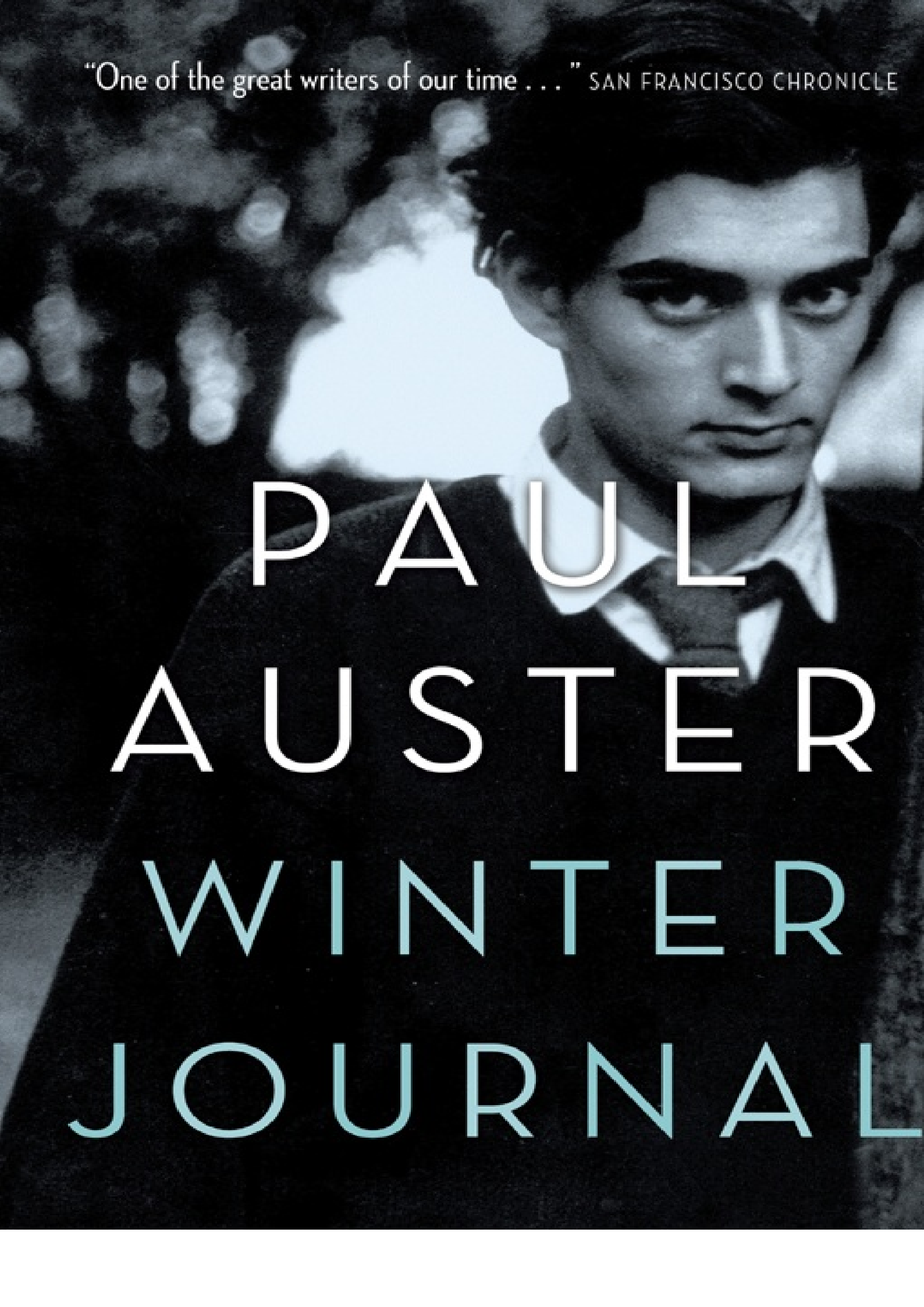


"One of the great writers of our time . . ." SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

A black and white portrait of Paul Auster, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark sweater over a white collared shirt and a dark tie. The background is dark with some out-of-focus light spots.

PAUL
AUSTER
WINTER
JOURNAL

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WINTER JOURNAL



PAUL AUSTER



McCLELLAND & STEWART

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You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else.

Your bare feet on the cold floor as you climb out of bed and walk to the window. You are sixty years old. Outside, snow is falling, and the branches of the trees in the backyard are turning white.

Speak now before it is too late, and then hope to go on speaking until there is nothing more to be said. Time is running out, after all. Perhaps it is just as well to put aside your stories for now and try to examine what it has felt like to live inside this body from the first day you can remember being alive until this one. A catalogue of sensory data. What one might call *phenomenology of breathing*.

You are ten years old, and the midsummer air is warm, oppressively warm, so humid and uncomfortable that even as you sit in the shade of the trees in the backyard, sweat is gathering on your forehead.

It is an incontestable fact that you are no longer young. One month from today, you will be turning sixty-four, and although that is not excessively old, not what anyone would consider to be an advanced old age, you cannot stop yourself from thinking about all the others who never managed to get as far as you have. This is one example of the various things that could never happen, but which, in fact, have happened.

The wind in your face during last week's blizzard. The awful sting of the cold, and you out there in the empty streets wondering what possessed you to leave the house in such a pounding storm, and yet, even as you struggled to keep your balance, there was the exhilaration of that wind, the joy of seeing the familiar streets turned into a blur of white whirling snow.

Physical pleasures and physical pains. Sexual pleasures first and foremost, but also the pleasures of food and drink, of lying naked in a hot bath, of scratching an itch, of sneezing and farting, of spending an extra hour in bed, of turning your face toward the sun on a mid-afternoon in late spring or early summer and feeling the warmth settle upon your skin. Innumerable instances, not a day gone by without some moment or moments of physical pleasure, and yet pains are no doubt more persistent and intractable, and at one time or another nearly every part of your body has been subjected to assault. Eyes and ears, head and neck, shoulders and back, arms and legs, throat and stomach, ankles and feet, not to mention the enormous boil that once sprouted on the left cheek of your ass, referred to by the doctor as a *wen*, which to your ears sounded like some medieval affliction and prevented you from sitting in chairs for a week.

The proximity of your small body to the ground, the body that belonged to you when you were three and four years old, that is to say, the shortness of the distance between your feet and head, and how the things you no longer notice were once a constant presence and a preoccupation for you: the little world of crawling ants and lost coins, of fallen twigs and dented bottle caps, of dandelions and clover. But especially the ants. They are what you remember best. Armies of ants traveling in and out of their powdery hills.

You are five years old, crouched over an anthill in the backyard, attentively studying the comings and goings of your tiny six-legged friends. Unseen and unheard, your three-year-old neighbor creeps up behind you and strikes you on the head with a toy rake. The prongs pierce your scalp, blood flows into your hair and down the back of your neck, and you run screaming into the house, where your grandmother tends to your wounds.

Your grandmother's words to your mother: "Your father would be such a wonderful man—only he were different."

