*The Planet of Love*

Possibly if she had not wanted the puppies, instead of us.

To my mother’s credit, she explains everything quite candidly, even to her children, even when we are young, lowering the boom on us without hesitation, even laughing as she goes about it, more or less oblivious to the emotional ramifications, it seems, or perhaps deeming them unworthy of consideration among so elite, so dashing a company as ourselves, such good soldiers, we, *cheerio*, pip pip, stiff upper lip, chaps, always giving herself over entirely to truth for truth’s sake, even adding a little extra punch, occasionally, an extra bite of irony or sarcasm, in instances where the initial blow doesn’t knock you completely for a loop. Which of course played into my own tendency to conceal weakness, at all costs.

Because, well, even as a boy, I knew a guy had to be able to take a punch.

If you couldn’t take a punch, what were you?

We are relaxing on the beach, the *Irish Riviera*, my parents and aunts and uncles call it, where the lucky sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters of immigrants bask in the summer sun at leisure, all in dark glasses, that *Jack and Jackie* thing, skins tawny, smiles bright, “ensconced” (a word we used to parody ourselves, ever alert to the comedic aspects, ready to have the rug pulled out from under at any moment) beneath striped umbrellas, hundreds of them sprung open like tulips, arrayed in a riotously colorful swath parallel to the surf, where the swells roll in off the Atlantic midnight with the regimental discipline we so admire, first midnight blue and then jade green and then glassily transparent as they rise and arch and collapse tumultuously, boiling and tossing kids in their paths, so the kids come up screaming with glee, blind for a moment, gauging at their eyes with both hands, while the one wave slides up the shining incline of damp sand to fizz and froth at the feet of the cowards standing there and another builds at the backs of the heroes and heroines who have brave them.

Steady as a heartbeat, the sea.

There are certain signals she gives my Aunt Marge when she wishes to cue Marge regarding the importance of an unspoken inference, on this occasion briefly repositioning the sunglasses to gaze over the rims at Marge.

“You know I wanted the Cocker Spaniels,” she says casually, I guess relying on the tone to confuse us, or perhaps forgetting that the interlopers are listening and frantically decoding her comments, as best we can.

“I hear you,” says Marge, inscrutable behind her own dark glasses, not even looking up from her magazine. She flicks at the lipstick-stained filter of her cigarette. “Who wouldn’t?”

Mother pushes the glasses with a forefinger placed between the lenses, but continues to stare Marge’s way, allowing a long moment of silence, during which I believe they are communicating telepathically about the advantages of Cocker Spaniels versus children.

Finally, deadpan, still staring, she murmurs, “It’s all God’s will.”

Marge sucks up a lusty lungful of smoke, jabs the stub her Marlboro into the sand, and says, “Right.” Shaking her head disconsolately, she adds, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

And they think we don’t know what they are talking about?

Beg pardon, but the so-called “subtlety” of adults is entirely transparent to me, a ten-thousand-year-old monk inexplicably reincarnated in the body of a thirteen-year-old New Jersey *nudnik* … who just happens to be more than halfway, in fact almost *three-quarters* *of the way* through reading the complete works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great Russian novelist? Even at this moment I see myself, as in a photograph, the face nut brown, the bright white teeth disproportionately large, somehow, the expression screwed around awkwardly in a futile attempt to narrow the eye slits against the pounding of the sun. Of course the two women make reference to the church’s prohibition of birth control, which is the single most significant fact in any of our lives, as it is responsible for our very existence and keeps them tethered to this whining, mewling pack of idiot midgets … *us* … as a group so much harder to train than cocker spaniels, I have to take their word for it … not to mention the requirements of clothing, schooling, haircuts, galoshes, innumerable other outlays that might otherwise have been channeled toward theater and airline tickets, high-heeled shoes, perfume, or cocktails at the *Top of the Sixes* in Manhattan, a nightclub neither Mom nor Marge has ever visited, but plan to visit as soon as their ship comes in.

Subconsciously, but *almost* consciously, *almost* realizing it, I want to roll over.

To play dead.

To bring her the newspaper in my teeth, drooling.

Would that do it? Allowing me to transcend the ignominy of … well, when you come right down to it, just being here, without any particular purpose that is apparent? Or even excuse? Looking at it from the point of view of, say, the brothers Karamazov … or even more to the point, the Grand Inquisitor … what was I, in the final analysis, but a mere byproduct of this great geyser of being called sex? Which went off every few nights in my parents’ bedroom, Old Fucking Faithful, not at God’s *behest*, you understand, not in keeping with his plan, but in *spite of him*.

Was that what it was all about? God vs. Sex? Jesus Christ frantically poking his fingers into the dike of human morality, in a totally futile attempt to hold back the Sea of Sex?

A blimp laboriously churns its way northward, upwind, through the azure inferno of summer in New Jersey, where the climate at this time of year … as I have discovered with an extra close reading of my Advanced Geography text … is essentially the same as that of the *Panama Canal Zone*.

Is this what it all comes down to, in the end?

A lipstick-stained cigarette stuck upright in the sand?

A blimp that is going nowhere?

The idea being … if I can somehow get a handle on this … the nature being itself, say. Or maybe … a better way of putting it ....the *why* of it. Or maybe … just to end the agony of wondering where it will all lead and assume that it’s over, finito, *kaputski* … that my soul has sprung loose into the ether … finally, *finally* free of this ever so mortal desire to stay the same and once again changeable as the breeze, swirling in mystic circles, bobbing like a blimp above a ball game, with a view of everything, in heaven or on earth.

Perhaps I should note parenthetically that, still charmed by the novelty of aviation, we in the Twentieth Century frequently observe ball games from blimps, especially at night, when the Orange Bowl glows like a volcano far below. What a thrill it is to hear our good friend the announcer, the ever-affable Jim McKay, introducing the blimp shot, knowing that in a moment we will be up in the air, where we *think* we belong, looking down from the prospect of angels on the pitiful strivings of mortal men, on a planet where the brothers Karamazov and the meandering mind of Dostoyevsky must co-exist with Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mantle, President John F. Kennedy, and my Aunt Marge.

Picture me, then, as a skeleton in captain's hat and flapping epaulets, a nattering, clattering stack of bones that merrily goes on thinking, goes on dreaming, cranium open to the breeze, blithely spinning the helm of the blimp, tipping my cap, bobbing and swaying to the beat of the calliope music, the cartoon music, that is beeping and booping in the background. Not an ancient one, I suddenly realize, but a cartoon of a soul, a ludicrous excuse for a soul, a pimply-faced thirteen-year-old in a ridiculously baggy suit, standing at the front of a lecture hall with a pointer in hand and opining, because I see the universe as My Science Project.

Below us we behold not a stadium, or a city … or even a country, my friends … but a particularly beautiful planet, the Pearl of the Milky Way, our own beloved Earth, whose cyclonic whorls of white and green and aquamarine, are the signature of life itself, or at least our own kind. Likely it will not have escaped your notice that nearly every species of life on the surface of this planet includes two variants known as “male” and “female.” Peculiarly, neither of the variants possesses all of the organs necessary for the survival of the species. Rather, those are divided between the two. If I may draw an analogy, imagine that specimens of the two variants awaken to find themselves lost at the bottom of a coal mine. We have given a flashlight to one and a set of batteries to the other. Life then becomes a desperate struggle to identify the complementary pieces, to figure out how they relate, and finally to put them together correctly, with much awkward fumbling in the dark, as most of us know.

It is this aspect of life that is our focus today, ladies and gentlemen.

For our topic today is love, my friends.

Not philosophical or theoretical love, not Venusian or Martian love, but love of the wildly unlikely, impossibly exotic Planet Earth variety … the fever that possesses my own mother … the Romeo and Juliet, Fred and Ginger, Tarzan and Jane variety, a phenomenon spawned like an exotic bacterium in the colossal petri dish that pinwheels through the universe below us, amid this magical cocktail of seawater, sunshine, Frank Sinatra music, and Saturday nights at the movies.

That there are two sexes on Earth is pure happenstance, as far as I can see, an accident of chemistry in the primordial broth, where molecules tumbled like dice and lined up like dominoes to decide our common fate. Had those first molecules clicked together a little differently, why, there could have been three or four or even five sexes, no? Indeed, it is not inconceivable that there *were* four or five at one time, and that these precursors of our own sexual order died out due to the extreme difficulty of arranging the orgiastic act of procreation. While we cannot rule out the possibility that modern communications systems may bring about a resurgence of such species, possibly in Greenwich Village, or on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, or in downtown San Francisco, I think we can safely assume that two is the number, for the foreseeable future.

Two, the hex.

Two, the charm.

Two the cipher whose secret meaning explains everything.

As there appears to be no normalexperience of love, it doesn't worry me that my own perspective might be a bit unusual. For some men, love is mere amusement. For others, a contest, of a simple sort, as with goats butting heads on a hill. While for me, it was oh, so much more … my obsession … my idyll … my all too attainable heaven … a religion when I had no other, complete with apparitions, revelations, and soul-devouring torments … a dream that continually came true, as natural and easy as a waterfall, so that, even now, I spend half the day in contemplation of the effortless process of realization, hoping to extract from my jumbled mass of memories some organizing principle or formula, some all-purpose, fast-acting, imperishable essence of human joy.

The result is not so much a story as a study, I’m afraid. Not so much a plot as a puzzle. Or perhaps just a few pieces of the puzzle, offered here in the modest hope that you, dear reader, may have a few others. I am taking the scholarly approach. I think now of the notebooks of Isaac Newton, of the scrawled handwriting around dotted lines connecting points A, B, the tree, the apple, Infinity or something, where Newton establishes the principle that, if you drop an apple, it falls to the ground, not once in a while, but *every single time*. Just so, one day, this thirteen-year-old *pischer* may be recognized as the person who discovered the principle of Sexual Voltage Differential, or something along those lines. Of course we don’t know what it will be called, because it hasn’t been discovered yet. Let’s remember, Newton did not know he was discovering “gravity.” Newton did not sit around wondering whether “gravity” existed. He was not thinking about moon launches, or even of apples floating gently toward the surface of the moon. And yet, one day, a giant apple settles there, a hatch opens, and a man in a space suits climb out. All deduced, if you will, from the drawings in those notebooks.

One day, scientists will be able to calculate with equal precision exactly how long it will take two people to get in bed together, how long it will take one of them to propose, which one it will be, and so forth. They may figure out how long it will take a certain guy to reach inside a certain woman’s sweater and unsnap her bra. If we make her figure a bit more curvaceous, maybe change the neckline of the sweater, the outcome is altered slightly, just as it would be if, for example, we introduced a very slight change to the contour on the wing of an airplane. Sitting there on the beach, safely concealed behind my own dark glasses, riding the hormonal high of the thirteen-year-old, I envision quadratic equations relating to necklines, high heels, the color of a woman’s eyes, the various types of perfume. It’s quite possible there will be all kinds of formulas, all derived from the Sexual Voltage Differential algorithm, or SVD, for short. What an honor that would be, if my discovery were ever to attain the status of an acronym. It is even possible that, one day, there will be a statue of me in front of St. Philip the Apostle school, where I am an eighth grader. In one bronze hand, I hold a cartoon heart. In the other, a cartoon arrow. The inscription: “Amoris Doctor.”

*Doctor of Love.*

I see a pigeon perched on the arrow, watching the world go by. All of the statues in the world, all of the inscriptions, all of the glory, all of the genius cannot begin to rival the glory of that pigeon, with his darting, blood-red eyes, leisurely taking a crap on a sunny summer day.

But now let us get on with the hard work of scientific research.

Logically, we begin at the beginning. With the lovely long ago. With the historyof love,if you will, as it was conveyed to me, by the man and woman who were my models of wildly romantic excess, the couple who set me down on the path to emotional catastrophe and sent me toddling happily on my way.

Let us begin with some photographs.

This one shows my mother sitting in short-shorts and sandals on the steps of the patio behind the house at Lake Hopatcong where we had spent earlier summers, her arms looped and clasped around her knees, her long, slender, showgirl's legs folded and fitted like wings against her chest. I could be wrong, Notice there is this ever so subtle and yet unmistakably sultry hint of “cheesecake” in her pose, just a hint of the temptress, if you will, which I’m sure is completely innocent, the kind of thing small town girls pick up from fashion magazines and movie posters and mime mindlessly, yet holding a certain erotic potential, no doubt about it. While normally we do not speak of our parents in terms of erotic potential, in this case it’s hard to ignore, as she herself is clearly aware of it. Clinging to her side like little marsupials are my brother Barry and I, age six and four, the two of us gazing curiously, bemusedly at the camera while she positively beams through the lens at my father, her face an aurora of contentment, where a mother’s love for her children merges with smoldering desire for the man looking through the other end of the lens.

The sound comes back with the picture, as the foliage of the forest encloses us, embraces us in a silence that somehow enhances or amplifies the individual calls of the birds. Each call is so different, so distinct, so demonstrative of the creature’s unique personality, so intricately modulated in its message, it is as though, in that moment, the bird sits on my mother’s shoulder, above me, talking to me.

She knew that she was beautiful. Her eyes brim with the exultation of it. Her smile exhibits the imperturbable poise of one who had been, until a few years earlier, the reigning belle of all of Passaic, New Jersey, and something of a local love goddess, to hear her tell it, virgin variety, of course, leisurely, even languidly cruising around in her famous aqua Plymouth convertible, an ever-so-voluptuous Venus on the half shell when the top is down, boys in letter sweaters and saddle shoes galloping after her on all sides. This particular photo is one of those ancient sepia jobs, but I seem to remember the colors. Lichens imprint tattoos of verdigris on the pebbly surface of the weathered cement. Where my weight rests on the palm of my hand, I feel the individual grains of sand pressing like needles. In her blouse, not two inches from my nose, miniscule purple morning glories or petunias bloom against a background of nubby ivory. Her hair is a radiant, healthy, wholesome brown, woven through with glistening strands of red and gold after a long summer in the sun.

Her eyes, a muddy, mossy green.

Those eyes that were my pillow, my rest.

And here am I, our anti-hero, our cute little Oedipus, our acolyte at the altar of love, afraid of the camera, afraid of my father, afraid even of my own independent existence. I am three feet tall and shrinking even as the shutter opens. As I compress myself against my mother’s fragrant flesh (the floral scent of her shampoo combining felicitously with that of our industrial strength laundry detergent, *Tide*), I cannot quell the urge to merge back into her, into womb as foxhole, if you will, into womb as airplane hangar, following a day spent flying around the forest. The problem, I think, is the camera, which has a funny way of insisting upon a person’s independent existence as a distinct and recognizable individual. You look at the picture it takes and there you are, right out in the open with the rest of them, fair game for any passing predator.

You see what I’m getting at here?

If you are a person different from the others, separate from the others, independent of the others, clearly the implication is that you can be extinguished independently, am I right? The camera produces the irrefutable evidence. It takes you out of the aqueous dream world of your mother’s love and puts you into the real world of life and death and … well, the terrible *separateness* of it all.

My head is barely covered with the pathetically sparse fuzz that somehow survives the onslaught of Johnny The Barber, who can give you a haircut blindfolded because he never looks anyway, blithely buzzing the shaver over your dome while gazing fixedly at your father and explaining, for example, why Almighty God gave Mickey Mantle hamstring problems.

Because if he *didn't*, Johnny opines, the Mick woulda been *poi-fect!*

Which, we all know … ain't possible!

When Johnny feels that a point is particularly important to our understanding of the universe, he raises his scissors and rapidly exercises the blades at nothing, just making noise, basically, as with castanets. Though the men around me seem deeply absorbed in the newspapers and magazines Johnny generously provides in piles on every horizontal surface, they always acknowledge this extra fast scissoring with a respectful glance or grunt of assent in Johnny’s general direction. Later arrivals observe as the earlier ones have fresh haircuts lavishly topped off with a healthy slathering of Wildroot Cream Oil, their cheeks patted with witch hazel, their necks sprinkled with lilac dust, all of which make the olfactory component pretty compelling, I have to tell you. When Johnny finishes with a customer, he makes a big deal out of knocking the clippings off his gigantic red leather barber chair, flapping and slapping and snapping the apron just removed from the customer every which way imaginable. Whereupon he will welcome the next customer, nod, exchange pleasantries, and resume the lecture.

“Well, because … if human beings were *poi-fect*, what would the angels’ job be?”

His raptor eye ratchets around the room, on the alert for the slightest tremor of disapprobation in the delicate web of social cohesion he tends so fastidiously. Obviously he is quite correct. Why, the truth of his assertion is explained in the catechism itself, where it very plainly states that only God is perfect. Plainly, Mickey Mantle is not God. Close, maybe. But close doesn’t count, in the perfection department. It’s like running the bases. If you’re out, you’re out. It doesn’tmatter whether you were *close*.

Here is how I look at it. Let’s suppose you happen to find yourself managing a team that has somehow or other found its way into the seventh game of the World Series. Your squad is down three runs and they are batting in the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs, the usual situation. You, the manager, must now decide who you are going to send to the plate, Mickey Mantle or Jesus Christ. For purposes of this explanation, let’s assume that the Second Coming has occurred, and Jesus has returned to live amongst us once more, this time in the person of a very talented young center fielder from the Dominican Republic. Bear in mind, this is not going to be an easy decision, because probably the two guys, Jesus and Mickey, are going to be staring at you, as if to say, you know, put me in, coach, I can do it. So the pressure is on every which way. You would prefer not to piss off either of them. But ultimately, you are going to have to go with Jesus, am I right? And just hope that Jesus is going to be pay attention, for God’s sake, and not have any whacky beatific visions or get any dramatic last-minute messages from the Holy Ghost while he is up there … or worse, maybe feel a *homily* coming on. Because, hey, you can’t rule out the possibility that the presence of so large a crowd will distract him, compelling him to take one last stab at saving all their souls, which of course is the *last thing* anybody want, in a World Series. Worst case, Jesus cranks up a real stemwinder of a sermon and clears out everybody but the hot dog vendors, while the Mick is sitting on the bench, fuming.

The point being, that’s a risk you have to take. You play the percentages, in this game. It’s all in the percentages. Last analysis, a guy who can walk on water and turn loaves into fishes can *probably* hit a curve ball.

Incidentally, when I say *we*, I mean we Catholics. When it comes to God and Jesus and the essential nature of the creation that surrounds us … which to my knowledge extends as far as Nutley, New Jersey, to the East, and probably Denville to the West … the Jews and Protestants do no matter. Theologically speaking, the Jews are history. Why? They took their eye off the ball, if you know what I mean. Only we, the Catholics, have the ability to see the situation clearly. Why the truth of the matter has not penetrated the thick skulls of the Jews is more than I can explain. But it hasn’t. Of course there was a time when the Jews had it made with God. The way my mother puts it, they were *in like Flynn* … maybe not exactly the phrase she wanted. As a teen philosopher, I can’t help but imagine the crucifixion of Christ and the reactions of the different ethnic and religious groups who happened to show up that day, looking for a bit of entertainment with maybe a little torture and sadism. Naturally the Jews have a ball because, well, what do they know, they are Jews. The Romans notice that the sky is turning purple, gigunda thunder bolts are blasting buildings apart, fissures are opening in the earth, the dead are walking, little tell-tale signs that something has gone just a teensy bit wrong somewhere. Probably the Romans mention some of this stuff to the Jews, in a collegial way. Like, hey, check out the corpses walking down the street, wonder what’s up there. But, *pfffft*, the Jews do not listen, they don’t have to, they figure they are the “chosen ones.” In a nutshell, the Jews think God is the doorman in their building. Jesus’s father is the schlemiel from Nazareth, the carpenter guy, Joseph, who apparently doesn’t even own his own business, because he has to put the family up in a stable for the night, and his mother, Mary What’s-Her-Name, what is she all about? Now the son introducing going around himself as the Son of God? Please.

They gambled and lost, the Jews.

They bet against Jesus and lost. It turned out that the Jews had a full house and Jesus had a royal straight flush.

In fairness to the Jews, the catechism explains that all of us human beings are basically substandard. No one comprehends this elemental truth better than Johnny the Barber, who has seen it all. We humans are what my mother calls “seconds,” her word for the clothing we get at rock bottom prices because a seam is crooked or a button has been sewn on wrong (flaws that of course she corrects immediately, as not to correct them risks revelation of our family’s vulnerability to financial reverses … which we never, ever, *ever* want to do … as that would only embolden the predators all around us, waiting for their chance).

Even I can see the anamoly. On the one hand, God himself is perfect. This is a truism, a tautology. God is perfection, perfection is God. Fine. I have not problem with that.

But then, the troubling part is, when he creates mankind, apparently God is having an off day? He fouls a few pitches into the stands as he kind of gets the hang of creating things?

And one of those foul balls, or two of them, actually, just happen to be … *mankind?* Unfortunately, as we all know, those two original foul balls, Adam and Eve, just happen to have the ability to reproduce. How does that happen? There again, is somebody asleep at the switch, or what? Next thing you know, you have millions of foul balls bouncing around the world more or less randomly, and the only way out is to flood the whole place, like a cellar full of rats.

Not good.

But here’s the other thing.

I consider myself humble. That is a plus. You want to be humble. You cannot be perfect unless you are humble, a tricky concept. Ideally, you want to be humble as all hell, mainly because Jesus was humble. Who washed the feet of Mary Magdalen? Can we agree that was not the act of egomaniac? Let’s remember, Mary Magdalen is not some randomly selected Jane off the street. Jesus knows very well she is, well, at the very least, a loose woman, let’s say. When you thought about it, it was amazing the apostles even mentioned her in the gospels. I would have expected someone in a supervisory position to step in. *The Mary Magdalen character? Lose that.* That is, until you realize that the Mary Magdalen is necessary to establish the humility angle in the Jesus character. Morally speaking, she is the doormat. What could be worse than a whore? A woman who actually *likes* sex! But anyway, you can see how humble Jesus is, actually washing her feet. This is how we know that Jesus is pretty perfect. The tricky part of this being … and frankly, I hesitate to even bring this up … not to risk misunderstanding … but I have spent a goodly amount of time searching for my own flaws, and frankly, haven’t found any, to speak of.

So, you know, God had bounced back, it looked like.

He created six or seven billion screwed-up human beings and then, one day, bingo, *me*.

The guy fouls off ten or fifteen billion pitches and then, *boom*, out of nowhere, the bases-loaded, game-ending, Series-ending home run.

Go ahead, laugh.

But let’s look at the evidence.

For one thing, there is my unquestioned preeminence as the reigning stickball king of Albion Road, which is in part based on an uncanny ability to field grounders off parked cars and even … get this … practically *under* parked cars. Ask yourself. How many guys are going to be able to snare a grounder as it emerges from beneath a parked car? That requires either X-ray vision or some kind of instantaneous algebraic calculation capability, where you plot the bounces of the pink sphere as dotted lines drawn in diminishing arcs beneath the car, then place your open glove at the end of the last dotted line, and bingo, X marks the spot, the pink sphere appears in your glove, right on schedule.

*Again*.

Also, I have hit something like thirty two home runs in a row … not total, I am saying *in a* *fucking* *row* … always with the same hip-hopping approach to the manhole that serves as home plate, always with the same exquisitely synchronized toss of the ball … the same fluid sweep of the broomstick … the snapping sound on contact … off they go … count ‘em … thirty two in a *row* … most of them landing deep in the shrubs in front of Mrs. Bilas’s house on Friar Lane, prompting not one, not two, but a total of at least three visits from the Clifton Police Department, *to* *this point*.

And in school, a mark of a hundred is flunking, okay? To me, it is all about the extra credit questions. Or, by what margin will my test score *exceed* one hundred. My papers are tattooed with turkey stickers and gold stars and extravagant hymns of praise printed in the red pencil teachers use to mark stuff. I learn the times tables and the state capitals so well the interval between question and answer in those subject areas is infinitesimal, on the order of, say, the interval between the pulling of the trigger and the emergence of the bullet from the barrel of a gun. If we could examine multiple cross sections of my head from this period, we would observe that, as the last syllables of the question impact the eardrum … “A-las-*ka*” … the lips and tongue are automatically set in motion, forming and firing off the word “Seward” with no delay that is discernible to even the most sensitive scientific instruments. All the study involved in accomplishing this feat is well worth it, by the way, because I know that, upon submitting the turkey stickers to my mother, I will be enveloped in her arms.

At peace there, for a moment.

Asleep, for a moment, in the oasis of love.

Not separate.

Not alone.

Not me.

*Us.*

One of Johnny’s customers suggests that Mickey Mantle’s vulnerability to injury is actually related to his tremendous strength, a line of logic that is pretty interesting, as it seems to offer a kind of a back door argument for the plausibility of perfection, possibly creating an opening for people like me. Another guy wants to know what the hell is wrong with Mays, or Kaline, or Gehrig, for Chrissakes. We all understand that these questions are more or less rhetorical, not really a challenge to Johnny’s authority, but rather offered as pretexts, giving him an opportunity to demonstrate the full range of his philosophical mastery of such questions. For example, Willie Mays had the misfortune of being born a Negro. Which was tragic. He could be the greatest hitter and the greatest fielder who ever lived. Still, he’s a Negro, right? Do you think it ever occurred to Willie that maybe God was delivering a little message there? We ourselves are white, and none of *us* are perfect, right? Ha ha. There you go.

“Am I right or wrong?” Johnny asks of no one in particular.

No one ever answers that question.

None of this stops me from dreaming of my very own home run in the bottom of the ninth in the last game of the World Series at, of course, Yankee Stadium. In my dream, there are two outs and the count is two strikes, three balls, bases loaded, Yankees trailing by three runs, and so on, a pretty standard dream, from my point of view, at least up to this point. Although, more than one therapist has pointed out to me the utter futility, the unbelievably stupid self-sabotage in all this “heroic” thinking. In answer, I have tried to explain that I might be neurotic, but at least I have the right neurosis.

This, I tell them, this is the All-American neurosis.

This is what it’s all about.

If we are going to have a pastime in this country, it is not going to be some relatively healthy, happy, all-for-one, one-for-all, sappy European kind of thing, like soccer. Heck, no. We are going to want the kind of pastime that puts the fate of the team on the shoulders of a solitary individual, an isolated individual, facing a more or less impossible task. One man with a bat in his hands, with the bases loaded, down three runs. Of course in my dream it’s going to be *me* at the plate, in the most dramatic, pressure-packed clean-up situation of all time. Because, not only is this the bottom of the ninth in the World Series, but coincidentally, it just so happens there is an asteroid hurtling toward earth, on a collision course that will cause it to land in Herald Square, right on top of Macy’s, in about five minutes, unless Yours Truly does something about it. With this information in hand, I do a few extra calculations in the batter’s box, scribbling equations in the dirt, with my finger, figuring out a few square roots and so forth, combining my knowledge of the parabolic flight of the curve ball with some algebraic skills and vector analysis picked up on a pool table at the firehouse where my uncle works. Anyway I soon figure out that I have to hit this next pitch so hard and so far it flies … not only out of the park, and out of the parking lot, but out of the earth’s atmosphere, not only clearing the bases and winning the Series, but striking the oncoming asteroid with sufficient force to deflect it from its path and save the planet from certain doom.

Asteroid in the corner pocket, if you will.

Given my superhuman powers of concentration, even the pitcher’s best fastball seems to approach the plate in slow motion, big as a beach ball, in my eyes. Oddly, the people in the crowd seem to understand this superhuman capability fully, and even to share in it, to an extent. Time slows down for them, too. You can well understand why they fall eerily silent as I prepare to unleash the incredible strength uncannily coiled within my scrawny beanstalk of a body.

Quite unpredictably, the time warp unwinds. It snaps back to normal in the instant bat and ball collide. The explosive impact resounds … well, not just through the entire stadium, not just through the entire Bronx, and through the rest of the city, and New Jersey, home of my own loyal fan base … not just through the entire United States of America … but throughout the world … because probably pretty much everyone from Tokyo to Terra Haute knows this asteroid is bearing down on us, and it’s up to The Kid from Clifton to save the day. Now in normal time, the whole stadium shudders with the roar of the crowd. TV announcer Mel Allen pulls frantically at the pathetic fringe of hair remaining on his mostly bald, bulbous dome. Ecstatic, Mel trumpets the familiar cadence of his trademark *"going, going, gone"* home run call, as I sail around the bases, waving my cap and skipping with glee, just like Mazerowski when he won it for the Pirates.

In fact, the person in the dream *is* Mazerowski, with my face!

I live this sort of fantasy so vividly, so many times, complete with my own expert phlegm-hawking simulations of applause and deft overdubbing of the Mel Allen home run call … the actual achievement is superfluous. Why bother with real achievements when the most outlandish ambition conceivable can be accomplished without ever leaving the comfort of my own imagination?

True, I control this physical form, what I call my body, which walks around and talks to people in the real world, takes spelling tests, names state capitals more or less automatically, fields grounders, captures fireflies in a jar, attempts to decode the signaling of the fireflies as some kind of secret insect semaphor, making notes on the periodicity of flashes, the intensity of flashes, who seems to be flashing whom, what the social hierarchy seems to be, and so forth. But the physical form is a kind of zombie whose only really important function is to anchor the blimp of my imagination to the surface of the planet, so that the imagination can obtain the lasagna and pot roast and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that fuel its otherwise uninhibited divagations through space and time. Another function is foraging for news items useful as raw material for my fantasy life. By amplifying or aggrandizing the most glorious achievements of others, perfecting their imperfections, if you will, I make their achievements suitable for inclusion in my own purely imaginary life story, a entirely fictional saga loosely based on the adventures of Superman, Mickey Mantle, Peter Pan, Frank Gifford, Cary Grant, King Arthur, Errol Flynn, Sir Edmund Hillary, Albert Schweitzer, Ernest Hemingway … that kind of guy … but way more impressive, in the aggregate, than anything any of those people ever *thought* of doing. Think in terms of Sir Edmund Hillary getting to the top of Everest and finding out that Sophia Lauren is already up there, in a form-fitting evening dress, looking, you know, *smashing*, at a candlelit table for two. “Ohhhhh … Sir Edmund,” she says in her breathy Italian accent, maybe adding an undertone of animal hunger. “You climbed the *w-h-o-l-e mountain.*”

Sir Edmund Hillary then turns into Cary Grant, kind of chucks her under the chin, good-naturedly, with a twinkle in his eye, as only Grant could do, and says, “*Dah-ling*, you look ravishing.”

What I am getting at is … or trying to get at … reality is just not that important.

I do not yet know what genuine sadness is. That realization must await the day when my Irish grandmother will open the window in her musty apartment in Passaic and let Petie, the parakeet we have solemnly entrusted to her care, flutter off in search of papaya and banana trees in the wintry wastes of northern New Jersey. Later that same day, I adamantly refuse to come in off the fifth floor fire escape outside Boomie Nan’s apartment, though it is as cold as Murmansk out there, preferring to remain on watch so I can call out to Petie intermittently, in case he needs to home in on the sound of my voice. I see myself as the radio man on an aircraft carrier tossed in a dark and stormy sea, with one missing pilot still out there somewhere, a pilot who just happens to be a parakeet, desperately straining to detect the sound of my voice through the static in his miniature headgear, a hemet about as big as a walnut. Lieutenant Petie is out there somewhere, I know, a tiny scarf bearing our squadron’s colors tossed rakishly round his neck.

Come in Petie. Come in Petie. Over.

“Peeeet-eeeee. Peeeeet-eeee.”

Come in.

Over.

Vainly calling Petie back from eternity.

For my first direct encounter with death I have to thank my Auntie Marge, the many-faceted fatalist from Jersey City who married my mother's brother, a fireman and part-time plumber in Passaic, and spent the rest of her life transforming the frustration of her own social aspirations into a marathon comedy, in which she plays the dual parts of Cele, the indefatigable social climber humorously modeled on herself, and Princess Manershka, the personification of all that is so absurdly beyond Cele’s reach, and our own. Cele almost always makes her presence known in a moment ripe with irony, as the Princess is indulging herself in some ludicrously expensive luxury, nearly always announcing herself with the same signature line, delivered in a guttural honk I now associate with the Russian Jews of Brighton Beach, whom we had come to know via the Borscht Belt comedians who appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, on TV: *"Dar-linkhhh, I could get it for you khhh-olesale!"*

The Princess and Cele are like two ventriloquists wrestling for possession of a single dummy, my Auntie Marge. Although, when the princess is feeling particularly talkative, my mother will sometimes help out by taking the part of Cele, and the two poltergeists will then chatter away a mile a minute, using the women as mediums. Come to think of it, when they are really into it, both women play both parts. On these occasions the two magpies, the two frustrated vaudevillians, can spend hours in the cavernous kitchen of the Lake House, their own private torture chamber, sweating over the spaghetti sauce and grinding diapers through the antediluvian ringer on the washing machine, talking the whole time, while uttering nary a word as themselves. Interesting.

One day, Auntie Marge is in a fit over the mosquitoes who home in on her every night.

“Like Buzz Bombs,” she says. “What *is it* about me? They’re coming from all over the country to take a bite out of *me*. You think it’s my perfume?”

“Mosquitoes are not interested in flowers,” my mother explains laconically. “Mosquitoes are interested in only one thing, Margie. That’s blood. They’re not like bees, Sweetie. Bees like flowers. Mosquitoes, on the other hand, like blood. Do you perspire at night? Could they be detecting the perspiration you think?”

“Perspire? Are you kidding? I sweat like a pig in that room. It’s like a submarine, in there. What are you suggesting? I should pack myself in iceat night?”

Instead, Aunt Marge waits until the rest of us are off to the beach and then fills the house with insecticide, including the room that holds our fish tank. When we return, we find our angel fish and ruby tetrasand guppies desperately gulping bubbles on the surface of the tank.

“H-e-y-y, w-a-a-a-i-t a minute, what … happened … to … the fish?”

And then, ah, imagine our astonishment, our outrage, when we request medical help and are told that, incredibly … ridiculously … hospitals distinguish between life forms, providing emergency medical care for humans only!

My reaction is … wait, you’re telling me this *now?*

Auntie Marge skulks in the background while my Mom helps us improvise fishie first aid, first plopping our patients into a maelstrom of well water, then oh-so-gently poking and prodding and murmuring their names as we urgently evaluate possible antidotes. My mother has a very good bedside manner. She is very proud of her background as a “Gray Lady” at the Naval Air Station in Pennsacola. Apparently she looked smashing in the uniform. She still recalls it fondly, the impression she made. People could be dying all around you and, if you looked smashing, well, it didn’t hurt, let’s put it that way. All the same, there is a feeling that life has taken a wrong turn here. Same as with Petie.

I hold my head between my hands, brains ready to burst. Then, now, ever and always.

Let’s remember that, in the world of inane television serials and comic books, my spiritual home, there is an answer for every riddle, a hero for every villain, an antidote for every poison. Why not this time? In the end, we are stunned by the absolutely stony stillness of those dear, dead daubs of glitter on the damp napkin. As the tears well and flow, Auntie Marge reappears and tries to staunch them by melodramatically launching into a densely detailed description of fishy heaven, which she envisions as an aquarium the size of Yankee Stadium, it sounds like, containing more or less infinite numbers of aerating windmills, plastic deep-sea divers, rubber mermaids, dried flies, you name it, a vision so ludicrously unrealistic, even for *heaven*, it only augments the torrents of tears.

And yet, in the end, it is more than acceptable.

It is the only possible answer.

And so, we commend their souls to Diver Dan, our heads filled with bubbles from imaginary underwater windmills.

All of this is by way of explaining that I and my entire family invested quite a lot of energy in the avoidance of any kind of emotional discomfort whatever. Emotionally, I am keeping a set of books that balances out to all assets and zero liabilities. I am always thinking of new ways to minimize, or, wait, no, actually, completely eliminate the pain and loss and … well, the *separateness* we find in life, shall we say. It’s the separateness that’s the problem, isn’t it? We are alive, the fish are dead. So, separate. We are here and they are … where? The only way to balance the books is with that Yankee Stadium of an aquarium. The Fish Paradise. I see myself on the roof, over the third deck in the outfield, holding a garden hose, which I am using to fill the stadium with water. When I am finished I will set up ten or twenty thousand bubble-blowing Diver Dans to keep the heavenly waters oxygenated. Now everything makes sense, in a way. Now it’s okay to go to sleep. The fish will be *okay*.

Is that too much to ask?

That we all be okay?

By the time I am seven years old I have become the Nietzsche, the Schopenhauer, the *Hamlet* of my block, continually contemplating the something that is missing, or the void it is missing from, or … the void that holds the other void … and continually coming up with ever more unlikely, ever more tenuous strategies to deal with whatever void happens to be on my mind at the moment. It is around this time that I express to my mother the fervent wish that I die before she does. That way, I will not have to endure the torment of grief I have already begun to imagine. I will already be safely dead. Immunized by death.

She laughs, I cry.

That is how bad it was.

How bad it *still is*.

I say *showgirl's*, a point that seems to call for documentation … in regard to the photograph, I mean.

Let me take you back to 1936 or so, when my mother was one of the rising stars of the Daisy Dunston Dance Troupe in, of all places, Harlem.

Correct. Harlem. My Mom, the spunky Irish kid from Passaic, New Jersey, once danced, once *entertained*, as she proudly puts it, at Harlem's fabled Apollo Theater, where today, in case you don't know New York, the innocents from the suburbs will normally appear only under armed guard or flags of surrender. Mom was a tap dancer, a very important element of the genealogy, if you ask me. She would take the bus into Manhattan and walk the ten or twelve blocks to the Daisy Dunston Dance Academy. She couldn't afford the second bus fare, she says. Even in the snow, she would walk.The *Abraham Lincoln of Tap*, my mother was. While people along the way would smile and wave and call hello to her, addressing her as “Little Miss Tap Shoes,” if you want to believe her account.

Of course, this is the storied epoch of the Great Depression, when nearly all Americans are broke and many have their first and only experience of true empathy for their fellow citizens.

“We didn't know it then, but that was the happiest time of our lives,” Mom would explain with a wistful sigh, decades later. In my dream world, I can still see my mother tap, tap, tapping her way down One Hundred Twenty Fifth Street, to the jubilant applause of the sidewalk crowds, as dozens of chubby-cheeked black baritones thrust their heads through their apartment windows, doff their derbies, and burst into the rhythmic, driving, four-part harmony of their welcoming song.

"You know what this sounds like?" I remark when she tells me the story. As a thirteen-year-old I am not one to trifle with prevarication.

"A Shirley Temple movie," she says.

"How did you know?"

"Because, my dear, dear boy," she tells me tenderly. "The whole *country* was a Shirley Temple movie. That's how come the Shirley Temple movies *were* Shirley Temple movies."

Mother wins a scholarship to attend an obscure school for the performing arts in upstate New York or Connecticut or someplace, Baldwin or Batavia or Bridgeport, lost in the snows up there somewhere, beginning with a “B.” But her parents can't afford the room and board, so she can’t accept the scholarship. Which is why, instead of ending up in Hollywood as the next Betty Grable, she ends up at the local telephone office as a switchboard operator. Pretty much all that is left of the whole dancing business is the legs we now see in this photograph, or *gams*, she calls them, unless of course you want to consider the sort of mentality it takes to get interested in tap dancing in the first place, and to then get really good at it.

This whole deal goes back to step-dancing and the hornpipe, if the reader will permit a digression from a digression. Only once have I seen the real thing. One summer afternoon when Boomie Nan and Ba are visiting us at the Lake House, someone gets a record player from the trunk of a car and sets it up in the living room and puts on a recording of *The Old Grey Goose*. As the staticky music begins, my mother rises from her chair as though under a spell, a fairy queen, and extends her hand toward her father, who is really past his dancing days, but rallies somehow, empowered by the same spell. The two of them dance the hornpipe around the living room with complete abandon, hand in hand, just sailing around the room, free and easy as leaves on the breeze, while my grandmother gently rocks in her rocking chair and laughs and cries, overcome with our own special Irish brand of happiness, the kind that comes fully stocked with tears over its own ephemeral nature.

The mind is still there, naturally, still ready to beat back black despair with a flying buck and wing. The point being … getting back to the genealogy thing … if any of her children were going to be Hamlets, they were going to be tap-dancing Hamlets!

The music ends and the dancers dance on as the rest of us clap our hands.

Not wanting such a beautiful dance to end, ever.

Never, ever to end.

Which is the feeling I have about the photo on the steps. I fully understand that the moment is past, yet feel it is close, somehow, behind a door I cannot open.

"Say cheese!" my father calls, screwing his little German camera sideways into his eye.

This is the little camera he got as a “steal” from a friend who had fought in the Army in Europe. Other war plunder in our possession includes two swords hanging over the fieldstone fireplace at the Lake House, one an ornamental job with a grip and scabbard of colorful enamel (probably manufactured in Singapore for sale to American souvenir seekers, we eventually learn), the other a much heavier Japanese Army-issue saber suitable for hacking off heads, which was something we boys could hardly wait to do when our turn came. I liked to take a few practice swipes with the sabre, imaginary the heads of Japs bouncing and rolling like basketballs all around me. In front of the same fireplace is a real bearskin, complete with very large glass eyes, yawning jaws, and what appear to be real fangs. When the fangs fall out, we replace them. All in all, the fireplace is a kind of household shrine to virility, where we pay our silent respects to the bear hunter, Mr. Rooney, who also happens to be the mayor of our little town, and to our fathers' joint conquest of the *Nips* in the South Pacific, and of course to Poppop's frontier construction skills. Mom never tires of reminding us that my grandfather set stone upon stone with his very own hands, her intonation suggesting that, even as she speaks, the house is supported on the ghostly shoulders of “himself.” Spoken with a certain resolute emphasis, the pronoun is understood to refer to only one man, the borderline-alcoholic, manic-depressive Zeus from whose craggy, dreamy, Celtic brow the rest of us neurotics had sprung.

Come to think of it, souvenirs of war are all around us. My father's howitzer of a forty-five is embalmed in cosmoline and hidden in an old knapsack in the attic of our “regular house” in Clifton. The knapsack lies on the crunchy foil that covers the fiberglass insulation between the rafters. We boys unwrap it there so we can quit piddling around with toys and get more of the feel of knocking off real people with real guns. Although it’s something of a struggle to even lift the thing, and the cylinder doesn’t seem to spin quite like the cowboy models. Still, with pistol in hand, it’s easy to envision Dad leaning out of the cockpit of his plane at ten or fifteen thousand feet and picking off a bunch of buck-toothed Nips on the ground, a kind of Lone Ranger of the Marine Corps, not a bullet wasted, strictly one Jap corpse per bullet. Nevermind that he had told us he never actually fired the thing. He was probably just being modest. Probably there were Nip corpses tracing the route of every flight.

Some of the souvenirs are actually inside people. When our big, red-faced, belly-laughing Uncle Jack comes to dinner at the Lake House and caps off a hilarious, whiskey-fueled performance as a raconteur by throwing up blood all over the tablecloth, and this time the ambulance comes, Mom takes us all aside and calmly explains that Uncle Jack had his intestines scrambled on Iwo Jima, and the doctors still haven't gotten them totally straightened out, implying that Uncle Jack needs a good plumber, more than anything. True, his prodigious intake of alcohol is not helping matters, but in regard to that, my mother is inclined to make liberal allowance, her reasoning being that those of us not actually present on Iwo Jima should be pleased to keep our god damned mouths shut in regard to any problems affecting those who were.

I mention where the camera came from partly because it hadn't come with instructions. The different adjustments for aperture and focus and so forth are labeled in German. My father has only the vaguest idea how to operate the thing. Instead of puzzling it all out (which is not going to happen, realistically, because German is the language of Adolf Hitler, and we’ll be damned if we are going to break our asses learning Hitler’s god damned language), he composes his pictures to suit the settings found on the camera when it came into his possession. That is why nearly all of my father’s photos are taken in full daylight, at approximately three p. m., with the sun at his back, while he stands exactly twelve feet from his subject, the proper distance paced off and counted out for all to approve. And why we are all squinting in nearly ever photo ever made of us, a family of troglodytes dragged up from their subterranean dwelling to be weighed, tagged, and photographed.

What is it about this picture that is so important, you would damn well like to know. What possible justification could there be, in narrative or logic, for this increasingly oppressive welter of detail?

Well, this is the proof of the principle, if you will.

This is the miracle that makes the rest of it almost bearable.

Some people need to believe that the Blessed Virgin appeared at Fatima. I say let them. Who knows, right? I was not present at Fatima. So, in that case, the Iwo Jima rule applies. In other words, let the believers believe. Some of them apparently need to believe that Lord Krishna swallowed a forest fire. If it makes them happy, fine.

All I need to believe is that this lovely, leggy young woman once sat on these mossy steps on a sultry summer afternoon and held her two boys in her loving arms. If this one thing is true, the rest of the pieces fall into place, for me. Or *did*, at one time. Be kind enough to grant me the abundance of her love, let me believe in that, and everything else we can negotiate. There are days when I lose my grip on the idea. Days I struggle to believe in anything. But somehow or other this photograph always brings me back to my fundamental premise. Because, well, there it is, folks. Almost as unlikely as Lord Krishna swallowing a forest fire … almost as implausible … but voila, there it is.

Love, big and bright and warm as the sun itself.

My father was another movie-star. He was from Passaic, too. What are the odds? The Passaic, New Jersey equivalent of Gable and Lombard, they were, from Spring Street and Howe Avenue. I am not talking about mere appearances here., but about the movie-star *dimensions* of their lives. We can live our lives big or we can live them small Some of us live our lives in a closet, spiritually speaking. Some of us live in the psychological equivalen of freaking *Montana*. We get to choose. Either we are afraid of it or we are not. They saw the choice, and they chose to live in Technicolor and Panavision. Life and death and love and loss and joy and terror were all circled around, ready to come onstage at any moment, and they were not afraid, not hiding.

I can't help but suspect that, when they shut the door to their bedroom at night, Frank Capra was in there with them, telling them how they needed to behave the next day to move the plot. You may recall that Capra directed *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,* the two great Jimmy Stewart movies where Jimmy's soul is a torch of idealism that almost sputters out, under a hail of cynicism and lies and greed, but miraculously rekindles at the last possible instant, finally blossoming into a blaze of hope that consumes the corrupt world around him, so justice is done and everyone can live happily ever after, especially Donna Reid, whose eyes glitter with tears at the majesty of it all, in the scene around the Christmas tree.

The End.

That was what Mom and Dad had arranged for themselves and that was what they planned for us, our own personal Happily Ever After, no question about it. As she was out canvassing the neighborhood for presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, America's own ridiculous Don Quixote, he worked as a crusading reporter for the daily newspaper in our town, tilting at windmills locally.

The result being that, all my life, I have been waiting for Frank Capra to show up and hand me the pages that are missing from the script we call life. Please find the pages where our hero is rescued from the mire of complexity and self-doubt. Our hero is stuck in front of the mirror asking himself whether that is Jimmy Stewart in the mirror, or another mirror in the mirror. Where are the pages that wind the whole thing up with a bang, in the blazing triumph of truth, justice, and the American way? This story needs some *va-voom*.

Here’s another photo.

This one shows the two of them emerging from the chapel at Pensacola Naval Air Station, he in the immaculate dress whites of the Marine aviator, she in a long white dress that seems to match, the veil billowing to the side in the warm, gentle drift of sea air. He tall and very dark, with the straight nose and erect bearing and the big, perfect, movie-star smile, she barely up to his shoulder, even in high heels, her long hair flowing in luxuriant curls over lacy sleeves. My God it frightens me, the way it comes to life as I think of it. The scent of frangipani and bougainvillea wafting in from who knows where, the DeSotos and Packards tooling around the base. I suspect that Capra himself could not have set this up any better. They come out of the chapel, the officers raise their swords, the happy couple pass beneath. What do we learn in this scene? I think we learn that true love is not afraid of death. Because, see these guys with the swords? These are not play swords, folks. Some of these very same guys are going to be dead soon. The imaginary Frank Capra observes all of this in absolute silence and stillness and when it is over immediately claps his hands and yells, “Cut. That’s a take! Print it! Back here tomorrow morning at seven, people!”

Do you get what I’m driving at? Their dream has come true, in this picture. They simply wished it into being! God bless them, God save them both, they had the courage to simply wish it into being. The pure and sweet and noble intention of the one had found its reflection in the pure and sweet and noble intention of the other. Two hopelessly impractical dreamers find a dreamer of the opposite sex, willing to dream the same dream, and embrace, engineering a more or less permanent escape from reality.

It still amazes me that they met in kindergarten at St. Nick’s in Passaic, where I still go to funerals and marvel at the bloody red and grassy green of the stained glass windows, while musing on the vicissitudes, in my distracted way. Here was where my parents approached the altar for First Communion, as ten year olds, possibly even striding down the aisle together, the boys on one side, in their brand new gray flannel shorts and jackets and shiny new shoes, the girls on the other, in their brand frilly white dresses, all carrying flowers, like miniature brides. For a hundred years it has been just so. Generations of desperate supplicants have worn the nap from the red velvet cushions on the kneelers with millions and millions of prayers that have been answered or not answered purely by chance. For a hundred years God fails to pick up the phone, but they keep calling. To think that my parents were children here … and later lovers … but possibly even lovers *as* children ... that possibly they *knew …* why, imagine making love to the person who walked down the aisle with you, at First Communion.

Imagine, making love to a woman who, at an earlier stage in life, had *lent you her crayons*.

What is the difference between the sexual act, any sexual act, and the lending of the crayons?

None, I would say. I fully appreciate the beautiful continuity in it, an endless panorama of innocence. Morally, the two things are equivalent. If I slip my hand under a girl’s wasteband, to me, that is the moral equivalent of asking for the loan of her Burnt Umber, no?

Then, as the war closes in on them, they are high school sweethearts at St. Mary's in Rutherford. He is one of the stars of the football team, it goes without saying. Somehow or other about half the graduating class joins the Marine Corps together and ships out to the Pacific more or less together. One day it is Glee Club, the next, Guadalcanal. I gather a couple of their classmates from grammar school showed up at the chapel at Pennsacola that day. It was all very exciting, she tells me. Although, not nearly so exciting as it would get later, when the Marines started getting killed in large numbers. Much, much later, when I have been born and am half grown and have assigned myself the role of family historian, ferreting out every last insignificant little detail of their lives together during the war, I will be extra inquisitive about any Hobie or Harry or Bob she may mention with that subtle sheen of nostalgia in her eyes, signifying subliminal regret or pain. She may oblige with a few grudging details regarding the dashing figure that Hobie or Bob cut in uniform, but often as not will end abruptly, saying simply: "He was killed."

And with that, pick up the spoon to stir her tea.

Killed meant killed in the war.

Period. End of story.

I learn not to insist, in this circumstance, understanding that all the young heroes lie sleeping together in the tranquil sea of her subconscious, and that none can rise to the surface without the others, a garland of happy, loving, innocent young souls floating upward out of the depths of darkness and doom, clasping hands in a ring as they rise, their faces all fresh as daisies from the moment she last saw them, whereupon she will cover her mouth and shudder, and then fight down the sobs, and finally gasp for a breath, even as she stares at me steadily in what seems profound … no, *absolute* disbelief that any of this could actually have happened.

How could it have happened?

She remembers life in pictures, like me. Not just photographs, but pictures her mind takes. They haunt her, same as me. She thinks of her dear cousin Raymond, who died in a troop carrier on the way to the Battle of the Bulge on … get this … *Christmas Eve*, for Christ’s sake. Torpedoed in the middle of the English Channel in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve. Apparently no one was interested in taking the night off.

So it isn’t like World War I, where the bugle player plays Silent Night and everybody has a cigarette and talks about their girlfriends. Where the German guys speak a little English, and the English guys speak a little German, and they give each candy bars.

No. The Germans sink his ship on Christmas Eve.

She last saw Raymond in a train station in Orlando not long after the wedding. She is seeing him off. As he ducks into his coach, the air between them is luminous with dust kicked up by the throng of departing soldiers and baggage handlers and weeping lovers and parents and sisters and cousins. The dust rises into the great vaults of sunlight that tilt through the high windows of the station. A mushrooming cloud of sparkling dust envelopes him, drawing a curtain of light around him, which she later recognizes as the mysterious shroud of impending death. One last time, he pokes his head out of the door of the coach, and seems to wink at her, and waves, and then disappears, into the radiant of death.

The pain that emanates from this moment is a fit subject for scrutiny by a young scientist of the heart. It is lustrous and layered, this pain, like the nacre of the pearl, layer upon layer of regret laid on around the seminal idea that, if only she could have seen him clearly in that last moment, she could have saved him, somehow. Interesting that the innocent among us always feel responsible, while the guilty feel utterly innocent. Part of it is the belief that she should have seen what was coming. Somehow that moment has gotten confused with all that came later. She sees it all mixed up together, the train station, the scintillant clouds of dust, the jets of steam from the locomotive, the ship, the waves of the Channel, the lights of Calais in the distance, the torpedoes hissing and bubbling along on their path toward the hull. She wants to scream, then puts her hand over her mouth to stop the scream, realizing it’s too late now. A thousand times she has said goodbye, hugged a wonderful boy and let him go, a thousand times watched him disappear, a wraith who spins up into the vortex of heavenly light, a thousand times wanted to scream, to stop the train, to pull him back, and a thousand times wept because she did not.

As I am taking notes.

For years, the flag from Raymond's memorial is in our attic, still folded into the firm, compact block that had come from the gravesite overlooking Omaha Beach. As we are a military family, sort of, we understand full well what a very, very big god damn deal the folding is. Very big. For years I didn’t realize they had recovered the body. I thought the flag was, you know, *it*. But then a big, beautiful, air-conditioned bus takes my mother from Paris to a little hotel near the cemetery, a hotel that depends upon the cemetery as a tourist attraction. And she finds the grave. And there, somehow, puts her grief to rest. Anyway we all know there is to be no screwing around with that flag. And no screwing around with the Purple Heart that lies in a blue cardboard box on the tan velvet behind the glass front of the old curio cabinet in our living room. The way I see it, Raymond's body may be drifting around at the bottom of the English Channel, but his soul is in our curio cabinet. Which also holds, in its enclosed lower compartment, the coins that came from Ireland in my grandfather's pockets, a stack of handwritten letters from our cousins there, a wafer of dried shamrock from County Cork, the dread wills, and a prayer book studded with pathetic plastic and glass beads … I guess the cheapest possible knock-off of the *Book of Kells* … my grandmother’s prayerbook, may she rest in peace.

A couple of the letters stored in the cabinet prove to be important to my early investigation of the anatomy of heartbreak. Several come from a woman named Katherine Flynn, whose relation to us remains something of a mystery. All that matters is that she, too, led the big life. My mother explains that Katherine had come to the United States from Ireland and had worked as a maid with my grandmother at The Maples, in Greenwich. She married an Irishman by the name of John Costello, who was, my mother will tell you, "a gay man, as we would say, before that word picked up the unfortunate connotation it has today.” John Costello’s work in the fetid darkness of the New York City subway system made him miserable. He yearned to return to the palm trees and grassy hills and sea breezes of Dingle, the Irish fishing village whence he had come. The two had no children, which was a terrible curse, for the Irish, a sign of Almighty displeasure. I don’t think it’s unrealistic to suggest that the Irish fully imagine their children before the children are born, with the result that, when they don’t arrive, the house is haunted. The voices of the lost children speak to the lonely parents out of nowhere. One day, Katherine is informed that her former employer in Greenwich has left her a substantial bequest. This is how life goes, for the Irish. You have this leprechaun factor, these wild, inexplicable swings, all this magic. But not the mythical “luck of the Irish,” because it works both ways. True, if you are Irish, the best thing that happens to you is going to be way, way better than the best thing that happens to the average Polish or Italian guy; but at the same time, you have to figure that the worst thing that happens is going to be way, way worse. Just multiply everything, in other words.

With the bequest in hand, it isn't long before the couple return to Ireland to build a house called Sunrise Cottage on a hill over Dingle Bay. A few weeks after they move in, they find out that John Costello is dying of lung cancer. All par for the course. All of this is explained in the precious, treasured letters from Katherine to my grandmother, letters that have about them an aura of sanctity every bit as powerful as that attaching to the Purple Heart, the prayer book, the coins. The letters are our family’s *Dead Sea Scrolls* of love*,* if you will.

So then the lovers have one year to live together in that impossibly lovely house, on that impossibly lovely hill, looking down on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean and its temperamental changes, sunshine and showers and fits of fury, like a girl’s.

One year to discover the limits of human empathy.

One year to perfect their love, to enshrine it, so it could endure into eternity. Along lines of packing for a really long trip.

Which they did, my mother assures me.

If you wanted to know whether there were limits to our existence, whether we were constrained in any way … whether, you know, the *wings would melt* on too close an approach to whatever it was, the answer was there, in the curio cabinet. The answer was … not exactly *no* … because the wings did melt … wings are melting around us all the time … heros and heroines going down in flames around us all the time … life was a five-alarmer at Madame Tussaud’s, when you came right down to it … so that wasn’t it … but more … well, *we don’t care*.

Don’t worry about the wings melting.

Die in the fire, as you were born to do.

On the day her husband dies, Katherine has his grave dug right there beside Sunrise Cottage. She lines the grave with lilies before she lays him in it. This woman has a born instinct for cinema, apparently, a born instinct for pushing things to the absolute breaking point. With the result that, if we were to open up the hearts of the children in this clan, open their hearts like lockets, we would find in each heart a kind of miniature replica of that grave above Dingle Bay, still open, still lined with fresh flowers, still aching with the wrongness, the incompleteness, the hunger, the yearning in life, and yet courageous in the face of it all.

Be brave, children, and let your hearts break.

So there you have the starting point, if you will, of my own curiously repetitious saga, the blueprint with which I sought to construct my own love life, and to reconstruct it, when it fell apart, again and again and again. A grave filled with lillies on a hill over Dingle Bay … the crossed swords of the Marines flashing in the sun … or Donna Reed and Jimmy Stewart, a.k.a. Mom and Dad, rejoicing over their own very happy ending, two hearts fused into a single, glowing ingot of pure happiness, indistinguishable, never more to be separated, by God or man.

Can you believe it?

They explain the photo to me. More than once.

At one point, my father and I are at my younger brother’s wedding in Los Altos, California. I am now an adult, chronologically speaking. With glaring deficiencies in the character department, but officially, an adult. Los Altos nestles in the golden brown hills just south of San Francisco, a picturesque little community of families who grew rich in the semiconductor industry. Near Stanford, if the location is important. It’s a lovely night, even on the Los Altos scale of loveliness, which reaches far beyond anything familiar to New Yorkers, I can tell you. My sister-in-law to-be has lined up an old mission of some kind and gotten the caterer and the priest to do the whole deal at the mission. Thanks to her careful planning, everything weaves in and out of a lovely garden that had been there for a couple of hundred years. There is an orchestra somewhere, not too obtrusive, as they have been given to understand they are the sound track for the event, not as the main attraction.

My father and I stand in a colonnade at the edge of the garden, picking off canapes as the waitresses swivel by. Our conversation turns to the difficulties of planning a big wedding, then to the haste and simplicity of the wedding in Pennsacola.

By now the dashing lieutenant is a peaceful, paunchy, balding man who owns a summer home on the ocean and has a pension coming to him, and can thus afford a ripening benevolence toward the rest of the human race. He drinks martinis and, after the second one, tends toward oddball humor and generous sentimentality, his eyes moistening around the lids, his smile milky and warm. For him, life grows more beautiful with each passing day.

"The problem was, there wasn't any time," he says of his own wedding. "We all thought, you know, we are going to go off and get killed somewhere, and that’s that."

I nod. I will confess that, when something is incomprehensible to me, I tend to just let it go.

"We kind of *expected* to get killed,” he says. “You just assumed, based on the odds, you know? So there just didn't seem to be any time for that kind of thing. But then, out of the clear blue, they told me I was going to be a flight instructor, for a while. I was going to stay at Pennsacola and be a flight instructor. And that was going to be at least, you know, a year. So all of a sudden, it looked like I was going to be around for a while. Alive for a while, you know? And not only that, but we were graduating from flight school, so now we were officers, and entitled to officers’ quarters. Which was a pretty big deal, because the guys who were married were able to live at home with their wives. So that's when I called your mother, and she got on the train, and came down, and we got married the next day. "

My sister comes over and asks him to dance. I wind up dancing with my mother. Not really dancing but this simple, practical, two-step kind of thing. The room where they do the dancing opens onto this beautiful garden. She and I are gliding along nice and easy, near these big double doors that open onto the garden, when the cool night air carries in the scent of flowers.

She murmurs in my ear, “Gardenias.”

“That scent?”

“That’s gardenias, trust me.”

“You know?”

“Oh, when you’re a girl, you learn about flowers,” she tells me. “You try all the different perfumes. The sales girls tell you all about them, so you learn. We would all go to Macy’s and try all the different ones. I always liked gardenias for some reason. So I remember.”

We catch sight of the bride and groom, enjoying themselves.

“They seem very happy,” I observe.

“Me too,” she says. “I’m happy for them.”

“I’m sure it reminds you of your own wedding day.”

She leans back in my arms and fixes me with a quizzical look, I guess wondering where that came from. Our rhythm is disturbed and we have to find it again.

“Mine?” she says.

“Although, that was not so peaceful and happy a time.”

"Oh, I don't know," she says. "I was just thinking that it was."

"I meant because of the war."

"I know," she says. "But listen. You take what God gives you, darling. Take what God gives you and be thankful. If he gives you one night, you take one night. If he gives you fifty years, you take fifty years. That's the way we all did it. Whatever God gave us, we took, and were happy to have it.”

And off she goes, into her memories, as we coast and twirl, nice and easy.

“That’s the way it was, for us. I mean for all of us. After we were married, we lived near the airfield. So, anytime there was a problem at that field, anytime there was a crash, or a plane in trouble, right away, we would hear the sirens. All of us at once. Oh my God, those sirens were terrible. It was a dagger in your heart, that sound. God help us, we would hear the sirens, we girls, and it didn’t matter what any of us were doing … girls washing their hair, or giving the baby a bath, it didn’t matter … we would all come running out of these huts we were living in, the Quonset huts … running like mad towards the field … with babies in their arms … suds flying all over the place, bubbles flying … in our bare feet … just running like mad … running as fast as we could … racing, all running together. Which was completely pointless, really, because of course there wasn’t a thing we could do about any of it. But we couldn’t help ourselves, because the fear was so strong. The fear just gripped us and made us all go racing over there.

“We would get to the fence around the field, and they wouldn’t let the wives past the fence. They were very well organized that way, I must say. It was strictly business, with these guys. So then we all just stood there along that fence. Sometimes there would be smoke near the field, and that’s when we knew it was going to be bad. The babies would cry and cry, but of course we weren’t really thinking about the babies, at that moment. We were in another world. We stood there for hours sometimes. And then, when we found out who it was, if it was bad, we all cried together, right there. All huddled together and just cried.

“We all tried to console the girl who had suffered this great loss, and all helped her as best we could, but then, a few hours would pass, and the other men would come home, and I think each of us would say in our hearts, well, we have at least one more day. Maybe only one, but at least one, you know? So the next day, we wanted to make that day count. So we would be happy, that day. Which probably sounds strange, to think of it now, but the next day was a brand new day, from our point of view, and maybe the only day we would have. Maybe the last day we would have together. We all knew that. So we would all get together and have a couple of drinks and enjoy ourselves. We just decided, you know, the heck with the war, we are going to be happy for this one day, or this one hour, even if this is our last hour on earth."

Somehow she senses that I am not well equipped to absorb all this.

"So let me give you some advice," she says.

"What's that?"

"Get happy."

“How do you get happy?”

“Well,” she says, “you just *decide*.”

So there.

You see?

Simple.

Much of the action here takes place in Clifton, New Jersey.

To understand Clifton, I think it might help to go back to the Devonian Age for a minute. Let’s just flip back through three hundred and fifty million years or so. The Devonian age was when Africa and Europe collided with the Americas to form the supercontinent of Pangaea. At that time, Casablanca and Clifton, New Jersey were basically across the street from each other. Incidentally, that was when fish began to walk on land. Fish walked around in what is now Clifton. The continents continued to heave and slide. As they pushed up against each other, they got wrinkled, here and there. One set of wrinkles later became known as the Appalachian Mountains. The Appalachians are a staircase that takes you up as you move toward the northwest.

Forty or fifty million years go by. Pangaea finally splits into two new continents, called Laurasia and Gondwanaland. As Casablanca floats away from Newark, it leaves a wide, flat coastal plain at the foot of the Appalachians, the New Jersey of today. I call the place New Jersey, but of course five hundred years ago it was Lenape Land or something. The Indians who lived in New Jersey called themselves the Lenapes. They called the mountains the Kittatinnies. That was their word for mountain, apparently.

In New Jersey, a lot of places have Indian names. The shopping centers have Indian names. Like “Acquackononk Plaza.”

No one knows what the names mean.

It’s not just the names, either.

When I was a boy, I lived on a street named Notch Road. It was called Notch Road because it ran up to a pass through First Mountain, the first step in the staircase I mentioned earlier. First Mountain rises from the coastal plain as a sheer cliff, maybe a hundred feet high. The pass was called Great Notch. Clifton was named after the cliffs of First Mountain, which faced east. You wouldn’t know it today, though, because a gravel company dynamited most of First Mountain and used the stone to pave the parking lots in the shopping centers. Now all we have is the name of the town to remind us of the cliff and how it glowed, a faint, rosy red, when the sun rose over New York City.

Recently I saw a documentary on public television that relates to all this. It was a documentary about a volcano. The narrator got my attention when he started to talk about “elephant molds.” It seems he had been able to calculate the speed of a certain lava flow *x* thousands of years ago based on the discovery of elephant molds in the lava. An elephant mold is exactly what you think it is, by the way. It’s the impression left in the lava by an elephant. This scientist had figured out that elephants can run at something like, oh, fifteen miles an hour or whatever, and of course had to be running like all heck to try to stay ahead of this lava, but didn’t quite make it. He explains all of this while riding in a helicopter and looking down at the lava flow from high above. What do you know, you can see the shapes of a couple of elephants in the lava, as clear as if they had lain down in plaster of Paris, then gotten up and walked away.

But of course they didn’t walk away.

Time took them away.

Just like the Indians. Just like the cliffs. And just like me.

Only difference being that, instead of the lava, I have the language, these words that now appear before you. Every morning, I drop my heart into the river of words. The phrases and sentences and paragraphs take shape around it. Years later, you pick up the book and say, ah, look.

There was a heart here.

A human heart.

Our family lives on the outer edge of a “development.” A development is forty or fifty acres of tract houses. This one shall be known here as Bilkoland. Around the corner from Bilkoland is the country, the woods and meadows and streams. The country is organized the way God wants it. So many birches, so many milkweeds, so many beavers, turtles, and butterflies. How God manages the bewildering inventory is more than I can fathom. *Birches, check. Beavers, check.*

Long afternoons the country held us in its lazy, sunny embrace. The fever of autumn comes and men hunt rabbits with beagles who break their necks before us. Winter comes and we follow the cloven-hoofed tracks of deer in the snow. We never see them, because the forest is still there for them, allowing them to disappear whenever they wish. As we follow, they listen to us and move ahead of us, deeper and deeper into the forest. How remarkable to see the actual shape of their feet. It got you thinking about redesigning your own feet. Obviously, the deer could run faster than us. Obviously they had the edge, there. Better feet.

Acre by acre, we see the country erased and replaced by Bilkoland. Bilkoland advances across the landscape by replicating itself, amoeba-like. The original development is called Sherwood Forest. When that goes over big, Steve Bilko buys another hundred acres and builds a replica called Nottingham Village. That’s where we live. Then Normandy Acres. Then Sherwood Forest. As I recall, there are two available “models” of homes. But these are essentially mirror images of each other, one with the garage on the right side and one with the garage on the left side, both “modified Cape Cods.” Except for Sherwood Forest, where we find about a hundred replicas of a third model, slightly larger, called a “bi-level.”

The Bilko approach to building is to first scrape every last trace of living flora from the weeping face of the earth, and to then sterilize the area by piling up the topsoil with bulldozers and hauling it away in dump trucks, leaving the purchasers of the new Bilko “estates” to try to grow lawns on a hardened scab of red clay, on a street called “The Glen” or “Willow Road.” Homeowners eventually had to ransom the topsoil from a company called Bilko Garden and Fill. The trucks that brought the topsoil back were the same ones that had taken it away. This explains why, when we first moved to Sherwood Forest, the rain ran red through the streets. After a big storm, the sewers were choked with what had been our front yards. When the sun came out, to once again bake the bare earth to a brittle crust, crews from the Clifton Department of Public Works would come along to shovel our property into their trucks. The same crews came around to plant scrawny maple saplings at regulation intervals in the strip of soil between the sidewalk and the street. The wilting leaves of the young maples fluttered pathetically in the withering blast of the summer sun. Our neighbors sewed grass seed in the clay and enclosed the planted areas with garden stakes and string festooned with strips of rags. Up and down the street you had the same garden stakes, the same rags, the same modified Cape Cods, the same driveways, the same Fords and Chevies parked in the driveways, and pretty much the same children, observing each other.

Although, not *quite* the same, because, of course, some were girls and some were boys.

I hear music coming from the house next door, hands clapping in rhythm, and … how to describe it … the musicality of it, the harmonic vibration at the base of the brain stem … the crazy, happy resonance in the laughter of girls. I will later identify the hopping, skipping, pounding music as a polka. It is Sunday afternoon in Bilkoland and I am standing on my side of the barberry hedge that our neighbor, Mr. Koslowski, has just installed, in mud that Mr. Koslowski has just created with his garden hose. I have strict instructions that I am not to go through the hedge under any circumstances, and not to eat the little red berries, which my mother suspects could be lethal. We are all very well aware of my father’s “good neighbor” policy, which he explained with some solemnity over the dinner table just the other night. Dad’s model was Roosevelt at Yalta. The idea being, we have what we have, and it’s enough, so whynot let the neighbors have what they have, and not mess around with what they have, and that way, they won’t mess around with what we have. *Got it?*

There is a subtext that maybe needs attention.

Let me ask you this. Yes you, the reader. Was Hitler good or evil?

Evil, of course.

How about Mussolini?

Again, evil.

Hirohito?

Evil.

Who had won and who had lost, in the war just concluded?

Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito had lost, right?

Why?

Obviously, because they were evil. What else would you expect? You didn’t know exactly where God was all the time, but you knew he was up there somewhere, right? He was *up there,* all right, the captain of the biggest blimp ever built, keeping an eye on all this crap.

God is good. We knew that from the catechism. Also, God is all-knowing. And, the icing on the cake, *omni-present*.

Which was why good always triumphed over evil. What the evil people did not seem to understand was that life was like a pinball game, where God could always tilt the table at the last minute, to make sure good triumphed over evil. He could say, okay, *enough of this kamikaze crap*, I have decided to give you guys the A-bomb. Let’s see how you Japs like having a couple of A-bombs shoved up your ass.

Same with the Germans.

God looks down and says, okay, looks like the Germans are going to just bomb the crap out of the British, a people I kind of like. We’ve got this new radar thing in the shop. What the hell. I’ll give that to the British, so they can shoot down the German bombers over the English Channel. How do you like them apples, Herr Hitler?

Subtract all the evil and what is left in the world?

Well, *good*, of course.

Bilkoland was, by definition, *good*.

It *had* to be good, right? Because, well, everyone had gone through all this trouble to sort out good from evil. It was what all the Dads had fought for. It was the prize that so many had died for, including my cousin Raymond. So for God’s sake let’s not get confused about this part. Let’s call this the principle of deductive virtue, which states that, after a certain number of perfectly honest, earnest, innocent young men and women get killed fighting for a particular set of values, those values are sanctified with the blood of the dead, and more or less permanently impervious to criticism and doubt, no matter how screwed up they may have been originally, because the innocence and honesty and earnestness of the young men and women who have died cannot be, mmmm … *lost*. It can’t be simply *erased*, can it? It has to be preserved somehow, along the lines of the conservation of matter. Innocence honesty and hope and love cannot just disappear, can they? They have to be transformed into something! As the ship goes down in the channel, dark waves closing over it, brave young men below, missing their girlfriends, it only stands to reason that the innocence and hope and love in all of those hearts will take another form, doesn’t it? Where there is a debit, there has to be asset. In this case, the asset is the flag and the country and values they have died for. We take all of the innocence and honesty and earnestness that was in column A, and subtract it, but then add it to column B. And then the books are balanced.

At this point we have been living on Notch Road for a couple of months.

More or less forever.

The grid of hedges and fences between the houses is nearly complete, each yard fortified, each homeowner prepared to defend his pitiful postage stamp of real estate with whatever it takes. In nearly every case, the man of the house is a veteran or a refugee and probably has a forty-five or a carbine wrapped in an old blanket in the attic. God forbid your dog should shit in the neighbor’s yard.

On the one side is Mr. Koslowski with his pricker bushes and on the other the emaciated Mr. Adelino with his split rail fence and chicken wire. Mr. Adelino is the neighborhood lawn compulsive. He spends every free moment preening and grooming every last blade of grass individually. Mrs. Adelino is the same with the interior of the house. She not only requires that visitors remove their shoes, but on certain occasions will forbid entry entirely, even to Mr. Adelino. Should Mr. Adelino need something from his amazingly orderly workshop in the cellar, he makes like Spider Man, quite the contortionist, really, and climbs in through the basement window. No big deal, he assures us. I really have to wonder what their sex life is like. Behind us are the Diefenbakers, with their claustrophobia-crazed German shepherd, Sergeant, who relentlessly gnaws away at his chain-link pen, actually *eating the metal*, and very much looking forward to the day when he can burst through, tear our throats out, and devour us in revenge for taunting him mercilessly. Beyond the Diefenbakers are the Paduanos, who have a chicken coop next to their garage, with real, live, flesh-and-blood chickens clucking and pecking and scratching away the livelong day. The chicken coop is watered by a windmill, somehow. Bilkoland has just been invented, so not everyone realizes that the stink of steaming chicken shit is going to be something of a problem in the heat of summer. The Paduanos are used to it, apparently. They think this is Sicily! My mother has been talking to Mrs. Paduano about the importance of pure, clean, fresh air and so forth, but so far has been unable to hammer into Mrs. Paduano’s Neanderthal skull the notion that chicken shit is something other than pure, clean, and fresh. Consequently, when the weather is warm, Mom is always on the alert for wind shifts, like the captain of a schooner. Even in the middle of dinner, she will spot the first tremor in a curtain and send us all sprinting to slam the windows shut.

“If only he would stop *wetting* it,” she cries, referring to Mr. Paduano’s unfortunate habit of spritzing the chickens with his garden hose in the evening and, in the process, freshening up the shit.

“I thought that’s what the windmill was for,” says my Dad, shoveling in another luscious slab of mom’s patented egg plant parmagiana, from the Fanny Farmer *Learn to Cook* cookbook, with the rubberized cheese. We all enjoyed stretching the cheese between our fingers. The wonder is it didn’t snap across the table and knock somebody’s eye out. My dad was the discoverer of eggplant, by the way, another pretty important landmark in the history of our family, because we were always on a very tight budget. One night, he extracts from a grocery bag an eggplant big as a loaf of bread and passes it around for examination, explaining, “It’s a plant, but it tastes like veal.”

“Egglant?” my mother says.

Allowing me to deduce that neither of my parents knows anything about cooking. And I mean *nothing*. What do they know? If you want to cook something, you boil it. There, it’s cooked. Both are of Irish descent, so, essentially, there is nothing to know, right? How do you develop a national cuisine when the menu is potato, potato, and potato? Or, when there *is no* menu?

What’s for dinner?

*Nothing*.

Raising the interesting question … if they don’t know this, what *else* do they not know?

Mom has agreed with Dad that she has license to vent her fury over being stuck in a steaming kitchen, with bawling brats tugging at her apron strings all day, when really, she was born to cruise down Hollywood Boulevard in a Bentley, wearing cool sunglasses, fresh stockings, and plenty of lipstick. My father encourages her along these lines, believing that tantrums are expiatory. “Better to get it all out,” he says. We rely on him to pick up the pieces at the tail end of the tirade and assert the balanced view that, bottom line, what was a little chicken shit among friends? We did not want to start World War III over a little chicken shit, did we?

*Well did we?*

We have covered the fact that most of the men in the neighborhood were in World War II, just concluded.

Most of the women got pregnant pretty much immediately upon the cessation of hostilities.

Like, that night.

A trumpet blows, the war is over, a mass ejaculation occurs. A hundred billion sperm go hurtling through seas of vaginal fluid like porpoises, intent on getting to the ovum ahead of the next sperm, so nine months later whole busloads, whole trainloads of babies are born on the same day, given the same names, the same clothes, the same futures. Imagine the moms arriving home from the hospital with the babies in their arms, all at once, on cue, a regular parade of moms and babies or, no, *ten thousand* parades. And then put all the women and all the men into identical houses, and figure every one of the babies is bawling every night, a baby in every house, bawling, and there you have it.

Imagine, every single house, new.

New moms and new babies in every single house.

The world, new.

Some came from exotic locales within the fantastic realm known as the United States of America. Brooklyn, for instance. The Bronx. But some came from other countries. The Koslowskis do not even speak English when they talk to one another. How do I know? Because in Bilkoland, the houses are built so close together my Barry and I can lie in bed at night and listen to Joe and Wanda yakking their foreign gibberish, while Joe slurps up the wine he makes in his basement, which is probably a fire hazard, my father says. We can only hope we will not be home when Joe Kozlowski blows himself to Kingdom Come. It's the same with grandma Adelino on the other side, as she trudges along the chicken wire on the perimeter of the Adelino quadrant, pausing here and there to examine the beds of lettuce and radishes so fastidiously tended by Mr. Adelino it's worth your life if a ball should fall in there, the guy actually checks the soil for footprints every morning, and for the telltale traces of fingers *covering* footprints. Apparently Mr. Adelino has made plaster casts of all the footprints, kept records of previous cases, and has all this stuff neatly arrayed in his workshop, so he can quickly match any new prints to the identity of the intruder.

We have yet to figure out what cockamamie language Grandma Adelino is actually speaking, or whether it is a language at all … she looks a little *demented*, really … though we have observed her closely and puzzled over this no end, while spread-eagled beneath the forsythias our own dad has planted next to the Adelinos’ property in an attempt to screen the Adelino’s from the chaos that prevailed on our side. We annoy the crap out of Grandma Adelino, I know. Anything that disturbs her concentration on her ten-billionth Hail Mary of the day is going to annoy the living crap out of her.

Obviously she has a lot on her mind.

Tons of stuff.

That’s why Mr. Adelino has set up the Adelinos’ own private shrine to Our Lady of Fatima in the back yard.

I forget how you tell if it’s our Lady of Fatima or Our Lady of Lourdes or some other manifestation of Our Lady. Is Our Lady of Fatima the one where the heart has lilies sprouting out of the aorta?

This stuff is pretty important because there are different formulas for calculating the benefits to be derived from different kinds of prayers said at different kinds of shrines. Ultimately, there could be quite a lot of math involved. Let’s say that, on the basis of all the sins you have committed, you are scheduled to roast in Purgatory for two thousand one hundred seventy nine years and two hundred days. Ballpark. Then, you utter a certain *ejaculation*. “Oh Mary, our hope, have pity on us.” If you utter the ejaculation at the shrine of Fatima, your time in Purgatory might be reduced by two hundred and fifty days. But, if you utter it somewhere else, maybe only two hundred. You see what I’m getting at? There are asterices, provisos, special situations attaching to Fatima, Lourdes, the robe that wrapped the body of Jesus, the special role of St. Frances as intermediary, what have you. St. Frances can be like your lawyer. He is on good terms with Our Lady. He can go to her and kind of whisper in her ear. He happens to know you, happens to know that you are totally sincere, well meaning, come from a good family, blahblah. He can close the deal for you. Although, if you are really serious about going to heaven, probably you are going to hire somebody like Price Waterhouse and have them figure it out for you. Either that or take the Grandma Adelino approach and just overkill the whole problem. I am surprised she didn’t have a guy walking alongside her with an adding machine. At some point, you had to figure she would be fingering the beads, sort of feeling around for the next bead, ready to knock off her ten millionth Hail Mary of the day, and the bead wasn’t going to be there, because she had erased the last remaining molecules of that particular bead with the previous set of prayers. And that would be that. Grandma Adelino would just keel over, the Blessed Virgin would appear, and the two of them would rise into the clouds amid a great outpouring of orchestral music, leaving a gaggle of ten-year-old stickball players drooling in amazement in the forsythias. Who, many, many years later, will be carried to the altar in sedan chairs at the Feast of Our Lady of The Adelinos.

This was not at all like St. Aloysius, in Jersey City, where my grandfather grew up among the Irish railroad workers, or like Wallington, which was pretty much wall-to-wall Dutch when my grandmother entered the world as the daughter of the big burgermeister there. I know that America is known as “the melting pot,” and so forth, but let’s be honest, certain immigrant groups have been somewhat heat-resistant, shall we say. The concept doesn’t really kick into high gear until the human effluvia of World War II washes up on the shores of Bilkoland, homogenized by the war machine. Here we have the Jews from Brooklyn, the Irish from Jersey City, the Italians from the Palermo, the Poles from the ruins of Krakow and Czestochowa, even a couple of suspiciously lucky Russians trying to mix in. The Russians you can’t be sure about, obviously. There was always the possibility they had short wave transmitters in their attics, and were sending map coordinates to Moscow, getting ready to trigger a nuclear holocaust in Sherwood Forest the next time a ball bounced into one of their yards.They have come, yes, but not forgotten where they came from, these people. .

When the wind is right, we can open the windows on a Sunday evening in summer and enjoy listening to the Koslowskis polka records, which are played so loud even the static between numbers crackles through the back yards distinctly enough to allow us to actually count the revolutions of individual specks of the dust on the surface of the record, while simultaneously enjoying a sobbing, slobbering rendition of *Mama* or *Take Me Back To Sorrento*, courtesy of the Perruchios, up the block.

Here I am, on just such a day, looking up into the gentle eyes of the woman I will come to know as Aunt Zu, beautiful and ebullient survivor of the Blitzkrieg, an angel who has somehow transcended all that, floating up and out of the smoking bomb crater, up and out of the big Polish barbecue pit, miraculously unscathed, *by the grace of Almighty God*, so that now she can pour down upon me all of that angelic grace, from her position in the previously mentioned Koslowski kitchen window. The dusty whitish patina of oxidization affecting all of the window screens installed in the Bilko “estates” lends a luminosity that makes them nearly opaque, when they are splashed with sun, so I am first aware of Zuzu as an amorphous sort of aura, somewhat vaguely materializing out of a mist of light. Probably the Blessed Virgin materializes in the same way. Due to the self-destructing nature of these window screens, she has to wrestle with the catches, but finally jerks the thing free and forces it up with hammer blows from the heels of her hands, then leans out into the dizzying splendor of the summer sun, her radiant hair woven in braids pinned up with pretty ribbons, her cheeks emblazoned with the blush of homemade wine, her red vest scintillant with a colorful crust of embroidered vines and flowers, her lips parted in delight at, I suppose, the pure, sheer, gushing exhilaration of being alive in such a form at such a moment. Naturally, she assumes that more or less the entire surviving population of Czestochowa has been transplanted to Clifton with the Koslowskis, and speaks to me in Polish, at first. When I tilt my head like a dog, mute, and she switches to an English that is lumpy with odd lulls and lilts and hiccups of laughter. When you thought about it, what could be more preposterous, more hilarious, more crazily hallucinogenic, in a purely happy, positive, wholesome way, than a half-drunk survivor of the Blitzkrieg trying to speak English to a slightly bored American boy plopping a baseball into his mitt? In this wonderfully, fabulously, oh so delightfully *boring* American suburb? Where the last noteworthy hostilities had to do with George Washington’s fighting retreat from New York, when the rifles weren’t good enough to actually hit anything. Probably at this moment Aunt Zu has one ear cocked for the thunder of a Panzer division crashing through the swings and garages and barbecues of Scotland Moor, but the tanks *never appear*.

"Hah-lo lih-tle boy!" she coos to me, laboring over every syllable, but seemingly please with even this over-pronounced approximation of English. "Are yoooo da lih-tle *nay*-bor boy?"

At her elbow appears the impassive oval face with the gray-blue eyes and the golden-brown bangs, my first portal unto the boundless mysteries of the female psyche … first romance, first crush, first true friend … done up for the day in pigtails and ribbons, just like her mother and aunt. Standing on tiptoe, she stretches her neck so she can prop her chin on the edge of the storm window and look down on me.

"Is *thet* your lih-tle lover?" Aunt Zu warbles.

And the answer comes back one hundred per cent New Jersey American English, lingua franca of the modern world.

“Him?” Margaret says. "I don't even *know* him.”

First feigning horror, Aunt Zu then pitches her head back, opens her mouth, and lets go with a peel of laughter that shakes her from the belly button up, her eyes clamped shut with delight, her brilliant teeth set off against vermillion lipstick. She ducks into the darkness of the Koslowskis’ kitchen and reappears behind the hedge, summoning Uncle Stosh or Joe with a staccato rush of Polish gibberish, to come and lift me over.

"Come!” she says, taking my hand as I alight. "You do polka with my Magda!"

And off we go to that little bit of Czestochowa in New Jersey, the Koslowski household, which is all steamed up with the pungent, peppery vapors of boiled cabbage and kielbasa and pulsating to the jouncing rhythm of the polka and the synchronized stamping of feet by the whole herd. A child in each hand, Aunt Zu drags us into the cramped living room, where, incredibly, it turns out the source of the music is not a record, but … get this … actual, living musicians! Just like on the Ed Sullivan Show! Including the garrulous Uncle Stan from West Paterson, who is throttling a suitcase-sized accordion with the word *Stanislau* inlaid above the keyboard in flowing script, and Stan's hulking son Leon, who is threatening to put his giant fist through a tambourine with every thundering beat. It’s the *Old Grey Goose* gone bonkers!

Aunt Zu parks us in the center of the room and introduces us as the next act. Uncle Stan doesn’t miss a beat. Little *Magda* grabs my hands and … well, what an easy dance the polka is! All you need to do is hang on for dear life! And apparently I am really good at it, because the relatives are quite enthused! They clap and stamp in unison as the room whirls around me. The only problem being the dizziness. To stay upright, I have to focus on Magda’s smug, self-satisfied little smile, as she waits for me to lose consciousness. Already I am in orbit around her, in more ways than one. Always spiraling inward and downward, toward the inevitable crash. When Uncle Stan reaches the resounding climax of the number, she stops on a dime and curtsies while I struggle to regain equilibrium.

She then pops the question.

"Will you be my boyfriend?"

And what was there to say but yes?

What is there ever to say?

*“Sure.”*

And smack, kisses me.

Carnal knowledge of a seven-year-old is a touchy subject, no question about it.

The sex drives of seven-year-olds … touchy.

One thing I definitely want to avoid is any skulking inference that my five-year-old neighbor Margaret is some kind of milk-and-cookies dominatrix, dragging me out of my crib in a state of complete innocence and indifference, into the corruption of the flesh, and so forth.

So … no, it was not like that.

Even if we were only *playing* at it, or pretending, even it was only the deep and abiding longing for physical affection of any kind, there was something there, for both of us. A spark on both sides, I am convinced. On that basis I will happily handle my share of any guilt or blame or whatever. Also, I guess along the same lines, I am aware at this juncture that, in the ambiance of our story, the penumbra … standing just offstage … we have the shadowy presence of a *Humbert Humbert* kind of character. By that I mean, the kind of guy who is somewhat over-eager in showing off a modest dexterity with the language, possibly a dictionary-reading, vocabulary-building fool, who, while drooling over the sexual awakening of a child, feverishly gropes for new words with which to describe an erection. As in, “the scepter of my passion,” and so forth. The point being, Margaret is not Lolita, and I am not Humbert Humbert, either. And in no way is this any kind of knock on Vladimir Nabokov, by the way, because I happen to be a fan. I read *Speak, Memory* when I was about fourteen and my reaction was, *whoa*, this fucking guy can *write.* In Nabokov’s hands, in case you are not familiar, the language becomes this big, wild, fragrantly blooming bed of honeysuckle, where he is supine, languidly rolling around, absolutely delirious, absolutely shameless in his joy over words, their textures and sounds and associations, their kaleidoscopic spectrums of meaning. Although, let’s make that plural. Let’s say rolling around in *them*. Because, remember, he was at least tri-lingual. Born in Russia, he enjoys a storybook youth there (and of course there is no storybook like a Russian storybook) as a pampered scion in this irredeemably corrupt ruling class, lollygagging his time away at these ridiculously idyllic country estates, where likely the interest in lepidoperty develops because he has nothing better to do (and by the way, I happen to have done some research on the estates, curious about the sources of his power, focusing particularly on *Roshdestveno*, the house on the hill, the house raised up into the light, raised up into the love, where he spent summers as a child, and which he later inherited from his uncle, and later still, lost in the revolution); subsequently flees with his parents to Germany as an effete fop (where, incredibly, his father is murdered by an agent of the Communist Party, whose communal stupidity knew no bounds); then writes a bunch of novels and poetry in Russian; then is swept out of Europe by the Second World War; then becomes an American, or successfully passes himself off as one, somehow avoiding a complete nervous breakdown in the process, which is what I would have expected; then teaches a course on Russian literature at Wellesley, which is hilarious, I understand (and couldn’t have been other than hilarious, really, Nabokov being Nabokov and Wellesley being Wellesley, but more of that later); then, in the chrysalis of his own imagination, transmogrifies into one of the world’s great novelists in English, a feat of linguistic alchemy that rightly should confound us all, finally translating his own celebrated works from English to Russian and back again, to prove once and for all that, in the realm of languages, he is a double-jointed kind of freak. Which is why I loved the guy, initially. Now I think that was something of a miscalculation, on my part. Today, I see that the language thing is secondary, a collateral result of the man’s insistence on being himself. Yes, he insisted on building and maintaining his own mind as a vehicle for the deepest, clearest, sweetest kind of consciousness, a vehicle for a life not merely lived but fully grasped, fully embraced, fully understood in the passing moment. And all of the explaining was done not for the sake of explanation itself, but rather because the effort to explain has the effect of slowing things down a bit, to the point where we at least a wild, random shot at understanding part of what is happening to us. In other words, you write in order to understand, not the other way around. Thus does Nabokov demonstrate that none of us need to make do with a Sunbeam kind of mind, or a General Electric kind of mind, or any commodity thinking of any kind. Nabokov’s mind was of particular interest to me because of the quality of clarity and space, I think. It was built mostly out of glass, it seems to me. There was this prismatic quality, this iridescent quality, which could filter from human experience the subtlest nuance of thought and emotion and concentrate that, and only that, into the most exquisitely apt, the most exquisitely accurate words, each arrayed in perfect relation to all the others, with the result that the words themselves had a transparent quality, never getting in the way, but letting the true colors of thought and emotion and worldly experience shine through, as when the sun is refracted in a crystal glass or bowl and scatters across the tablecloth in the form of twinkling, wobbling, dancing little rainbow points of color.

