Music

The Music I Played

Although classical music was always present in our house, my first experience as a *performer* of music came in the first grade, when I played in what was called the "rhythm band". I remember an Assembly in which the rhythm band sat, Indian fashion, near the front of the stage, each little musician with his or her pair of old, pitted, wooden drumsticks, some with chipped red and green paint, tapping them on the floor in time to the music which the band played as Mr. Bliss attempted to simultaneously conduct it and us six-year-olds.

"Glow, little glow worm
(click, click, click, click)
Glow, little glow worm
(click, click, click, click)...

A few kids played tambourines, which they shook at certain times in the piece with that uneasy expression that kids have when they don't understand why they have been asked to do something or when they don't understand what exactly it is they are supposed to do and when they are supposed to do it. Beginning with rhythm band all the way until I began playing jazz in high school, music for me, and I suspect for most of the other kids, was just another challenge, like schoolwork in general, not to do something wrong. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back."

I remember a sailor suit, white, with broad collar and French-style hat, and two black ribbons hanging down from a black band around the crown — a uniform we had to wear for parades. There is a picture of me in it somewhere. We kindergarteners and first graders had to march in the Memorial Day and other parades even though we weren't playing instruments. Nevertheless, it was a very serious business putting on that sailor suit and the hat. And then the marching: "Left...left, left right left...", down Columbus Avenue in front of the school, we blushing as the parents looked at us, the band racketing somewhere up front. Then, down in Valhalla Plaza, just north of the Village, the uncomprehended words of speeches. Then the drums rolling off: "*Rump-bump*. *Rump-bump*. *Rrrrrr-ump-bump*" and about face and off we went again.

I think I was in the third grade when I was chosen to sing "Billy Boy" with another student. We were in some sort of a chorus, and we practiced while standing on the steps of the stage in the Auditorium. One of us sang (in a shy, thin voice),

"Oh where have you been, Billy Boy, Billy Boy
Oh where have you been, charming Billy?"

And the other sang in reply, in an equally shy, thin voice,

"I have been to get a wife
She's the darling of my life
She's a young thing and cannot leave her muhhhhh-ther"

I can't remember which of the two parts I sang, but suddenly, as though a dark cloud had entered the Auditorium, or as though I had received a special message from somewhere, I knew that I had to fail at this. Maybe it was because I feared the envy of the other kids if I did it right, maybe because I felt that to succeed would make me a Common Person and hence, according to

the Code (see under "Not Normal!" in chapter 2), have no reason to go on living. In any case, I began forgetting the words. The teacher who was conducting gave me several chances, but eventually she had to get another student to take my part. I went home in tears, but at the same time felt that, because the humiliation was almost unbearable, it was what should have happened to me, because it placed me in a special category.

(Writing this, another song comes to mind from those many years ago (almost 70), one that we sang occasionally, almost without thinking:

"If a laddie meet a lassie,
Comin' through the rye..."

Of course, the first line here is wrong: it should be "If a body meet a body", as Robert Burns wrote it in his poem, but these are the words I hear sadly, faintly, in my mind's ear.)

Playing the Trumpet

We seldom remember the exact details of events that turn out to change our lives. When I was eight or nine, Mr. Bliss, the music teacher, must have asked me one day what instrument I wanted to play. Or did he suggest that I start learning to play the trumpet? Why not clarinet or trombone? What exact words were said? We will never know. But I remember coming home from school one afternoon with a trumpet case banging against my knee. I called to my mother; she came downstairs and sat in the corner chair in the living room, near the front windows, as I opened the fasteners , *snap*, *snap*, on the side of the case, and then opened the cover. Inside it smelled of old metal. The lining was soft, faded green felt, with indentations where the metal tubing rested. Like all school instruments, the trumpet was a dull, tarnished silver. Gold was for kids whose parents could afford to buy instruments for their kids. I took the trumpet out of the case, took the mouthpiece out of its little holder, wiped it off (you never knew whose spit was on it), and clumsily put the mouthpiece into the end of the tube. I had already been warned to do this gently, not to hit it in with the palm of my hand, because then it would be difficult if not impossible to remove. I raised the mouthpiece to my lips and noticed how it stank of what seemed like dried spit and metallic acid and sweat. My mother looked on, not knowing yet if this was entirely all right, but knowing that playing a musical instrument was what the sons of better families did (although the proper instruments were violin and piano), she was willing to let me try. *Don't puff your cheeks!* Mr. Bliss had said. I tried to blow. Nothing. Tried again. All that could be heard was the sound of air squeezing through tight metal tubes. *Purse your lips and blow!* And again. It was like trying to blow up a metal balloon. Eventually, a kind of a metallic burp emerged.

"Well," I said, looking at the marvelous contraption I was holding in my hands, and trying not to show my smile of excitement, "he'll teach me how." And my mother, seeing how my face was red from effort, and not sure now if such violence was appropriate for a son of the upper-middle class, said, "Well, I don't know..." and worked her thumb against her index finger.

The two rules of playing the trumpet were: never puff your cheeks and always play with the least possible pressure of the mouthpiece on your lips. All the music teachers I ever had were adamant about these. The ultimate test of your mastery of the second rule was to tie the horn to strings and hang it from something so that the mouthpiece was at the proper height. Then, if you were *really* good, you should be able to play all the open notes with your hands behind your back.

I never knew any student who could do this, but rumor had it there was a trombone player somewhere who could and who could even do lip trills that way.

School Band

If you played an instrument, then you played in the school band, which was led by Mr. Bliss. He was overweight, always seemed to have a red face and to have a mint between his front teeth. He also taught English and we all knew he liked to flirt with one of the women English teachers. We liked Mr. Bliss: he was a character. He sat on the podium, which was just a wooden box a foot or two high, on one of the folding metal chairs we all used, but with the back turned toward us so he could beat time on it with a wooden drumstick. He frequently banged the chair so hard that the drumstick broke and flew toward the rear of the stage, right into the drum section. (Only the tough kids played drums. The scholars played wind instruments.) Everybody would laugh, Mr. Bliss would snap his fingers at the drum section, and a fresh drumstick would come flying through the air to him.

Over and over, year after year, we always seemed to play the same Sousa marches: *Washington Post*, *King Cotton*, *Stars and Stripes Forever*, *El Capitan,* Edwin Eugene Bagley's *Flag Day* march, which everyone assumed was written by Sousa, with its refrain to which we sang "Oh, the monkey wrapped its tail around the flag pole...". Several times a year we gave concerts, which wouldn't have been so bad except that I usually had to play a solo, about which I will say more in a moment.

One kid in the band, we all knew, was going to be a professional musician one day. His name was Jerry Bucci (pronounced "*byoo*chee") and he played clarinet. His tone had a vibrato and everything, just like a professional, and he never made mistakes. Yet he never lorded it over us either; he was always friendly as we hung around after practice to watch him clean his clarinet. The other kids, the ones with the silver clarinets, just yanked the mouthpiece off theirs and put it and the rest of the instrument in their cases, bang, end of the story. But Jerry had a *black* clarinet, and furthermore, it didn't just break down into a mouthpiece and a long metal pipe with keys. No, his broke into *several* pieces, each a few inches long, with a silver ring around each end, and cork on the inside where the one piece fit into the next. A clarinet like this he had to clean after each use. (The silver clarinet kids never cleaned theirs. For one thing, these instruments belonged to the school, so why bother?) He had a cord with a little weight on one end and a piece of felt, like a little flag, on the other. He would drop the weight through the opening in one of the black tubular pieces, let it come out the other end, then pull the cloth through. This wiped the inside. He repeated this process from the other end and did this with each piece. Then he put them one by one back into his short black shiny rectangular case (not a long, scuffed-up formerly black case like the silver clarinets had).

We tended to refer to him by his full name; you wouldn't call a guy like this by his last name only, "Hey, Bucci!" although, in addressing him, we would often say "Jerry." But he was special, and respected by all the other kids. He had crinkly, Gladstone Gander hair at the front, like a lot of the Italian kids, and movie actors, had — the kind that I imagined never needed combing; it was always perfect as it was. A short, skinny, quiet Italian kid always hung out with him, like his pilot fish. I think that kid also played clarinet, but he never said anything; he just was there all the time at Jerry's side.

I never knew what eventually became of Jerry. Maybe he is now in his last few years at one of the nation's leading symphonies. This in fact is the case with another musician I met years later, but we will get to that.

In our orange and black uniforms, with their tight jackets that barely went below the waist, and their capes fastened around the neck by two metal hooks in front, and our military caps (I can't remember if we wore white shoes or not), we would march on Memorial Day. The silvered metal of our instruments smelled in the sunshine, our music held onto metal music holders by wire clamps, the holders having a square rod that you put in a hole on your instrument. We marched along, reading the notes. The neighbors looked on, enthusiastic, proud, clapping sometimes. We marched down to the War Memorial in the Village, then, afterward, had to march back up Columbus Avenue, which was hard work in the heat.

Mr. Salvo

A year or so after I started playing, my mother decided that Mr. Bliss wasn't a good enough teacher for me. She would wrinkle her nose when speaking about his teaching abilities, and that meant he was on his way out as far as being my personal music teacher was concerned. Somehow she had heard about a teacher who lived in White Plains, named Victor Salvo. (The die was being cast for a lifetime of my going to professionals to be made all right.) He was the music teacher at a school in Mt. Kisco. It was not unusual at that time, of course, for the children of the middle and upper classes to have music lessons. Girls typically took lessons on piano, boys on trumpet or trombone. No one I ever knew studied violin or any other stringed instrument. Kids in band would say, "Who're you taking from?" And I would say, "I'm taking from Salvo."

Mr. Salvo had black hair, parted near the middle, and wore rimless glasses. To me he looked like a music teacher should, the glasses giving an impression of seriousness, perhaps because they were like the glasses my father wore. He lived in a two-story house at 15 Davis Ave., White Plains, a residential street just off East Post Rd., which was a major city thoroughfare, with lots of traffic. Right around the corner was White Plains Hospital, where I had had my tonsils out, and which now, whenever I passed it, seemed like a great white ocean liner that had been moored there. I don't remember exactly how I got to and from my lessons. The White Plains bus could have dropped me at the corner of Main St. and Mamaroneck Ave. but then it was still a long walk of some ten blocks to Mr. Salvo's house. Maybe my mother drove me, but I can't remember her ever being present during a lesson. The only way she could have passed the time would have been by going shopping. But I do remember what seems like countless days of trudging through the streets of White Plains, my trumpet case banging against my knee, my soul filled with dread because I knew I hadn't practiced as much as I should have.

Mr. Salvo's house was old, with lots of dark wood. It always smelled of Italian cooking. The house had that atmosphere of music and food which to this day I cannot imagine as being present in any but an Italian family: the smell of cooking combined with the sound of opera and someone practicing. Old Mr. Salvo, Mr. Salvo's father, lived there, too. He was white-haired, short, wore silver-rimmed glasses, was missing a few teeth, didn't speak much English, but always smiled and nodded when he happened to see me in the hallway. I sensed that deep and important *family* things took place in the back of house, where the kitchen was, and in the upstairs rooms: intense discussions, arguments, day after day. Sometimes I would hear Mrs. Salvo talking to the old man. To me she was a beautiful woman. Normally, no one's mother, no adult woman who was in charge of us, was ever thought to be beautiful by us kids. But she was different. She always had a nice smile, and soft hair, and a face that looked like a movie star's, and she always seemed to want to make this dental appointment I was about to undergo as painless as possible. Her voice had a musical quality. I loved to hear her speak. She also had nice, full, pointed breasts which you couldn't help looking at, just once, or maybe twice, no matter how hard you tried not to. One

day, a year or so after I had started taking lessons, Mr. Salvo announced that they were going to have a baby. It took some hard work on my part to bring myself to believe and accept what this meant, namely, that they — my music teacher and this nice woman he was married to — actually did that dirty thing together. Not Mrs. Salvo!

Years later, I heard that Mr. Salvo was a difficult parent. He apparently felt that his son, Paul, had to become a great musician, and he was going to make sure of it. There was talk of the boy almost breaking under his father's discipline, rebelling, doing poorly at school, but somehow he managed to hang on. Eventually I heard that he had become a studio musician in New York City, which put him at the very top of the heap. (The strict parents, for example, my mother, took this as proof that, if a parent is insistent enough, they can make a child turn out right regardless of the protests of the child.)

Mr. Salvo looked like one of those bandsmen you see in old photographs sitting stiffly and holding a trombone: he wore rimless glasses, his black hair parted near the middle, and brushed down along the sides. At the time I suppose he was in his thirties.

My lesson was usually in a room at the front of the house, on the second floor.

"I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees..."
— Eliot, T. S. "Portrait of a Lady"

For the lesson, we sat side by side, the music stand in front of me. I had to play what he had assigned in the assignment book, a blue-lined book with imitation ink blots on the cover, of the kind used by students. My name, and the date of the first assignment inside, were on the cover. For each assignment, he wrote, on the top of a fresh page, the date, then, line after line, the exercises to be practiced, with admonishments next to them. "Slowly!" "At least three times a day!" Sometimes he would mention metronome settings. After each lesson, he would rate my performance in the assignment book, next to each task, Good, Very Good, Fair, Poor, I can't remember what he used for lower grades.

He never lost his temper. When I made a mistake and would say, half to myself, "Sorry..." he would reply, "Don't be sorry. Be careful." When I forgot my valve oil and had to use some of his, he would say, as I coated the sides of the pistons, face red at the delay I was causing, "A workman is known by the tools he keeps." He reminded me to boil my mouthpiece periodically, to get rid of the coating of slime that accumulated on the inside, and that eventually had a noticeable smell. When I couldn't play a phrase after several tries, he would lean down, pick up the silver baritone horn which was on the other side of his chair, place the mouthpiece to his lips, drum the valves quickly, say, in a quiet voice, "Like this", and then play it through absolutely perfectly and effortlessly, the sound of the valves clunking against the tops of their cylinders being the only intrusion of the outside world into the flawless performance. Every note received exactly the right attack, with just the slightest little squeek at the start of each as though to show how really perfectly the tonguing had been done. Then he would lean down, put the horn on the floor on its bell again, and have me try the passage once more.

He occasionally tested my ability to identify notes by sound alone. He would go over to the piano, tell me not to look, play a note, and ask me to say what it was. I had no idea, so I would guess: "B-flat!" "No..." and he would play it again, letting the note ring, then play it again. "C!" "No... Listen..." and again he would play the note. It was clear that I did not have perfect pitch.

I don't remember if he explained that that is what this note recognition ability was called, or that people who had it were almost always born with it[1].

This good teacher of mine spared no effort or expense in helping his students. Soon after wire recorders (no tape recorders yet) came onto the market, he bought one, a big box perhaps a foot-and-a-half on a side that looked like a piece of furniture. I think its name was "Sound Mirror". He sometimes recorded me (always an embarrassment for me). I was curious, though I did nothing about it, to know how sound could be imprinted on a thin, silver wire — how a thin, silver wire could be a mirror (which was something flat) which reflected sound. Occasionally, being a good teacher, he would stop the grind of the lesson, and we would talk. We didn't just discuss musical subjects. For one thing, he felt he had an obligation to improve the vocabulary of his students. He taught me the phrase, "A morbid propensity for sloth and procrastination" which at the age of nine or ten seemed impossibly difficult to understand. (In my early sixties, I came across it in the 1942 *Encyclopedia Britannica* — my father's, which I still have — as a description of Samuel Johnson's character in the article written by T. B. Macaulay.) He also taught me that "Procrastination is the thief of time", which, in my early sixties, I found is uttered by Wilkins Micawber in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, and which, in my mid-sixties, I found is a line from E. Young's *The Complaint*, *or*, *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*, published 1742-1745. On one occasion, the subject of teaching came up, and he told me that once he had to teach drumming, about which he knew nothing, having never played drums. (This may have been in the military.) So he had the students buy a drum method book, and then kept one lesson ahead of them, each day teaching them the lesson he had studied for the first time the night before.

He may have been the first person to correct some pronunciation of mine by saying that I had put the accent on the wrong syll*ab*le. He taught me to recite "Every Good Boy Deserves Favors" as the way to remember the names of the notes on the lines in the treble clef staff from bottom to top (E, G, B, D, F). And, in passing, he told me, as a guide to life, the musician's "Don't B sharp, Don't B flat, just B natural" ("sharp", "flat", and "natural" being represented by the musical symbols for these terms). And then there were the words connected with music: every music student had to learn the meanings of the instructions that told how a passage was to be played — the "markings". Rubank's *Advanced Method* — I still have the copy — had a list in the back and they still have Mr. Salvo's ink brackets indicating the set I was to memorize for a given lesson. They were all in Italian: *adagio* ("Slowly; leisurely"); *allegretto* ("Diminutive of allegro; moderately fast, lively; faster than andante; slower than allegro"); *allegro* ("Lively; brisk; rapid"); *da capo* ("[Repeat] from the beginning"); *dal signo* ("[Repeat] from the sign"); *fortissimo* ("Very loud"); *lento* ("Slow, between andante and largo"); *maestoso* ("Majestically; dignified"); *mezzo-piano* ("Moderately soft")... I don't think I ever questioned why they weren't in English: I assumed that, since music was clearly something that came largely from Italy, and was difficult, and different from ordinary American things like jam and model airplanes, the instructions should be in a foreign language. Had you asked me if, for example, "adagio" *meant the same thing* as "slowly; leisurely" — if, in other words, you could say to someone building something who seemed too much in a hurry, "Hey, *adagio*, *adagio*!" — I would have had great difficulty in answering, because, first of all, I felt that the word meant "Italian-slow" which was different from "American-slow".

1. Most, but not all, of the great composers had the ability. Haydn, Schumann, Wagner and Stranvinsky were among those who did not.

The former meant, "in the way that Italians know how to go slow", whereas the second meant "the way we go slow".

A frequent question among us young trumpet players then was who was better, Rafael Mendez or Harry James, since both had made recordings of "The Flight of the Bumblebee", one of the most difficult trumpet pieces. The consensus was that Harry James was too flashy, and that he slurred the fast notes because he had played too much jazz and didn't know that you weren't supposed to play classical that way. Rafael Mendez was more precise, articulate. But there were other virtuosos, figures from the past whom no one but trumpet students knew about because they were associated with music they had to play, or try to play.

For example, the single biggest hurdle for trumpet players was the "Carnival of Venice" — not the melody, which was easy, but the set of variations. It pretty much separated those who had some slight hope of becoming professional musicians (outside of jazz) from those who didn't. I could labor through the whole piece, but it was always a struggle, and always sounded like someone practicing. In order to inspire me, Mr. Salvo would play an ancient record of Del Staigers' performance of the piece[1], and then tell me some of the stories about this virtuoso: for example, that, despite being an alcoholic, he never seemed to lose his extraordinary ability. Once, at a party, quite drunk, he picked up his trumpet, turned it so the valves were pointing *downward*, and then played some impossibly difficult piece that way, he having to press *upward* on the valves with the *backs* of his finger tips instead of pressing down, to make the notes. Mr. Salvo told me about another virtuoso, Herbert E. Clarke, whose method book I used — his "My daily practice" being lines of sixteenth notes that I was never able to master. (Everything important was always too difficult.) Clarke, he said, was so sensitive to the sound of his instrument that he had all the gold plating removed, because he felt it dampened the true trumpet sound. He used to play concerts sitting there with his black, ugly instrument amid all the shining gold.

Another virtuouso whom Mr. Salvo clearly admired was James Burke of the Goldman Band. Del Staigers may have been able to play a trumpet upside down when he was drunk but James Burke could play the trumpet even though he had only *one arm*, and had to hold the horn *and* work the valves with his *left* hand! (A trumpet player normally held the horn with his left hand, and used the fingers of the right simply to work the valves.) This would have been unbelievable except that we had Mr. Salvo's word for it; furthermore we could hear James Burke perform on the weekly broadcast of the Cities Service Band of America. Mr. Salvo decided we needed to actually see this phenomenon in person, so he got tickets for some of his students and himself, and took us one evening to the Belasco Theater in New York City. We sat way up in the balcony looking down on the lighted stage below, with its microphone stands and black wires running across the floor.