This morning, waking in the dimness of another January dawn, a scumbled, grayish light seeping into the bedroom, and there is your wife's face turned toward your face, her eyes closed, still fast asleep, the covers pulled all the way up to her neck, her head the only part of her that is visible, and you marvel at how beautiful she looks, how young she looks, even now, thirty years after you first slept with her, after thirty years of living together under the same roof and sharing the same bed.

More snow falling today, and as you climb out of bed and walk to the window, the branches of the trees in the back garden are turning white. You are sixty-three years old. It occurs to you that there has rarely been a moment during the long journey from boyhood to now when you have not been in love. Thirty years of marriage, yes, but in the thirty years before that how many infatuations and crushes, how many ardors and pursuits, how many deliriums and mad surges of desire? From the very start of your conscious life, you have been a willing slave of Eros. The girls you loved as a boy, the women you loved as a man, each one so different from the others, some round and some lean, some short and some tall, some bookish and some athletic, some moody and some outgoing, some white and some black and some Asian, nothing on the surface ever mattered to you, it was all about the inner light you would detect in her, the spark of singularity, the blaze of revealed selfhood, and that light would make her beautiful to you, even if others were blind to the beauty you saw, and that you would burn to be with her, to be near her, for feminine beauty is something you have never been able to resist. All the way back to your first days of school, the kindergarten class in which you fell for the girl with the long blonde ponytail, and how often were you punished by Miss Sandquist for sneaking off with the little girl you had fallen for, the two of you together in a corner somewhere making mischief, but those punishments meant nothing to you, for you were in love, and you were a fool for love then, just as you are a fool for love now.

The inventory of your scars, in particular the ones on your face, which are visible to you each morning when you look into the bathroom mirror to shave or comb your hair. You seldom

think about them, but whenever you do, you understand that they are marks of life, that the assorted jagged lines etched into the skin of your face are letters from the secret alphabet that tells the story of who you are, for each scar is the trace of a healed wound, and each wound was caused by an unexpected collision with the world—that is to say, an accident, or something that need not have happened, since by definition an accident is something that need not happen. Contingent facts as opposed to necessary facts, and the realization as you look into the mirror this morning that all life is contingent, except for the one necessary fact that sooner or later it will come to an end.

You are three and a half, and your twenty-five-year-old pregnant mother has taken you along with her on a shopping expedition to a department store in downtown Newark. She is accompanied by a friend of hers, the mother of a boy who is three and a half as well. At some point, you and your little comrade break away from your mothers and begin running through the store. It is an enormous open space, no doubt the largest room you have ever set foot in, and there is a palpable thrill in being able to run wild through this gargantuan indoor arena. Eventually, you and the boy begin belly-flopping onto the floor and sliding along the smooth surface, sledding without sleds, as it were, and this game proves to be so enjoyable, so ecstatic in the pleasure it produces, that you become more and more reckless, more and more daring in what you are willing to attempt. You reach a part of the store where construction work or repair work is under way, and without bothering to take notice of what obstacles might lie ahead, you belly-flop onto the floor again and sail along the glasslike surface until you find yourself speeding straight toward a wooden carpenter's bench. With a small twist of your small body, you think you can avoid crashing into the leg of the table that is looming before you, but what you do not realize in the split second you have to shift course is that a nail is jutting from the leg, a long nail low enough to be at the level of your face, and before you can stop yourself, your left cheek is pierced by the nail as you go flying past it. Half your face is torn apart. Sixty years later, you have no memories of the accident. You remember the running and the belly-flopping, but nothing about the pain, nothing about the blood, and nothing about being rushed to the hospital or the doctor who sewed up your cheek. He did a brilliant job, your mother always said, and since the trauma of seeing her firstborn with half his face ripped off never left her, she said it often: something to do with a subtle double-stitching method that kept the damage to a minimum and prevented you from being disfigured for life. You could have lost your eye, she would say to you—or, even more dramatically, You could have been killed. No doubt she was right. The scar has grown fainter and fainter as the years have passed, but it is still there whenever you look for it, and you will carry that emblem of good fortune (eye intact! not dead!) until you go to your grave.

Split eyebrow scars, one left and one right, almost perfectly symmetrical, the first caused by running full tilt into a brick wall during a dodgeball game in grade school gym class (the massively swollen black eye you sported for days afterward, which reminded you of a photograph of boxer Gene Fullmer, who had been defeated in a championship bout by Sugar Ray Robinson around the same time) and the second caused in your early twenties when you drove in for a layup during an outdoor basketball game, were fouled from behind, and flew into the metal pole supporting the basket. Another scar on your chin, origin unknown. Most likely from an early childhood spill, a hard fall onto a sidewalk or a stone that split open

your flesh and left its mark, which is still visible whenever you shave in the morning. No story accompanies this scar, your mother never talked about it (at least not that you can recall), and you find it odd, if not downright perplexing, that this permanent line was engraved on your chin by what can only be called *an invisible hand*, that your body is the site of events that have been expunged from history.

It is June 1959. You are twelve years old, and in one week you and your sixth-grade classmates will be graduating from the grammar school you have attended since you were five. It is a splendid day, late spring in its most lustrous incarnation, sunlight pouring down from a cloudless blue sky, warm but not too warm, scant humidity, a soft breeze stirring the air and rippling over your face and neck and bare arms. Once school lets out for the day, you and a gang of your friends repair to Grove Park for a game of pickup baseball. Grove Park is not a park so much as a kind of village green, a large rectangle of well-tended grass flanked by houses on all four sides, a pleasant spot, one of the loveliest public spaces in your small New Jersey town, and you and your friends often go there to play baseball after school, since baseball is the thing you all love most, and you play for hours on end without ever growing weary of it. No adults are present. You establish your own ground rules and settle disagreements among yourselves—most often with words, occasionally with fists. More than fifty years later, you remember nothing about the game that was played that afternoon, but what you do remember is the following: The game is over, and you are standing alone in the middle of the infield, playing catch with yourself, that is, throwing a ball high into the air and following its ascent and descent until it lands in your glove, at which point you immediately throw the ball into the air again, and each time you throw the ball it travels higher than it did the time before, and after several throws you are reaching unprecedented heights, the ball hovering in the air for many seconds now, the white ball going up against the clear blue sky, the white ball coming down into your glove, and your entire being is engaged in this witle activity, your concentration is total, nothing exists now except the ball and the sky and your glove, which means that your face is turned upward, that you are looking up as you follow the trajectory of the ball, and therefore you are no longer aware of what is happening on the ground, and what happens on the ground as you are looking up at the sky is that something or someone unexpectedly comes crashing into you, and the impact is so sudden, so violent, so overwhelming in its force that you instantly fall to the ground, feeling as though you have been hit by a tank. The brunt of the blow was aimed at your head, in particular your forehead, but your torso has been battered as well, and as you lie on the ground gasping for breath, stunned and nearly unconscious, you see that blood is flowing from your forehead, no, not flowing, gushing, and so you remove your white T-shirt and press it against the gushing spot, and within seconds the white T-shirt has turned entirely red. The other boys are alarmed. They come rushing toward you to do what they can to help, and it is only then that you find out what happened. It seems that one of your cohort, a gangly, good-hearted lunkhead called B.T. (you remember his name but will not divulge it here, since you do not want to embarrass him—assuming he is still alive), was so impressed by your towering skyscraper throws that he got it into *his head* to take part in the action, and without bothering to tell you that he, too, was going to try to catch one of your throws started running in the direction of the descending ball, head turned upward, of course, and mouth hanging open in that oafish way of his (what person runs with his mouth hanging open?), and when he

