Summer Camp

Mohawk Day Camp

When I was around ten or so, my mother decided I should go to day camp in the summer. It wasn't, "Would you like to go to camp this summer?": she had decided I should go, and she had picked the one I should go to: Mohawk Day Camp, or Camp Mohawk to those who attended it. It was run by Glenn Loucks, the football coach at White Plains High School. He was a handsome man, with a strong set of teeth, and slicked-down hair, parted a little off the middle in a way that suggested a twenties or thirties celebrity look. He seemed a man in control, but in a good way.

The Camp was located on an old estate in White Plains. I remember an asphalt road along a stone wall running the length of one side of its large grass fields, other meandering stone walls. The main building was set far back from the road, a gravel or dirt driveway leading up to it. There were not many trees on the grounds.

Tribes

The kids were divided into groups named after American Indian tribes. The first year I was in the Tuscaroras, the second year, the Iroquois, which had the oldest kids. The youngest were in dinky tribes like the Senecas and Cayugas.

Each member of a tribe had to wear a gray T-shirt with the name of the tribe on the front. A van picked us up in the morning in front of our houses.

One of the guys I talked to more than most was George Cadzow, a lanky, gawky kid, who was usually the pitcher on the opposing baseball team. He wore long, droopy shorts and ungainly sneakers. He too spoke with too much extra spit, seemed to always have some extra in the corner of his mouth. He had an eager face, seemed to like talking to me. The only problem was he used to say, with a laugh, that he was going to try to see how close to my chest he could get with the baseball without actually hitting me. He said it as though it were an interesting, scientific question. The result was that I had to do another one of my trying-to-have-it-both-ways tricks: standing with my ass and as much else of my body outside the batter's box as possible (to protect myself), while pretending to be trying to have as much of my body as possible inside it (to appear to be as brave as the next kid). I don't recall him ever hitting me, but I do recall the buzz of that ball as it tore past my head.

The Code among the kids was this: if you were afraid to do something that they thought you should have the courage to do, and you didn't do it, then you were an object of contempt, even if your fears were justified. If you did something they thought you should have the courage to do, and survived, then you were OK. If you got hurt, well, then you had done it in a stupid way and so at best were worth only a superficial pity.

I hated baseball. In the field, I was forced to use the ploy, well known to girls, I described under "Games", since I was always afraid of being hit in the head by a fly ball. When the ball is hit your way, you make a great, an enormous show of running to try to catch it, all the while making sure that it just drops out of reach of your glove, after which you swear, race to pick it up (the ground having done the dirty work for you) and throw it to whomever. Of course, your teammates are thoroughly disgusted at your failure, but they can't exactly say you didn't try.

Sometimes, I managed to find a way not to go to baseball practice. One or two of the other kids who had accomplished the same feat would shoot baskets on the basketball court. The kids used to say "*swish*!" when the basketball went through the hoop without touching it. Sometimes, in the afternoon when no one was using the basketball court, a tall, skeleton-like guy — I think he was a counselor — with a lick of black hair over his forehead, but already going bald, although at

that age I thought of it as his merely acquiring an older man look at an earlier age than usual (I thought of him as a young doctor) — this guy would come out and shoot a few baskets by himself. He showed us how to make the ball go in from the *rear* of the basket. The trick involved standing behind the basket, a few feet in front of the support pole for the backboard, and shooting the ball up into the opening of the basket, causing the basket, with the ball in its opening, to swing forward, then up and around, and drop the ball down through the top of the basket. It didn't seem possible, but this guy showed me how to do it, and I seem to remember making the shot a few times. This was far more interesting to me than running around the court, trying to get the ball in the normal way.

Collecting Butterflies

The nature counselor was a young guy named Scotty McCloud (possibly spelled *McLeod*). He was, like Mr. Allard, another older male who seemed to make me stronger. He taught us how to catch butterflies in the fields around the camp, how you came down on top of them with the net, holding the bottom of the net with your right hand, the handle with the other, then let them flutter up inside the net, then, with a twist of the handle, cause the bottom to flop down over the rim, thus entrapping the insect inside. Then you opened your bottle of tetrachloride, which I loved the smell of, and put a drop on the head of the butterfly. In a moment or two, the fluttering stopped. Then you opened the net and gently, holding the body, never the wings, which were covered with a fine powder, put them into the fruit jar you carried with you. It had cotton soaked in tetrachloride in the bottom. Then on to find another specimen.

I loved the chase across the fields, the erratic running over stone fences, into distant fields, through flowers,white net fluttering overhead, the whole a huge living room under a blazing sky. We sometimes tried to catch the butterflies in mid-air. One way or the other, we caught monarchs, tiger swallowtails (a rare treasure), blues, buckeyes. If you went out at night and smeared molasses on the side of a tree trunk, something I did only once or twice, then shined a bright light on the wet patch, all sorts of night moths would convene, among which might be, if you were lucky, a beautiful green Luna moth.

When you got back, you had to mount them. But first they had to dry out. For this, you used little wooden racks: two boards, say a foot or so long, mounted on supports with shallow V-cuts on their upper side so that that the boards, when attached, would be at a slight angle. They were nailed to the supports so that there would be a slit between them. Then you put pins through the wings of the insects, near the veins, the slit being for their bodies. After several days they would be dry, and you could mount them in a box with white cotton and a glass lid. To do this, you simply pushed a pin, greased with Vaseline, down through their thorax, then through the cotton into the wood below.

Scotty taught us how to make a fire by bending a wire into a little loop, putting a film of water in the loop, then using the film like a magnifying glass. I don't remember if I ever saw it work but I considered it a nifty idea, and still do. He also showed us how to find a particular plant in the woods — which must have been sassafras or sarsaparilla — and how to cut (with our pocketknife) lengths of bark from the stems and the roots, and then how to make a tea that tasted like root beer. Years later, in a girlie magazine, I read an article on smokejumpers and saw a photo of a smokejumper whose name they said was Scott McLoud. He looked like an older version of our nature counselor, so who knows? I was tempted to write him, but how could I explain how I came across the article?

Swimming

I couldn't swim and I was afraid of the water, so I hated swimming — hated the fact that, to be considered good, you had to windmill along the surface with your arms while at the same time kicking your feet regularly, with stiff legs, so that you made a froth like a motorboat behind, and then on top of all that you had to keep plunging your face into the chlorine water and then turning it aside at just a certain time in each stroke to gulp down air, and this had to be done in a thorougly masculine, Hollywood style as your forearm moved casually forward for the next grab at the water. (The mouth had to be distended as you took in air, showing your courage and physical prowess. You wanted them to see your face under that forearm.) Diving to the bottom of the pool and seeing how long you could hold your breath was different, because here it was not skill but will power that counted, the ability to endure near suffocation.

And so, once again, as in baseball, I employed my strategy of gaining at least grudging admiration by trying hard. I made a show of how hard I tried to learn to swim, and of swimming the required number of laps, even though I was slower than most of the other boys.

Eventually I learned the four basic strokes: crawl, side stroke, breast, and back. There were two varieties of back stroke, whose names I have forgotten: one was like an inverted breast stroke, in which you drew the sides of your index fingers up along your side, then extended your hands over your head and out and thrust down while at the same time making your legs imitate a frog's; the other was a kind of inverted crawl stroke, made more splashes, and hence looked better, but the water kept getting in your face, so I preferred the first. The stroke I hated the most was the crawl, because you had to put your face in the water, so that you couldn't breathe. The breast stroke seemed all but useless, since for all that effort and putting your face in the water you never seemed to get anywhere. My favorite was the side stroke, because here you could breathe all the time and it almost always made you look as though you knew what you were doing. It was also my father's favorite stroke.

The best swimmer in the tribe was D—, who could churn along at an incredible pace doing the crawl. He was nut brown, had a kind of butch face. The rest of us just stood and watched when he began swimming laps.

Diving was much more appealing because it was a kind of flying. I learned the jacknife and swan, got pretty good at the latter, throwing my arms straight out and arching my back in a way that made people look twice. I also tried flips, or gainers, as they called them, but never with any confidence since I was always afraid of landing on my back. Yet I was intrigued by the idea of briefly giving up my visual orientation and trusting to some inner guidance inertial system as I went around. High diving also was too frightening. For laughs, we did cannon balls. The fat kids were always best at that, making the water slosh out of the pool and wet those who weren't paying attention.

We had to learn life-saving, a tedious business involving the hauling through the water, using something called the "cross-chest carry", of another kid who was lying on his back, arms outspread, pretending to be unconscious. You were supposed to lug this burden to the side of the pool, scissoring away with your legs underneath him. "Put your hip in the small of his back!" Hank Fox, the assistant counselor, would holler, walking along the edge of the pool. There was no doubt in my mind that if I ever got into this situation in a lake or an ocean, with a mile to go to shore, and waves on all sides, there would be not one but two deaths from drowning that day.

There were report cards even in summer camp. I sitll have a few of mine that were saved by my mother. Unfortunately, they have no dates. I have used my increasing weight measurements

to determine chronological order. I assume that there was one report card at the end of each summer session. Each was signed by Mr. Ray, who was the counselor in charge of our tribe.

Wt. 71 Wt. 74
Swimming Progress: John has made the most progress of any boy in the group, particularly in his form and endurance.in his strokes and especially in diving.
Physical Skills: John is well coordinated and learns physical skills very easily.
Food Habits: John is a good eater and has offered no problem in this respect.
Craft Skills: He likes this phase of camp work.
Social Adjustment:John is a very likeable boy and gets along well with everyone. At home he should get a lot of rest because his camp program is quite strenous.

Wt. 82 Wt. 80
Swimming Progress: John has made progress in his strokes and especially in diving.
Physical Skills: He coordinates his body very well.
Food Habits: John is a good eater in camp.
Craft Skills: He is far superior to the rest of the group in handling tools.
Social Adjustment: Everyone likes your son and he gets long well with people. I think that your son will grow in a spurt in a year or two.

Wt. 85 Wt. 84
Swimming Progress: John can now swim 20 lengths of our pool. He is one of the best divers in the group.
Physical Skills: His coordination is very good.
Food Habits: Very good eater in camp.
Craft Skills: The craft teacher rated him one of the very best in the group in this activity.
Social Adjustment: John adjusted himself very quickly at Camp Caribou [in Maine, I think, where we spent a week or so; it is possible that some of the recollections I have of Scout camp in Maine, as described below, in fact occurred at Camp Caribou]. He liked canoeing, sailing, rifle-range, etc.

And in this way, I won the Best Camper medal one week. (I was so nervous waiting for the assistant counselor, whose name was Ken Fox, to open the little manilla envelope containing the Best Camper badge and fish it out, that I stood on tiptoe and tried to peek inside. The kids all laughed and I immediately blushed and felt I had destroyed my triumph. Nevertheless, they gathered around afterward, and with my red face, and thumping heart, I let them look at the little round white button with “Best Camper” printed on it in no-nonsense, official camp letters.)

For my swimming efforts I won the Best Camper award one week: a white pin like those that we had worn in beanies, only larger, about the size of a quarter, with the pin part sticking straight down. When they announced my name — this took place in the tribe tent with the wooden floor, metal fold-up chairs — I stood, heart pounding, and after Hank Fox had finished his recitation of the deeds (efforts, really) that had made me deserving of the honor, he began fishing in the little manila envelope that contained the pin. Naively, without thinking, I tried to peek inside, which produced a big laugh from the other campers. I blushed, tried to laugh with them, but took it for

inevitable proof that, even in victory, I was a failure.

Juggling

Juggling became a major preoccupation, or perhaps I should say, it became a necessary skill if you wanted to be accepted by the leaders of the tribe. We were taught to begin with two balls first: throw one up with one hand, then, as it was about halfway down, throw the other one up with the same hand, and catch the one that was coming down. When we could do this pretty well, we graduated to three balls: in essence you held two in one hand, the third in the other hand, then tossed one of the two up in the air in the direction of the other hand, and just before the other hand caught it, that hand sent the ball it was holding up and over to the other hand, and just before the other hand caught it, it sent the ball it was holding ... I was eventually able to juggle three balls for sufficiently many seconds before dropping one that people would say, "He can juggle!" It seems we used oranges more often than tennis balls, I suppose because they tended to come in lunch bags.

Trampoline

They also let us use a trampoline once in a while. I took an immediate liking to this peculiar sport, and the reason was obvious, namely, because it provided an opportunity to fly — if only for a few moments. You bounced and bounced going ever higher, you could lean back and fall on your back, something you would never do on the ground. You could fly up and then lean forward and land on your stomach, always assured that the faithful mat beneath you would send you back up into the air again. I learned to do a forward somersault, this much easier than doing the same off a diving board.

"Follow the Arrow"

This was a strange game: there were two teams. One team laid out a path throughout the camp that was marked by various things that *could be* called considered an arrow — an arrangement of rocks or pieces of wood or a mark made with white lime — who knew what? The challenge for the other team was to follow the sequence of arrows to some termination point that would somehow be obvious if and when the team found it.

Entertainment

Every once in a while we had what in memory at least was a kind of talent show — very informal, merely one of the campers performing before the others on the grass after lunch. The only performance I remember was by a short Jewish kid — Martin or Marvin something — with close-cropped black hair and boundless self-confidence, who did an imitation of Cab Calloway singing "Minnie the Moocher", with its chorus "A hidey high, dee high" (then the audience would echo the syllables) "A heedey hee, dee hee" (the audience echoing that), etc. He repeated the performance several times, I suppose by popular acclaim.

In passing, I should mention another song I remember from those years, though I am not sure we sang it at camp, was:

"John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt,
His name is my name too.
Whenever we go out
The people always shout,

"There goes John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt."

An occasional prank was to send one kid to someone on the camp staff and ask them for a can of striped paint, or a sky hook. I don't recall if the kids in our tribe did this as a joke on the younger kids, or as a joke on the staff, but it was considered hilarious to have someone go off on that errand. A sky hook (which I understood to mean a hook that descended from the sky, not a hook that you threw up to hook onto the sky) seemed to me obvious nonsense, but about striped paint I wasn't so sure. Why couldn't there be striped paint? (It could be used to paint barber poles, for example.) After all, there was striped candy, for example in the form of candy canes at Christmas. The image of opening a can and seeing, say, white paint with dark red stripes, stayed on my mind throughout the summer. In the early 2000s, there was striped toothpaste, Très Près, on the PBS show *French in Action*.

Scout Camp

Eventually, I became too old to go to Mohawk, and so, one summer, I went to Scout camp. This must have been when I was twelve.

More Swimming

The camp was located in Waterford, Maine. I remember wooden-floored tents in the woods, a large wooden building where the mess hall was, and a black worker was always calling out, as we kids filed down the line with our trays, "Dey gonna be some *DEE-tail* tonight!" meaning that if we forgot to return our empty plates to the right place afterward, we would have to help with the dishes, or do some sweeping.

There was a lake where we could go swimming or take out canoes. The man in charge was a barrel-chested guy, Mr. — , who taught swimming and diving. He would get us to come to the waterfront just as dawn was breaking on a freezing cold summer morning. We had some prescribed swimming exercise to do in the freezing water. Then, when we emerged, he would have a big bonfire going. He would order us to remove our bathing suits and stand around it, saying that it was the best way to get warm quickly and prevent colds. And so, with each of us making sure we never looked at another's thing, we shivered and danced around on our bare feet and toasted ourselves in the orange warmth, while all around the silent forest and steaming lake slowly prepared for the day.

Mr. — was famous for the jokes he would play on some of the kids. He told us once that, because of his bulk, he was able to float in a vertical position, without kicking or moving his hands. So he would tell kids to jump in, saying it wasn't deep, look, he was standing, and they would, and then not find bottom, and presumably he would then have to rescue them, which meant get his hands on their struggling bodies.

One valuable thing I learned at the waterfront was how to make and use a David's sling: two strong cords, each composed of several strands of twine, were twisted and braided and attached to a large leather pouch, the free ends of the cord being loops. You put a big rock, or several smaller ones, inside the pouch, put two or three fingers of your throwing hand through one loop, twisted it secure, then held the other loop tightly in the crook of your index finger, and whirled the thing around in a vertical plane until, at just the right moment, you let the index finger loop go, and watched the rocks fly off into the distance. I was amazed at how far you could fling rocks in this way. We soon graduated from rocks to cherry bombs and, at campfires, would send them raining

down through the trees of other encampments.

Another thing I learned was how grappling hooks worked. Mr. — showed us what they looked like, explained how they were dragged along the bottom of a lake or pond where someone was suspected to have drowned, and then how the hooks would penetrate the body, regardless of where they happened to come in contact with it — legs, stomach, chest, perhaps even the eyes — so it could be hauled to the surface.

Years later I heard that Mr. — had been fired from his job for molesting some of the campers. I saw him once in a bus going to White Plains, a sad, fat man with big lips, standing, holding onto a pole, looking as though he had nowhere to go.

Getting into Trouble

I achieved notoriety at the camp through an incident whose outcome was to haunt me for years afterward. One day, during rest period, the kids in our tent were fooling around and decided it would be neat to take a picture of one guy pretending to suck off another. I was somehow volunteered for the active role. We would use a photographer's trick, namely, have the kid take his cock out and then have the other kid, me, kneel with open mouth and shoot the picture so that the foreshortened distance would make it seem as though I were actually sucking him off. Several pictures were taken. A few days, someone said one of the counselors had gotten hold of, or been shown, the pictures (which I never saw). I don't recall any overt punishment, but it was clear that, as far as the camp counselors were concerned, the other kid and I, along with the one who had taken the photos, had been relegated to the outermost level of outcast. Many of the campers admired us for having done something truly bad, and we skulked around in our tarnished glory.

Later, as happened each month, it was time to choose new inductees for the Order of the Arrow, some kind of best camper group. During the ceremony around the campfire, a number of kids said that I had been set to be chosen, but because of the cocksucking incident had been eliminated. My evil nature, which I knew could never have been permanently hidden, was now becoming well-known.

A Persecution

There were three or four boys in each tent. I don't recall if one was appointed to be the leader, or if this just occurred naturally out of the personalities involved, but I remember that the head of our tent seemed to consider that his main task was to torment another guy who he believed had shit in his pants. Sometimes we could smell something like that coming from him, but the tent leader kept up a day-in, day-out monologue about how Lindy — for that was the name of the poor guy — had shit in his pants, and wouldn't clean himself or change his clothes. "Don't try to deny it, we can all smell it, you hate to wipe yourself, don't you? And so you walk around like that. Doesn't it bother you? Do you think the rest of us should have to put up with that? Why don't you clean your pants?" And the other kid just took it. He sat silently on the edge of his cot while enduring the barrage of contempt. Once in a while he raised a feeble protest, but it had no effect.

Dutch Oven Bread

Then there was a nice old guy who taught us to make Dutch oven bread. We mixed the ingredients on stones next to the black ashes of a campfire, added flour, water, who knows what else, joking all the while, kidding each other that this wasn't going to work. Then I think we buried the whole thing in tin foil and built a fire on top. We hung around in the smoke, talked, maybe came back later. But in any case, what we found inside the hot tinfoil, when the time came to open it,

was something that looked and tasted like wall paste. We tried to eat some of it. The old guy was undaunted. We should try again.

A Small Heroism

One day, on a long hike, one of us, a guy named Hackzellah, cut his hand with an axe. (I'm not sure that that was the injury, but I am sure it was serious.) Someone had to run back to the camp for help. I was it. I took my mission very seriously, ran what may have been a mile or two over the dirt road, got to camp as though I were announcing the attack of the Persians. Someone got a car, drove out there, took the kid to the hospital. I was kidded for a while afterward about my seriousness, and the effort I put into that long run, but I felt pretty good about my bravery, especially when I remember what my father had confidently predicted, at that Sunday dinner, about how I would handle myself in a crisis.

Bugler

I was assigned the job of bugler. Throughout the time at camp, I was awakened early each morning to play Reveille, then I had to play Mess Call three times a day, then Taps around 9 p.m. This made me exceptional, made me feel a little important, but by then I had played taps at Memorial Day ceremonies for the American Legion for several years, so it wasn't all that big a deal. I took it matter-of-factly, even though I sensed occasional, low-key respect from some of the kids.

Mail from Home

I don't remember the letters I no doubt received from my mother. I do remember my father's postcards. They were written in his angular, forward-slanting handwriting, in the rust brown red ink of his fountain pen that had the marbled, swirled design on the outside. Sometimes he drew a little picture of me sitting in a rowboat, fishing. My mother made sure I understood how grateful I should be that my father had taken time to write to me, not to mention draw pictures, thus showing that not only was he a great man but that he also had a sense of humor.