An announcer emerged, gave us instructions on how to behave at a live radio broadcast, then introduced the band. Men in sleek green and white uniforms came onto the stage, made their way past the chairs and music stands, and took their places. Then he introduced the leader, Paul Lavalle, who came out, smiling, bowed, and then took his place on the podium. He was short, and wore white shoes and a natty white uniform that had a dark green stripe down the legs of his pants, and a similar stripe around the border of his jacket. Then the announcer took his place at a

1. In December, 2016, some 72 years after Mr. Salvo played that record, I found an ancient recording of Staigers' "Carnival of Venkce" on YouTube. It may well have been the same recording that Mr. Salvo had played for me. I was surprised that I even bothered continuing with trumpet lessons after hearing someone with such phenomenal, unbelievable technique.

microphone, script in hand, and we all waited for the cue from the engineer. In his clear, thin, slightly nasal, but radio perfect voice, the announcer spoke some introductory words and then said, "And now, from the Belasco Theater in New York City, here is Paul LaValle and The Cities Service Bannnnd of America!" with a hold on the "n" so it sounded more exciting, which it did in that resonant, nasal voice. Everyone clapped, and Paul Lavalle immediately got the band off on some rousing march. But of course, I was waiting for James Burke. I don't remember if I recognized him in the trumpet section but if I did I'm sure I was in anguish over what all that playing might do to his lip *before* the solo. Finally, it was his turn, and a young, smiling man with dark hair, perhaps in his thirties or forties, calmly walked up to the microphone — this was going out to the entire country! How could he stand the tension? — and holding the horn in his left hand, drumming the valves just as we all did before playing, he stepped up to the microphone, waited for the band to play the introduction, raised the horn to his lips, and suddenly there came the glorious, clear, perfectly articulated sound of a trumpet being played by someone who really knew how. I was in awe: it seemed a superhuman accomplishment, especially because he was able to seem so calm given not only that he was performing for the entire nation but also that he had already been playing through several marches and that he *only had one arm!* I may have been on the verge of tears, as I often am in concerts. Of course, that evening's performance didn't inspire me to practice any harder — who could possibly hope to compete with someone like that? This was some kind of freak of nature. It could no more inspire you than could, say, watching a champion racehorse inspire a mile-runner.

On another occasion, Mr. Salvo took several of us students to see Edwin Franko Goldman conduct the Goldman band at a concert on Long Island. Again, James Burke was the trumpet soloist.

But already at that age, though I wasn't fully aware of it, I shrank from the idea of becoming a virtuoso, even if I turned out to have the talent. I sensed that you would have no other life, you would constantly have to prove that you deserved your fame, you would constantly be at the beck and call of others, constantly have to follow the direction of this or that conductor. It seemed stifling.

Practicing

I had no interest in practicing. It was simply another one of the things you had to do to keep Them off your back. I hated the drudgery of playing to the metronome. Tick tock tick tock, the vertical rod with the black gradations and numbers, going back and forth. I had a hard time with Clarke's exercises. I played them over and over, day after day, but never really reached the stage where I could play them easily. Any note above high A or so was at risk, no matter how many times I played scales up to high C. My education here, as everywhere else, was in the hands of others. My business was to do what I was told — not to step on the cracks. The idea that I could seize control of my own education was not so much inconceivable as pointless. Why do it, when you would get no credit for it? Here are some of the books I practiced from:

The mighty *Arban's Complete Conservatory Method for Trumpet (Cornet)*, Newly Revised Authentic Edition, ed. by Edwin Franko Goldman and Walter M. Smith, published by Carl Fischer, Inc., N.Y. (no publication date); price $5.00;

The intimidating *Clarke's Technical Studies for the Cornet*, Second Series, New and Revised Edition, "containing special exercising material for breath control, endurance and elasticity of the lips, high note production and technical perfection in general together with instructive text", by Herbert L. Clarke, Carl Fischer, Inc., N.Y. (no publication date); price $2.25;

Rubank Intermediate Method [for] *Cornet or Trumpet*, "to follow any elementary method for individual or class instruction", by J. E. Skornicka, published by Rubank, Inc., Chicago (no publication date); price 75c;

Modern Pares Foundation Studies for Cornet or Trumpet, Completely Revised, Re-edited, Re-styled to Meet the Demands of Modern Education, by Harvey S. Whistler, published by Rubank, Inc., Chicago (no publication date); price 60c.

In my collection of moldy-smelling music, I also find:

The Junior Soloist, Twelve easy solos for Cornet, original compositions by Winston E. Lynes, published by C. L. Barnhouse, Oskaloosa, Iowa (no publication date), solo part price $1.00;

Polka Marigold, Cornet Solo, [one in a series of] Compositions from the Teaching Repertoire of H. A. Vander Cook, published by Carl Fischer, Inc., N.Y. (no publication date); price 60c.

I sat on the day-bed in the guest room on the second floor, the exercise book on the metal fold-up music stand in front of me, and played the exercises with as little attention as possible, but making sure that it always *sounded like* practicing because I knew my mother was listening downstairs. I found it was possible to read a book at the same time if I placed the book on my right side and then held the horn off to the left so I could see the pages. As a result, by the time I reached my teens, the natural position of the mouthpiece had shifted to the left of center of my mouth. The other kids used to comment on that: "Hey, you play on one side!" I would try to brush it off, since I was a little ashamed of looking odd. Later on, I tried to correct it, but never could: when the mouthpiece was squarely at the center of my lips — a position I could only arrive at with the help of a mirror — it felt as though it was way over on the right side, and for all practical purposes it made me a beginner again. I had no embouchure for even moderately high notes that way. Better to stay with what worked.

Some of the method books included exercises on syncopation. I wondered why they had chosen such an odd term for what Mr. Salvo I think described as "emphasizing the off beat". It was certainly a pecular way of playing. The exercises were easy, but I was curious — without doing anything about it — about the strange-sounding name.

Mr. Salvo always emphasized the importance of warming-up exercises — something about risking injury to your lip if you didn't do them. I thought the threat was rather exaggerated, not the least reason being that, when I failed to do them, there seemed to be absolutely no difference in my subsequent playing. They began with a series of notes, each held for a long time, going from soft to loud then to soft again. The notes I think were *g*, *a*, lower *d*, upper *b*, then *c*. A useless tune, I felt. It was so easy I couldn't imagine that it was doing me any good. Faster exercises followed, including several from the Clarke's book, which consisted of sequences of four sixteenth notes, each sequence starting on the next note up, or down, the scale. I played endless scales and chords: major, minor, augmented, diminished. None of it was *musical* to me. I did these mindless things in the belief that, because they were boring and made no sense, they must be good for me. Interspersed between the exercises the books included actual musical works, all of them easy: "Largo" from Handel's *Xerxes*; "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes"; Schubert's "Who Is Sylvia?"; Carl Maria von Weber's "Invitation to the Dance", which I think we also played in band; "Blue Bells of Scotland"; "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms", which, until I looked it up in the course of writing this book, I always thought was titled, "Believe Me *of* All Those Endearing Young Charms"; "The Lost Chord", which I played over and over because it was easy. I also remember "In the Gloaming", but the title only (I had no idea of what a gloaming was, and assumed it was something like a gleaming), and "Doxology", the title making clear that this was one of Their pieces, a piece from the world of adults who were in charge of music. It was

only during the writing of this chapter that I looked up the meaning of the word for the first time: "a short hymn of praises to God in various Christian worship services, often added to the end of canticles, psalms, and hymns."[1]

A great deal of time was spent on variations. This was a kind of exercise in which the trumpet "plays accompaniment to itself", in a phrase whose source I can't remember. They took an ordinary tune, say, "The Carnival of Venice", but then after each note of the tune you played three quick notes below it, which was supposed to be accompaniment. But sometimes you left them out if the melody note came too fast after the previous. *Dit* dah-dah-dah *dit dit* dah-dah-dah *dit dit* dah-dah-dah... You were supposed to accent — play louder — the notes of the melody — the *dit*s... Initally, I thought it a clever idea because if you did it right, it really did sound as though two instruments were playing, one playing the melody, the other the accompaniment. But soon it got boring. I wondered why, if you could make one trumpet sound like two, you couldn't make it sound like three. On the other hand, I also wondered what the point was, once you had done it and heard it once. It seemed nothing more than a way of showing off.

The tops of trumpet valves were imitation pearl, and I liked to look at the rainbow colors that sometimes came from the iridescence. Some valve tops were thinner than others, for example, some trumpet valves where almost as though squashed flat, whereas the valves of baritones, not to mention tubas, were very thick. I assumed that this was because the sound produced by these instruments was so different, that somehow the valve tops had to be "like" the sound, just as the green felt underneath each screw-on valve top had something important, but unknown, to do with the sound the horn made. To this day, when I see a trumpet player playing, whether in person or on TV, I look at the ends of his fingers and at the valves and try to see how flat — how spatulate — the finger ends are, and the valves, half-thinking, I suppose, that the degree of flatness of either reflects how hard he practiced (the more the flatter), or how he really thinks about playing. Some players, I noticed early on, would cup their finger tips over the side of the valves when they weren't pressing down on them, a strange habit, I always thought. Even now, when watching someone play the trumpet but being unable to hear the sound, as sometimes in previews of films or concerts on TV, I try to figure out, from his fingering of the valves, what notes he is playing. Which is rather like trying to guess what a pianist is playing by merely observing his fingers sinking down into the keys when one can't hear the sound. (I sometimes wondered, in my childhood, why the wood on the sides of piano keys always looked dirty.) Just about always, I am unable to tell what notes the trumpet player is playing. The sequence of valves he presses down never seem to be sequences I recognize. I think: No wonder these guys are good, they don't play the sequences of notes that I did! My attention is always centered on the last two valves, because these are the ones that are used for the hard-to-finger notes, like A-flat. If he presses down on those second and third valves a lot, I think: He's good. It is rather like trying to figure out what is being spoken or written, knowing only the grammatical terms for the words: indefinite article, singular subject, singular verb, adverb, prepositional phrase, gerund.... When I watched someone play the piano, my mother, for example, I always wondered how they knew when to press the pedals. The foot always went down softly, carefully, at just this place in the music, at just that place — if you knew how to play the piano you knew how to do this, and when! I was also fascinated by how the player knew how to put his fingers *between* the white keys to get to the black ones. She always did this so naturally, so knowingly.

1. Wikipedia, 03/22/14.

My father didn't have much interest in my musical development. When my mother complained to him about my not wanting to practice, he would say — I can hear the deep, impatient voice now, coming from the downstairs hall as he hung up his coat in the hall closet after a hard day's work — "If he doesn't practice, then don't pay for lessons."

Sight Reading

Part of a good musical education then, as now, was learning to sight read, which means learning to play music without practicing it beforehand. The idea is that someone should be able to put music on the music stand in front of you, count "One, two, three, four..." and you should be able to play it. I was no good at sight reading, despite Mr. Salvo's help, and the set of rules he gave me:

First look at the time signature: was it two-four (two beats to the measure, quarter note gets a beat); or three-four (waltz time: three beats to the measure, quarter note still gets a beat); or four-four (indicated by a C, for "common time"), or six-eight (six beats to a measure, eighth note gets a beat); or twelve-eight, (twelve beats...)?

Then look at the key: no sharps or flats meant key of C; one sharp meant key of G, two meant key of D, three meant key of E, ... one flat meant key of F, two meant key of B flat, ...

Then look ahead at the repeats.

Then look at the tempo marking; was it *andante* (slow) or *moderato* (moderately fast) or *allegro* (fast) or *presto* (very fast) or ...?

I would go through the ritual, but I never seemed to improve. The truth was, and always remained, that I was uncomfortable with printed notes. They seemed the business of scholars, teachers, those who owned the theoretical side of music. For me, music began and ended with the sound. I would have felt completely at home in a music culture in which students learned everything by ear, in other words, by imitating music that was played for them by a teacher, or that they heard on records (which is exactly how I learned to play jazz years later).

Although I could read music written in treble clef, which is what all trumpet and clarinet music, among others, was written in, then and ever since I was completely baffled by bass clef, which is what music for lower pitched instruments, like trombones and tubas, is written in. I kept wondering why they didn't have a single giant, tall staff and write the notes for every instrument on that one staff? Just as, later, when in my late teens, I played in orchestras, I wondered why they didn't give every player in the orchestra the full score, and, for that matter, why not give the same to every member of the audience?

But there was never any discussion about whether this or that method, or technique, or practice rule, was good or not. Students took lessons in order to learn what to do, not to carry out investigations into potentially better ways of learning to play. The implied argument behind everything was, "If you have better ideas, let's see you use them to become the best musician in your school." However, one piece of musical folklore did bother me from early on, and that related to a technique for obtaining a vibrato. One technique, used by trombone and baritone players, including Mr. Salvo, was to move the jaw up and down at the tempo of vibrato you wanted. I could never get this to work for me. Another technique, and this was the one I used, was to rock the hand forward and back slightly on the valves. Supposedly this caused the valves to rock slowly and smoothly in their cylinders, thus giving rise to the vibrato. From the start, I was skeptical about this: I couldn't believe that the tight-fitting valves could actually move forward and back in their metal cylinders by a movement of the fingers on top. It seemed to me clear that the vibrato arose from the forward-and-backward movement of the mouthpiece on the lips.

Playing Solos

The price of playing in the band was having to play solos at Assemblies. I don't remember the first time I had to do this, but it couldn't have been a worse experience than the later times. You must understand that playing music, like just about everything else in my life then, was purely a matter of not making mistakes. It was something that earned you the right to go on living. The idea of playing with feeling (even though those words may have been used by Mr. Bliss or Mr. Salvo), much less playing the way *I* wanted to play, in other words, putting myself into the doing of it, would have had absolutely no meaning for me. Furthermore, playing music in public meant the family reputation was at stake. My mother's very being was hanging in the balance. (My father didn't really care, since this had nothing to do with things that were, in his view, important for a boy, namely, studying, and making things in the basement.) My reputation among the kids was also at stake. Make a bad enough blunder and they'd laugh out loud at you, in the Auditorium, which would be unbearable. No one could survive that.

So one of the frequent items in my life was preparation for a solo. "Work on Vander Cook," Mr. Salvo would write in my assignment book. All the solos were named after flowers: "Peony Polka", "Marigold Polka", "Morning Glory Polka", "Hawthorne Polka" ... They were all in the format: Introduction, Polka, Trio, Coda. Sometimes they would require a bar or two of double-tonguing — *tuh-kuh-tuh-kuh-tuh-kuh* — and more rarely of triple tonguing, which I never mastered — *tit*-ikuh-*tit*-ikuh-*tit*-ikuh — no matter how often I practiced the mindless exercises.

I wish I could say I eventually got used to the anguish of waiting for it to be time for my solo in the band concert, but I never did. I sat in the first row of trumpets on Mr. Bliss's right, mechanically playing the marches — *Washington Post*, *King Cotton*, *El Capitan* — waiting with pounding heart and red face for him to announce me. Whenever I wasn't actually playing notes, I drummed the valves of my horn, because just about the worst thing that could happen during a solo was that one of the valves would stick: you pressed it down and it wouldn't come up when you released it. The next note would invariably be wrong if you actually played it. So you had no choice but to stop and let a note or two of the piece go by unplayed as you freed the valve by pulling up on the cap. From then on you played in torment that the valve would stick again, or that another one would. Wonderful subject of humor for the audience.

When Mr. Bliss announced me, I stood up, trembling, face red, and walked out in front of the podium to the center of the stage. Sometimes I had only piano accompaniment by one of the teachers. All the kids were looking at me. I dared not falter in front of them. But the parents had to be pleased too. If you made a mistake, the kids would laugh, the parents would frown, and you would know there was a real question whether you had a right to go on living. Throat dry, I licked my lips and positioned the mouthpiece on them I had no difficulty remembering the music itself, once I started playing. I don't recall making any major blunders, but I am certain that those solos were utterly wooden and without the slightest feeling. I played with no confidence. Playing music was, for me, the art of not making mistakes. Your job was to do it right. Period.

Not even summer vacation provided sanctuary from these ordeals. Sometimes, I would get a last-minute call: band concert at the school: they needed someone to play a solo. Play that solo you did at the last Assembly. Then, on the inescapable evening, I walked through the backyards with my trumpet case, a boy condemned to impending death.

Other Instruments I Tried to Learn

My father could play the harmonica, and I think he gave me several as gifts. I learned to play passably well, but I could never get that wow-wow sound that cowboys did in the movies by waving their hand at the back of the instrument. The cheap harmonicas were plastic, the more expensive ones metal. Whenever I got one as a gift — whether from my parents or from a relative — it was always a Hohner from Switzerland. One of these had a built-in vibrato and an extraordinary number of notes, it seemed to me: it sounded at though an entire harmonica band were inside the shiny metal case.

Then there were xylophones. One in particular managed to remain among my toys for several years. It had metal plates covered with brass paint that were fastened with black rubber grommets to the green sheet metal support underneath. You hit these plates with a wooden or hard rubber mallet and they would ring, like a low-voiced, humming, bell, for a long time. Years later, I was envious of real xylophone players like Teo Macero who could play with two sticks in *each* hand, the sticks being held between his fingers.

Ocarinas were popular. I was able to play simple tunes — "Home Sweet Home", "Home on the Range", "Happy Birthday" — on them. You could buy them in 5 & 10s, or better-quality ones in the music stores. They were made of marbled plastic.

Peter Christ taught me how you could make an ocarina by cupping your hands and then blowing in between your thumbs. By opening and closing your right hand, you could change the pitch, and, if you practiced, could eventually play a tune this way. I was able to do this sporadically. He was very good at it.

One afternoon I was over at Len Lindholm's house, on Shelley Ave., the family all sitting around, and he brought out a mandolin. I had heard mandolin music on the hillbilly stations, so I immediately grabbed it, looked it over. I was surprised to see that instead of single strings there were pairs of strings. How did you play something like that? A pick was stuck crossways in the strings (that was where you put it when you were done), and someone said that you scraped the pick back and forth across each pair of strings. I tried, but the pick kept getting stuck in between the double strings. I plucked at one string at a time but didn't even know how to change the pitch of a string on a stringed instrument. The same loser's idea came into my mind as at other times when I was confronted with a musical instrument I didn't know how to play: namely, that I would invent my own way of playing, and call correct what everyone else called wrong. But I couldn't convince myself of the validity of this idea, and so I sat there, on the Lindholm's living room floor, holding this smooth, rounded instrument in my hands, plucking lamely at the strings, and hating this world that subjected me to humiliation and frustration like this.

There was also a house on Shelley Ave., just a few houses from the Lindholms, where a kid in our gang lived. He played tenor sax. Brown, wide wooden steps led up to the wide front porch. A big living room was just inside the front door. I tried to play his sax several times, but got too caught up in trying to coordinate all that machinery and in looking at all those iridescent keys. How did they do it? A trumpet only had three keys. Much easier!

On the downhill side of the Old Barn, in a white, modern, apartment-building-looking house with (so it seems in memory) small rectangular windows almost like the portals for firing out of in an ancient castle, lived Cliff Zoll, an accordian player who I understood was famous, I think because he led an entire orchestra of young accordian players. But the instrument had no appeal for me then, and never has.

Since the only music I listened to was hillbilly music, it was natural that I should try to learn to play the guitar. Somehow or other I got hold of one but it had thin steel strings which were almost impossible to press down with soft fingers. Later I heard about nylon strings, which not only

were easier to press down but which also had a much warmer sound. But, being a Franklin, I knew that taking the easy way out was the way of losers, so I continued to try to toughen my fingers on the steel strings. A way out was offered by the ukulele, made popular by Arthur Godfrey on his radio show. Ukuleles had plastic strings. I got one of these instruments, made of plastic, along with a bridge, which was a piece of metal with cork underneath that you simply fastened in place at whatever position on the neck gave the right key. Thus you could always use the same fingerings to obtain corresponding notes in each key. I thought this a truly ingenious device, since without it, you had to press your index finger across the neck in order to accomplish the same thing, and that was much more awkward and painful. But because the ukulele was then a popular instrument, the engineers had gone even further, and invented a little device[1] which you clamped over the strings. It had white plastic buttons so that, instead of having to hold the strings down with your fingers , you simply pressed the button which had the name of the chord you wanted to play — G, B flat, D — written on the top of the button. I couldn't suppress my admiration for how easy these devices made the playing of the instrument, but I felt bad, disgusted with anyone, including myself, who needed them. I associate "The Old Oaken Bucket", the opening bars of which I can still remember, with learning to play the ukulele.