crashed into you a moment later, running at an all-out gallop, the teeth protruding from his open mouth went straight into *your head*. Hence the blood now gushing out of you, hence the depth of the gash in the skin above your left eye. Fortunately, the office of your family doctor is just across the way, in one of the houses that line the perimeter of Grove Park. The boys decide to lead you there at once, and so you cross the park holding your bloody T-shirt against your head in the company of your friends, perhaps four of them, perhaps six of them you no longer remember, and burst en masse into Dr. Kohn's office. (You have not forgotten his name, just as you have not forgotten the name of your kindergarten teacher, Miss Sandquist, or the names of any of the other teachers you had as a boy.) The receptionist tells you and your friends that Dr. Kohn is seeing a patient just now, and before she can get up from her chair to inform the doctor that there is an emergency to attend to, you and your friends march into the consulting room without bothering to knock. You find Dr. Kohn talking to a plump, middle-aged woman who is sitting on the examination table dressed in a bra and slip only. The woman lets out a yelp of surprise, but once Dr. Kohn sees the blood gushing from your forehead, he tells the woman to get dressed and leave, tells your friends to make themselves scarce, and then hastens to the task of sewing up your wound. It is a painful procedure, since there is no time to administer an anesthetic, but you do your best not to howl as he threads the stitches through your skin. The job he does is perhaps not as brilliant as the one executed by the doctor who sewed up your cheek in 1950, but it is effective for all that, since you do not bleed to death and no longer have a hole in your head. Some days later, you and your sixth-grade classmates take part in your grammar school graduation ceremony. You have been selected to be a flag-bearer, which means that you must carry the American flag down an aisle of the auditorium and plant it in the flag stand on stage. Your head is wrapped in a white gauze bandage, and because blood still seeps occasionally from the spot where you were stitched up, the white gauze has a large red stain on it. After the ceremony, your mother says that when you were walking down the aisle with the flag, you reminded her of a painting of a wounded Revolutionary War hero. You know, she says, just like *The Spirit of '76*.

What presses in on you, what has always pressed in on you: the outside, meaning the air—more precisely, your body in the air around you. The soles of your feet anchored to the ground, but all the rest of you exposed to the air, and that is where the story begins, in your body, and everything will end in the body as well. For now, you are thinking about the wind. Later, if time allows for it, you will think about the heat and the cold, the infinite varieties of rain, the fogs you have stumbled through like a man without eyes, the demented, machine-gun tattoo of hailstones clattering against the tile roof of the house in the Var. But it is the wind that claims your attention now, for the air is seldom still, and beyond the barely perceptible breath of nothingness that sometimes surrounds you, there are the breezes and wafting lulls, the sudden gusts and squalls, the three-day-long mistrals you lived through at that house with the tile roof, the soaking nor'easters that sweep along the Atlantic coast, the gales and hurricanes, the whirlwinds. And there you are, twenty-one years ago, walking through the streets of Amsterdam on your way to an event that has been canceled without your knowledge, dutifully trying to fulfill the commitment you have made, out in what will later be called *the storm of the century*, a hurricane of such blistering intensity that within an hour of your stubborn, ill-advised decision to venture outdoors, large trees will be uprooted

in every corner of the city, chimneys will tumble to the ground, and parked cars will be lifted up and go sailing through the air. You walk with your face to the wind, trying to advance along the sidewalk, but in spite of your efforts to get to where you are going, you cannot move. The wind is blasting into you, and for the next minute and a half, you are stuck.

Your hands on the Ha'penny Bridge in Dublin thirteen Januarys ago, the night following another hurricane with hundred-mile-an-hour winds, the final night of the film you have been directing for the past two months, the last scene, the last shot, a simple matter of fixing the camera on the gloved hand of your leading actress as she turns her wrist and lets go of a small stone that will fall into the waters of the Liffey. There is nothing to it, no shot has demanded less effort or ingenuity in the entire film, but there you are in the dank and dark of the windswept night, as exhausted as you have ever been after nine weeks of grueling work on a production fraught with countless problems (budget problems, union problems, location problems, weather problems), fifteen pounds lighter than when you began, and after standing for hours on the bridge with your crew, the clammy, frigid Irish air has infiltrated your bones, and a moment comes just before the final shot when you realize that your hands are frozen, that you cannot move your fingers, that your hands have turned into two blocks of ice. Why aren't you wearing gloves? you ask yourself, but you are unable to answer the question, since the thought of gloves never even occurred to you when you left your hotel for the bridge. You film the last shot one more time, and then you and your producer, along with your actress, your actress's boyfriend, and several members of the crew, go to a nearby pub to thaw out and celebrate the completion of the film. The place is crowded, jammed full, an echo chamber packed with roaring, clamorous people bobbing back and forth in a state of apocalyptic merriment, but a table has been reserved for you and your friends, so you sit down at the table, and the moment your body makes contact with the chair you understand that you are depleted, drained of all physical energy, all emotional energy, utterly spent in a way you never could have imagined possible, so crushed that you feel you might burst into tears at any moment. You order a whiskey, and when you take hold of the glass and raise it to your lips, you are heartened to notice that your fingers can move again. You order a second whiskey, then a third whiskey, then a fourth whiskey, and suddenly you fall asleep. In spite of the frenzy all around you, you manage to go on sleeping until the good man who is your producer hoists you to your feet and half-drags you, half-carries you back to your hotel.

Yes, you drink too much and smoke too much, you have lost teeth without bothering to replace them, your diet does not conform to the precepts of contemporary nutritional wisdom, but if you shun most vegetables it is simply because you do not like them, and you find it difficult, if not impossible, to eat what you do not like. You know that your wife worries about you, especially about your smoking and drinking, but mercifully, until now, no X-ray has revealed any damage to your lungs, no blood test has revealed any devastation to your liver, and so you forge on with your vile habits, knowing full well that they will ultimately do you grave harm, but the older you become the less likely it seems that you will ever have the will or the courage to abandon your beloved little cigars and frequent glasses of wine, which have given you so much pleasure over the years, and you sometimes think that if you were to cut these things out of your life at this late date, your body would simply fall apart, your system would cease to function. No doubt you are a flawed and wounded

person, a man who has carried a wound in him from the very beginning (why else would you have spent the whole of your adult life bleeding words onto a page?), and the benefits you derive from alcohol and tobacco serve as crutches to keep your crippled self upright and moving through the world. *Self-medication*, as your wife calls it. Unlike your mother's mother she does not want you to be different. Your wife tolerates your weaknesses and does not rant or scold, and if she worries, it is only because she wants you to live forever. You count the reasons why you have held her close to you for so many years, and surely this is one of them: one of the bright stars in the vast constellation of enduring love.

