ODDBALLS

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1 THE PITIFUL ENCOUNTER

When my sister Vicky and I were teenagers we talked a lot about hating people. Hating came easily to us. We would be walking down the street, notice a perfect stranger, and be suddenly struck by how much we hated that person. And at the dinner table we would go on and on about all the popular kids we hated at high school. Our father, who has a very logical mind, sometimes cautioned us about this. "Don't waste your hate," he would say. "Save it up for important things, like your family, or the President." We responded by quoting the famous line from Medea: "Loathing is endless. Hate is a bottomless cup; I pour and pour."

But being hated by us was not the worst thing we could say about a person. There was an even lower category, for which Vicky and her two best friends, Ann and Emily, had coined a special term: pituh. There was no word in the English language that specified all the particular characteristics that made someone pituh. Though it was pronounced something like the first two syllables of "pitiful," the term certainly did not mean that the person was pitiful or pathetic in the sense of being an outcast. On the contrary, most of the people our group considered to be pituh were the reigning leaders of the popular clique: the girls with perfectly groomed beehive hairdos who giggled and flirted and were always fixing their makeup; the arrogant guys they flirted with, athletes and class leaders who considered me a nonentity because I was lousy at sports. It was these slaves to peer pressure who we considered the most pituh of all—the vast majority of students who did not realize that we, as oddballs and deliberate non-conformists, were far superior to them in every way.

We were the first hippies at our high school. We wore ancient sandals, carried our books in cloth sacks, and let our hair grow long and untamed.

Vicky and Ann were the most daring. They pried discarded gum out of the school drinking fountains and casually popped it into their mouths to chew—making sure, of course, that pituh-people were observing them. The resulting expressions of bafflement and awed disgust were a joy to behold. Vicky and Ann insisted they weren't just doing this for effect. They claimed that ABC gum had a far more subtle depth of character than the unripened fresh stuff.

The pituh-people at school were not the only ones we took pleasure in bewildering. There was also the general public. Ann had spent a year in England when her father was on sabbatical there, and had returned with the ability to speak, when she chose, in a gratingly intense cockney accent. "'Ave yuh gawt inny boiros?" she demanded of drugstore clerks, who had no idea she was asking for a ballpoint pen. But the best use of her accent was a game the three of them called "The Pitiful Encounter," which they played frequently on streetcars.

In order to understand "The Pitiful Encounter" it is necessary to point out that Ann was not as attractive as the other two. She was not unpretty, but she was overweight, with a fleshy face and mousy hair. Physically lazy, she carried herself with a slump. Emily, in contrast, was tall, thin, delicately featured. There was an elfin quality about her. And Vicky was a real beauty, earthier than Emily, with huge blue eyes, prominent dimples, and thick strawberry blonde hair. Her looks were so stunning that, had she not consciously chosen otherwise, she could easily have been a member of the popular pituh-group at school.

On the Saturday "The Pitiful Encounter" was born, the three of them had gone shopping downtown, and were waiting for the streetcar home. Vicky and Emily—for some reason I now forget—looked almost like normal people, in skirts and blouses that actually matched, their hair pinned back and neatly groomed. They were even wearing makeup, in which they would never have been caught dead at school. Ann was dressed in one of her typical outfits—a discarded sweater of her father's, mud brown, moth-eaten and far too big, which emphasized her plumpness. It looked particularly hideous with an olive green skirt she had found at a thrift store, frayed at the hem and unfashionably long, which she wore with thick black knee socks. As usual, her hair was a mess, falling into her eyes.

Vicky and Emily boarded the streetcar first and took two seats together. The only other empty seat was two rows ahead of them. Ann, who was not timid, asked the icily prim-looking woman sitting in a single seat directly across the aisle from Vicky and Emily if she would mind moving, so that she could sit with her friends. The woman sighed irritably, but began gathering her parcels together.

And then Vicky, aware of how outrageously dowdy and bedraggled Ann looked, was struck by sudden inspiration. "Don't bother moving," she told the woman. "*We* don't want to sit anywhere near *her*."

The woman frowned, rolled her eyes, and sank back into her seat, shaking her head.

Ann was momentarily nonplussed. Then, responding to Vicky's subtle but significant nod, she caught on. "But I thought we might, yer know, 'ave a little chat," she said to Vicky and Emily with a sad, hopeful smile, laying on her cockney accent.

"Go away!" Vicky said, loudly enough for the other passengers to hear. "You can't sit with us!"

"But I jist want t' be yer friend," Ann faltered.

The woman Ann had asked to move was looking back and forth between them. Some of the other passengers had fallen silent, listening. "Well you *can't* be our friend! You talk funny. We don't like you!" Vicky savagely retorted.

"Just leave us alone," Emily added, finally getting the idea.

Ann cringed away and took the seat two rows ahead.

"Can you believe she actually thought we would let her *sit* with us?" Vicky asked Emily, bristling with indignation, her voice clearly audible throughout the car.

Emily put her hand over her mouth, but she was unable to suppress a snort. "That *hair*!" she said.

"I know!" Vicky began to giggle.

Ann pushed her hair out of her eyes, biting her lip. The shocked passengers were glaring at Vicky and Emily now, and casting looks of concern at Ann.

"And those clothes!" Emily gagged. "They look like they came out of a garbage can."

"Hand-me-downs," Vicky said cheerfully, imitating the complacent banal manner of a popular pituh-person. "I bet she can't afford anything better. Not that it would matter *what* she wore."

"I know," Emily agreed. "Nothing would make any difference, would it." And they both dissolved into giggles again.

Ann sank lower in her seat, staring straight ahead, wiping her eyes.

The unfriendly woman Ann had asked to move leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder. "Just ignore those nasty girls," she said gently. "You're a better person than they are. Remember that."

Ann struggled to suppress her own giggles, to press her lips together and maintain her miserable demeanor in front of the now kindly woman and the other outraged passengers. Only when they got off the streetcar could she let it out, explosively, as the three of them staggered away arm in arm, bent over in mirth.

It worked even better the next time they played it: an old man gave Ann a dollar, and on his way out told Vicky and Emily they should be ashamed of themselves. Another time, a woman with a little girl comforted Ann, and told her child she hoped she would never grow up to be like those horrible girls. Such responses were irresistibly entertaining. They rode the streetcar now with no destination in mind, continuing to play "The Pitiful Encounter." They practiced and honed it—though it often required an almost superhuman effort on Ann's part not to ruin it all by bursting into laughter in front of some compassionate stranger.

But on one memorable occasion "The Pitiful Encounter" had unexpected consequences.

Ann was sitting by herself in a double seat, across the aisle and one row behind Vicky and Emily. The other passengers didn't seem to be noticing them that day—no kindly person stepped forward at the usual moment. Perhaps their role-playing had grown routine, after so many performances. To get things moving, Vicky and Emily had no choice but to become more brutal, adding special twists to their usual insults.

"You'd think she'd at least go on a diet," Vicky said. "And all those hideously disgusting pimples! You think she ever washes her face?"

"She doesn't take too many baths, or brush her teeth, that's for sure," Emily said, wrinkling her nose and fanning the air in front of her. "That is, if they even have toothpaste, wherever it is she comes from. Do you believe that voice?"

"I know. God, the stupid way she talks!" Vicky agreed vehemently. "She says everything wrong. She should learn that we don't talk that way in America, if she expects anybody in this country ever to be her friend."

“Can’t ’elp the why I tawk,” Ann mumbled, her lip quivering.

Vicky rolled her eyes in a brilliant imitation of pituh-behavior. “God, how can somebody so pathetic even stand to exist?” she asked, shaking her head in wonder.

“You have a very charming accent. Where do you come from?” said a male voice.

Vicky and Emily spun around. Because of the lack of response, they were further along the streetcar line than usual now, where the tracks passed the University. None of them had noticed the three boys who had gotten on at the university stop. But now the boys were standing in the aisle, and one of them had his hand on the back of Ann’s seat.

Ann hesitated. Nothing like this had ever happened before. All three of the boys were extremely good-looking, and not the least bit pituh—especially the one leaning over her, with his hand on the back of her seat.

“Uh, I’m from, uh London, England,” Ann finally said.

“That’s very interesting. Do you mind if we join you?”

“Er, uh, no,” Ann said, fighting the impulse to glance over at Vicky and Emily.

The especially good-looking boy slid in beside her; the other two took the seat behind. Vicky nudged Emily, who was openly staring at them. Emily quickly turned back; the two of them did their best to look straight ahead and pretend indifference, to listen, and not watch what was happening to Ann.

“You must be pretty sophisticated, coming from a cosmopolitan city like London,” the boy was saying. “How long have you been here?”

“Since, uh, the beginning of term,” Ann improvised.

“Funny we haven’t noticed you around campus before,” another of the boys said.

“Oh, I ain’t at University yet,” Ann said in her richest cockney, finally beginning to relax and enjoy herself. “I’m in ’igh school.”

“You seem much more mature than that,” the other boy said. “Probably because you’ve traveled so much.”

Vicky and Emily glanced at each other, not smiling. This was getting a little tough to take—these were college boys!

“You must find the attitudes around here pretty provincial,” the boy beside Ann said. “Especially among high school students. Those little kids can be pretty narrow-minded—and too ignorant to know it.”

"You should really be hanging out with people more on your own level," another boy said.

"Vicky, what are we going to do?" Emily whispered.

"I don't <u>know</u>!" Vicky muttered grimly.

"Listen, uh . . . What's your name?" the boy beside Ann said."

"Ann."

"Hi. I'm Art, and this is Bob, and Gary. I think Bob's right; you're wasting your time with those high school children." He looked up at his friends. "What do you think? About Friday night, I mean."

"Great idea," Bob said.

"Friday night?" Ann asked, unable to control her curiosity.

"We're having a party on Friday night," Art told her. "Why don't you come? We'd like to get to know you better. And you'd meet lots of interesting people."

"We'll make sure you have a great time," Gary added encouragingly.

"Come on, Emily," Vicky said, standing up with determination. "Enough is enough." They moved across the swaying streetcar aisle. Vicky smiled charmingly at the boys. "Hi," she said. "I'm Vicky, and this is Emily. We're really Ann's friends."

The boys turned reluctantly away from Ann and regarded Vicky and Emily with silent hostility.

Vicky brandished her dimples. "Uh, you know that was just a game," she explained. "Ann really <u>is</u> our best friend. Right, Ann?"

Ann said nothing.

Emily pushed back her long, white-blonde hair. "We do this all the time, just kind of for laughs," she said. "We're all in it together, aren't we Ann?"

Again, Ann said nothing.

"For laughs, huh?" Bob said, not sounding at all amused.

"Pretty juvenile sense of humor," Art remarked.

"It's a sign of deep insecurity, putting another person down to try to feel good about yourselves," Gary pointed out.

"Anyway, we were in the middle of a conversation," said Bob, the gorgeous one beside Ann. "Would you mind letting us continue it?"

"Ann, <u>tell them</u>!" Vicky insisted.

"Tell them what?" Ann asked her, sounding completely innocent. "That you two walk around with yer noses in the air, treatin' me as if I was dirt?

And then these three young men start treatin' me like a 'uman bein', and suddenly yer all cozy and sweetsy?" She folded her arms across her chest.

