tos and danced whenever the spirit took her, which was quite often), and continue to play now and then, sometimes as The Remainders, sometimes as Raymond Burr's Legs. The personnel comes and goes—columnist Mitch Albom has replaced Barbara on keyboards, and Al doesn't play with the group anymore 'cause he and Kathi don't get along—but the core has remained Kathi, Amy, Ridley, Dave, Mitch Albom, and me . . . plus Josh Kelly on drums and Erasmo Paolo on sax.

We do it for the music, but we also do it for the companionship. We like each other, and we like having a chance to talk sometimes about the real job, the day job people are always telling us not to quit. We are writers, and we never ask one another where we get our ideas; we know we don't know.

One night while we were eating Chinese before a gig in Miami Beach, I asked Amy if there was any one question she was *never* asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk—that question you never get to answer when you're standing in front of a group of author-struck fans and pretending you don't put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Amy paused, thinking it over very carefully, and then said: "No one ever asks about the language."

I owe an immense debt of gratitude to her for saying that. I had been playing with the idea of writing a little book about writing for a year or more at that time, but had held back because I didn't trust my own motivations—*why* did I want to write about writing? What made me think I had anything worth saying?

The easy answer is that someone who has sold as many books of fiction as I have must have *something* worthwhile to say about writing it, but the easy answer isn't always the truth. Colonel Sanders sold a hell of a lot of fried chicken, but I'm not sure anyone wants to know how he made it. If I was going to

be presumptuous enough to tell people how to write, I felt there had to be a better reason than my popular success. Put another way, I didn't want to write a book, even a short one like this, that would leave me feeling like either a literary gasbag or a transcendental asshole. There are enough of those books—and those writers—on the market already, thanks.

But Amy was right: nobody ever asks about the language. They ask the DeLillos and the Updikes and the Styrons, but they don't ask popular novelists. Yet many of us proles also care about the language, in our humble way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper. What follows is an attempt to put down, briefly and simply, how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, and how it's done. It's about the day job; it's about the language.

This book is dedicated to Amy Tan, who told me in a very simple and direct way that it was okay to write it.

Second Foreword

This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit. Fiction writers, present company included, don't understand very much about what they do—not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad. I figured the shorter the book, the less the bullshit.

One notable exception to the bullshit rule is *The Elements of Style,* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. There is little or no detectable bullshit in that book. (Of course it's short; at eighty-five pages it's much shorter than this one.) I'll tell you right now that every aspiring writer should read *The Elements of Style.* Rule 17 in the chapter titled Principles of Composition is "Omit needless words." I will try to do that here.

Third Foreword

One rule of the road not directly stated elsewhere in this book: “The editor is always right.” The corollary is that no writer will take all of his or her editor’s advice; for all have sinned and fallen short of editorial perfection. Put another way, to write is human, to edit is divine. Chuck Verrill edited this book, as he has so many of my novels. And as usual, Chuck, you were divine.

—Steve

C.V.

I was stunned by Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liars' Club.* Not just by its ferocity, its beauty, and by her delightful grasp of the vernacular, but by its *totality*—she is a woman who remembers *everything* about her early years.

I'm not that way. I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood, raised by a single parent who moved around a lot in my earliest years and who—I am not completely sure of this—may have farmed my brother and me out to one of her sisters for awhile because she was economically or emotionally unable to cope with us for a time. Perhaps she was only chasing our father, who piled up all sorts of bills and then did a runout when I was two and my brother David was four. If so, she never succeeded in finding him. My mom, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, was one of America's early liberated women, but not by choice.

Mary Karr presents her childhood in an almost unbroken panorama. Mine is a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees . . . the kind that look as if they might like to grab and eat you.

What follows are some of those memories, plus assorted snapshots from the somewhat more coherent days of my adolescence and young manhood. This is not an autobiography. It

is, rather, a kind of *curriculum vitae*—my attempt to show how one writer was formed. Not how one writer was *made;* I don't believe writers *can* be made, either by circumstances or by self-will (although I did believe those things once). The equipment comes with the original package. Yet it is by no means unusual equipment; I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time.

This is how it was for me, that's all—a disjointed growth process in which ambition, desire, luck, and a little talent all played a part. Don't bother trying to read between the lines, and don't look for a through-line. There are *no* lines—only snapshots, most out of focus.

– 1 –

My earliest memory is of imagining I was someone else—imagining that I was, in fact, the Ringling Brothers Circus Strongboy. This was at my Aunt Ethelyn and Uncle Oren's house in Durham, Maine. My aunt remembers this quite clearly, and says I was two and a half or maybe three years old.

I had found a cement cinderblock in a corner of the garage and had managed to pick it up. I carried it slowly across the garage's smooth cement floor, except in my mind I was dressed in an animal skin singlet (probably a leopard skin) and carrying the cinderblock across the center ring. The vast crowd was silent. A brilliant blue-white spotlight marked my remarkable progress. Their wondering faces told the story: never had they seen such an incredibly strong kid. "And he's only *two!*" someone muttered in disbelief.

Unknown to me, wasps had constructed a small nest in the lower half of the cinderblock. One of them, perhaps pissed off at being relocated, flew out and stung me on the ear. The pain was brilliant, like a poisonous inspiration. It was the worst pain I had ever suffered in my short life, but it only held the top spot for a few seconds. When I dropped the cinderblock on one bare foot, mashing all five toes, I forgot all about the wasp. I can't remember if I was taken to the doctor, and neither can my Aunt Ethelyn (Uncle Oren, to whom the Evil Cinderblock surely belonged, is almost twenty years dead), but she remembers the sting, the mashed toes, and my reaction. "How you howled, Stephen!" she said. "You were certainly in fine voice that day."

– 2 –

A year or so later, my mother, my brother, and I were in West De Pere, Wisconsin. I don't know why. Another of my mother's sisters, Cal (a WAAC beauty queen during World War II), lived in Wisconsin with her convivial beer-drinking husband, and maybe Mom had moved to be near them. If so, I don't remember seeing much of the Weimers. *Any* of them, actually. My mother was working, but I can't remember what her job was, either. I want to say it was a bakery she worked in, but I think that came later, when we moved to Connecticut to live near her sister Lois and *her* husband (no beer for Fred, and not much in the way of conviviality, either; he was a crewcut daddy who was proud of driving his convertible with the top *up,* God knows why).

There was a stream of babysitters during our Wisconsin period. I don't know if they left because David and I were a

handful, or because they found better-paying jobs, or because my mother insisted on higher standards than they were willing to rise to; all I know is that there were a lot of them. The only one I remember with any clarity is Eula, or maybe she was Beulah. She was a teenager, she was as big as a house, and she laughed a lot. Eula-Beulah had a wonderful sense of humor, even at four I could recognize that, but it was a *dangerous* sense of humor—there seemed to be a potential thunderclap hidden inside each hand-patting, butt-rocking, head-tossing outburst of glee. When I see those hidden-camera sequences where real-life babysitters and nannies just all of a sudden wind up and clout the kids, it's my days with Eula-Beulah I always think of.

Was she as hard on my brother David as she was on me? I don't know. He's not in any of these pictures. Besides, he would have been less at risk from Hurricane Eula-Beulah's dangerous winds; at six, he would have been in the first grade and off the gunnery range for most of the day.

Eula-Beulah would be on the phone, laughing with someone, and beckon me over. She would hug me, tickle me, get me laughing, and then, still laughing, go upside my head hard enough to knock me down. Then she would tickle me with her bare feet until we were both laughing again.

Eula-Beulah was prone to farts—the kind that are both loud and smelly. Sometimes when she was so afflicted, she would throw me on the couch, drop her wool-skirted butt on my face, and let loose. "Pow!" she'd cry in high glee. It was like being buried in marshgas fireworks. I remember the dark, the sense that I was suffocating, and I remember laughing. Because, while what was happening was sort of horrible, it was also sort of funny. In many ways, Eula-Beulah prepared me for literary criticism. After having a two-hundred-pound

babysitter fart on your face and yell *Pow!, The Village Voice* holds few terrors.

I don't know what happened to the other sitters, but Eula-Beulah was fired. It was because of the eggs. One morning Eula-Beulah fried me an egg for breakfast. I ate it and asked for another one. Eula-Beulah fried me a second egg, then asked if I wanted another one. She had a look in her eye that said, "You don't *dare* eat another one, Stevie." So I asked for another one. And another one. And so on. I stopped after seven, I think—seven is the number that sticks in my mind, and quite clearly. Maybe we ran out of eggs. Maybe I cried off. Or maybe Eula-Beulah got scared. I don't know, but probably it was good that the game ended at seven. Seven eggs is quite a few for a four-year-old.

I felt all right for awhile, and then I yarked all over the floor. Eula-Beulah laughed, then went upside my head, then shoved me into the closet and locked the door. Pow. If she'd locked me in the bathroom, she might have saved her job, but she didn't. As for me, I didn't really mind being in the closet. It was dark, but it smelled of my mother's Coty perfume, and there was a comforting line of light under the door.

I crawled to the back of the closet, Mom's coats and dresses brushing along my back. I began to belch—long loud belches that burned like fire. I don't remember being sick to my stomach but I must have been, because when I opened my mouth to let out another burning belch, I yarked again instead. All over my mother's shoes. That was the end for Eula-Beulah. When my mother came home from work that day, the babysitter was fast asleep on the couch and little Stevie was locked in the closet, fast asleep with half-digested fried eggs drying in his hair.

– 3 –

Our stay in West De Pere was neither long nor successful. We were evicted from our third-floor apartment when a neighbor spotted my six-year-old brother crawling around on the roof and called the police. I don't know where my mother was when this happened. I don't know where the babysitter of the week was, either. I only know that I was in the bathroom, standing with my bare feet on the heater, watching to see if my brother would fall off the roof or make it back into the bathroom okay. He made it back. He is now fifty-five and living in New Hampshire.

– 4 –

When I was five or six, I asked my mother if she had ever seen anyone die. Yes, she said, she had seen one person die and had heard another one. I asked how you could hear a person die and she told me that it was a girl who had drowned off Prout's Neck in the 1920s. She said the girl swam out past the rip, couldn't get back in, and began screaming for help. Several men tried to reach her, but that day's rip had developed a vicious undertow, and they were all forced back. In the end they could only stand around, tourists and townies, the teenager who became my mother among them, waiting for a rescue boat that never came and listening to that girl scream until her strength gave out and she went under. Her body washed up in New Hampshire, my mother said. I asked how old the girl was. Mom said she was fourteen, then read me a

comic book and packed me off to bed. On some other day she told me about the one she saw—a sailor who jumped off the roof of the Graymore Hotel in Portland, Maine, and landed in the street.

"He splattered," my mother said in her most matter-of-fact tone. She paused, then added, "The stuff that came out of him was green. I have never forgotten it."

That makes two of us, Mom.

– 5 –

Most of the nine months I should have spent in the first grade I spent in bed. My problems started with the measles—a perfectly ordinary case—and then got steadily worse. I had bout after bout of what I mistakenly thought was called "stripe throat"; I lay in bed drinking cold water and imagining my throat in alternating stripes of red and white (this was probably not so far wrong).

At some point my ears became involved, and one day my mother called a taxi (she did not drive) and took me to a doctor too important to make house calls—an ear specialist. (For some reason I got the idea that this sort of doctor was called an otiologist.) I didn't care whether he specialized in ears or assholes. I had a fever of a hundred and four degrees, and each time I swallowed, pain lit up the sides of my face like a jukebox.

The doctor looked in my ears, spending most of his time (I think) on the left one. Then he laid me down on his examining table. "Lift up a minute, Stevie," his nurse said, and put a large absorbent cloth—it might have been a diaper—under my head, so that my cheek rested on it when I lay back

down. I should have guessed that something was rotten in Denmark. Who knows, maybe I did.

There was a sharp smell of alcohol. A clank as the ear doctor opened his sterilizer. I saw the needle in his hand—it looked as long as the ruler in my school pencil-box—and tensed. The ear doctor smiled reassuringly and spoke the lie for which doctors should be immediately jailed (time of incarceration to be doubled when the lie is told to a child): "Relax, Stevie, this won't hurt." I believed him.

He slid the needle into my ear and punctured my eardrum with it. The pain was beyond anything I have ever felt since—the only thing close was the first month of recovery after being struck by a van in the summer of 1999. That pain was longer in duration but not so intense. The puncturing of my eardrum was pain beyond the world. I screamed. There was a sound inside my head—a loud kissing sound. Hot fluid ran out of my ear—it was as if I had started to cry out of the wrong hole. God knows I was crying enough out of the right ones by then. I raised my streaming face and looked unbelieving at the ear doctor and the ear doctor's nurse. Then I looked at the cloth the nurse had spread over the top third of the exam table. It had a big wet patch on it. There were fine tendrils of yellow pus on it as well.

"There," the ear doctor said, patting my shoulder. "You were very brave, Stevie, and it's all over."

The next week my mother called another taxi, we went back to the ear doctor's, and I found myself once more lying on my side with the absorbent square of cloth under my head. The ear doctor once again produced the smell of alcohol—a smell I still associate, as I suppose many people do, with pain and sickness and terror—and with it, the long needle. He once more assured me that it wouldn't hurt, and I

once more believed him. Not completely, but enough to be quiet while the needle slid into my ear.

It *did* hurt. Almost as much as the first time, in fact. The smooching sound in my head was louder, too; this time it was giants kissing ("suckin' face and rotatin' tongues," as we used to say). "There," the ear doctor's nurse said when it was over and I lay there crying in a puddle of watery pus. "It only hurts a little, and you don't want to be deaf, do you? Besides, it's all over."

I believed that for about five days, and then another taxi came. We went back to the ear doctor's. I remember the cab driver telling my mother that he was going to pull over and let us out if she couldn't shut that kid up.

Once again it was me on the exam table with the diaper under my head and my mom out in the waiting room with a magazine she was probably incapable of reading (or so I like to imagine). Once again the pungent smell of alcohol and the doctor turning to me with a needle that looked as long as my school ruler. Once more the smile, the approach, the assurance that *this* time it wouldn't hurt.

Since the repeated eardrum-lancings when I was six, one of my life's firmest principles has been this: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times, shame on both of us. The third time on the ear doctor's table I struggled and screamed and thrashed and fought. Each time the needle came near the side of my face, I knocked it away. Finally the nurse called my mother in from the waiting room, and the two of them managed to hold me long enough for the doctor to get his needle in. I screamed so long and so loud that I can still hear it. In fact, I think that in some deep valley of my head that last scream is still echoing.

– 6 –

In a dull cold month not too long after that—it would have been January or February of 1954, if I've got the sequence right—the taxi came again. This time the specialist wasn't the ear doctor but a throat doctor. Once again my mother sat in the waiting room, once again I sat on the examining table with a nurse hovering nearby, and once again there was that sharp smell of alcohol, an aroma that still has the power to double my heartbeat in the space of five seconds.

All that appeared this time, however, was some sort of throat swab. It stung, and it tasted awful, but after the ear doctor's long needle it was a walk in the park. The throat doctor donned an interesting gadget that went around his head on a strap. It had a mirror in the middle, and a bright fierce light that shone out of it like a third eye. He looked down my gullet for a long time, urging me to open wider until my jaws creaked, but he did not put needles into me and so I loved him. After awhile he allowed me to close my mouth and summoned my mother.

"The problem is his tonsils," the doctor said. "They look like a cat clawed them. They'll have to come out."

At some point after that, I remember being wheeled under bright lights. A man in a white mask bent over me. He was standing at the head of the table I was lying on (1953 and 1954 were my years for lying on tables), and to me he looked upside down.

"Stephen," he said. "Can you hear me?"

I said I could.

"I want you to breathe deep," he said. "When you wake up, you can have all the ice cream you want."

He lowered a gadget over my face. In the eye of my memory, it looks like an outboard motor. I took a deep breath, and everything went black. When I woke up I was indeed allowed all the ice cream I wanted, which was a fine joke on me because I didn't want any. My throat felt swollen and fat. But it was better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Oh yes. *Anything* would have been better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Take my tonsils if you have to, put a steel birdcage on my leg if you must, but God save me from the otiologist.

– 7 –

That year my brother David jumped ahead to the fourth grade and I was pulled out of school entirely. I had missed too much of the first grade, my mother and the school agreed; I could start it fresh in the fall of the year, if my health was good.

Most of that year I spent either in bed or housebound. I read my way through approximately six tons of comic books, progressed to Tom Swift and Dave Dawson (a heroic World War II pilot whose various planes were always "prop-clawing for altitude"), then moved on to Jack London's bloodcurdling animal tales. At some point I began to write my own stories. Imitation preceded creation; I would copy *Combat Casey* comics word for word in my Blue Horse tablet, sometimes adding my own descriptions where they seemed appropriate. "They were camped in a big dratty farmhouse room," I might write; it was another year or two before I discovered that *drat* and *draft* were

different words. During that same period I remember believing that *detail*s were *dental*s and that a bitch was an extremely tall woman. A son of a bitch was apt to be a basketball player. When you're six, most of your Bingo balls are still floating around in the draw-tank.

Eventually I showed one of these copycat hybrids to my mother, and she was charmed—I remember her slightly amazed smile, as if she was unable to believe a kid of hers could be so smart—practically a damned prodigy, for God's sake. I had never seen that look on her face before—not on my account, anyway—and I absolutely loved it.

She asked me if I had made the story up myself, and I was forced to admit that I had copied most of it out of a funnybook. She seemed disappointed, and that drained away much of my pleasure. At last she handed back my tablet. "Write one of your own, Stevie," she said. "Those *Combat Casey* funnybooks are just junk—he's always knocking someone's teeth out. I bet you could do better. Write one of your own."

– 8 –

I remember an immense feeling of *possibility* at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a lifetime, I thought (and still think).

