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Learning Curve

I attended St. Charles Elementary School between 1964 and 1972. It was the institutional epitome of Staten Island. When the rest of the nation was changing so drastically, St. Charles and Staten Island were stuck in time. Years later, when reading Victorian novels, I'd encounter characters trapped in insufferable boarding schools or imprisoned in dreadful orphanages and I'd be reminded of St. Charles. Minus the morning's icy wash basins those neophytes encountered, there were remarkable similarities between the places. Of course, I may simply have been responding to the misdirection and loneliness those fictional characters were experiencing and feeling, regardless of where they were. Nevertheless, St. Charles was a cold, unfriendly place for children. For a school located in one of the most diverse cities on the planet, it was astonishingly one-dimensional.

A person would be hard-pressed to decide what was more monochromatic, the student body or the curriculum. General literacy studies, for instance, varied little, or not at all, from grade to grade. For eight years I read from color-coded, graded material I picked out from laminated cardboard boxes distributed by the diocese. Questions answered at the end of each story marked a reader's progress. It felt as if I were reading the same dreary narratives no matter the color code or the grade level. The repetitiveness didn't help me, though. My scores were as consistently dreadful as the material was consistently boring. The student body was possibly more homogeneous. Nearly a thousand students attended it every year and not a single minority passed through its doors. St. Charles was located three blocks from my house, its student body consisting largely of the Island's

two most dominant ethnicities, Italian and Irish, with an occasional Pole, Swede, or German thrown in.

Chris Pogee, a Portuguese buddy of mine, was one of the most exotic students, an impression reinforced by his parents, who read books—unlike the rest of our parents, who didn't. If they did, they certainly didn't read the kinds of books the Pogees read. Those who did read books were almost entirely women. Men read trade publications and the newspaper, and a few subscribed to *Sports Illustrated* or *National Geographic*, like my father, who only flipped through the latter's pages admiring the photography. (Once I came across a copy of *Playboy* in his bachelor pad, likely the first time I'd seen a woman naked, or anyone naked for that matter.) Men mostly spent hours in their basements or garages tinkering with machines or working on hobbies. Reading was anathema to most males in my working-class family and community. Books were for sissies. Even the "sissies" (the females) didn't read much. The only time I ever saw anyone read a book was when someone's mom read a romance novel while sunbathing in the back yard. If we unexpectedly stormed in to play she would have to hide the racy cover from us. When *The Godfather* came out in 1970 a lot of local people were reading that, but so was everyone, it being the biggest-selling work of fiction ever published in the United States—at least until 1985. The Pogees, on the other hand, were different. They read history and philosophy books and classic works of literature. I recognized the literary titles because in the seventh and eighth grades we started reading the ultra-extreme, twenty-page abridged versions of such works as *Great Expectations*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Jane Eyre*. Despite his being a chemical engineer, Mr. Pogee "wasn't very good with his hands," a description usually applied to Jews. He simply didn't care how his yard looked or whether he needed to install new kitchen fixtures. He preferred to spend his free time reading Dostoevsky.

As unusual as Chris and his parents were ethnically and culturally, Mark Spicolla, a richly dark-skinned Sicilian, was the most glaring exception in our school and neighborhood, as were his older brother and younger sister. While no one in his family had short, curly hair, all of them were as black as the African American athletes we wished we were as good as. (I'll skip the invasion of southern Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, and other parts of Europe by the Moors as to why Mark and his family were so dark. It seems like a familiar story by now, although it wasn't back then, that's for sure.) What probably saved Mark and his siblings from a lifetime of grief (and therapy) was that Mark and his brother were two of the strongest boys in the area. In second grade Mark was bigger and stronger and tougher

than most sixth-graders; by the time he was in sixth grade he could hold his own against most high school kids. Unlike Pops, he didn't need to lift weights. He was a meaty, tough kid all on his own.

When we were in fifth grade he learned that a classmate had nicknamed him Mark "Spic" Spicolla. He put an end to that right away. We were shooting hoops in his side yard when he saw the boy ride past us on his bicycle. Mark dashed after him and we quickly trailed behind. Within a few yards he was running alongside the terrified kid who was pedaling furiously, but not fast enough to avoid being caught. Mark tossed the boy and the bicycle onto the street as if they were a pillow. He did it with such force that the boy remained glued to his banana seat, a tangled web of limbs, metal, and rubber tires. With his left arm, Mark pinned the knotted mess to the ground. With his cocked right arm, he circled a threatening fist over the entire configuration. He not only forced the whimpering boy to apologize but also made him promise never to utter that word or anything like it about him or anyone in his family. "Ever," Mark said emphatically. "I swear, I swear," the boy hastily answered, close to tears. Sure enough, no one ever again developed a nickname to highlight his most outstanding physical characteristic. Mark had prevented his skin color from becoming his calling card. I'm sure if he had been a small or sickly kid his life would have been completely different.

Mark and Chris were the closest things to "minority" students at St. Charles because there weren't any within a ten-mile radius. What were in plentiful supply at St. Charles was girls. I was a serial day-dreamer in grammar school, not only bored by the material but a brooder over my broken home, so I could stare forever at the back of a girl's head sitting in front of me wondering what it would be like to stroke her hair. It didn't matter who she was or what she looked like. By the fourth grade, if even my arm grazed that of any of my female classmates, I'd swoon. I'd have to wait more than seven years to touch a girl, almost a full year after I'd been shot. Imagine that: I might have died before experiencing that small miraculous pleasure.

Each of the two classes per grade level consisted of fifty students, with equal parts boys and girls. I spent ten months a year for eight years with about the same twenty-five girls, almost all of whom I knew hardly anything about, at least not anything relevant. I knew that Patty Beck had nice legs and that Carrie Fox was a great speller, but that was about the extent of it. I might have steered clear of them because I wouldn't know what to do once I got anywhere near them, other than to fantasize about what I would do if I could. I received zero guidance or instruction from

my parents, the school, or the Church on how to treat them or how to relate to them, which figures. They always left out the really important stuff. The useless material they fed to us like junk food.

I rarely saw my female classmates outside of school, partly because many of them lived far away (as in three or four miles) and took the bus. After class, that was the end of them. The girls whom I did see in the neighborhood were mostly my friends' younger sisters, who were "icky," and older sisters, who were off-limits. While the older ones may have entered our fantasy world, they never entered our real world, unlike the younger ones, who tried. The older girls congregated in places we didn't inhabit. Seeing one in the neighborhood was like spotting a rare bird.

Younger girls were a different story, and not only because they were less physically developed. They were close to our equals, age-wise, but as males we felt entitled to boss them around, which typically involved shunning them. We chased them from our rickety forts or backyard sand-boxes. Three or four of us might run after one we discovered hiding in our makeshift tent, or two of us might take hold of one by the hands and feet and drag her out of someone's basement, lugging her upstairs and flinging her onto a couch, after discovering her down there tinkering with the field of battle we had set up with our tiny plastic soldiers. We wouldn't even allow them to watch us play baseball in front of their own homes. Their brothers were especially vigilant about that, deliberately hitting balls right at them and clipping their knees while rounding a base as they sat curbside.

Both younger and older kept to themselves, and they mostly stayed close to home, even when they were together. Unlike the boys, they didn't hang out in groups, more like in pairs. Boys, on the other hand, were everywhere, always traveling in packs of four or five, like our foursome. It was understood that if you were alone and found a pack to play with, joining it would not offend the primary group. Large packs, composed of multiple smaller ones, often were formed to create a couple of football or baseball teams. Finding such large packs was easy, especially in the summer, which was the only time of year in my childhood when I was free. It might not take more than ten minutes to form two complete nine-player softball teams.

