



*I HATE TO LEAVE THIS
BEAUTIFUL PLACE*

Howard Norman



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FOR DAVID ST. JOHN

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Introduction

Saigyō, a poet and monk who lived in twelfth-century Japan, wrote, “A soul that is not confused is not a soul.” That philosophy served me as a talisman throughout the writing of this book. I kept asking, How does someone with a confused soul, as I consider mine to be, try to gain some clarity and keep some emotional balance and find some joy, especially after a number of incidents of arresting strangeness have happened in a life?

I have always felt a bittersweet foretaste of regret when getting ready to leave certain landscapes. The title of this book comes from an Inuit folktale, one you will encounter in these pages, about a man who has been transformed into a goose. As winter fast approaches, he begins to cry out, “I hate to leave this beautiful place!”

What is remembered here? A bookmobile and an elusive father in the Midwest. A landscape painter whose plane crashed in Saskatchewan. A murder-suicide in my family’s house. A Quagmiriut Inuit rock band specializing in the songs of John Lennon. And in Vermont, a missing cat, a well-drilling, and my older brother’s requests to be smuggled into Canada. If there is one thing that connects these disparate experiences, it is the hopeful idea of locating myself in beloved landscapes—Northern California, Nova Scotia, Vermont, the Arctic—and of describing how they offered a home for honest introspection, a place to think things through. Often I just wanted to look at birds for days on end, shore birds in particular.

Still, I would be loath to suggest that life intrinsically has themes, because it does not. In this book I narrate a life in overlapping panels of memory and experience. When Henry James used the phrase “the visitable past,” he was largely referring to sites that had personal meaning for him: graveyards, archeological ruins, centuries-old cathedrals. Conversely, this present book contains memories of places that kept refusing not to visit me—unceremonious hauntings, I suppose, which were in equal measure gifts and curses. Since we are seldom stenographers of our hours and days as life unfolds, we remember events with different emotions than those we had when we originally experienced the events (as the haiku master Matsuo Bashō put it), and in associative patterns rather than original chronologies. I started this book in the Villa of Fallen Persimmons in Kyoto, Japan, in a landscape I had previously only read about and seen in paintings and films. But most of it was written in Point Reyes, California, and Vermont, each a beautiful place I always hate to leave.

Advice of the Fatherly Sort

ON SUMMER EVENINGS IN 1964, I used to sit on the basement stairs to read and cool down. This was in Grand Rapids, Michigan. August was particularly steamy, and about seven o'clock on a Friday late in the month, I sat there and watched my older brother's girlfriend, Paris Keller ("I was named after the capital of France," she said), who was wearing blue jeans, a T-shirt, and sandals, cross her arms, raise off her shirt, and toss it into the clothes dryer. Lavender in color, it had been soaked transparent by rain on her walk to our house. Paris owned a car but liked to take long walks, too. The T-shirt read EXIST TO KISS YOU, a declaration that was both existential and, for me at age fifteen, almost cruelly erotic.

She stood there naked from the waist up. The shirt tumbled alone behind the dryer's glass window. Paris looked over at me a few times. We talked awhile. I was all but praying that the shirt needed a second cycle. Paris told me her father had been killed in the Korean War. It was the first conversation I ever wrote down. Typed it hunt-and-peck on an Olivetti manual typewriter. I made a copy on carbon paper, too. I'm looking at the pages now. Remember carbon paper? If you handled a sheet carelessly, you would leave fingerprints on everything you touched, as if you'd broken into your own life.

I liked Paris a lot. More about her later.

To this day, my father's secret life draws certain difficult associations with an apothecary. In the Midwest in the early 1960s, the word *apothecary* had not exclusively been replaced by the term *drugstore*, or even *pharmacy*. In Dykstra's Apothecary on Division Street, the proprietor, Peter Dykstra, not only was the pharmacist but occasionally doubled as the soda jerk. In the summer months he'd hire a teenager to work the counter, which had three spin-around red leather seats, each elevated on a silver column, with a silver plate at the base, riveted to the floor. DYKSTRA'S APOTHECARY WAS stenciled in an arc of bold lettering across the wide front window. One day the radio said the summer was "proving downright tropical." The fighting in Indochina had completed its transition to the Vietnam War. You could order a root beer float, a coffee, a milk shake, a Coca-Cola—that was it. No you could also get a grilled cheese sandwich. The apothecary carried an Afrikaans-language weekly. Mr. Dykstra had been born and raised in Johannesburg.

For concocting root beer floats, there was a helmet-headed spigot out of which a pressurized elixir hissed and gurgled into glasses the size of a small flower vase. That summer's employee was Marcelline Vanderhook, who wore a triangular paper hat bobby-pinned atop her pale blond hair. Her boyfriend, Robert Boxer, a "part-Negro boy from Ottawa Hills High School," as Marcelline said, had his driver's license and provided home deliveries using Mr. Dykstra's Studebaker. Robert was an All State guard in basketball. Years later, he became a Rhodes Scholar in art history at Oxford. Later yet, he became a successful painter in Paris and then San Francisco, specializing in portraits. I own a small oil painting of his; it shows two elderly black women sitting in wheelchairs, chatting as if on someone's porch, except the chairs are set out on a dock at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. Trawlers are moored in the background.

Robert Boxer frequented the bookmobile where I was employed. The driver, a trained librarian named Pinnie Oler, would say, "Hello, Robert. I've got a Nehi orange in my ice chest here for you. You want to look at the art books, of course." Robert would sit in the bookmobile for the duration of the Dykstra's Apothecary stop, studying with great concentration books about Picasso, Matisse, Georgia O'Keeffe, and a few other world-famous artists. The art section never had more than twenty books in all.

One thing Pinnie Oler told me was that Peter Dykstra had been ostracized and "all but run out of the

Dutch Reformed Church” for allowing a mixed-race couple in his employ. At the time, that was all I ever heard about this subject. Except when Robert Boxer said, “I love kicking the shit out of East Christian in basketball. They look up at the scoreboard, last two minutes, and those Hollanders get crazy bug-eyed terrified looks on their faces, all panicky like they just ate a bunch of poisonous tulip you know? They and us worship a different Jesus, as my Alabama grandma liked to say.” One other thing: Robert Boxer was Peter Dykstra’s son (Robert’s mother had passed away), but Robert preferred to use his mother’s family name, Boxer. The emotions of it all registered in me then in an unlettered way, deep in the nerves. Any real understanding of how the apartheid system in far-flung South Africa was an intensifying element in the racist atmosphere of Grand Rapids came only in retrospect—when in 1977, I was living in Ann Arbor and read that Robert Boxer’s older brother, Reginald, had been beaten senseless during a violent protest in Detroit against the murder of the activist Steven Biko by the South African police. The name of Robert’s younger brother, James, is on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Through the bookmobile window, I saw my father eleven times that summer. The number has no other meaning except that it wasn’t more or less. Yet I remember it was eleven. Each time he’d be sitting at the counter in Dykstra’s Apothecary, chatting with Mr. Dykstra or Marcelline or Robert Boxer, he’d be drinking coffee. For the most part I’d see his handsome face in profile. He would have been thirty-eight years old. Hard to imagine that now: he’s been dead for twenty years as I write this (he’d succumbed to lung cancer). My mother and he had met in the Belfaire Jewish Orphan Home in Cleveland, in 1933, when both were seven, and had gotten married at nineteen.