Once we were visiting a family in White Plains who lived in a little house on the corner of a residential street. I remember thinking how small but nice it was; I liked the cluttered, cheerful rooms; they were like (as I might now describe it) something out of *Country Living*. In the living room, near a window with soft white curtains, afternoon sunlight coming in, was an old piano. It had chipped keys, the brown wood showing through, which reminded me of an old man's bad teeth. While the adults jabbered on, I stood there, trying to play harmony by pressing a few keys simultaneously, and hating the fact that I couldn't just do it immediately, intuitively. I felt I should have been able to do it, if I were worth anything — should have been able to dazzle the adults. Then I thought that maybe my random pickings were really a higher kind of music, that music was good or bad solely on the basis of what you considered it to be. But I hated that idea immediately. Had I pursued it, I would have leapt to the forefront of modern music, since what I was playing was a kind of semi-atonal music.

Listening to Music

Classical Music

If someone had asked me, as a child, what kind of a thing classical music was, I would have replied that it was the same kind of thing as furniture and lamb chops. Haydn's *Clock Symphony* (the second movement, in particular), Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* — this music was heavy, stuffed furniture and expensive carpets and lamb chops and gravy. (Some Haydn was pure beef consommé.)

Although we had records (78-rpm, of course, which meant that you didn't want to sit too far from the record player when you played a Beethoven symphony, because you had to do a lot of walking back and forth to keep changing the records), most of the classical music that was heard in our house came from radio station WQXR, "the radio station of the New York Times", as the

1. The name was probably "Uke Player", since that is the one that was advertised on the Godfrey show. Another brand was "Chord Master". These devices continued to be sold over the years. In 2016, one of them was called the "Chord Changer".

announcer intoned in a voice that made it clear that this was a radio station for the important people of the world. WQXR, like the BBC later on, became for me proof that civilization exists. Something was secure and good and important. When my father came home from work, he turned on the Stromberg-Carlson and tuned to this station. It went without saying that one listened to "good" music. He hadn't the slightest interest in, or use for, American popular music, and neither did I (except for hillbilly music — then), and I still don't. Chimes were rung on the hour over WQXR, as though from some ancient city in Europe. The station had an evening program called "Dinner Concert" that came on at 7, with the announcer intoning that it was "music for your dining pleasure" (in all those rich homes in and around New York City). At 8 was "Symphony Hall". Since then, through well over half a century, certain classical music is and always will be for me dinner music. ("We play the music you grew up with", an advertisement for a Bay Area FM station said, with complete accuracy, in the mid-nineties.) Classical music made the people who listened to it Good, Important, just as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* did, and the sideboard in the dining room, and the sofa and chairs in the living room, and the gray shingles on the house. Classical was music of the furniture, sunlight on the carpet in the afternoon. But learning the titles would have been to do something that my parents wanted me to do, and that would have meant becoming like them, completely losing the one self I sometimes had, and instead becoming a Little Lord Fauntleroy. (I sometimes wonder if my sullen attitude toward practicing, and my failure singing "Billy Boy", as described above in this file, did not come from a dread of my becoming a virtuoso, or a genius of any type, because then that meant you really belonged to them, you were super-good, super-obedient, like the Jewish kids with the Bronx accents who appeared on the radio quiz shows.) In any case, then, and throughout my life, I have always found it more difficult to remember facts about music, for example, who composed a piece and when, than to remember the music itself. In my childhood, I could have probably whistled or sung a few classical melodies without having the slightest idea what the titles were. (The psychological lore of the nineties would explain that my right brain was not strongly connected to my left.) In fact, it wasn't until my forties that I made a serious attempt to match the titles to the classical music I routinely listened to.

Thus the following list of the musical works heard in our house gives a false impression of a terribly learned child. A much better impression would be given if this autobiography were read aloud, and then fragments of the music played, because I am sure that, like me, many readers know the music far better than they know the titles and composers. In any case, these are some of the works, in alphabetical order by composer (since I can't think of a better order at the moment):

Arensky's "Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky";
Bach's *Praeludium in E Major* in the Eugene Ormandy orchestration;
Bach's *Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor*
Beethoven's Symphony No. 2, second movement (pure Dinner Music);
Bizet's *L'Arlésienne Suite*;
Brahms' *Three Hungarian Dances* (during the playing of the first, my mother would hold her hand on her heart and moan, remembering old Vienna);
the waltzes, which call to mind the girl playing the piano at Fetzer's, perhaps the same girl who played Chopin's *Heroic Polonaise* at Fetzer's;
the playful pizzicato movement from Britten's *A Simple Symphony*,
many works of Dvorak, e.g., the *Serenade for Strings* (Dinner Music), ;

Grieg's *Holberg Suite* (Sunday afternoon music: stuffed chairs, sunlight coming through the window, feeling of Europe); his *Lyric Suite*, *Norwegian Marches*, and the grotesque *March of the Trolls*.

Handel's "Largo" from *Xerxes* (which was in one of my trumpet method books, and was easy, so I played it a lot);

Haydn's *Surprise Symphony* (No. 94);

Ivanovici's "Danube Waves", also known as "The Anniversary Waltz" (I may have played this as a trumpet solo for an Assembly);

Khatchaturian's "Suite from *Masquerade"*;

the "Intermezzo" from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*;

Massenet's "Scenes Pittoresques" (forever associated with the city of blocks that Barbara Beaird and I built that late afternoon, the French horns sounding like chimes at red sunset, the rays slanting through the window as we worked, surrounded by dark wood furniture);

Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4 ("Italian"), third movement (pure dinner music: evening news, drawings of concrete pillars, smell of roasted lamb chops);

Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours*;

Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2* and *Prelude* (Op. 3 No. 2)

the "Grand Waltz" from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*;

Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite* (also associated with the immortal afternoon);

Respighi's *Botticelli Triptych* (especially the last one, with its horn part like chimes, again evoking the mysterious city at red sunset; also opening of first movement, "The Birth of Venus");

Rossini's *"*Overture to *The Barber of Seville*" (pure "things-are-all-right music"), and his "Overture to *The Thieving Magpie*";

Sibelius' *Violin Concerto* (pure upholstery), as played by Tossi Spivakovsky, a name I remember because of the nice sound of the words);

Sibelius' *Valse Triste* (cold fall evening suicide music);

Johann Strauss, Jr.'s, *Voices of Spring*.

Strauss's "Overture to *Die Fledermaus*" (dinner music, in particularly the waltz section, that produced ohing and ahing in my mother, her hand clasped to her heart);

"Du und Du" waltzes; causing the Waltz Reaction in my mother;

Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* (quintessential Dinner Music); *Serenade in C for Strings* (furniture music, to accompany my father sitting in his chair, calculating); the "Andante Cantabile" from the *String Quartet No. 1* (lamb chops, gravy, mashed potatoes, upholstery, the feeling that I was surrounded by importance); the "Waltz of the Flowers" and *Capriccio Italienne*;

von Suppé's *Light Cavalry Overture* (which my father liked, and about which he always said, "You can hear the horses!");

Carl Maria von Weber's, "Invitation to the Dance", which we may have played in band.

Songs We Sang

The songs we sang idly, for amusement, to kill time, included "Funiculi Funicula", "La Cucaracha" (I had no idea what either of these titles meant until many years later). A perennial question throughout my childhood was: Is it "London Bridge *Is* Falling Down" or "London Brid*ges* Falling Down"?

A perennial favorite was "Clementine":

"Oh my darling, Oh my darling, Oh my darrrrling, Clementine,
Thou art lost and gone forever, Oh my darling, Clementine"

Over and over.

Another one

"Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care,
Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care,
Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care,
My master's gone away."

a verse in "Blue tail fly", which I remember being sung by Burl Ives[1]. I can also still hear him singing "Wayfaring Stranger" —

"I'm just a poor wayfarin' stranger
Traveling through, this world alone
There's no sickness, toil nor danger
In that bright land, to which I go..."

(In my mind's ear, "this world alone" is "this world of woe".)

Then the World War II songs, though some were from World War I: what we called "the Air Force song":

"Up we go, into the wild blue yonder,
Flying high, into the sun...
...
Attaboy, give em the gun!"

"Over There":

"Over there, over there,
For the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,
the drums rum-tumming everywhere...";

"Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition";

and "The Caisson Song":

"Over hill over dale we shall hit the dusty trail,
For those caissons keeping rolling along"...

1. A popular singer primarily of folk and Western songs, later an actor (for example, in the film version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), where he plays Big Daddy.

Apart from war songs, there were the perennial favorites, like "Dry Bones":

"Dem bones dem bones, dem ... dry bones
Dem bones dem bones, dem ... dry bones
Dem bones dem bones, dem ... dry bones
Now hear the word of the Lord."

Each of the next lines was sung a little higher in key to match the ascent up the body.

"Foot bone connected to the...ankle bone,
Ankle bone connected to the...shin bone,
Shin bone connected to the...knee bone,
Knee bone connected to the...thigh bone,
Thigh bone connected to the...hip bone,..."

God knows how many times we sang that song. It was something to do when you felt like doing something amusing. Then there was our version of the Toreador's Chorus from *Carmen*:

"Toreadora
Don't spit on the floor-a
Use the cuspidor-a
That is what it's for-a."

and

"Row, row, row, your boat,
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream."

and

"It's only me
From over the sea,
I'm Barnacle Bill the sailor..."

with "Barnacle" always pronounced "Barnako";

and

"We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
And a Happy New Year."

At Thanksgiving,

"K-K-K-Katie,
K-K-K-Katie,
You're the one and only girl that I adore..."

the tune making me feel strange, as though it really contained Thanksgiving day, caught it exactly, asome particular strings of my soul.

On the radio was the Andrews Sisters singing "The Atcheson Topeka and the Santa Fe", which I always heard as "The Atchesent Apeka and the Santa Fe". I was in my late teens before I actually understood what the title meant.

Also in my teens was "Poco Loco in the Coco" as sung by Eileen Barton. I think I even had the 78-rpm record, as I had the record of the Jack Tetter Trio singing "Back of the Yards". They were the group that sang "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think, enjoy yourself while you're still in the pink..."

And "I've Got Spurs, that Jingle Jangle Jingle", also sung by the Andrews Sisters.

And "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree with anyone else but me, anyone else but me, anyone else but me, No, no, no, ..."

And the one with lyrics that went,

"I'm looking over
A four leaf clover,
That I overlooked before
One leaf is sunshine, the second is rain
Third is the roses that grow in the lane

No need explaining, the one remaining
Is somebody I adore
I'm looking over a four-leaf clover
I overlooked before."

All this to the accompaniment of some kind of mandolin band. I should mention that sometimes, when we were standing or lying in grass, and had nothing better to do, we would look for four-leaf clovers, which were supposed to bring you luck. On rare occasions we found several growing together, more often only one, and usually none at all.

And then there was the absurd

"Salicadoola, Menchicaboola,
Bippity, Boppity Boo!
Put 'em together and what do you got?
Bippity, Boppity Boo!
[repeat]

Salicadoola means
Menchicaboolaroo!

But the thing-a-ma-bob
That does the job
Is Bippity Boppity Boo!"

I think the song was from Disney's film, *Cinderella*.
And the equally absurd

"Marezee doats and doezee doats
And little lambs eedivy
A kidleedivy too, wouldn't you?"

which stood for

"Mares eat oats and does eat oats
And little lambs eat ivy;
A kid'll eat ivy too, wouldn't you?"

I have no idea of the source.

And something called "From the Indies to the Andies in Her Undies". And the hillbilly tunes to which I accompanied myself on the ukelele: "Big Rock Candy Mountain", "The Wreck of the Old 97", sung by Roy Acuff in his nasal voice that I can hear in my mind's ear to this day, the record often being played on the hillbilly music station :

"They gave him his orders at Monroe, Virginia,
Saying, 'Stevie, you're way behind time.
This is not 38, but it's Old 97,
You must put her into Spencer on time.'

He looked 'round and said to his black greasy fireman,
'Just shovel in a little more coal,
And when we cross old White Oak Mountain
You can watch Old 97 roll.'

It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville,
And the lie was a three-mile grade,
It was on that grade that he lost his air brakes[1],
You can see what a jump that she made.

He was goin' at a speed, doin' 90 miles an hour,
His whistle broke into a scream,
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle,
And was scalded to death by the steam."

1. "air brakes" is given in one of the Google references, but, in memory, a different word or phrase was used on the record.

And then "Ghost Riders in the Sky", "The Wabash Cannon Ball" (the latter, also sung by Roy Acuff, was also played frequently on the hillbilly music station), and the yodeling pieces that Montana Slim sang: I waited week after week for the station to play one of these: I loved his crystal clear, bell-like voice, his flawless yodeling.

Then there was a hillbilly tune about some poor guy being reprimanded for always playing cards, and his reply that a deck of cards could be seen as representing stories from the Bible, which he then described. The hillbillies always pronounced the three as the "tray", for example, the "tray of horts". I am fairly sure that, of all the annoying things I did, listening to hillbilly — allowing it to be heard throughout the house — was the one thing that came nearest to driving my father crazy.

And then there was "Grandfather's Clock", which my mother loved because it was about an old man who was Good, and because it had a sentimental ending:

"But it stopped, short, nehhhhver to go again, when the old man died..."

Even more sentimental was a hillbilly tune about a boy who is told that his mother will be dead by the time the leaves have fallen, so he goes out and starts tying the leaves to the trees:

" I'm tyin' the leaves so they won't fall down
So Mommy won't go away..."

There was a tune that Gene Autry sang, "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine", which always made me feel it was directed at me.

Yet strangely enough, it was hillbilly music that brought me to my first understanding of classical music, because, in my early teens, it occurred to me that some classical, for example, that of Bach, was just a grownup version of hillbilly music; it was the next step.

And then there were happy songs, with lyrics like those of the "Too Fat Polka" sung by Arthur Godfrey in his fat-man voice:

"I don't want her, you can have her,
She's too fat for me,
She's too fat for me,
She's too fat for me,
I don't want her, you can have her,
She's too fat for me,
She's too fat, much too fat, she's too fat for me!

She's a twosome, she's a foursome,
If she'd *lose* some,
I would love her more-some,

I don't want her, you can have her, she's too fat for me..."

And then there were the songs that were part of ads on the radio. One that I cannot seem to put out of my mind no matter how hard I try was for Chiquita Bananas, sung by a squeaky-voiced young woman (named Chiquita Banana, of course) with an all-too perky Mexican accent:

"I'm Chiquita Banana and I've come to say:
Bananas have to ripen in a certain way.
When they're flecked with brown and have a golden hue,
Bananas taste the best and are the best for you.

You can put them in a salad.
You can put them in a pie-aye!
Any way you want to eat them—
It's impossible to beat them.

But bananas like the climate of the very very tropical equator.
So you should never put bananas…in the re-frig-er-*at*-or!"

Of course we also sang songs in school, at Assemblies, including "The National Anthem" and "America the Beautiful."

"Oh byootyfull for spacious skies
For amber waves of grain
For purple mountain's[1] majesty
Above the fruited plain."

I was utterly baffled by the lyrics. What did "beautiful *for*" mean? It would have made sense if it had it been "Oh beautiful and spacious skies," or simply "Oh beautifullllll spacious skies." And then the same nonsensical "for" preceding "waves of grain" and "purple mountain's majesty". And what was a "fruited plain"? A plain was covered with grass, like the Plains in the cowboy movies and books. None of the movies or the illustrations in the books every showed *fruit trees* growing out there!

I had similar confusion over the song "Noël", as described in the previous file under "Winter".

In passing I should mention that it seemed that just about every girl could sing with a vibrato; it apparently came with being a girl, and I envied them for it. Beauty plus a vibrato — already at an early age these girls were worthy of Hollywood. A vibrato meant you were popular, you were like the singers on the radio, the stars. I don't recall any guys who sang with a vibrato. I think we would have regarded it as suspect, a sign of wanting to be a little too admired by others, in short, a sign of possibly being queer. I should also mention the popularity of sheet music in those days. Any house with a piano (almost always an upright) had a stack of sheet music on one corner, or underneath the lid of the piano bench. The only one I clearly remember was one I saw, I think, at the Lindholm's: it was for "Prisoner of Love", and had a handsome, suave, guy on the cover; who didn't look like a prisoner of anything.

1. There is no "s" in the actual lyric, but this is what I heard.

Boogie-Woogie

I can still remember the first time I heard boogie-woogie. I was about eight or nine years old and it was during a break in band practice. I was standing on the stage talking to someone. A group of kids were gathered around the piano, which was on the Auditorium floor below us. Suddenly there was a burst of excitement from them and the next moment this rumbling, devilish sound emerged from the piano. To this day I can see the image that immediately came to mind: it was the pink inside of a black man's mouth, and his pink tongue and white teeth. He was almost a cartoon figure, with close-cropped woolly black hair, and he was doing a dance, his arms loose at his side. My hair stood on end, my skin prickled — this was something *bad* suddenly coming out of that piano, and in school! As I watched the student who was playing — I think it was a girl — the black keys somehow came to be associated with this black music. I was ashamed at being so excited by it. I couldn't get over how her one hand was rolling over the low keys, creating the irresistible beat, while her other hand brought forth the plinkety-plink, shined-shoes, white-teeth notes.

First Paying Job as a Musician

I was probably the only pre-teen music student and member of a school band within miles who was actually paid to play his instrument. This occurred when Mr. Moser, who lived on Wall Ave., just a block and a half from us, and who was an officer in the local American Legion post, somehow heard, possibly through his daughter, Carole, who had been one of my baby-sitters, that I played trumpet. His post needed someone to play Taps on Memorial Day.

So there, on a spring morning, was this group of middle-aged men in ill-fitting old uniforms and cloth caps, and a boy in his black and orange band uniform, with cape and military-looking cap, trooping from grave to grave through the beautiful hills of the cemeteries in the area — Kensico, Gate of Heaven, one in North White Plains. Mr. Moser had a list of the graves we were supposed to visit. Some were for veterans of the First World War, although we were already in the midst of the Second. At each gravesite, the squad of six or so veterans with their antiquated rifles lined up, I took my place off to the side, Mr. Moser read a brief prayer "... for our fallen comrade...", then they quickly raised their rifles and fired three volleys of blanks into the air, the scraps of paper from the dummy bullets floating gently down onto the grass. Sometimes not all the shots went off at the same time, and there was a belated snap or two, as the delinquent marksmen tried to get theirs in before it was too late. Then I played Taps, trying to make it as beautiful as I could, with no vibrato, and above all trying not to crack the high note, something which, in memory at least, I rarely did.

Once or twice they asked me to play Taps at the ceremonies next to the big gray gun that marked the War Memorial at the north end of the Village. This was much worse than the graveside performances. There was a big crowd because this took place immediately after the Memorial Day parade through the Village and some of the people in the crowd knew me, so there would be much graver consequences if I cracked a note. My lips would go completely dry, I had to keep licking them, and I would be trembling so badly sometimes that the audience got a vibrato for free. But at the same time I liked the feeling of being special, set apart, admired by some of the mothers, treated with a jocular respect by some of the kids.

Somewhere there is a photograph of me standing girllike in my too-large uniform in front of the War Memorial, trumpet off to one side of my mouth as usual.

At the end, my reward, my pay, was all the spent shells from all those firings into the air, and an ice-cream soda (strawberry) at the soda fountain in the Village (I chose the fountain near the

end of the row of stores, near the Dam, for reasons long since forgotten — maybe they had better sodas). Mr. Moser would sit by me at the counter, patiently waiting for me to finish, telling me how much they appreciated my having played for them.

Fingernails

I can't remember a time when I did not bite my fingernails. I am a natural-born onychophagist.

Nail-biting is a pleasure which no normal person with decent, well-manicured nails can possibly imagine. There is the pleasure, for example, of getting your front teeth, your *incisors*, into the corner of a freshly grown index finger nail and then biting into it and turning the finger, the whole hand, so that a long sliver can be pulled off and then cut up with further front teeth chopping until the bone-hard slivers can be set on end between the lips and pressed into the soft flesh to give sharp points of pain that can keep you interested for minutes at a time. Many an hour of boredom and frustration and depression would have been intolerable but for this activity. And then there is the pleasure of removing from the nail not merely the hard front edge but also a small, ragged sheet, a feather of nail surface which can be bitten or crumbled or folded to produce all sorts of sharp, little pains. And then there is the skillful maneuvering and turning of a fragment between the upper and lower teeth as you try, try to find the right place for it. And the pleasure of ripping a half-dead sliver of skin from the flesh *behind* the nail.

