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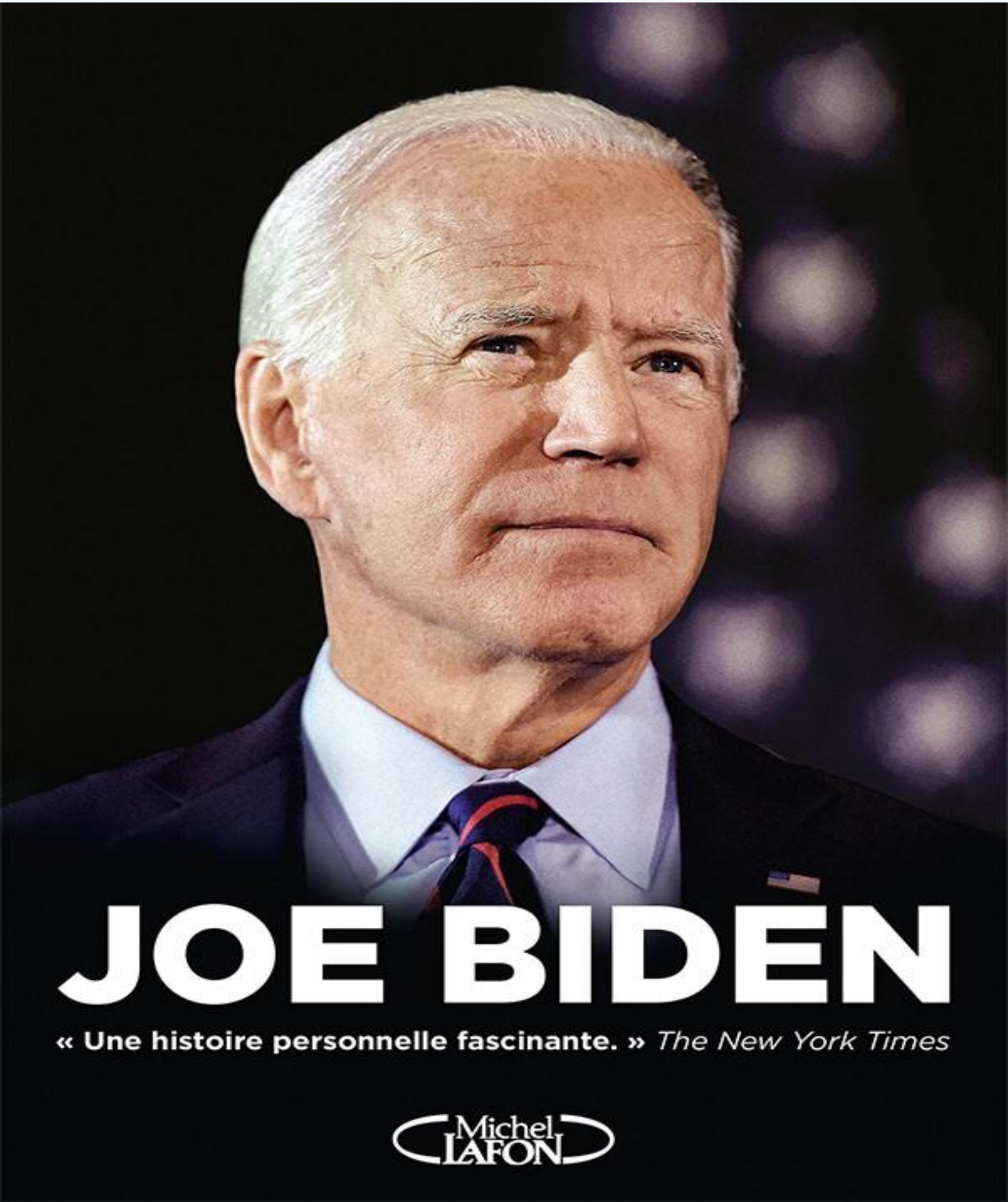

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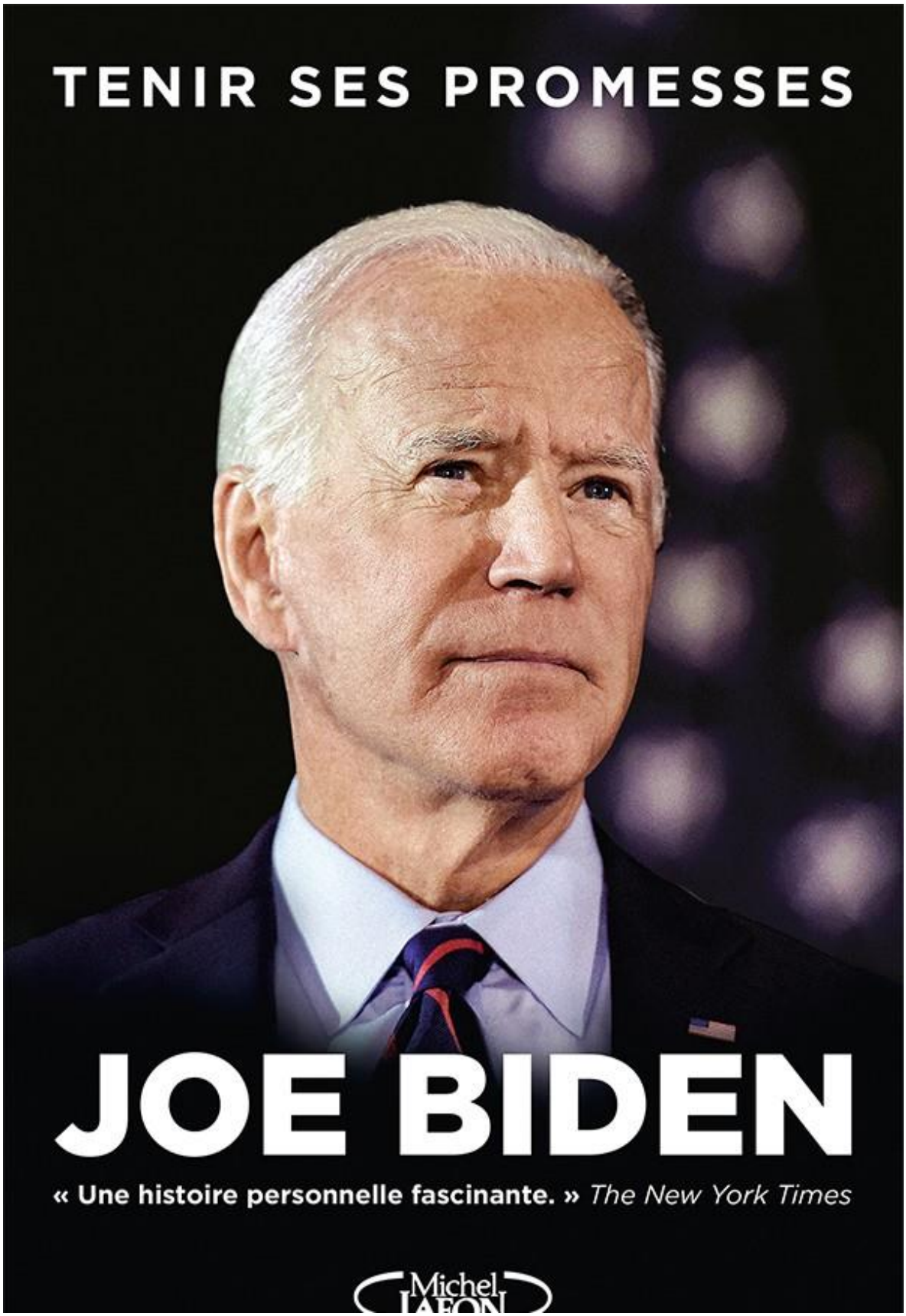

JOE BIDEN

« Une histoire personnelle fascinante. » *The New York Times*

Michel LAFON

KEEP ITS PROMISES

JOE BIDEN

Translated from the English (USA) by Sebastien Baert, Eric Betsch and Joelle fouati

Michel LAFON

For my parents,
who kept their promises.

The woods are charming, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep.
And a long way to go before I sleep, And a long way to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

Prologue

It was in the 1950s, in my grandfather's kitchen, that I was introduced to the first principle of politics, to its very foundation. I was then twelve or thirteen years old. My parents had recently moved to Delaware, and almost every Friday night they loaded their children - my sister Val, my brother Jimmy, baby Frankie, and me - into the family car, and we all drove together to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where we also lived before the move, to spend the weekend with Grandpa Finnegan. I was allowed to play all day Saturday baseball, basketball, or Cops and Robbers with my old friends from the neighborhood. Between games we would go down to Green Ridge Corners to buy some ammunition for our primer revolvers at Handy Dandy's or three penny candy at Pappsy's or Simmey's. The latter was next door to the former. The latter shop was next door to Walsh's Insurance Agency, so we were close to the crucifix in its window. There was nothing unusual or strange about seeing such an object on display in a shop. Indeed, many of the shoppers in the Green Ridge shops were Irish Catholics, like us. We never dwelt on this detail, knowing that most of the kids in the neighbourhood were also Catholic. We all knew how to behave; when, on our way to Sommet, for example, we saw a nun on the street, we would take off our caps, wish her a 'Good afternoon, Sister' and always hold the door for her. The priests were just as much a part of the neighbourhood and were entitled to the greatest respect. My grandfather sometimes complained about Mr.[gr] Vaughan, who kept asking for more money, but no one in Green Ridge would have crossed a priest's path without greeting him with a "Good afternoon, Father.