I eventually wrote a story about four magic animals who rode around in an old car, helping out little kids. Their leader was a large white bunny named Mr. Rabbit Trick. He got to drive the car. The story was four pages long, laboriously printed in pencil. No one in it, so far as I can remember,

jumped from the roof of the Graymore Hotel. When I finished, I gave it to my mother, who sat down in the living room, put her pocketbook on the floor beside her, and read it all at once. I could tell she liked it—she laughed in all the right places—but I couldn't tell if that was because she liked me and wanted me to feel good or because it really *was* good.

"You didn't copy this one?" she asked when she had finished. I said no, I hadn't. She said it was good enough to be in a book. Nothing anyone has said to me since has made me feel any happier. I wrote four more stories about Mr. Rabbit Trick and his friends. She gave me a quarter apiece for them and sent them around to her four sisters, who pitied her a little, I think. *They* were all still married, after all; their men had stuck. It was true that Uncle Fred didn't have much sense of humor and was stubborn about keeping the top of his convertible up, it was also true that Uncle Oren drank quite a bit and had dark theories about how the Jews were running the world, but they were *there.* Ruth, on the other hand, had been left holding the baby when Don ran out. She wanted them to see that he was a talented baby, at least.

Four stories. A quarter apiece. That was the first buck I made in this business.

– 9 –

We moved to Stratford, Connecticut. By then I was in the second grade and stone in love with the pretty teenage girl who lived next door. She never looked twice at me in the daytime, but at night, as I lay in bed and drifted toward sleep, we ran away from the cruel world of reality again and again. My new teacher was Mrs. Taylor, a kind lady with gray Elsa

Lanchester–*Bride of Frankenstein* hair and protruding eyes. "When we're talking I always want to cup my hands under Mrs. Taylor's peepers in case they fall out," my mom said.

Our new third-floor apartment was on West Broad Street. A block down the hill, not far from Teddy's Market and across from Burrets Building Materials, was a huge tangled wilderness area with a junkyard on the far side and a train track running through the middle. This is one of the places I keep returning to in my imagination; it turns up in my books and stories again and again, under a variety of names. The kids in *It* called it the Barrens; we called it the jungle. Dave and I explored it for the first time not long after we had moved into our new place. It was summer. It was hot. It was great. We were deep into the green mysteries of this cool new playground when I was struck by an urgent need to move my bowels.

"Dave," I said. "Take me home! I have to push!" (This was the word we were given for this particular function.)

David didn't want to hear it. "Go do it in the woods," he said. It would take at least half an hour to walk me home, and he had no intention of giving up such a shining stretch of time just because his little brother had to take a dump.

"I can't!" I said, shocked by the idea. "I won't be able to wipe!"

"Sure you will," Dave said. "Wipe yourself with some leaves. That's how the cowboys and Indians did it."

By then it was probably too late to get home, anyway; I have an idea I was out of options. Besides, I was enchanted by the idea of shitting like a cowboy. I pretended I was Hopalong Cassidy, squatting in the underbrush with my gun drawn, not to be caught unawares even at such a personal moment. I did my business, and took care of the cleanup as

my older brother had suggested, carefully wiping my ass with big handfuls of shiny green leaves. These turned out to be poison ivy.

Two days later I was bright red from the backs of my knees to my shoulderblades. My penis was spared, but my testicles turned into stoplights. My ass itched all the way up to my ribcage, it seemed. Yet worst of all was the hand I had wiped with; it swelled to the size of Mickey Mouse's after Donald Duck has bopped it with a hammer, and gigantic blisters formed at the places where the fingers rubbed together. When they burst they left deep divots of raw pink flesh. For six weeks I sat in lukewarm starch baths, feeling miserable and humiliated and stupid, listening through the open door as my mother and brother laughed and listened to Peter Tripp's countdown on the radio and played Crazy Eights.

– 10 –

Dave was a great brother, but too smart for a ten-year-old. His brains were always getting him in trouble, and he learned at some point (probably after I had wiped my ass with poison ivy) that it was usually possible to get Brother Stevie to join him in the point position when trouble was in the wind. Dave never asked me to shoulder *all* the blame for his often brilliant fuck-ups—he was neither a sneak nor a coward—but on several occasions I was asked to share it. Which was, I think, why we both got in trouble when Dave dammed up the stream running through the jungle and flooded much of lower West Broad Street. Sharing the blame was also the reason we both ran the risk of getting killed while implementing his potentially lethal school science project.

This was probably 1958. I was at Center Grammar School; Dave was at Stratford Junior High. Mom was working at the Stratford Laundry, where she was the only white lady on the mangle crew. That's what she was doing—feeding sheets into the mangle—while Dave constructed his Science Fair project. My big brother wasn't the sort of boy to content himself drawing frog-diagrams on construction paper or making The House of the Future out of plastic Tyco bricks and painted toilet-tissue rolls; Dave aimed for the stars. His project that year was Dave's Super Duper Electromagnet. My brother had great affection for things which were super duper and things which began with his own name; this latter habit culminated with *Dave's Rag,* which we will come to shortly.

His first stab at the Super Duper Electromagnet wasn't very super duper; in fact, it may not have worked at all—I don't remember for sure. It *did* come out of an actual book, rather than Dave's head, however. The idea was this: you magnetized a spike nail by rubbing it against a regular magnet. The magnetic charge imparted to the spike would be weak, the book said, but enough to pick up a few iron filings. After trying this, you were supposed to wrap a length of copper wire around the barrel of the spike, and attach the ends of the wire to the terminals of a dry-cell battery. According to the book, the electricity would strengthen the magnetism, and you could pick up a lot more iron filings.

Dave didn't just want to pick up a stupid pile of metal flakes, though; Dave wanted to pick up Buicks, railroad boxcars, possibly Army transport planes. Dave wanted to turn on the juice and move the world in its orbit.

Pow! Super!

We each had our part to play in creating the Super Duper Electromagnet. Dave's part was to build it. My part would

be to test it. Little Stevie King, Stratford's answer to Chuck Yeager.

Dave's new version of the experiment bypassed the pokey old dry cell (which was probably flat anyway when we bought it at the hardware store, he reasoned) in favor of actual wall-current. Dave cut the electrical cord off an old lamp someone had put out on the curb with the trash, stripped the coating all the way down to the plug, then wrapped his magnetized spike in spirals of bare wire. Then, sitting on the floor in the kitchen of our West Broad Street apartment, he offered me the Super Duper Electromagnet and bade me do my part and plug it in.

I hesitated—give me at least that much credit—but in the end, Dave's manic enthusiasm was too much to withstand. I plugged it in. There was no noticeable magnetism, but the gadget *did* blow out every light and electrical appliance in our apartment, every light and electrical appliance in the building, and every light and electrical appliance in the building next door (where my dream-girl lived in the ground-floor apartment). Something popped in the electrical transformer out front, and some cops came. Dave and I spent a horrible hour watching from our mother's bedroom window, the only one that looked out on the street (all the others had a good view of the grassless, turd-studded yard behind us, where the only living thing was a mangy canine named Roop-Roop). When the cops left, a power truck arrived. A man in spiked shoes climbed the pole between the two apartment houses to examine the transformer. Under other circumstances, this would have absorbed us completely, but not that day. That day we could only wonder if our mother would come and see us in reform school. Eventually, the lights came back on and the power truck went away. We were not caught and lived to

fight another day. Dave decided he might build a Super Duper Glider instead of a Super Duper Electromagnet for his science project. I, he told me, would get to take the first ride. Wouldn't that be great?

– 11 –

I was born in 1947 and we didn't get our first television until 1958. The first thing I remember watching on it was *Robot Monster,* a film in which a guy dressed in an ape-suit with a goldfish bowl on his head—Ro-Man, he was called—ran around trying to kill the last survivors of a nuclear war. I felt this was art of quite a high nature.

I also watched *Highway Patrol* with Broderick Crawford as the fearless Dan Matthews, and *One Step Beyond,* hosted by John Newland, the man with the world's spookiest eyes. There was *Cheyenne* and *Sea Hunt, Your Hit Parade* and *Annie Oakley;* there was Tommy Rettig as the first of Lassie's many friends, Jock Mahoney as *The Range Rider,* and Andy Devine yowling, "Hey, Wild Bill, wait for me!" in his odd, high voice. There was a whole world of vicarious adventure which came packaged in black-and-white, fourteen inches across and sponsored by brand names which still sound like poetry to me. I loved it all.

But TV came relatively late to the King household, and I'm glad. I am, when you stop to think of it, a member of a fairly select group: the final handful of American novelists who learned to read and write before they learned to eat a daily helping of video bullshit. This might not be important. On the other hand, if you're just starting out as a writer, you could do worse than strip your television's electric plug-wire,

wrap a spike around it, and then stick it back into the wall. See what blows, and how far.

Just an idea.

– 12 –

In the late 1950s, a literary agent and compulsive science fiction memorabilia collector named Forrest J. Ackerman changed the lives of thousands of kids—I was one—when he began editing a magazine called *Famous Monsters of Filmland.* Ask anyone who has been associated with the fantasy–horror–science fiction genres in the last thirty years about this magazine, and you'll get a laugh, a flash of the eyes, and a stream of bright memories—I practically guarantee it.

Around 1960, Forry (who sometimes referred to himself as "the Ackermonster") spun off the short-lived but interesting *Spacemen,* a magazine which covered science fiction films. In 1960, I sent a story to *Spacemen.* It was, as well as I can remember, the first story I ever submitted for publication. I don't recall the title, but I was still in the Ro-Man phase of my development, and this particular tale undoubtedly owed a great deal to the killer ape with the goldfish bowl on his head.

My story was rejected, but Forry kept it. (Forry keeps *everything,* which anyone who has ever toured his house—the Ackermansion—will tell you.) About twenty years later, while I was signing autographs at a Los Angeles bookstore, Forry turned up in line . . . with my story, single-spaced and typed with the long-vanished Royal typewriter my mom gave me for Christmas the year I was eleven. He wanted me to sign it to him, and I guess I did, although the whole encounter was so

surreal I can't be completely sure. Talk about your ghosts. Man oh man.

– 13 –

The first story I did actually publish was in a horror fanzine issued by Mike Garrett of Birmingham, Alabama (Mike is still around, and still in the biz). He published this novella under the title "In a Half-World of Terror," but I still like my title much better. Mine was "I Was a Teen-Age Grave-robber." Super Duper! Pow!

– 14 –

My first really original story idea—you always know the first one, I think—came near the end of Ike's eight-year reign of benignity. I was sitting at the kitchen table of our house in Durham, Maine, and watching my mother stick sheets of S&H Green Stamps into a book. (For more colorful stories about Green Stamps, see *The Liars' Club.*) Our little family troika had moved back to Maine so our mom could take care of her parents in their declining years. Mama was about eighty at that time, obese and hypertensive and mostly blind; Daddy Guy was eighty-two, scrawny, morose, and prone to the occasional Donald Duck outburst which only my mother could understand. Mom called Daddy Guy "Fazza."

My mother's sisters had gotten my mom this job, perhaps thinking they could kill two birds with one stone—the aged Ps would be taken care of in a homey environment by a loving daughter, and The Nagging Problem of Ruth would be

solved. She would no longer be adrift, trying to take care of two boys while she floated almost aimlessly from Indiana to Wisconsin to Connecticut, baking cookies at five in the morning or pressing sheets in a laundry where the temperatures often soared to a hundred and ten in the summer and the foreman gave out salt pills at one and three every afternoon from July to the end of September.

She hated her new job, I think—in their effort to take care of her, her sisters turned our self-sufficient, funny, slightly nutty mother into a sharecropper living a largely cashless existence. The money the sisters sent her each month covered the groceries but little else. They sent boxes of clothes for us. Toward the end of each summer, Uncle Clayt and Aunt Ella (who were not, I think, real relatives at all) would bring cartons of canned vegetables and preserves. The house we lived in belonged to Aunt Ethelyn and Uncle Oren. And once she was there, Mom was caught. She got another actual job after the old folks died, but she lived in that house until the cancer got her. When she left Durham for the last time—David and his wife Linda cared for her during the final weeks of her final illness—I have an idea she was probably more than ready to go.

– 15 –

Let's get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up.

On the day this particular idea—the first really good one—came sailing at me, my mother remarked that she needed six more books of stamps to get a lamp she wanted to give her sister Molly for Christmas, and she didn't think she would make it in time. "I guess it will have to be for her birthday, instead," she said. "These cussed things always look like a lot until you stick them in a book." Then she crossed her eyes and ran her tongue out at me. When she did, I saw her tongue was S&H green. I thought how nice it would be if you could make those damned stamps in your basement, and in that instant a story called "Happy Stamps" was born. The concept of counterfeiting Green Stamps and the sight of my mother's green tongue created it in an instant.

The hero of my story was your classic Poor Schmuck, a guy named Roger who had done jail time twice for counterfeiting money—one more bust would make him a three-time loser. Instead of money, he began to counterfeit Happy Stamps . . . except, he discovered, the design of Happy Stamps was so moronically simple that he wasn't really counterfeiting at all; he was creating reams of the actual article. In a funny scene—probably the first really competent scene I ever wrote—Roger sits in the living room with his old mom, the two of them mooning over the Happy Stamps catalogue while the printing press runs downstairs, ejecting bale after bale of those same trading stamps.

"Great Scott!" Mom says. "According to the fine print, you can get *anything* with Happy Stamps, Roger—you tell them what you want, and they figure out how many books you need to get it. Why, for six or seven million books, we could probably get a Happy Stamps house in the suburbs!"

Roger discovers, however, that although the *stamps* are perfect, the *glue* is defective. If you lap the stamps and stick

them in the book they're fine, but if you send them through a mechanical licker, the pink Happy Stamps turn blue. At the end of the story, Roger is in the basement, standing in front of a mirror. Behind him, on the table, are roughly ninety books of Happy Stamps, each book filled with individually licked sheets of stamps. Our hero's lips are pink. He runs out his tongue; that's even pinker. Even his teeth are turning pink. Mom calls cheerily down the stairs, saying she has just gotten off the phone with the Happy Stamps National Redemption Center in Terre Haute, and the lady said they could probably get a nice Tudor home in Weston for only eleven million, six hundred thousand books of Happy Stamps.

"That's nice, Mom," Roger says. He looks at himself a moment longer in the mirror, lips pink and eyes bleak, then slowly returns to the table. Behind him, billions of Happy Stamps are stuffed into basement storage bins. Slowly, our hero opens a fresh stamp-book, then begins to lick sheets and stick them in. Only eleven million, five hundred and ninety thousand books to go, he thinks as the story ends, and Mom can have her Tudor.

There were things wrong with this story (the biggest hole was probably Roger's failure simply to start over with a different glue), but it was cute, it was fairly original, and I knew I had done some pretty good writing. After a long time spent studying the markets in my beat-up *Writer's Digest,* I sent "Happy Stamps" off to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.* It came back three weeks later with a form rejection slip attached. This slip bore Alfred Hitchcock's unmistakable profile in red ink and wished me good luck with my story. At the bottom was an unsigned jotted message, the only personal response I got from *AHMM* over eight years of periodic submissions. "Don't staple manuscripts," the postscript read.

"Loose pages plus paperclip equal correct way to submit copy." This was pretty cold advice, I thought, but useful in its way. I have never stapled a manuscript since.

– 16 –

My room in our Durham house was upstairs, under the eaves. At night I could lie in bed beneath one of these eaves—if I sat up suddenly, I was apt to whack my head a good one—and read by the light of a gooseneck lamp that put an amusing boa constrictor of shadow on the ceiling. Sometimes the house was quiet except for the whoosh of the furnace and the patter of rats in the attic; sometimes my grandmother would spend an hour or so around midnight yelling for someone to check Dick—she was afraid he hadn't been fed. Dick, a horse she'd had in her days as a schoolteacher, was at least forty years dead. I had a desk beneath the room's other eave, my old Royal typewriter, and a hundred or so paperback books, mostly science fiction, which I lined up along the baseboard. On my bureau was a Bible won for memorizing verses in Methodist Youth Fellowship and a Webcor phonograph with an automatic changer and a turntable covered in soft green velvet. On it I played my records, mostly 45s by Elvis, Chuck Berry, Freddy Cannon, and Fats Domino. I liked Fats; he knew how to rock, and you could tell he was having fun.

When I got the rejection slip from *AHMM,* I pounded a nail into the wall above the Webcor, wrote "Happy Stamps" on the rejection slip, and poked it onto the nail. Then I sat on my bed and listened to Fats sing "I'm Ready." I felt pretty good, actually. When you're still too young to shave, optimism is a perfectly legitimate response to failure.

By the time I was fourteen (and shaving twice a week whether I needed to or not) the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing. By the time I was sixteen I'd begun to get rejection slips with handwritten notes a little more encouraging than the advice to stop using staples and start using paperclips. The first of these hopeful notes was from Algis Budrys, then the editor of *Fantasy and Science Fiction,* who read a story of mine called "The Night of the Tiger" (the inspiration was, I think, an episode of *The Fugitive* in which Dr. Richard Kimble worked as an attendant cleaning out cages in a zoo or a circus) and wrote: "This is good. Not for us, but good. You have talent. Submit again."

Those four brief sentences, scribbled by a fountain pen that left big ragged blotches in its wake, brightened the dismal winter of my sixteenth year. Ten years or so later, after I'd sold a couple of novels, I discovered "The Night of the Tiger" in a box of old manuscripts and thought it was still a perfectly respectable tale, albeit one obviously written by a guy who had only begun to learn his chops. I rewrote it and on a whim resubmitted it to *F&SF.* This time they bought it. One thing I've noticed is that when you've had a little success, magazines are a lot less apt to use that phrase, "Not for us."