Cape Cod

In the summer we went to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, for our vacation — specifically, to Chatham.

Getting There

We drove there in the '36 Ford, a trip requiring most of the day. I remember: the Merritt Parkway, the long straight road, a hill going down before us, going up far in the distance The proper cars, trees were another kind of living room. Neat, important, populated by important people who knew what to do. My father driving, my brother perhaps trying to identify the model and year of cars. The landscaping in the center and along the sides of the road was another proper lawn. We knew we were near our destination when we saw the wooden lawn ornaments for sale in he front yards of the houses along the road: varieties of windmills, some in the shape of birds, their red, blue, white, green blades spinning in the wind. There was something frisky, frollicking, about the town, and I had no doubt it was because of the presence of the ocean.

Once we arrived at the roads in Chatham, I would pester my father to let me steer. I sat next to him, he would get the car going slowly down one of the roads, and when there was no traffic,

would tell me when to take the wheel, which I did with one hand. Then he'd lift both hands from the wheel and I would try to keep the car going in a straight line. "You're too far to the right!" he would say, and quickly turn the wheel, then let me continue. I felt enormously proud and excited, as though, for these few moments, I was allowed to be a man. I may have asked him to let me help shift gears using the stick shift in the floor, a long, slightly bent black rod with a knob on top. My mother would be worrying aloud as usual: "Oh, Hermann, do you think it's all right?" Sometimes I just wanted to hold my hand on the gear shift, feel the power of its vibration, and then sometimes, when he had to change gears, my father would brush my hand away .

The Old Harbor Inn

We stayed at a place called The Old Harbor Inn. It was located on top of a low rise near the corner of Scatteree Road and Old Wharf Road in North Chatham, and was run by a middle-aged couple, the Nickersons. "Old Mr. Nickerson", as my mother always called him, was a lifelong fisherman who most days went out in his dory and caught the fish that was served for dinner. Mrs. Nickerson was like the Julia Child we remember from her original TV shows, a plump, cheerful woman who always seemed delighted to have all these nice people, most of whom came back year after year, staying at her grand old New England house by the sea. And it was just that: if you crossed a meadow behind the house, and were able to get through a swampy area, you were at the seashore, on the Cape side.

If there was any time in my childhood when I can be said to have been happy, it was at the Inn. There was a big living room which you stepped into from the front door on the left side of the house. Various nautical objects were mounted on the walls and ceiling: the traditional helmsman's wheel (looking like furniture!), pictures (of the Nickersons and their children) in frames that had a rope going around the outside; seashells; models of sailing ships. There were area rugs, sturdy, rough wooden chairs and tables, including a table near the door at the back of the living room where we kids would play cards (Go Fish, Old Maid) under moths in the evening. There was also a cribbage board. I never learned the game, though a few kids, and some of the adults, knew how to play. A winding staircase led to the second floor where most of the guest rooms were. Everything smelled like someone else's house. The place seemed ready to set sail for adventure.

The only kid I remember from all the years we went there was a tall, willowy, quiet girl that I liked a lot. Somewhere there is a photo of her standing in front of the Inn, taken just as we were leaving that summer. They also photographed me with her. I felt that she was yet another proof in my growing awareness that girls were special, different, not like us boys.

At intervals throughout the day, but especially in the evening, before dinner, the sound of shuffleboard disks hitting each other could be heard coming from the cement shuffleboard court outside the rear door of the living room. Shuffleboard was my favorite game, I think as much for the sounds as anything else: the scrape of the wooden head of the stick on the concrete, the wooden disk nestled inside the u-shaped indent in front, then the final shove of the stick, sending the disk skating down the length of the court, hopefully to hit, *clack!*, the disk of an opponent, knocking it off the court, and leaving yours in fine position so that just a nudge from a second disk would put it into the scoring rectangle.

To announce dinner, they rang a bell. There was a strange excitement in the waiting, due, I think, to the fact that the waiting would be ended by the odd occurrence of someone ringing a bell. I would probably not have felt the excitement at all if someone merely walked through the living room and out to the shuffleboard court calling, "Dinner is served!" Sometimes one of us kids was

allowed to ring the bell: it was made of silver or brass, and had a black handle. As soon as it had sounded, you would hear the solemn footsteps on the wooden floors as the hungry guests tried to restrain themselves from hurrying to the big dining room. One entire wall of the dining room had large windows through which you could look down the grassy measdows to the dunes and then Cape Code bay, the evening sun lighting it all with the excitement of the sea. Some families had their special table, and their special waitress. For us this waitress was Dorothy, an always cheerful, smiling girl whom I liked to kid around with.

We often had fish that Mr. Nickerson had caught that very day. He conformed to everyone's idea of a Cape Cod fisherman: usually wearing rubber boots, or so it seems in memory, he had white hair, weathered skin, a strong New England accent, a friendly manner as he greeted the guests.

Other Hotels

There were many inns and hotels in the area, but by far the most luxurious was the Chatham Bars Inn, a massive, gray-shingled structure situated on a sand dune at the bottom of a hill. It had awnings over the windows. Dune grass surrounded the grounds. This was where the rich people stayed. One of its most important recommendations, according to my mother, was that no Jews were allowed.

The Beaches

The water at south-facing beaches on the Cape was warmer than that on north-facing ones, so most of the time we went to the former, one of which was called Harding's Beach.

Harding's Beach

As we pulled off the main road and headed to the parking lot, the delicious bathroom smell of seaweed came through the car windows. Ahead of us were a few low sand dunes with beach grass, and beyond, the enormous ocean. Voices, umbrellas, children running, adults wading carefully into the water were all rendered small by the blue expanse before them.

We got out of the car, struggled with towels and beach blankets and a picnic basket and beach ball and snorkel and mask and then attempted, while carrying all this stuff, to walk across the burning hot asphalt. But the sand was almost as hot, so that you couldn't leave one foot in it for more than a second or too, and had to keep running in place. My brother and I were glad to let my parents select a place to sit, because the sooner we could dump our stuff, the sooner we could run for the strip of cold, wet, dark brown sand at the edge of the waves.

We looked at our footprints, the way the sand squelched white around our feet when we pressed them down in the wet sand. On all sides, *something was going on!* The waves were crashing in, kids were running and shouting, gulls were squawking overhead, people were sunbathing, each family had its collection of interesting things: a chair, various toys, red, shiny, over there some kids were building a sand castle that had a channel running down to the water. We looked at the women's fat asses in their black bathing suits, their fat thighs as they waddled toward the surf, a ship or two on the horizon, not moving, and yet, when you looked again, no longer where it had been.

After going in the water a few times, I would come out and get down to business: put on my brown, rubber-smelling skin-diver's mask, perhaps flippers, I can't remember, probably no snorkel yet, and once more enter the water. I never stopped thinking how miraculous it was that you could actually see underwater. Sometimes the water was full of jellyfish that looked like transpar-

ent scallops. They could sting you, so you had to swim through them quickly. I would take several deep breaths, then bend at the waist, as the books instructed, and dive straight down, through the yellow haze filled with swirling grains of sand. I would level out then and fly over the barren, sandy bottom, and see how long I could stay down. I was proud of my ability to hold my breath, and got a kick out of making my parents, or, rather, my mother, worry by not coming up for a long time. I was proud of the fact that I was one of the very few people, kids or adults, on the beach who was diving. One day, as I came to the surface and was treading water, turning around to look now at the beach, then out at a ship on the horizon, I was overcome with the magnificence of it all, and lowered my chin to the water and said, to the ocean, "I love you".

Sometimes, sitting on the sand, I would try to figure out, to get some idea, of how big the ocean really was. I wondered how long it would take me to walk out to the ship on the horizon. Could I run out to it? How long would it take? Hours, days, weeks? What a shame that we couldn't walk on water.

The Ice-Cold Beach

Another beach we went to, though much less often, was within walking distance of the Inn, and was called Scatteree Beach. Its one, never-to-be-forgotten characteristic was how cold the water was. When you started to wade, oh so reluctantly, out into that icy water, you kept wondering how you would ever be able to let your cock, your poor naked stomach, your chest, be submerged in this liquid ice. Yet the sun was shining, the water was clear and blue. Surely it couldn't be *that* cold. But your feet were numb by the time the water was up to your ankles. There were wooden sailboats and rowboats anchored fifty or more yards out, their bows chock-, chock-, chocking on the passing wavelets. The boats didn't seem to mind the cold. If you could make it out to one of them, then you could crawl up the side (if your freezing hands were able to grasp anything at all by then) and lie on the edge, surely the owner wouldn't mind — or maybe you could make it all the way out to the floating platform especially put there for swimmers, and climb out of this ice drink and just fill up with sun.

Complaining loudly for all to hear, you pressed forward until the water was up to your knees. Everything below was already numb. A supreme act of will and you had gone far enough so that now the water was wetting the bottom of your bathing suit. Please God, no waves, no spray, no droplets of *any kind*. Surely the boats and the platform were a little closer now, even though they looked exactly the same distance as when you started.

By now, the lower half of you was so cold that you had a pain in the side of your head, a pressing kind of pain as if your head were clamped between two blocks of ice. You wondered how it was possible that anything could live in such water. Yet every once in a while a fish would swim by, happy and carefree. In fact (you had to force yourself to realize) for it, the temperature of the water was much more preferable than that of the nice, sunny, warm air on the beach.

My father, having come up from New York to spend a few days with us, would be lying on the beach, much amused by our ordeal. He sat in his blue bathing trunks with the white belt surrounding his pot belly, silver buckle in front, his chest not flat and hard like ours, with our two little nipples (but we didn't call them that because we were boys and nipples were what girls had). His had more flesh, like a woman, except that this was a male's version of a woman's chest, and so not at all female (that would have been unthinkable). He had a pot belly and extra flesh on his chest because he was old and important.

And when he decided the time had come, he would take off his glasses, stand up, calmly walk down the beach, bend over, splash a little water on his shoulders and stomach, and then simply —

plunge right in, and start swimming his side stroke. Maybe a grunt or two, maybe a comment that it was rather cold, but that was that. He would swim out to the boats, out among them, float on his back, swim some more, and then return to the beach, get out, and dry himself. No moaning, no complaints. You got the thing done, period.

Nauset Beach

Sometimes we went to Nauset Beach. This was the dangerous beach, the killer beach. Here, all you could do was watch, and fear, the enormous waves as they crashed onto the beach. Here, even the sand was cold. My father never allowed us to stay there very long. They would never find you if you got snatched by one of those waves. You would be completely at the mercy of the sea's alien ferocity. Going to this beach always seemed to me like a lesson in what Nature was capable of.

For some reason, I remember a walk with my mother (and the Gadget that was keeping me alive at the time — probably a pocketknife) among some houses near the water, but here there was no beach to speak of, only smooth rocks. There were houses, with flowers, along the asphalt road. It was evening, and I remember thinking about why seaweed smelled like garbage, and why I should think about that rather than something else, and why we were there rather than somewhere else.

Walks

But beaches were not only for swimming. Sometimes I went walking along them, intrigued by the strange fact that the part where the sand stayed wet from the waves constantly coming up, was hard, like soft concrete, whereas the sand was not only hot, but soft, so that you sank in with each step, as in a nightmare. And then there were horseshoe crabs, looking like Nazi helmets or Panzer tanks with claws inside, or like spiders in a shell, except that they also had a long triangular-cross-section sword for a nose — or was it a tail? They lay in the beach smell, sometimes upside down. Once in a while I got up the courage to turn them over again. I thought of them as the ocean's dirty secret.

One one beach, I think Harding's, there was an old boat wreck on the sand, its wood smooth and white from years of wind-blown sand. I wondered who had left it there, why its original owners hadn't fixed it and floated away in it (who would just leave their boat behind and go off and forget about it), and why someone didn't come in the dead of night and steal it.

And then there were walks around the village of Chatham, I in tow of my mother, the only points of interest for me being drugstores. On a hot summer day, as at home, the cool smell of medicine and perfume was bewitching.

Other Places

But going to the beach wasn't the only thing we did.

A Ride in a Horse-Drawn Carriage

I remember a ride down a country lane in a horse-drawn carriage . For some reason I kept thinking about the fact that there was grass growing in the center of the lane, while there was only smooth dirt where the carriage wheels went. Obvious, of course, but still I wondered why the drivers of these carriages didn't make an effort, every once in a while, to have the wheels on one

side of the carriage roll down the center lane, so that the grass would be worn away and the whole lane would be smooth dirt. It bothered me that no one seemed to be concerned about this.

There were bushes on both sides of the lane. It seemed they were there to prevent anyone seeing the carriage as it hurried along. Why? But because their branches hung over the sides of the lane, we seemed to be moving much more rapidly than we would have in the open.

I remember there was a girl sitting next to me. I don't think it was the tall, quiet one from the Inn. This one seems to have had longer, darker, wavier hair, and to have been more animated, more attentive to what was going on. Exactly the kind of girl you would find sitting next to you in a horse-drawn carriage swaying down a country lane. Again the sense that she was special, because she was a girl, and that something important was going on between us, apart from the words we said.

As the horse swung down the narrow lane, and the bushes rushed by on each side, the horse suddenly lifted its tail and began to release a big mass of shit. The horse's pace didn't change, the carriage kept bouncing along as before, but now we all had to turn our eyes away and not look, or notice the smell, as the wet, brown stuff plopped onto the track below. This gross obscenity in front of parents, and the girl! No one said anything, except perhaps my mother commented about trees over in the distance. I sat there, shamefaced. My memory of the girl, her face, the lively eyes, is inseparably bound to the memory of the awful thing that happened right before our very eyes.

Perhaps that ride is the source of the sudden tranquillity I feel when I detect the faint smell of horse or cow manure at evening in soft spring, along with the smell of woodsmoke.

An Amusement Park

I remember an amusement park, with the usual rides, and one that immediately caught my attention, in which the seats were whirled around in the air, like seats on a circular swing. That seemed irresistible. I pleaded with my father to let me go on that one, all the while watching the riders go by overhead. Eventually he did. I don't remember if the girl was with me, but I was ecstatic over the fact that, as you sat in the seats, and the park and your parents went racing by below, the seats sloping inward because they were swung out by centrifugal force, the seats themselves perfectly stable, in fact solid as a rock, despite being suspended from ropes or cables and going around and around.

Trotting Races

One evening, we went to see the trotting races, because Mr. Nickerson was driving one of the sulkies, as they called the light, small carriages that the horses pulled. Here was a strange combination indeed: bicycle wheels (for that's what the two wheels looked like) and horses! This was not like the horse races you heard sometimes on the radio, with huge cheering crowds and the roar of hoofs on turf and an announcer screaming about who was ahead by a nose. Here, everything was quiet, like bicycles. The drivers wore colorful silk outfits — yellow, green, white — and had whips, and the horses, miraculously, pranced along in a precise gait that made two questions keep going through my mind: first, how could the horses keep remembering that precise step, and who was watching to be sure none of them forgot it and simply ran for a few steps? I was fascinated by the quiet, the drivers sitting in their flimsy rolling chairs, their whips dangling in front of them, the horses padding neatly on their appointed rounds through the rich dirt of the track. The railing around the inside of the track, I noticed, had bent supports, so that only the horizontal railing itself was near the track, and the supports were farther back, in the grass.

The Clam Restaurant

In the evening, the help at the restaurant would go off to be with their friends, who were employees at other hotels. One of the places they went was a restaurant that specialized in just one food, a small clam called, I think, "Quahogs", or "Littlenecks", that was harvested in the immediate vicinity. In fact, the restaurant was little more than a kind of shed built over the gravel at the edge of the sea. There were thick wooden beams overhead, and wooden benches and tables on the floor. You bought a bucket of the clams and sat at a table and just ate them, cracking them open like nuts. I forget what beverage people drank with the feast. I never actually had any of the clams, my mother apparently believing it was something reserved for much older children, but I still remember the excitment of the place, and the sound of the sea rattling the gravel under the floor boards beneath your feet.

But Not Provincetown!

One place we didn't go was Provincetown. My mother never explained why, but I somehow picked up the impression it was a place where men walked around acting like women, in other words, a place where there were *real* queers.

Other Vacations

Of other vacations I remember the names Saranac Lake and Saratoga (N.Y.), and my mother saying that Mrs. Conro went there. I remember a vast hotel, white wooden clapboard, with large porches running around it, porch railings, old trees nodding overhead, graceful older women in long dresses, waiters eager to serve, the sound of dishes in the early afternoon, my mother speaking in a hush because we were among the wealthy. I remember picking blueberries on some scrubby hill nearby, someone taking us, the buckets with holes in the bottom, the heat, the buzzing insects. To this day this remains the kind of environment that I believe holds happiness for me. Live in a hotel like this and your anguish will be over.

War

The Second World War was a great time to be a kid if you happened to live in the United States. Six years of the worst slaughter the world had ever known provided us kids with all the daily excitement that any kid could ask for, as well as supplying future generations with untold hours of entertainment in the form of novels and movies about the war, and, for TV watchers snug and secure in their beds in the evening, endless documentaries about Hitler and Nazis.

How Neighbors Supported the War

Unlike the Korean War and especially the Vietnam War, there was no doubt about the justice of our fighting the Second World War. I can't remember ever even hearing the phrase, "against the war". A popular song began "Over there, over there...for the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming, the drums rum-tuming over there..."

. The Second World War was Important. The adults talked about it almost with reverence. The Nazis and the Japs had to be stopped or else they would take over the world. We had no choice. Our boys had to go and fight and win.

Saving for the War Effort

The Second World War produced the greatest recycling effort the country had ever known, and I wouldn't be surprised if it outdid even our present level of recycling — certainly on a per-capita level. Ads on the radio and posters constantly encouraged people (the Home Front) to "Save for the War Effort!" That meant two kinds of saving: the saving of money, through the purchase of U.S. Savings Bonds — school programs encouraged kids to save their nickels and dimes by buying special stamps — and the saving (as opposed to throwing into the garbage or the dump) of just about anything made of metal — especially tin cans and, most important of all, anything aluminum, even the shiny aluminum foil that each stick of chewing gum was wrapped in — plus newspapers, bacon fat, even string, I think. Periodically, there were "drives", conducted, for example, by the Boy Scouts, and trucks came around to pick up what each household had accumulated.

I was not at all sure what the stuff was used for, nor, do I think, did the government make any effort to explain that to us. We knew, of course, that aluminum was used for airplanes, and that other scrap metal was used for guns, but that was about it. What were newspapers used for? And bacon fat? And string? Did they need that much string on the battlefield?

Showing Who Was Serving

For each son (I'm not sure about daughters) that a family had fighting in the Armed Forces, they had a blue star in a front window of their house. The stars were on a little piece of shiny white cloth perhaps six inches on a side, with a red border, hung on a string from the window latch[1]. Some families had two, some even three stars, and people would walk by and shake their heads in sympathy and compassion for what the family must be enduring each day, each newscast. If the son or daughter was killed, a gold star was superimposed on the blue star.[2]

Air Raid Protection

It would be wrong, of course, to say that we lived in fear of air-raids, since no part of the country had ever been attacked by bombers. But the possibility was kept before us by the measures being taken to protect us. For example, every house was required to have blackout shades on the windows. These were solid black, and wider and much stiffer than normal shades. They rode in a little track in the window frame so that the shade would fit close to the window and prevent any light from leaking out and serving to guide enemy bombers. As soon as the sirens went off for a nighttime air-raid drill, my mother and father went around the house pulling down the blackout shades. As a further precaution, we had to turn out all but one or two dim lights in the house. Some of the neighborhood husbands were volunteer air-raid wardens, and they patrolled the streets during the blackouts to be sure that all the houses were dark.

As soon as the sirens went off for a drill, all the dogs in the neighborhood, including Laddie, next door, began to howl — great, long, mournful howls as though in sympathy with the great sorrow being expressed by the sirens. I wondered what the dogs thought the sirens were — other dogs? Or were they howling back at this grotesque mechanical imitator of their own sounds? My mother used the howling of the dogs as the reason why my brother and I couldn't have a dog,

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1. Some histories say that the stars were surrounded by an American flag. I don't recall this, but my memory may be faulty.
2. J.S.

namely, that it would be frightened by the sirens. We argued time and time again that the dogs in the neighborhood seemed to be fine once the sirens stopped, but she never gave in.

