

These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies - captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose from among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

SWIMMING

Since my past is a familiar life story, like a novel, it seems more true to tell my story as a novelistic autobiography rather than an autobiographical novel. Nathan Axene and I share identical histories, but we are not the same. His life is in this book. Mine is in this moment. You could say that this is a personal true story, or you could say it's fiction, and both are true.

By telling my life story as if it's about someone else, I can tell both kinds of truth, the literal and the literary, the true story of Nathan Axene, my friend, the predecessor of who I appear to be.

Steve Abhaya Brooks

SWIMMING

~

The Perfect Fairy Tale

Once Upon a Time,
A Long Time Ago,
In a Far Distant Land,
They Lived Happily
Ever After.

M. Tuggle

~

When Nathaniel David Axene was three years old, he lived with his parents in a small house in Denver, Colorado. The year was 1945, and the war was over. There was much to celebrate, but little Nathaniel was puzzled. He sat at the small kitchen table, surrounded by two very large people.

He looked up from his plate and caught the attention of his Mother and his Father. His stern look of puzzlement aroused the curiosity of his Mother.

“Nathaniel David Axene,” she said, “what ever is the matter?”

He gave them both a stern, puzzled look and announced, in a softly accusatory voice, “Somebody tickled my tinkle-thing.”

He had begun to distrust the world of realities. He had begun a life of imagination, He had begun to sense that nothing was exactly as it seemed.

A Good Boy Once

Twenty-seven years later, Nathaniel Axene was a poet in San Francisco, leading a life of imagination, still confused by the so-called real world. After the divorce from his wife, he sought the help of a professional to begin to sort out some of the differences between illusion and reality.

Dr. Robbins stared at his patient. He sighed. He thought for a moment and tapped the stem of his pipe against the nail of his thumb. It was time for action.

Nat Le Blanc drove to the viaduct that paralleled Third Street and parked under it. He floated to the top of the raised roadway and surveyed the flatland of the city. He stood with his feet spread apart and his hands on the railing. He could see, in the distance, the neighborhood of his house, on the side of the hill called Diamond Heights. His eyes cut a hole in the roof of his house. He focused on the edges of things; his desk, his bed, the doorways, the rug. He ripped the house into shreds and let them turn into water, which ran down the street and into the gutter on the corner of 26th and Diamond. He went into the grocery store on the corner and ordered the man to give him a newspaper, which blew away in the air.

Dr. Robbins spoke, "Here's what I want you to do. There's a nice coffee house just down the hill. It's called The Owl and the Monkey. It's full of nice people who like to talk to other people. Walk in, get a cup of coffee, sit down at a table, and say hello. Practice being normal. Just go down to that

place and talk to someone. That's what coffee houses are all about. People love to talk to other people. All you have to do is say hello.

Nat Le Blanc lay on his bed, watching the stripes of his bedcover run under him. He looked at his foreshortened legs and torso and thought how large he was. "My room is a square, but it reminds me of a short slice of sausage, chopped off by a butcher," he said. He looked and saw the square room turn round. "I am a magician and outside this room people are gasping to imagine that I can be inside of it and still be alive." He looked at his feet, which were resting quietly at the end of his legs.

He stared at the doctor. Talking to strangers for no reason was like walking naked onto the Johnny Carson Show. He was good at taking dares, though, and Dr. Robbins' recommendation was as good as a dare. All he had to do was say hello. He could do that.

Nat Le Blanc sat in a seat on the NJudah streetcar. "These streetcars could be hung upside down and run on the sky," he said. He looked at the vents above the windows, at the steel tubing across the back of the seats, at the curtain behind the driver. "I am inside another sausage," he said. "This is a vacuum tube in the Biblioteque Nationale." He moved his feet from under his own seat and slipped them under the seat in front of him. "I hope no-one minds if I put my feet under them," he said to himself. "I could lift my feet, and the seat would be ripped from the floor, and it would fly through the roof of the streetcar. I could thrust another person into the sky." He looked at the curved walls of the streetcar. "This streetcar is the carriage of a typewriter," he said. "

“Sure. I can do that,” he replied, and a smile crept tentatively onto his face. Dr. Robbins sat back and thought, “Intervention is a risky business, but it works, and dammit, I’m good at it.” “Good. Good,” he said, “Our time is up. Now go out and have a great day.”

Nat Le Blanc lay underneath the grass of a meadow in Golden Gate Park. “It’s cold when I face away from the sun. It’s warmer near the surface and colder the deeper I sink. By rolling over and over, I can sustain an even temperature over my entire body.” He sat up and watched the cars passing on Middle Drive. He picked them up with his fingers. He watched the people who passed on the sidewalk, next to the roadway. He grabbed them like sheets of rubber and stretched them until they were nothing more than wide streaks of color. “These people have come to me like unsigned letters,” he said, “I don’t know their names.” He tied a tree into a knot.

Nate got up from the leather chair where he had sat for weeks, reciting the litany of fears and desires than was his life. Somewhere, buried deep in his littered landscape was an incident that surely must define his confusion and release his strength, but so far it had eluded him and Dr. Robbins, who was growing impatient with his patient, if not with his entire professional life.

“See you again, same time, Tuesday, Nate.”

“OK, Doc.” He loved saying Doc. He got up and went out. He walked down the hall. Doors. Little rooms. People telling crazy stories. He smiled at the receptionist. She was a sturdy Black woman. She looked like an anchor.

“The whole place would blow away, if she wasn’t sitting there, holding it down,” he thought and shook his head.

Nat Le Blanc sat inside a woman reading a book on a bench in Washington Square. "I like the feel of velvet," he said. He touched the palms of his hands to her velvet dress. He pulled his hands up against her breasts. "My flesh is deeper than I remember," he said. He put one hand across her belly and the other hand between her legs and pulled her out of him and into him. "It's like falling asleep. It's a double exposure," he said. She began to turn in his body. They spun around inside each other, and their limbs flew out from the spinning force. He watched this miracle and laughed. "These buildings that surround us have made an open grave of this square," he said. "Perhaps I am part woman. Perhaps one of these trees is blending with the cathedral across the street. He dropped his handkerchief behind the church, as they all danced in a circle.

He walked into the rain. "Does it always rain in San Francisco, or does it just seem like it?" he asked himself. He hadn't been in The City for very long. He had a job collecting the donation cans for a charity. It was a great job. He got to drive a beat-up VW all over town, and he didn't really have to talk to anyone. People thought he was a priest, because the soup kitchen was run by the Franciscan Fathers. "Thank you, Father," someone would say to him, and he would nod and bow a little, grab the can, and leave.

He had come a long way from the monumental storms of The Great Plains, where he grew up. "Another wimpy rain," he said, and thought of the kids in his building, who had nicknamed him 'Talk-it-Over' when they caught him talking to himself on the street one day. It was a dead giveaway that he was among the walking wounded of modern civilization, a sure sign that the empire was crumbling, but he thought he was practicing for the time

when he was ready to carry his message, whatever that was, to other people.

Nat Le Blanc was reading a book. "I am the author of this book," he said. "I am the pages, I am the cover." He ran through the print, until he was exhausted and covered with ink. He swam between the lanes of words. He climbed onto the sentences and ran across them. He ran across rows of desks in school, laughing. He looked at the book, the size of his hand. "I was a good boy once," he said, "but now I am everything."

Nate lived in a walk-down apartment on Carl Street. The Psychiatric Institute was only four blocks up the hill. He liked his room. It was small, and it fit like a glove, like the kid's room in 'That Man from Rio', a tiny place where everything was within reach. He could control the whole world on five hundred bucks a month. He stood in front of the Institute and debated the choices. He could go home and try to read Dostoevsky in the dark, or he could go down the hill and say hello to someone. The rain had turned to a light sprinkle. It felt cool and refreshing.

"I was a good boy once," he said. He felt Dr. Robbins watching him, from his office on the third floor. He could feel the doctor's eyes on the back of his windbreaker like two meaty fists. He almost fell, to the left, down the hill.

When he got to the front door of The Owl and the Monkey Cafe, it felt like he was embarking on one of life's great adventures. Owls and Monkeys reminded him of wisdom and sex, of watching and clowning. Here he would meet the great cross-section of humanity, the true and the false, the mighty

and the fallen, seekers, wanderers, those who were looking for, and those who had found, the essential. All he had to do was say hello.

Standing in front of The Owl and the Monkey Cafe, staring through the plate glass window, he began to drift back. A window is like a poem. You can see yourself in it, like a mirror, or you can see through it, to the other side. The poem is glass. Glass window, glass mirror. He began to remember. He remembered when he was eleven years old.

The Nebraska Kid

(When he was eleven years old, living in Nebraska, about to move back to Illinois, where he was born, Nathaniel Axene wrote his autobiography and called it, "The Nebraska Kid." He began with a poem of his own composition.)

On the Prairíe

The grass was wet
the day the horses
ran through.

There were windwaves
on the prairíe.

My ears had a wide range,
and my eyes were brand-new.

The Nebraska Kid

(or the true story of Nathaniel Axene, Age 11)

One day I rode my bike out to the Indian Monument on the west side of town. It's my favorite place. I was there for a long time. It was like being in church, only there's no church there, just a big old stone

marblisk (I think that's what you call it) and the sky and the prairie grass, and there is the feeling that there's Indians everywhere, but it's not spooky, it's great!

Back in town, each one of us kids has a home and doorways onto the ways between our houses and their parents. The radio station is on the edge of town, and you can look in the window and see the machine that collects all the news from all over the world. The radio station is across from the cemetery, which is like a permanent bedroom for dead people.

Sometimes, the grass at the edge of town is as tall as the corn, and there are weeds and burrs, stickers, and houses that are even farther out, and some that are not finished. There are smells everywhere. New wood smells like new wood when you've never smelled it before, and then after that other smells remind you of it. Unfinished. Everything. And the way things feel. Some smells make you not want to feel what it is.

Everything is made up of all the bits and pieces, but when you walk down the street, you pick up a thing and look at it. And then the parking meter is tall, and above the roof, the clouds go by. If you look at the clouds, then everything else goes by, including the street, which is First Street West, behind the newspaper office, where the lady who sells ceramic panthers lives.

If you bought one for your Grandma in Illinois, and she broke it, she would cry, but you wouldn't cry. You would look at the broken leg of the panther and how it felt, chalky and white. Even though you never saw a panther, you knew it wasn't like one died, even if it felt like it. The insides of the leg was worth it.

Everything is different. When someone smiles, like your Grandma, everything you already know, is different, just because they smile, and it's like someone put their hand in warm water in your stomach, or you did.

I'm not an expert, but what's the difference, when you hold it up to your eyes and look it while you feel it, and if it has a smell, smell it? You learn, when you're little that very few few things should be put in your mouth to taste it, because of poison and sharp edges.

You learn that because they tell you, but you also learn that by common sense and experimentation. Eating at the table is where you get to put things in your mouth. Even then, some things belong in the garbage can and not in your mouth. They taste terrible. But they say poison can trick you. So can food at the table. And the people, too.

My Aunt Emily could draw pictures. She was always telling me how she could draw pictures. And she would tell me how I could draw pictures, too. I would draw a picture, say of a cow or something, and she would act like it was a big deal, and she would tell me how she and I were just alike. Both of us being artists.

She would sign her name, down in the corner of my picture, and Aunt Emily would take the drawings into the other room to show my Mother how we were both such a big deal. Aunt Emily acted like she showed me how to make an Atom Bomb or something. My mother would say, "That's nice," like she meant, "So what." My Mother and my Aunt Emily were not best friends. She is my Dad's sister. They share a certain animosity. My Mom said that.

Which brings up words, for example. Words have always had a certain appeal to me. Half the time, I like to use words. Even ones that

are odd or peculiar, or words I don't entirely know the meaning of. I have been told that I have an advanced vocabulary, which is just fine with me, because my opinion is, the more the merrier.

But you know what? People won't tell you anything you want to know about. Like it's all a big secret, and I suppose it is. You figure people either know what the secret is all about, and they won't tell you, or they don't know, and they act like they do. You probably figure that since I don't know what the secret is all about, that I don't know what I'm talking about. OK, so you got me dead to rights, but you tell me if I'm wrong, or if you don't get the same feeling, sometimes.

Like when I was a little kid, my Dad was on the road, and my Mom would get mad at me and tell me I had a spanking coming, for something, I forget what, and she would send me down the basement to get the stick. Which was the stick she used to fish out the wet clothes from the washing machine. It was actually two sticks stuck together at one end, like pinchers. So, one time, I go down to the basement and over to where she put it on the table by the washer, and I pick it up.

I'm feeling pretty rotten, because she's going to spank me with the stick, and then I get a brilliant idea. The big problem is the stick. So I take the stick, and I throw it behind the big cardboard boxes that are at the back of the basement, wherein we keep the old toys and clothes and stuff.

Then I went upstairs, and I talk to Mom. First, she says to me, "Where is the stick?" And then I say, "I can't find it." And she says, "That's funny. It should be where I put it." So I say, "I looked

everywhere, but I can't find it." So she goes down to the basement, which incidentally is almost nothing but a big hole in the ground, but it has a cement floor, and she can't find it.

She gets back upstairs, and she says to me, "Well, that's the darndest thing." And then she looks at me, and I look at her, like, "I don't get it. Where could it be?" I felt bad, a little bit, that she would have to fish out the clothes with her hand and get it burned by hot water, but I didn't feel that bad. I don't think I'm a bad person, exactly, but I had just about enough of that stick. And you know what? She never spanked me again. Now, my Father's hand. That's another story.

My Dad has big hands, like elephants' hands, if elephants had hands, but they don't. When I was a little kid, I could hang on one of his fingers, but your perspective changes when that hand hits you on your butt, and it hurts. But I don't want to talk about that. That's like a dumb episode. It gets more serious, and I dislike it even more when my Dad is mad at me. But I don't bare repeating stuff like that, unless I'm in a bad mood, which I'm not, so forget it.

Well, what about TV? Mr. Davis, across the street, had the first TV set of anybody around us. Manny Roberts had the first TV set in town. He owns the Buick dealership, and he could afford it. Dicky Roberts is in my class, and we used to watch TV at his house. They had a perpetual clock, that is gold and spins around inside a glass thing. But the TV was the main thing after a while. We watched The Ed Sullivan Show, but it was like ghosts running around, jumping up and down and singing or just talking. It was fun, like a party. Everybody sat around the TV like it was a crackly fire in a box, but blue.

Mr. Davis made a big production about his TV. He has an antenna that is almost as big as the one out at KBRL. It looks like he's getting signals from the Planet Mars. He is a fat guy, and he lives across the street from us where we live, at #7 Georgia Court. At Christmas time, he puts up a wooden nativity scene in the yard and Santa Claus and the reindeer on the roof. Then he shines lights on it.

One day, he told everyone he had color TV. All us kids ran over to Mr. Davis's house to watch Pinky Lee. What he did was to put a piece of plastic on the screen. It was four colors, so Pinky Lee had red feet and green pants and a yellow shirt and a blue face. So Pinky Lee was blue in the face. Ha. Ha. That's a joke, son.

The man across the back yard is fat, too. He has a fat wife and two fat kids, and they sit at their picnic table in the Summer and eat hot dogs. I can't think of his name. I keep thinking his name is Mr. Davis, but that's ridiculous. Unless everybody who is fat is named Mr. Davis.

We live in a house on a circle with eight houses, and we are number seven. It is a fairly new addition, I guess, because the edge of town is just down the hill, where the Buffalo Drive-In is located. We can sit on the fence behind the house and watch the movies, but we can't hear what they are saying. But who cares? When you're a kid, you can get a great deal of satisfaction watching a free movie, Specially when it's warm out, and you're kicking your brother and laughing at big people kissing each other. We would say, "Mush. Mush."

That makes me think of Sgt. Preston of the Mounties, who is on the radio with his dog, King, catching the crooks who run all over the

Yukon robbing innocent people and trying to get away from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But they can't get away from Sgt. Preston. He says, "On King. On, you huskies!" And King bites the crook on the leg, and Sgt. Preston says, "Well, King, this case is closed." And King says, "Bark! Bark!"

Radio is my favorite, because you can see the story, even better than on TV. If you close your eyes and use your imagination, which is a strange way to say it, because you don't exactly use your imagination like it was a paint box or something. You just let it go, and it does all the work. Your imagination, I mean.

King is my favorite dog, even though I guess I'd have to admit that dogs are not my favorite animals. They bark and growl, and you can't tell what they are going to do. What if they thought you were a crook and took a big chunk out of your leg? The heck with that! Then there is that phony dog outside the music store. He sits there like a statue with his ears open and listens to his master's voice, and his master says, "Go over and bite that kid over there!" I know for a fact it's a phony dog, but ever since I was a kid, that dog gives me the willies. Puppies are OK, and so are old dogs, because they just lay there, and their legs run in their sleep.

Cats will scratch you and bite sometimes, but they're just telling you to GET LOST, and it's probably your own fault, because you got their dandruff up. Cats walk around like they think human beings are no big deal. Like people are a nuisance, and they could care less. They even get bored when you pet them an excessive amount, and they get up and go over and eat a piece of something, or they yawn

and go try to eat a June bug. Which is fine with me, because June bugs are bad news.

In the Summertime, they fly against the screen door, and anybody who's that stupid could fly in your mouth or walk under your bare feet, and bare feet are absolutely essential in the Summertime. Every Summer you try to get your feet to get tough on the bottom, like shoes, so you can throw your shoes away until school starts in the Fall, and then you have to wear them to keep up appearances.

Some poor people can barely afford to buy shoes, and I think that's a bad disgrace, of sorts. One poor girl really got to me, when I was a kid. Her name was Verna, and she lived in a shack on the outskirts of town when we lived on East Sixth Street. When I was in kindergarten, I watched her go down the dirt road with her shoes in her hands, and then she disappeared over the hill.

I thought there were alligators down in the gully where the poor people lived, and I didn't know if she would ever come back to school or get eaten by a big old alligator. They don't have alligators in Nebraska, but I didn't know that when I was real little and real dumb.

Verna used to lick her lips. She stuck out her tongue and waved it around her mouth, getting it wet, and it got chapped and red. Everybody made fun of her, and I tried to make fun of her, too, but I couldn't. I felt sorry for her. I don't remember her after that, so I guess she moved away.

I think we were poor when we came to Nebraska, because I remember my Mother crying under a tree. She put me and my brother in a red wagon, and she pulled us all over town to ask people if we

could live in their basement or some place. My Dad was still in Denver, Colorado, where we lived when I don't remember.

He was learning about tractors, which is what he sells. I guess tractors are very intricate mechanisms, because he was gone for a long time. But, you know how Time feels to a kid. It feels like air that gets thicker depending on the weather. Anyway, Time is weird when you think about, which I did all the time.

OK, so Mom pulled me and Mickey around in a wagon, because it was right after the Big War they had, and there weren't any places to live, because the soldiers came home and got married and got a house and had babies.

So she started crying one day, just before dark, and I sat there, and I didn't know what to do. It's funny because I remember the red blossoms on the tree and the blue sky with white clouds going through the open parts of the tree.

Her crying made everything seem different. I may have got the facts wrong in my memory slightly, but I was only three or four years old, and I wanted to cry, too, but instead I looked at everything. Maybe I thought we were going to have to live under that tree. That wouldn't have been too bad, except when Winter came and the snow was ten feet deep. Except you could build a fort in the snow. We do that all the time. But kids think they can live anywhere.

I was getting pretty used to that red wagon, except when Mickey was wet, or when he was carrying a load. Anyway, we found a basement room to live in, where the walls would sweat like a pig. It wasn't Mickey's fault he was a stinker. He was only a little runt. He

wasn't responsible for the stuff that came out of him, and I mean both ends. Little runts can't seem to hang onto anything.

Well, we didn't have to live under a tree, or even in a crummy old basement, for long. We kept moving, and the houses got nicer. Those tractors sold like hotcakes, I guess, and we ended up at Georgia Court, surrounded by fat guys and big old TV antennas.

In our house, there's a magazine rack by the front door. It is one of the small, wooden kind, with two compartments and a hole cut out for a handle in the middle. When I am home alone, and there's nobody around, I could go to the magazine rack and look through it. I might act like I'm on a secret mission or something, because it has a couple of hot items in it. I guess I'm kind of stalling around about it, because I'm kind of shy about it. Anyway, I don't mind talking about it, so I will.

You see, there are two magazines in there that are unique. One is National Geographic, which has people in it from around the world, including some that are dressed uniquely. That is, they wear different types of clothing than we do in America. Some don't wear hardly any clothes at all, and the ones that are women don't wear any clothes on their tops.

Neither do the men, and they don't seem to mind at all, probably because the climate is very hot where they live, and they're used to it, so they probably say, "What the heck," and they take their shirts and throw them away.

I was curious to look at them, and in particular the women, who have different tops that are many different sizes and many different shapes and even lengths.

And one magazine is called Photography, and in a way it is like National Geographic, because it has pictures from around the world but mostly of the United States, and fewer words. In Photography, there are pictures of naked people lying around in unique ways.

One bunch of pictures is of a woman lying down in the desert, only it doesn't look like she lives there, but she went there and took off her clothes and tried to pretend she was made out of sand. You can't barely tell the difference between her and the sand dunes, and sometimes you would think the actual sand dunes are a woman also. It's a trick. A lot of the photographs in that magazine are tricks. But for a long time, I thought that naked ladies in America looked like sand dunes.

There's other stuff that happened when I was a kid, but all of it is not stuff I care to go on about. So maybe when I'm an old man, I might feel like delving into the past about everything, but as for me, I don't care to.

Maybe by the time I'm thirty years old, and I've taken a hundred courses in Psychology, I'll write a book or something. But until then, that's all I've got to say for now.

Thanks to all my many readers.

Signed,

MONSIEUR NATHANIEL DAVID AXENE, ESQ.

Tippy the Puppy

Nathaniel's grandfather came to America from Sweden, at the turn of the century, after his older brother, Charlie, came first. Charlie's name was Magnuson, and he thought there were too many Magnusons, back home, so when he got off the boat, he changed his name to Axene.

Nobody knows where he got the name. But because he was the first, every other family member who followed him to America, changed his or her name to Axene. After all his brothers and sisters settled in the new country, he returned to Sweden and changed his name back to Magnuson. There were, by then, fewer Magnusons to spoil his uniqueness. There was precedent in Nathan's ancestry for things and people to disappear or not to remain as they had once seemed.

When he was seven, he had a puppy, a cocker spaniel, named Tippy. Tippy was named for the tip of his tail, which was white, and most of the rest of him was black. He had white spots and white feet. He was cuddly and energetic, and he jumped all over Nathaniel when he came home from school, and licked his face and peed when he got too excited.

East Ward School was across the street, and it was so close that Nathaniel waited until the bell rang in the morning, before he ran out the back door and shot across the street, leaving Tippy yapping like crazy at the back door.

He'd had Tippy for a couple of weeks, when he came home one day, and Tippy wasn't anywhere to be found. He had gone from school to Johnny Armstrong's house to play and when he got home, it was suppertime. His

Mom was in the kitchen, and his Dad was in the living room reading the paper on the couch.

Nate went up to his Mom and said, "Hey, Mom, where's Tippy?"