– 17 –

Although he was a year younger than his classmates, my big brother was bored with high school. Some of this had to do with his intellect—Dave's IQ tested in the 150s or 160s—but I think it was mostly his restless nature. For Dave, high

school just wasn't super duper enough—there was no pow, no wham, no *fun.* He solved the problem, at least temporarily, by creating a newspaper which he called *Dave's Rag.*

The *Rag*'s office was a table located in the dirt-floored, rock-walled, spider-infested confines of our basement, somewhere north of the furnace and east of the root-cellar, where Clayt and Ella's endless cartons of preserves and canned vegetables were kept. The *Rag* was an odd combination of family newsletter and small-town bi-weekly. Sometimes it was a monthly, if Dave got sidetracked by other interests (maple-sugaring, cider-making, rocket-building, and car-customizing, just to name a few), and then there would be jokes I didn't understand about how Dave's *Rag* was a little late this month or how we shouldn't bother Dave, because he was down in the basement, on the *Rag.*

Jokes or no jokes, circulation rose slowly from about five copies per issue (sold to nearby family members) to something like fifty or sixty, with our relatives and the relatives of neighbors in our small town (Durham's population in 1962 was about nine hundred) eagerly awaiting each new edition. A typical number would let people know how Charley Harrington's broken leg was mending, what guest speakers might be coming to the West Durham Methodist Church, how much water the King boys were hauling from the town pump to keep from draining the well behind the house (of course it went dry every fucking summer no matter how much water we hauled), who was visiting the Browns or the Halls on the other side of Methodist Corners, and whose relatives were due to hit town each summer. Dave also included sports, word-games, weather reports ("It's been pretty dry, but local farmer Harold Davis says if we don't have at least one good rain in August he will smile and kiss a pig"),

recipes, a continuing story (I wrote that), and Dave's Jokes and Humor, which included nuggets like these:

Stan: "What did the beaver say to the oak tree?"
Jan: "It was nice gnawing you!"

1st Beatnik: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?"
2nd Beatnik: "Practice man practice!"

During the *Rag*'s first year, the print was purple—those issues were produced on a flat plate of jelly called a hectograph. My brother quickly decided the hectograph was a pain in the butt. It was just too slow for him. Even as a kid in short pants, Dave hated to be halted. Whenever Milt, our mom's boyfriend ("Sweeter than smart," Mom said to me one day a few months after she dropped him), got stuck in traffic or at a stoplight, Dave would lean over from the back seat of Milt's Buick and yell, "Drive over em, Uncle Milt! Drive over em!"

As a teenager, waiting for the hectograph to "freshen" between pages printed (while "freshening," the print would melt into a vague purple membrane which hung in the jelly like a manatee's shadow) drove David all but insane with impatience. Also, he badly wanted to add photographs to the newspaper. He took good ones, and by age sixteen he was developing them, as well. He rigged a darkroom in a closet and from its tiny, chemical-stinking confines produced pictures which were often startling in their clarity and composition (the photo on the back of *The Regulators,* showing me with a copy of the magazine containing my first published story, was taken by Dave with an old Kodak and developed in his closet darkroom).

In addition to these frustrations, the flats of hectograph jelly had a tendency to incubate and support colonies of strange, sporelike growths in the unsavory atmosphere of our basement, no matter how meticulous we were about covering the damned old slowcoach thing once the day's printing chores were done. What looked fairly ordinary on Monday sometimes looked like something out of an H. P. Lovecraft horror tale by the weekend.

In Brunswick, where he went to high school, Dave found a shop with a small drum printing press for sale. It worked—barely. You typed up your copy on stencils which could be purchased in a local office-supply store for nineteen cents apiece—my brother called this chore "cutting stencil," and it was usually my job, as I was less prone to make typing errors. The stencils were attached to the drum of the press, lathered up with the world's stinkiest, oogiest ink, and then you were off to the races—crank 'til your arm falls off, son. We were able to put together in two nights what had previously taken a week with the hectograph, and while the drum-press was messy, it did not look infected with a potentially fatal disease. *Dave's Rag* entered its brief golden age.

– 18 –

I wasn't much interested in the printing process, and I wasn't interested at all in the arcana of first developing and then reproducing photographs. I didn't care about putting Hearst shifters in cars, making cider, or seeing if a certain formula would send a plastic rocket into the stratosphere (usually they didn't even make it over the house). What I cared about most between 1958 and 1966 was movies.

As the fifties gave way to the sixties, there were only two movie theaters in the area, both in Lewiston. The Empire was the first-run house, showing Disney pictures, Bible epics, and musicals in which widescreen ensembles of well-scrubbed folks danced and sang. I went to these if I had a ride—a movie was a movie, after all—but I didn't like them very much. They were boringly wholesome. They were predictable. During *The Parent Trap,* I kept hoping Hayley Mills would run into Vic Morrow from *The Blackboard Jungle.* That would have livened things up a little, by God. I felt that one look at Vic's switchblade knife and gimlet gaze would have put Hayley's piddling domestic problems in some kind of reasonable perspective. And when I lay in bed at night under my eave, listening to the wind in the trees or the rats in the attic, it was not Debbie Reynolds as Tammy or Sandra Dee as Gidget that I dreamed of, but Yvette Vickers from *Attack of the Giant Leeches* or Luana Anders from *Dementia 13.* Never mind sweet; never mind uplifting; never mind Snow White and the Seven Goddam Dwarfs. At thirteen I wanted monsters that ate whole cities, radioactive corpses that came out of the ocean and ate surfers, and girls in black bras who looked like trailer trash.

Horror movies, science fiction movies, movies about teenage gangs on the prowl, movies about losers on motorcycles—this was the stuff that turned my dials up to ten. The place to get all of this was not at the Empire, on the upper end of Lisbon Street, but at the Ritz, down at the lower end, amid the pawnshops and not far from Louie's Clothing, where in 1964 I bought my first pair of Beatle boots. The distance from my house to the Ritz was fourteen miles, and I hitchhiked there almost every weekend during the eight years between 1958 and 1966, when I finally got my driver's

license. Sometimes I went with my friend Chris Chesley, sometimes I went alone, but unless I was sick or something, I always went. It was at the Ritz that I saw *I Married a Monster from Outer Space,* with Tom Tryon; *The Haunting,* with Claire Bloom and Julie Harris; *The Wild Angels,* with Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra. I saw Olivia de Havilland put out James Caan's eyes with makeshift knives in *Lady in a Cage,* saw Joseph Cotten come back from the dead in *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte,* and watched with held breath (and not a little prurient interest) to see if Allison Hayes would grow all the way out of her clothes in *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman.* At the Ritz, all the finer things in life were available . . . or *might be* available, if you only sat in the third row, paid close attention, and did not blink at the wrong moment.

Chris and I liked just about any horror movie, but our faves were the string of American-International films, most directed by Roger Corman, with titles cribbed from Edgar Allan Poe. I wouldn't say *based upon* the works of Edgar Allan Poe, because there is little in any of them which has anything to do with Poe's actual stories and poems (*The Raven* was filmed as a comedy—no kidding). And yet the best of them—*The Haunted Palace, The Conqueror Worm, The Masque of the Red Death*—achieved a hallucinatory eeriness that made them special. Chris and I had our own name for these films, one that made them into a separate genre. There were westerns, there were love stories, there were war stories . . . and there were Poepictures.

"Wanna hitch to the show Saturday afternoon?" Chris would ask. "Go to the Ritz?"

"What's on?" I'd ask.

"A motorcycle picture and a Poepicture," he'd say. I, of course, was on that combo like white on rice. Bruce Dern

going batshit on a Harley and Vincent Price going batshit in a haunted castle overlooking a restless ocean: who could ask for more? You might even get Hazel Court wandering around in a lacy low-cut nightgown, if you were lucky.

Of all the Poepictures, the one that affected Chris and me the most deeply was *The Pit and the Pendulum.* Written by Richard Matheson and filmed in both widescreen and Technicolor (color horror pictures were still a rarity in 1961, when this one came out), *Pit* took a bunch of standard gothic ingredients and turned them into something special. It might have been the last really great studio horror picture before George Romero's ferocious indie *The Night of the Living Dead* came along and changed everything forever (in some few cases for the better, in most for the worse). The best scene—the one which froze Chris and me into our seats—depicted John Kerr digging into a castle wall and discovering the corpse of his sister, who was obviously buried alive. I have never forgotten the corpse's close-up, shot through a red filter and a distorting lens which elongated the face into a huge silent scream.

On the long hitch home that night (if rides were slow in coming, you might end up walking four or five miles and not get home until well after dark) I had a wonderful idea: I would turn *The Pit and the Pendulum* into a book! Would novelize it, as Monarch Books had novelized such undying film classics as *Jack the Ripper, Gorgo,* and *Konga.* But I wouldn't just write this masterpiece; I would also print it, using the drumpress in our basement, and sell copies at school! Zap! Ka-pow!

As it was conceived, so was it done. Working with the care and deliberation for which I would later be critically acclaimed, I turned out my "novel version" of *The Pit and the Pendulum* in two days, composing directly onto the stencils from which I'd

print. Although no copies of that particular masterpiece survive (at least to my knowledge), I believe it was eight pages long, each page single-spaced and paragraph breaks kept to an absolute minimum (each stencil cost nineteen cents, remember). I printed sheets on both sides, just as in a standard book, and added a title page on which I drew a rudimentary pendulum dripping small black blotches which I hoped would look like blood. At the last moment I realized I had forgotten to identify the publishing house. After a half-hour or so of pleasant mulling, I typed the words A V.I.B. BOOK in the upper right corner of my title page. V.I.B. stood for Very Important Book.

I ran off about forty copies of *The Pit and the Pendulum,* blissfully unaware that I was in violation of every plagiarism and copyright statute in the history of the world; my thoughts were focused almost entirely on how much money I might make if my story was a hit at school. The stencils had cost me $1.71 (having to use up one whole stencil for the title page seemed a hideous waste of money, but you had to look good, I'd reluctantly decided; you had to go out there with a bit of the old attitude), the paper had cost another two bits or so, the staples were free, cribbed from my brother (you might have to paperclip stories you were sending out to magazines, but this was a *book,* this was the bigtime). After some further thought, I priced V.I.B. #1, *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Steve King, at a quarter a copy. I thought I might be able to sell ten (my mother would buy one to get me started; she could always be counted on), and that would add up to $2.50. I'd make about forty cents, which would be enough to finance another educational trip to the Ritz. If I sold two more, I could get a big sack of popcorn and a Coke, as well.

The Pit and the Pendulum turned out to be my first best-

seller. I took the entire print-run to school in my book-bag (in 1961 I would have been an eighth-grader at Durham's newly built four-room elementary school), and by noon that day I had sold two dozen. By the end of lunch hour, when word had gotten around about the lady buried in the wall ("They stared with horror at the bones sticking out from the ends of her fingers, realizing she had died scratcheing madley for escape"), I had sold three dozen. I had nine dollars in change weighing down the bottom of my book-bag (upon which Durham's answer to Daddy Cool had carefully printed most of the lyrics to "The Lion Sleeps Tonight") and was walking around in a kind of dream, unable to believe my sudden ascension to previously unsuspected realms of wealth. It all seemed too good to be true.

It was. When the school day ended at two o'clock, I was summoned to the principal's office, where I was told I couldn't turn the school into a marketplace, especially not, Miss Hisler said, to sell such trash as *The Pit and the Pendulum.* Her attitude didn't much surprise me. Miss Hisler had been the teacher at my previous school, the one-roomer at Methodist Corners, where I went to the fifth and sixth grades. During that time she had spied me reading a rather sensational "teenage rumble" novel (*The Amboy Dukes,* by Irving Shulman), and had taken it away. This was just more of the same, and I was disgusted with myself for not seeing the outcome in advance. In those days we called someone who did an idiotic thing a dubber (pronounced *dubba* if you were from Maine). I had just dubbed up bigtime.

"What I don't understand, Stevie," she said, "is why you'd write junk like this in the first place. You're talented. Why do you want to waste your abilities?" She had rolled up a copy of V.I.B. #1 and was brandishing it at me the way a person

might brandish a rolled-up newspaper at a dog that has piddled on the rug. She waited for me to answer—to her credit, the question was not entirely rhetorical—but I had no answer to give. I was ashamed. I have spent a good many years since—too many, I think—being ashamed about what I write. I think I was forty before I realized that almost every writer of fiction and poetry who has ever published a line has been accused by someone of wasting his or her God-given talent. If you write (or paint or dance or sculpt or sing, I suppose), someone will try to make you feel lousy about it, that's all. I'm not editorializing, just trying to give you the facts as I see them.

Miss Hisler told me I would have to give everyone's money back. I did so with no argument, even to those kids (and there were quite a few, I'm happy to say) who insisted on keeping their copies of V.I.B. #1. I ended up losing money on the deal after all, but when summer vacation came I printed four dozen copies of a new story, an original called *The Invasion of the Star-Creatures,* and sold all but four or five. I guess that means I won in the end, at least in a financial sense. But in my heart I stayed ashamed. I kept hearing Miss Hisler asking why I wanted to waste my talent, why I wanted to waste my time, why I wanted to write junk.

– 19 –

Doing a serial story for *Dave's Rag* was fun, but my other journalistic duties bored me. Still, I had worked for a newspaper of sorts, word got around, and during my sophomore year at Lisbon High I became editor of our school newspaper, *The Drum.* I don't recall being given any choice in this matter; I

think I was simply appointed. My second-in-command, Danny Emond, had even less interest in the paper than I did. Danny just liked the idea that Room 4, where we did our work, was near the girls' bathroom. "Someday I'll just go crazy and hack my way in there, Steve," he told me on more than one occasion. "Hack, hack, hack." Once he added, perhaps in an effort to justify himself: "The prettiest girls in school pull up their skirts in there." This struck me as so fundamentally stupid it might actually be wise, like a Zen koan or an early story by John Updike.

The Drum did not prosper under my editorship. Then as now, I tend to go through periods of idleness followed by periods of workaholic frenzy. In the schoolyear 1963–1964, *The Drum* published just one issue, but that one was a monster thicker than the Lisbon Falls telephone book. One night—sick to death of Class Reports, Cheerleading Updates, and some lamebrain's efforts to write a school poem—I created a satiric high school newspaper of my own when I should have been captioning photographs for *The Drum.* What resulted was a four-sheet which I called *The Village Vomit.* The boxed motto in the upper lefthand corner was not "All the News That's Fit to Print" but "All the Shit That Will Stick." That piece of dimwit humor got me into the only real trouble of my high school career. It also led me to the most useful writing lesson I ever got.

In typical *Mad* magazine style ("What, me worry?"), I filled the *Vomit* with fictional tidbits about the LHS faculty, using teacher nicknames the student body would immediately recognize. Thus Miss Raypach, the study-hall monitor, became Miss Rat Pack; Mr. Ricker, the college-track English teacher (and the school's most urbane faculty member—he looked quite a bit like Craig Stevens in *Peter Gunn*), became

Cow Man because his family owned Ricker Dairy; Mr. Diehl, the earth-science teacher, became Old Raw Diehl.

As all sophomoric humorists must be, I was totally blown away by my own wit. What a funny fellow I was! A regular mill-town H. L. Mencken! I simply must take the *Vomit* to school and show all my friends! They would bust a collective gut!

As a matter of fact, they *did* bust a collective gut; I had some good ideas about what tickled the funnybones of high school kids, and most of them were showcased in *The Village Vomit.* In one article, Cow Man's prize Jersey won a livestock farting contest at Topsham Fair; in another, Old Raw Diehl was fired for sticking the eyeballs of specimen fetal pigs up his nostrils. Humor in the grand Swiftian manner, you see. Pretty sophisticated, eh?

During period four, three of my friends were laughing so hard in the back of study-hall that Miss Raypach (Rat Pack to you, chum) crept up on them to see what was so funny. She confiscated *The Village Vomit,* on which I had, either out of overweening pride or almost unbelievable naiveté, put my name as Editor in Chief & Grand High Poobah, and at the close of school I was for the second time in my student career summoned to the office on account of something I had written.

This time the trouble was a good deal more serious. Most of the teachers were inclined to be good sports about my teasing—even Old Raw Diehl was willing to let bygones be bygones concerning the pigs' eyeballs—but one was not. This was Miss Margitan, who taught shorthand and typing to the girls in the business courses. She commanded both respect and fear; in the tradition of teachers from an earlier era, Miss Margitan did not want to be your pal, your psychologist, or your inspiration. She was there to teach business skills, and

she wanted all learning to be done by the rules. *Her* rules. Girls in Miss Margitan's classes were sometimes asked to kneel on the floor, and if the hems of their skirts didn't touch the linoleum, they were sent home to change. No amount of tearful begging could soften her, no reasoning could modify her view of the world. Her detention lists were the longest of any teacher in the school, but her girls were routinely selected as valedictorians or salutatorians and usually went on to good jobs. Many came to love her. Others loathed her then and likely still do now, all these years later. These latter girls called her "Maggot" Margitan, as their mothers had no doubt before them. And in *The Village Vomit* I had an item which began, "Miss Margitan, known affectionately to Lisbonians everywhere as Maggot . . ."

Mr. Higgins, our bald principal (breezily referred to in the *Vomit* as Old Cue-Ball), told me that Miss Margitan had been very hurt and very upset by what I had written. She was apparently not too hurt to remember that old scriptural admonition which goes "Vengeance is mine, saith the shorthand teacher," however; Mr. Higgins said she wanted me suspended from school.

In my character, a kind of wildness and a deep conservatism are wound together like hair in a braid. It was the crazy part of me that had first written *The Village Vomit* and then carried it to school; now that troublesome Mr. Hyde had dubbed up and slunk out the back door. Dr. Jekyll was left to consider how my mom would look at me if she found out I had been suspended—her hurt eyes. I had to put thoughts of her out of my mind, and fast. I was a sophomore, I was a year older than most others in my class, and at six feet two I was one of the bigger boys in school. I desperately didn't want to cry in Mr. Higgins's office—not with kids surging through

the halls and looking curiously in the window at us: Mr. Higgins behind his desk, me in the Bad Boy Seat.

In the end, Miss Margitan settled for a formal apology and two weeks of detention for the bad boy who had dared call her Maggot in print. It was bad, but what in high school is not? At the time we're stuck in it, like hostages locked in a Turkish bath, high school seems the most serious business in the world to just about all of us. It's not until the second or third class reunion that we start realizing how absurd the whole thing was.