Anywhere you went in Oakwood Heights a bunch of boys could be found. We played in the streets, in the schoolyards, in the empty lots, and, of course, at The Station. The Station wasn't quite a play destination. While a game of stickball might develop now and then, it was more like the place where packs assembled before, during, and after games. On any

late afternoon in the summer there might be as many as thirty boys wandering in and out of George's and Sal's. In my youth we'd stand or sit in the parking area drinking sodas and shoving melting logs of Yodels into our mouths. In my adolescence, beers and joints replaced the sodas and cakes. Girls rarely came around the station. Even in my teens they weren't part of the scene. While we policed them in my youth, we likely scared them off as I got older by the sheer force of our inflated numbers—along with our inflated levels of testosterone. I'd imagine even the most egotistical "tease" found us intolerable.

While there were hardly any girls around, I sure was fascinated by and interested in them—from afar, and from a very, very safe emotional distance too. Looking back on it, I think the only thing I looked forward to in the morning as I walked the three blocks to St. Charles was that I'd be in the company of girls all day. I may have been in love with them all, including the ones the other boys considered physically unappealing. If I caught even a glimpse of someone's thigh as she sat in her chair, with her red plaid skirt catching a splinter in the wooden seat, with her skirt staying in place as her legs came forward, I was stirred. They all hurriedly pulled the skirt back up to its "proper" place, the thigh-sighting lasting only a few seconds. That was enough for me. I needed only a few seconds to imagine what a few hours might be like. But there was more to them than that, and I'm pretty sure I recognized it, viscerally, way back when. To me, their appeal was universal. It transcended whatever it was that made us "boys." There was something categorically different about them, well beyond the obvious physical differences. For one thing, they seemed smarter, and not only in school. They seemed to know more about the world than we did. We were too busy stomping on one another, crashing into shit, or leaping into rows of hedges to slow down long enough to figure things out, or to even try to. If we were destructive, they were reflective. I'm guessing most of the guys I palled around with were like me, covering their feelings and emotions with their aggression. Also, girls seemed less confused, at least in a harmful way. I can't imagine any female holding up a pizza delivery driver for no apparent reason. Sure, one might do it some day to pay for drugs or food for her impoverished kids, but not for "kicks." And the last time I checked there weren't any Juliet Caesars, Adele Hitlers, Paula Pots, or Josephine Stalins around. "Demonic Female" doesn't roll off of the tongue as readily as "Demonic Male" does.

At the personal level, I found girls different because they treated me differently. No girl ever goaded me about my father's absence or told me that surviving gunshots must have been "un-fucking-believable," as a few

males did. Girls clearly recognized my shame, along with the sheer lunacy of what had caused it. In my childhood, they also noticed how sullen and withdrawn my parents' separation had made me, either leaving me to sulk in peace or empathizing once in a while when they saw an opening. Until about the seventh grade, when I started getting into trouble, I was an academic enigma. I was the exception to the rule, the rare shy boy who was also academically weak, almost to the breaking point. Typically, the introverted kids were the better students, while the extroverts were the "cooler," poorer ones. I was an introverted poor student.

Clearly, my parents' separation took its toll on my ability to concentrate on my school work. I had other things on my mind. In second grade, the year they separated, I failed three subjects. *Anything* that involved concentration, I couldn't deal with. It didn't take long, for instance, for my mom to stop sending me to piano lessons. I never practiced on the plastic keyboard pad the studio loaned me. I'd place my hands on it and begin to stare into space. Even organized sports were difficult to master, despite my being an active, relatively athletic kid. After playing Little League for two years, I wanted to quit. It was the summer after my parent's separation. I sucked at it, almost as much as I sucked at school. Organized baseball was different from horsing around. I was too distracted to hit or catch a baseball properly, just as I was too distracted to study my multiplication tables. I had to stay in school, but baseball I could drop out of. Who needed the additional frustration and disgrace? There was plenty of that going around in places where I had to be. During an interborough championship game—our team was the Staten Island champs—I singlehandedly lost the game as the team's second baseman. We were ahead by two runs, until I ruined it. With two men out and two men on in the last inning of the game, I booted an easy ground ball—Bill Buckner-style—and the pair raced across home plate, tying the score. The next batter drove in the winning run, driving in the kid who'd reached second base on my error. Without me, I thought, the team could have gone on to further glory. I could tell from my teammates' expressions that they shared this view.

After that embarrassing experience, I figured it was time to retire. My older cousin Tommy had done so the year before, for similarly shameful reasons, and the last time I checked he hadn't fallen off the face of the earth. Why not do the same? My mom, fortunately, stepped in. She asked Mr. Endrum, the assistant coach of that ill-fated team, to convince me otherwise. His son Billy was the team's catcher, as well as a classmate of mine at St. Charles. The Endrums didn't live far from us, and when my parents were together they sporadically socialized. Before that unfortunate

day, Mr. Endrum already had noticed that my dad's absence was obviously affecting not only my play but also my psyche. I'm sure he and my mom talked about it. While he was a stern, by-the-book coach, he also treated the players fairly. He never favored the better players, or even his son, over any other child. He was both tough and instructive for everyone alike. In short, he was a good coach, and a good man. He was the ideal person to try and talk me out of quitting.

I can't recall a word he said, though. All I remember was crying like mad on the steps of our house. I kept blubbering about how I personally destroyed the team's chances of playing Japan in the World Little League Tournament. Without me, they would have been a better team. I'd be doing any team in the future a favor if I didn't play for them. Hell, I'd be doing the sport a favor if I disappeared entirely from it, I told him. Whatever he said worked because I didn't quit. My father must have learned that some other man had intervened because after that chat he put me on a healthy diet of practice drills. I remember shagging flies and practicing my swing—sometimes in the snow! Eventually, I became quite a good player—exceptional, to be perfectly frank. A couple of years later I made the Great Kills Little League “Majors” All-Star team, amassing more number-one votes from all the managers and coaches than any other player. It seems so inconsequential now. But back then it was a major accomplishment. In many respects, it was my only one as a child. My mother was wise to have asked Mr. Endrum to talk to me, to bolster my confidence and make sure I didn't become a quitter. She didn't apply similar tactics as I grew older, just the opposite, often confounding what little confidence I had. Perhaps that's because she thought of me differently after I'd been shot. I guess most parents would view their child differently if he'd been involved in a botched stick-up and nearly got his damn-fool head blown to bits.

While I was mentally restless in school, I was becoming a sojourner out of it. If my mind drifted unintentionally in class, my body was intentionally displaced every afternoon when I left the schoolroom. During the week, I was shuttled from one home to another, to different ad hoc after-school day cares. I rarely stayed at any single place more than twice in any given month. Affording a full-time babysitter or nanny—not that there were any nannies back then on Staten Island—was out of the question. My father hadn't stopped footing the bills, like the mortgage, but he was paying rent for a one-bedroom apartment on the other side of the Island. On a cop's salary, he was barely meeting whatever financial-support arrangement my parents had worked out with each other. They weren't

divorced. That would have been against church principles. He therefore wasn't legally bound to give us any money because they were only separated. I guess to them "separation" was a lesser offense in the eyes of the church, and in their own. To me, it didn't matter what they called it. I came from a broken home. My father was gone, making my family different from any other. That my mother had to work once he left further proved that difference, like my cutting the grass when I was six.

She worked as a bank teller several miles from our house. It was a 9:00-to-4:00 job and by the time she drove home or took the bus from work it was after 5:00. On those nights she didn't have to pick me up from that day's sitter. When she did, we arrived home after 5:30. My sister attended an all-girls Catholic school nearly as far away from our home, in the opposite direction, as my mother's bank. Oakwood Heights was situated in the middle of the Island's seventeen-mile stretch. Before the separation my sister was already involved in extracurricular activities. After it, she threw herself into them as if her life depended on it. Doing so was surely an expedient and constructive distraction from the domestic re/disarrangement. I've read that siblings tend to become closer when their parents divorce, unless they are adults themselves and take sides. Children are often forced to rely on each other. Not us. Our parents' separation physically separated us, so it had its emotional toll as well. I saw my sister only briefly at night and almost never on the weekend.

