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Child's Play

Whenever we walked to the train station as kids, we brought something to toss around—a Frisbee, a tennis ball, a pygmy football, a Nerf ball, anything. If we forgot, we'd improvise. We'd crush a soda can left on the street, pluck a pine cone from a tree, or even rifle through someone's trash looking for anything we could roll up into a ball or shape into a missile. Usually, it was the four of us—me, Dougie, Timmy, and Ritchie—who went. During the school year, we'd go a couple of times a week; during the summer, we'd go a couple of times a day. The destination was secondary. The primary purpose was for sport, of a very particular kind: to hurl the projectile toward a neighbor's shrubs, forcing the sprinting receiver to dive into the shrubs. Flying object, body, and flora would meet in perfect symmetry. At least that was the goal. Drawing blood was a bonus, as long as it didn't involve busting a lip or scarring a face.

This was before families from practically every economic class started hiring landscapers to tend their properties. The homeowners did all the work, much of it fancy and elaborate. And they did it as well as any professional. One yard sported a hedge shaped like a swan. It was perfectly understandable, then, that some became infuriated watching us destroy their handiwork. The most zealous greenthumbers went berserk. They might be watering their backyard lawns or sitting on their side porches and spot one of us leaping into their perfectly pruned forsythia trying to catch a shoe we'd discovered in the garbage. They would jump out of their chair, as if it had become electrified, or drop their watering hose, as if it had become red hot, and race to the curb screaming about our eternal

damnation. Some ran after us waving metal rakes or pitchforks, as if we were Frankenstein's monster (the one from the film version), promising to stick the thing up our collective asses.

Quite frankly, we deliberately targeted easily agitated homeowners. It was more exciting. The ones who overreacted posed more of a threat. It was exhilarating to be the cause of their chasing us down the street tripping over their flip-flops or struggling to keep their baggy bathing trunks from falling to the ground. Little else is as amusing to a child as watching adults behave ridiculously. Not everyone in Oakwood Heights could be so easily pushed over the edge. Some attempted to reason with us, pleading for us to be more respectful of private property. It wasn't the most effective approach to take with a bunch of nine-year-old boys seeking to turn their boring suburban neighborhood into a sports arena. But it often worked. We generally bypassed their homes, but not because we'd been persuaded by their logic or had come to our senses. Saner people lived on less challenging terrain according to our code of (mis)conduct. If people refused to get all worked up over our displays of super-hero heroism, what was the point of going through all that trouble? There were even a few sweet elderly widows who practically encouraged us to wreck their property. What was the fun in that? If they told us there was nothing wrong with playing on their lawns—after mangling a hedgerow—as long as we avoided the shrubs the grandson had worked on, then we'd never go back again, unless it was to help them shovel their sidewalks or lug metal garbage cans to the curb. We weren't that thoughtlessly naughty. We may have even considered them special residents in Oakwood Heights. In a landscape dominated by sullen, often surly adults, they seemed angelic in comparison.

On the night I was shot I lay on the lawn of one such angel. Maybe it wasn't entirely coincidental. Maybe I'd sought hers out, among all the others, believing I'd find shelter and solace there. No matter how grim it got, I might be able to keep my head above water, even if some bad-ass cop worked me over. I was on sacred ground. I was protected. But memory can be a fickle thing. If it functions anything like a river, as Wordsworth metaphorically expressed, it's a fluid process, picking up pieces of real *and* imagined recollections along the way. Because it's constantly moving, constantly acquiring, *and* generating more and more material as it flows toward the sea, the older sediments collected at the start can shift around or collide against newer ones. Such fluidity can alter its composition or appearance, even changing the recollection into a new form altogether. That's not all. Other bits fall to the bottom and may never be seen again,

especially when submerged deliberately, forgotten, like my parents' insistence about that entire night. Of course, like any artifact, some may rise up on their own or they can be retrieved, no matter how far to the bottom they go or how entangled they become in the weeds and the debris. This too may turn into a selective or artificial process. Someone may scoop up a handful of goop and look for what will most please him, choosing what serves her interests, while tossing the rest back into the water. What's kept can be scrubbed and polished, improving on the original.

Possibly that's what I'm doing right now in remembering the advantages of ending up on *her* lawn, not just any lawn. But I *have* to remember it that way. A shiny object from that cesspool needs to be retrieved. I need some aspect of that night to seem dignified, when everyone else directly involved behaved so dishonorably, starting with me, followed by the cop's unnecessarily unloading his gun into my back, continued by Dougie's unceremoniously leaving me for dead, and concluding with a man's tormenting another human being who is bleeding to death. Some reassuring image has to be located in all of that male despair, even if it involves what I never "saw." Otherwise, I believe I would slowly die of sadness every time I think about it, drip by drip. I simply must believe that if the old woman had come to the door she would have politely reprimanded the cop for being so cruel. Then she'd step back inside to get a pillow and a blanket.

However contrived or corrupted my memory currently is, or has been all along, it's evident I had come a long way from darting through front lawns as a boy to nearly bleeding to death on hers as a teen. There aren't many years separating my childhood from my adolescence. But it now seems as if I had lived a lifetime between the two. What happened to me—or what did I do to myself?—between those days of playing on lawns to almost dying on one? Can it be explained? Can I put the puzzle pieces into their right places? Can I even find enough of them, let alone assemble them correctly? And even if I can gather all the pieces and place them where they belong, then what? Will the final picture look more surreal than real? For that matter, can any life and its direction—or misdirection—be explained intelligently?

In some ways, my having been shot doesn't make any sense at all. No matter how many different ways I look at it and pick it apart, I'll never be able to satisfactorily explain it to myself and why I committed those robberies. That's why we've come up with metaphors and tales for the seemingly inexplicable, like *The Book of Job*, and less complicated terms, like *The Book of Life*, as in, "Shit happens." It's as if my mother was right to call it an "accident." It was just bad timing, like getting hit by a drunk

driver who runs a red light. Granted, I was doing something wrong so something wrong occurred, or it was more bound to occur than if I hadn't been. But lots of people do bad things and they don't nearly get their heads blown off—not at fifteen years of age, anyway. Lots of people do the right thing too and do get their heads blown off, or something like it. That's Job's woeful story, the fickle (middle) finger of fate. Either way you look at it, my getting shot was as random as Job's terrible losses and physical afflictions. It wasn't his fault he lost everything. He wasn't being punished. He didn't do anything wrong. Just the opposite, in fact—he was doing everything right. He was a good soul, leading a righteous life. That's the scary part. He didn't know God, and Satan had made a bet concerning his devotion, testing his allegiance to the Almighty. Even the concept of God's pulling a prank on someone doesn't quite make sense, at least not to me. What the hell?

All of that bad karma coming Job's way didn't make any sense to him, either. So it's not just me, then, or any number of the confused, who can't quite figure it out. *Nothing* makes sense to anyone, except to the Grand High Mystic Ruler, although many years ago a rabbi wrote a book, trying to explain the story and explain it *all* as well, called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. For most of us, though, that can't be easily explained, not in any comforting way. Sure, we all know bad things happen to good people. How come? Life seems as senseless to us as Job initially thinks it has become when his entire life heads south. He isn't in on the joke, as we are, but he realizes that despite his being a faithful, caring, honest, and all-around damned decent guy, he still loses everything. What the hell?

Except it does figure, or work itself out, at least to him—and, wink, wink, presumably to the reader too. At the conclusion of the story it's all added up for Job. But it isn't pretty, not just for him but for the story's readers as well. Ultimately, it doesn't offset the nagging feeling that capital “L” Life is altogether way too random with its outbursts of happiness, misery, joy, and suffering. In fact, the story's didactic conclusion reinforces that infuriating impression many of us have about life's rather quotidian fickleness. Simply put, according to the story, bad shit indeed happens to good people, just as the title of that rabbi's book informs us, because—and here's the kicker—God, in His infinite wisdom, made it that way. Near the end, when Job can't endure any more suffering and starts wondering about God's Great Master Plan, God steps down from His throne and angrily informs him that He, the Divine Creator, gets to create whatever He wants, including floods, plagues, and killer whales. Every now and then He throws in a cute kitten, a startling rainbow, and a cure for polio.

Message to the reader: Every person is a potential Job. So shut up if every once in a while a really devoted, righteous person, such as Job, is afflicted with disgusting boils, or a truly harmless, devoted mother gets mauled by a ferocious lion while jogging through the foothills of the Sierras. Curse the lion's presence along existence's superhighway and we're damning the Lord, the Creator of All Life. None of us therefore has any right to bitch about the existence of nasty stuff. C'est la vie.

Actually, it gets worse and even more confounding. We read the headlines. Some rather good shit happens to some rather bad-ass people, unless they get caught. But most don't. Even when they do—like all of those Watergate conspirators who turned to the Lord in prison, wrote about the experience, and made lots of money—there might still be a nifty payoff at the end. My point is that lots of good things happen to lots of bad people all the time, in full view. Life is therefore *perversely* senseless. Of course, these are the two extremes, and most of us live in the gray zone, as I likely did when I was shot. So, some bad shit happened to me, and I wasn't altogether that good or that bad. Life's senselessness may therefore be a three-ring circus: Shit happens to good, bad, and mediocre people. Great, now we're all in on God's little joke. Wouldn't most sensible people make the next leap and argue that they might as well live it up as a bad-ass because their chances of shit's happening to them is no greater than the chances of its happening to everyone else, including a Goody Two-Shoes like Job? At least they'd get to live it up a little before the shit hits the fan and sprays them with it. Yeah, one might think, why not be sitting pool-side with my AK-47, doing a few lines of Bolivian Marching Powder and sipping my Courvoisier with my ho's, before I get splashed with poop? Besides, maybe I won't anyway! My God-fearing, morally upstanding neighbor might instead. C'est la (F'ing) vie!

I was probably viewed as an "average kid," despite those who considered me sneaky and mischievous. But anyone with half a brain could see that was an outcome of my being mostly lost and confused, rudderless sans papa. Overall, I was a shy, timid child and I avoided doing anything that drew attention to myself. Even when I misbehaved I did it surreptitiously, like the time I slipped a tack onto my eighth-grade teacher's chair without anyone's noticing. But by then my father had moved back in with us and I was more mixed up than I had been previously. I don't think that throughout most of my childhood I was too rotten. As a matter of fact, by being the only child around without a father, I became so self-conscious of my deficiency that I was too broken to do much damage.

In some ways, then, my getting shot makes perfect sense. The shy, self-

conscious boy on the outside was cover for the misfit lurking inside. Play back the actual videotape from then and I might come up as a Junior League a-hole by the sixth grade. Who knows, maybe a toxic mixture of an increasing Napoleon complex (I was a small, if not tiny, boy) and my being raised by two skittish females (my mother and my sister) might have created a ticking time bomb. Lots of repressed turmoil churned inside of me. I was ready to explode. Sticking up pizza delivery drivers was the inevitable result. It was the result of the lid (or is it the id?) having been blown off—with my head close behind. So maybe it wasn't such a great distance after all. Sure, shit happens, but most of the time it happens for a reason. With some cautionary, careful analysis, the dots *can* be connected.