As further air-raid protection, every car was required to have the upper half of its headlights covered, so that the lights would be harder to see by enemy aircraft. Most people, my father included, taped the top half of their car headlights with black electrician's tape.

Rationing

Every family received rationing booklets, the stamps being required to purchase certain items which were also required for the war effort. I remember only coffee, sugar, and meat being rationed. Each stamp had a little cartoon symbol of the item that could be purchased with it. My mother seemed to consult her rationing booklet like an astrology chart before she went shopping. Do we have enough stamps left for some leg of lamb on Sunday? Can we buy some sugar? And you would hear people say, when someone proposed buying something, "It's rationed!" Or, "Is it rationed?" That question was always on everyone's mind. But I never thought of the War as a time of hardship or real deprivation. Candy and ice cream weren't rationed, so there wasn't really any problem.

I recall that motorists were encouraged, or perhaps required, to buy recapped tires instead of new ones. All for the War Effort.

"The other very important item that was rationed was of course gasoline. Not sure how this worked, but I do remember everyone getting a sticker to put on the car window that indicated your priority status. Doctors, government officials, and such were entitled to more gasoline per month. The popular slogan that accompanied this restriction was: 'Is this trip necessary?' We used to repeat it cleverly whenever a kid raised his hand to go the bathroom.

"I also remember that some people pronounced the word "rationed" as FDR did—with the vowel in the first syllable like the sound of "cat"; us common folks tended to say RAY-shuned..." — J.S., email, 9/2/05.

The War As Presented on the Radio

During the War, WQXR's evening news broadcasts opened with the four first notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the rhythm of which was the same as that of "V" (for "Victory") in the Morse code (*dit-dit-dit dah*). (At the broadcast there came the sound of chimes, which I always waited to hear.)

Normally, my father listened to the news sitting in his chair in the living room, but sometimes, especially if our forces were in trouble, he would listen to the portable radio on the sideboard in the dining room while we ate dinner.

The perfect voice of the news reader would intone those phrases we heard so often:

"Allied troops advanced a thousand yards in heavy fighting, but then were forced to make a strategic withdrawal, with casualties..." (My father, tearing off a piece of pumpernickel, would shake his head when they said this.) "Allied forces made advances on several fronts..." while "allied bombers under heavy antiaircraft fire pounded factories and ammunition dumps in Frankfurt and Düsseldorf..."

Part of the poetry of those broadcasts was the names of the places: Aachen, Antwerp, Berlin, Dresden, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Hamburg, London, Paris, Normandy, Compiègne, Tobruk ... and of the Pacific Islands: Saipan, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, the Marianas, Iwo Jima, Attu and Kiska, Corregidor, ..., I having no idea where any of these islands were, nor any desire to look them up on

the globe in the living room (which I still have). The battles were often depicted on bubble gum cards, with text on one side, and a picture on the other, with lots of red and yellow fire and explosions, and sailors trying to swim in oil-soaked seas, and enemy planes streaming smoke plunging to certain destruction.

The only dinner table conversation I remember during the War was the one in which my father tried to explain the progress of weapons development, I suppose in response to news of some new weapon, perhaps the atomic bomb. He began by explaining that first one side develops a new weapon, and uses it to achieve victory, but then sooner or later the other side develops one that enables it to overcome the first weapon. That would have been enough for us to understand the point, but for some reason he kept repeating the details of the process. Even my mother grew impatient, and finally said to him, with clear annoyance in her voice, something like, "Komm, komm, Hermann, you are taking too long with your explanation!" For some reason, he felt it was important to go through the process in detail.

Patriotic songs were likely to be played on just about any station: "Over there, over there...for the Yanks are coming, the drums rum-tumming... and we won't come back till it's over over there"; "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition..." (the melody for this song made me feel peculiar; I sang it over and over to myself); "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder, flying high, into the sun... Off we go, into the wild blue yonder, atta boy, give 'em the gun...for nothing can stop the Army Air Corps..."; "From the halls of Montezuuum-a to the shores of Tripoh-lee, we will fight our country's ba-attles, on the land and on-the sea...". It wasn't until years later that I learned that some of the songs were left over from the First World War, for example, "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile..." (I couldn't quite understand why that was a War song); and "Keep the home fires burning, while our hearts are yearning,..." (which I remember being sung by a guy with a rather high-pitched old-fashioned voice).

War Games

Rumors of Real Guns Around the Reservoir

We played games of guns as I have described in the chapter, "Games", and those games included our imitation of war. Then, from some unknown source, there were rumors of anti-aircraft guns hidden in the woods around Kensico Reservoir, to protect the Dam from air attack, and every once in a while we would set out to search for them. The rumors said that they were covered with bark and disguised as pine trees, which meant that we had practically to examine every one of the thousands of trees in the woods. We looked for the little wheel, such as we saw in newsreels, that was used to rotate the guns. We looked for a soldier sitting at the gun, aiming. We never found anything even though we were convinced, as I am to this day, that anti-aircraft guns had been installed.

Warplanes

Breakfast cereal boxes had silhouettes of German and Japanese warplanes, so that kids could learn to identify them in case any happened to fly overhead. (What the kids were supposed to do if they actually saw one of these planes was never made clear.) Model airplanes were *war*planes — ours, theirs, it didn't matter: Corsairs, Mustangs, Boeing B-17s, Lockheed P-38s, Marauders, Consolidated B-24 Liberators (all ours); British Spitfires, DeHavilland Bombers, Hawker Hurricanes; Japanese Zeroes; German Focke-Wolfes, Messerschmidts, and Junker JU87 Stukas, these

last being the funny looking squarish dive bombers with built-in sirens to make them sound even more fearful as they swooped down.

I have described in the chapter, "Planes and Parachutes", our fascination with the practice dogfights that the Air Force pilots held in the skies over our part of the countryside. I was confident then, as I am now, that I would have been a superb fighter pilot. When I see documentaries now, in the early 2000s, for example, *Battlefield*, or the several that have been produced about the Battle of Britain, I always feel that this conviction is reconfirmed. In everyday life I was filled with fear and dread; I was terrified of dying, of somehow being confronted with irrevocable proof that I had no reason to go on living, no justification for being alive, but when I contemplated myself at the controls of a fighter plane in a dogfight with German Messerschmidts or Japanese Zeroes, I had no fear of death. It was one of the few very convictions of my own worth I had during those years, others having been my conviction that I could outwit the kids in any game of guns and that I could outlast them in any long distance run, in other words, any run in which the ability to endure pain would be the criterion for success.

From the movies and radio shows and comic books, we knew that when you talked into a microphone in war, you always said "Over" when you were done speaking and you were ready to hear what the other guy had to say. I wondered why they just didn't say, "I am done talking now" or why they just didn't stop talking as in ordinary conversation. In the Navy, the engine room always repeated back the orders it had received from the bridge. I suppose I understood that this was so that the captain could be sure that the engine room had heard what he had said. At the end of the conversation between soldiers or airmen, if you agreed with what had been decided (and no soldier or pilot ever did not agree), you said "Roger, Willco" and then "Over and out". I wondered if it was really necessary to go through all that just to say goodbye. But I assumed that, because this was military, it couldn't be otherwise. In any case, in our war games we always made sure we used these military phrases, and used them with the same tone of dead seriousness with which they were spoken in the movies.

We often went over to Alan Preble's house to play. He lived two blocks away, on — St. They had a chicken coop, no longer used, which we considered as a potential hut, except that the thickness of chicken manure, and the smell, kept putting us off. We could never bring ourselves to actually climb inside it. I mention Preble here because he had one war toy that I particularly liked. It let you see what it was like to be a bombardier, and actually aim and drop little wooden bombs on cardboard houses you had built. You stood and held the device to your eye, looking straight ahead. A mirror with cross hairs then showed you the floor below. You positioned the gadget until a house was in the cross hairs, then pressed a button to let one of the bombs drop. The unfamiliar way that the image of the houses moved when you moved, and the way the bombs fell as you watched them, made it seem (we thought) realistic.

Insignias, Medals

Certain things had a quality that made we me keep wanting to look at them. Their meaning — what they really were — was never exhausted in the way that, for example, the meaning of shoes or mittens or dishes was. Any kind of transparent or translucent object was among these things, for example, jewelry or marble "purees", in particular red ones. So were flags, insignias, medals, the stripes that indicated rank in the army. I tried to understand why the sergeant's stripes, with its slightly rounded stripes below, and sharp angled stripes above, seemed so special. It was as though heroism and planes and rifles and men and officialness were all somehow contained *in* the symbol itself. How could this be? On the one hand, stripes were not pictures — they were things

you never saw anywhere else, and yet, at the same time, these strange things *contained* something important, namely, that the guy who had them on his sleeve was a sergeant, could give orders, had special duties, might get killed in battle.

My Love of Destruction

About one thing there can be no doubt, and that was my love of destruction. I loved the idea of explosions, loved throwing dirt clods and watching them blow up when they hit the pavement, the dust dispersing like smoke. I loved throwing imaginary hand grenades and making the sound of the explosion: cheeks suddenly puffed, rasping sound in the depths of the throat. I loved the idea of killing Germans. When I washed dishes, I loved to watch the drinking glasses sink as they filled up with water, imagining them to be ships sinking. And ever since childhood, to get to sleep, I have often used a fantasy of attacking a long line of "tanks and armored vehicles" (to use another phrase from those wartime broadcasts) making their way up a narrow road cut into the side of a stone cliff, an immense dropoff below, and a towering wall of stone above. I and a small band of guerrillas have prepared huge boulders along the top of the cliff, and at a signal, we lever them over the edge. They plummet down, crushing flat the vehicles they fall on, along with the drivers and troops inside. Then the entire line of vehicles to the rear is stopped in its tracks and our band shoots down on them from the clifftops, often hitting the gas tanks of the trucks and setting these vehicles on fire, the troops running in terror for the rear and being cut down by our machine guns. To this day this fantasy has always ensured a way for me to get to sleep at night. Another equally effective fantasy is a flat terrain in the French countryside, a two-lane asphalt road down the middle. It is winter, a light snow has sifted into the grass of the meadows, German military vehicles every once in a while make their way swiftly along this road. I am hidden in a hedge that runs along the road at a distance of perhaps a hundred yards. I have a bazooka or anti-tank rifle of some sort. A little olive-colored open-top car with high-ranking Nazi officers comes by, I aim, fire, destroy it and its occupants completely. But half-tracks and other cars soon come along, and, seeing what has happened, start raking the hedge with bursts of gunfire. Fortunately, I have dug a deep shaft into the earth, and then a tunnel that leads to an escape hole far off in the meadow. I lie hidden in the indentation I have dug below the thick hedge, the depth being just sufficient to protect me from the bullets. The German vehicles drive back and forth along the road, occasionally firing bursts at various places along the hedge. I lie there, snug in the cold, knowing that if they send men to investigate the hedge up close, I need simply open the trap door to my tunnel and escape. This is another guaranteed soporific.

Making Comic Books

World War II comics were everywhere — or, I should say, fighting the Germans and Japanese was a theme in many comics, regardless who the heroes of the comics were. In school, we drew endless imitations of these. We tried to make entire miniature comic books of our own, folding ordinary 8½- by-11-inch sheets of paper in half, then in half again, then cutting the folds and stapling along one edge. We drew successive frames containing pictures just like the real comics.

Without question, the best comic book artist in our class — in the school! — was Orpheus Staples. No one could draw the exciting cruelty of war better than he. With his stubby, blunt, greasy pencil, he drew the Jap tank being hit by one of our shells and the Japs inside being blown apart, heads, arms flying from bloody torsos. Not only did he draw Nazis getting stabbed with

bayonets but he showed the bayonets *coming out of their backs, with blood dripping down*, their arms thrown up in the air, as they cried "Ach, Himmel!" In the comics, every German soldier cried "Himmel!" or "Ach, Himmel!" or "Mein Gott!" as he died. When the Germans were killing somebody, they always said "Schweinhund!" And when a German officer reprimanded one of his subordinates, he always said, "Dummkopf!" *We* knew how Nazis talked. The Japs always died shrieking in agony: *A-a-a-a-a-rghhhh!* a cry which, we knew, expressed their anguish at having been Evil all their lives, and at now being punished for it.

Orpheus drew fighter planes banking and firing, our fighters shooting down theirs: he showed the bullets ripping into the fuselage, then showed the plane going down in flames and the Jap trapped inside and burning alive, smoke billowing up in the distance from where the plane finally crashed. He drew our pilots suspended below their parachutes, and, sometimes, Oh, no!, being shot full of holes by enemy planes. He drew far more planes than tanks, I suppose, because planes were more exciting.

He breathed heavily as he drew, biting his lip or opening his mouth and keeping the tip of his tongue tucked in the corner of his mouth. He smelled of pencil lead and oil and sweat, his fingers always dirty. Frame after frame he went. We huddled around his desk, watching. I can see those pencil lines of his even now. We: "No, make *all* those guys blow up! Yeah! Now make that guy have his arm blown off. Yeah, make the stump ragged like that. That's really good, Orpheus!"

I thought: If only I could just make one good drawing, just one that looked like a person, that looked real the way Orpheus's did, then maybe the Bad Feeling would go away. I could draw planes from head-on and the side, and at a couple of oblique angles, with bullets coming from the wing guns; I spent an inordinate amount of time on the five-pointed star that was on the wing tips and in the fuselage side toward the back, because I liked the challenge of drawing the star without lifting the pencil from the paper and getting the star as symmetrical and uniform as possible; I could draw upright wooden stakes on which native prisoners were impaled, but couldn't get their bodies right as they were in their death throes once they had been dropped onto the stake and it went through their backs. My tanks were clumsy; I was no good at soldiers.

War Toys

Most toys in those days had something to do with the war. I had toy fighter planes and bombers of all sizes, from an inch or so to a foot or more in length, all made out of plastic or cheap cast metal. The feathery fringes of metal from the casting mold still showed in some cases. When you were in bed, you could use your knees to make a mountain of the blankets, then land the little plastic planes — B-17s, Mustangs — on the side, then have them take off again,

War Surplus

In my endless pursuit of Gadgets, I was irresistibly drawn to War Surplus stores, which were also called "Army-Navy" stores. I could never pass one without stopping to look at the rows of used medals and insignias in the front window, the web ammunition belts, spent cartridges — the spell of these, with the odor of burnt powder when you stuck your nose in the end, the officialness of it, the thought that the powder had exploded, the bullet was who-knew-where, maybe it had killed someone , the look of the brass — and perhaps a few spent artillery shells, plus the pocket knives along the bottom of the front window, all the blades, screwdrivers, can openers, miniature saws, scissors, and whatnot, opened for your tantalization. Inside, these places smelled of old

blankets and tents. There were sheepskin-lined aviator's jackets and boots, ammunition belts, every conceivable kind of knapsack and carrying bag, including one that for some reason I was particularly fond of, called a "satchel pouch", which you slung over your shoulder. Everything had straps, extra pockets, buckles, fasteners. My parents called a knapsack, a "rucksack". ("Haversack" was a less common name than "knapsack".) This stuff was advertised in the comics. There were also all kinds of military flashlights, warning lights, signal lights. My favorite was the L-shaped light which clipped onto life jackets. It was supposedly water proof. It had a round red plastic lens which didn't seem to give out much light. And this — the fact that it was supposed to be bright, but wasn't, so there must be an important, secret, military reason why — plus the peculiar shape of the whole thing, and its white plastic housing, made it the most desirable of all the flashlights I saw.

I would sometimes buy or otherwise get hold of a brass military medal, something with an eagle holding arrows in its talons, or one with the crossed rifles of the infantry. I would take it home and polish it with the greenish cream my mother used to polish the silverware. I liked the fact there were little crumbs of some sort in it, and the smell, which I thought of as a medicinal smell trying to be nice. The trouble was, the polish dried in all the little intricate places where the polishing rag couldn't reach, leaving a hard green powder.

The two most popular items with us kids were webbed infantryman's belts and canteens. The belts had a big clasp in front that was so simple to fasten: turn it sideways and hook it in, that's all there was to it. (The metal made a nice click when you did that.) The belts had grommet holes from which you could hang your war-surplus canteen. We considered it almost mandatory to have a canteen, why I'm not sure. The canteens had a screw cap with a chain attached to prevent it from getting lost. We did, in fact, fill our canteens with water and even drink out of them (amazing how often you needed to take a drink when you had a canteen on your belt), but the water was always too warm and tasted of metal.

I don't recall having any military clothes — parts of a uniform, etc. — except for a white sailor hat. These were popular among the kids, but they had to have the right shape, namely, the with normally vertical sides bent out and down, like in the movies. We used rubber bands to accomplish this: whenever we weren't wearing the hat, rubber bands were stretched around the cap to hold the sides down in the proper position.

Bullets

The War Surplus stores didn't sell live ammunition, of course, and it was a very rare occasion when one of us actually got his hands on any. For us a bullet meant a cartridge, lead plus shell, although we knew this was incorrect: the bullet was, properly speaking, the lead part only. We always kept an eye out for cartridges — in the street, along dirt paths — and when we found one, almost always, it was a .22 cartridge. But any kind of small arms or rifle ammunition was fascinating to me. I suppose the reason was the thought, the *idea*, of the deadly power that was contained in this small metal cylinder. It could kill someone, and yet it allowed you to hold it in your hand. It was so neat, and shiny, and symmetrical, and precise. Yet if you did the right thing, a certain thing, suddenly you had a beautiful and precise violence, with smoke. A cartridge, for me, was full of promise. I liked the blunt, round head of the bullet, the pock-marked lead, the burnished brass of the shell. Most of us had a collection of shells, from .22s up to .30 or .50 caliber machine gun shells.

The spent shells all had a little rectangular notch in the little round button — the firing cap — at the center of the rear. We knew that this was where the firing pin had hit when the trigger had been pulled, causing the powder inside to explode and sending the bullet on hits way. We heard that if you took a cartridge that hadn't been fired, clamped it in a vice in your worship, then hit the button with a nail, the cartridge would fire. But, fortunately, we were scared enough of the consequences never to have tried this.

The Pornography of Death[1]

The war, like the horror comics, could always be counted on to bring you the special excitement that came from contemplating unimaginably horrible things. Once I read a *Life* magazine or *Reader's Digest* story about a nurse who had become a hero for risking her life to help the wounded. One day she stepped outside the hospital tent where she was working just as a shell landed nearby. The article described how one of her legs was blown off, and how she lay there on the ground, blood bubbling from between her lips. I read those paragraphs over and over, imagining the beautiful woman, whom I pictured as being a blonde, with only a stump on one side, the blood pouring out of it and sinking into the dirt. I tantalized myself trying to imagine where the missing part of her leg was, and, most of all, what it felt like to suddenly be without one of your legs. I would have given anything to know, to have experienced it temporarily, with just an idea of what the pain was like.

But my parents would sometimes not let me look at a page or even a whole issue of *Life* because of the cruelty of a scene depicted. I think this was the case in the famous photo of the resistance fighters, a teenage boy and girl, being executed by the Nazis, the boy already hanging, the girl waiting for the noose.

VE Day

Then, suddenly, we heard that the war was over. That wasn't exactly right: what was over was the war in Europe, and the day this occurred — May 8, 1945 was called "VE Day" (Victory in Europe Day). We kids were elated. We collected pots and pans and spoons and whatever else we could from our mothers' kitchens, and had a parade, marching from Beaird's house, along the pathway at the edge of the Woods to Clinton St., then down that street to I don't know where, banging on our pots and pans, and shouting, "The war is over, the war is over!" For reasons I can't fathom, VJ Day (Aug. 14, 1945) was hardly noticed by us.

The Gas Explosion

One evening — in memory, it seems to have been a cold November evening — I was in the den. My mother had just put something on the stove for dinner, talking to herself as she did so, as usual, then rushed upstairs to bathe my brother. My father was due home from work any minute. The house seemed warm, the lights, the smells of the cooking — made it seem like a happy home.

1. This is the title of an essay I read in the fifties or sixties, perhaps in a New Directions paperback. I cannot recall the name of the author.
"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., 9/1/05

I suddenly realized that I smelled gas. Occasionally you could smell gas after my mother had lit the oven, because she had to turn on the gas, then stick a wooden match down through a little hole in the bottom of the oven chamber to light the burners below. But this time the smell persisted and seemed to grow stronger. I went into the kitchen. There were two or three pots boiling away on top of the stove. Everything seemed fine. I opened the oven door, and the next moment I knew that something had happened. A moment later, I heard a loud *whump!* Then, in the next moment I realized my eyes had just closed.

