

## **White Plains High School**

I spent my junior and senior years, 1952 - 1954, at White Plains High School. It was a model of what public high schools could be. It had students from all socio-economic levels, including a significant black student population. It had a complete college-preparatory program and a first-rate vocational program, including an auto shop that was respected by mechanics throughout the area. There was something for everyone. The football team, under Glenn Loucks, hadn't lost a game in four years, and the best players, black and white, were respected by all the students, including me. (Later, a scandal would develop when it was revealed that the school actively recruited potential stars, even to the point of paying their families' expenses to move to White Plains.)

For me, of course, the most important thing about White Plains High was the opportunity it afforded for me to become a jazz musician. Everything else was a necessary evil toward achieving that end.

## **Music**

### **Jazz**

#### **The Rebels**

The Rebels began to get jobs in the fall of '54. We had no systematic way of doing this. Someone in the band knew someone who knew someone who was looking for a band for a school function. One afternoon we played at a party at a home in the suburbs of White Plains. I remember it because as the adult couples were dancing on the crowded living room floor, I saw one guy — I think he was the owner of the house and the father of the girl who had hired us — saw him reach around the woman he was dancing with, who may or may not have been his wife, and grab her ass through her billowing white dress. Some of the others in the band saw it too, but we all managed to keep playing despite shocked smiles that threatened to disturb embouchures.

I remember one job that gave us an introduction to the powers that the unions had been able to aggregate to themselves. In memory, the job was at the Westchester County Center, but that can't have been, because the Center was nothing but a huge concert hall, not a place where high school students might come to dance<sup>1</sup>. But I remember the polished wood floor of the stage quite clearly. As we were setting up — taking instruments out of cases, assembling drums, positioning microphone and loudspeakers — one of us plugged a speaker cord into an extension cord and headed for a wall socket. Suddenly, out of the wings appeared a middle-aged guy mumbling something and waving a finger from side to side. We were given to understand that union rules prohibited musicians from doing any work pertaining to electrical outlets in the building. So we had to back off (laughing behind our hands at the absurdity of the rule) and let the union man plug in the speakers.

We played not only Dixieland but popular tunes from the thirties on, using sheet music and a series called the "Combo-Orks" books ("For Small Dance Bands", the cover said). They cost \$1 each, and had the lead, second, and third parts written in a single score. We certainly didn't play all the tunes in each book, but, looking at the contents now, I seem to recall us playing "Stella by Starlight", "The Creep", "Little Things Mean a Lot", "Heart and Soul", "My Buddy", "Penthouse Serenade", "Out of Nowhere", "Beyond the Blue Horizon", and, though it is not in any of the

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1. It is even possible that the job may have been with a band I played with a year or two later, at a city other than White Plains.

books I still have, the perennial “Blue Moon”. “Perfidia” sticks in my mind as being in our repertoire — I think it was a current pop hit; “You Were Meant for Me” was a welcome tune to play after a harder tune requiring high notes. Then there was the tune which I thought absolutely captured the essence of Paris, namely, “Under Paris Skies”. I was worried that people would notice how how much it affected me, how much it made me yearn to be in that one and only city and to stay there forever. Only one other piece of music comes anywhere near to capturing the essence of Paris so well, and that is (or was) the theme music for the brief PBS television series on Inspector Maigret in the late nineties.

I was ashamed of how much I liked “Beyond the Sea”, because I regarded it as far too sentimental. I was even more ashamed to find that I liked Bobby Darin’s rendition of it when it was issued years later (in 1960), because I thought his performance embarrassingly phoney, with the all-too-masculine, handsome-guy voice, and the finger snapping. And yet, I knew that, whether I liked it or not, this was what was required for success with girls.

When I wrote the first draft of this chapter, the only members of the Rebels I could recall were Terry Pickens (class of ’53), trombone; John Porter (’53), tenor sax; and Ira Skalet (’53), tuba. Fortunately, Ira remembered the other musicians. They were: Mike Berniker, a student at Scarsdale High School (’53), clarinet; Alan Corcoran (’53), drums; and Alex (Alec) “Bucky” Gray (’55), my neighbor and former classmate at Valhalla Public School No. 1, whom I have described earlier, piano. Bucky had acquired the nickname “Clank” because he would begin some romantic piece with flourishes and arpeggios, then at the most exquisite moment, deliberately hit a grotesquely, hilariously wrong chord. I think, but am not at all sure, that he was the first musician I heard who, in reply to any question of the form, “Hey, do you know ...?”, would reply “No, but if you hum a few bars, I might be able to pick it up.” The reply could, and did, follow questions like, “Hey, do you know what time it is?”, or “Hey, do you know where I can make a phone call?”, or even “Hey, do you know your fly is open?”

It turned out that Terry couldn’t improvise, and so, reluctantly, we asked Mike if he knew a good trombonist who could and apparently Mike found someone in Scarsdale, though none of us can now remember his name.

I don’t recall Heim ever playing with us, but I may have forgotten.

Porter was the most amusing of the group. He was a tall, heavy-set guy with a devilish grin. He had a funny way of standing while he was honking away, with legs apart but half bent, feet toeing out, the toes of his shoes pointing up, like a cowboy’s. His father was a music teacher in one of the White Plains public schools. Porter (we called each other by our last names, because it was more manly) was able to get hold of a ’38 De Plymouth to drive to jobs, so he was a particularly valued member of the group.

I cannot recall if my mother ever allowed me to drive the ’49 Ford to jobs. I do recall that for a while at least, the story was that you could avoid a speeding ticket if you put a ten-dollar bill inside the cardboard envelope that held your driver’s license. I remember being stopped on Rte. 22 in New Jersey — I doubt if this was on the way to or from a job. Normally, when a bunch of us drove anywhere, the guy in the back seat was assigned the responsibility of looking out the back window to watch for cops. Apparently the guy had turned around to participate in the conversation going on in the front of the car, and didn’t see the patrol car. I handed the officer the cardboard envelope, he went around to the rear of the car, then after a few moments came back again and asked me to get out of the car. I followed him to the rear of the car, and without looking at me, he held up the bill and asked, “What’s this?” Realizing that I was probably dealing with a police

officer who didn't take bribes, I said, "Oh, it's just some money I keep with my license in case my wallet is stolen." He nodded, put the money and the license back in the envelope, and proceeded to write me a ticket. I think I permanently removed the bill after that.

A rule whose validity we all took for granted was that you never stepped on the brake if a cop was behind you unless you were stopping for a stop sign or a traffic light. Otherwise the cop would know you had been speeding and were trying to slow down to the legal limit.

In those days, of course, there were no electric turn signals in cars. Everyone had to use hand signals, which required that you first roll down the window on the driver's side (summer or winter): then: forearm straight up meant you were about to make a right turn; forearm sticking straight out meant a left turn; forearm straight down meant you were about to stop.

There were also no sophisticated door locks, much less car alarms. There was a chromium-plated handle on the inside of each door. To lock the door once you were in, you pressed down on the handle until it was horizontal; to unlock it, you pulled up and back on it until the door opened. Of course, you could lock the door from the outside using a key. We kids knew that you always should roll up your windows as far as possible before you left the car, because if you left even a little crack, the thieves could poke a wire clothes hanger through that had the end bent into a hook; they would maneuver the hook down until it was underneath the inside door handle, then merely pull up on it in order to unlock the door.

Porter used to break us up on the way to jobs by reciting raunchy variations on the old nursery rhymes. I think he learned them from an underground record that was going around.

"Jack and Jill  
Went up the hill,  
To fetch a pail of water.  
Jack fell down  
And broke his ass."

After he told each one, he would try to control his laughter, the result being a jaw-down-on-chest, between-the-teeth snigger that said, "Isn't that a bitch?", which only made the rest of us laugh even more.

"Hickory, dickory, dock.  
The mouse ran up the clock.  
The clock struck one,  
The mouse shit."

"Little Miss Muffet  
Sat on a tuffet,  
Eating her curds and whey.  
Along came a spider  
And fucked her."

"Little Jack Horner  
Sat in a corner,  
Eating his little sister."

(He particularly liked the last two.)

One winter day, as we were driving along a curving icy road next to Croton River (or Reservoir it may have been), we began talking about techniques for recovering from skids. Porter began to jerk the wheel sharply to put the car into a skid, so he could see if he could recover from it. One of these experiments got away from him, and there, in the middle of the road, with the icy black water a few yards below us on one side, and, fortunately, no other cars on the road, we skidded around in a complete circle. When we were moving forward again, he hammered the wheel with the palm of his hand, laughing, absolutely delighted at the accomplishment of doing a 360 on a main road just a few feet above a freezing river.

He had a slap-dash manner about him as he hulked around the school; he usually wore jodphurs, and always had that devilish smile. I remember one cold fall day walking, in my usual despair, through the leafy residential neighborhoods near the High School, going God knows where, when I heard the rasp and pop of a small motor. Along came Porter and a small, quiet guy who hung out with him<sup>1</sup>, riding on motorized bicycles. The two of them had figured out how to put the engines from their fathers' power motors onto bikes and connect up belts and what-not so that they now had what to me were the equivalent of motorcycles. They had hand brakes on the handle-bars, and rotary throttles which they revved as they talked. I remember how much I envied him living in a family where a teenage son was allowed to make a motorcycle — no, where a teenage son felt *confident enough* to take on the project of learning how to make a power-motor engine power a bike.<sup>2</sup>

Terry Pickens hung around with the Mellott sisters, Elaine and Eunice, who were baton twirling champions at the local or regional, perhaps even the state level. Both were blonde, both wore their hair in a tight braid at the back of their head. I remember once riding in a car near the high school, one of them in the passenger seat in front, the other in the back with Terry and me. I don't know if one of them was his girlfriend. If one of them was, neither I nor anyone else could imagine their relationship being anything but chaste, given his moral uprightness. About their talent and fame the sisters were completely confident, completely casual. I think they had black cases, like clarinet cases, to carry their batons in. They were always performing with the band, their sexy white knees high-stepping up and down, tassels swinging on their white cowboy boots (though in memory they also wore white tennis sneakers, white socks), their white and blue uniforms (the colors I see in memory) leaving their legs entirely bare. They would twirl their batons in front, on the side, behind their backs, then throw them up in the air, catch them, all the while strutting down the field. Even on the rare occasions when they dropped the baton, they clearly weren't bothered. They simply picked it up and went on twirling. Sometimes they used batons with flames on the ends, and you would see the flames going round and round, dazzling, mesmerizing in the dark, cold, fall afternoons, and when they threw these batons in the air, the audience was transfixed —

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1. "Tommy Van Essen" — J.S.

2. "[In] our high school days ... the guys who could fix cars and make go-carts were ordinarily not the guys who could get A's in physics, chemistry, and math. I had no trouble getting A's in anything, but the workings of automobiles have remained a mystery to me to this day. Ditto other repairs... Porter..., Tommy van Essen, and the Parsons brothers from the Soundview area a few blocks north of my house were the resident geniuses who turned lawnmower engines into go-cart motors. Guy Parsons, who was in my class, was the only one who was both a good student and a good tinkerer. He later went to Annapolis and fulfilled his boyhood dream of becoming a submarine officer. Unfortunately he picked the wrong vessel: the Thresher. He was the first of my friends to die, and not in a nice way." — J.S.

Can they really catch batons that are *on fire*? — and the answer was yes, they could, and not merely catch the batons, but catch them with a sweep down and around and up behind their backs, the flames going around and around.

I must admit that I was intrigued by how they actually twirled the baton. You could never tell by watching them, the movements were too quick. At home I would try with a stick from the basement. But the human wrist does not rotate 360 degrees, so it must be a trick. Well, you could just hold the baton and then sort of rock your wrist from side to side, partially rotating it at the same time, and maybe, from the front, that looked like the baton was rotating. Or you could, by a complicated movement, walk it through several fingers, then somehow get it back to the starting position and repeat. Maybe that is what they did. I never found out.<sup>1</sup>

Being the trumpet player in The Rebels, and, more important, having been a student of Victor Salvo, eventually got me an invitation to play in the White Plains High dance band, which was led by Mr. Salvo's nephew, Vic Trapasso, a senior. He played tenor sax. (He was related to Mrs. Trapasso, my Latin teacher in junior high. I think she was his aunt.) We rehearsed in the school auditorium during one period in the afternoon each week and played, among other things, many of the Glenn Miller tunes, including, among others, "Tuxedo Junction", "Chattanooga Choo-Choo, and "In the Mood", the last concluding with an ascending run on trumpet — *ya-ta-ta-ta-dahhhhh* — to what for me was a high note that I always worried about cracking. We also got jobs playing at school dances. Afterward, around one in the morning, we would go to Del Monico's Restaurant in White Plains and have pizza, which was still a novelty at that time. It was called "pizza pie": this huge pie crust, yet flat, not with apples or cherries but cheese and tomatoes and pepperoni in it! And the cheese would hang down in several strands between your mouth and the surface of the piece in your hand when you took a bite, so that you had to eat your way back to the piece, or pull the cheese loose with your fingers. To be eating hot, crackling pizza with other musicians at that late hour, to be talking about music — to be allowed out that late because you were a *musician*, well, surely that was a reason to go on living!

(On one of the occasions when I ordered spaghetti instead of pizza, Vic taught me how to eat spaghetti the way Italians do: with a big spoon in your left hand, you stuck the fork into a big wad of spaghetti, then pressed the points of the tines into the spoon and turned the fork so that the spaghetti would wind up into a ball that could fit into your mouth. Something a Swiss would never do!)

I don't recall if the dance band played at assemblies, but I do remember that another trumpet player in the band and I once performed a bebop tune out of a book we had bought. It may have been one of Henry Levine's books, but in any case all the tunes in the book were a sanitized, carefully-written-out version of bebop that would have seemed almost comic to any black jazz musician of the time. To this day, I can still sing the notes of the first dozen measures or so of the tune we played. The book itself has long since been lost. Amazingly, in the seventies or eighties the other trumpet player got in touch with me and told me what a kick he had gotten out of our duet.

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1. "The Mellotts: They were truly hot babes. There's a picture of Elaine (who was in your class) dueling with Patty Black (from my class) on p. 71 of the 1954 Oracle [yearbook]. The uniforms there look to be white, with orange and black trim — the WPHS colors. There's a picture of Eunice and Elaine together on p. 80 of the 1953 Oracle (Eunice's senior year). Same colors. Doubtful if there was any blue on them, but maybe they had others.

"...To quote the 1954 Oracle : 'Those who saw her [Elaine] twirl two fire batons at the high school on the Fourth of July were mystified by her skill in dexterously maneuvering the illuminated batons.' My baton illuminates at the very thought of it." J.S. 9/21/05

I also played with Bob Castle's Music Men, something that I had completely forgotten when I wrote the first draft of this book. Fortunately, Bob remembered the names of most of the musicians in his band when I communicated with him by email in 2004. Margaret Toth, piano (later replaced by Bucky Gray); Joe Gullo, tenor and alto sax; Zach Clements<sup>1</sup>, tenor sax; Barry Cohen, alto sax; Emil Antonaccio, bass; Bob and I, trumpets. We even had a vocalist. Her name was Nan Seymour, and she was the daughter of the radio announcer Dan Seymour, whom you would often hear announcing this or that program. I immediately fell in love with her, not the least reason being her crystal clear voice, although most of all I loved her face. Recently, I looked at a photo of her with the band (which according to Bob was taken at the ninth grade prom at Eastview Junior High), and was surprised at how heavy she was. In the summer, I heard she was in Cape Cod, and so I traveled there just to see her. Surely this would make her want me! I think she had an all-summer singing engagement. We arranged to meet outside a bandstand. I walked down the embankment, heart pounding. She came over to meet me. "Hi, John, how nice of you to come!" Pleasantries were exchanged, but it was clear she had more important things to do, and that it wouldn't be at all inconvenient for her if I returned home the next day.

Beautiful girls put the final stamp of approval on their beauty by being able to sing with a vibrato. Same with handsome guys. I envied that ability far above any other. To be able to make your voice do that, vibrate like that! Of course, you could always grab your throat with your fingers and just wiggle it, as we did when making fun of opera singers or even of pop singers. But...to be handsome and have a vibrato...

I had my first bottle of beer with The Rebels. My father had sometimes let me have a sip of Budweiser, a company which his company built brewery tanks for, and, as with all the male vices, it had been love at first sight and taste for me: the snowy froth, the golden-straw look of the liquid in the glass, the pyramid-shaped glasses, the cold, bready flavor. The band was on its way to a job one evening, driving up East Post Rd. in White Plains, when someone proposed we stop and buy beer. This was something of a dare because it required one of us to coolly go into a delicatessen and lie about his age. So we parked, and the oldest of us, who may or may not have had a false ID, ran across the street and soon came running back, like a bank robber, with a brown paper bag in his arms. While the bottles and cans were being handed around, I debated with myself whether it was worth while taking this final step to a wasted life. I held the beer for a long time, thinking, going over the pros and cons. I don't remember the basis on which I decided to drink it.

### Mr. Salvo Asks for a Decision

Mr. Salvo knew of my interest in jazz, of course. During one lesson, he told me about a trumpet player he knew who would have the piano player just call out the chords — G!, C7! F! — and

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1. Zach was (at least for me) the epitome of the Italian jazz musician — the Italian *tenor sax player*. He was short, with slicked-down wavy black hair, and always seemed to wear a long beige jacket and dark pants that were close to the zoot-suit style. He played leaning forward, concentrating on the sound he was producing, the big tenor sax hanging from a black cord around his neck that was attached via a shiny metal clasp to the instrument itself. I remember at one rehearsal he asked us if we would like some wine; we all said Sure!; and he poured each of us a glass out of a dusty bottle with no label. It was the color of gasoline, but tasted just fine to us (it was like the end of a hot summer day). He said his uncle grew the grapes in his back yard, and made the wine in his cellar. I thought: the Italians are great!

"Zach... went to Albany State...and went on to become a teacher, returning to WPHS at one point. I think he rose in the faculty hierarchy there and did well..." J.S. 9/20/05

construct an improvisation as he went along. I considered it, as did Mr. Salvo, an amazing feat. I still do, but not at all for the same reason as then, since I soon learned to make a passable improvisation by ear to any reasonably straightforward tune without knowing the names of the chords. To go through the process of hearing the name of the chord and *then* think of the notes and *then* create an improvisation intellectually — that seems to me much more difficult.

One afternoon after my mother came to pick me up from my lesson, the question somehow arose whether I wanted to be a jazz or a classical musician. My answer apparently would have some influence on what Mr. Salvo would teach me next. I stood there, trying to come up with the right answer, very little of my thinking having to do with what I preferred, most having to do with trying to guess what they both wanted to hear. Today I can't for the life of me remember what reply I made. But I surely must have been inclined toward telling them "jazz" if for no other reason than that it didn't require that I always play other people's notes and didn't require any sightreading to speak of, not to mention that it offered the excitement of just *being* a jazz musician.

I was quite certain that my father would have had little use for my interest in jazz (or literature). "You can't make a decent living playing music," he would have said in the same no-nonsense tone in which he had said "Children should be seen and not heard" and "Those who don't work, don't eat." I am sure he wouldn't have had the slightest inclination to learn something about the music. He might have been momentarily proud that his son occasionally earned money playing in public, but then the thought of the *kind* of music that his son was playing would have quenched that pride. He would have had absolutely no use for the bohemian life.

## Heim

Peter Heim<sup>1</sup> was, and remained, the best jazz musician I ever personally knew. He always seemed to be working on music, playing in this or that rehearsal band, singing in the Renaissance Chorus in the City — "Franklin, you have *got* to dig Josquin des Prez!" — taking lessons from the jazz clarinetist John LaPorta, whom you could hear on records with the likes of Teo Macero.

He played several instruments, not all of them equally well: he was best on alto saxophone, second-best on piano, which it seemed important to him to learn; I think he also practiced on tenor sax and even the cello. Thus he broke the sacrosanct rule that you learn only one instrument because if you try to learn more than one, you will be less good on any of them, and so your chances of having a reason to live, of saving yourself, were decreased. He was tall, and when he played alto, it was as though he considered it part of his job to tame his size in the presence of this diminutive instrument that was hanging from a cord around his neck: he stood with knees bent a little, like Porter, but toes pointing *in*, looking down the snout of the instrument as though to keep an eye on the way this half-toy in his hands responded.

My mother didn't like him, one reason being that she knew that he was passionately interested in "that awful music" and was influencing me in that direction, and second because when he came to our house, he would invariably sit down at the piano and start hammering out whatever tunes he had been working on. He was too big, too loud, too uncouth, too American, for my mother.

Heim lived in Briarcliff Manor, as I have previously mentioned. His father was a banker, a high-ranking executive at Chase Manhattan, I think. Even so, the family (at that time) didn't live in a mansion but in a snug little brown-shingled cottage behind another house on a tree-shaded street in Briarcliff. I loved that little place, its woodiness, its low ceilings, the small living room

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1. At some point, possibly years later, I learned that his middle name was "Christian".

with its fireplace, the bookshelves everywhere. It was a house for people who spent their lives with books and music. Heim had two sisters, Abby, who wore thick glasses and would later go blind, and a younger one, rather plump, whose name I have forgotten, and who would die at an early age. Both of them, like his mother, had a friendly manner which always seemed to say, “Come on in! We’re just about to play Bach!” (but I don’t recall if anyone else in the family was musical) or, “We just got this great book of Cezanne’s paintings and....”

I think while we were still in high school, Heim’s parents sold the cottage and moved into a huge white house up the street on the edge of Briar Hall golf course, where Heim and I had first met, and where I still caddied occasionally. It had a long, U-shaped driveway of fine white gravel, bushes and trees along it on both sides, impressive white pillars on the front porch, and enormous, echoing rooms. We both agreed that it looked like a banker’s house, and that is what we called it thereafter. Heim hated the place. I remember clearly having at least one dinner there in the big, elegant, dining room. His father, bald, slender, quiet, sat at the head of the table, his mother opposite me, Heim at the foot of the table. His father had a bemused expression when we talked about our life as jazz musicians, and would occasionally insert sage comments, with a half-controlled smile, about the difficulty of making a living playing jazz, and the importance of getting into a real profession.

Heim had a neighbor, Serge Serjenian, who played baritone sax and also did oil paintings that gave the impression that he was better at this than just any old high school kid who had decided he wanted to be a painter. Serjenian was short, stocky, with crew-cut black hair, and a carefree attitude that impressed Heim. I don’t recall our using him on jobs although he played in several of Heim’s rehearsal bands. The only reason we didn’t use him was that the combo books had no baritone sax part.

Heim had a genuine talent for mimicry. He could do Mr. Kitzel on the Jack Benny Show (“Geeve eem ah zetz!” when the car ahead didn’t move after the light changed), and he could do a Bronx accent you could cut with a knife: he had a little routine concerning a Jewish girl from the Bronx named SadauGeeGeeHoffenmeierWitz. When someone talked about going out on a date, he would sometimes say, imitating our conception of a Bronx working class guy, “So...d’ya get intuh huh<sup>1</sup>?” He also did a superb black accent. (In those days, of course, the term “black” was not used, nor, at least among jazz musicians, was “Negro”. A black was a “spade”; Heim would say, “Hey, man, I found this great spade drummer...”) Whenever we got lost on the way to gigs (when Heim was around, they weren’t jobs, they were *gigs*), and we happened to see someone on the sidewalk who looked like he might be able to give us directions, he would say — in the midst of a silence brought on by our perplexity and our (brief) collective loss of something to say — in a deep, understated black voice: “Hey, man, axe dis stud.” He told a story about Bird, supposedly true, in which the great saxophonist had a rather simple-minded black hanger-on who often traveled with him; once, when they were going uptown in New York City and got lost, Bird said, “Hey, man, you get out here ’cause we gonna make a *U*-turn,” and the poor fool actually got out of the car, thinking that a U-turn required that someone get out of the car.

A musician we knew (I don’t know if it was Heim or not) told a story about Prez Lester Young (“Prez” standing for “President”, that is, of all sax players), namely that one of his ideas of fun was to have Lena Horne take a crap into a goldfish bowl while Prez was lying on the floor looking up to watch the stuff come out. Heim told me that he had a Russian great uncle who used to hang out with Bix Beiderbecke. I am not sure now, but this great uncle might have been Serge Chaloff,

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1. “So, did you get into her?”



who is mentioned in biographies of Bix. Heim would imitate this uncle's greeting when he came to visit, saying, in a deep, voice, and a remarkably accurate Russian accent: "Hello, Peterrr, how are you..." This uncle had told him they would sit in Bix's room, drinking, then hide the bottle when the landlady came in to check, then bring it out again as soon as she left.

In our discussions about what it meant to be cool vs. pretentious, not only in everyday life but as artists — an important subject for us — we came up with four rules:

He who knoweth, and knoweth that he knoweth, knoweth not.

He who knoweth, and knoweth not that he knoweth, knoweth.

He who knoweth not, and knoweth not that he knoweth not, knoweth not.

He who knoweth not, and knoweth that he knoweth not, knoweth.

### **Learning to *Talk Like a Jazz Musician***

Heim was my mentor in the *lingo* of jazz as well as in jazz itself. All of us cultivated the non-verbal manner of communicating that jazz musicians used. But I was a slow student, and would drive him to exasperation with my habitual lapses into the use of the word "hep". "It's *hip*, man, not *hep*!" ( Laughing.) "*Hep* is what they used to say back in the *Twenties*!" And then, overcome by the idea of someone being that out of touch, he would shake his head and laugh, "God!"

To speak articulately was to mark yourself as a square, a person beneath contempt. Our communication was primarily a matter of tones and sometimes movements of the head. A grunt dropping off in pitch, accompanied by an understated toss of the head, meant, "Hello. How are you doing?" (Sometimes, in an extremely articulate moment, you might allow yourself, in a dead-pan voice, "Hey, what's happenin'?") A monotone reply accompanied by a *slight* shrug meant, "Oh, you know. About the same as usual. How about you?" No reply meant "Same here." (There was no need to communicate anything that was the same as something else.) To signal to one's musicians, "Hey, let's start playing this tune we have agreed on," the grunt began on a higher tone and sounded more urgent. Counting off was, for example, four grunts in rhythm, with the all but impossible-to-distinguish pronunciation of "one, two, three, four." Disagreement was conveyed by a grunt that was the tonality for the normal, "No, no, come on!"

To begin a discussion of Count Basie's virtues as a musician and a bandleader, you would say, in a low monotone, after a period of silence as you were walking along the street, "Basie, man." To which the other person might reply, in a deep, affirming tone, "Yeah." To which you might respond by singing, bop style, a few bars from an album of his you especially liked. Of course, eventually, the two of you would have to resort to something approximating sentences, or at least phrases, but as much as possible, everything would be done by tone of voice and hand and arm gestures. Profanity could always be relied on: "Like, Frank Wess' solo on ...Fuck, man!"

Later on, Heim instructed me in the blacks' use of antiphrasis, although he (nor they) certainly didn't call it that. "Hey, you gotta hear this sax player at —'s. I mean, this cat is *bad*." In other words, very good.

And, of course, you had to show you had mastered the basic vocabulary, which meant you always had to say "bread" instead of "money"; "shades" instead of "sunglasses"; "threads" instead of "clothes"; "wheels" instead of "car", "axe" instead of "instrument".