"I don't know, Nathan, why don't you go and ask your Father?" He went into the living room and went up to his Dad.

"Hey, Dad, I can't find Tippy anywhere. Do you know where he is?"

"No, I don't. Maybe you should ask your Mother."

"But, I already asked her, and she said to ask you."

"Well, I can't tell you, son. If your Mother doesn't know, then that's all there is to it."

"But, what if he's ran away, or got runned over by a car or something, or got stoled by somebody." His Mother came to the door, wiping her hands with a dishtowel.

"Listen, Nathaniel, I don't know what happened to Tippy, but you wouldn't have taken care of him anyway, and a dog is a lot of responsibility, and you'd expect us to take care of him, so it's probably just as well that he's gone. Somebody else will take care of him, in a way that you're not capable of."

"I would take care of him," Nate said, but guilt was taking over. He had gone to Johnny's house, and he didn't come straight home from school, and he was only a kid, after all. The food went down hard at dinner, as he blamed himself for Tippy being gone.

Two weeks later, he was walking by a house a few blocks from home, and he heard a familiar bark. It was Tippy, his front paws up against a chain-link fence. He ran up to Tippy, and they frantically loved each other, like they were both prisoners of a misunderstanding.

When he got home, his Mother was standing at the kitchen sink. “Mom, I found Tippy. Some people have him in their backyard.” She said, “Well, Nathaniel, Tippy has a new home now, and those people will take good care of him. You promised me you would take care of Tippy, but you didn’t live up to your promises.”

“Yes, I did. I mean I tried. I mean I wanted to.” It was hard to be imperfect and honest at the same time. He loved Tippy, and Tippy was gone, and it was his fault. How could that be?

His Mother could read his heart, it seemed, and she knew where the weak links were. It seemed to him that no matter what he did, there was a flaw in it, and his Mother could tell. And he was scared of his Dad. His Dad was big, very big, and there was always something going on inside him, that never came out.

The incident with Tippy kept coming up for him, all his life. The lesson seemed to be, *If you love something too much, it will be taken from you, especially by your parents.* Especially by his parents.

One day, he was sitting on the floor, in the kitchen, reading comic books. There was a big crash against the back door. His body jumped in fear. He thought it was his Dad, coming off the road and really angry. His Mom came running out of the bedroom.

“What was that? What was that noise?” Nathan sat silent and scared. She went to the back door and began to laugh. He got up and went to her side. There, on the back porch, in a tangled heap of blood and feathers, was a dead pheasant. It had fallen out of the sky and crashed into the back door.

His parents were magical, powerful, frightening strangers that he loved. The neatest scene he ever witnessed between his Mom and Dad happened one Friday night, a few years later. His Dad was due home from selling

tractors in Kansas, and his Mom was singing to herself, as she prepared his Dad's favorite meal of fried chicken and fixings, with coconut cream pie for desert. His car pulled into the driveway, and everybody got real excited.

His Dad came in the back door, and his Mom went to meet him, wiping her hands on her apron. He put down his valise, and they kissed. It was a great kiss, and they kissed for a long time. He watched in wonder. His Dad picked his Mom up off the kitchen floor, and her shoes fell off her feet. He set her down slowly, and they began to dance in the kitchen. Glenn Miller was playing on the radio. His dad was a great dancer, and the two of them floated across the linoleum.

Many years later, he told the story, and they couldn't remember that it had ever happened. His parents were always looking at him, as if he was making it all up. Maybe he was.

His Mom told him his Father had gotten drunk once, when Nate was a baby, and he dropped the kid on his head. They decided that was why Nate was crazy, it must've wrecked his brains.

He took it all on. He felt totally responsible for everything that had ever happened to him. All questions of blame were easily resolved. He did it.

Monster in the Closet

There are monsters in every kid's life. After a while, some kids think they have a jinx, or they have bad luck, or they have done something bad, or they are the kind of kid that monsters look for.

When Nathaniel Axene was eleven years old, living at Number 7, an older boy came visiting the people at Number 8. He was probably 14 or 15, and he was from Montana, Texas, or some other, big magical place. He was big himself, and boisterous, and his friendship made Nathan feel like he too was becoming a real man. It was during that time that he heard the story of the Craig boys, who lived a few blocks away.

Their father had always beaten them, and finally, when they were fifteen and sixteen, they turned on the old man and beat the living daylights out of him. It stunned their Father, and he never bothered them again. That story aroused a strange kind of excitement in him. Nate's father had never beaten him and only spanked him a couple of times, but his father was big and made him uneasy. The air was charged whenever his father was around, which wasn't often. There was an eerie calm that made peace and quiet seem dangerous.

The new kid was only visiting, didn't have anybody to play with, and that must have been really boring for him. As the summer days added up, the temperature rose to the normal Nebraska 90's and 100's, and the big kid became more and more restless.

One morning, when the outside temperature was already into the 80's, he waved at Nate, who was sitting on his backdoor stoop, reading a comic book.

"Hey, kid, c'mere. I wanna show you something" Nathan pushed through the bushes that was like a fence between the houses and went up to the other kid.

"Nate, let's go in the basement. It's too hot out here, already." The kid took Nate in the backdoor of his Aunt's house, where Nate had never been before, and down the steps to the basement. It was 15 degrees cooler, and that felt good, and he was always curious to see new things and new places.

The big kid assumed a conspiratorial pose and began to whisper. Nate thought whispering was great. Whispering meant, "This information is not for grownups to hear. It's too important." What the kid proposed, was this, "Listen, kid, I want to show you something I bet you aint never seen before, and if I show it to you, I want you to swear on a stack of Bibles that you won't go blabbing it all over the town, like to your parents or anybody. This is just between you and me, and since you're my friend, I'm gonna give you a real break, OK?"

"OK," said Nate, as he began to slip over the line from rational to exotic thinking, from the real world to the unreal, from the good to the bad or scary realms. Willingly, he gave up the unknown to the slick guidance of a disreputable mentor. The big kid outlined a course of action.

"I'm going to bring my dumb, little cousin down here, and I told her there was a monster down here, and she has to do whatever the monster wants, and your job is to hide in the closet, and I'll bring her up to the closet door, and you stick your hand out, and then I'll take her away and you get in the shower, and I'll bring her up to the shower, and you do the same thing, and

don't you ever say anything at all, because you are a monster, get it, and she thinks you're a monster, and that's the way it's got to be. OK?"

"OK," said Nate, so far gone into the cruel unknown, he couldn't imagine any way out. He went to the closet. When the little girl came to the closet, Nathan held his arm out of the door, and the kid grabbed his arm and stuck his finger in the little girl, between her legs. Nate couldn't see what he'd never seen before, so he didn't know what it felt like.

Then the kid whispered into the closet, "Get in the shower," so Nate did. When he repeated the scene, this time from behind the shower curtain, Nate could see the little girl for just a second. He was reassured to see she was just a little girl. For a split-second, his eyes and the little girl's eyes met, and they were the same. They were oddly the same. They were two kids playing a game with a big kid. Nate was a monster playing with an even bigger monster.

When the whole thing was over, and the big kid sent Nate up the steps and out the door, he burst into the light and the air, and then through the bushes. That afternoon, he got angry at every little thing his brother or his mother did. They didn't get it. They'd never seen that anger in such an easy going boy.

The big kid next door went home with his mother to Grendel's lair, and the little kid never said a word, and neither did Nate, and the sun went down every evening, and the sun came up every morning, and that year Nate's family packed up and moved back to Illinois.

When his mother told him they were moving, he said, "Great. Let's go."

Astonished at his unaffected demeanor, she said, "Aren't you going to miss your friends?"

“Let’s go,” was all he would say. It was time to get out of there. His pure childhood was over. The Wonder Years, age 4-12, were done, gone, finished. Besides, when he tried out for the band, the first week of 7th Grade, he wanted to play the clarinet, but they assigned him to the trombone, and he never wanted to play the trombone.

He forgot about the little girl and the monsters. He began to develop the sharp tongue and sarcastic outlook of the cynic. There is so little to do, when the pink bubble of innocence has begun to lose its precious air. The only recourse is love, the kind that is due every child from parents who received it themselves as children. When the chain of love is broken, or never exists, or lies hidden beneath pain, the child is on his own and uses whatever devices he can find, or come up with, to make his own way in the world.

Nate used imagination. When he got to Illinois, he was a stranger, and that gave him some protection from his gradual loss of innocence. One technique, that accompanies the loss of innocence, is to despise innocence and drive it from the castle. The very innocence that’s the clean air of joy in childhood, becomes the poisonous gas of cynicism adolescence.

When Nate sat in his new homeroom, at Calvin Coolidge Junior High, in Moline, Illinois, the teacher asked him where he had moved from.

“Nebraska,” he said, and the girl in front of him said, “Alaska?”

“Yeah, I’m from Juneau. That’s the Capitol. Actually, I’m part Indian.”

“Are you really? That’s neat,” she said, her eyes wide and her mouth open.

“Yeah, I’m part Nava Jo, part Soox, and part Mo Jave,” he said, and nobody noticed the difference.

“Jeez,” he thought, “kids in Illinois are really dumb.” And he thought, “I can make up my life anyway I want to.” He was working hard to cover his loneliness and his sense of separation.

Even though he was born in Illinois, and lived there for the first three years of his life, no one knew him, and they all knew each other. They’d all gone to grade school together. They all shared their wonder years, and now they were coming of age together. Nathan was an Indian from Alaska. He didn’t know anyone, and no one knew him, outside of his family, and his family felt more like a bunch of people who got stuck together in the same boat, adrift in a mysterious sea.

Who was he, and who was he becoming? What was real and what wasn’t? Where was he from? What was his name? A year before, he memorized some lines from a recitation he did at North Ward School.

Father calls me William,
Sister calls me Will,
Mother calls me Willie,
But the fellers call me Bill.

The Moron Story

“Nathaniel, if you’re going to tell a story, tell it so that we all may hear it.”

He was sitting at the end of the long table with the rest of the kids. It was Sunday at Bishops’ Cafeteria in Davenport, Iowa, across the Mississippi River from Moline. Everybody was there; the old folks who were still alive, such as his dad’s three aunts and their husbands, some of their kids, and a few of the kids’ kids. Nate was telling a moron joke, when his mother spoke to him from way up the adult table.

He was having a good time with his cousins and his brothers. Bishops’ was a great cafeteria. They had a cool sign at the head of the line, REMEMBER, AS OVER YOUR FOOD YOU PONDER, YOU TOO ONCE STOOD WAY BACK YONDER. He almost always got fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and his favorite, chocolate pie. On every table there was a lamp that looked like a candle and lit up when you pushed a little button, and then the waiter would come and ask you what you wanted. Nate wanted to steal a Bishops’ lamp.

There was a break in the conversation at the adult table, and all of a sudden the only voice talking was Nate’s. Or Nathaniel, as his mother preferred to call him. When Nate was eleven, he crawled under his dad’s desk, smoked a cigarette, vowed never to cry again, and vowed to be called Nate for the rest of his life. His dad and his brothers agreed to the change, but his mother never gave in. She always called him Nathaniel. It was Nathaniel this and Nathaniel that. But right then, he didn’t mind, because the spotlight was on him.

His mother said, "Nathaniel, if you're going to tell a story, tell it so we may all hear it."

"OK," he said and smiled to himself. "I was telling the story of the moron." He looked around the table. All the adults were listening, even crazy Aunt Linette. She was eighty thousand years old, and she had blue hair, and she was always saying funny things that she didn't think were funny. She had once been a radio personality on WOC before Nate was born. He liked Aunt Linette, even though she also called him Nathaniel.

"The moron wanted to know where the sun went when it went down." He paused, savoring the moment. "So he went out in the backyard, and he waited. And waited. And waited." He really had 'em where he wanted 'em. He prolonged the moment. "And finally, it dawned on him."

Everyone laughed, the kids mostly, and some of the adults, even if a few did so only out of courtesy or embarrassment. Then there was another miraculous silence, a break in the general hubbub, and Aunt Linette spoke up, in her wiggly old voice. She looked sad.

"It must have been cold," she said. The conversation closed in around her, and Nate wondered about Crazy Aunt Linette. She identified with the moron, sitting out in his backyard all night, shivering and waiting, just so he could find out about where the sun went when it went down. What a wacky old lady.

He remembered the story she told about when she was doing her radio show. The owner of the radio station was B.J. Palmer, the guy who founded the Practice of Chiropractic in America. He was about five feet tall, and he wore a pith helmet and a big old handle-bar moustache. He was always going off to Africa on Safari. One time, when he got back, Aunt Linette, or Cousin Polly as she was called on the radio, ran into him in the front hall.

She was nervous and scared of Colonel Palmer, as he preferred to be called. She said to him, "Colonel Palmer, I see you're back." He wheeled around and barked at her, "Never say the obvious!"

Nate felt sorry for crazy Aunt Linette. He could see her, standing there, shaking in her boots. He spent the rest of the dinner in a pensive mood, thinking about things. It was funny how that happened. You're going along, cracking jokes, and something would happen that made the world quiet and the noise all around far away.

"Never say the obvious. Colonel Palmer, you're a jerk! Or is that too obvious for you?" People were always being jerks to other people and getting away with it, especially if they were hotshots of one type or another.

The Birthday Party

Nate sat at the formica table with the stainless steel legs in his mother's kitchen, looking over the list of kids he'd invited to the party at his house. He was in 8th Grade, and when he announced he wanted a party, his mother sat down and started to make a list of names, just like she always did.

"Wait a minute, Mom. You don't know who my friends are. I'll make the list." Things were changing in his life. She looked startled and put the pencil down. Later, on the afternoon of the party, he was alone in the house. He ran his hand along the cool legs of the table. It was a fine, warm and beautiful Saturday. He liked the feeling of the empty house. It was his house, for a time.

He got up and went down the stairs to the basement. He went into the ping-pong room and stood in the cool quiet. Along one wall were cupboards, full of the accumulated things of childhood. He went into the large cupboard and pulled the door shut behind him. He had to get down on his knees, and then he sat in the middle of the boxes. He reached into the boxes, in the dark, and touched things, feeling their edges and guessing what they were; old toys, cars and trucks, boxes of games, probably parchesi and monopoly, junk and treasure: loved and cherished things.

He pulled out a baseball glove and felt the leather, put his hand in, and punched the pocket with his fist. He lifted the glove to cover his face and breathed in the pungent smell. The sensations of smell and touch were powerful. He went out of the large cupboard and opened all the little ones,

looking into the museum of familiar surprises. Each cupboard held a special moment, not of memory in the mind, but in the senses.

He went around the corner into the laundry room and stood looking at it, like a privileged visitor to a room preserved for posterity. He looked at the washing machine and the dryer. He lifted the lid of the freezer and lowered his head into the arctic breeze. He picked up a box of Green Giant Peas and ran the shape in his hands, the frost clinging to his fingers. He held the flat box to his cheek.

He put the peas back on the stack, closed the freezer, and walked across the room to the storage room, went in, and sat on the floor. He noticed the Christmas ornaments and the boxes of winter clothes. He sat for a long time, just being in the room. It was a place to be, no longer only a storage room. He liked the exposed two-by-fours on the unfinished wall and the cement floor, cold beneath his jeans.

He left the room and passed by the mangle his mother used for ironing; an amazing machine that would burn your fingers if you weren't careful. His mother ironed everything, even underwear and sheets.

He went back to the hallway outside the laundry-room and opened the double-doors of the clothes-closet. He stepped in, bending over, and bathed in the textures and smells of his dad's clothes, his mom's, his brothers', his own, it didn't matter whose. He was disengaged from the personalities and their histories. He went out and sat down on the stairs going up toward the kitchen. He heard footsteps and knew his parents were home. He listened to them walking around. He felt different toward them. They sounded far away.

That night, at the party, he felt a new exuberance. The party was in full swing. It was incredible. Everybody showed up, even kids from the other

junior high. They all brought 45's, and the music was nonstop. His mother had provided plenty of chips and dips, and Coke and 7UP, and even sandwiches.

He didn't eat much. He talked and joked around. He stood holding a Pepsi, listening to Fats Domino. What a night. The TV room, with his dad's desk in it, had been cleaned out, the furniture shoved against the pine paneling. He leaned against the only cement-block wall. It was cool and glistening with moisture on the hot night. The swell of sensual and sexual teenage energy washed over him.

He watched the movement of the dancing, with half-glazed eyes, his heart pounding, the bass and drums rumbling in his genitals, and moved out of his childhood of private and secret pleasures into a wider world of risk and adventure. He left his parents behind as the governors of his life and began to look to his own generation for some kind of communion.

Jump the Broad

Be careful what you pray for. It was the last day of swimming class. Dick Riley was the regular teacher, and he was out sick, so Mr. Barnett took over. On the last day, everyone had to pass some tests to show they had learned something. You had to bob, dive, and swim various strokes. The dog paddle was important, because it was necessary for saving lives. Nate was worried, because he was terrible at floating. His legs had become muscle and no fat, and he was afraid they'd sink like rocks.

Dick Riley was the basketball coach, and Mighty Bill Barnett was the swimming coach, and it fell on him to conduct the test. Swimming class was held at the YMCA, six blocks from the old high school building, which was condemned to prove it was time to build a new high school building. It was October, in Nate's sophomore year, and the walk back to the main building was nasty with a wet head.

He got through the test OK, but the last part was a 100 yard swim, five lengths of the dinky little pool. It was like a big, dark bathtub, where the little boys at the "Y" swam naked, for cleanliness or some such reason, their little penises sticking out like little rubber door-stoppers. Nate dove in when the coach said, "Go!" and swam as fast as he could. He was a pretty good swimmer. He had impressed his mother, when he was a kid.

When Nate splashed up against the last wall, Mighty Bill Barnett looked at his stopwatch. "Damn, this kid is as fast as anybody I've got," he said to himself. "Say, Nate," he said, as Nate pulled himself onto the pool deck,

“How would you like to come out for the swim team?” Nate was stunned. It had never occurred to him. He had tried out for track and wrestling in 9th Grade, and it had been a total bust.

Wrestling wore him out faster than anything he’d ever experienced. Track was where the true athletes showed off. He could jump, so he tried the broad jump. One day, coming out of the locker-room, he ran into Ernie Gordon, the track coach. Ernie Gordon was a hard-nose. Every year he challenged his teams to pushups, and every year he beat every one of them.

“Ah, Nate,” he said, “Howzit goin’?”

“OK, Coach.”

“Tell me, Nate, what event are you going to concentrate on?”

Nate thought about the question, standing on the steps going up to the basketball floor, feeling sadly inadequate to even be talking about his athletic prowess. He wanted desperately to be an athlete. His dad had been an athlete, and Nate had, by comparison, been a crip, a sissy, a wimp, a fairy, no chip off the old block. Looking at Ernie Gordon, he remembered that shotputters said, “Put the shot.” His brain jumped. He tried to sound like an athlete, a born broadjumper.

“Well,” he said, “I thought I’d jump the broad,” and as soon as he said it, it hurt.

“Oh, yeah,” said the Coach, “What’s her name?”

Nate went home in little pieces. He quit the track team, even though he knew that every kid, who stayed out, got a letter. He quit the wrestling team, and resigned himself to his fate as a member of the debate team. And now, here was The Swimming Coach asking him to come out for The Swim Team.

“Sure,” he said, and a fire started in his soul. A tiny door to heaven on earth opened in his gut. That afternoon, he got to the “Y” early and picked up his brand-new racing suit. He was standing in the shower, when the rest of the team started to come in. Each new face stared in amazement. Dan Tuttle looked at him.

“Axene,” he said, in shock, “What are you doing here?”

“Coach asked me to come out for the team,” was his only reply.

Was this a joke? Tom Anderson looked at Nate like a cruel hoax was in progress. Nate was not a jock. *They* were jocks. The world was out of joint. When they had all assembled on the pool deck, some of the guys were talking. This travesty must come to an abrupt end.

Anderson stepped up to him and challenged him to a race. Tom Anderson was one of the best sprinters that Coach Barnett had ever had. Nate beat Tom Anderson. Beat him good. It was the end of an era. It was the beginning of a new era.

By the time he was done with the high school, he had made All-American and Captain of the Swimming Team. He never quite believed it, even if he made believers out of Tuttle and Anderson and all the rest. Maybe our triumphs are like dreams, triumphant, wonderful, amazing, absolutely fantastic dreams.

“Wake me when it’s over,” he thought, “Pinch me. I must be dreaming.”

And how was it that Dick Riley got sick that day? That magical, fateful day that transformed him and made him a better athlete than his dad had ever dreamed of being. It wasn’t the same as punching out the old man, but it was a step in the right direction.

A Country Girl

When you're not sure how to act inside, sometimes it's easier to act outside. Nate had a talent for acting. It seemed to work in a lot of situations, maybe in every situation.

The teacher, Miss Beckwith, liked him. He was a good kid, and she thought he was going to become a great actor. He had her for dramatics in 9th Grade. He had played a great *kid* in the 9th Grade play, "A Date With Judy." He was such a great kid, he knew it. He sat on stage, in an old armchair, eating an apple. He really ate that apple. Nobody had ever eaten an apple, on stage, with such believability. Everyone in the audience must have been amazed at how well he ate that apple, it was so real.

He ate it all around, down to the core. In the meantime, the other actors gave him his cue, and he missed it. He was chomping away, oblivious to all but the fulfillment of that moment. The other actors took another tack. They circled around and came at the cue again. On the second go-round, he heard his cue and responded, with the perfect degree of juvenile verve.

After the curtain, it was revealed to him what had happened. It was great. He never felt a thing. The director loved him. He could project to the last row. Not bad for a scrawny kid. He was a born actor, she thought.

He sat, two years later, in the same woman's Junior Speech class. He had grown, now fully six feet tall, no longer able to play pre-pubescent roles, and Miss Beckwith could see her prodigy becoming quite the young Brando. It was the first week in the new high school building. Miss Beckwith

was full of new-school-year excitement. She announced to the class that the first exercise would be impromptu speeches.

“I want you to write down, on separate pieces of paper, two topics. We will collect them, and then we will all draw, out of a bowl, the topics, for our speeches.” She spoke with the precise amount of dramatic flair to encourage and instruct her young charges.

“But what should we make up for our topics, Miss Beckwith?” asked one of her more sing-songy pupils. She thought for a moment, remembering her duties as a teacher for the state.

“Well, for example,” she said, “*My Summer Vacation* or *The New High School Building*. But don’t use those. Those are only suggestions. All right, get busy.”

As she spoke, the guy behind Nate leaned over and whispered, “Hey, Nate, how about *My First Piece of Ass*?” Nate flushed and lost it. He hadn’t gotten up the nerve to use the word *shit* yet, and all the other guys used it regularly. He wanted very much to be accepted as a regular guy and not just as a smart kid, *smart* being the code word for *wimp*. This was too much too soon. The guys at the back of the class spent a lot of time in shop, fixing their own cars, reading *Playboy*, dating the easy girls, and having fist-fights with ex-Marines outside of bars, just for the fun of it.

Miss Beckwith urged everyone to finish, “Please finish up and pass your topics to the front.” The same guy leaned forward again.

“Hey, Nate, how about *How Long Was My Dong*?” Nate buried his crimson forehead and scribbled furiously. Miss Beckwith took the collected topics to her desk and read through them. She stormed to the front.

