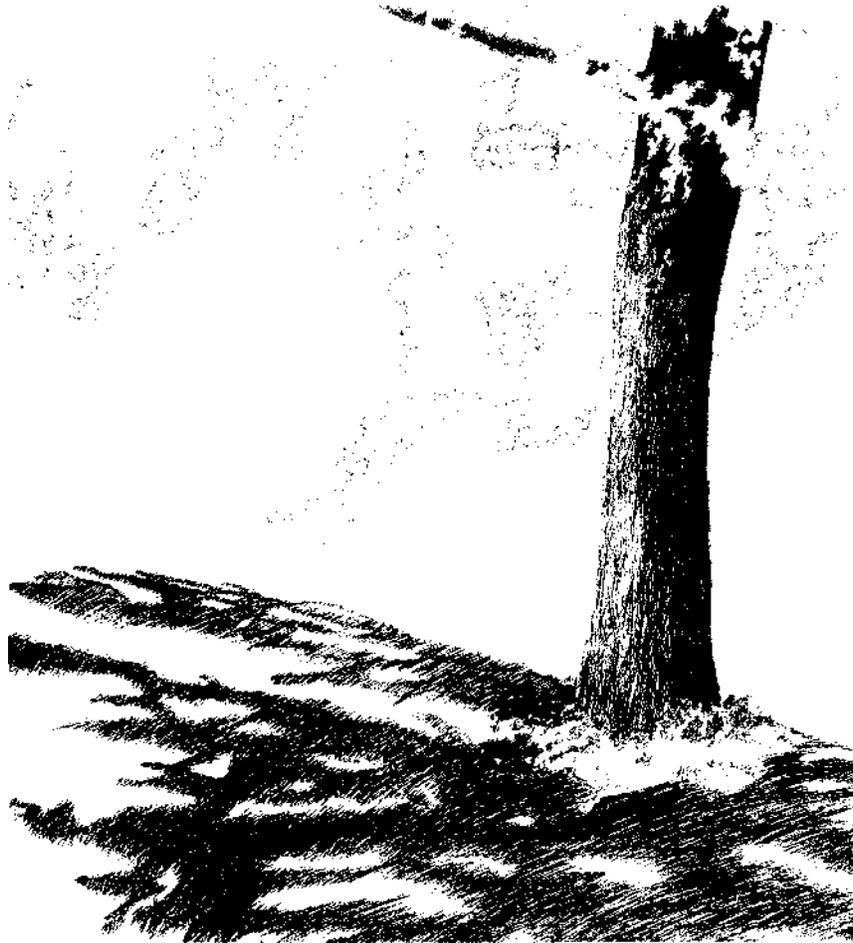


FORUM



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FORUM

**Spring
1995**

Volume XVI

Editor's Note

Well, I feel like now would be an appropriate time for me to have something really important to say. But, I don't. Lucky for me, Virginia Woolf does. In her essay *Street Hauntings*, she says:

The number of books in the world is infinite, and one is forced to glimpse and nod and move on after a moment of talk, a flash of understanding, as, in the street outside, one catches a word in passing and from a chance phrase fabricates a lifetime.

I read so many wonderful essays, each with something important to say. The essays which found their way into this magazine are those which flickered in my mind long after a first reading, whether it was due to the power of language, image, or idea. I would like to thank the writers and artists who submitted their work to *Forum* for the chance to catch a glimpse, to hear for just a second, these conversations on the street.

Thank you to the *Forum* staff for helping me pull everything together. I really appreciate all the time that you put in on the typing and editing — I couldn't have done it without you.

I thoroughly enjoyed working with Meghan Gocke on this project who, I should say, is one of the most patient people I have ever met. Apparently, I have a propensity for mild anxiety attacks and there is little doubt in my mind that I owe her many thanks for reminding me to breathe.

I would especially like to thank Dr. McGuinness, for both causing my anxiety attacks and for reminding me to laugh about them. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to put my "stamp" on the *Forum*, even though you never mentioned that there should be a *stamp* until the very last minute.

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The Haft

The people who come to the Haft are a diverse group, but the path to this one hundred and ten acre tree farm in rural Pennsylvania is sadly familiar to those who work there. It starts with a desperate phone call late at night: a worried family member, concerned friend, or a weary social worker tells the troubling tale. Then someone drops them off and they go in for an interview with the staff. It is the staff's job to make sure the people they interview are serious about changing their lives. Once they have arrived they promptly pack a few clothes, take some food and water, and hike up into the woods. They are alone in a solitary shelter for three days. When those three days are over, they come down to meet the Haft "family," and begin the process of straightening out their lives.

The Haft is truly a novelty. A professor at Mansfield University by the name of Glenn Hart bought the Haft. Established as a nonprofit organization in the late 60' s, it was originally intended to be a rural location for college retreats. These retreats were to be based on Christian values and were meant to teach the students responsibility and important life skills. Glenn and his wife Jean head a staff of dedicated adults who run the daily operations. The main building is a three story barn renovated to house up to forty people, a spacious living room, dining room, kitchen, and three bathrooms. A two-acre garden and some livestock are the main sources of food.

The original plan evolved dramatically. Today the Haft receives anyone with problems, no matter how severe, as long as they are serious about turning their lives around. These "students" are guided by volunteer teachers, who try to help them overcome their problems. A normal mix of students would include drug

addicts, battered wives, killers, gang members, and even AIDS victims. This nonprofit organization gets no federal aid, surviving mostly on donations from other concerned people. The teachers are volunteers and are not given any salary for their work. My parents were the first to assist Glenn and Jean as full time teachers, which is why I found myself getting out of a bunk bed at seven-thirty on a cold Saturday morning in October.

Autumn in northeastern Pennsylvania has a silent, expectant quality to it. It begins the steady progression towards winter, when the ground is frozen and everything seems brittle and cold. In September the woods are slowly dying. The leaves make raspy crunching noises under my heavy boots on the forest floor. October is a quieter month: the bullfrogs and crickets by the pond go into hibernation and the birds fly south. Finally, November brings the first snow, smothering the valley in silence until it reemerges in the spring.

On one particular morning we were traveling to the farm of Mr. Ordeely. He was a sullen old man, harboring all the instinctive distrust that resides in rustic communities towards anything new or unusual. His greeting was cordial, but behind that thin smile was a feeling of distaste, swelled by years of hoarded disdain. He thought the Haft was for "convicts" or "wackos," but he didn't say it very often because he needed our help come harvest time. That was a good thing because we needed the hay to feed the animals.

He got the tractor engine thundering and we followed him out to the fields. I wasn't big enough to lift bales onto the trailer, so I ran ahead to put all the bales close together before the tractor got there. The best part was riding to a new field. We all climbed on top of the bales to catch a ride. The tractor lurched over the uneven fields, rearing and snorting like a young bronco determined to throw the rider off its back. The farm was on a hillside so the tractor was always leaning at about twenty degrees feeding out the fear that the tractor would overturn and send us all scrambling to avoid getting crushed under an avalanche of hay. That never happened, so naturally I was terribly disappointed.

Afterwards some students grumbled about the work involved to get a few lousy bales of hay. I explained that we always

helped the neighbors harvest bales of hay—bartering our work for a share of the crop helped defray expenses.

During gardening season I would often sit out on the porch; the cool breeze was a welcome change from the stifling summer heat. People would pass in and out, coming from the direction of the garden. The challenge was trying to find out what they were carrying in their baskets while they were still a good distance away. This was an excellent skill to master, because I soon learned how to use it to avoid the tedious task of processing all that produce.

One afternoon I sat on the porch and saw a line of people walking in from the garden. They appeared to be carrying baskets of string beans. I was pleased to note, as they drew closer, that my swift diagnosis had indeed been correct. I knew better than to hang around the porch during the canning season, so I hustled my way through the kitchen. It was too late. My mom had already seen me trying to escape. Before I could launch a protest, she saddled me with a cutting board, a dull paring knife, and a stack of green beans taller than I was. That afternoon was spent listening to the dull crunch of snapping green beans reverberating off the slanted tin roof.

During the fall season there was always a scramble to gather firewood. The dreaded specter of winter made the collection of firewood a solemn affair.

A group of us converged on the old tool shed. It was a stark construction of sturdy two-by-fours and metal sheets pieced together in an eclectic fashion. Inside there was a grindstone for sharpening dull blades. Nearby sat a rusty oil barrel converted into a wood stove to supply heat during the winter. Facing us on the far wall was an assortment of tools, including the chain saw and hatchets we were looking for.

The trail heading into the woods was a steep one and the gears would whine in protest as the truck climbed the side of the mountain. Tiny stream beds were permanently etched into the side of the road. They were dry, but spring always returned with raging torrents from melting snow and heavy rains. There usually followed a clatter of tools, jostled by maneuvering over the rough terrain. Echoes of our noisy passage died quickly, swallowed by the solemn quiet of the woods.

Finally, we would come to the top of the mountain. The trees thinned out and eventually gave way to a meadow of slender golden weeds rustling in the wind. Further along the trail, a thicket protruded from the rest of the woods. The weeds went right up to the thicket, then stopped as if refusing to cross a border. We approached the woods and then the truck would be swallowed under a canopy of dark branches and shadows.

When we neared the back of the woods, my dad would search for a convenient place to work. He always selected the trees that he would cut down earlier, marking them with red paint. He chose the ones that were rotting or damaged by the elements. It was my job to cut the small limbs off the trees with my hatchet. I punctuated the steady buzzing of the chain saw with a steady chopping motion.

I met Dave on one of these trips. He was a man in his mid-twenties recovering from a cocaine addiction. Having lived in the city his whole life, he took every new experience at the Haft as a curiosity. He couldn't get over the fact that we used wood heat. I suppose it was hard for Dave to appreciate our dependency on firewood; after all, he had just seen his first wood stove in the kitchen a few days ago. To him, collecting firewood seemed downright primitive. I tried to explain the practical economics of the situation. He smiled in a reassuring way and told me that he understood, but somehow I didn't think he did. Firewood meant survival.

I'm told that when I was five we ran out of wood near the end of a particularly brutal winter. They had to dig in the snow for branches and brush to help start a fire. The wood was wet and made poor firewood. After that, we were never short of firewood again.

Dave was still there a few weeks later when we were working in the garden. Our job then was to get all the "pig weed" out of it. I have no idea if that is the correct name for the weed or not; we called it that because we fed it to the pigs. The pig pen was conveniently located right next to the garden.

It was a simple wooden shelter, connected to a fenced-in enclosure about fifteen feet wide and twenty feet long. The ground inside the enclosure was all mud, and the deeper it got, the more the pigs liked it. On this particular day, they were wallowing

contentedly in a glorious slough located along the far railing. Dave and I walked up to the edge of the enclosure and I dumped my bucket into the mud. Dave looked flabbergasted. He turned to me and asked why I had thrown all those weeds into the mud. I explained that the pigs ate the mud with the weeds, like gravy. As if on cue, there was a slurping sound and one of the pigs extricated itself from the mud. It grunted, taking short quick strides in the direction of the weeds I had just deposited on the ground. Soon all of the pigs had gathered around the weeds and were enjoying a hearty meal.

Later that morning we finished feeding the pigs and my dad came out to join us. Behind him there were two students pulling a large garden cart. As he came towards us, we could see that he was carrying a pistol in his right hand. I could read nothing from the expression on his face. He walked right up to us and pulled a box of ammunition out of his pocket.

He had decided that now was the time to butcher a pig. We were low on meat and it was good to kill one before the lean months of winter came and the pigs used up their stores of fat.

Dad opened the bullet chamber and calmly put in three bullets. He chose a male pig dozing on top of some weeds. Very deliberately, he raised his right arm and aimed just above the snout, looking directly into a pair of fat-encrusted eyes. He squeezed the trigger twice. Two terse cracks were followed by a loud shriek and a succession of wretched squeals. It wasn't dead.

The pig ran fitfully about the pen, dazed by pain and shock. Dad took aim and fired again. He hit it in the head, but that only made it screech even louder. Now blood was dripping from the head and the snout. It was obvious that the poor animal was in severe pain and gave no indication that it was going to die any time soon. My dad yelled above the din for me to climb on top of the pig pen and out of harm's way. At the same time, he reached into a coat pocket and pulled out his hunting knife. Then he barked instructions at some students and told Dave to open the gate on the count of three.

When Dave threw it open, the pig staggered out of the mud and ran through the gate. Two students grabbed it and pinned it to the ground as it squealed in terror. Dad grabbed it by the neck and started to slit its throat. Blood poured out all over his hands and onto

the ground. Finally, mercifully, he cut the jugular and put an end to those pitiful screams. Now the blood was flecked with pink foam. My dad checked to see if everyone was all right, the blood already turning black as it dried on his hands.

Humans must be the only predator capable of feeling compassion for their prey. In his essay on Last of the Mohicans, D.H. Lawrence noted that many Indian hunters said a prayer praising the prey and asking its forgiveness. Now there is no need to hunt for food. The thrill and excitement of the hunt have been replaced by domestication and the methodical certainty of butchery. There is no skill or glory in that act. The pitiful cries of a farm animal about to die takes advantage of our plight.

During the whole process of killing the pig, I was mesmerized. Later we learned that the pistol wasn't strong enough to penetrate the skull. The bullet had ricocheted off the bone beneath its skin. The whole scene had passed with a mixture of fascination and horror. I looked at Dave and saw that his face was white.

Modern man is removed from most of the essential acts of survival. He is a specialist and because of this, the gap in shared experience is wider today than ever before. Cutting wood or baling hay is reserved for menial workers and vast farming cooperatives. He rarely takes part in the simple defining act of being a carnivore and finds it repugnant when he does. At the Haft these activities are vital for survival: the raucous cacophony of hay bailing , the rhythmic thud of axes on trees, even the squeal of a dying pig, are events shared by all.



An Imitation of David Mamet: Dialectical Drudgery and the Passion of Plath

It doesn't require a particularly perspicacious reading to deduce from her poems that Sylvia Plath was decidedly pissed off.

Whether one chooses to view her as an exemplary poet, artfully penning line upon line of alliterative, metaphorical, and structurally sound verse, or as a study for off-kilter psychology — relentlessly venting line upon line of vicious, nefarious, and debilitating hostility, the underlying point is that Plath expresses an exigent anger that cannot be overlooked:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

"Daddy"

This is not, of course, an accurate representation of the entirety of her work. Scrutiny reveals that Plath is quite capable of sharing a more pleasant, less morose face with her readers, as she does when expressing love and adoration for her children. But if nothing else, then we have her suicide attempts—both failed and completed—as firm indications that something in her life was unequivocally askew.

We are tempted to ask ourselves, "What went wrong?". We are tempted to pore over her autobiographical versifying for clues to the inner workings of her psyche. The quest for insight, we hope, will lead us to a better understanding of human nature. In catching a glimpse of anguish in the cryptic quotations of the "tormented artist," we may possibly accumulate wisdom. Careful analysis may lead to sympathy, which may in turn give birth to empathy, and from there, we suppose, the road to Enlightenment has become much more traversable than it had previously been.

And in the end we are chastised by our consciences for assuming that such a short-cut would be an acceptable route to personal growth.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. once wrote an introduction for Anne Sexton's book of poetry called Transformations. She was another "confessionalist" full of venom and outrage, a kindred spirit to Plath. In his introduction, Vonnegut tells how he quit teaching in colleges because explaining works of art seemed criminal. And at this point, I'd have to agree. Though excellent for developing the skills involved in literary analysis, explaining poetry is, more or less, shaky ground for untangling the complexities of the actual poet.

