

2

Tracks of My Fears

If you don't talk about something, maybe it will seem as if it never happened. Not thinking about it helps a lot too. Add them together and it becomes evident that it's a lot easier trying to forget than it is trying to understand.

According to members of my parents' generation, the ones who stoically overcame a Great Depression and a Great War, there was no such thing as a talking cure. The weak were talkers, especially men. For all of what males in my family went through during those "great" events, hardly a peep was uttered about any of it, while those who knew them solemnized their silence. It was more than just impolite to talk about yourself or someone else; it was in poor taste. Take my father's older brother Eddy, for instance, whom I knew for forty years. During World War II he served in the Navy. Two days after D-Day, his ship was navigating the English Channel when a torpedo from a German E-boat struck. Uncle Eddy's ship sank in less than an hour. Half of the crew died, some killed on board instantly and the rest later drowned waiting to be rescued. My Uncle Eddy was one of the survivors, and survival must have been harrowing. I found this out at the luncheon following his burial. Throw dirt on the man and it's suddenly okay to talk about him.

That's how it usually went. During funeral services someone might tap me on the shoulder, as I sat uncomfortably in a folding metal chair, or sidle up alongside me, as I gingerly leaned against a pockmarked accordion wall, and begin, "Did you know . . . ?" No, I didn't know. How could I have known that my mother's brother, Sammy, was involved in the liberation

8 Tracks of My Fears

of Europe when what I most knew about him was the superior quality of his barbecued chicken? At every cookout it was always “Did you have some of Uncle Sammy’s chicken? It’s the best one yet” but never how his squad was among the first to enter the death camps. I might as well have been living with a family of ascetics. Uncle Sammy guarded information about himself as well as he guarded his chicken recipe. No wonder men like him were so angry when a subsequent generation returned from Vietnam and spilled their guts about what they’d done and what they’d seen. Some things were better left unsaid, passing through hell being one of them. For men like my Uncle Sammy, discretion demonstrated a resolute, steely character. Talking about war, or any traumatic incident for that matter, was dishonorable. Another upside of this practice assures the person that he actually has a firm handle on the situation; that, in turn, reassures those around him that he does. Achieving the nonexistence of disturbing experiences usually begins by one’s blocking them from the mind. Silence emerges from the absence of anything to discuss. That’s how my parents tried to raise me.

We certainly never talked in my family about anything that affected us, at least not the really important stuff. My parents split up in 1964 at a time when nobody—and I mean nobody, except maybe movie stars—divorced or separated, at least not in the largely Catholic neighborhood I grew up in. I didn’t know a single other kid whose parents weren’t together. And I knew lots of kids. My parents were trendsetters in a way: We were one of the first openly dysfunctional families within a ten-mile radius, if not on Staten Island entirely. To augment our dysfunction, my parents got back together seven years later, when I was in eighth grade. During those seven years, and subsequently thereafter, they never talked about the divorce, except on that one occasion when they called me into the kitchen to announce that my father was “going away for a while.”

It was a late afternoon in late winter. I was six years old. My mother, father, and twelve-year-old sister were seated at the kitchen table. Clouds of blue-gray Pall-Mall smoke were stacked above a hanging ceiling light, while swirling ribbons hovered around the rest of the room. Both of my parents smoked back then, as did every adult who ever stepped inside our home. You could cure meat in our house after just one other couple came over for cake and coffee. My mother wasn’t a heavy smoker, but my father made up for it. He was a borderline chain smoker, firing up a fresh one every ten minutes or so. He wasn’t smoking when I entered the room, and I didn’t stay long enough to see him light one. I was standing in the door frame when my mother broke the news, as my father’s bowed gaze

remained fixed on his lap, which seemed a bit odd at the time. I simply said, “Oh” and started to back away. It didn’t occur to me to sit down and join them. I had been summoned while I was watching TV in the next room. I remember thinking that maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea if my father went on a little trip . . . but couldn’t I just get back to my program before the commercials end? My sister’s eyes were red and puffy from crying, while my mother’s face was compressed with annoyance and displeasure, a look I often saw whenever she was disappointed with someone, a look that crushed me shortly after I’d been shot. Despite my sister’s tears and my mother’s expression, I didn’t understand the severity of the situation, which wouldn’t be the last time. Maybe if they had told me outright—“Your father is leaving us, possibly forever”—I might have understood. I still don’t understand. To this day, their separation (they never actually divorced), an event that radically altered all of our lives, has never been discussed in our family. It’s as if it never occurred, which isn’t altogether surprising. Much about my parents is a mystery. To ask them would be a breach of an unspoken agreement. Even our silences were sealed by silence.

My father’s life is a near-total blank to me. He may as well have been sent to Earth from another planet for all I know about him. I know almost as little about my mother, although she’s more like from another country. At least now and then she told a few stories about her childhood. Except she tended to repeat the same ones, as if they were the safest to discuss, such as how she and her older sister Rosie felt embarrassed and humiliated whenever they ate their sandwiches in front of the other grade-school children. Their bread had been freshly baked by my Italian grandmother, whereas the other “American” kids’ sandwiches were made with store-bought bread. This was during the 1930s. The background to the story changes each time she tells it, with her lamenting they were as poor as the kids on *The Little Rascals*, or with her celebrating her father’s shrewdness to keep them fairly comfortable during the worst days of the Depression. It wasn’t much to hang a picture of a life on, but it was better than nothing, which was what I knew about my father’s childhood: practically nothing.

That’s why whenever the seal was broken the event stood out, like the time when he and I were driving over the Bayonne Bridge. I was home for winter recess from Johnson & Wales College. We were coming back from skiing at Camelback Mountain in the Poconos. As the car rounded over the bridge’s central spine, out of nowhere he told me about how he and a childhood friend used to shimmy to the top of the bridge’s span on

snowy days and drop snowballs onto the barges and tugboats below. As he began telling me the story, I craned my neck under the visor and looked up at the bridge's arch, examining its height as best as I could without smashing my face against the windshield. It clearly was a dangerous thing to have done. The slightest slip would have caused him to fall to his death.

