then, as the rest of us watched, he began cutting into the turkey: thin, perfect slices that my mother then forked onto another plate for distribution to each of ours. The gravy boat sat in the middle of the table, and I am not sure but that she, and not my brother or I, ladled the gravy — just the right amount — onto our meat and mashed potatoes. And then my father allowed me, and perhaps my brother, to have a little Christian Brothers wine in the water in our glasses, because it was a special day.

Winter

Sometimes the snow, in fact the whole outdoors, had a sweet smell which made me think of a bathroom. I was never sure what caused it. Perhaps car exhaust. But there were moments that suddenly became immortal for me when that smell was in the air.

In the winter the bottles in the milkman's wire baskets seemed to rattle with a clearer, sharper sound. The ice between the bottles fell to the sidewalk and mingled with the ice that was already there. Since the bottles were packed in ice in the milkman's truck, I assumed that the special sound meant that the bottles were happier when there was ice, or at least snow, everywhere outside.

The miracle of snow: how was it possible? Folded and white. The way that sunlight looked on it when it had been churned by the snowplow. The high-piled banks on the side of the road, the irregularly-shaped balls. This big cold silent stuff that was soft, that you could make marks in that stayed there, this stuff you could form into things — snowmen, snowballs (as described in "Games"). The taste of snow on your mittens, the taste of wool in the icy water you sucked out of your mittens. When I went out into the snow, I had to wear galoshes, which I always called "boots", because galoshes sounded like a girl's term ("goshes"). The buckles intrigued me: black, shiny; you put a kind of metal loop through one of several rectangular holes, then bent the loop back and it stayed fastened. Sometimes, if you had on thick socks, you had to use the last hole in order to be able to bend the loop back. The jingle of those buckles as you walked around, especially if a few of them were unbuckled, sounded like a cowboy's spurs.

The things our mothers taught us: how to hold your sleeve when you put on a jacket over it.

The things we learned for ourselves: to prevent a sneeze, you could stick your thumb in your nose, and pinch the side of your nose against your index finger. Or you could stretch down the skin below nose by grimacing, keeping your mouth closed, like when you tried not to vomit. And you could will yourself not to get a cold: "*I will not get a cold now! I will not get a cold now!...*"

Christmas was a time for visitors, either Swiss friends of my parents or businessmen that my father dealt with. Sometimes the Labhardts came. They were the owners of Borsari Tank Corporation, the company that my father was president of. Mr. Labhardt was one of those visitors who were in that special category, along with Uncle Gus, of people who seemed to be genuinely fond of my brother and me. Mr. Labhardt liked to draw. On a cold December day in 1945, he sat at our dining room table and made a pencil drawing of a cabin in the snow. It hung on the wall in my mother's house until her death, with its carefully written date. I, kneeling on a chair, watched him as he worked. He used a precise, mechanical pencil like engineers used, the kind you had to rotate the barrel of to make more lead come out. It seemed he went over each spot again and again, particularly the branches of the tree next to the cottage, and yet the pencil marks never took on a

black shiny look, as they would have if I had done that. (You worked on the easy thing, the fun thing, over and over.) He talked to me as he worked.

Guests sometimes brought candy as gifts for my brother and me. Swiss milk chocolate — Toblerone is the only brand I remember, with its triangular shape, nuts, dark chocolate. I didn't like it as much as the other type (possibly Helvetia) that came in a flat red pack, red, with silver tinfoil showing at each end, and which was real milk chocolate. And then, once in a while, marzipan, which my mother also sometimes bought for us. It came in the shapes of little animals and fruits and I loved the bready, sweet, sugary substance. In memory, I hear the voice of one of our male Swiss visitors pronouncing its German name, *MARtsipahn*.

And Christmas carols : when I hear "White Christmas" I can still feel the crayons we used in school to draw Christmas pictures. From an early age, I didn't much like "Silent Night". I always liked "The Little Drummer Boy" (which was written when I was age 12) and "Up on the Housetop", which we sang in school:

"Up on the housetop reindeer pause[1],
Out jumps good old Santa Claus,
Down thru the chimney with lots of toys,
All for the little ones' Christmas joys.

Ho! ho! ho! Who wouldn't go!
Ho! ho! ho! Who wouldn't go!
Up on the housetop, click, click, click,
Down through the chimney with good Saint Nick."

along with, I think,

"You'd better watch out,
You'd better not cry,
You'd better not pout,
I'm telling you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.

"He knows if you are sleeping,
He knows if you're awake,
He knows if you've been bad or good,
So be good for goodness' sake."

"Joy to the World" was all right, but I had a problem with "Noël": "The first Noël, and the angel did say, was to certain poor shepherds..." Now what did *that* mean? Why not "...and the angel did say, to-oo certain poor shepherds..." Now that made sense. Or perhaps "The first Noël, what the angel did say, was (to certain poor shepherds)..." I decided that "certain" was a verb, and that the poor shepherds were certained, whatever that meant.

1. Here, it seemed, reindeer had paws, whereas in all the other songs and stories, they had hooves. I just accepted it — maybe they used different reindeer for this song.

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" I disliked from the very first moment I heard it sung by Gene Autry, in that twangy Western accent of his. With age I have grown to hate virtually all Christmas carols, and I don't understand why all old people don't hate them as well, since they have heard them for sixty, seventy or more years. I loved the toasty pine smell of Christmas trees, and the idea that the hot bulbs — red, green, blue, white — were somehow making that smell. First we had to set up the tree: carefully lift it into its holder, then tighten the three screws but not so tight that they would go into the soft bark. Decorating was under the control of my mother, and like everything else that she was in charge of, it was a serious business. It had to be done right. The ornaments were the best you could buy and, she made clear, they were in constant peril of being damaged by the kind of handling that boys give things. I remember the white crusty lines, presumably to imitate snow, on the silver balls, the designs on the other balls, the way they all caught the entire room and tree in their shine. There was always a sparkling string of silver tinsel, a little tarnished with age, that had to be wound down around the tree from the top after all the decorations were hung on the branches. Last of all was the angel, or sometimes just a long spire, which had to be put on top of the tree, an operation requiring a chair and lots of wringing of hands and cries of "Be careful!". And then, when the lights were turned on, they warmed the pine branches, making them give off a beautiful, toasty smell.

Christmas season was a time for fires in the fireplace. My father clearly considered the ability to lay a fire properly to be essential for any man or boy. Knees cracking, cigar smoke streaming out behind him, he would kneel in front of the open fireplace, and do the job the same way he did everything else, namely, the right way. First he would crumple the newspaper sheets (old *Reporter Dispatch*es or *New York Times*es) and place them between the brass andirons. Then a little kindling, with air spaces between the pieces, then heavier sticks, and finally a couple of logs. Then light a match and touch it to the paper underneath, not on top, as a naive boy is first inclined to do. The fire always burned.

For me — I don't know if this applied to my brother — Christmas was an exciting but not a cheerful time. Business acquaintances and various Swiss visitors had to be entertained, which meant that I had to behave. My brother and I had to buy gifts for our parents. I can't remember what we bought for our father: probably a few Robert Burns cigars that my mother picked up at the store, and that we merely paid for out of our allowance money. Our gift to her was always the same: Pine Sol bath oil, which came in a thick, cylindrical bottle, the dark green liquid inside smelling like concentrated pine needles. We always went through the same ritual when it came time to decide what to buy for her. One of us: "What would you like for Christmas?" She, wrinkling her nose: "Oh, nothing," then " Just some Pine", and we would trudge to the drug store and without the slightest interest or delight or pleasure, buy a bottle of the stuff and have it gift wrapped. She provided the labels to put on the package.

The term "stockings" is entirely too genteel for the thick, knitted red imitations that my mother made and hung on hooks above the fireplace, with great calling-of-attention to her handiwork and to the tentative possibility that on Christmas morning they might, just might, contain things that little boys would like.

Then there was the torture of waiting for Christmas morning and the possibility of saying or doing something that would result in presents being taken away. My mother kept us on tenterhooks. "You don't get anything if you don't behave." She made it clear that in the last minute it could all be snatched away. Christmas Eve: I made prolonged explorations of the phenomenon of time passing unbearably slowly toward a moment that could not be waited for. How long was a second? How long was a minute? How long — tell me, so I can know how to get through it! — is

the time from when we went to sleep to the time we were allowed to get up and Go Downstairs? "Can we go down now?" Muffled response from their bedroom: "No. Not yet. It's too early." "When?" "Later. Go back to sleep." Impossible task. How long is the right amount of time to wait? How can you find out? Surely now is long enough! "Can we go down now?" Then, at last, the glory of the living room in the cold morning, the Christmas tree regally displaying the wealth at its feet, the packages piled in disorderly order, the stockings hanging on each little brass knob at the sides of the fireplace screen. "Look!" "Look!" my brother and I shouted back and forth to each other. If my mother or father came down, still muffled in sleep, they would invariably say to us not to rip open the wrapping paper but instead to admire it first, then carefully undo the ribbons, lay them aside, then open the paper. Perhaps it can be used again. Yes, yes, OK. And animal claws would rip apart the paper like the flesh of newly-killed prey.

I must say that we usually got what we asked for, plus, unfortunately, far too many socks and educational toys and books. Once I got a snake made of jagged segments that when you held it made it move in an unpredictable and vaguely lifelike though jerky manner. It was dark green on top, light green underneath, and had cruel, red eyes.

The End of the World

One summer evening, out on the street in front of our house, the kids and several adults were talking about rumors that the world was going to end. They said that cars were parked on the hills over at Grasslands, behind the smokestacks. We looked across the valley at the red sky. The adults seemed to be taking it rather calmly, but I thought it was entirely possible the rumors were correct. I felt that I was too young to die. I pictured the people at Grasslands standing outside their cars, the red glow of the sunset huge behind them. I wondered how exactly the end would come, I mean what would actually happen. No one said anything about that, I suppose because, once you knew the world was going to end, it didn't much matter what the sequence of events would be. I somehow had it in mind that the ones over in Grasslands were going to get it first, they would be devoured by fire from the sky before we were. There were conflicting opinions as to the exact hour when this was supposed to occur. Some people said that night, others that it would be the next day, around one in the afternoon. But nothing happened, and so the excitement was soon forgotten. My parents said nothing on the subject.

Grammar School

In September of 1941, just after I turned five, I started school. There was some talk about my starting the previous year, but they decided I was too young — that I wouldn't be able to "adjust". "He is not well-adjusted" was a criticism my mother would make of a boy she had taken a disliking to. You knew that *that* poor bastard was going to have a hard time of it. Or sometimes she would say, " I wonder if he is normal..." That too meant the poor guy had no future.

There was only one choice as far as a school was concerned, namely, Valhalla Public School No. 1 on Columbus Ave., less than a mile from our house.

Our Principal

Mr. Ronnei, the principal, lived on Wall Ave. in what my mother always referred to as "the modern house", because it had a flat roof and and no shingles. The upper half was covered with dark, stained wood, and the lower half with stone. There was a stone pathway with a pipe railing

winding up to the house from the street, and low bushes on both sides instead of a front lawn. On the few occasions I caught a glimpse inside, for example, when I collected for the newspaper years later, I saw a cool interior with a white pipe railing on the bannister going up to the second floor.

Mr. Ronnei was tall, dignified, quiet, with thin hair slicked back like someone in a foreign movie. His wife was deaf — I think she taught at a school for the deaf somewhere in the area — and I assumed that this affliction was the reason she always smiled at whoever came to the door — it was her way of covering up her handicap. She had dark hair and small deep set eyes and always seemed delighted to be so privileged as to be the wife of a school principal and to live in a modern house. In memory her face reminds me of that of the British actress who is occasionally seen in British comedies, for example, as Dodo MacIntosh, the friend of Rumpole's wife.

The Ronneis were elegant people. To me they belonged in the same category as my parents' friends Uncle Gus and Claire: sophisticated, sleek, always nice to kids. (Neither one of these couples had children of their own. That was probably the reason they were nice to other people's kids, I thought.) The one or two times I was sent to the principal's office in school, I never had any fear of Mr. Ronnei. Here was an adult you could trust, who would always treat you decently. (Years later, a new school building was named after him.)

Kindergarten

My kindergarten teacher was Miss Toy. (A boy from a better family would never make jokes about a teacher's name; in fact, he wouldn't even notice that a teacher's name was a little unusual.) I remember her as a tall, thin, woman, with black hair, traces of gray, who took seriously her responsibility of overlooking her charges (that is exactly the right phrase in this case). I remember the gray rags, stinking of rancid milk, which we used to wipe up the milk that at least one kid was sure to spill each day. For some reason, the rags were kept next to the radiator, which only made them stink the more. We had milk and cookies at ten in the morning. Opening the milk cartons; peeling the wax cardboard back; or trying to push the tab down (causing the milk to spurt up sometimes) in order to get the straw in the hole — always a problem. If you bent the straw too much, it prevented the milk from coming through. Your mouth was the way it normally was, you pursed your lips, and then suddenly your mouth was filled with cold, sometimes a chocolate cold. Then you had to figure out how to breathe at the same time. Blowing out through your nostrils not only didn't make the milk come through the straw, but also made you have to take the straw from your mouth so you could breathe.

We may have taken a nap in the afternoon — I don't remember. I do remember that everything was extremely important. The aim of going to school was to show that you knew how not to do the wrong thing, because those who did would bring unimaginable shame on themselves and on their family, and, although I didn't think of it in precisely these terms, they would also no longer have any reason to live.

First Grade

In the fall of 1942, I entered first grade, which was taught by Miss Gill. She was what I would now call cuddly, curvy. She had a funny walk because of her big bottom. She was all feminine, with her pursed lips, big boobs, tinkle tinkle perfume, whistled *s*'s. If someone had asked me why she spoke that way, I would probably have replied that it made what she said "better". She pronounced words that way because she was a teacher. She got to make everything special because that was one of the things women were allowed to do.

In her class we learned to read, beginning with the words that adults of that generation have tucked away somewhere in the backs of their minds: "Mac sees Muff. Muff sees Mac. See Mac run. See Muff run." The soft-covered books were large, with soft white pages, lots of colorful pictures of the smiling kids in the story, a dog, houses on green hills, everything happy. Gale Carroll, who was in the class, told me many years later[1] that one day Miss Gill called on me and asked me to pronounce "determined". I had taken seriously the rule, "Sound it out", and so I responded with "*dee*ter-mynde". Gail said that Miss Gill didn't seem angry — I had done the wrong thing for the right reason.

I think from the very beginning it was emphasized that we should read silently, without moving our lips. From then on, we viewed anyone who moved their lips as being one of the dumb kids. We were not surprised, for example, when we noticed an Italian kid reading this way. Only in old age did I learn that reading silently was relatively new in Western culture. St. Augustine (354-430) first witnessed someone reading silently when he observed St. Ambrose (340-397) reading in his study[2]. St. Augustine thought the practice so remarkable that he described it at length in his *Confessions*. Not until the 900s did reading silently become usual in the West[3]. So when I was learning to read the practice was only about 1,000 years old.

One day — how do children know such things? What words are said? — we knew something had happened. There was sadness in the air. Miss Gill was not her sparkling self. Later, we somehow learned that her fiancé had been killed in the War. Some time after that, she left her teaching position and joined the WACs.

Second Grade

In second grade, the teacher was Miss Conro of the truly enormous breasts. She was a friend of my mother's. My mother, with that shake of her head that said boys shouldn't know these things, would occasionally mention her married name, which, I gathered we weren't supposed to use because she was divorced, or because her husband was dead, but in any case there was shame in that part of her life. She was a friend of my mother's, and so, whereas on the one hand, this might mean I could hope for special treatment in her class — easier A's — on the other hand it meant I had to keep it a secret from the other kids, and, of course, it also meant that I was under the daily scrutiny of someone who could report everything to my mother. She seemed to creak as she walked under the weight of those breasts. (At that time, I wasn't at all knowledgeable about the apparatus — bras, girdles — that women used to maintain control of all this extra equipment they carried around.) I loved her perfume. A chance to go up to her desk was a chance to smell that tantalizing aroma, as was a visit to her house, or of her to our house. Anything to get a whiff of that special, witchy garden smell. She wore thin, rimless glasses, and just enough jewelry to give some of her movements a tinkling accompaniment. She had an elegant, careful way of walking that made you know that she was special.

In her class, I worked on a painting that I still remember, mainly because, for some reason, it had found favor in her eyes. It was a water-color of a steamship seen from the side, with smoke coming from the smokestacks. Lots of browns and blues. What there was in this painting that caused her to praise me for it I had no idea, but I felt enormously proud and special. Clearly, my

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1. At the 50th Reunion of the 1954 White Plains High School graduating class, which we were both in. She had been rather plain in primary school but she had become beautiful in old age.
2. Manguel, Alberto, *A History of Reading*, Viking, N.Y., 1996, pp. 42-43.
3. Ibid

one task was to make the painting even better, and the only way I could think of to do that was to paint it and repaint it, piling the same color onto the same color, over and over. The painting may have been shown at the next parents' visiting night. I am not sure. In the fall, we were shown how to place a maple leaf on green paper, and then spatter some sort of white liquid onto it with a brush. When the leaf was removed, a silhouette of it remained.

Grades were all important. Good grades — meaning A's, with B's being barely acceptable — meant that there was a reason for you to be allowed to remain alive. My mother had certain expressions she used when talking about other kids: so and so was "tops" in school. "All A's" was another. She would roll her eyes when she mentioned that about another kid. Later on, toward the end of junior high school, and then into high school, she would speak of some son or daughter of some respectable person she knew, as having graduated "magna cum laude", a phrase I learned to detest. "*Magna* cum laude. Oh, yes." With the correct Latin pronunciation. She would say it with a tone of voice and an expression that said, "if only there were some hope that you would do the same, *then* you wouldn't always be so deserving of our contempt". In the depths of my soul, I bought it hook, line and sinker. In the early years of primary school, if one day the teacher had announced that 2 + 2 was 5, and that she shouldn't have to explain the reasons why, at least not to the *better* students, I would have unhesitatingly joined the ranks of those who believed that 2 + 2 = 5 (in other words, the exceptional ones). I would have found a way to believe it in the firm conviction that being able to do that was what made you a *really* exceptional student.

When report cards came out, which was every six weeks, that was judgment day. Once, I remember being proud that I had gotten all A's My mother looked at me with that girlish smile, a kind of blushing smile, and said, "But it's not all A+'s is it?", the expression saying almost, "*That* would be enough to make a mother do naughty things with her son". Or maybe her blushing was merely embarrassment at actually voicing this desire for perfection.

In our house, the perfect student was always present. I felt his presence, and hated him: he always sat up straight, always did his homework after school, always loved his teachers, always did the right thing.

What an enormous step forward it was for mankind to learn the difference between the What and the How! In those years we kids, and I'm sure our teachers, had no idea of such a thing. The form *was* the substance. I didn't doubt for a minute that the perfect handwriting of the teachers, the way they formed the letters on the blackboard, was part of what made it correct. I had no conscious awareness that the writing was *about* something, that it *stood for* something, and that it didn't matter what your handwriting was like as far as representing the thing was concerned. The excellence, the correctness, lay in the handwriting. To this day, I am easily intimidated by a woman's handwriting or printing. If, at a political meeting, a woman gives me her name and phone number written in an impossibly elegant hand, I immediately know, *This one is boss*. In her home life, on the job, here, she knows who runs things.

At the start of each school year, your parents gave you a pencil box — if you were a good student — if they wanted you to be a good student — if your being a good student was something they were concerned about. Inside were little gutters to hold several different kinds of pencils, and there were different compartments for erasers. The soft top came down and was fastened in place by a press-in button in front. (You might also get a pencil box for your birthday or at Christmas.)

We learned to write with what to us were huge yellow pencils. They were made of cedar (though we didn't know that's what it was) and had thick, soft, lead. The cedar smell of pencils

and the smell of the teacher's perfume: these smells were the smell of school, the smell of the subjects we studied — they were part of the difficulty of the subject matter, along with the difficulty of trying to form the letters perfectly. All were one. The idea that the smells and the perfection of the form of the letters were separate from the content, that even imperfectly made letters would not change the content, was not conceivable. The shiny yellow paint on the pencil ended in a wavy border where the wood sloped to a point, and this persisted after you sharpened the pencil. Why was that? Probably because pencils were one of the good things, and thus had to have that special thing. (The pencil sharpener was mounted on the window sill. You stood there, looking out the window as you turned the handle. I can't recall if we had to raise our hand to get permission to get up and go sharpen a pencil.) When we had no pencil sharpener, we peeled away the wood around the lead with our fingers.

The paper was yellow, with thin blue lines. Little bits of wood and other remnants of trees could be seen embedded in it. You bent over your paper, biting your tongue, and tried to sculpt, carve, letters that looked like the perfect ones on a paper chart across the top of the blackboard.