Unless, of course, the poet happens to be sitting beside you, available to respond to your every interrogatory whim. Particularly in this specific case, the chances for such an encounter taking place are very slim.

But there are those who insist upon interrogating anyway, despite the obvious fact that the "artiste" is invariably indisposed, to put it gently. The absurdity of the situation is compounded when such seemingly innocuous interpretation leads to even greater unanswerable questions: "Why," they ask, "would such a talented young woman, and so accomplished, want to end her life?," followed by the careless muttering of this abominable phrase: "It just doesn't make any sense."

My question, in turn, is this: Why are people incessantly imposing the order of reason upon the wild and unruly realm of emotion?

In trying to apply the laws of logic, the why-sayers not only thwart their plans for finding answers to such preposterous

questions, but also subvert any attempts to transcend the misdirection that promoted their confusion in the first place. For it signifies the lack of an ability to see beyond the crisply defined rationale of the black and white, of the if and then, of the why and because, of the action and assumed reaction. It indicates the absence of a broader vision and the unfortunate presence of one that is blinkered by personal perception and narrow subjectivity.

Just because you wouldn't kill yourself under similar circumstances doesn't mean that Plath's suicide "doesn't make any sense." And what business is it of ours, anyway?

An issue of this kind exists outside the jurisdiction of "sense." The rules do not apply. Give up, go home, this is not a case to be won on the grounds of reason.

Individuals who go around trying to remedy the ills of the emotionally troubled with carefully constructed syllogisms and artfully construed rationalizations not only fail in their missionary quest, but also exacerbate the already sensitive situation by insisting upon being so damn logical. As a result, not only does the other feel the pain of emotional conflict, but, to make matters worse, it seems as if the syllogizer is attempting to invalidate his or her irrevocable right to feeling that pain. And that leads to complete and utter alienation, and the one who felt malcontent to begin with has now even less chance of feeling better than before the Voice of Reason opened its big fat mouth.

Let's face it -- Plath is not coming back. The literary world mourns the loss of her talents and the additional fruits they may have yielded had she remained alive long enough to cultivate them. Let's not desecrate her legacy by shaking our heads and asking the logical "Why? Why? Why?"

Marvel at the brilliance of her poetry, but otherwise, mind your own neuroses. And of the passions of the living, I advise a similar policy of "laissez-faire": Tread not where the precepts of the thinking brain are easily subjugated by the fierce and mighty independence of the feeling heart.

Hold your tongue in check, oh you possessing dialectical tendencies, when you are tempted to bear-bait the man or woman in the throes of a sentimental dither.

Take your black rhetorical magic and work it elsewhere, where it has some value—in the debating-room, or in a court of law, for example.

Recognize the futility of its presence, well-intended as it may be, among the tears and troubles and tribulations of bold emotion.

Rather, offer compassion instead of polemics, caresses instead of contention, respect instead of rationalization, understanding instead of explanation. If you cannot exercise these basic skills in human interaction, you may unwittingly turn your back on a large percentage of the population. You may also unwittingly alienate yourself from the inevitable fluctuations of your own heart.

Many philosophers make the mistake of living only in their minds. Many intellectuals run the risk of dwelling only in theory. Defend yourself from such limitations. Train yourself to recognize these deviations from the path of plenty, the path in which reason does not condemn feeling, but complements it.

Back to Sylvia Plath. She committed suicide — no path of plenty there, either. She gave her passions free rein and they ran away with her. Her demise is not a case for debate, but neither is it a model for truth.

Strive for a balance. And on that note I say to those who would have logic as the be-all and the end-all of life on this planet: Would you not rather **join** your heart with your mind, instead of perpetuating their divide?

If your answer is yes, then listen to your heart—it has a lot to say. And if you listen closely and carefully and with an effort to understand, you may suddenly find that you no longer need to ask "Why?"



Drawing the Male Figure

I drew for three hours. Pencil, charcoal, brick red. My fingers were coated with fine dust, its pigments making the tips look as if I'd stuck them in an electric socket. It was deathly quiet in the Studio despite its high ceiling, which usually acted as an audio magnifying glass, making even the smallest sound echo and bounce off the walls. But until I heard the model's watch beep I scratched away, the sound audible only to me. I paid no attention to heat, which had been cranked up for the model's comfort, nor to flies, natives to the Studio, who buzzed in through the fireplace. This was too new, too sensitive to be interrupted by such trivial matters. I was drawing the nude figure.

And it was not only a nude whom I tried, with the fervent clumsiness of a non-expert, to reproduce on my paper, but a male nude. Our life drawing class had begun with a mere skeleton for the first few weeks, and just as I was getting the hang of sketching fibulas and femurs, the female nude entered, with all the comfort and nonchalance of one whose job it was to daily expose her flesh to an audience armed with pastels. And she did.

For four weeks we drew the female figure. I bragged foolishly to my male friends, "Oh, you wouldn't know it but every Monday night there's a little orgy on the east side of campus." Only Jonathan believed me. "You really sit and draw naked women?" he asked, his voice quiet and laden with tentative acceptance.

I smiled nervously at that. Jonathan was a ladies' man, suave and debonair as a young Bond, James Bond. We'd been friends since freshman year, and a large part of that relationship was being held together by a mutual, unspoken, playful attraction. By far I wasn't the only woman in his life. I had a brief vision of him

sneaking up to the Studio around eight or so, up on his toes in the muddy grass to catch a glimpse through the dusty window pane.

"Yeah, I draw naked women. It's life drawing. It's necessary."

I tired of it shortly, though. "When do we get a man, Mrs. Robinson?" I asked my professor jokingly, with a mockingly amorous leer. I thought I had mastered the female. My portfolio was full of thickly-lined, sketchy drawings of standing, sitting, reclining, twisting females. There was no newness to this.

Of course, Jonathan had to know when the male nude arrived. "Have you got him yet? What was it like?"

I squirmed a little. Yeah, we'd got him. It was like walking in on your father by accident when you were young, when he was getting out of the shower. There was the clean soapy smell and the trickle of the leftover shower water falling into the drain and the moist thickness of the air, and these were the only normalities, the only things you could cling to as familiar, as recognizable. In the middle of it all was this soft, fleshy, monochrome figure that you only slightly knew, and having body parts which you never dreamed existed on a human being. I daren't tell Jonathan that this was my first experience.

"Hasn't arrived yet," I lied, "I may need to practice on another model." How brazen this fruitless teasing. Even more brazen — I mentally unclothed him. He was squooshy, as if God had really fashioned him from clay. Was that truly what he looked like? I think I preferred him in T-shirt and jeans. Clothing penned in the flesh, giving it roundness and fluidity. I found THAT attractive. To each her own.

I'm not on the same level as everyone else. I got another C on my homework, a ludicrously stark red curve in the midst of my gray scratchings. The flies danced along the lines of my drawn skull, completing my macabre composition. My heart was seething somewhere within my ribcage. My line was beautiful, crisp, clean. Why the constant rejection? I tried to ignore it as I drew the male figure. Such a splendid blend of curve and angle. No Adonis by any means, but slender, tapering at wrist and waist and ankle. He didn't move despite the flies circling his head, so many small airplanes

staking out King Kong. My heart was willing, my hand uncertain. The line was searching. I erased too often, and charcoal dust filled my nostrils. I was unable to do him justice. Why am I majoring in this?

I went tentatively to Jonathan's dorm that weekend. His sweet cologne lingered by the doorway; he was home. He was draped over his bed already, though midnight had barely arrived, and there MIGHT have been a touch of alcohol mixed with the cologne. I felt the need to speak with him even in his unconscious state. "My drawings aren't doing so well," I began awkwardly. "I'm falling behind a little. I guess one day it'll all come together, but I don't think I'm patient enough for that. You know me..."

My face crunched up, my muscles tensed so that my forehead throbbed with a dull pain. Jonathan reached down with one sluggish hand and ran it through my hair. "What happened to my Dreamer?"

I let myself cry. I'm thrown overboard, I couldn't find the lifeline, the water washed over my face. Dare I try to keep up?

I lay down next to him. Almost against my will I faced away from him, a Prufrock afraid to hear the mermaids sing. I breathed in; the coverlets were heavy with his fragrance, and soft to my cheek. I couldn't see him at all. I was like a blind girl waiting, heart pounding, in a seemingly empty room, where a man approaches for good or for evil...

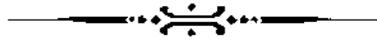
His arm slid around my waist and drew me toward him; I could feel his warmth along my length. My gaze was fixed on his roommate's computer resting, blank and faintly glowing, on the desk beside us. I couldn't turn, however badly I wanted to, however urgent and seductive the whispery voice in my mind became, coaxing me. I laced my hand in his, trying to ignore the knocking of my heart, the shivering of my teeth. If I had my charcoal now, I could shade that hand: a little dark at the knuckles, white at the tops of the fingers, blend a bit where the shade met the light, thin spidery lines where the joints creased the skin. The hand searched mine every so often, but always I held it in check, lest it succeed in finding something.

His voice seemed to come from a small, faraway place though his lips were so close that they tangled in my hair. "This is... different."

"This is weird." My own voice was wavery. I felt like an astronaut stepping onto the moon for the first time, a little sick and quivery, the chalky space food not sitting well with me at all, light and giddy, floating in an absence of sense, a void of abnormality. When I put my foot down at last, the dust rose up in a sluggish cloud and I wondered why I hadn't decided to go moon-dancing before.

We played hide-and-seek with consciousness until the red, glowing numbers on his alarm clock flicked to six o'clock. His chest ceased its rhythmic rise and fall. The hand danced mischievously along me once more and this time I let it go. I finally had a sense of completion: a few more touches of the pencil and the work would be finished. One cannot always be a perfectionist. Sometimes the Muse touches you sadly upon the shoulder and says, "Look long and hard, put down thy stylus, remember, and let go." When he got up and vanished into the bathroom I took my cue and found my own bed again.

My figures became larger, filling the page. I had a mere twenty minutes before the watch let out its shrill beep and the model relaxed. If I fashioned a small part—an arm, a back, a torso—I could cherish the details, round the forms. My lines were swooping, expressive, a bird gone mad. Jonathan hadn't remembered a thing that morning. I was determined to pour my disappointment into the work with some red unblended chalk. Mrs. Robinson was pleased with my improvement. Sometimes an artist has to fall back a little in order to catch up.



From Royalty to Reality

Once upon a time I was a princess, who dressed in the finest Afghan tunics and plastic jewels mommy would buy and ruled the mighty kingdom of the upstairs hallway from my pillow cloud throne. But I was no ordinary princess. When handsome princes and regal balls became a bore, with one wish and command I could transform into an astronaut on the spaceship swing set, a northern spy from South America, a lettuce factory worker, an Olympian, or anything else I dreamed of becoming, for this was a time when there was no place my imagination or bicycle could not take me.

My heroes were the "big kids" in the neighborhood, and I spent many hours watching in awe as they played basketball, drove their cars, and went to proms. More than anything I wanted to be a part of their "grown-up" world, so I put paper clips in my mouth, pretending they were braces, and lived a vicarious life through my Barbie doll, who had the greatest hair and boyfriend and the ability to bend in inexplicable ways that made her the most amazing acrobat I had ever known.

To my six year old eyes, everyone in the "grown-up" world lived a life like Barbie's, filled with freedom, excitement, and romance. Everyone was fearless, and there was nothing a "big kid" could not do. I believed that their world was as perfect as my tinker toy kingdoms, but as I grew older, I began to realize that the world I had created in my mind was nothing like the world in which I would have to live. I began to see that in the real, "grown-up" world everyone did not always play nice, that I would have to face monsters scarier than the ones under my bed, and learn lessons harder than my multiplication tables.

In junior high, as a person who trusted almost anyone without question, I was an easy victim for the back stabbing of twelve year old girls as they struggled to fit in and be "cool." The wounds that they inflicted were the first growing pains that could not be healed with Mommy and Daddy's kisses, and I began to realize that my parents were not super human creatures with all the right answers and curing powers. Like me, they could be hurt, wrong, scared, and confused. Once I realized this, I knew that I could no longer hide under their protective wings, and I became determined to fly on my own.

High school took me outside of my small hometown to a bigger school where I met new friends, different ideas, and more challenges to my picture-perfect world. I learned Latin, how to drive, and that elevator passes and the fourth floor swimming pool were myths created by upper-classmen to play with eager freshman minds. The long awaited-for status of "big kid" was finally mine, but being a "big kid" was not what I thought it would be. I started to see that Robert Frost was right when he wrote that "nothing gold stays."

Scared and helpless, I watched as my best friend from junior high began her love affair with alcohol and chose its seductive taste over her old friends. On Mulberry Street, I met hate and injustice face to face, when I saw two young children throw rocks at another boy and call him "nigger," and I began to wonder what happened to the rule of playing nice with everyone. After four years of learning and experiencing, laughter and tears, failures and successes, I graduated a few years older, more aware, more confident, and a little bit wiser.

Going away to college took me even further from my backyard kingdom and brought me to a place where there were many different people to meet, things to do, and ideas to explore. Just as I was beginning to become comfortable in my new home and to like the ways in which my life was turning, death touched my world and spun it out of control, away from everything I had once thought I understood. When my roommate's parents died in a helicopter accident, I watched her world begin to crash around her and felt mine begin to crumble.

Lost in a strange new world that looked the same as the one I used to live in, but where everything meant something different or something more, where there were no guarantees and nothing was forever, I felt scared, confused, empty and alone. Every emotion I had, whether of happiness or sorrow, seemed so much more powerful, and even the smallest actions and shortest conversations seemed so much more significant to my life and the lives of others. I couldn't trust all the things I had once thought were unarguable truths, and I couldn't believe in tomorrows when I had so much trouble understanding and dealing with today's.

Somehow, the fairy tale went bad. The author forgot that all "once upon a times" were supposed to end "happily ever after," and the person I had been closest to in the past two months ached with a pain that all the band-aids and aspirin in the world could not cure. Mommy and Daddy weren't there to kiss it all better anymore, and they never would be again. They were dead, and death is a permanent, non-fixable and final reality. There was nothing anyone could do to take away her pain or make her world purely golden again.

Hundreds of questions of "why?" that could only be answered honestly with "I don't know"s flooded my head and created a sea of emotions, fears, and confusion that churned and numbed my mind. These questions still swirl through my mind and probably always will, for I've come to see the truth of a Christmas carol I first heard sung by John Denver and the Muppets when I was a child. "We can all know everything without ever knowing why." My world has grown from the backyard kingdom of my six year old mind to include more people, ideas, and experiences; more awareness, more love, and more "why?"s.

Why was the little boy that I saw on Mulberry Street born looking different from me, and why did those children have to hate him and throw rocks at him because of it? Why was it my roommate's parents were killed and why did it happen now, when she and her parents were still so young? Why is there injustice and pain and hate? Why do the rules of life always change when I'm beginning to understand them? Why isn't anything as easy as I thought it would be?

I don't know the answers to any of those questions, and I never will. But I do know that even though life is hard and unfair, it is also the only thing we have right now. Thus, we must accept life as it comes to us, learn from its experiences, and love as much of it as we can while, we still can. Along with the hate, death, and pain come love, beauty, and friendship, and it is all these things woven together in a patchwork of memories and experience that create the scary, yet exciting adventure of life.