A day or two later I was ushered into Mr. Higgins's office and made to stand in front of her. Miss Margitan sat ramrod-straight with her arthritic hands folded in her lap and her gray eyes fixed unflinchingly on my face, and I realized that something about her was different from any other adult I had ever met. I didn't pinpoint that difference at once, but I knew that there would be no charming this lady, no winning her over. Later, while I was flying paper planes with the other bad boys and bad girls in detention hall (detention turned out to be not so bad), I decided that it was pretty simple: Miss Margitan didn't like boys. She was the first woman I ever met in my life who didn't like boys, not even one little bit.

If it makes any difference, my apology was heartfelt. Miss Margitan really had been hurt by what I wrote, and that much I could understand. I doubt that she hated me—she was probably too busy—but she was the National Honor Society advisor at LHS, and when my name showed up on the candidate list two years later, she vetoed me. The Honor Society did not need boys "of his type," she said. I have come to believe she was right. A boy who once wiped his ass with poison ivy probably doesn't belong in a smart people's club.

I haven't trucked much with satire since then.

– 20 –

Hardly a week after being sprung from detention hall, I was once more invited to step down to the principal's office. I went with a sinking heart, wondering what new shit I'd stepped in.

It wasn't Mr. Higgins who wanted to see me, at least; this time the school guidance counsellor had issued the summons. There had been discussions about me, he said, and how to turn my "restless pen" into more constructive channels. He had enquired of John Gould, editor of Lisbon's weekly newspaper, and had discovered Gould had an opening for a sports reporter. While the school couldn't *insist* that I take this job, everyone in the front office felt it would be a good idea. *Do it or die,* the G.C.'s eyes suggested. Maybe that was just paranoia, but even now, almost forty years later, I don't think so.

I groaned inside. I was shut of *Dave's Rag,* almost shut of *The Drum,* and now here was the Lisbon *Weekly Enterprise.* Instead of being haunted by waters, like Norman Maclean in *A River Runs Through It,* I was as a teenager haunted by newspapers. Still, what could I do? I rechecked the look in the guidance counsellor's eyes and said I would be delighted to interview for the job.

Gould—not the well-known New England humorist or the novelist who wrote *The Greenleaf Fires* but a relation of both, I think—greeted me warily but with some interest. We would try each other out, he said, if that suited me.

Now that I was away from the administrative offices of Lisbon High, I felt able to muster a little honesty. I told Mr.

Gould that I didn't know much about sports. Gould said, "These are games people understand when they're watching them drunk in bars. You'll learn if you try."

He gave me a huge roll of yellow paper on which to type my copy—I think I still have it somewhere—and promised me a wage of half a cent a word. It was the first time someone had promised me wages for writing.

The first two pieces I turned in had to do with a basketball game in which an LHS player broke the school scoring record. One was a straight piece of reporting. The other was a sidebar about Robert Ransom's record-breaking performance. I brought both to Gould the day after the game so he'd have them for Friday, which was when the paper came out. He read the game piece, made two minor corrections, and spiked it. Then he started in on the feature piece with a large black pen.

I took my fair share of English Lit classes in my two remaining years at Lisbon, and my fair share of composition, fiction, and poetry classes in college, but John Gould taught me more than any of them, and in no more than ten minutes. I wish I still had the piece—it deserves to be framed, editorial corrections and all—but I can remember pretty well how it went and how it looked after Gould had combed through it with that black pen of his. Here's an example:

> Last night, in the ~~well-loved~~ gymnasium of Lisbon High School, partisans and Jay Hills fans alike were stunned by an athletic performance unequalled in school history. Bob Ransom, ~~known as "Bullet" Bob for both his size and accuracy,~~ scored thirty-seven points. Yes, you heard me right. Plus he did it with grace, speed . . . and with an odd courtesy as well,

committing only two personal fouls in his ~~knight-like~~ quest for a record which has eluded Lisbon ~~thinclads~~ since ~~the years of Korea~~ . . .

Gould stopped at "the years of Korea" and looked up at me. "What year was the last record made?" he asked.

Luckily, I had my notes. "1953," I said. Gould grunted and went back to work. When he finished marking my copy in the manner indicated above, he looked up and saw something on my face. I think he must have mistaken it for horror. It wasn't; it was pure revelation. Why, I wondered, didn't English teachers ever do this? It was like the Visible Man Old Raw Diehl had on his desk in the biology room.

"I only took out the bad parts, you know," Gould said. "Most of it's pretty good."

"I know," I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good—okay anyway, serviceable—and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. "I won't do it again."

He laughed. "If that's true, you'll never have to work for a living. You can do *this* instead. Do I have to explain any of these marks?"

"No," I said.

"When you write a story, you're telling yourself the story," he said. "When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are *not* the story."

Gould said something else that was interesting on the day I turned in my first two pieces: write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then it goes out. Once you know what the story is and get it right—as right as you can, anyway—it belongs to anyone who wants to read it. Or criticize it. If you're very lucky (this is my idea, not John Gould's, but

I believe he would have subscribed to the notion), more will want to do the former than the latter.

– 21 –

Just after the senior class trip to Washington, D.C., I got a job at Worumbo Mills and Weaving, in Lisbon Falls. I didn't want it—the work was hard and boring, the mill itself a dingy fuckhole overhanging the polluted Androscoggin River like a workhouse in a Charles Dickens novel—but I needed the paycheck. My mother was making lousy wages as a housekeeper at a facility for the mentally ill in New Gloucester, but she was determined I was going to college like my brother David (University of Maine, class of '66, *cum laude*). In her mind, the education had become almost secondary. Durham and Lisbon Falls and the University of Maine at Orono were part of a small world where folks neighbored and still minded each other's business on the four- and six-party lines which then served the Sticksville townships. In the big world, boys who didn't go to college were being sent overseas to fight in Mr. Johnson's undeclared war, and many of them were coming home in boxes. My mother liked Lyndon's War on Poverty ("That's the war *I'm* in," she sometimes said), but not what he was up to in Southeast Asia. Once I told her that enlisting and going over there might be good for me—surely there would be a book in it, I said.

"Don't be an idiot, Stephen," she said. "With your eyes, you'd be the first one to get shot. You can't write if you're dead."

She meant it; her head was set and so was her heart. Consequently, I applied for scholarships, I applied for loans, and I

went to work in the mill. I certainly wouldn't get far on the five and six dollars a week I could make writing about bowling tournaments and Soap Box Derby races for the *Enterprise.*

During my final weeks at Lisbon High, my schedule looked like this: up at seven, off to school at seven-thirty, last bell at two o'clock, punch in on the third floor of Worumbo at 2:58, bag loose fabric for eight hours, punch out at 11:02, get home around quarter of twelve, eat a bowl of cereal, fall into bed, get up the next morning, do it all again. On a few occasions I worked double shifts, slept in my '60 Ford Galaxie (Dave's old car) for an hour or so before school, then slept through periods five and six in the nurse's cubicle after lunch.

Once summer vacation came, things got easier. I was moved down to the dyehouse in the basement, for one thing, where it was thirty degrees cooler. My job was dyeing swatches of melton cloth purple or navy blue. I imagine there are still folks in New England with jackets in their closets dyed by yours truly. It wasn't the best summer I ever spent, but I managed to avoid being sucked into the machinery or stitching my fingers together with one of the heavy-duty sewing machines we used to belt the undyed cloth.

During Fourth of July week, the mill closed. Employees with five years or more at Worumbo got the week off with pay. Those with fewer than five years were offered work on a crew that was going to clean the mill from top to bottom, including the basement, which hadn't been touched in forty or fifty years. I probably would have agreed to work on this crew—it was time and a half—but all the positions were filled long before the foreman got down to the high school kids, who'd be gone in September. When I got back to work the following week, one of the dyehouse guys told me I should have been there, it was wild. "The rats down in that basement were big

as cats," he said. "Some of them, goddam if they weren't as big as *dogs.*"

Rats as big as dogs! Yow!

One day late in my final semester at college, finals over and at loose ends, I recalled the dyehouse guy's story about the rats under the mill—big as cats, goddam, some as big as *dogs*—and started writing a story called "Graveyard Shift." I was only passing the time on a late spring afternoon, but two months later *Cavalier* magazine bought the story for two hundred dollars. I had sold two other stories previous to this, but they had brought in a total of just sixty-five dollars. This was three times that, and at a single stroke. It took my breath away, it did. I was rich.

– 22 –

During the summer of 1969 I got a work-study job in the University of Maine library. That was a season both fair and foul. In Vietnam, Nixon was executing his plan to end the war, which seemed to consist of bombing most of Southeast Asia into Kibbles 'n Bits. "Meet the new boss," The Who sang, "same as the old boss." Eugene McCarthy was concentrating on his poetry, and happy hippies wore bell-bottom pants and tee-shirts that said things like KILLING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR CHASTITY. I had a great set of muttonchop sideburns. Creedence Clearwater Revival was singing "Green River"—barefoot girls, dancing in the moonlight—and Kenny Rogers was still with The First Edition. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were dead, but Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Bob "The Bear" Hite, Jimi Hendrix, Cass Elliot, John Lennon, and Elvis Presley were still alive and making

music. I was staying just off campus in Ed Price's Rooms (seven bucks a week, one change of sheets included). Men had landed on the moon, and I had landed on the Dean's List. Miracles and wonders abounded.

One day in late June of that summer, a bunch of us library guys had lunch on the grass behind the university bookstore. Sitting between Paolo Silva and Eddie Marsh was a trim girl with a raucous laugh, red-tinted hair, and the prettiest legs I had ever seen, well-displayed beneath a short yellow skirt. She was carrying a copy of *Soul on Ice,* by Eldridge Cleaver. I hadn't run across her in the library, and I didn't believe a college student could utter such a wonderful, unafraid laugh. Also, heavy reading or no heavy reading, she swore like a millworker instead of a coed. (Having been a millworker, I was qualified to judge.) Her name was Tabitha Spruce. We got married a year and a half later. We're still married, and she has never let me forget that the first time I met her I thought she was Eddie Marsh's townie girlfriend. Maybe a book-reading waitress from the local pizza joint on her afternoon off.

– 23 –

It's worked. Our marriage has outlasted all of the world's leaders except for Castro, and if we keep talking, arguing, making love, and dancing to the Ramones—gabba-gabba-hey—it'll probably keep working. We came from different religions, but as a feminist Tabby has never been crazy about the Catholics, where the men make the rules (including the God-given directive to always go in bareback) and the women wash the underwear. And while I believe in God I have no use for organized religion. We came from similar working-class

backgrounds, we both ate meat, we were both political Democrats with typical Yankee suspicions of life outside New England. We were sexually compatible and monogamous by nature. Yet what ties us most strongly are the words, the language, and the work of our lives.

We met when we were working in a library, and I fell in love with her during a poetry workshop in the fall of 1969, when I was a senior and Tabby was a junior. I fell in love with her partly because I understood what she was doing with her work. I fell because *she* understood what she was doing with it. I also fell because she was wearing a sexy black dress and silk stockings, the kind that hook with garters.

I don't want to speak too disparagingly of my generation (actually I do, we had a chance to change the world and opted for the Home Shopping Network instead), but there was a view among the student writers I knew at that time that good writing came spontaneously, in an uprush of feeling that had to be caught at once; when you were building that all-important stairway to heaven, you couldn't just stand around with your hammer in your hand. *Ars poetica* in 1969 was perhaps best expressed by a Donovan Leitch song that went, "First there is a mountain / Then there is no mountain / Then there is." Would-be poets were living in a dewy Tolkien-tinged world, catching poems out of the ether. It was pretty much unanimous: serious art came from . . . *out there!* Writers were blessed stenographers taking divine dictation. I don't want to embarrass any of my old mates from that period, so here is a fictionalized version of what I'm talking about, created from bits of many actual poems:

i close my eyes
in th dark i see

Rodan Rimbaud
in th dark
i swallow th cloth
of loneliness
crow i am here
raven i am here

If you were to ask the poet what this poem *meant,* you'd likely get a look of contempt. A slightly uncomfortable silence was apt to emanate from the rest. Certainly the fact that the poet would likely have been unable to tell you anything about the mechanics of creation would not have been considered important. If pressed, he or she might have said that there *were* no mechanics, only that seminal spurt of feeling: first there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is. And if the resulting poem is sloppy, based on the assumption that such general words as "loneliness" mean the same thing to all of us—hey man, so what, let go of that outdated bullshit and just dig the heaviness. I didn't cop to much of this attitude (although I didn't dare say so out loud, at least not in so many words), and was overjoyed to find that the pretty girl in the black dress and the silk stockings didn't cop to much of it, either. She didn't come right out and say so, but she didn't need to. Her work spoke for her.

The workshop group met once or twice a week in the living room of instructor Jim Bishop's house, perhaps a dozen undergrads and three or four faculty members working in a marvellous atmosphere of equality. Poems were typed up and mimeographed in the English Department office on the day of each workshop. Poets read while the rest of us followed along on our copies. Here is one of Tabby's poems from that fall:

Stephen King

A Gradual Canticle for Augustine

The thinnest bear is awakened in the winter
by the sleep-laughter of locusts,
by the dream-blustering of bees,
by the honeyed scent of desert sands
that the wind carries in her womb
into the distant hills, into the houses of Cedar.

The bear has heard a sure promise.
Certain words are edible; they nourish
more than snow heaped upon silver plates
or ice overflowing golden bowls. Chips of ice
from the mouth of a lover are not always better,
Nor a desert dreaming always a mirage.
The rising bear sings a gradual canticle
woven of sand that conquers cities
by a slow cycle. His praise seduces
a passing wind, traveling to the sea
wherein a fish, caught in a careful net,
hears a bear's song in the cool-scented snow.

There was silence when Tabby finished reading. No one knew exactly how to react. Cables seemed to run through the poem, tightening the lines until they almost hummed. I found the combination of crafty diction and delirious imagery exciting and illuminating. Her poem also made me feel that I wasn't alone in my belief that good writing can be simultaneously intoxicating and idea-driven. If stone-sober people can fuck like they're out of their minds—can actually be out of their minds while caught in that throe—why shouldn't writers be able to go bonkers and still stay sane?

There was also a work-ethic in the poem that I liked, something that suggested writing poems (or stories, or essays) had as much in common with sweeping the floor as with mythy moments of revelation. There's a place in *A Raisin in the Sun* where a character cries out: "I want to fly! I want to touch the sun!" to which his wife replies, "First eat your eggs."

In the discussion that followed Tab's reading, it became clear to me that she understood her own poem. She knew exactly what she had meant to say, and had said most of it. Saint Augustine (A.D. 354–430) she knew both as a Catholic and as a history major. Augustine's mother (a saint herself) was a Christian, his father a pagan. Before his conversion, Augustine pursued both money and women. Following it he continued to struggle with his sexual impulses, and is known for the Libertine's Prayer, which goes: "O Lord, make me chaste . . . but not yet." In his writing he focused on man's struggle to give up belief in self in favor of belief in God. And he sometimes likened himself to a bear. Tabby has a way of tilting her chin down when she smiles—it makes her look both wise and severely cute. She did that then, I remember, and said, "Besides, I like bears."

The canticle is gradual perhaps because the bear's awakening is gradual. The bear is powerful and sensual, although thin because he is out of his time. In a way, Tabby said when called upon to explicate, the bear can be seen as a symbol of mankind's troubling and wonderful habit of dreaming the right dreams at the wrong time. Such dreams are difficult because they're inappropriate, but also wonderful in their promise. The poem also suggests that dreams are powerful—the bear's is strong enough to seduce the wind into bringing his song to a fish caught in a net.

I won't try to argue that "A Gradual Canticle" is a great poem (although I think it's a pretty good one). The point is that it was a reasonable poem in a hysterical time, one sprung from a writing ethic that resonated all through my heart and soul.

Tabby was in one of Jim Bishop's rocking chairs that night. I was sitting on the floor beside her. I put my hand on her calf as she spoke, cupping the curve of warm flesh through her stocking. She smiled at me. I smiled back. Sometimes these things are not accidents. I'm almost sure of it.

– 24 –

We had two kids by the time we'd been married three years. They were neither planned nor unplanned; they came when they came, and we were glad to have them. Naomi was prone to ear infections. Joe was healthy enough but never seemed to sleep. When Tabby went into labor with him, I was at a drive-in movie in Brewer with a friend—it was a Memorial Day triple feature, three horror films. We were on the third movie *(The Corpse Grinders)* and the second sixpack when the guy in the office broke in with an announcement. There were still pole-speakers in those days; when you parked your car you lifted one off and hung it over your window. The manager's announcement thus rang across the entire parking lot: *"STEVE KING, PLEASE GO HOME! YOUR WIFE IS IN LABOR! STEVE KING, PLEASE GO HOME! YOUR WIFE IS GOING TO HAVE THE BABY!"*

As I drove our old Plymouth toward the exit, a couple of hundred horns blared a satiric salute. Many people flicked their headlights on and off, bathing me in a stuttery glow. My friend Jimmy Smith laughed so hard he slid into the footwell

on the passenger side of the front seat. There he remained for most of the trip back to Bangor, chortling among the beer-cans. When I got home, Tabby was calm and packed. She gave birth to Joe less than three hours later. He entered the world easily. For the next five years or so, nothing else about Joe was easy. But he was a treat. Both of them were, really. Even when Naomi was tearing off the wallpaper above her crib (maybe she thought she was housekeeping) and Joe was shitting in the wicker seat of the rocker we kept on the porch of our apartment on Sanford Street, they were a treat.

– 25 –

My mother knew I wanted to be a writer (with all those rejection slips hanging from the spike on my bedroom wall, how could she not?), but she encouraged me to get a teacher's credential "so you'll have something to fall back on."