“All right, who wrote this? *My Summer Vacation* and *The New High School Building*. She stared right past Nate, star pupil and silent culprit, at

the rowdies behind him. They shook their heads in habitual denial, after years of habitual accusation. Nate felt like an axe-murderer in Sunday School, as the police haul off the wrong man.

A few days later, they played Charades. This was a cinch. He knew his strengths. When it came his turn, he strode to the front and consulted his title. Easy pickings. This could become a world's record. He cranked his arm for *Movie*.

“Movie!” his teammates shouted.

He made the sign for *Two Words*.

“Two words!” they yelled.

“Second word!” they caught his signal.

He swished a little, puckered, and put his hands on his hips.

“Girl!” Right. Six seconds.

“First word!” “Two syllables!” “Second Syllable!”

He did a flowering chestnut.

“Tree!” Right. Fifteen seconds.

“Jeez, I’m flying,” he thought.

“First word.” “First syllable.”

He paused a few milli-seconds.

“Rhymes with.” He mocked a football player, kicking the pigskin.

His team guessed everything wrong, and then did guesses off the wrong guesses. Time flew. He was dying right in front of them.

“Time,” Miss Beckwith said, the pain of disillusionment choking her voice. He announced the title, “Country Girl,” and sat down, in the embarrassment of his failure. The guy behind him leaned forward, reeking with admiration.

“Jesus, Nate, I knew what you wanted me to say, but I couldn’t say it, for Christ’s sake.”

“Why not?” he thought. He ran it over in his mind.

“I was trying to get them to say *punt*. Rhymes with *punt*.”

Then it hit him. He had been trying desperately to get his teammates to shout out, in unison, at the top of their lungs, in front of Miss Beckwith, God, and the whole world, the word **CUNT!**

The guys in the back of the room looked at him in awe and wonder. He was in awe and wonder, himself. He walked out of the room, bathed in an electrical storm of innocence and experience. The accident of innocence had granted him the aura of experience.

The guy behind him passed him in the hall, his eyes aglow with new, albeit unfounded, respect. Fate dealt Nate Axene an ace, when he thought for sure it was a joker.

Wimmin

The tough guy that Nate feared the most was George Pettis. George had a mohawk in 10th grade. He read the juicy parts of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the back of the bus on the way to school. He lived in Riverdale, the no-man's land down by the Rock River. He was tough. At least, Nate thought he was tough. He'd never crossed Nate, and Nate hoped he'd never cross George. George was the guy behind Nate in speech class who taunted him for being the teacher's pet, a role Nate didn't aspire to. He aspired to being accepted by the likes of George Pettis.

In swimming class, which everyone had to take, even the swimmers, Nate was king. He developed a pool-side strut. He was at ease and powerful around a swimming pool. Whenever the class played water polo, he rose above the likes of George Pettis and his cronies.

One day, after a satisfying game of water polo, Nate was in the locker room changing for lunch. He was hungry and pleasantly tired. In the door walked Bud Cooper. Nate liked Bud a lot. Bud was easy friends with the hoods in school and also with the *ladies*. Hoods were always popular with the ladies. Bud was also on the swim team, but he wasn't a great swimmer. Because Nate had come from out of nowhere as a jock, he didn't automatically gravitate to the hotshots. In a way, he felt more at ease with the guys on the second and third teams. One time, Bud came up to Nate with a piece of paper in his hand.

"Hey, Nate, want to know what my favorite sport is?"

“Sure, Bud. What’s your favorite sport?” he said, playing along. Bud showed him the paper. On it was written the word **SWIMMING**, in capital letters.

“Yeah. So. That’s nice,” Nate thought. Then Bud took out his pen and crossed out the **S** and the **G**, leaving the word **WIMMIN**. Nate laughed. He thought it was a great joke, and for him, about as far as you could get from the realms of possibility and likelihood. The idea of playing sport with **wimmin** was far-fetched, in his fledgling love life.

Bud had his hand over his mouth as he came into the locker room, on the day in question. Nate was putting on his socks and shoes. Bud looked terrible.

“What’s wrong, Bud?” he asked. Bud pulled his hand back. All his front teeth were gone. It seemed like there was only blood, where there once had been teeth.

“Pettis hit me,” he said, his words muffled.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Nate said. He had never said ‘Jesus H. Christ’ before. He wanted to, but it seemed sacrilegious. He blurted it out, without thinking. The occasion seemed to warrant a little sacrilegiousness.

“My team beat his team. He hit me.” Bud spoke as if each word was a painful struggle, barely audible. Nate found out later, that, on the way back to the gym from a soccer game, Bud and George were walking together, and Bud had said the wrong thing to George. George took one swing and knocked out four top teeth, two bottom teeth, and cut his own knuckles, in the bargain.

A few minutes before, Bud Cooper had perfect teeth, all lined up and white, with no cavities. Bud went into the shower and Nate left. He went down the long hall to the cafeteria. He wasn’t feeling too good. He was

tired, and he hadn't eaten since breakfast. It was a shock to see his friend bloody. In the cafeteria, he was standing in line, holding onto the stainless steel railing, and he felt faint. He looked at his surroundings and gradually everything went white. Everything faded into a blazing whiteness.

He turned around and made his way out of the cafeteria, holding onto the railing and knocking arms loose as he went. He could only make out shapes, in faint pastel hues in the white and bright yellow. He got through the door and headed across the hall to the far wall on automatic pilot. Classmates looked at him screwy.

"Hey, Nate, what's going on?"

"Jesus, what happened to you?"

"What's wrong? You look awful." He didn't say anything. He was headed for the nurse's office, around the corner and down the hall. He turned the corner and made for the doorway, across the throng of lunchtime loungers.

"Damn, Nate, you look like you seen a ghost," someone said. He was white as a sheet. He got in the nurse's office, and the nurse told him to sit down and put his head between his legs, she was busy. After a while, he felt better and sat up a little, with his elbows on his knees. He looked into the other room, and there was George, looking really pissed. He could imagine them pulling Bud's teeth out of George's knuckles with a pair of pliers. Nate sat there and got his bearings.

It reminded him of the time he and Alan Akers rode their bikes out to the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Works, north of town in McCook, one Saturday afternoon, when he was ten. They had a great time taking bottles out of the bin behind the plant and throwing them against the brick wall, until one of the bottles shattered, and a piece flew back and cut Nathan on the wrist.

The cut really bled, not like a scratch or a nothing little cut, but a real cut that really bled.

Alan pulled out his brand-new, unused handkerchief, and they wrapped it around Nathan's wrist. He thought that was a true act of friendship, even though Alan hated to carry a dumb old handkerchief that his mother made him keep in his back pocket.

They rode their bikes the eight or nine blocks back home. Alan veered off into his driveway, and Nate rode home. By the time he got to his front door, he knew he had something that would draw genuine sympathy. As he pulled the front screen-door open, he started to whimper a little. He and Alan had been laughing all the way back, but now it was time for a different mood to go into effect. As he walked into the front room, he spied his Mom and his brother Mickey standing at the kitchen sink.

"Mom. . . Mom . . ." he said, with just the right degree of hurt in his voice. "I cut myself. . . it's pretty bad." By the time he got to the sink, his Mother turned away from Mickey, for a second, to see what was up with Nate. He pulled the handkerchief, already crimson with dried blood, off his wrist.

"I'll see to that in a minute," his Mother said, curtly. Then he saw what was going on. Mike had his right arm in the sink, and there was a six-inch gash in it, and blood was everywhere. It looked like a ditch, compared to the pin-prick on Nate's arm.

On top of that, Mickey got to go to the hospital, stay overnight, have stitches taken, and the next day was Sunday, and they always served fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy on Sunday at the hospital. What a lucky dog Mickey was. And, he got a great scar he could show off for the rest of his life, just by crashing a borrowed bike with no hand-grips.

Nate took another look at George, got up, and slipped out of the nurse's office. He ate lunch alone and let the whole story slide. He really felt sorry for Bud, but George got no sympathy. However, both of them were heroes, wounded in action, in the battle for manhood. It was a hell of an experience to have a white-out, but it was nothing, compared to Bud and George's fist fight, even if it was a one-blow fight. Never again, would he believe the barroom fights in movies, where guys hit each other a hundred times and then ride off into the sunset like nothing happened.

"Jesus H. Christ," he thought, "One punch."

"How come I never get any stitches?" he asked himself. "Just lucky, I guess." He'd never had a broken bone, a chipped tooth, or a real scar, except the little one on his wrist and the one under his hair that he got when he did a jackknife in the pool and remembered, half-way down, that he was diving into the shallow end. Right after that episode, all he did was swim the fastest fifty in school history.

He wanted to be tough, and all he was was good. What a drag.

Seeing in the Dark

Swimming practice was mostly devoted to laps, and laps meant swimming back and forth in a twenty-five yard pool from end to end, for as much as a mile a day. Nate paid attention to technique, but he paid more attention to avoiding other swimmers, passing the other way, in the same narrow lane. There were only four lanes available for twenty to thirty swimmers, and, occasionally, divers appeared out of the sky in the deep end.

One day, one of the divers, Mark Mix, hit a swimmer, and the swimmer kept going, and Mixie went straight to the bottom. Luckily, Coach Bennett noticed his absence and pulled him out before he drowned.

But, usually, day after day, it was a time of uninterrupted mindlessness. The teenage body, tuned and engaged to its maximum output, operates on its own, so well, that for many teenagers, their bodies make decisions for them beyond their wildest dreams, with remarkable skill and without any guidance at all. When your body seems to make better decisions than you do, you are tempted to let it make ALL your decisions for you. This is the near divinity of the physical.

At any rate, Nate, without any effort on his part, discovered meditation. He didn't call it that. He didn't call it anything. It occurred. During endlessly repeated laps, during physical effort that was becoming second nature, he watched his thoughts separate from his body, and it was very satisfying. In a state of unthinking that he might call spiritual, later on, he watched his mind play out images free from any function, like dreaming while he was

awake, like watching dreams and knowing they are dreams, at the same time.

His body was swimming. His mind became the water in which his body was only a small part, all while he enjoyed the occasion. It all occurred without Nate ever putting any description to it. It was just true. He wasn't trying to meditate, so he didn't care what it was called. He was just doing laps.

One night, at home in bed, happy, exhausted, and satisfied from swimming and school and making out with his girlfriend, Valerie, he became aware of something. The exhaustion in his body and mind freed him. It's almost impossible for anyone to contemplate the essence of his own being when he's hungry, frightened, or caught up in desires. Nate's hunger, fear and desire had been taken care of with no thought on his part. He wasn't hungry, he didn't have any real fears and his desires had been fulfilled before he thought he *had* desires.

One night, lying in bed, about to sleep, he looked at his own mind. No one told him to do it. He didn't do it because he wondered about it. He just did it. He was on the edge of dreamless sleep, and it occurred. In the dark, in the moment of going to sleep, he looked at the reality of his own existence. Well, he didn't *look* at anything. It's more like he looked at *nothing*. But he *looked*. It had been a habit of his, going to sleep, to look into the darkness of the space in his eyes, in his thoughts. It was very satisfying and, oddly, it felt like home.

It occurred to him that who he was, was the only absolute reality he would ever know. It was the only reality there was. And in the stillness, darkness, emptiness, nothingness, it was *who* he was. He didn't exactly think that.

In the thought that tried to explain it, he thought, "I'm God." And the next thought was, "That can't be right." Either *everyone* thought the same thing, or he was crazy to be the only one to think it. But he didn't *feel* crazy. The more he *thought* about it, the more disturbing it felt, and the more trapped he felt in his mind. But he only felt trapped in it, when he thought about it. The reality of it was wonderful. It was shocking, wonderful, and scary.

Very strange. He didn't mention it to anyone. His mother would have told him to ask Jesus for forgiveness, and his father would have gotten up from the table and made a joke, "What kind of funny book are you reading now?" Like that. At the Methodist Church, they never said anything on the subject, and in school, they prepared you for getting a *good* job or getting into a *good* college.

It happened. More than once. Always the same. Each time, in his own mind, he experienced an incredible sense of being at home in the emptiness of the universe in his own awareness, not as a personal achievement but almost like a sudden shock of waking up, right there. In his personal thoughts, right *outside* the center of the awareness, it seemed frightening, and he had no reference point in the world to tell him what it meant.

Years later, when someone said, "So you think you're the center of the universe?" he would say, "Sure. And so are you, and so is everyone else." It seemed so obvious. He wondered over the years why everyone didn't get it, or he thought they did get it, and they just weren't talking about it.

Oh, well. He went to sleep. Dreamless sleep. Like everybody does every night. Like going where there's no body and no mind. Every night. Easy as pie. And then he had dreams, so real, in which he was the actor, the director, the writer, and the audience of one, all within the space that felt

like home. Then, he'd get up in the morning, take a shower, brush his teeth, comb his hair, get dressed, eat breakfast, act in a congenial manner toward his parents and brothers, and go off to school.

He never thought about his moment of universal consciousness. Thinking about it didn't seem to be of any use whatsoever. It was like suddenly being absolutely peaceful in the middle of some event, like watching a basketball game or driving down a street. Ordinary reality had nothing to do with it, and what kind of reality is THAT, when everything else becomes meaningless precisely when life is perfect?

Nate couldn't explain what happened. The only thing his mind could come up with was that it was crazy and possibly evil to think his awareness was the only awareness in the world. That meant he was God, and he knew he was just a guy. Seventeen years old. Just a guy going to high school. But all those thoughts came apart from the thing that happened when he looked at his mind when it wasn't thinking stuff.

Nate *thought* about himself and his family, about girls and swimming, about school, about people in general, but all of a sudden, without trying to, he stopped thinking *about* anything, and looked at where there were no thoughts at all, like nothing and everything at the same time.

If a kid wakes up with the realization he is nothing and everything at the same time, there's not much he can say about it, especially if it's suddenly morning, again, and he hears his mother calling and his brothers shoving each other around in the next room. Besides, he *likes* what's going on in his life. Life is life. There's no reason to dwell on it.

He couldn't think about it, so he forgot about it. For a while.

The Kind of Night

He was on the second floor bathroom of his parents' house. It had always been his parents' house, never his. He thought it was his, because he never knew any different feeling. It was comfortable and familiar. As the oldest, he had his own bedroom, while his two younger brothers shared a room. But, if it had been his home, he would have felt different about it. He wasn't sure what the feeling of truly being at home was like. Every once in a while he got a glimpse of that feeling in someone else's house. He felt it in Alan Aker's house.

Mrs. Akers was like *Mom* in a story. When they were in grade school, Nate played with Alan, and whenever he went to the Akers' house, Mrs. Akers would welcome him like a prodigal son. She'd grin, hug him, and say, "Git in here, little man." She made the best buttermilk pancakes he'd ever eaten. In 4th Grade, and in 5th and 6th, he stopped at Alan's on the way to school, and sometimes he'd have a second breakfast.

That was a long time ago. Now he was about to graduate from high school. It was the night of the Big Dance. He was fulfilling a dream. Ever since he walked into Mr. Kravitz's homeroom in 8th Grade, at John Deere Junior High, fresh from Calvin Coolidge Junior High on the east side, and only a year out of Nebraska, he had been crazy about Jenny Tolefson.

Sitting in Frank Frye's 9th Grade Civics class, he saw Jenny walk by the open door, and the sight of her petite, curvy legs convinced him she was his ideal. But Jenny ran with the in-crowd, and he couldn't get close. Jenny

liked him. When a girl you're crazy about *likes* you, it's a curse. "I like you, Nate, but . . ." The *but* is huge, and there's no way around it.

Magically, at the end of his Senior year, he was ushered into the inner sanctum of popularity. He was named All-American and Captain of the Swimming Team, and he was co-chairman of the Senior Variety Show. He had credentials. He found himself sitting in the backseat of the center car at the A&W Drive-In. It was heady stuff, sitting and laughing with the kids who were shoo-ins for the homecoming court, who were on the homecoming court almost by default, year after year.

So, Nate did what any star-struck adolescent would do. He dumped his girlfriend, Valerie, a sweet, shy, loyal, and genuine girl, and asked Jenny to the Graduation Dance. Jenny was dating a guy in college, and he told Jenny that he'd be damned if he'd go to a stupid high school dance, so Jenny said yes to Nate, because she liked him.

He stared at the mirror. There were only a couple of trouble spots. He got out the Clearasil and blended it over two possible pimples. He was getting better looking. When he was a Sophomore, Jenny's mother told his mother, "Nate's getting better looking all the times." That felt like a backhanded compliment. How bad had he been, before? Pretty bad, he thought. He had a big nose, he thought, and thin hair, fat lips, and no eyebrows. But it got better. The pimples came and went. The worst was walking into the john, after being in school for a couple of hours, and seeing last night's Clearasil still caked on his face, like a dried river bed.

He was getting ready for a big night. As he stood there, adjusting his tie, his father appeared in the doorway. The old man looked serious.

"Hi, Dad, what's up?" Nate said. His father shifted his large frame in the doorway, like he was about to announce that the family car had been stolen, or it had blown up, or it had given birth to a lawnmower.

"Nate, this is a big night for you, and I want you to have a good time, but there's something I want to say." He paused. He was having a rough time saying what he wanted to say. Nate shifted his own posture. He put the hairbrush down and turned to face his father, a man who had never looked or talked like that, before. Nate's face got serious, just like his father's.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Son, I want you . . . to realize . . . that this . . . is the kind of night . . . you may be tempted . . . to do something . . . you'll regret . . . for the rest of your life."

At that moment, Nate couldn't have swallowed a single drop of water. His throat was tight and dry. He stared. He was afraid for a minute. Then he began to wonder. What? What could he possibly do that he would regret for the rest of his life? Wow! What could it be?

"That's all. That's all I want to say," his father said and turned. "But you go and have a good time with your friends." He went off toward the stairs.

"Sure, Dad, I will" he paused, and then he said, "I mean I won't." The last words were more to himself, spoken almost in a whisper. He was at a loss. He ran through the possibilities. What could he do? He didn't drink. He didn't smoke cigarettes. He had never gone all the way. What could his dad be talking about? He couldn't come up with a reasonable possibility.

He had a good time at the dance. The evening flew. Dancing with Jenny, saying *Hi* to everyone, drinking punch, listening to the band, cracking jokes with some of the guys, having their pictures taken by the photographer in front of the phony arbor, holding the door for Jenny, holding the chair for Judy, he thought, "What a great night!"

It was a little upsetting that a couple of Valerie's friends were annoyed with him, but he felt that life must go on. A guy has to do what a guy has to do. He didn't like it that he felt a twinge of guilt, but he wasn't ready to get old and settle down, and life is for the young.

When the dance was over, they went out to the parking lot and got in his dad's car. Every block to Jenny's house was another plateau of ecstasy. Like a real gentleman, he walked her to her front door, and they kissed. It was a terrifically *nice* kiss.

"Thanks, Nate, I had a really nice time."

"So did I."

There was a strange moment. Something was supposed to happen, fireworks, earthquake, tidal wave, something.

"Well, I guess I'll see you in school, Monday," she said.

"Yeah. See you in school," he replied, lamely, not sure what else to say or do.

"See you in school," she said, not flatly but not lively, either.

"Bye." He looked at her, hopefully.

"Bye." They looked at each other.

"Goodnight," he said, losing faith.

"Goodnight," she said, regaining her resolve, "Thanks again, Nate."

"Thank you, Jenny."

"See you."

"See you later."

"Bye."

"Bye."

By then, he was climbing into the car, his '57 Chevy wagon, a hand-me-down car from the old man's business, a red car with white stripes, the

business colors. Something was not right. Something was wrong. Halfway through Morgan Park, six parks from Jenny's house, six blocks from his house, it hit him.

"Tonight is the kind of night you may be tempted to do something you will regret for the rest of your life."

"Shit," he said, out-loud. He had done absolutely nothing he would regret for the rest of his life.

"Shit." He wheeled the wagon around and high-tailed it back to Jenny's. He knocked on the door. She appeared in a robe, over her merry widow.

"Nate?!!"

"Hi. Can I come in?"

"Oh . . . well . . . OK."

They sat on the swing couch, on the screened porch, and he kissed and hugged Jenny for half an hour. He even slipped his hand around the waist of her merry widow. If anybody ever needed a girdle, it wasn't Jenny Tolefson. Jenny was totally, partially, overwhelmed. He was acting very strange. This guy, who she liked, was being sexy, and while it felt good, it didn't fit her plans.

Her boyfriend was a very special person in her life. He drove a Corvette, he was in college, and she was probably going to marry him. It was after midnight, and Jenny didn't know what to do.

"Nate, I have to go in and go to bed. I've got to go to church in the morning."

"Yeah, me, too," he said, although, he thought, why go to church, when you're already in heaven.

On the way home, he felt incredible. He still had not done anything he would regret, but at least he did *something*. He turned the corner onto his

street, and something happened. He slowed the car to a crawl. He got the idea that Jesus Christ himself was going to be standing on the front porch of his parents' house. He knew it. Jesus Christ, surrounded by a warm glow of light, tall and handsome, in flowing white robes, a beard and long hair, was definitely going to be standing on the front porch, when he pulled up to the house.

He strained to see the brilliant aura. But when the house came into view, Jesus wasn't standing there. He wasn't been afraid. He had been looking forward to it. What a moment. What an opportunity. He admired Jesus, even if the people who talked about him all the time, acted like jerks.

When he got in bed, next to the glowing, light-absorbant, plastic cross he kept on the bedstand, next to the lamp he called *Grace*, because he wasted the light of Grace to shine upon him, he was aglow.

"What a life," he thought. He masturbated with new energy. His dick got big. It was almost always hard. It was getting to be a real nuisance. After he came, in great spurts, his dick lay down and rested for a while.

He got up and took the Kleenex over to the attic door, opened it, and tossed the wad onto the rafters. There was a flurry of Kleenex, a veritable bank of white, on the rafters. Nate figured that, by tossing the evidence in the attic crawl space, no one would ever know how much he jerked off. Years later, he wondered what the next owners thought, if and when they discovered his secret depository. It was a new kind of insulation, perhaps. He fell asleep, at peace with himself and his destiny, whatever that might be.

The Slap

On Monday morning, the hallways were crowded. Friday would be the last day of school, and the last week didn't count on anybody's schedule. It was time to say, *Stay as sweet as you are*, and *See you in the Fall*, and *Good Luck at State*, and other heartfelt banalities. It was time to practice sincerity. College life and the workday world lay ahead and loomed large. Adulthood. Some kids graduated high school and turned forty, taking on the responsibilities and attitudes of their parents. Some kids froze in time, not knowing how to live any differently, not wanting to. "These are the best days of our lives," may thought, and committed silent suicide, locking their lives forever in a prison of pre-orgasmic nostalgia, the safe life that comes before the unsafe life.

Nate was thrilled to be done with high school. College was the land of Ali Baba, the Emerald City, the next level, a new place to become a new person. High school had fulfilled his fondest wishes, and to be in college was to achieve maturity, simply by crossing the street to the other side.