If we dwell on the pain in life, we can never completely live and enjoy it, for the world's playground is full of love and goodness as well. Through the support of my friends and family, the kindness of strangers, and my deeper understanding of thoughts and emotions, I have come to realize that there is no greater power in our world than that of love. There are millions of beautiful people in this world waiting to share in our life's experiences and to love and support us. Beauty surrounds us in the thousands of natural miracles that happen everyday and that I had once taken for granted. The beauty, love, and happiness that exist in our world can't be ignored, for they are all part of what makes us complete.

Although my roommate has lost the two most important people in her life, the death of her parents has not erased her smile or stolen her ability to laugh and love. Despite the confusion and pain that she feels, she must continue her life's adventure and take the chances it offers her. This is something we all must do, for there is no reason for existing if we are not embracing life and trying to find the goodness and truth beyond our backyards.

This year, my parents threatened to tear down the swing set in our backyard. To them, it is useless and ugly with its broken rings, bent monkey bars, rusted trapeze, and lone swing left to sway in the wind. But to me, it is beautiful and alive. It shines with the memories of my dad's superdog pushes, the Tarzan games we would play on the trapeze, and the obstacle courses my sisters and I used to create I can see in it the faces of the old neighborhood gang who have since moved away or grown apart from each other. It is my castle, my lettuce factory, my spaceship, and most importantly, my time machine. For with one wish and command, I can return to visit that golden time when I reigned as princess and my only scars were skinned knees.

Self du Jour

Boys all think she's living kindness
Ask a fellow waitress
—Tori Amos, from her song "The Waitress"

You're talking like a duchess but you're still a waitress
-Elvis Costello, from his song "Sulky Girl"

Elaine, our waitress for this evening, comes to our booth at Olga's diner to tell us that they are out of brownies. Just like last time, so this really ticks Carrie off. Carrie is already upset because Elaine is waiting on us — also just like last time. She is slow and "mousy," Carrie says, as if Elaine's limp blonde ponytail and grey Keds will have an effect on our service. I begin to feel for Elaine. I am a customer as well as a waitress, and the kind of waitress that I am is not speedy and dynamic. But I notice the way she has gone about this. All of us have our food except for Carrie, who gave her a hard time when we were here before. I notice that Elaine says "I forgot, we're all out of brownies" slowly, deliberately, reaching across Carrie to set down a plate, then straightening up to look at her. I get the sense that she knew all along that they didn't have any, but hid this information in order to torment my friend. I think that she may not be a bad waitress after all. She knows that waitressing is about duplicity, dishonesty, and discovering that some truths are not self-evident.

A friend of mine once remarked that she bet I had to "work it" to get tips, alluding to the stereotype of waitress as hooker. The answer, then, being that I worked in a place that prided itself on its "family atmosphere," was no. Although I did know a waitress who, when she worked the late night shift, wore more makeup to get bigger tips from drunk gentlemen customers. Along with the minivans and station wagons in the parking lot, there were Cadillacs and beat up compacts, indicative of our other regular patrons — senior citizens and teenagers. This was not the coffee shop of Faulkner's

Light In August, where the stools were filled with drifters and the waitress "knew the hands of many men." Waitresses don't handle many men, but we juggle many faces, and in that way we are required to work it. We check our selves in at the door, and after that must choose what roles we will perform. Will we be nice to these people who have been demanding all night or not? There is no time to be sexy, between keeping salad dressing out of our hair and picking half-eaten buffalo wings off the floor. At Denny's, getting hit on was kind of an event; it was not often that we were left phone numbers or asked out on dates. There wasn't enough sexuality in the job to work in the solicitous sense, so we had to work facets of it, shifting in and out of two polar opposites: the angel and the bitch. Neither of which are about attraction, but obedience.

Out of the thirteen servers that worked swing shift, the dinner hour, only two were over 23 — a young mother and our lone waiter. We were all, technically, women, but we saw and referred to ourselves as girls. (My grandmother, at 73, still refers to the women she waitressed with in that way.) Not only were we girls, we had to be nice girls, always on our best behavior while serving our customers. At Denny's, we learned the faintly Judeo-Christian maxim "Don't fight, make it right." Irritated customers were placated with constant coffee and soda refills, extra attentive service, fake smiles, and we were encouraged to give away free dessert if it would settle them down. We also had to be nice to the cooks, too, even when they screwed up your order and made you feel as if it was your fault. Going behind the cooks' line to ask them, sweetly, if they wanted a soda or a shake was part peace offering, part thanks for the extras they would give us and the favors they'd do.

The Victorian notion that women should be seen and not heard -- or only heard saying *I'll be right there, no problem* — is embodied today by waitresses. Greta Foff Paules, in her book [Dishing It Out](#), likens the waitress to the 19th century domestic. She finds that servile notion manifesting itself in everything from the uniform to the cubicles, comparable to servants' quarters, where waitresses should (but are often too busy to) take their breaks. In the politically correct term "server," which tries to extract the sexism

endemic to the work, she is quick to point out its obvious link to the word servant. The deferential bearing of the waitress is similar to the British sensibility of upstairs, downstairs, as she moves from the back of the restaurant to the front, from needed at the table to dismissed. But we often don't get the courtesy afforded by a starched white cap and the genteel address of "Miss." We dissolve into "the short redheaded girl," or "the tall black one." We are the sole reason for the undercooked meal, the butt of a joke to teenagers who leave beer or pennies for tips, someone to whom children bark "More Sprite!"

Disrespect is an occupational hazard and a natural result of the "growing-down" women endure in waitressing. Older customers, meaning well, would tend to adopt us as their own granddaughters. They would chat us up during dinner, ask us where we were going to school. We were sweetie and hon. We were such lovely girls and gave such lovely service. After waiting on them, we would return to take the order of the table with the wriggling toddler and discover that we were "the lady." As in, "Hurry up and tell the lady what you want to eat." All this roleplaying can make the waitress feel a little like Alice in Wonderland. She shrinks to girl size, the apron transforming into a pinafore as she becomes the favorite child. Wait a minute or two and she approaches matronhood, tapping her foot as she taps her pencil on the order pad. If the waitress must watch her manners at the table, excused from it she can be the bitch, all grown up and in control.

Carol had made the waitresses on swing shift fear her. She worked the late-night shift and had a habit of coming in a half hour early to make sure our shift had restocked and refilled so that her night would run smoothly. She'd start clanging lids on containers, refrigerator doors. "Whose job was it to fill the salad dressings?" she'd ask, in the tone of a mother who has just come home from work only to find that the laundry isn't done and the dishes are dirty. "Not me," we'd answer, all of us scurrying to far comers of Denny's. In a moment of charitable candor, she told me "If I didn't do any of this, our shift would get shit on."

She was right. Her bullying worked. If we weren't scared of Carol, we were at least annoyed by her, and did the work to avoid

conflict. Unlike other professions, unlike life, waitressing allows women to be demanding. To play the shrew, basically untamed, can get the waitress respect, and can get the work done. If silverware is low, or glasses dirty, she must keep nagging to change that situation. ("Your boyfriend must have it rough," my manager remarked when, for the second time in five minutes, I asked for an order of wheat toast). But only your coworkers can see your bitchy side; she's to be kept from the customers like Mr. Rochester's mad wife. Assertiveness flaming to outright anger is not allowed, and Carol was the second of two waitresses I knew to have been fired for crossing that line. The other was asked to leave because she told a customer to "fuck off." The lesson was this: you can be all good girl, but only some bitch. All bitch will get you fired.

Yet in a moment of duress, the waitress, in the state of all-bitch, comes as close to reality as the job allows. She throws off all the disrespect, the fragile construct of sweetness and light. Depending on who you talked to, these waitresses' rash acts were either brave or stupid. Brave because she refused to let the perpetual deference rob her of her will. Stupid because she lost her job—and now what is she going to do? The rest of us knew our place and grudgingly stayed there, partly circumscribed by interior design. In the Denny's where I worked, there were no doors closing the kitchen off from the dining room, making all the restaurant a stage. The salad bar, ice cream freezer, pie cabinets and trays were all behind the counters and visible to most of the customers. Waitresses could not storm into the kitchen, doors swinging back and forth in their wake. There was no offstage, so all the sturm und drang of the stiff or the screwed up order was played out for everyone to see — dinner theater on the cheap. Customers were treated to heated cook-waitress or waitress-manager exchanges, and the rest of us would end up doing sideline commentary, whispering the reasons for slammed trays and raised voices.

Even if we did have some curtain to veil our exposed nerves, it still wouldn't have made the job any easier. Ultimately, the physical environment has no impact on the psychological one. There is pressure coming from without and within, and where you crack is of no consequence. What matters is that you try not to. In

this job, being two-faced is less of a playground slur and more a desired quality. Keep turning the cheek, keep turning the cheek from stable ("More creamers? Sure!") to not-so ("Those bastards! No tip!") and before long, it might follow, your head would be spinning to beat Linda Blair's exorcist-worthy revolutions. But the waitress must keep her head about her, for the good girl can never let her customers see her sweat, never let them see a tantrum, never move from her caste. She pretends that she doesn't mind printing up separate checks. That she doesn't mind making six banana splits because suddenly some table has decided that they do want dessert, and will not tell them that Friendly's is just a little further up the highway.

This acting gets tiring. Though you could offer the consolation of philosophy and say that which didn't kill us made us stronger. Paules likes that Nietzschean logic; she thinks that a waitress' ability to be tough and servile "attests to her strength of will and power of resistance." But more often than not, the waitress finds that she is not everywoman, it is *not* all in her. Being sweet and apologetic becomes difficult after too many long frantic Saturday nights where the big picture of life is not a baroque study of Cupid and Psyche but more like Picasso's *Guernica*. There is no energy to be nice. In fact, there is a negative correlation between number of years worked on the job and the amount that you care. On day shift at Denny's, the waitresses had hardened eyes, hardened attitudes. I worked that shift only once, and was on the brink of collapse the whole eight hours of continuous full-speed service. None of these women, known only by first names like goddesses, would help me. I got the hint that on this sinking ship, it was every girl for herself, and someone had better pull themselves together.

There was a peculiar logic to what we could feel. We could, for example, hate another waitress. Walking around muttering "I hate that bitch" fits nicely into the tough girl persona. Crying doesn't. It's not allowed. Paradoxically, waitresses' servility is particularly, oppressively female, but in some respects, she has to act like a man. Lips can tremble, eyes can fill up, but she has to bite her lip and steel herself against caring. It's embarrassing to be caught out of character, for it shows too much of an emotional

investment in the job. Which is hard not to have when you work four or five days a week at nine hour stretches, and perspective becomes inverted to the point that the waitress believes everything hinges on whether the salads get to the table before the meal does.

The only waitress I ever saw cry was Melissa, Melissa whose motto was "Oh, screw it." She had served pancakes and eggs on the same plate to a woman who'd asked for them on separate ones. After a series of relays from cook's line to the table, each time with an inedible version, the woman refused to eat and left with her husband, without paying. She sat in the breakroom crying, saying "What did she want me to do? What did she want me to do?" Her hands dangled over the arms of the chair, flopping helplessly as she spoke. "It's just stupid fucking pancakes. It's not my fault he can't cook." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. "I don't know why I'm crying," she said. "I must be due for my period."

Melissa's tears were a result of, yet at the same time made up for, the dehumanizing inherent to waitressing. I felt badly for her, but I was relieved. Now she was someone who felt, who had a brother, was somebody's daughter. But she apologized away her self in the same way we talked away our selves during slow hours — nothing but the job, boyfriends, movies or school was alluded to, conversation nothing but an exercise in comparison and contrast, never touching on anything really important. At meetings, or when we came to pick up our checks, dressed in civilian clothing, we'd each eye the other, trying to translate the uniformed self to the t-shirt-and-short one. "You have legs," a dishwasher kidded a waitress, on seeing that she was a real live girl under all that polycotton blend. It was as if the body didn't exist.

Who the waitress is after the shift, when the uniform is laying in a grease-and-smoke scented heap on the laundry room floor, is not the point. The point is, can she juggle her tables and time wisely? Even though I was doing well for someone who'd been told not to waitress, the job was overwhelming at times. There was a temptation to stand on the vinyl booths, under the swinging lamps and shout *I have many friends. My parents love me. And, I am an intelligent person. I may have forgotten to punch in your chicken strips as an appetizer, turning your snack into a side dish, but I can*

write a ten-page paper on Virginia Woolf's use of feminine archetypes. It was Woolf who wondered" ..who shall measure the heat and violence of a poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?" But who shall measure the heat and violence of an aspiring writer when trapped in a green uniform and no-slip shoes? Or anybody's heart.

The phrase *going to work* does connote a leaving behind -- we left our bodies and our hearts went with them. Woolf knew the answer to her own question. Anything held in long enough would find its way out, and there were moments at the restaurant when heat and violence came to the surface like a bruise, darker in some spots than the other, then fading. Lives touched the perimeters of work in a way that was soap operatic. Cooks dated managers, waiters pursued bus boys. It was the long-time workers, though, that divulged carelessly, generously. Sandy had been waitressing since fifteen, and had been on her own since seventeen. Kathy supported one son but couldn't tell you why she married his dad. Beth dated many, many men. These stories, gossiped away to anecdotes in dead hours, were only narratives, seemingly without subtext. At times I felt that I might know what my co-workers felt about their lives; from their talk it was possible to detect what was right or wrong in their cosmic scheme of things. More often than not, though, I could only tell you if they thought O.J. was innocent. It was possible to know everything and nothing at the same time.

It was this sense of missed connections, of an uneven exchange, that kept us college students quiet. No matter how much we wanted to leave Denny's behind, we would take some of it with us when we left, and knowing so much was stealing without replacing. It wasn't our place to get involved -- and Denny's wasn't our place to begin with. It was not our station and we were destined elsewhere. (The only way we got through the summer was to keep advent for August, counting one more month, two weeks, three days until we left for school). Our sympathy was mixed with a kind of silent arrogance. Thank goodness, we thought, we had other places to be on our days off besides Denny's, sitting at the counter draining coffee cups and filling ashtrays.

I discovered, however, that the old assumption of the superiority of higher education over low-paying, low-prestige jobs may be at times false. One of the cooks once told me to stay in college, it was the best thing to do. "They love us college students," said a fellow waitress, "because we show up when we have to. We're responsible." Sure, we came to work on time, but how did that compare to defending unfairly laid-off co-workers at an organizational meeting, or supporting a union? We were punctual, but we lacked moral courage.

It had been raining all night, so badly that the lights had gone out a few times and the roads were being closed off. The parking lot had flooded. Three of our cars were filling with water and had to be moved — but none of us could leave the floor. Emily, however, who had just showed up to pick up her check, volunteered to move them, wading with a nearly healed broken leg out to the lot's knee-deep water. She entered the restaurant, limping slightly, and handed us our keys. She smiled; this was no big deal. We began to fawn over her, repeating "Thanks so much," and "Are you ok?" over and over again. And then Marc: "Oh, Emily, you're a saint."