Not to run on about Nabokov (from my point of view, the Mickey Mantle of American literature, if not the Babe Ruth), I will offer a final observation. I think this quality of clarity and light came out of the ethereal happiness of his childhood. He saw the world through the spotless windows of Roshdestveno. Interesting that he never owned another house. In even mentioning his name, I have to wonder, do I, an American guttersnipe, a would-be hoodlum, only make myself ridiculous here? Am I even allowed to mention a genius like Nabokov … or *Roth*, or Clemens, or Salinger … in a low-grade pastiche of this kind? Or is that ludicrously, outrageously, ridiculously presumptuous, the inflamed puffery of a sick ego.

Here, the humble wardrobe moth, *moi*, invokes the majesty of the Blue Morpho in approaching the ever so delicate, ever so treacherous question … can there be an real fever in a five-year-old?

It depends on what you mean by fever. Certainly we are not talking about malaria or diphtheria. Not the night sweats that affect the college freshman in heat. It’s more like the chill that runs through your body when you are first infected. The premonition. That instinctual awareness that something is taking possession, an awareness of, not necessarily sexual intimacy, but conjugal intimacy, let’s say, which is slightly different. Conjugal intimacy being the bigger thing, the thing that contains the other, the thing that encompasses one’s entire existence, sex being but a part.

How does this new possibility manifest itself?

It manifests itself as the softest, faintest flux of an eyelash against my cheek.

And, as the tropical warmth of her breath, laden with the luscious scent of Wrigley’s Juicy Fruit, regularly, rhythmically exchanging with mine, the Double Bubble.

As strands of her hair in my eyes, radiant filaments of beautiful golden forest brown.

As her eyes gazing steadily into mine, tentatively, tenderly probing the boundaries of individuality (what are the odds that the two smartest kids in second grade, the kids who will be competing for the most turkey stickers on their arithmetic papers, will wind up as neighbors, fondling the buds of nascent sexuality, and competing there, too?) I realize that there is another fully developed mind there, another world there, a big, wide, welcoming world where I can have a place, but one that is not me, and … *I not it* … if that makes any sense. To put it another way, a world where I can exist as something other than an offshoot of another identity. Not only exist, but be *known to exist*.

Be separate, yes, but still okay.

Imagine the amazement of the person who is cruising along in his thought blimp, convinced that his blimp is the only blimp in existence, and is, in effect, synonymous with the term “existence” itself, in other words all-encompassing, that way, just peacefully humming along above all these farms and orchards and quaint little towns, all of which he believes to be part of his own dream, purely imaginary, when on the horizon there appears another blimp, piloted by a person who seems interested in the same farms and orchards and quaint little towns, which is a pretty good indication that maybe, just maybe, all this stuff is not one hundred per cent illusory, or if it is, there is a channel for sharing certain kinds of illusions.

Did it matter that she was a girl?

My belief (and I think I am going to try to develop this idea as a corollary to the Sexual Voltage Differential Aglorithm) is that there is a kind of ciphering that goes on. All of our thoughts and feelings are encrypted for routine security purposes. Obviously we can’t have just anyone meddling with our true thoughts and feelings. To admit to the chaotic, neurotic, completely unrealistic nature of our true thoughts and feelings is to risk commitment to a psychiatric institution, as we all know. In a few cases, there might be a brief career in stand-up comedy, but even there, it’s not going to end well, we know. Consequently, the more pragmatic among us encrypt stuff into a kind of cipher of normality. The idea is to fade into the background, for the most part. We are chameleons, psychologically. If we advert obliquely to the anarchy and passion and panic within, normally we will use a jocular tone, signaling that we ourselves do not take the interior reality seriously. *Ha ha*. What is a joke, really, but a truth we cannot afford to acknowledge, normally? What is laughter, but our way of acknowledging the truth, while keeping it at arm’s length?

And what is love, if not the admission of all this, the admission of everything, the admission of all that is inadmissible, in abject, prostrate humility before the adored one?

I am convinced that the normality cipher is sexual in nature. In other words, only the female has the key required to fully decrypt the male, and vice versa. So, no woman can be fully known to another woman, and no man fully known to another man. We are discussing heretosexuals, for the moment, if that’s alright. No offense. In the case of homosexuals, please make the appropriate substitutions. It’s like working as a spy behind enemy lines, if you ask me. What happens? You meet a person you believe to be another spy, on your side. You attempt to exchange passwords. Most of the time, the exchange fails. She is not, in fact, a spy. She has no idea what you are talking about. She buys her newspaper and moves on. But then, once in a while, every five or ten years or so, miraculously, the agreed upon exchange clicks. She replies to your password with her own password. Bingo. Now everything else that is said takes on a new meaning, because the context has changed fundamentally. Along these lines, if you happen to be a heterosexual male, you know that only a heterosexual female can come into possession of the password and fully understand the cipher. Should you meet such a person, and successfully exchange passwords, you can then continue to encrypt your true thoughts and feelings into some semblance of normality, remaining mostly invisible to others, or incognito, I would like to say, but meantime be assured that she will be able to decrypt and comprehend the chaos, panic, passion, soaring and plunging emotions, and overall breathless desperation within you.

Make sense?

Margaret had learned about love by watching Million Dollar Movie on television in the afternoons. She was eager to fill me in. The Koslowskis had their television in the living room, where we had danced, the better to make room for the whole family to gather in worship before the Great Cyclops. The living room was usually dark, because Mrs. Koslowski always had the drapes drawn, the better to protect the slipcovers from the deleterious effects of the sun. Her whole identity was very much tied up in issues of that sort. Which kind of made sense because, after all, this was something you could control, to a degree. Barring the appearance of a Panzer division on the front lawn, you could build a modest kind of happiness that way. Mrs. Adelino had addressed the same issue by encasing the Adelinos’ living room furniture in industrial-guage plastic “spill covers.” imbued with “Sungard” protectant guaranteed to make them last forever. In any event Mrs. Koslowski’s paranoia about the sun worked to our advantage because, there in the living room, in front of the flickering tube, there was darkness even at midday.

I was not completely oblivious to the importance of love in human life. I understood that, where there was man, normally there was going to be a woman. Again, we are dealing with the heterosexual case. Love seemed to have certain magnetic properties, along those lines. People stuck to each other, in the very same way a magnet sticks to the refrigerator. The difference between Margaret and I was that I was not ambitious about love in quite the same way as she. I did not see love as a career choice. Soon it became clear that she was planning to find a husband and produce children in pretty much the same way I was planning to join the Yankees and clear the bases in the World Series. As I rounded third and headed home, with my three teammates waiting at the plate, she would be giving birth to the last of her quadruplets. They would be greatest quadruplets ever.

She wanted to be really, really good at the whole deal.

In order to get better, she needed to practice. She needed a partner to practice, just as I needed a partner to play catch.

We watched Million Dollar Movie, sitting there in the dark, on a slipcover that had to last for all eternity, and emulated the behavior we saw on the screen. On a given afternoon, I would be Errol Flynn and she would be Olivia de Havilland. Or, I would be Cary Grant and she would be Ethel Barrymore. Together we would re-enact what Margaret called “the kissing scenes.” Of course these were normally preceded by an ever so soft murmuring of violins, our signal to snuggle close and get ready. At the first swell of the strings she would put her finger to her lips to shut me up, then hunch forward so she could catch the dialogue.

“Here they go,” she says. “Watch this.”

I might be sitting there tossing a baseball. Without a word, she takes it and puts it on the end table.

Alert to the subtleties that led up to the kiss, she might ask me to repeat a couple of lines of dialogue. "Now you be the pirate and I'll be her," she would say, eyelids screwed shut. That was an important lesson right there. Close your eyes. Under no circumstances do you want to get your eyeballs crossed with the woman’s eyeballs, which wrecks the mood entirely.

She might give me the lines one by one.

“First, you say, ‘Dearest darling, I will carry your love with me wherever the four winds shall take me’.”

I would give it my best shot. Frequently, the desired intensity was lacking. Was there something about Errol Flynn that did not square with something about Mickey Mantle? A little too dashing, maybe? Maybe something in the kernel of maleness that wanted to be quieter? That wanted to be the quiet kid from Oklahoma with the big biceps, and not rely so heavily on the witticisms and the expert swordplay and, you know, swinging from the drapes? Quite frequently Margaret was critical of my performance. She would open her eyes, purse her lips in consternation, slap me on the shoulder playfully, and say something like, “Not like that, stupid. Say it like you *mean* it.”

I repeat my line until we have a reasonably good take. Only then does she deliver her line.

“God speed, my angel, until next we meet.”

And throws her head back and puckers.

“Go ahead,” she says. “Now.”

I plant my lips on hers, pause, and remove them. Like pushing a doorbell.

“Longer,” she says. “Don't be a sissy about it. And you have to mush them around a little.”

I kiss her until she somehow manages to speak with lips engaged.

“Okay, now, put your arms around me.”

And she adjusts my arms.

“Now you say, ‘Dearest darling...’.”

All of which is done in complete innocence. Because, well, what else is there? I am just starting to get the hang of the whole thing when, one day, here comes the big, bovine, splay-footed Mrs. Koslowski, stomping up from the basement with her blue plastic basket full of wet wash. Normally she proceeds directly to the back yard, to hang the clothes on her brand new whirly clothes line thingie, with the twenty plastic-coated clothes lines stretched between the collapsible aluminum rods, but in this instance for some reason she detours and glides silently through the hall and into the dim living room just as the violins and Margaret and I are hitting a crescendo. Which comes to an abrupt halt when the wet wash hits the floor with a bang. I take note of the gold fillings in her teeth as Mrs. Koslowski opens her maw to bellow at me. The point being, there will be no more kissing. Kissing is completely and irrevocably forbidden. For a moment Mrs. Koslowski is distracted as Flynn enters a banquet hall with a deer on his shoulder, encountering a pouty Dehavilland and effeminate knights. Recovering, she hoists the laundry basket onto a cantilevered hip, balances it there with the one meaty hand, and with the other snags my wrist, yanking me along behind as she heads for the back door, while lecturing Margaret in Polish. Having deposited me on my side of the barberry hedge, she waves a stubby forefinger.

“No kissing my Magda!”

Whereupon, over her shoulder, that face of my young lover appears.

She waves to me.

Not with her hand, but with her pinkie.

A pinkie wave, as she does not dare wave with her hand.

I feel on my neck the little jets of heat from her nostrils, feel her hand brushing back my hair, as she tries to make me look more like Errol Flynn. She licks her fingers to make the hair stick in place. There is something about the licking, maybe. In any event I am vaguely aware of a tremor, a tingle, a vibration deep within, which is, I am now convinced, the germination of the seed of desire, an unfolding of the first tender lobes of green in the humus of the subconscious, an unfettering of the magic beanstalk that will swell and stiffen and expand and shoot up like, yes, exactly like you know what, eventually going right through the roof, and beyond, with me on it! And well it *should* seem like you know what, because psychologically speaking, it *is* you know what. It is not needing, but *wanting*. Not merging with, but orbiting around another individual, while she is orbiting around me.

The the desire for sameness.

The desire for the other, for the otherness.

As a conscientious Catholic mother, Mrs. Koslowski viewed sexual maturation as the tar pits of human life. Sexual maturation was inevitable, as death is inevitable, but one could put it off indefinitely, and it was very much to the advantage of all parties to do so wherever possible. There was always the chance that the each and every one of the children would become priests and nuns and never have to deal with any of it. Otherwise life was an inexorable march downward toward inevitable damnation in the tar pits of human sex. Why hurry the process?

Fortunately, we could all look forward to the day when Christ would be born again, returning with the heavenly host, whoever they were, a day when sex would no longer be necessary. Why? Because we would all be angels then, more or less. Sex was not necessary for angels. God could use magic to create more angels anytime he wanted. Angels spouted from his forehead anytime he wanted, like steam from a tea kettle. True, the angels took more or less human form, but we all assumed that this did not extend to the area between their legs. In that regard, we assumed that the angels had a lot in common with the mannequins in the department store. Subtract sex organs, add wings, and *bingo*, that was an angel. Granted, the clothing the angels wore was pretty loose, so, you couldn’t be entirely certain about the groin area. But that was a question you did not even want to ask, probably. The question itself was going to be disrespectful of God. If you actually went ahead and asked whether angels had penises, that was going to be a sin right there, probably, and maybe a pretty serious one. Because obviously that was an “impure thought.”

When an impure thought began to surface, you had to say to yourself, basically, wait a minute, don’t think that, that’s impure.

You had to torpedo that thought.

Stop thinking it.

I personally made super-human efforts not to think about things.

True, creation itself was not pure. In trying to be pure, we were all more or less doomed to fail. But that was okay, because God would forgive us, as long as we gave the attempt a good old college try, banging our heads against the brick wall of our own profound impurity for a good long time. All of this was explained very clearly in the catechism. I had memorized the catechism, in pretty much the same way I had memorized the state capitals, so I knew. Bottom line, once Eve ate the apple in the Garden of Eden, pretty much everything was permanently fucked up, everywhere, from that point forward. Any kind of purity, *pfffft*, right there.

Check me on this.

On the Seventh Day of Creation, God looks out over his work and feels it is good. That is in the catechism. We know exactly how God feels about things at this moment. He is really proud of himself. Because we are mere mortals, we can only imagine. Who but God could have accomplished such a feat? Who but God could have thought up something like a giraffe. “What this needs is one creature with a really long neck.” And there it is. Bingo. Giraffe. He has created everything just the way he wants it. Right down to the last grain of pollen. He has figured out the correct shape for every grain of pollen and ordered up one hundred and fifty bajillion different models, and thirty or forty zillion copies of each, and had the angels install each and every one in its proper place, before the first wind starts blowing. Perfect. So now, the pollen has arrived, Adam has his nose to the grindstone in the Garden of Eden, picking grapes and so forth, the giraffes have been installed, everything is humming along swimmingly, when Eve shows up.

I imagine Eve as an Elizabeth Taylor type, a show-stopping, jaw-dropping, to-die-for knockout, her entire being, her whole life force fueled by rampant sexual desire. Her limo pulls up in front of the Garden of Eden (a limo with New York City plates, signifying trouble right there), and the doorman at the gate runs out to open the door of the limo, somehow sensing there is someone special in this car. Well, sure enough, when the door of the cab opens, and one long, lovely leg extends, leading with the toe of a black high-heeled shoe, the effect is electrifying. Is the Garden of Eden ready for Liz? I mean Eve? We’re about to find out. As the full figure flows forth, we see that Eve is wearing a handful of rhinestone-encrusted fig leaves, which look like they’ve been arranged by the House of Dior or somebody, and that’s pretty much it.

Okay, now, just working out the implications, fictively, we know that God is all-knowing.

So, he is watching all this, figuratively speaking.

*Because* he is all knowing, he knows that Eve spells trouble, the second he lays eyes on her. God is not stupid. He and his top angels are lounging around in an office that looks a lot like the security office at the Port Authority bus terminal, one wall filled with monitors for closed circuit television. There is a camera on the giraffes, one on the lions, and one on the gate. One of the angels sees Eve get out of the car and says, “Oh, it’s Eve, I’ll buzz her in.”

God catches a glimpse of Eve out of the corner of his eye and, ever on the alert, says, “Wait a minute, boys.”

He scrutinizes the image on the screen with a perspicuity only God can bring. There is a melee out there, paparazzi going nuts, flashbulbs firing in such rapid sequence they cast a continuous glow over the voluptuous Eve, just like outside the Academy Awards.

“Who is that?” he says.

“That’s Eve, the woman prototype.”

“Woman?” God says.

“You told us you wanted a woman. You don’t remember?”

“I said I wanted a *mate*.”

The angels begin fidgeting.

“Well,” one of the senior angels explains, “we thought of a couple of improvements.”

“Like what?”

“We gave her … this new thing.”

“Thing?”

“It has to do with the preservation of the species,” one of the junior angels says, trying to help the old boy get with it.

“But also, frankly, fun for Adam,” says another.

God says, “And what do we call this thing?”

“A vagina.”

A female angel adds, “Equipped with a clitoris.”

“And what’s so great about a vagina?” God says, ignoring the female angel.

Now the angels shift in their seats, furtively glancing around the room at other angels. Clearly they are a little nervous about the whole concept. Let’s remember, the vagina idea had never been tried before. Finally God becomes impatient.

“You guys better come clean on this right now.”

“It works with the penis,” says one of the angels.

“It’s complementary,” says another.

God’s head is jerked around as they all begin to speak. Clearly this has been a communal kind of project.

“You insert the penis, and it kind of slips and slides around in the vagina.”

“The penis feels better and better, until …”

“Slips and slides?” God says.

“The vagina is viscous.”

“But only in certain situations.”

The angels laugh.

“You said until …” says God. “What’s the until part?”

“The male ejaculates.”

“But inside the vagina.”

God is shifty eyed, now, leaning back in his chair, taking it all in, skeptical. You can see he is intrigued with the idea, but not necessarily buying it.

He says, “Adam doesn’t masturbate anymore?”

The angels crowd in on him. They see their opening.

“No,” one of them says assertively. “This is *better* than masturbation.”

“Better?” God says, cocking an eyebrow. “Be realistic.”

One of the lead angels nods in solemn, knowing assurance.

“Way better,” he says.

“If it’s better than masturbation,” God says. “All hell will break loose around here.”

Which is of course exactly what happens.

Inexplicably, given the backdrop of the whole Adam and Eve thing, the scriptures, what have you, my own parents were not the least bit ashamed of sex. We walked in on them one time, myself and my older brother, and it was no big deal.

*We’ll be with you in a minute, kids.*

I am reminded of my parents’ trip to Rio De Janiero for Mardi Gras. As you might guess, my parents, our local *Zeus and Minerva*, were perfectly at home in Rio, maybe more at home there than in New Jersey. They were visiting a couple they had known since their high school days. The guy had been an officer in the Marine Corps with my Dad. Another rakishly handsome, funny, totally fearless Irishman, with the patented devil may care twinkle in his eye. He guy had taken a job as a manager with an American pharmaceutical company that had a big operation in Brazil. Part of the deal was this fabulous apartment on the beach at Ipanema, complete with chauffeur, butler, and cook. When my parents arrived, he rolled out the red carpet. Nothing was too good for the old high school chums. The chauffeur was named Otto, as I recall. Otto was assigned to fulfill my parents every wish.

Normally a model of probity, my father found Rio profoundly intoxicating. Whatever compass he used, it started spinning madly. The climax of the visit was a costume ball given by a samba club of which the drug executive was titular head. I think presidency of the samba was an adjunct of the guy’s professional responsibilities. Anyway my parents took pictures everywhere they went, so the family archives contained a complete photographic record of everything that occurred. These photos were apt to appear at cocktail parties whenever the subject of sex came up. In one unevenly lit sequence of shots from this costume ball, my father exhibits progressively greater degrees of dishevelment. His complexion blossoms crimson. A sheen of sweat spreads across his forehead. He takes off his jacket and tie and begins to snap his fingers overhead. An all-but-naked young woman seems to orbit around him, appearing and disappearing, bringing cocktails, putting flowers behind his ear, shimmying as he watches, goggle-eyed. The ubiquitous girl's large, suntanned breasts are adorned with a few gossamer petals, and that’s pretty much it. She is wearing a skirt that seems tenuously attached. We are told her name is Cornelia, a name that cues the samba tunes in my father’s psyche even years later. They dance and, in the abashed, painfully defensive phrase my father employs for the recounting, *bump their fannies together*.

"Hey, that's the way they *do* it there," he says in answer to the usual uproar, opening his palms in a pathetic plea for reason. My mother is convulsed with every single rendition of this lame attempt at self defense. Weeping … *screaming* with hilarity, gasping for breath, her cheeks streaked with tears, she struggles to remind us, "Your father thought he was … *Xa … Xa … Xavier Coug-at!"*

A line always brings down the house, for some reason.

In one photo, my father and the half-naked girl appear to be headed for the exit. There is no denying this. My father explains that Cornelia wanted to go for *a walk in the garden,* as he puts it. “It's a good thing I caught up with them,” my mother says, “Or they would have sold your father into white slavery.”

He shrugs. Frequently this issue arose after he had entered into his two-martini state of nirvana.

“What can I tell you? It was Mardi Gras.”

Which is basically my line.

Only I alter it slightly.

“What can I tell you? It was the Planet Earth.”

They had a stack of record albums that my father purchased in Rio immeditately upon falling in love with Cornelia and the samba. For years afterward, my mother pretended that the records had the power to arouse Dad to priapic frenzy. "Uh-oh, your father's getting out the samba records, *Katie bar the door*.” But now and then she put one on herself. His eyebrows would pop up into exclamatory arches, whether from anticipation, or anxiety, or both, we don’t know. He would begin snapping his fingers over his head, doing the samba two-step around the living room, perhaps indulging himself once more in fantasies about the sensational Cornelia. Anyway, the point is, I do not blame my own parents for what happened next.

I blame the Wanda Koslowskis of this world.

Wanda was the one who made my brother and I voyeurs.

The new “dormer” that my parents put on when the “modified Cape Cod” bursts at the seams offers Barry and myself the perfect vantage point from which to spy on Margaret and her sister Denise as they get into their pajamas. How delicious to hear them chatting as we crouch beneath the window sill. How titillating to pop up and catch them in their underwear, which is perfectly ordinary underwear, and in fact exactly like ours, but still, it was underwear and … only problem is, when we do catch them, we have to laugh, or there is no point to it, is there? So it isn’t long before Joe Koslowski is bellowing at us from the girls’ bedroom window, and then stepping over his own hedge (a sure sign he is furious beyond belief … because the integrity of the hedge as boundary is absolutely paramount) to pound on our back door.

My father had quite a highly developed sense of due process, accountable to his early experience as a reporter, I believe, so he conducted his own little version of the Trials at Nuremberg there in our bedroom, the very room that had been the scene of the crime. We were invited to testify. Before we did, my father solemnly reminded us that God himself would be listening to our every word. If we were going to lie, we should figure out in advance exactly how we were going to explain that to God, because, one day, we would die, and find ourselves standing before the throne of Almighty for the Last Judgment, and chances were pretty good that he was going to whip out his notes on this conversation.

“It’s going to be like being called to the principal’s office, only a thousand times worse,” he tells us grimly.

But that was not so bad, really. I mean, the factor of a thousand was something to be weighed, no question about it. Better to do a few rough calculations there. But being called to the principal’s office itself? The baseline experience? Not all that bad, really. Because, when you thought about it, what greater distinction could there be than having your name called over the intercom to come down to the principal’s office *immediately?* As you meander down the empty hall, veering from side to side, pretending to be an airplane, footsteps echoing oddly off the cinderblock walls, because there is no one else around, are you sorry you did what you did?

Not really.

You are thinking, well, I have finally achieved something in life. Finally distinguished myself from the great, unwashed, huddled masses who meekly do their homework the *right* way, not embroidering, not inventing a new way to do homework, and who meekly answer roll call in the morning, surrendering their souls to Sister Frances or Sister Agnes or Mrs. Prestopino.

Along these lines, I have a dream about the Last Judgment.

In my dream, I throw the whole Last Judgment routine into complete chaos by unexpectedly cross-examining God and turning the tables on him. One or two clever retorts from me is all it takes to send the angels and saints scurrying through the halls of heaven, excitedly whispering the news that, *holy crap*, the kid from Clifton is giving the old boy a run for his money! Incongruously, I appear before God not in my altar boy outfit, the clothes I would expect to be buried in, but in normal stickball dress, suggesting I have just been run over while fielding a grounder on Albion Road, throwing the runner out before collapsing. The Converse All-Star sneakers, which were white, originally, but are now more or less dirt-colored, squeal and squeak as I approach the throne, thinking, possibly God has heard about me from the nuns at St. Philip’s. In speaking to God, my tone is modeled on that of Perry Mason, the lawyer in the TV serial, who has a clever way of setting traps for people.

I wait for God to wade into the subject of our being peeping Toms, knowing that, if convicted, we are going to do thirty or forty thousand years roasting in the flames of Purgatory. Which doesn’t scare me.

When he characterizes Margaret and her sister Phyllis as “irresistible” to us, I spring the trap.

“And who made them irresistible?” I inquire.

Not accustomed to being addressed this way, God bluffs and blusters and tries to cover his tracks, while I pace the marble floor before the throne, squeaking.

“Who, in fact, *invented* sex?”

You can hear a pin drop, in heaven, when that question is asked.

How my father ventures to reconcile his prosecution of the peeping with the pursuit of Cornelia and her spectacular, petal-covered tits is another conundrum. I can explain it only in terms of Dad’s own wise acceptance of inconsistency. Certainly you tried to be a good father. But when a woman like Cornelia appeared, well, it was one night in Rio, after all.Let’s not ignore the fact that the Original Sin system offered certain key advantages, in terms of accounting for aberrations of this kind. If you are permeated by sin, just soaked in sin, just completely covered with the wreaking tar of sin, through no fault of your own, really, but owing to Eve’s screw-up in the Garden of Eden, why then you could not be expected to behave perfectly every time, right?

No. Of course not.

Of course there are going to be lapses.

When a woman like Cornelia appears, the Original Sin thing is *bound* to kick in.

You sinned, you confessed your sins, and if you knew what was good for you, you offered an appropriate donation to the appropriate authorities, by way of expiating the guilt.

This system worked well for everyone.

During a subsequent period of “laying low,” as he put it, Barry philosophized at length about the difference between good and evil, pointing out that, ninety per cent of the time, when the parents said something was wrong, what they really meant was … you were not *old enough.*

Evil was something you had to kind of grow into. Once you did, it wasn’t evil anymore. It was normal adult behavior. So, in a way, experimentation with the behaviors identified as “bad” or “evil” was a mark of maturity.

"We're just growing up a little faster than they want, is all."

"Yeah? Well what if they *catch* us again?"

"We’ll say we dropped something out the window. People drop stuff out the window all the time, don’t they?”

“Oh sure. Brilliant, Bar. Brilliant.”

He grabs a baseball, walks over to the window, opens it, and drops the baseball into the forest of forsythia below.

He says, “Evidence.”

I believed that Margaret and I would eventually get married and have children of our own, but would not necessarily have to grow up, or even grow physically larger, to accomplish this. True, I was planning to hit the game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth of the seventh game of the World Series, but I also wanted to return home in time to be tucked in at night. Along the same lines, Margaret and I would have children, but might well remain on the small side ourselves, not to overdo it. Our children might be miniature children. Extrapolating, that meant our grandchildren might be the size of mice, not a fact I cared to dwell on. In any event, we had the next twenty or thirty years to make plans, figure out the details, pick names for the kids, and so forth, while further refining our love-making techniques in front of Million Dollar Movie. It went more or less without saying that Margaret would continue to live with her parents and I with mine. Possibly we could all dine together. At one end of the table, her parents would speak Polish, while passing the stuffed cabbage and pirogi, while at the other, mine would speak English, while passing the shepherd’s pie, a steaming heap of chopmeat and mashed potatoes that was our idea of a gourmet meal. Probably the parents would not have all that much to say to one another. Margaret and I would sit in the middle, politely sampling a little from each dish and interpreting, where necessary. I saw the two of us as mature, responsible midgets, doing our best to help our parents get along.

One of the interesting facts I have turned up in the course of my extensive research into sex and reproduction is that the life experiences of the parents can affect their offspring in unpredictable ways. It turns out that, if you are more or less continually terrified as a young adult, why then your kids are likely to be nervous. It’s not the genes themselves, but the way they are packaged, that does it. Which makes me wonder, for example, about the many days I spent as a sperm, riding back and forth across the South Pacific in my father’s C-46 Commando. He was constantly on the alert for Zeroes, knowing that, if they appeared, he was a goner, along with everyone else in the Commando, because the only gun on board was my father’s forty five. It was fine to imagine, years later, that Dad was the John Wayne of the Marine Corps, leaning out the window and picking off Jap infantryman with the pistol from fifteen thousand feet, but in reality he was scared witless the whole time, I’m sure. Might this experience have imbued the sperm with a special need for equilibrium?

And what about my mother? What about the ovum that went into this? What kinds of stresses may have operated upon genetic material in the ovum? Well, when the wind howled in the trees, in the darkness beyond Sherwood Forest, out there in the country, where the terrified rabbits lived, my mother would pick up her ears and, speaking to no one in particular, whisper: “The Banshee.”

Banshee?

What’s a banshee, Mom?

Ah, well, she says, happy to have the opportunity to explain, the banshee is a kind of ghost or ghoul, a particularly Irish sort of ghost, who wails like the wind when someone is about to die, and at the moment of death, swoops in and snatches the soul away, or something like that.

Ha ha.

Oh thanks, Mom. Very reassuring.

*Tell us more*.

And she does, unravelling the whole ghost and goblin and ghoul-bedeviled Irish thing, a madhouse of ruined monasteries and lost lovers buried in haunted graveyards, loony leprechauns and fairies and Banshees and alcoholic poets slobering into the Guinness, while we poor, stupid, defenseless children draw the sheets over our heads, teeth chattering, knees knocking, hoping to conceal ourselves from the marauding spirits.

Other than the genetically-encoded fears of diving Japanese fighter planes, plus the neighborhood’s ambient anxiety about roaming Panzer divisions, plus the ghosts howling hungrily out there in the storm, just ravenous for another soul to gobble up … apart from all that … the world was a warm and welcoming place. My conclusion was that nothing further had to happen. It had all happened already. Way too much had happened. Hiroshima had happened. Czestochowa had happened. The banshees had happened. My paternal grandfather had fallen in front of a subway train. What was that all about? People just casually keel over and fall in front of subway trains every once in a while?

That’s part of the drill here?

That’s *okay?*

We have these A-bomb drills at school. Talk about ambient fucking anxiety. The teacher claps her hands happily. Just like, you know, okay kids, get out the crayons! But the idea is, okay kids, time to get ready for an A-bomb! At least today there would be a preliminary consultation with a psychologist or something. I would *hope,* for God’s sake. And the psychologist would say, *umm,* *alright, now, when you get to the part about being vaporized? Just wiped off the face of the earth? At any instant? For no reason? How do you plan to explain that?* Probably most readers of this book will have seen the black-and-white video footage of these drills. The idea is, basically, if an A-bomb is going to go off over Clifton, not to worry, kids, you will be just fine, because, you see, you will be *under your desks*. Okay? If an A-bomb goes off on *top* of your desk, that has absolutely nothing to do with what is going on *underneath* the desk. Of course not. The problem is that the film of Hiroshima is on television. So I am watching the film and scratching my head and wondering, you know, where are the *desks?* We could all see every clearly what had happened at Hiroshima. Everyone could see there were no desks resting neatly in the rubble of Hiroshima.

The desks are gone.

Kaput.

No desks.

So then… where were the kids from Hiroshima?

And if that isn’t enough to scare the living crap out of you, what about fucking *Sputnik?* Every night, the gleaming orb bisects the fucking void, crossing from one horizion to the other with maddening steadiness, leaving the impression that the crazy, vodka-swilling Russians can rain A-bombs painted with hammers and sickles from the heavens. Every night, those jerks are up there with their stupid hammers and sickles, getting ready to rain A-bombs on Clifton. Looking down on us, between shots of vodka, through a bomb site whose crosshairs are centered over St. Philip’s.So really, you wanted to just *live* under your desk! I mean, why ever emerge? Why take a chance? Why not just have a bunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches delivered to your desk every day? Or placed on the floor beside the desk, so you can reach the sandwiches from underneath the desk, and maybe get your hand incinerated, so your arm is nothing but white, bleached bones from the elbow down, but still … you get the sandwich, and eat it out of your own bony hand.

Make sense?

The more depressing and screwed up things get, the more we depend on religion, obviously.

In our case, it’s all about the blood of Christ. That is where the real magic is. Good thing we have the priests, is all I can say. They are able to turn ordinary wine into the blood of Christ anytime they want, presto chango. So we have a more or less infinite supply of magic blood. And yet it is precious, isn’t it? Because of the magical powers, I mean. As I learn more and more about the way we humans handle our affairs, and the role I play, I pray harder and harder and worry more and more that, if I am not super careful, in the course of performing my duties as an altar boy, I may spill a drop of Christ’s blood. If you spill Christ’s blood onto the yellow carpet that surrounds the altar. Then what do I do? Get a napkin and try to absorb it? If so, what happens to the napkin? You then have a sacred napkin, right? You have to enshrine the napkin, then. On the other hand, suppose you don’t tell anyone? If you don’t tell anyone, Christ’s blood is just lying there, getting stepped on, people wiping their shoes on Christ’s blood, while you are trying to sleep in the morning. God is up there, looking down, noticing that Christs’s blood is getting stepped on, and checking his notes, and figuring out oh, yeah, it was *that* kid again. As a result, I am out-praying Granny Adelino, at this point. I had faith that it was all going to be okay, yes, because you had to have faith, faith was *good*. But it was going to be a squeaker, alright?

No question about it, is there?

The idea being, basically, it is *okay* that the children of Hiroshima are gone, *okay* that the children of Hiroshima have been erased, like stick figures on the blackboard, because, ultimately, God is watching, right? And kind of keeping score, right? Isn’t he? And God would make it all okay in the end. True, the brains of the children of Hiroshima have been vaporized by an American bomb, but God will fix that. Don’t forget the all-knowing thing. Because he is all-knowing, God can track down every single molecule belonging in every one of those brains, tag them individually, and schedule them for reinstallation at the Last Judgment. The angels will have to hustle, but it’s doable. The human race can be down twenty thousand runs, with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, but never, ever forget, when it’s time for the Last Judgment, God is going to step up to the plate, the greatest cleanup hitter of all time, with, you know, two hundred and fifty billion runners on base, and with one amazing swing … with the most dramatic, important, game-ending, series-ending, Creation-ending home run of all time … bring them all home.

*Okay?*

The children of Hiroshima are going to be on base. Fastball down the middle. Boom. The children of Hiroshima are coming home.

It was going to be okay.

The pope says so.

And he is infallible.

The infallibility idea intrigues me.

Here is a human being who farts and wipes his rear end pretty much the same as I do (and no one is claiming anything different, on that score, although it would be plausible to suggest, given the context, that once he is anointed, the pope does not shit). On the other hand, he is constitutionally incapable of saying anything that is untrue, while I am more or less constantly dreaming up little prevarications.

Did I clean up my room? Well, *in a way,* okay? If you insist on checking, we can then discuss my interpretation of the phrase “clean up your room.”

But not the pope.

The pope is a pretty important guy, in Catholic circles. Meaning no offense, I see the His Holiness, the Pope, as a headwaiter kind of a guy. You give him a good tip, he gives you a good table in heaven. Simple. My father does this at the race track. You give him a *great* tip, probably he comes up with a table with a terrifc view of the universe, as the stars come out, and tells your wife she looks “spectacular.” This dawns on me the day I direct traffic for the Twenty Fifth Anniversary Celebration of the Archdiocese of Newark, an event we are very much honored to host at St. Philip the Apostle Church, on Valley Road in Clifton, where I happen to be one of the top, up-and-coming young altar boy prospects, mostly on the basis of this completely deranged paranoia about spilling the blood of Christ into a pile of dog shit or soemthing, and having to explain *that* at the Last Judgment, while my mother lowers her head into her hands and weeps, not over me, but over the disgrace I have brought to our family. Anyway on this occasion, us top-rated altar boys are in the special red altar boy outfits, the Christmas get-up, while the not-so-hot altar boys, the *dildo* altar boys, are in the stupid black costumes, the regular ones, making sure the entire world knows exactly who is fucking up with the water and wine and not ringing the bells on time.

The special *red* altar boys are directing traffic out in the parking lot as the church dignitaries come cruising in. And you know what I notice? This is interesting. I notice that every single one of the church dignitaries is arriving in the biggest-ass Caddy limousine you ever saw, with, you know, a Norman Numbnuts type driver at the wheel, and a couple of hangers on licking the shoes of the bishop or monsignor in the back seat.

Even one limousine is a pretty big deal to me, by the way, because we do not have limousines in Sherwood Forest. We consider ourselves pretty god damn lucky to have station wagons, for God’s sake. But here is a whole god damn *shitload* of limousines. So your first thought is … *holy crap* … where the heck did all the *cash* come from? Because, well, up to this point, you had not thought of God as being, like, a banker! But it sort of made sense, didn’t it? If God could create Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, the Apple of Eternal Life, or whatever it was, why then he could certainly create fifty dollar bills, right? Or an entire mountain of them, if he wished. Of *course* he could. Where others have to earn money, God can just *think it,* and it will appear. Consequently, it only makes sense that, as they are being helped out of the cars, the bishops and monsignors extend their hands to their retainers, just as Sophia Lauren would do, very ladylike, and don’t you know, every single one of those daintily extended hands is weighed down with a rock the size of the fucking Star of India. Necklaces, scepters, brooches, very single one of them is wearing enough jewelry to make Sophia Loren herself fall flat on her face, tipped over by a load of diamonds.

The jewels serve various ceremonial purposes. It’s not like they’re useless. If you kiss the bishop’s ring, you get a whopper of an indulgence. This is not like the piddly little indulgences Granny Adolino is going to get, for grinding the rosary beads to dust in the Adelinos back yard. There, okay, maybe she has racked up two hundred and fifty million years worth of indulgences, but still, she winds up roasting in Purgatory anyway, because she falls thirty or forty million years short. So, you know, nice try, see you later, Granny. Where, in this case, where you actually kiss the bishop’s ring, it’smore like you are going to get in line for the Last Judgment thing, with no great expectations, positively shaking in your boots, like everybody else, watching Granny Adelino get dragged off for a good long roasting, for her own good, and someone in authority is going to notice you there, and remember that you were the guy who kissed the bishop’s ring at the anniversary celebration at St. Philip’s, and immediately, a nice-looking young gentleman in a tuxedo is going to take you out of the line, sort of cursorily check out your balance sheet, where the indulgences are totaled against the sins, immediately rip that to shreds and toss it over his shoulder in a cavalier manner, so, you know, no one can ever even mention such foolishness to you again, then usher you through an unmarked door, into heaven, and hand you the keys to a brand new Ferrari convertible.

Where does this power come from? In part, it has to do with pieces of dead bodies, which we call “relics.” The idea being, pieces of dead bodies … or certain dead bodies, let’s say, certainly not just *any* dead body … have certain magical powers, just like the blood of Christ or, say, pixie dust. Because the pieces of dead bodies are magical, you are not going to want to carry them around in your wallet, or the pocket of your jeans, obviously. No. For this kind of thing, you need an emerald encrusted staff or a ring that weighs about a pound and a half, with a secret, snap-open compartment containing the tip of St. Lucy’s forefinger, or whatever you happen to have.

What can we say about the psychological good health of this environment?

I mean … you’ve got your phantom Panzer divisions, check, your death camps, check, your A-bombs, your death-dealing Sputniks, your Banshees, your prissy bishops carrying pieces of dead bodies around in jewel-encrusted staves, your Bilkos, bulldozing the landscape so he can plant identical trees at identical intervals on identical streets, while carting the topsoil away so he can sell it back to you … oh and by the way, it’s not as if all this stuff is being presented as exceptions to the rule. No one was apologizing for any of this shit. No one is saying, “We’re sorry. Occasionally, people who believe in one religion will try to kill all the people who believe in another religion. It’s unfortunate. Occasionally, we like to burn a few completely innocent people at the stake, in a big public extravaganza. A lot of our people seem to find this very entertaining. Our apologies there, too. Here are two tickets to the Yankee game, as a mere token of our sincere determination to make this up to you in any way possible.”

Of course there is genocide, now and then. But people don’t *mean anything* by it.

Hiroshima was a pretty old city, the maintenance bills were going to be through the roof.

When my grandfather flops in front of the train, my father sits us down and explains that Poppop has gone to heaven. There is plenty of talk about sin and punishment and centuries of roasting in the flames of Purgatory as long as we are alive, but the second one of us dies, bingo, straight to heaven, you notice? Only trouble is, if Poppop has taken the “A” train to heaven, and he is happy as a clam up there, having a beer and watching the Yankee game from a sunny box behind first base, then why is my mother doing her patented hand-over-the-mouth thing, completely disoriented over the inconceivable, the profoundly inexpressible horror of life, while my grandmother writhes, wracked with sobs, in the next room.

At night I listen to Roy Rogers and Dale Evans harmonize the conclusion of Happy Trails.

*Happy tr-a-i-l-s, to y-o-u*

*Un-t-i-l, we m-e-e-t ag-a-i-n*

*Happy tr-a-i-l-s, to y-o-u,*

*Keep s-m-i-lin' u-n-til t-h-e-n*

But then, lying in bed alone, alone with my deranged thoughts, I actually tremble with terror at the prospect of my own mother's passing, which I have already rehearsed maybe ten thousand times. Until, finally, one night, the anticipatory grief is too much for me, and I march out in my pajamas to find Mom relaxing in her easy chair, with a nice, crisp, fresh-smelling copy of National Geographic, which amazes us every month with photos of people who live somewhere other than the suburbs of New Jersey. I know very well that my unauthorized appearance in the living room at this late hour will dismay her, and will, in and of itself, provide the pretext for a serious discussion of life, death, and eternity.

*"Hon-ey! "* she says, letting her mouth hang open to tell me she is unpleasantly surprised. And then, seeing how worried I am, "What's the matter, Honey?"

"I can't sleep," I tell her for openers, theatrically laying my head on her shoulder, perhaps for the last time.

“Why?”

“Because I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what, darling.”

“Of *dying*, Mom.”

“Oh, Honey … you’re not going to *die*.”

Oh?

No?

Imagine if we could all get that wonderful news. The whole death thing … a misunderstanding … the message was garbled in transmission.

"You get yourself too excited," she says, in her lilting, loving, infinitely sympathetic, mother-to-child voice. She then addresses my father in her deeper, more matter-of-fact, mother-to-father voice. "*I really think all of this television is getting them too excited.*"

Reallly? That’s all it is?

“Oh no,” I hastily interject. Certainly I don’t want to risk a ban on the Roy Rogers Show over a little thing like mortality. "It's not that.”

“Well, what is it then?” she says.

“Promise me something?”

“Well, it would depend on what it is, Honey.”

“It’s about dying,” I said.

“Oh, *H-o-n-e-y,*” she says, beginning to remonstrate. And then, to my father, again in the other voice. “This worries me, Sweetheart.”

I blurt out, “Promise me that you won't die before I do.”

Now she bounces out of her chair, bends over, and puts her hand on my forehead, to feel for a fever.

My father turns a page of the newspaper.

Now I am weeping.

“Because....if...if you ever d-d-die,” I tell her, desperate now but still holding out hope … hope that, yes, perhaps there has been some mistake, that it's all somehow a misunderstanding, that we are all going to get a reprieve, “... if you d-d-die ... then I don't want to be *a-live*.”

And on the last syllable the floodgates open.

My father puts down the newspaper.

Now that I have put the inconsolable torment of human existence into words, what’s a mother to do? What does she come up with, this wonderful mother of mine? Well of course she puts her arms around me, and hugs me tight, which feels about right, but then grips me by the shoulders, holds me at arm’s length, gives me a little shake, to awaken me, and laughs.

To love a woman, you have to become something approximating a man, obviously.

After all, Flynn is nothing like DeHavilland.

He is a man.

She, a woman.

They’re quite different.

But then, even on the Flynn side of the equation, there was quite a range. Even on Million Dollar Movie, quite a broad spectrum of possibilities, spanning the gulf between, say, the debonair Fred Astaire, on the one hand, so fragile seeming, physically, but so witty, imaginative, expressive, and urbane, always with the ridiculously starchy shirt, the glistening shoeshine, a dozen roses clasped behind his back, always prepared to sit down at the piano and pour his heart out in song, which he actually did every ten minutes or so, while, at the other end, you have the hulking John Wayne, in the cavalry uniform, with the spurs that clink and jingle as he stomps across the room, purposely awkard, filthy with trail dust, unshaven, loathe to exhibit any undo familiarity with English grammar, overall more or less completely devoid of feeling, and actually proud of that, because, after all, what was the practical use of feelings? When the Apaches came whooping over the hill, with blood in their eyes, you could not shoot them with feelings. That was when you needed your trusty Winchester Seventy Three and a fast horse, preferably a palomino. Or how about, even worse, Victor McLaglen, the big, bluff, blustery Irishman who always played the sentimental sergeant, gnawing on the stub of a cigar, swigging corn whiskey out of an earthen jug, and mindlessly snapping his broad suspenders. If you found you could not laugh and sing and dance your way down Forty Second Street, why then you could always play the an inarticulate troll in the thrall of the bedimpled Shirley Temple,, occasionally shedding tears over the little cutie’s complete devotion to you, in spite of your all your drunken, stupid, loutish behavior.

Ideally, you could be all of the above.

You could crush the Punjabs in the Khyber Pass by day, hit the showers, jump into a tuxedo, firm up the tip of a cigarette on a silver cigarette box, toss off a couple of clever one liners, and tap dance across the ballroom at night, into the arms of DeHavilland.

Cary Grant was all of them, right?

Clark Gable, too.

Gable in *It Happened One Night.*

Grant in *To Catch a Thief.*

And, yes, my father.

Who could ask for more than this paragon, this Lancelot exiting the chapel at Pennsacola, beneath the crossed swords of his Marine Corps pals? You could ask for *less,* yes … might very well want *less* … so you wouldn't feel obligated to follow in those mythic footsteps … possibly economizing on the expenses for psychotherapy years later … but certainly you could not ask for more.

There *was* no more.

I wonder if it is clear just how unreal the reality can become, how very far the pendulum of reality can swing out into the netherworld of dreams, and still be very real, because … well, what is reality but the backwash of our dreams?

The Marine Corps is like that. I think of it now in terms of an essay question.

Three hundred words.

Due next Friday.

*What does the Marine Corps mean to me?*

The Marine Corps means handsome, courageous, hilariouwsly funny young men handing around a pack of Camels before climbing into their flying machines and giving each other the thumbs up signal before sliding the canopies shut. They buckle on on their goofy-looking leather helmets, cast a glance toward the glamorous girls gathered at the fence (bawling babies in their arms), toss a rakish wink in that direction, then rev the engines, taxi into takeoff position, and sail away into the blue, never to be seen again.

*Tally ho, Yankee leader*.

One thing I always wondered was how people could manage to be so cheerful in the face of death.

My father explained it to me this way. Once you took a really sober, realistic, fact-based look at the odds of surviving as a pilot, you basically threw in the towel, psychologically, accepting the fact that you were as good as dead, or even, in a sense, *already dead*. Which brings us to the whole Crispin Crispian thing. Of course I refer to Act IV, Scene III of Henry V, a scene that is very well known now, I think, a part of Hollywood lore, really, but a thing you can’t fully appreciate in all its twisted complexity unless you are somehow connected to the United States Marine Corps, and maybe know a bit of the background.

Here’s the background.

It’s 1943 or so, and the English are getting killed by the Germans in large numbers, all over the place, and Winston Churchill is looking for, well, some propaganda, really, something that will give his countrymen the courage to *keep on* getting killed in large numbers. A reason to choose death over surrender, in other words. Churchill knows his Shakespeare, so he happens to know that the most eloquent battle cry in the English language is Henry’s speech about St. Crispin’s Day in Act IV, Scene III. With this in mind, he rings up Laurence Oliver. Churchill explains the problem to Olivier. Olivier gets it immediately. People do not *like* the idea of getting killed. So, we are going to have to make that idea one whole heck of a lot more appealing, if we want people to keep dying, this way.

Churchill’s suggestion?

He is willing to underwrite a movie version of Henry V. The movie can be shot in Ireland, which isn’t worth bombing, so there is no danger Larry is going to get killed making the movie. Churchill tosses in the idea that Olivier can both direct and star in the film. Which satiates Olivier’s ravenous ego, temporarily. To top it off, there’s a lot of money to be made. As I recall, Olivier gets a cut of the box office, which is unheard of, at the time. That cinches it. Olivier’s rendition of the the king’s battlefield speech becomes the standard rationale for getting killed in combat.

*This story shall the good man teach his son;*

*And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,*

*From this day to the ending of the world,*

*But we in it shall be remembered;*

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.*

My Uncle Bobby explained it all a little differently. He had been with the Marines on Guadalcanal, where he fought in the night battle at Alligator Creek, firing a Browning machine gun into the crowds of Japanese who came screaming out of the jungle to wade into the water and die there, chopped to pieces by the Browning. Uncle Bob’s code of combat was very simple. Tapping me on chest with his forefinger three or four times, he says, “Get shot … in the *front*.”

And taps me one time extra hard.

That simple.

Not to mention the fact that both my father and I are named Arthur, and so must deal with all the mythology cooked up by T.H. White, another guy who goes to ground in Ireland, writing *The Once and Future King* and enjoying cocktails and golfwhile the German bombers are pulverizing London. Or Kennedy, for that matter, Dad’s comrade-in-arms in the Pacific. Or *Camelot*, which mashes it all together into a delusional confection of *nobless oblige* that Henry V himself would have loved, I’m sure.

If you think I’m blurring the lines between legend and myth and reality, as far as the manhood thing goes, you don’t know the half of it. Mom talks about bumping into Tyrone Power in the officers’ club at the Naval Air Station in El Centro, California, this being the very same Tyrone Power whom Margaret and I have admired in *The Mark of Zorro*, where Power (opposite Linda Darnell for the first time) establishes himself as an even better swordsman than Errol Flynn. Now, it seems that, a couple of years after making *The Mark of Zorro*, Power enlisted in the Marine Air Corps, in the same program as my father, and actually wound up flying the same plane, the old reliable Commando, out of the same base, which explains how they all get together for cocktails. I probably should not even mention that my father actually *looked* a lot like Power. Or that both of them wound up based on Kwajalein, a speck of coral in the South Pacific, and played poker together there, one night. The result being that Dad was Power and Power was Dad and, the corollary, I sometimes thought of Mom as combination of Linda Darnell and Lolita Quintero, Zorro’s girlfriend.

One key part of our initiation (key because it relates to power over life and death , the single most important item on the agenda), is fishing, an adventure that begins in the transformational hour before dawn, when the sky in the east is luminous with the leading edge of the new day, a plume of pastel pink and silver across the horizon, hemming the canopy of stars, though the tenebrous vapors of the forest still waft through the windows in the rear bedroom of the Lake House, inducing in us kids the slumber of mummies. As the birds in the meadow across the road are touched by the light and bestir themselves, one species at a time, with what seem like roll calls, call and answer, call and answer, their rhythmical calls echo crisp and clear through the darkness and silence of the forest around us. My father's low, soft, murmurous voice steals into the medley harmoniously, announcing a kindly presence offstage somewhere, so reassuring, so safe, so warm we are barely aware of it, a sound that belongs there, somehow, like the sound of the breeze in the branches of the birches or the surf at the edge of the sea. When he prods me, fingertips on my shoulder, I am never surprised or alarmed, as his spirit is omnipresent, in my life, the spirit of a god.

"Hey," he whispers. "Going fishing."

My dear, sweet, couragous father. Courageous enough to be a man. Lancelot and Crispin and Shakespeare and Henry V and Uncle Bob and Gabriel, ,the angel, all rolled into one, hovering over me as I sleep.

While my father makes the oatmeal, Barry and I roll over and peer through the intricately woven mesh of the window screen, still a curious thing, to us, a very interesting warp and woof of light and shadow, filaments of light and dark and medium gray sprinkled with the pink and golden dust of dawn. Shoulder to shoulder, we wear very similar short-sleeved pajama tops imprinted with cartoon characters, the only difference being mine is Mighty Mouse and and his is Goofy. Outside, the birches are fragrant and still. I notice they are the same, the birches, but also different. Same leaves, but different branches. They are brothers, the birches, like Barry and I, standing in the forest shoulder to shoulder.

We observe as the bugs trundle through the curls and crevices in the peeling, papery bark of the birches, completely absorbed in their bug lives, doing their bug projects, working on their bug deals. Here and there, we can peek through the canopy of leaves to see the half light of morning advancing, a wave that washes over the stars and planets, washing them all away in the half light of the new day. How pretty they are, then, the stars and planets, as they fade. How nice to have so many, of different sizes and colors, planets with their own rings and whorls, their own mountain ranges, own seas, individually colored fish in the seas, probably fish that swim in seas of colored gas, probably birds that fly through rock, red planets and blue planets, yellow stars and pink stars, tops and whirligigs, scattered across the universe. And the centerpiece, he decides, the *coup de foudre*, will be this vast and beautiful lightness and emptiness, the ether, a black velvet pillow of darkness and silence, where the radiance of a pink or yellow star can be presented to good effect. Not ten inches from our noses, the jays remain sleeping in the boughs of the birches. At night their eyes are closed, their beaks buried in the down on their breasts. By the way, I assume that the birds have dreams very similar to my own. That all living beings have dreams. Bird dreams and elephant dreams. Doubtless the dreams of the birds are filled with fascinating birds. In their dreams, they discuss the most complex sorts of propositions in their impossibly complex bird language. I see them as philosophical, scholarly, turning things over in their minds, looking at things every which way, like me. On moonlit nights, when we can’t sleep, we observe that the excitement of their dreams makes them twitch. When the tender light of morning touches them, warms them, oh, so gently, like a mother coming near, they gradually commence the jerky movements of bejeweled little machines. Their eyes pop open and wobble randomly. They fluff themselves. They shake. They comb. The eyes seem oddly loose in their heads. When I try that, to maneuver my eyes separately, it doesn’t work. So, make a note, that is exclusively a bird thing. I try to imagine what it is like to awaken as a bird, to stretch the wings and know they can be used for flying, later on. To have a human being, a boy, observing from behind a window screen. When the image of the boy behind the window screen is processed through the brain of the bird, the bird does not totally get it, apparently. As long as we don’t move, they carry on, fluffing and pecking, somehow failing to integrate the various signals of heat and thought and feeling, the whole wonderful whir of being, that is just behind the window screen, not ten inches away. But the moment we move even one muscle, their beaks are open, screeching, little snake tongues stiff with fright, wings popping open like umbrellas, bright and shining sapphire blue and white, each feather iridescent, imprinted with little rainbows in the sheen of oil, and with one thumping beat they are gone, leaving behind the echo of their calls, the leaves bobbing and tilting crazily in the turbulence left by that one powerful thrust of the wings.

So there is something there, but it is not the bird. It is the anti-bird. It is the forces that are created by the relocation of the bird. Are there blueprints somewhere explaining all this? How to make the eye swivel like a radar dish?

We wander into the kitchen in our pajamas to find our Uncle Rich, my mother’s brother, sipping black coffee and stirring oatmeal in a big, fat, dented pot.

“Chow in on,” he says.

Somehow or other he found his way to Kwajalein, too. Kwajalein was the Times Square of the South Pacific, apparently. Uncle Rich is ruddy and round, definitely more the Victor McLaglen than the Astaire type, his black crewcut spiked with silver, inky smudges of red and indigo on each hairy, freckled forearm, in contours now barely discernible as anchors and flags and serpents, yet clear enough to remind us all of Uncle Rich’s woeful months in the fungus-invested jungles of Rabaul and Mindanao. We have heard the details from the women. They caution us not to ask questions. It is understood all around that what happened in the jungles of the Pacific is unspeakable, in the end, monstrous beyond endurance. The monster of war has burrowed into the bowels of the men who were in the jungles, and wrapped its strangling tentacles around their hearts.

Best not to disturb it, then.

Let it sleep, deep in their bowels.

Let them forget, if they can.

If only we could forget.

But of course we can’t. After all, the Pacific is still there. The Pacific is like the sky, an emptiness that encompasses all kinds of possibilities, heavenly and infernal. One day we will be back in the jungle with them, on Guadalcanal or Mindanao, Uncle Rich is convinced. Deep in his soul, he sees himself as the commandant of a remote military outpost, where we were his scruffy subordinates. He and my father hold our outfit together against all odds. As Uncle Rich enjoys a cigarette on the patio, in the penumbra of the retreating night, he scans the tree line warily, alert for the glint of a bayonet. The Japs are not far off, he knows. The Japs are there, somewhere. They could come charging through the birches at any moment, a monstrous, screaming wave of them, bristling with bayonets, overrunning our barbecue pit. Odd that they would run out of ammunition and still come at you with bayonets, no? So the corpses pile up in mounds in front of the machine guns? Odd that the bodies would cover the sandbars in Alligator Creek, but they would keep coming, wave after wave of them, charging into the sheets of bullets, as if life meant nothing to them.

How could that be?

My father checks out the clouds, *I* check out the clouds. We know from *Twelve O’Clock High* that the Zeroes will come at us from out of the clouds or out of the sun, one or the other. Because that is their strategy. Because the dirty stinking Japs need the advantage of surprise. Because, well, no way are they going to beat us going toe to toe in a fair fight. But they are sneaky bastards, the Japs, so you can’t count them out. You look up and, holy shit, there is death, dropping out of the clouds like a condor. All of a sudden a perfectly ordinary cloud spills a beehive full of Zeroes piloted by these crazy, buck-toothed, cartoon character Jap pilots, who mispronounce their Rs, substituting Ws, as they dive at us behind chattering machine guns, which, by the way, is another sound effect very much worth working on, in the phlegm-hawking realm.

*Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka. Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka.*

*Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka.*

*Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka. Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka.*

You get one of these buck-toothed Jap bastards in the crosshairs … I don’t know how they all get buck teeth, but, post-war, I’m telling you, Japan is going to be quite an opportunity for any orthodontist willing to work hard … and press the button on the joystick with your thumb, bending the fluid stream of tracers toward his fuselage, *ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka, ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka*, finally setting his plane ablaze, at which point you veer off just as it explodes, adroitly avoiding the fireball and debris field, and yell “*Sayonara, sucker!*”

Down he goes, ludicrously mispronouncing curses, as we offer a sporty salute, shove the canopy back for a breath of air, as if putting the top down on a convertible, just like David Niven in *Spitfire*, and bank for home, of course flying into a glorious sunset, with a bunch of violins in the background, and maybe even smoking a Camel, even if it is a fire hazard. No one wanted to survive a terrible dogfight in the sky and then immolate himself by lighting a cigarette in the cockpit on the way home, but a sense of style was a factor, as well. In my dream of this, I see the turquoise and aqua phosphors of the Kwajalein lagoon glowing in the darkness of the deeper Pacific, like the spot on a peacock’s tail. The spot guides us in from oblivion. What a relief to see the regular geometry of the airfield, running down the center of the atoll. Because only we … my dad and I and maybe Barry, although, I’m not sure Barry is paying attention when my father explains this … only we know how easy it is to get totally fucking lost over the ocean. Think about it. What could be more nightmarish than the utter and complete erasure of being that occurs when a pilot gets lost and runs out of fuel over the ocean?

Know what? There are no fucking dotted lines on the ocean. No exit signs. No gas stations where you can stop and ask for directions. No cheap motels. Each flight is a test of your navigator’s skills. If he flunks, you will probably die in the crash, but otherwise will almost certainly drown or, at the outside limit of probablility, bake to death in an open raft, while hallucinating weirdly. Of the anxious moment, the excruciating moment, when the atoll *should* be there, *should* be visible, Wake or Enewatak or Kwajalein, but is not, my dad says solemnly, “You’re looking for a dime on a football field.”

*Do you copy?*

Copy that, Dad. A fucking dime. I mean, even half dollar, you could maybe see. But a dime?

Perched on a rafter in the attic with the Forty-Five in my lap, I transport myself into the clouds over the Pacific, to meet the challenge with him. The drone of the engines on the wings of the C-47 is steady, deep, and reassuring. My plane is named Annabelle, a little like Roy Rogers’s jeep, Nellybelle, probably because both were machines. Below me, the ocean is menacing in its sameness, its endless, intractable, unforgiving sameness, stretching out to the horizon and enveloping the earth itself. There is nothing much to do at the moment, me and my crew will be flying for hours before we hit the next checkpoint on our chart, so I am thumbing through my father’s flight log. Enewetak to Wake. Wake to Enewatak. Enewetak to Kwajalein. I don’t want to blow my stupid leg off, so now and then I rotate the cylinder in the pistol to make sure there are no bullets. The book is bound between brown covers, entitled “Aviators Flight Log Book.” On the front cover, there is space for the pilot’s name beneath the title. I observe that my father has entered his name in very neat printing, in blue-black ink. Inside, every trip has been logged in the same exceedingly neat hand printing. Uniformly spaced. No cross-outs. Same blue-black ink. Same pen, even, from cover to cover.

He must have done the entries in the air, no?

When there was plenty of time?

Engines humming, sky blue, nothing better to do?

Just keep going, tell the navigator to double check and then triple check and then quadruple check, but go ahead and enter origin and destination in the flight log, because, if you *don’t* arrive, the log book will be at the bottom of the ocean anyway.

Uncle Rich never ceases to remind us all, my brothers and our cousins, his own sons, exactly what we could and could not get away with “in the service.” As far as he is concerned, it is a foregone conclusion that we will wind up in the jungles of Mindanao, fighting the sons of the men he fought there. He is doing us all a big fat favor by preparing us. After all, the Pacific is still there. And on the other side, the *Nips*. Sooner or later, they were going to come after us again. That is why we pull imaginary pins on imaginary grenades and tossed them at imaginary Nips and Chinks holed up in the hollows in the pasture across the road. Although, sometimes we ourselves become the Nips and Chinks. Only then can we shout “Banzai! Banzai!” as we are blown apart by the American hand grenades. Only then can we leap to simulate the impact of the grenade, blurt out some Japanese-sounding gibberish, crumple to the ground, writhe in agony, but die in defiance, with one final, desperate, wheezing “*Ban-zaiiii*.”

Then, simulate the stony stillness of death.

Immediately jumping up to become an American, on the attack.

For the momen, the ocean was big enough.

But it wouldn’t always be.

Look at it this way. Everybody knew that the yellow people wanted to kill the white people and vice versa. Don’t kid yourself. People were conveniently color-coded, that way. So you knew who to kill. It was more or less like the Giants versus the Packers or the Yankees versus the Dodgers, only with machine guns.

Along these lines, we understand that Uncle Rich’s questions to us are actually commands.

When he asks about worms, Barry and I and our cousins dutifully sally forth into the darkness with Uncle Rich’s giant-sized plumber’s flashlight and the coffee can reserved for this purpose, there to set upon the night crawlers before they can take refuge from the brightening day. Courage, we learn, is the balancing of one fear against another. Were you more afraid of the snakes and mysterious mammals grunting and lumbering through the underbrush, or of the merciless, sulfurous, soul-strangling derision that spew forth from Uncle Rich in the event you returned without worms? Whereupon, he would take the can himself, turn over a single rock, and find a whole city of worms.

When we pile into my family’s Chevy Impala station wagon with our cousin Des, Dad doesn’t start it, he eases off on the emergency break and lets the wagon roll down the dirt drive, so as not to wake *the girls*. This is the one time, the only time, when we are all men, and they are all girls.

Because fishing makes it so.

Our country lane is carpeted with rounded pebbles of quartz and schist, which capture and refract the light ten thousand different ways, rosy pink and powder blue, with hopefully a few diamonds or emeralds mixed in, you never knew, everything sifted and smoothed by seas and glaciers that had disappeared a million years ago. The gravel crunches and pops under the tires as the wagon rolls past the Valleys’, past the Padgetts’, while we observe strict radio silence, for the girls’ sake. Only the very tops of the aspens and birches brighten in sheets of sunshine that haven’t touched the ground yet, like paintbrushes dipped in bright colors, while the tangled mounds of blackberry in the pastures gather the darkness unto themselves, sponging it all up and storing it in purple clouds. When he is sure we are out of earshot, still rolling, will my father turns the ignition key. The Impala bucks and coughs and shudders, then roars and hums, as he slips it into gear. The radio lights up and fills the car with static, because the station on the tuner is off the air. Smoke spews from the exhaust and mixes with the pink clouds of stone dust in our wake. On we go, past the Snyders', past the Padgetts', past Mr. Larsen's barn on the left, until we come to Howard Boulevard and make the turn toward the lake. Only then, on the pavement, can Dad step on the gas without fear of damage to the shock absorbers installed at such great expense the last time he went down the lane too fast. We are the only car on the road at this hour. We make a point of beating everyone to the boat basin, the better to maximize our advantage. He twirls the radio dial through the static, through whistle and warble and hum, until he finds some scratchy Rosemary Clooney or Frank Sinatra tune, beamed far and wide over the dark New Jersey countryside from that citadel of insomnia, the Empire State Building, on a program known as *The Milkman's Radio Hour*. Evidently the development of my father’s musical taste is arrested the day he and my mother play hooky from St. Mary's and go to see Sinatra at the Paramount in 1942, while Hitler is dismembering London. And to think, Frankie is from Hoboken. The deer pick up their giant ears as our very own Frankie Boy sails through the trees in the Impala, while my Dad is snapping his fingers and waggling his head the crazy way he does, occasionally joining Frankie in the chorus. On, through the slumberous village of Mount Arlington, where the downtown, *all of it*, is a grocery store called Licardi's and a pizza place called Pat's, both owned by a guy named Pat Licardi. And finally, over the last grassy hill, and down into Long Cove, where, as we descend, a ghostly lattice of slips and boats emerges from the mist that blankets Briarley's Boat Rental every morning. Only here and there is a boat missing, like a tooth knocked out.

The part where we rent the boat and bought the bait is one of my favorite parts. While my father is paying, we get to inspect Betty Briarley's very extensive line of spoons and jigs and spinners and poppers, hooks and weights and swivels of every description, mean-looking pearl-handled fish knives, phony rubber worms and frogs, patented fish-mating scents, and assorted pink and white eggs and larvae and other fish delicacies neatly packed in little glass jars and absolutely guaranteed irresistible to bass or trout or pickerel or whatever. When Mr. Briarley (his wife Betty had a first name, but not him) goes to get the oars, which he keeps in a garage, my father explains for the hundredth time that we absolutely, positively are not buying any new lures, because, in case we have forgotten, he has this huge tackle box that, upon opening, disgorges an accordion like assemblage of nifty trays and compartments, containing pretty much each and every lure so far invented by mankind. Although, he does deign to discuss with us the efficacy of this one versus that one, why this lure might appeal to a bass, that one to a pickerel, and so forth, considering that the fish are different sizes, with different teeth, and jaws that work differently, to go after different prey, and so forth. He demonstrates the jaw action with his hand. The shit he knew about fish. Really. I personally was not that interested in the information itself. I mean, you were not going to find me congratulating myself on having outsmarted a god damn fish. On the other hand, I definitely saw fishing as a kind of prerequisite, a course you had to take on your way to a B.A. in Manhood. If you could hook a worm the right way, even if it *was* a living being, suffering pain, just like yourself, and could tie a bowline, so the rowboat did not drift away, when you stopped at the beach to visit with Mom and glom a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, why then, even if you never, ever went fishing again in your life, you would *sound* more like a man.

His other area of special expertise was gardening.. He always had a big garden behind the house on Notch Road, and made it bigger each and every year, as long as he could get away with it with my mother, to the point where the garden threatened to consume us all and, ultimately, the entire City of Clifton. Every January, he would order about a dozen seed catalogues from Burpee’s and Park Seed and anyone else he could think of, every seed catalogue then being published on the planet Earth, and stack them up on an end table in the living room until the last catalogue arrived. He would not so much as turn a page in even one until the last one was there, because, of course, the choices were all relative, weren’t they? Why make a choice until the full range of options is available? Then, on what seems the coldest, dankest, darkest morning in February, a day when summer no longer exists, except as mindless mythology, he makes himself an extra big pot of coffee, in the pot my mother uses for dinner parties, spreads the catalogues on the dining room table, like Eisenhower with the maps of Normandy, and commences. Snow is piling up outside and wind wooshing through the barren treetops as he deliberates over delicate differences in color, calculates the heights in the different tiers, making lists of candidates and comparing, with all of the catalogues laid open to, say, the top petunia, then as the weeks go by drawing the tiers, erasing them, drawing them again, and finally printing the numbers from the seed catalogues into tiers, like paint-by-numbers. The idea being to devise a plan so wildly ambitious it is unquestionably well beyond the capability of any mortal man to execute. Only the moonshot of gardens, the Titanic of gardens, would do, as my father saw himsel as the Napoleon Bonaparte of gardening. This is where scale came in. Let’s say that last year you had a garden of dimensions X by X. Why would you want to do that again? You have already proven you can do that. If my mother hadn’t stopped him, every square inch of soil they owned would have been soaked with Miracle Gro, bursting with monstrous asters and snap dragons and gargantuan asparagus plants and pumpkin and zucchini vines going haywire all over the place.

One day he comes in from the yard with about fifteen giant zucchinis in his arms and dumps them on the dining room table to bounce and roll around like bowling pins. This abundance of zucchini has inspired him to begin planning for an all-zucchini cookbook to be called *Zucchini Jamboree.* Only problem is, we now need to come up with a hundred or so wonderful new zucchini recipes, pronto. Okay. Doesn’t straightforward adaptation of the classics makes sense? That’s how we get *Zucchini Cacciatore* and *Zucchini Stroganoff*. My father insists on trying the recipes out on us, before accepting them for inclusion in the book, as he wants to avoid wiping out a whole segment of the population with a bad recipe. With the result that, before long, we are wretching on Zucchini pie … having nightmares about pursuit by giant, carnivorous zucchini. He brings zucchini to the office and gives them away until no one will accept them, they stop him and pat him down at the entrance to make sure he is not carrying any concealed zucchini.

I find my father in his garden in high summer, up to his knees in asters and gladiolas, which in full, fabulous bloom attract plenty of bees, hornets, bumble bees, dragon flies, blue-black wasps, a regular circus of flying creatures, whose presence, hovering and flitting and circling about, calls attention to the presence of the air itself, this wonderful medium creatures can fly in, in midst of which he holds the garden hose, which is spewing an even more magical ingredient called water, the miraculous source of life itself. I ask what he is doing. Rather than try to explain it to me with the usual pedantries, he leans over to touch a new leaf on a tomato plant, tenderly tilting it up for my inspection, a leaf that has just unfurled, so it is still translucent, freshly minted from his own patented combination of sunshine, purest magically transparent water, Miracle Grow, and choicest cow flop collected by him personally in Mr. Larsen's pastures across the lane from the Lake House. The new leaf seems somehow imbued with its own light, bristling and radiating life, so wonderfully, so magically, so miraculously insistent on being the one, simple, different thing, a leaf on a tomato plant in my father’s garden.

"Look,” he says.

In the evening, at the mossy edge of the woods behind the Lake House, we observe as he slices the heads off the fish while their tails are still flipping. He slices the heads off on a stump. The heads drop onto the moss like beautiful stones, mouths still moving, hungry for life.

“Are they still alive?”

He looks at the head with the moving mouth.

“No,” he says.

I point.

“But it’s moving.”

“Sometimes things still move a little after they’re dead. It’s the nervous systems. The nervous systems keep going for a while, after they’re dead.”

“Oh.”

But then, think about it. The nervous systems? Is that what we are? So many relatively autonomous nervous systems, scooting across the face of the earth, talking to one another about our concerns as nervous systems, but eventually winding up as detached heads? When the heads came off in the guillotines, did those mouths move? Was Marie Antoinette able to mouth a final *Fuck you* in the direction of her executioner, before the lights went out?

They actually make us pick up the heads, can you believe that? So now we have this sack of heads, which used to be attached to fish in the lake, sitting there in a garbage barrel, thinking about what could have gone wrong. We are sent to gather wood in the forest so Uncle Rich can build the fire in the cinderblock pit beneath the trees. Dusk falls as the little red dots of cinders go sailing up into the branches, up into the darkness, and the flesh of the fish we have caught roasts on the grill.

You could never fully figure it out. One day, the father of a friend dies. Brain tumor. The guy has been dying in his own bedroom at home for, I don’t know, it must have been a year. He was in no big hurry to die, let’s put it that way. When we play football in the kid’s back yard … Jolie Angstrom is his name … we are all aware of the aura of doom emanating from that bedroom. But nobody ever talks about it because, basically, what are you going to say? Too bad your dad’s dying? Anyway this particular day, my father pulls the station wagon into our very own, super modern and super convenient *attached* garage, which is a little tight, for a car of that size, so his arrival involves technical challenges of the sort you might expect from, say, the docking of an ocean liner. Frequently one of us will stand at the front of the garage, near the kitchen door, giving him hand signals. We all took pride in the safe arrival of the car. This accomplished, he enters the house through our ultra modern kitchen, with the built-in, ultramodern *Formica* breakfast bar, which has been added at considerable expense, after much measuring and diagramming and discussion regarding how it might be possible for all of us to have a meal in so ridiculously confined a space as our kitchen. This particular evening, as he enters, my mother stops him there, behind the counter, resting her hand on his chest in a manner I have not previously observed. We always go to meet him when he comes home, it’s always a big event, worth celebrating, every single day, so we are all watching them, my brother and little sister and I, when she leans close and says something in his ear. Thereupon, his big black eyebrows bunch over his eyes and he pulls his lips into a thin, tight line, the way he does when he is really, really determined to do something.

Only he can’t manage it.

He is really, really determined not to weep in front of his children, because he is a man, the man who must be our model, showing us the strength we will need to bear it all, and he can’t pull it off.

His shoulders start jerking up and down in a peculiar way. My mother has one hand on the shoulder of his raincoat, one hand over her mouth, her own features crushed, scrambled, by this great wave of grief and love and who knows what crashing down on them. Because she loves him, she knows what is coming, I guess. That’s it. She *knows*. When the howl comes, she drapes herself against his chest as though to protect him, somehow, to shield him, when the damage is already done. We are living as humans, so the damage is done. Which made you wonder, obviously. To think that so magnificent a being as this, a man who had faced the Nips at the controls of the Commando, out in the middle of the Pacific, could be destroyed in the kitchen of his own home, in Clifton, New Jersey … what the hell kind of sense did that make?

He had never even *met* the dead guy.

I point this out to my mother over a cup of tea at the breakfast bar.

Why would a perfectly normal, sane, supposedly well-balanced individual be so upset about the death of a person none of us has ever met? I am not going to put it into so many words, but the subtext is, you think our Dad needs help?

"Well, in a way he doesn’t know Mr. Angstrom, and in a way he does,” she tells me, conveniently bringing Mr. Angstrom back to life. “Sometimes you know how people feel, even though you don't know them well personally. Mr. Angstrom is a dad, too. You see what I mean? Sometimes you can put yourself in the other person's position, that way. That is something you should try to do yourself, as you get older. The more you can do that, the better a man you will be."

But there is a problem there, too, isn’t there? Because if that is the way it is going to go, you know that life is going to break your heart, don’t you? If it breaks *his* heart, you know it is going to break yours. And the better a man you are, the *more* it would break your heart. I am about to explain this little anomaly to her, figuring things can’t be set up this way, there must be some mistake, when I see that she already gets it. Her eyes gleams with tears. Ever s deftly, so delicately, she attempts to skim the tears from her eyes with the tip of fingernail, and tears fall on her fingers. Wiping her hands on her apron, she strokes my hair, smoothing it into place the way she likes it, and lays her palm against my cheek, not a word spoken.

And there you have it.

See if you can construct a human soul comparable to your father’s, the *Hindenburg* of human souls, in the way it soars, sees everything, comprehends everything, actually attracts the lightening, with its own nobility, and then explodes, burns, and vanishes, as the hysterical announcer screams.

*“Oh the humanity!”*

Growing up is not something I have ruled out. Obviously, other people *have* grown up. My own mother and father are perfect examples. But somehow, I have always assumed the process will take more or less forever. Because, well, life will take more or less forever. Every night, to reassure myself that this is so, I recalculate my own likely life expectancy quite fastidiously. I figure, okay, I am now, say, nine and a half. So let me see. Given a life expectancy of, figure, sixty five years, I have now lived approximately, oh … nine times six, plus the half … let’s say *one* *seventh* of my allotted time. Which means there is a pretty hefty, pretty generous *six sevenths* left to go. *Six sevenths* sounds pretty good. No reason for panic there, right? One seventh gone, a piddling, insignificant, practically negligible one seventh, and an entire six sevenths left to go. Which is pretty good. I mean, ight there, you know you can breathe a little easier, am I right? Six sevenths being the kind of number you could very easily round upward to, say, ninety per cent. Which sounds solid. Once you were at ninety per cent, what was the point of worrying, really? Ninety per cent was pragmatically equivalent to one hundred per cent. Practically speaking, I had just been born.

Okay. So then, what disrupts this line of logic?

In a word, *tit*.

I do not propose to include here a complete catalogue of male feelings toward the female breast, because if I did, we would be here forever, and I would never be able to write my planned three-part, three thousand page analysis of baseball as the intricate objectification of American psychopathology. However, I do feel I should offer at least a feint in the direction of defining those feelings. Imagine a vast nebula, something really big, on the order of the Milky Way itself, probably, not to give away the punch line, and imagine that this vast nebula is pinwheeling through the universe on a scale that is totally fucking magisterial, just mind-blowing in its magnificence, with tons of planets hosting tons of interesting civilizations whirling round, an Egypt here, an Athens over there, while at the very center of the nebula, arising out of a kind of interstellar fog, a little like the boat slips at Briarley’s, you have the prettiest tit you ever saw (and I don’t care whether the reader is male or female or both or neither, I think we can all come up with an image, here), and at the center of the tit is the prettiest, perkiest, cutest, most erect nipple you ever saw, a rosebud of a nipple that is just popping right out of the breast, longing for someone to suck it, and it turns out that the source of creation, the source of all of the planets and stars and comets in the nebula, the spring from which everything flows, the great organic jet of being … is the nipple of this tit.

And *that* is why they call it the Milky Way.

Are you with me on this?

So then, life is not really *about* tit.

Life *is* tit.

What is the focus of one hundred per cent of the male’s attention the moment he is born?

Tit.

At that moment, as he emerges from the womb, what will he trade to get a tit into his mouth?

He will trade five Mickey Mantles in mint condition, never flipped, never scaled, and in fact still smelling of the bubble come they came with, along with five Willie Mays’s, five Duke Sniders … in other words *everything*. No need to do the arithmetic to reckon the value of the other things. Take it all. I take the tit.

Then later, in the back seat of a car, after the prom or whatever, same thing.

Let me suck this girl’s tit. Let me pull down the delightfully frothy chiffon on the front of her dress pull the cups of her bra down as she giggles and suck her nipple good and hard, until the nipple is good and hard. And you can have the rest of creation, okay? Deal. Tit for tat. If there is to be an end to it all, give me the tit and let the end come now, in one gigunda crossfire of tit and cock, milk and come, the jets of pure being spewing forth and splashing together in the void.

Reasonable?

One day, as Barry is getting off the school bus, overstuffed bookbag in hand, nincompoop little brother trailing dutifully behind, he slips past the pert, freckle-faced Safety Patrol girl outfitted with her regulation plaid uniform skirt and saddle shoes, and of course the white bandolier-style belt that we playfully call the *Gestapo* belt … ha ha … oh, you know, those crazy characters, the *Gestapo*, a laugh riot, with their crazy gas chambers and firing squads … ha ha … which crosses her chest diagonally, left shoulder to right hip, right between her perfectly perky, brand, spanking new tits, really the very definition of perkiness, if you ask me. Two perfectly proportioned cones of pure, vibrant desire. Which have appeared practically overnight. Mind you, I am not really focusing on them, in the totally obsessive, really sick way that will come later, but am aware, let’s say. She playfully tousles Barry’s hair and says, "So long, *doll*." Which likely would have stopped me in my tracks, right there, in and of itself, had there not been other kids behind me in the aisle, stampeding out and shoving me onward in such a crush I practically fall on my face on the sidewalk. But then there’s more. Because, when I turn look up at her, awestruck at this demonstration of warmth by one so far above our station as an eighth grader, and maybe realizing, subliminally, that a woman with pretty nice tits has just shown affection for my brother in a new and very interesting way, she tops it off by turning to the other Safety Patrol girl and saying with a pretty smile, "He's my doll."

And the doors of the bus clap shut.

I am rooted to the sidewalk.

"What does she mean *doll?"* I ask Barry.

"Oh, I don't know," Barry says over his shoulder, already trudging down the hill. "I guess we're kind of sweet on each other."

And with that, he is gone.

I never saw him again, you might say. From that point forward, I don’t think we were ever as close. Never again would we think of each other as the most intimate connection. Forever more, the most intimate connection would be a girl.

Today I think of the Safety Girl’s tits as belonging to a category we can only call First Tit. It is as though we spend our early lives in the outer reaches of this putative, tit-centered universe I have described, the alternate Milky Way I live in, and, as we grow, we gradually move toward the center, drawn inexorably onward by the irresistible magnetism of the tit in the middle, and gradually pick up speed, until we are hurtling toward this colossus of a tit at ten times warp speed, and it looks like we are going to collide, but at the last second we miss it, although passing so close that its vast, irresistible attraction actually alters the path of our lives, pulling us in, pulling us toward it, with tremendous G forces, so that, though our incredible momentum carries us out of the gravitational pull, in the end, our trajectory has been altered profoundly, and we vector off in a new direction, so each of our lives can be described, ultimately, in terms of a parabola that bends around a human breast.

That is what just happened to Barry, for my money. I am not saying I know exactly what is going on. I do know that, whatever it is, it has something to do with tits, and something to do with the passage of time.

One solution is, just reverse time.

George Orwell had raised some interesting possibilitites in *The Time Machine*. I have not actually read the book, because frankly, with my busy schedule, that is not an option; but I have seen the movie starring Rod Taylor and Yvette Mimieux (*pronunciation: Mim-YO*) and it wasn’t bad. When the stickball game is rained out, we all go to the Allwood Theater and shovel very heavily buttered popcorn into our mouths for a couple of hours, until we were covered with grease, and preferably see an adventure movie like *The Time Machine* or *Around the World in Eight Days* or, maybe better than any of them, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. If the cast happens to include an astounding piece of ass like Yvette Mimieux, great. The way Orwell has it figured, time has something of the nature of a railroad track. In his mind, we are all passengers on a train that is moving down the track at a certain rate of speed. Speed *X*, say. Orwell asks, would it not be possible to move faster? At, say, 2X or 5X or 10X?

Or, to move in the reverse direction? At, say, minus10X?

Yvette Mimieux is a factor. If Yvette Mimieux is a passenger on the same train, would you really *want* to move faster? If you are going to move at 5X and Yvette Mimiuex is going to move at 1X, maybe that was not so hot a solution. To listen to Barry, you would have to be a complete fucking moron.

Time is not all bad, either. It does produce positive results. The problem is that, if you keep going down the track, at some point you are going to wind up dead, right? The track ends at your gravestone. Sayonara, sucker. On the other hand, you could have a heck of a lot of fun along the way. Rod Taylor certainly does. Clearly, the appearance of breasts is an item on the positive side of the ledger. One would be wise to consider the possibility that female breasts, and in particular, Yvette Mimieux’s breasts, kind of counterbalance the skull and crossbones part. True, the sands of time are slipping through the neck of the hourglass, inexorably dwindling down to the last few pathetic grains, to the last choking, sobbing breath before extinction. But meanwhile, the tits on the girl who sits next to you in geography class are swelling into the fullness of fecundity, day by day, exerting this special gravity they have, stronger and stronger, day by day. Does the blossoming of that girl’s tits compensate, to a degree, for the ineluctable fact of one’s own impending obliteration?

Even more troubling is the little problem Sister Mary Aloysisus calls “concupiscence.” Which she explains this way. Basically, human nature is in rebellion against the will of the Almighty. The Almighty wants one thing, human nature wants another. This is what we call “contumacious.” Or “concupiscence.”

It’s stupid.

It’s going right up against the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Almighty… all the “omni” aspects … right in his face, when he is sitting there twiddling with a freaking lightning bolt, or wondering what to do with some leftover plagues, or what have you. He could be sitting there thinking about whether or not he wants to give you cancer, while you are playing stupid games with him.

Unfortunately, I can see where the concept is directly applicable to me. Here I am, at my desk, in geography class, which is really my favorite class, as geography-related stuff seems to stick in my memory automatically. My Univac of a brain [Author’s note: Univac is the first commercial computer, developed by John Mauchly and John Presper Eckart at the University of Pennsylvania] is whirring through the state capitals at warp speed, as usual. The capital of Alabama is still Montgomery, the capital of Alaska is still Juneau. In view of the fact that Sister Al (as we call her) does not stop asking me these stupid state capital questions, no matter how many times I answer correctly, and no matter how rapidly or confidently I answer, actually answering before she even asks, in some cases (Sister Al is going down an alphabetical list), you have to wonder whether maybe the headgear she is wearing as part of her religious get-up might be on there a little tight? Perhaps constricting the flow of blood to her brain? But on she goes. Drilling, drilling, drilling. If you associate pain with virtue, why the hell not, right? What have you got to lose? With the result that, over time, the answers to all the state capital questions are not merely readily available, so many cartridges already loaded into the machine gun of my wise-guy speech apparatus, but essentially automatic, and in fact transacted in the subconscious (the beauty part of the whole thing), while the conscious mind is focused on the peaks in the uniform blouse of Karen Tedesco, in the desk across the aisle.

That is concupiscence.

That is human nature saying, basically, I am interested in Karen Tedesco’s pretty little tits, not the state capitals, even though the will of God, very clearly and explicity conveyed to me by Sister Mary Aloysius, is directing me to focus on the state capitals. And even though I know Karen’s brother Jerry would love to beat the shit out of me for even looking at her with such a thought in mind.

Through Sister Mary Aloysius, the Almighty is saying, basically, this is not about tits.

And I am saying, well, wait a minute, I think it maybe it *is*.

Stupid.

Do I want to spend eternity roasting in hell? No. So, I do the common sense thing. I try to reason with my own nature as a human being. I say, look, if you insist on fixating on Tedesco’s tits, you and I are going to roast in hell, no question about it.

I get nowhere.

How does human nature answer the appeal for reason?

It gives me a boner.

This is before I even know what a boner *is*.

One thing I know. Sex is evil. The penis is evil. The penis is under the control of evil forces. The penis is like an antenna getting messages from devil, at his headquarters in hell. Where he is tapping out messages in Morse code, to all the penises in the world. That much is clear, from the Bible and so forth. Sex is the moral quagmire that stands between us and heaven. You had to find a way around it. You’re not going to find any of the priests or nuns getting their hands dirty with sex. They know better. God has shown them the light. Anything having to do with sex, they are going to stay ten miles away from. Ergo, you do not want to display your penis to people. Ideally, you want them to believe you are an angel. Angels do not have penises, or at least never show them to anybody, as we have already discussed. You’re not going to see the Angel Gabriel whipping out his *dong* in the middle of a conversation. He doesn’t even one. It’s the furthest thing from his mind. When you come right down to it, it’s pretty embarrassing to be caught in possession of a penis. It’s like … I can only compare it to wearing a prison suit. The suit with the stupid horizontal stripes? Because, the thought process is going to be, look, you’ve got a penis, *you’re a criminal*. Don’t try to bullshit us, we *know* what you want to do with that thing. Nobody calls you up and consults with you regarding the installation date. One morning, you awaken with a boner. Overnight, the powers that be have installed a fully functional adult cock, complete with brand new, adult scale, boner-producing hydraulics. You are placed in the cab of a construction crane with zero training. No manual, no nothing. What does this thing do? Try this lever over here. What happens if I rub this thing? When they say “jerk off,” what do they mean? You are looking down from the cab of the crane at this enormous boom attached to your midsection. When the boom is extended, there is no hiding it. It is laughably conspicuous.

You know that.

You have absolutely no control over the thing. You are sitting in the cab, pushing buttons, adjusting levers, with absolutely no clue how these affect the operation of the boom, which appears to be totally out of control, always extending at the worst possible moment, when you are expected to give a speech. Watch me as I stand up in front of the class and give a speech with the biggest boner anybody ever saw.

Whose fucking idea was this?

And that’s not all.

You know that other males in your class have exactly the same problem.

I do some rudimentary calculations and figure out that, anytime one of the guys stands up in front of the class to give a speech or something, there is something like a twenty per cent likelihood he is going to have a boner. The occurrence of boners falls roughly in that range. If he *does* have a boner, the boner will be lined up with his zipper, pointing at his belly button, which is the natural boner position, of course, but also helpful in making the boner as unobtrusive as possible, kind of camouflaging it behind the zipper, to a degree. Still, if you knew what to look for, it was obvious. Jimmy Jacobsen would stand up to write on the blackboard, and predictably, almost every single time … as though there were something sexually arousing about blackboards … Richard Klein would turn to you from across the room and silently … but quite demonstratively, sort of overdoing the lip and jaw action, especially the “B” and the “O” parts … pronounce the word “b-o-n-er.”

The way things are going, I am going to arrive at the gates of heaven, approach St. Peter with my paperwork, which will show how many sins I have committed, associated penalties, minus deductions for penalties already visited, in one column, and in the other, how many Our Fathers I have said, how long I have fasted, given up pizza, how much I have helped the downtrodden, all of which will put me in pretty good shape, because, trust me, I have been keeping track in an appropriately neurotic way, but then, at that very instant, with eternity hanging in the balance, I am going to get a boner, all of a sudden. Maybe I can hold a Bible in front of the boner, is all I can think of. That is my plan. But let’s be realistic. What are the chances that St. Peter will be a complete fucking idiot? Probably we have to assume tht St. Peter is going to be at least as smart as Richard Klein.

More likely, St. Peter is going to pick up on the boner, make a little check mark on the paper on his clipboard, and without even looking up, say, “You. With the boner. Hell.”

You need an approach, obviously.

You can’t just, you know, let life happen, just let it *fuck you over* continually.

My next move is to read the complete works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Every single thing the guy ever wrote. How do I come to this brilliant conclusion? I have already picked up a few interesting ideas from *The Time Machine*. Certainly George Orwell is way more interesting than any of my teachers. Basically, I say to myself, *hunh*, if novelists are a good source of ideas on this subject, who is the best novelist out there? Who are the real heavy hitters, novelist-wise? Who is the MVP (for those who are not sports fans, that would be most valuable player) of novelists? The Mickey Mantle of novelists? The consensus seems to be Dostoyevsky.

Let's return now to the back bedroom at the Lake House, a year or so after the avowal of affection by the Safety Patrol girl.

