“Lefty” and Other Stories

John Doble
“Lefty” and Other Stories
For Elizabeth,
who speaks like silence.
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John Doble
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John Doble
New York City
Lefty
LEFTY

The first time I seen Lefty, I knew he was special. It was six years ago this May, a game between St. Steve's and Bishop Pierce. I go to tons of games. I'm always on the lookout—you gotta throw a lot of stones before you kill a bird.

I've been in baseball all my life. Spent three years at Double A, which is the second highest minor league, and one in Triple A. Twice went to spring training. But I never made the Bigs, not even for coffee. All the teams got guys like me—bird dogs, guys who, for beer money and tickets, keep an eye out for talent. Then, if I do sign a kid, I get a bonus. Not much, something. But money's not why we do it. We love the game and scouting's a way to stay in it. And to be honest, you're a big kind of fish. Everybody knows you: the coaches, players, guys from the paper. Parents'll whisper when you're in the stands. It tickles me when they're watching, trying to see what I'm writing, because sometimes I'm making out my grocery list.

I signed a half-dozen kids before Lefty but only one makes it and he don't make it big. He was the Cubs' back-up catcher for a couple years. My others are like nineteen out of twenty—they top out somewhere in the minors, stay with it 'til they're sick of living on what you make flipping burgers. That's how baseball is: when it rains, it's a downpour. The ones who make it, make it big. But most guys in the game—the scouts, the minor leaguers, even some of the ones in the front office—get paid like flunkies and work like a Husky.

Anyways, back to Lefty. He's 15, a sophomore at Bishop Pierce, the Pirates of Bishop Pierce. It's a Tuesday. It's funny how you remember little things. I'm late 'cause I have to work some OT. Joey DiSteffano's sick and I have to cover part of his route. I drive a bread truck. I drive from four until noon. But that day I don't quit 'til almost three. So by the time I get there, it's bottom of the first. St. Steve's got a southpaw too, a little kid with a curve ball. But the Pirates are hitting him; they score three in their half. Then it's top of the second and out comes this tall, skinny, dark brown string bean of a kid with his game face on. He's over six feet but weighs 140, 145 tops. Gawky, he's grown so fast, his body's not coordinated, it ain't caught up to the rest of him. And he don't know a thing about pitching. He's a slinger—herky-jerky, all arms and legs and elbows and feet. But can he bring it! Just hearing him
makes me sit up. Wham-O! I don't have my radar gun but just by the sound, I know he's in the 80s. When he's 15! When he fills out and with good mechanics, he'll be in the nineties easy, maybe the high nineties. Which is what we clocked him at once: ninety-nine miles an hour. And he was still growing.

You can teach a kid a lot about baseball: about hitting, pitching, how to play the game. But you can't teach three things: to hit for power, to run fast, or to throw hard. Those are gifts from the Lord. You either get 'em or you don't.

Speaking of fast, I remember a guy used to be with the Phillies. When he was a kid, a scout gives him a questionnaire. It's something they give all their prospects to see what they know about the game. Questions like: "Men on first and second and one out, where should the left fielder throw the ball on a single?" Stuff like that. Anyway, the kid looks at the test, then at the scout, then at the test, then at the scout. Hands it back; he can't make sense of it. Turns out the kid can't read. But he bends down, takes off his shoes and socks, and starts running. The kid can fly! I mean like an Olympics guy. Speed is something you can never have too much of. The scout signs him on the spot.

Anyway, I go behind the backstop. SH-H-H-O-P! The ball makes that no-doubt-about-it, sweet-as-Cracker-Jacks sound, saying: "Here, my friend, comes a real, honest to gosh, major league fastball." THWOP! goes the catcher's glove. I glance at Father Marty, Marty Russo, the coach at Bishop Pierce, a pudgy little guy who's shaped like a calzone. He looks at me with a you-know-what-eating grin on his face. He knows what I'm thinking. I yell, "I want to talk to you after the game." He nods and his grin gets bigger.

The funny thing is, Lefty don't pitch good that day. At least by ordinary reckoning. He walks six and hits a couple before Marty takes him out. But us scouts have our own way of evaluating a player. We don't look at what a kid does, we look for what he might do when he's, say, 26 or 27. We look for what you call potential. And by that way of figuring, Lefty looks great. He fans two an inning, and no one hits a ball hard. Not even a foul.

After the game, I learn he's from Mississippi, the Delta. His mom died so he came north to live with his aunt. Don't have no father, at least none he knows of. He's sixth in a family of nine. When his mom passed, his brothers and sisters got scattered all over, and Lefty moved in with his Aunt Pearl who lives in the projects. She has three of her own, else she'd taken in more than him, that's what she said the first time I went for dinner. She works in a hospital, a nurse's aide. Her man died, or ran out, or God knows what. She's like most of us—good folks, doing the best she can.

Besides having no mom, Lefty's got other problems. For starters, he's bow-legged, which is probably because of rickets. If kids don't get enough vitamins and stuff when they're growing up, their bones don't grow right. Not hard and solid like they ought to. A lot of players have bad knees. They're bow-legged and
in their twenties, they get tendinitis. Or worse. Four times out of five, it's a colored
guy or a Puerto Rican who had rickets as a kid.

Which reminds me of something that's beside the point but I'll mention it
anyway. You don't know what to call a guy today, a colored guy I mean. When I
was playing, we called 'em colored guys. You didn't use the "n—word." Only a
troublemaker'd do that. But somewhere along the line they decide you oughta say
"Negro" instead of colored. Then "black" instead of Negro. Now what do I
know? I'm just a stump of an ex-catcher who never finished high school, a bread-
truck-driving hillbilly with who-knows-who-all's blood in my veins. But that don't
make sense to me. Cause in the first place, they're brown! The only thing black
about 'em is their hair. Lefty's dark all right, somewhere between a
Mounds and an Almond Joy. But that's brown! Brown, brown, brown! Anyway, now you're
supposed to say "African-American" which, except for being a mouthful, is fine
with me cause that's where their people came from. I mean, we call Marty "Italian"
and the closest he's been to Italy was Godfather III. But for now, I call 'em
what I always did.

The next day I go to practice to watch him throw. Then Marty brings him
over and introduces him. Any other kid, I want to see some more. Baseball's the
hardest game there is. On a given day even the best player can look like a bum.
Baseball can humble you quicker than life itself. But with Lefty, I don't have to see
him again. With Lefty I know.

I got a little spiel I use with kids: how they gotta work their tail off, not get
mixed up with drugs or booze, that kinda stuff. But with him being such a talent,
I want to say it just right. So I tell him I scout for the Yankees, which he knows,
and that I seen him pitch the day before, which he also knows. Then I get to the
point.

"You got a shot," I say. "There's only a couple hundred guys in the Bigs,
and they come from all over the world: Puerto Rico, the Dominican, Venezuela,
even Australia. It's like a club that's hard to get into. Real hard. And once you get
in, it's hard to stay there. To stay, you gotta do the job. Not be able to do the job.
Not try to do the job. Do it! Then and there, no matter what. Under the weather?
So what! A sick kid? Your wife run off? Nobody cares. Maybe you get one game
to prove it, maybe you get ten. Here's your chance, buddy boy, do it now or go
home and sell shoes!

"Then, if you do it, you gotta do it tomorrow. And the day after that. And
as soon as you stop—wham-o! You're out on your ears. It'll end faster than a
balloon going pop. There's only two things they want to know: 'Can you do the
job today?' And, 'How's about tomorrow?'"

I go on and on, saying how making the Bigs is one tough tow-road and
that besides talent, you gotta want it so bad you'll do whatever it takes. Which
means giving everything you got—and that's for openers. I tell him how raw he is,
how he don't know squat about pitching. Then I say the other stuff: how drugs or booze or the wrong kind of girl can take you down faster than you can say Jack Robinson. But I end by building him up. I say he's one of the best 15-year-olds I ever seen. (I don't say he's the best—which he is. Or that I think he's got the potential to be a left-handed Gibson, a colored Steve Carlton. I got plenty of time to build up his confidence. Now I tell him how hard it'll be.)

I tell him if he busts his butt, keeps his head on straight and don't do nothing dumb, he's got a shot. And that maybe someday I'll sign him to a contract with the Yankees. Then I shut up. It was some dandy little speechifying, if I do say so myself. So I'm standing there, chomping my gum, watching him, trying to figure out what he's thinking. But his face is like a poker, it don't show a thing. So I ask what he thinks.

"I want to make it," he says, real calm and quiet. "I want to pitch for the Yankees." He lowers his head and the next thing is, I know, coming from Marty. But that's okay because it's coming from him too. "Will you help me?" he says, all soft and serious. "Teach me what you know?"

In the whole world, there's one thing true about every big-kind-of-fish guy who ever was: we like being recognized. We like being known for who we are and what we done. It may be little, Buster Brown, but this here pond is where I swim. So, like some just-off-the-bus blockhead, I let the kid turn my head. But I don't want him thinking I'm a jelly doughnut. "Maybe," I go. "Maybe I will. I want to watch you some more, make sure you're worth my time."

He grins a great big, goofy-ass grin, just like Marty's grin the day before. It's going around, I think. The priest's got something contagious, now the kid's got it too. But he's got me pegged. He knows my "maybe" means yes. He shakes my hand, still grinning like a doofus, then runs to take his shower. I watch him go, loping like a colt. He don't even look like he's going hard 'til you realize how much ground he's covering. And I realize that he's got the same fluid stride of a Bernie Williams or an Aaron, even DiMag—guys who, even when they're busting it, are so smooth they look like they're not even trying.

The next day I go to practice again. When he ain't pitching, he's shagging flies. Afterwards, he jogs over to say hello. I tell him okay, I'll teach him about pitching. But on my terms. He's gotta meet me on Saturday mornings at seven o'clock. Which, for me, is sleeping in. But I read about a basketball coach in Philly who holds practice at sunup. Now that, I thought, is a way to separate the weeds from the shaft.

That first Saturday, I warm him up and give him pointers. He asks can he bring his buddies, Bumper and Chuckie T, who are on the team too. Why not? When I met them, they're regular kids. Oh, Chuckie liked to spend money. And Bumper had a short fuse—if he didn't like something you said, he might sit down
on first base, take a rest in the middle of practice. Like he’s testing you, to see what you’ll do. One day after fanning a couple times, he hammers the backstop with his bat. Maybe they weren’t all serious and levelheaded like Lefty; but they weren’t bad kids. At least not then.

Chuckie played center and Bumper’s at first base. Chuckie could fly and Bumper had a good stick. They weren’t like Lefty of course, but they could play. How far could they have gone? Who knows? College ball for sure, maybe the high minors. Probably not the Bigs, but with kids that age, you never know. So I’m glad to work with them. Besides, that means working with Lefty.

The second week they all show up at seven. After warming up Lefty, I throw some BP while they take turns hitting. Sometimes I work with Lefty, sometimes with the others: with Bumper on short hops and his footwork around first; with Chuckie on how to drag bunt and hit to right field, take advantage of his speed.

It’s funny how kids get when they’re playing ball. They dream about who they are, who they might be. And that’s who they become. Even though he couldn’t switch hit, Bumper loved Eddie Murray. And Chuckie’d pretend to be Willie Mays, making basket catches, throwing underarm, running out from under his cap without making it look like he’s trying to. They’d laugh and joke, pull each other’s pants down. Lefty jokes with ’em all right. But when he plays, he’s all game. Whenever they talk about who they want to be—Junior, A-Rod, Rickey, Hurt—Lefty says the same thing: he wants to be himself.

Anyways, back to that first morning, I let Lefty show me what he’s got. Which besides his heater is about thirteen pitches. He throws everything under the son and a daughter: a forkball, knuckler, he even throws underarm, like a left-handed Quiz. He’s got thirteen pitches and twelve of ’em do the same thing—nothing. No break, no movement, they come in flat, with no steam or pop. And some of that stuff is hard on the arm. So I lay down some rules.

First, I say, no junk pitches—only I use a stronger word than that. No screwballs or fork balls and no darn split-fingers. There’s nothing worse for a young arm than those darn splitters. “I’ll teach you to throw a curve,” I go. “But I want you to throw it over the top. Not sidearm or three-quarters. And nothing else, just fastballs and a curve.” A curve’s hard on a young arm too so I tell him no more than 25 a day. Tops. Except on Saturdays when I’m with him. “And no messing with that other stuff. If I see you throwing one darn split-finger, I’ll break your arm.” Which was a heck of a way to put it, the way things turned out. But that’s what I said.

He did what I told him. Oh, he threw some junk in a game once in a while. But not often, and only when I wasn’t there. He didn’t break my rules any more than I figured he would. Which is another thing about kids—they got to break the rules; it’s part of growing up. So when you lay ’em down, you gotta figure a kid’ll
break them once in a while. Not because they're bad, because they're kids. You gotta figure on that ahead of time.

Anyway, rule number two is something not everyone agrees with, not every baseball guy I mean. But I'm doing the coaching here so I don't care what others say. I want him to ride a bike. The key to pitching is leg strength. But the way a pitcher should strengthen his legs is bike riding. Don't run. Running's tough on the knees, especially knees like his. After the arm, and not counting the head of course, the legs are the most important thing a pitcher has. I tell him his left leg should be like a piston, driving forward, pushing him off of the mound.

Baseball's like no other game. You don't want to get all muscled up. I hate that iron pump stuff they all do nowadays. That's why they're all going down, getting hurt I mean. Their muscles are bound. Lifting weights is for football players. In baseball, you want flexibility, what's called elasticity. A pitcher's legs can never be too strong. But not weight-lifting strong—bike-riding strong. A pitcher's legs can never be too bike-riding strong.

Turns out he don't have one so I help him out a little. Not a lot, a little. He gets one of them stationary things and dam if he don't get up and ride every morning before going to school.

Third thing I say is hit the books, put your Easter eggs in more than one basket. "Another thing," I go, "watch out for the wrong kind of girl." Which is what got me into trouble: Vera, that floozy who runs off with a cowboy while I'm on a road trip. Good riddance too, except she took every cent I had. I tell him that I ain't his dad and I ain't gonna tell him what to do. But that I ain't gonna waste my time on a kid who thinks with his Johnson. "When you take a girl out," I say, "ask yourself one question: 'Would I be proud to introduce her to Father Marty?' As long as the answer's 'yes,' you got no problem."

The last thing is no drinking, smoking, and no taking drugs. He swears he won't touch them. And, except for that night with Bumper and Chuckie, he never did.

It's funny, thinking back, but that's probably the most I ever said to him in the whole six years. At one time, I mean. And he never talked much, never. Except that night when he got so wound up of course. When we did talk, it was always about baseball. Him asking questions and me yapping away. A lot of times I'd wonder what's going on inside him. He's what you call deep, like water that's still instead of out of the tap.

Anyway, a few weeks later, he invites me for dinner. His Aunt Pearl's a class act, I see that right away. She lays out a big spread: fried chicken, corn bread, mashed potatoes, collard greens, and homemade pecan pie. My stomach rumbles just thinking about it. I want to talk to her about nutrition. But after seeing her place and meeting her kids, I don't have the heart to say: "Listen Miss Pearl, no more grits or fried food. And how's about a steak once a week." So I tell him,
"Eat your fruits and vegetables. And watch your sweets! Two pieces of pie a week, tops. And no candy." You ask much more than that of a kid and you ain't being human.

That summer I met him and his pals every Saturday. Oh, sometimes Bumper or Chuckie don't show up. I tell 'em they probably need their beauty sleep. But Lefty doesn't miss. Sometimes Marty comes by too. He's a good coach and one thing that makes him good is, he knows what he doesn't know. Not that he'll admit it of course. But I'll catch him out of the corner of my eye, listening to me as hard as the kids. The best part though, besides him getting me into this in the first place, is that he never corrects me, never says nothing in front of the kids. He knows they gotta believe in me, knows that what I say will stick only if they think I know what I'm doing. So, once in a while, when it's just the two of us, he'll ask if I'm really sure about such-and-such. But never in front of the kids.

I'd bring a bag of bats and balls, put on my gear and get behind the plate. Lefty don't know nothing about leverage or follow through or bending his back—which, by itself, can add a yard to your fastball. So that first year we work on mechanics: on pushing off so he gets dirt on his left knee; on finishing a pitch, following-through so he ends up in a balanced position, ready to field the ball. I make him pitch from the wind-up, then from the stretch. He likes to work on his pick-off move and, though I know it's mainly a waste of time, I help with that too. You gotta be careful—if you take the fun out of the game, a kid just might stop playing.

Sometimes Chuckie and Bumper'd take turns hitting off him. Or trying to. Lefty's a player; he wants to blow 'em away. And whenever he does, which is nearly every time, he gives them a laugh like a horse, you know, goats 'em, makes it clear he's number one and knows it. He did that a lot, come to think of it. A lot. Which was partly why it happened too I guess.

Anyway, then comes time to teach him to pitch. Now pitching's as different from throwing as birds with different feathers trying to flock. And I can't teach him all I know. For starters, it'd take years. So we work on the three basic parts of pitching: velocity, location, and movement. When it comes to velocity, throwing hard, he can throw with anyone. So except for mechanics, which we go over and over and over again, there's nothing I can teach him. The second part is location: where a pitch is compared to the strike zone. I draw a box. "That's the strike zone." Then I draw another, half as big, inside the first one, and I color the difference. "This," I point to the little box inside, "is Dakota. You leave a pitch there and a major league hitter will send it to Dakota. North or South, it don't matter." I tell him about the Ted Williams exhibit in the Hall of Fame, which we go see after he gets sent to Oneota. It's a strike zone filled with colored baseballs. The ones in the center, in Dakota, are red and orange; Williams hit pitches there at .370 or better. But the ones on the edges of the strike zone, in the big box but not
the little one, are pale green. Even Ted Williams, probably the purest hitter who ever lived, only hit pitches there in the low .200s.

When Chuckie and Bumper are up, I want Lefty to think location, not smoke. I want ten on the outside corner at the knees. Ten fastballs, low and away. I don't care if they're nothing-on-em heaters that Bumper puts up on a roof somewhere—I want location. Each time he hits the target, he gets a point. I keep a chart of how many points he has: low and away, five outta ten; high and tight, three points; like that. Pitching's like anything else: the more you practice, the better you get. Which he can see from my chart.

The third thing's movement and changing speeds. It's something we ain't worried about so far because his fastball's got so much natural run. But except for his heater, he's only got his 25-a-day curve ball. So we work on throwing that, especially when he's behind in the count. And I teach him how to hold the ball deeper in his hand but throw with the same arm speed. Next thing you know he's got the makings of a major league change-up—thank you very much. He soaks it up. I mean the kid's a sponge.

That year we open against Holy Spirit, who finished first the year before. Chuckie's in center, leading off; Bumper's at first, batting cleanup; Lefty's hitting sixth. When he takes the mound, I'm a leaf, I'm shaking so bad. Then comes the first pitch. He rocks back, pulls his arms up behind him, then drops them and swings them up over his head like a pendulum; he makes a half-turn and pivots, lifts his right leg so high he can almost kiss his knee, while cocking his left arm like he's got a slingshot, then he drives forward, pushing off with his left leg and striding toward the plate while his arm snaps down across his body and he releases the ball, one knee brushing the ground, and him ending up, feet planted, head and glove up, ready for anything hit back at him. And I hear that sound I love so much: THWOP! Into the catcher's mitt. Watching him that day was a thing of beauty, it truly was.

He strikes out 14. In seven innings! We win 18-zip. Bumper gets two doubles and a dinger, Chuckie T. scores five times, Lefty gets two singles to go with his two-hitter. That night I take 'em all out to dinner: them three, Pearl and her gang, and Father Marty. We go to one of those red places where you get a lot of shrimp. After dinner, I sit back and put a cigar in my mouth—I can't light it of course, you ain't allowed to anymore—but I sit there chomping away, thinking it's like a fairy tale—I'm the Papa Bear with my three baby-bear colored kids.

Of course they don't all go that well. But Lefty does okay. Wins four, two of 'em shutouts. The one I remember best is we're up one in the last inning, bases loaded, two out, and he fans a big lefty power hitter from Star of the Sea. With a full-count curveball. The kid freezes, he thinks it's a heater at his head; his knees buckle and while he's bailing out, the ball breaks down across the plate like a scoop of vanilla falling off an ice cream cone. "Strike three!" The kid didn't have
a chance. Yeah, everything was fine 'til the end of the year when Bumper gets nabbed for armed robbery.

I should have seen it coming. Bumper kept getting into trouble, little things—cutting class, a fight in the cafeteria. One day he comes to school with "THE BUMP" shaved into his head. Then he pulls his "I'm-gonna-sit-down-'cause-I-don't-like-what-you're-saying routine" with Father Marty. Which gets him benched. That night him and another kid are caught knocking off a 7-11. And Bumper's packing. Seems the place has been hit before—by Bumper, it turns out—so the cops are staking it out, hiding, just waiting for him. When he sees 'em, he starts to run. "Stop or I'll shoot!" a cop yells, and Bumper's got the good sense to stop—which I thanked God for at the time.

Off he goes to reform school. I don't know why they send kids to those places. They're worse coming out than they were going in. And when Bump gets back six months later, forget about it! He's as hard as a shin guard. He don't care about baseball—or nothing else, near as I can tell.

I did see it coming with Chuckie. Not that it made no difference. First was the gold chains and flashy clothes. Next time I see him, he's got a Rolex, a real one. I know the signs: Chuckie's dealing. A month later, they kick him outta school. They can't prove nothing but they know what's going on; them nuns don't mess around. I don't see him for a while but I hear he's got lots of girlfriends and drives a fancy car. Then comes the shooting. He catches one in the neck; one side of his face is paralyzed in a permanent little half-smile. I stop by the hospital but he won't talk to me. I drop off what I brung—a ball signed by Willie Mays. I got it at a card show. He don't say nothing. Not thanks, nothing. When I give him the ball, he just nods. I get a weird feeling, like my spine's made of icicles.

One out of three, I tell myself, one out of duee. If a ball player gets a hit one time outta duee, he'll make the Hall. If one of my three makes it—I'll be all right.

Then comes his senior year and was that something! Lefty wins six, including a no-hitter. We think about college 'til the Yanks take him with their first pick in the second round, the 44th kid in the country. I'm scared of the Brewers and the Expos. Most clubs don't scout the cities anymore, the inner cities I mean, where the colored kids play. But by now a couple others are sniffing around, them two the most. Anyway, the Yanks offer him 150 and Pearl asks what should he do. I say, hold out for 200.

After three weeks, the Yanks go, "One seventy-five, tops. Take it or leave it!"

Pearl asks me to help so I call 'em up: "What? You gonna nickel-and-dime some orphan? A Catholic kid lives in the projects? What'd the papers say?"

They go, "So that's how you're gonna play it!"

Now if Lefty's not colored, I figure they start at 200. But let 'em think what
they want. "Course not," I go. "Though some gal from the N-double-A-what-ever-it-is was poking around, asking how the talks are going."

Sometimes the best way to get what's fair in life is to let people think you're taking 'em to the laundry. Anyway, after some more back and forth, they say okay, 195. Which I figure is close enough. Pearl wants me to take a cut but they give me a finder's fee, so I got mine. Besides, for me it ain't the dough.

As soon as he signs of course, all the tough talk's forgotten and they're as sweet as Pearl's pecan pie. The GM, a skinny guy with gray hair, tells Lefty to relax and have fun, that they don't expect to see him in the majors for four years at the earliest and five or six'll be just fine. Then they send him to Florida, to the Rookie League.

The minor leagues got different letters to tell you the level of how good the players are. There's the Rookie League, which is the lowest; then they got A, double A, which is harder; then triple A, which is a step below the Bigs. The other guys in Florida are real young too, which is good because he can make friends and not have to worry about getting overmatched. You don't want a kid playing with guys who're a lot better than him because he might lose his confidence. And if that happens, he ain't got a prayer.

After he signs, Pearl invites me for dinner. We're at the table, I'd put away a second piece of pie, and real natural like, just like we'd been talking about it all along, she asks what should they do with the dough. I drop my jaw, I don't know what to say. But they want to know what I think. Now when it comes to money, I don't know from Adam or Eve. But I do know a banker guy and I talk to him, and he puts me in touch with another guy and pretty soon we come up with a plan. I tell him, get a car—but a Ford or Chevy, nothing fancy and no darn pimp mobile! And some clothes: shirts and ties, a couple of sports coats. Put some away for a rainy day. With the rest, I say, there's nothing like real estate. So he buys a condo for Pearl and her kids, gets 'em out of the projects. A three-bedroom place with a balcony overlooking some woods, where you can sit out at night, drink your coffee and watch the stars. It's his of course, but she and her kids move in. And when he's in town, he lives there too.

Next thing you know, he's off to Florida and darn if he don't want me to go with him. I guess he's scared, like any kid leaving home. Well, I got some vacation coming so I ride down with him in his new Chevy. Pearl and me don't want him on his own. So we find a family that takes in ball players. There's lots of families like that in minor league towns. We find a big old house with a wrap-around porch. They take in two players from the team. He gets his own room and shares a bath with the other guy, and I go to his first game.

When Lefty takes the field, my throat gets lumpy. There's maybe three hundred people there. They play a real scratchy record of the Star Spangled Banner and I look over: darn if his lips aren't moving—the kid's singing along.
But when he takes the mound, he ain’t got it; he walks five and don’t get outta the first. We go for pizza afterwards and he makes a joke, the only joke I ever heard him tell—some down-South thing about how he feels like the dog that caught the car. Then he grins a big grin and says he guesses he was nervous.

“Being able to admit it’s the important thing,” I go. “That means you’ll be all right.”

Now I don’t know if that’s true or not, but it’s what he needs to hear. Sometimes you gotta do that with a kid: tell ’em what they need to hear, even if it ain’t exactly true. You gotta because they need to hear it. Anyway, his next start’s a lot better: five innings, three runs, six strikeouts.

Then it’s time for me to head home. “Lefty,” I go, “there’s something I gotta tell you. Stay healthy. Ride your bike. I don’t know how many guys, when they get their chance, POW, they pull a hamstring. Watch what you eat, get your rest . . .” I’m going on and on, ragging him like a granny, when all of a sudden he leans over, wraps me in a bear hug, rests his jaw on top of my head, and starts patting my back like I’m a baby he’s trying to burp. It’s not something I’d ever admit, not something I’d tell him of course, but it felt nice when he did that. Warm and cozy like. Real warm and cozy.

Anyway, the next couple of years is a lot of ups and downs. He pitches good one time, then gets shelled. Seven innings, nine strikeouts is followed by an inning-and-a-third, five hits, six walks. If you look at it week by week, you think he’s going nowhere. But if you step back and look in what’s called perspective, you see he’s winning more than half the time and that just when he’s going good, he gets promoted. Then, in September of his third year, the Yanks are outta the race and they bring up a slew of kids, and darn if he ain’t one of ’em. We know it’s only a look-see but there he is—in a Yankee uniform in the same dugout used by the Babe, the Iron Horse, the Yankee Clipper, Yogi and the Mick. He rides the bench for a week, which is what I expect. But after a 15-inning loss where they use up lots of pitchers, the skipper tells Lefty he’s gonna start tomorrow night. Against the Red Sox.

He gets tickets for all of us: me and Pearl, Marty and some nuns from school. He calls up Bumper and Chuckie. They invite him back to the neighborhood, to celebrate. I say, “Why don’t you wait ’til after the game?” But he says no, the thing now is making the Bigs, not staying there, that he might not do well and then he wouldn’t want to go.

A Chinaman friend of mine, a scout for the Dodgers, told me something I never forgot—how there’s a certain kind of Chinese guy who don’t like it if you start doing good in life, start to get ahead. They get the red-eyed-dragon disease, that’s what they call it, the red-eyed-dragon disease. Like if you’re a farmer who had a good year, they might bust up your plow. Or if your little business starts going fine, they’ll set it on fire. They figure that life stinks and you ain’t gonna
prove 'em wrong. That's how their minds must work. Just like the minds of Bumper and Chuckie. Maybe they thought he was where they should’ve been. They forgot about all the work, all he did to get there. I keep thinking about it and thinking about it, trying to figure it out. Maybe I never will.

Anyway, the three of them go for a "reunion" celebration. They hit some dive, get tanked up, maybe Chuckie breaks out some dope—Lefty never did admit that part—but I wouldn’t be surprised if they sniffed or chewed or whatever it is they do. Anyway, Lefty’s sitting there, bragging away—about so-and-so’s Rolls Royce, or a joke Jeter told him, or about the gals who hang around after a game, looking to meet a ballplayer. He tells them how he wants to get a ranch in the country and raise horses, and how he’ll invite 'em out to go riding and swim in his pool, because no matter how big he makes it, he’ll never forget where he came from, that kinda b.s.

Now the best of us can be happy for a friend only up to a point. And those two ain’t in that crowd. Okay, so he laid it on. Let’s say he did. Thick, real thick, thicker than the head of our clown of an owner. But jeez-Louise, pitching in the Stadium would go to any kid’s head.

Anyway, while he’s going on and on, they start to boil. There’s Bumper who, besides reform school, has by now been in and out of the joint. And Chuckie with his lop-sided face, still pushing dope to high school kids. The way I see it, it wasn’t planned or nothing, at least that’s what I pray. One minute they’re joking around, then they start to argue, the arguing gets serious, Lefty jabbering away, them saying he ain’t such a big shot. There’s a push, another, and all of a sudden, Bumper picks him up and throws him to the ground. Lefty screams, "My arm, my arm, don’t hurt my arm!" Which is when they break the damn thing. His left one of course. Dislocated his shoulder too. It’s almost an hour ’til the ambulance comes.

It’s over now of course, it’s been almost a year. His arm’s fine again. He can use it for almost everything. Except pitching. Oh, he can throw all right. Just not the way he used to. He’s lost the hop on his fastball, the juice, the heat that made him special. He wants to develop his breaking pitches and so I’ll help with that. Who knows? Maybe he will turn into what they call a finesse pitcher, a guy with pinpoint control. Or maybe with exercise and rest and whatever, his arm strength will come back. Who knows? He’s a battler. He won’t quit. And if, after all that, he don’t make the Bigs, I’ll try to get him into coaching or scouting cause he’s learned a lot about the game.

It was bad all right, about as bad as anything I ever seen. I still think about running them over, running them down with my truck. If I saw ’em in the street, I might do it. I really might. Sometimes, thinking back on it, I get so mad, so filled with rage, I start to choke.

But you gotta go on. No matter what happens in life, you gotta go on. I
mean, what choice do you have? And he’s a gritty kid, he always had a way of reaching down, finding a little extra. He’ll do it now too. Oh sure, for a while there all he did was lie around the house, watching TV, sleeping 16 hours. But he’s up and out now. Most days anyhow.

So we’ll see what happens. Maybe he’ll make it; maybe he won’t. But no matter how it turns out, he can always remember them games where he shut ’em down, blew ’em away. And he could. He really could. And one more thing—it’s more than the rest of us can ever say. That’s for sure. That’s for darn sure.
The Mind Reader
It happened so long ago you'd think I'd just forget it. But I haven't, I can't; it's nested in my mind, coiled and twisted into my memory like a serpent I can't get rid of. I remember it at odd moments: when I'm eating breakfast or riding the train to work. Once I thought of it while I was making love. And each time I do, it remains as awful, as sinister and stunning as it was that night. But for reasons that keep changing. Different, elusive reasons I never fully understand.

It was the winter of 1973 and I was still in college. The country was at war in Southeast Asia, and in the summer, there were riots in the cities. Events that were deadly serious, yet with an unreality about them too. As if they weren't all they seemed to be, not something to take at face value. I remember anti-war protests that felt as serious as a rock concert: the air filled with music and the smell of marijuana, kids wearing red bandanas, waving Viet Cong flags, and chanting rhymes about how Ho Chi Minh and the National Liberation Front, the NLF, were going to win, like children sticking their tongues out or saying dirty words at dinner to see what reaction they could provoke. Even the young black rioters interviewed on television seemed to pretend to feel angry when what they really felt was scorn, and perhaps a queer sort of pride that someone was paying attention. It was theater, a way of showing off. It wasn't real, not to the kids on campus, or the ones in the ghetto, maybe not even to those who told the police to shoot to kill. But of course it was all real. And serious, deadly serious. I just didn't see it, didn't understand.

It was a Thursday night; we were in a college hangout called the Waystation, an old stucco building that had been there since the Revolution. Once it was a carriage house on the road from Philadelphia to Baltimore. The stage, then the train, would stop while passengers got out to stretch or eat a meal. I used to think about them, trying to imagine what they were like: gentlemen farmers, merchants, salesmen, immigrants, perhaps an occasional Congressman who knew Henry Clay. No one knew who used to sit in that room, their boots drying in front of a fire, with a mug of ale and a trencher filled with stew. But now the place was run down, seedy-looking; there was talk of tearing it down. The outside was cracked and peeling; hunks of stucco had been patched so often, they looked like tumorous sores. Inside, the great
The fireplace had been long ago bricked over and the planks on the floor were stained and worn, more grey than brown, with dust so thick you could move it with your shoe. People said it was owned by a speculator, that the university wanted the land for a new dormitory, and that only the price and some protestors from the historical society were holding things up. But students, being students, had made the place their own despite, or because of, the dirt and wear, the off-color draft beer, and the jukebox that played so loud it rattled your rib cage.

It was nearly nine o'clock and I was at the bar. The room was crowded; it was always crowded on Thursdays. Students and former students and those who never were, mingled with a handful of faculty members, the younger ones, and a couple of "townies" looking for girls who believed in free love. They sat around cheap metal tables with red Formica tops, on chairs with rusted chrome legs and red plastic seats, laughing and talking and arguing about politics, philosophy, religion, and sex. And below the surface, beneath the loose talk and the laughter, lay a reality that few of them knew or cared about. I was like the rest of them. Jeffrey was not.

"People can be divided into two types?" Jeffrey was saying. "The weak and the strong?"