Emily wasn't even religious, but she did exemplify what Saint Ignatius of Loyola commanded: live your ideals through your work. My Jesuit education had stuffed me with required classes in theology and philosophy so that virtue, justice, and the good were actual, always on the tip of my tongue. At work, though, they went forgotten, like the name of a childhood friend or the author of a half-read book. So what if the people I worked with didn't talk about life with a capital L? The girls who wrote papers on those meaningful capital letter words weren't using them either. There was a duplicity in the esoteric values taught at school. They mattered in a three-o'clock in the morning discussion about suffering and the nature of humanity, but in the context of dirty plates, submerged cars, and layoffs, in the world of the accidental and tangible, they vanished into air. But Emily, or anyone else who bused your table, got your drinks, and took orders for you, put those ephemeral words into the language of the pragmatic.

No one was giving out medals for these displays of courage on the battlefield of the food service sector. Although sometimes, for

being good little Denny's workers — staying when we didn't have to so there would be enough waitresses, for example — we would get certificates for free meals, excluding beverage. Still, we all deserved to be canonized. There are separate days that melt into one long string of tense, sunny afternoons where I want to scream because I am the only waitress on the floor, or a manager is cooking because they forgot to schedule a chef. Every day was *Anything Can Happen Day*, and that was terrifying. Denny's in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, gone slouching towards Bethlehem: our center never, ever held.

But we girls, we women, had to make it hold, making up for incompetent managers and co-workers. In order for the place to function, the waitresses had to pick up everybody else's slack. We got our own ice, made our own desserts and salads, hauled drums of ice cream and heavy bus pans, vacuumed, seated customers. We were always lifting, stretching, reaching, running. No talk, no thought, just action. In these moments, the job turned its femininity on its head, contradicting the notion that to be active is male, female passive. Michelle Gubbay, telling her story as a cocktail waitress, characterizes her fellow workers as a "strong, brave little group," sounding more like a chapter out of *Little Women* than *Working Women*.

Omit that "little." It asks for pity. It was the managers, mostly men, that needed sympathy. Paules points out that managers of Denny's-caliber restaurants often find themselves stripped of any authority the white shirt and tie might give them; customers must always be right, and temperamental cooks and servers must be placated. Where I worked we could call in sick, or just not show a few times and still have a job. The only threat our manager posed was to our schedule — it was a safe bet that if we asked for days off, he wouldn't remember. What Paules claims — that it is the waitresses who run the restaurant -- is true. Pay no attention to the man on the phone in the back office. Although he is responsible for ordering everything and hiring everyone, it is the waitress' problem when things run out and people don't show up. The manager can run over to another Denny's to borrow a server or more ice cream. He

may even pick up and seat tables. But until then, as always, she is on her own.

She is not alone completely, for there is a sisterhood that comes from all this being put upon and rising above. Waitresses know the password: Augustine and Sartre were right. Human beings are a diseased lot and hell is other people. We can spend hours comparing war stories, recounting victory and defeat ("They left me \$ 15. That was after I chased them down in the parking lot.") When we eat out we leave bigger tips and are mostly sympathetic and sometimes more critical customers. And if one waitress comes upon another, there is a knowing glance, an acknowledgement that the woman in front of them is tough. Between them, the secret is out — the notion of the weaker sex is wrong. But waitresses in Louise Kapp Howe's book *Pink Collar Workers* told her that admiration was not easily gotten from those outside the circle. For these women, "Oh, you're a waitress" resounded in the same way "Oh, you're a housewife" does to others. But they didn't really care. They were, one said, "doing good honest work."

Honest work. It is but it isn't. In the 19th century, waitresses were women of ill-repute, close cousins to wayward dance hall girls. The waitress may not be seen as a fallen woman anymore, but she still is not an honest woman. Even though a semblance of truth may be glimpsed in that moment when a fellow waitress offers help, when she ties on her apron she is tied to the pledge of keeping the whole truth out of view from customers and from her co-workers. And what results is an occupation built on contradiction. Use the deference of girls to get tips, but nag the hell out of the people you work with to get what you need. Bask in hard-won sisterhood, but keep a stiff upper lip that would make a marine proud. Tell everyone everything about your life, but obscure the meaning. "Behind," we say, when we are coming through with a tray full of food. It means *I'm behind you, watch your back, clear out, don't move*. It is more, though, than the warning. It is what waitresses are always doing. We clear out of our own way to make room for storefront selves — for whatever self the day, the moment, requires.

Brain Static

My sister Sarah could see that she was different from other children her age when she was five years old. She used to cry and beat herself in the head with her fist and sob, "I'm stupid, I'm dumb." While standing by the bushes in front of our house, waiting for the bus, she would whimper, "Please don't make me go. Mommy, help me." It was then that my parents took her to a psychologist. She was diagnosed with a learning disability called dyslexia, and it seemed her problems were resolved. However, because of people's misconceptions of dyslexia, her education has been one of continuous struggle.

Dyslexia is caused by a defect on chromosome-6. This causes synapses in the brain, which are usually found in clusters, to be scattered. Thus, when the synapses fire, they sometimes do not produce a clear connection, and the result is something like static on television. For example, when my sister has an idea, she knows in her mind what she wants to communicate, but she has a difficult time putting it into words. She ends up talking around a subject in an effort to define it, which is frustrating for the listener, and ten times more so for Sarah. People with dyslexia often require more than one type of learning in order to get a point across. Whereas a normal person might be able to understand a point visually, it would take visual, aural, and physical examples to get the same point across to someone who is dyslexic. It is a disability that cannot be seen, thus oftentimes causing people to disbelieve that it even exists. When my mother questioned Sarah's kindergarten teacher about her performance in class, the teacher told her, "She's average. Be happy." This was the beginning of a very trying relationship between my sister and the school system.

The public school system makes it very difficult for children with dyslexia to get the kind of education they require. In the opinion of the school psychologists, children begin to mentally "even out" during the third grade, so any kind of extra help before then is extraneous, unnecessary, and a waste of money. The practice of waiting until the third grade to identify learning disabilities like dyslexia was instigated in order to give "late bloomers" a chance to develop. The problem with this way of thinking is that by the time children are given the help they need, they often have already developed emotional problems and a poor self-image. The earlier the problem is identified, the easier it will be to prevent later problems. However, the public school system does not like psychologists who do not work for it, and often refuses to accept their diagnoses as true or accurate because they do not have the best interests of the school system at the top of their priority list. Rather, they put the well-being of the individual student first. In my sister's case, the school refused to give her any sort of extra help until she was evaluated by its psychologist. There were delays in making appointments and waiting for testing dates and test results, during which time nothing was being done to help my sister. Part of the reason they did not rush to help her was that it seemed to everyone that she was doing fine in school, and exhibited none of the stereotypical characteristics usually associated with dyslexia.

When most people think of the word "dyslexia," they automatically associate it with other more severe and more noticeable learning disabilities. Children with dyslexia are certainly not unintelligent, and the characteristic backwards-writing is not manifested in every case of dyslexia. When the majority of people meet the child, they are surprised to find that he or she appears perfectly normal. The misconceptions of the teachers in the public school system were the main reason that my parents sent Sarah to a private school.

My parents pulled my sister out of public school and sent her to St. Paul's Lower School for second and third grades, where Sarah and eleven other students were taught by three teachers with Master's degrees. If my parents could have afforded it, she might still be there even now. As my parents found in their dealings with

St. Paul's, it is possible for teachers to help students with dyslexia, although it requires some extra effort on their part. However, if people become teachers in order to help children to learn, then a child with dyslexia should be regarded as a welcomed challenge rather than a problematic burden. The teachers do not necessarily need to have a Master's degree or a degree in psychology, but they do need to educate themselves about different teaching techniques for different learning styles and be able to adjust to the unique needs of each student.

It is difficult for a teacher to prepare work for a dyslexic student because the work needs to be adjusted to a level which the student can successfully manage. The teacher needs to search for books which cover the specific topics of the course, but which also are at a low enough reading level for the individual dyslexic student. The instructor may need to repeat directions several times, or help the student with note-taking, or make any other number of adjustments in order to teach the child effectively.

To make matters worse, many times administrators, rather than teachers, decide which materials to order for the classroom. The most conscientious and capable teachers can be frustrated by this because their ability to formulate curriculums based on the individual needs of each student is drastically reduced. "How can a mechanic possibly make repairs to a car without the proper tools for the job?" (Huston 198). Without the support of the school systems, even the most caring teachers can "give up" on a student who requires a sizable chunk of their evenings and weekends, and who still may not understand the material because the textbook provided by the school may be inappropriate for the individual's learning style.

If teachers are willing to take that extra step and dedicate their extra time to helping individual students with dyslexia, the resources are available to enable teachers to help children realize their potential through education, research, medical and psychological services. There are workshops and seminars on teaching learning-disabled students that can be extremely helpful in learning how to deal with students with disabilities and which do not require an impossible amount of additional exertion on the part of

those people supposedly dedicated to the requirements of each individual student. Rather than "mainstreaming," or educating children in regular classes, teachers need to determine school placement and learning programs individually, according to the specific needs of each child.

What teachers have to realize is that giving extra help to a student with a learning disability does not entail coddling or spoiling them. Students with dyslexia who require help on an individual basis, extra time on tests or projects, or extra time to think before responding to a question in class would not be receiving "special privileges" or "preferential treatment." Denying students this extra time or extra help is like asking a student who wears glasses to read the blackboard without them. Because learning disabilities are not physically manifested, they are often overlooked or ignored, which is unfair both to the child as a student and to the teacher as an educator, as neither is realizing her true potential. However, even if teachers are willing to dedicate extra time to individual students through becoming more educated on different teaching techniques and putting these techniques into practice, they are often severely limited by the school system by which they are employed.

The school system has a major responsibility to its dyslexic students. School systems differ enormously in their resources for helping dyslexic students. For example, a well-funded school with a small number of dyslexic students and a staff committed to understanding and treating the problem will succeed better than a poorly funded school with an overwhelming number of dyslexic students. Schools are required by Federal law to meet the needs of all students -- regardless of the cost. This may require an adjustment of priorities when it comes to expenditures. Instead of spending money on a sports team of a few students, or stadium lights, or even the purchase of thousand-dollar computers which few students use for any length of time or on a regular basis, schools need to put the education of their students first. Before teachers even get to the school system, they should already be prepared to work with students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities.

All too often, special training for preparing teachers to work with dyslexic children is minimal. "In some higher education

institutions teacher candidates may hear no more than a half-hour lecture or report on dyslexia (usually at the graduate level)."

Teachers report that they are insecure, lack confidence, and do not really know how to work with dyslexic students because they do not receive enough training for working with children with dyslexia. Not only do regular classroom teachers have this problem, but also those trained at the graduate level as reading specialists and special education teachers majoring in learning disabilities. Some teachers, are unable to provide an adequate education because they simply do not know how. In my family's experience, though, the case has often been that both teachers and the school system are unwilling to bother with dyslexic and other learning disabled students, or unwilling to admit that a problem exists at all.

I recently spoke with a woman who has a dyslexic child in college at Old Dominion University. It startled and upset me to find that she and her son, Frank, had many of the same problems with teachers that my sister is having now. Although the public school system in New Jersey has a better approach to teaching learning disabled students than the one in Maryland, still she was told constantly that her son would be better off learning a trade than going to college. Throughout grammar school, the school psychologists told her that Frank was just lazy and that family problems at home were behind his below average performance in school. In fact, his parents were condescendingly viewed as uninformed, biased onlookers when it came to Frank's education. The school's clinical team consisted of "experts" in child development and psychoeducational techniques, and they were of the opinion that the boy's parents and teachers knew nothing about him, and that he would eventually be a "drifter throughout school" and a "nobody." Frank is now in his second year at Old Dominion University and he is performing very well despite his dyslexia, and despite the opinions of the "experts" in the field. The fact is that teachers and administrators have no idea how much time and effort people with dyslexia put into their schoolwork because of the varying levels of results they achieve. My sister often has this problem with her teachers.

Because my sister is so intelligent, and because she is so dedicated to her studies, she does well on her homework and on tests and quizzes, but she does an abnormal amount of work to achieve these ends. If the teachers could see what she goes through at home, working for hours only to be frustrated by some concept that eludes her grasp, having family members read a book to her after she has read it herself, and ignoring stress-induced migraine headaches to finish her work, they would understand that what she is doing and the effort she puts forth does not even out with the results she achieves. As it is, teachers think that she is not doing the work if she doesn't perform up to their expectations. Some have even gone so far as to call her "spoiled," "lazy," and a "brat," both on an individual bases and in front of the class, because they do not understand how difficult it is for her to do something that a "normal" child would consider easy. This is hurtful to a child's development on both an emotional level and an educational level. In fact, this kind of treatment on a regular basis can have far-reaching and drastic consequences.

Dyslexia is not something which goes away with time, and therefore, persistent difficulties in school, on the job, and in social interactions, can have very serious repercussions. Years of failure, frustration, and poor self-esteem can lead individuals to seek acceptance and satisfaction in ways that are not in his or her best interests. For example, there is growing evidence that there is a link between untreated learning disabilities in adolescence and dropping out of school, drug addiction and juvenile delinquency. Also, a continuity has been found between learning disorders in childhood and a high incidence of adult pathology, including depression and alcoholism. Adults who have grown up with learning disabilities have a tendency to be undereducated and underemployed, as a group. They have lower status jobs than their intelligence and ability would indicate, and fewer expectations for the future.

With the kind of education system we have today, people like my sister will find their dreams crushed and their ambitions suffocated. Because the SAT's are geared toward a certain type of student, and make few allowances for students with dyslexia, dyslexic students will not perform up to their potential. The scores they receive will not be a true reflection of their intelligence.

Because colleges place so much emphasis on SAT scores, the choices of students with dyslexia will be narrowed considerably. For example, since she was a small child my sister has always dreamed of being a veterinarian. I know that she has the dedication to achieve this goal, but I am afraid that she will be constantly bombarded with spoken and unspoken criticisms of her ability by society. Sarah will have to keep in mind that she can do anything she wants to, no matter how society labels or judges her, such as by standardized testing. She and many other people with dyslexia have an incredible amount of talent, insights, and ideas that will remain untapped and unshared if society does not begin to be more accepting of differences. If people were more open to different learning styles as well as better educated about the different problems others may have, then we would not have to rely on grades and standardized testing to prove our intelligence and our worth to society.

Recently, people have become more aware of differences between individuals in society, as is exemplified by the general trend toward "political correctness." However, they seem to have stopped at the differences that one can see visibly. Learning disabilities, dyslexia in particular, need more attention. If teachers, school systems, and psychologists realized this, my sister would not have to spend twice the usual amount of time on her homework every night, and her stress-induced migraines might disappear. I know that Sarah will succeed in whatever career she chooses, because she is so determined and stubborn, but I am sometimes scared that she will "burn out" before she realizes her dreams. If people were more understanding and aware of dyslexia, it would take away all the afternoons she is unable to function because her head hurts so badly, and all the nights she calls me crying because she cannot do her Spanish homework. There are many people who become what society believes them to be because people do not acknowledge their disability. Because it is not something one can see, dyslexia is all too often disregarded and neglected, which not only robs individuals of their ability to fulfill their true potential, but also robs society of a large pool of intelligence, creative thinking, and new ideas, which are more important now than ever.