Over the years I've tried mapping the distance separating my childhood from that "fateful" experience. I've also played armchair shrink to my own psyche, seeking to trace those seemingly connectable dots that were determined by . . . by what: my character, my lack of character, a series of events and circumstances within and/or outside my control? What about growing up in an atmosphere fixated on male bravado? How about living at a time when a bad moon was rising over the nation? Maybe it was luck of the draw, and I was dealt a bad socioeconomic or parental hand. Shouldn't *something* explain why I had been shot nearly to death? My lengthy scar is visible proof that something dramatic happened. I think I'm entitled to speculate now and then on the plot leading up to that drama. I think anyone in my shoes would.

Mind you, asking these questions is largely an intellectual exercise, my personal parlor game. I'm curious. Mentally *and* emotionally I've accepted it, to the point of embracing it as the defining moment in my life. Generally speaking, it was all for the better, including making me a better teacher (eventually), which I'll get to later. I accepted it the second I watched the priest recite my last rites—had to—since I thought I was preparing to accept the Whole Enchilada, as in accepting death. Despite accepting it, I have still looked for an explanation, even a precise one, like that passage in *War and Peace* when Napoleon's head cold explains why the French lost a crucial battle and failed to subdue Moscow. How simple and neat it would be if robbing pizza delivery drivers could be explained by a toothache or something. But nothing is that simple, especially when a generally good person does some wicked things. (For the record: Tolstoy wasn't simplifying human conduct. If you haven't read the book, I don't have time to explain it here. It is, after all, a really beefy book.) In *Les Misérables*, an even beefier book, Hugo reaches a slightly different conclusion about Napoleon's failures, agreeing with early historians that if only it hadn't rained

the morning of Waterloo, the great military tactician would have won that crucial battle. It rained on the night I was shot. How utterly convenient it would be to blame it on the rain.

Sometimes I think one reason I became a professor was to search quietly for the reason professionally, under the guise of the academy. It could help me understand and answer the question "Who was I?" Or better yet: "What the hell was I thinking?" Armed with my scholarly training and powers of deduction, I've examined, reexamined, deconstructed, re-constructed, and re-deconstructed my past, pulling the pieces apart and putting them back together again, Humpty Dumpy style, in order to figure out how I ended up on that old lady's lawn perforated by three bullets.

Here's what I've come up with over the years. Was it because:

1. I was a fatherless child? Answering "yes" would be the quickest and easiest explanation. End of story. Well, at least it would be the end of locating the overarching theme to a *shot story*. Obviously, this would be a bit more complicated explanation than having acquired a head cold or having watched the Weather Channel. A father's departure is more complex than that. Still, blame a parent or parents for screwing up your life and most folks, especially baby boomers, would nod their heads in agreement. But Dougie could've been the one gunned down instead of me; it could've been *his* shot story if the cop had missed his mark or if I'd thought of running first. And Dougie had a father at home. What was his excuse?

2. I grew up during the rise of the American Empire? We're all products of our times. Socially and culturally I was raised by a big bully. I learned to "be a man" at the feet of the Great White Father. Doubling its impact, this puffed-up period in American history developed alongside a culture long obsessed with guns and violence, "The Gunfighter Nation," as the historian Richard Slotkin explains. In the early '60s I came of age in a family that celebrated America's military muscle while blindly adhering to an ideology that pumped up any boy's dreams of blazing glory. It was the impetus behind Ron Kovic's joining the Marines and nearly dying from gunshot wounds in Vietnam. He regretted enlisting once he realized he'd been brainwashed into killing commie gooks. Born around Kovic's time, I might have done and felt the same. Different bullets but the same bullshit desire to be heroically and violently adventurous, to prove my manhood. The heroism part was missing from my equation, but certainly the rugged/adventure aspect of it took up a great deal of my brain space.

It was impossible to miss the cultural cue cards directing me to thump my chest back then as a boy, just as it is now. There are photos of me sitting under a sprawling Christmas tree wearing a cowboy hat and boots.

A plastic Tommy Gun lies beside me. Take a closer look at the photo and you'll notice I'm still in my diapers! I couldn't have been any older than three. Another photo from a later Christmas past shows I've been promoted into the U.S. Army. I must have been a prodigy because I'm no older than ten. In it, I'm decked out in full Army fatigues. I'm looking through a pair of binoculars directly at whoever snapped the picture. A western six-shooter in its belted holster, à la General George Patton, hangs on my hip. No surprise, then, that I had to ditch a fake gun after being shot by a real one. I wasn't doing anything much different from what my parents wanted me to pretend to do as a child, which was play with guns. But lots of boys brandished toy guns, and the neighborhood was filled with them playing Army or cowboys and Indians in their front and back yards. How come none of them ended up where I did?

3. More violent-chimp DNA coursed through my veins than other youngsters'? Some can handle it without going off the deep end, and others can't. I was one who couldn't. I struggled to grapple with an additional splash of testosterone, like some substance abuser with extra-addictive genes. My adolescence, already wobbly and off track, was further derailed because I had a more intoxicating brew of the chemical ingredients human males inherited from their tree-swinging ancestors, as Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson claim in *Demonic Males*. I'd grown into one fierce motherfuckin' beast. The robberies were practically inevitable. Biological determinism could explain it. Option number 3 is starting to sound pretty good.

But in my daily life I was far from aggressive. I avoided fights and confrontations with anyone. I didn't even like arguing with girls. I never threw my weight around, mostly because I had so little to throw around. Really, I was more of a chickenshit than an ape man. And I preferred the more athletically subtle game of baseball to the smash-mouth sport of football. My stomach would turn if I came across a mangled road-kill squirrel, as it still does. And no matter how many times I've seen it, I always get a bit weepy whenever I watch Bogie in *Casablanca* standing on the train platform reading Ilsa's "Dear John" letter, the ink streaming down the page from the rain, like the tears I shed running down my face. I don't feel that I'm any more naturally sinister or hot-headed than the next guy. It doesn't seem that my wires are overloaded with demonic electricity. If they are, it can't amount to any more than a few extra volts than normal.

If it wasn't "1," "2," or "3," can it be:

4. The United States is really terrible at turning boys into men? But this one requires a good deal of explaining, so bear with me.

For one thing, lots of males prefer to remain adolescents well into their middle years. Our consumer culture wants it that way. Spoiled children are always dissatisfied, always whining for more toys and candy. It works out nicely if they continue to spoil for fancier cars or larger plasma TVs. Few “grown-up” men could be found anywhere in Oakwood Heights back in the '60s. I bet there are even fewer today. It's unfair to label boomers as the first “Me” Generation. Their parents were already working at that. In fact, they invented it. Our perpetual state of adolescent consumer dependency is a phenomenon of the immediate postwar years, the early 1950s, when the consumer republic came into full swing. It was a hyperactive, cash-flush Madison Avenue that concocted a fuller extension of the Great American Dream, with television as the perpetual selling machine. The Elizabethans weren't watching plays seven hours a day and learning how to be patriotic “Elizabethans.” But Americans were watching that much TV *and* learning how to be patriotic Americans. By 1959, 90 percent of American households owned a TV set, ten years after it was introduced.

In no time at all, what we owned was who we were. It's what Americans have been told for several decades. Running parallel to this message is being told we need to have more of everything to assure fulfillment, yet whatever we do possess isn't doing the trick because something better exists, even if it's “the new and improved” version of what we already have. We are forever incomplete according to those standards and perpetually dissatisfied as well. No wonder half the country is on antidepressants. An endless cycle of instant gratification followed by instant disappointment occurs, about as fast as it takes a TV commercial to run. It's childish dependency, a culture of consumerism that encourages adults to remain as infantile as possible. My father went through it nearly fifty years ago. It's likely why he left us, a pioneer of sorts among the now common male midlife crisis managers who deal with aging by dipping back into a Fountain of Youth of immaturity and irresponsibility. And that's the good news.

Scores of males are so unprepared to face manhood when they reach it chronologically, having failed to do so emotionally and psychologically, that they end up blowing their goddamned brains out. Suicide rates among white, middle-aged American males are off the charts. (Nonwhite males have their own violent, anxiety-ridden problems.) Apparently for some males who reach middle age and haven't attained The Dream, debilitating disappointment overcomes them. Then there are those who've attained it but are left wondering why they feel so empty, having turned into straw men. For others, after sleepwalking through life, they wake from The Dream and realize it's actually been a nightmare. Nearly 30,000 people

every year are killed by firearms in the United States, which amounts to roughly 80 per day, almost all of them males. Of those 80, nearly 50 are suicides (18 veterans a day), and of those 50 about four-fifths are white males between the ages of 40 and 55. That's only the daily suicide rate from *firearms*. Add to those numbers the hangings, drug overdoses, cars left idling in garages, and bodies flung from rooftops to get the fuller picture. It's an epidemic. The stereotype of females struggling with midlife crises is that they go shopping for shoes and handbags. Males should be so lucky. Men in America are at war with one another for no reason, like blowing some stranger's head off over a parking spot. More tragically, American men are at war with themselves, blowing their own heads off if they can't *find* the right parking spot, so to speak. Can you imagine if we learned that 30,000 Lebanese or Japanese or Brazilians or Jamaicans died every year from firearms? We'd be calling them barbarians, a nation of Neanderthals. Let's be realistic about such name calling, though. When we think "barbarians" we generally mean males. We don't picture a club-wielding female baring her teeth while pumping her other hairy fist over a mangled corpse. Sure enough, the 30,000 deaths a year by firearms in the United States are a male problem, not a female one.

My educated guesstimate about when this national gender crisis started is the 1950s, not uncoincidentally with the rise of the American consumer republic. For more than fifty years our consumer culture has deemed middle-aged men uncool and useless. Not only do they have nothing to teach the young, but they're in the way. With the prospect of confronting the remainder of your life as hollow, who wouldn't become morbidly depressed or lose his mind? The novelty of the uncool middle-aged man likely went down pretty hard on my dad's generation, The Greatest One, which I suppose is fitting because they essentially were the ones who invented and launched the Great Male Immaturity campaign in the first place. Starting in the early postwar years, America's consumer culture turned members of my father's generation into stick-in-the mud bogeymen, while turning their children against them. I think it's why men of his generation had trouble relating to younger males, detached from them like never before. A cultural chasm was separating sons from fathers. The culture took on the task of "raising" the nation's children and it was doing so with a cool, aloof, youth-oriented pedagogy. It was pitting one generation against another, and it was particularly problematic for males. Their old brand of male authority—largely based on obedience and restraint—had to be killed off. Restraint doesn't serve the best interests of a culture consumed by carefree consumerism.