I kept these sightings to myself. Why? My mother had told me that my father was living in California. Did she know he was still in Grand Rapids? Was her statement a necessary displacement of the truth? Or did she actually believe my father was in California? My mother, Estella, died in 2009 at the age of eighty-four, and I never asked her about this. I didn’t ask her a lot of things I should have.

So when the bookmobile made its scheduled forty-five-minute stop across from Dykstra’s, I’d see my father with his neatly pressed trousers, white shirt buttoned to the neck, plaid sports coat, and slim build; his beautiful smile, curly short-cut brown hair, and deep blue eyes were reflected in the counter-wide mirror. Dykstra’s had air conditioning. I suppose that’s why my father wore his sports coat and Marcelline her button-down cotton sweater indoors. In my house, at 1727 Giddings Street, our “air conditioning” had to be set up on a day-to-day basis. It took some doing. You’d remove the ice tray from the Kelvinator’s freezer, gouge out cubes with an ice pick, put the cubes in two bowls, and place one bowl in front of a small electric fan on the kitchen counter, the other in front of an identical fan on the windowsill on the opposite side of the kitchen. The kitchen table, then, was the place to sit. WGR radio said it was on average the hottest summer of the century so far.

This is how I got the bookmobile job. One day in mid-June, about a week after Ottawa Hills High School let out, Pinnie Oler said to me, “You’re every single day on this bookmobile for hours. The city’s just told me I’m able to hire an assistant. Why not take the job? You know the place inside out. I’ll lie about your legal age by a year. Nobody gives a shit anyway. I’ll take that on myself, okay?” The job paid fifty-five cents an hour, and the hours were nine A.M. to four P.M., Tuesday through Saturday, with an hour lunch break, which I always began at noon. I’d pack a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and Pinnie Oler would provide a bottle of Nehi orange. It was called pop, not soda. I wasn’t allowed to eat my lunch inside the bookmobile, so I tried to find a shade tree to sit under. There were plenty of oaks and maples that served this need. I once woke up under a maple where I’d been napping open-mouthed, half choking on a hard-stemmed whirligig seed fallen from a low branch.

The bookmobile was an old school bus painted blue. Inside, it had been fitted with bookshelves and

two leather-topped benches. The benches had been repaired with strips of masking tape. There was a fan screwed to the dashboard and another nailed to the back shelves that covered the former—emergency door. Two fans in my house, two in the bookmobile.

Pinnie Oler was, to my best guess, in his late thirties. He had a slight Dutch accent. He was about five feet nine inches tall with a thin face—a sad face, I thought. He had sandy brown hair combed straight back; you could see the comb tracks. He always wore khaki shorts, white socks, lace-up boots and a khaki short-sleeved shirt. “My safari outfit,” he called it.

My first official day on the job, he showed me how to spray the books with a special solution that killed dust mites, and how to write overdue notices and perform other clerical tasks. From the get-go I approached this employment with the utmost seriousness. I thought of studying library science. I saw myself in that world. I even entertained the possibility that Pinnie Oler’s position might someday be mine. I had no earthly notion that one day bookmobiles would be extinct. I had always seen them on the streets.

Let’s say you were standing next to the steering wheel and looking toward the back of the bookmobile. Filling the top three shelves on the right side was the Science category: books about zoology, astronomy, geology, medicine. There were three or four books about the Canadian Arctic. The bottom two shelves below Science were reserved for Government/Social Science. This section had a lot of books about Abraham Lincoln. Along the left side were shelves containing Fiction and Poetry (Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, John Keats, Langston Hughes), and directly below was the shelf of Children’s Books. Art was on a shelf across the back. The five slide-out wooden drawers of the card catalogue were in the back left-hand corner. On top of the drawers was a slotted box: Book Requests. At the end of my workday I’d deliver the requests to Pinnie Oler, who would submit them to the central branch library. One time I found a condom in the request box, another time a pornographic postcard bent in half, another time a handwritten note: *You will be killed for letting kikes and niggers touch our books*. I didn’t show these to my boss. More typically, at day’s end there would simply be four or five requests for this or that title.

My mother worked in what is now known as child care. She supervised at least a dozen young children every day at the Orthodox synagogue downtown. This meant my two younger brothers had to be at “summer camp” all day. We couldn’t afford to pay the yearly dues at the synagogue, and no special dispensation was offered even though my mother worked there. Instead we belonged to what she referred to as the more “welcoming” Temple Emanuel, a Reform synagogue that provided her a more familiar if not nostalgic theology, insofar as the Belfaire Jewish Orphan Home had not followed strictly Orthodox practices.

All through my elementary and high school years, holiday events and myriad other occasions at Temple Emanuel comprised my mother’s entire social life. We never had anyone over for dinner, except once in a blue moon my aunt Shirley, my mother’s sister. Shirley, an officer of the temple’s Sisterhood, often sat at the rabbi’s table at Passover, and lorded this over my mother. (“Estella likes to fraternize with the *shvartzehs*,” meaning the black kitchen help—which was true.) Shirley had always struck me as a snob and a nag. I never did figure out where her impressive talent for condescension came from; after all, she was raised in the Belfaire Jewish Orphan Home, too. One of my aunt’s primary complaints was that my mother never had anyone else over for dinner. It is possible she might’ve worried that my mother was isolated. More plausibly, my aunt was embarrassed by my mother’s frumpy housedresses, her menial job, her introverted nature, and her absent husband—“for all intents and purposes my sister’s a widow”—and she rarely invited my mother to dinner at her house, either. There it was. But by week’s end my mother was simply exhausted. And she said, “I like weekends to myself.”

Twice that summer my older brother, Michael, stole a car. Oddly, after each theft he waited out the police in an empty pew of Temple Emanuel or at the library table playing cards with the temple's janitor and groundskeeper. Both times, Rabbi Esrig asked what he was doing there in the middle of the day, and apparently my brother gave him an honest answer, along the lines of, "I stole a car and drove it here. It's in the parking lot." The first time, when the car—a 1958 Edsel, for God's sake, a hideously designed vehicle—was returned to its rightful owner on Union Street, the victim agreed not to press charges if my brother painted his one-story house, which my brother did, though it took him about two months. The second time, Paris dipped into her "inheritance" to bail my brother out of jail. That second victim pressed charges.

In the end Michael served six months probation, during which he was assigned the task of painting the center lines on highways with a "cleanup crew" of other parolees. The thing was, in both instances Michael had only needed transportation to the temple. Once he'd arrived there he seemed to have no further use for the stolen car. I'm not suggesting there was anything rational in any of this. Paris would've loaned him her car at the drop of a hat. She had a two-year-old black Pontiac four-door. She'd made all her payments. That was a situation heretofore unknown to me. In my house, it felt as my mother was going to be making car payments for a hundred years.

Anyway, in late June Pinnie Oler said to me, "You always look fairly glum when you get to work. I figure you've got a lot going on at home. I'm not going to ask. Just consider this library your daytime address. But I can't let you sleep in here. I get the feeling you're about to ask to. But go ahead and consider this old bus like a café in Paris—nobody's gonna kick you out. I've never been to Paris, but I've heard that's true."

Engine-wise, the bookmobile had a lot of problems: stalled out at a corner, blue hood raised, radiator geysering steam, grind of metal and friction smell, fan belt broken, oil spilling out, things like that. "Just bus problems," Pinnie Oler would call them, shrugging philosophically. Looking back, the word that I think accurately describes him is *poised*. He'd walk right up to a house, knock on the door, and when someone appeared, he'd point to the bookmobile and ask to use the telephone, and far more often than not it worked out. He would call his wife, Martha, who was a bus mechanic for the Grand Rapids school system. It must've been rare to have a woman mechanic back then. Maybe it still is. Martha would come to the rescue. She drove a green pickup truck with built-in toolboxes.