Many of the businesses in Green Ridge had sprung up about 50 years earlier.

years ago, when the first electric tramway lines had been built.

These neighbourhoods of clustered houses were developed by resourceful Irishmen. Resourceful Irishmen had settled there, providing fresh air and a bit of lawn for their families. My mother frequented these shops as a young girl.

After buying our quota of goodies at Simmey's, Charlie Roth, Larry Orr, Tommy Bell and I would go to the Roosie Cinema to treat ourselves to the twelve cent double bill - we usually got two Westerns or two Tarzans.

If we had any time left after the movies, we would sometimes stop at Thompson's Grocery Store. Mr. Thompson had a live monkey, which he kept with him in his shop. So even if we couldn't afford any more candy, it was worth going in for a while. We would also sometimes hang out in front of Evelyn & E-Paul's, hoping that a breeze would carry the scent of homemade candy and ice cream towards us. As the sun dipped towards the horizon, Charlie, Larry, Tommy and I would head back along East Market Street to the Lackawanna River. We swung from branch to branch along the river, hanging from the stunted six-foot trees along the bank like Tarzan, whose exploits we had just seen in the movies. The ultimate adventure was to gallop across the river on pipes forty centimetres in diameter. It was a bad idea, we knew, because the sewage was flowing into the Lacky in those days, so the water was terribly polluted. Our parents kept telling us not to go near it. But as long as we didn't fall in, who could tell what we were doing wrong? Running over a pipe was not a mortal sin, far from it.

After having fun by the river, we realised that
It was getting close to dinner time. So we picked up the pace and went through the alley behind Richmont Street, where there was a succession of garages on which Tommy and I were bouncing from roof to roof.

—The ground is a swamp! Whoever touches it will be eaten by alligators!

Charlie and Larry preferred to deal with the reptiles. Sometimes a Richmont Street resident would open a window in the back of his house and

bellowed:

—Get out of those garages!

Anyway, on those Saturdays, it was often close to dusk when Charlie, Larry, Tommy and I were finally back home.

Sunday was nothing like the day before. It was a family day, starting with mass - which I was not optional to attend. The entire Finnegan clan went to St. Paul's Catholic Church - which always felt like an annex to the house. I had already gone through a few degrees of the Baltimore Catechism and tackled questions like: Who created us...? Who is God...? What is a Spirit...? What do we mean when we say that God is only Good? And the answers he gave: The word of the Lord is just, and He works faithfully. He cherishes mercy and judgment; the earth is filled with the Lord's mercy. I could recite almost the entire catechism. I knew the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed by heart, I had made my first confession, and Grandpa Finnegan had taught me to say my rosary. Every night, when I kissed him goodnight, he reminded me:

—Three Hail Marys, Joey, for purity.

It took me a long time to understand that he was talking about chastity. At first I was convinced that he was talking about nobility of soul, about the purity of a cause, concepts in line with the sermons we heard in St. Paul's. In reality, he was thinking more about spreading good than about behaving properly. In reality, he was thinking more about spreading good than about behaving properly.

After church, the Finnegans and their friends would gather at my grandfather's house at 2446 North Washington Avenue, not far from the end of the tram line. In the afternoon, while the pre-prepared dinner was being heated in the oven, the women relaxed in the dining room, sipping tea and stroking the lace tablecloth with their fingertips.

Meanwhile, Grandpa sat at the kitchen table with his friends from the neighbourhood, sometimes a colleague from the *Scranton Tribune*, and my uncles on the Finnegan side, Jack and Boo-Boo. Bathed in the afternoon glow, these gentlemen discussed sports and politics. Well-educated, informed and eclectic, they loved to debate. They talked about local and national politics, the

Although they were all Truman Democrats, and employees or sons of employees, they recognised that Truman had perhaps gone a little too far in his attempt to take over Youngstown Steel. The Supreme Court had probably done the right thing in stopping him. A president is a president, not a dictator. It seemed un-American. But at least Truman had been upfront about it. That was what they liked about him: no tricks. The man knew where he stood and wasn't afraid to say so. Grandpa's guests did not trust Adlai Stevenson, the new Democratic Party standard bearer, whom they considered to be a bit soft. They were prepared to give the benefit of the doubt to Eisenhower, who, after all, was a war hero. My father, who hardly took part in the conversations, believed in Ike because he had accomplished the feat of winning a war while negotiating the respective national prerogatives of the various Western allies and accommodating the overinflated egos of Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, *Field Marshal* Montgomery and General Patton. Dad saw Eisenhower as a big man, a leader of men, but the Finnegans regularly criticised his policies.

As for me, I was attracted by the rhythm and power of the exchanges verbal arguments echoing in the kitchen. Even though I was too young to deserve a regular place in these energetic debates, the speakers didn't mind if I hung around from time to time. Even when the discussion turned to local politics - at the Scranton and Lackawanna County level - and tempers flared, they never chased me away. I remember them talking about a local political figure they called Patrick. This rather shrewd Irish boss got on famously with the diocese, the workers, his neighbours and his family - perhaps a little too well, in fact. The political favours he was involved in, even in those days when they were generously distributed, were probably often the subject of articles in the local newspapers. Some of the younger people felt it was time for Patrick to step aside, to give Scranton's Democratic apparatus a new lease on life.

of a more modern sheen. However, I had noticed that my grandfather, despite the constant attacks on the man by his friends, was still defending him. Finally, after a while, he stopped arguing and did something he had never done before during these endless Sunday discussions: he addressed me.

—You wonder why your grandfather likes Patrick, Joey.

—No, no, no, Grandpa. Not at all.

—You like Mr. Scranton, don't you, darling?

What was I supposed to say? Lying at Grandpa Finnegan's table was out of the question. In my mind, William Scranton was the epitome of an upstanding citizen, the kind of man my father respected. Moreover, he was a descendant of the town's founders. After being a pilot during the war - like my uncle, that hero - this perfectly educated man had become a town personality.

—Yes, Grandpa, I like it," I said.

—Let me explain the difference between Patrick and Bill Scranton, Joey. When I ask Patrick to do me a favour, he may agree, but he may also refuse. In that case, he looks me straight in the eye and says:
"Sorry, Ambrose, I'm going to disappoint you." And I go with it. Whatever he has to say to me, Patrick says it to my face. He knows I may not agree with him, but he values me enough to speak to me honestly.

My grandfather asked me to come closer to him, which I did, then he put an arm around my waist and held me close before continuing:

—Do you know where Mr. Scranton's family lives, Joey?

I had no trouble imagining the kind of house the Scrantons lived in, certainly a mansion.

—I could call him right now and say, "Mr. Scranton, this is Ambrose Finnegan from the *Tribune*. I have a problem; can I come and tell you about it? He would reply with infinite politeness, "Of course, come in, Ambrose. I would go to his house, climb the flight of stairs to the huge stoop and knock on the door. His butler would open the door and invite me in, and then he would take my coat off. Then he would ask me to sit in the library and offer me a sherry.

I had no idea what a sherry was, and my grandfather didn't interrupt his story to explain it to me, but it must have been a wonderful thing to hear.

—Mr. Scranton would show up soon after and say, "What can I do for you, Ambrose? I would tell him my problem and he would say he would be happy to help me.

At that very moment Grandpa reached up and slapped me between the shoulder blades so hard that I was startled. At the time I thought he was furious, that I had somehow disappointed him.

—"I'd be happy to help you, Ambrose," he repeated. But Joey, it wasn't until I'd put on my coat and walked out of his house that I'd feel a warm trickle of blood down my back.

—Do you know what we Irish call that? A stab as soft as silk.

My grandfather did not even turn his head towards my uncle; without taking his eyes off me, he continued:

—Never forget this, Joey: men like Mr. Scranton would never do to their country club friends what they do to us on the street. They consider themselves above politics. For them, politics is for the Poles, the Irish, the Italians and the Jews. So they think they can do anything.

I knew that Ambrose Finnegan was a Democrat and that he had a grudge against the city's elite, but I couldn't understand why he thought it wise to look down on every Mr. Scranton on the planet. My father always said you shouldn't begrudge someone their wealth. However, I sensed that my grandfather was trying to instil in me a more fundamental notion than that of social class.

He wanted me to understand two things: first, no individual or group of individuals is above others. Civil servants, no matter how high up they are, are obliged to be honest with *everyone*, whether they agree with them or not. Secondly, politics is a matter of personal honour. A man's word is like a bond that binds him. When you give it, you keep it.

As far back as I can remember, I have always had an almost romantic view of what politics should - and could - be. I believe that good politics can make a real difference to people's lives. And integrity is the prerequisite for getting into the game. Almost fifty years after I first got involved, I am still fascinated by the possibilities of politics and public service. In truth, I believe - and I know my grandfather did too - that the profession I have chosen is a noble calling.

From the time I was a child, I had a vision of the man I wanted to be, a vision that was nurtured by my parents, by the Catholic schools I attended, by family stories of Uncle Bosie's heroic actions as a downed pilot in World War II, and by a certain faith in the greatness of my own future. During my teenage and high school years, there were men and women who changed our country - Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy. I was captivated by their eloquence, their conviction, the infinite scope of their unlikely dreams. Even though I didn't know how to do it, I wanted to be part of this effort, this metamorphosis. Without a plan in mind, I had this certainty in me. But amazing political opportunities came to me as a young man. I seized them without hesitation, because I had already understood what I had to do - how to behave - to take advantage of them.