"Ann!" Vicky cried out in furious, powerless frustration. "The game is over! Stop it! Just tell them the truth!"

Bob sighed, giving Vicky a disgusted look, and turned back to Ann, who smiled sweetly at him. "This is our stop," he said. He tore a page out of his notebook and wrote on it. "Here's our address and phone number. Call us if you need a lift on Friday."

The three boys got up, brushing rudely past Vicky and Emily. "'Bye, Ann, see you on Friday," they said, grinning engagingly at her, and dismounted the streetcar with casual college boy aplomb.

Now Ann was the only one laughing. "I just couldn't resist," she gasped, barely able to get the words out. "I mean . . . when . . . when would another opportunity like that ever come along?"

"Ann, we are never going to forgive you," Vicky said, fuming. "Will we, Emily."

"Never," Emily agreed. "What's their address, Ann?"

2 DANNY AND TYCHO

The best toys our parents ever gave Vicky and me were Danny and Tycho, our little brothers.

I was nine and Vicky was seven and a half when Danny was born. We had been looking forward impatiently to his arrival, especially Vicky, who loved playing with dolls. She had always particularly enjoyed making the dolls fight violently with each other; when the dolls began to wear out, she then took great pleasure in ripping off their arms and legs. Now she is a nurse.

We were a little more careful with Danny at first. But it didn't take us long to discover that he was not really all that fragile. It was a great moment (and, for Danny, a life-changing one) when it dawned on us that a helpless human baby was infinitely more fun to play with than a stupid doll. Not only did babies respond in a very satisfying way; they also healed. This realization struck us when Danny was about six months old, and the family was on a long trip in the car.

Before Danny was born, Vicky and I had devised our own games to play on car trips. Not for us the pedestrian boredom of looking for specific license plates or makes of cars, or the banality of spotting objects that matched the letters of the alphabet. Our favorite car game revolved around the subject of human fecal matter, which we called BM, for bowel movement.

Of course all kids are fascinated by this topic, but Vicky and I took it to new heights. We didn't just talk about BMs, or make jokes about them. We pretended we <u>were</u> BMs. We'd wrap ourselves up in an old brown blanket in the back of the station wagon and tell each other our life stories as excrement. Vicky, who had a sweet tooth, usually began her existence as an oreo cookie or a Hostess cupcake, depending on her mood. Invariably her metamorphosis into a BM would take place in the intestinal tract of Queen Elizabeth, from which she would be born into a golden palace toilet. She would then be swept away to thrilling adventures in the London sewers and finally the Atlantic Ocean.

Once we made the mistake of playing this game with our friend Albert when his mother was within earshot in the front seat. Albert began a spectacular tale about his very special transformation from a Matzoh ball inside the bowels of Superman. We never heard the end of the story, and it was years before Albert rode in the car with us again.

But once Danny was born, and Vicky and I were often required to change him, the subject of BMs lost a lot of its charm. We needed a new way to amuse ourselves in the car. And there was Danny. The game we came up with we called "Babaloo Bum."

We were in the back of the station wagon with Danny, amid boxes and suitcases, traveling on a bumpy road. Baby Danny loved to be bounced and rocked, which got tiring after awhile. It occured to us to let the car do this for us. We sat Danny on top of a suitcase. Danny's shifting weight, combined with the bouncing of the car, made the suitcase rock back and forth. But we didn't try to steady it. Danny was enjoying himself; he had no idea that anything might go wrong. It was a total surprise to him when the suitcase tipped over and slammed him onto the floor. He howled.

Chuckling, we set the suitcase on end, to make it a little more unstable, balanced a smaller suitcase on top of it, and perched Danny on top of that. Danny immediately stopped crying and began to smile sweetly, comforted by being rocked again. Vicky and I were now rolling on the floor. The suitcases swayed dangerously. Danny was too young to walk, too young to steady himself. The suitcases toppled; Danny hit the floor and wailed, completely startled once again. We shrieked with laughter.

The next time we set him up there we chanted "Babaloo Bum! Babaloo Bum!" He clapped his hands and chortled with glee atop the teetering pile, still oblivious to his danger. Soon our stomachs were sore from laughing. Amazingly, Danny didn't catch on for awhile, and this game entertained us for most of the trip. In fact, it's the only thing I remember about it.

Danny was a beautiful baby, with round cheeks and a rosebud mouth. Vicky, who would have liked a little sister, sometimes dressed him up in girl's clothes—fluffy slippers, a flowered dress made out of one of her blouses with a sash tied around it, a little furry hat. We called him Ginger Bennet when he was costumed this way, and our mother would take pictures of him. Mom had no fears that this dress-up game would have any deep psychological effect on Danny, and maybe it didn't.

When Danny was about 15 months old Mom got pregnant again. We tried to explain to Danny what was going to happen. We would show him a picture of a baby in a magazine and say, "See this cute, adorable baby, Danny? Aren't we lucky, because soon we're going to have a cute adorable baby in our family too." We knew he understood when he tore the picture out of the magazine, flung it to the floor, and screamed "No baby!"

The new baby was not as cute as Danny. His head was too big, he looked bald because his hair was so blonde, he had a disproportionately large mouth and ears that stuck out. Whenever Aunt Ronnie saw him she would remark, with a self-satisfied smile, “He looks just like Uncle Arthur.” Uncle Arthur was a mental incompetent who had spent most of his life in an institution.

The new baby fussed so much on the way back from the hospital that Mom nursed him right there in the front seat of the car. “Can I hold him?” Vicky begged her, as soon as he had finished eating. Mom passed the little bundle to Vicky in the back seat. But before Vicky had even settled him in her lap, the baby made a funny noise and the milk burst from his mouth in a powerful stream that splashed all the way to the front windshield.

Mom laughed. “I guess he'll need a little more,” she said. Vicky was not reluctant to pass the baby back to her. Mom fed him again, then nestled him against her shoulder and patted him on the back. We barely had time to duck when another jet of vomit shot past our heads and hit the back window.

“Maybe it's the motion of the car,” Mom said mildly. But the same thing happened at home. It became a routine part of his feeding pattern for Mom to hold him away from her at arm's length as soon as he had finished eating, to protect her clothes from the inevitable eruption. Vicky and I didn't want to get near him. Mom claimed she wasn't worried about him, even though he kept down about a teaspoon of milk a day and wasn't gaining weight. “Babies always throw up,” she would say, off-handedly.

We weren't surprised by her attitude. Mom was a pediatrician, and never paid much attention to any of our illnesses. When Vicky was six we went ice skating for the first time. Vicky immediately fell down and began to cry. Mom kept laughing and telling her to forget about it, it would stop hurting soon. Vicky lay in bed and cried all night long. Finally, the next morning, Mom took her to the hospital to get an x-ray. Vicky had a compound fracture. It <u>made</u> her first grade year. She couldn't walk upstairs with her cast, and so the handsome young principal would carry her up to the classroom in the morning. The other kids vied for the privilege of staying in the room with her during lunch.

Meanwhile, the new baby continued to vomit. Though Mom said she wasn't worried about him, other people were. Mom's friend, Albert's mother, happened to mention the baby's condition to her black cleaning lady. The cleaning lady said, “It sounds to me like that kid has pyloric stenosis.” When Mom heard this, she thought it made sense. She took the baby in for an x-ray, which proved that the cleaning lady was right. Pyloric stenosis is a blockage of the passage from the stomach into the intestine; most of what he ate couldn't get through. It required only a very simple operation to open up the blockage, and after that he stopped throwing up and began to gain weight.

But the new baby had other problems. One of them was Danny, who played with him sometimes, but also picked on him a lot; from Danny's point of view, the baby was a usurper who had taken a great deal of attention away from him. The baby, who had a sweet and gentle nature, adored his older brother. Danny accepted this affection on good days, helping him build things with blocks and other toys. On bad days he slapped him around.

Then there was the problem of the new baby's name. Our parents weren't going to have any more kids, this was their last opportunity to name a human being, and they wanted to make a truly creative statement. They came up with lots of interesting names—so many that they couldn't decide which one they preferred. There were also several relatives they felt it would be nice to commemorate by naming this kid after them, but how could they name him after one and not the others?

So they didn't name him anything. Our father referred to him as "that other kid." Vicky and I called him "the new baby," which soon evolved into "Newby." And for the first years of his life, while our parents continued to put off the decision, Newby was his name.

When Newby was about two, the authorities got fed up. Mom and Dad received an official notice that they had ten days to fill out "Baby Sleator's" birth certificate. After that deadline, the authorities would fill it out themselves, giving him some random name, and Mom and Dad would have no choice in the matter at all.

But they still couldn't decide. The only solution was to name him everything. And so in the end, the name they put on his birth certificate was: Tycho Barney George Clement Newby Sleator.

Now that his official, legal first name was Tycho, Mom and Dad decreed that we should all start calling him by that name. And so Newby became Tycho. It wasn't easy to remember at first, but we liked the novelty of this game, and persisted until it became natural to us. The only person in the family who did not enjoy the situation was, of course, Newby, who refused to answer to Tycho for months, pouting and looking the other way whenever we said it. This response only increased our amusement.

His early vomiting, an often abusive older brother, and the fact that everybody in the family started calling him by a completely different name when he was two, were probably the seeds that resulted in Tycho's first great act of independence: he refused to be toilet trained. It was a brilliantly simple and effective method of asserting his control; despite being the youngest, he was able to put us all at his mercy. His third birthday came and went, and then his fourth. He was still wearing diapers.

Our parents hadn't worried about his throwing up. They didn't worry when he didn't walk and talk at the expected ages. And they didn't worry about this.

But Vicky and I had to change him a lot. "Tycho, will you please have BMs on the toilet," we would beg him as cleaned him in the bathtub.

"When I'm five," he would obstinately insist.

"Big boys don't do this, Tycho, only disgusting little babies," I told him, squirting him off with a rubber hose.

"No one will want to play with you if you have smelly BMs in your pants," Vicky added, dumping bubble bath into the tub. "The other kids will hate you and make fun of you."

"Four-year-olds who go in their pants get a horrible disease and die, Tycho; it says so in Mom's medical books."

"Please just do it on the toilet and we'll give you all the candy you can eat for the rest of your life."

He remained steadfast, unyielding, true to his principles. "When I'm five," was his constant refrain.

As Tycho's fifth birthday approached our anticipation was tinged with uncertainty. It would be wonderful if he kept his promise, but what if he didn't? Would he be able to go to school? Would he ever have a girlfriend? Could he possibly hold down a job? Would we spend the rest of our lives changing him?

On his fifth birthday Tycho very calmly and skillfully went on the toilet, as though he'd always done it that way. He's been using the toilet ever since.

Without Tycho's messes to clean up, babysitting became a lot easier. As adolescents, Vicky and I enjoyed having the run of the house without parental supervision. But Danny and Tycho would sometimes get upset when Mom and Dad went out. We got so tired of answering their repeated questions about where Mommy and Daddy were, and when they were coming home, that we were inspired to invent one of our favorite games.

"Would you like to hear a little song?" we would ask them. They nodded innocently. We'd go to the piano and I'd play a mournful and heartrending tune, with lots of melodramatic tremolo. "Once there were two little boys," Vicky would sing. "And one night their Mommy and Daddy went out. They kissed the little boys goodbye and drove away in the car."

