

Freefall



by Larry Johnson



The Forum Press

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ISBN 0-9709353-1-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2001088356

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Printed and Published by



The Forum Press

Portland, Oregon

First Edition, First Printing

Printed in the United States of America

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to Glenna, my beloved wife,
who miraculously appeared after
I invented the Glenna in this story

Backword

This is a work of fiction. That's another way of saying it is a pack of lies. It press-gangs some real people I've known to serve as characters, some of them mashed together with others to create a composite like Glenna, for example. They're dressed in different names and so warped and masked by selective memory and a desire to spin a yarn that as characters they no longer resemble anyone living or dead.

And here's another thing: though this is a semi-autobiography of my coming of age, a time book-ended by two Democratic presidencies, John Kennedy's New Frontier and Jimmy Carter's National Malaise, I left many important people standing at the door, not letting them in, much to my surprise. Like my brother Eric who simply disappeared, or my best pals Bob Richter and Mike Straub and Bill Carlson, and many others. But I take no responsibility for that. I invented the narrator to tell the story, and once he got started he simply took over.

Preface

As we get older and unattached, we have no maps. When young we are given a set of maps. We take them and make some modifications while in formative years, planning careers and families. For some time those maps are useful and followed and we get the expected rewards. Then when we reach our zenith, we of necessity start going over a hill and down it, sometimes in a slow decline without noticing it, sometimes in a freefall where the spiritual and emotional G-forces are so overwhelming we never really find our balance again. It's as if, having lived together in a village of common (or subconscious) understandings, we are eventually and suddenly, each of us singly, thrown into a jungle to survive, without a compass.

There was a news item recently about a study released from the University of North Carolina. It said that women who divorce in mid-life commonly find a new lease on life. They become exhilarated with their new-found freedom and embark on things they always wanted to do. Good for them! The men, on the other hand, were more often than not depressed, reduced in their ambitions. Each day I find myself inventing my life, my ambition anew.

I think it is a good thing to send smoke signals from one jungle to others, just to let the world know a fire still burns, that we are not alone.

We must assume our existence as broadly as we in any way can; everything, even the unheard-of, must be possible in it. That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter. That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences that are called “visions,” the whole so-called “spirit-world,” death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God.

But fear of the inexplicable has not alone impoverished the existence of the individual; the relationship between one human being and another has also been cramped by it, as though it had been lifted out of the riverbed of endless possibilities and set down in a fallow spot on the bank, to which nothing happens. For it is not inertia alone that is responsible for human relationships repeating themselves from case to case, indescribably monotonous and unrenewed: it is shyness before any sort of new, unforeseeable experience with which one does not think oneself able to cope. But only someone who is ready for everything, who excludes nothing, not even the most enigmatical, will live the relation to another as something alive and will himself draw exhaustively from his own existence. For if we think of this existence of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it appears evident that most people learn to know only a corner of their room, a place by the window, a strip of floor on which they walk up and down. Thus they have a certain security. And yet that dangerous insecurity is so much more human which drives the prisoners in Poe’s stories to feel out the shapes of their horrible dungeons and not be strangers to the unspeakable terror of their abode.

We, however, are not prisoners. No traps or snares are set about us, and there is nothing which should intimidate or worry us. We are set down in life as in the element to which we best correspond, and over and above this we have through thousands of years of accommodation become so like this life, that when we hold still we are, through a happy mimicry, scarcely to be distinguished from all that surrounds us. We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. Has it terrors, they are our terrors; has it abysses, those abysses belong to us; are dangers at hand, we must try to love them. And if only we arrange our life according to that principle which counsels us that we must always hold to the difficult, then that which now still seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful.

How should we be able to forget those ancient myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter One

I'm not sure if it was Glenna who finally broke the shell and showed me the allures of failure, or whether it was Steve.

Glenna one day simply could take it no more. I don't know who at the Cosby Island Laund-Ro-Mat finally decided nobody was going to be taking her kids' clothes out of the drier, but it wasn't Glenna, that's for sure. She was already over 40 but that didn't matter. She was going to give it one more try at being a country & western queen.

Andy Hopper was there with his van and his bass guitar, and she was gone. Maybe she needed to fuck all the boys again and wake up in coke-induced vomit. I don't know about that either. But that's were it led. She came back to her husband, all washed-out and buggy-eyed, but of course then it was all over. He shut her out from what she called home for 15 years, like a plague-carrying rat. I hear she took up with some drifter after that, but again, I don't know for sure.

Steve was less dramatic and crazy. He simply stopped doing almost everything other than shave occasionally and deliver pizza. He told me he finally found the perfect state of being: feeling nothing, wanting nothing. He had once designed jet engines for airplanes. He's slow at making his pizza deliveries and therefore makes few tips. He would be fired from the Cosby Island Papa Pizza if Rudy Harris could ever get enough minimum-wage people to work for him. But in today's economy the competition for minimum-wage workers is just too fierce. So Steve has a lock on his job, but he has to put up

with a lot of Rudy's insults. But since he's numb to everything, he says Rudy's insults are like water off a duck's back.

Anyway, Steve was my best friend before he decided to be nothing, and Glenna used to work for my wife. My ex-wife now. I liked Glenna. I like Steve, but it's hard to keep up one-way conversations with somebody who has stopped talking. So I may have to give up on him.

When Glenna and Steve went out of orbit they cast off from them a gravitational pull that made my orbit go eccentric. Something in me just let go. I finally flew off, too, into space. I don't exactly know where I am now, I mean my soul part, I otherwise know where I live and what I want for breakfast, but for the most part, I'm happy. It took a while, but I'm happy.

Failure is an underrated thing. Actually hitting bottom frees you from the fear of it, because you're there and you notice you still are alive. Like most things, the reality is a lot less worse than the imagining of it. You still don't look that much different from everybody else on the street. If you're not completely crazy or addicted to something, you don't wind up as a bum wetting your pants, sleeping in filth or dying from poor nutrition and exposure. You simply become a gray person, and in time you learn to embrace the grayness, the loneliness you probably secretly wanted all along.

Life can get to be too much, you know. Too much conforming to other people's expectations and images of you, cramping yourself into a little ball until there is nothing of you left. Eventually, that trapped part of you has to go somewhere, and for many it is an escape to suicide. So in that way I was lucky. I flew out of orbit but landed here, in this little room in a house I share with some musicians, with a view to apartments across the street with their perpetually closed and cur-

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tained windows, this room with my computer and hotplate. I live a monastic kind of life. It's not so bad.

I have time to think. That's rare, I think. Our culture is set up to keep us from thinking: we scramble to work, we work, we scurry around, we collect things, we watch TV, we get drunk, we sleep, we go to ball games, we travel, always moving, never stopping. Not much time in there to think, to figure out whether it is all worth it.

One of the things I think when I think is that the 60's defined me, like so many other people. Just one little decade, but it left its imprint for all that came after. That decade, when I went from 17 to 27. It's the years when you are in your twenties that count for so much.

I started out the sixties as an exchange student to Zurich, Switzerland. I was smart and idealistic and skinny, ready to devour the world. When the sixties ended, much of what I thought would revolutionize the world had died on Dealey Plaza and in the rice paddies of Viet Nam. In 1969, man landed on the moon and I was a graduate student at Harvard with no real vision of what I would do when I left there, a husband and a father of a little girl. All the violence and the deceit visited throughout the 60's upon America by its government were among the first things to push my orbit into an eccentric loop.

Also tugging on my orbit like a rubber band so often that it would lose its shape was my marriage. I never settled into marriage, it was always a saddle with burrs under it. I never settled in. I think the best place for me is one where I get to be all alone, all by myself. But then I get really lonely and start the quixotic quest all over again to find a woman to warm up against. Those quests have all pretty much ended in failure. But as I say, failure isn't so bad a thing. To the ladies, God bless 'em!

In the 70's I became a lawyer, and for 20 and more years I wasted away in that awful profession, dealing with other people's conflicts (I hardly could handle my own!) and the endless gamesmanship of over-ego'ed asshole lawyers, when all I wanted was peace and quiet and harmony. I wanted unconditional love and long naps. But only got pieces of that here and there, and not long enough. In the end, I had to throw out the bathtub with the baby: I had to give up everything to finally get to here. It took a long time. I knew it would hurt, and it did. What I needed to get here were a couple of good examples of failure, some role models for disaster. I am grateful Glenna and Steve went flying off when they did, sucking me up in their wake.

Before I crashed and burned, my wife (now ex-wife) and I managed to have three children. They are well and do well. I thank God for them. They make it possible for me to say my life has meaning. For them alone I still keep up the pretense of caring about things, and also I try, still, to retain some façade of work and effort, all for their sake. I don't want much, need even less, so whatever surplus comes along I give to them. They see through me, though, they know I am a burn-out, a pretender. But they pretend I am all right, too, so that in the pretending we can get on to other things. Maybe someday, if it comes to that, I will be their role model for failure. Maybe in the way my Dad still is for me, from beyond the grave. He has the last laugh!

And they are so young, so young, my children. I look at them as if through a fish tank at guppies floating around. Their ages are: 22, 25 and 32. They are in their own defining years, in a world still full of violence and deceit, but nothing like the sixties. Their poisons from the Enemy - those fucking multinational corporations and the governments they boss around, including ours! - are much diluted. They are on tra-

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jectories of what most would call material success, and if that is what they want, then that's fine by me. God bless 'em! If they should ever hit the skids, though, then I hope they'll come to me, the secular monk, for soup and bread and balsams. I am good at comforting those in sorrow. I would make a good undertaker. Bring out your dead!

When I go out and walk in the city streets, not too far from Cosby Island, an island in the Puget Sound where the kids grew up in a self-consciously, maybe artificially nurtured "rural environment," I wonder in my urban meanderings what happened to all the people my age. They're not around, not visible. I am 57. I don't think that's old, but of course my kids do. I walk around and see only young people in the cafes and bars. Maybe that's because the University of Washington is not that far away. But I figure this: all the folks my age are at home, tired, watching TV, or doing something in their yard. Maybe they go to bed really early to get ready for tomorrow's rat race. Maybe they go into their dens with their plaques and their pictures of fishing trips, and they put a pornographic video on the VCR and beat off while the wife is making popcorn upstairs for the kids. What do I know? I know strange things do happen. Anyway, the over-40's are not on the streets. Not around here.

I don't have a yard. I do have a TV. I like watching "The Simpsons." Maybe because Homer is an even bigger failure than I am. Failures still keep score, I have noticed. Some are bigger failures than others. If you ever become a failure you will still have to deal with the competition.

When I was 17 and an exchange student to Switzerland I felt important. To get there I had to have been a straight-A student, which I pretty much was. I was an AFS exchange student. The American Field Service was first a collection of

ambulance drivers in World War I. They were there in France, taking the wounded and the dead out of the trenches, long before the United States, or rather our government - which was evil even then! - decided to jump in towards the end of that slaughter to begin, really on a major scale for the first time, to act like a World Power.

Which it was. All the other Great Powers lay bleeding on open fields full of the stench of cordite and rotting bodies. America was a teenager then, too, just like AFS-er me, full of juice, innocence and stupidity.

I think somebody told me that Ernest Hemingway (long before he blew his brains out with a shotgun) had been in the AFS. AFS, the exchange student program started by the ambulance drivers, has for years had alumni like me, and most of them are prominent people in commerce and government. In 1960 I figured some day, after I shone as an exchange student and then went to prominent colleges and universities and got degrees and awards, that I, too, would become a major figure, maybe famous, maybe powerful. I am not sure why that didn't happen, I certainly had the ego and the energy, and I did all the things I had planned to do. But somewhere in there I lost my plans and dreams, and I went out of orbit. It would be easy to say that I went crazy, because there are plenty of crazy people in my family, goodness knows. But I have examined this closely: I first went out of orbit, then I went crazy. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Anyway, I think it's a very good thing to be crazy. If I didn't have my neuroses I think I would feel a great void. I think most people who pass as normal spend a lot of time going through their pockets, looking for something, trying to find some level of acceptable insanity, if only to find something other than a martini to keep them going. Of course, there's

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another School of Thought: the normal people are part of the Living Dead, they just don't know it. They live normal lives in a bland white-bread kind of way and then walk down the normal exit ramp into the void, never once thinking, feeling, questioning, until the lights go out. I think my former best friend Steve would say to that: Yay!! Even though his normalcy is now spawned by what may be a very significant psychosis.

Life can be pretty dull without some ecstasies, as well as some lows to wallow in. Read Dostoyevsky or Sartre or Nietzsche. They can explain all of that far better than I can. The only people I trust are artists, and most of them are madder than a hatter.

When I was in Zurich, my Swiss "papa" in the family I lived with was then my age now. He came across as this big, powerful man who liked to boss people around, including his wife and two sons, Hans-Dieter and Kaspar. When I came back in 1980 for Kaspar's wedding, I found out Papa never did any of the work in the family's pharmaceutical business, it was diminutive Mami who did it all. Papa was too busy whoring around and drinking. The night Kaspar was married, Papa went nuts. I woke up in the middle of the night to cries from Mami. Papa was downstairs in his underwear, ranting and running around, drool on his face, a testicle dangling outside his underpants, and he was beating her up. I somehow got him to stop. He went back to bed, then later got up to go into the bathroom with an automatic pistol, where he threatened to kill himself when asked what he was doing locked in the bathroom. So I packed up my wife (now ex-wife) and daughter, and I just got the hell out of there.

Now there was a man who went truly crazy and out of his orbit, all at the same time! He was prepared to exit life because his boys would all be gone from home. Imagine how

that made Mami feel? Come to think of it, why did she stick around after that awful nightmare?

Later, I found out he was committed to a nuthouse for a while, then he calmed down, then he died a few years later in France, at the wheel of his car. Mami had gone into a store to get something. When she came back, there he was, dead as a doornail at the wheel. How about that?

My real father died in 1966 during the holdup of a grocery store. He was 45. He had gotten out of the store when he heard little pop-pop sounds going off in there. He put his groceries on top of his car, looked up into the sky and sighed. Like he knew what was going to happen. Then he went back into the store. Knowing him, he was probably thinking he could stop whatever was going on. But he never had a chance. When he walked back through the door of the store these two hopped-up teenage kids in ski masks shot him dead. Just like that.

That put another dent in my eccentric orbit.

As I say, the 60's were violent times.

I loved my Dad. I miss him.

My mother is 81 today. She's losing her memory. Her parents lived into their 90's but spent the last 10 years of their lives, both of them, in the brain fog of Alzheimer's, and I fear that's where Mom is headed, too. I smoke and drink and eat fatty foods and don't exercise worth a damn. If that means I lose the last 10 years of a life I could otherwise have, maybe I don't want them, anyway. Maybe I just don't give a shit. Maybe I don't give a rat's ass.

My maternal grandparents met in Spokane, Washington. Or maybe it was Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Anyway, she was

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around 18 or 20 and on a tour of the Northwest, singing opera songs. She had before that sung in the chorus of the Met in New York. My Mom says she also sang on the radio. Anyway, Babu (that's what I called my grandfather), an itinerant salesman, saw her sing and was immediately smitten. He was something like 32, I think. He sent her roses backstage every night for several nights running, each bouquet with a note asking her out for dinner. She kept the roses but wouldn't respond to the notes. One night, out of exasperation, she did, but with the express demand that if she did have dinner with him he would then promise to stop sending the flowers backstage. He accepted this condition, and three weeks later they were married. How about that?

Babu had been married before, but that was a family secret kept for years after his death. Frankly, I don't even know if my Nana ever knew about that secret, either. Divorce was considered shameful in times gone by. Imagine! A person who divorced was a disgrace to the community.

Another family secret kept under wraps for years was how my Uncle Phillip died. Phillip would have liked to have gone to France in World War I, just like the first AFS-ers, but he enlisted too late. By the time he got his doughboy uniform issued the war was over, and he was sent to some remote outpost near Greeley, Colorado. There wasn't much there, except for maybe the hand-tinted postcards he'd send home to Rosewood, Iowa, where my brother Paul and I found them decades later (along with his uniform in an old cedar chest; it smelled foully of mothballs, but we took turns putting it on, anyway).

Somewhere in Colorado was also a woman with whom Phillip fell in love. Then she jilted him. It was Babu, well into his Alzheimer's, who in 1962 blurted out to the whole dinner

table in the old brick house in Rosewood, Iowa, thereby revealing a truth none of us children were ever supposed to have known: “Phillip, the damned fool, blowing his brains out, all over a silly woman!” His wife, my Nana the opera singer, told him to hush up, but he was by then too deaf or senile to hear or care. Into the shocked void he continued to mumble something else. For the first time in my life, I saw what adult embarrassment was; silence dropped over the table like an anvil.

So, as I say, I was lucky. Phillip went straight out of orbit and crazy and right to the bottom of all bottoms, all in one shot, so to speak. Suicide, you see, was also shameful at one time. Killing yourself was a disgrace to society.

So, you see, as with gay and lesbian rights, failure has taken a long time to become acceptable, if not altogether respectable. I, for one, am glad that homosexuals are no longer killing themselves when their proclivities are “unmasked.” It was not so long ago when our evil government kept gays out of the military and denied them security clearances or jobs, all because they were squished into little balls of reduced identity, having to get their blowjobs in squalid Turkish baths or public restrooms.

For all I know, maybe Uncle Phillip blew his brains out because he was found getting a blowjob in a Turkish bath. Nobody ever could say who the “silly woman” was. You’d think the folks in Rosewood, Iowa, would have had a name for her, even a picture with her and Uncle Phillip with some falls in the background. And you’d think he wouldn’t have bothered to burn any love letters before putting his brains all over the walls of the hotel room where they found him, but as far as I know, there were no love letters. So maybe it was a guy. He was, after all, in the Army in a remote outpost in

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Colorado. But...who cares.

One of his tinted postcards shows a Denver that looks like a small bus stop surrounded by mountains. How time flies!

Glenna and Steve picked more evolved forms of self-destruction...or rather self-redefinition. I like that better. Glenna and Steve are failures, but live ones.

Maybe the word failure doesn't even fit anymore. I mean, take John Belushi - who used to make me laugh a lot and remind me of my grade-school friend Arty Halpern, who was Jewish and never at peace and harmony and who cut up a lot to get attention and approval - Belushi, like Glenna, somebody I also liked, woke up a lot in cocaine-induced vomit. Until one day he hit the bottom of all bottoms, and they had to dispose of his body. Now was Belushi, all in all, looking at the whole picture, a success or a failure?

See, we don't even think in those terms any more, do we? We say: what a loss, what a funny guy, poor Dan Akroyd, those guys were such buddies.

Frankly, Steve, who was my best friend, and I, we don't care anymore about what happened to John Belushi. We could give a rat's ass.

Chapter 2

Adolf Hitler also blew his brains out. Deep in the bowels of Berlin, in a bunker, in a room probably not much bigger than mine, Adolf Hitler put his lights out. At one time Adolf Hitler's armies occupied most of Europe. So I suppose you could say that, for a few years, he was a huge success. He kept on killing and killing people until he ran out of people to kill and he had to kill himself.

There was a time in my life when I admired Adolf Hitler, when I was skinny and wore braces and was afraid of girls, when I was 14 and 15 and 16, before the world drew me up into the mainstream in year 17 to make me a shiny new AFS-er and lovable person.

In Switzerland I was still growing, thus I had been given the chance to become somebody else and start over. So in that way I was lucky. Otherwise who knows what would have become of me.

I admired Adolf Hitler because of a television show. It was on every Sunday at 5:30 PM. It was called "Air Power," and the narrator was Walter Cronkite. The whole idea of the show was that because of American airplanes and the bombs that fell out of them, we won the war. Oh sure, the Russians and those other countries did their part, yeah, but it was our planes that did Adolf Hitler in. You could just tell by all the pretty mushroom clouds made by the falling bombs that what it really took to beat the Germans was blowing up their ball-bearing factories and rail yards. Stalingrad? Forget Stalingrad!

I always liked the part in "Air Power" where there were film clips of the Nazi soldiers. They had such cool uni-

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forms, with those neck-hugging oak-leaf collars and Iron Crosses and big shiny boots up to the knees. These guys looked so stiff and mean, and they had those sleek helmets that curved over the ears, the kind of helmets the soldiers of our evil government now wear. When the Nazis did the blitzkrieg — black-death dive-bombing Stukkas screaming down, strafing and blasting the way for the fast-moving Nazi tanks (On, Dixon, on Panzer!) and motorcycle units — that was just too cool, they just kicked ass out of those smug Frenchmen and sweaty-looking Poles.

The propaganda in “Air Power” worked in reverse for me, I was cheering for the bad guys!