When I reread my early political speeches, I realize that I
I owe my entry into public service not only to the inspiration of the Dr Kings and the Kennedys, but at least as much to my grandfather's simple and direct belief that the well-being of our nation depends on the candour of its leaders.

—People don't know who or what to believe - and most of all, they're afraid to believe politicians," I told a crowd at the Hotel du Pont in Wilmington on the day I announced my candidacy for the Senate in 1972.

"We need representatives who do not back down and who say exactly what they think to the people. [...] Our failure in recent years is not

It is not the failure of the people to meet the challenges, but rather the failure of our two major political parties to honestly and courageously present these challenges to the people, to trust their goodwill to do what really needs to be done. [...] We all know - or so we keep hearing - that our nation is divided, and we know that there is some truth in that statement. We have too often allowed our differences to get the better of us. Too often we have allowed ambitious individuals to exploit those differences for political gain. We have too often sheltered behind our differences, when no one was really trying to help us overcome them. But these differences are small potatoes compared to the values we all share. [... I am running for Senate because ... I want to make the system work again, and I believe that is what all Americans really want.

I believed that in 1972; I still believe it today. Our nation's founders laid the framework for a political system of rare genius; generation after generation of Americans have used it to make this country fairer, more welcoming, more committed to individual rights. The United States has the most effective and fairest system of government ever practiced in the world; there is nothing inherently wrong with it. It is up to each of us to do our part to make it work.

It is my privilege to serve that purpose. I have been a Delaware Senator for more than half my life. Nearly fifty years into my political career, I am as passionate and dedicated as ever to my work. One hears or reads daily of the sorry state of politics in our country, of the bitter divisions between our two major parties, of the unfortunate rudeness of the verbal exchanges. I don't deny it, but from the heart of the arena I feel that none of this is irreversible or fatal. We can always do better. I am convinced of this, otherwise I would have left the world of politics long ago. To tell you the truth, I seem to see great hope in this direction today, more than ever before in my career. Maybe because after all these years, people are really listening to me.

Only a few dozen people in the history of the country have served the Senate longer than I have. I was only twenty-nine years old in 1972 when I was first elected - not even old enough to be sworn in. At that time, there were still giants in the Senate, from *Dixiecrats s*[1] to the progressives, men who, while arguably no better or worse than their modern counterparts, enjoyed immense reputations: James O. Eastland, Sam Ervin, John Stennis, Barry Goldwater, Warren Magnuson, Stuart Symington, Jacob Javits, Henry 'Scoop' Jackson, Abraham Ribicoff, Philip Hart. The American people held in high esteem the most distinguished members of the Senate body such as Mike Mansfield and Hubert Humphrey. The Senate felt like a sacred place to me the day I first went there, a feeling that has never left me. Almost half a century later, I still get chills when I walk out of Union Station and see the Capitol dome.

I started at the bottom of the ladder, last in seniority, with a
The office was so cramped that my staff had to stand up and move aside when one of them wanted to open the door. In those early days, I had no intention of staying in the Senate for more than six months. Yet I stayed in the Senate long enough to chair the Judiciary and Foreign Affairs Committees several times. Things have changed during my six terms as a senator, for better or worse. While I have had to work with the remaining segregationists in the South, I have seen Carol Moseley-Brau n[2] and Barack Obama being sworn in. In 1973, there were no women in the Senate. Today there are twenty-six, and one of them, Hillary Clinton, came close to winning the 2016 presidential election. In the meeting rooms and conference rooms, in the cloakrooms and even in the Senate chamber, I have witnessed the decline of common decency and the growing reluctance of my colleagues to see the world through the eyes of others. I have seen the emergence of partisanship and the ever-increasing power of money, both in campaigns and in office. On the other hand, I have seen a thousand kindnesses from one wing of the Senate to the other and hundreds of acts of genuine personal and political courage.

The laws and traditions of the Senate are such that they demand the best from the men and women who serve it. Early in my first term, when the courts ordered President Richard Nixon to turn over the Watergate tapes, it appeared that the government was headed for a constitutional crisis. The President asked Senator John Stennis to block the tapes, to listen to them and summarise their contents for his colleagues, but to keep them away from members of the Senate. Stennis objected, refusing to act as a roadblock on behalf of the executive; the tapes should be open to all, he felt. In doing so, John Stennis, true to his principles, defended the Constitution. I have not forgotten the speech he made in the Democratic primary:

- I have thought long and hard about my obligations and I have determined what my honour requires of me. [I am a man of the Senate, not of the President. Therefore, I will not listen to these recordings. I belong to the Senate.

I too am proud to say that I have been a Senate man. This role has allowed me to express my strengths and my deepest convictions.

I have served the citizens of Delaware, but also the Constitution and the nation. George Washington regarded the Senate as an institution
"The nation's founding texts encourage U.S. senators to think long term on both domestic and international issues, to offer all that our individual and collective wisdom and intelligence bring to the table. The nation's founding texts urge U.S. Senators to think long term on both domestic and international issues, to offer all that our individual and collective wisdom and intelligence can contribute to solving each problem, to protect minorities from the destructive enthusiasm of the majority, to keep their eyes on any president who might overstep the bounds of his power. The Senate was designed to play this independent and moderating role; this most solemn duty and responsibility will always take precedence over partisan disputes.

As a United States Senator, I have witnessed (and sometimes played minor roles in the heart of the action) history: the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Iran hostage crisis, the appointment of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, [3]The Vietnam War, Watergate, the Iran hostage crisis, the appointment of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the attacks of 11 September 2001, two

I've been to wars in Iraq, *impeachment* proceedings, the resignation of a president, and a presidential election decided by the Supreme Court. I have been to war zones around the world and seen genocide up close. I have come face to face in tough talks with the likes of Kosygin, Gaddafi, Helmut Schmidt, Sadat, Mubarak and Milošević. I saw Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, the Bushes father and son... and then I almost died from an aneurysm. Then I had to recover my health and rebuild my reputation and my career in the Senate. The following years were the most rewarding of my life. My contribution to ending the genocide in the Balkans and, moreover, to the adoption of the law against violence against women are the milestones of my public life of which I am most proud. Even if I had accomplished nothing else (and even if I accomplish nothing of note in the future), these two successes would compensate me for the countless moments of difficulty and doubt I have experienced during my long career.

While I have learned a lot about myself over the years, I think I have retained some of the

I have learned even more important lessons about the American people - especially about their special pride. Shortly after my first election to the Senate in 1972, I used to say that I had great faith in the American people - and I meant it. Far from expressing this sentiment only in my speeches, I also spoke of it privately with my wife. I was extremely proud of our 1972 campaign, which was honest and straightforward, without any blemishes. I was really convinced that I had lived up to the warnings given by my grandfather. The "Senator Biden" campaign had been about preserving the integrity of politicians, and I felt that this effort had won us the election. I sometimes discussed this with Neilia, my wife, in our new house:

—I assure you, Neilia, that I have immense faith in the American people.

Neilia has always been more lucid than me.

—How would you have felt if you had lost, Joey?

To tell you the truth, I don't have absolute confidence in the judgment and wisdom of the American people. We are all human, and we can

We are all being led astray. When leaders are not straightforward with citizens, citizens cannot be expected to make sound judgments. Nevertheless, I have complete confidence in the *hearts of* the American people. This country's greatest resource is the grit, determination, courage, fundamental morality and stubborn pride of its citizens. I know thousands of ordinary Americans who, carrying burdens that would break many of us, get up every day and put one foot in front of the other to move forward. Most do so without even asking for special favours or mercy, even when the luckiest among us offer to ease their suffering. I have no doubt about the generosity, determination and capacity of my fellow countrymen. I have seen them in action on many occasions, but I became acutely aware of them in the dramatic hours following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001.

I was on the train from Wilmington to Washington when the planes hit both towers. As I left Union Station that morning, I saw a plume of smoke over the Pentagon on the other side of the Potomac. There was an unreal stillness over the city, barely disturbed by a gentle breeze. It was so quiet that I could hear myself breathe as I walked towards the Capitol, struck by the warm glow of the sun on my face and the purity of the cobalt blue sky, which strangely enough was not streaked with any airborne contrails. This apparent calm masked a growing panic in Washington. The Capitol had already been evacuated, and senators, representatives and their staffs were swarming the park between the Capitol and Union Station. Some were talking on their mobile phones, while others were already talking about the need to revive Reagan's missile defence system - the so-called Star Wars project. Capitol Hill security, refusing to let anyone back inside the building, invited a delegation of elected officials to attend briefings in a command post on the top floor of a four-story building behind the Senate offices. With most of Congress gathered outside, I shuttled back and forth between the briefing room and the outside, trying to convince those who would listen that we needed to take back our place in the Senate and show the American people that we were not only the right people, but also the right people.

We took matters into our own hands. No one reacted; the leaders of both parties were told to prepare to leave town. Bob Brady, a member of the House of Representatives, who had been trying to encourage our colleagues to return to work, finally gave in in disgust. He felt he could help out in some way in his constituency in Philadelphia, so he offered to drop me off in Wilmington, which was on his way. As I left the building, I could feel the panic growing. The dozens of reporters lined up at the entrance understandably insisted on a few words from us about the situation.