Nate strode down the halls, grinning, waving at his friends and acquaintances, a distinction of difference that meant he had spend a bit more time with some than with others. He was *friends* with hundreds of the thousand or so of his schoolmates. He did hang out with a bunch of guys, but he hung out with other bunches of guys, and he even hung out with a bunch of girls. Those girls had spurned him, recently, because, along with his newfound popularity, he had become sexually aggressive toward more girls than one. The girls' gang was the smart bunch, the ones with quiet

energy, high IQ's, and large breasts. He had turned his attention to the sexual, and they reacted by calling him Natalie.

The one girl he neglected was Valerie, his girlfriend of two years. They had taught each other all they had ever learned about sex, and they had both been teachable. The limit was intercourse. Valerie's sister had to get married, because of a pregnancy, so Nate was afraid of it, too. It was the 50's, a time of well-defined social rules. They seemed etched in stone. Girls who had intercourse were *easy*. Good girls, who got pregnant, were married by the guy who got them pregnant. Those were the rules. To think otherwise was unheard of. It happened, but you didn't hear of it.

Valerie and Nate had spent, on average, four hours a day for two years heavily petting each other, to the point of raw numbness, the point where every single nerve ending on the reachable body had been honed to mindless sensitivity. Nate had driven home, every night for a year, with wet pants. He could not bring himself to buy a rubber or a box of Kleenex. It felt too calculating.

Every night, they would sit in his Chevy wagon, in back of Valerie's house, on the cement slab driveway, twenty feet from her parents' bedroom window, and make out, until their lips were numb and swollen, until the car windows were completely fogged, until he had mapped, with his long fingers, every centimeter of her virginity, until they had lost all sense of time, space, place, function, duty, or responsibility, until her hand and his dick and his hand and her pussy had danced so long and so intimately that names were lost. Who led and who followed was lost, what was his and what was hers was lost, and finally, his proud mansion of jism erupted at the chimney and shook to the foundation, and a deep moan left his body like a soul ascending to body-busted heaven.

And then he stuck his sopping wet equipment back in his Hanes briefs and drove home several inches off the pavement. But they never screwed. If he didn't see Valerie for a couple of days, because of a swimming trip, he need only roll over on top of her, fully clothed, and he'd shoot his wad. He was completely satisfied. There was fear, but if he never crossed the danger line, he need never taste the fear of the unknown.

Screwing girls was a topic of speculation among his peers. It was a hypothetical reality. In their frustrated imaginations, there was such a thing as screwing. Screwing is a funny concept. It has nothing to do with reality. The mere use of the word belies the lack of experience. Nate believed that if he screwed Valerie, somehow, magically, his Uncle Lewis would hear about it, and Nate would be condemned by the family godhead. Lewis, in the meantime, was chasing starlets in Hollywood and couldn't care less about Nate's thwarted consumation. Lewis was his mother's brother. She worshipped him. He looked like Nate's father, and he was enormously successful. Lewis had been kicked out of Illinois Wesleyan for having an affair with his music teacher, but in Nate's immediate household, Lewis was the symbol of unimpeachable authority. Louis was an American god. He was rich.

Nate could see his dick going inside Valerie. He could *feel* his dick going inside Valerie. His dick *spoke* to him in clear language, a simple truth, with knowledge and understanding, from millions of years of genetic experience, *I belong in this pussy, as sure as breath belongs in your lungs, as surely as blood belongs in your veins, as surely as a snake belongs in the Garden.*

Some gigantic, fearsome denial kept Nate's dick from going all the way home. His dick belonged in her pussy, but it didn't get to go there. Nate and Valerie kept themselves so pleurably preoccupied, that the moment of

truth never came. Nate came, and came, and came, and came, but the moment of truth hung around outside the door, like a mystified, but patient, apparition, who never entered.

In the last month of his Senior year, fame and fortune offered its golden breasts to Nathaniel Axene, and he turned away from Valerie Kazner. He found himself dating Susie Early, one of the coveted queens of the inner circle, but kissing her was like kissing the belly of a dead fish. He had been spoiled by Valerie's pulsating warmth. He lost interest in Susie as fast as she had shown it in him.

Then Jenny Tolefson consented to be his date to the Senior Prom. From his lofty aerie in the heady kingdom of popularity, he looked down benignly upon Valerie and their happy, happy bower of semi-requited bliss. He smiled poetically at the memory of their Grecian yearnings. Life had called him to a greater destiny, and although he had drunk deep and long at the well of first sex, often called first love, it was time to move on.

He decided to write a letter of admiration and appreciation to his favorite girl, a kind of kiss and tell, for her eyes only, a review, a synopsis, a conclusion, a summing up. In the letter, he told Valerie some things he thought she should know, that only he could know, and only he could tell. He passed on some information that showed he cared and wished only the best for her future, her remaining year at Moline Senior High School, while he shuffled off to the groves of academe.

He told her, for example, that it would be good for her to purchase some new bras. Her baby-fat had begun to fade, and the breasts he had loved, for nearly two years, were no longer shown off to good advantage by bras whose crumpled cotton cups were apparent beneath her soft, pastel

sweaters. He sighed as he put down the pen and sealed the envelop. He felt that friendship was important for young lovers to share.

When Nate spotted Valerie coming toward him in the crowded hall, he had forgotten the letter he'd sent the previous week, but his beneficence had not faded, and his smile spread warmly across his face, flushed with Springtime and the onset of Summer. Valerie had a peculiar look of determination on her face, and Nate wondered what it might signify, but the hall was thick with kids, and there was little time these days to inquire. As she approached him, strangely, the sea of humanity parted, and by the time she was within reach of him, they stood alone, like Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, in "It's a Wonderful Life," dancing innocently toward the edge of the gaping, indoor pool.

A hint of foreboding cracked the corner of his awareness, as he watched the small hand he had held, the small hand that had held him, begin its arc from behind and below her back. It came around and across, like Apollo's Chariot, like Rocky Marciano's fist. It cut the hallway like a sputnik, like the revenge of the scorned, the rebuke of the denied, the cream pie of humiliation, and landed against his cheek, like the shot heard 'round the world. Her hand sank into the soft, pink flesh of his adolescence and left its mark like the fossil footsteps of Tyrannosaurus Rex.

All of the available world exploded in cheers and applause at Valerie's act of retribution. Somehow, every teenager within the sight and sound of her blow, could identify the justice of that one act.

Nate went on to college. Valerie went on to marriage with the Iowa State Wrestling Champion, and a dollar will get you a donut, that guy never thought about his uncle Lewis, and if he did, it was to thank him for his

encouragement in matters of love, and you can bet, too, that he wasn't a writer of helpful letters or a critic of intimate fashion apparel.

The world needs encouragers and loving and fewer critics and a lot less fear. In his entire ensuing life, Nate never thought ill of Valerie, and only after a time, did he begin to think well of himself. That's the irony. If only he'd thought as well of himself as he thought of her, he'd have begun to recognize the patient but mystified apparition that waited outside the door of his heart, the spirit of love, that guides, protects, and encourages little wienies, and grown men, and others, to stand up and claim their inheritance in this peculiar, and wondrous universe.

The Owl and the Monkey

Nate sat down at a table in The Owl and the Monkey Cafe. He could feel the life around him, like the undersea world of Jacques Cousteau, like he had seen at Hanauma Bay, outside Honolulu. Well, not like he *had* seen, but like he *would* see, in a few years, but what's the difference between past and future? Eventually, it's all the same. All futures become past, and all past becomes its own future. We predict ourselves by the stories we tell of our past. Even if the variety of experience is limited, there are so many versions available, that whatever we choose to tell, however we choose to tell it, becomes the pattern we live by.

Nate took a chair at a small table by the wall and leaned back, with his back against the wall. It was *cafe to the left of him, cafe to the right of him, cafe in front of him*. And the past behind him, and the past in front of him, and the future all around.

It wasn't that he was afraid of people. It wasn't that he didn't like people. Doc Robbins missed the boat on that one. People were his fascination. His own life, as prime example, as available resource, as demonstration model, was also fascinating. Sometimes, it was as if he had been dropped whole into a life form that was alien, and it was his task to figure it out, to learn it, to get used to it, to train it and shape it, to experience it, to take it on a long test drive, and to report back to some, as yet undeclared, headquarters, what it's like to be a human being.

Nate's *earthshape* had picked up a few scrapes and a dented heat-shield, but worst of all, he was beginning to feel like the very thing he was

sent to study. He was beginning to feel human, and it was disturbing. What if he wasn't a highly tuned, but inexperienced, extraterrestrial, but only an ordinary mortal, with some bad advice. In either case, he was far too separate from his fellows. There was a great deal to learn about them, from them, as one of them.

"One of *us*," he thought.

It was after two o'clock, on a typical San Francisco afternoon, gone sunny, as the West light poured into the cafe. There were a couple of dozen patrons, and at least half were female. The coffee was good and cheap, the table was wooden, and the chair was comfortable. The sounds were light and pleasant, of talking, cups clinking against saucers, the espresso machine hissing, the door opening to the tinkle of a small bell. Nate was glad he had taken the Doc's advice, but he had yet to say hello to anyone. It was as if his father had said, "Son, today is the kind of day you will be thankful for, for the rest of your life."

It wasn't that he was afraid of people. It was more that he was at a loss. It was as if everyone else knew a simple thing, like walking, and he could only stare at his flagellating limbs, and wonder. Of course, he knew how to walk. That was easy. His legs were second nature, especially since he'd become an athlete. And he was articulate, but it was like being a brilliant composer, who couldn't play the piano. And it wasn't the piano of his words he couldn't play, it was the piano of his heart.

Great music would occur to him, but when he sat down to play, it was like he had boxing gloves on, like a hippopotamus at the Steinway. And saying hello was merely hitting middle C. It wasn't Van Cliburn, but it was a start. And a journey of a thousand notes begins with one little middle C.

"Plink," he said.

“May I share your table?”

The cafe had filled up, and suddenly he was not alone.

“Sure,” he said, “have a seat.”

And the young woman sat down, opened up a book, and began to read. And the world did not collapse, or explode.

“I see you’re reading a book,” Nate said, “I’ve read several books myself, some of them from cover to cover, including all the pages inbetween. Oh, I skipped a few words, here and there, but nothing important. Probably just filler words, you know, ands, buts, thes, simple connectors we all know and don’t really need to read, I mean, for any greater understanding of the work.”

No, he didn’t say that, but he thought it. He sat, while his heart pounded, and he thought about the situation. He wasn’t particularly attracted to the woman, and the book she was reading, Love Story, seemed more interesting as phenomenon than as literature. On the other hand, he had been handed the very present dilemma he had dreaded and desired the most. He needed to tip the balance of dread over desire.

He needed some picture to ground himself. He turned and looked out the window of the cafe. He saw a boy on a bicycle go flying by.

We Shall Overcome

When Nate was a Junior in college, toward the end of the year, one fine, warm, Spring day, he got the idea it would be fun to ride a bicycle home for the weekend. It was 120 miles from Grinnell, Iowa, to Moline, Illinois, and he'd never ridden a bike that far, or anywhere close to that far, ever before.

Boys will be boys. He started talking about it on Friday, and by that night, he'd talked himself too far into it to back out. Saturday morning, he borrowed Mike Snyder's balloon-tire Schwinn one-speed and started out. It was a beautiful day, it was warm, he was young and strong, and the bike was sturdy. There wasn't much to it, but to keep pedaling. Nate figured he'd be home by dark, twenty miles an hour, for six hours, give or take a couple of hours.

He forgot that Iowa is hilly. It looks flat from the Interstate, and from the air, and everybody thinks it's flat, but it isn't. Ten miles outside of Grinnell, he felt good. He could feel the strain on his legs, but what the hell. He rode down Route 6, because, since the Interstate had been built, it was more fun. It had become backroad America, and the traffic was almost entirely local. He pumped along, with his shirt off, soaking up the rays. It was still cool in the shade, but the sun felt good. The fields were freshly plowed, and the smells were rich and pungent.

Some of his fellow Grinnellians were from New York and Chicago, and they mocked the farmers, but Nate had always loved the earth, in some way he didn't understand, and he admired the people who worked the earth. But the ride was turning out to be more than he imagined. He was in as

good shape as he thought. By the time he got to the Amana Colonies, he was pushing the wall. He'd gone 45 miles. It was three o'clock. He had covered about nine miles an hour, not twenty, like he imagined. He was tired and thirsty. He rolled up to the door of a small, roadside grocery store and bought himself a Pepsi. He drank it and bought another. Drank that and bought another. And another and another. He drank five Pepsi's, in rapid succession, like they were one great big glass of water. It was a pattern that would soon enough become all too familiar in his life.

He got back on the bike and rode two hundred yards along the shoulder of the two-lane blacktop. Suddenly, his right leg cramped up. He was used to cramps. He didn't mind. When he was a swimmer in high school, he'd gotten cramps at night, lying in front of the TV, and he almost came to enjoy them. His legs would go into powerful, involuntary spasms, and it was an incredible feeling, almost painful, but not quite, almost pleasurable, but not quite. So, when one leg cramped up, that was OK, but the left leg copied the right. Now, both legs were cramping badly, and becoming totally useless.

Nate sat on his bike, for a moment, motionless, like a snapshot of "Nate's Bike Trip." Then he fell. He toppled to the right. The whole operation fell, in slow motion, into a ditch. It was like a statue toppling off its pedestal. Crash. He lay in the soft, wet grass, in the ditch, and began laughing. He forced his legs to extend, and gradually, the cramps were alleviated. He was delirious with exhaustion.

Slowly, he got up and out of the ditch. He walked the bike a few hundred yards, thinking how wonderfully foolish he had just felt. He was able to get back on the bike and pedal off toward Iowa City, fifteen miles away. He knew a couple of guys at the University of Iowa, and he could

stay in one of the dorms or at a frat house, if he was too tired to go on, the sixty miles to Moline. If he was tired? What a joke.

Five miles down the road, he came upon a cemetery. He decided to take a rest. He walked into the small, simple, country graveyard, full of dead Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians. He climbed on top of one headstone, at the highest part of the hillside. He began to sing, exhorting the assembled to join him in his anthem of struggle and triumph.

We shall, we shall, we shall over come.

We shall OVERCOME. SOME DAY- AY- AY- AY.

Then he tried "Amazing Grace", by far his favorite spiritual. The audience showed absolutely no sign of disapproval. Finally, he felt foolish and got down. Barely foolish. He was exhausted and exhilarated at the same time.

The last ten miles into Iowa City were beyond reality. The bicycle continued to move, his legs continued to pump, but he was functioning in some realm beyond reason. By the time he got onto the campus of the U, it was late in the afternoon. He called Brian Johnson, and spent the night in the Frosh dorm at Brian's fraternity. He called his father on the phone, and the next morning his father drove out to Iowa City and picked him up. His father could be counted on for such things. It was strange. It was almost automatic to rely on his old man at such times. In other matters, he would never even think to ask.

When Nate was in 9th Grade, he went to a dance at the Sky-High Room of the LeClaire Hotel. It was the highest spot in the Quad-Cities, and you could see the entire Mississippi River Valley from its 360 degrees of 15th floor windows. The band at the dance, was two brothers from Nashville, who were making a name for themselves, called the Everly Brothers. Nate

got the idea it was supposed to be a Bermuda shorts dance. Somebody had told him it was. Bermuda shorts were all the rage at the time. The height of fashion was dress Bermuda shorts, black, with black knee-high socks, so that's what Nate wore.

His dad dropped him off at the front door of the LeClaire. He went into the lobby and onto the elevator. No one else was wearing Bermuda shorts. No one else was wearing shorts of any kind. When he got off the elevator at the 15th floor, he knew it had been a mistake. No one within sight was wearing Bermuda shorts. He could see onto the dance floor. No one. Only Nate. He had been tricked, again. Bamboozled by some dumb clod. He felt like he was in a naked dream, walking onto the dance floor at the Waldorf Astoria in his birthday suit.

He made a fast 180 and got back on the elevator. He got out in the lobby and went straight to a phone booth, the big wooden kind you could live in, if you got out once in a while for exercise. He called his dad, and his dad brought him a pair of long pants. He went back to the dance and had a good time. He thought the singers were great, and he decided Bermuda shorts belonged in Bermuda. The Everly Brothers weren't wearing them, and they seemed to be doing just fine in their lives.

His father was a strange guy. The same guy who convinced him his bicycle tire was only flat on the bottom, was also the guy who would come and get him if he got himself stranded by some foolishness. And his dad didn't mock him at those times. It was as if they shared a penchant for embarrassing situations. His dad told him a couple of stories about embarrassing situations in his own life.

He told Nate how he'd had a motorcycle when he was 17, in Oklahoma. He heard there was a new girl in town, so he decided to take a ride by her

house and check her out. He spotted her out in the yard by her house, and he was looking so intently, he drove his motorcycle smack into the rear end of a parked car. He made quite an impression on the parked car.

He told Nate how he once tried to leapfrog over a fire hydrant, couldn't get his hands out from between his legs, and smashed his face into the sidewalk. It was becoming a family tradition to walk through life with egg on your face. There's no accounting for the ways that sons continue the primogeniture. If there's no clear passing of the conch, no inheritance of ritual, no office to be taught, the child will create a hodgepodge of character flaws and imagined virtues to assume into the next generation.

He could sit like his father, legs planted, elbows planted, chin in his fist, and clear his throat, raise his eyebrows, and point with a big scepter of a finger. That would have to do, until something more noble came along, but it felt good to tell the same kind of joke and hold the steering wheel the same way, even if it was largely unconscious and apparently meaningless. What is meaning anyway, if it's not a ritual of shared imagination? Meaning is like a habit. We adopt habits that give meaning to our lives. Then we adopt lives that give meaning to our habits.

Nate's father never said, *Do this*, or *Do that*. Nate would have loved it if he had, but Nate was smart enough to learn from his father, even if his father wasn't much of a teacher. Nate loved his father dearly and simply. Sometimes, it seemed as if Nate was doing the loving for both of them, but that's the nature of love. It seeks to fill the space available, no matter how large, or how small. Nate loved his father, and his father loved him, even if it was only apparent in glimpses, or transcribed into corny jokes and angry put-downs.

I buy you books, I send you to school, I teach you all I know, and you still don't know anything. Send a boy to do a man's job. What a numbskull.

“If you want a job done right, you gotta do it yourself,” he’d say, and yank the screwdriver, lawnmower, or paint brush out of Nate’s hand. Humiliation is taught by example and by attitude. After a few years, Nate became smarter, happier, and a better athlete than his father. His father stopped the put-downs, but nothing else took their place.

He kept showing up at the oddest times, like a soccer game, or a swim meet, at little colleges in Wisconsin and Iowa, but he wouldn’t say anything, even though Nate almost always won. He’d just show up, and then he’d be gone again, back home in his Chevy wagon. He was a mystery, wrapped in an enigma, driving a Chevrolet.

Besoir Les Levres

College was a great opportunity to gain some wisdom from the company of older, wiser, more experienced young men. It was a crucible of influence, between equals, and between people from widely differing backgrounds. Nate was a glutton for learning, not so much in the classroom as in the many rooms of life. He was open to the possibilities, in whatever form they took, wherever they might occur.

Nate and ten of his classmates crowded into the small tent. It was a small tent by circus standards, but it was a special tent. It was the tent where the stripper did her number. It was the carnival, and it came to town every year. Many of the uninitiated freshmen went to see the strip show. Word got around that the carnival was in town, and on the warm nights of May, lit by carnival lights and awash in a beery glow, it was intoxicating.

Nate was eager to see something filthy, something magical, something unheard of, something unbelievable. The feats of the stripper were legendary. She could smoke a cigarette with her vagina. The fact that she *would* do such a thing, was as unbelievable to Nate, as the idea that she *could* do it.

Being with a gang made him feel safer. They couldn't all get arrested, and if they all did get arrested, they'd all go to jail together. The grass floor of the tent was worn to a pulp by the hoards of half-crazed boys who'd been in before Nate's group. The tiny tent was lit by a string of X-mas lights. Definitely not Christmas lights. A rope separated the audience area

from the stage area. The stage area was a steamer trunk and a folding chair.

Some of the guys were passing and chugging beers. The joking had diminished in the presence of the subject matter. It was easy to joke about a stripper's tent, when you weren't standing in it. But when you were, it took on the aura of pornographic sanctity. Here were a dozen boys, standing facing a trunk and a folding chair on the worn-out grass in a greasy khaki tent outside the city limits of a small town in Iowa, waiting for a woman of indeterminate origin and unspeakable experience to enter and show them her privates.

Music was coming from a record player on the other side of the flap door that concealed the woman. It was the music of cheap bars and strip joints. Nate thought, "God, I love this kind of music." It was, more often than not, Black music. He had only just begun to hear Black music, as it was different from rock and roll, as it was different from the Negro music of Nat King Cole or Brook Benton.

One day, in the first month of college, he had wandered across the hall in the dorm to say hi to the guys. Each suite of rooms had three guys in it, and guys were always floating around from one room to another.

Phil Sharron lived across the hall, and he was from Memphis. There was music coming from his small room in the triplex across the hall. It was different from anything Nate had heard before. It was pure. It was clear, strong, powerful, and sweet, like beauty is sweet. It was beautiful, like truth is beautiful. Among others, it was Huddie Ledbetter, also called Leadbelly, singing "Good night, Irene" his twelve-string guitar filling up every available space with the slow, rich cadence of its presence. Nate was drawn like a moth to a flame. It touched some part of him that he didn't know existed.

He had never thought about Black people as having any experience even remotely similar to his own. They were beyond his whiteness like lions and tigers are beyond house cats. Yet, inside every little kitty is a history of tigers and lions. Inside Nate was the human history of the planet, mostly unknown, and seemingly inaccessible, to him.

He listened to Leadbelly, and he was hooked by a feeling like memory. His blood said, *I know this music*, and his heart started to pump, in a familiar rhythm that startled Nate and thrilled him. Phil Sharron had a steamer trunk full of record albums. Not one of them was by a White singer. He had only been able to bring half of his collection. He had collected the records, called race records, from store-front record shops on the Black side of Memphis.

Now, Nate was standing in front of another trunk full of surprises. He was standing next to Jimmy Jensen, his roommate, from Lubbock, Texas, as white a boy as ever breached the womb of woman. He and Jimmy had created *The Students for War* together. In those years, *The Students for Peace* was a popular slogan. Nate and Jimmy were eighteen years old. Their perception of world tensions rarely extended beyond the myopic.

They figured a great joke would be to create *The Students for War*. So they did. They designed lapel buttons, which they painted black and then painted tiny red mushroom clouds on them. The joke was hilarious, the night they made it up, and pretty funny, the next day, when they sold the buttons outside the dining hall at lunch, and embarrassing, as Nate began to realize he was making fun of people who were getting the shit kicked out of them for saying something important.

Nate thought Jimmy was funny and half-crazy. He wanted to become a pilot. His dad was in the Air Force, and Jimmy had been born on an airbase

in Germany. He was in AFROTC with Nate, and Jimmy was the worst marcher in the cadet corps. He did a little bob and weave as he tried to march in a crisp and erect manner. He looked like one of those big balloons you punch, and it sways, and pops back up, and bounces off your nose.

Jimmy walked to breakfast, across the Quadrangle, in the dead of Winter, in shorts, a T-shirt, and bare feet, because, he said, "It's mind over matter," but he couldn't mind-over-matter his marching, or his squawky voice, or getting girls to go out with him. One girl told him, "I won't go out with you, because you're too obnoxious."