I am sprawled on the double bed in my now way-too-small Mighty Mouse pajamas (we’ll skip the humiliating indignity of passing through puberty in this ridiculous costume, a result of my family’s none too comfortable financial circumstances), reading *The Brothers Karamazov,* while awaiting Barry's return from another evening of worship at the feet of the Lindstrom girls, two delectable blondes who spend the summer in a house in the trees above the main road to the lake. The feet of the Lindstrom girls do not even touch the ground, is the only way I can put it. They are Norse goddesses who levitate over the rest of us, at roughly treetop level, laughing at our lust for them. Ironcially, their utter disdain for us makes them all the more alluring. But at the moment I am focused intently on the chapter Dostoyevsky calls *The Grand Inquisitor*, where he gets really serious. He is done playing around with us, at this point. I have discussed the *Grand Inquisitor* chapterwith my mother, as she and Aunt Marge are working on their spaghetti sauce. Aunt Marge is quite interested to learn that I was reading a book by a Russian guy.

“He wrote a best seller?”

“I’m not actually sure it was a best seller,” I said. “I think he did okay with it.”

Obviously I am more interested in the philosophical angles, how one cannot be saved until all are saved, how the sons redeem the sins of the father, all that stuff.

“Uh-hunh,” my mother says, stirring the spaghetti sauce. “Go on. I’m listening.”

One thing about me, I do not have a one track mind. I have a two track mind. I ponder the puzzle put forth by *The Grand Inquisitor* as I continue my quest to become the undisputed stickball champion of the Free World. Hour after hour I will stand in the lane in front of our house, smacking pebbles into the pasture opposite us with a broomstick handle, while reviewing once again the mysterious meaning of the kiss that Christ gives the Grand Inquisitor at the end of the *Grand Inquisitor*.

Why the fuck does he *kiss* the son of a bitch?

Batting practice ends only when I have attained a predetermined measure of performance. Say, ten imaginary home runs in a row. The trick being to hit the pebble on the fly clear over the brushy depression whence came the stone that was used to build both the house we live in and the lane that runs past it. Basking in the imagined applause of the Yankee Stadium crowd, I return to the back bedroom to again take up the madcap adventures of those happy-go-lucky, drunken, schizophrenic maniacs … my pals, the Karamazovs.

I have already read *The Idiot*. Then, *White Nights*. Then, *Notes from the Underground*, the hinge on which all of Western literature turns. And have begun to think of myself as a Christ figure, along the lines of Prince Myshkin.

But a pull-hitting Christ figure.

Because, so steeped am I in the mindless parroting of the catechism, so hypnotized by the Medieval rituals of guilt and redemption, so intimidated by the harrowing hocus pocus of the confessional, where that figure shrouded in darkness in the next booth supposedly peers into your soul (while probably, we now know, fighting off a hangover), so awed by the rabbit-out-the-hat stuff at Mass, where the bells jangle when God arrives … as though the deity were wearing *a cat collar* … so altogether deluded, getting nailed to the cross in public sounds like a good idea.

You had to remember, one of the tenets was that suffering was good. The more you suffer on earth, the less you will have to suffer in Purgatory. So, go ahead. Knock yourself out. Be miserable.

Summarizing, if we reduce to its very essence my curious double ambition at this stage of life, it would be roughly as follows: hit four consecutive home runs in a real major league ball game at Yankee Stadium, equaling the feat of the great Rocky Colavito, whom I admire tremendously, even if he *is* a Cleveland Indian, and then be crucified in center field, wearing a loincloth of good old Yankee pinstripes, if possible, and finally, ascend into heaven bodily, to a tremendous standing ovation from the fans, while good old Mel Allen describes the whole thing on television for the fans at home. *"Yep, there he goes, ladies and gentlemen,"* Mel would honk as I rose out of sight, adding in exultant crescendo his signature home run call: *"G-o-i-n-g, g-o-i-n-g, gone!".* And then, with good old Mel, we make the “three ring sign for Ballantine” and go to the bouncy jingle in the beer commercial, where a steady hand pours a pilsner full of Ballantine so perfectly the foamy head just barely dribbles over the rim and slides down the side of the glass.

The End.

Occasionally when we are whip-snapping each other's asses with wet towels on the way back from the beach in the evening we can hear the Lindstroms girls chatting with their parents while the family enjoys drinks and canapés served by their jolly maid, Deliliah, on the broad stone patio beside their home. The house is a little bit of Norway in New Jersey, it strikes me, although, I have never been to Norway, so what do I know. I just assumed. It’s all granite, with beautiful big leaded glass windows, vanilla stucco, purple and blue slate on the roof, a fairy tale kind of house with fairy tale girls in it, the two daughters and their mother merrily twittering away, occasionally shrieking with laughter, while the old man sips his drink in solitary and keeps an eye on the driveway, alert for any intrusion by riff raff like us. Barry knows he is not welcome at the cocktail hour, but he will go back later, to catch fireflies on the patio with the girls and indulge his obsession with Laura, the prettier of the two. To me it is perfectly obvious that Laura Lindstrom is unattainable. Were she ever to be attained, if you will, she would vanish in a puff of smoke. But Barry thinks he is going to marry her.

Much later, when the crystal doorknob squeaks and turns and the door to the bedroom eases open ever so slowly, I am resolute in focusing on page five hundred or so of *Karamazov,* wishing Barry to know that his comings and goings are of no consequence to me, I have more important things to worry about, like the eternal salvation of mankind. Realizing that the light is on, he waltzes in, tosses his sweater on a chair, and pulls the bottom of his tee shirt up over his scrawny shoulders. Before he slips out of his jockey shorts, he steps behind the closet door, to keep the homo hijinks to a minimum. Pointedly ignoring me and my book, he turns out the light, which is kind of his right as the older brother, because what kind of older brother are you if you don’t push people around a little, right? Once he crawls into the cot against the other wall I am barely able to make out his profile. He stares at the ceiling, hands behind his head, thinking. So this was an eventful night, apparently.

"I was reading."

"Tough. It’s time to knock off.”

He enjoyed using the phrase the way my father used it. Peremptorily. My big fucking brother.

“I wanted to finish the god damn chapter, okay?"

"Yeah?" he says. “What's Myshie up to now?”

“I finished that one,” I tell him. “I am now reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, probably the greatest novel in the history of mankind.”

“Yeah? The brothers getting any tail?”

“It’s about spiritual salvation, you fucking *moron*.”

He laughs.

“You want to know what happened at the Lindstroms’?”

I decided to try to read in the little bit of moonlight that came through the window and found this was not possible. But I pretended it was.

“Probably the smartest book I’ve ever read.”

“I got a feel from Laura Lindstrom.”

I was not going to give in.

“There’s this one chapter, *The Grand Inquisitor*, where he pretty much boils all of life, death, and eternity down to one very simple question.”

“An outside feel, but a feel, nontheless. A feel is a feel, right?”

“The question is: Why does Christ kiss the Grand Inquisitor at the end of the chapter?”

“Christ kisses some guy?”

“The Grand Inquisitor. Christ has returned, and shows up in the middle of the Inquisition, where they are burning all the heretics?”

“Uh-hunh.”

“And Christ has this conversation with the Grand Inquisitor.”

“Okay. Who gives a shit?”

“It’s very interesting from a philosophical perspective.”

“Yeah?” he says. “Here’s an interesting question for you. Why does Laura Lindstrom put her tongue in my mouth?”

That was possibly the most bizarre thing I had ever heard. The idea of one person putting his or her tongue into another person’s mouth … listen, I could kind of get the whole sexuality thing … that there were penises, and vaginas, and the two sort of fit together, theoretically … all of that was fine with me … but putting your tongue into another person’s mouth? Are you kidding me? Weirdly, I can now read the book again. I guess my eyes had adjusted. That little bit of moonlight was now just enough. The faint shadow of the window pane falls across the pages. I happen to be reading the hysterical funeral scene toward the end, where they are burying the kid, thinking, wow, the only thing stranger than Laura Lindstrom putting her tongue in my brother’s mouth would be Christ putting his tongue into the Grand Inquisitor’s mouth, a possibility I do not want to contemplate.

“It’s what they call a French kiss,” he says.

I ignore him.

“Ever heard of that?” he says.

“No.”

“Of course you haven’t. Because if it’s not in some crazy fucking Russian novel, you know nothing about it, right? Probably you would be better off if you were paying less attention to Russian novels and more attention to the world around you.”

My mother frequently said the same sort of thing.

Maybe he had a point. I closed the book, turned toward him, and propped my head on my elbow.

“The French kiss different?” I say.

He bounces up onto his knees, brimful of enthusiasm, all of a sudden. I can see him much more clearly now. Not in detail, but a distinct outline, a gradation of the darkness. He seems to be leaning toward me. He keeps his voice low, as there is a ban on conversation, in the bedrooms, after a certain hour, but gives it a raspy edge, conveying utmost urgency.

"They actually put their *tongue* in the other person’s mouth.   
That’s just how they do it over there, apparently. Fucking *unbelievable*. We're walking along the road, and I stop to give her, you know, a kiss, a *regular* kiss, and all of a sudden, bingo, her fucking tongue comes right out of her mouth. I could have shit.”

“She sticks her tongue out?”

The profound depth of my ignorance repulses him. He recoils and sinks against the wall, sticks his legs out on the bed, only gradually absorbing the true dimensions of it.

“Not that,” he says. “She sticks her tongue out of her mouth and *into* *my mouth*.”

I knew there was something I was not getting. I waited a second, hoping that the something … the missing something … would sink in somehow. But nothing did.

"Why?”

“Why?” he says. “Because that’s sex, you fucking moron.”

But I knew what sex was, or had a basic idea. I had spent hunders of hours watching Million Dollar Movie.

“Sex has nothing to do with a person’s *tongue*,” I tell him.

He smacks himself on the forehead. Being my big brother was all Barry could handle, at times. It was exasperating. I actually felt sorry for the guy, at times, that he had to put up with me, this way.

"You don't even know what sex is, do you?"

"Of course I do.”.

“You stupid, pathetic little dick.’

So it falls to Barry to patiently explain how a vagina actually functions. The engineering of the thing. And what sperm is. And that women carry eggs of some sort, like the platypus. As he explains all this stuff, leaning against the wall in a little bit of moonlight, I am kind of randomly hallucinating over details, here and there, thinking of the eggs we get from the supermarket, and so forth. Where there are eggs, they have to be wrapped in cotton or something, don’t they? I try to imagine myself as a sperm, with aqualung and flippers, scuba diving through my mother’s vagina, toward this Easter egg basket lined with shredded cellophane. As Barry explains it, there is a point system for sex, devised by his friend Jerry Tedesco, who had plenty of credibility with us, as he had once chugged an entire pitcher of beer at the Terminal Bar, across the street from the Port Authority, and promptly puked it all out on the sidewalk, immortalizing himself. The point system enables people to compare sexual experiences statistically, and to compete, in a way. So many points for a kiss, so many for an outside feel, so many for inside. So many for a wet kiss. So many for a wet feel.

“Wet feel?”

“According to Tedesco, they actually get wet down there, but only if the situation is romantic. Who knows.”

Barry explains that the point system does not include a point value for actually getting laid, because, the way he puts it, let’s face it, what are the odds of that?

Just down the lane from the Lake House is the Valleys’ house, where Carol and June Valley live. Carol is a little older than me, June is a little younger. Carol is very much into the dating scene, always wearing about fifty pounds of makeup, with her hair teased up into a this great big orange beehive (except for the occasion when she miscalculates on the timer and the hair turns green), while June is a little on the heavy side, more or less continually stuffing her face with popcorn and Twinkies, and could care less about dating, really, given her a choice between a platter of Twinkies and a date on Saturday night, Junie was going for the Twinkies every time. They live in the perfect white stucco house, with three gables in the roof, the perfect ivy on the front, set on a perfect lawn, with a giant oak in the middle of the lawn. How this place wound up on our rocky little country lane I don’t know. Somebody got a little carried away there. The house looks as though it was picked by a passing tornado in a ritzy suburb somewhere and set down more or less randomly.

Mr. Valley was a drunk who beat the crap out of his wife whenever he was in the mood. That’s what was going on inside the perfect white stucco house. She always wore a lot of mascara and eyeshadow herself, probably to camouflage a black eye, as often as not. Weirdly, she would have her hair in curlers, the bleached blond hair wrapped tight around these big fat curlers, curlers all over her skull, and her eyes would be made up like she was on her way to the Academy Awards. She would wear her hair in curlers to the bank, the supermarket, the pizzeria. These curlers were more or less permanently affixed to her head, apparently. And a cigarette. Always smoking a cigarette. If she is outside, always flicking at the filter with her thumb, to knock the ash off. Just constantly flicking away. If you saw Mrs. without a cigarette in her hand, something was wrong.

The girls’ room has the aura of a sacred grotto, with mysterious sources of illumination and a certain amount of day-glo crap on the walls. It’s a shrine to Ritchie Valens, basically, appropriately purple and black, because of course Valens is dead. The walls are plastered with glossy photos of Ritchie, Elvis, and Buddy Holly, and when I say glossy, I mean really heavily lacquered with whatever makes photos glossy, almost like candy apples. If you bent one of these photos a little too much, the lacquer cracked. Of course Buddy Holly died in the same plane crash that killed Ritchie Valens. They have framed and hung on the wall a newspaper showing the scene of the crash. One of them has circled and underlined the date on the newspaper page with a red pen, I guess so they don’t forget to arrange some special breast-beating on that day. Or maybe it is to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that the crash actually occurred. That it was not part of a bad dream. Without the documentation, there is no telling, right? This idea that people who are famous can be … you know … riding along in this flying machine, which all of a sudden falls out of the sky, killing them all … that is probably not going to be all that easy to absorb, at first. Aberrations of this kind keep occurring, making it difficult to define the precise nature of reality. Yes, it’s a flying machine, but that doesn’t mean it can’t stop flying, all of a sudden, and hurtle into the frozen tundra, and kill everybody on board. That is how life ends, sometimes. *Pfffft.*

Right next to the newspaper clipping about the plane crash is this magazine layout featuring the girlfriend Ritchie Valens sings about, the real-life *Donna*, who is splayed across one of the twin beds in Ritchie’s bedroom, with Ritchie’s guitars on the other bed. I’m not sure quite how to put this, but it certainly looks like the girlfriend has spent some time with a makeup person and a hair person and so forth, and actually, the whole photo has about it this *Life Magazine* quality, like there are probably about thirty lights on this girl, each meticulously adjusted, so she looks just perfect. The real-life Donna picked up on the silver lining in that particular cloud in no time, didn’t she? One of the captions points out that one of the guitars is missing, just in case anyone is forgetting that Ritchie Valens is dead as a doornail. By the way, I think the Elvis photos are left over from before the crash. Elvis was Carol Valley’s favorite Ritchie Valens swept her off her feet by dying tragically.

The centerpiece is an RCA Victor record player about the size of a suitcase.

Carol is a complete Ritchie Valens freak. Around her neck she wears a heart-shaped locket with a tiny photo of Ritchie Valens pasted onto the purple velvet inside. On the outside of the locket, embedded in a script made of cheesy-looking rhinestones, are the initials R.V. Interestingly, her favorite Ritchie Valens tune is not *Donna*, which is everybody’s favorite, but *We Belong Together*. I hesitate to use the word haunting, but trust me, if you ever feel like being haunted, *We Belong Together* is the ticket. Carol and likes both records so much she has two copies of each, one for everyday use and one for special occasions. Most of the time she plays the banged up copies, which by this time sound like somebody is dragging a piano down the street. She reserves the new copies strictly for her own very private listening pleasure and for the very special occasions when people grovel on the floor and beg her to play them, so they can have some vague idea what Ritchie Valens actually sounds like. I am going to estimate that Carol listened to Ritchie Valens sing *Donna* or *We Belong Together,* one or the other,twenty or thirty times a day, minimum. If she is in their room, and does not play *We Belong Together* every fifteen minutes or so, she suffers asphyxia.

They are both very interested in me, I think on the basis that I am so pathetic. When I explain to them that I am reading a book called *The Idiot*, they cannot understand why I would be interested in reading about a guy who is *that dumb.* And they have a point. On the other side of the coin, the only way Carol Valley is ever going to be interested in anything having to do with Fyodor Dostoyevsky is if Dostoyevsky shows up at the beach in Mt. Arlington driving a brand new Mustang. Anyway she drags me up to their bedroom one afternoon to teach me to dance. Everyone else is ready to follow along, but Carol says no, this has to be “private.” The only other person allowed in is June, who insists that it is her room, too, and if she isn’t going to be allowed in, then she is going to tell Mrs. Valley that Carol has a boy in her room without permission, and so forth, which is probably going to result in their father beating the crap out of their mother again.

The tackiest, most garish, most lavish funeral home you ever saw could not begin to approach the funerary magnificence of that room. The only additional thing they could have done was maybe have a life-sized wax figure of Ritchie Valens lying there on the bed, under a big bunch of gladiolas. And the Richie Valens stuff is only the beginning, really. Let’s not forget this is a girl’s bedroom, all lace and pillows and pretty curtains, and I have never been in a girl’s bedroom before, under anything like these circumstances, so the feeling of otherness is pretty strong, the feeling of intrusion into the sanctum sanctorum of the other, where the prettiness of things is so inordinately important, the way things match and fit and are right and pretty and happy the whole environment is right and pretty and happy, even if it is funereal, to a degree. Which is absolutely astonishing, just totally inexplicable, because of course the male tends not to care *what* the environment is like, tending to think of the environment as a transient factor, or even as the enemy. What matters is not the environment, but your power to survive the environment, no matter what it is. Or something like that.

"It's simple," Carol says.

She puts the beat-up *We Belong Together* on the turntable, starts the thing, and lowers the needle onto the record. A couple of nicks go by a couple of times as she stands up and clasps her hands under her chin, like she is praying. Then Ritchie Valens begins to sing and she has to raise her voice a little.

“Come on,” she says, holding out her hand to me. “You just kind of walk, but you don't go anywhere. And the girl kind of walks backwards, but she doesn't go anywhere either.”

She tilts her head toward me with a quizzical look.

“Got it?”

“No.”

“Okay. Well, like *this*.”

She takes my one hand in hers and kind of snuggles it in close to us, then grabs the other and puts it behind her. When I draw the hand back a bit, she grabs it again and smacks it down on the small of her back.

“There,” she says.

My face is in her hair as she begins to move ever … just *ever*, ever, *ever* so gently … oh … so softly, so gently, so easily, almost imperceptibly … shifting one foot, then the other … one foot … the other … and swaying … ever, ever so gently … then turning … turn … ever, ever so slightly … just the tiniest bit, with the shift and sway … my cheek against hers … her breasts against my chest … and then … the boner … which is mortifying … until she starts grinding her pelvis into it … which is not a bad feeling, really … and mumurs in my ear.

What is she murmuring?

Nothing. Just murmuring. The soft, sighing, meaningless murmur of contentment.

“Mmmmmmm.”

Still, I feel must apologize for the boner, or explain, as it seems somewhat presumptuous to get a boner with a girl who is simply teaching how to dance.

I tell her, “I’ve never danced with a girl like this before.”

“I know,” she says.

She pulls me toward her and lays her head against my neck.

“It's *time*."

I think now of the single whisker that sprouts from the mole on Sister Benigna’s cheek, as Sister Bennie, as we called her, thrusts her prodigious beak between me and Nancy or Linda or Louise, whoever I am dancing with at the CYO dance on Friday night, pressing a big fat boner into them, a boner as big as a flashlight, with a certain pride of bonership, if you will, but never acknowledging the boner in an way. The art of it being to make smalltalk in a low key kind of way, as if nothing were happening, while pressing up against her with this big fat boner that is never acknowledge by either of us. Sister Bennie’s role being to separate the girls from the boners. Which she does by inserting her nose or, sometimes, by prying people apart with the pointer she always carries, which is very handy for taking a whack at a boner, should one appear.

One day we are all Mousketeers, singing the Mickey Mouse Club jingle with Annette and Tommy and Cubby and the rest of the gang on television, all wearing our cute little black felt Mickey Mouse Club hats, with the round ears, singing "*M...I...C...* see you r-e-a-l soon! *K...E...Y...* why? Because we *like* you!" … and the next we are all in *Beach Blanket Bingo*, bounding after Annette's suddenly buxom body with Frankie Avalon or Tab Hunter or some other musclebound moron.

Or bounding after Frankie Avalon, I guess.

I lie on our own Navy issue beach blanket, between our friends Deedee Bigraft and her sister Neenie, two rudely healthy specimens of elemental femininity, real country girls who milk the cows and pitch some hay before breakfast every morning, and have the muscles to prove it, and a last name that somehow relates to the Lenapes. They have real beavers in the pond beside their house. Every spring, their cousin Butchie (pretty much everyone in town is their cousin) dynamites the dam, blowing half of it into the boughs of the birches overhead, mostly for kicks, I think, because every year, the beavers promptly rebuild it, pausing now and then to stare in defiance at Butchie, who observes in befuddlement on the bank, spewing forth incomprehensibly elaborate epithets. Beside Deedee on the blanket is my own little sister, the pretty but petulant Eileen (who will one day transmogrify into a beacon of sympathy bright enough to guide me in from the darkest storm … but this is the spoiled brat version), and beside Neenie my cousin Frank, who has a ferocious crush on Neenie, we know, and is probably concealing a boner at this very moment, perhaps burying the boner in the sand, even as we speak, which would make it a “gopher boner,” in our parlance, because if you got a boner on the beach one option was to just lie down on the blanket on your stomach, concealing the thing, which made it a gopher boner.

When the weather is warm Frank and I spend the night on the “sleeping porch” at the front of the house, where half of one whole wall is window screen, looking out on the pasture across the road and on the dense clouds of stars that seem to appear only in the country, as though there might be two different skies, city sky and the country sky, the latter holding double the number of stars. There, we discuss what we conceive to be the opening gambits of seduction, all in a purely theoretical way, you understand, our every desire focused on this blanket, on who lay next to whom during the preceding afternoon, on thighs that touched, on glances exchanged, on the sweat that beaded on a girl’s thigh, on the way one of them put her lipstick on, and tasted it, tasted in oh so tantalizing, so titillating a way, with the very tip of her tongue, savoring it, it seemed, really luxuriating in the berry flavor, or whatever it was. And how delicious the fresh lipstick looked. And how we yearned to lick it from her lips.

“You think she likes me?” Frank would inquire, speaking of Neenie.

“She wants to suck you cock, Frank.”

He takes a whack at me with his pillow.

The beach blanket we use is Marine Corps issue, olive drab, one of a good many olive drab blankets that hop-scotch across our little beach amid the patchwork of blossomy old bed spreads, bath towels, and bloated inner tubes, the dirty sand in the interstices pocked with half-buried candy wrappers, soda bottles, ice-cream sticks, old comic books rolled up and planted. On the land side of this little plot of paradise is a parking lot and, in the middle of the parking lot, a refreshment stand that hums with flies orbting the picnic tables out front. Beneath the beach runs a culvert, from which issues the stream. Not "a" stream, you understand, but "the."We shiver and scream in the frigid grip of the current that spills from the culvert’s mouth, attributing the warmer temperature of the water on either side to the heat of our own pee. Anyway the point is that, in the cozy geography of our world, there can be only one “pipe,” one “stream,” one "big rock", one "split rock", one "climbing tree", one "field", and so forth. Thus, “I will meet you in the field” is a perfectly workable way to arrange a rendezvous. All of creation is so pitifully constricted around us, no duplication or confusion is possible.

I am reading Mikhail Sholokhov's masterpiece, *Quiet Flows The Don*, a book so ponderous my arms have gotten tired, so I have constructed a special Mikhail Sholokhov reading platform, made of sand piled beneath the blanket. One thing I’ll say about Sholokhov. The guy writes interesting stuff about potatoes. My thinking is, I you can write interesting stuff about potatoes, you’ve got talent.

*Fences. Vegetable patches. A yellow sea of sunflowers oustaring the sun. The pale green of potato plants. There were the Shamil women hoeing their potato patch; bowed backs in pink shifts, hoes rising and falling sharply on the grey earth.*

Beside me on the blanket is darling Deedee, snapping her gum and thumbing through the big black and white photos in *Look*, among which are several of Richard Nixon on the campaign trail, the weasel. Your typical creepy, weaseling, ass-kissing teacher’s pet type, running for president. And in the same issue, the handsome face of Jack Kennedy, the god who consented to be human, that we might rise above ourselves. I am kind of shifting my attention between the wind-swept steppes of the Caucuses and Deedee’s bikini top, its eyelets embroidered in white against the blue background, which is dripping wet from a dip in the lake, clinging oh so close to Deedee’s freckled, coconut-scented flesh. Believe it or not, the moisture in the suit is actually visible, surfacing and then receding again as she breathes, while the frilly white fringe in front dangles so prettily, so enticingly, precisely at nipple level, which is very clearly defined by Deedee’s particularly perky teen tits, if I may be allowed even one *Humbertism*. Sister Neenie’s transistor, our only link to the rest of the universe, is normally tuned to WABC in New York City, where every afternoon our favorite disc jockey, Cousin Brucie, barks out a cataract of gibberish so raucous and rapid-fire the adults can't understand him, which suits us fine. Between hysterical outbursts, Cousin Brucie plays the same old favorites over and over again, *Duke of Earl* and *Angel Baby* and *You Belong To Me,* squealing with porcine delight over each selection. The kids on neighboring blankets are tuned to the same station, for the most part, all increasing the volume when a popular tune comes on.

*See the pyramids along the Nile,*

*Watch the sunsise on a tropic isle,*

*Just remember darling, all the while,*

*Y-o-u beeeeee-long to me-eeeeeeee.*

Deedee turns the page to a photo of a mushroom cloud, a test, somewhere in the Pacific. I have done my homework on this subject, so I know that, if it happens to us, the explosion will be an “air burst,” the flash brighter than the sun itself, fire raining down from the heavens, enveloping us. The flash will reach us a second before the great wave of incinerating heat, so there will be no time to ponder the implications. I ponder them in advance. How beautiful, I think, to watch the sailboats on the lake shifting their sails as they round their mark, like a flock of swallows banking into a turn. Beautiful, to hear the radios warbling with the music of the Duprees. Beautiful, the way the girls walk across the sand, never in any particular hurry, but enjoying the way we can walk from place to place. My parents are not inclined to build a bomb shelter themselves, but will comment soberly on the advantages of Joe Koslowski’s set-up, where, in the event of a nuclear holocaust, he would have all the wine and pickled tomatoes and peppers and kielbasa a man could possibly want, right there in his own basement. Joe might need to hole up down there for a year or two, but he was going to come out smelling like one smart Pollock, was the way my mother put it.

At about this time, my cousin Mary Ellen goes to work as a nurse in the emergency room of St. Vincent’s Hospital in Greenwich Village, in New York City. What a zoo that place was. She winds up living around the corner from Bob Dylan. Although, I don’t think he is Bob Dylan yet, officially. I think he is still Robert Zimmerman, officially. Or maybe is experimenting with one of his other names. About to *become* Bob Dylan. Anyway she hears him sing at the Village Vanguard or Gerdes Folk City or one of the other places she is always hanging out in. She hears Judy Collins and Joan Baez and Peter, Paul, and Mary. As a result, she has purchased a guitar and learned to play a little, probably a grand total of five or six chords, but that is really all you need, it turns out. That makes her a regular maestro, in our eyes. She brings her guitar to the Lake House and sits on the back steps and strums away, occasionally breaking a fingernail, while teaching us the lyrics to the songs, so we can have what she calls “a hootenanny.” She teaches us the lyrics to *Blowin' in the Wind,* whichwere as follows:

*How many seas must a white dove sail*

*Before he's allowed to be free?*

*How many times must a man turn his head*

*And say he's forever free?*

*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind*

*The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

Sounds harmless enough, doesn’t it?

One day, Mom and Dad stop by at our blanket long enough to hear a couple of bars of *Blowin' in the Wind* emanating from Neenie's trusty transistor. Dad is asking Neenie whether she would mind tuning in to the Yankee game for a second, so he can get the score. But then my mother becomes alarmed.

"Jack," she says. There is in her voice a certain hesitance, hinting at fright, when she really needs to get his attention. "Are you *listening?*"

"To what?"

“To the *music*, Jack.”

He listens. He shrugs. It is music. It is not the Yankee game.

“What about it?”

“It doesn't strike you as just a little bit...well … *provocative?”*

He stares into the sand, listening more closely.

"You mean … about the canonball and all?"

"About the cannonball, the *dove* … and what about all this *answer* stuff? What I'd like to know is, what's the question?"

But wait a minute, Mom. You don’t have to be Prince Myshkin or Albert Einstein to realize there were some pretty disturbing questions out there, did you? I mean, forget about the Grand Inquisitor, for the moment, and focus on the fact that, here in New Jersey, we still ride in buses that have signs in front saying: "Negroes Sit At Rear Of Bus." Granted, they are pretty old signs, and the Negroes don’t seem to pay that much attention to them, but they are there, okay?

There are *signs*.

Peter Paul and Mary put it this way:

"*If I had a hammer*, *I'd hammer in the maw-awr-nin.*

*I'd hammer in the evenin',all over this land.*

*I'd hammer out justice, I'd hammer out fer-ree-dom.*

*I'd hammer out love bet-ween my brothers and my sisters,*

*Aw-aw-aw-awll over this l-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-nd.*

*MMmmmm …. Mmmmmm … mmmmmm ….. mmmmmm.*

What none of us realize is that, okay, it is fine to muse about what we will would do if we happen to come into possession of a hammer. But the fact is we do not yet have a hammer. And P.S., the prospects of getting a hammer are actually not that all that great, because the people who do have hammers are bound and determined to hang onto their hammers, and equally determined to make sure we do not get one, and in fact have pretty much made up their minds that, if there is going to be any hammering done, they are going to be the hammerers, not the hammerees.

Thus, when two nice Jewish boys from New York go down to Neshoba County, Mississippi to help people with dark skins register to vote (something the people with white skins didn’t really want them to do), what do you think happens?

The nice Jewish boys get lynched, that’s what. Their names are Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodwin, and they were hung with a black Civil Rights activist named James Chaney. In my mind’s eye, I see Schwerner and Goodwin riding southward on a Greyhound bus with my cousin Mary Ellen, as she plays and they sing, and the rest of the passengers join in, exhilarated with the righteousness of their cause, creating their own joyful little hootenanny right there on the bus. The one disadvantage being that the enthusiasm for folk music made things a lot easier on the rednecks, as they knew exactly who to lynch.

You want to hammer out love?

Alright. We will string you up. See how you feel about it then.

We at St. Philip the Apostle actually pray for the souls of the missing Jewish boys, but not for the black guy. Not to get carried away, in other words. Even in the case of the Jewish kids, it is necessary for Sister Mary Immaculata to explain a bit. After all, they are still Jewish. None of us are going to forget who crucified Christ anytime soon. Obviously that wasn’t something that could be just swept under the rug. In praying for them, we are making an exception, and naturally Sister Mary wants to be on record explaining that there are limits to this sort of thing. The fact that we make an exception in this case does not mean the Jews will be spared eternal damnation, or anything like that. Be realistic. On the other hand, sometimes you have to give a person credit for doing the right thing, even if he or she happens to be Jewish. We are kind of giving them the benefit of the doubt, on this one. Willing to concede that even a Jew can do the right thing, occasionally.

Sister Mary Immaculata is the wizened, shriveled little principal with the dentures that won't stay stuck to her jaws, so she makes odd chewing noises as she speaks to us over our school's marvelously efficient intercom. Good old Sister Mary, she thinks she is so clever, listening over the intercom when the teacher leaves the room, not knowing we can hear her chomping and sucking on her dentures, trying to get them to stick, a sound like galoshes getting sucked out of the slush.

Or snoring, for God’s sake.

The implications do not escape me. For one thing, the events in Mississippi suggest that God himself, though all powerful, is a lot like Sister Mary Immaculata, and not always on the ball when he is supposed to be. Yes, God is all knowing, all-seeing. He has X-ray vision times ten. The super deluxe model. But it seems like, every now and then, he dozes off over the old intercom, figuratively speaking, only to awaken to find a Schwerner or Chaney or Goodwin twitching and kicking in mi-air, with a cross burning in the background.

Probably this is not all that great time to go through puberty. You look up and Schwerner and Goodwin are getting lynched in Neshoba County, wherever that is. It would have been good if someone had explained to me that, for all practical purposes, Neshoba County was on Mars. Not to worry, we are not going to have pick-up trucks full of Klansmen in Grand Inquisitor costumes in front of the *Food Fair*. But no one mentions that. Then, practically the same day, you look *down*, and there is hair sprouting in your crotch.

Where is the hair coming from? What is *hair* doing there?

Either one of these events is going to be disconcerting.

But both?

How far is the puberty process going to go? Do people ever need haircuts in the crotch area?

Simultaneously, your view of the world around you is changing.

You come to see the world through testosterone-colored glasses.

This really hits me the day Barry leads an expedition of hand-picked volunteers through the cavernous interior spaces of Reilly’s Marine, a ramshackle collection of floating docks and cinderblock buildings right next to our tiny beach. Deeper and deeper we go, into the dim maze of sheds where the speedboats are stored in winter, now empty and echoing every whisper. It strikes me that this scene is a lot like the scene in *Tom Sawyer* where Huck and Tom explore Injun Joe’s cave. Increasingly, I find it difficult to experience life without a kind of literary reverberation. Anyway, finally we find ourselves in the last of these dim, dank, vacant caverns. The room where we halt is as empty as all the others, so, for a moment, it seems the whole expedition is a pointless. A practical joke, perhaps? But then, with a magisterial wave of his arm, the kind of move a magician would make, Barry directs our attention to the wall behind us, where, barely visible in the murky glow a single grimy window, we behold maybe a hundred centerfolds from *Playboy Magazine*, neatly taped to the wall in one more or less continuous swath of glossy magazine stock, maybe fifteen or twenty square yards of tits and asses, if you totaled it all up. You know the kind of shot I’m talking about, I’m sure. Normally, the focal point is going to be the breasts or the behind, but everything else will be arranged to suggest that the model is about to have sexual intercourse with someone and can’t wait. The more imaginative the possibility, the better. So, maybe the model might is shown naked in the tack room of a race track, leaning over a saddle in a way that suggests she is thinking about fucking the pommel. Possibly with a riding crop on her hip. Glancing over her shoulder mischievously. Inviting playful use of the riding crop? When I have waddled back to the beach blanket, carrying my hands folded over my crotch, to take up once again with *Quiet Flows the Don*, the golden light of the harvest still gilds the steppes, but now imagination superimposes on Sholokov’s poetic vision of the river valley the even more compelling vision of Deedee Bigraft as a centerfold in Playboy, with a swatch of lace in her crotch and a rose in her teeth, representing you know what. True, Deedee lies spread-eagled on our beach blanket in a pose that is something less than licentious, jaws pumping her gum, wearing glasses with those little rhinestone-studded wings on the rims, which aren't exactly kittenish … more private-secretaryish, really … and her pink nail polish is flaking off in places, revealing the red stuff underneath … but she has tits, all right, and more than once I have confirmed the siting of a pubic hair protruding from her crotch area, an area I check for any new developments along those lines every five minutes or so, using my special, telescopic, high-magnification *pube-spotter* vision, which allows me to spot a pubic hair sprouting from a bathing suit at a distance of, oh, say, twenty yards, and to magnify the follicle from which it springs and surrounding freckles by a factor of one hundred or so, so I can confirm it is definitely a pubic hair.

From that point forward I visit the Playmates several times a week.

It is not an exaggeration to say I worship the Playmates.

The only problem being that, like everything else in heaven, the Playmates are unattainable. Or, even worse, seem to be teasing me, with their pouty lips and smirky smiles, knowing full well that, in the post puberty period, I have never even kissed a real girl. Never even *touched* a real girl … if by real we mean a girl with confirmed pubic hair … except for the touch of perspiring thighs on the beach blanket, which sends surging through my being such a heady dose of hormones I am inwardly overcome, lost in a kaleidoscopic fantasy of Playmates, a regular cyclone of tits and asses everywhere, and finally compelled to conceal my confusion by focusing the more intently on page eight hundred or so of *Anna Karenina* (we have moved on to Tolstoy now, starting with, oddly, *Letter to a Hindu,* more or less a direct extrapolation of the *Grand Inquisitor* theme, a theme that is percolating, brewing, deep in the subconscious). So, as Deedee pops her gum,Sergey Ivanovich bumps into Vronsky in the train station, then my attention wanders from the train station to the still damp fabric of Deedee’s bikini bottom, now stretched tantalizingly tight across the vulva, so only a supreme act of will, an excruciating strain at the very core of consciousness, can shift the focus back toward the greatest novel every written, and away from that single glistening black curlicue of a pubic hair.

Which tells you something.

It's quite obvious from the way the girls carry on in the centerfolds that at least some women are quite receptive to sexual advances. Enthusiastic, even. Otherwise why would they be drooling? On the other hand, I am not a magazine photographer. I do not have a Nikon equipped with a colossal penis substitute of a lens. Moreover, regrettably, all of my own experiments with post pubescent women have gone horribly wrong, while still in what can only be described as the conceptual phase. Nothing ever happens, in other words, it is all a disaster *before* it happens, and never gets a chance to be anything other than a disaster. Because I am just ludicrously, ridiculously awkward in my oh-so-meticulously planned, oh-so-desperately serious efforts to mimic the behavior of … there is a certain quality … I hesitate to use the term … but the only possible word is *suave*. I ask myself the question how would a *suave* person act, in this situation? Then I think, well, what do you know about suave? You are the opposite of suave. I have *tried* to kiss Deedee, and, absurdly, have failed a dozen or two dozen times. Not merely failed, but failed ignominiously and repeatedly, even after punctilious review of strategy with my brother and promising him, *swearing* to him that I will do it at the drive-in, when I sit in the back seat with Deedee and my sister Eileen, and he sits in front with Frank and my cousin Mary Ellen, periodically glowering at me in the rear view mirror and then grimacing as if to say, you know, get the fuck on with it, you *fucking idiot*.

Possibly the mirror itself and his menacing expression was the problem.

Or was the fullness of consciousness itself?

Being too conscious of things?

Do we need to be so conscious?

Maybe just let her fly?

Mired in my own reflections, theories about kissing, hypothetical kisses, I mentallly enact not merely the kiss, but the entire seduction from start to finish, over and over again, in my own neurotic little Million Dollar Movie, which stars me as the pubescent hero, but then, also, me as the antagonist who mocks the hero’s pathetic efforts to work up some gumption, and, finally, me again as the sympathetic friend who tries to buck the hero up and urge him on to action. It’s a cast of thousands, all wrapped up in one pathetically screwed-up personality. I can't have just the kiss, you see, I have to have the whole freaking screenplay in hand before we shoot even one frame. Before we hold hands, I have to make sure we are going to live happily ever!

The movie was *I Aim for the Stars*, the inspiring story of Werner Von Braun, who, as an up and coming young Nazi engineer, invented the V-2 rocket that rained death and destruction London. Probably he had a hand in killing a couple of hundred thousand people. Big fucking deal. Bottom line, the guy knew his chemistry and physics. While the trailers run before the main feature, Mary Ellen strums her horrendously out-of-tune guitar and demands that we all join in singing the yet another anthem of protest, this one about peace.

It seems that, while Count Vronsky has been meandering through the tumultuous train station, surrounded by drunken soldiers and engines snorting steam, while the Playmates of the Month have been cradling their powdery tits for the adoring camera, while Cousin Brucie has been spinning *I Get Around* fifty times a day, with the same manic introduction, while Mantle has been swinging for the fences with those gargantuan quadriceps, other things have been happening.

Like, the *next* war.

You would think people would learn to relax, at some point, wouldn’t you? Get tired of it? But no, we humans are always busy, so many elfin little insomniacs, making sure we produce our quota of war and pestilence and heartbreak every day.

“Have you heard of Vietnam?” Mary Ellen inquires of us between tunes.

How sad to have to introduce yet another war into our lighthearted romp through the fantasy and fluff of adolescent romance. If it hadn't been Vietnam, it would have been Indonesia or Thailand or some other jungle fastness, I have no doubt. Or North Korea. Or Pakistan. All of which are communities of humans on the Planet Earth, organized roughly along geographic lines. I emphasize communities of humans because I very much doubt that the squirrels living in Canada consider themselves “Canadian.” There is no big fat dotted line on the ground between Winnipeg and Grand Forks, is there? I don’t think God drew a dotted line with a big fat Magic Marker and said, okay, this is the United States, this is Canada. So we do not see squirrels standing at attention, with their paws over their hearts, when the national anthem plays, do we? Although, come to think of it, they do seem to have some of the same instincts. Probably what we are talking about here is pretty much universal in the animal kingdom, the same low-level instinct that makes the dogs piss on the bushes and the bears claw the bark off trees and the rhinos fan their shit all over the place with those funny, stubby little tails of theirs.

We’re talking territory here, right?

We’re talking *pissing ground*.

And because this sort of behavior is instinctive, you can bet there will always be another bush to piss on, always a little more shit to fan, always another flag to plant, though the quest may take us to the far planets and beyond. It just so happened that the bush we were pissing on at the moment was called Vietnam. Although, you might be surprised to know how many chances there were to *stop it* from happening.

How many of you know, for example, that Ho Chi Minh, my country's chief adversary in Vietnam, attended the peace conference in Paris in 1919, when he was twenty nine years old?

How many know what he said there?

What was the kid from Vietnam asking of the assembled portly potentates of the Western World?

What was it going to take to get the kid from Vietnam, wherever that was, to sit down and shut the fuck up?

He wanted the Vietnamese be treated like white folks.

Really, that was it.

You think that’s asking too much?

In 1919, when the peace conference takes place, Vietnam is part of a French colony called Indochina. That means that, if you are a Vietnamese, you have to ride in the back of the bus in your own country, just like the Negroes in New Jersey, because that's what being a colony is all about. It is about being a “Negro,” or more to the point, a “nigger,” if I may use the unpleasant slang term.

Of course nobody at Versailles paid any attention to Uncle Ho. To them, he was a nigger.

I am fond of one particularly telling photograph, where the young Ho Chi Minh is all dressed up in suit and tie, addressing the peace conference on behalf of his countrymen. The audience that surrounds him is mostly fat white guys with droopy with mustaches, who appear amused at the temerity of the skinny little wog.

Even then, Uncle Ho was a wise man.

He could see that the Great Western Powers were as so many mutts pissing on the bushes, so many rhinos fanning shit over the continents. He believed there had to be a better way to run the world. So, the next year, he goes ahead and founds the French Communist Party. Communism was a political system based on the dubious principal that all men are brothers. To each, according to his needs; from each, according to his abilities. With so wildly unrealistic a premise, it was doomed to fail from the start, obviously.

But Versailles wasn't our last chance to be friends with Uncle Ho. During World War II, he helped the Americans fight the Japanese by leading a bunch of jungle guerillas called the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, or League for the Independence of Vietnam. Apparently some of the Viet Minh were Communists, some were nationalists. I think it's fair to say that a nationalist is an individual who does not care to be a nigger in his own country. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the American president at the time, maintained good relations with Uncle Ho for the duration of the war by promising that Vietnam would be independent if our side won.

That's *promised,* folks.

And of course we did win. Whereupon, Uncle Ho and his friends went right ahead and declared the independence of the Republic of Vietnam, utilizing a document that bore a striking resemblance to the one Thomas Jefferson wrote. They wrote: “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Sound familiar?

The Vietnamese went ahead and held elections. Predictably, the Viet Minh won a majority in the new National Assembly. Roosevelt keeled over while weekending with his girlfriend. A courthouse hack from Missouri became President of the United States. His name was Harry Truman. Truman decided he didn't like the results of the Vietnamese elections. He ordered American ships to take French soldiers back to Vietnam, so they could make Vietnam a colony again, and make Uncle Ho a nigger again, more or less. Not putting words in his mouth but that was the idea, I think old *Give ‘Em Hell Harry* would readily agree. The French had an emperor at their disposal, for public relations purposes. They put the emperor back on the thrown of Vietnam. His name was Bao Dai.

So here you had ships that flew the flag of Tom Payne, the flag of Ben Franklin, the flag of Lafayette, helping French soldiers bring a stooge emperor back to a country that had declared: “All men are created equal.”

I am sick … *sick* to even think of it.

Oy. But wait. Unbelievably, it gets worse. Whenever you think that the piggishly myopic blundering … the stupid randomness of history … absolutely, positively cannot get any worse, because it is already so horrendous … there is yet another breakthrough, in the wrong direction. As humans, we will not accept any limits on our own stupidity. The Viet Minh then fought the French and the emperor’s stooges ferociously. They dragged artillery through the mud in the jungles and up into the hills overlooking a French fort called Dien Bien Phu. Of course the French did not expect wogs to possess artillery, much less to be capable of moving the artillery through the mud in the jungles. They were wogs, for God’s sake.

Imagine their surprise as the shells came raining down.

*Nigger artillery*.

At this point, the Western Powers have to throw Uncle Ho a bone. Everyone goes to Geneva and agrees that Vietnam will be divided. Uncle Ho and his friends will get the part called North Vietnam. The stooges of the Western powers will get the part called South Vietnam. This arrangement is supposed to come to an end in 1955, when there will be another election. But then, when 1955 comes, it looks like Uncle Ho is going to win the election again. The fact is most people in Vietnam loved the guy. So the French and the Americans and their stooges get together and just call the elections off.

We changed our minds. No elections now. Forget about elections. We’re afraid we might lose.

What would Thomas Jefferson have thought?

Back at the drive-in, my thigh presses against that of my very own Playmate of the Month as one rocket after another fizzles on the launch pad and our hero, Werner, knits his Prussian brow in cogitation. In the inner chamber of my own convoluted consciousness, I am frantically trying to devise a series of words and actions that will lead ineluctably to a kiss, a process of logic and deduction, action and reaction, not terribly unlike Werner's own convoluted calculations on fuel consumption and ballistic trajectories. If I do "y", her "a" characteristic will compel her to do "x", the plots will intersect, and at the point of the intersection, I will have the opportunity to say "z", probably prompting her to say “q,” and so on and so forth, onward toward the desired outcome, which is the meeting of our lips, pretty far down the road.

The trouble is, I cannot put to rest the suspicion that this planning process is preposterous, that I am, in fact, a pathetic clown, a ludicrous teenage Myshkin with incipient acne, hardly fit to worship at the feet of the goddess who chomps on her popcorn beside me, let alone kiss her.

Only out of the deepest despondency, convinced I have nothing left to lose, can I manage to take her clammy hand furtively in mine. The hand is warm but inert, a lump of numb flesh. And then, of course, comes the sickening, sinking, humiliating sensation of perspiration creeping across my own palm and threatening to *drip*. Oh sure, just when you think you are making progress, *eh Werner?* Just when you think you are getting somewhere, on the verge of the big breakthrough, your ten-story firecracker blows up right in your fucking *face*. I solve the perspiration problem by disengaging that hand and wrapping that arm around her shoulder, only to realize that, when I am in this position, point "a", which is my mouth, cannot possible be made to intersect with point "b", which is hers.

I jostle to try to get her to turn toward me. Whisper her name in an especially warm, intimate, inviting way.

What is my little lovebird’s response?

She says, “Shut up.”

When I build up the audacity to rest the fingers of my other hand lightly, tentatively, but oh, so suggestively on her pretty-as-a-Playmate knee, she says, "Don't be fresh."

She swats the hand away. Doesn’t even take it seriously.

"You know what your problem is?" Barry tells me later that night, as he gets dressed for bed. He derives a certain fiendish pleasure from my repeated failings, I know. They confirm his position as the older, wiser, superior one.

"What?"

"You think too god damn much."

"Isn't that what separates us from the animals, Bar?"

"Exactly," says Barry. "What you don't seem to understand is, this is *animal* stuff, you fucking dufuss."

Ultimately, the power of love finds a way finds a way around our so-called intelligence.

My first kiss is awarded to me by Amanda Waring of Warwick, New York, daughter of a chatty, sun-burned, chain-smoking couple my parents came to know during the war. The Warings drive straight from Warwick to our beach at Lake Hopatcong, climbing out of their rocket-shaped, Werner Von Braun Buick in their bathing suits, all four of them (the fourth is Amanda's older sister Nancy, not really a factor because she is too old for me) wearing very dark sunglasses, a complete family of movie stars, heavily laden with the very latest and best equipment and provisions for a day of fun in the sun, including folding chairs and umbrellas and towels and sliced watermelon and, heck, you name it, these people have a talent for affluence, I’m telling you. No sooner do I lay eyes on Amanda than I am hers, enthralled with the pink and blue twinkles of refracted sunshine in her pale blond hair and the homogenized bronze of her skin and ... but why go on? When she removes the glasses and smiles at me, her eyes perfectly blue, her teeth perfectly white, that pert little nose wrinkling up so playfully, so happily, so confidently, I am mute with puzzlement that a girl could be so much like...like a woman...so calm and poised and ...well...*ready* ... and still be my age! Demonstrating the continual surprise of it all, the deer-in-the-headlights effect as you realize … life is going by! Everything that has happened … you mean … that was life?

“Maybe the kids would like to go to Bertrand's Island tonight,” Mrs. Waring suggests, once it has been decided that the adults will play Gin Rummy. She grinds her lipstick-stained cigarette into the hard clay that underlies our sparse layer of dirty sand, only then exhaling the last of the smoke, a breath from the grave, into the summer sun. Bertrand's Island is the amusement park on the lake, with the Buck Rogers style Moon Rocket that swings out over the water on the wings of centrifugal force (little do we dream men will soon actually walk on the moon soon, fulfilling all of our Sunday comics fantasies), of course the shooting gallery, normally nestled in a blue cloud of gunsmoke and popping like a string of firecrackers, and last but certainly not least, the tunnel of love, featuring boats that float through a series of ramshackle sheds to encounter simulated spiders hanging on strings in the dark and ghosts that light up suddenly and laugh, always good for a scream or two but, more importantly, offering a few moments of privacy, a few moments of tenderness, in the dark. The instant I hear this suggestion I glance toward Amanda and by reflex she tosses her golden hair. Even I understand that, in the cryptic language of love, the toss of the hair is an invitation. She isn’t going to toss her hair for just anybody, is she? She isn’t *constantly* tossing her hair. And she tossed it a certain way, didn’t she? And she is dreamy, isn’t she? Later, I will propose and we will be married and have freckle-faced kids and live happily ever after in an ivy-covered house in the suburbs.

"Isn't it supposed to rain?" says the suddenly repulsive Deedee, who seems to materialize out of nowhere to lie uncomfortably close beside me.

"Not until after midnight," says Mrs. Waring.

"Oh yeah?" says Deedee, chomping on her gum with extra energy. “Well, I just hope y'all don't get caught in a thunderstorm.”

When of course she means she hopes we will.

“Oh, a little water never hurt anybody,” Mrs. Waring says, with a mother's fond look at Amanda. Deedee soon realizes she is no match for this pair and trots off down the beach to get wet. Whereupon Amanda shows her stuff by jumping right into Deedee's spot on the blanket.

“It sounds like your friend would like to come with us,” she confides.

“Oh, I wouldn't worry about her.”

I diverted her attention to the book I was reading, *Virgin Soil Upturned*.

She says: "Who is Sholo....Sholo..."

“Sholokhov.”

“Who is he?”

“He's a Russian.”

Lying on her stomach beside me, she scoops sand in the ball of her foot, steam-shovel style, bends the knee to raise the foot, and dumps the sand, grain by grain, to bounce deliciously on the shiny fabric stretched taut between the two fetchingly symmetrical hemispheres of her derriere. She listens attentively and even smiles as I offer a pithy history of the Russian novel, I think suggesting that I would be happy to offer a more complete exegesis if we could, you know, slip away into the woods.

Five hours later, I have missed my chance in the tunnel of love, partly because I cannot see her face and do not want to risk kissing her on the ear. The ear is not the right thing to kiss. Nor I have not held her hand on the merry-go-round, because she climbs onto a horse that is too far away, nor won her a stuffed animal at the shooting gallery, though I go way over budget in the attempt, taking note of her darkening expression as I miss every target with every shot, probably because I am nervous. Now Amanda and I are jostling over the ruts in Larsen Lane in the back seat of the interstellar Buick, with her parents in front and the others ahead of us in the station wagon, notably my brother, who looks out the back window with a leer suggesting he cannot wait to taunt me again. The windows in the Buick are open, the summer air fluffs Amanda’s blossomy hair. As we pass the Valley’s house, the floodlights in front put a rim of gold on her profile, which is the profile of a Cleopatra, a Nefertiti, I tell myself. Her perfume reminds me of the honeysuckle, of rolling in the honeysuckle in the evening, when the bees have gone home and the first stars are appearing in the lavendar dome of dusk.

How does love get us to do the things we do?

Is there any better explanation than sheer desperation?

Are we not desperate for it, fully aware in the depth of our souls that only love can save us?

I hear Ritchie Valens singing *Donna*. The music comes from Carol Snyder's bedroom window, a patch of bright purple in darkness that now seems to well up out of the earth. As the Buick pulls into the dusty drive, the big, bright, blood-red tail lights on the wagon blink off. She turns to me and I to her and together, as one consciousness, one organism, we recognize and accept what the moment requires. It is written into this moment that our lips should touch ever, ever so lightly, ever so tenderly, hesitantly, so *kindly*, taking nothing, giving everything, while Ritchie Valens strums his guitar in heaven, for us and us alone. For this one moment we will be two hummingbirds, exchanging a drop of nectar. Two larks, circling each other in the air. Our eyes must meet for the briefest instant, recognizing and acknowledging, one lost soul to another, that the moment now passing is the sweetest thing in life, just the sweetest, nicest, happiest thing that can ever be, can ever happen, to anyone, anywhere, if earth and sky roll on through day and night for a hundred million zillion jillion years. One look, without a word, to exchange that acknowledgement. Then I get out. Her father wrestles the gearshift into reverse and backs the car up, tires crunching and popping over the gravel, as the adults call out happy goodbyes and my angel rests her chin on her arm, in the open window in back, smiling at me in a way that signals infinite understanding, infinite grace, and deep down gratitude for the opportunity to be human on a summer night in the country. Even one is enough, because even one is everything, we now know. Down the road into the darkness they go, as the dead Ritchie Valens serenades his girl, serenades all the girls, fromCarol Valley's bedroom window.

Now I feel the ground fall away from the soles of my feet. I float up and over the earthen steps at the side of the house. In the boughs of the trees, the luminous little eyes of the toads and salamanders and raccoons follow me in wonder as I go sailing by. All of the magical creatures of the night bow and make way for the prince of night.

This is my night, they know.

My night forever.

If I cannonball into the lake with the expected whoop, I wonder whether the waves thus created will ever cease to refract and reflect and reshape themselves in infinite permutation of the original impact, an echo that goes on eternally, providing a kinetic sort of immortality to the cannonballing me.

Obviously, the answer is no, they will never cease.

But … really … so what?

Is the eternal refraction of the waves going to save my ass?

Similarly, scientists speculate that the universe seems to be expanding. Okay. I have no big problem with that. You have to figure that the universe is probably elastic. Look at it. Things whirl around, there’s gravity, it has that feel about it. Probably there will be a yoyo effect. But even when the universe eventually ceases to expand … and instead contracts … and finally collapses into one infinitely small and infinitely dense grain of matter, the final implosion will contain some infinitely faint reverberation of my whooping leap into the lake, of that I have no doubt. Granted, we are talking really, really, *really* faint here. So, maybe not much of a substitute for real immortality, where, when you play golf, there is an infinite number of holes. But let’s not jump to conclusions. Things might be more complicated than they look. We can’t rule out the possibility that the universe is a kind of Swiss cheese of positive and negative space, and that “matter” (let’s think of matter as light that has come to rest, momentarily) flows through the black holes (which are something like that infinitely dense grain we were just talking about), and finally out again, to blossom again, renewed, in the negative space on the other side of the black hole (a little like when Jimmy Jacobsen puts two pieces of Double Bubble in his mouth and blows a bubble *inside* another bubble). Still, the waves from the swimming pool will be there. The Apache war whoop will be there. The nickels on the bottom of the lake … the babes getting splashed on the dock … the popsicle melting faster than I thought … all there … my sticky, fruit-flavored fingerprints all over the new stars and planets spewing out of the other side of the black hole.

Something like that *could work*.

Let’s call this line of thinking the Principle of Infinite Continuity, One Way or the Other.

PICOWOTA.

This principle applies in space as well as in time, because the reach of gravity is infinite. Thus, the slightest twitch of my finger moves all of the suns and moons and planets that gyrate in all of the solar systems and galaxies around us. All of these infinitely variegated orbs, each and every marble in God Almighty’s infinitely big bag of marbles, which he has spilled across the nothingness in a moment of joyful abandon, including solar systems and galaxies we cannot even see … they all move anytime I move my pinkie.

Okay, maybe only a hair, but a hair is a hair, and moving is moving.

When anything moves, everything moves.

I control the universe, to an extent.

A satisfying thought.

If I control it, to an extent, maybe there is a limit to how fucked up it can be?

The drawback is, it is a mortal sort of control. Yes, I can move the planets around like yoyos. I move my finger, Saturn moves with it. But I cannot do “loop the loops” with Saturn, cannot do “walk the dog” with Saturn (another pretty good yoyo trick). I tend to focus on the limits. One of them presents itself to me as a pencil point sort of dot on an imaginary piece of graph paper, its position determined by the unpredictable chemistry of cell replication, the cumulative damage from interstellar radiation, the exhausting pull of gravity … various factors in the mysterious algebra of mortality. That dot is the instant of my own death, a set of coordinates I need to avoid for as long as possible. What I need to do is alter one of the other variables, change the equation somehow, drink a million gallons of carrot juice, eat plenty of liverwurst, anything to move that dot deeper into the distance, until, well … I don’t have to worry about it anymore.

Boredom may be a factor. Suppose I live to be seventy billion years old. Or, as I like to think of it, seventy billion years *young!*

How am I going to feel if I have front row seats to my seventy billionth Yankee game? What if the guy playing first base has been there for fifty billion years? This is heaven, so … the Yankees will have won their last thirty or forty billion games in a row.

Point being?

Only that … as life becomes more magical, thanks to puberty, its ephemeral nature becomes even harder to accept. You have all these positives lined up … the Yankees are going great, you yourself are hitting home runs pretty much at will, not to mention fishing, little paper turkey stickers on your homework, diving for lost coins off the end of the diving board in the morning, when the lake is calm and clear (so, from the end of the board, you can see the fuzzy glow of the coins on the bottom, little nickel-colored smudges of light that waver as the waves pass) … you’ve got all of this going for you and then … what happens is … *holy shit* … even *more* positives! So now you still have the baseball and the fishing and the nickels at the bottom of the lake *…* but also, incredibly*,* in *addition …*female breasts bulging from the tops of bikinis, pubic hair sprouting like little pumpkin vines from the bikini bottoms … and the actual vagina, the *pièce de résistance,* has not even entered the picture yet! An idea almost too magnificent to even conceive! A human organ whose main purpose … or okay maybe not *main* … but you have to admit, *one main purpose* … is making your own human organ feel terrific! You look at the women around you and are astounded to realize (and I think Philip Roth points this out) that *each of them has one*. But even without the vaginas … let’s leave vaginas out of this for a minute … it’s perfectly clear that the central problem is not getting better, it’s getting worse. Because now, death takes away not only any slim remaining possibility of additional episodes of the *Roy Rogers Show* … but *also* Mandy Waring in the back seat of the Waring’s spaceship on wheels, slicking Strawberry Luster over her ever so slightly puckered, ever so perfect, ever so kissable lips. She lays the lipstick on thick and creamy, then runs the tip of her perfect pinkie with its perfect pink nail polish back and forth, back and forth over the lipstick tracks, smoothing and polishing, smoothing and polishing, as with the icing on a cake (the cake being, if I may elaborate, Mandy’s entire body, which seems to me not merely edible but, if I may be candid, quite appetizing that way, a convection sweet as anything, equating to a very shapely cloud of cotton candy, or even better, meringue) … the perfect pinkie ever, ever so gently, so tenderly, so … sensuously … smoothing away the last crease, until her mouth is so deliciously aglow, so very excruciatingly luscious … a succulent berry … the yearning for it, the ache of longing, so exquisitely painful … in a moment so rich, so ripe with anticipation … she does not glance my way and yet I somehow know … know in the very heart of my innermost being, wherever that may be … she is fully aware she is being closely observed … drawing out the delectable agony of the moment for the fully premeditated purpose of pinning me there, holding me there, and thus redefining me, the Blue Morpho transfixed to the axis of his own desire.

She hunches forward and beams her delirium-inducing smile into the rear view mirror, demurely turning this way and that, blinking energetically, perhaps testing the eyelid functions? Like the shutter on a camera? Tilting whimsically, cutely, flashing the dimples, then relaxing them (I could be wrong about this, but it seems to me she actually practices dimple control), grimacing so she can check her gums, finally running her tongue over the incisors and leaning extra close to the mirror to make sure not a fleck, not single, solitary molecule of Strawberry Luster besmirches the brilliant enamel of her perfectly formed teeth.

Only when she is well satisfied on that score does she give her glossy extra-blonde hair a playful shake and sweep it back over her head with the palm of her hand.

And that’s it.

She is herself now.

So when she turns to me and smiles the real smile, it hits me with real heat.

Does she know that the Strawberry Luster reflects the ever-so-subtle aurora of sunburn on her lightly freckled cheeks, a tint studiously controlled by means of her lovely straw hat, which still smells sweetly of hay, and the coconut-scented suntan lotion oh-so-delicately dabbed here and there and here and there, each dab strategically placed, as the day goes by, each dab evoking in me the thrill of actually touching her magically sexual flesh, not to forget the long lunch hours when the sun is high and forces her to retreat to the Waring’s cabin in the trees, to sip lemonades and try ever so earnestly to read something from the summer reading list, at the moment *The Sun Also Rises*, a book about … straight from the mouth of *Lo-li-teeta*, … “some dope in Spain”?

Lunch hours when the house is usually empty, by the way.

The bedrooms … empty.

The curtains drawn, to shield the furniture from the bleaching strength of the sun.

The coconut fragrance of the suntan lotion stronger.

We are inside a coconut, up there.

Particles of sand cling to the viscous coating of lotion and sweat that now encases my cotton candy confection. I seem to detect the pinkish imprint of popsicle drippings on her tan. My attention focuses on a single grain of sand on her breast, the way it shifts and trembles as she breathes. I cannot seem to take my eyes off that grain of sand. I am fixated, until she actually puts her hand beside my nose and pivots my head away.

“You’re dreaming.”.

Is she aware that her eyes are the same earthy green as my mother’s?

Spacious, that way.

Beckoning.

Her eyes are portals to an infinitude of emotion. The emotions ought to be hers, you would think, because, well, these are her eyes, right? But in fact, no. The emotions I see in her eyes are actually mine, so fully enveloped am I in the contemplation of the only life I get to observe closely. Yes, mine, but not mere reflections of me, because there, in her eyes, I become different. Only in the capacious vaults of a woman’s eyes do my feelings fully unfurl, trusting infinitely to the tenderness and love and acceptance I associate with … who?

Mom?

At the same time, a part of me despises her.

In the stifling claustrophobia of adolescent narcissism, where I confront my own image, my own reflection, wherever I turn, even imagining that somehow or other the universe may … mind you, I’m not saying *will* … but *may* actually end at the instant of my own death, collapsing inward onto the aforementioned pencil point … totally sucked in by the majestic gravity of the event … as when the graves opened and the dead walked, the day Christ died … I somehow imagine that the absolute worst thing that can happen to Mandy Waring, the one and only absolutely fatal, final, and irrevocable disaster … is *getting caught in public with lipstick on her teeth*.

Putting it another way, she lacks the stature that attaches to my own misery.

I tend to question the intelligence of any individual who is not conducting schizophrenic interior monologues with the miserable ghosts of Dostoyevsky and his prize pupil, Leo Tolstoy. Aware that, at one point, Dostoyevsky was put before a firing squad as … there’s no other word for it … a joke, I conclude that probably this experience should be part of the normal high school education.

The premise being … what?

That misery engenders a certain spiritual nobility? That the right kind of misery is superior to the wrong kind of happiness? I know it sounds stupid but, isn’t that the way it *must* be?

Because … otherwise … what’s the point?

I have acne. I am just now learning how to jerk off. Luckily, that is not too complicated. I’ll say this about jerking off. It’s a lot simpler than figuring out exactly what was on Dostoyevsky’s mind when he wrote the *Grand Inquisitor*. But eventually I get that, too. Before long I am convinced that I fully understand everything Dostoyevsky is trying to communicate there. Why does Christ kiss the Grand Inquisitor at the end? Not only am I sure I know, I am pretty sure that *only* I know.

What would the Grand Inquisitor have said about jerking off?

Suppose I were able to take the Grand Inquisitor into the back bays of Reilly’s Marine to watch me as I jerk off in front of the Playmates taped to the wall? He would be there in his Ku Klux Klan outfit, with his scepter, probably a couple of magical sacred rings, containing little pieces of fingernail clippings from dead saints, and of course his long list of people to be burned at the stake the next day. I would be in my bathing suit, with the big boner hanging out.

Just before spewing come all over the place, I remark, “Tits don’t turn you on, Your Eminence?”

What would the Grand Inquisitor say about me before having me burned at the stake? Something pretty cutting, I imagine. I can see the Grand Inquisitor all decked out in his finest auto-da-fé regalia. I’m sure he had a special costume for the auto-da-fés, probably had it dry cleaned, had someone shine his shoes, et cetera. I will be burned before an enthusiastic crowd of thousands of other groveling weasels, probably in the parking lot in front of the supermarket in Clifton, the largest public space at our disposal. When the fateful moment is at hand, the Grand Inquisitor will summon one of the other weasels to his side and solemnly confide instructions for the execution, covering his mouth so no one can read his lips.

The instructions?

“Light the boner.”

While Mandy smoothes the Strawberry Luster, I stand before the terrifying chasm of my own open grave, the manic-depressive Dostoyesky at my side, *weeping*, while at my other side we have Leo, decidedly *not* the dashing artillery commander of Sevastapol, with the giant sideburns and the spiffy epaulets beneath the hulking campaign coat, who, as I understand it, made a point of exploring all the best brothels in the Sevastapol area (based on the photo I have in mind here, I think of the young Tolstoy as the Elvis Presley of novelists), but rather the crazy visionary of Yasnaya Polyana, with the wild eyes and the mangy beard, wandering out into the snow to find Christ. Only question is, when Leo Tolstoy writes *Letter to a Hindu,* is he aware that there are creatures like Mandy Waring on the loose on this planet? He has a vision. Fine. Nothing against visions. I have visions. But does his include the entire picture? Does it include Strawberry Luster? Or the perfume she wears? Which smells like a ripe cantaloupe when you first slice into it?

Or is it honeysuckle she smells like?

Or are they the same?

Whether it’s honeysuckle or a ripe cantaloupe, it acts on my central neurological system with the potency of nerve gas. Evoking the complete sweetness, the peaceful pleasantness, the *dreamy-eeemyness*, the somehow eternal tenderness of sun shining on dewy leaves on a summer morning. The sun of my own childhood, let’s say. Wherein was concentrated the essence of human kindness, the essence of what a woman is, the pure, sweet sustenance distilled from the dew of a peaceful summer morning in the country. I know Tolstoy stood up under the cannonfire. But had he stood up to the scent of summer on the skin of a pretty girl? To the downy softness of her sweater, the tenderness of her arms, the voluptuous turn of her neck into sinew of her shoulder? Forget about the mortars raining down on the cavalry. Could Tolstoy have handled the shock that comes with the realization that Mandy Waring’s lipstick actually tastes very much like real strawberries? Suppose the rocket-finned Buick containing Mandy Waring had pulled up in front of this young lieutenant I have imagined, this Elvis Tolstoy character. What would have happened then? I am betting Tolstoy would have been transmogrified more or less instantaneously into a Humbert Humbert with sideburns. *Letter to a Hindu* would have been, not the world’s greatest-ever philosophical analysis of the power of selfless love, but a rambling rumination on the panting, the breathless, the urgent peeling of Mandy’s damp pantyhose in the back seat of the car, more like *Letter to Lolita.* In other words, there is love, and there is *love*. The whole momentum of human history hits a switch point when Mohandas K. Ghandi reads *Letter to Lolita* instead of *Letter to a Hindu* and winds up not as the champion of non-violent liberation but as a successful Bollywood producer, with the sunglasses, the cigarette holder, the babe on his arm at all times, and that smile of Hollywood permafrost. [Author’s Note: The reader may well ask, wait a minute, what gives this *schlemazel* the standing to comment on the work of the great Leopold Tolstoy? I feel I should apologize for this impertinence. And yet, it has to be said. There are no good fuck scenes in Tolstoy. We never get Anna Karenina writhing in delight on the business end of a stiff cock, never get the complete panic, the all-enveloping psychological chaos, that a beautiful woman can induce in even the most self-assured male.]

I think it all over and conclude I like the old Tostoy better than the young Tolstoy, and will therefore become a priest.

It’s a career decision, more than a spiritual calling, like following your dad into the prosperous family firm. That’s it precisely, as a matter of fact. Indeed, I think of myself as a rising young executive in the well established firm of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I will be like Father Sullivan, our matinee idol of an assistant pastor, who appears to have his bronze-blonde hair trimmed every day, his pants pressed, his collar starched, and brings on giggling fits among the fifth grade girls by … get this, *handing out Communion* … a routine that normally doesn't get a lot of laughs, in Catholic circles.

Communion is where you eat the brittle little wafer of bread that is supposed to be the body of Christ. And sometimes drink the wine that is supposed to be his blood. And let me be clear, I don’t mean *represent*, but actually *be*. This rite is rooted in the belief that … and I don’t mean to be disrespectful, here … but the belief is that, if you serve him a nice big bowl of piping hot blood in the morning, God is much more likely to start the day on the right foot, and probably be a lot more flexible regarding the crops or rainfall or setting the right course for the ship or whatever. Whatever happens to be on your agenda. If real blood is not available, locally, due to an unfortunate dearth of sacrificial victims, or whatever, why then some symbolic representation will do.

Even in puberty, I do not overlook the problematical aspect of this. At times, I see myself in the role of psychotherapist to Almighty God, probing his attitudes. God is on the couch, I am seated in an easy chair, legs crossed, taking notes on a pad in my lap.

“Tell me more about this blood thing.”

But anyway, getting back to the reasons for my decision, I have been keeping an eye on the priests, had have realized that they live pretty well with what seems a very modest output of energy. They play golf or tennis whenever they want, graze contentedly upon the bountiful tables set by the faithful, suck up the liquor and gasp with pleasure as it rakes their throats, blithely offering in return the broad assurance that, in eternity, the biggest of all big spenders, the Sugar Daddy to end all Sugar Daddies, will be picking up the biggest of all checks, with champagne for everyone, on the house!

All of which is explained by Father Blaise, my uncle, the Franciscan monk.

A golfing monk.

According to Blaise, St. Francis specifically instructed his followers to freeload as much as possible, the better to accustom the faithful to the edifying practice of charity. I happen to know it’s the same with the Buddhists, so, that’s nothing to get excited about. The main difference being that the Buddhists will beg for a couple of crusts of bread and some leftover rice, while the Franciscans will beg for eighteen holes at the club, beers in the locker room, scotch on the rocks before dinner, roast beef and mashed potatoes, throw in a couple of bottles of a good Pinot Noir, and maybe brandy and cigars and jokes in the library to wrap things up. And believe me, they knew how to handle a nice cigar, never failing to slide that baby under the nostrils slow and easy, the better to savor the sunshine of Havana in the stoagie’s musty perfume, never failing to swirl the ambrosia in the snifter, eyes closed, eyebrows arching, the corners of their mouths lifting impishly, in a transport of earthly delight.

God have mercy on our souls, we do love the tangy perfumes of the twelve-year-old Hennessy and the ripe Macanudo.

They all had their talents, conversationalists or comics or singers, cooperating in a kind of travelling minstrel show that moved from one free spread to another. Blaise is a master of one liners. Jeremiah a booming tenor in the unctious Irish style, cutting your heart out with his histrionic rendition of *Danny Boy*, so women are left weeping in his wake, wringing their handkershiefs, wherever he goes. And, finally, let’s not forget Father Joe, a mind reader and pretty fair magician, although he tends to have dexterity problems after a couple of drinks. Who can forget how the playing cards explode out of Father Joe’s hands, scattering in a colorful cloud and settling with a patter across the dining room table, the night he loses control of one of his mind reader tricks? Plucking a card out of the gravy boat, he gives it a playful wiggle, shedding viscous liquid into the dish, turns calmly to my mother (who is horrified, hands clamped tight over her mouth) to inquire with imperturbable aplomb, “Would this be your card, Miss?”

You’re *killing* us, Father Joe. *Killing us*.

I hope to be foremost among them, one day, tap dancing up the stairway to heaven in top hat and tails, twirling my cane and making signs of the cross all over the place, with the cane.

Part of the idea is that I want be my family's ambassador to the beyond. So, if any of them should have any … shall we say … *irregularities* in their spiritual ledgers, when it comes time for the final accounting … I’ll be in a very nice position to put in a good word, if you know what I mean. Exercising utmost discretion, it goes without saying. *Mum’s the word*, as Mom would say. With a subtle nod from me, the pearly gates swing open on their incredibly creaky hinges. The creakiness of the hinges makes it abundantly clear that the gates do not swing open for just anyone. In fact, they have not swung open in one hell of a long time, apparently. Naturally the writhing masses of the damned cry out in agony and bewilderment as, inexplicably, members of my family are pulled out of line and ushered through the gates by angels assigned to security. When St. Peter meets my mother, he apologizes profusely for any “undue delay” accountable to “the unfortunate confusion” in the line … pausing to shoot a sidelong glance at an assistant angel, who then bows and shuffles away backwards, probably to be broken on the rack, while another groveling assistant angel scuttles forward with a platter of warm, damp towels, a feature I seem to have borrowed from a hibachi restaurant my parents enjoyed. Laughing devils are spearing sinners on pitchforks and tossing them over the ramparts of heaven for the ridiculously long plummet into the depths of hell, a descent accompanied by the endless, yodeling kinds of screams we practiced on the imaginary sands of Iwo Jima, as our bodies were riddled with imaginary machine gun bullets. As the process of admission to Paradise unfolds, I am a bit nervous, I have to admit, just crossing my fingers that my family members (who, I have to admit, do not really look like they belong in heaven) will at least have the good judgment to keep their mouths shut about how they got in.

Later on that same heavenly day (remember, they go on forever, so there’s never any hurry, it’s impossible to be “late,” in heaven), I will play golf with St. Peter himself at the Heavenly Acres Golf Club, where every single swing produces a hole-in-one, and the only uncertainty is how the ball will ricochet, veer, and spiral into the hole, amazing everyone, every single time, with ever more implausible routes. Still later, my family will nestle together on a heavenly sofa just as in this life, possibly watching the *Roy Rogers Show*, which now has an infinite number of new episodes that Roy and Dale were happy to produce exclusively for yours truly, once they found out I was a big fan. Naturally the Franciscans are there, hosting a big blowout party for everyone, stuffing big cigars into the breast pockets of the new arrivals, clapping people on the back, basically sayingsee, what did I tell you? Everything worked out *swell*, right? *Our horse came in, baby!.* Jesus Christ came across for us in the end, baby! The spunky kid from Nazareth came through for us, right? A hundred to one shot, maybe, but here we are!

The party is a big celebration of poverty, which turned out to be the greatest business in the universe.

Each and every night, impatiently waiting for sleep to come, I hear the trains whistling and hooting as they charge down the Ramapo River Valley from Port Jervis. I think, well, that is the whistling of the wind of time.

The dot in the distance is a little larger.

One less day of life remaining.

Check.

Probably Father Jeremiah will sing at my funeral. Probably they will have bagpipes. I am probably worth it. It may depend on how much have fucked up over the final few days. Father Jerry will open up nice and easy, as usual, perfectly under control, for starters, knowing that, in an Irish crowd, he doesn’t need to press, the tune and the lyrics will grab everyone by the throat:

*Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling*

*From glen to glen, and down the mountain side*

*The summer’s gone, and all the roses falling*

*‘Tis you, ‘tis you must go and I must bide.*

And then he opens up with the trumpet he has hidden in his throat. Let’s them have it full bore, sounding ready to throw himself on the floor and, yes, weep:

*But come ye back, when summer’s in the meadow,*

*Or when the valley’s hushed and white with snow,*

*‘Tis I’ll be t-h-e-r-e, in sunshine or in shadow,*

*Oh Danny boy, oh Danny boy, I love you so.*

In the front pew, grief grips my mother like influenza. I am hovering in the blimp overhead, observing all this through binoculars, realizing I must come to her aid. I hover at her ear, whispering, assuring her that I am still around, more or less, only now in purely spiritual form. In truth, I have been transmuted into pure goodness, my natural state.

But of course she can’t hear me.

I forgot that part.

No vocal chords.

So what I do is, using the normal, standard-issue magical powers of an angel, I have a pink rubber ball, a Spalding … or, as we would say on Albion Road, a “Spal-*deeeeeeeen*” … bounce gently down the steps of the choir loft and roll ever so slowly up the center aisle of the church, until it comes to rest next to the pew my mother occupies. She looks up from her prayer book and there it is, the home run to end all home runs, socked over the fences of heaven, out of that reality, through the cosmos, into this reality, just to make her feel better. Obviously she is going to know it’s me. Who else is going to come up with an idea as whacky as that? Who else has the brass to swing for the fences of heaven? Obviously it’s none other than the stickball king of Albion Road. His way of saying, basically, not to worry, I’m okay, Mom. Not to worry. I am rounding the bases and crossing the plate, a manhole cover made of solid gold, on Elysian Road, in Paradise Acres, which is part of South Valhalla.

Life becomes a series of exquisitely poignant tableaus.

I come upon my mother washing the dishes.

It’s heartbreaking.

Because, well, *there*, that dish is washed. It can never be washed again. It’s the *evanescence* of things, know what I mean?

My favorite word. Evanescence. I use it once or twice a day.

How do I preserve the washing of that dish forever?

I want my mind to work like one of those crystal spheres containing picturesque miniature houses, where the snowflakes swirl anytime you turn the thing upside down. The snow is never over. It never melts. The little Santa on the roof never even slides down the chimney. He is always there. Turn it upside down, it is snowing again, just as before. That’s the ticket. I want Mom, the dishes, the dog, the herky-jerky accordion music emanating from the Koslowskis’ house … everything … to be permanent, peaceful, unchanging. If the only way to do that is embalming everything in the formaldehyde of memory, so be it. I am the only person I know who actually practices remembering things, calling a moment to mind and straining to remember each and every detail, studying all the fine print, if you will, memorizing every footnote, determined not to lose anything … not a hair, not a feather, while I am searching, desperately searching for a solution to the teensy weensy little problem of mortality.

Here we have myself and Chuckie Andraczik, he with the freckles and the muscles and the pug nose and the sun-bleached blond butch that seems to glow at the edges (destined to share miserably in Sisyphean fate of his father, is Chuckie, to play American Legion and then minor league ball, but never quite make it to the majors, instead spending his entire adult life in a twilight of own extinguished glory, that somewhat familiar but still forlorn American figure … *ballplayer manqué* ), the two of us bending our backs into our bikes as we grind up the last big hill on Notch Road, whole weight on one haunch, whole weight on the other, ever so slowly, so laboriously crisscrossing as we work our way up, against the hill, against the sun, against the heat of our own bodies, sprinkling sweat on the pavement as we pass and then, having switched back to the other tack, observing as the asperges evaporate almost instantly. So gloriously … ah … so happily young and strong, are we, on our way to a party at Ann Devoe's house, which looms in imagination mysterious and romantic as an enchanted castle, partly because, to get there, we must pass out of Nottingham Village and into Sherwood Forest, where the split levels are a lot bigger. Or, split *level*, I suppose I should say, because the two neighborhoods are both provinces of Bilkoland, so all the buildings are based on common blueprints. All the families in Sherwood Forest had the one house and we had the other. Theirs was bigger. We were Nottingham Village families, with dads who were aircraft mechanics and newspaper reporters, and they were Sherwood Forest families, with dads who were lawyers or doctors or owned their own businesses.

Ann is the niece of Big Bud Devoe, legendary, locally, as the founder of Torch Gases, which had its “headquarters” on Route 46. Several of Big Bud’s brothers work for him at Torch, including Ann’s father, Big Tom. Just rounding out the name thing, Ann’s youngest brother is known as Little Tom. She has a cousin known as Little Bud. Presumably the next generation would include Tiny Tom and Tiny Bud and so forth. The Devoes seem to have all this stuff worked out. They all sit together in church, dressed pretty much the same, all get more or less identical new Cadillacs every year, courtesy of Torch Gases, all exhibit the same confident reserve, socially, again courtesy of Torch Gases. What with the new Cadillac, the swimming pool, the house in Sherwood Forest, the fact that they own the business, the Devoes are on top of the world.

At Ann’s house we will actually change out of our raggedy cut-off shorts, made from old blue jeans, actually removing our underwear*,* so we can put on our swimming trunks (now carried on the handlebars wrapped inside bath towels), under who-knows-what makeshift arrangements for privacy. Dicks dangling free at a girl’s house. A volatile situation. Once we crest the hill, Chuck puts on a routine exhibition of protean athleticism by waving the bath towel in one hand while eating an apple with the other and gazing not at the road ahead but at me, while simultaneously chattering merrily on about whom he likes among Ann’s friends and whom he doesn’t, with plenty of commentary about personalities thrown in, appreciatively mentioning “nice jugs” or, pejoratively, “the giant schnozzola,” while not once so much as mentioning by far the most interesting personality we will encounter, Ann herself.

He applies punctuation, finishing up, by pegging the apple core dead center into the mouth of an open storm sewer.

I inquire, “What about Devoe?”

We call people by their last names, generally, even the girls we are interested in, not wishing to appear too interested, as there is something just a little bit suspicious about that, isn’t there? Something not quite rock solid? For, to be a man, was it not necessary to be in command of the emotions aat all times? And not get carried away about something stupid like a girl?

“Oh, Ann?” he says.

He has a point. There are a lot of Devoes.

“Yeah, Ann.”

“You kidding?” he says.

“Nope.”

He coasts along, riding no hands, drifts behind me, around me, relaxed as you please, considering the thing from all angles as he shows off his biking skills. I never resented his showing off, as that was his natural state. He was put on this earth to field grounders and hit triples to left and show off. Obviously the mention of Ann’s name amuses him. It is amusing that we can actually discuss such an angelic being as though we are her equals. That we can walk the same planet with her amuses him. I amuse him, just dreaming this stuff up.

He says, “She would laugh at me.”

“Nah.”

Although, I was thinking, possibly she would. We couldn’t rule it out.

“Sure she would. She’s a fucking Devoe, man.”

I was a little ahead of him at this point. Chuckie would toy with me at times, letting me get a little ahead, then reel me in and blow by, to impress upon me that, not only was he stronger, it wasn’t even fucking close, as he would put it. For the moment he is laying back. When I look over my shoulder, he is kind of swerving back and forth, grinning at me, no hands, a master at steering with his weight, to the point where there was something funny about it. He enjoys cutting up on the bike.

Any game he can play, Chuckie enjoys, win or lose.

He says, “I’ll tell you what, though. She wouldn’t laugh at *you*.”

Of course she wouldn’t. I know that. I also know that it is important to act humble. Wherever possible, present a veneer of sham humility, cloacking the supernatural powers in a semblance of normalcy.

“Says who?”

“Oh come on,” he says. “Don’t bullshit me, man. You’re a college kind of guy, man. Your dad went to college, right? You could marry Ann and be a big fucking deal in the acetylene business.”

He pulls ahead, crosses in front, drifts back, no hands, grinning. Holds his hands up beside his head, appearing to grip an imaginary sphere.

He says, “I picture you with one of those big-ass welding masks.”

I could see it myself. Me, with the acetylene torch, single-handedly building an ocean liner in the parking lot of Torch Gases in, like, three days.

To us, the Devoes three-bedroom “bi-level” looks enormous, a veritable “estate,” if I may use Steve Bilko’s term, all but unattainable, and indeed the logical end point, the apogee, of all human striving. We dump our bikes on a lawn that is, incredibly, pretty much weed free. As my own father spends a goodly amount of time watching Yankee games on weekends, our own lawn is only half grass and the rest dandelions, a plant that my father categorizes conveniently as a “cash crop.” I am aware that the Devoes are said to employ professional gardeners to care for the lawn, an astounding fact, as my own mother counts coins on the dining room table every Sunday evening, not once but twice, and giving even one of those coins to a person who does nothing more than cut grass is not in the cards. Even the sunshine seems different, at the Devoes’ house. Prettier, somehow. More detailed. On a split-rail fence festooned with roses, bumblebees buzz leisurely from one picturesque puff of pink petals to another. The sugary smell of the roses is impossibly potent. The big black Caddy in the driveway is spotless, glistening with fresh wax, ready for a very stylish funeral at a moment’s notice. As Chuckie and I sidle past, walking our bikes, the car throws heat like a mammal. No need to ring the bell, as the hubbub from the back yard beckons. The intro to *Please Mr. Postman* is thumping, the Marvellettes wailing, as Chuck and I round the side of the building to behold the apotheosis of American youth right there in the Devoes’ back yard. When the rotund Jimmy Jacobsen belly flops into the pool and successfully drenches the potato chips resting on the edge, the girls heap him with scorn and the boys heartily congratulate him. Nice going, Jake. You totally fucked up the chips. Simultaneously, the anemic Kyle Kennedy (who has “stunted” his own development … my mother’s word … by hanging out of the bathroom window of his parents house and smoking cigarettes … so the parents are the only people in the neighborhood who do *not* know Kyle is smoking), camouflages his deep-rooted insecurity by flailing at the water with his forearm to send sheets of chlorine-laden spray flying toward the row of St. Philips cheerleaders who chant and high-kick, arm-in-arm, on the lawn. Simmering in the midsummer sun, the pool smells like a hospital. Any microbe venturing anywhere near the pool is dead on arrival, guaranteed. In this instant it is apparent to me that everything I see, everything I smell, everything I hear, feel and think is critically important to my understanding of the nature of human life. Sheerwood Forest will be my Sevastopol. As the Marvelletes get rolling … *wah-ooooo, wah-oooo* … Ann and her cherubic girlfriend Rhonda from next door jitterbug across the patio with steps and turns they have rehearsed a thousand times. Ann's auburn hair is damp. Her feet are bare. She has a towel around her waist, I suppose trying to be modest, but the damp towel clings to her hips as she dances. Clings and swirls as she turns.

God women are beautiful.

Oh God they truly are.

The other kids clear the patio for them and clap in rhythm with the Marvellettes as Ann and Rhonda clasp hands, lean back, balance the centrifugal forces, and spin madly across the flagstones, throwing their heads back and squealing as the Marvelettes reach full throttle and dizziness takes them.

Causing me to wonder (as I would more than once), can heaven be *this* good?

Be realistic.

You want to *improve* this?

You would hope that God would have a sense of humor about the whole thing, enough to concede that someone else had come up with something pretty good for a change, wouldn’t you? The *Marvellettes,* in this case. So, as I approach heaven, probably in the back seat of the Impala, with my father driving, I hear that big, thumping downbeat kick in and then the Marvelletes cranking up the intro, as angels posted along the approach to the Pearly Gates, black angels with white wings, sing harmony, jiving to that driving rhythm.

But the pinnacle of the evening is when Chuck and I trade boasts about our swimming prowess, prompting the girls to suggest that we settle the matter with a quick lap or two. Drunk with testosterone, we transit the pool in an eruption of boiling foam. Here is my excuse for what happened next. I had learned to swim in the open lake, where there was no need to judge distances or avoid obstacles, generally speaking. Consequently, I finish the race by driving my skull full steam into the concrete, as my right hand crashes down on the pool's edge hard enough to draw blood. Brilliantly, I not only win the race, but bring the sympathetic Ann rushing to my side, to sit down beside me on the edge of the pool and cradle the wounded hand in her lap.

She splashes the blood away with the antiseptic pool water.

“We’ll get you a band-aid,” she says.

Her factotum Rhonda correctly concludes that “we” means her, so off she goes at a trot, swiveling her ample rump. Nurse Ann remains beside me, periodically splashing water on the wound. It is evening now, and the lights in the pool give the water the look of a giant, living, breathing jewel, a scintillating membrane of turquoise around a beating heart of pure light. The wrinkly pattern of the waves radiates upward to play across Ann’s face, same as it plays across the bottom of the lake, but in reverse. The clamor of the party around us is now attenuated … although, maybe only psychologically … so that she can speak to me very softly, tenderly, murmurously, and yet make every syllable, every vowel, every consonant distinct, much as though she were whispering in my ear.

“You hurt yourself.”

She splashes the cut and the inky swirls of blood dissolve into the bright blue light.

Et cum spiritu tuo*.*

This is the blood of the New Convenant, which shall be shed for you and for you, Ann.

Reaching back into my archive of Million Dollar Movie scenes, I become Jimmy Stewart, who had that uncanny, that unerring knack for bashful candor.

“I guess I was trying to impress you.”

“You should be more careful, you silly goose.”

Look into her big, kind, welcoming eyes.

Tell her, “I guess I wanted you to notice me.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed you, alright.”

It strikes me that the person she has noticed is not me, but the person I am supposed to me, that special combination of Albert Einstein and Sir Edmund Hillary. I am just beginning to feel the alchemy of it, how the gaze of a woman transforms me, somehow requiring that I become a better person, instantaneously. I notice that there is something unusual about her eyes. The lids fold in a way that suggests an element of Chinese or Japanese in the lineage. Given the success of Torch Gases, it would not be one bit surprising to me to learn that the founders are descended from Genghis Khan. Or, say, the Emperor of Japan. On this basis, Ann becomes a geisha and I become Admiral Matthew Perry. The pool becomes Tokyo harbor. The American ships in the harbor are the Mississippi, the Plymouth, the Saratoga, and the Susquehanna.

I, Perry, have just “opened” Japan.

One minute you are alone in this life, searching among the stars for some distant glimmer, some hint, some promise of escape from the solitude you cannot bear, the riddle that has no answer, and next thing you know, you are pedaling homeward through the alternate universe in the eyes of a pretty girl. The night is feminine, somehow, aware of your passing, sonorous with sympathy and longing, pretty in the way a girl is pretty, the sky a violet lampshade with little cutouts for moon and stars, the houses in Bilkoland a honeycomb of windows aglow with the apricot-colored light of table lamps, the crazy music of the mockingbirds mingling with snatches of dialogue from funny television programs, with the laugh tracks and the big band music blaring in the intros. It embraces you, the summer night, caresses you, whispers in your ear as you glide down the hills toward your own happy home. The tenderness in her eyes is everywhere, now, her spirit everywhere. Shooting past the maples that are now filling out, growing into their destiny, like you, you brush the leaves with your free hand and find them sensitive as human flesh. Even the bicycle seems alive, a cartoon bicycle, a friendly bicycle, delighted to be along for the ride with you.