### **Listening to Records and Radio**

We constantly listened to jazz, either on the radio or on our own records. The fifties were, without question, the last great era of jazz. Nothing since has come anywhere near it<sup>1</sup>.

There was the Gerry Mulligan Quartet — a quartet without a piano! a brand new idea — with Chet Baker, trumpet; Carson Smith ( or sometimes Bob Whitlock), bass; Chico Hamilton (or sometimes Larry Bunker), drums; playing what amounted to the chamber music of the genre. I can probably still whistle or hum most of the tunes on those albums by heart, even after more than 45 years. In those days, I could play parts of the solos. We were bothered about liking Chet Baker because from his singing we thought he might be queer. Yet we heard he had all the women he could handle, and apparently liked it. Re-listening, in the course of writing this book, to his recording of “Look for the Silver Lining”, I realized that his voice wasn’t that of a gay man, but rather that of a butch lesbian. In fact, there isn’t a great deal of difference between his voice and that of Chris Connor, who sometimes sang with the Stan Kenton orchestra, and who we heard was a lesbian.

The Modern Jazz Quartet (which we often referred to merely by the letters: “the M J Q”) was another chamber music group: John Lewis, piano; Milt Jackson, vibes; Connie Kay, drums; the immortal Percy Heath, bass<sup>1</sup>. We ignored the comments by some critics that they, in particular, the leader, John Lewis, were a bunch of black guys who were trying too hard to act white. The excellence of their playing made all such comments irrelevant. I thought when I first heard them, and still think now, that Lewis’s solos on “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” (*The Modern Jazz Quartet*, Atlantic 1265), on “Two Degrees East, Three Degrees West” (*The Modern Jazz Quartet at Music Inn*, Atlantic 1247), and on “Django” (*Django: The Modern Jazz Quartet*, Prestige 7057) belong in the small category of unsurpassable jazz solos. Whether they were pre-composed, as some people said, or not, is, again, irrelevant: they are that good. What can possibly surpass Lewis’s solo on “Two Degrees East...”? First the lead-in: Percy Heath’s repeated single note with Lewis’s repeated, ascending three-note figure, then becoming a four-note figure, the cymbal keeping up its relentless soft, clanging beat, the whole thing building, building, then the bass suddenly dropping down, like black rubber marbles into a big empty jug, and then the first-year-piano-student-simple, but irresistible, notes of Lewis’s short solo.

In passing, let me say that the next tune on the album is David Raksin’s hauntingly beautiful “Serenade”, from the UPA cartoon “The Unicorn in the Garden”, which I saw. Jimmy Giuffre’s breathy clarinet conveys perfectly the sadness of the hen-pecked husband longing for the soul that is completely owned by another. He sees a unicorn in the garden and tells his wife. She — drawn with the sharp, humorless, predatory features that were the hallmark of Thurber’s women — replies: “The unicorn is a mythical beast. You are a booby. Boobies belong in the booby-hatch.”<sup>2</sup> The faint possibility of hope that is suggested by the bridge of the tune, is subdued by the return to the main theme. The fact that this time the tables are turned on the tyrant female in no way softens the fact that Raksin’s theme expresses the essence of the poor husband’s life — at least until the end of the story.

In John Lewis’s superb solo on “Django”, there is a phrase that is repeated several times; in one of the repetitions, he deliberately or accidentally leaves out a note. I pointed this out to my brother, trying to get him to hear how the note nevertheless seems to be there — how the ear fills in what it expects to hear.

Stan Kenton, in particular his album *New Concepts of Artistry in Rhythm* (Capitol T383), with

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1. This was written in the early 2000s.

1. Whenever I asked myself what other instrument I would have liked to play, the answer was immediate: string bass, and the reason was largely the irresistible appeal of Percy Heath’s playing.

2. In Thurber’s original story, she says instead, “I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch.”

Maynard Ferguson, the envy of all trumpet players because of his ability to play phenomenally high notes, was another musician we listened to endlessly. One of his albums had Bob Graettinger's "City of Glass", an extremely dissonant work that, for me at least, seemed closely related to science fiction. One of the many stories circulating about Graettinger was that he went mad after he wrote this work. We had virtually no interest in anything before the bop era. But once Heim and I were driving at night to or from a gig, and on the radio suddenly came Louis Armstrong playing one of his grand old *blat-blat-de-blat* solos before a huge crowd, and Heim smashed his palm onto the dashboard, and said, "Yeah!" and then with that sheepish laugh, "Looney is great, man. His music is pure joy." And I agreed with him, and still do.

As we drove around or walked around, constantly discussing jazz, we would whistle or sing in bop style a few phrases of what we were talking about. One of us would spontaneously ask, "Do you know...?" Then he would whistle or sing a few phrases. And similarly, though much more rarely, with classical. Heim and I would sometimes play a game with the classical that was broadcast on the radio: one of us would turn on WQXR and if music was playing, turn it off after a few seconds and challenge the other to identify the piece. I was only occasionally successful, but I remember that on the basis of just a few notes I could always identify the start of Beethoven's Violin Concerto. (Heim on the phone once, as we were talking about Beethoven: "The Late Quartets, man: Holy Christ!" He clearly felt they were a kind of superhuman achievement.)

Although I tried very hard to whistle or sing in tune, Heim would often slam his hand down on the seat or on the dashboard and say, "Franklin, you're flat!" And then seeing my shame, he would relent, "Well, Bird always played flat, so ..." (Actually, I am not sure now if he said Bird played sharp or flat.)

Heim and I listened religiously to Jean Shepherd, especially on the way home from jobs. We loved his voice, his dry sense of humor, and his superb story-telling ability. I only remember part of one of his stories, this one about his experiences as a pin setter in a bowling alley in the steel town of Gary, Indiana, where he grew up. He described muscled steelworkers who were so strong that the ball *never actually touched the bowling alley until it hit the pins*, which as a result were sent flying through the air with such speed that the pin boys, standing in a dark vertical shaft above the end of the alley, lived in constant fear of having their legs broken. Equally, we loved his openly cynical attitude toward the companies and products that sponsored his show, and we loved his outrageous pranks. One night, he suggested that everyone open their window and put their radio on the window sill. Then he played some spectacular Basie piece, arguing that people would all be better off if the out-of-doors were flooded with this kind of music. (Perhaps Paddy Chayefsky remembered that night when, in the film *Network*, he had the eccentric TV personality Howard Beale have everyone open their window and shout, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more!") Another of Shepherd's ingenious ideas was to reverse the normal process of (1) write a book, (2) publish it, (3) have an author's reception. So he announced the book publication party for a book he *intended* to write called *I, Libertine*, the party to be held in one of the Liggett's drugstores in New York City. He invited his listeners to attend. (The book was later written and published.) Another time, he held a meeting, for what purpose I have long forgotten, in a New York parking lot, and had the Dixieland trumpeter Max Kaminsky bring a few members of his band to play. That one I attended.

(I must add here that, according to Wikipedia in 2008, Shepherd's show began (on WOR) only in 1956, two years after I graduated from WPHS. I have no doubt about the accuracy of the above memories, but it is possible that they originated in the part of 1956 that I was living at home, after dropping out of RPI, as described in the next file of this volume.)

Sometimes I listened to something called the the Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street, in which a band led by trumpeter Henry Levine played Dixieland. The master-of-ceremonies was Orson Bean. I had bought Henry Levine's book of Dixieland standards, and we used it in the Rebels. And then, possibly through Mr. Salvo, I got to go and see the program as a member of the studio audience. There was the band, and Henry Levine himself, beaming, looking confident, the musicians holding their shiny instruments (the shinier the instrument, I knew instinctively, the better the player) standing in the back of the stage, and Orson Bean with his script, reading it to us, with all the naturalness that only announcers were capable of.

At home I sometimes listened to a program on WQXR called "Nights in Latin America", because, despite the stifling boredom of all programs on that station apart from the music itself, they sometimes played recordings of village bands, and I liked the lemon-juice sound of the out-of-tune clarinets — thought it more interesting than the same music played in tune.<sup>1</sup>

WQXR was also the station that broadcast spoken essays by Gilbert Highet, who became for me another example of what was detestable about college professors: here was this man, laiden with degrees, I think a professor emeritus of Columbia or another New York school, with a pretentious accent, and ideas that couldn't hurt a fly — precisely what upper class moms wanted to hear when they were in the mood for a brief immersion in something intellectual and uplifting. He reminded me of expensive, stuffed furniture.<sup>2</sup>

The advertising on FM station WBAI prompted me to tell people that *that* is how advertising should be: I loved the deep, intelligent, hushed voices of the announcers, and the way they went into detail on the virtues of this or that product. It didn't sound like advertising at all. I felt that all stations should advertise that way, should calmly explain the pros and cons of the products. I had no idea that the usual hysterics displayed in ads were, in fact, deliberate, and carefully calculated to sell products to their intended audience.

On another station, there was something called "Hawaii Calls", which solidified my contempt for Hawaiian music.

### Improvising

A few words now about a subject that was of crucial importance to me for the next seven years, namely, improvisation. First, despite my pathological sense of inferiority and worthlessness, I had far more confidence (or, I should say, far less lack of confidence) in my ability to play by ear than I did in being able to sightread a piece of music: the former was my territory, the latter was Their territory, namely the province of music teachers, virtuosos, people who ran musical competitions. For me, at that time, printed music was to music as it is actually played, actually performed, as printed poetry was to poetry as read by someone like Dylan Thomas. The printed representation was a mere shadow of the reality.

Second, I was even more confident about my ability to *recognize* a good improvisation. I knew a good jazz solo as soon as I heard it, just as I knew that the classical composers I liked — Bach, Beethoven mainly — wrote great music. There was not the slightest doubt in my mind that

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1. "... the Peruvian numbers with panpipes, guitars, and mandolin [were] a terrific combination you didn't hear anywhere else. The hostess was a woman with one of those mellow WQXR voices. Her name was Pru Devon..." — J. S.

2. "Gilbert Highet was a Professor of Classics at Columbia College, but he was a Scot by birth and educated at St. John's College, Oxford. So the accent was proper Oxonian, pretentious for an American but not for a Britisher. ...his field was Greek and Latin literature..." — J. S.

Gerry Mulligan, Chet Baker, John Lewis, Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond, and, later, Clifford Brown, were superb improvisers.

But I was deeply ashamed that I couldn't "play modern", meaning, that I couldn't improvise in the idiom of what was then called "modern" or "progressive" jazz. Improvising a Dixieland solo was always something I felt I could do, even though I didn't do it particularly well<sup>1</sup>. I always felt I understood how the solo was supposed to *sound*, how any Dixieland solo was "supposed to go" *and*, more important, what that required as far as playing was concerned. Modern jazz was another story: I felt I was in way over my head, that I didn't have the insight into *playing* the music that I had with Dixieland. If I had had exceptional range, some of my ineptitude would have been forgiven. "Can he scream?" (or, sometimes, if I recall correctly, "Can he squeal?") was a standard question concerning a new trumpet player on the scene, the term referring to whether he could play piercing high notes above high C, like Maynard (we seldom mentioned his last name: there was only one Maynard, and that was Maynard Ferguson). Ira Skalet, tuba player in the Rebels, said in his email of 11/21/02 (see above footnote) that the musicians in the Rebels kept asking me to get what was called an "angel" mouthpiece so that I could hit some of these high notes. I never did, probably because I believed that if I couldn't hit them with an ordinary mouthpiece, then it wouldn't count if I were able to with a specially designed mouthpiece.

I remember one afternoon Heim was playing in some club in Pleasantville: in memory it seems that he and a bassist and drummer had simply talked the owner into letting them play, without being paid, for a few hours. He probably had phoned me and told me to come by and listen, possibly even join in playing backup. When I got there, I opened my case, took out my horn, but I knew that I could never do a decent job at playing along with him. So I sat at a corner of the little stage, hunched over, bell of the horn pointed at the floor, and tried to half-play along with them (trying to sound like Chet Baker), half-not, as though I were in the process of deciding if it was worthwhile for me to stand on the stage. It was a disaster: to the handful of people in the audience it was the sound of someone who is not sure if he should be part of the band or not (if he is, why doesn't he stand up and face the audience?) and, worst of all, is not sure of how to play properly. Heim meantime was playing beautifully, sounding like a combination of Bird and Paul Desmond, "really cookin'", as the expression went, curled around the sax, bent slightly forward with his pigeon-toed stance. Eventually, he lost his temper. "Christ, man, if you're going to play, then play!" Filled with shame and self-hatred, I packed up and left.

### Going to the Jazz Clubs

Since jazz was our life, we went to hear the greats as often as we could, which meant as often as we could wheedle permission to use the family car out of always reluctant, always suspicious, uncomprehending parents. Heim would phone me: "Basie's at Birdland!" The word would go out among all of us young musicians: "Hey, Basie's at Birdland!", "Basie's back in town."

And the great labor would begin: yes, the leaves will be raked, the ham station will be cleaned up, with no tools left on the desk, no solder, everything neat. Yes, I'll come right home after work in the store. Yes, I'll do my homework each night this week. Yes, I'll sweep the basement and polish my shoes<sup>2</sup>. Of necessity I began developing the skills at manipulating people which would prove invaluable later in my business career: control your temper as long as you possibly can;

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1. Although Ira Skalet, the tuba player in the Rebels, said in an email of 11/21/02 that "Mike [Berniker, the clarinetist] and you were especially adept at improvisation, along with John [Porter, the sax player] who had a natural talent."

always tell them what they want to hear; never tell them what you think of them; lie when necessary; appear to be sympathetic to their concerns; survive by nurturing your utter contempt for them.

### **Birdland**

The most important of the jazz clubs was Birdland, “The Jazz Corner of the World” located at the corner of Broadway and 52nd Street in New York City, an address that every jazz musician and aspiring jazz musician knew by heart. Most of the time, Heim and I went together, or at least so it seems in memory, but sometimes we brought dates along.

Usually several blacks were hanging around the entrance, doing what we never knew, but they always seemed engaged in important business. There was an awning over the sidewalk. Then you went down a flight of stairs, into the moist, warm, darkness of the club. At the bottom of the stairs, on the left, inside a tiny cage was the cashier. You paid, then stepped down a few more steps. On your immediate left was the men’s room in which there was always a courteous black who handed you a towel after you had washed your hands, and to whom you in turn handed some money, I think a quarter or fifty cents. Straight ahead beyond the men’s room was the bar, the stools always filled with guys leaning forward, talking to the bartenders standing in front of the illuminated bottles. Immediately to the right of the bar was the stage. To the right of it, and in front of it, were the tables. They seemed to disappear into a gloom so dark that to this day I have no idea how big the interior of Birdland really was. I remember always being surprised at how low the ceiling was. I thought it was the reason why the sounds all seemed so muffled, never thinking that the real reason was the leather walls, upholstered with diagonally-lined-up metal buttons. The place was always filled with cigarette smoke. We would walk up to the maitre d’s desk, which was on the right as you stepped into the club proper, and while we were waiting for him to return from seating people, one of us would take out a \$1 bill and hold it in the palm of his hand so the maitre d’ would be sure to see it. Then when he came back we would say, “A *good* table, up front near the band”. (If we had dates, we would hope they would be impressed by how sophisticated we were in all this.) The maitre’d would nod and lead us straight to a table in front of the stage, and as he half-pulled a chair out for one of the girls, we would hand him the bill without looking at it, and he would take it without looking at it, because both of us were cool.

We were socially aware enough to know that we should try to restrain ourselves from talking continually about music, about the virtues and shortcomings of what was happening on the stage, since all this was no doubt largely incomprehensible to the girls. I felt sorry for them: here they were with two guys who obviously were more entranced with what was happening on the stage than they were with them. And although I am sure they tried hard, I am equally sure none of them ever had any idea of how great the music was that they were hearing.

The place always had the steamy heat and excitement of every black nightclub I have ever been in. The audience was hip, enthusiastic, exactly as it sounds on “Segue in C” on the old vinyl album, *Basie at Birdland* (“Recorded Live at the ‘The Jazz Corner of the World’”) (Roulette Birdland R 52065). It was as though Basie was just having some friends over to his house. “Bill Basie of Red Bank, New *Juhsey*”, Heim would say, in his deep black voice (then, in an even lower

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2. The typical high school male seldom polished his shoes as often as he should have. And so he developed the habit of shining them on the back of his pants legs at the last minute: he raised one shoe and rubbed the upper surface up and down on the back of the lower half of the opposite pant leg, then did the same with the other foot. Eventually it became reflex action before any important event, e.g., a date, even when the shoes had been properly shined.

voice: “Yeah.”). Sometimes he would point out a plump, prosperous looking woman sitting near the band, and tell me it was Mrs. Basie. The place was filled with laughter, talking, white teeth and eyes shining, the women all looking beautiful, the tables so tiny there was hardly any room for the accumulating glasses and napkins. I think they charged the outrageous price of a \$1 a beer and maybe as much as \$1.50 or \$2 for a drink. We had a drink or two, but we weren’t there to get drunk.

We heard many different jazz artists in our trips to Birdland: the guitarist Johnny Smith, trumpeter Harry Sweets Edison, who was an old-timer even then, tenor saxophonist “Prez” Lester Young, who had been one of Bird’s early inspirations, Dizzy Gillespie... Dizzy had a girl trombonist (we would never have called her a “*woman* trombonist”) in the front row of his band. Heim and I exclaimed over this — it just proved again how cool Dizzy was. I think her name was Melba Liston. We never heard Bird himself, however: he died in 1953, just before we started going to the New York clubs.

But the most exciting evenings were those spent listening to the Basie band.

### **The Basie Band**

I can’t remember if there was a curtain or if the band would simply stroll onto the stage, take their places, play a few warm-up notes and then wait for Peewee, the midget black announcer, to announce them, in his high voice. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, tonight we gonna have the Count Basie Orchestra...” Peewee wore a bow tie, neat white shirt and suit, and always had his hair greased down and parted in the middle. He looked like a waiter at a posh 19th-century restaurant. Invariably, one of us would lean over and say to the other, “Peewee’s cool, man.”

After Peewee’s announcement, Basie would give a nod or perhaps count off and the great rhythm machine that was the Basie band would roar into something like “Little Pony” on the above-mentioned album. My skin would prickle, I would have to fight back tears. Now, at last, we were getting down to business! Things were being torn apart the way they should be! I would sit there motionless, mouth half-open, or else gritting my teeth. Now, at last, we were getting the News, and let no one doubt it for a moment: when I was listening to the Basie band, live or on records — say, to a number like “Good Time Blues” on the above-mentioned album — I was convinced that somehow, in some way, I was getting News from the Other Side. What that Other Side was, I had no idea; furthermore I knew that students who were going on to accomplish important things in this world — become scientists and engineers — would have regarded with contempt any such idea. But nevertheless I knew it without the shadow of a doubt.

Sometimes during the evening, as I watched those extraordinary musicians, I would wonder what a Basie rehearsal was like. Did they really have to rehearse at all? The music played itself. The band in those years was one of the best in the long history of that jazz institution:

Trumpet section: Thad Jones, Snookie Young, George Cohn, all of whom stood in the back, against the wall at the rear of the stage. I was envious of the high notes they were able to reach (as, for example, on “Backstage Blues” on the above album);

Trombone section: Henry Coker (whose last name Heim pronounced in his deep black voice “Henrih *Cokuh*. Yeah”), Bennie Powell, Quentin Jackson;

Sax section: Frank Wess, Marshall Royal, Budd Johnson;

Drums: Sonny Payne;

Guitar: The immortal Freddie Green, whom Heim and I were both in awe of. He played without changing his facial expression, cradling the guitar in his lap, seeming hardly to move his hands, and yet ... “*He never plays solos, man*”, Heim would say, to express how great a rhythm

guitarist he was, in other words, so great that he didn't have to bother with such displays. How old was he? we would wonder among ourselves. "I don't know, man: forty, fifty, sixty, He never ages." A fine example of his playing can be heard in the recording of "Every Day I Have the Blues", with the band backing their star vocalist, Joe Williams.

Bass: Eddie Jones, a big, smiling black with huge hands who would sometimes pick up the bass with one hand, and without missing a note, move it several feet to a better position on the stage with no more effort than you would expend in carrying a violin.

Sometimes the great Joe Williams was there, always managing to include a few of his hits in the program, including, "Every Day": "Every day...every day I have the blues... Nobody loves me, nobody...seems to care...Nobody luuuuve me, *nobody*...seems to care...Speakin' of bad luck and trouble...Well you *know* I've...had my share." And the concluding lines, "...my baby gonna...jump and shout...When the train rolls up...And her *Daddy* come...walkin' out." Heim could do an almost perfect imitation of these lines in his deep, Joe Williams voice, always adding his approving, low-voiced "Yeah" at the end.

We loved the way that Basie played only a few notes, especially compared to the other piano virtuosos like Bud Powell. The thing was, they were always precisely the *right* notes. *Plink, plink-plink*. They were after-all-is-said-and-done notes. And he always had that expression of pride and delight in the music, as though he were saying to us, "Now isn't this something?"

When the brass hit one of those magnificent chords, we would punch the air with our fists — "Pow!" We would listen intently to every solo, try to absorb a little for our own use. No comment at all meant it was merely good; comments meant it was great. After a set, we would be worn out. We felt as though we had played it ourselves. At the end of the evening, as the band was playing their theme, "One O'Clock Jump", Peewee would get on the stage and say, in that high voice, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, looks like Count Basie gonna get outa here...." We walked out of Birdland at one in the morning exhausted, worn out, rung out. How could we go back to normal life — the life of mothers and school — after listening to the Basie band for four hours? Then home to the Alien waiting for me. Sometimes — most of the time — we got back later than we had promised: not at one, but at three or four in the morning. (Tell the bitch anything, just get the car!) I would park in the driveway after having dropped Heim off in Briarcliff, or he would drop me off if he was driving. "Later, man!" he would say as I got out. The front porch light is on. I press down on the black steel latch. The door doesn't open. Yet it's not locked. What is going on? I push. The door moves inward a fraction of an inch. I hear a groan. "Hey. I can't open the door!" I call out. A whimper. I push harder, then throw my weight against it. Something heavy seems to be on the other side. Again and again I heave at the door, finally get it open far enough to get my head through the opening. She is half-lying, half-sitting on the floor, leaning against it, pretending she has collapsed out of worry. She pretends to be only semi-conscious, holds her hand pressed to her breast, is panting, as though the heart attack were occurring then and there. My rage is almost beyond control. I: "*What's the matter?*" She pretends to gasp as though she is trying desperately to formulate the words. I put my foot under her, try to shove her from the door. The gasping continues. She is trying to scare the daylights out of me. I: "Hey! What's going on? I'm going to call a doctor." She raises a feeble hand, waves it to signal no. I make out the words, "Don't...want to...bother... him." So thoughtful is this poor old widow that even as she is gulping down her last few breaths of air, she thinks of the doctors first, their much-needed night's sleep. See what a good woman she is! I scream at her. "*Look, you bitch, either we call a doctor or you stop this fucking shit with me!*" She puts her hands on the floor,



turns her body, attempts to crawl to the stairs, still taking in great gasps of air, choking.

Eventually, she manages to convey to me that the reason for this spectacle is that I didn't come home on time. But I think: why should I feel guilty, given that the reason was music? My shame at being (I was sure) the only one of all the kids, and a budding jazz musician at that, who has to come home to a spectacle like this makes me want to kick her and smash in her face. Instead, I merely swear at her. She takes away all driving privileges for the next two weeks.

### Newport Jazz Festival

In the summer of 1956, Heim and I went to the Newport Jazz Festival, an event that lasted several days, and that took place in Newport, R.I. We attended concerts in the afternoon and evenings. There, beyond the sea of chairs and heads, on the distant stage, in far greater number than at the clubs, were the musicians whose records we listened to at home and on the car radio.

One afternoon we went to a panel discussion at the mansion called The Breakers. You couldn't believe that buildings this big had once been merely someone's *house*. Al "Jazzbeau" Collins who, with Jean Shepherd, was the disk jockey we listened to daily, was the moderator. He had made a record, "Fairy Tales for Hip Kids", in which he updated some of the traditional fairy tales into the language of jazz musicians. One of the three little pigs' houses, for example, was made out of "clarinet reeds and Scotch tape". His show was supposedly broadcast from the Purple Grotto, 3½ stories under a station in New York (I forget the call letters). He was the best of all the jazz disk jockeys, not only because of his musical taste — he always seemed to find exactly the *best* performances of whatever artist he was featuring — but also because of his wonderfully laid-back, unhurried voice and manner of speaking, the very essence of the cool style. If any speaking voice could be said to "lag the beat", it was his. He had certain favorite words. For example, he would describe a musician as "...a cat whose playing is [then just the right amount of pause]...*pro-digious*."

He was the moderator of a panel discussion at The Breakers, and this was the first time I had ever seen him: he turned out to be fat, balding guy with a goatee.<sup>1</sup> At one point, he introduced his wife, who was slim, quiet, beautiful, with long black hair.

Among those participating were Gerry Mulligan. Heim and I sat in the front row before the table at which the panelists sat, a couple of feet from these artists whose music we listened to and studied and memorized every day.

(Once, at White Plains Community Center, Heim and I somehow managed to get backstage as Mulligan was getting ready to go onstage. I thought, "I am this close to a great jazz musician!" Heim whispered, "He's nervous!" Then Mulligan was announced, and he walked briskly out onto the stage with the other musicians, and they started to play.) I can't remember where we stayed during the Festival but I do remember fog blowing in from the nearby ocean and I remember that one night we got into a heated argument about who was greater, Duke Ellington or Count Basie. I argued for Basie, he for Ellington. At some point I think he made a remark about my inferior improvising, and said I tried to be too far out and that I wasn't making it, that there was nothing wrong with sticking closer to the melody, that I should listen to Cat Anderson, trumpet player in the Ellington band, who often improvised close to the melody. I felt he was throwing me a sop

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1. "Al Collins: Started at WKPA in Pittsburgh in 1943. To WNEW in NYC in 1950. To KSFO in San Francisco in 1959. Was on various stations until he died in 1997 of pancreatic cancer in [San Francisco]. (See <http://www.440.com/namesc2.html>) He apparently officially changed spelling of his name to 'Jazzbeaux' in 1969, but earlier it was Jazzbo or Jazzbeau, depending on how he felt at the time." — J.S.

because he knew how much I hated myself for not being able to improvise well, and that made me all the more angry. So there we stood, on the top step of the bleachers in the cold night air, arguing back and forth, as Ellington's band played far below on the illuminated stage. I was ashamed and furious with myself for not having Heim's talent.

I think it was on the way back from Newport that Heim and I took a side trip to meet a trumpet player who had played with one of the big bands. He was now an English teacher. I remember a sunny rented room in a small town, long grass outside, woods. He had a shy, quiet manner, which only increased our awe of him, even though I remember thinking that he was already a has-been. At one point during our visit, when I assume we were raving over the Brubeck quartet, he raised a finger, said, "Here, some musicology" and turned and put a record on his record player. It was a track in one of the Brubeck albums. In the midst of Paul Desmond's solo, he asked us if we recognized what he was quoting. Heim and I both were familiar with the melody, but I don't think either of us could immediately tell its source. So our host explained that it was several measures from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*.

## **School Music**

### **Marching Band**

In those days, schools had ample budgets for musical activities, and so White Plains High had not only a marching band (which played at all the football games in the fall) and a dance band, but also a school orchestra.