Of course, the reason I was a teenage Nazi had to do with the fact that I was suffering from the same kind of inferiority complexes and inadequacies that drove most Germans in the 30’s to become Nazis: I was skinny, with braces, and resentful of the way all the smart Jewish kids in my school were so clique-ish, especially Haddie Bernbaum with whom I was in love but who wouldn’t date any WASPs like me, she went out with older guys from the predominantly Jewish private school in the rich part of town. My disgrace was nothing like that felt by the Germans in the ’30s from the raw deal they got from the Versailles Treaty and subsequent ball-breaking Depression they went through, but it was enough to make me think the Nazis were given a bad press by Walter Cronkite. What did *he* know?

To show you just how dumb a teenager I was, I thought Adolf Hitler’s party was left-wing, socialist, and therefore he was an OK guy! After all, the word “Nazi” comes from the German word *Nationalsozialismus*, “National Socialism;” the long, official name for it was the “National Socialist German Workers Party.” Maybe you didn’t know that.

Anyway, because my Jewish friends and I considered ourselves rebels and anti-everything, I was not only a teenage Nazi, I was a teenage Communist, too. How about that! Although the Russians in WWII had those lousy helmets and the officers' hats were a joke, they did have those jack boots like the Nazis, and that was cool. Plus they were such wildly fierce fighters, they just threw themselves at the Germans in one huge wave after another until the Nazis ran out of bullets. So when "Air Power" showed the Germans and the Russians fighting, it was always a tough call who I was for. Today I would say: I don't give a rat's ass.

In reality, in those brain-dead Eisenhower years, there wasn't much to complain about. Everybody was buying cars, my Dad kept buying newer and better ones, and everybody was building or moving to better houses, and that's what my family did, too. I remember getting a little frightened about the Hungarian uprising in 1956, and the advent of sputnik in 1957, the first object hurled into space by the Russians. This thing that just beeped in space and went around and around for a while until, like me, it went into an eccentric orbit and crashed. This little metal football of a satellite, sputnik, got all our leaders and teachers fretting about a "science gap." Senator Jack Kennedy, who would also have his brains blown out, took advantage of that hysteria, and in 1959 he made a campaign issue of the "missile gap," he said America needed more penile erections with which to send lethal flotsam into space.

So maybe that's when America's Evil Empire began. It was JFK, after all, who got us going in Viet Nam. It was JFK who gave the CIA the orders to have President Ngo Dinh Diem's head blown off, the elected leader of South Viet Nam. It was JFK who gave the CIA the orders to have Diem's brother's head blown off, too. His name was Ngo Dinh Nhu, but who cared then? Who cares now? JFK had also tried to

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have Fidel Castro's head blown off with a trick cigar. Seriously, the CIA actually tried that! Your tax dollars at work! What's being a teenage Nazi-Commie compared to all that!

My Nazi leanings were encouraged by my neighbor across the alley, Burt Kraus. In 1958 I was 15, Burt was 22. In 1959 I was 16 and he was 23. He was skinny, too, and smelled like he seldom bathed, and his teeth were crooked, too, but he was past the age for braces.

I don't know how I found this out, but in 1958 word was passed to me by somebody, maybe my brother Paul, that Burt was also a Germanophile and could speak German. Since my high school did not offer German as a foreign language (but did offer Latin, a language you can speak to nobody!), at age 14 I taught myself German. With records and books taken out of the library. But I had nobody to practice my German with (though it was fun spouting German phrases at my brothers and sisters, who had no idea what I was saying), until I found out about Burt.

And lo and behold, Burt was also a Nazi! He actually had phonograph records of Hitler's speeches! The real thing! The problem with that damned "Air Power" show was that every time der Führer spoke, somebody turned the volume down on him and translated his words into English, drowning him out. I hated that! Here was a record with nobody butting in! And Burt could explain to me the words I didn't know! What luck!

Today I speak flawless German. I often fool Germans into thinking, for a while, anyway, that I am German. For that prowess I can thank my two early teachers in the language, Burt Kraus and Adolf Hitler.

Burt was my early passport into the corruptions of adult life, for which I was grateful. At 16 I couldn't wait to

get to college, high school was one huge bore, I made the Honors Society every year with about as much effort as I put into sleeping. By contrast, Burt's dark and dank house was like Oz to me.

My parents had no clue that I could just cross the alley and enter another world. I spent hours with Burt, who at his age still lived with his parents, probably because they were never home, they were always traveling abroad somewhere, or maybe they escaped to other places nearby and didn't tell Burt, just to get away from him. Anyway, Mr. Kraus had a huge liquor supply and a cellar full of wine, to which Burt and I generously helped ourselves. Burt cooked gourmet meals, too, and knew how to play the piano better than I, and I was a fairly good piano player.

Also, Burt had these crazy friends, all of whom were in college or graduate school, including Lyle. Lyle's way of financing his way through school was to be the resident night manager for a funeral home. He had his own apartment in the basement, and every now and then, in the middle of the night, he'd have to drive the hearse somewhere to pick up a dead body. What a job! There was also Randy, who had this incredibly beautiful girlfriend named Ickis, or something like that, she was around 25 and Latvian and had this translucent creamy skin and magnificent tits that rolled this way and that. In 1940 Adolf Hitler had made her and her family "D.P.'s," Displaced Persons, people out of place, people knocked out of their Baltic orbits.

Just to be clear about this: I no longer admire Adolf Hitler...OK?

I was stone-dead in love with Ickes. But I was too young, and she was Randy's girl. So, anyway, Lyle had various girlfriends there with him in the basement of the funeral

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home, and Randy and Ickis and Burt and I would show up for these long drunken parties, the “hi-fi” blaring with classical music, until we emptied whatever bottles Burt had lifted from his parents’ basement and stuffed in the family Jaguar. Sometimes, in these revelries, we’d conga-dance upstairs and see how the stiffs were doing. It was all pretty sick, I know.

My orbit would have gone more eccentric sooner and faster then, failure would have been an earlier friend, if it weren’t for the fact that, like the ambulance drivers whose legacy it was, AFS rescued me. Guess what? For the first time ever, rather than just sending American kids abroad in the summertime so that their foreign host families could practice their English, AFS in 1959 decided to send American students to Europe in order to spend the whole school year there, just like the Europeans they were sending to the U.S. And so they needed American students for this experiment who actually could speak a foreign language! And I really knew German! I had no competition at all! So I got sent to the German-speaking part of Switzerland!

At first I was a little disappointed, because I wanted to go to Germany. To me Germany was it, they had the best composers, writers, philosophers and uniforms. My disappointment grew when I discovered the Swiss Germans don’t even really speak German, but some kind of dialect, *Schwyzerdütsch*, which is no closer to German than Dutch, it’s a whole different language, but unlike Dutch, it’s not a written language. Get this: the Swiss Germans read and write the official German, they just don’t speak it unless they have to, like on TV or radio or on stage - or in school, but only after the bell rings.

What a strange thing that was. All these boys (it was a boys school then, the Swiss being then a bit prudish about sex) would be jabbering in a dialect I could not understand,

then the teacher would walk into the classroom, the boys would all stand up, the teacher would tell them to sit down, the bell would ring - and then suddenly the fog parted and everyone was speaking High German! Talk about living in a schizophrenic world.

Well, anyway, I learned the dialect, I picked it up. To this day I can still speak it, and when a Swiss hears me, he just starts laughing and laughing. It must be like encountering a Zulu warrior who opens his mouth and speaks perfect Brooklynese.

So while my brain was still malleable I went from Nazi to Swiss Boy Ambassador. Just before I left on the student ship *The Waterman* from New York on September 12, 1960, heading for Rotterdam, my braces had come off, and thanks to Burt Kraus, who knew how to cook (my mother, God bless her, was a terrible cook), I had filled out. In Switzerland I found a new family (which was a carefully kept tableau before Papa went coo-coo), I discovered girls who liked me, I was free of all that going-nowhere love-hate thing with Haddie Bernbaum, I had my own bicycle to wander off in, I was allowed to drink wine at the table because that's what Swiss 17-year-olds get to do, and I learned to love that compact, workable thing called the Swiss democracy.

They had the wisdom to opt out of all the mass killings of the 20th Century, they were among the few sane ones. And I discovered beauty of breathtaking proportions - all those alps and valleys and cows with clanging bells on their necks and churches that tolled so mournfully on Sunday mornings, perhaps because so few people were in them. It was heaven!

In Switzerland I discovered I had a sponge brain for languages. Not only did I pick up the dialect and start jabbering in it after three months (to the consternation of Papa and

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Hans-Dieter, both of whom wanted to practice their English; Mami and Kaspar, though, were only too glad to see my progress), I also started to learn French, Latin and Italian. I got those under my belt in later years, along with Spanish, Russian, Dutch and Norwegian. How about that? A polyglot! If you think you have multiple personalities, then why not give each one of them its own language?

Glenna, for example, has two languages for two personalities, one normal English and the other country-western. She can talk in a kind of regionless English common to the West Coast, but put a few beers in her and out comes this Oakie twang, and she starts dropping all the “g’s” in her “ings,”: “Ah’m goin’ to da-yance an’ day-ance all nigh’ lawng, singin’ and shoutin’, an’ ain’t nobody goin’ to stop me, unh-unh!” Then soon she’d be into it, singing one of her songs, she only sang her own songs. One of them had a refrain that goes like this:

*There’s a highway to Heaven,
But I ain’t a-goin’ there,
So point me to the nex’ saloon,
Where I need a-nother bee-eer.*

Glenna sang this so that “there” and “beer” rhymed.

She had once, in her late teens and early 20’s, tried to break through to the Big Time with her garage band. But only Andy Hopper, her bass back-up, was reliable; she was always scrambling at the last minute to find other musicians to have enough to play a gig. Then she met Ben while on the road, and she married him after getting pregnant with the twins, and that was the end of her music career.

Besides the twins she had a pen full of rottweilers she and her husband Ben would raise and sell. They called their enterprise the Cosby Island Kennels. The dogs cost them more

grief and trouble then it was worth (including a dragged-out lawsuit when one of the mutts bit the UPS man), but it was the one and only thing Glenna and Ben did together, so they clung to it. Until Andy Hopper showed up in Glenna's life again, and she disappeared. Just like that.

So maybe it's that different parts of us need different languages. She needed to let that country&western voice of hers come out and sing.

When Glenna got to dropping all her "g's" she'd start to talk dirty, too. So I'd just get in there and talk dirty, too. One time I asked her what a cunnilinguist was. I knew, of course, and she knew I knew, I'm sure, but she went for it, anyway. She got pretty graphic about it, and we laughed and laughed. Then I said, "Hey, guess what? I'm not a cunnilinguist, I'm a cunning linguist!" Then we laughed and laughed some more.

I sure do miss her. Ben doesn't, though. He is still legally her husband, but after Andy Hopper and the cocaine were done with her, when Ben saw her coming up the steps with her guitar and an old suitcase, he just locked all the windows and doors and simply waited her out while she pounded on the door, sobbing. Ben can be pretty hard that way. She hasn't seen the twins in years.

I almost made a pass at her once, and she saw it coming, too. Then we both just stopped and stared at each other, wondering what would come next, what we might do with it. But it was like a movie on the VCR you suddenly pause and rewind. I went backwards in my motion, and so did she. And we both pretended where we were going to never happened, and in fact, it never did happen. But the thought hovered there for a few seconds, ready to take form. Then it flew off into space.

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My brother tells me Burt Kraus, who now must be 62, just lost his wife. She was 93. Her heart failed. Entropy, the Third Law of Thermodynamics! She hit the bottom of all bottoms. She was 31 years his senior. Holy smoke!

Now that I think back on it, Burt must have been as queer as a three-dollar bill. He never had a girl in the funeral home to take off into some corner to make squishy noises with, not the way Lyle and Randy did. He'd just turn up the volume on the hi-fi and pass me the wine bottle. He and I would just sit there and listen to the music and wait for Randy to come back with Ickes and Lyle to come back with his girl-friend of the moment from wherever they were after doing whatever they did in that spacious funeral home. There were rooms everywhere there in what was once a railroad baron's mansion, but I never snooped around, I was too afraid of what I might find behind any of those closed doors.

But come to think of it, I can see a 30-year-old Burt marrying a 61-year-old woman, why not? What I can't understand is what she would have seen in him. Burt's sister was in my brother Paul's high school class. Paul bumped into her the other day. That's how I know about Burt's wife's death. Paul told me. Burt's sister also told Paul that her family was having a family reunion, and everybody was trying to figure out ways to make sure Burt wouldn't know about it. Nobody wanted him there.

Burt still lives in his parent's house, that's another thing his sister told Paul. It was, already back in 1958 and 1959, a creepy haunted place, with dark black-brown wood walls and a sickly green carpet everywhere. The place was so nestled into the shade of trees that no sunlight broke through the windows. It always smelled of Lysol and garlic.

So I imagine Burt from time to time, I see him taking out that old Hitler record and starting it a-spinning. Against the background of a scratchily-played rendition of the Horst-Wessel-Lied I picture him, his teeth yellowed and decayed, his pate combed-over with strands of brittle gray, his goose-step hindered now with incipient arthritis, as he screams to the dank walls of the cavernous living room, in unison with Adolf Hitler and the crazed mob: "*Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!*"

Chapter 3

Steve, who was my best friend and probably still is, even though he has stopped talking except to say “thank you” to people tipping him when he delivers their pizza, has a famous last name: Niemoeller. At least it’s a name famous to students of the Germany when Adolf Hitler was in charge. One of the few Christians to speak out against the Nazis and be sent to the concentration camps for doing so was Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran pastor. He wrote this poem:

In Germany,

*they came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a
Communist.*

Then they came for the Jews,

and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists,

*and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a
Trade Unionist.*

Then they came for the Catholics,

and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me,

and by that time, no one was left to speak up.

Talk about loneliness! Talk about failure!

Anyway, Steve’s father was also a Pastor Niemoeller, no relation to the guy sent to the concentration camps. But since Steve was the classic case of the minister’s son, Steve became a rebel and an atheist. I was a rebel, too, partly be-

cause my Dad was the local Boy Scout Master, and it drove me to an unspeakable jealousy that he'd spend so much time with all these older and more athletic boys, planning camping trips and survival courses and all that rinky-dink shit Boy Scouts do for merit badges in preparation for being good soldiers. I was too skinny and scrawny to even think of competing with these boys for my Dad's attention. And there was also this about the Boy Scouts: their uniforms stunk! You had to wear this silly red scarf around your neck, with two ends drawn through a clasp shaped in a wolf's head, a Weeblo. What the hell was that?

Steve was in my "pack," too, in Troop 73. We were destined to be close friends. We both hated Boy Scouts and going to his dad's church, so we would do all kinds of things to get in trouble and piss our dads off.

On those awful Troop 73 camping trips we'd smoke cigarettes I stole out of my mother's purse, and at night while others slept we'd pee obscenities in the snow. Steve and I perfected the art of "getting lost" on hikes: we'd fall back from the main pack, then build a fire and read comic books and eat candy bars. Hours later we'd sneak back on the last leg of the trail (always near the start of the hike, of course), and we would fall into the tail end of the stragglers as they came back to camp. Nobody noticed.

Our mess kits and knives were always clean and shiny because we never used them. We got merit badges for that. We also got our "signalmen" merit badges right away because Steve would test me, then I would test him. We waved flags around at each other across a frozen lake, then we would send primitive dit-dah sounds of Morse Code through crystal-set transmitters, neither of us once using a word known in the English language unless by sheer accident. Then we graded

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each other. We gave ourselves high marks!

Most of Troop 73 learned the discipline and crafts of soldiers. Many, alas, would take those crafts and hit the bottom of rice paddies when their lights went out. Steve and I, on the other hand, out of perversity taught ourselves the arts of clandestine action and sabotage. Steve and I would survive and later be in great demand for such skills!

During Pastor Niemoeller's sermons Steve and I would sneak downstairs and scuff up the shiny linoleum with folding chairs we'd send flying at each other from across opposite ends of the basement. We'd scoot them across the floor at break-neck speeds, seeing if they would collide. They made great crashing noises when they hit and collapsed. By the time the good Christian folk came down for coffee, the folding chairs would be all over the basement, like some Dodge-'Em Car concession on strike. Steve and I would be gone by then.

As many times as we did that we never got caught. But Steve would catch hell from his dad, anyway. After all, how many suspects were there? Steve never ratted me out, though. He took all the heat. I now wish that I did, too. I shouldn't have let him catch hell alone. But I did.

Steve's dad now lives in an Alzheimer's fog and often frightens himself when he looks in the mirror. It's hard to say whether Pastor Niemoeller believes or thinks anything any more.

Having fought each other all their lives, Steve and his father act now pretty much alike, his father finally - who can say? - a role model for Steve.

I never really fought my father, I was too much in awe of him, he was so full of life and so talented, and really funny,

too, and he was so young for a father, he and my mother had me, the second son, in 1943 when he was just 22 years old. When I was 22 people thought he was my brother, that's how young he looked.

Because I was one of five kids, my Dad and I never did much alone together, just the two of us. So I remember those special times vividly. Like those times at the South 30 Club, a men's gym at the YMCA then, where you could swim in the pool naked, and then I'd have meatloaf and mashed potatoes with my Dad in the upstairs cafeteria. It was wonderful.

I used to meet him in the South 30 Club downtown, after my piano lessons with Mr. Farstad. Mr. Farstad had what the TV ads then called "the heartbreak of halitosis," the worst smelling breath you can imagine.

He didn't seem to care that I never practiced between piano lessons. Like the Boy Scouts and the Lutheran Church, I hated the piano lessons in this run-down old building downtown, with blasts of bad breath from Mr. Farstad every time I hit a wrong note.

But I went to the lessons because my parents made me. It was only after I quit the lessons when I was allowed to, when I was 15 and learning German from records and sneaking over to Burt Kraus's house, that I really took to the piano with gusto, I played for the playing's sake, I enjoyed it because there were no lessons. So I got to be pretty good. Imagine that, getting good because the lessons stopped!

The South 30 Club was where wrestlers on TV worked out, people like Verne Gagna and Hard Boiled Hagarty, and they were bigger than life! They'd come into the steam room where there were already rows of very fat men sitting on marble

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slabs, some of them way up there in the clouds. These fat old geezers (old to me then, anyway) would sit naked in the steam room and talk in loud, big voices. I couldn't get over how some of these men were such mountains of flab yet with little tiny weenies, their maleness swallowed up in there. I couldn't get over all the different sizes and shapes of all those penises. It would be the beginning of a lifetime of penis study and comparison. I often wonder if other men were ever as caught up in that as I was. When I finally got around to traveling Europe and going to art museums, I noticed none of the paintings and sculptures from all those famous artists had portrayed men like David or Adam with penises that you could really call shlongs, really hung, you know? But then I've seen porno films of guys who have these huge erect monster sausages that just go on and on, fucking for hours! How do they do that? My goodness!

Then there was the time when just my Dad and I got on a DC-3 airplane, flying out of what was then just a tiny airport. It was a small terminal in what looked like a cow pasture. It was my first time on an airplane. We sat in the front seats of the passenger section, and in front of us were all this mail and cargo kept secure by big black straps that formed a kind of netting. The engines were so loud you couldn't talk inside the cabin. My Dad loved the part where we took off, the speed of it. After that, he said, "There's not much more to this, the fun part is over." But I loved looking down at all the tiny lights, this was a night flight to Milwaukee, where we were to pick up an English sports car my Dad had just bought, from somebody in the Pabst family, the people who make the Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.

We stayed in a hotel. Just me and my Dad, and we talked a lot, and he said things to teenager me that stuck, wisdoms of a man-to-man kind, stuff from him I had never

heard before. He told me about his summers on a farm of his Uncle Lou's where he'd work in the sun all day, and the kids would come off the fields and sit in the house with a fan on and listen to the radio and drink beer. This was the German side of the relations, and kids on German Wisconsin farms drank beer as if it were iced tea. It was on this farm that he first fell in love, with his Aunt Amalia, somebody who would haunt him for the rest of his life after she was dead. Just like he haunts me now, now that he is dead. He told me how he learned the facts of life from watching bulls fuck cows, though he didn't put it quite that way. That was about as close as we got to the "birds and bees" talk men are supposed to have with their sons, and that was fine by me, I had things pretty well figured out after seeing those black-and-white, 8mm silent porn films that Mr. Kraus thought he had secreted away in a hiding place in his closet.

We picked up my Dad's Triumph TR-3 at the Pabst mansion the next day. It was the first time I was in the house of somebody really rich! The massive stone house stood grandly above a green sea of an exquisitely manicured lawn that sloped gently down to Lake Michigan. Inside, there was a maid in a uniform, just like in the movies! There was a gardener, too, and somebody else in the house doing something. It was magic! To this day I don't know why my father had to go to this mansion several hundred miles away from our house, just to pick up a car, but that's what we were there for.

When we got to see the car, I asked so many questions about how it worked and what things on it did what that it finally got my Dad so irritated he said: "Stop asking me so many questions already, you're driving me nuts! You sound like your Cousin Herbie!"