"One time," he said, "I let one go that fell directly into a pot of boiling water a cook was carrying across the deck. It splattered all over him and he dropped the pot. Boy was he surprised, and mad as hell. It was a one-in-a-million shot, but it was one of those slow-moving barges. He didn't know what happened at first, until he looked up and could see the two of us hanging there. He started shaking his fist at us and cursing like crazy, I think in Russian, but what could he do?"

"Did you intentionally try to hit him?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think you did, but you missed and nailed the pot instead."

"As I said, it was one in a million."

He told me this story less than two years after I'd been shot. Maybe he did so on my behalf, as a cryptic lesson, to reveal to me that nobody's perfect or that young men are prone to do foolish things and perform wicked deeds. Still, the paucity of such personal discussions characterized our relationship, as it did with nearly every other man of my father's generation. They were stingy with expressing their emotions, or much of anything, while stubbornly adhering to rather narrow views of correct behavior. While my Uncle Sammy may have been a war hero, and famous for his barbecued chicken, he was intolerant of those who differed from his orthodoxy, which caused him not only to snub any man who didn't work with his hands but also to be a rabid racist and a staunch anti-Semite. Any stranger who deviated from his version of normalcy might have to deal with his unpredictable rage, while any intimate who did so might have to spend the remainder of their lives pitted against his wrathful apathy.

When my parents separated, he wrote off my mother practically right after my father stepped out the door. For the next thirty-five years of his life he treated her with sanctimonious indifference. During the entire time my father was gone, my mother's only brother (she had six sisters) never visited her, never came by to help her, and never once dropped in to spend time with me or my sister. To him, it had been my mother's responsibility to keep her man at home, whatever the circumstances, and so he blamed her for whatever fatal flaw in her character had caused my father to leave. He'd never tell her that. He didn't have to. I guess to him it was quite evident where he stood, just as he wouldn't say a word to my father about

how he felt about his shortcomings as a husband and as a father, and just as he would never say a word about the mayhem, cruelty, and suffering he encountered in the war. He simply unleashed those restrained feelings by carrying a baseball bat in the trunk of his car and confronting the “niggers and spics” who dared to share the road with him. The man was clearly a raging sea of repressed emotions and scalding ruminations, but you’d never know it by looking at him. The stereotype of the passionate, easily eruptible Italian did not fit him in the least. He was Nordic cool, a man of few words who kept everyone at a distance, including his wife, my Aunt Grace. With his calculated respectability, he convinced those closest to him how rock-solid and self-assured he was because his gutters were always free of debris, his basement tool shed was arranged as fastidiously as a hardware store, and his symmetrical hedges, overflowing flower beds, and swollen vegetable garden all looked as if they could appear in magazines.

He worked as an auto mechanic in a garage for the New York City Police Department. He was the cleanest “grease monkey” I have ever seen. His garage served the same precinct my father worked in until my dad was transferred. They strained and stretched cordiality with each other, while neither would ever say a word about how they really felt. I think my Uncle Sammy utterly despised my father. He treated all of us with one part disregard and one part derision. My sister and I were guilty by association. He’d wiped his hands clean of their filthy separation, even if that meant disavowing my mother when she needed his help the most. It was part of his generation’s code, part of being a “real” man, to speak softly (or not at all) and carry a big stick (or a baseball bat). This attitude about a man’s real duty partially explains why my father urged me to remain tight-lipped about being shot.

“You shouldn’t let it take over your life, letting it become such a big deal that it dominates who you are,” he urged. We were on our way to the Oakwood Heights train station, located on Guyon Avenue, to buy a newspaper at a store across from it. As it turned out, he started talking to me about the shooting as we were walking along South Railroad Avenue, which paralleled the commuter train tracks running below street level, the very same tracks Dougie had scuttled along three weeks earlier. In fact, we were only a couple of blocks from where I’d been shot. I’m sure that was uppermost in his mind. He had chosen the setting to underscore his message.

“You know,” he added, “it’s probably a good idea to forget about it altogether and move on.”

And so I did, for better and for worse. In hindsight, it looks more like

12 Tracks of My Fears

it was worse than it was better to put it behind me, as if it had never happened. It took on a life of its own because the experience essentially saved my life. Getting shot, and the aftermath of the shooting, was too much a part of me to forget it and get away with making believe it hadn't happened. While I have traveled a great distance since then, inventing that rare "second act" by becoming a college professor, I wonder how much further I could have gone if I hadn't heeded his words so religiously. In the long run, they may have hindered me more than advanced me, because in my mind I was nearly grateful for the experience. It felt like a revelation. It felt like a rebirth. Granted, I never got the chance to explain it to my parents, or to anyone, for that matter, in that. But couldn't they see for themselves that I was a changed man because of it? In less than a year I went from being practically a high school dropout to sitting in an AP Calculus class. Shouldn't my father and my mother have understood the impact that getting nearly shot to death had had on me? Were they blind? Did they metaphorically gouge their eyes out like Oedipus because they preferred not to see what was too painful for them, to think their son was a thug, and how that fact would reflect upon them? Maybe they wanted me to forget it had ever happened because they wanted to forget it ever happened to *them*?

If that's true, then they wanted me to turn a blind eye, for their recovery, to what happened, thereby refusing to see how important it was for me to embrace the experience as part of mine. They simply didn't want to tackle it head-on, whereas I did. In many ways the experience had made me much wiser and more mature than they, but at the time I didn't know that. I couldn't see what they were refusing to see. In many respects, I spent far too many years following their blind lead and following in the footsteps of their ignorance. How dumb was it for them to pretend that nothing had happened? It was a lie, really.