Since my primary school years, there had always been one or two exceptionally good musicians in the school bands I played in. In primary school, it was the clarinetist, Jerry Bucci. In White Plains High, it was another clarinetist, Bob Renino, and the trumpet player George Hilliard. Renino, like Jerry Bucci, had that black, wavy, always-in-place, Gladstone Gander hair that made me envy Italians and indeed all Latins. He was good-looking and had a heavy growth of beard that clearly needed to be shaved every day. Everything about his manner said, "Hey, things are basically easy!" He seemed always to be good-natured, friendly, never lording it over his musical inferiors, which were just about every musician in White Plains High School or any other high school in the area. He had a steady girlfriend.

In response to my question of whom he had studied with, he said, in an email of 11/06/04, "I studied with the famous Daniel Bonade in NYC. He played with the Cleveland and Philadelphia Symphonies. Later I studied with Herb Blayman, principal clarinet at the Met."

He also said, in that same email, "[You and I] played with Vic Trapasso with Harvey Kahan and Skippy Dashnaw. Then I had my own band with you, Pete Smith [as] drummer and others." I have absolutely no recollection of playing in his band, nor of anyone named "Pete Smith" being among the musicians I knew in the High School. Could he have been the same kid who lived up behind the German restaurant in Valhalla?

Renino always took a first at the spring contests. Sometimes he would show us what he was going to play, and bring out sheets of music which were solid with sixteenth notes, line after line.

George Hilliard, on the other hand, was a real character. He said he was Russian, even though he spoke American English without an accent. But because he was Russian, he smoked only Russian cigarettes — which were oval, not round like ours, and which, we understood, he got from a relative over there. They were magnificently foul-smelling, like burning weeds and dirty socks and stale cheese. They reminded me of the cigarettes on the French liners, and in Europe. They made me think of cocktail lounges, European intrigue, women with French accents who wore per-

fume that made you know without the shadow of a doubt that what you were *meant to have been* was a wealthy European aristocrat.

George was always in trouble at school. In fact, he was the only guy we ever heard of who was forced to do a year of postgraduate work in high school. His grades were that bad.

But he was a magnificent trumpet player. Not only did he know how to play the bop accents correctly, but he had an extraordinary high-note range. We considered him our local Maynard Ferguson. (Whenever he had a horn in his hands, he would repeatedly spit little bursts of air from the center of his lips — *tooh, tooh* — as though he were always getting ready to play.) And he was an incorrigible rebel. Sometimes, toward the end of the day, during a break in band rehearsal, or when we were gathering our instruments to go practice formations on the football field, and we were feeling particularly mischievous, we would get him to — or he would get us to get him to — go out into the corridor, which was silent except for the occasional voices of teachers heard through the closed classroom doors, and, surrounded by his fans, he would position the mouthpiece on his lips in that careful, knowledgeable way he had, then at just the right moment, press it into his lips and in the next moment his body would jerk, his cheeks balloon out like Dizzy Gillespie's, and a piercing G above high C would go screaming down the corridor, chase around the corner, go screaming down the next corridor, in fact reverberate around the entire floor, then go up the stairs and go around the corridors on the second floor. We would listen to the disturbance it created in the classrooms, the muffled snickers and “Attaway, George!”s coming from behind closed doors. We would quickly go back behind the stage, while George would linger in the hall, fingering the valves of his instrument, no doubt contemplating whether the situation might not warrant another reminder that there were other things in the world besides books and homework.

Sometimes the school band had to play in a parade. George's uniform fit him so badly we laughed just to see him in it: the pants way too short, revealing his white socks and black shoes. His sleeves were too short, his cape never fit properly — he looked like a refugee, except that he usually wore his cap at a rakish angle. He was the perfect picture of the Jazz Musician Forced to Do the Establishment's Bidding. But he had his revenges: his lip was so good that he was able to play many of the lead trumpet parts *an octave higher*, so that “Washington Post” sounded like Maynard Ferguson was playing it. He would do this unpredictably, and so we were never fully concentrating on our playing, but always waiting to hear those high notes screaming above all the noise of the music. And when he did play them, we often could not continue playing our own instruments for laughing. Perhaps Meredith Wilson had a character — or a whole trumpet section! — like him in mind when, describing the mythological marching band in the lyrics of “76 Trombones”, he said that the musicians included

“...trumpeters who'd improvise  
A full octave higher than the score.”

George was born to play jazz in big bands, not play marches in high school.

Sometimes, at intersections, he would execute a smart right turn, march a few steps till he was even with the sidewalk, then execute a smart left turn and march down the sidewalk, *behind* the on-lookers, keeping exactly even with the other trumpets marching in the street, and, of course, causing great confusion among the on-lookers, who didn't know if they should watch the band or watch him. The first time he did this, there was a notable lapse in the brass playing, because we were all laughing so hard.

Bob Castle remembers a big band that George was instrumental in establishing, and that put

on a performance featuring Stan Kenton-type music for a school assembly. Bob believes that George wrote an original score for it: “Ballantine Blast”, “with a great trumpet riff”. “Ronny [Blomgren]’s drums started to slip and he played all over the stage while someone reset them.” I don’t recall playing in this particular band.

When football season was over, the marching band became a concert band. The one memory I have of it was Gail Natterer, who played flute, and sat diagonally opposite me. She was the only other girl in high school, next to Paddy Hurley, who will be introduced below, whom I was in love with. She was not beautiful, but she had light brown hair, a pleasant, intelligent face and a serious manner, and was thoroughly competent on her instrument. I probably said a few words to her once in a while during rehearsals, but I am sure she had no idea how I yearned for her, how much I day-dreamed about her.

### **Orchestra**

The orchestra was directed by Mrs. Hildebrant, a short, middle-aged woman with curly hair and a ready smile. During my senior year, I began to get the impression that she was just going through the motions of leading the orchestra, since we always seemed to play the same music — Schubert’s incidental music to *Rosamunde*, Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmilla* and others — pieces I grew to hate — which is strange, since Mrs. Hildebrandt never did anyone any harm. We practiced in the orchestra pit below the stage in the main auditorium. The percussion was at one end of the orchestra, all the percussion instruments being played by blacks.

### **Brass Choirs**

Terry Pickens, always coming up with the Right Thing to Do, organized brass choirs at Christmas and Easter. In December, in the days before Christmas, we walked the icy, snowy residential streets of White Plains, music flapping in the lyres mounted on our instruments, stopping in front of now this house, now that, the windows glowing orange with the warmth and coziness within, and played the hymns he had supplied. As in marching band, we had to warm the mouthpieces with our hands before we played, and make sure our lips were wet, because otherwise our lips would stick to the cold metal. Then, when you pulled the mouthpiece away, you tore the skin off your lips. I tried for a *twa twa twa* sound that I had somehow decided was how a trumpet in a brass choir should sound.

One Easter Sunday morning we played on the plaza of Kensico Dam, standing in front of that great sloping wall of rectangular stone blocks, the sun shining down on us.

We didn’t get paid for these Christian good works. I participated because any kind of music playing counted toward my immortality, and made me a better musician. But there wasn’t a trace of Christmas or Easter joy in me. Christmas in particular was, and still is, the worst time of year.

### **All-County Band**

Every year the high schools sent their best musicians to play in the All-County Band, which practiced for several weeks, then gave a concert at the Westchester County Center. (I don’t remember how they decided who was best in each high school.) Then the best of *these* musicians went on to play in the All-State Band, but to earn that honor you had to practically be a professional already. I made All-County both my years at White Plains High, as did Heim. I think the second year, namely, 1954, our conductor was Frederick Fennell, founder and conductor of the Eastman Wind Ensemble. His recordings with that organization and many others are now every-

day fare on classical music stations. He died at age 90 in 2005, so he was about 40 when he conducted the All-County Band. But even then we knew he was someone special. I remember him as very youthful and French-looking, wearing black pants and a black turtle-neck sweater. Once, when he had gotten us started on a piece, and apparently liking the sound, he turned and jumped off the stage and ran back up the center aisle to hear us better. Pure exuberance! First trumpet that year was Bobbie Zatola, a short, slim, good-looking Italian kid from Port Chester, whose father made trumpet mouthpieces. (You saw the advertisements in the music magazines.) No one could come near to Zatola in virtuosity. He played the solo in the “Hymn of Freedom”, from the last movement of Brahms’s Symphony No. 1, and never failed to hit the high C. I still have the 78 rpm records that they made of each of these concerts.

Pat Hurley (introduced below) and I set next to each other. I think we were both second trumpets. As always, she was pleasant, dutiful, competent in her upper class responsibilities, and all I wanted to do was look at her.

### **The Westchester Symphony and First Love**

By the end of my junior year, I was a member of four musical organizations: the high school marching band, the high school orchestra, the Rebels, and Vic Trapasso’s dance band. In my senior year, the number increased to five, when I began playing with the Westchester Symphony. This was an orchestra composed of better-than-average students and of adults deemed still sufficiently adept on their instruments. For all I know, a few professionals were also members from time to time.

I don’t remember any of the music we played, nor the name of the conductor. I do remember that once the violinist Roman Totenberg appeared with us. We knew he wasn’t in the first rank, and this seemed to show in his personal manner. He was thin, always seemed nervous, as though eager to get on with the ordeal so he could get his paycheck. I felt sorry for him. I wondered what it was like to be a concert violinist who knows he will never be great, but who will always be the first to get calls to play with amateur and semi-professional orchestras, who will always be short of money, yet always have to pretend otherwise<sup>1</sup>.

Once, the Symphony went to see Zino Francescatti play, I forget with which orchestra in the City.

But the most important thing about the Westchester Symphony was that it was where I met Pat Hurley. The brass section sat in the last row of the orchestra, and one evening, as I was sitting in my chair, waiting for the rehearsal to start, this *girl* suddenly sat down on my left. She had a trumpet, for God’s sake! No one ever heard of a girl trumpet player in those days. She wore a pony tail, and with my first look at her I found her irresistible. Of course, I worried about being so strongly attracted to a *girl trumpet player*, since that could be an expression of my latent homosexuality, but that concern was soon lost in my feelings for her. I fell hopelessly in love. I knew that I could have spent the rest of my life just looking at her face.

We went out on dates — we may have gone to the movies and a school dance once or twice, I can’t remember. At first I called her “Pat”, but she said she preferred “Patty”. Once, after I had written her a letter, she said it was spelled “Paddy”, which seemed a little strange to me. I was bothered a little when I later learned that that is the spelling for the man’s name among the Irish.

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1. This description does not do justice to his career, as I realized when I read his obituary in May 2012. (He died at age 101.) He had performed with the best orchestras, made numerous recordings, and was a highly respected teacher.

We went several times to hear Count Basie in Birdland (possibly on a double-date with Heim and his date); and we went to a studio performance by the WQXR String Quartet in New York City. Face aflame with pimples, stinking of Clearasil, I put on my good pants and sports jacket, applied the usual amount of Vaseline hair tonic to the comb (or maybe it was Vivalis, which had more of a barber shop, shaving cream smell), spread it through my hair, then shaped and reshaped the wave in front so that it was absolutely perfect. I picked her up and we drove to the City. We parked somewhere, made our way to the studio, I wheeling her along with an occasional gentle hand on her shoulder, each touch the result of anguished calculation whether it should be done *now* or *later* (the touch itself must have been infuriating to her, so gentle and light and respectful and *timid*). I was like wood the entire evening, stomach in knots, always on the verge of breaking out into a sweat. Oh, God, please don't let it be boring, please let her like it. I have no idea what we heard, but I know that, to me, it was the most boring, the most proper, the most upper class, the most this-is-what-the-best-people-do, music I ever heard<sup>1</sup>. I sensed she was bored, too, and so I started to sweat, which only made the Clearasil stink more. But she patiently sat through the concert (she too knew it was what the best people do), we made small talk, but after it was all over, there was no sign it had changed her feelings toward me.

She lived in Mamaroneck at 1603 Harrison Ave., at the top of a T where another road joined Harrison. The house always reminded me of a New England farm house, with its gray wood and porch around three sides. It was set back from the road on a lot that was five feet or so above the sidewalk. There was a stone wall along the sidewalk, with steps in the center leading up to a front path that ran through a scraggly lawn, with no trees, to the house. On the left side of the lot was a driveway leading up to an old garage under some old, overhanging trees. Her father worked for Con Edison. Her mother reminded me of a farmer's wife, or I should say, of the kind of woman who might live on a small New England farm near a music conservatory or university. The family was Catholic. She had a sister four years younger who also played trumpet, and a brother, Jim, about the same number of years older, who was studying one of the sciences or engineering. He was tall, and I thought (always sensitive to such matters) that he was losing his hair in front, though on top it was still OK. He had the friendly, contented manner of a young man born to be an engineer. Pat was a student at F. E. Bellows High School in Mamaroneck.

Next door to her, across a little grassy field and a low stone wall, lived Roland Kohloff, who was about our age. (She said his nickname was "Butch".) Whenever we went over to see him, he was practicing timpani. He didn't stop even when he was talking to us: he remained bent forward over the drum, both hands moving in their sustained rapid up-and-down motion, the mallets almost a blur against the white of the drum head, his head cocked to one side to better hear its pitch, his attention equally divided between what we were saying and how the drum was sounding. He had a quick, intense manner, spoke rapidly, was obviously fond of Paddy. I think I told him that I was playing in jazz groups. He said he earned a little money playing in strip joints. He later went on to become the tympanist for the San Francisco Symphony (I said hello to him once, after a performance), a position he held for 16 years, and then, after his teacher, Saul Goodman, died, he became tympanist for the New York Philharmonic, holding that top-rank position for 32

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1. Beginning in my sixties, chamber music became my favorite classical music. Brahms was the composer who opened my ears — I told the rare lover of classical music I met that he was "talking to No. 1" when he wrote the Clarinet Quintet, that "no human being could write such a piece of music". And then the deluge: Haydn, Mozart, Schumann, Beethoven, Dvorák, ...

years. He was featured in a PBS segment about the percussion instruments in an orchestra. I wrote him to say hello again, reminding him that Paddy and I used to come over and talk to him when we were in high school, but he never wrote back.

I may have asked her to go steady, and she may have replied with something like she didn't feel she was ready for that yet. Since I never knew what her feelings for me were, but since I couldn't stand the idea of her not liking me, I felt that my job was not to seem too eager to see her. In that way, I imagined, she would be more eager to go out with me when I called, although, the truth is, she never seemed *eager* about anything.

She was the first girl I kissed. I knew that this event had to be faced, sooner or later, and I knew it might well determine the future of our relationship. And so the anxiety at the end of our dates grew, until one night I decided the event could not be postponed any longer. I walked her up the stone front steps, a little way up the path, and then, I think putting my hand on her upper arm as we were saying good night, I asked her if I could give her a kiss. I suspect the words were more along the lines of, "I wonder if you would mind if I gave you a good night kiss." So there, in the blazing cold white gray moonlight, she indicated her willingness to accept a kiss from me. I thought: Not only can her parents see us but so can the cars passing on the roads below. I thought, This is it. Your one and only chance. If you do this right, she might start to love you. If you don't, she will remain merely a friend. I was tormented with the thought, How could you know if this was *supposed* to be your first kiss? Maybe another first kiss, at a different time with the same girl, or with a different girl, would be the key to happiness. How could you find out the one you were supposed to kiss first?

I brought my face close to hers. Her eyes closed. And then I realized there was a more immediate problem, namely, the problem of noses! How did you know which side to lean your head so your noses wouldn't bump? Because if they did, the embarrassment would be so great that would end everything. Furthermore, with her eyes closed, how could she see which way your nose was going, so that she could move hers the other way?

My solution was to close in so slowly that I would be able to tell if my nose direction was wrong. Eventually, our lips touched. Hers were soft and still. They were just — lips: a girl's lips. I knew from the movies that a kiss was supposed to last, it wasn't just a quick sucking in and release of pucker. I kept my lips pressed against hers until I sensed enough time had passed. Needless to say, no thought of sticking my tongue in her mouth even entered my mind. It would have been appalling to her if I had.

She loved Bach but said the Church still forbade the playing of his music because he was a Lutheran. We joked about how ridiculous that was. "The Church is throwing away some of the best religious music ever written!" I told her. But because of her love of Bach, I thought that maybe she would like me more if I played Brubeck's "Give a Little Whistle" for her. Ever since I had first heard this track, I thought (and I still think, after what must be many hundreds of listenings), that it is an absolutely perfect piece of music. I have often thought over the years, especially during the descending bass line Brubeck plays near the end of his solo, that to be able to play music like this *is all you need*. His improvisation, even with its Bachian sound (or, for me, *because* of this sound!), belongs with the handful of great jazz improvisations.

So, during a date, we went down into our basement, with its sterile dark red-and-green linoleum floor, and fake wood-grain walls — an engineer's basement (or the wife of an engineer's

basement). I played the ten-inch red vinyl on the portable player in that echoing cold room, she stood listening, patiently, arms folded across her chest, and then, toward the end of Brubeck's solo, she exclaimed, "It's Bach!" And from that brief moment of excitement I thought, there's still hope for me with her!

I wonder if I played "Over the Rainbow" for her, from the same album. This too is a stunning and unique performance, and for me the most beautiful rendition of the tune I have ever heard. To this day both of these tracks can bring tears to my eyes.

Throughout the remainder of high school, I kept not seeing her as often as I could, in hopes that it would make her want to see me more. It didn't. When I called her, she was polite, talking about school, or music. It was always proper, and Catholic, and wretched agony for me.

When I went to college, we wrote to each other once in a while. Once, when we got a job at Cornell, I invited her to come and hear us, which she did. I was hoping and praying she would be impressed not only by the quality of the music, but by the fact that I was the leader of the group. She listened politely, smiled, and said the right things, in that remote way of hers, and after that I lost track of her until 2004, when we met for dinner, as described in the second-to-last file of this narrative. I carried her picture in my wallet long after we no longer saw or even wrote to each other. After that, I saved the photo in little packet of treasured photos that is now lost. I still have dreams of calling her on a dark, cold, rainy fall day, imagining her in her New England house surrounded by trees on the hill above the road in Mamaroneck, I somehow believing that at last she will have changed her mind, she will like me after all, she will see me after all these years. But she is never at home.

Losing her, never having had her really like me, does not rank with the death of my father in losses we never recover from, but as far as women are concerned, it remains the deepest scar.

All in all, in my senior year I played in a total of eight different musical organizations: the high school marching band, the high school orchestra, All-County Band, the Westchester Symphony, the Rebels, Vic Trapasso's dance band, Bob Renino's band, and Bob Castle's Melody Men, this on top of daily practice and getting all A's and B's in my courses.

### **Popular Music**

I said in the second file of this volume that from early childhood on I had nothing but contempt for popular music. Yet on Saturday mornings I listened to Martin Block's "Make-Believe Ballroom", which featured the most popular recordings of the week. What I didn't have contempt for during that brief period of my youth was hillbilly music (it was seldom called "country-western"). On Saturday there was a disk jockey who played hillbilly records. I endured hours of recordings I hated, waiting for him to play the tunes I lived for: Frankie Lane singing "Ghost Riders in the Sky"; the now long-forgotten musicians playing "The Sicilian Tarantella", which I can still whistle the verses of — I loved the piping sound of the penny-whistle and the low sound of the bass line on the guitar, the inevitability of the chord changes, promising happiness; then there was Montana Slim singing "The Big Rock Candy Mountain", in his pure, mountain-clear, voice. I tried to imitate his faultless yodeling, but could never even get my voice to crack at will — *dee-oh-dle-lay-dee-oh*. For me, this kind of yodeling — Western yodeling — was all right whereas the Swiss variety was not, the main reason being that my mother admired it. It bothered me a little to be trying to sing in a high voice, but the fact that cowboy stars did it prevented it from being queer. Then there was "Little Rock Getaway", with its descending theme that always made me happy.



The reader will not be surprised that two songs about the deaths of fathers affected me deeply. One was “Grandfather’s Clock”: about a grandfather who had a grandfather clock that was as old as he was.

“My grandfather's clock  
Was too large for the shelf,  
So it stood ninety years on the floor;  
It was taller by half  
Than the old man himself,  
Though it weighed not a pennyweight more.  
It was bought on the morn  
Of the day that he was born,  
It was always his treasure and pride;

But it stopped short  
Never to go again,  
When the old man died.  
Ninety years without slumbering,  
Tick, tock, tick, tock,  
His life seconds numbering,  
Tick, tock, tick, tock,  
It stopped short  
Never to go again,  
When the old man died.”

The other was a song about a boy whose father was dying, and who had been told that his father would be dead when the leaves had fallen. I remember the lines:

“I'm tyin' the leaves  
So they won't fall down,  
So Daddy won't go away.”

I always liked Hank Snow's rendition of the “The Wreck of the Old 97”. The following are the lyrics as I remember them (a modification of lyrics found on Google in Feb., 2011):

“They gave him his orders in Monroe, Virginia  
Saying, Steve you're way behind time  
This is not 38, but it's old 97  
You must put her into Spencer on time

He turned and he said to his black greasy fireman  
Just shovel on a little more coal  
When we cross that White Oak Mountain  
You can Watch old 97 roll

It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville  
In a line on a three mile grade  
It was on this grade that he lost his air brakes  
You can see what a jump he made

He was goin' at a speed, doin' ninety miles an hour  
His whistle broke into a scream  
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle  
And was scalded to death by the steam  
[I particularly liked this verse.]

Now come all you ladies, you must take warning  
From this time on and learn  
Never speak harsh words to your true lovin' husband  
He may leave you and never return"

"Deck of Cards" was about a soldier who is caught playing cards in church, and is brought before the Provost Marshal. The soldier explains that each card reminds him of something in the Bible.

"You see, sir, when I look at the Ace, it reminds me that there is but one God.  
And the deuce reminds me that the bible is divided into two parts: the Old and the New Testaments.  
When I see the trey, I think of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..."

The names of some of the singers I listened to slowly come back to me: Hank Williams ("Your Cheatin' Heart"), Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb, Homer and Jethro ("Does the Spearmint Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Over Night?"), Grandpa Jones, Little Jimmy Dickens, ...

I also said, in that early file, that I hated crooners. There was one exception, however, and that was Frank Sinatra, whose voice, and his way with lyrics, I thought beyond criticism. Bing Crosby, on the other hand, with his bah-bah-boo, I always thought a caricature of what he was trying to be. Another singer I thought was beyond criticism was Ray Charles (not normally regarded as a crooner), who was just coming into prominence in the early fifties. Here too I had not the slightest doubt about his genius, and this was confirmed for me with his recording, years later, of "Georgia On My Mind".

Jazz musicians had little use for popular music. When Heim even heard the *title* of Patti Page's hit song, "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?", much less a few bars of it on the car radio, his contempt knew no bounds. "Oh, *Gawd!*" he would say, and be unable to restrain himself from laughing at the sheer awfulness of it. I agreed with him. He had the same reaction to most of the other hits of the day, for example, Johnnie Ray's "The Little White Cloud that Cried". Here you had lyrics expressing the most whining, sob-sister emotions being sung with apparent complete conviction by a man! Not only must he be queer, but he must be so queer he didn't even know it was wrong.

And then there was Teresa Brewer's hit, "Music, Music, Music", which was played intermina-

bly, forcing us to listen again and again to that nasal, slightly hoarse, back-fence voice shouting, “Put another nickel in/ In the nickelodeon/All I want is lovin’ you/And music, music, music”. It was so affected, so awful, that for me it was erotic. And the equally-often-repeated “Come On a’ My House”, by Rosemary Clooney, a song I immediately regarded as particularly stupid when I first heard it. I considered it a kind of proof of the inferiority of Italians. When I recall these melodies and lyrics, I always hear Heim’s “Oh, *Gawd!*” and his laughter, as I do whenever I see, during a PBS Pledge Drive, a film of Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians. Dear God! The greasy, overdone tenor sax vibratos, the brazen sentimentality of the tunes, made our skin crawl.

A distinctly erotic song for me was “Slow Boat to China” as sung by Kay Starr: “I’d like to get you <sup>1</sup>/On a slow boat to China...” In fact this was masturbation music, because I always associated it with Dorothy Dijkstra, who sat in the back of the bus and who all the guys wanted to fuck. (She lived on a wooded avenue a few houses from where the bus route branched off from the Aerators Road.) And there was “Secret Love”, which I almost liked, because of its sadness: “Once I had a secret love/That lived within the heart of me...”

Probably the only popular group we respected were Les Paul and Mary Ford, who had a long-time hit with their rendition of “How High the Moon”. The jazz musicians all recognized not only Les Paul’s extraordinary guitar technique, but also his genius as a recording engineer, since he was one of the pioneers of multi-track recording, which enabled him to achieve a sound of several guitars, and have his wife sing all the harmony parts with herself. The tune itself, of course, was a jazz standard.

### **The Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll (I Thought)**

In my junior year at White Plains High — specifically, in November, 1952 — what I then, and through much of my life, erroneously regarded as the first rock ‘n’ roll record<sup>2</sup>, was played on the commercial radio stations, specifically, on Martin Block’s show, which was the show we all listened to in order to hear the top tunes. That record was “Oh, Happy Day”, sung in lugubrious tones by Don Howard who, like his record, is now long forgotten. He accented the first two words, like a big dumb high school kid reading poetry aloud:

“**The,**  
**sun,**  
is shining  
Oh happy day...  
No more troubles and no skies are gray;  
ever since you said those words to me;  
Oo-Doo, doo-doo-doo-doo;  
you said you loved me, I know it's true;  
My life's complete, dear, for now I have you;  
Oh, happy day, oo-oh lucky me;  
Oo-Doo, doo-doo-doo-doo...”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Which we always heard, and pronounced, as, “get choo”

2. The honor of being the first rock ‘n’ roll record is usually given to “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and the Comets, and perhaps one or two other recordings.

3. “‘Oh Happy Day’ (1952)”, Wikipedia, Feb. 21, 2011.

Martin Block said he would eat his hat if it became No. 1 on the Billboard Chart, and, as I recall, it did, and he ate his hat, but then he said he had had one made out of chocolate. Mrs. Robacker, my English teacher (about whom more below), was also shocked by the record, and made dire predictions about what it meant for the future of the country, but did so with a grudging smile.

Throughout my early schooling, being a popular singer (or a movie star) was what all of us kids considered as *real* success in this world. To be able to sing with a vibrato put you in a special class, like being extremely good-looking. If a girl sang with a vibrato, well, that meant she was totally feminine, totally desirable. We, or at least I, regarded it as a gift that some of them had, like naturally wavy hair or big tits.

### **Classical Music**

I came to classical music — or, at least, to Bach — by way of hillbilly music. Around my mid-teens, his music, and perhaps that of some of the other baroque composers, began to sound to me like a more advanced version of hillbilly music, which at the time was my favorite. Even though classical was the kind of music that parents listened to, hence something I had to be wary of, it had a steady rhythm, predictable chord patterns, and it didn't sound like the insufferable Saturday opera my mother still listened to.

By the time I was sixteen, Bach was for me the best of them all. In those days there was lots of talk about mixing jazz and classical. Brubeck's "Give a Little Whistle" is about as close as you can get to bringing classical into jazz (which is strongly to be distinguished from writing classical music that contains jazz elements, as Gershwin did). Unfortunately, I didn't have Brubeck's skill at this, and so I can assure the reader that I played some truly wretched solos throughout my jazz career by trying to sneak in passages that sounded like Bach.