I don't know if I screamed or shouted, but in any case my mother must have heard the explosion, because in a minute she was running into the kitchen. It was a few seconds before I fully understood that the oven had exploded in my face. She was beside herself, called Dr. Gardner. I don't remember if he came, or simply recommended Dr. Hecht, a doctor in White Plains, but as soon as my father arrived, he drove me to Dr. Hecht's. I only remember my face feeling hot, and that I felt close to my father, proud, special, because something serious had happened to me which made me special and, at the same time, enabled me to show how brave I could be. I talked man to man with him — we men together. Dr. Hecht had me sit on the sheet-covered table in his office. There was a smell of antiseptic, as usual in doctors' offices. He was a nice man, bald on top, young looking, with glasses. He was obviously concerned, but was putting on a brave manner that included respect for me, I sensed.

I seem to remember being given a needle, only this time I took it quite well, probably because this time it was no doubt really necessary. And because they were not waiting for me to complain, waiting to put me down for my fear of needles. This time they were really on my side. Then he covered my face with a kind of Vaseline-like grease, and proceeded to apply bandages over it, mentioning several times that he did not think there would be any scarring. I had not seen myself in a mirror before the bandages went on, but I heard my mother say several times how the explosion had burned away my eyebrows and all my hair in front. The miracle, of course, was, as she and everyone else remarked, that in the fraction of a second between the igniting of the gas and the moment at which the explosion reached my face, my eyes had closed. They were unharmed. Dr. Hecht applied one strip after the other, talking all the while to keep me calm.

Throughout all this, there was no significant pain, and, meantime, I had become a sudden center of attention. They kept me home from school for a number of days. I remember hiding in the bushes in the vacant lot next to our house, watching the kids come home. They, in turn, saw a kid who had gotten ready for Halloween weeks too late, because my entire head was covered with the white bandage, with openings only for eyes, nose, and mouth.

I think I eventually went to school with part of the bandages still in place. No doubt teachers and classmates had been well briefed about not laughing at me, and, I must say, I remember nothing but being treated kindly, even deferentially, by the kids.

Dr. Hecht had done his work well, because, when the bandages were removed, there was no scarring at all.

Another Trip to Switzerland

One day in early 1949, my mother announced that we were going to Switzerland that summer. We would travel by ocean liner from New York to Le Havre, then drive across France to Switzerland. I thought immediately of the weight such a trip would place on me — all those relatives to be good for, no kids to play with, no Reservoir, no place to escape to. I made it clear to her that I had no interest in going to Switzerland or any other place. I wanted to stay at home and

build huts. (That spring may have been the time when we decided to build a hut on stilts.) If I went to goddamn Switzerland, I would risk losing my place in the gang. I seized every opportunity to show my mother how unhappy I was about the prospect.

A New Car for the Trip

That year we got a new car — another Ford because my father believed that Ford made good cars. Part of the reason why my father didn't buy a new car earlier may have been that no private cars were made between 1941 and 1945, due to the War effort. The car was black and had a new-car smell of plastic and new rubber as it sat in the cool garage. I don't know what happened to the old car, which we now referred to as the " '36 Ford", to distinguish it from the new " '49 Ford".

The radio in the new one had round chrome knobs — very modern! — each with perpendicular cross pieces, presumably so that your fingers wouldn't slip when you turned the knob. The car was shaped like a smooth, streamlined box. There were fenders like those on the '36 Ford that were obviously supposed to cover the wheels, but there was no wide running board that anyone could stand on and ride along on. Here, only a narrow running board clearly designed to keep people *off*. When my father started this car, you could hardly hear the engine.

We were going to take the car *with us* on the trip, a cause of considerable excitement. Take a car *on a boat*? How were such things allowed? Wouldn't it make the boat sink, all that weight? Suppose the car got wet? Suppose it fell into the ocean while they were loading it on or taking it off? What would hold it in place when the boat rocked? All these potential problems at least made something about the trip exciting.

Needless to say, my parents weren't about to postpone the trip so that I could build huts, and they certainly weren't going to let me stay at home alone, or pay someone to take care of me. So it became clear that, whether I liked it or not, I was going to Switzerland that summer.

(It is measure of the absence of crime in Valhalla that as part of the preparation for the trip, my mother called the police department to ask them to keep an eye on the house. When I asked her what that meant, she said, confidentally, that they would drive by it a couple of times a day. That was all that was needed. The house was not burglarized. For that matter, as far as I know, there were no burglaries in the neighborhood in all the years I lived there.)

A Diary

At the start of the year, my mother gave me a diary, suggesting that I record events on our trip. It was a small, black notebook with lined pages. I still have it, and though it is a bit worse for wear from having been stored too long in damp basements over the years, many of the entries, written in ink and pencil, are still legible. The cover says "Westinghouse 1949 Diary You can be *sure* if it's Westinghouse." The first few entries are: Mon., Feb. 7, is "Large Math assignment due"; for Fri., Feb. 18, "Social Studies Outline on Comm" (I don't know what "Comm" stood for); for Thurs., Feb. 24, "David's [my brother's] birthday", and for the next day, a repeat of the Social Studies entry.

For Mon., July 4, I wrote: "Shot off my fireworks at night with all the kids. Had lots of fun. Rockets were nice. Also Roman Candles."

Aboard the De Grasse

Our liner was the De Grasse. We left on Thurs., July 7. When you stood on the deck and looked down at the figures on the dock, you felt you were so high up that you might as well be in

a tall building. When we finally began to move — when the huge ropes had been thrown down to the men on the dock, and the deep whistles had given their blasts and all the passengers held on to the rail as though we were on a roller coaster about to set off at fifty miles an hour — the movement was so steady, so completely free of any kind of rocking motion, that I seriously thought the ship must be a building mounted on underwater rails. But then, as I stood at the railing, I thought that anything this big, this steady was all the more likely to sink because it clearly couldn't float once it had left its underwater track.

I liked the orderliness of everything on the ship. The railings were smooth and rounded, like furniture. Everywhere was the company insignia: *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique* . I liked to say the words over to myself because they sounded so French. Here, for once, the usual adults weren't in control, even though we had to do what the ship's rules said. I loved the smell of wine-soaked wood which became for me the French smell. I would think of the car somewhere down below swaying back and forth, bouncing on its tires. But in truth, you had to look at the horizon, you had to concentrate, to tell if the boat was moving from side to side at all. Everything was orderly, under the control of machines. I never got seasick — possibly because I hated vomiting so much that I simply willed myself not to let it happen.

I didn't take to all French food, especially not the fish, I think because of the smell. And so a little ritual began each day at lunch when the waiter came to take our order. After writing down, on his pad, what my parents wanted, he would look at me, say something like, "Et vous, monsieur?" and I would reply, everyone at the table already knowing what I would say, "Pas de poisson!" [No fish!].

My diary entry for the first day was: Thurs., July 7: "Left pier 88 at 12:00 Noon. Perfect weather. Very large meals. Cabin no. 429. Went to bed early (8:15 p.m.)." There were only four, closely-spaced lines for each date, and so the daily record of the trip was rather sparse: Mon., July 11 [still aboard the liner], "Got up late. A little cloudy. 2 kites were flown..."

Every afternoon there was a dance in one of the ship's lounges. These events were closed to kids of my age, but one afternoon, I think with my mother, I got to stand inside the doorway of one of the lounges. The bandstand was only a few feet away. There was a sax player standing in front of a chromium microphone stand, another sax player on his other side; piano at the far end of the stage, bass and drums in the rear, to my right. The air was filled with smoke and the sound of voices and laughter and that magnificent smell of stale wine. Suddenly the band — it was probably called "the orchestra" — began to play. I saw no signal from any of the musicians; there was no announcement. The sax players simply raised their shiny instruments together (they knew how to do this because they were musicians!) and suddenly a deafening, glorious noise filled the air. I thought, "God, to be allowed to make a noise like that!" People began jumping around on the floor; the women got even more excited. And I stood there in the midst of all that sound and cigarette smoke and bodies moving around and wanted nothing more than to spend my life in places like this.

In the evening they showed movies. I remember *A Letter to Three Wives* and, far more interesting to me because it was French, *La Cage aux Rossignols* (*The Cage of Nightingales*) . Throughout my life, I thought the title was *Le Sau aux Rossignols* (the Mon., July 7 entry in the diary says only, "Saw a French picture. was pretty good", with no title given), but then J.S., in the course of editing this book, informed me that there is no film by that title in any of the online movie databases, and that furthermore "sau" is not a French word in any standard dictionary. And yet throughout the years, the title stuck in my mind; I still hear myself *pronouncing* it. In memory, I saw the male lead, a handsome man with slicked-back hair parted near the middle, standing in an

upper-class room with palm fronds and a bird cage; I remembered the black and silver (not white!) quality of the film, and that strange excitement — these are sophisticated modern people who know how to *live*! — that French films always gave me.

In 2010, while reading about other foreign films in Google, I came upon the correct title, *La Cage aux Rossignols* (1945). But I soon realized that the images I remembered must have been from an entirely different film, because Wikipedia's description of *La Cage*... (July 29, 2010) is as follows:

"In France, in the 1930s, a supervisor at a rehabilitation house awakens difficult teens' inner musical tendencies by forming a choir, despite the director's skepticism. Later, this experience is reported in a novel in a major newspaper. The history of the 'Cage of Nightingales' is directly inspired by that of an actual educational centre, called Ker Goat, where Jacques Dietz, Roger Riffier and their teams worked to help children in difficulty through choral singing and innovative teaching methods."

We first stopped at Plymouth, England (sea gulls, milling of passengers, dock workers), then crossed the Channel to Le Havre. Here I saw some of the reality behind all the war fantasies I and the other kids had lived on, namely, the bombed submarine pens. The twisted, broken-off steel rods inside the concrete, the huge pieces of concrete at grotesque sloping angles, half collapsed, seemed to me like another kind of engineering, no less important than the kind my father worked on. My parents shook their heads at the sight, I kept my nose glued to the car window, exulting in all that magnificent destruction. The war had been real! There were real bullet holes and shell holes in the walls of many of the other buildings, too.

In France

The Sweet Smell of the Countryside

As we drove across the flat countryside of France, I noticed a sweet, bathroom smell in the air. My father explained that it was the smell of human manure on the farm fields — the French, unlike the Americans, used it as fertilizer. He said the barrel-shaped wagons we passed every once in a while, pulled by plodding horses, contained the manure. There were dark streaks on the wood of these barrels, where the stuff was leaking out. But even knowing its source, I loved the smell. It, like that of the stale wine on the De Grasse, seemed to me quintessentially French.

The Hotel Burgundy

We spent a couple of days in Paris, staying at the Hotel Burgundy, a place that terrified me from the moment I set foot in it. It smelled old; I felt that a ray of sunshine hadn't entered the place in years. The lobby had an old-fashioned cage elevator on the left as you entered. The reception desk was straight ahead. We went up to our room, I threw myself on the bed and began to scream. I think I kept repeating over and over, "I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here!" It was clear that my parents were worried about this sudden attack of despair. But I was inconsolable, the place was too musty, too old, too dark, too strange. The bed was old-fashioned, made of tubular metal shaped to look like plant stems at the head and the foot, not smooth wood like beds at home. The mattress was too soft, it creaked, the mirrors were chipped, the wardrobe far too mysterious (why didn't they have closets, like normal people?). I don't recall another hotel so I assume that somehow I managed to get through the night there.

The Eiffel Tower

The next day, my father took us up the Eiffel tower, and that made me forget the terrors of the Hotel Burgundy. If he hadn't been there, I'm sure I would have been very frightened of going up in any elevator that went that high. Afterward, when we were standing on the plaza below, and I asked him for the hundredth time, I'm sure, how tall the Tower was, and what would happen if you threw something off the top, he said that once someone had thrown a piece of sugar from the top, and that it had hit a man below on the nose with such force that it had taken his nose off.

A Pair of Beggars

Then we all went on a carriage ride through the city, and I got another shock, worse even than the first few hours at the Hotel Burgundy. As we were stopped somewhere on the Champs-Elysées I heard voices. I turned and looked down, and there, almost climbing up the little step on the side of the carriage, was a beggar, with another one close behind him. Their faces were horrible, I can still see them to this day, the faces of madmen, with teeth missing, and the urgency of their plea for money making them even more grotesque. I think my father told them to go away, or maybe he just ordered the driver to move on. Perhaps he gave them money, but I don't recall it. I had never known anyone who was truly, desperately poor until then, had never known anyone who was ugly with poverty and want and need. They had almost entered our world, meaning, in this case, the interior of the carriage. "Help! Give us! We *need*!" It may have merely been their haggard appearance, the mad expressions on their faces, and that if they had been properly dressed and approached us politely and said words that sounded as though they were not desperate, but simply could use a little help, then I wouldn't have been frightened at all. But this was different.

The Pissoirs

On the city streets, I was intrigued by the pissoirs. Why, in Paris they let you go to the bathroom in the middle of the sidewalk! The pungent smell seemed another smell of France: this was the kind of thing they did there, along with think of sex much more than we did, and smoke cigarettes that smelled much different than ours

The Tour de France

If the two beggars had been an example of raw animal need, then the Tour de France was for me at least an example of raw, animal energy. All I remember now is that we were in some sort of a large open space, with a large oval track with grass in the middle — it may have been simply a park — and people were exclaiming, "the Tour de France!" We waited, and then suddenly, out of a side road, came this crowd of cyclists, hunkered down over their machines, and the air was suddenly filled with the whisper, the whirr of the spokes and the sound of tires on the pavement. Here they came, down the track. You could see the tense muscles of their arms as they gripped the handlebars, which pointed backwards because they were racing bicycles (I had no idea why that enabled you to go faster), the cyclists' legs pumping relentlessly like machines, the little metal bottles of water attached to the frames. The riders stared straight ahead, their faces sheer, animal determination. My father said that the race lasted for days. I couldn't believe that anyone could pedal like that for so long. They were like beings from another world, in their bright, skin-tight orange and red and yellow uniforms. Once in a while you would hear a grunt of effort. The crowd cheered, they took no notice. Pedal, pedal, crouch low and pedal, nothing else matters!

On the Swings

Another time we stopped somewhere in which there were swings. My brother and I immediately got on them, and I in my exultation, kept shouting a French word I had picked up, *Attention!* After a while, an old guy came ambling over, and, grumbling, asked my mother, in French, why I kept saying that, was there danger? (My mother translated what he said.) And we just kept pumping higher and higher, and I may have said something like, "No, nothing's wrong! *Attention! Attention!*"

French Things to Drink

And then there was the discovery of French things to drink, *European* things that no one in America even knew about. A kind of grape juice was one — "like wine only with no alcohol" my parents explained. But yet not like grape juice either. So for all practical purposes it was a type of wine, and one that I was allowed to drink, just like an adult. Even better was Vichy water, beginning with the name. But then, even better, was that it had no taste. All you got was the prickle of all those bubbles in your throat, sometimes so sharp that it made it hard to swallow. To me it was the essence of something European, something French. My parents said it was "mineral" water and I thought immediately that it must have no taste because of all the minerals in it — after all, stones didn't have a taste. And although the thought was far beyond me at the time, I know now that part of the appeal of this new beverage was that it was something without much going for it in itself, but extremely important because of what people thought of it, and not merely people, but the kind of people who were important, and therefore — it tasted good! Precisely because it wasn't sweet or flavored, it was that much better. However, there was one French drink that our entire family hated, and that was French coffee. For us it was almost undrinkable. My brother and I would remark endlessly on how bad it tasted. Like kerosene! Like gasoline! (Though we had never actually tasted either (for us kerosene was still merely what you used to make torches out of cat-tails).) We understood that the coffee was so bad because of the war. One of the things that happened when you fought a war was that you could no longer get good coffee.

Switzerland

My Father's House

And then we were in Switzerland. We entered at Geneva, and here too there were reminders of the war: not bullet holes and shell holes in buildings, but some of the defenses that the Swiss had installed to keep the Germans out. Sticking out of the rocks on one side of a narrow road we drove along were gray guns — artillery. Then, in the green meadow opposite, at the base of a mountain, we saw row upon row of tank traps (my father had to explain what the vaguely pyramid shaped pieces of stone were, and why they stopped tanks; I think he said they were called "dragon's teeth"). Later, I heard that the Swiss had dug, or, rather, blasted, caves into the Alps, and stored huge amounts of food and weapons there, and that even though Hitler could have conquered Switzerland if he had wanted to, the price would have been very high, since every male over 18 had a rifle and a supply of ammunition in his house, and was required to undergo two weeks of military training every summer.

We stayed at my father's house in Wangen-an-der-Aare, a few miles from Berne, the capital city. The house was owned by my aunt, Tante Rosalie (my father's sister), an old woman with gray hair worn in a bun, who didn't say much, but smiled a lot, I assume because she didn't know English and yet didn't want to appear unfriendly to us boys. She served wonderful breakfasts —

café au lait, bread, butter, and rich strawberry jam with big lumps of the sweet fruit in it, full of crunchy seeds, much better than an American breakfast because on the one hand it was so little — just coffee and bread and butter and jam — but on the other hand this little was allowed, it was considered enough, and furthermore, the jam was better than ours.

Renting a room in the house was a Mr. Domichek, a man of uncertain origin and background, according to my mother. I remember him primarily because he smoked European cigarettes — Virginias, Sailors' — the package of the former stating that they were made of *American* tobacco. In fact, as I gradually learned, being very interested in the subject, just about all European cigarettes claimed to be made of American tobacco, yet we had never heard of any of the brands in America! Mr. Domichek might also have smoked Galois, the French brand, which I loved because the smoke smelled so awful. He kept an extra pack or two of Virginias in the basement of the house — he acted as handyman to my aunt — and I found it irresistible to steal one of his cigarettes as often as I could convince myself he wouldn't notice. Some of the best moments of the trip were seeing the green package of these forbidden cigarettes lying on the workbench, hearing the paper crinkle when the cigarette was gently rolled between my fingers, then smelling the delicious smoke when I lit the end.

Mr. Domichek raised pigeons also, the coop located in the middle of the backyard, which was backed by a long mound, parallel to the house, that ran along the backs of the neighboring houses also. On top of it were the railroad tracks for the local train.

In addition to providing a steady supply of cigarettes, Mr. Domichek also provided my first introduction to the European bike. This, like virtually everything else European except French coffee, was much better, in my eyes, than the American variety. A European bike you could pedal *backwards* and it didn't stop you, as it did ours, since that was how our brakes worked. But their pedals just went around and around in the backwards direction; in fact it was apparently what bike riders did for the hell of it when they were coasting (why were they allowed this useless activity?). If they wanted to stop, they squeezed the hand brakes that caused "calipers" to rub against the rim of the front wheel. More primitive than ours, and therefore better!

Mr. Domichek and a couple of his friends would sometimes play cards in the evening, he sitting there, eyeing his cards while smoke from the cigarette in the corner of his mouth curled up and got into his eye and made him squint. Sometimes the radio was on, and, in memory at least, I remember being able to hear "Ghost Riders in the Sky" as sung by Frankie Lane.

When I was sure no one could hear me, I would continue trying to yodel.

I distinctly remember my father showing me his rifle and box of ammunition and uniform, all of which were kept in the closet of an upstairs bedroom. (I had no doubt worn him out with pleading to see these things.) He let me hold the rifle and aim it. He repeated again that every Swiss man had the same military gear in his home, so that he could be called out to fight an invader at a moment's notice.

Across the street from my father's house lived a farming family. However, their fields were not adjacent to their property, but instead on the outskirts of the town. Somehow my parents arranged for me to go with them and help, and so, early in the morning, I climbed aboard the horse-drawn wagon they had, and he, his wife, and I (I don't remember any kids being present although in all likelihood they must have had to help during the summer months) rocked along through the streets. Once in a while he let me hold the reins, which gave me a wonderful feeling of power — to hold those leather straps in hand, they just barely touching the horse's back, then to pull on one or the other in order to turn the horse, or on both to make him stop. This vast animal

right in front of us, ambling along, his big rump (from which sometimes, unfortunately, grotesquely, there issued something I did not like to look at or think about — if only there were a way this could be done privately, out of sight), this great beast perfectly willing to do our bidding! And I thought again, as during our drive across France, how the smell of horse manure makes the world different.