"You may want to get married, Stephen, and a garret by the Seine is only romantic if you're a bachelor," she'd said once. "It's no place to raise a family."

I did as she suggested, entering the College of Education at UMO and emerging four years later with a teacher's certificate . . . sort of like a golden retriever emerging from a pond with a dead duck in its jaws. It was dead, all right. I couldn't find a teaching job and so went to work at New Franklin Laundry for wages not much higher than those I had been making at Worumbo Mills and Weaving four years before. I was keeping my family in a series of garrets which overlooked not the Seine but some of Bangor's less appetizing streets, the ones where the police cruisers always seemed to show up at two o'clock on Saturday morning.

I never saw personal laundry at New Franklin unless it was a "fire order" being paid for by an insurance company (most fire orders consisted of clothes that *looked* okay but smelled like barbecued monkeymeat). The greater part of what I loaded and pulled were motel sheets from Maine's coastal towns and table linen from Maine's coastal restaurants. The table linen was desperately nasty. When tourists go out to dinner in Maine, they usually want clams and lobster. Mostly lobster. By the time the tablecloths upon which these delicacies had been served reached me, they stank to high heaven and were often boiling with maggots. The maggots would try to crawl up your arms as you loaded the washers; it was as if the little fuckers knew you were planning to cook them. I thought I'd get used to them in time but I never did. The maggots were bad; the smell of decomposing clams and lobster-meat was even worse. *Why are people such slobs?* I would wonder, loading feverish linens from Testa's of Bar Harbor into my machines. *Why are people such fucking slobs?*

Hospital sheets and linens were even worse. These also crawled with maggots in the summertime, but it was blood they were feeding on instead of lobster-meat and clam-jelly. Clothes, sheets, and pillowslips deemed to be infected were stuffed inside what we called "plague-bags" which dissolved when the hot water hit them, but blood was not, in those times, considered to be especially dangerous. There were often little extras in the hospital laundry; those loads were like nasty boxes of Cracker Jacks with weird prizes in them. I found a steel bedpan in one load and a pair of surgical shears in another (the bedpan was of no practical use, but the shears were a damned handy kitchen implement). Ernest "Rocky" Rockwell, the guy I worked with, found twenty dollars in a load from Eastern Maine Medical Center and punched out at

noon to start drinking. (Rocky referred to quitting time as "Slitz o'clock.")

On one occasion I heard a strange clicking from inside one of the Washex three-pockets which were my responsibility. I hit the Emergency Stop button, thinking the goddam thing was stripping its gears or something. I opened the doors and hauled out a huge wad of dripping surgical tunics and green caps, soaking myself in the process. Below them, lying scattered across the colander-like inner sleeve of the middle pocket, was what looked like a complete set of human teeth. It crossed my mind that they would make an interesting necklace, then I scooped them out and tossed them in the trash. My wife has put up with a lot from me over the years, but her sense of humor stretches only so far.

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From a financial point of view, two kids were probably two too many for college grads working in a laundry and the second shift at Dunkin' Donuts. The only edge we had came courtesy of magazines like *Dude, Cavalier, Adam,* and *Swank*—what my Uncle Oren used to call "the titty books." By 1972 they were showing quite a lot more than bare breasts and fiction was on its way out, but I was lucky enough to ride the last wave. I wrote after work; when we lived on Grove Street, which was close to the New Franklin, I would sometimes write a little on my lunch hour, too. I suppose that sounds almost impossibly Abe Lincoln, but it was no big deal—I was having fun. Those stories, grim as some of them were, served as brief escapes from the boss, Mr. Brooks, and Harry the floor-man.

Harry had hooks instead of hands as a result of a tumble into the sheet-mangler during World War II (he was dusting the beams above the machine and fell off). A comedian at heart, he would sometimes duck into the bathroom and run water from the cold tap over one hook and water from the hot tap over the other. Then he'd sneak up behind you while you were loading laundry and lay the steel hooks on the back of your neck. Rocky and I spent a fair amount of time speculating on how Harry accomplished certain bathroom cleanup activities. "Well," Rocky said one day while we were drinking our lunch in his car, "at least he don't need to wash his hands."

There were times—especially in summer, while swallowing my afternoon salt-pill—when it occurred to me that I was simply repeating my mother's life. Usually this thought struck me as funny. But if I happened to be tired, or if there were extra bills to pay and no money to pay them with, it seemed awful. I'd think *This isn't the way our lives are supposed to be going.* Then I'd think *Half the world has the same idea.*

The stories I sold to the men's magazines between August of 1970, when I got my two-hundred-dollar check for "Graveyard Shift," and the winter of 1973–1974 were just enough to create a rough sliding margin between us and the welfare office (my mother, a Republican all her life, had communicated her deep horror of "going on the county" to me; Tabby had some of that same horror).

My clearest memory of those days is of our coming back to the Grove Street apartment one Sunday afternoon after spending the weekend at my mother's house in Durham—this would have been right around the time the symptoms of the cancer which killed her started to show themselves. I have a picture from that day—Mom, looking both tired and

amused, is sitting in a chair in her dooryard, holding Joe in her lap while Naomi stands sturdily beside her. Naomi wasn't so sturdy by Sunday afternoon, however; she had come down with an ear infection, and was burning with fever.

Trudging from the car to our apartment building on that summer afternoon was a low point. I was carrying Naomi and a tote-bag full of baby survival equipment (bottles, lotions, diapers, sleep suits, undershirts, socks) while Tabby carried Joe, who had spit up on her. She was dragging a sack of dirty diapers behind her. We both knew Naomi needed THE PINK STUFF, which was what we called liquid amoxicillin. THE PINK STUFF was expensive, and we were broke. I mean stony.

I managed to get the downstairs door open without dropping my daughter and was easing her inside (she was so feverish she glowed against my chest like a banked coal) when I saw there was an envelope sticking out of our mailbox—a rare Saturday delivery. Young marrieds don't get much mail; everyone but the gas and electric companies seems to forget they are alive. I snagged it, praying it wouldn't turn out to be another bill. It wasn't. My friends at the Dugent Publishing Corporation, purveyors of *Cavalier* and many other fine adult publications, had sent me a check for "Sometimes They Come Back," a long story I hadn't believed would sell anywhere. The check was for five hundred dollars, easily the largest sum I'd ever received. Suddenly we were able to afford not only a doctor's visit and a bottle of THE PINK STUFF, but also a nice Sunday-night meal. And I imagine that once the kids were asleep, Tabby and I got friendly.

I think we had a lot of happiness in those days, but we were scared a lot, too. We weren't much more than kids ourselves (as the saying goes), and being friendly helped keep

the mean reds away. We took care of ourselves and the kids and each other as best we could. Tabby wore her pink uniform out to Dunkin' Donuts and called the cops when the drunks who came in for coffee got obstreperous. I washed motel sheets and kept writing one-reel horror movies.

– 27 –

By the time I started *Carrie,* I had landed a job teaching English in the nearby town of Hampden. I would be paid sixty-four hundred dollars a year, which seemed an unthinkable sum after earning a dollar-sixty an hour at the laundry. If I'd done the math, being careful to add in all the time spent in after-school conferences and correcting papers at home, I might have seen it was a very thinkable sum indeed, and that our situation was worse than ever. By the late winter of 1973 we were living in a doublewide trailer in Hermon, a little town west of Bangor. (Much later, when asked to do the *Playboy* Interview, I called Hermon "The asshole of the world." Hermonites were infuriated by that, and I hereby apologize. Hermon is really no more than the armpit of the world.) I was driving a Buick with transmission problems we couldn't afford to fix, Tabby was still working at Dunkin' Donuts, and we had no telephone. We simply couldn't afford the monthly charge. Tabby tried her hand at confession stories during that period ("Too Pretty to Be a Virgin"—stuff like that), and got personal responses of the this-isn't-quite-right-for-us-but-try-again type immediately. She would have broken through if given an extra hour or two in every day, but she was stuck with the usual twenty-four. Besides, any amusement value the confession-mag formula (it's called the Three R's—Rebel-

lion, Ruin, and Redemption) might have had for her at the start wore off in a hurry.

I wasn't having much success with my own writing, either. Horror, science fiction, and crime stories in the men's magazines were being replaced by increasingly graphic tales of sex. That was part of the trouble, but not all of it. The bigger deal was that, for the first time in my life, writing was *hard.* The problem was the teaching. I liked my coworkers and loved the kids—even the Beavis and Butt-Head types in Living with English could be interesting—but by most Friday afternoons I felt as if I'd spent the week with jumper cables clamped to my brain. If I ever came close to despairing about my future as a writer, it was then. I could see myself thirty years on, wearing the same shabby tweed coats with patches on the elbows, potbelly rolling over my Gap khakis from too much beer. I'd have a cigarette cough from too many packs of Pall Malls, thicker glasses, more dandruff, and in my desk drawer, six or seven unfinished manuscripts which I would take out and tinker with from time to time, usually when drunk. If asked what I did in my spare time, I'd tell people I was writing a book—what else does *any* self-respecting creative-writing teacher do with his or her spare time? And of course I'd lie to myself, telling myself there was still time, it wasn't too late, there were novelists who didn't get started until they were fifty, hell, even sixty. Probably plenty of them.

My wife made a crucial difference during those two years I spent teaching at Hampden (and washing sheets at New Franklin Laundry during the summer vacation). If she had suggested that the time I spent writing stories on the front porch of our rented house on Pond Street or in the laundry room of our rented trailer on Klatt Road in Hermon was

wasted time, I think a lot of the heart would have gone out of me. Tabby never voiced a single doubt, however. Her support was a constant, one of the few good things I could take as a given. And whenever I see a first novel dedicated to a wife (or a husband), I smile and think, *There's someone who knows.* Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough.

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While he was going to college my brother Dave worked summers as a janitor at Brunswick High, his old alma mater. For part of one summer I worked there, too. I can't remember which year, only that it was before I met Tabby but after I started to smoke. That would have made me nineteen or twenty, I suppose. I got paired with a guy named Harry, who wore green fatigues, a big keychain, and walked with a limp. (He *did* have hands instead of hooks, however.) One lunch hour Harry told me what it had been like to face a Japanese *banzai* charge on the island of Tarawa, all the Japanese officers waving swords made out of Maxwell House coffee cans, all the screaming enlisted men behind them stoned out of their gourds and smelling of burned poppies. Quite a raconteur was my pal Harry.

One day he and I were supposed to scrub the rust-stains off the walls in the girls' shower. I looked around the locker room with the interest of a Muslim youth who for some reason finds himself deep within the women's quarters. It was the same as the boys' locker room, and yet completely different. There were no urinals, of course, and there were two extra

metal boxes on the tile walls—unmarked, and the wrong size for paper towels. I asked what was in them. "Pussy-plugs," Harry said. "For them certain days of the month."

I also noticed that the showers, unlike those in the boys' locker room, had chrome U-rings with pink plastic curtains attached. You could actually shower in privacy. I mentioned this to Harry, and he shrugged. "I guess young girls are a bit more shy about being undressed."

This memory came back to me one day while I was working at the laundry, and I started seeing the opening scene of a story: girls showering in a locker room where there were no U-rings, pink plastic curtains, or privacy. And this one girl starts to have her period. Only she doesn't know what it is, and the other girls—grossed out, horrified, amused—start pelting her with sanitary napkins. Or with tampons, which Harry had called pussy-plugs. The girl begins to scream. All that blood! She thinks she's dying, that the other girls are making fun of her even while she's bleeding to death . . . she reacts . . . fights back . . . but how?

I'd read an article in *Life* magazine some years before, suggesting that at least some reported poltergeist activity might actually be telekinetic phenomena—telekinesis being the ability to move objects just by thinking about them. There was some evidence to suggest that young people might have such powers, the article said, especially girls in early adolescence, right around the time of their first—

Pow! Two unrelated ideas, adolescent cruelty and telekinesis, came together, and I had an idea. I didn't leave my post at Washex #2, didn't go running around the laundry waving my arms and shouting "Eureka!," however. I'd had many other ideas as good and some that were better. Still, I thought I might have the basis for a good *Cavalier* yarn, with the

possibility of *Playboy* lurking in the back of my mind. *Playboy* paid up to two thousand dollars for short fiction. Two thousand bucks would buy a new transmission for the Buick with plenty left over for groceries. The story remained on the back burner for awhile, simmering away in that place that's not quite the conscious but not quite the subconscious, either. I had started my teaching career before I sat down one night to give it a shot. I did three single-spaced pages of a first draft, then crumpled them up in disgust and threw them away.

I had four problems with what I'd written. First and least important was the fact that the story didn't move me emotionally. Second and slightly more important was the fact that I didn't much like the lead character. Carrie White seemed thick and passive, a ready-made victim. The other girls were chucking tampons and sanitary napkins at her, chanting "Plug it up! Plug it up!" and I just didn't care. Third and more important still was not feeling at home with either the surroundings or my all-girl cast of supporting characters. I had landed on Planet Female, and one sortie into the girls' locker room at Brunswick High School years before wasn't much help in navigating there. For me writing has always been best when it's intimate, as sexy as skin on skin. With *Carrie* I felt as if I were wearing a rubber wet-suit I couldn't pull off. Fourth and most important of all was the realization that the story wouldn't pay off unless it was pretty long, probably even longer than "Sometimes They Come Back," which had been at the absolute outer limit of what the men's magazine market could accept in terms of word-count. You had to save plenty of room for those pictures of cheerleaders who had somehow forgotten to put on their underpants—they were what guys really bought the magazines for. I couldn't see wasting two weeks, maybe even a month, cre-

ating a novella I didn't like and wouldn't be able to sell. So I threw it away.

The next night, when I came home from school, Tabby had the pages. She'd spied them while emptying my wastebasket, had shaken the cigarette ashes off the crumpled balls of paper, smoothed them out, and sat down to read them. She wanted me to go on with it, she said. She wanted to know the rest of the story. I told her I didn't know jackshit about high school girls. She said she'd help me with that part. She had her chin tilted down and was smiling in that severely cute way of hers. "You've got something here," she said. "I really think you do."

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I never got to like Carrie White and I never trusted Sue Snell's motives in sending her boyfriend to the prom with her, but I *did* have something there. Like a whole career. Tabby somehow knew it, and by the time I had piled up fifty single-spaced pages, I knew it, too. For one thing, I didn't think any of the characters who went to Carrie White's prom would ever forget it. Those few who lived through it, that was.

I had written three other novels before *Carrie*—*Rage, The Long Walk,* and *The Running Man* were later published. *Rage* is the most troubling of them. *The Long Walk* may be the best of them. But none of them taught me the things I learned from Carrie White. The most important is that the writer's original perception of a character or characters may be as erroneous as the reader's. Running a close second was the realization that stopping a piece of work just because it's hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to

go on when you don't feel like it, and sometimes you're doing good work when it feels like all you're managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position.

Tabby helped me, beginning with the information that the sanitary-napkin dispensers in high schools were usually not coin-op—faculty and administration didn't like the idea of girls' walking around with blood all over their skirts just because they happened to come to school short a quarter, my wife said. And I also helped myself, digging back to my memories of high school (my job teaching English didn't help; I was twenty-six by then, and on the wrong side of the desk), remembering what I knew about the two loneliest, most reviled girls in my class—how they looked, how they acted, how they were treated. Very rarely in my career have I explored more distasteful territory.

I'll call one of these girls Sondra. She and her mother lived in a trailer home not too far from me, with their dog, Cheddar Cheese. Sondra had a burbly, uneven voice, as if she were always speaking through a throatful of tightly packed phlegm. She wasn't fat, but her flesh had a loose, pale look, like the undersides of some mushrooms. Her hair clung to her pimply cheeks in tight Little Orphan Annie curls. She had no friends (except for Cheddar Cheese, I guess). One day her mother hired me to move some furniture. Dominating the trailer's living room was a nearly life-sized crucified Jesus, eyes turned up, mouth turned down, blood dribbling from beneath the crown of thorns on his head. He was naked except for a rag twisted around his hips and loins. Above this bit of breechclout were the hollowed belly and the jutting ribs of a concentration-camp inmate. It occurred to me that Sondra had grown up beneath the agonal gaze of this dying god, and doing so had undoubtedly played a part in making her

what she was when I knew her: a timid and homely outcast who went scuttling through the halls of Lisbon High like a frightened mouse.

"That's Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior," Sondra's mother said, following my gaze. "Have *you* been saved, Steve?"

I hastened to tell her I was saved as saved could be, although I didn't think you could ever be good enough to have *that* version of Jesus intervene on your behalf. The pain had driven him out of his mind. You could see it on his face. If *that* guy came back, he probably wouldn't be in a saving mood.

The other girl I'll call Dodie Franklin, only the other girls called her Dodo or Doodoo. Her parents were interested in only one thing, and that was entering contests. They were good at them, too; they had won all sorts of odd stuff, including a year's supply of Three Diamonds Brand Fancy Tuna and Jack Benny's Maxwell automobile. The Maxwell sat off to the left of their house in that part of Durham known as Southwest Bend, gradually sinking into the landscape. Every year or two, one of the local papers—the Portland *Press-Herald,* the Lewiston *Sun,* the Lisbon *Weekly Enterprise*—would do a piece on all the weird shit Dodie's folks had won in raffles and sweepstakes and giant prize drawings. Usually there would be a photo of the Maxwell, or Jack Benny with his violin, or both.

Whatever the Franklins might have won, a supply of clothes for growing teenagers wasn't part of the haul. Dodie and her brother Bill wore the same stuff every day for the first year and a half of high school: black pants and a short-sleeved checked sport shirt for him, a long black skirt, gray knee-socks, and a sleeveless white blouse for her. Some of my readers may not believe I am being literal when I say *every day,* but those who grew up in country towns during the fifties and sixties will know that I am. In the Durham of my

childhood, life wore little or any makeup. I went to school with kids who wore the same neckdirt for months, kids whose skin festered with sores and rashes, kids with the eerie dried-apple-doll faces that result from untreated burns, kids who were sent to school with stones in their dinnerbuckets and nothing but air in their Thermoses. It wasn't Arcadia; for the most part it was Dogpatch with no sense of humor.