The peak of my nail biting period — the height of my ferocity — was unquestionably childhood, when I frequently drew blood and worse. After exhausting all the material at the front of each finger, the only choice was to keep chiseling toward the back until I eventually reached the cuticle. The sculptor in me loved the carved look of the mutilated nail, the bulging, red, uneven deformity that had once been a normal, slightly curved, smooth surface. My denuded thumb would start to look like a cock.

Sooner or later I was digging the long slivers out from under the flesh at the back of the nail, which sooner or later produced first bleeding, the red blood filling the ditch between flesh and butchered nail, then shiny, red inflamation, then infection. The puffy flesh would grow red and shiny. Then the inflammation would start creeping down the finger. At times the throbbing pain would become bad enough to keep me awake at night. I would bathe the finger in hot water to soften the skin. But then when the crisis had passed, the puffy skin would turn white and grow taut from the pressure of the puss inside it. I would try to release the puss by squeezing the edge of the inflammation, as much as the pain would permit. But sometimes it was necessary to heat a straight pin and stick it into the puffy skin. Then the puss would flood out and fill the air with a delicious garbage smell. I loved that smell. To be the bearer of that foul a smell and yet have no one else know it!

If my supply of nail material happened to be running short, I would save some of the cuttings from my toenails and chew those.

I developed the habit of keeping my fingers curled under my palm so no one could see the damage, and to this day when I am drinking from a glass and another person is sitting on the opposite side of the table, I hold the glass with only index finger and thumb, since for some reason the index finger nail is usually not as badly bitten as the rest. The rest of the fingers I keep curled under.

But sometimes someone sees one of the mutilations and asks, naturally enough, "What happened to your finger?" — asking it with the tender, controlled repulsion they would use if they

were asking an amputee, "How did you lose your leg?" And I reply with something like , "Oh, I slammed it in a door."

Sometimes I resolve to quit, particularly if I sense that a woman has been repulsed by the sight of my mutilated nails. I keep track of the inventory: OK there's two that others could be allowed to see. Let's try to bring that other one along so we'll have three. Since the early eighties, I have taken to wearing a bandage on the most damaged finger tips (normally three: one on the left hand, two on the right). This also stops the biting on those nails, of course. But a former girlfriend[1] of mine, when responding to my request for advice on how to appear at my best when meeting a new woman, always said, "And no band-aids!", she being convinced that somehow keeping the mutilated fingertips out of sight is better than trying to conceal them under bandaids and pretending that they have been accidentally cut in working around the house.

Planes and Parachutes

Planes

I loved airplanes of any kind: little red or green or blue plastic ones you could buy in the 5 & 10, which often came with a plastic ring so you could put them on your key chain; or the ones that were prizes in Cracker Jack boxes; or the bigger ones with hollow fuselages that you could look inside of. My favorite was a trainer, red and silver, about six inches long, made of cast metal. It had rivets and thin window ribs over the cockpit, just like a real plane (but some of the ribs had a feather of metal left on them, from the casting process, so it wasn't completely realistic). I played endlessly with this plane, especially as I lay in bed, landing it on the precarious sides of the red blanket mountains I made with my knees.

For a birthday or Christmas when I was around six or seven, I received a book about a pilot, and I read it over and over — or perhaps I should say, I looked at the pictures over and over. The pilot's head was round, and the drawings had the same roundish quality, but that didn't prevent me from imagining myself in the little cockpit, the little house, flying through the clouds just as the pilot was doing. He controlled the plane wth a steering wheel, and that brought up the question, Is it better to fly with a wheel or using only a stick? This soon became the central preoccupation, equivalent in obsessive power to the question whether a Gadget was perfect or not.

Flight was the major mystery. I loved the idea of a little house — the cockpit — in which a man, tightly encased in leather (special clothes!), sat, wearing goggles. Whenever I put on a pair of goggles that one of the kids had, pulling the wide elastic strap down over my head and settling them into place, I was always aware of how everything seemed to become more quiet and close. I wondered why, in pictures, pilots often had their goggles over their eyes even when the cockpit canopy was closed. Pilots always had a thin-lipped, serious expression, because this was extremely important business.

But when I speak of *model* airplanes, I mean the kind that we made of balsa wood. The truth is, I hated *building* model airplanes but I loved *the idea* of them, these little tissue-paper and balsa-wood *houses* that would fly through the air. I liked the *boomp* sound the tightly-drawn tissue paper made when you tapped on it . I loved the smell of airplane glue, I liked to roll the little balls of glue between my thumb and index finger. I liked the way that, with a razor blade, you could cut balsa wood as easily as if it were spaghetti. I liked the pins in the breadboard that held the balsa wood struts in place, the look of a desk or workbench on which someone, like Frank

1. See "Kathy" in the first file of Chapter 2 in Vol. 3.

Fetzer, down the street, was building model airplanes. I loved the word "fuselage". This was where the pilot, always with a serious expression, sat, in his brown leather cap, with the straps hanging down, and the goggles on his forehead.

You built model planes on a breadboard, which the instructions told you to get from your mother's kitchen, except that the wood in the board my mother gave me was too hard to push the pins into without great effort. Furthermore, here as everywhere else, my instinctive sense of defeat set in immediately. I knew from the start that I would be no good at this. Still, you had to try. So I bought the kits, which came in long boxes and always showed a color illustration of the finished plane, perfectly built and painted with the white star of the Air Force, with speed lines trailing along the wings and tail. The plane was always climbing toward the clouds, with perhaps a few birds in the distance, and watching it was the excited, smiling face of the boy who had built it.

I followed the directions. I laid the drawing on the breadboard, held it in place with pins. Sometimes, I used a hammer to drive them into the infernally hard wood. (But the instructions said a *breadboard* and so I wasn't about to further the chances of failure by using another kind of board.) Then I put translucent wax paper over the drawing. Then cut the balsa wood sticks to the same size as on the drawing, put them over their images on the drawing, used more pins to hold them in place, then glued the cross members in place with delicious-smelling airplane glue (the only enjoyable part of the whole ordeal). But sometimes the balsawood sticks had to be bent, and I could never do this so that the bend was the same as on the drawing. The two sides of the fuselage didn't match. The result was always lopsided, the typical work of a kid *who was not meant to be an engineer*. The slightest jar of the board, and the half-dried glue-laden joints would pop apart. When I held the fragile structure up in the air, you could see that the paper was wrinkled and that the fuselage curved to one side when you looked down it from the tail. The tissue paper covering the fuselage and wings and tail was lumpy where it had been glued. It was never perfectly smooth and tight as a drum like the ones in the picture on the box, or the ones built by the kids who knew how to build model airplanes, and would go on to become engineers.

You forced yourself on, hooked the rubber band onto the the circular fishhook behind the propeller, closed up the remaining openings in the fuselage, and put in the little transparent plastic cockpit window so you could imagine looking out as you sat inside in the smell of glue and balsa, watching the nose climb into the clouds.

You took the plane outside, say, to the middle of the back yard, and, with your index finger on the side of the propeller blade, carefully turned the propeller around and around to wind the rubber band tighter and tighter. Once or twice I wound it too tight, the rear support pulled out, or the wooden proppellor support at the front cracked, and there was a tangle of rubber in the fuselage

But then, after the interminable winding, holding the plane in your left hand, preventing the propeller from spinning with the index finger of your right, the way the instructions said, you gently slid it forward into the air. The wing dipped down, the nose tried to climb to the left, and your creation flopped or dove headfirst into the ground.

Try again. You are not engineering material.

Building model airplanes also led to my permanent distrust of X-Acto knives. The reason may have been that they were too elaborate — imagine! a special holder for not one, but several different types of blade, each designed for one special kind of cutting, some blades triangular, some bevel-shaped, all of them much thicker than a razor blade; and then having to unscrew the little ferrule to remove the blade that was in place so you could install another one: imagine all this in comparison with an ordinary double-edged wafer thin razor blade, which was not only

harder to use but had the added virtue of being much more likely to make you cut yourself. X-acto knives went against the Code. They were too American. If you used one, that meant you were taking the easy way out.

Once in a while I tried to get the plane to take off from a street or driveway, the way the instructions said. But after a few bounces and hops, it would turn into the grass, the propeller would catch in the dirt, and the plane would flip over.

Whether the plane flew properly or not was a judgment about me and about my right to go on living. I had no sense — none — that it simply meant that I needed to do something different. That was talk for boys who already knew they were engineering material. I experienced none of that feeling of caring for machinery, devices, mechanical things, that I am convinced those who are good with mechanical things have, in the same way that animal lovers have for animals. (The poor creature needs my help to fly! There, there, what's wrong, boy?) But, on the other hand, although it took me many years to realize it, it was much more exciting my way, even though I hated it, because I was living under a daily sentence of death.

And yet, still, there was something irresistible about the look, the *idea*, of a model airplane. All that intricacy inside — the coiled rubber band, the hook where it connected to the propeller shaft, the wings stretching out, ready for flight, the struts, just like on a real Piper Cub, the wheels hanging down below the fuselage — wheels that went into the air! wheels that did not roll, but passed over your head! — the streamlined cowlings over them on some planes — the smell of the glue, the lightness of the thing. I loved to handle the plane, hold it up, look at it. But Oh God how I hated trying to build it. Throughout my life, I have felt that when I figured out what went wrong with my attempts to build model airplanes, and I am not referring to my lack of skill, then I would have a major part of the Answer.

The master builder of model airplanes in our neighborhood was Frank Fetzer. His family lived at the corner of Shelley Ave. and Maple St. in a big house with a large sloping lawn on the side. At the back of this lawn, up against a row of trees and rocks, was a cabin that looked like it was made of big, heavy, lifesize Lincoln Logs. This was where Frank lived. The story among us kids was that he was so bad that his parents had built the cabin and forced him to live in it in order to get him out of the main house. As far as we kids knew, all he ever did was sit at his work table and build model airplanes. I don't remember any mention of him in connection with school. He was that bad.

We would drop by the cabin every once in a while. "Hi, Frank, what are you building?" He would be sitting at his work table in the center of the one and only room. All around were the brown logs, the bark still peeling from them, hanging in little shreds. The place smelled deliciously of cedar. On his work table was always the balsa wood frame of a model airplane he was building, the balsa ribs laid out on tissue paper over the printed plans, with pins stuck into the balsa at the joints to hold it in place. He always had a few pins, like toothpicks, in the corner of his mouth and he rolled a piece of airplane glue between his lips. He didn't say much. Instead, he grunted or chuckled at things we said. The smell of the glue mixed with the the smell of the cedar logs. The airplanes he had already made were suspended on thin strings from the ceiling; they bounced lightly in the breeze, as though they were in flight. While we struggled to make a single plane, and couldn't get the pins to hold the balsa properly, Frank had two or three planes under construction simultaneously. It was all he did. He never had to do his homework. To be *that bad* that all you had to do every day was build model airplanes! Our envy was boundless.

Since then, I am always stopped in my tracks by the smell of cedar. It makes the world a different place. There is a kind of perfume or soap which has it. The smell of ginger ale seems close.

Once in while, over an open field on a summer day, we would hear the whining buzz of a gas model plane. One or two of the kids in the neighborhood, including, I think, Len Lindholm, built these, but they were way beyond me, both in cost and in the skill required to build them. I remember Len's fingers turning the little knob on the end of a metal shaft that adjusted the amount of fuel that was fed into the engine, the fuel tank having been filled with an eye dropper. He adjusted, gave a sharp tap to the propeller, the little engine would sputter and stop. He would turn the knob, hit the propeller again, the engine would sputter twice, cough, and stop. My memory of gas model planes is almost entirely of these endless attempts to get the engines started. I loved the smell of the fuel — it was as pleasurable as that of airplane glue. I loved the association of this smell with the term "glow-plug", which was something in the engine, possibly like a spark plug. I never found out. But the idea in my mind was of a spark plug with a glowing red or blue ball at the end which somehow produced this wonderful smell of the fuel.

Most of the gas models the kids built were controlled by two wires that ran into one wing tip, so that all you could do was fly the plane around and around in a circle. That didn't seem very interesting to me. Once in a while someone would fly a gas model without controlling wires, sometimes simply setting the ailerons and rudder so that with luck it would fly in a large irregular loop in the sky. Radio-controlled planes were just becoming feasible then. I don't recall many. What excited me was the idea of a free-flying gas model plane getting away from its owner and flying out of sight, to who knows where, on a hazy summer day. What would it be like to be in the cockpit, looking down on the treetops, flying off over houses you had never seen before, perhaps finding an upward air draft, being lifted toward the clouds, the buzz of the engine filling your ears, you making the ailerons and rudder and elevator move, the smell of airplane glue all around you, as you left the grassy meadow behind and headed off over the trees that, from your height, looked like broccoli? How would you land? You would have to find another meadow and then slip down to it as the little engine sputtered to a stop, so that you landed with only the sound of wind in the little struts. Maybe you would get out (the grass several feet high because you were so small) and find yourself in a neighborhood you never knew existed. An entirely new life would start...

Sometimes, when we hadn't the patience to work on a model, we bought gliders at the 5 & 10. These consisted of a stick of balsa for a fuselage, with a slit in it through which you pushed the wing, and two other slits in the tail for the rudder and elevator. A little clamp-on piece of metal at the front provided the necessary weight to keep the nose from lifting up too quickly. You held the fuselage between thumb and middle finger, with your index finger at the end of the fuselage, behind the tail, and snapped the plane forward into the air. Normally, it simply made a few loops, then settled to the grass. With a gentler launch, you could get it to fly straight for a few yards, and once in a while, if it caught an updraft, it would even rise a few feet. But the best glider I was ever to find was still many years in the future.

Sometimes we took just the wing of a glider and, with a forward movement of the hand, sent it rolling into the air. It would keep turning, long edge over long edge, and descend slowly to the ground, in a slower and more graceful version of what trading cards did when we played the matching game.

You could also buy rubber band models in the store. They were similar in construction to the gliders except they had a propeller (wood or plastic) and a hook near the back for the rubber band, and thin, bobbly wheels.

(In passing, I should mention the boomerangs we occasionally played with. You could buy one kind in the store: it consisted of three balsa wood blades fastened at the center, each blade

tapered slightly, with the widest part at the outer end, which was flat, not pointed. You could move each of the blades to position them so they were equally far apart. You launched the object with a movement of the hand similar to what is now used to throw a frisbee. We knew, of course, that what was interesting about a boomerang was that it would come back to you after you threw it, but in memory that very seldom happened. I am not sure, but we may also have bought, or carved on our own, the kind of boomerang shaped like a wide V. We read that the aborigines in Australia used these as weapons when they hunted for rabbits, but I could never understand the point in having the boomerang come back to you, since it would never do that after it had hit a rabbit. In writing this, however, it occurs to me that having the boomerang return would be exactly what you wanted if you didn't hit the rabbit!)

Sometimes my father would drive us over to Armonk Airport on Sunday "to watch the planes". They came in across the asphalt road we drove up on. As a plane passed overhead, the engine always made a *putt-putt-putt* windy, breathy, sound. We could hear the faint hiss of the wind in the struts. Then we watched it grow smaller as it sank down, down, closer and closer to the ground. Three point landing! Now it was bouncing and wagging on the wide, hard-dirt field. At the other end of the runway, where the planes turned around, were trees, shrubs, grassy hills. We never got close to the pilots, who emerged backwards from their planes, lifting the second leg high to free it from the cockpit, and unbuttoned their chin straps and always seemed to walk thoughtfully, hunched forward, toward the hanger office. What were they thinking about? Impossible for a boy to fathom: these men had just come down out of the sky!

And starting the engine: the pilot calling "Contact!" through his little clear plastic window, the guy having to turn the propeller with a hefty downward pull and a swing of the leg. And he didn't even seem eager to step back from the suddenly spinning propeller, despite the fact it was obvious that if he was even a little slow in pulling his hands back, they would be cut off. Sometimes the engine didn't catch, and he would have to try again, but for some reason he turned the propeller into what was apparently a correct position. Not smoothly, but as though it had only one or two positions when it was still. Comic books occasionally showed a villain being chewed up by a propeller, the wide-eyed terrified expression as he realized the blade was about to tear his arms off, eyeballs flying out as the blade tore into his skull, and he giving the the familiar agonized- death cry, *Aaaaargh*!

Takeoffs began with a big roar of the engine, a wagging of the rudder, then the slow bouncing down the runway, faster, faster, then tail up and then — they were no longer rolling on the ground, they didn't need it any more, now the fuselage was hanging from the wings and being lifted up into the blue. (I liked the struts, the idea of these stick-like things being so important for flight.)

Reynold's Airport, located up behind the Reservoir, in the semi-rural residential area above Rte. 22, was a much smaller airport. I can't recall my father taking us there: we rode there on bikes. A dirt driveway led to it around the back of a small house that, in memory at least, was surrounded by uncut grass. There was a tree on the left. An old building with fading red paint on the edge of a field served as a hangar. A couple of old Piper Cubs with ropes to their moorings seemed permanently parked outside. The rest was a field of overgrown grass with bumpy dirt track down the middle that on rare occasions, we assumed, served as the runway. I may remember seeing a plane land there once, but that memory is vague.

The place had a quiet mystery: why an airport with no planes landing or taking off? And why only one or two planes? Perhaps it was like the airport in the Gene Autry Saturday afternoon film,

where planes were hidden in a mountain. Or maybe in a tunnel like the one you always hoped to find in the dirt, or like the always-imagined cave behind a vine or some blackberry bushes.

As I rode my bike past the the houses on the way to the Airport — this was uphill from the Aerators — I looked at them, wondered who lived there. Sometimes they had stone walls along the road, the houses set back in a field of unkempt grass. On a cold fall Saturday when it was about to rain, I would look at the dead grass, the dark gray clouds, and think, "I know how the boards in that house feel, I know how the house feels, the emptiness." And it would terrify me to realize I could know an object that well.

Once, driving down from the summit of a mountain outside Ashland, Oregon, in the fall of 1992, I saw, almost at the same level as the car, a white Piper Cub coming in for a landing in the valley where the Ashland airport was. The late afternoon sun shone down from just behind the mountain, illuminating the side of the airplane. It was a peaceful, eternal, scene. I suddenly smelled, or imagined I smelled, pine wood and house paint. I thought of busy guys in each house below carving, sanding. The Piper could have been a gardener's shack in a back yard. I imagined a kid jumping over a brook somewhere.

Seaplanes always gave me a strange feeling, perhaps simply because it was so odd that a plane could not only fly, but also could land on water, and be like a boat for a while. Perhaps it was simply an association with a blue and white metal one with turnable propellers that someone had given me as a gift. That plane was the essence of seaplanes for me, with its silver propeller, wobbly on its pivot, the metal tabs visible that the manufacturer used to assemble the blue sheet metal into the finished plane. The round rudder, the tin wings, the windowless cockpit — I don't think it had plastic windows. Perhaps it was the shape of the pontoons that got to me, the way they glided in the water.

But most of all, even more than planes, I loved parachutes.

Parachutes

In those days, an airplane going by overhead was an event. Whenever we heard the sound of an airplane engine, we dropped what we were doing and ran to see what kind of plane it was. My brother and I and the other kids we happened to be playing with, if we weren't in the midst of a baseball or football game, would watch the plane go by, calling out its type and model: "Piper J-103!" "Cessna 237!" "Grumman Trainer!" "Grumman Hellcat!" "P-47 Thunderbolt!" "P-51 Mustang!" I noticed that when you bent over, or moved your head in certain ways, you could make the pitch of the engine change. For me even now the sound of a single-engine plane, the modern equivalent of a Piper Cub, going overhead on a peaceful summer day, is a definition of contentment, a reassurance that all is well with the world.

Sometimes the planes were doing maneuvers. Sometimes they would deliberately go into a stall: the pilot would go into a steep climb until the engine started to cough, and the plane would suddenly nose down, the engine would pop and sputter, and that would mean — Oh, please, let it be — that maybe the pilot would have to *bail out*!

"I think he's bailing out!"

"I think I see him!"