To my mind, Martha Oler was an absolutely beautiful woman. I thought she looked savvy and confident. During my months as a bookmobile assistant, she had to be called out on at least half a dozen occasions. Each time, she'd climb down from the cab of her truck, walk over to her husband, lean him against the broken-down bookmobile, and in her smudged mechanic's smock kiss him as deeply and passionately as people kissing in any movie I'd seen up to that point—right out in the open, daylight audience or no. I saw a lot through the bookmobile window. Then she'd return to the truck, get her tools, and attend to the bus problem. She was slightly taller than Pinnie, had dark red hair and a quick, lip-biting smile, and always leaned inside the bookmobile to say, "Hey, sport, fancy seeing you here!" That was her little joke, me being a fixture like I was.

The bookmobile made eight official stops per day. Hillcrest Elementary, the public swimming pool, Mills Retirement Village, Blodgett Memorial Hospital, across from Dykstra's Apothecary, Mulick Park Elementary School, Union High School, and the YMCA. But in the summer of 1964, Pinnie Oler also made, a minimum of twice a week, what he called an unscheduled stop. This was in front of his own house, at 58 Wycliffe Drive NE. The first time he made this unscheduled stop, he switched off the ignition and said, "There's a park nearby. Take a Nehi orange or keep filling out overdue notices, whatever you want. Me and Martha are trying to make a baby." He turned the roundabout handle to open the door, stepped out onto the street, went to the front of the bookmobile, and propped open the

hood so it looked like the bus had broken down. “For appearance’ sake,” he said. His wasn’t a front door he had to knock on. Two Nehi orange sodas later—add to that sitting in the park reading a book about adventures in the far north of Canada, dangling my feet in a pond that was home to two aggressive swans to watch out for, and nodding off under an oak for a quick nap on a sultry afternoon—I went back to the bookmobile. There I found Pinnie Oler sitting in the driver’s seat, the motor idling. Martha was browsing the Science section. “Martha’s got the afternoon off,” he said. “She’s going to get some reading in.”

It was about this time that I started to write letters to other people’s fathers. I wrote a lot of these letters in the bookmobile during lulls. I wrote them on the backs of overdue notices, upward of ten notices per letter.

First I made a list of fathers. All told, there were twenty-two. I wrote to Jerry Boscher’s father, Marcia Eldersveld’s, Paul Bigelow’s, Shawnay Smith’s, Gary van Eerden’s, Becky Marcellus’s, Jay Osherow’s, Stephen Peck’s, Tommy Sturdevant’s, Esme Carlyle’s father (he was an elementary school principal), Ellen Hake’s, Brian Siplon’s, Sara Schoen’s, Genevieve T. Park’s, Eric Klein’s, Eileen Heuvelhorst’s, Darlene Diane Johnson’s, Bobby Fodor’s, Mandes Iver Garnes’s, Yvonne Muller’s, Nancy Wong’s, and Ira and Jay Dembinksky’s father.

I never sent a single letter; in that sense, my epistolary life was willfully unrequited. But I didn’t throw them away, either. Plus, I made carbon copies. “A letter never sent is a kind of purgatory,” writes Chekhov. What made me write all those letters? The basic desire to speak to *any* father with a sense of intimacy, I suppose. Being able to organize emotions, the direct address, the implorations and requests, the letting off of steam, the indictments, the complaints, the attempt to feel things deeply. And since I was composing these letters on pieces of paper with the words *Overdue Notice* at the top, they must’ve been written with an abiding sense of urgency, not to mention some notion of imposing penalty. No single example can fully represent this veritable fugue state of letter writing. But here’s one written to Mandez Garnes’s father, whose first name was Jacob.

Dear Mr. Garnes,

You probably remember that I’m friends with your son Mandez and that I’ve been at your house. You probably remember that at your barbeque Mandez and I took our chicken and potato salad over by the guest house. Mandez told me the guest house was going to become his own private room. It was going to be his birthday present when he turned sixteen. I work in the bookmobile and have some time to think about important things. One of these things is that last week you might remember seeing me in front of the Majestic Theatre. I wasn’t short on money for a ticket. I didn’t need to ask you for money because I work in the bookmobile, as I said. I don’t remember a lot of things my own father said but he called that kind of movie a shoot ’em up. Why I’m writing this letter is for the following reason. I want to tell you that I thought it was wrong of you to embarrass Mandez when he found out he was short of ticket money himself. You said it builds character to earn your own money and why should you pay for Mandez, he’s already fifteen. My own father embarrasses me every day by not being around. Mandez is lucky you’re around but you didn’t have any cause to embarrass Mandez that way, I think. You could just as easily of given him the ticket money and talked to him father son in private later on. That’s all of it. By the way something you should know is that Mandez is good at earning money. For instance there’s nobody better than your son at finding money people dropped under the bleachers at Ottawa Hills stadium, during football games. Maybe you didn’t know that every Saturday and Sunday morning Mandez walks around under the bleachers and finds money like that. Were you ever that smart when you were 15? Maybe you should give that some thought. I don’t think

Mandez enjoyed the movie very much because of all of what you did.

With sincerity,

I stopped writing these letters when school started again, but by then my archive contained two hundred, give or take. I'd purchased two manila envelopes, placed the originals in one, the carbons in another. I stuffed both in the bottom drawer of a metal cabinet in the basement of our house, a drawer otherwise crammed with Belfaire Jewish Orphan Home newsletters from the 1930s.

On July 5—I remember the date because I watched Peter Dykstra take down from the apothecary window an American flag he'd displayed on Independence Day—Robert Boxer brought his grandmother to the bookmobile. She had just been in the apothecary with my father, her grandson Robert, and her son-in-law Peter Dykstra. I saw my father step outside, walk down the street, and stand by the bus stop about a block away. Mrs. Boxer was quite large, about sixty-five years of age, I'd guess, and confined to a wheelchair, so Robert had to carry her up the three steps. He was strong, but it definitely took some effort. At the landing, she said, "Now, see, Robert, aren't you glad I don't eat those Snickers bars like I used to?" Robert started laughing so hard he almost dropped his grandmother, but he kept his balance, navigated to a bench, and set his grandmother down on it. He sat next to her, catching his breath. "My grandmother's doing deliveries with me today," Robert said to me and Pinnie Oler.

"I'm keeping on my church hat," she said. "It's good for these hot sunny days and I am easily flushed. And if my blood heats up too much, well, my grandson Robert can tell you, I have been known to faint."

"You're strong as a horse, Grandma," Robert said. "I don't know why you present yourself this way all the time. I've never seen you faint."

"Heat stroke, it's called," Mrs. Boxer said. "And the only reason, Robert, you have not seen me faint from it is because you never happen to be there."

"My loving pharmacist father says you're generally in very good health," Robert said.

"My own mother lived to be one hundred and two," she said.

"I've heard that rumor," Robert said. "I've heard that rumor a thousand times."

Naturally, Pinnie offered Mrs. Boxer a Nehi orange, which she accepted. Mrs. Boxer, Pinnie, Robert, and I were all drinking Nehi orange. "This bookmobile's a regular speakeasy," she said, but I didn't know what a speakeasy was. Once she got settled with her drink, Mrs. Boxer started in on "the man who's always at the counter." I quickly realized she was referring to my father, though she didn't know the man was my father; nobody knew he was my father except for me. "Every time our church station wagon delivers me to visit Robert at work, that man's there. Well, maybe not *every* time, but almost. Yes, sir, just about every time. I don't know, there's something *uncomfortable* about him. O vale of sorrows, O Lord in heaven, forgive me for speaking with suspiciousness toward a man living or dead, but *this* man—he's a snake charmer. Yes, sir, he could charm a snake."