After all, very physical proof existed that something *had* happened. One of those bullets went right through my shoulder, and another smashed into my lung, collapsing it. I have a ginormous scar on my body. It was evident something had happened to me. Less evident was the impact that watching someone administer my last rites had: the impact on my sense of self. That struck far deeper and left an even bigger mark than any of the bullets. It went to the very core of my being. But I couldn't tell them about that because I couldn't talk about any of it. It's why I struggled so mightily with them to become a college professor, coming up against their lesser expectations of me, as well as their total lack of support in what I wanted to achieve in my life. Because I couldn't speak of "the accident"

at all, I couldn't speak of what I'd learned that night in the ER. I couldn't mention the epiphany as my claim to a better future and a better "self" altogether. So when opportunities came along and my parents—especially my mother—discounted them as being unreachable or a waste of time, especially by someone like me, I agreed. I stayed silent. And I moved on, just as my father had asked me to do about being shot. Forget it and move on. In moving on I also became as protective about my personal life and as emotionally cautious as my parents. Partly, that was a good thing. After all, holding up a pizza truck isn't exactly something to boast about, nor is being nearly shot to death by a cop a good way to pad a CV. That part I get. But I think I understood that already on my own.

For me to have ignored it for so long seems perversely ignorant, but in a calculated, intentional way. It would be like writing a history of the United States and deciding to leave out the Civil War because it was a gruesome part of the nation's development. Sure, being shot was one of the worst things that ever happened to me, but it also was one of the best things that ever happened to me, sort of like those opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*, the best of things, the worst of things. For my parents, eliminating it entirely was the best solution to one of the worst things that happened to them . . . I mean, me. But you can't realistically shave off one side of a coin because you prefer the other. Even if it could be done it would be a piece of counterfeit currency. Was that what they were asking of me, to be a phony?

Facing death in such a dramatically unheroic way produced extraordinary insights. Its lasting impression bore great relevance: The moment is tattooed onto my brain, the bad and the good. My parents' insisting I shove the entire incident into a shadowy corner, by pretending it never happened, meant that its enlightening qualities couldn't be spoken of either. They believed nothing good could possibly have come from it, and therefore nothing good could possibly come from talking about it. So I didn't. Part of my recovery, so I believed, was to become The Best Damn Dutiful Son in the World. As a result, I had to perform a rather wacky self-induced exorcism of sorts. At the very least, I knew I could never share with others what I'd learned because that would mean I'd have to talk about being shot. It now seems egregiously dishonest—about about what I was, what I became, and who I am now as a consequence. If the experience doesn't exist, then how can I? As a teacher, to me the sham seems doubly unfortunate—wasted opportunities, really. Throughout these years I could have shared that story with my students, and maybe they could have learned a thing or two from it. In following my father's words to the

14 Tracks of My Fears

letter, I had a hand in scripting my own personal paradox—an eclipsed epiphany. At the very least it was a magic trick: a disappearing act.

For them, I had to keep the experience stored like radioactive material buried under miles of concrete. If my being shot had leaked out, further pain and suffering would surely follow. Allowing others to know about it not only ran the risk of my becoming identified by it—what would someone think of such a person?—but it also increased the danger of what others would do with such knowledge. My mother felt that any kind of information about us, no matter how large or how small, and no matter how good or how bad, could be used against us. “Don’t tell anyone how much you make on your paper route,” she would say. “They’ll be jealous.” Imagine the slings and arrows fired at me if people knew I’d committed a crime and had been practically shot to death doing it! Only family could be trusted. They knew how to keep secrets and how to circumvent conversations about tangled feelings. These were the terms my father was trying to set as we walked along the railroad tracks.

Putting the incident behind me, as my father insisted, meant I would be able to get on with things. My father didn’t want me to embrace it as *the* definitive event of my life and then recklessly bank on its uniqueness, on its juvenile coolness. Even now I understand why he saw it that way. He feared that the minor celebrity status he knew I was gaining with my peers and the attention I was receiving from the neighbors (all of it negative) would go to my head, as it had to Dougie’s—he’d turned himself into a John Dillinger wannabe. According to my dad’s reasoning, I might value being shot for all of the wrong reasons. He probably agreed with my mom as well. The more who knew, the worse off the family would be. It would bring further shame to them, to all of us. They had reared a criminal. What parent wants to be known for that? Already too many people knew. The story had been splashed across the front pages of the borough’s leading newspaper, the *Staten Island Advance*. Although our names weren’t used, given that I was underage, most people in our neighborhood knew the two families involved. Even the *New York Times* ran a piece on it, on how the son of a cop was nearly gunned down by another cop. I’m sure my dad must have been thinking about that too on the day he advised me to put it all behind me. What kind of cop was he to raise a son who turned to crime? “You need to put this behind you,” he said. He certainly must have wanted to.

It seemed like good advice at the time. I said little, if anything, in response. I really didn’t think I was entitled to. After all, if I hadn’t been a minor at the time, I would have had a criminal record. While I wasn’t a

criminal in the strict legal sense of the term, I was still a crook nonetheless. All I had was my guilt and mortification to stand on. I knew that only a jerk would do such a thing as I had done, for little more than a cheap thrill and not much more than fifty bucks. I was a crooked jerk. Why wouldn't I think my father's words were wise? I didn't even turn to face him, let alone say a word in response. "What happened is done, done and over with. Forget it and move on." I nodded in agreement. I never brought it up again, and neither did he. Neither did any of them. Case closed. I knew that's what he wanted, what everyone wanted. Silence is golden. It would be my salvation.

But it was awful advice, now that I look back on it. Nonetheless, I acted on it then with the tenacity of a trained terrier. But rather than latch on to something and never let go, I latched onto the invention of nothing and never let it go. I succeeded beyond my own imagination in not letting the *fact* of being shot from becoming a preoccupation, while barring anyone and everyone from knowing about it, as if state secrets, instead of a scar, were etched on my torso.

But secrecy has its price. Rather than allow the experience to take over my life, I found that its concealment did. I replaced one indefinite obsession with a definite one. Suppressing it became my life's mission. In the simplest terms, I wasn't really dealing with what happened, which is precisely what my parents wanted from me. Now, of course, I realize this placed a premium on its irrelevancy, a ridiculous proposition when you think about it. How could being shot and coming that close to death *not* be considered relevant in anyone's life? To my parents, my recovery and redemption involved ignoring an event that would be momentous in anyone's life. Ultimately, it boiled down to concealing the truth, of what being shot had made out of me, because I couldn't admit to what had happened—including admitting it to myself. I certainly could never admit it to others.