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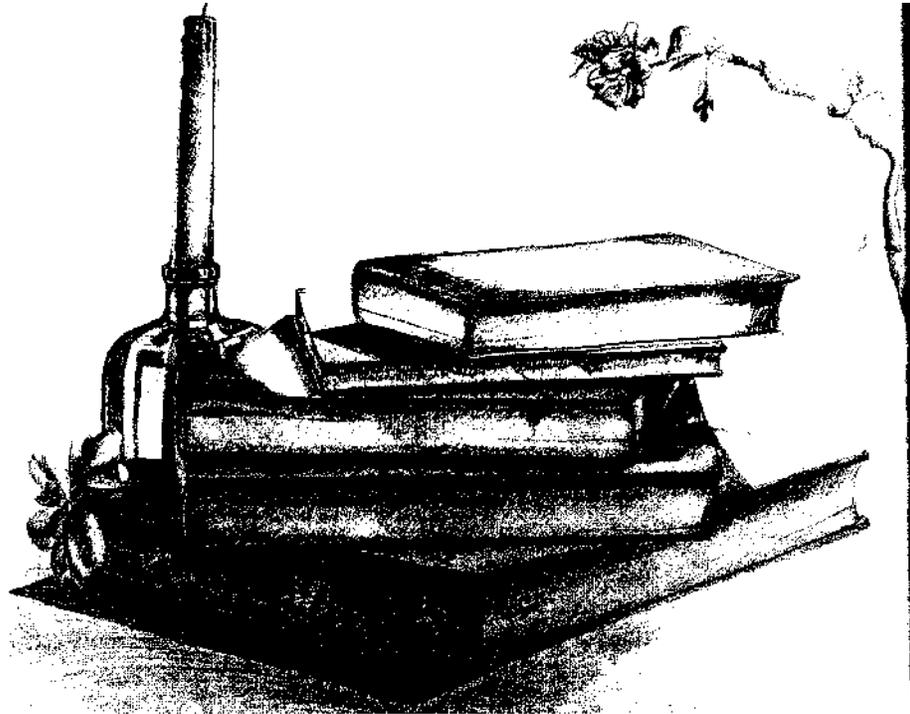
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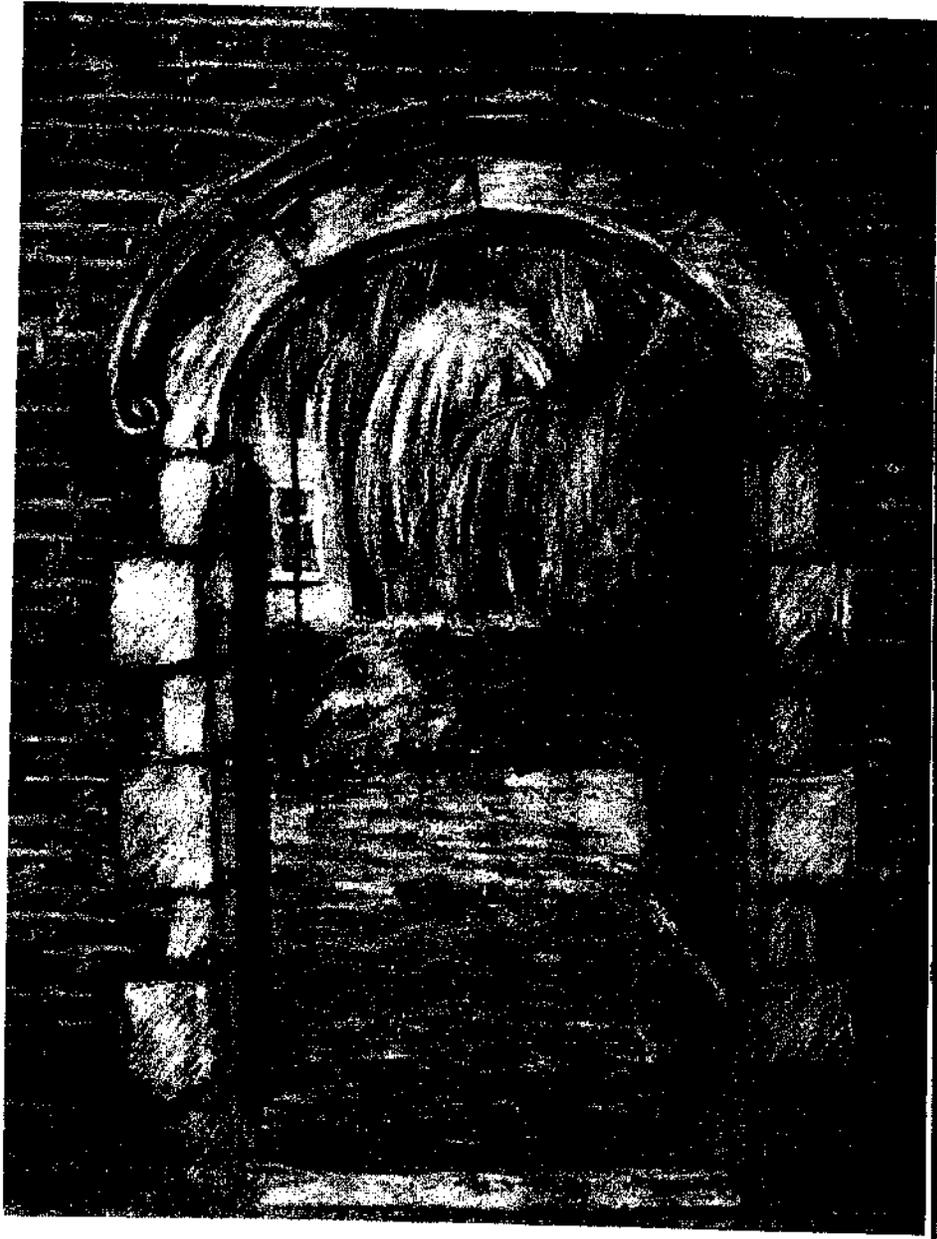


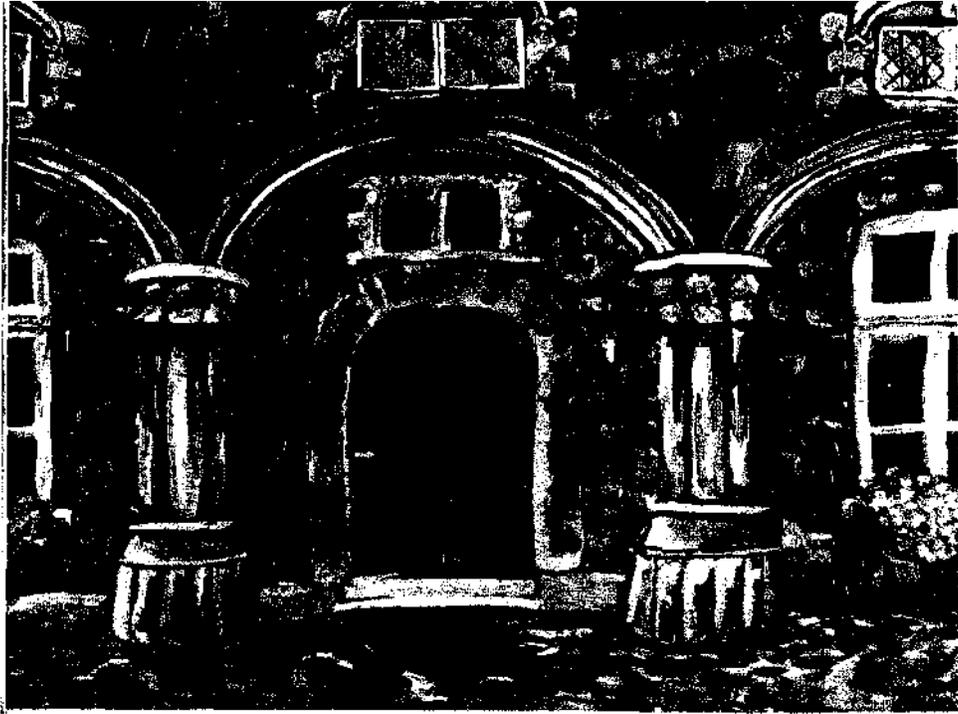


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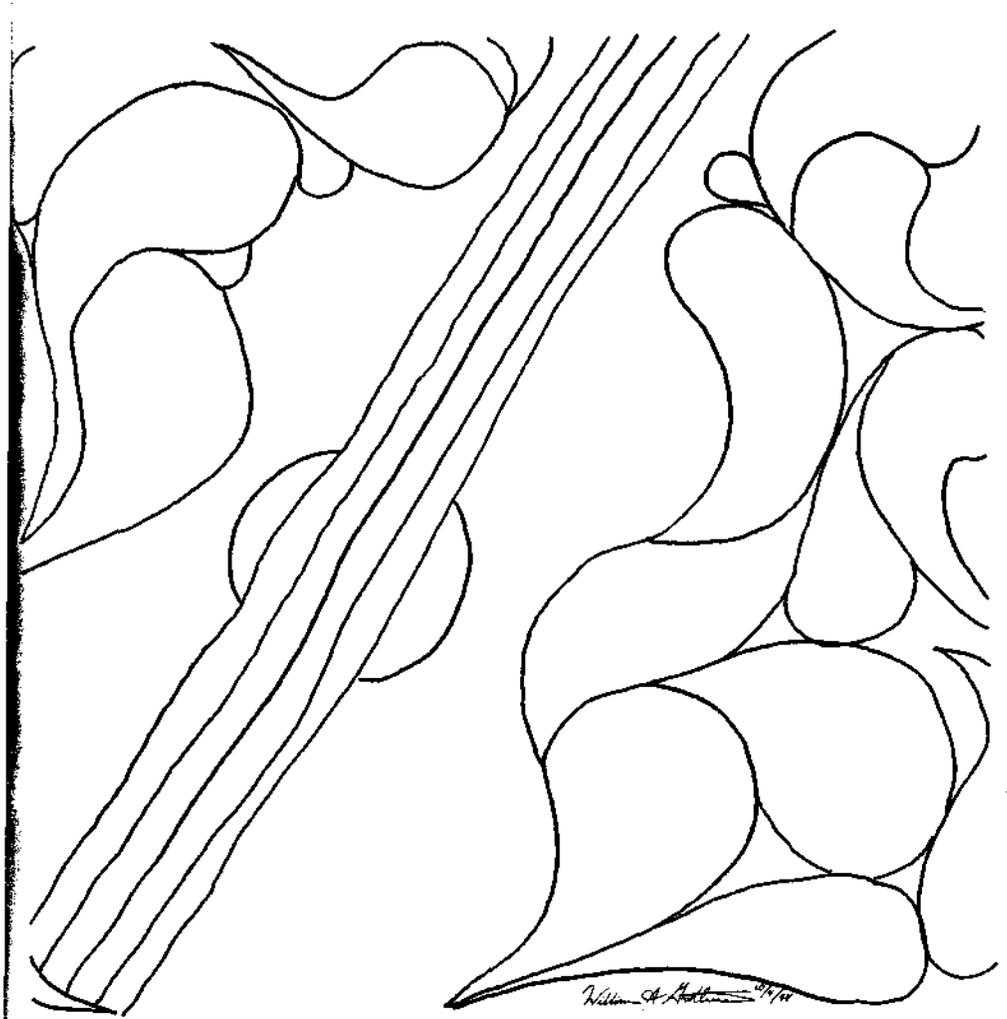












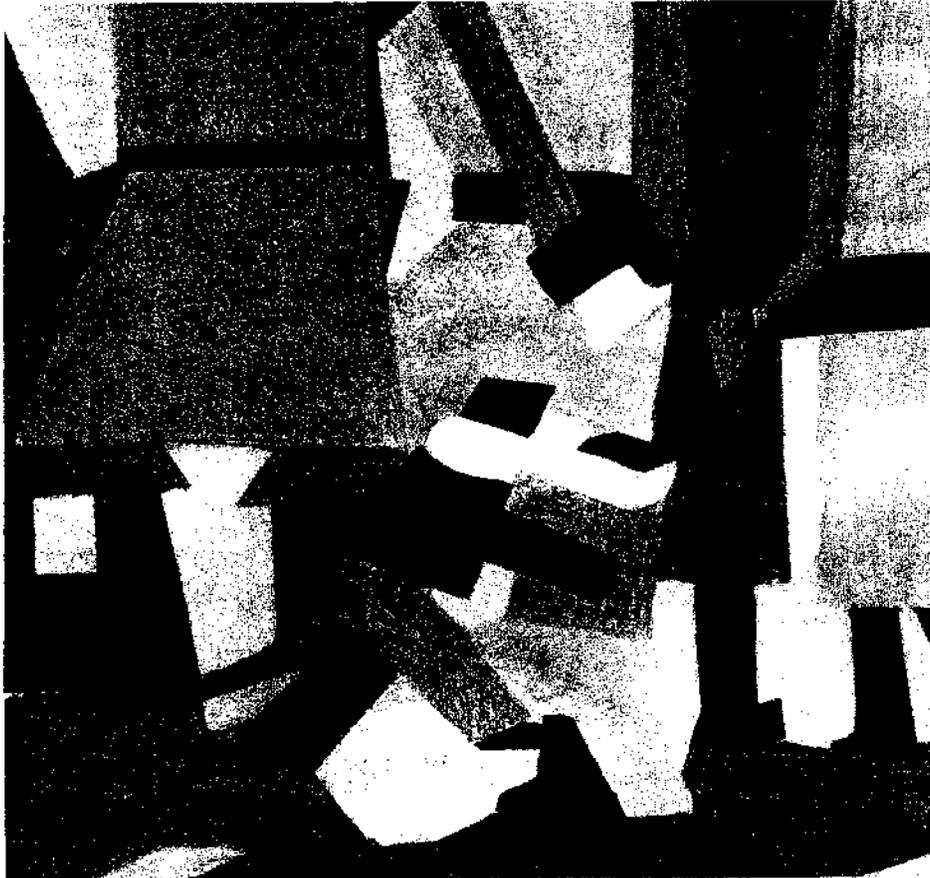














Common Ground

My friends and I approached the familiar diner, anticipating cheap food and a couple hours of conversation. The decaying concrete steps, covered with corrugated iron for protection, stood out sharply against the newly constructed wheelchair path that was built solely to comply with new ordinances. I climbed the steps and pushed through one of the glass double doors. Inside, the diner was very bright and very empty. A couple of skinheads hovered over their coffee in a dull orange booth to my left and an old man read the paper at the bar directly in front of me. Patsy Cline softly hummed from the individual jukeboxes in each booth. They looked old, but they blended in with the rest of the place. This wasn't one of those rebuilt facades that are supposed to look like flashy teenage hangouts of the fifties, like the Silver Diner, a few miles down West Third Street. This place was genuine, almost a landmark in my hometown of Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

The rest of my party bumped into my back as they rambled through the door, laughing loudly at the joke I obviously missed. Without saying a word, the old woman behind the bar showed us where to sit by pointing to my left. It was one o'clock on a Friday night, we had just seen a play, then decided we were hungry. As the discussion began of where to get some food, I instinctively reached inside my pocket and, as usual, found about two dollars and change. After we found our seats, a waitress brought some menus. Of course, my meager allowance would get me a decent helping of eggs and potatoes here. Orders were taken, the first round of coffee was served, and the conversation jumped randomly.

The situation was very typical of my life during high school, late night at Denny's. Although it wasn't as rustic as anything in a Barry Levinson movie, it was Williamsport's version of

Hemingway's "clean well-lighted place." It was open late, had cheap food, and you didn't have to be twenty-one to get in.