As I recall, the other end of the pencils did not always have an eraser, so you had to resort to a seperate eraser from your pencil box. To get a nice, smooth erasure with no smears, you used a gum eraser, but these left behind large rubber crumbs which you then had to blow away with several breaths, *whh*!, *whh*!, and then brush the remainder off the paper with the lower part of your hand. You went through gum erasers in nothing flat. It was heavy work, learning to write!

Among the many reasons why teachers were better than students was that their handwriting was beautiful, flawless, with graceful female curves. To become good in school, to learn, was to be able to make your letters like the teachers' and like the chart above the blackboard. And for years, prior to tests, and when a writing assignment had been given, the cry would go up: "Does penmanship count?"

It was the same with doing your numbers. To be good at arithmetic was to be able to write the numbers well. The more perfectly you made each numeral, a "5", say, the more nearly it was a real, a perfect five. Part of the essence of the number "2" was how smoothly and elegantly you made the loop at the bottom. The teacher made her numerals better than we did, therefore... I had this feeling all the way through college. I envied how perfectly math professors wrote their symbols, wished I could write them that carefully, because then I would be better at math. To this day, when I think of all the centuries since the birth of Christ, I see the numbers visually arranged as they probably were on the blackboard of some classroom in the early '40s: the first century high and on the left, then below it the 100s, then below it the 200s, then the 300s, down to the 600s, after which the centuries start to rise as they move gradually to the right, until they reach the 1200s (where the Magna Carta is). Then they descend, still moving toward the right, down to the 1600s. The year 1700 is hooked on to the end of 1699, 1800 is hooked onto 1799, the decades rising irregularly now, until the mid 1800s, after which they again descend. The 20th century decades are side-by-side. The 21st century is hooked onto 1999.

Every fall, the smells of school greeted us: the rancid-milk-soaked rags, the smell of fresh shellac on the desks, with its vaguely heinie smell, the shellac immortalizing, encasing in amber, the black markings, initials, names, painstakingly carved into the desks by past generations of students. And the delicious cedar smell of pencils, and of library paste with its strange crumbs and lumps, which was kept in an enormous jar, and which we scooped out with flat wooden spatulas and smeared on the back of the Christmas trees we had outlined on thick green paper, so that we could paste them onto the background paper, all white, because it was snowing outside. The paste

stuck to your fingers, to the top of the desk, to your artwork, and soon dried, so that after one of these art sessions you were always rubbing your fingers together trying to get the brittle stuff off.

And the smell of mimeographed copies, with their blue-purple ink. I recall a teacher asking me to help her once: I think my job was to turn the handle of the machine, and I stood there drinking in the alcohol smell of the ink as the machine clanked out its copies that you couldn't touch for a while, until the ink had dried.

All these smells were the smells of school, the smell of arithmetic and writing and spelling and geography and history — the smell of doing things right.

Lunch in the cafeteria: all of us sitting at big tables. You opened your lunch box, which was a rectangular metal box, probably with a Walt Disney cartoon on it, and rounded edges and corners, or else a workman's lunch box, with a rectangular box below, and a rounded, half cylindrical top to hold the thermos bottle. This latter kind was usually black. Then the crackle of the wax paper as you unfolded it to see if your mother had given you anything interesting that day. There was always a piece of fruit, typically an apple in my case. And paper napkins. Everyone looked to see what the others had in their lunch boxes. You could buy your lunch, but for me that was a radical choice, because it meant I preferred the cafeteria cooking to my mother's. In memory the sandwich my mother packed for me was occasionally peanut butter and delicious grape jelly, with the tiny seeds inside it, but I doubt if my mother would have packed such marginal food for her son to eat at lunch.There was an ongoing worry, God knows why, that we were being served horsemeat. A kid would sit down at a table with his tray of cafeteria food, start on the hamburger or meat loaf, suddenly stop chewing and say, "Hey. This is horsemeat!" Others who had been eating the same would take a bite, chew thoughtfully, probably come to the same conclusion, say, "Jesus Christ!" and throw down their forks in disgust. Then the fevered discussion would begin about how they were trying to poison us, they didn't give a damn what they fed us, etc. The only possible source of this suspicion that I can imagine is that during the War there must have been occasional news about people somewhere, perhaps in Europe, being forced to eat horsemeat because of the unavailability of beef. In any case, we had little trouble believing that the school would give us this inferior, and to us inedible, meat if it deemed it necessary to do so.

Coming home after school, living for that peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread, the purple grape jam bleeding into the white. That and a glass of milk and life could be endured for another hour or so.

Third Grade

In third grade, our teacher was Miss Ray, a thin, kindly old lady who, as it happened, was the aunt of Jackie Ray, the kid who used to make appointments for me to get beaten up.

In grammar school, the toilets had no doors. The explanation we passed among ourselves was that the school authorities wanted to make sure you didn't play with yourself while you were taking a shit.

"The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker' judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its system of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power. The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation; it is, by its

very nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formulation of knowledge that this very economy needs." — Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1979, p. 304.

I would endure almost any discomfort rather than have to sit there with my stink spreading through the boys' room and the kids looking in and making remarks as they passed to and from the urinals. "Sure stinks in here! Pee-yew!" I tried to force myself to shit without sound and without smell. I flushed immediately after the plop of the stool into the water, but of course you had to make sure no one noticed you were doing that, because that would have shown you up as a fairy.

When you stood at the urinal, you had to keep your eyes fixed on the wall in front of you, because if anyone even suspected that you had looked to the side, they would know that you had tried to see the other guy's thing, which meant you were queer.

Fourth Grade

In the fourth grade, I got into an argument with Miss Plamondon about something. Apparently she had made me stand in the cloakroom, which was the standard punishment and for some reason that made my mother furious. For several days I was in the midst of a running battle between her and my teacher. It felt strange to have my mother side with me on something. Thereafter my mother hated Miss Plamondon.

I remember very little of what we studied. The most boring subject was geography. Where did adults find such boring things? I wondered. Only a person with a talent for loving boredom could be a teacher. Over and over, it seems now, we studied New York State. City after city: Johnstown, shoes, something or other, tanning (why did they call it "tanning"? why was it important?), the Mohawk Valley... New York was the most boring state in the world, I thought.

We also seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time learning the difference between Doric and Ionic and Corinthian columns. Why this was important I hadn't the slightest idea. I assumed it was because it was Greek. Then there was Triangle Trade and lots about the early colonists. This I felt better about because the colonists lived in the woods in log cabins, but still, why were we spending so much time on people so remote from us, people who shot turkeys to eat, made no sense to me. All I can remember of of the poetry we read (or heard read) in those years is the first two lines from Robert Louis Stevenson's, "The Wind":

"I saw you toss the kites on high
And blow the birds about the sky..."

I liked the image, liked the peculiar way the words seemed to go with the image. I remember the thin book of these poems, and that a woman teacher, standing near the window, read from it (looking up at the class a lot, since she knew the poems by heart, being a teacher) as we looked at the words on the page before us.

I remember in a math class — in memory, this occurred before junior high school — the teacher speaking of a circle as "the locus of points equidistant from a point". I immediately started wondering, Why *locus*? "Locus means place", she explained, but that didn't make it any clearer at all. It sounded like *locus*t. Those great men of the past who thought up all this difficulty must have seen a connection between points, circles around points, and those bugs that

looked like grasshoppers. It was obvious to these ancient men though extremely strange to us. (That's how difficult math was: if you really understood it, you could see how these things were really connected, and you could also understand why things were called what they were.) But this difficulty didn't seem to bother anyone else, and the teacher never explained what the connection was. Why not just say "the place of all points equidistant from a point"? But why make it even that complicated? Why not just say, "A circle is what you get if you put the point of a compass into a piece of paper, then draw a circle"? Or, "...then make the other point go round until it's back where it started"?

Fifth Grade

In fifth grade our teacher was Miss Fiore, an "older woman". God knows how old she really was. She was rather formal, without humor, but not a danger.

Was she the teacher I remember who had a desk calendar, turning the pages when something had to be done on some day in the future, perhaps some assignment to be turned in? Ever since, when I buy a desk calendar, I always see that teacher with her serious expression, sitting at her desk, frowning, turning the pages on the two big metal loops. For art class at about that time we had a teacher — a no-nonsense middle-aged woman named Mrs. Abele (pronounced "able") — whom I remember solely because she made us sit up straight when we were drawing. She told us in no uncertain terms that you couldn't draw anything, not even an apple, unless you sat straight up in your chair, with the bottom edge of the paper parallel to the edge of your desk. I didn't believe her for a moment, because when I drew a picture on my own, the paper was usually at some crazy angle, sometimes with the *sides* of the paper parallel to the edge of the table or desk. Sometimes I lay on my stomach on the floor. But furthermore even when I drew the way she demanded, I couldn't make things look real. Thereafter, I hated art.

During grammar school, at one point, we were given reproductions of famous paintings that we had to paste onto 8-1/2 x 11-inch pieces of paper. The reproductions were like over-size stamps, a few inches on a side, with serrated edges. The only two I can now remember were Rosa Bonheur's "The Horse Fair" and Thomas Gainsborough's "The Blue Boy". For me the painter's name was part of the picture — the name somehow explained the picture. (I wasn't aware how odd it was that a woman had painted a famous painting.)We made papier-mâché puppets by cutting newspapers into strips, wetting them, adding library paste (its smell was half the pleasure of the whole process for me), then making a head with indentations for eyes and a long scrawny chicken neck. Then, when the paste dried, we painted a face on the head — oh, good enough for German Expressionists but not for me!: our family had friends (the Kuntzes) who were professional puppeteers, for God's sakes, and they made *their* puppets out of *wood*, not out of scraps of wet newspaper.

When it came to clothes, I knew that I needed only three things to be happy: high-tops (leather boots that went up to just below the knee and (most important!) had a pocket-knife holder near the top, though I knew it was too small for my pocket knives. High-tops made the boy who wore them an outdoorsman, a real man. Second, I needed knickers[1]. Everything would be OK if I had knickers. With them, everything was neat and in its place, the lower ends tucked into your long socks that came up to the knee, everything woolen, brown, ready for fall. Third, I needed a workman's cap, also of rough cloth, with a brim that you could stick a pencil into, as the stock clerks

1. Note to British readers: the American meaning of the term is not the same as the British one.

did. With your high-tops, pocket knife (no matter where you carried it), your knickers and your workman's cap, you were ready for anything. Unfortunately, I was allowed only the pocket knife.

Hearing Tests

Once a year or so, we all had to take hearing tests. We sat together at tables in a small room, where we were each given a pencil, a piece of lined paper with several columns on it, and a pair of earphones. After receiving a few words of basic instruction from the teacher in charge, we had to put on the earphones, and then wait. Soon we heard something that sounded like a needle being put down on a scratchy record, and a woman's voice that said, "Now write the numbers that you hear in the first column". As I recall, her voice gradually faded as she spoke each sequence of several digits, the fading increasing with each column. The last digits of the last column sounded as though she were very far away, the noise on the record being now in the foreground. We strained to hear what now seemed like the crystal clear tones of her voice. As with all tests, I was extremely nervous taking this one, and yet, because it had to do with sound, I felt that I had at least a fighting chance to do well enough that the school nurse wouldn't call me in days later and tell me I was going deaf.

Throughout my life, I have always found it easy to memorize things I have heard, whether words or numbers or music. In the case of the first two, I simply hear, in my mind's ear, the tones in which the words or numbers are spoken, and the rest is easy.

Intelligence

I remember taking a test in the third or fourth grade which they said was an IQ test. I was extremely nervous, since I understood that this test, more than any classroom test, determined if you were *all right* or not. Soon afterward I began pestering my mother to know what my score was. She said that children were not supposed to know, but that I shouldn't worry because my score was very high. In fact, the reason she couldn't tell me was that it *was* so exceptionally high! For years afterward I continued to pester her, and she always had the same answer. During this time, I learned that you're not supposed to study for an IQ test — in fact, that studying for it would be a waste of time, since it doesn't measure what you know, only how intelligent you are. I was troubled by this idea because I knew perfectly well that you had to know *something* to do well on the test. I wondered how the IQ testing authorities could be sure that all the parents in all the homes of the kids who would eventually take the test would uniformly not tell their kids anything that could be useful on the test. How did all these parents know everything they shouldn't say to their kids? How could the IQ testing authorities catch cheaters among both parents and kids? But I decided that merely to ask such questions proved you had a low IQ. The high-IQ students didn't think about such things. They were simply smart.

Then, perhaps in my late teens, or even later, she or someone else revealed that the number was 135. By that time, I had some vague idea of the range of IQ scores, and although I knew this was above average, it was nowhere near what I needed to achieve the greatness it was essential that I achieve. I consoled myself with the thought that, given how nervous I had been, my real IQ was probably much higher.

One day in the 1980s, when I was already close to 50, I wrote to one of the high schools I had attended and asked if they were permitted to tell me my score. They wrote back with the numbers, and I was shocked to find it was lower than 135. So my mother had lied to me all those years, and it was now clear that the IQ experts, whom, of course, I had hated since childhood

because they held my future in the palm of their hands — that they had been right after all, and that my slowness in math and science was due to simple lack of ability.

I remember radio shows in which very smart kids answered questions: "The Quiz Kids" I think was one such show. And yet, for all my desperate wanting to be a genius, I wanted above all not to be like these kids, who I thought of as New York Jewish wise-ass types. I dreaded being doted upon the way I assumed the parents of these kids did. I thought of the way my mother would sigh over the genius of Chopin, who had had the additional advantages of being sickly and of dying young. To be a genius meant you were even more in their clutches! I could well imagine how I would have been stifled by my mother's love if I had been a precocious engineer! I was trapped: I couldn't bear not to be a genius, and I knew I could never stand being one. But at the same time, I couldn't bear the thought that I would never accomplish great things.

My life would have been changed utterly if during these years, I had come across Paul Valery's statement, "Genius is a habit which certain people acquire."

The Kids

Neighborhood Kids

Barbara Beaird, who was a couple of years older than me, lived in the brick house on the west side of us (the Thomases lived in the brick house on the other side). She was always chewing on one of her braids. She had a rubber band near the end of each braid, I assumed to prevent it from unwinding. I wondered how much time it took girls to make braids. Her mother helped her — I knew that. I remember sitting on the wall of boulders between our houses, the kids gathered around, and some girl doing her braids for her, dividing the long hair into separate plaits, then folding one over the other, pulling them tight, in the knowing way that girls had. A kind of loving casual gesture. "Hold still, Barb. That's it." A strange thing to have to do every day.

Barbara was the only girl we boys allowed to build huts with us. She was one of us, for reasons that I don't think we could have begun to explain. We let her work with us when we built The Trench (to be described later) — an extraordinary honor for a girl.

My mother didn't like her mother, Grace, very much. She considered her "common" because she was friendly and outgoing and got along well with kids, and because she smoked cigarettes. "The house always smells of cigarettes," my mother would say, with that expression of distaste she reserved for things that were almost beneath her contempt.[1] So my mother and father had tall cedars planted along the entire length of the stone wall that separated our lots. Eventually the trees were so high that all I could do was see in their second story window from our attic window, which I often did, trying to catch Barbara's sister, whose name was also Grace, naked in her room. Barbara was too young. I didn't think of her that way.

Barbara's brother, Bobbie, was a member of our hut-building gang. Strangely enough, I don't remember much about him.

Her father , Robert L., who worked at Schrafft's, became the president of the Board of Education (1957, possibly earlier).

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1. The dream-world does strange tricks with childhood memories. In early 2007, I had a dream of Mrs. Beaird standing on a rock in her back yard at dawn, trying to kill bats with a long scythe, while behind her a thick column of steam rose from the incinerator. She stood on one leg, like a ballet dancer, silhouetted by the morning sun shining through the steam as she swung the scythe at the shapes darting around her.

One holy afternoon, Barbara and I decided to get all our blocks and Lincoln Logs and build the biggest building we could. I don't remember if by then we had already let her be in our hut, but I felt a special intimate bond with her: she was a girl who knew how to be with boys; she didn't tell your secrets to other kids. I seem to remember that I had already been working on a project on the living room floor, but we quickly gathered up all the Lincoln Logs, blocks, cars, trucks, odds and ends of other wooden construction kits — round red solid pieces of wood, blue, green, arches, squares, rectangles, the wooden blocks with letters and numbers carved in the sides — and moved them all to the den. The walls had bookshelves containing my father's books. My parents had bought a desk for the room, but it hadn't arrived yet. A few chairs were all the furniture. It was late afternoon, we spread everything on the floor and began working. I remember the room filled with the red light of the setting sun (precisely the light that is expressed by the pieces of music described below). We both seemed to understand what needed to be done. We built a giant fort or palace, probably a fort, with roadways to the entrances. More blocks! Maybe she ran across to her house and brought more. We need a room here! With holes they can fire out of! And this is where the guards live! And a tower! I'm sure we painstakingly constructed the most important part of the building, a tower, so that it was as tall as possible without tipping over. The idea was to use up every piece we had, no matter what.

When we were done, the fortress covered most of the den floor. The shafts of evening sun came through the window on her house's side. It was a scene that is perfectly expressed by the repeated horn phrase in the Carillon movement of Bizet's *L'Arlésienne Suite No. 1*, and by the conclusion of the last movement, "Apothéose — Le jardin féérique". At the time, of course, I had no idea what the titles were of this music, even though I had heard it all my life on WQXR. What do kids really say to each other at such moments? Probably something like, "Looks really neat, don't it?" "If we had more logs, we could ..." "Who lives in the tower?" "A king!"

It was my first experience working on a project with a member of the opposite sex, and to this day this remains a more intimate activity than sex.

For some reason, the Beairds are associated in my mind with someone saying that someone they knew had earned ... a *master's* degree. There was no doubt in our minds that an accomplishment like that was unimaginably difficult, and reserved only for a few brilliant people. I didn't even bother to wonder if I might earn such a degree some day. (Thirty or so years later, I did.)

Across the street, in the Patterson's house, lived Bobby Wilkins. He had a glass eye and your main task, when you were with him, was not to look at it. He was a pleasant kid, kind of soft, with pale skin, and a little too much moisture in his good eye (probably from constant crying over the loss of the other eye, I thought). He had dark hair, a hank of which hung over his forehead. In the summer we would go down into their basement, where it was always cool and dark and smelled of an old phonograph and an old piano. To this day, I can bring to mind the smell of that dark wood from another time (the very definition of *forgotten*), see those cracked, yellowing piano keys and the chipped dark paint or stain at the end of the keyboard. Heavy carpets were draped on things. Sometimes we would wind the phonograph handle and make the turntable turn, maybe play one of the ancient, dusty records, and marvel at the big horn that was the loudspeaker. How old-fashioned!

Mr. Patterson, who was Bobby's grandfather — we were never clear on where his mother or father were; it didn't much matter — looked and talked like a Hollywood star. He had a deep voice like Clark Gable, but was much older. He had white hair, a trimmed moustache, and often

worked on their big lawn, peering at the brown spots, mowing it. Bobby said he worked at *The New York Times*, where his job was to put the "Please see page ..." lines at the bottom of columns.

Next door to the Pattersons on Shelley Ave. were the Mastersons. Lois Masterson was about my age, very feminine, but a good girl; hence it never even occurred to us to invite her to participate in our hut-building projects. Once when we were playing on her lawn, which sloped down to the Patterson's driveway, I tried to see up her dress, but only got a glimpse of her underpants.

Across the street from her was the Cat Lady, a strange woman with neck-length gray hair, who had built low chicken-wire cages down the entire length of one side of her house, and possibly around the back, to house her dozens of cats. No one talked to her, she didn't seem to have any interest in talking to anyone else.

Next to her house was the home of Peter Christ, a classmate of mine. His name was pronounced with a short *i*, but once in a while a substitute would pronounce his name with a long *i* and the class would giggle and she would be visibly embarrassed. He had a number of minor talents. He knew how to make an ocarina by cupping his hands and then blowing between the backs of his thumbs, a skill which I eventually was able to learn also. He also knew how to make his knuckles crack, not by pressing down on folded fingers, but by pulling straight out on the fingers, which always made onlookers wince, since they couldn't help but feel that he was literally pulling the bones out of their sockets. He was also adept at Donald Duck imitations. And he and I had an on-going joke about masturbation. One of us, during a boring stretch in class, would start to softly pound the desk with his fist at a regular pace, then go faster and faster, then suddenly slow to a stop, as at the moment of orgasm. We did it to make fun of a habit that neither one of us would have revealed in a million years that we indulged in.

A few houses further down the street, on the same side as Lois Masterson's house, was the Collins's. The father was the local mailman. There were three daughters, Ann, the oldest, Shirley, second-oldest, and Barbara. One of them was in my grade, but I am now not sure which one[1] it was.