Needless to say, you cough, especially at night, when your body is in a horizontal position and on those nights when the breath tubes are excessively clogged, you climb out of bed, go into another room, and cough on madly until you have hacked up all the gunk. According to your friend Spiegel-man (the most ardent smoker you know), whenever someone asks him why he smokes, he inevitably answers: "Because I like to cough."

1952. Five years old, naked in the bath, alone, big enough to wash yourself now, and as you lie on your back in the warm water, your penis suddenly springs to attention, popping out above the water line. Until this moment, you have seen your penis only from above, standing on your feet and looking down, but from this new vantage point, more or less at eye level, it occurs to you that the tip of your circumcised male organ bears a striking resemblance to a helmet. An old-fashioned sort of helmet, similar to those worn by firemen in the late nineteenth century. This revelation pleases you, since at that juncture of your life your greatest ambition is to grow up to become a fireman, which you consider to be the most heroic job on the face of the earth (no doubt it is), and how fitting that you should have a miniature fireman's helmet emblazoned on your very person, on the very part of your body that moreover, that looks like and functions as a hose.

The countless tight squeezes you have been in during the course of your life, the desperate moments when you have felt an urgent, overpowering need to empty your bladder and no toilet is at hand, the times when you have found yourself stuck in traffic, for example, or sitting on a subway stalled between stations, and the pure agony of forcing yourself *to hold in*. This is the universal dilemma that no one ever talks about, but everyone has been there one time or another, everyone has lived through it, and while there is no example of humanity suffering more comical than that of the bursting bladder, you tend not to laugh about these incidents until after you have managed to relieve yourself—for what person over the age of three would want to wet his pants in public? That is why you will never forget these words which were the last words spoken to one of your friends by his dying father: "Just remember Charlie," he said, "never pass up an opportunity to piss." And so the wisdom of the ages is handed down from one generation to the next.

Again, it is 1952, and you are in the backseat of the family car, the blue 1950 De Soto your father brought home the day your sister was born. Your mother is driving, and you have been on the road for some time now, going from where to where you can no longer remember, but you are on your way back, no more than ten or fifteen minutes from home, and for the past little while you have had to pee, the pressure in your bladder has been building steadily, and

by now you are writhing on the backseat, legs crossed, your hand clamped over your crotch, uncertain whether you can hold out much longer. You tell your mother about your predicament, and she asks if you can hang in there for another ten minutes. No, you tell her you don't think so. In that case, she says, since there's nowhere to stop between here and home, just go in your pants. This is such a radical idea to you, such a betrayal of what you consider to be your hard-won, manly independence, that you can scarcely believe what she has said. Go in my pants? you say to her. Yes, go in your pants, she says. What difference does it make? We'll throw your clothes in the wash the minute we get home. And so it happens, with your mother's full and explicit approval, that you pee in your pants for the last time.

Fifty years later, you are in another car, a rented car this time since you do not have one of your own, a spanking-new Toyota Corolla that you have been driving for the past three hours on your way back from Connecticut to your house in Brooklyn. It is August 2002. You are fifty-five years old and have been driving since you were seventeen, always with skill and confidence, known to everyone who has ever driven with you as *a good driver*, with not a single accident on your record beyond a single scraped fender in close to forty years behind the wheel. Your wife is up front with you in the seat to your right, and in the back is your fifteen-year-old daughter (who has just finished a summer acting program at a school in Connecticut), sprawled out asleep on the quilts and pillows that have served as her bedding for the past month. Also sleeping in the back is your dog, the ragged stray mutt you and your daughter brought home off the streets eight years ago, whom you dubbed Jack (after Jack Wilton, the hero of Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*) and who has been a much loved and lunatic member of the household ever since. Your wife, who worries about many things, has never worried about your driving, and in fact has often complimented you on how well you handle yourself in various kinds of traffic: passing other cars on multi-lane highways, for example, or negotiating the tangle of city streets, or easing your way around the twists and curves of backcountry roads. Today, however, she senses that something is wrong, that you are not concentrating properly, that your timing is slightly off, and more than once she has told you to watch what you are doing. You should know better by now than to doubt the wisdom of your wife's words, for she possesses an uncanny ability to read the minds of others, to see into the souls of others, to sniff out the hidden undercurrents of any human situation, and again and again you have marveled at how accurate her instincts have proved to be, but on this particular day her anxiety is so acute that it has begun to get on your nerves. Are you not a famously *good driver*? you tell her. Have you ever had an accident? Would you ever do anything to put the lives of the people you love most in the world at risk? No, she says, of course not, she doesn't know what has gotten into her, and once you reach the tollbooths at the Triborough Bridge, you say to her, Look, here we are, New York City, nearly home now, and after that she promises not to say another word about your driving. But something is wrong, even if you are not willing to admit it, for this is 2002, and so many things have happened to you in this year of grim surprises, why shouldn't your mastery of cars suddenly and inexplicably abandon you? Worst of all, there was your mother's death in mid-May (heart attack), which stunned you not because you didn't know that people over seventy-seven can and do die without warning but because she was in apparent good health and just the day before the last day of her life, you talked to her on the phone, and she was

in buoyant spirits, cracking jokes and telling such funny stories that after you hung up you said to your wife: "She hasn't sounded this happy in years." Your mother's death worst of all but there was also the blood clot that formed in your left leg during a nine-hour coach flight to Copenhagen in early February, which kept you flat on your back for several weeks and forced you to walk with a cane for months afterward, not to speak of the trouble you have been having with your eyes, the tear in the cornea of your left eye to begin with, then the tear in the right cornea some weeks later, followed by repeated, altogether random instances in one eye or the other over the past several months, and the damage is always done in your sleep, which means there is nothing you can do to prevent it (since the cream prescribed by the ophthalmologist has had no effect), and on those mornings when you wake up with yet another torn cornea, the pain is ferocious, an eye being without question the most sensitive and vulnerable part of the body, and after you put in the painkilling drops the doctor has prescribed for such emergencies, it generally takes from two to four hours before the pain begins to disappear, and during those hours there is nothing you can do but sit still with a cold washcloth over the afflicted eye, which you keep shut, since opening that eye will make you feel as if a pin were being jabbed into it. A six-month siege of *coach leg*, then, and a chronic case of *dry eye*, and also the first full-blown panic attack of your life, which occurred just two days after your mother's death, followed by several others in the days immediately after that, and for some time now you have felt that you are disintegrating, that you, who were once nature's strongman, able to resist all assaults from within and without, impervious to the somatic and psychological travails that dog the rest of humanity, are not the least bit strong anymore and are rapidly turning into a debilitated wreck. Your family doctor has prescribed pills to keep the panic attacks under control, and perhaps those pills have been affecting your ability to drive this afternoon, but that seems unlikely to you, since you have driven with these pills in your system before, and neither you nor your wife ever noticed any difference. Impaired or not, you have now passed through the tollbooth at the Triborough Bridge and have begun the final stage of your journey home, and as you drive through the city you are not thinking about your mother or your eyes or your leg or the pills you swallow to keep your panic attacks at bay. You are thinking only about the car and the forty or fifty minutes it will take to reach your house in Brooklyn, and now that your wife has calmed down and no longer seems concerned about your driving, you are calm as well, and nothing out of the ordinary happens as you cover the miles from the bridge to the outskirts of your neighborhood. It is true that you have to pee, that your bladder has been sending out signals to you for the past twenty minutes, ever more rapid and dire signals of distress, and therefore you drive a little faster than perhaps you should, since you are doubly eager to get home for the sake of home, of course, and with it the relief of being able to emerge from the stuffy confines of the car, but also because getting home will allow you to run upstairs to the bathroom and relieve *yourself*, and yet even if you are pressing a little more than you should all is well, and by now you are just two and a half minutes from the street where you live. The car is traveling down Fourth Avenue, an ugly stretch of dilapidated apartment buildings and empty warehouses, and because pedestrian traffic is sparse along these blocks, drivers rarely have to worry about anyone crossing the street, and on top of that the lights stay green for longer intervals than on most avenues, which encourages drivers to go fast, too fast, often far above the speed limit. This poses no problem if you are going straight ahead (that is why