The music grew more passionately cornball. Danny and Tycho began to sniffle. "And their Mommy and Daddy never came home again," Vicky sang. "The little boys cried and cried, but nobody ever came. Nobody came to say goodnight or give them their bottles. They never saw their Mommy and Daddy again."

By this time Danny and Tycho would be sobbing uncontrollably, tears rolling down their cheeks. Even after they knew the song by heart, it still invariably made them weep. And when it was over, they'd always wipe their eyes and beg us, "Play it again. <u>Please</u> play it again!"

Babysitting was also our chance to teach them every obscene word we knew. Our parents were not upset when Danny and Tycho repeated these words to them. But Danny and Tycho also taught these words to their friends in the neighborhood, and <u>their</u> parents were not charmed when they heard their toddlers cursing them. Still, Vicky and I persisted. We spent a lot of time coaching Danny to memorize all the verses of a song called "Canal Street," which was full of the nastiest words and the lewdest situations.

Then our grandmother came to visit. Grandma and I were playing Scrabble, pondering silently over the board, when Danny strolled into the room. In his sweet, childish soprano voice he began to sing. "Walkin' down Canal Street, knockin' on every door—"

"Wait, Danny!" I said, horrified. "Don't bother us now. We're concentrating."

"But I'd love to hear his little song," Grandma said. "Go on, Danny."

And so he sang "Canal Street," one verse after another, not forgetting a single gross syllable. Danny didn't know what the song meant, but Grandma didn't realize that. It was hideously embarrassing. Grandma and I sat there, our eyes on the Scrabble board, until finally Danny wandered away.

Something had to be done. But we couldn't just tell Danny and Tycho never to say those words; that would only guarantee that they'd use them at every possible opportunity. So we took the opposite tack. We invented the word "drang."

"All those other words we taught you, it doesn't matter if you say them," we told Danny and Tycho. “Just go around and say them to everybody. But there is one word you must never, never say, no matter what. That word is ’drang.’ It’s the worst word in the world.”

Danny’s eyes lit up. “Drang?” he said experimentally, testing the sound on his tongue.

Vicky and I shuddered and closed our eyes. “Yes, that’s it, ’drang.’ If anybody ever hears you say it, they will never forgive you, and they’ll hate us because they’ll know we taught it to you.”

For about one day, Danny and Tycho ran around saying “Drang” to Mom and Dad and Grandma. They taught it to their friends, who repeated it to their parents. It was sweet to see the two of them getting along so well.

But saying “drang” produced no satisfying response; nobody was shocked and horrified. Soon they knew we had tried to trick them. It was their first scientific experiment. Our credibility was destroyed. They went right back to saying all the other words, and there was nothing we could do about it.

And so we began to learn that these wanton games with our little brothers could backfire against us. Now Danny, especially, knew that it could work both ways, that we were not the only ones with power. We had gone too far to change him into a docile, obedient creature who would not use what power he had. And the worst was yet to come—at a Florida hotel.

3 FRANK'S MOTHER

When I was in sixth grade my best friend was a kid named Frank. We hung out at my house a lot more than his. One reason for this was that both my parents worked—Mom was a doctor and Dad was a scientist—and after school there would always be several hours at my house when no adults would be around. Frank, knowing his mother was watching the clock for his return, would dutifully call her up right away and tell her where he was, (without, of course, mentioning that my mother wasn't there). Then we could do what we wanted.

We stood on the back porch railing and peed out into the yard. We studied the color photographs in my mother's medical books. Some of the pictures, of hideous skin diseases for instance, were thrillingly gross, giving us weird pangs in our stomachs. Other pictures were fascinating for different reasons.

We played catch with eggs. There was a lot of tension to this game, because we were both lousy athletes, and we knew that it would not be long before an egg would smash on the floor or on the kitchen counter. Then we would scrape the egg into a big bowl and make fake vomit. We'd dump in oatmeal, brown sugar, vinegar, syrup, raspberry jam for bloodiness, and whatever else seemed disgustingly realistic. When we were satisfied with our artistry, we would splash the mixture onto the sidewalk in front of the house. Then, hiding on the front porch, we'd watch the reactions of passersby, praying that someone would step in it.

Even when Mom did come home, it was still fun at my house, because she was very relaxed, and did not fuss over her kids. She had her own things to do, and would leave us alone. Frank and I would go up to my room, which was a refinished attic—we lived in a big old house, and I had the whole top floor to myself—where we could read comics, and use bad language, and have private conversations about anything we wanted. Frank had a really cockeyed sense of humor, and an irresistible cynical side. He was always coming up with the most hysterical remarks about the teachers and the other kids at school. Our principal, Mrs. Crossette, made long announcements over the PA system every morning, filled with advice like, "Always sit on your cushions," (her euphemism for buttocks), and "Your principal is your pal." She also made everyone in the school recite "The Westgate School Creed" and "The Westgate School Prayer." Frank invented many unprintable verses to these poems. We'd roar with laughter up in my room. And even if Mom heard us, she never asked what we'd been talking about.

Mom was unconventional in many ways. She let my sister and brothers and I read anything we wanted, and never asked much about our friends or where we were when we weren't at home. She never tried to make us finish our food at meals, which was why none of us ever had any eating problems. Though Mom was proud of her Jewish heritage—her mother and father were poor immigrants from the Warsaw ghetto—neither of our parents was religious. Though most kids we knew went to synagogue or Sunday school, we never attended any religious services—on Sunday mornings we had a large, leisurely breakfast, while Dad played chamber music on the phonograph.

Mom did not wear high heels or makeup, which was very unusual in those days. "Why should you worry about what some stranger thinks about you?" she would ask us. But she wasn't obnoxiously rigid about this. Vicky would beg her to please wear lipstick whenever she came to school, and Mom, amused, would oblige, not wanting to embarrass her.

Sometimes Frank and I did have to go over to his house, because his mother had this idea that it somehow wasn't fair for us to spend all our time at my house. We also didn't want her to get suspicious, and start wondering exactly why we so preferred my house to his. His mother would be waiting for us at the door of their ranch house—in a dress and stockings and high heels, her hair in a permanent, her face perfectly made-up—and she would always be holding a tray of donuts, or jelly rolls or cookies. We would have to sit with her at the kitchen table and force down the sugary pastries and drink glass after glass of milk, while she would question us in her ladylike way about what had happened at school.

She would also ask politely about my family—how my sister was doing, and my two little brothers. Frank was an only child, which might have accounted for his mother's relentless hovering. I suppose she was impressed that my father was a scientist at the university, but though she refrained from comment about my mother's profession, it was clear that she did not approve of a mother who worked. I did manage to imply, however, that Mom only worked part time, and of course was always there when I came home from school.

When the snack ordeal was over we could not escape up to Frank's room—that was out of bounds, because his mother couldn't keep an eye on us there.

We would have to sit, squirming with boredom, in the formal, spotlessly clean living room. All the furniture was covered in transparent plastic, which was either slippery or sticky, depending on the weather, and always uncomfortable. Frank's mother bustled around vacuuming, polishing, dusting the plastic flowers, frequently peeking in to see what we were doing. Not that there was anything interesting we could do. I would never stay very long. My visits there were the price we had to pay for the freedom we enjoyed at my house.

Things continued in this way without mishap for most of sixth grade. Then, toward the end of the school year, I made a fatal blunder: I invited Frank to sleep over.

It was going to be a great night, a Saturday. Two of our other friends were coming; there was plenty of space in my large attic room for sleeping bags. Vicky would be sleeping at someone else's house, so she wouldn't be in our hair. I knew my parents would leave us alone—and they had said I could bring the TV up to the top floor; we could watch the kind of late movies they showed when kids were usually asleep. I had also just discovered two very lavishly illustrated new books in Mom's medical library, which I knew everyone would find deeply fascinating. And since the attic was pretty well soundproofed, we'd be able to stay up all night if we wanted.

Frank was torn. He desperately wanted to come. But it was a certainty that his mother would not allow him to spend the night without first checking all the details with my mother. So far, our mothers had never met, or even spoken on the phone, and we wanted to keep it that way.

"If I ask her, she'll call your mother up," Frank told me miserably after school on Friday. "She'll ask her all sorts of questions, like if they're going to keep an eye on us, and make us go to bed early, and stuff like that. And what if she finds out your mother isn't there after school? I'll never be able to come over again."

"Maybe I can get my mother to say they'll make us go to bed early. And maybe she just won't tell her how late she works," I said, not too sure about this. But it was worth a try. The party wouldn't be the same without Frank, and his crazy sense of humor. And he was my best friend. "She wouldn't be lying, exactly. I'll ask her first, then call you."

But as loose as Mom was, she had her limits. "Poor Frank," she said. "I agree, his mother sounds like a pill. I guess I can imply that you'll be supervised. But I can't lie to her about how late I work. She's his mother;

she has a right to know the situation. Anyway, what would someone like that do if she found out I lied to her? I dread to think."

"I'm not asking you to lie. Just don't tell her. And if she asks, be vague."

I called Frank, and then we put our mothers on the phone. I listened nervously to our end of the conversation. "I can assure you, the boys won't get into any mischief," Mom said, in her most businesslike voice. "Billy's had friends over before; it's always been fine. And we'll certainly see to it that they don't stay up late—we'll want our sleep too." There was a pause. I held my breath, wondering what Frank's mother was asking now. "Yes, there'll be plenty of healthy food for them to eat, I know what growing boys are like." Another pause. Mom rolled her eyes at me. "I did study nutrition in medical school," she said, a slight edge to her voice. "You know Billy's not underfed. And he hasn't missed a day of school all year."

She hung up with an expression of disgust. "That poor kid," she said again. "But I think I convinced her. She's dropping him off at five thirty. A little early, but that's okay."

I was excited and happy all day on Saturday, setting up my room, eager for the time to pass quickly. At four thirty the doorbell rang, I pulled open the front door—and my heart sank. Frank's mother had not just dropped him off. She was standing there beside him, dressed as though she were going to tea with the Queen, obviously expecting to be invited in. Frank did not look very happy.

"Hello, Billy," his mother said, with her tight, artificial smile—I wondered how she could smile even that much, with all the makeup she had on. "I just wanted to come in for a minute and have a little chat with your Mom."

"Uh, sure, come in," I said, wishing I had been warned about this, thinking fast, trying to avert disaster.

His mother's high heels clicked across the wooden floors—her house, of course, had wall-to-wall carpeting. I walked ahead of her, Frank trailed behind. I stopped in the living room and turned back. Frank's mother was looking around at the forest of houseplants, the old oriental rugs, the dragon-legged library table piled with magazines. "Listen, why don't you just sit down in here," I said. "And I'll go get my mother. She's, uh, busy in the kitchen."

"Oh, let's not be formal about this," Frank's mother said, though she was the one who was all dressed up. "And I don't want to interrupt her cleaning. Let's just go in the kitchen and I'll say hi."

“But . . .” I tried to protest.

“The kitchen must be this way,” Frank’s mother said, heading right for it. There was nothing I could do.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table nursing Tycho, who was six months old. She wore an ancient faded housedress, open at the top, of course. She was barefoot, her legs unshaven.

“Mom, this is Frank’s mother,” I mumbled.