Jimmy was the kind of army brat who was going to get his wings, one way or another, no matter what it took, and he was exactly the right guy to instigate a little reconnoitering with a stripper. Nate could keep his trap shut and follow along and cop a thrill, himself. Jimmy could be counted on to do the upfront bullshit, to run interference and be the focus of attention. It seemed like a nice arrangement to have an obnoxious kid around to do the dirty work and take the heat.

Finally, the curtain parted and out came the stripper. Forty years old, with bad teeth, too much makeup smeared all over, not pretty, not a playmate, not even familiar as a female type, but female. And naked. She shed her flimsy robe immediately, lay it on the folding chair, and climbed up on the trunk. She danced. Well, she moved around, as if her mind was a million miles away, and she was just going through the motions. But they were motions Nate hadn't seen before.

She fingered her nipples and stuck her tongue out. She bent over, this way and that, as if trying to expose her vagina from every possible angle, for the calculated education of the assembled class in Erotic Anatomy. The

boys hooted and hollared, more from the imitation of some mutually imagined male pattern than from any genuine satisfaction.

Then, after a man came around collecting more money for the *pièce de résistance*, the vaunted smoking episode, she lit up. She took a Marlboro from Tim Sorensen and bummed a light from Gordie Taylor. She got back up on the trunk and assumed a contortionist's pose with her nether lips as exposed as a surgeon would lay open an area for incision.

"Besoir les levres que dit jamais," said Jimmy Jensen, reciting his favorite phrase. "Kiss the lips that never speak," he said, rolling each word, savoring them, as if they were the very lips he spoke of, the lips he most desired. The phrase lost all romance for Nate, as he contemplated the spectacle before him.

She took the cigarette from her mouth and placed it between her labia and began puffing. Smoke billowed out from the Marlboro, dangling from her vagina, bouncing with each puff, as if it had a life of its own. The gathered boys raised a shout. This was what they had come to see. Now they could say they'd seen it all. Or at least more of it than they'd seen before.

There was a joke going around. Two women are talking. One says to another, in a secret voice, "Say, Mary, do you smoke after intercourse?" The other thinks for a moment and says, "Gee, I don't know, I never looked." Nate didn't smoke after intercourse. He didn't smoke at all.

He didn't have intercourse, either. He did put his hand on the crotch of CeCe Karns' jeans. She burst into tears and ran back to her dorm. He sat under the tree they had chosen and wished there were a plan, or some clues.

The night after the carnival left town, there was a meeting in the residence hall he lived in. It was rocking with debate over some hotly contested and deeply divided issue. Nate struggled to form a thought, to take a stand. Jimmy Jensen broke into the storm of controversy and demanded to be heard.

“Yes, Jensen, what is it?” said Mike DeGraff, a Senior and the Secretary of the hall. Jimmy stood up.

“I just want to say,” he pronounced in his high Texas drawl, “That I have no opinion on this question.” What an amazing character. His opinion was that he had no opinion. That just about summed up Nate’s conclusions about the opposite sex. He would wait on more information, before he took a stand. Obviously, there was a lot to learn, and it demanded attention, plenty of consideration, and some careful sorting. It was a job that challenged him, and he was up for a challenge.

The four years of College were like a time trial. *Here, Nate. Here’s four years to check it out. No hurry, take your time.* Like an essay test. They give you a blue book as a Freshman, a few questions, and four years to complete it. If you pass, you get laid and a career. If you fail, you’re labeled obnoxious and a failure for the rest of your life. Some guys finish early, turn in their blue books, and get laid immediately. Some guys fail before the test even begins. No matter how many blue books they fill up, it’s a lost cause. Nate was somewhere in between, slightly obnoxious, but hopeful. There were 150 girls in his class, and more showed up each year after. He had the time and the inclination to explore the ramifications.

Nate was a swimmer, and the motivation for swimming is the fear of drowning. Might as well take the plunge. It was like Leadbelly said, “Good night, Irene. I’ll see you in my dreams. Sometimes, I live in the country,

sometimes, I live in town. Sometimes, I take a notion, Lord, to jump in the river and drown.”

Adolescence is a time for answers, without hearing them, and a time for questions, without knowing them. College is like being issued a small sailboat, going out on a great lake, much larger than the shoreline indicates, getting caught in a violent storm, and nearly drowning. College is like being assigned a horse, going for a ride in the woods, discovering the horse is untamed and the woods are treacherous, nearly being thrown. College is like going for a long hike, without adequate provisions or preparation, nearly starving, nearly freezing, nearly falling down a deep crevice, but surviving somehow, then being told college is like camp, all fun and games, of little importance, and a matter of life and death. It's a start.

Blake's Wife

One night, Nate and several others were sitting in Phil Sharron's room listening to the blues and shooting the bull. Jimmy came in the doorway with a piece of paper in his hand. He stood still, for a long time. Long enough, finally, for everyone to turn to see what was up.

"I wrote a poem," he said, "I thought somebody might like to read it." He held out the piece of paper, waist high, turned, and let the paper fall. It fluttered to the floor in the middle of the group. By the time it came to rest, Jimmy was gone. He left everyone staring at the dramatic moment. Ah, the dramatic moment. If one were attuned to it, Nate thought, it was enormously pregnant. It was a moment of birthing. If not, Nate supposed, it was barren and passed without notice.

Nate loved movie night. Every Friday night, at 8PM, movies were shown in the ARH, the Alumni Recitation Hall, a wonderful, old theatre with a proscenium stage and a great balcony, with deep, dark recesses on the main floor, under the overhanging balcony. It was the occasion of relief, as the entire student body took a break from serious study.

Back when Nate sat in the first general meeting of the incoming Freshmen in his class, he was stunned to learn that two-thirds of his classmates had been either valedictorian or salutatorian of their Senior class in high school. Nate was neither. He had made the National Honor Society, and he gave a speech at the assembly for it. In his speech, he told the entire student body that hard work was crucial to scholastic

achievement, because, he said, “You can’t sew wild oats and reap Cheerios.”

He told them that, and they sat in silence. No one had ever told jokes on such a solemn occasion. It wasn’t done. Nate did it, and it went over like a lead balloon. Then Miss Harvey began to laugh. Janet Harvey was the Gertrude Stein of Moline Senior High. Her laughter was contagious. The principal, Harold Lamont, was caught by surprise and started to laugh. Then, everyone laughed.

Miss Harvey was an inspiration. She loved literature. She called it the *realms of gold*, and she meant it. She was the first person Nate had ever met who truly loved the language and what it could do. Being under her influence gave him freedom to discover his own love of language. She effectively changed his interest in education from academic excellence to wonder and possibility. He was spoiled, ruined for life.

One week, she had her class present speeches on writers. Everyone could choose his or her own subject. Nate chose William Blake, the poet, for no other reason than the simple resonance of *Tyger, tyger, burning bright in the forests of the night*. He stood up in front of the class, at 10AM, after three others had already given their speeches in the first half hour. Twenty-five minutes remained, and his note cards had just enough material to fill the ten minutes he was allotted. He spoke for the rest of the period.

After ten minutes, he wasn’t referring to the cards anymore. His subject matter had shifted, or drifted, from the poetry of William Blake to the love life he shared with his wife and the time they spent with a variety of angels, who would appear and invite the two of them into the walled yard behind their bungalow to commune, naked, in body, mind, and spirit, on the ground and in the trees.

The bell rang for the class to end, but Nate kept on talking. Something magical was occurring. It was as if he was channeling a visit, to Miss Harvey's classroom, by Blake, his wife, the angel Gabriel, and a corps of kindred spirits. The kids from the next class were crowding in the doorway, and finally, Miss Harvey, her sides aching with laughter, out of breath, her lungs wheezing, said, "Stop. Stop. I don't want you to stop, but you have to."

"OK," said Nate, and he sat down. He didn't know what was happening. He hadn't planned it, he didn't control it, it just happened. God knows why or how. *God knows, but only time will tell*, he thought. Tom Reilly came up to Nate in the hall, after the speech, with wonder in his eyes, and said, "Jeez, Nate, how do you do that?"

"I don't know," Nate said. It felt like something he did but didn't have a clue how he did it. It happened from time to time, and Nate love it that it happened. He didn't dwell on it. It was an accident, he figured. You can't plan an accident, he thought. If you do, it's not an accident, anymore. Then, it would seem to die. It would evaporate or lose its charm. Whenever it was calculated, if even for a split second, it became artificial. That was all he knew.

The atmosphere in the ARH Theatre, on Friday night, was festive. All the valedictorians and salutatorians started to salute their dicks and valleys. It was supposed to be mind AND body, after all. After a week of mind, it was time for a little body. Or a lot of body. As usual, there was a warm glow of healthy young bodies, coming alive. It was date night, a night for movies and dancing and romance. Nate took a seat on the main floor, off to the side, and soaked up the ambience. He sat still, for a time, basking in the energy of several hundred bodies of anticipation.

The movie was "To Have and Have Not," with Humphrey Bogart and Loren Bacall. Nate felt good. Then he noticed, up on stage, a blackboard, on which had been written the words **NO SMOKING!!!** with three exclamation points. Nate looked around. Don McDermott was sitting behind him.

"Hey, Don, loan me your pack of Marlboro's for a few minutes."

"Yeah, sure," Don replied.

Without a moment's thought, Nate got up out of his seat and went to the side door of the small stage. He found a folding chair and dragged it out through the curtains, in front of the movie screen, that someone from the Movies and Lectures Committee had set up. He placed his chair at a slight angle, took out his pack of cigarettes, tapped one out into his hand, put it to his lips and struck a match.

Suddenly, he caught sight of the large sign looming over his shoulder. **NO SMOKING!!!** with three exclamation points. He read it and struggled with the dilemma. What to do? Should he put his smokes away? Should he defy the ban on smoking? An idea came to him. The perfect squelch. Defiantly, proudly, he held the Marlboro up, like a symbol of independence, and plunged it into his mouth. He shoved the whole thing in, filter and all, and ate it.

He ate the cigarette with obvious pleasure. He chewed it up with great delight. He grinned at the audience. *His* audience. He stood, took his chair, folded it, and walked proudly off the stage, to the imagined roar and applause of the surprised crowd. He never heard a thing.

Backstage, he spit out the tobacco. It tasted awful. He'd never tasted anything quite so awful. He had to go down the hall and wash his mouth out. When he got back to the theatre, he took his seat quietly. Don

McDermott leaned over, took his pack, and said, "Jesus, Nate, you're a crazy sonofabitch."

"Shhh," Nate admonished. "Could you please be quiet, young man? The movie is about to start. Thank you so much." His heart was racing. At the same time, a calm came over him. He still hadn't done anything he'd regret for the rest of his life, but, who knows, it sure seemed a lot more possible. The older he got, the more the regrettable became a possibility.

"You know how to whistle, don't you?" she said, standing in the doorway, "You just put your lips together, and blow."

Doing Right By Nell

Back home, during the summer after his Junior year, Nate answered a notice in the local paper and tried out for the lead in a production of the melodrama, "He Aint Done Right By Nell," being presented at the Barn Theatre. He got the part and began rehearsals, under the direction of Jim Summerfield, starring opposite Darci Winslow. It was great fun. In the daytime, he dug ditches for the Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company, and at night, pleasantly tired, he attended rehearsals at The Barn.

Darci was cute and bubbly, and Nate had a mild crush on her, during the run of the show. Darci was infatuated with herself, and she loved having others in love with her. It was fun for Nate to let their melodramatic love affair run its course, and on the night of the final performance, it had. There was a party gathering among the cast and crew, but Nate was done with the experience. It was time to get on down the road. He had had a good time. Darci accompanied him to the door at the back of The Barn. It truly was a barn, converted to a theatre, somewhat in the round, with the audience seated on three sides.

The kind of intense attention he was learning at Grinnell was lacking. Moline audiences seemed to be satisfied with costume changes and bombast. Anyone who could get through an entire production without forgetting his lines or knocking over the set, was labeled a fine actor. Nate and Darci stood in the doorway and kissed. It was a romantic scene. Nate savored the obvious romance of a farewell kiss, in a backlit doorway, on a warm summer night, with a pretty girl.

Darci pulled away and skipped back to the group, planning their night of celebration and self-congratulations on a job, pretty well done. Ah, the excesses of communal mediocrity. Nothing to write home about and certainly, for Nate, nothing to stay home about. Nate had been discovering a world of broader horizons. Home was feeling more and more like a pleasant backwater.

He walked out to his Chevy wagon, parked by the horse corral, and got in. It was a warm night. He rolled all the windows down and put the key in the slot. He heard a voice in his right ear.

“Get out of the car, you bastard.”

Nate turned and looked. The voice was angry and urgent. There was a guy leaning on the passenger side, staring at him, through the window.

“What?” said Nate, genuinely puzzled.

It was too sudden, too inexplicable, for Nate to feel or act frightened.

“I said, ‘Get out of the car.’ I’m going to kick the shit out of you, you bastard.”

He was a big guy, maybe a little younger than Nate. Words came out of Nate’s mouth. The guy had said, “Get out of the car,” and Nate said, “No, you get in.” And, miraculously, he got in. As soon as he did, his whole attitude changed. His shoulders slumped, and his hands fell to the seat, helplessly.

“I saw you kiss Darci. She’s my girl. I want to marry her, but she won’t get married.”

Oh, Jesus, Nate thought, this guy is really in love with her.

“What’s your name?” Nate asked.

“Jerry,” he said, “Darci and I have been going together for two years. I thought we were going to get married after graduation.”

“Listen, Jerry. That was just a goodbye kiss. I’m not interested in Darcí, and she’s not interested in me. And besides, I think all she wants to do is go to the University of Colorado and drink beer. I don’t think she’s gonna want to get married for a long time.”

“I know. Hey, man, I’m sorry I called you out. I just didn’t know what to do.”

“Well, shit. I wouldn’t expect to marry Darcí any time, real soon. She may get tired of partying after a while, but right now, that’s all she’s thinking about.”

“I know. I know,” he said.

Jerry stared at the dashboard and was quiet. Nate sat still and marvelled at the way things happened. It was sad to see this guy practically crying about his true love, but it was also wonderful to see how much he cared. It felt good to sit with him and feel like a comrade. Jerry opened the door and started to get out.

“Thanks, man,” he said, “You take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, you, too,” Nate said.

When he was gone, Nate sat in wonder and then said, “Shit!” as the adrenalin started to kick in. It was a delayed reaction, but he was starting to feel it. “I’m going to the party!”

The party was planned for Darcí’s mother’s house. Her mother was Marge Winslow. Marge Winslow had her chubby fingers in about every pie in the Quad-Cities. There were bound to be dozens of people at the party. The shows were an excuse for the parties. Marge Winslow was reputed to throw great parties. She even had a talk show on the radio, “The Marge Winslow Show,” every Sunday evening, when she talked to local and visiting celebrities and discussed the nightlife, such as it was.

The Winslows had a big house by the golf course in Rock Island, and by the time Nate arrived, the party was in full swing. Everybody greeted him with surprise, since he hadn't been expected to show up. He was praised all around for his sterling performance as the handsome young hero. Nate thought it was odd. It was like being praised for his posture or the great haircut he'd gotten at the barber shop. But, what the hell, there were several good looking girls and some flirtacious *older women*. Nate relaxed and let himself feel attractive.

Many of the guests got drunk, some in a real hurry, some more slowly. Nate got drunk on the energy of the night, the music, and the attention. He felt conspicuous. He had never been better looking, or healthier, and it felt OK to be young and handsome. Maybe, it was the role he had played. Maybe, it was having done a good job. Maybe, it was talking to Vicki's boyfriend, but he felt particularly secure with himself, and he talked to lots of different people.

One guy he talked to was the Entertainment Editor of the Rock Island Argus, the newspaper that split the readership of the Quad-Cities with the Moline Dispatch and the Davenport (Iowa) Times. He was an arty type of guy who said he'd lived in Hollywood, at one time, and Nate was flattered that he was interested in talking to him. Nate even told the guy that he was thinking about becoming an actor, but he wasn't sure about that, it was just an idea.

"Well, there's a lot more to it than you might think," the guy said, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah, like what?" Nate said.

"Well," the guy said, "If you want to make it in Hollywood, you might have to do some things you might not want to do."

“Like what?” Nate said, puzzled, and slightly annoyed by the veiled threat of necessary compromises.

“It’s just something you should consider,” the guy said, and turned away. He turned back and gave Nate a strange, half-drunken leer. Nate felt a funny chill, a break in the warm glow of the night. But, he found some banter to toss back and forth with one of the other actors, and let it go.

The evening progressed. There was singing by the piano, bad jokes in the hallway, food in the kitchen, and pretty soon, it was well after midnight. People were starting to leave. The party was thinning out, when Marge Winslow and her husband, Bob, took Nate aside for a little chat. Bob Winslow was stinko, reeling, he could hardly stand up. Marge was dead serious and sober.

“Nathaniel, could you possibly do us a great favor?”

“I guess so. Sure.” He was flattered by the attention from the local Perle Mesta.

“Could you drive Milt Parsons home? He’s too drunk to drive himself, and we’re driving his wife home.” Milt Parsons was the Entertainment Editor. It didn’t make any sense. Why didn’t his wife drive him home? Why didn’t the Winslows drive both of them home? What was the deal? It didn’t make any sense.

“I know it sounds ridiculous, Nate, but could you just do us this one favor? We’d really appreciate it?” Bob Winslow was bobbing up and down, like a water-glass stork, mumbling to himself. A strange world, but what the hell.

“All right. Why not?” Nate said, resigned to a little inconvenience.

“Oh, Nate, thank you. Milt lives down by the Rock River, by the Airport Bridge. Here’s the address. And thanks again. It’s very kind of you.” Nate

tried to shrug off the feeling that something was going on, that something was not being said. Milt Parsons was already in tow, on the drive, in front of the house, and his wife and Marge loaded him into Nate's car.

Nate drove off with Milt Parsons slumping, and everyone on the driveway waving. Milt came to, as Nate turned onto Airport Road, a couple of miles from the river.

"Well, young man, how are you feeling this evening?"

"I'm fine," Nate said, not expecting much in the way of conversation.

"Yes you are. Do you remember what I told you about becoming an actor?" It was a leading question, couched in the slurry, blurry speech of the watery drunk.

"I do, but you were a little vague."

"Ah, the party. . the party . . A party is no place to have a private conversation." He was still being vague.

"I suppose not." Especially if you're drunk, Nate thought.

"I'm a little tipsy," Milt said, "but I'll tell you this. I'm sure you've heard of the casting couch." Nate couldn't imagine what the guy was talking about, but he didn't like the sound of it.

"Pull over here, for a second, Nate, would you please. I need to . . uh . . rest for a second. Just pull the car over for a second, could you, please?" Nate eased the car to a stop on the side of the road. He figured that Milt Parsons was about to toss his cookies, and he sure didn't want that to happen in the car. But, after they came to a stop, Parsons stayed in his seat and turned to face Nate. Parsons gave him a long, oily look, and his left hand came to rest on Nate's crotch.

It was a shocker. Nate grabbed the hand and lifted it, placing it back on Milt's side of the car.

“No, thanks,” Nate said, amazing himself with his politeness.

“Haven’t you been with a man?” said Milt Parsons, with the aplomb that belongs only to drunks.

“I haven’t been with a woman, yet,” said Nate, embarrassed, but content with his virginity, for once.

“You should try it first with a man. It will make being with a woman even better,” continued Milt, his sales pitch starting to die.

“No, thanks,” Nate said again, “I’m not interested. Get it?”

This time, a degree of anger rose into his eyeballs, and Milt caught the look, even though his bleary fog. When they pulled up at Milt Parsons’ house, Marge and Milt’s wife were already there. They stood by, while Milt got out and walked stupidly up to them. They waved a cautious hello/goodbye, as Nate pulled away.

When Nate got home, he was in a rage, with no place to put it. He thought of throwing a chair through the plate glass window of his parents’ new house. It was a house he hadn’t lived in, except during summer vacations. He stood in the living room, with all its beautiful new furniture, and looked at his reflection in the window. He thought that if he threw one chair through the window, he’d end up tossing out the whole damn overstuffed room. Then he thought what a waste it’d be, and he’d only have to pay for it, whatever it cost.

How come it was, that whenever anyone treated him badly, it seemed, he was the one who ended up paying for it? The rage he felt inside seemed homicidal. He’d never expressed it, and the depth of it, unexpressed, seemed beyond control. If he let it out, surely, it would be catastrophic. What was the alternative? It was either *eat it* or *lose it*.

When he was little, he felt entirely powerless. Now, he felt far too powerful. The little boy he had been was now riding herd over a great beast of a man's body, and a man's rage. A little boy's rage feels helpless and futile. A man's rage feels massive and boundless.

When he got back to campus that Fall, it was a different set of Nate's he had to deal with. One innocent morning, he sat in the Union, over coffee and donuts, staring at nothing in particular, when Eddie Collins came over to him.

"Man, if looks could kill, this place would be a graveyard."

"Oh, hi, Ed, how's your mom?"

"My mother is dead. Why'd you wanna go and say that?"

"Oh, Jesus, Eddie, I'm sorry. It was a stupid remark. I'm sorry."

It was an old line from Mad Magazine. "Hi, Ed, how's your Mom?" Nate decided, then and there, that he'd never ask anyone named Ed about their mothers ever again. All the old cliches of childhood were fast becoming useless. In fact, it felt like just about everything was becoming useless.

Only a Cigar

Les Malone was the swimming coach. The team swam in a pool that had been built, as temporary, in 1939. It was another bathtub, like the one at the old Y, back home in Moline. The freshman team had twelve swimmers, six of whom were of championship quality. It was Les Malone's finest crop in many years.

Les' favorite was Jim Edmonds. He called Jim *Tiger*, because he liked his attitude. Jim was a team-player, a yes-coach, a hardworker, and a good swimmer. Not a great swimmer, he tested the old adage that hard work can make up for any deficiency.

Early on, Coach Malone said it was time to elect captains. Co-captains. The team voted for two. Les counted the ballots, in another room. He came onto the pool deck and announced, in a troubled voice, that the vote was so close, they would have to have three captains. Three captains on a twelve man squad. He announced the three; Nate, Jim Matlin, and Jim Edmonds, also know as Tiger.

Nate thought little about it, but Matlin wasn't satisfied. He went around after practice and asked everyone who they had voted for. No one had voted for Edmonds. Coach had stuffed the ballot box. He needed to have a tiger in his tank.

The track coach shared an office with Malone. His name was Killer Curtis. Everybody called him Killer because he was a hardnose. One day, in late fall, in his office alone, he felt a pain in his side. His standard reply to any complaint was, "Run it off," so Killer Curtis took his own advice. He put

on his shorts and track shoes and went out on the track. It was dark and cold, and he was alone.

He ran it off. That is, he almost ran it off. He collapsed on the track with an acute appendicitis. He had to crawl back into the gym on his hands and knees to call an ambulance for himself.

Malone had the same outlook. He had the word PAIN written on a blackboard at the diving end of the pool. He told his teams that, when he was in school, an athlete who went out for a sport, would stay out for four years, regardless of his success or failure, unless he was cut from the squad. There was no other excuse. Malone didn't approve of quitters.