Your bike is to you what Trigger is to Roy.

Bearing you homeward.

“Home, boy!”

In the end it’s too much, the moment cannot hold it all, the seams burst, my heart rockets over the rooftops of Bilkoland, pinwheeling and corkscrewing in a cloud of sparks and colored smoke, over the hill, out of sight, back to her house, to be near her for the night, to watch over her all through the night, and keep her safe, my imaginary princess, ensconced the fairy castle of my own dreams.

No need to document the obvious, I suppse.

No need to tag and file Specimen of Puppy Love #7,678,429,546 or whatever.

Collected: Planet of Love.

Intergallactic Timestamp: 127563958128676395826485847013.

No need to fuss over the hallucinatory effects. A hint of that is plenty. Let’s face it, anyone who has ever been in love, just *sick*, just *ga-ga* in love, is going to outright laugh at any effort to explain the phenomenon. On the other hand, let’s not lose sight of the fact that some in the audience very likely have *not* been through it. For their sake, I will suggest that the experience involves a mysterious radiance, not unlike the radiance of the sun. In a universe that is dark and cold, the male or female naturally navigates toward this radiance, a source of physical comfort as well as spiritual ease. In one direction is dark and cold and death, in the other light and warmth and life. Which way do you go? There is this subconscious awareness, this deep-rooted pang, constantly reminding us that, whatever we are, we are only half of what must be, and cannot do without the other half. It’s not just an attraction, but a compulsion on the scale of the planet’s own magnetic properties, orienting our every thought in the direction of the opposite pole, for the purpose of engineering the union that resolves the problem. Ergo, whatever delusion, whatever fantasy might be necessary to effectuate the final, desperately, deleriously happy *fucking* of the other, we embrace it.

Does this make sense? No.

Why does the salmon expend the last of its life energy fighting its way upward through waterfalls, to spawn and die in the gravel in the mountains, when it could remain in the bay, leisurely munching on sardines?

It makes no sense.

Why do the rams keep butting heads on the mountainside long after both of them have splitting, excruciating headaches?

We’re talking about an entire life form *based* on a kind of lunacy.

Dear reader, should you happen to be what we on Earth have called an “alien” life form (pretty funny, I know), and wish to get a solid grip on the phenomenon of love, I highly recommend that you study the solo song and dance routine that Gene Kelly does in *Singing in the Rain,* after he kisses Debbie Reynolds for the first time. Get some popcorn, get comfortable, and watch *Singin’ in the Rain* at least through the puddle scene, where Gene Kelly goes nuts dancing in the puddle? At the very end of that scene, Kelly gives his umbrella to a stranger. That is the clincher, from my point of view. It’s still pouring cats and dogs, so it would seem Kelly really needs the umbrella, yet he gives it away, for no apparent reason, to a complete stranger. And there you have it. We can write fifty or sixty volumes of analysis if you like, or fifty or sixty thousand volumes, and none of it will ever change anything, because in the end we will come circling back to the stark, staring, simple fact that, once Gene Kelly kisses Debbie Reynolds, he no longer *needs* anything. His destiny has been fulfilled, his bliss is complete. He now knows that everything that seemed illogical and wrong and out of kilter within him does in fact make sense, because the counterpart or complement exists. The *reason* exists. The very existence of Debbie Reynolds explains everything.And it doesn’t even matter whether she loves him in the same way. *She does not have to do anything.* Does not need to marry him. They do not need to have kids and send their kids to Ivy League colleges. The one kiss detonates a nuclear reaction of happiness that obliterates all else in Gene Kelly’s consciousness, to the point where he begins to sing.

Exactly what does he sing?

What does he tell us, in his song.

*Doodle oooo dooo doo-doo*

*Doodle oooo doodoodoodoo*

*Doodle oooo dooo doo-doo*

*Doodle oooo doodoodoodoo*

Which is as fine an explanation of the meaning of human life as I have ever heard.

When does the delirium take hold?

Is it while I am pedaling my bike past her house (purely by coincidence, I tell myself, although, I am probably wearing a rut into the asphalt), in hopes of colliding with her on the sidewalk? Perhaps while fastidiously posing myself, the human mannequin, on the gliding bicycle? With the angle of the head and the torturous twist of the spine contrived to suggest that I am definitely *not* looking at her house, not even aware I am on her street, and have in fact forgotten her, and could care less? While preparing to feign utter and complete surprise if by some fabulous, fantastic, blessed stroke of luck I should happen to see her hauling groceries out of the Caddy, or maybe practicing jump rope in the empty driveway with the ponderous Rhonda? The best way to acknowledge her, I decide after much cogitation, is to go flying by, making it abundantly clear that, far from being infatuated with her, I have plenty of better things to do and think about, but then, strictly as an afterthought, slam on the brakes and fishtail in the middle of the street, hopefully with an alarming screech of rubber against baking pavement, the better to call attention to my complete astonishment at her presence.

Or is it while wallowing in the disappointment, the yearning, the grief that washes over me when, slowing as I pass, putting the brakes on, circling for a moment, I draw out the last excruciating seconds of possibility, of hope, of pleasure in her presumed presence, but must then begin to pedal again, head bowed, up the opposite hill.

How I missed her, then.

How I yearned.

True, we knew nothing about each other.

The Ann I missed was the theoretical Ann.

The hypothetical Ann.

The Ann too perfect to actually know.

Quite possibly it is at the American Legion Hall on Valley Road, a concrete cube that is routinely hung with patriotic bunting both inside and out to lend a festive air to the various celebrations and convocations staged there by groups and families who rent for the evening. For funerals they break out the purple bunting. But bunting, always the bunting. A lot of these events are pretty much the same, people spooning rigatoni and chicken thighs and boiled peas out of disposable aluminum pans at the buffet, while the moth-eaten moose and antelope heads gaze dolorously down from mounts high on the walls, the largest of them swathed in dusty Stars and Stripes, and the ever-smiling accordion player throttles yet another polka or tarantella or Irish step dance for the carefree enjoyment of the crowd that spills across the combination dance floor and basketball court. The main difference on this particular evening is that good old Coach Conte, the guy with the triple chin and the burning blue eyes set in charcoal circles of sadness, has somehow allayed the nuns' fears of a sex orgy and arranged for a record player to be connected to the hall's ancient public address system, which can make a person standing right next to you sound like he is addressing the crowd from a thousand miles away, over a bad telephone connection. The girls have brought stacks of forty-fives from home. Sister Immaculata has sent a detachment of goose-stepping penguins over to cast a pall, as a precautionary measure, but even the nuns seem to be enjoying themselves, as "Mr. C." hands out trophies in his dapper black blazer and red vest, constantly adjusting his necktie beneath the blubbery folds of flesh that spill copiously over his collar, benignly smiling at each and every one of *his boys*. This is the childhood equivalent of, say, an Olympic Gold Medal. Because, at least from my point of view, the adulation of classsmates is every bit as satisfying as adulation from the international press. Instead of a medal I get a trophy consisting of the glistening, imitation-gold figure of a boy shooting a basketball, mounted on a hollow plastic base, which is made to look something like marble, kind of, and which contains a conveniently removable imitation-brass plate, engraved with the glorious inscription *St. Phillip's - Passaic League CYO Champs*.

The cheerleaders are getting trophies, too. Probably it goes without saying Ann is a cheerleader. How could she be Juliet to my Romeo, Isolde to my Tristan, and not don the green and gold of the good old St. Philip's Flyers, shake her green and gold pompoms, and scream her lungs out as I launch yet another wildly errant jump shot from the far perimeter, prompting Mr. C to bury his face in his hands and rock his hulking frame on that awesome posterior, apparently on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Cue the Duprees and *You Belong to Me*.

Do you think it’s odd that all of the memories seem to have been recorded with sound tracks? I only wish I could play the tunes. Have the lush sonority of the woodwinds come pouring in behind the vocal harmony of *Duprees*. See the pyramids along the Nile. Watch the sunset on a tropic isle. They sound very much like a choir to me, fully cognizant of the sacred significance of the moment, when the crowd parts and we spot each other at opposite ends of the room, and our eyes lock together like enemy radars, because she is looking for me in the very same way I am looking for her. The same emptiness is there, the same hunger, I am convinced … the gnawing hunger that impels us toward relentless quest. In a scene just dripping, just *wreaking* of destiny, we both find what we are looking for in a single instant. It is all so completely clear and certain the element of will seems to have been removed altogether. Rather, every molecule, every atom in the universe has been put in place for the sole purpose of bringing us together, this way. *The Duprees* have come together and recorded the song for us, the record been pressed, purely and solely as accompaniment for this moment, the record player brought to the hall, that record dropped onto the stack of records, awaiting the moment when our eyes will meet. The needle swivels into place, settles onto the spinning surface, finds the groove, and sends a cataract of four-part harmony pouring through the crummy loudspeakers that hang beneath the rafters, above the moose and antelope heads.

Of course no one dances, at first.

To dance, you have to *ask someone* to dance.

Who has the nerve for that?

Yet the moment comes when Ann and I must play our part. If the Earth is going to continue to turn, if the sun is going to continue to rise, Ann and I must dance this dance, and we both know it. As I walk toward her, another guy approaches, an idiot who somehow cannot sense the hand of fate. Barely acknowledging his presence, she politely points to me as I as I make my way across the middle of the floor. I am the one. This is the moment. Nothing can interfere. There are no thoughts to be thought, no words to be said, no decisions to be made, no opportunity to control things in any way. I take her hand and we come together smooth as you please, step right into the tempo of the dance together, enfolding each other tenderly, two waterfalls of longing that spill off facing mountains and combine, falling into one ridiculously beautiful pool of peace and happiness. Her cheek nestles against my neck, her hair falls against my eyelashes, as I bow my head to be nearer to her.

She says, “Don’t you just love this song?”

I say, “Yes.”

“This is one of my favorite songs of all time.”

“Mine too.”

“Oh, you’re just saying that.”

“No,” I tell her. “It *is* one of my favorites, too. There’s something … ”

“What?”

“No. I’m embarrassed.”

“No. Tell me.”

“I was going to say … eternal. But that sounds goofy.”

“What do you mean eternal?”

“You know, the pyramids and everything?”

“What about them?”

“Well, they’ve been there forever, more or less, is what I’m getting at.”

“Oh, sure,” she says, as we dance on. “It makes you think.”

“About what?”

“Well, it makes you wonder.”

“What are you wondering about?”

“Oh, you know, just … what will happen, that kind of thing,” she says.

“What do you mean what will happen?”

“You know,” she says. “As life unfolds.”

“Ah,” I tell her. “Well, we’ll see, won’t we?”

“Hopefully,” she says.

One night, we are necking in the Devoes’ fabulous finished basement, which is outfitted with every conceivable luxury, along the lines of the tomb of Tutankhamun, when Big Tom kicks us out, as per usual. This was strictly a ritualistic kind of thing, where Big Tom comes tromping down the stairs to the basement, kind of extra slow and extra noisy, to give us a chance to pull ourselves together, *then* kicks us out. So he is a good sport about it. Anyway here we are standing in the driveway saying goodnight, which usually takes us about forty five minutes, because we always start necking again. As usual, Big Tom turns the front light on and off a couple of times, to let Ann know he is watching. Finally this starts to get on her nerves and she grabs my hand and leads me into the back yard and then through the back gate to this meandering path that leads down through the trees to Pearl Brook.

There is a full moon, just as bright as a giant light bulb, up there, so, quite weirdly, we can see everything clear as day. Not just what’s around us, in other words, but everything, clear through the trees, into the distance. Back there by the brook you had all these gnarly old fairytale willow trees, these thousand-year-old willows, with thousand-year-old willow souls, who had somehow survived the scourge of Bilko. When Bilko bulldozed everything else, he stayed away from the banks of the brook, maybe because it flooded, now and then. Maybe he was afraid the bulldozers would get stuck. In Bilkoland all of the extent plants and animals could trace their origin to a nursery or a pet shop somewhere, but then you had the brook and maybe fifty yards on either side, this one crazy swath of nature's wild abundance, swirling and curling through the quadrilaterals of the subdivisions, where one would encounter all kinds of weird creatures, possums and woodpeckers and foxes and raccoons and what have you. We thought of the territory around the brook as our little Kentucky, as wild as Kentucky was when Fess Parker, playing Daniel Boone on the Walt Disney Show, first laid eyes on it. As kids we would catch crayfish there. There was a swimming hole with a rope hanging from a limb overhead, so you could swing out over the brook and let go, Huckleberry Finn stuff we can skip, I think. Adding to the enchantment, the moonlight has an eery quality, much brighter than moonlight should really be. It falls through the ancient limbs of the willows in great, dusky golden shafts, like sunshine through stained glass, so bright the birds seem to think it’s daytime, with the result that they are flirting, all kinds of birds winging through these golden shafts of moonlight, the glint of red and blue wings flashing as they chase. The book is calm, so the moonlight is reflected off the surface, a little river of molten moonlight, meandering through this great, green cathedral of old trees. At one point I stop, unable to go on, because it’s so beautiful. And think, my God, the Lenape were here. And it was just so. Just like this. On a moonlit summer night. Ann leads me briskly along the path beside the brook to a giant stump where we sometimes paused to neck. There, she steps up on the sump and puts her hands on my shoulders. She looks at me for one long moment, making up her mind about something, smiling, with a sheen of tears in her eyes, and then addresses me in a voice that trills with glee, right at the edge of laugher.

“I have something to ask you.”

She holds my head in her hands.

“What?”

"Do you remember the night we danced?” she says.

“You mean, at the championship dinner?”

That’s what we called the dance.

I had my hands on her waist. I was always pretty careful about all of this stuff, by the way, figuring Big Tom might step out from behind a tree at any second, with a shotgun.

“Sure,” I said. “They played *You Belong To Me.”*

She looks up into the trees and smiles at the treetops.

*“*You do!*”*

“And somebody else asked you to dance, and you said no.”

She gives my shoulders a little shake.

“You do!” she says. “Pat Kennedy. I told him I had promised that dance to you.”

“You low down liar.”

“Oh no,” she says. “Not at all. Because I *had*. I just hadn’t told you about it. It was a secret promise.”

“I see.”

“Do you remember what I was wearing?”

Separate and apart from the fact that I actually review memories, actively dust them off, make sure they are in good shape, and so forth, I happen to have an unusually accurate memory, visually. Maybe it’s a chicken and egg kind of thing. Like, if you have an unusually vivid memory, you tend to spend a little more time with your memories, for the simple reason that the memories tend to be a little bit more interesting. Obviously I have no idea what memories are like for other people. But for me it’s a little like going to the movies, except there is no one else there. Just me, Mr. Narcisssist, in a dark theater, all by myself, watching things happen, over and over again, while I stuff my face with popcorn and, half the time, wonder how I could have been so incredibly stupid. People tell me it’s a little unusual to actually hear voices in the memories. And on the visual side, it’s literally photographic, to an extent that is even a bit weird. I may not remember your name, but I will remember the exact sound of your voice, like a tape recording, the colors of the individual stripes in the tie you were wearing or the scarf you had on or whatever, how you part your hair, the color of your eyes, what kind of rims you have on your glasses, whether the frames were silver or gold, whether you have a freckle on your cheek, that kind of thing.

“Yes,” I tell Ann. “I do remember.”

“Tell me.”

I think about it for a second, because I want to get it all exactly right. I close my eyes for a second, to concentrate. Sure enough, Ann appears in the clothing she was wearing that night at the dance. When I open my eyes again, the real Ann has a big smile on her face.

“Well,” I tell her. “I remember you were wearing these funny shoes. Or, not funny. I mean, unusual.”

“Very diplomatic. You mean funny,” she says, nodding and laughing at me a little. I am about to look down to see whether she happens to be wearing the same shoes, but she won’t let me. She puts the back of her hand under my chin to stop me from looking down.

“No cheating,” she says. “Tell me, what was so funny about them?”

“Well, I remember, they were kind of patched together, made of little squares of leather patched together”

“Yes?”

“I think I remember the colors of the little squares of leather.”

“Okay. Go ahead. Tell me. What were the colors?"

She is pretty happy about this whole deal, by the way. I had already remembered enough, in other words.

“Well, there were light brown pieces, kind of a beigy, really light brown, and there were pink pieces, very bright, light pink, and there were light green pieces.”

She takes her hand away and we both look down at her feet and sure enough, there they are, the same shoes, in the colors I had described.

“And what else?” she says.

So now I pull out all the stops. All I can say is, it’s a pleasure to be able to make good use of one’s neurotic tendencies, once in a while. I tell her everything I can think of. She wore a woolen skirt, charcoal gray, with pleats. I remember exactly what the fabric looked like, that it was fuzzy, in other words, wool, and how the pleats were nice and sharp, as though the skirt had just been pressed. Plus, on top, this extra fuzzy, extra soft, mohair kind of sweater, bright green, over a blouse that was kind of silky or shiny, very pale pastel pink. The sweater is a V-neck. The collar of the blouse is open. Around her neck is a silver chain with three little pearls on it. I go so far as to describe the cable knit pattern in the sweater, the pattern of the knit around the neckline, everything about, like I knitted the sweater myself. As I am reeling off all these details, she is listening and every once in a while nodding at me.

“Go on,” she says.

I remember her having these two tortoise-shell clips or combs in her hair, holding her hair back, on either side, and the way her smooth, fine hair fell straight down around her ears, behind the clips, and how the clip feels against my neck, when we dance.

“What else?” she says.

I remember a ring that holds an little amethyst, which is square, a sparkly little square of purple in a gold ring, and a gold charm bracelet, and even a few of the charms, one of a horse and rider, one of two tennis rackets crossed, plus of course the obligatory crucifix, plus one of two hearts pierced by an arrow.

“The shish kebob of love,” I tell her.

She puts her finger against my lips and presses.

“Okay. No more now,” she says.

She grips my shoulders really tight with her two hands and leans over and kisses me on the lips.

And then we just stand there for probably ten minutes, she on the old stump and I below her, looking up at her, because there isn’t one other thing either of us wants to say or do, ever, we are perfectly content to just stand there, staring into each other’s eyes, and I guess wondering, the two of us, at the strangeness of it, how that night had turned out to be so much more beautiful than we had ever thought anything could ever be. But there we were, standing there in the moonlight, so happy. Either it was ten minutes or it was ten thousand years, I don’t know. Ten thousand years of happiness, back there in the willows with Ann.

One little problem.

As our necking sessions grow ever more feverish, she seems to know exactly what she is doing, while I am mostly guessing, because, well, *Million Dollar Movie* takes you only so far.

For instance, it is amazing what tongues can do..

Who would have thought this would be one of the best uses of a tongue? There seem to be few corollaries in the animal kingdom.

You don’t see cows tongue-kissing.

Big cats? No.

Although, it is true that big cats do lick one another quite a lot, and do seem to enjoy it. We don’t really know whether they totally get off on that, or whether it’s mostly hygienic.

And yet, running the tip of my tongue along the edge of hers, running the tip of my tongue … so very lightly … across the bottom of her tongue … when her tongue curls up … or just touching the tips of our tongues … or just lightly licking her lips, licking ever so gently, slowly and deliberately … her lips … the corner of her mouth … behind her ear … back to the lips … it all seems perfectly natural to me. No, I do not have instructions. But I seem to get the hang of it pretty quickly. It’s more like riding a bike than shooting a basketball, when you come right down to it. Granted, it’s a little awkward to be standing in line at the cafeteria and know that the person ahead of you likes to have that spot behind her ear licked in a certain way. The tongue just flickering over it. And how she moans when I do that. I’ll have the meat loaf and mashed potatoes, please … and you, *lick me*.

You now what I notice?

Women are no angels either.

If I lick behind her ear a certain way, suck her skin where the neck meets the shoulder, she becomes a very different person.

Observe.

She is climbing over me. She comes across me, on top of me, to be cradled in my arms. I have my hand on her hip. I am not actually going to grab her ass, because, for all I know, Big Tom has installed surveillance equipment, and is all set to spring a trap door on us. But thoughts do occur. In a purely theoretical way, one considers the fact that the other person’s clothing appears to be perfectly normal clothing. A plaid uniform skirt, standard issues at St. Philip’s. I can feel the hem of her panties on her thigh. Normal skirt. Normal panties. If you can put them on, you can take them off, am I right? In other words, there do not appear to be any special security arrangements. No combination locks or special keys. My hand runs up and down her leg and over her hip, feeling for the edge of panties, feeling the skirt slide across her hip.

Lips just touching, just tickling, barely touching.

Let’s see how lightly we can touch.

As our breath mixes.

You know what’s funny?

When she is lying across me like that, with her eyes closed, her mouth open, moaning … her breasts seem to get bigger.

Is that anatomically possible?

I’ll be honest, I don’t know.

Are the breasts actually a little like cocks?

Inflatable?

“Oh,” she says, drawing her hand up and down the back of my neck. “Ohhhhhhhh.”

She must have put some perfume on her chest because she smells just like the split rail fence out front, just like a big fat bed of roses. She puts her head back and lets her head roll back and forth, left and right, a metronome, ever so softly moaning.

“*O-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h.*”

When I throw caution totally to the winds and give her a tentative little peck on the chest, there where her collar is open, she says, “Mmmm.”

She grabs the back of my head to bring me back there.

For another tentative peck.

“Mmmmmmmmmm.”

And then, a tentative little lick.

But just then, her spine stiffens. The eyes snap open, round with fright. Her extra-sensory awareness has detected an ominous pattern in the sound of footfalls above us.

“Here he comes.”

So we tidy up and do our best to look ridiculously innocent. Ann hops up and grabs a stack of records we can sort through. When Big Tom arrives we look up at him and smile.

Very casually, sounding kind of bored, she says, “Oh hi Daddy.”

I say, “Hello, Mr. Devoe. How are you?”

Big Tom’s bushy black eyebrows knit together.

“Young man,” he says. “Do you ever do any homework? Or, let me put it this way, any productive labor of any kind?”

I try not to be overly sensitive, but I think I am entitled to take offense there, don’t you?

“Well actually, Mr. Devoe, I consider myself a pretty industrious person.”

“What I mean is, you seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time with my daughter, just sitting around in the basement. I can’t see that you are accomplishing anything that seems particularly worthwhile, to least not to me.”

Ann says, “Don’t try to be cute, Daddy.”

She grabs my hand and leads me up the stairs and out the front door. On the front steps, she gives me one quick peck on the lips and then, whispering low, “You ride around the block, okay? Just ride around the block one time. When you get back, leave your bike in front of Rhonda’s. Come back here and get into the car.”

She glances at the Caddy and I follow her glance, marveling at her diabolical genius. Then says goodbye to me a little louder than is necessary, hoping her father will hear, and ducks back into the house. But not before opening the door again and winking at me.

As I ride, I contemplate how lucky I am to have a girl waiting for me in a car. And not just any car, mind you, but a fucking Fleetwood Brougham. Certainly this is an extraordinary gift, is it not? The hand of a loving God extends itself, opens, and there in the palm of God’s hand is Fleetwood Brougham, with a pretty girl waiting in the back seat. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, is all I can say. So extraordinary a gift is this, I am actually in no hurry to get back. Because, well, the state of awaiting her, the state of anticipating, is really all a person can ask for, isn’t it? Not to mention the splendor of the summer night in the Middle Atlantic States, at a latitude where the sun is never very far from New Jersey (sometimes I think of New Jersey as orbiting the sun separately), so the day is never really over, the sky never really dark, but always transitioning into a new day, in bruised shades of purple and blue and silver and indigo and … just as beautiful as all hell, in other words.

Which will be better, thinking about it or actually doing it?

Arriving back at the Devoes’ driveway, I notice one of the doors on the Caddy is ajar.

As I approach, I hear Ann’s raspy whisper. “Get in.”

When I slide in, she says, “Shut it.”

As I reach for the door handle, she abruptly reaches across and grabs it herself.

“Quietlly,” she whispers.

And eases the door in, until it’s snug against the latch. Then gives it one hefty tug and bingo, the latch catches, with barely a click, a fine testament to American engineering if ever I saw one.

“Like that,” she whispers.

Leaning across me, she puts her hand on my chest.

“He thinks you’ve gone.”

Gives me a little pat. Good job.

Sweeps her hair out of her eyes and gives her a head a shake, the way girls do, the point of which is a mystery.

“Unhunh,” I say. “But where are *you* supposed to be? What if he comes out here looking for you?”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s suspicious?”

“Don’t be silly,” she says. “This is crazy stuff.”

“What is?”

“Us being here in his car. Trust me. Never in a million years would he believe we would do this.”

“I see.”

“Where were we?” she says.

She closes her eyes and adds, “Oh I know. You were kissing me.”

I kiss her on the lips.

“But not like that,” she says. “Not a crummy kiss.”

She squirms in my arms.

Her breath seems to be coming faster.

“I must say I find you very interesting,” she says.

She clamps her mouth onto mine and puts her tongue in my mouth, probing.

Withdrawing for a second, she says, “Very.”

And clamps back on for dear life, lungs heaving now, her hands in my hair, her rear end rotating to be under my hand, faster than I can move the hand away, the skirt sliding upward, somehow, her hair damp with sweat, the tongues going at it like two blenders, the moans, the hands tearing at my hair, until she can’t take it anymore, and stops, and draws back, and looks me in the eye.

And says, “Is that all you know how to do?”

Such a fool, I am. Such an idiot. I say something she cannot bear to hear. It is the truth, and yet is unacceptable. An outrage.

“Yes.”

She clambers over me, actually crawls across my lap, pushes the door open, climbs out, looks back at me for one moment, fuming, and slams the door in my face.

I know that Big Tom has heard the door slam, but am so bewildered, I don’t care.

Sure enough, Big Tom comes out, comes straight toward the car, leans down, looks through the window, sees me there, and tries to open the back door. But the door is locked. So he knocks on the window. Very politely, if you can imagine.

I open the door.

He says, “Are you in need of transportation?”

What happens to happiness?

What happens to the blackberry sky and the luscious kisses on luminous summer nights?

Why can’t I suck on those raspberry lips, those strawberry lips, forever and ever and ever?

What happens to erections while riding my bike?

You ever try riding a bike with an erection?

It isn’t easy.

But oh, how wonderful, how magical to be injected with that massive overdose of hormones, so you spend the entire day looking for something to fuck, anything that looks even remotely, even conceivably fuckable, … anything vaguely resembling two intersecting orbs, it can be … two pizzas, two cantaloupes … anything … because you are carrying the dynamite of animal ecstasy between your legs, one big fat stick of joy in the form of dynamite, ready to detonate any second, the fuse burning down, so you know the next explosion is going to happen, there is nothing you can do to contain it, it’s just a matter of circumstance … fucking two pizzas or fucking this wraith who looks like Marilyn Monroe in my dreams. Which I guess makes me Joe DiMaggio. Which isn’t bad either. But anyway one day, good old Sister Bennie … the sadistic hunchback who holds us prisoner in the seventh grade … bends so low over my desk her extra large toucan-style shnozzola almost touches my chest, while luxuriant gorilla hairs sprout from the mole on her cheek right into my eye, and broccoli-scented nun breath envelopes me in an odoriferous cloud. The other kids have gotten up and migrated down the hall toward the gym. But Benigna blocks me. We have these one-piece desks, so you have to slide out to one side, and that’s where she has positioned herself. Her crooked, twisted little witch’s finger twitching in my face as she solemnly tells me that she has something to tell me.

How can I ever forget that single front tooth, that *tusk*, protruding over her lower lip?

The spit scattering before her at every diphthong.

“Aaaaaaatha,” Benigna says. That was her way of pronouncing my name.

"Yes, Sister Benigna."

In addressing Bennie, I try to adopt a tone of deadened neutrality, an absolutely flat monotone, wishing to convey that I am willing to do her bidding, within reasonable bounds, but not willing to be her minion, like some of the others, an important difference.

"I don't want you to tell the other students, Aaaaaaatha. But I am in receipt of the results of the IQ tests?”

She loves that kind of phrase. In *receipt*.

Richard Klein would mock her.

She is in fucking receipt.

I can see that she is actually holding the results. Very much in receipt, she is. She examines them for a moment, adjusting her glasses.

"Yes, Sister Benigna? "

"Aaaatha, you ranked … it’s quite extra-or-dinary, Aaaatha … you ranked in the ninety nine point … ninety … nine point … ninety nine point … ninety ninth … percentile? "

Spit flies all over the place, as you can imagine.

"Point ninty ninth?"

"Point ninety *…* ninth," she says.

“That’s pretty high, isn’t it?”

"Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"It means you are *gifted,* Aaaatha*."*

So there.

I’ve said it, okay.

The fateful fucking decree.

I had to bring the hunchback up from the dungeon just to have her deliver the news. Otherwise it might lack the necessary air of foreboding.

“Gifted?”

“In other words, you can do great things, Aaaatha. Not like, well, not like Dr. Albert Einstein, of course, but …”

She squints at the paper again, adjusting the glasses again, grimacing, nodding.

“But … close, apparently,” she says.

I did all the calculations instantaneously and rewrote my entire life story on the basis of this bit of news. I now knew that if I did not become President of the United States … or at least solve the riddle of time … or possibly develop a fabulous musical talent, becoming the Irish *Jascha Heifetz* … I was going to be a big disappointment to everybody.

"Aaaaaaatha," Sister Benigna says, bathing me in broccoli breath.

"Yes, Sister."

"This score is so ex-tra-ordinary, I think that, if you work very, very hard, you could go to *Ignatius*."

"Ignatius?"

"It's a school for special boys in New … York … City."

Where, not long afterward, standing before the student entrance, I would read the graffiti that so aptly expressed the mood of the student body: “*Give up hope all ye who enter here.”*

Ignatius High School is on Eighty Fourth Street, between Madison and Park, near the Metropolitan Museum of Art, my all-time favorite place on the face of this earth. Although, not as favorite as it used to be, when they had the cafeteria laid out around the fountain, with all the nymphs and satyrs or whatever they were. Nymphs and satyrs and leaping porpoises, all in greenish, grayish bronze, peeing and spouting water every which way, in this enormous marine cavern, where the spattering of the water echoed against the marble walls and, more importantly, you could get a great egg salad sandwich for about a buck and a half.

In case you’ve never hung around on the Upper East Side, I will explain that Eighty Fourth Street is a pretty nice street. In fact the whole neighborhood is nice. Really … I’ll tell you what … if you want to know what *nice* is, probably you want to visit Park Avenue in June, when all the flowers are in bloom in the gardens that run down the center of the avenue, not in midtown, but more toward the Upper East Side, where Park Avenue is mostly residential, so you have something like forty blocks of flowers between you and the big office building over Grand Central Station, this absolutely ridiculously beautiful carpet of flowers running all the way down the avenue, which suggests that somebody was crazy enough to actually plan the whole thing. The other thing about summer being there are spectacular women all over the place, in full cry. I will have you know that the Upper East Side is just crawling with spectacular women. Their world headquarters, apparently. And when I say spectacular, honestly, you don’t know what you’re up against, as a guy, in this world, until you’re on Park Avenue in June, and the flowers are in bloom on the avenue, the Pan Am building resplendent in the summer sun, and a spectacular woman with a spectacular haircut and spectacular clothes and spectacular shoes climbs out of a navy blue Bentley right in front of you. With the result that you become invisible. You vanish. She looks right through you. She can *walk* right through you, if she wants.

I think am going to just skip over most of my illustrious career at Ignatius, how I was suspected of being a heretic, of purposely sabotaging the religious retreats, and so forth, and eventually kicked out of religion class, with instructions to just walk the halls and amuse myself, while the other kids are learning how to save their souls. It was not that I was not interested in saving my soul. Saving my soul was actually right at the top of my agenda. My thinking was, well, if we are going to save our souls, probably a good place to start is just being honest with each other. Which was a big mistake.

I will merely note in passing the big thing that happened my freshman year, which was the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Not that I can actually talk about it. Probably there is not one thing I can say about that without going completely of the deep end, except maybe that Kennedy was the guy who made it okay to be Irish Catholic in this country. Prior to that, if you were Irish Catholic, you were a sub species. And then, to top it off, he gets to the White House, and it’s Camelot, that whole thing. Arthurian legend comes to the White House, via Broadway.

And of course Jaqueline. Holy Christmas.

So of course we shoot him.

The day Kennedy died I was the one guy at Ignatius who couldn’t stand it. Everyone was upset, of course. Half the kids in the school were Irish Catholic. But I was off the deep end, the one guy who insisted on having a nervous breakdown. So my new pals had to walk me down to the guidance counselor’s office, where they told me to go home. I get off the bus in Cllifton and trudge up the hill and there is Mrs. Trautwein, our neighbor across the street, standing on the sidewalk in front of her house.

Not doing anything, particularly, just standing there, with her arms folded across her chest.

I happened to be walking on her side of the street.

As I approach, she puts her arms out, and I walk right into her arms, and she hugs me and says, “I’m so sorry. I know you loved him.”

And I say nothing, because it’s all so far beyond that.

The other part I can’t skip is Charlie Padula.

Charlie is from Clifton, too. He is a junior when I am a freshman. He is Mr. Personality, at Ignatius. Maybe he doesn’t have much choice there, as he is the homeliest kid in the school, hands down. By a mile, I would say. Not just homely but really ugly, in a very particular way. Charlie had a head that was way, way bigger than it should have been, for the body he had. He had the wrong head, was what it came down to. And then, to top it off, a nose that was unusually large, even for the unusually large head he had. So it looked like the nose, the head, and the body belonged to three different people.

You know what it looked like?

It looked like, when God was done creating all the members of the human race he had planned to create, he had parts left over, which added up to one more human being. And the angels just stuck the parts together, for efficiency’s sake. That’s how it struck me, anyway. That was Charlie. Just as homely and awkward as you can possibly imagine, and then some. The second you met him, you could plainly see that he was determined to compensate by being Mr. Personality, Mr. Conviviality, just the friendliest, happiest, most positive, most outgoing kid in the school. Just sickeningly friendly, at times. To the point where people got fed up with it. There were times when you wanted Charlie to just give it a rest, for Christ’s sake. But that was not in the cards, for him. Every time you saw him, Charlie’s face would light up with a big smile and he would stick his hand out and clap you on the back and stop to chat, ask you how you were doing, what he could help you with, and so on and so forth, on and on, no holding back, friendly and presumptuous as can be. He would give you the whole works every single time. Or he did with me, anyway.

Possibly he was extra special charming and outgoing with me because we were both from Clifton. There was one other guy from Clifton, also a freshman, kind of a loner, but that didn’t bother Charlie. Loners were fine, with Charlie. Everybody was fine. Charlie referred to the three of us as “the Clifton contingent.” He saw himself as kind of the elder statesman of the Clifton contingent. If he and I were walking down the hall together, he would put his arm around my shoulder and walk along beside me, gripping my shoulder, giving the shoulder little pats and squeezes as we walked, which was a little weird, at times, but basically okay, because he was just trying to be friendly, trying to overcome. Meantime asking how my classes are going … how I am getting along with Mr. Oliveri, the pain-in-the-ass Latin teacher we have, who believes that the main purpose of human life is the study of Latin … what my plans are for the summer, and so forth, meantime nodding and saying hi and smiling at all the other kids streaming past, getting updates from everyone as we go, while never missing a beat in the conversation with me.

Every once in a while he would call me at home.

I pick up the phone and say hello.

He says, “Chaz here.”

He calls himself Chaz sometimes. Where he got that, I can’t tell you. Really clumsy, some of the stuff he pulls. And he always had to be doing something else. It was always Chaz here, I’m just watching a ball game and thought I’d give you a buzz. Chaz here, I’m just having some soup.

And you would hear him slurping the soup, like he wanted you to know he actually was.

“Just checking up on you,” he says. “Just checking in, know what I mean? Making sure everything’s okay? Not that I’m keeping tabs on you or anything.”

He laughs.

Obviously he *is* keeping tabs. That is *exactly* what he is doing. He is keeping tabs on everyone, Charlie. His mind is one great big set of tabs and he is keeping tabs on the entire fucking human race, if you ask me. Or would be, if he could. I always thank him for calling and make small talk for a while, so he doesn’t feel he has wasted his time. The reality is there is no need for him to check up on me, most of the time things are going pretty well, but it was a nice gesture.

“You comfortable? You settling in?” he says. “It’s not going to be easy, you know. Don’t expect it to be easy, buddy. Jesus, it isn’t going to be easy, I can tell you that. You have to maintain discipline, is the main thing. Maintain discipline, day to day, know what I mean? Put in the hours, every day. Put in the hours. Don’t get into any stupid negotiations with yourself, if you know what I mean. Don’t let the work get ahead of you. Stay on top of the work. Stay ahead of the old steamroller or you’re dead, I’m telling you. You see what I’m saying?”

“Gotcha.”

“You can’t tell yourself you’re going to do the work tomorrow. You have to do it today. Always today. Got me?”

“I got you, Charlie. Stay ahead of the old steamroller.”

“Exactly.”

I basically love the fucking guy, even if he is kind of a pain in the ass, at times. Whenever Charlie is a pain in the ass, he is a pain in the ass in exactly the right way.

I remember meeting him at a mixer.

The girls who come to the mixers are mostly somewhat precocious Catholic girls from Marymount, Dominican, and Ferrer, the girls’ prep schools in Manhattan. Precocious and snooty, sometimes in the extreme. Here again, the point of reference can be tricky, because a teenage girl who is living in a really big, beautiful apartment on Fifth Avenue or Park Avenue is probably very close to the ultimate expression of concept of “snooty,” taking that whole idea about as far as it can go. Usually there was a band at the mixers, sometimes kids we knew from Xavier or Cardinal Hayes, one of the boys prep schools. Usually the band was terrible. But that was okay. We were lucky to have a band, instead of records. The fact that we had bands was a big deal. Of course for the most part people did precious little mixing at these things. There was some. People danced. But it was mostly the same twenty people doing the dancing. Most of us stayed in our own little group and *talked* about dancing, looking across the dance floor at people we might like to dance with, theoretically, and discussing with each other what it might be like to dance with them.

And that’s how life goes by, right?

Charlie, on the other hand, was always mixing and dancing his ass off. He seemed to feel that he had carry the load for everybody else. He got going before the dance even started. Girls would be arriving and Charlie would be standing there at the entrance to the auditorium, this enormous man’s head on the boy’s body, this giant *buffalo head* bobbing up and down, smiling, greeting all the girls, telling them how happy he was they could come, shaking hands, giving their hands a polite little pat, just as debonair as all hell, telling everyone how absolutely fabulous and absolutely sensational they looked, and wow, what a sensational night it was going to be, blah blah blah, just the most predictable, most conventional crap you could think of. Just try to think of the emptiest, corniest, most predictable pleasantry ever uttered by a human being and that was what Charlie was going to say next. I’m convinced knew how it came off and he didn’t give a shit. He *knew* it was all conventional, predictable bullshit. But it was *nice* bullshit. In a way it was *nice* that it was predictable.

He kind of shamed me into things, that way. He would finish a dance with a girl and see me standing around with my pals and walk over and more or less demand that I get out on the dance floor or he was going to choke me.

“Come on now,” he says. “Let’s go! We need to get the Clifton contingent out there!”

He wouldn’t stop. He would actually pick out the girl he wanted you to dance with, and try to introduce you, just completely out of control.

“Come on,” he would say. “I want you to meet Polly Fitzgerald. Have you met Polly? No? You’ll love Polly. Love her. I just saw her. Where is she? Come on. You come with me. Let’s find Polly. Her father is a big wheeler dealer with the Ogilvy and Mather, the ad firm? Before you know it you’ll be having cocktails with the old man.”

He would drag me across the dance floor to look for Polly or Claire or Judy, and half the time the girl we were looking for wouldn’t even be there. Or maybe they took cover, I don’t know. You knew the girls didn’t want Charlie dragging people over to meet them. You could see them melting into the crowd as you approached. Charlie would be asking around for Polly Fitzgerald while Polly was jumping into a cab out front.

At one point, Charlie and I are out on the dance floor together. We’re boogying our asses off. Doing the Clifton contingent proud. Only Charlie would even *think* of dancing over to have a conversation with you while you are dancing. But that’s what he does. He dances over, kind of jerking his giant head in my direction, to let his partner know what he’s up to. He comes bopping over, snapping his fingers, bopping the giant head, really working hard to look as cool as all hell. He was hilarious. He broke me up. I had to stop dancing and give Charlie a good whack on the shoulder, to let him know how much I appreciated the whole outrageous deal. I just whacked him on the shoulder and laughed. We all stop dancing to make conversation with Charlie, yelling at each other in the middle of the dance floor.

“You guys look terrific!” Charlie yells. He’s holding out his arms like he’s going to hug us.

And right there, at that moment, the girl he has been dancing with scoots. Just disappears*.* Just like that. People would do that to Charlie, occasionally, where they wouldn’t do it to another person. For the most part people played along with Charlie. But there were plenty of people who thought Charlie was just a colossal pain in the ass. So occasionally a person would just disappear when they got the chance. He didn’t notice, at first.

I’m yelling, “You look like a million dollars, Chaz.”

He nods appreciatively, playing along, just enjoying the hell out of himself. I introduce him to the girl I am dancing with. Her name happens to be Eileen. They shake hands. Once Charlie gets a grip on Eileen’s hand, he won’t let go. He goes into his whole meeting and greeting thing.

“Eileen!” he says, like they are long lost friends. He’s holding her hand tight, patting her hand. Grinning. Nodding at her. “How nice that you could join us this evening, Eileen. We’re so lucky to have such a wonderful group here. It’s all about the company we keep, isn’t it? Eileen, I’d like you to meet …”

And now he turns, and the other girl isn’t there. He looks all around, kind of panicky, like she might be hiding behind him, tricking him.

“Oh,” he says. “Where did she go?”

He scans the crowd, looking really worried. Possibly she has been kidnapped. But soon enough, the smile flicks back on, just like that. Like a blender.

“Well, possibly nature called,” he says. He laughs. “Well, I can see you two kids are having a ball. Didn’t mean to interrupt. Enjoy yourselves, kids. See you later.”

He would call the rest of us kids, now and then. Like he wasn’t a kid. And the reality was, he wasn’t. The reality was, Charlie was about a thousand years old. He *wanted* to be a kid, but really couldn’t be.

He kind of bows toward Eilene and yells, “Have a great evening, Eileen. I’m so glad you we could spend a few minutes together this evening. Ciao!”

And off he goes, giant head pivoting this way and that, Tyrannosaurus Charlie.

And that was the last time I saw him.

That Sunday morning, what do you know, Charlie hikes up First Mountain, stands on the edge of the cliff for a minute (I know this because people saw him standing there, actually watched this whole deal), I’m sure thinks about everything he is, everything he has seen and heard, everything that has happened to him, everything that is out there, in other words, known and unknown, looking out over the coastal plain where the Lenape have fished and hunted, where Pearl Brook still meanders down to the river, where New York City now rises through the rosy smog in the distance, this magical city where we are going to school, and adds it all up in his gigantic adding machine of a brain … I’m sure looks at it a couple of different ways, because he is a really smart guy, Charlie … draws the inevitable conclusions, and finally … steps off.

A week later, I am up there myself.

I stand right where he stood.

I add it all up for myself.

I figure I know why he jumps. It’s simple, really.

His head is too big.

And he believes that, because his head is too big, no one can ever really love him.

Maybe in heaven.

So, end it.

Junior and senior years I hang around in the yearbook office pretty much every day after class, always doing a little work on the yearbook, but also spending a goodly amount of time smoking cigarettes and drinking Cokes and bullshitting with the moderator, Mr. Phelan, who is a Jesuit scholastic. A scholastic, by the way, is a young guy in training to be a priest. A lot of our teachers are scholastics. Most of them are pretty good guys, incidentally. Pretty solid guys in a pretty difficult situation, I would say. About half of them are at the end of their rope, psychologically, it seems to me. But they had a sense of humor about it.

There are four desks in the yearbook office. One for the editor, who is always a senior, one for the assistant editor, who is always a junior, one for the photo editor, who could be anybody, and one for the moderator. Two of the desks were on one side of the doorway, two on the other. Facing each other. So, all in all, the arrangement made for a lively conversational grouping. Phelan and I would spend a lot of time with our feet up on our desks, just reading and smoking and bullshitting the afternoon away, maybe occasionally doing a little work on the yearbook, when we couldn’t avoid it any longer, but mostly just shooting the breeze with each other. It was okay with Phelan that I was a heretic. Or, as I liked to put it, an *agnostic*. He thought that was hilarious, for some reason, the whole agnostic business.

We got to know each other after Phelan had me named a Lincoln Center Scholar. For all I know he pulled my name out of a hat. All of the top high schools in the city had a Lincoln Center Scholar, which meant you got free tickets to the Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, the ballet, the works. There were two tickets for each event, one for the kid and one for a teacher. So Phelan and I wound up going to the Philharmonic and the opera and the ballet quite frequently. Whenever we did, we would have dinner together, on him, at a French restaurant on Eighth Avenue called *Coq au Vin*. We would order some escargots and some red wine and he would talk about Sibelius, filling in some biographical information, maybe relating Sibelius to Beethoven, stuff along those lines. He would twirl the wine in his glass and talk about the gravel on the banks of the Garonne, wherever that was, how the Medoc differed from the Graves, and so forth.

After the principal informs me that I am no longer welcome in religion class, and should instead just wander the halls, and maybe give some real serious thought to where my life is headed, Phelan and I talk the whole thing over in the yearbook office.

“You realize he has no choice, correct?” Phelan says. Occasionally he gets a little pissed off at me, and this is one of those occasions.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I tell him.

“He is doing it for your own good. You realize that, don’t you?”

“How do you figure?”

“He can see that you are going down a path that leads nowhere. Or, actually, worse than nowhere.”

“Worse?”

“Yes. Significantly worse.”

We both have our feet up on the desks, facing each other, smoking. Hours would pass this way, as we contemplated the eternal verities. Phelan would say something. In response, I would blow a smoke ring. Or vice versa. The smoke rings would float across the room as we thought about things. People would come in and no one would be saying anything, but a smoke ring would be floating across the room, and the two of us would be sitting there thinking about something really interesting.

“In what way is it worse?”

“Because it leads to despair.”

“How so?”

“The testing that you do, the testing of everything for logic, the presumption that everything needs to be logical, in the end that leads to despair, because everything is not logical.”

“No?”

“Logic is an approximation,” he says. “It represents our best guess in regard to the way things actually work. But the real thing is different. The real thing is not confined to logic. Logic is a mere mind construct, merely our best approximation. A picture, in other words. Not the thing itself.”

Smoke ring.

After a while, I say, “I’m not sure I follow you, Phelan.”

“Think about gravity,” he says. “Newton thought he had it figured out, right?”

“Yes.”

“And he had a formula that explained it.”

“Yes.”

“And that formula was the law of gravity.”

“Correct.”

“But there was a problem with the formula.”

“What was that?”

“Well, when Einstein discovered that gravity affected light, that wasn’t covered by the formula, was it?”

“True.”

“Well, certainly not,” Phelan says. “Because the law of gravity dealt with things in terms of their mass. The critical mechanism was the relationship between two objects with mass. And light has no mass, am I correct? If it has no mass, it shouldn’t be affected by gravity, according to Newton.”

“True.”

“But it is.”

“It is?”

“Einstein proved that light from the stars bends as it passes near the sun. So light is affected by gravity. So the law turned out to be not a law, just an approximation.”

“I see what you’re getting at.”

“It’s a rather important point,” he says. “It’s very important to understand that these mental constructs we come up with are merely mental constructs. Logic is merely a mental construct. Color is merely a mental construct. We take these things to be the foundations of the realities around us, but really they are only ideas about those realities.”

“Gotcha.”

He blows a smoke ring. The smoke ring drifts across the room.

“That’s reality,” he says.

I tell him, “I get it.”

After a while, says, “No you don’t.”

Phelan drinks.

I mean, we *all* drink. But he *really* drinks.

Fortunately, he is not the morose, desperate, cornered kind of drunk. More the happy, buoyant, funny kind. But he drinks, alright. He will get about three quarters *schnockered* in the privacy of the rectory and feel so wonderful about everything, about the whole world, the whole universe, he has to get out into the streets of the city and just luxuriate in the glory of God or what have you. It is always all about the glory of God, with Phelan, the glory of God, left, right, and center. But frequently the glory of God is enhanced or facilitated with copious ingestions of Dewar’s White Label on the rocks. The Dewar’s White Label boosts you to an altitude where you can see the glory of God, apparently. You would see Phelan strolling through the neighborhood at night, just wandering around, with this beatific smile on his face, this goofy smile, and know that he had had a few, and if you stopped and asked what he was so happy about, he would say, “The glory of God.”

And just smile at you.

And leave you with that puzzle.

His favorite time to do that is when it was pouring rain.

It will be teeming rain, just teeming, the whole sky just collapsing and falling on our heads, everybody else running for cover, and here comes Phelan, strolling down Park Avenue in a raincoat … and rubbers … he would always wear these big, clunky rubbers, I think because ruining a good pair of shoes would have been a sin … but without an umbrella, because he loved the feeling of the rain falling on his head, apparently, and I think loved being wet with rain … so he is just soaking, just sopping, dripping wet, walking through the rain, water running off his face, off his nose, and smiling at you like a complete lunatic. There is never any point in asking him for explanations because there were no explanations. He doesn’t believe in explanations. If you ask him why he doesn’t believe in explanations, he starts talking about Ludwig Wittgenstein, his favorite philosopher, and the thoughts that occur to Wittgenstein as he is dying.

Ludwig Wittgenstein died on April 29, 1951, in a beautiful house at 76 Storey’s Way in Cambridge, England. At the time, Wittgenstein was working on a book he called *Remarks on Color*, trying to figure out exactly what color *is*. How much of it is psychological, how much a physical reality, and so forth. And the bottom line was, he couldn’t figure it out. All he could come up with is “remarks.” Which somehow struck Phelan as a big breakthrough. Phelan says that, were it not for Wittgenstein’s discoveries at Storey’s End, he would not enjoy walking in the rain so much.

Thanks to Wittgentstein, he says, rain is rain.

We must forever be grateful to the great Wittgenstein. He gave us the rain, or gave it back to us, ater we lost it somewhere for a couple of hundred years.

Whenever I feel a particularly gripping sense of dread, I stroll over to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Normally this would happen after school, after a full day of dread. I would pack up about a hundred pounds of books, all the stuff I needed for homework, and walk over to the Metropolitan, which was right around the corner, up the grand staircase from Fifth Avenue, through the beautiful brass doors in front, then straight back to the marble staircase in the middle of the building, up those beautiful stairs, past the gorgeous white marble Aphrodite at the top, then left, into that first room of dingy, muddy stuff from the Enlightenment or whatever, on into the Impressionist section, where people finally learn to paint their hearts out, and keep going until I get to the room where they have most of the Monets, where finally I hang a right and walk straight to the wall where they kept the painting Monet called “The Seine at Giverny, Morning Mist.” At least that’s what they say he called it.

In other words, I didn’t go there to look at paintings or statues, I went there to look at that one painting.

Same one, every time.

And that is *all* I looked at.

I would just plant myself in front of the one painting and stare at it, sometimes for quite a while, sometimes for half an hour or forty five minutes or even an hour. It may sound nutty, but no one else would be around long enough to realize I was completely hypnotized, they would all be coming and going, a new bunch every ten minutes, so it’s fine.

I just stare at the painting until I am out there on the Seine with Monet, with absolutely nothing to worry about, apart from what color the water is and what color the sky is and what color the leafy branches are and how it all reflects upon itself. What is blue and what is lilac and what is really purple, that’s all that matters. All getting mixed up in this aqueous, dreamy mess of colors and emotions about colors and colors about emotions. I would just stare at that painting and go from pretty thoroughly depressed to pretty calm to really happy in about twenty minutes, most of the time. At which point I could actually hear the water … water slapping the bottom of a rowboat … water swishing through the grass on the riverbank … the birds in the trees … and could actually *smell* the water, although of course the smell was really the smell of Lake Hopatcong. But the museum wouldn’t be there anymore. The museum would dissolve. All that remained was the river, the trees, the light, the water, the sounds of the water.

Which tended to calm me down.

And that is how I met Natalie.

If I got feeling really good in front of the painting, and the weather was nice, I would take a walk through Central Park afterward. Normally I would take the bus through the park, and then get the A train down to the bus terminal. But on special occasions I would skip the bus and walk through the park. The museum is on the edge of the park, if you don’t know New York. So you can walk out of the museum and down the steps and then around the building and into the park.

I feel that the park is a lot like the painting. For me, it’s a tossup which is more beautiful. The park is shady, with sunshine showering down on the trees, bright gold and green in the treetops, but shady on the ground, in most places, like the painting, all mottled blue and purple shadows beneath the trees, spangles of sun on the gray walks, mothers in bright dresses with their children, cute dogs and what have you, all beautiful colors, everywhere. Maybe it is the influence of the painting, but that’s how it looked to me. Of course it makes a difference that you’re right on Fifth Avenue. If we bring the great Impressionists back from the dead and give them travel money to go anywhere they want, they are not going to set up their easels at a gas station in Clifton, New Jersey, they are going to set up their easels in Central Park, in the neighborhood of the Metropolitan, quite possibly at the southeast corner of the building, where the pedestrians are kind of swirling in and out of the park, with baby carriages and strollers.

So this particular day, I stroll into the park deep in a dream, and as usual, the park is so beautiful, the dream continues. I am walking through the mind of Claude Monet, basically. I have my Monet glasses on, if you will. Everything looks *Monetish*. Just creamy, dreamy, sunny, happy, beautiful colors, all mixed up. Not really things, you understand, no particular substance to it, just the beautiful colors of things. Little patches and swatches of beautiful, bright color adrift in the sunshine and the beautiful bluish and purplish shadows under the trees. I don’t really know exactly where I am and it doesn’t even matter.

Natalie is sitting on a bench with a girlfriend, Rosalie Schwarz. I know them both from mixers, but have never actually met either of them. Natalie is so sensationally, so cruelly, so mercilessly beautiful you don’t have to meet her to remember her. People will point her out in a crowd and say, you know, look, there’s Natalie Shea, and when you look, you get knocked right on your can, just completely floored, and remember her for the next five years, probably, in pain every moment. Rosalie is dating a friend of mine, Gene Lugano. So I know who she is, too. And Rosalie is pretty, too. Just not like Natalie. Which is a little sad for Rosalie, I think, to be so close to a girl as beautiful as Natalie, because Rosalie always comes off looking a little plain, when really she isn’t, she just happens to be standing next to this moviestar type.

The two of them are sitting on one of the benches along the edge of the walk that leads into the park. As I approach, I am kind of hoping they don’t notice me. It’s a little bit of a strain to talk to people, when you are a complete neurotic, so normally I prefer to just dream on. I actually consider turning around, to avoid them. But then figure it’s too late. Because, what if they look up and see me turning? Now I see they have recognized me. They suspend their conversation as I approach.

I smile at them. I can’t help myself.

I say, “Hi.”

And pass by.

And take another five or six steps, listening for the resumption of their conversation. When they do not resume, I can’t help but wonder whether they are watching me. And in fact feel the pressure of their awareness. Or *something*. What is it? Something makes me stop. Or makes everything stop, as when an actor misses a cue and blows a line. Everyone stops, and shuts up, and stands there. Because there is no proceeding on this basis. No path to fulfillment, in this direction. There is no choice but to stop. The world must stop turning, the sun stop moving through the blue sky, time stop passing, generally. Here I am on a sunny day in late spring, in the most beautiful park in the world, near the most beautiful girl in the world, on the most beautiful day the world has ever seen, waiting, with my back to her, for the resumption of the flow of time.

She speaks to me.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

How beautiful sounding, that nasally twang from Paramus.

I turn to look toward her again. She smiles at me.

Astonishing.

Reality materializes around me in a new way.

Where there was a dream path, now there is a real path. Where there were dream tulips, now there are real tulips. It is as though her presence is the last necessary element. Now that she is here, the rest is feasible.

“Well isn’t it?” she says.

“Yes. Beautiful,” I tell them.

And walk back to them.

Natalie has a book in her lap, which she and Rosalie are reading together. She holds up the book and reads aloud to me, struggling with the pronunciation a bit. “Quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.”

Looking up at me, she says, “What’s amabat?”

I tell her, “Third person singular, imperfect indicative.”

“Ah,” she says.

“Amo, amas, amat,” I tell them. “Amamus, amatis, amant.”

I love, you love, he loves. We love, you love, they love.

They laugh at me.

Natalie, Natalie, Natalie.

A lovely little arpeggio of a name, isn't it?

A trill, a riff, a chime.

Oh, please just roll all of the cornball, happy-tune analogies you can think of into one cockamamie conception of ringing, rhyming, twelve-part or thirty-part or hundred-part harmony, into choruses of angels, and there you have it, the seductive sonority of that name in the sanctum sanctorum, the crania craniorum … the bombed-out, rock and roll, war-zone chapel of my heart.

Natalie, Natalie, Na-tal-ie.

The counterpoint.

The antipode.

The period to my question mark.

A name more beautiful still when enunciated in her flutey, flighty, slightly sinus-afflicted, maybe very slightly *New Jersey* voice, that voice always gurgling with laughter that wells up out of subliminal reservoirs of the freshest, clearest, most exquisitely cockeyed irony, skiding into falsetto with every pulse of excitement, skating across the surface of things with such glee, plunging into the depths with such courage, a voice that moans and weeps and cries out to me from a pit of grief she cannot escape, rasps with animal hunger when our bodies knots together, so desperate to be merged, says I love you in a hundred different places, a hundred different ways, somehow managing to include whole concertos of new meaning in those three little syllables every single time.

Or so I imagine.

Part of her charm is the intellect. You know she is going to be good at any game you play with her, right up there with Phelan, that way, really, one very important difference being that she enjoys it more, sees it more as fun, and not so desperately important, with sanity itself at stake. If she outmaneuvers you, mentally, she immediately hits you with a pillow. Or throws a sock at you. Or declares victory with a bright-eyed, happy, laughing look. All signifying it really doesn’t matter, it’s all for fun, the only thing that matters is that you are there, that you are together, enjoying the game, one human being to another, human beings walking the earth together.

Which is amazing, no?

To be of the same species? Speak the same language? Share so much of life? Amazing. How fortunate they make more than one copy of a species. How lucky we are not alone. How lucky that there are many humans, many giraffes, many whales, and we can all keep each other company, the whales speaking the whale languages, the humans, their own. And yet, that part of it is never, ever, not in a million years anything to compare with the wisp of blonde hair over blue eyes, where the pure and simple, light and bright little spray of Norwegian sunshine flutters in front of the bright blue of the sea.

There, *that* is where the cataract of my own consciousness goes off the edge.

The next time I see her, it’s about five a.m. on a Friday morning, still May, still gloriously, stupendously May, at a lovely home in Riverdale, which is in the Bronx, just north of Manhattan, but looks more like one of the ritzy suburbs of Connecticut or Jersey.

It’s the morning after the Marymount junior prom.

All the Ignatius guys who are invited climb into tuxedos in this dingy old dungeon of a locker room we have down in the basement. We’re all feeling pretty swell about ourselves, in a totally egomaniacal way, because Marymount is a pretty snooty place, right on Fifth Avenue, and not everyone gets invited, obviously. We are the chosen ones. Our feet do not touch the ground. Most of us are supposed to be geniuses, of a sort, but we still have trouble figuring out the cummerbunds and suspenders, why you need both, and so forth, how stupid it is, blabbering with each other across the tops of the lockers a mile a minute. Our enthusiasm for all this is repulsive to the guys who have not been invited. They grab their books, slam their lockers shut, and get the hell out of there, one or two of them remarking what a colossal waste of time proms are. We have had the girls do a little reconnaissance on the nuns’ plans for refreshments, even so far as determining whether there will be bottles of soda on the tables, as usual, and what brands, mainly so we can get some ginger ale, empty the bottles, and refill them with champagne, to be swapped for the soda on the tables. We meet the girls at Mike Malkin’s, our meeting spot, just to make sure things get off to roaring start. Most of us are vaguely aware we are acting like idiots, I think, tipping the bartenders to get drinks, smoking cigarettes non-stop, adjusting the cufflinks a certain way, more or less constantly trying to figure out what a successful advertising executive would be doing or saying, if he were on his way to the Marymount junior prom, and doing or saying that. When the girls arrive in their gowns, all at once, with flowers in their hair, it’s like the Rose Bowl parade has marched right into the middle of the room. We pretty much own Mike Malkin’s, in cooperation with the other young alcoholics in the neighborhood, but never so much as now, with all these pretty girls arriving, their skirts rustling as they walk, hair all done up, makeup perfect, in a big gust of perfume.

The prom itself is a fairly tame champagne-guzzling affair, because of course the nuns are there, on high alert, feeling really terrific about themselves, as the prom puts them right on the front lines of the war against depravity. As we get giddy, we make sure we are as friendly as pie to the nuns. They keep pointing out to us what a fabulous time we are all having, with nary a drop of alcohol, nodding and smiling and winking at each other over a job well done, and we agree, toasting their wisdom and determination them with the last of the champagne. When the last drop is gone, we take cabs to the Copacabana, of all places. The Copa is probably the single biggest tourist attraction in the city, and for that reason the single biggest waste of money, a stop we just couldn’t miss. It’s a big old barn of a place with long tables lined up perpendicular to this huge stage, where people just drank, drank, drank, as the acts came and went. Just drink yourself into oblivion, into catatonia, as the people onstage sing and tell jokes. Oh, and if possible heckle the comic, so he can cut the whole group to pieces, for being dopey high school kids, out on a tear.

I would be happy to tell you all about Stephanie, my date, if I remembered anything. Stephanie and I were a fix-up date, arranged by Rosalie Schwarz when Stephanie’s boyfriend broke his ankle in St. Moritz or someplace. I do remember Stephanie was quite upset when the bill at the Copa wiped me out and we weren’t sure we had cab fair to get up to Riverdale. On the way, she keeps counting the bills in her wallet, over and over again, constantly losing track of the count, as the cabbie gets more and more suspicious. When we pull up in front of our destination, Helen Hendricks’s house, and explain to the cab driver that we are broke, he curses a blue streak in Spanish, but finally agrees to wait while we go in and panhandle the rest of the fare. Which isn’t easy, because most of the people at this little after party are just as broke as we are.

The plan is we will drink beer and laugh and converse brilliantly all night long, then have an excruciatingly witty breakfast together, like characters in a story in *The New Yorker*, then toddle on down to school and be even more brilliant and witty the rest of the day, thinking up puns and *bon mots* and interesting little stories in class. You couldn’t be an executive at Young and Rubicam if you couldn’t think up a good *bon mot*, at will. Of course around three a.m., the bon mots are in short supply. People start falling asleep wherever there is room to collapse. There’s a guy under the dining room table. There’s a girl curled up in a fur coat on top of a grand piano. Now and then one of the guys with real stamina would try to feel somebody up, somewhere, and you'd hear the two of them tussling. Some hopelessly romantic soul would fart really loud, dead to the world. All more or less the opposite of what we had planned.

Meantime, here is the kind of thing that goes through my mind. If I lie down and go to sleep, I’m going to wake up with my hair going in five different directions, with bad breath, probably, and who knows, I’ll probably start snoring, and someone will have to kick me, and for the rest of my life I will be known as the person who was snoring like a walrus at Helen Hendricks’s otherwise flawless post-prom breakfast party.

So I spend pretty much the entire night sitting in a chair in the dining room, in the dark, thinking. I may have snoozed a little here and there. But for the most part I am totally conscious the whole night. Not only concscious but even, I would say, on my toes. I didn’t even take the jacket off. I undid the bow tie, my one and only concession. I figured, as long as I don’t take it off my neck, my chances of losing it are minimal.

About six in the morning, the light in the kitchen comes on, and there is Natalie, squinting and kind of shielding her eyes, at first, then smoothing her hair back with both hands, and rubbing the sleep out of eyes, with her knuckles, and yawning. Up to that point I hadn’t seen her the whole night, so she must have come in late. She has no idea I am watching her, because I am in the dining room, in the dark. She is in her slip, but with a big goofy sweater on top, a guy’s sweater, which looks like it has been sitting at the bottom of somebody’s locker for a couple of months. She comes toward the dining room, kind of cups her two hands around her eyes, to keep the light out, and leans into the darkness, and speaks very softly.

"Helen?"

For some reason or another I decided to sit there in the dark and watch, and not say anything.

She goes into the living room and speaks very softly again.

“Helen?”

Then Helen Hendricks shows up in the kitchen in a bathrobe.

“Oh,” Natalie says, when she goes back there. “There you are. I was just looking for you. I’m starving. I’m starving.”

Natalie opens the refrigerator and bends down so she can see everything.

“You have any orange juice or anything?”

Helen is starting to make coffee.

"You might have to make it,” she says.

“Oh, shit, Helen."

A guy comes into the picture and puts his hand on Natalie's waist. The guy is Perry Dunbar, a mediocre basketball player and legendary ladies man from Loyola. Loyola is the school the rich kids go to, around the corner from Ignatius. I have never met Perry, but have heard his name a couple of hundred times, minimum, along lines of, whatever Perry was doing, however Perry handled himself, that was the gold standard of human behavior. Because most of us were only sixteen or seventeen years old, none of us could actually *run* Ogilvy and Mather. Short of that, you wanted to be Perry Dunbar.

He slides his hand down the small of her back, kind of edging onto her rear end.

She pushes the hand away.

He slides it down again. She pushes it away again.

Still kind of sleepy-voiced, a little tired-sounding, she says, “Perry, stop, please.”

Next thing you know everyone is waking up, splashing water on their faces, getting coffee, of course lighting cigarettes immediately, peeing, scarfing up cereal, et cetera. The girls organize quick shifts in the shower upstairs as I am marvel at their efficiency. Pretty soon they are in their school uniforms, white blouses and pleated plaid skirts, normal. The prom was always on a weeknight, the rule being that, if a girl didn’t show up for school bright and early the next morning, she was in big trouble. Someone opens the window in the kitchen. I drift over to stand at the window with my hands in my pockets, watching a bunch of wrens hopping around in the rhododendrons outside. Natalie comes in and grabs the phone on the wall, right next to me, and starts dialing fast. Perry comes in after her.

“I’m calling a cab,” she says.

She turns her back on him.

When he tries to speak to her, she puts her hand over her free ear, making it clear she is listening to the person on the phone. He keeps mumbling at her, trying to communicate something without letting the rest of us in on it. She gives the address to the person on the phone, then covers the mouthpiece and lowers the phone and speaks to Perry again.

“No, we’re going,” she says.

She is annoyed about something. When she notices me, she is more cheerful.

“Oh, hi,” she says. “Rosalie told me you were coming.”

I say hi.

Perry says, “Oh, forgive me. I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Perry Dunbar.”

Perry is a very confident guy. A worthy model, is all I can say. It’s just as if he is saying hi, I am Clark Gable. Perry’s eyes are shuttling back and forth between Natalie and I, taking readings on the Sexual Voltage Differential. He says, “You two know each other?”

I start to explain about the park, about translating Catullus for Natalie and Rosalie, but Natalie interrupts me.

She says, “Wasn’t that a beautiful day?”

I feel I have no choice but to take a risk.

“The most beautiful day ever,” I tell her.

“Yeah,” she says.

“Well let’s not get carried away,” Perry says, looking at her.

At this point I decide to head for the hills. If I don’t, I may go down in school history as the guy who was dumb enough to try to steal Perry Dunbar’s girlfriend at the Marymount junior prom. People will be laughing at me thirty years later, at the reunions at *Tavern on the Green*. I have a forged subway pass, so that isn’t going to be a problem. I don’t even say goodbye to people, just walk out the front door and down the walk and right out into the middle of the street, right out into the middle of Independence Avenue, and head for the subway, walking right smack down the middle of the street, in a tuxedo, with the tie lose. I could have been run over and wouldn’t have noticed, probably, I was so completely lost in dreamland over Natalie.

As I get down to the end of the block, I hear a car behind me and move over to the side of the road.

It’s the cab, jam full of giggling, gabbing girls. The cab pulls up alongside me and stops. Natalie rolls the window down and says, “We’d offer you a ride, but there’s no room. One of us would have to sit on your lap.”

They all laugh and joke about that. Which one it would be. Hilarious, apparently.

“Oh that’s alright,” I tell her.

She doesn’t close the window right away. She sits there, in the cab, looking at me. As I am thinking, you know, how nice to be alive, with such a person on the planet.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“No, really,” I tell her. “I’m fine.”

The cab gets going and she puts out her hand and waves to me.

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The last time I rode my bike, I went to see Ann.

I was about to get my driver’s license anyway, but this was the *coup de grace* for the bike, no question about it. This was actually embarrassing, for my poor bike. We come whizzing around the corner onto Ann’s street, the bike and I … picture me leaning over the handle bars, man and machine operating as one, fused into a single unit of thought and energy, like Roy and Trigger … sadly for the last time … *Happy Trails* to you, old buddy … and what do you know, there is Ann, kneeling, actually *kneeling*, if you can believe it, on the little strip of grass between the curb and the sidewalk, beside the most beautiful convertible you ever saw. Specifically, a white Jaguar XKE convertible, with a brown top, and the top down. A car every kid in Clifton knew, because it belonged to Alfie Foderaro, then a senior at Clifton High School and the Clifton equivalent of Perry Dunbar.

A lord of the realm.

If she had been *standing* there, probably this scene would not have made such a big impression on me. But she is kneeling, for God’s sake, with her arms on the door of the car. Alfie is in the driver’s seat, in more ways than one, it appears. She is about as close to him as she can get without actually kissing him.

I don’t even stop. I get one good look at Ann, kneeling there on the grass beside Alfie Foderero’s convertible, and turn right around and ride home and prop the bike against the wall of the garage and never ride the stupid bike again.

Except in my dreams. Where I still it.

Only when I have the driver’s license will I venture to see her again. Finally I borrow my father’s car and drive over. I call her up in advance and tell her I have a couple of things I want to give her. We don’t have to explain to each other. We both know what the heck is going on. I mean, you don’t ride around Clifton, New Jersey, in Alfie Foderaro’s XKE and expect people won’t notice.

We wind up sitting on the front steps.

“Here,” I say, when I am ready to go. “I brought you a couple of things.”

I give her a record I had lying around. This is pretty much as goofy as it gets, I think. She knew the song, because we had danced to the song more than once. I’m not going to say it was *our song*. But we both liked it, let’s say. No question about it, we both knew the words to the song. So she knew what I was trying to tell her, in my stupid way. The record was the Tommy Edwards’s recording of *All in the Game.*

Many a tear has to fall

But it’s all in the game.

All in the wonderful game

That we know as love.

The other thing I give her is a little silver whistle for her charm bracelet. The idea being, something along the lines of, you know, if you need me, whistle. Which is equally ridiculous, I know. Don’t think I’m not aware a lot of this is completely ridiculous. That is the whole point, really. I give her the whistle and say, basically, nothing, because I can’t think of a single thing to say, and then give her knee a friendly little shake, like we’re buddies, which we are not, not even close. She looks at the whistle and says, “Oh, pretty.”

She happens to be wearing the charm bracelet. She attaches the whistle to the bracelet right there. I’m thinking, wow, that’s pretty nice of her. I don’t have an XKE, but I am immortal, all the same. I am the whistle on Ann Devoe’s wrist.

“One thing,” she says.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t ever forget, okay?”

“Forget what?”

“Anything.”

Of course I’m thinking, yes, she’s right. Don’t ever forget even one single thing. It’s all just too beautiful to ever, every forget even one thing. Even if that makes you a complete, raving neurotic.

The second I get home from Ann’s, I climb the stairs to my parents bedroom, which is pretty much the only place in the house where you can talk on the phone with any hope of any privacy whatsoever … although, even there, I figure my mother has one ear cocked in my direction … rapidly correlating any fragments of conversation she can pick up with all the other intelligence she has on me … and kind of toss myself onto my father’s bed, this horizontal flop thing I did, which drove my mother bananas, because she was convinced I was going to break the bed … just flop as loud as hell on the bed, so she knows I am in there making a phone call, and is thus obligated to at least pretend to allow me a little privacy … and just automatically dial Natalie Shea’s phone number, which I have obtained from Rosalie Schwarz in a fairly high-level espionage operation. I didn’t have to memorize the number, that happened automatically. Natalie Shea’s phone number was like the combination to the safe holding the *Star of India*. If you heard it once, you were going to remember it.

I’m sure hundreds of guys had *thought* about calling Natalie and never done it, because if you thought about it, you were dead, no question about it. If you thought about it, you were going to realize that the odds of getting anywhere with a girl like Natalie were just astronomically, stratospherically against you, so why bother.

You had to be kind of dumb to call Natalie.

Anyway she picks up the phone and says hello. She had that very distinct, slightly nasally, sort of lilting voice, a very happy voice, like everything was a little funny, so there was no mistaking her. I introduce myself very politely, sort of formally, the perfect young gentleman, as always, and start into this long rigamarole of an explanation about translating Catullus in the park and the party in Riverdale and so forth, kind of making my case or defending myself, with this big, long, rambling, stupid explanation of why I’m calling her, my excuse, in other words.

“Oh I know who you are,” she says. “I waved to you as we were leaving.”

“Oh, that was you?”

“Oh come on.”

“I thought it might be you.”

“Come on. You knew who it was.”

“Well, possibly, yes.”

“Oh, yes, *possibly*. I don’t need a lot of help with Latin, either, by the way.”

“Ah.”

The date I invite her on is this party on Long Island. The party is being given by Marty Defeo, the genius short story writer at Ignatius. I give Marty a lot of credit for realizing that what was happening around us mattered, what was happening around us was what we wanted to write about. Generally speaking, the impression you are given as a kid is that only what is written in books really matters. If it happens in *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Sun Also Rises* or even in *The* *Gallic Wars,* that matter*s*, while, what is happening to you and your stupid, pimply-faced friends, that’s just the same stupid, boring crap that happens to everybody, and doesn’t matter. Nobody explains to you that Julius Ceasar farted at dinner parties every once in a while. And woke up with crazy hair in the morning, just like you. And had to take time out from writing the *Gallic Wars* to take a crap on occasion. Putting it another way, Marty made the amazing discovery, or amazing to me, anyway, that it wasn’t really necessary to imagine life on a higher plane. We didn’t need to be Ernest Hemingway, making out with fucking Ingrid Bergman, in a pine forest in the Andalusian mountains, in the middle of the Spanish Civil War. As planes go, the plane of Eighty Fourth Street and Park Avenue was fine. We could make out in the back of a bus and write about that and it would be fine. Not to worry.

Marty wrote a pretty good story about the plane we were in. Granted, the story was completely saturated, just reeking of the influence of Jerome Salinger, which can be a little tough to assimilate … obviously Salinger is *such* a lunatic genius … a real pain in the ass, that way … but still, even taking into account that Salinger was kind of helping, maybe even unduly, this little story was pretty good, a nice little slice of *la vida* from Marty, shall we say. As the story begins, a youngish couple are walking across the Sheep Meadow, which is a big open field in the middle of Central Park, on a dreary afternoon in November. In the moment when we join them, they are starting to regret that they decided to cross the field, rather than stay on the asphalt path around it. The field is kind of muddy. The woman is explaining she doesn’t have the right shoes. She is wearing a floppy black hat, which kind of half hides her eyes. We know it’s November, because right away there is passing mention of Thanksgiving Day, always a big day in New York. It’s all very time and place specific, without getting really heavy handed about it. So you feel, oh, shit, this really happened, no question about it. The weather is just dreary, not arctic. Just bad enough to provide an ominous aura, shall we say. Salingeresque, that way. When the woman finishes explaining about her shoes, she starts in talking about adopting a baby, just jumping off the one track and onto another. Blam. No transition. Which was good, I thought. We soon find out that she is all for adopting, the guy is not so sure. He is being cagey. She doesn’t want to pressure him, so she is kind of darting and dancing around the idea. He says he is expecting a promotion, and thinks the whole deal might be a little easier, financially, if they wait, hemming and hawing, on and on. Meantime kids are passing by with their parents. The woman smiles at the kids, nods at their mothers. The guy doesn’t notice them, so much. Obviously he is kind of a heel.

Then, in the middle of the field, a little girl approaches out of nowhere and says, “Excuse me. Have you seen a little white dog?”

The little girl holds her hand about eighteen inches off the ground and says, “He’s about this big and fluffy. I put the leash down and he ran away.”

“What’s your dog’s name?” the guy says.

“Lolly. Like in lollipop.”

“And what’s yours?” the woman says.

“Mimi. But my real name is Naomi.”

Naturally the young couple try to help. The three of them wander around the park asking about the dog. When the young woman asks the little girl where her parents are, the girl explains that her mother is coming to meet her. The guy asks when. The girl explains that she has to meet her mother at four forty five, on a bench beside the pond around Fifty Ninth Street. That is the name of the story, by the way, *Four Forty Five*. They have time, so they look for the dog a while longer. Finally time runs out and the three of them hustle over to the lake. They are sitting on a bench beside the lake as the sun goes down and the lights come on in the apartment buildings that overlook the park. Four forty five comes and goes, and no mom. The girl starts singing the dog’s name. Just singsong chanting the dog’s name, there on the bench, over and over again.

“Loll-eee, Loll-eeee, Loll-eeeeee.”

She stops when she notices a guy jogging toward them around the lake.

“Here comes my father,” she says.

The guy jogs all the way around the lake and doesn’t stop until he gets his arms around the little kid. He squats down to hug her. Then holds her by the shoulders and remonstrates. He is a little upset.

“Naomi,” he says. “I’ve looked everywhere for you.”

“She said she was going to meet her mother here,” the woman says.

“Naomi?” the father says, looking more than a little alarmed, now. “Did you tell these nice people you were going to meet your mother?”

“Why not?” the little girl says.

“Then Naomi has said something that is not true,” the father says. “Naomi, we have discussed this, have we not?”

“We have?” the little girl says.

The father looks up at the young couple and says, “Naomi’s mother will not be coming to meet her. Naomi’s mother passed away last year. So she cannot come to meet Naomi here today. Isn’t that right, Naomi? Your mother isn’t coming here today, is she?”

“Oh, Mimi,” the young woman says. “I’m so sorry.”

By this time we know that the young woman’s name is Linda. Her husband has called her Linda. She has called him Stewart. All woven in quite deftly.

“It’s been a difficult period of adjustment,” the father says. “But we are trying to accept it and deal with it directly, aren’t we, Naomi?”

“Yes,” the little girl says, looking pretty glum.

“We were trying to help Naomi find your dog,” Linda says.

“Lolly?” the father says.

“Yes,” says the little girl. “We were looking for Lolly.”

“Well I’m sorry that we have put you through that trouble,” the father tells Linda. “Lolly is not a real dog. Is he, Naomi?”

“He’s real to *me*,” the child says.

“Precisely, Naomi. That is precisely the point I have been making, Sweetie. And that is what the doctor has told you, right? He is real to you, in other words. But that’s different than being *really* real, right? He is not really real unless he is real to other people, isn’t that right? Other people have to be able to see him and hear him. And Lolly is not really real to other people, is he, Naomi?”

The father is pretty urgent, at this point, holding his child by the shoulders and looking her in the eye, while she looks away. She doesn’t answer him.

“Well is he?”

“No.”

“No, he isn’t,” the father says. “Because no one else can see Lolly or hear Lolly, isn’t that right? Lolly is an imaginary dog, isn’t he? He exists only in your imagination. Which means, okay, yes, he does exist. But only in your imagination. Not in the real world. Can we agree on that, Naomi?”

“I guess,” the child says.

“Okay. Good. Just so long as we know the difference, Naomi. Let’s just make sure we know the difference. That’s the important thing. Knowing the difference. Remember what the doctor said about imagination?”

“I can imagine anything I want to imagine, as long as I know I’m imagining it.”

“Yes. And as long as other people know.”

“Yes,” the kid says.

Now the father seems ready to shrug the whole thing off. He stands up, holding Naomi by the hand.

“At one point we had hoped to have a dog,” he explains to the young couple. “But I’m afraid that’s quite impractical now. The dog would be alone in the apartment all day long. Which would not be fair to the animal, frankly.”

Linda says, “I see.”

“Anyway thank you for trying to help. Naomi, please thank these nice people.”

“Thank you very much for trying to help,” the kid says.

As the father and daughter walk away, the husband says, “Raising a child is big responsibility, Linda. That is not something we want to get into without a lot of thought. Do you agree?”

As the father and daughter walk back around the edge of the pond, the little girl is holding her hand and chanting.

“Loll-eee, Loll-eeee, La-la-la-la-lolly.”

And that’s it. That’s the last line. The little girl chanting.

It floors me.

Only, leave it to our crack creative writing teacher, Mr. Wooten, to foul up a pretty good story up by insisting that we discuss the relationship between the woman and the little girl, and how the imaginary dog actually represents the child the woman wants so badly, and so on and so forth, following along in this steeplechase through the ridiculous maze of Wooten’s mind, where nothing could be what it appeared to be, it had to be something else, and our job was to guess what. In other words, it could not be a pretty little story about a sad little kid. Just a pretty little story about two lonely people who happen to bump into each other. Wootie was not happy until everything became a metaphor for the human condition. Good old Wootie had an absolutely uncanny ability to fuck things up royally, that way. Wootie is a very dapper, sixtyish kind of guy, with whitish hair, very stylish, who apparently wrote a couple of *Talk of the Town* pieces for the New Yorker, once upon a time, a fact he brings to our attention every fifteen minutes or so, without fail. In Wootie’s mind, having a *Talk of the Town* piece in the New Yorker roughly equated to being fraternity brothers with J. D. Salinger himself. Or, like, camp buddies. But anyway, we’re all sitting around this big conference table in the office of the school literary magazine, *The Owl*, discussing our “works,” as Wootie likes to call them, when Wootie asks Marty what the woman in the story is thinking as the girl walks away, chanting the dog’s name.

Just like that.

What she is *thinking*.

Defeo is from the Bronx, by the way. He lives with his folks in this tiny apartment a block or two off Fordham Road, which is not the toughest neighborhood in the city, but not the nicest, either. His father is a watchmaker, of all things. The father works in the apartment, at this tiny roll-top desk, which is crammed full of watches and watch parts, fobs and chains, a regular treasure chest. Marty’s key distinguishing physical characteristic is exceedingly oily, very straight, very black hair, which is formed into a little pompadour kind of thing, in front, and parted on one side, but mostly slicked straight back, like fenders on the side of his head, shiny and black as fresh tar, I swear to God. The father is Italian but the mother is Puerto Rican. Marty is a bit defensive about the Puerto Rican thing, always interested to know whether perchance a new acquaintance might care to express any derogatory opinions about Puerto Rico or Puerto Ricans, so he can go right ahead and punch their lights out without further ado. You might think a guy like that would hate the whole paisley handkerchief, Madison Avenue, ad agency schtick that we were doing, but in fact, no. Marty goes for that whole deal and the hair too. Just throws it all together, what the hell, so he comes off like an a rising young ad executive who very well might be carrying a concealed weapon.

One other thing. Marty’s teeth are not quite right. He has nice teeth, straight and all, but the teeth are a little yellowish, from smoking constantly. He is aware of this. The way he handles it is, anytime he laughs or smiles, he covers his mouth with his hand. So, very much a character in one of his own stories. Not quite equal to the circumstances, in other words.

Then, too, there is something about Wooten that rubs Marty the wrong way.

Maybe the manicure. Wooten always has a nice manicure. He looked like he had the manicure freshened up almost every day. Obviously that is going to be a problem in itself, in the Bronx. Men do not get a lot of manicures in the Bronx.

Or, the New Yorker shit.

Generally speaking, Wooten acts like he has everything down pat, like he understands everything, is above everything, in a way, asking questions about things only because he is obligated too, and kind of filling the time, that way, with us, punching the clock, drilling. So, there again, that’s a pretty good way to get your ass kicked on Fordham Road, because it puts you in pretty much the same category as people who didn’t like Puerto Ricans.

Marty says, “How would I know what she is thinking, Mr. Wooten?”

In Wooten’s presence, Marty always goes out of his way to address Wooten as “Mr. Wooten.” Which isn’t really necessary. Sir was okay. Most people called the teachers sir, which meant nothing, because we called the janitor sir. When Wooten isn’t around, Marty calls him “Wootie.”

Wooten reciprocates by addressing Marty as “Martin” or “Mr. DeFeo.”

The two of them are hilarious, together.

“Well, Mr Defeo,” Wootie says, “You are the author, are you not? You know your characters, I presume.”

I loved that. Are you not? Honest to God, I don’t think Wootie would have known a character if he fell over one. He was such a character himself, he kind of blotted out the horizon, the way. But he loved to lecture people, along these lines.

“But not *that* well,” Marty says.

“Well, tell me this, then, Martin, what do you *think* she was thinking.”

So Marty leans back, stretches, puts his hands behind his head, kind of leisurely, like he is leaning back in a beach chair, and looks at the ceiling for a minute, as though prepared to expound. We all know that’s what Wootie wants from us. The exegesis, he calls it. As long as there is plenty of fucking exegesis, Wootie is happy as a clam. As far as the rest of us are concerned, the exegisis is one hundred percent baloney. But what Wootie wants, Wootie gets, until the bell for the end of the period rings.

Finally, still looking at the ceiling, Defeo says, “I honestly don’t know, Mr. Wooten. Maybe she is thinking, like, I want to get the fuck out of this story, so people will stop trying to read my fucking mind.”

None of this is going to bother Wootie even one little bit.

“Ahah,” Wootie says. “Very well. Maybe she *was* thinking that. Very good. Let’s start there.”

Now everyone else bursts out laughing. Wootie is completely bewildered for about a second and a half, eyes darting around, but rapidly collects himself and refocuses. On he goes, nose to the grindstone, explicating away.

Marty’s folks had this little cabin way the hell out on Long Island, and I mean *way* the hell out, around Quogue. I didn’t know how far it was, I heard the place was on Long Island and thought, well, okay, *Long Island*, it can’t be *that* far. At this point, my father is in the grip of some kind of mid-life crisis, with the result that he has invested in a used Pontiac Bonneville convertible, a really slick looking white one, with really nice bucket seats, these beautiful black leather bucket seats, and a regular rocket of an engine, certainly not an XKE by any means, but probably as close as I was ever going to get. Basically I am thinking, okay, I don’t even *care* how far it is out to Long Island, I’m going to be in this really cool car, with Natalie Shea, so I am willing to drive to Sebastapol, basically.

I am willing to just keep circling the globe in the Bonneville, with the radio on, chatting with Natalie.

Right off the bat, though, the car leads to a problem.

I park in front of Natalie’s house in Paramus, a nice house on a nice street but nothing super special, and ring the bell. The Sheas have a Chihuahua named Rocky. The dog goes berserk anytime he hears the bell ring. The inner door swings open and there is Natalie’s mother behind the storm door, which is mostly one big sheet of plate glass, with a panel of aluminum at the bottom. Every single time I encounter Mrs. Shea she is fully done up, to an extent that is theatrical, actually. Her hair will be all teased up and lacquered stiff in this big “bouffant” sort of do she wore, her face just plastered with makeup, thick as asphalt, with gobs of mascara and eyeliner and lipstick and everything else, so she looks like a Kabuki character, a caricature, but at the same time is kind of coy about it, batting her eyes a little, with eyelashes big as fly swatters, so it’s apparent she considers herself pretty sly, pretty sophisticated, and quite the model of modern femininity, really. She is always in a nice dress, never slacks or shorts or anything casual. Always prim and proper as can be. Never letting anything slip. And that was the main thing, I think. Always in control and kind of stage managing everything to achieve an effect of utmost decorum. Fucking decorum, here, there, and everywhere. Decorum to the last fucking ditch. We don’t want people to think ill of us. Rocky is too small to see over the panel of aluminum, so he launches himself into the air to get a glimpse of the intruder, and just keeps doing that, bouncing up and down. He’s barking his head off, popping into the air every five seconds to check me out, as she is smiling her Kabuki smile, greeting me, finally opening the door and inviting me in. “Ah! Come right in, Arthur. Welcome! I’m so pleased to meet you. I am Natalie’s mother, Mrs. Shea.”

The smile so prim, so mechanical, so sterile, the hand limp, ladylike, numb.

We both have parts to play, and are expected to follow the script to the letter.

Possibly Mrs. Shea hated my guts from the moment she first laid eyes on me. I can’t say I blame her. Possibly she could see I was awash in adoration of her daughter, already overwhelmed, a pitiful peasant in the presence of a goddess. I had washed and waxed the car, and put the top down, so the car looked like a million bucks, but probably from her point of view that was a net negative. As I enter, Rocky is backing up but still yapping and snarling, projecting ferocity as only a Chihuahua can do. Mrs. Shea kind of tilts her roundish head toward the car and says, “Is that your vehicle, Arthur?”

“Oh. That’s my dad’s.”

“Well, I expect you’ll be very careful driving your father’s car.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mrs. Shea, I’ll be extra careful.”

“Because that looks like a very powerful vehicle.”

One thing I pride myself on, I have a way of knowing exactly what not to say, and saying exactly that. I tell her, “It sure is.”

“I meant *too* powerful.”

“Oh.”

“Certainly, caution would be in order, in such a powerful vehicle.”

“Oh, yes, certainly. I didn’t mean to make light of the need for caution.”

I try to laugh at myself, to let her know I recognize how preposterously stupid I am to have allowed for so gross a misinterpretation of my own lofty aims. But must then wonder whether the sound I am making is anything like a real laugh. It is as though the person talking to Mrs. Shea is another person, and I am passing instructions, then observing in disappointment as the other person fails to follow the instructions.

“Can I get you some iced tea?” she says, eyes on the car. “I’m sure Natalie will be with you in just a moment. Sometimes it takes her a little while to get ready. You know how girls are.”

Ha ha, I try to affect a convivial little chuckle, the way adults do. Just taking a wild stab at pretending I know what she is talking about. I don’t wish to come across as completely alien. When people say things, I am expected to understand what they are saying. To have absolutely no idea what a person is trying to communicate, when they are speaking the same language, in one’s native country, is disconcerting, to say the least.

*Girls*.

Ah yes, those whacky, wonderful girls in our lives.

Their antics are quite amusing. Like bouncing Chihuahuas, one and all. What would we do without them, *ha ha*. Mrs. Shea gets us a couple of glasses of iced tea and comes back to face the hard work of chatting with me, while Rocky gradually runs out of gas, like a wind-up toy. I can see in the hardening of her little smile that chatting with me is just a bit distasteful, to her, but she is ready to grind it out. I lower myself onto the couch, taking it nice and easy, because the last thing I want is for the couch to collapse, while she sits on the edge of an easy chair across from me, just barely lowering her can onto the edge of the chair, not to risk anything that might look like relaxation, I suppose. I am not even sure her can comes to rest on the chair. She looks like she might be hovering.