Family lore likes to depict us as close and tight, which is true only if certain details are ignored. But that's true of all families. Mythology is part of the equation, no matter how much unconditional love goes around, because all families are dysfunctional. Tolstoy wrote that "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I believe that all families are dysfunctional and all families are dysfunctional in their own way. But that's just me. Maybe I'm more jaded than most. What's likely true for all families is that family history is composed of fact *and* fiction. Also, many families create a Bermuda Triangle, whereby things are ignored or left unsaid and end up missing. But not entirely gone, either, just out there somewhere lost at sea.

My sister often got home from school after us. Some nights my mom and I would be in the middle of dinner before she finally arrived. With neither of them home during the day something had to be done with me. No one family member or sitter supplied that care. Multiple care-providers either stepped in or were roped in. Off I went from one day to the next, to one house and another. Monday I might be at Aunt Mary's; Tuesday, with a family friend; Wednesday was the hardest to book, it being

a half-day so the Catholic kids from public schools could come to ours for religious study; Thursday might find me at cousin Angela's, while the week might conclude in someone's home I'd never been to before and would never be in again.

Leading such an itinerant existence solidified my outsider status. It was bad enough I came from the weird family with no father—even genuinely freaky TV families like the Munsters and the Addams Family had both parents at home!—but I also had to suffer further public humiliation when my Aunt Rosie or my Uncle Al waited outside the school to pick me up. While my friends raced home or jumped into school buses, I climbed into a different car every day, as if I were being abducted by a different predator. When I got to their homes I stayed indoors, day-dreaming and waiting it out, patiently biding my time, knowing that the next three hours would soon be over. With any luck, so would my childhood.

Wherever I stayed, playing outside wasn't an option. Normally, I'd rather be outdoors. But these weren't normal circumstances. Not being in any one place for any period of time put me in the awkward position of being the stranger in town, always the pseudo-new kid on the block. I'd show up one day, disappear, and then reappear three weeks later, or never again. I was not reliable play material. If the situation were reversed, I can't imagine that my friends and I would go out of our way to play with such a kid. We certainly wouldn't go looking for him or invite him to join us.

When I pulled up to someone's home, a welcoming committee wasn't exactly waiting for me. No boy stood in front of a house holding a bat and tossing a baseball into the air, surrounded by his friends pounding their gloves with their fists, all of them begging me to join them because they'd heard about my great hitting and fielding. What did occur as I sheepishly emerged from the cars were long stares from unfamiliar kids wondering what I was doing getting out of Mrs. Schapane's car, wearing a forest-green jacket, matching pants, white shirt, and red plaid tie. My school uniform alone would scare most kids away. That is, if they were around in the first place. Boys weren't exactly playing in front of the homes I was staying at. If I wanted to play with them I'd have to find them. That's unrealistic for the average six- or ten-year-old to do, let alone someone as timid as I was. And then there was always that one thing uppermost in my mind: If I did gather the courage to search for playmates, then once I found them I'd either have to explain why I was there or I'd have to lie, to a bunch of kids I might see less than five times a year or maybe just once. It just wasn't worth it. So I stayed indoors.

Inside as well, no one was around to play with. All of my cousins were

older than I; some were nearly as old as my mother, both she and my father being the youngest of very large families. They either were away at college or had moved out; some had started families of their own. Then there were the single friends' homes and the childless couples' homes, along with the homes where the kids who lived in them magically vanished right before I arrived. It was like being involved in the Witness Protection Program where I had to be relocated periodically, or I was an insane criminal who had to be shipped to different cells, for my own protection and for the protection of the other inmates.

Actually, it was worse than prison. At least in prison they let you watch TV. I wasn't allowed to do that anywhere I was left, either because of the times (when adults heavily regulated how much children could watch) or because my mother urged the care-providers not to let me. There were never any toys to play with, either. I was supposed to be doing my homework. But I never did. I couldn't. I was too distracted by my situation, my homelessness, and so I must have begun living too much inside my head. My day-dreaming became my home. The simplest tasks were beyond me. I couldn't concentrate on memorizing a single multiplication table, including the easy ones like 2 and 5, let alone the complete oeuvre. I still stink at basic spelling, despite all of my schooling, as a result of those days. I gazed into space sitting in strange rooms, or stared at the pictures and posters hanging on the walls of a cousin's bedroom where I was told not to touch anything. "Your cousin Marilyn won't like it if she finds out you were playing with her things when she comes home from college this weekend."

I didn't always follow their orders. I would pick through drawers and dig around in closets in search of tangible distractions. Even I was incapable of day-dreaming for three solid hours. I might come across a stack of horror magazines buried in my cousin Andrew's closet, although the disfigured faces and twisted features of Lon Chaney Jr. and Peter Cushing upset me more than soothed me. To be honest, what I was really looking for were girlie magazines. Alas, the few searches I did conduct reaped no such rewards. On the whole, I did what I was told. I was quiet and never asked for anything.

My aunts and my mother's friends often told her that they sometimes forgot I was there. Good. That's the way I wanted it. I didn't want to seem like any trouble and run the risk of not returning to a home I'd been to before or going to a new one. Why I never returned to some of them after one stay is beyond me. I'm sure it wasn't anything I did. I was the Invisible Boy. I also vanished so I couldn't be reminded by whoever was watching

me that I was there in the first place. I preferred to spend three hours lost in space alone in my cousin's room than deal with the reality of my Aunt Mary's company. No matter where I was, I'd sit in a room with the door closed, if permitted, and pretend to be studying. To bide my time I'd pick up a paperweight, a stapler, or an ashtray and turn them into rocket ships, dinosaurs, or race cars, surrounded by a cast of characters involved in adventures rivaling those of any movie or comic book. I might have had other options, but invisibility worked best for me. If I hadn't become an escapist, I think either my head or my heart would have exploded before I reached puberty.

The isolation and oddity of my week were amplified on the weekends. While my nomadic weekdays lasted until about the seventh grade (when my mom started letting me be home by myself after school), the unusual weekends lasted an additional two years. I spent every Saturday with my father and every Sunday with my mother and grandmother. My sister, who was furious at my dad, never joined me on Saturday. She also was old enough to opt out of the Sunday visits to my grandmother's from the start of my parents' separation.

On Saturdays, my father would pick me up at our (his former) house in the morning and drop me off at night, often way past my bedtime, which didn't sit too well with my mom. He always drove a convertible sports car, a different one practically every other month because they kept falling apart. March might be a yellow MG; June might be a white Austin-Healey, and October might be a sky-blue Mustang. None of the vehicles were of high quality. Their ripped canvas roofs leaked when it rained and in the winter they were so cold a butcher could hang meat in them, even as the noisy heaters cranked out tepid air. During any season, the engines often stalled or refused to start. A garage a few blocks from his apartment specialized in selling these doomed vehicles. Almost all of them required repeatedly pumping a choke, shaped like an old vending-machine knob, to start the engine. Almost every Saturday we'd have to stop by the garage for the mechanics to inspect a faulty knob, examine a rag-top stuck in mid-position, or tinker with an engine hemorrhaging oil.

My mother viewed them as deathtraps. At the very least, they posed as perilous "toys" that could lead to my potential disfigurement. I don't think she cared one way or another about his. She was always asking me about the cars. I could tell from her tone that they represented more than danger—they symbolized my father's irresponsibility and immaturity. To her, he'd become a cliché, the mid-life-crisis male who needs to drive a sports car. It also seemed silly to her that a man of below-modest means

believed he could be a jet-setting playboy by driving clunkers, sports cars or not. I was too young to know or care what his motives were. It struck me as more comical than contemptible that he couldn't afford to be 007 or a member of the Rat Pack.