In our mind's eye we could see the tiny black figure tumbling down, down, then the white streamer behind him, the balled-up chute unrolling against the blue sky. *Maybe it won't open!* Then, in the vast, blue silence, the puff of white silk above him and he now descending in his

leather straps, the plane meanwhile nosing crazily toward the ground, perhaps with smoke pouring from the engine. We lived for it. The legs hanging down. All those straps. To be way up there, to be *that special*, to descend slowly, closer and closer to the ground, hanging on to the straps overhead, perhaps drop into the trees and hang there till someone came and rescued you. I was prepared at all times to start running in the direction of that parachute (which never appeared). I would have run through anything to reach him — woods, fields, rivers. (In the movies, someone was always running to where a parachutist had just landed.)

To see a man before you who mere minutes before had been driving through the sky in a smooth aluminum house or a canvas-covered house, and then had fallen through the emptiness and then floated to earth holding onto straps under a blossom of white silk ... Please, please, let the engine stop so he'll have to bail out.

When we played war, sometimes we pretended to be paratroopers. We would hold our hands crossed on our chests, our wooden guns strapped over our shoulders. We knew that when a paratrooper hit the ground, he was supposed to roll, so we would shout "Let's go, Geronimo!" which we understood the paratroopers all said when they bailed out, and jump off a wall or a bench onto the ground and roll.

During World War II, the excitement of any airplane passing overhead was enhanced by the possibility that it might be an enemy plane. So when we heard engines high overhead, much higher than the Piper Cubs flew, we would lie on our backs in a field or in our back yard, and watch the dogfights that the military pilots engaged in for practice. The planes usually came from Rye Airport, many miles away, beyond the Reservoir. On a summer day, we would hear the engines, then look for the dots in the vast blue sky, and, if we were lucky, we would find them and watch them loop and dive past each other. (It was amazing how loud the engines were and how small the dots were!) If it went on for more than a few minutes, I would lie on my back in the grass in the back yard or in whatever field I happened to be in and just watch and listen. There was always the possibility that it wasn't a practice fight, that maybe the enemy had really gotten through! I lay there hoping, hoping, that a tinier dot would float off from one of the dots, and fall down through the infinite blue, and then, suddenly, a tiny white puff would appear above it, and the most wished for of all things in the world would occur before my very eyes: a pilot parachuting to earth.

My father couldn't help but observe my obsession and so, for one birthday, or perhaps just as a gadget he brought home from the office, he gave me an unusual toy parachute: it came in an aluminum sphere the size of a tennis ball. The sphere opened into two hollow hemispheres connected by a single hinge. Inside was a white tissue-paper chute. Soft, thin, white strings were attached to the sphere. You carefully folded the chute into one hemisphere, then fastened a rubber band in a certain way to a couple of metal tabs so that it acted to open the halves. Then you threw it as far up into the air as you could. The rubber band was supposed to make the two halves fly open so that the chute would unfurl and the whole would float slowly and beautifully to earth. That was the idea. But it didn't work, at least not for me.

There were also parachutes which had, instead of strings, balsa wood sticks. The chute itself in these cases was usually very thin cloth, red, or white, no doubt to compensate for the weight of the sticks. I recall one that you pushed into a tube and then forced out with a burst of air from your mouth, another which you shot out with a hit of your hand on the end of a cylinder. They always worked, but they didn't go very high.

Easiest and simplest was to make a parachute out of a handkerchief. They were also the most reliable. You simply took a handkerchief, tied a piece of thick twine to each corner, then pushed

the other four ends through the hole in a large washer or two and tied the ends. Then, holding the center of the handkerchief, you rolled it up, strings and washers on the outside, and threw it as high as you could. When it reached the highest point in its flight, it dropped a few feet and immediately opened and for a few breathless moments, you had before your very eyes the miracle of a parachute slowly descending to earth, swaying from side to side, the top rounded by the uprushing air as it descended. We even tried shooting these in slingshots, if someone had a slingshot big enough, and we tried throwing them off the Plaza side of the Dam, but this was a waste of materials, since we could never get it to go far out enough, with the result that it wound up on the side of the Dam, hanging over one of the big stones, far too high to climb down to, or up to.

Once in a while, when the breezes were just right, we experienced the ultimate treat of a parachute going *up*. The breeze lifted it, and away it sailed, turning, the washers swaying underneath. How high would it go? Over the trees? Up to the clouds? It bobbed along on the updraft for a few seconds, and then, the wind losing interest in it, descended suddenly and dully to the ground. The thought of a real parachute, with a man hanging on below, actually going up was almost too much to bear. To soar over the countryside that way, looking down at the roofs of the houses, the trees and roads and fields, in your special white parachute that never went down!.

Of course, for us, umbrellas were always parachutes — but only potential parachutes. You could feel the lift when you held one up on a windy day. Oh if only it would lift me up off the ground! I held the umbrella high over my head and jumped off the swing or the back porch, hoping that just this once the fall would stop, that I would hover there — surely the wind could afford to let me hover there, or let me go up, just once, that's all, just once![1] I still feel this excitement when I carry an umbrella on a windy day: the slightest upward tug on the umbrella and I think, Maybe this time! and I imagine being lifted off the ground, rising past the fronts of buildings, above the rooftops.

Which reminds me of elevators: the operators then (often short women) wearing white gloves and a uniform with braid. The way they announced the number of the floor, then brought the elevator up exactly level with the floor, watching the floor of the elevator as it rose, working their handle till the elevator floor was perfectly even with the building floor. Then how they pulled the lattice grill aside, pulled down on the big handle of the outer door to open it. "Watch your step!" The friendly greetings to regulars as they got on.

Smells

I hated going shopping with my mother but I loved the smells of women's clothing stores, in particular what seemed to me a combination of perfume and wool smell which I always associated with a kind of wool with sparkles that was used for certain types of sweater. The smell seemed to come from the yarn itself, but also from the red nail polish on the fingernails of the women who handled the material. I wanted to stay in those stores forever and be taken care of by these women who knew all about these smells in addition to knowing all about everything else that was important.

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1. It is an interesting question whether an umbrella can be designed that would be capable of lifting a man (or at least a boy) during "typical" gusts of wind in a given region of the country. Of course, given a sufficiently strong upward draft of air, and sufficiently strong material and ribbing, an umbrella is capable of this. But here we are asking about how large and strong an umbrella would have to be to accomplish the task for a given maximum upward movement of air.

Smells revealed the true nature of things. Smells put you in contact with another realm. Dog feces, for example, revealed the true nature of dogs, the essence of dogginess. There was the delicious smell of airplane glue, and Sunday dinner, and the bathroom smell of the air sometimes in winter, and wood smoke in the fall, and warm fresh air, and the dirty socks/heinie smell of fertilizer in the spring. And the smell of a freshly peeled orange on a hot summer day.

Jumbo's Taxi had the smell of old felt and cigarette smoke in the seat covers. I couldn't resist watching the way Jumbo — who was an overweight white guy, not a black, despite his name — turned the steering wheel using the steering knob. To be allowed to do that! To know how! While sitting in seats that were like living room chairs, soft, upholstered. A car is a building. The windshield wipers going back and forth, he not even having to look at the road all the time, that's how good he was and how much he knew: he could turn his head and talk to us in the back seat and not have the car crash.

Then there was the smell of other people's houses, the little old lady smell that some of them had, as in Bobby Wilkins' house. The curtains, in the dim yellow light of a summer afternoon, and the old piano in the cellar smelled faintly of mothballs and the things women kept on top of bureaus.

At Thanksgiving, there was the smell of the pine incense in the little log cabin as I have described in the section, "My Father". There was also the delicious smell of a birch bark canoe that had been bought at some souvenir shop. Even though the canoe didn't float — it would only flop over on its side, being just a rectangular piece of birch bark that had been folded and then trimmed into the shape of a canoe, and held in shape by thongs along the edge that made it look like the canoe in *Paddle-to-the-Sea*.

Getting Into Trouble

Since it was clear I could never measure up at home, the idea of doing bad things appealed to me. Probably my finest hour came one day when, as we were playing in the woods above the Bronx River Parkway, we came across some discarded automobile tires. One of us wondered what would happen if we rolled one down the hill and out in front of the cars on the Parkway. We decided to find out. Most of the tires hit the trees, so we reduced the chances of that by starting them closer to the open, grassy part of the hill (which was our ski run during the winter). The woods curved a little, so that we could roll the tire straight onto the grass and send it bouncing and hopping gaily down the slope, down, down, then across the grass at the side of the Parkway and, sure enough, right onto the Parkway! Cars swerved suddenly, brakes screeched. We crouched behind the trees until the cars had moved on. Then we got another tire and tried again. I don't remember how many we actually got to reach the Parkway, but I thought it was a magnificent amount of trouble to make.

One bit of mischief we never carried out, but which remained a constant challenge in the back of our minds, had its source in a rumor that someone had already succeeded in doing it, namely, throwing, or, rather, rolling, a manhole cover off the top of Kensico Dam. What a beautiful sound that would make! How far would it roll once it had reached the Plaza below? Would it chip some of the blocks of stone of which the Dam was made? What kind of penalty would the cops throw at you if they caught you doing that? (What a falling manhole cover would do if it struck someone standing or walking on the Plaza below never occurred to us.)

But this bit of mischief was beyond our reach for many reasons: first, the problem of finding manholes nearby (and what would happen to cars driving along the road and suddenly coming upon a gaping hole right in the middle of it?); second the sheer physical strength needed to roll one to the center of the Dam; and third, the even greater strength needed to lift it some three feet above the sidewalk onto the balustrade. We were able to slide open manhole covers aside sufficiently to climb down inside, but to move them any great distance was beyond us.

Then there was the period when, descending ever farther into a life of crime, I got the idea of concealing my Daisy BB gun in my pants, walking up Columbus Ave. below MacShane's and then, at each street light, taking out the gun, holding it concealed until no cars were coming, and then shooting out the bulb. This produced a crunchy pop, then a very pretty, though brief, burst of purple flame and smoke. At night, the effect was even better. I think I set the goal of shooting out every light from Maple St. up to Franzl's, the German Restaurant on Columbus Ave., beyond the Aerators. I don't remember if I succeeded. I also tried, on other streets, including our own, to do the same thing with my BB pistol. But it was just barely capable of sending the pellets that high at sufficient speed, so I would just stand there, under the light, aiming, firing, hearing the tink as the BB bounced off, then aiming, firing again. It passed the time.

One day, in a bored and angry mood, I went over to the school playground with a new sling-shot I had bought by mail-order from one of the comics. It was made of stiff wire shaped into a V. You fastened the rubber band to the tops of the V. The handle contained a red, cone-shaped holder for your supply of BBs. I liked the sound of them in there. My ammunition. You tilted the cone down to shake a few BBs out of the narrow end into the pouch. I immediately realized that I had bought the sling-shot equivalent of a shot-gun, since you could put several BBs in the pouch at once.

The playground was packed with kids. I think it must have been a Saturday. I stood at the fence on the south side. A game or something was going on in the opposite corner; a lot of kids were gathered there, shouting. I put a few BBs in the pouch, pulled back the rubber, aimed in the direction of the kids, let go. No noticeable effect. I did it several times. I suppose I was hoping to see a kid jump, say "Ow!" at the bee-sting on his arm or neck, look around, and not realize that the lone kid leaning against the fence at the other end of the playground had done it. Instead, after a while, I may have sauntered onto the field, or maybe I remained standing at the fence, but in any case, a kid ran up to me and asked if I had been shooting a slingshot. I half-said yes. He said that Arvid Johanssen had been hit in the eye. I think I tried to deny it was my BB; someone else must have been firing also: look how far away I was standing. I don't remember if I waded into the crowd that were now huddled over Johannsen, but I do remember that someone called his home. Then a car arrived and took him home. I went running to my house, icy with terror, and told my mother. I then called Mrs. Johanssen and confessed that I had done it. She said they had brought Arvid to the doctor or the doctor had come to the house (as doctors did in those days) and he had been able to remove the BB, which had descended into the lower fold of the eye. The only question now was if the eye had been permanently damaged.

Now I had *really* become the monster outcast, and unlike the accident with the oven to be described in the next chapter ("The Gas Explosion), this time it was entirely my fault. In succeeding days, the kids didn't try to beat me up, but they definitely kept me at a distance while we all waited to see if Arvid would go blind in one eye.

He didn't, and the incident was soon forgotten. I even resumed speaking to him, and he to me. But the memory of that terror remains with me. And, let it be understood: it wasn't terror over what I had done to him — possibly deprived him of the sight of one eye — hell, you can see out of one eye as well as two — but rather the terror of suddenly becomg a complete outcast, being exiled to lifelong loneliness, having to live the rest of my life in shame, with not a single person on the earth willing to talk to me.

Reading

"Once I had learned to read my letters, I read everything: books, but also notices, advertisements, the small type on the back of tramway tickets, letters tossed into the garbage, weathered newspapers caught under my bench in the park, graffiti, the back covers of magazines held by other readers in the bus. When I found that Cervantes, in his fondness for reading, read 'even the bits of torn paper in the street', I knew exactly what urge drove him to this scavenging." — Manguel, Alberto, *A History of Reading*, Viking, N.Y., 1996, p. 8.

I was one of those kids for whom reading was a natural instinct. Reading was the great time-killer, the great escape. I read everything that came within reach. At breakfast I read the labels on the jam jars, the backs of Wheaties and Corn Flakes and Cheerios boxes — "To open lift tab...whole grain oats, food starch, salt, sugar, calcium carbonate, niacin, iron, riboflavin, folic acid...trade mark General Mills, Inc., Battle Creek, Michigan...".

When forced to go on a visit with my parents, the first thing I looked for when we arrived was something to read. Anything, I couldn't have cared less what it was. And today, when I walk into a living room in someone else's house, I take a quick look at the furniture and decorations, and then start looking for something to read, even if it is just the backs of the books on the bookshelves. Around town, I always carry a knapsack with at least two or three books inside, even if I am just going to the Post Office or to the supermarket, because there is a always a chance that there might be a waiting line, and what can you possibly do standing in line except read?

Books in Early Childhood

One of the first books I remember was given to me by my mother. It might have been a translation of a German fairy tale, I'm not sure. All I remember now is that it had a picture of a young man, standing on a mountain top above the clouds and leaning on a crutch, the golden sun in the distance illuminating the sea of white puffy clouds around him. I think the story was that the young man was laughed at on earth for being a cripple, but when he died, he was welcomed into Heaven. This was exactly the kind of story that would have appealed to my mother. I remember that the young man seemed — though of course I didn't know the word at the time — to be rather effeminate, a Momma's boy. But he eventually learned the higher value of being sick or crippled. This book may have been the beginning of my obsession with crutches and amputations, about which more later.

I remember a book of stories which included "The Boy Who Cried Wolf", and despite the fact that my mother wanted me to read it, I felt that it contained an important message for me. It was probably the first of the "premonitions" I had in my childhood reading, in which something in the book seemed to say "Remember this. It will be important." All of these premonitions have turned out to be correct.

Another story, possibly in the same book, was titled I think "The Little Red Hen", and was about a hen who asked the other barnyard animals for help in planting corn seeds. But none of them would. Each step of the way, she asked for help and was refused. Then, when the corn was ready to be harvested, they all suddenly became interested in helping her, but now she turned *them* down, saying words to the effect that if they couldn't bring themselves to do the hard work to achieve this result, they couldn't share in it. The story immediately signaled itself as another premonition.

Then there was a book about tugboats, the hero being a tugboat whose smokestack had a face, and a turned-up cap on top. I read it over and over, the drawing becoming part of the feel of the story. Another book I read and re-read was "The Little Engine that Could", the engine laboring up the long hill, saying to himself (or itself) all along, "I think I can, I think I can...," but then eventually getting to the top, and all the way down saying, "I thought I could, I thought I could..."

Another was a book about monkeys. All I can summon to memory is the peculiar feeling it gave me: these monkeys wearing strange clothes, having wings, living in a strange country. Then there was *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, another book that I read and re-read. The troll who lived under the bridge — the book had a picture of the ugly, shrunken little monster looking up at the goats as they clumped by on the bridge overhead. I wondered what was it like to be a troll, living all alone like that, his only excitement in life being in chasing away intruders.

And I think a Walt Disney book about someone inside a whale. (I am not sure that it was supposed to be Jonah.[1]) I kept wondering what that would be really like. Was the bottom of the whale wet and slimy? Did it stink? Where did you sleep? What happened when the whale took a drink? Or ate another fish? The book had a picture showing the person clearly, but he had no lamp, so in reality it would have been totally dark!

And a book in which Mickey Mouse is proud of his ability to kill flies with a fly swatter. But giants are abroad, and someone asks him if he could help defeat them. Mickey, thinking that people are talking about flies, boasts that he has "killed 100 in one swat"; the others think he is talking about giants and want him to join them.

And a book called *Wacky the Small Boy*, about which all I remember is that the book had a brown cover and that Wacky's ears stuck out.

And a book about a boy named Horatio, who could jump up and click his heels together three times in the air. I kept trying to do this, eventually gave up.

And a book called *Penrod Jasper*, by Booth Tarkington, about which I remember nothing except the title and the author's name.

Crayon Drawings

Among the countless art movements in the 20th century, several drew attention to children's art work. I have forgotten the precise argument that was used, but I think it was that children's artwork expresses a unique, unsophisticated view of the world that provides a healthy counteraction to the art produced by self-conscious, trained, career-minded adult painters. Many artists cultivated the style, and received praise for how unsophisticated they were able to be or pretend to be. I don't know what posterity's judgement of this artwork will be (in many cases, I think it was nothing but an excuse for painters not to learn their craft) but I do know that, even apart from the comic books we drew, the crayon drawings we made had a special fascination for us. I am sure that we always were aware that our crude drawings didn't look like "real people" or "real houses",

1. It was Geppetto, Pinocchio's father. — J.S.

but I know that, at least in my case, we regarded our drawings to be representations of a different kind of world than the real world — a world in which the yellow-orange sun had spiky flames sticking out around it, in which the stick figures were happy if you drew their mouth line curving upwards, sad if you drew it curving downwards, in which children were just smaller stick figures than adults, and girls had scraggly hair, and the green rolling hills under the blue sky were just two curves, one beginning a little above where the other ended, to show a little valley — a world in which you could make a house, bingo!, like that: a rectangle with an inverted triangle on top, two windows on the second story, two on the first, separated by a door, and a chimney on the roof with thick smoke curling out of it (made by two wavy lines). At first, we drew the chimney perpendicular to the steep roof, and the smoke going out straight from it, in other words sideways from the house. Then we became sophisticated and knew that the chimney must point straight up, and the smoke must go straight up from it (unless you wanted the wind to be blowing, in which it went straight sideways). A car was a small rectangle (the motor) followed by a bigger rectangle (where the driver and passengers sat). Half circles indicated wheels that were hidden by the metal of the body.

The appeal of these drawings, at least for me, was the utter simplicity of what they represented: a boy stick figure with a smile represented a creature that was always happy, that is all the feelings he ever had. The sun always shone on the rolling green hills, it was always nice and warm (but not hot) in those hills, the grass always green and cool. The inside of the house was bare, but you could look out the windows! If you wanted curtains, you could draw them. No complications. Nothing any more unhappy that you wanted it to be. I wished it were possible simply to move into that world of crayon drawings.

Comic Books

On the bottom shelf of the nighttable that stood between my brother's bed and mine I kept a stack of comics. As soon as I woke up in the morning, I would roll over, reach down, grab one and start reading, often not even bothering to turn on the light. This became a reflex action whenever I was lying in bed. Sometimes at night I read under the covers with a flashlight. This habit of reading in bed has lasted throughout my life whenever I have lived alone. I always have half a dozen or more books on my bed, and another dozen on the shelf behind the bed.

But I had a habit of reading in bad light no matter where I was. When I got a new comic book, I would often lie down on the floor in the living room to read it, not bothering to turn on the stand lamp. My father, if he happened to walk by, would invariably say, clearly annoyed, "You wreck your eyes!" This bad habit may be the reason that I became nearsighted and required glasses already by the seventh grade.

In those days, comic books were all but uncensored, so that every imaginable kind of cruelty and all but outright pornography was for sale at the corner newstand, or, in our case, at the narrow little news store in the Village. Row after row of comics were on display along the left side as you entered. There were the mild ones, of course, containing the adventures of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Scrooge McDuck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd, The Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, Lash LaRue, Batman, Superman, Captain Marvel, The Human Torch. Lash LaRue used a whip instead of six-guns to subdue the bad guys. Another superhero, whose name I have forgotten, had a right arm with the power to repel things (or people), a left arm with the power to attract. At crucial points in the story, his gauntleted hand would be shown pointing; you would be looking down the arm and seeing the lightning bolts of force shooting out of his index finger.