I went there after the game, after the date, after Baccalaureate, after just about everything. The size of the group always varied but my two best friends, Kevin Kirby and James Pivrotto, and I were always there. Kevin, James, and I hung out a lot together. In a small high school, with a small amount of class options and limited activities, you find you're basically with the same people throughout the entire day. We were in the same classes, played the same sports, worked at the same place during the summer, even ended up dating the same girls. Hell, we led the same lives until graduation.

As we sat in Denny's, we drank coffee and imagined rebellion against our small parochial school and stern Catholic surroundings. We became excited as we rationalized how we couldn't get in trouble for wearing shorts to school. "They're pants, just shorter. The rule book says they have to be single-seamed and navy blue. Nowhere does it say how long they have to be!" We resolved that the only thing to do about Sr. Mary Catherine of Christian Charity was to beat her in a dark alley. Not seldom did the conversation fall to thoughts incarnate. We let our evil minds ramble before we routinely atoned for it at Mass on Sunday.

It's funny what we would talk about at that diner. Although sports sparked many great debates (it's very hard to be a Notre Dame fan so close to the Happy Valley of Penn State), they never held our attention for long. Women were interesting but admittedly, none of us really knew anything about them, so comments were generally the same and short-lived. Nobody cared who got A's, or who was given some honor award. The conversations that lasted for hours were about the strangest things, the zany occurrences of life that get funnier every time the story is told.

The zaniest guy we knew was Edward Boerke. I don't think I have ever been at Denny's without hearing an Eddie story. Eddie was just a funny guy. He was extremely intelligent, an amazing actor and piano player, but his personality was as screwy as the way he put his tie on in front of his locker every morning. Sometimes he could be malicious in his antics, but you just couldn't force yourself

to get angry with Eddie. His long slender limbs and flaming, poorly cut, red head created an appearance that just couldn't be taken seriously. Best of all, as much as we loved him, the nuns hated him.

At Denny's, everyone always laughed at the story of how Eddie tried to play a soccer game with a five by seven picture of the Pope taped to his jersey. He actually argued with the coach on how it was going to give him good luck, so he just couldn't take it off. That is, of course, until the coach benched him. Another great anecdote was when he took a wireless microphone with him in the bathroom, so suddenly everyone at play practice was trying to figure out what they were hearing over the intercom. If Eddie happened to be at Denny's, he was the guy that would accept the dare to eat the glop by mixing all the condiments on the table.

These were things that we could laugh about until late into the night. No one could ever make the comment, "I guess you had to be there," because we always were "there." These were the shared experiences that come with close friends. Only through so much time spent together could we know everything about each other, what was going on in each other's lives and how each other thought about everything. The laughter came so hard, it brought tears to our eyes.

I remember one day when nobody told an Eddie story. It was a Saturday in late August, the summer before I left for college. Kevin, James, and I were at Denny's picking at some runny eggs shortly after Eddie's funeral. He had been with some friends walking through the woods above what is known as "mayor's cliff." Somehow, he had slipped off the edge.

Like all small towns, everyone knows everybody, so even though Eddie was only eighteen, the church was absolutely packed and I couldn't even see his casket from where I had to stand in the cemetery. We had trouble believing that it really even happened, but when we came out of shock it was one of those horrible events that reminds us of our own fatality. I believe everyone else went home immediately after the burial to try to make sense of it, but the party rental store where Kevin, James, and I worked expected us to come in and tear down some wedding reception after Eddie's services were over. I think what few words that were spoken, as we procrastinated in Denny's, were of damnation toward our pitiless boss.

Here we were, about to leave for this completely foreign experience called college, horribly reminded that we weren't immortal, and faced with the reality that someone will always be making us do something that we don't want to. Everything seemed unknown, questionable, and even dreaded. Yet, for the time being, we were at rest with each other's company in this cheap, greasy diner.

A week after the funeral, I packed my things and headed for college in Baltimore. Kevin went to school in Bloomsburg, which is about an hour east of Williamsport, and James went to school at the private college in Williamsport. We promised to stay in touch throughout the year, which we did. I found out in short letters that James had made that soccer team and Kevin began his search for the best fraternity, while I tried to express how, in my folly, I was excited about becoming an English major. It was obvious that a lot lay ahead of all of us. Although there was a lot of uncertainty out there, we were excited. Different things were everywhere and we were ready to distinguish ourselves from the other thirty-five students in our graduating class. Cavalier about what lay ahead, we didn't yet realize the importance of what was behind us.

That following break, it didn't take long for James, Kevin and I to get together and go to Denny's. We had been visiting some friends one night, and when it was time to leave, we didn't feel like going home yet. When we pulled into the parking lot, it seemed that the place hadn't changed at all. I knew the diner would never change; it seemed almost to stand still in time. The prices didn't even seem to be affected by the advancing of time.

We walked in and saw all the same characteristics it had before, from Patsy Cline rambling through the jukeboxes, to the hostess that refuses to say anything more that she has to. Oddly, the place was pretty full for this hour of night. James said that its popularity had really picked up that fall; there will always be more insomniacs who don't want to go home.

We found our seats, ordered coffee and began talking. I think it was then that all of us noticed something that none of us expected. There was a pause in the conversation. There was never a pause in the conversation before, at least not one that couldn't be

attributed to tiredness or some petty quibble. It was actually hard to talk. Stumbling, we started trying to tell each other what was going on in our lives, but the conversation wasn't like it always used to be. It had fallen from sharing ideas and feelings to reporting stories. In fact, we even had trouble doing that. By the time our eggs had come, I couldn't grasp Kevin's necessity of getting into a fraternity, nor did I understand why James had to go to mandatory study hall during his season. I don't think they could understand why I still wanted to read a bunch of old stories. The pauses were becoming painfully frequent and long and we struggled to gain insight into each other's point of view.

I didn't know what had happened. I guess our lives were so interwoven before we left that it was hard to communicate when we came back. I think we were realizing that you have to talk differently to someone who doesn't live the same life as you, anymore. It was tough because even the funny stories from college just weren't that funny.

Just as another lull in the conversation was about to become uncomfortable, the waitress came around and asked us if we wanted our coffee refilled. Knowing that yet again I had little money in my pocket, I sheepishly asked if refills were still free. After she told me they were, I realized the question sounded very cheap. "Sorry," I replied, "just wanted to make sure I don't stiff you, I'm working off a limited budget."

She smiled and seeing our various college sweatshirts answered, "You guys are in school, you're not poor. You're just ruffing it for a few years." I think we were "ruffing it" more than she realized. We had just discovered how much our lives were changing. I couldn't believe that I just had trouble talking to my two best friends. I've heard it said that people walk in and out of your life like characters in a soap opera, but I couldn't imagine Kevin and James walking out of mine, though it seemed inevitable if we had that much trouble talking after being apart just a couple of short months.

Then James mentioned Eddie. He told an Eddie story that made us all die laughing. Yes, there was a bitter note at the end, as I suppose there always will be, but when Eddie lived he had the ability to make anyone laugh and there was no reason why his

memory shouldn't do the same. Someone brought up Sr. Mary Catherine of Christian Charity and wondered if the miserable tyrant was beaten yet. Then I took a beating from the Penn State fans and we all feigned new found knowledge of women. We were saved, back on common ground.

Although we laughed loudly for a long time, I couldn't ignore that we had changed. We didn't mean to change, no one wanted to distance themselves, but it just happens when your lifestyle switches. What used to be in our daily lives was now only in our memories. My life in Williamsport used to define my personality, now I had to recognize that part of my life as only a base upon which I will continue to grow. James, Kevin and I possess a common base, but the importance of that base is going to change.

I would like to believe that people don't change. I'd like to believe that thirty years from now, Kevin, James and I will be able to sit in this same diner and laugh like we did our senior year. Unfortunately, what we would like to believe sometimes just isn't true.

It was getting late and we all finished our last coffee. After paying our bill, we walked out into the cold parking lot. Looking back through the windows of the diner, I saw a group of young teenagers talking and laughing. They would probably stay until much later. They would enjoy each other until early in the morning, but it was time for us to go home.



Tunnel Vision

The man with the Willie Nelson hair-do and the black briefcase is ignoring the woman wearing stockings and New Balance running shoes. The shoes are white leather with pink and orange stripes. The stockings are black. The old lady sitting next to her, following the habit of all old ladies, has chosen a lipstick that is much too bright and has colored outside the lines. She is wearing white hair and keeps patting it into place. Her skirt is green; her sweater crocheted. In the rear, a young man in a grey suit and red tie is standing, right hand resting loosely on the orange seat next to him. He is pretending to read a book.

I say pretending because I am almost certain that like me, he is an observer — not a reader — and I wonder if he notices that I am watching him. I can almost discern the movement of his eyes behind glasses that are tinted, but it's hard to tell what's caught his attention — me or the best-seller spread accordion-style across his left palm. I turn my head away just in case.

I used to lose this eye-contact-look-away game all the time, concede to defeat by slightly raising the edges of my lips in a polite smile. Now, I am becoming a master player. I am inquisitor and mediator, stranger and friend. I am an underfed cat waiting to pounce. I am a child looking down upon a glass-enclosed ant farm. I see a complex subterranean network, neatly compartmentalized, well-maintained, efficient. Each ant is programmed to head in one direction only and to perform one job only. There is no time for other ants. No time for *hello, how are you?* or *hey, need some help?*. The ants drone on in a steady stream, digging newer, darker tunnels, inward, always inward.

I tunnel through with the others, our paths, like that of our train's, as clearly marked as the worn grooves on the surface of an old roll-top desk. We go with the grain, never against it. We slip by, in and out of each other's lives. We mean nothing to each other; we could mean everything to each other.

We emerge, up, up, up into the light. When we disembark, I watch. I watch college students with backpacks, a bunch of Catholic grammar school kids on a field trip, a troop of Boy Scouts, some field hockey players. I single out a woman in a long autumn-colored skirt who is breathing on her glasses to clean them. The man next to her is wearing a bow tie. A clump of thick, black hair has dislodged itself from the gelled mass on his head and has fallen forward. It is only a small, out-of-place detail, but it is an inconvenience, and I stop myself from entering the scene and pushing back the lock of hair.

I turn and watch Amtrak employees reporting for work in navy blue pants and vests that were fashionable three decades ago. Each one wears a name tag, but no one calls any of them by name. Not even the lonely grandmothers who grab their elbows at every stop. They say "Sonny" or "Young Man" or "Boy." Never "Michael" or "Sam" or "Steve."

I watch a blind man ahead of me with curiosity. He is one of three I will see that day, walking with his cane jutting out in front of him, leaning forward and pricking up his ears for the sound of the train. This man is heavy-set, with a big belly hanging over his belt. His suit is light grey and needs ironing. His face is pockmarked with scars and his stare is empty, but something about him is happy. I name him George.

I decide that helping George would be acceptable. I'm willing to take that risk. It may set me back a few now, but not in the final contest, not when the final prizes are awarded. As it turns out, though, I've already lost this round — it is a gentle young black woman, not me, who first takes George firmly by the arm and guides him on the escalator to the green and yellow line.

Up in the waiting area at Union Station, a man approaches me, the first person to approach me all day. He wants to know if I am waiting for him. "Are you supposed to meet me here?" he asks.

"I'm looking for a girl with a ribbon in her hair." I tell him no and look away. There's no sense getting involved; it's dangerous to talk to strangers.

I resume my vigilance. A man asks the woman in front of him for the Sports section. She is carrying a tote bag with red straps and grey stripes with the word "San Francisco" scrawled across it in fancy script. She hands over the paper without a glance. The man returns it quickly. He seems fearful of infringing, fearful of overstepping the hidden boundary of her generosity.

Across the room, a fat man with a walkie-talkie attached to his pants alternately gulps down a banana and spoonfuls of frozen yogurt. The yogurt looks like strawberry with nut crunch from where I am sitting. An Oriental man in a pin-stripe suit sits down next to me and lights up a cigarette. I am immediately suspicious because there are so many empty seats. He is making gestures to another man at a pay phone, and I imagine that I have placed myself in the midst of some dangerous and illegal transaction. I don't like that feeling of being caught, without a strategy, without a next move. I look straight ahead — it's my way out.

I see a little black boy in denim overalls, crying and whining as his mother drags him along like a piece of luggage. The sight brings me back to an encounter on a Baltimore city street a few evenings before. A woman had come right up to our faces, but I am convinced that she could not really see through eyes that were filmy and dull. "Scuse me, 'scuse me, can you help me?" We listened to her, ignored her and walked by her, trying not to notice her thin frame and the skin pulled tight across her cheekbones.

The woman wandered off aimlessly, pulling her son behind her. We trudged another block in silence until my friend said it. It wasn't right to just walk by. We had to go back. We just had to do something. We each carefully separated one dollar bill from the rest of our money. A dollar, we thought, was safe — not too much and less stingy than a handful of change. We offered to buy the woman food, and the little boy tugged at the woman's pants leg and said, "Mommy, Mommy, they said they'd buy us some food." "I don't want the junk they sell in there," she replied sullenly, "I'm taking you to McDonald's."

I followed her gaze up the block. There was no McDonald's in sight, and I guessed right away a little boy would go hungry that night. I was angry. This woman disgusted me. This woman discouraged me. This woman was not worth it. She was not a George.

George was innocent. He hadn't done anything wrong. He'd just been dealt a bad hand of cards, had placed his bets on all the wrong horses. All George needed was a little help beating the odds.

Beating the odds, that was easy, that could be done. All that meant was working hard and following the crowd. That's what my sister thought, too, until, last Wednesday, standing on the sidewalk a block from her office, she was struck to the ground by a station-wagon taxi. She was lucky to escape with a concussion, a broken shoulder and some stitches and bruises.

Suddenly, she was a George. Suddenly, people started to recognize her. She received cards from co-workers and neighbors she barely knew, and a woman who witnessed the accident even paid a visit. Lawyers called, wanting to take the case. Even *The Washington Post* thought something might be there -- a "human interest" story they call it, the kind that people look at, think "This could happen to me," and walk away.

Fortunately for *The Post*, a police officer found a pair of shoes at the scene of the accident, and tried to return them to a nearby store. The shoes turned out to be my sister's. She had been knocked clear out of them. The next day, *The Post* ran an article accompanied by a sensational photo of the taxi smashing through a storefront window. They didn't have much to report on my sister's condition and they got her age wrong. And as for those shoes, they were black, not blue.

Why was I so disappointed? I might have reported the very same thing.



No Longer the Name Game

It was the thickest layer of dust I had ever seen. Sneezing as I began to wipe it from the surface of the black leather-covered binder, I got the impression that my great-uncle had never cleaned his basement. My late great-aunt used to keep the rest of the house in miraculous shape, but she dared not invade my uncle's cellar sanctuary. Uncle Ray always was a pack rat, but I never realized how much so until I found myself helping to clean out his house after his death.

He used to spend hours upon hours in this basement. I always assumed he was trying to escape my Aunt's constant nagging, but standing there gazing over his pile of lifetime memorabilia, I realized that he probably spent his time there reliving his past, daydreaming about his youth in New York City: schoolboy by day, Yankee Stadium souvenir vendor by night. The binder slipped from my hands and hit the bare cement floor with a loud crack. Looking down, I realized it was a scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings, some of which were now scattered over the floor. Forty-plus years-old tape just doesn't hold as well as it once did.