I was feeling humiliated at this point. I started to page through a book of photographs of polar bears and Eskimos and stark landscapes.

"That's not how you raised me to talk," Robert said. "You're becoming what you say you didn't like about your own mother in Alabama, Grandma. An old back-porch gossip. Larry's never been anything but friendly to me. He's got a name, by the way. Larry."

Pinnie adjusted the dashboard fan so Mrs. Boxer could benefit more from it.

"Larry might be unemployed," Pinnie said. "Just because he dresses like a toothbrush salesman doesn't mean he's employed selling toothbrushes." Truth was, I had no idea what my father did for a living. Maybe he did sell toothbrushes.

“That’s also true,” Mrs. Boxer said. “It’s my son-in-law I’m worried about, though. Peter’s a good man, but he shouldn’t agree with all this man’s opinions—is *my* opinion.”

“He’s got opinions. He’s got opinions. And some are excitable. But Larry speaks like a very well-educated man, Grandma,” Robert said. “Okay, he’s maybe *uncomfortable*, like you say. However you mean that.”

“I’ve never once heard him say anything personal about his life,” Mrs. Boxer said. “Such as, does he have a wife, does he have a family? Nothing.”

“Well,” Pinnie said, “if he doesn’t have a wife and family, he’s not going to mention them, is he?”

There was agreement on this sentiment all around. Everyone drank their Nehi oranges in silence. Then Mrs. Boxer looked at me and said, “Did you ever meet this Larry? Come to think of it, Howard, I’ve never seen you inside the apothecary, come to think of it. You’re either in this bookmobile or you’re standing next to this bookmobile.”

“I’ve seen him through the window,” I said.

“Not quite the same thing as being in a room with somebody, Lord knows,” Mrs. Boxer said.

“Maybe he’s got no other daytime place to go,” Pinnie said. “It’s a free country, as long as he pays for his coffee.”

The conversation moved on.

During a mid-July stop in front of Union High School, a man returned a book on interlibrary loan, *North American Indian Waterfowl Traps, Weirs, and Snares*. At such moments, the basic transaction of borrowing or returning, I would often attempt to be a student of people. I’d scrutinize a face, size up a person, make a private assessment, indulge in speculation as to what sort would be interested in this or that particular book. I’d even speculate about which room a person read in at home—kitchen, living room, bedroom, screened-in porch—and other sorts of domestic tableaux, attempting to think narratively, to put each person at the center of the story of his or her life.

One day Pinnie caught me exhibiting a severe frown, part of an overall expression of doubt toward borrower, a woman who was teaching a summer course at Union High. Soon after this teacher left the bookmobile, he said, “That look you get on your face, it isn’t exactly welcoming. It doesn’t fit the etiquette of my bookmobile. You squint like you’re trying to hypnotize somebody. You should see yourself. Goodness sake, the person’s just returning a book. You make it like you want to sit them down in an empty room at the police station. You know, bare light bulb overhead. ‘Sir—ma’am—why’d you choose that particular book, anyway?’ Like every day’s an episode of *Dragnet*. Try and stop doing that, okay?”

That evening, without officially noting on an interlibrary loan form that it had been punctually returned to the bookmobile, I slipped *North American Indian Waterfowl Traps, Weirs, and Snares* into my weather-beaten knapsack, in there with the tangerine peels from my lunch. I didn’t want to wait for the book to go through channels before I could study it. I stopped to sit on a park bench on my way home. After a quick perusal of some of the illustrations, I was hooked. I immediately felt the excitement of trying, as soon as possible, to apply ancient, “well-traveled” techniques of capturing ducks—maybe even a swan—to my almost nightly visits to Reeds Lake in Ramona Park. Reeds Lake was my secret haunt that summer.

While I wasn’t legally sanctioned to drive until I was sixteen, truth be told I drove a car nearly every night. I’d been anxious to drive. (In the bookmobile I’d read enough of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac to grasp its hipster restlessness as a possibility for me, say, a year or two down the line. What’s more, I’d secretly put Maynard G. Krebs, the stereotypical beatnik character on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, with his goatee, his unkempt clothes, and laid-back cool, in the same light. Kerouac and Krebs were my earliest icons of an independent life.) In fact, I’d already purchased a

beat-to-crap 1960 Ford, whose grille had been stove in by a pickup truck and never repaired. I didn't care. That car represented my future, sitting day and night in my driveway. It had cost \$200. Paris Keller helped me out there. I had only mentioned my desire to own it and she loaned me \$150. She even went to East Grand Rapids to take it for a test drive, telling the owner she herself was interested in buying it. I suppose that had some truth to it, since she was the one who signed the bill of sale, and the next day, she transferred the title over to my name. I had no idea how to thank her.

As often as seven nights a week, I'd wait until my mother was asleep, the radio always on next to her bed (my mother was ever on the alert for tornado warnings; we had a tornado shelter, with a basement entry, stocked with cans of Campbell's soup and two bottles of whiskey, and some nights my mother slept down there), then I'd drive the thirty or so blocks to Reeds Lake.

I had practically memorized the driver's test manual and was careful to stay below the speed limit hands at ten o'clock and two o'clock on the wheel, navigating the streets to the wealthy section of town. Some people had lakefront houses with wraparound porches and cabin cruisers moored in boat garages. One reason I went to the lake was to swim near the faux Mississippi paddle-wheel steamer, which, a decade earlier, had been the feature attraction of a popular amusement park, but now it was shabby disrepair, in dry-dock on scaffolding, propped up a few feet out of the water, so on a windy day waves lapped at its hull. Most people I knew preferred to swim at public swimming pools, the more adventuresome ones in the Thornapple River.

On an exceedingly hot day during the last weeks of school the previous year, my best friend, Paul Amundson, and I played hooky, walked about three miles to the Thornapple, stripped down, and prepared to go for a swim in the shallows, mostly shrouded by enormous oak and willow trees, on a beautiful stretch of the river. When we stepped out from behind an oak, we heard laughter and playful shouting. We immediately got dressed and investigated, and to our astonishment discovered our English teacher, Kathy Woods, skinnydipping with her fiancé, whom she'd introduced to our after-school creative writing club. "Class," she'd said, "I'd like you to meet my fiancé, Mr. Williams. He's a policeman. But he's extra-special and different, because he writes for newspapers, and he's writing his own poetry, too. Don't be afraid to ask questions just because a real writer is visiting, okay?"

Behind the tree, Paul became a little panicky. "We have two choices. We can stay and watch, or we can get out of here fast." I voted for staying. Paul said, "But what if I see something I can't forget? What'll I do then?" I could only come up with, "Just remember as much as you can for the rest of your life." Paul started to walk away. He didn't look back; I looked back, then ran and caught up with my friend. "What I think's best," Paul said, "is to give people their privacy." I thought it was the most adult, dignified thing I'd ever heard.

The following Monday, an "exercise in description" was due in Miss Woods's English class. I worked on mine for hours over the weekend, typing version after version on the Olivetti. On Tuesday before English class, the last period of the day, Miss Woods asked for a private conference. So I stayed after, and she said, "I want to speak with you about your three pages of description. First, let me point out that I only asked for two pages. You got a little carried away. That meant I had to read more of your writing than anyone else's. But okay. All right. That's not a crime, is it?"