Sure, there have always been tensions and rifts between fathers and sons. Pick up the Bible and you'll see plenty of it, like poor old King David having to deal with Absalom, or any number of ancient Greek myths and tales, such as that one very famous son who kills his (unidentified) dad during a street brawl—and then marries his mom, putting the kooky-family icing on the cake. Such father/son conflicts clearly go way back. They've been around a long time. Cave-dwelling sons and fathers probably bickered over who got to carry home the slain prey.

But something appeared on the scene that was entirely singular, a real game changer for my father's generation. Adult males had never encountered it, both in its articles of faith and in its scope. I don't think we've ever recovered from it, or at least tried to figure out how to deal with it. It was historically unprecedented: the hyperventilated social empowerment of the young, enchantingly and rigorously mediated and radiated in Technicolor through the prodigious expansion of culture, with a capital "C." Capital "C" Culture was now mass-produced and mass-consumed with the same totalizing effect as every other commodity. But it was even bigger than all of it. Culture was responsible for handling all of those other commodities, their packaging, publicity, and distribution. Culture was commodification squared. It still shared the same task as it had in bygone days, to get inside a person's head and heart, to get them to think and to feel a certain way (now mostly about things to purchase). Language—the means to the end—has always been the primary vehicle for carrying the signals to those two places. But never was it too so totalizing: the language of film, the language of television, the language of music, the language of sports, the language of suburbia, the language of shopping malls, the language of Main Street, the language of Wall Street, the language of theme parks (children's—Disney—and adults'—Las Vegas), all the way down to the language of cereal boxes and soup cans. The principal ideology these discourses conveyed was the projection of a youth culture, initially and intensely marketed at the start of the postwar years.

Even though my dad's generation eventually bought into this concept of youthful abandon (so as to keep "purchasing" it) like everybody else, it initially blindsided them. When it came time to dealing with their own children, who started to look, walk, and talk differently from them in ways that varied enormously from how fathers and sons differed in the past, they didn't know what to do. Many, it seemed, shut down completely. Others became resentful. When this situation reached its apex during the '60s, some of these men despised the young. If he could have gotten away with it, I think my Uncle Sammy would have murdered his son-in-law

after he had gained conscientious objector status after he was drafted to fight in Vietnam. When I was growing up during that politically rebellious period, only women spoke to children. I can't recall a single significant conversation I had with a man, including my father. When I hit puberty, most men could barely look me in the eye. Perhaps what they most resented, without realizing it, was that their roles as mentors had been taken away from them. They saw and heard that they'd become obsolete. When they struggled to interact with *their* children, middle-aged men felt more intensely the distance that separated them from way-cool youth.

In effect, a gargantuan mass-media ethos of hipness had kidnapped their children and taken over their development. This didn't start in the '60s either. Worshipping the young and demeaning the old started in the 1950s. Watch James Dean, Natalie Wood, and Sal Mineo in *Rebel Without a Cause* dump on their parents for misunderstanding them. The fathers in the film undergo the severest shellacking. From there it was off to the races: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, what has now become a culturally built-in wave of "next generation" hipster rebelliousness. Today's rappers imitate yesterday's in-your-face, go-fuck-yourself attitudes of the past, only with coarser language and catchier phrases. What real father can compete with that?

At its inception, the mass media's cool-youth ethos transcended the kind of natural antagonisms between fathers and sons that had existed for centuries. It was unlike the kind of political rights of (young) men that Thomas Paine advocated, correctly pointing out the absurdity of the previous generation's legislating "from the grave." This was different. It was a *cultural* phenomenon. In its scope and magnitude, no other civilization in history had gone through it, and in such a short span of time. Big "C" Culture became *the* dominant, pervasive force in the daily lives of every American in less than ten years. Eventually it reached even into the remotest, most segregated outposts in the nation, Native American Indian reservations, where large satellite dishes practically topple the trailer homes they're nesting in. By the end of the 1950s, the consumer-cultural imperative had reached into every corner of private and public space.

This cultural Fun Factory (Walt Disney called his production studios exactly that, a Fun Factory) was churning out Totally Cool and Way Hip youngsters and shoving these newly minted aliens down my father's generation's throats. Just as their generation was maturing (chronologically), the Youth of America had taken over, and they would continue to do so for each succeeding generation. Young male punks and young female preeners ruled. A man like my dad was considered "the old man" before

he'd reached forty—bye, bye, Daddy! That's when it became necessary for men like my father to find ways to stay forever young, like bailing out on the family and driving sports cars. It was the classic midlife crisis, trying to turn back the clock, to catch up backward with the youth behind you. Then there's that other option, deliberately not getting to fifty, ending it prematurely by blowing your brains out. Didn't Hemingway, Mr. Macho Man himself, swallow a shotgun for feeling inconsequential? It happened in 1961, a most appropriate time considering it was the same year JFK uttered those famous words in his inaugural address about passing the torch to a new, younger generation. Maybe Hemingway didn't want to stick around and get all burned out by the fiery youth movement.

For the first time in history, males (of my dad's generation) could no longer share expressions of basic, common experience with younger men because the world had changed so drastically and the culture had so dramatically pigeonholed them as over the hill. There was little they could pass down to the young to demonstrate their wisdom or learning, or instruct the young about age-old traditions that might capture their interest, compared with the ever-changing, fast-paced ways of the Super-Cool flashing across a TV or movie screen. Gone were opportunities to narrate the ways of being a man that had existed for generations—hell, for centuries—like plowing a field, retrofitting a roof, or riding a horse. Men could reveal these “secrets” of life to the young just as their fathers had revealed it to them and their fathers' fathers to them. My father's father taught him how to slaughter a chicken and maintain a coal-burning furnace.

Sure, I know, things are changing all the time and have been for the past 200-plus years, from around the French Revolution on, according to my reckoning. But nothing like this, nothing like what occurred, post-1945. I've read all seven volumes of the brilliant *Oxford History of the United States*, and every author discusses how monumentally the United States changed during whatever time period is under review. I get that. Yes, the telegraph and the steam engine were significant inventions, as was the intercontinental railroad. But in spite of these shifts, life in 1650, 1750, and 1850 America wasn't altogether that much different, give or take a few less people living on farms. But life in 1850 America and life in 1950 America were vastly different. The United States changed fundamentally in the immediate postwar years. So powerful was it that the nation mainly still looks the same now as it did then because of the significant impact those changes had, give or take a few more computer screens replacing TV screens. While the resolution is better, the computer screen is essentially

the same pitchman as the TV screen, and it didn't take long for TV shows to be watched on it. It's "better" only because watching TV and shopping can now be done with the same flick of a finger.

The advent of the Electric-Histrionic age after World War II meant the spread of jazzed-up knowledge and information at increasingly larger degrees of influence, with increasingly greater speed, and with increasingly greater means for its dissemination. In the past, most American families shared a common doctrine, conveyed by a common document, the Bible, with a handful of other primary texts, such as *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*, all of which reinforced this familial cultural consensus. Like a father showing his son how to pluck and slaughter a chicken, a "simpler" philosophy of life could be passed down just the same. Not anymore.

The new consumer culture has not only co-opted "raising" America's youth, it did so by proposing for the first time the advantages of adolescence and the disadvantages of maturity. Men of my dad's generation were instantaneously displaced, while being replaced by a new authority. The only fathers who knew best were on TV. They just so happened to be "cool" too, cool in their demeanor and cool in their moronic pithy expressions. They didn't do much except sit in chairs waiting for their wives to call them to the dinner table. If they had jobs, viewers didn't exactly know what they did, except for the guy married to the witch and Rob Petrie, both of whom worked in the very industries that sold them back to us as "real" fathers. Eventually, such married men with TV children would become cool for different reasons. They behaved like ass-clowns and were *proud* that they hadn't grown up. They demonstrated that night after night for our enjoyment. Their children were smarter than they—and more mature!—and everybody knew it, especially the viewers. That was the coolest thing of all. Viewers were in on the joke, the cynicism and humiliation. We ate it up. For the past thirty years especially, white middle-aged men were fools who didn't deserve the respect of their children. Even the cartoon kids were hip and the dads were chumps.

So convinced had we become of the veracity and validity of these fictional fathers that we eventually elected a couple of boys to be president, one a fake cowboy from Texas who dressed up like a soldier for our patriotic fervor and the other before him who got blowjobs in the Oval Office from a woman young enough to be his daughter. The nation giggled about cum-stained dresses and thick cigars, including grade school kids on their way to school. That presidency was soon followed by one touting the manly appeal of the phony fighter pilot's codpiece after his staged plane landing on an aircraft carrier. It ran on the news like one of

our favorite TV shows. How childish had we become? Shouldn't we have grown up after Vietnam and Watergate? But that was the point. We didn't want to, or we weren't allowed to. We had to stay "innocent" and infantile. Childish attitudes and behavior make you want things.

Our presidents reflect our values and principles, and vice-versa. Even our nation's highest elected officials were "failed boys" (the writer John Updike's words). This shouldn't be surprising given that both came of age during the postwar era. Fittingly, a president from the Greatest Generation, who aptly embodied the era's Fantasy Land, prepared us for them. Reagan lived inside the Make-Believe Fun Factory for most of his life and even accepted it as "reality," as had the nation by the time he was elected president. When Disneyland opened with great fanfare on July 17, 1955, Reagan served as master of ceremonies. For decades, it was the most-visited place in America (later replaced by Las Vegas), more than our real national treasures like Yellowstone and Yosemite. Reagan and the nation were meant for each other. As president, he recited lines from movies during real events. We were more amused by it than outraged—that is, if we even noticed.

By then, the country had been so afflicted by cultural immaturity that it didn't want to grow up historically anyway. If anything, we could disregard realistically looking at ourselves in the mirror. The country preferred Reagan's "Morning in America" to the harsh truths of our recent dysfunctional past (the hostage crisis, Watergate, assassinations, Pinochet, Vietnam, Kent State, Jim Crow, and on and on). It was as if we were a new nation once more, starting from scratch. It was *morning* in America, after all, not even early afternoon. Reagan showed us that we needn't dig too far into our past to recapture our youth, just like my own dad who had to reach only a decade or so into the past to recapture his. We could be reborn again by summoning the Golden Age of the Fifties. If only our illusions *and* amnesia were meant to be ironic. Our sunny future could be reclaimed by returning to the place where the culturally manufactured morning-in-us-all exuberance began, where it all started, the birth of TV, fast food, highways, and malls. To celebrate it all, we inserted "God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, to confirm that our new (shopping) cathedrals were graced by the Almighty.