—Senator Biden," a reporter from ABC asked me. The senators and representatives I have interviewed say we are in a state of war. Senator Shelby, a senior member of the Intelligence Committee, claims that we are in a state of war, practically speaking, and that we need to take steps to do so. On the other hand, Senator Chuck Hagel says we need to strengthen the borders, close the airports and re-examine how we protect our public institutions. What do you think about that?

—I hope the gentlemen are wrong," I replied to the person and his viewers.

"I prefer to look at it in a different way. I would rather say that we are facing a certain reality. A reality that we knew existed, that we knew was possible. A reality that has already occurred to varying degrees in other countries. If, in order to respond to this reality, we have to curtail civil liberties and change the way we operate, then we have lost the war. [...] The best way to fight this war is to show that our civil liberties and freedoms and our freedom to move about as we please are not fundamentally at risk. [... There is much we can do to significantly reduce the likelihood of such horrors happening again, without altering our character as a nation. [...] This nation is too large, too strong, too united, too powerful in terms of cohesion and values, for these events to break us. It will never happen. Never."

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Senate and House of Representatives had been persuaded to board helicopters to a secure location in West Virginia. The Vice President was quietly evacuated to an undisclosed location, and the President, aboard *Air Force One*, was bouncing from safe house to safe house, having been convinced that returning to Washington was too risky.

The twin towers had collapsed by the time I set off for Wilmington in Bob Brady's vehicle. At this point, it was estimated that New York would lose five, six, maybe seven thousand people - maybe more. When I got home, I turned on the television and saw that America's heart was still beating strongly. Doctors and nurses were on the alert in New York hospitals, ready to treat the wounded. Long lines of New Yorkers lined the streets and avenues of the city, eager to donate blood even though information had been circulated that it was no longer needed. The faces of these anonymous people spoke for themselves: they were desperate to do something, *anything*. No one was talking about war or revenge; these people just wanted to play their part. The reaction of all these people that day reminded me that even in the virtual absence of instructions from the nation's leaders, Americans were rising to the occasion. Seeing those lines of volunteers ready to give blood gave me confidence that our country would rise to the new challenges without hesitation, and emerge stronger because of that success.

This is, in my opinion, the first and fundamental principle of life, a lesson that no wise man can teach you: *Get up!* To live is simply to get up after taking a blow. It is a lesson that can only be taught by example, that can only be learned by experience. I learned it myself on a daily basis growing up in an ordinary house in the suburbs of Wilmington, Delaware. My father, Joseph Robinette Biden Sr. was not a big talker. I learned a lot from him by watching him. Hard hit in his youth, he had lost something he knew he would never get back. Despite this, he never lowered his head. Every morning he was the first one up at the house. Clean-shaven and smartly dressed, he would heat up the coffee and get ready for his shift at the dealership

car, a job he had never enjoyed. According to my brother Jim, our father sang almost every morning in the kitchen. He was imbued with grace. He never gave up, and never once complained.

—The world doesn't owe you anything, Joey," he liked to say, but without bitterness.

He had no time for self-pity. He did not judge a man by the number of times he went down, but by how quickly he got back up.

Get up! That was his motto, which has resonated with me all my life. The world has collapsed on your head? *Get up!"* he would say to me. Don't you want to get out of bed, sad for some reason? *Get up!* Did you get a beating on the football field? *Get up!* Got a bad grade? *Get up!* This girl's parents don't want her to date a Catholic boy? Get *up!*

Far from being limited to trivial matters, this principle also applied to crucial moments - when I could only hear one voice: my own, in my head.

—You may lose the ability to speak as a result of the surgery, Senator.

Get up!

—The papers are accusing you of plagiarism,

Biden! *Get up!*

—Your wife and daughter... Sorry, Joe, there was nothing we could do to save them.

Get up!

Missed an exam at law school? *Get up! Do* others make fun of you for stuttering, Bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-Biden? *Get up!*

1. This term used to refer to conservative Democratic elected officials in the Southern states.
2. First African-American woman elected to the Senate.
3. In 1987, Ronald Reagan nominated Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, a nomination that was rejected by the Senate.

- 1 -

Impedimenta

Joe Impedimenta. That was the nickname my classmates gave me during our first semester of high school, when we had two Latin classes a day. It was one of the first terms we learned. *Impedimenta: baggage impeding progress.* So I was Joe Impedimenta. I was also called Dash, and many thought I owed this other nickname to American football. Indeed, I was quite fast on the field and scored my fair share of *touchdowns*. The truth is, students at an all-boys Catholic high school didn't usually give you nicknames that made you look good. They didn't call me Dash to celebrate my achievements during games, but rather to highlight my shortcomings in class. Because it sounded like I was speaking in Morse code. Dot-dot-dot-dot-dot-dot-dot-dot[4].

- Fe-fe-fe-fer it, le-lé-lé the guys!

My impedimenta manifested itself in the form of a stammer. It wasn't always catastrophic, as it was barely noticeable when I was at home with my brothers and sister, when I was meeting up with my friends in the neighbourhood or exchanging a few light words with my teammates on the football pitch. But when I had to deal with a new situation, adjust to a new school, read out loud in class, or ask a girl out, the words stuck in my mouth. In ninth grade, I was exempted from public speaking. Every student was required to give a short speech at morning assembly sometime, in front of two hundred and fifty classmates. So I was exempted. And everyone knew about it. Perhaps my fellow students didn't care about this detail - they had other things to worry about - but it made me sick. I had the

I felt I had been sent to the corner wearing a dunce's cap. Some people laughed at me, staring at me as if I were retarded. I would have done anything to prove to them that I was like everyone else. To this day, I remember my fear, shame and absolute rage as clearly as I did then. Sometimes I thought that my impedimenta would be my death warrant, that my stammer would be listed in my epitaph. At other times I wondered how to get rid of the problem.

Amusingly enough, I would not, even if I had the power, want to erase the darkest days of my stammering years. For these impedimenta were ultimately a gift from heaven. Indeed, coming to terms with my disability gave me strength and made me - or so I hoped - a better person. The lessons I learned from this ordeal have proved invaluable in my life and my professional career.

I had been concerned about my stuttering since primary schools, when we still lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Before that, when I was in kindergarten, my parents had me examined by a speech therapist based at Marywood University. The solutions he proposed were not very effective, so they only took me there two or three times. The point is that I didn't let my stuttering keep me from what really mattered to me. As one of the youngest in my class and always small for my age, I made up for it by proving that I had guts. I was quite capable, on a whim, of climbing to the top of a flaming slag heap, of balancing on a construction site, or of slipping between the wheels of a speeding garbage truck. As soon as I could visualise myself performing the feat in question, I knew I could do it, without fearing for a moment that I could not. My confidence in my athletic ability was more than matched by my lack of confidence in my speaking skills. Playing sports was as natural to me as speaking seemed unnatural. Sport was my ticket to acceptance - and to much more. It was hard to intimidate me during a game; even when I stammered, I always claimed the ball.

Who will take the last shot? Give me the ball. We need to score a *touchdown* now! Give me the ball. When I was around eight years old, I was usually the smallest player on the field, but I would ask for the ball. And they gave it to me.

I was ten years old when my parents moved from the Scranton area I knew so well to Wilmington, Delaware. My father was having trouble finding meaningful work in Scranton, and his brother Frank kept telling him that there were jobs available in Wilmington. Since the Biden brothers had spent most of their schooling in Wilmington, my father felt like he was coming home when the day came for us to move. The rest of the family, by contrast, felt the heartbreak of leaving home. However, my mother, although born and raised in Scranton, was determined to see things my father's way. Any other consideration was out of the question for her. This was a wonderful opportunity, she said. We would make a fresh start and new friends. We would discover a brand new neighbourhood and move into a brand new house where we would be the first to live. Everything would be fine. Refusing to dwell on the upsetting issues, she reacted in the same way to my stammering.

—You're so cute, Joey. You're a great sport, Joey. You're incredibly smart, Joey. You've got so much to say your mouth can barely keep up with your brain, darling.

And if the other kids made fun of me, that was their problem:

—They are just jealous.

However, she knew how cruel children can be. When we moved to Wilmington, she was determined to have me repeat the grade. In addition to always being the youngest and smallest in my class, I had missed a lot of school during our last year in Scranton, including having my tonsils and adenoids out. So when we moved to Delaware, my mother insisted that I repeat the third grade - and no one at Holy Rosary, my new school, would have to know that my mother had forced me to repeat a grade. It was just one more example of how Wilmington would be a new beginning for us.

Our new home was located on the outskirts of town in the working class neighborhood of Claymont, just across the Pennsylvania/Delaware border. I remember the drive to our new home; it felt like a great adventure. With my father driving and my mother in the passenger seat, I sat in the backseat with my brother Jimmy and my six-year-old sister Valerie, who was also my best friend. After crossing the state line on the Philadelphia Turnpike, we passed the Worth Steel Mill, the General Chemical Company, and several oil refineries, all belching smoke, and then the Worthland and Overlook Colony neighborhoods, where the terraced houses built shortly after the turn of the century by the factories for their workers were crammed together. Worthland was populated by Italians and Poles, and Overlook Colony by blacks. Just a mile further on, we came upon the Brookview Apartments, where our new house and garden were located. After leaving the motorway off-ramp, we only had to turn right to reach our destination. Home.