Picking up the clippings, faded yellow with worn edges, I noticed that they were all articles about baseball. Box scores, game reports, and season previews lined every page. As an avid baseball fan myself, I recognized many of the names in the clippings, and started reading.

"Splendid Splinter Downs Yankee Clipper's Ship-Sox take two from Yanks" read one headline. What I wouldn't give to have been around baseball in those days. Not much could beat a late-

season showdown between the Red Sox and Yankees and their two stars, Ted Williams, "The Splendid Splinter," and Joe DiMaggio, "The Yankee Clipper." Uncle Ray and I could always talk about baseball. He knew everything about the game and was very opinionated about it. DiMaggio was his favorite player, and no one dared tell Uncle Ray that someone else might have been better than Joe D. Uncle Ray's favorite topic was Joltin' Joe's famous 56-game hitting streak during the 1941 season. Uncle Ray beamed with pride as he told the story of the streak, almost as if he had a part in it himself. I once tried to tell Uncle Ray that Williams should have won the MVP award in '41 (over DiMaggio), because during DiMaggio's streak, he only hit slightly above .400, while Williams hit .406 over the entire season. I learned my lesson; Uncle Ray didn't speak to me for several weeks thereafter. I can only imagine what the season of 1941 was like: The Yankee Clipper versus The Splendid Splinter, The House that Ruth Built, and The Green Monster. I'd love to have been a part of that great American pastime—not baseball, but nicknames.

Nicknames have always been a part of American life, from politics to sports. Nicknames are the one factor that links "Honest Abe" Lincoln to "Hammerin Hank" Aaron to every famous American in between. Maybe nicknames didn't originate in the United States, but Americans certainly perfected them. The word "nickname" comes from the Old English "an ekename," meaning to give an additional name, or the name itself. It's interesting that the word "nickname" is not only a noun, but also a verb. This implies participation by an outside party, who was as responsible for the sobriquet as the nicknamed party himself. No one had ever successfully nicknamed himself because in order for a nickname to endure, it must come from an obvious feature of the person. Although Alexander the Great, Ivan the Terrible, and Richard the Lion-Hearted were all certainly powerful enough to give themselves those nicknames, they didn't: The nicknames emerged from their respective peoples, who recognized their traits out of respect or out of fear. There is a direct connection between a nicknamed person and those who surround him. The nicknamed party usually has distinguished himself from his contemporaries in some way or

another and is therefore seen as notable. Notability generates nicknames. The combination of sports and nicknames is even more of a "natural" than Robert Redford's famous movie character. The popularity of baseball players is unsurpassed, making them highly susceptible to nicknames.

Nicknames allow the "common man" to associate with his heroes. Calling out a nickname forms a bond between player and fans, as if they had a familiar connection to one another. Visiting young hospital patients, George Ruth told them to forget the formal "Mr. Ruth" and to just call him "Babe." The powerful slugger and sickly youngster met on a single plane. Seemingly, "The Babe" was not reduced to their level; they were elevated to his.

Therein lies the magic of nicknames. They allow man to identify with Superman. Even nicknames developed out of respect produce this intimate feeling. All nicknames allow man to break invisible lines and to shape the game in his mind. The game would be boring if players were only identified by number. Imagine saying, "Boy, that number three sure can hit," instead of "The Babe really socked one that time." Separated by stands and security guards, fans and players bond through the nickname, the fan shaping the player's image.

Nicknames have evolved like any other natural creation. Through time, nicknames became an art form, something which not only reflects culture, but also has a hand in determining its course. In the case of baseball, nicknames have been derived from any number of things. Because of the public's deep involvement in the nicknaming process, the nickname became a part of the game itself, and its legend.

The fascination with nicknaming comes because it is a spontaneous process. Few nicknames have been methodically contrived, most just happen in the course of conversation. Such was the case with what is probably baseball's most famous sobriquet. On a recent trip to the Babe Ruth Museum in Baltimore, I questioned a member of the museum staff about the origin of "Babe," and was told that scout Jack Dunn, upon first seeing hefty young George Herman Ruth, remarked that he was as big as Paul Bunyan's ox, Babe, and the name stuck.

Luckily for all parties involved, not all nicknames are references to animals, mythical or real. Nicknames can come from almost any source, ranging from a person's ancestry or physical attributes, to his talents or accomplishments. It is both common and convenient to shorten a name like Yastrzemski to "Yaz," or Cornelius McGillicuddy to "Connie Mack." Although nicknames like this become very frequent, they tell virtually nothing about the person to whom they are applied.

Many popular nicknames come from physical attributes. Ernie Lombardi was "Schnozz" because of his large nose. There have been dozens of "Lefty's" and even more "Red's." The ones which stand out are the more creative ones, those that almost beg for a story to be told: Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown, "Pee-Wee" Reese or Marty Marion, "The Octopus."

Often nicknames do, in fact, have great stories attached to them. Jesus Alou was called "Jay" because broadcasters feared Spanish listeners may have considered a call of "Jesus strikes out" to be a blasphemy. "Shoeless" Joe Jackson got his nickname by playing most of a game in his socks because his news spikes were too painful. Frank Baker would forever be known as "Homerun" after he hit game-winning round-trippers in successive World Series games during the "dead-ball" era. Perhaps the greatest story of them all surrounds the great pitcher Christy Mathewson and his nickname, "Big Six." A young fan wished to write to Mathewson, but he didn't know the correct address. He mailed the letter with nothing but a large number "6" on the outside of the envelope. The letter was delivered directly to Mr. Mathewson.

It's easy to give someone a nickname, but getting it to stick is a different story. In order for a nickname to become popular, it must be readily identifiable with the player it represents. It must also capture an aspect of their character which is well-known and obvious to all. A nickname must have rhythm and most importantly, originality, the absolute key. The same nickname never works for two different people. There will never be anyone who can pull off the name "Babe" like Ruth did, and "The Big Train" just doesn't approach the same meaning when applied to someone other than Walter Johnson.

Real nicknames aren't "Bob" or "Bill" or "Jim." Calling someone "Bud" or "Mac" just doesn't capture anyone's interest. Great nicknames manage to capture a part of the person they describe, whether it be a great accomplishment or a personal attribute. They are etched into the minds of all they come across. Like the legends and stories of the players themselves, great nicknames never die. Most great players will forever be known by their popular nicknames, even if their real first names are forgotten, as in the case of Lawrence "Yogi" Berra.

Players with nicknames are far better known than those who lack them. It's not clear whether the nickname causes this popularity or results from it; but it is abundantly clear that there is a connection. Uncle Ray's favorite player, DiMaggio, was known as "The Yankee Clipper," "Joltin' Joe," or just "Joe D." His popularity raised him to the level of cultural icon. Ernest Hemingway refers to him in "The Old Man and the Sea." Many homes proudly displayed pictures of the great Yankee. His fame has crossed lines into the realm of music. There are references to DiMaggio in songs written decades after his career ended. He is mentioned in John Fogerty's "Centerfield" along with similarly nicknamed "Say Hey" Willie Mays and "Ty" Cobb. Simon and Garfunkel's hit "Mrs. Robinson" does the best job of all in summarizing America's love affair with Joe D: "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? /Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you.../ What's that you say Mrs. Robinson?/ Joltin' Joe has left and gone away."

The best nicknames are given to someone not for physical attributes, to acknowledge nationality, or out of convenience, but as a form of respect for accomplishments. Any number of players might be "Lefty" or "Red," but few could be "Homerun" Baker or "Hammerin' Hank" Aaron. The most enduring nicknames evoke images of grandeur, majesty, often having a royal, titular quality. Such nicknames often begin with the word "the," implying great distinction and accomplishments which may never be duplicated: Mickey Mantle "The Commerce Comet," Ted Williams "The Splendid Splinter," Joe DiMaggio "The Yankee Clipper," Lou Gehrig "The Pride of the Yankees," Frankie Frisch "The Fordham Flash," Ty Cobb "The Georgia Peach," Honus Wagner "The Flying

Dutchman," Jimmy Wynn "The Toy Cannon," and Roger Hornsby "The Rajah." The ultimate level of respect is shown in a nickname like Ernie Bank's "Mr. Cub." There are only a handful of great nicknames like this in the game today: "The Rocket," Roger Clemens, "The Big Hurt," Frank Thomas, and "The Bulldog," Orel Hersheiser.

A change has occurred in recent years. The number of enduring nicknames, those that display respect and a connection to the player, has drastically decreased. If today's stars played in the age of Joe D., they'd have many great nicknames, but one can only find a handful of examples in the game today. The nickname is a dying art form, one which no one really cares to rejuvenate. Great nicknames are about as frequent as a .400 hitter, while others are as common as a light-hitting middle-infielder. It's not clear why the nickname is fading, or why it originated in the first place. There hadn't been any major change in the game between the lines, so the change seems to have occurred within society.

I fear the great nickname is a dying breed with no hope of recovery. When is the last time an up-and-coming ballplayer has been given the tag of "The Wild Horse of the Osage," like Pepper Martin, "The Say Hey Kid," like Willie Mays, or even "Charlie Hustle," like Pete Rose? The problem today is the increasing alienation between fans and players. The nickname is dying because fans can no longer identify with players. Players used to be Everyman. Many had to get off-season jobs just to get by. In the current state of the game, the minor star may make more in one season than many people do in a lifetime. Today, "Charlie Hustle" may as well be "Charlie Sit On Your Wallet."

Great nicknames don't come around that often today because the respect is gone. It is very difficult for a person being paid millions of dollars for playing a game to garner respect from the common man. One can frequently hear statements such as "He's not worth that much," or "Nobody should be paid like that just to play a game." When Babe Ruth was asked to justify the fact that he made more than President Hoover, he responded, "I had a better year than he did." Today, all but rookie players earn more than the president. There is growing hostility where there used to be admiration and

respect. Fans used to attend games and cheer for the home team, sometimes waiting to get an autograph at the players' exit after the game. Now, players are constantly under criticism from radio call-in shows, newspaper columnists and fans in the stands. Today, many won't even acknowledge autograph seekers.

The change in the atmosphere surrounding the game has prompted a documentary series entitled "When It Was A Game." The programs are created from player and fan home movies from the 1940's and 50's. It's remarkable to see how interaction between players and fans has collapsed over the years. The player that would gladly pose for a picture with a child in the 1940's may today ask for the child's security clearance, his medical records, and a nominal fee. One could be arrested now for even attempting to bring a movie camera into most stadiums.

Nicknames are supposed to be timeless, but appear to be as mortal as all else. Contemporary "political correctness" prevents us from calling someone "Three-finger" Brown. Today, it would lead to accusations of insensitivities toward the physically challenged. Bill Lee could no longer be called "Spaceman" because one shouldn't joke about mental illness. I can't imagine the trouble which would be aroused with Al "The Mad Hungarian" Hrabosky.

Many of the nicknames in the past came from newspaper writers who were searching to inject some life into their columns, most baseball fans' main interaction with the game. Such a thing rarely happens today. The writer could easily get slapped with a lawsuit if he portrayed the player in a manner the player didn't appreciate. In recent years, sports reporters have been verbally and physically assaulted by players they had criticized. In a highly publicized event, a player threw a cup of bleach on a reporter who had questioned his efforts.

Still, such incidents are the exception rather than the rule. The skill level of today's best players is comparable with those of the past, but many of today's best and most exciting players have never had nicknames, and probably never will. The art of the nickname is almost dead. Consider Ken Griffey Jr.: the twenty-four year old is probably the game's best player and one of its best showmen. He had two of the most boring nicknames possible: "Kid," and "Junior."

Nicknames give a player distinction and individuality, both lacking in society today. Many of today's great players are in the class of the talented greats of yesteryear, but they lack the mystique associated with past players. People say that there aren't many heroes or role-models left today. It's not clear if a nickname comes from fame and popularity or results in it, but the art of the nickname is something to which more attention might be paid.



The Flight of the Spirit

When I was a young boy living in Brazil, I built traps to catch birds. Each trap was made of wood and was shaped like the great pyramids of Egypt. The traps were made in the style of a log cabin, with thin pieces of wood overlapping one another. One stick held up the trap on one side, so that only one of its four sides was touching the ground. To keep the pyramid balanced in this position, a second stick would be wedged against the side of the trap on the ground and made to lean against the first stick. It was the second stick that would set off the trap when the bird knocked it over or stepped on it in order to get to the food. This trap was very successful and with it I caught many birds, which I later set free. One time, however, the trap broke the wings of a bird. It was a blue-grey medium sized bird which resembled the common pigeon. Not knowing what to do, I asked my grandmother for help. My grandmother looked at me with her big blue eyes and white bushy hair, wiped her hands on the apron that was always against her frail thin body and told me not to worry; she said that she would keep him in a cage and heal his broken wings. Every day she cleaned his wounds, applied medicine and changed his bandages. This went on for about a month, until one day when I looked into the cage and saw that it was empty. My grandmother told me that he had healed and had flown away, but I was not convinced. Why hadn't she called me when the time came to free the bird? I think that she had secretly put the bird out of its misery. I know that she could not stand to see the battered bird deprived of its freedom in the cage. She had always nagged at my grandfather to let go the many birds that he kept in cages. She knew that the bird would never fly again; and she would say that a bird without wings, without freedom, is no longer a bird. That is why to this day I can't stand the sight of a bird in a cage,

gilded or not. To me this is the ultimate sacrilege, it is the destruction of something both beautiful and free. Although I had felt badly about what I had done, at the time I had not truly realized the fullness of my actions; it took something more.

At the age of fourteen and in the eighth grade, I was forced by my parents to attend CCD with most of the other kids in my class. They didn't take it seriously and neither did I. When the teacher asked us to research a saint for a written report, I wasn't very interested. Most people chose a saint by their first names, John would write about St. John and Paul would of course choose St. Paul. Since St. Celso doesn't exist yet, I chose one of the most famous and most interesting of them.

St. Francis of Assisi began life as the son of a wealthy merchant. He was said to have been a handsome, merry leader of the youth of Assisi. In his early twenties, St. Francis underwent a complete transformation and became famous for his total submission to the vow of poverty. Unlike many of the noble clergymen of the time, he did not distance himself from reality. St. Francis always tried throughout his life to help the lepers and beggars of Italy.

He devoted his life to feeding the poor and preaching the word of God to the world. Thus, one might ask, how is St. Francis different from any other saint? He was not so far aloof from the world that he did not see the beauty in nature and especially in birds. Who hasn't seen a painting of St. Francis with birds? Many paintings depict him holding birds in the palms of his hands or walking down a dirt path in his brown robe enjoying their heavenly music. When I had researched St. Francis, I had read that at the time of his death, hundreds of birds could be seen circling over his house. It isn't too hard to believe when one hears the story of the welcoming of the birds upon the arrival of St. Francis and his closest companions to his most dear wilderness retreat.

When they were come nigh to the foot of the very rock of La Verna, it pleased St. Francis to rest a while under the oak tree that stood by the way, and there standeth to this day; and resting beneath it St. Francis began to consider the lay of the place and of

the country round about. And lo, while he was thus pondering there came a great multitude of birds from divers parts that, with singing and fluttering of their wings, showed forth great joy and gladness, and surrounded St. Francis, in such wise that some settled on his head, some on his shoulders, and some on his arms, some on his bosom, and some around his feet. His companions...beholding this, marvelled greatly, and St. Francis rejoiced in spirit, and spake thus: "I do believe, dear brothers, that it is pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ that we abide on this solitary mountain, since our sisters and brothers, the birds, show forth such great joy at our coming."