We were talking about psychology, my field of study, and a paper I was writing, and he was repeating what I'd told him about a personality test. The test had been developed after World War II by a group of psychologists who, shocked by what happened in Nazi Germany, had tried to understand how doctors and lawyers and bankers and businessmen—a population of law-abiding, God-fearing, ordinary people—could have taken part in it all, or at least stood there, watching it unfold, without trying to stop it, without crying out in protest. The philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the phrase the "banality of evil" to describe men like Adolph Eichmann who could be kind to children and animals, yet be part of a totalitarian machinery that murdered 12 million people: six million Jews from across the continent, and also homosexuals, gypsies, Russians, Ukrainians and other East Europeans; civilians: old men, women, children. The psychologists had developed a test to discover what kind of person could do such things. In the psychology literature, it is called the "F-scale," the "F" standing for fascist. Elegant in its simplicity, the test consists of only five questions with which a person either agrees or disagrees. An extreme response, strong agreement or disagreement, on all five items, reveals, according to the test-makers, that a respondent has an authoritarian bent or fascist tendencies, and, inferentially, that he might well fall in behind someone like a Hitler or a Mussolini. Jeffrey had asked me what the five questions were and, when I'd told him, he latched onto one of them.

"People can be divided into the weak and the strong? Now I'm supposed to tell you whether I agree with that or not? And depending on my answer, you can tell if... what's the jargon you used? If I have an 'authoritarian personality?"
It occurred to me later that I may have upset him, that what he did was a defense, a way of protecting himself from what he felt as an attack. But none of that occurred to me then. All I saw was that he was distorting what I'd told him, deliberately oversimplifying. I was sorry I'd brought the subject up.

"It's not my test," I explained again. "I didn't make it up. It's a standard test that has been used for decades. And that's only one of a series of questions. Someone has to answer all of them. Then, depending on all the answers, a psychologist can make a guess, an educated guess, about a tendency that might be part of someone's personality."

He smiled in that self-satisfied way of his, breathing deep and laughing once, so that his shoulder rose and fell. As if to suggest that life was so simple, so easy to understand, if only you saw it the way he did. But then, of course, the smile also suggested, that was too much to ask.


A TV was suspended above the bar and someone had turned it on. I looked up and watched a powerful man in a red t-shirt and shorts slam an orange ball through an iron hoop. There was no cheering, no applause. The volume was turned down. It was the music, the loud, driving rock and roll music dominating all sound in the overcrowded room that caused the televised giant to run down the floor, waving a dark brown fist.

"Jeffrey, why are you ridiculing what I told you? Making it sound silly, like so much nonsense?"

I was trying to cut through his playacting, hoping that one question, one honest question, would change things between us. But he was like everything else around me: the jukebox, the furniture, the mirror behind the bar. Even if I had opened the door and let in enough air to clear out the haze and cigarette smoke, it would all still be there, it would all be the same.

"Is that what I was doing?" he said.

I felt anger build up inside me. He was patronizing me, treating me like a fool. Yet, naively, I persisted.

"Jeffrey, there are probably plenty of psychologists who might criticize that question, may be the whole test. But their criticisms would be thoughtful, analytic. They wouldn't take it so . . . personally."

He signaled to the bartended that we wanted another round.

"Suppose I prove it?" he said. "Right here. Tonight. Suppose I prove that all your little textbook questions aren't worth the paper they're written on. If I did that, what would you think?"
As the bartender set two mugs of beer in front of us, I realized he aroused my curiosity. But instead of his question, I thought about him, about how well I knew him and what it was I knew.

Pale and thin, with dark curly hair, Jeffrey was not imposing to look at. A graduate student in photography, he was outstanding in his field, at least that's what people said. He'd had two shows and was already selling his work. He had few friends; I suppose I counted as one of them. But if not well liked, he was always treated with a certain deference or respect. In part, I'm sure, because of his talent. But there was another reason too.

During that winter of protests and marches, it seemed as if he always wore his old army fatigues. And though he never talked about it, I had somehow learned what he'd done: He'd been a first lieutenant, won a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. He led reconnaissance missions into Laos at a time when American troops weren't in Laos, at least according to the government. There was a day in the jungle when he surprised a North Vietnamese soldier and killed him with his bayonet. And an afternoon, years later, when—though I never heard him talk about the war, never criticize its wisdom or morality—he, along with a few hundred others, threw his medals over the White House fence.

His left hand was deformed, the tips of his thumb and forefinger missing. I'd heard it was caused by a land mine. It was gruesome looking, a reminder of a war I detested. But it was something else—a badge, a mark, something I secretly envied. For it was proof that Jeffrey had been tested. And come through.

In contrast I was in my first year of graduate school. I was 23. My goal was to teach at a university. And though I never achieved it, I was, and am, generally content with my life. Except around Jeffrey. Then I'm aware of something else, a pinprick of a feeling, that I don't measure up, not to him. And that I never will.

"Prove it?" I said. "What do you mean you're going to prove it?"

"A demonstration." He waved his hand indicating the roomful of students. "With one of them."

He nodded toward the back. "See that girl? In the corner, in the sweatshirt. The one who looks like she's just been raped." He smiled coldly at the description. "Where do you think she's headed? A junkie, an alcoholic? Battered wife, unwed mother? All of the above? She's perfect, exactly what I need."

The girl sat at a table with two others. Above their heads, revolving slowly and illuminated from within, a half-dozen miniature horses, tan with shaggy white hooves, pulled a red beer wagon past green plastic trees. Around and around they went, in circles, forever. Or until someone stopped them.

Her companions looked like they came from an earlier era. A pretty blonde in a tight-fitting sweater who looked like a cheerleader or sorority member was listening intently to a broad-shouldered fellow with short hair in a varsity jacket. But the girl with them, the one he'd singled out, was a child of the times.
Her eyes did not shine from too much beer; rather, they had a glazed, indifferent, faraway look signifying drugs or depression or both. Her sweatshirt looked slept-in, or as if she took it off at night, rolled into a ball, and put it under her pillow. Her hair, long and stringy and a dull shade of brown, hung down over her shoulders and full, unfettered breasts, sprawling onto the tabletop like so many roots from a dying plant.

I wondered what she had in common with the other two, why they were together in the first place. The girl seemed left out of the conversation next to her. As if she were there by accident or as a favor to someone. The blonde would lean back and laugh or reach across the table and take the fellow’s hand. But her expression, the dull, vacant stare, never changed.

I felt a kind of tired sympathy for the girl. She was like so many others, too many for one person to care about. In those days, it seemed like the campus was littered with kids just like her: who’d dropped out or run away, whose search for something they couldn’t define led them to fill their bodies with drugs and live like vagabonds. Yet they were proud and defiant too, as if what they were doing was somehow true, or free, or spiritually authentic. I wished someone would turn off the music and turn up the volume of the basketball game.

“I need a strategy,” Jeffrey said. “I can’t just walk over and introduce myself. She’d have the advantage then, in spite of herself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re a man of science,” he said. “Think of it as an experiment. I’m about to conduct an experiment using that girl.” His sigh was too heavy to be genuinely felt. “I wish there was someone who was more of a challenge, but in the interest of time . . .”

A look of concern must have crossed my face because, in a mocking tone, he said, “Don’t worry, your liberal sensibilities won’t be offended. I have no intention of harming her.”

He was patronizing me again, I wanted to insult him and leave. Instead I watched him reach for a piece of paper and on it, in large capital letters, print two words: “I KNOW.” He showed me the paper, then folded it in half.

“We begin,” he said.

Without glancing at her, he walked over to the jukebox near her table, dropped in a coin, and pushed some buttons. The girl did not notice him. Her expression, the dull, vacant stare, did not change.

On his way back and with seeming indifference, he bumped her chair and dropped the paper near her foot. She picked it up and waved it listlessly after him, then called out as he re-crossed the room. But he paid no attention and rejoined me at the bar.

“You must not look at her,” he said and obediently, I turned away. “That was to get her attention. Now we wait.”
It didn’t take long. A moment later she came up behind us and tapped him on the shoulder. But he did not respond.

"Hey," she said, tapping him again, "you dropped this."

Deliberately, he spun around on his stool, and when I turned too, I thought of his description: a girl who’s just been raped. Her eyes were red, probably from marijuana. Her skin was blemished and sallow looking. And her clothes—a gray sweatshirt and a pair of faded jeans—hung on her like they belonged to someone else, as if she’d found them somewhere, tried them on, and decided to wear them anyway, even though they didn’t fit. She couldn’t have been more than 21. But her tired, drawn, worn-out appearance made her look years older.

“You dropped this,” she said, offering him the paper.

Jeffrey kept his hands folded in his lap, refusing to take in. In a tone that was nearly hostile, he said, simply, “I know.”

The girl started. She stood there a moment, her outstretched hand holding her offering, and smiled tentatively.

“Is this a joke?” she said. “Some kind of joke?”

He ignored her question. “You read it,” he said, and she colored slightly.

“It opened when I picked it up,” she lied.

Jeffrey shook his head. “You had to read it.” His tone was matter of fact.

“You have no self-control.”

The girl seemed to collect herself.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on here but this is yours, right?” She waved the paper and he nodded. “Well here,” she flipped it into his lap, “if it’s yours, take it.”

She went back to her table and Jeffrey stared at her. I was about to laugh at his “experiment” but he ignored me and stared at the girl.

She sat back down and pretended not to notice. But she knew he was watching. Self-consciously, she combed her hair with her fingers, then, after lighting a cigarette, made an attempt to join in her friends’ conversation. All the time, Jeffrey stared. Finally she crushed out her cigarette and stared back. Their eyes locked and for a moment she glared at him, chin up, challenging him. Then her face relaxed and she smiled, a tentative little half-smile, inviting him to respond. Instead, he spun around on his stool.

“Superstition,” he said. “Signs, omens, magical thinking—that’s what’s important to her. She doesn’t realize how important.” He sipped his beer and I thought of how a detective works, deductively, clue by clue, piecing things together. “She has no self-respect, anyone who looks like that... she probably hates her life, hates herself. But instead of doing anything about it, or trying to, she’s waiting for someone to come along and do it for her. A stranger, a magician, some phantom from the back of her mind who’ll ride in and whisk her up on his horse and carry her away to live happily ever after.”
I thought about Samuel Beckett and his play, *Waiting for Godot*, and about the cults and movements and religious sects that had sprung up, and about the desperate kids who had run away to join them. I was about to mention all that to Jeffrey, but he continued to explain and I did not interrupt.

“She’s starting to wonder if I’m him, the one who’s finally come. It’s a simple enough dynamic, it happens all the time.” He grinned, bearing his teeth, and said, “Your crowd must have a name for it.”

I don’t know why I answered. I knew he was baiting me, treating me with the same contempt he felt for the girl. Yet for some reason, I felt the need to show I understood.

“A ‘conversion experience,’” I said. “Someone who’s predisposed to make a radical change. That’s a term that comes to mind.”

“Why do you people have to label the life out of things? ‘Conversion experience.’” He nearly spit out the words. “When what you mean is pathetic little people leading pathetic little lives, hoping against hope that someone will come along and change it all for them. And someone will. Inevitably, they will find someone.” He reached into his wallet for a ten-dollar bill. “But she’s not quite ready so I’ll help things along.”

He handed the money to the bartender and ordered that a small glass of ice water be taken to her.

“She’ll ask who sent it. The only thing you’re to say is, she already knows.” The bartender cheerfully agreed.

I watched in the mirror as he set the glass in front of her, said something, then shrugged. The girl looked up at Jeffrey. At his back.

At first she ignored the water. Then she wrapped one hand around the glass and began tapping it lightly. She glanced our way, saw he still wasn’t looking, raised the glass halfway to her mouth, leaned toward it and took a sip. She glanced up again and took another sip. Then she put the glass down and turned in her chair, as if making a final attempt to resist. Then, suddenly, as if overcome with a burning, unquenchable thirst, she grabbed the glass, lifted it to her mouth, and drained it down. I told him what happened and he nodded.

“Good choice, don’t you think? Water? Necessary for life, yet so abundant, it’s free. Of course it could have been anything—ashes, an animal, wine that represents blood. They’re all incarnations of the same thing, aren’t they? And so, the form doesn’t really matter. It’s the belief that’s key. Of course, with her, I wanted the taking, the taking of something into her body.”

What he said was chilling; it was so calculated, so piercing, so merciless. Yet fascinating too, darkly fascinating.

“She wants to believe now, she wants to believe in me.” He motioned that we wanted another round. “But it’s far from over. She’ll probably come over. If she does, no matter what she says or asks you, you must not answer her. For me
to do this without harming her, you cannot say a word.”

He was being condescending again and I got irritated. I sipped my beer and looked up. There was a commercial on the television, a time out in the game, and I wondered what the score was. Before I could find out, the girl was standing behind us.

“Hey,” she said, tugging his shoulder and spinning him around, “what’s going on?”

He stared at her and did not reply, and she took her hand off him.

“I said, what’s going—”

“What do you think?” he interrupted.

“I have no idea!” Her tone was indignant.

He reached around for his beer and took a long, slow sip. “I know,” he said.

The girl took a half step backward. I could feel her unease.

“You drank the water,” Jeffrey said.

“That was from you?”

The transparency of her ploy made him smile.

“Okay, so I knew it was from you. I was thirsty. So what?”

He watched her, saying nothing.

“I said I was thirsty.”

“I knew you were,” he said.

The girl began to laugh, a nervous little laugh, more to herself than anything. As if to hear a familiar sound, to convince herself she was really here and this was really happening.

“This is creepy,” she said. “This is really creepy. You’re creepy and . . . Jesus, now you’re gonna say ‘I know’ again.”

The music seemed to blast louder than ever.

“Is this a game? Is this some kind of game?” she said.

“In a way,” Jeffrey said.

“It is?” She was clearly surprised by his answer. Her shoulders hunched and she began stroking her neck. One arm dropped straight down, her hand dangling; the other settled across her breasts. She seemed to muster something and her tone was flip.

“Suppose I don’t want to play?” she said.

He shrugged and she turned to go back to her table. She took a few steps in that direction, then changed her mind.

“You weren’t going to stop me, were you? You’d just let me go back there. To them. Them.” Her tone made it clear how she felt about her companions.

“Why would I stop you?” Jeffrey said. “Why would I want to?”

For the first time the girl looked at me. “What’s going on here? What’s this all about?”
But following his instructions, I did not reply.
She looked down, as if deciding what to do. The stool next to him was
empty and suddenly, like a child in a drugstore, she bounced up on it and spun
around.
“Okay, I’ll play your game. What are the rules?” She laughed. “What are the
rules? Does your game have any rules?”
“I don’t want you to sit there,” Jeffrey said.
She threw back her head and laughed, much too loudly to sound carefree
as she wanted. “You think you’re so cool. Who cares what you want? Who gives
a flying fuck?”
He watched her for a moment, expressionless, then, without a hint of
irritation, shifted on his stool, turning his back on her, dismissing her, shutting her
out. His manner was totally controlled and icy cold.
The girl didn’t know what to do. She sat there, gripping the chrome band
of her stool with both hands, twisting herself back and forth like a child waiting
to be told she was excused, that she could get up from the table and go out to
play. Loudly, to provoke him, she said, “How’d you hurt your hand? Playing
games with somebody else?”
He ignored her. Finally, when she realized he would continue doing so, she
climbed down off the stool and came around to stand in front of him.
I thought of the way some parents discipline their children, giving or with­
holding love and approval, like a door that’s open one moment, then slammed
shut, until the child does what it’s told. And when she obeyed him, when she’d
climbed down and came around in front of him, he reopened the door.
“It happened in the war,” he said. “Do you know what a land mine is?”
The girl nodded. “We were on patrol, one of my men stepped on a land mine.
He was blown apart. Like a firecracker. I was next to him.”
I’m not sure why her manner changed so abruptly. In part, I’m sure, be­
cause of what he’d put her through: the way he’d humbled her, bent her to his
will. And because his answer was so direct, so unexpected. But surely, too, be­
cause of what it was he said. We saw it on television every night, we marched and
we signed petitions. But few of us were really affected by that war. Not really.
Not in the way he’d been. But whatever the reasons, once he answered her ques­
tion, her whole demeanor changed.
“My God, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I am so very, very . . .”
He shrugged. “The funny part is, it was one of ours.”
“Oh my God,” she said.
He sensed the change too and, in response, he became sympathetic, almost
gentle. He shook his head, telling her without a word that it was all right.
“Things have happened to you too, haven’t they?” he said softly.
The girl nodded and her eyes filled with tears. It was as if, after all the back
and forth, she had just decided to give in to him, trust him, to go along, no matter what that meant. She stood there, head bowed, like some disheveled prodigal ready to accept her penance.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?"
"So much," she said. "So many things."
"And it's hard to explain, huh? Explain to anyone."
"Whenever I try . . ." She broke off, crying. She turned her head until she'd regained control. He gave her his handkerchief and she wiped her eyes and nose.

"Confusion, the confusion is terrible," she said. "About things they don't know exist."
"And tired? Tired of everything?"
"Sometimes," she began to tremble, "sometimes I think about . . ." He reached out and stroked her cheek.
"Don't give in," he whispered. "You're closer to it than you think."
She nodded, smiled through her tears, looked up at him and said, "I know, I'm going west—San Francisco. Actually, a little north, a town on the Russian River. The people there are so different, so laid back and mellow . . ."

She was hoping for his approval, hoping he'd say that was just the thing to do—start again, turn the page, a new beginning. Instead he wheeled and turned on her, snapped like a rattler, the door slamming shut. "And that will change things?" His tone was insulting.

"It's different there," she pleaded. "People there have something going, something real, they're not so hung up . . ."

They were words she'd said many times. To herself and to others. But now, even before she finished, it was clear she no longer believed in them.

"It's over, isn't it?" he said. "Your daydream. Your last, best hope. You thought running away would change everything. You'd go to a magic place where things are different. Where you'd be different. Transformed. But I made you see it, didn't I? Made you see what a sorry little dream it is." He chuckled once and his shoulders rose and fell. "Isn't it strange how things work out? I never saw you before tonight and I've just changed your life."

"What's going on?" she said to me. "Please tell me what's going on."

Again I became aware of the music. Rock and roll, primitive, driving rhythms, so loud I could barely think. I began to answer, then felt his hand on my arm.

"What do you want to know?" he said.
"Your name," she said. "Tell me your name."
"My name's not important. But if you want to know, I'll tell you." He did. Then: "And yours?"

Hers was a frantic struggle now, an attempt to salvage something, a shred of self-respect from the ordeal she'd been through. "I thought you knew," she said. "I thought you knew everything."
Jeffrey smiled at her cruelly, one side of his upper lip raised. “That’s exactly what you thought,” he said.

She staggered, as if punched in the chest. Then she said, “I know what you’re doing—playing cat and mouse. And I’m the mouse.”

He nodded.

“But why?” she pleaded. “What in God’s name do you want?”

“What do you think?”

She smiled knowingly and shifted her weight onto one foot, accenting her hip. She’s attractive, I thought. In spite of herself, she’s attractive. But his reaction was different than mine.

“Don’t make me insult you,” he said. She turned her head as if she’d been slapped. “Is that the only time you feel?” he said. “The only time you feel anything any more? When you’re high or getting laid? By someone? Anyone?”

It came pouring out now, the invective, as if he’d been restraining himself all along and could no longer hold back. “And when it’s over, when you wake up in some strange bed or come down off your high, how do you feel? Disgusted with yourself? Empty? Used? Yet you keep doing it, don’t you? Again and again. It’s all you know anymore, isn’t it? It’s all that’s left.

“That’s why you came to me tonight,” he continued. “Why you let me do it. Because whatever else I may be, I’m real. And with me, you are too. It’s no exaggeration, is it? No exaggeration to say I make you feel alive! I woke you up from your stupor, your drugged-up daze. Humiliated you? Yes, I did . . . but you got something in return. Something precious, something you need—the feeling of being alive.”

“Stop it,” she said. “Please stop.”

I’d had enough. I got up to leave but she grabbed my arm and looked at Jeffrey. “You can,” she said to him. “You both can.”

He grabbed her shoulder and shook her roughly. “Do you want to know what this is all about?” he said. She nodded and again her eyes filled with tears.

“This was an experiment. You were the subject of an experiment.”

“A what?” She couldn’t believe what she’d heard.

He nodded at me. “We made a bet,” he said.

“What kind of bet?”

“That I could manipulate you.” His tone was casual, as if he’d just told her the time.

“To do what?” She began to cry. “I already said . . . .” She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands. “You have no right to do this.”

“Why not? You enjoyed it. You enjoyed every moment.”

“Maybe at first,” she said.

“That’s the first truthful thing out of your mouth,” he said.

She nodded. Even in the midst of it all, she seemed pleased by his appro-
bation. He continued. "We were having a discussion, an argument. In order to make my point, I had to find someone. I didn't have much time so I needed someone easy, someone who's slovenly without any dignity or self-respect. I chose you."

She stood there, numb with disbelief.

"I didn't intend to puncture your balloon, end your little West Coast dream. That wasn't part of the plan. But now that I have," he softened his voice, "I want to make it up to you." He held out his hand, the mangled hand, stroked her hair and softly spoke her name. "Let me help you. Help you see what you've turned into. You still have time. It's not too late, I can help."

"How?" she sniveled.

"Go home and look in the mirror. Look at what you've let yourself become. Then do something about it. You can do it. I want you to. And when you have, come back. I'll be here. I'll wait for you."

"Go fuck yourself," she said. Her words were fiery, but her manner was meek and defeated, there was no fight left in her. She went back to her table. A moment later, she picked up her coat and left the room.

"Jeffrey..." I began.

"Not now," he said.

I lit a cigarette and looked up. Ten basketball players and two referees, out of sync with the music, were running back and forth, back and forth.

We waited almost two hours before she returned. In that whole time, we said nothing to each other. Not a word about what happened. I nursed my beers, careful not to get intoxicated, and waited.

If I hadn't been there to see her when she came back, I would not have believed it, the change was that remarkable. Instead of a runaway, or a pothead, she looked like a student. The sweatshirt had been replaced by a pale blue, oxford cloth shirt with a button down collar and a midnight blue, v-neck sweater. Her jeans, though faded, looked neat and clean, and came down over the tops of a pair of polished black boots. Pulled straight back and hanging in a ponytail, her hair looked freshly brushed and seemed to shine in the haze of the room. Though she still wore no makeup except a trace of lipstick, her face looked smooth and her skin clearer. Even the dullness in her eyes was gone; they were alert and lively.

"Hello," she said, coming over.

Jeffrey smiled at her. "You look much better."

"I feel better," she said. "I wasn't sure you'd really wait. I mean, I know you said you would, but I wasn't sure." She took another step. "Can I sit with you?"
Wanna buy me a beer?”

He shook his head and her body tightened. It was not the answer she’d expected.

“Why not?”

He reached out and caressed her cheek.

“Because you don’t need me to. Not anymore.”

She stood there, letting him stroke her, then pressed her cheek against her shoulder, pinning his hand in place. He started to pull away but she reached for his hand, held it in both of hers, then, softly, lay a kiss on the tip of his damaged forefinger, then his thumb.

“I understand,” she said. “I think I finally understand.”

“I think so too,” he said.

She nodded and turned, and he threw some money on the bar. We were gone before she crossed the room.

As I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, I told him he’d done a fine thing. He leaned back, his hands behind his head, and even in the dark I could see him smile.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” he said.

I did not say a word.

“A fine thing,” he said, sarcastically. “For Christ’s sake, I could have done anything I wanted with that girl. Anything!”

“But you didn’t,” I protested. “You could have, but you didn’t.”

“She’d have let both of us . . .”

“But you didn’t,” I said.

“I didn’t, I didn’t. But someone will. Others probably have. And others certainly will. She was easy for me, and she’ll be just as easy for someone else . . . Maybe not tomorrow. But next week, next month. . . .”

I drove in silence.

“But you,” he said, half-turning in his seat, “you were worse. More difficult of course. But worse, so much worse.”

I didn’t know what he meant.

“With you it was intellect, intellectual curiosity. You watched. Damn it man, you watched!”

He raised his voice. “How far would you have let me go? When would you have stopped me?

“I’m not going to harm her, don’t worry, it’s all going to be fine.’

“I did it to her all right, but don’t you see, I did it to you.”

I watched him reach for a cigarette, his first of the night, and light it.

“Jeffrey,” I said, “I want to tell you something. As a friend. Something you won’t want to hear.”

He stared straight ahead and I said something I used to believe. “I think
you’re an angry person. Bitter. Maybe because of the hell you’ve been through. Jeffrey, I think you need help. There are people, professionals . . . I think you need to see someone."

He looked at me and smiled and in that moment I came to hate him. "I know," he said.

I turned on the radio and listened to two men analyze the results of the basketball game. I drove him home in silence, dropped him at his apartment, and did my best never to see him again.
Two Letters from the Doctor
I’ve had these letters for over 30 years. The paper they’re written on is yellow and cracked. There were times when I thought about burning them. And times when I thought about letting others read them, trying to get them published. But to do either seemed like a betrayal. I couldn’t throw them away because, except for some snapshots and him mugging in a home movie, they’re all I have to remember him by. And I shouldn’t get them published, I thought, because the Doctor, Michael Patrick Dougherty III, had written to me, just me. About things he’d been through, being on the edge. But he didn’t want anyone else to know. At least that’s what I thought.

Through the years, I shared them with only one person—the woman I was lucky enough to marry. She read them and afterward took my hands and pressed them to her breasts and said, “I love you, John. Make love to me now.”

He could have cheated too but didn’t. And so, because of his honesty, because he played it ramrod straight, Doc was bounced out of college and into the army.

But not too long ago I had my 50th birthday. And since then, something strange has begun to happen. The Doctor has started to talk to me. Quietly, in whispers, I have to listen carefully—but it’s him all right, I think it is.

Oh, a part of me knows it’s my imagination, wishful thinking. Or maybe guilt. That it happened to him but not to me. But sometimes I think it’s his voice, I really do.

Usually he’ll remind me of something, to give his mom a call, see if she needs anything. Or to call my own. And a while ago, he told me it was all right, I could go ahead if I wanted, get the letters published. Some people wouldn’t believe them, he said; some would already know, and some wouldn’t care. No big deal, he said: no sweat, either way. And so, though they’re over three decades old, I decided to go ahead.

All you really need to know is in the letters. But here’s some background. He used to call me “Dobe,” which rhymes with robe. We were ordinary kids, sons of working class parents who’d climbed a rung or two on the ladder of success, but no more than that. By the mid-1950s, we lived in little brick ranchers in a development of little brick ranchers in the suburbs of a small city. We were best friends for as long as I can remember. We went to the same schools and, being Catholic, to mass on Sunday and CYO, the Catholic Youth Organization, on Wednesday nights. We played on the same
little league team, won the county championship when we were 12. That year, we started smoking cigarettes together and comparing notes about our changing bodies. (“Am I normal? My left one’s lower than my right.” “Mine is too.”)

We saw the Temptations together. Three times. Doc loved their lead singer, David Ruffin. He’d impersonate him in the car. “Oo-oo-oo-losin’ you!” We got into trouble together, drinking beer in a cemetery one night when we were 17, throwing the empties out the window. It was the breaking glass that led someone to turn us in. We were arrested together, the cops called our parents and we were grounded; but that’s all that happened; we didn’t even get probation.

The summer after high school we worked together as bus boys at a race-track and on our breaks, we’d sneak off to bet. One night we hit the Exacta for $314, which was a lot of money in 1965. We used it to go to Baltimore, to an area called The Block, where, though underage, we went into a few strip joints, drank watery beer, and stuffed dollar bills in the g-strings of strippers. Later that night, a cabby took us to a brothel where we each went with a prostitute; it was our first completed sexual act. With another person, I mean. Afterward, we pretended to be exhilarated that we’d lost our cherry. Until about a third of the way home, when we confessed to each other how depressing it had been. His girl had needle marks on her arms. Mine took me to a flop of a room with only a bed and mattress, no sheets or pillow. She shed her clothes indifferently, as if she were alone, lay me on my back and performed fellatio, then went to the bathroom and gargled loudly, again and again, I could hear her spitting mouthwash into the sink. He said he felt empty inside. Which was just how I felt. We drove home in silence and never went back. It was something we never talked about again.

We graduated from high school, both of us in the bottom half of our class, and barely got into college together, the state university, the only place two working class kids with lousy grades even considered. We got in because of our test scores and because any state resident who remotely qualified was admitted. We commuted of course, no money for a dorm. And our grades were lousy. At the end of freshman year, we almost flunked out together: Doc did, and I would have, except I cheated on our science final and got a D instead of an F. He could have cheated too but didn’t. And so, because of his honesty, because he played it ramrod straight, Doc was bounced out of college and into the army.

In the summer of 1966, the Vietnam War was still popular. Public opinion had not yet turned. Most people, including everyone we knew, saw it as a worthy effort and had no doubt who’d prevail. America had never lost a war; this would be no exception.

Doc was drafted that August. The big buildup was beginning but the summer of 1966 was before the war got really bloody. At least for Americans. We worried about him of course, but it looked like he’d go to West Germany for 13 months.
I wrote to him regularly, at least once a week. I'd write long letters, keeping him up on news about our friends. I'd try to make them funny. Sometimes I'd pretend the letters came from Walt, an old wino who lived in a wreck of a trailer and would buy us beer or sloe gin in return for a hamburger and hot soup. And when he could, when he had time, he'd write back. Every time, he asked me to keep the letters coming. He couldn't get enough mail.

He went to boot camp in Washington, near Spokane I think, where he almost got into a serious fight. With a huge black guy named Chuckles who later played a couple years with the Raiders. Chuckles started something in the mess hall and that night, in back of the barracks, they squared off: Doc at five-seven and 130, and Chuckles, about six-five and a good hundred pounds heavier. There they were: Doc in a boxer's stance, fists clenched, bouncing on the balls of his feet; Chuckles standing still, arms at his side, not moving, not a twitch. When all of a sudden he starts to laugh. A high-pitched giggle, a little girl's laugh out of a huge body. I remember Doc's impersonation:

"Shee-it, look at you, bouncing up and down—who you think you is, Cassius Clay? Hee-hee-hee! You got gonads, boy. Why ain't you afraid of Chuckles? Cause you ain't got the good sense you wuz born with, that's why! Chuckles could bounce you from here to Seattle, but you ain't afraid. Or if you is, damn if you'll show it. Even if it kills you. Which it might, it truly might! Hee-hee-hee!"

Chuckles put his hands on his hips and laughed and laughed. With Doc standing there, at the ready. Until he realized that Chuckles wasn't going to fight; he's so tickled by the sawed-off white kid that he decides on the spot he likes the Doctor, likes his heart. And from that day on became his friend. After that, Doc had no trouble in boot camp. Chuckles saw to that.

It was in my sophomore year that I began to change. I took a course with a fiery professor who bitterly opposed the war. I started to become what they called "politicized," to see events through a political lens. I began to study, to get good grades and, for the first time in my life, to enjoy my work. I'd send him books, novels I liked. Doc was a smart kid, always a reader, always had a good mind. I'd send him books and he'd read them and we'd write about them. He was changing too. More serious. Life wasn't a breeze anymore; we were no longer kids. There were consequences when you did things. Or didn't. When you didn't work hard, didn't study, something might happen—you might flunk out and go in the army. You might get sent to war.

I remember when he came home from boot camp. His head was shaved and all he did was talk about how he hated the drill instructors, the DIs. That's when I first tried marijuana. He'd brought some with him. A few months later, he wrote that he was going to Vietnam. Or Nam as it was called by all those who went. Even then, I wasn't worried. Most GIs were in support positions, not in the field, and so the odds were he wouldn't have to fight. That's what he told us. But
he did fight of course. He saw lots of what they called action.

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About six months after he got there, he sent the letters, first one, then the other. And so, here they are, just as I received them more than 30 years ago: two letters from the Doctor.

January 3, 1968

Dobe,

Christ man, I thought you forgot me. It seems like I haven’t heard from you in months. I kept thinking: here’s the Doctor, risking his ass to keep Asia safe for democracy, dodging bullets so Dobe won’t worry about the VC landing in Santa Barbara, eating the crap they feed us so you don’t have to watch Bonanza in Chinese—all that and what thanks do I get? Does the college boy, who only reads about war while the Doctor learns about it first hand, even remember his best friend? Pal, you were in hot water. I mean you were on the third page of my shit list. Then I got four letters from you on the same day. And yesterday your Christmas presents came. Old buddy, I guess the Doctor was wrong and you’re off the hook.

One of your letters was dated before Halloween. This Man’s Army is so fucked up, you wouldn’t believe it. Fucked from top to bottom. And the way they handle the mail is totally typical.

I’m glad to hear you’re doing well in school. Study hard pal, keep at those books. Remember what happens to guys who don’t—they come over here and get to play soldier.

Sorry to hear about you and Adrienne. She’s a nice girl. I thought you two went together well. I guess you know what’s best, but the next time you see her, tell her I said hi, okay? Just because you broke off with her doesn’t mean your friends have to.

And, hey, thanks for the Christmas presents. I’ve got plenty of time to read—that is, when I’m not single-handedly winning the war—and so I appreciate the books. I’ve never read anything by Salinger except Catcher so I’m looking forward to those short stories. And I know you think Hemingway’s a great writer, so I’ll be glad to read For Whom too.

Well, the Doctor’s only got seven months to go. Seven months, twelve days, four hours and two minutes to be precise. Christ, the old countdown. Everybody here does two things—bitch about the food and count the days. Sounds like high school, right.

Know what I want when I get home? A pizza. No shit, Dobe,
I dream about pizza. When I roll into town, that’ll to be my first meal. And guess what, old buddy—I’ll let you pay for it.

We’re out of the field now. It was a little noisy for a couple of days but everything’s quiet now. I’ve got some spare time so I’m catching up on letters, reading books, things like that.

I’m a “grunt.” We do all the shit work so we grunt a lot. What’s weird is that it takes nine guys to support a single grunt in the field. I don’t know why, but it does. I guess between food and supplies and doctors and making sure everyone gets paid and keeping records—anyway, out of the nearly half-million of us, there’s less than fifty thousand like me.