Well, of course, then I did shut up. My Cousin Herbie was a know-it-all and talked too much. My Dad said Cousin

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Herbie drank his own bathwater. So I certainly didn't want to be like him in my father's eyes.

Cousin Herbie would wind up at the Harvard Business School, just across the Charles River from me when I went to Harvard to study, well, of course, Germanic Languages and Literatures. Cousin Herbie and I were always competing, always trying to one-up the other guy. It was so transparent. But no more. He runs an insurance company that is headquartered in the Cayman Islands where he uses his Harvard MBA to avoid all sorts of taxes that would otherwise go to our evil government. Good for him!

Cousin Herbie lives in a great big brownstone in the most expensive part of Boston and has a string of cars and motorcycles and a lot of antique furniture. So that war is over.

He won.

Maybe.

The last time I saw him, he looked so old and joyless. He still was a big question-asker, he asked me all about my being single again, what that was like, did I get laid a lot, was I happier now, and so on and on. So of course, maybe just to see his envy, I lied a lot. I got the impression I was in his mind this great adventurer, a guy still taking chances, and there he was, a prisoner of all his stuff and a wife grown far too familiar for any excitement left.

So maybe the reality in all this is that we're both losers, each in his own way. Truth is, I don't care about Cousin Herbie any more at all. Truth is, if he still drinks his own bathwater, I say: that's his business!

When my Dad and I came home in the TR-3 (he drove so fast we made it back in almost as much time as it took the

lumbering DC-3 to get us there), one of the first kids on the block to see this strange vehicle was Steve Niemoeller. He said I had the coolest dad in the whole world.

It was early Spring and still cold out, but my Dad drove his sports car around with the top down, a pipe in his mouth.

My mom got the old Chevrolet station wagon. My dad spent a lot of time zooming around in cold weather with the top down while Mom picked us kids up here and there in that monster station wagon and got groceries at the same store where my Dad would get shot to death.

The things I did with just me and my mom were numerous, but all prosaic, like the Chevrolet station wagon she drove: visits to Nana and Babu, visits to the doctor, the dentist, the store. When I think back on it, I don't remember my mother ever indulging herself in anything. It was always the family first, herself second. Actually, herself never; forget second.

My dad sucked up all the limelight and praise. She didn't get much of either.

Life has not been known to be very fair.

Chapter 4

When we were children, my parents moved from house to house a lot for reasons that are still not all that clear to me, other than that my mother was probably restless and liked to move around a lot, it gave her something to do.

Maybe my mother's wanting to move all the time had something to do with the fact that her father, my Babu, was an itinerant salesman. He changed jobs a lot. Nana and Babu and my Mom (she was an only child) lived in several towns in Texas and Missouri and California, and a lot of places in-between. Mom says that in her lifetime she has lived in 37 different houses. I experienced seven of them before I left for college. Even with incipient Alzheimer's now, my mother has a terrific sense of humor. This is what she's already directed to be written on her tombstone: "This is my last move." Leave 'em laughing!

Anyway, after each move of the homestead, being white-bread Protestants, my Mom and Dad would send us kids to whatever church was down the block, so we could walk there. A convenience church. The longest of these short-term conversions based on geography was to Pastor Niemoeller's Universal Lutheran Church.

Because of all these religious musical chairs, my two brothers and my two sisters and I soon figured out that Christianity was anything you wanted to make it, we had gone through Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and a couple other brands born of a distant and long-forgotten Reformation in far-away Europe. The Reformation, by the way, caused the Thirty Years War which left at least a good third of Europe's Christendom dead as doornails, sent to the bottom of all bottoms. The Thirty

Years War, 1618-1648, was as bloody as the Thirty-One Years War, 1914-1945, and almost as bloody as mass slaughterings by Christians of non-Christians 400 years earlier, in what were then known as the Crusades. (I hear “the Crusades” is now a rock-’n’-roll band. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*)

So you could say — and Steve Niemoeller used to say it all the time! — “One enduring legacy of the Prince of Peace was that His followers could sure get hopping mad!” Steve and I would have probably really liked Sunday school if they had only shown us some truly graphic samples of all that gore for God.

My siblings and I soon learned that the one thing that united all Christian sects was their sense of superiority over all the others. And Pastor Niemoeller (Steve’s dad, not that other Pastor Niemoeller) added his own twist. Besides being, of course, the only right road to God and Jesus, he and his Lutherans took extra pains to tell you how terrible the Catholics were. And because we were kids and were spirited down basements to Sunday School, taught more by well-meaning babysitters than amateur theologians, the theological differences were never made that clear between these places of worship.

My siblings and I had our own measure of religious excellence: the Baptists had the best Kool-Aid and extra cookies (but store-bought ones); the Congregationalists allowed people in the choir room to smoke, which made the place really stink, but the main reception room had a really thick piss-green carpet, so Paul and I would rub our shoes back and forth over the lush pilings, then walk up to metal lamps that would give us a real zap when they discharged the static electricity in our fingers; Lutherans had great all-you-can-eat pancake suppers (but that was confusing, eating breakfast at night); the Episcopalians had a pretty organist my brother and I had a

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crush on (and whom, unbeknownst to us for many years, my Dad had been diddling on the side); the Methodists, well the Methodists had nothing at all, that's how cold and uninspiring they were.

The best place of all, of course, in all these churches, was the basement linoleum floor of the Universal Lutheran Church where Steve and I had our folding-chair chariot races and where we would now and then sneak some of the communion wine from the refrigerator (The Blood of the Lamb came chilled in this church); though the taste was awful, we had the thrill of knowing we were doing something very wrong.

So that was my Christian upbringing. The Catholics have more beauty, art, splendor, grand architecture: Botticelli and Raphael and Michelangelo and all the rest, and confession, that wonderful absolution, humbly received and so easily done (“Say 12 Hail Marys, and sin no more, my son”). I wonder if there are as many Catholics as there are Protestants, Jews or atheists who go to psychiatrists. Isn’t a psychiatrist just an expensive secular Father Confessor with a stop watch?

And there was another thing: the Catholics always had a terrific football team, Notre Dame, the Fighting Irish. And I think it’s really cool when even *i mafiosi*, the scum of the earth, cross themselves when portrayed by actors in movies, whether at the funeral of a fellow gangster, or at a wedding, or in church. A church that makes itself a parent (Holy Mother Church!) and can still hold bound to its bosom even the worst, most evil of men, is certainly worthy of respect. What church claimed Stalin? Not the Catholic one! Stalin was a church-goer in his youth, preparing for the priesthood, did you know that?! His real last name was Djugashvili, or however you spell it. But he was in a seminary of the Russian Orthodox

Church before he decided to take up a career in slaughtering people! What did those Russian Orthodox do to him?!

My German teacher, Adolf Hitler, used to make tinted postcards and sell them! If he'd lived in Greeley, Colorado, my Uncle Phillip would have bought them all and sent them to Rosewood, Iowa! Instead, the artist Adolf Hitler flopped, and he had to turn to a career in dictatorship.

As a high schooler, I also thought there was something deeply mysterious, so other-worldly about Catholics. In those days they couldn't eat meat on Fridays, so they would seriously and in all devotion do this crazy thing: eat no carcass of cow or pig or sheep or frog or bird on the fifth weekday of each week; but fish meat, well, that was OK. So it wasn't even a vegetarian thing. Strange!

And eventually, at the flick of the Pope's pen, it became OK to eat on Fridays all the bloody cow, pig, sheep, frog or bird you wanted!

And they threw the Latin out! What a mistake! It was so much easier to believe something when you couldn't understand it in a dead foreign language than in the English version, which, if you looked too closely, was what the Lutherans down the block were using. Much the same package. Which might explain why the Lutherans were always slamming the Catholics: because they're too much alike ("We fought a Thirty Years War over *this*?")

So I wonder if Lutherans still spend most of their time warning their kids not to marry Catholics, or whether both faiths are now more interested in getting interdenominational softball leagues going. Hard to tell the Catholics from the Protestants without uniforms, you know, which means most Christians, at least Catholics and Lutherans, now tend to keep the

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Sabbath holy by sleeping till noon on Sundays, which, frankly, is the worship regimen Steve and I, once free adults, adopted: Our Lady of the Blessed Late Brunch. Still with a major focus on the communion part, but with plenty of real bread and a whole jug of wine, not that sip-and-a-cracker crap.

As a kid, I loved the fact that the Catholic school kids had to wear uniforms, I guess I was always a sucker for uniforms. The Catholic kids were like an army from some alien nation, you could see them coming home from school, there they were in their blue and black and white uniforms, with Gothic letters emblazoned on their uniforms in abbreviation of their school's name.

I liked it a lot that none of it made any sense. I guess I have always been a defender of nonsense. Anyway, for some perverse reason, I enjoy travel to foreign lands just to be able to watch people do really strange things that, for them, are perfectly normal. Shakes up the salt shaker, makes you think there are many more wild possibilities in life than the habits and manners tossed into your lap without question. Already as a Wandering Lutheran, I could see we were all the unnecessary prisoners of inherited conventions that are arbitrary and limiting, caked with mold.

Every moment of human progress has been marked by the first steps of someone with courage to take those steps, only then to be vilified as insane, impractical, dangerous or treasonous. Like Glenna! She flew the coop to chase her dream, to find her bliss. She flew too close to the sun, though, melting the wax in her wings. God bless her!

If Jesus came back, we'd crucify him all over again, we'd kill the guy. Jesus even says in the Bible that at the Second Coming he will come as a "thief in the night," which in the high-crime neighborhood I live in means he'd get his brains

blown out! I bet in some Celestial Council the Second Coming has been canceled due to bad weather. Who's not to say God gave up on us as a botched job and started a whole new race of semi-god conscious beings elsewhere, on a better planet with better ingredients? And what duty would He have to tell us we've all been fired, us ungrateful failures, killers of his solo offspring? None!

It is possible, just possible, that the Planet Earth is now just a celestial spiritual junkyard.

Anyway, the other thing about Catholics in high school, for this unprotesting Protestant, was the completely awesome sexual mystique which everyone immediately attached to a Catholic girls school, Holy Angels.

First of all, this school was somewhere where the bus in my neighborhood did not go, to this day I have no idea where this school is, or if it even still exists. But the rumor was, no, it was taken as simple fact, that the girls from Holy Angels were taught from such an early age that sex was sinful. So that what all these nuns talked about, day in and day out, was all the false allure of sex, and how these girls should shun their sexuality, and how they shouldn't do this to their body or that to their body, so that, of course, at night in their dorm beds or bathrooms they tried out the very things the nuns said were sinful, just to know what was so sinful, so that if they ever came across it again they'd know what to do. Which was to check it out again for a few more times, just to be sure they had this sinful experience thing down pat.

So, of course, all that these girls ever thought about was sex, but not quite in the way the nuns had wanted.

Word for the white-bread Protestant boys like me was: get a date with a Holy Angels girl, and man, these girls would

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go all the way, and they would teach you a thing or two. These girls from places that had apartment buildings and warehouses and railroad tracks were really good and experienced, they'd drive you crazy, and then after you were done fucking them over and over again all night, they'd still talk about sex until you took them home. This was the Grand Fantasy.

So for a few years in my adolescence, my most secret dream was to meet a Holy Angels girl and be propelled into a world of certain ecstasy, discovering sex like a stolen Porsche, exploring the unspeakable mysteries of girls' bodies, the exact nature of which I had no clue, other than anatomical pictures from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and the operating instructions for Tampax that the female members of my family discarded in the wastebasket in the bathroom (it was still a year or two before Burt Kraus would find Mr. Kraus's porn movies in the closet). Looking at that maze of female reproductive anatomy, I had a renewed respect for mature male adults who knew how to navigate that convoluted female canal. Stuff kids told me at YMCA camps I knew for sure now to be lies ("The man just sticks it into the woman's belly button, and the baby comes out of the belly button. God, don't you know that?").

Yet at the same time my greatest fear was that I would in fact meet a Holy Angels girl and all my friends would want the full report the next day. With my pubescent friends like Steve Niemoeller, sex was far more important in the telling than in the doing, which few if any of us did (except for bullies George Hennissey and Rob Kalstad who - we just knew! - had gone all the way with dozens of Holy Angels girls!).

There was another anxiety about going all the way with the loose and horny girls of Holy Angels: the nuns had told them that any kind of birth control was sinful. And while they could come up with excuses about how they wound up

having sex against their will, there would be no way for a Holy Angels girl to explain a premeditated and consciously decided-upon method of birth control. So you took your chances. You knocked up a Catholic girl, all her brothers and cousins would come around to make sure you married her.

So I was lucky again. I never met a Holy Angels girl because the world sucked me up and sent me into orbit towards Switzerland. And I would have had no real choice in the matter, anyway. I was a nerd, with braces and glasses and arch supports and an eye twitch and a neck needing cracking (my mother, God bless her, would even send me to a chiropractor!), so it was certain I would stay clear of the Holy Angels girls. I even imposed my own self-exile. I wouldn't get a driver's license until I was 19. With no car and therefore no place to make out in a back seat, I was as good as a monk then as I am now.

I don't think I was ready for girls, I had much broader visions of grandeur. I thought it wouldn't hurt to begin then planning for what it would take to be a U.S. Senator. I practiced being a ward healer, a kingmaker, a pol organizing campaigns for worthless offices, like treasurer of Blue Tri, or class president, or hall patrol. I promoted others calling me "Senator." Only a weird but secretly impressed girl could handle that. That was how I eventually got together with Haddie Bernbaum, who envisioned herself a hip beatnik, a Left Bank Parisian rebel hooked on jazz, mostly Miles Davis. She spoke in a kind of whisper. She talked Commie pinko talk, so I talked Commie pinko talk with her when I wasn't talking Nazi deranged talk with Burt Kraus.

Visions of Haddie kept me awake at night.

Haddie was no kind of Christian at all, as the only girlfriend I had in high school she was a Jew. A little out of

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place in the norsk-svensk ghetto of white-bread Protestants who lived in my brain-dead Eisenhower Republican neighborhood. Her parents voted for Adlai Stevenson. What Commies!

Haddie was cerebral, and in public pretended to be aloof, because she was under a lot of pressure from her rich private-school Jewish friends and her parents to stay away from the goyim. So we were not officially “going steady,” we simply happened to wind up at many of the same places at the same time, planned accidents.

Like the time we volunteered to attend the funeral of our English teacher’s brother. Huh, you say? Well, somehow the principal of our high school thought it would be nice if some of Mrs. Swanson’s home room students stood by her in this her moment of grief. But Haddie and I and Mary Beth Myerson and Steve Niemoeller sat in the funeral home, far away from Mrs. Swanson, who didn’t seem all that happy to see us anyway, and the four of us giggled and every now and then did those playful ambiguous things teenagers do, taking a seemingly aggressive action, like pinching or pressing your knee against the girl’s, then pretending there was nothing in that, the usual gangly and awkward acts of puppy love.

My, how funeral homes and lust went hand in hand in those days!

In retrospect, I think Mr. Swanson, or whatever the name of that dead guy was, would have been pleased to know that the occasion of his funeral was a small celebration of out-of-school youths with more hormones than they could handle, and too oblivious to his death to really give a damn. I certainly don’t give a damn now!

Even during my teenage Nazi years I was never really anti-Semitic, I just resented the fact that something to me so

abstract and meaningless about Haddie's Jewish faith should get in the way of a clear shot at her. I couldn't come to terms with it. Just the way most Christians don't seem to come to terms with the fact that Jesus was a Jew. Even all Pastor Niemoeller, Steve's dad, could say about that was: "Well, yeah, but, er, well, you know...." I think he wanted to edit that out of the program.

The last time Steve and I gave religion a serious look was during the Viet Nam war, when he was drafted and had to make a choice about killing people. I wasn't drafted because I just kept on going to school after school, studying so many things until I was too old to draft. What Steve and I finally glommed onto was our own brand of Buddhism. I say our own brand, because Buddhists don't seem to care much about what you do with Buddhism. Our special sect's credo came down to one sentence: If it feels good, do it. No joke: we invented that! But, as I am sure you know all too well, even that simple credo got corrupted and screwed up by the press, by unthinking people like Walter Cronkite.

So Steve and I never got the theological-philosophical-historical credit we were due. We wound up having to look for other things to do.

Chapter 5

I leave nameless the city where I was born and grew up because it is not there anymore. All the places I would want to go back to and visit out of nostalgia are gone, torn down in just two decades to make room for parking lots and cutesy Yuppie restaurants and soulless steel and concrete buildings. What Gertrude Stein once said about another city could be said now about my home town, too: “There’s no there there.”

This, too: Most of the people I once knew there are all gone, too. Some of my best pals from high school are even dead, from natural causes, how about that? How did that happen so fast?

Maybe I move around a lot in order to avoid evidence of decay, evidence of my own mortality, always changing the scenery to avoid looking Time in the face. Maybe that’s why my mother wanted us to move from house to house so often.

The South 30 Club is gone, with its pool and steam baths. So is the rickety College of Music with its high ceilings and chandeliers and cacophony of trumpets and singers and clarinetists, screeching out their scales from behind closed doors as I sat downstairs on the wooden bench, staring at the hexagon tiles on the floor, making bigger and bigger hexagons in my mind, until Mr. Farstad was ready to instruct me in piano and release his clouds of foul breath.

Gone also is the Radio City Movie Theater where my brother and I could see a full-length feature film and five color cartoons for a quarter, a place my mother would send us kids on Saturdays, probably just to get us out of her hair. We took a streetcar there for a dime.

The streetcars were yellow and brown and had a pleasant clang and roll to them. Men who wanted to smoke stood on the back platform, with its doors and windows open in the summer, people jumping off and on before the streetcar came to a full stop. The seats were wicker in woven patterns, inter-leaves of straw-like material in rows with regularly-spaced little diamond-shaped holes in them, perhaps to allow the wicker to expand when fat asses sat on them. I'd stick my pinky in these holes and try to get it stuck. In the winter the snow on people's coats would melt in the overheated car and give off the smell of the fur or wool underneath. Some of them stunk of mothballs. In the summer you smelled the accumulated sweat of all the passengers in their short-sleeved shirts.

The streetcars are now all gone, too.

Hansen's Pharmacy, where my Mom would let me "charge it" to our family account a chocolate malted milk every day after school, in her vain hope to fatten me up, is now some upscale antique shop. My Mom's plan to fatten me up failed. When I drank it all (it was a lot, there was a whole other glassful in the metal container, too), I had no appetite for dinner. More often than not, though, my fat friend Arty Halpern, who threw up a lot in class and would thus make everybody else feel like throwing up, would sit next to me at the soda fountain and drink most of my chocolate malt. He would joke a lot and make me laugh, so it was a good trade.

It would take me years to figure out why I didn't eat well as a child: my Mom's home-cooking stunk! God bless 'er, she was a good mother, she was soft and protective and caring, but she couldn't cook for beans.

Well, also in her defense, she had a limited budget. My mother had to supplement the family income in the winters when my father's produce-brokerage business slumped; he

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made most of his money in the summer with strawberries and grapes which could in those days only be had when in season. So my mother, who always kept flunking driver's tests, would illegally drive the family's old Chevrolet station wagon to substitute teach in various schools, or run a day-care center out of some church basement.

She'd come home tired to five noisy kids and a hungry husband, and in her fatigue she'd muster up baked frozen fishsticks and baked frozen french fries, or melted Velveeta cheese on toast, or macaroni and cheese, or calf's liver and onions, or tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, or hotdishes with celery and tuna in them or hamburger and runny tomatoes. Every now and then we celebrated with minute steaks or round steak with baked potatoes and creamed corn, but then it was back to those other dishes, rotated predictably through the week.

Actually, though, I liked the melted Velveeta cheese on toast. I haven't had that in years.

Grossman's, the grocery store where we kids could also charge things and bring them home, and where my Dad was shot to death, is still a grocery store, but much smaller and with a different name. It's called Tom Thumb. It's one of those places that charges more for the milk and bread and you pay anyway so you don't have to go farther away to a bigger place and wait in line. A "convenience" store. But I'm just guessing. I have no desire to go back in there to check out the prices.

The obliteration of my home town reminds me of Dresden, Germany, another place that got bulldozed. Dresden is where they made dolls out of porcelain, and china and pewter things. It had rows of rococo buildings that looked like wedding cakes with extra frosting. During the very last days

of World War II, however, it was all blown to bits. American and British airplanes dropped so many firebombs (“incendiaries”!) that hurricane-force winds were created from the heat of the firestorm, and over 145,000 women, children and old people were killed, more than the number of people killed in either Nagasaki or Hiroshima with A-bombs.

Dresden had no strategic value, it was used mostly as a convalescent center for wounded soldiers. That was why, until April of 1945, nobody bothered to bomb it. Sensing that the war in Europe was coming to a close in a few weeks, though, our evil government must have figured it would be cheaper to dump all those stockpiles of firesticks somewhere rather than send them back to Oklahoma to rot. So Dresden got creamed!