In keeping attuned to my father's advice, I devoted myself to keeping the truth from everyone, even though it is visibly apparent that something horrible had happened to me. The scar runs from the middle of my stomach and wraps around to the middle of my back, the removed stitches leaving behind a railroad track pattern. For several years following the surgery that repaired my collapsed lung, the pink strip, as thick as clothing line, and small white cross-sections, as long as sewing needles, could be seen from a distance. (To me, it appeared as red as a traffic light and as wide as a fist.) I had been sawed nearly in half, across the center of my body, like a rusty tin can that can't be opened from its top. Possessed of such an obvious tell-

16 Tracks of My Fears

tale sign, and the need to hide its meaning, I could never remove my shirt in front of anyone. Doing so would jeopardize my scripted undertaking of confidentiality, thereby invariably inviting unwanted questions about the scar's origin. I therefore avoided any circumstance that would require showing the disfigurement to anyone, including my college roommate. I engaged in all sorts of machinations and subterfuges as a result. It's not easy never getting undressed in front of someone you live with day after day. For the record: Hiding and lying are exhausting when they're a full-time job.

Before attending Boston University, I went to Johnson & Wales College in Providence, Rhode Island. Back then it was a two-year college, known mostly for its culinary school; it also had a business division where students could get associate degrees in accounting or management or, as in my case, court reporting—a career and college choice not of my choosing (more on that later). Not far from Providence was a rather unspoiled, picturesque state beach called Horseneck in Westport, Massachusetts. On warm fall and spring days, groups of students in the dorm often organized trips there. But I never went. For two years, I refused to accompany them, always employing the same lame explanation about my fair skin being too sun-sensitive to risk minutes, let alone hours, of exposure to direct sunlight. I told them that a history of melanoma on my father's side had practically relegated the entire Borkowski clan to Mole People-like status. "I'm sorry, I can't go," I said repeatedly. "I don't tan, I singe." Granted, I could have worn a T-shirt, but I had seen how T-shirts, when worn in rough, choppy waters, can sometimes rise up to the wearer's shoulders. That would mean I'd have to steer clear of going swimming. If I did accept their invitations and wear a T-shirt I'd have to devise yet one more ridiculous ruse about why saltwater was nearly as detrimental to my skin as the sun. I wasn't prepared to pile on one lie after another. One good one was enough anyway. "What is the point of going to the beach dressed like a goddamned mummy?" I'd say.

I couldn't anticipate every situation that might end in disrobing. Once, I was virtually trapped into it. In my last semester at J&W, several dorm mates and I were wandering around East Providence one weekend, undoubtedly too bored to stay in our rooms taking hits off of the bong during marathon sessions of backgammon. We stumbled across an open door on the Brown University campus. It happened to lead to an indoor swimming pool, which, for some inexplicable reason, was not only unguarded but also unattended. Someone suggested we go for a swim. Dressed in our street clothes, this meant we'd have to strip down to our

underwear. Some dove in naked. Protesting sun sensitivity wouldn't cut it this time. For a second, in full mind-race, I thought of linking the chlorine to my "condition," but that seemed too much of a stretch. I never wore an undershirt, so unless I ran out of the place like some madman, I'd have to take off my shirt and expose myself, which I did.

"Holy shit," someone said almost as soon as I peeled off my shirt. "That's some scar you've got there. What the fuck happened?"

"Oh, it was a freak accident," I began, wishing I *had* dashed out of there, but what kind of freak accident? I was totally unprepared. It was bound to happen. I should have been ready with a ready-made story, except I had become so adept at hiding the scar that I didn't think the moment of truth would ever arrive. I had to think fast. For some reason, I remembered an incident years earlier when I was lying on the ground during football practice after having the wind knocked out of me. I was the tailback on my pee-wee football team and I was running full steam with the ball when a defensive player, seemingly out of nowhere, appeared in the line's opening. He buried his helmet right into my gut, with the impact causing some pain in my ribs. After the shooting, the surgeon, Dr. Rose, explained to me that he'd had to crack two of my ribs to repair my collapsed lung (two others had been damaged by the bullet) and that I'd feel "discomfort" there for some time. (He left out the "forever" part.) In my desperation to find a suitable answer, I conflated the football experience and the medical conversation. While I always knew it was no ordinary scar, this guy's reaction upon seeing it confirmed it. I felt I needed a plausibly violent explanation for its existence. I also may have gone with something relatively macho rather than something relatively tame and medical, like pulmonary arterial whatchamacallit.

"I was playing football," I said. "I was running full speed—I was a tailback—when out of nowhere this huge guy—bam!—slams into me head-on, but sort of from the side, like a rocket. Hits me right there," I say as I point to it. "Either his helmet or his face mask caught my rib cage, breaking a couple of them. One of them freakishly snapped and punctured my lung. So they had to operate."

So I lied, just as I used to lie about my father's disappearance. Whenever any of my Little League teammates asked, for instance, why my dad wasn't around like the other fathers when we had Sunday or late afternoon weekday games I had a prepared story: "He's a cop, you know. They have different hours than your dads'," I'd say, trying to sound more special than embarrassed. I learned that from my mom, who lied to her father about my dad's repeated absences at family functions. She always said he

was working whenever my grandfather asked about his whereabouts. I think my grandmother knew. At the time, my grandfather was growing increasingly senile. He once flailed at me with his cane when I went to kiss him, not recognizing me and hollering something about who was “this damn stranger” who’d been invited to his house for Easter. For one thing, we weren’t in his home; for another, I was all of six years old then so he mistook me for an adult. He was a bigger anti-Semite and racist than his son, Sammy, so maybe he mistook me for a Jew—on the day of Christ’s resurrection no less! During my parents’ separation his dementia fluctuated from day to day, hour to hour. One minute he’d ask about my father, but then in the next he’d think I was David Ben-Gurion. Whatever his condition, he remained in the dark about their separation. He always believed my mom’s explanations for his absence and never asked any additional questions.