At the field, we picked potatoes, I think throwing them into the back of the wagon, the rich earth having been loosened before we arrived. The farmer and his wife talked cheerfully among themselves as they worked; I don't think they spoke any English, although they certainly attempted to be friendly to me. In mid-morning they took a break — not a coffee or tea break, but a wine break. The wine wasn't red or clear, but instead a reddish orange, like gasoline, which I immediately assumed was because it was Swiss wine. They let me have some. (In Switzerland, my mother had told me, the farmers gave their children wine at an early age, sometimes in order to quiet them if they were crying, a practice which often led to their becoming alcoholics, or so my mother said).

While we drank our wine and sat in the dirt in the shade of the wagon, the farmer plucked a white grub from the soil and gave me to understand that these were pests that they were constantly trying to get rid of. Whereupon he squeezed the head off with his thick, dirty thumbnail and tossed the pieces aside. He found another one, and did the same, with a casual laugh, as though to express the fact that they were so easy to kill, and yet always were present. He was clear that (unlike me) he felt not the slightest concern about any pain the creature might feel while it was being decapitated.

Down the street from my father's house lived a kid whose name, at least in memory, was Kübbeli. Although initially my brother and I could speak not a word of his language (which I assume now was some dialect of Schweitzerdeutsch) and he not a word of ours, nevertheless within a matter of hours we were able to communicate. Of course in saying that I must keep in mind that the subjects of our conversation were limited and basic, concerned solely with matters pertaining to play.

My parents spoke the Swiss dialect of German ("Schweizerdeutsch") with Rosalie, I am sure, but in the stores standard German was universally understood. To this day, in my mind's ear, I can hear my father's asking the young woman at the cash register, after we had bought something, "Und was macht das, Fräulein?" ["And what makes that [how much is that], Miss?"]

The Moons of Jupiter

We visited my grandparents' apartment in Berne, at 8 Fellenbergstrasse, another of those addresses and phone numbers that I remember after for more than half a century, even though I can't remember, and have no interest in remembering, the password of my web site that I defined only a few weeks ago. The apartment was on the top floor, spacious, you could run between the rooms, with a little porch from which you could look down on the city. Immediately in back was a church, and every hour the bell rang, a deafening clangor that made your ears feel like a piece of paper were being dragged across your eardrums. I was amazed that my grandparents, and especially my grandfather, who was a professor, could stand living like that, year in, year out, but they apparently thought it was quite charming.

Both grandparents were obviously delighted to have their daughter and her family come and visit. One night my grandfather set up his telescope on the balcony and showed us moons of Jupi-

ter. There they were: two tiny dots of light next to a glowing bigger dot in the inky blackness. It meant absolutely nothing to me. It may have been around this time that my mother revealed that, not only did my grandfather do the calendar each year, he also thought Einstein was wrong. Furthermore, she said, he had told him so once at a meeting. The rest of the world was easily led by famous people, but my grandfather knew the truth.

I continued to think that, in person, as in the photographs my mother had shown me before, he looked a little like Hitler.

Many years later (in 1987) my uncle Sigmund (to be introduced below) and cousin Christiane wrote a genealogy of the Mauderli family. It included a description of my grandfather's life that I think is worth repeating here. The author of the following passage is my uncle, who had the same name as my grandfather.

> My father Sigmund spent the years of his youth up to the end of compulsory school attendance with his siblings on the mountain ranches of Riedbrunnen and Schönenwerd. From the high meadow slope he had a view of the open landscape of the Solothurn and Aargau Jura mountain ranges far to the east and west. The silhouettes of the Solothurn and Aargau Jura mountain ranges before the lit-up night sky and the twinkle of the night sky fascinated him from early youth on. And when in 1887 a great comet entered the visual field of his small binoculars, his soul was filled with awe and quiet admiration. He discovered and saw many a riddle in the night sky. In this time, his decision to become an astronomer matured. He turned out to devote a great part of his life in astronomy.
>
> Although his mother, who took care of a small estate, lost her husband when my father was 13 years old and was solely responsible for the family, she made it possible for my father — when she recognized his gift — to enter a seminary and the Kantonschule Solothurn, together with his brother. After a short time teaching as a primary and secondary teacher, he was attracted to further studies, first at the University of Lausanne, then to the University in Zurich. His astronomy professor was Professor Wolfer at the Eidgenössische Sternwarte [National Observatory]. But the young astronomer could not at once devote himself to his beloved sciences. He first became a mathematics teacher at the Kantonsschule Solothurn. He built a school conservatory, where he he knew how to awaken the enthusiasm of the young students. Although he enjoyed being a teacher, he wanted to work in science. He went on sabbatical to prepare for his habilitation [doctorate] at the University of Bern. In his dissertation, "On Commensurabilities in the Solar System", he again dealt with a problem in celestial mechanics. He remained a teacher at the Kantonsschule Solothurn and was at the same time an associate professor at the University of Bern. During this time, he also overcame the greatest resistance against the establishment of a university conservatory and the introduction of institutionalized astronomical instruction. Thanks to his relentless efforts, the new Astronomical Institute at the Muesmattstrasse in Bern was inaugurated, and my father was promoted to professor. But his teaching was not limited to the university. He held lectures at night school and popular lectures on his beloved astronomy throughout the country. He opened his institute to the public once a week. Beyond these activities, he also took up research.

> ...When he was 70, his teaching career at the University of Bern came to an end. But he did not put his calculator aside, since he stayed mentally and physically fit for a long time. Astronomical computing remained his professional passion into old age.

The Bear Pit

While we were in Berne, my parents took my brother and me to the the Bärengraben, the Bear Pit. You walked up to a thick cement railing, looked down, and there, below, were the bears. They looked like old men in fur coats who were working the crowd. They stood on their hind legs, paws dangling, and waited for the food to come flying down from the tourists. I thought (as I always did at zoos), "What a dreadful life!" The boredom, the having to, well, behave like an appreciative bear all day before a bunch of gawking humans, instead of being out in the wild, killing things.

We were also taken to see the clock tower in the center of Berne, in which, as each hour struck, various mechanical figures came out. To this day, I can hear my mother pronouncing the name: the "*Ziehglockenturm*!"

Those Little European Cars!

Probably the greatest pleasure of our visit to Berne was driving around the city in Uncle Sigmund's little car. My brother and I had never seen cars as small as European cars. I felt instinctively that the cars were small because the Europeans were better than us. Furthermore, since riding around in a little car gave you a greater sensation of speed than riding around in a big car, which ours was, relatively, I thought that European cars were faster. Faster and smaller meant better. It might have occurred to me also that because of the Second World War, and all the bombing, the Swiss couldn't yet afford to have big cars, although we knew that Switzerland had only been bombed once, accidentally, by the Allies. I was particularly intrigued by the direction signals that came out of the frame between the front and back doors. I am not sure that our Ford had direction signals of any kind, but certainly not like this. These were little orange plastic arms, narrow plastic triangles like flags, and when Uncle Sigmund touched a button or moved a lever, they snapped out horizontally, with a little *thunk*. They had a round light at the tip. My brother and I studied these objects, how they merged flush with the surface when they snapped back in.

A Hermit's Cave

We made several trips within the country, one of them to the Lake of Thun. I remember how I was struck by a hermit's cave we visited in the hills above it. The view was magnificent, of course, and since it was summer, the temperature in the cave was pleasantly cool. But what I couldn't stop thinking about was the story of this old, bearded man who had chosen to *do without*, in particular, to live *all alone*. The admiration of the women in the tourist crowd for that bearded old man who had *sacrificed so much* seemed to be boundless. (My hermit tendencies may explain my attraction, in my teenage years, to the life of mountain men.)

Searching for the Meaning of Life in a Walking Cane

At some point, my father bought for me, or I somehow acquired, a walking cane for use on the family hikes. It was made of dark wood, with a pointed aluminum ferrule on the lower end. I knew, from watching others with canes, that as you walked, you were supposed thrust the lower end out in front of you, then position it on the ground, then lean on it as you walked past where you had positioned it. This was the grown-up way of using a cane. I soon understood that a hike

only really became a hike when you had a cane. I was obsessed with trying to figure out what the right way of *regarding* a cane was. Was there a way of holding it, swinging it, looking at it, that would make me All Right? I pondered its look, the dark wood, I wondered if it would be any different if I wore real hiking clothes while using it — dark gray knickers and long socks and a jacket. Would they, and the cane, make me walk any better, go up steeper hills? Where should I keep the cane at home? What was the right way of thinking about a cane?

My Uncle Hans

On one of our trips we visited my Uncle Hans in Montana, near Lake Geneva. He was a tuberculosis doctor who, my mother made clear, catered to the wealthy. Oh, yes. His wife Jeanne immediately became for me the essence of French woman. Her name was pronounced "Zhanne", which was enough in itself! I was dazzled by her. Not only was she an attractive blonde who spoke English with a tantalizingly sexy French accent, but she was also sophisticated, a word I am not sure I knew then. She smoked cigarettes in a long cigarette holder (I was boundlessly envious of people who could use cigarette holders — was there anything more quintessentially French?), and both she and my uncle drank cocktails, from special cocktail glasses. When she took a sip, she did it as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world, and then, after putting her cigarette holder to her lips, went on to talk with whisps of smoke escaping from her lips.

I met my three cousins, André and Martine, the twins, who were much younger, and Christianne, who I sensed liked me and wished we could spend time together in private. I thought of her as a French woman like her mother in the making, a not yet fully developed sexy French woman. (I took for granted that that was the only thing that French girls wanted to become, sexy French women like Jeanne.)

The Castle of Chillon

On the way home, or on the way to visit Uncle Hans, we visited the Castle of Chillon on Lake Geneva, scene of Byron's poem, "The Prisoner of Chillon", which describes a man who has been a prisoner there so long that when he was released in old age, he doesn't want to leave. (For some reason, I felt I understood immediately how the prisoner could feel that way.)

We were shown the dungeon, with its rows of pillars, and the pillar to which the prisoner had been chained, and the grooves in the stone floor that his feet had worn over the years, and the high windows that provided him his only view of the sky during all his years there, and through which he could hear the sound of the waves. (I thought the dungeon was quite spacious — all in all, not such a bad place to be.)

The Voyage Home on the Île de France

We took the *Île de France* back, driving across France again to Le Havre. Bullet holes, terrible coffee. As before we traveled second class. But we kids discovered a passageway to first class, and so spent our days racing back and forth to the glamorous, forbidden territory.

Among the kids was a blond boy who could speak French and English fluently. He was very good-looking, like a child movie star, and had a deep voice and a kind of tough-guy manner about him which made me think he was some kind of French street kid. Like D at Mohawk camp. When he talked to the adults in his entourage, he frequently switched between French and English right in the middle of a sentence, which amazed us.

A kid who I got to be friends with was named Silvio Venchiarudi. He gave me his address in New York City at the end of the voyage, and I still have it in the diary.

The ship always smelled French, meaning, it always smelled of stale wine — like the cork in a red wine bottle. The company logo was everywhere: *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*, a name which made me want to say it to myself I said over and over, with the best French pronunciation I could muster.

With our discovery of a secret passage from second class to first class, we felt that we had the run of the ship. We would go into the first class salon in the afternoon and watch the rich people having tea and cookies. We would race down the narrow decks along the side of the ship, maybe play some ping pong on their ping-pong table. And I all the while would marvel at the how calm and stable the ship was. You had to stop and look at the horizon and really concentrate to detect the movement of the ship.

One incident on the trip stands out particularly in my memory. About half way through the return trip, we ran into a storm. We could see the waves from any window or porthole, but my brother and I thought it would be much more exciting to go to the front of the ship and watch them from the bow. Which we did. All before us under a gray sky, the vast army of waves marching, the white foam frothing at their tops

We looked down and saw the bow rise up, up, 30, 40 feet, then start to go down, making us fear that this time, certainly, it would go all the way down into the water; but then it changed its direction, although sometimes not before some cold spray came over the bow, drenching us. We were beside ourselves with excitement over the spectacle. Down plunged the bow again, this great steel construction, painted black, with numbers far below to tell how far up the water came: 15, 25, 30, then no numbers were visible. We went down again, this time, surely, the ship wouldn't be able to lift itself, surely, this time — what fear we had was overwhelmed by the excitement, the wind, the glorious waves on their march.

And then, after one particularly deep dive of the bow, the spray again pouring over the bow so that we really had to hold on in order not to be knocked down by it, I heard a voice and turned, and there was my father, drenched, his glasses wet, blinking behind his wet glasses, looking very much different from the father we always knew. He didn't shout at us — well, yes he did, because it was the only way to make himself heard over the noise of wind and water — but he told us in no uncertain terms that this was much too dangerous, and that we were to come back inside right now. We obeyed without complaint, but we knew we had just done something special.

The trip ended with two incidents that my parents considered all too likely, since after all we had to go through the New York docks, and the dockworkers were all crooks. First, my father had his windbreaker jacket stolen — I still remember it: beige, plain, with a zipper — and then when we got home, he discovered that his trouser pocket had been cut by a pickpocket who fortunately didn't have time to remove his wallet. We were back in the United States again.

In the Addresses-Phone Numbers section of my diary, along with names and addresses of some of the kids in the neighborhood, I find an entry for a kid I hung around with on the voyage back: "Silvio Venchiarudi, 297 High Park, Toronto 9, Ontario, Canada"

Sex

First Awareness of the Female Sex

I was fascinated by women before I was fascinated by girls, and the first woman I remember being fascinated by was my second grade teacher, Miss Conro. She was a friend of my mother's,

the two having met when my parents rented the bungalow from her father, old Mr. Conro, the minister[1]. (I remember a visit to his house once: the dark wood mouldings, respectable furniture, a sun porch from which you could look down at Kensico Plaza, below the Dam. I remember his whispy white hair, his gentle yet precise manner, his obvious pleasure at having visitors.)

My mother, with that shake of her head that said boys shouldn't know these things, occasionally mentioned Miss Conro's married name, Mrs. Fornro, but she made clear that we weren't to call her by her married name, since she was divorced, or her husband was dead, or something equally shameful and unmentionable had happened in that area of her life.

Miss Conro sometimes came over to our house, and I remember sitting on the floor one day — I was then aged six or seven — looking up at her as she sat in a living room chair, her feet on the floor, her knees a few inches apart, the air filled with her glorious perfume. I tried not to look at her enormous breasts — larger than those of any woman I knew — or rather, I tried not to let her catch me looking at them. Everything about her was tantalizing: not only her breasts but also her wavy, black hair, which she wore neck-length, her earrings and numerous bracelets, which tinkled and jingled with every movement, her thin, rimless glasses, and her perfume, which seemed perfectly suited to her, to a woman with the large burden that Nature had given her to carry around — a woman who spoke her s's so sensually they were like little whistles. Her perfume made me think of hundreds of tiny red and blue densely packed flowers. Everything about her sparkled, tinkled, was "extra". But oh those breasts: I wondered how often she thought of them during the day. Did she ever touch them? At that time, I doubt if I knew that women wore bras, or what bras were, but if someone had told me that she did, I wouldn't have been surprised, assuming it to be only natural that a woman would need a harness of some sort to hold up such an enormous weight.

Where Do Babies Come From?

Around the same age, it suddenly seemed to me extremely important to know where babies came from. So I asked my mother. She smiled in that eye-sparkling way of hers, blushed, and said: "Why do you ask such a question?"

"I want to know."

"Well, when you're older, you will understand."

"Why can't I know now?"

" 'Why?', 'Why?', 'Why?' — why do you ask so many questions?"

Then, one day, after more of my importuning, she said, smiling and clearly embarrassed, "Well, when a man and a woman get married, God plants a seed in the woman and then she has a baby. It's all perfectly natural."

I had no trouble believing that God, who knew the flight of the sparrow, could keep track of all the people in the world, but I had a hard time imagining him being able to know the exact moment to plant the seed in each woman. Furthermore, some married women, or formerly married women — like Miss Conro — didn't have children. Why? Had God forgotten to plant the seed in them? How could God be capable of forgetting? I wanted to know *where* the seed was planted, and where the baby came out[2]. But my mother's reply to these questions was only that knowing smile of hers and words to the effect that some day I would understand but that in any case it was all perfectly natural.

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1. See first chapter of Vol. 1.

2. A few years later, when I had learned how men and women made love, it seemed completely sensible that babies came out of the place where they were put in.

Years later she would tell me that what is wonderful about a child is that it makes you soon forget the act that brought it into being. For many years, I thought that she was referring to the sexual act, but then, in my fifties, someone pointed out that she might have been referring to child bearing. But is giving birth really an act? I never bothered to find out from her what she really meant.

"Imagine Your Parents Making Love"

Psychotherapy patients used to be asked to imagine their parents making love. The profession considered this a clever way to get the patient to reveal his sexual anxieties. (I remember the knowing smile on the face of the first psychiatrist who put the question to me.) But the truth is that many patients who had a great deal of difficulty imagining such a thing were in fact revealing a truth, not about themselves, but about their parents, because these patients intuited that sex between their parents was an anxiety-ridden joyless activity whose main purpose was the "satisfaction of physical needs" (namely, the father's) and, of course, making babies. I am sure that was the case with my parents. I cannot conceive of either one of my parents, and especially not my mother, enjoying the process of making love. Both performed their marital duty. That was it. (My mother once mentioned that my father became remiss in his duty after a few years of marriage, but she said it was probably because he was preoccupied with his work. I fervently hoped it was because he was having an affair with his secretary, Miss Sullivan.)

But as I was growing up, I had to face the fact that each day, at least some of the people I passed on the street had had sex the night before. And yet they all looked so normal! Like Mr. and Mrs. Salvo, when Mrs. Salvo became pregnant. The passive expressions of people on the street, their preoccupied looks. No blushing, no furtive looking around. How did they learn to conceal it that well? Was it that routine to them? But that could be because they did it so often. Or was it possible they didn't think that sex was an evil thing?

Private Parts

Once, as I was riding my bike along Wall Avenue, I saw a little girl playing in the gutter in front of the Lachmann's house, which was just two doors from the Ronnei's. She was squatting the way that little kids do, her dress up around her thighs. I realized as I approached that there was a real possibility that she wasn't wearing any underpants. As I rode slowly past her, I thought to myself, "If I see her private parts, I will disappear." I had no idea what they would look like, I only knew that they would not be like mine, and that if I were to commit the unpardonable crime of allowing myself to see them, the world would erase me from existence. I was thinking quite logically: "If you keep looking, and if she is not wearing any underpants, there is a possibility she will spread her knees apart and you will see her place down there. If that happens, there is no hope for you. You might as well kill yourself." The seeing her private parts, after this conversation with myself, would mean that I had decided to *want* to see them. It would have been my fault, not the world's. And so I turned my eyes away and rode on.

Of the many things I have always felt were beyond me — that I would almost certainly get wrong if I tried to do them — that were meant to be performed by Americans only — one is telling the sex of a newborn animal or child. When I watch movies that contain a birth scene — whether of an animal or a human — I always think, Thank God for vets and obstetricians! Because they know how to tell immediately, and without ever making a mistake, what the sex of the newborn is. Whereas if I were given the job, well, first of all, in the case of a human, you are

not supposed to look down there where the private parts are, and then, second of all, if you do somehow force yourself to look, well, what do girls have there at that age? A slit? What? Suppose the organs are entirely different at birth, only later becoming vagina and penis! And who could be so perverted as to think of sex in a delivery room? And if you make a mistake and say it's a boy when it's really a girl, or vice versa, then the shame would be unbearable. You might as well commit suicide, because it is incontrovertible proof that you are queer.

As a kid, when the question arose if a dog or cat that came to sniff us were male or female, I would always wait for someone else to answer. Suppose that what looked like a cock was just a tuft of hair? And never in a million years could I bring myself to turn the animal over and simply look, *look* between its hind legs and *see* what sexual organs God had given it. Farm girls could do that kind of thing without giving it a moment's thought. Not me.

Similar anxieties were present until late middle age when, on an application form, I had to check the Male or Female box. (This was especially true during the height of my homosexuality phobia in my late teens and twenties.) Make a mistake here and you are a dead man: the truth will be revealed: you have really been a homosexual all your life. So, naturally, I would think it through: I am a man, of course, a man is a male, therefore I should check the box next to Male. But the mere fact that I am uncertain may mean that I am not really a Male, but underneath am Female. But we can't possibly let *that* out, so let's concentrate now, really think, let's bring the pen down to the box opposite the word "Male" — but wait, maybe this is the box for Female! How can you tell? Well, let's see if the boxes on this form come before, or after, the word they apply to. OK, they seem to come before. So, carefully, concentrating on what we are doing, let's mark the right box, in God's name.