The East German Commies rebuilt Dresden in the worst possible way: block after ugly Stalinist block of apartment buildings, all made from the same Russian design and substandard concrete that stained and crumbled even as they were being built. Between these dismal eyesores they put wide plazas made with more concrete, dotted with hangman-type lamp-posts that gave off dull cones of sickly yellowish light at night.

In my home town you’d think that, it, too, had been firebombed. Where there were once proud old buildings with interesting stone shapes and high, curved windows and iron-banistered staircases there are now slabs of concrete, windowless buildings or parking lots or concrete plazas like in Dresden. All the places I hung out in on Harding and Buell Avenues, between 4th and 12th Streets, became part of some urban-renewal Ground Zero.

Only one little building, housing Bucco’s, a Ma and Pa Italian restaurant, remains, an island in a concrete desert.

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My Dad would take the family to Bucco's sometimes after church. We'd eat spaghetti and softball-sized meatballs until we could eat no more. The last time I was there the owners still had the sentimental and badly painted murals of Venetian gondoliers and Neapolitan sunsets on the walls, and everything was as it used to be years ago. Bucco's, surrounded now on all sides by parking lots, became like a loose tooth in a kid's mouth, the last of the baby teeth to go. I'd bet you five dollars right now it's no longer there. But I don't want to make the bet, I don't want to know. Or maybe I just don't give a rat's ass.

When Thomas Wolfe wrote the novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, I think he was saying that a person changes so much in a lifetime that trying to recapture past happiness where it happened is doomed to failure. I don't think he ever imagined that one's home town itself could go into the dumpster and be forgotten, just like that.

Another place that was like a magnet for me was the old bandstand on Lake Harrison, also gone, replaced by a marina where you can rent a canoe and paddle around and around until you are tired. In the summer there were concerts at the bandstand, a wooden clamshell of a thing, put on by members of the symphony orchestra playing Souza and broadway tunes and an occasional popular piece of classical music, like *Rhapsody in Blue* or *Gaité Parisienne*.

My Dad was an amateur ham actor and semi-pro singer. He'd get on makeup and costumes and buffoon around in bandstand productions and make us kids laugh and be proud of him. Once, before a bandstand performance of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, he sat backstage in his powdered wig and 18th-Century frilly froo-froo suit. I walked in and thought I'd come face to face with George Washington! Was I surprised! It was my Dad!

An even more ancient memory: My Dad in blackface, before it became politically incorrect for white men to play and satirize black men on the stage, he laughing and squirting a seltzer bottle at me as I stood behind the living room window, me laughing, too, that he couldn't get me wet. I must have been three years old at the time.

Other places that fell to the wrecker's ball in my former home town: the Universal Lutheran Church (to make way for a Burger King); a perfectly good baseball stadium (to make way for a far uglier "domed" ballpark); the state university's football stadium (also perfectly good, where some of the greatest moments in football history were made); a number of grand 1920's and 1930's movie theaters; a great Chinese restaurant; five elegant old office buildings; a park where the bums liked to sleep; and a classic railroad station. My grade and high schools have been "remodeled" and "added on to" so many times they are as recognizable as a movie star after six facelifts. The grande dame of a City Hall is now little more than a place to get pamphlets and bus maps, reduced to embarrassment by the sleeker, leaner Government Center in whose shadow she cowers.

Across from City Hall, local booster greed destroyed the only decent bar in town, Willard's, a watering hole for journalists, politicians and courthouse lawyers for nearly a century. You came to Willard's for loud talk, laughter, slaps on the back and rude floozey waitresses who knew your name. You came to Willard's to bet on sports and smoke cigars with your pals. But the boozey "opinion maker" regulars were conned into silence by a promise that next to the parking complex that would replace Willard's (for the new "domed" stadium) would arise again the same Willard's, magically restored.

The new owners took the long wooden bar and the tables and chairs and the long mirror, but they couldn't take

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the soul out of the old Willard's and transplant it to the new one. The "new" Willard's is a joke, a stop on the way to the stadium for people in baseball hats or football jerseys, waving one-fingered rubber arms saying "We're Number One." Like so much in my former town, the attempt to keep a token of the past failed, all for things that in their turn will be bulldozed and forgotten two decades hence. Maybe sooner.

Local color is now only in those small towns of America where hard times hit so hard they never left, leaving things pretty much as crappy as they always were. Most cities now, though, look and act the same. I travel a lot. All the airports, the Holiday Inns, the freeways, the malls, the billboards, the fast food chains, the glass-and-steel towers of the downtown skylines, the cookie-cutter homes, the lawns, the cars...everything looks the same. You fly hundreds of miles and you wind up in the same nameless place. You can't go home again because you never left it.

I reject all this senseless newness — with its proliferation of useless stuff — with a rebellious minimalism. What I can't take in one load I leave behind. Travel light and you travel far, I say. The less you got to worry about the less you got to lose. That song about life and the bowl of cherries is right. You come in and you go out naked. Between those inexorable book-ends, I say: Skinny-dip!

To escape the ubiquitous shiny same Nowness of America, I go from time to time to foreign places that maintain character and crud from the past, any kind of character, any kind of crud, just to see it, just to know that it's still there. Usually these places are in the Third World where it's hot and sticky and full of bugs and filthy toilets and customs officials wanting bribes. But the food is usually quite good and the beer cold and cheap. So, what else you want...Skinny-dip!

I wonder why the Third World is called the Third World. Where is the Second World, and who lives there? Could that be...Canada?

I don't remember "Air Power" ever showing what we did to those 145,000 dead people in Dresden. I almost wanted to say "innocent dead people." But there are no innocents in war, only victims. All those people went to the bottom of all bottoms, in one long night of unspeakable horror, burning to crisps just like that. You could say they all went to a Fourth World by way of hell. Your tax dollars at work!

A great writer, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., happened to be in Dresden in April of 1945, as a prisoner of war. He survived the fire-bombing because he was imprisoned deep in the bowels of Dresden in a cold meat packing plant. Vonnegut later wrote a book about the Dresden holocaust called *Slaughterhouse Five*. When he and his fellow POW's climbed out of the meat packing plant to survey the ashes, they were ordered to help stack all the little shriveled-up, burned-up corpses, stack them neatly like firewood.

"Air Power" also never showed us how Japanese-Americans, citizens just like you and me with constitutional rights, were all rounded up and put in concentration camps by our frightened evil government, most of them to lose their homes and land and businesses. The shame of that! What were we thinking? Why are we not ashamed of that? Why don't I care about that? I should. I really should.

In 1967, when Steve Niemoeller got his draft notice, we met in what used to be downtown to talk about it, in one of our favorite places, the Public Library. The Public Library met its fate with the wrecking ball in 1988. When we were kids we liked to go down there and look at the pickled octopus in a huge glass jar, his huge accusing eyeballs staring at us

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through gallons of formaldehyde, the long tentacled arms reminding us of the monster squid in the movie Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, starring James Mason.

We'd often go to the Public Library (spelled PVBLIC LIBRARY in chiseled letters outside, as if there were a shortage of "u's" during the Depression along with everything else), check out records and listen to them in little listening cubicles, or we'd stare at the bearded bums who came in out of the cold and fell asleep over newspapers in the Reading Room. We imagined some of the bums maybe were like Karl Marx in the British Museum, laboring over some book they were secretly writing that would change the world. Or we'd wonder from their smells and clothing who they had been and where they came from.

I sometimes wonder if the college kids from the University of Washington, looking at me now when I wait for my Big Mac Combination Meal (Super-Sized for only another 39 cents), whether they wonder who I have been and where I come from.

Later, in college, we found out the Public Library was the perfect place to pick up girls, we'd just come up to them and talk, Steve, Arty Halpern and I. Most of the time they thought it was pretty funny, our just coming up and saying, "Would you like to meet us?" We discovered that shy bookish people often welcomed our boldness, to them it was so...amusing! Come to think of it, people are often grateful for small-talk from strangers if they feel they're in a safe place. Don't you think?

But this time, in 1967, we were in the Public Library to find information about what it took to get Steve classified 4-F, the magic designation for those unfit for service. The librarian wasn't very helpful. We were going to find out more

from different draft resistor groups, but that never happened because Steve soon decided the only honorable thing to do was to go to prison in protest over the war in Viet Nam. So that's what he did. I tried to talk him out of it, maybe because his courage so embarrassed me, I was as much against the war as he was, but I lacked his courage. I just kept going to school, knowing I'd outlast the government with student deferments and beat it at its own game. Steve, however, refused to do that. I pleaded with him, but he ignored me.

Even the prison where they kept Steve is now gone. It's now a place where the evil government keeps records that nobody wants anymore. And the Viet Nam war is over now, too, come and gone. And Steve has long since been out of prison, where he learned how to design jet engines, and he looks and acts OK if you don't mind the fact that he won't talk and may not be serene but psychotic. And the wicked government no longer drafts people but instead makes them all that they can be by paying for college tuitions that should be free anyway, then putting these semi-educated soldiers behind screens of computers that now do all the killing for us. The soldiers can be all they can be with smart bombs with TV cameras stuck in them so we don't have to wait for shows like "Air Power" anymore to see the mayhem later in a documentary, we now get instant replays on the Evening News! Even before some of the smart-bombed people have had enough time to die! How about that?

So maybe it's just as well we Americans destroy our home towns, our pasts — and everything that might remind us of them. Just so we don't have to look back. We've learned to replace history with mythologies, made-for-TV movies. Steve Niemoeller's time in prison exists now only on a record in a box that occupies his old cell. The JFK that had another head of state and his brother assassinated three weeks before

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he met the same fate, the same JFK who screwed up the Bay of Pigs and almost caused World War III over Cuba again, the guy who out-diddled Bill Clinton in the Oval Office, is now a hero, his face is on the money. We invented a black saint in Martin Luther King, even though he, too, was a rake and a philanderer. We used to be a nation bitterly divided over Viet Nam, but now we all get to go and wail at the Viet Nam Wall together because, hey, we were all there, we are all veterans of that conflict. And after all, we'd all, really, just like to forget all about it.

Something that Class Clown Arty Halpern always used to say, again and again, in his best Brooklynese, whenever he got in trouble: "Hey, Forgeddaboudit!"

Chapter 6

Glenna is a magical woman. Maybe because she's a musician and writer of sorts (her own lyrics, anyway), she's also a spiritually gifted person. Like so many other women and so very few men.

Maybe most men are spiritually defective because we are much too involved in aggressive behavior, for reasons both biological and cultural. Maybe women are more spiritually accessible because they have more genetic information than men, all those extra genes on the X chromosome that are absent from men's Y chromosomes (X chromosomes with a leg missing). That might help explain why men spit and scratch their balls in public and forget to put down the toilet seat. We men, you might say, in politically correct Newspeak, are among the Genetically Challenged.

Anyway, Glenna has this gift of hypnotizing you and getting you to find all these interesting people floating around inside you. They just suddenly appear and move around as if in a play, but you soon discover you're in the play, too, interacting with what you see. These could be Jungian archetypes in the Collective Unconscious that you tap into, or, as Glenna believes, you are simply "regressed" into past lives you've lived before. For a brief time you get to walk around in a former self, reliving things in a way, but without losing touch with the life you're currently living.

I know that all may sound pretty weird, but Glenna proved her magical powers one day when she took on the least likely, most cynical, most suspicious person imaginable to try her powers on: Me.

It happened like this:

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Glenna was working in the garage that my then-wife Elli had converted into an office. Elli took up a career selling real estate to support her real passion, which was painting and sculpting. She also probably intuited the fissures in our marriage which would soon appear, and she was building a life-boat for herself in that garage. Anyway, Elli hired Glenna to be her secretary, and during a break on a hot August afternoon Glenna suggested to Elli that she “regress” her. Elli said, “OK,” and Glenna took her through some past lives. Then Elli became all enthusiastic about this power of Glenna’s, so excited in fact that she called her best friend Fran and told her to come right over, she had to be regressed, too. And then after Fran was regressed the two of them, Elli and Fran, were so excited about it all they turned to me and said I had to do it, too.

I refused at first. Elli had a pushy way about her, when she thought something was good for me she had a way of forcing it on me whether I wanted it or not. Which made me only dig in my heels all the more. But then I looked over at Glenna and she gave me this beatific smile, it was so warm and welcoming; all she had to say with just a shrug of her shoulders was, “What have you got to lose?”

I thought about it for a few seconds and realized I had nothing to lose. By the way, I still have nothing to lose. Some things don’t change!

Anyway, there they were, these three women drinking lemonade on the deck and sweating in the heat, and there I was, not wanting, as usual, to do all the legal work I had left piled up in my own “office,” a little tower next to the converted garage that Elli had built for me one Christmas to get me out of the house along with my computer gear (which had managed to take on a life of its own, occupying the whole living room). So I gave in and said to Glenna, “Yeah, what

have I got to lose? But don't be surprised if I'm an unsuccessful guinea pig."

As Glenna led me into the house and told me to lie down on the sofa, I was already rehearsing in my mind the diplomatic words I'd use to ease her certain failure with me, things like "Maybe I'm just too reluctant a subject," and "Well, two out of three ain't bad."

She had me lie down face up, with my head slightly propped on a pillow. Then she took what I remember to be a washcloth that had been soaked in warm water, and she placed it so as to cover my forehead and eyes. Then she pulled up a chair right next to me and switched to a low, soft voice.

She asked me to take deep breaths and relax. She had me relax one set of muscles at a time, from my head to my neck to my shoulders to my arms to my back to my belly to my butt to my legs to my feet. Then she told me to imagine her standing next to me, and once I had a clear image of her I was to hold her hand. Not her real hand but the hand in the image. I did what she said, and it felt good. She asked me to picture her and me standing at the bottom of a rise. She told me, "When you get to the top of the hill you will enter a past life." When I was ready I was to walk up that little hill with my hand in hers.

Somewhere in all that the part of my brain that's always busy and thinking was shut off. I was feeling a wonderful, floating sensation. I was glad to be where I was, in the room with Glenna sitting there, breathing her words to me, and in this dreamlike place with Glenna and the hill, holding her hand.

It was so simple. I walked up and over the hill, and suddenly, amazingly, there I was, on the threshold of some

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old Flemish farmhouse that looked like it belonged in a Breughel painting.

But I didn't see everything that was there yet, not yet. What I first took notice of was my feet, or rather my shoes. I was looking down, almost as if floating in water, and there they were, these crudely made, scuffed wooden shoes, with rough-hewn edges to them and faded colors painted on them of something no longer distinguishable, maybe flowers. And around my shoes were pebbles and straw and animal shit of some kind.

When I looked up I saw this oddly shaped house, with three stories, each story narrower than the one below, and on the ground floor the front door was open, and there were big wooden beams making up the doorframe. To the Glenna who was seated next to me on the sofa, and to the Glenna who was holding my hand in Flanders, I said, "I can't believe this! I know this place, I don't remember being here before and yet I do! I live here!"

The ground floor was for the animals, I knew that. And I knew if I turned left I'd find this big old draught horse in a stall, and sure enough, there he was. He was as brown and fat as I "remembered" him to be. I was a little distracted, though, because I couldn't figure out why nobody seemed to care that there was all this animal shit mixed in with the straw down at my feet. I wanted a broom!

To my right, three big hogs were eating their slops. They were muddy and hungry.

What most surprised me were all the sharp details, so new but also familiar, so odd-looking now: a crude barrel with water in it and insects and dust and little pieces of straw floating on the surface; the big supporting wooden beams that held

up the house above these animal stalls, the grain so clear; rooms with old-looking tools and equipment in them; a recently killed game bird hanging on a hook from the wall with a couple of flies on it.

This was not like any dream I ever had before. My dreams are in color but mostly surreal and not very detailed, and I'm never "aware" that I am dreaming. In this case I was very aware that I was in two places at the same time, on my sofa and in this farmhouse.

In the farmhouse I sensed Glenna being there, helping me around, but I didn't actually see her while I was in there. I did see, however, and very vividly, the crooked wooden steps that led to the living area on the second floor. I was struck by how low the ceiling was, how uneven and rough the white-washed walls were, how sooty and smudged the places were where the smoke of hundreds of candles must have left their mark.

And then I turned a corner, and there she was. All dressed up, in a dress of light fabric with some gold thread in it that bunched around her shoulders and flew wide to the ground from her waist down. Her hair was up in yellow braids, and her cheeks glowed red though the rest of her skin was very pale. She had blue eyes and tiny teeth.

She was petite, yet all of her filled the end of a narrow corridor covered with what looked like flagstone tiles. Her small hands, swollen from labor, were folded in front of her. She smiled, and I started to weep.

"What are you seeing," asked the Glenna seated next to the sofa, "what is the matter? Are you all right?"

I said, "It's my wife."

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She asked, “Why is she bringing tears to your eyes? Does she make you sad?”

“No, no, I’m happy,” I said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her!”

That made Glenna laugh. I laughed, too.

And then the Glenna in the farmhouse had me turn around and leave, and that was fine with me. I didn’t have the feeling I could say or do anything, I was meant to just visit and look around, and then go. I figured those were the rules. I know some Dutch, which is almost the same as Flemish, but what are you supposed to say to a wife you haven’t seen in 300 years, anyway, “What’s for dinner?” “Let me tell you quick about bacteria so you won’t drink that water downstairs?” What can you say when you reappear as an alien from the future?

Come to think of it, what makes me so sure I was in Flanders? I would have to say that was a hunch.

The two Glennas had me back on the hill again. They asked if I wanted to look again at something else over the rise. I said, “Sure.”

So we went over the hill again, and this time I was a shepherd boy. I had been to Morocco before, and it looked like that. It could have been present-day Morocco or some Arab place a thousand years ago. There were people on donkeys. I remember looking down at my feet again and seeing boy’s feet in leather sandals. I had on, like the people on the donkeys and the other boys tending the sheep, a white robe of a rough material. It itched a little.

I didn’t recognize anybody and had no idea what was going on. This was still as vivid and un-dreamlike as the Flemish

farmhouse, but nothing much happened. I looked at my right hand and was surprised to see a long stick there in my hand. Glenna near the sofa asked me what I saw, and I told her, and she asked what was happening, and I said “Nothing much.” So I left that, and that was that. I was done.

Of course, when it was all over, I was amazed and stunned. I had experienced something truly fundamental and different. At a minimum it was a guided vivid dream. I have read a couple of things about vivid dreams after that experience with Glenna. People who have vivid dreams say they are hard to distinguish from what we call “reality.” What I experienced, though, was induced by Glenna’s magic; without her graceful ability to connect me to what happened it would not have happened.

It was wonderful, but I felt and feel no need to do it again. I think it’s enough to know that we are all involved in so many other things beyond what we call consciousness, there are all kinds of things going on that impinge on us like radio waves we neither feel nor see or hear except with the help of a radio. Glenna was my radio, or at least she was my antenna.

I think there are spiritual aristocrats, people like Glenna who have special talents the way some people have special talents that make them outstanding dancers or swimmers or chess players. Most of us just don’t have those talents. The people who have touched me importantly in life have all been spiritual aristocrats who believe we are influenced by our past lives. Who believe that life is a school from which we eventually graduate. Who believe we create even greater realities from what we believe than the realities we create by what we do. That through reincarnation we transcend life and death in the physical plane, evil and suffering being a necessary part of the curriculum in the school of life. In the end we all go home

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to the same place, united with the all-encompassing One. Those are sublime and comforting beliefs. I accept them and embrace them with a kind of beginner's kit. I'm clearly not 100% in tune with all of this, but I trust and believe those who are.

Glenna told me later, over a beer in one of the two bars on Cosby Island, Green's Pub, a place that attracts bikers and Food Stamp scammers, that each time you come back for another life it's because you still have some lessons to learn. Apparently the lesson she had to learn was that she would never make it as a country&western queen, at least not in this lifetime. Or maybe the lesson for her to learn this time around was to avoid getting pregnant with twins next time so she wouldn't have to marry Ben. Then she'd have a better crack at being a country&western queen. Or maybe it was OK to marry Ben but not have the twins, or maybe it was OK to have the twins but not marry Ben.

It seems to me now that it will take Glenna three or four lifetimes to work out all the possible combinations. For her sake, I hope there's somebody keeping score.

Glenna and Andy Hopper wrote a song that was a minor hit. It is called "One More Dance." It was their only hit, they sold more than 20,000 copies of it, and it got some local play on the radio. I remember hearing it one day when I was driving to the office, back in the time when I had an office to drive to.

The song is about a middle-aged woman who finds her old prom dress in the attic and wonders what her first boyfriend is doing now. The beginning of it goes like this:

*He's the one set my heart afire,
He filled me with deep desire,
We kissed and more ev'ry chance we had,*

Freefall

*Makin' love in his car till early dawn,
But I said goodbye, that made me sad,
He found a wife, and I'm movin' on.
Movin' on, movin' on, movin' on...*

I can't remember the rest. It was a pretty catchy tune, with banjos and violins. A lot of Glenna's songs were about leaving people. No surprise there! But it's possible, I suppose, that Andy Hopper wrote the lyrics. Maybe he wrote the whole thing, the music and the lyrics.