I doubt if my Little League teammates believed me. Their brains weren’t so mushy, and the whispers and snickers that would follow each lie indicated they knew or had put two and two together. I may have had a better go at it with my college buddies standing at the poolside. They believed me, or at least so I thought. It didn’t matter, really. The lie achieved its purpose. No more questions were asked. I’d soon be leaving J&W for good anyway, and I’d never see any of them ever again. My having been shot would remain as unknown to them as it would to countless others whose lives I furtively moved in and out of over the years. I had to move on, didn’t I?

My parents would have been so proud. That day at the pool I proved I had it in me. And I could keep it there. Rather than tell the truth, I discovered the advantages of spinning a good yarn. I continued to avoid situations that might involve taking off my shirt. If I couldn’t, at least I could tell that football story. Until I grew tired of it and it started to feel like plagiarism. Then I started making up all kinds of other stories, often off the top of my head. I welcomed the challenge to invent, and the opportunity to use the scar to have a different past, to be someone else. I was not only growing accustomed to it but enjoying it. More important, as my father had advised, I was demonstrating that I had put the shooting behind me, perhaps more creatively and convincingly than he had expected.

His remarks occurred not more than three weeks after I’d nearly bled to death on a neighbor’s front yard. I had recovered quickly, discharged from the hospital after only a week, thanks to Dr. Rose’s surgical skills. Some people attributed my rapid recovery and my survival to an act of

God, a near miracle. “God didn’t want you to die,” they’d say. “It wasn’t your time.” In God’s hands, they told me, I had dodged a bullet—so to speak. I never put much faith in any of it. For one thing, I’m not that solipsistic to believe I was singled out by God. For another, Dr. Rose’s skill and expertise, along with advances in medical science, saved me, not divine intervention. If my near-fatal gunshot wounds had happened thirty years earlier, I would have died, similar to the hundreds of thousands before me at Verdun or Gettysburg who had perished with far more superficial injuries, derived from far less disgraceful reasons.

So well had I been repaired that I returned to school a couple of days after being discharged, a lot sooner than I should have if the startled and alarmed expressions on my schoolmates’ faces were any indication of how I looked. Although I was enervated and pale, one classmate graciously said I’d gained in appearance from the ordeal. “You look better thinner,” she said. Bless her attempt to put a happy face on my gaunt one. I must have looked like a cadaver. I remember having to pull my belt buckle three additional spaces past the worn-out hole in order to keep my pants up. I looked starkly different from the way I had only a week before. I felt as different as if I were someone else.

I shouldn’t have gone back to school that quickly, really. I sure as hell didn’t want to be there, not yet anyway, to face classmates and teachers and have to explain things. But my mother wanted us to resume our “normal lives.” Going back to school would convey that. If I didn’t miss too much time, maybe my schoolmates wouldn’t make too much of the absences I’d already accumulated. Maybe I’d get lucky and my teachers wouldn’t ask what had happened when I handed them my medical note excusing me from school, as my chemistry teacher did. On my way out of his class the first day I returned to school, I handed him the slip of paper. As he folded it back in half and handed it to me he asked what had happened. When I told him, he was initially dumbfounded. I can still see his mouth opening and his thick salt-and-pepper beard dropping into his chest. He started mumbling a string of incoherent phrases, separated by audible “wows,” “gees,” and “holy cows,” concluding with “That’s really something.” Once he regained his composure, he placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “Well, you’re okay now and you’re alive; that’s what’s important.” Now it was my turn to be speechless. His generosity was touching. All I could muster in response was a choked-up “Thanks.” We stood there for a few clumsy seconds staring at each other, until he broke the awkwardness by offering to help me in class. “You’ve obviously fallen behind,” he said, “so

if you need any assistance catching up, let me know. Come by my office or we can set up an appointment.” An additional choked-up “Thanks” was the best I could do in response.

“You what!?” my mother shouted.

“I told him I’d been shot,” I said. I was sitting at the kitchen table watching her prepare dinner. She stood by the stove stir-frying peppers and onions in one pan and repeatedly turning over sweet Italian sausages in another to brown them. She had asked how my first day back at school had gone. When I started telling her about my chemistry teacher she spun around, about as quickly as I’d ever seen her move before, holding the wooden spoon in her hand, the same one she would sometimes spank me and my sister with when we were naughty toddlers. It looked as if she might try to hit me with it once again, with a lot more force this time around, as she began challenging the wisdom of what I’d done.

“What’s the big deal?” I asked. It was the wrong thing to say, too nonchalant under the circumstances for her taste. She became more visibly upset and annoyed, “the look” settling over her face, that cutting combination of disdain and annoyance, the same one she’d worn the evening I was informed that my father was “taking a little trip.” The same one I’d observe many more times by the time I was a teen. I could recognize it from across a room, as I was doing then.

“For *heaven’s* sake,” she said, placing an angry emphasis on selected words, “are you *planning* on telling *everyone*? Is it *something* you’re *proud* of?”

Of course I wasn’t planning on telling everyone. I certainly wasn’t proud of what I’d done—far from it. But my teacher had asked what had happened, so I’d told him. I knew she wasn’t asking those questions to be answered, so I didn’t answer them. She was making a point, to highlight the gravity of the situation, calling my attention to the disgrace I’d brought upon myself and the family by uniting my culpability with my accountability.

“Don’t you *know*,” she continued, “the *embarrassment* you have caused us; how *ashamed* we are, of the *shame* you’ve put on this house? I can *barely* look my friends in the face. And *you* want to *add* to it by *telling* people what you *did*? How *dare* you! How *dare* you!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, as tears started sliding down my cheeks. “I’m sorry,” I repeated, but I couldn’t go on. I started crying uncontrollably, gasping for air. My lung wasn’t completely healed and I could taste blood in my mouth. She whacked the wooden spoon a few times against the side of the pot to remove any food particles, calmly placed it in a dish on the counter by the stove, and walked over to the table. She put her arm around me

and said nothing more. She'd made her point. It was up to my father to do the rest and drive it home.