Reagan was truly the perfect postmodern president, a man from the Greatest Generation who had trouble dealing with his own children, like most men of his age, and who once announced when walking into a sound studio to make a political ad that "the bar of soap has arrived." He was more comfortable *playing* a role than at *being* a real person. As

one biographer put it, being president was the “greatest role” of his life. Ronnie—a boy’s name—made it safe for us to forget about our more recent adolescent mistakes because we were still the innocents we were in the ’50s, no less desiring a state of forgetfulness than what my father advised me to do about being shot. To me, Reagan was as bad a father to the nation as was my own to me when it came to guidance. Neither one dealt with the facts of life very well. If in the past we’ve raised the specter of Lost Generations, I wonder if it’s time to consider a Lost Gender.

Which brings me back to my question (I warned you it would take a while before we got to “4”): How did I end up on that old lady’s lawn? I’ve spent a lot of time—much of my life, really—trying to figure it out. The best answer I can come up with, after having cross-examined the facts of my childhood like an attorney, probed the psychological reverberations of my youth like a psychiatrist, observed general human behavior like an anthropologist, while reading hundreds, if not thousands, of books like the academic that I am, is “4”—America does a really crappy job of turning boys into men. Also, I’m choosing “4” because it can legitimately subsume “1,” “2,” and “3.” All three can be viewed and explained through 4’s lens. It’s the macro opposite of Napoleon’s head cold, or Hugo’s stormy weather, the micro explanations. Furthermore, “4” is entirely human-made. I really can’t blame it on the weather, including whether that’s divine planning or random occurrence. Working backward, then, there’s no healthy social system in play for anyone with extra chimp chromosomes (“3”), unless playing with toy guns while still in diapers counts (“2”), and about a minute after my dad left us he started driving convertibles and dressing like James Bond (“1”).

The wacky thing about trying to understand how I ended up on that widow’s lawn, even if “4” offers a sliver of an explanation, is that it almost doesn’t matter because I’m glad I did. I’m grateful I got shot, believe it or not, which I know sounds really strange, especially after all of that soul-searching. Ultimately, I’m thankful I screwed up enough that I got the chance to be “reborn.” In addition to finding “enlightenment” at the end of the priest’s rosary beads, my screw-up provided a less grandiose reward. It preempted the retardation caused by an infantile culture, or so I like to think. Again, I’m well aware that being shot doesn’t sound like anyone’s idea of having fun, including mine. Yet in no small part, I’ve avoided some of the pitfalls of growing up male in America. The shooting’s happening in my adolescence catapulted me into becoming a man extra-pronto. I had no choice, really. I grew up fast by witnessing my own death, so to speak. I got wise before I got old. As a general rule, wisdom doesn’t come easily

to people. Sometimes it doesn't come at all, ever. But it did to me, at an incredibly young age, and super-fast. Yet at the same time I was profoundly ignorant. Unlike wisdom, knowledge doesn't come to a person in a flash. I may have become wise in one grand moment, but I didn't simultaneously become knowledgeable. That takes time and work, a lifetime of work. I'm still working on it. Despite all of the time I've spent inhaling books and studying life, there are moments when I still feel like an ignoramus. Before that night I was most definitely ignorant and most certainly foolish too. I was oblivious. And I can see now that even though my dad was in his mid-forties when it happened, he was just as clueless, like a lot of men. Number "4" had begun to affect his generation, no matter how "Great" they were, maybe even more so because of the great expectations they had placed on themselves.

Most of the men I encountered throughout my life appeared as lost as my father, while most of the boys were as lost as I was—but in different ways and for different reasons. The men were more stuck and stagnant than lost. They weren't wandering around the neighborhood, as we were, looking for things to do. They weren't even wandering around inside their own heads. They may have attained the creature-comforts associated with middle-class success, but men in Oakwood Heights seemed unsatisfied and unfulfilled. Some were apathetic and depressed, unless they were drinking. Then they became angry or maudlin, like my next-door neighbor Mr. King. From his porch almost every night we could hear him cursing the weather or Mrs. King's existence, like a befuddled Lear. A few minutes later he'd be crying over the rain's beauty or ruefully weeping over mistreating his long-suffering wife. We frequently came across such men as boys while we roamed the neighborhood on our way to The Station. We came across many things, which was the point. It explains why the ten-minute walk there might take us hours.

Our trips to The Station generally followed the same route. We avoided locations like the kindly widows' and targeted the dangerous homes. It was on such an occasion we first saw him standing completely naked in the street.

"Look how little it is," Timmy said. "Half of my pinkie is bigger." He was right. It was incredibly small. But the toddler scrabbling along Isabella Avenue in tight back-and-forth semi-circles, powered by churning parenthetical legs, was no more than three years old. Just how large was his penis supposed to be?

His family had recently moved to Oakwood Heights and he was running around like that in front of his house. Over time it became a familiar

scene, to see him playing in the street or on his front yard alone, although not always in a total state of undress. More often he wore a diaper. His parents had relocated from a rough neighborhood in Brooklyn. They must have assumed that the comparatively tame, traffic-free back streets of Staten Island were safe enough to let their naked child play freely.

That's how we saw him for the first time. It was really too bad for him. From then on he was called "Little Dickey." Whatever his real name was didn't matter. He became Little Dickey to the four of us that summer afternoon in 1967, and Little Dickey he remained for as long as I lived there. Once we came up with that nickname and the "rules of engagement" went into effect, everyone else in the neighborhood called him Little Dickey. The label stuck. Even when I went back to the neighborhood to visit my parents when I was in my thirties, and he was in his twenties, I continued to address him as "Dickey." For all I know, now his wife and kids call him Little Dickey. At least his older brother Anthony had the slight advantage that his nickname was a diminutive of his real name. But it was a very slight advantage.

Anthony wasn't much older than his brother, and we weren't much older than he. An undeclared rule in Oakwood Heights granted older kids the privilege of nicknaming younger ones, or peers to nickname one another. The playbook also stipulated that outside the peer group the name established by elders trumped the peer name. Being older, we had every right to determine Anthony's nickname. If kids older than we approved of the nicknames we assigned to others or to one another, they typically were permanent. This was especially true if the names were so obviously suitable, like calling Ritchie Graham "Crackers," or so ridiculously silly, like "Little Dickey," or so well suited rhythmically, like Paul "Smelly" Capelli, or so outrageously apt for underscoring an outstanding physical or behavioral characteristic, like Anthony's rather pointed head.

It was Crackers who first noticed that Anthony's head was shaped like a woman's breast. Soon thereafter, Anthony was known as "Antonio Tit-Head." Like all studious grammarians, we frequently parsed names. "Antonio Tit-Head" was reduced first to "Tit-Head" and then further still to "Tit." On the street or in George's, it was often, "Hey, Tit, what's up?" If he was with one of his parents it was only "Hey," never "Tit." It wasn't that we didn't want to humiliate him in front of them. It was that parents and adults weren't supposed to have access to our world. Ours had more flair, and most adults would have been appalled. They wouldn't have recognized the genius in having a "Tit" among us, rather than some undistinguished Anthony. There were thousands of Anthonys on Staten

Island. At least we had gone through the trouble of singling ours out, establishing a world populated with unique individuals. That wasn't a feature of the adult world, with its cookie-cutter tract homes crowded with carbon-copy appliances and furniture. Originality and creativity didn't seem part of their world, like ours, however vulgar ours was.

We didn't depend strictly on crudeness for inspiration. Some of the less coarse nicknames we borrowed from pop culture, such as "Mouse." Actually, there were two "Mice" within blocks of each other, one of whom was "Mouse" because of his appearance. Bob McAllister looked just enough like a mouse as a child, with his pointy ears, small eyes, and nose, whereas Billy Poppino was "Mouse" because of a popular novelty song. It included the lyrics, "Oh, Poppino, oh you little mouse / why won't you go away?" For years, everybody called him Mouse because of it. That changed once he hit puberty. From when he turned eleven to about when he turned thirteen he'd grown to more than six feet tall, without adding any weight. In addition to being called Mouse, he acquired the nicknames String Bean and Bean Pole. So he started lifting weights. Within a year, the weightlifting helped him overcome all of his nicknames.

On nice days, he'd be out in his back yard for hours after school, grunting, groaning, and puffing, the noise accompanied by the sound of a large transistor radio turned up full-volume to WNEW-FM, a station that played Led Zeppelin one minute and Joni Mitchell the next. In bad weather, he'd descend into his basement; from the street could be heard the sound of the weights slamming onto its concrete floor, the noise accompanied by even louder music from WNEW blaring from his more powerful stereo system. He was one of the first kids in Oakwood Heights to own an inclined bench-press. He practically slept on it. He used it in and out of doors, lugging it up and down his basement stairs depending on the weather.

Every couple of months he'd have one of his older sisters drive him to Masters department store, part of the newly built shopping center in Oakwood, one of the first department stores built in Staten Island. They'd return from there with more weights. We'd sometimes watch him pull out a box from the trunk, the bright red and blue plastic casings that sheathed the concrete discs visible through the ruptured cardboard boxes they were in. It wasn't long before all of the 25-lb. weights he owned, the biggest size sold then, couldn't fit on the longest bar available, without excluding his hands from grasping it. After a while he started wearing extra-tight T-shirts, even in the winter, stretched to the breaking point over his bulging chest and forearms. He was announcing to everyone in the

neighborhood, from the sounds emanating from his back yard to wearing Fruit-of-the-Looms pulled like taffy across his upper body and that nobody was going to mess with him anymore. Billy didn't pal around much with kids his own age in our immediate neighborhood. Maybe that's because many of them picked fights with him, being an easy target, until his weightlifting regimen. The bullying stopped simultaneously without affixing some silly nickname to him.

"String Bean" and "Bean Pole" disappeared immediately, and he was in a position to expunge "Mouse" from usage as well, even among the older boys. He began insisting that everyone call him "Pops." If anyone dared call him Mouse he'd put an end to it. For a time, he seemed to be fighting practically everyone in the neighborhood, one at a time, some of it as payback I suspect. Plenty of other kids in Oakwood Heights lifted weights, including me, but not as ferociously as Billy. Our irregular routines meant that whatever advantages we sought to gain from them—like curtailing the use of an embarrassing nickname—were offset by others in the weightlifting congregation, all of whom were equally unfaithful in their devotion to it. There was parity among the half-hearted. Not Billy. He was a true believer and a scrupulous practitioner. When the extreme weightlifting began preventing him from flexing his arms enough to hit someone or throw a football, he bought a punching bag. From his basement we were serenaded by WNEW blasting from the speakers, weights crashing to the floor, and the staccato thumping of an old-fashioned bur-lap bag.