you have chosen this route, after all: because it will get you home more quickly than any other), but the onrush of traffic can make left turns somewhat perilous, since you must turn left while the light is green, and while the light is green for you, it is also green for the cars speeding toward you from the opposite direction. Now, as you come to the juncture of Fourth Avenue and Third Street, where you must make the left turn that will take you home, you stop the car and wait for an opening, and suddenly you forget the lesson you learned from your father when he taught you how to drive close to forty years ago. He himself was a wretched, incompetent driver, an inattentive, daydreaming motorist who courted disaster every time he put his key in the ignition, but for all his shortcomings behind the wheel, he was an excellent teacher of others, and the best piece of advice he ever gave you was this: drive defensively; work on the assumption that everyone else on the road is stupid and crazy; take nothing for granted. You have always held these words uppermost in your thoughts, and they have served you well for all these years, but now, because you are desperate to empty your bladder, or because a pill has affected your judgment, or because you are tired and not paying close attention, or because you have turned into a *debilitated wreck*, you impulsively decide to take a chance, which is to say, to go on the offensive. A brown van is coming toward you. Going fast, yes, but no more than forty-five miles an hour, you think, fifty at most, and after gauging the distance of the van from where you have stopped in relation to the speed of the van, you are certain you will be able to make the left turn and get through the intersection without any problem—but only if you act quickly and step on the accelerator *now*. Your calculations, however, are founded on the belief that the van is traveling at forty-five or fifty miles an hour, which is in fact not true. It is going faster than that, at least sixty, perhaps even sixty-five, and therefore, once you make the left turn and begin hustling through the intersection, the van is suddenly and unexpectedly upon you, and since you are looking forward and not to your right, you do not see the van as it comes crashing into your car—a ninety-degree-angle hit, straight into the front door on the passenger's side, the side on which your wife is sitting. The impact is thunderous, convulsive, cataclysmic—an explosion loud enough to end the world. You feel as if Zeus has hurled a lightning bolt at you and your family, and an instant later the car is spinning, out of control, madly rotating down the street until it collides with a metal lamppost and comes to an abrupt and jarring halt. Then everything goes silent, the entire universe is enveloped in silence, and when at last you are able to think again, the first thought that comes to you is that you are alive. You look at your wife and see that her eyes are open, that she is breathing and therefore alive as well, and then you turn around to look at your daughter in the back, and she too is alive, jolted from the depths of sleep by the double blow of van and lamppost, sitting up and looking at you with large, bewildered eyes, her lips whiter than any lips you have ever seen, lips as white as the paper you are writing on now, and you understand that she has been saved by the quilts and pillows she was sleeping on, saved by the fact that one's muscles are utterly relaxed in sleep, and therefore no bones are broken, her head has not been hurled into contact with any hard surface, and she will be all right, is all right, as is the dog, who was sleeping on the quilts and pillows as well. Then you turn back to have another look at your wife, who was closest to the impact of the collision, and from the way she is sitting there beside you, so still, so mute, so absent from her surroundings, you fear that her neck might be broken, her long and slender neck, the beautiful neck that is the very emblem of her extraordinary beauty.

You ask her how she is, if she feels any pain and if so where, but if she manages to answer you, her response is muffled, spoken in such a low voice that you cannot hear what she says. By now, you have become aware of noise outside the car, things are happening around you, several things at once, most noticeably the shrieking voice of the woman who was driving the van, who is hopping around in the street, angrily insulting you for causing the accident. (You will later learn that she was driving without a license, that the van did not belong to her, and that she had been in trouble with the police on several occasions—which would account for the vehemence of her anger, since she was afraid of running afoul of the law—but as she stands there shouting at you now, you are appalled by her selfishness, stunned that she does not even bother to ask if you and your family are all right.) As if to blot out the vicious behavior of this woman (who, to use your father's words, is both stupid and crazy), a small miracle then occurs. A man is walking down Fourth Avenue, the only pedestrian on this thoroughfare that normally has no pedestrians, and against all reason, all logic, and all presumptions about how the world supposedly works, this man is dressed in hospital white. He is a young doctor, a native of India with smooth brown skin and an exceptionally handsome face, and seeing what has just happened, he approaches your car and calmly begins talking to your wife. There is no glass in the window anymore, which allows him to lean in and talk to her in a low voice, his soothing Indian voice, and as you listen to him ask all the standard questions a neurologist would pose to a patient—What is your name? What is the date? Who is the president?—you understand that he is doing everything he can to keep her conscious, to keep her from lapsing into a state of profound shock. Given the impact of the crash, it does not surprise you that for the time being she can no longer see any colors, that the world in front of her eyes is visible only in black and white. The doctor, who is not an apparition, who is a real man (but how not to think of him as a divine spirit who has come to save your wife?), stays with her until the ambulance and emergency team arrive. You and your daughter and Jack have left the car by now, but your wife must not move, everyone is worried that her neck could be broken, and as you stand there watching the firemen cut open the right front door with an instrument known as *the jaws of life*, you study the demolished car and cannot comprehend why all of you are still breathing. The car looks like a squashed insect. All four tires are flat, splayed out, twisted, the passenger side is caved in, and the back, which you now realize is the part of the car that crashed into the lamppost, is crumpled up, with no glass left in the rear window. Slowly, the paramedics strap your wife onto the board to keep her immobilized, they slide her into an ambulance, you and your daughter are put in another ambulance, and then you all set out for the trauma unit at Lutheran Medical Center in Bay Ridge. After two CAT scans and a number of X-rays, the doctors announce that no bones are broken in your wife's back or neck. Happy, all of you happy, then, in spite of this brush with death, and as you leave the hospital together, your wife jokingly reports that the doctor in charge of conducting the CAT scans told her that she had the most perfect, most beautiful neck he had ever seen.