"That car is dangerous," I remember overhearing her shout at him over the phone. "What's your problem?" There was a pause as my father explained his problem. "Good," she snapped, responding to his promise to get rid of the latest "Christine." Sure enough, he'd show up the following Saturday in a "new" car, just as reliable and safe as the last one. We'd pull away as the tailpipe farted black, noxious exhaust. Left behind was a saucer-sized pool of oil the engine had drooled as the car idled while he waited for me to come out of the house.

When my father first started picking me up, he'd ring the door bell and come inside. After a few weeks of that he'd ring the bell and wait on the doorsteps. Eventually, he'd honk the car horn and wait for me curbside. During the first two phases, my sister never answered the door. She couldn't bear the sight of him. My mother always answered it as I ran around the house gathering my things. I was never ready the night before or that morning, which was atypical considering how my mother encouraged me and my sister to be punctual and "always be prepared," like the good Boy and Girl Scouts we were. I think she deliberately had me get ready at the last minute just so he'd have to wait. While phases one and two lasted, I could hear them bickering from my room upstairs as I stuffed my glove, a toy or two, and a change of clothes into a brown paper shopping bag. The arguing started almost as soon as he stepped inside, or, as phase one morphed into phase two, they talked through the screen door in the summer or a crack in the storm door in the winter. By the time I ran downstairs, they were engaged in a full-blown argument, either way. Only my arrival prevented it from developing into a full-fledged shout-fest. As I pushed past both of them or individually to get outside, my brief Saturday with my mother ended and my full Saturday with my father began. He would follow me out the door or start walking behind me from where he stood on the stoop. No matter which, the front door would slam with such force the blowback caused the screen or storm door to bounce around a few times before coming to rest.

These two periods didn't last long. After a few months, my father waited for me in his car. Like my sister, I guess my mother couldn't stand the sight of him anymore either. Now the creaky automobiles belched even more exhaust as they sat there idling for increasingly lengthy periods of time, leaving behind even larger pools of oil once we pulled away. The

exhaust and oil grew as my mother forced him to wait for me longer as their separation dragged on. She always had something vitally important to tell me just as I was leaving. As their separation progressed from months to years, and as they talked less and less, and whenever they did it grew more and more cantankerous, the urgency and length of my mother's "last words" swelled. As a result, these essential discourses forced my father to keep the cars running for greater amounts of time, sometimes up to twenty minutes. He couldn't turn off any of them for fear they wouldn't restart. It was one thing for that to happen if we were at the park or coming out of a movie theater. But to have my mother see him jerking the choke knob or tinkering unsuccessfully with the engine—"He's no Uncle Sammy," she liked to say—would have been too much for him to bear.

As a rule, he'd cram into a day what he believed would have been a week's worth of activities and attention. In all likelihood, it amounted to more time than most fathers spent with their sons in a month. Big and small events were planned well in advance, depending on the weather. In the winter, we'd go sleigh riding at LaTourette Golf Course, the best and most popular hill (the tenth hole) on Staten Island for the fastest and longest run. There were several bumps and ridges along the sides for the more intrepid riders to test how much vertical leap they could create by approaching them with as much pluck and speed as possible. I typically lay sprawled on top of my dad, holding onto his jacket, while he steered our long, well-made wooden and metal sleigh. Between the two of us and the heavy sleigh, we generated a ton of speed once we got going, one of the fastest sleighs every time we were there. For us, there was a double challenge—not only that of attacking the ridges fearlessly to go as high and as far off the ground as anyone else but also to see how much we could push both extremes further before I might fall off. (I rarely did.) It was buckaroo sleigh riding at its finest. We'd also go ice skating on any number of ponds still in existence before the tract homes and strip malls devoured them.

In the summer, there were Mets games, horseback riding (Staten Island still had horse stables in the late '60s and early '70s), or playing catch at any number of the Island's parks. If the weather didn't cooperate, we went to a movie. No matter what the weather or the time of year, there was always a trip to a department or toy store where he'd buy me a rather expensive toy. That drove my mother nuts. She thought he was bribing me, perhaps even establishing some kind of secular confessional. As all good Catholics know, a trip to the confessional booth on Friday or Saturday absolves the confessor's sins in order for him to receive communion on

Sunday. Postconfession he's pure enough, despite his previous indiscretions and misdeeds, to receive the holy wafer. It also means the penitent starts off each week with a clean slate, so to speak. My father's shopping ritual, according to my mom, was similarly redemptive and purifying. She was certain he bought me toys so I would newly forgive him every week for leaving us while also inducing me to look forward to seeing him the following Saturday. The toy, therefore, not his abandonment, would become uppermost in my mind. She was probably right. There was some kind of motive behind the shopping junkets, to supplant his displacement with an expensive toy.

Toys or not, there was nothing to forget and forgive. Despite its having been his decision to leave us, I didn't find fault with him. For one thing, because nobody bothered explaining it to me, there was no information on which I could base a judgment. Perhaps that's why my parents withheld it, to spare me from choosing sides. What we had there was our usual family failure to communicate. Not talking in my family had become habit, not even a conscious decision. People simply didn't talk about important things. The pattern (or pathology, if you like) lasted for decades, and it continues. But it's hard to teach old dogs new tricks, as I've learned. Only when I was told that my sister and brother-in-law were separating did I learn they'd been having marital problems for years. As a child, I imagined I would have had to torture either one of my parents before they'd talk about their separation. Today, even torture wouldn't work, so obscured is it in their memories, I suspect. Whether then, or even now, it's not a matter of assigning fault. A little useful information would've been nice. When I was a child, I didn't care very much about that either. I had other cares and concerns.

What most concerned me was that I was the kid with no father, a standout. Maybe my mother was right about my father's spending sprees, that he was trying to buy my acceptance and love. Without them, the theory went, I'd hate him for turning me into that conspicuous child. But I didn't care. I had other things on my mind. Besides, the spending sprees probably had the opposite effect anyway. The weekly toys and compressed attention actually compounded my feelings of isolation. None of the other kids I knew were receiving such special treatment. That's why I never played with the toys my father bought me when I was around them. "Wow! Where'd you get that?" I could imagine someone asking me. Like me, all of my friends were from rather humble, working-class backgrounds. If my dad plunked down twenty-five bucks—a lot of money back then—for a battery-controlled airplane, for instance, it would be noticeable. I

didn't want to be noticed—at least, not for that. It was obvious enough I wasn't around most weekends to play in an empty refrigerator box or pitch two nine-inning stickball games until my arm crumbled. Sharing some exotic toy would only highlight my absence and what I was missing. I would have traded in a second all of those high-priced toys and Mets tickets for routine, “normal” playing time with my friends.

Whether my father was bribing me or whether my mother was being paranoid about the possibility made no difference to me. I was so busy simply trying to survive my childhood I didn't care who was more or less liable. Upon reflection, I probably blamed *both* of them with equal amounts of intensity for not working out their crap. They both had a hand in making me feel like an oddball, in my opinion. Today, kids from dysfunctional families have plenty of friends and confederates who come from broken homes. Not in my day. Our broken home was busted before it became commonplace. Despite my family's efforts to pretend we were normal, we clearly weren't. No other kid spent every Saturday with his dad and every Sunday with his mom. (I'll get to that in a minute.) So self-conscious was I about my father's not living with us, along with my spending Saturdays with him away from home, that I lied about it. Why not? My mother lied to her own father about it. She could fool him, easily enough, as he slipped toward dementia. It was a lot harder for me. When I said stuff to my friends like, “Yeah, I know I said I would play ball, but my family made me go with them to the Poconos for the day,” I wasn't fooling anybody. They all knew, especially when I showed up to church each Sunday with blood-red lips and finger nails.