In our neighborhood we always had to be on the lookout for the Italian kids, who lived in Kensico, because they were always looking for a fight, or looking to knock down the hut we were building, or steal our tools. The two main threats were Ted Stark — a good-looking blond kid — I always wondered how come he didn't have an Italian last name, but since he lived in Kensico, he was considered one of the Italian kids — and his cousin Ed Stark, who looked very different, with thin dark hair combed forward to a point over his forehead, and a thin, fox-like face, and big protruding front teeth. He always seemed to have too much saliva in his mouth — it was always kind of watery at the corners of his mouth. He was like a henchman, a righthand man to Ted. We knew that when they came around, we had to treat them with respect, because if they got mad at us, they would wreck our hut. We tried to joke with them. Sometimes we had to allow them to be in our gang, but of course all they wanted was that concession, not to pitch in and do any work. They lived much too far away to actually want to trudge up the hill from Kensico each day. We imitated some of their expressions like '*Marrone!*', an exclamation of disgust. It was considered

1. I had always thought that one of the daughters was named Gail, and that she was the one who had been in my grade, but in a phone conversation in Januay, 2015, Barb Beaird told me none of the daughters had that name.

cool to say that. We particularly had to watch out for the Starkses on Halloween, when they liked to come up from Kensico and pick out a few kids who were trick-or-treating and beat them up.

Yet Kensico was famous, at least we assumed it was, because one of its sons had made the big leagues, namely, Sal Yvars, who was a catcher with the New York Giants for a season (1951)[1]. (Later, rumor had it that Bobby Thompson lived in the white shingle house at the opposite end of Shelley Ave. from us, although I have since heard that he lived on Staten Island during those years..)

Down near the other end of Shelley Ave. lived Len Lindholm. His parents were Swedish. I only remember his mother, because I liked her Swedish accent. I don't remember his father at all. In fact, I don't think I ever met him. Len's brother Burje (which he pronounced "*Bury*-yuh") had been a paratrooper, but had been hurt during a jump, so that he could not work. He just stayed home. Len always spoke respectfully, admiringly, of him.

Their house had a pleasant, sunny kitchen — exactly like a Swedish kitchen, it seemed to me. In memory it was blue and white, with various painted white wooden decorations on the furniture. I liked to sit there whenever I was in their house.

Len was one of the lucky kids because his parents gave him a great deal of freedom. He was allowed to buy a shotgun — absolutely amazing to me. We often went hunting in the woods beyond the aerators, along Columbus Ave., beyond Franzl's, where Wilfred lived. Len talked a lot about the virtues of .12 gauge vs. .16 gauge vs. .20 gauge. To this day, I don't know what the numbers refer to, or why one gauge was considered so superior to the other. It was the same with talk about cars. The Kids had worked out deep and complex reasons why this model was obviously better than that one, but I never had the slightest idea what their judgments were based on. You learned the language and went along with the crowd. Len and I would walk along a dirt road, hear a crow, or see several of them fly overhead. Len would raise the gun, aim, then usually lower it: "Nope, out of range." It would be more correct to say that he shot *at* crows, since they were usually flying too high and were too smart to get near a guy with a shotgun.

I loved the smell of a warm shotgun shell after it had been fired — the burned powder and warm cardboard and perhaps a trace of acrid metallic smell. Something important had just happened! Another time, Len and I were walking along a dirt road next to one of the fields in that same area, near the school whose purpose we never learned — was it for juvenile delinquents or the deaf or the insane or...? I remember the school was in a one-story building in an open field, set back several lots from the road. We came upon a sparrow sitting on the twig of a sapling a few yards ahead of us. It didn't fly away but just sat there, flitting its wings every once in a while, puffing out its chest. Len laughed and said, "Watch this." He slowly, quietly walked closer to the tree, raised the gun to his shoulder. I, with a sort of laugh, asked him not to kill it, but he said words to the effect that maybe I was too chicken. He raised the gun slowly to his shoulder so that the muzzle was only a couple of feet from the bird, took careful aim, and pulled the trigger. There was a blast, his shoulder lurched back, the barrel kicked up, and the bird disappeared. All that remained, literally, was a feather or two, sinking slowly to the ground. I laughed because I was supposed to, but I was ashamed of myself, and to this day I regard that stupid killing as a measure of my state of mind — and, I'm sure, the state of mind of other guys in the neighborhood, who

1. "He did catch for the Giants and was on the legendary 1951 team that stole the pennant from my beloved Dodgers, thanks to Bobby Thompson's timeless homer. Yvars was a marginal player who spent most of his career at the AAA level but got up to the majors now and then; he played in only 210 major league games, hitting .244 overall. Still, he was about the only player from our area I can think of who made it into the bigs—at least in those years (1940s and 1950s)." — J.S.

would have done the same thing — in those years. Do anything as long as it keeps you in good favor with the others.

I envied Len his lenient parents, his good looks, his don't-give-a-shit attitude. I envied his freedom from guilt about how he built his derby racers. I always knew I was building them wrong, since I used nails instead of screws, as my father wanted. Len always hammered his carts together with big nails. If a piece wasn't holding very well, he just grabbed some more building nails and hammered more into the wood. One of his racers had soft wheels, that is, pneumatic tires. It went faster than mine, but possibly because the wheels had ball bearings.

Len's house was where I first saw television. His parents had bought a Delco set (or possibly a Dumont), the screen I doubt more than eight inches on the diagonal. I couldn't resist going over to his house to watch it; I was constantly fighting with my mother for permission. She considered television bad because it was Common, like chewing gum. I loved the phosphorescent sculpture of those flickering images, the snowy electric light. There was no color at first, but soon a device was on the market consisting of a spinning wheel that you put in front of the screen. It had the three primary colors in transparent cellophane pie wedges. I don't think I ever actually saw one of these things in action.

The set required constant adjusting. We sat mere inches from the screen, as much to see how the images were made as to see what they were about, for example, the Lone Ranger. I thought, of course, that I was watching pictures of what we had listened to for so many years on the radio, and they were a letdown, perhaps for no other reason than that the images were smaller than my mental images had been. I remember the white, phosphorescent hats of the cowboys, the bad sound, so that you had to strain to see and hear what was going on.

Television was greeted with tut-tut disapproval by the custodians of the national culture. An article in the *Saturday Evening Post* said it would replace the family hearth. "Well, Margaret, throw another log on the video, it's going to be a long night." There was, needless to say, no chance of our getting a TV of our own. First and foremost, according to my mother, it ruined your eyesight[1], second of all, and almost as bad, it was what the Common People watched, and third of all, it required that ugly antenna on the roof. She said the last even though we already had an FM antenna on the roof that was almost exactly the same size as a TV antenna. But because the purpose of the FM antenna was to bring in good music, it was not ugly.

One afternoon, as Len's parents and he and I were sitting around in their living room, the parents got out a mandolin. They said it was an instrument that was played in Sweden. It got passed around, each person plucking the strings, asking questions. When I got it, I was surprised to see that the strings were in pairs. I tried to tune it, according to what rule I have no idea, and to try to get the tremelo effect I had heard on the hillbilly stations. I assumed this was accomplished by moving the pick between the pairs of strings. Complete failure. I marveled that there were people who could play so fast on such an instrument. It seemed so difficult that there was no doubt in my mind that you were either meant to play such an instrument or you weren't. Everything was preordained.

1. Whether or not this was true for television viewers, it might well have been true for those on the other side of the camera, because we heard that the lights in the studios had to be so bright that performers were forced to learn how to refrain from squinting all the time.

Then there was Phil Fink, the leader of our local gang, whom I hated and feared but always wanted to be on the good side of. He lived on Clinton St., almost directly behind us through the woods, and had peppermint growing along his driveway. He beat me up a number of times. He also used to call me a fish. "You *Fish*!" A term of major contempt, combining fruitcake, four-eyes, queer, and several others. He was short, had a short haircut, always seemed to know what we should be doing. He used the word "Marrone!", like the Italian kids, all the time. I had no idea what it really meant (and still don't), except that it was an exclamation of disapproval.

One day I got into a fight with the Kids, over what I can't remember. Soon they and I were throwing rocks and apples at each other. All of them against me. Even though it was considered the ultimate cowardice, I eventually retreated to our house. With the back screen door to shield me against the missiles, we exchanged insults.

They: "Fuck you."
I: "Aghh, go fuck yourself."
They: "Fuckin' homo."
I: "Don't you wish, you cocksucker."
They: "Your mother's a whore."
I: "So's yours."
They: "Fuck you."
I: "Go fuck yourself."
Etc.

But one taunt of Phil Fink's, which was immediately taken up by the others, I didn't know how to return. He yelled out, "Why don't you go peddle your Swiss cheese[1] somewhere else?" It was another proof that, if they ever accepted me back in the gang, it would only be provisionally, because I was not one of them.

Another fight I remember very clearly was with Bruce Strong, who lived in a ramshackle little cottage right behind Valhalla School No. 1. This fight took place in the dirt below the stone wall on the other side of the school. He had offered me a chance to avoid being beaten up: all I had to do was retract something I had said. I refused, purely out of obstinacy. The fight began. He eventually got me down on the ground, lying on my back, and began pressing his knees into my upper arms. I remember his eyes behind his thick glasses. He kept repeating, "Will you take it back?" I kept repeating, despite the pain, "No!" On it went, until eventually he gave up.

Alec Gray, whose nickname was "Bucky", and whom my mother made clear I was supposed to like, lived on Ford St. — at least that is what it's called on the map that the Chamber of Commerce sent me in August, 1996. I remember it as Prospect, which, according to the map, is wrong. In any case, his house was a wooden shingle house on a tree-shaded street off Columbus Ave, a block from Valhalla Public School No. 1. We would go up to his room, which was on the second floor, in back, and play with some of the board games he had, one of which was baseball.

Alec was that most remarkable thing among us kids, a *willing* Mama's boy. This was at least partly excused among the rest of the Kids because he looked different, and because he was said to be sick all the time. He certainly stayed home from school a lot. Also, it was obvious how hope-

1. This was one of the rare occasions when they at least got the name of my ancestory correct. Usually they referred to me as being "Swedish" .

less it would have been for him to rebel, that's how powerful his mother was. He had very white skin, wavy blonde hair, big blue eyes, big red lips, though I don't think he was really an albino, as some kid suggested. His mother, a slim blonde woman, always seemed to be beside herself with anxiety over her son, in particular over his catching a cold. His musical instrument was piano. I think he "took from" my music teacher, Victor Salvo, for a while.

In the eyes of other kids and their parents, he and I were two of a kind because we were both Mama's boys and because we both took music lessons and were supposed to do well at school.

He was much better at drawing comics than I was. He had a way of keeping the pencil tip in a kind of pointed bullet shape, which enabled him to achieve any shading he wanted simply by flattening the angle of the pencil to the paper, but also enabled him to make as thin and sharp a line as he wanted. I envied his ability to produce that feathery shading.

Alan Preble always had a peculiar smell, like old skin. Maybe it was from the unused chicken coop next to their house on Cambridge St., two streets over from our back yard. He had a big brother named Roger. Their father, who had a glass eye, was reputed to be cruel to them. It was said they got beaten regularly. But they seemed to have developed their own defenses, and when he was around, they, with a kind of laugh, simply kept out of his reach. Their yard had no trees. The house was on high ground above the street, with a stone wall rising up from the sidewalk. One of the brothers, I think it was Roger, taught me this rhyme:

"Did you eever eye-ver ever in your leef life loaf
See a deevil dye-vil devil kiss his weef wife woaf?
No I neever neye-ver never in my leef life loaf
Saw a deevil dye-vil devil kiss his weef wife woaf."

We played, or rather, tried to play, in the chicken coop. We kept thinking it could be made into an ideal hut, since it had no chickens, but all the boards were coated with chicken shit and feathers, and the place smelled bad. We would try once in a while to start cleaning the boards, but we soon lost interest. The smell was too much.

When we played cowboys, Alan always used to call the sheriff the "shaft".

John Del Bagno, blond, with outthrust jaw, always embarked on some purpose, lived on the other side of Columbus Ave., near the Conros. He was the best marble player any of us knew. Ferocious speed. He just squeezed them out from a callus in the knuckle of his thumb. I tried to get the same speed by pinching the marble between the tip of my index finger and thumb, but I couldn't aim that way. Del Bag we called him. He was left-handed. To me, left-handers were a special breed. It always seemed as though they had learned to write backward. I would marvel at the awkward curl of the hand as they wrote. To this day, I always associate the smell of sweat and cedar pencil with left-handers.

Sometimes, on the way home from primary school, we got into conversations about hell with Claire Doria, who was Catholic. We, or at least I, wanted to know what got you sent there, if there was any way out, what the fires of hell were really like. She walked along, holding her books to her chest like all girls did, and did her best to answer our questions. I sensed she was a little nervous about being asked to remember everything she had been taught on this subject. Sometimes we teased her, telling her that we had committed some sin and still hadn't been punished for it.

But I envied her for having this world to live in in which the rules were so clear and furthermore were known by all Catholics.

I knew that Christianity was better than any of the pagan religions that had gone before because Christians didn't worship idols. But I couldn't help wondering about the images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints, on the walls and in the books of Catholics. Wasn't that the same? I asked Claire, and she said No, it was different because Catholics didn't *worship* the images. And I think I accepted this for the time being.

Pete Smith was a handsome blond kid with a crewcut. He was tough, popular, good at sports and, when we were in our teens, he was one of those kids that each of us knew that girls would like. He lived up in the woods behind Franzl's, on one of the hilly, dirt roads that went into the hills behind the restaurant, and would go hunting along the creek that flowed below his house. Sometimes I would see him on my paper route. He was another source of envy because he was allowed to have a .22 rifle.

The Kids With the Notepads

Once or twice a year a group of several kids, boys and girls, would go through out neighborhood with note pads, checking, it seemed, the numbers on the houses. The note pads were attached to clip-boards. Occasionally the kids wrote in the pads. We didn't know who the kids were or where they came from or, at least in my case, why they were doing what they were doing. I remember the name of an organization being mentioned, but I had never heard of it before. I'm sure it wasn't the Scouts. The kids seemed always to be delighted with their task; they were always smiling and laughing and talking intimately to each other. I can see them coming down Shelley Ave. in early evening. Perhaps they had not been sent by a higher authority that had no interest in our behavior but was deeply concerned about house numbers. Every now and then I wrack my brain trying to bring back a trace of memory that might reveal what brought these kids to our neighborhood each year, but so far I have been unsuccessful.

Kids in School

I remember only a few of the kids from kindergarten through the start of junior high school. One is Donald West, a big, quiet kid whom we all regarded as rather dumb. He had bad breath that I always thought smelled like electricity — like an electric motor. Everything he did, for example, his writing, was done slowly, deliberately, dutifully, but seemingly without comprehension. Most of all, I remember that he had a sliver of skin hanging from his upper lip. It was always there. I wondered why he didn't bite it or scrape it off with his teeth, or rub it off with a handkerchief or washcloth. It was always dry, as were his lips. But it added to the impression of a guy whose one and only purpose duty in life was not to disturb anything and just to do his duty.

Then there was Pauline, whose face, with a few freckles, and hair cut in bangs, and wrinkled dress I can see in my mind's eye to this day. She was from the other side of the tracks and seemed never to quite understand what was going on. According to rumor, she had cooties, which the teacher had to remove.

Then there was Bill Rocco, an Italian from Kensico, and hence one of the tough guys. And Dorothy Baker, tall and good at sports, and Gail Carroll, short, quiet, who became beautiful in old age[1].

Somewhere between third and sixth grade, Hardinge Dunn entered our class. He was from England, the teacher told us when she first introduced him. We had never heard anyone talk the way he did before. He seemed to have too much saliva in his mouth. One of his front teeth grew partly over the others, which to me made him all the more English. I wondered if his accent might somehow have caused his tooth to grow that way. He had a smiling, sunny, fat face with a mole on his cheek, like Piggy in *The Lord of the Flies*[2], or like Henry VIII as I imagine him as a child. Before coming to Valhalla, he had lived in Sausalito, California. I wanted to know if he really knew the names of all the English kings. He did. He thought it rather amusing that I should find that remarkable. I was fascinated by his name, asked him why it wasn't pronounced with silent *g*. It seemed a quintessentially English name. He was like a young lord of the manor.

Orpheus Staples was the bad kid in the class. Year after year we could rely on him to fill that role. He was our hero. He always sat in the back of the room and was always in trouble. No one knew where he lived, but it was rumored to be in a tumbledown house near Kensico. Rumor had it that he didn't have a mother and that his father was a drunk and that Orpheus got beaten up a lot. He had nothing to lose by being bad and we envied him for it. He was the best comic book artist in the class, although John Del Bagno told me many years later that Don Bushell also was very good. I don't remember Bushell having that skill at all.

Orpheus had a smell of oil and dirt about him. The whites of his fingernails were always black. He got wilder and more disruptive at the years went on. Finally, one day in social studies or whatever it was called then, he got into an argument with the teacher, Mr. Diskint. I don't remember the subject of the argument, but I do remember that there came a point where Orpheus was standing in the aisle, shouting. Diskint told him to sit down or he would make him sit down. Orpheus taunted him, and Diskint marched down the aisle and hit him. Strangely enough, the class was on Diskint's side, feeling that Orpheus had definitely stepped over the line that time. Thereafter, he was quiet in social studies.

In junior high school, there were the Jensen brothers, John and his little brother. John wore glasses with translucent plastic rims and had a bad skin disease, the skin peeling around his lower cheek and neck None of us knew the name of the disease. But he bore it bravely, as though it were an old sheepskin coat which his mother had required him to wear all the time. He and his brother stuck together, no one made fun of him. The little brother had a forward jutting jaw, so that he looked like a little tough guy in training.

And Barbara Gross, around this time, entered our school, and was immediately the center of attention among the boys, because she had big tits

In seventh grade, the real juvenile delinquents began to appear. I am not sure why: perhaps they had been transferred to our school from other schools. There was Don McLaughlin, idolized because he had been held back so many years that he now could legally *drive* to school. He had a

1. As I saw when she said hello at the White Plains High School 50th Reunion of our 1954 graduating class
2. The book and the film only appeared years later, of course: in 1954 and 1963, respectively.

big Packard and in the morning the kids from the Village all piled in it or jumped on the running board, and he slowly drove them up Columbus Ave., around the sharp corner onto the driveway that went along the front of the school, and finally to the school parking lot. Very impressive.

Then there was Donald G — big, loud, and not ashamed to admit that his sexual interests were not exactly the same as those of the rest of us guys. (He used to tell us that when he had to suppress an erection, he would repeat to himself, "Think of typewriters and televisions".) He could sing, "I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts" in what seemed to us a hilariously perfect Cockney accent ("Oy've gawt a levverly bunch of kewkuhnuts, There they ah, stahnding in a rew, Big ones, small ones, some as big as yer 'ed..."). He always had a kind of devilish smile which seemed entirely appropriate for a guy who had a natural talent for making trouble in a way that was guaranteed to make the rest of us laugh helplessly. He was unusually strong, as we all learned when, one day, while the teacher was droning on, we suddenly heard a sharp metallic *thunk* from the window seats. There was Don with a sheepish, surprised look on his face, and there was his desk sitting in his lap. He had been forced to sit in the window row to stop him from talking and joking with the other trouble-makers. But he wasn't about to let that deprive him of being the center of attention. So he had set to work wedging his thighs under the desk and pressing his knees upward to see if anything could be made to happen. And it could: both pieces of the black scroll-work cast-iron that were screwed to the floor and on which the desk was mounted were cleanly broken off at knee-level. He played the complete innocent, looking at the now useless desk with the upper pieces of the supports still attached and saying, "I don't know what happened! It just broke!" and then, in a lower voice that had us falling out of our chairs, "They don't make these things very strong. I wouldn't buy any more of them." And in a still lower voice, "A student could get killed. I'm going to stay home from now on."

And now, here is a bit of irony. My main goal at school as far as my relationship with other kids was concerned was to avoid being called a fairy, because that is what boys were called who got good grades. The best way to do this was to be a hero among the dumb kids. So I sat in the back of the room with G, before he was moved to the window row, and Salvatore Lombardi and some of the other Italian kids. The first price for this privilege was that I had to let them copy from me during tests. Throughout junior high school during exams I would hear Salvatore's harsh whisper: "Hey, Franklin, move your hand! I can't see!"

G decided I needed a further challenge. So one day he dared me to reach back and feel his cock. At first I refused, but I sensed how much it would impress them if I had the guts to do it, especially during class, so after a couple of days I did. The material of his pants was smooth, almost glossy, as though freshly ironed. The Italian kids put their heads close to their books and papers and watched with suppressed laughter and exclamations of awe. This went on for several weeks. G would whisper, "Hey, Franklin, put your hand back!" and after complaining and saying no, I would. Before this was over, he would have a limp erection. Once or twice he asked me to do the same in the boys' room, but I flatly refused, since that would have made me a fairy.