When Les was in college, he was a diver and a gymnast, and his upper-body strength far out-classed his scrawny legs. He had performed a stunt in college, walking on his hands, up and down four flights of stairs. His classmates would put a dollar on the step they thought he'd quit on. The problem was, he never quit. He had to wait six months or a year between attempts, so people would forget how good he was. He always won every dollar. And he was a liar. And he stuffed the ballot box. Oh, well. It didn't seem like anyone got hurt. The team got the captains it wanted, and Les got the captain he wanted.

Nate went unbeaten his freshman year in one event and lost only twice in the other. He started the sophomore year with predictably high hopes, but it was his fifth year of competitive swimming, and the thrill was fading fast. By the end of the season, he was held up as the man to beat at the conference meet at Carlton College, in Minnesota. But there were rumblings of discontent, led by Jim Matlin and others. It was the beginning of the '60's, and the lock-step obedience of a new generation was being challenged everywhere, and the Les Malones of the world were due for a

shock. No one knew that, for sure, because it was early in the race. Things were changing, but most of the changes were coming slowly, unconsciously.

In the meantime, at the Monmouth meet, Nate demonstrated his new routine. He stood on the blocks and hyperventilated. It involved a lot of huffing and puffing and stretching and flexing. He puffed up his chest and shook out his hands and feet. The pool area was packed with busloads of Grinnell students who'd come along for the weekend. The next afternoon would be a meet with Knox College, thirty miles away. Nate did his Tarzan routine, and then broke the pool record. It was becoming sort of commonplace. That night, in the hotel, Nate chased girls from one room to another, got three hours sleep, and the next day he was dead. As luck would have it, the Knox team was severely out-gunned, and the coach asked Nate if he'd sit this one out.

"Oh, sure, coach, no problem," he said and thanked his lucky stars.

It was two weeks before the conference meet, and that meant two weeks of practice, no competition, and no glory. By the second week, Nate was sick of swimming. He came onto the pool deck one afternoon, and the water was repulsive. He went over on the side and did pulley weights for an hour and a half. On the day of the conference meet, Nate was excited. He was the man to beat. He had beaten every sprinter in the conference.

The Carlton pool was jammed to the rafters with cheering students from all over the Midwest. There was barely enough room on the pool deck to walk. That suited Nate just fine. He went to the blocks and hyperventilated. Several students, close enough to touch him, jeered at him. But, Nate was used to that, by then.

He dove in and entered the Black Hole of Minnesota. He couldn't see three feet in front of him. The backwash in the pool was like high tide in a

typhoon. He missed his first turn, and it got worse from there. He came in third. Third, for Christ's sake. He muscled out of the murky water, and his face came nose to nose with the guy who'd mocked him.

"Serves you right, you conceited asshole," the guy said, with obvious glee. Nate made his way into the locker room, past his stunned teammates. He went through one locker room and then into another. There was no one around. Nate stood there, alone, in shock and embarrassment. He had let his conditioning slide, his heart wasn't in it, and he had taken it all for granted. He started to beat on one of the lockers with the butt of his fist.

"FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" he shouted. "FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" He caught sight of something small, in the corner of his eye. It was a little boy, a kid, practically a baby, standing there in the deserted locker room, staring up at him.

"Hey, kid, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I lost. I'm pretty upset. I'm sorry."

The kid just stared at him. He didn't look scared or anything. That was the last time Nate swam for Les Malone. He quit the team. So did Jim Matlin and four others. Jim Edmonds didn't quit. Guys named Tiger never quit. Nate had lost and quit. Matlin had won and quit. What's the difference. "A quitter is a quitter."

That same year, Nate had gone out for the soccer team. He'd never played soccer, and it was unusual for him to try anything new that he wasn't already good at, but his buddy Bill Shuck was on the soccer team, and it looked like fun. It turned out to be a lot of fun, and Nate got pretty good at it. In fact, it was a hell of a lot of fun, and Nate loved it. Diane Duffy said to him, once, after watching a soccer game, "Nate, you're really different when you're on the soccer field. You're so . . . enthusiastic." It was true. Normally,

Nate was reserved, quiet, and subdued, but on two occasions, he went absolutely berserk, on stage and on the playing field.

Unfortunately, the soccer coach was none other than Les Malone. By the second year, he was carrying a major grudge against Nate. Nate was remarkably oblivious to Les' constant disrespect. I suppose it is a condition of college, and perhaps the army, that the rank and file expect no quarter from the officers and generally disregard their existence, as far as personal feelings go. What mattered to Nate was his own opinion, that of his buddies, and, of course, girls. The opinion of Les Malone was curious and needed to be dealt with, but there was still a clear demarcation between age and youth. Generally, age was fucked, and youth was cool.

At the end of Nate's Junior year, he was the starting left half on the soccer team, and he was having the time of his life. Swimming was OK, but it wasn't dirty. Swimming is the cleanest sport in the world. You take a shower before, a shower after, and a bath during. But soccer was muddy, and it involved a lot of collisions. Nate discovered that he could take a lot of punishment. He was a defensive player, and that suited him. Anything anybody could dish out, Nate could take. He was growing tired of being a nice piece of white fish. He liked becoming red meat. His bravado startled the opposition. Usually, the hotshot of the other team, would come at Nate full speed, and Nate wouldn't budge. He might bend a little, but he wouldn't break.

For months, Coach Malone had been promoting Al McNaughton, to replace Nate at his position. He instituted a challenge system, which allowed any player to challenge any other, to go through a set of drills and head to head contests. Al was a good guy, and Nate liked him, but he wasn't up to the challenge. He came up against Nate, and Nate beat him. Al seemed a

little relieved. Nate wondered why he tried it anyway. He played fullback. He didn't ride the bench.

After the last game of Nate's junior year, played at Wheaton College, outside Chicago, the team went for dinner at a semi-fancy restaurant in downtown Chicago. It was the night to vote on co-captains for the next season. Malone called for the vote, for an offensive captain and a defensive captain. David Staley won the offensive captain, outright, but Les came back from counting the ballots, in another room, and announced that there was a tie between Nate and Al McNaughton for the defensive captain. Does that sound familiar? It didn't ring any bells for Nate. Once again, he was just happy to be elected to anything.

Someone pointed out that the goalie, Steve Klein, lived in Chicago, and he had gone home, instead of coming out to dinner. Les could call up Steve, and Steve would break the tie. When Les got back from making the call, his chin was dragging on the plush red carpet.

"Axene won," was all he said, and the words dropped off his lips like he'd taken a bite of something foul, and he couldn't get the awful taste out of his mouth. It never occurred to Nate that Les had, once again, stuffed the ballot box, but another pattern was emerging. Les tried everything to get rid of Nate, and Nate hardly even noticed.

There was one episode that was hard to miss. One Monday, after a road trip, Les called a team meeting. He spoke to the team about his ethics of dedication, hard work, and following the rules.

"I know some of you have broken training; drinking, smoking, staying out past hours, and I want you to step forward and admit it. It's the only manly thing to do. Now, I know there are some coaches at this school who don't expect their players to follow strict training rules, and if you want to live like

that, you can go out for their teams, but if you want to play for me, you've got to follow my rules.

"If you don't want to follow the rules, I want you to say so." He stared at a couple of guys back in the corner. "If you're breaking training rules, I expect you to be a man about it and admit it in front of your teammates." He waited, and he stared. Finally, Stanley Merdian confessed.

"All right, Coach. I admit it. I got a little drunk, but shit, Coach, I live in a drinking hall. I didn't mean to do anything bad, but I did it. I'm sorry." He turned to the guy next to him, for support.

"Me, too, Coach. I'm sorry. I broke training. I didn't think it was so important. It's not like I'm a starter, but I'm sorry." They both looked relieved. Confession is good for the soul. Malone looked at them with the same expression he'd had before their confessions.

"You're off the team. Turn in your gear. Clean out your lockers." The entire room was stunned. The two guys simply left. They went out the door, and they were gone. Malone turned to face Nate.

"There are others in this room who broke training. Drinking, or smoking, for example." He stared at Nate. Nate couldn't believe his ears. He couldn't believe the coach's eyes, either. Time passed, and Nate blurted out, "Are you looking at me? You're kidding. Is this some kind of joke?" Nate hadn't broken training. And, it wasn't because he was in training, exactly, unless he was in training for half-assed sainthood. He was looking forward to his rendezvous with sin, but it was a remote idea, not yet entered on his calendar. Up to that point, his slate was clean, more by default than by design. But, once again, he stood accused of some imagined moral catastrophe, the nature of which was beyond his knowing.

"This is no joke," said the coach, "and you know who I'm looking at."

He wasn't looking at anyone. He was looking at the rafters in the gymnasium. Nate racked his brain. Then, he remembered. After the road game, in Beloit, Wisconsin, as a joke, he had bought a huge Connestoga cigar in the hotel lobby. He lit it up in the back of the nine passenger station wagon, took a couple of fake puffs, and tossed it out the window.

"Are you talking about that cigar? Are you talking about that stupid cigar I bought. Forget it. Shit, Les, I don't even know how to inhale. I don't smoke. That was a joke. That was a damn joke. If you think I'm confessing to a stupid joke cigar, forget it. No way!" Nate had been backed against a wall, and he was happy to find out there was a wall there. He was adamant. Malone was stymied. He paced back and forth.

"All right," he said, finally. "All of you, get out of here. The meeting's over. You're dismissed. And I don't want to hear about any of you breaking training, ever again, and you know who I mean."

Nate looked around to see who it was who'd ratted on him about the cigar. It was a huge cigar, like a huge dick. As Freud once said, "Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar." Malone had accused him of having an illegal cigar, a sinful cigar, and Nate's defense had been that it was an innocent cigar, a play cigar. But it was a huge cigar, and it had gotten him into trouble. It might as well have been a red herring. It had been the excuse Les Malone was looking for in his campaign to get rid of Nate.

Nate finally noticed Jon Carlson, the Senior captain, the coach's favorite, the guy who'd won the secret ballot the year before, not an especially good player, not especially popular, but a guy who was real close to the coach. How do guys like that get elected? There are forces at work in this world beyond the apparent.

Maybe, they could be made more apparent. Jon Carlson was looking at the floor. He wouldn't look at Nate. Jon had driven the car that Nate rode in, when he whipped out his huge cigar and lit it. Nate, like anyone else in his predicament, looked around for an explanation for what was going on. He couldn't find one. He figured Jon Carlson was obsessed with training rules, but that didn't explain it all. The surest, likeliest, most familiar path to understanding, for Nate, was to blame himself.

At the end of that year, Nate ran for President of Landon Hall. He ran against Bill Farling, and Bill beat him. Nate thought, "Oh, well, it would have been a lot of work, and the President's room is always jammed up with complainers, and I guess everybody likes Bill better than me, anyway." Nate figured he didn't deserve the job, and so he didn't get it. It was justice.

Two weeks later, Don McDermott came up to Nate in the library and said, "Nate, I got to talk to you. I can't keep this to myself, any longer. You won the election. Bill didn't win. Dave McCann stuffed the ballot box. He doesn't like you, and he likes Bill, so he didn't want you to win."

"What a strange world I live in," Nate thought to himself. He never said anything to anyone. He had already accepted his fate. He was moving to an off-campus house that looked like a lot of fun, and all the rationalization he'd done to cover his loss had convinced him he didn't really want or need the job, or even deserve it.

He admired Don for his honesty. It made them better friends. Some part of him thought that Dave was probably right not to like him. He must have done something wrong to lose the election, even if it had been stolen from him. It wasn't like the cigar incident, where he knew he was innocent. It was a grey area, where he was always guilty, the grey area of moral and emotional issues. The great grey area of personality and character. It was familiar to

be fucked over for no good reason. So there must be a good reason. Except, he couldn't think of it. Habitually, there was enough good stuff going on to gloss over the rough spots.

At the end of his senior year, Nate entered two paintings in the annual art contest. He had been painting in his room for three years. It was liberating. It was like speaking from the heart, without having to engage the brain. Talking from the heart was the great untried path of his life. Language was good for many things, and it was great fun, but the path from his heart to his tongue was overgrown with briars and clogged with weeds.

Painting unconsciously forged a pathway. The exuberance of the simple act of making shapes in color opened in him a new experience. He had finally declared himself an art minor, but he was not a member in good standing with the art department. No matter. He had two large canvasses that he liked, and he entered them in the annual art show. The head of the department walked around the show with the visiting judge, the head of the art department of a nearby university. After looking at all the sculpture, pottery, oils, watercolors, and drawings, the judge, came to his decision.

"Well, Richard, I can't make up my mind between that one . . . and . . . that one."

He had chosen Nate's two paintings. Richard Denzellen, the head of the art department, leaned over and said to the guy, "Can't you pick someone else? This guy isn't even a major."

"I see," he replied, "Well, I like this watercolor over here," and he pointed to Denice Booker's work. Denice was standing nearby, and she overheard the whole exchange. The prize was awarded to Nate and Denice, and they split fifty dollars.

“I can’t take this money,” Denise said, “I want you to have all of it.”

“No,” said Nate, “That’s ridiculous. You won, too.”

It was a nit-picking issue, Nate figured. He did win, even if it was tainted by chicanery. Nate was beginning to be unsurprised by devious elections. His parents had probably taken a vote on which baby to take home and voted on Jenny Tolefson, who was born the same day in the same hospital, but were overruled by an irate Dr. Allsteen. Reluctantly, but resignedly, they gave in and raised the child as if he were their own. Not as their own, but as if.

Life was full of as-ifs. It seemed as if nothing truly mattered. Old shit could be forgotten as half-truths and partial realities. One could imagine a truer universe, and that was good enough for dreamers and dumbfucks, good enough for Nate, whichever he was. There was lots of time for finer realities ahead, and in the meantime, he thought, what’s wrong with a little chicanery. It certainly made life interesting.

Since Nate was young, life ahead was full of unknowns, and it seemed as if they were knowable, one at a time. Later, he could come to know the unknowns, and by then, he’d be safe. So it was OK when he found out about the dark side of things. It made the dark a little less scary to have the monsters pointed out. The dark was full of monsters, and if you could have them all stand up and identify themselves, at least you’d know what you were dealing with. Well, that’s the theory.

Small comfort. But small comfort will suffice when things are going pretty well, and you don’t think you’re in any real danger. What danger could there be? The snakes in the grass don’t seem terribly fierce, when the garden is so well kept and cloistered.

When he was a kid, Nathaniel's favorite movie was "The Secret Garden." In it, three kids find a secret garden and fix it up. It's their secret place. Maybe a murder had been committed there. Actually, one of the kids' mothers had died there, and in his grief, the kid's father had sealed it off, and the father's love was withering and dying. The kids restore the garden and rekindle the father's love. Nate's other favorite movie was "The Boy with Green Hair," about a kid who has accidentally dyed his hair green and become the laughing stock of his town, a pariah.

But those were only movies. And Nate won the prize, after all. Who could complain? There were worlds to conquer. And women. And worlds of women. Sometimes, a cigar is only a cigar. Sometimes, a dick is only a dick. Nate couldn't solve the big issues, and the little issues kept turning into big issues. Sometimes, he would think about a problem, until he got tired of thinking about it, and then he'd forget about it. It didn't eliminate the problem, but it kept the slate clean. When you're young, a clean slate is good enough. For a while.

The Magic Woman

Nate had seen her around. By the middle of January, every year, he had seen everybody around. In a school of 1200, it doesn't take long to know who everyone is, if you're paying attention. He sat in the student union, one Winter's night, with some of the guys. The door opened, and all the heads turned to see who it was. It was no one. It was someone familiar. It was someone no one wanted to know, or it was someone everyone already knew.

The door opened and Mike Liebenbaum turned to look, and then he said, "We're all waiting for the Magic Woman." He continued, "We know everyone there is to know, and still we wait, and we watch, and we expect to see the Magic Woman come through that door."

In November of his senior year, Nate was waiting seriously for the Magic Woman to come through the door. He had already checked out the freshman girls. The senior girls, or women, as they were called, had spread the word about Nate. The warnings had intrigued the new girls, and Nate had not been rejected by them. By his senior year, he had gotten a reputation as a ladies' man. When Nate had been a junior, Will Henderson, a senior, came running up to him one day, almost out of breath.

"Hey, Nate, you go out with a lot of girls, and I go out with a lot of girls. Are we all right, or are we seriously fucked up?"

Nate thought for a moment and said, "We're all right." Will breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thanks Nate. I was really starting to worry about it."

“Shit, Will, don’t worry about it. It’s OK.” And it was OK. Anyway, it felt OK. But, by the time Nate was a senior, like Will, he was beginning to worry about it, too. One night, in November, he was sitting in the student union getting ready to dance. He had danced nearly every night for three and a half years. That was one of the great features of the college he attended. The old student union had a great dance floor, a great juke box, and a tradition of nightly dancing. Mind *and* body.

Nate loved to dance, and he was a good dancer, like his father before him. Beside the sheer enjoyment of dancing itself, it was a wonderful way to get extremely close to women without signing any papers. It was possible, while dancing, to take full measure of the woman. Nate loved their breasts against his rib cage, their breath against his neck, the fit of thigh against thigh, of thigh against pubic bone, of cock against pussy, of a bigger cock against a hotter pussy.

Dancing encompassed nearly all of the pleasures of intercourse without the ensuing or accompanying complications. Some college boys, in the early Sixties, thought like that. Nate didn’t think that much about it. He liked to dance, and he liked to dance with girls.

In September, he had dated Juliette Benson. She was tall, large-breasted, soft-lipped, and sensuous. She loved to dance, and she loved to make out. Her breasts were young, and she wore no bra. In the huge cloak room of her dorm, Nate and Juliette kissed and rubbed each other, and when his dick was hard, she swooned. She nearly passed out, her legs went limp, her eyes rolled back, her juices flowed, and Nate got real uncomfortable. It was as if he was standing on the shore, while she roared out to sea in a powerful motorboat. He was left stranded by her swoon.

One night, lying on the grass outside her dorm, she asked him if he was

going out with her for her body. "Of course," he could have said, but instead, he said, "I like your body, but that's not all I like about you." He got real intellectual, real fast, describing at length the moments of companionship and conversation he had enjoyed with her. They had gone for a walk down by the lake that afternoon, and she had brought a book of poems along, and she asked him to read some to her, and he did, and she swooned over that. She was a complicated girl, and a bit much for our hero.

The next week, she went back to her old boyfriend, who rode a motorcycle, and fucked her brains out. Not a difficult task, apparently. It drove Nate crazy to see her slip away, even when he didn't know how to keep her. He got so agitated, that, one night, he walked down the row of residence halls, into the one where Juliette's boyfriend lived and into his room. He wanted to find out just who this guy was and what was his appeal.

They chewed the fat for a while, and Nate went home. Along the way, he began to feel a mild rage welling up inside, and he stomped and swore, fumed, and beat on walls and doors. The guy had told Nate that he really loved nature, especially riding his motorcycle down the highway at eighty miles an hour.

"What nature? What kind of nature is that? Fucking nature boy on his goddam motorcycle!" And he beat on a few more doors.

He went out with Claire Nyland. They had been friends for a long time, and she reminded him of his own mother, when she was a pretty girl. She had the same broadfaced, Midwestern openness, cleanliness, and pioneer plainness. They got back to his room, he told her she reminded him of his mother, and he told her that he had decided not to let that bother him, anymore. It bothered her. She jumped up, and blew out of his room, deeply offended. So much for the Oedipal possibilities.

In Senior Shakespeare class, Nate sat next to Claire. Jane Crowley was on the other side. Nate was paying attention sexually to the girls he'd been friends with. He started looking at everyone in a new light. If anyone had told him he was looking for a wife, he would have laughed out loud, and a huge knot would have appeared in his solar plexis. It was his senior year, and all hell was breaking loose.

He was painting in his room, nearly all the time, staying up, sometimes, until 8AM, going to an eight o'clock class, and then sleeping until two or three in the afternoon. He was assiduously neglecting his studies.

The professor had assigned Hamlet, and Nate had neglected to read it. Senior Shakespeare was the meeting ground for the evolved elite intellectual crowd, and Sherman Spitzer was the acknowledged Professor of the Elite.

Spitzer came into class, placed his briefcase on the desk, on the raised podium, and announced a pop quiz on the assigned reading. Everyone cleared his, or her, desk and began to answer Spitzer's questions. Nate sat with his paper in front of him and his pen in hand, and listened to the impossible questions. It was absurd. He had no answers to give. He folded up the piece of paper, put it in his book, and put the pen back in his pocket. As his highly qualified and well-prepared classmates worked on their answers, Nate looked at Claire, and then at Jane, and then out the window, and then at the shadows in the corners, and then at the back of Andy Schwartz's head, and then out the window, and then back at Claire and Jane.

The room fell silent. Spitzer had stopped asking questions. Everyone looked up to see what was going on. Nate noticed that Spitzer was looking at him. Everyone noticed that Spitzer was looking at Nate.

“Mr. Axene, are you taking this?” Sherman Spitzer said, in a high, haughty, and arrogant whine. There was a long pause.

“I’m taking it in stride,” Nate said, ensuring himself no better than a C in Senior Shakespeare, where the creme de la creme collected their most cherished A’s. No one laughed at Nate’s joke. No one admired his aplomb. No one, among his peers, appreciated his ability to take things in stride. Nate took everything in stride. If he did well, he took it in stride. If he did poorly, he took it in stride. But life was growing increasingly hard to stride through. There were decisions to be made. In six months, he would be past 21, and out of school, for the first time in his life. And, he was still a virgin.

When he saw Jenny Walters dancing, he was attracted to her in a way he had never been attracted to other girls. When they danced together, they danced in a way he’d never danced before. When they kissed, it was a different kind of a kiss. It felt like he was kissing, holding, dancing with, a different kind of girl than he had dated before. There was something remarkably familiar about her. She didn’t look like Nate. She didn’t act like Nate. She was blond, he wasn’t. She had blue eyes, he didn’t. She had breasts, he didn’t. She had a pussy, he didn’t. He had a cock, she didn’t. There was a strange bond between them, that he had never known and didn’t understand.

He described his interest in her as a curious kind of paralleling. People thought he was from New York and she was from Connecticut, when in fact, he was from Illinois and she was from Iowa. People thought they were brother and sister. Dancing with her was so easy and natural. He had a rule about dancing. If a couple was good and compatible, after a while, you couldn’t tell who was leading and who was following. That meant they were a good match, and that was true with Jenny. These were conclusions he

had reached in the course of an hour or two on the dance floor. Her hand fit his hand. Etcetera. It all felt so right. They made a date for the next night. Their first date would be Thursday, the twenty-second.

Nate went down to the Dixie Inn that night, and had a burger with his friends Nearsighted Kansas City Ken and Darryl Jennings. When he got back to his room, he worked on two paintings that were coming along. One of them was of a face that was emerging from a murky, cloudy background, a head, with shoulder-length hair, and it was dark and foreboding. But it wasn't female. It was decidedly a male head, but with long hair. What could that be about? It looked like his face. Very strange. He didn't have hair that long, even though he was often called a beatnik. Ten years later, he would look exactly like the face in the painting, but at that time, it was only a bizarre image.