I believe that this story shows the true nature and spirit of the saint. He was so kind and loving of all of God's creatures that it seems proper for the birds to act in this way. St. Bonaventura wrote of St. Francis's meeting with Christ who came down to him from heaven in the form of a man with six wings nailed to a cross. Two of the wings were covering his body, two were raised above his head and the other two were raised as if in flight. Not only are angels almost always, in works of art, depicted with great white wings, but here is Christ himself displaying the wings of a bird.

It seems that we see something of the divine in birds because we have always depicted angels in works of art with wings. The wings are what gives the bird his freedom and they are the parts of birds that we see with angels in art. Thus, it is the freedom of the birds that we see as divine. Angels depicted with wings are symbolic of the freedom they possess. When a human being is freed from his or her earthly existence, he or she becomes like the bird and dons new wings. In the old movies, the person who dies and enters heaven is usually seen carrying a large pair of white wings on his or her back. Sometimes, however, when we look at birds, we feel the need to capture this freedom and stifle it. We do this in capturing birds, putting them in cages, by killing them or by injuring them so that flying is not possible. What brings us to do these things is our power-hungry nature. We feel the need to have the power to be able to give or take freedom at will. We are in effect making ourselves

into gods in giving ourselves this power. Everyone falls prey to the desire of making oneself godlike at one point or another.

When I was younger, I had somehow managed to get my hands on a BB-gun, as almost every fourteen or fifteen year old kid does. The novelty of shooting at tin cans or bottles soon wears thin, and unfortunately you begin to look at moving targets through the cross-hairs. I only shot at a couple of birds before my father brought home a painting which changed me around entirely. He brought home a painting of St. Francis not knowing that he was my patron saint. It was a beautiful painting. St. Francis was seated on a rock and perched in his hands and flying overhead were many brightly colored birds. To me, however, it was not just a painting about St. Francis because when I looked at that painting, I thought his face appeared like mine. St. Francis had dirty-brown curly hair, he had a narrow face and a Roman nose that was an exact duplicate of my own. I was so struck by this painting that on that day I laid the BB-gun in my attic where it lies to this day.

After all of this occurred I felt terrible for what I had done. I felt as if the thread connecting me with God had been cut and the vision had been erased. I had felt this way until my family and I made a trip last December to Italy for my birthday. We took an extensive tour through many of the famous Italian cities such as Rome, Venice and Florence. I remember seeing many of the old Italian churches with their cavernous insides and the many altars where the remains of famous saints lay buried. We visited a church in Padova and I can't remember the church's name, but I remember that outside this church, hundreds of pigeons gathered. There were people scattered throughout the crowd of birds feeding them bread and there was one woman with a pigeon resting on her palm, pecking away at the corn. When I saw her doing this I bought some bread crumbs from the street vendor and knelt down in the square with my palms out in front of me. All of a sudden a grey pigeon flew up and landed on my palm. His claws wrapped around my fingers and his wings stayed outstretched so that he wouldn't lose his balance. He was reminding me to keep my wings outstretched so that I wouldn't lose my balance.

Gripping Permanence

They were a dark olive, and the pads of the fingertips were caked with everlasting grease from working on the busses fifty-two hours a week. They were callused, but still sensitive to the needs of everything they encountered. They were small, but strong, and their power could be seen with a glance of the muscles which lay beneath the palm-side surface. They were the hands of my father, and of all the things I remember, I know and understand his hands the best.

I know my father was ashamed of those hands. I can remember him meticulously scrubbing each inch, desperately trying to get the garage out of them, for they were workman's hands. He viewed them as the hands of a grunt, a laborer. I saw them as impressive and marveled at the power and dexterity and the skill to which they called attention. Those hands could fix nearly anything, down to the 1960-something Maverick that called for attention more than any other member of the family.

His hands would work on the seemingly endless stream of automobiles every weekend, leeching away time I could have spent with my dad. I never really watched him work on the cars, simply because my mother wouldn't allow me near him when he had a wrench in his hands. He swore too often at the steaming engine parts and the wing-nuts that evaded his every attempt at capture. I grew weary of it all, and jealous of the cars. I was just a kid.

To a kid, those hands offered amazing comfort and utter solace. Those hands had a way of finding my shoulders and giving a firm grip just when their presence was required. Being a timid boy (to say the least), feeling their grasp would remind me of support and give me courage. Those hands would be the tools to give this boy

some solid grounding, away from all his fears and the terrors lurking within a child's imagination. I remember the way his hands would calm me out of a breathing fit. I would wake up in the middle of the night, presumably from some horrible dream, to find myself struggling with every breath. My father would hear me stirring, most likely awakened by the wheezing, and sit on the edge of the bed to rub my back. His hands were firm and supple, and the callused pads would scratch my back simultaneously as they massaged. The sensation would calm me, making me forget the dream. Those hands would literally restore my very breath.

For as hard and unfeeling as they may have appeared, those hands were truly the most gentle things I'd ever known. They would untangle any knot in a ball of twine for flying kites. They would find just the right piece to finish the border of a jigsaw puzzle (always do the borders first). They would wave at new acquaintances, preceding a warm smile shrouded always in stubble and wrinkles. And on those hands, only upon my father's hands, could the fragile parakeets ever perch themselves; they were too afraid of mine or my sister's grasping.

I never imagined seeing those hands as frail or old, children don't often ponder such things. But I would see them in such a condition. My father entered the hospital when I was about ten years old. All I knew was that his heart was bad and that the doctors were going to fix it. My father told me that surgeons all have hands of gold. I wasn't upset by it much, I always saw doctors and nurses in the same light as those hands, omnipotent. I had no fear.

The night before the surgery, I went to the hospital with my sister to visit my father. He was lying in bed playing along with "Jeopardy!" on the six inch television screen that swiveled before the inclined half of his bed. I noticed his hands, then his face and his smile (which I knew was false but it held me in awe) — the things that quantified for this child just who his father was were lying limp and gray at his sides, at rest on one of those thermal spun-polyester hospital sheets. I saw their gray color, and the tubes, three in all, that laced their way around and through his veins. For the first time in my life, I feared for my father.

But I should have known that those hands could come through. I should have known that they'd be only that much warmer and sensitive after the surgery. I should have known that their color would return, this time with a more engaging rosy hue, something I'd never seen before. As the doctors had told me, "Daddy's new veins can carry all his blood now." I was to assume that was a good thing. When I learned what a triple bypass operation actually entailed, I began to think that those hands were invincible, especially after I read the article in the paper about the operation; he was the first man in New Jersey to have an operation performed using artificial arteries for replacement. Following the operation, my father was famous to me and truly omnipotent. Four lively years punctuated by one severe heart-attack would rob me of that image.

It seems that in time we tend to forget faces, voices, even little idiosyncrasies that people tend to adopt. In these years following my father's death, there are several things that I seem to lose track of in my memory. I can't remember the right length of his mustache, the exact color of his eyes, nor what kind of watch he wore; I remember his hands with impeccable vividness. I suppose that stems from the feelings of connection people tend to have when it comes to another person's hands. There's a certain degree of personality that shines through the fingertips of a person; and that reverberates every time we come in contact with one another.

Hands are a concrete memory, not like faces or smells. In memory, they are constant. That brings to them an amount of comfort or even splendor in retrospect. You could say that those hands of my father's are more amazing to me now, after his death, in that they are the summation of all I remember of Antonio Pinho. It gives me a solace, the memory of his hands. And now, I realize that sometimes holding on to something the importance of which cannot be measured, is exactly the same thing as letting it go.

The last time I saw my father's hands was at his funeral. They were resting across his chest, his fingers meshed just above the ruby tie tack he secretly loved. I figured it was appropriate that those hands keep the tie tack a secret, for my father was never a vain man. Before they closed that casket, my sister and I got a final

chance to say good-bye to our father. She simply folded herself into my shoulder, wetting the crook of my neck. I placed my hands upon his and wished his soul a pleasant journey saying, "Bon Voyage." It ade my sister smile.

Later I would contemplate that moment, mulling it over repeatedly in my head. It wasn't that I denied the funeral, or the heart attack, or the doctors. I just couldn't comprehend touching those hands and not having them touch me back.



The Mystery of the Frozen Image

"Smile and say Cheese," the father pleads. Pressed between stone and sky, the cloudy lidded child smiles briefly. She is dressed in a blue and green Catholic School jumper that itches wretchedly, and is clutching a tin Annie lunch box because her mother wouldn't let her get the one with The Fall Guy on it, and she is missing a tooth. She stands in the black asphalt lake of the parking lot, and moments before looked as though she might bite off the hand of her new teacher. But for a plastic lipped, teeth stained instant, her face is happy for the camera. The photograph has, in fact, captured a half-truth. It is true that the child did smile, and the child did look happy, but the child at the moment was frightfully unhappy, and was only smiling to please her father. An outside viewer would most likely look at the picture and assume that it was a picture of an excited kindergartner on the first day of school. Yet, the actual content of the photograph will remain a mystery based on its place in history; the actual element of time that separates the viewer from the image.

Humans possess a desire to be visually stimulated; to use pictures to tell stories and to record events. Even the early forms of man exhibit this through their chalky designs on the walls of the caves they inhabited. The photograph is not exempt from man's inclination to find a story, in fact it is more subject to it based on the nature of the medium. Because a photograph is an image formed from light coming from the subject itself, it holds a certain sense of reality that other visual mediums cannot capture. Because of this, it is a popular belief that photographs are accurate reproductions of

the way the someone or someplace looked. The mystery of a photograph is often ignored by the viewer based on the popular conception of the photograph as truth. Many people therefore use the contents of a photograph as facts on which to base a story about what the photograph shows. We often search to know people we have never met in photographs, we expect the photograph to cater to our search for reality.

When photography was invented in 1837 by Louis Daguerre, he was experimenting with the light projection of images so that his paintings would be more realistic. The technology behind the photograph during its infancy was mainly used as an alternative for people who wanted to have portraits made but could not afford to have them painted. Photography served as a tool to record the way someone or someplace looked. The concept of a photograph has developed over time into an ideal that tells photographers not only to record how something merely looked, but to actually portray the way it was. A still image often only records how things were for a mere fraction of a second (most commonly anywhere between 1/60 and 1/500). The viewer is virtually oblivious to what has happened during the same second in which the photograph was taken. Though photographs may provide the most accurate coverage of the way something looked (i.e. architectural photographs), they only tell half-truths about the way someone may feel (portraits).

The photograph allows us to examine an outstanding moment that would go unnoticed into a stream of other moments with the flow of time. The photographer chooses the moment to capture, he presses the shutter release for that one (hopefully) revealing instant, yet he is powerless once the image is locked into the emulsion of his film. The photographer abstractly manipulates time, and impresses a frozen instant into a concrete product. The photographer, whether he is an artist wishing to make an aesthetic or profound statement, a journalist striving to capture a critical moment, or the family Polaroid freak who seems to cling to the edge of every single family reunion and wedding, his purpose with the camera will affect what the viewer will find in his image.

The way in which a photographer chooses to present his work can also affect the viewers perception. In a given context, the

feeling of reality in a photograph can purposely mislead the viewer. Advertising and propaganda take advantage of the photograph's feeling reality, and use the power of presentation to further manipulate it. During the 1960's, anti-war protest groups would use Eddie Adams' picture of the police chief of Saigon executing a Viet Cong officer to make the public think a senseless killing was taking place. The viewer is oblivious to the fact that the family of the police chief's best friend had just been slaughtered by the Viet Cong officer who stood conveniently below the barrel of his gun at the time of the picture. The photographer has the power to manipulate that frozen instant, and can present it in a manner that may mislead the viewer. Yet the power of presentation can also amplify what is true. During the 1930's, the Farm Security Administration sent a number of photographers out across America to photograph the depression era. Their job was to capture the devastating impact the depression was having on people across the country. One particularly moving image is "Depression Era Mother with Children" by Dorothea Lange. This photograph conveys a definite sense of hardship and exhaustion. The mother and children are dirty, the posture is tired, the mother's face is grainy, her skin is worn and aged and her eyes seem to send nails out of the page at a steady pulse. Because of its presentation, the viewers know that they are looking at a victim of the depression, and it is this knowledge that lends the photograph an air of validity it would not have had, had it been presented differently. The mystery of the photograph is untangled through the presentation. These half truths people gather from photographs are not bad, yet when the power of presentation is used to purposely mislead the viewer, the feeling of reality a photograph possesses is being abused. The presentation in such cases as the photo of the Viet Cong officer barely even allow room for viewer interpretation and force-feed a lie into the mind of the viewer. In comparison, the Dorothea Lange photograph is presented in a manner which clarifies the truth (though the truth is not definitely known unless one is present at the creation of the photograph).

When I flip through old family albums, I often question the accuracy of photographs, the way I did when I came across the picture of me on my first day of school. I am the only person who

knows how unhappy I was in that picture. Even my father has forgotten and will insist, that yes, I was happy to be at school. How can we accept what we see? How can we expect anything to be entirely accurate and revealing? There are pictures of people that I've never met, yet I feel like I know because we have so many glossy, flashy lipped, dressy pictures from weddings. There is one picture that I love in our album of my great-grandmother. She is not really smiling; she is merely looking into the camera with a tired and pleasant expression on her face. Her eyes are like charcoal in the black and white print, and though this is the only picture I have seen of her, based on it I feel like I could tell you how she walked and spoke. I even feel like I could tell you what kind of music she liked. Though what I think may not be true, the picture has moved me, and I've remembered it. The photograph has not necessarily told the truth, yet it has made a strong impression on me. I, the viewer, have interpreted it and made it tell me more than just what she looked like. I have looked for a story in the photo that may not be there. After all, I only know her for a split second in the photograph, yet I expect this to tell me the story of her life.

But a photograph can't let us know someone; it can lead us to an assumption, but it can't provide us with details. We may gather a definite sense of how someone is by the expression on their face in a photograph, but we do not know their name, their favorite color, or even what they are thinking about during the photograph. We cannot know what we see for only a moment. Though that split second can be scrutinized for an eternity, we can only establish a partial reality in our head. It will never be fact, only interpretation. This makes the image intensely flexible in meaning. It is after all, only a picture of a slice of time, yet these fractions of seconds dominate what we accept as truth, or at least give us enough information to make us feel we know enough to adequately invent our own truth. It allows a certain degree of intimacy that makes the work all the more rewarding for the viewer. When I look at pictures (especially of people I don't know), I enjoy the element of imagination that comes in. Yet when I look at pictures that I know the story behind, I'm often disappointed at how little they may actually tell.

When I look through the view finder in my camera, I know that what I may capture will only be a hint about what is actually happening, but the mystery only adds to the intrigue of the photograph. You can't aim the eye of the camera deep into someone's soul. The photographer can only hope to capture something that others can't see all the time, something that will leave that viewer with an impression. That image pressed and sealed on a mere slip of light sensitive paper has a story to tell. Yet the story will never be told completely because of the hindrance of time. The picture of the smoky-eyed woman who is my great-grandmother stares at me from the page of the family album. In my mind, that is a picture of a woman who was a good dancer and a good cook, a woman who still did her laundry with lye soap. She has a voice I will never hear, but in my mind it is throaty and beautiful, and I am happy with this assumption, even if I am wrong.