Salvatore asked me to do the same to him a couple of times, but I said no — I can't imagine now how I could have reached across the aisle even if I had been willing to.

For this kind of daring, my reputation among the underworld soared. I'm sure they said to themselves, "He's smart, but he's also a good guy".

There were only two blacks in the school: one guy, with glasses, always had a smile to show that he could take the friendly teasing he was subjected to for being the only guy, black or white,

who studied home economics with the girls. The other was quiet, sitting at the back of the room with hands folded at his desk, always polite, friendly.

The Dilemma Regarding the Kids

The dilemma with the Kids was that, on the one hand, it was *essential* that I seem to be on their side, that is, against parents, against teachers, but on the other hand, I had the Code to adhere to, which meant that it was *essential* that I be on my parents' side. Someone, a girl I think, had looked up my middle name, "Peter", in the dictionary, and one day they told me it meant *rock*. The others immediately took up on this, because it was funny that a guy as short and skinny as I should have a name that meant that. So thereafter they often called me "Rock". That meant that, at least up to a point, the Kids liked me.

In any dealings with other people, I always had to pretend to do one thing while I was feeling something entirely different. On the one hand, there was no escaping my mother's power, much less the requirements of the Code, so, in order to be allowed to exist, I had to be a Momma's boy. On the other hand, the one thing I could not do without was being liked by the Kids, which meant that, above all else, I could not be seen as being a Momma's boy. So, when I was with them, I had to make sure they saw how much I considered her an enemy (and yet, strangely, I felt suddenly protective when one of the Kids said something bad about her), and when I was with her, I had to make sure she saw how much I rebelled while at the same time never forgetting that the Code was inviolable. The working rule was: Pretend to be what those you are with want you to be, but pull back as much as possible in the opposite direction. In other words: wherever you are, don't be there.

This paradox may have led to my third great dilemma, which I will describe later, namely, the dilemma of not being two people even though at times I was.

Our General Health

We kids were a pretty healthy bunch. I recall only colds, coughs, runny noses, measles and chicken pox.. Not one case of polio. No deaths. In fact, the one affliction that is clearest in memory is a stye, or pink eye, in which a pink, elongated pimple develops on an eyelid. This made you special. "He has a stye!" It never happened to me. The Jensen brothers had some kind of eczema — flaking skin —on their face and hands. Possibly it was psoriasis. Once in a while, we would hear that someone had broken an arm in falling out of a tree. But that was about it.

Language and Customs

This part of the story would not be complete without a little anthropology.

Pronounciations

"Aluminum" was often pronouned "alunimum". Some kids, just for fun, would pronounce it "aluminuminuminum...".

"Ass backwards" was sometimes deliberately pronounced "bass ackwards".

"Athlete", needless to say, was always pronounced "athalete".

"Atrocious", a briefly popular word, was pronounced "utrocious" — "you-trocious".

"Badminton" was invariably pronounced "bad mitten" (I don't know about the other Kids, but I always wondered why a game involving the hitting of a feathered object over a net, should be named after a kind of hand covering worn in the winter, and one of inferior quality at that).

"Cavalry" was usually pronounced "calvary" ("Here comes the calvary!") or "cavaltry".

"Chimney" was often pronounced "chimbley" or "chiminey".

"Concrete" was often pronounced "conkameet".

"Hard-on" was almost always pronounced "hard-arm". "Look! He's got a hard-arm!"

"Havvies on", as in "I have havvies on the big shovel!" (I have the right to use the big shovel) was sometimes pronounced "haggies on".

"Indivisible" in the *Pledge of Allegiance* was often pronounced "indivisigible".

"Kindergarten" was invariably pronounced "kinneygarden".

"Library" was almost invariably pronounced "libairy".

"Mischievous": for years, up until my late teens or later, I, and I think several others among the Kids, pronounced it "mis*cheevey*us" instead of the correct "*mis*chevus".

"Okey-Dokey" was an occasionally-used variation on "O.K.", but in my mind's ear I hear it only being spoken by Florence, my baby-sitter. Among the kids, this form was considered a bit fruity: "Okey-Doke" was better.

"Saw", as in "I saw it", was usually pronounced "sawr".

"Spearmint", as in Spearmint gum, was usually pronounced "Spearamint".

"Suppose" was often pronounced "suspose".

"Truant" was always pronounced "trawnt" (the truant officer was a frequent character in the comics).

"Umbrella" was usually pronounced "umberella".

"Valentine's" was almost invariably pronounced "Valentimes" — "Valentimes Day".

"Yogi Berra", the name of the Yankees' catcher, was pronounced "Yogi Barra".

Rejoinders

"What are you looking at?" (said when someone saw you looking at them in a way they didn't like).

"Not much."

To which the reply often was, "Hey, what did you say?" said in a threatening manner, indicating the possibility of a fight.

"Take you over" meant "beat you up". Someone would say, under his breath, during a nasty argument, perhaps with fist clenched, "Better watch out...I'll take you over." Or, in expressing that one kid was tougher than another, someone might say, "He can take him over any time."

An all-purpose rejoinder, spoken with appropriate tones of disgust and extended middle finger: "Perch and twirl." (that is, sit with my finger up your ass and rotate on it).

Another (still in use): "Up yours!"

And another: "Suck this!" or "Eat this!" (said while you pointed at your cock)

Another, very common, when someone announced they were leaving: "Good riddance to bad rubbish!" At the time, I didn't understand it to mean, "It will be good to be rid of the bad rubbish you are." I understood it to be saying that Good Riddance (namely, you) will be converted into bad rubbish.

And another: "Why don't you use your head for something besides a hat rack?"

A common reply when you asked one of the kids a question: "That's for me to know and for you to find out." Also: "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

If you explained something that everyone thought was obvious, a common reply was, "No shit, Sherlock."

And then there were the old reliable replies to name-calling and other insults:

"Sticks and stones
May break my bones
But names will never hurt me."

and

"I'm rubber, you're glue,
Everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you."

"That's rude, crude, and socially unacceptable."

A common expression of agreement with something that someone had just said: "[You're] damn straight!"

I recall from my teenage years once prefacing some observation with the question, "Do you know what's indescribable?" and someone replying, "How bad your breath smells?" (Although

most of the time I did not have that affliction.)

Put-Downs

"Hey, you *Fish*!" Phil Fink often used it on me, "Fish" meaning "fruit", effeminate nerd (as we might say nowadays).

A term for a harmless fool was "nudnik". I recall Phil Fink using it a lot, saying of some kid: "The guy's a real nudnik." Arthur Naiman, in his *Every Goy's Guide to Common Jewish Expressions*, gives the following definition:

"nudnik (NOOD-nik) ['OO' being pronounced as 'oo' in 'took', or 'ou' in 'could', or 'u' in 'put']

"A pest, a bore. Someone who's a nuisance because he's such a jerk."

If you stood around with your hand in your pocket, and any movement was detected beneath the fabric of your pants, you would immediately be derisively accused of "playing pocket pool."

A term for someone awkward, inept was "spas" (derived from "spastic"), as in, for example, "The guy is spas."

A far more vicious term, in its connotation, was "tool". Phil Fink made extensive use of it. After expressing his contempt for someone in our gang, he would conclude with, "Christ, what a *tool*!" Or, if the pariah happened to appear on the scene: "What's that *tool* doing here?"

"Brown noser" was used when a kid in school was seen as trying to please a teacher. This was often said with fist clenched (to represent the teacher's anus) and rotated clockwise and counter-clockwise on the end of one's nose. Or sometimes the Kids would say something like, "Boy, he's got his nose *way* up there!"

Someone with bad breath was called a "garbage mouth".

If you said you were thinking about something, someone would often remark, "I know, we can smell wood burning."

"I like me who do you like?" was said behind the back of someone who obviously had too good an opinion of themselves.

"He don't know shit from shiloh" (or "from shinolah"). (Said of someone considered stupid.)

If you put what someone regarded as too much ketchup on your hamburger, he would often remark, "Have some hamburger with your ketchup?" Similarly, "Have some coffee with your sugar?"

Later in primary school the saying "Fools' names, like fools' faces, are often seen in public places" might be uttered when someone was writing their initials on a wall, or carving them in a

tree. But the saying had too much of an adult quality to it, and so wasn't used often. In my mind's ear, I hear my father saying it.

Terms for Minorities

Blacks were "Negroes", "jungle bunnies", "jigaboos", "spooks", "niggers" ("You can take a nigger out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of a nigger"). Later, among jazz musicians, the universal term was "spades", from "black as the ace of spades". My mother called them "darkies".

The black stereotype among us, acquired from the movies, was that they were easily frightened — perhaps this assumption was one source of the term *spooks* (that is, they were easily spooked), although another possibility is that you couldn't see them well in the dark, that is, at night they could spook *you* — that they had rhythm, and that they would kill you with one of the switchblades they all carried if you called them *nigger*.

I can best describe our attitude toward minorities by saying it was guiltless and unquestioning prejudice. That's how some people were, period. We knew, of course, that the blacks had been slaves, but that again was just a fact of life, of history. As far as I can remember, there were only two black students in Valhalla Public School No. 1. One took homemaking, as I have described elsewhere. The other, who was literally from the other side of the tracks in the Village, was a nice guy, quiet, sheepish, and this, we assumed, was because he knew what a rare privilege it was for a black to be allowed in a white school.

Italians were "guineas". I still do not know the source of the term. It was understood that you would be beaten up if any of them heard you use the term. Another term, equally offensive, was "dago".

Spaniards and Puerto Ricans were "spics". It was universally assumed that they, like Negroes, all carried switchblades.

Jews were "kikes", sometimes (rarely) "Heebs".

Japanese were "Nips", sometimes (rarely) "slant-eyes".

Germans were "krauts" or "heinies" ("*high*nees" — since your hiney was your buttocks, the term was considered appropriately contemptible for Germans during WW II, although in fact there was no relationship between the two words).

We referred to the southern U.S. as the "backward South".

Fads

Chartreuse shoelaces were all the rage at one point. I never had any, but I was curious how they could have that molten glow — green, pink — and still not have any temperature. Day Glo colors came in much later.

When the hula hoop fad arrived, I resisted participating, because I thought the pelvic movements required to keep the hoop circulating were too obviously like those in sexual intercourse. I loved to watch girls perform them, though.

You always had to be leery of wearing something out of fashion. Any shoes deemed effeminate or odd, for example, a certain kind of jodhpur (which in fact I liked) were called “fruit boots”.

Practical Jokes

I don’t recall many practical jokes among the kids. There was a pack of what looked like Wrigley’s Spearmint gum. Someone offered you a stick from the open pack. When you went to remove it, a wire spring snapped down on your finger like the wire in a mouse trap. The boutonnierre that could be made to squirt water when you leaned forward to smell it made an appeaance now and then. And, though not really a practical joke, during boring moments someone would reach inside their shirt, place their hand underneath their armpit in a certain way and then quickly move their bent arm downward to the chest, which produced the sound of a fart. Sometimes several tries were necessary, the arm pumping away as the performer tried to get the hand pressure right.

Miscellaneous

The perennial,

“Rain, rain, go away,
Come again another day.”

and

“It’s raining, it’s pouring,
The old man is snoring.”

and

“Apples, peaches, pears and plums,
Tell me when your birthday comes.”

When walking on the sidewalk: “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.” I seem to recall first hearing this much later, possibly only as a memory that someone had. I don’t remember actively thinking it as I walked along.

And, regarded with a certain contempt:

“What are little boys made of?
Snips and snails, and puppy dog tails,
That’s what little boys are made of.

“What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice, and everything nice,
That’s what little girls are made of.”

The following verse was recited almost without fail when someone mentioned beans:

"Beans, beans, the musical fruit,
The more you eat, the more you toot;
The more you toot, the better you feel;
Beans, beans, for every meal."

And then there was the perennial:

"How much wood would a woodchuck chuck
If a woodchuck would chuck wood?

A woodchuck would chuck as much wood
As a woodchuck could chuck wood."

Two Italian words were popular: one, pronounced "Gabeesh?", was a corruption of some tense of *capire* and meant *Do you understand*? The other was "Marrone!", the original meaning of which is *a gross blunder*, but among us the meaning was intensified to something like "My God!" or "Jesus Christ!" The word is Italian dialect for "Madonna!" (J.S.)

And the perennial, "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream."

After someone had explained something, they might say, "Get it?"
You quickly replied, "Got it."
They then quickly said, "Good."
The point was to have the three sentences said as rapidly in succession as possible.

If someone thought you looked dejected, he might say, "Hey, don't be a glum bum!"

At some point, I think because the word appeared in a movie, the way to say that everything was all right was to say, "Everything's copacetic!"

Also from a movie, I believe, was:

"Think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?"
"Not if it's in cans, t'won't."

If you left a door open, someone would sometimes say: "Hey! Close the door! Where do you live, in a barn?"

Dog feces were called "do-do" or "dog pooh" or "dog-do", sometimes "dog shit." For example, "Watch out, you're going to step in some dog-do!"

A dachshund was often called a "two-dogs-long-and-a-half-a-dog-high".

Sometimes, just for the hell of it, someone would pronounce "mustard", "mouse-turd".

When someone wanted to express the fact that a proposed solution to a problem was ineffectual, they would say it was "mouse's milk", but I first heard this term only in my late teens or early twenties.

A handkerchief was called a "snot rag".

Names for the penis included "dick", "cock", "middle-leg", "wang", never penis: the word (*pee*-nis) sounded too sissy. In an argument, one kid might say, "Suck my dick", or (pointing) "Suck this."

Of passing amusement were the names "Eileen Dover" and "Ben Dover".

A joke considered mildly amusing: "What's the height of conceit?" "A fly walking up an elephant's leg with a hard-on."

The standard expression for "I have to urinate," which no one would have said (I doubt if many of the kids knew the word), was, "I gotta take a leak". More rarely, because considered too polite, too genteel, was, "Nature calls".

When someone returned from having been to the bathroom, he would occasionally be asked, "Everything come out OK?"[1] If he was deemed to have spent too long a time on the toilet, someone would ask him, "What were you doing, giving birth?"

At some point, and I think it may have been in my early teens, I learned — from a girl, as I recall! — that one way to cover a fart smell was by striking a match, then blowing it out. And, in fact, the smell that the match gave off when it was first lighted (a smell just like the gas for the kitchen stove), and the smell of smoke when the match was blown out, did in fact take away the fart smell.

"Yours" as in "It's all yours" was sometimes deliberately pronounced "urine" by way of the old-timers' pronunciation of "yours" as "your'n" in the Westerns.

At such moments, someone might quote the title of the well-known book, *The Yellow Stream*, by I. P. Daily.

And then there was: "The angle of the dangle plus the square of the hair = the heat of the meat."

In discussions about the physical attractiveness of this or that girl, someone would sometimes remark, "Turn 'em upside down and they all look the same."

Always good for a snicker was:

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1. I am not sure if I need to mention that "How did it come out?", "It didn't come out right" normally referred to any small project.

"'Can you tell me where the Staten Island ferry [fairy] is?'
"Thpeaking.'"

And likewise for:

"Under the spreading chestnut tree
The village idiot sat:
Thinking of Venus,
And playing with his penis,
And catching the goo in his hat."

And then there was the following. I have long forgotten if I first heard it spoken or if I first saw it written on a public restroom wall, or when.

"Some come here to sit and think
And write upon the wall.
I come here to shit and stink
And rest my weary balls."

In gym, the double meaning of "athletic supporter" [1]was good for a laugh once in a while ("Are you an athletic supporter?").

"Canoe canoe?" that is, "Can you (paddle a) canoe?" I think I recall my music teacher, Mr. Salvo, saying this.

Shoes that the others thought were bigger than style allowed would be referred to contemptuously as "gunboats".

An affectation of propriety was achieved by not saying "hell" but instead by spelling it as "h", "e", "double hockey sticks".

Sometimes "guts", as in, "He's got no guts" was replaced by "intestinal fortitude".

If you said "But seriously...", the person you were talking to would often reply "But serially..." (or, for all I know, "But cereally..."). This rejoinder may only have appeared in later years, I am not sure.

To express someone's good fortune, as often as not, people said he had it "made in the shade".

Getting a haircut was often called "getting your ears lowered". I still do not understand the source, or sense, of the phrase, unless, as has been suggested to me, it arises from the fact that, if your ears stuck out, they did so more obviously after a haircut than before. Later on, when you

1. (1) a person who supports athletics; (2) a jock strap

said you were going to get a haircut, someone might reply, "Only one?" [You're only going to have one hair cut when there are so many?]

When someone spent too much time on the toilet while others were waiting for him, he would often be greeted with the question, when he was finished, "What'd you do, fall in?"

A joke considered to be devilishly clever was to call, or go into, a tobacco store and ask: "Do you have Prince Albert in the can?" and when the clerk said yes, to reply, "Well let him out!"

A repulsive joke that to this day can bring on a vague nausea in me is one that I not only remember, but remember the way someone told it (the sound of their voice): "A guy goes into a bar and bets $100 that he can drink the entire contents of the spittoon. The others take the bet, he drinks the contents. People are amazed. Someone asks, 'What did it taste like?' He replies, 'I don't know. It all went down in one string.'"

At some point, I think as I was nearing my teens, the parting words, "See ya later, alligator" came into vogue. The reply was, "After a while, crocodile."

If, by accident, two words that you said in a sentence, rhymed, someone was sure to say,

"He's a poet,
But he doesn't know it,
But his feet show it,
They're long fellows[1]."

The word "antidisestablishmentarianism" appeared at another point, perhaps in jr. high or high school. I had no idea what it meant until my late sixties.

Minor diversions: picking your nose, burning hair, pulling your upper eyelid over the lower, making Ubangi lips (tongue out and up to form upper lip, lower lip bent inside out and spread downward), pretending to remove your thumb (thumb of left hand bent sharply down, thumb of right hand bent at a ninety-degree angle and then the upper part pressed against the left-hand thumb and the index finger of the right hand placed so as to cover the crack between the two thumbs; then the index finger and right-hand thumb slowly moved away from the other thumb, giving the illusion that the upper part of the thumb of the left hand had suddenly been separated from the lower part).

The Little Engineer

Certain things were inherently good and not because they made you *feel* good. (Things that made you feel good were almost always inherently bad.) Tools were inherently good. Everything in books that was difficult and boring was inherently good. So, for example, lots of things in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* were inherently good. Concrete was inherently good. I remember once — this was on our trip to Switzerland when I was thirteen — my father wanted to visit a hydro-

1. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a famous 19th-century American poet.

electric project under construction. I think we arrived there in the evening, a place way up the side of a mountain, with construction sheds and white gravel and wires strung on thin rectangular posts. He allowed us to follow him into the tunnel. Soon after we entered, the air became very cold — biting, freezing, cold. Bright greenish-white lights illuminated the interior from high on the side of the tunnel. We climbed over pieces of wood and up metal stairs and down narrow paths cut into the side of the rock. My father was met by several of the workmen and immediately was absorbed in conversation. My brother and I looked around at the equipment, tried to make our voices echo. And if feelings could have been expressed in words then, mine would undoubtedly have been, "*Nothing is more important than concrete!*"

Algebra and calculus were inherently good, indeed any kind of figuring was inherently good. Engineering, of course, was inherently good. Doing what you hated, what was unbearable, was inherently good.

Another example of this way of looking at things was the way I regarded the radio tower on Kensico Ave., a road which ran from Columbus Ave., near the aerators, down through Kensico to the Bronx River Parkway. The tower was set back from the road on raised ground above a stone wall that fronted the sidewalk. Nearby was a ramshackle wooden house with a pointed roof. Several wires ran from it up to the tower. We were told, I think by one or both of my parents, that it belonged to the Associated Press or some other organization that sounded official. At the same time we were led to believe, or perhaps this was entirely my own imagining, that some guy with a tarnished reputation worked there. (The reason his reputation was tarnished was never given. It may have been that he had chosen the wrong profession — working in a radio station rather than being an engineer.) I can still picture him, though I never met him, as a man in his thirties, a hank of dark hair hanging over his forehead, sitting at a desk with several Morse Code keys in front of him. He is wearing a white shirt, dark necktie loosened at the neck, like an overworked reporter. When I think of that radio tower, I think of it on a sunny day, the trees behind it, blue sky and massed white cumulus clouds behind the trees, and the signals going out into the air, up into the clouds, through the sky. I never attempted to find out anything about the station or about the guy with the tarnished reputation — not doing so was part of the station's very meaning. It was to *remain there,* on the grass above the wall next to the sidewalk, next to the house under the trees.