Dodie and Bill Franklin got on all right at Durham Elementary, but high school meant a much bigger town, and for children like Dodie and Bill, Lisbon Falls meant ridicule and ruin. We watched in amusement and horror as Bill's sport shirt faded and began to unravel from the short sleeves up. He replaced a missing button with a paperclip. Tape, carefully colored black with a crayon to match his pants, appeared over a rip behind one knee. Dodie's sleeveless white blouse began to grow yellow with wear, age, and accumulated sweat-stains. As it grew thinner, the straps of her bra showed through more and more clearly. The other girls made fun of her, at first behind her back and then to her face. Teasing became taunting. The boys weren't a part of it; we had Bill to take care of (yes, I helped—not a whole lot, but I was there). Dodie had it worse, I think. The girls didn't just laugh at Dodie; they hated her, too. Dodie was everything they were afraid of.

After Christmas vacation of our sophomore year, Dodie came back to school resplendent. The dowdy old black skirt had been replaced by a cranberry-colored one that stopped at her knees instead of halfway down her shins. The tatty kneesocks had been replaced by nylon stockings, which looked pretty good because she had finally shaved the luxuriant mat of black hair off her legs. The ancient sleeveless blouse had given way to a soft wool sweater. She'd even had a permanent. Dodie was a girl transformed, and you could see by her face

that she knew it. I have no idea if she saved for those new clothes, if they were given to her for Christmas by her parents, or if she went through a hell of begging that finally bore dividends. It doesn't matter, because mere clothes changed nothing. The teasing that day was worse than ever. Her peers had no intention of letting her out of the box they'd put her in; she was punished for even trying to break free. I had several classes with her, and was able to observe Dodie's ruination at first hand. I saw her smile fade, saw the light in her eyes first dim and then go out. By the end of the day she was the girl she'd been before Christmas vacation—a dough-faced and freckle-cheeked wraith, scurrying through the halls with her eyes down and her books clasped to her chest.

She wore the new skirt and sweater the next day. And the next. And the next. When the school year ended she was still wearing them, although by then the weather was much too hot for wool and there were always beads of sweat at her temples and on her upper lip. The home permanent wasn't repeated and the new clothes took on a matted, dispirited look, but the teasing had dropped back to its pre-Christmas levels and the taunting stopped entirely. Someone made a break for the fence and had to be knocked down, that was all. Once the escape was foiled and the entire company of prisoners was once more accounted for, life could go back to normal.

Both Sondra and Dodie were dead by the time I started writing *Carrie.* Sondra moved out of the trailer in Durham, out from beneath the agonal gaze of the dying savior, and into an apartment in Lisbon Falls. She must have worked somewhere close by, probably in one of the mills or shoe factories. She was epileptic and died during a seizure. She lived alone, so there was no one to help her when she went down with her head bent the wrong way. Dodie married a TV weatherman

who gained something of a reputation in New England for his drawling downeast delivery. Following the birth of a child—I think it was their second—Dodie went into the cellar and put a .22 bullet in her abdomen. It was a lucky shot (or unlucky, depending on your point of view, I guess), hitting the portal vein and killing her. In town they said it was postpartum depression, how sad. Myself, I suspected high school hangover might have had something to do with it.

I never liked Carrie, that female version of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, but through Sondra and Dodie I came at last to understand her a little. I pitied her and I pitied her classmates as well, because I had been one of them once upon a time.

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The manuscript of *Carrie* went off to Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William Thompson. I pretty much forgot about it and moved on with my life, which at that time consisted of teaching school, raising kids, loving my wife, getting drunk on Friday afternoons, and writing stories.

My free period that semester was five, right after lunch. I usually spent it in the teachers' room, grading papers and wishing I could stretch out on the couch and take a nap—in the early afternoon I have all the energy of a boa constrictor that's just swallowed a goat. The intercom came on and Colleen Sites in the office asked if I was there. I said I was, and she asked me to come to the office. I had a phone call. My wife.

The walk from the teachers' room in the lower wing to the main office seemed long even with classes in session and the

halls mostly empty. I hurried, not quite running, my heart beating hard. Tabby would have had to dress the kids in their boots and jackets to use the neighbors' phone, and I could think of only two reasons she might have done so. Either Joe or Naomi had fallen off the stoop and broken a leg, or I had sold *Carrie.*

My wife, sounding out of breath but deliriously happy, read me a telegram. Bill Thompson (who would later go on to discover a Mississippi scribbler named John Grisham) had sent it after trying to call and discovering the Kings no longer had a phone. CONGRATULATIONS, it read. CARRIE OFFICIALLY A DOUBLEDAY BOOK. IS $2500 ADVANCE OKAY? THE FUTURE LIES AHEAD. LOVE, BILL.

Twenty-five hundred dollars was a very small advance, even for the early seventies, but I didn't know that and had no literary agent to know it for me. Before it occurred to me that I might actually need an agent, I had generated well over three million dollars' worth of income, a good deal of it for the publisher. (The standard Doubleday contract in those days was better than indentured servitude, but not much.) And my little high school horror novel marched toward publication with excruciating slowness. Although it was accepted in late March or early April of 1973, publication wasn't slated until the spring of 1974. This wasn't unusual. In those days Doubleday was an enormous fiction-mill churning out mysteries, romances, science fiction yarns, and Double D westerns at a rate of fifty or more a month, all of this in addition to a robust frontlist including books by heavy hitters like Leon Uris and Allen Drury. I was only one small fish in a very busy river.

Tabby asked if I could quit teaching. I told her no, not based on a twenty-five-hundred-dollar advance and only nebulous possibilities beyond that. If I'd been on my own,

maybe (hell, *probably*). But with a wife and two kids? Not happening. I remember the two of us lying in bed that night, eating toast and talking until the small hours of the morning. Tabby asked me how much we'd make if Doubleday was able to sell paperback reprint rights to *Carrie,* and I said I didn't know. I'd read that Mario Puzo had just scored a huge advance for paperback rights to *The Godfather*—four hundred thousand dollars according to the newspaper—but I didn't believe *Carrie* would fetch anything near that, assuming it sold to paperback at all.

Tabby asked—rather timidly for my normally outspoken wife—if *I* thought the book would find a paperback publisher. I told her I thought the chances were pretty good, maybe seven or eight in ten. She asked how much it might bring. I said my best guess would be somewhere between ten and sixty thousand dollars.

"Sixty thousand dollars?" She sounded almost shocked. "Is that much even possible?"

I said it was—not *likely,* perhaps, but *possible.* I also reminded her that my contract specified a fifty-fifty paperback split, which meant that if Ballantine or Dell *did* pay sixty grand, we'd only get thirty. Tabby didn't dignify this with a reply—she didn't have to. Thirty thousand dollars was what I could expect to make in four years of teaching, even with annual salary increases thrown in. It was a lot of money. Probably just pie in the sky, but it was a night for dreaming.

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Carrie inched along toward publication. We spent the advance on a new car (a standard shift which Tabby hated

and reviled in her most colorful millworker's language) and I signed a teaching contract for the 1973–1974 academic year. I was writing a new novel, a peculiar combination of *Peyton Place* and *Dracula* which I called *Second Coming.* We had moved to a ground-floor apartment back in Bangor, a real pit, but we were in town again, we had a car covered by an actual warranty, and we had a telephone.

To tell you the truth, *Carrie* had fallen off my radar screen almost completely. The kids were a handful, both the ones at school and the ones at home, and I had begun to worry about my mother. She was sixty-one, still working at Pineland Training Center and as funny as ever, but Dave said she didn't feel very well a lot of the time. Her bedside table was covered with prescription painkillers, and he was afraid there might be something seriously wrong with her. "She's always smoked like a chimney, you know," Dave said. He was a great one to talk, since he smoked like a chimney himself (so did I, and how my wife hated the expense and the constant ashy dirt of it), but I knew what he meant. And although I didn't live as close to her as Dave and didn't see her as often, the last time I *had* seen her I could tell she had lost weight.

"What can we do?" I asked. Behind the question was all we knew of our mother, who "kept herself to herself," as she liked to say. The result of that philosophy was a vast gray space where other families have histories; Dave and I knew almost nothing about our father or his family, and little enough about our own mother's past, which included an incredible (to me, at least) eight dead brothers and sisters and her own failed ambition to become a concert pianist (she did play the organ on some of the NBC radio soaps and Sunday church shows during the war, she claimed).

"We can't do anything," Dave replied, "until she asks."

One Sunday not long after that call, I got another one from Bill Thompson at Doubleday. I was alone in the apartment; Tabby had packed the kids off to her mother's for a visit, and I was working on the new book, which I thought of as *Vampires in* Our Town.

"Are you sitting down?" Bill asked.

"No," I said. Our phone hung on the kitchen wall, and I was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. "Do I need to?"

"You might," he said. "The paperback rights to *Carrie* went to Signet Books for four hundred thousand dollars."

When I was a little kid, Daddy Guy had once said to my mother: "Why don't you shut that kid up, Ruth? When Stephen opens his mouth, all his guts fall out." It was true then, has been true all my life, but on that Mother's Day in May of 1973 I was completely speechless. I stood there in the doorway, casting the same shadow as always, but I couldn't talk. Bill asked if I was still there, kind of laughing as he said it. He knew I was.

I hadn't heard him right. Couldn't have. The idea allowed me to find my voice again, at least. "Did you say it went for forty thousand dollars?"

"Four *hundred thousand* dollars," he said. "Under the rules of the road"—meaning the contract I'd signed—"two hundred K of it's yours. Congratulations, Steve."

I was still standing in the doorway, looking across the living room toward our bedroom and the crib where Joe slept. Our place on Sanford Street rented for ninety dollars a month and this man I'd only met once face-to-face was telling me I'd just won the lottery. The strength ran out of my legs. I didn't fall, exactly, but I kind of whooshed down to a sitting position there in the doorway.

"Are you sure?" I asked Bill.

He said he was. I asked him to say the number again, very slowly and very clearly, so I could be sure I hadn't misunderstood. He said the number was a four followed by five zeros. "After that a decimal point and two more zeros," he added.

We talked for another half an hour, but I don't remember a single word of what we said. When the conversation was over, I tried to call Tabby at her mother's. Her youngest sister, Marcella, said Tab had already left. I walked back and forth through the apartment in my stocking feet, exploding with good news and without an ear to hear it. I was shaking all over. At last I pulled on my shoes and walked downtown. The only store that was open on Bangor's Main Street was LaVerdiere's Drug. I suddenly felt that I had to buy Tabby a Mother's Day present, something wild and extravagant. I tried, but here's one of life's true facts: there's nothing really wild and extravagant for sale at LaVerdiere's. I did the best I could. I got her a hair-dryer.

When I got back home she was in the kitchen, unpacking the baby bags and singing along with the radio. I gave her the hair-dryer. She looked at it as if she'd never seen one before. "What's this for?" she asked.

I took her by the shoulders. I told her about the paperback sale. She didn't appear to understand. I told her again. Tabby looked over my shoulder at our shitty little four-room apartment, just as I had, and began to cry.

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I got drunk for the first time in 1966. This was on the senior class trip to Washington. We went on a bus, about forty kids

and three chaperones (one of them was Old Cue-Ball, as a matter of fact), and spent the first night in New York, where the drinking age was then eighteen. Thanks to my bad ears and shitty tonsils, I was almost nineteen. Room to spare.

A bunch of us more adventurous boys found a package store around the corner from the hotel. I cast an eye over the shelves, aware that my spending money was far from a fortune. There was too much—too many bottles, too many brands, too many prices over ten dollars. Finally I gave up and asked the guy behind the counter (the same bald, bored-looking, gray-coated guy who has, I'm convinced, sold alcohol virgins their first bottle since the dawn of commerce) what was cheap. Without a word, he put a pint of Old Log Cabin whiskey down on the Winston mat beside the cash register. The sticker on the label said $1.95. The price was right.

I have a memory of being led onto the elevator later that night—or maybe it was early the next morning—by Peter Higgins (Old Cue-Ball's son), Butch Michaud, Lenny Partridge, and John Chizmar. This memory is more like a scene from a TV show than a real memory. I seem to be outside of myself, watching the whole thing. There's just enough of me left inside to know that I am globally, perhaps even galactically, fucked up.

The camera watches as we go up to the girls' floor. The camera watches as I am propelled up and down the hall, a kind of rolling exhibit. An amusing one, it seems. The girls are in nighties, robes, curlers, cold cream. They are all laughing at me, but their laughter seems good-natured enough. The sound is muted, as if I am hearing them through cotton. I am trying to tell Carole Lemke that I love the way she wears her hair, and that she has the most beautiful blue eyes in the world. What comes out is something like "Uggin-wuggin-blue eyes,

wuggin-ruggin-whole world." Carole laughs and nods as if she understands completely. I am very happy. The world is seeing an asshole, no doubt, but he is a *happy* asshole, and everyone loves him. I spend several minutes trying to tell Gloria Moore that I've discovered The Secret Life of Dean Martin.

At some point after that I am in my bed. The bed holds still but the room starts to spin around it, faster and faster. It occurs to me that it's spinning like the turntable of my Webcor phonograph, on which I used to play Fats Domino and now play Dylan and the Dave Clark Five. The room is the turntable, I am the spindle, and pretty soon the spindle is going to start tossing its platters.

I go away for a little bit. When I wake up, I'm on my knees in the bathroom of the double room I'm sharing with my friend Louis Purington. I have no idea how I got in there, but it's good that I did because the toilet is full of bright yellow puke. *Looks like Niblets,* I think, and that's all it takes to get me going again. Nothing comes up but whiskey-flavored strings of spit, but my head feels like it's going to explode. I can't walk. I crawl back to bed with my sweaty hair hanging in my eyes. *I'll feel better tomorrow,* I think, and then I go away again.

In the morning my stomach has settled a little but my diaphragm is sore from vomiting and my head is throbbing like a mouthful of infected teeth. My eyes have turned into magnifying glasses; the hideously bright morning light coming in through the hotel windows is being concentrated by them and will soon set my brains on fire.

Participating in that day's scheduled activities—a walk to Times Square, a boat ride to the Statue of Liberty, a climb to the top of the Empire State Building—is out of the question. Walking? Urk. Boats? Double urk. Elevators? Urk to the

fourth power. Christ, I can hardly move. I make some sort of feeble excuse and spend most of the day in bed. By late afternoon I'm feeling a little better. I dress, creep down the hall to the elevator, and descend to the first floor. Eating is still impossible, but I believe I'm ready for a ginger ale, a cigarette, and a magazine. And who should I see in the lobby, sitting in a chair and reading a newspaper, but Mr. Earl Higgins, alias Old Cue-Ball. I pass him as silently as I can, but it's no good. When I come back from the gift shop he's sitting with his newspaper in his lap, looking at me. I feel my stomach drop. Here is more trouble with the principal, probably even worse than the trouble I got into over *The Village Vomit.* He calls me over and I discover something interesting: Mr. Higgins is actually an okay guy. He bounced me pretty hard over my joke newspaper, but perhaps Miss Margitan had insisted on that. And I'd just been sixteen, after all. On the day of my first hangover I'm going on nineteen, I've been accepted at the state university, and I have a mill job waiting for me when the class trip is over.

"I understand you were too sick to tour New York with the rest of the boys and girls," Old Cue-Ball says. He eyes me up and down.

I say that's right, I'd been sick.

"A shame for you to miss the fun," Old Cue-Ball says. "Feeling better now?"

Yes, I was feeling better. Probably stomach flu, one of those twenty-four-hour bugs.

"I hope you won't get that bug again," he says. "At least not on this trip." He looks at me for a moment longer, his eyes asking if we understand each other.

"I'm sure I won't," I say, meaning it. I know what drunk is like, now—a vague sense of roaring goodwill, a clearer sense

that most of your consciousness is out of your body, hovering like a camera in a science fiction movie and filming everything, and then the sickness, the puking, the aching head. No, I won't get that bug again, I tell myself, not on this trip, not ever. Once is enough, just to find out what it's like. Only an idiot would make a second experiment, and only a lunatic—a *masochistic* lunatic—would make booze a regular part of his life.

The next day we go on to Washington, making one stop in Amish country on the way. There's a liquor store near where the bus parks. I go in and look around. Although the drinking age in Pennsylvania is twenty-one, I must look easily that in my one good suit and Fazza's old black overcoat—in fact, I probably look like a freshly released young convict, tall and hungry and very likely not bolted together right. The clerk sells me a fifth of Four Roses without asking to see any ID, and by the time we stop for the night I'm drunk again.

Ten years or so later I'm in an Irish saloon with Bill Thompson. We have lots to celebrate, not the least of which is the completion of my third book, *The Shining*. That's the one which just happens to be about an alcoholic writer and ex-schoolteacher. It's July, the night of the All-Star baseball game. Our plan is to eat a good old-fashioned meal from the dishes set out on the steam table, then get shitfaced. We begin with a couple at the bar, and I start reading all the signs. HAVE A MANHATTAN IN MANHATTAN, says one. TUESDAYS ARE TWOFORS, says another. WORK IS THE CURSE OF THE DRINKING CLASS, says a third. And there, right in front of me, is one which reads: EARLY BIRD SPECIAL! SCREWDRIVERS A BUCK MONDAY–FRIDAY 8–10 A.M.

I motion to the bartender. He comes over. He's bald, he's wearing a gray jacket, he could be the guy who sold me my first pint back in 1966. Probably he is. I point to the sign and

ask, "Who comes in at eight-fifteen in the morning and orders a screwdriver?"

I'm smiling but he doesn't smile back. "College boys," he replies. "Just like you."