Among the countless things I have never forgiven my mother for is that she always used to say, when I mentioned that I liked Bach, "Oh it's all the same". (I hear her snapping her girdle as she says it.) My contempt for her would reach new heights whenever she said that. She preferred Strauss waltzes instead, and Wagner, both of which, I am sure, were for her a kind of expensive auditory furniture.

But the truth is, it wasn't much use trying to discuss any classical music with her (much less jazz), because she would always use it as an excuse to complain about her ailments. I might exclaim over Respighi (*The Pines of Rome*, in particular), or a Beethoven piano concerto, or Brahms's Symphony No. 1, part of the last movement of which we had played in All-County Band, and after listening to me for a few seconds, she would turn away with a sigh: "Well, of course you are young, you have no worries. The doctor has told me I am to have no upsets. Oh, yes. He is quite worried. I don't want to worry you, but he was not at all pleased with my heart at the last examination." To which I would reply with something like, "Fuck your heart. Why don't you do us all a favor and croak? Christ, don't you ever stop thinking of yourself once in a while and listen to some beautiful music?" Which would set off her automatic response about Papa (my grandfather) and the musical evenings they had at home.

Once, in my desperation to get her interested in my music, as I stood in front of the Stromberg-Carlson, listening to "Greensleeves", my mother standing in the doorway, I said to her, "Some day I'll tell you what this means to me." She was curious. I didn't reveal any more, played coy in response to her inquiries. (What it meant was that it was a description of the one and only girl I would someday marry. And at the time, that was Paddy Hurley.)

When Heim and I were driving around in the car, everything stopped when they played Bach. “Oh, yeah! Fuck!” Heim would shout as the piece began, and then he would start singing along, shouting along, as we sped down the road. Sometimes somebody in the back seat would continue to talk. Heim would turn around and say, “Hey, shut up!”. Then in addition to singing, shouting along with the music, he might start conducting, or the two of us would pound our fists on the dashboard.

I listened to music to escape the feelings which living in our house gave me. I would lie under the sunlamp on the day-bed in the den, wearing dark goggles, and while the ultraviolet rays baked my acne, I would listen to Ravel’s orchestration of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. During “The Hut on Fowl’s Legs” I would imagine enormous chicken legs, drumstick legs, several stories high, like something out of *Fantasia*, gallivanting through some European countryside, with high-stepping feet, like an ostrich — like an upper-class lady — and on top, a little woodcutter’s cottage, rocking back and forth, the terrified woodcutter standing in the doorway, clutching the jamb, looking out.

In the same den, lying on the day-bed, I listened to Debussy’s *La Mer*. It had all the ingredients that some classics had for me then: it was boring, it gave me a hot feeling in my stomach, and therefore I knew it was important. I imagined an upholstery ocean, hot, stifling cushions, red velvet waves. I would have been ripe for Rimbaud had anyone told me about him.

The second part of the first movement of the Bach *Orchestral Suite No. 3* always brought me hope, could be relied on to get me through my worst days. So could his *Concerto for Two Violins, Strings and Continuo in D Minor*. I would be driving in the Ford, shaking my fist, tears coming down during the last movement, knowing that this was a Call to me. *I will do it! Keep going!* Even if I couldn’t afford the records I wanted, in those days prospective customers in record stores could listen to the LPs before they bought them, simply by going into little rooms at the back of the record store where there were 33-1/3 and 45 rpm players, and earphones if you wanted them. (This idea is now considered novel; one store in Berkeley made a name for itself by offering the same service in connection with its CDs.) After school I would go to Hunt’s Music Store on Mamaroneck Ave. and listen to jazz or, if I was really in bad shape, listen to Bach’s *Preludio in E Major* from the *Violin Partita No. 3* (BWV 1006) as orchestrated by Eugene Ormandy (or possibly by Stokowski) and played by the Philadelphia Orchestra with Ormandy conducting. It was a piece that made my skin prickle. It was a call to keep going.

But I was no scholar of classical music. For most of my life, I pronounced *Purcell*, *Purcell*, and *Pachelbel*, *Pachelbel*.

Without question, music was what got me through high school. It was my one source of hope that some day I might be able to prove that I had a right to live, that I had had a right to *have lived*. Books and movies merely provided escape and, once in a while, encouragement. My contempt for American movies was already well established. I detested the way the stars always played themselves but were called “actors”. For example, even though I admire Katherine Hepburn for her independence and outspokenness, to this day I cannot watch the films she made with Spencer Tracy because I cannot work up sufficient disbelief in what these movies actually are, namely, movies of Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy pretending to be other people. And, of course, I detested the way the actors’ personal lives were such an important part of their success.

Books helped too, of course. Heim put me on to several in that passionate way he had:

“Franklin, you have *got* to read *Catcher in the Rye*, man. This is *Truth*, man.” And then, laughing, he would tell me about this character Stradlater who was a *secret slob*, and about Holden’s putting on the old lady in the train by telling her he had a brain tumor but it was only a small one. Another book Heim felt was must reading for us was *Of Human Bondage*. But he liked Salinger the best. He insisted I read “For Esmé — With Love and Squalor”, a story which I recently re-read and which seems as fresh and beautiful as it did forty years ago.

I read books that seemed important, for example, Churchill’s *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* which I think ran in *Life Magazine*. Churchill was one of those very rare individuals whom I liked despite the fact that my mother liked him too.

One day, in a bookstore in White Plains, I casually opened a volume of T. S. Eliot’s poetry. I had heard his name mentioned a few times and knew that he was a considered one of the best poets of the time. I tried to read a page, could get nowhere. I was amazed at how incomprehensible it was, and yet I felt it was saying something important to the privileged few who could understand it.

I grasped at anything that might show how failure like mine could still somehow end in success. I felt that the answer would come from Europe. So, one cold, gray, fall afternoon after school, I went to the White Plains Public Library and took out *Mein Kampf*. I remember walking up the steps of the stone building, I remember the old smell of the place; the uneven floors; the atmosphere of failure, forgottenness. I tried to read the book in German, but that was too difficult, so I read it in English. At about the halfway point, I became angry with his faulty logic. I simply couldn’t force myself to believe what he said. But make no mistake: if Hitler had not killed the Jews, and if there were little or no racism in his philosophy, and if *Mein Kampf* had presented logical arguments, and if Hitler had been as smart as Nietzsche, I would have become a Nazi, then and there, even at that late date in history. To discipline and train yourself for a cause about whose worth there was no doubt, to have a purpose in life, to march and drill and learn to use weapons, all with the goal of crushing your enemies — how could I possibly have turned away from it?

Somehow, probably while doing the research for my essay on Beethoven (described in the sub-section “Mrs. Spettel”), I came across his *Heiligenstadt Testament*, which was written when he realized he was going deaf. If any single piece of writing can be said to have pulled me through my teenage years, it was this one. I quote most of it here, omitting only the parts addressed specifically to his brothers.

“...Oh, my fellowmen, you who have thought and called me inimical, stubborn and misanthropic, how you wronged me! You do not know the causes underlying these charges. My mind and my heart from childhood on were kindly disposed, and I longed to perform great deeds. But consider that, for the past six years, an unhappy lot, an incurable ailment, has befallen me, which has been worsened by ignorant physicians. Cheated of the hope of improvement from year to year, I was finally forced to accept the possibility of a lingering malady, which it might take years to cure, or worse still, which might prove to be incurable. Born with a fiery, vivacious temperament, and having a bent for social recreation, I was obliged, early in life, to retire from the world and to live a lonely life. When, at times, I tried to rise above this, how bitter, how sad was the experience, due to my poor hearing. And yet, I found it impossible to say to people: ‘Speak louder, shout, for I am deaf.’ How could I admit the weakness of a sense that, in me, should be keener than in most — a sense that at one time I possessed in full perfection — a perfection such as few in my profession have ever enjoyed. I could never do that. Therefore forgive me for withdrawing from you all, when I so gladly would have mingled with you. My misfortune is doubly hard to bear, because I know that I shall be misunderstood. For me there is to be no relaxation in

human society, cultural conversation, exchange of views. Almost all alone, I can approach human society only as far as the barest necessities demand. I am condemned to live like one banished. Whenever I approach a social gathering, a hot dread fills me, lest my condition be noticed.

“And it was thus that I have spent these last six weeks in the country. Following the orders of my physician — orders which only too well met with my present disposition — I am as sparing as possible of my hearing, but, at times, a longing for social intercourse has driven me to disregard his instructions. But how humiliating, when someone standing beside me heard the playing of a flute from afar, and I heard nothing; or when a shepherd was heard singing, and I heard him not. Such experiences almost drove me to desperation and I was on the brink of taking my life.

“Art alone hindered me. It seemed inconceivable that I should leave this world, without having produced all that I felt I must. And so I go on, leading this miserable life, a truly miserable one, with a body so irritable that upon the slightest occasion a sudden change can throw me from the best condition into the worst one.

“Patience — that is the name of her who must be my guide, and I have made my choice. I hope my resolve to persevere will last until it pleases the relentless Parcae to break off the thread. Perhaps I shall succeed, perhaps not. I am resigned. To become a philosopher at the age of twenty-six is not so easy, and harder for the artist than for another.

“O God, Thou art looking down on me, Thou knowest, Thou canst see into my inmost being, Thou knowest that the love of humanity and the desire to do good ever actuate me. And, O, you human beings who read this, think how you have wronged me, and if there be among you one as unhappy as I am, let him console himself with the thought that he is not alone, that there is another like him, who, in spite of all natural obstacles, has striven to keep his place in the ranks of worthy artists and men.

“ ...

“And now it is done. I hasten toward death with joy. Should it come before I have had time enough to devote to the unfolding of all my powers, I might deem it too soon, despite my hard lot, and I might wish for it to come later. But even so — should not the thought of being free from infinite suffering be a cause for gratification? Therefore, Death, come when Thou wilt: I shall meet Thee with fortitude.

“Farewell, and do not forget me altogether after my death. I have earned this, for I have tried all my life to make you happy. So be it!

“Heiligenstadt, October 6, 1802  
Ludwig van Beethoven”

— quoted in Nettle, Paul, *Beethoven Handbook*,  
Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., N.Y., 1967, pp. 86-87.

“Art alone hindered me [from committing suicide]. It seemed inconceivable that I should leave this world, without having produced all that I felt I must” — I felt these words were addressed to me.

## The Teachers

I don't know if we tend to remember our primary- and high school teachers as having been better or worse than they really were, but I have no doubt that the teachers I had at White Plains High were among the best.

It is unfortunate that not a trace of the homework I did in high school exists, except for a cou-

ple of essays and a few short short stories and sketches I wrote for Mrs. Spettel's English class. Nor do any of the textbooks I used in my high school and college years (in college, we sold them as soon as we could after the end of the semester, out of revulsion). One title sticks in my mind: *Prose and Poetry*. But it might have been a college text. And yet, I have no idea when exactly I threw out the three-ring binders in which I kept all my homework and notes in both high school and college — if in fact I ever did. Perhaps I should mention briefly that, for reasons I no longer recall, we always wrapped each of our three-ring binders in a cover. It had "White Plains High School" on it, and a place where you could print the name of the course that the binder was for. The covers were given to us by the school. In September, after classes started, we each went through the little ceremony of folding the covers, which were made of a heavy, plastic-coated paper, so that the thick front and back covers of the binder would fit inside.

### The Robackers

Dr. and Mrs. Robacker taught English. Both were regarded with a special respect because they seemed so exceptional. Dr. Robacker looked like the father in the French films *My Father's Glory* and *My Mother's Castle*, only older. He had a moustache, and rimless glasses, and was a *Dr.*, which we knew was not a medical doctor but just about equally important. He had a reputation for always being calm and on top of things. (But that was because he was a *Dr.*) He commanded unusual respect from the students. Mrs. (Ada) Robacker was exceptional because she was a Quaker<sup>1</sup>, and therefore wore dark gray dresses without belts (she was so thin it hardly mattered), and no lipstick, and had long black hair which was never subjected to anything but soap and water. She looked like a friendly witch. Remarkably, she accepted a certain amount of kidding about her strictness in grooming and attire.

Mrs. Robacker, we all knew, was "old-fashioned", not only in her peculiar dress and refusal to use cosmetics, but also because she was strict and made us memorize things, like Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us", most of which, after forty years, I can still recite:

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not. — Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn."

She also made us memorize the first part of the Declaration of Independence. Donovan called it the "Dec of Ind". I can still recite the first part of it:

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1. or so we believed. J.S. informs me that she was really Amish.



“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to abolish the political bonds that have connected it to another and to assume among the nations of the earth that separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind...”

One by one, over a series of days, we had to stand up in front of the class, and recite the assigned piece.

Strangely enough, I felt less anxious in her class, even though then, as now, I did all the grammar exercises by ear: on tests, whenever the question was which of several forms was correct, I “sounded it out”, cocking my head to one side and listening to each version in my mind, and then making the choice on that basis. Grammar never made any sense to me, by which I mean, given a good ear, it seemed an extremely laborious way of getting the right answer. Who thought up such a thing?

I think I learned the rules regarding “lie” and “lay” from Mrs. Robacker, and I have remembered them all my life — “lie”, “lay”, “lain”, “lay”, “lay”, “laid”. Also when to use “lie” and when to use “lay”. Meantime, my educated fellow countrymen and women torment me by routinely saying things like, “I am going to lay down for a while”, “The dog is laying on the carpet.” Either Mrs. Robacker or Mrs. Spettel (to be introduced later) taught us to say “try *to* do” not “try *and* do”, another rule that I have remembered, and practiced, all my life. I know I am listening to a second-rater when I hear someone say “try and do” or “try and get”, etc. And either Mrs. Robacker or Mrs. Spettel was the first teacher to tell us that every paragraph — at least in non-fiction — had to begin with a topic sentence. I was highly suspicious of this rule, mainly because the first sentence in paragraphs I read in books never seemed to be a topic sentence, and because I thought it odd that a reader would be so naive as to require this special message to tell him what the paragraph was going to be about. Why couldn’t he just read the paragraph, and figure it out for himself? To this day, I have never consciously written a topic sentence.

One assignment she gave us was to write about what we wanted to be. I sat there, wracked with anguish, trying to come up with the answer that would save me. I knew, or rather, felt in the depths of my being, that, whether I liked it or not, my mother was depending on me to make up for my father’s death. It was hopeless for me to try, but I had to try, because it was the only way of avoiding having no reason to live. In desperation, I wrote that I wanted to become an electronics engineer, thinking (though I didn’t say so on paper) that this was the best compromise I could come up with, since engineering was my father’s profession but at the same time electronics had to do with sound, that is, music.

There was a feeling, at least among the better students, that Mrs. Robacker was the best teacher any of us had ever had, or ever would have.

### **Col. Black**

Math was taught by Mr. Black, whom we all called “the Colonel”. In our minds, or at least in mine, the designation came from the fact that he was from the South, and there was a running joke that he had probably fought in the Civil War. He had a quizzical expression that always suggested he was going to do a little kidding. (I can’t remember if it was he or Mr. Salvo who enjoyed the phrase, “putting the *emphasis* on the wrong *syllable*”.) As he tugged and cajoled us through geometry proofs he would walk with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the floor, and say to the student standing at the board, “So it looks to me like...” Student: “So it looks to me

like...” Col.: “...that the line drawn perpendicular to the plane at point P...” Student: “...that the line drawn perpendicular to the plane at point P...” Col.: “...is parallel to the line AB through point Q...” Student: “...is parallel to the line AB through point Q...” Col.: “On account of because ...” Student (trying not to laugh): “On account of because...” The Colonel would then lead the student through the logical justification. Eventually, the denouement was in sight. Col.: “...And therefore...” Student: “...And therefore...”

I remember wondering about the strangeness of the fact that a triangle with sides of length 5, 12, 13 was a right triangle. How odd: those three numbers. 3, 4, 5, which was the first right triangle with integral sides that we learned about, made more sense. 7, 24, 25 was even worse than 5, 12, 13. But I accepted these odd facts without even thinking to ask if there was a reason for them. At that age, for me, they were simply the way things were in geometry. Period.

### **Herr Weigel**

For German, we had Herr Weigel, a teacher from Germany who was visiting on some sort of exchange program. I remember him, along with Ken Allard, my sixth grade teacher, as one of those rare teachers who seemed to spend all their waking moments trying to figure out how to make a subject that is normally dull, interesting. He was in his thirties, and had an alertness, a quickness and youthfulness about him that set him apart from most of the other veteran teachers. He wore a bow tie, and had us listen to records of poetry: I remember Goethe’s “Erlkönig” (Elf King), which troubled me I think for obvious reasons:

“Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?  
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;  
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,  
Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

“Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht? —  
Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?  
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron and Schweif?—  
Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif. —

“Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!  
Gar schöne Spiele spiel ich mit dir;  
Manch bunt Blumen sind an dem Strand,  
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.’

...

“Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;  
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt.’  
Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt fasst er mich an!  
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!—

Dem Vater grauset, er reitet geschwind,  
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,  
Erreicht den Hof mit Müh and Not;

In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.”

“Who is riding through night and wind?  
It is the father with his child.  
He has the boy firmly in his arms,  
he grasps him securely, he keeps him warm.

“My son, why are you hiding your face in such terror?’  
‘Father, don’t you see the elf king?  
The elf king with his crown and train?’  
‘My son, it is a patch of fog.’

“You dear child, come along with me!  
I will play really beautiful games with you;  
many colorful flowers grow by the banks,  
my mother has many a golden garment.’

“I love you, your beautiful form arouses me;  
and if you’re not willing, I will use force.’  
‘My father, my father, now he’s seizing me!  
The elf king has hurt me!’

“The father is frightened, he rides swiftly,  
he holds in his arms the groaning child;  
he reaches his yard with effort and distress —  
in his arms the child was dead.”<sup>1)</sup>

I thought: only a German could write a poem like that.

I don’t know if the term was used in those days, but the school had what we would now call “tracking”, meaning that a student’s past performance determined the level of class he got into in the future. Thus, for example, in English, if you did well in your sophomore year, you got into a more interesting class in your junior year. The highest level class in English (which I got into) had a reputation for being a bit “racy”, at least as taught by Mrs. Spettel, since, among other things, some of Byron’s works, which weren’t normally taught in school, were included.

There was an atmosphere of respectful banter with some of the teachers, for example, The Colonel. But when addressing the teachers in person, we always used “Mr.”, or “Mrs.”, although among ourselves we referred to them by their last names, or, as in the case of The Colonel, by a nickname.

### **Mr. Wilson**

Mr. Wilson taught physics. He looked a little like Broderick Crawford, the movie actor: he was overweight, a chain smoker, with thin hair slicked down on his head, and had the same kind

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1. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *103 Great Poems*, ed. and tr. Appelbaum, Stanley, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, N.Y., 1999, pp. 66-69.

of gravelly voice. His voice also reminded me of William Conrad's on the radio version of *Gun-smoke*. His fingers were dark yellow with nicotine and his clothes and breath always smelled of cigarette smoke. I got the impression he had to duck out between classes to take care of his habit. But, I thought, hell, if it gets you a great voice like that, why not? One experiment I remember drove me further into my distrust and fear of electricity, even though by that time I already had a ham station. He had groups of students form a chain, each holding the hand of the next (the reason I don't recall any homosexual horrors about this must be that I always managed to have a girl on either side), then the two end persons put their fingers on the poles of a hand-powered generator, and another person turned the handle until the shock made someone (usually me) let go. I tried it several times, sometimes just using both fingers of one hand, by way of trying to steel myself to endure higher currents, but instead the reverse happened: I became more and more sensitive to the first sensation of the current, so that soon the person hardly needed to move the crank before I thought I felt myself past the threshold. This unpleasant ability of anticipating pain before it had really occurred had been developed by years at the dentist's office, and before it began to subside in old age, had attained truly remarkable dimensions.

We did optical experiments. I remember only a horizontal double wooden track along which a lens could be moved. A lighted candle was placed at one end, and I think we were supposed to focus the image on a piece of white cardboard, and thus learn something about focal length. In memory I see the warm glow of the candle flame through the sparkling lens. It has a cozy feeling about it, almost making the wooden track into a kind of furniture, despite the serious business at hand. I felt that even such a dull, abstract mechanism has a life, a purpose — to make a flickering yellow image on a piece of white cardboard — and therefore it has a warm, glow about it!

### **Mr. Holderman**

Chemistry was taught by Mr. Holderman, who, despite his genial manner and occasional jokes, failed to arouse any interest in chemistry in me. All I remember about the year's course is that chlorine is a yellowish-green gas which makes a glass beaker containing it look kind of interesting.

### **The Questions I Always Wanted To Ask**

I knew that subjects like math and the sciences, which were always hard for me, were *Good* because they explained how the world was made, and understanding that could earn you the right to stay alive. But at the same time, for me these subjects might as well have been the tax laws. I wanted to know what had made people think of the questions that led to these subjects in the first place. I wanted historical introductions in which the teacher said something like, "About ... years ago, people were trying to figure out how come ... They knew ... and they also knew ... but that didn't seem to explain ... So they kept trying, and then, one day ... hit upon a new idea. He decided to ..." I wanted to know why they called things the names they did. Why *bomb* calorimetry? Why would anyone want to measure specific heat? (This was the question that tormented me more than any other in high school.) In those last two years, when I was thankful for having been allowed to go to a school that wasn't for fruits, I had little of the hatred and contempt for technical subjects that I developed my first week at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I felt that my being bothered by certain questions was my fault, not the subject's or the school's. I felt that as long as I did the homework and did well on the exams and got good grades, there was still hope for me, and that such questions were just a reminder of the loser that always threatened to take over.

So I paid attention, used the strange lab apparatus — the copper calorimeters, the softly whooping Bunsen burners, the tubes and wires and what-not — and tried like hell to get the answers we were supposed to get in our experiments. (If you were destined to have a reason to live, then experiments came out the way they should. If not, then they didn't, and that's how you knew your fate.)

In chemistry we had to wear goggles when doing the chlorine experiments. Holderman himself told about a few accidents that had happened in the past. This whole world of science seemed to me dangerous, forbidding, the property of Them, and having above all the one single property of Judgment. Science was put on the earth to enable Them to find out who had a right to live and who didn't

I had no natural facility in mathematics, although by sheer, hard, dogged work I could usually get an A. In White Plains High mathematics consisted of plane geometry, trigonometry, and advanced algebra. (Calculus wasn't offered.) For me, everything — in mathematics, as in all my other courses — was monumentally difficult and, worst of all, made little sense. If, instead of an IQ test, someone had given me a test which said, simply, "Write down all the questions you can think of — that you would like to ask if you could — about the subject  $x$ ", and if, furthermore, I were told that my score would be based solely on the honesty of my answer, then I would have been a happy young man. (I wonder why it wouldn't be a good idea, each year, to have a Question Day for students, in which they get to write, anonymously, on slips of paper, the questions they would like to ask but for some reason, any reason, are reluctant to ask? No subject would be forbidden. Then all the questions would be posted, with their answers, or else made available in printed form, or on the computer. What a blossoming of intellect *that* might produce!)

Now that I am old enough to be allowed to admit my ignorance, I will list some of the questions I had during those years. Some of them had occurred to me already in grammar school, some only in high school, some not until the first few years of college. Some are questions that occur to most students. But in no case were any of these distinct questions that I carried around in my head and sought answers to. They were rather *regions of shame* in my mind. I certainly never dared to ask anyone for the answers: I thought I was the only one for whom the answers weren't immediately obvious, and that my not knowing the answers was further, damning proof of my low IQ. Here are some of the questions, in no particular order:

- Why do we carry when we do addition? What does "carry" mean — why did they choose that word and not another one?
- Why do we do division the way we do? Why do we use that little bracket, that little half box? If we used a different symbol, would it still be division? (My answer at the time would probably have been no!)
- What does "dividing through" an expression or an equation really do? Why are we allowed to do this? This question bothered me for many years in connection with the standard derivation of the formula for the number of combinations of  $n$  things taken  $k$  at a time, a formula which it is possible I was first introduced to in high school.
- Why do we prove things in geometry, since most of the things we prove are obvious? (I was gratified to learn, many years later, that even Newton asked that question when he first began

studying the subject.) This is probably the one question that most students of plane geometry would ask, if given permission to.

- What does “=” mean? Sometimes it seemed to mean “has the same value as” but at other times, as when you said, “Let  $x$  = the height of the building”, it seemed to mean, “*should* have the same value as” and at other times, for example, when you were solving an equation, it seemed to mean something like “is *trying* to have the same value as”.

How can we say things like “ $x = y$ ” when  $x$  clearly doesn’t equal  $y$  at all —  $x$  and  $y$  are different letters!

- In equations, for example,

$$ax^2 + bx + c = 0,$$

the letters  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ , were called “constants”, whereas  $x$  (like  $y$ ,  $z$  in other equations) was called a “variable”. Yet they were all letters! How did it come about that letters from the start of the alphabet turned out to represent constants? Or, rather, what was the difference between a variable and a constant? (After all, both are “numbers”.) It wasn’t until many years later when I read Bertrand Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics* that I found an explanation of this:

“Take, for example, the equation  $ax + by + c = 0$ , considered as the equation to a straight line in a plane. Here we say that  $x$  and  $y$  are variables, while  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  are constants. But unless we are dealing with one absolutely particular line, say the line from a particular point in London to a particular point in Cambridge, our  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$  are not definite numbers, but stand for *any* numbers, and are thus also variables.”<sup>1</sup>

- How do you do factoring, that is, what do the students (and teachers) do who are good at factoring? What is the trick?

- Why are the sine, cosine, tangent called that? Who invented these words, and why?

- Would it still be a polygon if it were called a “many-side”? (I knew from Latin courses I was taking, plus, possibly the dictionary, that that’s what “polygon” meant.) If so, why don’t we call it a many-side, since it’s clearer?

- How does handwriting affect the truth, or at least the importance, of what we write? In what sense is a solution to a math problem, or an essay in English, which is written in very careful handwriting, better than, or different from, one that is written sloppily? I mean, apart from this or that teacher’s opinions on the matter?

- In physics, we were often told that something was “directly proportional” to something else. This was represented by the “ $\propto$ ” sign. Then we would be told what the “constant of proportionality” was. How did the discoverers know it was directly proportional? How does an experiment

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1. Russell, Bertrand, *Principles of Mathematics*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., N.Y., [no publication date given; includes Russell’s 1938 “Introduction to the Second Edition”], p. 6.

tell you that? And if it does tell you that, why don't you get the constant directly, especially if you are using instruments to make measurements? Yet I had never heard of a "proportionality" measuring device.

What did "directly proportional" look like on a graph? I didn't mean this or that equation with a constant, because I could probably have figured out the graph, I meant "directly proportional" in general. Could you draw a graph of that?

And similarly for "inversely proportional".

- In chemistry and physics, how could they say that the number of molecules in a mole of gas was Avogadro's number ( $6.02214 \times 10^{23}$ )? Consider how incredibly small and light atoms are! You couldn't be that precise about grains of sand, much less atoms!