Science was inherently good, and so I knew it was likely to do me in. For some Christmas or birthday I got a chemistry set, I think a Gilbert Chemistry Set, with a picture of an old-fashioned man with a moustache on the box. Who was Gilbert? I wondered. Somehow I associated him with magnets. In any case, he had done the Right Thing. That's how you got your picture on the box of a chemistry set. To ask who he was, to try to look him up somewhere, say, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, was something I had no time for. Doing that would have been too good.

The only thing I remember about the chemistry set was looking through the microscope at diatomaceous earth. (The microscope itself was a problem: you had to get the specimen onto the center of the thin, rectangular glass slide, then select one of the three lenses by rotating the lens holder, which was at an angle, then tilt the round mirror below to get the bright beam of light to go through the specimen just right — a nervous, unreliable business every time.)It was the *word* "diatomaceous" that gave the material what little interest it had for me. I assumed that the difficulty, the unusualness of the word implied the unusualness of what it represented. I tried to force myself to be interested in what I saw in the microscope, but couldn't: it was just more of the com-

plicated boredom that came from the world of adults. The one appeal of a chemistry set for me, and, I think for all the Kids, was that, according to legend among the Kids, you could use it to make gunpowder. Somewhere or other, we picked up the news that gunpowder consisted of a third charcoal, a third saltpeter, and a third — we didn't know. We mixed the ingredients on the sidewalk. The result looked like lumpy, black and white powder, not the crystalline dark lethal grains which were in firecrackers. We tossed a match into the pile. It went out. Another. The same. Someone had the idea of hitting the powder with a hammer. Nothing. We never succeeded in getting so much as a brief spurt of flame.

I was mildly interested in looking at amoebas and paramecia under the microscope. But all this belonged to Them. There was a proper way to look at these things, to be amazed by them. If you did that, then that meant you would become a scientist or an engineer and They would be proud of you. But They were my enemy, so why do something that would make them proud of me? Science was like furniture, upholstery. It belonged to Them. The idea that you could go where your interests led you, that there was no right or wrong about that, that you could ask whatever questions you wanted to and then set about trying to answer them — the idea that all these things in the chemistry set and inside the microscope could be *mine* — never occurred to me.
I also got a magic kit somewhere along the way. One trick they explained, in the manual, was how to palm three corks so that it would look like you were putting them into a little round cardboard box. I worked on that trick, but the Kids always saw that my fingers were wrapped around the corks. I think there was a magic wand in the box, and a tube with hollow sides for hiding a scarf. There was a trick involving a cup with crinkled brown paper around the lid, and a piece of elastic. If you did things right, some object that came with the kit, and that you were trying to make disappear, flew up your sleeve so quickly that your audience wouldn't notice it. But they always did. None of this was for me, I clearly understood.

I had a fear of puzzles from the very start, because I knew that they were ways that They used to decide who was really an engineer (and therefore had a reason to live) and who wasn't. I was supposed to love puzzles, take to them "naturally", but I hated them. I remember a paperback with a collection of puzzles, one of which asked which direction a weight on the end of a rope that ran through a complicated set of pulleys would move when you pulled on the other end of the rope. I remember trying, in a half-hearted fashion, to figure it out, but I knew my efforts were doomed, since this was more engineering stuff. Another puzzle I remember not getting was about a crudely written ransom note, in which you were supposed to figure out if a certain barely literate suspect had written it. The answer was no because, despite the crude language and misspellings, the sophisticated punctuation revealed the note had been written by an educated person.

Later, I read somewhere that a straight line is not always the shortest distance between two points. They showed a sphere and explained that a great circle on the sphere was the shortest distance. But here again I felt another blow of defeat because to me it was obvious that if you drilled through the ball, a straight line was still the shortest distance.

I had the same attitude toward card games and most board games, except for Monopoly, which had the epic quality that marked it out as special. I always felt, regarding games, that the only right way to approach them was by studying them completely, understanding them, figuring out the strategies. (Game theory was still being invented in those years.) I detested the idea of learning by doing, of having to memorize all the tricks which seemed to work and never really knowing why they worked. But at the same time, I knew that my approach was hopelessly

beyond me although there were probably smart kids around who could figure things out quickly and easily. So, I hated games.

Making Things

"Many things would be easily accomplished but for the imaginary objections men sometimes take pleasure in inventing. From our childhood upwards, how often have we been prevented from doing one thing or another we should have liked to do, simply by hearing people about us repeat: 'He won't be able to ...'" — Gide, André, *The Pastoral Symphony*, in *Two Symphonies*, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., 1931, pp. 145-146.

Blocks

When I was a child, say, before the age of five or so, I loved building with blocks. This had the same metaphysical, epic, importance for me as climbing trees would later on. To build a very tall tower, to build it until it was so high it fell down, this I did with a kind of reverance. The same went for building houses, either with blocks or Lincoln Logs or in the dirt in the back yard. I can still hear the clacking sound of the precisely cut triangular green hardwood blocks that you had to position to make a little roof, I can see the black chevrons on the blocks that were used to construct English Tudor houses. I spent hours building and arranging cardboard houses to make Western towns, imagining myself inside the houses. Then there were little red bricks, I assume made of some sort of plastic, with rough sides to make them look realistic, and a row of little vertical pins around the edge so you could stack them on another in the overlapping pattern (the middle of the upper brick centered on the joining of the two bricks below) to make the wall much stronger than it would have been if you merely stacked the bricks one on top of the other.

I knew I was supposed to like building with Tinker Toys and Erector Sets the most because it had to do with engineering, and so I tried to force myself to like constructing, say, a windmill or a walking beam engine out of the Erector Set, but I got no pleasure out of it. In fact, once the age of playing with blocks was behind me, I never took the slightest pleasure in *making* things, if we except building forts in the dirt in the back yard. I hated working with tools and the reason was obvious: whatever I worked on always seemed to come out as badly as it possibly could. I knew that, no matter what I did, I would be a failure at it, yet at the same time I knew that I had to persevere with iron-willed determination. My father said, or at least I got the idea from him, that real boys always *build* the things they want to have, instead of buying them ready-made in a store. This applied to guns, kites, radios. That turned the whole thing off for me, because I loved to buy the things ready-made. They were much better than what I could do.

I often heard the phrase, throughout my childhood and teens, "the pleasure is in making the thing, not the finished result". I took this as further evidence I was damned, because for me it was just the reverse: the making was agony, dreadful, something I hated more than almost anything else, and the agony was only justified if the result was successful. The pleasure — or, rather, the relief from agony — lay in the result. There was only one reason to work on anything and that was to find out if you had a reason to go on living. I loved *the idea* of whittling, the esthetics of it, the look and smell of the wood, but these things I could like just as well if someone else were wielding the knife, and that would in fact have been better, because they would do it right. To this day, if someone were to ask me, "Would you like to be a craftsman?" my answer would be, "Yes, as long as I could be someone *else* who was a craftsman. But please don't ask me to imagine I myself being one." My reverse morality on this issue has persisted throughout my life.

Nevertheless I made a fair number of guns and kites, not to mention huts, when I was a boy.

Guns, Bows and Arrows

It is fair to say that guns and huts were our major preoccupation. I always wanted to buy guns at the store but the Code — and my parents' explicit refusal — required that I make most of them at home.

I whittled an old-fashioned, long-barrelled minature six-shooter out of soft pine. The barrel wasn't round, but kind of oval, like a big wet straight noodle. Another time, my father had cut some big circular pieces out of a square board. The shapes that were left could be imagined to be the handle and barrel of a pistol, so I and one or two of the Kids put them to that use.

I made a Thompson submachine gun. My father cut the round magazine and the handles and stock on the power jigsaw. I think he also convinced me that I should increase the thickness of the handles by nailing thin pieces of wood on the sides. For a while, I was famous among the Kids for having such an authentic-looking gangster weapon.

Another time, I made a Winchester .73 carbine, but it was nowhere near as exciting-looking as a Daisy air rifle, which imitated the same design. Behind the trigger it had a piece of carefully-bent wire in imitation of the handle that was used to pump the next cartridge into the chamber. But the wire couldn't move. It was held to the wood with a staple.

We also made bows and arrows, although the store-bought ones were much better (I no longer remember why I didn't have one) — the wonderfully flexiible pale wood shaped wide at the center, where you held it , narrow at the ends, which had grooves to hold the thick bow line. The only bow I made was simply a stick perhaps ¾-inch in diameter, five feet long, cut from a tree, the bark shaved off, and then the whole covered with a mahogany stain from the workshop. Each end had a notch for the the thick white twine (the same we used on kites). But there was no easy slipping the twine on and off the ends of the bow. With all my might, I bent the bow the slight amount it would bend, then tied the ends of the twine permanently. When I put the notch of an arrow in the center of the string and pulled back, it always felt as though it was the twine that was being stretched; the bow itself hardly bent. Nevertheless, I was able to shoot arrows at what seemed to me a considerable distance in the fields across Columbus Ave. I suppose I tried to hit birds a few times, but my aim wasn't good enough.

Model Airplanes

These are described in the section, "Planes and Parachutes", in the next file.

Huts

Sooner or later in the course of life, we are asked what profession we would have entered if we had our life to live over again, and it is remarkable how many people answer: "architecture". It is certainly the answer I always give. In fact, were it not for the Code, and the unspoken assumption in the family that there was really only one profession, namely, engineering, that I could enter with any hope of thereby earning a reason to live — apart from this, I might have made the right choice the first time around. The reason I say this with such confidence is the obsession I had with anything that had to do with *places you could live in*, as I might have put it then. This included what we always called "huts", though the term applied to any place we could stand or crouch or lie in, above-ground or below, including tunnels and caves. Something of the same feeling extended to model houses made of building blocks or Lincoln Logs, and to tunnels

scooped out of the soil in flower beds. These were things about which, had anyone asked me, I would have said something like, "I don't know. They are very important. I can't explain it."

The term "playing in the dirt" covered everything from making mud pies[1] to building tunnels and forts in the flower bed in the back yard to digging a trench for a hut. The flower bed was located at the rear of the yard, near the stone in the stone wall that we climbed over to get to the Beaird's back yard. "You can play there if you want to play in the dirt", my mother said, making it clear that if this unsavory pastime of youth must exist, then it will take place in a clearly defined, limited, area in the back yard, not the front yard. If, in our games of war or cowboys and Indians or in our busy going from one important place to the next, we had to climb over the worn boulder that became the accepted means of access to the Beaird's yard, I was always nervous and had to warn the others, in particular the new kids, not to step on our roads and tunnels — our work in progress.

Typically, we began by scooping out a little hand-sized trench. Then we covered it with popsicle sticks for roof beams, then covered those with scraps of tar paper, shingle, or bark, then covered that with dirt for camouflage. (Everything had to be camouflaged to conceal it from Enemy attack.) Then, or at the same time, we would use fingers or a stick to make the interior as rectangular as possible. Finally we would press the dirt down as far inside as we could reach without damaging the roof, then pat the dirt in the front hard and smooth to make a road leading to another garage or tunnel.

Along these roads we moved the collection of cars and trucks accumulated from various Christmases and trips to the 5 & 10. When things got boring, it was time to start a new layout. To destroy the old one we resorted to aerial bombing using dirt clods that exploded on contact, just like explosions in the movies. We took note of which roofs took the longest to be caved in. Although moving toy trucks slowly over their bumpy dirt roads was inherently interesting, nothing could compare with the spell of watching real trucks leave tire treads on the snow. I could have spent the rest of my life doing this, as I have described under "Cars and Trucks" in the previous file. It was my pornography. Farting away with excitement, I watched the dull black rubber with its carved tread slowly crunch down into the snow, make its imprint then move upward. Kings should have been summoned, entire nations, to be lectured on the supreme importance of this phenomenon. The big engine under the truck hood, racketing away, the driver up in his cab turning the huge steering wheel and working the important controls, which were understood only by *drivers*...

One day we decided to build a trench-hut in an open dirt patch near the corner of the fence in the woods behind the house. This one was unusual because we decided to let a girl join us in the project, namely, Barbara Beaird, who for some reason we felt could be trusted not to give away our secrets and who would work hard with us. The plan was simple: dig a trench — deep, wide, and long to our childhood sense of scale, but actually probably no more than six feet long by three feet wide by a couple of feet deep. We piled the dirt around the side by way of "protection" — against attackers, of course. Days of labor went into this effort, utilizing a rag-tag collection of shovels, trowels, and who knows what from various garages and basements. (I doubt if we were so advanced as to have had a pick, but I may be wrong.) We got thin logs from the woods and laid

1. And also mud bowls. Perhaps we were inspired by pottery exercises in school, the clumpy donut-shaped bowls we made. I thought that if I was any good, I should be able to make little bowls (for what?) out of mud. After all, the Indians did it. Somehow, magically, after the bowl was shaped, it should somehow harden (if I was any good) of its own accord. I can still feel the coarse dirt crumbling, the bowl crumbling, breaking in half even as I tried to move it into the sun to dry.

them across the top, then thinner sticks and laid them perpendicular to the logs, then the inevitable tar paper and asphalt shingle scraps, then dirt over that, for camouflage as much as for waterproofing. Just as we were nearing the end, it threatened to rain, and so we raced to get the roof done before the rain filled up the trench. We barely made it. Someone brought candles and sawed-off tin cans to put them in. The entrance was on the side, near one end, a mere slit under the roof. We crawled in. The bottom was too round!. Pass in a few trowels! We tried to make it more like a box, collecting the dirt in a pile and then passing it out the narrow opening. Whatever state your clothes were in when you entered, they were covered with dirt when you exited. The rain was coming down now but we were snug inside — some five or six of us — listening to the rain hit the few exposed pieces of tar paper. Barbara chewed on her braids. We made plans for defense. I don't think it dawned on us that our only real protection was secrecy, because once another gang knew where the trench was, they could simple kick in the roof, whether we were there or not.

But the most immediate concern was: did the roof leak? We could hear the drops hitting softly overhead. So far so good. Once in a while a drop landed in a tiny opening between the roof and the side. We could hear it. Climb out, find some tarpaper, seal the hole, cover it with dirt, then crawl back inside. Huddled there together *underground*, as we thought of it, our voices muffled by the close, brown dirt, the candle flames waving in the drafts, we waited for the first signs that the roof was leaking. Someone said, "I felt a drop!" Oh, no! How could that be? Crawl out, scrape away the dirt, cover the hole with a piece of shingle, put dirt on top, crawl back inside.

Not having the roof leak was to me the difference between safety and worthlessness. I thought it a kind of miracle to be able to stand somewhere and have something you built prevent rain drops from landing on you. And throughout my adult life, of all the things that can go wrong with a house, the one that rattles me most is a leaky roof. Suddenly I am without defense, suddenly the outside has been let in, suddenly the house is worthless.

As with all the huts we built, we soon lost interest in the trench-hut after it was completed. It was too cramped inside, you got too dirty going in and out, and the rain somehow managed to make the ground inside wet even though it didn't come through the roof. Sometimes, when the kids weren't there and I crawled inside on my own (the hut was near one corner of our yard, don't forget), and I lay there in the silence, listening to the dirt, I couldn't help thinking, "Is this all there is? This really isn't all that great. Kind of boring."

The other huts we built were above ground, but typically they too were only big enough for at most four of five of us to squeeze into. They all had "firing holes" to shoot out of at attacking enemies. The best of all huts to build were tree huts, but we never got beyond nailing a plank or two across a couple of branches. Once, we decided to try for a hut on stilts, according to what logic, I don't know, since it meant that the enemy could attack us from below as well as from all sides, which meant we would have to be able to fire through holes in the floor. But this hut, started in the woods below Wall Ave., was to be our magnum opus.

Building materials came from new houses, those cornucopias for industrious young carpenters. Available for the taking were tar paper, nails (by the kegful), boards of all sizes, cinder blocks, asphalt roofing shingles with the slits that defined each shingle, thus making the tearing of them into thirds or two-thirds sizes so easy, and, incidentally, as we discovered, metal slugs that worked in the candy machines in movie theaters. The slugs covered the holes in electric switch- and outlet boxes: the electrician pried them off as necessary in order to allow wires to enter the box. We found that, if you took them home, put them in the workbench vise, filed off the rough tab that had held them in place in the box, and made sure the remaining metal was flat, why, with

a bit of luck and several tries, you could get Milk Duds out of the machines at RKO Keith's and Loew's. We began carrying them around in socks, just as we did marbles. One particular house became the principal vein of this new-found gold mine, and so, one day, kids from blocks around came with their socks and screw drivers and together we removed, I think, every single one of the slugs from every electrical box in the house. Days later, one of the kids reported he had overheard a carpenter or the builder himself say that the owner had to pay to have an entire new set of these boxes installed, since the electrical code did not allow boxes with holes punched out unless the holes were filled with wires. I remember feeling briefly sorry for the guy.

The hut on stilts was never completed. We got the posts into the ground all right, and put in the floor, which was all of two feet above the ground, and got one of the walls up, with a couple of firing holes. (It had a floor area of, I suppose, eight by eight feet.) Some of us felt that it was more important to work on the steps first, others, that we should do the walls. The truth was that it was simply too big a project for us.

After that, I decided to go it alone, and built, on the immaculate lawn of our back yard, a kind of lean-to, the slanting-roof part being a door we had found near the hut on stilts. I nailed asphalt roofing onto this door, put firing holes in each of the triangular side walls, and had hinged doors on the inside of the holes to open and close them. This prevented the enemy from shooting BBs or stones from a slingshot into my house from a distance. The front door was secured by a hasp. I spent a fair amount of time in this odd-shaped house, at least as time spent in huts was reckoned then. Despite almost constant checking through the firing holes, no enemy was ever in sight. Once in a while, another kid was invited in, and we made plans, discussed bigger huts, or looked out of the firing holes to see if any attackers were approaching. None were.

The continual, nagging worry we always had with any hut was that the ceiling would fall down. And the truth is that even now, in old age, I don't feel I have a right to live in any house in which I can't understand why the ceilings don't fall down. Those large grand rooms in wealthy homes where there are no supporting posts in the center — how do the carpenters do that, given that wood beams are the only structural support materials? How could they make wooden beams span that much empty space? Why don't the beams sag? How much genius was required to figure that out? That is still the world of adults, I am still a child who will never and can never understand such things.

"Of course they're[1] safe. There's absolutely no doubt about that. They are as strong, solid and as safe as any other building method in this country...provided of course people *believe* in them." — *The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Vol. 2, Pantheon Books, N.Y., p. 168.

In winter, when there was a couple of feet of snow on the ground, we tried to build igloos, usually in our front yard, near the driveway (why there I don't know), in the way our books described, which was the way the Eskimos built them, namely, by laying a circle of blocks of snow on the ground with their tops cut so they formed a slight upward slope.

Then on top of these you put rectangular blocks of hard snow and sort of got them to lean in a little and spiral upward so that eventually you had a half-dome with a small hole at the top. Oh, easy for Eskimos! We could never get so far as the second row. The snow was too soft, and "rectangular blocks of snow" were for us an impossibility. Our blocks of snow were round, lumpy, and irregular, and the more you patted them and scraped them the odder-shaped and less rectangular they became.

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1. Apartment buildings that the Amazing Mystico and Janet erect by hypnosis

Most important, of course, was to crawl inside as soon as possible. We made a little arched tunnel in front of the door, as in the pictures in the books, but it was usually so small, and the snow so fluffy, that our shoulders knocked it down no matter how careful we were. But sooner or later, ignoring the wreckage behind us, we managed to get Inside, which was a space, full of snow, with barely a foot between the top of your head when you were lying there, face down, and the snow hanging down above.

But the thin parts of the wall were sometimes blue! To be able to lie inside what amounted to little more than a snow pile, in the hissing cold, and look at blue snow from the inside, made the whole hopeless effort worthwhile.

Our solution to the igloo problem was simply to make as big a pile of snow as we could, say, in our front yard, and then, very carefully, like sculpting wet sugar or wet feathers, cut a little opening near the ground, crawl into that cold blue silence, and then carefully, handful by handful, scoop more of it out, the voices outside muffled; then we would go a little farther in, so that, with luck, we managed to create a tiny room, hardly big enough for one kid to crouch and eat the snow off his mittens. Then we tried to enlarge the room by carefully scraping, wiping snow off the roof, until, sooner or later, there was one scrape too many and daylight was staring us in the face.

But for me the main appeal of snow was not its potential for building igloos. I loved it for how it *looked* — for example, the glistening mountain of boulders by the side of the road, as the snowplow left it, in the sun, under the blue sky. I can say now, but hadn't the slightest idea then, that what appealed to me were all the sculptural qualities of snow: the irregular shapes, the little blue and gray shadows between the lumpy balls, the way the tops gleamed brilliant white in the sunlight, the crunch of new snow under the wheels of cars or under my rubber boots. It gave me a strange feeling, as though I were in touch with something from another realm. I knew that it was more than just snow, the stuff that parents complained about and that made the snowplows come out and that sometimes kept you home from school. That was all of minor importance compared to the way it looked (and sounded)!