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In 1971 or '72, Mom's sister Carolyn Weimer died of breast cancer. My mother and my Aunt Ethelyn (Carolyn's twin) flew out to Aunt Cal's funeral in Minnesota. It was the first time my mother had flown in twenty years. On the plane trip back, she began to bleed profusely from what she would have called "her privates." Although long past her change of life by that point, she told herself it was simply one final menstrual period. Locked in the tiny bathroom of a bouncing TWA jet, she stanched the bleeding with tampons (*plug it up, plug it up,* as Sue Snell and her friends might have cried), then returned to her seat. She said nothing to Ethelyn and nothing to David and me. She didn't go to see Joe Mendes in Lisbon Falls, her physician since time out of mind. Instead of any of those things, she did what she always did in times of trouble: kept herself to herself. For awhile, things seemed to be all right. She enjoyed her job, she enjoyed her friends, and she enjoyed her four grandchildren, two from Dave's family and two from mine. Then things stopped being all right. In August of 1973, during a checkup following an operation to "strip" some of her outrageously varicose veins, my mother was diagnosed with uterine cancer. I think Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, who once dumped a bowl of Jell-O on the floor and then danced in it while her two boys lay collapsed in the corner, screaming with laughter, actually died of embarrassment.

The end came in February of 1974. By then a little of the money from *Carrie* had begun to flow and I was able to help with some of the medical expenses—there was that much to be glad about. And I was there for the last of it, staying in the back bedroom of Dave and Linda's place. I'd been drunk the night before but was only moderately hungover, which was good. One wouldn't want to be too hungover at the deathbed of one's mother.

Dave woke me at 6:15 in the morning, calling softly through the door that he thought she was going. When I got into the master bedroom he was sitting beside her on the bed and holding a Kool for her to smoke. This she did between harsh gasps for breath. She was only semiconscious, her eyes going from Dave to me and then back to Dave again. I sat next to Dave, took the cigarette, and held it to her mouth. Her lips stretched out to clamp on the filter. Beside her bed, reflected over and over again in a cluster of glasses, was an early bound galley of *Carrie.* Aunt Ethelyn had read it to her aloud a month or so before she died.

Mom's eyes went from Dave to me, Dave to me, Dave to me. She had gone from one hundred and sixty pounds to about ninety. Her skin was yellow and so tightly stretched that she looked like one of those mummies they parade through the streets of Mexico on the Day of the Dead. We took turns holding the cigarette for her, and when it was down to the filter, I put it out.

"My boys," she said, then lapsed into what might have been sleep or unconsciousness. My head ached. I took a couple of aspirin from one of the many bottles of medicine on her table. Dave held one of her hands and I held the other. Under the sheet was not the body of our mother but that of a starved and deformed child. Dave and I smoked and talked a

little. I don't remember what we said. It had rained the night before, then the temperature had dropped and the morning streets were filled with ice. We could hear the pause after each rasping breath she drew growing longer and longer. Finally there were no more breaths and it was all pause.

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My mother was buried out of the Congregational Church at Southwest Bend; the church she'd attended in Methodist Corners, where my brother and I grew up, was closed because of the cold. I gave the eulogy. I think I did a pretty good job, considering how drunk I was.

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Alcoholics build defenses like the Dutch build dikes. I spent the first twelve years or so of my married life assuring myself that I "just liked to drink." I also employed the world-famous Hemingway Defense. Although never clearly articulated (it would not be manly to do so), the Hemingway Defense goes something like this: as a writer, I am a very sensitive fellow, but I am also a man, and real men don't give in to their sensitivities. Only *sissy*-men do that. Therefore I drink. How else can I face the existential horror of it all and continue to work? Besides, come on, I can handle it. A real man always can.

Then, in the early eighties, Maine's legislature enacted a returnable-bottle and -can law. Instead of going into the trash, my sixteen-ounce cans of Miller Lite started going into a plastic container in the garage. One Thursday night I went

out there to toss in a few dead soldiers and saw that this container, which had been empty on Monday night, was now almost full. And since I was the only one in the house who drank Miller Lite—

Holy shit, I'm an alcoholic, I thought, and there was no dissenting opinion from inside my head—I was, after all, the guy who had written *The Shining* without even realizing (at least until that night) that I was writing about myself. My reaction to this idea wasn't denial or disagreement; it was what I'd call frightened determination. *You have to be careful, then,* I clearly remember thinking. *Because if you fuck up—*

If I fucked up, rolled my car over on a back road some night or blew an interview on live TV, someone would tell me I ought to get control of my drinking, and telling an alcoholic to control his drinking is like telling a guy suffering the world's most cataclysmic case of diarrhea to control his shitting. A friend of mine who has been through this tells an amusing story about his first tentative effort to get a grip on his increasingly slippery life. He went to a counsellor and said his wife was worried that he was drinking too much.

"How much do you drink?" the counsellor asked.

My friend looked at the counsellor with disbelief. "All of it," he said, as if that should have been self-evident.

I know how he felt. It's been almost twelve years since I took a drink, and I'm still struck by disbelief when I see someone in a restaurant with a half-finished glass of wine near at hand. I want to get up, go over, and yell "Finish that! Why don't you finish that?" into his or her face. I found the idea of social drinking ludicrous—if you didn't want to get drunk, why not just have a Coke?

My nights during the last five years of my drinking always ended with the same ritual: I'd pour any beers left in the

refrigerator down the sink. If I didn't, they'd talk to me as I lay in bed until I got up and had another. And another. And one more.

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By 1985 I had added drug addiction to my alcohol problem, yet I continued to function, as a good many substance abusers do, on a marginally competent level. I was terrified not to; by then I had no idea of how to live any other life. I hid the drugs I was taking as well as I could, both out of terror—what would happen to me without dope? I had forgotten the trick of being straight—and out of shame. I was wiping my ass with poison ivy again, this time on a daily basis, but I couldn't ask for help. That's not the way you did things in my family. In my family what you did was smoke your cigarettes and dance in the Jell-O and keep yourself to yourself.

Yet the part of me that writes the stories, the deep part that knew I was an alcoholic as early as 1975, when I wrote *The Shining,* wouldn't accept that. Silence isn't what that part is about. It began to scream for help in the only way it knew how, through my fiction and through my monsters. In late 1985 and early 1986 I wrote *Misery* (the title quite aptly described my state of mind), in which a writer is held prisoner and tortured by a psychotic nurse. In the spring and summer of 1986 I wrote *The Tommyknockers,* often working until midnight with my heart running at a hundred and thirty beats a minute and cotton swabs stuck up my nose to stem the coke-induced bleeding.

Tommyknockers is a forties-style science fiction tale in which the writer-heroine discovers an alien spacecraft buried in the

ground. The crew is still on board, not dead but only hibernating. These alien creatures got into your head and just started . . . well, tommyknocking around in there. What you got was energy and a kind of superficial intelligence (the writer, Bobbi Anderson, creates a telepathic typewriter and an atomic hot-water heater, among other things). What you gave up in exchange was your soul. It was the best metaphor for drugs and alcohol my tired, overstressed mind could come up with.

Not long after that my wife, finally convinced that I wasn't going to pull out of this ugly downward spiral on my own, stepped in. It couldn't have been easy—by then I was no longer within shouting distance of my right mind—but she did it. She organized an intervention group formed of family and friends, and I was treated to a kind of *This Is Your Life* in hell. Tabby began by dumping a trashbag full of stuff from my office out on the rug: beercans, cigarette butts, cocaine in gram bottles and cocaine in plastic Baggies, coke spoons caked with snot and blood, Valium, Xanax, bottles of Robitussin cough syrup and NyQuil cold medicine, even bottles of mouthwash. A year or so before, observing the rapidity with which huge bottles of Listerine were disappearing from the bathroom, Tabby asked me if I drank the stuff. I responded with self-righteous hauteur that I most certainly did not. Nor did I. I drank the Scope instead. It was tastier, had that hint of mint.

The point of this intervention, which was certainly as unpleasant for my wife and kids and friends as it was for me, was that I was dying in front of them. Tabby said I had my choice: I could get help at a rehab or I could get the hell out of the house. She said that she and the kids loved me, and for that very reason none of them wanted to witness my suicide.

I bargained, because that's what addicts do. I was charming, because that's what addicts are. In the end I got two weeks to think about it. In retrospect, this seems to summarize all the insanity of that time. Guy is standing on top of a burning building. Helicopter arrives, hovers, drops a rope ladder. *Climb up!* the man leaning out of the helicopter's door shouts. Guy on top of the burning building responds, *Give me two weeks to think about it.*

I did think, though—as well as I could in my addled state—and what finally decided me was Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery.* Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to work anymore if I quit drinking and drugging, but I decided (again, so far as I was able to decide anything in my distraught and depressed state of mind) that I would trade writing for staying married and watching the kids grow up. If it came to that.

It didn't, of course. The idea that creative endeavor and mind-altering substances are entwined is one of the great pop-intellectual myths of our time. The four twentieth-century writers whose work is most responsible for it are probably Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and the poet Dylan Thomas. They are the writers who largely formed our vision of an existential English-speaking wasteland where people have been cut off from one another and live in an atmosphere of emotional strangulation and despair. These concepts are very familiar to most alcoholics; the common reaction to them is amusement. Substance-abusing writers are just substance abusers—common garden-variety drunks and druggies, in other words. Any claims that the drugs and alcohol are necessary to dull a finer sensibility are just the usual self-serving bullshit. I've heard alco-

holic snowplow drivers make the same claim, that they drink to still the demons. It doesn't matter if you're James Jones, John Cheever, or a stewbum snoozing in Penn Station; for an addict, the right to the drink or drug of choice must be preserved at all costs. Hemingway and Fitzgerald didn't drink because they were creative, alienated, or morally weak. They drank because it's what alkies are wired up to do. Creative people probably *do* run a greater risk of alcoholism and addiction than those in some other jobs, but so what? We all look pretty much the same when we're puking in the gutter.

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At the end of my adventures I was drinking a case of sixteen-ounce tallboys a night, and there's one novel, *Cujo,* that I barely remember writing at all. I don't say that with pride or shame, only with a vague sense of sorrow and loss. I like that book. I wish I could remember enjoying the good parts as I put them down on the page.

At the worst of it I no longer wanted to drink and no longer wanted to be sober, either. I felt evicted from life. At the start of the road back I just tried to believe the people who said that things would get better if I gave them time to do so. And I never stopped writing. Some of the stuff that came out was tentative and flat, but at least it was there. I buried those unhappy, lackluster pages in the bottom drawer of my desk and got on to the next project. Little by little I found the beat again, and after that I found the joy again. I came back to my family with gratitude, and back to my work with relief—I came back to it the way folks come back to a summer cottage after a long winter, checking first to make sure

nothing has been stolen or broken during the cold season. Nothing had been. It was still all there, still all whole. Once the pipes were thawed out and the electricity was turned back on, everything worked fine.

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The last thing I want to tell you in this part is about my desk. For years I dreamed of having the sort of massive oak slab that would dominate a room—no more child's desk in a trailer laundry-closet, no more cramped kneehole in a rented house. In 1981 I got the one I wanted and placed it in the middle of a spacious, skylighted study (it's a converted stable loft at the rear of the house). For six years I sat behind that desk either drunk or wrecked out of my mind, like a ship's captain in charge of a voyage to nowhere.

A year or two after I sobered up, I got rid of that monstrosity and put in a living-room suite where it had been, picking out the pieces and a nice Turkish rug with my wife's help. In the early nineties, before they moved on to their own lives, my kids sometimes came up in the evening to watch a basketball game or a movie and eat pizza. They usually left a boxful of crusts behind when they moved on, but I didn't care. They came, they seemed to enjoy being with me, and I know I enjoyed being with them. I got another desk—it's handmade, beautiful, and half the size of the *T. rex* desk. I put it at the far west end of the office, in a corner under the eave. That eave is very like the one I slept under in Durham, but there are no rats in the walls and no senile grandmother downstairs yelling for someone to feed Dick the horse. I'm sitting under it now, a fifty-three-year-old man

with bad eyes, a gimp leg, and no hangover. I'm doing what I know how to do, and as well as I know how to do it. I came through all the stuff I told you about (and plenty more that I didn't), and now I'm going to tell you as much as I can about the job. As promised, it won't take long.

It starts with this: put your desk in the corner, and every time you sit down there to write, remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. Life isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around.

What Writing Is

Telepathy, of course. It's amusing when you stop to think about it—for years people have argued about whether or not such a thing exists, folks like J. B. Rhine have busted their brains trying to create a valid testing process to isolate it, and all the time it's been right there, lying out in the open like Mr. Poe's Purloined Letter. All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation. Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but even if I am we may as well stick with writing, since it's what we came here to think and talk about.

My name is Stephen King. I'm writing the first draft of this part at my desk (the one under the eave) on a snowy morning in December of 1997. There are things on my mind. Some are worries (bad eyes, Christmas shopping not even started, wife under the weather with a virus), some are good things (our younger son made a surprise visit home from college, I got to play Vince Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac" with The Wallflowers at a concert), but right now all that stuff is up top. I'm in another place, a basement place where there are lots of bright lights and clear images. This is a place I've built for myself over the years. It's a far-seeing place. I know it's a little strange, a little bit of a contradiction, that a far-seeing place

should also be a basement place, but that's how it is with me. If you construct your own far-seeing place, you might put it in a treetop or on the roof of the World Trade Center or on the edge of the Grand Canyon. That's your little red wagon, as Robert McCammon says in one of his novels.

This book is scheduled to be published in the late summer or early fall of 2000. If that's how things work out, then you are somewhere downstream on the timeline from me . . . but you're quite likely in your own far-seeing place, the one where you go to receive telepathic messages. Not that you *have* to be there; books are a uniquely portable magic. I usually listen to one in the car (always unabridged; I think abridged audiobooks are the pits), and carry another wherever I go. You just never know when you'll want an escape hatch: mile-long lines at tollbooth plazas, the fifteen minutes you have to spend in the hall of some boring college building waiting for your advisor (who's got some yank-off in there threatening to commit suicide because he/she is flunking Custom Kurmfurling 101) to come out so you can get his signature on a drop-card, airport boarding lounges, laundromats on rainy afternoons, and the absolute worst, which is the doctor's office when the guy is running late and you have to wait half an hour in order to have something sensitive mauled. At such times I find a book vital. If I have to spend time in purgatory before going to one place or the other, I guess I'll be all right as long as there's a lending library (if there is it's probably stocked with nothing but novels by Danielle Steel and *Chicken Soup* books, ha-ha, joke's on you, Steve).

So I read where I can, but I have a favorite place and probably you do, too—a place where the light is good and the vibe is usually strong. For me it's the blue chair in my study. For you it might be the couch on the sunporch, the rocker in

the kitchen, or maybe it's propped up in your bed—reading in bed can be heaven, assuming you can get just the right amount of light on the page and aren't prone to spilling your coffee or cognac on the sheets.

So let's assume that you're in your favorite receiving place just as I am in the place where I do my best transmitting. We'll have to perform our mentalist routine not just over distance but over time as well, yet that presents no real problem; if we can still read Dickens, Shakespeare, and (with the help of a footnote or two) Herodotus, I think we can manage the gap between 1997 and 2000. And here we go—actual telepathy in action. You'll notice I have nothing up my sleeves and that my lips never move. Neither, most likely, do yours.

Look—here's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.

Do we see the same thing? We'd have to get together and compare notes to make absolutely sure, but I think we do. There will be necessary variations, of course: some receivers will see a cloth which is turkey red, some will see one that's scarlet, while others may see still other shades. (To color-blind receivers, the red tablecloth is the dark gray of cigar ashes.) Some may see scalloped edges, some may see straight ones. Decorative souls may add a little lace, and welcome—my tablecloth is your tablecloth, knock yourself out.

Likewise, the matter of the cage leaves quite a lot of room for individual interpretation. For one thing, it is described in terms of *rough comparison,* which is useful only if you and I see the world and measure the things in it with similar eyes. It's easy to become careless when making rough comparisons, but

the alternative is a prissy attention to detail that takes all the fun out of writing. What am I going to say, "on the table is a cage three feet, six inches in length, two feet in width, and fourteen inches high"? That's not prose, that's an instruction manual. The paragraph also doesn't tell us what sort of material the cage is made of—wire mesh? steel rods? glass?—but does it really matter? We all understand the cage is a see-through medium; beyond that, we don't care. The most interesting thing here isn't even the carrot-munching rabbit in the cage, but the number on its back. Not a six, not a four, not nineteen-point-five. It's an eight. This is what we're looking at, and we all see it. I didn't tell you. You didn't ask me. I never opened my mouth and you never opened yours. We're not even in the same *year* together, let alone the same room . . . except we *are* together. We're close.

We're having a meeting of the minds.

I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, and the number eight in blue ink. You got them all, especially that blue eight. We've engaged in an act of telepathy. No mythy-mountain shit; real telepathy. I'm not going to belabor the point, but before we go any further you have to understand that I'm not trying to be cute; there *is* a point to be made.

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair—the sense that you can never completely put on the page what's in your mind and heart. You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: *you must not come lightly to the blank page.*

I'm not asking you to come reverently or unquestioningly; I'm not asking you to be politically correct or cast aside your sense of humor (please God you have one). This isn't a popularity contest, it's not the moral Olympics, and it's not church. But it's *writing,* damn it, not washing the car or putting on eyeliner. If you can take it seriously, we can do business. If you can't or won't, it's time for you to close the book and do something else.

Wash the car, maybe.

Toolbox

Grandpa was a carpenter,
he built houses, stores and banks,
he chain-smoked Camel cigarettes
and hammered nails in planks.
He was level-on-the-level,
shaved even every door,
and voted for Eisenhower
'cause Lincoln won the war.

That's one of my favorite John Prine lyrics, probably because my grandpa was also a carpenter. I don't know about stores and banks, but Guy Pillsbury built his share of houses and spent a good many years making sure the Atlantic Ocean and the harsh seacoast winters didn't wash away the Winslow Homer estate in Prout's Neck. Fazza smoked cigars, though, not Camels. It was my Uncle Oren, also a carpenter, who smoked the Camels. And when Fazza retired, it was Uncle Oren who inherited the old fellow's toolbox. I don't remember its being there in the garage on the day I dropped the cinderblock on my foot, but it probably was sitting in its accustomed place just outside the nook where my cousin Donald kept his hockey sticks, ice skates, and baseball glove.