Grunts have something else in common: we’re from families whose kids don’t go to college. Most are black or Hispanic or poor whites, mainly from down South. This war’s being fought by the have-nots, Dobe. Believe it or not, I’m one of the best-educated guys in my outfit. You wouldn’t believe how many guys can’t read.

I’m a hero, JD. And when I get home, I want to be treated like one. I want a parade, medals, pretty girls with flowers in their hair, all the beer I can drink, and a pizza. A great big mother-fucking pizza. And a real bed with wool blankets and silk sheets. And six months with nothing to do but sleep ’til I wake up, then all the French toast and bacon I can eat. And a hot shower with gallons and gallons of hot water. Sometimes it feels like mud is underneath my skin.

And a woman. With blue eyes and blonde hair. A natural blonde. Who’ll only want to get it on with a hero who loves pizza. I’m counting on you, friend. I know you’ll fix it up. And look, if that’s too tall an order, don’t worry about the eyes. Green or brown will be okay.

Well, some guys are getting up a card game and the Doctor’s going to go take their money. So I’ll close for now. Tell your folks I was asking for them and that I wished them a late Merry Christmas. And keep those cards and letters coming. Tell everyone to write as often as they can. It gets mighty lonely over here, pardner. Signing off for now.

Michael Patrick Dougherty

P.S. When I get home, just call me “Doctor Hero.”

That was the first one. And after reading it, I had a funny feeling. I hadn’t heard from him for well over a month. And when you think about it, the letter doesn’t say much. What did he mean “noisy”? But I had things on my mind. Finals were coming up, there was the business with Adrienne. Besides, we were so close, he wouldn’t hold back. Not from me. I pushed the feeling away. Three days later, another letter came. This one. It didn’t have a date.
Dobe, I don't know where to start. There's so much, so much to tell you. I've got to tell you, get it out of my system. It's a poison and I've got to throw it up. Get it out, once and for all.

That last letter I sent was bullshit, pure bullshit. I lied to you. I've been lying to you and everyone else for a while now. And today I've got to tell the truth. Tell it to you, if only for once.

I've seen so much, things you wouldn't believe. I've done things—I have to get it down on paper. It feels like something's at stake. All that's good in me, or all that used to be. And that this is my last chance—if I don't tell someone, it won't make a difference. Even if I do make it out of here, it won't make a difference.

The censors might see this, but I don't give a shit. Christ, with all the reporters running around—one day some TV guys went out in the field with us—anyway, with all that crap, the only damn secrets here are the ones Charlie knows.

Dobe, I burned your Christmas presents. I made a little fire, ripped the books apart, and threw them onto it, a few pages at a time. When I opened the package and saw what it was, I hated it. And hated you for sending them. I burned the books. I burned them and I loved doing it. I'm like the Nazis, Dobe—I burn books. Dear God, if only that was all we had in common.

There's no room for Holden Caulfield over here, no room for a sensitive 16-year-old who reads the poems on his brother's baseball glove. Not in this hellhole. This is a place for animals. Human animals. And I'm one of them. I swear to God, that's what I am. I burned the Hemingway too. I took special pleasure in burning that. That blowhard. He's a blowhard and a liar, and I loved watching his lies go up in smoke.

Know his definition of courage? “Grace under pressure.” The only “grace-under-pressure” guys over here are the ones who get wasted before you learn their first name. Or maybe the ones in back, giving orders. But there's no “grace” out here in the field. At least not among the guys in one piece. In the field, there's three types—the psychos, the guys who are high, and the ones who are scared shitless and just plain hanging on. I'm all three, it just depends on the time of day.

Maybe I'll start with Knockers. He's a big, fat hillbilly from some damn place, I think Kentucky. He's called “Knockers” because he's got what one of the brothers called “the best set of tits I've ever seen on a white man.” Knockers is a psycho. In a civilized world, he'd be locked away somewhere. Over here, he's a hero. He's got enough decorations for a company. Know why? Because he loves it, that's why. He loves the war and loves to kill. And if he makes it home, people will kiss his ass and let him make speeches to school kids and elect him sheriff. All because he gets his rocks off wasting
Gooks.

He's got a jar, Dobe, a glass jar. It's buried a few hundred meters from base. It's filled with ears, Dobe, human ears. He cuts them off the ones he wastes, hides them til we get back, then sticks them in his fucking jar. They're his trophies, his souvenirs. Maybe he'll put it on his fireplace when he gets home. A conversation piece. He showed it to me. I think I'm the only one who's seen it. At least that's what he said. I don't know how many were in there. A lot, that's all. They were floating in formaldehyde like something you'd see in a supermarket. Like olives or pickles. Only they were ears. Dobe, some of them were little. I think that psycho cut the ears off of little kids. And since I'm the only one who knows, he said that if they find out, he'd put mine in there too. Then he laughed. Honest to God, I'm afraid to write what I might do.

A while ago we got a new second lieutenant. We go through these guys about once a month. Anyway, this one's right out of the Point and a real straight arrow. One day, he tells us how we're supposed to treat the civilians with respect and Knockers calls him a "Gook lover." The lieutenant kept his cool, just like Hemingway would have wanted. Knockers was a corporal then. He's made corporal three times and three times been busted. Anyway, the lieutenant, Johnson was his name, doesn't say a word. Just reaches out and rips the stripes off Knockers' sleeve, puts them in his pocket, and walks away. Class, huh Dobe? Grace under pressure? Like out of a movie: think Sidney Portier with Jackie Gleason playing a big, fat racist.

A week later, we're on patrol. We're strung out along this dirt road off Highway One, taking our time. Nobody expects a thing. Hell, we'd been there a dozen times.

All of a sudden, Charlie opens up. A couple of bursts, AKs, AK-47s. The Russians make them. They're like our M-16s, only a fuck of a lot better. I dive for the brush and Johnson starts barking orders. We form up in a half-ass kind of way and we all open up. Hell, we're not even sure where the shots came from, but we open up anyway. We're firing like mad, guys throw grenades. We don't know if there's 3 or 300. But there's no return fire. Charlie just slipped away. That's how he does it, Dobe—hit and run. He's too smart to slug it out. We have too much firepower. I swear, it's like this country is a rotten house infested with bugs. And we're exterminators trying to kill the bugs with sledgehammers, fucking sledgehammers. Every time we kill some bugs, we smash the house.

After a few minutes, we let up. Guys start calling out that they're all right. I figure we're going after them. Hell, we don't know how many there are or where they went, but I thought, sure as shit, this gung-ho asshole's going to order us to fan out and pursue. But we
don’t hear him. Somebody calls his name. Still nothing. So this other guy and me crawl over toward him. We’re not sure if Charlie’s still around so we’re eating dirt. When we get there, we see him. Or what’s left. He’s torn up. Dead. By a grenade. Dobe, the VC didn’t use grenades. Know who was closest to him? Knockers. I think Knockers fragged him. Understand? I think that because he got busted, Knockers threw a grenade at Lieutenant Johnson. That night somebody says, “Too bad about the lieutenant, seemed like a decent guy.” Knockers starts laughing. Laughing and doesn’t stop. I wonder if they told Lieutenant Johnson about guys like that at the Point, Dobe. If they told him to keep one eye on Charlie and the other on the psychos in your own outfit. I’m afraid to write down what I might do, afraid to put it on paper. Let’s just say I wouldn’t be surprised if one night when it’s real quiet, the VC come by and slit Knockers’ throat. Let’s just say I wouldn’t be surprised.

That’s the worst part, Dobe—I’m like he is. Honest to God, I’m just like Knockers. The only difference is, he’s psycho all the time and, with me, it’s only part of the time.

Once, after a firefight, we were crossing a field, muddy as hell, buffalo grass up to our knees. We’re in a staggered line. Charlie’d been there but we’d cleared him out and we were securing the area. I’m next to Carper, my buddy from Wyoming. Like everyone else, I have my piece ready. But Charlie’s long gone and all you can hear is the sound of our boots sloshing through the muck. I come to some logs and start to climb over them when I see him. He’s on his side, sandwiched down, trying to hide. He’s caked with mud, his black pajamas soaked with blood. He’s been hit and he’s trying to hide. His AK’s pointed at me. I remember every detail. Time stopped. A split-second became an hour. I freeze. I can’t move. I’m not afraid, not then. I just can’t move. I watch him. His black eyes are filled with pain and fear and hate and determination, all at the same time. It’s like I can read his mind. His fingers, red with blood, strain to squeeze the trigger. Mud is caked in his hair. I don’t know what happened. If his gun jammed or if he was just too shot up. Anyway it won’t go off. And I’m just standing there, paralyzed, watching him. Then I hear a crack and his forehead explodes. Carper shot him. Then more cracks and what’s left of him jerks and snaps like a puppet with broken strings.

Carper put his arm around me. “You all right?”

I nod but my knees buckle and I lean against him. He has to hold me up. Other guys come running over and Carper pulls me out of the way. Somebody starts giving orders but I’m just leaning against Carper. We start to split a cigarette, but some asshole says put it out and a few minutes later, we’re moving out again.

That night in my tent, I think about it and start to sweat. It’s not
hot, I just start to sweat and can't stop. The weird thing is, during a firefight, I'm not afraid. There's no time to be. I react. I do things automatically. By instinct or something. It's when it's over, Dobe. The nights. That's when I get scared. I keep thinking about what happened, almost happened, and I get scared shitless. I hate the nights, Dobe. I hate to go to sleep anymore.

Once we were trying to take this hill. It had a number; they all have numbers instead of names, I forget its fucking number. Charlie's got the high ground. He's dug in and has some punch—mortars and shit, which they don't always have. We get partway up when it gets too hot. We can't make it. But Charlie's got us pinned. We can't go up, but we can't go down either. They tell us to dig in as best we can and then I hear the jets. I was never so happy in my life. They swoop down on the hill like banshees, screaming and screeching and dropping barrels of fire. Napalm. When I saw those canisters fall and that hilltop explode into flames, I felt like crying. Guys are cheering, "Go jets! Go, jets, go!" I don't feel bad about being happy, it was us or them. But then the wind shifts and the smell drifts our way. Cut off a lock of hair, Dobe. Put it in an ashtray and light it. That's what it's like. The odor of burning flesh is like nothing else. Through all the brush and the fumes, I can smell it. There's no escaping napalm. It rolls over the ground like water on fire. Follows you everywhere, into foxholes, into those fucking tunnels they dig everywhere. The smoke stung my eyes, the stench almost made me vomit. But I inhaled it. I took deep breaths and held it in my lungs. It choked me but I loved the smell. God help me, I loved the smell of men being burned alive.

There's more, so much more. There's the ARVN, our great fucking ally. It's perverse, Dobe, the ones you respect are the ones you try to kill. Charlie's one tough SOB. And though we kill him, or try to, we love him. I swear to God, I love the VC. It's fucking perverse.

But the ARVN aren't worth shit. We can't count on them for squat. Our great fucking ally. Once, we're on an operation together and the ARVN are on our flank. For some reason, Charlie decides to stand and fight. Like I said, he doesn't usually do that. It's the ARVN's job to hold, no matter what. Because if Charlie breaks through, we're in a crossfire and he'll cut us to pieces. The lieutenant says if the ARVN break and run, we're to open up on them. No shit, Dobe, that was a direct order—to shoot our own ally. We kept one eye on Charlie and one on them, because we know from experience that if things get hot, they'll try it. Sure enough, some of them do.

The flank with the ARVN is where Charlie puts the most pressure. Honest to Christ, they're not human, the VC, I mean. They're so smart, it's like fighting wild dogs, a pack of cunning, smart as hell,
wild dogs. They know what we're going to do before we do it. Anyway, some of us are ordered to go reinforce the ARVN. We circle behind and we're making our way when we see some of them running. Most of the time, I have no idea if I've hit anyone. In a firefight, you just shoot in a direction, like everyone else. You keep your head down and you shoot. Later, when you secure an area, there might be bodies around. But you don't know who shot who. It might have been your round, it might have been anyone's. You have no idea. But this time, I knew.

Three of them are running, like bats out of hell, through the brush. I aim at one and squeeze. He goes down. Other guys are firing too. But that one was mine. At least I hope so. Honest to Christ, I hope I sent that fuck's soul straight to Buddha. I pray to God it was my round that killed a human being. What kind of prayer is that, Dobe? What kind of man would pray such a prayer?

When they see they're going to get it no matter what, they hold. And we kicked the shit out of Charlie that day. But I wasn't happy about all the dead VC. I was happy about that fucking ARVN.

Honest to God, I wish somebody would tell me what it's all about. You kill the ones you're trying to save and you love the ones you're trying to kill. I wish they'd nuke this fucking place. Guys like Carper and me risk our ass, get shot up, and those nukes just sit there in Montana or wherever the fuck they are. Either nuke this place or get us the hell out. The way things are is crazy. We fight with our hands tied behind our backs. Know what I really wish? That they'd do both. Get us out, then nuke this fucking place. Blow it up and pave it with asphalt. Honest to God, that's what I wish.

Know what a free fire zone is? It's where the civilians are cleared out and anything left is presumed to be VC. And we're "free to fire" at it. It could be a cow or an old woman who's lost—it doesn't matter, they're VC and they get wasted. The idea is to disrupt their supply lines or some such shit. You didn't know the VC had cows on their side, did you, Dobe? Well, they do—at least according to the Army. After we clear an area, the flyboys come in. The B-52s. You never saw anything like it. When those suckers get through, a blade of grass is lucky to survive. I heard the civilians are rounded up and put in camps around Saigon. Anyway, most of the time they're told to get the hell out ahead of time. We round them up and herd them away. The only things they can keep are what they can carry. Everything else, their hooches and everything they own, is left behind. And blasted to God knows where. Sometimes though, especially when the villages are hard to get to, instead of sending us in, they leaflet. The leaflets tell people to get the hell out because their village is about to be bombed.

Once, not long after I get here, they drop leaflets on this village
near the mountains. It's hard to get to and the area's crawling with VC. So they drop a shit load of leaflets and a few days later, the B-52s go in. They unload all kinds of shit—defoliants, cluster bombs, you name it. You should have seen it when they got finished. Thousands of square meters turned into wasteland.

Afterwards, we go in to secure the area. I swear, it's like the fucking moon. Craters so deep, a squad can stand in them. Unfucking real. We go to the village and the hooches are all blasted and burned. Not one is standing. But the people didn't leave. A couple hundred of them—old men, women and children—the young men are all off fighting with one side or the other. But these harmless, ignorant people, a couple hundred of them, had been wasted, just like their village. A few are still alive. They're hurt but they're still breathing. The captain tries to find out what happened, what went wrong. You know why they didn't leave? They couldn't read! No one in the village could read the fucking leaflets. So they stayed. And got blasted.

I remember watching the Huey's fly out the wounded. I was sitting against a stump of a coconut tree, smoking a cigarette and watching. All of a sudden, I start to cry. I just sat against that stump and start to cry. They couldn't read. No one in the village could read the fucking leaflets. So they stayed. And got blasted.

I only went once. And it was barbaric, worse than you could imagine. But the worst part wasn't her, the worst part was me. While I was watching, I got a hard-on. I got off watching her. What have I turned into, Dobe? You tell me who's worse—that old witch or a degenerate like me?

Once on R and R, I got rolled by a whore. I was in a bar and got drunk and she picked my pocket. It wasn't just the money. Money doesn't mean shit over here. You should see the ways guys blow their money. In the card games the stakes are unbelievable. A hundred and forty bucks she took. It wasn't the money. It was something worse.

I found out where she lives and the next day I go to her place.
I knock on the door, it opens a crack, I put my shoulder to it and break in. She runs to the kitchen and grabs a knife. She cut my hand before I could get it from her. Cut me pretty bad. I slap her hard and her nose starts to bleed. I think I broke it, I’m not sure. I throw her on the bed and kneel on top of her, my knees on her arms. Every time she struggles, I slap her. Finally, she lets me do what I want. I rip off her blouse and tie her, spread-eagled, to the bed. I ask her where she keeps her money.

“Not here,” she says.

I go into the kitchen and boil some water. I tell her I’m going to pour it on her face if she doesn’t tell me. She points to a little green statue and I smash it on the floor. There’s maybe six hundred dollars stuffed up inside. I count out one forty and set the bills on fire. Then I made her eat the ashes.

And that’s what it’s come down to, I’m turning into something. Or maybe I’ve already turned. I’m not human anymore. I’m an animal: a vicious beast. And the change is permanent. I’ll never be the same.

I’m not sorry—not about any of it. Not for myself or anyone else. I’m scared. I’m scared all the time. They said I’d get used to it, but I haven’t. My stomach’s tight all the time, like it’s made of violin strings. And I hate. I hate with my whole being. But I’m not sorry. How can a sadist be sorry? Because that’s what I am: a sadist and a killer.

The reason I wrote is to let someone know. Know the truth. About what I’ve been through, what I’ve done. There’s a rumor going around. This place is crazy with rumors and this one’s probably not true either. But the word is that Charlie’s up to something, something big.

There’s another reason I wrote. This feels like my last chance. My last chance to keep part of me from turning into something, something I don’t want to be. It’s the good part that wrote this. I want you to do something. I know you’re not religious anymore but I want you to pray. I want you to pray that part of me stays human. I can’t do it. Not anymore. So do it for me. Do it for me, Dobe. And for all the guys like me.

Doc

Those are the letters. He died shortly after writing them, in the Tet Offensive. His squad was ambushed along Highway One. Doc was hit trying to rescue a wounded medic. His CO, his commanding officer, nominated him for a Bronze
Star. They didn't give it to him, though. I think because the medic was already dead.

To my way of thinking, Doc was a hero. A real American hero. He wouldn't think of himself that way, of course. But I do. He gave everything he had for his country. Except his soul. That was his when he died.

His name is on the wall. That heartbreakingly beautiful wall of black in the nation's capital. About the only decent thing we've ever done for the Vietnam vets. If you're ever there, you might look for his name.

A lot of children died in that war. The Doctor was one of them. He was 19.
The Accordion's Greatest Hits
I've known Leslie for nineteen months and we've been married nearly seven. A year and a half is a long time and it goes without saying that I know a lot about her. "Only a fool will marry a stranger." If that's not an adage, it ought to be.

But at the same time and in many ways, I don't know her any better than I did on the day we met. I'll try to explain.

Leslie lies to me. She tells the biggest, most outrageous whoppers of anyone I've ever known. At least I think she does.

One Sunday, on our way to the zoo, she asked if I knew that giraffes have a black tongue. Now I've learned that a question like that coming from Leslie may well be a set-up or trap. So I turned away from my driving momentarily, smiled at her, and said nothing.

"They're the only mammals that do, you know. Have a black tongue, I mean. A few have dark ones, but only giraffes have black." She looked out the window, and then turned back and added, "And they have no idea why."

I began to feel foolish. "Who has no idea, Leslie?"

"Bio-whatever-they're called, evolutionologists, that guy from Harvard on PBS. The people who study evolution. They can't figure out why only one species, the giraffe, developed a black tongue. They don't know what function it could possibly serve."

I pretended to concentrate on the road.

"Things like the appendix usually have or had a function. It's adaptive, it has a reason for being. It helps the animal survive."

"Leslie," I said, "are you putting me on?"

She cocked her head, as if puzzled that I'd ask such a thing, tilting it so that one ear nearly touched her honey-brown hair, draped on her shoulders like a shawl.

"The appendix did so—"

"I don't mean the appendix," I interrupted. "I mean giraffes. Are you
putting me on about giraffes?"

She didn't answer. Just sat there, looking perplexed, almost hurt by my question. But at the same time I swear I could see the trace of a smile in the corners of her eyes.

Neither of us mentioned it again. But when we got to the giraffe cage at the zoo, you can probably guess what happened. I found myself—whenever Leslie wasn't looking—trying to sneak a glimpse of the animal's tongue. Needless to add, it's impossible to see into the mouth of something that's eighteen feet tall.

The first time I saw Leslie she was smiling. It was a Saturday morning in October. She was by herself, standing in front of a small religious gift shop on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. By herself, looking in the window grinning. Her hair was tucked like a hood into the collar of her buttoned-up pea coat. She had on a pair of faded jeans and leather boots with worn heels. A red shopping bag, from Gimble's I think, was in one hand, the other was in her pocket. She looked so natural, so vibrant, so teeming with life that I had to talk to her.

I'm not an impulsive person. And ordinarily I'm quite shy. I was raised in a small town where I knew everyone and everyone knew me. If you did see a stranger, you waited until you were introduced. So I surprised myself when I approached her.

"Excuse me," I said, "I hope this doesn't sound rude or intrusive ... but you look like you're really enjoying yourself so much ... would you mind if I asked what are you smiling at?"

She looked up and, still grinning, nodded hello exactly as if she'd been expecting me and I were a few moments late. She was slender, with gray-green eyes; her skin was pale, nearly translucent, and her features were delicate and fragile looking.

"I'm looking at some kitsch," she said. "World class. Do you know what kitsch is?"

I shook my head.

"Junk. Stuff in God-awful taste," she said. "Ever see a paint-by-numbers Elvis, leopards on black velvet, know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"Kitsch," she said.

She pointed to the shop window. There was a towel imprinted with the face of Jesus and, if you stared at it, his eyes seemed to open and close. A manger set inside a seashell. And a rosary made out of nuts and bolts. It all looked like junk to me so I asked which one.
“Good one.” She smiled but did not laugh. “That’s really funny.”

She pointed to a gilded plate on a stand in the corner. Painted on it, John Kennedy and Pope John the Twenty-third were strolling, arm in arm, on a road made of clouds toward a welcoming angel standing beside a wide, golden archway underneath a huge sign reading: “The Gates of Heaven.”

“It looks like they’re going to McDonalds,” I said.

“You’re right, it does,” she said. Again, a smile but no laugh.

I stood there, my mind churning, trying to think of something, anything, to say to prolong the conversation when she looked up at me and, with just a hint of a lilt to her voice, said, “I’ll make you a deal. You buy me that plate—get it giftwrapped though; it has to be gift wrapped—and I’ll buy you lunch. But only a sandwich, okay? I mean, I hardly know you. I’m not going to spring for Bookbinders.”

I was floored. Elated! Going to lunch, I instantly calculated, would mean I’d have at least an hour to talk to her, probably more. But dumbstruck too, bowled over. It’s a combination of feelings she’s stirred up many times since. Leslie still has the plate. She’s never unwrapped the package.

One afternoon not long after we’d met, we got into a discussion of writers and the name of Thomas Mann came up. Though not someone I know much about, I know enough to know he’s one of the century’s giants, and I asked Leslie her opinion.

“Well, I only saw the movie, of Death in Venice,” she said.

I asked what she thought of it.

“You know,” she said, “the story about the old man who thinks that little boy is such perfection. But then an epidemic comes and the boy leaves while the old man stays and dies.”

I’d read the book, a classic pregnant with symbolism, in an English class and so we talked about it briefly. Or rather, I talked about it. Then I again asked what she thought.

“I liked the shots of the city,” she said.

“Go on.”

She glanced from side to side, her head darting like a bird’s.

“The shots of Venice were very nice.”

“Leslie, I’m not going to argue with you. Tell me what you think.”

“I guess I didn’t care for it,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Well,” she said, with the most tentative smile, “until you explained things, I
thought the moral of the story was, if you’re a dirty old man, you’ll get cholera.”

What could I say? What could anyone have said? The moral of the story. I remember thinking that even Mann himself would smile, had he heard what she said. But then, I guess not.

One of my life passions is football. And though she could care less, Leslie will go to a game with me whenever I ask. She never pretends to enjoy herself, never cheers or gets excited. But she never complains, never ridicules the game or makes fun of my enthusiasm, and never wants to leave early. But none of that’s important or interesting. The interesting thing happens before the game begins.

As at all American sporting events, the national anthem is played before the game. And everyone in the stadium stands up. Everyone except Leslie. She just sits in her seat, expressionless, staring straight ahead, until it’s over. The first time she did it, I asked her why. She didn’t stand, she said, because she doesn’t believe in the concept of the nation-state.

It’s quite a sight. Ninety-nine pound Leslie, bundled up in a blanket, gloves, and a hooded parka, sitting there, dwarfed by a hundred fans, many singing their hearts out, looking down at her, a beer or a flask in one hand, a hot dog in the other, glaring their disapproval. While she just sits there, expressionless, staring straight ahead.

No one’s ever said a word to her about it, though. Not a word. But I’ve got my response worked out in case someone ever does. I’m going to say she’s Canadian.

The first time we made love, I knew I didn’t satisfy her. I wanted to hold back, tried to wait, but my body refused. Afterward, I wanted to talk about it, tell her I knew what had happened and that next time I’d do better. She burrowed her face into my neck.

“You worry about stupid things,” she said.

“Leslie, I want it to be good for you, I want—”

“God, you can be dumb. What happens? When blood goes to your penis, it stops going to your brain?”

“Leslie…”

“Tell you what,” she said, grinning. “Next time I’ll dig my nails into your back. How’s that?” Then she laughed and bit me on the ear. She kept her promise too.
I remember the moment we decided to get married. I'd been thinking about it, wondering how life with Leslie might be almost from the moment we met. But when I asked her to be my wife, she didn't say a word. We were lying side by side, and she pushed away from me, sat up, and turned her head.

I was terrified. I thought she was about to turn me down.

"You don't have to decide now," I said, sitting up too. "Think it over. Tomorrow, next week, we'll talk it over, there's plenty of time."

With her head still turned, she said, "I sleep with my teeth clenched. I'm not always that stable."

I didn't know what she was talking about. She always seemed fine to me.

"If we have problems," I said, "we'll work them out together."

She turned back toward me and shook her head. Her eyes had filled up. "Know something?" she said. "Sometimes you sound like a Henry Fonda movie."

She clutched me. "Of course I'll marry you," she said. "I thought you were never going to ask."

Our wedding was in October. I didn't want to wait that long but Leslie said she'd wanted to get married in October. She didn't know why, she just liked October. But except for the date and the ceremony, a quiet affair in her parents' home with a few dozen guests, about the only other major thing she's ever insisted on was where we'd go afterward.

It was near the end of the month and not all that warm anymore, but she wanted to go to the beach. We didn't have much money, I was still in school, and so she picked out an old Victorian hotel in a town on the southern tip of New Jersey. Our room was on the third floor and had its own little porch facing the ocean. And every morning for ten days, Leslie would wake up in the dark, make a pot of coffee in the Mister Coffee she'd brought along, wrap herself in a blanket and her blue, velour bathrobe, and then, snuggling the coffee cup to keep warm, she'd curl up on one of the cane rocking chairs on the porch, her feet tucked up underneath her, and watch the sun rise over the ocean.

She never tried to paint or sketch the scene, though she does both quite well. She was content just to sit there, with her feet tucked up, and watch. Then she'd climb back into bed, nestle against me, and we'd sleep as late as we wanted.
I got up with her three times. And it was striking to watch the sky light up, then see that red-orange disk peek over the horizon and glide up into the sky. But Leslie got up every morning.

A number of our afternoons were spent on that porch too. We'd start to read, but after a few moments, Leslie would put her book down and stare at the ocean. She doesn't like to sail or fish. She doesn't even swim. She just likes to watch. Before the week was out, I asked her why.

"Because that's where we come from," she said.

I tried to make a joke, compared the ocean to the house she'd grown up in or the neighborhood where she'd lived as a child.

"That's right," she said. "That's just how I feel. A part of me remembers," she took a deep breath. "A part of me remembers where we used to be."

I remember once when we talked about growing up, what childhood was like, our happiest memories. Leslie told me about a night when she was eleven. She'd been watching television, an amateur variety show, and after it was over you could mail in postcards, vote for the act you liked best. Her favorite was a shoemaker who played *Lady of Spain* on the accordion.

"It was the first time I'd heard it," she said, "and I guess it's an awful song. But I loved it. I still do. I'm probably the only person this side of Barcelona who loves *Lady of Spain* on an accordion.

"The next day after school," she continued, "I went to the store and bought postcards, maybe ten dollars worth. Which to me was a lot of money. I filled them out using different handwriting and different color pens, I even mailed them in different mailboxes so they wouldn't have the same postmark. I wanted to make sure they couldn't tell they all came from the same person. God, I wanted that shoemaker to win. So bad. But he didn't. When the show was on the following week, they didn't even mention his name, he didn't even win runner up."

The next day I bought a CD: Frankie someone-or-other, a Polish name, plays "The Accordion's Greatest Hits." I had it gift-wrapped and after dinner, gave it to her. I expected her to burst out laughing, or coo and tell me how sweet I was. But when she opened it, she froze. She sat staring at it, as if it weren't quite real. Then she began to sway in her chair and I thought she might pass out.

"She's really me, you know."

"Leslie, are you all right?"

"In my mind. The *Lady of Spain* is me. Or my mother. Or both. That's what a psychoanalyst would say. That's why I love the song, why I adore her."

I reached for her hand but she pulled away. She sat there a moment, staring
at the CD, and then walked over to the trash and dropped it in.

“There is no innocence in life, is there?” she said. “Nothing’s the way it seems.”

I have never seen Leslie cry. And one night, after making love, I asked about it. She could remember crying only once she said: on the night of her twenty-first birthday. That night, she said, she felt the need to mourn the end of her childhood.

Making love with Leslie is always nice. But usually it’s quite . . . civilized, I suppose. Conventional or normal, it’s hard to find a word. But every month or so, usually on a Friday or Saturday, it’s as if she becomes someone else. I can tell at a glance when it’s happened, I can see the lust in her eyes. And this soft-spoken woman becomes lewd. Ravenous.

I enjoy those nights of course. Leslie is never so sexy, never more erotic. But afterwards, that night or the next morning, I’m always uneasy. It’s the transformation that bothers me. Who is this woman I’m married to? Who is she?

Leslie never complains about our marriage. She rarely asks for anything and often says that making love with me is satisfying and fulfilling. She says it often because I often ask.

You see, I have a feeling she isn’t happy. But whenever I ask, her response is the same: “I’d tell you if I weren’t.”

Still I never quite believe it.

That’s why it’s only a matter of time before I leave her. Because sooner or later, she’ll get tired of me. Bored and restless, it’s inevitable. And when that happens, when I feel her begin to pull away, I’ll have no choice. I’ll leave Leslie before she leaves me.
The Magic Show
Dan Cahill walked down a wide, well-lit hallway, his heels echoing on the pale green marble floor until, at one end, he reached an unmarked mahogany door. On the ground floor of a high-rise just off City Line Avenue in Philadelphia, the hall was an arcade lined by a drug store, a coffee shop, a tobacconist, a man who called his barber shop a Tonsorial Parlor, and some professional offices, including two dentists, a podiatrist, and a physician apparently without a specialty: only his name, Arthur J. Benderman, M.D., was on a small brass plate next to the buzzer. Cahill pressed three times, three short quick bursts, as if to signal someone inside, then waited until he heard the metallic click of the door being unlocked electronically. He entered a foyer and turned into a small, windowless room furnished with a turquoise vinyl couch, two wooden chairs with red pillows on the seats, and a coffee table covered with a half-dozen magazines: a Jack and Jill, three issues of a travel magazine, a year-old copy of Newsweek, and a much older copy of The New Yorker in which “The Talk Of The Town” was about a threat by Leonid Brezhnev to send Soviet troops to the Middle East.

The room was empty and Cahill flopped onto the couch. He had just turned twenty-two but looked much younger. Slightly below medium height and slim, Cahill had dark brown eyes and a comely, angular face. Like many men his age, his hair, which had recently been shoulder-length, was now cut short; he had kept his neatly trimmed, reddish beard, grown as a sign of something, but he was no longer sure what. He had on the back-to-school outfit of an assistant professor: a tan corduroy jacket with leather elbow patches; a pale blue, oxford cloth shirt with a frayed, button down collar; faded jeans; and cordovan-colored Wejuns that needed a shine.

He glanced at his watch, realized how early he was and then, from the coffee table in front of him, reached for one of the assortment of magazines and flipped through it absently. He’d read it before, he’d read them all before. And with that realization, he slapped the magazine onto the table and put his feet up on it, deliberately, one loafer at a time.

Moments later a door opened and, glancing up, he saw a dark-haired woman in a raincoat scurry by. Two doors closed simultaneously: the front
door the woman went through and an inner one; whoever let her out had gone in again. Cahill realized his feet were still on the table and, though certain the woman had not looked his way, sheepishly removed them. After a few minutes, the inner door opened again and a middle-aged man in a dark blue suit came into the waiting room.

“Hello,” the older man said with a smile. He half-turned and, waving his hand like a matador, indicated that Cahill should follow.

“Hello doctor,” Cahill said.

When the doctor turned, Cahill ran his palms down the back of his hair and, as he left the waiting room, hoped his furtive grooming had not been noticed.

Stopping by the inner door, now wide open, the doctor stood aside, letting Cahill go first into what looked like a study or den. Custom-made shelves filled with books, including a hard-cover set with pale green covers, lined one wall; the others were dotted with framed certificates and diplomas and some art, including a handsomely framed reproduction of a pencil sketch—a horse race in the home stretch by Manet—and a large oil painting: a modernized version of an ancient city, perhaps in Italy, but in the foreground, the shapes of the buildings were distorted by a patch of bright yellow, as if the summer sun reflecting off the limestone and concrete were melting the buildings. A dark red Oriental rug and a healthy-looking ficus tree near the window on the far wall provided the only other color in the room. Everything else was dark brown or black. But except for the books and a pair of brown leather chairs, the furniture was incongruous with the notion of a study because, in place of the usual desk or writing table stood a flat, black leather couch, the pillow at one end covered by a white paper towel.

Ignoring the couch, Cahill settled into one of the chairs. But in contrast to his waiting-room posture, his back was straight, both feet on the floor. The doctor moved toward the chair positioned in the corner, behind the couch, so that someone lying there would not see his face. He sat down, crossed one leg over the other and waited.

After a moment Cahill said, “Doctor Benderman, you need some new magazines.” He reached into his pocket for a pack of Carltons, tapped one out and, using a red Bic lighter, lit it, inhaled deeply, and put the pack away.

Doctor Benderman did not reply.

“I’ve read them all twice. Even the Jack and Jill!”