But all those muscles didn't protect Billy from experiencing a transformative "bad trip" when he was seventeen, during a Deep Purple concert. Mentally, he never came back from it. I was fifteen when it happened, the summer before I was shot. A few of us had dropped acid before attending a Deep Purple concert at Madison Square Garden. Billy was someone who never should have taken LSD. His family was known to have a history of mental illness, his mother sometimes absent for days "recovering from tiredness," as it was euphemistically described. His father, a New York City fireman and plumber, was never around. One of Billy's older sisters seemed unnaturally nervous all the time and acted strange a lot of the time. Billy himself was a bit paranoid, especially whenever we played cards or Risk in his room. He often accused us of scheming against him while playing poker or conspiring to invade his game-board possessions by forming Axis powers.

His room was located in the back of his basement, attached to the large, open space where he lifted his weights. He had to remove a section of

the low-lying drop ceiling in order to do military presses. Every time he stood up abruptly in his room he'd bump his head. The room's seclusion from the rest of the house allowed us to get high there freely, along with his family's clinical obliviousness to it. Between the joints passed around intermittently and six or seven guys chain-smoking cigarettes, by the end of a weekend night the room resembled San Francisco Bay in the late afternoon when the fog rolls in. Billy didn't mind. He smoked nearly two packs of Marlboros a day. That's the beauty of weightlifting: the appearance of health without necessarily living a healthful life. A person can smoke, drink, and take drugs and still lift like mad.

We had plenty of laughs and great fun for a couple of years, until Billy "freaked out." Both Dougie and I lived around the block from Billy's, so the two of us spent a lot of time there. The other guys we were palling around with lived on the other side of Oakwood Heights, almost in the next neighborhood, New Dorp. By our early teens, Dougie and I had outgrown our childhood playmates, Pee-Pocket, Crackers, and Santa. We were with a different crowd, mostly fellow potheads, the lost and illiterate, one of whom initiated the stickups. The robberies and Billy's nineteenth nervous breakdown unfolded concurrently. If any of us had known better, we would have prevented him from taking acid with us that night. His fragile mind was often adversely affected simply by his smoking Black Afghanistan, an opium-laced hashish that was our drug of choice at the time.

During the concert, when the mescaline started kicking in, he unexpectedly jumped up every few minutes, turning his head in every direction and saying how unsafe it was to stay there. We kept pushing him back down into his seat as the people sitting behind us kept shouting, "Sit the fuck down!" When he went to the bathroom, none of us trusted to let him go alone. After the show, as we walked through Madison Square Garden and rode the subway, he was dead silent, but he looked as if he'd undergone shock therapy. He didn't remain quiet for long. As soon as we boarded the Staten Island Ferry, he ran through it screaming and yelling from one end to the other, and up and down the stairs of all three decks. Much of what he was yelling was unintelligible. Whatever it was, his behavior showed how paranoid and delusional he'd become. First it was the cops who he believed were after him; then it turned into anonymous "theys." Some of our names were mentioned. Maybe he was back in his room playing Risk with us. He was never the same after that. He was in and out of mental institutions throughout his twenties.

One night one drug fried his mind for good. That's all it took to change the course of his life. It took only one night to change mine too.

That's all it takes for anyone, I guess. It seems that young men in Oakwood Heights were particularly ripe for life changes, and rarely for the better. The boxes of weights Billy brought back from the store didn't come packed with good fortune or instructions on how to deal with adolescence mentally or emotionally.

But that was Oakwood Heights for you. You played with guns when you were a child and then inflated your biceps as a teen hoping to take on the world, except that the world often took you on, without your ever knowing it. Hardly anybody lived by brains or wits, neither the preferred mode of entry into male adulthood. Both were in relative short supply and undervalued, although I did try getting by with wisecracks, a poor man's way of faking intelligence. I wish I could say I faked or strong-armed my way out of acquiring an unwelcome nickname. It would better serve the interests of the plot's arc. But that wasn't the case. My talent for self-deprecating, self-deflecting humor had nothing to do with my never having a pejorative nickname. Love saved me.

Like "Mouse" (a.k.a. "String Bean," "Bean Pole," and "Pops"), my nickname came from popular culture. During my adolescence, I was "Corn Flake" or "Flake," thanks to Ray Miller, a rather mild-mannered, affable teen who lived down the block from us. He also happened to have a mad crush on my sister. He was convinced I was the spitting image of a boy who appeared in a Kellogg's Corn Flakes TV commercial. That meant my sometimes being greeted on the streets by kids inserting my last name into the commercial's jingle: "Hey, Bor/kow/ski—new-country corn-flake." Having been given "Flake" undoubtedly spared me from being stuck with an unfavorable nickname, perhaps scarring me for life, like being called "Shit." Bobby Barnes, who was considered such a shithead by the age of ten (most likely because he was stealing bicycles when he was eight and breaking into homes when he was nine), was being called "Shit" at the start of his adolescence. He lost his eye in a barroom shootout in his late teens and a couple of years later took a header off the Verrazano Bridge. Not that his nickname directly contributed to those unfortunate twin events, but being called "Shit" several dozen times a day couldn't have been a confidence-booster or morale-builder. By comparison, "Flake" was downright ennobling. But I didn't think I looked anything like that kid on TV. It had more to do with Ray's trying to score points with my sister.

When it came to casting nicknames we drew from many different sources, not only from popular culture, like mine, or from physical characteristics, like "Tit-Head." There were also behavioral traits that we identified and used, like calling Bruce Contess "Mess." He was named Mess

because he was always messed up on drugs. He obtained that ignoble moniker at a rather young age, when he was about twelve. During my jock phase, as I headed to a pair of concrete baseball diamonds adjacent to P.S. 50, I'd often spot him passed out on the wooden benches behind the school, high from sniffing glue. Hours later, when the rest of us were packing up our bats and mitts, he'd wander from the back of the building, stumbling like a Bowery drunk into right field, with hardened glue smeared over his face. In his teens his drug habits advanced to barbiturates and Quaaludes, LSD and morphine. Whenever he was in Billy's room, he rarely played cards or Risk with the rest of us, preferring instead to pass out on Billy's bed. He'd be out cold minutes after he arrived, snoring as loudly as our fathers. Billy didn't like it much, so he sometimes drew on Mess's face with a black marker. But that never stopped Mess from doing it again. If we were at The Station, Mess might quietly slip into the back of someone's parked car and pass out there. If he wasn't such a loud snorer I'm sure a few guys would have mistakenly driven home with him. Mess cleaned himself up by the time he got into a pretty decent Pennsylvania college, by then no longer even taking a single hit from a joint being passed around. It didn't matter. He was Mess and stayed Mess. He's still Mess in my mind. Maybe that's because Mess was the one who turned Dougie and me on to the idea of sticking up pizza delivery drivers. I guess we should've known not to take instructions from some kid who used to periodically conk out into a paper lunch bag full of airplane glue.

In addition to coming up with names based on outstanding traits, physical features, and pop culture, we also created puckish rhymes. We often fell back on them whenever none of the other three came to mind. In addition to Paul "Smelly" Capelli, for instance, there was Jay "Poo-Stain" Ruane. Paul didn't smell, and Jay didn't poop in his pants. The names simply had a rhythmic sound to them. Of course, the same parsing rules applied. Soon, everyone was calling Jay just "Stain."

On occasion, an original nickname could be supplanted if a more striking trait or feature was subsequently detected, like Timmy Fosket's, the very same Timmy who regularly participated in Extreme Lawn Sports. Until he was about seven, he was Timmy Tomato Head. Timmy's head wasn't shaped like a tomato, whereas Anthony's was shaped like a tit. Timmy and "Tomato" had a nice ring to it, pure and simple. I haven't the foggiest idea why "Head" was attached, other than we seemed to favor creating multi-syllabic nicknames so we could reduce their parts for variety ("Timmy Tomato Head," "Timmy Tomato," "Tomato Head," and "Tomato"). I'm sure not a single kid in Oakwood Heights knew what the word "alliteration"

meant, but that's what we often went for if there weren't any outlandish options available. Timmy's first nickname fell under that category, but a second quickly replaced it. Based on a quirky hygiene habit apparent to everyone, he became "Pee-Pocket."

Timmy was in the habit of not going to the bathroom whenever he needed to, and he needed to a lot—as far as taking a pee went. Because of his affliction, he regularly had one hand thrust deeply inside one of his pockets so he could hold onto his pecker, choking off the chances that any renegade urine might dribble out. While standing, he'd often shift from one leg to the other leg, having removed his hand from one pocket and inserted it into the other one. His whole body would tilt to whatever side he was favoring. He could have been "The Leaning Tower of Timmy" if any of us had been familiar with geography. Even when we were swimming in backyard pools, Timmy stood in the water with one hand inside the pocket of his trunks. At least he had the decency not to pee in the pool. Thank God: Most of them weren't much bigger than kiddie pools. During the winter, his long winter coats provided greater cover. But anyone could see the coat's fabric bouncing around now and then. For all practical purposes, he was essentially a kid who had the use of only one arm. When it came to playing games and sports this was a major drawback.

Whenever we played baseball, for example, Timmy was always picked last, his ailment being a tremendous handicap for the team he played on. His condition wasn't so detrimental when he came up to bat. He didn't have the nerve to hit a ball holding the bat in one hand while holding his weenie with the other, although he crouched down so low to put pressure on his diaphragm that he might as well have hit with one arm. Visually, in contrast to his actual urinary needs, he looked as if he were taking a crap. Playing in position was different. His handicap was a more serious burden. No team in its right mind permitted him to play the infield. It was too risky. He couldn't react fast enough to play an infield position with any proficiency. This wasn't because of a lack of athleticism. He was actually a pretty decent athlete when he first came out of his house, no doubt thanks to his having just gone to the bathroom. Nobody wanted him in the infield because being there involved too much bending and reaching, and if he had to pee badly enough he'd let a slow grounder flutter through his legs rather than scoop it up. As a result, he was always consigned to the outfield. But he was a liability wherever he played.

Typically, he stood in the outfield with his gloved left hand covering the fidgeting taking place in his right pocket. I'm guessing it was his favorite time of year because he conducted a really good workout. He'd be so

absorbed that sometimes he wouldn't notice that a ball had been hit to where he was located. Even when he did, his habit still presented a problem. It took time for him to pull his happy hand from his pocket before chasing a fly ball. If he was at the breaking point, sometimes he didn't bother taking his hand out of his pocket at all before running after a ball. He'd hobble toward a lazy pop-up that Quasimodo could snare and let it drop anywhere but in his glove. Everyone on the opposing team knew to hit the ball to him. Therefore, none of us wanted him on our team, yet none of us had the heart to tell him why. Maybe we were too embarrassed for *him*. More likely, we considered it too amusing for *us*. His handicap was worth the laughs, but we never laughed at him to his face—we'd have had to explain what we were laughing at. It could jeopardize the fun. Among us, it was "Pee-Pocket." Around him, it remained "Timmy Tomato Head."