I went to a music store the other day to see if I could buy the tape or CD with the song on it and put all the words in here. But the label has been out of business for a number of years. So if you missed it, you missed it.

Somebody I recently bumped into from Cosby Island told me they heard from somebody else that Glenna and the drifter she took off with (after her husband Ben wouldn't let her back in the house) had settled somewhere near Durham, North Carolina. So if you happen to live or travel near there, maybe she might still be doing some gigs, and you can ask her to play "One More Dance" for you.

As I recall, the song ended fairly upbeat. The woman puts on the dress for one more dance in the attic, then puts it back in the trunk again. That's all she really wanted, just one more dance.

Chapter 7

Looking back, my teen Nazi period was pretty dark and scary. Not only did I identify with those swastika’ed Darth Vader black hordes that stomped death all over Europe, I was also sociopathic. I was a thief.

I’d routinely go through my Dad’s billfold and lift money out of it. I took cigarettes out of my mother’s purse (she never had enough money to steal). When I visited my aunt in Rosewood, Iowa during my summer stays there, a woman who spoiled and doted on me, I knew where all her purses were hidden. I’d help myself to some of her money, too. I never got caught. Or confronted, anyway.

Once during my Nazi period, two of my pals and I went into a downtown record store, and we all shoplifted records. I have to be the only teenager in history to have stolen Rudolf Serkin’s recordings of Beethoven’s piano concertos 2 and 4, and a complete set of Richard Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. How I got all that into one shopping bag and out of the store undetected is beyond me. But I did it.

In Rosewood, Iowa I also hustled the local town kids and farmboys in poker games that were high stakes for kids, usually winning fair and square, but I also cheated, too. I always came home with a good chunk of cash. I never got caught at that, either.

My same buddies who stole records with me also joined me on one Halloween evening in taking people’s pumpkins with their cute carved faces and tossing them through their owners’ windows, then running like hell. We threw the jack-

o'-lanterns into basement windows, garage windows, living room windows. We would hear the smash of shattering glass, imagine the splattered pumpkin, and we thought that was hilarious. Then we'd run like hell into the night. We didn't get caught for that, either.

I wonder why I didn't feel the shame then that I feel now.

I had no orbit then. No orbit at all.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, by the way, was Adolf Hitler's favorite opera. I bought a German-English dictionary to try to figure out what the words meant. When that did no good, I went and bought the College Outline Series' German Grammar. I still remember the author's name: Eric Greene. So Richard Wagner was also my German teacher. He taught me things like "Morgenlicht leuchtend im rosigen Schein..." — "Dawn light glistening in rose-like beam..." Useful stuff like that.

I used the money I stole or hustled, along with the allowance I got from my parents every week, and put it all into camera and darkroom equipment. I was a camera freak, I read camera magazines and hung around camera stores. I even worked up the courage to ask a friend of my Dad's, a professional photographer whose work was published in slick magazines and the Sunday paper of my home town, if I could come down to his studio and watch him work. He let me do that, and it was a magical day. I decided then and there, at 14, that I would become a professional photographer when I grew up.

My career as photographer was stillborn in high school, however. I had joined the school newspaper staff to take pictures for them. I took pictures of football and hockey games and award ceremonies. I then developed the film myself and

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printed the pictures on paper with the help of trays and chemicals and water in my basement.

My pictures were always out of focus or too dark. The student paper printed them anyway. One hockey picture shows a pile-up of players trying to stop or force a puck into the goal. It could have also passed as a photo of a major pile-up of cars on a highway, with strange sticks sticking out of the cars.

I was nearly lynched and railroaded out of town by the varsity football team when my picture of these helmeted warriors, all lined up in impressive rows before my Agfa camera, showed up in the high school annual as a blur of ghosts. The other negatives had been worse, with scratches on them. Mr. Dolby, the football coach and algebra teacher, blew his top! Never again would the huge high school athletic budget leave out a line item for a professional photographer. Never again!

I lost interest in photography not long after that.

Meanwhile, though, the only way I hoped to make up for my inferiority feelings over the way I looked was to excel in my grades. I not only got good grades, I'd take every chance I could get to show off, if possible put down my teachers, show them I knew as much if not more about their subject. This would, of course, piss off just about everybody, students and teachers alike. I didn't care. It was the price I paid, after all, for being part of the Master Race. What did these Untermenschen know?!

I was a royal arrogant insecure pain in the ass.

There were two bright spots, though, that helped to pull me out of darkness and towards the light, before AFS came along to turn me into Swiss Boy Ambassador with a

clean, precise orbit. One was Mr. Norqvist, the other Sharon Knudsen.

Mr. Norqvist was my 8th Grade Science teacher, then he became my 9th Grade World History teacher. He was not popular with most kids. He had nervous quirks, like always playing with his collar (his bow tie seemed always tied too tight), and he spoke in a high squeaky voice. Kids would intentionally get him mad just so he'd wag his finger and squawk, "Ohhhh, nowwww, let's not have any more of that!" The kids would then laugh, and he'd get even more exercised. He looked like an owl in his glasses, he had a big Adam's apple that bobbed up and down over his bow tie, and he had patches sewn to the elbows of his tweed jackets. I adored him.

He was scholarly, and he refused to teach down to his students. He ran his classes as if we were already college kids. I did all the extra reading assignments he gave plus whatever else I could do on my own, like reading Scientific American or books written by historian Arnold Toynbee. When I did my show-off numbers in Norqvist's class, it was simply to please him, to get his approval.

So it came as a jolt to me one day when he came up to me and said he'd like to see me, one on one, after school. He wanted to talk to me. He said it in the same serious and solemn tone my Dad used whenever he felt I had "gotten out of line" at home, usually by mouthing off to my mother, thus earning me a "man to man" talk with my father. I dreaded those worse than a spanking, which was always direct and done with. The man-to-man talks, on the other hand, were guilt-loading things where I would be told in calm and articulate ways what an absolute dickhead I was. Mr. Norqvist could not inspire that sort of fear, but I sensed I had let him down somehow. I did not look forward to the end of that school day.

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When I went into his classroom he told me to sit down. He had a book in his hand. And when he started to talk, he took on a wholly unexpected tone. I think for the first time in my life I was greeted by an adult with something that a child should rarely be in need of, would hardly seem ripe for: compassion. He took a tone as if he were including me into a confidence.

“You know,” he said, “you’re a very bright boy. You’re one of the best students I’ve ever had. But you need to learn some things that we unfortunately don’t teach here in this school, at least there’s no course in it. I want you to read a book. We don’t have to talk about it, you just have to promise me you’ll read it. When I first read it, I was like you are now, but I didn’t know it, I didn’t know I needed this book, just like you don’t know it either. But I was lucky because somebody gave it to me, and because of that my life was changed. I think it could change yours.”

With that he gave me a warn paperback. It was entitled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. By Dale Carnegie. Now there was a 1950’s book if ever there was one, probably the first self-help book ever, or maybe the second. *The Power of Positive Thinking* was another 50’s bestseller, by Norman Vincent Peale. I had heard of Carnegie’s book, the way people in general conversation throw around the name of a popular title and sum it up, and I thought *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was all about how to become a more effective salesman.

But oddly enough for me then, I took to heart Mr. Norqvist’s words and I took him at his word. I kept an open mind about a book I probably would have otherwise considered cornball before opening it, probably because I was genuinely touched. Here was someone I really respected who had

taken time and effort to think about me, somebody who said he knew something about me I didn't, and here he was handing me the tool that would impart to me the knowledge about me he had and I lacked.

I read Dale Carnegie's book carefully, from cover to cover. It really is a book primarily pitched at salesmen, how you can get people to like you so you can manipulate them to your purposes. Not a pleasant thought, really. And Carnegie, like a good salesman, made his basic points over and over again, with slight variations, in order to fatten his message into the size of a book. But that aside, here's what I got from the book:

1. Listen to people. People like to be listened to.
2. Ask people questions about themselves. People never tire of talking about themselves. To them, their story is the most interesting story.
3. Don't take too much time talking about yourself. People are not all that interested in your story.
4. People like praise and hate criticism. People will do things for you if you praise them. They will resent you if you criticize them.
5. People will think you are a jerk if you brag.
6. People like to have their names remembered.

Those, anyway, are the lessons I remember, or at least what I thought was in the book. It had a big impact on me. I got the message fairly clearly from Mr. Norqvist that if I continued to gloat in class as a know-it-all and didn't appreciate and pay attention to qualities in other people, I'd alienate myself from others, have no friends, and wind up like the loner

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Mr. Norqvist was until somebody gave him Dale Carnegie's book.

I wondered if the paperback I had just devoured was the same book he had read.

I consciously put into practice the precepts of the book, or rather, I tried to act the way I thought Mr. Norqvist would expect me to act after reading the book. The most important first objective was to please him. I stopped showing off in class. I didn't snicker with the other "brains" when somebody gave a wrong answer. I started to talk to kids I thought were intellectually beneath me, and I asked them questions. I got them to talk about themselves. I asked more questions. And I found them to be interesting people, once they began to trust me and knew I was really interested.

I even made a point of treating kindly those kids everybody else picked on. Kids like Milton Trapp who was a little retarded, or Dianne Hubbell, who had coke-bottle glasses and looked and talked like a boy.

The amazing thing, though, and I am just realizing this right now, is that it wasn't that sappy book with its invitations to self-serving hypocrisy and cynicism that changed my life. It was Mr. Norqvist's being compassionate with me, giving me something that was important to him to share with me, because he thought I was that important, I was worth it. That gave me self-worth from a role model I so desperately needed. It was his compassion I was now willing to try out, myself, on others. I warmed up. That was when my orbit got started.

An immediate consequence from all this was my first puppy love, Sharon Knudsen. She sat next to me in one of my classes. Though I had been generally scared of girls (except of course, my "little" sisters whom I considered mere nui-

sances), fantasizing about girls but not having any idea at all how to approach let alone deal with them — Sharon was different.

With her flaming red hair, freckles and friendly smile she made it pretty clear she had a crush on me. In no time at all I found ways to avoid walking home with my usual pals and somehow taking a route that found my footsteps next to hers. She lived on the same street I did, but 8 blocks farther north. I got to carrying her books. Whether she asked me to, or whether I offered, I can't remember, but it was no great effort to walk the extra 8 blocks, taking her books all the way to her home port. Once there, I was invited to stay for a while. That became a nice routine.

Sherry and I were nuts about each other, but we didn't know how to say it. When I'd get to her house, she'd invite me to stay and watch "American Bandstand" on TV, a program with kids in Philadelphia doing the Lindy and the Cha Cha Cha with Dick Clark jabbering in-between. We held hands and sat close to each other on the sofa while her mother fussed around in the kitchen.

Sherry's sisters, both older than she, would sometimes pop into the living room, and we'd quick stop holding hands, until, after several days of this, it was hopeless to disguise what we were doing, so we just kept on holding hands.

Sherry was a good drawer, she loved to draw horses. She'd take me upstairs to her room and she'd show me her drawings, and we'd sit awkwardly this way and that, and I'd brush up against her this way and that. We'd sometimes look dreamily at each other, and I knew I was probably supposed to kiss her, but what if I did that all wrong? What if I made the move and she turned her head and I wound up with hair in my mouth? What if she screamed and her mother came running

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upstairs to find out what was the matter?

I lived for those afternoon walks and “American Bandstand” and holding hands and going upstairs into the confusion and the horse drawings. Sometimes I was surprised to see Sherry’s Dad in the family kitchen. He was a mean-looking man who spoke gruffly and was not at all glad to see me. I learned that he was a fireman. I couldn’t imagine him putting out fires. I couldn’t imagine him doing anything.

The house Mr. and Mrs. Knudsen lived in with their three daughters was too small for them, everything was crammed into every nook and corner. The three girls shared the one big bedroom upstairs. Mr. Knudsen never left the kitchen when he was there, and I only remember him in his undershirt, drinking beer. Sherry and I wouldn’t hold hands when he was around, and I’d leave right after “American Bandstand.”

Finally there came the day of our first kiss...my first ever. Sherry and I were alone in her house. Our natural desire to want to kiss by now lay in the air as heavy as humidity in a bayou. But she and I both wore braces, and if she was thinking what I was thinking, she wondered if the railroad tracks on our teeth would get entangled and ensnarled, maybe even bloodying us up in the process. And I was always worried that some of my lunch might still be stuck in some of that metal in my mouth, who in the hell would want to come near that?

But it all came quite simply. As since time immemorial, starting with Eve and the apple, I was set up. Thank God!

Miraculously, Ma and Pa were out somewhere, the house was empty and silent. Sherry had me follow her into the kitchen, and we sat at the table across from each other in plas-

tic chairs. In the wintertime Sherry's sweet full lips would chap and crack. Crack sometimes to the point where the skin in her lips would break and bleed. In this moment, as we sat there, she started to dab her upper lip where there was a little fleck of blood apparent. She said the magic words, "This really hurts." Trembling a little with the daring I felt coming over me, I was suddenly inspired to come up with words right for the moment: "Do you want me to kiss it?" Demurely, shyly, she said yes. And there it was, my passport stamped, the gate opened. She closed her eyes and mouth and leaned a little forward. Feeling like I was diving off a skyscraper, I moved my head the distance between us and felt the wonderful sensation of my lips against her chapped mouth.

Heaven! Bliss! I pulled back, my heart pounding, and I dove in for a second, longer kiss.

From that day forward, afternoon after blissful afternoon, our mouths were inseparable. We couldn't get enough of kissing, but only when nobody else was in the room. Sherry must have gotten the word to her sisters to find something else to do in the afternoons. But her mom was usually somewhere around, though she left us alone through "American Bandstand," and she'd pretty much leave us alone upstairs in Sherry's room as long as we made talking noises often enough, otherwise she'd yell up the stairs, "Everything all right up there?" and Sherry'd roll her eyes and say, "Yeah, everything's fine. We're doing our homework." Some homework!

The hard part was going home to dinner. Not that I couldn't tear myself away from Sherry, but I always wound up with a nagging erection that was impossible to conceal, try how I would. We never talked or did anything about that. We were such innocents, I think we were plenty happy just doing what we were doing.

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Sherry was so sweet and kind to me, and while Mr. Norqvist had boosted my sense of self-worth, Sherry had made me feel lovable, a mating kind of lovable.

Unfortunately, though, at the same time all this was going on with Sherry, I was still secretly in love with Haddie Bernbaum. It was to just-out-of-reach Haddie I wanted to take the hard-on inspired by Sherry, take it the mile and a half to her professor father's house, take it upstairs to her room and plant it in her a dozen, a thousand times while she whisper-talked to me, madly thrusting my uncompromising member into her while clinging to her big ass until the only sound that would survive would be Miles Davis' trumpet. The trumpet would play all night while I'd sleep in the sweat and hair of Haddie, until the next morning when her mother would come up and serve us breakfast in bed and send us off to school. That's what I really wanted!

And despite all my new-found compassion from Mr. Norqvist, I betrayed Sherry Knudsen. She was from the wrong side of the tracks. That was all that was wrong with her. She was not among my intelligentsia friends.

My brother's friends, who were the athletes and the class presidents and the hot-rodgers and the hipster poets...so much older and gods, all! — they confronted me in Don & Mark's, a hamburger hang-out, and they teased me about Sherry, they wanted to know who my girlfriend was! They called her "Red" — "Who's Red? She your girl, hah?" I was in terror! If my brother Paul found out, he'd tell the whole family, and I'd be teased about it forever! The imagined refrain from my sisters, an endless taunt: you got a girlfriend, you got a girlfriend! I remember the humiliating grilling Paul got from Dad when he was in the same boat, how embarrassed Paul was when Dad, surely well-meaning, had the sound

of tease and titter in his voice when he wanted to know who Paul's girl was, where she lived, what she was like, why didn't he bring her over, all that stuff! Yikes!

Irony is: years later Paul told me he saw me walking Sherry home a number of times, and he always held far enough back so I wouldn't see him. He understood how fragile and new it all was to me, and he said nothing.

That was very kind of him.

But I shut Sherry out. After the "Sweetheart Swing," a dance where the girls ask the boys. I went with her to the dance, we kissed a lot, and then that was it. We continued to sit next to each other in Civics class, but I ignored her. I didn't tell her why, so she had no idea.

That was another thing where years had to pass before I began to feel anything like shame. How can that be?

I saw Sherry at a high school reunion, the first one I ever went to, the 20th for our class. She had wound up marrying a guy with my last name, how about that? But my Scandinavian last name where I come from is as common as water. By our 20th reunion she had had five kids. She even had grandchildren not that much younger than my youngest child. She must have been popping kids out first chance she had. Good thing we didn't fool around when we were 14, after all, she was mighty fertile!

Anyway, I was glad I had a chance to tell her how sorry I was I treated her so poorly. She was gracious enough to say she didn't remember how it all ended, and maybe she didn't! Well, and that was that. I felt better for saying I was sorry, anyway.

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It would probably do my orbit some good, too, while I am thinking of it, if I could go back to those houses where I helped toss the pumpkins into the windows and say I'm sorry, and pay for the damage done. But I don't remember now where those houses are, or if they are still standing. I can't pay back my Dad or my aunt, either, for all the money I stole from them because they're dead. And those Rosewood, Iowa kids I bilked at poker have long since flown the coop to places like California or Chicago.

One of the places from my youth that still stands in my home town is the store where I stole the records. I could make amends there, and I plan to, next time I'm there. I'll come up to the cash register with the Rudolf Serkin Beethoven concertos and the Wagner opera, I'll pay the money, then I'll leave without the records.

They'll probably come chasing after me, telling me I forgot the records. And I'll tell them to keep them, I owe them the records.

I bet you that will be a first, too.

Chapter 8

When Steve Niemoeller went to prison in 1968 he was facing a sentence of twenty years. In 1977, though, President Carter issued a blanket amnesty for all draft resisters. After nine years in, they let Steve out.

Before he went in there was a big party. The media were there, pushing cameras and microphones into Steve's face, and when that happened he flipped the two-fingered "peace" sign and said, "Hell, no, I won't go." That brought a round of cheers from his well-wishers, including me. But if the TV people kept crowding him, he would drop his index finger from the "V"-for-Victory peace sign and rotate his hand so that he wound up flipping the bird. That worked; the media suddenly turned off their cameras and left.

Outside on the sidewalk, though, were about 30 people with signs, some of them saying "Support Our Troops" and "America, Love It or Leave It." On the TV news that group of 30 somehow looked like 200. They were angry people who shouted at Pastor Niemoeller's house. That was where the party was.

There were balloons and streamers and home-made posters with attempts at humor on them, and a cake, too. Steve did his best to clown around. But nobody really succeeded at putting a happy face on what was to happen the next day, the day Steve would be taken into the custody of U.S. Marshals and driven to a cage somewhere. Mrs. Niemoeller couldn't stop crying. Pastor Niemoeller was pretty somber, too. So was I.

Pastor Niemoeller, whose first name was Dennis, by the way, had tried to talk Steve into becoming a conscientious

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objector. That was another way to avoid getting shot dead in Viet Nam. Conscientious objectors usually put in time working as orderlies in hospitals or doing some kind of mindless desk job that the U.S. military had thousands of desks for.

But Steve didn't fit the bill: you got C.O. status only if your objection to killing people was based on the beliefs of some recognized organized religion. You had to be a card-carrying member of some officially sanctioned belief group that had serious notions about a personal God, like the Quakers.

The government thus got into the business of deciding what was a religion and what wasn't. Steve's belief system rested pretty much on magazine articles he had read about Gandhi and Albert Schweizer. Steve's Draft Board couldn't understand what Steve was saying about passive resistance and Reverence for Life until he admitted he was an atheist. With that they all gave a big sigh of relief...an atheist, now that was something they could get their minds around! They all knew that atheists had nothing to back up their consciences with!

Steve could have pulled it off if he had said he was a Quaker. Everybody by 1968 had seen that movie with Jimmy Stewart or Ray Milland or Gary Cooper, one of those guys, who refused to fight in the Civil War and was considered a coward, even by Grace Kelly, I think it was, the guy's wife. Just another whiny simp. Quakers were known cowards. But Steve wasn't a Quaker.

Richard Nixon was a Quaker. How come he wasn't a conscientious objector?! Imagine that, the Commander in Chief of the United States of America, doing his time of service as an orderly, say in Bethesda Naval Hospital. Close enough to the White House for an easy commute. Cleaning up blood and

vomit and moving people around in wheelchairs while being called Mr. President. But Richard Nixon was no pacifist. His “secret” Peace Plan for Viet Nam, which helped get him elected President in 1968, consisted of bombing the shit out of Hanoi, a plan proposed by Barry Goldwater in 1964 that led to Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory. Back in 1964 the thought of bombing Hanoi was like bombing Dresden, it was considered idiotic and pointless. Everybody thought it was dangerous, too, tweaking “Red” China’s nose that close to its borders. Barry Goldwater was branded a war monger.