A Terrifyingly Obscene Picture

One day a kid told me there was something over by the Reservoir that I had to see. I followed him across the fields, across the white concrete of the Aerators road, into the field beyond it, to some scaffolding which had been erected out of old boards in front of one of the corrugated-metal construction sheds. He pointed to a board nailed to one of the vertical supports. On it one of the workmen had painted a picture of a naked woman. It was perhaps two feet high. Nowadays we would say it looked like one of De Kooning's nudes: it was done in thick paint; the woman had big tits, with daubs of dark red paint for nipples; she had black hair, huge staring eyes with green pupils, and a primitively drawn half-mad smile. But what took my breath away was that, between her legs was an enormous *gash*. It was the first time I had ever seen a picture of what was *down there* on a woman. My heart was pounding. It seemed an enormous wound, as though it had been made with an axe. And yet she was smiling! I couldn't get it out of my mind. Time and time again I would find an excuse to cross the fields and look at the painting. Someone had cut her open with an axe and there she was, crippled, deformed (after all, she didn't have a cock) with this enormous wound and yet she *she liked it! — she was happy about it!*

I think that experience is as close as I will ever get to knowing what the *primitive* is really like: the raw, violent, overwhelming power of the image as savages must experience it — what is expressed in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

For many years, that was my only evidence of what girls and women looked like down there. I couldn't get enough of looking at lingerie ads in magazines but I had no idea what lay underneath the garments between their legs. I couldn't believe all these women had a big, ugly, raw *axe wound* down there.

Among the Kids

Here are some items of the folklore of those years.

The worst thing you could be called was a "queer", a "fairy", a "homo", or a "pansy". The term "fag" was not in our early vocabulary (I recall it being used in high school, however), and, of course, neither was "gay". "Homosexual" was regarded as ridiculously formal — only fit for use by adults.[1]

Whenever I was with the other kids, I had to be constantly on guard that I didn't walk, or move my body, in any way that could be considered effeminate. Remembering that Mary Regano had been gently reprimanded by a teacher because she had merely bent forward to pick up something, thus allowing her bottom to stick up (she should have knelt and picked the object up from the side, while kneeling, the teacher explained), I avoided bending down under any circumstances when in the presence of the other kids, because I didn't know which one of the two ways of doing this applied to boys. I never sat with my legs crossed. I (like other boys, I assume) was always worried about being seen to have a hard-on. If my pants happened to fold in a certain way across my lap, it could easily have been taken for a sign of a hard-on, and so I was constantly on guard to get rid of the that fold, for example, by standing up, or putting books down on it.

The story went that if you were dancing, and you decided you wanted to fuck the girl, you communicated this to her via the hand that was holding hers by wiggling the tip of your outstretched middle finger against the palm of her hand. I never did this, of course.

Probably the most popular terms for "vagina" were "cunt" and "hole". I don't recall "pussy" being used very often. Sometimes the Italian kids would say "putang". For example, "Gonna get me a little *poo-tang*.".

Song (sung to the tune of "Stormy Weather"):

> "Don't know why
> There is lipstick on my fly —
> Sloppy blow-job"

Another song that was considered mildly amusing was:

> "Roll me over,
> In the clover,
> Roll me over, lay me down, and do it again."

The first line was always sung especially loudly in a drunken beer-hall style: "Roll meY-OHver...". Needless to say, I thought about the lyrics, and was bothered that they didn't make sense. First of all, who was uttering the words, a man or a woman? Well, clearly a woman. But what position had she been in before she uttered the words? If she had been on her stomach, then somehow she was being screwed with the man lying on her *back*, which to me seemed impossible. OK, so she must have been on her stomach. But in either case, she was already lying down, so why did she ask her lover to lay her down? That implied that she was standing, and I consid-

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1. I recall only one occasion in my youth in which female homosexuality was mentioned. I was riding in a bus in White Plains, sitting on one of the seats toward the rear, and noticed a boy, perhaps seven or eight years old, sitting in the bench-like seat that ran across the back of the bus, watching me. I tried to ignore him but couldn't. Then, suddenly, he slid across his seat toward me, and said, "Hey, mister, are you a lesbium?"

ered it impossible to make love in that position. And why did she first say, in the third line, "Roll me over," and only *then* say, "lay me down?"? How could you roll a person over if they were not already lying down?

On it went. To this day, I don't know the correct interpretation of the lyrics. Of course, I never admitted all this perplexity to the kids.

A verse of which I remember only two lines:

> "...
> The frost is on the punkin,
> Now's the time for dicky-dunkin'."

It was considered clever to say, when you hadn't understood something in a conversation, "Come again?" with a knowing expression that signified you were thinking of the other meaning of the first word.

There was a one-line story made up of the names of candy bars, which went roughly:"O. Henry went into the woods with Mary Jane, put his Mars bar into her Milky Way and out came Baby Ruth."

Another story went something like: "Girl goes into woods." (Index and second fingers walk across table top.) "Man goes into woods." (Same fingers walk across table top, only this time the thumb is between them, representing an erection.) "Man comes out of woods." (As before, only in the other direction.) "Woman comes out of woods." (Walking imitation by index finger and thumb, to represent her walking with legs far apart, after intercourse.)

An ever-popular riddle was, "Why is the peanut vendor the bravest man in the world?" Answer: "Because he whistles while his nuts roast."

A girl with large breasts was invariably described as being "stacked". On the other hand, a girl with small breasts was invariably described as a "pirate" (because she had a hidden chest).

Supposedly there were girls who would go "around the world", meaning that they would lick you over your entire body, including, of course your cock.

Condoms were invariably called "scum-bags". We knew they were officially called "prophylactics", but we thought the name ridiculous. We would usually find them around the Reservoir: white, long, distended, full of the mucuousy white fluid. I recall one kid saying that he had seen some little kid pick one up and, assuming it was a balloon, put it to his mouth and attempt to blow it up.

One winter day, on the driveway of a cluster of houses on the hill behind Wall Ave., Laddie, the Beaird's dog, began trying to jump up on me. I was talking to the other kids, and so just kept telling him to get down. Then, he put his paws around my waist and began rubbing up and down on my leg. At first, I thought this just a further nuisance, but then looked down and saw that his penis was erect and all red. By this time, the kids were laughing, even though, at the same time, they tried to get him to stop. I couldn't believe what he was doing was actually sexual because, for one thing, it made no sense for a dog to be excited by a human's leg.

Trying to Figure It All Out

If there ever was an instance of "problem solving under circumstances of inadequate information", then it was my efforts to understand how men and women had sex. I had no idea what girls looked like down there (I couldn't believe that the obscene picture in front of the construction

shed represented reality) or of what men did when they were being dirty with girls. The guys always joked about "friction". Sometimes, with a dirty laugh, they would accompany the word by making a fist and then sticking their index finger inside the closed fingers and moving it in and out. So apparently, some sort of back and forth motion was involved.

The word for a girl's private parts was something like "cun" or "cunt", I gathered. I was never sure, because one kid always just said the letters, "c", "u", "n". "...you put it into a girl's 'c', 'u', 'n'..."

Then, one day, after countless attempts to piece together the puzzle, it suddenly occurred to me that the in and out movement of the finger in the fist was a kind of "friction", and so that must be the way the cock moved in the girl's "c", "u", "n" or "c", "u", "n", "t".

But then why was this also called "screwing"? That word implied a rotary motion, like a screw going into a piece of wood. Surely you didn't rotate yourself around when your cock was in her "c", "u", "n".

Another puzzle was why they called it a "blow job". Did the girl blow on your cock? That didn't seem very exciting at all. Was it because her cheeks alternately inflated and deflated as she sucked on your dick? But why would they do that?

Americans understood these things and I didn't!

My greatest fear, which persisted well into my twenties, was not knowing how to lie on the girl. Did you just literally lie on her? What must that feel like to her, a heavy guy lying on her stomach? Or did you support yourself on your elbows, in which case, if you supported yourself too high, you wouldn't touch her at all, and maybe couldn't get your cock in, which might make her think you didn't like her. How did you know exactly the right height?

From the very beginning it seemed to me that putting your cock between her tits was not only much more sensible, but also much more exciting.

I must not conclude without mentioning that, up into my twenties, when the first glimmers of sexual liberation began producing books about male and female sexuality, I was utterly baffled as to what women got out of sex other than children. Why did they bother? I knew nothing of female orgasm — didn't even know there was such a thing — but I knew that women sometimes desired sex. Why? Why did lying there and having the male thrust in their vagina for a few minutes, satisfy their sexual desire? At what point did they reach satisfaction? What told them they had reached that point? It made absolutely no sense to me.

Amputations

From as far back as I can remember, I, like Salvador Dali, was fascinated by amputations. Not merely amputations, but *amputation*: the concept itself. From the vantage point of age and experience, I think I can say that the source of the fascination lay in the idea that something so horrible, so cruel, was *good*. (Like the girl smiling despite the gash that the axe had made between her legs.) It played right into the Code. But in the case of the Code, the awful feelings were all from doing things you hated to do, like homework or picking crabgrass or going to the doctor and getting a needle or trying to build something you knew would be a failure when it was done. And when the thing you hated to do was over, nothing of you had changed. But an amputation! It was like a tattoo: you could never get rid of it. I asked my father why people couldn't just grow another arm or leg, and he explained that people can't do this, only certain animals, like starfish and chameleons, can. So it was a permanent disfigurement that made you an outcast, and yet it was good for you.

I would catch my breath whenever I saw a cripple. To this day, I remember, on the corner of Martine Ave. and Mamaroneck Ave. in White Plains, one cold fall Saturday afternoon, as my mother dragged me from one fabric store to the next, suddenly, as we were standing on the corner in the wind, a middle-aged woman went past us dragging one shoe on the sidewalk. She would take a step with one foot, then haul this other lame, bent-sideways foot along after her. It made a scraping sound on the sidewalk. I couldn't help watching her even though I knew I wasn't supposed to. I wanted to know what it was like to be her, to have to go through life that way, to always make that scraping, dragging sound when you walked. She had a pained, tortured expression (she was wearing a flower print dress, with a dark background), and she went along that way: step, drag, step, drag...

Of course, amputations occurred frequently in the comics: swords amputated arms and legs. You could see the bone where the limb had been cut off, they always showed that, and the little circle of marrow inside, and the red flesh all around it — that poor guy would only have a stump to wave after that, if he lived. What was it like to wave a stump instead of a hand? What was it like not to be able to step on one foot because it wasn't there, because it had been cut off? The question became more tantalizing when, years later, I read that amputees sometimes experience the limb as still being there. What is it like to have no leg but still feel as if you do have one? Bad: they cut off my leg! Good: but I still feel it there! Bad: But it's really gone!

To see a man with his leg amputated above the knee was an experience so exciting I dared not reveal it to anyone. To see an amputee on crutches, swinging the one remaining leg forward, the stump just hanging down there, like a big cock, the pant leg carefully, neatly folded up under it and then pinned in place, gave me a twinge in my cock. I used every subterfuge in order to keep looking at such a guy, just as I used every subterfuge to find an excuse to keep looking at a beautiful girl. Breasts could be regarded as amputed stumps, and the fact that girls had no cock — well, what was that but an amputation? If someone had given me three wishes at that age, I'm sure one of them would have been to have an arm or leg amputated (and another would have been to be able to have the arm or leg reattached later if I asked for it).

Sometimes, at home, when I was playing in the living room, and my mother was upstairs sewing, I would get a wastebasket, bend one leg and put my knee into the basket and try to walk that way, pretending the one leg had been cut off. Not even I could deny the sexual thrill it gave me.

Pictures

My mother had a small, framed picture of angels above her dressing table. I think it was a reproduction of an old painting. The angels, with puffed cheeks, were flying naked among the clouds, various figures below looking up at them with expressions of supplication and awe. All the colors were there: the white of the clouds, the blue sky, the baby flesh color of the angels' skin, the white and red togas worn by the men, the silk-like swirling blue togas of the women. I kept wanting to look at this picture, would sneak into my parents room when I knew I wouldn't be caught, and go to her dressing table, in the little alcove by the window, and look at it. The idea of being naked and of flying gave me a funny feeling. It made my prick twinge.

One birthday or Christmas my mother gave me a book which, in memory, was about a crippled young man who somehow winds up standing on a cloud, bathed in the rays of the orange sun on the horizon. I seem to remember it was some Swiss story, the young man was weak, sick, but handsome — no, beautiful — , yet no one loved him because he had to walk with a crutch. And then, because his heart was pure, and because he didn't let his affliction bother him, the angels came and raised him up into the clouds, and somehow enabled him to stand there and look at the

golden sun in distance, the puffy clouds all around him, the sky blue. This too gave me a strange feeling: the young man, who looked a little like a girl, but was crippled and an outcast, nevertheless, because he was humble and his heart was pure, was given a gift that was like the ability to fly.

Masturbation

When I was about eleven, I discovered masturbation. I am not sure, but I think the discovery was helped along by a Better Little Book called *Scarlet O'Hara*, about a beautiful woman detective. One picture showed her lying on a bed in a slip or night gown, the outline of her breasts very obvious, the material over her nipples sticking up in little points. I would rub my cock, still having no clear concept of what sexual intercourse was. I sensed that the pleasant feeling I experienced would get even better if I kept rubbing, so I did. And then, one day it kept getting better and better, I kept rubbing, soon I couldn't stop, and suddenly I felt as though I were being lifted up by a miraculous pleasure, transported up into to another world which contained nothing but this wonderful pleasure. The experience was so startling, so completely unlike anything I had ever known before, that I decided it was a message to me from the Code, a sign that I had successfully passed the first years' of testing, and that pleasure like this awaited me, along with the accomplishment of great things, if I could continue to endure the almost unbearable suffering that I did each day. For more than a year, there was no doubt in my mind that I was the only person in the world who had been given this pleasure.

The feeling was brought on by looking at pictures of women, and so I was soon on the lookout for lingerie ads in the magazines, and for comic books with beautiful women. I soon developed the way of masturbating which I used for several years afterward, still having no idea how sexual intercourse actually was performed: I would hold my cock immedately below the glans between the index and middle finger of my right hand, as you would hold a cigar or cigarette, then waggle it back and forth. The only trouble with this method was that the friction tended to rub the skin raw. But that didn't matter. The feeling was too overwhelming, too joyous, to be inhibited by the pain of fingers rubbing on sensitive raw skin.

Since I shared a bedroom with my brother, the opportunities for enjoying my newfound pleasure were limited there, and so the bathroom was my only refuge. I began to spend longer and longer times in the one upstairs, and my mother noticed it. "John?" she would call from downstairs. I deliberately wouldn't answer. I was looking at a picture of an actress in *Life* magazine, or a lingerie ad.

"John!"

"I'm in the bathroom."

"Oh." Pause. Less loudly, "Why do you take so long in there?"

"Because I do!"

She, in that chiding, almost playful voice: "It doesn't take people forever to do their business."

I, sullenly: "I'll be out in a minute."

Back and forth, back and forth, the wagging motion, the glorious look of a woman's tits in a soft white sweater, the garter belts, long legs, girdles.

"John?"

"*What!*"

"I want you out of there right now. There are things I want you to do!"

"I'll be out in a minute."

And then, the heavy clump of her low-heeled shoes on the stairs. Then the sound of them coming across the little landing to the bathroom door. I had locked the door when I went in. A knock. "What are you *doing* in there?"

"Nothing."

"I want you out of there right now."

"In a minute."

She tries the door. "I don't want you to lock the door." Pause as she listens, her ear no doubt pressed against the door. "Do you have something to hide?"

"No, bitch. Leave me alone. I'll be out in a minute."

"If you are not out in one minute, I'm going to get the key."

"Go ahead."

The problem was that now, if she saw me come out, she would see the magazines. Later on, these included at least one girlie magazine, those strange collections of pictures of girls posing and of stories of men in combat. I could hide them in a school binder. *Life* magazine didn't have to be concealed.

She would get the key, and then the trial of sheer physical strength began, she trying to turn the doorknob in one direction, I trying equally hard to stop her. She was amazingly strong. It often took all my strength to keep her from turning the knob sufficiently to open the door. The struggle went on for minutes.

If I was supposed to be taking a bath, the situation was more painful, because as soon as I let go of the doorknob, I had to jump into the hot water, and the pain of the hot water on the raw skin of my cock was sometimes so great that I almost cried out. But my cock would be hidden under the suds, and I could hold a washcloth over it innocently as my mother burst into the room. She always looked around, trying to find an indication of what I had been up to. But the magazines were hidden inside my school binder, and she never looked there.

These battles occurred over and over, she standing outside the door, demanding to be allowed in, I refusing, then the trial of sheer physical strength at the doorknob. Sometimes I was able to hold out, and she left in disgust, but she was soon back.

I started buying girlie magazines in the news stores, always an anxiety-producing experience. Heart beating like mad, hands sweaty, I tried to disguise my purpose by buying an innocuous magazine or two in addition, *Popular Mechanics* or *Popular Science*, say. By the age of fifteen I had screwed all the stars in Hollywood: Lana Turner, Rita Hayworth (I remember a picture of her kneeling in bed, she wearing a white silk nightgown), Veronica Lake, Elizabeth Taylor, Gene Tierney, Kim Novak, Felicia Farr (who I always remembered (wrongly) as having a little mole above her lip that was maddeningly sexy). For some reason, I never found Marilyn Monroe very exciting, sexually. I suspect the reason was that she always seemed a caricature of a beautiful movie star to me, with that baby voice and curvy way of sitting and moving. She wasn't real.

And then there was always the lingerie ads in the newspapers.

I found out that some of the books on the shelf in the glass-enclosed cabinet above my mother's desk in the living room had dirty passages in them, so I would sneak these books upstairs and masturbate over the passages. (No kid ever said "masturbate": it was called "wacking off" or "jerking off" or "pounding your meat", or, much more rarely, "pulling your pudding".) I especially remember *Forever Amber* in its green cover The kids could always be relied on to find the books with dirty passages: *Tobacco Road*, and even an autobiography of Burl Ives, with a passage about his chasing a girl in a field and line something like, "I caught her just as she reached

the woods." There may have been other Better Little Books than *Scarlet O'Hara* that had pictures of sexy women, but that is the only one I remember.

To overcome boring periods in class, Peter Christ and I would do imitations of masturbation: you would start by thumping your fist on the desk top in jerking-off rhythm, then speed it up, faster and faster, then suddenly stop, signifying orgasm, then finish with a few widely spaced more thumps to signify the coming down, all this accompanied by much snickering.

When I was around twelve or thirteen, I tried to suck my own cock. I lay on my back on the floor of the downstairs bathroom and tried to bring my hips over over my head. I succeeded once or twice, but it wasn't much of a sexual thrill, considering the pain of remaining in the contorted position.

Peculiarities of Girls

I was fascinated not only by the physical attributes of girls, but also by the way they did things. I would watch them take out their makeup kits (their "compacs"), flip open a round mirror, peer into it frowning and contorting their lips, then, as though having arrived at a decision, start to put on lipstick, which was a ritual in itself: the pursing of the lips, the careful application of the red waxy substance, then the raising of the eyebrows and pressing together of the lips. Why this last? To press the excess lipstick *into* the lips? To give it the right shape on their lips? I noticed that after they were done, you could see a kind of ragged red edge of lipstick inside their lips. What did lipstick taste like? (I don't think I ever tried to find out.) Did it give girls a nice sweet taste in their mouths all day, and was that one reason why girls pronounced their words, well, like girls instead of like boys? Or did that just come from knowing that your lips had this special red color on them? But girls spoke like girls even when they weren't wearing lipstick.

Or the way girls handled their purses (Florence called hers "my pockabook"). The way older women opened them, peered inside into a world no man could ever comprehend, then began fishing around in them. The busyness of it, the fussing, all accompanied by clicks of metal and plastic. Then the way they peremptorily snapped the purses closed. Something had been accomplished. Who knew what?

Or the way they walked along in their white cotton sweaters and seemed to spend a lot of time looking down at their breasts. But surely that couldn't be doing that: at all other times they seemed unaware of their breasts, unless they caught you looking at them, when they made it clear with looks of mild annoyance that you should be ashamed of yourself. But then what were they looking at as they walked along, heads down, so preoccupied?