Benderman smiled and Cahill felt pleased. He liked to make the older man smile; it made him feel warm inside: as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud and was shining on him brightly.

“Know the ones I hate?” He did not wait for a reply. “Those travel mags, the ones where some pseudo-celeb-intellectual like George Will writes about the restaurants of Mozambique. Jesus!” Cahill smiled at what he saw as a devastating
critique. "Why do they recycle the same guys? I mean, with all the writers who could use a free meal, you'd think they'd find someone else besides George fucking-Will."

The doctor's smile faded and he again sat expressionless, watching and listening.

"Anyone else complain about them?" Cahill said, the doctor no longer amused, the sun behind a cloud. "Anyone else say you oughta break down and get some new ones?"

The question went unanswered.

"Well, it's probably because they're politer than I am. Or 'more polite'—whichever is correct." He shook his head, annoyed by his momentary lapse in grammar, then, smiling at himself and with the edge off his voice, said, "You know what I mean: they have better manners."

"Have you been wondering about my other patients?" Benderman said.

Stunned, Cahill sat still a moment, then said, "It never changes, does it? I comment about your magazines and you analyze what I say." He dragged on his cigarette, mumbled something about how he should quit, dragged again, more deeply this time, and then crushed it out in the ashtray beside him. "Isn't it possible I don't have some dark secret thought behind my question? Isn't it possible that I'm just sick and tired of the same old mags and wish you'd get some new ones?" He shook his head. "You do have a limited selection. I mean objectively speaking, you don't have many to choose from. I could tell you what they are. Wanna hear me?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Well," Cahill continued, "isn't it possible that someone who sits in that waiting room twice a week for—How long's it been? Nearly three years?—would get sick of reading about where George fucking-Will goes to eat?"

When the doctor still did not answer Cahill shook his head.

"Doctor Benderman, I hope this doesn't hurt your feelings but sometimes I think this is an act. I mean, you have a few basic moves that you use over and over. Like never saying anything at the beginning of the session. As if the first thing out of my mouth, whatever it is, is so darn important. Always asking," he mimicked German, "Vye, vye, vye? Analyzing, always analyzing, as if everything has a dark, dark meaning."

Benderman said nothing and after a moment Cahill resumed.

"It's artificial, the way you treat me. It's not how people are. You come into the waiting room, act like you're glad to see me. You smile like you're welcoming company. But you're not a host and I'm not company. I'm your patient, your client. I pay you—well, my insurance pays most of it—but you get big bucks to sit and listen to me and be understanding. But not hear what I say. I mean, what I say on the surface. Sometimes I think the whole thing's an act. They teach you
some moves in psychoanalyst-school and out you come, ready to try them out on
the crazies of the world.”

“Moves?” the doctor said.

Cahill felt a measure of satisfaction: he’d gotten a response. “Techniques.
For example, you don’t say my name. You never call me ‘Dan.’ And only in a blue
moon do you even call me ‘Mister Cahill.’ Why’s that? Why won’t you say my
name?”

Silence.

“Just tell me that one thing: Why don’t you use my name? I’m supposed to
tell you my most private thoughts and you won’t even say my name. Why? Just tell
me that one thing.

“When all this is over,” he continued, “if it is ever over—we won’t be
friends, will we? You’ll never invite me to dinner; we’ll never go to a ball game.
You’ll go your way and I’ll go mine, right? C’mon, just tell me that one thing: why
don’t you say my name?”

“You sound angry,” Benderman said.

Cahill sat back and nodded. “I am. I’m angry because you have a very
crummy selection of very crummy magazines. And because I keep coming here,
90 miles round trip, nearly three hours with traffic, and when I get here, there’s
nothing to read.

He waved his hand as if erasing a blackboard. When he resumed, his tone
was different: subdued and serious. “I’m angry because I think it’s all a waste of
time. Not doing any good.” He leaned back, closed his eyes and rubbed them
with the edge of his fists. “It happened again last night,” he said. “I banged my
head.”

The doctor said nothing.

“I thought it might be going away, subsiding, because I hadn’t done it for
over a month.” He rubbed his eyes again, not to remove sleep but as if wishing to
push them back, all the way, into their sockets. So they could not see. “But last
night it happened again.”

“Tell me about it,” Benderman said. He leaned forward slightly.

“There’s not much to tell,” Cahill said. “I went to bed at my usual time,
about midnight I guess. I was feeling fine, in fact I felt fine all day yesterday. But I
couldn’t sleep. I tossed a while. And then it started. It’s like something was turned
on, like someone flipped a switch.

“I could feel it coming, like fog rolling in. I’d been lying there maybe half an
hour when I felt it coming in, rolling over me. I can’t remember what I was
thinking before it started. But all of a sudden, I knew it was going to happen. I
rolled onto my stomach and started banging my forehead into the pillow.”

He looked at Benderman. No reaction.

“At first it was slow, like this.” Cahill nodded his head several times. “Then
it got faster and harder, faster and harder. Then I was banging my head into the pillow as fast and as hard as I could." His voice trembled. "I kept doing it and doing it. Like I'm epileptic or something, like an epileptic having a fit. I could feel the muscles in my neck stretch and bend as they were pulled and jerked. It felt like I might rip my head off. I kept doing it and doing it. Then, all of a sudden," he snapped his fingers, "it stopped."

He sighed. "Then I rolled over and masturbated. Just like I always do." When he reached into his pocket for another cigarette, his hands were shaking. "Then I felt terrible. Ashamed because I'd masturbated and scared because I'd banged my head." He turned away so the doctor would not see the tears in his eyes. "But exhausted too. And better, in a weird kind of way. I felt better afterward. More relaxed, I could go to sleep. That's one thing about it—when it's over, at least I can sleep."

"What were you thinking about?" Benderman asked. "What was on your mind before it started?"

"Nothing," Cahill said. "That's just it, nothing was on my mind. I went to bed feeling fine. Lying there, trying to sleep—still fine. Okay, maybe I couldn't fall asleep right away, no big deal. I did feel a little tense in my stomach, but that's nothing new. Then all of a sudden, I knew it was coming. And once it started, all I could think was: Jesus, I'm doing it again! Sweet Jesus, I'm doing it again!"

"That's another thing: when it happens, I think about God. Which is funny because I haven't gone to church in years. I don't believe in any of that now. But when it happens, I find myself starting to pray. Old habits die hard, huh?"

He didn't wait for an answer. "And I have no control over it, that's how it feels. Like I'm on a ride at the carnival, a roller coaster or something. Part of me is hanging on, holding the railing, scared stiff, counting the seconds 'til it's over. Except this is no ride, no goddamn carnival ride—this I something do to myself."

"I remember worrying if I'd hurt myself, pull something in my neck. Or hurt my brain, whether banging my head might bruise it, cause a concussion or something."

"Maybe that's why I do it, huh? To get even with my fucking mind for making me feel like shit all the time." He shook his head. "I know, I know," he said, anticipating a correction, "that's not the reason."

"You're looking in the right place though," Benderman said. "The answers are inside you."

"I know," Cahill said. "It's just that..." His voice trailed off. "All right, let's see," he said, doubtful about what he'd been asked to do but willing to try. Again.

"In the morning I worked on my Con Law paper." Cahill went to the State University where he majored in political science. Although 22, he was still an undergraduate, having dropped out twice for medical reasons. "Constitutional law. My paper's about impoundment, know what that is? When a president doesn't
spend money Congress appropriates. That's what Nixon did—refused to spend for stuff passed by Congress. But if he can do that, it's the same as a line-item veto. Which is unconstitutional as hell, at least that's what I argue. I mean, the president has to take a bill as a whole because if he can impound . . . well, suppose he didn't want to enforce a civil rights law ..." Cahill shook his head. "That's a digression, isn't it? A defense. A way of avoiding your question?"

Benderman nodded. "I think so," he said.

Cahill decided not to mention meeting a friend, swimming for a half-hour in the university pool, then having a salad for lunch. He felt ridiculous about exercising, eating a healthy lunch, then topping it off with three or four cigarettes. He knew something had to go and suspected it would be the swimming and the salad. He couldn't imagine quitting. To him, smoking was part of his persona, as unchangeable as his left-handedness or brown eyes.

"I had class in the afternoon," he continued. "Uneventful. Last night I had pizza, studied a while, then watched the news and the beginning of Johnny Carson. I don't like him, I don't know why I watch. I mean, he's all right I guess. But he's so apolitical, he never says anything about what's going on. I guess I was thinking about him in bed though."

Cahill decided to have the second cigarette after all. Smoking was how he timed the sessions. One at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end. Three cigarettes equals fifty minutes.

"What comes to mind about Johnny Carson?" the doctor said.

Cahill sighed. "Really? You want me to talk about Johnny Carson?"

Benderman nodded and Cahill said, "What bullshit. You want me to talk about that?"

Benderman was impassive.

Cahill shrugged. "I'm sorry," he said in a softer tone. "I didn't mean to criticize you."

"Yes you did," Benderman said. His tone was matter-of-fact.

The younger man sat back, stunned. And then, oddly, his body began to relax. As so often happened, the doctor had said something so ice cold, so direct, so unflinchingly honest, it made Cahill trust the man. And admire him.

"All right, I'll do it your way." He moved as if he were about to stand up but instead, changed his posture, kicked off a loafer and pulled one leg underneath himself, sitting on his foot, the one without the shoe. He was attentive again, ready to go to work. "Let's see, Johnny Carson, Johnny Carson, what comes to mind about Johnny Carson?"

Cahill had met Dr. Benderman when he was hospitalized just after his 19th birthday. Waves of self-contempt, pounding at him, again and again, like the surf
at Big Sur, led him to take an overdose of the anti-depressant the family doctor had prescribed. Enough to require getting his stomach pumped. But since he took fewer than half the pills in the bottle, Bendersman called it a cry for help, not a real attempt at self-destruction.

The City Line Psychiatric Center, a three-building "campus," was established in the late 1940s for so-called intermediate patients, those who need hospitalization but not long-term care. Two buildings were dormitories, one for men and one for women. The third housed the administrative offices and space for the Center's affiliated psychiatrists and psychologists.

Cahill, when admitted, was terrified. He had never been around the mentally ill, and many were much worse than he was. Some hallucinated regularly. Cahill remembered a girl with long brown hair, perhaps 15, standing in the courtyard, swaying, about to topple, her head thrown back, eyelids fluttering: hallucinating, dreaming while awake; forced, against her will, to endure in public what most experience only in bed. He remembered her boyfriend standing there, holding her up, his arms around her waist, saying it was okay, everything was okay, she was only hallucinating and would somebody please get the nurse. And Edgar, terribly thin, who spoke in whispers and would go off to a corner and dance, by himself, for an hour or more, twirl and spin to music only he could hear. Michael, an older man, who'd wander around, stupefied after his shock treatments, electroshock therapy, which, for a time, erases the memory. Sitting at a table in the day room, playing pinochle, and asking the other players, over and over: "Do I own a car? What color is it? What color is my car?" And Alan, a tall man in his 30's who wore cashmere sweaters. Whose wife, who came every day, was drop-dead beautiful. He'd stand at the sink in the men's room, soaping and washing and rinsing his hands, again and again, all the while talking to Cahill about books or movies or what was in the news. Carrying on what would sound, on a tape recording, like a normal conversation. One part of his mind was under his control. But another part, defying all conscious intent, compelled him to stand at the sink, soaping and rinsing his hands, again and again. Actions that, for him, were as involuntary as hiccups.

Cahill's life started deteriorating when he reached puberty. Before that, he had been an average kid who did well enough in school and who, though content to spend hours alone reading or playing with his baseball cards, had the usual number of friends and no stark abnormalities. But in high school, his interest in school began to wane, his grades went downhill, and he started running with a tougher crowd, drinking, sometimes heavily, and one night, at a dance at the fire hall, starting a fight, deliberately, with a stranger. Someone broke it up and no one got hurt.

Sometimes he'd get so depressed that he'd sleep for 18, 24, 36 hours straight. Waking only to use the bathroom, eat milk and cookies, and masturbate.
He was admitted to college only because of his test scores, not his grades, which were lousy, or his extracurricular activities, which were nonexistent, or the essay he wrote about why he wanted to go, a slap-dash effort written in longhand the night before it was due.

He lived at home and commuted. His parents provided room and board while he worked as a busboy to cover expenses, including his car, a Saab with 110,000 miles, and tuition, kept low to encourage working class families, to send their children to college. Indeed, no one in his family had gone before—no one, including all his aunts and uncles and cousins.

At first, college went okay. It was a new beginning, a renaissance, and Cahill applied himself. At the end of the first semester, he had a C+ average, which, though nothing to brag about, was better than he'd done in high school. But in January, he had the fight with his father. Then he broke the window. And after that

It was a Sunday. Cahill was late for dinner, a special dinner, with company. He'd felt depressed all day, filled for no apparent reason with rage that was directed, now at the world, now at himself. That seemed to rise up out of nowhere and took all his strength to contain. With his mood pressing down like a branding iron on his brain, he drove around all day with his girlfriend, a fawn of a girl with short hair who nursed him, tried to help him, as she used to say, pull himself together. Finally, over an hour late, he parked his car, walked around the side of his parents' little brick ranch home and entered the back door, into the kitchen. Late? Yes. But he'd made it. Fought like hell to contain the depression and now he'd made it, got there after all. He walked in, proud of himself, and for reasons he later realized made no sense, expected everyone, especially his father, to know what he'd conquered. Expected a pat on the back. What an effort! Great, son, glad you made it! His father was at the counter, carving a roast. It was dark brown. Overcooked. His parents had held up dinner, waiting for him, and his mother had let the roast cook too long. Now it was tough and dry. Dinner was ruined.

His father, a soft-spoken man who Cahill loved more than anyone on earth, was in a foul mood. Over the past few years, he'd grown increasingly disappointed in his son. And when Cahill saw him standing there, frowning, carving the overcooked meat, he knew something was about to happen. He wasn't sure how it started, who said what to whom. All he remembered was his father, angry, spitting out something like: "I can't count on you for anything!" And Cahill, who had battled so hard just to get there, let out what he'd held back all day. He reached down and picked up a muddy green rubber boot that his father had worn doing yard work earlier that day and threw it, with all his might, at his father's head. It missed, bounced off the cabinet and onto the floor, mud flying onto the counter and the meal. His father bull-rushed him, grabbed his shoulders
and shoved him against the back door. Cahill fell backward and shattered the glass. He wasn't cut but glass fell everywhere. He straightened, shouted a curse, turned and left, slamming the door behind him, breaking more glass, fragments spraying everywhere. His girlfriend ran and barely made it into the car before he sped away.

Two nights later, in the mall, he kicked in the window of a shoe store. Shattered it. On impulse, for no reason. And then, again for no reason, banged his forehead into what was left. Smashing more glass, fragments flying. He was lucky. Some cuts on his forehead, nothing serious, no glass in his eyes. And no one else got hurt. Thank God. He just stood there, silent, head down, waiting to be arrested. His father went to the police station to get him. The storeowner agreed not to press charges if he'd write a letter of apology and pay for the window. Which he did. Three weeks after that came the overdose.

He had taken an instant liking to Benderman. After working with him during his five-week stay, Cahill agreed to see him twice a week. And now, nearly three years later, he was waiting tables and living on his own in a tiny apartment with a hot plate instead of a stove. His rent was fifty-five dollars a month. Things had reached a new equilibrium; peace had been restored. And in his third try, he was back in college, finishing his junior year, doing well, and for the first time in his life, enjoying his work.

“I only watched the first half-hour,” Cahill was saying. “The monologue, then Carnac the Magnificent. You know who that is, right?”

Benderman shook his head.

“You don’t know who Carnac is? What? Were you raised by wolves?”

Benderman smiled. “Tell me about it,” he said.

“Carnac’s a character, a magician, he knows the answer to a question before it’s asked. Only they’re funny. He’ll hold an envelope to his forehead,” Cahill pretended to have one, “and say something like, ‘9W.’ Then he opens the envelope and reads a question: ‘Do you spell your name with a ‘V,’ Mr. Wagner?’ Get it? 9W?”

“He knows all the answers?” Benderman said.

“Yeah, but you’re missing the point. It’s funny, it’s the . . . I don’t know, he’s a magician.”

Benderman watched his patient. “Just say what comes to mind.”

“Nothing comes to mind, I don’t even like Carnac. That much I mean . . . Okay, I should associate, right? To Carnac, a magician, magic, tricks—whatever comes to mind.
Well, he used to be a magician, Johnny Carson I mean. When he started out. Or was it Dick Cavett? I'm not sure.” Cahill shook his head. “Maybe they both were. Anyway, I like Dick Cavett better. I'd like to talk to him, have a beer. Maybe even be on his show. Someday I mean. When I've done something worthwhile. If I ever do. He's serious. Maybe talk about ... I don't know, what I'm doing. Dick would sit there, listening, asking intelligent questions. But Johnny only wants a quick laugh. You know, so that Ed-guy can laugh that stupid, yuck-yuck, dumb-ass laugh of his. Jesus!

“Magic, magic, being a magician. Well, I never wanted to be a magician. Magic never fascinated me like it does most kids. I knew it wasn't real, that there was a hidden pocket or a trap door. I like slight of hand. That is very cool. But magic never, I don't know, captured my imagination. Even when I was little.”

Then came a flicker of a memory, something he wasn't going to mention. But remembering the rule that whatever he was tempted to censor was just what he should talk about, he changed his mind. “I remember a magic show I went to. With my dad. I told you about that, right?”

“Just say what comes to mind,” Benderman said.

“Well, it was amateur night.” A smile creased his face. “You know, amateur magicians. God, we had a blast. Just the two of us; I don't know where my brother was. I guess I was, I don't know, 12 or 13. The trouble between us didn't start 'til later. When I was 12, we were still buds. That night especially.

“The show was put on by the Kiwanis or somebody to raise money for something. Some kind of benefit.” As the memory came into focus, he began to grin. “The performers were these local-yokel types, you know, homegrown magicians from the 'burbs. Guys who sold insurance and did magic on the side. They must have volunteered because, God, they were so bad, nobody would've paid them.

“It was so bad, it was great. I mean, bad in every conceivable way—hell, that's why we went. It was in a middle school, in the cafeteria, with chairs for about three hundred. But only about fifty came. About the only ones were some Kiwanis-types, the magicians' wives and kids, and Dad and me. We were probably the only ones who paid. We sat right up front too. In the second row. We didn't want to miss a thing.

“They had live music, a little band, maybe five pieces, a guy on trumpet. About the only thing they played all night was Saber Dance. Know it?” He hummed a few bars.

“Da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da,
“Da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da,
“Zow-oom! Da-da. Zow-oom!

“He'd read about it in the paper. And at dinner, on the spur of the mo-
ment, asked if I wanted to go. We used to do things like that, on the spur of the moment I mean.

"Anyway, the MC wore a tux and a big, goofy-ass grin. There was a guy with one of those guillotines that cuts a carrot but not a person's arm, know what I mean?" He didn't wait for an answer. "And his assistant, who must've been his wife, she was . . . how do you put it when you're trying to be polite? 'Full-figured?'

Well, she was full-figured as hell. She wore one of those magician's assistant costumes: you know, spike heels, dark mesh stockings, and a low cut, short sequined dress, I mean really low cut. Half her boobs were showing, she was supposed to look sexy but . . . I mean, maybe before the first four grandkids, know what I mean?

"Anyway, for the trick this guy starts cutting up carrots like crazy, you know, to show you how sharp the blade is. While the band is playing 'Saber Dance' for about the forty-ninth time. And his wife struts around the stage, waving her arms and smiling a bright red, lipstick-all-over-her-teeth kind of smile. Finally she puts one arm in the guillotine and the drummer starts a drum roll. The magician gets this real serious look on his face, says he hopes nothing goes wrong, and she gives a little, fakey-doo, 'what'd-he-say?' double take, you know, kind of a 'Perils-of-Pauline, aren't-I-just-a-cutesy-wootsie' kind of look. Know what I mean?

"Then he puts a carrot into the guillotine, you know, just below her arm. The drum rolls get faster, and BOOM! Down slams the blade. The woman screams—I guess for dramatic effect—the carrot splits in half, part rolls off the table, and the band starts playing Saber Dance again. The woman takes her arm out and waves it around, you know, to show you it's all in one piece, while the magician bends down under the table to pick up the piece of carrot. Then he stands up next to his wife, holds up the two halves of carrot while she's waving away, and the band goes: 'TA-DA!'"

"Well, everyone starts clapping. Except Dad and me. We're laughing. Hard. And it's embarrassing because we're the only ones. Laughing I mean. We try to stop, but we're like kids with the giggles. And the more we try not to laugh, the funnier it gets. I mean, we can't even look at each other.

"Anyway, after the magician comes these acrobats, three brothers who run a local bakery: 'The Tumbling Tambolinis.' Their costumes are like kids' pajamas, you know, baby blue long Johns with feeties. And their act consists of somersaults, cartwheels, and a handstand or two—all with a 'Hey!' or a 'Hol!' thrown in here and there. I mean, the Moscow Circus it wasn't. Then comes the 'Grand Finale.' Two of them get a chair that's up on a pole while the third guy brings out a miniature trampoline, about three times this size." He made a circle with his arms. "He puts the trampoline on stage while the other two hold up the chair-on-the-pole and brace it."

"Now the finale is, this guy is gonna run across stage, jump on the trampo-
line, spin around in the air or something, then land, sitting down, in the chair on the pole. Great, huh? I mean, something to tell the grandkids, right? Anyway, the drum roll starts and the place gets quiet—except for Dad and me. We're giggling like little girls. Then, from offstage, comes pudgy little Mr. Tambolini, in his pajamas with the feeties, running full speed, and we lose it. I mean, we lose it. As he gets to the trampoline—BASH go the cymbals. Only he doesn't jump—he runs right past the trampoline, off the other end of the stage. Nothing happens for a second, then he stomps back with a stern look on his face and, in a serious voice, the Kiwanis-MC-guy goes: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, this trick requires Mr. Tambolini's complete concentration. For the safety of the performers, please keep absolute silence.’

“That did it, put us over the top. ‘For the safety of the performers.’ That was the line that did it. He nudged me, we had to go; everyone was staring at us as we left, God, it was embarrassing. We walk out with our heads down, still giggling away, hoping like hell no one knows who we are. God, we laughed all the way home. Even now, he can crack me up. All he has to say is, ‘I wonder what Mr. Tambolini’s doing.’” Cahill was laughing so hard a tear ran down his cheek. “I'll tell you something else—we never went in that bakery again. We were ashamed to show our face.”

He reached for another cigarette. As he lit it, the joy in his eyes melted into an unfocused gaze. “Know something, Doctor Benderman,” he said as he exhaled, “I loved my father more that night than at any time in my life.”

He dragged on the cigarette and studied the ashes as he flipped them into the tray. “I guess we're a long way from Johnny Carson.”

The doctor sat there. “Just say what comes to mind.”

Cahill responded. But his voice was different now, soft and serious. “I haven't seen him for a while. The last time was two months ago. He's getting older. He'll be fifty-six on his next birthday. He married late,” Cahill explained. “He was in the war. In Africa and Europe, for more than three years. I told you about that, didn't I?”

The doctor did not answer. “He was a hero too. That's what one of his friends told me. One night after a party, I must have been—let's see, things had started going bad but hadn't reached bottom yet, and so I was probably about 16. Anyway, the friend was from out of town, visiting, staying with us. He and I were alone after the party; everyone else was in bed. I fixed him a nightcap and he popped me a beer. Even though I was under age, he gave me a beer and I sat up with him. ‘Know something, Danny,’ he said, ‘your Dad was a hero. I don't mean some John-Wayne-movie star-bullshit hero, a real hero, the kind of guy who won the war.’

‘Those were his exact words. ‘The kind of guy who won the war.’"
"He was in the infantry. In North Africa, against Rommel. In Sicily, Italy, Normandy. He served under Patton, who he hated, and Omar Bradley, who he loved. He's a hawk, a real hawk on Vietnam. He voted for Goldwater. But God, did he hate Patton. Hated him! Mom said that afterward, when she told him Patton's jeep had crashed, Dad said he hoped he didn't die. Mom said, 'Why? Don't you hate him?' And my dad, who, I swear, does not have a mean bone in his body, not one, said he didn't want Patton to die, he wanted him to linger and suffer. I swear, I never heard him say anything like that in my life. God, he hated Patton. He was there the day Patton apologized. You know, for slapping the GI, the shell-shocked guy. Eisenhower made him apologize to the troops. They were in dress uniforms, the whole outfit, standing in the sun all day. Finally, late in the afternoon, a helicopter buzzes in. No one knew what was going on, no one could hear; they didn't find out what happened until they read *Stars and Stripes*. After five minutes, Patton gets back on the chopper and splits. Dad said it was typical Patton. Everyone all dressed up, standing all day in the sun, then him showing up and nobody can hear a word he said.

"He said that with Bradley, they took more territory and more prisoners with fewer casualties than they ever did with Patton. He loved Bradley. But Patton—God, he hated him. He wouldn't even see the movie. Would not go!

"He was at the Bulge. His outfit, the 9th Infantry, was the hinge. The Nazis had punched a hole in the Allied lines and if they overran the 9th, the door would've swung open and they'd have poured through to Antwerp, cut the Allied lines in half. Then dug in and negotiated a truce. That was their plan. But despite getting pounded, the 9th held its ground, the Allies regrouped, and the Nazis were stopped.

"He went to Germany, his outfit liberated a concentration camp. The one at Nordhausen, in the Harz Mountains. It was a work camp, not a death camp like Auschwitz. But bad enough. He saw mass graves. The Germans tried to kill all the Jews before they had to evacuate.

"He won a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart—he was wounded in Tunisia. And a slew of other stuff. A loop of rope from the Belgian government because his outfit liberated Brussels, things like that. It's hard to imagine, thank God I didn't have to . . . that's the one good thing about the head banging crap—4-Fs don't go to sunny south Asia.

"I used to ask him about it, what it was like. He's such a quiet guy, he hardly ever talks about it. I don't know what he did to get the Bronze Star. Do you believe that? I don't know why he got it. I don't think anyone does. Once I asked and all he said was, 'It was in North Africa, we got beat up pretty bad. They gave it to a lot of guys that day.'

"Do you believe that? 'They gave it to a lot of guys that day.' That's all he said. That's something, huh? Something to live . . .

"He hardly ever talks about it. But one night, he told me a story. I was
about 15. I asked if he'd ever shot someone, ever, you know, killed a man. He said that in battle, everything is chaotic, you try to keep down, shoot in a general direction, you can’t see much to start with. Then, with all the smoke and noise, you have no idea what you hit, if anything. But once, he said . . . in Italy.

“He was on guard duty at a bombed-out monastery. About, I don't know, fifty yards away was the remains of a wall—jagged, uneven, blasted in the bombing. He sees an Italian helmet bob above the wall. He was a great shot. ‘Expert.’ Which is better than ‘Sharpshooter’ or ‘Marksman.’ ‘Expert’s’ the best there is. Anyway, he aims at the next place where the wall’s bombed away. And when he sees the helmet again, he shoots. One shot. A guy starts screaming, ‘Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!’ A GI was bringing in a prisoner. Dad shot an Italian soldier. Killed him. The bullet went right through his helmet. The GI was short and so his helmet didn’t show. It was an accident, a goddamn accident.

“I asked whether it bothered him, if he ever wondered about the guy or his family. He shrugged in an embarrassed kind of way and said he guessed the war was full of stories like that. It wasn’t a ‘yes’ exactly, but it wasn’t a ‘no’ either. ‘The war was full of stories like that.’ That’s all he said.”

They sat in silence for a moment and then the doctor said, “Ever been afraid your father might shoot you?”

Cahill looked up, his eyes ablaze. “You’re kidding me, right. You’ve got to be kidding. Christ, don’t throw that crap at me now, okay?”

Benderman said nothing.

“Use that crap on my fantasies, on my head banging. On Johnny Carson, if you want, or the magic show. But when I tell you something real, don’t come at me with Freud 101, okay?”

The doctor did not move.

“He killed a man, a man who’d surrendered. It was an accident, a freaking accident. But it happened, it really happened.”

Cahill was fuming. He lit another cigarette, number four for the session, and dragged on it angrily again and again. Then, gradually, something else occurred to him and he shook his head in disbelief.

“I know what you’re thinking. I just figured out what you’re thinking.”

Benderman said nothing.

“You’re thinking my reaction proves you’re right, right? You’re thinking my getting angry proves you hit the nail on the head.” Cahill shook his head. “My over-reaction, right. That’s what you’re thinking, I know it.

“But don’t you see, there’s another way to look at it. My dad killed a man. A human being. Who maybe loved Mussolini or hated him. Maybe he loved the opera. Maybe with a wife and kids. Maybe he’d surrendered because he was hungry . . . look, it was real. It happened. It’s not something from the bowels of my mind.”
He shook his head.

"You don't listen like a normal person, know that?" He took a deep breath.

"That was no fantasy, no perverted wish—that was real."

Cahill put his hands on his ears, cupping them, as if to block out any sound, preempt anything the doctor might say. He sat in silence, going over it all in his mind. He felt like walking out. And then, suddenly, something else occurred to him. Another thought. He snapped his fingers and looked up, his eyes bright.

"You made a mistake, didn't you?" he said.

Benderman did not reply.

"You tried to hit a home run, right? Shoot the moon."

"What do you mean?" Benderman said.

"You tried to put it all together." Cahill uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, his voice eager.

The doctor remained expressionless.

"You think my head banging and all is rooted in one thing, right? And that's what you tried to put together. To see if it would register.

"But even if they are—and I mean even if they are—you can't just say to someone: 'You feel like shit because of your Oedipus complex.' It's a lot more complicated, right? Otherwise, you could just read a book and presto! Instant mental health.

"You have to nibble at it, right? Take bite-size pieces and chew them up. Digest them, a piece at a time. And that was your mistake."

Benderman did not answer for a moment, then he said, "What would it mean if I did make a mistake?"

Cahill shook his head. "Oh no you don't. No more tricks. No more answering my questions with a question."

Benderman did not reply.

"Look, if you're not gonna be straight with me, I'm not gonna keep putting myself through all this."

The doctor lit a cigarette, a Salem. Sometimes he smoked during the sessions too. One, never more than one. He exhaled slowly, then, measuring his words, said, "The focus has to be on you. On what goes on in your mind. If we drag me into it, it'll get too complicated."

They sat in silence a moment. Then Cahill made a joke. "You know, if I came in and said I'd just pulled a Richard Speck, you know, whacked six nurses with a hunting knife, you'd probably say, 'Vat vere you t'inking at de time?'"

The doctor smiled but Cahill did not feel the pleasure he usually did. Instead, he looked away and together they sat in silence. Finally Benderman said, "Well, we're about out of time."

As he rose, Cahill did not make eye contact. Silently, he moved toward the door and opened it. Then another thought occurred to him and he turned to face
the older man. "Dr. Benderman?"

"Yes?"

"Something happened here today, right? Stuff came up, surfaced, from down in my mind. And though we didn't get it all, we made progress, right? Because we'll go back over it and maybe understand it, maybe make connections. And if we do that, I'll feel better, right?"

"That's how I see it," Benderman said.

"Sometimes this is all frustrating as hell. Slow, like we're going nowhere. But we're moving, right? An inch or two at a time. But moving. We're chipping away at something, trying to dislodge it. And it's budging, huh?"

"Yes, it is," Benderman said.

"I hope you're right," Cahill said.

"Have a nice weekend," the doctor said.

"You too," Cahill said, sighing and shaking his head. He left the door open behind him.
After Six Weeks in New York
AFTER SIX WEEKS IN NEW YORK

On Thursday evening at precisely eight twenty-seven, Dan Cahill called Theresa Thorpe. Cahill had been in New York for six weeks. He'd taken a job on Madison Avenue after graduating from a branch of a state university just below the Mason-Dixon Line—a solid enough school, but filled with people like himself: local residents without the means to go away. After reading about the job in the Careers office and sending a carefully composed letter and his resume, he flew in for two days of interviews—his first time on an airplane—and late on the second day, they offered him the job. He was a little intimidated by the idea of New York, a place he'd never been, and worried whether he could keep up with colleagues from Princeton and Cornell and little colleges he'd never heard of. But he accepted on the spot. He'd give New York a try. If it didn't work out, he could go back home. And if it did, his career prospects were as bright as a stretch of Second Avenue sidewalk on a sunny September Saturday.

Not counting the people in his office, most of whom he barely knew, and old arthritic Mrs. Bergman who lived down the hall and once had him in for tea, Cahill, after six weeks, knew not a soul. No one from his little hometown lived in New York. No one from school. His nearest relatives were in Rochester. And since he hadn't joined a fraternity and wasn't especially religious, he didn't look there either. Despite its eight million people, New York City can be a lonely place.

But Cahill didn't mind. He was focused on his job. Most days he'd work until seven, then grab a sandwich and salad on the way home. On weekends, when not at the office, he'd enjoy one of New York's greatest pleasures: he'd walk its streets. The Village, Fifth Avenue, Broadway, Central Park, just soaking up the city. For now he was content. Almost content. The one person he wanted to know was Theresa Thorpe.

Theresa Thorpe had come to the firm via "Performing Arts," an agency that finds temporary work for aspiring actors, dancers, musicians, and writers—a group New York abounds with. She had, Cahill discovered, studied drama at one of those little colleges he'd never heard of and told him she was an actor (not an actress she'd made it clear), an actor who wanted to work mainly in theater instead of movies or television.
It's not that Theresa Thorpe was beautiful. Or even all that pretty, at least in the usual sense. But when he looked at her from certain angles or the light was just so, Cahill found her so alluring his mind would blank, then he'd panic 'til he thought of something to say.

He had twelve dozen questions he wanted to ask her. Since she worked only four days a week from ten until two, he wondered if she had another source of income as he could barely afford the rent on his miniature apartment and he had a professional's salary, albeit an entry-level one. Did she share a place? With two people? One? A man? Her boyfriend?

He tried to draw her into conversation at every opportunity. But being raised in a small town, he was unfailingly polite. And since he wasn't good at small talk, about the best he could manage, besides asking for paper clips or pens or some little yellow Post-its, was to stop each morning at 10:30, when the coffee wagon came, to ask if she wanted some tea. Which she sometimes did, but never let him pay for. And though she seemed to genuinely appreciate him getting it, she never invited him to sit and chat, never asked a question, in fact, never seemed curious about him or anyone else in the firm—so separate and apart, he thought, that her true interests must lie elsewhere.

But whatever her interests, she was diligent, as most New Yorkers seem to be. Except to answer a question or to eat the yogurt and banana she brought each day, she rarely looked up from her work. And the few times she did, he tried not to gawk. At her honey-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and tied with an elastic band; her grey-green eyes that changed hue, depending on the color of her shirt or sweater; her delicate nose, the nostrils flaring ever so slightly with each breath; her pale, clear skin, so translucent he could trace the light blue lines of her veins; her angular face, without a hint of makeup. Or at her hands: her slender fingers and unpolished nails bitten a little, not a lot, just a little, with a single piece of jewelry, a silver ring with a red stone—probably a garnet; her birthstone?—on the third finger of her right hand. And sometimes he'd furtively glance at her figure: her small but what he imagined as exquisite breasts; he'd always liked small breasts. Her firm little backside; the shapely ankles that peaked out beneath her jeans; her feet in those tiny blue running shoes.

Twice this morning she smiled at him. And each time, nearly took his breath away. The first was when, after stopping to ask if she wanted some tea and hearing her say what she sometimes did: no, but thanks for asking, he sputtered out the question he'd settled on, the one among the many candidate questions he decided would be most likely to start a conversation. He'd been wondering, he said, what were her favorite plays.

"I didn't know you liked theater," she said with a bright, sudden smile, her teeth white and even, her eyes crinkling so that she smiled with her whole face.

"It's something I'd like to learn about," he said, inhaling deeply, trying not to
gasp. "I mean, now that I'm in New York, I want to go to the theater. And the ballet and Carnegie Hall too of course. Learn about them all. I mean, what's the point of living here if you're not going to take advantage of it? Them. New York I mean, the city." He mentally cursed himself for sounding so disjointed. "At least that's what I think," he said.

"Sounds like a good attitude to me," she replied.

"But," he quickly added, sensing that she found him inarticulately boring, "you didn't answer my question."

For the second time, Theresa Thorpe smiled at him. And again nearly took his breath away.

"There are so many," she said. "I could never name one. Or even two or three. There are just too, too many."

She asked what his favorites were and he said he'd only seen one, his high school's production of *Bye, Bye Birdie*. Didn't he see any plays in college, she asked, and he shook his head.

"You have a lot to look forward to," she said.

Accepting her comment, not as a put-down but as a matter of fact, he nodded and then blurted out the other lines he'd mentally rehearsed.

"Maybe some night, if there's something you think I should see, I mean a play that would be especially interesting for, you know, someone who's just learning about theater, maybe you'd tell me about it. And go with me to see it. It'd be great to see a play with someone who knows about theater. And talk about it afterward."

He took a deep breath. There, he'd done it; that much was over. But his small-town politeness asserted itself and he quickly added, "I mean of course if you're not too busy."

"That's sweet," she said, her smile melting. "Or even if I couldn't go," she brightly added, "I'd be glad to tell you about something."

He felt like he'd jumped off the George Washington Bridge and was about to smash into the Hudson River. He was sure she meant *tell* you but not go, not with *you*, not in a million years. He tried desperately to keep the conversation going, to think of something to say. But his disappointment was keen and he stood there a moment dumb and embarrassed, wondering if, because they always have final say, women realize how much power they really have. The best he could manage was, "Sure you won't have some tea?"

"You know," Theresa Thorpe said, changing her mind, "maybe I could go for some. With lemon, not milk, okay?"

On his way to the coffee wagon, Cahill began rationalizing away his disappointment. There are thousands of young women in New York he thought, plenty of fish in the sea. And it's not that she was beautiful. Or even all that *pretty*, at least in the usual sense. And probably way too artsy. Even artsy fartsy.
By the time he got back, he was beginning to mentally regroup. Regroup, that is, until she handed him a Post-it with a number on it and said, “If you like, you can call me sometime.”

His hopes shot back up as if tied to a bungee cord. He thought he might pass out from joy.

And so that night, at precisely eight twenty-seven, he dialed her number. He'd intended to wait until eight-thirty but got impatient and figured this was close enough. It's a good time, he thought. She'll have eaten but won't be settled in. At least if she hasn't gone out. And she hadn't.

“There's a play downtown,” she said. “It's experimental. Experimental theater. I'm free tomorrow night. Friday. Does that work for you?”

“Of course,” he said, though he'd planned to see a ballet, his first, and had splurged on an eighty-dollar ticket at Lincoln Center.

“I'll meet you there. I think the tickets are like ten bucks.”

She gave him an address in the East Village.

“But I have to go afterward,” she said. “I'm meeting someone so I won't even be able to stop for a drink, okay?”

“Of course,” he said, momentarily disappointed, but then thinking she's probably just playing it safe. Which was something he understood. Folks from below the Mason-Dixon Line know all about mannerly reserve, all about playing it safe.

The play didn't start until eight but Cahill, worried he wouldn't find it, arrived at six-fifteen. The theater, if you could call it that, was on the third floor of a nearly decrepit four-story building. Because the elevator was out of order, he climbed a dimly lit, rickety metal staircase, holding the railing as he went, hoping it wouldn’t pick tonight to collapse. He bought two tickets from a pallid young woman with a shaved head and a hammer and sickle tattoo on her neck. The thought of asking if she'd be happier in Cuba crossed his mind but he checked himself, telling himself he was in New York now and should not be provincial. The girl with the shaved head put his money in a cigar box and handed him two tickets and an orange flyer that said "The Idiot, a musical comedy based on the novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky."

Cahill lifted a faded purple curtain to peak into the theater: three rows of metal folding chairs facing what resembled a Victorian parlor. In the center was a fireplace and on the mantle, a stuffed animal, a squirrel or something, Cahill couldn't make it out. He glanced at his Timex, saw he had lots of time, walked back down the rickety stairs, bought some coffee at a nearby deli, and began a long wait in the cold.

Theresa Thorpe arrived at quarter of eight. From where he could not say. All of a sudden, with a blue knapsack on her back, there she was, smiling and saying, “Hi. Any trouble finding it?”
“Not a bit,” he said.

She asked if he'd bought the tickets and when he said yes, she said she'd get the cab, adding he could drop her near Restaurant Row on 46th Street where she was meeting someone, and then he could take it the rest of the way. Though she'd said there'd be no stopping afterward, Cahill winced with disappointment. He assumed she was meeting a friend. An actor? Maybe a terrific actor? The lead in a Broadway show?

Referring to what they were going to see, Theresa Thorpe said, “Know what it's about?”

Despite combing New York and The New Yorker, he'd found nothing about the play. He shook his head.

“It's based on The Idiot. Ever read it?”

Cahill shook his head.

“It's one of the greatest novels ever written,” Theresa Thorpe said. “You know about it, right?”

He shook his head.

“The Brothers K?” He shook again. “Crime and Punishment?” And again. “You've never read any Dostoevsky?” Theresa Thorpe said, dumbfounded, as if he'd just said he never brushed his teeth.

Cahill composed himself, indeed, recovered rather nicely he thought, because all those questions had given him time to think.

“Tell me about it,” he said. “Tell me why it's great.”

Hurried because she had little time, Theresa Thorpe said, “Oh boy, what time is it? Quarter of? Where to begin? Okay, there's this prince, a Russian, Prince Myshkin, who's so honest, so true, so guileful... is that the right word? Or do I mean guile-less?”

She didn't wait for an answer.

“Forget 'guile.' Forget all about 'guile.'

“Anyway, he's so honest, so selfless and kind, so caring, so trusting that everyone he meets, I mean everyone, thinks he's an idiot. A complete and total idiot.

“Ever heard the saying: ‘Any man who says what he thinks is a fool. And any man who thinks what he says is an idiot?’

“Anyway, Dostoevsky thinks that's how people are. We mask ourselves. Deliberately. Everyone does. Everyone except Myshkin. And so the world thinks he's a dimwit.

“But of course he's anything but. What he really is is about as perfect as a person can be.

“And so, what Dostoevsky's saying is that if a person were almost perfect, we human beings, because we're so cynical and selfish and narrow-minded and, quote unquote, sophisticated, would think he's an idiot.”

She smiled a little half smile, asking without a word if he followed the
implications of her very last point. He nodded and she continued.

"This is a musical based on the novel. The whole play's in music. Not a word of dialogue. I know the guy who did the costumes."

Cahill wanted to hear more, more about the novel and the Russian who wrote it. But it was time to join the two dozen others who had filed in to sit on the folding chairs.

Afterward, with a nearly rapturous look on her face, Theresa Thorpe looked at him as they exited.

"Pretty cool, huh?" she said with a smile. Then, scampering down the stairs, she said over her shoulder, "Sorry but I've got to hurry." He nodded but her back was turned.

When they reached the ground floor, she bolted for the exit and, with him struggling to keep up, set off at a brisk pace toward the corner. As they zipped along, she said, "So creative and ambitious. Not perfect of course, but bold. I like people who take chances. And that actress was so affecting."

When they got to the corner, instead of standing to chat, Theresa Thorpe stepped out into the street, one arm high in the air and, like Joe Torre signaling an outfielder, let out the loudest whistle Cahill had ever heard. A southbound cab screeched into an abrupt U-turn and lurched to a stop beside her. She opened the door, slid nimbly across the back seat, and patted for him to follow. As he climbed in next to her she said, "Wha'd you think?"

"I wish you'd talk," he said.

"No fair," she said. "I already did. Now tell me what you think."

"Won't you say more about why you liked it?" he said.

"You first," she said as the cab raced uptown at about sixty miles an hour. Cahill realized their time together would be short. He wanted to say just the right thing and desperately hoped something would come to mind.

"I'm glad we talked beforehand," he said. "That helped a lot."

"You didn't like it, did you?" she said as the cab jerked to a stop. Finally, he thought, finally a red light.

He said nothing.

"That's okay," she said. "If you didn't care for it, you won't hurt my feelings. I mean, it's not like I'm in it."

Cahill was going to mention that each time the prince had a fit, which happened a lot as he suffered from epilepsy, he'd been sprayed by the actor's spittle. But he mentally shrugged and figured that getting sprayed is probably part of live theater, at least if you're in the second row.

"This was my last day," Theresa Thorpe said. "At your office I mean. I start somewhere else on Monday. Full time. Which I can use. The full-time hours I mean. I'll probably be back at your place one of these days. But, hey, you know, you never know."
Stunned, he realized his time was running out.

“I wondered,” he said as the cab took off again and, now on Park Avenue, raced down into a tunnel he didn’t know existed, “about some of the songs. . . .”

She watched him without saying a word.

The cab resurfaced and sped around Grand Central Terminal and he knew he had only moments to go. He decided to dive off the cliff.

“Well,” he said, “remember the tormented woman, not the one who was murdered at the end, the other one?”

“Aglaia,” she said.

“Right. When she grabbed that stuffed gerbil off the fireplace?” A quick cautionary thought came to mind. “Did your friend do the props?”

She shook her head.

Relieved, he nodded and continued.

“And started singing to it? Dostoevsky, why did you put this gerbil on the mantle? What does it mean, what does it mean? Remember?”

Theresa Thorpe nodded.

“When I heard that, I thought to myself, ‘Say what!’”

“Say what?” She said, like Marcia Clark mid cross-examination.

“I wondered if the people who did the play really understood the novel.”

She was silent.

“I mean, would a writer put a symbol in a novel and then have a character ask why it’s there?” He shrugged.

“S’D’ what?” She said, like Marcia Clark mid cross-examination.

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“I wondered if the people who did the play really understood the novel.”

She was silent.

“I mean, would a writer put a symbol in a novel and then have a character ask why it’s there?”

She nodded.

“And register almost without you realizing it?”

“Right, subconsciously,” she said.

“Well, would a character ask why . . . say, a sled. Like Rosebud. You know, the sled in Citizen Kane?”

She nodded.

“Would the man,” he said, “or woman who wrote—”

“Man,” she interrupted. “Orson Wells.”

“—wrote that screenplay have a character ask why the sled is there? During the movie?”

Theresa Thorpe looked at him, expressionless. Stared at him really. The cab was stuck in crosstown traffic.

“Traffic’s a mess,” she said, handing him a ten-dollar bill, “and I’m already late. I’ll jump out here and walk the last couple of blocks. You can go up 6th.”

Cahill ever so lightly touched her arm, asking her without a word to wait just a second. “You think I’m a know-nothing, don’t you?” he said. “A know-nothing and a goober.”

Theresa Thorpe looked at him a moment, then smiled. A warm, inviting
smile.

"You're sincere," she said. "And thoughtful, you think for yourself." She patted the back of his hand. "You can call me again if you like," she said. "Not this weekend, I'm busy this weekend. But soon. I mean, I'd like it if you did."

She jumped out of the cab and jogged toward Broadway, the knapsack bouncing on her back.

After sitting there a moment or so, Cahill told the driver he'd get out too. And the next morning, could not for the life of him remember how he got home.
Entries from Skipper Bitwell's Journal
ENTRIES FROM SKIPPER BITWELL'S JOURNAL

These journal entries were written in the winter and spring of my sixteenth year. I edited them lightly and corrected errors of spelling and punctuation. But for those changes and a few times when I excised material to make it read more like a story, I did not alter a word of what I originally wrote.

Lawrence P. Bitwell
New York City, 2002

Friday, February 7, 1986

School was as dreary as ever today. My classmates continue to aggravate me with their alienated antics. A perfect example happened during second period when Carolyn Prendergast put on a performance worthy of a Golden Globe. Carolyn's boyfriend, it seems, had recently been unfaithful. He had, it seems, taken "Mayonnaise Legs" Masterson (AKA Andrea to her parents and brother) home from a party last weekend and copulated with her in the back seat of his car. (Although how anyone came to know all this in the first place is beyond my comprehension.)

Tell Skipper not to judge Dostoevsky until he's at least twenty-five. That was the last thing he ever said.

In any case, Carolyn—along with everyone else—found out about all this just before class. And so, for nearly half an hour, Miss Childress's account of the Spanish-American War was upstaged by the spectacle of Carolyn struggling to seem to be struggling to keep her composure despite this heart-breaking chain of events. Actually, of course, she enjoyed—no, was basking in—all the attention and concern. ("I'm fine. Really, I am. Thanks for asking.") In the end, however, the emotional jolt proved to be too much. (Either that or Carolyn sensed people were losing interest.) And so, after countless murmurs of concern about how awful she looked or how her eyes were all watery and red, and a half-dozen outraged whispers about what a "rat" her boyfriend is, and God knows how many folded-up sheets of paper slipped from desk to desk marked: "Personal. Pass To Carolyn Prendergast. Do Not Read! This Means You!" even the courageous Carolyn could hold out no longer. And, after a last choked sob or two (and just as the Rough Riders were riding up San Juan Hill), Carolyn burst into hysterical tears and ran out of the room, as cruel fate would have it, right in front of twenty-four people.
Naturally, Miss Childress, who is a bit of a mooncalf herself, ran out after her, presumably to take Carolyn down to the nurse. But when I heard the girl next to me say, "I feel so sorry for her!" it was all I could do to keep from yawning. Not only is this the third time since Christmas that she and her boyfriend have broken up, they will undoubtedly be reconciled in time for Tuesday's basketball game.

Perhaps I seem hardhearted to my classmates, but I find it impossible to empathize with their juvenilia. Perhaps I should be more kindhearted but I'm just not able to. I wonder how some of my fictional heroes would have reacted to the situation: Pip, Atticus Finch, Mr. Spock. Would they be as hard on them as I am? Probably not. But in all fairness to me, Pip never had to put up with the likes of Carolyn Prendergast. Not to mention Miss Childress.

One further school note: I received a "96" on my chemistry test and after class Mr. Bowen called me aside and said I had a "good head" for the subject and that I should consider majoring in it at college. (Mr. Bowen will never be lionized for his eloquence. I suppose he was merely trying to relate to me in the day's vernacular, but my immediate thought was that my skull reminded him of a tungsten molecule.) In any case, and all sarcasm aside, I was quite pleased.

On the other hand, however, his comment only added to my confusion. Because of his assessment, I decided to add "chemist" to my list of career possibilities (which now numbers sixteen). However, my continuing difficulty in French makes me wonder about my aptitude for foreign languages and whether I should cross off the State Department.

After dinner, Mother and I went to a movie, one of those foreign, intellectual efforts she always wants to see and almost never enjoys. Mother is so sincere. She must feel it's her duty to expose me to "high-minded" things like foreign films. And the more inscrutable, the better. This one, by a French (so-called) genius pitting the good, natural man against the vice and corrupting influences of contemporary society. (I did get that much.) In one scene that typified things, the protagonist gets his head caught in a trash compactor—the compactor, I suppose, representing technological excess, the protagonist failing to understand its function or need. But there was also a transvestite, a parrot that refused to talk, and a midget who worked for the CLA, and I have no idea what they represented. (If anything.)

I wish I could decide what we'd see more often. I suppose we'd still be taking turns if I hadn't tried to trick her into seeing that massacre movie by saying it was a Sierra Club documentary about Texas. Now, anytime I even suggest a film, she says the same thing: "Skipper, does it have anything to do with chainsaws?"

After the film, we went to Howdy's for ice cream sundaes where, to my relief, conversation was limited to mundanities: my schoolwork, her job, and our plans for the weekend. Only once (and with characteristic crypt) did she allude to
the anniversary: "Skipper, you seem so much more mature this year." I, of course, ignored the remark and the subject quickly changed. Thus both before and after it, we had a not unpleasant evening. In fact, we had a not unpleasant evening as a whole.

A frivolous postscript: Mother had butterscotch and I had hot fudge.

Saturday, February 8, 1986

Largely to escape Mother's admonitions ("It's just not healthy for a boy your age to sit in his room all day. Even if he is reading"), I've gotten into the habit of going to the university library in my spare time and that's where I spent the bulk of the day. Mother worries about me. She worries about what she calls my lack of a social life. Maybe she can't help it. Maybe it's in her genes. Maybe mothers are biologically determined to worry about their children. It's probably an implausible hypothesis but at least it would explain a few things.

Work wise, it was a most productive day. I read two Hemingway novels—I finished The Old Man and The Sea and then started The Sun Also Rises. I enjoy Hemingway. I admire his style. And though I've read only three of his novels and six of his short stories, I believe that Old Man is his masterwork. Spencer Tracy and that boy, the book and the movie run together in my mind. I liked that boy, always talking to the old man about the Great DiMaggio or the Indians of Cleveland. I wonder whatever happened to him, what he turned out to be when he grew up. That happens to me a lot. When I get interested in a character in a book, I find myself wondering whatever happened to him after the end of the story. How did his life turn out? I want to hear more of the story; I want to know what happened afterwards.

Curiously, I almost never have this sensation after a movie. After a movie, I'm aware that a character was played by an actor, the "star." To the extent that I have any thoughts about a movie afterward, they involve the actor, not the character he portrayed. People in movies just aren't as real as the people in books.

I had dinner alone as Mother and Arthur ate out then went to a hockey game. I was invited to join them but declined. (Watching overgrown Ice Capeders smash each other to the delight of a frenzied crowd is not my idea of a good time.)

It's not that I dislike Arthur. He's considerate, treats me with respect, and often seems interested in what I'm doing in school. (Interested, however, only in my grades, not my coursework and what I'm actually studying or ideas.) He's just
So bland and unimaginative. What can one say about a man who reads *Dum's Review*, cover to cover, on the day it comes out? We have so little in common. I sometimes think that if we were strangers on a train sharing a Sunday paper, I'd reach for the book review, he'd take the business section, and we'd never swap. Never. We wouldn't want to.

After dinner, I read for a while, and then watched television. I could have watched a debate about nuclear power but instead opted for the second half of Double Creature Feature. (I don't know why I waste my time watching such tripe but nevertheless find myself doing it on a semi-regular basis. Oh well, another avenue to explore if I do become psychoanalyzed when I grow up.)

In any case, this was one of those especially bad, "made-in-Japan" efforts where a man in a dragon costume is photographed by a ground-level camera. Thus, he appears enormous as he crushes model trains, rips down power lines, and stomps on buildings. He was also an expert in karate—monsters that invade Japan are always experts in karate—and in one particularly dreadful scene, he chopped and kicked his way through an entire downtown. In the end, however, it turned out the monster wasn't "all that bad." He was, it seems, from another solar system and angry only because he could not find his child, abducted by an oriental P. T. Barnum-type who'd locked it up and planned to exhibit it (presumably in the greater Tokyo area). At the movie's end, the creatures were reunited and flew away together into outer space. But not before P. T. Barnum had been electrocuted or something. The "star," the head of Japanese Special Forces in charge of dealing with monsters, closed the film by saying something "profound" about how wrong it is to break the laws of nature. (In the spirit of forgiveness, the smashed bridges and buildings of the first reel were apparently forgotten.)

It is now nearly one o'clock and they are still not home. I wonder if tonight I'll have the dream about the ferret.

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**Sunday, February 9, 1986**

I met a most unusual person today. It happened just after lunch. I was in the library, wandering through the stacks with my list when I first saw her. She had an armload of books, at least six or seven, a frown on her face, and seemed oblivious to everything around her. She pushed past me, excusing herself with unconscious politeness, and I gave her no further thought until I came across her again two aisles later. She was sitting on the floor cross-legged so that her blue denim skirt covered even her feet; books and papers were spread out on the floor around her; one hand, clenched in a fist, was pressing her forehead, the
other furiously paging through the book in her lap. Needless to add, she was an unorthodox sight.

As inconspicuously as possible, I tried to climb over her and her paraphernalia when she suddenly looked up. "Hey," she said in anything but a whisper, "you look smart. Do you know anything about Mark Twain's structural patterns?" I, of course, immediately realized that she was engaged in some kind of literary research project but the whole scene was so preposterous that a serious answer seemed inappropriate. "Well," I said, "I've only seen photographs, but his hair was curly, he walked with a cane, and he seemed to be fond of white suits."

She looked at me strangely, then began to smile, then laughed out loud. And then she invited me to "pull up a book," which I did. Extending her hand, she introduced herself—Valerie Franklin—and I responded in kind. She asked if Skipper was my "real" name and I told her the story. (I can't remember the last time I told the story to anyone.) At once, she demonstrated both an above-average sense of humor as well as the ability to trade jibes. "Boats in the bathtub. Oh brother. Why didn't your father just call you 'Commodore'? Or 'Admiral,' for God's sake. Hey, how about I call you 'Commodore'?" I was amused but said she could either call me Skipper or my given name.

"Lawrence!" she exclaimed, "Is that bad or what? Too Arabian! And 'Larry,' ugh, almost as bad as 'Skipper.'"

She screwed up her face and thought for a moment. Upon reflection, I'm not sure whether she considered this a real dilemma or not (although some of the things she said later make me suspect the former). In either case, she quickly arrived at a solution. She asked me my middle name and when I told her, she said, "Cool, that's my brother's name too. How about I call you 'Paul?'"

The conversation was absurd anyway so I assented.

"Know what, Paul?" she said. "I'm sick of structural patterns. Let's blow this joint and get some coffee, okay? I'll buy."

Valerie Franklin is five feet, four inches tall and weighs one hundred and fourteen pounds. Her skin is moderately freckled and her eyes and hair are brown (although of different shades—her eyes are dark and her hair is light and naturally streaked, depending on both the light and its placement on her head). She is quick to smile, a wide, full smile that extends to her eyes and forehead, and her most distinguishing feature is her chin, which because of her thick bone structure, is very solid-looking and slightly wider than average. However, in combination with the rest of her face, it is not unbecoming. In fact, from an overall point of view, she is not unbecoming. However, she is not the flashy type (so to speak), not the type men turn their heads to stare at as they walk down the street.

We went to a little luncheonette across the square, about two blocks from the library. It was early in the afternoon and nearly deserted, but VF wanted to sit in the back so that we wouldn't "freeze our butts off every time some turkey
comes strolling in.” We settled into a booth where much of the conversation involved a comparison of likes and dislikes. Valerie Franklin seems particularly illogical, especially for a college student majoring in psychology. And she has opinions (or, more precisely, impassioned convictions) about very nearly everything.

For example, she is a coffee freak (her expression), but after her first cup, “it has to be decaf and I have to have milk, 2 percent milk. No cream and none of that Coffee mate, which is god awful.” In addition to coffee, she loves the beach, but not when it’s windy and not in the summer when there are lots of people around “cluttering things up.” She makes great spaghetti but except for a few things “like that,” she hates to cook. However, she does not mind doing dishes. Blue and green are her favorite colors, and she hates purple, although she does know a couple of “bo’s” (short, I think, for “bimbos”) who look good in it. She thinks sewing and knitting and “all those things” are dumb, but quickly added that if she could sew or knit, she probably wouldn’t think so. She thinks that orchids are beyond belief and would some day love to grow them, and never misses the annual flower show. She loves horses, especially palominos, “probably because I used to hang out at a Roy Rogers when I was a kid. Maybe I identified with Trigger and secretly wanted Roy to ride me too.”

In spite of myself I must have blushed because she looked at me with some alarm and quickly said, “Hey, c’mon, Paul, I’m no schlepper.”

(The word is Yiddish and means, I think, something about taking a trip. However, and despite the fact that I think that VF may be Jewish herself, I had the definite sense that, given the context, she meant something akin to a “loose woman.” I would have sought clarification but she was talking again and once she gets going, her words tumble out so fast that it takes concerted effort to slow her down.)

In any case and whatever she meant, she reached across, patted my hand, and said, “On second thought, never mind. It’s kind of nice to find a ‘blusher’ nowadays. You’re becoming very rare. Kind of like the buffalo. Go ahead if you want. Blush all you want.”

Back to the conversation: She loves the Impressionists, especially Monet (she would happily “live” in the room with the water lilies at MOMA) but thinks Picasso is “overrated.” She tried to learn to play guitar once but gave it up because the strings hurt her fingers. She almost got engaged to a dental student but broke it off because he was too “bourgie” (a variation of the word “bourgeois,” but I have only the faintest idea what she means). She worries because she hasn’t accomplished anything and she’s already twenty-three. After she finishes school, she wants to go to Europe and “bum around” for a year, and then probably teach middle school. Oh, and of all the occupations in the world, she thinks being a flight attendant is the “dopiest,” although she does think they all have “lots of
brass” because they’re always calm in emergencies.

I found all this out in just over two hours. Needless to add, Valerie Franklin talks a lot. But paradoxically, when not talking, she is an excellent listener. I found myself telling her things I rarely, if ever, talk about. For example, she asked about my list, which I was carrying when we met. I said that since I was learning so little at school, I had decided to educate myself and so I’d drawn up a list of the books I should eventually read. I told her that it’s sometimes disheartening because, if my calculations are correct, I won’t finish everything on my list until I’m thirty-one (which struck her as rather amusing and she mumbled a phrase of psychological jargon—something-or-other compulsive, I didn’t quite catch it. Presumably, it means you read all the time.) Then she asked to see the list.

“Hey,” she said, “You’ve got some great stuff on here.”

I asked why she was surprised.

“I guess I didn’t expect someone to care so much about books,” she said. I asked if she really meant “someone my age” and she nodded. Sheepishly too. I told her that I was quite mature intellectually and she agreed. “You pick up on things too,” she said.

She asked if I’d read The Odyssey for class and I said, no, I’d read it for myself, adding that in my view it is far superior to The Iliad, which, as far as I’m concerned, involves too much running around the walls of Troy. As she looked over the list, she seemed amused by some of my choices, saying, for example, that one of the listings under the letter H really “cracked her up.” With a grin, she asked, why, in the “name of all that’s holy,” did I have, sandwiched between the works of “Hitler, Adolf,” and “Homer, No First/Last Name,” the title “Hoffman, Abbie, Steal This Book.” I explained that I saw the work as a cultural benchmark that was, in its own way, somewhat akin to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which, though not good literature (or even remotely close I suppose), nevertheless spoke to a great many people in its day. Her grin faded.

“So you see it as a period piece?” she said.

I said I supposed so.

“You see it as a book that captured the spirit of the times. At a crucial point in history.”

I nodded.

“Jeez,” she said, “that’s not too bad,” and again asked how old I was. When I told her again, she repeated, “Really, that’s not too bad.”

Then she pointed to a title with a checkmark next to it and asked if that meant I’d read it.

“God, you’ve read a lot,” she said. “Hey, I always wanted to read this and never got around to it.”

She pointed to For Whom The Bell Tolls and asked me to tell her about it. I wasn’t sure if she was really interested—so often grownups ask you a question
when, really, they couldn’t care less—so I gave her a quick summary of the plot. But as soon as I’d finished, she began asking questions, one after another, and I realized she was interested, and so I gave her a detailed account of, not only the story, but also the characters and the little I know about the historical setting. I told her how, after finishing the book, I felt as if I’d practically known Pilar—and how, contrary to the generally accepted view, I thought the later novel was a stronger effort than *A Farewell to Arms* (which has too much rain in it, at least for my taste).

“That’s really neat,” she said. “You described it in so much detail, I almost feel as if I’ve read it too.”

Then she talked a bit about what she knew of the Spanish Civil War. Also, she told me her feelings about *The Great Gatsby*—about how she’s probably the only person in the whole world who doesn’t go “gaga” over it.

“Because they all were so despicable, such total slime balls,” she said. “The whole crowd. Which Nick should have seen in three minutes, not three months. I mean, compared to Daisy Buchanan, Madame Bovary was a regular Emma Goldman, know what I mean?”

I nodded.

“So even if Daisy did look like Mia, and even if she did have tons of dough, how “great” could any guy be who’d fall for the likes of her?”

I of course did not argue, primarily because I usually don’t like to argue (and also because I haven’t read the book yet). But her view is definitely one I’ll keep in mind when I turn to it.

I also told her about Mother, and Arthur, and about my favorite colors—in fact, I found myself talking about all sorts of things. (However, I did not tell her about the anniversary.)

And to my delight, and except for the fact that she insisted on paying for our six cups of decaffeinated coffee and four doughnuts, she treated me as an absolute equal, despite the difference in our ages. She said she frequently works in the library and asked if I’d meet her again sometime and again go for coffee, and I agreed.

A quiet evening. After homework and the dishes, Mother and I played Scrabble for an hour. (I won of course but she really is improving.) I also read for a while.

I know Valerie Franklin’s height and weight precisely, because she is only slightly smaller than I am and I wanted to compare dimensions. So, I asked her. I wonder if Valerie Franklin likes me.
Monday, February 10, 1986

I went to the library after school but did not see anyone I knew. But now, as I reflect on my afternoon experiences, I recognize for the first time another of those mental processes lurking at the edges of my consciousness. Although this one is almost too comical to describe, it is exactly like the others in that now that I have acknowledged it, I realize that it is continual and ongoing. (I feel more than a little silly as I try to record this but here goes.)

As I wandered around the library, I found myself mentally sizing up and accosting almost every woman I encountered. It's not that I mentally undressed them or fantasized about a particular sexual experience. Instead, I felt as if she and I were, or more precisely that some corner of our minds were, for an instant, in some state of primal communication. And in almost every case, she appreciated, was flattered by, and receptive to my imagined advances.

To be more precise, the feeling is not some Walter Mitty-type fantasy where I saunter up to a desirable woman, introduce myself, and after a few coquetries, seduce and copulate with her. It's not like that at all. It is to the contrary totally elementary and primitive. It feels as if I mentally communicate my own sexuality and simultaneously acknowledge hers. And for a microsecond, the female responds affirmatively to my mental communication. All this takes place in an instant. The thought exchange is something like this: "I am sexual. I know you are too." And she replies, "Yes, I see you and recognize your sexuality. And you're absolutely right, I am sexual, very sexual." As noted, it all takes place in an instant. And as soon as it does, or less than a millisecond after it does, something else, something civilized, takes over, and blocks further communication. Then one or both of us turn away.

As noted, now that I acknowledge it, I realize it's something that happens all the time, that it regularly goes on and that I knew it for a long time. But until today, I was unable to consciously know or acknowledge and collect the thought, and would have been utterly incapable of writing it down.

If these thought processes are widely shared—and the reactions today by women in the library suggest that indeed they are—then I am forced to conclude that lust is both primary and pervasive in human beings.

دارة

Tuesday, February 11, 1986

I had a conversation in study hall that typifies my entire scholastic experience to date. I decided to put down der Papa and started reading You Can't Go
Home Again. I was reading it in study hall when Alan Corridan (renowned for trying to spit in your milk or sandwich and for such bon mots as, "Hey Birwell, don't let your meat loaf!") interrupted to ask what it is about. My experience with VF led me to think that even he might be interested and so I (naively) started to reply until I saw that he was interested, not in the book, but only in another opportunity to mock or disparage me. So I told him it was a book about baseball.

“You're not so damn smart, Bitwell,” he said before turning to pester someone else. And I think Corridan now believes what I told him—that Thomas Wolfe is a retired shortstop.

After school, I again met Valerie Franklin at the library. I found her in the same place, on the floor, sitting cross-legged, Indian-style, surrounded by a semicircle of books and papers. She must have been tired of studying because when she saw me, she said, “Paul, thank God. I thought you'd never get here.” She picked up her books and stuffed them into a khaki knapsack, then put on the navy blue pea coat that had been serving as her cushion. When I mentioned it was cold out, she pulled up the collar, shook her head once so that her hair fell freely, and tucked her hair inside the collar, like a hood, to protect her ears from the wind. “A built-in scarf,” she said, slipping the knapsack onto one shoulder.

We went to the same little luncheonette, a place the students call “The Spoon” (an abbreviated appellation for Greasy Spoon), and again sat in a booth near the back, away from the front door. When she sat down, she blew on her hands, then tilted her head back and exhaled twice, as if checking if she could still see her breath. I mentioned that when you exhale in cold weather, the “smoke” that comes out of the mouth is actually only water vapor in the carbon dioxide exhaled from the lungs and she said, “You're very smart, aren't you?” I told her what the guidance counselor had said: that I was gifted, but not exceptionally so. VF said that in her opinion I was “very gifted” then told the waitress, a thin girl with dark hair wearing a stained green dress and white apron, that in addition to her coffee, she'd like some cinnamon toast—“but with not-too-much butter.” Though it's very fattening and high in cholesterol, she could become a “cinnamon toast junky” because her grandmother used to make it for her when she was little and the taste brought back good memories. Then, for nearly two hours, we sat there, drinking coffee and talking about all kinds of things. Below is a recount of some of our conversation, including who said what to whom.

VF is not, and never has been, married; though she wants to be and someday have “a bushel of kids.” (Which means, I think, three or four.) She described herself as “a working class kid” who comes from a family in which you “join a union when you hit 18.” She said that counting her parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, she is only the second in the family to go to college. The first, she said, was her cousin Norm, who is very smart and got a full scholarship to Cornell.
“There’s lots of brains in my family,” she said. “Just not much education.” She offered as an illustration an anecdote about her mother who, though proud of VF for paying her own way, does not understand what college means. And so, if VF did well in her first three years, her mother would send VF, for her senior year, to Notre Dame.

“Mom thinks the only reason you go to college is to get a diploma. To her, it’s a ticket, a passport that lets you start at a higher salary. And what’s important is the name of school on the diploma. The more prestigious the school, the better the ticket. To my Irish-Catholic mom, the top rung of the ladder is Notre Dame.” She added that her mom is ignorant, which, she reminded me, is a descriptive term, not a pejorative one, in that it means, “not knowing.” When it comes to college, she said, her mother “simply does not know.”

We talked a little about current events. She hates some of the Sunday morning news-show people, especially “the guy who looks like Ming the Merciless, you know, black plastic hair. Who wrote that book, Shut Up, Mr. President?” (which is not, I’m fairly sure, an actual book). She is an ardent democrat, “small d, but also big,” she said, and from time to time, peppered her speech with political-isms, such as, “meaner than a Mississippi Republican.” She does not care for the president (to say the least I suppose), saying that besides having had “too many jelly beans,” he is poorly informed and even intellectually lazy, calling him “the only president we’ve ever had who watches the clock.”

It turns out, as I suspected, that VF is Jewish, or at least partially Jewish. Her father is/was Jewish. (Can someone be half-Jewish? While people can definitely be half-Italian, can they also be half-Catholic?) In any case, VF is the daughter of a Jew and thus, officially, Jewish (at least in the eyes of Israel’s Supreme Court). But since her father and mother split up when she was little, she really doesn’t think of herself as a Jew. However, she is proud of the many American Jews who worked to enhance public education, adding that one of her life goals is to “give something back.”

“It’s one reason why I want to be a teacher,” she said.

VF also has the habit of changing the subject abruptly and totally, as she did when she started telling me about something else she “loves”—movies that are what she called “those cornball Westerns.”

“Know what I love, Paul? Those cornball Westerns where a covered wagon comes up on a ridge and a woman smiles broadly and says: ‘Let’s call it Utah!’”

At which point she laughed out loud. (Indeed, when she says something humorous, she is often her own best audience in that she’ll laugh out loud, as if someone else had made the remark and she just happened to overhear it. More generally, she carries on as if her own sense of humor came as a complete surprise, as if she had absolutely no idea something was coming or is funny until she hears herself actually say it.)
Here is another snippet of the conversation: “Know something, Paul? I love dogs. But only big ones. I can't stand those yappers, know the ones I mean? Those little things that yap and bark and nip at your heels. I love big dogs. But not Saint Bernards, they're too big. And they drool. Or those pinchers (sic). You know, those Doberman things. You always hear about how they turn on their masters.

“Know what I'd love to do? Live in the country in a house made out of stone. Gray fieldstone. And have three or four dogs. Three dogs and a fireplace. But big ones, not yappers. Do you like those yappers, Paul? I mean those little yappers, do you like them?”

Somewhere along the line VF asked if I'd ever thought about getting different shoes and different style glasses and perhaps even using a little less hair gel. And later in the conversation, she asked if I'd ever thought about yoga or meditation. Also, she offered her feelings about what she called “the whole of humanity,” saying she basically has a love/hate relationship with it. On the one hand, she thinks most people are “fundamentally pretty decent” and try to do what's right most of the time. Whenever she learns about people making a great discovery such as a scientific breakthrough, she feels uplifted or, as she put it, “proud of her species.” On the other hand, she said there are times when people are “cruel beyond belief” and “dumber than a poke” (whatever that means). She said she did not just mean dictators and “people like that,” adding that she has no idea why, for example, someone who is otherwise brainy enough to be on the Supreme Court would belong to a club that doesn't admit women, Jews, or people with dark skin.

“Those clubs are despicable,” she said. “Why would anyone want to belong to such a thing?”

She was getting a little worked up and so I interrupted to say I would never join such a club (which is true I suppose, though I never thought about it before today). As quickly as she began to get steamed, she calmed right back down.

“Thank God,” she said, tossing her head, shaking her hair out of her eyes. “I'm glad to hear you say that, Paul. I mean it, I really am.”

Re: getting worked up, we also talked about another issue in the news, i.e., the topic of abortion. My, did she get heated about that! In her opinion, abortion is terrible and should be the option of last resort because “people should have the good sense to use birth control.” But, she said, a lot of the people who are anti-abortion are really “anti-sex,” saying their real motive is to “punish women for enjoying their sexuality.” If they were really so “all-fired concerned” about children, why didn’t they organize themselves and take in every kid in the world waiting to be adopted, especially the ones with brown skin.

“Most abortion opponents care about kids before they're born,” she said, “but don't give a 'rat's ass' what happens to them afterward.” She ended hermini-diatribesaying: “You'll probably say I'm all worked up about this and that I'm
exaggerating,” then admitted maybe she was, but that there’s a lot of truth in what she said; I could be sure of that.

Regarding the issue of sex and sexuality, I mentioned the fact that I simply could not understand my own gender’s fascination with certain body parts. She asked what I meant and I said I could not, for the life of me, understand what is so stimulating about a woman’s naked breasts, which are, of course, nothing but glands. I said I lamented the existence of so many magazines filled with photographs of women displaying their glands. She asked if I was serious, then wanted to know if I was putting her on. But when I told her I was most definitely serious and that no, I wasn’t putting her on one bit, she mulled over what I’d said for a long while. Then she said that was the first time she’d ever heard anyone say anything like that, then said something flattering about how sometimes I reminded her of an Americanized version of a teenage George Bernard Shaw, adding she wouldn’t be surprised if Shaw, at my age, had a similar opinion. Which I took as quite a compliment (although I’ve never read anything by Shaw except what I skimmed tonight in Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations). In fact, and because of her comment, I plan to add at least two of his works to my reading list.

VF talked a bit about her family, especially her brother Paul, the one with, as far as she’s concerned, my same name. She said, “You remind me so much of him—except he’s tall, heavy instead of thin, his eyes are blue, and his shoulders aren’t always hunched.”

I said we sounded like twins and she leaned across the booth and punched my arm. Hard too. “Don’t be a wise guy,” she said, punching me again.

“When we were growing up,” she said, “there was my brother Robert, who’s older, then came Paul, then me. When he was little, everyone called him ‘Pauli,’ you know, like the bad guy in The Godfather. Anyway, on his twelfth birthday, the family went to dinner at this place he’d picked out, a steak house that was a real joint: there’s sawdust on the floor and the waitresses dress like cowgirls and, when they bring the cake, they all stand around the table and sing Happy Birthday real, real loud, then they all fire their cap guns in the air and shout: ‘Yippee!’

“Just before we cut the cake, Robert, who was eighteen, announced he had something to say. ‘I want to propose a toast.’ I think he held up a coke or something—even Robert could be a regular toad sometimes. But except for the coke, what he did blew me away. He said, ‘When you’re eleven, it’s fine to be Pauli. But when you’re twelve, you’re about to become a man and so you need a man’s name. I propose a toast tonight to my brother, Paul. Happy birthday, Paul.’”

“And that was it,” she said. “From then on, everyone called him Paul, my mom, his teachers, even his friends. He was too old for Pauli. He’d outgrown it.”

I told her the dinner sounded like a Bar Mitzvah, and she said she didn’t mean to overdo it, that it certainly wasn’t all that. But then she thought a moment
and said, well, maybe it was in a limited kind of way.

After we left the luncheonette, we walked across campus and got very cold. As we were crossing the square on our way to the bus, something happened. Something awkward actually. It was frigid and the wind was gusting so hard that, at times, we each nearly lost our balance. When it kicked up the next time, VF did something that took me by surprise: with one smooth motion, she slid her arm up and under mine, then reached across with her other arm and grabbed me by the forearm, presumably to steady herself or to keep herself warm, or both. In any case, I must have reacted, tensed up or something, because she quickly let go and looked at me strangely. Then she began to apologize.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't help it. I'm a 'toucher,' that's all."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Some people are 'touchers,'" she continued. "They like to touch the people they like. God, did that make any sense? I mean, when I'm talking to people, people I like, I'll reach out and touch them."

"Anyway, it's nothing to worry about. People like you are the smart ones, the high achievers. I'll bet there's not a single 'toucher' on the whole faculty at Yale."

Neither of us mentioned it again. But when she got on her bus and stood inside, in front of the driver, rooting around in her purse, looking for change, I wondered if I should have been polite and said I didn't mind it when she took my arm. Or whether I should even say it now. But I wasn't sure if it was true. Indeed, I'm still not. In any case, she wouldn't have heard me as her back was turned, and there was lots of noise. And then the bus pulled away, and she was gone.

Before she left, she asked if I'd meet her in the library on Thursday but I told her I probably had to go someplace and she didn't press for an explanation. She seemed disappointed though, which surprised me. (I'm always surprised when someone seems to like me.) So I suggested we meet this weekend, perhaps on Saturday. She said that was a "great idea," we exchanged addresses and phone numbers, and she said she'd call me. I wonder if she will.

Because of my afternoon, I am left with a number of questions to ponder:

1. Is "Skipper" a ridiculous name for someone my age? Should I abandon it, insist that people call me something else? Larry?
2. Why did I react like that when VF grabbed my arm? Is it because I'm smart? Is it something to worry about?
3. Should I have told VF about Thursday? Or even asked her what to do?

Post Script. It is now one-fifteen a.m. (I wrote the bulk of this entry earlier in the evening.) I find myself thinking back to various points in my conversation with VF and about her ability to listen well. It is a trait I should probably cultivate.
I was lying in bed, reflecting on today's events, especially the idea of being a good listener, when I began to juxtapose what happened with something that happened years ago, and so I decided to get up and write it down.

I remember an incident when I was five or six involving K, a girl in my class whose honey-colored hair would get streaked with blonde in the summer. I "liked" K but she did not "like" me in return. (And the verb "like" does not apply here as it severely understates the intensity of my feelings.)

I remember my Uncle Frank, who had just had surgery and was probably in great pain and may have even been laid off work at the time, saying how lucky I was because I "didn't have a care in the world." When I, of course, was in agony because I (did not "like" me, i.e., did not reciprocate my feelings. In fact, I vividly remember feeling that life without her was not worth living. But I knew even then that it would be pointless to try to explain any of what I felt to my Uncle Frank. I was fairly certain that he would have dismissed my concerns (and maybe even made fun of me, as his so-called sense of humor sometimes has a rather nasty streak). And so I kept my feelings to myself. But my unhappiness (no, my misery really) was terrible, as real and terrible as anything I've ever felt. And I remember resolving, immediately, never to forget how forlorn someone can feel, even if he is only five or six.

And now, many years later, I still think that's true. I still think that while the things that trouble a six-year-old may seem totally unimportant to an out-of-work adult who's just recovering from surgery and is in pain, they can feel, to the child, just as urgent and painful and desperate. That is, the feelings are the same, even when the objective cause is disproportionate—which was, in my uncle's case, literally life-threatening and, in my case, important only when understood and viewed through my six-year-old eyes. But the feelings themselves were the same. The despair was every bit as intense for both of us.

Which leads me to imagine how life must be experienced by pre-verbal human beings (i.e., infants and toddlers). Things that are absolutely inconsequential from an adult perspective (e.g., "Where is my rattle?") may feel like matters of life and death to the child. The child (or, to use a more evolutionarily accurate phrase, the little animal) may feel, literally feel, that if it does not get its rattle back, life is not worth living, "I cannot go on."

If that is true, or even partially true, it's no wonder that babies cry all the time. They have to learn that losing your rattle is just like losing your job—it's something that happens but it's not the end of the world. Not literally. And moreover, they have to learn that if you're attentive and enterprising and energetic, there is probably something you can do something about it. (That is, just as an adult can get another job, an infant can look around the crib.) Moreover, the feeling, to the infant, of getting its rattle back must be exactly like what Uncle Frank felt when he finally found a new job—a surge of joy. Relief, grateful,
joyous relief.

Indeed, in some ways, the loss may be worse for the infant because, for Uncle Frank, the issue wasn't finding another job, it was when would he find one and would the new job be as good as his old one. He had a context that enabled him to know he would probably recover from his surgery and eventually find a new job—somewhere, sometime, eventually. Whereas the baby has much less experience to draw on, much less experience against which to consider the loss. And so, to the infant, the thought process may go like this: since my rattle is missing now, it will always be missing. And if it is always missing—despondency, depression, despair. It is only when its rattle is returned—and then returned again and again and again—that the baby learns, gradually learns, over time, that he (or she) will probably recover it sooner or later, either because he will find it himself or because an adult will give it back.

To summarize, I remember vowing, when I was six, to never forget how I felt at the time. And I remember resolving, then and there, never to talk down to a kid the way Uncle Frank talked down to me. Indeed, I hope that, if I have children, I'll remember not to dismiss as meaningless whatever one of them is fretting about. Even if I, the adult, realize that it is, truly, pretty close to meaningless in the scheme of things.

One final thought: All this speculating leads me to think that perhaps I should add "child psychologist" to my list of career possibilities. The idea of trying to understand how the world looks to an infant is far from an uninteresting exercise. Since VF is a psychology major, perhaps I should ask her about it.

Wednesday, February 12, 1986

It happened tonight after dinner. It's turning into an annual event—the mid-February incident, tomorrow being the fifth anniversary.

Mother prepared a big meal: lamb chops, which are one of my favorites, along with rice, a salad, and angel food cake. (To the mind through the stomach I suppose.) Conversation was fragmentary from the time she got home. We both knew it was coming, and neither of us wanted to say something that might be misinterpreted. I was clearing the table, about to serve dessert when she said there is something we have to discuss.

I told her that I very much wanted to avoid a scene and she said, "All I want to know is why won't you go."

I told her it is my sincere belief that once a person is dead, he has no need of flowers and so I saw no point in going there and leaving some.
She said the flowers weren't for him, and I asked whom they were for.
"They're not for anyone," she said. "They're a symbol."

A symbol of what, I asked, and she got irked. I told her I was only trying to understand the point of what seems to me like a primitive ritual, and she said, "Okay, let's assume you're right. You're right, right, right. Let's assume it's all superstition. Won't you do it anyway? Do it for me."

I gently pointed out that she was contradicting herself, that if she believed a particular practice was voodoo, for example, would she still want me to stick pins in a doll.

"We're not talking about voodoo, Skipper. We're talking about your father."

I said that that in my opinion, God is man's creation, instead of vice versa, and she said I'd been reading "too much Nietzsche" (whom I've never actually read, but who is indeed on my list). She also said that I sounded like a "smart alec," which was "not very becoming."

Instead of arguing I asked why is it so important and she said it was so important because I've never gone, and that I was still having trouble accepting things. I pointed out that I'm not the one who believes he's floating around in the clouds, chatting with God, and generally keeping an eye on us.

"I don't mean religion," she said. Then she said she wasn't sure what she meant but asking would I please just do it for her sake. Before things got completely out of hand, I asked if I could think it over, a response that seemed to calm her, at least a little. Then I went to my room. I had hoped my non-participation wouldn't bother her as much this year, but that was apparently a foolish hope. If only what she asked didn't violate all my principles.

Friday, February 14, 1986

A quiet enough day. School was uneventful. But I did dream about the ferret last night. For the record, it's the same dream I've had so many times before—of being chased by a giant ferret with big, razor-sharp, buckteeth. (Although this time it was outside instead of indoors down a hallway, the way it usually is.) In fact, now that I think of it, the creature might be a cross between a ferret and a beaver. In any case, I can run faster than it can and so I get away. But it doesn't get tired and it just keeps coming after me, sometimes in slow motion, somewhat like the crocodile that eternally chases Captain Hook in Peter Pan. And like Hook, I have to always be alert and watchful and ready to run. I'll be glad when I outgrow the dream.
Saturday, February 15, 1986

The only reason I went in the first place was to pay her a visit. I had no intention of spying on her, no intention of butting into her personal life. I couldn’t care less.

I woke up earlier than I usually do, ate a light breakfast, and returned to my room to read before Mother left for work. After reading the paper, I did a little house cleaning (i.e., vacuuming, which I knew would please her), but then I couldn’t decide what to do. And that’s when I got the idea of paying her a surprise visit. A surprise visit, how ironic.

I got off the bus a few blocks from her apartment and stopped at a bakery to buy a coffeecake. I thought we might sit in her kitchen, eat it while we had coffee, and talk for a while. Or maybe we’d go to the library or I’d even help her with chores. It was just after eleven when I climbed the stairs to her apartment.

I knocked on the door but there was no answer. Disappointed, I assumed she wasn’t home. I was about to leave when I heard her laugh. I knocked again, harder this time, and the laughter stopped abruptly. For a moment there wasn’t a sound. Then the door opened slowly.

A tall fellow with scraggly hair and a beard stood in the doorway. He was wearing a pair of jeans, no shirt and nothing on his feet. A mat of brown hair covered his chest, and he stared down at me with a quizzical expression.

I apologized for the intrusion and explained that I was a friend of hers who just happened to be in the neighborhood and that I’d stopped by to say hello. But that I’d just realized it was later than I thought and I was supposed to be somewhere else any minute now. I asked if he’d tell her I dropped by. Then I handed him the bag and said it contained a coffeecake, a very good coffeecake, and would he please give it to her, and tell her I hoped she’d enjoy it, that I hoped he’d enjoy it too, and that I had to go.

He didn’t say a word. He just stood there, smiling down at me. Then I saw her; she must have heard my voice. She was wearing only a shirt, his shirt. It was much too big for her and hung down to her knees.

“Paul,” she said, walking towards me and holding out her hands. “I thought it was you. C’mon in. Paul, this is Ritchie. Ritchie, this is Paul, my extra-special friend.”

He kept smiling at me, smiling and not saying a word and, despite myself, I extended my hand and said, “How do you do?”

He stared at it momentarily, like he’d never seen a hand before, then grabbed it with long, bony fingers and shook it roughly, and said, “Same to you, man.”
She invited me in and turned, presumably, to dress. I told her I didn’t mean to intrude, that I had just stopped by to say I wouldn’t be in the library next week because my aunt had become ill.

Suddenly. A heart attack. The doctors thought she was about to die and I was going to her house to stay with my uncle, that they live in the country, and that I hoped we’d get together soon but I didn’t know when that would be. Then I left. She ran out after me, called down the stairwell for me to come back, but I pretended not to hear her and kept on going.

It’s over six miles but I decided to walk home. About halfway, it began to snow. Lightly at first, then the flakes became heavy and thick. I had my hat in my pocket but didn’t put it on. Like an idiot, I remember wishing I’d get pneumonia. And how it would be with me in the hospital, dying, and Valerie Franklin on the edge of the bed, crying and begging to be forgiven.

I thought about that Ritchie fellow too. About his insulting sneer. And what I’d have said if only I’d kept my composure and thought quickly. “I may not look formidable, my friend, but I’m extraordinarily intelligent. Cunning. If you don’t wipe that grin off your face, I’ll devote my considerable mental energy toward one goal—making you regret the day you sneered at Lawrence P. Birwell.” Or a less physical retort: “I always knew Valerie Franklin had compassion for pitiful creatures, but I never dreamed it extended to satisfying their carnal desires.” Or perhaps best of all: “Oh, pardon me, did I disturb your erection?” Then I’d catch myself in the middle of one of the fantasies and realize how ridiculous it was, and how ridiculous I was for conjuring it up. And just as I’d be thinking that, another one would start.

When I got home, the phone was ringing. I thought it might be her and I was right.

“I’ve been calling and calling,” she said. “Where were you? It’s freezing outside. Where were you? I want to talk to you.”

I said I’d been out running some errands.

“I want to talk,” she said. “I’ll be right over. Gimme ten minutes.”

I told her we were leaving any minute and that if she did come, no one would be here. And that no, she couldn’t call me at my uncle’s because it would upset him, that he wanted quiet above all else. She asked if I’d meet her in the library on Monday, and I said I would.

“Promise you’ll be there,” she said. “Promise me. I want to hear you promise.”

I promised and then she made me “give her my word” (which I always thought was the same thing, but, never mind, I did that too). And then I said Mother was calling and that I had to go. Then I hung up.

All afternoon I’ve been struggling with my emotions. I feel a lot like
Hemingway's old man. Except, instead of a fish, I'm battling with myself. Like the old man, I think I've won. I will not be taken in by some college girl. I will not be a source of amusement for some nymphomaniac. I will not expose myself to situations where I look like a fool. And I will not see Valerie Franklin again.

Monday, February 17, 1986

School, school, school—I wonder why I even bother. I still don't know why I did it. I have no idea. But I did do it. And now, though the repercussions may be somewhat serious, I'm not sorry about it, I don't have a single regret.

It started in first period when Miss Thornton called on me to put a problem on the board, part of the homework I did not finish. Instead of telling her I wasn't prepared (or, better, instead of going up and trying to solve the problem then and there, which I probably could have done), I did something I've never done before—I refused.

Miss Thornton looked stunned. She stood there a moment, her face frozen, acting as if she hadn't heard me. "Skipper, please put number four on the blackboard."

The image of a character in a story by Herman Melville—a man who one day quietly but totally refused to do any more work—came to mind and I spontaneously decided, then and there, that I was going to do what he had.

"Miss Thornton," I said, "I respectfully refuse."

It was actually quite humorous, in a perverted sort of way. Miss Thornton just stared at me, more surprised than angry, then asked me to "step into the hall." She closed the door behind us. I stood against the lockers and, despite everything (or perhaps because of everything?), I felt entirely calm and composed. But Miss Thornton looked anything but composed. She paced back and forth in front of me, her high heels clacking on the floor, and finally said: "What's the matter with you today?"

I told her nothing was the matter but she went on as if I hadn't said a word. "Aren't you feeling well? Didn't you do your homework, is that it?"

I told her I felt fine, thank you (the "thank you" was the only time I even came close to being sarcastic), but then said I simply did not feel like going to the board, in fact, that I did not feel like doing anything at all today. I also said I didn't care to discuss it.

At that point, although I knew I was on the verge of getting into trouble, and perhaps big trouble, it was all I could do to keep from smiling. What could she do? It was like Gandhi and the British—my tone was polite, my manner
thoroughly non-hostile (except for the “thank you” part). Yet here I was, refusing to follow the most routine instructions. She said she supposed nothing would be gained by a test of wills, then told me to go back in and sit quietly, that she wouldn’t call on me again today. The class was buzzing when I went back in but I did not speak to or look at anyone. Miss Thornton too totally kept her composure. In a pleasant voice, as if nothing at all had happened, she calmly asked someone else to go to the board and do problem number four.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. (To say the least I suppose.) The worst part was in the cafeteria after lunch. And the sheer absurdity of the conversation preceding it may have been a contributing factor. Keith and Gregory Spencer were arguing about whether God can exist in a vacuum.

"Nothing can exist in a vacuum,” Keith kept saying. “That’s what a vacuum means—there’s nothing in it.”

“But if God can do anything . . .”

“Except that.”

“What about outer space? Outer space is a vacuum. Are you saying God can’t exist in outer space?”

“If God exists,” Keith said, with a wave of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich, “He has to be something. And something, by definition, can’t exist in a vacuum.”

“Who said God has to be something? Maybe God is a vacuum.”

After a while, Keith asked me what I thought of their argument and I said, “Not very much,” which seemed to hurt Keith’s feelings. So I added that, in my opinion, arguments about God are irrelevant since there are no available data. Which made them feel better (though I haven’t the faintest idea why), and then they asked me about this morning. Which they’d heard about even though they’re not in my class.

“Why’d you do it, Skip?”

I told Keith what I’d said to everyone—that I did not want to talk about it. (I couldn’t tell him the truth. It made no sense to say I had no idea why I did it.)

“Didn’t she threaten to send you to the office?”

When I said she didn’t, he started telling me how lucky I was.

“Boy, are you lucky it was only Miss Thornton.” He must have said it a dozen times. He reminded me of the time in gym when Louie French, one of our so-called class comedians, ran outside wearing a pair of gym shorts like a t-shirt, his head through the fly, and his sneakers on the wrong feet. And how everyone thought it was such a riot until Mr. Bulrush made him run laps on the cinder track in just his socks.

“Just for clowning around a little. And that was nothing compared to what you did. Boy, are you lucky it was only Miss Thornton.”

The rest of lunch was more of the same: Keith telling me how lucky I was
or telling Gregory Spencer to look up the definition of a vacuum. Then the bell rang and that’s when I did it. Or, to be more precise, when I didn’t do it.

I told Keith and Gregory to go ahead, that I wanted to sit a minute and think. Then, Keith and several hundred others laughed and clowned and pushed their way out of the cafeteria on their way to fourth period. And shortly the room was empty except for me, a janitor, the kitchen workers, and a hulk of a man (known universally and without affection as the “Marquis,” short for the Marquis de Sade), our gym teacher, assistant football coach, and this week’s lunchroom proctor, Mr. Up-Chuck himself, Charles “Chuck” Bulrush.

Even now I’m not sure why I did it. Partly I suppose because of Keith saying I was lucky it wasn’t him. Or maybe that was the main reason, I’m not sure. But whatever the reason, Mr. Bulrush has never been fond of me and the feeling is totally mutual. When we play basketball or soccer, he’s more than once made the same joke at my expense.

“These teams aren’t even. Here, Bitwell, you play with them (i.e., the stronger team). That’ll even things up.”

Then he grins that big, sadistic grin of his and looks around to see who’s smiling too.

He was talking to a janitor on the other side of the room when he realized I was still there.

“Bitwell,” he barked across the cafeteria. “What’re ya, daydreaming? Get out of here and get to class.”

I looked straight ahead without acknowledging that I’d heard him.

“Bitwell,” his voice boomed in the nearly empty room. “Did you hear me? I said, lunch is over. Get out of here and get to class.”

As he came toward me for some reason, I thought of a gunfighter in a grade B Western: Mr. Bulrush in the role of the Lee Marvin-bad-guy role in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance: a crew-cut, prematurely gray, slightly bowlegged gunfighter, stalking down the main street, itching, just itching for me to make the first move. While I, a kind of a Jimmy Stewart-type, bookish and perhaps a lawyer who has never fired a gun in his life, stands there, terrified to face him. But stands there nevertheless. Except I didn’t feel afraid. Not at all. And I didn’t move. I did not even twitch. When he’d crossed the room and stood at the end of my table, I looked up and calmly said, “Mr. Bulrush, I’m not going to class.”

“What did you say?”

“That I’m not going to class.”

“Bitwell, when I tell you something, you better damn well do it. And I’m telling you to move. Now move!”

I shook my head and his face turned red. For a moment he just stood there. Then, suddenly, he sprang like a lion across the table and grabbed me by the back of my shirt. He pulled me up so that my face was inches from his. I thought he
"Bitwell," he nearly hissed my name, "you've got one last chance."

It was hard to talk as my collar was pressing my Adam's apple but I did manage to say, "Mr. Bulrush, if you don't let go of me, our lawyer will see you in court."

If there's one thing teachers are afraid of, it's the thought of being sued. And maybe he figured I was just smart enough to know how to do it. In any case, he let go of my shirt and I fell back and slumped into the chair.

"I'm going to get the vice-principal," he said. "If you're gone when I get back, we'll forget this ever happened. If not..."

Why I didn't leave then I'll never know. But I didn't. All I know is it felt as if I had to stay, that if I left, I'd be giving in, that sitting there and not going to class was the only way I could prove my point. (Though what "my point" was I had no idea.)

A few minutes later, he returned with Mr. Buckley, the school's vice-principal and disciplinarian. One thing about Mr. Buckley—while he is our disciplinarian, at least he doesn't have a reputation for enjoying his work.

After a few more attempts to coax me to leave, during which I said nothing, they moved to one side and whispered. Then Mr. Buckley approached me again.

"Skipper, if you're not willing to leave under your own power, we're going to carry you out. Is that clear? Think it over, son. You're in trouble already. Why make it worse?"

"Mr. Buckley," I said, "I respectfully refuse to leave this seat."

They nodded to each other, and then Mr. Bulrush pulled out my chair. I didn't resist as Mr. Buckley took hold under my armpits and Mr. Bulrush grabbed my ankles. Then they carried me, like a sack of flour, out of the cafeteria and down the hall to the vice principal's office.

(While all this was going on, I distinctly remember thinking three things: first, that the kids we passed looked shocked and pointed and laughed and that they'd tell everyone what they saw, which I dreaded but found amusing too; second, that Mr. Bulrush was squeezing my ankles, instead of just holding them; and third, that I didn't have the faintest idea why I was doing all this.) They sat me down in a chair in Mr. Buckley's office.

"Thanks, Chuck," Mr. Buckley said. "I'll handle it from here."

Mr. Bulrush hesitated. "Know what I'd do, Don?"

"I think so," said Mr. Buckley (for which he immediately rose in my estimation, as the double entendre was not lost on any of us). "Thanks for your help."

As soon as we were alone, he turned toward me and leaned across his desk. He said that Miss Thornton told him about this morning (which surprised me as I had no idea they communicated with one another between classes, or at least so
quickly).

"So this is actually the second incident, isn’t it?"
I nodded.

"She also said you refused to explain your behavior or even to talk about it," and I nodded again. "I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what’s going on."
I shook my head.

"I didn’t think so. Okay, instead of asking why you’re doing this I’ll try another question. If you were in my shoes, what would you do about it?"
His question was unexpected and totally unrebuking, and I said, "I suppose I’d suspend me."
He asked if that was what I wanted, and I said no, that wasn’t what I wanted, that I’d like to home for the day if he wouldn’t mind. He picked up the phone and said, "Get me Mrs. Bitwell."
When Mother got on, he gave her an abbreviated account of what happened and after assuring her I was all right, put me on and she said I could go home, that I should just get a cab and go home. Which I did.

She came home from work early. When she saw me, she seemed uncertain whether to scold me or not. In any case, seeing her was like being in Hades. Mother upset: "Oh Skipper, what is the matter with you?" Angry: "How on earth could you do such a thing?" Perplexed: "Won’t you even tell me why you did it?"
She refused to believe anything I said: that I didn’t know why I’d done it; that I just felt like doing it; and that no, in all honesty I wasn’t sorry about it, and I didn’t know why.

(Curiously enough, I had three simultaneous feelings about that point and all of them were equally true: I was indifferent about what happened and not one bit sorry for any of it; second, I was glad about it, proud of it in a bizarre sort of way, as if I’d shown my mettle or proven something—though I don’t have the faintest idea what that might be or to whom I was proving it; and finally, in one corner of my mind, that I was terribly sorry it had happened—sorry for Mother’s sake, sorry for Miss Thornton and Mr. Buckley, and most of all, sorry for myself.)

I felt exhausted and went in to take a nap. I slept soundly, without dreaming, and didn’t wake up until after seven. I was feeling better until I got dressed and went into the living room and saw Arthur, sitting on the sofa.

As soon as she saw me, Mother ran to the closet to get her coat. She said that Arthur wanted to talk to me and that she was going out to “leave you two alone.” Before I could say anything, she had her coat on and was out of the apartment, and I felt a wave of nausea.

“Hungry?” Arthur said, nodding toward the kitchen. I wondered if he were reading my mind.

“I haven’t eaten since lunch,” he said. “Mind if I fix myself something?”
All I could think of was Pepto Bismol and all he could do was talk about
food. I told him of course not and he took off his jacket, folded it neatly, set it on the couch, and rolled up his sleeves. Then he went into the kitchen and I heard him open some cabinets, then the refrigerator, then there was the sound of a glass bowl on the counter top. I was still in the living room so he had to speak up for me to hear him.

"You'd think by now I'd have learned to cook, wouldn't you? But when I get in a kitchen, I'm nearly incompetent."

I was in no mood to play games. I went to the doorway and said, "Would you like me to fix you something, Arthur?"

He smiled in a sad kind of way. "That wasn't a hint, Skipper, just an observation about myself. Not a very interesting or important one I guess, but that's all it was."

I decided to take the direct approach and asked what he wanted.

"To make myself an omelet," he said. "If I can find the goddamn frying pan."

I asked if he was swearing to impress me, and he said no, he was swearing because he couldn't find the frying pan. I couldn't help smiling. Even though his remark was at my expense, it was one of the funnier things he's ever said. And so I showed him where the pans were and he bent down to get one, then stopped what he was doing and looked up at me.

"Your Mom's got some funny ideas," he said. "She's upset so I didn't want to argue but... know what she asked me?"

"To talk to me."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Man-to-man, I guess."

I asked if that meant he wasn't going to tell me that I'd made a mess for myself. As he cracked three eggs into a bowl, he said why should he tell me what I already know. I said, because Mother asked him to, and he shook his head again. Then he asked if I was sure I couldn't eat something and I remembered that I didn't even eat my lunch and then, like magic, my appetite returned. I got out some cheese and green peppers and he said, "Great, that'll liven things up."

After we finished, I poured us coffee. We were at the kitchen table and I watched as he accidentally poured too much milk into his cup, spilling some onto his saucer. He didn't get upset or embarrassed though. He just emptied the saucer into his cup, as if it happened all the time and was nothing to be ashamed of. And for some reason, seeing him do that made me feel more comfortable with him. So I started to talk about what happened.

"I made a mess of things today, didn't I?"

"Yepper," he said.

"But it's not the end of the world?"

"Of course not," he said. "Where'd you get that idea?"

I asked if Mother was upset, and he said she doesn't always handle things as
well as she might. I asked if that meant, “yes” and he said yes it did.

“Arthur,” I said, “I’d like to tell you something and I wish you’d explain it to Mother. I really don’t know why I did those things today. I have no idea. All I know is that I wanted to do them. Or to be more accurate, if felt like I had to do them, as if there’s something inside, that’s part of me and yet not part of me, that was in control and that made me act that way. I suppose that sounds a little insane but it’s true.”

Then he told me about an experience of his when he was in the army, about a friend, a “hellava nice guy,” who one night walked into a bar, “threw down four or five drinks and started a fight. For no reason. With a total stranger. A bunch of us broke it up,” he continued. “And it was lucky for him that we did. The guy he’d picked a fight with was a boxer. And huge, much bigger than my friend. He could’ve been hurt. The next day I asked him why he did such a crazy thing. Know what he said? The same thing you did. He didn’t know. He just felt like doing it and didn’t know why.”

I asked if he thought that’s what I was doing, picking a fight.

“Maybe. In your own way,” he said. “You’re not the type to go into a bar and slug somebody. You’re more of a passive-resister type. But in your own way, it could be the same kind of thing.”

Mother still wasn’t home by the time we finished talking and I asked Arthur to tell her I didn’t want to go to school tomorrow. He said taking a day off sounded like a good idea to him, adding he was sure she’d think so too. Then I went to my room.

In a way, what Arthur said made a deep impression. I’m still turning it over in my mind. It would seem to be at least one possible explanation.

I’m glad to take off from school tomorrow. Ugh, I hate the thought of going back and facing all the other kids, and especially those gossipy girls. Maybe beside tomorrow, I’ll take off the next day too. Though I know it’s not possible, I wish I could simply change schools, go somewhere else, start over. But one can’t do that in life.

Needless to add, I didn’t go to the library.

Post Script: I write this entry at 1:25 a.m., in the midst of another attack of the stabs. The pattern is so familiar, I know it by heart. I was in bed, semi-relaxed, waiting to go to sleep, my mind drifting over today’s events, when all of a sudden they began. I have no idea what brought them on. After a series of about 10 or 15 stabbing sensations, sometimes coming in groups of two or three, I decided to get up and write about them. (Ow, there’s another one.) I’m going to try to write down (ow, ow, two of them) using the word “ow” whenever they occur. Perhaps writing about them (ow) might be a way of controlling them or getting them to stop. (Ow.) But (ow) it doesn’t seem to be working and so I’m going to stop
recording each one. It's too interruptive of my attempt to record my thoughts. I'll simply disregard the stabs that continue every few seconds and again try to put down on paper at least some of what's going on in my mind and body.

The sensation feels as if someone were stabbing me in the pit of my stomach with a sword or knife—although of course there's no wound, the skin isn't broken, and when the sensation goes away, I'm unhurt and my abdomen is totally unharmed. The sensations are involuntary, like the hiccups. Like a hiccup, each stab is a reflexive reaction that interrupts whatever I may be thinking or doing. And, like a hiccup, a moment after the stabbing sensation ends, my mind is free to return to whatever I was thinking about, I'm able to resume the mental activity I was engaged in with virtually no sense that anything happened, except of course the momentary interruption and the thought that another stabbing sensation will soon come. If they are persistent enough, if they keep coming and coming and coming, they block my ability to think clearly. No, that's not right. Even then, the sensations don't interfere completely. I can still think clearly between each stab, as soon as they abate.

It's so strange. Each one feels as if someone were plunging a dagger into my stomach. And when it occurs, it feels like a gag reflex or any other kind of involuntary spasmodic response, except of course for the pain (i.e., each one is most painful). In fact, when they keep coming and coming, the accumulation of discomfort is about as acute as any physical pain I've ever had.

Interestingly, the sensations occur only when I'm alone. Why that should be, I have no idea. And they tend to happen at night, when I'm in bed, waiting to fall asleep. Or sometimes in the shower in the morning. Or once in a very great while when I'm walking outdoors by myself and I fall into a reverie. I can't ever remember getting them when someone else was present.

They now seem to be easing up and I'm going to go back to bed. I know that logically, because of the law of cause and effect, they are an effect and so they must have a cause, a psychological cause. That something is going on in my mind causing them to happen. But I don't have a clue about what the cause is, either of a general onslaught of the sensations, or of each particular stab. Since they are self-induced, at least self-induced insofar as my "self" includes that part of my mind that is not under my control, they present to me overwhelmingly incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the subconscious or unconscious mind. (I'm not sure what the difference is, if any.) Also, and totally unlike the hiccups (or at least insofar as I know from what I've read), no one else on the planet gets them. Just me. As far as I'm concerned, they are inexplicably mysterious.
Tuesday, February 18, 1986

I didn't go to school today, I didn't have to. Mother decided I could take a day off if I wanted, which I did. I slept late (I seem to be unusually tired these past few days) but when I finally did get up at about ten-thirty, I was feeling somewhat better and I fixed myself breakfast. Then I spent the rest of the day doing things so totally different from one another, it causes me to wonder about myself in the scheme of things (not to mention the scheme of things itself).

I spent some time with Thomas Wolfe, but found my concentration drifting, partly because of all that's on my mind and partly because of him. (Despite his remarkable capacity to describe everything he sees, smells, or touches, he is, frankly, not that much of a storyteller.)

Later this afternoon, I turned on TV and watched two quiz or game shows. The first was tolerable enough; contestants were asked general knowledge questions, and I found myself playing along. But the second was so amazingly inane, adjectives can't describe it.

It was called *Five Senses*, and today was "Nose Day." The game was played as follows: nine fifty-dollar bills were sprayed with cologne or something, then taped inside nine large boxes, each wrapped like a giant Christmas present. Contestants then walked and crawled around the stage, sniffing each box to see if they could find the ones with the money. The catch was, there were actually ten boxes on the stage—nine with money and one with a midget dressed like a clown and armed with a cream pie. If a contestant had the misfortune of selecting that box, he would, in addition to losing the money previously accumulated, be splattered with the pie by the midget. (However, losers did receive consolation prizes, microwave ovens I believe.) If a contestant selected all nine boxes without getting the one with the midget, he could repeat the procedure, this time with hundred-dollar bills. There was also some kind of time limit. At the end of the show, a man in a tuxedo whose face was mostly teeth said to be sure to tune in tomorrow because Wednesday is "Tongue Day." (I can't imagine how that works.)

Mother got home at her usual time and I surprised her by having dinner started. (I had also cleaned the bathroom and done a load of laundry, which surprised her too.) I told her I was feeling okay again and that I wouldn't mind going back to school tomorrow. Neither of us mentioned Monday. For some reason it just seemed better that way. And conversation was amicable enough, as if, perhaps, things between us are getting back to normal.

This evening was quiet: dinner and then homework. I'm more than a little uneasy about going back to school. I'll probably have to put up with all kinds of intrusive questions and comments, not to mention some sneering ones. I wonder what Mr. Bulrush will say. Or all those gossipy girls. But I probably shouldn't
worry. As the quality of daytime television indicates, one should not expect too much from the human race. To feel differently is just naive.

Wednesday, February 19, 1986

When I got home, I found the following letter, stamped but not postmarked, in the mailbox. It was addressed to "Paul" Bitwell so I knew whom it was from.

Dear Paul,

In my almost twenty-four years, I have been stood up only once—by you, on Monday. And when you didn't show up again on Tuesday, I knew I had to write. I don't know how to begin, so let me get a few wishes out of the way first:
- I wish I'd told you about Ritchie.
- I wish you hadn't come by on Saturday or at least that you hadn't come when you did.
- I wish you hadn't reacted that way.
- And I wish you were in the library on Monday as you promised you would be. (You did promise you know. People who break their promises make me nervous. So don't let it happen again. Okay?)

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when you didn't show up. You're the stubborn type, aren't you? Once you get your back up, you're someone who'll never give in. Never. So unless I can talk—or in this case, write—some sense into that brainy but thick head of yours, I'm on the verge of losing a special friend.

Look, if you can't see how fond I've grown of you in a very short time, how I enjoy your company, how I think you're sweet and funny and fun to be with, then you're blind as a billboard. (God, where do I come up with my metaphors? Or is that a simile?) See, that's another reason I like you. You would know the difference and you would teach me a little mnemonic to keep them straight. You'd also know how to spell "mnemonic," or at least not drive yourself crazy trying to look it up in the dictionary because you'd know it starts with "m" instead of "n."

Cripes, this letter is getting all balled up so I'm going to cut it short. Look, Buster, I want a friend. want you to be my friend. Don't drop me, okay??

Love,
Valerie

P.S. This letter is a mess but I sending it anyway because I want you to get it ASAP. There’s a Charlie Chan movie at the Rialto. Let’s go on Saturday, okay? Come to my place for a late lunch, maybe about two. We’ll eat and have a long talk, then go to the six o’clock show. What’d you say?

Saturday, February 22, 1986

I went to VF’s apartment today. I got there at exactly two, which is when she told me to come. I was actually rather early and so I went to a Barnes and Noble and killed time by reading the newest *Star Trek* magazine (specifically, an article about Klingon mating rituals, among other things). The last thing I wanted to do was surprise her. In any way, shape, or form.

She seemed glad to see me and smiled, then gave me a big hug, then took my coat and hung it on a coat rack next to the door. Her apartment is tiny. To call it a studio would be an overstatement: it is on the third floor of an old white house that has been cut up into apartments. Hers is a room with a miniature kitchen, a little Formica kitchen table with two chairs, a small sofa, a bookcase with a stereo and little TV on it, and a bright red, burlap curtain hanging down from the ceiling, in a rectangle around what must be a bed. Everything is almost wedged in so that it’s not that easy to walk around without bumping into something.

We started to eat soon after I got there. I had correctly anticipated that she would make spaghetti and I’d brought a loaf of Italian bread from the bakery and a jar of imported olives that are almost as good as the ones you get at Zabar’s.

When she finished cooking, she took a bottle of wine out of the fridge, poured herself a very small glass, said, “This is probably illegal as hell but I’ll take a chance that we won’t get busted,” and then offered me some, which I declined. Then, while we sat at the little table and ate lunch/dinner, she told me about that Ritchie, how she’s been seeing him for almost six months and how they might be getting married. But how, even if they did, she still wants to be friends with me, and that no, she didn’t expect me to become friends with him too, only with her, that our friendship would be independent and separate from her relationship with him because he has his own friends and so does she. Then she said that our friendship would never change unless I wanted it to. In all that time, I didn’t say anything, I just sat there eating and listening, trying to take it all in.
We did the dishes (she washed and I dried) and then we walked about a half-mile to the theater and watched the movie (which I found thoroughly mediocre but she seemed to more than like). Afterward, as she walked me to the bus stop, VF said she wanted to ask me something but didn’t want an answer, at least not then, that she wanted me to think about it first, okay? I said okay, and she asked whether I was willing “to go to the next level.” I had no idea what she meant, and my expression must have showed as much. And so she elaborated. She talked about relationships, how they exist at a particular level, and how people who become friends must decide, usually without ever saying so, at what depth their relationship will be established and maintained. She said that she hoped we’d “go to the next level.” She said it requires “a leap of faith,” a lot of trust in the other person. But I was still unclear what she was referring to. At the time, I had the distinct impression that like that Freudian Dr. Quackenbush I saw for almost a year, she wanted me to say whatever came to mind. So I said I was very glad to have made her acquaintance and that I was pleased and would continue to be pleased, to meet and talk with her on a semi-regular basis, if not more often than that. And she smiled a half-smile and nodded and said she felt the same way. Which left me with the distinct impression that I hadn’t said what she wanted. Perhaps I’ll find out more when I see her again.

Sunday, February 23, 1986

Today was generally uneventful. Mother and Arthur went to the city for the day to go to a matinee and then to dinner, leaving me alone for the bulk of the day, which was more than fine with me. I’m always glad to have time to myself. (Indeed, I seem to relish it.) I enjoy reading and writing. I also dusted the books in my bookshelf.

I thought about calling Keith in the early afternoon to see what he was doing but decided not to. He’s avoided me since the incident in school, perhaps because I was so dismissive of his argument with Gregory Spencer.

I wonder if I am, by nature, a mean-spirited or nasty person. I usually think I’m not. But at other times, I’m not so sure. Mother can be exasperating, there’s no doubt about that. Besides being overly protective, she can be far nosier about and generally engaged in my life than I wish she were. Besides checking up on me constantly in terms of schoolwork, etc., I generally wish I weren’t so important to her. (I suppose I wish she’d never told me about her feeling: that I was the only reason she kept on going, and that if it weren’t for me, she might take an overdose or drive to the center of the George Washington Bridge, get out of her car,
and jump off.) Of course, that was some time ago now and well before Arthur. Lately, she seems quite inclined to spend time with him and not be with me all the time the way she used to be.

I also found myself thinking quite a bit about VF and reflecting on yesterday’s time with her. It’s curious, however, that now that I sit to write about it, I cannot remember a solitary thought that went through my head. I wonder why that is.

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Monday, February 24, 1986

What a life mine is turning into! I’ll go slowly and try to be as accurate as I can.

VF gave me a big welcoming hello when I came into the luncheonette, and we settled into a booth in the back where she ordered two decaffeinated coffees and an order of cinnamon toast. Initially, neither of us mentioned her question of Saturday night. In fact, the conversation was a bit (uncharacteristically) aimless, and so, after thirty minutes or so, I concluded that she was waiting for me to broach the subject. I told her that I’d been thinking about what she’d said and that, yes, I was ready to “go to the next level” if she wanted me to, although I wasn’t sure what she meant exactly—that I might be willing to give it a try if she wanted me to.

She said it’s easy to make acquaintances but hard to make friends. She said friends accept each other for what they truly are, warts and all, and that what makes people endearing are their flaws, not their virtues. True friends are friends after they get to know each other’s inconsistencies and contradictions. She also said something about the importance of talking about your feelings, “about what’s going on inside,” and that it’s especially important for people who might be a little “emotionally bottled up” and perhaps not even “completely in touch with their feelings” (whatever that means).

I didn’t ask her to explain, however, because she immediately started talking about her own parents, about how they were divorced, and about how she and her brothers found it painful to deal with.

“Their breakup happened when I was ten,” she said. “And I was angry about it. Really angry.” Her father, it seems, had taken up with (and then eventually married) another woman, a younger woman, for which, she said, she used to blame him terribly. But her mother was also a “very controlling” person and someone who, years earlier, “had let herself go” (presumably in terms of her appearance). Their marriage had not “been good” for a long time—for example, her parents had stopped sleeping in the same bed, but her mother, being Catholic,
was most reluctant to get a divorce. And so, while she often misses her father and to this day sometimes blames him for “punching a hole” in her life, the divorce really wasn’t anybody’s “fault”—not her father’s fault, or her mother’s, or her brothers’ fault, and especially not her own (which she used to think it was).

Her father and his second wife lived in Florida where he rather suddenly became quite successful in the same field as my mother: real estate. (Indeed, he is the one who is paying for VF’s college education.) On the other hand, she said that when she was growing up, she only got to see him once or twice a year, which is still the case today.

Then the subject became me and the topic became my family. VF said she’d been wondering about my family a lot because when I’d spoken of them earlier, I’d mentioned mother and Arthur, but no one else. She said not mentioning my father was “kind of a conspicuous omission” and so, she wondered, were my parents also divorced.

I said that when I’d thought about her question, about “going to the next level,” other things had come to mind, and that I really didn’t care to talk about my father, at least right then, because I’d been thinking about something else, something I’d never told anyone, and was that the kind of thing I should mention? She said yes, that was exactly the kind of thing I should mention, and so I told her I engage in the practice of onanism.

“You what?” she said, nearly spitting out a bit of toast.

I repeated that I onanize and she stared uncomprehending. And so I made a motion as if rolling dice, and she whispered, “Do you mean masturbate?”

I nodded.

“Oh thank God. For a moment,” she whispered, “I thought it had something to do with dead people.”

She continued whispering, “Paul, everyone does that. Don’t you know that? Didn’t they teach you that in school, in Health or something? It’s a natural part of life.”

I asked if she did it, and she again said everyone does, “especially during the teenage years which is when a person’s sexuality awakens.” She said it was perfectly normal, an essential part of growing up. So I again asked if she does it and she again said that everyone does it, and then asked why did I want to know. I ignored her question and instead said, “If you did do it, would you think of me?”

She sat there a moment, looking a little flummoxed (in fact, more than a little flummoxed), and then lifted her head back, smacked her forehead, and said to herself, “Valerie, how can you be so dumb? You’re dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb!”

She opened her purse, took out some money, slapped it onto the table, grabbed my hand and said, “C’mon, we’re out of here.”

She didn’t say a word as we walked back to her apartment, she just walked
and repeated to herself, "Trust your instincts, Valerie," as she smiled and held my hand. When we got to her building, she said, "You trust me, right?"

I nodded and she said, "Good."
She led me inside and up the stairs.
"And you like me, right?"
I nodded again.

And she said, "Good, because I like you too. I more than like you. I think you're special, really, really special."

We went up into her apartment and took our coats off and she hung them up, then she just stood there, her back against the door, and said, "Skipper, the ability to make love is a gift from God. It is a wonderful, wonderful gift. It's a natural thing. There's nothing sinful about it. When you're with someone you care about, it's a wonderful thing. And I care about you very much. I care about you very much."

And then she kissed me. I could feel how soft her lips were. (Indeed, the operative adjective to describe her entire body is, I learned, "soft.") She opened her mouth a bit and very, very lightly slid her tongue across my lips. And then we made love. Right there. In her apartment. On her bed. Right then and there. It was remarkable. And I didn't feel self-conscious or awkward. She made me feel comfortable and relaxed and not one bit embarrassed or otherwise awkward. (Interestingly, I don't know how she did that, because it wasn't anything she said. It was instead her demeanor during all of it.)

Afterward, I probably embarrassed myself. Utterly and totally. In fact, now that I think about it, I'm sure I did embarrass myself. Utterly and totally. But VF, though occasionally kidding me and having a gentle laugh at my expense, seemed only slightly put off by what I wanted. And then, after a while, not one bit put off. Not put off at all. And the truth was, I didn't care. It was such an opportunity, I couldn't let it pass.

We were lying in her bed and she was snug up against me, our nude bodies pressing together, side by side, and in a semi-whisper, she asked what I was thinking. And so I told her. I said that I had never been in a situation like this before, even remotely never been in such a situation. And that while I had, of course, seen photographs of naked women, I had . . . I just couldn't get the rest out, couldn't quite finish what I had to say. But it was as if she read my mind. She pulled the covers off herself and asked if that was what I wanted, to see her body in the daylight. I said not only to see, but also explore it if she wouldn't mind. She asked did I want to play doctor, play "anatomical show-and-tell?" and I said I supposed I did.

At first I felt a little ridiculous but it was all so fascinating that I soon forgot all that and took my time stroking and probing and poking around her hips, thighs, stomach and breasts. I asked her to roll over so I could examine her back
and buttocks. I cupped one breast. I wanted to feel what happens to them when she lies on her stomach.

“They just spread out!” I said.

She asked with a laugh what did I think? “That my glands are retractable?”

Another joke at my expense, but I didn’t mind. I said of course not, but asked didn’t it hurt or feel uncomfortable?

She said, “It’s not like I’m lying on softballs you know,” adding they are very malleable.

But then she thought a moment and said that maybe my question “wasn’t so dumb after all”—that maybe it is uncomfortable for women who have really big breasts to lie on their stomachs. Now that she thought about it, she wasn’t sure.

Mammary glands aside, the rest of her musculature is totally different than mine. In places where my body tends to be firm, hers is much softer and fleshier. When she rolled over, I asked her to tense up so that I could feel her hamstrings. Her calves, though a bit muscled from intermittent jogging, are, when relaxed, plumper and softer than mine. Not at all like, for example, the legs of a chicken, which I think mine tend to resemble. And her feet, as I felt her soles and toes, etc., I found, curiously enough, that each foot was rather attractive (in an odd sort of way).

I knew she was laughing at me but the truth was, I didn’t care. (For perhaps the first time in my life, it did not matter that someone was laughing at my expense.) I knew she was merely amused, not being mean. Moreover, being there, studying her body was so fascinating, it did not matter. I was too busy poking and prodding and examining her to be bothered by distractions.

And then I asked what I really wanted but was fearful of putting into words because I thought she’d get offended and get up and go dress. She smiled and said she didn’t mind at all. And so she spread herself wide and, with one fingertip, I very gently touched it all. She asked if I wanted a flashlight (again making fun of me), but I pretended to think it was a serious question and said, no, thank you, that I could see just fine. Then, as I was probing away, and from completely out of the blue, she said her body was nothing to be afraid of. I asked why did she say that.

“Oh, you know,” she said, “because some men are afraid of a woman’s body.”

I had no idea what she was talking about and asked her to elaborate. She said it is a fear some boys develop early in life. They become frightened, she said, when they learn that a woman’s body is so different than theirs. I assumed she was drawing on things she had learned in her psychology class. But then I remembered that when I was eight or nine, I wondered if babies were born through the navel, whether a woman’s navel expanded to expel a baby. I mentioned this and
she nodded understandingly. It's a common fantasy, she said, adding that some boys think babies are delivered through the anus. She also said that sometimes men are afraid in ways they're not fully aware of.

"It can be like a weed that starts growing early in life," she said. "And if it gets deeply rooted, it can cause real problems later on."

I said well I wasn't afraid of her body and she said something about how she meant out of awareness, in the subconscious or unconscious mind, I forget which. Then she said that sometimes she probably talks too much, and then how glad she was that I wasn't afraid of her, that I shouldn't be and she was very glad I wasn't. Then she snapped her fingers, she'd thought of something, and sprang up out of bed.

I thought she was going to get dressed and that everything was over. But to my complete and total surprise, the most fascinating parts were yet to come. She returned with an anatomy text and opened it to a full-page, close-up picture of the vagina, with all the parts labeled. Then she pointed to things in the picture and showed me exactly where hers are. Going back and forth with the book, she pointed out all her private parts, including her clitoris. She explained how it functions when a woman reaches orgasm.

"And so the fact that a penis isn't the size of your forearm really doesn't matter?" I said.

No, she said, adding that if that were the case, women everywhere would be like Catherine the Great, "you know, taking on stallions, things like that." She explained something I suppose I already knew but didn't really realize: that the vagina is like the anus in that it is "adjustable" and can close up or expand so much that a baby can pass through. Which led to another thought: was there a chance she'd get pregnant?

"I'm on the pill," she whispered.

"Isn't that dangerous?" I asked.

She said we could talk later but for now we should just take a nap. But I had more questions. I asked about the differences between men and women afterwards. I explained that almost immediately after a male consummates the sexual act, he is—assuming I'm anywhere near representative of my gender—totally disinterested in all things sexual, and, in fact, inclined to find them off-putting or even slightly repugnant. But everything I've read, I said, says women feel the opposite, i.e., they love to hug and snuggle, they think the post-coital embracing is the best part, and, in fact, that sometimes they like the "before" and "after" better than the "it" itself, if she knew what I meant.

She nodded and so I told her my speculation: that the difference stems from the fact that females do not produce an equivalent seminal discharge and, therefore, there is, for them, a less definitive sense of completion of it all. And so, I said, women want to ease out of everything gradually instead of just turning on
TV or going out to mow the lawn.

She said she didn’t agree, and then said it didn’t seem like I found her “slightly repugnant” and I said, of course I didn’t. She asked did I want to turn on TV or mow the lawn now, and I said of course not, adding that she wasn’t taking my inquiry seriously. She said she most certainly was, and that the reason I didn’t want to mow the lawn now was because I was happy to “hug and snuggle” with her. Which was, she said, just what she wanted to do with me now: hug and snuggle and take a little nap without any more what she called “jibber-jabber.” And then she cut off further conversation, pulled the covers up over us, and nestled herself against me, burrowing her head into my neck and resting her thigh across my leg. Her breathing became deep and regular and I wondered if she had fallen asleep. We lay like that for a few moments, and I started playing with the hairs on the back of her neck. I liked the way they felt, all those little wisps, and I played with them gently, trying to curl them or touching them as softly as I could.

“May I ask one more question?” I whispered.

“Only one,” she said sleepily. “And I might not answer it.”

“Before we take a nap, could we do it again?”

She did not react for a moment, then, abruptly, propped herself up on one elbow, awake, and said to me, “You mean right now?”

I nodded and she asked didn’t I want to wait even a little while and I said no, that I was perfectly willing to proceed, assuming she was too of course, or at least if she did not mind. She laughed out loud, and then said yes, she guessed that even though what she was doing was probably “illegal as hell,” she also was “willing to proceed.” And then she pulled me down on top of her, laughing and saying, “Better call your mom to say you’ll be late for dinner.”

Saturday, June 21, 1986

It’s been months since my last entry and so much has happened that I wonder if I can get it all down. In that time, I did something, accomplished might be a better word, accomplished what Mother’s been asking—I paid a visit to my father’s grave. I went last weekend with VF. She stayed in the car while I went into the cemetery and sat there at his gravesite, by myself, for over an hour, just thinking about him, about conversations that we’d had, and about things we’d done together.

After not going (being able to go??) for so many years, I thought it would be difficult. But it wasn’t so hard, especially compared to everything else I’ve been through. Which is still something I hardly believe.
In any case, since my last entry, Valerie Franklin and I were at first together often. For a few weeks, we saw each other all the time. While she never again let me be intimate with her, saying it "really would not be appropriate again," VF acted, during that whole time, like she couldn't be happier than to be in my company. We'd meet in the library and spend the afternoon together and then, later that night, talk on the phone. We'd spent all day Saturday or Sunday together, sometimes doing things—twice we went into the city—or sometimes just being together and not doing much in particular (except of course reading).

Then all of a sudden she started avoiding me. At first I wasn't certain if she really was avoiding me or if it was just my imagination. But I shortly became certain, and I had no idea why, I had no idea what was going on. Was it something I'd said or done? I didn't know. But when I asked, she acted like she didn't know what I was talking about. Then, all of a sudden she wasn't in the library every day when I went to meet her, then she was never there. Instead of wanting to spend most of the weekend with me, she was suddenly busy. Our phone conversations became more and more abbreviated, then she stopped taking my calls, or at least answering the phone when I called. Twice I stopped by her little studio apartment but there was no answer when I knocked.

I didn't know why she was acting that way or what I had done to make her feel this way, or what I should do about it. I felt perplexed and more than a little discomforted. What I mainly wanted was an explanation.

Now, as of this morning, she's gone. VF graduated and today moved to Chicago. She'll try to get a teaching job, she said, and though she didn't actually say it, she will probably end up marrying that Ritchie. VF said she would keep in touch with me for the rest of her days but that we could no longer see each other, that it "wasn't best for either of us."

Now that it's over, I sometimes think I'd have been better off had I never heard her name. And sometimes I feel the opposite and can't imagine my life without her in it, being a part of it (or having been a part of it, if for only a short time). I'll try to reconstruct events as they happened.

I remember the first time she said we could not continue. It was more than three months after my last entry, on a Saturday. It was after she'd cooled off toward me, after she'd stopped seeing me and even taking my phone calls, etc. One night, quite unexpectedly, it was a Thursday I believe, she called and invited me to meet her at the zoo that Saturday morning. Which is where we met, shortly before ten.

I vividly remember that the sun was shining bright. And I vividly remember what she had on: a red-and-black checkered poncho over a dark blue shirt with a button-down collar, a pair of faded jeans, cordovan-colored penny loafers with light blue socks, and on her wrist a braided silver bracelet with a turquoise stone.
Her hair was pulled straight back in a ponytail and tied with a bright red band.

Our zoo is about the size of the one in Central Park, but we have somewhat larger cages. Being there with her was not uninteresting because, instead of spending roughly an equal amount of time at each exhibit, VF wanted to stand in front of one cage and watch a single animal for a long, long time, in one case, half an hour. Her favorite is the polar bear, a big old male named Buster that the zoo’s had for years. He was sleeping when we got there, but we waited for him to wake up. And after a while, he bestirred himself, meandered around a moment or two, then, front paws first, he slid into his pool of water and took a swim. He didn’t stay in the water all that long though and he did not play with the empty keg floating next to him. VF told me how she’s seen him play with it, how he jumps on the keg, submerges it with his paws and chest, trying to sink it, and how it pops back up, explodes up out of the water like a ditched surf board, whenever he lets go.

“The best part about watching him,” she said, “is that you know he’s playing. And when you think about a two-ton arctic bear playing like a little kid, it makes you wonder about animals and whether they have a sense of humor. I mean, maybe it’s possible that bears just crack up when they think of something funny.”

VF said a zoo is one of those places that points up the best and worst about human beings. If it is well designed and the animals have a lot of room, she said, a zoo is a real achievement. She said that curiosity is one of our best traits (with “our” meaning us, the human race) and that a good zoo is like a National Geographic special that comes to life. But at the same time, she said, the whole idea of capturing an animal and locking it up so we can gawk at it is “basically perverse,” especially when you think about the people who try to throw tennis balls into the mouth of a yawning hippo. And, she said, even those who don’t do such things are, at the zoo, “kind of like voyeurs, like men at a topless bar.”

She bought a bag of peanuts from a vendor and we sat on a bench to eat them. She went rooting through the bag, looking for “triplets,” three peanuts in one shell. They’re a sign of good luck, she said, and she seemed disappointed when she found only one of them, which meant, she said, we’d have to split the luck. We were just sitting there, eating peanuts, enjoying the sun, when for no reason I can imagine, I started thinking about my father. In fact, I suddenly remembered things I hadn’t thought about in years.

I wasn’t sure if VF would be interested because she had not at all explained why things had abruptly changed between us. And I sincerely wanted an explanation. (To say the least I suppose.) Yet here were all these memories, suddenly in my mind. Curiously, it felt exactly as if I’d forgotten them momentarily, instead of years—I’m not sure how many.

I must have been in a reverie because she said, “A penny for your thoughts,”
and I told her that I'd just started to remember things about my father and asked if she wanted to hear them. It was bizarre, almost as if there was a trace of desperation in her voice, but she said she'd very much like to hear them and would I please tell her. So I did.

And so I told her how, on Sunday mornings when I was little, my father would sleep late. Every single Sunday. About how he'd say it is "a violation of the natural law" to get up early on Sunday mornings. And how, if he liked a joke, he'd tell it over and over, until the joke itself became a joke. My mother and I would be getting ready for church and I'd give him the straight line.

"Why aren't you coming?" I'd say. "Why are you still in bed?"

Then, the three of us, together in a chorus, would say: "It violates natural law to get up early on Sunday."

Once on our way out the door, my mother said she was going to "pray that a certain member of this family thinks up at least one new joke." And how a comment like that was all he'd need.

When we came home, he met us in his bathrobe and announced to her: "I think your prayers were answered." he said. "Why did the fireman wear red suspenders?"

And though she'd try not to, she'd always give in and end up laughing. She called him "the master of the worn out joke" and he'd hug her and say that was why she loved him.

He always slept in the nude, I remembered that too.

I asked him about it once, why I had to wear pajamas when he didn't. He said that as you grow up from a boy to a man, there are certain things in life you have to give up. But that you get other, better things in return. One of the things you get, he said, is freedom to decide if you want to wear pajamas.

What an impression that comment made! I puzzled over it for the longest time, trying to figure out what I'd have to give up and just what I'd get in return. In fact, now that I think about it, I'm still not sure I know about all the things he meant.

There was a TV in their room and we used to watch a cartoon show with puppets. It's not on anymore; it hasn't been on for years. I'd lie next to him on Saturday morning and we'd watch together, just the two of us. I suppose I couldn't have been more than five or six. Sometimes I'd lie at the end of the bed with my head on his feet. And sometimes I'd get up on the pillow and let him wrap his bare arm around my shoulder.

It was the silliest show. One puppet, Lord Bagawind, spoke with a British accent. Another one, Sparky, had a high-pitched voice and talked quickly, like a record playing at fast speed. And there were two bears, Fuzzy and Wuzzy. Each week Lord Bagawind had some preposterous scheme and, between cartoons, he'd try to persuade Sparky and the bears to go along. Once he bought a rowboat
because he wanted to row across the ocean to visit his cousin, Sir George Bagawind, who lived “right next door to Buckingham Palace.”

My father would impersonate their voices. And do it most unexpectedly. I remember a night years later, when I didn’t want to go to bed. I suppose I was nine.

“Will you please talk to Skipper,” my mother said. “He refuses to listen to me.”

He looked at me sternly, hands on his hips. I thought he was about to get angry.

“Now see here, Sparky old bean,” he said in a clipped British accent, rocking back on his heels, and then strutting back and forth. “What’s this I hear about you and Her Majesty? Why, even in India (pronounced ‘Inn-JA’) when the Queen says, ‘Time for bed,’ we know it’s time for bed.”

Then he ushered me to bed with the silliest tale of how he bought a map from a little old lady who was also selling a bridge to Brooklyn and that if I didn’t get a good night’s sleep, we couldn’t go find him tomorrow.

“Find who?” I (of course) said.

“Who? Why that abominable snow-chap, that’s who! You see, the old girl explained everything. It’s his name that throws people off. Turns out he hates the snow. Allergic to it. Fact is, he lives in Florida. That’s right, sunny old Florida. Has a place in Daytona. Now tomorrow...”

When I was telling her about what I remembered, VF slid over next to me, lifted my right arm and put it around her shoulders. She didn’t say a word, just let me talk and sat there, snuggled up, with my arm around her. I told her what happened after we got word of the accident, about how, when I saw him in the hospital with all those tubes going in and out, I passed out. And about what they called my “hunger strike,” how I suddenly stopped being hungry, didn’t eat anything for ten days after he died. How they had to give me an IV and almost put me in a psychiatric hospital. And how everyone kept saying that I wasn’t in touch with my feelings. While I thought I was totally in touch with my feelings, that my feeling was that I simply did not want to eat anything. And how it all ended after two weeks when, as suddenly as it started, I went back to normal and started eating again. But how I refused to go to the cemetery for the service. Or any time since.