“Summer is *such* fun, isn’t it?” she says. She takes the tiniest possible sip of tea, a miniscule amount, really, ingesting a grand total of maybe two or three drops, and rolls that two or three drops around in her mouth, the mouth reshaping around that one tiny sip of tea, to derive maximum enjoyment, I guess, before she finally ingests it, with some difficulty, it appears, perhaps not wishing to overindulge? One tiny, very carefully controlled sip is all she allows herself, followed by the tiniest, tightest, most carefully controlled, most carefully calibrated expansion of that miserable little smile, along with the statement, “What could be more fun than a summer party with friends, on Long Island?”

“Yes. It sounds grand, doesn’t it.”

I hate myself sometimes. Grand, for God’s sake. I felt like shooting myself right there. But she amps up the smile just a bit more, letting me know I am headed in precisely the right direction. Which is *grand*. Honestly, I was willing to do anything to get along with this woman. If she needed a bridge partner, she could sign me up.

“I only hope there won’t be any reckless consumption of alcohol,” she says.

“Oh, certainly not,” I tell her.

I hope that my facial expression reflects contempt for the very idea of reckless consumption. It’s just a good thing she does not know of my great admiration for Jerry Tedesco and the way he poured an entire pitcher of beer straight down his throat, ingeniously re-engineering his own esophagus to obviate the need for swallowing, in much the same way as a toilet flushes, actually, provoking whoops of approval and applause before exiting the Terminal Bar to spew a fountain of urine-colored vomit into the gutter, a proud moment for us all.

“Well, you and your friends will be driving all the way out and all the way back, you’ll want to stay alert.”

“Ah, yes, absolutely.”

“I’m certainly glad to hear that,” she says. “Let me see how Natalie is doing.”

The dog guards me while she is away. He figures he has me pinned down, he might as well keep me there, cornered, and minimize any potential for damage. Not barking anymore, but resting on his haunches and training one bulbous Chihuahua eye on me. The peace is short-lived, though. Possibly dogs have special detectors for Sexual Voltage Differential, because Rocky starts barking his head off, now spinning in place, the moment Natalie enters the room. In truth, I am kind of spinning in place myself. On my mental dashboard, the needle indicating Sexual Voltage Differential is pegged, vibrating under strain, like the pressure gauge on a boiler that is ready to blow.

“Ohhhhhhh, poor baby,” the mother is saying, as she observes the dog’s wild rotation. “He doesn’t want you to go, Natalie!”

When Natalie pays no attention, mom seems to suggest that maybe we should skip the whole Long Island thing and stick around to keep the dog company.

“Natalie, look at him!”

Why do I feel I should describe what Natalie is wearing in exhaustive, worshipful detail? Perhaps there is a need to document the true depth of the mania. There is nothing particularly unusual about her attire, really. She is a typical American teenager, outfitted at Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s, ready to appear on the cover of *Seventeen*, if called upon, as a kind of amalgam of conventional expectations, but in this instance executed to perfection, crisp white cotton slacks with a fresh, sharp crease, strappy sandals of white patent leather setting off her coral-tipped toes, the little clutch handbag of rough hemp, so perfect, the floral blouse, the single pearl suspended on an ever so delicate gold chain, the flossy, golden hair, the azure eyes twinkling with awareness of the irony in it all, the absurdity in it, the poignance in our own inability to transcend the absurdity, doomed to be human.

She sees the car and says, “Where did you get *that?*”

“The car?” I say, pretending there might be another possibility.

“We should put the top up.”

“But it’s such a beautiful day.”

“If we don’t, my hair will look like it went through an egg beater. Besides, my mother will be a whole lot happier.”

“Why is that?”

“She feels that convertibles are dangerous. Because, you know, what if we roll over? That kind of thing. My mother is kind of a safety freak, now. You know about my brother, right?”

“No.”

“That my brother died last year?”

“Oh. No. I’m very sorry to hear that.”

I open the door for her, she hops in.

“That’s terrible. What happened?”

“My brother drove his car off a pier and into the Hudson River. He took a wrong turn, apparently.”

“Oh, Jesus. He drowned?”

“Get in,” she says. “Let’s get the top up.”

I hasten to unbutton the boot that covers the convertible top, not wishing to lose the thread, conversationally, then hop into the car and hit the switch that puts the top up, setting all this amazing machinery in motion, the grinding and clanking, the top extending over us like the great, black, rubbery of a pterodactyl, then finally sinking into place perfectly, where I can buckle it to the windshield, in a pretty effective display of my own technical abilities. As the stainless steel buckles snap shut, Natalie turns toward the front of the house, where her mother stands behind the plate glass.

She waves and mumbles “Bye bye” in a voice barely loud enough for me to hear, let alone her mother, trusting that her mother could read her lips, I guess. And the mother does the same, mouthing the word “Bye” behind the sheet of glass.

“I certainly don’t want to pry,” I tell her.

“Oh that’s alright. I’m not all that sensitive about it, anymore. “It’s kind of a toss-up between drowning and hypothermia, apparently. It was April, so the water was very cold. But I guess drowning is what actually kills you, in the end. You get so cold you just kind of give up and drown, apparently. I prefer not to think about it too much, if you want to know the truth.”

Purring along, tooling along, man and his machine, down Princeton Drive, to Elm, to Reservoir, to Forest Avenue, then onto the highway, toward the bridge.

“We visit the grave every Sunday. You want to know something spooky?”

“Sure.”

“She talks to him in his grave.”

“Hunh, that is a little spooky, isn’t it?”

“You bet. We all stand around the grave while my mother updates my brother on all the family activities. She wants him to feel included. And we kind of wait for him to answer. It’s like, she expects him to answer. And when he doesn’t answer, it’s a little awkward. Although, sometimes I think she can hear him, that he answers *her*.”

“Hunh.”

We give each other the whole rundown on family members. Her father is a mechanical engineer. He specializes in designing vending machines for frozen food products, mostly ice cream. He feels quite challenged in his work, because it’s tough to keep the ice pops and creamsicles cold while also keeping the machines in proper working order. Either the creamsicles are going to melt or the machine is going to freeze, that was the challenge. So the father is fighting off nightmares about crystals of raspberry-flavored ice creeping menacingly across the surface the levers and gears. Meantime, her other brother is drinking a lot of beer and smoking a lot of weed at Boston College, causing Natalie to worry that he, too, will take a wrong turn into the Hudson, leaving her holding the bag Mom.

“Then I would have to kill myself,” she says very calmly, looking out the window. “She would be talking to the two of them, at that point. Might as well make it a clean sweep.”

The Defeo house turns out to be a very modest little bungalow in the pines, brownish red, solitary at the end of a long dirt drive, with pine paneling inside, pine logs stacked up beside the barbecue pit, little flower beds here and there, where pine chips are spread around the geraniums. Natalie and I change into our bathing suits in a claustrophobic little pine-paneled bathroom where nothing has changed for fifty years. Separately, of course. First me, then her. Looking down at my penis, I see it as an instrument intended to facilitate the satisfaction of Natalie. A moment later, when the thought crosses my mind that she is naked in there, with the faucet dripping onto a spot of rust, the window open, her bare tits visible through the window, the perfect imaginary tits, a branch caressing the window screen with pine needles, I struggle to recover my focus on reality. She emerges in a two-piece bathing suit that provides a lot more coverage than anything we might want to call a bikini, Navy blue with white polka dots. Yet this hits me hard, as her legs get the better of me, or her thighs, I should say, sleek and firm and joined at the delta of her pelvis in a manner evocative of ballet, of a creature from Swan Lake. Off we go to the beach to gambol in the surf with a football Marty has brought along. All these inveterate bookworms trying to look like star quarterbacks. And believe me, I am as goofy as the next guy. More so, maybe, because Natalie’s presence makes me I want to do a double somersault over a wave, catching the football with one hand and runnig all the way to Paris across the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

That evening we grill hamburgers and hot dogs over the barbecue pit in the pines, reclining on blankets and beach towels spread over the umber clay that surrounds the barbecue pit, as rosy embers float up and wink out against the field of stars, something we were keeping an eye on, by the way, as we didn’t want to incinerate ourselves. At some point the conversation turns to the departure of Mr. Phelan and his plan to serve as an orderly at a cancer ward in the Bronx, changing bed pans and passing out pain killers and so forth, a plan that is, as I understand it, a kind of substitute for going to purgatory, in the sense that it is supposed to purge Phelan of what he calls “the visceral instincts” and give him a much better shot at eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, down the road. DeFeo happens to be familiar with the hospital and is quite skeptical, as usual. He regards all plans advanced by teachers as flim-flams, until proven otherwise. Because the scrub pines all around us are mostly scraggly and low, the sky above seems especially vast, this particular night, an endless ocean of a sky, swallowing the earth. Clutching his knees to his chest, with a cigarette in his hand, DeFeo relates his conversation with Phelan on the subject of the cancer ward.

“I asked him what he could do to actually help these people,” DeFeo says.

“And what did he say?” I inquire.

“He says, that’s not the way it works, dummy. He says he is not going there so he can help *them*. He is going there so they can help *him*.”

“Ah, well, bravo,” Natalie says.

She and I are sitting together on a blanket on the gravel, in bathing suits and sweatshirts, both a little uncomfortable, a little cool, I think, but not really minding it, or at least I wasn’t, as our thighs touch, from time to time, and heat seems to flow from her flesh into mind. Not only heat but happiness, of a radiant sort, like sunshine, sustaining me.

“Bravo?” says DeFeo.

“Well,” she says. “It shows he’s at least thinking.”

“The place smells like urine,” DeFeo says. “It has that death smell.”

“So?” she says. “We should just throw up our hands, because the place is a little smelly?”

“My point is, there is nothing he can do about it. Nothing he can say is going to alter the situation, for these people. And nothing they can say is going to alter the situation for him. It’s all mind games.”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” Natalie says. “He can think it through with them, can’t he? Isn’t that what they need to do? Just think it all through and understand it for what it really is?”

DeFeo says, “And what is it, really, Natalie?”

Even now there is just a hint of that happy, hiccupping lilt in her voice, not exactly bubbly, not idiotically bubbly, but buoyant, let’s say, a spirit always bobbing to the top of whatever it is, able to rise above and enjoy a happy laugh at whatever it is. That never goes away, it seems. If you are accustomed to schizophrenic graveside conversations with your dead brother every Sunday morning, a lot of other stuff looks pretty cheery, I suppose. But there is something more there, it seems to me, something deep down optimistic. Or at least not afraid.

“Well,” she says. “It’s creation.”

“Creation?”

“Yes,” she says. “It’s really all one thing, isn’t it? We choose to divide it into life and death, good and evil, cancer and not cancer. But really it’s all one thing, isn’t it? Really life isn’t good and really death isn’t evil, it’s all the same.”

DeFeo flicks the ashes off his cigarette with his thumb. Flick, flick, flicking away.

“Did anyone else understand that?” he says to the group gather around the fire.

I chime in, “Yes.”

She ploughs right ahead.

“I’m not saying we can understand it fully,” she says. “There is no nice neat package there, that I can see. What I am saying is, just accept that. Understand what you can understand. But also, understand what you cannot understand. Know your limits. If there is a mystery there, accept the mystery. Don’t make stuff up to fill in the blank. Just let it be a blank.”

“I don’t think that would be particularly comforting to people dying of cancer,” DeFeo says.

She is smiling at him in the darkness, her devastating, fashion magazine smile.

“Oh I don’t know,” she says. “I think there is comfort there, myself. When I think about death, I think of what Haldane said. The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it’s stranger than we *can* imagine.”

DeFeo says, “Who the fuck is Haldane?”

She tells him, “An English biologist.”

On the way home, Natalie and I get stuck in traffic on the Long Island Expressway. We stop for a while, then creep along for another twenty or thirty yards. We are able to put the top down in the middle of the Long Island Expressway, so now the summer night is all around us, moon and stars and radios playing in other cars. We while away the time with a rather involved discussion of the limits to man’s powers of cognition and the implications for frame of mind.

"In a way, it's nice to be stupid," she says, twirling a wisp of hair.

Basically we’re in the middle of this big parking lot, with the top down, the radio playing, other radios playing.

"I’m not sure I follow.”

"People think it's the *not knowing* that bothers them. They think, you know, if only we had all the answers. But really, that's what saves us, if you ask me. I mean … the thing about knowing is, it's a little too final, isn’t it? It’s so solid, so final, when you know. Because … once you know … well then you always know. You can’t *un-know* a thing, right?”

“I’m not so sure,” I said.

I was thinking of Phelan and the Dewar’s on the rocks. When Phelan really got going on the Dewars, on a rainy afternoon, I think he did quite a bit of un-knowing.

“Where, something that’s mysterious, that’s more … ummmm … what’s the word I want… I think … like … *spacious*.”

“Spacious?”

“Yes. Because, where there is a mystery, there is no limit. Where there is mystery, the truth can be anything. It can be something more wonderful than we could ever imagine.”

“Nice way to think.”

“That is how I think of death,” she says, starting to pick up a little steam. We’re creeping along “Probably death is the most wonderful esperience in the world, an experience more wonderful than we could ever imagine, in a hundred million years. That is the way Einstein looked at things, I think. Einstein was wonderful, that way. Always seeing the positive possibilities.”

And she raises her arms and reaches out to the heavens, as though to embrace everything, as the car creeps along.

She is professionally beautiful.

Makes money at it, I mean.

I kind of like that.

My feeling is, if you are going to go after a girl, don’t go after one in Triple A. Go after one who has made it to the big leagues, one who can actually *sell* her appeal in magazines and television commercials.

Think of the prestige there.

Does my delving into every aspect of this cause awkwardness, of a sort? I think we have established that there is a thread of lunacy, along these lines, woven deeply into the fabric of all our lives. I am merely following the thread. For that matter, I am a professional too. I have a summer job writing feature stories and theater reviews at our local newspaper, the Herald News. Imagine the horror of the playwright who realizes his work will be reviewed by the testosterone-crazed, acne-afflicted, teenage egomaniac in the second row, who basically pays no attention to the play, because the pinkie finger of his right hand is in contact with his date’s thigh, exposed to the surge of a hundred thousand volts of sexual energy, to the point where his hair is standing on end and he lacks the mental capacity to even *notice* anything else.

If people want to pay me to *say* witty shit, is there anything wrong with that? Same if they pay her to be beautiful, charming, alluring, right?

Or no?

Our first kiss is on the lawn of Applegate's.

Applegate’s is an ice cream place in Montclair, New Jersey, which is right next door to Clifton but completely different in every respect, or at least I think so. The key point being, Montclair has been there for about two hundred years, so there are all these really old oaks and elms and beeches, great green vaults of leaves over-arching the streets in summer, shady sidewalks and lawns on practically every street, and really beautiful old houses of stone and timber, each built for a real family, not a manufactured family or a formula for a family, so more a real American town, with American families, not so much the tired, the poor, the wretched refuse, what have you, and consequently no phantom Panzer divisions, no steaming chicken shit, no statutes of the lachrymose Our Lady of Lourdes, made of painted plaster, hovering over shit-spattered bird baths with painted tears.

More the Mark Twain America than the Philip Roth America, if you look at it from a literary point of view.

More the America that did *not* need a psychiatrist.

More those wonderful covers Norman Rockwell drew for the Saturday Evening Post, where God is in his heaven and we’re all Yankee Doodle Dandies here on earth, here in the greatest fucking country in the world, the America of … to use Defeo’s perhaps infelicitous phrase … *Booth Fucking Tarkington* [Author’s note: Booth Tarkington was a best-selling American author in the early part of the Twentieth Century, originally a corn-fed Indiana kid, but educated at Princeton and said to have been known there as “Tark,” although, based on my own experience of Princeton, I have to believe it would have been “Tarkie” instead; but in any event in every way the predecessor of F. Scott Fitzgerald, *another* Princeton guy DeFeo didn’t like, based mostly on the suspicion that their ilk didn’t get along well with Puerto Ricans, but also on the knowledge that their brand of literature focuses mostly on the self-indulgence of the upper class, both materially and psychologically, and the disappointments that come when life turns out to be something other than a big fat bowl of cherries, which was obvious at the start, from DeFeo’s point of view. Poor Fitzgerald. I often think that, had Tarkington not envisioned the big bowl of cherries so effectively, had he not rendered so exquisitely this big, delicious, wedding cake of a world, the *Penrod* world where every noble sentiment is rewarded, every dream fulfilled, every desire satiated, but in a *nice* way, why then Fitzgerald would not have faced the grim necessity of drinking himself to death in Hollywood.]

Anyway, between Grove Street and the picture perfect, storybook red farmhouse and barn where they make and sell the ice cream, buildings that represent thethe very quiddity of country clapboard quaintness, there is an equally perfect, equally idealized lawn where Natalie and I recline on the grass to eat our sundaes and watch the cars roll by on a jewel of a summer night.

She licks at a dab of strawberry ice cream poised at the end of a shiny white plastic spoon, barely touching it with the tender tip of her adorable tongue, tasting tentatively, and appearing to ponder the taste, when in fact she is pondering something else.

She says, “I’ve decided to go to Wellesley.”

I simply repeat the word, a name with a special resonance, especially there, in Montclair, because it’s a Booth Tarkington kind of word, used in a Booth Tarkington kind of place, and in my mind evocative of another a Booth Tarkington kind of place.

“Wellesley.”

Only a person like Natalie could simply decide a thing like that. Others would need to apply.

“My mother is ecstatic.”

“That’s’ nice.”

“It’s the fulfillment of her dream.”

“Hers?”

“Well, ours, say. I think she’s entitled, frankly.”

As the cars roll by, the music from the radios wafts toward us through the open windows, blowing over us in waves, three or four seconds of each tune, louder or softer according to the mood of the driver, accruing to consciousness as nacre to the pearl, layer after layer of music, emotion, longing, desire. The Beatles sing *Penny Lane*. The Stones sing *Ruby Tuesday*. Frank Sinatra sings *Strangers in the Night*. I find it interesting that each tune contains instructions and suggestions regarding how to handle romantic relationships. It borders on the incredible, but the fact is human beings get most of their information about love from popular music, not from serious academic research. My own parents seem to have received much of their guidance from Sinatra, a hoodlum who was thrown out of high school in Bayonne, New Jersey.

What is there to say, that the great Sinatra has not already said?

That *Frankie* has not said.

The canopy of stars, the lush leaves of summer whispering in the dark, the sighing of the tires on the roadway as the cars pass, what is there to say about any of it?

Anything but silence is inadequate.

Anything but a kiss, inadequate.

The silence invites the kiss, somehow. Requires the kiss. The silence is a vacuum that can only be filled with a kiss.

It has to happen. There is no choice.

I roll toward her and prop myself on my elbow and lean close, so our legs are touching. She turns her head toward me, looks into my eyes, and smiles her happy, her gleeful smile.

“It’s all right,” she says.

“What?”

“*You know*.”

And I do. I do know.

One ethereal kiss, then.

One kiss in heaven. And then return to Earth.

And hover near.

How close we are now, how nice it is to be close, oh, so close, our noses almost touching. Then touching. Then not. Then touching. How *nice* to see the street light set the fuzz on her cheek aglow, to hear her murmurous, her sonorous, her voluptuous viola of a voice so near and so clear, meant only for me, audible only to me, the infinitely subtle and sensitive and compendious meaning of the words evident only to me, decipherable only by me, a secret between us two, sweetened by the strawberry scent of her heavenly breath, her hair on the grass, golden on the green, so much finer than the grass, radiant in the electric light, her happy eyes inviting me into the inner realm, twin portals to another existence, another sky, another universe, another beautiful dream of happiness, complete unto itself.

"On a night like this, a girl *wants* to be kissed.”

She kisses me back.

I kiss her back.

Kisses on a summer night.

Ideally, someone approaches from behind and blows my brains out.

That summer, we eat a lot of ice cream and make out a lot in parking lots and parks.

We finish making out in the parking lot behind the Dairy Queen in Paramus and Natalie is smoothing her hair down and adjusting her clothes, tilting the rear view mirror this way and that, to make sure she can pass inspection by her mother. When I turn, I see the girl in the next car doing exactly the same thing, in exactly the same way. Now it is August, and we lie entwined in each other’s arms, beneath the great spreading oak in Anderson Park in Montclair. I am thinking, wow, this oak was here for a hundred years before we got here, just a few minutes ago, and will be here for a hundred years after we are gone, a few minutes from now. And yet, here we are. For a few minutes.

Lying in each other’s arms beneath that tree, we are happy.

Lying in the gondola of her arms, I am happy.

One minute, adrift in the lagoon of happiness. The next, swept out to sea, a sea happiness. Oddly, we have no trouble reading each other’s minds. When the question arises, are you thinking what I am thinking, the answer is always yes. Thoughts seem to occur simultaneously, a single lightbulb going on over the two heads.

What did I want from women?

Was it only to be rocked again?

To rock, and be rocked, in the gondola of femininity? Which glides back into that only perfect tenderness, back into the memory of that first and only complete and perfect happiness?

I notice that, when I touch her, I seem to be able to discern how her whole body is feeling. The slightest contact between fingertips effects a dense transmission of information, a regular torrent of revelation about our innermost feelings and most delicate sensations. Or so I imagine. It seems the neural pathways are interconnected., that impulses are passing from the tips of her toes to the tips of mine. A single circuit. Psychologically, we are transmuted. As our tongues intertwine, we stand in the naked in the sunshine, beautifully and exultantly naked, and happy in our nakedness, having shed the shame with the clothing, just ecstatic that the sun is shining on our true selves for at least one moment of this existence.

Is that it?

That she authorizes me to *exist* as I really am?

Here we have Columbia College on a beautiful day in May, when I visit with my high school chum Reiter to arrange for a room in one of the dormitories. Imagine. A *college* on Broadway. The campus is bathed in the limpid light of order and reason. We amble through the iron gates and on down College Walk to the edge of the great plaza, there to behold the serene confidence and optimism of Locke and Voltaire, of Hume and Kant, the humans who were not afraid to be human … and not afraid to be *only* human … a concept set out here in the unmistakable, non-negotiable terms of monumental architectural, constituting a kind of grand piazza of man's happiness, constructed not by angels and devils but by mortal men … as a shrine to their own powers of observation and reason and … love?

The piazza to end all piazzas, it is. An idea to fall in love with if ever there was one.

Oh, and I do fall in love, instantaneously, swept off my feat, embracing the whole deal and taking to heart its reassuring assertion that, where there are lines, there must be an angle. Where there is a sine, there must be a cosine. Where there is a question, there must be an answer. Normally, one can reasonably expect the answer to be framed in the wonderfully orderly and precise prose of Oxonian English, the coin of the realm, here, because we … and by we I mean myself and Reiter and other leading lights of the Western World, whose names are inscribed in the entablature of Butler Library … Aristotle and Socrates and the rest … have this whole deal pretty much figured out, don’t we?

It’s all pretty much settled, isn’t it? Civilization, I mean?

The guesswork is over, right?

I mean, we wouldn’t be studying all this stuff unless it were … pretty solid?

Which is why the birds that drop out of the clouds and settle in the boughs of the linden trees on College Walk look unearthly wise and peaceful to me. Very well educated birds, these are. They seem to nod in acknowledgement at perceptive passersbys. In the sunny expanse of the great square, where manicured hedges hem the unblemished lawns called South Field, knots of leggy young women linger leisurely at play with their rosy-cheeked toddlers, contented as any crack-brained philosopher could ever hope. Arrayed on the perimeter are the dormitories and the classroom buildings where students are expected to live and work as celibate hermits. If it was good enough for Alexander “Hammie” Hamilton, our celebrated classmate … why then it is good enough for me, is my attitude.

Reiter is another guy from the Bronx. His father is a doctor, from a background that is Austrian, somehow, a little mysterious, with a little mustache that isn’t exactly an Adolf Hitler mustache, but dangerously close, if you ask me, so that, coupled with his propensity toward embroidered suspenders, hats with feathers, and liederhosen in summer, the mustache does raise questions. The Reiters considered themselves the elite of the Bronx, if that isn’t an oxymoron. His mother is a very traditional, docile, even saintly Irish type, named Katherine but known as Kitty, her blouse always buttoned tight around her neck, her lead-colored haired piled atop her head strictly for storage there, as a purely practical matter, and no other purpose, at least as far as I can discern, presenting a pretty good example of the way religious women can rid themselves of sex, when they want to, living in terror of it, I have to believe, as sex is pretty much all that stands between them and the eternal life of leisure, where there are no babies to change, no diapers to wash, no vacuuming to be done. Just make sure you don’t get laid and all be well. She runs the doctor’s office and refers to her husband as Dr. Reiter or, sometimes, “the good Dr. Reiter.” The two of them frequently attend mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral and are part of the coterie there, so they get to kiss the bishop’s ring anytime they want, putting themselves in a swell position to transit directly to paradise at the instant of death, or at least catch the express, the “A” train to heaven, say, which I think they were pretty much counting on, particularly Mrs. Reiter. She did a lot of volunteer work for Ignatius and , as she once put it, “those who have not experienced the Good Lord’s blessings to quite the same degree as ourselves.”

Reiter and I wind up rooming with two juniors at Carman Hall, a high rise dormitory representing the last word in housing efficiency, all steel and cinderblock and linoleum tiles and something of an eyesore, really. One of the juniors is Phil Feinstein, a Jewish kid from Rockaway Beach whose life plan is to become either a) a movie star or b) a successful orthodontist in the Rockaways. Remarkably, it turns out that Phil and Natalie were co-stars in the only movie Natalie had ever made, a no-budget short for kids entitled *Spoiled*, where Phil plays the spoiled kid and Natalie is the girlfriend who helps him learn a valuable life lesson. Apparently their mothers fight on the set over who is upstaging whom. Phil goes on to become one of the kid assistants on *Watch Mr. Wizard* on television on Saturday mornings, a show where the avuncular Mr. Wizard shows his starry-eyed assistants one home-cooked phenomenon of physics and chemistry after another, setting fire to Brillo pads, snuffing out a candle with an Alka Seltzer, that sort of thing, while the young assistant serves as obedient factotum, adjusting the Bunsen burner as instructed or spooning out the dry ice while gee-whizzing with goggle eyes at appropriate intervals. Phil is the perfect foil for our other rooomate, a goy's goy from Des Moines, Iowa named Chris DeVries, who introduces himself to Reiter and I as “DeVries, with a capital V.” DeVries determined to become the only Columbia student ever to record straight A-plusses through four years of school and to eventually serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Reiter and I feel fortunate that Phil has somewhat ameliorated the oppressive air of a penitentiary by transforming the room he shares with DeVries into a kind of miniature cocktail lounge, complete with dark drapes, compact bamboo bar trimmed in fake tiger skin, miniature refrigerator, a stereo on which he plays an eclectic mix of Jimmy Hendrix, Judy Collins, Phil Oxx, Cream, Ian and Sylvia, and the Beatles, all the popular stuff, and the pièce de résistance, a miniature Japanese TV, with a screen about the size of a wallet, on which we watch football games on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, more or less imagining the action, based on the play by play, because, from across the room, where we sit against the “bolsters” that make Phil’s bed a little like a sofa, we can’t see much on the wallet-sized screen. Although, possibly the pièce de résistance was Phil’s girlfriend, Noel, from Sarah Lawrence, who usually arrived on Saturday afternoon and stayed until we turned on the football game on Sunday afternoon, and who, at about midnight on Saturday, could usually be heard screaming her lungs out as Phil worked his magic, sexually, a disturbance the rest of us were more than happy to tolerate, because, after all, Phil was furnishing the bar, the record player, and the miniature television. Besides, Noel’s moans and screams were pretty entertaining. There was something about the cinderblock … maybe it never actually absorbed any sound … just bounced it around … but for whatever reason we could always hear Noel gradually getting excited, moaning, the increasing tension, the sound of distress as she built toward the big crescendo, and then, finally, the totally tasteless bellowing as she went over the top and plunged into ecstasy the maelstrom of ecstasy, while, meanwhile, Devries is ploughing through the Supreme Court opinions of Felix Frankfurter, *in the same room* with the nymph and the satyr, and Reiter and I are seated at our desks in the adjoining room, staring at each other in abject bewilderment.

Frequently Phil drove Noel back to Sarah Lawrence on Sunday afternoon, giving the rest of us a chance to discuss the intensity of her orgasm the night before and sometimes rating it on a scale of one to ten. This system eventually broke down because, as time went by, Noel seemed to attain new heights of orgasmic abandon. It sounded like she was being thrown out of the building, at one point. I was quite concerned, at first, and expressed my concern to Reiter and DeVries, one afternoon when Phil was off to Sarah Lawrence.

“What is he doing to her?” I ask, more or less rhetorically, assuming no one knew.

Devries ignores me.

I press on.

“It sounds like he’s *torturing* her.”

Devries has this big hank of blonde hair that hangs in his eyes, which he sweeps upward, on the infrequent occasions when he is willing to put down the opinions of Felix Frankfurter and make eye contact with one of us. He usually has a growth of a couple of days on his beard, as he looks upon shaving as a waste of precious study time. He doesn’t sleep much, either, harboring doubts about the productivity of sleep, as well. All in all, the march toward the Supreme Court is taking its toll. He looks like he has been stranded on a desert island for a couple of months. Turning to me at this instant, he throws the hair back, and says, “You dumb shit. You don’t *know*?”

“You *do*?”

“Of course I know. I’m in the same *room* with them. You think I’m deaf? He’s *eating* her.”

“Eating?”

I am thinking in terms of cannibalism, a highly unlikely scenario, given the involvement of a Jewish pre-dental student from Rockaway Beach. Even Reiter knows better. Reiter is a pretty serious guy, mostly focused on his studies, as he wants to be a doctor like his dad. But even he understands eating. He handles the translation of the term dispassionately, as though offering a definition of, say, British Thermal Units, while maintaining focus on the on the miniature television screen and the football players the size of dimes. To make sure he is heard over the play-by-play, he enunciates with particular clarity, more or less announcing it.

“Licking … her … vagina.”

I don’t think I’m inferring too much if I say Reiter’s inflection conveys distaste in regard to personal hygiene.

“Phil has evolved a certain technique,” DeVries says solemnly. “He’s a master at it, apparently. Phil Feinstein may well be the premier cunt lapper in the Western World. I’ve been listening to it for three years, and he only gets better. He plays them like violins, I’m telling you.”

“I don’t know how you get any sleep, with that going on,” I tell him.

“Don’t be silly,” DeVries says, matter of factly. “You sleep before, you sleep after. The actual procedure doesn’t take forever. I’ve timed it more than once.”

“How long?” says Reiter.

“On average, it’s about sixteen and a half minutes from start to finish,” DeVries says. “A little longer if he’s pulling out all the stops. The longer the buildup, the bigger the bang at the end, apparently. But the variations tend to fall within a range of about four minutes. You can figure that, twenty minutes after it starts, it’s over. Then, they fuck. Which is usually about five minutes. So, figure half an hour, give or take. She is usually out like a light in half an hour. It totally drains her.”

“*Drains her?*” Reiter says. “It sounds like it near *kills* her.”

“I hear you,” says DeVries. “The women of this country should have Phil’s tongue declared part of the national parks system.”

And back to Felix Frankfurter he goes.

What a happy foursome we will be, Feinstein and DeVries and Reiter and I, getting sloshed on Singapore Slings while munching Pu Pu Platters at Trader Vic's (the Polynesian-themed bar in the basement of the Plaza Hotel), then standing up in the convertible Phil has borrowed from his dad and singing the Columbia fight song at the top of our lungs as we career through Central Park at two in the morning. Or, standing up and singing in the same convertible as we career up the Henry Hudson Parkway, now turned out in its splashiest autumn color, to watch Columbia's handsome star quarterback, Marty Domres, dissect another team of witless nincompoops from Dartmouth or Brown or Lafayette. *Roar, Lion, roar*, we sing.

Just like real college kids.

Then it's off to Harvard to stay with my old grammar school basketball buddy, Bobby Conte, and visit Natalie at Wellesley. When I awaken on a couch in Bobby’s comfortable suite of rooms at Wigglesworth Hall, I feel that I have earned my place in history. On the way down to breakfast, I take note of the portraits in the stairwell. Harvard is up to its ass in historical personages, it seems. In the dining hall, I imagine that each and every person present is a future president of the United States. Outside, in the thinning light of October in New England, sparrows twitter in the ivy that covers the walls, and not just any ivy, I tell myself, but *the* ivy. And this is *the* Harvard Square, motley and dilapidated and malodorous and fizzing with life and, well, not an imitation of anything, but the real thing. Look, Harvard men enjoy old black and white Humphrey Bogart movies too, just like at the good old Thalia, on Broadway! And they have crummy beer joints just like the West End! The obvious conclusion being, anybody can be president! On the rickety MTA, I watch the gritty scenery of outlying Boston scroll past, a jumble of junkyards and parking lots and crummy apartment buildings that gradually fades into the familiar pastiche of suburban lawns and sidewalks, the houses growing larger, nicer and neater, the lawns larger, the streets broader, as we approach that Athens of the suburbs, Wellesley. Now I am hitchhiking the last mile or two through the picture postcard town, with its whitewashed church steeples and quaint book stores and cutesy schmootzy potholder shops, deliberately, assiduously, delightedly doing all of the things my parents told me never to do, working my way down a big long list of offenses like hitchhiking, check, drinking a bit too much, check, while very much looking forward to the next few items on the list!

Striding along College Road, with the granite dormitories in view, the dormitories built to last forever, to stand in eternity as monuments to the solid Protestant values of hard work and entrepreneurial whatever … whatever it is they do … I wonder whether there can possibly be a finer state in life than visiting a beautiful blonde freshman with X-ray intelligence at Wellesley College, home of the All-American girl genius.

I have taken to calling her “Bunny.”

That’s what Jack, President John F. Kennedy, called Jackie, his wife.

She looks a little like Jackie, I tell myself.

Like Marilyn Monroe *as* Jackie.

We go to tea, Natalie and I.

Imagine.

To *tea*.

One bright, sweet, shining moment of teatime before the riots break out. One last petit four as the B-52s taxi onto the runway, pregnant with napalm, as the warheads are loaded into the rockets.

“Come,” Natalie murmurs as I gobble crumpets and cookies in the spacious reception area on the ground floor of Freeman Hall. All the girls are in party dresses and all the guys in nice sports jackets and slacks. Fountains of fresh flowers everywhere. They have laid out the ancient silver tea service like a great haul of pirate treasure beneath a sunny window, its gleaming surfaces now coated with an enamel of bronze and crimson and lemon-yellow autumn leaves, reflecting the trees and shrubs outside with weird fish-eye effects owing to the bulbous contours of the tea pots and sugar bowels.

“You have to meet Mrs. Lagerfeld.”

“Pray tell, who is Mrs. Lagerfeld?”

“Our house mother.”

I have never heard the term, but fully understand its meaning instantaneously.

“Have to?”.

"Yes, have to,” Natalie explains. “That’s what she’s here for. To meet the guests.”

God bless her, my sweet angel girl, she wants to cooperate, to be a part of it all, to belong, to be a *good girl*, to sip the tea, to nibble at the petit four in just the right way, the perfect way, precisely as Mrs. Lagerfeld would wish, with dainty, ladylike fingers, nails done in perfectly conventional rosy red, like all the other nails, the hair conventional, the dress conventional, doing her best to make the mind conventional, while the heart is screaming its objections. So we wait in line politely with the other boys and girls as Mrs. Lagerfeld, the model of middle-aged, middle-of-the-road propriety, with the simple dress, the simple hair, the simple everything, protected by a good, solid coating of Puritanical frost from Boston, shakes hands and chats with everyone just long enough to let them who’s boss.

One by one the boys are handed over to be sniffed by the blueblood bloodhound.

"Mrs. Lagerfeld, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine from New Jersey," Natalie says at her sociable best. “Arthur, I’d like you to meet Mrs. Lagerfeld, our house mother.”

Mrs. Lagerfeld extends a bony, veiny hand, smiling in a way that somehow conveys she is ready to take a nip out of my hand.

"Delighted, I am sure," she says.

"Me too," I tell her sportively. And even at this first false note of over-familiarity the smile begins to harden.

"Arthur, are you going to college in Boston?" she says.

"Arthur is a student at Columbia," Natalie chirps, clearly hoping that my choice of schools will meet with Mrs. Lagerfeld's approval.

"Ah, yes," Mrs. Lagerfeld says. "Columbia. Are there still quite a number of Jewish students there?"

It has not occurred to me to count the Jewish students, so I was caught off guard. But Mrs. Lagerfeld has a point. There certainly are quite a few of them. If you wanted Jewish students, you couldn’t do better than Columbia College, which is really the next best thing to Tel Aviv, in the Jew department. Of course I was thinking of our very own cunt-lapping Phil Feinstein.

“Yes, there are,” I tell her. “Quite a number.”

"I understand they are *wonderful* students," Mrs. Lagerfeld says. And at that, turns to pick up her cup and saucer, and demurely sip her tea, graciously allowing me a moment to decipher what she is telling me. What I get out of it is that she can only *understand* these things, can only accept the outlandish respresentations of others, because obviously she personally has never been anywhere near any Jewish students, and intends to keep it that way. Apparently satisfied that I have taken her point, she turns to Natalie and says, "I trust you've arranged suitable accommodations for Arthur."

Meaning, as I understood it: No tricks, dearie.

No defiling of the gene pool on my watch.

Natalie explains about Bobby Conte and my place in front of the fire at Wigglesworth.

“Ah,” says Mrs. Lagerfeld, pivoting back to me. I notice her spine does not seem to work properly. There is no flexibility there. To turn her head, she must turn her whole torso. As though encased in a body cast. “Isn't that cozy? Just remember, Arthur. All of our guests must be off campus by ten p.m. I certainly hope you won’t be remiss in that regard. Rules are rules, after all. And we here at Freeman Hall take our rules very seriously. Isn’t that right, Natalie?"

The eyes dart back and forth, seeking assurances. While I can detect no sign of sexual energy emanating from Mrs. Lagerfeld … zero, really … indicating a libido deeply entombed … it does seem to me that Mrs. Lagerfeld is keenly attuned to the sexual energy around her, and picking up alarming signals of excess, along those lines.

Natalie is all smiles and blithe acceptance.

“Oh yes, Mrs. Lagerfeld.”

Oh don’t worry, Mrs. Lagerfeld.

No, we won’t be remiss.

We are not going to be remiss in anything, just yet.

Soon, maybe.

Soon, yes, we may be just a little bit remiss.

But first, one last sip of tea, one last delicate nibble on a petit four, one last cutesy schmootzy curtsy before we go, before the mushroom cloud envelopes us all and we surf into eternity, ghost riders on a wave of gamma rays.

Making out in the lounge is okay with Mrs. Lagerfeld. Obviously she has given her blessing there. The Sex Gestapo has discretely distributed makeout papers or whatever. Apparently Mrs. Lagerfeld actually *wants* people making out in the lounge, because, well … think about it. There will be limits, out in the open, yes? Obviously you aren’t going to unsnap the girl’s bra and fondle her tits in the lounge of Freeman Hall. You aren’t going to peel her damp panties *there*. Weren’t going to be licking her vagina and have her writhing and scream in orgasmic glory in the lounge. Although, inevitably, the notion does occur. And with it, the notion of Mrs. Lagerfeld happening upon us. Mrs. Lagerfeld clearing her throat politely, to interrupt. Not wishing to be rude about it, you understand. Probably picking up the panties, by way of tidying things, as she observes me burrowing into Natalie’s crotch.

“Excuse me. Excuse me. You there? Young man? Arthur? Is that you, Arthur?”

At ten p.m. the lounge is packed with couples locked in desperate embrace, pawing at each other’s clothing, gnawing each other, sucking hungrily at any morsel of exposed flesh.

A young woman enters with a silver bell.

The bell tinkles, we all ignore it.

Five minutes later, the same young woman enters with the same bell.

Again it tinkles.

Again we ignore it.

Five minutes after that, the young woman enters a third time, but this time keeps ringing, insistently, incessantly, just annoying the living crap out of everyone, until all are on their feet, catching their breath, straightening their hair, tucking blouses in, sweeping the wrinkles out of clothing where it has been compressed between slabs of perspiring flesh, young men arranging the boners to be as unobtrusive as possible, which is none too unobtrusive.

Following the boners.

Now it’s Sunday morning. The fog has rolled in, a veil across the crazy colors of autumn. Hand in hand, in jeans and sneakers, Natalie and I explore the paths that wind around Lake Waban. The cold, clean, soaking dew seems to have had an anesthetic affect, silencing the birds, or all but a single cranky crow hidden in the trees somewhere across the lake. As we are in New England, I am tempted to think that the rest of the birds have gone off to church with Mrs. Lagerfeld. Yes, just so, the silence suggests that the universe has opened a hymnal for us, graciously giving us a chance to fully absorb this amazing thing that is happening, this astounding thing, the youth of a human being. When we come upon a bench, there beside the lake, Natalie sweeps the dew from the glossy green slats with the palm of her hand and pats the bench with her palm, signaling me to sit and not worry unduly about getting my jeans wet, we will be out of our clothes soon enough. Our mouths couple and lock, deep and solid, like railroad cars. No need to disengage, ever, as we find we can breathe quite well through our noses.

She points her finger into the fog. At nothing.

“Across the lake, on the hill, there are topiaries. The whole hill is topiaries. Dancing giraffes and elephants, carved out of hollies and yews. It’s really amazing.”

I’ll say. And her presence lends a quality of magic to it all. As she speaks, a tear appears in the misty tissues of fog, to reveal green elephants and giraffes on the far bank, dancing in rapturous sunshine for just a few seconds, before the mist closes over them.

She laughs.

“What did I tell you?”

Later, when the sun has come out and dried the dew and again crowned the trees with their autumn colors … though I notice not one leaf is falling, all are poised in place, on an afternoon of poignant stillness … I lie on my back in the grass beside the lake and wonder aloud why any of it would ever have to change. These are introductory remarks, leading to a discussion of my deep and abiding fear of mortality. She sits cross-legged beside me and listens patiently, occasionally planting her palms on the grass and leaning back and laughing at me, laughter that reassures me in a way I will never be able to explain. Why, she would like to know, must I insist on thinking of creation as an enormously complicated clock, inexorably ticking down to the moment of my own extinction, when nature knows nothing of any such thing? What strikes me as odd she seems perfectly at home in nature. Her laughter communicates that, right? Every time she laughs, I feel better. When I am terrified, I *want* people to laugh, because I *want* my fears to be ridiculous, do you follow me? She pinches a tuft of grass in her fingers and tears off the tips of the blades, to sprinkle them a little at time in my face, beautiful blades of grass showering lightly down, making me close my eyes and inhale the last of that sweet, fresh, precious smell of summer.

“Think of the grass,” she says.

I see the blood in my own eyelids, the rosy glow of it, and feel her lie down beside me in the sun, feel the weight of her body on the earth, hear her and feel her letting herself lie down and back across the warm, welcoming earth beside me, which seems to embrace her, aches to embrace her, as I ache. She barely touches my leg with her hand, just so I know her hand is there, and can take her hand in mine, and feel the warmth of her blood, and communicate with her, that way, through the fingertips, through the two oceans of feeling that meet there, great ocean swells of emotion washing together. My eyes open. The yellow leaves of the poplars shimmer ever so gently as the clouds cruise pass. The planet rotates on its axis, whirls in orbit around the mother star, approaching its aphelion. We lie there hand in hand, gazing across the tremendous emptiness of it all, the beautiful blue emptiness of air and light and vacant ether, and think about it all, about everything, about nothing, together.

“What should I think about it?”

“Oh, you know, just … how *grassy* it is.”

“Ah.”

“Think of the clouds.”

“What about them?”

“Nothing. Just that they are there. There are clouds. How *cloudy* they are, you know?”

She is right. The clouds are the very picture of cloudiness, today. I have never seen such clouds, and will never see such clouds again. These are the cloudiest of clouds.

“They *are* kind of cloudy, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

I squeeze her hand, she squeezes mine.

And what more is there to say, really, on earth or in heaven, ever?

Next night, the big concert of *Fall Fling*. No question about it, this is really *college*, I tell myself, as we saunter through the lantern light toward the auditorium with the rest of the kids, all nattily attired in blazers and ties and plaid mufflers and skirts and earmuffs. How tender, how sweet, to sit there holding hands while the real live Ian and Sylvia sing some of the songs I am used to hearing on Phil Feinstein's stereo. Yes, how nice to have these few nights together the way our parents had them, the way Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland had them, these apple-cheeked New England nights of sing-along harmony and oh-so-wholesome sexual frustration sitting by the fire, nights of purest, fullest, totally unsatisfied lust.

Just so we know what it was like to be this *good*.

Up on stage, the Ian and Sylvia sing about the inevitable end of it all.

*Four strong winds that blow lonely*

*Seven Seas that run high*

*All those things that don't change*

*Come what may*

And then, lugubriously, something like:

*But our good times are all gone*

*And I'm bound to movin' on*

*I'll look for you*

*If I'm ever back this way*

The point being, of course, that none of us will ever, or *can* ever, be back this way, and neither can anybody else, and we know it. The Lettermen sing *The Way You Look Tonight* and Natalie and I dance the last dance as the B-52s roar off the runways to pulverize the patriots of Vietnam. Next morning, before I board the Greyhound for New York City, she and I take one last walk along the path beside Lake Waban. But now the wind is up. We watch the autumn leaves set sail across the trembling waters of the lake. When I cannot contain my happiness and my fear of its loss any longer, I take a quarter out of my pocket and use the milled edge to carve our names into the bench, squeezing them in among a hundred other sets of initials. True, this is a sophomoric act, but then, as we are freshmen, we are more than entitled, no? Are we not more than entitled, to that one last moment of innocence, that one last moment of happy pretending, before we are blinded with tears?

“To most of these guys I'm just an idea, some crazy idea they have in their heads about, I don’t know, what the love of their life is going to be or something. It doesn't have anything to do with me, actually. I’m just a prop. Or, I don’t know what I am, actually. The freaking hat rack,really, is all I am, where they hang their crazy ideas about women, looking the way they imagine I should look, saying what they imagine I should say, feeling what they imagine I should feel. It doesn’t have anything to do with me, honestly, that I can tell.”

The tears run down her cheeks.

It’s Christmas and she is home from college.

We are having dinner in a swell French restaurant in Manhattan, a place called Montmartre, one of the places I have frequented with Phelan. Phelan knew where all the good escargots was. He had a mental map of Manhattan with pushpins inserted where there was good escargots and Cotes du Rhone.

“It’s not just that they don’t know anything about me,” she says. "I could almost handle that part. I mean, I almost know what to do about *that*. If someone doesn’t know anything about you, you can just tell them, right? The problem is, these people don’t really *want* to know anything about me. If I tell them the truth, that kind of gets in the way of the fantasy, know what I mean? I started to explain to this one guy that I was interested in physics, and got absolutely nowhere. In fact, he laughed at me.”

“Really.”

“He said I was too pretty to be interested in physics.”

“Huh.”

“You know what he said?”

“What?”

“Y’all don’t need to worry your pretty little head about physics.”

“So he sees you as a kind of feminine ideal.”

“Hallucination, is more like it.”

“And you don’t want to *be* the feminine ideal.”

“It’s not a question of whether I want to be or don’t want to be. That doesn’t even enter the picture, does it? Even if I wanted to be, I *couldn’t* be. Because I’m me.”

“Of course.”

“And if I were dumb enough to try, that would make me very unhappy.”

“Of course.”

“You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

“I mean, I go out with a guy twice and he's telling me he loves me. It makes me want to *cry*. It’s not *funny*. I’m *serious*. I just want to sit down on the curb and cry. Because … well, what does that word actually mean to him? What could he possibly have in mind? How can he think … think so little of himself? And so little of me? And from my point of view … well, you know the whole thing has to be one hundred per cent physical, am I right? Or, you know, maybe not even that. Maybe it’s a lot worse than that, even. One hundred per cent imaginary, is more like it.”

“I get it.”

“You’re sure you’re not just saying that?”

“No. You’re right, Bunny.”

“Why do you call me Bunny?”

“Because … you’re cute as a bunny.”

“I don’t like it when you say things like that. Just so you know. At one point, I had so many guys calling me, I called up the telephone company and told them I had to have my number changed. I had to get away from all these guys. They said they would look into the problem. So, what they did was, they looked at all the numbers that were calling. They called me back and said, wow, all these numbers are from Harvard University. I said right, exactly, that’s what I told you. Horny guys at Harvard are driving me crazy. So, then, the woman actually laughs at me. I am crying on one end of the phone, she is laughing on the other end.”

She dabs at her nose.

“Well,” I tell her, “you have to admit, there is certain potential for humor.”

“Will you *stop*? I was dating this one guy, and, unfortunately, his roommate, I guess, kind of had his eye on me. Which is the worst thing that can happen to you, I found out. The absolute, freaking worst. Because, of course, the guy's roommate is calling me behind the guy's back. Can you imagine? I would never, *ever* do that to a roommate. Anyway the roommate was so insistent about it, he wouldn’t give up. Would *not* give up. I finally thought, well, okay, I'll have to have a cup of coffee with this guy, or something, and try to straighten him out on this. Like … here I am … I'm going to have to explain that I can't be dating two guys who are roommates, that isn’t going to work. I can’t even believe I went ahead and talked to the guy. It was so obvious.

“So we meet for coffee. I’m there … I explain to him that there is just no way I can do this and maintain my sanity. And he doesn’t seem to get it, at first. I keep explaining, keep explaining, and finally, wonder of wonders, it looks like the message is finally beginning to penetrate his concrete skull, that possibly we've reached some kind of understanding, maybe even gotten the whole thing settled, and we can be friends. I don't know *what* I was thinking. Because, the first thing the guy does, oh my God, is go back and tell his roommate he's been out on this date with me. He calls it a *date*, apparently. So next thing I know, the other guy, the first guy, is banging on the window of my freaking dorm room. At three o'clock in the morning, for God’s sake. And of course creating a complete panic, so we had to call security and everything."

"That part is funny. I’m sorry.”

“I mean … you can't have a *cup of coffee?*"

"People are sensitive."

Yes, that's me speaking, ambassador plenipotentiary for the male sex, explaining a thing or two to the goddess of femininity on behalf of … an entire class of inferior beings, really … while thinking, wow, how stupendously beautiful she really is … so … well, frankly, it’s no *wonder* people are behaving like cockroaches. Of *course* they are. Ultimately, what choice do they have? The male character is totally subservient to the sex drive, as we know. I have done a survey of exactly one specimen, me, and penciled that in as a generality. A penis with a pilot, that is the male character. A giant, flaming pink penis with a prop on the front and stubby wings and a pilot in an open cockpit, with the scarf flapping and the World War I vintage goggles.

"So, one thing I eventually concluded was, I wanted to spend more time with just one guy."

“Ahah."

"I kind of wish you weren't so far away."

"Me too."

"Maybe I could come down a little more often, and you could come up."

"Sure."

“I get lonely.”

“I get lonely too.”

"There are a couple of rooming houses just off campus, where guys stay for the weekend."

"That sounds wonderful."

“That would be wonderful.”

Another Saturday that same Christmas.

We are parked in the Bonneville in front of her parents' house in Paramus. The engine is running, the radio murmuring low, the dials on the dashboard dimly effulgent, the sky fringed all around with the azure aureole of the highways, the strip malls, the hamburger and pizza joints that cover the hills where the Lenape once hunted, hills now aglow with neon lighting that is visible even from outer space, very much like the plankton that live in the sea, it occurs to me. Ten thousand years from now, when archeologists excavate the remains of our civilization, they will likely focus their efforts on Paramus, in much the same way we have focused ours on Pompei and the Valley of the Dead, except in the case of the Paramus the rationale will depend on fragmentary evidence that Paramus was the world capital of the great empire of shopping malls, auto dealerships, and hamburger and pizza joints. The archeologists will be ecstatic, beside themselves, when they come upon the first perfectly preserved Burger King, a Burger King encased in ash, where Americans encased in ash are still standing in line, waiting to order cheeseburgers and fries. The word Paramus itself will have a mythical ring to it. Lissome graduate students will listen in rapt awe as their professors explain that the Burger King is the Holy Grail of archeology. It was in buildings like this that the Americans produced the cheeseburgers vital sustenance for their entire civilization. Think of it. A hundred billion happy, peaceful, grass-munching animals were converted into a hundred trillion sandwiches in buildings just like this. The archeologists will dig past all the Styrofoam cups, the tons of plastic forks that were never used, the vast stores of tomato ketchup in aluminum packets, all surprisingly well preserved, like the wine sunk in amphora at the bottom of the Mediterranean. By this time the archeologists will have given our time on earth a label, “The Polystyrene Age.” In surrounding neighborhoods they will come upon a colossal crucifix and doezens of Blessed Virgin bird baths. They will thus be forced to confront the astounding conclusion that, during the Polystyrene Age, human beings worshipped themselves, believing that God had become a man, which is a little like ants believing that God became an ant.

God became an ant and died for our sins. Blessed be God. Amen.

He didn’t have anything better to do.

Then, in the next layers of earth, the scientists will find nothing but arrowheads, all that remains of the people of grace, the peaceful forest dwellers who wisely worshipped the spirit that animates all living things.

This was the apogee, they will write in their treatises. It was all downhill after the Lenape.

Downhill or not, this is our moment.

This is the time when we are allowed to live.

Christmas in Paramus, in a time of war.

Natalie’s parents are out for the evening, kicking up their heels, secure in the knowledge that, at least for the time being, there will be very few problems with the ice cream machines. All the creamsicles and popsicles in the northern hemisphere are pretty much just sitting there for the winter, like corpses caught in a glacier. All the moving parts in all the ice cream machines north of Baltimore can freeze solid and no one is going to notice until June. So, go out and have a couple of cocktails and dance the night away in abandon. Summer is coming.

Natalie and I never worry about the neighbors. It is always possible that one of them will report us to Mrs. Shea; but on balance unlikely, I suspect, as none of them would want to be responsible for the climactic nervous breakdown.

The Bonneville is not the ideal makeout car, because the bucket seats are not conducive, what with the gearshift in the middle, but we make do.

Our mouths couple and lock together, tongues probing.

I notice that, when I rest my hand on her knee, she does not draw away.

Interesting data point, there.

I dare to move my hand up.

In the Polystyrene Age, everything is encased in plastic, even the thighs of the women, as the humans are convinced that a nice, tight, colorful coating of plastic makes everything more appealing, even sex. My fingertips run across the tightly woven mesh of her pantyhose, tracing ovals whose edges creep imperceptibly (I tell myself) closer to her pelvis. I will not belabor the interesting thought process that is at work here. You have your hand on a person’s thigh. Yet you somehow believe she is not going to notice as the hand moves closer to her crotch.

Does the tongue withdraw?

I am metering the tongue action as an indicator of resistance.

Note: Tongue withdrawal is negligible. Check. Tongue action may be increasing, even. Reminder: Let’s think about measuring tongue action in standard units. Like, SUTAs. For Standard Units of Tongue Action. Note: SUTAs increase from one point six to one point seven two, at this point. Or something along those lines. Based on SUTAs, respiratory rate, temperature on surface of the skin, all systems are go, stop already with the circling.

My hand slides up her thigh and boldly down onto the pliant inner thigh.

There is a different feel to the inside of a woman’s thigh, isn’t there? Even when encased in plastic, like baloney, the inside of a woman’s thigh offers a certain tenderness, a give, a potential for … I don’t wish to presume … but it has to do with surrender, doesn’t it? Unless I am mistaken … and I could easily be mistaken about this, I grant you … her legs part ever so slightly, assenting.

She seems to want to.

Interesting that they want to, when we … well … we *want them to*.

Make a note.

How amazing that she lets me stroke her there … settles her can in the seat … her hand on the back of my neck … *mmmmm* … so, recalculating, I let my fingertips circle … just ever so gently, softly, slowly, rhythmically, moving round in little circles, my fingertips on the inside of her thigh, while she assents with her mouth, her tongue on mine, her lips sucking at mine. I imagine myself as Professor Jerry Tedesco, inventor of the Tedesco Sexual Encounter Calibration System, on a historic night.

And so, moving along, one fingertip traces along the wasteband of her pantyhose.

Dawdle there a moment, fingertips running along the wasteband.

Allowing the interval for objection.

Just lightly, ever so lightly, almost inadvertently, if you will … yes, just happening upon the wasteband … wondering what this little thing is. Exploring, innocently. And I *am* innocent. And the innocence is such an important part, no? In the morning of your own consciousness, when the consciousness itself is fresh, when the dew of creation rests on the consciousness itself you awaken to realize, oh, so, this is what pantyhose is. You get the nubby, rubbery feel of the elastic in the wasteband. All of the awareness in the universe is concentrated into that one fingertip, moving along the wasteband of the pantyhose. And then, oh, so innocently, kind of incidentally, accidentally, inadvertently, whatever, hooking one fingertip inside, and running along the *inside* of the wasteband, a daring maneuver if ever there was one, the backs of my fingers against the wonderfully soft and supple, cotton-candy belly flesh above the pelvis, her breath mixing with mine, her fingers in my hair.

Just slipping and sliding along the inside of the wasteband.

Noticing how soft her belly is, just above her pelvis.

And then out.

And then in again.

Stoking the furnace of desire.

Her tongue reaching into my mouth.

Delectable.

A mouthful of her.

Another.

Swallowing the femalesness. Gulping her in.

Sucking on her raspberry tongue, her strawberry mouth.

Her mouth opens wider and presses closer as we maneuver acrobatically around the shift lever between the seats. Can you get the picture here? The sex-crazed contortionists? Twisting around to kiss her, another mouthful of sweet, juicy strawberries, the left hand sliding up her leg. Unbelievable, shockingly, as the process gathers steam, which is blowing out of my ears, at this point, she shifts her ass to give me a better angle, signaling, you know, go on, *go ahead*, I am ready, I want it too, I need it too, it will be all right, even if the neighbors see this, because they certainly can’t tell Mom about *this*, we are now well into the territory of the fatal coronary now, so just push the top of the pantyhose down and let the fingertips creep down into the pubic hair.

And this is when I make my most amazing discovery to date.

The vagina is not where it’s supposed to be.

My fingertips run down the front of her pelvis, through the pubic hair, expecting to find the opening.

No opening.

I have never actually touched a vagina, obviously, and have only the vaguest, most general idea what a vagina actually is. The vagina is to me what China was to Christopher Columbus, say. The analog for this instant would be, well, think of the wildly, just stupendously overconfident Christopher Columbus, a person who could not have done what he did without being wildly overconfident, sailing up and down the coast of New Jersey, from Long Branch to Staten Island and back again, back and forth, back and forth, looking for … for Shanghai, am I right? Where in the hell is Shanghai, boys? Just so, I have in my mind this ridiculously inaccurate map of the female body, where the vagina is pictured as the mouth of a river that really doesn’t exist, in the middle of a continent that really doesn’t exist, because all these shapes and labels have been drawn by a mapmaker who had nothing to go on, really, but was under intense pressure from the boss to come up with something, *anything* to give to the explorers. Months later, Columbus plunks his forefinger down on a spot that is marked on the map as Shanghai, but is actually, in reality, the location of Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

That’s me.

Most of what I know about the vagina … or most of what I *think* I know … is actually deduced from the nature of the cock, an instrument I know pretty well, from having logged quite a few practice hours, at this point. Thus it is possible to deduce. If you are holding the key in one hand, you can then deduce a few things about the lock that would match, correct? If the key is this, the lock has to be that. Key, cock. Lock, vagina. Yes? Things are going to correspond, in certain ways. You are going to be able to deduce certain things. In the same way as, coming upon the tooth of a stegosaurus, a good scientist can deduce what the stegosaurus looked like, what he ate, how fast he could run, and so forth. Or at least approximate.

If we follow along on this path of reasoning, the opening of the vagina should be in front.

That’s why I am sort of feeling around in front.

Where is the opening to the vagina?

How can there be a vagina without an opening?

Isn’t that kind of pointless?

What if the most beautiful, the most charming, the most captivating girl in the world should also turn out to be a mutant, born without one physical feature that is common to every other specimen of female humanity.

Born, tragically, without an opening to her vagina.

I am kind of patting around there, not unlike a blind man with a cane, actually, sort of feeling for the opening, crossing my fingers that there will be some kind of breakthrough, and soon, because I am stumped, when, mercifully, she actually takes my hand and puts it in there, puts it under her, where she is wet. Which is another thing that kind of surprises me. Or, actually, astounds me, to be honest. I mean, it’s wet?

Understand, it is not every day I get to put my hand on a person’s vagina. So, I am not in a position to understand that certain of the observations made here are time-related or time-based. I am like Ben Franklin with the kite and the lightning. You only get so many observations. You can’t make a bolt of lightning materialize every time you want to make an observation. You have to wait a long time between observations. Thus, you may be prone to over-extrapolate, misconstruing the observations. Concretely, my first reaction to the moisture is, wow, this must get pretty uncomfortable, after a while. Then I focus on the viscosity, which is pretty interesting, when you think about it. Mind you, we are not talking about thoughts I actually dwell on. These are not things I am thinking about for ten or fifteen seconds, or ten or fifteen years, but things that kind of flit through my mind, for a second or two, but remain there, years later, possibly because some of them are a little weird. Bottom line, in all previous observations of life on the planet Earth, I had felt only one thing that could compare to the viscosity of Natalie’s vagina.

Frogs.

Or fish. I had held fish, too. Same thing.

The mermaid thing.

Does a thought like that cross my mind as I am sipping a cup of tea with Natalie’s mother, chatting about the play Natalie and I are going to see at the Bergen Mall Theater?

In fact it does.

The conversation I imagine is very different conversation from the one that actually transpires.

“Incidentally, Mrs. Shea, have I mentioned to you that, just the other night, while you and Mr. Shea were at the dinner dance at the Elks Club, I was making out with Natalie in front of the house? Well I was. And the reason I mention is … in the course of making out … you’re not going to believe this … I happened to slip my hand into her panties … which was pretty cool to begin with … and was able to make a pretty interesting observation. She feels just like a frog down there, are you aware of that? And I connect that with the evolution of the race, dating all the way back to the fish who walked on land. Does that make sense to you? That certain parts of us, parts of our lives, are still … marine in character? That we live the lives of fish, in certain ways? Just an observation, of course.”

I would come in and Rocky would be leaping and yapping, bouncing up and down for a while, a dog on a pogo stick, and Mrs. Shea would show me into the living room, offer me a cup of tea, and usually sit down to chat for a while, polite as all get out. We would talk about the infernal ice cream machines, about Natalie’s fabulous academic career, or my promising-as-all-hell work at the newspaper, or on occasion my screwball plans for the future.

I confide to Mrs. Shea that I intended to make my living as a poet.

Realistically, I was lucky she didn’t have a fatal coronary on the spot.

“You mean, actually writing poetry?" she says.

"Yes."

"I didn't realize people still did that.”

“Oh, I can assure you the art of poetry is alive and well.”

“I meant, commercially.”

“Oh. Commercially? Well, I don’t know about *commercially*. It’s art. I’m not sure you’d call it commercial, really.”

“Well, when I say commercial, what I mean is, things that people give you money for. It can be commercial and still be an art, can’t it? Movies are commercial, right? People still buy tickets.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sure. People publish books of poetry, other people buy the books.”

“And pay for them?”

"Yes," I tell her. “That’s what I mean by *buy*.”

“But, you mean, like, *best sellers?*”

“Oh, I don’t know whether I would go that far,” I tell her. “Let me put it this way. I’m sure the top poets in the country have no trouble paying the bills.”

I thought I was reassuring her.

“And is that what you want," she says, a finger on her cheek. "To just … pay the bills?"

“Money is not that important to me.”

There is no discernible reaction to this last statement. It is the complete lack of reaction that strikes me as noteworthy. Her whole makeup-encrusted face looks like as though I have just totally numbed everything above the neck with a massive injection of novocaine straight into the jugular, so now she can’t even feel her face anymore. The horrible realization that her beautiful daughter, her lovely, her lively, her brilliantly imaginative daughter, the star of *The Brat* … is now dating this … this complete nincompoop … who says he wants to be, of all things on earth … a poet*?*

Is that what he just said?

Which, as a career choice … to her … well, really, it’s like saying you want to be a *hobo*. Yes Ma’am, I plan to get my bachelor’s in panhandling and go for a master’s in scavenging and, at some point, try to make it on my own as a hobo.

The notion paralyzes her. In this instant … all the evidence indicates … I become Public Enemy Number One in the Shea household. Why? Because I stand between Mrs. Shea and the moneybags orthodontist or personal injury lawyer that she has had in mind for Natalie, has been targeting all this time, with all the advice about hair and nails and perfume and accessories and so forth. On occasion she would actually mention alternate career paths, trying to bring me to my senses.

“What about teaching English literature?”

“I’m afraid I would get bored.”

“Or law.”

“Paper shuffling.”

“Criminal law can be very exciting.”

“You mean, like, trying to get people off?”

“What about personal injury? That can be very rewarding?”

“Personal injury?”

“Personal injury law. Representing people when, you know, they get run over or something. Have you considered anything along those lines? I understand personal injury lawyers are very well compensated for their work.”

“Really. How much do they make, do you think?"

“Well, I don’t know. But they get a percentage, don’t they?”

“A percentage of what?”

“If they win the case. They get a percentage of, you know … what they win … if they win the case. Right? Don’t they? I think so. I thought that was the whole big deal about personal injury lawyers. That they get a percentage.”

“I have not idea,” I tell her.

Understand, I do not wish to soil my hands with the filthy lucre that so captivates others.

Let others grovel in the dust for coins!

My quest is for an aesthetic ideal.

I think of myself as the young Keats.

She wants her daughter to have a percentage.

Every Sunday, off they go to the grave.

Every Sunday, the same cockamamie, fucked-up psychodrama.

Natalie relates how the mother speaks to her dead son about me, confiding her doubts my future.

I am honored.

I have made it to the big time, to the graveside schizophrenia.

Almost unbelievably, Natalie actually enacts the part, head bowed, shoulders slumped, an excellent impression of her frumpy mother, saying: “And then, unfortunately, your sister is dating this guy … I don’t know … who … if he isn’t careful … I hate to say it … will turn out to a complete schlemiel … God help us.”

The way the mother sees things, we can blindfold Natalie, spin her around a couple of times in the middle of Harvard Yard, have her throw a dart, probably she will hit a future CEO at one of America’s great corporations, and she can marry him. Why hang around with a nincompoop poet type? The lifestyle considerations alone should outweigh all other factors. And it wasn’t just that. I’m sure Mrs. Shea was concerned about defiling the gene pool with low income stock. Engineering the internal moving parts of ice cream machines was maybe not the most *glorious* occupation in the world, but it was steady, it was professional, and it paid pretty well. It gave you central air, a Buick, and vacations in the Poconos, a far cry from groveling at the feet of the book critic for the fucking Village Voice, hoping she will toss you a bone.

From Mrs. Shea’s point of view, the timing is *horrendous*.

The mother is observing her daughter’s sexual awakening in close proximity to a complete nincompoop. Desperately trying to hold it back. I give her credit for an absolutely heroic assertion of will. It’s like, well, watching the apple trees burst into bloom and trying to hold *them* back. Like, maybe if we *tape all the buds closed?*

I feel sorry for her, in a way. I mean, I understand that we can’t have young women just blindly fucking their asses off and getting pregnant and living the rest of their lives as waitresses, with litters of kids bawling and puking and trailing after, hanging onto the apron strings. But that is only part of it, right? The other part is that *sex starts* off in the category of evil, right? A young woman feels like fucking, what is the reflex judgment, in our society? That she is evil, right? We wouldn’t fee l the same way about a mockingbird, say, or, an otter. We don’t feel this way about the *real* birds and bees. If a bee picks up a little pollen from the male part of a flower, and drops it off on the female part of the flower next door, there is nothing evil about that, is there? Nothing pornographic or salacious there, right? Nothing pornographic about the robins’ eggs, sky blue in the spring, or the cuddly bears cozily fucking their asses off in their dens, under tons of snow, or the otters fucking in the streams, or the salmon spraying jets of semen … is there?

Only we have the capacity for evil.

We invented it.

Why? Well, I think, basically, for the same reasons we invented everything else. The idea has profit potential. If sin had not been invented by the voodoo priests, a graduate of the Harvard School of Business would have invented it, guaranteed. Probably framing the proposition roughly as follows.

See if you can persuade people that it is countrary to their own long term best interests to do something you know they are going to do, at least once in a while, because it is in their natures.

That is what we will call “evil.” Contrary to their own long term best interests. In other words, if you do this thing, you may enjoy it now, but long term, it is going to work against you. You are going to be punished for doing it. That is “evil.”

By the way, it can be *anything*.

We can persuade them that it is evil to take a pee, for instance.

Or fart.

Fart, you go to hell.

Look at our records. When you died, you had an unforgiven fart on your soul. Hell for you.

Simple.

We don’t even have to hear you fart. Trust us, God hears you fart. God can hear a fart across the universe. It’s a little like the principal listening over the public address. Only God doesn’t snore into the microphone. God has super sensitive fart detectors installed on every star. Angels with headphones, specially trained to detect any fart-like noises occurring anywhere in the universe. God and the angels can hear a fart at a distance of a hundred trillion billion miles, and *know who farted*. Even if you fart silently, God knows you have farted, because he can detect an infinitesimal change of air pressure in the rest of the universe. The instant you fart for the first time, he puts your name on a list of people who have farted and not yet sought forgiveness for their farts. An angel wearing special headphones jerks his head up at the Fart Control Center in heaven and exclaims, “The Carina Nebula!” Whereupon others scramble to determine which star, which planet, and which particular asshole in the Carina Nebula emitted the fart.

If you die before you seek forgiveness for that fart, tough shit, you go to hell.

Or … if you eat off the wrong dish, maybe. Mix meat with dairy. *Basar b'halav*.

Or … not go to mass on Sunday.

Unless you show up at mass on Sunday, humbly submitting yourself to the process of being bored to fucking tears, just *crucified* with fucking boredom, at the hands of some fatso, self-important monsignor … you go to hell.

Or how about this?

We tell the men they can’t masturbate. We’ll have a field day.

It doesn't matter what element of human behavior we choose, as long as we know people can't avoid violating the prohibition, once in a while. Once they have been persuaded that God has imposed requirements they cannot meet (no need to reinvent the wheel here, let’s call this umbrella concept “Original Sin”) … and that, as a consequence, just playing by the rules, God will have no choice but to send them to hell, to writhe and scream eternally, roasting on this giant rotisserie of souls … what are they going to do?

Seek forgiveness, obviously

And *that* is where we make our money, boys!

Our product?

Forgiveness!

Make it rain and sell umbrellas … beautiful!

Drop the money into the basket.

No charge to kiss the ring.

You think anger is a problem here?

Should the process of revelation in this, the high temple of art, the *Cadillac* of the arts, maybe be just a bit more complex, more subtle, than me just … you know … *saying shit?* Even if it’s the shit that really needs to be said? Just one fucking time?

One day, oh, I pray … *Hail Mary, full of grace* … one day we will be lucky enough to seize the moment when all death-sucking vampires have fluttered on their deluxe wings of purple velvet back into the crypt, back into the catacombs, into the stinking darkness, where they are happy … to fasten themselves to the ceiling with their creepy little bejeweled bat claws, wrapping themselves in their vestments, chasubles and albs and surplices … mitres and pots of incense … all their stinking holy things … the skulls, the relics, the chalices, the moldy corpses of phony saints (because all the real saints have been burned at the stake, I guarantee you) … wait, I say, until the last one has fluttered in, down into the darkness, into the black hole of death where they are comfortable … then slide the stone back over the entrance, to seal them within, forever, and wait for the sun to come up. Because, sooner or later, the long night will be over, the Dark Ages will be over (I certainly hope most of us realize we are still *in* the Dark Ages) and the sun will come up. But right now, poor Natalie has the filthy little vampires in her hair, sinking their filthy little needle fangs into her flesh as she sleeps. She lurches upright, eyes popping with fright, hands shaking, skin glistening with sweat. She calls me on the phone that hangs in the hall outside her dorm room and tells me through whimpering, gasping, choking tears that she thinks maybe, just maybe … not to get all panicky, it’s just a possibility … but she thinks that, you know, as a precautionary measure, maybe she should mention … she might be losing her mind. And the reason she mentions is, better not to get all the marbles scattered all over Wellesley, right? Better to mention before that happens, right?

So, being a practical person, I place the phone on the hook, very gently, very deliberately, and walk right out the door, and down the steps, and around the building, through the great iron gates, which are never closed, always welcoming the person who might like to think about the unfolding catastrophe, and out onto Broadway, where I put out my thumb to begin the process of hitchhiking the two hundred miles or so to Wellesley, the last part in the dark, driving, blustery, hopeless rain of a cold November evening, so leaves are plastered against the windshield of a car driven by a gay guy who thinks I look interesting, a perfectly conventional-looking businessy kind of guy with a secret life, I imagine, as if we didn’t have enough to worry about, here. I arrive soaked through, at about eleven that night, to find my innocent virgin lover crumpled on the tile near the entrance to Bates (yes the years are going by here, just flickering past, now, and Natalie has moved from Freeman to Bates), so desperate to see someone (and realistically, it probably doesn’t need to be me, let’s not get carried away, but *someone*, yes), to speak to someone, to hold onto someone, she has decided can't wait up in her room, instead choosing to huddle by the door and watch the rain blast across the turnaround in front.

My wet sneakers squeak on the waxy linoleum.

I sit down beside her, our backs against the cinderblock.

It’s okay, Nat.

Please, stop crying.

I am here now. I will shoo the vampires away, for the moment. That I can do. I have my anti-vampire kit. I slump against the wall beside her and put my arms around her and pat her shoulder as a puddle forms around me.

I am guilty too, I realize.

I have not adequately understood how much she wants, how much she needs, how much she hungers to be good. How frightening it is, for her,doing the trapeze act with me, above the roaring flames of hell. How important not let her mother down, because her brother has already let her down, by dying.

How important not to not let her brother in heaven down. Expectations there are bound to be high, right?

Nothing to hold onto but each other.

Not even a heaven.

Not even a God.

In November. The worst.

“It just makes me feel so awful,” she says, indelicately blotting her eyes and bright pink blob of a nose with her shirtsleeve. "I just don't feel *good* about myself. I feel like I'm some kind of convict or something. Just for, you know, wanting to be close to you. Like I'm not supposed to want that."

And what can I do but pat her head, hold her head, rock her head as my shoulders sway, the human metronome. My baby.

And then, to bed.

We slip between the warm, clean sheets in our underwear, so we don’t freak out her roommate, Sylvia, who has made it clear that she’s a little bit sensitive about having naked men around, other than her own boyfriend, of course. We remove the underwear, and put it on again, when necessary, beneath the sheets. The agreement being that, on certain weekends, Sylvia’s boyfriend will be in the room, and on certain weekends I will be, but not the two together, as that would freak us all out. We are not concerned about the sleeping arrangements, per se, but rather, about arrangements for sex play. Sex play requires privacy. Am I going to feel perfectly comfortable tickling Natalie’s nipplies with the tip of my tongue while Sylvia and her boyfriend are watching? No. So, we alternate weekends. Some weekends, I tickle, some weekends, he tickles. The girl who is not being tickled stays out of the room as much as possible, to maximize tickling time for the other girl.

Autumn again.

Waves of flame roll over the surrounding hills as waves of flame roll over us, naked, in Natalie’s tight little twin bed. If you want to know how much time two people can spend kissing and hugging and holding and sucking and caressing and just generally hanging onto each other, hanging onto each other for dear life, without ever actually coupling in coitus, I am here to tell you, it’s *a lot*. Occasionally we would have to take a break, get dressed, and walk down to Lake Waban, where we would sit on the bench beside the lake and just stare, half the time, because there is absolutely nothing to say, we have entered into a realm where the only ideas worth communicating are susceptible to communication only via the tip of the tongue on the bud of a nipple. Or, a hand held tight. Or, the whispery soft stroke of an eyelash against a cheek. The radiant warmth of the other person’s bodily being … the delicious, the delectable, the entirely consumable cotton candy being … that is the main thing, obviously. But it isn’t only that, is it? Because the warmth of the other spirit is there, too.

Another spirit, another heart, held close.

A good heart. Kind and loving and gentle and innocent. Wishing only to flourish in the perfectly natural way.

Held close, held oh so tight … oh, so close … as rain pelts the windows and the leaves fly and Donovan sings *“Wear Your Love Like Heaven”* for, oh, Jesus, I don’t know, the twentieth or thirtieth time that same day? Because we would let the album play all the way through, and then listen to the needle go round and round in the middle of the record, for the longest time, holding each other tight, unable to let go, and then get up and start it again, the same record, and just keep doing that, for hours and hours … while our two spirits go sailing through paradise … happy and free.

*Cannot believe what I see  
All I have wished for will be  
All of our race proud and free*

*Wear my love like heaven*

*Wear my love like heaven*

And we do, alright.

Oh, do we.

“You lick the clit.”

It’s a quiet Sunday afternoon and Phil Feinstein is explaining a few of the basics to Reiter and I. DeVries is only half listening, while catching up on a few Supreme Court opinions and keeping one eye on the miniature football game. DeVries feels free to chime in while continuing to take notes and read, turning pages back and forth to cross reference things, apparently. He doesn’t even look up, by the way. We all understand he isn’t fool enough to devote his full attention to our idiotic conversations. The apportionment of twenty per cent of DeVries’s brain power is generous, given the primitive level of discourse. We ll understand he needs to get ready to decide some really big cases, twenty or thirty years down the road.

“That’s not what you told me,” he says.

“Okay,” Phil says. “*Caress* it, I think I said.”

“Right, caress. That is the key word, I think.”

“Lick it?” Reiter says.

“Caress is the better word,” Phil tells him. “I stand corrected.”

Phil is making himself a cocktail. He enjoys a good stiff Scotch on a Sunday afternoon, preferring to relax a bit after fucking Noel within an inch of her life the previous night. The Sunday afternoon cocktail is a ritualistic kind of deal with him, where he has to fill a silver bowl with ice cubes, drop the ice cubes into a glass one by one, always using silver tongs, then slowly dribble the Scotch over the cubes, then rub a piece of lemon peel around the rim of the glass, drop that in, then add the tiniest splash of finest spring water, which he explains in terms of the intentions of the distillers, who did not want us to drink the stuff straight. Phil likes to do things right. And sex is no different.

“You don’t know what a clitoris is?” he says very casually, dribbling the Scotch. “The Catholic girls don’t have clits out there?”

Reiter and I laugh, mostly to camouflage our own ignorance.

Phil is not dissuaded.

“Do they or don’t they?” he says.

“Clits?” Reiter says.

“The clitoris,” says Phil. “The woman’s main sex organ. Are you familiar with the function of the clitoris?”

Reiter is mute.

I confess, “No. It sounds like a chewing gum, to me.”

“Ah,” Phil says. “Well then. Let’s talk about cunt, gentlemen.”

He puts his glass on the bar and steps toward us. Raising his hands, he forms his fingers into two “V” shapes.

“The cunt is a complicated piece of machinery,” he says.

Holding up first the right hand and then the left, with their V shapes, he adds, “There is an outer opening, the hairy part and an inner opening, the slippery part. This is how they fit together.”

He puts the one V shape over the other. As he does this, I am thinking, this is just like *Watch Mr. Wizard*, the television show Phil appeared on, only, instead of a bunson burner, we have this makeshift facsimile of a vagina.

“See that?” he says. “That is what we’re dealing with, gentlemen.”

Reiter and I are nodding.

“Okay, now, see the inner opening?” he says.

We nod.

“Don’t take your eyes off it,” he says.

He removes his right hand and uses the right index finger to point to the spot on his left hand where the index finger meets the middle finger, the joint there.

“The clitoris is there,” he says. “Above the vaginal opening, just above the inner labia. It’s in a sheath there. Like the foreskin on your penis, if you guys have foreskins. I haven’t noticed, honestly.”

“You mean, there’s something there besides an opening?” Reiter says.

DeVries is starting to nod, and just keeps nodding.

“Anything you want to know about female genitalia, Phil is your man,” DeVries says.

“I cannot overstate the importance of the clitoris in sexual relations,” Phil says, taking a seat with me on his own bed. He jiggles his glass to slosh the scotch around and raises the glass as if to offer a toast, but says nothing, along those lines, I think toasting sexual fulfillment, in sort of a general way. “Let’s just say that a good understanding of the role of the clitoris may well be the single most important bit of expertise that will ever come into you possession.”

“And what is that role?” says Reiter.

Phil says, “That is how your girl gets off, you idiot. Gentlemen,I must tell you, I feel quite confident in asserting that, if either of your girlfriends has ever had an orgasm, it was purely accidental. Is that a reasonable assumption?”

“Orgasm?” Reiter says.

“When Noel hits the roof, that’s an orgasm,” DeVries says, eyes on his book.

Phil says, “Noel is an unusual case, but yeah, that’s what I’m getting it. Believe me, you’ll know it when it happens.”

“You *lick* it?” Reiter says.

“Well, not just lick it,” says Phil. “It’s not like, you know, an ice cream cone.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” DeVries says, entering a note in his notebook. “Why is that such a bad analogy? It kind of is, isn’t it?”

“Well maybe a little,” Phil says. “Maybe, like, yeah, a really *tiny* ice cream cone. Where the ice cream is sort of retractable. You have to figure that, sometimes there’s a dollop of ice cream on top of the cone, and sometimes there isn’t. Sometimes you have to kind of tease it out.”

“Am I correct that you actually put your tongue on the woman’s genital region?” Reiter says.

“Correct,” says Phil.

“Aren’t there … health risks associated with that?” says Reiter.

And I know exactly what he is thinking. In his mind’s eye, Reiter sees his mother approaching with a tongue depressor, I’m sure. Mother wearing a surgical mask. She feels it necessary to intercede in the sex play, dousing the woman’s genitals with alcohol prior to the unholy act. Not only that but … and I don’t think this is unrealistic exaggeration … I think all of this stuff is one hundred per cent in play, psychologically … there was the Last Judgment to think of. Where the Almighty, incredulous, would inquire whether Reiter had actually done what he was said to have done.

“You *ate* her?”

Phil ignores this sanitary aspect.

“I’m not saying you whip the girl’s pants off and lick her vagina,” he says.

“Heavens no,” says DeVries. “It’s a timing thing.”

“Exactly,” says Phil. “Timing. That is the critical piece of the puzzle, for you gentlemen. In fact, if there is one thing the average guy can be counted on to get totally wrong, just totally fucked up, it’s the timing part. When you’re a guy, you want things to happen fast. You want to jump right in there and, you know, just fuck the living bejesus out of everything, I know. It’s understandable.”

“Totally counter productive,” says DeVries, dispassionately turning a page. DeVries is dispassionate about everything. He is dispassionate about being dispassionate. He knew you could not be a Supreme Court justice if you were subject to wild fits of hysteria. You have to be able to process everyone else’s insanity.

“Correct,” Phil says. “It builds, in the female. You want it to build. Slowly.”

“Right. Like, so slowly, you probably want to jump out the window.”

“Correct,” Phil says. “Because, if you’re doing it right, you’re going to be uncomfortable with the pace. Just resign yourself. You’re *supposed to be* uncomfortable with the pace. Because you aren’t doing it your way, you’re doing it *her* way. Which is slow, slow, slow, okay? Just relax. Just touch her hand in a tender way. Take a break and enjoy yourself. Smell the fucking roses, for Christ’s sake. You’d be amazed how much you can accomplish by just, you know, touching a woman’s hand in the right way, in an understanding way, and not, you know, ejaculating all over her instantaneously.”

Ostensibly, the three of us are focused on the football action. DeVries glances at the TV only when he hears cheers. He is perfectly happy watching the replays that normally ensue. This way, he utilizes his time much more efficiently.

“You have to be supportive. You have to be tender. You have to let her know it is safe to come, you are going to catch her,” Phil says.

“Catch her?” Reiter says.

“For them, it’s like going over the top of a coaster,” Phil says. “It’s a little scary, at first. So, you want to be tender, reassuring.”

“Tender, key word,” Devries says, turning another page.

I don’t know how DeVries keeps it all straight. As this conversation proceeds, I am imaginiong that, years later, fragments of explanatory material relating to cunnilingus, clitoral stimulation, and orgasm will be popping up randomly in the legal briefs he writes.

“She has to trust you,” says Phil. “She has to feel totally comfortable, totally safe, or it’s not going to work. So, you start very slowly. It’s all about affection. It’s all about empathy. Just touching her hand. Very lightly, very softly,in a very calm, soothing, friendly way. Try to communicate empathy.”

“Empathy. Another key word.”

I realize that Devries has learned a lot about sex in precisely the same way he has learned a lot about liability law; namely, by highlighting the key words with a yellow marker, making notes in the margins regarding key words, and so forth. Clearly, DeVries sees Feinstein as the Felix Frankfurter of sex. Which gives Feinstein a lot of credibility, in my eyes, as I know DeVries is not one to waste his time with pretenders.

“By the way, women know exactly what you’re thinking,” Phil says. “Women have X-ray thinking. So, don’t try to fake anything. You don’t have to fake. You can be honest. One thing you have in common is desire. You both *want* to fuck, right? It is in your natures to fuck. So, that’s empathy. That’s where you start. Then you have to understand that, for her, fucking encompasses everything.”

“Right,” says DeVries. “Sex does not exist as an activity separate from other stuff, for women. It’s all tied together.”

“Every word, every thought, every gesture,” says Phil. “One, big, orgasmic, ectoplasmic mess. Chris, am I correct that you and Nancy have made excellent progress along the lines I describe?”

Nancy is Chris’s girlfriend back in Des Moines. She has visited us a couple of times. On one occasion she and Noel stay in the one room with the two guys and the four of them fuck their asses off simultaneously, while Reiter and I listen. Obviously the sound effects are going to be a bit tricky to sort out, at that point, so, suffice it to say, a good time is had by all.

“True. We’ve learned from the master,” DeVries says.

“Excellent.”

“Nancy sends her very best.”

“Happy to be of service,” Phil says, sipping his Scotch and smacking his lips. “I must tell you, gentlemen … ultimately, you are going to want to look upon the sexual experience as a religious thing. I don’t know how all this fits into Judaism, which is probably more about jerking off, when you come right down to it. But to me, sex is mystical. If you get it right, it’s fucking nirvana.”

“Thus saith the high priest of the double orgasm,” DeVries adds.

“I’m not saying you can’t go ahead and fuck the girl’s brains out,,” Phil says.

“Heaven forfend, no,” says DeVries.

“But the timing has to be right,” says Phil. “You want her to come *first*. You guys have to realize that, if you get into bed with your girlfriend, she has to have an orgasm. And normally, you want her to have the first orgasm. You have an orgasm only after she has an orgasm. Got that?”

“It is actually in our best interests to give them everything they want,” DeVries says.

“Everything,” says Phil.

“Most of which would seem to have nothing to do with sex, by the way. But to them, it does.”

At this point I have to interrupt.

“But you were saying that you actually lick the woman’s genital region?”

Reiter lets his head fall into his hands. It’s all too much for him, apparently. The adademic approach, I mean.

“Well, a particular *part* of her genital region,” Phil says. “We’re not painting a fence here, okay? And that’s the last thing you do. That is the final act. That is the grand finale, okay. Where all the fireworks go off. But before you get to that, you have to lay the groundwork.”

“Think of it as a roller coaster,” DeVries says.

“Yes,” says Phil. “You have to get them to the top.”

“And how do you do that?” Reiter inquires.

“Slowly,” says DeVries.

“That’s it,” Phil says. “Just go slow. If she is kissing you passionately, play with a button on her blouse. Enjoy the kissing. But play with a button. See if she lets you. If she is uncomfortable, retreat. Never do anything uncomfortable, for her. Play with a button. If she seems okay with it, unbutton that one button. Show her you can go slow. That will reassure her that things aren’t going to get out of control.”

“Things can’t get out of control,” DeVries says.

“And you just gradually proceed, one button at a time, one kiss, one caress at a time, making sure you bring her along, every step of the way, very slowly and patiently and deliberately, making sure that, from your point of view, you are going *too slow*.”

“Good way to put it,” says DeVries.

“And how do you know if she is with you?” Reiter inquires.

“Well, you guys realize that women have erections just like men, right?”

“They do?” Reiter says.

“Of course,” says Phil. “The lips of the vaginal opening are going to be swollen. Not as hard as your cock, but swollen. Her nipples are going to be swollen. When her nipples are swollen, standing up, you want to suck her nipples.”

“The final phase,” DeVries says.

“And you just gradually zero in,” says Phil. “She’s swollen, she’s wet, her nipples are hard, at that point the clitoris should be erect. You should be able to feel it, a hard little ridge above the inner labia, at the opening of the vagina. You just kind of follow that hard little ridge to the end, and that’s the tip. That is action central, for a woman. And that’s when you go down on her.”

“Go down?” Reiter says.

“To lick her clitoris,” says DeVries. “It drives them nuts.”

Feinstein says, “You lick around the outside, at first. The inner labia will be wet and erect. Lick the labia, to tease her. It’s quite a lovely thing to do, really, because it completely sends her, if your technique is any good.”

“Technique?” Reiter says.

“You want to be gentle, you want to be subtle, you want to play,” DeVries tells us.

“Right,” says Feinstein. “It’s not eating a bowl of goulash, okay?”

“Gradually, you close in on the clitoris,” DeVries says.

“Here here,” says Phil. He gives the glass he is holding another little shake. The glass is mostly empty now, just a little Scotch rolling around in the bottom, so the ice cubes are rattling around in there.

“If you do it right, she opens up for you. She wants you to kiss her and lick her there,” DeVries says.

“Sometimes you can see the clitoris,” Phil says. “It’s like a little raspberry that pops out. Like little wet raspberry. A delicious little raspberry. That’s where you want to lick her and kiss her. Lick and kiss and suck that sweet little raspberry. Diddle her there. Rub it. Stroke it. Lick it. Enjoy it.”

“You mean, with your *tongue*?” Reiter says.

“Yes,” says Phil. “As you do, the energy of the orgasm will be building. You can’t always sense it, can’t always feel it. Sometimes you can feel the tension building.”

“Like, a stiffening, almost,” DeVries says.

“Or coiling. Almost like she’s afraid of something,” says Phil. “And actually, I think they are afraid, a little. I think it’s kind of a wild experience, for them. Men don’t get that part.”