Eight and a half years have gone by since that day, and not once has your wife ever blamed you for the accident. She says the woman in the van was driving too fast and therefore was entirely responsible for what happened. But you know better than to exonerate yourself. Yes, the woman was driving too fast, but in the end that is of little consequence. You took a chance you shouldn't have taken, and that error of judgment continues to fill you with shame.

That is why you vowed to quit driving after you left the hospital, why you have not sat behind the wheel of a car since the day you almost killed your family. Not because you don't trust yourself anymore, but because you are ashamed, because you understand that for one near-fatal moment you were just as stupid and crazy as the woman who crashed into you.

Two years after the crash, you are in the small French city of Arles, about to read from one of your books in public. Appearing with you will be the actor Jean-Louis Trintignant (a friend of your publisher's), who will take the passages you read in English and read them again in French translation. A double reading, as is customary in foreign countries where the audiences are not bilingual, with the two of you alternating from paragraph to paragraph as you march in tandem through the pages you have chosen for the event. You are glad to be in Trintignant's company tonight, since you hold his acting in great esteem, and when you think of the films you have seen him play in (Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, Truffaut's *Confidentially Yours*, Kieslowski's *Red*—to cite just some of your favorites)—you are hard-pressed to come up with the name of another European actor whose work you admire more. You also feel tremendous compassion for him, since you know about the brutal and highly publicized murder of his daughter some years back, and you are keenly aware of the terrible suffering he has lived through, continues to live through. Like many of the actors you have known and worked with, Trintignant is a shy and reticent person. Not that he doesn't exude an aura of goodwill and friendliness, but at the same time he is closed in on himself, a man who finds talking to others difficult. At the moment, the two of you are together on stage rehearsing the evening's performance, alone in the large church or former church where the reading will be held. You are impressed by the timbre of Trintignant's voice, the resonance of his voice, the qualities of voice that distinguish great actors from merely good ones, and it gives you enormous pleasure to hear the words you have written (no, not quite your words, but your words translated into another language) conveyed through the instrument of that exceptional voice. At one point, apropos of nothing, Trintignant turns to you and asks how old you are. Fifty-seven, you say, and then, after a brief pause, you ask him how old he is. Seventy-four, he replies, and then, after another brief pause, you both go back to work. Following the rehearsal, you and Trintignant are taken to a room somewhere in the church to wait until the audience has been seated and the performance can begin. Other people are in the room with you, various members of the company that publishes your work, the organizer of the event, anonymous friends of people you don't know, perhaps a dozen men and women in all. You are sitting in a chair and not talking to anyone, just sitting in silence and looking at the people in the room, and you see that Trintignant, who is about ten feet away from you, is sitting in silence as well, looking down at the floor with his chin cupped in his hand, apparently lost in thought. Eventually, he looks up, catches your eye, and says, with unexpected earnestness and gravity: "Paul, there's just one thing I want to tell you. At fifty-seven, I felt old. Now, at seventy-four, I feel much younger than I did then." You are confused by his remark. You have no idea what he is trying to tell you, but you sense it is important to him, that he is attempting to share something of vital importance with you, and for that reason you do not ask him to explain what he means. For close to seven years now you have continued to ponder his words, and although you still don't know quite what to make of them, there have been glimmers, tiny moments when you feel you have almost penetrated the truth of what he was saying to you. Perhaps it is something as simple as this:

that a man fears death more at fifty-seven than he does at seventy-four. Or perhaps he saw something in you that worried him: the lingering traces of what happened to you during the horrible months of 2002. For the fact is that you feel more robust now, at sixty-three, than you did at fifty-five. The problem with your leg is long gone. You have not had a panic attack in years, and your eyes, which still act up every now and then, do so far less frequently than before. Also to be noted: no more car crashes, and no more parents for you to mourn.

Thirty-two years ago today, meaning half your life ago almost to the minute, the news that your father had died the previous night, another night in January filled with snow, just as the one is, the cold wind, the wild weather, everything the same, time moving and yet not moving, everything different and yet everything the same, and no, he did not have the luck to reach seventy-four. Sixty-six, and because you always felt certain that he would live to a ripe old age, there was never any urgency about clearing the fog that had always hovered between you, and therefore, as the fact of his sudden, unexpected death finally sank in, you were left with a feeling of unfinished business, the hollow frustration of words not spoken, opportunities missed forever. He died in bed making love to his girlfriend, a healthy man whose heart inexplicably gave out on him. In the years since that January day in 1971, numerous men have told you that this is the best way to die (the little death turned into real death), but no woman has ever said it, and you yourself find it a horrible way to go, and when you think of your father's girlfriend at the funeral and the shell-shocked look in her eyes (yes, she told you, it was truly horrible, the most horrible thing she had ever lived through), you pray that such a thing never happens to your wife. Thirty-two years ago today and you have gone on regretting that too-abrupt departure ever since, for your father did not live long enough to see that his blundering, impractical son did not end up in the poorhouse as he always feared you would, but several more years would have been necessary for him to understand this, and it saddens you that when your sixty-six-year-old father died in his girlfriend's arms, you were still struggling on all fronts, still eating the dirt of failure.

No, you do not want to die, and even as you approach the age of your father when his life came to an end, you have not called any cemetery to arrange for your burial plot, have not given away any of the books you are certain you will never read again, and have not begun to clear your throat to say your good-byes. Nevertheless, thirteen years ago, just one month past your fiftieth birthday, as you sat in your downstairs study eating a tuna fish sandwich for lunch, you had what you now call your false heart attack, a siege of ever-mounting pain that spread through your chest and down your left arm and up into your jaw, the classic symptoms of cardiac upheaval and destruction, the dreaded coronary infarction that can stop a man's life within minutes, and as the pain continued to grow, to reach higher and higher levels of incendiary force, burning up your insides and setting your chest on fire, you grew weak and dizzy from the onslaught, staggered to your feet, slowly climbed the stairs with both hands clutching the banister, and collapsed on the landing of the parlor floor as you called out to your wife in a feeble, barely audible voice. She came running down from the top floor, and when she saw you there lying on your back, she took you in her arms and held you, asking where it hurt, telling you she would call the doctor, and as you looked up at her face, you were convinced you were about to die, for pain of that magnitude could only mean death, and the odd thing about it, perhaps the oddest thing that has ever happened to you,

that you weren't afraid, you were in fact calm and altogether accepting of the idea that you were about to leave this world, saying to yourself, This is it, you're going to die now, and maybe death isn't as bad as you had thought it was, for here you are in the arms of the woman you love, and if you must die now, consider yourself blessed to have lived as long as fifty years. You were taken to the hospital, kept overnight in an emergency room bed, given blood tests every four hours, and by the next morning the heart attack had become an inflamed esophagus, no doubt aggravated by the heavy dose of lemon juice in your sandwich. Your life had been given back to you, your heart was sound and beating normally, and on top of all that good news, you had learned that death was not something to be feared anymore: that when the moment comes for a person to die, his being shifts into another zone of consciousness, and he is able to accept it. Or so you thought. Five years later, when you had the first of your panic attacks, the sudden, monstrous attack that ripped through your body and threw you to the floor, you were not the least bit calm or accepting. You thought you were going to die then, too, but this time you howled in terror, more afraid than you had ever been in your life. So much for other zones of consciousness and quiet exits from the valley of tears. You lay on the floor and howled, howled at the top of your lungs, howled because death was inside you and you didn't want to die.