Unless we ate out for dinner, which was rare, every meal with my father was the same. He prepared all of my favorite foods, as if I were on death row. Every Saturday night it was steak, frozen french fries, string beans, and chocolate pudding or strawberry Junket for dessert. For my “appetizer” he'd break out a large bag of pistachio nuts, dyed red, the only kind available at the time. I was a nail-biter, so I was incapable of opening all of them with my fingers. Shells with hair-strand gaps had to be pried open with my mouth. Pistachio nuts were quite an expensive luxury in those days, unlike now where they can be bought inexpensively in bulk in chain drugstores, which explains why they're so damned bland. Back then, I knew what a costly, tasty treat they were. I figured he'd had to capture a lot of bad guys to be able to buy them, so I didn't waste a single one. No matter how many times I washed my hands and face, it took nearly forty-eight hours for the dye to come off. As a consequence, the next morning in church—if Dougie and I stuck around long enough to

attend—my stained fingertips and lips announced to my friends and other parishioners that I'd been with my father.

"What happened to you?" I was asked. I always said I'd eaten too many pistachio nuts the night before at *home*, or in the Poconos during a family outing. Everyone knew my parents weren't together and that I'd spent Saturday with my father, but I told them otherwise, as if I hadn't been alone with him all day. As long as they kept asking, I kept lying. And they kept asking. Relentlessly. Looking back on it, I realize that some people simply liked to make me squirm, zeroing in on my vulnerabilities and watching me come undone. Eventually, most stopped asking why I showed up to church looking like a vampire. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy being with my father. I just knew that any break from "normal" family practices compounded the odds of my standing out even further. Bloody Sunday exposed it for all to see, which they did, and I knew they did. But it didn't stop me from lying. I knew that they knew I was lying. I suspect knowing that they knew furthered my unease about what I was lying about. It was fitting, though, that Sundays typically started out that way. The rest of the day was typically downright awful.

Every Sunday afternoon my mother kidnapped me to go see my grandmother for the day. It was bad enough I had to be in church in the morning, unless I skipped out with Dougie. I then had to spend most, if not all, of the afternoon at my grandmother's. If I prayed at all in church I'm sure I prayed for our car to be stolen or to learn that my grandmother had moved back to Italy during church services. If not, I'd be in for the most boring four or five hours of my life—that is, until the following Sunday.

St. Charles students were supposed to attend the 8:00 or 9:00 Mass. Several rows in the front were reserved for us. My mother insisted I follow this requirement, while she attended a later Mass. I actually preferred the early morning service. By attending such an early one, at least I'd be out playing with my friends by 10:00 or so, depending on how many papers I could deliver by 8:00 when the route was mine alone. No matter what time I started playing, the fun never lasted long. By around 12:30 it was over.

Every Sunday morning as I scampered around the house looking for whatever piece of paraphernalia I needed to play with, my mother reminded me to be home by noon so we could drive over to see my grandmother. I never was. She always had to come looking for me. She'd be furious with me for not coming home on time, even though it didn't take long to find me. I knew better than to be playing in any of the school-

yards. If she had to search for me in those more remote places, she'd have been further irritated. I usually could be found just around the corner on David "Santa's" large, hilly front lawn or in Timmy "Pee-Pocket's" side-yard sandbox. I never offered that we should play in my yard—it would have been too easy for her to find me. After driving to a couple of houses searching for me, she'd pull up to Cracker's house and see me whipping around a giant oak tree avoiding being "it" during a spirited game of tag.

"Get over here," she'd shout from the car. I'd freeze in place. I pretended to be surprised that she'd had to come for me.

"Do you know what time it is, young man?" she'd ask, as I sheepishly approached the car.

"I guess it's after twelve."

"You guessed right. Try 'many minutes after twelve.' Nearly thirty. To be exact. Now get in the car." As I did, she gave me the once-over, from top to bottom. Something was missing. Something was always missing. "Where are your things? Where's your jacket? Didn't you leave home this morning wearing a jacket?"

I'd point to the back yard or inside the house or wherever I'd dropped my things off in my mad rush to get in as much play time as possible.

"Well, you'd better go get it." I'd jump out of the car. Behind me, as the door shut, I'd hear her shout, "Hurry up about it. We're late as it is."

It was never late enough. This scenario and its accompanying charade occurred every Sunday. It was practically scripted, right down to the dialogue. I *felt* the same way every Sunday too. I didn't want to leave my friends. I didn't want to spend the second day of my weekend with my other parent. What exactly had I done wrong to deserve such a fate? I wondered. I would sit in the car silently, speculating on any number of other gloomy things: feeling singled out, how long we'd have to stay at my grandmother's—three, four, five hours?—and whether my mother was doing this to make some sort of statement, to have me to herself following the day my father did. If my father was going to spend all of Saturday with me, then she'd do the same on Sunday. It was a chess game between bitter rivals, and I was one of the pieces, the clichéd pawn. Couldn't she find a speedier, more exacting form of revenge targeted directly at *him*, like stealing his newspaper and soaking it in a muddy puddle? It's what I would have done. End of story. If she was mad at him—and she had every right to be—why did I have to get caught up or ensnared in her anger?

My grandparents lived in a one-bedroom apartment above my Uncle Sammy. My grandmother lived there alone after my grandfather died, which happened less than two years after my parents separated. When-

ever we visited my grandmother, my Uncle Sammy always answered the door—sort of. Occasionally it cracked open as soon as we stepped out of the car. We would let ourselves in, and as we ascended the steps to my grandmother's we'd hear the door slam shut behind us. It was his way of demonstrating to my mom how much he disapproved of her as a "fallen woman." His mood occasionally swung so far south that it was sometimes beneath him to escort her in or to say "Hello" to her, or to me. In addition to the rudeness, it was positively spooky watching the door open slightly and inching to rest, with nobody behind it, only to close again once we were inside, with still no one visible causing it to happen. It was like something out of a horror movie, the moment when a creaky haunted castle door lures visitors into *the* room where the psychopath awaits.

Uncle Sammy may have been suffering from PTSD, but he was no Norman Bates. He was no Casper the Friendly Host either. He probably sat by the window 24/7, vigilantly keeping an eye on things, especially his precious property. I imagined him sitting there holding a shotgun, ready to blast anyone who looked suspicious or who took one step onto his beloved tiny front lawn. No golf course looked as pristine. In addition to his immaculate lawn, he had the most exquisite hedges, which, admittedly, were *Better Homes & Gardens*—perfect. He was always yelling at me to stay off the lawn and not to go anywhere near his hedges. If he'd lived in Oakwood Heights he would have been a prime candidate for our shenanigans, although he was more certifiably insane about his property than anyone in Oakwood. When the family held barbecues at his place he proudly displayed a bucket of balls and a box of toys taken from the neighbors' kids whose things had drifted into his yard. He turned absolutely giddy while describing how he confiscated their things as he ignored their pleas to return a miniature football or roll a Tonka Toy Cement Mixer back across the yard. If he could've gotten away with it I bet he would have enjoyed smashing their toys with the baseball bat he carried in the trunk of his car. As I sat at some of those family outings, I often wondered what he'd have done to *us* if he ever caught me or Crackers flinging ourselves into his hedges to catch a tennis ball. Who knows what somebody like him was capable of doing? I imagined one of our heads mounted on his wall, the other placed on a pike behind the Horror Door, a warning to any future transgressors. As it was, in all of the years I went there he never once bothered playing catch with me with one of those impounded balls. In fact, when we were visiting my grandmother he never even bothered coming upstairs. His disapproval of our "family" began as soon as we arrived, either by his avoiding meeting us at the door or his answering it as

if we were strangers. When he did come to the door, he barely acknowledged our presence.

“Don’t just stand there,” my mother would say, nudging me. “Shake Uncle Sammy’s hand.” Like my mother’s kidnappings, this was another routine carried out almost on a weekly basis. I stuck my hand into the open air. He barely put his out in return. I had to find it as it dangled limply by his side. When I did catch it, it was like shaking hands with a dead fish. He’d withdraw it with equal indifference. He’d stand aside and reach over one of us and push open the door behind us to my grandmother’s apartment, which was accessible through the tiny hallway entrance. As we shimmied past him, he would inform my mom who was already there and who might be coming later. He was the gatekeeper and the clearing station.