- Why, in science classes, did they keep telling us that "air has weight"? (Mr. Bastian, in ninth grade science, I think was the first to tell us this.) If air has weight, then inflate a balloon, put the balloon on a scale, and weigh it. But the scale won't register anything because the balloon will float away. Therefore air doesn't really have weight. To me, this was just another of those things that, for reasons no student could ever understand — maybe it had something to do with the government — teachers had decided it was important that students believed.

- What is the difference between "extrapolation" and "interpolation" — or, to be more precise, Why are these two concepts so important that they are given these big words as names? For many years, I felt that understanding these terms was something that I was excluded from, because of who I was.

- Who decided on the units that are used in chemistry and physics? How did they come up with the right ones? What does it really mean to "change units"? Why do they always come out right after they have been changed? What does *per unit something* mean? (To this day, I have to think through what is meant when, in a textbook on electrostatics, I read that the electrostatic force on a charge situated among other charges is such and such, but then by *dividing through*, we can get the force *per unit charge* at the point, and that is the field at that point. I have to go through the laborious thought process of saying, "OK, that means that if the charge is 1 at that point, then..., but if the charge is 2, then... but if the charge is 3, then..." But why would they want the force per unit charge in the first place? What makes you want things in terms of the force per unit charge? Suppose you have ten, a hundred charges?)

- What made people think up something like *bomb calorimetry*? Why did they call it that? Did it have something to do with the War? Probably, because it was about heat, and war had a lot to do with heat. But then why not just come out and admit it, instead of hiding it under the objective veneer of physical or chemical fact?

- In connection with the annual Woodrow Wilson competition, why did the smart kids always come up with science projects that pleased the teachers? If science was objective inquiry, then why didn't a smart kid sometimes come up with a perfectly good project that everyone thought was absurd?

- Why is everything so difficult?

I have mentioned that all my life these questions have been a source of shame to me. I have felt that they make only too clear what a loser I was already at that early age. When a reader of this chapter commented that, on the contrary, “they show you had a brilliantly probing mind”, I didn’t feel any better about them. And then it suddenly occurred to me that what I really had to be ashamed of was not the questions, but my timidity in pursuing the answers. If I had had the courage to say to my teachers, “We’re not going one step further until I find answers to these questions that are satisfactory to me, and if you can’t provide those answers, then I’ll find them out for myself!” — then I would have had nothing to be ashamed of. It was my gutless hiding behind shame that made me a loser.

One thing that can be said about my math training is that, whatever its shortcomings, somehow or other I learned the basic operations of algebra. Ever since my senior year in high school, I have felt comfortable with moving terms across the equals sign, factoring numbers out of sums, combining and separating fractions. I don’t mean that I perform these operations faster than most people (most people who perform them at all), or that I seldom make mistakes; I mean simply that I know the rules.<sup>1</sup>

What would have been ideal for someone like me would have been, instead of the stupid work in electronics stores after school, a job as an entry-level technician or bottle washer in a scientific lab — a job I had to go to each day, but in which I was under the supervision of a kindly person who each day had to make use of the technical concepts we were learning in school, and who loved the work for its own sake, and, in particular, who was in pursuit of the answer to a problem which no one so far had been able to solve. That might have pulled me out of my morbidity.

As it was, I left high school with absolutely no confidence, much less skill, in tackling difficult subjects I knew nothing about. The schools had done their work: I believed that without a teacher and a class and exams it was utterly hopeless to try to understand something difficult, particularly in mathematics. I remember how sometimes one of the kids would mention a subject like spherical geometry, and I knew — we all knew — the subject was unimaginably difficult. Hopeless.

Once, and this may have been when I was in college, someone mentioned that a mathematician had pointed out that in reality a fraction like  $1/2$  wasn’t really just one fraction, but in fact was all the fractions that equaled  $1/2$ :  $2/4$ ,  $3/6$ ,  $4/8$ ,  $5/10$ , ..., and I remember thinking, now that’s a neat idea! It seemed to me a rumor of things going on somewhere else, in some other country where strange men sat around thinking new and interesting thoughts about this normally intimidating subject whose rules, for me, at that age, were really no different than the tax laws would have been, had we studied them.

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1. However, there are some things that I was taught that I have completely forgotten, and have never bothered to re-learn. One is the computing of square roots (hardly a necessity nowadays, when the average pocket calculator can give you the square root of a number faster than you can enter the number in the first place). I distinctly remember being taught how to find a square root — possibly in Molly Malone’s class at Valhalla School No. 1 — and I even remember that we were told that the number you were trying to find the square root of had to be written under a bracket that was slightly different from the one that was used for normal division — I think the little vertical line curled to the left at the lower end, instead of being straight. But that is all I remember.



**Mrs. Stough**

One of the math teachers, Mrs. Stough, seemed to take a liking to me. One day, as I was sitting in her classroom, she came up and said she was wondering if I would like to try some of these problems, and handed me an open book (not our textbook). She may have marked a few problems on the pages, I don't recall. But she spoke in a way that said, "I see how hard you work, and how lonely you are, and I would like to do something to show you that I think you are a good student." She had white hair, cut short, with pointy edges pointing forward, and a kind of regular-guy manner. Nowadays, in California, you would assume that she lived in Berkeley and was active in local politics. She was yet another in a long line of women who I wished had been my mother. I didn't want to work on the problems she gave me, since I had my hands full with homework as it was, and felt obligated to complete them and get them all correct. I don't remember what I wound up doing. But I do know that I tried to convey to her how much her gesture meant to me.

**Mrs. Spettel**

My favorite teacher was Mrs. Gratia Spettel, my English in my senior year. She had long, dirty-blond hair, glasses, and a girlish manner. She also had a slight gap between her front teeth, which made it interesting to watch her talk, especially when she was explaining the difference between words like "torturous" and "tortuous". I suppose at the time she might have been in her thirties. Her husband, I somehow knew, worked for Picker X-Ray in White Plains. I sat in the second seat from her desk. In front of me sat Bob Porter (no relation to John, in *The Rebels*), a kid who was so eccentric that the other kids were uneasy about teasing him. He had wide, shining eyes, and a kind of half-laughing, half-mad expression that unnerved the rest of us. I remember one day we were assigned to write an essay on the subject of being invited to dinner. Everyone wrote predictable narratives of visits to relatives or friends of parents, but before the papers were to be handed in, he turned around, and with that half-laughing half-mad expression, he told me that he had written the whole essay in the form of a thank you letter after having been invited to dinner in a hut in the Andes mountains. He was particularly proud of the line, "Boy, those yak chops were really swell!"

Mrs. Spettel had a reputation for being a bit sexy, which was truly a rare honor for a teacher, since all of us boys took it for granted that no group of adults that dull could possibly have anything to do with sex. But the word was that if you got into Mrs. Spettel's advanced class in senior year, you could read some of the writings of Byron that were normally never allowed in English classes. I remember her taking care to explain to us that the title of Byron's poem "Don Juan" was correctly pronounced *Don Jo<sup>o</sup>an* and not *Don Wahn*, and her seeming to consider it important that we understand the difference between "sensual" and "sensuous". Although I tried to grasp the distinction, my attention was usually focused instead on the way her lips moved and the way she pronounced the *s*'s in the two words when she said them. I never attempted to look up the meaning of the words in the dictionary. I felt, as so often in school, that if you couldn't understand it in class, then you weren't fit to understand it. In fact I did not know the difference in meaning until my mid-sixties, when I came across an explanation in my reading. In spring, as Porter was quick to point out, Mrs. Spettel seemed to find some relief from the heat by wearing thin yellow dresses and sitting at her desk with her legs sort of apart. This was the first time, after Miss Eaton, my junior high art teacher, that a teacher had appeared sexy to me.

I have mentioned that I don't remember any more if it was Mrs. Spettel or Mrs. Robacker who drilled into us the rule not to use "and" in the phrase, "to try and" do something: that it should be

“try to” do something. The breaking of this rule, when I see it in a quotation in the paper, or in an article, even sometimes, an article in a literary journal, makes me shake my head in disbelief at the illiteracy of my fellow countrymen. As of this writing, I have never looked up the rule in *Fowler’s* or in *Elements of Style*. Nor do I remember if it was Mrs. Spettel or the Skeleton Man at Briarcliff High who taught us the definition of “irony”: “a seeming contradiction”. But to this day, the definition goes through my mind whenever I hear the word used in speech, or see it in print.

### What We Read in Mrs. Spettel’s Class

For Mrs. Spettel’s class, I read, among other things, De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, but it didn’t give me what I had hoped for. There were damn few opium hallucinations for the number of pages. The book did give me a hot feeling in my stomach as all the classics did, and filled my limbs with a kind of prestigious fog, but I knew that I was trying to love something I found deeply boring.

I suspect I read the Illustrated Editions version, because when I came across the book in a used bookstore in the fall of 1997, I seemed to recognize the typeface and the illustrations. The original was lost long ago, or loaned, or left in storage somewhere, in those early years of our life when we allow books to disappear. Or maybe I read the copy in the school library. I thought to myself in the bookstore: There was a time when I last held that book. Where is the book now? What actually became of it? Not probably, but *actually*.

I always wondered why it wasn’t called *Confessions of an English Opium Taker*, since that is what the person does: he *takes* opium.

Reading it in high school, getting around the big words, was like moving furniture in the living room. Re-reading it in 1997, it was perfectly accessible except for a big word now and then. I kept reflecting how much we have lost in giving up the old style of English prose, with its old rich vocabulary!

And then there was the book that I always considered the dullest, the most depressing, of all the books that students are forced to read in school, namely, Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*. For those readers who have not seen — or not remembered — the PBS film of the book, I give *The Concise Oxford Companion’s* summary:

This grim story is told by a middle-aged engineer, who pieces together the history of the inhabitants of a bleak Massachusetts farm. Zenobia (Zeena) is a whining slattern who hugs imaginary ailments to her barren breast, and spends upon quacks and patent medicines the scant substance her husband, Ethan Frome, manages to wring from the earth. Her cousin Mattie Silver is left destitute and comes to live with them. The friendship of Ethan and Mattie arouses Zeena’s jealousy, and after a year Mattie is ousted to make way for a strong hired girl. On their way to the railroad station, Ethan and Mattie realize that they cannot bear to part, and when they are coasting down their favorite snow slide he purposely steers their sled into a great elm. Instead of being killed, they are crippled for life, and spend the remainder of their unhappy days on the barren farm under Zeena’s surveillance. — Hart, James D., *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Literature*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1986, pp. 125-126.

To me it was a book that a middle-aged woman writer of some bygone age had written for women English teachers of the future so that these teachers could force their students — particularly the boys — to learn that what really counted was experiencing the world as women did. As I write this, I have difficulty associating the book with the youthful, sexy Mrs. Spettel, but I am cer-

tain I didn't read the book in Briarcliff High, so there was no other possibility.

Another book I found strangely dull was *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* by John Muir. I felt I was supposed to like it — after all, it was about an outdoorsman, a man who had lived in the mountains out West. But all I can remember is the rough light green or light brown cover (it was a hardback) and forcing myself through the pages.

Among the poetry we read I am pretty sure one poem was Tennyson's "In Memoriam". We, or at least I, tried to understand why a young poet would spend so much time writing poetry about the death of another man. It couldn't have been because he was queer, because for me, and I'm sure for most of the other students, it was unthinkable that those who wrote classics were something that awful. So it was a strange friendship of the kind that, clearly, only poets were capable of. And stranger still that he would express his grief in such a formal way, instead of merely writing what he felt, in prose, as any of us would have done. It was the complicated, perfect language of poets, and not merely of poets, but of those about whom there wasn't a shadow of a doubt that they had a reason to live.

We also read excerpts from Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol". Here again, what intrigued me was the way Mrs. Spettel pronounced a word, in this case "gaol", which she pronounced "gay-ohl". I wondered if a gaol was the same as a jail, and if it was, why they spelled it differently, and why she pronounced it differently, and if it wasn't, what the difference between the two was. I never attempted to find the answers to these questions, for the usual reason.

And we read excerpts from Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Mrs. Spettel emphasizing that "apologia" did not mean "apology" but rather something closer to "explanation" or "justification".

And I know we read Poe's poem, "The Raven", because to this day whenever I re-read it and come to the line, "And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain", I can hear her explaining to us that the *s* sounds in the words were supposed to suggest the sound that the curtains made. (I don't recall if she told us the technical name for this kind of thing, namely, onomatopoeia.)

### Writing for Mrs. Spettel

Mrs. Spettel had us do a lot of writing. She also had us read and criticize each other's writings from time to time. Copies were placed in a mail box somewhere near her office (how did she make copies?) and each student was supposed to pick one up, read it, and make notes of his or her criticisms. Here, too, this felt right to me, it felt like an advanced, but decent thing to do (no teacher before had ever done it).

Among the essays I wrote for her was one called "Beethoven, the Revolutionary", another titled "Plato's Republic" and an essay on an 18-mile run that Jimmy Swan and I took to celebrate the end of cross-country season our senior year. This last is reproduced in Appendix 1 at the end of the first volume of this autobiography. The one on Plato's Republic has been lost, along with an essay about my first contact as a ham radio operator. Throughout my life, I believed that all the essays I wrote for Mrs. Spettel were among the mss. and folders I carried with me. And just as Dumbo the Flying Elephant believed that the feather he held in the end of his trunk enabled him to fly, so I believed that these mss. enabled me to go on living, since they were already my immortality. "If I die, at least they will see these early efforts of mine and they will say, 'He showed promise, he might have become a writer had he lived.'" Then, in summer 2004, after carefully going through all my old records and papers, I found that the Plato essay and ham radio essay were not there. A one-page sketch that I had long forgotten about was there: it described a man leaving a

hospital after having obviously gotten bad news . (I tried to *show* what he was feeling without actually stating it, that kind of thing being a big deal in literary circles in those days: “Show, don’t tell.”) So, whether I wanted to admit it or not, the fact was that I had been able to go through life without my feather, or at least without one of them. Who knows? Perhaps if I had known, during my worst moments, that at least one of essays had been lost, that might have been enough to push me over the edge to suicide.

Where could the others have gone to? Was it possible Mrs. Spettel never returned them because she thought they were that good? We will never know.

I spared no effort to make the essays perfect. If one of them got an A, then my experience got an A as well: the essay was a way of making the experience it described be admired by an important person and thus become important in itself. Similarly, to read something counted for nothing. But to read something and then write an essay on it that got you an A meant that your reading of it had been worthwhile, it was OK that you had read it. Everything else was waste.

My handwriting in the mss. that have survived is careful to the point of being feminine; every word is carefully shaped, because maybe those who knew about these things would decree you had a right to live on the basis of your handwriting, maybe that would do the trick, and all those others who were good at the words would be lost after all and you would be saved.

### **The Plato Essay**

I remember the hot feeling in my stomach as I tried to force myself to like Plato’s dialogue about the ideal government, a dialogue I found to be almost intolerably wordy and abstract. But I knew there was no question about my feelings in the matter: it was love this or die. I labored over every word I wrote, having not the slightest idea of how to approach the task except on a word-by-word basis: the correct sequence of words could save me from having to die.

### **The Beethoven Essay**

The Beethoven essay went a little easier, first, because it was about music that I had heard all my life, and about whose greatness I had no doubt, and second because Beethoven was a great man who had rebelled against authority. But the hot feeling in my stomach was present here also, as I labored over the words, labored to hear a scherzo as a joke<sup>1</sup>, trying to convince myself that somewhere in all that seriousness, there was laughter. The sonata form, and the concept of development of a theme, were a complete mystery to me. (I doubt if the thought even occurred to me that development of a theme might be distantly related to improvisation in jazz.) At the time of this writing I still don’t know what the formal definitions of “sonata form” or “developing a theme” is, although I am confident (now) that, given a theme for a string quartet, I could develop it, could see where it wanted to go, and could do this in subsequent movements. But this would be by pure instinct, based on more than fifty years of listening to classical music: I would try to sense the “underlying thought” in the first movement, and try to sense what this thought led to, and make that the second movement, and so forth.

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1. A scherzo is “often a movement from a larger piece such as a symphony or a sonata. The precise definition has varied over the years, but scherzo often refers to a movement that replaces the minuet as the third movement in a four-movement work, such as a symphony, sonata, or string quartet....The word ‘scherzo’ [means] ‘I joke,’ ‘I jest,’ or ‘I play’ in Italian.” — Wikipedia, “Scherzo”, June 7, 2015.

### **The Running Essay**

The running one was easiest. But all the essays were done with the conviction that they must be scrupulously honest, that I must labor and suffer over them nearly to the breaking point, and that I was engaged in something of transcendent importance, because it had to do with immortality and classics and bravery.

### **A Major Embarrassment**

One day in class I raised my hand in response to something Mrs. Spettel had said, and in the course of my reply, mentioned “baroque composers like MacDowell”. In the gentlest possible way she said something on the order of, “But MacDowell is a modern composer, isn’t he?” I blushed immediately, knew she was right, and said something like “I’m sorry, I thought...” and immediately hated myself. No doubt I had been half-listening to music at home or in the car, and had confused the work that the announcer had identified as being by that composer. But I was convinced that whatever grudging respect I had earned in Mrs. Spettel’s eyes about my knowledge of music had disappeared for good.

### **Précis Writing**

Mrs. Spettel introduced me to précis writing and in doing so unquestionably changed my life. I can still recall the scene. I was standing at the side of her desk after class. She may have mentioned this form of writing during the class and I was curious about it. She explained that it was a kind of writing in which you try to be as brief and concise as possible. Immediately I felt, *this is meant for me*. The feeling was that distinct, and was associated with the same certainty as when I heard a good improvisation or, later, came upon a good idea. It was another of the premonitions that I have mentioned.

### **Writing Short Stories**

Among the types of writing she had us do were short stories. According to rumor, she had herself published a short story in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In fact, that is how one of the students learned that her first name was Gratia.

My first short story was written for her. Its title was “The Long Way Home”, which I discovered many years later was the title of a story by another author. I think mine was about a kid who runs away from home, and then returns, knowing it is for the best that he spend the rest of his life resigned to his hopelessness. The effort here was to create a piece of artificiality that the teacher would approve of, even though you had to pretend it hadn’t happened to you. I detested the fact that I had to create this artifice to get someone to like me. Like many other miserable teenagers from overachieving families, I looked to becoming a writer as a means of saving myself, of becoming immortal. Fortunately, at that age, I hadn’t come across passages like the following:

“Doubtless my books also, like my earthly being, would finally some day die. But one must resign oneself to the idea of death. One accepts the idea that in ten years one’s self, and in a hundred years one’s books, will no longer exist. Eternal existence is not promised to books any more than to men.” — Proust, Marcel, *The Past Recaptured*, tr. Frederick A. Blossom, vol. 7 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1932, p. 397.

I put off the effort on the short story as long as I could. I hated myself for not being able to write a story about a life other than mine — a businessman or, still better, a noble living in the last century — because that, I was convinced, was the sign of real genius in a writer. Only the weak wrote about themselves. I spent hours getting ready to begin to commence, then would find some

other more pressing thing to do. I decided at one point, having already intuited at least that much of writer's folklore, that the problem was that I needed to get away, and so I went over to the Reservoir with my three-ring binder, sat on a rock on the edge of the water, in the warm cold afternoon sunlight of a spring weekend, the biscuit-like ice still present along the gravelly shore, I thinking, if I was any good, I would be able to write the story here, shivering in the spring sunlight. I wrote barely a word or two before I was overcome with hopelessness and barrenness and loneliness, so I dragged myself home, and finished the story in snatches, hating every moment of the ordeal. And the endless questions: Is this what I am supposed to be doing? Is there any chance this story can be immortal after all?

### My Attitude Toward Short Stories

From the very first, and throughout my lame attempts at writing stories, I had a persistent feeling of *not understanding* what made a good, as opposed to a bad, story. They all seemed so corny, so ephemeral, so contrived. "He said it was OK about the wrench. But then he looked at the river for a long time." You were supposed to *show*, not say. So you could never speak your mind. You had to go through this tedious literary algebra to say, for example, that you hated life, hated your mother, hated the world, that you were unbearably depressed and suicidal. You had to *represent* this, not say it. And then, when you were dead, they would study your stories and slowly conclude that you had hated your mother, hated life, were depressed and suicidal. I detested the roundaboutness of it, but I had not the slightest doubt that my detesting it was purely because I wasn't any good at writing stories. And yet there were one or two stories that seemed different, that stopped me in my tracks — Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", which I had first read in Mrs. French's class at Briarcliff High, and Salinger's "For Esmé With Love and Squalor". But most American short stories were full of corny subtleties, little symbols of despair, and above all realistic speech: the dialogue, even the narration, had to sound the way people, preferably kids, actually talked. I accepted that without questioning. If someone had said, "Why not stilted speech?" I would have dismissed them as not being serious. If someone had told me to question this business of realism, I would have known they were losers.

I remember one image that Mrs. Spettel talked about, but can't remember if it was mine, or another student's, or if it was merely given as an example of what not to do. The image was that of a boy "growing up through his hair", the poor misguided student-author having decided this was a way of expressing rapid increase in height.

If someone had asked me, during my senior year, what form of writing I felt *called* me, and if I believed I could be honest in my reply, then my reply would have been immediately: the essay — in the form of précis writing. I had no doubt, even then, that that was the form I was destined for. And yet I also had no doubt that the only way I could acquire a reason to be allowed to go on living was by becoming good at writing short stories (and, later, novels).

Mrs. Spettel was without question the best English teacher — and probably the best teacher of any subject — I ever had. I have tried many times over the years to write to her and tell her how much her class meant to me, but she has apparently long since moved from the last address on record with the school<sup>1</sup>.

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1. I finally tracked her down in the summer of 2007. See the last chapter of the last volume of this autobiography.

## The Morning Ritual

Every schoolday morning it was the same: I stood in front of the full-length mirror on the inside of what had been my father's closet in my mother's bedroom. First I applied Vaseline hair tonic from its clear bottle with the pinched center, onto the tips of my index and middle fingers. Then I pressed it to the scalp at the front, gave a few half scratching movements of the fingers — never touch too much, never disturb too much, because it is always possible you will destroy something that was previously right. Then the combing: first straight down on the sides and the back. Then the major work: first, the hair in front combed down flat to the side. At this point you wouldn't dare let anyone see you, because you looked like a little European fruit, like a Lord Fauntleroy. No, that was only preparation. Now you had to get the wave perfect. Up and back, with a little fillip to make the front part stand up higher. Then two quick strokes on the sides, to get the sweep toward the back. Maybe sweeping all the way to the back on each side, to form a duck's ass (DA) in the back, like the tough guys had. But usually the wave was still wrong. It pointed up in the middle, like that of some fruit who studied too much. Try again: first, come flat to the side, then upward, just the right stroke, the right casualness of stroke, and you would look like Jay Clark, whose family was rich and who got all the girls, or like James Dean. The top of the wave *had to be flat*. Try again.

. "...the endless, killing effort to make [one]self attractive." — Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*, Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, p. 346.

This ritual came just before I put on my corduroy sports jacket, gathered my pile of three-ring binders and textbooks, and headed for the school buses at Stotz's garage.

I don't think I wore a tie, but we dressed remarkably formally in those days. MacDowell, the only smart black kid I knew at White Plains High, and one with whom I developed a fondness because of his obvious determination to do well in school, also wore a sports jacket. Some of the other guys I seem to remember wearing knitted vests over long-sleeved shirts. A picture of Mr. Black's math class from those years shows me in this jacket, looking solemn and harassed.

I then walked the quarter mile to Stotz's garage, and talked to Terry Pickens while we waited to board the yellow/orange bus that would take us to school.

## Rotary Club Meetings

Because my grades were all A's and B's, I was chosen to be a guest at the Rotary Club luncheon meetings on Tuesdays at the Roger Smith Hotel, which was just a few blocks from the High School. I was touched by this recognition: it seemed a damned decent thing for the school, and the Club, to do. One other WPHS student besides me had been selected, as I recall. I sat, in my usual hunched-shoulder bad posture, at the white-table-clothed tables, and for the first time heard accomplished after-dinner speakers. The only speech I remember was by a guy who had traveled extensively around the world. I remember his eager eyes, his sense of humor, his expressive hands as he talked. These meetings made me aware of the art that after-dinner speaking can be.

## The Students

At White Plains High, as at Briarcliff, I hung out with the smart kids. One was Jimmy Swan. He lived at 6 Craven Lane, right across the street from the school grounds. He had acne as I did,

but it didn't seem to bother him, that's how interested he was in science and various kinds of adventure. He had long, dirty-blond hair that always seemed to need combing, and what I imagined was an Englishman's face, a face that would go well with white shirt and pants and tennis shoes and sweater tied by the sleeves around the neck, or with a game of polo on a Saturday afternoon. Adding to his Englishman's aura was his quiet, understated manner, and his way of keeping his lips in a straight line. We were both on the cross-country team our senior year.

Even before I was a student at WPHS, I had become interested in skin diving, this as a result of reading Jacques Cousteau's book *The Silent World*. I was irresistibly drawn to the idea of being able to see through water while *inside* it. It seemed to me a kind of metaphysical miracle. I bought a mask and snorkel and fins, and practiced holding my breath in the tub while my brother timed me with my father's stopwatch. I could get close to three minutes, with mask on, having read somewhere that there was a certain amount of air inside the mask, and that you could breathe this to extend your time a few seconds. As I neared the three-minute point, and my lungs were on fire with lack of air, I would breathe in as hard as could through my nose, which did little more, as far as I could tell, than cause the mask to stick tightly to my face. I liked to see if I could make my brother or my mother, if they happened to look in, worry about my having passed out during these experiments.

I made a Hawaiian sling out of a cylinder of wood, drilling a hole down its length using the drill press in the basement. Then I attached two pieces of surgical tubing to the side of the cylinder and ran a piece of wire from one of the dangling ends to the other, the purpose of the wire being to go into the notch of the spear, like the string on a bow. I was intrigued by what was called a "medusa mask". This had two built-in snorkels; they curved back and had corks that automatically closed the opening in each snorkel pipe when you submerged.

I read books about diving, especially scuba diving, and learned about pressure and the "rapture of the deep", a state similar to mild intoxication or the effects of nitrous oxide in the dentist's office. It occurs at depths over about 130 feet. But even after all this reading, I never understood why the air pressure in submarines had to be any greater than it was at sea level. Apparently it was supposed to push out on the steel skin of the sub in order to keep it from imploding. But why not just use thicker steel? Apparently this wouldn't work, since even diving bells, which were steel balls with a little chamber inside, also had pressure problems. But how could a fractional reduction in the volume inside the sub or diving bell be the source of any problems? To this day I do not know the answers to these questions.

The books also described some of the creatures we were liable to meet underwater, including the near-round sting rays, which buried themselves in the sand at the bottom, and had a long tail with a poisonous barb near the end that you had to watch out for, and seemed to fly through the water, like manta rays, the huge but supposedly harmless fish that likewise seemed to fly through the water with a slow flapping of what looked like their wings. They always reminded me of underwater airliners. The books said that some of them were so large that they cast a shadow on the bottom, reminding the downward-looking diver that something very big was passing overhead. And then there were the Portuguese Man o' Wars, big, bulbous, transparent jelly-fish-like creatures that floated just under the surface, and had poisonous tentacles that could descend as far as 30 feet, so that you always had to look up when diving in waters they inhabited, as the tentacles could scrape across your back and cause you serious harm.