"The assignment was to provide a description of anything you wanted and to give what you write a lot of thought. And I think your writing is excellent. But I took note of a few things. Let me see here . . . Oh, yes, here on page two. Where you write how this teacher and this policeman—let me quote you—'entwined their clothes in knots before they jumped into the river.' Let's examine this sentence. You really don't need the word *entwined* to describe knots, do you? Knots are by definition entwined aren't they? Now, I won't tell the principal you were skipping school. That would be hypocritical of me. Fine, then. Now that we have an understanding, I'll trust you to keep my truancy to yourself—an

I'll do the same for you. Both of us will have to live with the fact that we skipped school on an unbearably hot day and ended up at the same swimming hole. Funny how life is. All right, you're free to go now. By the way, I haven't breathed a word about this to my fiancé. You remember he's a policeman, right?"

As for Reeds Lake in the summertime, its nocturnal waters, moonlight, starlight, and especially the trumpeter swans ghosting along the hull of the paddle-wheel steamer, seldom failed to provide a reprieve from a fifteen-year-old's operatic despairs. Also, I found it was a place where I could think things through. Not that I ever succeeded in thinking anything through to perfect clarity, or even usefulness, but I was aware of trying to. In essence I went to the lake to think. And to slip into the water and dog-paddle a few yards behind the swans, I suppose daring them to turn and unfold with startling velocity those S-curved necks and strike me with their beaks. That had happened only once, when I was caught unawares, daydreaming at night near the paddle wheeler, and a swan was right there and it was too late to swim away or dive underwater. For a week I had a bruise risen black-and-blue above my right eye. I might've been blinded by a swan, which would at least have been unique. Apart from that skirmish, I always had the rarest sense of a peaceful heart at Reeds Lake. Yet the most magical times for me were whenever enough gulls—they migrated from Lake Michigan—gathered on the paddle wheeler, so that the shifting weight of them would make the boat begin to turn, if only a foot or two at most. I always hated to leave that place. Every time, I hated to leave.

After studying *North American Indian Waterfowl Traps, Weirs, and Snares* for five or six nights in a row, I felt prepared to apply my one-book scholarship to the real thing. At a hardware store I purchased strips of balsa wood, framing wood, nails, twine, and a length of window screen for the trap's walls (my use of the wire screen was cheating a little in authenticity). Water weeds, for camouflage, I found at Reeds Lake. There I was, waist-deep in the water at about two A.M., the lake misting, completing the construction of a trap. Given my limited carpentry skills, focus and intent were not enough; the result was less trap than contraption. Still, I situated it just beneath the paddle wheeler and fixed it to a splintered part of the hull with twine. When I first entered the water, ten or so mallards scooted off, honking in alarm. I placed "duck pellets" and bread crusts on a small platform inside the trap and retreated a dozen yards, sinking until I was neck-deep in water. From there I kept the trap under surveillance, vaguely aware of a pair of swans off to my left that appeared to be sleeping, heads tucked into back feathers, all exquisiteness in their moonlight repose.

Soon the mallards cautiously drew close to me. At such proximity, they were, in the intricacies of their plumage, surprisingly lovely. The expressiveness of their muttering, gargling, and quick nostril fluting, the repertoire of coded signals, was hypnotic. I suppose I was lost in all of that when, quite suddenly, a swan reared back, water fantailing in moonlit droplets from its wings spread full width, then lurched forward, emitting a kind of choking hiss, hell-bent on destruction. In its approach the swan sent the mallards packing, then darted out its head directly into the trap, lifted it up, and finally wore it like a fencer's protective mask. Caught like that, the swan went berserk, violently shaking its head and neck back and forth, attempting to disengage itself from the trap.

However much I was taking this all in, I hardly expected the swan to have the sheer strength to push the trap underwater in the direction of the paddle wheeler, and in a few moments I grew terrified because it hadn't surfaced again. I didn't know whether to wait it out or swim over and in some sort of adrenaline rush attempt to intervene—how would a person even do that with a swan? I should not have thought but acted, because all motion had stopped: the swan was now visibly floating, but drowned.

Back to the evening when I sat on the basement stairs talking to Paris Keller. I told her about the

letters I was writing. I don't know why I did that. Perhaps her sheer presence, the bold, natural way she had exposed her breasts, turned the laundry room into a confessional. Perhaps I wanted her to think I was interesting in some way, that I had depths. "You put them in envelopes and put stamps on them and everything?" she asked. "You paid good money at the post office and everything?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't sent a one. Not one letter."

I walked over to the metal cabinet and kicked the bottom drawer. "They're all in here, Paris," I said.

The clothes dryer had stopped spinning and Paris took out the T-shirt and, facing away from me, slipped it back on. "It's my fault I was standing here looking like I looked," she said. "But once you saw that, you made the decision to stay and talk. Polite to stay and talk, but not so polite to stare, my friend. You could've sat a few rungs up, huh?"

"You could've asked me for a spare shirt."

"Touché," she said. "Well, I have to get going. Your brother and I are going to the drive-in and doing stuff after."

"Goodbye, Paris," I said. "You won't tell anybody about the letters, will you?"

She made a gesture like she was zipping closed her mouth with her finger. Then she comically mumbled, "Mum's the word."

There are certain incidents that will not allow you to forget them. The Japanese have a saying: "Rain enters your diary." It refers to the melancholy that is forever part of your personal history. Later, you find the diary and read it and rediscover how you were experiencing life. The diary remembers for you.

When I assert that I can recall only one conversation with my father with any confident degree of accuracy, I mean it. That is because I wrote about it in a diary.

The conversation took place because my father, listening to WGRD in Dykstra's Apothecary, had heard the announcement that I had won \$666 in a contest.

I scarcely saw my older brother that summer. "Michael lives on another planet," my mother said. "It's right here in Grand Rapids, but it's another planet." He was eighteen. Black chinos, black shit-kicker boots, duck's-ass haircut, indoor pallor. Always exhibiting a pained, wistful expression. Cut from the James Dean or Sal Mineo mold. He was working different jobs—he did groundskeeping work at a cemetery for a few weeks, for example—and the rest of the time he spent with Paris. He had an apartment on Union Street. I always wanted to see it, but I didn't know the exact address. I thought he may have been living there with Paris. "I'd venture to guess they cohabit" is how my mother put it—her vocabulary was inventive. Truth be told, I didn't know much about my older brother's life at all.

As I said, my Ford was parked in our driveway, license plate and all. One morning in late July, at just after eight—the summer-camp bus had just picked up my two younger brothers at the corner and my mother had already left for work—I was eating cereal and drinking orange juice at the kitchen table, listening to WGRD. The disk jockey, "Mad Marty" Sobieski, whose morning rock-and-roll program ran from seven A.M. to noon, was gabbing away between tunes. His signature shout-out during his show was "Mad Marty's throwin' a party!" Sometimes he'd add, "Former president Dwight D. Eisenhower said he'd drop by, but he canceled. Oh, well, maybe next time, Ike."

That morning, Mad Marty talked a blue streak about the "license plate lottery." In fact, he was about to announce the first winner. The deal was, WGRD's director of programming, at eight-fifteen sharp, would reach into a bin containing, on strips of paper, the license plate numbers of "every legally registered car in Grand Rapids, Michigan." There was a lot of excitement at the radio station. Though WGRD was just background noise while I ate breakfast, when the winning number was

announced, a bell went off in my head. I turned up the volume. Mad Marty repeated the number again and again. “If this is your license plate number, call Mad Marty right up here at WGRD, then come on down and collect the prize money of *six hundred sixty-six dollars and no cents!* You heard me—six hundred sixty-six smackeroos!”