And the way the female sales clerks would sometimes lean their breasts on the counter.

And then there was the question, unanswered to this day for me, whether their breasts actually stretched the material of the sweaters and shirts that girls wore. (Wearing men's white shirts was in fashion for a while, the shirttails tied around the waist.). It was a perfectly reasonable question: if their breasts "strained against the material", as the trashy novels put it, if they pressed out against the material, keeping it taut all day, then surely it was possible that the material eventually would be permanently stretched, would have indentations where the breasts had been pushing against it. I would have given anything to be allowed into a girl's closet so that I could study their sweaters and shirts carefully.

Of course, if a girl had attractive breasts, the question among us boys was always, "Are they real?" We constantly constantly wondered, constantly speculated on whether the girl was wearing falsies, as they were called. Girls who had small breasts were dismissed as being "flat".

And the way that, with a toss of their hair, girls would shake down the sleeves of their long-

sleeved sweaters. And the little necklaces they wore.

And the way their skirts prevented them from walking with full strides. The movement of their legs was always constrained. I wondered what it was like to have to walk like that. And the funny side-to-side swing of their legs when girls ran — Regina Oechsle ran that way, and so did Barb Beaird—, especially when their arms were cradling books. Did having a cunt make girls run that way?

(Of course, not all girls had legs that made us want to look at them. Legs that were too thick we called "piano legs", and the name was then applied to the unfortunate girl herself. Girls with thighs that we regarded as too large were called "thunder thighs".)

My explanation for some of these behaviors (had anyone asked me for one) would probably have been that girls had to appear weak. They needed to be encumbered — by bracelets that clacked and jingled and called attention to themselves, by rings, and by tight skirts that prevented them from walking and running properly , and by the threat of boys' stares and boys' uncouth language. Girls' purpose in life was to be beautiful and helpless. And to suffer, or at least be more uncomfortable, than boys. What else could explain their having to walk around with bare legs even when it was cold, whereas boys could do what made sense, namely, put on warm pants?

Dreams

It is said that dreams of flying express sexual feelings. In my case that is certainly true of one kind of dream that I have had since my early teens, but I am not so sure about the other kind, which seems to me instead expressive of a far more profound emotion, or, I should say, intuition. Both kinds began in my early teens. I will describe the second kind first.

I am in the back yard at our house at 14 Elm St. It is a bright, moonlit night. A few other people are standing around in the yard. In the dream I remember that throughout my life I have wanted to be able to fly, but have been unable to. Then I get the idea that I was wrong, that if I really believed that I could *will* myself to fly, then I could: all it takes is believing absolutely that you can. I know I am right in this new conviction, and so I flap my arms, and, in front of the awe-struck people, I rise up above the backyard. I know that the secret is that you must believe, you must *know*, that you can fly, and then you will be able to. The reason others can't fly is precisely that they don't believe they can, they are unable to bring themselves to the belief, the conviction, that they can.

I am now above the height of the roof of our house. I know I can go anywhere I want. I rise up very high, thousands of feet, I soar through the air in any way I want. The feeling, the conviction, that all it takes is believing, *knowing* you can fly, is more real to me than the resignation, in real life, that I cannot will myself to fly.[1] I have had this dream at various times throughout my life, even into old age, and each time I awake convinced that the dream reveals the real truth, and

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1. Perhaps it was dreams like this that, at the least, made convincing to St. Matthew, if it didn't actually inspire in him, the story of Peter walking on the water: The reader will recall that Christ walks on water to the boat containing his disciples. Peter says, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.
"And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.
"But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.
"And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst though doubt?" — *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, **14**, 28-31.

that what we believe in waking life — that it is impossible to will yourself to fly — is a lesser truth, a kind of consolation truth for people who are unable to believe.

The other kind of dream is explicitly sexual. It is properly described as a lucid dream, a term I didn't know into middle age, but which means a dream in which the dreamer knows that he is dreaming. Already in my early teens, I found that I was able, sometimes, to know that I was dreaming inside my dream. (I am not sure this is the case in the above dreams of flying.) And I very soon realized what extraordinary power this meant I had, because it meant that I could make the dream go the way I wanted it to. Which meant, I could make it be about sex. So that I could fly up to a girl, feel her breasts, kiss her, pull up her dress, lie down with her, tell her how beautiful she was and how much I loved her, do whatever I wanted with her.

In later years the frequency of these dreams decreased, until now, in old age, I doubt if I have one lucid dream a year. But when they occur, it is usually a moonlit night, and I am in an upper-class section of a city. There are big, dark, stone houses, old, European,with lattice window frames, lots of old trees, and as always I realize I really can fly. I start looking for a house with a lighted window, then try to will that there be a woman inside the room. But sometimes it doesn't work. I can't keep up the illusion; the awareness that this is only a dream, and that what I want will not come to pass, intrudes. Sometimes all I can find is an old woman. Very rarely, I find an utterly beautiful girl, and the experience with her is more real than anything I have experienced in real life.

The Jenny Clarkson Girls

I was always attracted to the girls I wasn't supposed to be attracted to. Most of these came from a place called the Jenny Clarkson Home for Girls. It was located on the other side of the Reservoir, on a road in the woods above Route 22. I think I only ventured up that road once or twice, and then only for a few hundred yards. As far as I know, all the girls were jr. high school age. None of us boys had ever been told by anyone in authority why girls were actually sent to the Home, but to us it was obvious they were there because they were bad girls — female juvenile delinquents — and that meant that they all put out. As a result, we found them infinitely desirable, even the ugly ones. All but one I knew was out of reach for me — they would have nothing to do with a boy with pimples who lived on the right side of the tracks and wasn't good at sports. But in the ninth grade I became friends with one of them, a blonde named Franny Cole. I liked to watch her mouth when she talked. I think she liked me — at least she always seemed to have a smile for me. She sat in the front row (surprising for a bad girl!), and I sat in the seat behind her. We were pals from opposite ends of the social spectrum. So I could talk to her.

The main attraction from Jenny Clarkson was a dark-eyed, thin girl named Yvonne who all the boys, including me, were crazy about. I yearned for her from afar, envied the dumb guys who seemed to have no trouble talking to her, kidding with her each day. I admired the skill with which she maneuvered under the constant male attention.

First Love

The first girl I fell in love with — in the all-consuming, I'll-do-anything-for-you, your-face-is-music, way that only happens in our teens — was Veronica Barry. All the boys called her Ronnie. She was a grade behind me. You have seen her duplicate in sit-coms and movies — the thin, flashing-eyed, thirteen- or fourteen-year-old who is half — well, three-quarters — aware of her beauty, and yet is not sure what to do with all the male attention it gets, and so, both because it increases the amount of that attention, and because it keeps her beyond it, develops a kind of dis-

tance, a hauteur, an above-it-all, that drives boys crazy. She looked like Susan Strassberg in the movie *Picnic*. I wrote on the cover of my loose-leaf notebook, "J. F. L R. B."[1] Most of the other boys had their initials, followed by "L R. B." on their notebooks. I pined for her, yearned for her, in that strange, not explicitly sexual, way that even boys who have discovered masturbation at an early age, seem to have when confronted with a real live beautiful girl. I wanted her to look at me, wanted her to think me brave, a regular guy, admire me for the fact that I hung out with the bad kids and still got good grades. I learned the desperate optimism of those who are not destined to be desired by women. The thought actually occurred to me, repeatedly, that the reason why she chose Len Lindholm to be her boyfriend for a while was that she wanted to be with me, and was using him as a means to do it. I tried to convince myself that the reason she so seldom looked at me was that she was shy with me. Len didn't discourage me from suspecting that he was having sex with her. I tagged along when he went to her apartment complex in North White Plains to visit her.

Summer at Rye Pool was a chance to look at her in her light blue tight bathing suit. I planned elaborate diversionary moves in the water, all designed to make it seem I hardly noticed her, so that I could see her climb up the ladder, the water dripping down, when her bathing suit was the tightest. If everyone had suddenly disappeared from the pool, and she had come over to me and said "You can do anything you want with me and I will love it," I would certainly have swooned on the spot — my legs would have given way and I would have sunk to the bottom of the pool and died in ecstasy.

My one chance to get close to her, and to try to win her away from Len, was in dancing class, which was held once a week after school in the gym. Somehow I managed to become her more-or-less regular partner, probably by just making a point of standing near where she was. Then came the anguish of trying to guess what would please her and to do so while appearing masculine and cool. She put up with me, did her best not to reveal that I did not excite her. We were supposed to learn the fox-trot, the lindy, the waltz, and then, as an amusing afterthought, the Charleston. I was an utter failure at the first three. She would patiently go over the lindy steps with me. Left, right, turn... I tried to appear one-up despite the fact I was one-down. I was constantly blushing or on the verge of blushing, constantly trying to will my feet and legs to move as naturally as hers. I tried to duplicate what hers did, yet not in a million years was I about to let myself make a movement with my body that had anything remotely to do with sex since that always carried with it the risk of my doing something that I, or one of the other kids, could interpret as effeminate. If that happened, it would be all over, of course. As with playing trumpet solos, my task was to somehow contrive an outward appearance, a performance, that would please, without allowing my soul to engage in the activity in any way — to dance expertly without the slightest Yea-saying on the part of my soul, the slightest giving in to the current demands that I relax and let go and be like the others.

Not surprisingly, I became something of a success at the one dance that didn't count, namely, the Charleston. It was easier for me because everyone considered it rather comic. The steps were more mechanical: toes in, foot out, cross foot in front of other foot, hands on knees, cross to opposite knees... She and I won some kind of competition in the class. We also did this ridiculous dance in front of other kids at a school dance. These wretched affairs were held several times a

1. In the diary I began on our trip to Switzerland, I find: "Ronnie Barry W.P. 98818". It is hard to believe that I somehow I managed to get her phone number, but the number of digits is correct. "W. P." must have stood for "White Plains".

year. All the boys stood on one side, all the girls on the other. When the record started, the boys walked across the vast acreage of the gym and asked the girl to dance. We sweated like pigs and tried not to show it. We went through our wooden motions, holding the girl at arm's length, smiling, trying to make small talk, all under the watchful eye of a few teachers and Mr. Ronnei. Sooner or later in the evening he would be asked by the crowd to dance a waltz with Mrs. Ronnei, and the two of them did it so perfectly that the kids watched them quietly and respectfully and clapped afterward, even though they knew the dance was incredibly old-fashioned.

Ninth Grade Prom

For the ninth grade prom, there was no doubt about whom I was supposed to take: it had to be Alberta Steves, the smartest girl in the class. Among the kids, there was an unspoken assumption that the two of us belonged together because we both got high grades. I felt guilty because even though she was always nice to me, always seemed glad to talk to me, I felt no passion for her (or perhaps I should say, *because* she was always nice to me...). My mother always spoke of her with a sigh because she was *valedictorian*. My mother's eyes would glow and sparkle when she said the word, her face became flushed, the tone of her voice said, "Oh, if only *you* could have gotten that honor!" Alberta Steves was raised a strict Catholic and was scheduled to go to a Catholic school in White Plains for her sophomore year. She had an angular, vaguely masculine, face, was always polite and obedient in school, always did the right thing. She was subject to migraine headaches. I hadn't the slightest sexual attraction to her. But still we were friends. (I was the one with the dirty face.)

On prom day I had to go with my mother to buy the corsage. I had no idea what to do. Yet somehow it was bought, in its silvery box with the cellophane top, so you could see the oversize white flower inside, like something for a funeral. Early that evening, a phone call. Alberta was having a migraine, maybe wouldn't be able to go. I was meantime consumed with anxiety over the possibility of sticking her with the corsage pin when I went to pin it to her dress. My hands were sweating. Within minutes after my shower, I knew that body odor was already starting to build up. How could you will yourself not to sweat? I sniffed my armpits. (I can't remember if boys used deodorant at that age.) White shirt, blue suit, tie. I was being strapped into my death suit. My mother drove me to Alberta's house. There were the beaming parents, both looking old, as parents always looked (except for Mrs. Beaird). There was Alberta, trying to smile. We both knew we had to go through with this. I made a lame joke, then with everyone looking on, began to try to pin on the corsage. I felt the beads of sweat on my forehead, my hand was trembling, my mother was watching and wringing her hands. Needless to say, I stuck her. She jumped, I blushed, all agreed it would be best if she did it herself.

We went to the prom, sat at a table with Alex Grey. (I still have the picture. I am staring at the camera with a haunted look, my acned face moist with sweat.) I danced in my wooden manner: left, right, left together, left, right, left together, Oh, please God, let it be over soon, left, right, left, together... Encased in my suit and white shirt and tie, I prayed that no one would say anything that I could construe as having to do with sex, because that would mean I would blush so badly I would have to fake an excuse to leave the table. Sweat trickled down inside my armpits, I was afraid the wave in my hair would start to sag. Left, right, left together. We were both doing our parents' bidding, because we knew what was at stake, namely, continuing to have a reason to go on living. Fortunately, her migraine gave us an excuse to go home as soon as the assigned parent arrived with the car, and not go to any of the parties that some of the parents gave.

The Death of My Father

Even before we went to Switzerland, it was clear that something had become wrong with my father. He had to go to the doctor, which had happened only once or twice before that I could recall. Then there was talk about the need for tests. I no longer remember the details, but I seem to remember my mother saying that "they suspect cancer". Yet he seemed as strong as ever, though once in a while my mother said he had a pain in his arm.

After the trip, there was more of this behind-the-scenes activity concerning doctors, and then one day — I no longer remember any of the details — my mother said that he had liver cancer. Then, weeks or months later, that the cancer had started in his liver but had now spread to his arm. My mother mentioned that they were considering amputation. I didn't think they would do it, because it was impossible for me to think of my father with one arm cut off, a mere stump hanging down from his shoulder like a penguin's wing. For months, my brother and I went through almost daily alternations of hope and terror, depending on the news as reported by my mother: today he was going to be all right, the doctors were optimistic, the next day they had found the cancer had spread. A few days later the doctors were optimistic again because of a new treatment that had been discovered. My mother would pore over the Encyclopedia, reading about the disease, searching for hope. She said my father had said that cancer was "an industrial disease," and the way she reported this, I got the impression my father had said it with a shrug, as though to add that it is part of the price you pay for living in the modern world.

At the dinner table, I noticed tiny red blood vessels on the side of his nose. His normally strong thumbs now seemed thinner, the skin like paper — the thumbs of someone who was being made gentle.

On the hillbilly radio station around this time they sometimes played a song about a boy whose mother is dying, but who has been told that she won't die "until the leaves fall", and so he climbs the trees and starts to tie the leaves to the trees. "I'm tying the leaves, so they won't fall down, and mommy won't go away...". Another song they played was "Grandfather's Clock": "...for it stopped, short, never to go again, when the old man died." These songs seemed to be aimed at me personally.

By September of 1950, I had decided he was going to die: I had no more strength for the daily torture of my mother's reports. It was my secret that I had lost hope, and sometimes, then and later, I felt that in doing so I had condemned him to death. Years afterward, I asked my mother why he had not chosen suicide. She said that he had always held out hope that they might find a cure while he was still alive.

There had been a severe ice storm the winter of '49-'50, the ice on the branches of the trees so heavy that they couldn't support its weight, and would simply break. The elm tree seemed to have survived, but that summer, it became clear that it was dying. For me, it seemed entirely possible that this was somehow connected with my father's illness. His skin became yellow and thin, like paper, the moles on the side of his head stood out more, and by the fall, his face had a hollow, death look, like the faces in the photographs of the survivors of the concentration camps. His eyes seemed to sink deeper into their sockets.

When he had once been sick in the past — I think with pneumonia — they had given him sulfa drugs. Supposedly these drugs could cure almost anything, but certainly pneumonia. When I asked about them now, my mother told me they didn't work for cancer.

One dark fall evening, I came into the living room and stood near the front window. My father was sitting at the other end of the room, in his chair, listening to Beethoven's Eroica Sym-

phony on the radio. It couldn't have been on records, even though we had it in that form, because that would have required him to get up to change the records every few minutes, and he no longer had the strength. I stood by the window, looking out at the great elm tree. Perhaps he said a few words to me, I don't remember. All I remember is what seemed the enormous length of the living room, and he sunk in his chair, with his hollow eyes, listening to this music. I didn't know what to do. If you say to me now, "But didn't you want to go up to him and say something — say goodbye, tell him how much you loved him, cry?", then I say to you that you have seen too many movies or read too many late-twentieth-century psychology books. All I knew was that the impossible was happening and I was burning alive with the pain of it, and this great man, my father, this Swiss mountain of a man, this engineer and inventor and master craftsman and president of a company, this good and decent man, was being cut down, shriveled up, before my very eyes. If I had somehow been able to bring myself to speak to him, I would probably have said something like, "Please tell me how to live through this."

In numbness I went to school, somehow did my homework. The days got shorter, the cold dark gray light came earlier each day. The kids knew what was going on. They kept a respectful distance from me. My mother said that she had asked my father if he wanted her to send for a priest or minister, that that might help him to feel better, but he had said no. I was angry at her for even having asked him, because I had no doubt that he would live up to what he had always said to me when I had asked him about death: "If you live a good life, you have nothing to fear."On Dec. 20, 1950, toward noon, as I was sitting in the ninth grade classroom, at the desk near the front of the room next to the windows, behind Franny Cole, there was a knock on the door. I don't remember the subject we were studying or the teacher. But I remember a hush falling over the class, and the teacher getting up and walking quietly to the door. There were whispers between the teacher and the other person. The class was silent. I was on the verge of tears. The teacher turned to me and led me to understand that I was to go down to Mr. Ronnei's office.

Someone was waiting for me outside Mr. Ronnei's door. Somehow they managed not to say what had happened. I seem to recall that Mr. Ronnei was sitting at his secretary's desk, in the space behind the counter, and not in his office. I don't remember his exact words, but I do remember the kindness and sympathy in his voice and manner. He said something like, "John, I'm very sad to have to tell you that...your father has passed away...There is a car waiting to take you home." I was blushing, I felt an unimagineably crushing weight descend on me. But the most important thing was not to let them see me crying.

When I got home, my mother said the body had been removed. In my mind's eye, I saw a stretcher covered with a white sheet, and the quiet, efficient men taking it down the stairs, somehow managing to get it around the little landing, then out to an ambulance or some kind of a truck parked outside. I remember the day as having been cloudy, but with a strange, clear, yellow gray light everywhere. I don't remember what I said to my brother or my mother. I think I only wanted to be alone and not cry.

The next day, a brief obituary appeared in the *New York Times*:

"**Herman Franklin** (Special to the New York Times) Valhalla, N.Y., Dec. 21 — Herman Franklin, president of the Borsari Tank Corporation of America at 25 Broad Street, New York, died here yesterday in his home at 14 Elm Street. He was 58 years old. The company designs and builds tank structures for breweries and other concerns."

Another obituary, source unknown to me, but probably a periodical of the American Concrete Institute (ACI), was more detailed:

"Herman Franklin, well known for his work with prestressed concrete, died recently at Valhalla, N.Y.

"The designer of one type of self-contained prestressed unit, Mr. Franklin had also served as manager and president of Borsari Tank Corporation, New York, specializing in design and construction of concrete tanks.

"Affliliated with ACI since 1935, Mr. Franklin was a member of Committee 323, Prestressed Reinforced Concrete, and had published two contributions on prestressed concrete in the ACI Journal.

"He was born in Switzerland and was graduated from Federal Polytechnic Institute, Zurich, in 1914. He was employed for hydraulic investigations, 1914-17, by the Swiss Bureau of Water Resources and, 1917-20, by the Lonza Power Co. Mr. Franklin came to the United States in 1920 as a draftsman for the New York Central Railroad and Merchants Dispatch Transportation Co. From 1922-23 he was field draftsman and designer, San Joaquin Light and Power Co., Fresno, Calif.; in 1924, concrete designer, Estuary Subway Office, Oakland, Calif. From 1926-32 he was hydraulic engineer and chief engineer for Thebo, Starr and Anderton, San Francisco, Calif. He was connected with the design of the Glines Canyon arch dam and penstock, supervised the design of the Guadalupe River power development, Columbia, S. A., and various other hydroelectric projects. He joined the Borsari Tank Corp. in 1934 as manager and president."