But without question, the most terrifying creatures were the ones in Lieut. Harry Rieseberg's *I Dive for Treasure*<sup>1</sup>, which shows the author, in diving helmet and rubber suit, fighting gigantic octopuses, some of their tentacles as thick as a man's body. (I wonder now, looking at the book



again after all these years, who exactly took the pictures?) One photo shows one of these creatures completely enveloping a diving bell with one of Rieseberg's crew members inside. The bell had robot arms that could cut through the tentacles.

Jimmy Swan was also interested in skin diving. The summer of my senior year we made several trips to Point Judith, Rhode Island, to go diving. (In an email fifty years later, he said "In those days you drove fast." Another proof of how faulty our memory can be sometimes, since I have believed that all my life I have been a slow, careful driver.) Even in summer the water was cold, and so we wore long underwear, which in those days served as a wet suit. I wore my father's, which still had the loose part in front from where his paunch had been. We would buy a bottle of port or chianti to warm us up. Then we rented an outboard motorboat and headed out to the ocean side of the breakwater that lay off the Point, a long line of huge, angular, cubist granite boulders. As we rode along on the heaving swells, the gulls flying, screeching, overhead, I couldn't stop thinking of the ocean as nothing more than highly concentrated drowning.. We anchored fifty yards or so from the breakwater. We wore our bathing suits under our street clothes, so all we had to do was take off our street clothes, pull on the long underwear, don mask, snorkel and fins, grab our Hawaiian slings and gingerly lower ourselves over the side of the boat into the freezing water. But once we got going, the cold wasn't so bad that you couldn't concentrate on the task at hand. Underwater, the ocean sounded full of cracklings (the crepitation of the under-sea). I never knew exactly what the cause was, but I thought that possibly it might be the sound of the rocks rubbing against each other, or else some kind of shell fish, clams, maybe, being crushed. Maybe it was just the ocean chewing. Contrary to the title of Cousteau's book, this was certainly no silent world but a very noisy one indeed. We would carefully kick toward the breakwater, keeping our eyes on the sand bottom about fifteen or twenty feet below. As soon as the rocks came into view, we could see the fish. We would take several deep breaths — a process called "hyperventilation" — and dive straight down to the sand bottom, then swim to where the rocks met the sand. The fish we pursued were gray on top, white underneath. I am not sure of their name: we called them bluefish, although they never seemed blue to us<sup>1</sup>. The ones we went after were around two feet long and were so plentiful, and so dumb, that you could simply swim up to one of them, aim the spear point behind the gills as the books instructed, pull back the sling, and let go. Sometimes you could do this with the spear point only a few feet from the fish. The heavy steel rod would go right through the head and come out on the other side. The fish would immediately start flapping, trying to get away, but the swivel barb kept the spear from sliding back out. On principle I never shot a fish with an arbolette, the spearfish gun with a string attached to the spear. I wanted to give them a chance to kill me in their own element, because I didn't consider the killing of any kind of animal a sport unless you had to risk your life. Since we had no string connected to the spear, we had to kick after the fish as it retreated into the rocks with the enormous weight of the spear stuck through its head. It was difficult for the fish to drag that thing into its hideout, and so we were able grab the end of the spear as it skittered across the sand and into the rocks, the sound of it coming through our water-choked ears, and then, with spear hanging down from one hand, we would kick like hell to the frothing, heaving surface far overhead.

Re-reading the above words, I am appalled at our cruelty. We both suppressed all thought of

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1. Robert M. McBride & Company. N.Y., 1942.

1. In a phone call to a Pt. Judith dive shop in June, 2010, I was told that the fish were probably tautog or blackfish.

it, since we were engaged in a masculine activity, just as I had suppressed, or tried to, all thought of the cruelty that I and the other kids in the neighborhood had inflicted on the animals we trapped.. Merely to dive and observe the undersea life would have been pointless and would have called our masculinity into question.

When we got back into the boat, we would open the bottle of wine, and drink that salty, wonderful glowing red liquid in the straw-covered bottle, the color always reminding me of the red purie marbles from my childhood, the velvety liquid crawling down our insides, warming our freezing bodies as the boat heaved on the swell and we listened to the waves hurling themselves against the big rocks.

Sometimes Jim would look at Block Island across the misty water and remark that the diving was good there. It would occur to me that maybe I could be happy in a remote place like that.

I vaguely remember that we tried to give the fish we kept, to local restaurants. I can't recall ever cleaning one of them and having my mother cook it.

Another smart kid was Bill Alexander, a handsome guy who seemed to have everything: wealth, great intelligence — he apparently never did homework but always got A's. He was the son of an orthodontist in White Plains. I always wondered if he was Jewish, but never found out. I think I met him through Jimmy Swan. He lived in a big white house on Soundview Ave., one of the wealthy parts of White Plains. There always seemed to be a servant of some sort around — maid or cook in the kitchen — which he treated with the off-hand familiarity which the rich are allowed to indulge in toward their servants but which their servants are not allowed to indulge in toward their employers.<sup>1</sup> It was at Alexander's house (he was another of those kids whom we always referred to by their last name) that I first heard a recording of Dylan Thomas reading his poetry. I remember arriving one afternoon after school and walking down the little hallway leading from the kitchen, and hearing what seemed to me like the ravings of a madman; I thought that Alexander had somehow gotten hold of a recording of someone in an insane asylum. I entered his room and he told me it was this poet. I was stunned, transfixed. That something so near to madness could nevertheless actually be saying something — I don't know if I went out and bought a book of his poems, or if I thought this was not the kind of thing I could understand except on records. But I knew it was the same kind of experience I had had when the Skeleton Man at Briarcliff had suddenly begun reciting Chaucer.

Alexander played flamenco guitar. While you were talking to him in his room, and he was demonstrating his astoundingly quick mind, not to mention his knowledge of any subject you cared to bring up, he would reach over and carefully, gingerly, lift his guitar from its privileged resting place and stroke a few strings. "Yes, go on..." he might say, as you stopped whatever you were saying, he making clear that he was still listening to you, but that he just had had a musical idea that he should try out quickly. And then a brushing movement across the strings with the backs of his fingers, and it was only a matter of time before you could not concentrate on what you were saying but instead had to be dazzled by his technique and what *he* was saying.

Another of the extended Salvo/Trapasso family was George Russo, who was in several of my classes. He was related to Vic Trapasso, the leader of the White Plains High Dance Band, and to Vic Salvo, my former music teacher. He was a quiet, seemingly contented guy, short, stocky but

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1. "The maid was named Lil and she had a good relationship with the kids and would sass them right back." — J.S.

not fat, with lots of black Italian hair on his thick arms, and the usual crinkled full head of Italian hair. He already had a heavy beard, which he kept neatly shaved. (I envied a guy my age who had five o'clock shadow!) He also usually had very bad breath — a real electric motor factory in there. One reason for his contentment may have been that his girlfriend was Kay Ferraro. We all considered her one of the most attractive girls around. She had nice tits (to use the expression of the time), but also a nice, sweet face. She was taller than he, which made them look a little odd as they walked in the halls together. Even though he was about as far from a hot-rodder temperamentally as it is possible to imagine, he drove to school, always, of course with Kay. He had an ancient car, the paint chipping, and he was without question the slowest, most cautious and deliberate driver of all the kids in the high school, perhaps the state. He drove like an old man. Or perhaps it was simply that the car wouldn't go any faster. He already was an old man, an old married man. He and Kay had been together for over a year, so everyone assumed they would be married after graduation. They always seemed to pass me just as I was at the corner of — and —, in front of the Roger Smith Hotel, trudging home from school. They would stop at the stop sign, wave, say hello, offer me a ride, but I was usually on my way to work, so had to decline. He never took part in any of the wildness I would tell him about in connection with jazz, but would only laugh in that retiring way he had — that's for you fellas, too much for me. He got good grades because he came from a good family, meaning one that expected him to get good grades, but I sensed no brilliance in him. He had no musical talent, no ability at sports. He was a plodder, but one of the most likable plodders you could ever meet. I respected and in fact envied his deliberateness, his quiet way of referring to what the book said or what his notes said when a question came up about an exercise in a homework assignment.

In his senior year, he became an aircraft observer, going after school to some tower or mountain or something to watch for Russian bombers. He stood there for an hour or two a day with field glasses, scanning the skies. He did it with that old man's way of his: no hysteria, no fear: this was simply something that should be done and since he had the time, well...

Once we had an air raid drill. We all had to go out into the cool, dark corridor in the middle of the afternoon, and sit on the floor while someone explained to us about duck-and-cover. For me it was all rather passé after World War II.

A few years after graduation I heard that he and Kay had split up and she had married someone else.

White Plains High was a thoroughly integrated school. The white students were remarkably free of prejudice, or at least remarkably free of showing it. The president of the student body was black. Many of the football heroes were black and the team, under Glenn Loucks's coaching, hadn't lost a game in four years by the time I arrived. As I have indicated, blacks who wanted to excel scholastically and go on to college were given every chance. In several of my classes was a black kid whose last name only I remember: McDowell. He always dressed neatly in a brown corduroy jacket and tie, always did his homework. We developed an across-the-races friendship, he seeming to want to be a friend of mine. He tolerated, even smiled at, my pronouncing his name in black accents: "Hey, *Mac Dowell*," instead of the normal *MacDowell*. I went out to his house once: a small, white, single-story building on the corner of a main road in a still not built-up area outside of White Plains.

But there was also a vocational education school that was part of the high school, including, according to rumor, one of the best auto mechanic schools, public or private, in the area. When I first set foot into the sullen hallways of Berkeley High forty years later, it seemed like a giant step

backward — not to my high school, but to something that must have existed years before, and which WPHS had set out to remedy.

Yet another classmate was Gordon Parks, Jr., the son of the famous photographer. The kids looked up to him, gathered around him. He seemed an amiable sort, seemed to have something going for himself apart from his father's fame, but I never got to know him.

I suppose we were no more cruel than any other high school students in similar circumstances, but I remember with sadness what the kids did to a student named Danny, one of those pathetic misfits who usually dies at an early age or winds up in a mental institution. He was in several of my classes, perhaps my home room, a gawky, perpetually frightened kid who always seemed on the verge of running away. The kids thought he was queer because he was so shy and awkward and so he was subjected to a day-in, day-out taunting both to his face and behind his back. It was said he wouldn't allow others to see him naked in the shower because then, somehow, his queer-ness would be revealed, but I never knew the source of this information, since I remember that only the kids in after-school sports had access to the showers and Danny certainly never played sports. But maybe I have forgotten that we all took showers after physical education. He had a lick of hair smoothed over his forehead, big lips, like the peasant in Van Gogh's "The Potato Eaters", and a nervous smile, whose purpose seemed to be, on the one hand, to serve as a permanent apology to the world for being so odd (for being alive!), and on the other to serve as a greeting for the friend he always hoped to find but knew he never would. I detested what the kids were doing to this poor soul, but I never made a move in his defense because I was all too aware of what the price would be.

Sometimes kids I knew got into trouble. The lives of our neighbors took place inside their houses, behind front doors, usually white, with a brass knocker, that were always closed. The news of what was going on came from my mother. Richard Thomas, who lived next door, got a girl pregnant, and at the age of 17 or 18, had to marry her. His father, an alert, overweight German who always looked like he was searching for a good business deal, bought his son and his new daughter-in-law a house somewhere in a nearby town. The sister of Tom McGuinness — the family lived down the Elm Street hill from us, on the corner of Columbus — had an unfortunate love affair and at the age of 18 had to go into a convent, where she would spend the rest of her life in silence. Or so my mother said.

### **Cross-Country**

Since I had always felt that the only sport I was meant for was running, I joined the cross-country team in my junior year. I was probably right in doing this, since I doubt if there was a single other sport that could produce so much pain and misery.

We had practice after school. The coach, Bill Enslee, was a stocky, middle-aged man with a crewcut, glasses, and a gravelly voice — the kind of guy you could imagine piloting a boat in a little seaside village off the coast of Maine, or in charge of some obscure military operation during the War. We had some nickname or other for him. The story among the team members was that after he assigned us the afternoon's run, he would wander down to a bar on Mamaroneck Ave. and drink until the time we were supposed to come back. I don't know if that story was true, but I do know that I had never before seen a man with less interest in his job, although as this book was

being written, Jim (no longer “Jimmy”) Swan reminded me that Coach Enslee’s advice on running hills was “lean forward, take smaller steps, and don’t look up”.

We changed clothes in the gym. I remember the dim electric lights, the stink of socks and sweat-shirts which never got washed, the stink of sneakers. Or, in our case, of running shoes. These were very unlike the sophisticated ones we nowadays take for granted. They were nothing but thin canvas on top and a strip of thin rubber underneath, the theory being that shoes should be as light as possible. The front of the foot was higher than the rear, with the result that some of us were in constant pain from shin splints, a feeling, especially when running, as though red-hot steel rods had been inserted up the back of each lower leg. The pain persisted throughout the day. In fact, the fall of my senior year was among other things a painful exercise in trying to walk normally when the back of your lower legs are in constant pain. No one thought there was anything particularly wrong with this — no one thought that we should try to find better shoes: if you were lucky, you didn’t hurt; if you were unlucky, well, your job was to run in spite of it.

If, before running, I tried to touch my toes without bending my legs, that seemed to help a little, but still I wondered how it would be possible to run so much as one step with that kind of pain. But run we did, sometimes around the track at the school, behind our two best runners, Duke Harmon and Ken Boland. I can still remember their faces; Harmon looked a little like Robert Redford. Apparently the coach gave the route to these two, and then the rest of us just followed. I was always out of breath trying to keep up, always running as though my execution the next day would be postponed if I did just a little better than I actually did. Bunched together, we ran through the gray, cold, autumn streets, over the crackling brown leaves, trying not to think of the pains in our legs. I think the cross-country racing distance was 2-1/2 miles. Each year there was a multi-school meet at Cortlandt Park, near Yonkers. More than a hundred runners competed. The race began with a long sprint across an uneven, worn, lawn, then across a wooden bridge, the bridge being narrow enough, say 15 feet or so, that all the runners had to clump together to get across. Then around the asphalt paths of the Park. I was out of breath by the time we reached the bridge, but I kept running for the usual reason, namely, fear of the unimaginable fate that awaited me if I stopped. Up the slopes of the path, down the other side. How can anyone run feeling like this? Then, with nothing left, the last, gasping, hurling yourself toward the finish line. I came in 36th out of 105, and was surprised to have done that well.

To celebrate the end of cross-country season in my senior year, Jimmy Swan and I — he was also on the team — decided to do a long run. In fact, it turned out to be some 16 miles — from his house in White Plains, through Mamaroneck, and back. This became the subject of the essay I wrote for Mrs. Spettel’s class. It, along with all but two of the pieces of writing I did for her class, has been lost. See “Writing for Mrs. Spettel” on page 365.

The essay described how we began in mid-afternoon on a cold, gray Saturday at his house right across from the High School. We took off down the tree-lined streets, heading for Mamaroneck, settling into a slow, steady pace we felt we could maintain for the whole run. (“Run at a pace you feel you could maintain all day!”) Fifty years later, Jim said in an email that a friend of his named Leslie Colitt accompanied us on his Vespa motorscooter throughout the whole run. I have no memory of this. We ran to Mamaroneck. In that same email, Jim said that he thought we had turned left and made it as far as Rye before retracing our steps. By this time, I felt as though we were running in some kind of realm beyond the physical, a realm in which the only source of your energy is the spirit of running itself, all your normal physical sources having long since been used up. You are running on the exhilaration of the impossibility of running in the state of physical exhaustion you are in — that, and the spell of indifference in the world you are running through:

the thick trunks of the cold, barren trees, the never-ending pavement, the houses behind stone walls and lawns, families with teenage daughters keeping warm inside...I remember having vivid fantasies of orange juice. I could see it shining, frothing in a pitcher, could see the bubbles, could smell it, could feel it bite my eye, could see it being poured into a large tumbler, could taste it. I thought, if I can finish this without stopping, then I will be able to have a pitcher of that delicious orange juice. Keep going! Of course, another motivation to keep going was not wanting to look bad by stopping.

Yet if the only thing keeping me going toward the end was the promise of being able to stop when we reached his front yard, I found that my legs did not want to stop. They no longer belonged to me, they were someone else's legs, they were the fowl's legs in Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and I was merely the hut riding on top of them. And the truth is that for several seconds my legs ran around and around his front yard I shouting to him, between gasps for breath, "My legs won't stop, I can't stop them!"

Then, finally, having had their way, they relented, and we trooped into his house. I remember climbing the narrow staircase, wallpaper with large flowers on one side, the staircase runner soft and old under our feet. We took showers and for all I know, his mother served me big glasses of orange juice.

As for how far we ran, the figure of 16 miles has stayed in my mind through the years. That is almost two-thirds of a marathon. I never again ran a similar distance.

## Satires

We kids loved satires, for example, Stan Freeberg's of the Harry Belafonte song "Day-O", in which a cool jazz musician, a bongo player I think, and a loud singer are making a recording of the song. As well as I can remember over some 45 years, the singer begins with his "Day-O! Day-ay-ay-o!"

"Hold it," says the bongo player, in a cool voice. "Like, it's too loud, man."

We hear footsteps going backward, and then a repeat of the lyric: "Day-O! Day-ay-ay-O!" The singer asks how that is.

"Still too loud, man." says the bongo player.

Footsteps are heard going even farther back. But the singer is still too loud.

Finally we hear the door to the studio open, then close, then a muffled voice, clearly from the corridor outside: "How's this?"

"Crazy."

Then there were the animated cartoons featuring characters like the jazz musician Shorty Peterstein who hardly moved his lips when he spoke, and who was always nervously flipping ashes from his cigarette. Another was about a poverty-stricken violinist, with Mel Brooks as narrator. I have forgotten the plot, but I remember one line, regarding the physical appearance of the violinist, delivered in a thick New York Jewish/German accent. "I've seen zuffering before but never like this. Now dot's *zuffering*." And a series of cartoons about the character Gerald McBoing-Boing. And a superb cartoon rendition of Toad of Toad Hall<sup>1</sup> madly driving his roadster down country roads to the terror of everyone. And a rendition of Harold Pinter's sketch "Last To Go", the drawings and working class accents perfect. I cannot imagine any stage performance of the sketch being any better than this animation.

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1. from Kenneth Grahame's classic, *The Wind in the Willows*

But it seems that all of these have been permanently lost, since I was unable to find any of them in a search of Google in March, 2012. Perhaps they have been preserved in a film archive.

## **Living With My Mother**

Always claiming that we were on the verge of poverty, my mother rented out the upstairs guest room to a quiet, willowy woman with a Southern accent, whom we addressed only as Miss Haymaker. You hardly knew she was there. I forget what she did for a living. She had a brother whom we addressed only as Mr. Haymaker. He wore dark-rimmed glasses, and had the quick, boyish, scholarly look of Mr. Allard, my sixth grade teacher. He too spoke with a soft Southern accent. My mother said he had an important position (what else?) with the Billy Graham Crusade. To me he seemed a little too friendly, smiled a little too much.

One evening as I stepped into the house, it was obvious that something had happened. My mother was near hysteria again. There was much bustling around, the house had something of the same feeling it had had when my father died: once again, something awful had happened to us. My brother was upstairs. Apparently, Mr. Haymaker had offered to drive him somewhere so he could run an errand for my mother — I think, pick up some flowers at the florist in Kensico — and Mr. Haymaker had made sexual advances toward him — asked him to take down his pants or some such. This took place in Kensico Cemetery, according to my mother. She was beside herself: “He is homosex!” she said several times, in a tone that clearly indicated that there was nothing worse: it was worse than being a Russian spy, or a carrier of the plague. I never talked to my brother about it afterward. Nor did he seem to want to talk about it. He seemed to just shrug it off. But Mr. Haymaker was forbidden to come to the house thereafter. Soon, Miss Haymaker left. My mother then rented the room to Miss Coester, a plump, middle-aged, cheerful woman who, my mother made a point of telling us, worked in advertising and “earned five figures”. Later Miss Coester moved to a saltbox house in Danbury, Connecticut, with another woman, named, I think, Miss Lagerwohl. It was never really mentioned that they might be — that kind of woman. But I remember my mother standing on the back porch, having just read a letter from Miss Coester, and putting it down in shock, saying, “This is a love letter!” Later, Miss Coester lost her job in the advertising company, spent long months looking for work in the Danbury area, then got a job as some sort of part-time stringer for a local paper. Once in a while, especially later, when I was in college, I would send her a poem I had written, and she would reply in her courteous, always encouraging way.

As my mother sat in her living room chair with her knitting, she would indulge the only pastime that brought a little excitement into her life, namely, criticizing me: the fact I was late coming home again, that my shoes were a mess, that Terry Pickens was always dressed so nicely. (Only those who were dressed properly could hope to be accepted by people who mattered. Her highest praise, other than for those who received academic honors, went to those who “made a good impression”, because that would lead to them eventually getting “a good position” at an important company.)

And then, sooner or later, out would come her collection of homilies on the subject of motherhood, the most infuriating of which was, “Lincoln always said, ‘All I am, or ever hope to be, I owe to my mother.’”

“Fuck, Lincoln” I would shout back at her. “He sure as hell never had a mother like you!”

She: "Oh! You don't know how good you have it. If your father were here..." Then she would tell me, in no uncertain terms, how soldiers on the battlefield always called for their mothers as they lay wounded and dying.

When things were at their worst, I listened to Beethoven. I would lie on the couch in the living room, put on the Emperor Concerto, or the Eroica Symphony, the piece I always remembered my father listening to during his last months. She would come in, survey the scene, and begin:

"Turn it down."

"No."

"I told you to turn it down. You disturb the neighbors."

"Fuck the neighbors."

"You stop using that language around here. I won't stand for it." And she would march to the record player and turn the volume way down. I would get up, go over and turn it back up. She would reach down and turn it back down. I would turn it back up, push her away and return to the couch.

She, clenching her fingers in that way she had: "How awful you are." Pause. A wave of her hand. "Take your feet off the couch."

"They're not on the couch."

"Yes they are and I want them off. You are not to dirty my slipcovers."<sup>1</sup>

"Fuck your slipcovers. My feet are not on the couch. See? The shoes are hanging off the edge. They're not even touching the cushion."

"I want those feet off."

I would lower my feet to the floor. She would stand there, clenching and unclenching her fists. She: "Did you do your homework?"

"I'll do it after I listen to this music."

"You'll do it now."

I, now getting up: "Look, you bitch, I am listening to this music. You will not wreck it for me. Now get out of here. When I have finished listening to it, I will do my homework. Got it?"

Pause, then that smirk on her face, and a look toward the ceiling. "You think you know music. In my family we always had music. I played the piano, my brothers played the violin. Oh, yes. Pappa saw to that. In the evening we all played together. I have listened to music all my life."

"Didn't seem to do you much good."

"I want you to do your homework."

And then, sometimes, I would lose all self control, and simply scream at her as long and as loudly as I could: "You filthy evil bitch, you get out of this room, you piece of shit, you will not disturb me when I am listening to Beethoven, do you understand, you pile of shit? Get out of here or I'll kill you. Get out here. Now. Leave me alone, goddamn it, leave me alone or I'll get a knife and cut your fucking throat. Get out, get out, get out!"

In another fight with her, I was standing in the little hallway that connected the back door, the basement steps, and the door to the garage. A door led to a few steps which in turn led up to the hallway to the kitchen. The door had nine panes of glass. I was standing in the little hallway as we shouted at each other. I don't remember what the original cause of the argument was, but as happened so often, she took the car away even though I had a date, probably with Pat, that very

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1. In middle- and old age, when I tried to describe my mother's obsession with cleanliness, I used to say that in effect she said to guests, "Don't walk on the floor, don't sit on the chairs or the couch, but otherwise, make yourself at home."



evening. I was so furious that I kept hitting one of the glass panes with my fist until the glass broke. Then I hit the next one until it broke. I went on to the next, until I had smashed all the windows. At the end, blood was pouring from my knuckles and the back of my wrist. I let it drip on the broken glass on the floor, repeating over and over, “You filthy bitch, you evil pile of shit, you filthy bitch...”

Why didn't I just leave? The reader must understand that in those days the parent was always right. No one conceived that within forty years, child abuse would become a public concern, that a boy in his early teens could legally divorce his parents. If I ran away, I would have had a very difficult time finding a high school that would accept me as a student, and it probably would have been all but impossible to get into college, since no young person got anything but a job without a parent's signature somewhere along the way. Worst of all, I would have had her after me for the rest of my life. I would have spent the rest of my life living like a criminal. And I had no doubt then, nor have I now, that she would never give up trying to track me down.

A phrase started going through my mind in these years, one that seemed to provide a certain consolation: *Hate brewed in his heart*. I would say it to myself during our fights, or as I was just walking along the street. It was part of my revenge. It would be in a book I would write some day.

Throughout my teenage years, winter was the most dreadful season. Outside were icicles and snow and freezing cold. Inside was the leaden weight of Christmas. I remember the way the lights in the house seemed brown throughout November and December. My mother would talk, over and over, about how our father had died on December 20, how he was not here, but how, even though her heart wasn't good, and she was sick, she nevertheless was going to sacrifice everything to try to make a good Christmas for us.

In the grim, empty days of December, she would nag me to read the Christmas story in the *White Plains Reporter Dispatch*. And so, in order to get through the excruciating boredom of this worst of all seasons, I would try to read the installment each day, or each week — wretched stories with Santa Claus somewhere in the background, and a snowman who had been forgotten but then on Christmas morning was remembered, or a family with no money for presents that suddenly got money for presents, or kids who had done no wrong but were wronged but then were done right. I would lie on my stomach on the living room floor in the brown light next to the Stromberg-Carlson and turn the pages of this paper I had hated ever since the days when I had had to deliver it.

She would buy a tree — I don't remember how it came to be delivered to our house — and then with great lamentations for days gone by, and how wonderful Christmas had been when she was a girl in Switzerland, she would cajole and threaten us into helping her decorate the tree. I hated her damned expensive ornaments, the little angels and cheery Santa Clauses and family heirlooms and stars and tinsel; hated her teetering on the step ladder as she heaved and panted and whined about the imminence of heart attack or mental collapse.

The only thing I did willingly was build a fire, which I was good at, having remembered what my father had taught me: first crumple the newspaper into loose balls, then put the kindling on top, then a few logs, with spaces in between to create a draft, then be sure the flue was open (put your face inside and look up and try to see the sky if it's in daytime, or feel the cool air if it's night), then light the paper at the bottom, and put the screen in place. But even a fire couldn't bring any cheer into the house for me. The best the fire could do was give me something to imagine: flames destroying houses, bodies falling.

She: "Other families decorate the tree together. You just lie around. You never help." (A sigh.) "Well, if your father were here..."

I: "But he's not."

She: "No, he's not. Sometimes I think you're glad."

I, turning the pages of the Christmas story: "Fuck you."

She: "You stop using that language. I won't stand for it in my house!"

I: "Then stop always talking about other families. And it's not your house. He bought it and paid for it. He designed it and had it built."

She: "How mean you are. He often said to me" — reaching as far as her arms would stretch to hang a ball on the edge of a branch, making it look as dangerous and exhausting as possible — "he often said to me, 'I would never have been able to accomplish what I have accomplished without you.' Oh, yes." Then a sudden gasp, a stifled shriek, as she pretends that she has almost fallen off the ladder. "You never help. Look at how I have to do these things I shouldn't be doing. The doctor said 'You shouldn't exert yourself. You are not well. You do too much.'"