Steve also thought he was displaying a greater conscience, anyway, in simply going to jail. Like Martin Luther King before him, who spent a lot of time in jail and was shot dead on a motel balcony just days before our party send-off for Steve, Steve wanted to “make a statement” by going to prison. Steve said that the war in Viet Nam was illegal and undeclared, therefore un-Constitutional. Therefore the law that sent him to jail was equally illegal and, above all, immoral.

He told Connie Bjornstad of the local Eyewitness News Team, “What were the trials in Nuremberg,” (that city of Wagner’s opera, Adolf Hitler’s favorite!), “what were those trials all about, if not that there are Higher Laws that must be obeyed, that ‘following orders’ is no excuse?”

“Isn’t that why they took what was left of the Nazi leadership and hanged them?”

Connie Bjornstad just smiled to the camera and had no answer for that. She said, “Now back to you, Ted.”

I remember “Air Power” did a show on the Nuremberg Nazi war crimes trials. What a pathetic sight those defendants were, men like Goering and von Ribbentrop and Hess, sitting there like bums on a bench, stripped of their cool uniforms and their arrogance, their heads shaved.

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And what was Rudolf Hess, Adolf Hitler's #2 guy, doing there, anyway? He bailed out of the war in 1941, literally: He parachuted out of an airplane over England, apparently on some kind of peace mission which has never been fully disclosed. Some of the information about what Hess was up to is still classified and under seal in Britain. What the hell for? Could it be that Churchill feared making any peace with the Germans, that the Americans would then stay out of the conflict and Stalin would eventually beat the Germans and wind up with all of Europe on his plate?

Right up until September of 1939, Churchill had been more wary of Stalin than Adolf Hitler.

Churchill was one crafty, wily son of a bitch.

I say this: the deal Hess had to offer was so good that British public opinion would have forced its acceptance. I say Churchill wanted to cling to what was left of the British Empire while getting the Americans to do his fighting for him. I say Churchill was a war monger. You want to prove me wrong, open up those still-classified UK files on Hess and prove me wrong! I dare you!

Although, in all probability, Hess did do his weird stunt in 1941 because he was nuts. Steve did his stunt and eventually went nuts. I can't prove that, any more than I can prove Hess was a messenger of peace, but that's what I think, anyway.

Not that prison was all that bad for Steve, at least not what I saw of it. In fact, when I went to visit him at this minimum-security place that is now a Federal Records Retention Center, it was like visiting a kind of low-budget mental hospital. The beds were neatly made with sheets and blankets, there were TV's around, and a ping pong table. There were pic-

tures on the walls painted by Norman Rockwell. Covers taken from The Saturday Evening Post and hung behind glass in cheap metal frames.

Steve looked chipper, healthy and rested. He was pale, but that's what happens in prison, you get pale.

In prison he had learned how to bake bread. He had learned how to play chess. He could take lots of naps.

At first I had to visit Steve like any other visitor. I would talk to him through a phone and hear his voice that way, because between us must have been a piece of Plexiglas about a foot thick. But later, when I became a lawyer, I was able to see him as his counsel, and the warders were more generous. At one visit I was able to do a tour with him and we could talk in the library and I could stay as long as I wanted.

“I really can’t complain,” Steve said, “I’ve made some nice friends here, and the food is a lot better than you’d think.” He lifted up his prison tunic and showed me a little bulge in his belly, and we laughed.

“One guy I play a lot of chess with is a Mafia don. He says he has a good-paying job waiting for me when I get out if I want it,” he said. “I told him I didn’t qualify, I wasn’t Italian. The don laughed and said he and his ‘associates’ were all in the big corporations now, where they could steal legally, and you didn’t have to be Italian any more, either. The mob is an equal-opportunity employer.”

I found out from Steve that the mob had come to own most of the major film, record, pharmaceutical, oil and insurance companies. They also own ships and trucking companies and they lease planes to airlines. The Mafia still dominates unions in order to keep them from striking against the indus-

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tries it owns. But the big-time mobsters are no longer criminals, for the most part. They contribute heavily to presidential election campaigns and a whole host of charities. They send their kids to Harvard and Yale. They got out of restaurants and pimping and drugs a long time ago. They let the Colombians and the Puerto Ricans and the blacks and, later, the Russian immigrants take those over. “Let them have that garbage,” the don told Steve. How about that?

The Mafia don back in the prison library in 1968 said he was set up to do a fall for another “associate” that was on Bobby Kennedy’s shit list. Bobby Kennedy is another guy who got shot and killed in 1968.

The Eyewitness News Team in Los Angeles, there to broadcast Bobby’s victory speech in the California primary, got right into the kitchen where Bobby lay on the floor in a pool of his blood, his eyes still open, looking very stunned and confused and surprised. The last thing Bobby Kennedy saw while still alive was the lens of a TV camera.

The don was in prison for allegedly having arranged to have his brother-in-law, Dino, rubbed out. They had to jackhammer Dino’s body out of a huge chunk of concrete and rebar. A good part of Dino’s body got jackhammered, too. His funeral was one of those closed-casket services.

I wasn’t really Steve’s lawyer, but the prison people didn’t know that. There would have been nothing for me to do as his lawyer, anyway; Steve wasn’t appealing his 20-year sentence. The American Civil Liberties Union, though, kept pestering Steve to take his case, but Steve steadfastly refused. As I say, he wanted to make a statement, he wanted the badge of honor that came with being branded a criminal, when it was the war that was criminal, he kept saying. When it was Nixon who was the criminal, and before Nixon, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

He really thought that some day Nixon and Johnson would sit in a docket, too, and be made to look like bums. Henry Kissinger would be with them there, too, his head shaved and skinny from the prison food. Steve and I both laughed and laughed at Steve's rendition of a Kissinger in oversized prison togs, looking nervously about everywhere like a trapped ferret, mumbling over and over again, "I vas only following ze orders! I vas only following ze orders!"

We howled. A prison guard yelled at us to keep it down.

In my later visits, Steve became more and more serious. He really did start to believe in earnest there would some-day be a War Crimes Tribunal against those of our leaders who took us into Viet Nam. There were even indications that the Swedish government would convene it, he said. He would pull his chair up really close to me, too close, really, and his eyes got buggy when he said that.

When Steve talked like that, I thought I saw the first signs of his going crazy. How do you police the lawless police? Who was going to come and haul the President, his Secretary of State and an ex-President to Nuremberg, or Stockholm, or wherever you are supposed to try war criminals?

By the way, I have been to Nuremberg. It is a very pretty city. They make a lot of toys there. Every year they have a gigantic trade fair and festival, celebrating Christmas. It is called the Christmas Child's Market. Germans are our allies now. It is now OK to like Germans.

The Nazis had a euphemism for killing so many Jews and gypsies and Commies and the occasional Pastor Niemoellers who acted up: "The Final Solution."

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Today, when we kill innocent civilians for no military reason whatsoever, we call it “collateral damage.” Today’s war criminals are computers. They do all the fighting. If you wanted to convict the culprits who sent Iraqi and Serb women and children and old people to the bottom of all bottoms with American smart bombs, their heads blown off, you’d have to arrest a gaggle of PC’s and hang them.

How do you dress up a PC running Windows 98 to look like a bum and shave its hair?

Answer: You can’t!

When I visited Steve in prison as his lawyer, he was usually dressed in a loose-fitting ensemble of bright-colored work clothes, like a scrubbed surgeon in a jolly hospital with a sense of humor. Like the rest of the prisoners, he also wore what looked like comfortable over-sized slippers that clopped-clopped whenever he walked around. He also usually had on an old cloth bathrobe that he let hang open.

He worked in the library and thus had access to all the books he wanted. He took a liking to physics and math. He took correspondence courses from the University of Maryland. You could take as many of those courses as you wanted, and the evil federal government that wanted to punish him for his refusal to kill people paid for all of it. In three years he had himself a double degree in physics and chemistry, three years after that he had degrees in chemical, mechanical and electrical engineering. He was a whiz!

“I never would have accomplished this on the outside,” he told me, “there are just too many distractions. Here all I can do is read and stay clear of the gangs. I do that by giving the money I make working in the library to a biker doing time for beating an IRS agent to a pulp. The guy’s name

is Malcomb. Malcomb keeps away the black and Latino gangs.” Isn’t that something?

Even in a federal minimum-security prison there was little safety against other prisoners grabbing you and making you their love-slave toy boy. What kind of government allows that to go on? We have the money to make bombs smart, but when our evil government puts men behind bars in its own facilities, is it really so powerless to prevent gang rapes and the AIDS that can result? Could it be, could it just possibly be that the evil government condones — no, encourages — cruel and unusual punishment of its prisoners by its prisoners, because Constitutionally it is prohibited to do so itself? Our wicked government gets away with this sort of indirect bestiality because we don’t care. Nobody cares!

Steve had to do a project for one of his engineering degrees. The prison wouldn’t help him get the materials he needed, something involving liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen. But somehow, in explaining his project to the Bureau of Prisons, the Department of Defense got wind of what he wanted to do. I don’t fully understand what he wound up doing, but he managed to get about a dozen patents, all having to do with the fuel efficiency and longevity of jet engines. The Department of Justice and the Bureau of Prisons bought all the patents, giving Steve handsome royalties that went into a trust fund pending his release.

The government was smart enough not to let Steve know that his inventions were being used to improve helicopter and rocket performance in Viet Nam. While in jail, Steve earned over seven million dollars, most of it paid by Lockheed and Pratt & Whitney and several phony front companies used by the military for “discretionary projects” the brass in the Pentagon didn’t want Congress to know about. Some of the

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same “companies” that sold arms for hostages when Col. Oliver North broke the law with Ronald Reagan.

One of those companies, Northeast Roofing Supply, by the way, was once owned and operated by Dino, the don’s brother-in-law, the guy who wound up in a soup of concrete and rebar. I have done some research, you see.

Ronald Reagan and Col. Oliver North conspired to buy massive amounts of cocaine from Colombians that were sold in the U.S. and put on the streets as crack. While First Lady Nancy was promoting “Just Say No” her hubby was pushing “Just Say Yes” in a big way. That money then went into the phony corporations and came out again to buy arms for the Islamic Republic of Iran and the contras in Nicaragua. The mullahs did their part and released the hostages that Jimmy Carter had lost an election over. The contras did their part in getting the Colombian cocaine into Miami. All kinds of hands were washing each other.

Ronald Reagan and Col. Oliver North did not have to go to prison for breaking a whole potpourri of laws, including one passed by Congress specifically prohibiting aid to the contras in Nicaragua. Ronald Reagan and Col. Oliver North should have been sent to Nuremberg and dressed up like bums, too. But they weren’t.

Nobody nowadays gives all that a second thought. Honestly, did you even know about Ronald Reagan’s and Col. Oliver North’s shenanigans? Do you remember any of it? Do you care?

In 1977, when President Carter decided to stop keeping young men like Steve in jail any longer, Steve got a special letter from the then Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance. What Steve’s fate and his inventions had to do with the Department

of State is beyond me, but Cyrus Vance wrote him a letter apologizing for Steve's incarceration, saying "it was now time for all Americans to heal their wounds." Steve didn't have a scratch on him, and I don't recall Cyrus Vance having one on him, either, but then I suppose he was speaking metaphorically.

The letter went on to thank Steve for "his contributions in upgrading the efficiency and performance of our nation's jet engines." Cyrus Vance wanted to personally commend him.

That was the first Steve had learned about what his patents were used for.

Steve donated all the money he made from the government to different Viet Nam Veterans groups and to the ACLU. He then went fishing in Mexico for a while.

Then, without ever letting me know about it, Steve moved to Cosby Island. While Steve was in prison I had sent him a lot of postcards of Cosby Island with all kinds of pictures on them, often the same subjects but from different points of view, like the lighthouse. Sending him postcards was a convenient way for me to keep my messages short because there is only so much room on a postcard. I could often just write little one-liner jokes and be able to leave it at that, especially if I wrote in letters big enough.

But he never wrote or phoned to tell me he was going to move to the same "rural" island in Puget Sound where my family and I had spent some 20 years.

Then one day, there he was. It was an "accident" that was bound to happen. He showed up at my doorstep with a pizza in hand, a large pepperoni that I ordered while watching a professional football game on television.

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He didn't want to come in and talk for a while. He had other pizzas to deliver. At first I thought his reticence was due to some kind of embarrassment, my finding him this way in the red T-shirt uniform of the Cosby Island Papa Pizza. So we stumbled around there for a while, both of us acting like we were happy to see each other again but neither one of us moving much, talking just long enough before I got his phone number and let him go. I gave him a big tip.

Truth is, I didn't feel like having Steve come in and talk just then anyway. Truth is, I did feel embarrassed for Steve. He had damage written all over him. And there was this, too: the game was at the two-minute warning, and I had a \$20 bet on the Seahawks who were tied with the Rams. The Seahawks had just recovered a Rams fumble and were trying to get into field goal range. It was a cliff-hanger.

The next day I called Steve a number of times, and there was no answer. Same thing happened for a week after that. So I went to see Rudy Harris, owner of the Cosby Island Papa Pizza.

Rudy was glad to see me. He told me Steve had stopped talking. Steve was a good worker if a little slow, but it was annoying, Rudy said, to have a guy who'd sit around and refuse to talk when the business got slow. Rudy is a gabby guy. I thought, maybe Steve was putting him on so he wouldn't have to listen to Rudy's motor-mouth.

I don't know, maybe Steve really did go around the bend. He looked a little shell-shocked when he stood at my doorstep. He looked like collateral damage. His face was still prison-pale, and he'd lost that little gut he had.

I left Rudy my number to give to Steve.

Steve never called.

I figure if he ever really wants to talk to me, he will.

I also decided, before leaving Cosby Island for good after my divorce, to order my pizza from then on from the Pizza Pie Factory, Rudy's competitor. Some say Rudy's pizzas tasted better and had more crust. But I could never tell the difference.

Chapter 9

My first year in college was a breeze. Between the hard grind of the Swiss Realgymnasium and Mr. Norqvist's college-level teaching, I was prepared. I already knew most of the first-year course materials.

I had a full scholarship, too, and a dad willing to foot the bill for my living in a freshman dorm called Frontier Hall. I had a room I would soon share with another student, and I had three big meals a day.

I had all I needed.

So I didn't have to work my way through school and had fun just being a student.

I got involved in all kinds of extra-curricular activities. I went to all the "mixer" dances and joined clubs and left-wing political action groups, like Students for a Democratic Society and Young Democrats and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Castro was fresh bacon to the pinkos then, an unknown star. Just think, that was 1961, and that old fart Commie is still running Cuba! Get the hook! Hook, please!

I also joined The Socialist Youth League where people thought Leon Trotsky was a god. All the mimeographed pamphlets had red and black covers with a lot of exclamation points in the titles. Titles about smashing capitalism! and bewareing of deviationist revisionist Stalinist personality cults! and building the worker's state! and the struggle for world peace! Things like that.

Stalin had arranged in 1940 to have somebody imbed an ice pick deep into Trotsky's brain, and the Socialist Youth

League was still very upset about that. They had no use for the Soviet Union whatsoever. They didn't think much of Mao Tse-Tung's China, either. Revisionism with soy sauce. They were ambivalent about Castro's Cuba, too, because he was starting to suck up to the Soviets so much. So their socialist world-revolutionary utopias existed pretty much in their heads.

What I liked best about the Socialist Youth League, though, was Sadie Gutmacher. She had a pair of perfectly sculpted tits that stood proudly in a wool sweater that did little to conceal them. She was the first woman ever, at least to my knowledge, to shun bras as constraining inventions of the male bourgeois oppressor class. She threw hers away, an act of revolutionary consciousness which I for one thought was terrific. She was way ahead of her time.

Sadie was Jewish, or formerly a Jew, and she was from New York with an Eastern accent that made Midwesterners listen with respect. She knew that and would use it whenever she thought her audience was lacking in "revolutionair-y cawnsciousness." She was very cock-sure in her opinions.

She made me think, of course, of Haddie Bernbaum and arose my ever-unquenched lust in that direction, so that she'd be the object of many a nightly masturbation in my dorm room which I had to accomplish quickly whenever my roommate, Roger Goulet, was in the bathroom popping zits.

Roger Goulet was a short, red-haired kid from Bismarck, North Dakota. He was even more of a nerd than I ever was. Roger was a student of Mortuary Science. He had, instead of pinup girls on the wall on his side of the room, a number of pictures of caskets in different sizes, colors and shapes, all cut out from some casket magazine. I guess there is a magazine for everything.

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I have had, in case you haven't noticed, more than the usual person's exposure to things funereal.

Before Roger showed up I had looked forward to seeing what it would be like to have a "roomie." I had imaginings of our pulling clever pranks on other dorm occupants and having late-night philosophy talks over instant coffee and cooking up plans to sneak girls into the room from the girls dorms nearby.

But all of that went up in a cloud of smoke when Roger showed up, unpacked his suitcase and decorated his side of the room.

Roger's dad owned a funeral home in Bismarck. Roger would some day take over the family business. He said you could make a fortune in embalming and burying bodies because nobody else wanted to do it. People in grief don't haggle, they just want to get the thing over with. The deceased's life insurance usually paid the bills, anyway, so nobody cared.

Well, Roger kept to himself, and I did most of my studying in the main library on campus or at some desk in the "office" of the various clubs I had joined, except, of course, at the Socialist Youth League's dingy office above a used-book store when Sadie Gutmacher showed up. Then my gonads took over and I'd stare at her with longing, waiting for those moments when she'd lean back in her folding chair or stretch so that her wool sweater would spread across that perfectly mounded landscape formed by her breasts, or when she would stand up and start ranting revolutionary slogans and the canned prattle she had learned from other radicals, in which case those tits would jiggle in tune with her wildly gesticulating arms and hands.

I often tried to figure out ways to get Sadie's goat so she would rant some more and I could watch her.

But Sadie chose to ignore my ogling and lacked warmth, pretty much in the way, come to think of it, Haddie Bernbaum lacked warmth. Using today's New Age psychojabber, both young women "lived in their heads." I'd fly around them in their closed orbits, looking for a place to land, and there were never any openings I saw. There was never a place for an approach, because their mouths were always busy, open and talking, yap-yap-yapping. There was no flight path to touchdown with all that verbal turbulence going on, with all that radio noise from their mouths on all the time.

There were plenty of clear-minded, marriage-seeking and lusty Midwestern farm girls out there when I was a freshman in 1961-1962, some of them On The Pill and ready for a good time. But I was stuck with desires for women with brains. Most of the women with brains that I was attracted to were also chock full of neuroses, too. Libidinally I always pointed myself in the direction of trouble.

I still do that.

I went to keggers at frat houses, too, to stare at more girls in tight sweaters and to drink free beer. I got a few dates that way. I had lost my virginity in Switzerland in a quick and comic way, so I was no longer scared of girls. But I got bored so fast when the party girls had nothing to say that yawning got in the way of my making any sexual progress.

One girl, Mary Breckenridge, was a lot of fun, though. She was a returnee AFS student like me. She had been to Norway. We met at an AFS function and hit it off. But she only let me dry-hump her with our clothes on, and that was very unsatisfying. She also kept talking about getting married, and that was the farthest thing from my mind.

Mary and I just drifted apart in the summer after our freshman year. That was fine with me.

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So it was hard to find on this campus of 40,000 students, this state “land grant” university in my home town, the girl of my fantasies. I had this image of the perfect girl who just had to be out there somewhere: a genius music-loving nymphomaniac who knew when to talk and when to shut up. The hardest part in that equation was finding a girl who wouldn’t talk all the time, like that motor-mouth Rudy at the Cosby Island Papa Pizza who talks all the time. Was that asking so much?

Is that asking too much now?

Sharon Knudsen and Haddie Bernbaum and Sadie Gutmacher and Mary Breckenridge were endless talkers. When they (well, not Sadie, she refused to support the fascist phone company) got on the phone they wanted to talk some more, for hours. Guys aren’t like that. Why do women have to talk so much? Is there a part of their brains that will explode if they stop talking?

I loved that feeling in the fall of my first year in college, the leaves turning colors and the air clean and brisk. New textbooks, lots of them, and crisp notebooks and shiny pens and folders with pockets in them.

On Fridays at noon you could hear the sounds coming up the Mall, the U. Marching Band in maroon and gold Nut-cracker-soldier outfits, the drums and horns in martial rhythms, getting everybody all worked up for the football game on Saturday and the pep rallies.