The funeral was held at a Protestant church in White Plains, despite the fact that, as far as I know, my father had never gone to church in his life, and hadn't the slightest interest in organized religion. But now my mother was in charge. I remember blond wood pews, sunlight streaming in, green cloth. The front pews were filled with people, the total number attending probably thirty or so, most of whom I didn't know. The faces were immobile. Mr. Labhardt[1] was there, with his wife. My mother, my brother, and I sat in the second row, perhaps in order not to be too close to the coffin, which was made of beautiful golden wood, and was on display on a stage next to which the minister stood. When funerals had been mentioned in the past, my mother had always said, with that haughty exclamation of hers, that in our family, the coffin would always be closed because she didn't want to be like the Catholics. I tried to suppress the thought, every time it arose, that my father was lying in that box. My goal, above all, was not to cry, because I knew that my mother wanted me to. In fact, by then she had already asked many times, in that inquiring, girlish manner, why I didn't cry, that it was perfectly all right, didn't I love my father?. I felt as though my body was bound with barbed wire. I was holding myself together by sheer will.

The minister wore a white surplice, a feminine piece of clothing that somehow became masculine because he was a minister. He had a benign smile, spoke nice things about my father. But I knew he was being paid to say these things, to act appropriately solemn, that they were all fake because he had never known my father.

I doubt if my brother and I said a word to each other. As the service neared the end, I could no longer keep down the thought that not only was my father in that box, but that soon it would move, automatically, on rollers of some kind, toward the back of the stage, then be lowered on an elevator, all of this taking place silently as we were filing out. And then, in the basement, it

1. The owner of Borsari (see first chapter of this book)

would move forward on other rollers, into a narrow oven. Then the door, which I imagined had a little glass window in it, would be closed, and the blue flames would be turned on, and my father, and his coffin, would be burned to ashes, after which some hired attendant would shovel them carefully together and put them into a jug. At this point, I almost lost control of myself. I'm sure my eyes were blazing with tears, my cheeks hot. But I didn't cry. Not then, or the next day, or the next week, or month, and in fact not for thirty years.

Afterward, in our house, the women, all wearing black, gathered in the darkening living room and my mother served tea and some squarish pieces of dense cake I had never seen before. I wondered why in the world anyone would want to serve cake on such an occasion.

I don't remember how many days I was allowed to stay at home after the funeral. I suspect I wanted to get out of the house as soon as possible. I seem to remember Mr. Ronnei putting his hand on my shoulder and saying a few comforting words and offering some quiet counsel on understanding what the kids might say or not say. The shame of returning to class was dreadful — equivalent to having just had a leg or arm amputated and now having to pretend that nothing had happened. I had already been a freak, being a Swiss, and having all my other problems. Now I was a crippled freak, since I didn't have a father.

My brother and I were not allowed to say he had died of cancer. My mother put her finger to her lips when she admonished us about using that word. No explanation was given. We were to say that he had died of pneumonia, and I dutifully repeated that for years afterward whenever someone, adult or young person, asked what he had died of.

She said in 1996 that David for many months couldn't tell other kids he had no father because he would cry. She said she told him that it was all right if a boy cried — or even if a man cried.

Over the years, when I met a certain type of white-haired old man, I would feel that somehow he was my father, but that he didn't recognize me. And into my old age, perhaps once a year or so, I have a dream that he survived the cancer after all. We are sitting in the living room, I on the floor, he in a big chair — but not in his normal chair: this is in the part of the living room nearest the front windows, which was occupied by my mother's desk and an upholstered chair I had sat in during the ice storm. He has the same haunted death look, but in the dream I know from long experience that this is because of his memory of what almost happened, but didn't. My mother sits in another chair, knitting. I am thinking to myself, "I knew this is the way it really turned out. Of course he couldn't have died. I knew it. That other was all a bad dream." I know, in the dream, that he has gone on to work on his inventions, even though he carries this fragile thing inside him, the remnants of an almost fatal cancer that still might return.

Some of his colleagues and business friends still came to the house, and once in a while they would voice an opinion as to what caused the cancer. Mr. Berker was convinced it was the Robert Burns cigars he smoked. Doctors to whom I have described the blood vessels on the side of his nose have asked if he was an alcoholic. I could only tell them that liquor bottles in our house were never touched. The only times I ever saw him drink were on summer weekends, when he might have a bottle of Budweiser in the back yard, and at our Sunday afternoon dinners, when he had a glass of wine. The doctors would comment that the blood vessels could also have been a sign of liver disease.

My mother soon began talking about returning to Switzerland. I was totally against it. France, yes, but not Switzerland. She told us that there was very little money, that we might lose the house. My brother and I immediately wanted to help. We would go out and get a job after school. How much did we have? we wanted to know. She never told us. Revealing that kind of information to one's children was simply not done in Swiss households. Many years later I managed to wangle out of her that he had left her $30,000 in savings, roughly equal to $400,000 in 1994, plus a completely paid-off house and car, and Social Security plus a list of my father's business acquaintances that included Salwyn Shufro, an investor and financial advisor in New York City, who soon after agreed to take care of her money for her. On top of all this she received a monthly check from her father, and, starting a few years later, received monthly income from renting out the guest room. Yet her laments about our financial state continued.

One day, she announced that things were so bad that she was going to have to start working at a job. She had been hired as a sales clerk by Lord and Taylor, which my brother and I knew was a clothing store in White Plains that catered to the upper class. She came home late that afteroon in tears, saying that her supervisor had shouted at her, the other employees were disrespectful to her, she could never work with such people. I would give anything to have a film of what actually went on that day. In any case, she never again attempted to find, much less hold, a job, choosing instead to keep up her day-in, day-out moaning about how we were on the verge of being put out onto the street.

This was also the beginning of her long, endlessly repeated litany about Mrs. Labhardt depriving us of a decent pension — how my father kept asking until he died, "Did she sign yet?" At the very end she saying "Yes" — lying so that he could die in peace.

And my mother never stopped telling us how she had helped our father with his inventions, worked with him in the basement, and how he always told his colleagues that without her, he would never have been able to accomplish what he did. She may have helped him once in a while, but I never saw it.

Despite our supposedly dire financial straits, my mother sometimes had a black woman come in and do some cleaning. I remember the woman as sweet, eager to please, very impressed by Mrs. Franklin's house. Since my mother liked only those who were subservient to her — Florence, Mrs. Laubner —, she spoke fondly of this woman, because, like all the good darkies she was "so simple", never wanting much, always content. This was one of her highest praises, and she managed to apply it even to wealthy people: they could be worth several million but nevertheless they were "so simple", meaning that they accorded her the respect she demanded, and didn't flaunt the fact that they had much more money than she did.

Trapping

Soon after Richie Thomas moved in next door, we decided to become trappers. I don't remember who introduced the idea. By then, of course, I had already been reading books about Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and knew that the mountain men had done trapping at one time or another. In our neighborhood, trapping was strongly associated with smoking cigarettes and, as you might have guessed, with huts, each of which we now called a "trapper's shack". Our

bible was the Stanley Hawbaker catalog, which offered every variety of steel trap from little ones for catching weasels up to big ones for bear. I assumed that Hawbaker lived in Maine or somewhere else in New England[1]), and knew everything about trapping.

At the start of each fall season, we were supposed to boil our traps. I thought the purpose was to get rid of the human smell, but it may have been also to dye them black so they would be less visible to the animals. We put charcoal chips or logwood chips, bought from Hawbaker, of course, into the water. The boiling was done over an open fire outside.

I remember one time going with Len Lindholm on Len's trap line in the woods near Rte. 22. He found that he had caught a skunk. We stayed out of the way of its spray while he looked for a dead pine branch that had no sharp protrusions that would make holes in the pelt. He then cautiously approached it where it lay, terrified, among the leaves, and hit it with the branch until it was dead. Muskrat, oppossum, skunk, raccoon, weasel, it didn't matter. We trapped them and beat them to death and skinned them and sent in the pelts for money (around $0.35 for a skunk pelt, less for oppossum, as I recall). Some of the animals bit their trapped foot off in order to escape, an act of desperation I somehow managed not to dwell on, but which now seems argument enough to make any decent boy (or man) renounce the filthy sport, because even after the animal had somehow withstood the pain of his self-amputation, the chances were very low that it could survive very long on three legs. I was amazed at our casual mercilessness. But if I had stood up and said, "Hey, guys, let's stop this shit of hurting animals. They have a right to live," the reply would have been, "Hey, look at fuckin Franklin, he's turning into a *queer*," and I simply didn't have the strength to withstand that. The truth is I would have probably accepted my sentence and gone off to try to find out how to be queer.

I once caught an opossum — the word was always pronounced "possum"— in the woods between the road to the Dam and the Lake. I tried to club it to death, but when I finally managed to bring myself to pick it up by the tail, I was horrified to feel the tail, which was like a stiff scaly rope, coil itself around my hand, as though the animal were attempting to say to me, "I'm not so bad. You don't need to hit me any more. Perhaps we can be friends." I brought it home, got out my single-edged razor blade, waited till I was sure it was dead, and then began slicing into the thick pelt between the stiff gray fur. Ideally you were supposed to use a skinning knife, such as they sold in Hawbaker's catalog, with the slender, upward-curving blade that we knew was razor sharp. But for some reason, I never sent in for one.

I cut down the center of the belly, then down the center of the legs, then began peeling the pelt off of the carcass. Soon my hands were coated with grease and blood. I looked at the lhe lifeless snarl of the animal's mouth.. I wanted no part of this wretched business, but I forced myself to do it because I wanted to remain a part of the gang.

Len Lindholm was much better at this than I, and minded it a lot less.

After the skin was removed, it had to be stretched and dried, which mean sliding it on to a paddle-shaped piece of plywood. Eventually it became stiff as a board and when the smell had dissipated, could be sent off to Hawbaker and sold.

In old age, I think more and more of that poor animal, and my willingness to put it through such suffering just so that a bunch of kids would like me. One of the very few reasons I hope for an aferlife is that perhaps I will be able to apologize to that creature, and ask it to forgive me. I see it carefully picking its way through the dry leaves and undergrowth on that gray, cold, fall day. Then, suddenly, there is a *snap!*, a sharp pain in one leg, and movement forward is no longer pos-

1. Actually, he lived in Pennsylvania.

sible. I see him looking down at his leg, trying to comprehend the strange metal jaw that has bitten him, and then I see the twisting and turning as he tries to free himself, the pain increasing, hour after hour, until he hears something approaching. It is one of those To Be Feared, but perhaps he thinks, "Maybe he will free me and make this terrible pain go away". The one To Be Feared seems to be looking for something in the undergrowth. He finds a heavy piece of wood — "Surely to pry off this thing that is holding me in its jaws. But why is he raising the wood over his head? Why is he bringing it down so swiftly? Oh, why is there now this terrible unbearable pain in my head?"

I am brought to tears thinking about that poor animal even though his death occurred more than 60 years prior to this writing..

Boy Scouts

Somehow or other my mother got me to join the Boy Scouts, which I had no interest in doing because some of the kids thought it was an outfit for fairies. What else could an organization be that expected you always do the right thing? ("A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent,"[1] as we recited together at the start of each meeting.) The scoutmaster was a guy named Potter who lived in the Village. I think he worked for the railroad. He asked me to give trumpet lessons to his son, Malcolm. I was reluctant but I tried. It soon became evident I was dealing with a dumb kid with no musical talent. I tried to cajole him into practicing, considered it (for a while) an interesting challenge to try to get someone to do something he clearly had no interest in doing; I assigned him the simplest passages to learn to play (not memorize!) for the next lesson. He nodded, said he would do it, did nothing. After a few weeks, I think because his parents sensed that nothing was being accomplished, the lessons ended.

I had nothing but contempt for Scouts. I hated the stupidity of merit badges, hated the weekend overnight camping trips we occasionally had to go on in a woods north of Valhalla. I remember a pickup truck or station wagon backing up a dirt road; the bored men trying to get us to do what they had read we should do; the building of a lean-to that was a Troop project; the long wooden saplings with gray bark that we had to drag from a pile nearby so they could be lashed together to form the frame of a lean-to we were always trying to build but never completed; the standing around in the freezing cold while one of the adults ineptly lashed the poles together; the smoking camp fires that never burned properly; the tents pitched too close together; a kid every once in a while tripping on a root and falling into the side of one or the other of these flimsy structure; the roots and rocks in the ground that made it impossible to sleep, despite the blankets and sleeping bags . We all had copies of the Boy Scouts' Handbook and we were all supposed to learn how to tie knots, a skill I had not the slightest interest in acquiring. To this day, I remember the name of exactly one of the many knots in the book: the "bowline on a bight". I had no idea why the knot was called that, and could only tie it by looking at the pictures.

In the summer, I went to the Scout camp in Maine and got into trouble, as will be described later in this chapter.

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1. *Handbook for Boys*, Boy Scouts of America, 1948, pp. 26-27: apparently my brother's copy, since his signature in pencil is on the front page.

A Paper Route

Around the age of twelve, through strong urging from my mother, I got a newspaper route. She had adopted the American belief that boys who were going to have any chance of amounting to anything in life, had to work after school as soon as possible. No question of what I wanted.

It was yet another job I hated right from the start, but which I did because I had no other choice in the matter except to be subjected to her relentless nagging.

The routine was the same every day. I grabbed the dirty, canvas delivery bag, which was crumpled in a corner of the garage, got on my bike, and rode to the dirt road opposite the entrance to the school, where the day's bundle of papers was dropped off on the corner. I had to cut through the cheap twine (but with my pocket knife!), then load them into the bag, then hoist the bag onto my shoulder, climb onto my bike, and start off on the route, the first houses being, I think, on that dirt road, then back out and up Columbus Ave. and down Alex Gray's street. Sometimes, if the papers were particularly heavy, I would settle the bag on the front fender of the bike, with the strap around the ends of the handlebars, but the bag sooneer or later drooped down and began rubbing against the tire.

I never mastered, or tried to master, the folding each paper into a square so you could throw it spinning from the street or sidewalk onto the front porch of each house. Instead, I would stop the bike, kick down the kick stand, walk up the front path, and drop the paper behind the aluminum front doors, or drop it on the front doorstep, all in accordance with what the subscriber had requested. Sometimes they were willing to let me just put the paper in the mailbox next to the sidewalk. In any case, it was mindless, meaningless, endless work, and I lived for it to be over each day.

Over the years, I had several routes, all of them in the streets along Columbus Ave. One of them took me up behind Franzl's, to where Pete Smith, who was allowed to have a .22, lived.

One day a week I had the additional burden of collecting, which meant, walking up to the front door of each house, knocking, then waiting, waiting, waiting, for the woman to open, then telling her something like, "Collect for the paper", then waiting, waiting, till she came back, often with bills that I might or might not be able to change, which, if I was unable to, meant having to come back.

The air emerging from these houses was different for each house: cooking smells, smells of old curtains and furniture, smells of cigarette smoke, of perfume, and on at least one occasion a strong smell of alcohol. You couldn't help but think that no fresh air had been allowed into some of these places for years. The family revealed itself, couldn't help but reveal itself, I always thought, by the smells that came out when they opened the front door. Sometimes the door was answered by a father in a T-shirt, he having no understanding what you wanted, what the whole point was in bothering him when he was home from work early this once in a blue moon, having no clue about the daily life of his household.

Each week, on Friday or Saturday I think it was, the woman from the paper came to collect the money. She had a thick book with large arched metal rods to hold her records, one for each delivery boy she handled. Her name was Mrs. Hagen, she was Irish, overweight, but had a twinkle in her eye. I carried my money in a sock. What was left after I paid her was was my profit, my pay for the week. I seem to remember I earned something like $5 or $6 per week — for dragging some 90 to 100 papers around, six days a week, in a soiled canvas bag, through heat, wet, rain, and cold.

I remember virtually no customers except, of course, our neighbors. There was a woman in Martine Ave who lived in a house we had played at when they were building it, a house with big caterpillar tractors in the front, mounds of fresh earth to jump on, barrels of nails, rolls of tarpaper,

all the wood we could use for our huts. But now this family lived there, the woman attractive, with black hair, , coming out sometimes when I arrived, smiling, her dog immediately leaping on me, growling, teeth snapping, she all the while saying, in those words I learned to hate and have hated all my life, "Don't worry, he won't bite. Just don't act afraid."

Farther up on Columbus Ave., there was a woman whose days seemed to be devoted to nothing but smoking cigarettes. She always had one in her mouth when she answered the door, the air of the house seemed as though it could be cut with a knife. I got the impression she also spent a lot of time with alcohol, since I never seemed to be in focus when she talked to me.

Becoming Two People

The realization that I might become two people began even before my father died, but the threat grew worse in my teenage years, until about age 17, when I had developed ways of stopping the thoughts as soon as they started.

I remember one day when I was 14 or 15 (so this was after my father died) — a gray fall Saturday afternoon on which I had been commanded to rake leaves in the front yard. Sometimes I was able to put off the hated chore until Sunday, but not this time. As usual, I was hating every minute of it, the hopelessness of life weighing upon me. I hated having to rake the middle part of the lawn, because there was so much lawn on all sides. I started on the side, where it sloped down toward the Thomas's. Anything but this. Stick the rake out, pull it back, sweep the leaves past you, stick the rake out again, pull it through the grass, which was thick with fibrous crab grass, pull it back, sweep the leaves past.

I began thinking the usual thoughts: Why am I here? What good is this? It was like trying to find a trace of air in a room without air.

Then the thought occurred to me that there is an "I", John Franklin, who was having these thoughts — who was thinking about himself — but that there was also an I who was being thought about. So I was really two people! But there was also a third I who knew, for example, right at that moment, that there were these two I's, and so now there were at least three I's. The terror on that fall afternoon arose because for a few moments I didn't know which I, I really was, and therefore didn't know, as I did in the past, which I to use to control the other I's, or at least to try to get to stop thinking about all these I's altogether.

I seemed to feel these I's separating, like the multiplication of images in a movie. I threw the rake down and ran into the house, screaming, "I can't rake any more! I'm becoming two people, I'm becoming two people!" I repeated it several times to my mother, and ran up to my room.

She was utterly baffled. "What? What do you mean? I told you to rake the leaves." For once, my mother's helplessness did not make me angry, perhaps because she seemed genuinely at a loss, and because she spoke immediately of getting a psychiatrist, or calling Mrs. Laubner, which proved that she was taking me seriously.

I don't know how I got through the rest of the day, or the days that followed, because this was a problem that only intensified the more you thought about it. "Don't think of becoming two people!" I found that the only way to stop the separation was to think of something else as soon as I felt the thought that I was two people coming on, and not look back for a moment. I had no doubt that I was completely alone in this latest catastrophe. But the thought became like a raw fingernail, already puffy and bleeding, that you had to keep worrying and gnawing to find out how bad you could make it.

Church

When I was in my early teens, my mother decided that I should go to church. I am sure the reason was that she felt the need of an additional authority to keep me in line, now that my father was gone. Through the recommendations of people she knew, she decided that it should be the Lutheran Church in White Plains, on Mamaroneck Ave. She went with me a couple of times. I immediately hated the old, musty, religious smell of the place, which for me was the smell of Christianity, the forced smiles of the worshipers, the whole idea of deliberately doing good. Pastor Stroebel, a heavy, balding man with a red face, had a drinking problem, my mother whispered to me at home. For some reason, she decided that I should also go to Sunday school. I remember only two meetings, sitting with others my age while a woman taught us things out of the Bible. Sunday school somehow led to meetings of the Lutheran Youth group which were held in the yellow/brown basement. I went to one or two, then refused to go to any more.

My mother did not let me forget that Terry Pickens was doing the same thing, and in fact already had acquired some sort of leadership role in his youth group. I hated her continuing praise of him, her clear message that she wished I were like him. Terry was Irish, his father was a bus driver or something. My mother liked his parents because they were "simple" people.

I especially disliked the way the church was always on my mother's side, and on the side of adults in general. It always served them, never us kids. But, on the other hand, I had made the Long Prayer in my childhood, and had said "I love you" to the ocean at Cape Cod. I wanted to believe in a God who had no interest in rewarding or punishing — a God who called us to our greatest heroism, and admired us only for our bravery and determination. Then, as now, I detested the idea of having to beg for favors. I asked myself what it was like to be God, and tried to imagine waking up every morning and hearing this vast sea of voices moaning and groaning and bargaining and pleading for mercy and forgiveness. I was determined not to be part of that chorus, and so in my early teens, I resolved not to pray to God for help unless I felt I couldn't go on one minute longer. Other than that, I would only pray to him to thank him for something he had allowed me to do, or for some good fortune he had sent me.