I: "Fuck you."

She, now shouting: "You stop that this instant! You will not talk that way in my house. Oh, if your father were here, he'd slap your face."

I: "But he's not."

She: "No. And you're glad. Because you know he wouldn't tolerate you to treat me this way."

I: "If you don't want to be treated this way, then stop hounding me."

She: "I don't hound you. Other boys help their mother at Christmas. Especially if she no longer has a husband. But you ..."

I: "I don't help, that's right. I hate Christmas."

She: "Your father died five days before Christmas. Have you forgotten that?"

I: "No I haven't forgotten that."

She: "I think you have."

I: "Fuck you."

Then she would fake a mild attack, gasp, and pretend to be barely able to climb down from the ladder to sit down in one of the easy chairs. I would ignore her completely. With her hand to her breast, she would sit, eyes, closed, breathing hard. "I want you to put up the tinsel now."

I: "I'll do it later."

She: "I want you to do it now."

I: "I'll do it later. I'm reading this stupid Christmas story. Don't you want me to finish it?"

She: "It's not a stupid story."

I: "Have you read it?"

She: "I want you to put up the tinsel now. It's in the box."

I: "I'll put it up later."

She: "I don't think you should have the car this weekend. Oh, no. You have to earn that privilege."

I: "I have a date with Pat!"

She: "I don't care. What do you mean, you have 'a date'?"

I: "I mean she and I are going out to a movie. I asked you and you said it was OK."

She: "Only if you help around the house."

I: "You said if I do all the dishes and finish my homework."

She: "And help with the tree."

I: "You didn't say that!"

She, now seeming much better, in fact almost happy: "I don't think you should have the car on Saturday."

I: "You fucking bitch."

She: "Oh, no: no car for a boy who talks to his mother that way."

I: "You fucking goddamn pile of shit. I'm getting that car if I have to steal it."

She: "Then I will call the police."

I, now throwing the paper on the carpet and storming out, kicking the box of tinsel: "Go ahead. They'll never find me."

And so it went at Christmas.

My mother's obsession with my always having to be well-dressed had its counterpart with respect to the house, and so, at almost any time, some part of the house was being painted. She had two men at her beck and call, Mr. Foster, whose first name I think was Bob, although my mother, as well as my brother and I, always called him "Mr. Foster." As he worked, I would talk to him about his experiences in World War II. He had been a truck driver, and told how he had had to jump out of his truck and dive down into ditch when German fighters strafed. He seemed to have taken the danger matter-of-factly. It's what you did. The other painter, a man we knew only as "Mr. Carlson", always seemed to me a little disreputable, with his cigarette dangling from his lips, his long moustache, and thinning, slicked-down hair. He once told my mother that our '49 Ford could catch fire and blow up if it didn't have some device he was selling. I think my mother immediately checked with the mechanic at Stotz's garage and apparently was convinced that there was no such danger.

My mother wouldn't buy a television set because of the ugly antennas. Also, TV "wrecks your eyes". I hated the dumb, unthinking way she said it, since to me it seemed the TV didn't shine out *at* your eyes nor, on the other hand, was it too dark so you had to squint. But not long after she had an FM antenna put up in the same place on the chimney where a TV antenna would have gone. It looked virtually the same, but she said it wasn't ugly because it brought in good music as opposed to that "awful television". Also, exceptional people like us didn't do what everyone else did; *they* had ugly antennas to bring in worthless stuff for the masses; our antenna brought in quality.

One fall evening, in my room, filled with the sense of my own worthlessness and failure, I began firing the beebie slingshot out the half-open window. Maybe I could hit the Thomas's house. I put a wad of beebies in the pouch, crouched down on the floor, took careful aim and let go. I listened to see if they had hit. Did it several times. Then I heard the window raised a few inches, and Mr. Thomas's gruff, German, voice. I busied myself with something. A minute or so later I heard a knock on the front door. Then Mr. Thomas's angry voice. Then my mother's footsteps on the stairs. She pushed open my door. Someone had just broken the kitchen window next door. Was it me? No. But I had left the window open, and she saw it. I don't remember if I went downstairs and made my denial to him. Maybe it was one of the kids, I said. Why do I get blamed for everything?

Maybe she offered to pay for the window, I don't remember. But for days, weeks, years afterward, she tried to make me confess to doing it. I refused. It seemed then, and seems now, of immense importance that I never admit it to her. She tried, with her smile, to entice me into confessing. With a toss of the head, girlishly, "I know you did it." "I did not do it, goddamn it!" "Why don't you admit it? You will feel much better." "Because I didn't do it, goddamn it."

## Earning Money

### Working After School

After school, except for the few weeks in the fall that were cross-country season, I worked in electronics stores — in my junior year, Melville Electronics, in my senior year, Westchester Electronics. Both were in downtown White Plains, within a mile or so from school. I carried my trumpet case in one hand, putting up with its constant banging against my knee, and a pile of books and my three-ring binder in the other. You always carried your books by your side: if you carried them against your chest, like a girl, that would be a dead giveaway that you were queer.

To this day, if I hear, say, the Bach *Piano Concerto No. 1* on a cold fall or winter day in California, I am again in White Plains in the early fifties, trudging through the leaves on a cold, fall day on the way to my after-school job, my cheeks burning with the emptiness, the gray barrenness, of my life. The buses go by. They have a purpose, at least! If I could do something well, I too would have a purpose, and a reason to live! I thought of myself as a piece of bloody meat held together by the piano wire of my thoughts, my self-control, which prevented me from going mad.

Melville (I think his first name was Frank) was a wealthy man, lived somewhere near Mayfair Acres, and had a kilowatt ham station. He used a microphone, not a Morse code key (in other words, he “worked ’phone, not CW”), since CW was for kids and adults who couldn’t afford expensive equipment. Someone told me that his station was so powerful, it caused QRM (interference) in the CW band. He was a good-looking man, and, with his smile and gravelly voice, reminded me of the actor Van Heflin. Rumor had it he was a playboy, always dating, and getting into trouble with, beautiful women. He was always decent to me, I think because he knew I was a ham operator, too.

His secretary was a blonde German woman who was probably in her late thirties, and therefore “old” by the male standards of the day. She was still attractive, however, and, best of all, she tolerated the sexual banter of the men. They would say to her, when she was seated at her desk, “Could I look in your drawers, Helga?” She would give them a mildly reproving look that said, “Yes, we all know that boys will be boys.”

Sexual jokes helped the men in the store get through the day. A part of their brains was always on the lookout for a way to turn an innocent statement into one with a double meaning. Once, in idle talk about something, perhaps about sleeping at night, I remarked, “It’s hard getting up in the morning”, and immediately Hal, the blond guy who worked behind the counter, caught it and said something like, “Oh, it is, is it? What you need is a wife!” Laughter from the overweight guy who also worked behind the front counter. I think his last name was Gianinni. He wore dark-rimmed glasses, had a genial manner. His way of saying hello was “Greetings!”, which I have used to this day. After that, he would begin his conversation with, “What can I do you for?” Both men had that fast, anticipatory, alertness of people who work in parts supply stores. You can’t say they knew the product line by heart, because there were easily hundreds of products, but they knew a great many of them by heart — part numbers, costs, both per unit and in quantity, where the parts were stored on the shelves, manufacturers, equivalent replacements. They also knew the current goings-on in the lives of most of their regular customers, so that they would carry on a conversation as they turned the pages of the multi-volume catalog on the counter and then deftly picked the tube from the stacks on the shelf. “So, did those NL6’s work for you?” “Yeah,” the guy on the other side of the counter would say. “See, didn’t I tell you? And you kept telling me you needed NL7’s! I wouldn’t lead you astray.” Always with a smile, a laugh, a clear eagerness

to please by entertaining the customer.

One of Hal's ideas of fun was to charge up one of the large capacitors — the ones that looked like a small-diameter tin can — and then tell some innocent to grab it off the shelf. It would discharge in their hand, giving them a shock. In half trying to convince me it couldn't hurt me, and half trying to convince me of the amount of electricity that could be stored, he would sometimes short the terminals with a screwdriver, so I could see the spark.

He may be the person I first heard tell the joke about the who guy runs into a police station in obvious distress, and asks, "Quick, how big is a penguin?" The officer behind the counter holds his hand flat at his side at waist level, says, "About so." Guy: "Oh, my God, then I just hit a nun!"

My job was to replenish the shelves, carefully stack the boxes of tubes, throw out the empty cartons. What I wanted to do was to wait at the counter, and once in a while they would let me, but they were clearly reluctant, because I knew so little about the stock. At the end of the day, I had to sweep the floor, a job that had to be done carefully, so as not to raise dust. Everything was coated with a dark, gray/brown grime. It got into your fingernails, and, worst of all, I was convinced, it made your acne worse.

I had to come in once in a while on Saturday mornings to help with breaking the returned TV picture tubes. This was done in a large, wooden barrel in the basement. The tubes were in their boxes, which measured two or three feet on a side. Hal took out the tube, very carefully, then, giving some sort of a signal, one, two, three, threw it down into the barrel, where it imploded. We all had to duck as soon as he let go of the tube, so we wouldn't be hit by flying glass. When the barrel was full of glass, we started on another. This job was much filthier than the one upstairs, what with the grime everywhere, the stink of the basement, the rickety metal elevator up to the street, everything dark.

One of the regular customers at the store was a cheerful, rather quiet blond guy with a long last name I no longer remember. One day I happened to mention his name in connection with some topic, and the two countermen said he had recently died in a boating accident, his head cut open by a propeller. It was my first confrontation since the death of my father with the death of someone I knew, and I remember thinking for several days about this guy who used to come into the store and talk about electronic parts, this guy who used to be alive and ordinary, just like everyone else, and now had been removed from this world. How was it possible to live in the world, have a self, know you have a self, go about your business, and then suddenly have all this stop? Does he know it has all stopped? Isn't that a terrible burden for him to have to carry, wherever he is? I didn't know how to think about someone who, when I knew him, I didn't know was going to die soon.

A year later I got an after-school job at Westchester Electronics, which was a few blocks closer to the school, and much bigger. The place was owned by a little Jew with a thin moustache whom everyone called "Old Man Soames". He had none of Melville's charm. He walked around in his white shirt, bow tie, and was clearly very seldom pleased with what he saw, although I never heard him shout at anyone. The two hours or whatever I worked there dragged worse than at Melville's. I hung out with two full-time stock clerks who were experts at ways to dodge work. On the second floor, where the TV tubes were stored, there was a driveway down the middle, for use by delivery trucks, which came up the ramp in back. We arranged the tube boxes to form an enclosure with a slim entrance at the rear. No one could see us inside, and so we had a place to talk, read the paper, just loaf, exactly as the factory workers do in the 1959 British comedy *I'm All Right, Jack*.

Had you asked me why I allowed myself to be subjected to this grim work, I would probably

have muttered something about my mother demanding it, and that I need the money for college, and that this is what anyone must do who wants to be allowed to go on living. As I recall, I had to give her some proportion of my earnings, or else pay all my personal expenses out of them, for example, for movies, candy, soda, gas for dates.

After work, in the cold, dark, fall and winter evenings, I took the green Mt. Pleasant bus home, hating the desolation of having to wait for the bus, the having to look at the dull faces of average Americans. I got off at the foot of Elm St. sometimes close to 7:00 p.m., dragged myself up the hill, walked across the lawn, around the garage, came in through the back door, climbed the three steps into the warm house.

My mother (at the sink): "Where have you been?"

I: "Working".

She: "Why are you home so late."

I (as sullenly as possible): "It's not late."

She: "You're supposed to be home at 6:30."

I: "I missed the bus."

She: "Your dinner is cold."

I: "So what?"

She: "You are supposed to be home on time."

I: "Fuck you."

She: "Ohhhh. If your father were here..."

I: "Well, he's not."

Sometimes she would be waiting for me at the head of the three steps so she could try to detect the smell of tobacco. When she asked for a kiss, or when she embraced me, it was not an expression of mother love. I could hear her draw in air through her nostrils, sniffing. And then, if I had been careless —

She: "You've been smoking."

I: "No I haven't."

She: "I can smell it on your breath."

I: "No you can't because I haven't been smoking."

She: "I can smell it on your clothes."

I: "No you can't."

Back and forth, in our routine exercise of mutual hate. Eventually she would sigh and say, "If your father knew..."

And then, with or without dinner, upstairs to spend half an hour or so contacting other hams, then down to the wooden desk in my bedroom to do homework and listen to the radio. The details of these evenings have been long forgotten. Did I just sit down and study the textbooks and turn pages and do assignments and go to bed? No, surely, the blessed escape of radio programs alleviated some of the misery. Did I ever go downstairs for something to drink? What was my mother doing in the evenings? What we do most often, we forget. What is most a part of our lives escapes us first.

## **Yard Work**

In the summer of my junior year, under the relentless pressure of my mother to earn money for college, I cut our lawn and did weeding for some people who lived near the Prebles. As I knelt among the shady bushes, pulling weeds, doing the least possible work that would enable me to

keep the job for another week or two, the only thought in my brain was, “Why am I here? Why am I being forced to do this? I have much better things to do!” But what they were amounted to nothing more than not doing the bidding of other people.

### **Summer Work — Caddying**

I don’t remember the year I first started caddying, but I do remember that caddying and setting pins in bowling alleys were considered to be the two best means of earning money among kids my age. Not the least reason caddying was favored was that you could do it when you wanted — in other words, not do it when you wanted, although if you were to have any chance at all of being selected to carry bags (to “get a loop”, in the vernacular) you had to show up often enough so that the caddymaster recognized you. I think my first opportunity came at the Briar Hall course in Briarcliff Manor, where I met Heim. That would have been the summer of my freshman year of high school, when I was 14. Initially, caddying had a certain excitement — for one thing, you never knew if you would get called that day. Many days you made the long hitchhike trip to the golf course and just sat on the bench all day, eating your lunch far too early, and spending money you didn’t have on endless bottles of soda and candy bars to help fight the boredom. I always brought a book or two, of course, but even reading got tiresome after a while. Sometimes, when you were absolutely desperate for money, you might settle for shagging, that is, retrieving the balls from the driving range that was attached to the course — walking out on the grass with a bucket, praying that the golfers understood that they shouldn’t hit any balls while you and the one or two other caddies were out there. Eventually, I resented this work as much as I had the paper route and all the other unnecessary labor that my mother’s stinginess, and her belief that boys should be forced to earn their spending money, compelled me to endure. On the other hand, it was a way to get away from her during the summer vacation days.

### **Getting There**

We got to the golf courses by hitchhiking, which in those days was only occasionally dangerous. I don’t recall the roads I hitched on to get to Briar Hall: almost certainly I didn’t use the Bronx River Parkway, since hitchhiking was illegal on it. I do remember that to get to Whippoorwill Country Club, in Armonk, where I caddied during my junior and senior years, I walked across the fields to the road near the Aerators Road, hitched a ride from there across the Dam to Rte. 22, then up 22 to where it turned right toward Armonk. A little way past that was an asphalt road (Rte. 120) that ran several miles along stone walls, past woods and fields to the country club. One of the club members would usually give us a lift on this road.

### **Waiting for a Loop**

We sat on wooden benches under the trees outside the caddy shack and waited. The caddy shack was purposefully located out of sight of the club house — off to one side and below it. I can’t recall ever having actually seen or been inside the club house. In addition to my books, I brought lunch. I know that I read *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* sitting on the benches at Whippoorwill. The golfers came up, their spiked shoes clacking on the cement outside the caddy shack. The caddy master looked out of his window, or came out and stood in front. I don’t remember if we waved our hands, like kids in school who have the answer, or if we just tried to sit in the quiet, ready-to-work way that might convince him we were the best ones. (Eventually, I came to the conclusion that it was better to sit and look as though you were yearning with all your

might to carry those golf bags.) Then he would call out a name, “Thompson!” and the boy would bound to his feet and walk over and take the bag or bags of clubs from the golfers. Sometimes the golfers asked for a caddy by name. But most of the time we just sat there, drinking soda and eating candy and waiting.

The caddymaster was from Yonkers. He always drove up with a car full of caddies from the Yonkers area. There were rumors that some were giving him a cut from each loop. He gave me a lift a few times, and I seem to recall trying to offer him the same if he would give me more loops, but he shook his head.

### **Carrying Bags**

We carried a single (one bag) or a double (two bags). In the latter case, most of the caddies, including me, carried one bag on each shoulder, one hand resting on the backs of the clubs in each bag. The club heads had all sorts of elaborate covers, some made of leather, with a design of some sort, some made of wool, with tassels in front. How these golfers loved their clubs! They dressed them the way rich people dressed their poodles. And the golfers themselves wore clothes they never would have dared to be seen in off the golf course: red or yellow pants, two-tone shoes, funny hats.

Once in a while we would see a caddy who carried both bags on one shoulder, but in memory I associate this way of carrying bags with professionals, and black professionals at that.

Up and down the hills in the summer heat we trudged, in the smell of freshly cut grass and the faint bathroom smell of fertilizer. The sprinklers hissed on the greens. You learned how to push yourself through labor you hated: just five more holes, just five more, just get through these, then you can have a Coke and get the hell out of here... just four more now, and one of them is short, so it’s practically like three, only three more... get up this next hill and you’ll never have to walk up it again today, just get up this next hill, that’s all, then you can rest while they’re on the green, just a little more, just a little more, and every second out here makes your skin that much more tan and the acne that less noticeable.

And then there were the golfers, most of whom we considered to be fools. (I remember some caddies at Briar Hall telling me that a guy had had a stroke and died after he stuck his head under the cold-water fountain at the end of the 18th hole. We all laughed, thought it a fitting end for a typically stupid golfer.) There was Mr. Lawrence, in his colorful plaid shorts and white jersey. He had big, piano legs, thick, black, curly hair, and a short temper, as he often demonstrated by throwing clubs. Once, on the 11th hole, a par three, in which the golfer teed off from a bluff overlooking a pond, hitting an eight iron or so onto the green<sup>1</sup>, Mr. Lawrence missed a putt and threw his putter into the pond. I couldn’t afford to let an opportunity go by for earning a bigger tip than the \$1 there was a chance he might give me, so I took off my shoes, waded into the slimy bottom, and somehow or other retrieved the damn club. As I recall, his response was pretty much one of, “It’s your job, caddy.”

Then there was a woman for whom a round of golf was also a Nature hike. She couldn’t resist storing in her golf bag whatever she found of interest in the woods along the fairway, where she frequently hit the ball. It never made her angry, missing yet another shot, because it provided yet another opportunity to explore Nature. By the end of eighteen holes, the caddy and the golfbag were loaded with all sorts of branches, flowers, stones, birds’ nests. In addition, for reasons none of us ever understood, she kept an extra pair of golf shoes in her bag, and they weighed a ton.

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1. One day we heard that someone had made a hole-in-one on this hole.



Once, at Whippoorwill, I caddied for Glenn Loucks. It was a late afternoon loop, the sun red over the trees, he absently asking after my mother as he prepared his next shot. He still had the same slicked-down hair, parted a little off the middle. He still smelled of Mennen's hair tonic. His son, Dean Loucks, by that time was a star football player at White Plains High.

### **Faking It**

Like my father, I detested golf, and still do. For one thing, I didn't understand anything about the game or the equipment, other than that you were supposed to use the latter to get the ball in the hole in the fewest number of strokes possible. I was never clear on why the club heads had different angles. I heard it was so the golfer could always swing the club at about the same speed, the ball going higher for short shots, because the head was angled more steeply from the vertical. It made far more sense to me to have one slightly angled club and then to adjust the speed of your swing depending on how far you wanted to hit the ball. But the whole game seemed utterly stupid: if you want to get the ball into the hole, then pick it up, walk to the hole, and drop it in. And when you have done this once, it makes absolutely no sense to repeat it for 17 more holes.

On Mondays, which were called "Caddies' Days", but which were really days on which the greenskeepers could tend to the vast universe of grass without worrying about being hit by golf balls, I sometimes attempted to improve my negligible knowledge of the game by dragging myself to the course with an old bag and a few ancient clubs, and playing a few holes. But more often than not, when I had pushed my wooden tee into the bony soil and stood back and made a few practice swings and then attempted to send the ball arcing down the center of the fairway, all that happened was that it went skittering off to the side over the hard dirt, and after a few holes like this, I would say the hell with it and hitchhike back home again.

But in order to get tips, you had to be able to "club" the golfer whose bags you were carrying. Which meant, tell him what clubs to use when he asked you. Although I knew that, in the order of decreasing distance that the club could hit the ball, the clubs were: the woods — driver, 2 wood ("brassie"), 3 wood ("spoon"), 4 wood (sometimes called a "mashie", I believe) — then the irons — 2 iron, 3 iron, 4 iron, ..., up to 9 iron ("niblick"), then the wedge, a thick, heavy club with a head angled way back for use when the ball was near the green, and, finally, the putter.

Not having the slightest ability to gauge distances on the course, much less estimate the hitting power of my golfer, I developed a trick which was to prove useful again a few years later, at another summer job, when I was supposed to recommend wines to diners at a restaurant, despite the fact I knew nothing about wine. When the golfer paused, rubbing his gloved hand against his bare hand, walking around the ball, looking down the fairway, and said, "Well, caddy, what do you think?" I would press my lips together, frown, look down the fairway, and give the best impression I could of an expert pondering a deeply important question. Then I would say, "Well, let's see..." He wouldn't wait. "A 5 iron, I think, hunh?" he would say. "Yes," I would say, still pretending to be deep in thought, still not ready to deliver my expertly-worked-out recommendation, "I think a 5 might do it. Or, maybe..." "You're right," he would say. "I think a six iron would be better." and he would reach into the bag, draw out the six iron and start his practice swings. On at least one occasion I received an extra large tip and a compliment for my expertise in recommending the right clubs.

### **Pay**

Pay was \$4 a bag, with maybe a dollar tip on a double, for a total of \$9. But I did many loops in which there was no tip at all. A hard day's work was 36 holes. I don't think I ever did that. If

you got 27 holes — a double and a single — you considered yourself fortunate because you went home with perhaps \$13.

### At the End of the Day

After a day of interminable waiting and then trekking up and down the hills of the course, I, like virtually all of the caddies, had to hitchhike home. By then I was stinking of sweat, and of the always-present smell of Clearasil that had been dissolved in the sweat. My white T-shirt, the sleeves rolled up to my armpits, had a vertical brown stripe over each shoulder from the straps of the golf bags. After a few weeks, my face and arms were nut brown, the main benefit of caddying, as far as I was concerned, because my acne all but disappeared under the tan. The pimples shriveled into a little crumbs, and only if I stood a certain way in the light could the bumps still be seen.

When I got home, I had only one thing on my mind: consuming a bottle of cold Nedicks orange drink. Droplets of condensation beaded on the outside of the bottle. I pried the top off with a bottle-opener. I poured the delicious, cold, sun-colored juice into a glass, and as my mother watched, I glugged it down. Sometimes, I am sure, I just drank it out of the bottle.

She: "You drink too fast."

I, panting after more glugs: "I'm thirsty. I've been out in the sun all day."

She: "It's not good for you."

I: "How am I going to earn some money?"

She: "You should save for college."

I: "I do."

She: "Mrs. Pickens said Terry saves every penny he earns. Oh yes."

I: "I save as much as I can."

She: "But you go to those awful places [jazz clubs] with that Peter Heim. I don't like him."

I: "He's a great jazz musician."

She: "You should have better friends. Terry doesn't have friends like that. Oh no. He is studying for the ministry. Do you know that?"

I: "He's not studying for the fucking ministry. He's in high school, just like me."

She: "Don't use that word. I forbid it."

I: "Then don't make me mad."

She, laughing contemptuously: "I don't make you mad. You just don't like to hear the truth."

I: "Fuck the truth."

She: "Stop using that word. I forbid it."

I: "I'll use it when I want to."

By now, the delicious orange cold swimming in my belly, I would saunter upstairs. Who knows what I did? Close the bedroom door and lie in bed and masturbate. Go up to the ham station in the little attic foyer which was still unbearably hot, tap out a few CQs in hopes of escaping into conversation with someone.

### Boys' State

At the end of my junior year at WPHS, I was chosen to represent Valhalla at the annual Boy's State meeting, which was to be held at Colgate University, in upstate New York, from June 21 through June 27, 1953. This was the creation, I think, of one or more civic organizations or service clubs. Its purpose was to introduce high school kids to the world of government.

*In memory*, Mr. Nelligan, the Valhalla realtor (whom my mother always referred to, somewhat contemptuously, merely as “Nelligan”), a portly man with a slight limp who I remember as always wearing baggy brown suits, and who always seemed preoccupied in the manner of someone whose business is failing (I have no idea if his actually was) — Mr. Nelligan had me meet him at his office to walk with me over to the train station. I remember being overwhelmed with anxiety because, first of all, I had no idea what I was supposed to do, but second of all, I knew I was the recipient of a great honor. *In memory*, as we walked, Mr. Nelligan, in a very serious voice, told me that he was depending on me to win a high office — I don’t know if he actually said “governor”, but he made it clear that not only his reputation but that of the entire town of Valhalla, was resting on my shoulders. My heart was pounding so hard I could scarcely breathe. I felt that here was a man who was offering me a self: when I got back, what he thought of me, would be who I was. I felt like a poster being put up on a wall.

I have emphasized “in memory” in the previous paragraph because all Boy’s State participants were required to keep a diary, which I found after writing the previous paragraph. For Sunday, June 21, 1953, the entry (in my usual, careful, forward-sloping, eager-to-please handwriting) begins: “Today I got up at 5:00 a.m., and after a hasty breakfast, got the train in North White Plains at 6:34 a.m.” No mention of Mr. Nelligan, much less of him walking me to the train, although I have no doubt that at some point he made me realize the responsibility I was being given. The diary continues:

It was a very boring trip, and I almost fell asleep. At Grand Central, I had little trouble finding the “Advanced Empire State Express”. I was the first one in the Westchester county car. I met two nice fellows from the Rye-Mamaroneck area.

Phoney politics were quite prevalent on the train. Westchester decided to push any member of the county who got to the top.

I find that Tod Whitmore, the brightest of our ham radio circle at Briarcliff High School, had also been selected.

When we arrived at the Colgate campus, we were divided up into dormitory sections, each of which represented a town. My town was “Demarest” in “Craig County”. The diary says, “After a quick Medical, we went to our respective rooms. Next there was an assembly followed by a [Nationalist] party meeting. I was elected permanent chairman. After a discussion of party platform, the meeting was adjourned.”

I had apparently brought my horn, because I was chosen to play “Reveille” the next morning. After breakfast the first order of business was to elect a mayor, and with Mr. Nelligan’s stern admonition constantly in mind, I decided to run for the office. I had one opponent, who had a reputation of self-confidence, even brashness. I made a huge poster in which I argued something along the lines that what a city needed was not self-confidence or speeches but sincerity and honesty and determination to do a good job for the citizens. The others in the city watched me as I worked. I was in fact pleading with them desperately to elect me, so that I would have a self when I got home. And they did.

I will spare the reader further extensive quotes from the diary, except “In bed [on Tuesday night] the members of room #110 (including me) had a discussion on tortures. We finished up debating on school systems, though.”