We weren't being overly mean-spirited about it, I don't think, making fun of some kid's unfortunate handicap. It wasn't like we were joking about someone's birth defect or uncontrollable tic. Timmy's liability was rather self-induced. If he'd called a "time-out" once in a while to pee behind a tree or something, he wouldn't have had to go through all of that handwringing and we wouldn't have had cause to joke about it behind his back. Overweight David "Santa" Santoro (physical feature + alliteration = jackpot) was a different story. Not only slow and plodding whenever he played sports or games, he was also incredibly un-athletic, a "spazz." He often vied with Timmy for being chosen last—that is, whenever he came outside to play. He generally stayed indoors reading books about animals and watching TV. None of us ever went into his house to play with him, unlike all the other kids' homes we did play in. I think we feared it was haunted and we'd end up like him, never coming out, trapped inside like David seemed to be.

He unfairly had a reputation for being a momma's boy, for no right-minded kid would spend all day in his house with his mother unless he was sickly. And David wasn't. He was undoubtedly overly self-conscious of being the fattest and least athletic kid in the neighborhood. But we didn't tease him about it. Most of us probably empathized with him, knowing we were never far from being called spazzes and sissies if we dropped an easy touchdown or struck out a bunch of times—"looking like a girl." We also knew it couldn't be much fun being a chubby kid in such a competitively male neighborhood. In contrast, Pee-Pocket didn't warrant similar compassion because we assumed there was actually some advantage to fiddling with your dick all day. Both David and Timmy were terrible players, but Timmy appeared to be having a much better time at it.

Several adults in the neighborhood were given unflattering nicknames too—deservedly so, in our judgment, usually for the most egregious sin in our book, stinginess. If the parsimony was extreme, we'd assign ourselves the role of avenging (rotten) angels. They were subjected to our pranks and hijinks. If people wanted to behave like cheap bastards, even though they owned the biggest TV or had the largest backyard pool, we felt we were within our rights to punish them for their sins.

We generally learned about their stinginess through our paper routes. The *Staten Island Advance*, an afternoon daily newspaper, was delivered on foot or by bike. As the week progressed and the size of the papers increased, delivery could be done only on foot. Sunday papers required shopping carts. Anywhere from fifty to a hundred homes might be on a single route. Tightly situated tract homes at least didn't add up to great distances to be covered. Initially, Dougie had the paper route to himself (in seventh grade); then we shared it (in eighth), and then I had it alone during my freshman and sophomore years of high school. Even separately we often helped the other so afterward we could squeeze in a little more play time before we had to go home for dinner.

Collection for delivery was bi-weekly, and it might take hours to complete, even if we were both doing it. A 50-cent tip was generous, while a quarter was adequate. Anything less than that was barely acceptable. No tip was downright intolerable. The stingiest of all opted against having the paper delivered at all to avoid tipping altogether, as was the case with my next-door neighbor Mr. Weiss. He was such a miserly coot he didn't even want to give the boy who lived next door a quarter every other week for the service. Neither did Mr. King, my other next-door neighbor, who may have had an excuse: He needed the loose change for the cheap beer he drank by the six-pack. In retrospect, these were wise decisions. In time, we would have found a way to assail them too, just like the others.

Rarely did an entire family, or both husband and wife, tip poorly or not at all. Older children who answered the door and knew us frequently threw in some spare change. The males didn't spare a little invective while they were at it, just to show that they weren't total softies. They usually answered the door playing some kind of TV teen character that didn't exist yet. "Who invited you assholes to my house?" they'd ask. After placing the money in an outstretched hand they'd grab the small accounting book tucked under an armpit. "What do we have here? I bet the *Staten Island Advance* would be very upset to find out you jerks lost this." It was best when an older daughter answered. They not only tipped well, they chatted with you as if you were a normal person. "Oh, I know what you're

here for. Pay day. I saw your sister in Driver's Ed. today. Our instructor is such a creep. Does she talk about him? No? Well, why should she, right? Oh, wow, it's really nasty out there," she might say, sticking her head farther out from the screen door and peering at the sky. "Would you like to come inside?" From the distance the father would shout, "No! Don't invite them in. They'll get the floor all wet!" Invariably, The Man of the House was the meanest of the lot, and the worst tipper. We always seemed to be "disturbing" him at the most inopportune time, just as he was about to sit down to dinner or just as he was getting ready to watch the news.

Almost all of the homes on Staten Island had front porches, some no more than a few feet of stone tile, while others were large, enclosed structures. Standing on them, we were at eye-level with the bay windows that also accompanied most homes. Nearly every bay window was shrouded in thick, wide drapes, but not thick enough to conceal the ever-present pulsating blue-gray TV screen, or wide enough to prevent the throbbing beam from poking around its sides. After ringing the doorbell, we could peer through a tiny parting in the curtains to see who was coming to the door, and what to expect. If The Unpleasant Man of the House was seen rising from the couch, shaking his head disgustedly, you knew you were in for plenty of guff, and possibly no tip. Some were so visibly annoyed they seemed two ticks shy of one day appearing on the rooftop with a high-powered rifle ready to pick us off before ringing the bell.

Minus the rifle, The Grinch opens the door: "Why do ya always have to come around just when we're about to sit down to dinner, huh? We were just gonna eat."

I want to say, "Well, maybe it has something to do with me getting out of school at 2:30 and by the time I change out of my school uniform and walk over to the street where the delivery truck leaves the papers it's already after three and then it takes a long time to go from house to house ringing doorbells and collecting money from crabby-ass cheapskates like you and let's not forget your house is one of the last of the fifty-four on my route and really aren't you taking up more of my time by pestering me about what time it is you miserable Scrooge so why don't you just pay me so I can go on my way and whatever it is your wife is cooking sure smells good and you're lucky to have her because if it was up to me I'd be serving you puppy chow." But of course I don't say anything even remotely like that.

"Is it dinnertime already?" I say instead.

"Is it dinner time already? What are you, an idiot? Here," he says, thrusting a clean envelope into my hands with the words "Paper Boy"

perfectly typed on the front. When I open it, I find the exact amount owed and not a penny more.

On occasion there is a slip of paper stuffed inside the envelope itemizing our transgressions and the deductions paired with them. I read it as he watches me through the screen door. "Sunday paper missing 'Parade' section (subtract 5¢); paper wet on Tuesday (subtract 5¢)." Nice. How should I react to such a calculating turd? Am I supposed to be impressed or cowed? I'm neither. I'm more baffled at how trifling people can be. I lift up my head. He's glaring at me through the screen door, looking for clues into my reaction. He wants me to be wounded. It's written all over his face.

I wish I could say, "Am I expected to go through every Sunday paper to make sure each section is there and Tuesday it poured during the middle of the route and I carried your paper under my jacket as I walked from the curb where my soaked, now probably ruined, bicycle was but what do you care and placed the paper between the storm and main door and carefully closed it and other than that really how much control do I have over whether your paper gets wet and knowing what a stingy sourpuss you are I wouldn't be surprised if what you mean by wet is that a tiny piece of the top right corner where the weather summary is was wet and so I'm really glad that I went through all of that trouble trying to keep your paper dry now that a nickel plus another nickel for the missing section must come out of my pocket to meet my payment to the paper company." But I don't say any of that either.

"Thank you," I say instead, forcing a smile and walking down the steps. The door slams shut behind me. He wants to make it clear he's upset, perhaps all the more so because I didn't seem as bothered as he wanted me to be. I let pass how good he is at making his point. Nobody was going to pull a fast one on him, especially a child, by making him read a newspaper that was one one-hundredth wet and then expect to pay for it in full. It's hard to tell if he's upset over that or something else. He's always upset. Mr. Sarnesse—The Grinch—is a grumpy bastard and he wants everyone to know it. He's mad at the world. He wasn't alone. He could have been my Uncle Sammy or my next-door neighbor Mr. King, or any number of my other neighbors or male relatives. It was a masculine mystique thing, I suppose.

Someone like Mr. Sarnesse therefore merited multiple nicknames, the more scatological the better. He was not only "Mr. Sorry-Knees" (he was in fact gimpy), "Mr. Four-Eyes" (he was in fact near-sighted), and "Mr. Sardines" (he did in fact have a fish-face) but also "Mr. Fat-Ass" (he was in fact chubby) and any number of their rude offspring—"Ass-Face,"

"Fish-Face," "Fish-Ass Face," "Fish-Fart-Face," "Fish-Fart Four-Eyes," and anything else we could imagine. And we could imagine a lot.

When customers like Sorry-Knees pushed us too far, we felt it was imperative and within our constitutional rights to punish them. Whether Dougie and I owned the route individually or collectively, payback was always done together. (Look, I know what you're thinking: sounds like a foreshadowing to the holdups. It could have been. Dougie and I perhaps were like that old TV episode of *Superman* when he divides himself to carry out two separate missions, which causes the two of him to have almost normal human strength. Separate, Dougie and I were normal. Together, we were volatile. As children, we played Batman and Robin in his basement or mine. As we grew older, we continued to imagine ourselves as a fearless pair, but by then of the more criminal kind, like Redford and Newman robbing trains or pulling off convoluted scams. One of Dougie's favorite movies was *Bonnie and Clyde*, which he saw several times, and he was all of six or seven, mind you. Bonnie's being a female obviously complicated our desire to duplicate their escapades in our imaginations. Years later, he saw *The Sting* almost as many times when it originally came out in theaters, and it came out a few months before we started our own spree of criminal activity. I'm not blaming those films for our actions, or for glorifying criminal behavior. After all, it's a bloody finale for both Bonnie and Clyde and Butch and Sundance. But the timing of the release of those films and for hanging our own wayward dispositions onto some pop cultural reference could be seen as propitious. Rather than Hugo's rainstorm fouling up Bonaparte's plans at Waterloo, a handful of big-ticket cultural events helped solidify our already formulating attitudes and sparked our foul plans. So, yeah, *maybe* the wickedest plan of them all, to stick up pizza delivery drivers, was cultivated as we were getting back at the customers we didn't like, reflected and refracted by the culture at large.)

In time, Mr. Sorry-Knees pushed us beyond nasty nicknames. We simply couldn't take it any longer. The stinginess had reached biblical proportions. His repeated deductions, based on the most trivial grounds, had to be stopped, even if that meant losing him as a customer, and certainly getting in trouble for it. One day, after a night's worth of torrential rain, we trolled his paper through a muddy puddle of water and delicately put it in his mailbox. Placed inside the newspaper, wrapped in a plastic bag, was an envelope, with his name neatly written on it. The note inside read: "One Really Wet Paper: Free." He got the message, all right. He phoned our parents and told them about it, throwing in complaints about "bad parenting" and "the state of the country," or words to that effect. I don't

recall the punishment I received because it didn't matter. As expected, Fish-Fart-Face canceled delivery. Big deal. What most mattered was we had made it clear who owned the route. Some stingy-ass wasn't going to push us around! It simply never occurred to people like him that we might sacrifice money for our own crazy code of acting on principle.