“Rosie is upstairs. Muffy said she’d be here about three.”

“Oh, good,” my mother would say cheerfully. “Thank you. It’ll be good to see Rosie.” She was always so pleasant around him, possibly to show him that his surliness toward us didn’t bother her. More likely, though, she was practicing a belief she extolled throughout my life: Never reveal to others how you feel, even if they are mistreating you or behaving poorly. Better to smile in their faces and never let on that you’re miserable or suffering because of them. It may seem like some quasi-Zen tactic, or the manifestation of Jesus’s dictum about turning the other cheek, a genuinely grand and cosmic approach to interacting with other humans. I’m all for a philosophy of life. We sometimes have to get along for the sake of getting on.

There is one large problem with this, of not expressing your opinions or feelings while behaving and acting in a contradictory manner to disguise those feelings, as I later discovered. It ties in perfectly with our family motto: Don’t disclose too much information to anyone about yourself, including your emotional states. You see, it can be incredibly frustrating and unproductive not to do that. If you don’t inform someone that he is making you unhappy or that he is behaving like a dick, that person will continue making you unhappy and continue behaving like a dick. Then you end up resenting him even more for not recognizing what a dick he is, or at least not recognizing that you think he’s behaving like a dick, and how you’re suffering as a result. Going out of your way to prove how wonderful it is to be around them, to show what little effect their behavior has on you, exacerbates the situation. Now they get the opposite impression. They may think their dickishness actually makes you happy, so why would they stop being a dick? Hell, they might even become bigger

dicks. On and on it goes. And the resentment deepens. Ultimately, there's no calming effect to it. In all likelihood, the opposite is true. In the less cosmic arena of day-to-day living, and living among such blowhards as my Uncle Sammy, all of that bitterness builds up inside a person, either developing into some kind of mental funk or even into a life-threatening disease. Or it gets displaced and redirected toward the wrong person, an innocent bystander, like siblings, wives, husbands, and children, the "kick the dog after a hard day at work" syndrome. My mother never needed to redirect her suffering toward me. I was suffering plenty all on my own having to be at my grandmother's every damn Sunday.

Uncle Sammy's appearance (or disappearance) at the front door was the start of a painful afternoon. As I climbed the long, narrow staircase, which might take my eighty-eight-year old grandmother ten minutes to accomplish, I considered racing back down, blowing past the android at the bottom, and launching out of the door. I'd run somewhere, anywhere, but somewhere other than there.

There was a cramped kitchen in my grandmother's apartment, made even smaller because there's a washing machine in it. I sat at an old-fashioned metal kitchen table, with two pull-out utility drawers, which I'm not allowed to open. (Clearly they know that if I have access to the utensils, I might pull out a knife and slit my wrists.) I'm with my mother, grandmother, and aunts. It's all women. No other cousins are there or anyone under thirty. It is all grown-up talk and gossip about people they know, and I don't. I understand even less of it than when my grandmother, who barely speaks more than fifty words of English, talks. I start fiddling with the salt and pepper shakers, drifting. I pretend they're gladiators and start slapping them together.

"Stop that!" my mother says, slapping my wrist. "Can't you see you're annoying everyone? Can't you sit still for five seconds?"

You must be kidding. I've been sitting still for nearly an hour. I'm an eight-year-old boy. I'm not genetically programmed to sit still for this long. It's a beautiful spring day outside and I'm cooped up inside with a bunch of old ladies. I got news for you: This is worse than school. At least there I'm bored with other kids who are bored. That's collective boredom. This is the solitary kind. Actually, I'd rather be alone. I'd settle for solitary confinement in prison. I think it would be an improvement. I'm getting rather used to that. Why don't you at least let me watch TV? A half an hour is all I'd ask. Daddy lets me watch TV when I'm with him. Okay, I know not to bring that up. That won't work to my advantage. And you

never let me bring any toys, either. “It’s rude,” you say, playing with my toys or watching TV. It’s about spending quality time “with your grandmother.” Sure, she’s a sweet, benevolent woman; a kinder soul can’t be found on earth. But she’s nearly ninety, obese to the point of immobility, and slipping into senility. She sits there smiling at me, and nodding her head once in a while, which is awkward and uncomfortable. I grin and nod back to her. She smiles and nods some more back at me. It’s positively zoo-like. On occasion, she pats my hand. I bet she knows how awful it is for me to sit at this table for three or four hours. She’s consoling me. Really, what’s the point of my being here? Why can’t I be with my friends? Why does everything have to be so unusual and uncomfortable for me? What did I do?

I stare out the window. Under the table, my mother pinches my leg, bringing me back to the scene of the crime. I’m not permitted to day-dream either. It’s the equivalent of playing with my toys or watching TV. I’m required to be interested in what’s being said around the table, even if I have to fake it. I wish it would rain. I wish it would rain like hell, hellish rain with howling winds that would blow the roof off the house and carry us all into the flooding streets. It would break the monotony. I stare out the window again. Not a cloud in the sky. No chance of Armageddon this week. My mother taps my foot with hers a couple of times. She has an array of weapons. I don’t need to look at her. I turn my attention to the table, smile, and nod my head at my grandmother, who does the same.

There’s always a bowl of pasta with sausage and meatballs sitting on the stove for any visitors. I have some. Everyone teases me about how I really came for the meatballs and not to see my grandmother. I don’t have the heart to tell them, “Neither.” The meatballs are tasteless mush-meat. Because of my grandmother’s through-the-roof high blood pressure, and some of my aunts’ predisposition toward colitis, they’re made with no herbs and little, if any, salt and pepper, as is the sauce. It’s nondescript red and brown stuff. (How many Italian-American families make meatballs and sauce like this? Even the traditional fare is blandly offputting.) I chew on the cardboard. I grin through my stuffed mouth and swallow, although I could use some liquid to wash it down, except I’m not permitted to drink anything while I’m eating—it’ll spoil the flavor of the food and my appetite. As if my appetite—for any of this!—could be any further spoiled.

“The meatballs *are* good,” I say. They all laugh. “Ma,” someone says, turning to my grandmother, “David isn’t really here to see you. Here’s here for the meatballs.” I’m still grinning. She smiles back at me. She

probably didn't understand what was said other than "David," so she strokes my face. Despite her tender gesture, I want to say, "I'm only here because I was forced to. For God's sake, you're the matriarch of the family. Do something!" I turn to my mom, hoping to impart a look of anxious weariness: "Let's go," my face begs. If we leave now, part of the day might be salvaged. There might be some daylight left when we get home. If it's an overcast winter afternoon, the day is already lost, so I don't bother shooting her the look. I'm resigned to my fate. I know this as soon as we arrive. We typically stay at my grandmother's until nearly five, later if right before we're leaving someone else shows up to visit. My mother always feels compelled to stay, to be polite. If I roll my eyes or show any signs of impatience I hear about it on the ride home. While she scolds me, I barely listen. Another Sunday has vanished.

I have vivid memories of those Sundays at my grandmother's, as I do the Saturdays with my father, and the weekdays with whoever was forced to watch me. I can even recall some of the finer details of the homes I went to only once. Much of my childhood can be replayed lavishly and clearly in my mind, like hitting the rewind button on a VCR. It probably has a lot to do with my outsider status. I became a vigilant observer at an early age. Wherever I was—even when playing with my friends—I always felt as if I were on the outside looking in, as if I were viewing my own experiences even while taking part in them. I became an involuntary recording device as a child. Left behind are trace elements for me to examine now, much of it in high definition and resolution.