“Very nice to meet you,” Frank’s mother said, fixing her eyes just to the left of Mom, and trying not to react to the dirty dishes in the sink, and the piles of soil on the kitchen table from the plants Mom had been repotting. Mom was a good housekeeper, and we also had a cleaning woman during the week. But on Saturdays Mom relaxed.

“Oh, hello,” Mom said, a little surprised, glancing at me, then at Frank’s mother. She pushed her hair back with her free hand. “Pull up a chair for her, Billy. Not too close, though, you know Tycho.”

I pulled out a chair as far away from Mom and Tycho as possible.

“Tycho?” Frank’s mother said, sitting down on the edge of the chair, as though protecting her dress from its surface.

“This one here,” Mom said, looking fondly down at Tycho. She was, of course, not at all embarrassed about nursing in front of them, though Frank was blushing.

“Unusual name,” Frank’s mother said, looking around uncomfortably. “Big old house you have. Must be very time consuming, keeping it . . .” Then she stopped, not wanting to say the wrong thing.

“It works for us,” Mom said. She lifted Tycho away from her, at arm’s length, directing his face toward the center of the room, as she always did after feeding him. “Paper towels, Billy,” she said matter-of-factly, and in the next instant Tycho was ejecting the usual long stream of milky fluid all over the kitchen floor. I hurried to wipe it up, glad to have something to do with my hands.

Frank’s mother made a little noise.

“It’s no big deal, Tycho does this all the time,” Mom explained.

Frank’s mother found her voice. “All . . . the time?” she managed to say. “But aren’t you worried about him?”

“Babies always throw up,” Mom said. “He’ll get over it. Want a little more, honey?” And she began nursing him again.

Frank's mother was struggling desperately for something to say. "So, uh, your husband is a scientist, I hear?"

"A physiologist. He does experiments on live human heart muscle," Mom told her.

"Live human heart muscle?" Frank's mother said. "But where does he get live—"

Vicky and Ann dashed into the kitchen, giggling. They had dyed their hair purple with grape juice, their teeth were colored red, white and blue, and their clothes were also smeared with paint. "Are there any cookies left, Mom?" Vicky demanded.

"No. Anyway, it's too close to supper to eat stuff like that. Have an apple if you're hungry."

Finally, Mom was saying something vaguely normal. But when Vicky took the apple from the bowl on the counter it slipped out of her hand and rolled across the floor—which, due to potting soil and Tycho's stomach problem, was not what anyone would call clean. Vicky picked the apple up from the floor and immediately bit into it, and she and Ann raced out of the room.

"But she didn't wash it!" Frank's mother could not keep herself from expostulating.

Mom shrugged. She was not pleased by Frank's mother's remark. "It's good for them to eat food off the floor. Dirt builds up immunities. I never wash food, never sterilized a bottle in my life. And my kids are never sick."

I couldn't really blame Mom. If she'd known Frank's mother was actually coming inside, she wouldn't have been nursing Tycho, she would have kept her out of the messy kitchen, she might have made an effort to fix up her appearance a little. But this woman had arrived early, invaded her house without warning, and pushed her way into the kitchen. It was too late now for Mom to put on a false front.

I already knew there was no hope of Frank spending the night, or ever eating over here again. His mother would certainly not want him to be exposed to any food that was not sterile. And it was clear that Mom was not paying any attention to what Vicky and Ann were doing, which meant she would also not be supervising us tonight. It was only a matter of time until Frank's mother dragged him home—and I was hoping it would be soon, before anything else happened.

A vain hope. Danny, who was two and a half, tottered into the kitchen, sucking his thumb.

Frank's mother, out of some deeply ingrained sense of propriety, was still trying to maintain a pleasant facade. She smiled at Danny, at the same time shrinking back from him a little. "Aren't you adorable," she said. "But you know, it's not good to suck your thumb, dear."

Danny looked puzzled and slowly took his thumb out of his mouth.

Mom was really fed up. "Danny," she said, "put your thumb <u>back</u> in your mouth.

Danny comfortably obeyed.

At last Frank's mother had had enough. She stood up. "Well, thank you for inviting us in," she said. "Now it's time for us to go. It's been a very, uh, <u>interesting</u> visit."

"Isn't Frank spending the night?" Mom asked her, as though she didn't already know the answer. "Oops!" she added, as Tycho projectile vomited again.

"Not, uh, this time, I'm afraid," Frank's mother said. I could see the struggle she was having not to rush from the room. "Good afternoon."

I followed them to the door. "'Bye, Frank," I said sadly.

He just looked at me. I didn't envy him. He was going to have a lot of questions to answer now.

The next year Frank was sent to a fancy private school, and I attended public junior high. It was only natural that we soon stopped seeing each other. It turned out, years later, that we both went to Harvard. But we did not renew our friendship. By then Frank had become a preppie, and was part of a super conformist clique—the kind of people I would have nothing to do with and who, of course, wouldn't be seen dead with someone like me.

But I sometimes wondered: would he have turned out differently if his mother had <u>not</u> come into the house that afternoon?

4 THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS OF PARKVIEW, Part I

The Lermontovs often came to our house for Thanksgiving dinner and other holidays. The parents were both distinguished scientists—more successful and recognized than our father, Mom told us.

They were also urbane and bawdy. I remember Dr. Lermontov (the father) telling a story at dinner about being interrupted by a phone call while he was in the bathroom. His lazy kids weren't at home, he made sure to point out, or else they would have answered it instantly, if they weren't already talking on it. So he had to stop what he was doing in the bathroom and run to get the phone. It was a woman working for a survey. "What television program are you watching?" she asked him. "I'm not watching television," he said. "What magazine are you reading?" "I'm not reading a magazine." "What newspaper are you reading?" she persisted. "I'm not reading a newspaper," he said, his patience dissolving. "Then what are you doing?" she wanted to know. "I'm trying to take a shit!" he shouted, and hung up. Everyone else at the dinner table laughed, kids and parents alike, while Dr. Lermontov took a swig of beer.

Vicky and I always loved it when the Lermontovs came over because we had so much fun with their kids. Vera was three years older than me, Nick a year younger than Vera, and little Anna was several years younger than Vicky. Vera and Nick were both brainy and good-looking, Nick blonde and athletic, Vera dark and bosomy. Once, at the Lermontov's house, Dr. Lermontov (the mother) bragged at the dinner table about Vera's large bra size. She described how Vera's devoted boyfriend picked her up every morning in a huge Cadillac that was a particularly hideous shade of pink. "It makes you want to vomit!" exclaimed Vera's mother the famous scientist, laughing, as she put out her cigarette and took another piece of candy. Vera was not so amused by these stories.

Vera and Nick were popular though not the least bit pituh—a unique combination of attributes—and Vicky and I both looked up to them. It would have been natural for us to resent them, since Mom was always telling us what brilliant students they were, so athletic, attractive, articulate and so on. But we couldn't help liking them anyway (though Vicky would often scream at Mom to shut up about them). Vera and Nick also clearly enjoyed spending time with us on these family occasions, though we couldn't really be friends with them at school, since they were older and hung out with a different crowd.

It was the Lermontov kids who taught us to play "I Doubt It." The game required two complete decks of cards, which were thoroughly shuffled together and then all dealt to the players. The basic objects of the game were to get rid of all your cards—and to cheat.

The first player began with aces. "Two aces," he would say, placing the cards face down in the center of the table. The player to the right was supposed to put down only twos, the next player only threes, and so on up through the deck, and back around to aces again. Often a player might not have the particular card he was required to put down on his turn. In that case he would lie, putting down a five and a six, for instance, but stating "Two queens." You wanted to get rid of your cards fast. Because there were two decks, it was harder to tell from your own hand how many of a particular card another player might have. But if you suspected him of lying, you shouted, "I doubt it!" You had to say this before the next player took his turn. Then the player who had just put down the cards had to display them. If he had been lying, he had to take the entire pile. If he hadn't been lying, the player who doubted him had to take the pile.

Tension mounted when the pile of cards in the center grew larger. It became riskier both to lie and to doubt, because in either case you might end up collecting a huge number of cards. At the same time lying became unavoidable, because you had only certain cards left. And doubting increased as the balance of cards shifted; it became easier for certain players to tell from their hands that someone else was lying.

It was at this point in the game that you graduated to another form of cheating. Say you only had one card left, a seven, but it was your turn to put down queens. Your only chance to win was to lie and get away with it. But since it was highly unlikely that your last card would be a queen, it was almost a certainty that someone would doubt you. The solution was to make a whispered deal with the player to your immediate right. This was possible if that player had a lot of cards in his hand and no chance of winning. Then you might be able to coerce him to make his move so quickly, the instant after you had put down your last card, that there would be no time for anyone else to scream "I doubt it!"

If little Anna was sitting to your right, you could take this even further.

You could often bribe her to help you out even if you still had quite a few cards in your hand. "Fifteen queens," you would quickly mutter, getting rid of all your cards, and if lightning Anna moved fast enough no one would have a chance to doubt your blatant lie. The great thing about the game was that you could still win even if everybody knew you had cheated; you were disqualified only if you were actually caught. There were many moments during "I Doubt It" when you'd try to scream furiously at somebody but couldn't manage it because you were laughing too hard.

The Thanksgiving I was in seventh grade we couldn't play "I Doubt It" because many of the cards had disappeared. Danny, who was four, denied any knowledge of them. (We discovered what remained of the missing cards when Mom made Vicky change Tycho later that evening. Confronted with this palpable evidence, Danny admitted that he had fed them to him.)

And so instead of playing "I Doubt It" on Thanksgiving, Vicky and I and the Lermontov kids sat around in my third floor room complaining about adults in general, and our parents in particular. The topic turned out to be as inexhaustible as our enthusiasm for discussing it.

Though both sets of parents, by their very existence, had certain defects in common, kids from each family were fascinated to discover the many inventive, insidious, and previously unimagined crimes that the other set of parents routinely inflicted on their children. "They really do that?" a kid from one family would gasp in wonder. "You mean yours don't?" a kid from the other family would reply. Vicky and I were particularly surprised and gratified to find out that the Lermontov parents did not think their kids were as perfect as our mother did—far from it.

Vera, who was efficient, well-organized and sexy, began to make a list of our parents' various sins against us. She was the oldest, and the most practiced at taking notes in school—no one else could have written fast enough to get the increasingly rapid outpouring of grievances down legibly.

It was a very long list. Even so, we soon began to realize that we were barely scratching the surface; Vera's copious notes represented only two measly sets of parents as primary sources of data. The list grew longer when we began to contribute secondary knowledge acquired from friends about their parents' offenses. We marveled at the wealth of first-hand information these kids would have provided if they had been here in person. A whole new world was waiting to be discovered!

It proved to be a lot more fun—and more deeply satisfying—than "I

Doubt It" ever could have been.

Mom found the list of parental outrages the next day when she went up to my room to make my bed, unavoidably dragging Danny and Tycho along with her. She was not in the best mood, since she and Vicky had just had a screaming fight, and Vicky was sulking in her room. Mom caught sight of Vera's notes on my bedside table, two wailing toddlers pulling and clawing relentlessly at her as she struggled to plump my pillows and straighten my sheets. I was reclining on the couch downstairs at the time, reading a wonderful book of horror stories Mom had recently given me, enjoying the rich aroma of the turkey soup which had already been simmering on the stove when I got up that morning.