Brookview was a lunar landscape. A huge water tower dominated the housing estate, but there were no trees in sight. We followed the main street, which curved slightly. Not far from this road was a complex, one side of which had already been built, while the other was still under construction. We could see the heavy construction equipment moving slowly over hills of earth and red clay. On that hot summer day, we had rolled down the car windows; I remembered the smell of that red clay, the sulphurous stench of the earth's bowels. As we followed the street towards our new home, my mother saw tiny one-storey dwellings with mustard-coloured walls, packed together so tightly that they were suffocating. My father certainly noticed her reaction.

—Don't worry, darling," he reassured her. It's not there. Our house is bigger.

He parked near the end of a curve and, without getting out of the car, pointed to our future home, which was set in a plot of dubious grass. It was a white, one-storey house with slender columns in front - the only thing we could see was the roof.

to give it an antique look, I suppose - and flanked by a large single-storey block on either side.

—Here we are," said my father.

—All this?" my mother wondered.

—No, only the central house, but don't worry, my dear, it's only temporary.

From the back seat, I noticed a few tears on my mother's cheeks.

—Mum!" I cried. Why are you crying?

—I'm crying with joy," she lied. She's beautiful, isn't she?

Our new house suited me perfectly, actually. It looked like a miniature version of a large colonial building, and our rooms were upstairs. Mine was the one at the back, and through my window I could see the object of my greatest desire, my very own land of plenty: Archmere. In the heart of this mining town, less than a kilometre from the factories and exactly opposite the Brookview Apartments, stood the first mansion I had ever seen. Sometimes I would stare at it for hours. John Jakob Raskob had built it for his family before the chemical, steel and oil refineries appeared in Claymont. Although he was merely Pierre du Pont's personal secretary, Raskob had a knack for making money. He had convinced the du Ponts to invest a large sum in General Motors and was subsequently appointed the company's financial director. Raskob was also a Catholic hero. He used part of his fortune to fund a charity and supported the campaign of the first Catholic presidential candidate, Democrat Al Smith. In 1928, the Democrats held political strategy sessions in his Archmere library. Raskob was also responsible for the construction of the Empire State Building.

The manor house he had built in Claymont, the Patio d'Archmere, was a

The house is a splendid Italianate marble building on a slope down to the Delaware River. Archmere - literally the arch by the sea - was named after the arch formed by elm trees planted from the house to the riverbank. When the working families, not to mention the noise and pollution of the

When the factories gradually began to populate the area, Raskob retired and sold the manor to an order of Catholic priests, the Norbertines, who turned it into a private grammar school for boys. Archmere Academy was just twenty years old when my family moved across the road.

That year I was part of a football team that participated in the CYO[5]. We were coached by Dr Anzelotti, a chemist employed at DuPont whose sons were enrolled at the school. Archmere allowed him to conduct his practices on the school grounds. From the moment I first stepped over the ten-foot wrought-iron fence surrounding the campus and up the driveway - known as the Golden Road - I knew I wanted to attend the school. Far from seeing Archmere as a stepping stone to even greater glory, my ten-year-old mind was satisfied with it as my ultimate goal. From my bedroom window, I would spend hours dreaming of the day I would walk through the gate and take my place in this great place of learning; I would visualize the moment I would score the final *touchdown* or hit the decisive *home run* for the win.

As agreed, I entered the third grade at Holy Rosary School, a Catholic school less than a mile from the Philadelphia Turnpike, where the Sisters of St. Joseph helped me settle into my new world. These women were the link between Scranton and Claymont. I felt at home wherever there were nuns. I am Catholic both culturally and theologically. My understanding of myself, family, community and the larger world has been directly inspired by my religion. I have learned more about culture than about the Bible, the Beatitudes, the Ten Commandments, the sacraments and the prayers. The nuns are one of the reasons why I am still a practising Catholic today. A few years ago in Dubuque, Iowa, Teri Goodmann, a local political ally, introduced me to St. Francis Convent - a beautiful old building that one would have imagined housing a major university campus. On the way, I had asked for a stop at a Hy-Vee supermarket to buy some ice cream for the nuns, because Jean Finnegan Biden's son

never visit nuns empty-handed. They remind me of primary school, especially on the last day of school before the holidays, when my classmates and I would give them modest Christmas presents. On that occasion, their desk was quickly overloaded with scented soaps. (What else would you give a nun?) So they smelled of lavender until the end of the school year. I can't remember a nun who didn't smell of it.

As I entered Dubuque's convent laden with several quarts of ice, I was immediately seized with concern, fearing that I had underestimated the amount needed. While Teri had expected only ten or twelve nuns to attend my talk, a good fifty of them - many of the generation that had taught me - were already seated in the large common room.

I had come to give a talk on the situation in Iraq, and the sisters really wanted to understand the sectarian conflict there. They bombarded me with questions about the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Kurds. They wanted to know the history of the religion practiced by the Kurds and what had made me aware of the concerns of the Iraqi people. Many of them had been teachers, so the knowledge was invaluable to them. We also discussed our own church, the problems faced by women, education and national security. Whether they agreed with my public stance or not, they all smiled at me. Even after the ice boxes were opened, they continued to question me. As I was about to let Teri ask them to kindly pray over the next few days for the success of Joe Biden's journey into public life, they did better than that. They formed a circle around me, raised their arms above my head and sang the blessing usually reserved for those of them who go to spread the word of God in another place.

—May God bless and preserve you.

They were so kind and sincere that I felt like I was falling back into childhood, as if touched by an entity that was far beyond me. It was not an epiphany or the revelation of a vocation, but simply a return to that which I had always been.

that I had always been. The Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque had taken me home.

So my first teachers were nuns. At St. Paul's School in Scranton, and later at Holy Rosary in Wilmington, they taught me reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as geography and history, and their curriculum included morality, sportsmanship and virtue. Their first principle was the biblical exhortation that offering one's life is the greatest proof of love that one man can give to another. We didn't do that in school, of course, you didn't sacrifice yourself, but you did show nobility by helping a lady across the street, by extending a helping hand to someone less fortunate than yourself, by stepping in when the class bully was harassing a classmate. In short, it was noble to intervene, to act.

One day Sister Michael Mary, our teacher at Holy Rosary School, had to leave the classroom for some reason. While she was away, Sonny Deramo threw an eraser across the room, which was still on the floor when Sister returned.

—Who threw that?" she asked.

Silence. No one opened their mouths.

—You will all stay in your seats after class until the culprit comes forward.

I raised my hand:

—It's me, my sister.

When school was over, she sent all my classmates home, but kept me with her:

—Stay here, Mr Biden.

I knew what those words meant: my punishment would be to write on the blackboard a hundred times: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

As the other students left, she ordered me to sit back down.

—You turned yourself in for something you didn't do," she said. I nodded, thinking she would let me go.

—That's admirable, but you still have to pay for it," continued Sister Michael Mary. So you will remain in detention.

She explained to me why she had taken this decision, and I have never forgotten it. When you intervene in a case, you have to be prepared to face the consequences.

While we only saw the priests on Sundays, the sisters were there every day. Sister Lawrence Joseph played baseball with us, running from base to base, pulling up the sides of her dress. I was very athletic but, although I was a repeater, I was still one of the smallest in my class, and Sister Lawrence Joseph noticed that this annoyed me.

—My brother wasn't very big either, you know, Joey, but he was a real athlete!

The nuns did everything to give me confidence. Almost all my teachers tried to help me overcome my stuttering. Like my mother, they reminded me that I was a good boy, intelligent and athletic. They defended me when my classmates made fun of me in class and even made suggestions on how best to get rid of my stutter.

For my part, I had developed my own strategy, which I called 'anticipation'. It consisted of guessing the thoughts of others. In 1955, after my family had moved to a new house in Mayfield, another housing estate, I took a small job as a paperboy. All week I lived with the anxiety of Saturday mornings, when I had to go round houses whose occupants I had only known for a short time. To get rid of this apprehension, I learned to anticipate the conversations to come. My neighbour was a big Yankees fan, so I always made sure to ask about the team's latest results, knowing that he would ask me about it. Thanks to this precaution, I was able to talk without looking like an idiot. I was rehearsing our entire upcoming conversation before he even opened his front door to me. "Did you see that? Mantle slammed *two home runs* yesterday!"

Reading a text aloud always made me panic, so I memorised the long passages I had to read in class. A nun suggested that I keep a certain rhythm, like a chant, so that I wouldn't dawdle over a word and my facial muscles wouldn't freeze.

They were always ready to help me. That's why I was taken aback by the incident with Sir Walter Raleigh.

Following our move to Mayfield, I was enrolled at St. Helen's Primary School. In fifth grade, as in previous years, we were seated alphabetically, which put me in the front row, a few places behind the first student. When it was my turn to read in class, I anticipated the paragraph that would come next. If I was fifth in alphabetical order, for example, I would get the fifth paragraph. So that day I thought I would have to read this: "Sir Walter Raleigh was a gentleman. He took off his cloak and spread it in the mud so that the lady would not soil her shoes. My prediction confirmed, I set off, carefully keeping my pace:

—Sir Wal-ter Ral-eigh was a gen-tle-man...

—Would you repeat that last word, Mr. Biden?

I was overcome with panic and was unable to read the words on the page open before my eyes. I had lost my nerve. I was asked to say the word 'gentleman' but it was suddenly out of my reach:

—Gen-gen-gen-gen... I stammered.

She cut me off again:

—Well, Mr Bu-bu-bu-bu-Biden?