There was another painting, of colors. It was mostly color, with little sense of an object, but it held together beautifully, especially with all the shades of red that were evolving. He took up a brush and daubed a tiny bit of black over a tiny bit of vermillion, and the painting died. It died, right in front of his eyes. It went dead on him, as dead and flat as a sidewalk. He knew what he'd done, and he knew the color underneath. He took a clean brush, picked up a tiny bit of vermillion, still on the pallet, and put it back where it had been before, and it didn't work. The painting was dead, and nothing he tried could revive it.

He went to sleep as the birds were beginning to chirp. He had come to hate the damn birds, in the way that college kids love to hate things. It was wonderful to hate so deeply the very things one had once loved, the things one had once taken for granted, the things one still loved. To taste the passion of loving and despising, that was joy.

He slept until that afternoon, and when he woke, he was pleasantly groggy. He remembered the date he had planned for that night. There was a peculiar peacefulness about it, a kind of inevitability. He got dressed and started across the campus to get a bite to eat. It was a bright November afternoon, crisp and clear, and warm for that late in the year, but there was an eerie quiescence.

Quiescence was one of those words that actually belonged at some times, under certain circumstances. People were scurrying about, almost furtively, almost fearfully. It felt sad and disquieting. It was quiescent and disquieting at the same time. A sophomore he barely knew, but who knew him, passed him on the sidewalk, in the center of the campus.

“What’s going on?” Nate said. “What happened?”

“Kennedy’s been shot,” the boy said, “He’s dead.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No. It was in Dallas. President Kennedy’s been shot. Assassinated, I guess.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Nate began to understand. The whole campus, the town, the state, the country, the whole damn world went into mourning. Everybody and everything got real serious, all of a sudden.

The college had gone crazy during Kennedy’s election and then again during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and now it felt as if the three years had come to a crashing halt, as if the magical mystery tour was over. For a time, it felt like Grinnell was a little Camelot, and then it had become just another Midwestern college town.

It was November 22, 1963, and it was to have been the first date with the girl he would later marry. Not an auspicious sign. When he got back from

Christmas vacation, they began dating in earnest. Juliette Benson had taken Jenny aside and told her how lucky she was.

“Isn’t Nate the best kisser ever?”

Nate had tried to date other girls. He went out, one night before vacation, with Liz Sterling, who looked like Ava Gardner, and she was the best dancer he’d ever danced with. They danced together like pros. But Liz said to Nate, “What does Jenny think about you going out with me?” If Liz had objected to him going out with Marie, it would have changed things considerably, but she didn’t. He rode the train back to Grinnell, after Christmas, and it was full of revelers, celebrating the return, but Nate was separate from it all.

He heard through the grapevine that Andy Schwartz had warned Jenny she shouldn’t go out with Nate, because he wouldn’t fuck her. That hurt. What a lousy reputation.

Jim Beam, The Pill, and Poems

One day, Nate and Jenny were sitting in the union, on a sunny afternoon, having a cup of coffee, when Paul Klein came in, pulled up a chair next to Jenny, and began to talk to her, soto voce, ignoring Nate. Nate watched them talk. Jenny had been Paul's girl for several months the previous year. Paul was the consensus King of the Literati. Finally, Paul leaned back.

"So, you want to take a walk along the tracks?" he said. The tracks of the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad, the M and SL, the Missing and Still Lost, ran through the middle of campus. Taking a walk along the tracks meant taking a blanket north of town and making out.

"No, thanks," Nate said, "I think I'll just stay here and finish my Danish." That seemed to exasperate Paul. He got huffy and left the room.

Nate didn't know Jenny's sexual history, but she hung out with the gang of writers and musicians who made up the Bohemian crowd that Nate was only a loose cousin of. Nate wrote, painted, and passed himself off as manager of the bluegrass band, just to hang around with them. But Nate was also an athlete, and the combination of his wire-frame glasses, worker's cap, workshirts, bluejeans, cowboy boots, and letter jacket, made it hard to define his affiliations.

He knew she'd been with several of the raunchier *men* on campus, and he assumed she was *experienced*. He didn't know she'd slept with a few boys, and that every time she did, she'd been tormented by the experience.

She had chosen Nate, she told him later, because she thought he was *safe*. Andy Schwartz's warning had actually given her comfort.

Fate conspired against both of them. Drinking had been a common element in Jenny's experience, and her best friends were all hearty drinkers. It was part of the Beatnik scene. It wasn't part of Nate's scene. It could have been, if he'd paid any attention. Booze was everywhere, and now drugs were starting to appear. The hip crowd, reputedly, did peyote and morning-glory seeds, bennies, dexes, and marijuana. All of these things were alien to Nate's experience.

Nate's mother had told him that there were three things she didn't like to do. Get drunk, be hypnotized, and dream. Nate loved to dream, and he sensed there was a further challenge in the things his mother distrusted.

One night, on a romantic impulse, Jenny and her best friend, Suze, got into Nate's room when he was out, fired up his hot plate, and fixed dinner for him. Pork chops and cornbread, applesauce in the can, and along with dinner, they brought a fifth of Jim Beam and a pack of Winstons. Years later, Nate would say that his future wife taught him how to drink, smoke, and fuck, and he was so grateful, he married her.

He had never been interested in drinking or smoking, and he wondered at those who were. So many times, he had had such a good time at parties that people assumed he was drunk. The cigarettes he tried in high school had spoiled the taste of the cheeseburgers he dearly loved.

But this was different. He sat in his big, off-campus room, with his painting all around, and his new girlfriend, who had just fixed him dinner, and her friend, who was pretty and goofy, and funny, and he took a drink. Alcohol works in strange ways in some people. When Nate drank a glass of Jim Beam Malt Whiskey, it went into his system like the missing ingredient.

All of a huge sudden, and as naturally as breathing fresh mountain air, his life changed. His life went from *as if* to *real*.

The clever trick of distance that had protected him, and charmed his life, was gone, replaced by a state of being that felt as essential as blood. There was no need for distance. He had stood by the side of the pool of life, it seemed, and now he was in, he was under, he had taken the plunge. His fear of drowning was gone. His life went from sensual to visceral. Instead of the intense delight of touch and sight, smell and sound, his life became emersion, in a world of sensation from which there was no separation.

It was a feeling he was privy to, on occasion, at times of great physical exertion, in sports, or great emotional exertion, in the theatre. Now, it was constant. It was magic. He could feel unafraid and visceral, all the time, as long as alcohol was filtering through his system, as long as it was nearby. It was as if the Great Doctor in the Sky said, "Here, my fine young fellow, here is the trace mineral I've withheld from your diet. Here is the magic phrase, the *open sesame*, the potion, the secret I've known all along, and now you can know it, too."

Nate took a drink, and it felt good, and he didn't get drunk, he got real. He felt complete. He made love to Jenny Walters, on his roommate's bed, and she cried. She wept for no reason he could discern. His roommate came back from Chicago, and chewed him out because of the blood on his clean sheets. He didn't care. He was free, and he didn't care about those petty concerns. The petty concerns that would have seemed important to him one day, were, the next day, of no concern whatsoever.

He began to think about poetry. His roommate was a poet, so Nate stopped him in the doorway, one day, and asked him, "Jim, what is poetry?"

Jim Merriman looked at Nate. He stared in Nate's eyes for a moment. Then he turned and walked away. Nate would have to discover poetry on his own.

"Poetry is the language of crisis," said Stephane Mallarme, and Nate was embarking on a life of crisis. Nate discovered a lot of things in a hurry. He read Hamlet on bennies and thought it was the finest and truest play he had ever read. The booze seemed to intensify his experience, whatever it was. The colors of his palette seemed stronger, more brilliant, more alive, just like he, himself, seemed to become.

At the same time, his willingness to neglect his duties and responsibilities mushroomed. He nearly flunked out, his senior year. He graduated by three bowling pins. He needed to pass a physical education requirement by taking an equivalency test at the bowling alley. He fucked off the second game and scored enough in the third game to pass, by three pins. Drinking was already exacting a penalty or two, but the rewards far outweighed the penalties, it seemed, if he'd bothered to think about it.

He and Jenny drove to Iowa City, one Friday night, got a room in a guest house, and the next day, she picked up a prescription for birth-control pills. The pills had been on the market only a short time, and the coincidence was liberating. She was protected by pills. He was protected by booze. It was a perfectable world, after all. They made love, time after time, that night. He didn't even lose his erection, between times. She continued to be hesitant about their sexuality, but he wasn't. What can I tell you? Nate felt like a little kid at the circus. He was in awe. His innate sensitivity was now free to explode, and there was no more fear. The elephants, tigers, clowns, and acrobats were in front of him and inside him.

Little kids live in a state of mind and body that booze only imitates. Little

kids are born drunk. Healthy, happy kids have no need for distance. Distance is a little trick we learn to protect ourselves from things we hardly know how to name. As Nate was about to enter a part of his life that was unknown and frightening, a wizard handed him a stick, a wand, a sceptor, and told him that he could wave his magic wand and fear nothing. Booze was like Dumbo's feather. As long as he held onto it, he could fly. He didn't think of these things. He did not say to himself, "Now, I am free." He did not think to notice the change. It had all happened simultaneously. It seemed to him that life had only become *more* of life, than it had been before.

Life became less delightfully charming, but it became a hell of a lot more powerful. It became dangerous and problematic. It had turned scary, and the booze added to the fear and dulled it, at the same time. It was starting to feel on the inside, like life was getting to seem on the outside.

It was 1964, the President was dead, there was a war in Asia, the civil rights movement was stirring, women and students were on the march for change. Nate's adolescence was over. He was no longer a virgin. He applied to graduate school in three areas, literature, art, and drama. Jenny told him that if he wanted to go to Chicago and be a painter, she would stretch his canvas for him. His hair grew, his clothing got darker, his tongue got sharper.

One weekend, he went to a basketball game in Clinton, Iowa, to see his big little brother play, and during half-time, he overheard a man talking to his wife and friends. The man said, "Look at that disgusting Hell's Angel. Who let him in here?" He was referring to Nate. Nate couldn't believe his ears. He went up to the guy and said, "You're lucky I'm not a Hell's Angel. If I was, you'd be in big trouble. Have a nice evening."

His mother declared that college had ruined him. She told him, "Nathaniel, you have done something for which I can never forgive you."

"What?" he said, astonished.

"I can't tell you," she said, and walked away.

"Oh, great. You'll never forgive me, and you won't tell me what for. Thanks a lot."

His father had warned him that he might do something he would regret for the rest of his life, and then his mother told him that he already had, and he didn't know what either of them was talking about. It felt perfect. The cat was out of the bag. He was bad, and that was good. If he was going to be chastised, he might as well feel like he deserved it, and he did.

Tectonic Plates

There was a part of the town in the dream that Nate wanted to show his old man. It felt good being in the driver's seat. His father was in the back, as they rolled along, getting into faster and faster traffic. The highway was divided by a wide, flat, gravel median. The big, sleek '64 Pontiac was unwieldy, and Nate was concerned. The car slipped off the one-way onto the gravel. The car seemed to fly, nearly out of control, across the gravel, and almost into the oncoming traffic.

It was frightening, as the huge American car edged closer and closer to disaster and then back away from it. Nate was afraid, but he managed to bring the car to a stop, in heavy traffic, in driving rain, on an unsure surface. Ahead of the car, was the mouth of a culvert. A raging river ran under the ground between the two lanes of traffic, under the gravel section, on which he and his father drove. At the mouth of the underground river, there was a walkway formed of large, overlapping plates of steel.

There was such a force of wind blowing, that the plates were buckling and lifting. Directly in front of the car, a man was crossing the plates in a torrential rain. Nate was afraid the man would be blown off the plates. He was afraid the plates would blow onto the top of the car he and his father were in.

Nate pulled out into the traffic and held close to the inside lane. He was getting into a left-turn lane, when he discovered it was a bike lane. He narrowly missed hitting a divider and two bicyclists. He was afraid and cried out, "Oh, no!" but managed to avoid a collision. He drove out into the wide

cross-street, and turned left, hoping to circle the business district and find a place to park the car. He cut across the traffic, toward a side street, directly in front of an oncoming car.

He said to his father, "I'm beginning to lose it." He felt sick and disoriented. He pulled to a stop on the sidestreet, in front of a huge pile of trash and the fallen branches from the nearby palm trees. As the car came to a stop, Nate slumped onto the console between the front bucket seats. He spoke in the voice of a five year old boy.

"I want my daddy." His right arm reached into the backseat to make contact with his father. He couldn't hear any sound. He couldn't see into the back. He thought he could make out the shape of a man. His hand reached across what felt like a leg, but maybe it was a cock. All the time that he was crying out, he felt foolish and frightened. He was twenty years old, and he was crying out like a child.

"I want my daddy."

It was the clear voice of a child speaking his need. It was the heart of a young man about to begin his life's journey, with or without the support of his father. He needed to be consoled. He needed his father behind him. He needed guidance. He needed to know that someone was there. He couldn't tell if anyone was there. The journey was fearful. The forces at work in the world were fearsome. The child in him was afraid. Inside himself, even in his dreams, he reached out for greater strength. He could handle the challenge of the journey, if he could feel the strength he needed, if he could find the courage.

A True Rival

There was a guy in his class Nate admired. He seemed larger than life, which made him exactly right, by Nate's standards. Sometimes, Nate felt smaller than life and sometimes life-size, and occasionally as big as Jeremy Gould. Gould was a tall, handsome Jew from New Jersey, already three points ahead in Nate's book. Nate had always wanted to be two inches taller. His father was three inches taller than he was, and two more inches would have brought Nate into range.

Being Jewish and from New Jersey was equivalent to being a Moor from Spain. It was romantic, exotic, and impressive to a Methodist from the Midwest.

Jeremy Gould was public, to the degree that Nate was private, and yet they occupied a lot of the same space. Nate marveled at Jeremy Gould's ease in his celebrity. Gould had a Romanesque profile, a booming, sonorous voice and big, dark eyes. His father was a Wall Street broker, who hung out with jazzmen from Harlem. Nate's father sold ice cream and hung out with nobody in particular.

Gould told the story, when they were freshmen, of the time he'd been arrested for smuggling marijuana across the border from Mexico. At eighteen, he had driven up to the border with a bundle of weed under the seat and several joints in his lungs. The border guards gave him a cursory glance and were about to pass him, when Jeremy smirked and said, suppressing his laughter, "Better not look under the seat." They did, of course, and Jeremy spent the next six months in a grungy Mexican jail,

barely surviving the ordeal, and that explained why he was a year older than everyone else.

Nate's roommate, Jim, said, one night, after witnessing Gould hold court, "If Jeremy Gould did everything he said he did, he'd be eighty-seven years old." He came back from the East and told everyone about the hot new singers in New York City, one year.

"There's this guy, Bob Dylan, that everyone's raving about. Forget him. He's a flash in the pan. The guy to watch is Davey Gude." It didn't matter that he was wrong. He was the sort of character everyone loved or hated, but always noticed and never forgot. No matter how foolish he might act, he was prominent. He was a lion in the path. His presence might have no lasting effect on the life around him, but as long as he was there, everyone took notice.

He said to Nate, "We should get together sometime," or "We ought to double-date sometime," but that time never came. He was an actor that no one thought showed any special talent, his singing was mediocre, his guitar ordinary. His politics were predictable, his scholarship average, he couldn't dance, and he had no athletic ability. He was a fair writer and a decent orator. All these things that Nate could do well, even brilliantly, seemed, to Nate, to lack the peculiar panache that Jeremy Gould exhibited with ease.

While Nate could evacuate his psychic space with ease, Gould seemed to fill his with equal ease. Jeremy Gould was full of himself, a phrase Nate found particularly appealing. People made fun of Gould for being full of himself, but everyone secretly coveted, at least the appearance, if not the reality, of anyone being exactly who they were. Nate was discovering that he was many different beings. The more he discovered, the more it seemed to him that there was no Nathaniel Axene. Perhaps there was only a space

in time called by that name, that could be rented out, or taken over, by any interested spirit, like an available park bench, a rent-a-soul, or more accurately, a personality for hire.

As a Freshman, he discovered his ability to become other people. He could walk behind people and become them. He would let the way the person in front of him walked, influence the way he felt, until he was walking exactly like the one he was following. It was eerie, and he felt like a thief, so he stopped. This gift made him a good actor and, in moments, a boon companion. Whoever he was with influenced him so subtly that he mirrored the other, whoever the other was. This talent for merging with others was remarkable, but it was frightening.

At a time when he ought to be testing himself in the world, he was discovering how unformed he truly was. He seemed to be expanding into a formless universe without a core to which he could return. He felt like a gas or a liquid, not a solid. To be with a woman was to become a woman. He did not want that. He wanted to become a man and stay a man, especially with a woman. He needed to feel grounded. He needed some consistent habit to cling to in a formless, shapeless universe. He found it in a bottle of Jim Beam. Jim Beam became his mentor.

When Nate was approaching graduation, Jeremy Gould invited him to his room for a chat. Nate was flattered by the invitation. They drank from a bottle of California wine. After a while, Jeremy leaned to the side, like a man of prominence considering the weight of what he was about to disclose.

“Nate,” said Jeremy, “I want you to know that, of all the men on this campus, I consider you my only true rival.” Wow. Nate knew immediately that that was a hell of a compliment, even if he couldn’t figure out exactly what it meant. It seem to mean a lot to Jeremy. Nate didn’t think in terms of rivalry,

but it was true that Jeremy Gould was the only man on campus that Nate felt was a real challenge.

Nate easily granted most people their strengths and abilities, because he didn't feel specifically challenged by them, but Jeremy was a challenge that was a recognition of his own capabilities. It was like playing better than you usually did, when you found yourself in the game with an especially good opponent.

There was a camaraderie of equals, that lifted the game to a new level of recognition and possibility. It was the way Jeremy said *true rival*, that made Nate feel recognized by someone who mattered.

They talked a while longer. The talk turned to Nate's relationship with Jenny.

"I have to tell you, Nate, that Jenny could be a real problem." Jeremy had known Jenny far longer than Nate had. When Jenny was a freshman, she was named *Beatnik Queen* by the Bohemian crowd in which Jeremy was a guiding light. It had been an in-joke, but it had been true. She had been the queen of that bunch. But what was the problem? Nate was puzzled.

"Why is that?" he said.

"I think she'll like you, only for what you can do, and not for who you are." He looked at Nate, genuinely, kindly. It didn't seem like a problem to Nate. He didn't like himself for who he was, and he didn't dislike himself, either. He didn't have a clue who he was. He couldn't imagine how one came to know who one was. All he knew was, that when he drank a little wine, a little bourbon, a little gin, or even a little scotch, he felt like he had a self, and he had a feeling of love for his self, for himself, in himself. It gave him a feeling of self-love, an approximation.

He wanted to love himself, and it seemed that he had found a way to do it. It worked, almost. It was close enough for horseshoes. And hand-grenades. And H-bombs.

As he sat and drank Cribari Red with Jeremy Gould, he felt full of himself, like a big man on campus, normal, like a man, a true rival of anyone, recognized, and ready for the world, ready to become a man of the world, a gentleman and a scholar, a regular guy.

A Fart in Time

Nate had always wanted to be one of the guys. His desire for acceptance applied to both sexes, in different ways. Nate joined the Orchesis Dance Company because he loved to dance. That was one reason. He stumbled on the other, one afternoon, wandering in the Fine Arts Building. He opened a door and discovered a half-dozen girls dancing in leotards in front of a wall of mirrors. The spectacle was enticing.

He knew Liz Sterling. She was a lead dancer in the company, and she introduced Nate to Mrs. Denkmann, who directed the company. Mrs. D was still quite young, and Mr. D was middle-aged. Mrs. D invited Nate to join the troupe, and he did. The clincher was that Phil Thomas was a dancer, and Nate knew Phil wasn't gay. Nate didn't know anybody who was gay, but it eased the question to know Phil wasn't. After Nate joined, David Shell joined, because he knew Nate wasn't gay, and by the time of the annual recital, half the jocks on campus were part of the show.

Nate was chosen as male lead, to dance opposite Mrs. Denkmann, in the finale. Nate felt the envy and resentment of the other male dancers, who were used to starring roles on the field of sport. Being relegated to the chorus was demoralizing. The afternoon of dress rehearsal, the company moved to the main stage in the newly-designed theatre. Mrs. D signaled Nate to join her center stage for the final run-through of their showstopping duet, or pas de deux, as they say in *the dance*. The football players, who never cared much for soccer players anyway, sat in a semi-

circle at the back of the stage in a phalanx of male camaraderie, a joining of embarrassment and shyness as much as strength and power.

Nate must have had beans for lunch, because the first time he leaped and landed, he felt a tiny burst of wind from the beans, and he became fearful. Nate and Mrs. D bounced around the stage, circling and circling, in the round of male and female dancers, sitting too near at hand to miss the sounds, as he tried to squelch the unsquelchable. Each time his feet touched down, a fart announced itself, until finally the set was over, and Nate sheepishly rejoined his friends and adversaries among the boys. The men.

They razed him. They had been cracking up all during the dance, trying to be quiet about it, but when Nate sat down, they ribbed him, mercilessly. Oddly, and to Nate's amazement, from then on, he felt no resentment and no jealousy from any of them. His display of flatulence had earned him the respect of the others. Their respect had been in abeyance, until he farted. His farts had made him normal, and that freed him to be the exception. Nothing else had ever worked so well. His kindness, generosity, openness, acceptance of others, his desire for friendship, hard work, nothing had had as much effect, as farting on stage had.

Later, when he watched Jeremy Gould refuse to play in a faculty-student softball game, he thought Jeremy should have played. He should have popped up and then stumbled over the first base bag. If he had eaten a little humility, he'd have been better loved, Nate thought. But Jeremy Gould had other obstacles and other remedies. It was apples and oranges to compare them with each other.

Still, it was a lesson for Nate. As Phil Thomas said to him, on another occasion, "Nate, you always blow your own cool." Jeremy Gould had a cool,

and he never blew it. Nate's cool seemed to be that he always blew it. It's hard work maintaining a cool. Whenever Nate could feel a cool coming on, it was exhilarating, but soon, it was exhausting, and it became easier to pull the rug out from under himself, than it was to wait for someone else to do it.

No matter how many rugs were pulled out from under Jeremy Gould, he seemed to be standing on another, even fancier rug, underneath the old one. Jeremy Gould had a cool, and rugs were irrelevant. Nate had no cool he could count on, yanked his own rugs, and learned the virtues of that. The virtues became the next target.

If innocence is a virtue, and it is, it has no handle for control. Nate hoped that experience would give him control of innocence. He thought he was a fool in his innocence, even though it had always been the land of his heart. Perhaps he would not be a fool, if he could learn to make himself a fool. Of course, nothing is ever so conscious. Nate was just trying to come up with some tricks to get along in the world. The innocence of his farts had been good for his standing in the community, and he immediately began to figure how he could capitalize on it. He couldn't.

Beat the Devil

Nate sat in the Owl and Monkey Cafe and thought, *I wish I was forty-five. It's probably going to take that long for me to sort all this shit out.* He had turned to his friend, Curt, one day, when they were painting a house and said, "Curt, I feel like I'm making it all up."