I was so engrossed in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" that I didn't even notice Mom's approach, despite the pervasive stench of Tycho's loaded diaper that inevitably accompanied her. Only when Mom said, "Is this Vera's handwriting?" did I look up.

She was standing above me, holding Tycho against her hip with one arm and Vera's notes in her other hand. My first response, when I realized an already irate Mom had read the list, was chillier than anything evoked by the Lovecraft story.

"Vera's handwriting?" I said stupidly. "Oh, um . . . I guess . . . I mean . . ."

But Mom chuckled. "This has got to be one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my life. Listen to this." And she read, "'In the privacy of their home the parents drop their artificial public behavior and reveal their true natures: disgusting slobs who laze around the house, brutally reprimanding their kids the instant they are not industrious, engaged in constructive behavior, or impeccably groomed."

"Nick said that, not me or Vicky," I quickly pointed out.

"Of course <u>you</u> dumbells didn't," Mom said. "The Lermontov kids are clever enough to come up with something that has a real comic punch to it—and <u>they</u> do chores around the house."

I had finally realized she wasn't angry; now <u>I</u> was insulted. "But I <u>was</u> the one who said parents are always telling their own kids how inferior they are to other people's children."

"I know you have a talent for inventing imaginary situations, Billy. But that remark just isn't as witty as Nick's. Sorry."

I didn't know what to say.

"Take Tycho and clean him up," she told me. "I want to look this over again."

"You've . . . already read the whole thing?"

"Uh huh." She thrust Tycho at me. He started screaming the instant I lifted him, gingerly, from Mom's hip. She sank down on the couch with Vera's notes as I bore him away.

I worried only briefly that the Lermontov kids might get in trouble as a result of Mom finding the list. Mom was not the kind of unscrupulous person who would cause trouble by reporting anything from the notes directly to the Lermontov parents. Her discovery of the list had quite different—and unexpected—repercussions.

I don't remember whose idea it was to turn the notes into a play about the horrors inflicted by parents onto their children. What I do know is that Mom was the driving force behind the entire production. She worked harder on it than anybody else, even though she had a full-time job, and Danny and Tycho to deal with.

The first official meeting took place the next day, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. The industrious, well-groomed and witty Lermontov kids were there, of course. We also invited Albert, who was Vera's age, and Vicky's friends Ann and Emily, and my friends Nicole and Bart and Matilda. I was still buddies with Frank at the time, though he had recently started going to private school. He was a particularly essential participant, since his mother was regarded by all as a very special example of extreme parental foulness.

The initial brainstorming session did not begin well. The Lermontov kids, surprisingly, were not perturbed that Mom had found the list; they seemed to trust her implicitly. But the other kids were understandably constrained by Mom's presence—she <u>was</u> a member of the enemy camp, after all—and did not dare to express themselves freely. Mom attacked this problem by reading the list aloud herself, praising much of it, and contributing her own creative and constructive suggestions for improvement. It became apparent to everyone that Mom was being completely objective, and not taking any of the material personally.

It <u>was</u> a little disconcerting that Mom had to stop reading at frequent intervals because she was laughing so hard. Unlike the rest of us, she seemed to consider our list a source of hilarity, rather than a cause for righteous indignation. "<u>This</u> line will have them rolling in the aisles," she said, more than once.

Frank, growing more and more perturbed, finally spoke up. “Are you saying you think this play should be a <u>comedy</u>?” he asked her.

“What else?”

“But it can’t be!” he objected, looking around at the rest of us. “I mean, this is life and death stuff we’re dealing with here.”

“Think about it for a minute, Frank,” Mom said carefully. “If we try to make this a serious drama, it will just come across as petty. But if the adults in the audience are laughing they’ll enjoy themselves—and be in the right frame of mind to pay attention to some of these gripes.”

“Makes sense,” Nick agreed. Vera and Albert, the oldest and most influential, also nodded their approval.

“How about the rest of you?” Mom asked.

The others could not disagree with Mom’s logic—except for Frank. “I didn’t realize <u>parents</u> were going to be invited,” Frank said bleakly. He didn’t speak for the rest of the meeting.

But eventually the other kids began loosening up. Mom made it clear that she would not say a word about the play to any of the other parents. Her statement had credibility because everyone knew she had not mentioned the list to the adult Lermontovs, as any other parent would have done. It also helped that our house was a popular hangout, a familiar place where kids were already comfortable, mainly because Mom was so easy-going and unconcerned about things like hygiene, foul language, and personal appearance—matters other parents were so unreasonably fussy about.

Still, most of the kids <u>didn’t</u> loosen up enough to come up with anything really meaty about their own parents, and Mom did not make the mistake of trying to coerce them. It was only the Lermontov kids who volunteered truly gross and personal material, partly (we thought) because they were the most outspoken and self-confident—and partly because they in particular had proof that they could trust Mom, who was so interested in what they had to say about their parents. Again, Vera took notes. Before the session was over we had so much great material that we knew already we had a show.

We decided on a date for the performance, a Saturday in January, at this first meeting. That would give us plenty of time for rehearsal over Christmas vacation. We also wanted to invite the audience of parents and friends well in advance, so they could mark it on their calendars and be sure to be there.

Frank dropped out after the first session. The rest of us met once a week. A series of scenes began to develop. We didn’t write out the dialogue word for word; we would set up a situation and then let the actors improvise within it. Vera and Albert, being the oldest and most mature in appearance, took on with relish the villainous roles of the parents. The others, except for me, mostly played the heroic children. I was the pianist—this was turning out to be a musical production—and I represented the Spirit of Childhood. I was something akin to a Greek Chorus, reflecting in my music and demeanor the emotional states of the protagonists and their antagonists. I was also the stagehand, turning the lights on and off to indicate scene changes.

By now, all the kids knew that Mom had kept her promise—if she'd said one thing about the play to their parents, they would have heard about it. And she hadn't had a chance to say more than a word or two to the Lermontov adults since Thanksgiving—they were both very busy scientists—and our parents wouldn't be seeing each other over Christmas, since both families had other plans this year.

It seemed quite natural that Mom became the director; everyone had to admit that she was essential to the production. It wasn't only that Mom participated with such vitality and spirit, stimulating enthusiasm in the cast, or that her lyrics were so inventive and trenchant. Paradoxically, her most essential contribution was being a parent herself. Because she could see things from a parent's point of view, she was able to come up with inspired dialogue and action for the parents that exposed levels of profound baseness in their characters that we, in our innocence, would never have imagined. There was no denying that Vera and Albert had the juiciest roles.

And it was Mom who came up with the name of our theatrical group, "The Parkview Traumatic Club"—Parkview was the name of our suburb—and also the title for the production itself. The courageous and ultimately doomed Hungarian Freedom Fighters were big news at the time, and so calling our show "The Parkview Freedom Fighters" gave it significance.

It was not until the final rehearsal that Vera Lermon-tov casually dropped the information that their parents couldn't come to the performance after all. It seemed that they had been called upon to present papers about their new research at an extremely prestigious scientific conference on the same day as the play.

Mom was aware of this particular conference; she had known months ago that Dad had not been invited to attend. "But why didn't you say so before?" she asked Vera. "You must have known about this when we set the date. It's too late to change it now."

"They don't bother keeping us informed about their plans," Nick said. "It's too bad. We were really, uh, looking forward to them seeing the show." He sighed, sounding almost regretful.

I could tell Mom was suspicious. Since the roles of the mother and father in the play had been essentially shaped by grisly personal details from the Lermontov kids about their mother and father, it seemed more than coincidental that they had waited until the last minute to mention that their parents would be busy the day of the show.

Still, we had no choice but to go ahead with the performance on the original date—we couldn't ask everyone else in the audience to change their plans just because of two people. The show went on. The Lermontov kids sailed through their parts with breezy aplomb. The rest of the cast, knowing their parents were watching, were a little more self conscious about their performances.

My role gave me more opportunity than the others to observe the reactions of the audience. It was clear right away that Bart's parents and Matilda's mother were not amused. They didn't crack a smile, despite the fact that hardly any of the material in the play pertained directly to them at all. I wondered what Bart and Matilda would have to go through when they went home.

But the rest of the audience—teenage friends of the actors, more enlightened parents of the cast, and other adults whose children were not in the show—roared with laughter, just as Mom had predicted. The applause at the end, the repeated curtain calls, were intoxicating. But the euphoria was almost immediately followed by a feeling of loss—after all those weeks of hard work and increasing anticipation, suddenly it was over.

For the next few days our phone never stopped ringing. We were beseiged by calls from children as well as adults who had not seen the show but had heard about it, begging us to do a repeat performance. We called the rest of the cast to try to arrange it. Most of the actors were eager—the thrill of performance had been irresistible. Even Matilda and Bart managed to get grudging permission from their parents to do it again.

It was too bad that Vera and Nick Lermontov were now inextricably tied up with school activities and didn't have a free minute for the next several months.

Then a reporter called from the local paper, very eager to do an article about the show. The pressure on Vera and Nick became intense, not just from the rest of the cast, but also from their own parents, who were back from the conference and very curious about the play—especially after Mom just happened to mention to them that it had attracted the attention of the press.

Vera and Nick had no choice but to give in. The performance was repeated the following Saturday for an SRO audience. The best seats in the house were reserved for the reporter—and the Lermontov parents.

5 THE PARKVIEW FREEDOM FIGHTERS, Part II

The stage was the front hall of our house. The piano was there, and the front hall had direct access to the kitchen, which functioned as the dressing room. The hall was also the only room in the house that had an overhead light fixture, and could be darkened or illuminated by the flick of a single switch. The audience sat on rows of chairs in the living room.

I have to admit that Nick and Anna—and especially Vera—were real troupers. Though obviously not as comfortable as they had been the last time, they nevertheless threw themselves into their roles like true professionals, performing as well as they had the week before.

The play began with Vicky seated at the breakfast table, neatly dressed in a modest skirt and blouse, her hair impeccably groomed (for the first and last time in years). Her face was partially hidden by a stack of barely thawed pancakes that towered above her head, devoid of butter or syrup, and a gallon of milk with a straw protruding from the top. She was hurriedly trying to work her way through this gargantuan meal, continuously sawing off hunks of dry pancake and quickly shoving them into her mouth, gulping at the milk. She would stop eating only long enough to take an occasional fast glance at her watch and utter a forlorn little sigh—until Vera, the mother, shuffled yawning into the room, at which point Vicky immediately stopped sighing and smiled brightly at her. "Good morning, mother," she said sweetly.

The mother grunted. She wore a slatternly bathrobe, a pair of fluffy pink bedroom slippers, and had large curlers in her hair. She slumped down at the table and began idly picking through a box of expensive bon-bons, while her daughter cheerfully and diligently applied herself to the pancakes and milk—the stack was an inch or so lower now.

The mother finally chose a piece of candy and bit it in half, then grimaced at the enterior with a loud snort of disgust, returned the uneaten half to the box and spit the goo in her mouth out onto the tabletop.

She reclined in her chair. "What's the matter with your manners?" she reproved her daughter. "It's rude to slouch at the table. Sit up straight!" The child obediently sat up even more erectly, though her eating slackened somewhat.