On the other hand, I remember almost nothing about school, except for the trouble I started getting into. The rest is a blank. I had a lay teacher in third grade named Mrs. Delaney. She had dark hair and an aquiline nose. I remember nothing else. I can't call up a single memory of sitting in her classroom. Fourth and fifth grades are no different. It's like I wasn't there. In many ways, I wasn't. I learned nothing. That much I know. I became more withdrawn in school than in the strange homes I visited. I wasn't a troublemaker—at least not until the seventh grade, following a handful of harmless missteps in the sixth. For the most part, teachers leave me alone because I'm academically incompetent. It's the script they all seem to follow. They will pay greater attention to me when I begin to get into more serious trouble. I'm practically the center of attention in eighth grade, when I become a leading troublemaker, not coincidentally the year my father returned.

As with the later robberies, I'm really not looking for the attention. I

don't know what I'm looking for. And I don't know what's come over me. I'm still not learning anything, except by eighth grade I have a sense that what I'm supposed to be learning is a bunch of B.S. anyway. The teachers don't know what they're doing. It's all rote and regurgitation and mindless busy-work, topped off with healthy doses of punishment. What we learn is used to measure us, to separate us from one another. Because I don't add up academically, I feel like I'm on the outside looking in, as I often do. From my point of view, the entire process reeks of ridiculousness. How can anyone expect fifty ten-year-olds, half of them boys, to sit still for four straight hours, eat lunch, and sit still for another two and a half hours, all the while having nonsense shoved down their throats? I began to take notice that at least at St. Charles, instruction occurs to expose our ignorance and illiteracy rather than to facilitate our learning and advance our literacy. Sometime around sixth grade I began to actively resist the spoon-fed material rather than blindly accept it. I didn't even fake interest or show signs of uninterest. I was probably, in fact, on a mission to demonstrate just how goddamned idiotic I thought it all was by flaunting my indifference. As a result, I fell further and further behind my classmates. Unwittingly, I began to resent my own inadequacies, without understanding why. I certainly didn't take responsibility for them, as I should have. Instead, I acted out more and more by talking back to my teachers, to the point of telling Sister Marcella, my eighth-grade teacher, that I wasn't doing her "stupid" in-class reading because it was "boring junk" and "not worth my time." She sent me to the principal's office. In minutes I was suspended for either the second or third time.

Many of the teachers at St. Charles had no business teaching, especially the nuns. Our senile, borderline demented sixth-grade teacher sometimes fell asleep behind her desk, her false teeth rattling around in her mouth. She looked simultaneously helpless and preposterous. She wore her wimple too tightly on her face and it pressed her wrinkled skin together like a deflated, shriveled balloon. Sometimes she snored. Nobody woke her up. We welcomed the break from the dreary routine. Besides, she likely would have punished the person who did because doing so would have violated her rule that we were never to come to her desk without being invited. I was maturing, but only chronologically. I began to lose respect for teachers by the sixth grade, authority figures and adults generally. In addition to my being a poor student academically, the stirrings of misbehavior kicked in. It was the double whammy. It was bad enough that my parents had to hear from my teachers about my academic deficiencies. Starting in the sixth

grade they began to hear about a handful of behavioral misdemeanors, which escalated in the seventh grade and grew into full-fledged misdeeds in the eighth. Neither one of them knew what to do or say. By the middle of eighth grade, they're back together, so they devote their time and energies to working things out between them, as they should have. Unlike in the further past, when I was unconsciously overlooked, I was consciously disregarded, perhaps a lost cause. My confusion about myself, leading to awful grades and bad conduct, must have made them wish they could separate *me* from the family.

As far as my schoolwork went, I don't know what my parents expected under the circumstances. When they were separated, my father spent zero time going over my schoolwork with me, not with what little time we had together. He wanted to make it as fun as possible, not have our few hours saddled by boosting my vocabulary or helping me know the difference between the numerator and the denominator. During the week, my mother was too exhausted every evening from working all day to assume any kind of instructional role. I also think she was worn down by the pressure and societal implications of being a single mother in an uptight, intolerant family, community, and, quite frankly, nation. I can't recall a single instance when she insisted I work with her on my school assignments. I don't remember her checking to see if I had done my schoolwork. I never once remember my sister's helping me either. I'm sure on occasion she did, as did my mother. But here again I may have been too distracted for their help to have made a dent in my academic development, let alone in my memory. I usually sat in my room pretending to do my schoolwork or I lied about already having done it at So-and-So's house earlier in the day. My mother had the luxury of not needing to coax my sister into doing her schoolwork because she was a straight-A student throughout most of her youth and teens. She had been left to her own druthers and it had worked for her. Maybe my mother believed the same could be done with me.

But my track record indicated that being left on my own wasn't a winning strategy. My mother had to have noticed, especially after my nearly getting left back in the second grade, that I wasn't anything at all like my sister, unless I simply fell under the radar because my mother became too busy and too distressed working out her own issues to help me with mine. Honestly, I wish there was a more delicate way of putting this, but there isn't: I think she had limited, if any, faith in my intellectual abilities. She may have even started to believe, throughout my youth, that I was far from being a "gifted" student. Perhaps she even had reached the ultimate

critical conclusion: I may have been seen as good old-fashioned dumb. In my youth and much of my adolescence, I did very little academically to dispel her opinion of my woeful mental abilities. After the second grade I wasn't failing subjects, but neither was I doing well in any of them. I was barely getting by. "Barely getting by" was enough for someone like me. It was better than "not getting by." Whether she was more depressed than she led on, causing her to ignore my formal education, or she simply believed I didn't have what it took to be successful in school, or a combination of the two, she gave up on me as a "good student" at a rather young age, long before the behavioral stuff kicked in.

I have no idea what my father thought. As usual, he was a sphinx. He rarely expressed his opinions about anything, and a person couldn't tell what he was thinking. Maybe being a cop all of those years had taught him to be emotionless in the face of consequential events and decisions, so there was nothing to express anyway. He never said anything one way or the other about my early schooling, either when he was living apart from us or when he was living with us. That reticence continued throughout my life, except once when he strongly objected to my accepting a scholarship to graduate school to study English. There was a time when I was a senior in high school when it seemed he favored my desire to attend a four-year college. He drove me to a local New Jersey school to check out its campus, before the decision had been made to send me to Johnson & Wales. Perhaps that trip was his way of telling me he supported me, without having actually to tell me (which he didn't). It made no difference. Apparently, the decision was in my mother's hands, because off I went to a two-year college after graduation from high school. Throughout my life they discouraged my academic ambitions. It pains me to think of my parents that way, how dismissive they were regarding my academic development. At least one good thing came out of it. It has guided my teaching practices, in a reverse psychology sort of way. I avoided treating my students apathetically in their academic development, whoever they are, "gifted" or "nongifted." In fact, I think I've inspired a few of those "nongifted" or underachieving students to realize their intellectual potential. Because of my parents' destructive views about mine, maybe I became a better teacher as a result—or in spite of it.

Regardless of my parents' perception of me academically, I take full responsibility for my succession of early school failures. Clearly, I was unmotivated and unfocused. While this is particularly true of my years at St. Charles, it wasn't much different during my first two and a half years in high school. I can't recall a single thing about my freshman year, except

for my fears, and absolutely nothing at all about my sophomore year. I'd have to look at my transcripts to know what subjects I took. I haven't a clue who any of my teachers were. I was on the academic, Regents track rather than the non-academic one. (I think New York state remains to this day the only one that awards a Regents diploma.) I know I was on the academic track because I wasn't taking "shop" classes, assigned to students who weren't. I'm guessing children who came from private schools were automatically placed in the academic core curriculum, perhaps because administrators assumed anyone who attended a parochial school must have received a good education. I certainly didn't deserve to be in such a fast academic track, based on my history at St. Charles.