I remember one comic book in which people walked upside down and trees had their roots sticking up in the air. This gave me a strange feeling, as when I read about the Educated Woggle-Bug in *The Land of Oz* (Mr. H. M. Woggle-Bug, T.E., "H.M." standing for "Highly Magnified" and "T. E." for "Thoroughly Educated"). I read and re-read the story, looked endlessly at the picture of this grotesque creature sitting in an oversize stuffed living-room chair. The contrast between his appearance — his larger-than-child size, broad, striped chest, spindly legs and the two antennae sticking out of the side of his head— and his refined manners, made him all the more grotesque. Sadly, that picture was omitted from the paperback edition of the book (Del Rey Books) that I bought in old age, the publisher thus stealing a part of my childhood from me. As of this writing, I don't know if the picutre is in other editions.

I always had the feeling that the balloons, as they are called, that contained the words the character said, had something sinister about them, regardless of what the comic book was about. The little pointed tail below them that pointed to the character looked like a sting ray's.

But most important were the horror comics, like *Tales from the Crypt* and others. Someone in the fifties wrote an essay called "The Pornography of Death" and in that sense the horror comics were my childhood pornography[1]. With pounding heart I pored over the pictures of corpses rising from coffins, natives impaled on stakes, their eyes blazing wide with pain, the sharp pointed log sticking out of their chests, blood running down from where it emerged from the flesh, captives tied to stakes inside a stockade and having their heads cut off. The neckbone was always shown, the fountains of blood spurting up, the wide-eyed terror on the faces of the severed heads. I would try to imagine what it was like to have your head cut off. There would be nothing you could do if they captured you and tied you up! Did you feel the blade cutting through the flesh of your neck? What did it feel like when the knife started cutting through your neck bone? What was the exact moment when you died? Did the head live for a few seconds after it was on the ground? Did it live after the spear had been stuck up into the neck bone so the head could be raised on high as a warning to others who dared to disobey, did it think to itself, in its final, agonizing moments, "I am much taller! But I have no body any more! What is happening to me?"

There were beautiful women, curvaceous, with up-pointing breasts in blouses so thin you could almost see their nipples.

And then the sound effects: *Aaaargh* when someone bad died , for example, when they were pushed off a cliff or were run through with a bayonet. Various kinds of concussion, for example, fist on jawbone, were rendered as *Biff!*, *Bam!*, *Pow!* (Bat-Man-isms). Cars went *Varrooom!*, explosions *Barrooom!* Pistol handles (made of pearl, of course) often *bucked in the hand* of the hero who was pumping lead into the bad guys. *Splogg! Splush!* were the sounds that a bad guy made when falling into a vat of acid. Silencers on pistols always went *Chugg*, *Chugg*, as the bullets were fired. When in peril, comic book characters didn't cry "Help!", they cried "*Halp!*"

One of the horror comics had a story about a classical pianist who had angered some rich beautiful woman he was in love with, or was it that she didn't want him to play for anyone any more? In any case she cut his hands off, or had them cut off. But then at night the hands walked up the stairs— you could see the bone in each wrist, the flesh around it looking like a ham in the

1. "'Pornography of Death': The article was by an Englishman named Geoffrey Gorer and appeared in *Encounter*, October 1955. His point was that the mention of death had become almost as shameful and embarrassing to people of his generation as the mention of sex had been to Victorians. I think you may be getting a different connotation from this phrase—that death had the same fascination for you that porno has for others." — J. S.

kitchen — *Pit, pat*, *pit, pat* went the *finger tips* on the stairs (these words were right there, in the picture), then along the floor they walked to the beautiful woman's bedroom, then they climbed up on her bed, and walked along the covers till they were at her throat and then they strangled her.

IComic books usually had several odds-and-ends feature pages. One type of item was a Did You Know? question. I learned the meaning of the word *shibboleth* from these pages. In a couple of frames it explained how the word was used to distinguish Gileadites from Ephraimites, who pronounced it *sibboleth*. I learned the meaning of the words *flotsam* and *jetsam* from a comic book, and to this day I can see the picture of the floating crates next to the ship (dark water, crates floating at an angle), which accompanied the explanation.

These same pages carried advertisements for buzzers you concealed in your hand and that gave a shock to a person you shook hands with, war surplus lights that stayed on underwater, magic kits, ventriloquist's dummies (with clear, easy-to-understand instruction book) and other items. The ads for things like the magic kits and the dummies always said, "Imagine the look on your friends' faces when..." you demonstrated your new skill. The phrase was satirized years later in Mad Comics.

I shouldn't fail to mention ads for flying cars. They probably appeared in *Popular Mechanics* or *Popular Science*, not in the comic books. But a company had managed to create a vehicle with folding wings. When the wings were folded, it was a car. When they were unfolded, it became a plane, although finding places where it could take off and land was a problem. I think the manufacturer required that small airports be used. In any case, you needed not only a driver's license, but also a pilot's license, and I seem to remember hearing that some of these vehicles had accidents.

Classic Comics

Once in a while, because they were Good for You, I would buy a Classic Comic. You could tell they were derived from the classics — which we knew even then were the hard, boring books they would sooner or later make you read in school — because the quality of the drawing was much better than in ordinary comics (except for superbly drawn *Prince Valiant*, each frame like a painting, in those Sunday newspapers that, unlike *The New York Times*, actually had a comic section). I first read "The Pit and the Pendulum" as a Classic Comic, and to this day, the images of Poe's story are those of the Classic Comic version, in particular the enormous, crescent-shaped blade swishing back and forth through the air above the narrator's chest, the dark gray stone, the ropes, the faces of the Inquisitors looking down. I first read *Two Years Before the Mast* as a Classic Comic, and also something about the explorer Magellan. When I read, or hear someone say, the words "Magna Carta", I see the frame in the Classic Comic: the date 1215 and King John standing under a tree, surrounded by the angry nobles. Probably the Classic Comic that bothered me the most was *Les Miserables* — the fierceness of the misery, poverty, suffering. We kids thought, "That's what it's like in France, where they have the guillotine", and we were glad to be living in America. Knowing absolutely no French, I half-thought the title was French for "Less Miserables", and that the book was a tract to show how important it was that there be less misery in the world.

I am sure it was in a Classic Comic that I read about some hero of old who was such a good shot with a bow and arrow that, in a competition, after his opponent had shot an arrow into the middle of the bull's eye, this hero shot one that split the opponent's arrow down the middle[1]. I was in awe over such a feat.

Of course, I knew that we were supposed to be ashamed of reading Classic Comic versions of classics because that showed we didn't have the courage or intelligence to read the books themselves, but I couldn't get it out of my head that they were better than not reading the books at all. Something was better than nothing. This too was a kind of premonition which proved to be valid many years later.

Books in Later Childhood

A book that made a particularly deep impression on me was *The Land of Oz,* in particular the part about the Educated Woggle Bug and the chair that could carry people through the air. I re-read these pages many times.

There was a book version of comics, called Better Little Books (or Bigger Little Books). These were little fat books measuring about 3 by 5 inches, with text in large type on one page and a drawing on the opposite. I suppose some genius in the comic book industry had thought this might be a way of duping parents into believing that at last their kid had started reading books, and thick ones at that.

The only one I remember (apart from a significant one to be described later) is a Lone Ranger volume having to do with the shanghaiing of denizens of a bar in old San Francisco in which there was a trapdoor in the floor through which the drugged sailors-to-be were lowered, and through which the sound of the sea could be heard on the stones below. At one point, Tonto says to the Lone Ranger, who I think was about to allow himself to be shanghaied, "You needum help, you holler," and I was bothered not knowing if that meant that he should holler if he needed help, or if "holler" was a flattering epithet for the Lone Ranger, meaning something like "tough guy who is always willing to risk his neck".

As with Classic Comics, I knew that, although these were thick books with half their pages containing only words, they weren't *real* books, so I couldn't really get credit for reading thick books.

Then there was *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, which seemed to me as beautiful as any poem I have ever read since, with its tale of the wooden canoe which the Indian boy carved, and which he then launched, sending it traveling down the Great Lakes, the carved Indian's expression never changing, people helping him on his journey, snatching him from the path of a saw mill blade. The boy's words to his creation were another premonition which came true years later.

" 'I made you, Paddle Person, because I had a dream. A little wooden man smiled at me. He sat in a canoe on a snowbank on this hill. Now the dream has begun to come true. The Sun Spirit will look down at the snow. The snow will melt and the water will run downhill to the river, on down to the Great Lakes, down again and on at last to the sea. You will go with the water and you will have adventures that I would like to have. But I cannot go with you because I have to help my father with the traps.

'The time has come for you to sit on this snowbank and wait for the Sun Spirit to set you free. Then you will be a real Paddle Person, a real Paddle-to-the-Sea.'"— Holling, Holling Clancy, *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1941 (no page numbers).

I read a book called, I think, *Children of Other Lands*, of which all I remember is that it said that the Japanese slept on wooden pillows, and I kept wondering how they were ever able to force themselves to do that, or, for that matter, how they could force themselves to eat in what sounded like the most difficult way possible, namely with two sticks held between the fingers of one hand.

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1. The feat was performed by Robin Hood at an archery contest in Nottingham. — J.S.

How could they eat peas that way? What made them choose the most difficult ways of doing things?

In second or third grade, as a reward for doing well in class, the teacher (Miss Conro or Miss Ray) gave me a book called *The Flying Jenny* to read. I considered it a great honor, since the book was about something I was deeply interested in, namely, airplanes, in this case, the type of early biplane (around World War I) that was called the Flying Jenny. This was another book that I read and re-read, being particularly intrigued by the wires that ran between the two wings to hold them in place. (Mere wires made it possible to fly!) I think the story concerned a boy who is given the plane for doing something good.

Later on I read *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* because they were, in effect, how-to books for me and a few other kids in the neighborhood, though I am not sure how many of the other kids actually read the books. They showed us how to live.

I tried time and again to read *The Swiss Family Robinson*, but never could get into it because of the big words. Later on, starting in my late teens, when I read that some of the great authors of the past were reading Greek and Latin classics in the original at the age I when I first began struggling with *The Swiss Family Robinson*, I considered it further proof of my fatally low IQ.

Then there were the mountain man books, a series on Davy Crocket, Daniel Boone, and Jim Bridger, which I read again and again. I asked my father who his favoritie mountain man had been when he was a boy, taking it for granted that every boy in the entire world read the same books as I did. He said Jim Bridger, and gave a reason, which I have forgotten. One of Davy Crockett's mottoes made an impression on me as premonitions: "Be sure you are right, then go ahead", as did another mountain man's[1] "First, get the lay of the land. These seemed important, worth memorizing. I always liked to read about beavers — their snug houses which I understood to be half underwater, yet the water never got in. I envied their spending the winter there like that, all curled up and warm and with each other, then, whenever they wanted, diving down through the hole in the floor and swimming out underneath the ice. I imagined them with a little fireplace, the fire going all winter, bathing the interior of their carefully constructed stick walls with a nice warm light Perhaps a few books on bookshelves, everything nice and quiet, except for the sounds they made in communicating with each other.

I read and re-read a history of the West I had received as a present. I remember the pages on Conestoga wagons, the difficulty the pioneers had in getting them up the mountains, how the roads were rutted with wheel tracks, how the pioneers sometimes had to stick poles through the spokes and push on them in order to help the wheels turn, how the wagons sometimes had to be abandoned when they broke down, how the styles of the wagons improved, over the years. This book, or another one, described the settlers' cabins. In particular, I liked the idea of making windows by knocking the necks off bottles, then lining the bottles up side by side in a frame and caulking the cracks.

In this or another book I read that in galloping over the prairie, horses sometimes stepped into prairie-dog holes, broke their legs, and in the process threw their riders over their heads. For me, this possibility killed much of my desire to become a cowboy. I tried to imagine how the horse must have felt having its leg broken, the lower leg stiff only a second ago, now flopping around...well, no, the horse would have been lying on the ground... but no, maybe it could stand on three legs, with the one leg dangling... the excruciating pain it must have felt. Then, if the cowboy hadn't been killed, he would have to put the animal out of its misery, the poor horse look-

1. Possibly Kit Carson

ing at the guy as he came toward him, perhaps with the rifle partially hidden...no, the rifle would have been in the saddle bag. The cowboy maybe trying to say some soothing words to the poor animal, "Don't worry, old boy, we'll make it better again..."

I read and re-read an oversize book about the Pony Express, a mail service that only lasted from April 1860 to November 1861, and in which the mail moved 200 miles per day. For some reason, I was attracted to the idea of riding that hard just to deliver the mail. I read and re-read a paperback on Billy the Kid that I bought at the news store in the Village. I remember that its cover was white and light brown, which I supposed were intended to be the colors of the desert and tile-roofed houses where he lived. I think I kept re-reading it to try to find a reason to be like him. His name was William F. Bonney. Someone insulted his mother and he killed him. He said "Quien es?" in response to Pat Garrett's calling to him as he stalked him on the wooden porch of a house, Billy not sure who it was. Then, using Billy's voice as a guide to his exact position, Pat Garrett killed him. I couldn't figure out if Billy the Kid was a good guy or just a good bad guy. It seemed a an empty life walking around with a gun shooting people just because you had shot one who insulted your mother. But maybe that was why he was a good bad guy.

I read books about pirates, but not, I think, *Treasure Island,* which when I first read it at age 58 didn't seem to call up any memories.

Many of the kids in the neighborhood read the Hardy Boys books. I frequently got one as a Christmas or birthday present. In one of them, another premonition occurred. It concerned a secret code that the Hardy boys were using. The idea was that the message was written on a long strip of paper, with other letters in between them. The way you read the message was by winding the strip in a spiral around a window shade roller. This made the letters of the message line up vertically. As soon as I read this, I felt, this is important! though I had no idea why. Many years later, in trying to understand a mathematical concept I was trying to teach myself while working on a hard problem, the idea came to mind again, and proved to be of great use.

I surely must have heard of *Alice in Wonderland*, and must have looked into it, but I think I found it too fierce, too adult perhaps, in a strange way. The Duchess running around and saying "Off with their heads, off with their heads", everything happening so abruptly, without rhyme or reason, made me put the book down, and in fact it wasn't till my late fifties that I actually read it and then, of course, having learned a little mathematics meanwhile, was able to appreciate it.

From the age of seven, I attempted to read the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. My father had bought the 1942 edition. At first he kept the volumes on the shelf in his den. Later, they went on the shelves in the living room, next to the Stromberg-Carlson. I would ask, "Can I look at the Encyclopedia?", "Can I get an Encyclopedia?", and he would nod, working on his figuring, and say, "As long as you put it back." It was clear that he thought it was a good idea to get into the habit of looking things up.

The words were hopelessly difficult, the style repellently dry, most of the articles were boring, seeming to have been written by old men, but I knew this was because the *Encyclopedia* was about important things. And if you couldn't understand the articles, you could always look at the pictures, which I did. There were pictures of army tanks, guns, cars (which were listed not under "automobile" or "car" but under "*motor* car"), all kinds of ships, strange natives from other countries, statues...

I also liked the fact that the subjects were arranged in alphabetical order, because it meant they were constantly changing as you leafed through the books. I assumed that this was the only way knowledge of the important things in the world could be presented. This was official stuff,

not kids' stuff. The idea of using alphabetical order to organize lots of information would many years later be one of the key ideas in the first book of mine that someone else wanted to publish.

The mysterious titles of the volumes were a kind of poetry: "A to Anno", "Annu to Baltic", "Baltim to Brail", "Brain to Casin", "Castir to Cole", "Coleb to Damasci", "Damascu to Educ", "Edwa to Extract", "Extracti to Gamb", "Game to Gunm", "Gunn to Hydrox", "Hydroz to Jerem", "Jerez to Libe", "Libi to Mary", "Maryb to Mushe", "Mushr to Ozon", "P to Planti", "Plants to Raym", "Rayn to Sarr", "Sars to Sorc", "Sord to Textile", "Textiles to Vasc", "Vase to Zygo", and finally, "Atlas and Index" My favorites, for no particular reason, were "Gunn to Hydrox" and, best of all, "Sars to Sorc". I still have the set, and still use it to look up things that haven't changed in sixty years, like the date of the Wright brothers' first flight (Dec. 17, 1903) or the lives of historical figures like Pascal or Samuel Johnson, or the locations of places like Alexandretta and the Dogger Bank and Zeebrugge.

Nature

I know there are children who early on have a deep love of Nature but I wasn't one of them. For me, Nature was where you played Guns, or where you tried to build things. Nature with the capital N, like just about everything else, was the province of parents and teachers. I couldn't imagine loving anything abstract except for what you could do with it.

Every once in a while, someone would say that snakes really aren't as dangerous as they looked. But once, at some local fair or other, I went to see the snake exhibit. The handler, a burly guy with a couple of snakes draped over his shoulders, and more of them in cages, kept repeating how snakes wouldn't hurt you. But then I noticed that both his thumbs were missing and so I decided, here we go again.

The Lake

We kids knew that Kensico Reservoir had been rural land before the Dam was built and the land flooded, but I had no interest in finding out who had lived on the land, where they went, what happened to their houses. During severe droughts, the papers would point out that the lines of the old stone walls could be seen if the Lake sank low enough.

On Columbus Ave., near Franzl's German restaurant, perhaps a mile from our house, were the Aerators, where the water from the Reservoir was purified before being sent on to New York City. We always pronounced them the "airyators". "Want to go over to the airyators?" In memory, they seem enormous — much larger than a football field, rows and rows of concrete furrows, trapezoidal in cross-section, with the rusted ends of pipes on top, spewing up fountains of water, each fountain perhaps ten feet or so high, towering up in the sunlight like snow. Sometimes, depending on where you stood, you could see rainbows that the showers made. The sound of the water was like the hiss of snow. You had to concentrate on listening to it when you were there, so readily did it become the background of all other sound. Because I had heard, perhaps from my father, that the water was shot up into the air in order to expose it to the sun's ultraviolet light, which killed bacteria (I don't remember thinking that the purpose was to mix oxygen with the water, because that didn't seem to have much purpose), I always thought I detected the faintest trace of violet color in the snowy cascades of water.

On weekends, the New Yorkers came and parked and got out of their cars to watch the water plumes.

This was more concrete, more engineering, yet it seemed somehow different: this was concrete and engineering in a good cause, though what exactly that cause was, I couldn't have begun to express.

The flow of water was controlled in a huge building above the Aerators, on the shore of the Reservoir. We called it, I think, The Cement Building. It had no windows, but there was concrete where the windows would have been, and louvres above those, as though the designers had said, "There's no need to look outside if you are doing your work. And any work as important as this should be done in the dark, in gloom, anyway." On one side were big metal doors that were open sometimes. In summer you could feel the cold wind blowing out from inside. You could hear the echo of the cavernous interior. Once in a while a pickup truck was parked near the doors. Two or three men in shirt sleeves might be seen moving slowly in the doorway. We never saw them actually do anything, but we had no doubt they did important work. It may have taken only a few turns of a wheel, a moving of the right lever, to make the enormous quantities of water flow, but to know which wheel, and which lever, and when to do this — who could possibly aspire to understand such things? They were beyond curiosity. I doubt if any one us even thought to ask the question, "What do you do here?" In a sense it was obvious. They controlled the flow of water to New York City.

We would lean over the parapet on the Lake side, look down at the Intake, and talk about what it would be like to be swept in. We imagined there were huge, silver wheels, always turning in the green brown water as it flowed under the Building. You would be swept along, feeling yourself being pulled under, and know that soon your arms and legs would be cut off, then your body cut into pieces. *What was that like?* No boats were allowed near the Intake: that's how dangerous it was. Once in a while some kid would argue that there were protective screens or grill work of some kind to prevent people and boats from being sucked in, but we didn't believe it.