Sometimes, toward spring, when the snow began to be wetter, we would try to get a ball of snow to roll down our ski hill below Clinton St., becoming bigger and bigger as it went, so that (if only!) a giant wheel of coiled snow perhaps ten feet high would roll out on the Bronx River Parkway, causing cars to screech to a halt, maybe even rolling into one of them.

And throughout there was the smell of wet woolen mittens after you had rubbed the snot dribbling out of your nose. The taste of mitteny show.

Another kind of hut was tents. I had a pup tent which I would put up in the back yard, with a canvas ground cloth, and blankets, and sleeping bag, and weapons at the ready near the pillows. (The sleeping bag — military olive-drab in color, rectangular, with a red plaid lining — was filled with kapok The word always sounded like a true Army word: like "ack-ack". As I remember, it never seemed to keep me warm on the rare occasions I actually used it for camping; it was too thin. So I always had to add a few blankets on top.) But pup tents were nothing compared to *tents with cloth windows* (which were in fact cloth *sculptures* of real windows). Those were tents you could stand up in — they were in fact cloth *houses*, made of dark green canvas, with a roll-down flap in front. The dark green color seemed to attract the heat on hot summer days, making the material give up a wonderful, oily, smell of new canvas. The smell seemed similar to that of the kapok. This was truly an Outside that was an Inside.

I shouldn't omit mentioning the *miniature* houses we built, namely, the cardboard Western towns you could buy — I can't remember if through the cereal boxes or at the store. You punched the houses out of a flat piece of cardboard, following the instructions, then began hooking the tabs

in place — tab A into slot A. The notion of connecting things together with tabs had an engineering feel to it. It was sensible, important. But sometimes the tabs didn't hold, so when you looked the other way, suddenly the entire front of the livery stable opened like a door that it was never meant to be. Sometimes the cardboard bowed out, so that it didn't look like a wooden house at all. When the houses were put together, you arranged them on the carpet — the grass — to make a little town. There were little swinging cardboard doors on the saloons. I always wanted to be able to climb inside these houses, find an old room there, live there, hide there.

The Lure of Construction Sites

As I have indicated above, construction sites were our sources of supply. But they had other excitements: the little mountains of fresh brown earth, boards stacked six feet high, and, most important, heavy machinery, in particular, tractors and steam-shovels. At the end of the day, these giants stood quietly in the dirt where they had been parked, their warm metal smelling of earth and oil and exhaust. We kids would climb up on them, feeling the warm, round, pitted metal of the treads, then, sometimes, if the men had forgotten to lock the little airplane-like door of the steam-shovel cockpit, we would take our place on the shiny black seat and pretend that the giant scoop in front of us was under our control and that we could actually make the levers move. (Not just one lever, like the emergency brake in the family car, but lots of levers!) We walked on the shiny embossed image of the treads in the dirt, climbed the mountains of dirt, jumped off, got dirt in our shoes, smelled the newly-poured concrete (or cement — we never understood the difference) in the skeletal, new, basement, smelled the freshly sawed wood.

Sometimes, if the men were working on a Saturday, we could watch them mix the concrete. The job always seemed to be done by Italians, and I was in my sixties before a neighbor was able to plant the first suggestion in my mind that you didn't have to be Italian to know how to mix concrete, by which I mean, mix it *right* — so it would last forever. There was the sound of gravel being shoveled, the job always looking so easy, and always being carried on during casual conversation and laughter. That's how good they were at it! They didn't even have to think about how much to put on the shovel each time, or where to throw the gravel. They just knew, because they were Italian! I envied them, just as I envied the men who were allowed to spend all day digging dirt, standing in holes in the ground with a short-handled shovel that had an actual round handle at one end, not like my father's shovel, which just had a long, straight, round shaft. When they drove the blade of the shovel into the dark brown earth, it left shiny marks in the soil, that's how expert they were. Workmen were allowed to do all these things, *and* talk all the while.

Italians not only were the only ones who knew how to mix cement but also were the only ones who knew how to apply it, to smooth it and make it become a sidewalk or a wall. They knew how to sweep the mortar board over the smooth, wet, gray glistening surface, and lift it at just the right moment. If they were laying brick, they knew how to wipe the cement off the trowel on a board they held in the other hand. It was all so easy, if you were of the right nationality.

Tunnels and Caves

Closely related to huts was an even more mystical subject, namely, *tunnels and caves*. Auden seems to have had the same obsession in his childhood —

" I should like
— Who wouldn't? — to shoot beautifully and be obeyed

(I should also like to own a cave with two exits);"

— Auden, W. H., "Lakes"

I was ready to follow any kid anywhere on the promise that he had found a tunnel or a cave. Once, possibly on the say-so of one of the Kids, I got it into my head that there was a tunnel underneath the hedge on the Thomas's side of our house. I felt I knew where it was, I was all but certain that a certain irregular line in the grass was one side of the trapdoor, but I never tried to find out because the kid had said that if I tried to, I'd never find it (better not to try to find it, and know it was there).

Then for a time I was convinced there was a tunnel entrance right near the cherry tree in the woods behind our back yard. I must have been very young at the time, because at least in memory I was not allowed to go that far back into the woods (perhaps ten feet from the back fence). I knew it must be a tunnel because there was a strange little wooden railing on the ground. It was red and yellow and blue, and probably came from a child's crib, but I was convinced that that was exactly how the entrance to a tunnel would look. I can see it now in my mind's eye, in the flickering sunlight of an afternoon, in the darkness under the cherry tree. Who used it? When did they go inside? I imagined that they simply raised the railing, and there was the hole going straight down into the earth, probably with a ladder or stairs, leading to rooms and who knew what else underneath. What I had to endure was not the torment of not knowing if it really was a tunnel or not, but the torment of not being allowed to go into the woods and open the little entrance and go down inside.

We actually did find a cave once. It was next to a dilapidated building we called The Old Barn on the back side of Clinton St. I have described it in another section.

Near the power station up on Columbus Ave., perhaps a mile from our house and not far from the aerators, was The Hollow Tree. The hollow part was so small that all you could do was climb in and sit in a crouching position. But it qualified as *real* because you could get out of the rain by going inside. I tried to ignore the occasionally strong smell of urine in it, and the smell of wet ashes. It was a place of last resort for me. I kept going back to it believing that it *should* be all I needed to make the world stop being so hopelessly gloomy. Through one of the little knotholes, you could look down on the power station on the other side of the creek below, with its silent man once in a while walking along the concrete building, and you could listen to the rush of the water. I tried again and again to make it be what I felt it should be for me.

Whittling

Sometime around the age of nine or ten, I became interested in whittling. There were probably two reasons: first, whittling was something you did with a pocketknife and a pocketknife was my most important Gadget[1], and second, my mother had, as decoration on various shelves in the house and on the mantelpiece, Swiss hand-carved figures of old woodcutters and old women carrying firewood. The humble woodcarver in his little chalet, with his devoted wife and happy children, poor but content with his craft, making things that the world loved and admired, had an irresistible appeal for me. (All my life I have enjoyed *pretending* to be poor. Going to sleep at

1. Strangely enough — or perhaps not so strangely — I was never able to make a Swiss Army knife, which my father often carried in his pocket, into a Gadget. I am sure my father would have bought me one; I might even have received one as a present from a visitng Swiss friend of my parents, but all Swiss Army knives lacked the mysterious quality that was required for a Gadget.

night even now, I imagine myself forced to sleep on a concrete landing in New York City, my only possessions a few blankets and a dog. It is always raining. Or I am on the run, sleeping in a hedge, in hollowed-out ground.) I loved the *look* of carved things — I mean carved things in which the knife marks were still visible. I had no particular interest in woodcarvings that had been sanded and polished smooth, such as you saw in stores sometimes — intricate carvings, in rock-hard wood, of Don Quixote, or prancing horses, or old men, or flowers, which sold for a small fortune. I loved to see the signs of the workmanship; loved the signs of the hand that had carved the wood. It seemed to make it more magical, because, on the one hand, you had the figure itself — the old man or old woman with their little wooden hands and fingers, their faces, with eyes and nose and mouth and ears, the folds in their clothes, the woman's kerchief — and on the other you had this clear evidence that it was, after all, not "real", but only wood, which by a few strokes of the knife, had been converted into a person.

I probably spent more time on whittling than on any other activity associated with making things. But I was convinced that if I were any good, I would be able to carve with the simplest tools: not the ones that professional woodcarvers used — which, in any case, were used to make those smooth, professional-looking carvings I disliked — but ordinary pocket knives. My father gave me a whetstone, showed me how you always had to put some oil or water on it (it was all right to spit on it though oil was much better), and then how you held the knife as flat as possible, so that, when you were done sharpening, the blade would taper continually, at the same angle, to the edge. This was better than if there were a sudden, chisel-like angle near the edge. It made the blade cut better, he said. The whetstone he gave me was too big to carry around, so somewhere I got a pocket-sized one in a cardboard box. I carried the stone, in its oily, deteriorating little cardboard box, with me as another Gadget. I always tested the sharpness of a blade by running my thumb *across* it. When the blade was very sharp, it felt almost feathery, or like the edge of a piece of paper. But I noticed my father felt the edge by running his thumb *along* it, which made me almost cringe with the imminence of his cutting himself. I didn't see how he could feel the sharpness that way, either.

But if I looked closely near the edge of the knife or axe I was sharpening, I could see it wasn't flat, but round, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get rid of that roundness. The reason was that sooner or later I would lose patience with trying to make the entire side taper, flat, to the edge, and in the last moment would try to get the edge sharp by increasing the angle of the blade on the whetstone. But that produced a chisel! So in the last remaining seconds of my patience, I would try to *round* the chisel part and at least start to make it flat. But then time would run out and so I would be left with a blade that, for the moment, would be sharp, but which, when it needed to be sharpened again, would need to have that round part ground away, which meant more work, more time spent not actually sharpening the blade.

On top of all this, there was the need to find the right whetstone. If the surface was too smooth, it would take you forever to sharpen the blade. If it was too rough, you would damage the blade — "wreck the edge" in my father's words — meaning that little nicks would appear, making the blade not perfect, hence not worth using. Somewhere was the perfect whetstone. Meantime, I used the one my father had in the workshop, and carried the small one in its oily cardboard box so that I could sharpen the pocket knife whenever I sensed it was getting dull.

A blade so sharp it felt like the edge of a piece of paper: that was the goal. The Kids had a test which they gave, with a smirk, to any new knife that appeared on the scene: hold up a piece of newspaper, then attempt to cut it in half with a single downward stroke of the knife. If it cut cleanly, with a *fffft!* sound, then the knife was sharp. Otherwise, it wasn't. (Some of us, includ-

ing me, learned to imitate that *fffft!* sound to such a degree that other students couldn't tell the difference. So you grabbed the homework assignment that the kid in the next seat had been working on all night, told him you were going to rip it in half, turned, made that sound, and for a few seconds, the poor guy really wasn't sure if you had done it or not.)

The tormenting questions were always present: which is really better, oil or spit? "Better" didn't mean "would have the best result" but "would make me *be right*". Which one, later on, would they say was a sign of my unique skill and genius as a woodcarver? Worst of all was the torment of finding that the knife wasn't perfect! I would notice, trying hard not to — trying to convince myself it was only that my thumb had slid on the handle, that's all — that the plastic grip was moving a little; the two metal tabs at each end that fastened each grip to the knife itself, weren't tight enough. The grip was moving! Somehow, it had to be made perfect again. So I got a pair of long-nosed pliers and pinched the tabs tight. But then a few weeks later they would be loose again! The knife wasn't perfect! I had bought the wrong one! So on top of everything else I had to resume the search for a perfect knife.

And then there was the tormenting thought that if I were really any good, I would be paying attention to the nature of the wood I chose to carve, that I would study each different kind of wood *in itself* — pine, willow, and poplar were the only types I had any personal acquaintance with — that I would learn the *properties* of each type. But I knew that was entirely too mature, too calm an approach to the desperate task at hand. My job was to make something that the world would approve of. Then, when I had established a reputation, then and only then would I have time to devote to such abstract matters as the nature of the wood apart from what was carved out of it.

I loved to read about carving far more than I liked doing it, since the activity was nothing but a continual revelation of my lack of talent. I loved carved wood, I loved the life of the wood carver, I loved the idea of carving a piece of wood into something. Some of the books described how, out West in the last century, after dinner, men would take out their pocket knives and whittle a stick, the sticks themselves sometimes supplied by the hotel or restaurant.

> "Some one has been trying to claim for the practice of whittling an English origin, and in a little work, published in London in 1774, entitled 'The Sentimental Exhibition; or, Portraits and Sketches of the Times,' may be found the following statement: 'M. Grosse, or some other Frenchman, remarks, that when we English have no other employment, we are sure to do mischief, and, therefore, when a parcel of sailors go into an inn at Wapping, the landlord delivers to each of them a stick and a knife with which to amuse himself, that they may not destroy the host's furniture.'
>
> "In Kentucky and all through the Southwest, fifty years ago, it was the custom to have piled up on the hotel counter a lot of neat cedar sticks. Each guest, as he left the dining-room, selected a stick, and, taking out his jack-knife, commenced to whittle as he talked. So universal was this habit that he probably would have been unable to talk without whittling. The author has seen the most complicated wooden chains and cubes, with movable balls inside, that were whittled out of solid sticks by some of these old-time experts, and are now kept as curiosities by their children." — Beard, D. C., *The American Boy's Handy Book*, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1910, p. 414.

I tried sitting on a stump, aimlessly carving a piece of wood with no goal, as I imagined some of the whittlers did whom Beard describes. I tried to force myself to see its significance but was

never able to. It was a mindless activity. But I loved the smell of the moist, white wood when the bark had just been peeled off. This led me to try another project.

> "Every boy — and some girls — in the backwoods schoolhouse made a willow whistle at least once each spring, that is, when the sap was running. Some used a willow shoot and some a basswood; but the method was the same and the melodies alike. Most of our school used basswood, because there was a thick cluster growing in the playground, and there were no willows short of the river a mile away.
>
> "This is the plan: Select a straight, smooth shoot, (a) [the letter referring to his hand-drawn illustration on the next page], about nine inches long, 3/4 inch thick, without flaw, knot, curve, or blemish; and in the thin smooth bark that covers all new shoots.
>
> "Cut one end sloping as at (b), and a notch in the shoot as at (c). Three inches from the other end, cut a ring around through the bark to the wood, (d). This three inches is your handle.
>
> "Now beat and roll the other six inches of the shoot. Gently hammer it with the back of your knife; roll it firmly between two boards; wet it, work it, and pummel it, for twenty minutes. Then hold the handle firmly in the left hand; grasp the six-inch end in the right and give it a twisting pull. If the twig was well chosen, and your hammering well done, the bark will slip off, slick, clean, intact. [Here he has a footnote:] "The marvelous cleanness of the stem exposed is so exquisite that a finger touch, a breath, a puff of wind, defiles it — which accounts for the phrase 'clean as a whistle'.
>
> "Now shape the stem by removing a section of the wood as at (e) for a blowhole; and cut a deep large notch in the wood as at (f). Replace the stem on the bark, and blow. If rightly shaped, it will give off a shrill, clear whistle, often improved by dipping the whole thing in water." — Seton, Ernest Thompson, *The Birch Bark Roll of Woodcraft*, A. S. Barnes and Company, N.Y., 1931, pp. 114-116. (Mrs. Ringwald, the school librarian, gave me the book in 1948 because it was being discarded, and because she saw how I was constantly taking it out.)

Well, first of all, how could you recognize basswood? I knew what a willow tree looked like, but the closest one to the house was in Kensico Cemetery, several miles away. If you cut the wrong shoot, then you'd have to walk all the way back and cut another one. Well, already failure was looming. Take any twig in the woods near the house. If it works, that's a sign you're not damned.

So I would cut a twig from a tree in the neighborhood, and cut the ring around the bark, and know that I could never perform that miracle of separating the bark from the twig. And there was no way I was going to risk damaging (*wounding*) the knife by using it as a hammer! This was crazy: to hammer even a twig with the side of your knife meant that the plastic (or wood, in the case of the electrician's knife) would loosen, the tabs would have to be re-pinched, and that would bring them closer to breaking off from metal fatigue and then your knife would be worthless! "Roll it firmly between two boards; wet it; work it; and pummel it, for twenty minutes" — impossible! This was for kids who were at home in this world. This was for kids who lived in the country, and whose fate did not hang in the balance when they attempted a project like this. So the bark ripped as I tried to tear it away from the wood and I got no whistle at all.

Boys' Life showed how to carve an old sea captain, and made it all seemed so effortless. Just as now on the home repair shows on TV, nothing ever went wrong, they always got it right the first time, and their workshop was immaculate (and not only that, the guy on TV can tell you how

to do it *while* he's doing it!). No one had to try and try again, and become discouraged and angry and ashamed.

Later, in Boy Scouts, I carved several neckerchief slides, one in the form of an Indian head. I used a piece of square pine post and let the ninety-degree angle of two adjacent sides give me the angle of the two sides of the face. Another was a coiled snake, the neckerchief going down through the center. I painted it yellow, with black stripes and with glass fragments for eyes.

Boys' Life once showed how to carve the kind of snow goggles used by Eskimos. These were, in effect, wooden sunglasses with horizontal slits in the middle of what would have been each lens. I loved the white wood in the magazines, the thought of carving it into these strong, masculine-looking glasses, and I admired the cleverness of the Eskimos to have figured out how to make sunglasses without glass. The real challenge though, no doubt because of what Beard had said — God knows how many times I read that passage — was wooden chains and balls in a cube. These I eventually learned to do, despite dull knives and cut fingers and anxiety beyond endurance. The smell of the freshly cut pine wood was always mixed with the smell of my sweating hands. The too-sharp knife blade started to curl over under the force I was applying. More sharpening! Then came the labor of trying to carve the squarish block inside the four cage bars into something resembling a sphere, but without making it so small that it would simply fall out between the bars. The knife blade was way too big (but to choose a better tool would have been to show weakness — anything made with a tool that made it easy was worthless).

Equally difficult was cutting each link of the wooden chain loose without splitting the wood. But after innumberable attempts I finally had a chain which I felt was good enough to show around. I caught up with Donavan in the between-class crush on the first floor as he walked toward the stairs. He gave me his usual greeting, "Hey, Domer!" and pinched the back of my big head. A few more words, and then I said I had made a chain. He asked to see it. I handed it to him with great reluctance, told him to be careful with it. A shit-eating grin came to his face. "Is it strong?" he asked, and began pulling on it. "Don't!" I almost shouted. Too late. Suddenly the chain parted, the pieces of the broken link fell to the floor, were trampled. I swore at him, demanded he give the two pieces in his hands back to me. He moved on in the crowd, with that same grin on his stupid American face that said, "Guess I did something I shouldn't of."

But even as I was achieving success with chains, and balls in cages, I knew that here, as in drawing, the truth was that I couldn't carve a face, and so I was still no good. In the magazines, the old sea captains and woodsmen all had faces that looked exactly like captains' and woodmen's faces. And apparently this was done by just a few knife strokes. But my faces were always *flat* — they always looked like what they were: *attempts* at faces by someone who didn't know how to carve faces.

On top of all that, I soon realized that it might be foolish to give myself completely to a life of carving, because at the rate the forests were being cut, there would soon be no trees left to get wood from — not even for houses, much less for whittling. I think this worry came from an off-hand remark of my father's to the effect that the way we (the people in the U.S.) were cutting down trees, soon there would be none left. But at the same time I felt that if we had enough time, and enough wood carvers, we could still carve every piece of scrap wood that existed, a thought which still appeals to me: gargoyles and sea captains and wooden chains and balls in cubes and flowers and trees carved into every piece of wood lying by the side of the road, in basements, near the entrances of shipping and receiving docks. So there would still be some chance for us to be remembered.

This feeling that there is always something that needs carving differed from my feeling about other woodworking projects. When I think about saving myself by taking up woodworking, making my own furniture, knowing how much the women would admire that, I can't get the question out of my head: Who needs to spend so much time and money on a chair or a table? My internal accountant can't justify it. Are you going to say that you will feel that much better sitting in the chair knowing you built it? Or will your (rare) visitors? What a dull subject: chairs, tables. The most boring objects in our lives. And who would see them and know that I had built them? Not the whole world, but a few casual visitors. No one would know what I had done.

But the humble woodcarver seemed inherently good. I couldn't help admiring, envying, the perfection of the carving in the figures on my mother's shelves and on the mantelpiece,of the old woman carrying wood on her back, her red kerchief — how the cuts seemed to have been made loosely, casually, by someone who never made a mistake, who could be as sloppy as he wanted. The more that wood was smoothed, polished, the signs of carving removed, the more indifferent I was to it.