I loved it that the professors called me “Mr.” followed by my last name, and that I could cut classes if I felt like it and nobody cared if I did. I was an adult! I was free! I could go to a coffee shop and order coffee, and if I felt like it, I could light up a cigarette and look very sophisticated. I could buy and

flash for all to see my copy of *The New York Times*. I bought it in Dinky Town, that hip strip of shops and coffee houses and newsstands and restaurants just off-campus that cater to students and tweedy academics.

I decided that Pall Mall cigarettes looked the best in the delicate long fingers of my narrow right hand. Held just so. They were longer and more urbane than those stubby Lucky Strikes my dad used to smoke. Filter cigarettes, like my mom's Viceroy's, were, of course, for wimps and women.

I went to foreign films, mostly French and Italian ones, pretending I didn't need to read the subtitles. I took careful note at how people like Marcello Mastroianni and Jean-Paul Belmondo held their smokes, just so at the tips of their fingers. I studied how they inhaled and then looked bored as the smoke encircled their eyes, how they picked tobacco crumbs from their tongues.

Smoking was how you expressed the deep existential ennui, the heroic absurdities of life. This is what Humphrey Bogart would have done if given the role of Albert Camus to play, he would have smoked, blown it in your face, maybe shrugged, and said nothing. Because there is, after all, nothing to say. Lung cancer? Emphysema? What the hell were those? I was 18 years old! I was bulletproof! What was death compared to the studied moves needed to get laid?!

Man, there was nothing like that movie with Marcello Mastroianni in it, that black-and-white dream/fantasy flick called "8 1/2" (*Otto e mezzo*). There's this one dream scene in it where he gets fed up with all the women in his life and wants to take control of it. So, in this fantasy moment, he pulls out a bullwhip while he's smoking a cigarette and looking cool, and he runs his other hand slowly along the brim of his black low Zorro hat, holding his energy in while cracking

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a bullwhip. And all of the women in his life who are in the room, his wife, his bimbo girlfriends, his mistress, they all cower and grovel to him as he just keeps on cracking his whip. “Crack!” They cringe. “Crack! Crack!”

Macho Italiano!

Well, I didn’t go out and buy a whip and a Zorro hat. But at least I had made my way out of Adolf Hitler speeches and Wehrmacht jackboots.

I loved being in college so much I resolved to live in or near a university for the rest of my life. This was where I belonged. I would study all kinds of things and then be a professor of some or all of it. This was where the world was changed. The Ivory Tower was the Tower of Power! This was where I could spout and be profound and be near women ripe for the plucking, the fucking, the sucking! I wanted it all! Renaissance Man!

This was the fall of 1961. Jack Kennedy had become President, and I was very happy about that. I wanted him to win because he looked so cool and had that Eastern accent and “vigah,” not like that creepy Nixon with the five o’clock shadow and the beady eyes and forced smile. Jack Kennedy promised a New Frontier and touch football on the White House lawn...and I lived in Frontier Hall! How about that?

A million choices lay at my feet, and I wanted to take them all.

I wanted everything on the menu.

Chapter 10

When Glenna came back to her husband Ben, all washed out and buggy-eyed from cocaine and country&western overload, I was about 8 miles away, with my own marriage falling apart.

Glenna banged on the door and sobbed for almost an hour while Ben just sat in the basement on the sofa in his den, staring at his bowling trophies and the pictures of him holding up some fish he'd caught. He sat on the sofa with his arms folded, mildly rocking back and forth, unconsciously in rhythm with Glenn's pounding on the door. "Go away," he whispered into the den, "go away, go away."

Ben told me later, at Cosby Island's second and therefore second-best tavern, Green's Pub, that when he saw Glenna coming up the path with her guitar and an old suitcase in hand, she looked like a walleye. A walleye is a fresh-water fish that apparently has big, buggy eyes. "She was skinny and filthy, too, she looked dangerous," Ben said. He said he was more frightened than angry to see her again. That's why he locked all the doors and windows and hid in the den.

Well, that was how he saw it. Apparently even the rottweilers were frightened by Glenna's appearance. They barked and barked and ran around in their pen, getting all worked up.

If instead of banging on Ben's door Glenna had banged on mine, I just might have taken off with her to Durham, North Carolina. I always liked her, and there was that time I almost made a pass at her. Not that I would have made a pass at her in her buggy-eyed state, but I would have been sympathetic, I

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would have been open to suggestions of flight to the open road. I was ready. My orbit had knocks and jerks to it, like a car out of tune, like an arrhythmic heart. I had run out of energy to keep it going with Elli my wife, now my ex-wife. She just wore me out. I think I wore her out, too. We'd gone past the warranty on our marriage.

I see Elli now and then when the kids come to visit from out of state, or on holidays or graduations or one of her art openings. And it's OK, it's peaceful and nice, in a friendly sort of divorced way.

When the kids come to visit they like to stay in their old bedrooms, so I make the ferry trip to Cosby Island for the family reunions.

You could even say I still harbor a kind of love for Elli because people always come with memories attached. There are a lot of pleasant memories of Elli. But there are the guilts, those cling with her, too, enough of them so that my orbit sometimes gets those knocks and jerks back. Then I begin to start glancing at my watch to make sure I don't miss the next ferry back to Seattle from Cosby Island. The only way to get to Cosby Island is by ferry.

Elli looks good and fit these days, happy with a man in her life who I guess people now call in the Newspeak "a partner." He is clear and lean and unflappable, able to take the winds that blow from her, able to sidestep them and see the good person she is.

I have come to terms with letting her go. I have come to terms with letting just about everything go.

When Steve Niemoeller was in prison, he sent me a letter. In it he said he was now "pure function," that his life

was to function as friend, son, correspondence student, inmate and tinkerer. He said he was “beyond the illusions of achievement and goals,” he was learning, from baking bread and keeping card catalogs of books in the prison library, that his jobs met purposes of keeping others fed and informed (though most of the books in the library stayed on the shelves, with only The National Geographics, the ones showing titties on African tribal women or headhunters in Borneo getting any attention from the other prisoners).

That’s what I do nowadays, too. I function. I didn’t understand Steve then, but I think I do now.

Steve tinkered with liquid oxygen and hydrogen to make better jet engines for rockets. He loved tinkering for the tinkering’s sake.

He once wrote, “Funny thing about hydrogen and oxygen. In water, those elements make stable molecules of H₂O, and there’s more of that on the planet than solid land. Our bodies are mostly water. But take these two elements in pure liquid form and combine them, and you get a very powerful explosion. In their pure liquid forms, hydrogen and oxygen rush towards each other and start to bond too closely, so they retreat from each other with enormous heat and energy, creating the explosion.”

That’s what happened to Elli and me, we went from water to pure states and exploded. We didn’t want to be part of somebody else anymore, we wanted to explode free.

I almost didn’t meet Elli, even though we both sat not not very far apart in the same French class in college. That’s because Professor McGeen kept referring to her as “Contessa von Hauenfels” when he called the roll. You could cut Professor McGeen’s French class like any other, but he did a roll call, anyway.

Her maiden name was Elisabeth von Hauenfels. As a student of German, I knew the “von” meant nobility of some kind. I figured this beautiful woman, with her strong European features and slight accent, was some countess slumming in the wastelands of the Middle West, vamping abroad in a breezy way until it was time to return to the castle and accept the hand of some titled twit back home in Germany. Me, a self-styled leftist in my Army Surplus combat jacket and my scruffy unshaven facial hair, I would be way out of my league with this “countess.” I would be her Sharon Knudsen.

I didn’t know that Elli was just another D.P., another Displaced Person, whose family, though German, was also kicked out of Latvia by Adolf Hitler as part of the 1939 pact he’d signed with Joseph Stalin. Just like Ickes’s Latvian family was kicked out, Ickes, my unrequited love in the funeral home that Burt Kraus used to take me to, the Ickes who made squishy noises with Randy in a room where empty caskets were stored. But how was I to know that the “countess” reference by Professor McGeen was his little private joke with Elli, who did nothing to correct him?

In those days I lived in an attic garret of a three-story house, not far from Dinky Town, that cutesy row of shops that catered to students and their needs (beer, pizza, books, supplies, ice cream, cigarettes, movies, music). My roommate Reeber, a high school friend, and I lived for 6 months rent-free because we converted our landlord’s attic into a livable space (if you didn’t mind bending over most of the time, since the roof slanted up and inwards from two sides of the attic to let the rain and snow run off it). We put up sheetrock and spackled and painted and made a mess of ourselves, but we had a garret, with an uneven layer of about an inch thick of spackle, as befitting two self-styled rebels with causes. We could pretend we were in Paris. We could pretend we had roles in *La Bohème*.

La Bohème is my favorite opera now. I never listen to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* any more.

After classes Reeber and I would get out an old toaster and place it on the floor and sit in folding chairs next to it to watch it toast our Taste-tee Bread. Reeber and I sat opposite each other, hovering over the toaster like mother hens. When the toast popped up we'd smear peanut butter or Cheese-Whiz on it, then eat and wash that down with chocolate milk. Often I'd run out of bread or cheese or lunch meat, and then Reeber would sell me some of his, at a profit. Reeber was poor. He financed his way through college in good part by the food he'd sell me.

Reeber was, like Steve Niemoeller, an atheist. He majored in psychology. Today he makes a decent living as a motivational speaker with a born-again Christian slant. He gets people off their butts to succeed at something and to feel good about themselves. He is much in demand.

It was during one of the toast feasts that I told Reeber about Elli. I was in some despair. She was so beautiful! She had this wonderful smile, a great figure, she giggled a lot from two rows behind me (students could sit anywhere, but seating habits formed and stuck). I was fascinated by Elli's eyebrows, they grew together in the middle to make one long eyebrow. I got up to my old tricks, showing off in class, this time to get her attention. I'd show off, then I'd look back at her, and sure enough, she'd be looking at me and smiling. Oh how that made my heart race! I told Reeber all this, and he would just nod and smile and wait for the toast to pop up.

While Reeber listened and ate with his mouth open, I confided to him my insecurities about Elli. Besides my being a lowly commoner and thus not worthy of such a countess, I figured I was also not up to conquering such an exotic woman

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of the world with my sexual unpreparedness. I had not yet gotten anywhere near the right fuck quotient, my card simply hadn't been punched enough. I had lost my virginity in what would have to be something like innocent groping in Switzerland, but that hardly counted.

What happened in Zurich was this: I was with the usual small clique of friends that Hans-Dieter hung out with. We'd go to his girlfriend's house usually, on Friday and Saturday nights, when her parents were usually off on some social engagement.

One night, Friederike, the girlfriend's sister, and I started building a bridge from empty beer bottles. The room was illuminated by just two small candles, so that most of the couples that were there could quietly move into corners and make squishy noises. That left just me and Friederike to build our beer bridge.

She managed to direct our engineering efforts towards her bedroom. Soon we ran out of beer bottles and light, and then she attacked me! It was wonderful! I felt like Magellan exploring that undiscovered convoluted canal of womanhood. How warm and wetly welcoming a journey! But before I knew it we had coupled and it was over, just like that. It was so fast I wasn't even sure we had "done it," except there I was, on the floor with my pants around my ankles, and there she was, wrestling with her bra in the dark and muttering to herself in Schwyzerdütsch.

As Swiss Boy Ambassador I don't think I got very high marks as a lover on my first time out. When I next went to Friederike's house for more bridge-building, she was there with her new boyfriend Tom. I became the odd man out. When the parties went their usual course, I would wind up lying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling while the "hi fi" played the

Kingston Trio, and I would wonder what my old friend Burt Kraus was doing then, back in his dark and dank house in a time zone 8 hours off.

So, two years later, with little more to my credit than dry-humping Mary Breckenridge and a couple of sorority girls eager on getting married but “saving themselves” (there were still women like that in the early 1960’s), I knew I had to get truly and properly laid before I could even dare to think of being a part of the countess’s surely sex-crammed slumming in the backwaters of America.

So Reeber acquiesced in my plan to go where college men could always be assured of getting laid: back to high school. Back to the high school girls (seniors, of course, one had to draw a certain line) who, we remembered (and how bitter then we were!), would do anything to be pinned to a college guy! We didn’t have to take that dark and uncertain journey to Holy Angels to find the willing horny girls, we only had to go back to the old neighborhood pizza parlors and take our pick. So that’s exactly what we did.

Reeber was a fearless man. He was the state shotput champion in high school. He modeled himself after Marlon Brando from *The Wild One*, complete with leather jacket and motorcycle boots. He even looked like Marlon Brando. He had that pouty sneer of his. Reeber was a juvenile delinquent who got into lots of trouble. It was a sheer accident he became my college roommate.

In the summer after my freshman year, when I lived in a dorm and hated it, Reeber came up to me on Thomas Beach, a place where you hung out to stare at the girls in bikinis while you got sunburned. He asked how I was doing, then he started to talk about Sartre and Tolstoi and Bertrand Russell. Turns out, all during high school, while he got barely passing grades

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and was a taciturn jock, he'd lived a secret life all along as a closet intellectual! He immediately passed my snob test. And true to the teachings of Dale Carnegie, I started asking him all kinds of questions about himself. He told me all about his life, about being brought up by an alcoholic mother who lived on the same side of the tracks as Sharon Knudsen. He told me he was determined to work his way across those tracks. He said he was studying psychology "at the U," and he knew of a place we could fix up and rent for free for six months, a place owned by a pipe-chewing, wheezing guy named Russ.

So here Reeber and I now were, walking into this pizza parlor in a shopping mall near our old high school. It was reputed to be the first shopping mall ever built in the United States. It was torn down in 1977, the year Steve Niemoeller got out of prison, to make way for a Medical-Dental Building. But back then in 1963 there were booths with girls in them, eating pizza, and Reeber just slid in next to one of them and used the Arty Halpern Public Library line that never failed: "You want to meet us?" I slid in opposite Reeber, next to the other girl.

Her name was Cathy Ruppert. She was chewing on a piece of pepperoni and 17 years old. I was so very much older, I was 19. Reeber wound up going with her friend somewhere, I drove Cathy to her house. We listened to records while her mother, about 40, kept trying to flirt with me. I had fantasies of fucking both Cathy and her mother! The mom sure gave off some signals there! I would have felt like Dustin Hoffman in Goodbye Columbus were it not for the fact that the story hadn't been written yet.

I had to go to Cathy's house a couple more times. Then I had to take her to dinner and a movie once before she'd agree to go to the garret. I had to arrange it with Reeber that he'd stay away, which he graciously did. When I got Cathy

to the garret she wanted to talk and talk. She wanted to know if we were now going steady. So I said, sure, we're going steady. Anything to get into her tight capri slacks.

“So where’s your ring, then?” she wanted to know. Oh boy. I didn’t have a ring for her. She had to have a ring to tie into a necklace to wear around her neck. It had to be official, something to show off at high school. We went into some heavy kissing and petting, but that’s where the wall came down. There’d clearly be nothing more until I produced a ring.

Damn!

Will men, young men, anyway, so full of semen that their back teeth are awash in it, will they do anything, anything at all in order to get laid? You bet they will! At least that’s my excuse, and I’m sticking to it.

Cathy’s birthday was in May, same as mine. So I got her the cheapest “signet” ring with imitation emerald birthstone I could find. Again I had to get Reeber out of sight (for a second fuck session I told him, I was not about to tell him what had happened the first time around!).

And, yes, this time, paying the proper wampum (she had a big rubber band all ready to tie the ring into and put around her neck), I hit paydirt.

I was quivering with intense excitement, this was Sharon Knudsen and “American Bandstand” times 20,000! And this finely shaped vixen, this wonderfully horny 17-year-old fatherless Barbie Doll was hot to trot! Though her face bore the marks of some nasty zits, her tits were absolutely perfect when they came popping out of her bra, and when the capri pants came off she had this fine, tight belly with a tawny bush at the apex of her perfectly shaped legs.

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There she lay, as I fought with my clothes and shoes, waiting for me, beckoning me to my bed, with nothing on at all but that horseshit ring dangling between her perky breasts, her arms outstretched to embrace me. I was really making friends and influencing people here!!

There was as good as no foreplay at all. I was in her and out of her and back in her again in what seemed like a dozen times, my male plumbing getting a terrific workout. I must have lost a quart of precious bodily fluids in her! She groaned and scratched and writhed to a music I was getting to like a whole lot! After about an hour of this frantic grinding and squirting I was completely depleted, but she wanted more, more, more!!!

Whew!

I had to go to Cathy's house a few more times. With the fake emerald ring dangling always between the two mountains that punctuated Cathy's sweater Cathy's mother became suddenly cold. She wanted to know all kinds of things about me she never asked before. What my father did for a living. What I planned to do after college. What kind of car I had. Whether I had a job now.

I was so stupid, this was an age where AIDS was a breath mint, I went "bareback" into Cathy every time we copulated. I always had a supply of "rubbers" with me, but neither she nor I were patient enough to fiddle around with those. She also said she couldn't come if she didn't feel me come. Oh boy. I was lucky. I didn't get her pregnant, but how I escaped that fate I will never know. We screwed in every possible place and position we could figure out. My card was punched with so many holes it disappeared.

And so I got bored with Cathy. She wasn't stupid, she just didn't have anything inside her brains. She just wanted to

get married and have kids and watch TV, those were her goals. And I was beginning to look and feel like I was about to fill her bill.

Meanwhile, I yearned for the contessa, just as I had yearned for Haddie Bernbaum all the time my mouth was glued to Sharon Knudsen's chapped lips.

It has often been my fate, in some way or another, to betray the woman I am with. If not with infidelity, then in some other way. It's a trait that I know Dale Carnegie and Norman Vicent Peale would not approve of. I know Mr. Norqvist would have disapproved. My Dad, on the other hand, if he were still alive, my father who diddled the church organist while married to my mother, he'd probably understand.

One time while lying in a pool of sweat atop Cathy's perfectly perky tits, with my sheets drenched with our precious bodily fluids, there came a knock on the door of the garret. It couldn't have been Reeber, because I'd sent him off to the Chemical Engineering Library to study, so I figured it was Russ, the pipe-smoking wheezing landlord. I got on a robe and went to the door. It was my mother! She'd dropped by for a visit!

So I told her to wait right there and closed the door on her. Then I spirited Cathy off my bed and into a "storage room" Reeber and I had made that was behind one of the walls. It was where Reeber and I stuffed all our dirty clothes. It was also where the slanting roof met the top of the house below, leaving a narrow crawl space with about two feet of headroom. It was into this space that I spirited the naked Cathy.

Then I went back to the door and let my mother in. I told her I had to put out a fire in the bathroom!

For the next half hour I had to jabber with my talkative mother in the living room about how things were going. I tried to hurry her up to get her visit over with. But my Mom just droned on and on in her side of the conversation while Cathy shivered in the crawl space.

I just couldn't think of anything that would make my mother leave. She was oblivious to the suggestion that the fire in the bathroom could have spread underneath the floorboards. She thought maybe the next time she came for a visit she'd bring me a rope so I could escape future fires by climbing out the window with it.

The longer Mom jabbered the less likely was the prospect I could just introduce her to a shivering girl wearing nothing but a horseshit ring dangling from a rubber band around her neck.

When my Mom finally left, Cathy was understandably furious. She sprung loose from the dirty clothes, got dressed and stomped out. When I saw her next, by coincidence at the same pizza joint where I met her, I finally called the whole thing off. She sat there and cried. I felt like a jerk. I was a jerk. She asked if she could keep the ring. I said sure.

Six months later Reeber asked me for her phone number and took her out. He did get her pregnant. Cathy had the baby — thank God it was 15 months after I had last seen her! — but Reeber would have nothing to do with the consequences of paternity. She named the baby Rebecca.

Oh boy.

Back in French class, the “contessa” finally broke the ice. She saw me reading a book in German before class, as I had hoped she would, and she said, “Hey, are you taking that

class, too?" Turns out, she was taking the same German lit class I was, but from a different professor. That got us talking.

The next day I bumped into her outside her German lit class, not by mistake since I found out where it was, and we talked some more. She came out of class in the company of a guy who was in an Air Force ROTC uniform, and I withered back. But she introduced me to the guy and somehow communicated that although he was trying to court her, she was not having any of it.

Then I truly did bump into her by accident on the Mall, that stretch of grass and trees that formed the center of the university from which radiated the first buildings constructed to make the college campus. We were walking towards each other, and I spotted her and extended my hand in an exaggerated wave. She did the same thing. We were both heading to different classes.

She stopped and asked what I was majoring in, and I quite modestly said, "Renaissance Man." I asked her what she was majoring in, and she said, "Well, I drink coffee." Taken a little aback by that, I figured she must have misheard me, but why not plow through the breach in the line! I asked, "Well, then, you want to have some coffee now?" And she said yes!

Wow! The Universe was bending to my will!

So we went to a place called Chevron Hall, where there is a theater for the theater majors, and under that was a cafeteria. Elli went there regularly to meet her sister, who was in a graduate program to become a Spanish teacher, and her brother, who was in law school.