“It’s like, gripping the restraining bar on the coaster, before it goes over the top,” DeVries says.

“Right,” says Phil. “Like, holy shit, hang on, here we go. And then, voom.”

“Over?” Reiter says.

“Into the fullness of the orgasm,” says Phil. “It kind of detonates across her entire neurological system.”

“It is not cock centric,” says DeVries.

“True,” Phil says. “But a woman who is having a really deep, fulfilling, satisfying orgasm is definitely going to let you know about it, in no uncertain terms.”

“It’s like a convulsion,” DeVries says.

“But it kind of keeps happening,” says Phil. “That’s important to realize. Don’t let her go just because she comes. Keep licking her, keep stroking her for a minute, but very lightly, very tenderly, and let her enjoy herself. It’s just like a coaster, that way. You know how, when you go over the big hill, you kind of whip over a bunch of smaller hills beyond that, one after another?”

“Exactly,” DeVries says. Turning another page, he adds perfunctorily, “Class dismissed.”

So there is more to it than Tab A in Slot B.

The foreplay is … well … the question is … is it really foreplay?

Or is the foreplay really the whole deal, from the woman’s point of view?

Do women get off on sexual intercourse? Or is it the foreplay? Intercourse being … an incidental consequence?

It’s the foreplay, Feinstein says. The rest is an inconvenience to be tolerated, from their point of view.

I am not sure we have conclusive data.

For now, I suggest we remain focused on further elucidation of the Sexual Voltage Differential itself, building a firm foundation for better understanding of flirtation, necking, foreplay, orgasm, the whole ball of wax. Ultimately, we want to reduce all of this to a mathematical formula, possibly something like:

a = SVD/d2

where ‘a’ is arousal, ‘SVD’ is Sexual Voltage Differential, and ‘d’ is distance. We are striving for something simple here, in the expectation that simplicity will best reflect Mother Nature’s design. Although, in recording our observations, we want to remain mindful of distortions accountable to point of view. The mind of the male homo sapiens works thus and so, a prism or lens of a certain character, and not a perfect instrument, by any means, I can assure you. Essentially, the point of view is that of Jerry Tedesco, the idea being to get laid at all costs. Obviously, observations filtered through this point of view will not represent reality, but rather a delusional version, skewed toward getting laid. For example, males will tend to believe it is possible to get laid when they have absolutely no shot. Mother nature knows it is better to skew toward optimism, to make sure no legitimate opportunities go unexplored. She does not care about the frustration factor.

I think we can assume the distortions are fairly consistent. Probably they can be analyzed and corrected, in the very same way eyeglasses correct astigmatism. Generally speaking, we males try to organize knowledge into a form that looks very much like a well illustrated owner’s manual for, say, a television set or riding lawnmower, a manual with large, colorful numbers indicating discrete steps toward the goal. The phrase “idiot proof” comes to mind.

Step One: Hold her hand tenderly.

Where, on the other hand, females seem to shape knowledge into a form very much like an impossibly complicated organizational chart, indicating that each and every being has relationships of various kinds with every single other being, all of which are active at all times. Yet the female sees nothing confusing in this. Remarkable.

One wants to believe that the two ways of thinking are consistent with some higher purpose. However, my own observations in the field indicate this is not so.

In fact, the two ways of thinking are demonstrablyinconsistentwith the higher purpose. Both points of view would naturally lead to utter futility in life, were it not for the fact that they complement each other, in a delusional way, as when, for example, a terrible artist meets a patron with terrible taste. Both parties to the transaction are convinced they know exactly what they are doing, when in fact only the delusional thinking of the other party legitimizes their own delusional thinking. For a time, the two will enjoy a delusional sort of happiness. My observations indicate that these periods will tend to be transitory, because it’s tricky to keep the delusions lined up perfectly. From nature’s point of view, hat’s okay, as her purpose requires only one night of happiness, and the cycle can start again.

Bes to think of Mother Nature not as kindly Aunt Millie, worrying about us, hoping we will meet a nice girl and settle down; but rather as the dispassionate croupier who keeps taking the dice from players who have gone bust and handing them to new players, confident that, given a certain number of rolls, the house will come out on top. What happens to the individual players is not her concern. As long as the dice are passed, everything will be fine, from her point of view.

She asks only that we roll the dice.

In fact impels us to, by means of the Sexual Voltage Differential.

How, precisely, does this work?

Clearly, there is a genetic memory of the physical joy of sex, no? That is imprinted into the DNA, it seems, so that, as we blunder through the darkness of our own delusions, even as virgins, we are vaguely aware, subliminally aware, of the purely physical jolt of joy that results from union with the opposite half. We gravitate toward that joy. It’s as though, at the moment of our birth, each and every one of us were handed a pirate map marked with a single “X.” We don’t know what we will discover at that spot, but have no choice but to get there and find out.

How a race of beings remembers things genetically is a question I will leave to colleagues in neurobiology. Based on my own observations, I can attest that, when a male walks down the street behind a woman with an attractive rear end, and she is swinging that rear end coquettishly, in a pretty skirt, with a hem that swings, in pretty high heels, wearing stockings with seams that run down the backs of her legs, I don’t care whether the male is a virgin or not, whether he has ever been in bed with a naked woman or not, it doesn’t matter, awareness of the potential for physical pleasure will obscure everything else in the landscape.

Virgin or not, the male tends to see himself as an appliance that is fully functional only when plugged into a woman.

It can be plugged in anywhere. Pick an orifice.

I don’t wish to argue that it’s all as simple as static electricity. Although, in Natalie’s presence, I do have the feeling that my hair is kind of standing up, along with everything else. All I am saying is that there is a charge, of some kind. The term Sexual Voltage Differential (hereafter I think we can make that SVD, for short) is a very general way of describing the intensity of the charge.

Psychologically, I am metering the strength of the charge, anytime I am in her presence.

There is a needle that wavers, a dial on the SVD meter, wobbling left and right as Natalie moves around, smiles at me, puts the music on the record player.

I notice the slenderness of her hands, how beautifully she has done her nails, rosy red.

The charge is undifferentiated, as far as I have been able to ascertain, not targeted at the sex organs, particularly, that I have noticed. Rather, it plays across the entire body of the woman, electrifying and magnetizing her entire body. It’s like the aurora borealis, that way. It makes the male want to kiss and lick and suck her toes, her fingers, her lips, tongue, clit, everything. Let’s call this the cotton candy syndrome. I have alluded to it before. And let’s not be squeamish about admitting any of this, shall we? Let’s be clear that, if I make certain admissions here, it’s all in the interests of science, far as I am concerned, all stated frankly in a documentary vein.

When is this charge most intense? When does the SVD meter register the peak values?

It is when Sylvia finally … *finally* takes the fucking hint … and gets up … and takes her blanket down the hall for the night.

Natalie follows her to the door, cheerfully pokes her head out into the hall, and calls down the hall after her, “Thank you, Syl! Night, Syl,” in such a way that I seem to hear her secret thoughts.

Yes, thank you, Syl.

Night, Syl.

I appreciate it. Because now my boyfriend is free to hold me, to touch me, to love me, to kiss me on the nose, run his fingers through my hair, talk to me as long as I want, forever, if I want, but more importantly listen, let me laugh or cry, whatever, forever, never needing to hurry, never needing to wait, just take it as it comes, the two of us floating free, drifting free, on the lovely, lazy river of desire, floating free on the river of our own being, free to unbutton one button and leave the rest, kiss me there, on my chest, my neck, my cheeks, kiss my hair, my forehead, nibble my ears, say funny things, lay with me on the bed, let me relax for once, let me unfold, just barely grazing the down on my cheek with the back of one finger, just that, only that, that forever, then maybe unbutton one other button, the button on the jeans, unzip me just a little, no need to take them off, just now, just kiss me there, where the hem meets the flesh above the vulva, pull my shirt up, kiss my belly button, kiss my lips, flick his tongue at mine, unsnap the bra, let my tits fall into his mouth, kiss my nipples, suck my tits, lick me and suck me, nuzzle me between my tits, only that, only there, only that forever, his nose between my tits, nuzzling everywhere and everything, every wish, every want, so, yes, thank you, Syl. *Night*.

And then, very softly, I think hesitantly, fully aware of the deliciously sinful commitment, savoring the sinfulness of it, abandoning everything but desire, she closes the door, hears the latch catch, and turns the little dial on the knob. Softly and tenderly and quietly, she does it, turns her back on all of the angels and saints and ghosts and goblins, the foolish virgins, the idiot priests, all the counterfeit crap of sin and redemption and eternal life, when who would ever want it, compared to this, compared to the physical possession of a lover, just turns the latch and turns her back and leans against the door, her hand behind her on the knob, gazing toward me with a little tilt to her smile, a crooked little smile, to acknowledge the humility we all experience in the grip of it, knowing that we are mere instruments of desire, powerless to control or resist or even steer in any particular direction, melting in the heat of it, flowing toward each other, molten, slowly, two red hot ingots of desire, liquifying and flowing toward each other, inching toward each other, from across the room. With the back of her hand she brushes the blonde hair away from the bright blue eyes, eyes as deep and clear as the universe itself, big as the universe, beautiful as that, containing everything, containing me, in fact, smiling the crooked, embarrassed little smile of surrender to it, of complete powerlessness in the face of it. We have been naked with each other often enough to know everything that must happen now, everything that cannot be resisted.

There is time to put another record on.

Sip a Coke.

Chat.

Play with a button … chat, smile, kiss.

A hand that moves lightly over the side of a breast, just touching the side, sliding past there.

There is time.

Hair that falls lightly into the other person’s eyes, strands of sunshine out of the blue.

A kiss, a murmur, a sigh, and then the deep, hungry moan of anticipatory delight.

She stops and rises and puts another record on, bending over in her panties, her beautiful white tits hanging free, and lowers the needle onto a certain track, a melody we both love, because it takes us back to the long, lost, lovely days of high school in Manhattan, far away now, all lost now in an ancient time, all the more beautiful because they are lost. With one rap on a snare drum the tune picks us up and takes us back.

*There are places I remember*

*All my life, though some have changed*

*Some forever, not for better*

*Some are gone, but some remain.*

I make sure to tell her my thoughts.

Your tits are so lovely, so beautiful, I want to kiss them and lick them and suck them. So I will.

Your belly is beautiful, I want to kiss it and lick it and suck it.

So I will.

The downy hair on your cheeks.

The freckles on your nose.

No need to hurry with the removal of the panties, as the panties themselves are such a joy, such lovely, soft, silky things, sliding on your hips, sliding over my hand as I caress you.

And then I am sliding down, and the panties are sliding off, and my tongue is sliding along the inside of her thigh.

And her legs are opening.

She knows she must let me, knows she must have me do it, knows she must make me do it, make me want her that way, because she wants it so, loves it so, the tongue sliding along the electrified ridges of the labia, dripping from the tip onto the tip of her erect clit, touching her there, tickling her there, flicking her there, fluttering against it, making her bigger, making her want it more, but no hurry, never any hurry, let it happen slowly, as it must, let her lift herself toward me, offering herself, as I suck her in and kiss and caress her there, probing for the spot, experimenting, then really connecting, feeling the current in the connection go right through me, although maybe only because she moans from the toes up , her attention so intensely concentrated there, on the tip of the clit, the antenna there, the twenty five thousand volt pleasure amplifier turned all the way up, my arms encircling her hips, her knees coming up, so I can pin her there against the mattress, pin her into her own delirium of joy, the knees in the air, the vagina opening like an orchid, my tongue on the hot spot on top of her clit, licking and sucking it, her pretty pussy, so wet and full and open and hot, a mouthful of berries, while she holds it up to me, offering everything, riding up and up, fully under my power, holding my head against her, afraid I will stop, hungering for more, whimpering with that hunger, clutching at my hair, spreading the legs wider, taking the knees back so I can suck more of it in, holding my head in her hands as I lick her and suck her ravenously, then lost in it, dizzy in it, crying, pleading, letting go one final, spiraling moan of utter abandon, at the brink, and then the shriek as she goes over into the bucking, writhing, squealing thrill of the climax, her back arching as it comes, slamming against the mattress as she lets go of one last, crazy animal cry of joy.

For a long time afterward, our identities are confused in a warm puddle of satiated flesh.

When thirst asserts itself, I rise as out of a dream and walk down the hall to get a couple of cold sodas from the machine.

I pass other girls who eye me suspiciously.

I feel guilty that I do not feel guilty.

We all gather in the dorm lounge around a television broadcast of the draft lottery. Officials in Washington are pulling capsules containing little pieces of paper from a big glass jar, a little like a bingo game. On the little pieces of paper are printed dates. When the capsule containing your birthday is drawn, that is order in which you will be sacrificed to the war machine. All the little boys born on September 14th will be sacrificed first. I’m thinking, we should have told their mothers at the start. See all these little babies in the nursery? One day, we will hold a lottery, and the lottery will determine these will be sacrificed first, because they were born on September 14th. Make sense, ladies? It’s all very efficient, very fair, once you buy into the lunacy at the heart of the idea, people of different colors fighting for flags of different colors, competing to see who is better at killing other people. Fortunately, the Secretary of Defense has run a large auto company, so he has a lot of experience at administering undertakings of this kind. He has been brought to Washington to introduce new efficiencies to the killing process.

In each capsule drawn are a thousand broken hearts.

When I hear my number called, I know I will be expected to help eradicate the Yellow Peril and preserve colonial dominion in Southeast Asia.

We put the war on television, so, every night, all the young men who are in line to get drafted and sent to Vietnam can see those who have gone before ducking bullets in the jungle. All the news anchors go over there and make a big show out of getting close to the gunfire, while never getting quite close enough to actually get shot.

Naturally, it isn’t long before Natalie and I are smoking a goodly amount of weed.

We learn that the United States Army has turned into the Gestapo. A patrol of American soldiers marches into a little village in South Vietnam and shoots everybody. There aren’t any guerillas in the village. The guerillas have taken off. The only people in the village were women, children, and old men. But what the heck, let’s just round everybody up and line them up in front of the drainage ditches and shoot them all, women, children, old men, everybody. Everybody outside now! Chop chop! A little closer to the ditch, please. That's it, scoot in there a little closer, kids, right next to your moms, so we can get you all with one burst. Also, we would very much like all of your bodies to fall into the ditch when we shoot you, okay kids? It’s a lot easier for us that way. If the road is knee deep in dead bodies, it’s going to be tougher to get the vehicles out of here.

When I see the photographs from My Lai published in the New York Times, I rip one out and fold it up and put it in my wallet.

Obviously, there is a moral test here.

Which I fail.

The people who pass the test are hurriedly stuffing their clothing, their stereos, their complete works of Shakespeare, dogs, bong pipes, what have you, stuffing everything they own into suitcases, laundry bags, paper bags, just heaving things into the back seats of cars and heading for the Canadian border, because it is either that or join the Gestapo. They are the real heroes, the ones who light out for Canada. Me, I drop by to visit with a Sergeant Bumpers at his office in the financial district of Manhattan, trying to figure out how I can serve in the military with minimal risk of exposure to combat operations.

His office is all spit and polish, shiny shoes and happy hellos, flags behind the desk, battle streamers on the flags, all the gloriously colorful military crap, walls adorned with all kinds of honorary plaques, proclamations, certificates, parchment crap, horseshit insignia, ribbons and seals, all arranged to create the impression of perfect legitimacy, as if it were all sane and true and right, when of course the reality is a hallucinatory nightmare, streaming with blood and pus and snot and tears, a big, fat, stinking abscess of greed and murder and lies. The good sergeant is wearing a khaki shirt with so much starch in it the sleeves look like slabs of cardboard. Of course there are plenty of ribbons on his chest and stripes on his sleeves, proclaiming him to be a very fine professional soldier, but he is a salesman at heart, of that there can be no doubt, just delighted to have the opportunity to spin up all the god and country baloney, which had such a gorgeous ring to it, based on everything that had gone before. I come into his office and he charges out from behind the desk to shake my hand and clap me on the shoulder like we are good old buddy chums from school or something. Good old Sergeant Bumpers is a tough little fireplug of a guy, cheeks rosy red, with this reddish, brownish stubble of hair on his head, so short the hair is barely visible, really, just a reddish, brownish haze over the top of his skull, and just brimming with good cheer in every direction, bouncing up as merry and bright as you please, exactly what you would expect upon entering an auto showroom or a little insurance agency in some little town.

“Well lookie what we have here!” he says, clasping my hand in both of his and pumping away. “As fine an example of American manhood as I’ve seen lately, I don’t mind saying! Young man, I’m delighted to have the opportunity to discuss your future with you. Dee-lighted. Just sit right down here, lad. Sit right down here and make yourself comfortable as you please and let’s talk, shall we?”

Bumpers reels off a very smooth bit of stock patter about the wonderful breadth of opportunities in what he calls “the modern military,” a line of thinking that runs counter to my strongly held belief that there can be no such thing as a modern military, because all military organizations are essentially medieval at the root, where people are responding to one another based on what kinds of hats they are wearing, that kind of thing. When the most important thing about a person is what kind of hat he is wearing, or what kind of costume, you know you’re in trouble, is my thinking.

But I let it go.

“Very well now,” Sergeant Bumpers says, concluding the preamble with a flourish. “Let’s get down to business, shall we? Am I correct that you will be graduating this year, Arthur?”

“That is correct.”

“From Columbia University? I think someone here mentioned Columbia University.”

“Correct.”

“Ah. Well then. *Attaboy*. An Ivy League son of a gun,” he says with a big smile. “Tremendous.”

“Thank you.”

“Impressive. Very impressive, Arthur. And what are you studying at Columbia.”

“Modern American poetry.”

Sergeant Bumpers has all his blather down pretty pat, so he is very much in control of the situation, at first, but this bit of information about my course of study knocks him off balance a wee bit. He nods, just completely blanking for a second. Finally he says, “Any particular kind?”

“Kind?”

“Well, you know, I mean, kind of poetry. There are different kinds, aren’t there? Brands? Anyway tell me all about it. I’m very interested.”

“Well, I’m particularly interested in the imagists.”

“Terrrific. What’s the big deal with them?”

“Well, it’s kind of a school of poetry.”

“School?”

“A group of people who kind of work together, doing the same kinds of things.”

“Ah. Okay. I see. The imagists, eh? Well, ha ha … there you go, right? Shows you how much I know about poetry. I didn’t even know there *were* fucking imagists, ha ha. Poetry is not my strong suit, obviously. Which is my own fault, I know. God knows I’ve got plenty of time to read it in the shitter, ha ha. But that is neither here nor there, Arthur, is it? Neither here nor there. You said in your letter that your dad was an officer in the Marine Corps, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you have received a wonderful education at Columbia University, right here in the City of New York. Very impressive. Very impressive indeed, I must tell you. Bottom line, I am convinced you have a terrific background for a leadership role in the modern military, Arthur. I am confident of that. And your study of poetry is … well, that’s perfect, really, Arthur. That’s what it’s all about in positions of leadership. The communications skills.”

Bumpers can’t stop chuckling and smiling. My sense is that Sergeant Bumpers got quite a kick out of the “read it in the shitter” line.

I say, “How is it all about communications skills?”

“Well, it’s all rather obvious, I think, Arthur. People have to understand what is required of them under different circumstances. They have to understand exactly what is required, and why it is required, and when it is required. That’s leadership, young man.”

“We require a lot of people, don’t we?”

“Say again?”

“To be perfectly honest with you, sergeant, I’m still getting used to the idea that these things are required. It seems like we require a lot of people, at times.”

“Well, but nothing has been required of you, to this point, am I right?” Bumpers says jovially. “Heck, you’re still living the life of Reilly up there in the hallowed halls, right? No reason for you to get your joint out of whack.”

He grins at me.

I tell him, “I was referring to the coercive aspects of the Selective Service.”

“Coercive?” he says. “Ah, well, I don’t know about that, Arthur. Nobody is *coercing* anybody, here, are they? We’re talking about a person doing his duty for his country, am I right? There is nothing coercive about doing your duty for your country, is there, Arthur?”

I reach into my back pocket and get my wallet out and fish out the newspaper clipping about My Lai, while telling the sergeant, “The thing is, when we require people to do things, and start talking about a duty to follow orders, that kind of thing, there is a risk there, isn’t there?”

“Risk?” he says. “Watcha got there?”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to show Sergeant Bumpers the clipping, not wishing to insult him personally.

“Well, I mean, what are the orders going to be? There is always the risk that the commanding officer is going to make a mistake, right? Maybe give the wrong orders?”

“Well, we’re all human. Nobody is perfect. People make mistakes, from time to time.”

“Right,” I tell him. “That’s what I’m getting at. Take a hypothetical situation. What if the commanding officer is wrong about something? What if the commanding officer makes a bad mistake, and soldiers who are following his orders wind up shooting the wrong people?”

“We try not to make mistakes like that,”

“Well, yes, but that’s my point,” I tell him. “We all *try*. But we’re human, right? So, mistakes are made. Accidents happen. And it’s not just *some of us* who are human. It’s *all* of us, right? That’s the part that worries me. What if the President of the United States makes a mistake?”

“The commander in chief?”

“Yes, him.”

“What the hell kind of mistake are you talking about?”

I put my crummy piece of newsprint on his desk, creased and faded already. Still, the photographs are clear.

Bumpers opens it up and says, “Oh for God’s sake.”

I tell him, “To me, that looks like, you know, a pretty bad mistake, to be perfectly honest with you, Sergeant Bumpers.”

He folds the clipping up and kind of flips it back to me.

“Do you know how this kind of thing happens?”

“How?”

“It happens because not enough conscientious people like yourself are in the forefront, young man. Not enough people like yourself are exerting real leadership. People like yourself have a responsibility to go to the forefront and take responsibility and exert leadership. Natural leaders have a responsibility to lead, young man. When natural leaders go to the forefront and lead, things like that do not happen. It’s when the real leaders are hanging back that things like that happen.”

“You mean, it’s *my fault?*”

“We’re all Americans, aren’t we?” he says.

I unfold the clipping again and I point to the corpse of a teenage girl wearing what appeared to be pajamas.

“Look,” I said. “It was morning. Breakfast time. They are in their pajamas.”

Bumpers is losing patience with me.

“What?” he says. “They’re *always* in pajamas. That’s what they wear over there. It’s hot.”

“So, we just shoot everybody who’s wearing pajamas?”

“Of course not. We shoot the combatants. Only the combatants. But sometimes there are collateral casualties. It’s not a perfect world, is what I’m saying.”

“Not by a long shot. What do you mean collateral?”

“Well, other people get in the way,” he says.

“Three year olds?”

“A five-year-old can pull the trigger same as you or me,” Bumpers says.

He is getting exercised, now, blood rising into his ruddy cheeks.

“I said three. Look, this one is two or three,” I tell him, holding the picture up so he can get a good look at it. “This one is too young to even *lift* a gun.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he says.

“So you are thinking, basically, the children are our enemies?”

“Shit,” Bumpers says. “You *are* a nervous Nelly, aren’t you?”

“You’re thinking, the bodies of the children fell *over* the combatants, and *hid* the combatants, or what? Because, if not, then, where are the combatants? There *are* no combatants. There *were* no combatants.”

And that is the end of our so-called conversation. Fixing me with a calculating stare, Bumpers rises from his chair, extends his hand and says, “Good day, young man.”

And that is how I know I am not terrific military material.

About this time, Natalie begins to experience excruciating abdominal pain.

She faints.

“From your period?”

“No, actually, it’s the opposite. It’s when I’m fertile.”

“Ah.”

“But it’s a lot *like* that. I mean, it’s cramps, basically. Although, this is just the worst cramp you could possibly imagine. And it’s not like in your leg or something, it’s right in the middle of your body. So you are like one, big, giant, aching, excruciating cramp, to the point where you have no choice, you have to lose consciousness, there is no other way.”

“Have you seen a doctor about this?”

“Sure.”

“And?”

“He says it’s sexual frustration.

“That is the diagnosis? Sexual frustration.”

“He says the only thing I can do about it is, you know, basically … screw my ass off.”

I evaluated for a second.

“He sounds like an excellent physician.”

“But I can’t do that.”

“Why not? It’s doctor’s orders.”

“My mother would know.”

“Who is going to tell her?”

She laughs.

Natalie finds the neurotic aspects of life quite amusing. Lucky thing. That is one of the many things I love about her, actually. She can find humor in the fact we are all lunatics. She and I are having breakfast at *Tom’s*, the diner on Broadway at 112th Street. It is about eight o’clock on a Sunday morning, and we are the only customers, but we are still speaking very low, or actually whispering, because the subject is our own sexuality, a subject that cannot be discussed within hearing of others, because really, we are not supposed to be discussing it at all. Anytime the waitress approaches, we stop speaking altogether, smiling at her until she retreats.

“My mother comes with me to the gynecologist.”

“You jest.”

“She actually sits in the examination room.”

“Really.”

“She insists that the gynecologist report on the condition of my hymen.”

“Your what?”

“My hymen.”

“Hymen?”

“You don’t know what a hymen is? I thought you knew all about this stuff.”

“Brief me.”

“The hymen is the membrane that stretches across the opening of the vagina. If you’re a virgin, that is. Obviously, once you have sex, it’s not the same.”

“I thought that was a myth.”

“Oh no, it’s diabolically real,” she says, smiling at me in angelic innocence.

Is it strange that a person with an obsessive interest in sex, me, would be ignorant of such a thing? You might think, well, he certainly could have learned all about that at the Phil Feinstein School of Sexual Gratification. But actually no, because Feinstein didn’t know any virgins, or none that I ever encountered, anyway. When Phil came in contact with a virgin, that person either stopped being a virgin or stopped hanging around with Phil pretty quickly.

“The idiot doctor reports to my mother whether my hymen has been punctured.”

“No kidding. Doesn’t that violate of some sort of confidentiality?”

“Well it violates *something*,” she says.

Before long, Natalie drops out of Wellesley and enrolls at the New School for Social Research in New York City. We will be together more, she says. Besides, the New School lets people study what they want to study. It lets them be themselves, she says. She is expanding her cultural and spiritual horizons. She will be studying subjects like Beginning Harp and Yogic Inner Harmony.

"I want to study something that makes my life better," she tells me.

I suggested *haiku*.

“I don’t know,” she says. “You mean, cherry blossoms in the snow, all that?”

“Yes.”

“The problem is, it doesn’t *mean* anything.”

“But isn’t that the point?”

There are signs of trouble, I admit. I ignore them. She cries. I chalk it up to the geopolitical situation, sexual oppression, the brother’s death, everything but the relationship. She becomes friendly with two guys who live in Greenwich Village, Desmond and Dirk. Their apartment features lavender walls overlaid with day-glo images of dragons and castles and sunflowers and what have you, all fancifully drawn and painted by Desmond and Dirk themselves during midnight fits of stoned inspiration. When they are feeling especially frisky, of an evening, they wear day-glo T-shirts and turn on the special fluorescent lights they are so proud of, creating an impression of disembodied spirits moving about in tenebrous vapors, the crazy day-glo paintings looming behind them. When Natalie and I go to visit, we are usually all dressed up, mostly to keep her mother happy, so I feel out of place, to say the least. The apartment is prowled by an enormous Great Dane who leaves big ball-socket bones here and there, all polished clean by his muscular and abrasive tongue. Desmond and Dirk could be brothers, really, perchance afflicted with the same genetic disorder, both tall and slender, a little on the anemic side, both with pale, clammy, pasty-looking skin, which only makes sense, as they venture outside mostly in the wee hours of the morning, when the danger of getting hit by a stray sunbeam is minimal. They both wear big, bold bandanas, red or yellow or blue, sometimes around their necks, sometimes around their foreheads, and these impart a swash-buckling, piratical air. Along the same lines, Desmond has a droopy, extra-long mustache and Derrick the same, but complemented by a long, stringy beard. I think of Desmond as the clean-cut one.

Both have dropped out of college so they can concentrate on smoking marijuana more or less full time. I assume they are dealing the stuff to make ends meet. But Derrick also has a job in a tee-shirt shop that specializes in fluorescence. He runs the silk screen set-up they use to imprint the images on the shirts. He has transferred some of these images to the walls of the apartment. When we visit it is late at night, when Desmond and Derrick are in high gear with the Maui Wowie or Thai sticks or whatever. They give you a couple of tokes of whatever it is and the stuff soon detaches you from physical circumstances altogether. Relaxing in one of the easy chairs they have reclaimed from the sidewalks around town, you look up to see a phosphorescent rose or ghostly Spanish galleon drifting toward you out of a lavender cloud. Whether it is Derrick or Desmond or one of images imprinted on the walls, or all three, there is no telling, as the combination of day-glo paint and fluorescent light confuses the dimensions somehow, not to mention the hasish. Having passed the pipe around a few times, they would serve desert, frequently a bowl of unbelievably scrumptious sherbert or ice cream, ambrosia of the gods, topped with fresh fruit that assumed a jewel-like, glimmering quality. There would be hilarious readings from the newspapers deposited in alluvial layers on the living room floor and sometimes a terrifying wrestling match with the dog, whose snapping jaws seemed capable of removing a hand or foot.

Normally the evening ends with another hit or two on the hash pipe, with the result that Natalie and I would step out onto the street with a very keen awareness of the newness of it all, sensing that, during the time we have been inside, everything has been recreated from scratch. Natalie is living at home now, so we can’t sleep together anymore, other than on the rare occasion when a plausible alibi presents itself. We need an accomplice, someone willing to vouch for Natalie’s presence elsewhere, because her mother will look into things.

It was perfectly obvious to me that Desmond was fixated on Natalie. The combination of the golden hair and azure eyes and carefree, happy smile was captivating enough under normal circumstances, but combined with the hallucinogens became overpowering, I’m sure. Talk about your feminine ideal.

I express displeasure.

“Oh stop.”

“Natalie, his tongue is hanging out.”

“He’s just a friend.”

She questions my fanatical devotion to poetry. Cannot understand how I can stay up all night writing, come up with nothing, not a sentence, not a line, and yet, feel good about myself.

“I’m learning.”

“But what’s so *hard* about it?”

She grows impatient with my convoluted explications of nonsense. My gushing over a phrase. How thrilled I am to sit in the coffee shop in the basement of St. Paul's Chapel and listen to the readings, knowing that the great John Ashberry, one of the wizards, is right beside me, drinking Malabar Cinnamon or Jamaica Mocca or something, with his boyfriend, who is a classmate of mine! Thrilled and honored even to be in the great man's company, even if I *am* looking at his back. For here was a man who could write:

*Whose wind is desire starching a petal,*

*Whose disappointment broke into a rainbow of tears.*

“What does that *mean?*” she says.

Mean? Of course it means nothing. But don’t you see, it’s not supposed to mean anything! Aren’t the words even more beautiful when they mean nothing? Colorful words on a blue velvet pillow, meaning absolutely nothing, that’s what we want. Words whose only meaning is that words exist. Meaning whose only meaning is that meaning exists.

That we have hearts.

That we have brains.

And look, this is the result.

Words.

I try to explain to her in a poem that ends this way:

*Everything you see*

*Is something else, you see?*

*Every urinal has been signed.*

*Such is our compulsion to make things*

*Less perfect, more like ourselves.*

*Such our power to change things*

*That really are too beautiful to bear.*

She says: “You want something that doesn't exist, don’t you?”

“But my wanting it is something. And that *does* exist.”

“Not much to cling to,” she says.

“Maybe not.”

“Ideas are only ideas.”

One morning, she knocks on the door of my dorm room at the usual hour, with the usual breakfast provisions, which of course are merely an appetizer for that most delectable of confections, herself.

“Come in.”

She enters, takes the coffee out of the bag, puts the two cups on the desk.

“I'm afraid it got cold.”

Comes to kiss me.

I put my arms around her.

She squirms, which is not the usual reaction.

“Let’s talk,” she says.

“Okay.”

I prop my back against the wall at the head of the bed, she sits on the edge. As the cataclysm closes in on me, I am calm, the ultimate measure of my own insensitivity. I probe the usual problem areas in ascending order of potential impact, inquiring whether the bus from New Jersey got caught in traffic, whether the abdominal pains have struck again, whether her parents discovered the marijuana stash. No, she says, it's not that.

Not that.

Not that, either.

"Well what is it then?"

With tears in her eyes she turns toward the windows.

“I want …”

And that’s it.

Or … there is more, but she is choking on it. Turning red.

“Yes?”

“I want …”

And the tears trickle down her cheeks, pure and bright and true as rain, the purest, brightest, truest tears.

I touch her knee, to steady her, the last time I will touch the prettiest knee ever created.

And now, out of nowhere, she finds her courage. The wave of courage rises within and she faces me, that ineffably, that oh so miraculously beautiful face spattered and smeared with tears, a weeping Venus, a heartbroken Venus, just now finding within, discovering within, the astounding courage of a true goddess.

“I want to be a complete person.”

“But … you *are*.”

“I am not.”

“Natalie,” I murmur, somehow believing that the mere pronunciation of her name might calm her, that somehow I might be able to transfer to her the absolute calm attaching to my own impenetrable stupidity. “Natalie, what’s the *matter?*”

When the question really should be, what *isn’t* the matter?

“I want to be complete, that’s all,” she says, dabbing at the tears with the sheet. I don’t want to be haunted, anymore. I want to be happy and at peace and complete.”

“But … you *can* be.”

“No I can’t.”

“Why can’t you be complete?”

“Because …”

And she stares out the window again.

“Why?”

Now turns back to me, riding another wave.

“Because of us,” she says.

“Us?”

“Yes. Us.”

“There is something about us that prevents you from being complete?”

I am thinking I will just lead her through this little cloud of confusion, emerging happy on the other side.

“Yes.”

“And what is that? What prevents us?”

“The idea that we are supposed to get married or something. Live happily ever after. The perfect couple. Whatever.”

“And that’s … *bad?*”

“It’s not life, is my point. It’s not *my life*, anyway. I want to live a *life*.”

“We can’t have a life?”

“I want a sex life.”

“But … so do I.”

“Not marriage,” she says. “Not like we’re engaged or something. I mean free.”

Free? But … doesn’t everyone want to be free? No disagreement there.

“*You can be free.*”

“No, I don’t think I can. Not with you.”

“But why not?”

“Because …”

And she could not say it, at first. It was too much to say.

“Because … why?”

“Because …,” she says.

“Yes?”

“You love me too much.”

“Too much?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible?”

“It you from being you and it stops me from being me.”

“Stops me from being me?”

I had been thinking, you know, I am me.

“I need to be me, and you need to be you. I’ve thought about it. So, I’m sorry … but, I can’t see you anymore. Not now, anyway.”

“Not now?”

“I’m sorry.”

“But … I love you.”

“I know,” she says. “That’s the problem.”

I begin to lose sight of her as my eyes fill.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I need to go.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

And then, of course, I realize, no, there is nothing.

I let her go.

Do I now love her more or love her less?

Answer, more.

Because now, of course, any restraint associated with her actual existence as a living, breathing human being has been removed.

During the fuck-a-thon that follows, I gather extensive evidence of the salutary effects of sex, particularly in regard to mental health.

Is it possible to fuck one’s way out of depression?

We can *try*.

Melissa is an interesting case in point. She arrives for Chinese class a few minutes late, walks past the desk where I am sitting, discretely deposits a tightly-folded wad of paper on the desk, and moves on gracefully, to sit at the back.

The note says, “Would you care to join me for a cup of tea?”

A few days later, at Melissa’s roomy apartment on One Hundred Eighteenth Street, we enjoy the tangy perfume of some premium grade Darjeeling or something (who knew such a thing even existed, that tea could be “better” or “best”) around a tiny table in the corner of her somewhat dilapidated “pre-war” kitchen, where the ceiling is so high I feel miniaturized, and contemplate the fact that, inevitably, we will soon be fucking our asses off. The realization rides on the floral aromas from the foothills of the Himalayas, not so much a decision as a matter of unimpeded momentum, I think. She is there, I am there, the SVD is definitely there, the bed is there, nothing is holding us back. The whole point of having a cup of tea being to allow either party ample opportunity to signal reluctance, register objections, criticize, draw back … and neither of us does. Rather, with each passing second, each pleasantry, each exchange of small talk, the necessity of a sexual encounter becomes clearer. My cock is listening to it all, approvingly, the erection coming on gradually, in this instance, a first phase of gentle tumescence stealing in unobtrusively, with that pleasant feeling of tightness in the pants, the fullness of the pleasure to come, as she sips the last of her tea, eyes alighting on the rim of the cup, dancing happily on the rim, as though she knows what is going on in my pants and wants to encourage it, or even *needs* to encourage it, really needs to fuck me, right here and right now. So, what follows is not so much seduction as confiscation. Somehow or other I know she is mine before I even touch her. Thus, when I do touch her, there is nothing tentative about it, it is the grip of complete possession from the first moment, when, as she lays the teacups in the sink, I rise and approach from behind, slide my arms around her, lock my mouth into supple juncture of neck and shoulder, and suck her hungrily as her head rolls with the exhilaration of it, the thrill of it, feeling the hard cock press into her, knowing what is to come. I will not give her a chance to catch her breath. Just take her in one swoop. I put my two hands on her cunt, draw my two hands from her pelvis up over her tits and hold them firm as her arms ride on mine, her hands covering mine. Then unbutton her blouse from the bottom up. Never hesitating. Melissa has a wonderful figure, by the way, tall and lithe, but very feminine, downright voluptuous, actually, with bountiful tits and a lovely, heart-shaped derriere, and really enjoys herself, that way, really relishes being female, and enjoys being around men, fully understanding the inspirational effect she has, basking in the passion for it, the hunger for it, the fever of the male, so, what she does … as I am undoing one button after another, pulling her long hair away, playing with her hair, because it’s nice to pull it away, nice to let it fall back, to pull it way again, slowly, to kiss her neck and flick the tip of my tongue at her earlobe, my head on her shoulder … she squirms delightfully in my arms, the captive mermaid, wriggling and squirming and sighing musically and reaching up with one hand to stroke my cheek. I pull her shirt up and unhook her bra and reach around to grip her tits again, but under the bra. When she turns, a hint of embarrassment has lit her cheeks with pink and I can feel her nipples standing up against my palms, her eyes are shining bright, lashes lovely, long and dark, and she is smiling the happy, willing smile of complete surrender.

In the bedroom, I am not surprised to see the bed has been turned down, awaiting us. Sex is thoughtless, easy, natural, for us. I slide into her and come. It’s alright.

We smoke some weed and talk about it.

We lie in bed in the moonlight, in New York, passing a joint.

She is gradually, step by step, fucking her way out of autism, she says.

We discuss the diagnosis, the failed treatments, how her father finally took charge. She sucks on the joint, hands it to me. Our bodies are stuck together with cooling sweat. It’s alright.

“My father told me I should have sex with everyone,” she says, using my shoulder as her pillow. “His feeling seems to be that, if I have sex with a lot of people, really a lot, I’ll feel more comfortable with people, generally. What do you think of that theory.”

“It seems to be working.”

“Yes. My father is a big believer in sex.”

“Interesting. Do your mom and dad have a good relationship?”

“They’re divorced. They really hate each other.”

“Ah.”

Late at night, when we feel like fucking, we call each other up and explain how we feel, normally without a lot of embroidery around the idea, pretty much along the same lines as ordering a pizza. If we feel like fucking, we fuck. If we don’t, we don’t. Sometimes we feel like getting a pizza and *not* fucking. In that case, we opt for the pizza. But I am never happier than when Melissa is bouncing up and down on it, honey-coated cunt wrapped tight around the bulbous pleasure probe, in the comfy peace and quiet of her moonlit bedroom, on a bed piled high with quilts and pillows and stuffed animals from mom, emitting a high pitched little squeak with each bounce, the squeaks gradually modulating into little yelps, louder and more excited, and then yells, as it totally takes hold of her, and then real screams when she really gets it going, the gorgeous tits flopping madly, the auburn hair flying, as she rides after the ultimate orgasm.

Like a fox hunt, I’m thinking.

After one of these rumpus room scenes, we turn on the light to find the bed bathed in blood, the walls spattered and streaked with it. Granted, we are both vaguely aware that there was something iffy about fucking when the woman is having her period. But this?

I expect Melissa will be anxious about taking the bloody sheets to the Laundromat. I advise her to be discrete. We do not want a murder investigation, do we? She asks me what I think washing machines are for, if not this. She has such a calm, common sense attitude toward things, it’s heartening. The whole scenario makes me feel better about the fundamental underpinnings of the universe, if you want to know the truth. It all makes sense all of a sudden, right down to the fuzzy dogs and bears that surround us. It all seemed right, somehow, the dogs and bears, Melissa’s stupendous *derriere*, the moon shining through the window, the fact that we could drop in at the neighborhood noodle shop and order a snack in Mandarin … what more could a person want, really?

The only thing that comes between us is my puerile need to get my cock into pretty much every attractive woman I meet.

There is nothing romantic about it. But nothing egotistical or selfish, either. It’s all purely physical. All simple, that way. In the way of the bee seeking the nectar, if you will. In fact precisely that, if you ask me. Far from pondering any higher purpose, or indulging my own ego, I am brainlessly, slavishly executing my mission on this planet. I have been programmed to want to fuck and am dutifully executing the program, no questions asked.

Quite a few of the women I meet seem to understand this instinctively. They understand I am helpless to resist them. They seem inclined to have mercy on me, to forgive and empathize and accommodate, as one would empathize with the victim of an incurable illness. For my part, I avail myself of every opportunity to refine the Feinstein techniques, which my partners seem to appreciate. I do not actually chart responses on graph paper, or enter statistics, but am fairly zealous about recording observations, mentally, and using them to improve the process, let’s say. Where I have a whimper, I want a moan. Where I have a moan, I want a cry of delight. Where I have a cry, I want a scream of ecstasy. Only then, when she is electrified with it, slick with it, riding the rapids on the river of joy, oozing love from every pore, do we slide the instrument of my own pleasure into her, and let her squirm around it delightfully, as the founder has suggested.

Only when actively fucking do I seem to achieve a state of complete spiritual equilibrium. I understand some people have the same feeling when looking at the Grand Canyon. I like to preserve this state. Even to the extent that I will pick them up and carry them around, at times, so they can slide up and down on my engorged cock while I get a soda out of the refrigerator, sometimes deliberating in regard to flavors as I move the cans around, even discussing this, Black Cherry versus Orange Crush, while making sure not to lose any ground in the fucking process. By which I mean, it’s important that the cock stay as big and stiff as possible. The cunt has to keep slipping and sliding over it. A certain minimal movement must continue steadily. The taut nipples have to keep dragging over my chest, setting off little sparks. The music cannot stop. So the two of us will sip a cold Coke as we fuck. Smoke dope as we fuck. Almost as though … yes, very much as though I am drawing oxygen through my cock, depending on my cock for survival. If I could fuck in Chinese class I would. Fuck with abandon, without guilt or remorse, while discussing the peculiar sense of tense that the Chinese have. How everything is present, more or less. That is what fucking means to me, Mrs. Sobelman.

It means that everything is present.

For once.

Our Chinese teacher is Chang Seligman, the daughter of the exiled curator of the Imperial Palace, now implausibly married to a Jew from Brooklyn. She would understand all this, I am sure. Chinese is such a sensitive language, so picturesque, a singsong language, actually sung more than spoken, you might say. Thus I can hear her now, coaching Melissa on the tonality of the screams, the delicately nuanced meaning of the modulations in the groans, as Melissa groans and screams and comes catclysmically. I do try to understand their longing, the emptiness that is there, the void that Natalie has described to me, in the depths of her agony, but to my great surprise, many don’t seem to need the emotional part, or are more than willing to surrender that, as part of the bargaining between the two radiant bodies. More than emotional support, they seem to want to be held a certain way. Stroked a certain way. Where there is an emotion, there is the physical analogue or expression. One substitutes for the other. I am frank to admit I don’t understand what any of it means and don’t care, as I am focused on the physicality of it, on the perfume, the hair so beautifully done, the freckles, the lashes, the lips, the warmth of the neck, the milky fullness and fruitfulness of the breasts, the welcoming softness of the belly, the beautiful black gloss on the pubic hair, when it is slick, the lovely lips of the vagina, the ten thousand watts of joy in the clitoris, the tingling nipples, the sunniness, the rosy everythingness, the complete abandon that gradually takes possession, riding the waves of animal happiness as they come, one after another. No need to fret about the implications. They are trying to get the hang of the equipment, same as me. I candidly explain that I have a bachelor’s degree in orgasmic engineering and have decided to go for my masters. They are happy to render such assistance as they can, much as though we are working on term papers.

Accordingly, let’s build up the voltage patiently, don’t hurry, be content to begin with nothing, with the tentative, easy, sensitive, tracing touch of one fingertip, figuratively asking her what she wants, when she wants it, how much, how soft, how hard, and then ever, ever so slowly, step by step, allow her to creep along, to come along, to climb, to gradually store up the charge, imagining what is next, everything that can happen, everything to come, but never going there right away, instead letting her wait, letting her climb, letting desire and imagination run well ahead, never giving her more than she wants, always a little less, until her whole being gradually warms to it, is illuminated, aglow in the light of the clitoris, oscillating on the wavelength of the energy there. Yes, let’s make sure she really enjoys that moment, really glories in that moment, suns herself sinfully in the energy of her own sexuality, young and fecund and wet and naked in that sun, while I hold her there, caress her there, keep her there, totally attuned to the sonority, the resonance, the song of her mighty little violin, patiently awaiting the moment of maximum energy, as the arc gets ready to jump, so that when it finally does, when she finally goes over, the lightning hits us both, igniting everything in one convulsive flash and cry, and we are both incinerated.

Lydia is another noteworthy personality. She is from Greenwich, Connecticut. She has been disappointed in a love affair with her high school sweetheart, who went off to become an Oriental Studies major at Yale. Apparently he is a few years older than she. Anyway, she, in turn, has become an Oriental Studies major at Barnard, resolved to outdo her former lover in all things “Oriental” or kill herself in the attempt. Who will attain greater peace and happiness via the teachings of Buddha and Confucius and so forth? Lydia is intent on kicking the crap out of the poor guy, along those lines, just bound and determined to be so very fucking happy, so very much at fucking peace, he will be miserable for the rest of his life, realizing that he held the mother lode of peace and happiness in his arms, and let it all slip away.

For what? Some *bimbo* French major in New Haven?

She and I have sex three or four hours after we meet at an exhibition of ancient Chinese bamboo paintings, an outcome that was predetermined, I think, as part of her program of revenge. Before we get out of bed the next morning, she has given me a pretty thorough introduction to Taoism and a kind of overview of Eastern spirituality. Subsequently, we make every possible effort to conduct our liaison, even our sex life, according to the teachings of the great Taoist masters, Lao Tse and Chuang Tsu. I owe Lydia a great debt, in this regard, as I find it very comforting to know that there are hundreds of millions of living beings who believe in reality, more or less, can accept reality, feeling no need to interpose elaborate fictions about gods, prophets, miracles, and the rest. No need to invent Zeus as an explanation for thunder. Thunder can just be thunder.

Lydia is a very slightly plumpish, prosperous looking, with brownish blonde hair and very nice gray eyes, very simple and tasteful in everything she does, very Greenwichy, that way, in terms of attire and hair and makeup and so forth, by which I mean perfectly at ease in the ways of affluence but not particularly stuck up about it, either, not like the Park Avenue girls, who need to associate pretty much everything they say or do with the utmost in opulence, twenty four hours a day. Lydia insists that I meet her brother, Nigel, who is attending a special school in Westchester, just north of Manhattan. I initially assume the school is special in regard to the intellectual gifts of its students, a mistake she seems to find amusing.

“It’s for the emotionally disturbed,” she says.

So we drive up to Westchester with Lydia’s somewhat nervous roommate, Gayle David, and Gayle’s boyfriend of the moment, Vance, smoking marijuana from Vance’s special souped-up stash in the car. Vance is always on the lookout for more potent strains of marijuana, ever hopeful that the next batch will bring him the psychological breakthrough he is looking for. Lydia and Gayle are very different but very close, the one blondish and the other brunette, the one a little on the buxom side, buoyant as can be, in fact maybe a bit too buoyant, as one is inclined to wonder, at times, whether Lydia is covering something up, or avoiding something, the other slender and more reserved, let’s say, keeping her thoughts to herself, for the most part, but essentially pretty happy, I think, or at least cheerful, not one to let a giggle pass without joining, and overall a very warm, empathetic sort of person. A very interesting Yin and Yang kind of combination, Lydia and Gayle, which caught my attention from the start.

Where Vance gets the car I can’t tell you, but clearly he is not an automobile person, as we wander around Westchester for quite a while, over hill and dale, searching for this or that intersection or landmark. Gayle sits up front with Vance and offers suggestions about our route, kissing him and patting him on the shoulder periodically, as he misses one turn after another, off on a tangent, mentally. Each time she tells him to make a left or right, he goes flying past and then says, “Where?”

Overall, Vance does not have a lot to say. The few thoughts he does manage to put into words are mostly massive over-reactions to externl stimuli, relating to the cannabis. If it’s a nice day, and the sky is blue, he may get completely lost in blueness, meditating interminably upon the optical interaction of interstellar light with certain earthly gases. Doubtless the fact that Vance is so out of it plays a part in what happens with the girls. While he is dreaming, I make sure to pay close attention to every word they say, following along with the little games they play, trying my best to get the inside jokes, although they seem to guard against that, to the point where the joke will take the form of the momentary, barely perceptible elevation of an eyebrow, when they think no one else is looking. I can see how much they enjoy sharing everything, even reading each other’s minds, the one collapsing in laughter over a sideways glance from the other.

We arrive at the Tate School more or less accidentally, a cause of exultation all around. The majestic stone gate is right in front of us all of a sudden. The girls clap and cheer and bounce in their seats. It’s like a pinball game, where the ball hits every paddle and lever in sight, but then miraculously pops into the hole with the highest reward, lighting everything up and switching on all the horns and bells. Vance chauffeurs us through calm as you please, implying that he has had that gate squarely in his sights the whole time, while we foolishly assumed he was lost. He reaches for the cigarette lighter and fires up another joint, by way of rewarding himself. Wending our way along the campus drive, we pass beautiful brick buildings with accents of pink granite, the tattered ivy barely clinging to the walls, brownish and lifeless, after a long, dreary winter. It’s March, so the light has just started turning around, putting everything into the comforting perspective of the coming spring, but nothing has actually sprouted, as yet.

“No weed around my brother, okay?” Lydia says.

“There’s a problem?” says Vance. He likes to main as much latitude of action as possible, in regard to the weed, the better to keep the pharmacological effects on a nice even keel.

“He takes a sedative,” Lydia says. “I would very much prefer not to complicate the picture, if that’s alright.”

“What kind of sedative?”

“He takes Thorazine.”

“Oh, heavy,” Vance says.

Lydia guides us toward a little parking lot in front of the mansion that now serves as the school’s administration building. We all get out of the car to stretch our legs, while she pops in to inquire after Nigel. When fifteen or twenty minutes go by and Lydia hasn’t reappeared, we enter to find her engrossed in conversation with a Mr. Grosvenor, in Mr. Grosvenor’s office. The sign outside identifies Mr. Grosvenor as an assistant dean. He is just sitting down behind his desk, with Lydia sitting in front, when the rest of us walk in. Grosvenor is a pretty athletic-looking guy, a young guy, I think, but with plenty of gray hair, and very heavy horn-rim glasses.

“Well, I spoke to him,” Mr. Grosvenor says.

“And?” Lydia says.

“He would prefer not to have visitors, at this time.”

“My brother said that?”

“He’s just not feeling tip top, let’s say.”

Lydia looks at us and says, “We have a little problem.” Then, addressing Mr. Grosvenor again, “We came all the way up from the city just to see him.”

“Well, sometimes it’s best to be patient, with these situations.”

“Tell me about these infractions,” Lydia says.

“Well, there have been several disciplinary infractions, and we’re concerned about that, yes,” Mr. Grosvenor says. “We’re concerned about a pattern of infractions.”

As he speaks, Mr. Grosvenor keeps adjusting his glasses, seeming a little uncomfortable with the whole situation. He keeps kind of picking them up and settling them down again on the bridge of his nose.

“What exactly did he say, that got him in trouble?” Lydia says.

“I believe he was discussing a play written by Samuel Beckett, realy one of the great dramatists of the Twentieth Centur, and characterized the play as, if I have the choice of words correct … a *blow job*.”

“Blow job?” Lydia says.

“Which was poor choice of words, to say the least,” Mr. Grosvenor tells her. “But that wasn’t all he said. When the instructor cautioned him, I think then proceeded to tell the instructor that the instructor had his head up his posterior, or something of that kind. Which put the icing on the cake, so to speak. And unfortunately, this is not the first time we’ve had to deal with an outburst of this kind. I am told there have been several incidents of behavior that has been characterized as aggressive toward instructors. We at the Tate School can abide a lot of things, and we do, I can assure you. We really do. However, one thing we cannot abide is aggressive behavior toward faculty. I am sure you understand.”

Vance says, “I’m betting the play sucked.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Grosvenor says, bowing in Vance’s direction. “Possibly you are correct. We’re all entitled to our opinions, after all. However, at the end of the day, I don’t think we’re discussing the literary merits of a dramatic work.”

Lydia then tries a different tack.

“Mr. Grosvenor, I’ll grant you the choice of words was unfortunate,” she says with cool aplomb. “But I don’t think you need to send the kid to Alcatraz.”

“No?” Grosvenor says. “May we have a word in private?”

His expression invites the rest of us to leave. Outside, Lydia explains that Nigel has been asked to apologize, and won’t be allowed to have visitors until he does. She is worried about his medication, as the family’s deal with the school provides that Nigel must take his medication faithfully. Rules be damned, she insists on going over to Nigel’s dorm. She doesn’t want to go in, she says, that might get the brother in even bigger trouble. Instead, she stands under Nigel’s window, which is on the second floor, and calls his name until the window opens and this skinny, pimply-faced kid with a big mop of curly hair pokes his head out.

“There you are,” Lydia says.

He says, “You realize I am not supposed to talk to you, right?”

“I’ve got only one question,” she says.

“What’s that?”

“You’re taking the medication, right? Tell me you’re taking the medciation. That’s all I need to know.”

With that, the kid slams the window shut, pulls the curtains closed, and disappears, leaving Lydia to bury her face in her hands for a while. A minute later, he opens the window and throws a handful of prescription containers at Lydia’s feet. She picks them up and reads the labels, starting to cry. Turning to Gayle with tears in her eyes, she says, “I really can’t deal with this anymore.”

And soon we are on our way.

That night Vance disappears, immediately upon hearing that Lydia and Gayle will be dining with Mrs. David, who has just popped in from Vancouver. His decision is somewhat surprising to me, as the girls insist they want me to come along, and would have been delighted to have Vance, as well, I’sure. Although, the drift I get from Mrs. David is she does not get along particularly well with Vance. At one point she asks whether he is “eating well” and alludes to his more or less continual state of catatonia, apparently not understanding that it’s all self-induced.

Mrs. David rides the elevator up to the fifteenth floor of Plimpton Hall and we meet her in the hall, the two girls wrapping their arms around her simultaneously. She is an older version of Gayle, basically, just subtract the *joie de vivre* and most of the sexuality, although not all. She does manage to pick up the energy level a bit when we all go to dinner at a little Austrian place on Amsterdam Avenue, where she speaks to the waitress in German, asking questions about the schnitzel and sauerbraten and dumplings and so forth, a big deal for her, apparently. Probably she does not bump into a whole heck of a lot of people who can discuss schnitzel intelligently, back in Vancouver. When Gayle tries to translate all the Schnitzelese for us, her mom keeps saying no, no, that’s not it, exactly. The English language is not well suited to discussion of schnitzel, evidently. Nothing is quite satisfactory, along those lines. Something has been lost, somehere. After dinner, we repair to the dorm suite at Plimpton, where Lydia and Gayle are roommates. Lydia gets sodas out of a machine somewhere and we all sit around in the bedroom Lydia and Gayle share, sipping cold soda from the cans and chatting about how beautiful Vancouver is and how much Gayle enjoyed growing up there, a topic Mrs. David gets quite sentimental about. She has the old windshield wipers going pretty good, for a minute. Every once in a while, recalling a particularly endearing detail, she turns to her daughter and says in an off-kilter, half-Austrian kind of way, “That’s right, yah?”

She is somewhat distracted, at times. In the middle of this conversation about Vancouver, she loses focus, staring over our heads and thinking of something else. Her head is turning, adjusting, like a radar dish locking onto a signal, the eyes a little extra wide, wondering, trying to sort something out. Then she reaches for her daughter’s arm and grips tight. Only then do I become aware of the sound that has disturbed her, a rhythmical, pulsing, chugging kind of sound, which seems to arise from Amsterdam Avenue, the broad boulevard fourteen or fifteen floors below us.

The conversation between us gradually dies off as, one by one, we all tune in to listen for this strange noise.

“What *is* it?” Mrs. David says.

There is a muffled, fuzzy, buzzing quality, to it. But also an intensity that’s hard to place. In a minute, I make the connection to Yankee Stadium. Or, more specifically, to the sound of the stadium from a distance, as one approaches.

When I try to raise the window, Lydia explains it doesn’t open.

“We can go to the roof,” she says.

There are stairs leading up. Others have climbed them ahead of us. They are all lined up along the wall that runs around the perimeter. Taking my place between Mrs. David and her daughter, I see that the street below us is empty. I am surprised at the volume of the noise, which now seems to be everywhere, enveloping us, caroming off the sides of the buildings all around. Gazing down the avenue, I see the source of it in the distance, a tossing sea of human heads, signs and banners bobbing above, the whole amorphous mass cascading toward us, extending from one side of the broad avenue to the other, and at the rear, deep into the distance, disappearing into darkness, a picture that borders on the unbelievable, really, there are so many people, carpeting the street and the sidewalks on either side.

The thought occurs, perchance is this something Sholokhov has written?

Have we been transported into his imagination?

It has that feeling of grandeur, of the magisterial river of life, sweeping us all along, sweeping us all over the falls, into the sea, an ocean tide washing over a race of ants, washing us into the great, wide sea, helpless, except in our ability to comprehend, vaguely, what is happening to us, which is a mixed blessing, obviously.

Mrs. David has a death grip on the railing that runs along the top of the wall. On her wrist is an odd tattoo, a little row of numerals, neatly printed in indigo ink. So neat, so businesslike, it’s a little bizarre, that way, isn’t it? Not what a tattoo is supposed to be, in my mind. Not like pirate writing, or a panel from a comic strip. Of course, there is a message in the very neatness of it, isn’t there? In the orderliness of orderliness, shall we say. Gayle is observing as I scrutinize the number, half aware of its horrific significance, but not quite ready to accept the reality. I am always hoping there has been some misunderstanding. And truly, it only makes sense that a person will have difficulty accepting it all, doesn’t it? A lot of it truly is unbelievable, isn’t it? That the history of the human race could even be *possible*, let alone have actually happened? The Grand Inquisitor? Auschwitz? All done in the name of *good*, mind you. Always in the name of the good. It is always presented as a *good thing*. *Good* that we burn these people at the stake. Each time we, as a race of beings, set a new standard for the evil we can do, we seem to find it unsatisfactory, and feel compelled to expand the frontier to something even more nightmarish. At this moment, s I am pondering, Gayle leans close and whispers into my ear the single word that says more about the human character, about our souls, about the forces that possess us, than any other in any language on earth, for my money, the word “*Auschwitz.*” Then closes her eyes for brief moment, her face angelic in its calm, which I take as a token of her acceptance of it all, roughly equating to, well, this is what they have given us, this is all we have, and yet, we are who we are, wanting so much that we cannot have, angels bound to be miserable, in these chains. The protesters pass beneath, bellowing in fury so intense I am glad we are out of it, so high above. It’s difficult to make out the words at first, what with all the echoes caroming around. Oddly, the sound is out of synch. We see their mouths moving, their fists pumping, in rhythm with the chant, but the sound takes a little longer to travel, I guess, so there is this delay.

*Hell, no, we won’t go.*

*Hell, no, we won’t go.*

Mrs. David puts her hands on her cheeks, stunned. As tears gather, she at first tries to wipe them away with the heel of her hand, then gives up and lets them fall, glittering, fifteen stories toward the crowd below, veering and dancing in the light from the girls’ dorm rooms on the way down.

When the march has passed there is nothing to say about it, we all sense it’s time to get Mrs. David back to the Waldorf Astoria as quickly as possible. Having packed her into a cab, we repair to the dorm suite, where Lydia insists that she and I have sex while Gayle pages through back issues of *Vogue* and *Cosmo* in the kitchen. We know she hates this. What’s the alternative? As Lydia sees it, the whole day has been way too upsetting *not* to have sex. She is convinced that intercourse will help erase some of the unpleasantness. Following the main event, she hops up to get a drink of water or something, some excuse along those lines, as I drift in the post-coital stupor, one eye shut, one open intermittently. Opening that one eye, I find myself staring at a woman’s vagina, my head propped on the pillow more or less at vagina level. Gradually, I puzzle through confusion to the surprising perception that this vagina is not one I am familiar with. This is a new vagina. Not Lydia’s vagina, but Gayle’s. Gayle has some erasing to do as well, apparently. The two of them seem to see my penis as a pencil with a big pink eraser on the end, an idea that makes perfect sense to me.

“Hi Gayle.”

“Hello.”

More or less pro forma, I ask a question or two.

“Why are we doing this?”

“Because I’m lonely.”

“What about Lydia? How does she feel about this?”

“We’re close, Lydia and I. I mean, this *is* our room.”

“Tell me this. If you’re both sleeping with the same guy, wouldn’t that threaten the closeness? Wouldn’t that be … awkward”

“No,” she says. “If we’re close with each other, why can’t the two of us be close with you? It’s perfectly natural.”

“Natural?”

“Look at the lions. Look at the deer. Females get along well together, that way.”

“But we are humans.”

“So?”

She picks up the sheet and slides in beside me. Kisses me affectionately, a friendly kiss, snuggles near.

“It would make Lydia happy. It would make us both happy, if we could all be close.”

Now Lydia comes back, wrapped in a bath towel, a silhouette outlined in the dim light from the windows, in the blue, half light of midnight in the metropolis. Halfway across the room, she drops the towel on the floor.

“Scoot over,” she says, hopping into bed with us.

She wears a big smile, perfectly at ease as she clambers over me. When she has settle down, she murmurs, “Make Gayle come,” and Gayle shrieks with laughter.

At first, I am a little vague on the etiquette of the situation. How is it they can be so relaxed in a set of circumstances that brings me to the verge of a nervous breakdown? I am not saying the thoughts actually surfaced, but subconsciously, the Last Judgment has to play a part here, right? One cannot simply forget about the Last Judgment. Even in the event a person decides most of that is mythology, there are *odds*, right? In other words, what if I am wrong about that? Incredulous at the stupidity of the mortal being who stands before him, stupefied, St. Peter then inquires of me, “So. You fucked them *both?*”

“Please,” Gayle says.

Lydia gives me a shake.

“Don’t be a stick in the mud.”

I interpret their entreaties as a challenge to my level of skill.

*Can* I make her come? With another woman watching?

How would Sir Edmund Hilary respond?

What a pleasure to walk around campus with not one but two lovers, at times even holding hands with the two of them, making an obnoxious show of it, I think to inflict extra distress on all the jealous males. It is perfectly obvious that the two of them have made a kind of hobby out of making me come as many times as possible every day. Which is not a situation I am going to be shy about. But here’s the best part. Any time I make one of *them* come, the other seems to enjoy it nearly as much, telepathically. Which all adds up to very wholesome, happy arrangement, it seems to me. The only unhappy part being that even this is not enough, because, no matter how much they give me, no matter how much we enjoy ourselves together, there must be something more.

Even the fusing of the three hot bodies into one knot of passion … one wild exorcism of fulfillment … seems lacking, in a way.

Whatever is not heaven itself … is lacking.

As even heaven would be, probably.

If you ever got there, probably you would think, that’s it?

That’s all?

When I enlist in the Navy, they both accompany me to the recruitment office on Church Street. It’s a lovely spring day, when the city is at its finest, and so are they, in summery skirts and blouses, dressed up for the occasion, for some reason, the blouses unbuttoned to the point where just a bit of cleavage comes into play, something they did as an expression of support, I believe. They are escorting me, in their way, forming a phalanx of cleavage around me. Regarding my strategy, I had figured out that, if I joined the Navy as a sonarman, true, I might be engaged in a major naval battle, here or there, but would not be swatting flies in the jungle, or fighting off venomous snakes, or sinking in quicksand.

Better to be blown to bits instantaneously, on a full stomach.

The three of us are sitting together in the reception area of the recruiting office when a boatswain’s mate I had spoken with on the phone comes out to usher me into the inner office.

“Arthur?” he says.

Each of the girls grips one of my arms.

“That’s me.”

He looks at them, then back at me, and says, “Arthur, you are my hero.”

I am at a bookstore in Paramus, buying a few books that I plan to read in basic training, while others are learning how to kill and maim their fellow men, when Natalie appears at my side, scanning the same row of books.

She says, “Oh. It’s you.”

I look up from *The Cosmological Eye*.

“Oh my gosh. Natalie. How have you been?”

She says, “Better.”

She explains how she has given up marijuana and is thinking about going back to Wellesley.

“I think I could take advantage, now,” she says. “I’m more grounded.”

“Good.”

“I got over a couple of hurdles I really needed to get over.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“I really feel, ummm, well, so much freer, really.”

Meaning, what, I am wondering. Maybe the worst thing imaginable. Natalie making love with one of the troglodytes.

But it didn’t have to be that bad.

Natalie making love with anyone was more than I could stand.

She says, “We could see each other again, now, if you would like.”

I tell her, “Well, believe it or not, I’ve enlisted in the Navy.”

“You’re kidding.”

“This way, I probably won’t get killed, and probably won’t have to kill anybody else. I’m kind of crossing my fingers, on that one.”

“You in the Navy?”

“I know. It’s the practical thing to do.”

“When?”

“Next week.”

“We should get together.”

“It might be a little late for that, Natalie.”

“Call me if you want.”

“If I can.”

“Do.”

“Sure.”

Imagine what we would think if we saw *dogs* marching.

All the left feet hitting the ground at once, then the right, turning left and right on orders, all the dog noses pointed in the same direction, pivoting around, stopping, starting.

All the tails wagging in unison.

Dogs on parade.

Now imagine that one group of dogs marches under one flag and another under a different flag. The dogs in the first group are trained to do everything possible to kill the dogs in the second group, whom they have never met. Each of the dogs has a special collar, containing oblong wafers of aluminum embossed with the identity of that dog. When the dogs are killed, one of the tags stays with the remains, to facilitate identification, as the corpses are frequently mangled badly, and one is taken off, to serve as a kind of proxy for the corpse in a highly mechanized process of corpse disposal. These are called “dog tags.”

The dogs are aware that their bodies are being tagged for efficient disposal, yet they do as they are told. What do they know? They are *dogs*. Besides, there is something inspiring about it, when the martial music plays and the colorful flags unfurl and all the stupid feet hit the stupid ground at the same stupid instant. Yes, inspiring, in a way, to be a part of such a powerful machine, even a mere cog in a machine that can sweep across the earth, sweep across the sea, incinerating everything in its path. Remarkable, too, that certain human beings can train others *not to think*. To do so, we need to manipulate the minds of our beings in a pretty ingenious way. Rest assured it’s all doable. If we play upon their feelings for each other in a very particular way, play upon their natural sympathy for all that is human, their innate desire to belong to a community, to be accepted by the people around them … convince them they are doing these things not for us, but for *each other* … why then we can persuade them to abandon even basic humanity, the intellect that God gives them, the love in the innermost chambers of their hearts, and to retreat beyond the level of our friends, the dogs, to the level of the rats and mice.

It turns out that, given the choice between life as a beloved rat and life as a shunned human being, nearly all of us become rats in no time. Give us the merry company of fellow rats and we will be happy.

Ultimately, it is all about the marching, isn’t it? When one falls out of step, punish them *all*. When one errs, inflict pain on all. Teach them that thinking itself puts comrades at risk. The apparatus of thought introduces a liability. Better to just follow orders.

March with us, and live the simple, happy lives of rats.

Consider what we would say to all of the soldiers who are in training, at any given moment, in all of the different nations, in uniforms of different colors, under flags of different colors.

Fellows, hey … *hey listen up, fellows* … time to learn to kill each other.

All you guys under the yellow star? The yellow star on the red field? Okay, you will kill all these other guys under the good old stars and stripes, okay? And vice versa, okay? This will be the critical next step in your development as human beings, learning how to maim and murder each other in really, really large numbers. Think efficiency, okay guys? We are not talking about shooting one or two people, okay? To make this whole thing work, in a practical way, we need you to slaughter each other by the thousands, by the millions, incinerate and gas each other, blow each other up, incinerate the babies in their mothers’ arms, by the thousands. Got it? The more massive the casualties, the better. That is how we define success here, fellows.

I pay close attention as our drill instructor explains things, fascinated with the cause and effect aspect, as he leads us through the process of psychic transformation, utilizing to the age old methods.

Somehow he senses that I am psychoanalyzing everything, potentially a big problem, for him, as even one thinking being at the center of the crowd can disrupt the discipline. He focuses intently on me. While he does his best to manipulate my mind, I counter-manipulate, following all his stupid instructions with an attitude of servile compliance, a complete automaton, taking obedience to absurd lengths, in order to remove even the most remote possibility of any kind of confrontation. This is somewhat frustrating to him, I expect, as he is no doubt accustomed to seeing at least some sign of struggle from the reluctant ones. Of course any sign of struggle or resentment gives him the opportunity to punish the group, and he gains leverage from there.

But what if the reluctant one is servile?

In hiding, so to speak?

Inexplicably, the Navy fails to identify me as a person of profound psychological weakness (evident, even obvious, even here and now) and instead channels me into, of all things, nuclear weapons training. Raising the possibility that I have outmaneuvered myself. For who but an automaton could do this job?

I find myself in Key West, at the nuclear submarine base there, assigned to clean urinals for a couple of weeks, as I await an open slot in the training cycle, getting high on the ammonia fumes, in mortal fear that the acrid admixture of intestinal gas, urine and ammonia will prove highly combustible, blowing us all sky high at the first spark, the first non-combatants killed by their own flatulence. In need of ballast, psychologically, I begin writing out my innermost thoughts in a notebook of the sort schoolchildren carry, the kind with the stiff covers, imprinted with the pebbly pattern of black and white, front and back. Each day, I read what I wrote the previous day and congratulate myself on the overall tone of objectivity, realism, and yes, sanity, while observing that, meantime, the larger reality around me veers deeper and deeper into the realm of lunacy. I think we can all recognize that there is a mirror image process at work here, the process by which insanity gradually takes hold.

As I progress, I feel better and better. Let’s recognize that insanity is not an unhappy experience. Most of the lunatics living on the sidewalks of New York are pretty happy people. Problems arise only when reality impinges upon the delusion. By way of covering my retreat, and minimizing any conflict, I learn how to operate my face via remote control, if you will, simulating reactions that have nothing to do with the thoughts in my head, but rather, are designed to camouflage those thoughts. I am a dummy sitting in my own lap. Using my fingers, I manipulate facial expressions that are, in effect, decoys, intended to throw people off the track. My doppelganger, the dummy, makes conversation, tries to laugh at the appropriate moments (each attempt a wild guess), does his best to figure out the expectations classified as normal, in this strange country, even amuses people, sometimes, while I, the inner being, focus on the inner life.

On my imaginary life with Natalie.

Whatever fascinates her, fascinates me.

My thoughts seem to be a kind of subset of her thoughts.

First, there is Natalie’s attitude toward clouds.

So.

Now then. Focus. Write that down. In real ink on real paper. Real writing in the real world, verifying that the dream world does, in fact, exist. If someone in fact thinks these thoughts, well then they are not purely delusional, are they? Because they are real thoughts.

1. *Clouds*.

Natalie and I lie together in the grass on the sunny banks of Lake Waban, looking straight up into the resplendent sky. Her head is on my shoulder, her soft, silky, radiant hair splayed against my cheek. Brilliantly, she names the different types of clouds as they scoot past, giving each its lovely Latinate name. This storybook imagery is shuffled together with that of Natalie hungrily sucking and yanking at my cock. Sucking and yanking the come out of my cock, as if her life depends upon the extraction of every last drop of semen. And that of Natalie chalking up yet another orgasm … or a roller coaster, firecracker chain of them … so she is now leading her mother by a score of about ten thousand to zero, probably. And that of Natalie and I doing all of our sexual pretzel tricks, which fascinate me more or less infinitely, as we figure out how we can knot our bodies together even tighter, increasing stimulation to the sex organs to the absolute max, given the handicap that, after all, we are human beings, and have only one tongue and ten fingers apiece, one cock, one clit, and so forth. Which is a challenge.

But getting back to the cloud thing, one would think that, on any given day, most of the clouds would be of more or less the same type, the type determined by prevailing conditions, yes? Same as a flock of ducks, in other words. The flock is not going to contain a lot of different kinds of ducks, is it? *Hungrily*, *she licks the creamy come from the tip of my pulsating cock.* But in fact, no. The sky is capacious. *As my own tongue flutters against her swollen little clit*, now broadcasting a million megahertz of pure pleasure into the rest of her body … completely electrifying her … Pleasure Central calling …she gradually tenses up, contorts, twists, hardens against the intensity of the accumulationg charge, moans as if in terrible pain, and finally heaves and cries with a joy that I think becomes the more intense, the more explosive, when she tries to contain like that, to hold it back or avoid it. She will try to hold it back, and fail, and be swept over the falls, and scream with joy in the fall, so someone down the hall will call out, *“Natalie?”* or *“Natalie, you okay?”* Whereupon Natalie will have to compose herself, catch her breath, and mimic the carefree musicality she might use to answer while, say, reading a textbook*.*

“Oh, fine.”

They soon stop asking.

The sky can contain many different thermal layers and, in each layer, a different type of cloud. But then, of course, the distance between them is collapsed, visually. Thus, the various types seem to float alongside each other, in the same layer.  *Her back arches, taut as a bow, as she clenches the scream in her throat, so it becomes a moan that rides up into the register of extra-high-frequency falsetto, and then breaks out, threatening to shatter the windows all around us.*

It’s a cloud laboratory, the sky, that day.

Nimbus. Cirrhus. Stratus. Cumulo nimbus.

She points to them and names them all.

This is what I think about in ASROC class … all of it … as Chief Sonarman Bogarty talks about the concussion from the blast and the minimum range required for the weapon’s use. Bogarty is a big, burly, sunburned, red-headed, freckle faced kind of a guy, pretty much standard issue U.S. Navy enlisted man, beer belly and crewcut, from Baton Rouge, more or less straight ahead on everything, totally oblivious to the puzzling awpects of life, God bless him, or seems so, anyway, although, ultimately, what the heck do I know. Punch your time card, launch the nuclear weapons, try to get home in time for dinner with the kids, that’s the ticket. Bogarty draws the critical perimeter on the blackboard for us. Minimum range, four miles. Maximum range, twelve, because beyond that, you don’t know what you are shooting at. When an idiot in the back of the room asks about the minimum range, Bogarty nods the guy, feigning thoughtfullness.

“Good question,” he says. “Let’s think about that. Let’s be mindful, what we have here is a nuclear fucking warhead, am I right, gentlemen? That baby turns the ocean into fucking *bouillabaisse* for three miles around, remember? So, unless you want to blow your own ass to kingdom come, you want to stand off a distance of at least three miles, am I right?”

Bees buzz between the clover blossoms and Natalie rolls over to kiss me as Bogarty brackets the ranges on the blackboard. We have an excellent view of the bees, Natalie and I, because we are right at bee level, right down there amongst the puffball little blooms on the clover. So the bees look as big as buses, to us, their wings enameled with little rainbows, wings of stained glass on the bees, for God’s sake, and jackets of black velvet. How perfect are the parallel black stripes on their gleaming, golden abdomens. Natalie is quite correct, isn’t she? There is indeed a certain cloudiness about the clouds, and a certain grassiness about the grass, that should not be overlooked.

There is a certain insistent specificity in the real world, is there not? A certain clarity and certainty and determination to be as it must be, and no different?

This quality eludes us, in our dreams and delusions, representing an attention to detail that can only come from the hand of the master, and in the end, a lesson to be learned. Namely, that nothing about this place and time should be overlooked, as this really is a profoundly astonishing place and time, just packed to the rafters, just crammed with honeybees, blue sky, warm green grass proliferating in the sun, pretty tits, kisses, music, tremendous erect cocks, the beautiful smiles of girls fulfilling their own sweet natures, amazing, not least of all because we are in it, observing it all, taking copious notes, trying to make sense of something that makes sense all by itself. That I can write down my thoughts amazes me. I drop my heart into the river of words, they harden over it, and years later, thousands of miles away, you can figure out some vague approximation of the thoughts and feelings, visions and fears and longings, the cataract of awareness that coursed through my brain as I wrote. That Natalie is something of a cloud maven is not the main noteworthy thing. The main noteworthy thing is that she has a certain way of inhabiting the moment.

A certain weight or gravity in the moment.

She sees it, she shows it to me.

It is almost as if the clouds cannot pass until she notices them and names them, to welcome them into the fullness of their own being, as she has welcomed me. She points out to me how each cloud is different, every second.

Changing.

Floating free.

“Just like people,” she says.

She has a funny little catch in her voice, when she is happy.

“Just like you,” I tell her.

Same funny little catch.

I twiddle my toes in the grass.

Bask in the ethereal light of my own existence.

I have toes, a stunning realization.

The sun is shining.

Stunning.

The sun, a lightning bolt of happiness aimed at me.

I touch her hand, hold her hand, wishing to communicate to her my gratitude for the wisdom she shares with me, my gratitude for her willingness to show me that tenderness, that openness to the fate that envelopes us.

Item number one, then: Noticing clouds.

These memories or ideas, whatever you want to call them, are so clear, so specific, so fully rendered, here in the movie theater of my mind, right down to the furry jackets on the backs of the bees, they completely captivate me, enveloping my consciousness and occluding awareness of any outside reality. Bogarty is aware of this, by the way. He monitors the degree of distraction, so that he can choose the perfect moment to roar a question at me, jerking me back to the present with utmost violence, which always gets a laugh from my classmates. Curiously, I always know the answer to the question. It seems to come to me from memory. One of me is listening to Bogarty. One of me is stretched out in the grass beside Lake Waban.

The two beings can communicate, somehow.

Item number two: Natalie’s baby blue Volkswagen, another convertible, the bribe her parents offer to try to get her to stay at Wellesley.

Here we are sailing around the campus in spring, Natalie at the wheel, the two of us in glamorous sunglasses, Wayfarers we get from who knows where, very much a Jack and Jackie kind of thing (of course referring now to the Kennedys, the gold standard for real glamour), and hilarious in that way, as we try to live *their* lives, not our own, with the top down of course, the wind in our hair, waving to people we have never met, because, well, we feel so fucking glamorous, so fucking attractive, naturally they will want to wave to us, see what’s up with us in the world of glamorousness. We make conversation with folks on the sidewalks as we pass, singing along to the tunes on the radio, sun pouring down golden bright through the treetops, garlands of golden blossoms brightening the oaks, the girls beautiful, the tulips popping, and oh, everything just as glamorous and glorious as can be, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever.

I enter the room to find our roommate, Quackenbush, throwing darts at a page torn from my notebook. Quack shares a room in the barracks with myself and Avery A. Pressler III. Press, we call him.

There is no mistaking when Quack is practicing darts. The cinderblock hall reverberates with the whack of their needle noses into the plywood doors of the lockers at either end of our room. We enter with caution, as Quack has made it perfectly clear that, if either one of us should happen to get in the way of a dart, or even, possibly, take a dart in the temple, say, or even the aorta, possibly, that wouldn’t be Quack’s responsibility. Indeed, he has taken pains to explain to us how easily this could happen, how it is almost *bound* to happen. By way of covering himself legally, in his hillbilly fashion, he has declared our room to be a “free fire zone,” a term coined by American troops in Vietnam to denote areas where they officially authorized themselves to kill anything that moved, a hilarious idea.

I stand in the doorway and observe as Quack yanks the darts out of the door. The page from the notebook is riddled with tiny holes. He taps at the paper with one of the darts.

“Genius Boy,” he says, using one of his favorite expression of contempt, second only to *Ivy Ass*. “This shit don’t rhyme.”

“It’s not poetry.”

I was still writing poetry occasionally. I had not yet given up trying to make poetry out of old, used up ketchup packets and Styrofoam coffee cups and bullet casings. Always on the lookout for a swan in the parking lot of a burger joint. Occasionally Quack would riffle through my notebook and read a work in progress aloud, for the amusement of all.. Not a single fucking rhyme in the whole thing, he would point out to anyone who would listen, indicating a degree of incompetence that only confirmed his complete contempt for the eastern education establishment.

“They are not supposed to rhyme,” I would tell him.

“Oh, sure, good excuse.”

Quack is from the back country of West Virginia somewhere, a deer-hunting, pickup-truck kind of guy, maybe not a complete Neanderthal, but inclined to enjoy his own stupidity to an unusual degree, let’s say. Given a choice, he would clothe himself in animal pelts from head to toe, I am convinced, and would regard that as a mark of merit in the eyes of his fellow men. The more brutal and primitive, the better. Indeed, Quack’s measures of what he calls manhood are in every way appropriate to the stone age, when men were men, and so forth.

As tenderly as possible, handling it like a wounded animal, I remove the tape from the mangled sheet of note paper and tuck the page into my training manual for ASROC, the weapons system we are learning. It will be perfectly safe there, as I very seldom open the manual. The fact is there is not a lot to learn about ASROC. Any reasonably intelligent chimpanzee can learn to operate the system in no time. Quack can operate it. If you can throw darts, you can launch nuclear weapons, is what it comes down to. They very fact that we can contemplate using such a weapon tells you we are not that far removed from the chimps. So it all fits together. War is a chimp kind of thing, a stone age kind of thing, fit only for chimpanzees, requiring that we become chimpanzees, to participate.

The perforated page trembles in my hands. In my sadly deluded mind, I believe that the page of notes about clouds is physically connected to Natalie, somehow, and that the damage done to the page is damage done to her, somehow. Am I making it clear that my memories of her are intense to the point where they aren’t even memories?

Everything *else* is a memory.

The *present* is a memory.

The perfume from the bougainvillea heaped in red and purple mounds on the fences and rooftops is *her perfume*.

The silvery azure of the sky when the sun has gone down is the color of her eyes.

The wash and sigh of the surf on the beach at night is the sound of her voice, whispering in my ear.

“I love you.”

Again and again and again, she says it.

Until I awaken in a sweat.

There is no point in complaining to Quack. Complaints only embolden him. He smiles at us with his little rat teeth. We are *wusses* in Quack’s eyes, to use his word, inferior beings, unworthy of the uniforms we wear and the flag we carry. Both guilty of what Quack calls … and he is very straightforward about this, I give him credit … “*homo thinking.*” In contrast, Quack sees himself as a heroic figure on Mt. Rushmore, traveling through life with his own little fife and drum corps, his own little coonskin cap, his own imaginary muzzle-loader, Old Betsy or whatever, cocked and ready to blast away at anything that looks like a different skin tone. Different uniform, different skin tone, it’s all color coded, one way and another. All laid out for easy execution by complete idiots. And it’s a good thing. If a man couldn’t kill a deer with a bow and arrow, field dress it in an hour, and pack the meat out of the woods on his back, why then he was nothing but a sorry burden on those who could, a sorry burden on the rest of humanity, best cast aside at the earliest possible moment, to allow hardy folk to move on and meet their glorious destiny, was the way Quack saw it.

One afternoon I am lying on my cot reading *The Best and the Brightest*, which is not the greatest thing to be reading, obviously, not really recommended reading, in the military, because of course it is *about* the military, and what pathetic clowns people can be, what stupid, conniving, ass-covering clowns, even when they are generals and admirals and presidents, dripping with medals and ribbons, because they are still controlled by vanity and fear and greed, blithely bullshitting their way into deep trouble, like ten- year-olds, and dragging the rest of us in with them, even when they are sixty and, say, running the Pentagon, the dumb shits. But enough of the historical analysis. Quack has this great big whetstone he uses to polish the knife to a razor edge, deriving great pleasure from the polishing process itself, the stroking process, which has a masturbatory aspect to it, if you ask me. He sharpens the tips of the darts the same way, trying to get those needle sharp, in case, as a last resort, he is forced to use them as weapons against individuals with unauthorized skin tones or something. The *gooks*. After a while, the sound of the knife sliding over the stone takes on a gritty, scraping quality, with real teeth in it, indicating the blade is sharp enough to catch just a little against the grain of the stone. After a good half hour of this, Quack sits on his bunk with his back against the wall and slices up pages from the training manuals just as smooth and easy as you please, by way of demonstrating just how easy it would be to slit my throat.

“There you go,” he says, as a page peels apart. “That gets her. Ready to carve me up some yellow-bellied Viet Cong sons of fuckin’ bitches, yes sir.”

Quack’s consistent preoccupation with skin color has caused me to dog-ear a page of my book. I enjoy taunting him about this.

“Hey Quack,” I tell him, flipping back to the dog-eared page. “Listen to this. This is a memo written by a guy named Charles Taussig, a State Department guy, after a conversation with President Roosevelt, in March of nineteen forty five.”

“Nineteen forty five?”

“Right. The end of the Second World War, Quack.”

“F.D.R.?” Quack says.

“The same.”

“Excellent gentleman,” Quack says. “Proceed.”

“*The President said he is much concerned about the brown people in the East*.”

“Brown people?” Quack says.

“The gooks.”

“Ah,” he says. “You mean yellow bastards.”

Quack likes to keep the color coding sorted out.

“Precisely,” I tell him. I then continue reading. “He said there are one billion, one hundred million *brown* people. In many eastern countries they are ruled by a handful of whites and they resent it. Our goal must be to help them achieve independence -- 1,100,000,000 enemies are dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Quack says.

“Yes,” I tell him. “Franklin Roosevelt thought we should try to be friends with all the brown people.”

“I say fuck ‘em,” says Quack.

I close the book and lay it in my lap.

“So guess who winds up fighting the one billion, one hundred million royally pissed off brown people?”

“I guess that would be me,” Quack says. “Cause you guys ain’t got the guts.”

Quack tended to lump Press and I together. Press and I and a few of our friends of indeterminate manhood. I put my hands behind my head and stretch out, pondering the big picture with Quackenbush.

“Quack, my man, we find ourselves at the ass end of history.”

He is getting up now, satisfied that the knife is ready for combat.

“Not me,” he says.

“Yes,” I tell him. “You, too. We are all in this together, Quack.”

“You and I are not in anything together, Genius Boy. I am going to make triple fucking sure of that.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “I’ve got your back, Quack.”

“Genius Boy, I think I’ve had enough of your ass-brained bullshit for one day.”

And with that he winds up a if to throw a baseball and lets the knife fly across the room. It buries in the front of his own locker and vibrates there, the resonance deep and strong, like the fattest string on a bass violin. Turning to me, he says, “Right in the fucking heart, Genius Boy” and winks.

Quack fascinated me, as he had it all worked out, in his head. He had come to a point where everything made sense to him, where he could explain everything, which was my own goal.

“Quack,” I say. “I got a question for you.”

“What’s that, Genius Boy?”

“Do you ever think about the guy you will kill?”

“Think?” he says.

“It’s something you do with your brain.”

He nods at me, smirking. Quack seemed to enjoy this sort of repartee. Well aware that Press and I see the world very differently, he enjoys baiting us, along those lines, supremely confident in the moral superiority of his own position, and expects to be baited and mocked in return, interpreting mockery as a convoluted expression of respect. Along these lines, he would exert himself to think up comments reflecting the most extreme sort of racism, just to annoy us, and laugh uproariously when we evinced outraged. He was, in a way, a kind of self-caricature of a redneck, a cartoon of his own imagining, in much the same way I was a cartoon. So there was common ground there, somewhere, room to recognize that it was all ridiculous, all loony, all hopeless, and we were all in it together.

‘I don’t need a brain when I got this,” he says, dawdling the knife.

“Do you ever think about the fact that the guy you will kill might have a life? That he might be a real person? More or less just like you? Like, with pictures of his kids in his wallet?”

“A life?” he says.

“A family,” I tell him. “You know, like, a girlfriend. Or … maybe … kids.”

“The gooks?” he says.

“Right, the gooks.”

“Sure,” he says. “Gooks have kids. But the kids are gooks, too, right?”

Anytime you thought you were making progress with Quack, he would reset your expectations that way, saying something that was more or less infinitely depressing.

“True,” I tell him. “Of course. The kids are gooks, too.”

“No I do not think about that, Genius Boy,” Quack says hautily. “Because I got better things to do with my good old time than worrying about shit that don’t matter.”

“What matters, Quack?”

“Gettin’ my honorable discharge and college,” he says.

Quack always says it just like that, as though college is a commodity, like cheese or wheat. He feels he needs to “get a little college.” He knows people who “have some college.” He is more than a little suspicious of such people, particularly Press and I, frequently classifying us as “college jerkoffs,” but he sees the advantage. Unfortunately he is more than a little anxious that he may never get any college, and may have to spend the rest of his life bouncing around in the backwash of those who do, a notion that does not please him one bit. Whenever he gets really pissed, he throws the knife around a little, by way of keeping Press and I in our place as homo-thinking college jerkoffs. All things considered, the atmosphere around Quack is more than little nerve wracking, frankly. Which is one of the reasons Press has gone in on a house in town with a couple of other guys. The house is a communal kind of thing, very much like a frat house, except the turnover is a little more rapid.

We find that the house offers a number of advantages. For one thing, it is not adviseable to smoke weed in the barracks, and Press likes to smoke a little weed in the evening, by way of settling his nerves. Also, Press has a car, a pretty cool Chevelle SS, maroon with a white stripe on the hood, and he can park the car over there, and come and go as he pleases, with no hassles from the Navy. Finally, at the house, you can turn the music up a bit without fear of being court martialed. So Press has transferred most of his stereo equipment over there. Under the influence of Rory Spellman, my other friend, Press has been expanding his musical horizons. Or *says* he has been. Rory has given Press a couple of recordings by Glenn Gould. Whether Press would actually listen to the Glen Gould records on his own, we can’t know. For Press, it is quite enough that, the moment Glen Gould begins to play, a look of beatific contentment comes over Rory’s face. His head bobs on waves of bliss emanating from the record player. A smile tugs at his lips. Press is interested in unlocking the secret of this musical enchantment and believes that some really good marijuana might be the key.