By now you’ve figured out that the winning number was on my brand-new license plate. I’d memorized it because, besides my telephone number, it was the only number that meant anything to me. Still, I went out to the driveway just to make sure.

I telephoned the radio station. Then I called Pinnie Oler at home and told him my news. “I take it you’ll give at least half to your mother,” he said. “Okay, then, get downtown and become a millionaire. Take the day off work. I’ll consider it that you called in sick. See you tomorrow morning. I’m going to have to start charging you for every Nehi orange from now on.” I didn’t know what to say. Pinnie interpreted my silence. “Jesus, Howard, just *kidding*. Such a serious kid. Your sense of humor’s in the trash can.”

I took three connecting buses downtown to WGRD. I never thought I’d ever get to meet Mad Marty Sobieski in the flesh. He was a specter, a disembodied voice like the Wizard of Oz. Turned out he was about forty years old, wore a suit and tie and owl-eyed black-rimmed glasses and bespoke shoes. And he took all of two minutes with me.

He came out of his broadcast booth and had some lackey take a snapshot of us both holding the check. “Well, kiddo, congratulations. Don’t let all this cash give you too much of a hard-on. On second thought, you look like you could use it! Ha ha ha!” He shook my hand in exaggerated pump-handle fashion, said “Look at that scowl! Groovy. Too cool for school,” and disappeared back into his booth. I heard the beginning of “Baby Love” by the Supremes. By the time I made it to the ground floor and stood gawking at my check, the lobby’s sound system was playing “Do Wah Diddy Diddy” by Manfred Mann. And when I got on the first bus and turned on my transistor radio, Mad Marty was saying, “Two in a row by Mr. Manfred Mann—oooooh, I just can’t *help* myself!” And then he played “Leave My Kitten Alone.”

One day in early August at about six-thirty P.M., Paris drove up and parked in front of our house. I was sitting on the porch. “Your brother’s got the flu. He’s throwing up and complaining. Getting the flu in summer’s a real drag. Well, at least he doesn’t have to paint that house for a couple days, right? Wanna go to the movies?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Aw, come on, fuckstick.” That was her pet name for me.

“I don’t know. What’s playing?”

“*Zorba the Greek*’s supposed to be good. It’s at the Majestic.”

“You want to go to the movies with *me*? I don’t get it.”

“Tell me the truth. Have you ever been to the movies with a girl?”

“Nope.”

“See how easy telling the truth is with me?”

“I’d better ask my brother.”

“He suggested it, actually.”

“Still, I’d better check with him.”

“Just call him up, why don’t you?”

“Okay.”

I went inside and dialed Michael’s number, which was on a piece of paper held by a magnet on the refrigerator door. I let it ring and ring. He didn’t pick up.

Back on the porch I said, “There’s no answer. What’s *Zorba the Greek* about, anyway?”

“A Greek person named Zorba. His adventures.”

“What time’s the show?”

Paris was wearing jeans and a T-shirt that read ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK. I didn’t comment, but she saw I’d taken notice. She looked at her watch. “Twenty-five minutes. We can just make it.”

Against my better judgment, or on behalf of it, I don’t know which, I got in the front seat. “We can each pay for our own ticket, okay?” she said. “That make you less nervous?”

“Fine.”

We both bought popcorn and settled into seats in the middle section, about a fourth of the way down the aisle. The Majestic was a magnificent World War Two–era movie house with a cathedral ceiling, plush carpeting, and employees dressed like bellhops; it was all going to seed but was still the best theater in town. The air conditioning felt good. This showing was sparsely attended: the closest person was at least four rows away.

After the coming attractions, the movie got under way. When Anthony Quinn started to demonstrate his famous finger-snapping, drunken, all-joyful-abandon Zorba dance, Paris, staring at the screen, unbuckled my belt. She lowered the zipper of my blue jeans, reached in, and started to slowly (and allow me to say expertly, though I’d had nothing to compare it to) stroke me. This went on well past Zorba’s dance. At one point, she leaned close and said, “It’s okay, darling. It’s okay, I’m in no hurry. The movie’s hardly halfway through I bet.” She had on some subtle, breathtaking perfume, and I think it was that, mixed with the tangy fragrance of her sweat, dried in the coolness of the theater, as much as the ministrations of her fingers which drove me to distraction. When I pulsed hard and exploded, thickly, into her hand, she whispered, lipsticked lips touching my ear, “That feels nice,” speaking for both of us, I hoped. Then she got me all tucked back in and zipped up, and even buckled my belt. Whispering again, she said, “A nice girl would go to the ladies’ room now, but I don’t want to miss any of the movie. It’s making me want to go to a Greek island.”

We didn’t speak about this in the car. In fact, we never spoke about it ever. About a week later, I received the first of many telephone calls like this one: “Hello, Howard? This is Jacob Garnes, Mandez’s father.”

There in my kitchen, between pounding heartbeats and hard-to-catch breaths, I immediately understood that Paris had mailed my letters. It had to have been Paris. No one else knew where the letters were hidden.

As for the conversation with my father that entered my diary: When I got back home from WGRD with my check for \$666, I sat at the kitchen table looking at it. I may have had a second bowl of cereal. No more than half an hour later, Mr. Dykstra’s Studebaker appeared in the driveway. I stood at the window and watched my father crouch out from the driver’s seat. I couldn’t imagine how he persuaded Mr. Dykstra to loan him the Studebaker—the thought occurred to me that he’d stolen it. Either way, there it was, right in the driveway.

My father hadn’t noticed me yet. He was dressed in light brown slacks, brown loafers, a white short-sleeved shirt. I could see his sports coat slung over the front passenger seat. Really, he was as handsome as a movie star. He glanced briefly at the house, walked to the back of the Studebaker, popped open the trunk, took out a hammer, slammed shut the trunk, laid his left hand flat on the trunk lid, and brought the hammer straight down on his thumb. He winced and slumped in pain, then closed his eyes and leaned against the trunk for a moment, as if he were about to faint. He tossed the hammer in the back seat and walked into the house.

He hadn’t been in the house for well over a year. What I theorized right away was that he’d battered his thumb in order to deflect my mother’s anger and suspicion away from him. Desperate and inane—he was a coward that way. My theory wasn’t far-fetched at all: I’d seen him invent such distractions

three or four times before. This time the bizarre plan didn't have its intended effect because my mother wasn't home. To this day, I'm amazed that he didn't even know her work schedule.

I was alone in the house, sitting at the kitchen table, the check next to my cereal bowl. My father stood in the doorway, appraising me. "You've gotten too skinny," he said. "You're a skinny goat, son."

"Since I'm your son, does that make you a goat, too?"

"That's witty. That's thinking on your feet."

"What happened to your thumb, there, Dad?"

He held out his hand and studied it, as if beholding an object separate from himself. "Oh, that," he said. "I accidentally slammed it in the car door. Get me some ice cubes and a towel, will you?"

I stayed at the table, trying to stare him down. It must've looked stupid. I was dressed in a black T-shirt and blue jeans and black high-tops, no socks. I had let my hair grow. I was the only one among my friends and acquaintances who had a ponytail.

"What's that on the back of your head?" my father asked. He was nothing if not well groomed. He always kept his hair in what he called a "businessman's cut." When I didn't answer, he said, "Cat got your tongue?"