A day or two later my father invited me to join him while he walked to the store to buy the *Daily News*, to instruct me on how to react to being shot. Only now, after all of these years, do I see that his invitation to walk with him for our little "heart-to-heart" was part of a twin effort to put "the accident," as my mother started calling it, completely to rest. Evidently, following the conversation I had with my chemistry teacher, my mother must have spoken to my father about the need to set me straight, to make sure I didn't shoot off my mouth ever again about it. From that moment on, what had taken place on that night was never mentioned again among any of us, just as neither of my parents ever came clean about their separation. If we didn't talk about our dysfunction, then maybe it didn't really exist.

"One last thing," my father said, as we walked along South Railroad Avenue and made a right onto Guyon Avenue, the main drag up and down which police cruisers had frantically scrambled looking for me several days before. "Is it true what the paper said and what I heard from some of the guys at the station house, that it wasn't the only time you did that?" By then we were approaching George's, the candy store and soda shop where my father bought the newspaper, as did many residents of Oakwood Heights. George's was patronized especially by locals who commuted into Manhattan every day by taking the train to the Staten Island Ferry Terminal. In the mornings, many of them would run into George's, grab a paper and a pack of cigarettes, and then dash across the street to the train station, while others would buy a paper and begin reading it while waiting for George or his wife, Jodie, to prepare a toasted bagel-to-go, with a cup of coffee. In the evenings the place would be packed with the same commuters, many of whom bought cigarettes, cigars, and the late afternoon local paper, the *Staten Island Advance*. At all other times of the day and night the majority of George's customers were kids of all ages, like me, who went from buying comic books as a boy to buying sodas as a teen.

My father bought the *Daily News* there, and nothing else. He liked its crossword puzzle; even to this day doing the puzzle is one of his favorite pastimes. He never lingered in George's for long, unlike other men who might exchange a few words with George about the Yankees or the Jets, or about money lost or won at the racetracks. It was rumored that George was a big-time bookie and his store was merely a front for a much more profitable operation. Maybe my dad knew about it and that's why he

22 Tracks of My Fears

didn't stay there long. On this day, though, which I guess my father considered special, he offered to treat me to a vanilla egg cream, one of my favorite soda fountain drinks as a child.

In my adolescence I was still ordering them, frequently in batches of three or four after smoking a "J" with someone in an empty lot not far from the store. George's had a counter and five swivel stools, upholstered with the kind of gummy plastic fabric that stuck to the back of your thighs in the summer if you were wearing shorts. Getting up from the seat sounded like a fresh Band-Aid's being ripped from flesh. George's also had a couple of flimsy wooden tables with equally flimsy wooden chairs in a tight, triangular corner near the counter. The table and chairs were surrounded by an assortment of oversized plastic toys, dangling from rickety shelves—kites and Wiffle Ball and stickball bats stuffed into old, crumpled cardboard boxes and dusty beach chairs so ugly only a desperate sunbather would purchase them. There didn't seem to be enough room for George and Jodie in the place, let alone the ten or fifteen boys and young men (it was almost always crowded with males) who might be there at any given time. I had spent hours sitting at that soda fountain with my friends, but in particular with Dougie. Sometimes even on a Sunday morning after cutting out of church we could be found there. But we first needed to take care of our alibi by placing our prelabeled, named envelopes in the church kitty, or give them to a friend to drop into the wicker basket that was passed from parishioner to parishioner. Our prepackaged contribution was the way for the church, and for the school, to take attendance. If the church didn't receive the envelope they'd have the nuns at school inquire about it. If we didn't bring in the weekly 50 cents due, they tacked it onto the school's tuition. For parishioners' children who weren't attending St. Charles but the public elementary school, they sent a bill to the house. To me and Dougie, church was about as exciting as a bag of sand, as it was to most boys barreling toward puberty. We'd sit at George's counter sipping egg creams and sharing a package of Ding Dongs as we paged through the latest *Batman* installment. "Hey!" George would bark, "Are you kids planning on buying that?" How could listening to Father Gannon read a passage from Corinthians for the umpteenth time compare to egg creams and Batman battling the Riddler?

I doubt my father appreciated how fitting it was that we were at George's so soon after I'd been shot, the site of so much childhood and adolescent activity and mischief. It also happened to be the first stop after our first robbery, the place where we went to "celebrate." In addition to George's location at "The Station," which was what the area

was called by kids and adults alike, there was a brightly lit pizza parlor, a shoe box-sized one-chair barbershop, and Sal's, a deli that catered to the largely Italian-American population in the neighborhood. Every kid in Oakwood Heights was familiar with each of those stores, knowing exactly where Sal shelved the mayonnaise or Comet or where George kept the jar containing the pretzel logs. Many of those same kids, at some point in their lives, spent a good deal of time milling about the parking lot adjacent to George's, sometimes in groups of ten, twenty, or thirty. So intimidating was the density of teens there on any given night, and so voluminous the child-teen combo there during the day, that only those among us who even had a car, let alone were old enough to drive, dared park their cars there. No one else would dream of invading our space. If they did, we punished them for it. As soon as anyone walked into George's or Sal's, two or three of us would sit on the car's hood as a half a dozen more would prop against the vehicle's side, which was easy enough to do back when 4-doors were the size of small boats. Most adults got the message and parked on the street or drove past Sal's to look for another deli at which to grab an order of baked ziti and meatballs. Sal didn't stay in business there long, to nobody's surprise. We scared off many of his customers. My mother said he went back to Italy, that's how far away he needed to be from us.