To stay in the academic program a student had to pass all of the Regents exams, equivalent to mini-SATs for each subject. I scored a 65 on the biology test and was always in danger of falling out of the academic program because of my poor test scores—that is, until I got shot. I think if I hadn't been shot, I eventually would've found myself making napkin holders and fixing carburetors. Something tells me my parents were unaware of the dual tracks because they saw me as a primary candidate for those shop classes rather than for the academic ones. As they saw it, my destiny involved working with my hands, not with my head, a rather common belief among most in my working-class circle about the "fate" of males. That ideology was even more ingrained after I was shot. It became official doctrine.

It's not as if before the shooting I was this horrific student, drooling into my workbooks, or a passionate troublemaker, planting stink bombs in the nunnery, although the thought may have occurred to me more than once. In high school I was mostly a ghost. I never got into trouble there. Socially, I was neither a popular nor an unpopular kid. I was simply passing time and passing through. Granted, until my junior year, I didn't give two shits about the place academically. But neither was I considered an ignoramus. I was the classic underachiever. I think both my social and intellectual apathy had much to do with all of my friends' attending a different high school. I was supposed to be there, too, but my parents lied about where we lived in order to send me to the newly built high school ten miles away, rather than send me to the one within walking distance from our house. Somehow, they convinced school officials we lived on the opposite side of Guyon Avenue, the geographical dividing line that determined where a child went to high school. Kids living east of Guyon attended New Dorp High School while those living west of it attended Tottenville High School. My parents either used someone else's address or

my dad pulled a few strings, a practice not uncommon among New York City cops. Dougie, who lived around the block from me, and all of my friends went to New Dorp, as I should have based on the criteria. But my parents believed I needed to be separated from them, especially Dougie. According to my folks, the two of us were devolving into a highly problematic and volatile pair. Based on the robberies we committed two years after we were separated, it's evident it was a very effective plan.

The old Tottenville High School was a modest-sized brick building that looked like a nineteenth-century textile factory. It was so overcrowded that half of the students attended morning sessions and the other half attended afternoon sessions. The new school was built to house the tidal wave of kids who had moved to Staten Island from other parts of the city right after the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge was built. The new school was massive. Nearly 5,000 students attended it that first year. My freshman class, which was the first to graduate, comprised nearly 1,200 students. In an attempt to be modern, bureaucratically efficient, and economically prudent, the building was architecturally ugly as all hell. The entire structure was constructed out of cement, including the seating areas. It looked like a prison from the future. In fact, it looked like the ghetto housing complex that the sinister Alec lived in from the film *A Clockwork Orange*.

My best friend at Tottenville High School was Stephen Malloy, a St. Charles classmate, who was too wild even for my tastes. We hung out together between classes smoking cigarettes, which was about the extent of our relationship. Stephen started palling around with a rough, older crowd as soon as he set foot on the school's grounds—cutting classes, doing lots of drugs, and being a full-time “Juvie.” Truant officers and undercover narcs were always pursuing him. He was one of the most popular kids in school, despite his troubles, or possibly because of them. He wasn't much of a bully, even though he had the strength to be one, and he rarely picked on other kids. He did more harm to himself, just like me. Maybe that explains why we got along so well. He was naturally athletic and extraordinarily good-looking. In seventh grade the girls passed around a note asking which of all of the boys in the class they would most want to kiss. All but one of twenty-five wrote Stephen's name. I think one wrote Dougie's. Stephen was even more desirable in high school. But he was a lost soul his whole life. (I've often wondered if he was gay, an impossible position to be in at that time considering Staten Island's fanatical homophobia, and the nation's.) He was the closest thing I had to a friend in high school, which I guess isn't saying much. Sharing cigarettes and a few laughs with someone isn't terribly evocative. But maybe that's about

as profound as it gets with most male teenagers, or males generally, the extent of our emotional connections with one another being threadbare. Unless it was just me, wandering through my first couple of years of high school, content to be anonymous and disconnected. It was, after all, what I was accustomed to.

It was easy to get lost in such a large school. I made no new friends there. Other than Stephen, I mostly talked only to old St. Charles classmates, like Jay—Pooh—Stain—Ruane. I went on only one date, right after I was shot, which went horribly. In a school of 5,000 students I was a lonely outsider, not identified in any way with any particular clique. I did float in and out of a few. I played football in my sophomore year, but I wasn't a jock; I smoked weed, but I wasn't a stoner; I wasn't into any particular genre of music, so I wasn't a Dead Head or a Glitter Queen (rabid David Bowie fan); I didn't belong to any clubs or organizations because I wasn't a joiner, and I sure as hell wasn't smart enough to hang around the various gaggles of smart kids who kept to themselves. I guess I didn't know where the fuck I belonged because I didn't know who the fuck I was. It didn't help that I didn't feel as if I belonged there at all, and technically I didn't. Once again my parents had shuttled me to somewhere other than where I was supposed to be. Other than a fleeting memory or two of getting high at the handball courts or in a wooded area near the school, I have no idea what I did there. I can't even picture those kids whom I smoked jays with, faceless and nameless, just like the nameless and faceless teachers I encountered. But that all changed in a hurry when I was shot, for the better. At least it did for me. For those closest to me, it cemented their worst impressions of me or deepened them.

In my senior year at Tottenville I had a 98 average. As mentioned before, I was enrolled in an AP Calculus class and hit a homerun on my physics Regents. I was even impressed with myself—but not for long. No one in my family acknowledged the transformation or how far I had come from that rainy night in just a few months. I didn't help my own cause, either, when it came to honoring the distance I already had traveled. It never occurred to me to celebrate, let alone embrace, the degree of time and effort I was putting into my school work and putting into *myself*, to find some self-worth and value in just how much I'd changed in a few months. I had almost died. I was “lucky,” so I thought, to have had a second chance and to be doing so well. Part of my epiphany that night in the ER involved recognizing the need to re-educate myself, and I knew that a major piece of that undertaking would require books, and lots of them. Lying on the gurney that night, I actually saw them stacked in

rows piled ceiling-high and spilling out the windows and doors. It sounds crazy, I know, as if I'm making it all up because it fits the *Shot Story* arch, the thug-turned-professor. I know all about poetic license, even when it comes to nonfiction. It's not that either. The vision of books in the ER is true. About that night, I remember *everything*. I also remember thinking that while I would be the greatest autodidact in the history of the world, I wanted to be more formally educated too.

I had had three synchronic revelations that night in the ER, one of which involved my re-education. I knew that if I ever came out the other side alive I would immerse myself in books like a medieval monk. I would join the Order of the Word all on my own, and pull myself up by my intellectual bootstraps. In addition, a *very* formal education of some kind was also a big part of the vision. I saw myself attending college for a long time, even though up until then I was anything but college material. When I did come out the other side, I was willing to do whatever it took to obtain the best formal education possible. I knew in my heart and soul I could thrive in the best colleges and major in any subject and succeed. My first thought was to become a medical doctor, to some day save lives, just as my doctor had saved mine. From then on, my formal education was never about acquiring a piece of paper, of moving up the socioeconomic ladder. It's never been about that. It's always been a matter of life and death.

But it wasn't to be, at least not right away. I was discouraged from going to college. My parents dissuaded me from attending four-year schools and instead persuaded me to attend a trade school. They even called in reinforcements to convince me. History repeated itself. I was discouraged from pursuing my formal education throughout my life. My earlier track record marked me as academically inferior to those who knew me best and who had the most influence over me. The countless hours I sat day-dreaming in class and toying with staplers and pencils in my cousins' rooms caught up to me. My past prevented me from reinventing my future, which altered my present plans. Casting a giant shadow over all of it is my having been shot during an attempted robbery. The shame of being shot during a hold-up made me vulnerable to how *they* wanted me to turn out. But coming so close to death was the very thing that changed me. However, it was the Great Unmentionable. I couldn't raise the specter of that night as the driving force behind my seeking to become someone other than who I was. And what I wanted to be. To my family, my life was already over. They spent the next twenty years trying to dictate how it was, right up until I was months away from obtaining my Ph.D., when my mother urged me to take the New York City Sanitation Department test.