Press is very big on marijuana-enhanced meditation, along those lines. Most days wraps us his classes on the base and changes into jeans and heads for the house in town at the earliest possible moment. He makes a pitcher of pink lemonade or something, smokes some primo weed, puts on a record, and contemplates Earth’s place in the Milky Way or whatever.

I put the book in the locker and clamp the padlock onto the latch. When the locker isn’t locked, Quack can’t resist snooping around. Our suspicion is that he is checking for any kind of contraband he can report to the authorities. It’s a patriotic matter, with him. He suspects that our attitude of homo-thinking empathy with the enemy may make us undependable as comrades in arms. Thus, it is his duty to bring about our dishonorable discharge at the earliest possible moment, for the good of the country. We have it on good information that he discovered a pack of rolling papers in Press’s locker and turned those in, only to be infuriated when informed that rolling papers are legal. When Press asks Quack whether he has seen the rolling papers, Quack’s infantile response is, “Maybe I have and maybe I haven’t.”

As I am on my way out he mumbles something like, “Say hello to the drug addict.”

Off I go, on my meandering way, past the commandos out for their evening run … the SEALS, they call themselves … each and every one of them a mass of rippling muscles, each and every one merrily joining the silly singsong running chants that accompany them wherever they go. God bless them, they have a sense of humor about the whole thing. We always hear them coming, continuously chanting their screwball rhymes. I am all in favor of staying in shape, but of course the SEALS take that idea to the ultimate extreme. Apparently no one has explained to them that, in the end, it isn’t going to matter, a fatso at an ASROC station or the like is going to stop picking his nose and eating pizza and swivel around in his swivel chair and push a button. At that point all the triceps and biceps and quadriceps and lung capacity in the world aren’t going to matter, because it all gets converted instantaneously into the light, fine, gray ash that filters down from the radioactive clouds, far, far away. On I go, down the impressive avenue where the admirals and the captains live, the royal palms arrayed like sentries on either side, the emerald lawns spritzed by sprinklers five times a day, the houses whitewashed anew every six months, blinding in their snowy brilliance, loudspeakers squawking in the distance, always the cockamamie loudspeakers, droning unnecessary instructions, because the issuance of orders and instructions is itself somehow reassuring, reminding all that this is a place where people damn well follow instructions, not like the rest of the fucked up country. Then through the gate guarded by the stone-faced Marines, the inhuman ones, and down a civilian street, where houses seem to float in a sea of flowers, where flowers seem to rain down on everything out of a blue sky, and on, and on, indirectly, circuitously, randomly, leisurely perambulating toward Lou’s, the open-air bar on Duval Street where Press and I would sometimes meet.

The island is beautiful to the point of strangeness, in my eyes, a lush mirage that shimmers, glimmers, sparkling with dew, over the forbidding desert of desire. I never get over the fact that it was built by coral worms, or polyps, or whatever you want to call them. The polyps are like clams or snails in that they are constantly building a shell, but different in that, in their case, all the shells are fused, like an apartment building. Each polyp is an industrious little cement mixer, it seems, fully capable of filtering all of the necessary ingredients from the sea … two cups calcium, two cups carbon, whatever … and building their own little cement apartments, which of course are piled on top of billions and billions of other little cement apartments, in a pattern very much like human civilization, it occurs to me, the new Athens taking shape above the old Athens, which of course was built on the Athens before that, and the Athens before that, and on and on. Just as we build the burger joints on the bones of the Leni Lenape, the polyps keep building, ever upward, from the bottom of the sea, until the island almost breaks the surface, at which point, as I understand it, the natural drift of the sand kind of takes over, and there you have it, a tropical island.

And then, they keep going, building the reefs around the island.

We tend not to view the island as a living thing, but it is, really. It’s much as though we are all riding along, riding through the sea, on the back of a giant snail, a thought I have broached in a marijuana reverie at Press’s house, to his great disgust.

Here’s the central thing about the reefs, in my mind. The reefs sank a lot of ships. The ships would wreck on the reefs and hang there for a while, allowing salvors or pirates to extract from the wrecked hulls whatever goods the ships were carrying. With that as their starting point, it didn’t take long for the good citizens of Key West to figure out there was plenty of money to be made by increasing the number of wrecks. This was done by moving the navigation lights and buoys in ways that confused the captains of the ships. Once a ship had struck the reef, pirates would row right out and offload the cargo, and if there was room, maybe pick up a couple of female passengers, if they weren’t bad looking. Of course, it is the law of the sea that a wreck and its cargo belong to whomever can salvage it, so all of this was legal, in a way. Not that anyone living in Key West cared that much about the law of the sea. Bottom line, the polyps had built the island and the reef around it in such a way that Key West was predestined to become a pirate town, which was pretty much how we found it.

Nearly every afternoon, a single fructuous cloud passes and splashes the town with refreshing, nurturing moisture, not infrequently leaving a king-sized rainbow in its wake, alone in the blue sky, beautiful as a harp on an empty stage. The moisture combines with sunshine to form flowers before our eyes pretty much instantaneously. During the day, it seems there is no shadow, no darkness, even in the graveyards, only the lovely gradations of light and color, glowing filaments of rose and pink and blue, nothing shy or secret or dark, only the lovely, luminous, glowing colors of flowers and sky and sea, and the pretty pastel houses, where blossomy vines entwine in high trellises dappled with sunshine. The hibiscus, particularly, are everywhere, exhibiting personalities perfectly suited to the environment. They clown on every street corner, dance, cavort, cover the graves luxuriantly with kisses, pump intoxicating perfume through every petal, every pore, their presence decidedly female, it seems to me, decidedly girlish, what with the lipstick colors and the vaginal convolutions of the blooms, chamber within tender chamber, although of course there is also the hermaphroditic aspect, always with the big, stiff pistil in the middle, the big, happy cock scattering pollen indiscriminately. God do I love that part of it, the sunshine in the stillness of late afternoon, the beautiful birds so much at home in the boughs of trees festooned with moss, so happy there, twittering and preening, parakeets and parrots, robins and sparrows, how their heads never stop moving, how their eyes never seem to close, God bless them, every second of life fascinates them, they treasure every instant of it.

Lazy and free, I perambulate on down to the wharf to watch the sun go down with everyone else. We all turn out to support the sun in its big moment, gathering at the west end of Duval, next to the Coast Guard base. Calm as a pond, the waters of the Gulf are painted with cloud reflections merging with the storm of flame in the sky to form one hypnotic knot of color and space, where nothing is anything, really, nothing discernible as separate or distinct, all one dreamy, steamy mix of lipstick and mascara and rouge, jewels and feathers and inviting glances, where the blue lips of the sea form to meet the descending sun with a kiss, to caress it with the barely discernible undulation of the waves out on the deep Gulf, and finally swallow it voluptuously. At that moment, a trumpet player comes out and stands on the fantail of the Coast Guard moored there, the U.S.S. Ingham, a beautiful white ghost of a ship peacefully afloat on this riotously colorful sea. You never saw him appear, somehow, never saw him raise the trumpet to his lips, but when the sun touched the sea he was always there, ready. The synchrony of it is moving, somehow, the deadly synchrony, because of course the trumpet player is watching the sun descend along with everyone else, and takes his cue from the sun, so the precise moment when the horn will emit those first three wrenching notes is predetermined, a moment that sweeps over us all, a wave of heartbreak over all the boys adrift in the sea, lost in the sea, all the lost souls adrift in that beautiful, that endless tropical sea. The last lugubrious notes of the melody resolve into absolute peace, absolute quiet, because even the gulls are mostly quiet then, listening and observing it all through bright yellow eyes. As the trailing edge of the orange disk slips beneath a blue horizon, the crowd applauds and roars its approval, somehow believing, communally, that the sun enjoys the encouragement. We turn toward the town as the lights come on in the taverns, inviting us to live, to love, to indulge ourselves for one more night, in the oasis.

Lou's is right on Duval, maybe a hundred yards from the wharf, basically a dive of a place, visited mostly by down on their luck locals who are sensitive to the slightest fluctuation in the price of tequila. The bartenders lock the liquor cabinets when they leave, but otherwise it’s mostly an open air kind of place, part of the street, really, a ramshackle old wreck of a place, breathing in the feminine scent of the tropical night and breathing out the mixed vapors of alcohol and perfume and cigarette smoke and heartbreak, as expressed in rhythm and blues or rock and roll. In one corner of this big, open barroom is a baby grand piano, painted white and filled to the brim with peanuts, normally. You grab the peanuts by the handful, or fill a baseball hat, spreading them on the table in front of you and tossing the shells unceremoniously over your shoulder. The bar is to your left as you walk in and to your right, a big old push-button jukebox, softly luminous, like the moon, accepting quarters to play forty-fives robotically. Against the back wall, beneath a hooded light, is a pool table emanating a shiftless, reckless air. To challenge the winner of the game in progress, put fifty cents on the rail of the table and say nothing. To speak is considered bad form, as even a whisper may disturb the rapt concentration of the present players. Even Navy guys are welcome to play because, though we were the lowest of the low on the island, mere minions in the service of a nefarious government, the clientele at Lou’s are tolerant of all human failings, encompassing in their number pretty much each and every one of those failings, and a good many of them to crazy excess. Some evenings Press and I and Rory will sit at the old mahogany bar and swig tequila with salt and lemon, adding theatrical flourishes for the benefit of the tourists, until we were fully fired up and eager to go marching and singing through the flowering streets, arm in arm. Some evenings we will take a table on Duval Street, put our feet up on the railing that separates the bar from the sidewalk, sip a beer, and invite the twittering tourist ladies to admire us desperadoes, us free spirits, while their anxious husbands tug at their elbows and urged them to come along. Occasionally one of the more adventurous ladies will insist on taking our picture. Of course we are more than happy to oblige, happy to play our part, melding into the rest of the scene as certified, genuine local riffraff. If we get about three quarters plastered we may wind up in the dingy interior of Captain Tony's, where the sailors and the artists and homosexuals and charter boat fishermen and itinerant musicians are fused into one seething, heaving, inchoate mass of yearning, overall so dark and smoky and rank and raucous only the most intrepid of the tourists will poke their noses in, then rapidly withdraw, sensing disequilibrium. Occasionally the sun-burnished Captain Tony himself will preside. By day he hunts the big marlin that slide unseen through the deep Gulf, beyond the reef, where the lime green waters of the lagoon drop off into midnight blue, by night entertaining the gays and encouraging them to entertain the rest of us. He can be pretty funny, once he gets up a good head of steam, officer’s hat tilting jauntily on his head, unabashedly inept as he sets up the slide projector to beam images through the smoke. He finally figures it all out and treats us all to photos of especially big fish, staring at us with their big, cold, button eyes, or Mardi Gras in Belize, or maybe a dog show in Manhattan, where all the poodles are showing off their gorgeous assholes, while he expounds extemporaneously on pretty much anything that comes to mind, not the least bit constrained by the images he is showing us. It’s all quite convivial, as we are all wanderers of one sort or another, sailors and gays, hitchhikers and bikers, dopers and runaways, and all look kindly on one another, for that very reason, accepting everything, forgiving everything in advance. We all know the nuclear warheads are racked up in the submarines nearby like cartons of eggs, and that the missiles can fly a thousand miles, and that any city on earth can be transformed into glowing pile of embers in an hour or so, give or take. So what the heck, take Captain Tony’s advice, just issue everyone around you a blank check, carte blanche, and let them do what they please for the evening, saint or pirate, what do you care. Let’s just relax for one night and enjoy the ride, one more sleigh ride through the Milky Way, through the sea of stars, smooth and beautiful, before the Chinese or the Soviets get the range and tap the right numbers into the launch console.

Upon entering Lou’s, I find that Rory has arrived ahead of me. Before him is one of the squat, heavy glasses the bartenders use for straight tequila. Drop them on the floor and they bounce. He is reading something, with a cigarette lit, a few sheets of paper in one hand, the cigarette in the other, smoke branching and curling in blue tendrils over his head. He glances my way as I approach and shows me the usual impish, ironical smile, the one corner of the mouth tilting ever so slightly upward as he cocks an eyebrow at me, always amused that we are where we are, doing what we’re doing, so wildly unlike does it seem. I slide onto the barstool next to him give him a good smack on the back, a gesture that is a little too chummy for Rory’s taste, which is exactly why I do it. It’s fun to make my good friend a little uncomfortable, and he doesn’t seem to mind at all. He knows he is a little out of place, with his haughty air, and is more than happy to absorb a little punishment, by way of atonement.

“A letter?”

“Ah,” he says. “Indeed.”

He lays the letter on the bar and shoves it toward me, two sheets of paper that have been folded and refolded different ways, carried around in a pocket, maybe read and reread, beaten up a bit. The letter is on Army stationery, it looks like, with a medieval-looking insignia and the name of an infantry division at the top, the something or other division, but no return address other than the name of the writer, a Corporal Robert Nash. I check out the envelope and observe that the return address is Long Binh, an American military base in Vietnam. The letter is typewritten, with white correction fluid over quite a few mistakes. However there were no mistakes left uncorrected, and I gave the writer credit there.

“*Dear Avie*,” it says. “*Just when you think things can’t get any more fucked up than they already are, bang, the roof falls in.*”

Of course I am a little confused as to what this letter is doing in our possession. I figure I’ll start right in on clearing up that little puzzle, by confirming the obvious.

“This is a letter to Press.”

“Yes.”

With that, Rory drains his drink and takes a long drag on the cigarette, then stubs it out in an ashtray on the bar and let’s his head drop into his hands, so he can run his slender fingers through his sparse black hair. The truth of the matter comes to me out of an ambient sense of dread. I lay the letter back on the bar and guess at it.

“The writer of this letter is dead.”

Rory twists his head and looks up at me with a crazy little grin.

“Excellent work,” he says.

Rory is impressed anytime he sees that one of us has been a little extra perceptive about something, his feeling being that the run of human beings are doltish clods.

“How did he die?”

Still grinning his impish little Mona Lisa grin, he says, “In combat.”

“I mean the details.”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Tell me.”

“A mortar attack,” he says. He gestures to the bartender and orders up another tequila. I indicate I’ll have one too. Rory spins the empty glass in front of him on the mahogany, pondering.

“At night,” he says. “In the jungle. Apparently they were surprised. Apparently the Viet Cong watch them pitch camp or whatever, and I guess zero in the mortars, but don’t fire. They are patient little bastaards. They wait until the middle of the night, when I guess most of the Americans are asleep. Then, bam, they open up with the mortars, first, and when the Americans shit their pants and try to get away from the mortar fire, there are machine guns all around them.”

“Fuck.”

A minute or so goes by before I poke at the letter again.

“Press gave you this?”

“He thought I would be interested to see that the grammar and everything was so perfect. Jesus. Sure, let’s write one perfect fucking letter before we die in this stink hole. Let’s catch every fucking typo, with our last breath.”

“They were friends?”

Rory lights a smoke and proceeds to explain all the background in his chirpy, entertaining way, never one to get depressed over that which is beyond his control.

“Press tells me they were on the football team together. They went to their senior prom together. So, yeah, I guess they were pretty tight. They sailed a little sailboat over to Annapolis and threw a bunch of toilet paper into the trees. Hurray. Throwing toilet paper into the trees at Annapolis is apparently quite an achievement, in Press’s social circle.”

He picks up the two pieces of paper, taps them together on the bar to get them to line up, and very carefully folds the letter along the fold lines where it was originally folded, then slides the pages pack into the envelope, and folds that where *it* was folded before, so there are no new folds in anything, and finally slides the letter in the breast pocket of his shirt.

“Only the good die young,” he says cheerfully, giving the pocket a little pat.

Occasionally I got sick and tired of the buoyant equanimity. Enough with the wit, for Christ’s sake. If you weren’t a little depressed over all this stuff you weren’t entirely realistic, was my take. But Rory had a special point of view. For one thing, he had actually volunteered, a fact that completely blows my mind. We were all volunteers in the legal sense, but most of us had enlisted only because we were dead certain to get drafted, and wanted to avoid the fighting in the jungles at all costs. We had volunteered with guns to our heads, figuratively speaking. Had actually volunteered wholly and solely because we did *not want to fight*, a conundrum that Navy could not seem to decipher. On the other hand Rory seems to have volunteered because he felt like it. He *likes* being in the Navy. Or at least takes it more or less in stride. All the stuff that drives the rest of us nuts is funny, in his eyes. At night, we watch the videotape of people getting shot to pieces in the jungles, bullets whizzing everywhere, chopping up the leaves, making that crazy chirping sound they make when they come close, this giant buzz-saw of bullets chewing everything and everyone to pieces, while Rory munches on potato chips and points out the humor in the reactions of the hunky network anchors, who are doubtless pissing their pants as they try to get some footage of themselves being brave.

And there *is* a funny side to it, of course, because it is all so colossally stupid, so clownish, how the American dunderhead blundering into the booby traps, and what have you, bedding down for a good night’s sleep while the Viet Cong are adjusting the trajectory on the mortars, and so forth. *Oy*.

Rory is overall a pretty pathetic string bean kind of a guy, I have to say. Not that I hold that against him, particularly, certainly I am no muscleman myself. But he had this kind of puffy, pasty-looking skin, just like pizza dough, actually, oddly puffy, that way, if you ask me, with little air pockets in it, here and there, like big fat whiskers have been pulled out, and totally white, which is weird on Key West, because most people are running around in the sun half the day, brown as nuts. The rest of us finish class and can’t wait to get outside and play tennis or get a swim or run through town or whatever, just working off the anxiety, any which way we can, while Rory holes up in his room reading, usually reading something pretty abstruse, or holes up over at Press’s house, in the coolness and stillness under the trees there, sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the living room, on the bare floor of the living room, listening to Glen Gould or Van Cliburn or someone of that ilk, playing Mozart or Rachmaninoff. He sits there with his freaking eyes closed, that beatific little smile on his face, with a pencil in his hand, marking time with it, like a conductor with a baton, while usually humming one of the parts, usually not the main melody but the bassoon line or something, so you were very aware that he was taking the music apart in his head, deconstructing everything into quarter notes and half notes and rests, and could, as he explained to us, actually see the notes in the staves as the music plays. Rory would get records from the Key West Public Library and Press would get some primo marijuana from who knows where and they would team up in the afternoon to get stoned and listen. Sometimes it was the Beach Boys, the crazy record with “A Day in the Life of a Tree” on it, sometimes Van Cliburn and Rachmaninoff and Gould. Rory is always happy to offer an exegisis, pointing out what the Beach Boys had in common with Rachmaninoff, this way or that.

\*

Press has an acoustic guitar they pass back and forth. Rory has never played guitar, but he picks it up in no time. Press shows him a couple of chords and Rory figures out the rest. He describes himself as a pianist, but we have never heard him play, for the simple reason that there are no pianos in Key West, unless you count the one at Lou’s, the one with the peanuts. I have heard Rory play the organ a grand total of once. For some reason he looks upon the organ as a stupid instrument, compared to the piano. “Cumbersome,” he calls it. On Sundays he sings in the choir at Trinity Presbyterian. He gets up super early and puts on his dress whites and sings his head off over there. One Sunday Press and I get all dressed up, all of us in dress whites, the only clothes we had to look halfway decent for church, and parade over there with him. After the service we meet Rory in the choir loft. I ask casually whether he can play the organ. First he plays part of Bach’s *Toccata and Fugue*. I know what it was only because I asked. But this obviously bores the living crap out of him. The fact that he is not Van Cliburn or Glen Gould just bores the crap out of him. Press asks if he can play the beginning of *Louie, Louie.* That is much more to Rory’s liking.Rory cranks up the organ up a little and plays the big, swining intro and then Press sings a bit of it, kind of jiving around in the choir loft, and after a couple of bars they kind of shame me into joining for the chorus, so we’re all jiving around up there, doing our level best to be halfway normal, for a couple of minutes, just good old buddyroo normal pals singing *Louie, Louie* together, but not quite making it, of course, never quite making it, because we are singing it in church, for God’s sake, in these stupid uniforms.

But close, let’s say. Close enough for us.

Rory and I make sure to polish off the last tangy, lovely, lime-scented drops of tequila and then toddle over to Press’s place and ring the bell. They never answer the bell there, fearing bill collectors, I suspect, but we always ring it, sort of pro forma. When no one answers, we go around back and out into the middle of the back yard, where we can get a good look at the roof. This little bungalow of a house has porches both in front and in back and a big, broad roof covering everything, pitched very gently, but high enough so you can see most of the sunset if you’re on the roof, so that’s where the guys spend a good part of the evening, normally, up there. They have a ladder leaning more or less permanently against the edge of the roof, for ease of access. Almost every night a couple of them grab a couple of beers and a couple of joints and climb up there to watch the sun go down, and sometimes hang around up there for quite a while. It’s pretty up there, pretty and quiet and cool, up there in the breeze coming off the Gulf. Anyway by this time it’s starting to get dark, so I have to squint a little to make him out, but sure enough, there’s Press, lying on his back right at the top of the roof, with his hands behind his head, in jeans and a tee-shirt, with a can of beer sitting next to him on the shingles.

“Want company?” Rory calls out to him.

Press sits up and flashes that big old happy smile of his, a heck of a handsome dude.

He calls out, “Hey!”

I’ll be damned if Press doesn’t know exactly how to exist in the world as a perfectly relaxed, natural, mostly happy person, which of course was an absolute miracle, from my point of view. An absolute fucking miracle of the very first order. My theory is it has something to do with Maryland and the Chesapeake and boats and fishing and crabbing and just being outdoors in a beautiful place, and roughing it a little, maybe, as opposed to hanging around with all the neurotics in Manhattan. You had to wonder whether hanging around with all the neurotics in Manhattan and all the utterly perfect girls there and rethinking the ultimate fate of the universe ten times a day was going to be good for you, ultimately. Press always seems to feel at home in the world and I always feel like a guest, when you come right down to it. Although, he is not immune to psychological disturbances. He has this one very interesting dream, along those lines. When he spends the night with us in the barracks, the dream will start and he’ll start tossing and turning and yelling to people in the dream, mostly to his mother, we finally figure out, although, she never actually appears in the dream … which is the key element, if you ask me … and this will go on until someone throws a pillow at him or something, and he wakes up, very surprised to realize he is not in Maryland.

Every single time we wake him up he is shocked as hell that he is not in Maryland. Stupefied.

Apparently there was this woods behind his parents’ house. I had never seen the house, but he had talked about it a couple of dozen times, probably, so I felt I knew all about it, and in fact imagined it very clearly and concretely, this cute little red house, this storybook house, with a white chimney, set on a big, woodsy lot on a bend in a country road, with clusters of white birches all around, somewhere near Annapolis, generally speaking, but on the other side of the Chesapeake, the eastern side. Not that I know anything about Maryland, really. I haven’t mentioned that I was a member of the Columbia sailing team, and we did race at Annapolis, but that is for another day. All I really know about Maryland, at this point, is that it is somewhere between New York and D.C., with a lot of water around, and a diet that consists almost exclusively of crab cakes and corn on the cob, the only food items Press ever mentions. Anyway in Press’s dream, he is running through the woods on his way home. That is practically the whole dream, in fact. Just running, running, running his ass off, and never getting where he wants to go. He is deep in the woods, but everything is sunny and bright, for some reason. Eerily beautiful, he says. *Too beautiful.* Because, the way Press sees it, things get only so beautiful before you’re dead. If things are too beautiful, that means you’re dead. Things are beautiful because you are in heaven, or close. Interesting that he thought you could get *close*. It’s early fall, and very still, there in dreamland. The timing is significant. We all know when we are supposed to get out, the precise discharge date, so Press knows he will be getting out in one year, ten months, twenty nine days, or whatever. The important thing being, he knows it will be early fall. In the dream, it’s early fall, and the leaves are just beginning to float softly down, one by one. Just a couple of leaves are falling, one by one, individual leaves floating softly, slowly down, as he runs through the woods like a bat out of hell. Like, the clock is ticking. Time is running out, somehow. So, there is something ominous about the leaves, too. Press and I have psychoanalyzed the dream and accounted for the leaves as a pretty obvious death symbol, on a provisional basis, at least until one of us gets his PhD. At first Press doesn’t see the house. He actually *smells* the house before he sees it*.* The reason he smells it is, in the fall, when there are tons of apples around, his mother makes apple pies. For some reason she has apples up to her ears, people are dumping whole truckloads of apples in the driveway, I don’t know, and she bangs out apple pies one after another, at a terrific rate, a regular little apple pie factory, to listen to Press. Which I know probably sounds like a made-up detail, because here in America we have that whole mom and apple pie schtick to worry about, mom and flag and apple pie all wrapped up together in one stupendously neurotic package, all part of the same hallucination, all kind of unbelievable, but hey, there you have it, moms do, in fact, bake apple pies. And their soldier boy sons do, in fact, sometimes come home again. Sometimes they don’t, granted, but sometimes they do. Some of them survive the imperial wars. And when they do, I bet some of them smell apple pie fresh from the oven. Maybe only one in ten million, but it happens. And there are, in fact, pretty little houses with white birches in the yard. And boys who come running through the woods when they smell the apple pie. So it is all real enough. Although, obviously just on the outer edge of reality. Apparently Mrs. Pressler bakes the pies on Sunday afternoons, and usually bakes two or three at a time, and puts the pies on the window sill to cool, so the smell of the pies drifts through the open window. And apparently if a bunch of her son’s pals come in, she gives them all a nice big slice of warm apple pie. Anyway Press can smell that apple pie from a thousand miles away, it seems. And that’s how the dream unfolds, with him running, running, running through the woods, toward the smell of the apple pie. In the dream, he never actually gets home. He stops at the edge of the woods, looking at the back yard, looking at the back of the house, and sees the pies sitting in the window sill. But for some reason he can’t go any further. He is afraid to go further. That’s when he starts yelling for his mother, expecting her to come out of the house.

He needs her to come out of the house, for some reason.

But she never does.

So Press is kind of stuck, in this dream, looking at the pies in the window, and calling her name.

His great fear, I guess, the fear that completely overwhelms him, at this point in the dream, is that he is actually dead, and his mother cannot hear him for that reason.

His great fear is that she is grieving, because he has been fool enough to get himself killed, and he cannot get to her, to comfort her, to fix it, because he is dead.

In our best good old, buddyroo, jocular fashion, Rory and I have offered to contribute toward the cost of a good shrink to fix Press up. Yeah us certified lunatics will chip in to hire a shrink for probably the one and only sane person on the face of the earth, Press. Makes perfect sense, in a way.

Now everything around us is purple as the darkness closes in.

“Sure,” Press calls down to us. “Grab me a beer?”

We walk right in, through the flimsy old screen door, which slams with a bang behind us, one of about five hundred things that were never going to get fixed, in that house, and get some beers out of the fridge. Soon as we get up to the peak of the roof, Press fires up a joint and hands it around, not a word spoken, the assumption being that, if you are on the roof, and the sun is going down, or the stars are out, you want to be a little high, or you might miss something. What did we know. We take a couple of ceremonial hits of the joint and a couple of swigs of beer and no one says one word. Finally, there seems to be no way around it, no way to leave it alone, so I say, “I’m sorry about your friend, Press.”

He thinks about the whole thing for a minute and then says, “Yeah.”

I thought it might be good if he talked about it a little, so I continue on a bit. Always happy to volunteer as incompetent amateur psychiatrist. Always imagining that others have figured out how to torture themselves at least as well as I, and need some help dealing with it.

“Good guy?”

“Nashie?” he says. “Yup.”

The whole island is kind of chirping and sighing around us. The whole island is alive, every single moment of every single day and every single night, because there are insects and birds and flowers everywhere, and a lot of them are pretty busy at night. In fact a lot of the flowers, the cactuses, open *only* at night. Press kind of catches his breath for a minute and we all listen to the birds and insects buzzing and chirping all around us.

Then he goes on.

“The part that kind of, actually, gets me, is … this is the part I have trouble handling … he really *hated it* there. I mean … *hated it*. You know? Like, all he fucking wanted was to just get the hell out of that god damn place, you know? So … all I can say is … what a hell of a thing that is, to get fucking killed in a place you fucking hate. A place you don’t even want to ever *set foot in*. And you wind up getting killed there, for god’s sake. And then, to top it off, when he is dead, they keep the body in a refrigerator for a couple of weeks. Can you believe that shit? Like, it isn’t bad enough already. They have to top it off by keeping his body in a fucking refrigerator. That is the icing on the fucking cake, I’m telling you. Apparently there aren’t enough planes to carry all the dead bodies. So the body sits in a fucking refrigerator for a couple of weeks. They have this traffic jam of dead bodies, in this giant, like, industrial refrigerator, with, like, a hundred dead guys in it. Can you believe that fucking nightmare? Who the fuck dreams this shit up, is what I want to know. In a place he fucking hated, to begin with. A place he didn’t even want to be.”

I thought I heard a flute.

I sit up and look around and notice, in the yard below us, there in the tenebrous vapors of the coming night, a figure in the mist, a figure in a dream, a tall, skinny, wavy-haired, mostly naked guy, I guess one of Press’s roommates, I guess a Navy guy, with a big old American flag wrapped around his torso, like a bath towel. Wrapped around him high, the way a girl would wear it. A big old industrial strength American flag, from the base, probably. Possibly this is an apparition, I know, because we are pretty stoned, at this point. But after a while I realize, no, it’s a real guy, wrapped in a real flag, strolling through the shrubbery, la dee da, slow and easy as you please, barefoot, paying a pan pipe. Or not really playing anything, actually, just kind of tootling aimlessly away, it seems, having a little fun, a note here, a note there, enjoying the evening. He looks up and spots us and gives us a half-assed little salute. All three of us return half assed little salutes. God, we had all loved it so, that flag, had been so proud of it, marching around the playgrounds, marching to the martial music on the public address, little heroes, every one, courageous little commandos, every one, mowing down the Japs with the plastic guns, the air rifles, the imaginary grenades … what the fuck did we know … and still love it, really … but now in a crazy, cockeyed, fucked up, upside-down way, because the President of the United States has taken the flag away from us, by putting a flag in his fucking *lapel*, and encouraging all the corporate fatsoes to do the same, so now it is mostly their flag, the flag of corporate fatsoes everywhere, who want to wear it in their fucking *lapels*, which of course makes you want to grab the fucking lapel and just rip it off the fucking jacket, just rip it off the creepy sons of bitches. So in a crazy way it’s kind of nice to see this guy wearing the flag the way *he* is, around his chest like that, like a monk, but of course a Yankee Doodle Dandy monk, Yankee Doodle do or die, the flag of good old Tom Paine and Paul Revere and Betsy Ross, before the fatsoes got their fat, greasy fingers on it.

We lie on our backs on the shingles, with our heads cradled in our hands, and just stare into the darkness as the first stars come out. Just lie there drinking in the peace and quiet of night, until Press says, “It’s getting near dawn in Vietnam."

“Yes,” I tell him.

It’s quite a while before he says anything else.

Finally, he says, “You guys making a wish?”

I had totally forgotten about wishes. Totally.

“Ah,” I say. “Shit. I forgot. We get to make a wish, don’t we?”

“Yes. You get to make a wish on the first star you see, remember?”

Rory proceeds to hum the first couple of bars of the theme from the Disney show, which we all knew as kids, of course. He hums just the first couple of bars, very soft and low, so you can barely hear him, very light and free and soft, just kind of carried away with the memory of the tune and the television show and how happy we were then, I think. Then reminds us of some of the lyrics.

“Like a bolt out of the blue,” he says. “Fate steps in and sees you through.”

“Is it too late to make a wish now?” I wonder.

“Nah,” Press says, taking me more or less seriously. “Just so long as you remember which star was the first one. Whichever was the first one you saw, that’s the one you get to wish on.”

He is really into it, I can tell. You have to be on your toes with Press, because he can get very deep into the Maryland thing, the whole growing up thing, being a kid in Maryland, to the point where he actually *becomes* a kid in Maryland, with all the same attitudes, basically, as if the war were not happening, as if we were not where we were.

“I see,” I tell him.

God it was beautiful there, on that roof, watching the sun go down, watching the stars come out. It felt safe, somehow, up there. Like we were on our own ship. Like we had set sail into the sea of flowers, and left the rest of the world behind.

"I always make a wish. I never miss a wish," Press says.

I think he felt the same way, felt safe up there, somehow. Anyway he sounded pretty happy. I’m thinking, God help us, if this is how we will be happy, so be it. Just live and die on this rooftop. Order pizzas and beers for the rest of our lives. Press is on one side of me, Rory on the other, Press to my right, Rory to my left. Now Press kind of half rolls over to face us and props himself on his elbow. He seems to be speaking to both of us, but somehow or other I decide he is actually addresssing me.

"What did your mother tell you about stars?” he says.

“Tell me?”

“Right,” Press says.

“What do you mean?”

“He wants to know how your mother explained the phenomenon of stars to you,” Rory says laconically, like he can barely stand how incredibly stupid I am about these things. “In other words, what the stars *were*.”

“Were?”

“Yeah. What your mother said about the stars, if you can remember back that far.”

“Ah.”

I saw my mother’s beautiful green eyes.

“And night,” Press says. “The stars and the night. What night was. All that.”

I repeat it, “What night was.”

“Yeah,” Press says.

How odd, I thought, that they would want to reach back. How very odd, indeed, to be lying on a rooftop on a tropical island, with the warships nearby, speaking of such a thing as this, with two sailors. The most fanciful, the most fantastic fable I ever heard was nowhere near as fantastic as this. And yet, there we were. There was the wildly improbable reality of the thing, a mermaid surfacing in front of you. I had to think about it for a minute. Press lays back on the shingles again while I think. He folds one leg over the other, folds his hands over his belt buckle, and the three of us just lie there for quite a while, nowhere to go, nothing to do, watching the sky fill with stars, until it is dusty, cloudy, bright with stars.

“I was scared shitless of the dark,” Press says. “Scared absolutely fucking shitless, I’m telling you.”

We just lie there and listen, lie there and absorb the whisper and sigh of the night, the whisper and sigh of the waves on the beaches far away, the rustling of the leaves, the calls of the crickets and toads, the sigh of tires rolling past on the quiet street out front. Rory and I are both expecting Press to say something more, I think. But no, he doesn’t. He leaves it at that.

Until Rory says, “Tell us.”

“About what?” Press says.

Press gets totally lost in his own thoughts. Lost in the hidden valley of thought, as I do. Only Rory remembers that we exist in the real world, on this rooftop.

“About being scared,” Rory says, very upbeat and good-humored. Rory likes to keep things cheerful and energetic and moving right along. There was no moping, with Rory.

“Ah,” Press says, remembering where he is. “Yeah. God. I was so afraid, when night came. I was afraid night was going to swallow me, you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Rory says

“Me too,” I tell them.

“My mother made up this story, that the stars were angels. Or not angels, actually. The way she had it figured, the stars were the lanterns the angels carried, as the angels came toward us, to help us.”

“Ah,” Rory says. “Angels at work?”

“It was a lot like the guardian angels thing, her concept of it,” Press says. “Except, during the day, the angels spent most of their time in heaven, relaxing or whatever, playing golf and shit, you know, going to the beach, whatever angel type crap they had on the agenda for the day. Because you really didn't need them during the day. When you really needed them was at night. That was when the angels were kind of on the hot seat, when all of the monsters and devils and goblins were roaming around, wreaking havoc, you know.”

I say, “Yup. That’s when you need them, alright.”

“Right,” Press said. He knew exactly what I meant. “So, the idea was, as soon as it got dark, the angels took these lanterns that they had, on some kind of lantern stand, up there in heaven, where all the lanterns were all fired up and ready to go, kind of like rifles in the sheriff’s office, remember? Remember how the deputies or the cavalry would grab the rifles? On the way out to do battle with the bad guys? That’s how the angels grabbed the lanterns on their way out … or what I imagine, anyway … the angels grab the lanterns and stand on the steps of heaven … which are kind of hanging there in the sky, floating in the sky, and they jump off … just jump the fuck off … like, off the high board, you know … and fly down to earth like that, carrying the lanterns, like a big bunch of birds or butterfies or something, flying through the universe, each holding a lantern … and those lanterns were the stars you saw … those were the angels, coming toward you. So, when you looked outside and the stars were coming out, that meant the angels were coming, the angels were on their fucking way … and everything was going to be alright. Not to worry. It is all going to be alright. The angels are on their way.”

“God,” Rory says.

“And the first one you saw, of course, that was your angel. The first star everybody saw, that was their angel. You got to make a wish on that star. And if you did, that wish was passed to that angel, like a fortune cookie or something, in the interoffice mail or something, up there in the angel department, know what I mean? So that angel knew that, if you were good or whatever, if you did your homework and cleaned up your room, all that crap, then he was in charge of granting you your wish. He was authorized, in other words.”

"What if it was cloudy out?" I inquire in my dry, academic, annoying way way. I am trying to reel Press in a little. Sometimes I am afraid Press is going to go totally off the deep end. Just totally bonkers. "Then you were totally screwed, or what?"

At times his voice got just like a kid’s voice, a little extra cheery, a little breathless, kind of bouncing around on the emotion. Press would get well and truly stoned, just blitzed, and dream he was a kid again, and once he was into it, it was not that easy to shake him out of it, because that crazy way of looking at things made him really happy. Deep, deep down, he had this conviction that, whatever we were when we were kids, whatever we were taught to believe, then, we were kind of entitled to that, in a way, and no one should ever try to take any of that away from us. Which is nuts, of course. Because they have already taken it. They have taken all of it away. Every last bit of it.

"If it was cloudy, or raining or something, then my mother left the light on in my room. The idea was, and this was a little crazy, that the angels were still out there, still coming, you just couldn't see them. And you weren't exactly sure the angels could see you, either. So we had to have the lights on, to kind of guide them in, you know? Like at the airport? Which was nice, in a way? Because, what that taught me was, it’s always better to worry about the other person. That’s what my mom said, anyway. If you were worried, the way to stop worrying was, try worrying about the *other* person. Think what the *other* peson is going through. And that will calm you down right away. She wanted me to focus on the trouble the angels were in, in other words. Focus on that, and how we were going to help the angels out. Which worked like a charm.”

“Yes,” Rory says.

“So the angels are always on their way,” I say.

“Yes,” Press says. “Every night.”

“But never actually arrive,” Rory says.

"Well, sure, they arrive,” Press says. “But after you fall asleep. You know what I mean? When you were trying to fall asleep, it was enough to know that they were on their way. Help is on the god damn way. You know what I mean.”

“Oh, would that it were so,” Rory says, in Shakespearean mode. “Would that it were so.”

“Well it worked for me,” Press says. “That’s about the happiest I’ve been, I’ll tell you. Looking up at the stars, when I was a kid, and making a wish, and knowing that my special wish was going to my special angel.”

Rory says, “The happiest?”

“Pretty much,” Press says. “Well, maybe not the *happiest*.”

“What’s the absolute happiest?” Rory says.

“The happiest I’ve been?” Press says.

“Yeah.”

We wait for Press to compose his thoughts.

Finally he says, “One night when my father got pissed at me for something.”

“Uh hunh,” Rory says.

“I was supposed to mow the fucking lawn or something. I don’t know. Something like that. For one reason and another, I didn’t mow the fucking lawn. Which he interpreted as a personal betrayal. It was a Saturday. I got distracted. My father was playing fucking golf. My father spent virtually every free moment playing golf, it seemed like. That was his absolute top fucking priority. What a life. Anyway, I forgot. I got engrossed in something. I forget what it was. Something amazingly important at the time, but now I totally forget what it was. So anyway he shows up, at about three o’clock in the afternoon, about three quarters schnockered, and proceeds to make a big fucking deal out of the fact that I didn’t mow the lawn. Like that is the end of the whole fucking world. He makes a big speech about how irresponsible I am, not only about the lawn, but like, everything about me is irresponsible. I am Mr. Fucking Irresponsibility, all of a sudden. And how, you know, young man, you are grounded until further notice. Totally an over-reaction. Because, really, it was only Saturday, and I was thinking, what the hell, I’ll mow the lawn on Sunday. What’s the god damn difference? A day. Big fucking deal. Well anyway, my father could be quite a pain in the ass about things like that. I’m telling you. Wow. Then, to make matters worse, this was the summer after my junior year, and I was just hyper, hyper sensitive about not taking any kind of crap from him about anything. That was a complicating factor, I think. Anyway I was supposed to have a date that night, with Dorothy, my girlfriend, but needed to borrow the car to go on the date, you know? So I had to call Dorothy up and say guess what, we can’t go on the date, my fucking father won’t let me borrow the fucking car. I felt like such an idiot. Christ.”

And that’s it for a while. He shuts up.

“That’s the happiest you’ve been?” Rory says.

“Well no. I was just thinking about my father. I loved the guy. But also hated the son of a bitch just a little bit, at times, I have to admit.”

“Loved?” Rory says.

“He’s dead. Anyway, I am lying in my room about nine o’clock that Saturday night, feeling pretty much like a complete piece of shit, when I hear a horn blowing. The horn blows, blows again, keeps blowing and blowing, to the point where I know my father is going to go out there and hit somebody with a fucking shovel or something. Really. So anyway finally I get up, kind of up on my knees, there in bed, thinking, you know, who the hell is this idiot, and look out the window, and don’t you know it’s Dorothy, in her father’s pickup, parked across the street, leaning on the fucking horn.”

Now he shuts up again. He would shut up and leave us hanging. You got the feeling he wasn’t sure he wanted to tell the whole thing. It upset somehow.

“What did you do?” Rory says.

“I went right out the fucking window,” Press says. “Right out the window, and across the roof, and swung down hung off the gutter, which I completely fucking wrecked in the process, by the way, but that’s another story, and swung down, and jumped into the truck, and she just fucking floored that baby right out of there.”

“Nice going,” I say.

“Hunh,” Rory says. “And where is the fair Dorothy today?”

“She works at a bowling alley in Easton,” Press says.

“Where’s that?” Rory says.

“Oh, you know, nowhere,” says Press. “Eastern shore, where I come from. What about yours?”

“Mine?” Rory says.

“The happiest you’ve been. The happiest moment ever.”

Rory thinks for a minute and finally says, “It was under a piano.”

And then, just like Press, he waits for us to ask him questions or egg him on a bit. There was an element of reticence that had to be overcome. You didn’t want to seem like you were all that interested in the happiest moment of your life, because it might not measure up. You wanted other people to be interested.

“That’s interesting,” I tell him.

“My mother was having a cocktail party for all her rich friends,” Rory says. “I was, I don’t know, about fourteen, I guess. I was just starting to get good at the piano. Which is kind of late, for the piano. Usually, if you’re going to get *really* good, you get good before that. But I didn’t know that, at the time, because of my totally sheltered youth. Or, actually, I guess my mother was afraid to tell me that. She knew, I think, but she was afraid to tell me. Anyway, my mom throws this cocktail party, which was a fundraiser for something, I forget what, and insists that I am going to play Rachmaninoff for the guests at the party. At the time, I was just getting the hang of Etude Number Five, Opus Thirty Nine.”

“What the fuck is an etude?” Press says.

“Kind of like an exercise, in a way. This one is particularly difficult,” Rory says.

Press says, “I can fucking imagine.”

“I mean difficult in the physical sense,” Rory says. “Some pieces are difficult in a purely aesthetic way, demanding a certain touch, a certain attitude toward the music, a certain emotion, a certain way of looking at the world, and feeling about the world, and you have to communicate that through, you know, your fingers. But other pieces are more about the instrument itself, the playing *as* playing, if you know what I mean. Just plain physically fucking difficult, so, you don’t even know you can get through them, actually. It just kind of happens. Etude Number Five is one of those. But somehow or other, I manage to get through it with only two or three, you know, non-disastrous kinds of mistakes. Which was amazing. I felt like fucking Glen Gould, for a minute there. And of course everyone applauds, which is great. And after that, they pay no attention to me whatsoever, which is exactly what I wanted, because I was exhausted. I wanted to just completely disappear there, if you want to know the truth. So what happens is, the daughter of a couple of guests, very close friends of my mother’s, approaches me out of nowhere, with a little plate of hors d’oeuvres. And grabs my hand, and drags me under the piano. Literally drags me. And offers me an hors d’oeuvres. And kisses me. And says, ‘You’re brilliant.’”

“And that’s it?” Rory says.

“Yup,” says Rory. “That’s the happiest. The young Glen Gould.”

Press waits a minute and then kind of half rolls toward us again.

“It’s your turn,” he says.

“My turn for what?”

“The happiest you’ve been.”

I have the answer instantaneously, by the way, the answer just flicks on, right away, in my mind, but I’m not all that sure I want to start blabbering about it. So I say, “I have to think.”

“No,” Rory says. “Don’t think. Thinking spoils it. Just tell us.”

“I was sitting on a park bench,” I say.

“Ah,” Press says. “Peaceful. I’m with you.”

Rory says, “Bucolic.”

“Beside a lake,” I tell them.

“Where? What lake?” Rory says.

“Lake Waban.”

“Where in the hell is Lake Waban?” Press says.

“It’s on the campus of Wellesley College, in Wellesley, Massachusetts, about fifteen miles west of Boston. Or sort of west. Maybe … let’s see … west by southwest?”

“Okay. Whatever. Boston,” Press says.

“Presumably you are not alone, on the aforesaid bench?” Rory says.

“That is correct. Someone is with me,” I tell them.

“A lover,” Rory says.

“Yes. A lover.”

“What is her name?” Press says.

I tell them, “Her name is Natalie.”

“Go on,” Rory says.

“It’s a sunny day, a beautiful day, the most beautiful day ever, in the history of the universe.”

“Okay,” Press says.

“I had spent the night there.”

“Ah,” Press says. “So there is a sexual relationship.”

“Well, in a way, yes, and in a way, no,” I tell them. “We were beginners, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure. Okay,” Rory says.

“We went for a walk that afternoon. Then, halfway through the walk, she says, ‘Let’s go somewhere.’ Initially, it sounds like she wants to get on a plane to go to San Francisco or someplace. But eventually I figure out … we talk a little more … and I figure out … what she has in mind is a visit to a place she calls her *thinking place*.”

“Thinking place?” Rory says.

“And what was that like?”

“Actually, it was a goldfish pond. Or, you know, carp? There is a little bridge over the pond. A little marble bridge. White marble, with black swirls. It was very pretty there. Kind of … you know, Japanese? It’s *always* very pretty there. The whole campus, I mean. But this was especially pretty. Fucking beautiful, really. Because, you know, it was summer, or almost summer, and this was the end of our freshman year, and, well … everything was perfect, for that one summer.”

“And she’s pretty?” Press says.

“Yes,” I tell him. “She is pretty.”

I almost choked. I was thinking, yeah, she’s pretty, alright. The prettiest girl in the world. The prettiest girl in the universe. The prettiest being God had ever created, if you want to know the truth. I had to kind of suck it up to keep talking.

“Anyway, we arrive at this goldfish pond, and she says, ‘This is my thinking place.’ I ask her why she has chosen this particular place, and she says, ‘Because no one ever comes here.’ And all it is … is a little bench beside the goldfish pond. A memorial of some kind, to somebody, I think. Like, someone had donated it. Everything is a memorial of some kind, there. So anyway, we park ourselves on the bench and chat for a while, and somehow … it’s funny how this works … it seems like every word we say is perfect, and every thought we think is perfect, everything combining just perfectly, into the happiest conversation you could ever have about anything. Finally the two of us stand up to go, and before we go, we look down into the goldfish pond, kind of leaning over and looking down at the fish, and instead, see our own reflections there. And that seemed perfect, too. Like, our reflections were telling us, look, you are here. Look at yourselves, so happy. I remember thinking, at that moment, wow, what a lucky son of a bitch you are. But here’s the crazy part. I still feel that way. What a lucky son of bitch, to have had even one day like that, you know? Even one minute like that. Just to know what that is *like*.

“Then, we walked down a path through the woods to Lake Waban, this beautiful lake they had, right on the campus, and there was a bench beside the lake there, a regular park bench, like in Central Park. Across the lake is a hill with a beautiful house right at the top of the hill. On the lawn around the house, there are these topiaries, these big shrubs trimmed to look like cats and dogs and elephants, you know? But really big, so you could see the animal shapes from across the lake. We’re sitting there on this bench, and I notice people have carved their initials into the bench. Which is pretty goofy, from my point of view. You have to understand, I thought of myself as a big time Ivy League intellectual shit, you know what I mean? Like, damned if I was going to get caught doing anything fucking goofy. They might not give me the fucking Novel Prize. But then, looking at it another way, I got it. It was like, all these people had probably recognized it was not going to be all that easy to be that happy again. So they wanted a reminder of it. Or, not a reminder, but more, proof, I think. They wanted to be able to go back there, back to that bench, in the future, and see the initials, as a kind of proof that this moment of delirious happiness had actually happened, you know what I mean?”

“Absolutely,” Rory said. “Totally.”

“Did you carve your initials into the bench?” Press says.

“Yes,” I tell them. “I had a brand new quarter in my pocket. I carved our initials with the edge of the quarter.”

“And have you ever gone back?”

“No,” I tell them. “But listen to this. You want to hear something nuts?”

“What?” Rory says.

“I still have the quarter.”

“Where is the quarter?” Rory says.

“It’s in my pocket.”

“Now?” Rory says.

“Yeah.”

It is about this time I encounter the Homecoming Queen of the University of Miami, that peerless paragon of pulchritude, Wanda Waverly, whose real name is Wanda Wevurski, but who never calls herself that, as she believes Wevurski is a name that “does not work for show business,” for the very simple reason that “it sounds like the woman who does the freakin’ *laun*-dry.”

Anytime anyone introduces her as Wanda Wevurski, Wanda yips out “Waverly.”

From my point of view, Wanda is perfect. Except for being Wanda. Indeed, it is as if my own purely abstract formula for feminine sex appeal has been transmuted into flesh and blood, the perfect punishment for delusional thinking. I won’t say that Wanda is *better looking* than Natalie. The comparison does not really make sense, because at this point Natalie is purely an ethereal being, while Wanda is, oh, maybe half real, I would say … approximately half … a living, breathing, perambulating mannequin … a wraith who steps out of the mirror at the very moment Wanda Wevurski, from North Haledon, New Jersey, finishes combing her lustrous hair, puts the lipstick on, steps back, admires herself, and smacks her lips with a loud, popping sound signifying personal satisfaction with the confection she has just created in the mirror. Imagine the young Marilyn Monroe cast as a college student in Miami, before Monroe became *zoftig*, if you know what I mean. The incandescent, the pubescent,, the *incendiary* Monroe,melting the lens with the pure animal heat of human sexuality, which is magnified a hundred times by our self-conscious awareness of it. Not by the gtting laid thing itself, but by our *thinking about* getting laid. In other words, someone who absolutely pegs the needle on Sexual Voltage Differential. [Technical Note: At this point, our subject, me, is becoming aware of certain problems with the equipment, shall we say. Like, with the SVD meter itself, a dial implanted on the inside of my skull, right above my eyes, right in the middle of the little dashboard there, a lot like the speedometer on a car, with a needle that ranges unsteadily over luminous little numerals, only instead of speed, it measures Sexual Voltage Differential (SVD) in the area immediately around me. Out to a radius of, say, ten feet.]

Hunh.

Should the needle always be pegging that way? Figuratively speaking, I tap the glass with my fingernail. Can that be a true reading? The analogy would be … just making this up, obviously … the weatherman who awakens to a typhoon every single morning. Is that even possible? Isn’t that likely to indicate a problem with the instrumentation? Anytime a halfway attractive woman steps within range of the sensors, her presence shows up with at least a wobble on the SVD meter, and if she is even halfway good looking, or maybe has unbuttoned one button too many on her blouse, or smiles at me … God forbid someone should smile in a perfectly innocent way … the meter maxes out and freezes, a loud buzzer goes off, and warning lights start blinking all over the place. Drop everything, *babe in view*. Whatever you are doing, forget about it. It can’t be nearly as important as this, you idiot.

Can that be normal?

Does everyone go through this?

In the same instrument panel, I have my own little radio, constantly playing my favorite tunes inside my head …*,* and distracting me from whatever I am supposed to be doing, which I can’t even remember, half the time … theBeach Boys singing *Don’t Worry Baby*, John Lennon singing *In My Life* … as I hurtle down the Garden State Parkway at about 90 miles an hour … miraculously not hitting anything. And then, of course, there are the vital life-support type readouts … indicating the current total number of beers in the nearest refrigerator, current likelihood of finding eternal happiness in the hereafter, current volume of semen in the seminal vesicles, number of hours, minutes, and seconds to the next New York Giants football game … readouts that result from complex calculations about cold beer and a ballgame in the hereafter … and then, off to one side, the separate Penis Control Panel, which of course has never worked, and which, if you remove the cover, turns out not to be wired at all, but rather a purely cosmetic appurtenance, so any idea of control of any kind is purely illusory. Indeed, experience teaches us that that operation of the male sexual apparatus and the male psyche itself is not something one actually controls. It’s more like sitting down in a backhoe or a steamshovel for the first time. The only real difference being that, with maleness … malecity … whatever you want to call it … you never, ever learn. You never *find the manual*. You spend your entire life pawing through the glove compartment in search of the manual, which never turns up. The backhoe is operating, alright, extending its bucket, spinning around, dumping stuff, impregnating people, and all that, and yes, you are at the controls, but you have no idea why things are happening, really, it’s all kind of random, as far as you can see … because, fundamentally, face it, what are you? You are a four-year-old who has climbed onto the seat of a backhoe and started fiddling with things. Turn the key and it roars to life, spewing diesel smoke. Push buttons, turn knobs. Wonder what this thingie does. Whatever there is to fiddle with it, you fiddle with it. And sure enough, stuff happens. The female becomes sexually aroused. Did you *cause her* to become sexually aroused? You don’t really know. How could you know? To know, you have to have a readout of her thoughts and feelings as you fiddle with things. That is not available. Her thoughts and feelings are on the other side of the windshield. Between maleness and femaleness stands an inch of plexiglass. Rain on the windshield. Windshield wipers. [Note To Explorers Of The Future: This state of abject, abysmal, totally helpless ignorance is the essential experience of male adulthood and very likely is fundamentally necessary to the sexual nature of our lives. I posit the theorem that it is absolutely fundamental … critical … that we never have any idea what the heck is going on. Because if we did, the chemistry of the whole thing would collapse. Looking at it another way, the antipodes can never touch, or the spark jumps and the charge is lost. Yes, it is love that makes the world go round. But what makes love go round? Only a deep and abiding ignorance of the other point of view, am I correct? Only in darkness can the moon appear. Thus, upon first catching sight of Wanda, as per usual, I find myself tapping the SVD meter with my fingernail, trying to jar it loose, as it seems to me the reading registered cannot be real… which means *she* cannot be real. Or, *I* cannot be real. Take your pick. Which is it? Do they *make women* like that? Or is that an apparition in the rear view mirror?

What has gone wrong?

No answer.

Through the fogged up, rain-spattered windshield on the back hoe, I anxiously check the numbers of the seat rows against the number on my ticket, with one eye on the needle on the SVD meter as it trembles, shudders, strains, like the pressure gauge on a boiler that is about to blow, and finally, when I see that my seat is in fact right next to Wanda, curls up, emitting a wisp of smoke, and crumbles to dust. The point being … what? What is the point? That I *know* the machine is malfunctioning? *Know* the machine doesn’t work properly? And step on the accelerator anyway?].

Her sculpted lips.

Her radiant hair.

Her hips squirming in the seat the second she sees me.

Her smell, which is the inhalation of romance itself. Like laughing gas, taking me away.

The smell of roseson the fence in summertime.

Of roses popping open on a dewey, sunny, summer morning.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhh.

The agony of desire.

Behold, the incomparable Wanda, Homecoming Queen of Miami, Polish Princess of North Haledon, Supreme Empress of the very wettest of my wet dreams, not merely seated but royally ensconced in a window seat on an airplane at Miami International, wistfully, wonderingly gazing out at the tarmac as I approach, her chin perched on the perfectly manicured tip of her perfectly formed forefinger, the forefinger of Venus herself, her gorgeous face bathed in the tender effulgence of a rainy day in the tropics, that pretty little nose crinkled up … oh, so smashingly … disapproving of the weather … of the silliness of it … how it stupidly insists upon raining … when sunshine is so, *so* much more fun … and I think maybe adding in just a hint of disbelief at the outlandishly awkward dress of the workmen outside, those incredibly clutzy creatures, subhuman, really, what with their giant, galumphing galoshes, awkwardly tilted hard hats, bright orange, big beer bellies bulging out beneath their too-small tee-shirts … why, even the gigantic, phosphorescent yellow slickers are too small … so all in all, when you came right down to it, their ensembles were totally fucking devoid of any fashion sense whatsoever.

There is a certain something.

An extra vibration, with her.

A *Wandaness* about Wanda, which I can’t put my finger on, at first.

I think it’s that she is *on*.

Yes, that’s it, I think.

If I imagine myself seated in the full Panavision motion picture rig, the one that rolls along on the little railroad tracks, with the two grungy guys pushing, rolling along on the perfect little mini railroad track built solely and exclusively for this moment, this one absolutely indispensable motion shot, that big old cyclops of a lens beneath the giant black hood, with the grips and the sound guys hovering near, rolling down the aisle in the airplane, with me behind the camera, even then I cannot imagine her more *on*. She is on, in the very same way a lightbulb is on, fully on, tingling with energy in every nerve ending, luxuriating in the attention, and *knows* she is on, and knows this shot is all about her, that all of the other people on the plane are extras, if you know what I mean, and that the plane itself is a mere prop. I am convinced she detects my presence and deciphers my essential maleness, my essential subservience to primordial instinct, before visual contact is made. I am the cruiser whose presence is detected on radar long before the superstructure appears at the horizon. Because radar follows the curvature of the earth or something. She lets me stand there for a long moment, while I am double checking the seat number, like a winning lottery ticket, totally flabbergasted at my own good fortune. Lets her own presence sink in, like venom, paralyzing me. Finally pivots toward me in a deliberate way, just like the big guns on a battleship, and bats her lashes, more or less automatically, I think, as eyelash-batting is the default behavior, it turns out … yes, Wanda was more or less constantly flailing away with those eyelashes at anything that looked even remotely like fair game … just shotgunning away, just blasting anything that came even close.

And then, evaluates.

The eyes drinking in tons of information that I have not chosen to disclose … it is just out there, freely available to the probing, penetrating eyes of women … the eyes that always seem to want to look within … to unlock my forehead and peer inside … only to be profoundly disappointed in the end, finding nothing of interest … nothing but empty pizza boxes, empty beer cans, baseball cleats and mitts, dirty coffee cups … novels … where is the majesty of life?

She thinks she gets it. And she does get it, in a way. They *all* get it, in a way. But in a way not. The faintest little hint of smile barely tilts at the corner of her mouth.

She says, “Hey sailor.”

And *winks.*

Because, well, obviously, the whole thing is set up as a part in a motion picture.

Meeting a sailor on an airplane.

Regarding which … the only explanation I can offer … totally non-sensical as it is … it’s not even an explanation … it’s a scientific observation … is that the dress blues of an enlisted man in United States Navy worked like a charm with women. The dress blues were the male equivalent of a slinky cocktail gown, apparently. The good old dress blues made you look and feel like Frank Fucking Sinatra in *On The Town*, where Frank and his sidekick, Gene Kelly, are tap-dancing around Manhattan, tap dancing down fucking Broadway with Ann Miller, tap dancing their way through World War II, through hell itself, with a fresh haircut, a shoeshine, and the mushroom cloud billowing up behind them. Probably it does not hurt that I have been through boot camp, where I got plenty of exercise, did plenty of pushups, and so forth, climbed ropes, ran, all that crap, and am now living in Key West, where I am getting plenty of sunshine, eating tons of steak and eggs for breakfast every morning, and am somewhat constrained not to totally self-destruct every night. Anyway, it appears Wanda is quite taken right from the start.

And why shouldn’t she be?

Unbelievabley, I actually have a medal on my chest.

Me, a medal.

Or at least, the ribbon representing a medal. For I am now wearing the National Service Ribbon, which is awarded to anyone who shows up to put on the uniform of our country in time of war. Yes, a little clip of glossy cloth, on a brass pin, with two little fasteners in the back. That is what they pin on your chest. That is your reward if you agree that you will die for your country, should that become necessary. Vertical bands of red and gold and white and blue, signifying that I have had the audacity to shoulder the full burden of maleness in all its neurotic, homocidal glory.

I scoot into the seat beside Wanda and show her my ticket, kind of leaning toward her to confide. To properly imagine the look on my face at this moment you have to think in terms of the four-year-old upon first seeing the presents beneath the Christmas tree on Christmas morning.

The clothing is the wrapping.

Half the fun of it is, you know, getting the wrapping off.

“I was *hoping* this would be next to you,” I tell her.

“Awwwww,” she says.

We shake hands politely and introduce ourselves.

“Wow, two kids from Jersey … that’s *int*-er-est-ing!” she says.

“I’ll say.”

It does not take Wanda long to mention the homecoming queen thing. Having explained that she is flying to Newark to visit her parents in North Haledon for Thanksgiving, she quickly adds, “I have to be back right after, or my frat friends’ll kill me!”

“Frat friends?”

While the SVD meter is pegging, the boilers whistling, ready to blow, the lights flashing madly, I show her a smile of cool, calm, self possession.

“Who sponsored me,” she says. “I was the Theta Beta Tau girl.”

“Sponsored you?”

“Oh. For homecoming queen,” she says. “They sponsored me for homecoming queen. They thought I was cute. And guess what?”

She grips my wrist, to steady me, not wishing to completely blow my neurological circuits mere minutes after we first meet. Only when she feels I have braced myself adequately does she proceed.

“Are you ready for this? I fucking won! Can you believe it? Which is going to be fabulous for my career, I don’t mind telling you. It’s already paying dividends.”

“Career?”

“In show business. No question about it, I’m going into show business.”

“You mean, like, television?”

“Well, I don’t know whether you start in television, right off the bat,” she says. “It’s not like I’m a guest on the Johnny Carson show later on. Get a grip on yourself, know what I mean? But, well, let’s just say I know people who can help me.”

“Like who?”

“Well, for instance, the star of *Jesus Christ Superstar?*”

“Uh hunh.”

I want to emphasize, there are plenty of times when I have absolutely no idea what to say to people. Absolutely no idea what to say next. Emotionally, it’s like, all of a sudden, I find myself standing at the end of the highest diving board imaginable. I am driving along, I come to the Grand Canyon. What she is telling me is that she is counting on the star of *Jesus Christ Superstar* to help her with her show business career. What is supposed to come after that?

People say things to me, I try to absorb, and the input does not compute. Everything goes blank. I tap the glass on the readouts. They remain blank. She waits for me to say soemthing. I say nothing. She decides to plough ahead without me.

“We’re fellow alums of North Haledon High.”

“You and Jesus Christ?”

“Yep.”

When I explain to Wanda in a perfectly deadpan, matter of fact way that I am in training to shoot nuclear weapons at people, to incinerate the yellow races in their entirety, if necessary, all in a day’s work, or what have you, she thinks that is pretty fucking cool, far as I can tell. Consequently, I chat a bit about the technical details, laying it on pretty thick, I have to admit, regarding how the missile has sensors, how the bomb pops out of the missile at two or three thousand feet above sea level, or whatever, like that’s a fucking masterpiece of engineering in itself, I think letting on that I personally am responsible for the diabolical genius of the design … how the chute pops open with the bomb beneath, how the *bomb* has sensors, too … how the freaking *sensors* have sensors … sensors on sensors, all over the place, really, sensing this, sensing that … powering readouts that can be interpreted properly only by yours truly or a person of equal genius … sensing the temperature of Wanda’s blood as it warms to the magisterial dimensions of my role … oh, yeah, me and Robert fucking Oppenheimer as buddyroo old teammates in the destruction of the entire fucking civilized world in one wild afternoon … how the bomb is cleverly programmed to settle down to the optimum altitude for detonation (oh, and by the way, as I am explaining this crap to Wanda, I am very well aware that the people around us are listening, pretending not to listen but really listening, and really have to listen, because, when hyper-sexed twenty-three-year olds are being given nuclear warheads to play with, what choice do they have? While I am thinking, what the hell, if I can scare the living shit out of the other passengers, while simultaneously stimulating interest in Wanda, why, all the better, that’s kind of two birds with one A-bomb) … and how it is all dependent on the target set quite professionally by yours truly (here I am leaning into the bed of roses, leaning in to luxuriate in their tenderness, their narcotic fragrance, their silky texture) … bearing in mind that, with submarines, you wanted it to settle in pretty close, the better to pulverize a hull blanketed by a thousand feet of seawater … so it collapses like a beer can in your fist … which wasn’t exactly easy.

I turn to glance at the guy across the aisle, who is staring at me.

Turn back to Wanda.

She says, “Wow-*wee*.”.

That very weekend we have a date. I pick Wanda up at her parents’ house in North Haledon, a “modified Cape Cod” quite similar to the house I grew up in, where she can’t resist showing me the green and orange and white sequin gown she wore to the Homecoming Ball. Also, the white sequin shoes. Before you know it we are in her “bedroom suite.” Which, she explains, has been “customized” to take up pretty much the entire second floor of the house, making room for a closet pretty much equal in size to the bedroom itself, containing maybe a hundred pairs of shoes and maybe a hundred dresses, nearly all of which are light blue, in one shade or another. When I comment on this, Wanda leans close to me and points to her eye. “It’s my color. Cerulean.” Plus, a bathroom almost as big, with multiple makeup mirrors of various sizes, lens effects, and positions on various telescoping stainless steel extension gizmos, so the whole bathroom has a fun house feel to it. All of which Wanda needs, she says, “to make sure I look okay.”

All that is missing is the star on the door.

She holds out the glittering shoes and turns them this way and that so I can observe how the sequins sparkle as the light shifts.

“Are they fucking outrageous or what?” she says. “Like the fucking *Wizard of Oz*, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Am I right?”

“Yup.”

She holds up the gown one more time.

“Of course these are the school colors,” she says. “Obviously you’re not going to win the vote if you aren’t wearing the school colors.” She clenches her fist and whispers raspily, “Go ‘Canes!”

Maybe I should mention she meant Hurricanes, the University of Miami football team. Although, all but the aliens who read this book will know that.

There I sit on the edge of Wanda’s gargantuan bed, which is stacked with large stuffed animals in orange, green, and white … with pillows that are orange, green, and white … against a wall hung with orange, green and white pennants and paraphernalia. Emerging from the cavernous interior of the closet, Wanda approaches, leans over, and murmurs, “And now I have a special treat, if you’re a good boy.”

“What is that?”

I half expected Wanda to take her clothes off. Why not? It was all way too good to be true, from my point of view. No reason why things couldn’t continue along those lines.

“Wait,” she says. “I’ll show you.”

Darts back into the closet. Emerges with a box about the size of a cake. The box is covered in clownishly bright orange velvet. The top of the box is hinged. She sets the box down in my lap ceremoniously, conveying that the contents are sacred, in some way.

“You ready?”

Slowly, oh ever, ever so slowly, extracting the maximum dramatic effect from the moment, she lifts the lid, to reveal that, inside, the box is mostly white velvet, and that, resting there, on a cylinder of green velvet, velvet all over the fucking place, is a tiara.

She looks at the tiara, looks at me, her face emblazoned with disbelief, and says, “Can you believe this shit?”

“Wow.”

“My crown!”

“It’s beautiful!”

Now, I mean, realistically, this tiara was about as beautiful as, say, a great looking hubcap. That’s what it was, really. A gorgeous hubcap kind of thing to put on a woman’s head. But you have to play along with people, right? You have to indulge the enthusiasms around you, to a certain extent, or people are going to hate your fucking guts. What the hell. Live and let live.

“We swiped it.”

“Swiped?”

“My mom and I? We wanted the real, actual crown that they actually put on my actual freaking *head*. The actual one. So … my dad had a jeweler make us a copy. This jeweler who works for the mob? Look. Tell me. Is this absolutely fucking perfector what? And then we just switched that one for the real one. You could not tell the fucking difference for a million dollars, I swear to fucking god. It’s all rhinestones anyway. They aren’t going to miss it, trust me.”

“Ah,” I said.

Everything about Wanda was astonishing, to me.

That Sunday, I attend Mass with my parents and sister. It’s a pleasant enough day, a sunny day in November, although, a bit on the blustery side, so, afterward, people are milling around in front of the church, trying to ignore the wind, trying to be good Catholics schmoozing up the other good Catholics, or what have you, the women holding onto their hats as they chat politely with the portly Monsignor Tumulty, he naturally decked out in full religious regalia for Thanksgiving Weekend, with the purple hat and purple buttons on the black robe with the purple piping, et cetera, the black skirts of the robe tossing malevolently in the wind. My mother just can’t resist dragging me over to chat with Monsignor, I think because she wants to make sure everyone knows that one of her sons is “serving his country,” as she likes to put it, that our family is “holding up our end,” willing to make a deposit in the graveyard to ensure the national credit is good.

Well, while we are chatting, who shows up in the cluster around the monsignor but Ann Devoe. Just pops up in front of me. I could have died. And then her parents. As the chatting is winding down and everyone is getting sick of freezing their asses off out there in the wind, Mom turns to Mrs. Devoe and says, “I’m cold. Are you cold? How about a nice warm cup of tea?”

“Oh *love to*,” says Mrs. Devoe. Her name was Dolores. My mother called her Dolly. Dolly Devoe. She looks at Mr. Devoe and says, “Darling? We’re going to have a cup of tea.”

He says, “Certainly, darling.”

From the look on his face, honestly, you would have thought she was dragging him to the gallows.

I notice neither of them asks Ann.

On the way home, my mother says, “You heard Ann is getting married?”

She is in the front seat with my father, I am in back with my sister.

I had not heard.

That seemed impossible, to me.

There was a puncture in the fabric of space-time.

“No.”

“Mmmmm. This guy she met at the Shore. He tells Dolly he wants to be an electrician. Which is all well and good, I suppose. Although, I think Dolly was thinking brain surgeon.”

She stares out the window. What she meant was, it was not all well and good. It was about as far from well and good as it was possible to get, short of hell itself, maybe. Screwdriver and pliers instead of forceps and scalpel. Not well and good.

She rephrases the thought.

“There were definitely higher aspirations in that quarter.”

She twists around in her seat to check me out, kind of check out how all this is going over with me. I try to keep a poker face with people, most of the time. By way of minimizing the number of social disasters involving me. I will admit I have taken the poker-face thing pretty far, well into the realm of neurosis, probably, something of a sore point with my mother.

“You’re not reacting,” she says.

“I’m thinking.”

Satisfied that I am not having a complete nervous breakdown there and then, she turns away from me, but keeps talking.

“I’ll tell you honestly … and this is just between us, her mother was wondering whether it might be possible for me to… well … possibly … I don’t know how to put this, exactly … but she was suggesting I could kind of encourage you … not get back together with Ann, but … just drop by, in other words … some weekend when you have leave.”

She turns around again.

“What do you think of that idea, darling?”

I had no answer. I was just one of those moments where I just freeze completely, up there on the high board, the very highest of the high boards, up there on the high board on Mt. Everest, where I literally can’t believe what people are saying and doing. Eileen is looking out the window on her side. Normally, Eileen knows exactly what is going on inside me head, partly because the male female thing is inoperable, between us. The circuits that enable all the confusion are not there. Without moving, still staring out the window, Eileen says, “Mother, it sounds to me like that horse is out of the barn.”

This little exchange doesn’t stop my mother from sequestering Ann and I in the kitchen while she and my father and the Devoes have tea in the living room. She makes tea for the two of us and puts the steaming cups of tea in a picturesque little square of sunshine on the kitchen table. The sunshine turns the tendrils of steam blue, somehow. The tendrils of steam blue, the tea orange. Very designer, this moment. Ann and I mute, watching the steamy tea.

“Here,” she says. “Why don’t the two of you fascinating young people catch up out here by yourselves, and let the rest of us be boring in the living room. Okay?”

Ann smiles, so pretty.

The pretties girl in the world, forever.

I tell Ann about the Navy, the same old moronic stuff, how you can actually figure out which way a submarine is turning by listening to the echoes bounce off the hull, et cetera. Rising tone, turning toward you, falling tone, turning away, blah blah. Which was interesting, I suppose, in a completely moronic, completely Neanderthal way. Interesting in a natural history sort of way. In pretty much the same category as how the termites build the towering termite mounds. Again illustrating how we in the human race have been really ingenious at figuring out new ways to totally waste our time. Just totally piss our time and energy down the drain, dreaming up ingenious new ways to destroy shit. A vast, teeming multitude of tired four-year-olds, that’s the human race. Let’s spend another couple of centuries, another couple of fucking “ages,” concentrating all of our considerable energies on figuring out new ways to destroy shit, that will be a good use of time. But people are always interested, I notice, or pretend to be, anyway. Or at least polite about it. I don’t know. Maybe they see you are involved in something totally moronic and just don’t have the heart to tell you how stupid it all is. When really, they should look you right in the eye and say something like, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Ann lets me run on for a while, now and then interjecting the usual professions of interest and fascination and so forth, and then says, out of nowhere, “You heard I’m engaged?”

“Yes.”

She stirs her tea as the last of the steam dissipates. Somehow or other, it seems to me that time is slowing down, at this moment, not just between us, not just at that kitchen table, but throughout the universe. There is something about this moment that slows all of the planets in their orbits, all of the stars in their paths through the Milky Way, all of the nebula and the black holes, the light and the dark matter, the pollen blowing off the milkweed, the fish coursing through the sea.

“I’m glad we met today,” she says.

Sometimes I feel, oh my God, I am actually alive, and things are actually happening to me. It’s not a dream. She puts the teaspoon in the saucer and the spoon makes that little clink it makes against china.

“Yes,” I tell her, just kind of chatting, making small talk the best I can. “Me too.”

“I saw you were in church with your parents. I suggested we might be able to stop by.”

“Ah. Really?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh,” I say, “Well, I didn’t realize it was your suggestion.”

“Yes,” she says. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, I don’t know … just talk, really, I guess. I thought we should talk. Obviously it’s kind of a big deal, getting married.”

“Sure.”

She stirs the tea, stares into the tea, seems to seek the answer to something in the tea, a little like my mother, kind of creeping up on some way to say something.

“I want you to know something.”

So, she had decided. I waited.

“I just want to say … just to *say* … and you know, it’s funny, but, now that I’m here, the funny thing is, I don’t know whether I can actually go ahead and say what I wanted to say. Isn’t that weird?”

“Tell me what you can’t tell me.”

She laughs. Throws her head back and laughs and smiles. That smile always hit me with a big wave of happiness. That sunny old Jersey smile. Just like a big old wave coming in from the Atlantic, lifting me up into the sun, splashing salt in my face. Just like a big old ocean wave of happiness, rolling in. She gives me a good, long, really suspicious, analyzing kind of look, up and down, in her cheerful, happy way, with the twinkly eyes, sizing up whether she is really going to tell me whatever she has on her mind, and then decides to go ahead and do it … what the hell .. she is going off the high board … lays her hands flat on the table, fingers spread wide, like she is hanging onto it, just hanging on for dear life, as we are all hanging on … gets good grip on it and and looks me in the eye and says, “I *loved* you.”

Then seems perfectly relaxed, all of a sudden. Her hands let go. She ease back in her chair. Then just sips her tea, while kind of keeping an eye on me, over the rim of the teacup.

A big ocean wave comes in and picks us up and sets us down somewhere else. So I have to reorient. Get my feet on the ground.

“I loved you,” I tell her.

And then, nothing.

The two of us sitting in the kitchen, the light falling across the table, time coming to a complete stop.

Finally, she says, “I didn’t fully realize what it was, at the time.”

I understand.

“You mean, because we were kids.”

“Oh, well, not really, not me,” she says. “I was already a woman. You couldn’t see?”

Her eyes are alight with fascination at the abject, the unfathomable, the bottomless, dark pool of male ignorance.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I tell her. “I guess I did.”

“But you were still a boy.”

She pauses, let’s me think, sees I have nothing to say, sees there is no harm in continuing, that I am okay with it, not falling over in grief or anything, and pushes on. “There wasn’t anything I could do about that, really, or even … even anything I wanted to do. It was alright the way it was. Really perfect the way it was. It kind of had to be exactly what it was, you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” I tell her. “It all has to be exactly what it is.”

“I just wanted you to know,” she says. “I did love you. I did … oh, I did love you so. I just didn’t know that was the word for it, you know what I mean.”

“Yes.”

Now she unsnaps her purse and reaches in and gropes around in there, feels around in this cavernous purse, big as a knapsack, and finally comes up with the whistle I gave her the day we said goodbye, this little silver whistle on a silver chain. With the whistle and chain in the palm of her hand, she holds her hand out toward me, to show me. When she sees that I have recognized the whistle … that I see it … see what she is telling me … see the whistle in her hand, the initials carved into the bench beside Lake Waban, and at the end of the road, the grave lined with lilies above Dingle Bay … all so far beyond me … so far above me … like a wave crashing over my head … but do see it, do sense it, and look into her eyes, to let her know I do … she then slowly closes her fingers over the whistle, and draws her fist back to her chest, to hold that whistle in both hands, with nothing more to say to me, ever, in this life or any other, and snaps the purse shut, and stands up, and pulls at the wrinkles in her clothes, and walks into the living room to join our parents with her usual lilting, happy hello.

Soon I am riding the bus to Miami to visit with Wanda at the little house she rents in Coconut Grove, a pretty little pink bungalow of a house about half a mile from the campus, where she has a little sheepdog … not an English sheepdog, she is quick to explain, but a Polish sheepdog, named Reggie, after the quarterback of the Hurricanes football team a couple of years back. Wanda explains all about the honorable role of the Polish Lowland Sheepdog back in Poland, how this was a dog of *honor* … the word she actually uses … which has to do with the sheering of the sheep and the birth of the lambs and so forth, where you couldn’t trust just any dog, or even any sheepdog, with the vulnerable little lambs, it had to be a *Polish Lowland Sheepdog* or nothing. And not only that, but how the Polish Lowland Sheepdogs did their darndest to keep the Nazis at bay, standing in front of the tanks and woofing, but of course then getting squished into sheepdog pancakes, at least in Wanda’s rendition. I guess I kind of doubted that part. Although, Reggie was a ferocious little bastard. Recognizing that this subject is very close to Wanda’s heart, I keep nodding appreciatively and expressing, you know, boundless admiration for the heroic dogs. I recognize Reggie as a formidable rival for Wanda’s affections, right off the bat, and I think he felt the same way about me, and asserted himself in that direction. When Wanda got annoyed with him, she shook her finger in his direction and addressed him sternly as *Reginald*. Anytime the dog was called Reginald, his head sank and he sulked for a while.

Usually Wanda’s beautiful white Corvette convertible is parked beside the house, under this rickety green plastic awning kind of thing, the “caport,” which is engulfed in wisteria, the purpose being not to keep the car dry, Wanda is happy to explain, but to keep the seagulls from crapping all over it.

“Luckily seagull shit is white mostly,” she explains. “You think it’s their diet?”

Wanda had fashion sense, even with shit.

“No,” I tell her. “God created them that way. On the seventh day, the Lord saith unto the birds of the sea, whomsoever shitteth, let him shit white.”

“I think you’re right.”

The first time I show up at the house, Wanda is inconsolable, as I have not brought my uniform. After that, she insists I have the uniform with me at all times. This was when I started to realize that one of the reasons for her interest in me was that I kind of matched the car.

“Well,” she says, “you have to look the part. Otherwise, how can *I* look the part?”

“The part? What part?”

“You know,” she says. “Do I have to *say it*?”

“Try saying it. See what happens.”

“You know, the *boyfriend* part.”

“Ah. I didn’t know you considered me your boyfriend.”

She winks.

“Think of it as an *audition*.”

Anyway Wanda very much enjoys riding around in the Corvette with the top down, me in the passenger seat and Reggie in the cramped little space behind the seats. Reggie is always panting because, after all, he is a sheepdog, wearing a pretty heavy fur coat, and this is Miami, and even in the middle of what we call winter, here in the northern hemisphere, Miami is pretty warm. Occasionally he licks Wanda’s arm and pants in her ear, which delights her. I take notes on any favorable reaction, intent on incorporating successful Reggie behaviors into my own repertoire. Nothing makes Wanda happier than riding around with Reggie in back and me beside her, in uniform. If she could have put Reggie in uniform, she would have. “My boys,” she calls us. So, evidently, if you have a penis, why then you are a “boy.” A male *anything* is a “boy.” You can have a long, shaggy coat, with fur hanging in your eyes, and maintain body temperature by panting, or you can be wearing a sailor uniform and Wayfarer sunglasses, it doesn’t matter. What matters is the pleasure probe hanging between your legs. Whenever Wanda gets the Vette out onto the Dixie Highway, she guns it a little and Reggie starts barking from sheer exhilaration, nose into the breeze, ears flapping madly, while I hang onto my hat. Anytime you were in uniform, and outdoors, you were supposed to have the hat on at all times, it was a capital offense to remove the hat. The moment I was sure I was not being surveilled, I would take the off, to try to blend in a little better. To be a normal human being and not Shiva, the god of destruction. Only to have Wanda insist that I put the hat back on.

“Why do you need to be so difficult about this?” she complains. “You’re a sailor, right? You’re in the Navy, am I right? So … if you’re in the Navy, be in the Navy! That’s all I’m sayin’.”

“Wanda, I guess … listen … the point I would make … there’s a little more to human character than, you know … he’s a sailor, isn’t there? Isn’t that kind of one dimensional?”

“Oh stop.”

Now and then we drop in at the Theta Beta Tau house to discuss Wanda’s duties as Miss Theta Beta Tau. It happens that the fraternity brothers are doing the planning for their annual Christmas party, which is quite a big deal for them, evidently, as it involves a certain number of returning alumni, who plainly expect the resident brothers to show proper hospitality, with garbage barrels full of beer, plenty of ribs, pretty girls, a band, amusements people can enjoy while inebriated, all the amenities, if you will. Granted, there is a certain amount of organizational work to be done. Yet it seems to me that the president of the fraternity, a self-proclaimed “redneck” from Alabama and model of barroom bonhomie by the name of Harry “Hog” Haskel … Hog because he is just a tad on the pillowy side … very much enjoys exercising authority, and particularly enjoys having Wanda in his thrall, and maybe has about half a crush on Wanda, or lust for her, and for that reason has made the whole planning process a lot more complicated than it needs to be, so he can keep calling Wanda in for consultations. At one point, Hog insists that Wanda show up for the final planning session wearing her gown, which she refuses to do, explaining to him over the phone that it is way too hot for a gown, the gown tends to get sticky real fast, and choosing instead to carry the thing over there, or actually have me carry it, in a dry cleaning bag.

When I casually suggest that possibly she should tell Hog to go fuck himself backwards, she very calmly explains that will not work very well, because her gig as Homecoming Queen requires she be in good standing as Miss Theta Beta Tau.

“We need to get along with Hog, get me?” she says.

She insists that I get into the car first, so she can lay the gown in my lap just so. It’s a lovely, sunny day, hot as blazes, coconut palms shimmering like torches in the watery whirls and eddies of heat. Wanda is in short shorts and strappy sandals and dark lollipop sunglasses, fully doing her thing.

“If you don’t fold it just right, the sequins get all fucked up, and the sequins start popping off, and then there are these fucking bald spots in the sequins, you know what I mean? And those little buggers are the devil to sew back on, I’m tellin’ ya,” she says, fiddling with the folds in the dry cleaning bag. “So, that’s what I’m trying to avoid here, okay? There. Now don’t move.”

The Theta Beta Tau house is a pretty impressive Georgian house with a little portico out front, the gables, chimneys at either end, the whole nine yards, architecturally. It has definitely seen better days, although, considering it’s a frat house, it’s not all *that* bad. One of the drainpipes is a little crooked, one of the shutters tilted at an odd angle, missing a hinge, I think. Little touches like that alert you to the chaos within. This particular Sunday morning, all the windows are open on the second floor, I guess airing the place out, which it definitely needs, periodically, because it always smells like a wet rug, when I am there. I am always concerned that things may be growing on me, possibly my armpits are turning green, that kind of thing. Makeshift curtains of various fabrics and colors hang from the upper windows, and from one, the obligatory Confederate flag, proud banner of human enslavement, plus a bath towel or two draped over a window sill here and there. It’s situated on a broad residential avenue of nice homes that are impeccably kept up, for the most part. Two frat houses right next to each other constitute a compact little slum onto themselves. As Wanda pulls up a couple of guys in dark glasses and baseball hats, T-shirts and shorts, are enjoying a few beers in lawn chairs out front, crushed cans scattered about, just as peaceful and easy as you please, smoking cigarettes and drinking and watching the girls go by. Wanda pulls into the driveway a little too fast, radio blasting, thumps the tail end of the Vette on the little ramp at the curb, but doesn’t seem to notice, as she waves at the guys on the lawn and yells “Hi y’all” in an accent I have not heard before. I have noticed that, anytime Wanda gets involved with the fraternity brothers, she is particularly frisky, just as cutesy schmootzy as she can possibly be, speaking with a slight Southern accent, and just throwing herself with complete abandon into the role of Miss Theta Beta Tau. Although, the moment she turns her back on the frat brothers, she reverts to being the normal Wanda, still cutesy, but not totally overkilling it.

“Now, hold it up in the air, if you can,” she says as she opens the door for me, very serious and focused. “So it hangs straight, you know what I mean? Any kind of friction is bad for sequins.”

She takes the dog and trail I behind, holding the gown as high as I possibly can. If anything happens to that gown, it’s curtains for me. We find Hog and the other officers of the fraternity on the terrace out back, gathered around a picnic table out there, with beers and cigarettes and cigars, every one of them wearing dark glasses. Hog and the boys were all in recovery mode after another night of fun and frolic at the frat, all speaking very softly, presumably to minimize the impact on inflamed eardrums. I think maybe Wanda missed that part. She says hello in her usual cheerful way, just as buoyant and bubbly as can be, while the guys remain absolutely deadpan, even recoil a little at her good cheer. Once she gets going Wanda rattles on a mile a minute, introducing me and explaining how she couldn’t wear the gown, it’s too hot, it *sticks to her*, et cetera, then gets the gown out of the bag and shows it off, holding it up against her and twirling around for them. But even this brings very little response from the frat boys, who appear to be blind, deaf, and dumb. Hog is slumped in a plastic chair with a beer in one hand and the sloppy stub of a cigar in the other. Finally he points the cigar stub at Wanda.

“Here’s my question,” he says, with a lawyerly air.

“Uh hunh,” says Wanda.

“Do you sing at all, Wanda?”

“Sing?” says Wanda. “Of course I sing. Are you kidding? You don’t remember I sang at the finals for Homecoming Queen? I sang *Over the Rainbow*. At the finals for Homecoming Queen. What? You don’t remember? Everybody said I absolutely fabulous. Not to mention I won the friggin’ thing. You guys don’t remember that?”

She looks around at all the deaf mutes and they all kind of look around at each other. I’m sure they could hardly remember their own names.

“Of course. Wanda. Of course, we do,” says Hog. “What I meant was, do you sing other stuff? I thought *Over the Rainbow* was terrific. Just terrific, really. I meant, you know, other stuff. What I have in mind is, you know, Frank Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney, that kind of thing. Like, show tunes and stuff. You ever sing any of that stuff?”

Wanda looks a bit confused. Hog keeps plugging away.

“It’s for the Christmas party,” he says. “We need to do something for the old farts in the crowd.”

“The alums,” one of the other guys says.

“The alums think the music at the Christmas party should be … what did they say?”

Everybody kind of looks around.

“Eclectic.”

Hog says, “They felt last year was more or less a complete fuck-up, in that regard.”

Another guy says, “We didn’t know what eclectic *was*, last year.”

Hog says, “And I am still somewhat in doubt, to be totally frank. Like I really give a fuck about eclectic. I don’t think so. However, be that as it may, Wanda, we were wondering whether you might be able to kind of help us out in that department. We were wondering whether you could show up, in the gown and all, with the crown, the whole Homecoming Queen rig, if you know what I mean, and sing a couple of numbers in, you know, the Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra vein. Whatever that is. I’m not even sure I know, frankly. But that’s what they were saying. Rosemary Clooney. Anything along those lines. We have a pretty good band lined up, actually a super band, really, but we thought, you know, maybe you could sing a couple of the more traditional numbers, exclusively for the alums, to make them feel nice and cosy and appreciated. Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra*,* that crap*.* You know what I mean, I’m sure*.* And at that, Hog perks up a little, and starts snapping his fingers, and becomes a crooner himself, singing into his cigar stub. “*Ba-ba-boooo, ba-ba-baaahhhhhh, ba-ba-boo-baba-baahhhhhh*.”

“You know, traditional shit,” says one of the other guys.

Wanda is nodding.

“Sure,” she says. “Piece of cake.”

They all drink a toast to Wanda.

On the way back to her place, Wanda plays the temptress, licking her lips and fondling the gear shift with her fingertips, alternately caressing it or gripping it firm and rotating her palm maddeningly. Oy. In my sex-deprived state, I find it easy to envision her actually having intercourse with her car, straddling the transom and shifting gears with her vagina as the engine races out of control. Sliding up and down on the stick as the car does spins and crazy wheelies. I can’t wait to see what Wanda is going to do with the real article. But upon our arrival back at the bungalow, our romantic hideaway, she promptly sets about laying obstacles in my path, as usual. It’s too hot or too cool, she’s hungry, wonder what’s on television, et cetera. By this time I have pretty much concluded that Wanda is a virgin, and a bit cock shy, at that. Which I feel I understand fully. I mean, turning the whole proposition around, do I feel I would enjoy having another person insert a bodily appendage into me? No offense to the gay community, et cetera, but no, or not at the moment, anyway. Wanda seems to feel that, as the reigning homecoming queen of a major university, and a future star of stage and screen, she cannot have sex with just anyone, but must be mindful of her curriculum vitae. Certainly she does not want me to become the one inexcusable a blot on her record. She does not want to be sitting in the office of the Cecil B. DeMille of our age, and have him point to her credits on a piece of paper, and have him say, “Wait a minute, Wanda. You fucked this schlemiel?” She sees an advantage in being unattainable. By the way Reggie seems to agree with her. As I work relentlessly to get her pants off, stroking, kissing, smooching the little hollow where her neck meets her shoulder, the whole battery of Phil Feinstein tricks, there on her massive waterbed … so massive the two of us bob on top like a couple of rubber ducks, waves caroming back and forth, this way and that … Reggie is running around the bed and barking more or less non-stop, outraged at what he sees when he peeks over the side. Reggie is just big enough to get his front paws and chin onto the edge of mattress.

He worries me.

“He looks like he’s ready to attack,” I tell Wanda.

“Oh don’t you worry,” she says blithely. “He won’t hurt you. As long as you’re nice to me.”