That corner of Oakwood Heights was ours. It was where a kid could buy wax lips filled with a colorful, sticky substance or buy an ounce of weed stuffed in a plastic sandwich bag rolled up like a cigar. In my youth, I sometimes played stickball in front of George's brick wall that faced the parking lot and watched Spalding balls, which George plentifully stored in a peach basket, sail over the railroad tracks, sometimes bouncing off the roofs and steps of the houses along South Railroad Avenue. There was plenty of fun and sometimes monotony at the station. It could also be a pretty gruesome place. I once saw a kid I knew who was standing at the top of the train station's steps get jumped from behind by one of the neighborhood's biggest drug dealers. Apparently he had missed a payment for whatever drugs he'd taken on credit, being a minor peddler himself. The big-time dealer had his "muscle" with him. They both took turns beating my friend's face to a bloody pulp. He'd been so surprised he didn't utter a sound. After he collapsed to the ground, the dealer repeatedly kicked him. "You're fucking with the wrong person," he casually reminded him, as if such a beating were a common occurrence. Only then did my friend speak. "Stop, stop!" he begged. "I'll get you your money."

That happened soon after I'd been shot. While some guys around me

were hooting and hollering like it was some kind of sporting event, I was so overcome by the raw savagery of it, along with the sight of all of the blood, I thought I would throw up. I didn't, but I felt faint. I surreptitiously sat down because I didn't want my friends to think I was too weak to stomach what we were witnessing. I can remember thinking how absurd it was for me to have to do that, to have to hide my aversion to violence after what I'd been through. I'm not 100 percent sure, but I believe that was the last time I went to The Station. When I was in the hospital I kept telling myself I wanted out of the life that I'd been living. *If I ever make it out of here alive*, I told myself, *I'll re-work and re-do my life so drastically that the people I know won't recognize me, however long it takes*. Steering clear of The Station was the first step.

Before that incident, though, The Station was where I and many others learned about life's vagaries, and its tedium. One way of dealing with both was to stage amusing distractions, many of which were destructive. Possessing an acerbic tongue produced just as much amusement as lighting stink bombs on the train platform as evening rush-hour commuters were disembarking. The barbs and razzing were common among us all, although some were better at it than others. The cooler and better-looking kids didn't need to be so witty. Their hipness and handsomeness gave them enough self-assurance. I was neither handsome nor hip. I stood out because of my size. I was, euphemistically speaking, diminutive. As a result, I developed a special brand of wittiness. I had to. Otherwise, I might get my ass kicked like my low-level drug-dealing friend, but for no reason other than that it could be done. I cultivated one of the sharpest tongues around, making me popular with almost everyone, including the thugs. Self-deprecating humor, rarer than the abusive, one-upmanship zingers most guys parleyed, was my specialty. It turned out to be highly prized, too, being unique. So while I was among a handful of neighborhood jokers, I must have perfected my craft to near stand-up-comic proportions. I was voted class clown when I graduated from St. Charles, an honor I wasn't terribly thrilled about when it occurred at our graduation party. I was out-of-my-mind high on acid at the time so I panicked when my name was announced and had to walk up to the podium to receive my "award." Also, I found it troubling that I had stood out in that way. Cracking wise, even at my own expense, was a defensive mechanism, not a plea for attention. I wasn't searching for the spotlight. If anything, there were times when I just wanted to be left alone, to be a ghost.

Playing the jester wasn't demonstrative. It was Darwinian, a survival tactic. As one of the smallest guys, if not the smallest, in any number of

cliques we moved in and out of—both as a child and as a teen—I quickly realized that dickheads, bullies, and gangster wanna-bes preyed upon easy pickings. But they left you alone if they saw you as a harmless fool. For them, it wasn't worth the trouble taking down anybody whom they considered already beneath them, in a nonphysical sense. They often weren't the brightest bulbs in town so they probably figured anyone who played the self-deprecating card, anyone who'd belittle themselves, proved they'd encountered someone stupider than they. Only an idiot would make fun of himself. Some of the roughs and toughs weren't natural-born dickwads anyway. *They* did it for show, perhaps their own version of warding off the truly natural thugs by appearing to be a bad-ass and as crazy as they. Perhaps they recognized other showmen, like me, and left me alone for that reason. I guess those faux-mofo's tended to appreciate the show I'd put on for them to save my own skin. They were flattered I'd gone through all of that trouble to impress them verbally.

For some reason, macho a-holes seemed to be everywhere in Oakwood Heights, as well as in the surrounding neighborhoods, and pretty much a swarm throughout Staten Island. Maybe it had something to do with the water. If it was environmental it more likely had something to do with the landfill, the largest one on the planet, so big it was visible from outer space, like (supposedly) the Great Wall of China. But it was the great garbage pile heap. I suspect tons of trash are bound to affect people adversely, in more ways than inducing cancer, possibly poisoning the borough's testosterone levels, thereby propagating a larger pool of jag-offs.

Simple math, though, explains the rise in the number of assholes. Staten Island's population practically doubled every couple of years in the 1960s and '70s because of the influx of families who mostly emigrated out of Brooklyn when the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge was built, linking Staten Island and Brooklyn. Before its construction, Staten Island was more countrified than citified, even though it was a borough of New York City. It might as well have been located in the Catskills with its horse stables, farms, acres of marshlands and wooded areas, so inaccessible was it to the rest of the city. I actually grew up on a dirt road, and we're not talking about eighteenth-century Virginia, mind you. It's hard to believe that in the last half of the twentieth century some parts of New York City still had dirt roads and cornfields. But once the bridge was built, our street was paved and the pace of life accelerated to city speed. Those arriving by the truckload from other boroughs, especially Brooklyn, seemed fueled emotionally with high octane compared with us "country," low-octane types. Many of the boys from the city's meaner streets moved into the

sprawling, tract-home developments that were built seemingly overnight. These kids were born and bred rougher, tougher, and, quite frankly, nastier than those of us who grew up on Staten Island. Even some of the girls from there turned out to be pretty damn unpleasant. Before the bridge, groups of rival kids might engage in “dirt bomb” or in snowball fights with one another. When the “city” and Brooklyn kids moved in and went at it, the boys—and sometimes the girls—threw rocks and bottles. Later, they’d exchange gunfire or beat one another with tire irons. Girls never went that far. But they often provoked a lot of violence with their petty jealousies, contrived rivalries, and ultra-foul mouths. I did see a couple of vicious “cat fights” that drew blood and hair.