The toolbox was what we called a big 'un. It had three levels, the top two removable, all three containing little drawers as cunning as Chinese boxes. It was handmade, of course. Dark wooden slats were bound together by tiny nails and strips of brass. The lid was held down by big latches; to my child's eye they looked like the latches on a giant's lunchbox. Inside the top was a silk lining, rather odd in such a context and made more striking still by the pattern, which was pinkish-red cabbage roses fading into a smog of grease and dirt. On the sides were great big grabhandles. You never saw a toolbox like this one for sale at Wal-Mart or Western Auto, believe me. When my uncle first got it, he found a brass etching of a famous Homer painting—I believe it was *The Undertow*—lying in the bottom. Some years later Uncle Oren had it authenticated by a Homer expert in New York, and a few years after that I believe he sold it for a good piece of money. Exactly how or why Fazza came by the engraving in the first place is a mystery, but there was no mystery about the origins of the toolbox—he made it himself.

One summer day I helped Uncle Oren replace a broken screen on the far side of the house. I might have been eight or nine at the time. I remember following him with the replacement screen balanced on my head, like a native bearer in a Tarzan movie. He had the toolbox by the grabhandles, horsing it along at thigh level. As always, Uncle Oren was wearing khaki pants and a clean white tee-shirt. Sweat gleamed in his graying Army crewcut. A Camel hung from his lower lip. (When I came in years later with a pack of Chesterfields in my breast pocket, Uncle Oren sneered at them and called them "stockade cigarettes.")

We finally reached the window with the broken screen and he set the toolbox down with an audible sigh of relief.

When Dave and I tried to lift it from its place on the garage floor, each of us holding one of the handles, we could barely budge it. Of course we were just little kids back then, but even so I'd guess that Fazza's fully loaded toolbox weighed between eighty and a hundred and twenty pounds.

Uncle Oren let me undo the big latches. The common tools were all on the top layer of the box. There was a hammer, a saw, the pliers, a couple of sized wrenches and an adjustable; there was a level with that mystic yellow window in the middle, a drill (the various bits were neatly drawered farther down in the depths), and two screwdrivers. Uncle Oren asked me for a screwdriver.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Either-or," he replied.

The broken screen was held on by loophead screws, and it really didn't matter whether he used a regular screwdriver or the Phillips on them; with loopheads you just stuck the screwdriver's barrel through the hole at the top of the screw and then spun it the way you spin a tire iron once you've got the lugnuts loose.

Uncle Oren took the screws out—there were eight, which he handed to me for safekeeping—and then removed the old screen. He set it against the house and held up the new one. The holes in the screen's frame mated up neatly with the holes in the window-frame. Uncle Oren grunted with approval when he saw this. He took the loophead screws back from me, one after the other, got them started with his fingers, then tightened them down just as he'd loosened them, by inserting the screwdriver's barrel through the loops and turning them.

When the screen was secure, Uncle Oren gave me the screwdriver and told me to put it back in the toolbox and "latch her up." I did, but I was puzzled. I asked him why he'd

lugged Fazza's toolbox all the way around the house, if all he'd needed was that one screwdriver. He could have carried a screwdriver in the back pocket of his khakis.

"Yeah, but Stevie," he said, bending to grasp the handles, "I didn't know what else I might find to do once I got out here, did I? It's best to have your tools with you. If you don't, you're apt to find something you didn't expect and get discouraged."

I want to suggest that to write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle so you can carry it with you. Then, instead of looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work.

Fazza's toolbox had three levels. I think that yours should have at least four. You could have five or six, I suppose, but there comes a point where a toolbox becomes too large to be portable and thus loses its chief virtue. You'll also want all those little drawers for your screws and nuts and bolts, but where you put those drawers and what you put in them . . . well, that's your little red wagon, isn't it? You'll find you have most of the tools you need already, but I advise you to look at each one again as you load it into your box. Try to see each one new, remind yourself of its function, and if some are rusty (as they may be if you haven't done this seriously in awhile), clean them off.

Common tools go on top. The commonest of all, the bread of writing, is vocabulary. In this case, you can happily pack what you have without the slightest bit of guilt and inferiority. As the whore said to the bashful sailor, "It ain't how much you've got, honey, it's how you use it."

Some writers have enormous vocabularies; these are folks

who'd know if there really *is* such a thing as an insalubrious dithyramb or a cozening raconteur, people who haven't missed a multiple-choice answer in Wilfred Funk's *It Pays to Increase Your Word Power* in oh, thirty years or so. For example:

> The leathery, undeteriorative, and almost indestructible quality was an inherent attribute of the thing's form of organization, and pertained to some paleogean cycle of invertebrate evolution utterly beyond our powers of speculation.
>
> —H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*

Like it? Here's another:

> In some [of the cups] there was no evidence whatever that anything had been planted; in others, wilted brown stalks gave testimony to some inscrutable depredation.
>
> —T. Coraghessan Boyle, *Budding Prospects*

And yet a third—this is a good one, you'll like it:

> Someone snatched the old woman's blindfold from her and she and the juggler were clouted away and when the company turned in to sleep and the low fire was roaring in the blast like a thing alive these four yet crouched at the edge of the firelight among their strange chattels and watched how the ragged flames fled down the wind as if sucked by some maelstrom out there in the void, some vortex in that waste apposite to which man's transit and his reckonings alike lay abrogate.
>
> —Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

Other writers use smaller, simpler vocabularies. Examples of this hardly seem necessary, but I'll offer a couple of my favorites, just the same:

> He came to the river. The river was there.
>
> —Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River"

> They caught the kid doing something nasty under the bleachers.
>
> —Theodore Sturgeon, *Some of Your Blood*

> This is what happened.
>
> —Douglas Fairbairn, *Shoot*

> Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold.
>
> —John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Steinbeck sentence is especially interesting. It's fifty words long. Of those fifty words, thirty-nine have but one syllable. That leaves eleven, but even that number is deceptive; Steinbeck uses because three times, owner twice, and hated twice. There is no word longer than two syllables in the entire sentence. The structure is complex; the vocabulary is not far removed from the old Dick and Jane primers. *The Grapes of Wrath* is, of course, a fine novel. I believe that *Blood Meridian* is another, although there are great whacks of it that I don't fully understand. What of that? I can't decipher the words to many of the popular songs I love, either.

There's also stuff you'll never find in the dictionary, but it's still vocabulary. Check out the following:

"Egggh, whaddaya? Whaddaya want from me?"
"Here come Hymie!"
"Unnh! Unnnh! Unnnhh!"
"Chew my willie, Yo' Honor."
"Yeggghhh, fuck you, too, man!"
—Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*

This last is phonetically rendered street vocabulary. Few writers have Wolfe's ability to translate such stuff to the page. (Elmore Leonard is another writer who can do it.) Some street-rap gets into the dictionary eventually, but not until it's safely dead. And I don't think you'll ever find Yeggghhh in Webster's Unabridged.

Put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your toolbox, and don't make any conscious effort to improve it. (You'll be doing that as you read, of course . . . but that comes later.) One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you're maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes. The pet is embarrassed and the person who committed this act of premeditated cuteness should be even more embarrassed. Make yourself a solemn promise right now that you'll never use "emolument" when you mean "tip" and you'll never say John stopped long enough to perform an act of excretion when you mean John stopped long enough to take a shit. If you believe "take a shit" would be considered offensive or inappropriate by your audience, feel free to say John stopped long enough to move his bowels (or perhaps John stopped

long enough to "push"). I'm not trying to get you to talk dirty, only plain and direct. Remember that the basic rule of vocabulary is *use the first word that comes to your mind, if it is appropriate and colorful.* If you hesitate and cogitate, you will come up with another word—of course you will, there's always another word—but it probably won't be as good as your first one, or as close to what you really mean.

This business of meaning is a very big deal. If you doubt it, think of all the times you've heard someone say "I just can't describe it" or "That isn't what I mean." Think of all the times you've said those things yourself, usually in a tone of mild or serious frustration. The word is only a representation of the meaning; even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning. Given that, why in God's name would you want to make things worse by choosing a word which is only cousin to the one you really wanted to use?

And *do* feel free to take appropriateness into account; as George Carlin once observed, in some company it's perfectly all right to prick your finger, but very bad form to finger your prick.

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You'll also want grammar on the top shelf of your toolbox, and don't annoy me with your moans of exasperation or your cries that you *don't understand* grammar, you *never did understand* grammar, you flunked that *whole semester* in Sophomore English, writing is fun but grammar sucks the big one.

Relax. Chill. We won't spend much time here because we don't need to. One either absorbs the grammatical principles of one's native language in conversation and in reading or

one does not. What Sophomore English does (or tries to do) is little more than the naming of parts.

And this isn't high school. Now that you're not worried that (a) your skirt is too short or too long and the other kids will laugh at you, (b) you're not going to make the varsity swimming team, (c) you're still going to be a pimple-studded virgin when you graduate (probably when you die, for that matter), (d) the physics teacher won't grade the final on a curve, or (e) nobody really likes you anyway AND THEY NEVER DID . . . now that all that extraneous shit is out of the way, you can study certain academic matters with a degree of concentration you could never manage while attending the local textbook loonybin. And once you start, you'll find you know almost all of the stuff anyway—it is, as I said, mostly a matter of cleaning the rust off the drillbits and sharpening the blade of your saw.

Plus . . . oh, to hell with it. If you can remember all the accessories that go with your best outfit, the contents of your purse, the starting lineup of the New York Yankees or the Houston Oilers, or what label "Hang On Sloopy" by The McCoys was on, you are capable of remembering the difference between a gerund (verb form used as a noun) and a participle (verb form used as an adjective).

I thought long and hard about whether or not to include a detailed section on grammar in this little book. Part of me would actually like to; I taught it successfully at high school (where it hid under the name Business English), and I enjoyed it as a student. American grammar doesn't have the sturdiness of British grammar (a British advertising man with a proper education can make magazine copy for ribbed condoms sound like the Magna goddam Carta), but it has its own scruffy charm.

In the end I decided against it, probably for the same reason William Strunk decided not to recap the basics when he wrote the first edition of *The Elements of Style:* if you don't know, it's too late. And those really incapable of grasping grammar—as I am incapable of playing certain guitar riffs and progressions—will have little or no use for a book like this, anyway. In that sense I am preaching to the converted. Yet allow me to go on just a little bit further—will you indulge me?

Vocabulary used in speech or writing organizes itself in seven parts of speech (eight, if you count interjections such as Oh! and Gosh! and Fuhgeddaboudit!). Communication composed of these parts of speech must be organized by rules of grammar upon which we agree. When these rules break down, confusion and misunderstanding result. Bad grammar produces bad sentences. My favorite example from Strunk and White is this one: "As a mother of five, with another one on the way, my ironing board is always up."

Nouns and verbs are the two indispensable parts of writing. Without one of each, no group of words can be a sentence, since a sentence is, by definition, a group of words containing a subject (noun) and a predicate (verb); these strings of words begin with a capital letter, end with a period, and combine to make a complete thought which starts in the writer's head and then leaps to the reader's.

Must you write complete sentences each time, every time? Perish the thought. If your work consists only of fragments and floating clauses, the Grammar Police aren't going to come and take you away. Even William Strunk, that Mussolini of rhetoric, recognized the delicious pliability of language. "It is an old observation," he writes, "that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric." Yet he goes on to add this thought, which I urge you to consider:

"Unless he is certain of doing well, [the writer] will probably do best to follow the rules."

The telling clause here is *Unless he is certain of doing well.* If you don't have a rudimentary grasp of how the parts of speech translate into coherent sentences, how can you be certain that you *are* doing well? How will you know if you're doing ill, for that matter? The answer, of course, is that you can't, you won't. One who does grasp the rudiments of grammar finds a comforting simplicity at its heart, where there need be only nouns, the words that name, and verbs, the words that act.

Take any noun, put it with any verb, and you have a sentence. It never fails. Rocks explode. Jane transmits. Mountains float. These are all perfect sentences. Many such thoughts make little rational sense, but even the stranger ones (Plums deify!) have a kind of poetic weight that's nice. The simplicity of noun-verb construction is useful—at the very least it can provide a safety net for your writing. Strunk and White caution against too many simple sentences in a row, but simple sentences provide a path you can follow when you fear getting lost in the tangles of rhetoric—all those restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, those modifying phrases, those appositives and compound-complex sentences. If you start to freak out at the sight of such unmapped territory (unmapped by you, at least), just remind yourself that rocks explode, Jane transmits, mountains float, and plums deify. Grammar is not just a pain in the ass; it's the pole you grab to get your thoughts up on their feet and walking. Besides, all those simple sentences worked for Hemingway, didn't they? Even when he was drunk on his ass, he was a fucking genius.

If you want to refurbish your grammar, go to your local used-book store and find a copy of *Warriner's English Grammar*

and Composition—the same book most of us took home and dutifully covered with brown paper shopping-bags when we were sophomores and juniors in high school. You'll be relieved and delighted, I think, to find that almost all you need is summarized on the front and back endpapers of the book.

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Despite the brevity of his style manual, William Strunk found room to discuss his own dislikes in matters of grammar and usage. He hated the phrase "student body," for instance, insisting that "studentry" was both clearer and without the ghoulish connotations he saw in the former term. He thought "personalize" a pretentious word. (Strunk suggests "Get up a letterhead" to replace "Personalize your stationery.") He hated phrases such as "the fact that" and "along these lines."

I have my own dislikes—I believe that anyone using the phrase "That's so cool" should have to stand in the corner and that those using the far more odious phrases "at this point in time" and "at the end of the day" should be sent to bed without supper (or writing-paper, for that matter). Two of my other pet peeves have to do with this most basic level of writing, and I want to get them off my chest before we move along.

Verbs come in two types, active and passive. With an active verb, the subject of the sentence is doing something. With a passive verb, something is being done *to* the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting it happen. *You should avoid the passive tense.* I'm not the only one who says so; you can find the same advice in *The Elements of Style.*

Messrs. Strunk and White don't speculate as to why so

many writers are attracted to passive verbs, but I'm willing to; I think timid writers like them for the same reason timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe. There is no troublesome action to contend with; the subject just has to close its eyes and think of England, to paraphrase Queen Victoria. I think unsure writers also feel the passive voice somehow lends their work authority, perhaps even a quality of majesty. If you find instruction manuals and lawyers' torts majestic, I guess it does.

The timid fellow writes The meeting will be held at seven o'clock because that somehow says to him, "Put it this way and people will believe *you really know.*" Purge this quisling thought! Don't be a muggle! Throw back your shoulders, stick out your chin, and put that meeting in charge! Write The meeting's at seven. There, by God! Don't you feel better?

I won't say there's no place for the passive tense. Suppose, for instance, a fellow dies in the kitchen but ends up somewhere else. The body was carried from the kitchen and placed on the parlor sofa is a fair way to put this, although "was carried" and "was placed" still irk the shit out of me. I accept them but I don't embrace them. What I would embrace is Freddy and Myra carried the body out of the kitchen and laid it on the parlor sofa. Why does the body have to be the subject of the sentence, anyway? It's dead, for Christ's sake! Fuhgeddaboudit!

Two pages of the passive voice—just about any business document ever written, in other words, not to mention reams of bad fiction—make me want to scream. It's weak, it's circuitous, and it's frequently tortuous, as well. How about this: My first kiss will always be recalled by me as how my romance with Shayna was begun. Oh, man—who farted, right? A simpler way to express this idea—sweeter and more

forceful, as well—might be this: My romance with Shayna began with our first kiss. I'll never forget it. I'm not in love with this because it uses *with* twice in four words, but at least we're out of that awful passive voice.

You might also notice how much simpler the thought is to understand when it's broken up into *two* thoughts. This makes matters easier for the reader, and the reader must always be your main concern; without Constant Reader, you are just a voice quacking in the void. And it's no walk in the park being the guy on the receiving end. "[Will Strunk] felt the reader was in serious trouble most of the time," E. B. White writes in his introduction to *The Elements of Style,* "a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone trying to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope." And remember: The writer threw the rope, not The rope was thrown by the writer. Please oh please.

The other piece of advice I want to give you before moving on to the next level of the toolbox is this: *The adverb is not your friend.*

Adverbs, you will remember from your own version of Business English, are words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. They're the ones that usually end in -ly. Adverbs, like the passive voice, seem to have been created with the timid writer in mind. With the passive voice, the writer usually expresses fear of not being taken seriously; it is the voice of little boys wearing shoepolish mustaches and little girls clumping around in Mommy's high heels. With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he/she isn't expressing himself/herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or the picture across.

Consider the sentence He closed the door firmly. It's by

no means a terrible sentence (at least it's got an active verb going for it), but ask yourself if firmly really has to be there. You can argue that it expresses a degree of difference between He closed the door and He slammed the door, and you'll get no argument from me . . . but what about context? What about all the enlightening (not to say emotionally moving) prose which came *before* He closed the door firmly? Shouldn't this tell us how he closed the door? And if the foregoing prose *does* tell us, isn't firmly an extra word? Isn't it redundant?

Someone out there is now accusing me of being tiresome and anal-retentive. I deny it. I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they're like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day . . . fifty the day after that . . . and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it's—*GASP!!*—too late.

I can be a good sport about adverbs, though. Yes I can. With one exception: dialogue attribution. I insist that you use the adverb in dialogue attribution only in the rarest and most special of occasions . . . and not even then, if you can avoid it. Just to make sure we all know what we're talking about, examine these three sentences:

"Put it down!" she shouted.
"Give it back," he pleaded, "it's mine."
"Don't be such a fool, Jekyll," Utterson said.

In these sentences, shouted, pleaded, and said are verbs of dialogue attribution. Now look at these dubious revisions: