UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Announcing The Apocalypse – A Memoir

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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December 2015

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my committee members who have given me insightful comments regarding this memoir and inestimable help, tips, thoughts and ideas along the way.

DEDICATION

To my family, here and gone.

Announcing the Apocalypse - A Memoir

By Bill Ratner

The Moth – July, 2014

The theme for the night was *Never Again.* When my name was called I planned to get up on stage and tell the story of how I ate a piece of my favorite strawberry pie at Emil Villa's California BBQ in Walnut Creek, California, and thirty-six hours later it colored my bowel movement a bright fire engine red. I called the restaurant. *Did you by any chance hire a new pastry chef?* "Yes, sir, we did. Been here for only three days. Hope you're pleased with his baking." *Tell him he's putting too much #2 red dye in the strawberry pie. It turned my shit red.* "Sir, would you like to speak with the owner…?"

The Moth Storytelling Grand Slam is hosted at Echoplex, a large, high-ceilinged music club in the basement of an old brick building on Sunset Boulevard in Echo Park. Musicians who've performed there include Kid Congo & the Pink Monkey Birds, The Heartless Bastards, and The Adolescents. The Rolling Stones played a surprise show at Echoplex to start their 2013 North American tour.

My wife and I stood in a long line in the alley behind the club waiting for the doors to open. She was happy that I was going to compete in the show but wasn't particularly excited with my choice of story. I reached in my pocket for the index card I'd written story notes on, but it was soggy from sweat. I was nervous and distracted and didn't feel

like rehearsing outside in the July evening heat.

"Do you really need to tell a toilet joke?" my wife asked.

"It's not a joke. It actually happened," I said.

"It's still a toilet joke."

For a moment I remembered back to two weeks earlier when I stood on the grass at Rose Hills, Chicago's largest cemetery, and rolled my one-hundred-year-old Uncle Gerry's casket into his crypt. Other than my daughters, my uncle was my last remaining blood relative. The rest of my family was gone. I thought about the night's theme, *Never Again,* and the significance of my strawberry pie poo-poo story began to dim. I had gone over the seamy details and rehearsed it many times. But what if I got on stage and told a story I hadn't planned? It is a fear of mine that I'll stand up in a theater, scream out my name a bunch of times, then sit back down and be mortified that people sitting next to me in the dark will think, *How sad, not being able to control himself.*

What if instead of telling my well-rehearsed toilet joke, I got up on stage and honored the memory of my uncle, and by doing that, honored the memory of my family and reopened the question of how I survived when things spun so far out of control? Would the audience boo me off the stage? Would they stand up and shout*, Try being funny! This is too much!* A competitive storytelling slam isn't therapy. It is a performance in front of an audience of strangers. I like attention, but I don't want people thinking that I do. And I have mixed feelings about telling sad stories. In previous story slams I had resisted going into anything more than brief anecdotes about my family. But on the occasions when I did, a stranger often came up to me, tears in her eyes, and thanked me. I'm fascinated by

other people's difficult stories. But how to tell mine? I admit that for as long as I can remember I have wanted to be acknowledged for being a brave survivor of a once-happy childhood that turned bleak, for outwitting the Grim Reaper and going on to live a productive life with a career, much-wanted children, and a long, happy marriage. My mother and father and my brother weren't murdered. I didn't endure psychological torture at the hands of cruel, deficient parents. In fact my parents were exemplary, loving, emotionally open, happy people. And my story isn't a ghost story. I don't put much stock in the supernatural.

Finally the bouncers pulled open the Echoplex doors and the crowd swarmed in to secure their seats. The ten storytellers were given bright orange wrist bands, and we were taken to the performers' tiny "green room" that was filled with cases of bottled water, a bag of Doritos, and a Shakey's large pepperoni pizza. I paced around backstage on the cracked concrete floor hoping to soak up the vibe I imagined Keith Richards and Mick Jagger left behind fifteen months earlier, wondering if they still wore Capezio dance shoes and stovepipe pants that made them look like eccentric seventy–year-old teenagers. Tonight's contestants, all former story slam winners, would tell about lost loves, bad drugs, and rotten hangovers – all purportedly true stories. The winner of The Moth Grand Slam would go on to compete at the annual Moth Ball in New York City. I stood behind the black velour curtains with the other storytellers, listening to the crowd and whispering the first line of my story. I walked into the green room and took a bite of pepperoni pizza. When my name was picked out of the hat I would have five minutes to tell my *Never Again* story before the host called time and the judges tallied their scores. A storytelling

slam is an odd ritual, standing in line, waiting to spend two hours in a sweltering beer-fumed nightclub. It is an amalgam of stand-up comedy, intimate personal theater, and public confessional. I've always attempted to disguise myself as worry-free and wise, especially in front of an audience. But no matter how hard I try to hide it, the DNA of my family history is strung throughout every story I tell—a wistful melancholy, a sadness, an unmet need. On stage I sometimes get laughs, other times it's as silent as a cemetery.

I sat on an upholstered bench at the side of the Echoplex stage with the other storytellers. It was a standing-room-only crowd. The young, sardonic, bearded emcee warmed up the audience with a quick and oddly funny anecdote about his contemplating suicide. Then he reached into the hat and pulled out a name.

"This is our first storyteller of the night, folks, and it's a tough spot to get." He glanced at the piece of paper. "So let's have a big hand for *Bill Ratner*."

I groaned in nervous anticipation, stood up, and made the long walk up to the microphone. I squinted into the stage lights and took a moment to decide whether or not I would tell my strawberry pie story, or perhaps something very different.

The Bath -- Spring, 1952

It was the middle of the afternoon. My mother's voice was smoky and quiet, calming. I was five and a half years old.

"Billy, you and I are going to take a bath together and I'm going to show you my breast. You know I had a mastectomy and they removed my breast, but I'm better now, and I don't want you to be afraid."

I hadn't taken a bath with my mother for as long as I could remember. She filled the bathtub with hot water, helped me undress, and took off her terrycloth robe. I climbed into the tub with her and we sat down in the clear warm bathwater. I stared at the soft pink knot of flesh where her breast had been, and at her remaining breast, and at her pale skin and brown wavy hair that smelled like vanilla. For months she had undergone cancer treatments at doctors' offices and hospitals. She and my father spoke in hushed voices about medical appointments and treatment modalities. My eleven-year-old brother Pete had begun acting sullen and withdrawn.

My mother unfolded a washcloth and floated it on the surface of the bathwater. Like a magician with a black art cloth she created a bubble of air, pulled it down into the bath, and squeezed. A burst of bubbles rose up and fizzed on the surface. I giggled, and she repeated the trick again and again just to please me. I looked down into the bath at her dark pubic hair as it undulated in the water. The pink outline of her vagina showed through. I was fascinated. Questions went through my head. Is that where you and dad made me? Is that where you pee? But I just stared.

She noticed me looking at her. "That's my vagina," she said.

I was embarrassed. "I know," I said.

"That's where you and your brother came into the world."

Both my parents shared an ease about their bodies. They met in graduate school at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s while my mother was earning her Masters in Social Work. My dad grew up behind his mother's cigar store on the south side of Chicago; my mother came from a middle-class Episcopalian home in the suburb of

Glencoe. The youngest of three sisters, she had a pragmatic view of parenting. When her pediatrician urged her to feed baby formula to me and my brother, she breast fed us both. Before my brother and I could barely talk, my parents educated us about the proper names for sex organs and bodily functions. In our house it wasn't *poo-poo* and *pee-pee,* but rather *bowel movement, urinate, anus, and penis*. One Saturday afternoon I was taking a shower with my dad, and I noticed the ample dimensions of his penis.

"Dad, you have a really big one."

"Don't worry, son, you'll have one just like it when you grow up," he said, giving me an optimistic sense about the future, at least regarding penile maturity.

I pointed at my mother's vagina submerged in the bath water. "Is that where my sister came from?"

She paused and looked down at the washcloth. Pushing a strand of hair from her eyes she said, "If your sister had lived she would be thirteen years old now."

My parents' first child, a girl, was stillborn. The umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck, and she asphyxiated inside my mother's birth canal. Technology to detect such complications hadn't been invented yet. Two years later my brother was born.

My mother swished the washcloth around on her arms and her neck. "You and your brother came into this world because daddy and I had sexual intercourse. That's when your father inserts his penis in my vagina, and his sperm swims up to my ovum and fertilizes it, and a baby is started."

This sounded like a science experiment. I pictured my mother and father lying on their stomachs, each in their own twin bed covered in floral coverlets, their faces buried

in pillows, with their crotches connected by plumbing pipes running at right angles between their beds. My father would inject fluid into his end, and it would flow toward my mother, and at some point a child would result. My mother could see that I was bored with her explanation.

"I wanted us to take a bath together," she said, "Because I wanted you to see my breast and not be afraid. I'm much better now with the surgery, and everything will be back to normal soon, I promise."

In her practical, unassuming way she soaped me up, rinsed me off, and we exited the bath together. As she toweled herself off I watched rivulets of water run down her naked body. This was my first memory of sex—furtive, secretive, and comforting. After the bath with my mother, I began noticing women's underwear ads in the newspaper. At the breakfast table my dad read the Des Moines Register where Younkers Department Store ran display ads for Maidenform, Caprice, Perma-Lift, and more. I began clipping them out and storing them inside my toy UPS tractor-trailer rig—a secret and growing collection of pictures of partially clad women dressed in silken bras, girdles, and panties. I doted on photos of beauty queens. I was especially fond of Miss Wisconsin. I clipped out a newspaper photo that featured her standing on a beach in black pumps and a pleated white swim suit, her hands resting on her wide hips. Her dark wavy hair and her soft breasts reminded me of my mother.

Where the Tall Corn Grows

Following my mother's mastectomy, our house was filled with a happier mood. My

dad began coming home from work earlier, spring weather turned to summer, and when daylight savings time came we adjusted our clocks to the sun and extended an hour of daylight into the evening, allowing us more time to play hide and seek and lie on the grass and watch the clouds skid across the flat blue Midwestern sky.

"Let's get supper, boys," my father said, pulling on his jacket.

The sun had just set beyond the fertile terrain of south-central Iowa with its millions of acres of corn fields extending from Wapello County in the southeast to the state capital of Des Moines where we lived.

"Are we going shopping?" I asked, excited to leave the house with my brother and my dad.

"We're going to pick some corn, son. It's harvest season."

We piled into our four-door Packard sedan and headed south over the Racoon River. It was a warm August night, and by the time my dad pulled over to the side of state highway 28 it was dark. The vegetable stands where farmers' families sold corn by the roadside were closed. Steam whistles from the Chicago & Northwestern Railway filled the night. The air was thick with the smell of loamy black soil. The sky was limitless.

"Shouldn't we go to the store and buy our corn, dad?"

He handed paper bags to me and my brother, and he headed off into the endless rows of corn. Coming from the south side of Chicago, to my dad the corn fields of Iowa at night were free for the picking.

"How do you know this isn't feed corn for the cows, dad?" said my brother.

"Taste it." A few rows in from the road my dad reached up and broke off an ear of

corn, pulled aside the husk, and bit into it. “M-m-m. This is the stuff,” he said, chewing a mouthful of raw corn.

“Mom’s got to cook it first,” I said.

My dad began tearing ears of corn from the stalks and dropping them into his bag.

“Aren’t the farmers going to get mad?” I said.

“They won’t know. Look at all this.”

In a sweeping gesture he waved his hand at the fields surrounding us. I had never seen my dad cross over from the right side of the law where he existed comfortably as a publishing executive, to a nighttime thief, encouraging his sons to join him in his delinquency. I was nervous about us being caught. I pictured me, my brother, and my broad-shouldered Jewish dad sitting in the back of an Iowa State Police car with two fair-haired, corn-fed cops writing us up as criminals -- corn thieves, the lowest kind of human in the state of Iowa. Each of us kept tearing ears of illicit corn from the stalks until our bags were full. My dad walked us back to the car. When we were on our way home I felt safer. I was relieved that we hadn’t been caught stealing.

“Where did you get all this corn,” my mother asked as we set our bags on the kitchen table.

“Dad let us steal it,” I said. I felt like a small-time robber baron.

“Shut up, *Yllib*.” My brother said my name backwards when he was mad at me.

My mother clucked her tongue at my father. “Big city boy turns bad. Steals corn. Sons taken to Juvenile Hall.”

“Oh, come on, it was fun, wasn’t it boys?” he said.

My mother shucked eight ears of the fresh sweet corn and dropped them into a deep pot of boiling water. She set the table with yellow plastic corncob holders and put out a bowl of tunafish salad she'd made with mayonnaise, lemon, and chunks of celery. Our kitchen was a warm sunshine yellow; an old-fashioned milk glass light fixture hung from the ceiling. My father walked over to my mother and kissed her on the neck. She reached around and touched his cheek. My brother and I watched as they held each other. I wanted this moment to go on and on and never end. I wanted my mom to be healthy, my dad to be happy, and the two of them to still be in love.

One Saturday morning after I finished breakfast, I sat and watched my parents talk together. My father's face was clouded with concern. At work he supervised writers, photographers, home economists, test-kitchen chefs, and marketing executives. With beguiling four-color photo spreads of happy moms and dads and pink-cheeked toddlers, *Better Homes & Gardens Magazine* ballyhooed the new post-war consumerism. Some of his employees were feuding, and he didn't know how to stop it. My mother had been a social worker, and when interpersonal issues at the magazine came up, my dad turned to her for advice. She rested her chin in her hand, listened to his complaint, and dispensed advice. I hadn't noticed before, how much he relied on her.

On Saturday afternoons my dad took me swimming at the Des Moines Municipal Pool in Water Works Park. His friend Morrie Noun brought his daughter Susie who was three years older than I. She wore a polka-dot tank suit. I asked her if she had breasts. She said she just had baby fat. I swam after her and tried to pinch her, but she was a strong swimmer, and she easily avoided my touch.

“Daddy, Billy’s trying to pinch my body.”

My dad grabbed me, lifted me up out of the water, and tossed me toward the deep end of the pool. Flying through the air like that felt better than riding the tilt-a-whirl at the Des Moines County Fair.

“Again, dad, do it again,” and I swam toward my father.

Over and over, my face brushing against his wide, hairy chest, hearing his laugh as he lifted me up and slung me skyward, I splashed down into the deep water and swam back to him for more. I was five-and-a-half. I must have weighed more than fifty pounds, but to my dad I was a laughing pool toy, and he was a circus strong man. After our swim we drove to Morrie’s house which had a lush green lawn and a swimming pool with a white marble deck.

“How come we didn’t we swim here?” I asked.

Morrie served us glasses of lemonade. “Louise doesn’t like the noise.” He nodded up at the second story window where his wife, a thin middle-aged woman in glasses, stared down at us.

“And I don’t like the messes little boys make,” said Susie, sipping her lemonade loudly through a straw. “I’m going to play with my dolls.”

On the sun porch was a large wooden dollhouse on a card table. I had never seen anything like it. It was like Disneyland Main Street USA without the entrance fee, where a dozen rubber bendy dolls appeared to rule their own destiny. I wanted a set-up like this where I had control of things, where I could drown out anyone else’s agenda, where I would hold sway.

"How many dolls do you have in there," I said, reaching for one of the man bendy dolls.

"Stop it. Don't touch my dolls. *Daddy*, he's touching my dolls."

Morrie and my dad wandered in. "You've got a bunch of dolls," said Morrie. "Let Billy have one."

"He can't *have* one. He can *play* with one if he wants."

She stood in front of her dollhouse like a guard dog in front of its doghouse. I reached for the man doll. He had a bright yellow long-sleeved shirt, a red necktie, and stiff brown plastic hair. I bent him in half and watched him unfold like an earthworm. He had a look of mild surprise on his face.

Susie grabbed the man doll away from me. "You're going to break him."

I walked back out to the pool. She followed me, tapped me on the shoulder, and handed me the man doll. "Here. But you give him back," she said.

My swimming suit had a pocket in the back. When Susie walked into the house I put the man doll in my pocket. Later that day I was in my bedroom playing with him, trying to fit him through the window of my UPS truck when my mother walked in.

"Did you take Susie's doll?"

"No."

She pointed at the man doll wedged halfway into my truck. "What's that?"

"She's got a hundred of these, mom. Can't I just have this one?"

"It's Susie's, honey. Her mother called. Susie knows you took it. She keeps a very close watch on her dolls. You have to bring it back to her next Saturday when you go

swimming together."

Cramming the man doll through the UPS truck window had ripped his shirt. I took a bottle of Elmer's Glue from my brother's room and put a drop on the man doll's shirt and pressed it hard to his belly. It looked like he had spilled yogurt on himself.

Ruby

Just before Labor Day my parents drove me and my brother Pete in our Packard sedan to Guillick's Resort in Spider Lake, Wisconsin, for a week's family vacation. Guillick's was a friendly place with log cabins, a rickety old wooden dock, canoes, and rowboats. The food was good. Mrs. Gustafson was the cook. She was a talkative, divorced lady with a daughter named Ruby.

The day I met Ruby, she took me for a walk up a narrow dirt trail into the woods. I was five and a half. Ruby was seven. Just out of sight of the resort she turned to me.

"Do you ever play naked?" she asked. Without waiting for an answer she pulled down her pants. I had seen my mother naked, but this was different.

"Take your pants off," she said. "Let's smell butts. I'll smell yours, you smell mine."

I leaned my face in close to her, not sure if I should try to kiss her. She had an alluring smell, like musty snack food and perfume and sweets. I lowered my pants.

Pointing to my small erect penis, she said, "If you put that in me, I'll have a baby."

I was somewhat leery of getting trapped inside her body. This was new and mystifying territory. After sniffing each other, Ruby bent down and took my penis into her mouth. It was an immensely pleasurable sensation. Then we heard voices up the trail.

We pulled our clothes back on and ran down to the resort.

I was enraptured. I didn't tell my brother or my parents about my exploits with Ruby. I kept it to myself. The next day she and I met up at the waterfront wearing our swimming suits. I grabbed her hand and we ran down the dock together and plunged into the cool gray water of Spider Lake. When our feet touched the bottom, Ruby and I pulled our swimsuits down and urinated in the lake. We watched the yellow plume rise, and I pulled her toward me and kissed her hard on the lips.

The next morning we met outside the dining hall. "I don't think anyone's in my cabin right now," I said.

We walked down the concrete sidewalk shaded by lilacs and into the bedroom I shared with my eleven-year-old brother Peter. Without speaking Ruby and I took off our clothes. She lay on my bed, and I lay on top of her.

The next thing I knew, my brother's face loomed over us, bellowing like a wounded bull moose, *"What are you doing? I'm telling mom!"* And he ran from the room.

Ruby dressed quickly and left. All day I wandered around like a condemned man. I didn't even feel like looking for Ruby. The following morning when I awoke, my mother sat on the edge of my bed. My brother had obviously tattled on me.

She ran her fingers through my hair. "I know you and Ruby are very close friends," she said, "And that's okay. But you have other friends here at the resort, and until we go home I'd like you to play with the other kids."

I was surprised by her calm, unfazed manner. She wasn't angry with me. I wasn't going to be punished, except for having Ruby banned from my social calendar. For the

next few days I played innocent games with the other children. I didn't see Ruby again. But it wasn't the last time I would hear her name.

My TV

When we arrived home from Guillick's, my father, hoping to lighten the mood in our house after my mother's mastectomy, bought us our first television set. In the living room he uncrated the large ungainly device. Its mahogany doors opened to reveal a dark, pea-green screen shaped like a porthole on a ship. My father pointed to the gold-lettered volume control.

"Son, this is *On*, this is *Off*. Don't stand too close and watch too long or your eyes will pop right out of your head."

He patted me on the shoulder and left me alone with the massive wooden appliance which now dominated our living room. I reached for the volume control knob and twisted it clockwise. A soft hidden click came from somewhere inside. Nothing happened. The set appeared lifeless, inert. Then a crackling, hissing sound like frying bacon came from the gold speaker cloth beneath the screen. And on the screen an image faded up: an elderly man in railroad overalls, a polka dot bandanna, and an engineer's cap. He spoke in a folksy, baritone voice, *I'm Boxcar Bob and I'll be right back with more cartoons, puppets, and other fun stuff for you, after this message.* Then came a throaty, disembodied voice: *This commercial message will be sixty seconds long.* A 1953 Oldsmobile 88 drove across the screen carrying a happy family of four waving through the car window. I was transfixed. The concept of sixty seconds resonated inside my

head—*sixty seconds is a minute.* I could now measure portions of time as defined by the length of an Oldsmobile commercial.

As soon as the ad finished I ran into the kitchen and shouted at my mother, "Mom, I know what a minute is. Sixty seconds."

My mother appeared healthier and less preoccupied than she had in months. When she started undergoing cancer treatment, things in our family had become murky and unclear. The familiar, warm mood of clarity and reliability in our house was replaced by furtive whispers, incessant hushed talk of doctors visits, my brother Pete's erratic moods, and a parade of babysitters. But as the autumn of 1952 faded to winter my parents declared that my mother's condition was improving, that her breast cancer was finally in remission. The mood in the house lightened. I didn't want to think about her illness any more. I wanted to play with my friends, run through the woods behind our house, watch television, and eat M&M's, *They melt in your mouth, not in your hand.*

"That's right, honey, there are sixty seconds in a minute," she said. "How did you learn that?"

"The man on TV said it."

"Boxcar Bob?"

"No. He was invisible."

"Oh," she said, "The announcer."

The announcer. This mysterious unseen figure spoke with a deep and commanding voice. Calm, dignified, he appeared to possess important messages sent forth from a vast storehouse of information and imagery. I wanted to be inside that carefully timed dream

world of easy-talking, good-looking spokespersons selling toasters, blenders, radios, hair oil, cake mix, refrigerators—all the things that made for a happy home. I was mesmerized. Though my parents didn't seem to notice, the hold they had on me, on my manners, my thoughts, my very development as a human being, they had unwittingly turned over to an RCA Victor 17-inch Model 7-T122 television set.

One afternoon the Des Moines League of Women Voters came for tea. My mother slipped a jacket on me, zipped it up, and asked me to play outside. She ushered me out onto the back stoop and shut the storm door behind me. The delicate clanking of teacups and the smell of cigarette smoke came from the window as she and her friends chatted around the dining room table. I stood on our back steps and watched the elm trees sway in the wind. In my jacket pocket I carried an empty blue plastic box that my dad had given me from his Gillette shaving kit. It had a metal edge that pointed upwards like an antenna; it looked like a miniature radio, and an amalgam of soundtracks faded up inside my head: *I've Got a Secret presented by Winston…I'm going to tell you something mister, and I want you to remember it. As a con man you're a flop…As we say here in the west, 'Reach, partner, reach for Nabisco'…On any given day something can happen that turns good men bad. That's when I'm called in. I'm a lawman…*The soundtrack switched off, and my own words began to form. I raised the blue box to my lips and aimed my voice toward the sky: *This is an important announcement. I'm talking to you now. Do you hear me? I repeat, do you hear me*? *I think you do*. By means of a tiny device known to no one but me, I had found the power to transmit my thoughts to the world. Nothing could quiet me – no mercurial moods, no humdrum doctors' visits. I was in control.

Points of Style

It was Saturday evening. Meredith Publishing was holding an awards dinner, and my mother and father were getting dressed up to go. My father asked me to come upstairs. I walked into my parents' bedroom with its Hawaiian Tiki wallpaper and perfectly made twin beds with sheets stretched tight enough that you could bounce a quarter on them, a holdover from my dad's Navy days.

"Son. In here."

The smell of fresh Shinola shoe polish came from my dad's closet. He stood next to his rack of size 46-medium three-piece suits, hands on his ample hips, like Al Capone posing for a wedding photo. He pointed at his shoes and looked at me proudly, head cocked back. He wore tight black wing-tip brogues with shiny black laces and a navy blue worsted-wool suit which draped across his sturdy pot-bellied frame like velvet on a rock.

He did a slow twirl. "Lookin' sharp, people," he said, "Look out now, lookin' sharp." He didn't snap his fingers or say *ta-da.* He didn't have to. He palmed a bottle of Bay Rum cologne, sprinkled a few drops on his hand, and slapped his tan shaved cheek making the room smell like big-time downtown style.

My mother appeared in the doorway. "You look gorgeous, sweetheart," my dad said, and he kissed her hand. She wore a lustrous long-sleeved black taffeta gown. The look on her face was a bit tentative, maybe a little embarrassed, as though she wasn't sure she looked quite right. This may have been the first time she had put on a fancy dress since

undergoing her mastectomy. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen my mother and father dressed up and getting ready to go out on a date. She looked like a model. She was thin, but I had never seen her look so elegant. They stood side by side, his hand on her waist, almost like they were posing for me, as if to say, everything is okay, your mom and dad are still in love, and life will be as it always was.

"You look so beautiful," I said, "So fancy."

My dad looked very proud. My mother and father fit together. I fell asleep before they came home from their event. As I drifted off I cherished the image of the two of them dressed up, happy with each other.

My mother continued with her doctors' visits. And soon it was my turn.

"It's time for your booster shots," she said.

"I don't want a shot."

"It's easy, believe me. I've had a lot of them lately."

She drove me to a pediatrician I hadn't seen before, a middle-aged man in a starched white coat and big shoes. My mother accompanied me into the exam room. The doctor greeted her, but he said nothing to me. He held a hypodermic syringe up to the light, tapped it with his finger, and squirted out a drop of liquid.

"Okay son, let's get to it." And he walked toward me.

I had accompanied my mother on lots of medical appointments, and I was tired of doctors' offices, plus I hated shots. I walked to the other side of the exam table to get away from him, but my mother caught my arm. "Come on, honey, be a big boy."

"I don't need a shot. I'm not sick."

The doctor pointed the syringe at my arm. "Hold him steady, please."

I had enough, and I broke down crying and refused to submit. The doctor stepped back. "What are you crying about?"

"I don't want a shot."

"I just gave you the shot. You didn't even feel it."

I looked into his eyes. They were close together under a bald and sweating brow. He was lying. There was a cynical, overtaxed look on his face.

"You didn't feel it, did you? So what's all the screaming about?" he said.

For a moment I wondered at the truth of what he was saying, just like I wondered about all the diagnoses and prognoses my mother had been given over the months. I knew he was lying. I thought it was strange that a doctor should try and deceive me with a story so patently absurd. He put away the syringe, and my mother and I left his office.

"Why did he say that, mom? He didn't give me a shot."

"I don't know sweetheart. But you didn't need to scream so much. You've had shots before."

"I hate doctors. I'm sick of doctors. Let's not go to any more doctors for a while," I said.

Janet

My mother needed a place to put me while she continued treatment, so she enrolled me at Sunnydale Nursery School. Every morning I took the long walk up a set of wobbly

pine steps to a room like a warehouse. Sunnydale had hired a new teacher who was brittle, humorless, and mean. I got along okay in nursery school maybe because my mom read to me, and my brother had taught me how to count. But the Sunnydale teacher scolded my and made me feel guilty for making messes. I thought that was my job, at least that's what my mom said. After a week of teary-eyed rides home with me begging, *Don't make me go back there,* she relented and freed me from Sunnydale. I was old enough for Kindergarten, so I transferred to Hanawalt Elementary School, a quick walk from our house. Compared to the living hell that reigned at Sunnydale, Hanawalt was a relief. I liked my teachers, there were lots of art supplies and a big red jungle-gym. Every day my brother Pete took me to Hanawalt on his maroon and white balloon-tire Schwinn. I felt proud as we coasted onto the school lot, my brother steering one-handed, waving to his fifth-grade friends as we drifted to a stop at the bike rack, and I dismounted, the envy of my fellow Kindergartners.

It was there that I met Janet Neff. Janet had auburn hair, smooth pink skin, and a relaxed, friendly way about her. She lived on my block in a two-story wood-frame house with a wide grassy yard and a garden shed tucked behind a stand of lilac bushes that bloomed purplish-blue and smelled like Janet. One Saturday morning we met in her yard. We could hear the sound of her father's power lawn mower as he mowed the grass on the other side of their house. I took Janet's hand and we went inside the garden shed. I shut the door. The shed had a dirt floor and sacks of fertilizer stacked up along the walls. The sacks were in the shape of pillows, so I dragged a few into the center of the room and lay down on top of them.

“What are you doing,” she asked.

“It feels like a bed, it’s comfy.”

“It’s cow manure.”

I stood up and kissed her on the cheek. She kissed me back. I felt my penis stir inside my corduroys. Unlike Ruby at Guillick’s Resort who was older, Janet was my age and just my height. I thought of all I had learned from Ruby. I remembered the warmth of her skin, her smell, and her acceptance of me. I didn’t exactly know how to do it, but I wanted to get closer to Janet.

“Let’s take our pants off,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because it’ll be fun.” I pulled down my pants. She stared, dumbstruck. I was showing myself to the girl I now loved. We took off our shoes, socks, and our underpants and stood naked before each other.

“Janet?” said a deep voice outside the shed.

The sound of the lawn mower had stopped. We scrambled to our feet and pulled our clothes back on. I pushed on the door. It wouldn’t open. It was locked from the outside.

“Janet?” said the voice again.

“We’re in here, daddy,” she called.

The door opened and the shed flooded with light.

“What are you doing, Janet?”

I stepped forward. “Mr. Neff, we were just playing.”

“Playing what? Janet, come with me. Young man, you go home.”

Janet's father led her away. I stood on the lawn, my eyes still adjusting to the afternoon sunlight. I walked home. My mother met me at the door. She sighed and frowned at me. I walked into the kitchen, and my dad arched his eyebrow.

"Hello, son."

My mother said, "Janet's parents are very angry. They think the two of you were playing naked together."

"No we weren't."

"Apparently she had her underpants on backward and she smelled like cow manure. Like you do. I want you to know that your dad and I are not angry with you, but sex can sometimes cause strong reactions in grownups."

"Do I still get to play with Janet?"

"According to her father on the phone just now, no."

I felt like I was falling into a black hole. I had destroyed Janet's life. But like with Ruby at Gullick's Resort, my mother showed me mercy. I was relieved.

"Why can't I play with Janet?"

"Billy, you're smart enough to understand these things," she said.

You're smart enough to understand was becoming a recurrent theme in my house. It was implicit in my mother's message to me that the ability to get through crises, to move past the opaque moodiness in our house and the indeterminate stretches of time inhabited by her illness, was an intellectual strength. If I just *understood*, things would go better for me.

Minnesota

That fall my dad got a new job.

"They waved a lot of money in my face," he said. "I got job offers in New York City, but I'm not going to raise you boys in that hell-hole. So we're moving to Minneapolis."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Up north. They have lakes and hockey teams and cabins in the woods. You'll love it, believe me."

My mother wasn't as excited as my father was about the move north for his new job as Executive Vice-President and Creative Director at Campbell-Mithun Advertising. My parents had left Chicago together after college and come to Des Moines where my dad climbed the ladder at *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine,* and my mother had made friends who had helped her through her first struggles with cancer, and she was reluctant to leave them. My brother and I finished the fall term at Hanawalt Elementary, and right before Christmas, 1952, moving men packed up our belongings, and we drove north. I carried with me a 3x5 black and white photograph of the Hanawalt Kindergarten class. Janet Neff stands next to me, we are wearing our snowsuits, holding hands, rosy-cheeked, and in love.

When we arrived in Minnesota the roads were coated with frozen slush. Snowdrifts covered the cars. On our way into the city I counted the radio and TV transmission towers that dotted the city's hillsides. Minneapolis was a bowl surrounded by gentle highlands. Clogged with ice, the wide, brown Mississippi River flowed through downtown. The bulk of the population lived within this curvature of the land, avoiding

the tornadoes that roared through the outlying prairie.

We spent Christmas in a rented three-bedroom house on busy 50th Street and Harriet Avenue two blocks from my new school. The first day of winter term I walked to Margaret Fuller Elementary in waist-high snow. The kindergartners were friendly enough, but they spoke with an accent and had names like Nielson, Olson, and Bjornson. After lunch in preparation for nap time, kindergartners went to their cubbies and pulled out cloth bath mats and spread them out on the classroom floor. I didn't have a bath mat, but my teacher told me to lie down on the floor anyway and to bring a mat the next day like the other kids. I was surprised at how many of them were able to drop off to sleep. I lay down and stared at the ceiling. I began rolling my head back and forth, muttering lyrics to *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*.

The teacher said, "Excuse me, what are you doing?"

"I'm rolling my head."

"I can see that," she said.

"I do it at home at night."

"And that's okay with your mother?"

"It's how I get to sleep."

When I got home that afternoon I explained the nap and bath mat situation to my mother.

"Why on earth do they want you to bring a bath mat?"

"So we don't have to sleep on the floor."

My mother unearthed an extra bath mat, and gradually I melded into the winter term

of Kindergarten at Margaret Fuller Elementary. I missed Janet Neff and my other friends in Des Moines. Minnesota was a forbidding place of frozen lakes, barren Indian reservations, and mythical creatures like Paul Bunyon and Babe the Blue Ox.

My main diversion from the loneliness of leaving Iowa was watching television. A new puppet show called *Fearless Fosdick* aired on Sunday afternoons on NBC-TV. *Fearless Fosdick* was a dark and moody police procedural featuring marionettes. Fearless lived in a run-down rooming house across the hall from his girlfriend Eunice Pimpleton and upstairs from their landlady Mrs. Flintnose. In his line of work Fearless encountered bad guys who wore robbers' masks and battered fedoras—shifty characters who lurked outside Fearless' apartment. In the first episode he emerged wearing his police badge and derby hat, and the bad guys pulled out their pistols and opened fire at Fearless. He staggered back, tore open his suit coat, the camera dollied in, and Fearless' chest was riddled with smoking bullet holes like a piece of Swiss cheese on fire. I'd seen cowboy gunfights on TV and a few old gangster movies with my brother, but I had never seen a close-up of bullet holes. Fearless looked down at his ventilated chest, leaned against the door frame, and closed his suit coat. His girlfriend Eunice Pimpleton came screaming into the hallway, *Oh, Fearless, you've been shot!* Mrs. Flintnose stood with her arms crossed, scowling at the stage blood on the carpet. Fearless pointed at the fleeing assailants, *Don't worry, Eunice, I'm going after the bad guys, and they'll be brought to justice.* A dramatic music sting played and a sonorous voice announced, *Tune in next week for another exciting episode of Fearless Fosdick.* Unscathed by the fusillade of bullets, Fearless Fosdick and Eunice Pimpleton walked hand-in-hand down their dark

hallway in a hurky-jerky puppet way, marionette strings glinting in the fading TV lights. Fearless was still alive. The Sunday before Christmas I sat down to watch again, but *Fearless* wasn't on. Instead an inane children's show host made silly faces, lit toys on fire, and played Max Fleisher cartoons. I was devastated.

"Dad, where's Fearless? *Fearless Fosdick* is supposed to be on."

"Relax son. We'll look at the TV listings." My father grabbed the Minneapolis Tribune. He wrinkled his brow and ran his finger down the page, muttering program titles under his breath.

"I'm sorry, kid, it looks like the show's not scheduled. They might have cancelled it. Probably took it off the air." He tossed the newspaper on the coffee table.

My heart shrank inside my chest. "But it was the best thing on TV," I said.

"Maybe so, son." He pulled his chair closer to me. "Look, there is no accounting for quality in television."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you and I are for sale. We're TV viewers, and if the network can't sell enough of us to the sponsor, they cancel the show. You might never see *Fearless Fosdick* again." My dad lit a cigar butt he was carrying in his bathrobe pocket.

The news that *Fearless Fosdick* had left the air was paralyzing to me. Watching television was my lifeline. It helped me forget Janet and Ruby and Des Moines and my mother's health. In a single breath my father had unmasked the inner workings of television as a heartless mercenary enterprise. I trusted my dad. He was an advertising professional. I'd seen him in action in the Pillsbury test kitchens on *Bring Your Child to*

Work Day, sampling new cake mixes and powdered mashed potatoes. I watched his photo shoots of fashion models posing for Donaldson Department Store ads. I felt comfortable in my dad's workplace – a tantalizing world of artists, models, cameramen, actors, announcers, and pitchmen. But my favorite TV show, *Fearless Fosdick,* had gone away. It felt like the well I drank from had suddenly dried up.

Every Saturday morning while my parents slept I got up early and turned on the TV set, and before the programs began I watched the test pattern—a hypnotic black and white image on the screen resembling an electronic bulls eye, with *RCA Television System* in the lower right and the towering image of a sky-high TV antenna. A lush studio orchestra played soothing instrumentals. And after staring at the screen for an endless stretch of time, the insipid theme music of *Captain Kangaroo* faded up -- *Puffin Billy* by the Melodi Light Orchestra. Captain Kangaroo wore a gray-haired pageboy wig and a railroad conductor's uniform. He peeked through a tiny door-within-a-door and began strolling aimlessly through his childlike world. He carried a feather duster and danced as only a middle-aged man on a children's show can. Relief finally came in the form of *Mighty Mouse* cartoons, followed by action-packed episodes of *Spin and Marty*, then the hyper-active dancing show host *Pinky Lee,* and finally *Froggy the Gremlin*, a rubber squeeze toy whose sole task was to befuddle his sidekick, the live-action idiot-savant Andy Devine.

Having left her doctors and caregivers back in Des Moines, my mother had enlisted a new medical team in Minneapolis, and on school days she was often at an appointment. So after Kindergarten I spent afternoons at my next door neighbor Kirk Dahl's house

playing with his electric train set. When we got tired of his train circling the ping pong table we lost ourselves in the endless parade of childlike figures on TV. One afternoon we put our coats and mittens on and went outside. A neighborhood dog ran up onto Kirk's back porch. It had a collar on and it wagged its tail. I bent down to see if the dog would lick my face, but it bit me and ran away. Blood dripped from my cheek onto the snow.

Mrs. Dahl ran out onto the porch. "Where is your mother? Is she at home?"

She dabbed my face with a paper towel, cleaned my wound with Mercurochrome, and applied a bandage. I ran next door and knocked on our back door. There was no answer.

"Your mom knows you're already out of school and at our house, doesn't she?"

"I don't know, she's not there," I said. I tried to stop crying, but my chest kept heaving.

My mother appeared around the corner of our house trudging through the snow in her rubber galoshes. She saw the bandage on my face and the blood in the snow.

"I'm so sorry. I was at the doctor's. Are you all right, sweetheart?"

She thanked Mrs. Dahl and took me back to our house. She seemed stricken with guilt and kept apologizing to me.

"It's okay, mom. The dog didn't bite my nose off or anything."

I learned the next day that the dog belonged to a neighbor. They had the dog tested for rabies. The test turned out negative, but they had him put down because he bit me. I felt sorry for the dog.

The A-Bomb

Three months after we moved to Minneapolis, the U.S. Department of Defense aired on network television *Operation Upshot-Knothole*, a nuclear bomb test held at the Atomic Proving Grounds at Yucca Flat, Nevada. It was the first time actual houses were built, furnished, and filled with families of mannequins to illustrate to the public what would happen if the Russians dropped a nuclear bomb on an American city. On a cold winter morning, March 15, 1953, my father woke us early, and we gathered around the television set in the living room. Remote cameras enclosed in two-inch lead shields as a protection against radiation had been placed inside the living room, kitchen, and bedrooms of House Number 1. A family of mannequins—a mother, father, a little boy, and a little girl—sat around the breakfast table lit by carbon electric spotlights placed outside the house. The live telecast showed the mannequin family from different angles, shadows changing on their faces as they switched from camera to camera. A few miles away a second house had been built, House Number 2, which held a second group of mannequins seated in the living room and dining room like they were attending a dinner party. More mannequins were tucked into bed upstairs. Through the window a three hundred foot high steel tower stood a mile and a half away, a nuclear bomb affixed on top. It would be detonated at exactly seven AM Central Time.

Off-camera TV commentators described the mannequins in the houses as though they were real families. They speculated on the effects of the impending bomb blast. Then the countdown began. A sonorous voice counted slowly from ten to zero, after which there was a brief silence followed by a white-out. The time from the first to the last picture of

the blast was 2.3 seconds. The main source of light on the TV screen was from the bomb itself. House Number 1 was hit by the blast. The radiating energy set it on fire and the house disintegrated in the blast wave. The family of mannequins was incinerated. House Number 2 at a greater distance from the blast revealed mannequins strewn about or missing. Windows were broken. The house was partially scorched.

"Why did they do that? Why did they kill the mannequins?" I asked.

"Mannequins can't die, stupid. They're mannequins," said my brother.

I pointed to the television set. "They look dead."

That day at Margaret Fuller Elementary School I participated in my first duck and cover nuclear bomb drill. The teacher wheeled in a movie projector and showed a film instructing us to hide under our desks. Then at the direction of the Principal, with an air raid siren blaring on the roof of the school, we crouched under our desks, held our knees to our chests, and closed our eyes as our kindergarten teacher announced, "If a Russian fighter plane flies over our school and drops a bomb, you must duck and cover, duck and cover." Later at recess we scanned the skies and wondered which of the airplanes overhead might be a Russian fighter with a bomb on board.

That afternoon when my father got home from work I followed him upstairs, and while he changed out of his business suit I said, "Dad, we need to build a fall-out shelter in our back yard to hide from the bombs."

He stared at me. "Where did you hear about bomb shelters."

"They showed us a movie at school. The Russians are going to bomb us."

"The Russians aren't going to bomb us. My God, what are they telling you in

school?"

"They taught us how to hide under our desks when the bombs come," I said.

That spring robins built a nest right outside our kitchen window. It was so close, it nearly touched the glass. Soon two light-blue robins' eggs appeared in the nest. In the ensuing days the mother and father robin flitted back and forth, in and out of sight, flying off to seek food, adding new twigs to the nest.

One morning my brother ran to the window and pounded on the glass, shouting, "Go away, go away."

A shiny black crow sat perched on the edge of the nest. It had cracked open the two robin's eggs with its beak and had eaten the contents.

"He killed the baby robins," I said, and I burst out crying.

I had waited weeks for the tiny robins eggs to hatch. Now they never would. The parents didn't return to the nest. My father tried to explain to me about predators and prey and the cycle of life. None of it made any sense.

To cheer me up my brother gave me his fifth grade science project he had just completed at school, a crystal radio set. It consisted of an empty toilet paper roll wrapped in copper wire connected to a stainless steel needle with a quartz crystal glued to a piece of pine with headphones attached. I was skeptical.

"It's a crystal radio set, dimwit." My brother put the headphones over my ears and scratched the tiny crystal with the needle.

I heard nothing but static. Then came the voice of an announcer, *The High-Life Hit*

Parade Music Hour is brought to you by Camel Cigarettes. I'd walk a mile for a Camel, followed by music. That night I took my brother's crystal radio to bed with me and listened for hours: Hillbilly music on WLAC Nashville, *News and Blues* on WBBR New York. It wasn't like watching TV. Listening to radio, the pictures were in my head -- music and voices and advertisements for hair creams and cars and candy. I listened to *Boss Jock WCCO* with its clear-channel signal featuring the lazy baritone voice of *Steve Cannon and The Cannon Mess* chatting with listeners who phoned in from all over the upper Midwest to request a song: *That Doggie In The* Window by Patty Page, *Is That All There Is* by Peggy Lee, *All I Have To Do Is Dream* by The Everly Brothers. At night with the sun on the other side of the earth, invisible AM radio signals bounced higher and farther than during the daytime. I hid under my cowboy-themed bedspread and guided the needle across the quartz crystal on my brother's radio set, and I remembered the tiny empty blue box my father had given me from his Gillette shaving kit and the afternoon in Des Moines when I put it to my lips and spoke to the sky, escaping to an invisible world of voices and songs and everything in the world for sale.

On Tuesday nights at nine o'clock my family watched *I Love Lucy* on CBS-TV. When Ricky Ricardo got a screen test for the lead in the Hollywood movie *Don Juan*, he and Lucy and Fred and Ethel packed up and drove from Manhattan to Los Angeles and checked into the Beverly Palms Hotel. And a new character came on the show, Bobby the Bellboy. *Knock-knock, Mrs. Ricardo. It's Bobby. Say, I've got that pretty Kelly-green ballroom gown of yours all nice and dry-cleaned for you. Oh, and here is another dozen long-stemmed red roses from Ricky. Wonder what he's feeling guilty about today,*

hmmm?"

"Hey, that's your Uncle Bobby," my dad said.

"Uncle Bobby?"

"Yes, Bobby the Bellboy. You remember, your Aunt Eleanor married an actor. That's him."

"Uncle Bobby is on *I Love Lucy*? I said. "We should go to Hollywood and have a vacation with him and meet Ricky and Lucy"

"We're not going to Hollywood for a vacation with your Uncle Bobby," said my mother.

"But, mom, Bobby's a TV star."

"That's not going to last. It never does. Besides your uncle is a little bit too *Hollywood* for us," she said.

"Oh, come on, Dolly," my dad said. "I like the guy. I had drinks with him a couple of times. He was funny."

I had close relationships with all my other aunts and uncles, but it seemed that my Uncle Bobby was off-limits.

"Actors have difficult lives, son," said my dad. "Your Uncle Bobby probably can't even get car insurance because acting is in the same job category as circus clowns and sideshow performers. They didn't even start burying actors in proper cemeteries until the twentieth century."

"Eleanor should have married a doctor," my mother said.

But instead her older sister had married Bobby the Bellboy. The tone of voice my

mother used when referring to her sister Eleanor indicated that there probably wasn't a lot of love lost between the two of them—my mother, the baby of the family, and my Aunt Eleanor, the jealous middle child. I had met Eleanor only once when she passed through Des Moines on the train and gave me and my brother eight-by-ten glossy photos of Bobby on *The Danny Thomas Radio Hour.* In the photograph Bobby is holding a radio script in front of a big silver RCA microphone, his curly hair slicked back, the smirk of stardom on his face. I put my picture of Bobby inside my toy UPS truck along with my collection of underwear models and beauty queens. After *I Love Lucy* went off the air I saw Bobby on the occasional episode of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. I always thought we'd get an invitation from him to come out to Hollywood and visit. But we never did. And eventually Bobby stopped showing up on TV and dropped off our radar. But Bobby was still family, if only through the television set.

My Brother

My mother began a series of new cancer treatments. A year earlier her mastectomy had appeared to put her cancer into remission. But it had returned and had moved into her lymph nodes. The mood in our house fell into a muted, quiet worry. My father worked long hours at the ad agency. My mother continued to seek help from doctors and spent time with friends. And once again my brother Pete seemed cut adrift and alone.

At age six the one advantage I had over my twelve-year-old brother was my growth rate; I was getting bigger faster than he was. My legs were growing, my voice was becoming scratchy and loud. Stuck in mid-puberty my brother's growth hormones were

leveling off a bit. He was already tall and stout. But I was getting wilier and more agile. Whenever I found my brother in a compromising position – sitting on the toilet, taking a shower, masturbating – I would strike: *Hey, zitface. Where do your pimples come from? Your face is a butt.* I had learned to talk like that from him and his twelve-year-old friends. The first time my brother cursed at me, he called me an *asshole*. And I visualized it.

"A hole in an ass?" I said incredulously.

I pictured a good-sized maple donut with crinkly soft folds, like the entrance to a dark fleshy temple of curse-words, shit, and sex. When my brother shouted the names of body parts and excretory functions at me, I was ecstatic. Whether he intended to or not, he was teaching me to revel in language, to sling dirty words around as if they were weaponry. I was old enough to have already quit saying *goodbye* to my bowel movements when I flushed, and I had stopped apologizing to God every time I farted, *Excuse me for breaking wind.*

"You're an asshole," my brother said in that slow, deliberate, hostile tone of voice he was so masterful at. "You're a little asshole."

"Asshole. That's a funny word. I can see it." I laughed uproariously.

"See what?" my brother said.

"Your asshole."

My survival tactic was to counter my brother's strength, foil his dominance by means of feigned ignorance and a building resistance, forge a corrosive undercurrent of smart remarks, humiliation, and attack – tactics all designed to anger him, irritate him, and wear

him down. Our parents were too distracted with our move to Minneapolis, my father's new job, and my mother's complicated schedule of cancer treatments for them to pay much attention to our feuding. My brother didn't hate me, I don't think. This is what brothers did. The Deems brothers down the block, Danny, Ben, and Kenny, wounded each other regularly with forks, baseball bats, matches. Compared to them, the modes of combat my brother engaged in were rather elegant. But it often depended on his my brother's moods. One afternoon I followed him down to Lynnhurst Field to watch him play baseball with his twelve-year-old friends. He played left field and had a Ted Williams Fieldmaster glove which he punched with his fist and greased with neatsfoot oil and punched some more. A batter hit a high fly ball to left field, my brother squinted into the sun and drifted after the ball like a gazelle loping across the Serengeti, and he caught it. I stood on the third-base line and shouted my approval. He stopped and stared.

He threw his mitt at the ground and ran at me, screaming, "Get out of here. Go away. Nobody wants you here. You're too little. Go away."

He looked so mad, I was scared he was going to hit me. His friends stood and watched him yell at me. I ran home, crying, humiliated. I kept wondering if his friends thought he did the right thing or if they thought he was mean to me for no reason. When I caught my brother in a good mood he made me laugh with all his dirty words. And he carried me high on his shoulders and jerked and quaked and danced like a madman, and I laughed and held his neck and touched his big protruding Adam's apple.

I kept a notebook, a small 3-ring black notebook with lined pages the size of a notecard. I drew pictures and wrote curse words in it. My favorite picture is of my friend

John Waterhouse's dad, Sidney Waterhouse, whom I didn't like very much. I drew a picture of him lying in the O.R. on an operating table, and I am the surgeon opening him up with a carving knife meant for slaughtering turkeys, and not sewing him back up ever. Coming out of my mouth are cartoon speech bubbles with the words *prick, jerk, fucker, idiot, asshole.* I had begun to appreciate the power of words.

My brother had a large bookshelf in his bedroom filled with *Hardy Boy Mysteries, Tom Swift* books, *The Black Mask* detective stories.

"They're called books," he said. "They make your brain grow. You do nothing but watch TV. By the time you grow up your brain will be the size of a rabbit turd."

He sat me down at his desk, took off his belt and strapped me into the chair like the Hollywood gangsters did in *77 Sunset Strip* with Ed Kookie Byrnes.

"Say you're going to read a book."

"I'm going to read a book."

"Louder."

"I'm going to read a book."

He made me sit there while he lay on his bed reading *Tom Swift and his Electric Rifle*. And then with no explanation he undid the belt and let me go. He was like that—changeable, mercurial, and at times forgiving.

One afternoon my mother asked my brother to babysit for me.

"I hate babysitting. No, please, mom, don't make me."

"Oh, honey, it's last-minute. I need you to do this for me. You can take your little brother for a walk."

"Oh, man." my brother said. "I suppose I could take him up to the water tower."

"Good idea, just be careful crossing 50th Street," she said.

The Washburn Water Tower was a hulking concrete structure shaped like a giant Viking's helmet with eagles and Viking warriors perched high along the edges. The tower sat on top of the hill in Tangletown on the south side of 50th Street a few blocks from our house. My brother waved goodbye to my mother in that innocent way of his with his long fingers and hands that looked just like hers. When my brother was two years old, my father enlisted in the Navy and was assigned to fight in World War Two in the Pacific aboard a destroyer escort. His ship, the S.S. Appanoose. came under frequent attack from Japanese Kamikaze suicide fighter planes which swooped down out of the sky and aimed themselves at the American ships below. As communications officer my father was responsible for putting gunners in position and pointing the massive naval machine guns at the incoming enemy planes. When my dad came home from the war he was a stranger to my brother. And soon I was born. When I was three months old my mother took a series of black and white snapshots of me, my brother Pete, and my dad, still wearing his Navy fatigues. At age six my brother was stocky, substantial. He looked more like a well-fed adolescent than a little boy. He dressed in a self-determined way, as though he picked his own clothes and knew just how he wanted to look. The photographs show him wearing a long-sleeved striped t-shirt, high-top sneakers, and jeans with the cuffs rolled up. I am in his arms, but barely. His hands are outstretched. He is holding me at arm's length. He looks askance at me, as if to say, *Who is this little brown-eyed thief who sucks my mother's breasts, who my father laughs with and hugs and kisses?* I can

hear my father warn him, “Hold on to your little brother. Don’t drop him.” The look on my three-month old face was one of confusion. I wanted this big curly-headed boy to like me.

Getting ready for our walk to Washburn Water Tower, Pete helped me put on my fringed Roy Rogers jacket. He took my hand and we left the house and walked south on Harriet Avenue. We waited for the light at 50th Street. From the look on his face I could almost guess his thoughts: *I could lose this little brat like shaking a stone from my shoe, like in the movies where big men do things to small men just to make them cry. What if a bus hits him? Would I feel bad? It’d be like murder. Or at least dad would accuse me of negligence. Oh boy, would the old man be sad if that happened. I’d almost like to try. Nah, kidding.*

The light turned green, we crossed the street and walked up the hill toward the tower. It was huge; it took up a large portion of the sky. We walked around its circular base, and it took forever just to make one revolution. My brother stopped and read aloud from the iron plaque at the base, “’Water was pumped from Minnehaha Creek to the tower and then piped to the orphanage at the site where Ramsay School stands today at 50th Street and Nicollet Avenue.’ Ramsey, that’s where I go to school.” He pointed at his junior high off in the distance. “Okay, so, wait here,” he said.

“Why? I don’t want to. I want to go with you.”

“No, it’ll be fun. You’ll walk one way, I’ll go the other, and we’ll meet on the other side. Count to thirty. Close your eyes. Start counting.”

I closed my eyes. I heard the crunch of gravel under my brother’s sneakers as he

walked away. I stopped counting and opened my eyes. It was a gray March day. The air was still. I began walking around the tower to meet him on the other side. I circled the tower. Maybe we were both going around the tower in the same direction. I turned around and ran the other way. I figured he would appear around the side and say, *Where were you, little brat? I was looking for you.* But I couldn't find him. My brother had left. I felt alone and sad. But I knew I wasn't that far from our house, so I walked back down the hill towards 50th Street. I waited at the light. The sidewalk along Harriet Avenue was empty. I walked until I found my house. My mom was already home, and she was mad at me.

"Where were you, Billy?"

"He left me there."

"No I didn't," my brother said, "He ran off."

"Liar. You're a horrible babysitter," I said.

My mother grounded my brother for a week. As he stomped up the stairway to his bedroom I yelled, *Liar, liar pants on fire, I hope you hang from a telephone wire.*

My mother sent us both to our rooms. I lay on my bed and counted the rocks I had collected with my dad the previous summer at Racoon River Park in Des Moines.

West 47th Street

When I turned six my parents bought a red brick colonial house at 47th and Girard Avenue in south Minneapolis, just up the hill from Lake Harriet, a mile-wide spring-fed lake with sand beaches and a bandstand where they sold popcorn and cotton candy. My

mother drove me over from our rental on 50th Street and gave me a tour. It was the tallest house I had ever seen, three stories, Boston Ivy covering the redbrick walls, green louvered shutters framing every window, Doric columns holding up the front entryway, a screened-in porch, two separate stairways to the second floor, and a sun deck.

"It was built in 1925 when I was just a girl," my mother said as we walked up the two flights of stairs to the attic where my brother Pete and I were to live in our new bedrooms with sloped ceilings and dormer windows.

It was spring, and my mother had taken to wearing bright cotton clothing—a deep purple sleeveless blouse and yellow skirt—perhaps to celebrate the purchase of our new house. She took me down to the basement and showed me the coal shoot and the room where coal was stored for the furnace. A new gas furnace stood in the corner. In the next room was the central air conditioning unit made from a commercial ice cream maker by the man who had previously owned the house.

"It will always be cool in summer," she said.

In the kitchen she showed me the recessed place in the wall where the house keys were kept, dozens of keys, hanging neatly on hooks behind a tiny wooden door, including skeleton keys that could open all the interior doors in the house. She wandered away for a moment, and I reached in, took a skeleton key, and put it in my pocket. Later that day I tested my key on some of the doors inside the house. It worked perfectly. I was able to lock my bedroom door at night before I slept, so nothing could disturb me. This made me feel safer in the new house with its unknown rooms and closets, and it gave me a welcome sense of control.

There were three closets in my bedroom on the third floor. Inside the closet farthest from my bed a bare light bulb hung from a braided black cord, and in the back corner a pair of loose pine planks were placed end-to-end on the floor at the mouth of a crawl space -- a small tunnel which disappeared into the wall. In the bottom drawer of my bed stand I kept a Christmas candle in the shape of a choirboy holding a hymnal, his mouth open in song, the wick protruding from his head. My mother smoked cigarettes, so there were always matches lying around. I lit the candle, held it in one hand, and careful to avoid splinters, I dragged myself slowly along the wooden planks into the crawl space. It was pitch black and smelled of creosote. When I reached the end of the short tunnel I found myself inside a small, windowless, unfinished room that mirrored the size of my closet. Yellowed wads of old newspaper stuck out of the gobs of dried plaster that oozed from between strips of wooden lath. It seemed dangerous to have newspaper embedded in the walls of a wooden house. It could catch fire. It appeared that no one had been inside this crawl space since the house was built. It was mine alone. I was being enfolded by my new house.

"Billy." Through the wall came the muffled voice of my mother. "Where are you?"

I blew out the candle. The darkness absorbed the sounds of my breathing. My mother did not know that I lay close by, on the other side of my bedroom wall.

"When your dad gets home from work he is taking you shopping for clothes."

I didn't want to worry her, but I remained silent. This was a safe and secret place.

To my father our new house was just a business proposition. He didn't take as much pleasure in showing it to me and my brother except for the new workbench and tools in the basement.

"Boys, come down here for a minute. We're going to finish this basement. It's like a goddamned root cellar right now, but there'll be a wet-bar over here, and we'll get a ping pong table, and the TV will go over here."

He opened the door to a room I hadn't seen. "Here's your work bench and tools."

A brand new woodworking bench made from pine two-by-fours and plywood sat in the middle of the small room. It was covered with new tools with the price tags still on them.

"What are we supposed to build?" I asked.

"I don't know, whatever you want. You boys take Wood Shop in school, right?"

My brother picked up a pair of pliers from the new work bench. "Where'd the table come from, dad?"

"I had a carpenter make it. It's the real deal. It's got a vice and everything."

My father was disconnected from the normal "dad" realm of hammers and nails and carpentry. His world consisted of creating ad campaigns, watching baseball on TV, and smoking expensive cigars, but he obviously felt that woodwork was something he should make available to me and my brother if only by paying someone else to make a bench and get tools for us. My brother lost interest and went upstairs.

"We had something built in your room, Billy. I'll show it to you."

We walked up the three flights of stairs to my bedroom. While I was at school, my dad had the carpenter install in my bedroom an eight-foot wide plywood desktop with rounded edges and storage shelves with sliding doors. It was better than a desk. It was my workspace. In his mother's cigar store on the south side of Chicago there was neither

time nor money for hobbies. If he couldn't build them himself, my dad would commission things to be built.

In Minnesota spring comes quickly. As winter fades, the gray, leafless trees are soon covered with bright green buds, and pollen fills the air. That year I succumbed to sneezing and wheezing, and every morning I awoke with my eyes sealed shut with dried mucous. My mother filled a glass eyecup with boric acid and unsealed my eyes from the crust.

My Aunt Caroline, my mother's favorite sister, flew out from Swarthmore to spend some time with us and to accompany my mother on her medical appointments. Caroline was taller and nine years older than my mother. I marveled at how similar their faces looked, and their hands, and they way they lifted their chins when they listened to each other talk.

My aunt noticed me blowing my nose and said, "Billy, those allergies of yours are just psychosomatic."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means it's all in your head. For some reason you have decided to have allergies this year."

"Oh, give him a break, Caroline. He'll be fine," my mother said. "Don't listen to your aunt, honey," she said to me. "She's a bit harsh."

My mother took me to an allergist to have me tested. The nurse took off my shirt and laid me down on a gurney. She brought out a metal tray filled with tiny brown bottles labeled by hand: *household dust, cat fur, dog fur, canary feathers, dandelions, oak*

leaves, maple pollen, and more. The nurse handed the doctor a ballpoint pen with which he drew a grid pattern on my stomach – a series of small ink dots, each with an accompanying number.

"We're going to place concentrated tinctures of things on you that you might be allergic to," he said as he poked holes in my abdomen with a needle. He made some notes then placed a drop of each of the substances in the pinprick holes in my skin. "All right now let's wait to see where the bumps appear."

In a few minutes nine of the holes on my stomach began to turn red. He scribbled down the numbers, glanced at the bottles and announced, "You're allergic to the pollen of nine deciduous trees."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that nine different trees that sprout leaves and make pollen in the spring don't appear to like you."

He wrote out two prescriptions and handed them to my mother. "This is for *Tedrol*. It will stop his wheezing and will dry him out. *Teldrin* is an antihistamine which will keep his eyes and nose from running. Besides, if they run too fast, you'll never catch them." He snorted at his own joke which he had probably told hundreds of times, patted me on the head, and ushered me and my mother out of the exam room.

That night I took my first allergy pill. *Tedrol* was a small, white, slotted tablet. Within minutes my heart rate increased, and I felt very focused. I liked the feeling. My mother put me to bed, but instead of falling asleep I went down to my parents' bedroom.

"I can't sleep, mom."

"Wonder if it's those pills," my dad said.

I lay down next to my mother, and we read the classified ads in the newspaper. I learned how much a used Frigidaire sold for, what salaries architectural supply salesmen were paid, the price of a new 1953 Corvette from the New York Motorama Car Show. I lay there with my heart racing from the Tedrol. Spring became the season when tree buds burst open and spewed their pollen into the air, and a little white slotted pill kept me up at night and helped me learn to read the newspaper.

Despite taking my allergy medication every day, my symptoms continued. My mother took me to Gould's Drugstore at 50th and Bryant to refill my prescriptions. Dark oak cabinets lined the walls of the drugstore. Behind a high glass counter Mr. Gould counted pills and filled prescriptions. The shelves were covered with candy bars, cigarettes, unguents, crèmes, and underwear. Next to the school supplies was a bin full of rubber bands. I picked up a pack. They were like fleshy brown dandelions all bound up, no paper wrapper, just pure gum rubber bands. I rolled them back and forth across my palm. If I threw the pack at the wall it would bounce back at me like a seamless rubber ball.

"Mom, could I have these rubber bands?"

"What do you want them for? You don't need that many rubber bands."

"They cost ten cents."

"No." She turned her back and continued talking with Mr. Gould.

"Mom, why not? Please?"

She gave me a stern look, walked over to me, and whispered sharply, "Don't be so

stubborn."

I think *stubborn* was the word she used. Whatever the word was, she used it like a riding crop. She might have said, *annoying, disturbing, aggravating, tiresome, vexing.* I don't remember the exact word she used. Over the years I've thought of this interchange, and every so often I have remembered the word she used. Then I forget it again. But I remember the sentiment. She was tired and exasperated. It felt like something between us was changing.

My hand was sweating. I squeezed the pack of rubber bands. They made a sound like a squeegee. I crammed them deep into my pocket. They were mine now. A streetcar stopped just outside Gould's Drugstore, heading downtown. I wanted to get on and ride away. Mr. Gould and my mother stared at me. Had they seen me take the rubber bands? I felt like I wore a sign that said, *Stop me, I am a thief.* Could they see the bulge in my pocket? I wanted to cover it with my hands, but that would be too obvious.

I acted nonchalant. "Are you ready, mommy?"

She paid for my prescriptions and said goodbye to Mr. Gould. In the car on the way home my mother turned to look at me a few times. I stared straight ahead. When we arrived home I barely waited for the to stop the car, and I sprinted up the sidewalk into the house and up to my room where I shoved the pack of rubber bands deep underneath my bed. Then came the slow ominous footsteps of my mother.

She stood in my doorway. "What did you take?"

"What?"

"What did you take from Mr. Gould's drug store?"

"Nothing. I didn't take anything."

She nodded slowly. She knew.

I stared at the floor. "The rubber bands," I said.

"Give them to me. We're going back to Mr. Gould's, and you're going to return them to him and say you're sorry. Until you pay for them, they belong to him. How would you feel if someone came up to your room and took your baseball mitt?"

She grabbed my hand and walked me downstairs. The ride back to Gould's took forever. In my pocket I fingered and squeezed the rubber bands that I would never own.

"My son has something he wants to tell you," she said to Mr. Gould.

He waited for me to speak

"I'm sorry I took your rubber bands."

I handed him the pack. The thought crossed my mind that he would be impressed with my honesty and he would say, *Oh, that's okay son, go ahead and take them. Enjoy.* But he placed them back in the bin with the other rubber bands and thanked me and my mother for returning them. On the ride back home my mother and I didn't speak.

That fall my parents enrolled me in Blake Country Day School, a private Episcopal boys school that sat on top of a hill on a large parcel of land with football fields and baseball diamonds and resembled what I imagined an Ivy League college looked like.

"Your mother and I believe in the public schools," my father said, "But Blake will keep you later in the afternoon, so your mother can go to her medical appointments."

"I thought you were done with all your appointments," I said.

"I still have appointments to go to," she said.

"With doctors?" I asked.

"Yes."

In the morning the school bus picked me up a block from my house and was full of other first-and-second-graders, so I was comfortable taking the long ride into the suburbs to school. Stoddard Crane was my first friend at Blake. At recess Stoddy and I stood on the playground outside the modern 1950s brick school building, both wearing scuffed Buster Brown lace-up ankle boots.

"Does your mom make you wear those?" I asked.

"Yeah," Stoddy said.

"Me too. They're stupid."

"They're baby shoes," he said.

We looked around the playground at the other first-grade boys; we all had the same shoes on. That afternoon I asked my mom why I had to wear them.

"A little boy's ankle needs good support, honey."

"I'm in first grade, I'm not a baby."

Our first-grade teacher was a large-boned blond woman named Miss Olsen who was kind and friendly to her new first-graders. For weeks she administered tests to us – drawing, counting, sounding out words. Miss Olsen showed us her new diamond ring, and soon she became Mrs. Riddlington. That fall we lay on the floor of our classroom making paper jack-o-lanterns, and Mrs. Riddlington moved from one child to another, encouraging us in our handiwork. She was about to step over me to get to Joggs McCann,

when she straddled me, her legs spread wide under her skirt. I lay on my back and stared up at her cotton panties and at the blond pubic hairs that protruded around the edges. It was one of the most alluring things I had ever seen. But as the year wore on, Mrs. Riddlington grew rather sad, and just before summer break she became Miss Olson again. During recess we speculated about what happened to her marriage in such a short time. Was her new husband mean? What had he done? What had she done?

My new neighborhood on 47th Street in south Minneapolis was filled with boys my age, and I made friends. We did the usual things boys do – toilet papered neighbors' houses, threw gravel at cars from the woods below Lake Harriet Parkway, and rode our bikes behind the mosquito-spray trucks, sniffing the fragrant clouds of DDT. Within a week or so I had apparently won most of the neighbor boys' trust, and they told me about *The Love Club.* The President of *The Love Club* was my next door neighbor Bobby Bergstrom's older sister Becky who was in the sixth grade. At age twelve Becky looked very grown up. When her mother wasn't looking, Becky put on lipstick and rouge and pranced around like a *June Taylor* dancer on *The Jackie Gleason Show*. One afternoon Bobby and I were playing in his room, and he asked, "You want to join *The Love Club*?"

"What do you do in *The Love Club*?"

"Becky takes her clothes off and shows us her butt, then we show her ours, and then we look at dirty pictures."

"Are there other girls in *The Love Club?"* I asked.

"No. They all quit except for Becky," said Bobby.

"Where do you get the pictures?"

"I steal my dad's girlie magazines."

"Does Becky get naked with you?"

"Yeah, she does," he said. "Do you have any dirty pictures? You can only be in the club if you bring dirty pictures."

"Do you like photos of ladies in brassieres with big breasts?"

"You mean, big boobs?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah," Bobby said. "Bring them tonight."

"Will Becky be here?" I asked.

"She's the president."

I went back to my house, climbed the stairs to my bedroom, and snuck into my crawl space where I kept my collection of photos in my UPS truck. I pulled out a few of the ladies' underwear ads and the picture of Miss Wisconsin, folded them carefully, stuffed them in my pocket, and went back to Bobby's. His mother fed us supper, and afterward Bobby and I and a few of his friends went upstairs and prepared for the meeting. Bobby took out a few rumpled pages of one of his dad's magazines featuring a nudist family on a walk in the woods, wearing nothing but hiking shoes and sandals. I took out my ladies' underwear pictures.

"These are no big deal," said Bobby. "You can see these in the newspaper."

I took my photo of Miss Wisconsin out of my pocket.

"She's got a swimsuit on," Bobby said.

"Yeah, but look at her butt and her boobs," I said, defending the flagship photo of my collection. "Where's Becky?" I asked. "Is she coming?"

Bobby shouted down the stairs for his sister.

"She went to the movies with a friend," said his mother.

"I guess she quit the club again," Bobby said.

"She quit?" I was heartsick. I wondered if she quit because I had joined. I imagined her telling her little brother, *If one more smelly little boy joins the club, I'm through*. I was looking forward to seeing Bobby's sister naked.

"Let's take our clothes off," said Bobby, kicking off his scuffed oxfords.

"And do what?" I asked.

"Look at dirty pictures."

"What if your mom catches us?"

"She won't know. I lock my closet door." Bobby didn't seem surprised that his twelve-year-old sister Becky had quit *The Love Club* and had gone to a movie.

"I probably better go," I said. And one by one the other members of *The Love Club* gave their excuses, and we all left.

The next day I saw Becky outside her house with a boy; I wondered if he got to see her naked.

In August my parents took me and my brother on a vacation to the Black Hills of South Dakota. On the drive west into the prairie we stopped at cowboy towns, farm museums, and gift shops, and my brother and I filled our suitcases with garnets, quartz,

and chunks of stalactites that hung in the caves of the Dakotas.

We spent a week at The Black Hills Dude Ranch. It smelled of horse barns and Jack Pines. I emptied out my suitcase into the one drawer my brother had left me.

"Get outta there," he said.

"Get outta where? It's my goddamned drawer," I said.

I hid the rest of my stuff in various spots around our cabin. I had a habit of hiding whatever it was I didn't want my brother to know about. We rode horses every day. I learned that women cantered and men galloped. I did neither. I just sat on my horse while it did what every other horse at the resort did on these outings – stuck its nose near the tail of the horse in front and plodded along with its saddle creaking and the occasional fly buzzing past. My mother didn't ride horses with us. I noticed that she was walking slowly, often with her hand resting on her lower back.

One night my dad took me on a hike. A gravel path led from our cabin to the edge of a sloping cliff. He moved slowly as he walked in his city shoes. The crisis of my mother's health had worn him down. He put his arm around me. He seemed to take solace in my company. We walked toward the edge of the resort, where the hill sloped down toward the prairie.

"Look at that." He pointed straight up. I caught the tail end of a shooting star. I'd heard children's songs about shooting stars, but I'd never seen one. My dad and I stared at the horizon where the rounded Dakota hills were silhouetted against the night, and another star flashed white and fell in a soft arc, leaving a trail of light.

"A shooting star," he said. "The Pleiades. There'll be more."

"How come mom doesn't like to ride horses with us?"

"Her back doesn't feel good. We don't want her to get hurt," he said.

"She won't fall off the horse. She could ride a slow one." I said.

I pressed my dad to talk, but he just stared out at the plains. We had lived with my mother's illness for a long time. She was as much a part of us as always, but quieter now, more tired. Often it was just Pete and my dad and I doing things together. I wanted to help my mother somehow. Maybe I should pray or bray in the wind or shut myself up in a hayloft and grab a gigantic hemp rope, thick as an arm, and swing out over the bales of hay and horseshit and memories and just let go. Someone, or something, had cursed her. Or God, whatever he is. If I had a painting of God, I'd sell it. I sure as hell wouldn't put it up.

My dad and I stood and watched the stars, fixed in the firmament. Occasionally one would flash and skitter across the sky. I wondered if things actually fell from the sky. It grew cool. He took my hand and we walked back to our cabin. Photographs from that trip show each of the four of us leaning against a hitching post or standing inside a paddock or sitting on a horse, at a distance from one another. None of us are smiling.

That fall I started second grade. It was nice getting back to school and seeing my school friends. Our second grade fall outing was a trip to a poultry farm on the outskirts of town where they raised Thanksgiving turkeys. Our class was only a dozen boys, so instead of renting a school bus, the moms drove us in their cars to see the turkeys. We stood on the hard brown dirt listening to hundreds of nervous birds gobbling and squawking. We toured the farm, tromping through the barnyard as the last leaves of fall

crunched under our school shoes. It was late October, and Minnesota had grown cold. My mother stood off to the side with the other moms, all in cloth coats, turning up their collars to the wind. She was the center of attention. They knew about her two-year struggle with cancer, and they were concerned that she had become so thin. But she looked calm, elegant almost, in her black low-heeled shoes and thin leather gloves. She assured them that she was fine, and at times she broke into a soft, ironic laugh. I wondered if she were laughing about her cancer.

"Don't worry," she told them, "I know my limit."

My mother didn't notice me standing close by listening. She said in a low voice, "I wanted to do this for Billy. I've missed so many things. I wanted to be here for him."

I felt the now-familiar fear mixed with sadness. I turned away and walked toward my friends who were shouting at the turkey pen. I tried to join in, but my voice wouldn't work, and my turkey noise was lost in the cacophony around me. Slowly the dim grayness in my head faded away, and I was fully back with my friends, yelling, poking, acting up, being second-graders. As a thank-you gift for visiting the farm, the owner gave each of us an unassembled cardboard John Deere tractor to take home.

After school the bus dropped me off, and I trudged up our hill. I was excited to show my mom the cardboard tractor kit. She lay in bed propped up by pillows, reading. She was always reading.

"Why not keep my mind active? she said "I like to read."

She put her book down and gave me a kiss. The smell of her breath had changed. Once sweet and familiar, it was now sour, almost putrid. She took a sip of water from a

glass on the bed stand. I lay the cardboard tractor pieces on the bed. She made a careful effort to assemble them. There were no directions, so we both tried to slip the cardboard tabs into the various slots, but we couldn't get them right, and soon she handed the pieces back to me and lay back on her pillows.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she sighed, "I just don't have the energy."

On these afternoons she was candid with me about her exhaustion and her pain. She wasn't helpless within her illness, she just lay beside it, tired and noble. I fluffed her pillows and pulled up the covers as she slid down into bed and fell asleep. I watched her for a moment, breathing, shifting slightly. Her quilted bed jacket draped over her shoulder. She slept on her side. Her hips and legs were outlined by the blanket. She was in profile. Her hands rested one atop the other as if in prayer. I wondered if she were comfortable. The afternoon light reflected gold on her still thick, wavy coils of the darkest brown hair. She looked leonine, royal, at rest. She was forty-four years old.

I went downstairs to find something to eat. I grabbed a hand full of Hydrox cookies from the ceramic barn cookie jar and poured myself a glass of milk. I had learned to eat this way from my father who, every night, opened the tall kitchen cabinet that was filled with snack foods. Whenever I happened to hear the creaking of the hinges of the cabinet door, I would join him and we would snack together.

The next day after school, my friend Timmy Meyer and I asked the bus driver to drop us off at 50th and Bryant near Gould's Drugs.

"I have to pick up some medicine for my mom," I told the driver.

This wasn't the first time I had used my mother's illness as a way to get what I

wanted. The bus driver let us off, and Timmy and I counted up the coins in our pockets, enough to buy five nickel candy bars apiece and eat them on the way home, something I did often that fall. We bought our candy and stood outside the drugstore inventorying our purchases: Peter Paul Mounds, Butterfingers, Almond Joys, Three Musketeers, and Hershey bars with almonds. We walked north on Bryant Avenue, eating our candy.

"No littering," I said and tossed my candy wrappers on the lawn we were passing. Timmy did the same, and we ran until we were sure no angry neighbor was following us. With each bite of candy I drifted farther and farther away from thoughts of my mother's health.

I walked up the front steps of my house. In the living room my mother sat with her lap covered by a blanket. She had combed and braided her hair into a loose bun that draped down the nape of her neck. My brother was slumped in an easy chair with a brooding look on his face. And next to him sat Reverend Carl Storm, our minister from the Unitarian Society.

"Billy, now that you're here we can start," my mother said.

Her voice was soft and measured. When she was younger she had suffered from an enlarged thyroid which her doctors treated in the early 1920s with experimental drugs. As a result her voice had become permanently husky and low.

She spoke slowly. She intended to be heard without confusion. "You boys know Dr. Storm from church, but he's also a psychotherapist, and I go to his office and talk with him every week. That's why I am late for supper on Thursdays. I talk with Dr. Storm about my illness. I talk about how I worry about daddy and about how much I love you

boys. This is what you do when you are in crisis. You seek help."

This was an act more heroic than what most parents would attempt with a seven-year-old and a thirteen-year-old. She was preparing me and my brother for her death. But what she had said didn't register. She was alive. She was sick with cancer, and one of her breasts had been removed by surgery, but she was still here with us, making our breakfasts, helping me with my homework. She had done something that week that was so uncharacteristic of her, a woman who preferred political organizing to domestic chores; she sewed a red cloth bag for my collection of marbles and a new red shirt which she put on Cowboy, my favorite teddy bear. I had never seen her sew before. She handed Cowboy to me, his tattered checkered shirt replaced by a new bright red one, her stitching straight and perfect. I was happy, but I wondered what she thought about as she sewed. It was clear that she wanted to make some gesture, do something for me to indicate her love and concern which overshadowed her abysmal sadness at counting down the weeks she had left to live.

"Is there anything you boys would like to ask Dr. Storm?" she said.

My brother and I sat silently. I had never known my mother in any way other than with my father. Now she was with Dr. Storm in our living room. He looked at my mother with a deep tenderness. I wondered if he loved her.

My Aunt Caroline flew back again from Swarthmore to help around the house and to take care of my mother. Every afternoon she and my mom lay in bed together, and they talked or they read.

I was on my way up to my room when I overheard my Aunt Caroline, "She's an

awful cook, that Mrs. Lambert. Where did Jay find her? I hear she's from Pampa, Texas. I think she keeps half the money you give her and buys the cheapest cuts of meat. You poor things."

"She's not that bad," said my mother. "She has a hard job, stepping into all this."

"I'm going to send her home early today," said my aunt.

"Why? Jay hired her so I wouldn't have to cook."

"I'm going to cook."

"Oh, Caroline, you can hardly boil water for tea."

"I'm going to serve you the same thing I served you forty years ago when I fed you like a Kewpie doll."

"How boring. The boys hate BLT's."

"Don't be so negative," Caroline said. "Speaking of negative, I brought that damned letter you wrote to me. It made me terribly unhappy. You're talking yourself into your grave."

"I am not. I'm trying to be realistic. I'm not going to be a Polyanna. For God's sake, Caroline. I'm dying of cancer."

"You have cancer. We all know that, dear. But Jay has found you the best oncologists in the Midwest."

"Jay is busy designing ads for beer and cigarettes. I found my own doctors. Give me that letter." My mother reached over her sister's shoulder, but Caroline held onto the letter.

"No, I'm going to read it to you to show you how you sound," my aunt said. "You're

scaring Jay and the boys, and you're scaring me."

"If *you're* scared, how do you think I feel? All right, go ahead, read my letter. I was in a very clear head when I wrote that. Read it."

My Aunt Caroline reached into her purse for her reading glasses, sat up in bed, and read, "Dear Sis, you're the only one in my life, such as it is, who can stand these boring details, so here we go. What a week. And speaking of weeks, how many might I have left? God what a mundane, maddening, self-referential question that no one can answer, not even you, oh, Swami big sister. Please dear, pardon my ghoulish side; you've always know it was there from when I began telling you my dreams when I was five. Remember *the little orange man* who I dreamed stole from us both? I used to scare you with him. I even took one of your doll heads and mounted it on Daddy's Christmas Orange with the cloves, remember? And I made it talk like a puppet from the dark place – the place Daddy wouldn't talk about because he said, 'Young ladies, your father goes to church with your mother because I have a hunch that it is better to believe in something rather than nothing.' Big sister, this week I believe in nothing but getting things in order for the boys. I did something today so naively simple – I sewed up Billy's plush toy. Remember Cowboy? Nancy gave Cowboy to Billy for his third birthday. He treasures it, sucks his thumb every night while rubbing cowboy's fur – the precious thumb of a boy who is too young for all this. He is so cheery. His big brother resents his cheeriness. I must gather things up, arrange the boys' clothing, clean their sock drawers, repair their trousers, stock the larder – all pretty soon, not in a big hurry necessarily, for nothing is big anymore except the question, when? When will the light fade? When will I hear Jay utter his last

angry curse word. He is so mad at God, and sometimes I think at me, but that is neurotic, and that is why I see Dr. Storm -- to quell the narcissistic things that concern me now. Thanks for reading all this madness, Sis. You know, if I've ever had any maternal feelings toward anyone in this world, they are toward you, and not mother."

Caroline reached into her purse again and brought out a handkerchief. She was crying, but she kept reading: "But why don't we love mother? She swept and mopped and sweated and sewed and cooked. My God, we are cruel, you and I. So here's what I wish for now. I wish for order and a nurturing routine for the boys so they won't lose themselves in grief. One day when it's an appropriate time, I wish for a new love for Jay, since I've brought him such sadness. I want to finish all the tiny boring things on my list, from papering kitchen shelves to distributing my clothing to the Salvation Army, to writing final notes to friends, to telling mother I love her despite her thick-headedness. And finally I wish to tell you I love you, I miss you, I do want you by my side – for me, for Jay, and for the boys. This letter is all about me, I know, but I deserve that much, don't you think? Love and kisses from your unwell little sister, Dolly."

Caroline put her arm about my mother and stroked her brow and cried. My mother stared at the ceiling.

"Let's have a cigarette," said Caroline.

"I'm not smoking much these days, dear. I don't have the energy."

My brother came in the front door and tossed his baseball glove on the couch. He yelled up the stairs, "Is Granny coming to visit?"

My aunt dug in her purse for her pack of Old Gold cigarettes and got up from the bed.

I walked away from the bedroom doorway. I didn't want them to know I'd been listening.

"Maudie? Yes, she's coming," said my aunt. "Frankly I wish she'd stay home. Your grandmother can't negotiate her way to the airport by herself any better than your goldfish can drive to the supermarket."

My mother got up slowly and dressed for supper. At the dining room table my aunt brought out a photo album. "Boys, I've brought this for you to look at. It's full of pictures of me and your mother, your grandmother, your Aunt Eleanor. Do you boys know that I used to push your mom in a pram? I was nine when your mother was born. She was my little baby. There, see? *I'm* holding your mother, not Maudie. Your grandmother was a dutiful wife and a passable gardener, but as a mother she was rather feeble. This was before women got the vote you know." She turned the page in the album. "Oh, and here are your mom and your aunties lined up in front of their father like proper little girls in our proper little smocks. Your grandfather had only girls. He was a wonderful dad to us. I'm sorry he died before you boys had a chance to know him. And your mom got stuck with only boys. How did that happen? Where have all the girls gone, all the soft, starchy, well-ironed girls?"

"Is Uncle Hal coming?" I asked.

Caroline lit a cigarette. "God forgive me, but your Uncle Hal is busy drinking his way across the eastern seaboard like an earthworm splurges through the loam. He comes back from Baltimore or New Canaan or Poughkeepsie smelling like a penny-pinching Scotsman after a weekend of kite flying. Oh, I don't mind the drowning of a sorrow or two. It keeps the cheeks pink. Your Uncle Hal makes a good living. Like your dad. That's

what counts."

She stubbed out her cigarette on her dessert plate. "I am going to put you two wooly-headed wonders into my will for my set of The Complete Works of Charles Dickens - The Centennial Edition. I'm going to give half of them to you, Billy, and the other half to Peter. That way you two will have to at least keep holidays together when you grow up, so you can filch titles from one another, and hopefully pass them on to your kids to read, that is if your father gave you the sperm count to have children. And I hope to God they're girls."

My dad laughed as he cleared the dishes from the dining room table. Caroline put her arms around him and they hugged. "She'll be fine," she whispered to him.

"I'm not sure, Caroline. The news on that front isn't so good," he said.

The next afternoon a Yellow Cab pulled up in front of our house. Maudie had arrived, Maude Conklin West, my grandmother, Granny. She wore well-polished black Wedgies with a thick low heel and a practical wide toe box for her hammertoes. She struggled with her suitcase until my father came down the sidewalk, took her arm, and walked her inside. She was seventy years old with a gentle, face full of wrinkles and a baby-like fuzz on her upper lip and cheeks. She wore a starched blouse and rimless glasses.

"How was your trip, Maudie?" my dad said. He pulled up a chair for her at the kitchen table.

"I'm exhausted, Jay, just exhausted."

My Aunt Caroline got up and started straightening up the kitchen. "You're always exhausted, mother."

Our dog, Champ, a nervous little Boston Terrier, licked Maudie's hand.

"Mother has a new friend," said Caroline.

"May I take her for a walk?" asked Maudie.

"It's a *him,* and no, you can't take the dog for a walk, dear," said Caroline, "He'll yank on the leash, you'll fall in the street, and we'll have to plan your funeral earlier than we'd expected."

"He's tiny," Maudie said. "I can handle the dog."

"Granny," I said, "You have fuzz on your chin. Why don't you shave it?"

"Because it would get all stubbly and then I'd have to deal with a beard," and she rubbed her chin on my neck and gave me a kiss. She smelled of moth balls and laundry soap and reminded me of my trips to her big old house in Swarthmore, with her secret worlds covered in dust and the smell of cats. I buried my face in her comfortable bosom and wished I were in Swarthmore a thousand miles away.

The next day my Aunt Caroline bustled about the house, cursed loudly, and made phone calls. My mother stood at the kitchen door. "Something happen?" she asked.

"Maudie took the goddamned dog for a walk, just like I told her not to," said Caroline, "And she fell and probably broke her hip."

My mother sat down by the stove. She looked exhausted. "I hope this isn't my fault. We should have boarded the dog somewhere," she said.

"You can't farm out your dog every time mother comes calling. Why can't she just sit still? When she's not out trying to get herself killed with the dog, she's sweeping or mopping or burning dinner. Why can't she simply read a goddamned book?" Caroline lit

a cigarette.

I pictured my grandmother lying prone on the sidewalk, face up, in her wool skirt and starched white blouse, the leash wrapped around her wrist, while Champ takes a pee on a nearby bush, Granny staring at the sky, resting. Cold, but resting.

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked.

"She'll be fine," Caroline said. "Hopefully she just bruised her hip. She's at Methodist Hospital. At least she can't get in trouble there. I know you love your grandmother, dear, but sometimes she is a big pain in my arse. Do you know what an *arse* is? It's the butt. She's a pain in the butt, your grandmother is."

Maudie stayed in the hospital overnight, and the next day Caroline put her on a plane back to Swarthmore. Granny was going to stay a week and try to help out, but Caroline felt that things would go more smoothly without her.

That November the air was dry and scented with smoke and mold. Our street was no longer covered with a soft carpet of oak leaves; most of them had been raked up and burned. Potholes were numerous, the asphalt was buckled and cracked from a hot, rainy summer followed by a slow-moving cold front that drifted across the upper Midwest wringing the life out of the landscape. Our red brick steps didn't look new anymore. The mortar between the bricks had begun to crack and would have to be repaired. There was dust in the grooves of the Doric columns that stood on our front porch.

I had a dream that I was at the top of our basement stairs staring down at my mother who stood barefoot on the black and white linoleum tiles below, wearing a nightgown

and a robe. She held an empty frying pan which dangled from her hand. She tried to lift it, but couldn't. Looking up at me she said, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm so sorry, but I can't make your breakfast anymore." This seemed to make her very sad. I woke up from the dream crying.

I walked up our hill from the bus stop. An ambulance was parked in front of our house. Mrs. Lambert, the housekeeper, was standing in the front doorway.

"They're taking your mother to the hospital," she said.

I pushed past her and started up the stairs toward my parent's bedroom. On the landing by the den two paramedics carried my mother on a gurney. She was dressed in her nightgown and bathrobe.

"Stop, please," she said, "I want to say goodbye to my little boy."

In the middle of the stairway the two men steadied the gurney. With great effort she lifted herself up an put her arms around me and kissed me.

"Goodbye, sweetheart."

The men finished carrying her down the stairs. I was numb. I don't remember if I followed the gurney down the front steps or if I just stayed by the front door and watched them put her into the ambulance.

"Your father is meeting your mom at the hospital," Mrs. Lambert said. "She is going to be fine."

I knew my mother was not going to be fine. She had told us herself when she brought our minister Carl Storm to the house. She had tried with all her intelligence and good

sense to be realistic in the face of her death. Mrs. Lambert didn't subscribe to the kind of common sense that my mother did. Nor did anyone else. My father had retreated into a worried silence. And everyone else tried to shield us from the reality of my mother's worsening health.

The next morning my father drove me to the hospital.

"Do we get to see mom?" I asked.

"Son, the hospital has rules. You're too young to go inside, but we can wave to your mother from the sidewalk."

"I'm seven years old, dad, I'm not a baby. They can let me in."

He gave me what I felt was an unlikely explanation about age restrictions in the hospital. Either he or my mom or both of them must have decided that my mom was too sick for me to see her, that it would upset me. Perhaps they both wanted me to remember her as stronger and more coherent than she was now.

My dad asked me to wait outside the hospital for a moment while he hurried inside. In a moment he hustled back out, walked me a few yards down the sidewalk, and we stopped at the side of the expansive hospital building.

"She's up there," he said, pointing up to a window on the top floor. It was November and it was cold, so the hospital windows were shut. My mother stood at the window of her room dressed in a hospital gown. A nurse stood behind her. My mother stared down at me and smiled. She waved. I waved back. I felt the urge to cry, but it stayed deep in my throat. Soon she moved away from the window. My father and I walked to the car and drove home.

That night I dreamed that I was in the sky and I was falling towards the earth. I was afraid that I was going to die. I fell and fell, and as I got closer to the ground I could see my old neighborhood in Des Moines, and I saw my house and all the other houses. But they had eroded away. Only the foundations remained, dusted by the wind. I woke up before I hit the ground.

Saturday morning my Aunt Caroline was sitting on the edge of my bed when I awoke. She was wearing her winter coat and hat. She held a pair of cloth gloves in her hand.

"She's gone, sweetheart. Your mother is gone."

I buried my face in her lap and sobbed. The world had overtaken us.

"We have lots of things to take care of," she said. "Mrs. Lambert is here to make your breakfast. Peter is next door with the Meyers."

My aunt got up from my bed and left my room. I stared after her as she grabbed the handrail and descended the stairs. I was seven years old. My brother was thirteen. The deepest part of our world had fallen out. My body filled with a warm tonic. I stared into the hall that connected my room with my brother Pete's. His room was empty. It all struck me as nonsensical, aberrant, abrupt. My mind closed down, like in dreams where I walked along the top of a narrow brick wall that was miles high. I knew that if I were close to the ground I wouldn't be afraid, but up there, if I stepped wrong, if I slipped, I would tumble and perish on the earth.

Thereafter

Peter and I were dressed in suits and ties. We stood in the hallway on the second floor

of the Unitarian Society on Mount Curve Avenue near downtown Minneapolis with my Uncle Gerry whose mood seemed almost cheery. He was trying to distract us from the vague, immovable grief that surrounded us.

"Where's dad?" I asked.

"He's over there." My uncle pointed down the hallway where I could see my father holding onto a balcony railing, staring off into the woody expanse of the church with its Danish Modern pews and large framed photographs of waterfalls, sunsets, and flowers.

"Let's go be with dad," I said.

"He wants to be alone right now," my uncle said.

He and my father must have decided to keep us separated. This seemed like an odd prohibition, a separation that made no sense.

A week after my mother died my dad climbed the carpeted steps to the third floor. "Get your clothes on, boys. We're going to Wimpy's for hamburgers."

"We haven't had breakfast, dad," I said.

"Don't you want a cheeseburger for breakfast?"

My brother and I both dressed quickly and waited at the front door. My dad appeared from the back hallway carrying three identical forest green zipper jackets. "Your mom bought these for us. She would have wanted us to wear them."

We put on the jackets and walked down Girard Avenue past the familiar houses. None of us spoke. It just felt good to be together. Wimpy's was a small storefront burger stand across Bryant Avenue from Gould's Drugstore. The Wimpy's burgers and fries tasted good. We ate in silence.

My Brother

My brother Peter sat on my bed holding me by the arms and stroking my head. I was crying.

"You're having a nightmare," he said. "You were yelling really loud."

My chest was convulsing with sobs. "Was I really yelling?"

"Yeah, loud."

"What was I saying?"

"I don't know, I had my door shut. I just heard you yelling." He ran his fingers through my hair. He wasn't awkward or tentative. He calmed me down with his large hands. "You had a bad dream, huh?"

"I don't know. I guess."

I wondered if I had been dreaming about our mom. I couldn't remember. Pete and I never discussed her death. We weren't forbidden from doing so, we just never talked about her.

"I'm going to help you get back to sleep." He lay down on my bed with me and pointed to the wall. "Pick a spot and stare at it. Don't look away from it, just stare at it."

"It's too dark. I can't see the wall."

He reached for my flashlight on the bed stand and shined it at the wall. "Pick a spot." I picked a horse that pulled a pony express stagecoach on my western-themed wallpaper.

"Good, now stare at it. Don't stop. Just stare at it, and you'll go back to sleep."I stared at the spot and breathed slowly. The spot seemed to grow in size, and the darkness in my room softened. I didn't blink. I just stared. If I was yelling in my sleep why didn't my dad

hear me? Maybe he was still at work. I didn't know what time it was. It felt late.

"How come you're being nice to me?" I asked.

"You're my little brother. Are you asking if I *like* you? Sometimes, yeah. And I like football. And baseball. And swimming. Do you know what my friends call you? They call you *Little Pete*, after me. I didn't want to tell you this, but they call you *Little Pete* because they don't remember your name, dufus. Your name is Dufus Dumbfart. *Hello, this is my little brother, Dufus Dumbfart.* Remember the first time I called you an asshole? You looked at me like I had grown a second head. You said you could picture it. *A hole in an ass*, you said. Yeah, you are a hole in an ass. Now, look at the wall and go to sleep."

During those first winter months after my mother's death our house was a somber, empty-feeling place. My brother wasn't around much; he sought refuge at friends' houses. On weekends our neighbors the Meyers took him skiing at Telemark Resort in Wisconsin. My dad hired Mrs. Lambert fulltime to clean and cook our meals. She was kind enough I suppose, but Pete and I hated her cooking. At suppertime we sat alone in the dining room and ate nearly everything except the meat dishes she served. We scarfed down mashed potatoes and green beans, but after a bite or two of mystery meat we cut the rest up into chunks and wrapped them in our paper napkins and hid them behind the Oxford English Dictionary on the bookshelf.

Weeks later my dad pulled the dictionary off the shelf, and with it came the dried chunks of mystery meat. "What the hell is this, beef jerky?" My dad asked.

"Mrs. Lambert's meat was pretty bad that night, dad," Pete said.

One evening my brother arrived home late for supper. Mrs. Lambert locked him out. It was a cold December night, already dark outside. My father was still at work. Pete stood on the back porch knocking on the door.

"You're late for supper, Peter, I'm sorry we're closed," she said.

"Let him in. He's hungry," I said.

"No, I won't. He doesn't deserve to eat."

As she meted out his punishment I watched my brother's face through the window. He was a handsome, tall, adolescent boy, but standing there outside the locked door he looked so helpless**.**

On weeknights my dad didn't arrive home until I was in my pajamas, brushing my teeth, and getting ready for bed. I would hear his tired footsteps as he walked up the two flights of stairs to our bedrooms. He would sit down on my bed with a sigh, still wearing his overcoat and fedora hat. He would hang his head for a moment, then turn to me, "What are you reading, son? Can I read to you?" This was his last effort of the day, like he was running the final yards of a race before he collapsed into a dreamless sleep. I loved my dad's company on those somber weeknights—his thick horn-rimmed glasses, his baritone voice with the Chicago accent, his wool winter overcoats that smelled of cigars.

As a high school kid, my dad, a Jew, was the starting catcher for St. Pancratius Polish Catholic Church baseball team. Occasionally a teammate shouted *Yiddich* at my dad and my Uncle Gerry, but relations between my dad, my uncle, and the Polish Catholic players were generally cordial. As an undergraduate my dad played varsity baseball for the

University of Chicago. He coached my little league team, and I was used to his uncanny ability to catch a fly ball with his bare hand, and he could knock innumarable fly balls far over the fence on the Lynnhurst Field baseball diamond, his stocky frame rounding the bases in a jaunty, athletic fashion.

One Saturday, he insisted that we go ice skating together. Every December Lynnhurst Field was flooded by the city, and the park iced over into a huge recreational skating area the size of a city block where hundreds of people skated from December through March, morning until night. The warming house was a large, friendly, sweaty-smelling place that sold Cokes and candy bars, where you could store your shoes in lockers and put on your skates. I was used to my dad's graceful athleticism on the baseball diamond, and I have to give him credit for being willing to skate, but his ankles looked like they were made of rubber. He skated knock-kneed, taking short, stabbing steps along the ice. While he struggled to get his footing, I skated away and dribbled my hockey puck back and forth, when an older kid – a pimple-faced fat boy in a stocking cap and bomber jacket grabbed my puck with his hockey stick and shot it across the ice.

"Go get your puck, you little *kyke,"* he said, snickering.

My dad was on the other side of the rink and didn't notice the interchange. I skated off and retrieved my puck, and on our way home I told him what the boy had said.

"Oh, Christ," he said. "I don't want you to have to deal with that stuff. You're only a quarter-Jewish, anyway."

"What are you talking about, dad? You're Jewish. Mom wasn't. That makes he half-Jewish."

"No, no, my mother was Russian Orthodox. Look, don't worry about it."

I knew my dad was trying to shield me from the anti-Semitism that still lurked in the upper Midwest, but it surprised me that he was willing to twist the truth and deny that he was Jewish. I wondered if playing baseball with Polish Catholics in the 1920s on the multi-ethnic south side of Chicago had made him watchful.

One Sunday that spring we rode home in the car from the Unitarian Society when my brother asked, "Dad, Ronny Goldblatt wants me to come to Temple with him for Pesach. Is it okay if I go?"

"No, goddamnit, no, it's not okay. I've spent years trying to keep you boys away from that stuff. It's old world, it's superstitious and it drives people apart. No, I don't want you to go to Temple."

My father's closest friends were Jewish, but he wanted nothing to do with Judaism. The Unitarian Church was a refuge for lapsed Jews, fallen-away Catholics, and back-sliding Protestants. It was as close to a house of worship as my dad wanted us to be.

My dad's secretary at the ad agency, Betty Grimes, was a horsey-faced blonde, loyal, efficient, and gossipy. Betty visited often on the weekends carrying file folders full of half-finished ad campaigns. She would confer with my dad in the den upstairs, then she would come down and make us all a meal. She kept me and Pete informed as to whom my dad was dating and how he seemed at work.

"Your father was going out with a woman named Eustis. Did you know that?"

I thought Eustis was a weird name.

"She is from the south," Betty said. "I think they liked each other very much, but he tells me he's still carrying the torch for your mother. Maybe it's too soon."

My mother had been gone only a few months. I didn't want to hear about my dad's romantic life. Secretly I think she wanted to marry my dad. She had begun to urge him to start dating, to move on.

"I think you boys need a new mother," Betty said. "Your father should keep up the search and stop working late. It's hard for us who are close to your dad to watch the change that's come over him. He is a jolly, lively man, and he's only forty-five, but he's become so quiet. He spends time alone in his office with the door closed, not like before when he wandered the halls spouting ideas, acting like a cheerleader, stirring up the place with his big laugh."

That spring my dad put me and Peter on an airplane to spend Easter with my Aunt Caroline, Uncle Hal, and my cousin Nancy, in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. They lived in a rambling nineteenth-century three-story house at 213 Elm Street just a few blocks from Swarthmore College, with a garage full of trunks and boxes that seemed older than pirate ships. Cobwebs hung from the gray pine garage beams like antique necklaces, and it was the first place I smelled cat spume, lots of it. My aunt had three cats including a fat orange tomcat, Jouster, named for his fighting ability. One night after everyone else went to bed I found a pair of oxblood red 1920s gauntlet driving gloves in the hall closet. I put them on, sat on the floor in the middle of my aunt and uncle's den, lay a gloved hand down on the rug, palm up, and gave it a bit of a quiver like a wounded animal. Jouster crouched at the other end of the room, fussed and aimed himself and hurtled toward my

hand and pounced, sinking his teeth and claws into my thick leather glove. I acted as though he had won, my hand pinned to the floor underneath his weight, then with my gloved hand I lifted Jouster up off the floor and slammed him down like Gorgeous George Wagner pinning Enrique Torres in the Heavyweight Wrestling Championship. When I released Jouster he shook it off, sauntered back to the other end of the room, and we repeated the gauntlet cat slam over and over until I was too tired to continue and went to bed.

Nancy was my only blood cousin. She bought me my first teddy bear, Cowboy, when I was three. I treasured that bear and held him every night. Nancy lived in Swarthmore, so I didn't see her very often, but when I did, I felt a deep kinship with her. My mother and my Aunt Caroline, looked alike and had been very close. Visiting my aunt's house was a way of keeping the memory of my mother alive, with Aunt Caroline's stories and photo albums full of old family snapshots. My cousin Nancy was ten years older than I, and she indulged me and hugged me like a pet. She took me shopping, and she knew that I didn't like little boy clothes. For Easter she bought me exactly the kind of hat I wanted, like Arnold Palmer wore on the PGA Golf Tour, a sports car cap, I called it.

Nancy suffered from diabetes, and every morning at breakfast I watched her inject herself with insulin, usually in her thigh. I thought she was very brave.

"How can you do that?" I said.

"Practice. Watch." She took an orange from a bowl of fruit on the kitchen table, sucked up a syringe full of water from her water glass, and plunged the needle into the orange. "Want to try it?" she asked.

I had never held a syringe. I had always feared syringes and had seen dozens of them used on my mother, but holding one in my fingers made it seem less threatening, less freighted with pain and failed intent. I jabbed the orange and shot it so full of water that its skin cracked open and leaked onto the kitchen floor.

One night during our stay I walked down the hall of my aunt's house to the bathroom when my cousin Nancy rounded the corner. She was nude. She stopped and stood there long enough for me to take in her nakedness, her dark brown patch of pubic hair, her hips, her breasts. She raised her hands and covered herself and smiled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know you were in the hall."

"That's all right, sweetheart. Now you've seen a naked lady." And she giggled, hurried into the bathroom, closed the door, and ran a bath for herself. I felt the immediate warmth and pleasure I felt when I was with Ruby and Janet. Could I love my cousin? I was eight years old. I savored the image of her naked body as I dropped off to sleep in the guest room down the hall from her.

The next morning after breakfast my aunt went to Trinity Episcopal Church for a committee meeting. My uncle had gone off to work, Nancy was in class at college, and my brother Pete was next door with family friends. The house was empty. Swarthmore Town Center at Chester Road and Park Avenue was only a few blocks away, so I walked there. It was exhilarating walking in the fragrant spring air. Swarthmore was different from the upper Midwest. It was a nineteenth-century college town. The doorways to the English Tudor-style storefronts were lower than those in the midwest. I felt taller. I pulled my new hat down over my forehead and walked past the train station where the Media

Westchester Wawa line took commuters downtown to 30th Street Station in Philadelphia.

A middle-aged woman crossed Chester Road and approached me. "Hello, Billy, how are you?"

I had no idea who she was.

"You're coming over for hamburgers tonight. Does that sound good to you?"

"Yes." I smiled. But there was no sincerity to my smile. How did she know my name? I felt vulnerable stopping to talk with her. Who was she? A kidnapper? Later I told my Aunt Caroline about the incident.

"Oh, for God's sake, Billy, she is our neighbor. We're all eating at her house tonight. You have nothing to be afraid of except food poisoning."

At the supper table that night I examined my hamburger closely for any irregularities.

Alma Jane

When my brother and I returned home from Swarthmore my dad threw a party for his friends at the ad agency. Whenever my dad held an event at our house, I worked. I helped Mrs. Lambert in the kitchen and greeted the guests at the door. *Hello, welcome to our home. May I take your coat?* I knew a lot of them—advertising copywriters, commercial artists, secretaries, executives. I lugged their big winter coats up to the guest room along with the ladies' purses and handbags, made from soft goatskin, gold chain handles, patent leather snap pockets, all with the alluring fragrance of grown women, and all fat with cash, which I took. I saw it as a gratuity. My dad wasn't paying me. He called it *pitching in.* At first it didn't occur to me to take money. It was enough that people said, *Why,*

thank you, Billy, what a big boy you are now. But when I served the hors d'oeuvres, they acted like cattle. I held up a platter of bacon-wrapped smokies, and hands shot out from all sides, no eye contact, no one said *thank you*. They stuffed their mouths and made boring grownup conversation. That's when I decided to go upstairs where I had put the coats and purses, and take their money, just a few quarters, maybe a dollar bill if there were enough of them so they wouldn't notice one missing.

I lay on my bed counting the cash I'd lifted, when my dad burst into my room.

"Billy, there's a big star downstairs, a big star for you to meet. Come on, get your shoes on, and let's go meet her."

He didn't seem to notice the pile of money I was counting. My dad wore two-tone black and tan wingtip shoes and a double-breasted pinstriped suit. He was an advertising executive, but he was dressed like Jimmy Cagney in *The Public Enemy*. Growing up behind his mother's cigar store on the south side of Chicago, he was a tough kid from the neighborhood—the perfect preparation to deal with the monolithic power that controlled him at work, the *Betty Crocker* brand.

"Let's go, son. She's waiting."

I followed my dad down to the party, not sure what I'd find. Maybe all the victims of my thefts were lined up at the bottom of the stairs waiting to demand their money back. But when we got down to the living room, sitting in an easy chair was a gorgeous blond woman in a sleeveless black cocktail dress and a smile as wide as the Mississippi River.

"Son, meet Betty Crocker."

"Betty Crocker, the lady on the cake mix box?" I asked.

Betty Crocker put down her cigarette and offered me her slim, bejeweled hand. Her skin was smooth and silky. “Awfully nice to meet you, Billy. You’re doing a wonderful job at your father’s party.” Her voice could melt icebergs. She smelled of gardenias. Betty Crocker was real.

“Your first big star, right, son? We send her all over the country dressed up like Betty Crocker. She plays Betty Crocker on TV.”

I looked at her closely and squinted. I recognized her from television commercials and magazine ads. She was beautiful. Then my dad took me into the den where an attractive brunette sat in an easy chair with a drink in her hand.

“Son, this is Alma Jane Demmen.” This was turning out to be my dad’s cavalcade of women.

“Alma Jane is part of the Betty Crocker gang,” he said. “She road-tests our powdered mashed potatoes and extra-fudgy brownies. She goes on the road with Betty.”

Alma Jane looked nothing like Betty Crocker. She was a cooler presence; she wore tweeds and matching accessories.

“Why, hello Billy, so nice to meet you. And what an honor it is to be here with your dad in your beautiful home.”

My dad stood there looking awkward.

“I have a cabin by the lake out in Zimmerman,” she said, “With a motorboat and a canoe. Want to come out and visit?”

I thought it would be nice to visit her at her cabin. I liked Alma Jane Demmen.

Soon after the party my dad started dating Alma Jane. She lived with her mother in a

large home in the suburb of Edina. Her house was filled with brightly colored wooden furniture that her mother had hand-painted in intricate floral designs.

"I like your furniture." I said,

"Well, you're a very grownup little boy," said Alma Jane's mother.

On the wall hung a series of black and white framed photographs of a handsome mustachioed pilot in a leather helmet standing next to a 1920's bi-plane, his hand resting on the large wooden propeller.

"That's my father, Edward Demmen," Alma Jane said. "He was one of the early sport flyers. He loved to fly."

I didn't know anyone who flew their own plane. I wished I had known Edward Demmen.

Camp White Earth

Skipper Hastings, John Waterhouse, and I filled our pockets with chunks of gravel from John's driveway and waited just off the path that perched over East Lake Harriet Parkway. It was Saturday morning, so we knew there would be plenty of traffic. A sky-blue Buick Roadmaster made its way past 47th Street Beach. As it cruised below us we aimed and threw. Like the rapid report of a machine gun, the rocks bounced hard off the hood of the Buick. The driver swerved like he was trying to avoid gunfire. He stomped on his brakes and his car jerked to a stop. There was a small crack on the driver's side of his windshield. He glanced up into the woods where we stood. I don't know if he saw us, but he punched the accelerator and peeled out of there, laying rubber all over the asphalt.

We ran across the upper parkway into John Waterhouse's garage and pulled the door shut. Through the garage window we saw the Buick rolling past, driving slow.

"He's looking for us," said Skipper. "He'll kick our asses."

"You really think is he going to sniff us out and tear open the garage door?" I said.

"I doubt it," said John, securing the bolt-lock on the door.

"Everybody be quiet until he leaves," I said.

"He can't hear us," said John, and he let loose with a loud hyena laugh.

"Shut up, man," said Skipper. "My dad will murder me if we get caught for this."

"Your dad's Pastor of the Episcopal Church. Murder is against the rules," I said.

John stared out the window of his garage. "He's getting out of his car and he's walking toward my house. We're fucked."

"Are your parents home?" asked Skipper.

"Yes, they're home. It's Saturday," John said, his voice low with fear.

Skipper yanked open the garage door and bolted down Humbolt Avenue towards the Episcopal rectory where his family lived. The rest of us followed. As I ran I looked back over my shoulder. The man from the Buick was standing in John Waterhouse's doorway talking to John's father.

Alma Jane Demmen sat at my mother's desk in our kitchen talking on the telephone. "If you have room at camp for Billy for both months instead of just the first session, we'd really appreciate it," she said into the phone. "His mother died last fall, and he's been spending his summer making mischief with the wrong crowd."

She was talking about me like I was a character in *Rebel Without a Cause.* She noticed me listening.

"Billy, your dad and I both think you'd be better off spending two months at camp this summer," she said. "I think you know why."

"Dad's already signed me up for camp in August." I told her. "I want to be with my friends this month."

"And throw rocks at cars? I don't think that's the best way to spend your summer."

My dad stood in the kitchen doorway looking hesitant and cheerless. He appeared to need the help Alma Jane giving him. I was enrolled for two month-long sessions at sleep-away camp. Sixty days. Apparently Alma Jane was now my disciplinarian. But she sweetened the deal a bit by taking me on a shopping spree downtown at Dayton's Department Store. She started off buying white pants and white t-shirts.

"I don't wear white pants," I said.

"At Camp White Earth you do. On Sunday mornings they do a flag-raising ceremony, and you have to wear all white."

We cruised through the children's clothing section, and she bought me new sneakers, blue jeans, and a yellow raincoat. I liked the way she shopped—she bought a lot, fast.

On the morning I was to leave for camp, Ajay, as I had taken to calling her, packed me a bag lunch, and helped me carry my trunk to the car. She drove me to the pick-up point downtown in the parking lot of Dunwoody Institute, a hulking sandstone vocational school that looked like a prison; my dad threatened to send me and my brother to Dunwoody to learn how to assemble radios if we did badly in school. I thought it would

be fun to learn how to assemble radios.

I never had stomach troubles before, but as I sat in the bus and waved goodbye to Ajay, I felt a dull sting in my gut. I remembered adults talking about "queasy stomachs" and "irritable bowel," but I figured I was just nervous. I knew none of the kids on the bus, and at age eight I was among the youngest. I had never been afraid of situations like this, so I leaned back in my upholstered bus seat and waited for an opportunity to share with someone a wise-ass remark that I had learned from my brother, about the bus or the bus driver or the camp experience that lay ahead. My brother had spent a summer at Camp White Earth and liked it. He and I were scheduled to spend the month of August at camp together. But I was headed up a month early.

Camp White Earth was located deep in the pine forest on the shore of Lake White Earth near Waubun, Minnesota, a three-hour bus ride from Minneapolis into the northwest part of the state near taconite mining country. The camp was owned by the coach of the University of Minnesota Swimming Team, Egil Forslund, a Swedish man with ropey arms and a thick Scandinavian accent. He carried a long hickory stick which he used to steady himself when he stood by the campfire and told adventure tales and scary stories. Always in the back of my mind was the threat he made on the first night of camp. He smiled through his yellowed teeth, "I've had this stick for decades, boys. It was my father's stick before me, and his father's before him. They herded sheep with it and fended off enemies in the night, but here at camp I call it the skull-cracker for boys who don't do what their counselors tell them to do."

He hiked up his khaki pants and rested his foot on a tree stump. "Who wants to hear a

scary story?" The older boys roared their approval. This was obviously a well-worn camp tradition. I and the other eight-year-olds sat on the pine log bench in front and stared up at Egil Forslund.

"How many of you know of the legend of the *Wendigo*?" The older boys waved their arms enthusiastically.

"The Inuit Indians call him by various names – *Wendigo, Witigo, Wee-Tee-Go*. His name means 'the evil spirit that devours mankind.' Pioneers here on the Prairie believed that a *Wendigo* was created every time a human had to resort to eating another man's flesh." He pointed his stick at the dark woods behind us. "In these woods the *Wendigo* awaits. Tall and thin, he is driven by a maddening hunger. And many a young, tender camper has gone missing in these woods, never to be found again. So stick together, boys, look out for each other, and don't get lost."

Mr. Forslund was a good storyteller. But he was scaring me. I suppose that was the point. I wished my brother were here. But he wasn't coming to camp for another month. Forslund looked down at the eight-year-olds in the front row. "Whether the *Wendigo* seeks human flesh, or he acts as a portent of doom, just remember that stories about the *Wendigo* have been around since before the white man walked on the shores of White Earth Lake."

He stared up at the sky filled with cirrus clouds still visible over the lake in twilight, now turned a dark red-orange. "Good night, boys. Sleep well. And welcome to camp."

On the back benches the older boys whooped and hollered, and I wondered if they were cheering about the fear that gripped the eight-year-olds as we sat motionless on our

bench, waiting for our counselor to take us back to our cabin for the night. Jerry Gunderson, our counselor, a University of Minnesota varsity bantamweight wrestler, led us up the long dirt path to Cabin Six. Bill Bohlander, our other counselor and wide receiver for the U. of M. football team, trailed behind. As we walked we waved our flashlights at the trees. We looked like a search party hunting for a victim in the forest. In our cabin we finished putting our clothes in our lockers and stowing our trunks under the bunk beds.

"Ratner," Jerry Gunderson shouted at me, "What's this?" He held a jar of Skippy peanut butter.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? I took it out of your trunk. Didn't you read the camp manual we sent you? No snacks in the cabins. They attract rats. Get over here."

My cabin mates stared as Jerry took his Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity paddle down from the wall. "Bend over."

"I didn't do anything."

"You broke the rules. Next time you'll know." He slapped his palm with the narrow wooden frat paddle that was drilled full of holes.

"How come you have holes in your paddle?" I asked.

"Better aerodynamics. I can paddle your ass with less wind resistance." He swung the paddle back and forth. "I drilled them out on a drill press. Now bend over."

I didn't bend over, but he struck me on the butt anyway, hard and repeatedly. I began to cry, and I shouted, "I didn't put the peanut butter in there. My dad's girlfriend did." I

ran to my bunk and buried my face in my pillow.

Jerry Gunderson came over and sat on the edge of my bunk. He put his hand on my shoulder. “You didn’t bring the peanut butter?”

“No.”

“Your dad’s girlfriend put it in there?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, man. Look, I’m sorry.

“I didn’t even know it was there,” I shouted into my pillow.

He appeared to feel bad for having paddled me because of a misunderstanding over who put the peanut butter in my trunk. But it was embarrassing crying in front of my new cabin mates, my butt hurt, and now, with his obvious taste for violence, Jerry Gunderson couldn’t be trusted.

“I’m sorry, kid, I really am. Buddies?” He held out his hand for me to shake, but I batted it away and rolled over in my bunk and faced the wall.

“Time to brush, pee, and wash.” Jerry ushered us all outside in our pajamas to the use outhouse and brush our teeth and wash our faces over a long sheet-metal trough with faucets. When we were tucked in our bunks, Jerry dragged a folding chair into our wing of the cabin.

“You guys know about the *Wendigo* now, right? From Mr. Forslund’s story?”

None of us spoke.

“We have a tradition here at camp to try and keep every one of you safe. So if you hear anything in the woods tonight, you wake me up and let me know, and I’ll protect

you guys. Okay? No talking, now. Good night." He turned out the lights and dragged his chair back into the counselors' wing. I lay on my bunk listening to the night breeze.

Then from hundreds of yards away came an agonized cry, then silence. The cry came again, only this time it was closer. Someone or something was tromping through the underbrush and it was approaching our cabin.

"Jerry," called one of the campers. "There's something out there."

"Go back to sleep," he said from the next room. "Don't worry, you guys are safe."

Whatever was out there was now very close, and it was howling. Then something hurled itself against the wall of our cabin, screaming and wailing. It felt like the cabin was being knocked off its foundation. I stood up on my bunk and peered out the window. Standing in the moonlight in his camp shorts and t-shirt, pounding on the wall of the cabin and howling as only a college athlete can, was our other counselor Bill Bohlander. A few of the eight-year-olds were crying.

"It's just Bill Bohlander," I said, lying back down in my bunk.

Jerry Gunderson ran into the room with a flashlight, "What the heck was that? Did you guys make that noise?"

"Yeah," I said. "That was us. After you left, we dressed up as little *Wendigos* and ran outside and threw ourselves against the cabin."

"Is he still out there?" said Gunderson, trying to continue the charade.

"It's over, Jerry," I said. "We killed him."

"Killed who?" he said.

"Bill Bohlander. We killed Bill Bohlander."

Bohlander walked into the cabin and shined his flashlight into our faces. “Man, that was a tough fight. I’ve never seen one so big.”

“What, the booger in your nose?” said my bunkmate, Chucky Flynn. We all laughed.

“No, the *Wendigo*. He was gigantic, like a sea monster,” said Bohlander.

“You’re the sea monster, Bill,” said Chucky.

“I am not. That was for real.”

“As real as Disneyland,” said another camper.

“You guys are no fun at all. Can’t you be scared for even a minute?”

“We were scared at the campfire,” I said. “But this was stupid.”

“Shut up and go to bed,” Bohlander said. He seemed offended. On his way out he slammed the door to the counselors’ wing.

I suppose I was a logical candidate for fear and terror at the mention of monsters in the night. But the *Wendigo* masquerade seemed almost silly. I was proud of my relatively fearless pose in contrast to the tears of some of my cabin mates. My fears had nothing to do with monsters in the woods. They came from within, and they were unexpected. There were nights at camp when I dreamed that outside the window down on the grass in the dark was a presence, a gloomy thing that I didn’t understand and that I feared.

Days went by smoothly enough in my first month at Camp White Earth. Every morning at breakfast I toasted a piece of Wonder Bread and loaded it up with a few tablespoons of white sugar and savored each bite. My cabin mates liked my sugar toast, and I showed them how to make it. During morning and afternoon activity I made lanyards, beaded belts, learned to do the backstroke, paddled canoes, drove motor boats,

and sang Elvis Presley's *Heartbreak Hotel* at talent night:

It's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel,
Where I'll be so lonely, baby,
Well, I'm so lonely
I'm so lonely I could die.

The third week of camp Bill Bohlander drove us in an outboard motorboat around White Earth Lake. As we glided across the water I stared up at the hills covered with deep green second-growth douglas fir and birch trees.

"Ratner your parents are here," said Bohlander.

I had no idea my dad was coming to visit me. I turned around and looked toward shore. My dad and Alma Jane were tiny dots on the dock. I began to cry. The noise of the motor and the wind masked my crying, but I was embarrassed in front of my friends. As the boat drew close to shore I could see that my dad had put on weight. He looked uncomfortable. Alma Jane wore a crisp white sleeveless blouse and Bermuda shorts. She waved and smiled. On her left hand was a diamond ring. As I got out of the boat Ajay hugged me and showed me her ring.

"Your daddy gave this to me. Isn't it pretty?" She rotated her hand in the sun, and the light reflected off the diamond mounted in its gold band. "It means he wants to marry me. I hope that's okay with you."

I liked Ajay. I liked her cabin on the lake in Zimmerman, Minnesota. I liked the way she cooked suppers for us. I remembered all the talk about how my dad should find a new mom for me and my brother. Our new mom was Ajay. I wasn't sure how to introduce her to Bill Bohlander and my cabin mates, so I just said, "This is my dad and Alma Jane.

They're getting married."

On our walk through camp Alma Jane was chatty and wanted to know all about the place. My dad seemed preoccupied and not particularly happy to be there. I wondered if he was uncomfortable about my seeing him with someone other than my mom. I told Ajay about getting paddled for having the jar of Skippy Peanut Butter in my trunk.

"Well, I don't understand why your counselor didn't just take the peanut butter for himself. He didn't have to beat you."

I wanted my dad to come to my defense and dress down Jerry Gunderson for smacking me with his fraternity paddle, but he didn't seem to want to get involved. My dad and Ajay joined me for lunch in the mess hall, then they left to continue their summer vacation together. Their visit was unexpected. And seeing my dad in less than his usual ebullient mood was troubling. He didn't seem very happy to see me, and I took it personally.

That afternoon during rest hour my bunkmate Chucky Flynn stepped on my new Converse sneakers. "Watch where the fuck you're walking," I shouted.

Bill Bohlander walked into our wing. "Did I hear what I think I heard? You know what we do to pottymouths who use bad words at Camp White Earth? We wash their mouths out with soap."

I had heard the expression, *wash your mouth out with soap,* but I always thought it was metaphorical. Bohlander took a knife from his belt, got a fresh bar of Ivory Soap off his shelf, unwrapped it, cut it into quarters, and handed me a piece.

"Down the hatch, pottymouth," he said.

I stared at the white cube of soap in my hand.

"Just get it over with. It's easier that way."

The other campers gathered around and watched. Chucky Flynn said, "Don't eat it, Ratner. He can't make you do that."

Bohlander stood up from his bunk. "Okay, who's next?" and he brandished the remaining chunks of soap.

I tried to think of my favorite chocolate candy, Marshal Fields' *Frango Mints*, I raised the soap to my mouth and took a bite. As I chewed, my mouth and my throat began to burn.

"Finish it," said Bohlander.

The counselors at Camp White Earth were athletes. So were my father and my brother. But there was an untrustworthy strain of cruelty these young men seemed to share. *I am not like you,* I thought. *You are a lesser being, you are stupid.*

When I finished eating the quarter-bar of Ivory bath soap, Bohlander said, "Enjoy your supper."

That night the camp cook prepared hamburgers grilled over a campfire. They smelled delicious, but they tasted like Ivory soap. My mouth felt like it had been doused with gasoline and lit on fire.

The next afternoon on the softball field my cabin divided up into teams. It was hot and humid, so the counselors stripped down to their jockstraps. My bunkmate Chucky Flynn was a lousy ball player, and no one could decide what team he should play on, so while they argued about it, I sat down in the outfield. The next thing I knew the Sports

Director, Rich Borstad, had snuck up behind me, and wearing only his jockstrap he squatted down on my head, his balls dangling on my forehead and his asshole resting on my scalp.

I crumpled and rolled, an escape method I'd used many times with my brother. I rubbed my scalp. "Eeeew, why did you do that?"

"No sitting down on the ball field. We've got rules you know."

On the way back to my cabin after softball, Rich Borstad came up behind me on the trail and tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, kid, what's that brown spot on the top of your head?"

"It's counselor poop," I said. This became a running joke between me and Borstad who became a much-needed ally.

My counselors often acted angry and seemed immature for their age. I missed my brother and my dad. Though he often mentioned the poop stain on my scalp, Rich Borstad, varsity fullback and leading ground-gainer for the University of Minnesota Golden Gophers, became my friend. Whenever Jerry Gunderson or Bill Bohlander lashed out at one of us, and Rich saw it, he would give them a quick punch to the shoulder to calm them down. "They're just little kids," he said "Give them some slack."

At night before bed our counselor Jerry Gunderson decided to set aside the house of horrors he helped create the night of *The Wendigo*, and instead he led us in a recitation of the twenty-third psalm. I hadn't heard the twenty-third psalm before; it wasn't part of the spiritual canon at the Unitarian Society. It was intriguing, if a bit frightening. One line I repeated in silence as Gunderson led us through it: *Yea, though I walk through the valley*

of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. What evil was there to fear? I felt safe surrounded by campers and counselors. Even when they tried to scare us with pantomimes like *The Wendigo*, I knew they were just big, galumphy college athletes. And at home I had my older brother and my broad-chested father with his big, welcoming, hairy arms. In the twenty-third psalm the Old Testament God was a bit of an abstraction to me, a mythic figure. *Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me,* didn't register much. Night after night we recited the twenty-third psalm together in Cabin Six, and I saw an imagined place appearing like in a stereoscope, a vast mountain pass covered in shadow by an unseen, formless presence. As for *A table for me, in the presence of my enemies*, I wasn't sure who my enemies should be. *The Wendigo?* Bill Bohlander? Every night that summer I put myself to sleep by concentrating on a more comforting fantasy: I am alone in the woods, lost, the sun is going down. I walk through an unfamiliar landscape, and I fall and twist my ankle. The shadows are growing long, the forest floor is getting cold, and from behind a thick grove of trees comes a chestnut-haired woman dressed in a long flowing robe. She walks toward me followed by a bevy of women, like in a Greek pageant. They are smiling, murmuring, and giggling to each other, *Oh, look at him, he's hurt,* and the lead one with a saintly look of concern on her face reaches down and gently takes me in her arms, and the other women gather around, mopping the sweat from my brow with cloths scented in lavender. They caress me as they walk me through the woods to a sloping open meadow, and they lay me down on the soft grass. The leader stands over me, letting her gown fall. She is naked, and she makes love to me, slowly, gently. It was almost always the same; sometimes I skin my knee as I fall, and the women in

diaphanous gowns dress my wounds; sometimes they cool my swollen ankle by blowing their breath on it; sometimes I am seized by an allergic fit and they hold me until it passes.

The first month at Camp White Earth came to a ritual-filled end with a farewell supper for the departing campers, extra desserts, and teary-eyed goodbyes from staff and campers the next morning as the bus pulled away. Of the ninety campers, only six of us stayed on for the second month. It would be a few days before campers arrived, including my brother. I was excited that Pete was coming. I was proud to introduce my counselors and cabin mates to my older brother. Though I was the youngest of the six remaining campers I felt privileged. We ate with the counselors at every meal. We were allowed to choose our own activities while the camp was cleaned and prepped for the next batch of kids who were coming in August. The barriers of age and authority seemed to drop away if only for a few days.

The day before the second month was to start, a group of older campers took me sailing in a small skiff. In the middle of the lake they dropped anchor and gathered around me.

"Tell us about Ruby," one of them said. I was mortified. In the three summers that had passed since my brother caught me naked with Ruby in our cabin at Guillick's Resort, he had obviously told his camp friends about Ruby.

"Tell us about Ruby or we'll tip over the sailboat and you'll drown."

So I told them. Everything. They cackled and slapped each other on the back. Revealing the details to these boys of my intimacies with Ruby wasn't a proud moment.

It was a betrayal of Ruby and the love I felt we shared.

The next day the camp buses arrived filled with second-month campers including my brother Pete. I stood with the counselors and watched as dozens of excited kids bounded out of the bus. My brother stepped down from the bus surrounded by friends. There were hugs and handshakes. I ran up to Pete and tapped his arm. He looked down at me, said an unenthusiastic, *Hi,* and walked away with his friends. I had told everyone at camp during the few interim days that my big brother was coming. I was embarrassed and hurt.

The afternoon activity was group swim. I got my swim suit on and walked down to the waterfront. I felt like crying, but I held it in until I got into the water. I figured no one would notice if my head was submerged under water. So I began to swim laps, and as I swam, I cried. I stayed in the water bobbing my head up and down until I stopped crying. All the other campers' eyes were red from swimming, so no one knew. My camouflage had worked. I returned to my cabin and got acquainted with my new cabin mates.

That night a supper of hot dogs and potato chips was served on the lawn outside the mess hall. One of the older boys who took me sailing during the interim break approached me. He squatted down and grinned at me and my eight-year-old friends. He squeezed my shoulder and winked. "How's Ruby?"

The next day at rest hour the same boy came into our cabin wing accompanied by some of the other boys who were on the sailboat. He spoke in a hushed tone. "Did you tell your little friends here about Ruby?"

"No."

"So, when you think about her, do you *whack off* or *jack off?"*

"I don't know," I said.

"Do you know the difference between *whacking off* and *jacking off?"*

"No."

My cabin mates were silent but riveted on the conversation.

"Whacking off is when you stroke your dick and think of girls, but *jacking off* is a mortal sin."

"What's a mortal sin?" I said.

"It's when you do something so bad you go to hell and burn for eternity for what you did."

"Who believes that?" asked my bunkmate Chucky Flynn.

"Everybody believes it. The Pope, the Catholic Church, the whole world. It's true."

I rolled over and took out an *Archie and Jughead* comic book and started reading. "I don't believe it," I said.

The older boy stood up. "You're going to burn in hell," he said, and he and his friends left. I was glad that I went to the Unitarian Church and an Episcopal school; at Blake we had to say prayers and sing old English hymns, but we didn't have to fear burning in hell for eternity.

I came down with a cold, so I had to spend a day and a night in the Infirmary and wasn't allowed to travel with the rest of the campers to Itasca State Park, the headwaters of the Mississippi River, where we were going to see Dakota Sioux Indians dance in the parking lot of the gift shop that was filled with candy and souvenirs.

That afternoon the camp nurse woke me up. "You have visitors."

My brother Pete stood at the edge of my bed with a couple of friends from his cabin. He set a paper bag next to me. “Open it,” he said.

Inside was an Indian beaded belt, an Itasca State Park paperweight made from a painted rock, and a small, impressive-looking carving knife inside a leather sheath.

“You couldn’t go today, so I got you presents. You like them?”

I felt a rush of pride and love for my brother. “These are really nice,” I said.

They were more than nice, they were evidence that my brother thought of me, that he cared for me and looked out for me. I stared at him in his olive drab cargo pants and black t-shirt. My brother meant the world to me.

At the end of August I returned home from my sixty days at camp. My father’s colleagues from work had arranged an engagement party for my dad and Alma Jane at the Calhoun Beach Club on the west side of Minneapolis by Lake Calhoun. It was Saturday afternoon. My brother was off with his friends, but my dad and Alma Jane had asked me to come to the party. Lake Calhoun was filled with sail boats scooting back and forth in the wind. The guests at the party were advertising people and a few neighbors. I was the only child. On the serving table were napkins and a banner that said, *Alma Jane & Joe: The Solid Gold Couple.* I stared at the gold writing. I was going into third grade and hadn’t learned the word, *solid.*

“Alma Jane and Joe” I said aloud, “The Soiled Gold Couple.” That got a big laugh from the room. I was pleased that people thought I was funny.

“*Solid* gold couple, honey,” Alma Jane whispered, “Not *soiled.”*

I felt embarrassed and bored. Champagne was poured and toasts were made, and soon

it was time for the party to move to a restaurant downtown. My dad knew that I probably had enough of the party, so he arranged a ride home for me with one of his young copywriters. We said goodbye, and people thanked me for the *Soiled Gold Couple*.

My house was only fifteen minutes from the Calhoun Beach Club, but I didn't recognize the streets the young couple drove me down. I said nothing. They weren't speaking either. Then it came upon me—an unnerving certainty that I was being kidnapped. These people weren't talking to me, because they were going to do something bad to me. I stared at the back of the woman's hatless head, her paste jewelry earrings the color of eggplant. The man's hair was cropped close to his neck and his ears stuck out. It was August, but I felt cold. The car smelled of gasoline. We passed 42nd and Dupont Avenue where every morning the Blake School bus picked up my friend Buchan MacDonald. I wanted Mrs. MacDonald to come outside so I could let her know I was in a car with strangers. I didn't doubt for a moment that doom awaited me. I didn't think about my dad or my brother or my mother, I just sat in the back of the car, my fists balled up in my pockets, afraid to speak, helpless, alone. When the car stopped at a stoplight I counted backwards from ten like in a rocket launch. If the car took off before I hit zero, my luck could improve and I might make it home. If the car waited, the engine ticking, the two people in the front seat sitting stock still, my luck diminished. These parameters were an internal logic that served as rules, immutable, unchangeable.

The car pulled up in front of my house. I didn't want them to know that I was certain they were going to take me somewhere besides my home. I got out slowly and counted my steps as I walked toward my house. I had begun to count in order to mark time. When

walking, I counted backwards; when riding in a car I counted with my fingers and kept rhythms of five. At night in bed I rolled my head and counted in sets of two or four or eight, as in a song. If I were careful, if I were vigilant, when putting on my shoes, opening a door, going up steps, if I counted and finished the task before I reached zero, I could hold off trouble and I would survive.

Our New Family

Alma Jane and my dad scheduled their wedding for November. I was eight and my brother Pete was fourteen. Alma Jane took us shopping for our wedding outfits. I thought it was a nice gesture that she consulted me and my brother and didn't simply dictate what we should wear to the wedding. I knew exactly what I wanted. I led the way into the Thom McAn Shoe Store which featured an x-ray machine by the front door -- a shoe-fitting fluoroscope. Children were invited to place their feet in a pair of shoes and place them inside the x-ray machine. I knew my shoe size and asked the clerk for a pair of black penny loafers like my brother wore. He produced a pair of Buster Browns. They were all wrong. I asked for alternatives. He brought out a pair of size seven black Bass Weejun penny loafers, the very ones I had envisioned. I slipped my feet into them, and I walked around the store. They felt like slippers for royalty, no heel slippage, no pinching, a perfect fit. I stepped up to the x-ray machine, slid my feet under the main beam, pressed the large red metal button, and the machine hummed to life and produced an x-ray image of my eight-year-old feet in the viewing screen. I wiggled my toes to be sure the machine wasn't fake; the toes in the x-ray wiggled along with me. I was the proud owner of a pair

of shiny black Bass Weejun loafers like Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain*. The strap across the top had a split design that looked like a pair of lips into which I could hide dimes for emergency phone calls.

I stepped down from the machine, kicked off my new loafers, the clerk wrapped them in tissue paper, and he handed the box to Alma Jane. She asked for two more pairs of the same shoe in my brother's and my dad's sizes. She paid cash for them. She allowed me to carry mine to the car.

"Very nice choice," she said. "You knew just what you wanted, didn't you? Now, you mustn't wear them. We want them to look nice for the wedding."

The wedding was six weeks away, a protracted stretch of time. I stored my loafers in my closet, and every afternoon I took them out of the box and put them on. I walked back and forth across my bedroom floor, testing the friction of the unmarred leather soles on the carpet, watching the glint of the bedroom lights on the polished tips of my shoes.

The wedding took place in a rented house at 36th & Blaisdell -- a three-story red brick colonial house just like our house on 47th Street. It was a Saturday afternoon in November, 1955, twelve months after my mother died. The house was full of flowers, catered food, cigarette smoke, and gin-laced Hawaiian punch in cut crystal bowls. My dad, Pete, and I wore identical blue serge suits and our black penny loafers. We looked like The Kingston Trio on The Ed Sullivan Show. That day my brother and I inherited a new family: Alma Jane's mother whom we called Gram, Alma Jane's brother Uncle Cliff, his wife Auntie Del, and my step-cousins Aimee, Anissa, and Glenn. My dad's younger brother, my red-haired Uncle Gerry, was the best man, and he and my dad

hustled about, checking their watches, shaking hands, welcoming guests. I felt buoyed up by the presence of my Uncle Gerry and Aunt Eunice, Aunt Ann and Uncle Jimmy – solid flesh and blood family, my family. And my mother's big sister, my Aunt Caroline was there in a hat and veil and a cranberry velour dress that showed off her womanly figure; she was a taller, fleshier version of my mother.

My dad was in an upbeat mood. I saw no trace of the sadness that marked his behavior in the months after my mother died. We had lived in my mother's absence for twelve months in the beige, roomy emptiness of the house that she had helped pick out for us two years earlier. And now, today was a celebration, not a denial of my mother or a departing from her, but something new, with a wedding cake and a string quartet, my brother dancing with our new cousins, everyone in their best clothes, our blue serge suits and new black penny-loafers. The wedding was officiated by our Unitarian minister, Carl Storm, whom my mother had loved and respected, whose counsel she had sought every Thursday afternoon at four. No, this was a good day.

My mother's family, my dad's family, and Alma Jane's family all blended together, eating wedding cake, drinking punch. While my brother danced with Aimee and Anissa, I ate lunch at the family table with cousin Glenn and his father, Cliff. They were large, taciturn men who hid behind thick horn-rimmed glasses and had low, inexpressive voices. They nearly always sat side-by-side. I wondered if one of them wandered off, would the other one disappear?

My new Uncle Cliff sat across the table from me. "Billy, here." He handed me a cup full of punch.

"That's booze," I said.

"I know," he whispered. "It's gin. It's good. Drink up."

I was eight years old. My dad had let me taste his drinks before, so I wasn't terribly curious about the gin punch. I checked to see if my dad was watching. He was dancing with Alma Jane. I took a sip and winced as the gin-laced punch coated my throat, but the near-instant warmth it produced in my face felt good. Uncle Cliff watched me drink, and he laughed. He thought it was funny. I rather enjoyed it myself.

After Alma Jane and my dad returned from their Honolulu honeymoon, family life began to return to our house. We saw my new cousins often. Glenn was the only other boy, so at family events Alma Jane usually sat me and Pete next to Glenn. I didn't quite trust Glenn. There was something about the thickness of his brow, the monotone he spoke in. He rarely smiled or even looked at me. When he was around I sought protection by sitting next to my brother Pete who was older than Glenn. Pete had grown taller. He looked like Paul Newman. He wore skinny leather belts, pleated pants, tan suede buck shoes. He was a handsome boy with sun-tipped, curly, brown hair. His friends in south Minneapolis called me "Little Pete." That made me feel proud.

On our first Fourth of July together as a new family, my dad drove us to the cousins' house in Edina. The party was full of red white and blue decorations and paper goods from Auntie Del's party closet. She served bowls of snacks that passed for holiday food. My girl cousins had chocolates and cologne, and they danced to their 45s of Peggy Lee and Clyde McPhatter. It was a relaxed day. My stepmother was the life of the party. I ate

Hydrox cookies and potato salad.

"When can we go?" I whispered to my dad.

"Slow down, son. We'll get there."

Cousin Glenn came up to me. "Do you want to blast the bark off the trees with a firecracker?"

It felt like a test question. If I said yes it would mean I liked to hurt trees. So I said no.

"Why? Are you chicken?"

"No."

"Come on then." Glenn grabbed my arm and led me into his mother's garage. From behind some boxes he pulled a brown paper bag.

"M-80s," he said. "Quarter-sticks of dynamite. They can blow your fingers off if you're not careful. Here."

He handed me an M-80 -- a silver cardboard barrel the size of a half roll of dimes with a thick green fuse sticking out of the side. He gave me a box of Diamond matches. I wondered if he were trying to arrange it so that I would maim myself.

"Don't light it until we get to the tree," he said.

I followed Glenn into his back yard where a tall, healthy-looking elm tree stood shading the house. Glenn grabbed the M-80 from my hand and wedged it under a hunk of bark on the back side of the tree.

"Light it," he said.

I pictured the fuse burning faster than a rattlesnake in a coal mine in an episode of *Have Gun Will Travel* where Richard Boone stomps out the dynamite fuse and bashes the

bad guy, saving the town from blowing sky high.