A wave of heat went up my legs and down my neck - pure rage. I got up and walked out of the classroom, dodging the nun, and walked the two miles to our house in Wilson Road, Mayfield. My mother was waiting for me because the school had phoned her.

I didn't even reach the front door.

—Get in the car, Joey," she ordered me.

She also put my brother Frank - who could barely walk - in the car and headed for St Helena. Her fury was obvious, and I could tell I had got myself into trouble.

—What happened, Joey?" she asked.

—She laughed at me, Mom. She called me "Mr. Bu-bu-bu- bu-Biden".

At school she took me by the hand and carried Frank, before leading us to the office of the headmistress, Mother Agnes Constance. With its three-foot wooden panels topped with frosted glass, the room had all the makings of a private detective's office from the old detective movies. My mother sat me down in the vestibule and put Frank on my lap, then entered the office. I could see their figures in the bright light and hear what they were saying.

—Can this sister join us?" my mother asked, and her request was granted.

My teacher began to describe my behaviour but was immediately interrupted by my mother:

—Yes, I know, sister, but what did you tell him?

—Well, nothing special, Ms. Biden...

—Did you say 'Bu-bu-bu-bu-Biden', by any chance?

—That's not the point," intervened Mother Agnes Constance.

—Did you or did you not say "Bu-bu-bu-bu-Biden"?

—Indeed, Ms. Biden. To get my point across.

Then I saw my mother stand up straight and, from the height of her five feet, this woman, usually so shy, so respectful of the Church, approached the nun and warned her:

—If you address my son in that way again, I'll come back and rip your hat off! Do you understand me?

The office door opened violently, and my mother retrieved Frankie.

—Go back to class, Joey," she told me as I left.

If there was one thing my mother could not stand, it was meanness. She didn't have a shred of it herself, so she couldn't stand to see it in anyone else. One day she asked my brother Jim to give a boy who was picking on people smaller than him a beating. When he had done his job, Jim received a dollar from her as a reward. Religious and authority figures were no exception to the rule. When these people abuse their power, they have to be made to pay.

The alb or chasuble should be respected, she said, as should any uniform, but no one is bound on principle to respect the person who wears it.

door. Years later, when I told her that I was about to be granted an audience with the Queen of England, her first reaction was:

—Don't you dare bow down to it.

When I told her that I would be meeting the Pope, she had a similar reflex:

—Don't put your lips on his ring. Never forget you're a Biden, Joey. No one is better than you. You're no better than anyone else, but no one, you hear me, is better than you.

Even when money ran out and the power company sent a collector to tell us to pay our bill, or when I was reduced to patching holes in my old shoes with cardboard until my father got his next paycheck, nothing fazed my mother. One day, when I was in the fourth grade, I was invited to the Presbyterian Church where a party was being held for the public school students. I was Catholic, and Catholic families were few and far between in Mayfield. I had to put on one of Dad's dress shirts, too big for me, of course, so Mom had to roll up the sleeves. The sleeves ended in cuffs, so cufflinks had to be added, and we couldn't find any at home. My father was working late that Friday night, so my mother went down to the basement, grabbed the toolbox from above the washing machine and went upstairs with two screws and two nuts. When I realised that she was going to fix my sleeves with this material, I jumped aside:

—No way, Mom! I refuse to wear this! The others will laugh at me
of me.

—Listen to me, Joey.

—No, I don't want to. I don't want to!

—Listen to me, Joey. If someone says anything to you about those nuts and bolts, you look them straight in the eye and say, "What? Don't you have any?"

—Mamaaaaan! Don't make me do this!

I finally gave in, as I was very keen to go to the party. While I was there, pouring myself a glass of non-alcoholic punch, a comrade

noticed my makeshift cufflinks. He grabbed my arm, raised it high and shouted:

—Look at Biden! Nuts and bolts!

The shame that had come over me was quickly replaced by anger. Fortunately, I had not forgotten the advice given by my mother.

—Don't you have any cufflinks like that?" I said, pretending to be surprised.

There followed a dead silence, which my comrade broke, loud enough for everyone to hear:

—Yes, yes, of course I have a pair...

About twenty years ago, my sister Val gave me a pair of silver cufflinks from Tiffany in the shape of nuts and bolts, as a souvenir of that evening and so that I would never forget the episode.

Whenever we had a problem, we would go to our mother and she would always find a solution. For one year I had some problems on the school bus. I was always the first one on the bus, and then six or seven stops later the bus would stop to let a chubby girl who lived in a shabby house on board. Her face was covered in freckles and she smelled as if she had just come out of her grandmother's attic. The bus was still almost empty, yet she always sat next to me, which made me feel overwhelmingly ashamed. As everyone laughed at her, so everyone laughed at me. One day I told my mother about this concern:

—I don't know what to do, Mom. The bus is empty, but she sits next to me. Everyone thinks she's my lover!

—Do you think she likes you?" my mother asked.

—Yes, Mum, that's the problem.

—Well, give him back his friendship. You must always love in return those who love you.

This was the permanent lesson we received at home: respect for others. The other ever-present teaching was to take care of each other. "If you have to ask for something, it is because it is not there.

It's already too late," says a family proverb. At home, Val, Jimmy, Frankie and I were supposed to look after each other.

—You are brothers and sisters, you have no one closer to you, our mother liked to remind us. You share the same blood. You are much closer to each other than you are to your father or me.

If our parents let us fight at home, we were not allowed to say a single word against a sibling outside. In all circumstances, no matter how stupid the person was, we could not react other than to support our brother or sister. To take sides against one's brother or sister would have been as despicable as passing on secrets to the Russians at the height of the Cold War. It was treason. In primary school, the nuns had appointed me as a security guard and given me a shiny blue badge. One of my duties was to report bad behaviour on the school bus. One day Val did something stupid on the bus. That evening I asked my father for advice.

—Everyone has seen her do it," I explained. And I'm supposed to report it.

—She's your sister, Joey.

—But Dad, the nuns have made me a security guard, so I'm supposed to tell them what Val did.

—You don't have to, Joey. You have a choice, if you think about it.

I understood what he was getting at. The next day I gave my badge back to the nuns.

As far as philosophy of life was concerned, my parents were exactly on the same wavelength, although my mother expressed it more readily than my father. My father had always been calm. You learned by watching him. He couldn't stand people who looked down on those less fortunate than themselves. Never talk about money in public, he advised us. People who abused their power, whatever it was, made him angry. He never raised a hand to us.

—Hitting a child is not worthy of an adult, he said. No man has the right to raise his hand against a woman, whatever the circumstances.

Dad often worked late at night, but most of the time he took an hour's break to have dinner with us. At the family dinner table, this true rule keeper - he demanded impeccable manners from us - liked to steer the conversation towards important topics such as morality, justice and equality. From time to time he would mention the Holocaust. He never understood that people were persecuted because of their very nature.

—The world was wrong in failing to respond to Hitler's atrocities against the Jews, and we should all be ashamed of that.

Because, he explained to us, our personal responsibility required each of us to denounce this kind of behaviour when we witnessed it.

My parents didn't go out much, so it was an event when these occasions arose. One day they left us alone at home - Val and I were responsible for watching Jim and Frank - to attend a Christmas party at the car dealership where Dad was then the manager. The owner of the dealership was imposing in every sense of the word: over six feet tall, with a drawl and several fat bank accounts and political connections across the state. On his billboards, this *self-made man called* himself a "friend of the workers". He took the silver one-dollar coin as his emblem and would gladly offer it to his best customers. This did not bother my father too much, but he did grit his teeth when his boss paid his employees in bags full of silver dollars. The latter then had no choice but to go home with these burdens. Such behaviour did not seem friendly to the workers. Dad was pleasantly surprised when this individual decided to throw a Christmas party for his salesmen, secretaries and mechanics. He had the showroom cleared and a band set up. A fan of big bands and their swing, my father had been a very honest clarinet and saxophone player in the 1930s and was still a graceful dancer. So my mother put on her best dress, and they set off.

They were back earlier than expected, as the dance party began
probably just about. They went straight to their room, my father not having said a word. The next day we were told that he had lost his

employment. Mum later told us what had happened. For dinner, they were seated at the head table, which overlooked the dance floor. Before the band started playing, Dad's boss pulled out a bucket full of silver dollars and proceeded to throw them down, enjoying the spectacle of salesmen, secretaries and mechanics scrambling on the dance floor to get some coins. After standing there for a few seconds, Dad stood up and took Mom's hand, and they left. He resigned in protest.

Although I didn't really realise it at the time, or perhaps I refused to acknowledge it, my father was out of his element in Mayfield. In 1955 we were only the fourth family to move into the area. Eventually, three- and four-bedroom houses sprang up around ours, housing families of young professionals recently hired at the DuPont plant - chemists, accountants and lawyers, all with university degrees. A new development with no greenery like so many others, Mayfield was a big improvement over Brookview for us. For these ambitious young people, however, it was just a step up the corporate ladder to bigger jobs, bigger cars and bigger houses. DuPont offered them immediate security and the promise of a bright future. My classmates' fathers all wore tie clips with the company logo - the word DuPont surrounded by an oval. "The oval takes care of you," was a popular saying among these people. It was reminiscent of the old Allstate Insurance Company maxim: "You're in good hands with Allstate.