The mother coolly assessed the height of the pancakes. "Another slow day, I see. Something the matter with your appetite again?" she chided her. "Why can't you be like Marylou Pinsky? Her mother was just telling me the other day that she always cleans her plate right away and asks for more. But not you. Oh, no! You force me to sit here and remind you that you're not getting up from this table until you finish your breakfast down to the last drop and crumb."

"But mother . . . it's so much," the daughter meekly dared to suggest. "I'm so full already. If I try to eat any more, I'm afraid I might get sick." She had managed by this time to get the pancakes down to the level of her chin.

The mother rolled her eyes—giving the daughter a chance for a surreptitious peek at her watch. "Do I deserve this?" the mother asked, with a hopeless gesture at the sky. "I work my fingers to the bone to provide her with healthy, nourishing food, and all she does is complain and malinger. I ask you." She lounged back in her chair, legs spread, and began pawing through the box of bon-bons again, while the daughter went on eating with renewed, desperate vigor. "And on top of everything else, half of these things are creme de menthe," the mother moaned. "I can't stand creme de menthe."

This line got an even bigger laugh than it had the week before. I glanced curiously at the Lermontov parents. The father was grinning at the mother.

"Mother, I can see the school bus coming," the daughter nervously whispered—she had choked down only half the pancakes. "If I miss it, I'll be late for school again. I . . . I don't want to get in trouble for being late another time."

"Excuses, excuses." The mother studied a piece of candy for awhile and then moved it rather suspiciously toward her mouth. "And don't bother asking me to write you a note for being late. It's your own fault for playing with your food. You have to learn to take responsibility for your actions." The daughter nodded in agreement as she raced to force down more pancakes.

The mother bit into the candy. "Now that's more like it," she she said to the piece of chocolate with a self-satisfied burp, and popped the rest of it into her mouth. She stretched. "Guess I'll go turn on the TV. Not that there'll be anything except boring news shows for the next hour or so."

I switched off the ceiling light with a mournful expression, and the scene ended. Furniture was quickly shuffled around in the half darkness. It took several minutes, but the audience was still applauding when we had finished.

The next scene was a schoolroom. Students bent over their notebooks, scribbling frantically, while Albert, the teacher, reclined with his feet on his desk, leafing through The National Enquirer. There were shrieks from the audience when the daughter from the first scene, her stomach grotesquely distended, tried to waddle unnoticed into the classroom.

The instant she appeared the teacher slammed down his paper and jumped to his feet. "Late again!" he roared, pointing an accusing finger at her. "What kinda dumb, lamebrained excuse are you gonna try dumping on me this time?"

"Excuse me, sir. My . . . my mother made me eat two to the sixth pancakes and drink 3.5 liters of milk," the girl faltered. "It . . . took so long I missed the bus and had to walk all the way to—"

"If it was your mother kep' you home, then she woulda written you a excuse, now wouldn't she of?" the teacher interrupted, tilting his head to the side with a crafty smile. He extended his hand. "Lemme see it."

"I'm sorry, sir. But . . she was unable to write me an—"

"Shut up!" bellowed the teacher. "I'm sick of hearing you blame your poor hard working mother for your own lazy-assed stuff you do. It's disgusting. Another F for the day." He pointed. "To the principal's office for a lot more discipline stuff this time. When you get back, you'll just sit on that there stool at the front of the class—if you can sit, I mean," he added with an evil smirk, "and the whole class'll fix their eyes on you while you meditates on your sins." He swung around to the other students. "You hear me, class?"

The other students, who had not dared to look up from their notebooks during this entire conversation, now instantly stopped scribbling, lifted their heads and chorused, "Yes, sir!" in unison.

"Now get!" the teacher ordered the late girl, who wobbled miserably from the room, clutching her bloated stomach.

The teacher glared at the other students. "The minute that fat kid gets back in here, the rest of you gotta hand in your 40-page essays on the history of colonialism butchery atrocities. Like I already told you, one spelling or grammarial mistake, one wrong date or amputation death statistic, or one unlegible word will get you a automatic F." He smiled again. "I have people who check your papers. I bet you're all hoping the principal will discipline that fat kid for as long as he needs to learn her a good lesson, so you'll have a lotta time to work on your essays. Well ain't you?"

"Yes, sir!" the students chorused again.

“Well? Ain’t any of you enough a devoted student to want some more time than that much?” the teacher asked them in a coaxing tone of voice, drumming his fingers on the desk, while fixing his gaze on each student in turn. “If any one of you can gimme some reason for another student to get some discipline, you’ll have that much more time to fix up your short little essays.”

The students peered furtively around at each other, naturally reluctant to cause any of their fellows pain, even though it would result in more time to complete their impossible assignment.

“Well?” crooned the teacher. “If nobody ain’t gonna say nothing, I’ll just send another one a you in there myself, just pick somebody, like.”

Finally, Bart started to lift his hand, brought it back, then finally managed to lift it again.

“Yeah, Jimmie?”

“Well, I . . . I don’t know about anybody else,” Bart said in a weak voice. “But I . . . well, I looked up one word in the dictionary when I was doing the 20-page take home test you gave us last night,” he nobly admitted, volunteering to be punished for the benefit of the rest of the class.

The teacher was not pleased. “That ain’t what I was asking you—I was asking for you to tell me about what somebody else done, you lamebrain. Something the matter with your ears? They’re sure big enough so you oughta hear better.”

Bart blushed. (He did have big ears.)

“Can’t the rest of you hear either?” the teacher gently asked.

The other students pretended to laugh at the teacher’s witty remark about Jimmie.

The teacher swung back to Bart, who was still blushing. “I don’t like what you done. And I knows you got the hots for that cow Susie over there. Your mother told everybody at the PTA meeting the other night how long it takes you to build up the guts to phone Susie up, how you sweat and pace. We all got a real hoot out of it.”

Bart blushed more deeply. The Lermontov mother, I noticed, was looking down at her lap.

“So Susie—you’re the one’s gonna go to the principal’s office, on account of what Jimmie here done,” the teacher continued. “And while you’re in there getting it, you can think about how it’s all Jimmie’s fault. How about that, Jimmie?”

“No. Please. Not Susie!” Jimmie piteously begged him.

“Shut up and write your colonialism butchery atrocity essay. Get going, Susie!”

Susie (Nicole) slunk from the room. I was limping slightly now as I went to turn off the light. The applause was even more enthusiastic.

Scene three: an emporium. Vera was the salesperson, chewing gum, her elbows on the counter. Diminutive Anna, chosen for this role because she was the youngest and smallest, was the single shopper at the counter as the scene began. Neatly though somewhat shabbily dressed, the tiny child waited patiently, change purse and purchase in hand, for the saleswoman to notice her.

Vera, her jaws deliberating on the gum, stared vacantly into space as though Anna were invisible.

“Excuse me, Miss,” Anna politely tried to catch her attention. “If you don’t mind, I would like to buy these earrings as a gift for my mother. I have the exact change all ready.”

The saleswoman blew a large bubble, popped it with a finger, and went on chewing obliviously away.

An adult, (Matilda in high heels), marched up to the counter and carelessly pushed Anna aside. “May I help you?” the salesperson said at once.

“Yeah, I want this scarf,” the woman said. “Or no, maybe I want this other one. Gee, I can’t decide . . .”

“Take your time, honey,” the saleswoman said. “I’m stuck here all day anyway.”

“Excuse me,” Anna tried again, after watching Matilda for awhile and waiting courteously for her to try to make up her mind about the scarves. “May I please buy this pair of earrings?”

Vera still couldn’t seem to hear her.

Another adult stepped up to the counter on the other side of Anna and shoved her further out of the way. “You have any Coral Blush lipstick?” she demanded.

“Coral Blush? Let me see now,” Vera said, immediately checking the merchandise. “No, I’m afraid we’re all out of that particular shade. How about Tropical Sunset? Believe me, it’s the same stuff. They just give ’em different names to fool you.”

“No, it <u>has</u> to be Coral Blush,” the woman said petulantly. “Coral Blush is the only shade that’s subtle enough for my delicate complexion.”

"But I think Tropical Sunset would look perfectly lovely on you," Vera coaxed her. "Just take a look at it and see if you don't agree. Take all the time you need."

"Well . . ." the woman murmured, studying the lipstick with intense concentration, as though her life depended on it.

Little Anna managed to wedge herself delicately between the two indecisive adults at the counter. "Please, Miss," she piped up. "It will just take me a second to give you the exact change for these earrings."

Vera had suddenly become blind and deaf again. Anna didn't exist.

Vicky attacked from the rear, grabbing Anna by the shoulder and thrusting her behind the others. "Is that your entire collection of earrings over there?" she asked Vera incredulously. "Such a limited selection! There's not a single pair I'd be caught dead in."

"Perhaps Madame didn't notice <u>these</u>," Vera said, leaning over the counter and reaching past Vicky to pluck the earrings directly out of Anna's hand in one skillful and accurate movement. She held them up temptingly for Vicky's perusal.

"But, excuse me, Miss," Anna tried to protest from behind the others. "I had already chosen those as a gift for my mother who—"

"Why, these are gorgeous!" Vicky exclaimed. "Exactly what I was looking for. I'll charge them."

"Certainly, Madame."

"But I forgot my charge card," Vicky said.

"No problem at all, Madame. I'll just have to fill out three forms and check them with my supervisor." She reached under the counter.

"Please," Anna begged her, with courage born of desperation. "I had already chosen that pair. And I have the exact—"

Vicky turned on her. "Don't bother us, little girl!"

"Stop annoying the real customers or I'll report you for shoplifting, you obnoxious brat!" the saleswoman threatened, addressing Anna for the first time.

Anna quietly turned away and left the store with downcast eyes. My back was bent now, weighted down by the woes of the children of the world, as I hobbled over to turn off the light.

Despite the continued appreciative applause, I was a little nervous about the next scene, an evening at home. This section was almost entirely based on material from the original list—supposedly very accurate material about the Lermontov parents.

The two children, Nick and Vicky, sat at the table studiously taking notes as they pored over thick encylopedia volumes. They were of course neatly and conservatively dressed and perfectly groomed.

The mother, in curlers and bathrobe, sprawled on the couch watching TV and chain smoking, picking sullenly at her bon-bons between cigarettes. The father, in a dirty undershirt, sat at the other end of the couch reading a cheap paperback novel with a lurid cover. He swilled down the last of a can of beer, tossed it onto the pile of empties on the floor beside the couch, and snapped his fingers. Silently, the son rose from the table, left the room, and returned with another can of beer, which he handed to the father. The father accepted the beer with a belch, not glancing at his son, and went on reading. The son sat down to his studies again.

The father looked up from his book. "Children! I want you to stop that busy-work for a minute and listen to this," he announced, scratching an armpit. "I'm going to give you an example of truly great and profound literature that I hope might improve your undisciplined little minds."

The son and daughter immediately lifted their heads from their tomes and folded their hands, focusing all their attention on the father.

He cleared his throat and read, "'Gallagher tightened his large, muscular hands around her blushfully pink, delicate neck. "You're lying!" he accused her in loud, angry, vibrant tones. "No one lies to me and lives to tell about it." "No, darling, I'm speaking the truth in all honesty and you must believe me!" she pleaded huskily, though her large, periwinkle blue eyes were shifty as she muttered the words. Gallagher lifted one virile hand to tenderly stroke her long, thick, wavy, golden hair. "Gee, I'd like to believe you, toots," he said in his deep, earthy, masculine voice. And then he pulled out a knife and began to slash, starting at her . . ."'