So in short time I was drinking cup after cup of coffee with Elli and her siblings, and they were all very charming and

funny, explaining how their ancestors got lost a thousand years ago as Teutonic Knights and wound up in Riga to convert the heathens. Nine hundred and seventy-seven years later, Adolf Hitler kicked them out of Riga and put them back into Germany. Until, thanks to U.S. air power, the Germans lost the war and the von Hauenfels family moved to the U.S., due to some well-meaning Midwestern Lutherans who put them on a ship and found them a farmhouse near a small town so that they could stare at the von Hauenfelses every Sunday at church.

Elli and I spent an hour drinking coffee with her siblings, then another two hours with just the two of us. I had to pee something fierce but was too enthralled and spellbound by it all. Here I was, sitting next to the woman of my dreams, and it was so fun and easy and unreal.

When we finally parted (she lived at home and had to cook dinner for her working parents), I got her phone number. I called her that night. She said I would enjoy meeting her father, he was very intelligent, too! I loved that part about “too”! She told me about her dog, funny dog stories about her dog. We talked and talked. She charmed me right out of my socks.

Next day in French class, we sat together. We did this for the rest of the quarter, towards the end of which Professor McGeen no longer made references to the “contessa,” he simply wanted to know how “Mr. and Mrs. Bill and Coo” were doing! We smiled and waved. We didn’t give a rat’s ass what that fag French teacher thought!

Our first date was to a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Usually I loved to sit in the big performance hall at the university and during a concert dream myself into a music trance. But all I could do now was dream myself into Elli’s perfume and that cotton-candy-and-honey smell of her

hairspray that held up her French bouffant hairdo. She was more heaven than anything Beethoven could have served up!

I moved my hand to hers, and she took it with no hesitation. I felt all my body emptying through my hand and into hers.

Only two weeks before I had suffered through Cathy's crying jag, my wiener wrung dry and ragged, and here I now sat, swimming in the sounds penned by Beethoven to Schiller's "Ode to Joy" ("Joy, beauteous spark of the gods, daughter of Elysium.."), my own Elysium Fields sitting right there next to me!

For our first date Elli wore a red dress with red high heels. After the performance I told her my friend Gareth was having a party and we were invited. Gareth was a professor's son, a worldly fellow who'd been to places like New York and Mexico City, an urbane wit I met in a history class, somebody who would never in a million years swap costume jewelry for poontang. I was hoping Elli and I'd have some wine with Gareth, listen to some of his Stan Getz and Duke Ellington records, then maybe, just maybe, after I brought Elli home, I'd work myself up to a good-night kiss.

But just before we got to Gareth's door, somehow as if we both had just hit upon the same idea right then and there, we turned to each other and swooped together into a long, sweet kiss.

My head was swimming. I looked up to the stars, I looked back at her, I held her close and said, "What a perfect night! What an absolutely perfect night!"

She agreed.

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While Gareth smoked his pipe and spoke mostly to himself, since Elli and I were really not there, I knew I had met the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

There was a movie I once saw, it was a long and boring thing, called “El Cid,” fashioned after a Spanish classic, a book I never read. I saw the movie a year before I met Elli. There was one line in it, though, that stuck with me. El Cid turns to somebody and says, “My marriage was one year of fire and twenty years of ashes.” I laughed at that then.

I had more than one year of fire with Elli. We had several years of fire, sometimes on, sometimes off, sometimes on again. Even after we decided to divorce, she said this kind thing: “We always had a passion for each other. Maybe we always will.”

Just writing that now brings tears to my eyes. Why did that have to go? What happened to it? Where did it go? I might as well ask, “Why do we live and die?”

Two things that will never die as long as they exist on this paper and in the amber of my memory: that night of Beethoven’s Ninth with the contessa, and that kiss under the stars.

Chapter 11

And so in due time Elli and I got married.

But not until after I spent a year in Berlin, again as an exchange student.

My chosen field, German, was not full of economic promise. About all I could expect to do with it was teach. There weren't many jobs available, so I figured I needed to have another credential to guarantee my acceptance into an Ivy League graduate school. I figured I needed a Ph.D. from a hot-shot school in order to get a decent college professor job.

So even though Elli and I talked about getting married, we couldn't get married, I didn't have a pot to pee in. It took me some doing, working part time as a janitor, just to buy my first car for \$25, a 1949 Ford that barely ran, just so I could take Elli on dates.

And, besides, as much as I was in love, I was all of 21. I deep down didn't want to get married. Not yet.

In 1964, Berlin was Ground Zero in the Cold War. In the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev had just seized power after Nikita Khrushchev had been deposed. To scare off the Americans from trying to take any advantage during this shaky period of transition, Russian MiGs flew low and threateningly over West Berlin, leaving sonic booms and the scream of jet engines overhead. Their jets flew so close I could see the pilots' faces in their cockpits.

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In an effort to show who had the bigger dick, American tanks rolled down the Potsdamer Chaussee, the big street outside my dorm. President Johnson reaffirmed the American commitment to defend freedom at the Berlin Wall, even if it meant world war. Personally, as much as I liked West Berlin, I didn't think it was worth incinerating civilization to keep it. The politicians on both sides were saying and doing all sorts of reckless things.

But it was an exciting and dangerous and scary time and I loved it even though it was crazy, too.

West Berlin was a big propaganda showroom, the island of freedom and capitalism in a Commie East German sea. Whenever I went over to visit the East Berlin side after passing through elaborate border controls to get through the Wall, I'd pass over into this dark movie set of black-and-white spy thrillers out of the '30s, complete with old streetcars and people dressed in lumpy old clothes and plastic shoes and streets with no lights. I'd look back towards West Berlin and see the lush glow of neon lights reflected off the sky. East Berliners must have wondered what sort of Disneyland lurked over there.

My scholarship to Berlin, by the way, was paid for by the Ford Foundation, who in turn got their money from the CIA. The Free University of Berlin, built after the war when Berlin's venerable old Humboldt University wound up in the Russian Occupation Zone, also owed its existence to CIA funds.

Later, at Harvard, when I needed money to support me and my wife and daughter, I taught German to Green Berets at Fort Devens, again paid for by the CIA.

So, you see, I had no scruples. I worked for the CIA. I hated the evil government, but I took its money. I could be bought at a pretty low price.

I discovered at the “FU,” as the Free University in West Berlin was called (a place built to look like the UC Berkeley campus), that there was no curriculum. There were no credits and fixed class schedules and exams, not if you were an exchange student for just a year.

I learned I could do any damn thing I wanted.

It was very confusing because I was so used to the American academic regimen of rewards and punishments. For the first couple of weeks I had no idea what to do. I went to a few lectures on this thing or that in *Germanistik*, as the Germans call German language and culture studies, but it was so much academic blah blah.

So I picked one book to read, a hard one: *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann. I decided I would read it cover to cover, and I would look up in my German-English dictionary every word I didn’t know. Then I would write it down, along with its translation in English. That project took six months.

I would read about 10 or 20 pages a day from this monster book, then tire of it and want to go drink beer or watch a movie or play the piano or write one of my daily letters to Elli or hang out with my Norwegian friend, Geirr.

Geirr was like me, a foreigner in Berlin who spoke good German, and he had no intention of pursuing his major in dentistry. Nobody would ever have checked to see if he went to class or not. As far as I know, he never did. He spent

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most of his time sleeping and driving around and drinking and screwing as many women as he could, many of them American exchange students who lived in the Student Village in the suburb of Zehlendorf.

Geirr and I lived in House 12 of the Student Village. It was a dorm with semi-Bauhaus pretensions, made of cement and glass, a kind of bunker raised out of the ground with windows added.

It was probably a mistake I went to Berlin. I had some fun goofing off, traveling around, doing some nice things now and then for Elli's relatives stuck behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany. But in going to Germany the magic with Elli somehow changed.

It was my fault.

Here is what I did: I told her sometime around February of 1965 that I was lovesick-to-death lonely for her, I was miserable without her, could she come to Germany, could she come and marry me.

And God bless her, she argued with her parents and ranted until they relented and blessed her decision to come to Berlin and join me. We'd get married, we'd find an apartment, we'd figure things out. She was planning on coming over to Berlin to surprise me.

I got letters from her parents. The mother was understanding. She said, like me, she was a *Gefühlsmensch* (a person governed by feelings), and she only hoped my heart was sending her daughter and me in the right direction. From the father I got a stiffer, more practical letter: that he thought a

marriage was premature, especially one (and I remember the exact words) “so completely without financial foundation.”

Well, he was right. I panicked and wrote Elli, using some of the words her father had written me. We should wait, I wrote, until she and I both graduated. With our degrees we would stand to get better jobs. There were no jobs in Berlin for foreigners. I had no money for an apartment. She shouldn’t come.

I chickened out. Elli, whose bags were packed and about to leave, felt humiliated and let down. She canceled her travel plans.

I think she never got over her disappointment with me after that. I had let her down. Something fell off the wagon of our romance.

Though we later married and remained that way for 25 years, that first wound to Elli never healed. When I returned from Germany in 1965, there was always a little dark cloud on her forehead, the hint of a chill always present between us. We didn’t capture and hold the magic when it was there, when we could have had it. It slipped away. When we married we were keeping old promises.

We got married in 1966. So long ago.

Geirr was there as my best man. It was a happy wedding in Elli’s sister’s house. A Latvian woman had worked three days to make mounds of exotic food. Elli and I were so nervous during the wedding ceremony that we shook like leaves. It was a hot June day, and drops of sweat kept forming and falling off the end of my nose. Afterwards, the small group

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of close friends and relatives ate and danced and drank and laughed, long into the night.

We were 23 years old then. My son, the youngest of my three children, will be that old next year. How young that seems to me now. How old I felt then.

Today I feel neither young nor old. But it is unsettling to know a number of old high school and college friends who would now be my age are dead. But I have survived! How about that!

Geirr lives in New York now. Shortly after I got married he got married and I got to be his best man, but his marriage crashed almost at take-off. He is now again happily married to a very fine woman.

I see him from time to time. He has a microphone in his bedroom where he broadcasts daily observations about American life to a radio audience in Norway. It's a comfy job. His wife does her business out of their home, too. They have a warm, cozy life together.

He and I often reminisce about the Berlin days, maybe as a way of verifying that we were really there. Like my home town, Berlin has been flattened and bulldozed, not once but twice. First, after WWII, when Americans with Air Power flattened Berlin and then rebuilt the western half of it. Second, after the Wall came down and Berlin became for Europe what Las Vegas is to the U.S.: a town of eternal demolition and new construction.

East Germany did one thing I think must be unique in history: it voted itself out of existence. Poof, gone! What do you call it when a whole country does itself in? Staticide?

East Berlin was more fascinating to me than West Berlin. The place was eerie and sinister. Strolling down the drab streets where buildings still showed walls pocked from Russian bullets and howitzers, I'd often go into a beer hall and drink a watery beer and eat some stale bread paid with aluminum coins that looked like they came straight out of Cracker Jack boxes.

I would go over to East Berlin just to look at the dowdy, dispirited people and the endless number of uniformed soldiers, policemen, trolley drivers, customs officials, border guards, museum clerks. Here was a city overpopulated with uniforms and treeless streets with no traffic and filthy busses. Everywhere was the smell of paranoia and the smoke of burning brown sulfurous coal and the overdoses of Soviet disinfectant in the subway stations. Munch's *The Scream* must have been painted here.

In the restaurants and cafes, most of the items on the menu were not available. In the upscale places there were always lots of East German and Soviet military brass, and in a corner somewhere you would often see an aging string quartet scratching out shmaltzy waltzes and popular songs from decades ago. It seemed everybody was smoking, and most of the faces were either pale or overly made up. It was here that the old sleazy decadent Berlin soul lived. It was like walking into a drawing by Gross from the 1920s.

I loved it.

West Berlin was, by contrast, a town in a razzmatazz hurry to Armageddon before the Mongolian Hordes in the East formed up again to come poring over the Wall. It was Germany's bootleg Chicago on the make: grab it now and squeeze it hard, baby, because who knows about tomorrow.

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I enjoyed walks through these two cities in one, each with its own kind of crass sauciness and despondency. The atmospheres played well into my lovesick melancholies and the anxious awareness of my carefree youth soon to be gone.

My other chief activity was the daily ritual of reading one ponderous page of *The Magic Mountain* after another.

The Magic Mountain is about Hans Castorp, a young man who journeys up into the Swiss Alps to a tuberculosis sanitarium in Davos to visit his cousin. He planned to stay seven days but winds up living there for seven years after the resident doctor finds Hans has a “spot” on his lungs.

The novel takes place between the two World Wars. All the patients are fascinating people from all over Europe. The Dutch guy is apple-cheeked and loud and eats a lot. The Russian woman is mysterious and moody and unpredictable. One Italian guy is a humanist, while another Italian guy is a Jesuit fanatic or maybe a nihilist, I forget. And so on. Each character is a standard bearer for some philosophy or political school of thought from that era.

There are long discussions and debates and intrigues, blah, blah, blah — a microcosm of the Europe below the mountain that’s also all in turmoil and sick, too. Get it?

The book is full of learning and endlessly long Germanic sentences like this one where Thomas Mann’s German is flowery, fancy and, like Thomas Mann himself — all the photos of him show him dressed like a banker in stiff suits and starched shirts and a carefully manicured mustache, and he looks unsmiling and uncomfortable like he has an enchilada stuck up his ass — archaic, prudish and dry, and every now and then there’s some dainty fun at irony and satire, but God

did the thing go on and on and on, and please somebody stop me here.

Steeped in the book I became mentally absent from Berlin, only to veer off in my own fevered state, lost in reveries of Elli. I spent many an hour writing her long, homesick letters.

In a way, I was living my own kind of Magic Mountain in House 12, a concrete outpost on a campus with similar bunkers-on-the-green, isolated from the Cold War lurking not far off in the barbed wire and machine gun towers overlooking The Wall. In my room my mind wandered. In the communal kitchen I carefully husbanded my 400 marks (\$100) a month stipend eating mostly Corn Flakes, eggs, beer, sausage, bread, cheese, candy and spaghetti.

I eat pretty much the same things now, prepared right here on my hotplate. I hide my beer up here, too, otherwise my musician roommates would simply drink it all.

Geirr had a car, a Volkswagen. He took me and some other friends on outings to places in France and Belgium, to a forest in East Germany, to Bavaria. The big trip, though, was to Geirr's home town of Risør, Norway. The locals call it the "white town," for this seaside village consists of nothing but one white house after another, perched on hills that slope into a small bay.

For five straight days we played marathon Monopoly in his room and drank scotch. It has to be the longest game of Monopoly ever played, since we amended the rules to allow the player who was about to lose the opportunity to cheat liberally, such as help himself to a few banknotes from the bank, so long as this was done when the other guy wasn't looking.

Larry Johnson

It was in Geirr's house that I learned the sweet Norwegian custom of thanking the maker of the meal at the close of dinner: *Takk for maten* ("Thanks for the food").

A jolly, uncomplicated people, the Norwegians.

And a lusty lot, too. A local girl, a friend of Geirr's family, invited me out for an evening stroll down to the docks, where a moon reflected off the water and into her big, blue eyes. She must have been all of 17 or 18, and her name was Solvej. It was the night before we had to take the ferry back to Denmark and, from there, back to Berlin.

I don't really know if I did the right thing. I had promised Elli I'd be faithful, and here I had a very clear chance to break that vow. I indulged in some kissing and petting, but I cut it short. I think that really pissed Solvej off. I know from Geirr that she complained about it later, wanting to know what the hell was wrong with me.

Geirr said I was "a bit of an odd one," and she let it go at that.

I was really horny then, I really would like to have consummated the encounter, I tell myself. But the me who was I then thought differently.

And I am no longer him. What is confusing this whole thing, I think, is that right now I'd like to go back to that dock and give it a different ending, not for the me of then, but for the me of now.

Anyway, it was the second magic starry night of my life. I felt like I was in a movie.

Freefall

I liked that week in Norway better than the whole year in Germany.

Chapter 12

In 1990 I went back to Berlin to see what it looked like after the Wall had been torn down. The Student Village had gone to seed. It is home now to Third World students only, apparently on the theory that they wouldn't notice the difference.

The Student Village looked more like what East Berlin used to be: shabby, run-down, grassless, buildings with graffiti all over the walls. The student cafeteria was empty and abandoned. Indeed, the whole Free University looked more like some under-budgeted community college than any serious center of learning.

The CIA, having won, had pulled up its stakes.

Berlin is a wonderful old floozy hag, intimate with failure.

The Evil Empire of the Soviet Union is dead. One Evil Empire down, one Evil Empire to go.

“But my car’s still buried behind the soccer field,” my buddy Geirr told me recently on the phone (we catch up on things about every four months).

He explained: Before emigrating to America, Geirr sold his VW to a Lutheran minister, a man who by appearance and profession should have been an upstanding man, like good old Pastor Niemoeller, Steve’s dad. But on Geirr’s last day in Berlin the pastor took advantage of the situation: he would now only pay half the agreed price. Geirr could take it or leave it.

Geirr was over a barrel and had no choice but to accept. But after taking the minister's money and before the pastor was to come and get the car the next day, Geirr poured sand into the hole where most motorists would have put oil. Then he decided, with the help of a few friends, to dig a hole and bury the thing behind the soccer field next to the Student Village. If Geirr says so, I have no doubt it is still there.

One dreary Thomas Mann book I came to hate and some escapades with Geirr, that's about all I took with me from spending a year in Berlin. I would vegetate another year like this, five years later when I was a graduate student. Harvard had to spend some more Ford-CIA money in its coffers to ensure it would get the same amount the following year. The German Department gladly gave me a large wad of dollars which Elli and I spent on eight months of beach life in Spain.

I was supposed to be working on my half-finished Ph.D. thesis, but I no longer wanted to be a German professor. I was married with a two-year-old daughter, and I had no clue what to do with my life. I was supposed to have gone to Berlin again, researching trivia about Bertolt Brecht. But I kept telling Harvard to send its checks to Altea, Spain, then later, to Madrid. Nobody asked why. Nobody cared. I was grateful!

It is unsettling to look back on the past and realize that there is little if any connection left between my life today and the lives I've shed along the way. Any continuity, any semblance of order, is an illusion. And what I call the past may be just a few posts of reality that I festoon with invention, calling it memory.

Life from 14 to 24 seems so vivid, the part we get to see clearly before somebody hits the fast forward button.

Larry Johnson

We never really graduate from high school. Part of our soul gets stuck there, and we can never really pry it loose. High school is the Ur-tribe template of our society, it is the Jell-O Mold of American Culture. Life after high school is just high school all over again in a different guise.

Life since high school and college, to be honest about it, has been a shiny slick blur. Along the way came three wonderful kids that Elli and I spun through and out of us, we paid attention and doted and loved parent love, and I went to law school in a fog and practiced law in a fog. I had my ups and downs and infidelities and wrong turns in spiraling orbits gone fiercely awry.

And before I knew it I found myself alone in a room above a barn on Cosby Island. It was a refuge offered by a dear friend after I finally resolved to leave Elli. I was alone for the first time in my life since those days I spent adrift in Berlin. Alone in the room above the barn, crying and confused, but yes, excited; I was as exhilarated as an escapee from a chain gang.

I was free.

Geirr doesn't live far from the bar where Paul Newman once filmed the scene in *The Verdict* where he drank that raw egg in a glass of whisky. That is a terrific movie. Paul Newman plays a burned-out lawyer who gets a chance to beat the pants off of well-heeled, arrogant, sneaky defense attorneys. Newman plays a failure who bounces back.

I am not so sure I want to bounce back. But I do plan to quit smoking and to start eating daily from the four basic food groups.

I plan to grow a lot older, just for spite. I plan to beat the spread.

I've been working out and swimming, trying to lose some weight, because I recently got a call from Steve Niemoeller. I don't know how he got my number, because since I saw him last I have moved five times. But he called to say that he heard a rumor that Glenna was coming back to Cosby Island. She was coming home for good, and she wanted it known she would be looking for me.

She supposedly has told somebody who told somebody else who told Steve that he was expressly to pass on two messages. First, she had won the Tennessee State Lottery. The second message he had written down, and he read it over the phone.

The message was: "Tell him I want him. Tell him I want him to live with me."

I wanted to ask questions, but Steve hung up. I called using the number he gave me back at the time when he delivered that pizza to me during the Seahawks-Rams game. That must be, what, two, three years ago? Anyway, I got a disconnected number message.

I like the idea of Glenna coming back. Maybe the Country&Western is out of her system now, maybe she's done with the band and the drifters and the bad habits.

The lottery ticket part is B.S., I would have read about it in the papers, don't you think? Probably Steve's perverse idea of a joke.

But the second message, that sounds like Glenna. She would be really blunt and direct like that.

If it's true she's coming back, that's good news.

It will be good to see her.

ISBN 0-9709353-1-5



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