I always knew that my father was not a model employee; he had a
He was too independent-minded for that. Nevertheless, he seemed just as confident as the other fathers about his future. He assured us that we were just passing through the house on Wilson Road. My brothers and sister and I were equally confident about the future at the time, as America seemed to be rebuilding itself for the benefit of our post-war generation. New houses, new schools, new cars, new gadgets, new ways of doing things were appearing.

television, and new programmes featuring people who looked like us. It all made one feel absolutely safe. The possibility of communism ravaging Mayfield seemed as unlikely as Nikita Khrushchev inviting himself to the Cleaver table[6].

As Mayfield was predominantly Protestant, we had to travel a little further to attend Mass on Sundays, but apart from that we were just another family. On Sunday nights, after dinner, Dad would give me a dollar. I'd hop on my bike and pedal to Cutler's drugstore to buy a two-litre tub of Breyers ice cream. When I got home, the six of us would sit in the living room and watch *Lassie* and the Jack Benny and Ed Sullivan shows.

Despite all this, I had the feeling that Dad didn't feel at home in Mayfield. I never asked him about his life, nor did he open up, but I found it strange to see his polo mallet, black leather riding boots, beige trousers and jacket in his wardrobe. I would have the same reaction when I saw the home movies shot on his cousin's huge estate on Long Island where Dad had once boarded his horses, or the photos of Obediah, his favorite show jumping horse. I would find out a lot about my father later on. One day when Jimmy was eight years old, Dad took him to the Wilmington airport where he rented a Piper Cub and flew it himself. The two of them flew together over the city. They also sometimes went clay pigeon shooting on the Delaware River. Later, when I was in college, he took the rest of the family on a trip in a thirteen-meter boat he had borrowed. Jimmy was almost shocked to discover that our father could sail. If family legend is to be believed, he even *swam* across the Delaware River. I saw him do a perfect angel jump from a diving board myself. He was the most elegant, well-manicured and well-dressed car dealership manager Wilmington had ever seen. He was also a wonderful dancer. He loved to sing and had absolute grace. I never saw him get confused in public. However, my brother Jimmy - who, unlike me, often asked our father about his past - always perceived a hint of melancholy in him.

- You have to go to university at all costs," my father often told me.

This kind of phrase from another time was typical of him. "I almost have tears in my eyes when I think about it. He always regretted not getting a university degree, so much so that it had the effect of holding him back in his career. Without ever expressing it openly to me, his message was clear: "No one is going to take your degree back, Joey. Some powerful people have the power to influence you, to take away your job, your money and your salary, but nobody is going to take away your education. My father and his brother Frank had not even started university. No Biden of my acquaintance had ever been to college. However, his early success in the workplace gave the illusion that Joseph Robinette Biden would never need a university degree.

My father was born in 1915 in Baltimore, at a time when his own father, Joseph H. Biden, had recently become involved with the Blaustein family, helping them sell oil door-to-door. The fuel was transported in a tank attached to a horse-drawn wagon. When they sensed the golden age of the automobile coming, the Blaustein family adapted and sold petrol. At that time, they founded a small company, the American Oil Company (the future Amoco). Joseph, my grandfather, was appointed regional manager of the Wilmington area. My father spent most summers at the home of his cousin Bill Sheen Jr. who was like a brother to him. Old Sheen, also known as Big Bill, was a burly Irishman with a penchant for the bottle who, we were told, had invented a plaster used in the construction of burial vaults. The Sheens owned property in the Baltimore countryside and - without giving too much away - were quite wealthy. Every two years, Big Bill bought three brand new Cadillacs - one for himself, one for his wife and one for his son. He also gave his favourite nephew, Joseph Biden, the latest Buick roadster. My father's youth was filled with chivalrous chases. He hunted, raced and flew planes. He wore designer clothes, knew about thoroughbred horses and mastered the latest dance moves.

So when his father, Joseph H. Biden, was transferred from Wilmington to Scranton, my father drove up in his brand new four-hole Buick to attend his senior year of college.[7] "to attend his last year of college. Scranton's Catholic institutions had never seen such a thing, and the other students gave him a hard time for his pride. Conversely, my mother - Jean Finnegan, who lived on North Washington Avenue - fell madly in love with him. They were married in May 1941 in Scranton.

While the war was in full swing, the Sheens signed a big contract to put their coating on merchant ships sailing from American ports. My father was drawn into this new business. While Big Bill ran operations at the Norfolk, Virginia shipyard, Bill Jr. ran New York and my father ran Boston. Bill Jr. and my father lived the good life, each flying their own plane up and down the East Coast, running off to the Adirondacks to hunt elk, showing up at the Barclay Hotel kitchens with a couple of quail that the chef would immediately prepare. The Sheens did very well during the war, and my father benefited from this. He eventually put aside some money, with the intention of investing for his own account. I was not yet three years old when the war ended. We were living comfortably in an elegant home on the outskirts of Boston. Dad teamed up with an old friend to buy a building downtown, in which they planned to open a furniture shop. Alas, before the deed was even signed, my father's partner disappeared with the money. My father refused to sue him, arguing that the money had disappeared anyway and, secondly, that this individual had been his friend.

- I can't do such a thing," he explained to my mother. I am the
his daughter's godfather.

With his meagre remaining savings, he joined forces with another friend who had been a pilot during the war. They bought an airfield on Long Island and set up a farm spraying business. They sprayed fertilizer on apple orchards in upstate New York and on potato farms on Long Island. We had just moved to Garden City when that business went under. Dad had no one to turn to. His parents were dead, as was his Uncle Bill

Sheen. His cousin, Bill Sheen Jr. had squandered his wartime fortune living in luxury on his Long Island estate.

In 1947, when it was time for me to start primary schools, we moved back to Scranton, completely broke. Mum, Dad, Val and I moved in with Grandpa Finnegan on North Washington Avenue, in the house where my mother had spent her childhood. Her brother Edward Blewitt (whom we called Boo-Boo) still lived there, as did Aunt Gertie Blewitt, Grandpa's sister-in-law and an old lady who remained a maid. Life was not easy for my father in this house. The Finnegans had criticised him severely when he was making a good living, but their reproaches hardly ceased when he lost his savings. As typical Irishmen, the Finnegans were not the type to forget their grudges.

I remember going up to Aunt Gertie's room one night, a room on the second floor that smelled musty.

—Your father is not a bad person, my darling," she confided, sitting next to me and stroking my back.

Such a possibility had obviously never crossed my mind.

—Your father is not bad, he's English, that's all. But he's still a good man.

My father was a remarkable man in that he understood that the world owed him nothing. No matter how successful he had once been, he was determined to take any job if his family needed money. For nearly a year, he commuted daily from Scranton to Wilmington to clean boilers for Kyle Heating & Air-Conditioning. To make ends meet, he ran a stall at the weekend farmers' market in New Castle, Delaware, selling pennants and other trinkets. One Saturday, my mother decided to surprise him by bringing his lunch to the market. When she discovered him behind his stand, wearing his ironed tweed jacket, with a silk tie elegantly tied and a neatly folded clutch bag, my father felt humiliated. If being reduced to selling these odds and ends was bad enough, watching my mother witness this sad spectacle was even worse. Despite this, she hugged him and said:

—I am very proud of you.

My father taught me the value of loyalty, effort and hard work, just as he taught me to bear burdens with grace. He liked to quote Benjamin Disraeli: "Never complain; never justify yourself."

So I set my mind on attending Archmere High School. My father wasn't too keen on the idea because the tuition was three hundred dollars a year.

—Sallie's a great place too, you know, Joe," he pointed out.

Not only did Salesianum High School not suffer from the comparison, but it had the merit of charging only one hundred dollars in tuition. Nor was there anything to complain about at Mount Pleasant, which, in addition to being a public school, and therefore free, was among the best in Delaware. I remained obsessed with Archmere, and had learned that students who could not afford to pay the tuition could be admitted at a lower cost in exchange for a job at the school. These jobs were not during the school year, so they did not shame the poorer students. After I had passed the entrance exam to Archmere, I was offered to work there during the summer. There were about ten of us in the school's maintenance team, under the command of a rough-voiced guy called Dominic. I gave up part of my summer holiday to work on his team from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon every day. Dominic was housed on the school grounds and supervised by the headmaster, Father Justin Diny. That summer, Dominic was always in a bad mood.

—Bloody Father Diny!" he grumbled.

For my first job, he asked me to pull the weeds in the gardens in front of the huge mansion, a task that took me days. Then I had to wash all the windows of the building. I didn't have any of today's cleaning products, of course, but just vinegar and water in a bucket, a rag to scrub and a newspaper to wipe. There must have been something like two hundred windows... After that I had to repaint the wrought iron gate. When September came, I had earned my place in Archmere.

The first day of school was like a dream. Everything° was new: my clothes - we wore jackets and ties every day - my notebooks, my Parker fountain pen and a dozen pencils as sharp as a gladiator's lance. The bus passed through the gate (its black paint glistening with light) between the two huge stone pillars, and drove down the gold-paved road to the old Raskob mansion, its windows glistening in the morning sun. High school graduates parked their cars by the old garages and servants' quarters and walked through the gardens to the main entrance. They looked like university students.

We entered through the front portico and made our way to the square, marble, columned central hall under a *removable* stained glass roof. From the main entrance I could see the back patio and the arch of elm trees leading down to the Delaware River. The hall led to the classrooms, a refectory - where we also attended Mass - the headmaster's office and finally the library.