Tough girls or not, Oakwood Heights was ultimately a man’s world—well, more like a boy’s world. Males were everywhere. And they roamed in packs, smoking cigarettes under the train trestle or behind the schoolyards, riding bicycles up and down the same streets all day and all night, later mini-bikes and then later still motorcycles. There were enough boys in Oakwood Heights to fill up three separate baseball fields, with each team sometimes fielding nine players. That didn’t even account for everyone. At the same time the ball games were being played, there might be others playing basketball near the ball fields, with still more playing roller hockey in a playground above the basketball courts. Several more groups who didn’t play sports roamed the streets or hung out in bunches on schoolyard stoops or street corners, chased from one corner to another by alarmed residents. You could go anywhere in Oakwood Heights at almost any time of the day and find a collection of guys doing something or absolutely nothing.

Then there was The Station. That’s where ballplayers, bikers, smokers, druggies, and drunks would converge. The summer months called forth so many that it looked like a sprawling movie set of a teeming street corner. Kids from all directions went there to buy a soda between ball games, or they sat at George’s counter and ordered two or three cheeseburgers in succession, or they went next door to the pizzeria to buy two slices and a Coke for a buck. Most stood in front eating their slices in about a minute, a skill many of us had developed by laying the two pieces on top of each other, curling them into a tight triangle, and then devouring it in three or four gulps. A bottle of Coke was usually pressed between our knees, or a 7-Up in a paper cup was delicately held in our free hands.

Generally, kids simply showed up to while away large blocks of the day, the entire evening, or both by standing by the side of George’s. Some downed a six-pack of beer in less than two hours, the cans or bottles hid-

den among George's garbage bins. In my teens, we often snuck around the corner to smoke a couple of joints. We almost all smoked a pack of Marlboros or Kools, the two preferred brands, in full view during and between the drinking and pot smoking. It didn't seem to matter back then that someone's son or daughter was already smoking by the time they were thirteen or fourteen. Everyone's parents smoked, probably not starting at such a young age, but "learning" to smoke was as common as learning to ride a bike.

There were other places besides The Station where guys wasted their time, like the benches behind a public elementary school, where some kids were so high they were passed out on them, typically from sniffing glue. Some underage teens, who clearly didn't look old enough to pass for eighteen—the legal drinking age at the time—spent time in local bars. Many of them, I'd later learn, were already juvenile alcoholics. But the real place to be seen was The Station. All of those other places were peripheral, secondary hangouts. During the eighteen years I lived in Oakwood Heights, The Station was the primary meeting place for nearly every kid in the neighborhood.

Yet I never liked it much, which seems strange considering how often I was there, especially as a teenager. But it didn't seem as if I had many choices. As I got older, I was playing less and less sports, so I was going down to the ball fields less and less. I wasn't going to sit home like some old fart and watch TV all afternoon like some kids. I couldn't imagine myself sitting home reading, either, which is exactly what I did—voraciously—after I'd been shot. After my more jock-ish childhood years ended, I spent a lot of time simply hanging out. The Station was the Taj Mahal of hangouts. Still, always gnawing in the back of my mind was what a waste it seemed to be just standing around there trying to be cool and succeeding in being foolish, all the while my life going nowhere. Another reason I was secretly uncomfortable there was that some guys who hung around The Station scared the crap out of me.

At least that's one positive thing I can say about myself and the stupid shit I did: I never intended to hurt anyone, surely not with a water pistol. In the end—and this is probably true of most decent kids who try pulling off some boneheaded move as I did—the person I hurt the most was me. And that was another reason why I wanted out of the place. My father was right about the little celebrityhood that came my way following the shooting. What frightened me the most about it was that I was receiving a good deal of attention from the very same hoodlums I despised. If *they* were proud of me, that proved I'd been heading in the wrong direction.

It was time for a change, a massive, full-scale restructuring, the kind found in the *Bildungsromans* I'd later read, the kind of building blocks I promised myself I'd accrue when I was given last rites.

Soon after I'd been shot I realized that not going to The Station again wasn't enough. I needed to get the hell off of that damn island. Of course, I couldn't do so right away, knowing full well that I'd have to wait a couple of years to graduate from high school. Going away to college was my best chance of escape and of reinvention. However—and it still pains me after all these years to accept, let alone write—my parents did their best to block my escape, essentially discouraging me from trying to reinvent myself through any kind of formal education. As much as they advised me to move on after I'd been shot, they hadn't. Perhaps to them I wasn't worthy of bettering myself. So convinced were they of my unworthiness that my mother called in reinforcements to convert me to their way of thinking, just in case their words weren't enough. With the help of a cousin's husband, they actually talked me out of going to college. My mother especially seemed bent on dissuading me from my academic ambitions my entire life, right up until I was in my late thirties when she urged me to take the New York City Sanitation Department test, four months shy of obtaining my doctorate.

Because I lacked confidence and moral courage, I often bent their way, just as I had done about keeping being shot a secret. Maybe it all started from there, becoming the dutiful son. But for all of their talk about putting the shooting behind me, I think it was they who could never quite get past the idea that their son had once attempted a robbery, along with the interminable shame it had brought to them once he'd been caught—and shot. Throughout my life, I was constantly at odds with them about my desire to remake myself and constantly at odds with myself about the value of it, of having come so close to death to become truly alive. As a result, it took a long time for me finally to become what I knew all along I wanted to become and what I wanted to do—to be the kind of person who helps others find their way in life. I wanted to be someone whom I hadn't really encountered most of my life growing up. And I guess telling this story is a further fulfillment of that desire, along with stating that it *is* better to remember even the harshest of experiences and to try to learn from them. It's actually the only way to figure things out. It's also the best way to move on.