"You light it," I said, and I backed away from the tree. He grabbed my chin and made me look at him. He smelled like donuts.

"Are you chicken shit?"

"No."

"Then light it."

"Why do you want to hurt the tree?"

"It's not going to hurt the stupid tree." He struck a match and touched it to the fuse.

I ran away as fast as I could. The loud explosive crack made everyone's heads turn.

"Glenn," his mother yelled, "Don't do that. Stop it."

"Billy did it," he said.

My dad and my brother sat on lawn chairs by the barbeque. My dad winked at me as if to say, *Our new stepfamily is a little squirrely, son. Don't worry about it.*

Glenn had a devious look on his face. "Let's go water the lawn," he said, and he walked me to the far corner of the yard where a garden hose was connected to a sprinkler. He unscrewed the hose and sprayed a strong stream of water at his mother's roses causing petals to scatter and fall to the ground. Then he turned the hose on me. He grabbed the back of my head and shoved the hose in my mouth. I kicked him in the leg as hard as I could, and he crumpled, dropping the hose and whining like a much younger child, and I ran to the safety of my dad's lap. Cousin or not, Glenn was bad company. Fortunately I never saw much of him after that. When Glenn graduated high school Anissa showed me Glenn's yearbook. I leafed through it looking for photos of Glenn –

Glenn seated in study hall, Glenn on lunchroom duty, Glenn's senior graduation photo. But in every photograph Glenn's face was erased, leaving images of a well-dressed boy with a blank head.

"Who did this?" I asked Anissa.

"Glenn did."

"Why?"

"He doesn't like the photos," she said.

We continued to visit our girl stepcousins. Aimee took me for rides in her Nash Rambler convertible wearing a bikini. Anissa gave me her 45 rpm record of Patti Page singing *How Much is That Doggie in the Window.*

Alma Jane had been Director of Marketing at Campbell-Mithun Advertising where my dad worked, but after they got married she quit her job and dedicated her time to raising me and my brother. She initiated adoption proceedings.

My Aunt Caroline told me, "Your stepmother doesn't have to adopt you. She married your father; legally that's enough. But she's adopting you because she loves you. She never had her own kids. Your stepmother has a big heart. Tell her that you know that."

When Alma Jane moved into our house she began cleaning it up. My mother had never been a fastidious housekeeper. When she was alive our house was filled with books, record albums of operas and symphonies, political campaign materials – evidence of a rich cultural life.

In the front hallway sealed moving boxes with Alma Jane's handwriting on them

appeared and disappeared. New bedspreads, pillows, and linens were put on our beds. The Tiki wallpaper in my parents' bedroom was replaced with gold-flecked grasscloth.

The last gift I had given to my mother was a tiny gold-plated ashtray for her purse. She smoked Kent filter cigarettes. She held her cigarette elegantly in her long pale fingers, and on her frequent visits to oncologists she enjoyed a cigarette in the waiting room, and she extinguished it in the ashtray I had given her. Shaped like a skillet it had a green paste jewel glued to its hinged lid which snapped shut and kept cigarette butts neatly tucked away inside her purse until she had the opportunity to dispose of them.

Alma Jane handed me my mother's gold-plated ashtray inside its original Dayton's Department Store box.

"Your dad told me you gave this to your mother as a gift. I thought you might want to have it. We've gotten rid of some of her things."

"Where did you take them?" I asked.

"Goodwill, thrift stores. People will use them. She had some very nice things."

That night Alma Jane came up to my bedroom to tuck me in. Under her bathrobe she wore a rather revealing nightgown. As she fluffed my pillows, her breasts hung directly over my face like moons over Saturn. I punched one of them.

"Ouch. That hurt. Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry," I said.

At school my friend Stoddy Crane asked me if I knew how to ride a bike.

"I know how," I said.

"Yeah, but you use training wheels," he said.

"It's my brother's bike. It's too big for me right now."

"So, you don't know how to ride a bike. Why don't you just ride a trike instead?" he said. "Here, I'll make you a bike your size." Stoddy grabbed a twig and began breaking it into pieces. "Can you ride this?" He handed me the bent-up sticks.

I knew that Stoddy's mother had been hospitalized for an extended stay that year. She had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Stoddy was being raised by his father. My father had married Alma Jane; my life had begun to regain a semblance of normalcy. I considered Alma Jane our second mother.

"I may not know how to ride a bike yet," I said to Stoddy. "But at least I have a mother."

He lunged at me and we rolled around on the ground pulling hair and punching each other. Athletic Director Chub Bettles ran up and separated us. He walked us to the Principal's office, and Stoddy and I cursed at each other.

Our Principal Mr. Runkle sat behind his desk and fussed with his pens and papers. "Boys, I have never confronted a situation like this before. I don't know what to say to you. I don't even know if I should call your dads. I don't think they'd know what to do either."

Our meals at school were served in the large mint-green lunchroom. The third-graders sat together at an oak table with our teacher, Mrs. Brustad. She had sheeny brown hair styled in a bouffant, neatly polished fingernails, and carmine red lipstick. Mrs. Brustad

was more businesslike and reserved than my favorite teacher Miss Olsen had been. The school kitchen was a large, busy place. Upper-classmen on work-study hustled trays of food in and out of the swinging doors. It was liver day. After I doused it with ketchup I didn't mind the taste of liver, but Joggs McCann didn't eat his liver. It wasn't until the end of the meal that Mrs. Brustad noticed Joggs' plate.

"Finish your liver, Joggs."

"I don't like it." Joggs McCann was a sweet boy with plump cheeks, and he spoke with a slight lisp. Whenever he bumped someone accidentally or knocked something off your desk, he would stare you in the eye while he hit himself in the head with a book; you had to beg Joggs to stop.

Mrs. Brustad got up from her end of the table and walked around to our side. "Eat your liver, Joggs." She picked up his fork and put it in his hand.

Joggs started to cry. "My mom doesn't make me eat liver."

"You're not at home, Joggs." Her tone was stern. The lunchroom was empty. The rest of the students and teachers had gone back to class. "We're going to sit here until you finish your liver." She cut a few pieces and speared them with Joggs' fork.

Joggs grimaced through his tears and began to eat the liver. As he chewed, burbling sounds came from his throat, and he vomited into his napkin. I thought the Principal, Mr. Runkle would come to our table and stop this, but the place was empty.

Mrs. Brustad pointed to the vomit in Joggs' napkin. "Eat that, Joggs."

Stoddy Crane and I looked at each other. "She shouldn't be doing this," I whispered. Stoddy nodded in agreement. Things had spun out of control. We could no longer trust

our schoolteacher.

Mrs. Brustad must have thought better of what she was doing to Joggs, and she stood up and dismissed us all from the table, including Joggs who was still crying. Throughout all of this she hadn't raised her voice. She hadn't hit Joggs. She had enacted a quiet, measured cruelty, and no one had stopped her. The third-graders walked back to class in silence. I felt as though I was looking across a deep chasm that existed between my teacher's mindless sadism and the grace and gentleness I had known from my mother. I felt bad for Joggs.

I had a dream that my dad and Alma Jane took me to a Christmas party in a house by the ocean. We lived in the upper Midwest over a thousand miles from the Eastern Seaboard, but in the dream it was just a short drive from our house to the Atlantic. The party was in a brick mansion by the water. It was cold. The ocean lapped against the rocks. The house was filled with adult strangers. I was eight years old. Ajay and my father walked me into the house and disappeared. I wandered about, grabbed a few Christmas cookies. Everyone was cordial to me, but I knew no one. The sun was going down. It was getting late. I began looking in every room for my dad and Ajay, walking up and down stairways, searching the house. I went into an anteroom with a floor-to-ceiling bay window and a view of the ocean. A tall, blonde woman walked in wearing a long, white, chiffon dress and straight dandelion-blonde hair pinned back. She stood before the window, silhouetted by the fading light of dusk. She smiled as if to apologize for something. Then she reached down and picked up the hem of her skirt. Her legs were

female and bare. She continued to raise her skirt until a large, veiny, circumcised penis swung into view, fringed by a halo of curly, blond pubic hair. I wasn't shocked or threatened. I stared at it. It was impressive. The woman with the penis just stood there, needing to show it to me. With that, the dream ended. When I woke up I wasn't inclined to share the dream with my brother or anyone else for that matter.

Miss Jean Dewey was my third-grade Music teacher. We met for class in her large thirty-seat music room with a black upright Steinway piano and a raised stage for performances. Miss Dewey was a thick-legged brunette with horn-rimmed glasses, long wool skirts, and breasts like huge scoops of ice cream. I had a crush on Miss Dewey, and I was afraid of her. She was strict, she allowed no nonsense in class. She was like a musical drill sergeant. She had a powerful voice, and when she demonstrated a measure of a song for us, I imagined that she could break a crystal goblet at twenty yards. She carried a conductor's baton, and when she was angry she pointed it at us like a rapier. In the third-grade play I was cast as Mars, God of War. Costumed like a farmer at war with the bee kingdom, I wore no pants and carried a metal sword almost bigger than I could handle. I'd played with swords before, but they were always my older brother's discarded Disney crap – generally plastic. What kind of soldier uses a plastic sword? I knew nothing of the heft, the weight of a real sword. I held it in one hand, and I stroked the blade. Had it been real it would have left a deep, clean, gash across my palm. I could hardly hold it up, let alone do anything like what Errol Flynn did in *Captain Blood.* I mounted the steps to Miss Dewey's stage. I let the sword hang limp at my side. I was

ready to skewer my enemy. I was ready to defend Miss Dewey. I was no longer showing off for my friends, I was Mars, God of War, stirring a cauldron of old blood and poisons that would raise up goose flesh on the devil's ass. Come near me and I'll cleave you in half and watch you totter to a bloody sleep.

The parents gathered in the back of the class for the play, and Miss Dewey called, "Scene." I stepped out from behind the curtain and lifted up my sword to brandish it while saying my first line, but the weight of it pulled my arm farther back than I had planned, and I nicked a chunk of plaster from the music room wall. Someone gasped. I continued with my lines, "I am Mars, son of Juno, father of Romulus, founder of Rome…" Playing Mars, God of War, was the first chance I ever had to go outside of myself, be bigger than myself. I wasn't embarrassed that I had knocked a chunk of stucco from the wall. I was Mars, God of War. After I finished my speech, Miss Dewey moved on to Diana the Huntress played by Joggs McCann. I picked up the chunk of plaster that I, or rather Mars, God of War, had knocked from the wall. Nobody mentioned it, nobody whispered, *You wrecked the place.* It was like in the theater when the scenery falls on the hero, and he just keeps delivering his soliloquy, and no one is the wiser. All I knew was that I had slammed a three pound iron sword into the wall, marring Miss Dewey's music room, and she said nothing. I attributed her silence to the power of my performance. I hadn't wrecked anything. I had transformed myself.

It was Friday night. The phone rang. "It's for you," said Alma Jane.

It was my neighbor friend, Danny Deems. He invited me over to play at his house.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” he whispered into the phone.

I told Alma Jane, who said, “I wonder what the surprise is. Maybe brownies?”

I walked across the couple of back yard lawns that separated Danny’s house from mine. His parents’ car was gone.

“Come upstairs,” Danny said. “I’ve got a surprise.”

I followed him up the steps to his older brother Ben’s room. Ben was sixteen. He was in my brother’s grade at school. The evening’s surprise was Ben. He lay on his bed naked, masturbating. Ben was thin and blonde. The whole Deems family was blonde. Just like the woman with the penis in my dream. Ben gazed at me through half-closed eyes as he moved his hand slowly up and down.

Danny stood by the bed. “Take your clothes off and lie on top of Ben. You can pretend you are fucking.”

I got an erection. I took my clothes off, and Ben took my hand and helped me mount him. He encouraged me to rub myself against his scrotum. He smelled of sweat and Planters Peanuts. I found this somewhat erotic, but I lost my erection.

Danny appeared to be in charge of the seduction, so I directed my complaint to him. “I don’t have a hard-on.”

He thought about this for a moment. “Pretend you’re fucking a woman.”

I lay back down on top of Ben, and I imagined myself with my music teacher, Miss Dewey, alone with her in her comfortable suburban bedroom, light streaming in through the Venetian blinds. She would unbutton her blouse, her beautifully formed breasts swollen beyond the silken borders of her brassiere. But even while imagining making

love with Miss Dewey, lying on top of Ben was no longer exciting. I rolled off. Ben got up and put on a bathrobe.

"Our mom and dad will be back pretty soon." Danny said, "You probably shouldn't tell anyone about what we did."

As I walked toward my house I wondered if I was supposed to feel guilty. I didn't. I was nine years old. I thought this was simply what boys did together sometimes. I honored my friend Danny's request and kept it to myself.

Ajay Finds My Collection

When I got home from school my UPS truck was on the dining room table.

"Billy, let's have a chat," my stepmother said. My entire collection of pictures of underwear models and bathing beauties was spread out on the dining room table.

"I am not angry," she said, "And I have decided not going to show these to your father."

She was trying to win my favor by appearing lenient, but she didn't understand my relationship with my dad. He wouldn't have been angry at me for collecting newspaper ads of women; he created pictures just like them at work. But Alma Jane felt she had something on me.

"These pictures of yours are not appropriate for a child."

"I got that stuff out of the newspaper," I said.

"I know, but altogether it's more like what you'd find in a college fraternity, not in a child's bedroom."

She gave me my UPS truck back, but not the photos. It had taken me years to build that collection. My display advertisements had allowed me to have intimate experiences with total strangers. I experienced imaginary relationships with models and beauty queens. As I perused their faces, I doted upon each one, and I often wondered, would she like me? *New Elizabeth Arden holds hair in place with a gossamer touch.* No, not her, she looks aloof, unfriendly, and I would turn the page. *So fresh! So fragrant! So wonderfully sure.* Yes, maybe this pink-cheeked one. She looks warm and friendly. A particular face in a magazine would strike my fancy, and I would spend time with her and add her to my collection. But now I'd have to start from scratch. Maybe Alma Jane would hide them, and when she and my dad went out, I would search the house until I found them. In the mean time my UPS truck was empty. I went into the den and turned on the TV.

When I watched television, I felt I was restoring some order to my universe. I focused on the faces of the actors, hosts, and commercial spokespersons selling cars, crunchy cereal, and trips to exotic places. I imagined owning the things I saw. *That's right, you too can win a trip to Hawaii, just copy down the number on your screen and call today.* I grabbed a pencil and wrote down the number. I went upstairs to the guest room, picked up the phone and dialed the number. An operator answered.

"I want to win the trip to Hawaii," I said.

"All right ma'am," she said, "What is your address?"

"I'm not a *ma'am,* I'm a guy."

"You sound awfully young," she said, and she hung up.

I tossed the phone number into the wastebasket and went back to watching TV. Every time the deep-voiced announcer came on, I talked along with him. *Put a smile in your smoking; in the whole wide world no cigarette satisfies like Chesterfield…Life-size pictures at lower cost. Want your TV big? Get a Motorola Television.*

"Why are you talking to the television?" Alma Jane stood in the doorway.

"I'm the announcer."

"I don't mind your imitating TV commercials, but go easy on the cigarettes," she said.

What she didn't know was that I started smoking when I was eight. Inside her desk she kept a box of *Sherman Pastels* with gold filter tips; the cigarettes were lime green, hot pink, purple, and sky blue, like they were made for children. One by one I stole them, and Danny Deems and I smoked them in his garage. I learned early that the way to dispel a mood that made me feel unhappy was to eat cookies, watch television, look at pictures of women, call a friend, or smoke a cigarette.

For our first Christmas together with Alma Jane, I wanted a set of colored chalk, a chalk board, and a brown leather jacket with a collar, like the one Marlon Brando wore in *Wild* One, except not black and without all those stupid zippers. I was eight years old.

Alma Jane said, "Is that all you want? Don't you want more than that?"

This meant that she was ready to give. I liked Christmas presents, but I felt like holding tough, staying minimal. I went to Dayton's Department Store with Danny Deems and his mom, and she gave us each a dime to operate the photo machine. I greased my

hair with butch wax, wore Danny's leather jacket, held up his Swiss Army knife to the camera and sneered. This was the image I wanted to give for Christmas, 1955. Lucky for me I had a natural predilection to be happy. When I was on an even keel, all was well. I could bury myself in tv, radio, drawing, and playing with my friends, arranging cadres of World War Two plastic soldiers, cowboys, and Indians into elaborate scenarios of war or deadly gang rivalries. We would build our towns on ping-pong tables or simply on the floor of our bedrooms, and we would play on into the night. John Waterhouse and I would stay up until three in the morning in his bedroom, dug in, waiting to do battle, plotting, dominating, vanquishing. For me it was all about how to have a good time while remaining insensate to death.

I had to go to the bathroom, so I opened my door, and my brother stood there in his doorway holding a six-inch buck knife.

"Hey, pimple-face," I said, ignoring the threat from the knife in his hand.

He glared at me and bounced the knife across the floor, and it landed point down in my foot – nothing serious, but enough to draw blood.

With this one foolish, clumsily violent move my brother had finally handed me my sword of triumph.

I stared him in the eye and screamed at the top of my lungs, *"Dad!"*

And dad came barreling up the two flights of steps to see who had wounded whom in this ongoing fraternal battle.

"What the hell is going on?" he said. "Why are you screaming? You're bleeding. What happened?"

I looked at my brother, and I savored his fear that was making his face turn pale and small.

"I dropped a knife on my foot." I said.

"Well, then why were you screaming?"

"It hurt. Look, I'm bleeding."

Slightly confused, my father shook his head, grabbed a box of Band-Aids, splashed a drip of mercurochrome on my foot, and went back downstairs.

I stared at my brother. I didn't have to say a thing. The situation said it all. *You have lost this round. From now on you owe me.* I felt like I had just made a large deposit in my own personal safety account.

Mr. Bob Close, my history teacher at Blake School, was a World War Two Army infantry veteran who fought the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. Fifteen years earlier he had watched fellow soldiers get killed by the hundreds in the French lavender fields near the Belgian border. Mr. Close's method of teaching was to lean back in his creaky oak office chair, swing his legs up onto his desk, and reminisce about the war. We were riveted on each and every story he told. After he told about fighting the war in Europe I went home and asked my dad to tell me about his fighting the Japanese in the Pacific.

All he volunteered was, "My men liked to drink on shore leave, and they'd come back to the ship staggering around and slurring their words, and I'd shout at them, *What*

the hell's wrong with you, sailor? Stand up straight like a soldier should. And they'd whine at me, *Lieutenant, I'm not drunk, I swear, I've just been eating candy."*

And he would elongated the word, *candy,* and I would laugh.

"Why did they say they were eating candy, Dad?"

He ignored my query, and though I questioned him repeatedly, he never gave away any more. He kept silent about the War. One time he was cleaning out the garage and I saw an old mud-encrusted old canteen. I picked it up.

"Put that down, son," He said. "I took that off the body of a dead Jap."

"Who was the dead guy, dad? Did you shoot him?

He wouldn't talk. Instead he took me for a walk to the drug store and bought me a G.I. Joe comic book. I'd never seen G.I. Joe. He was a boxy, muscular, brutish guy. He fought in the Korean War. In the opening frame of the comic we're in an extreme close-up. G.I. Joe's jaws are clenched, his veins bulge from his temples. He grits his teeth. He is unalterably furious. A mad killer. In the next panel is an Asian soldier in awkward foreign military garb. His skin is yellow. He's drawn with exaggeratedly slanted eyes that are dark, have no color, no light, more like a mask of evil than a person. The next panel explodes in gun fire, brutal red, orange, and black, hot lead blasting out of the barrel of a gun at a man's head, *YA WOUNDED ME, YA YELLOW-BELLIED COWARD. TAKE THAT!*

"Who was the dead guy with the canteen, Dad?"

He never said. After World War II, psychiatrists used the term *Battle Fatigue* to describe symptoms of stress occurring in soldiers who had seen action in war. My friend

John Stout's dad fought in the Army infantry in the Battle of the Bulge, and twenty years after the war John's dad underwent electro-convulsive shock therapy which was explained as treatment for the battle fatigue he still suffered as a result of the war.