He walked to the refrigerator, opened the door, took an ice cube tray from the freezer, set the tray on the kitchen table, and pried out some cubes with his ever-handly jackknife. The jackknife was on a key chain. He wrapped the ice cubes in a dishtowel and sat down across from me at the table. He swathed his thumb in the towel.

"Slammed the door on it, huh?" I said.

"You aren't hard of hearing. That's good. That's a good thing."

"It must hurt."

"What's that on the back of your head?"

"Where's the hammer? Still in the back seat?"

"What hammer, exactly, are you referring to?"

We stared at each other for a long, silent moment. I could hear the refrigerator humming.

"I guess it's a badge of individuality, that goddamn ponytail. It's a short ponytail. But still noticeable. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Like what?"

"Like you might not be the type of young man interested in girls."

"I don't get what you mean."

"Never mind."

"I see you've got Mr. Dykstra's Studebaker out there."

This stymied my father—how would I know whose car it was? How had I come by such knowledge?

"It's a borrowed car, true enough."

"Borrowed from whom I already said I know."

"I'm very impressed by your diction. It's like Shakespeare."

"Too bad it doesn't have California plates. I've never seen California plates."

"The car I keep in California has California plates, naturally."

"Naturally."

"Maybe—and I just thought of this—maybe you've been low on cash and couldn't afford a decent haircut. Maybe that hairdo's the result of financial constrictions around this house in my absence. I send your mother money, you know. She's got money I send her for house expenses. Come to think of it, I could give you a haircut right now, in the kitchen here. Just with a scissors."

"No thanks."

"I've had the same haircut since I was in the air force, flying over Europe. The Italian campaign."

When a haircut suits you, it suits you no matter how the world changes.”

The ice cubes were melting out of the towel.

“Speaking of license plates,” he said. He adjusted the towel and his face cringed.

“What about them?”

“Let’s reverse the situation here, shall we?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s reverse the situation. Say you dropped by my place of residence and said you were temporarily not flush. Do you think for one minute I’d hesitate to reach directly into my pocket, snap out my wallet, and hand you a roll of five-dollar bills, or tens, or twenties, you being my son in need? Peel off a few fifties for you? Right on the spot to help out my son?”

“I’m fifteen, Dad. I work in a bookmobile. Maybe you didn’t know that. Maybe that news didn’t reach you in California. I’m never flush.”

“Speaking of license plates, you’re pretty flush now, aren’t you?”

“Were you listening to WGRD, maybe? Like Mom says, miracles never cease.”

“Your mother and I don’t agree on that. I think miracles cease the minute you’re born.”

“Mom’s life is not easy. I don’t know what yours is.”

“Imagine how proud I felt—just dropped in to have a cup of coffee at a counter on Division Street, on comes the radio, and on comes my own son’s name spoken by WGRD. If that’s not good news first thing in the morning, I don’t know what is.”

“It was to me. I’m giving half to Mom.”

“Hey, know what? I could give you a lift over to Old Kent Bank, you could cash your check, and I’ll be right there with you.”

“Where’ve you mainly been this past year?”

“Mostly California.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Mostly. Not always. Mostly.”

“Well, I think some of that money you say you sent didn’t get here. Mom’s not exactly flush.”

“Whoa, now, son. Hold on. Just hold on. The adult finances—no, that’s not your business.”

“I’ll give you a hundred dollars.”

“How about a three-way split. Me. You. Your mother. Just like a family. Of course, it’d be a short-term loan, mind you.”

“We could stop at Blodgett Hospital. They could look at your thumb.”

“No, no—life’s generally an emergency, but this thumb’s not.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let’s drop it. How’s your job in the bookmobile? What’s your wages?”

“I’m paid six hundred sixty-six dollars an hour, Dad. Since you’re all of a sudden so interested. I file cards in the card catalogue. You once told me you used to read books. You should drop by, find a book to read. When it becomes overdue, I’ll send you a notice. Give me your address, just in case.”

We drove in the Studebaker to Old Kent Bank. The teller had heard the WGRD lottery on the radio and commented on my luck. “You don’t need to deposit it,” the teller said, “because we’ll hold the amount against your mother’s account overnight. But it’s WGRD’s check. It’s going to be fine. Congratulations.” He counted out the cash and pushed it toward me.

In the parking lot I handed my father ten ten-dollar bills. No more bargaining. No further discussion. It felt as if I’d compensated him for his rare visit. I told him that I wanted to take a bus back, and he said, “A nice summer’s day to be young with cash in your pocket.” He got into the Studebaker. The windows were rolled down. “The money I gave you would buy maybe two hundred cups of coffee in Dykstra’s,” I said. I turned away, not wanting to see the expression on his face. I’d

rather have imagined it. I heard the Studebaker drive off.

I'd gotten only a block or two away from the bank when my father pulled the car up alongside the curb about ten feet from where I was walking. He honked the horn in a snippet of Morse code. I looked over. "Men shake hands when they part company after a business arrangement," he said. I walked up to the car and we shook hands.

When my mother dragged herself in from work, she said, "I'm beat." I'd already cleaned up the kitchen. She liked a clean kitchen when she got home. I handed her a wad of cash and told her that I'd won \$666 in a contest on WGRD. I told her I had just given her \$566. She was flabbergasted and had to sit down. "Oh, my," she said. "I had no idea. No idea at all. Miracles never cease." She set the money down on the kitchen table and got a glass from the cabinet. She filled the glass with water and drank it. "So, you kept a hundred dollars for yourself, sweetheart. That's good. That's a lot of gas money—when you turn sixteen and start to drive, for instance. But why not splurge a little now? Why not take a friend to see *Zorba the Greek*? It's still playing at the Majestic. I hear it's wonderful. You should see it, honey."

"I'll think about it, Mom."

"All right. I'm going to have a cup of coffee, then go meet your brothers at the bus. Want to come with?"

Four days after the incident with the swan, Pinnie Oler did something unprecedented, which was to say, "How about lunch with me today?" Right away I knew something was wrong. I soon discovered that he'd put some advance thought into this because he'd brought along a checkered tablecloth. He parked the bookmobile near a small park full of big sycamore trees, carried the tablecloth and his lunch pail along with two bottles of Nehi orange over to one of the sycamores, spread out the cloth, and sat down.

I stood by the bookmobile with my lunch in a paper bag, watching, postponing what I felt was going to be a bad moment. I had no choice, however, but to go over and sit under the tree. I had taken only one bite of my peanut butter and jelly sandwich when Pinnie unfolded the *Grand Rapids Press*, flipped through it, found the page he wanted, and laid it flat on the tablecloth. I saw he had circled a small article in pencil.

"What's that?" I asked.

It is remarkable how long you can suspend a peanut butter sandwich in midair and stop time, hoping perhaps to turn back the clock, return to the life you led before, say, you stole a book. I noticed Pinnie staring at my levitated sandwich, so I set it down on the bag. "There's an interesting article in the paper today," he said. And he read the three-paragraph article about the police going out to investigate the death of a swan. Apparently two young women walking home from playing tennis had discovered the swan washed up on the shore of Reeds Lake. I recall this sentence: "Police say the swan died from the malicious handiwork of a cruel person." The investigation was ongoing, the article said; swans fell under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department, and the perpetrator would, if identified, be fined and possibly serve jail time.

"Sad about the swan," I said.

"You know who my favorite author is?" Pinnie asked.

"You never told me."

"Arthur Conan Doyle. You know, the Sherlock Holmes mysteries."

"I'd like to read one someday."

"As you know, my bookmobile's got quite a few."

"If I don't know that, who does?"