Sometimes they would turn off the Aerators water. We never knew why, or when this was about to occur. But that meant we could sneak over the chain link fence, walk along the concrete sidewalk that was the perimeter of the Aerators, and climb down a blue-gray metal ladder (always ice cold!) to The Tunnel, which was a rectangular cavern through which huge volumes of water could flow, we believed. We never actually saw this, because we never climbed the fence when the Aerators were working. We would walk into The Tunnel as far as we dared, which wasn't very far, because we could easily image the wall of water coming down the dark tunnel at any moment. In winter, too, we climbed in there, the skin of our hands almost freezing to the metal rungs of the ladder down the side of the concrete wall. All this was a strange kind of mountainous terrain in which everything was made of concrete and all surfaces were flat.

The Lake shore stretched in two directions from The Cement Building. One direction led parallel to the Aeroator Road. The other went past a shallow cove, with grass growing in the shore sand, to what we called The Point, where we sometimes went fishing for perch.

Our adventures fishing in the Reservoir are described in the section, "Fishing", in chapter 2.

The Cove was also known as 22, for reasons I never found out. To get there, we had to walk up the macadam road that wound through the pines beyond The Cement Building, then, where it made a right angle turn to the left, we headed straight, across a grassy patch that was part of the property of the small set-back house on the left, then over a stone wall, and onto a trail that went through the pines: up and down, over little gulleys where streams sometimes ran down to the Lake, through a stand of tall pines that I described with the phrase "cathedral pines" in a poem in my early twenties. Sometimes, for a few yards, there was nothing but grass and tree stumps, then woods again. Our passing through there was illegal, of course, since this was New York Water

Dept. territory. Finally, we descended to the Cove, which was surrounded by trees, with a stream coming in, big boulders along the shore where you could sit in the sun and look down into the green brown water, and see the rock bass, sunnies, and blue gills, I thinking: they are swimming muscles. Then I would put a worm on my hook, drop it in, and soon have several of them to take home for dinner.

It was a place we could call our own. We sometimes went skin diving there, bringing our face masks, swimming down into the brown, sun-shafted water, over the barren bottom, seeing an occasional fish. (So this is what it's like for them!) Although we knew there was always the chance the guards could see us with fieldglasses from the Rte. 22 bridge directly across the Reservoir a couple of miles we never got caught

The Reservoir was also good for flying kites over. We would sit in the grass near the Aerators Road and, if the wind was right, fly them till we ran out of string — fly them out of sight, an idea that had a deep metaphysical appeal for me. To fly something so far away, so high, that you could no longer see it! It had a deep meaning. You were flying them into the sky.

Over near the Reservoir, after you crossed the Field and climbed up the Embankment, crossed the Aerators Road, beyond there was another grassy area, then two piles of gravel, and, on their right, a long construction shed, corrugated metal. Usually, particularly in spring, there were shallow, crystal clear cold ponds at the foot of the piles. Good place to try out sailboats. We climbed those piles, which, I suppose, were only twelve or fifteen feet high, threw the smooth round stones, in our boredom. We called the place The Gravel Piles. In the years I played there, I was always disappointed; I always was aware that I was making the most of inadequate things. The ponds were too shallow, the boats tipped over in the wind, or ran straight into the reeds, the piles weren't high enough to be called mountains. After you had scrambled up them, in the smooth stones, there wasn't much more to do.

Junior High School

In junior high school, I had my first crush on a teacher. Miss Eaton, who taught art, sometimes moved up and down the aisles to help us with our work. She always wore sweaters which showed her soft, pointing, pendulous breasts. When she stood over me and I could smell her perfume, I got so dizzy I was afraid I would faint. An entire semester of art training for me consisted of looking at her and imagining what it would be like to kiss her red lips and feel those soft, perfect, breasts.

My sixth grade teacher was Ken Allard. I think this was his first, or one of his first, teaching jobs, and it was clear how eager he was to do a good job for his students. He wore plastic-rimmed glasses that weren't black but rather somewhat yellow, which I always thought came from long wear — from many hours spent studying books. I thought it must be the same as with a pipe: the only way you could get that color was by smoking it a long time. I started wearing glasses that same year, but the rims of mine were too dark. I thought that if I wore them long enough, they would become yellow like his. But the process seemed to be an exceedingly slow one. I would check the rims every once in a while, try to detect the slightest yellowing, but never could.

Mr. Allard had a slight speech impediment, pronouncing his *s*'s with his side teeth, which made them sound kind of watery. I remember his eager face. Here was clearly a teacher who was determined that we appreciate how neat certain things are. In particular, I remember him trying to teach us about atoms — I can still see his careful drawings on the blackboard. He told us about electrons, and the nucleus of the atom, which contained neutrons and protons. Protons had the

opposite charge of electrons. These abstractions coming out of nowhere, with no relationship to anything in our lives, made my stomach hot. On the other hand, I knew this was very important, very high class, and so I tried to understand everything he said. But for me the effort of understanding was really not one of understanding how the electrons in their little orbits whirled around the nucleus, but of trying to figure out where this whole idea came from, how someone could have thought of it, starting with the things of ordinary life.

Mr. Allard was the first teacher I had ever felt good about, the first who I felt treated us students as adults; the first who seemed concerned about our futures; the first who seemed to want to introduce new things to us because he found them exciting. This was different, and much better, than having to please the incomprehensible, but iron-bound, demands of women.

In seventh and eighth grade our math teacher was Miss Malone — Molly Malone, all the kids called her. A skinny, middle-aged spinster with gray hair who was generally regarded as tough but fair. The joke was that her breasts were so flabby that she didn't need a bra: they were held in place by the belt of her dress. I recall no particular insights into math from her, which in those grades I think was introductory algebra, but after that, I didn't have to "figure out" certain basic mathematical operations — cancelling, multiplying through both sides of an equation, solving simple equations, adding fractions — each time I needed to do them. She drilled us, the rules were clear, both in her subject and as to how we were expected to behave in her class, and as a result we respected her.

Perhaps it is her voice I always hear when I have to deal with logarithms, and have to keep straight what is going on. In any case it is a woman teacher's voice which comes down to me across some fifty years: "Log means exponent!"[1]

For junior high English, we had Miss Clark, plumper than Molly Malone, softer, with white hair, no speech mannerisms, but a seriousness that invited rebellion. I don't remember what I did, but I do remember, and can still see on the report card for that year, that Miss Clark gave me the first *D* I ever got in my life. But since by that time I already knew I was on my way to a life of evil, it didn't much matter.

A *D* wasn't the lowest grade I ever got. In the seventh or eighth grade, we had to take something called *Guidance*, the purpose of which was to start us thinking about our careers. Among other homework, each week we had to summarize what we had learned in Guidance by doing a Milestone, which was a drawing showing a crossroads with an old-fashioned signpost pointing down one of the roads. The sign had to contain something like, "Investigate different careers", or "Perseverance counts", or "Planning ahead is wise". The course was taught by Miss Walker, a plump, curvy, short woman who, like Miss Gill, my first grade teacher, whistled her *s*'s. I thought of her as kind of sexy, with a nice big ass and big tits, and a funny, awkward walk which, had anyone asked me, I would have said was due to her girdle. She always seemed to take care to wear enticing perfume. She had perfect, cupid-bow lips. But her course drove us nuts. We all knew what a waste of time it was — knew that it was one of those things that teachers think up to torment kids. So we did what we could to sabotage it. I made an effort to make the slogans as bland as I could: things like, "This way to the future". We all talked and joked in class.

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1. "Log" stands for "logarithm". For every positive number y, there is a logarithm (exponent) x, such that $10^x = y$. This simple fact makes it possible to replace multiplication of positive numbers (decimal or fraction or integer) into addition: Details can be found on Google.

The result was that, for the first and only time in my life, I got an *F*. There it was, in thin red ink, on the report card. Ever since, when, in reminiscing about school, people ask me, "Did you ever flunk a course?" I have to say, "Yes. In the seventh grade I flunked Guidance." "*Guidance*?!" they always reply. "What's *that*?"

But if the school required us to take nonsensical courses, it also required us to take one that turned out to be worth its weight in gold, namely, typing. It was taught by Mr. Fuchs, a man who in memory reminds me a little of Siegfried in the TV series *All Creatures Great and Small*, except that his hair was thinner in front, and he bit his nails, which was very unusal in an adult then (and still is). But his nails were merely bitten short, so that the ends of his fingers were all puffy (which always reminded me of a kind of amputation). He had not advanced to my level of attacking the top surface of the nails themselves, and the cuticle, ripping spears of nail, even though it hurt, back to the cuticle and under the overhanging skin, there to be bitten off, leaving a wonderfully maimed, red, sub-nail on top, which too could be attacked, until the entire cuticle filled with blood and would become inflamed and hurt like hell and had to be covered with a bandage.

The typing classroom was narrow, with two or three rows of tables and chairs, the typewriters lined up on the tables. On the front wall, hanging down from the ceiling, were diagrams of the typewriter keyboard with symbols to show which finger was supposed to press each key. Mr. Fuchs always seemed bored with teaching typing. What he really wanted to do was go flirt with Mrs. Ringwall, the librarian, and that is what he did as soon as he had gotten us started on the day's exercise. So we sat, clacking away at the keys, heads turned to the left to see our workbooks (you were supposed to type without looking at the keys), making occasional jokes and wise-ass remarks, usually about Mr. Fuchs and Mrs. Ringwall, to prevent ourselves from taking this seriously.

Nevertheless, without question, being taught how to type was second in value only to being taught how to read in all of my first eight years of school.

I liked Mrs. Ringwall. She had a mock-serious way of asking you about the books you had forgotten to return. She liked to play with us students, that was clear. She wore shell-rimmed glasses, red lipstick, full dresses and even though she was impossibly older than us, we boys felt her sexual attraction (aided, of course, by the stories, which may been completely baseless, of her and Mr. Fuchs). Sometimes we called her "Maggie". I think many of the kids mispronounced her name as Mrs. Ringwal*d*. I have a very clear memory of her telling me — what brought up the subject I don't know — that someone had shown her a collection of postage stamps that would have been quite valuable except that someone else had cut the serrated edges off, and that made them worthless. Her desk faced the door of the library so she could keep an eye on things, and she always seemed busy cataloging books. In those years, the books I took out were about trappers and mountain men. Some were books I felt *should* have been mine — most of all, *The American Boy's Handy Book*, by Dan Beard, founder of the Boy Scouts. And so, toward the end of my last year at School No. 1, I took it out and never returned it. I felt instinctively that it was not a crime to steal things that were essential to your life. I still have it. Other books I stole were Beard's *The Book of Camp-Lore and Woodcraft* and Emanuele Stieri's *The Book of Indoor Hobbies*, which I took merely because it had a few pages on soap- and wood-carving. All these books I still have, sturdy hardbacks that seem not to have aged at all, the pages as white and strong as when I first read them some sixty years ago. The one paperback I obtained legally from that period is Ernest Thompson Seton's *The Birch Bark Roll of Woodcraft*, its pages still white and strong, but the

brown, bark-like cover long since taped together with scotch tape that has turned a transparent brown. I notice on the first page, in sprawling, elegant, teacherly handwriting, "Discarded MAR 9-29-48", "MAR" being Mrs. Ringwall's initials.

I still remember a phrase from one of these books — or maybe from the Boy Scout's Handbook, which I got later. The phrase was contained in a section of instructions for building a fire in the woods. The reader was told to collect wood that was "dead but from a tree", which at first sight seems completely useless advice, since all wood comes from trees. But what the authors meant was dead branches from a standing tree.

Latin was taught by Miss Trapasso. She had a mole on her cheek. Her hair was curled at the sides. She was a little overweight. But she wasn't a bad person, despite the subject she had chosen to teach. We could get along with her. In high school, when I played in the White Plains High Dance Band, I found out she was related to the leader, Vic Trapasso.

What we learned in her class wasn't a *language*, if by that you mean something you can use to communicate with, but instead a series of poems constructed of the forms[1] of Latin words. Here is the one I remember best, along with a few of our pronunciations of some of the lines:

hic, haec, hoc [hick, hike, hoke],
huius, huius, huius [*hoo*yus, *hoo*yus, *hoo*yus],
huic, huic, huic [hoo*ick*, hoo*ick*, hoo*ick*],
hunc, hanc, hoc [hunk, honk, hoke],
hoc, hac, hoc [hoke, hock, hoke].

hi, hae, haec [hee, high, hike],
horum, harum, horum,
his, his, his [heese, heese, heese],
hos, has, haec [hohss, hass, hike],
his, his his [heese, heese, heese].

Another poem was:

agricola [ag*ric*ol*ah*],
agricolae [ag*ric*ol-*eye*],
agricolae [ag*ric*ol-*eye*],
agricolam agr*ic*ol*ahm*],
agricol$\bar{a}$ [agricol*ahhh* (longer on the *a*, because this was the ablative)],

agricolae [ag*ric*ol-*eye*],
agricolarum,
agricolis [ag*ric*oleese],
agricolas [agricol*ahss*]
agricolas,[agricoleese]

1. For "hic, haec, hoc", the adjective meaning "this", the columns are, from left to right, the masculine, feminine and neuter forms; the rows are the cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative. The first section contains the singular endings, the second contains the plural. For "agricola", the noun meaning "farmer", only the cases are given, since the noun has only one gender, which is feminine. The first section contains the singular endings, the second contains the plural.

These and numerous other similar poems we had to memorize.

Social Studies, nothing of whose content I can remember at all, was taught by Mr. Diskint. He was a teacher whom we kids considered "one of us". Among ourselves, we often called him by his first name, He was physically strong, and proved himself once and for all a hero to us by hitting Orpheus Staples when Orpheus clearly deserved it (see "The Kids" in chapter 3).

Mr. Bastian taught what I think was then called "general science", a collection of rudiments of biology, chemistry, and the beginnings of laboratory procedure. He was an amiable man. I don't remember a single fact he taught us, but I do remember his taking up several students on a bet that drinking Coke with aspirin dissolved in it could kill you, or at least knock you out. He said words to the effect, "I'll demonstrate it to you," clearly hoping thereby to give us an example of the scientific approach to questions. On the appointed day, he stood in front of the class with a bottle of aspirin. Then he took a bottle of Coke out of the lab refrigerator, poured it into a glass, put in several tablets, stirred them up, and allowed them to dissolve. Then he drank the entire contents of the glass, put the glass down, and stood there, hands on the lab counter. He smiled. "See? I'm not dead." We watched him until he had us return to the day's subject matter. But a few of us thought we saw a shine of sweat on his face, and a trace of unsteadiness. We talked about it after class. "He was feeling it, boy! You could see it!" No one seemed to want to repeat the experiment.

He was later promoted to principal of the school, replacing Mr. Ronnei who, I must assume, either died or was in turn promoted.

Coach Fallek taught gym, a subject we regarded with healthy contempt. He seemed to have long since gone asleep at his job. Among other things, we had to learn the military commands: about face, left face, right face, forward march, halt one, two, three. Why I don't know. He would say, chewing on a peppermint, and breathing in that heavy, controlled way he had, "...which is done in this manner..." and then he would place the toe of his squeaky, polished shoe precisely behind the polished heel of the other and turn perfectly around. I used to wonder why he, like Mr. Bliss, our music teacher, had this need to always chew peppermints?

In junior high, the boys took shop, the girls, plus one black guy who seemed to accept with good nature all the kidding he got, took home economics. I don't remember the teacher — the 1957 Yearbook lists a man named Steffenhagen. The name is vaguely familiar. All I remember of shop is: (1) making copper ashtrays by pounding a flat piece of copper into a bowl-shaped indentation in a greasy wooden block, (2) making ugly, thick, pottery in which the bottom was always wider than the top, and which, after the shop teacher had put it into the kiln overnight, had a nice glaze on the side, but otherwise was nothing you'd ever want to put anything in, and (3) the persistent rumor that you could put bullets in the kiln and make them go off, and that some kids were on the verge of doing this. The kiln would be destroyed and no one would know who did it. But the kids never got around to making this experiment either.

My inferiority complex regarding anything to do with books began at an early age. I remember a kid in grammar school asking me, "Do you believe the pun is the lowest form of humor?" It was one of those moments when I knew my entire future hung in the balance. I think I hesitated

long enough for him (or her) to tell me that, in fact, it *was* the lowest form of humor. And to this day, despite Shakespeare and Nietzsche and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and the wits I have read and my own enjoyment of coming up with a good pun once in a while, I remain convinced, because of what that kid said, that the pun really *is* the lowest form of humor, and that the reputation of all those authors is only a temporary thing, and that one day they will all be forgotten because they went against this fundamental truth. It is part of my flesh and blood.

Another example: one day, I think in a coversation with the Beairds, our next-door neigbhors, someone said that someone they knew had earned, or was trying to earn, a Master's degree. Immediately I knew that this was an impossibly difficult task, one that required such intelligence as only one in a million could possibly have. I would never be able to manage such a thing.

Second Major Failure

One afternoon, while lying in bed where I was supposed to be having my nap, I began looking out the window and trying to think of the most intelligent thing I could about air. I felt that, if I was going to achieve anything in life, I should certainly be able to think up something brilliant, amazing, profound, about something as empty as air. I concentrated on the blue sky beyond the rectangular window frame and asked myself: What can I think of here? The answer came back, Nothing! I was appalled and ashamed. I tried again and again to think of something about empty air. I couldn't. To this day I consider this one of my first of many major failures — a sign of my lack of intelligence, because, as I realized many years later (after I had learned about the mathematical concept of a dense set), I *could* have thought that each piece of air, no matter how small, has a smaller piece inside it. (I didn't know about atoms then.) I *could* have said to myself: No matter how tiny a piece of air I look at, there is a smaller piece inside it! This was certainly a thought I was capable of grasping. Yet I didn't grasp it, in fact I didn't conceive of it. It and my failure to be able to sing Billy Boy, as described elsewhere in this book, I consider the first two major failures of my life.

Going to the Dentist

My childhood dentist, Dr. Louis Citron, was about as close to the ideal of a child's dentist as you could ask for: a short, cheerful man, always with a smile, who shared an office with his brother, Dr. Victor Citron, in White Plains. (Dr. Vic, as everyone called him, had the knack which I saw later on in Jewish dentists of always joking with his patients, the women in particular, in a kind of harmless, flirtatious way.) Dr. Louis (pronounced "Looey") was a talented cartoonist, and always had a new sketch of Mickey Mouse or Woody Woodpecker on the little blackboard in his office when I arrived. I remember him as a gentle, infinitely patient man. Sometimes, when he was busy, or on vacation, I had to go to Dr. Vic, who was brusquer.

Despite Dr. Louis's best efforts, I was terrified of going to the dentist. The basis of my terror was, I think, my mother's own relationship with dentists: she had soft teeth which required constant work, but, since this placed her at the center of attention of doctors, she bore it, and, in fact, when she complained about having to go for another visit to the dentist, I sensed how she felt this was because she was special. (She sometimes talked about her bridge, and the trouble it gave.) So, for me, going to the dentist became yet another situation in which I had to place myself in her power. This fear of dentists was to last until my late fifties, when it suddenly disappeared, as will

be described in the section "A Painless Dentist At Last!" in the fourth file of the last volume of this book.

"He Has to Wear Glasses"

When I was in the seventh grade, the eye doctor told my mother that I needed glasses: "just for distance". Not more than one or two kids in my class wore glasses and so I was aglow with shame at the prospect. The teacher was informed about this new development. The glasses had plastic rims, and a hard alligator case to put them in. I thought: at least they're not rimless, or with thin wire rims like my father's, so at least I won't look like an old man. In fact, they looked like Mr. Allard's, and I was glad of that. But I sat in the back of the classroom, hand poised to take them off if the shame of wearing them became too great while answering a question in class. Donovan and some of the others started calling me "four-eyes" but in a good-natured way.

Around this time, I think, I read in a book or magazine about the way that Eskimos prevented snow-blindness: they fashioned eye-covers from bone, and then cut a thin horizontal slit across the middle of each cover. Apparently, eyes did not become snow-blind when they looked through these slits. Even more interesting, to me at least, was the fact that you could improve your eyesight by looking through a tiny hole! The hole could be made by covering most of your index finger with the thumb of the same hand, leaving a tiny hole, then extending the other fingers. By squinting through the hole, and adjusting its size by moving the thumb slightly, it was remarkable how clearly you could see distant objects through the hole!

Modern ophthalmologists sometimes have the patient look through plastic glasses with lots of tiny holes in the black plastic where the glass would normally be. Everything viewed through these holes is sharper then it is otherwise (at least for patients who wear normal glasses).