If someone had said you're supposed to enjoy yourself in working on projects like this, I would have said enjoying yourself is for the Common People; if you want to be great, you must hate yourself unless you're better than everyone else.

Saturday Morning Wood Shop

When I was about ten or eleven, my parents decided I should attend a shop class on Saturday mornings. It was in White Plains, in the large basement of some school. There I made: a lamp that looked like an old-fashioned pump, with a handle that, when you pushed down on it, pulled the chain to turn the light on and off[1]; a PT boat; a carved fish. I remember the teacher being one of those cheerful middle-aged guys with a thinning widow's peak. He always had a smile and lots of patience and a clear desire to simply be there and be helpful, no more. I sanded the PT boat and tried to make the turrets perfectly round (each had two or three brads partially nailed in, to represent machine guns). I painted it several coats of gray, took it home, and showed it to my mother. But the truth was, the hull was not realistic; it looked like what it was, a piece of 3/4-inch pine board that had been given a point at one end, and rounded on the other, and then had various blocks mounted on it. But I worked hard in the class, feeling again that it offered hope for a reason to go on living.

Kites

I was the son of an engineer, yet understanding why things worked, understanding the rules that would enable me to *make* things work, had no interest for me. The whole idea was boring — typical of the kind of things adults liked. I wanted excitement, unpredictability, mystery — in particular, communication with the world that existed *behind things*. Kites offered the best chance for this. (Things that fly or could be made to fly were always of prime importance to me, and I knew that the lighter something was, the better the chance it could fly.) I would say of almost any scrap of paper I saw blowing around on a windy day, "That could be a kite!"

One fall day, sitting on the horizontal ladder that constituted the top of the swings in the back yard, watching the wind churning the bushes and making the trees strain and the leaves go flying, I suddenly got the idea of trying to make a kite. I went into the house and asked my mother for

1. This lamp somehow never got lost over the years, and in 2009 was in the kitchen of my house in Berkeley, CA.

some paper, but it had to be *light*. She gave me some white tissue wrapping paper from a Macy's or B. Altman's box. The clothes and other female things my mother bought at Macy's and B. Altman's came in white or pink cardboard boxes with white tissue wrapping paper inside them. I went to the string drawer, got a ball of string, twisted the paper at one end, and tied one end of the string around the twisted part. Then I went out into the back yard, letting the string out as I walked backwards to the swing, and let the paper go. It thrashed around on the end of its string, dove into the ground or into the flower bed, then sometimes swooped up — *it flies!* — then crashed back into the ground, whipsawing from right to left and every other way. I climbed backward up the vertical ladder on the side of the swing, then onto the the top, all the while letting out more string. Even though, later on, I learned to make real kites for myself — in fact, they were probably the only thing I ever tried to make, apart from wooden chains and balls in a cube, that I considered myself to have had any success at, and even though I knew what a real kite was — you could buy them any time of year in the 5 & 10 — by far the more interesting, the deeper, more mysterious, more *profound* of my kite-making and kite-flying experience was trying to fly these tissue paper kites, because it was a way to get the universe to talk to me: if a gust took the paper up in the air and made it fly high in a whoosh of air, that meant I had done or thought something right; I knew there was hope for me. But if another gust sent the paper diving into the flower bed, perhaps tearing the paper into shreds, then I had done something wrong. I knew that mine had been a false hope.

I tried to guess what made the paper go up. A certain angle of holding the string? Certain thoughts not allowed to occur in my mind? Which ones? And if I knew, how could I then not think of them? Sometimes it raced up higher than the low back roof of the house, and it seemed I would triumph after all, especially when it stayed there, whipping back and forth above the copper gutter, tugging at the string. But then, as if in anger, it dove down, sometimes into the side of the house, and I knew I was lost again. To this day, I can feel the mystery, the sense of another force speaking to me through the movement of that kite.

Of course, like every other kid in the neighborhood, I routinely bought kites at the 5 & 10. They cost, I think, only around 35 cents, although that was a major portion of a week's allowance. They were usually kept in cylindrical containers that looked like large waste baskets. Most of the time we bought the traditional diamond-shaped kites. These were made of strong, crinkly, dark-green tissue, with two cross sticks held together by a little metal clamp. On the tissue was usually a picture of a kite up among the clouds, and the usual smiling boy for whom kites and model airplanes always flew perfectly.

Making this type of kite was easy: all you had to do was take off the rubber bands, then unroll the kite tissue so you could get at the two cross sticks. You then turned the shorter, upper stick so it was at right angles to the longer, center, one, then hooked the loop of string at each of the four corners of the tissue into little slots cut in the end of the sticks. This could only be done by bowing the sticks and sometimes, if you were too fast, or if the sticks or tissue were the wrong size, one of the sticks broke. Unless you happened to be in a particularly good mood, and had the patience to find an equally light replacement stick, and find a saw or axe and cut it to proper length, and notch the ends, you just tossed the whole kite aside and bought another. You also had to be careful not to allow the strings, which were under considerable tension, to tear through the paper holding them.

When we couldn't get a parent to buy us a kite, and we didn't have enough money, we tried to build our own. The tissue paper from inside the department store boxes was too thin, but the blue paper that was sometimes put around the outside of the boxes that contained the stuff my mother

bought at B. Altman's was much stronger, so we used that. We cut the sticks from boards in the basement. The combination was much, much heavier than the materials used in store-bought kites, but if the wind was sufficiently strong, they would fly.

We also bought box kites. I don't think we ever tried to make one of these.

There was always a last-minute scramble to get the tail on. Tails were made by tying rags together. All this was done in great haste. The tail had to be just long enough to stop that accursed swinging back and forth that, if it became too great, would send the kite into a vertical dive. Then you had to run forward, give it enough slack to recover, tease it, work it back up into the blue. Oh, a fine art indeed was flying a kite!

Here, as elsewhere, the *American Boy's Handy Book* provided us with ever new inspiration. For one, it gave us the idea of kite wars. You attached pieces of wax to the tail, then stuck pieces of broken glass into the wax. Then you could attack other kites by swooping down on them and allowing the glass knives in the tail to cut the paper of the others. We tried this only a few times, mainly, I think, because we didn't like the idea of having to rebuild kites all the time.

We could make trial flights in our back yard, or even on the street, but in the first case they easily got caught in the trees, and in the second in telephone wires. The best place to fly them was in The Fields, across Columbus Ave. Here it was all open, and all grass from the embankment leading down from West Lake Drive to the creek that ran through The Fields. Best of all was to fly a kite out of sight over The Reservoir. Now you had achieved something! You kept letting out string, watching the kite grow higher and smaller and begin to merge into the blue of the sky. Oh no, it's diving! Run forward to slacken the string. Now it's climbing back up, zigging and zagging. Now pull back, run back a ways to make it gain altitude. Oh no, diving again! Run forward. (It needs more tail. Too late now.) And so you worked it higher and farther away until you weren't sure if that tiny spot was the kite or one of the spots you always had in your eyes. Sometimes, as we let the string out, we sent messages up the string. You got a piece of cardboard (paper was usually too floppy), cut a slit half-way through, then widened the end of the slit a little, slid the cardboard onto the kite string and let it go. The wind pushed it up and up, faster and faster, along the string. A few times I attached a parachute to the piece of cardboard by some means that, I hoped, would release the parachute when I shook the string. I tried to attach various release mechanisms to the string itself, that would cause the parachute to fall. The point was that if you could get one of these to work, you could get a parachute very high up before it started down. Naturally, we didn't do this when we were flying the kites over the Reservoir. But I never found anything that worked consistently. I had lots of good ideas about *what* to do, but seldom a good idea about *how* to do it.

Once, when I was in my fifties, stuck in traffic on Rte. 880 in Oakland, near the end of my one- and-a-half-hour commute home from Palo Alto, I saw a sheet of paper being blown around at the side of the road. Out of old habit, I watched it to see what the wind would decide its fate would be. It seemed to manage to stay aloft longer than most sheets of paper in its situation. I kept watching out of idle curiosity. The gusts were strong. Up it went. Then down. But then up again, and this time, amazingly enough, it stayed there, some thirty feet above the roadway and above the line of cars, swooping around, sinking a little, then being lifted higher. It did not come down! It stayed in the air for several minutes. This was no accident. A lifetime of waiting had not been in vain! *Paper can fly all by itself!* We don't need engineering *if* we are willing to wait long enough!

A Paper Balloon

Most of the projects in the *American Boy's Handy Book* were beyond our reach. We could only read about them and look at the pictures and wish we had been born in 1900, when country boys who lived on a farm near a river could build just about anything in the book they wanted. The project that called to me more than any other was one in Chapter XV, "Fourth of July Balloons, with New and Novel Attachments". This was something almost unbelievable, namely, a four-foot high hot-air balloon *made of paper*. Beard showed several illustrations, both of ones having shapes that would lead to erratic flights, and those "of good, substantial, portly build [that would] go up best and make their journey in stately, dignified manner." (p. 136). (They looked pretty much the way modern hot-air balloons look.)

The trouble was, I was convinced I would never be able to cut the gores and glue them together properly, even though his instructions are clear. The gores were cigar- or spear-shaped pieces of paper. There was a point at one end — the end that would be at the center of the top of the balloon; then the paper widened to about a foot across, then gradually tapered to the other end, which was about four inches across. You had to cut thirteen of these, each six feet long, then glue the sides of each to the sides of two others. When you were done, you had a balloon about four feet high. You then glued a hoop into the opening. Two wires were strung across the hoop at right angles, and from the center was hung a ball of lamp-wick, which, when lighted, caused the balloon to be filled with warm air and hence to rise in the July 4th night.

(The fact is I was worried about what would happen when a balloon with a ball of burning yarn in its opening came down on rooftops or fields in our neighborhood.)

But even though I was convinced that constructing this beautiful thing was beyond me, I studied the illustrations and text and imagined my glowing paper lantern ascending from our back yard, the Kids and my parents oohing and ahhing as it climbed higher, far above the roofs of the houses, swaying gently in the upper air, everyone spellbound by this bright, warm jewel in the night sky.[1]

To this day, in my sixties, I have promised myself that, when the toil of completing my life's work is over, I will finish the project that I didn't dare begin in my late childhood, and one day will watch this glowing paper bubble that I have built all by myself, and without self-hatred and shame, ascend into the soft, summer night.

Rafts

Rafts always had an attraction for me, probably as a result of reading Tom Sawyer and all those books about the mountain men, some of whom, like Mike Fink, traveled down the rivers on rafts. I built my one and only raft on the shore of the Reservoir, behind the Shed, in the middle of winter. I collected some huge waterlogged planks, and without the slightest hope that anything good would come of it, somehow nailed them together with cross planks. I had to drag the raft across the ice-covered stones to get it into the water. The top was just barely above the surface. I tried standing on it, but it immediately sagged down under the water. I traveled perhaps a few feet altogether in the several attempts I made to somehow find a way to stand on it that would keep the water below the tops of my galoshes. I imagined building a little hut on it and huddling there, a few inches above the water, as I drifted out in the lake.

Walkie-Talkies

1. I was in my late sixties when I learned that these balloons — called "fire balloons" — were used by the ancient Chinese in New Year's celebrations..

Among the infinite variety of intriguing gadgets that were being produced by the War, one was walkie-talkies. It wasn't so much the fact that you could use them to talk to people far away — that was also possible with the telephone and the radio — but that you could carry this box around on your back. And you had to pull the antenna up first, and then press a button and then use a strange password and have a mysterious code name like Red Rover and then you could talk privately, confidentially, secretly, *officially* down into a microphone that was built *flat* into this square olive-drab box, and then, when you wanted the other guy to speak, you had to say "Over" and then when you had heard him you had to say "Roger" and sometimes "Willco" and then, when you were done, "Over and out" — now that was an entirely different kind of communication! Most important, the reason why you did this was to discuss attacking the enemy, charging over his barricades, stabbing him with your bayonet, or blowing him to bits with grenades.

Once in a while there would be a rumor that someone's uncle had brought a real walkie-talkie back from the War, and I think we actually got to touch one once — ponderous, heavy, olive drab, with an antenna on top, and earphones and microphone all built in flat against the sides. Sometimes the comic books advertised them. But for us, our only alternative was tin cans connected by a taut string. Instructions came out of comic book pages and boys' magazines and books. I was always disappointed by the result. First of all, you had to stand out in the open with this stupid white string connecting your can to the other guy's. Real soldiers would never risk such a thing. And then, to add insult to injury, you had to keep the string *taut* — really tight, or the tinny substitute for a voice would disappear and you would hear the other guy's real voice talking into his can — that's how close you had to stand. This was a joke.

I wanted a real walkie-talkie. I wanted one that you could take with you, crouching in the bushes, and talk to your fellow teammate, fellow soldier, somewhere up near the Reservoir, and really make plans to *wipe out* the other guys, catch them in a cross-fire of exploding dirt balls and rifle and pistol fire they would never survive.

But the Code was always present to turn frustration into the illusion of victory: winners do not do things the easy way; they do not have what others have; it was far better to *imagine* what it would be like, or rather, to be wracked with envy; or better, to build one, from scratch: to figure out how to make one from pieces of wire, and dirt, and pieces of wood you merely found, without a manual or a book of any kind. That would earn you a place in this world. The best do not have walkie-talkies.

Derby Racers

Then there were derby racers. None of us had the money or, I think, the interest, for building a sleek racer that could run in the annual *White Plains Reporter Dispatch* Soap Box Derby race down— hill in White Plains. Your father had to be a millionaire business executive for that, since it was commonly known that the kids didn't build their own racers, but had them built, or at the least built them with the help of paid experts. You had to be able to buy the special, regulation wheels that had ball-bearings. (You could hear the ball bearings churning quietly when you spun the wheel.) And who wanted to wait a year for a race? You didn't dare to bang up those cars in races in your neighborhood. So we built ours out of whatever we could find. The simplest versions were a two-by-four with a piece of board nailed on it in the center for a seat, then two shorter two-by-fours, one nailed at right angles at the back, and one pivoting on a bolt at the front. You found axles somewhere and centered them underneath the front and rear two-by-fours, then banged nails in every inch or so and banged them into a U over the axle to hold it in place. For wheels, anything would do. Typically they were baby carriage wheels we found in the woods or

wherever someone dumped a baby carriage. A rope fastened near the ends of the front two-by-four allowed you to steer, although you could do that with your feet.

I think I built several before building my best, which I called the Black Streak because it was painted black (and, I wanted to believe, was fast). This one was "advanced". For one thing, it had a *steering wheel*! I don't know if we actually figured out on our own how to make a steering wheel that worked , or if we got it out of books, or if it was just an imitation of the real derby racers, or if my father showed me how. But we made them like this: we built a box that was nailed to the center two-by-four just in front of the seat, where the motor would have been in a real car. Near the top of the two end boards of the box, we drilled a hole for a broomstick. Onto this broomstick we pushed a cylindrical piece of wood perhaps six inches long and two inches in diameter. The diameter of most of the exterior of the cylinder had been reduced by filing so that only a kind of rim remained at each end. We ran the clothesline from one end of the front two-by-four, through a pulley at the bottom of the box, up through a hole in one of the side boards of the box. Then we wound the line carefully around the narrow part of the cylinder, then ran the end out the hole on the other side board, down through the other pulley, and out to the other end of the front two-by-four. We cut a circular piece of wood — the steering wheel — out of a board with a jigsaw, then somehow attached it to the end of the broomstick which was in front of the seat. It had to be attached so that when you rotated it, the broomstick, hence the cylinder, rotated, causing the clothesline to pull on one end of the front two-by-four.

This steering mechanism actually worked as long as we retightened the clothesline every once in a while. Since a mark of sophistication among adult drivers of the time was having a steering knob on their steering wheel — even Jumbo the taxi driver had one — I naturally had to have one too. So I got a glass knob for a kitchen drawer and screwed it in near the edge of the wheel.

Now, with that box in front of you, you needed a place to put your feet, so I attached two foot rests on either side. And since there was always a risk of running into things, I clearly needed a bumper. But I decided that not only would I have a front bumper (another piece of two-by-four), but I would have one with springs — two of them, so that when the bumper hit something, it pushed back on the springs instead of just passing on the shock of the blow to the frame of the car. My father was impressed by that, or maybe he suggested it, I don't remember, but I do seem to recall that he was impressed by my having gotten the thing all assembled and working.

And clearly you needed a place to keep your tools. So I put a hinged top on the rear box behind the seat, where you could store tools. It had a little hook and eye to hold it closed. I made the box so that the front sloped back, like the back of a seat should.

We were constantly searching for axles. I don't remember where they came from, but one type consisted of square rods with holes at intervals, with only the ends being round for the wheels to go on. These were ideal. Did they come from baby carriages, like the wheels we used? I can't remember. My axles were much higher quality, being steel rods from my father's workshop. God knows the quality, not to mention hardness, of that steel, but it was far more than was needed. My father used the rods in his inventions. He put the threads on the ends himself, using his tap and die, and so it was easy for him to do the same for me. Instead of cotter pins to hold the wheels on, I had nuts with rubber linings . Everything done right.

When it was all finished, I painted it black, hence the name. (I can't remember if the name was painted on — in white — or not.)

This was one of the few things I ever built that I was proud of. God knows how, but we manage to get these things all the way over to the opposite side of the Dam, several miles away. I still can't imagine how we did it. No one's parents had a station wagon to carry them in. But there, on

the far side, was The Brick Road, the best, the ultimate challenge for our racers, a winding road, paved entirely in brick, that wound down from the top of the Dam to one end of the Plaza below, perhaps half a mile. Best of all, at the very bottom, right before the road met — Ave., there were two cement pillars sticking up to block access to the Brick Road. These were just a few inches farther apart than the width of our racers, so that your final challenge was to drive so perfectly that you got between them without destroying your car. Great! You then had a few yards to somehow come to a stop before you ran into the traffic on the avenue.

I made this run many times. The bricks produced a bumpy ride. There were tall weeds growing up between them. On both sides were bushes and trees. God knows what would have happened if we had gone off the road at the speeds we came down that hill. The Dam was at our right, like a giant statue, as we hurtled down. Of course, we tried to use as little braking or foot dragging as possible, and each time I tried to use less than the previous time, aiming, of course, for the ultimate goal of running the entire hill with no braking whatsoever. I don't think I ever succeeded.

The Flat-Bottomed Boat

When I was about twelve, I decided to build a scow or flat-bottomed boat out of the *American Boy's Handy Book* (Chapter XII, "Home-Made Boats", "The Scow"). Somehow I got my parents to allow me to have the garage for this purpose, my father agreeing to keep the car parked in the driveway for a while. Bending the sideboards slightly at the front and the back was the major problem. I realized how hopeless it would have been to have to bend the side boards all the way to a point in order to make a normal-looking rowboat. I worked in desperation — If you can do this, maybe there will be some hope for you. I became the center of attention among the Kids: they came around to watch and advise as I cut and sanded and then caulked the far-too-big cracks in the bottom. When you picked up the boat at one end, the whole thing wiggled like a giant snake. How did other people get their boats to be stiff and strong? I painted it a dark green, the color of water in a pond. Several coats. They covered all that caulking compound on the bottom.

My goal was to put it in Kensico Reservoir, but to do that you had to get a license from the Reservoir authority. My mother found out whom to call, and a very nice, understanding old guy in a gray uniform came by one day, and looked the boat over. I still remember how considerate he was to this young boy who obviously had worked so hard to build himself a boat that would float. But finally he said that he was afraid that it was only 11-1/2 feet long, and the law required 12 feet. I pleaded with him. What's half a foot? Why did they have such a regulation? He listened patiently, but said he was sorry, but that was the rule. I then asked him if I could add a false front to one end of the boat, and he said yes. So I immediately set about doing that. I don't remember if we then asked him to come back and if another official rejected it again — I certainly would have done so, had I been them. But I do remember that somehow we got it to the pond behind the houses on Columbus Ave., north of Franzl's, where we occasionally played. With a couple of us on each side, we slid it into the water. It immediately filled up with water and sank level with the surface. I couldn't believe how rapidly it happened. The thing must have had one big hole that I never allowed myself to see. There were weak jokes, and consolations from the Kids, but I at that point lost all interest in building boats.

As if the failure with the boat, and with virtually everything else I attempted weren't enough, I made sure my workshop career ended with a deep sense of failure by dreaming of two projects that would have been far more difficult than a flat-bottomed boat. They were the two things I wanted most to build: a tank and a submarine.