When Dougie's older brother left him the route, sixty-eight homes received the paper. By the time I stopped doing it five years later there were forty-three. In our confused minds we thought we were undermining reckless and unjust adult authority, particularly when it involved titanic chintziness, such as the kind displayed by Mr. Sorry-Knees. I know I overreacted to these abuses of power. Obviously, I didn't entirely operate on the premise that unquestionable respect had to be conferred on all grownups. To me, they had to earn it. Some of them came up way short in my opinion. I'm sure that kind of defiant attitude toward authority didn't always serve me well, especially in the classroom, where I was often accused of being obstinate and bull-headed.

While generally shy and inhibited around adults, I had a rebellious streak under the surface. To this day, I can't be sure whether such an underlying trait was innate or bred over time, perhaps even accounting for the robberies, adding another wrinkle to the earlier list of possible explanations. Clear to me now, looking back on it, is the lack of faith I placed in adults as a child. For one thing, many seemed immature and intellectually stunted, especially the males (a condition that has seemingly become worse over time, in my opinion). Also, adults in those days—both males and females—were short on generating much passion for anything other than spoils and treasure. People had made a virtue out of material self-interest. Even as a boy I could see that. Acquiring things was life's goal. The not-so-funny part about it was how unhappy they seemed. Mr. Sorry-Knees lived in one of the fanciest homes in the neighborhood and he drove new, luxury-model Buicks, unlike nearly everyone else who owned older-model Fords and Chevrolets. But what good did that do him? He was discontented and hollow. He couldn't even deal humanely with a couple of kids who delivered his newspaper. It's not as if we weren't initially respectful and courteous to him, or other customers we later ambushed. We turned on someone like Sorry-Knees only if we were provoked, if their smallness interfered with our doing our jobs with some degree of dignity.

Oakwood Heights wasn't completely overrun with miserable misers like Sorry-Knees. There were plenty of "nice" men around. But they tended to be reserved and kept to themselves, almost to the point of in-

visibility. In effect, they were socially awkward. Nearly everyone, though, was fixated by appearances: lawns trimmed and groomed like golf courses, automobiles washed and waxed like show cars, and wardrobes and hair-styles modeled after those on *Ozzie and Harriet*. There was an endless fascination with *stuff*, especially acquiring the *right* kind of stuff, whether the right Christmas decorations or the right backyard grill. Most families owned apartment-sized aluminum sheds not only to store the rakes, shovels, hedge clippers, lawn mowers, and bags of limestone but also to accommodate some of the newly manufactured plastic junk on sale. Plastic was taking over the neighborhoods. Some families had two sheds to house the spillover of stuff that wouldn't fit in the already-packed basement, attic, back porch, or first shed. Oakwood Heights, like many of Staten Island's neighborhoods, was a working-class community aspiring to appear middle-class. Back then, that wasn't so hard to do. A person didn't need to have a secret benefactor, like Pip in *Great Expectations*, to advance themselves toward middle-class respectability.

The early postwar years were plentiful times, before the after-effects of the Vietnam War crippled the country economically and morally, not unlike how World War I crippled England in its aftermath. Despite nearly all of the families in my neighborhood being working class, they all wanted a middle class lifestyle, and many of them could afford to do so. *Appearing* middle class was a primary objective. If reached, it signified success. But it wasn't only Oakwood Height's mission. It was the nation's *modus operandi*. If we were all in the middle materially then we were all the same, all equally enjoying the good life. Richard Nixon had crowed about it during "The Kitchen Debates." Our cars, refrigerators, and TV sets demonstrated more than prosperity. They added up to equality, Nixon told Khrushchev and other Soviet visitors to the Moscow Exhibition. Mass consumerism proved we were equal among our consumer brethren. It was a special, American form of economic equality. We were *middle class*, so much better than being "bourgeoisie," which was such a foreign, outdated European term. "Bourgeoisie" also sounded like the superficial and insensitive characters in Dickens and Balzac, not that anyone in Oakwood Heights read such authors. Nobody wanted to believe they were some superficial, avaricious Victorian in mid-twentieth-century America. "Bourgeoisie" also had a Marxist ring to it, and the United States was more fervently anticommunist and antisocialist back then than it is now. Individual initiative and effort were prized: "We're (all) number one!" People privately exhibited their goods no differently from those who displayed theirs at the Moscow Exhibition. Their doing so revealed their success, demonstrating

that they too had mastered the American Way of Life, which was *the* way to live a life. It's why members of the Island's working class were enslaved by their possessions.

People judged one another according to the things they owned, and *how* they were owned. Any family whose home showed any outward sign of disarray or disrepair was considered fallen. Leaving a lawn sprinkler out after it had been used bordered on insanity. Every weekend, neighbors returned from supermarket and department store safaris, their boat-sized cars overloaded with boxes and packages. Two or three people would have to make several trips back and forth from car to home as if supplying an army rather than a family. Grocery stores turned into supermarkets, any one of which could've fed half of East Asia for a month. Candy stores like George's competed with department stores, a single aisle carrying ten times as many toys as George had packed in his cardboard boxes. Store owners like Sal were competing against not only a gang of kids scaring off his customers but also supermarkets big enough to drive a forklift through its aisles. (Let's tout the entrepreneurial spirit of the Little Guy and the decency of Main Street, while actually destroying both to serve the Big Guys and Wall Street?)

Who needs all that stuff? We all did, starting in childhood. Or so it was presumed. During my father's absence what I most remember about the men who sought to fill his shoes were the gifts they bought me for my birthdays or Christmases. My Uncle Larry was a corpulent man with an equally big heart. But if he exhibited moments of a generous spirit I didn't notice or I don't remember because it was trumped by material, tangible gifts. So what I do remember vividly is a toy battleship he bought me one Christmas, as big as an ironing board. Search lights and deck lights required half a dozen double-D batteries, which had to be replaced once a week. Rockets could be fired from its control towers and planes could be launched from its expansive deck, thanks to a rubber-band propulsion system. It was magnificent, as was an electric racecar set he gave me one birthday. Believe me, I loved it, but it wasn't what I was looking for or what I really needed. And maybe no kid does when you come right down to it. But if you believe you can buy freedom and equality I guess you'll believe you can buy anything, including a child's love and well-being.

Such a consumer-oriented lifestyle requires a lot of time and effort. The pursuit of material happiness comes at a price. No wonder grownups were always busy taking care of business. Every weekend, families in Oakwood Heights scurried around their little pieces of property—the men outside, the women inside—raking leaves, cleaning carpets, clipping

hedges, scrubbing stoves, cleaning gutters, washing windows, and tinkering in the remotest corners of their homes, sanding, spackling, and then painting imperfections no bigger than a half-dollar. Families with accumulated half-dollars and those who allowed saucer-sized imperfections to surface were pariahs. Two large families living on the same block as we were best-known for their poorly maintained properties. Actually, that's all they were known for. As a rule, neighbors who lived next door to or across the street from one another might exchange "Hellos" and "Good mornings." More often than not, they ignored one other by avoiding eye contact, pretending not to see someone across the street repairing his driveway or somebody getting into her car to take a child to school. If you were on the other side of the fence, literally and figuratively, repairing your driveway or taking your daughter to school, you didn't want to be noticed anyway. This practice validated the adage of how good fences make good neighbors, like the code of silence my family lived by, except this one spread throughout the neighborhood. Everyone guarded their privacy as tightly as they guarded their possessions. No wonder we pissed off so many households when we became entangled in their shrubs as boys. They weren't concerned only about their yards. They were afraid we might see something. On the other hand, concern about the general well-being of neighbors was nonexistent. Nobody cared that those two families couldn't afford to do much more than feed and clothe themselves. Knowing that their spotty grass wasn't regularly dosed with weed killer was enough information to go by. "White trash" was a term I often overheard to describe them. We too must have merited such pejorative terms because we'd fallen on such harsh times.

When my parents split up, our property went to hell. Situated on a street corner, our house had a relatively substantial side yard as far as yards went. But there was no back yard to speak of. Our unattended property was therefore fully exposed for all to see. The first summer they separated I spotted a rat camping in the waist-high grass and weeds. Ours had become a fallen household. No neighbor offered assistance, and my Uncle Sammy wouldn't set foot anywhere near us. We might be infectious. That must have been the prevailing view because not a single uncle or friend of my parents' came to our rescue. Perhaps offers were made and my mother's pride prevented her from accepting them, although I suspect the biggest obstacle was societal norms. It wouldn't be "right" for some strange man to be seen clipping our shrubs, even if it was just my mother's brother-in-law. In time, my mother had to hire a couple of older neighborhood boys to clear away the overgrowth—a further sign of our peculiarity. The next

summer I was barely strong enough to push a lawn mower around and do basic yard work, which didn't exactly overshadow our difference either. No other six-year-old boy was doing his father's work.

Most other families were better equipped to hide their dysfunction. We couldn't, obviously. As I'd later learn, Oakwood Heights was rife with alcoholism, drug addiction, spousal abuse, child abuse, and clinical depression. Fucked-up families were everywhere. I didn't know it at the time, of course. These days it's rather commonplace to know about everyone else's problems. In many cases people seem to take pride in their mental and emotional disorders and the problems their families inflict upon them, announcing them on their Facebook pages right below the snapshot of the first Caesar salad they made. The pendulum has clearly swung in the opposite direction. I don't know what's worse, today's excessive true confessions or yesterday's spurious detachment. Keeping secrets seems to require more effort, as I learned about keeping my being shot a secret. In all honesty, it was exhausting. I'm sure it must have been for my mother as well to pretend we were a normal two-parent household, when in fact we weren't.

We worked tirelessly to conceal our problems, despite their being in full view. How much easier it must have been for other families to hide theirs. Our neighbors presented themselves as archetypes of stability and normalcy. They demonstrated such by turning a basement into a family room or buying the latest gadget, like a gas-powered weed-whacker. The children were expected to follow their lead. It was a big part of growing up, learning to be like our parents. If we followed along in their footsteps, we too could some day march through life clutching our accumulations and believing we had "made it." Sometimes, though, making it was pretty darned ugly.

In the Oakwood Beach section of our neighborhood, neighbors torched a black family's house shortly after they moved in. While such incidents were atypical, rabid racism wasn't atypical in Oakwood Heights and throughout most of Staten Island. I guess you could say it was a blessing the family wasn't home at the time, except that their absence didn't exactly indicate altruism on the part of the culprits. There were enough people in the neighborhood who would have torched the house even if the family had been inside.