"Right. Well, I mention Sherlock Holmes because it's interesting to see how clues come together in

those stories. I know they're made-up stories, of course. But that's what good fiction can do, isn't it, give you a different way of looking at real life."

"I'd need to think about that. Maybe tonight I'll think about it."

"Hey, take out any Sherlock Holmes you want. I'll personally cover it if you're delinquent in returning it on time. No problem in the least."

"That's nice of you."

"You get peanut butter and jelly every damn day, don't you? I don't think I could do that. I have to vary lunch a little. Today, for instance, I've got ham and cheese with mustard. Yesterday it was meat loaf with mustard."

It was blessedly cool in the shade, and would've been a serene picnic had it not been for the conversation.

"You wouldn't happen to remember, from last week, a fellow came in and returned a book," Pinnick said. "The Union High School stop. His book was out on interlibrary loan. It had *North American Indian* in the title. I've got a record of it, of course, me being professional, everything neat and clean and in its own place. This fellow got a notice from the main library that the book was still overdue. He wasn't too happy about this and telephoned the library to lodge a complaint. The downtown library can't seem to locate the book. And I've looked high and low in the bookmobile—no luck. Now, I've given this some thought, and here's the conclusion I've come to. I can either hire Sherlock Holmes to solve this mystery or just get it over with and pay full price for the book out of pocket, seeing its disappearance happened on my watch. How would you advise me here?"

Basically, I confessed all my crimes by indirection—that is, by trying to blame someone else. "No, I don't remember the book," I said. "It was about how to trap wild birds. So, what I think is that the man from the Union High stop is the one who killed the swan in the newspaper."

"Interesting theory, Sherlock."

"Which Sherlock Holmes should I start with, do you think?"

"*Hound of the Baskervilles*. Without a moment's hesitation, *Hound of the Baskervilles*."

"Okay, I'll start with that one, then."

"How many interlibrary return forms do you think you've filled out so far this summer, give or take?"

"I don't know."

"Take a wild guess."

"Maybe a hundred."

"Say, in theory, you were to screw up just one time out of that hundred. I'd bet most anyone would chalk that up to normal human error, don't you think? I mean, I've fallen asleep in church more times out of a hundred than that. Nobody's perfect."

"I'll try and think of it that way from now on."

"Look, I don't mean to sound like I'm giving fatherly advice, mind you. You already have a father. But return that goddamn book, okay?" He cuffed the top of my head hard and said, "What expression do you see on my face right now?"

"I can't read it."

"Disappointment, that's what."

The next day during lunch, I put *North American Indian Waterfowl Traps, Weirs, and Snares* on top of the card catalogue, filled out the proper interlibrary return form, and placed it like a bookmark in the book.

I hadn't meant to kill the swan. It was a beautiful, mean bird, and spent nights in my secret haunt. Nearly fifty years later, I can still hear its strange guttural exhalation; fifty years of hapless guilt and remorse. So often I close my eyes and picture the water closing over.

~~My fifteenth summer was ending. My older brother started to talk about enlisting in the army. This didn't go down well with Paris. "If Michael joins the army," she said, "I'll move to my namesake city and never speak to him again." But before he could make any decision, Michael first had to serve time in the Kent County Correctional Facility for car theft. His starting date was August 30.~~

The evening of August 29, he drove with Paris to Reeds Lake. How did I know this? Because I had driven to the lake myself, parked my car under a willow tree, and walked to the area where the love cars parked. Right away I heard my brother's inimitable fusillades of laughter. Then I heard "Sherry" by the Four Seasons—Paris half singing, half screaming, "Sher-er-ee, Sher-ee bay-yay-bee!" in a duet with Frankie Valli, whose every falsetto surge was like a shot of adrenaline administered to the radio. I saw a bottle of whiskey float the length of the back seat, as if levitating sideways. It was a very hot night, still around eighty degrees at nine P.M., which wasn't unusual that summer. Reeds Lake was famous for being one of the best make-out spots in the city. The police left the love cars alone. Nightly rendezvous there were necessary and beautiful—at least that's what I was led to understand, and I was led to understand it by Paris. "Now that you own a car," she once told me, "see how much you have to look forward to?"

I saw Paris's car. I saw her feet, with her favorite red high heels on; she wore those shoes no matter what the occasion, sometimes even first thing in the morning, going to the diner for breakfast. I could see her legs, wide apart, resting on the base of the open rear window, those red high heels somehow still balanced on her feet, suspended in the night air.

I stripped down to my swimsuit and slipped into the lake to cool off. At one point, when I looked up and saw dozens of gulls perched on the paddle wheeler, I clapped my hands loudly four or five times, and they flew off as though I'd rudely interrupted a conference of ghosts. They scattered every which way, out over the moon-in-a-mirror dark water, gone into stars.

"No more unscheduled stops necessary," Pinnie Oler said by way of announcing that Martha was pregnant. I had only two more days left to work in the bookmobile. I'd asked if I could keep after-school hours, but Pinnie said there was no money in the library budget for that. "Maybe next summer huh?"

When the bookmobile stopped across from Dykstra's, I looked out and saw quite a commotion. There was a police car out front. I saw two policemen inside the apothecary, along with my father, Mr. Dykstra, his employee Marcelline, and Robert Boxer. One policeman waved the others to one side of the room. Then he put handcuffs on my father's wrists and led him out to the cruiser. My father got into the back seat. One policeman got in behind the wheel, the other rode shotgun. Pinnie said, "I'm going in and find out what happened." I watched through the bookmobile window. A few minutes later, when Pinnie returned, he said, "Looks like that fellow Larry reached into the cash register. Marcelline Vanderhook called the cops."

I slumped onto one of the benches. "But you know what Peter Dykstra said just now?" Pinnie continued. "He said, 'I'm not about to press charges on a war hero, fellow I've been talking and drinking coffee with every day for months who just got overcome by a desperate notion. Besides, I think this heat's made everyone go haywire. You'd almost have to have gone haywire to reach into a cash register like that.'"

So, I thought, my father had told everyone in the apothecary that he was a war hero.

And here is the last remembered truth of that summer. The next day, when we parked the bookmobile across from Dykstra's, my father was inside having coffee, as usual. I decided now was the time to walk in the door and set the record straight. Marcelline was there, and of course Mr. Dykstra. So was Robert Boxer, who was packaging up this and that item for delivery. WGRD was on

the radio. I ordered a root beer. Robert introduced me to his dad. Peter Dykstra and I shook hands. I said, “Larry here is my father.” Everyone but my father looked incredulous. “You let my father drive your Studebaker. That was nice of you.”

Perhaps I should not admit this, but at the end of that summer I found it compelling and not peculiar to talk to ducks, gulls, even swans at a distance. After school started up again, I continued to go to Reeds Lake—through much of that unseasonably hot September, if memory serves. I’d swim around under the steamboat’s paddle wheel. By talking to the birds I meant to reinstate each night an unthreatening familiarity. I could scarcely sleep because of my relentless sorrow over the dead swan. Simply put, it wasn’t so much that I felt things any more deeply than anyone else, but that this was the thing I’d chosen to feel most deeply about. How unhinged this seems to me now, my murmuring and cooing and stuttering and imitating nighttime birds like that. What was wrong with me? And I had an inkling that my soul was off-kilter, askew, and that I was in a phase of moving away from people. I wasn’t exactly afraid of this, only curious, and wanted to chronicle it. In late October, when the lake got too cold to swim in, and the ducks and swans had jettisoned my useless presence and apologies, migrating south in their formations, I remember feeling bereft.

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