The daughter, thinking she was momentarily safe, glanced down at the large volume in front of her and then smiled faintly to herself. But the mother, whose eyes had appeared to be glued to the television screen, a cigarette dangling from her lips, instantly noticed her daughter's disobedient lapse and silently nudged the father.

The father pounced so quickly that the brother had no time to warn his sister, the daughter no chance to protect herself. "Aha!" the father cried triumphantly, lifting the thin paperback the daughter had hidden inside the encyclopedia volume. “What is this garbage? *Selected Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*!” he read, and shook his head in pity and contempt. “Don’t think I haven’t heard about that slut. So *this* is the kind of prurient trash you prefer to real literature with some guts to it. Not assigned by the teacher, I bet, was it?”

“Well, no father,” she truthfully admitted. “It’s just that . . . well, some of these poems are so beautiful.” “'Some of these poems are so beautiful,”' the father nastily mimicked her. “I don’t want to hear it!” he said in disgust. With one dramatic gesture he tore the slim volume in half and hurled the pages to the floor. “That’s what I think of your obscene taste in . . .”

His voice faded. He peered more closely at the daughter for a long, tense moment. “Oh, my God,” he said in a choked voice. “Is it possible? And yet . . . I see it.”

“See what, Father?” the daughter said, looking down at herself, afraid of what was coming next.

He closed his eyes and swallowed deeply, as though speech were almost beyond him. “A *pimple*!” he breathed.

The Lermontov mother laughed so loudly and so long at this point that the action had to be delayed. This time, I noticed, it was their father who seemed a little embarrassed.

Finally Vicky was able to continue with her role. “No father, please. You must be mistaken,” the daughter protested, turning her head away from him in an automatic response of self-protection. “I checked my face ever so carefully, right after I washed the dishes and mopped the floor. There was nothing, I promise.”

“You expect me to ignore the evidence of my own eyes?” cried the father, whipping a magnifying glass from his pocket. “And don’t cringe!” he ordered her. He lifted her head roughly by the chin, bent over and scrutinized her face through the powerful magnifying lens, as she tried not to squirm. “There it is, just as I thought.” He jabbed her cheek with one finger. “Right there, in the left quadrant. What have I told you about proper hygeine? A pig wallowing in its own filth, that’s what you are!”

“Ugh!” the mother said, shuddering, as she lit another cigarette.

“But father, I promise you, I never stop working on it, three times a day, just like—”

“You expect me to share the same house with someone who has no respect for hygiene and decent health habits?” He pointed at the ceiling. “Upstairs, to the bathroom,” he pronounced in righteous tones. “Do not come out until you've spent the next hour with your pimple soap and pimple pads and pimple creams and pimple powder—and all your other pimple crap!"

The daughter hid her head in her hands and ran from the room.

I staggered over to turn off the light, my face a mask of pain. This time the laughter went on for so long that I had to stand there, waiting for it do die away, before I could switch on the light. But when I did I stood up straight again, radiating health, smiling benignly. Things had begun to change.

It was a revolutionary cell, where the children were hard at work cleaning and loading guns, moving sandbags, and checking and re-checking lists. Devoted comrades, they shared equally in the work, hurrying to help one another whenever it was necessary. In a moment they broke into a rousing song—the lyrics had been suggested to Mom by the Boy Scout Manual.

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Be prepared!
That's the children's marching song.
Be prepared!
As through life you march along.
Be prepared to fight your parents without fears.
Just remember how we've suffered all these years.

Be prepared!
Though they don't seem very spry
Don't be fooled,
For the old things still are sly.
And if their appeals for mercy
Ever touch your tender heart,
Just remember they've been fakes and frauds
Right from the very start,
And it's only for themselves they've ever cared.
Be prepared!
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"Go to it!" a kid in the audience shouted above the applause for this number.

It soon became apparent that Vicky was the revolutionary leader. Though her character, the daughter, had suffered more at the hands of parents than any of the others, she was also the most temperate, cautioning her comrades to base their cause on empathy and reason rather than crude emotion. "We can't allow ourselves to sink to their level," she urged the other freedom fighters. "Remember to shoot into the air. Our object is not to kill or maim, but to achieve our rightful independence. The weapons are just a means of gaining control. Only through non-violence can true justice prevail."

"Even though they have perpetrated such gross abuses of human rights?" someone objected.

"That is not our way," Vicky said gently. "Remember, they too must once have been human beings like ourselves, hard as it is to believe. Our goal is not to repeat their mistakes, but to guide them by our own example. Only through education will they learn the error of their ways."

"But exactly what will we do with them once we <u>are</u> in power?" the others wanted to know.

"Nursing homes, of course," Vicky said. Everyone in the audience knew that a local nursing home had recently burned to the ground as the result of gross neglect of the fire laws, immolating most of the helpless patients but none of the staff, who had all escaped unharmed. "Yes, nursing homes," Vicky continued sweetly. "They are such warm, such scintillating places."

This line, suggested by Mom, drew an appreciative chuckle from the audience.

"The time is at hand!" Vicky announced. "To your battle stations. Soon, victory will be ours! Remember, we have nothing to lose but our chains."

The freedom fighters briefly clasped hands, cheering one another on. Then they separated, and moved in silent stealth to crouch in various positions about the stage. They waited, their eyes all on Vicky. She checked and rechecked her watch.

At last she lifted her arm in preparation to give the signal to begin their heroic struggle for liberation.

At that moment the mother rushed on. "So there you are!" she cried shrilly. "Late for supper again, you ingrate! You'll pay dearly for this. And don't snivel!" She grabbed Vicky by the ear and pulled her off the stage, toppling the revolution before it had even begun.

I barely managed to crawl from the piano to turn off the light, ending the show.

While we were taking our bows, Nick darted unexpectedly into the kitchen and pulled a protesting Mom, who helped with the costume changes during the show, onto the stage. Vera produced a large bouquet of roses. "We would all like to express our heartfelt thanks to Dr. Esther Kaplan Sleator," she said, smiling warmly at Mom as she presented her with the flowers. "Without her inspiration and tireless effort, none of this would have been possible." (It was, Mom told us later, exactly the kind of thoughtful gesture she would expect the Lermontov kids to come up with.)

The audience applauded appreciatively after Vera's little speech. The Lermontov parents clapped just as much as the others—though I also noticed that they were whispering together, their eyes on Mom. When everyone was milling around afterwards, they told Mom, beaming, what a brilliant job she had done.

The newspaper reporter was very gracious. But for one reason or another, no article ever appeared.

We had dinner at the Lermontov's house a few weeks later. Their mother smoked and ate candy and talked about how Nick, who was on the swim team, always made sure to do his body-building exercises immediately before appearing in public in his swimsuit. Nick quickly left the room, ostensibly to get his father another beer. Anna, who was not even approaching adolescence and whose complexion was flawless, had a very noticeable patch of some kind of cream on her forehead.

For once, Mom did not go on and on afterwards about how great the Lermontov kids were. She was, I seem to remember, unusually silent as we drove home that night.

6 THE HYPNOTIST

When my brother Danny was in grade school his best friend was a boy named Jack. On the surface Danny and Jack were total opposites. Danny was quick, emotional, a rapid-fire talker, full of nervous energy, always doing something with his hands. He couldn't leave an appliance un-fiddled with, a bowl of fruit un-juggled, or a button unpushed.

Jack was dreamy, vague, laconic. Whenever Mom picked him up at his house she always had to wait interminably while Jack inched so very, very gradually down his front walk to the car. "Good old Jack, slower than molasses in January," Mom would say, resignedly turning off the ignition. It took Jack so long to answer a question that you wondered if he'd even heard it. When he finally did respond, in a flat, toneless voice, there were such prolonged gaps between words, even between syllables, that he might have been speaking in a foreign language. He spent a lot of time staring vacantly into space, as though his mind inhabited some private world so remote that it required a monumental effort for him to wrest himself away from it. I found Jack far more irritating than any of Danny's other little friends.

But there must have been something interesting about Jack, or else impatient Danny would have been driven into a frenzy by his maddening behavior, and rejected him. Instead, Danny actively sought out Jack's company, spending more time with him than anyone else.

I began to understand when we found out about the hypnotism incident.

It was Jack who noticed the advertisement in the back pages of a comic book: "Teach yourself hypnosis. Complete course in one simple, easy-to-read pamphlet. Only twenty-five cents. Money-back guarantee. Enclose self-addressed stamped envelope with each order." It was Jack who laboriously addressed the envelope, tongue protruding from teeth. It was Jack who read the pamphlet from cover to cover, learning the instructions.

And it was Jack who tested it out—on Tycho.

There was no one else in the house that day except for Geneva, the cleaning woman, who was busy downstairs. Mom and Dad were at work, I was home from college but at my summer job, and Vicky was somewhere with friends. Jack's mother had dropped him off at our house after lunch; Mom would bring him home when she got back from work.

Tycho was eight, two years younger than Danny and Jack. He had several motivations for doing what they asked. He knew that it was an honor to be invited by the older boys to participate in one of their activities, not quite understanding that activity meant being used as an experimental subject.

More importantly, he knew that Danny would not leave him alone until he acquiesced. He readily agreed to be hypnotized.

Jack gently ushered Tycho into Danny's room. It was a rare privilege for Tycho to be allowed into this room at all. Danny usually kept him out for fear that he might accidentally damage one of Danny's many projects, such as the delicate and complicated model airplane Danny had been working on for weeks, and had just completed that morning.

Jack had threaded a piece of string through a foil-wrapped chocolate coin. He sat Tycho comfortably down on a chair, meticulously pulled the window shades down one by one, turned off the light, and told Danny to focus a flashlight beam on the coin. "Keep your eyes on the coin," Jack instructed Tycho in his level, emotionless voice, swinging the coin slowly back and forth. "Focus all your attention on the coin . . . There is nothing else . . . nothing but the coin . . ."

Tycho was naturally gullible. He hadn't *always* been perfectly obedient—notably in one particular area of personal hygiene. But in relation to Danny, obedience was the only sensible option.

"The coin . . . You are so comfortable . . . So relaxed . . . You are sleepy, so sleepy . . . Your eyelids are growing heavy . . . You can't keep them open now . . . All you want is sleep, deep, restful sleep . . ."

There was enough light for Danny and Jack to see Tycho's eyelids flutter and then slowly close. "You are deeply asleep now . . . but you can still hear my voice," Jack said. "Are you asleep now?"

"Yes," Tycho uttered, in a voice nearly as flat and expressionless as Jack's.

"Okay. Turn on the light, Danny," Jack said, so cool and matter-of-fact that he might have successfully achieved this scientific result dozens of times before.

Danny flipped on the light and then hurried over to Tycho, eagerly bending down to study his face. Tycho's eyes remained closed, his arms hanging at his sides in the straight-backed chair. Danny turned quickly back to Jack. "You think he's really hypnotized?" he asked him in an excited whisper, rubbing his hands together. "He's not faking it or anything?"