Wanda makes a kissy face. Reggie bares his fangs and snarls. She ducks into the bathroom to repair her makeup for the tenth or eleventh time that day. Odd that she wants the makeup to be perfect even when we were engaged in what she calls “foreplay.”

“In what sense is it foreplay,” I ask on one occasion. “To be foreplay, it has to come before something, right? It doesn’t come before anything.”

“Yes it does,” she says. “It comes before. Only thing is, *long* before.”

I know from experience that Wanda will not emerge from the bathroom until every last lash has been curled and caked with tar once more. When Wanda bears down on the makeup, her eyelashes are as big as fly swatters. I turn the television on and happen upon a news channel. Over in Vietnam, civilians are streaming down a jeep track in the jungle, their clothing in smoking tatters, babies screaming in their arms, black smoke rising in towering columns behind them, fighter bombers roaring overhead. On another channel, a basketball game, the Lakers are playing the Pistons in Los Angeles. I think, well, it is true there is horror in the world. True, there is death by fire. True, marauding soldiers from other countries sweep across the countryside, killing, raping, and burning as they please. They wear uniforms of different colors, follow flags of different colors, but they are all the same, basically. The Panzer divisions, the Big Red One, Attila and the mongol horde. And each of us owns a share of the guilt. Particularly those of us with stripes on our sleeve. Particularly those of us willing to put our finger on the button. But then, on the other hand, there is a beautiful woman performing her *toilette* in a bathroom in Miami. And simultaneously, a basketball game in Los Angeles, where the Lakers can show off a wonderful passing game. I change channels. On *Beat the Clock*, there is a blindfolded woman covering her supine husband with molasses. The barrels of napalm come hurtling down, the ball drops through the hoop, the eyelashes darken under the wand, the molasses dribbles over the husband’s forehead and everyone laughs, and everyone laughs in Televisionland, all in one magic moment.

It was enough to make you want to blow your brains out.

When Wanda emerges, she is wearing a cuddly little chemise, short enough to reveal cute panties beneath. Blue silk, they are, trimmed in lace. Wanda is resolved to remain a virgin, for the time being, and has said as much, in her buoyant, jocular, tomboyish way, but also seems intent on inflicting the maximum possible pain and frustration in the process, and chooses her undergarments appropriately. The frilly edges of the panties … their lacy texture against her velvety thigh … disturbs my psyche deeply, which she finds quite amusing. Our understanding is that the panties are to remain in place. The panties are permanent. I can only dream of what lies beyond. It is fine for me to *try* to remove them … that she enjoys … my fingertips at play along the lacy hems, feeling under the rubbery wasteband … even when my palm slides down over her stupendous ass … the ass to end all asses … it’s all perfectly acceptable, along lines of maximizing the frustration … maximizing her power over me. It is fine for me to complain, long as I don’t get too “rambunctious,” she says.

She sits on the edge of the bed, beside me. Anytime either of us adds weight to the bed, we ride the undulations for a while. In this instance she is the sine, I, the cosine. She rides up, I ride down.

“Shush,” Kelly tells the anxious dog, bending over to pat him on the head.

I wonder whether the dog has designs on Wanda himself. It’s not out of the question. Does Reggie dream of getting his little doggie dick into Wanda? Seriously. The possibility is not to be overlooked. How else to explain his constant drooling? His frantic yelping as I fondle Wanda’s heavily armored valkyrie-grade bra cups? His roar of dismay as I oh-so-gently pull her down onto the tossing surface of the bed? Ah, her fabulous movie star face hangs above mine, peaceful and pretty as the moon. Pretty much stripped of all natural color, the hair is almost translucent. It looks a lot like fishing line, to me. I brush my fingers through the plastic waves, taking care not to get snagged on any hidden hooks or lures.

“Beautiful,” I tell her.

“My Mom says I should do shampoo commercials.”

I peck at her cheek.

“But I decided not to.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because … you get typecast, as, you know. *Hair*?”

“Hair?”

“Sure. I mean as, you know, a hair model. You get typed. You didn’t know that? There are certain people who are hair, certain people who are feet, certain people who are, you know, *teeth*, or skin. You get in the hair book, and that’s pretty much the end of your career, far as anything else goes. From that point on, it’s all about hair.”

“There’s a hair book?”

“A hair book, a feet book, a hand book. There are hair models, feet models, hand models. You didn’t know that? Not everything about everybody is perfect, you know. If you get in the hair book, well, then, for the rest of your life, nobody wants to talk to you about anything but fucking *luster*.”

As I rise to remove my jeans, I see that Reggie is on the alert, ready to incapacitate me with one swift clip of the jaws.

“You’re not taking it *all* off, are you?” she says.

“No?”

“I don’t think we’re ready.”

“No?”

“No. I need time.”

I turn the television off.

“You turned it off.”

“You want it on?”

“It’s nice when it’s on. It keeps me company.”

I slide into bed beside her. We embrace, entwine, out there on the bounding main together, heaving and tossing in the bottom of the lifeboat. Good thing I don’t get seasick. My hand runs down the voluptuous swoop of her back, over her muscular hips, to the point where the frilly hem of the panties meets the voluptuous, the generous, the giving tenderness of her upper thigh. Certainly the fingers know their way over this terrain, having traversed it many times before, to no avail. Not to be discouraged, I take note of the number of garments to be eliminated, type and location of fasteners and catches, preferred method of access, and so forth, formulating an action plan. True, the action plans never come to fruition, as events inevitably intervene. Along those lines, anything can happen. Wanda can get hungry all of a sudden. Supine on the bed, head on the pillow, panties damp from the copious flow between her legs, she may say, “Let’s have a banana split.” Or, get a headache whose very sudden onset could conceivably signal the presence of an aneurysm. Or, the pizza she has ordered (without telling me) will arrive at the door. The guy rings the bell. When there is no answer, he rings again. And again.

“The heck with it,” I tell her.

“No, answer it,” she says. “It’s probably the pizza.”

“Pizza? What pizza? You ordered a *pizza?* I thought we agreed this was going to be our time together.”

“You think a slice of pizza is a big deal?”

“It’s the continuity.”

“I told you I didn’t *want* continuity.”

She cannot bring herself to tell me she does not want to have sex. Her story is that she does, oh yes, deep down, desperately *does* want to. So what if the propitious moment has not yet arrived. What’s the hurry? When it will arrive, there is no telling. Who could predict that the pizza delivery guy was going to show up in fifteen minutes, when he usually takes forty? Is that *her* fault?

Commenting now on my own psychological makeup, whenever I see that one of my goals is out of reach, I tend to redouble my efforts, maximizing the potential for frustration. Readily attainable goals are abandoned, mostly out of insufferable boredom. Only the unattainable can truly fascinate me. Thus, the seduction of Wanda Wevurski becomes the Mt. Everest, the Kentucky Derby, the World Series, the *moon shot* of conquests. As I fumble with the tie at the back of Wanda’s little chemise, wondering whether the knot I encounter there has a name … double inverted half-hitch bowline thingie, perhaps … I see myself (again) as a kind of Sir Edmund Hillary character, in goggles, frost on the beard, big smile, but now the Sir Edmund Hillary of Sex, Sir Edmund Hillary with a king-sized boner, scrutinizing a colorful map that includes a dotted line denoting the perilous route across Wanda’s rear end, up her thigh, toward her crotch and the Vale of Heart’s Desire, Katmandu. Now her knees straddle my torso, her pelvis grinds into mine. She is wearing a pointy bra, so her tits look especially perky. Now and then, my goal seems almost within reach, tantalizing in its proximity, as when, unpredictably, she straightens up, flips her hair, and says with a smile, “Want me to take it off?” Upon hearing that I really, really, *really* do, she whips the chemise over her head and gives her armored tits a playful shake, causing the boner to threaten to launch at her through my underwear, like the ASROC taking off, and me to focus with the most extreme determination on the removal of the panties, slipping my hand ever, ever so slightly beneath the waistband, just exploring a bit, at first, kind of the way a cowboy gets a horse used to the saddle, just flipping the blanket over her back, although, of course I have never done that. And then down a little further, over the far horizon of the perfect globe of her stupendously perfect ass, where only the radar and the sonar can see … and where … wait … a returning echo … ever so faint … the beginning of a blip, possibly … the first, feint, blurry hint of a target … a barely palpable protrusion from the otherwise perfect hemisphere.

A pimple?

Wait a minute.

Is it even *conceivable* that my American dream of sexuality … my Homecoming goddess … my ever so pretty pompom princess … has a fucking *pimple* on her ass? However remote the possibility may be, it sets in motion a massive recalculation. There is something deeply disturbing. Because, well, certain things are supposed to be perfect. Like the fender of a Corvette, say. Indeed, *must* be perfect, to be what they’re supposed to be. And yet … there it is! A veritable volcano arising from the virgin plain, ready to spew puss across the landscape!

Her head jerks up.

My hand jerks back.

Too late.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she snaps. “I thought I heard something.”

By way of diversion, I trace a figure eight on her neck with the tip of my tongue.

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“You just went.”

“I have to go *again,* okay? Did you ever think I might be having a problem with my *bladder* or something?”

She barricades herself within for what must have been ten minutes. Long enough to explore, assess, maybe perform surgery. Standing on the toilet seat, I imagine. While loyal dog sits outside and whimpers. No doubt he is accustomed to the privilege of watching her pee. When she returns she wants to know what time it is.

“It’s midnight.”

“I’m exhausted.”

“But …”

“Goodnight.”

And she rolls over.

Then says, “Would you mind sleeping in the living room? I kind of want to be alone, a little bit.”

“Not at all.”

“You can sleep on the couch. There’s a blanket in the closet in the hall..”

“Sure.”

The couch looks out at the blank wall of the house next door. I don’t need the blanket, because I not the least bit sleepy. I sit on the couch and stare at the blank wall of the house next door and dream of Lake Waban in summer, of the images of the topiaries shimmering in the undulant water of the lake.

Of Natalie holding my hand as we walk.

Of the thunking sound the little waves made on the bottom of the one rowboat tied up at the dock.

Of the swish of the oars as I rowed and she sat silent, alert, appreciative, knees together, arms around her shins, chin on her knees, pretty as a picture in the back of the boat.

For hours, I dreamt this dream, then fell asleep in my clothes, sitting there.

Wanda awakens me the next morning.

She says, “What happened? You couldn’t find the blanket?”

“I didn’t look. I got distracted.”

“By what?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Just looking out the window.”

She looks out the window.

“But,” she says, turning back to me. “There’s nothing there.”

“I know. That’s what makes it perfect,” I tell her.

“Ah,” she says. She nods.

She repairs to the kitchen, rustles around in the refrigerator for a bit, pours herself a glass of orange juice or something. But in a minute she is leaning on the doorframe at the entrance to the living room as she sips her juice, staring at me.

“That worries me,” she says.

“What?”

“Getting distracted by … by what? You got distracted by … by *nothing,* really. You see what I mean? How can you get distracted by nothing?”

“It’s okay,” I try to tell her. “I was kind of dreaming.”

“Well, that’s what I’m getting at,” she says. “You don’t want to get too interested in what’s inside your skull, you know what I mean?”

“Sure. Absolutely. I get it.”

But of course I do not get it. What I am supposed to get is that there is a border between the real and the unreal, and you are supposed to be aware of the border, and spend most of your time on the real side. But I didn’t give a shit about any of that. I didn’t like the real side. So, fuck the real side. Not an attitude I can highly recommend to someone who wishes to preserve reasonably good mental health.

Rory is intent on conducting a chorale at Captain Tony’s. This is not the least bit implausible, as people there do break into song, occasionally, usually when they are pretty well oiled in the early morning hours, in upwellings of pure, irrepressible exuberance, it seems, sometimes around a guitar player, sometimes around a vintage tune on the juke box. Late at night, Captain Tony’s has the aura of a subterranean grotto, where the stalactites mysteriously take the form of bras and panties. These have been signed by the former owners and tacked to the rafters in memoriam, sort of. To Rory’s taste, *In the Still of The Night* is on the jukebox, *We Belong Together*, *Are You Lonesome Tonight*, other unctiously romantic favorites. Rory and Press have been rehearsing *We Belong Together*, with Press thunking away on the guitar. I must admit, they are getting pretty good at it. Rory has printed the lyrics to his favorite tunes on the copy machine at church. Meantime, Press is planning to conduct a little mind experiment with mescaline. The idea is to ingest the mescaline and then listen to *Surf’s Up*, the Beach Boys new record, and see whether this approach will allow us to divine the origin and purpose of the universe, more or less. Press explains that we don’t necessarily have to nail the thing down tight, a rough approximation will do. This experiment was suggested by someone at Lou’s, probably on their fourth or fifth margarita. But anyway, all in a day’s work, was my attitude. I’m figuring, well, before we blow the whole fucking world to kingdom come, why not take one wild stab at some faint, fragmentary comprehension of it? That might not be a bad idea. Mescaline seemed like, you know, not a bad idea. Press had been reading *The Doors of Perception*, a book I was familiar with, based on my acquaintanceships with other companionable drug addicts. If it was good enough for Aldous Huxley, it was good enough for us, was Press’s attitude. And as for the Beach Boys, certainly no one else had the faintest idea what the fuck was going on in the universe, maybe they did. So, fuck it. Let’s go for it. Press’s feeling was we should attempt to plumb the mysteries of the universe together, tape recording our conversation for ready reference later. This way, we would not have to explain to people that we had discovered the origin and purpose of the universe, but clean forgotten it. Which would be terribly embarrassing, from Press’s point of view.

Little knowing that these two hair-brained schemes will come to fruition on the same night, I agree to both. That night, I arrive at the house to find Press mincing mescaline in the kitchen, a regular little homebody, and Rory collating lyrics in the dining room, while now and then absent-mindedly singing a fragment of *“You’re Nobody Til Somebody Loves You,”* alternating the actual lyrics with *da-da-deeee, da-da-daaaah* and intermittently mumbling to himself about the task at hand*.* He dwelt in his own little world, an invisible bubble filled with music. So, we saw pretty much eye to eye on that. Early in the evening, we all thought the mescaline trip was a capital idea, we were all very much looking forward to it, like a month in the country, but soon Rory decides he cannot partake, as the mescaline may impair his ability to lead the chorale at Captain Tony’s. So Press and I have no choice but to soldier on alone, in quest of the fabulous revelation that will make life halfway livable. We down the strawberry shakes and climb up on the roof to watch. As the stars come out and the mescaline takes hold of us, we conduct a pretty interesting conversation about light and darkness and how the stars are always there, but not always visible, and so forth. Sometimes things are there, but not visible. And how, if we had super sensitive eyes, we could see the stars at noon, et cetera. Pretty soon Press comes up with the theory that time is the same way. Everything is always there, he explains, past and present and future, the thing being that most of it is invisible, most of the time. We kind of can’t see around the corner. We always see time from a certain angle, the same angle, which happens to be the present. But to fully understand it, you have to kind of walk around it. You have to see where you are from the vantage point of outer space, if you will. It’s like an endless train, he says. The engine goes by, and then the first car, and then the second car. When the thousandth car goes by, the first car is no longer visible. But it still exists, only somewhere else. Just so, the guy and the girl on the park bench beside Lake Waban are still there, he says, just invisible, from our vantage point. Just somewhere else. I am no longer the guy on the bench, he tells me. I am a different guy. But the guy on the bench is still there. And the girl too. The two of them are still together, still happy, he says. It’s still a sunny day in early summer, and they are still in love.

Nothing is ever lost, he says, nothing ever forgotten.

“You sure about that?”.

“As sure as I’m sitting here.”

I myself have been working toward a new theory of time, built on the swiss cheese model, where time flows into and out of the black holes in the universe, flowing in the direction we call “forward” on the way out of a black hole, then flowing backwards again on the way into another black hole. According to this theory, time itself is infinitely complex. More a maze than a tunnel. In my mescline dream, I wander through the maze until I happen upon the chamber where the sun is shining above Lake Waban. I actually see us there, quite vividly, Natalie and I, at the far end of a tunnel through the sky, a tunnel through the stars, in a chamber of time now inaccessible except in this clairvoyant dream, but still completely real, perfect in every detail, every bit as specific as the waking reality, two lovers on a park bench beside a pretty lake, on a warm, calm, happy morning in late spring, her leg over his, to get closer, his arm around her, in perfect peace and contentment, somewhere out there in the stars, out there in the clouds, or maybe beyond the clouds, beyond the sun, even, beyond the rainbows and the roses and the new graves and the windswept vista of the rest of our lives, somewhere out there in its own permanent place.

Then and there, I realize I need to go back to Lake Waban.

After that I begin to lose track.

I do remember riding around Key West in the Chevelle, with the radio on, and Press driving, and me in the passenger seat, and Rory in the back seat, thinking, oh wow, pretty cool, we are driving through the body of Jesus Christ. This is what Christ meant, isn’t it? Must be. How could we have failed to realize? The Chevelle is a corpuscle in Jesus’s bloodstream, and the houses, sidewalks, fire hydrants … pavement, streetlights, lights in the windows … the Milky Way, the nebulae, the pastel-colored galaxies that blossom all around us, like dandelions going to seed … all of that stuff lines the veins in Christ’s body.

That is, in fact, the meaning of divinity.

It’s everything.

What Christ meant.

What Buddha saw.

Check.

As the car turns aimlessly down one street, then another … Bahama Street, Love Lane … make a u-turn, Elizabeth Street … through this orgasmic blossoming of pure being, bursting with wisteria and roses and night-blooming cacti, *Archie Bell and the Drells* are singing *Tighten Up* on the radio, and I am marveling at the generosity that is Christ, the sheer beneficence that is Christ, inviting *Archie Bell and the Drells* into his body, for god’s sake. There are certain things God has created that are dead giveaways regarding God’s stupendous generosity. And *The Drells* are one of those things. That God gives the *Drells* permission to exist says a lot about the guy, doesn’t it? As I explain all this to Rory and Press, all about what a nice guy Christ is, the divinity of the *Drells*, the incorporation of the Drells into the tissue of Christ’s body, Rory keeps saying, “Very interesting. Go on.”

We stop at the barracks, at one point. Press needs to pick up some tapes or something. While we are there, Natalie appears and speaks to me, a Tinkerbell kind of thing, not entirely substantial, more an apparition, a wraith, who travels across the chambered flux of time and space to visit with me for a few moments, crossing through the ten zillion quadrillion little vortices of energy, swimming through them, flying through them, so she can sit on the floor in front of me and elaborate on Press’s theme, much as though she, too, has been listening to him, while keeping an eye on me and my reactions. She talks about her own theory in a tone that is at once pedagogical and solicitous, the tone that a patient teacher will use with a child who has made a mistake. Yes, she says, time is like a train. But her slant is a little different than Press’s. Remember how, on the ride from Boston, Providence and New London and New Haven appear to pass by? To come into being and pass away? But in reality they are always there, aren’t they? They are there before you see them, they are there after you see them.

It is all there, always there.

It is we who are moving.

I relate what she is saying to Press and Rory. For some reason they can’t see her or hear her. Which surprised me.

“Say hello to her for us,” Rory says.

We can’t have arrived at Captain Tony’s much before midnight. As we approach the place is raucous, roaring with laughter, human voices and music mixed, buttery light spilling through the windows into the cool blue, the incandescent purple of the night, which is fragrant with frangipani and roses and hibiscus, everything somehow adding up to a lovely vanilla smell, the scent of the tropics. And then, within, a scene swarming with life, packed, silver cones of smoke hanging beneath the lights overhead, human faces packed together, practically kissing, beaming with joy, all riding the same wave of music and smoke and sex and all these heartbeats drumming together, for the moment, riding the wave of life, so vivid and so alive Rory stands in the doorway and marvels at it, overcome, for a moment. We have to drag him over the threshold, into the crazy crowd, clutching his collection of lyrics in a tight cylinder in his fist. For a moment he is with us, a moment later, gone. He disappears into the jostling, writhing, convoluted mass of flesh while Press and I down a beer or two, nectar of the gods. The smoke is so dense it occludes the other end of the room. When we hear Rory again, we can’t locate him, at first. He is wreathed in smoke, a sorcerer, a fire god, standing on the bar at the other end.

By the way, there could not have been more than ten women in the room, at the time. This was an assemblage of manhood in all its glorious permutations, fisherman sprouting golden hair on their sunburned arms, the pasty-faced submariners, up from a three month sojourn in the deep, the prim gays, all skinny, all stylishly atttired, and of course Captain Tony himself, always the life of the party, a cork on the sea of conviviality tossing around him. The moment he hears Rory encouraging the crowd to sing, Captain Tony is all for the idea, and in fact gets a little carried away. He insists that everyone sing one of his own personal glee club favorites, and with that the idea of handing out lyrics to the tunes on the jukebox goes down the drain. Captain Tony is about three quarters drunk. He insists we will all learn the words and melody of *The Whiffenpoof Song*. Rory sees that chaos is in control and tries to help our good captain. As Rory windmills his arms like a conductor, yelling at everybody, a couple of people join him in singing a bar or two. This is far from satisfactory, from Captain Tony’s point of view, and he insists that we all try it again, but harder. When the singing starts picking up a little momentum, he wants to do it a third time. “And this time let’s hear it!” he shouts. So finally we are all singing, just singing our heads off, while in my eyes the scene is transmuted into a hallucinatory vision of Press’s angels, all kinds of angels, fisherman angels and gay angels and Navy angels, picking up their lanterns before they step off the cliff at the edge of heaven and they fly down, toward earth. Picking up their lanterns as they sing. Why the angels would be singing *The Whiffenpoof Song* before taking off I can’t explain. Sorry. At the height of it Rory opens his mouth and his ringing tenor soars over the voices of the crowd as he spreads his arms and embraces them, up there on stage, with the mugs of beer at his feet.

*Gentleman songsters off on a spree*

*Doomed from here to eternity*

*Lord have mercy on such as we*

*Baa, baa, baa*

When dawn sweeps over the horizon, projecting pink and purple rays onto the high clouds, washing out the stars, putting the color back into the sea, spreading lipstick on the petals of the hibiscus, we are on the beach, mostly sober, by this time, our feet on the ground again, the three of us sitting on a log that has washed up there, our feet in the warm, gentle, green surf of the Gulf. Rory has explained he won’t be able to sleep, he needs to go to the beach, needs to see the sun come up, for some mysterious reason, but has absolutely nothing to say when we get there, just stares at sea, dreaming a dream he cannot explain, and getting more depressed by the minute, it seems to me.

Finally I risk inquiring, “You okay, Ror?”

He doesn’t seem to hear me.

Press says, “Ror? Hey, buddy.”

Ror tries to smile, but doesn’t do a very good job of it.

“Ah,” he says. “Yes. Sorry.”

I ask him what’s on his mind.

He says, “Oh, nothing.”

Press says, “Come on. That’s bullshit. You okay, or what?”

“True,” Ror says. “That is bullshit. I guess I’m a little afraid”

“You’ve got nothing to be afraid of,” Press says.

Rory says, “Anyone who isn’t absolutely terrified is out of his mind.”

Naturally I ask him what he’s afraid of.

“If you must know, I'm afraid I will never, ever be okay again.”

And you know,  I had a pretty good idea what he was talking about. I felt that way myself, occasionally. That I would never be okay again, that the whole idea of being okay was ancient fucking history. It wasn't what we were doing that bothered me, if you want to know the details. It was what we were willing to do. As you went through it, you couldn’t help thinking about what you were willing to do, if push really came to shove. Whenever that started to happen, I tried to distract myself as quickly as possible. Mentally, it was like catching a cab. Just hop into the next cab that comes, the next tune, the next view, the next memory, whatever, and take the fuck off. Which of course didn’t always work real well. Because the cab would kind of circle the block and drop me off on the same dreary streetcorner. Where apparently I was willing to do things I never would have dreamt of doing, on my own. If you had told me as a kid, son, one day, you yourself will pull the trigger on an A-bomb, I would have classified you as a complete fucking lunatic, because that was not even conceivable to me. But then, as push approaches shove, you realize how things happen to people. How people kind of creep into acceptance of it all. You go to hell one inch at a time. So, in the end, you have to face the fact that, it isn’t just the situation that is hopeless. That's kind of a given. That’s just for starters. What is way, way worse is that we ourselves are hopeless. Because, ultimately, what are we? We are chimps on the loose in the astrophysics lab. Chimps taking orders from other chimps, because the other chimps have scrambled eggs on their hats and stripes on their sleeves. You can be a complete fucking idiot, just a complete moron, and if you have scrambled eggs on your hat, people will do what you tell them to do. Amazing to me. You learn one of the chimp languages, adapt to one of the chimp cultures … drinking tea or not drinking tea … smoking hashish or not smoking hashish ... watching the news or not watching the news … and gradually spiral down into the depths of despair, an inch at a time. Mentally, you keep jumping into a the next cab, telling the driver to go anywhere, it doesn't matter where, just go, just get the hell out of here, and the cab keeps circling the block and dropping you off at the same spot, where all the people around you seem to feel things are going pretty well.  Everyone feels they are being very practical about everything. People with scrambled eggs on their hats will sit around a conference table, look at charts, mull things over, and decide, okay, under the circumstances, the practical course of action to incinerate a couple of million of our fellow human beings. Toss them into the ovens. Gas them. Roast them. Do the arithmetic. Casualties in the amphibious invasion of the home islands of Japan will be X. On the other hand, if we go ahead and incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki ... and everyone who happens to be downtown that morning ... casualties will be X minus Y. And P.S., all of the casualities will be yellow bastards, not people like us. I think the logic behind Bergen-Belsen was more or less along these lines. The great difficulty being that the instrument used to make these kinds of calculations is the same instrument we use to try to find some happiness and peace. In other words, our form of life is not sufficiently advanced to even conceive of real happiness or peace, any more than the chimps can. So, you wind up living in a corner of your own mind, observing what is going on in the rest of your mind, and thinking, basically, I have to get out of here.

I am almost afraid to ask the question, but finally have to ask Rory, “Why would you never be okay again?”

He picks up a stick and doodles in the sand. A wave comes in and erases the doodle. He doodles again.

“I don’t think you would understand.”

“Well what the fuck,” Press says. “Try us. Take a flying fucking leap.”

“I met someone,” Rory says.

“Ah. Last night?” Press says.

“No,” Rory says. “Before. I met someone. A very special someone. Or special to me, anyway.”

“Oh,” Press says. “Well that’s nice. I assume we are talking about a romantic someone.”

“Yes, I would say so,” Rory says. “Quite romantic. Exceedingly romantic, I would say.”

He doodles again. The wave washes it away again.

“Maybe even the love of my life,” Rory says. “Maybe not. But maybe.”

“Then you should be happy,” Press says. “Who is she?”

Now, Press was a pretty good looking guy, and thought of himself as quite the ladies man, and really liked girls, and really reveled in it, I think, the whole romantic thing with girls, and got along swell with girls, and I think thought of Rory as kind of a beginner, in that category, and was just a tad presumptuous about all this, I’ll grant you. I think I got Rory’s drift a minute or two before Press did. So I was kind of cringing over the way he put the question. Sometimes you want to slam on the brakes, put the conversation into reverse, and back up, and you can’t. Weirdly, though, the question seems to make Rory happy. He turns to Press with a big, goofy, bashful kind of smile, and says, “Oh, Press.” Like Press is just hopelessly, ridiculously naïve. Which was true, in a way. Press wanted to be a kid again, I think. He wanted to be naïve. And *knew* that about himself.

Press is confused. He says, “What? What am I missing something?”

He looks at me. I shake my head and stare at the sand.

“She?” Rory says. “Don’t you see? Don’t you see, Press?”

“See what?”

Rory leans back and laughs and almost falls off the log. I am just kind of watching and waiting for Press to catch on.

“That it’s not a *she*, Press. It’s a he.”

I can see Press is pretty surprised.

“Oh,” he says. “Holy shit.”

Rory looks out to sea.

“I think it’s pretty obvious I am gay, isn’t it? I mean, I guess that’s kind of a dumb statement, coming from me, because I’m just kind of figuring it out myself. But in some ways it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t think of a response to that and neither could Press, apparently. We just sit there.

“Well isn’t it?” Rory says.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I tell him. And it was true, I *hadn’t* realized. I am realizing as we speak. Which sounds ridiculously stupid, I suppose. How can you be close to a person, seeing that person every day, and not have the slightest clue in hell what that person’s life is all about? Unless you are a chimp?

Rory says, “Oh come on. I stick out like a sore thumb.”

“No,” Press says. “I wouldn’t say so.”

“You guys are just trying to be nice, in your way,” Rory says. “And I appreciate it. I mean, I hope I haven’t burdened you unduly. I just wanted you to know. I kind of … I’ve been thinking about all this … and I kind of just want to be myself now, if you know what I mean. I haven’t been sure about this, myself. But now I’m pretty sure. And I would like to be able to be myself. To be accepted as myself. To be able to live as myself. To just have one little corner of the world, about four square feet, if there is four square feet available, somewhere, where I can be myself. You think that’s too much to ask?”

“No,” Press says.

“Imagine meeting your special someone, and realizing your special someone is the same sex you are. Holy mackerel. You know what I mean? What a fucking mind blower.”

“A special someone is a special someone,” Press says.

“What about you?” Rory says. “Is Dorothy your special someone?”

“Dorothy?” Press says. “I don’t know. We like each other, alright. But that isn’t what you’re talking about, right?”

“No,” Rory says. “I’m talking about love.”

“And what is love?” Press says.

“Oh, well, that is a profound question,” Rory says. “Love is …”

And then he decides not to go on. He turns to me and says, “What is love? Pray tell us, Genius Boy.”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh I think you do, Genius Boy.”

“Well if I do,” I tell them, “it is not something easily put into words.”

Press says, “Take a flying leap.”

“Okay,” I say. “Then love is profound understanding.”

“Yes,” Rory says. “I think you’ve hit the nail on the head, so to speak. The main thing is understanding. For the first time in my life, I feel I am understood.”

“That’s nice.”

Rory says, “You guys have been in love, right?”

“I don’t know,” says Press.

“Yes,” I tell them. “Or, I think so.”

After all, we had not been alive all that long. Something happened, and you thought, oh, well, this must be what everyone means when they say “love.” But you couldn’t be sure, right? It was possible they meant something very different. One of the tragic aspects of the situation is that humans live just long enough to have a pretty good idea what the language means. Just long enough to realize that other human beings are going through pretty much the same experience, and have designated certain aspects of it as the correlatives of certain utterances. For instance, the floaty feeling I had when I looked into Natalie’s eyes. Her eyes were like the sky, to me. Big and beautiful as the sky. Just as beautiful and warm and welcoming as that. It would be ten o’clock in the evening, and we would be laying around in the lounge of Freeman Hall, and I would be looking into Natalie’s beautiful blue eyes, and have the feeling I was parachuting right into the middle into paradise. Parachuting on down, endlessly, through a beautiful blue sky, and never actually landing there, just getting happier and happier and happier on the way down.

“Think?” Rory says. “Oh, my. Oh, my dear, dear friend, we are feeling just a bit cerebral, this evening, aren’t we?”

He tosses his drawing stick into the sea.

“I really do hope,” he says, “that life is simpler, for you, one day, my friend. You’re talking about this Natalie person, right? This woman from Wellesley who appears to you, like Our Lady of Fatima?”

“Yes,” I say.

“It was always a woman, with you, right? You were never tempted by the other side?”

“Always a woman.”

“I envy them.”

“Yes, definitely always a woman,” I tell him, just to make sure we are all on, you know, the same page.

“And by definitely, you mean what?” Rory says.

“Well, very much so, in other words. I have been attracted to people who are very feminine.”

“And you very much enjoy that.”

“Yes, I kind of do.”

“Funny,” Rory says. “It was always a mystery to me. Be sure to drop me a line if your tastes ever change.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” I assure him.

“Both you guys, please. Write to me with updates on all your romantic liaisons. I may do the same. Although, of course, that would be scandalous, wouldn’t it? I won’t do that. Silly of me to say, isn’t it? Anyway, it will still be fun hearing about the girls. I do love girls, in my crazy way. Girls are such fun. Just not as life companions. But otherwise, wonderful. ”

Rory referred to the fact that he and I were graduating a week or two down the road. So we were all going our separate ways. I was going home, no longer needed, as the Navy had decided against nuclear war, for the moment. They weren’t in the mood for nuclear war, all of a sudden. Rory was on his way to join a submarine in New London. Press had a ways to go yet, with his training. Or so we thought.

“So, the Navy still works for you?” Press says.

“You mean, now that I’ve discovered I’m gay?”

“Yeah,” Press says. “You know what I mean… you don’t want to feel isolated or anything, right?”

“Oh, there are plenty of gays in the Navy, if that’s what you’re referring to,” Rory says. “Plenty, plenty, plenty. Oh goodness gracious, you’d be surprised. And you’d be surprised *who*.”

We all get up to stretch our legs. Press takes the packet of mescaline out of his pocket and hands it to me.

“I think I’m done with this,” he says.

“Well, so am I,” I tell him.

I try to hand his little baggy back to him. He looks at the baggy in my hand and says, “Put it in my locker.”

“Quack will find it.”

“I know,” Press says. “Put it in there.”

“He’ll turn you in,” I tell him.

“I know.”

I looked him right in the eye to make sure he was serious and, when I saw he was, put the baggy in my pocket.

Sonar is dark, the darkness faintly tinged with the green glow of the sonar screen, where a bright radius rotates around a black pivot at the center, lighting up the echoes as it spins, to leave in its path a few glistening fragments of emerald on black velvet, each one pulsing with that phosphorescent green and squeaking or chirping with the sound of the echo as the radius passes over, then falling silent and gradually sinking into the darkness until the next pass. Hunched over the screen in that eery light, eyes fixed on a particularly threatening echo, the operator takes on the aura of a sorcerer over a crystal ball, and really isn’t all that different, as the riddle described on the screen holds the secret to life and death itself, translated into chirps and cheeps and blips and sparks and glowing crescents, where there are reefs or big shoals of fish. If we decipher the riddle first, we will live and the other guys will die. If they do, vice versa. In the warbling, trilling sonority of the echoes, experts like Chief Bogarty can discern not only the range, size and position of the target, but whether it is whale or submarine, its course and speed, and which way it was turning, when it turns. They can hear the whales talking, the icebergs grinding against each other, the screws of the ships turning, and describe it all as though everything were out there in plain sight. They can listen to the sound of the screw on a submarine and tell you whether it was American or Russian. Bogarty never tires of explaining that the Russians have inferior machine tools, so they aren’t very good at milling the shafts and bearings to the exacting specifications that made machines quiet. When you came right down to it, Russian subs were floating junk piles … the jalopies of the seas … one whole *fuck* of a lot noisier than your American and your British jobs. Which goes back to your tolerances, and your dies, and lathes and cutters and polishers and machine tools generally, and of course, bottom line, your good old American fucking know-how. Bogarty’s rough rule of thumb is, if you can hear a screw noise from a sub, why then it is probably okay to go right ahead and nuke it, because the guys are either Russkies or Americans who have failed to perform proper maintenance procedures on schedule, and deserve to die in either case. Not shy about his own expertise, Bogarty explains it this way: “Boys, not only can I tell when the toilet flushes on a submarine a mile and a half away, I can tell you what the son of a bitch had for dinner last night! If that captain of that sub farts, I’m going to say excuse me!”

The training facilities have been expertly programmed with all the appropriate noises … the whales, the icebergs, the torpedoes … all woven together … a veritable symphony of the seas … and all perfectly realistic, Bogarty assures us, the sound of the approaching torpedo very much like the sound of an electric shaver, except it grows louder as the torpedo closes, homing in on your own echo, and of course comes at you from different directions, relatively speaking, as your own ship maneuvers in frantic attempts to escape, while the torpedo follows relentlessly, pinging and listening with its own little sonar, a machine with a malevolent little mind, until it finally catches up to you and blows you and all your friends to a million pieces. In Bogarty’s mind, that electric shaver sound is equivalent to the wail of the banshee. “Listen,” he tells us, in a rapt, raspy whisper, forefinger erect, eyes opened wide against the darkness of the sonar shack, eyeballs rolled up, not really looking at anything, just staring into the darkness there as he listenes, as he strains to hear the electric shaver sound, somewhere out there in the loose, crazy clouds of noise from whales and reefs and thermoclines. A hundred times he has warned us that, when the torpedo is directly astern, hidden in the noise of our own wake, we will neither hear it nor see it. And therein lies the cardinal rule of defense against submarines. In Bogarty’s immortal words, “Never let a submarine crawl up your ass, boys. Always request zigzag. Request zigzag when you wake the fuck up in the morning. Zigzag your way to hell and back.”

Of course the zigzagging will reveal the predator in your wake. But it also consumes fuel, so there is a tradeoff. There are calculations to be made. The longer you steam in a straight, steady line, the greater the possibility that the predator has slipped in behind, and is closing, hidden, in your own wake.

Bogarty’s arms swarm with indigo eagles and big-breasted mermaids languidly entwined around anchor shafts. As we pick up the echoes, we name them … Foxtrot or Tango or Zebra … classifying them as ship or whale or reef, animal or vegetable, friend or foe … while Bogarty leans over the guy on the sonar station, one inky arm on the sonar set, one on the operator’s chair, headphones clamped over his ears, eyebrows bunched in concentration. In a pinch, he points to the object that worries him, which is barely visible, normally, a mere blur, half the time, so the target is sometimes best detected in the sound itself, rather than the visual display, a barely perceptible wobble in the otherwise smooth ringing and warbling that comes back to us. Bogarty is quite anxious that we do well in our simulated attacks, as our performance says something about him as a trainer. So he doesn’t mind cheating a bit, by pointing things out, now and then. If we prevail, crushing the submarine and boiling the super-heating the sea around it, he whoops and yells congratulations all around, raising the inky arms in exultation.

# “Whooooeee!” he cries. “Them crawfish is fucking *étouffée*, baby.”

I have two targets.

They glow. Ring. Glow. Ring again.

The little tail of a rising tone at the end of an echo tells me target Foxtrot is turning toward me. He knows we have him, can hear us pinging, knows we are into our launch routine, knows he must kill us all quickly, before we kill him. He abandons any hope of concealment and turns to close on us in a desperate charge.All simulated, of course. ASROC has greater range than his torpedos, so he must close.

“Target Tango turning to port,” I call into my little microphone. “Closing. Range, five thousand. Bearing, one, one, eight.”

The blip representing target Foxtrot jumps toward the center of the screen. Toward us. With the next revolution of the cursor beam, it jumps again, a little father.

Bogarty whoops, “He’s gettin’ on the express, boys!”

A voice comes over from Combat Information, very calm, almost lackadaisical. It’s Press.

“Range and bearing?” he says.

“Target Foxtrot … bearing … one, niner, zero. Range … two thousand yards.”

“Aye, sonar,” came the answer.

I hear the keys clicking as Press punches the numbers into the weapons control console. The simulated captain on the simulate bridge orders zigzag. Our simulated ship begins to turn through the simulated sea. It doesn’t happen suddenly, because we are simulating the turning of a warship. One doesn’t exactly *hear* the oncoming torpedo, at first. Rather, one becomes vaguely aware that something is there. Something alien. A perturbation at the edge of consciousness. An indeterminate *flux* at the interface between the known and the unknown. Sensing it, I clutch the headphones and press them down over my ears. Feel the stab of panic in my bones as the green vector of a torpedo appears where the wake had been. Hear the singing sound, drilling into me.

I yell, “Torpedo! Sonar has torpedo! Bearing … two one zero!”

Bogarty’s great bull head thrusts over my shoulder.

“Cock *suckers!*” he cries.

“Torpedo two one zero!” Press calls back.

Bogarty slams his big ham of a fist on top of the sonar set.

“Damn! Since when is this in the playbook!”

In a little theater down the hall, a little amphitheater, like a lecture hall, officers are listening to our voices and watching our maneuvers, which are plotted as big fat dotted lines on a big screen against the wall. Over the intercom came the voice we knew as God.

“Carry on, Chief.”

“God damn!” Bogarty cries again.

“Torpedo bearing two one five!”

“Closing?” says Bogarty.

“And fast, Chief!”

“Shit!” Press cries.

“Hard right rudder,” Bogarty whispers.

“Sonar requests hard right rudder,” I repeat into the microphone.

“Sonar requests hard right rudder!” Press shouts back. The command echoes on down the line, while the green ray of torpedo noise rotates with the turning of the ship. Rotates and grows brighter, as the humming gets louder. Sure enough, the death machine is homing in on us.

“Still closing!” I call out.

“Flank speed!” Press yells to the simulated engine room.

The electric shaver sound fills my head.

“Prepare for impact!” someone yells.

“N-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!” Press screams. “N-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!”

But in sonar, only I can hear him, through the headset.

“What’s happening?” Bogarty says.

Bogarty whips the headset off my head. Yells into my microphone, “Fire! Why aren’t you firing? Fire torpedoes! Fire everything! Fire the fuckers, goddammit! If we’re going down, we go down firing!”

Now the green death ray of a second torpedo appears. Target Foxtrot has fired.

I grab the headset.

“Second torpedo!” I cry into the mouthpiece. “Bearing one two five.”

Bogarty swipes it back. He doesn’t put it on, though, because that isn’t necessary. Now Press is screaming in the other room and we can hear him through the walls. “Oh no. Oh, God no!” he screams. “My God! Oh, God help us! Ohhhhhhhhhhh! We’re going to *d-i-i-i-i-i-e*. A-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h! No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o! No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o! I don’t *want* to die! Ahhhhhhhhhhh!” Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee. Blessed art thou …”

I’m thinking he might be overdoing it.

“What the fuck is that?” Bogarty says.

“He’s praying, chief.”

“What?” Bogarty says. “Praying? What the *fuck*.”

He yells into the mouthpiece for the headphones. “What the fuck is this *prayer* shit? I said fire!”

Just then the voice of God comes onto the intercom again.

“Beg pardon, Chief” God says. “The prayer shit is quite appropriate. You have all passed on to your eternal reward, chief.”

From the next room comes a simulated roar of anquish. Press is flipping his wig, as planned.

“Oh Christ! Oh! Nooooo! Ahhhhhhhh! Torpedo amidships! Torpedo amidships!” he screams. “Man the lifeboats! Out! Out! Get out! Abandon ship! Abandon ship! Every man for himself! A-h-h-h-h-h-h … we’re *s-i-n-k-i-n-g!”*

Bogarty strides toward Combat Information with me behind him. We find Press on his knees beside the chart table in there, headphones on the floor beside him, face crimson, tears streaming down his cheeks. He hunches over and slaps the floor with his palms as he sobs. It strikes me that, in putting this performance together, he has borrowed heavily from the tape recording of the wreck of the Hindenburg in 1927. His voice has that wild, wailing, singsong quality, totally out of control. The fists are clenched. His eyes shut tight. Arms flailing, he beseeches the Almighty with fragments of prayer while also issuing orders.

“Torpedo! Ahhh! Torpedo amidships!” he sobs. “It hit us broadside, boys! The engine room is flooding! Forward compartments flooding! Swing out the lifeboats! Don survival gear! Fire party to the engine room! Oh! Oh! Hail Mary … full of Grace … Mayday! Mayday! … the Lord is with thee, Mary … Blessed art thou, among women … Mayday! Mayday! Mayday, boys!”

Press falls forward, spread eagled on the cement floor, and commences to make swimming motions.

Bogarty attempts to impose order.

“At-ten-*hut*!” Bogarty shouts. He stands up straight and comes to attention himself. He thought of himself as a leader. Pretty funny.

Press ignores him. Keeps on slobbering and swimming across the floor. Finally Bogarty grabs the back of Press’s shirt and yanks him to his feet. Now Press is paddling through the air. The legs look rubbery. The eyes are still shut tight. The weird part being, Press is almost laughing, at this point. It’s all so absurd he can’t stand it. For a second I thought Bogarty was going to sock the poor guy. But instead he lets Press go, with a look of disgust, and Press collapses on the floor again, loose as a sack of potatoes, belly down.

Bogarty spins on his heel and marches out with a Napoleonic air.

“Mom!” Press cries, making sure he was yelling loud enough for Bogarty to hear him. “I love you. I love you, Mom!”

On the other side of the chart table, the officer running Combat Information has been immobilized. He is aghast.

“Call the medics,” he says.

And with that, Press rolls over onto his back. Only I can see him now, as the others are blocked by the table. He opens his eyes, grins at me, and winks.

“Aye aye!” I tell the officer.

At that very instant, Quackenbush appears out of nowhere. Press shuts his eyes again. For the moment, he is pretending he has passed out.

“Well looky here,” Quack says. “Looks like our boy had a little too much pixie dust!”

Press does get kicked out of sonar school, but does not get kicked out of the Navy, which is what he was shooting for. Instead, he gets orders to report for duty as a deck hand aboard a ship described to us as the oldest, stinkiest, most decrepit ship in the U.S. Navy, a kind of holding pen for ne’er-do-wells, as we are given to understood it, a minesweeper based in Boston. Meantime, Rory and I are getting set to graduate. Rory is headed for a submarine in New London and I am headed home because, apparently, the Navy has decided that nuclear war with the Chinese is not all that terrific an idea. Press is planning to drive to Boston and figure out what to do with the rest of his life on the way. In the end, we decide we will all drive up the coast together, and do some further cogitating about the future on the way. Press can drop me in New Jersey and Rory in New London on his way to Boston.

Which of course is not what happens at all.

Graduation is held in a parking lot with a little grandstand at one end, beside a rickety plywood podium from which our commanding officer, Commander Blonder, can address the graduates. This was one of the rare occasions any of us ever saw Blonder, other than on the tennis courts outside the officer’s club. Blonder seemed to devote a goodly amount of time to tennis. But always strove to make a big impression at the graduation ceremony, I think, seeing that as a great opportunity to show real leadership, no doubt. For every graduation ceremony they painted the podium blue and gold and hung it with patriotic bunting, giving the parking lot a festive air. This happened once a month or so. Blonder gave more or less exactly the same speech to every group, so every one of us had heard the speech two or three times, at least. Amplified by the public address system, Blonder’s exhortations boomed through every building, over the beaches and the docks, every time he gave it. The first time I heard this magnificent oration, I was leaning on a mop in a stinking, steaming head, already woozy from the ammonia vapors, but the more disoriented by Blonder’s nursery rhyme nonsense about holding up Old Glory, and so forth. When you heard the speech for the third or fourth time and realized he was repeating it, you began to understand that it was all about the process,from the Navy’s point of view, just moving the sardines into the sardine cans with maximum possible efficiency. The only fitting fate for Blonder was to be blasted into outer space by fart gas, was how I felt about it. Anyway the speech was so predictable, so routine, certain phrases had been memorized and kind of passed along by guys in training, eventually constituting the legend of Commander Blonder, if you will. With the result that, the day we graduated, guys around me were able to anticipate Blonder’s next sentence and beat him to it, giving the whole scene an air of weird ventriloquism.

“And what is honor?” Blonder asks, appearing to address his words to the palm trees, or maybe to the departed spirits of fallen heroes, because he is staring over our heads. He stares into the wild blue yonder, allowing a long moment of silence, so we can all weigh every word, the medals on his chest gaudily aglitter in the pounding sun, seeming too much, somehow, too pretty, if you ask me, like costume jewelry at a Halloween Ball.

“Honor is a man’s peace with his own highest ideals,” a guy behind me says.

“Honor is a man’s peace …,” Blonder echoes.

Another guy says: “*Asshole*.”

There is a certain sibilant edge to that phrase. Blonder is alert to it. Possibly he is filtering the ambient noise for any occurrence of the word asshole, knowing it will apply to him. He glances our way, hawk-like, the tendons in the neck taut, lips compressed in grim determination to do his duty, no matter freaking what. Oh, God, if only we could all just do our freaking duty, and not be bothered by the graves lined with lilies above Dingle Bay, by the letters and coins and the Purple Hearts in the bottom of the curio cabinets. Satisfied that he has intimidated the offender, Blonder returns to his script. He holds his hand against his chest, plainly indicating for all to see that honor dwelt within his own breast. Whatever this honor shit was, he had it in spades.

“It cannot be enforced. There are no rules to regulate it,” the guy behind me says.

And sure enough.

“It can’t be enforced …,” Blonder says, and so on.

“*Asshole*.”

It is just so, so, *so hard* to keep from laughing, sometimes. Even when you know that laughing can get you hung. Five or six of us have to struggle mightily to keep from laughing out loud. To keep from dropping onto the asphalt in hysterics. We are actually trembling with laughter, or at least I am. Little snorts of laughter escape as we strive mightily to contain them. Tiny snorts of laughter, in the face of the great war god. Blonder’s hyper awareness of anything that looks like ridicule causes him to rotate in our direction and scan the ranks, raptor-like, eyes peeled for the pathetic little rat who would dare to laugh at the ideals of the empire.

Blonder introduces Bogarty with a recitation of Bogarty’s illustrious service record. You would have thought that Bogarty had won the Medal of Honor. Bogarty had once served on a tin can twenty or thirty miles off the coast of Vietnam, which enabled him to say he had served in the “theater of war,” a phrase he used all the time, implying that he had been in hand to hand combat. When in reality, the only hand to hand combat Bogarty had ever seen was with a plate of spaghetti, I would say. Speaking extra loud into the loudspeaker, which I think he really enjoyed, Bogarty now informs us that we will all … each and every one of us … have the honor of shaking hands with Commander Blonder. Quite a privilege, really. And Bogarty himself will be presenting what he calls “the certificates of certification.” As Bogarty concludes, Bloner signals one of his lackeys to turn the music back on. The music picks up smack in the middle of *Stars and Stripes Forever*, a rendition that goes on more or less endlessly. The chief begins calling out our names as Blonder stands off to the side, smiling broadly, handsome and fit, the perfect picture of an officer in the United States Navy.

About the same time, Press starts his car. We are all packed and ready to roll, all three of us, with all our gear in the trunk, as we do not wish to spend even one extra second on the base. The engine in the Chevelle has a very distinctive, uneven rumble that I picked up on immediately. Press has explained it is *supposed* to sound that way, owing to his expert installation of a double three-quarter one-and-a-half cam shaft or some god damn thing. I forget what he called it. It was a real top of the line thing, though. The pièce de résistance for motorheads. As I am shaking Blonder’s hand and listening to his little spiel about what a great job I did in training (more or less the same little spiel he has given everyone else), I see the Chevelle over his shoulder, kind of creeping along the street that runs beside the parking lot. The windows of the car are open and the stereo is playing pretty loud, so, through the jouncing rhythm of *Stars and Stripes Forever,* I can hear Mick Jagger singing *Ruby Tuesday*, a tune that was totally incomprehensible to me, which made for a clean sweep, because *Stars and Stripes Forever* was incomprehensible, too. The Chevelle eases to a stop in the great, plumed, purple shadow of a date palm. It purrs and burbles there, one and three-quartering, whatever it does. The next tune on Press’s tape is *Archie Bell and the Drells*. Just then Bogarty finishes handing out the certificates of certification. At Blonder’s signal, the martial music cuts off. We can all plainly see that the *Drells* irritate the shit our of Commander Blonder. He confers with Bogarty and Bogarty sends a guy trotting across the parking lot to speak to Press about the volume of the radio. Only when Press has turned the music down does Blonder gather himself to launch into his finale.

Again, the guy behind me says it first.

“And so, as you embark upon the next exciting phase of your Naval careers ….”

“And so, as you embark …,” says Blonder.

He gets to the last line, which has taken on a special significance for all of us, often repeated as a kind of capsule summary of the stupidity of the whole experience, and a couple of guys behind me speak the line with him.

“Good luck and … good hunting!”

Bogarty signals and *Stars and Stripes Forever* comes back on, but louder than before. Then *Tighten Up* comes back on, and that’s louder too. So it’s a case of dualing loudspeakers. Bogarty dismisses us. Someone makes a tremendous farting noise, loud enough for Bogarty to hear, but not loud enough, or long enough, to let him activate his range-finding and directional gear. Press comes creeping around the edge of the parking lot, until he is as close as he is going to get. He is revving his engine as Rory and I climb in. We cruise past all the admiral’s houses, past the Seals barracks, past the guard station, past Lou’s, and straight on down Truman Avenue to the circle at the north end of the island, where the road turns into a real highway. It’s only four lanes, but there are no lights for a while, from that point on. The causeway takes off from there, up and over the water, which is bright as neon all around us, just as brilliant and beautiful as can be. Press steps on the gas and the Chevelle rises like a ghostly spirit. Everywhere I look the earth is robed in the silky sheen of the sea. I feel like maybe the tires are going to let go of the asphalt. Press holds the steering wheel steady with his knees and fires up a dooby. He takes a deep drag and passes it to us. He turns the radio up full, so now we are a rock and roll missile, blasting into the silver and azure gasses of the upper stratosphere, for a long, lovely, voluptuous hour of sailing through the clouds, an hour among the angels, among invisible stars, pink and blue and yellow stars submerged in a flood of sunlight, but always there, twinkling, all the same, nothing but sun and clouds and clear air suffused with sea colors, with star colors, the clouds perfectly white, the sea effulgent, until the Chevelle gently descends to the gorgeous beach we know as Bahia Honda, coasting in like a gull.

Bahia Honda is part of a public park, supposedly, but the sum total of public improvements put in along those lines was one lonely garbage barrel and a parking lot for maybe twelve cars. This was on a narrow neck of sand between two islands, flat as a pancake. If there was even one spot that was more than three feet above sea level it wasn’t obvious. As long as you were above the surface of the water, the whole area was kind of nondescript, a big nothing, macadam and palmetto brush. Only when you submerged into this beautiful, clear, wild aquarium and coral garden, where nothing had been touched by the hand of man, other than, you know, the occasional odd Coke can, did you realize what the park was all about. You would be standing in the sea, with the mask and snorkel and flippers on, and a car commercial playing on somebody’s radio, coping with the usual feeling of weirdness, of not knowing what things were all about, of not belonging anywhere, and then drop beneath the surface, drop into the silence of the sea, and see the different corals and brilliant fish, the sun rippling across the sand, and think, well shit, this is the way it is supposed to be. This is the way it is when living beings remain within themselves, free of ideas about God and empire and utopia, free of engines and gears and wings and explosives. Eating each other for lunch and not complaining, as it’s all very efficient, not a morsel wasted.

“Gotta wash the Navy off,” Press says, swing the door open.

He steps out of the car, gets a towel out of the trunk, drops his clothes on the sand, and wades into the water naked. The sun is in his face, so we see the shadow side of him, the dark side, a blue man wading into a rainbow sea, water calm and clear as a bathtub, as usual, but thick with little corals and crabs and urchins, we know from previous trips, so you have to tread carefully as you go in, really watching where you put your foot with each and every step. Rory and I sit on the hood of the car and observes as the colorful wavelets radiate in expanding rings from the spot where Press submerges.

“Ahhhh, me. Oh me, oh my, oh me,” Rory sighs.

“What’s the matter?”

“A God among men,” he murmurs.

I pretended to laugh. Phony little chuckle. I can be as phony as the next person. Try me.

“Okay, not a god,” Rory says. “But you know what I mean. A good person. A beautiful person. It has nothing to do with sex, by the way.”

“I expect it doesn’t.”

“Expect?” he says.

“Well, because we’re all friends, you know?”

“Oh don’t be so complacent,” he says. “It’s open season on friends, dear boy. What I meant was … I *guess* what I meant was … you don’t think of Press, that way, because … well I don’t know … he seems so wholesome, if you know what I mean … he has that whole wheat wholesomeness, to him … although, maybe you’re right … maybe because it’s so nice to have him as a friend … maybe you can’t have everything if you know what I mean.”

“He’s a good guy.”

Press surfaces a little further out and swims across the surface, now, smooth and easy as you please, stroking his way through the water calm and easy as a man striding across land, further and further out with each stroke.

“I don’t even try to be good, anymore.”

“You try to be bad,” I tell Rory. “But you’re no good at it.”

“True,” Rory says. “I got bored being good. The problem is, good is always the same, you know what I mean? Good is too predictable. It’s a cookie cutter kind of thing. People see good, they figure, okay, turn the page already. Where bad is … bad can be different. Bad is more or less infinite in its variety. You can make up your very own unique way to be bad. It’s not scripted for you, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes.”

“But Press is good. That much is agreed. No question about it. Too good, maybe.”

Rory lights a cigarette. When contemplating the eternal verities, he liked to smoke. I wasn’t that much of a smoker, but I figured this was a good time for one, so what the hell, I grubbed one from him.

“Too good for what?”

“For this country? For this century? For life as a human being? Have you noticed it’s a bit constricting? Or am I the only one? I don’t know. There are limits, in other words. You can only be so good. The circumstances are limiting. Our ankles are stuck in the tar pits, know what I mean?”

Press turns around, a great, wide arc in the sea, and swims back, into a spot where the bottom is nice and smooth and sandy, water only knee high or so, and stands up there, shakes the water out of his hair, pastes his hair back over his skull with two hands, and sweeps the water off his arms in glimmering sheets. As he comes back across the sand, Rory makes a big deal out of averting his eyes, actually covers his eyes with his hand. To be perfectly honest, there were plenty of times when Rory was a bit too theatrical for me. Honest to God, I felt like smacking him, sometimes. Press pats himself dry and pulls his pants back on while Rory and I smoke.

“We were just discussing you,” Rory says.

“Yeah?” says Press.

“Yes. What a prince you are.”

“Uhhunh.”

“And the pity of man’s fate,” Rory says.

“Which is?” said Press.

“To live as the prisoner of time and place and personality, in the hovel of human character,” Rory says.

Rory thought that kind of thing was funny. He meant every word, you could see, but recognized the humorous aspect, that our real thoughts and real feelings are pretty funny. Press wraps his towel around his neck, reaches into the pocket of Rory’s shirt, takes the pack of cigarettes out, taps it against the heel of his other hand to get the cigarettes to slide out a little, takes one, takes the lit cigarette out of Rory’s mouth, lights his own, and puts Rory’s back. Press puts his sunglasses on and looks out at the sea and takes a deep drag on the cigarette. There was something nice about a cigarette after a swim. I could see he was really enjoying it.

He says, “Well, my attitude is, fuck man’s fate.”

Rory smiles. Indulgently.

Press turns to me.

“Know what I mean?” he says.

“Sure,” I tell him.

This is the night of the big, blowout Christmas party at Theta Beta Tau. I am thinking the three of us will camp at Wanda’s place while Wanda is at the party, and then, later, Rory and Press can sleep in Wanda’s living room, while I take one more wild shot at Wanda, and get nowhere, of course, and next morning we can be on our way. I know Wanda’s plan is to sing her little lungs out at the Christmas party, then catch a plane for Newark first thing in morning, allowing her plenty of time to shop and enjoy Christmas and get her hair and nails done and what have you, in plenty of time for the even bigger, even more fabulous New Year’s Eve party involving the entire cast and crew of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. Not just part of the cast and crew, mind you. We’re talking *entire*, Wanda wanted to make sure that was perfectly clear. She wasn’t going to any stupid parties where only *part* of the cast and crew would show up. But anyway, things did not go as planned, because the second Wanda saw Rory and I in uniform, she came to the brink of orgasm, more or less instantaneously.

We ring the bell, she answers, with Reggie yapping at her heels, trying to claw his way around her. Still standing behind the screen door, she clutches her jaw in both hands.

“Oh my God,” she says.

Only, to be brutally frank, it sounded a little like *Gawd*. *Oh my Gawd*. Not a lot, though. It wasn’t over the top Brooklynese. Just enough to tell you that Wanda had been raised somewhere in the general vicinity. Maybe Brooklyn is a state of mind, more than a place. Reggie is barking his head off and the dog spit is flying all over. Wanda opens the screen door just a little and squeezes through as Reggie tries desperately to get his nose through the opening and Wanda pushes him back with her shin. I notice Press’s head is swiveling back and forth between Wanda and the Corvette parked under the carport. I going to take a chance and say it was a tossup, in his mind, which of the two sights was more beautiful.

“Oh my *Gawd* you guys are *killing* me!” Wanda says. “You know who you guys *look* like?”

I say, “Who?”

“Oh my Gawd. Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly in *On the Town!*”

Rory says. “I *love* Gene Kelly.”

Wanda’s head is ratcheting rapidly back and forth, so she can maintain eye contact with all three of us.

“Really!” she says. “Remember?”

I introduce everyone and start to explain my plan.

“Oh no you don’t,” she says, recoiling, when I get to the part about our hanging out at her place, while she goes to the party. “Are you kidding me? No way, buster. You guys are coming. It’s going to be a hoot.”

She looks at Press and says, “You’re in the Navy, too, right?”

“At the moment,” he says.

“Then all three of you can your uniforms, okay? All three of you. Really. And I’m not taking no for an answer. So you can all relax. You’re coming. In uniform. I walk in in the gown, you three guys walk in right behind me, in uniform. Like the color guard, know what I mean? Seriously. It’s going to be totally fucking outrageous.”

She invites us in and gradually Reggie gets a satisfactory sniff of everyone’s pants and begins to settle down a bit. I feel I am gradually building a rapport with Reggie. We both have a bead on Wanda, and that creates a bond. We are collegial competitors. Two hounds sniffing around for something good in the same neighborhood. I feel that Reggie is alert to this. He is a *thinking* dog.

The thing about Wanda is, when Wanda tells you she will not take no for answer, she is not kidding around. Basically, Wanda is used to getting her way with things, that is obvious. She doesn’t have to listen to a lot of fol de rol in the way of stupid objections, and she makes that perfectly clear. When you come right down to it, Wanda is so drop dead *gaw*-geous she knows it is going to be pretty easy for her to find someone willing to give her exactly what she wants, when she wants it, so, so if you don’t want to, that’s your tough luck, Wanda is moving on smartly. And that is just the way of the world, and something everyone else can damn well get used to, from Wanda’s point of view.

I say, “Wanda, you realize people in uniform are not universally popular?”

“You mean, because people don’t like the war?” she says.

“Well, yes, Wanda, that’s what I’m getting at.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous,” she says. “We’re talking about a frat party in the southern Florida, remember? They’re all rednecks, except for the ones from New Jersey. Actually about half the ones from New Jersey are, too. So they are going to *love* you guys.”

Rory hears the word *redneck* and bunches his mouth to one side.

“Well …” I tell Wanda. “The thing is, sometimes things can be a little more involved than they first appear.”

“Oh, you’re going to give me a hard time now?” Wanda says. “If you’re not coming to the party, and not going to wear your uniforms, I’m going to cry, okay?”

Rory says. “Don’t cry. I’m sure we’d all be delighted to attend your little soiree.”

So that’s settled.

Pretty soon Press is figuring out how Wanda’s stereo works and rummaging around in the kitchen for a cocktail shaker so he can make Singapore Slings. It’s still pretty early in the afternoon, but Wanda loves that idea, “long as I don’t get drunk on my ass.” The two of them are searching for brown sugar, lime juice, this whole big long list of ingredients that Press seems to have committed to memory, in precise detail. Like, two tablespoons of lemon juice. One and a half teaspoons of brown sugar. Taking it all very seriously. Or pretending too. Camouflaging himself pretty well, I would say. Which Wanda found quite charming. And I understood that, or told myself I understood it. At times, you wanted life to be simple, right? You wanted to be with someone who could pour his whole life energy, body and soul, into shaking a *Singapore Sling* into a state of tangy, foamy perfection. And not think about one other thing. Because the Singapore Sling was enough. One really good Singapore Sling was enough to justify a lifetime of striving, know what I mean? Shake it too much, it's watery. Too little, it’s warm. And that is pretty much what life is all about. Soon Press is shaking the cocktails over his shoulder and she is admiring the bulging biceps… the hair that glows blonde on his bronzed forearms … so obviously there is something about Press ... the unencumbered *joie de vivre* ... the elemental sexuality, totally free of analysis, like a rosebush … just a bit of the cabana boy, there, if you know what I mean … giving everyone else permission to stop all the god damn worrying, for Christ’s sake, and just enjoy life, for a change … just take one breath in true happiness, without some idiot egghead, like *me*, commenting on the significance of every god damn thing.

The two of them get along swimmingly, as Betsy Buford would say. The *swims*, Betsy would say. She mocked the girls from Greenwich in her sarcastic way. *“*It's *the swims.”*

Wanda has some burgers that we can cook up. There is no point in hurrying. She can’t arrive at the frat party before ten o’clock or so, she says. Only then will the crowd be psychologically prepared for the grand entrance she is planning. A good two hours before our scheduled departure, Wanda disappears into the bathroom to start getting ready. I guess it was a laborious process.

“You going to put your uniform on?” I ask Press.

“Sure,” he says. “What the hell. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“We could get killed,” Rory says.

When Wanda is ready she calls out to us from the bedroom.

“O-k-a-a-a-y!” she yells. “I’m r-e-e-a-a-dy!”

“Okay!” I call back to her.

“You guys ready?”

“Y-e-e-s-s-s, we’re r-e-e-a-a-dy!” Rory calls back.

We all stand up and look toward the bedroom door.

Wanda emerges with the tiara on her head, the smashing gown … oh, *smashola*, as Betsy Buford would say … the long white gloves, the sequined shoes ... the makeup, the lipstick ... the crazy shiny banner across her chest ... imprinted with her strange, ridiculous identity ... which makes me think of the Queen of England, wearing the same kind of ribbon, only one that says “Queen of England” ... and of course the sceptre encrusted with gobs of rhinestones ... altogether a sight to behold. The more so because we are riding the crest of the Singapore Slings and particularly susceptible to Wanda’s thermonuclear, take-no-prisoners approach to her own sexuality. To think that this angelic being actually had a vagina, cute little nipples under there somewhere, and ultimately, theoretically, strictly *hypothetically,* I’m saying ... was fuckable ... and not only fuckable but … maybe with the right approach, eminently so ... might even *like* it ... it was more than the male mind could easily absorb, frankly. Smooth and easy and carefree as you please, Wanda starts singing the old standby grand entrance theme from the Miss America pageants, holds her arms out in the long white gloves, wrists cocked back at the angle prescribed for debutantes, for princesses, nose high in the air, cutting through any resistance with the ease of an ocean liner, and sashays into the middle of the room, satin rustling in her skirt, the gorgeous hips swiveling with a little extra verve, where she pauses, pivots, twirls one way, then the other, tilts her head this way, then that, like she's trying out the different angles, and finally turns to me and says, “How do I look?”

She doesn’t wait for the answer, but instead turns to Press, maybe expecting him to answer.

“Swell,” I tell her.

I’m not sure she hears me, though.

“How about you, Press?” she says. “You think I look okay?”

She smooths the sparkling skirt with the palm of her hand.

But Press has gone into cardiac arrest, pretty much. Very, very slowly, his head is rotating from side to side. Like a person coming out of a coma, maybe. I can see he is not going to respond.

“He thinks you look terrific,” I tell Wanda. “Unfortunately he is paralyzed at the moment."

“Oh, good,” she says.

Slithering back toward the bedroom, she makes sure to give her ass an extra little wiggle, sealing our doom. One thing about Wanda, she has absolutely no idea when to quit. Because she has no experience of intercourse, she is a very bad judge of momentum, in that regard. She drops the bomb on Hiroshima, flies back to the base, picks up another bomb, flies back to the smoking ruin of Hiroshima, and drops the second one. Along these lines, she stops at the door to her bedroom, turns her shoulders back toward us, while the magnificent, heart-shaped derriere remains in place, and kind of cooing or murmuring, just as sweet and gentle and sexy as can be, says, “Please put on your very best uniform, Press. I want all of us to look really nice, okay? Remember, I’m going to be performing.”

Press says, "Yes ma'am."

And actually salutes her.

She salutes back. Cute. A little Shirley Temple salute. She did not know when to quit. You could be gasping for air, with Wanda, just trying to survive the onslaught, and she would keep coming at you.

Now in a celebratory mood, Press whips up another big batch of Singapore Slings. I understood completely. Wanda had that effect on me, as well. The minute you laid eyes on Wanda, you felt like celebrating.

It’s getting ready to rain cats and dogs, but Wanda insists that she and I will drive to the party in the Vette, with the top down, with Rory and Press behind us.

“Won’t that mess up your hair?” I ask.

“Go slowly,” she says. “It’s not like we’re in a big rush, you know? The idea is to have fun.”

The party turns out to be a lot bigger than we thought. Apparently it is kind of an open invitation. Or maybe everyone is crashing the thing. Anyway there are, oh, I’m going to guess, two hundred people there, when we pull up. Thunder rumbles in the distance. Lightning is flashing on the horizon. The palms are tossing wildly. Fat raindrops are spattering down. Inside everything is in high gear, just as Wanda has planned, so she gets to make her grand entrance, as scripted, sailing through the front door and into this big ballroom they had with one hand on my arm, the other holding the scepter, and Press and Rory trailing behind, her courtiers. No sooner have we entered than Wanda is surrounded by admirers. Hog is beside himself with pride at having conceived such an absolute stroke of fucking genius. He keeps dragging alumni over to meet Wanda, with their wives trailing along, introducing them as Mr. and Mrs. This, Mr. and Mrs. That. All these paunchy, sunburned guys in beautiful sports jackets and starchy shirts, not a one of them missing the flag in the lapel, more or less straight off the golf course, like happy, fat little squirrels, with their cheeks full of nuts. The wives just as pleasant and smiley and vacuous as can be. Each a poster couple, a perfect couple. Which makes me sick. The men are kissing Wanda’s gloved hand, patting her hand, bowing, smiling with twinkly eyes, explaining how god awful sweet and charming she is, all the bullshit you would expect from smooth talkers, while of course Wanda is just dying with happiness, probably ready to pass out, as attention is mother’s milk to her. All that was missing was the spotlight. The band is pounding away, playing one good old, reliable rock and roll standby after another, but over it all we can hear the waves of rain thudding against the windows and that weird, ripping, crackling sound that lighting makes when it’s close.

And then the power goes out.

Everyone shouts as the darkness envelopes us.

Over the wave of anxious murmuring that follows, the stentorian voice of Hog Hassel can be heard crying, “Shit!”

Hog fishes a pack of matches out of his pocket and lights all the candles on the big candelabrum that sits atop a piano in a corner of this enormous room. He then approaches Wanda and says, “Wanda, baby, you gotta bail us out here, honey. Can you sing a couple of numbers?”

“Sure,” Wanda says. “Can someone in the band play the piano?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Hog says. “I asked. But there’s got to be someone here who plays.”

Rory says, “I play the piano.”

Hog hesitates for a second, I assume because Rory is in uniform, but then decides to go for it.

“Perfect,” he says.

Next thing you know, Hog is holding up this giant candelabrum and trying to make himself heard over the hubbub. People are lighting candles and carrying candles all over the place. I guess they had been through this drill before. The wonder is the place hadn’t burned to the ground. “May I have your attention? May I have your attention everyone? Everyone?”Hog is saying. Finally he puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles really loud. Which does the trick. “My apologies,” he tells them. “Thank you all for your patience as we address the power problem. I can assure you we are doing everyting in our power to have the power restored.”

People applaud.

“Thank you,” Hog says. He bows a little. He was enjoying himself. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, as you know, we here at Theta Beta Tau have been honored, this year, to have our own Miss Theta Beta Tau …”

More applause. Lightning is crashing all around us.

“That’s right, ladies and gentlemen,” Hog says. “Our very own, Miss Wanda …”

And then I guess he realized he wasn’t sure what last name to use, because he turns to Wanda, and whispers in her ear, and she then whispers in his.

“Miss Wanda Wevurski!” Hog announces, gesturing toward Wanda.

Wanda bows and heads for the piano, where Rory has taken a seat, to stretch and wiggle his fingers. He runs his fingers over the keys a couple of times, limbering up, as the crowd gathers around. He and Wanda confer, for a minute, as he lightly touches the keys. Much murmuring and whispering between them and some very soft, low singing from her as they get on the same page. When they are both nodding and smiling and feeling good, she takes her place in front of the piano. She draws a deep breath and pulls at her skirt a little nervously, making sure any wrinkles are straightened out, licks her lips one last time, and finally smiles the show business smile, that smile of pure, wonderful courage in front of a crowd. The big candelabrum is beside her on the piano, enveloping her in its ever so soft effulgence, a moonlight kind of glow, barely enough to get the sequins sparkling with a distant, starry sparkle. Wanda turns to Rory and nods, and he plays a little intro, and then pauses, and looks back to her. She turns toward the crowd again and opens up, clear and high and bright, singing “We Belong Together,” the Ritchie Valens tune, so simple and pure and pretty everyone shuts up and stands still and listens.

*You’re mine, and we belong together*

*Yes we belong together, for eternity*

At the end, Rory closes the melody off very softly, tenderly, barely touching the keys, which to me meant he loved the tune, then hangs his head over the keyboard for a second. Everyone else is stunned, momentarily. Rory stands up and applauds Wanda. She bows, blushing. Now everyone else applauds, louder and louder, whistling and yelling, as Wanda squirms. Finally she gestures for Rory to join her in front of the piano. This the maestro is only too happy to do. So now the two of them take a little bow together.

“Sailor!” someone shouts. “Play the national anthem!”

Rory smiles and kind of waves his hands, along lines of, you know, this is not the time for that. Very polite, kind of embarrassed about it, as the national anthem was not really his thing.

“Play it!” the guy shouts.

Wanda raises her hand and says, “I’m not really ready for that, boys. Remember, we haven’t rehearsed!”

She beams a big, buoyant happy smile at them, her desperate searchlight of a smile, and says, “How about we do something I can actually sing?”

A lot of these people were already well and truly drunk. They were not interested in what she had rehearsed and what she hadn’t rehearsed.

“Play the national anthem,” the guy shouts again.

“The national anthem,” they yell. “Play the national anthem.”

Finally Rory waves his hands once more, hands high in the air, head nodding in reluctant assent. His sense of humor never failed him. He sits down at the piano and goes through an abbreviated version of the whole finger-stretching, warmup routine. He plays the national anthem, alright, but at about three times the usual speed, making it sound like a cartoon version, a Keystone Kops version, running through the whole thing in no time, as though the national anthem is some kind of stupid piano exercise he happens to be able to play. *Oy*. And really having fun while he is doing it, by the way. Which made matters way worse. Only when he gets to the last few notes does he play the thing normally. The last chord lingers, resounding ominously through a room that is now quite as the tomb. Oblivious to the drift, Rory stands up, steps to the side of the piano, and takes an extra deep bow. Probably the bow pisses people off as much as anything. Wanda is holding her hand over her mouth, whether from amazement or fear we will never know. There is no applause, no comment, no anything, for a moment. Just stoned, dead silence, as Rory is bowing and smiling. Until someone out there in the darkness pulls himself together and yells, “Play it the right way, faggot.”

People don’t know what to make of that, either. The words just kind of hang there.

Press yells back, “What did you call him?”

“I called your friend a fucking faggot,” the guy yells back. “Because only a faggot plays the national anthem that way.”

And just like that, not another word, Press goes after the guy. Walking a few steps, then trotting. Next thing you know, there is a melee in front of the bar, and Press is in the middle of it. A guy has Press by the kerchief. Press takes a wild swing at the guy. It turns out there are plenty of guys from other fraternities at this party, and when they see the Theta Beta Tau guys pushing Press around, they start pushing the Theta Beta Tau guys around. So pretty soon ten or twenty people are falling on the floor, wrestling, throwing wild swings, most of them drunk on their ass. Wanda is squealing “Boys, stop! Boys! Boys! Please stop! My God, boys!” At first the alumni try to referee and calm things down. A couple of them wade in and try to pull people apart. But pretty soon one of *them* gets tagged, and *they* start pushing and shoving and swinging at *other* alumni. So the whole thing gets totally out of hand. Mind you, it’s dark, so it’s hard to tell what the heck is going on. Wanda is blubbering, tearing at her hair. The rest of the women are screaming and running for it, the best they can, wobbling away on the high heels, stopping to take their shoes off, straight out into the thunder and rain. Of course I have no choice but to go in after Press. Elbows are flying, fists are flying, I’m ducking. But it’s not like I actually want to fight anybody. More like crossing a crowded dance floor. Guys who look like football players are crashing into the bandstand, the instruments, knocking things over, kicking the drums around, pissed off at the drums. The base drum goes rolling across the dance floor. A lot of people are not actually fighting, of course. They just want to make it look good. They’re just kind of flailing away, so they can say they didn’t let their side down, et cetera. The usual bullshit. Which was my approach, precisely. I think I got tagged with a more or less random punch. Like, the guy missed what he was swinging at, probably intentionally, and I stepped right into it, the big hero. Anyway bingo, I have a gusher of a nosebleed. There’s blood all over the place, all of a sudden. To be perfectly honest, I think the blood helps us. Because now I am a legitimate casualty. I am entitled to be evacuated. Press appears out of nowhere and pulls me out of the mess. When Wanda sees me, she clasps both hands over her mouth for a second, then takes them away and says, “My God, is that *blood*?”

One thing about the white uniforms, they made for a terrific display of blood. Wanda grabs a fistful of my shirt. The whole front of the shirt is crimson. She is feeling the fabric, which is just like blue jeans, only white.

She says, “Do these things get dry cleaned?”

Rory has pulled my kerfchief off, to mop up the blood on my face.

“Hold this against your nose,” he says, handing the kerchief to me.

The sight of my own blood gets me pretty god damn annoyed.

“Press,” I’m saying, in an extra nasally way. “Try to make the odds a little better than a hundred to one next time.”

He is just as annoyed with me.

“Well somebody’s got to stand up for somebody!” he says.

Just as the peacemakers seem to be gaining sway, and the whole scene is calming down a bit, the sweeping beacons of powerful flashlights announce the arrival of the constabulary. Soon enough, the cops identify Hog Hassle as the architect of the whole mess. Incongruously, he has lit a cigar. He actually tries to take a puff of the cigar while handcuffed. Which the cops didn’t care for. The cigar gets tossed. I guess Hog said something about Wanda, because they come right over and get ready to snap the cuffs on her with pretty much zero discussion.

“But what did I do?” she tells them. “I was *singing*.”

“You didn’t want to sing the national anthem?”

“But I haven’t *rehearsed* it.”

One of the cops looks her in the eye and says, “In south Florida, that is incitement, sweetheart.”

“But I’m from New Jersey,” she whimpers.

The cops look at each other like this is an unbelievably dumb thing to say. To be from New Jersey is just unbelievably dumb. This is Florida, you’re supposed to be from Florida. The beautiful thing about being a cop is, you can just be a cop. Things are what they are. You’re not expected to maneuver around a lot.

They arrest her.

I think the combination of the blood and the uniforms saved the three of us. One of the cops taps me on the chest, next to where the shirt is all bloody, and turns to Rory, and says, “Get this guy taken care of.”

It’s still pouring cats and dogs, so Wanda is pretty well drenched by the time they get her to the squad car. Her hair is hanging in strings, the makeup running, she has lost one of her shoes. So she is kind of peg-legging along. Just before they duck her into the car, she spots me across the street, and screams, “Do you realize what this means?”

Luckily, I have Wanda’s keys. Under the circumstances, it seems only prudent that the three of us camp for the night at Wanda’s house. We figure Wanda will be out of jail in no time, an error on our part. Upon returning to the bungalow, we allowed ourselves a recovery beer or two. I couldn't figure out which was more upsetting to Rory, that the guy had attempted to ridicule him for being gay, or that Press had gotten all in a knot about it and started a ruckus. It was a tossup. Rory packs a dish towel full of ice and hands it to me.

"Put it on your nose," he says. "You won't look like a stoplight."

The two of them are staring at the blank wall outside Wanda's window, like it's a movie screen. I settle back on the couch with the ice pack.

"It's not like I'm embarrassed or anything," Rory explains, at one point.

"I know you’re not embarrassed,” Press says.

"I'm proud of who I am."

“I realize that,” Press says.

“If you realize that, then why did you go after the guy? I could have just played the stupid thing the regular way. I thought I was being amusing. But I could have played it the regular way.”

“You played it the way you wanted to play it,” Press says.

I chime in with my own thoughtful analysis.

“Fuck the regular way. Fuck them all.”

"Ah,” Rory says, allowing himself a deep, contemplative sigh. "I would love to. In any event, I’m not troubled by what happened. The way I look at it, I'm still getting used to my new identity, a little bit. I think that’s it. Maybe I get a bit rambunctious about it, at times.”

“Rambunctious about what?” Press says.

“Just being me. Just being happy to be me.”

“Ah,” Press says.

“If you’re a rose, be rose. If you’re a daffodil, be a daffodil.”

“Right,” Press says.

“I just happen to be a daffodil.”

“Or maybe a gladiola,” I tell him.

I don’t know where that came from. My father loved gladiolas.

Rory says, "If we can't be who we really are, well then, what's the point?"

“True,” Press says.

The main problem we encounter at Wanda’s house is Reggie, who is exceedingly suspicious about Wanda’s absence, as he had every right to be. Other than that, the couch Wanda has in the living room is a convertible, so it is easy enough to rig the sleeping arrangements. I take the waterbed, Rory takes the convertible, Press sleeps on the couch cushions on the floor. Before long it is obvious Reggie suspects we we have done away with darling Wanda. He props his paws on the edge of the waterbed and whines interminably. Throughout the night and into the early morning, I am vaguely aware of the restless Reggie, pacing and whining at the foot of the bed. Meantime, my head teems with crazy dreams. Not surprisingly, the dreams are decidedly nautical. The last of them is quite distressing. In the dream, I am in my bunk on a big warship. The ship is heaving and tossing on a stormy sea. It’s dark. I can hear the crack of lightning, the booming of naval guns. Then the panicked cries, “Torpedo! Torpedo!” Then the explosion and the spine of the ship shudders. Then, “Torpedo amidships! Torpedo amidships!” And the sound of water rushing through the hatches, coming for me.

When terror awakens me, of course I realize I am not on a sinking ship, I am in a bungalow in Coconut Grove.

But the *sound* is still there.

The doorbell rings.

“Com-ing!” Rory chimes merrily. Then, “Oh! Ah! Oh Jesus!”

When I roll over, the waterbed feels a little on the saggy side. It feels *shallow*, all of a sudden. I then realize that the sound of water in the dream is actually the sound of water spilling out of the bed and onto the floor of Wanda’s bedroom. I would say, oh, half of this enormous water bed has drained onto the floor, and the rest of it is on its way. So, when I hop up, I am up to my ankles in water. Having eaten a hole in one corner of the bed, Reggie is tearing away at the far corner with tooth and claw, growling, eyes on me.

I haul the bedroom door open, against the pressure of the reservoir at my feet, and the water surges across the living room floor, sweeping around Press and his makeshift bed. When Rory opens the front door, there is Wanda, in jail clothes, carrying her gown and shoes, with the tiara on her head, tilted weirdly. I was happy she had found the other shoe.

Our little tsunami rolls across the living room floor toward her, carrying bits of flotsam picked up on the way.

As it reaches her feet she cries, “Shit!”

Reggie scrambles toward the front door. He slips on wet floorboards, flops into the flowing water, and is carried toward Wanda on the tide, paws churning madly as he tries to right himself. I have slept in the blood soaked uniform. Press and Rory are in their underwear.

“Reginald!” Wanda shouts, shaking her finger. “Bad boy! I told you! Do not chew the bed!”

Wanda’s little bungalow must have been tilted a little because, oddly, a lot of the water rolled right out the front door. But of course the couch cushions were soaked. She had a little rug that was soaked. Anything on the floor was soaked. Trying to look on the positive side, I tell Wanda, “Well, at least we’re all okay.”

Obviously this strikes her as nutty.

“Okay?” she says.

Wanda drops her shoes on a chair and holds the orange dress up in front of her. It looks like a little girl’s dress, now. The dress has shrunk, quite significantly. “Look,” she says. “I’m a dwarf!” She drops her head into her hands. The tiara bounces across the floor, coming to rest in a puddle. Cradling the dress in her arms, Wanda rocks the dress like a baby, like a long lost lover, whimpering, “My beautiful, beautiful, beautiful dress.”

Before long the little stockade fence around Wanda’s yard was festooned with throw rugs, towels, Hurricanes sweatshirts, uniforms, what have you. On the gravel out front we spread a carpet of magazines, newspapers and photos recovered from the sodden layers of debris around Wanda’s bed deflated bed. Among these are a bunch of postcards left over from the family’s triumphal direct-mail campaign for Homecoming Queen, kind of cheescakey, but a little on the amateurish side. Like, Kelly in a skimpy orange and green bikini, which clung to her nipples suggestively, kneeling on an orange shag rug, while holding up a Hurricanes pennant and showing off her dimples, under a legend that said, “MHHQAC,” which I determined stood for Miami Hurricanes Homecoming Queen, Autumn Carnival.

Holding this postcard, there in Wanda’s front yard, with the debris all around me, I scan the blue sky overhead, on the alert for incoming helicopters or the odd barrel of napalm. I turn toward the street, half expecting the refugees to come barrel assing through Coconut Grove. Aware that my own train of thought is now completely out of kilter, I have no choice but to go with the flow. If the choppers come, they come. If the refugees come, they come.

Here is my thinking.

If the refugees come, we will buy ice cream for them.

Rory goes for a walk, just wanders off, with a glassy eyed look, his head kind of swaying, kind of swimming, through the waves of music within, off into his dream world of Liszt and Rachmaninoff, the blizzard of staves and quarter notes swirling through his head. Wanda seizes the opportunity to lecture Press regarding his overly aggressive behavior.

"What's the big *deal*, anyway?" she says. "You guys are that sensitive?"

"Sensitive?" Press says.

"So they called him a faggot. So? They called him a faggot. He can't take a joke?"

“Wanda,” Press says. “You don’t understand.”

"Here’s the problem,” I tell her. “Rory actually *is* gay."

Apparently this possibility has not occurred to her.

"What?” she says, with the nose wrinkle thing.

"Quite gay," Rory says.

She looks at me.

“Gay-o-mania,” I tell her.

"But then, what’s he doing in the Navy?" she says.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Press says, like it’s confidential information.

"Oh," she says. “Oh I’m sorry. So you were defending him."

"Yes," I tell her.

"I meant Press," she says. "Press, I'm sorry."

So Press is off the hook.

Interesting that she calls him Press. Because, up to this point, the only people who call him Press are Rory and I.

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/images/cleardot.gifFortunately the day is sunny and hot and bright, your picture perfect southern Florida toaster of a day, so by nightfall most of Wanda’s stuff is pretty dry. Soon as we are within range of cocktail hour Press whips up another batch of Singapore Slings. The couch cushions are going to be a problem, obviously. We sit on the floor and sip the Singapore Slings and smoke. Press rolls a couple of joints. To me, Wanda seems incongruous. She is very anxious about sex, but happy to get pretty seriously stoned, two things that ought to go together, from my point of view. Our main problem (or so we tell ourselves) is that Wanda has missed her plane. Which means that Reginald, as she now addresses him, has missed *his* plane. Making a reservation for an animal is not so simple, Wanda tells us. And besides, it’s Christmas. Meaning she can’t get another flight for six or seven days, and it’s going to cost her an arm and a leg.

“Well, we’re driving north,” Press says. “You live anywhere near Genius Boy, here?”

“Oh,” Wanda says. “Well there’s an idea.”

Press looks at Rory and I and says, “You guys can ride with the dog.”

Bright and early next morning, that’s what happens. We all pile our stuff into the trunk of the Chevelle and take off, with Wanda in the front seat and Rory and I in back, with Reginald.

The long drive north over the flat, empty plain of coastal Florida gave us sailors an opportunity to tell Edie pretty much everything she wanted to know about the Armed Forces of the United States of America. Of course Rory was a regular treasure trove of submarine lore. The notion that Rory had done a cruise on a real nuclear submarine fascinated Wanda no end. She was interested in all the detail about the hot bunks, as Rory called them, where one guy wakes up and another jumps into the bunk to sleep, that sort of thing. One after another, we parroted Chief Bogarty’s hyperbolic anecdotes about storms in the South China Sea, waves as high as Mount Surabachi, white slavery on the coast of Africa, what have you. We made sure to throw in plenty of technical stuff about the weaponry, torpedoes and rockets of various sorts. The whole spiel has a phallic character about it, I realize. All leading up to an atomic organism. Radioactive come spewing everywhere. The mushroom cloud of come. Meanwhile we’re smoking a little weed, listening to the music, watching the swamps roll by, emphasizing to Wanda that, between the three of us, we’re in a pretty good position to bring the world to an end, just like that. Indeed, idiots just like us are fiddling with A-bombs at that very instant. Idiots who have absolutely no comprehension what they are doing. And like it that way. They like having no comprehension. If you are going to play a part in the end of the world, you probably want to do it in a state of abysmal ignorance.

“Well when you look at it that way, it’s kind of upsetting, isn’t it?” she says.

We all had a good laugh over that one.

It really wasn’t upsetting.

It was way too weird to be upsetting.

We drove as far as Fayetteville the first day and stayed at a Howard Johnson’s there. The only rooms they had were twin beds so Wanda and I had to settle for that. Although, I think Wanda was pretty comfortable with that. It turns out she has brought pajamas. Regular pajamas with the pants and shirt, like guys pajamas. She gets into the pajamas and we cuddle for a while, as I try desperately to find Wanda’s hot button, and get nowhere. When I was with Wanda, I always kept my briefs on, because Wanda was afraid that, if I took them off, things were going to get of hand. Finally she winds up in the other twin bed. She says goodnight, then tosses and turns for a while, getting more and more restless, more and more annoyed with herself. Finally she whips around and faces me, propping her elbow on the pillow and her head on her hand.

“Sorry if I’m frigid,” she says, very matter of factly.

“No problem.”

But I guess it was a problem.

“It’s not that I don’t like men,” she says.

I turn toward her and prop my head on my hand, just like her. There are bright lights in the parking lot outside this hotel room, and the lights are blasting through the drapes, so it’s not totally dark, in this room, just dim, really, so I can see Wanda’s silhouette against the drapes.

“Oh I get that.”

“It’s just that …”

“That what?”

“I kind of want it to be perfect, you know?”

“Sure,” I tell her. “I know exactly what you mean.”

I lay back and put my head on my pillow and thought of Natalie.

“No you don’t.”

“Oh no, actually, I think I do,” I tell her. “Like, you want it to be with the person you were meant for.”

“Yeah. I guess. Kind of. That’s kind of it.”

“Like it was meant to be.”

“Yeah.”

“And that’s not me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. It’s just that, you know, I’m not sure, is all. You know what I mean? I want to be sure, is all. I do realize all of this is pretty unrealistic, in today’s world.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

She flops back on her pillow and stares at the ceiling.

“I just want to be sure.”

“I understand completely. I think that’s very good idea.”

We both lie there for a while. We’re both staring at the ceiling. Finally I decide there is one more thing I have to say to her.

“Wanda?”

“What?”

“Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet dreams,” she says.