Snow, so much snow these past days and weeks that fifty-six inches have fallen on New York in less than a month. Eight storms, nine storms, you have lost track by now, and all through January the song heard most often in Brooklyn has been the street music made by shovels scraping against sidewalks and thick patches of ice. Intemperate cold (three degrees on a morning), drizzles and mizzles, mist and slush, ever-aggressive winds, but most of all the snow, which will not melt, and as one storm falls on top of another, the bushes and trees in your back garden are all wearing ever-longer and heavier beards of snow. Yes, it seems you have turned into one of *those* winters, but in spite of the cold and discomfort and your useless longing for spring, you can't help admiring the vigor of these meteorological dramas, and you continue to look at the falling snow with the same awe you felt when you were a boy.

Roughhousing. That is the word that comes to you now when you think about the pleasures of boyhood (as opposed to the pains). Wrestling with your father, a rare circumstance since he was seldom present during the hours when you were awake (off to work while you were still asleep and home after you had been put to bed), but all the more memorable because of that perhaps, and the outlandish size of his body and muscles, the sheer bulk of him as you grappled in his arms and strove to defeat the King of New Jersey in hand-to-hand combat, and also your older cousin by four years, on those Sunday afternoons when you and your family visited your aunt and uncle's house, the same excessive physicality as you rolled around on the floor with him, the joy of that physicality, the abandon. Running. Running and jumping and climbing. Running until you felt your lungs would burst, until your side ached. Day after day and on into the evening, the long, slowly fading dusks of summer, and you were there on the grass, running for all you were worth, your pulse pounding in your ears, the wind in your face. A bit later on, tackle football, Johnny on the Pony, Kick the Can, King of the Castle, Capture the Flag. You and your friends were so nimble, so flexible, so keen on waging these pretend wars that you went at one another with unrelenting savagery, small bodies crashing into other small bodies, knocking one another to the ground, yanking arms

grabbing necks, tripping and shoving, anything and everything to win the game—animals the lot of you, wild animals through and through. But how well you slept back then. Switch on the lamp, close your eyes ... and see you tomorrow.

More subtly, more beautifully, more gratifying in the long run, there was your ever-evolving skill at playing baseball, the least violent of sports, and the passion you developed for beginning at six or seven years old. Catching and throwing, fielding ground balls, learning where to position yourself at each moment throughout the course of a game, depending on how many outs there were, how many runners were on base, and knowing in advance what you must do should the ball be hit in your direction: throw home, throw to second, try for a double play, or else, because you played shortstop, run into left field after a base hit and then wheel around to make the long relay throw to the correct spot on the field. Never a dull moment, in spite of what critics of the game might think: poised in a state of constant anticipation, ever at the ready, your mind churning with possibilities, and then the sudden explosion, the ball speeding toward you and the urgent need to do what must be done, the quick reflexes required to perform your job, and the exquisite sensation of scooping up a ground ball hit to your left or right and making a hard, accurate throw to first. But no pleasure greater than that of hitting the ball, settling into your stance, watching the pitcher go into his windup, and to hit a ball squarely, to feel the ball making contact with the meat of the bat, the very sound of it as you followed through with your swing and saw the ball flying deep into the outfield—no, there was no feeling like it, nothing ever came close to the exaltation of that moment, and because you became better and better at this as time went on there were many such moments, and you lived for them in a way you lived for nothing else, all wrapped up in this meaningless boy's game, but that was the apex of happiness for you back then, the very best thing your body was able to do.

The years before sex entered the equation, before you understood that the miniature fireman between your legs was good for anything but helping you empty your bladder. It must be 1952 again, but perhaps a little earlier or a little later than that, and you ask your mother the question all children ask their parents, the standard question about where babies come from, meaning where did you come from, and by what mysterious process did you enter the world as a human being? Your mother's answer is so abstract, so evasive, so metaphorical that it leaves you utterly confounded. She says: The father plants the seed in the mother, and little by little the baby begins to grow. At this point in your life, the only seeds you are familiar with are the ones that produce flowers and vegetables, the ones that farmers scatter over large fields at planting time to start a new round of crops for harvest in the fall. You instantly see an image in your head: your father dressed as a farmer, a cartoon version of a farmer in blue overalls with a straw hat on his head, and he is walking along with a large rake propped against his shoulder, walking with a jaunty, insouciant stride out in some rural nowhere, on his way to *plant the seed*. For some time afterward, this was the picture you saw whenever the subject of babies was mentioned: your old man as a farmer, dressed in blue overalls with a ragged straw hat on his head and a rake propped against his shoulder. You knew there was something wrong about this, however, for seeds were always planted in the earth, either in gardens or in large fields, and since your mother was neither a garden nor a field, you had no idea what to make of this horticultural presentation of the facts of life. Is it possible for

anyone to be more stupid than you were? You were a stupid little boy who lacked the wit to ask the question again, but the truth was that you enjoyed imagining your father as a farmer, and you enjoyed seeing him in that ridiculous costume, and when it comes right down to it, you probably wouldn't have understood what your mother was talking about if she had given you a more precise answer to your question.

Some weeks or months before or after this conversation with your mother, the little neighborhood boy who smashed you on the head with the toy rake inexplicably went missing. His frantic mother rushed into your backyard and told you and your friends to start looking for him, and off you all went, thrashing into the borderland of wild shrubbery and tangled undergrowth that served as your secret hiding place, calling out the name of the boy, which was Michael, although he was commonly referred to as Brat or Monster—a midget felon whose life thus far had been devoted exclusively to acts of terrorism and violence. You entered a dense patch of bushes, flicking leaves out of your face and parting branches as you moved forward, fully expecting to find the runaway hoodlum huddled at your feet, but what you found instead was a nest of wasps or hornets, which you inadvertently stepped on, and seconds later you were engulfed by those stinging creatures, who were attacking your face and arms, and even as you tried to swat them away, others had crawled inside your clothes and were stabbing you in your legs and chest and back. Horrific pain. You went running out of the bushes onto the grass in the backyard, no doubt screaming your head off, and there was your mother, who took one glance at you and immediately began stripping off your clothes, and when there was no longer a stitch on you, she swooped up your naked body into her arms and ran with you toward the house. Once inside, she carried you upstairs, turned on the water, and put you in a cold, cold bath.