“And so you’ve never been?” she asked, and I nodded.

And that’s when she said it for the first time. “Well, that’s the one thing we should do before this is over: let’s take a trip out there, help you get over that block. What do you say?”

I was startled. I asked what did she mean by “before this is over?” And then she asked why was I so surprised, that this had to come to an end because we were so mismatched, surely I knew that, surely I’ve seen that all along.
“I’m too old for you,” she said. “And you’re too young for me. We have to end it, and end it soon too.”

She reminded me that she was graduating very soon. (I had deliberately tried not to think about that.) And that she’d decided to apply for a teaching job in the Chicago area, near where her mother lives. She said I must know that we couldn’t go on together. Or did I, for a minute, think we were just going to go on and on as we were, as if we were made for each other? I just sat there and didn’t say anything.

She said let’s go back to her apartment; there was something she wanted to tell me. When we got there and I saw all the cartons on the floor, I felt terrible because I realized she had already begun packing her books.

We sat on the sofa and she again said there was something she wanted to tell me, something important she wanted to talk about. At first, she said, she wasn’t sure if she should tell me because I was so young and because she was afraid I’d hunch my shoulders back up and generally go back into my shell. But then she figured that I had a right to know, that I was grown up enough to get involved with her, and, therefore, that I had a right to know what had happened as a result.

She told me she was pregnant and that’s why she’d been avoiding me, that she’d felt ashamed and guilty, and that she’d gone too far, gone way over the line. That she’d dragged me into things I wasn’t ready for and now that she realized it, she felt ashamed that she’d exercised such bad judgment. She went on and on, and I didn’t know what to say. I must have looked shocked because she took my hand in both of hers and rubbed the back of it softly and started saying everything was all right. I asked if it was my baby or that Ritchie’s, and she said it was mine. I said I thought she couldn’t get pregnant because she was on the pill, and she said she thought so too. I asked what should we do and she kissed the tips of my fingers and said I shouldn’t worry that she was going to have an abortion. I felt my stomach heave. I told her that it was a baby, a little human being, and she dropped my hand, slid away, turned to face me, and said no, it’s not a baby, it’s a fetus. It’s a person, I said, but she said it’s not a person until it’s born, that you don’t become a person after a few weeks, you don’t become a person until you can survive outside the womb. I’m not sure what else I said. I remember saying something about how the baby was “mine” and her saying it didn’t “belong” to me, that it was her body and that her body belongs to her. I said something about how it might be the only child I’d ever have, and she said I wasn’t going to have the child, she was going to have the child while the most I’d do was “stand on the sidelines and root her on.” I asked her please to not get sarcastic and she nodded and said that even though I might love the baby and do everything I could to help, she was the one who’d be responsible for it, no matter what. That even though I might pay child support, she was the one who’d have to change her whole life to take
care of it, take care of it every single day, and that, while she wanted to have children and take care of them someday, she wasn’t ready for that now, she had her life planned and this wasn’t part of it, at least not now it wasn’t, and I didn’t have a right to insist otherwise.

“Skipper,” she said, “if you want a baby later in your life, that’s up to you. But this one was mine. It was in my body. And it would have been up to me to care for it. To drop everything I’m doing, change my whole life to take care of it. And I’m not ready to do that.”

I pointed out that she was speaking in the past tense and asked if that meant she had already had the abortion. She said no, she hadn’t yet, but that she had made up her mind she was going to. I said I knew she cared for me, and she said that was beside the point, that even if she “loved the hell out of me,” we were a complete and total mismatch and nothing on God’s earth could change that.

I said I’d be willing to marry her, and she said, “Now that is just super! Super super-duper! You’re willing to marry me. Now that is a proposal, all right. Just what every girl dreams of—the day some guy says he’d be willing to marry her.”

I again asked her please not to get sarcastic, that I’d misspoken, that I wanted to marry her very much. Then she started crying and I gave her my handkerchief and she blew her nose and cursed herself for crying. I said I wanted to be her partner and that, together, we would raise the baby. She said that was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard, that I wasn’t even “raised” myself yet, and that since I was just learning how to take care of myself, how in God’s name did I think I could take care of someone else? She asked what would I do for a living—become a paperboy? Once again, I asked her to please not get sarcastic and she said she was sorry. But then she said I was too young, I was just “too damn young,” and that if I paired off with her, I’d never learn what life’s about, I’d never learn “to stand on my own two feet.” Then, anticipating what I might say, she told me “not to go and get all literal,” that standing on your own two feet doesn’t mean “standing on your own two feet,” it’s an expression that means being able to cope with whatever comes along.

I said I wanted to cope with her and with our baby, and she started crying again, then motioned for my handkerchief back and, as she blew her nose, again cursed herself for crying and for being such a “putz, such a complete and total putz.”

Then she said it was “no big deal,” that she’d had one before and come through it fine, that an abortion is “no big deal.” She said she’d gotten herself “knocked up” when she was 17 by some “jerk-eroo” she shouldn’t have been talking to, let alone sleeping with. And that the procedure hadn’t been too painful, hadn’t been “all that terrible,” or at least not as terrible as she thought it would be. Then she started saying she couldn’t believe she was turning into “a walking infan-
ticide” that “some right-wing nut case” would probably want to electrocute and then she really started to cry. She said she had no idea why she had to be “so goddamn fertile,” then said that she was afraid that God was going to punish her by taking away her ability to have children. (It was the first time I heard her seriously mention “God” and her fear made a deep impression.) She cried hard for a moment, then began to collect herself and said the reason she was crying was because she felt sorry for herself, that people cry because they feel sorry for themselves. She said that crying is a “self-indulgent” thing to do and that she felt sorry for herself and her own stupidity and her own dumb luck.

I again said I wanted her to have the baby, I wanted her to have our baby. She said she wanted to have it too, more than I could imagine, but that she couldn’t, she just couldn’t, she just could not. I told her I felt terrible and she said so did she. I said we could raise the baby together and she said would I please knock it off, that tilting at windmills would be a piece of cake compared to what we’d face.

Then, abruptly, she stopped. It was as if she’d suddenly decided, at that moment, then and there, what she was going to do. She had reached a decision, a judgment, and the only thing remaining was to do it. The time for feeling bad had ended. She stood up, locked her arms around my waist and, with her thighs pressing against mine, leaned back and said, “Dearest, darling Skipper, we have no choice. We simply have no choice.”

She became calm and composed, a transformation of how she’d been just a moment before. She stood there, with her arms locked around me, leaning back, looking at me, and saying, “I’m so very sorry it has to end like this.” Which was, I think, when I may have started to cry. I can’t remember exactly. And then she hugged me, started rubbing my back in a big circle, and saying things like, “It’s okay, it’s okay, I know how you feel.”

I asked if she was going to marry that Ritchie and she said probably, that she didn’t know for sure yet but that she probably would. I asked was she in love with him. She smiled a sad little smile, “Yes I am,” she said. “And I’m in love with you too. Totally. Completely. One hundred percent.” I told her I supposed the feeling was mutual, and she said she’d guessed as much but that it didn’t make any difference.

“We’re not meant to be,” she said. “We’re just not,” adding that surely I could see that too.

I told her I surely could see no such thing but she shook her head and said that’s how I might feel today, but it’s not how I’d feel later, tomorrow or years from now. “We’re just not meant to be,” she said, adding that nothing anyone can say or do will change that fact.

A lot of other things were said. By her and by me, but I don’t remember them very well. I didn’t want to leave, even after everything was said. Though I
knew things would never be what they were, I didn’t want to go. She may have felt the same. I remember her going into the kitchen and putting on some water for tea. But I don’t remember us drinking any, and now that I think of it, I don’t even remember the water coming to a boil. For a while, it seemed as if we just stood there, everything had been said but we didn’t separate. Then she said she guessed it was time for me to go, and I nodded and got my coat. I stood at the door and we just looked at each other and didn’t say anything; we just stood there, looking. I put my coat on, she came toward me and pulled my collar up around my neck, hugged me, kissed my cheek, then said it was time and pushed me away. And I went out the door and went home. I remember, as I walked, thinking about things I wished I had said. But I can’t remember them now. At the time, they seemed so important, but now I can’t remember any of them. I can’t even imagine what they might have been.

The next day we went to the cemetery. She said it would be a good way to end things, that she wanted to help me come to terms with my father’s death, and that helping me visit his grave would “make everything right in the eyes of God.” (Again, a serious reference to God and I was going to ask what she meant, but decided not to. In a vague sort of way, I felt like I knew.)

That was two weeks ago today. The night before, I remember waking up several times, including once just before dawn. I didn’t have nightmares or cold sweats, I just kept waking up. I remember lying in bed shortly before the sun came up, watching my room gradually fill with light. Darkness conceding to gray, shades of gray giving way to color; form into shadow, shadows into what was familiar. I kept thinking about what Mark Twain said: that if courage were the absence of fear, a flea would be the bravest animal since it will attack anything, no matter how big. Therefore, courage must be the mastery of fear, not its absence. I kept telling myself the reason I’m nervous is that I’m not a flea, I’m nervous because I’m not a flea.

We left early. I was up and out of the apartment before my mother got up. Though she had acted normally enough last night, I had the distinct impression that my mother knew something was up. But she didn’t say anything last evening or ask any questions. She knows what’s been going on between VF and me, I’m sure of that. (At least she knows in a general sort of way.) But she’s kept her distance, hasn’t pried or asked questions and I of course have volunteered nothing. (Perhaps Arthur advised her, I’m not sure. But whatever the reasons, I certainly am grateful.)

I was outside waiting when VF pulled up shortly before eight. She had borrowed that Ritchie’s car. She pulled in front of the building, in the loading zone. Her window was down but she didn’t say anything, she just smiled as I went around and got in the front seat next to her. As she put the car in gear and pulled away, the only thing she asked was did I feel okay and I said I thought so.
It is a long drive, well over an hour, so the first thing we did was stop at a Mister Donut and get some coffee and crullers. We ate the crullers in the parking lot and, since her car doesn't have a cup holder, I held her coffee between sips until she finished it just as we crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge. At which point we settled in and didn't get into a conversation or say much of anything. She also didn't turn the radio on (which was a thoughtful thing to do since music was the last thing I wanted to hear), just drove in silence. I remember watching as trees and farmland replaced the gas stations, fast food restaurants, and other signs of suburbia. We passed some horses in a pasture. Beautiful and still, there were more than a dozen, each a different shade of brown. Surrounding them on two sides were rows of dark green trees, the start of a forest that kept the horses from straying from where they belonged. The next thing I remember clearly was when we came up on the roadside nursery.

"How about there?" VF said.

It was as if we were communicating by telepathy: I knew exactly what she had in mind even though neither of us had said a word about it. I nodded and we turned into an unpaved, gravel-covered parking lot. The pebbles crunched underneath as the car pulled up and jerked to a stop.

A heavy-set woman smiled at us as we came in the door. She had on a blue denim dress that hung down to her shins and a white apron. Strands of thin, gray hair peeked out from underneath a bright red scarf tied around her head. She had a thick accent that sounded like German. I told her what we wanted and she led us to the back of the store to a refrigerated case with a glass door where she pointed to some long-stemmed carnations in a white plastic bucket.

"Pretty," she said, "but is all I hav today."

I asked for a dozen and she took her time picking them out, choosing the nicest ones. She took up six red ones and six white, and laid them gently on the counter before wrapping them in sheets of dark green tissue.

"Pretty flowers for a pretty girl," she said smiling and handing the flowers to me. I paid her and we went outside and got back in the car.

"She thought they were for me," VF said as we drove out of the parking lot.

"I saw that too," I said and waited for her reaction. But she just stared straight ahead, concentrating on the road in front of us, not saying a word, and so I just let the subject drop.

We drove for a while in silence then VF said, "Nervous?"

"A little," I said.

"Me too," she said.

"I'm glad you're with me," I said.
She half-turned and said, "I'm glad you're with me too."

I didn't point out what a nonsensical thing she'd said—why on earth would
she go to my father's grave without me? But I didn't want to start "getting all literal" (as she so often says I do) and risk ending her good mood. Besides, we were almost there.

"Here's the exit," I said.

We turned off the highway onto a flat, two-lane road lined with pine trees and then drove through a little town with a main street about two blocks long. When we passed the one-engine firehouse at the end of town, I knew we were almost there.

We came up to a traffic light and turned right, then went straight for about a mile until we came to a stop sign where we made another right. Then I saw the sign planted in the grass, marking the cemetery entrance.

VF slowed down as we approached. She glanced at me before turning, as if to see if I had any last second thoughts, then drove through a black, wrought-iron gate, past a fence of tall, j-shaped, iron bars. Like those in a cell, the bars were only a few inches apart so that you couldn't squeeze through them; and their hooked j-shape, facing away from the road toward the field of grave sites, made them easy to scale but impossible to climb back over to get out again.

As we passed through the gate, we turned onto a narrow, blacktop road that twisted through the green grass until it curved up over a hill, out of sight. I thought of the beginning of a maze. I asked her to park near the gate, as I wanted to go in alone. (For one thing, I was afraid it might take me a long time and I didn't want her to be uncomfortable or get wet, as it had started to cloud over. But I also wanted to know exactly where the car was and that she would be in it, waiting for me.)

My mother has described the place and so, in spite of its vastness, it seemed familiar in a dreamlike sort of way. I had a little trouble getting oriented. At first, I stayed on the blacktop because I didn't want to lose my way; unlike Theseus, I had no ball of string. But then I decided I couldn't get too lost and so I cut across the grass. The ground felt spongy under my feet; drops of dew and slivers of grass collected on the tips of my shoes and I wondered when it had last rained. The air was fresh and sweet, and unusually cool for a morning in early June; each time I inhaled, I felt a snap of crisp, cool air rush into my lungs.

The cemetery was deserted, I don't remember seeing anyone else the whole time. After walking down one of the sloping hills, the car was out of sight too. And so, except for the sound of my footsteps on the grass and the chirping of some birds in the distance, I made my way in total silence.

I took my time, stopping to read some of the markers: a man who'd lived into his eighties next to his wife of sixty years. A family, four generations, each one's name carved on a tall, imposing obelisk—with space enough for many more names. The marker of an infant who had lived less than a week, with an inscription that read: "We never knew him. But we will never forget him." As I
walked along, reading and thinking about all the people buried underneath my feet, it occurred to me that there's something mystical about a cemetery, something transcendental, reminiscent of the ocean. It gave me an ineffable sense of myself and my place in the scheme of things. A feeling of calm. It's not a joyful place, certainly. But it isn't a sad place either. It's like the ocean or the stars—it simply is.

Then I saw the dogwood tree. It stands alone. There are no other trees nearby. It was still in bloom, but just barely. Almost all of its blossoms had been replaced by green leaves; a few white petals with brown edges clung to its thin, brittle-looking branches. I felt a sense of kinship with that tree. All these years it had stood there with him, alone, waiting for me to come. It was my twin, the brother I never had. We are physically alike, both of us small and scrawny compared to our respective counterparts; and in our own way, we will each be near him as long as we live. I stroked its rough, grainy trunk. I knew that his grave was just behind it.

Suddenly I could feel my heart beating, my breathing became labored and quick, the tension in my stomach was intense. It felt as if an animal, a rat or a weasel, were running back and forth inside me, crazed, clawing at my insides, trying to escape, trying to dig its way out. I took several deep breaths and, as suddenly as it began, it ended. And I felt calm, as calm as I've ever been. My senses seemed to heighten and I became aware of everything: colors, textures, sounds and smells. Of my hands and feet, my chest and face—I could almost feel the blood pulse through my body. I bent down and picked up the carnations. Apparently, I had dropped them without noticing. Then I saw the pale gray granite marker with BITWELL in capital letters carved on it, and I walked toward it purposefully.

It's a plain gray monument, a little taller than my knee; only his name and dates are carved on it. My mother said it's what he would have wanted: no epitaph, no engraved design—just his name and dates.

I sat under the tree, leaning against the trunk, looking at his marker. The ground was damp underneath me and, at first, it felt cold and wet. But after a moment, I didn't notice. I just sat there, staring at his name etched in the stone and started remembering things I hadn't thought about in a long time.

He worked for the federal government, in the Department of Labor. He liked to call himself a bureaucrat. Only in the United States, he used to say, is "bureaucrat" a derogatory term. In Europe, he said, a bureaucrat is a prestigious occupation, on a par with a physician or professor. He said the people who work for the government "get a bum rap" because most of them are as capable and do as good a job as people anywhere. Better, he said, because so many want of them to serve the public. But, he used to say, Americans sometime think like adolescents—they want things only government can do, but they don't want gov-
ernment to do them. He used to say that in some ways the United States is like a big high school and that some of our national problems are really about growing up.

I remembered how, when I was about nine, he taught me to play chess. We used to play in the living room before dinner, after he came home from work. He’d pour himself a beer—he always had one beer before dinner, exactly one—and we’d sit and play until it was time to eat. Chess was something we shared, just the two of us.

He wasn’t a very good player and it wasn’t long before I was as good as he, then better, then a lot better. (For a while I even thought I might have the makings of a good player until he brought home a thick book filled with dozens of openings and defenses and their variations. I tried to study it and, while I did learn a few things, I realized the reason I won all the time was because of the level of my competition, not any innate skill.) After a while, it was so easy to beat him that the games got boring. And so, if one of his pieces was threatened and he didn’t see it, I’d give him a hint. I might say something about going to church and seeing the bishop. Or I’d say that it was going to be dark tonight (to-Knight). Sometimes he’d be concentrating so hard he wouldn’t notice the hint. So I’d say it again, a little louder, and then, finally, he’d see the threat, clap his hands, sit back and grin and say, “I see what you’re up to, Foxy Felix!” That’s what he used to call me when I beat him at chess: “Foxy Felix.” I don’t know where the name came from, whether it was an old cartoon character or something he made up. But that’s what he called me when we played chess and I made a good move.

I used to think of him as a fortress, my rock of Gibraltar. Someone who was so strong and reliable that I would never be harmed. No matter what the danger or how serious the threat, I’d be okay because he’d be there to protect me. But in the chess matches, when he wouldn’t see a threat, I’d sometimes think that one day the tables would be turned. When he didn’t see the most obvious threat to his rooks or his queen, I’d think that someday he’d be the one who’d need protection, and that someday he’d count on me to provide it.

I thought about how much he loved books. That’s probably why I read so much. When I was little, he used to read to me after dinner. Then, after I learned, we’d read out loud, one to the other. He’d tell me about the different writers, about their lives, what they were known for. And we did it all systematically. We might read two or even three works by the same author and talk about them as we went along, comparing and contrasting—I especially remember reading *White Fang*, then *Call of the Wild*, they were two of our favorites. Besides Jack London, we read H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—I loved those stories, especially Sherlock Holmes! Even though I’ve read them all several times, I’ll still take down my compendium volume sometimes and reread one. We’d watch the movies too, the ones with Basil Rathbone. I was
allowed to stay up late only on special occasions, but a Sherlock Holmes movie on the Late Show on a Friday or Saturday usually qualified. My mother would long have gone to bed and we'd sit up, eating peanut butter and crackers, watching away, even if it was one we'd seen before. We'd laugh when Nigel Bruce would, as my father put it, "ham it up like a hot dog with mustard." Or we'd say to each other, "Oh yeah, this is the one about the hypnotist who works for Moriarty." Or, "Watch, here comes a good part." Sometimes we'd sit together on the sofa and, if I got tired, I'd lie with my head on a pillow in his lap, and he'd cover me with a blanket and hold onto my shoulder.

I remembered a movie we saw based on an Elmore Leonard story where Paul Newman plays a white man raised by Apaches who inherits a bed and breakfast. He goes on a stagecoach with Frederick March, who is running away with stolen money that was supposed to have been used to buy food for the Indians. It was a good movie, we enjoyed it a lot. But the part I remembered was how, for weeks afterward, whenever he addressed me, he'd call me "Hombre." And with the thickest, fakiest, most inauthentic Mexican accent you ever heard, without pronouncing the letter "H"—as in, "Om-bray!" For example, in the evening, he'd say something like: "Hey, Om-bray, eets time for siesta, si?" And whenever he did it, I'd laugh of course. And my laughing would only encourage him to keep it up. Even now, just remembering it makes me smile.

There were bad times for him, times when he used to sleep a lot. I used to be so puzzled by his periodic bad moods, I'd get worried about what was going on. But it happened often and after a while, I suppose I got used to it. He'd come home from work and go right to bed. Sometimes with barely a word to me. Or some days, he'd sleep in, wouldn't go to work at all. And sometimes, in the evenings, he'd just go to their bedroom and not eat dinner or say much of anything to us or disappear: come home, then go out right back out again. When I'd ask where he went, my mother'd say he went to the movies, that he was tired and needed "some private time." Well, he must have sat through the movie two or three times, because it would be late when he came home, usually after midnight. Long after my mother and I had gone to bed, I'd hear him come in. Sometimes he'd stay up in the kitchen, eating peanut butter and crackers and doing the crossword. More than once, I got up and went in with him. And he'd be his usual self again. "How about some ice cream, partner?" he'd say. He'd fix me a bowl, put aside his crossword, and we'd sit there in the kitchen, sometimes not even talking a lot, just sitting there, the two of us, while I ate.

I remembered the Sunday mornings when I was little. We always had a big breakfast. He loved a big breakfast on Sundays. The only times he came to church with us were Christmas and Easter. My mother is still devout of course. And I used to be. I used to think that anyone who didn't go to church would have a hard time getting into heaven and so I'd pray that he'd become a believer before
he died. Of course he never did. But as much as I used to worry about, and pray for him, I also used to try to imagine, if he wasn’t Episcopalian as we were, what he was. Just what did he believe in. One day, I got up the courage to ask what his religion was. My father looked embarrassed by the question, as if it were something he’d hoped would never come up. He shrugged and raised his eyebrows, as if he felt guilty. As I think back now, his expression was like a child’s who’s caught sneaking a cookie. But I just stood there, waiting; I wanted to hear what he’d say. Finally, after shrugging a second time, he said, “Protestant, I guess.” Then he bent down and hugged me and, as if it were a deep secret between the two of us, whispered, “I guess I don’t think about religion that much.” Then with a kind of conspiratorial grin he whispered, “But that’s a secret between us, okay? Don’t tell your mother what I said.” And of course, I never did.

I remember his chest. It was much darker than mine, and it seemed so broad in comparison, and so hard. He had dark hair on his arms, but only little bits of hair in the middle of his chest and around his nipples. And the scent of his body. In the morning, before he showered. It was strong, distinctive, but not at all unpleasant. My mother would be in the kitchen fixing breakfast and she’d tell me to go in and wake him up. I must have been about five or six. I’d climb into their bed, crawl up next to him, and shake his shoulder. He’d pretend not to notice. So I’d shake him again, a little harder, and whisper, “Dad, time to get up.” Then, suddenly, he’d spring to life, growl like a monster and reach up, wrap his arms around me, pull me down on top of him while I’d wrestle and laugh and struggle to get free. “The octopus has got you,” he’d say, wrapping me with his arms and legs. “The octopus has got you now!” And as we tussled on the bed, with me in his arms, pressed against his bare chest, I’d inhale his scent. He smelled like popcorn. In the mornings, he smelled just like popcorn.

And the games we used to play. My mother would call us to breakfast and we’d pretend not to hear. She’d call again but I’d put my finger to his mouth and he’d nod. Finally, she’d give up and come into the bedroom and we’d pretend to be asleep.

“All right you two,” she’d say. “I know you heard me that time.”

He’d reach up and grab her, and pull her down onto the bed, on top of us. She’d complain that he was wrinkling her clothes or mussing her hair. But she’d be laughing even as she complained and there we’d be, just for a moment, the three of us, together, in a heap on the bed. Then she would pull herself up, smooth her hair, say something about the bacon burning, and order us to come to the table.

He’d play games there too. As soon as we sat down, he’d reach for the Sunday paper and start to read. Every time he did, my mother would say it was bad manners to read at the table and that he wasn’t setting a good example for “you know who.” With the most earnest expression, he’d “agree completely,” then fold the paper in half, drop it in his lap, and read from there, surreptitiously,
between bites.

Then came the accident. I remember the sound of the telephone. It never sounded like that before or since. We were in the living room and my mother answered. I was reading and at first not listening. But somehow, I remember every word as if it were tape-recorded in my memory. I can still hear the ringing and her voice as she said, “Hello?” It was all so sudden, so unexpected. Like dropping a glass. You’re doing the dishes, washing a glass. You don’t expect to drop it, you’re not even thinking about it, you’ve washed it dozens of times. But then it happens; it slips out of your hand and shatters. You can’t believe it; you look at the pieces on the floor around you. It’s true, you know it’s true; but still you don’t believe it happened.

I remember how he looked in the hospital. We had to wait a long time until he came out of surgery. I fell asleep on a bench and someone covered me with blanket. I woke up when a doctor came to say we could go in. He was in a room by himself, in a bed with metal bars at the side to keep him from rolling out. His head was shaved, bandages went around his ears and jaw; his chest was bandaged too and coated with Mercurochrome; tubes were going in and out of him everywhere.

My father never used to complain about pain; no matter how bad it might be, he would never complain. Once I saw him taking some aspirin and asked if he had a headache. “I guess so,” he said. That was the most I ever heard him say about pain. Until that night. He was in pain that night, really bad pain.

I stood next to him and reached through the bars, giving him my hand to hold. He gripped it tight and every time the pain would come, he’d squeeze it and moan. “O-o-o-o-w!” he’d cry, squeezing, perhaps as hard as he could. His pain seemed to come and go, as if it were throbbing or pulsating within. I thought about the tide, waves breaking on the shore, going in and out, in and out. And each time another wave of pain came, he’d squeeze my hand and moan. Squeeze and moan, squeeze and moan—I remember standing there, wanting to take it away, wanting to make the pain go from his body into mine. I prayed it would happen. I didn’t pray that he’d get well or that his pain would end—that seemed like too much to ask. But if God would just let me take his pain away, or at least give some of it to me so that he wouldn’t hurt quite so much, at least give me some—I prayed with all my might. Every moment or so, another wave would come crashing in, and my father would squeeze my hand and moan from the pain.

Somehow, he indicated that he wanted to talk and I tried to lean over. But he could barely talk. And because of the tubes and the bars on the side of the bed, I couldn’t get close enough to understand. He whispered something, but I couldn’t make it out. Then my mother leaned over and put her ear down right next to his mouth and he said it again. When she stood up, I asked her what he’d
said. This is what it was: “Tell Skipper not to judge Dostoevsky until he’s at least twenty-five.” That was the last thing he ever said.

I just sat there, underneath the tree, thinking of him, letting my mind drift over all of it. I suppose that in a twisted sort of way, I blamed him for leaving us. Which is ridiculous, because he wasn’t even driving. I realized as I was sitting there this was part of what I’d felt—that it was his fault, that he’d left us on purpose, left us on our own because he didn’t care enough, didn’t feel for us what we felt for him. I was about to put the carnations on his grave, all twelve of them. Then I decided to keep one. I unwrapped the others and lay them on his grave. Then I left.

As I made my way back to the car, it started to rain. Lightly at first, then harder, the kind of cool, penetrating rain that comes at the end of spring, and I decided to run. I ran up over the hill and saw VF, despite the rain, standing outside the car watching for me. When she saw me running toward her, she waved, then jumped inside, and I came around, climbed in and sat beside her. There were some paper towels in the glove compartment and she tore off several sheets and started rubbing my head, drying my hair. Then I gave her the last carnation, a red one.

“I suppose you know this,” I said, “but I couldn’t have done this without you.”

She leaned over, kissed me lightly, and said she was proud of me. She said, “You really did something today. You really accomplished something important and I’m proud of you.”

We hardly talked the whole way home, even when we stopped to eat. Mostly I just sat there, looking out the window, thinking about how much I missed my father but at the same time feeling good about myself and about what I had done. About nearly everything, I suppose.

That was two weeks ago. And this morning, she went away. She is gone now. She and Ritchie drove to the Midwest, near Chicago, where VF hopes to begin teaching in the fall.

I saw her off. I went over to her apartment early and helped them put the last few things into the little yellow and black U-Haul trailer they’d rented that was hooked up to the back of Ritchie’s white Toyota. After we got everything loaded, we went upstairs, the three of us, and had one last cup of coffee and a coffeecake that I bought this morning at the bakery. Sitting around, drinking coffee and talking is something I will always associate with her, I’m sure of it. We sat at her little table and talked about their upcoming trip: Ritchie spread out a map and we all looked at which interstates he should drive on and estimated how long it would take. It somehow seemed inappropriate to talk about anything else; the decision had been made. VF plans to live with her mother in suburban Chicago for a few months until she gets a job, then she’ll get a place of her own. After
dropping her off, Ritchie will come back here, tie up some loose ends, and then
go back and stay with her as soon as he can, probably in September. He too is
going to look for a job in the Chicago area and they will probably get married
next spring, at least that's what I surmised. Neither of them came right out and
said as much, but I think that's a good surmise.

When we went downstairs to go it was a little before ten. I shook Ritchie's
hand—it really wasn't all that uncomfortable being around him today, it feels as if
everything between us is over; the tension has dissipated; little remains of the
competition. It doesn't feel as if he's won exactly. It's more like we decided, the
two of us, without saying a word, that there is no point in being rivals, no pur­
pose to it; Valerie made her decision and being jealous would somehow be inap­
propriate.

I stood by the passenger's side as VF came around to get in the car. I
wanted to remember how she looked and so I made a mental picture of exactly
what she had on: a pair of worn white Reebok sneakers and white wool socks,
faded Levis with a red patch on her left knee, a long-sleeve, dark green cotton
work shirt with the two top buttons open and the sleeves rolled up to her elbows,
a silver bracelet, and a faded New York Yankees cap, with her hair pulled straight
through the back of the adjustable plastic band into a ponytail.

Just before she got in the car, she handed me a letter. Then she gave me a
tight hug, a kiss on the ear, a kiss on the cheek, then she started to cry, then she gave
me a light kiss on the lips, then got in the car. She rolled down her window and
said I should wait to read the letter until she was gone. I stood there watching as
Ritchie started the car and drove away. I stood there for a long time. I was
foolishly hoping she had forgotten something and that she might come back to
get it. But she didn't forget anything, and she didn't come back. This is what she
wanted. The way, she said, it had to be.

Here is the letter:

Dearest Skipper,

I know how you feel, how deep and true your feelings are.
So, I'm going to take advantage of that and make an unfair appeal. I
want you to do something. I want you to let go. I want you to let me
go. I want you to do it for me.

There are lots of reasons, a jillion reasons why I need to go.
And you probably know some of them. You've probably known
some of them from Day One.

You see, I've written draft after draft. And each time I do, I
end with a long list of "do's" and "don'ts," sort of old Aunt Valerie's
recipe for living. Here is some of it:

Grab life by the horns, don't back away from it. Grab it and
wrestle the hell out of it. Drink life down like a root beer float. Don’t be afraid to take chances. And don’t worry if you get some dirt under your nails—you will, you have to, it’s part of being human.

I wanted to warn you not to become mean or sour, or turn into the emptiest kind of person I know of—a cynic.

And I wanted to say to be understanding. Of others and yourself.

And to make sure that whatever you do is quality. Aim for quality in your work and in your life. Never settle for schlock.

And about friends, how good friends are so, so important. And that it’s about time you started making some of them.

There was more, lots and lots more. But that’s what’s wrong. Because the more I wrote my list of “do’s” and “don’ts,” the more I saw why it would never work. My advice is advice for your life.

Skipper, I have no right to give you advice. You have to find your own way. Your partner can’t be your mentor. And you can’t be her protégé. Having me feed you even the very best advice, little by little, sip by sip, will be poisonous. Not because my advice is bad. Because of my feeding it to you. Because of our relationship.

As long as I’m around, you can’t be free—free to become whoever you are.

Skipper, I have to go. I have to go where I belong. And you have to let me. We have no choice.

I’ll be in touch. Always. And if ever you need something, ever, you can call on me. I’ll be there for you. As long as I live.

With love,

Valerie

Afterward: I’ve been married almost three years. When my wife and I began to get serious, we, like most couples, wanted to know more about each other. In that vein, I mentioned the journal I kept in high school and asked if she’d like to read it. Afterward, she said—and these were her exact words—“Valerie was quite an influence on you.” I was surprised she saw it that way. Pleasantly surprised. Not long after that, we decided to marry.

When V’s cards with the photos of herself and her children arrive, as they do at Christmas and on my birthday, my wife and I share them and sometimes talk about my journal, my journey really—about what happened, and about my father. And whenever we do, the bond between us grows stronger.
I am now 32, and soon to be the father of my first child, a girl. I’m thrilled; we both are. But what’s relevant here is that recently and out of the blue, my wife said that she liked the name, that she’d always liked the name; and so we’ll call our daughter Valerie.

Lawrence P. Birwell
New York City, 2002
A Note on the Author

John Doble grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, and was educated at the University of Delaware. His fiction has appeared, or will soon do so, in *The South Carolina Review*, *The Mississippi Valley Review*, *Timber Creek Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Washington Square Writes*, and *Euphonia Field Quarterly*. His plays, *The Mayor Who Would Be Sondheim* and *An American Life*, are in development at Pulse Ensemble Theatre in New York. He lives in New York City with his wife, Elizabeth, and Bear the Dog.
"In this strong collection of stories, John Doble shows a rare ability to expose the foibles of very average folk—baseball pitchers, soldiers, college students, low-level Manhattan office workers—with compassion, not condescension."

—Greg Mitchell, author of Joy in Mudville and Campaign of the Century, winner of the Goldsmith Book Prize

"'Two Letters from the Doctor' has such stark realism of naive boys turned into gruesome men that you find it hard to believe that it is fiction. It makes other stories, like [Tim O'Brien's] 'The Things They Carried,' seem mundane."

—John M. Freiermuth, Timber Creek Review