Someone named Kim Stieber, from Demarest, was elected governor. During the various assemblies we heard speeches by H. Shatraw of the F.B.I. (“very interesting”), Charles Curtin, a

lieutenant of the N.Y. State Police (“best speaker of all... ‘I never want to go home and tell your parents that their son was just killed.’ ”); someone named “Creal”, head of the N.Y. State Fair (“very narrow-minded”); and Thomas Corcoran, mayor of Syracuse, N.Y. (“not very well received because he talked too much detail”).

I remember hearing the word “caucus” for the first time, and, as usual, my central question was why this word had been chosen for what amounted to a meeting of politicians. Why not just call it a meeting?

Students of memory might be interested in the following: the diary states, under Thursday, June 25, “This morning we had an assembly as usual, but afterward Dick Argyle [who played trumpet] and I auditioned for the Talent Show. After the audition, we went over to Eaton Hall, where Dick and I practised bop (and had a jam session).” I have no recollection of our playing bebop at Boys’ State, but a very vivid recollection of playing it at a concert at White Plains High with another trumpeter. I can see the stage from where we stood, on the side, waiting to being announced, I remember the bop tune we played.<sup>1</sup> So, as with several other memories recorded in this book, it seems that we can often remember specific scenes visually, and words said, but we often forget or confuse their original contexts.

The diary certainly indicates that I lived up to the responsibilities Mr. Nelligan had given me. Under “Offices Held” is the following list:

Chairman, Nationalist Party of the City of Demarest  
Bugler, Craig County  
Mayor, City of Demarest  
Chaplain, Nationalist Party Convention  
Temporary Clerk, Nationalist Convention  
County Delegate (Craig County)  
County nominee for State Comptroller  
Chairman of the Nationalist Party convention  
Rules Committee  
Secretary to the Governor

At the end of the diary, the counselor for the city of Demarist, Otto(?) W. Edkin, wrote, “Excellent Diary Pete, I wish you all kinds of luck because you are a fine boy.” I think I still have a photo of the members of our city and Mr. Edkin.

When I returned to Valhalla, Mr. Nelligan had already been given a report of my performance, and seemed pleased, though when he congratulated me, it seemed, again, that his mind was on other things.

## Finding a College

Throughout my high school years, my mother was obsessed with my getting a scholarship — not because she couldn’t afford to pay tuition, but because it was what the sons of the best families did. She would always make a point of telling me about someone’s son or daughter (usually a daughter) who had graduated *cum laude* or *magna cum laude* or *summa cum laude*, always giving

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1. Many years later, I received a letter or email from Dick in which he expressed fond memories of our performance(s). I don’t know how he found my address. As far as I know, the email or letter has been lost.

the words their most proper European pronunciation — *mahgna koom lowdah*, and in a tone of voice and a manner that added, “Of course, you could never achieve that. There might be some hope for you if you could, but you won’t do it.”

We had frequent fights. “*Fuck scholarships!*” I would scream at her, and then she would start a frenzy of moaning about the expense, how I would be unable to get an education, how my father would be ashamed of me. I applied to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, N. Y., and to Union College in Schenectady among, I am sure, others. I was accepted by RPI. I can’t recall visiting the school prior to receiving notice of the acceptance, but my feelings about the school after having seen it and talked to people in the Admissions Office — much less my feelings about deciding on an engineering education — wouldn’t have mattered one bit. I had learned from my mother, if “learn” is the correct term for something that has become part of your nerve fibers, part of your flesh and bone, that, as with music lessons, the overwhelming need was for finding someone, or some thing, that would process me so that I would be acceptable to those persons and institutions who alone could establish that I had a right to live. The idea of taking the matter into my hands, asking myself what I wanted to do, how I might achieve it, never occurred to me. If it had, I would have dismissed it in a moment, because I would have known these were loser’s questions.

## Graduation

I graduated in June 1954. I seem to remember another student telling me that I was 24th in academic rank out of some 500 students. I think I was awarded a \$350 scholarship, possibly from the PTA, possibly from RPI in upstate Troy, New York, where I had been accepted. I don’t remember if I attended graduation or not, although I am sure that if there were any way to avoid it, I would have. I do remember that after the ceremony, Joe Napolitano’s parents had a reception at his house in White Plains and that there were all these beaming Italians, welcoming us.

I think I got a slide rule from my mother, since I was going off to become an engineer at RPI — or maybe she gave me my father’s Dietzgen<sup>1</sup>. It was an alien thing to me, except for the smoothly sliding piece of plastic with the vertical hairline you used to select a number. I felt that the slide rule came with a stern message: “I hope you will use it as well as the real engineering students.”

Whenever I hear someone say that the public schools cannot work, and that the only answer is one of the alternatives that began to proliferate in the early 2000s, I always tell the person that he or she is wrong, that the public schools I went to — primary, jr. high, and high school — were outstanding, and that they were living proof that the public schools most certainly *can* work.

## The Summer in the Catskills

I don’t remember how it came about, but in the spring of 1954, in my senior year at White Plains High, I was invited to play in a hotel band in the Catskill Mountains for the summer. At the time of the invitation, my mother was in White Plains Hospital, having an operation: the doctors had decided that her constant nervousness and her bulging eyes were caused by an overactive thyroid. They would remove some of it, just enough, and then she would be cured. For a while, I dared to hope that maybe this would make a human being out of her, but that was not to be. If

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1. I am not sure if Dietzgen is correct. It might have been Keuffel & Esser, which was the brand of choice among young engineers-to-be.

anything, the operation made her meaner than before. I called her at the hospital, bursting with pride and excitement over how I was going to spend the summer. She, in her distraught voice, asked me how I could possibly want to do such a thing when she was in the hospital, that this, on top of the operation, would probably kill her and then it would be entirely on my conscience. I lost my temper, then apologized, pleaded, tried to make her understand that this was the opportunity of a lifetime for a young musician. She: “Oh, if your father were only here...”, the clear implication being that he would put a stop to such nonsense.

Along with the invitation had come a request that I try to find a good sax man. Immediately I thought of Heim. I called him, waited for him to talk to his parents. He came back with the answer: yes! And even though my mother detested him because of his habit, when he was at our house, of sitting down at her piano and hammering out bop tunes, I think the fact that he, someone she knew, was also going to be in the band eventually allowed her to give her reluctant permission.

So, at the age of 17, I was about to have my first full-time job as a professional musician.

The hotel was Stiers’ Hotel, and it was located near Liberty, New York. The leader of the band was the drummer, a thin, small guy named Mel B—, who was older than the rest of us but didn’t go to college. During the year he ran a band somewhere in Westchester County. Chris Smith, a tall, nervous-looking guy with short black hair, played bass. According to Heim, he had a reputation for being one of the best bass players in the White Plains area. Richie Balsam played piano. He had a perpetual, sheepish smile, glasses, and wavy hair which made him a Buddy Holly look-alike.

We arrived in the early afternoon and were immediately invited by the management to have lunch in the dining room. The guests, many of them middle-aged and old, looked at us with expressions that said, “How young they are! Are they all Jewish? Can they really play? What must their parents think!” We sat down at a table that had a white tablecloth, and were served the first entree, a pink-looking liquid which I assumed was strawberry soda because it was served in a tall glass. I thought, “What a nice bunch of people, to serve us sodas after our long trip in the summer heat!” I took a deep gulp, and immediately thought, “My God, the strawberries have gone bad!” It tasted like vinegar. The other guys had a similar reaction. Then someone gently informed us that it was a Russian kind of soup called borscht. Soup that is *deliberately* served cold? I had never heard of such a thing. If this is an example of what they’re going to serve us for the rest of the summer, I’m not going to make it through. The watery boiled chicken that followed didn’t help matters any either.

Our sleeping quarters were in one-story wooden sheds, arranged in a U, in a rear corner of the Stiers property. The floors bounced whenever anyone walked on them, so you had to tiptoe if someone was playing a record. I shared a room with Chris Smith (we almost always called him by both names, for some reason) and Heim. The bunks were cheap, pipe-and-wire contraptions. I slept on top. In the next room were a couple of waiters.

We had been hired to play for the stage show each evening, and then to provide dance music afterward. All this took place in the Casino, a big, echoing, brown wooden building on stilts across the main road from the hotel. Next to it was a pool, and surrounding everything was a grass field, with woods in the distance. The performers (the “acts”) arrived in late afternoon. After being shown to their rooms and being given time to wash up, they would have a rehearsal with the band. They handed out their music,<sup>1</sup> which was hand-written but legible, so presumably it had been done by the composer or a professional copyist. There were sheets for each of us. It was assumed that we were all good sight-readers. After dinner, the show would go on. The term

“variety show” was appropriate for the collection of odd-balls that passed across our stage. There was a blonde middle-aged woman who clearly had suffered a loss in love from which she would never recover: her act consist of her dancing around and around the stage with a dummy in top-hat and tails while we played a series of waltzes. There was a middle-aged dancing couple, man and woman, European we knew from their accents. Unfortunately Mel didn’t remember the tempo accurately from the late afternoon rehearsal, and so he set it too fast. Although they performed their dance as they had in the afternoon, going round and round the stage, we could see they were in trouble, though at first we weren’t sure why. Then, as the man raced past us, he said to us, panting, barely able to speak, voice cracking, “*Slower! Slower!*” His plight, and the reason for it, and the way he said those words, struck us all as so funny that we could hardly keep playing. Mel made a lame attempt to slow the tempo, but since he was sitting behind us, there was no way he could indicate the change of tempo by gesture, so we had to try to make the adjustment by listening to the erratically slowing thump of the bass drum. The dancers, exhausted, sweat dripping down, didn’t know whom to listen to and so struggled on as best they could. Meantime we were all on the verge of laughing out loud.

Several times we had singers of Yiddish songs. I remember one stout, middle-aged man who sang one tear-jerker after another, the last being “A Yiddishe Momma”. Handkerchiefs appeared everywhere in the hands of the Jewish mothers in the crowd. Then there was an entire family — mother, father, and several kids — who did their entire act roller skating on a circular mat in the middle of the stage. Hands clasped in the center of the circle, kids riding on shoulders, around and around they went as we bent over our music stands, trying to play all the notes at that brisk tempo.

Without question the most interesting act was a hypnotist. Up till then I had been skeptical about hypnosis, didn’t think anything so bizarre could really be true. But he had the band line up on the stage, then told us to close our eyes, relax, and lean back slightly. Then he said that our feet were becoming heavier and heavier, and soon we wouldn’t be able to move them. I went along with him for a while, but then I thought I should just check to be sure that none of this was actually working on me. I was amazed to find that, by God, I could not move my feet! The shock was enough to bring me out of whatever mild trance I had been in, and I made sure I was among those he allowed to return to their seats. Mel stayed in until the end. His reward was that he was hypnotized further and told that, when he opened his eyes, he would be able to see everyone in the audience naked. His expression certainly suggested that he was seeing what had been promised, but he and the hypnotist might have worked out something beforehand. In any case, the experience with my feet changed my mind forever about hypnosis.

All these events were announced by the hotel master-of-ceremonies, a good-looking man with dark curly hair named Herb something-or-other, but because he was queer, we all called him “Herbie”, saying it with a simpering voice and a lisp. Rumor had it he was having sex with some of the boys who worked in the kitchen.

After the evening’s performance, we had to play dance music, and that meant not only the popular dances in resorts at that time — rhumba, samba, and, most of all, the cha-cha-cha — but also Jewish dance music, like frailachs. I think it was Heim who taught me how to shake the maracas and play the claves, both of them providing good minor exercises in concentration. With

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1. I’m sure some of the acts were stand-up comics, though I can’t remember any specifically. I do remember that more than once, when I or someone else mentioned the popular tune, “Three Coins in the Fountain”, someone would immediately reply with the Catskill version of the title, “Three Cohens in the Mountains”.

the former you kept a bunch of seeds in each gourd moving back and forth so that, twice a beat, they hit the wall of the gourd, preferably so that the resulting rhythm lagged the beat just a little. With the latter, you had two pieces of wood about seven inches long and an inch or so square; you placed one over your upturned fist, and tapped the other against it lightly in rhythm (click, click-click...click-click, click, click-click...click-click...).

Mel called the tunes from his seat behind the drums at the rear of the bandstand. We sometimes argued with him, and then we turned to the page in one of several books of music on our stands, and kept the music coming until 11 or 12.

That summer was, I think, the first time I got the idea that musicians should be paid by the number of notes they played. Pianists should get the most, therefore. (A pianist could play any wind instrument's solo, but no wind instrumentalist could duplicate what a pianist does.) The counterargument that this policy would simply encourage everyone to play too many notes I felt was not valid, since musicians who did that would simply not be hired.

I anguished constantly over my lack of musical ability. I remember walking across the grounds of Stiers' one afternoon, heading I think for the Casino, probably for a rehearsal — I was walking behind a couple of other band members, trying to keep up. We had just crossed at an angle the sidewalk that led to the dining room, and were now walking across the brown grass at the front of the Stiers' property, when I realized that, because I didn't have perfect pitch, I had *no future* in music. I don't recall what gave rise to this thought: perhaps we had been discussing the subject, and Heim had said that he had the gift, though I am not sure about this. But in any case, the realization almost stopped me in my tracks. It was as bad as if an IQ expert had told me that, on the basis of my performance in school, and on the IQ tests I had taken, and what I had said in conversations with friends, it had been determined by some of the nation's leading experts that I would never accomplish anything in this life, that all my hopes were, in fact, merely self-delusions, and that I should resign myself to reading only the books that teachers told me to, and plan on working in the Post Office or an insurance company for the rest of my life. *No hope!* No matter how much I might want to become an important jazz musician, no matter how much I might suffer, no matter how deeply I felt, it mattered not one bit. Because I didn't have perfect pitch, I was wasting my time, I was doomed to mediocrity.

From that day forth, I believed that all musicians of any consequence — not merely all the great composers but also the great classical musicians — had perfect pitch. I believed it until I was 63 years old, when I heard — from one of my neighbors, a piano teacher and accomplished classical pianist who had been graduated from Juilliard — that only about 10% to 20% of Juilliard students had perfect pitch. I was astounded. I felt as if he had just remarked casually, “You might have become a good musician, you know.” It hadn't been hopeless after all! If someone, anyone, had told me that in that summer in the Catskills, everything might have been different. Then, a few months after my neighbor's revelation, I came across the following dialogue in a film made in the early nineties about young classical music students at the Munich Conservatory in the early sixties:

Hermann Simon, hero of the film, a young guitarist, pianist, and aspiring composer: “I keep thinking about the exam. We start at nine, with the aural.”

Renate: “What's that then?”

Hermann: “Chords. You have to guess the notes.”

Renate: “It sounds awfully hard.”

Hermann: “It is; unless you have perfect pitch.”



Renate: “And have you?”

Hermann: “Of course not. It’d be hell. No great musician ever had perfect pitch. It would drive you mad, and stop you from working freely.”

Renate: “So you can be *too* gifted.” — Reitz, Edgar, *2nd Heimat*, video tape 1.

After the evening’s performance, we would get quarts of beer and go out into the brown grass behind the hotel and have a party. I would get mildly drunk. Here I met Lucy, who was also on the hotel staff — I think she did child-care during the day, or cleaning or was a waitress — and she and I would neck. She was Italian, had neck-length glossy black hair, and was from Philadelphia. With her I learned how to French-kiss. She was the first girl I ever enjoyed myself with in anything remotely like a sexual situation. Since we were all drinking, and since this was a job far from home, and since I was a musician, and since she was an Italian from a city far from New York, it all didn’t count somehow. Several times, as I staggered into our room afterward, I announced, “Next time, man, next time!” Heim liked to kid me about that. But I liked things just the way they were, with no obvious opportunities for more and, in particular, all the embarrassment I was sure that would entail. I got Lucy’s phone number and address at the end of the summer, but never contacted her.

Another girl on the staff was Debby. She was the girlfriend of one of the waiters, and therefore out of reach, but nevertheless I was absolutely mad about her — her face, her smile, her cute breasts, the way she had of walking which said, “I can’t help it if it drives you wild, it’s just the way I am” — all this and, finally, her perfume. To this day when, once every few years, I come across it while walking along the street, I am stopped in my tracks. I have never had the courage to go up to a woman and ask her what perfume she is wearing. But I have occasionally gone to expensive department stores like Neiman-Marcus, told the clerk the story (I with my bald head and gray beard), and asked the clerk to help me identify that perfume. She usually loses patience after half a dozen tries or so.

After one evening’s performance, Heim wanted to walk to Brown’s Hotel, which was just down the road from Stiers’, in order to hear the Tito Puente Orchestra, which featured the renowned Willy Lobo on conga drums. We never got there. Heim began a long harangue on the importance, in fact, the greatness, of Latin music, and I began a long stubborn refusal to agree with him. Then as now I considered it a huge bore, a music fit only for sweating, ignorant, hot-tempered people. Long before we reached the hotel, I had turned back, leaving Heim to go on alone.

Throughout the summer I listened to classical whenever I could on the crude portable record player I had brought. In my mind, Haydn’s *Horn Concerto*, his *Concerto for Oboe*, and his *Piano Concerto* are inextricably associated with that wooden room with its bouncing floors and the narrow unpainted porch, really just a plank, outside, and with hot summer days. I also listened to Beethoven’s *Pastorale Symphony*, in particular the last movement, with its evocation of a thunder storm, and then the sun coming out, which almost brought me to tears — I could clearly see, in my mind’s eye, the rainbow colors in the drops of water suspended on the branches of the trees. I felt the music was urging me to keep going, that there would be a happy ending.

During the day I caddied at Grossinger’s, the big resort at the other end of Liberty. I hitchhiked the several miles each way. The reason for taking on this labor was the only one I ever knew for working, namely, to “earn money for college”, as parents always liked to say. One day I caddied for the son of the owner of Springmaid Fabrics, another day I was in a foursome right behind comedian Jerry Lewis’s. A photo of all us caddies, and the rotund caddie master, taken

outside the caddy shack, shows me with rolled up T-shirt, crew-cut, dark tan, and the look of a boy determined to endure anything. I think here was the first time I heard the rhetorical device called “tmesis”, in which a word, typically a profanity, is inserted between the syllables of another word, for example, “I ain’t takin’ no thirty-fuckin-six-hole loop at no one in the afternoon!”

We had a few professional caddies among us. They took care of the celebrities. We could only guess at how much they earned. One was a black guy named Snowball, who always wore a white golfer’s cap, always had a smile on his face, and seemed rather embarrassed at the respect and awe he received from the other caddies. He was a migratory caddy: in the winter he went south and caddied at the best courses in Florida. Sometimes he caddied for the same wealthy man there and at Grossinger’s.

I have a memory of several times climbing a steep hill somewhere near the golf course and reading in a paperback copy of Will Durant’s *The Story of Philosophy*<sup>1</sup>. Sadly, the copy is no longer in my philosophy library, or on any other bookshelf in the house. And yet I remember it quite clearly: the green cover with a pattern of light and dark bands, the thickness of the book. As I recall, part of the golf course was below to my right. The hill was grassy, with a few bushes. I thought of myself as doing what a young, original thinker would do: climb a mountain in order to find wisdom on his own. I can only recall trying to force myself to like Spinoza. For some reason, I felt that he was the philosopher I *should* like. But no matter how hard I tried, I kept having the hot feeling in my stomach that meant that I didn’t like what I was reading, and only read it because I felt I had to..

I was convinced that I had to make the most of the summer, not only as a musician, but also as far as hardening myself physically and mentally were concerned. I remember running laps around the pool — why I didn’t simply run on the country roads around there, I don’t know — and I remember that I managed to get the social chairman to set up the TV set on the side of the pool so we could watch “The Mile of the Century”, in which Roger Bannister, the first man to break the four-minute, raced, in Vancouver, British Columbia, against six other runners, in particular, John Landy, who had also broken four minutes. I stood on the warm concrete in late afternoon, having made sure I came back from caddying in time, pacing back and forth in front of the TV, and tried to make the others realize what an important event this was, that they were watching the two greatest runners in the world. I practically ran the race along with Bannister. I saw Landy’s fateful glance over his left shoulder eighty yards from the finish line, and saw Bannister, at the very limit of his strength, pass him and win in 3 minutes, 58.8 seconds.

Whenever I had a headache, I refused to take any aspirin because I felt that it would make me stronger if I endured the pain. Also, it was said occasionally in those years that aspirin might be bad for you. Once I felt myself coming down with a cold. I decided to see if I could cure it. So I took a long, hot shower, then jumped in bed and wrapped myself in blankets and slept that way. The next day the cold was gone. Over the years since then I have often used this preventative — it isn’t really a cure because it doesn’t work once you have caught the cold — and it has worked more than 2/3 of the time.

Our leader, Mel, was a real pig. At meals, he liked to tell us about the day’s love-making with whatever working girl he had managed to pick up. He was not good-looking, had a scrawny neck,

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1. I can’t remember how I got to the hill, or when I typically made the excursion during the day. In fact, it is entirely possible that I was at another golf course, at another time. But my memory of my reading efforts is clear.

and a voice that was a high voice spoken gutturally. He would describe where he had taken the girl, out into the fields somewhere, say, and then with his shit-eating laugh, he would extend his fingers, and say, "Want to smell?" Sometimes he would try to convince us that the height of sexual pleasure was to eat a girl when she was having her period.

Even though Heim and Chris Smith and I were probably the only gentiles for miles around, we never detected the slightest discrimination in how we were treated. Maybe everyone thought we were Jewish too. I do remember one morning, however, on the way to Grossinger's, stopping at a diner in Liberty, climbing up on the stool, and, my nose in a book as usual, ordering bacon and eggs and a cup of coffee, and then becoming aware of a sudden strange silence. I looked up and saw that people were looking at me. I had no idea what was going on, so I asked the counter-man, and he, via a few hints, led me to realize that bacon was not something you normally ordered in a Jewish restaurant. Another time I came back in early afternoon from the day's caddying. The owner saw me and told me to go into the kitchen to get some lunch. The place was empty except for a guy who was cleaning up. He told me where the dishes and silverware were and said, "Help yourself." So I did. A little of this, a little of that, and a nice glass of milk to go with it. As I was carrying it all to a table, there was some scurrying in the background, and then the owner appeared, obviously deeply concerned about what I was about to eat. I soon learned another fact about orthodox Jewish culture, namely, that one never mixes meat and dairy. I was embarrassed, offered to wash the dishes, but they gave me to understand that it wasn't that easy. However, considering that I hadn't actually eaten anything, maybe they wouldn't have to call in the rabbi and go through the normal process of correcting my egregious blunder (which, for all I knew, might have entailed shutting down the kitchen for several days). They were really very nice about it.

Thursday was our day off. One Wednesday evening I was talking to Heim about Pat Hurley when one of us suddenly blurted out, "Let's go visit her!" I don't know who proposed what about the transportation, but somehow or other, in the middle of the night, we were in a car driving to La Guardia Airport in New York City. Somehow we managed to book a flight to Maine, where her summer music camp was.

The plane had four engines (with propellers, not jets). We sat on the left-hand side, I in the window seat. It was the first airplane flight for either of us. We were convinced that there was a very good chance we might not survive. The engines started, puffs of smoke coming from the back of each. "Holy shit, man, they're on fire!" Soon the plane was slowly making its way down the taxi strip and onto the runway. The engines roared, the ground started to race by, and we sat there in our seat belts, clenching the arms of our seats. Somehow this metal construction we were in made it into the air. We looked out the window and saw — that the wings were vibrating! You could see them, no doubt about it. This was it, then. Soon they would break off and we would go turning, spiraling, nose-diving into the ground, and the careers of two promising jazz musicians would be snuffed out, and all because we had been stupid enough to try to make it to Maine and back on our day off to see some girl.

The wings were a little stronger than we suspected, because although they kept flapping, they didn't fall off right away. After a half hour or so, I became a little braver and asked the stewardess if I would be allowed to go up and see the view from the pilot's cabin. (In those days, no one had yet thought of hijacking commercial airliners.) The stewardess said she'd see, went up to the pilot's cabin, then came back. Sure, but only for a few minutes. So I walked along the aisle, past the other passengers who no doubt wondered what was up, and stepped into a little room filled

with dials and which had a great view of sky and clouds. I'm sure I asked some very predictable questions, including how come the wings haven't fallen off the plane yet. The reply was that, strange as it might seem, they were designed to vibrate, because there was less chance of their falling off if they were a little flexible than if they were completely rigid.

So I went back to my seat with a sudden confidence and Heim and I enjoyed the flight the rest of the way except when the air got bumpy and we knew that our optimism was all misplaced, that with vibrations like that, it was only a matter of seconds before the plane broke up in mid-air and we would be poured out of our seats and fall however many thousand feet, all the while knowing we were going to die, and in just a few seconds we would be hitting the earth — some farmer's field or a woods or a parkway. But, somehow, the plane still managed to hold together, so that we actually landed where we were supposed to.

In Maine we had to hitchhike to the camp. We found ourselves on an asphalt road in the country, with stone walls, gray wooden fences on each side, and trees and farms behind. It all looked very much like Maine. We stuck out our thumbs. Soon an ancient pickup stopped and we climbed in. The driver was a Parker Fenley type<sup>1</sup>. "Where you boys from?" Heim and I, both students of colorful personalities and, in particular, of accents, revelled in this opportunity. This good Samaritan took us right to the outer gate of the camp. As he pulled away, we heard what I think is one of the most beautiful sounds in the world, namely, the sound of someone practicing a piano as heard through the woods. It came to us from beyond the trees along with occasional bird chirps. It was some piece of Bach's, I think. We stopped and listened, both of us overcome by the beauty of the thing.

I can remember nothing of the visit itself. I'm not even sure if we surprised her or if, at some point during our trip, we called and said we were coming. I remember that her response was subdued, as it always was with most things I did with her or said to her, as though she had really hoped to do a lot of practicing that day but, of course, now that we were there, she couldn't. We slept over and left before dawn, walking down that long country road because no cars were in sight at that hour. Heim's feet were killing him and I recall being in some kind of pain also, but I didn't slow down, which only made him feel worse. But this was precisely where the Code demanded that I not give in, that I push myself as hard as possible. Heim didn't have a Code, or at least not the same one, and so even as he complained about the pace I was setting, I could sense that he admired my ability to endure self-punishment. Finally we got to the airport. It was now dawn, the runway (there was only one at this out-of-the-way place) shrouded in mist. You could sense the pine trees beyond. We stood around on the tarmac, trying to keep warm, listening for the plane. Then we heard the engines, and then, at the far end of the runway, a DC3 suddenly appeared, materializing out of the mist, settling onto the runway. Amazing that it had been able to find this place and get onto the ground without crashing! This was a smaller plane than the one we had arrived in, having only two engines. When you sat down in your seat, you were at an angle, because the plane rested on the tail wheel. Finally, the revving of the engines, the bumping along — Christ, will we actually get off the ground before we hit those trees? — then racing down the runway, bouncing, lurching, and soon the only vibration was that of the engine. When we were up high, we looked down on the endless green forests of Maine, as far as the eye could see, and I kept thinking, this may well be how it looked hundreds of years ago; we are looking down on the past of our country from an angle that no one saw it at in those days.

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1. Parker Fenley was an old, white-haired New Englander — a true Yankee — who appeared in radio and TV ads for Pepperidge Farm bread (he pronounced it "Peppridge Fahm").