The boy was found. If you remember correctly, he was discovered in his own house, asleep on the living room floor, either hidden behind the sofa or curled up under a table, but if you need further proof that he did not die or vanish that day, you have only to recall the afternoon four or five years later when you were in bed with a case of the flu, one of those dreary sick days spent in the airless confinement of pajamas, fever, and aspirin tablets every four hours, thinking about your friends, who had already been let out of school and were no doubt playing a game of pickup baseball in Grove Park, since the sun was shining and the weather was warm, which made it an ideal afternoon for baseball. You were nine or ten years old, and as you remember it now, more than half a century later, you were the only person in the house. Outside in the backyard, chained to the wire runner your father had built for him, the family dog was dozing on the grass. He had been a part of your life for a good two years or longer, and you were intensely fond of him—a frisky young beagle with an appetite for adventure and a mad penchant for chasing after cars. He had already been run over once, injuring his left hind leg so badly that he could no longer use it, which had turned him into a three-legged dog, a strange, peg-legged kind of dog, a swashbuckling pirate of a dog in your opinion, but he had adjusted to his infirmity well, and even with just three legs he could still outrun any four-legged dog in the neighborhood. So there you were lying in bed in your upstairs room, certain that your crippled dog was safely tethered to his runner in the backyard, when a sudden volley of loud noises burst in on the quiet: a screech of tires in the front of your house, immediately followed by a high-pitched howl of pain, the howl of a dog

in pain, and from the sound of that dog's voice, you instantly knew that it was your dog. You jumped out of bed and ran outside, and there was the Brat, the Monster, confessing to you that he had unhooked your dog from his leash because he "wanted to play with him," and there was the man who had been driving the car, a much rattled and deeply upset man, saying to the people who had gathered around him that he had no choice, that the boy and the dog ran straight into the middle of the street, and it was either hit the boy or hit the dog, so he swerved and hit the dog, and there was your dog, your mostly white dog lying dead in the middle of the black street, and as you picked him up and carried him into the house, you told yourself no, the man was wrong, he should have hit the boy and not the dog, he should have killed the boy, and so angry were you at the boy for what he had done to your dog, you did not stop to consider that this was the first time you had ever wished that another human being were dead.

There were fights, of course. No one can get through boyhood without some of them, and many of them, and when you consider the tussles and confrontations you took part in, the bloody noses you both gave and received, the punches to the stomach that knocked the wind out of you, the inane head-locks and hammerlocks that sent you and your opponent sprawling to the ground, you can't think of a single instance when you were the one who started it, for you hated the whole business of fighting, but because there was always a bully somewhere in the vicinity, some brainless tough who would taunt you with threats and dares and insults, there were times when you felt compelled to defend yourself, even if you were the smallest one and were almost certain to be thrashed. You loved the mock wars of tackle football and Capture the Flag, the rough-and-tumble of barreling into a catcher at home plate, but real fighting made you sick. It was too fraught with emotional consequences, too wrenching in the dangers it provoked, and even when you won your fights, you always felt like crying afterward. The slug-or-be-slugged approach to settling differences lost all appeal to you after a boy at summer camp came at you by jumping down from the rafters of the cabin and you wound up breaking his arm when you retaliated by slamming him into a wooden table. You were ten years old, and from that point on you steered clear of fighting as best you could, but fights continued to come your way from time to time, at least until you were thirteen, when you finally figured out that you could win any fight against any boy by kneeing him in the balls, by driving your knee into his crotch with all the force you could muster, and just like that, within a matter of seconds, the fight would be over. You acquired a reputation for being a "dirty fighter," and perhaps there was some truth to it, but you fought like that only because you didn't want to fight, and after one or two of these bouts, word got around and no one ever attacked you again. You were thirteen years old and had permanently retired from the ring.

No more battles with boys, but an abiding passion for girls, for kissing girls and holding hands with girls, something that started for you long before the onset of puberty, at a time when boys are supposedly not interested in such matters. As far back as the kindergarten class in which you fell for the girl with the golden ponytail (whose name was Cathy), you were always mad for kissing, and even then, at age five or six, you and Cathy would sometimes exchange kisses—innocent pecks, to be sure, but deeply pleasurable for all that. In those years of so-called latency, your friends were unanimous in their public scorn for girls. The

would mock them, tease them, pinch them, and pull up their dresses, but you never felt the antipathy, could never rouse yourself to participate in these assaults, and all during that early grammar school period of your life (that is, up to the age of twelve, when you carried the American flag with a blood-soaked bandage around your head during your class's graduation ceremony), you continued to succumb to various infatuations with girls such as Patty, Susi, Dale, Jan, and Ethel. No more than kissing and holding hands, of course (you were physically incapable of having sex, the mechanics of which were still rather vague to you, since you did not arrive at full-fledged puberty until you were turning fourteen), but the kissing had become altogether ferocious by the time you reached graduation day. There were dances and unchaperoned parties in that final year before you entered junior high school, nearly every weekend you and a gang of fifteen or twenty others were invited to someone's house, and in those suburban living rooms and finished basements, impotent boys and girls with newly sprouting breasts would dance to the latest rock-and-roll songs (the hits of 1958 and 1959) and eventually, as the evening wore on, the lights would be dimmed, the music would stop, and girls and boys would pair off in hidden corners of the room, where they'd all neck crazy until it was time to go home. You learned much about lips and tongues that year, were indoctrinated into the pleasures of feeling a girl's body in your arms, of feeling a girl's arm wrapped around you, but that was as far as it went. There were lines that could not be crossed, and for now you were happy not to cross them. Not because you were scared, but because it never even occurred to you.

Finally, the day came when you went hurtling across the threshold that separates boyhood from adolescence, and now that you had felt the feeling, now that you had discovered that your old friend the fireman was in fact an agent of divine bliss, the world you lived in became a different world, for the ecstasy of that feeling had given a new purpose to your life, a new reason for being alive. The years of phallic obsession began. Like every other man who has wandered this earth, you were in thrall to the miraculous change that had occurred in your body. On most days, you could think of little else—on some days, of nothing else.

Nevertheless, when you recall the years immediately following your transformation, you are struck by how cautious and backward you were. In spite of your ardor, in spite of your constant pursuit of girls in junior and senior high school, the romances and flirtations with Karen, Peggy, Linda, Brianne, Carol, Sally, Ruth, Pam, Starr, Jackie, Mary, and Ronnie, your erotic adventures were frightfully tame and insipid, barely one step beyond the make-out sessions you took part in when you were twelve. Perhaps you were unlucky, or perhaps you weren't bold enough, but you tend to think it had more to do with the place and the time, a middle-class suburban town in the early sixties, and the unwritten code that girls did not give themselves to boys, that good girls had reputations to uphold, and the line was drawn at kissing and petting, notably the least dangerous form of petting, that is, the boy's hand placed on a breast covered by two or three layers of clothing, a sweater (depending on the season) or a blouse, and a bra, but woe to the boy who tried to put his hand inside a blouse, let alone reach for the forbidden territory inside a bra, for that hand would be swiftly pushed away by the girl who had a reputation to uphold, even if that girl secretly wanted the hand to be there as much as the boy did. How many times were you rebuffed in this way, you wonder, how many useless expeditions did your hands make into the skirts and blouses of your

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