A Tank

The main source of difficulty here was that I had a particular idea of how the tank should look and was not about to compromise at all: it had to have sides that tapered to the front and the back, like a real tank. It couldn't look like a box. Curving in meant that, as with a proper rowboat, I would not only have to cut wood in a curve, but also be able to bend the boards that I nailed to it. I knew this was way beyond me, and I also knew that I could settle for a more box-like replica of a tank. But I was convinced that was taking the easy way out, and would, in effect, count for nothing even if I completed it. I had these thick boards I had picked up God knows where which were dark gray in color. I never understood why. These were to be the top boards on the front and back. But the prospect of cutting them — I think we had a band saw then, or at least a power jig saw — and then bending each of the side boards that would be nailed perpendicular to them, was so daunting that I often just sat in the basement and looked at the boards and let the full degree of my failure sink in. This was the first occurrence I can remember of a habit that would stay with me the rest of my life, namely, that of scorning anything I could do easily, and always setting my sights on impossibily difficult tasks.

A Submarine

The final hopeless project was to build a submarine. Whenever I saw an old discarded water tank, my imagination put a conning tower on it. Even though real submarines didn't have portholes, I wanted them, so I could look out under water. I saw myself sitting inside, cruising the seas, unable to stand except in the center, having to lie down to look out the portholes. It would be a magnificent way to run away from home. We had heard about Japanese one- and two-man submarines, some of which were suicide weapons. I envied the Japanese who piloted them. If I were any good... Just a little effort....

Craftsmanship Among Us Kids

Like Len Lindholm, I always wanted to drive in more nails.

"I made up for my lack of knowledge of carpentry by increased use of nails. 'Just a minute,' I would say, 'one more nail will fix it.' One of my boats was so covered with nails that it nearly sank. Non-plussed, I turned it into a submarine. The only things that I built without nails were model aeroplanes, but few of them flew successfully. Usually I played alone." — Bannister, Roger, *The Four Minute Mile*, Dodd, Mead & Company, N.Y., 1955, p. 28.

None of us were craftsmen, but in our early teens some of the dumb kids became very good not merely at fixing but at rebuilding cars. Don Bushel, for example, put together an old jalopy. Once, he picked me up on top of the Dam. His car made a tremendous racket. You could see the road through an opening in the floor boards below the brake pedal. You could smell engine smoke. I thought: this is what the real kids do, but I am not allowed to because I have to accomplish something in life. He had dirty skin, greasy fingers, never did his homework, hung out with the bad kids, but the car worked. Once in a while I would hear that these kids were replacing the entire engine of a car. If they used a block and tackle to lift the engine up out of the chassis, they would say they had to "pull the engine". If, on the other hand, they lowered the engine onto the ground or into a grease pit, they would say they had to "drop the engine". I was in awe of their courage, because the engine either had to be repaired and then lowered back into the chassis and

reconnected properly, or else a replacement engine had to be installed. These kids had none of the morbid fear of failure at mechanical tasks that I had.

Shop Class in School

Starting in junior high school, we had shop class in school. The only things I remember making there were plastic rings and ash trays. The former were sections of a kind of green tubing with a marbled pattern in it; the tubing wasn't round but had a raised, flat part that was supposed to become the part of the ring that, in a real ring, would have held the gem. We clamped the pre-cut sections into a vice and then began filing and sanding and polishing until the ring looked sufficiently smooth. (The best part was holding the ring against the electric polishing wheel.) Still, the result was thick and clumsy on our fingers. The ash trays were made according to the ancient tradition of boys' shop, namely, they gave you a circular piece of copper and a special hammer and a piece of wood with a shallow bowl-like indentation and told you to start hammering. Then, when you were done, you had to hammer around the edge to make it flat. Then there was a trick which I have long forgotten for making the little half-round indentations in the rim in which the smoker was to rest his cigar or cigarette. So much for shop.

Legacy of My Building Career

The outcome of all my childhood attempts at making things was a hatred of people with the gift of craftsmanship (except for my father, of course). I couldn't stand the idea, which I firmly believed, that there were those who, no matter how simple the task they performed in the workshop — driving a nail, sawing a piece of wood in two — would perform it inherently better than others, like me, could ever hope to. The gifted ones, I was convinced, put certain impossible-to-recognize twists on the motions they went through to perform the task, and these made the process by which the result was achieved, and the result itself, inherently better than what the others did. Some people were blessed and some were damned and that was how things were.

I couldn't complain that I had no example of how to do the job right. I knew in my very bones that when you wanted to do something difficult, you built a jig, in other words, a device, a framework that made the task itself easier. But that took time! and time I didn't have. I hated all the preparation that was required to do something which *conceptually* was simple.I knew to the depths of my being that I would never be able to discipline myself to, in essence, build something as complicated and difficult as what you were trying to build, just to make the thing you were trying to build go more quickly and with less pain. Even though I knew that was the right way to proceed, I wanted to slip by with short-cuts, I hoped that Nature, or whatever it was that governed the building of things, would make an exception in my case, so that the thing would work even though I had transgressed the right way of building it. Most of all, I was utterly baffled by those who can remain calm when things don't work for them. What did they know that I didn't? How could they endure the anxiety during those moments of knowing that their failure to be as fast as others might mean they have no reason to live?

There is no question that these early failures were the real beginning of my later interest and obsession with reducing work to a set of instructions — in particular, to reduce work to units that could *not* be made special — faceless, characterless, ball-bearing units of work, for example, the pressing of a key, the sawing or other shaping of a piece of wood by a machine following pre-set parameters. That way I could equal or even better the craftsman with his instinctive gift.

Of course there is craftsmanship in intellectual work, too, and since there, too, I had no craftsman's talent, I was determined to accomplish the same reduction. This eventually led to the idea of Environments for technical subjects, about which more later.

Listening to the Radio

It is difficult for people who have grown up with television *and* radio to imagine how different radio was when there was no television. The difference can be summed up by saying that radio took place inside of you, whereas television takes place outside of you. To us as children, radio was an irresistible power in our lives, sometimes terrifying, sometimes funny, but always capturing our full attention whenever it was turned on. I would not have been able to go on living, and I knew it, without the promise of the late afternoon's and evening's programs to take me out of my life. And so it was in old age. The day's always-frustrating work, boundless anxieties, utter hopelessness was endurable because at 6:30 I could watch *The Simpsons* and then at 9 I could look forward to a PBS documentary, or, on Sunday night, a Masterpiece Theater, or, if there was nothing worthwhile on, as was often the case, then I could watch an episode of *Rosemary & Thyme* or *A Touch of Frost* on a rented DVD.

The earliest radio program (I don't think we called them "shows") I remember was "Uncle Don", which came on around five each afternoon. (Five was the time when kids made sure they were home, because that was when an hour of kids' programs began.) Uncle Don told stories and played music in the way that countless kids' programs afterward imitated. Then, one day, he was no longer on. We didn't know why, so we went on listening to our other programs. Years later I heard that he had been kicked off the air because at the end of one broadcast, thinking the microphones were off, he had said, "There, that oughta hold the little bastards". But the microphones weren't off and the nation's children ran to their mothers asking what "little bastards" meant.

We listened to "Nick Carter, Master Detective", and another program starring his son (or nephew), "Chick Carter, Junior Detective". On one of these programs was a villain called the Fat Man, who, after outlining yet another evil plot, would say to an obsequious underling, in a deep , gravelly, heavy-breathing voice[1], "And while you're out, get me [deep, fat-man breathy pause] a five-pound box of candy," the words "five-pound box of candy" resonating with deliciously evil obesity and gluttony. Another deep-voiced announcer from those years can still be heard on TV once in a while. For me, it is still the Octopus Man I hear when he speaks.

"Tom Mix" came on at 5:30, I think. He was the cowboy I felt closest to. I was usually him in our games of guns. He was played by Curley Bradley. We listened to "Captain Midnight", with its opening chimes. Also "Gene Autry", who, as I write this, in 1997, is still alive[2]. I don't remember if his program was drama or just singing and a little comedy, but I remember fragments of his theme song:

"I'm back in the saddle again
Out where a friend is a friend,
Where the longhorn cattle feed
On the lowly jimson weed,
Back in the saddle again."

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1. The actor was probably William Conrad.
2. He died Oct. 2, 1998, at the age of 91.

(Having never heard of a weed by that name, and because of Gene's cowboy accent, I always heard the words as "On the lolly genson weed".)

In the afternoon other programs were "Jack Armstrong" ("the All-American Boy"), "Terry and the Pirates", "Hop Harrigan", "Sky King", "Buck Rogers", and "Superman".

In the evening, at 7:30 (I don't recall how many times a week), was "The Lone Ranger" (which most kids pronounced, "the long ranger"), with his background music taken from the classical repertoire: Rossini's "William Tell Overture" (which forever thereafter became "Lone Ranger music") and several others. The Lone Ranger, I could have told you even then, was played by Brace Beemer. The announcer was Fred Foy[1].

Then there was "Sgt. Preston of the Yukon", with his theme music, Reznicek's *Overture to Donna Diana*. I think I looked forward to the program largely because this music seemed to express snow so well: blue white snow sparkling with crystals in the ice cold Canadian air, the creak of Mounted Police hightops on packed snow.

And "Amos 'n' Andy", played by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the names still like a piece of verse in my mind. (All the actors were white.) In those years we had no idea we were being racist in loving the characters on this show. This was the way the darkies were: funny, that's all. Sapphire was George Stevens' (the Kingfish's) mercilessly nagging wife. Andy (pronounced "Andih") was his long-time friend. Lightnin' spoke oh so slowly, in his rather high-pitched, sweetly tired voice. And Calhoun de Lawyer: George: "So what did you do?" Calhoun: "I got down on my knees and I pleaded with dat judge, I *pleaded* with 'im, I said, 'Judge...'" George: "And did you win?" Calhoun: "No..."

At eight o'clock on certain evenings were news reports by Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson. Winchell, in his tough newspaper-man voice would bark, "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. United States, let's go to press." Drew Pearson's announcer introduced him as "Drew Pearson and his predictions of things to come", followed by a statement of what percentage of the time (way over 50%) that his predictions had come true in the past.

Later on in the evening was "The Answer Man". "A listener from Fall River, Mass., writes..."

The sale of "premiums" was a major feature of many of these programs. You "sent in for" a premium, always being required to enclose a specified number of box tops from the cereal that sponsored the program, with the result that for weeks on end you had to eat the cereal that your mother had bought. I sent in for just about everything: glow-in-the-dark badges, identification bracelets, decoders, secret-compartment rings and, most important, the Whistling Ring from Tom Mix . It had holes in a circle on the top. You blew down through these and a little fan wheel, held in place by a rivet, turned, producing a buzzing kind of siren sound. It took all your wind to get the little fan to turn. For some reason, this ring became almost as important to me as the Electrician's Knife. I lost the first ring, and became desperate for a replacement. I wrote a letter to Battle Creek, Michigan, where, it seemed, all the cereal manufacturers who sponsored these programs had their headquarters. Weeks of waiting. I wrote another letter. I could not go on living this way. Finally the replacement came, I think with a note saying they were glad they could provide me with another.

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1. "Nowhere in the pages of History can one find a greater *champion of justice*! Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. From out of the past come the thundering hoofs of the great horse *Silver.* The Lone Range *rides again*!"

We were told (or somehow learned) that if you held the glow-in-the-dark badges in the light, then took them into a dark place, the glow would be stronger. One of these badges, I think from Tom Mix, developed a strange smell, like stinky teeth. Little sweat spots began to appear on the plastic. The Lone Ranger offered an atomic bomb ring. (We barely gave the anachronism a second thought.) It had a silver replica of a bomb mounted on it. The fins were part of a red plastic cap, which, when you removed it, revealed a little glass viewer. If you looked inside, you could see scintillations against a black background that seemed like outer space or the inside of an atom. You were supposed to understand that these were caused by atomic energy. God knows how much radiation we absorbed from some of these items. For more than eighteen years, while I was living in Berkeley, a wooden box containing that ring, was barely ten feet from my computer table, where I worked for several hours a day.

Then there was a ring with a piece of square plastic on top that was supposed to look like a gem. Underneath was a piece of ink-blotter type paper that changed color from blue to pink and back, I think in response to changes in humidity. I couldn't stop thinking about this ring: this fake plastic jewel, and under it, a piece of paper, a little towel, that today might be blue, tomorrow pink. What could be stranger than such a thing? Each of the Tom Mix decoder buttons had a word on the back and a picture of one of the main characters in the show on the other side. At the end of a program, the announcer would read a sequence of the characters' names (that is, buttons); you copied it down, then put the buttons in that order, and turned them over to read the day's secret message, which usually was a teaser about what was going to happen in the next episode. Those buttons were perhaps the source of my fixation on beanie buttons, with their white background and a cartoon character in black, white, red, yellow, which you could buy in the 5 & 10. They were like pieces of candy. I could see that somehow the glossy white cardboard with the picture on it had been made to conform to the round metal back, but how? You really had something when you wore one of these! After I had sent in for a premium, I would sit on the sloping cement gutter in front of our lawn and wait for the mailman. It can't not come today! Waiting seemed one of the supreme ordeals that the world felt I had to be put through — I had to wait, day after day, beyond endurance, for the thing that would make me better. And finally it arrived: an olive drab, five by seven, envelope. *It's the Whistling Ring!*

Then there was Red Skelton's comedy show (the Kids called him "Red Skeleton"). Various dramatic shows — "The Shadow", "Lights Out", "Escape"[1], "The Whistler", "Suspense","Inner Sanctum", with its sinister squeaking door, and deep-voiced announcer preparing you for another proof of how terrifying the world really is. One of these shows I remember listening to while lying on the couch in the den. It was about a woman who became trapped in her own dream. At first, she was able to get out, and sought a doctor, who tried to cure her. But the condition got worse. She tried not to sleep, but sooner or later sleep overtook her. Then, one night, she became permanently trapped, knowing, in the horror of her dream, that she was, in fact, only dreaming, but knowing also that she could not make herself wake up. This was on my mind for days afterward, the awfulness of it, the hopelessness, the knowing how hopeless your situation is. I kept wondering if something like it could really happen, possibly to me.

1. The deep voice of William Conrad always intoned at the beginning, "Tired of the everyday grind? Ever dream of a life of *romantic adventure*? Want to get away from it all? We offer you...*Escape*!"

I heard about the death of President Roosevelt on the portable radio on the center table between my parents' beds (mahogany, with a single drawer in which were kept kleenexes, things for her hair, rubber bands, a lamp on top, the radio in front of it).

"We interrupt this program..." In memory it was a little after 6 p.m. I crawled over my father's bed to hear it (I can't remember now why the radio would have been on in my parents' room). And then, in a somber, serious tone, the announcer saying that President Roosevelt had died. It was as though they had said, "The U.S. Government has fallen" or "The City of Washington has disappeared" — no, that would have been less serious. They played some music. I sat there, wondering what was going to happen to us. I must have run down and told my mother. Roosevelt had been the president my entire life, and for four years before I was born.

I remember the radio ads only as a kind of poetry, that is, I never bought any of the products, nor did anyone I knew. Certainly not my mother. A nasal voice asked if you were "...suffering from headaches, neuritis and neuralgia..." and then offered the remedy, Doan's Pills, the words said in a kind of nasally resonant voice. Other ailments would be cured by Carter's Little Liver Pills, Pepto Bismol, and Ovaltine, the last being one of the sponsors of Captain Midnight.

I often listed to the radio lying on the day-bed in the den — why, I don't know: perhaps because it was where my father's desk was, perhaps because, unlike the living room, it had a door I could close to keep my mother out. We still didn't have a TV, and so for me these were the days when radio dramatizations were still as capable of instilling fear and terror as the movies. I remember one that particularly frightened me. It was about a woman who gets trapped in one of her dreams. Several times she is able to find a way out. She tells friends, goes to a doctor, but no one believes her, or else they merely console her with platitudinal advice. Then, one night, she goes to sleep and has the same dream but this time can't get out. Even now it seems like a fate worse than death, especially if we consider that she might be kept alive for years, decades, reliving the same horrors with no hope for escape and no one having the slightest belief that this was in fact happening.

Movies

Movies were the most exciting things in our lives (radio and comic books were second). To me, the movies were so real that when it rained in the movies, I assumed it had started raining outside, and would be angry at myself for not having worn my raincoat.

If the film started to skip or vibrate during a violent scene, I thought it was because the violence in the film caused it.

I remember a film (we always called them "movies") in which a woman was trapped inside an ice cave, but it had a telephone, so she could call for help. In summer, the theaters themselves were ice caves, thanks to air conditioning. Below the marquee hung a piece of rectangular dark blue canvas with the upper part painted white to resemble snow hanging from a ledge. A sign said "Air Conditioned!", or "Air Cond.!" Those early systems lowered the temperature to what seemed like refrigerator temperature, the air so damp that mothers warned their kids that they would catch cold, but we loved it. Cold, wet air, a Frostick and excitement on the big silver-gray screen. That was all you needed.

I remember a film about a horse, *My Friend Flicka*, which starred Roddy McDowall.

I remember *National Velvet*, another film about a horse, which made me fall madly, head-spinningly in love with Elizabeth Taylor. The film came out in 1944 when I was eight. I saw the horserace part again in 1995 and I was still in love with her. Her beautiful voice, so clear and young and pure girl, and the fact that she dressed as a boy — I knew she was the kind of girl, like Barbara Beaird, who would be your comrade in pursuit of a great goal.

I was terrified by horror films. I think I saw *Dracula* and one or more other films about things coming to life in graveyards. Nowadays I can't bring myself back into that naive state. The only film I have been made anxious by in, say, the past twenty years, was *Alien*. Before that, the only one was *Diabolique*. I saw the twenties German film *Nosferatu* in the mid-nineties and had to force myself not to laugh throughout it. It is a puzzle to me how this could once have frightened people.

But Westerns were our main fare: Gene Autry, Roy Rogers — Gene Autry was always considered the best of the two — William "Hopalong Cassidy" Boyd, Tom Mix (I think).

Every Saturday, they showed movies in the school auditorium at Public School No. 1. It cost seven cents to get in. (I usually brought a nickel and two pennies: not seven pennies.) A typical afternoon's program included several cartoons — Felix the Cat, Tom 'n' Jerry, Donald Duck, Pluto — a serial or two — Clyde Beatty the lion tamer, with his chair and cracking whip — and a Western — then maybe something else. In the serials, I loved the way each week they would manage to show how what you thought had happened at the end of the previous week's episode— the stagecoach going off the cliff — didn't really happen after all.

One Gene Autry serial had a strange effect on me. It was about a beautiful, wicked queen who lived underground with her army of knights. They wore strange, metallic helmets, all identical, and metallic capes. She was like the witch in the Wizard of Oz, except beautiful.

She and her henchmen stood around a kind of television console, watching what was going on in the outside world. Then she would give orders to her knights by radio. (A light winked on and off as she spoke.) Her henchmen had eyebrows that sloped up wickedly at the ends.

After a mission, the knights would ride, in their smooth, glowing dull silver armor, and *capes*, straight toward a steep, dirt mountain. Then, suddenly, before they actually ran into it, a rectangular slab *in the side of the mountain* would open up and allow them to enter.

Gene Autry sometimes pursued the wicked queen and her knights in a Piper Cub. One time they parachuted down to the top of the mountain: Men in leather being supported in mid-air by a white silk blossom overhead, falling in a special way, landing on the side of a grassy slope. At first it seemed to be nothing but dirt and shrub but these turned out to conceal a tunnel entrance to the queeen's cavern lair!

The music, I remember, particularly affected me. I have no idea what it was, but I am sure I haven't heard it since, because I would have remembered it immediately.

In the end, Gene somehow manages to get her to destroy herself, and we see her melt, see her slowly being pulled apart, elongated, as she sinks down under tons of collapsing rock and dirt. Oh, magnificent ending for boys who hated their mothers!

(In 2005, Jim Swan, in the course of editing this book, found information on the film via Google. The film was *The Phantom Empire*, and was made in 1935. There were 12 "chapters". Queen Tika was portrayed by Dorothy Christy. Her "scientific city" Murania was 20,000 feet underground. "The incidental music was written by a Viennese-trained musician/composer named Hugo Riesenfeld, and I have no doubt it was memorable, since these guys really knew their business." — J.S. Later in the year, Jim sent me the entire serial on DVD as a gift. I was

saddened to find that not one trace of the old spell remained. It had become merely an absurd black-and-white film with mediocre actors and primitive special effects. I couldn't even get through chapter 1.)

A standard source of amusement among us kids was how in gun battles, the cowboys never ran out of bullets. A six-shooter, the cylinder of which had room for at most six cartridges, was capable of firing 10, 15, who knew how many shots — sometimes we tried to count them — without needing to be reloaded. I often found myself hoping, praying that just once the film would show one of the guns being reloaded, so that I could believe the film was realistic. But I cannot recall ever seeing this.

Unfortunately the best Westerns were shown in the Strand, the smelly, flea-bitten theater in an alleyway near Loew's on Main St. in White Plains that I described in the first chapter.