I need to sit still, he thought, *I need to take up residence somewhere.* He looked around at the cafe. *This looks like a likely enough spot.* In fact, the cafe seemed, in that moment, like a watering hole, where all the animals came, on the edge of the Great Serengeti Plain. It felt like time to find out just which animal he was.

The woman sitting across from him had gone up to the counter and come back with a half-carafe of red wine and two glasses. She sat down and smiled at Nate.

"I hate to drink alone," she said. "Would you care to join me?" Nate looked at the wine. He looked at the woman. She was a lot better looking than he had first noticed. And he loved the taste of burgundy. It filled his throat. It filled the space around his heart. It filled the holes in his raggedy spirit. It was the most normal thing in the world to say yes. He said no.

"Thanks," he said, "but I think I'm allergic to that stuff." His words surprised him.

"That's too bad," she said and poured herself a full glass. The red juice splashed like maroon kool-ade. It looked beautiful, it smelled wonderful, it glistened on her sensuous lips.

"How do you know you're allergic?" she said.

“Because I like it, and it treats me like shit. I expect it to love me, and it says it loves me. I believe it, when it says it loves me. Then it starts to run my life, and then it runs my life, and then it runs my life into the ground. It kicks the shit out of me, with a big grin on its face.” He was astounded by the truth pouring out of his mouth, like wine out of a jug, uncorked after a hundred years in a dark, dank cellar.

“That sound like more than an allergy,” she said.

“Yeah, it sounds like an obsessive love affair with a nasty woman.” He seemed to be understanding something for the first time. He didn’t know where it was coming from. It was like he’d been keeping a secret, and telling it, he felt free.

“Or man,” she said, as if she had some sense of it, herself. He took a deep breath and looked at the tabletop for a second. Then he looked up at the woman and let out a soft sigh from deep in his chest.

“I’m Nate. What’s your name, if I may be so bold?” he said, as natural as breathing.

“My name is Jennifer,” she said and held out her hand. Nate touched the hand, held it, and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Jennifer. The first woman I ever drank with was named Jenny.”

“And the last?” she said, turning her head, slightly to the side, as if she wasn’t sure what answer she wanted to hear. He thought of saying, “Yes, the last.” It welled up in him. The prospect of saying, “Yes, the last,” spread in his body like a transfusion. He looked at the woman sitting across from him for a long time. He was able to look in her eyes, without looking away, without looking for anything.

“The last,” he said. He felt like he had come out of a long sleep. He felt alive.

“There’s a movie playing around the corner, a revival. I was thinking about going to it,” she said, with a hint in her voice.

“I like old movies. Which one is it?”

“Its *Beat the Devil*. It’s a Bogart movie.”

“That’s the one they made up as they went along. I can’t think of anything more appropriate. Oh, I haven’t told you my name. My name is Nate. Nate Axene, but you can call me Bill.” She looked at him and laughed, a little.

“You did tell me your name, but you didn’t tell me you had more than one.” He looked at her and smiled like a happy kid, and she smiled back like a shy, curious girl.

At that moment, Nate turned. He looked at the door. There was a man in the doorway. When he had come in, a bell rang. The same bell rang when anyone came in, but Nate had only heard it the last time. He recognized the man. It was Ivan Johns, an old poet he knew from around, a strange old bird he’d talked to, a few times. Ivan looked at Nate and Jennifer, and he entered the room like a blessing on both of their houses. He came over to their table. Nate introduced Ivan to Jennifer and her to him. Ivan spoke to her, politely, almost courtly.

“It is a great pleasure, Jennifer.” He glanced at Nate and then back to Jennifer. “I’m a patient man, Jennifer, but until this moment, this young man has had me a bit mystified.” He sighed. “But, no more.” He paused. He was holding each of them by one hand. He let the hands go.

“I’ll go, now. I have some work to look over.” He put his hand on the leather pouch that was hung over his shoulder.

“Tell me, Ivan,” Nate said, because he liked to hear Ivan talk, “Do you have any advice for us, today.” Ivan Johns knew that Nate was kidding with

him, if only a little. But he also knew that Nate listened to what he had to say. Ivan felt like a father to Nate. It was a feeling he'd come to like, as he'd gotten older, and yes, he thought, even a little wiser.

He looked at them both, and he thought about nothing in particular, and then he said, "Love is my only advice. It's not nearly as dangerous as everyone thinks. But, here's the trick. Most people miss this one. You get to keep the love you give away, as long as you realize it comes out of your own heart. If you see where it comes from, you can't lose it. The source of love is inexhaustible. That's my advice for today."

"Thanks, Ivan," said Nate. He got the feeling, when he listened to Ivan, that it didn't even matter what he said, that the way he said it was as important as what he said.

"Thank you," said Jennifer. "I'm glad I got to meet you."

"The pleasure is entirely mine," Ivan said, and made a half bow. A brief moment took a very long time to pass, and then he turned to leave.

The Maintenance Crew

Ivan Johns retired to the back of the cafe, leaving Nate and Jennifer in an afterglow of good feeling. They both sat quietly. Nate looked around at the cafe. He felt as if his internal organs had been replaced with newer, younger, stronger ones. Jennifer broke the silence.

“Would you like to go out back? There’s a garden behind the cafe. It’s not fancy, but it’s nice?”

“Great idea,” he said, and he gathered up his cup and saucer. Jennifer moved away from the table.

“Aren’t you going to take your wine?” he asked.

“Nah, I lost interest. I think I’m allergic to it.”

“Oh, sure,” Nate said, enjoying the joke.

“Well, you know, allergies are funny. They can crop up at the strangest times.”

“Aint it the truth?” said Nate. He stopped at the counter. “Can I get you something else? Cappucino? Latte?”

“A latte.”

“Two lattes,” he said to the girl behind the counter. They found a quiet spot on the grass in the fenced yard, by a flowering begonia, and sat down.

“Tell me a story, Bill, I mean, Nate. Tell me what’s going on. What do you and Ivan have in common? I look at you, and I see a man who’s about to explode, like a dormant volcano. I like it, but what’s it all about?”

Nate looked at Jennifer and then past her, through the back window of the cafe, to where Ivan sat. He was looking back at Nate. He looked at Nate

and nodded. Nate turned back to Jennifer, and the sun hit his eyes like a warm flood.

“This is a lot harder than I thought.”

“Just make it up as you go along. I’m in no hurry,” she said.

“I’m a poet, and so is he. I’ve been trying to find out what’s missing in my life, and now I can’t remember the question. I’ve thought a lot about the dark side, so to speak, and I’m beginning to get it. I thought I had it figured it out. I thought booze had something to do with it, and now I think that’s a red herring. Someone said I was an explorer of the dark side. I never intended to do that. I didn’t even know what the dark side was. I sure didn’t think I had one. I felt inferior to those who seemed to have a dark side, like they had depth, and I was shallow.”

Nate looked at Jennifer for a second. “Are you sure you want to hear this? I don’t know what I’m talking about, and I don’t know where I’m going with this.”

“That’s my favorite kind of story.”

“I’ve been thinking about what happened, you know, over the years.”

“Like what.”

“Why should my story interest you?”

“I’m a good listener. I like stories. You’re like a good book I just picked up. Don’t close your covers on me, now. I’m just getting into it.”

“It started when I was in college. There was a guy there who dated Jenny, my ex-wife, the girl who taught me how to drink. Anyway, he dated her before I came along. He was the most formidable intellect, wit, and scholar of us all. He had written a novel by the time he was a Senior. I had written one poem, in 7th Grade. It was called *I Love to Wander*, and it was all

about vales and dales and glens. Shit, I couldn't tell the difference between them. It just sounded nice.

Anyway, he invited me to his room one night, when we were seniors. For some reason, he wanted to read his stuff to me. I guess he thought I was an equal. I didn't. I thought I was an idiot. I was blown away. He read to me from his novel, all about his insane brother, who was actually saner than the doctors at the asylum. It was thick with pain, misery, angst, torment, bitterness. All the stuff I longed for and thought I didn't possess.

When he finished reading to me, I didn't know what to say. I just sat there, and finally, I got up, and I went home. I felt like a fool. How was I ever going to call myself an artist, if I continued to be such a featherbrained lightweight? That's what I thought. And I was a virgin. I had lots of girlfriends, but I never got laid. That felt like a crime, all of a sudden.

I got drunk. Conveniently, the girl I wanted to have sex with was the one who brought me the bottle. Perfect. I had a ticket to ride. I wasn't drunk all the time. I wasn't drunk at all. I could drink all night and never get drunk, never get sick, and I didn't have hangovers. I didn't slur my words. I could dance, and I could fuck. I felt like a hero. I could dance on the roof, but the house was still empty.

I was an artist at the time. I was just starting to write. I went to Graduate School in Art, and I dried up. I sat in front of my canvas with a bottle of Jim Beam, and nothing happened. I went to a professor. I told him what was happening. He said, *Go paint trees*. I thought, *Go fuck yourself*. I quit graduate school.

I got a job working in a factory. I figured that was great. I was a worker among workers. Except the other workers resented my presence. They couldn't figure out what a college boy was doing in the factory. They

wouldn't work there, if they had any choice in the matter. I got an ulcer. I was doubled over in pain, and I got fired for loafing on the job." He paused.

"Damn, this is a bitch. I used to brag about all this shit. You know, *White boy gets tough*. What a crock."

He looked at Jennifer again. "This is really weird. I'm telling my life-story to a stranger. And it's a bitch. And it feels good. A few hours ago, or ten minutes ago, I was sitting in a shrink's office, like a catatonic moron. It was making him crazy, so he sent me down here, to talk to some poor unsuspecting guinea pig. Like you. Like sending an idiot out to buy a candybar. Or like teaching a stutterer to talk to strangers. Now I think he's a genius." Nate's shyness was matched by a calmness.

"What happened in the factory," she said.

"There was a guy on the maintenance crew named Moreno. Jose Moreno. But everybody called him Joe. Except for one guy who called him Mayonnaise. He thought it was real funny. *Hey, Mayonnaise, where's the hammer?* Shit like that. So, you know what Moreno did? He called the guy the same thing. The guy called Moreno *Mayonnaise*, and Moreno called him *Mayonnaise*. That threw him. He didn't get it. It didn't make any sense at all. Finally, he gave up and quit talking to Moreno.

One time, a bunch of us were way down in the bowels of the factory, taking an unauthorized break. We were on the maintenance crew, so we had the run of the place. The crew bosses knew all the tricks. I was a flunky with Moreno and old man Amundson, the Swede. And Lester was there. And a guy called Haircut. They called him Haircut, because all he had going for him, that he could be proud of, was his damn haircut. He had a ducktail, with a big pompador wave in front. He was dumb and slow and homely, but he had a great haircut, so, of course, everybody made fun of his haircut. At

lunch, we all sat down together, and one day, Haircut said two things the whole time. At the beginning of lunch, he said, *Oh, shit, I got to go piss.* At the end of lunch, he said, *Oh, piss, I gotta go shit.* Jennifer laughed, and Nate smiled back at her.

“More?” he said.

“More,” she said.

“We were taking a break in the hole, some time in the afternoon, although it was hard to tell. Going to work in the factory was like going down in the mines. It was dark when I went to work, and dark when I got off. It was December in Illinois. It was freezing cold outside. The foundary was like Hell on a typical day in Hell. Going down in the storage rooms under the main floor of the factory felt like being in the Devil’s bomb shelter. It was dark, and it stunk, and it was filthy with dust that seemed to have been around since before Time began. We were sitting there, and Lester starts kidding Moreno about being called Mayonnaise, real good-natured, and Moreno goes fucking nuts. He’s a little guy, in his 40’s or 50’s. Who knows? You couldn’t tell. He starts yelling at Lester.

“*Get out of my face, you goddam Nazi lover,* he said. Lester married a German girl, and Moreno fought in Germany in the War, and the fact that Lester is married to a German woman is too much for Moreno, even though the woman is so young she must have been a baby during the War. Lester tries to calm Moreno down. He tells him about his wife, how’s she’s real nice and not a Nazi, at all.

“*I hate all Germans, says Moreno. I hate the rotten sons-of-bitch mother-fuckers. They trained me to kill Germans, and I killed Germans. I hated them, and I killed them, and I still hate them.*”

But not all Germans are bad, says Lester, and the old Swede says, Yah, dat's right, Joe, not all Krauts is bad.

Don't say Krauts, Swede, I don't like that word, says Lester.

That's because you're married to a goddam Kraut, says Moreno, and they go around again. Finally, they all get tired and quiet. We were all just sitting there. Moreno looks around, and then he says, Before the War, I had a wife and two kids. I loved my wife. I loved my kids. I loved them more than anything. Then, the war comes along, and I got drafted, and they taught me how to kill. They sent me over to Germany, and I killed the Germans, just like they wanted me to. Then the war is over, and they send me home. They put me on a ship, and they bring me home, and they say, The War's over. So long. I got home, and I looked at my wife and kids, and I didn't feel a thing. They taught me how to fight, but they didn't teach me how to stop. They didn't teach me how to love my wife again. I got home from the war, and I didn't stop fighting for six months. After a while, my wife left me and took the kids, and now I'm working in this fucking John Deere Harvester, and I have to work with guys who are married to fucking Nazi's, for Christ's sake.

I'm sorry, Joe, said Lester, but my wife's not no damn Nazi.

And don't call me Joe. My name aint Joe. My name is Jose Moreno, and my name aint Mayonnaise, either. Get it?

Sure, Joe. I'm sorry.

"And that's what I thought of the dark side, as we've come to know and love it. You learn how to be miserable and hate yourself, and that's what it's all about. You take people with love in their hearts, and you hand them a bottle or a gun, and you say, Here, go kill yourself. Have fun. Be a man. And I bought it. When Vietnam was on, I wanted to join the Marines and

show those motherfuckers that I was as tough as they were. And I was afraid, because I *knew* I could enjoy pulling the trigger and blowing some poor bastard away. Because I was afraid of the feelings in my heart, and it's easier not to feel, than it is to feel. When you don't feel anything in your heart, the next step is to kill or to die, because when your heart is dead, you're dead. The more I drank, the more I felt like Moreno. I watched it happen. The more it happened, the more I thought I understood about the dark side.

I'll tell you a little secret. God talks to me through my heart, and when my heart is pumped full of booze, I can't hear God talking. I can't hear my little baby self talking, and those two carry on the best conversation of all.

You know what? It doesn't matter to me who my Mommy and Daddy were or what bullshit they laid on me, and what happened after that, because once, there was a little kid with a heart as big as an oak, and Ivan is right, and damn, I feel like I'm talking too much, and how are you, and it's a beautiful day. Whew! This is great. I can't remember when I talked like this. I can't remember *if I ever* talked like this. Does any of this make any sense? Do you mind me talking so much?"

He looked at her, and he realized that, for the first time in his life, he didn't automatically gauge and assume any of her characteristics. He let her listen to him. He let himself be himself.

"No. I don't mind," she said, "I like what you say. It's more than OK. It's great. When I listen to you, I feel like I'm talking, too."

Nate sat for a moment. He felt sheets of ice fall away from his heart, from his eyes, from his tongue, revealing his true self.

“This is me at my worst,” he said, “being myself.” Nate put his hand over his chest, and he began to breathe, drawing deep breaths and letting them out.

Poet's Milk

“What are you thinking about, now?” Jennifer said, shifting her body weight from one rump to the other, as easily as a cat, sunning itself, turns toward the warmth.

“About the weather in Nebraska, where I was a kid. We had a mud storm, once. There was a dust storm, and it rained at the same time. Once, there was a dust storm after a show storm, so we had brown snow. We were caught in a hail storm, one summer, sitting in the car, in the town of Indianola. The hailstones were as big as golf balls, but no more scary than ping pong balls.

The snow drifted as much as fifteen feet deep. The rain washed down the streets like rivers. I had a paper route, and the first Winter, I got caught in a driving snow storm. I cut the route short and plodded home with my hands nearly frostbitten. I felt bad I didn't finish my route. In the Summer, a lady stopped me and said, *Sonny, do you know how hot it is?* I said, *No*, and she said *It's a hundred and five degrees*. I said, *Is that right?* and she said, *Yes, but it doesn't feel that hot, because it's a dry heat*. I thought, *Well, OK, I guess so*. The sky was incredible, as if God made up for boring landscapes with fantastic skies. The clouds were gargantuan and the colors were always changing.

“In Illinois, it rained and rained and rained. When the Mississippi flooded, you felt lucky to be on a hill. The Illinois winters seemed longer and crueler than the winters in Nebraska. Probably because it's drier in Nebraska, or because I was a kid in Nebraska, and when you're a kid, everything is

exactly as it's supposed to be. Nebraska had crickets every Summer, or locusts. I stayed with some folks when I was passing through, a while back, and when we were having breakfast, I mentioned the steady hum of the locusts. I said it was a beautiful tone. They looked at me oddly and said, *What locusts?* Anyway, I love weather. It proves that God is not rational and not boring. It fulfills the ultimate requirement of life. It's surprising."

"Surprise me some more," she said, and touched his forearm with a finger.

"In 9th Grade, I was the editor of the annual. Miss Stinson was the advisor. She wore red support shoes. We were told to come up with designs for the sections, you know, pictures of kids involved in activities and sports. I was good at drawing. I had a book of Walter Lantz's *How to Draw Cartoons*, so I looked at various cartoon figures, and I redesigned them. I drew a track uniform on one, and I had another one playing the tuba.

I submitted it, and Miss Stinson called me into her office, after school. She told me she was sorry, but she had to reject mine, because they were too good, so I must have traced them, and tracing wasn't allowed. She took my drawings, put them on the shelf in her closet, and she chose someone who drew stick figures. I was the editor, and she said I had cheated. And you know what I did about it? Nothing. I went home, and forgot about it. I never told my parents anything. I should have. If I had different parents, or if I was a different kid, or if this was a different world, but I wasn't, they weren't, and it isn't, so I didn't. That sort of thing kept happening to me, and I had no right to bitch, because I was the editor, or the captain, or the prize winner, and who was I to complain?

When I was eleven, an older boy took me into his basement and got me to

act out some sex game with his little girl cousin. And you know what I did about it? Nothing. And until this very minute, I thought I was the one who molested the little girl.

I never thought about what was done to me. I never asked anybody for any help, because I wasn't supposed to need any help. When I was sick with fever, I didn't cry out. When I was cheated, lied to, manipulated, I didn't cry out, because I was too good to complain, and if you're too damn good, you deserve to be fucked over. I didn't feel bad when bad shit happened to me. I felt like justice was being done."

"What about being a poet?" she said. He looked at her, and he saw that she was with him.

"One day, in college, I was sitting in Carl Landsberg's Poetry class, joking around with Carol Bradley, and Landsberg came in. He was as tall as the great poet, William Butler Yeats. He loved Yeats, he looked like Yeats, he wrote a book on Yeats. He smoked unfiltered Herbert Tarytons, and his fingers were yellow to the elbows. He sat down, opened up his book, and started to read a poem of Yeats'. He never looked up once. He had a beautiful voice, and he read softly. When he finished, he took a long drag off his Tareyton and he said, almost in a whisper, *That . . . is poetry.*

The sadness of his reading was matched by the power of the language. Right then and there, I became a poet. I heard a quote from Cyril Connelly that poetry was born of a great imagination and a rotten childhood. I thought that let me out. I couldn't be a poet. I thought *Leave it to Beaver* was about me. We lived in a cocoon of unreality, just like television, except that reality kept seeping through the cracks, like the Slime that ate Dreamland. When booze told me it was OK to feel pain, and it didn't have to hurt, I said, *Well, all right.*

I've been sober for a while, now, but I never thought about it like I have, today. Everybody I know, drinks. Wine is poets' milk, they say. I drank in order to feel what I thought I should feel, not what I really felt. It's like I took a tour of pain and joy, and when I got back from the tour, all I had to show for it was hang-over souvenirs, like an ashtray from Niagara Falls or a towel that says Morocco. This is beginning to make sense. There's the Nate my parents made up, and there's the Nate I made up, and now, I think there's a real Nate nobody made up, except maybe God."

Nate glanced away from Jennifer, for a second, and saw Ivan get up from his table, wave and smile, as he left the cafe. "Damn," he said, as if his great-great-great-grandfather had just given him the key to the mysteries, like the family ring. A little boy began playing in his heart.

One afternoon, while he was still very toxic, he sat in Doc Robbins office and he had a vision. He was inside his own eyeballs, looking out, like through a peep-hole. Inside the cave of his mind was a clearing in the woods, and in the clearing was a tree. Around the tree were three figures, a big brown bear, a little boy, and a kind of satyr-jester. They communicated with Nate and asked him if he would make sure they would be protected. Nate answered that he would.

As soon as he told them that he would take care of them and protect them, they all relaxed. The bear began scratching his back against the tree with great sensual satisfaction. The little boy sat down at the foot of the tree and began to daydreaming. The satyr did a jig and made a face of delight and mischief.

The Middle of the Ocean

Nate looked at Jennifer. “I feel terrific. I feel like swimming. We could go see Ted. You know Ted? Ted is the guy who causes the tides. He sits in a rowboat in the middle of the Pacific. He dips his oar in the water on each side of his boat. And, as he does, he says, *Asía . . . América . . . Asía . . . América*. How would you like to swim out to the middle of the Pacific and say hello to Ted.”

“Sure,” said Jennifer, “as long as we don’t have to wear suits.” Nate looked into the pools of her eyes, and he wasn’t afraid of falling into them. He wasn’t afraid of drowning.

“I had a dream, once,” he said, “I was in the middle of the ocean, and I panicked. It was too far to swim to shore, and then I gave up. I decided, *What the hell*, and I gave up. I could swim, so I might as well swim in the sea, and it felt easy. It felt great. It felt like I could do that forever. I forgot about the shore, and I swam like a fish. I was a fish, and I swam in the sea, and I was at peace.”

“I like that,” she said. “I want to be a fish, too.”

“OK, but you have to have the entrance fee.”

“What’s the entrance fee?”

“It’s a fin.”

“You mean like *the end* in French?”

“Yeah, or one buck five times. You have to be a doe with a lot of stamina to have one buck five times.”

“Well, I’ve got the doe, if you’ve got the time.”

They sat, for a time, under the flowering begonia, behind the Owl and Monkey, and then they went to the movies. Before they went to the movies, Nate stopped and was still for a moment.

“Jennifer, before we go to the movies, can I read you something?”

“Sure, what is it?” Marie said.

“It’s a poem I found. I wrote it, but I forgot I wrote it. It’s almost like someone else wrote it. I found it in a notebook. It’s not the sort of poem I usually write, but I like it.”

“Please read it,” she said. He took a folded piece of paper out of his shirt pocket, and he read the poem to her, in a gentle, natural voice.

He found me in the tub, praising water.
He found me in the trees, praising wind.
He found me on the roof, praising sun.
He found me in the garden, praising earth.
He found me in the mirror, praising him.

As he finished reading the poem, the last few words caught in his throat.

“That’s beautiful,” Jennifer said, softly.

“Yeah. I like it. I think it’s good. Maybe true Nate wrote it.”

“He’s a good poet. I think I’d like to hear more of his poems.”

“Me, too,” he said, and he looked at her and smiled. It was the kind of smile we have, when we are truly happy about anything.