"Come check it out," a boy shouted breathlessly from his bicycle as he pedaled toward us, his legs pumping like pistons. Dougie and I were playing Wiffle Ball in the St. Charles parking lot. "*Their* house is on fire," he hurriedly added, as if we were supposed to know whose house "*theirs*"

was. A classmate of ours, he lived on the other side of Hylan Boulevard, the Island's major thoroughfare. It extended the fifteen-mile length of the entire Island, from the Brooklyn side to the New Jersey side. The Boulevard also divided the larger and more populated northern half from the smaller, less populated southern "beach" half, which included bungalows built prior to the tract-home developments. The beach sections had a reputation for their rough-and-tumble neighborhoods, especially the newer developments built on drained swampland. Many of them would be ravaged decades later by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Husbands and wives often carried their loud arguments onto the streets, and their children got into bloody fights with the children of equally combative parents. If the rare shooting or stabbing was reported, it frequently took place in one of the beach neighborhoods, like New Dorp Beach or Midland Beach.

Two years before the torching incident, a shopping plaza and several subdivisions had been built in Oakwood Beach, replacing the swamps and the dense rows of tall reeds. The open land extended about two miles from the Boulevard to the ocean. Even after the developments, bunches of reeds grew in empty lots, waiting to be hacked down to make room for additional homes. What little vegetation remained sometimes caught on fire, especially during a dry summer, usually from kids hiding in them smoking cigarettes or dope. When Dougie and I first saw the smoke rising from the direction of Oakwood Beach we ignored it, thinking it was another brush fire. A house on fire was a different matter. I'd never seen one before, and I'm sure neither had Dougie. We hid the Wiffle Ball and bat in some bushes and hopped on our Sting-Ray bikes, which were leaning against the school's brick wall.

When we arrived, the street was filled with cheering onlookers. Men and women, holding their children's hands and pushing baby strollers back and forth in tight formation, seemed to be entreating the flames to spread faster. Some were angrily shouting "nigger this" and "nigger that." Others were laughing, giddy about being part of such a powerful mob. The fire trucks took forever to arrive, it seemed, whereas they reached the tiniest brush fires in minutes. The fire had started at least a half-hour before we showed up, and even after another fifteen minutes after we got there, they still hadn't arrived. Later that month, a New York City policeman was arrested for starting the fire. On the Island few expressed outrage or even dwelt on the irony of of a law man's committing such a terrible crime. If I recall, most Staten Islanders considered him a hero. Certainly those verbally fanning the flames that day did.

Oakwood Heights was similar to other communities on Staten Island,

as lily-white and as restrictive as the notorious Levittowns built on Long Island and in Pennsylvania. Our residents were as vigilant in policing its "purity" as any Levitt-towner. The house was set on fire in 1965 or 1966, but the reigning temperament was stuck in 1866. Oakwood Heights residents shared the same attitudes and opinions as the rest of the Island, and the nation generally. Intolerant parents generally breed intolerant children. Most of the kids I grew up with were becoming as rabidly racist, sexist, and homophobic as their parents.

After the house burning, little had changed on Staten Island for thirty years. The children who watched the fire with their parents grew up to take their place. The sins of the fathers are truly visited upon the sons, as I observed one afternoon in the early 1990s. Both events took place on sultry summer days. Maybe it was the heat that had gotten to everyone, like the uprisings during the mid-1970s summer of the "Son of Sam."

I was temporarily living with my parents after losing two high school teaching jobs, the first in New Hampshire, the second in New Jersey. Occasionally, I spent time with guys I grew up with, most of whom I hadn't seen much after I was shot. I fled the Island after high school, thinking I'd never come back. But there I was fifteen years later, having moved back from New England two years earlier to take a teaching job in New Jersey, which I lost when cataclysmic budget cuts ravaged the public school system. The institutional euphemism was that I'd been RIF'ed. The acronym is a euphemism in and of itself, standing for "Reduction in Forces," which sounds like a military term. Heaven forbid the powers that be should admit they were firing hundreds of us because the state had reduced property taxes for the wealthy. Property taxes funded the bulk of New Jersey public schools, as it does in many states.

Until I found another position and started graduate school, I was living in my parents' basement for a few months. (It was possibly the worst seven or eight months of my life. Given the choice, I think I would rather have been shot again. At least the anguish and humiliation would have gone more quickly.) Wherever I walked around the neighborhood, I kept running into guys I used to hang around with at The Station. A few of them were even still there, standing outside of George's, smoking and drinking as if they were still sixteen, except now they were overweight and unhealthy-looking, their eyes as colorless and dim as those of dead fish. I considered my return to Oakwood Heights a personal setback, although in many respects feeling so defeated forced me to enroll in graduate school. I had had the opportunity to do so ten years earlier, on scholarships, but I'd allowed those closest to me to talk me out of it. Until

my graduate studies started and I resumed teaching as an adjunct professor, along with teaching GED classes at a drug-treatment facility across the street from Manhattan's Tompkins Square Park, I'd occasionally meet old 'hood friends at bars or hang out with them in their back yards. Unlike me, some had never left their parents' homes, even though they were in their mid-thirties.

One sticky summer day about six of us were sitting in Tommy Fitheone's side yard after having gone swimming in his enormous above-ground pool. A couple of the guys had taken the day off from work, while others were there in the middle of the week because they had gone from petty to professional crime. They had graduated into becoming "Goodfellas." We were sitting in a semi-circle on the cement patio. Most chain-smoked cigarettes and went back and forth retrieving beers from a cooler placed under a tree. It wasn't much past noon, and almost all of them were drunk. Suddenly, someone shot out of his lawn chair with such force it collapsed onto the floor. "Holy fucking shit! Look what the fuck is coming our way," he said through his clenched teeth, flinging his towel to the ground.

Tommy's house sat on a small rise along Oak Avenue, which steadily climbed for a half a mile from Hylan Boulevard to the Oakwood train station. From where we were sitting, we overlooked a long stretch of the street. Two black teens had been walking up the incline and were about to pass us. The pair had canvas satchels slung over their shoulders, containing free weekly circulars supermarkets distributed. They were delivering them to the homes along Oak, gingerly and deliberately. They made sure never to cut across anyone's lawn to get to the next house, and they went only as far as the front steps before tossing a flyer onto a stoop or a porch. They knew better not to approach any doors. They apparently didn't know how unwelcome they were at all in Oakwood Heights, at least not that day and on that street.

After they'd been spotted, everyone bolted out of their chairs—except for me—and chased after them, hollering, "You fucking niggers. Get the fuck out of here." The two teens sprinted remarkably fast up the steep incline, considering the weight they bore, but who wouldn't have under the circumstances? They raced fast enough and far enough to be out of harm's way, although I don't think anyone was interested in actually confronting them. They mostly wanted to scare them, trotting well behind, and continuing the barrage of invective. Rather than catch up to them, which they likely could have done, they gathered some roadside rocks, hurling them along with the savage words they continued to express. "The next time we see you motherfuckers we hang your black fucking

asses." I looked on with horror. *The street must be cursed*, I thought. Behind Tommy's house was the empty lot where Dougie and I had hid waiting for the pizza delivery car.

I remained in my chair the entire time. Once they'd chased the two teens from the area, I could hear them laughing as they walked back to the yard. When they returned, they all glared at me. To them, I was spineless for staying behind. If they thought I was cowardly, they were right. But not for the reasons they suspected. I was a coward because I said nothing. I was ashamed to be there with them, and I hated them at that moment far more than they hated those two black kids. I also was ashamed of myself, ashamed to have felt the need to rekindle friendships with a bunch of guys who may never have been my friends in the first place, other than to have gotten high with and be a jerk with twenty-five years ago. But I didn't tell them that. Doing so would have been the brave thing to do.

Those two incidents reflected Staten Island's overall social and political views. In the 1968 presidential election, Staten Island voted overwhelmingly (3 to 1) for the segregationist candidate, George Wallace, the only congressional district north of the Mason-Dixon line to do so. Nothing had changed politically over the next twenty-five years throughout the Island, just as it hadn't changed socially in Oakwood Heights from the time of the house burning to the time of the "nigger" chasing. No sooner had David Dinkins, the city's first black mayor, been elected in 1989 than the Island threatened to secede. Calls for secession ended in 1993 when Rudy Giuliani narrowly defeated Dinkins in a rematch of their 1989 race, which Dinkins had solidly won. Giuliani's round-two victory was due entirely to Staten Island's overwhelming support of him; or, to put it differently, its overwhelming hatred of Dinkins. The majority of voters in the other four boroughs—the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens—cast their ballots for Dinkins, whereas more than 90 percent of Staten Islanders voted for Giuliani, providing Giuliani with a slim overall majority. He beat Dinkins by only 3 percent. After the election Dinkins's media advisor proclaimed that "Rudy is the mayor of Staten Island now." Staten Islanders, proudly, had singlehandedly booted Dinkins out of office. It was the political equivalent of burning him out of office or chasing him from the neighborhood.

For as long as I lived in Oakwood Heights, minorities were *persona non grata*, as they were in every neighborhood surrounding it. Blacks were relegated to a corner of the Island's North Shore, which formerly had been an Italian neighborhood. My mother had grown up there, and the way she and others talked about it, it might as well have been taken over

by Martians. Sure enough, minorities were considered aliens in Oakwood Heights and communities like it. In the eight years I attended St. Charles elementary school, not a single minority student attended. Diversity wasn't part of the school's enrollment policy. Nor was it part of the curriculum. And that's exactly the way the parents wanted it. It's why they sent their children there. If the school had even *considered* enrolling a minority or had proposed straying slightly from the formulaic syllabus, they would have stormed the convent and the rectory.

Such a homogeneous, narrow view of the world—imposed from without and enforced from within—meant that in school we were taught to think the same, be the same, and act the same. It wasn't just our bright green and red plaid clothing that was so uniform. Any thought or action out of the ordinary was viewed with suspicion. If that wasn't bad enough, the teachers, especially the nuns, were serially incompetent and uninspiring. They seemed to get their kicks largely out of disciplining and punishing us. I still managed to learn a few invaluable lessons, though, just not the kind they expected. For instance, it was clear that school and "the real world" had little to do with each other. There was the classroom and "out there." Not that I was terribly popular or successful "out there" as a child, but at least it was fun sometimes. There wasn't much fun involved with my schoolwork. Academically I was a total flop. School didn't necessarily have to be all fun and games, but at least the teachers could have tried harder to make it more interesting and enriching. At least they could have been more passionate about what they were doing. That might have offset my own inadequacies and inability to concentrate on my schoolwork. Then again, maybe it wouldn't have mattered at all. I might have remained a poor student no matter what the teachers did. I was lost and heading nowhere. It didn't help that I was so "giftless" academically. There wasn't anything special about me. Heck, I was well aware that there wasn't even anything terribly mediocre about me.