Also round this time, or perhaps a year or two later, I began to develop a facial tic which was severe enough so that by the time I reached my late teens, people would sometimes comment on it. It was an extra tight blink of the left eye. I would try to blink that eye very slowly but the result was even more ridiculous than the tic itself. The problem persisted throughout my adult life, and I assume I still have it in old age, though no one has commented on it in many years, possibly out of a desire not to hurt my feelings, or, possibly because it has gradually diminished.

Fires!

Fires and air raid drills were announced by a siren on the roof of Stotz's garage. It was so loud that, if it went off while I was standing within, say, a block of the garage, it would make a kind of rubbing sound in my ears. I liked the idea of deliberately listening to a sound that was almost deafening.

We kids lived for the sirens to go off, because it meant that soon we would hear the fire engines roaring down Columbus Ave. We, or at least I, always hoped that maybe a house in our neighborhood would bless us with the sight of flames pouring out the windows and through the roof. (Alas, it never happened.)

Valhalla had a volunteer fire department, which meant that whenever there was a fire, the barber and the guy in the hardware store and someone from Mr. Nelligan's office (not Mr. Nelligan, he was too fat) would drop what they were doing and race out onto the sidewalk and as the engine made its way down from the firehouse on Cleveland St. — as the engine was moving! — they would jump on. That's what it meant to be a real man! Then away they'd go, changing into their

fire-fighting uniforms, which were like black and yellow thick raincoats, as the truck was moving, buttoning the jackets, balancing on the moving floor.

:The dogs in the neighborhood would howl when the sirens went off; people would laugh, but in a compassionate way, at this behavior. During the War, the sound was changed from a siren to a horn. We had to count the number of blasts on the horn to know if it was an air-raid drill or a fire..

I went to every fire I could. They were all grass fires, sometimes down at MacShane's. The black-coated figures of the men in their helmets silhouetted against the leaping orange flames, the smell of burning brown grass in the air, made a perfect summer's afternoon. I thought a lot about setting a grass fire and being the center of all that attention, but I never dared. It was not something a Franklin would do.

Sometimes, in late fall, on some cold, end-of-the-world day, we would build a fire in the vacant lot down near Columbus Ave. Standing in the smoke, I would look at the orange red flames and think how nice it would be if you could actually *live* in a fire, always warm, always bright. I'm sure I wasn't the only kid for whom a fire was one of the few chances we had for intimate companionship. We would build fires when we were bored. We cared little about the fine points of technique. We would try to build fires in the rain. Maybe this time the laws of combustion would have mercy on us and make our wet wood burn! Sometimes they did. A reason for hope! We would stand around, breathing the smoke, faces dirty, watching the flames trying to grow larger.

Fireworks

Explosives Through the Year

Explosives of any kind were exciting to just about every kid in our neighborhood — explosives in the comics, explosives that we imagined in games of guns, explosives that we produced by dropping mud balls on the forts we built in the dirt in the back yard, explosives we heard about in World War II, or saw in the movies, explosives we made on our own.

We screwed a carriage bolt halfway into a nut, put the crumbled heads of wooden matches into the shallow cavity thus formed, then screwed another carriage bolt into the other side of the nut. We threw the assembly end-over-end up in the air above a cement street, and if it landed on one of the bolt heads, it detonated the match head material, making, well, not a *bang*, but a loud *snap*. At least once or twice during the year we would try to make gunpowder with someone's chemistry set, including mine. But we never could discover the right proportions of saltpeter (sodium nitrate) and charcoal and sulfur. I remember mixing the first two on a board, and becoming immediately discouraged, thinking I was doing something wrong, because you could see the white of the saltpetre in the charcoal, so that the whole thing gradually turned gray with more mixing, when everyone knew (from the movies) that gunpowder was black. (Somewhere I had picked up the idea that it consisted of shiny black very small crystals.)

There were persistent rumors that you could make a cylindrical Quaker Oats box explode if you put flour inside it. You put the flour in, then shook the box to set up a dust cloud inside it, then dropped a match through a hole in the lid. Other kids said it worked. They said that whole factories had blown up because of dust in the air. But we didn't seem to be able to make even a Quaker Oats box explode that way.

Once a year we had a real festival of explosives — real explosives, made of black powder — and that was on Fourth of July.

Getting Ready for the Fourth

Fireworks, like water, and, later on, like the appearance of a hand-carved piece of wood, were inherently exciting to me. They were a call from another world. Or perhaps I should say they were like pornography — something you weren't supposed to like as much as I did.

As Fourth of July approached, another period of waiting had to be endured, namely, waiting until my father decided it was time to drive to Danbury, Conn., where I could buy the good fireworks, in other words, the ones that were illegal to sell and use in New York State because they were, or could be, dangerous (although the roadside stands always had signs that said "Safe and Sane"). What genius of my childhood persuasive skills I invoked to get my father to make the trip each year has gone unrecorded. It required nearly unendurable patience, since, obviously, if I showed any anger at having to wait, that would give him an excuse to cancel the trip altogether, leaving me with nothing but sparklers and cones that merely sent a shower of sparks a few feet into the air, I then being the only kid who didn't have real fireworks, especially firecrackers and rockets. I had to perform a balancing act between, on the one hand, not provoking my father to cancel the trip, and on the other, keeping up the gentle reminders of what he had promised, and getting him to make the trip sooner rather than later. ("There won't be any left!")

When the day finally came — it was a Saturday or Sunday, when he was home from work — we drove up Rte. 22, past Armonk, and headed for Connecticut. Soon we were on country roads lined with trees. I sensed that he really didn't want to spend the hours the trip required, but that he was doing it for me. But I was always afraid he might change his mind, and so I did my best to keep up a steady stream of good boy patter that would keep him interested, and assuage his concern about cooperating in an illegal activity.

Once we were over the Connecticut border, the red, white, and blue fireworks stands would start appearing along the side of the road in the towns. I would ask excitedly, "Is this a good one?", trying to guess what kind of red flame and noise the colored tubes and boxes on the makeshift shelves would deliver to the lucky purchaser. "No, try a little farther," I would say. The trouble was, you never knew when you had passed the best stand you were going to pass that day. If I kept urging my father to drive on, he might get angry and declare the next stand we approached to be the one we were going to buy from, period.

Eventually, somehow, a stand was decided upon. He parked the car, and, breathlessly, I leaped out and ran up to the plank counter. "Got any 1-1/2 inchers?" It was absolutely essential to have an ample supply of these; they were what got you through the days until the Fourth. They were about the diameter of a pencil. You could poke a hole through an apple with a pointed stick and insert one, then light its paper fuse, wait a couple of seconds, then throw the apple as high and far as you could, and usually before it came all the way down, the firecracker would go off and shower all beneath with apple juice and apple fragments. This was especially impressive during apple fights, some of which were initiated solely to have an excuse to put 1-1/2-inchers into apples.

The fuse was made of tightly wound light gray paper, almost like papier-mâché paper or Chinese lantern paper, with peppery grains of gunpowder visible along the length. Because the paper sometimes unwound a little, the rate of burning of the fuse was not always constant. Sometimes it would barely start burning after you had applied the glowing end of the punk to it, then suddenly it would burst into a hiss, and the red spark bead would race down toward the firecracker itself. You got rid of it real quick when that happened. Some of the kids considered it a test of manhood to pinch the very end of the firecracker between thumb and index finger, have another kid light

the fuse, then hold the firecracker high above their head until it went off while they were still holding it. Phil Fink did this many times. I never had the courage. I loved the way the fuses drooped, loved the sweet smell of the smoke that was released as they burned. The idea that such a certain ending, such an inevitable result, should have such an imperfect beginning, for some reason intrigued me. Well, not inevitable result. Sometimes the 1-1/2-inchers didn't go off. The fuse burned down to the compact body of the firecracker itself, and then, silence. We would approach it cautiously, poke it with a stick. The braver kids might pick it up after a minute or so. There wasn't much you could do with a dud except break it open and study the powder inside, then maybe light it, but that would no longer make a bang, just a sudden flash, leaving behind a puff of black powder smoke.

If we could find a small enough apple, we could insert the 1-1/2-incher, light the fuse, and then shoot it into the air with a slingshot. If this were done right, the apple would be out of sight by the time it exploded, so that, in theory, you could bomb enemies more than a block away. Or you could just shoot the apple straight up, and revel in the faint rain of apple pieces and juice that fell on your head, if the wind didn't blow them away before they reached you.

Someone found out that you could put the apples containing the 1-1/2-inchers into water, and they would still explode.

More difficult than buying 1-1/2-inchers, which were the standard issue ammunition of Fourth of July, was buying 2-inchers, which really looked like firecrackers in the movie cartoons: dark red cylinders about the diameter of a cigar, with a dark red fuse that was like a piece of shiny, stiff string, the powder somehow occupying the center. My father knew that these were much more powerful than the 1-1/2-inchers, and so the permission to buy them had to be obtained near the end of the shopping, so that the prospect of finally heading home and getting back to work in the basement was just tantalizing enough for him to incline him to let me buy a few. "Can I have a box?" "No." "Fifteen?" "That's too many. They're dangerous." "Twelve?" "Let's finish, now." That meant yes. "Thank you." 2-inchers were good for more advanced demolition: you could get a No. 10 can, put the 2-incher on the ground, light the fuse, then place the can over it, wait interminable seconds and *boom!*, the can would fly ten or more feet into the air, trailing a fat, cylindrical cloud of smoke. Or, you could do what several kids in the neighborhood did one year: they picked a neighbor they didn't like — the woman who lived in the house at the corner of Shelley and Martine Aves. — got some wire, and a 2-incher (maybe several), then, in the evening, or when they were sure she couldn't see them, they sneaked up to the mailbox, opened it, lit the 2-incher, threw it inside, then quickly wrapped the wire around the mailbox so that it couldn't be opened, and ran like hell. Naturally, when the explosion came, there was nowhere for it to go, and so the entire mailbox suddenly acquired a nominally spherical shape. Kids from all over the neighborhood made the pilgrimmage to admire the handiwork of the daring few. (For some reason, I was not among them; not out of any principle, but because I didn't hear about the event before the woman had her mailbox removed.)

2-inchers were the inspiration for a new type of gun. We had heard that the gangs in the Bronx made things called zip guns. According to rumor, a zip gun was a piece of pipe with a rubber band or a strip of inner tube somehow attached to one end. This end was closed with a screw-on metal cap into which a small hole had been drilled. A rubber sling, the same as in a slingshot, was attached to the pipe, with the pouch tight against the metal cap. The head of a nail was poked through the pouch and the pointed end inserted in the hole. You slid a cartridge down the inside of the pipe so that it was resting against the cap, then pulled back the pouch a ways and released it.

The pointed end of the nail would strike the firing pin on the cartridge and fire it, just like in a real gun.

We decided to make our own zip gun using 2-inchers as the explosive, with ball bearings or pieces of wooden dowel serving as the bullets. So I got a piece of pipe about six inches long and 3/4-inch in diameter from my father's workship. It was threaded at both ends and had been painted gray, why I don't know. The paint was now peeling. I found a pipe elbow in the workshop, put it in the little portable vice that was used to hold the work for the drill press, and then, through the rounded portion on the concave side, I drilled a hole which seemed large enough so that the fuse of a 2-incher could pass through. I screwed the elbow onto one end of the pipe, got a wooden dowel four or so inches long, and carved the end so that it could be forced to screw into the other opening of the elbow. Result: one gun.

To fire the gun, you got a 2-incher, made sure the fuse was straight, then dropped it into the open end of the pipe with the goal of getting the fuse to come out through the hole in the elbow. I don't recall ever being able to do this. The fuse got bent around if it did not enter the hole perfectly. Then you had to shake the 2-incher out, twist the fuse straight and try again. (God help you if the enemy was closing rapidly.) We tried using 1-1/2 inchers, but those fuses were more crooked and so even harder to get into the hole. (In writing this, I suddenly realize that if we had simply unscrewed the pipe from the elbow, the fuse could easily have been pulled through the hole. Then the firecracker could have been inserted into the pipe and the pipe screwed back on. I can't remember ever doing this, but it would have solved the problem, at the expense of some clumsy mechanical labor. But who would admire a gun that you had to unscrew the barrel of every time you wanted to load it?)

We also found that the ball bearings we hoped would serve as bullets would always roll out of the front end of the pipe as soon as you held it inclined downward in the slightest. So even if we were able to get the fuse through the hole, the gun would be useless for hitting anything at eye level or below. We could only hope to hit targets that were high up!

Now there was always the possibility of making the fuse hole much bigger, so that the chances would be increased of the fuse actually finding it. But then more of the force of the explosion would go out the back of the gun (and possibly into your face), and even if I had managed to get a piece of dowel inside to serve as a bullet, I wasn't about to let a 2-incher explode that I was in effect holding in my hand — not even if it was encased in a metal pipe. I could all too easily imagine the pipe exploding, the pieces heading right for my eyes, my fingers all blown away or bent back at horrible angles. It would be just like in the comics when a Nazi soldier was shot just as he was about to throw his potato masher grenade, and you watched the explosion (of his own grenade! perfect justice!) tear away his arm as he fell back, crying "Ach! Himmel!"

Next up the scale were cherry bombs. It took sufficient guile on my part to be able to buy a few 2-inchers, but the only way I could get cherry bombs was from other kids. Parents and kids both knew that the brain-deafening explosion of a cherry bomb could blow off a couple of fingers. Most of the fireworks stands didn't sell them anyway. They made a noise so loud that it made funny sounds in your ears, like dragon fly wings rubbing across your eardrums. They were objects of awe and reverence among us. They looked like cinnamon candies, with a stiff red string (the fuse) sticking out of them. So we treasured them and selected with great care the occasions to set them off.

Finally, there was something known by legend only: they were called "ash-cans", presumably in recognition of their enormous size. No kid that I ever knew had ever been able to get his hands on one. Supposedly the smallest were the size of soup cans, the larger ones as big as No. 10 cans

— all filled with black powder. Some kids said they were used only in the rockets sent up by professionals at Fourth of July shows, and that made some sense, since what good was a firecracker so powerful you would have to run to the other end of the block in order not to be killed by it?

Fourth of July Night

Our supply of 1-1/2 inchers and 2-inchers enabled us to endure the agony of waiting for the night of the Fourth. The hours, minutes, seconds dragged on. You wouldn't dare run out of your supply! So you just didn't light the fuse and toss the thing away whenever you felt like it. Oh no, the moment had to be right. Where's a can? Gimme an apple! Hey, toss it in that bush, watch the smoke come out! Once or twice you set off a whole package of 1-1/2-inchers at once but that was rare, and very wasteful. You could afford to do that only with lady-fingers, which can best be described as miniature firecrackers — little red things all strung together, several dozen in a clump I suppose, but each so small it barely made a loud *snap!* But they were cheap, and their only disadvantage was that the machine-gun sequence of tiny explosions was over so quickly.

Finally the day of the Fourth came, a day whose length can only be compared to that of Christmas Eve. Somehow you got through the morning, the afternoon, the early evening. You wanted to start setting off your fireworks when the sun was just disappearing below the horizon, but you knew they wouldn't show up as well as if you waited till it was dark.

Around 8 or so the kids from the neighborhood began to flock over to our back yard. Finally, around 8:30 or 9, it was dark enough for us to begin. "Tell them we're about to start!" I would tell my brother, "them" of course being our parents. Only parents could possibly have so little interest in fireworks as to have to wait to be called to come and watch them. They came out of the porch door, slowly, not really sure if they should admit they had any enthusiasm about being there, or at least about revealing what enthusiasm they might have had. They sat on the top step of the porch steps. Maybe my mother brought some soda or orangeade for everyone, I'm not sure.

We laid a couple of boards on the grass, to have a place to rest the fireworks on. First came the safe things, like the fountains, which were in cone-shaped containers. You simply lit the fuse at the top — ah! the intimate hissing, spitting, sound of a fuse! — and a fountain of golden sparks burst up, lasted for half a minute or so, then died away.

Meanwhile, as a kind of background for the pyrotechnics up front, sparklers were lit, and the little kids, squinting against the sparks, would hold the burning wire out at arm's length and trace graceful patterns in the night air. By the time the glowing little sun on the wire had worked itself down to the end of the gray coating that was its source, the wire would become too hot to hold, and if the kids forgot about this, there was a sudden cry of "Ouch!" and down went the wire into the grass.

There were also helicopters, which went clumsily around and around like a mechanical robot grasshopper that had lost its orientation, then stuttered into the air, rose up eight or ten feet, and plopped back down to the ground

And Piccolo Petes, which did nothing but give out a piercing whistle.

And pinwheels, which we nailed onto a tree, and which spun around in a wheel of sparks that always seemed to be over too quickly.

Some Marketing genius had guessed that kids would consider just about anything you got going with a match to be appropriate for Fourth of July, even if it didn't explode, or send out sparks, or go up in the air, or exhibit any flame whatsoever, and so there were also "snakes". All they did was ooze out of a little black tablet, like a slimy, black worm that smelled of burning tar. When they were done, they left a wonderful, infinitely delicate worm-shaped ash.

Then came Roman candles, with their repeated sounds*: ssss-foop!*, *ssss-foop!*, like a mouth blowing something out of a cardboard tube. A ball of pink or green or yellow or red fire blossomed up with each *foop*, and everyone went *ooh!*, *aah!*, as though they were receiving an exquisite massage. My mother didn't like the idea of balls of fire flying out of a tube her son was holding. "Don't point it here! Oh, Hermann, should he...?" I wondered how Roman candles worked, and sometimes had an impulse to look down into the tube after a fireball had been emitted, so I could watch the fuse burning its way to the next one, but fortunately I had brains enough not to do it.

Sometimes we lit the fuses with a match but most often with the glowing end of a what now would be described as an incense stick, but which we called simply, "punk". It had the advantage of maintaining a red-hot ember for half an hour or more, and also had the added dramatic effect of requiring you to hold the ember against the fuse for a certain amount time until the fuse caught. A match started the fuse right away, and sometimes the flame was big enough to light the fuse half-way to the firework at the very start, so that matches were in fact more dangerous.

And then, finally, the rockets.

The first year we were allowed to buy fireworks, my father made a launcher for the rockets. He got a piece of board perhaps a foot on a side, and in the center drilled a small hole into which he put a piece of thick wire. The wire extended perpendicularly up from the board about a foot or so. The end he carefully bent into a little loop — a little eye — so that the wooden stick that was attached to the side of the rocket could be inserted through it. You put the board on the lawn, or on another board, lowered the stick through the loop, lit the fuse, and stood back. The nice thing about the launcher was that it was always easy to change the angle of launch by moving the location of the end of the stick where it rested on the board.

A fuse did not burn uniformly. Sometimes the little fire seemed to go out We all held our breath. Then it flared to life again (it had merely been thinking) and rushed on its short way to the skirt of paper at the base of the rocket. Then it went inside and, for a second or two, nothing happened. (It must be tunneling up inside the rocket.) We waited. And then, as though having suddenly made up its mind, there was a flare at the base of the rocket, a sudden, increasing *whoosh!* and the rocket was gone! With a streak of sparks it leaped up into the night sky. Everyone went *ohhh!* and watched for those few infinite seconds as it went higher and higher, and, then, suddenly, all was dark, but no! it wasn't finished, for now came a little fountain of red sparks, perhaps the crack of exploding powder, perhaps a whole fountain of white sparks, and only then, we knew, was it really over, and the spent tube was falling who knows where — probably on a neighbor's roof, or into their gutter, where it wouldn't be found for years. But maybe into someone's back yard, or even onto the street.

I had bought perhaps a dozen rockets, and so the firing of them had to be stretched out as long as possible, with the biggest ones saved for last. But sooner or later, the last one went up, and gave forth its shower of sparks, and then the Fourth was over, except for the desultory bangs of 1-1/2 inchers, and a few kids' remaining helicopters and Piccolo Petes.

My father and mother slowly got up from the top step. My mother said, "I want that mess all cleaned up!" I don't remember what my father said, but since he had built the rocket launcher for us, I always sensed that he didn't entirely dislike this annual celebration of ours.

Next day, reports would come in of where the spent rockets had been found. "One fell into the Rupp's yard!" "Mrs. — said not to let them land in her yard any more!" "I found one way out in Shelley Ave.!"

In the days that followed, you would still hear an occasional bang as the kids used up the fire-crackers they had been saving, but it was all over except for the waiting for next year.