I think I let out a hiccup of astonishment the first time I set foot in the library. Like the other rooms in the mansion, it was adorned with dark wood panels and had the distinction of having the walls covered with books from floor to ceiling. I felt like I was in heaven - or at least at Yale.

In the basement were the changing rooms - Archmere was a very sporty school - and doors that could only amaze a fourteen-year-old living in a modest house in Mayfield. One led to a bowling alley built by John Jakob Raskob, another to a passageway leading to the servants' quarters and garages. In winter we used this secret passage to get to the classrooms there. One day, shortly after the start of the school year, I was allowed to leave the classroom and go to the toilet in the basement. On my way up, as I reached the top of the stairs, I heard Father Diny calling out to two senior students. He was on the raised walkway outside the hall and the boys were one floor below. I froze, hiding behind a pillar, to watch them. They never knew that I had witnessed the scene.

—A warning for everyone," decreed Father Diny, wrapped in his white robe and cape.

The two students had slipped out of their classroom without permission to smoke, for which they were punished. Neither of them replied, but one of them probably glared at the headmaster.

—You are angry with me, aren't you, Mr Davilos?
Would you like to hit me?

Although these words made me shudder, Davilos did not seem in the least disturbed. He was a member of the football team and probably weighed about ninety kilos, while Father Diny was already fifty-five years old at the time. But Davilos was no fool.

—My father would kill me if I did such a thing," he replied.

—Well, I give you permission," said Father Diny.

—Are you kidding, Father?

—Absolutely not, Mr Davilos," insisted the headmaster, who came down from his perch and, after approaching Davilos, removed his cloak and handed it to the other student. Go ahead, my son. Hit me.

Then Father Diny slapped Davilos, who lost his temper and tried to hit the old man. The old man parried the blow with his right arm and followed up with a left jab and a right hook. Davilos collapsed. Father Diny reached out to the other boy, to retrieve his cloak, and ordered him:

—Relieve Mr Davilos and take him back to class.

As for me, I returned to my classroom without wasting a second.

I had a difficult start at Archmere. At five foot five, I was the second smallest boy in my class. Add to this the fact that I weighed a wet forty-five kilos. My classmates soon noticed my stammer, as did the fact that I was the only one exempt from public speaking in the first year. I didn't want that kind of exemption, those excuses, anymore. I prayed that this handicap would disappear with age, but I did not intend to leave it to fate: I was determined to act to get rid of it. To do this, I applied the only method I knew, which was to work hard. Practice, practice and more practice. I memorised long passages from Yeats and Emerson, and then stood in front of the

the mirror in my room in our house on Wilson Road and I talked for hours.

—"Docile young men grow up in libraries... Docile young men grow up in libraries... Docile young men grow up in libraries..."

I would watch myself as I spoke, to make sure that my facial muscles didn't tense up, because that was what was making my classmates laugh, and therefore blocking me. So, as soon as I saw my jaw clench, I would give myself a brief pause, the time to relax my muscles, to smile, then I would resume my exercise.

— "Docile young men grow up in libraries, convinced that it is their duty to accept the views expressed by Cicero, Locke or Bacon. In doing so, they forget that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were themselves only young men frequenting libraries when they wrote these works. This gives us bookworms, rather than men capable of reasoning.

At home, in addition to my mother's constant encouragement, I had another source of stimulation in my Uncle Boo-Boo. My mother's brother, Edward Blewitt "Boo-Boo" Finnegan visited us in Wilmington shortly after Grandpa Finnegan died in 1956. He stayed with us for seventeen years. As a salesman for Serta, a company that sold mattresses, Blewitt would sleep with my brothers and me between tours. Besides being a wonderful friend to us, Boo-Boo was a brilliant man, the only person in the house with a university degree. He used to make me read the *New York Times* editorial, and then discuss politics with my classmates and me. One day he took Val and me to Washington, D.C., just to show us around the Capitol. He even approached Senator Everett Dirksen and introduced us to him. Like my father, Blewitt couldn't stand vulgarity. When Jimmy or I let out swear words we'd heard in school, Uncle Boo-Boo wouldn't was sure to intervene with a mocking look on his face:

—Vulgarity is typical of limited minds trying to express themselves, Joey. You should think of more creative ways to express your displeasure.

Unfortunately, Uncle Boo-Boo suffered all his life from a dreadful stammer, which he used as a crutch as an excuse for everything he did not accomplish. He did not marry, had no children and never had a home of his own. Endowed with a thousand talents, he had wasted them. The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, my mother's four brothers decided to join the army. Three were taken. My uncle Ambrose Jr. became a pilot and was killed in New Guinea, and Jack and Gerry went to war, but the army didn't want Blewitt. Did he owe this refusal to his stammer? After a few drinks, he readily confided in me how much he had dreamed of becoming a doctor, explaining that if it hadn't been for his debilitating disability, he would have gone to medical school.

—That's a lie, Edward Blewitt Finnegan!" my mother said, loud enough for everyone to hear. You could have become a doctor, even if it took twenty years of study.

My mother did not accept bad excuses.

Although we were young, we noticed that Uncle Boo-Boo drank a bit too much. As time went by, he became more and more bitter. If someone taunted him with something like "Sa-sa-sa-sa-sa-salut Bu-bu-bu-bu-Blewitt", he would reply violently:

—My name is F-f-f-f-f-Finnegan, you know! I bet you've never even heard of *Finnegan's Wake*! I'm sure you don't even know who wrote it!

Then he would turn to a witness of the scene and bellow:

—I p-p-p-p-p-p-lease, this guy has never r-r-r-r-read anything by J-j-j-j-Joyce!

He hated the rich. When my father was making money during the war, he kept reminding him that he had never been to college, like all the Biden's before him:

—The B-b-b-b-Biden's have money, M-m-m-m-monseigneur Joseph, but the F-f-f-f-Finnegan's have education.

As he grew older and more bitter, he sometimes even broke his own rule about vulgarity:

—Money can do anything, Joey. The rest is shit.

I loved Uncle Boo-Boo but I didn't want to end up like him. That's why I stood in front of the mirror night after night, watching my

face while reciting my texts:

—"This stupid spirit of coherence is the leprechaun of pusillanimous minds, revered by statesmen and theologians of low stature.

—It's time for bed, Joey!

—"A great soul does not care about this spirit of consistency. You might as well worry about your shadow on the wall. Express what you feel today in strong words and what tomorrow will think, express it also in strong words, even if it contradicts what you are saying today. ''Not to be understood!'' This is the word of a fool. Is it so bad not to be understood? Pythagoras was not understood, nor Socrates, nor Jesus, nor Luther, nor Copernicus, nor Galileo, nor Newton, nor any of the wise and pure spirits that have taken flesh. Being great is an excellent condition for not being understood.

I went so far as to imitate Demosthenes, the greatest orator of ancient Greece, who, according to what I had read, had also been a stutterer. To overcome this handicap, he had trained himself to speak with pebbles in his mouth. According to the legend, he would run along the beach, trying to speak over the

"I was so desperate that even though we had no beach or ocean nearby, I tried. I was so desperate that, even though we had no beach or ocean nearby, I made an attempt. A nearby garden had small paths of pebbles. I picked up a dozen or so and, after approaching the wall of our modest home, slipped them into my mouth. Facing the brick wall, I wanted to speak in a loud voice. For your information, this method is ineffective. I almost swallowed half the pebbles. So I went back to my room and resumed my position facing the mirror.

At Archmere, the little boy gradually became a young man, so much so that by the time I reached the first grade I had grown a foot taller. Although my grades were rarely above a regular B, I was quite popular with the girls and liked by my classmates. Whenever a group formed, for whatever reason, I became the leader. I was class representative in the second year and president of the first and second years. I might even have been appointed president of the entire student body, but for Father Diny's veto, who said I was getting too many punishments to be worthy. And I knew it was in my best interest not to stand up to him. On the other hand, I wanted to be a leader

benevolent. I never failed to stand up for students who were being taunted - I knew the effect it had. I sometimes drove a mocked ninth grader home, sometimes stopping off at the local snack bar to be seen with me, or took a kid to the prom with my date.

Sport was the area in which I tried hardest to excel. In my senior year, I was the top scorer on my football team, which finished the season undefeated, without even drawing a game. I was not lacking in confidence on the field, constantly demanding the ball, as I always had. In the final game of my final high school season, away to Friends Central in Philadelphia, we were headed for an easy win. With only a few minutes left to play in the final quarter, the ball was handed to us. I can still hear our *quarterback*, Bill Peterman, telling us:

—This is it, guys. This is the last play of our high school career. Let's take turns getting the ball, so everyone has a chance to score. (Including the *quarterback*, there were four of us who could run to the end zone; Bill turned to me.) You start, Joe.

We were forty-five yards from the end zone. Peterson certainly thought that the last one of us to get the ball would have the best chance of scoring a *touchdown*, and it was up to him to make the team decisions.

—Okay, I'll go first," I said. But you're not touching the damn ball again, Peterman.

I had to run a hundred and ten yards, slaloming from sideline to sideline, determined not to get tackled before I reached the end zone.

However, my proudest achievement of my Archmere period was in the area in which I was least confident. In second grade, I stood up and, facing the morning assembly, delivered a five-minute speech, as required, without hiding behind an excuse or dispensation. I did it, as did everyone else. In June 1961, at the graduation ceremony, I delivered the few words of welcome to the parents and friends of the students without stuttering once. It was