"We'll find out," Jack said blandly. He took one careful, measured step toward Tycho and stood staring down at him for a long moment, thinking.

"Well? Is he?" Danny said, hopping with impatience.

Jack ignored him, watching Tycho. Finally he said, "Tycho, your arms are tied to your sides by a very strong rope. The rope is very tight, wrapped around you many times, and you can't reach back to untie it. Can you feel the rope?"

"Uh huh," Tycho said, nodding slightly, pressing his arms against his body.

"You can't move your arms, no matter how hard you try. Can you move your arms?"

Tycho's arms quivered. His body tensed. "No, I . . . I can't," he replied, with a slight frown.

"But . . . your nose itches. It itches something terrible. You can't stand it for another second," Jack mildly informed him.

Tycho's nose twitched. His hands clenched, his shoul-ders tightened. Gradually, veins stood out on his arms as he strained, trembling, to move them. They wouldn't move. His forehead creased, his cheeks flushed with effort. He grunted.

Danny's eyes lit up. He looked at Jack, then Tycho, then at Jack again—who was watching Tycho dispassionately.

Suddenly Danny's face fell. "He's faking it, he's got to be!" he exclaimed. "You're faking it, Tycho, you jerk!" he accused him.

Tycho didn't notice. He went on struggling miserably to move his arms, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"Tycho, the rope is gone," Jack said quietly.

Tycho's hands shot to his nose, furiously scratching. His shoulders sagged in relief.

"He's faking it," Danny said. "I know what he's like. This is boring." He sighed, and scowled at Tycho.

Tycho continued scratching ferociously. Jack wandered over to Danny's desk, picked up the hypnotism pamphlet, and paged through it in a leisurely manner.

Tycho's fingernails tore more wildly at the skin of his nose.

"Hey, I think his nose is starting to bleed," Danny said, no longer so skeptical.

"Umm," Jack murmured, slowly turning a page. "Oh yeah . . . That one." He studied the pamphlet a moment longer, then finally closed it and carefully positioned it on the desk beside Danny's model airplane, staring thoughtfully down at the booklet for awhile.

"His nose <u>is</u> bleeding," Danny said, sounding worried. "Maybe you better do something before he hurts himself."

Jack turned vaguely toward Tycho. "Huh? Oh. Okay, the itch is gone, Tycho."

Tycho let his hands fall limply to his sides, seemingly unaware of the drop of blood that dangled from the tip of his inflamed nose and then dropped down onto his chin.

"But now . . . you are thirsty." Jack plodded back toward Tycho. "You haven't had any water in days . . . days and days. You've never been so thirsty in your life. Your mouth feels like it's stuffed with cotton. Oh, yeah . . . Your arms are tied to your sides again. And you can open your eyes now."

Tycho's arms stiffened. His eyelids lifted; he stared blankly at nothing. His lips parted slightly, bits of them sticking together. The tip of his tongue emerged, moving slowly back and forth.

"You are dying for a drink of water, the thirst is killing you," Jack recited in a monotone, as though reading from a book.

Tycho's throat contracted with a sick, rasping choke.

"You will do anything for a drink. But," Jack mentioned, "your hands are still tied. You can't turn on a faucet or pick up a glass. And you are dying of thirst. You are so thirsty that—"

Even Jack was startled when Tycho bounded from the chair and dashed out of the room. Danny raced after him, and Jack actually managed to sort of lope along behind.

They found Tycho in the bathroom, kneeling beside the toilet, his head thrust deep into the bowl, his arms at his sides. His mouth was immersed in the water, making gurgling and splashing sounds as he desperately lapped and gulped it down. He kept it up until Jack granted Tycho the information that his thirst was quenched. Tycho immediately pulled his head out of the toilet bowl.

"I guess he's not faking it," Danny had to admit, when they were all back in his room, Tycho dociley seated in the chair again.

"There's a final proof," Jack said, after taking his time to consult the pamphlet once more. "Okay, Tycho, listen carefully," he instructed him. "After I wake you up, you will forget everything that happened while you were asleep—except one thing. Whenever anybody says the word 'window,' you will pick up the nearest object you can find and throw it to the floor.

Do you understand?"

Tycho nodded.

"You will forget everything that happened, except for that one instruction. Okay?"

"Okay," Tycho repeated.

"Now I'm going to count to three," Jack said. "And when I say 'three' you will be fully awake. Here we go. One . . . Two . . . Three."

Tycho blinked. His eyes focused on Jack, then on Danny. "Why did you turn the light back on?" he asked. "Aren't you going to hypnotize me?"

Tycho was confused when Danny burst into laughter. "What's so funny?" he wanted to know. "I don't get it. Why didn't you hypnotize me?"

"We just decided not to," Danny said. "Jack, I think you should open the window shades."

Tycho stood up, walked over to Danny's desk, picked up the model airplane and hurled it to the floor, shattering it to pieces.

Danny did not share Jack's mild amusement. "Tycho!" he howled. "How could . . . Why did . . ." He smacked Tycho hard across the face, then sank mournfully to the floor, gathering up the ruined airplane.

Tycho put his hand to his cheek. But he seemed more upset about the airplane than the slap. "I'm sorry, Danny," he cried, on the verge of tears because of the terrible thing he had done. "I don't know what happened! Really. All of a sudden I just had to do it."

"You're faking it!" Danny screamed at him. "You're just pretending it was because . . ." He bit his lip, looking down at the airplace again, wondering.

"Danny, something made me do it," Tycho piteously and hopelessly persisted. "I don't understand it. I'm so sorry. Believe me. I know it sounds crazy. But . . . but . . ."

"Forget it, Tycho," Danny snarled at him in frustration. He glared up at Jack. "If he's not faking it, then it's your fault," he said. "Maybe you better—"

"Come on now, kids! Time for Jack to go home," Mom called from downstairs. She had just come back from a long hot day at work, and her tone of voice indicated that she was not to be argued with. "And would you try to hurry for a change? I've got a lot of things to do."

Danny and Tycho went along for the ride, Tycho in the front seat, Danny fuming and Jack smiling remotely to himself in the back. As Mom irritably waited while Jack inched his way so very, very gradually up his front walk, she said, "It's hot, Tycho, roll down the window."

Tycho grabbed Mom's handbag, sitting open beside her on the seat, and threw it to the floor of the car, scattering most of its contents.

"Tycho, you monster!" Mom screamed. "Are you <u>nuts</u>? Pick it all up this instant!"

Tycho obeyed immediately, not holding back his tears now. Danny wasn't amused this time either.

They were both abnormally quiet during supper. The rest of the family chatted away as usual.

Mom talked about her job. She was a pediatrician for the public health department, working in free clinics for poor people in the inner-city. "A woman came in today who lives in that terrible Pruitt-Igo project," she was saying. "She has five kids and lives in a three-room apartment on the eleventh floor. She has to keep her kids inside all day long, because of the toughs in the playground. Even if she could watch them from the window, she wouldn't be able to—"

Tycho picked up his plate of spaghetti with meat sauce and smashed it to the floor. Mom shrieked; Tycho wailed in apparent bewilderment.

It was Dad, who could usually be counted on to remain calm in moments of stress, who noticed how uncomfortably Danny was cringing in his chair. It was Dad who patiently got the whole story out of Danny. Mom had scraped the spaghetti sauce off the rug and served dessert by the time Danny finished.

"Well, can't we just hypnotize him again and tell him not to do it any more?" Dad asked him.

"I think it will only work if Jack does it," Danny said. "He's the one who hypnotized him and gave him the suggestion. And . . . he didn't say anything about how to make Tycho stop doing it. Maybe . . . he <u>can't</u> stop," Danny added in a hushed voice.

"But Jack <u>didn't</u> hypnotize me," Tycho insisted. "Nothing happened. I didn't drink water out of the toilet. I'd never do <u>that</u>!"

"If that's the case, then you must be making these messes on purpose," Mom accused him.

"But why would I get in trouble on purpose?" Tycho asked her, sounding completely innocent.

"It's not Tycho's fault," Danny said. As mean as he often was to Tycho, he was nevertheless always the first one to leap to Tycho's defense when he felt he was being unfairly treated by someone else. “Tycho just doesn’t remember being hypnotized because Jack told him not to,” Danny explained. “He can’t help it.”

“Well, even if I was hypnotized, why would Jack tell me to break things just because somebody said a certain word?” Tycho wondered.

“Like . . . window?” Vicky suggested, experimentally.

While Vicky cleaned up Tycho’s bowl of ice cream and chocolate sauce Mom got on the phone. Jack’s mother drove him over right away. We all waited in the living room while Jack inched his way so very, very gradually up the front walk to our house.

“But this is fantastic!” Jack’s mother was saying.

“It’s not fantastic at all. It’s called post-hynotic suggestion,” Dad told her.

“Well, I’m sorry,” she said. “I hope Jack can undo it. It would be kind of inconvenient never to be able to say ’win—”’

“Stop!” Danny shouted.

But it was too late. “’—dow,”’ she had already finished.

This time it was the beautiful ceramic ashtray my college roomate had given Mom that was closest to Tycho’s reach. Jack’s mother swept up the pieces while the three boys made their way up to Danny’s room.

But now Tycho chose to be obstinate. “I don’t <u>want</u> to be hypnotized any more,” he grumbled, pouting. “What if you make me drink toilet water again?”

Danny didn’t stop to consider some <u>other</u> reason why Tycho might not want to repeat the experiment. “Shut up, Tycho! You’re going to be hypnotized, period!” Danny ordered, lunging at him.

Jack took one step, planting himself stolidly between Danny and Tycho, fixing Danny with his calm gaze. Danny growled, but he backed off.

Jack remained rooted in place, thinking for a long moment. “Uh . . . Wait outside, Danny,” he finally said, in his usual measured tones.

“You don’t need me to hold the flashlight?” Danny objected.

“I can manage,” Jack said. “We’ll both be in trouble if Tycho doesn’t stop. It won’t take long. And then . . . then I’ll tell you a secret.”

“But I don’t want to be hynotized,” Tycho protested again. It was strange; you’d think he would have been <u>eager</u> to stop helplessly breaking things.

"It'll be worth it, Tycho, I promise," Jack assured him. "You'll see. We'll be out soon, Danny."

Danny was too impatient to stand there doing nothing while he waited out in the hall—and even at that age he loved to do experiments. He thought for a minute, then quickly placed a chair just outside the closed door of his room. He put Tycho's prized Mickey Mouse alarm clock on the chair, making sure it was the only object that would be within Tycho's immediate reach when he came out of the room.

A few minutes later Tycho and Jack emerged into the upstairs hall. "Window!" Danny instantly shouted.

"What are you talking about?" Tycho asked him. "And what's my clock doing here?" He picked it up carefully and took it back to his own room.

"You want to hear that secret, Danny?" Jack asked him, beckoning him back into the hypnosis chamber. They were in there for about ten minutes.

It was just around this time that Danny began to stop picking on Tycho. We all assumed that Danny's abuse of Tycho came to an end simply because Tycho was getting to be Danny's size.

But I thought I heard, on a couple of occasions, Tycho mentioning the word "door" just when Danny was about to attack him. And oddly enough, Danny suddenly turned away and left Tycho alone.

7 THE SEANCE

The houses in our middle class neighborhood were all set well back from the street. Most of the other people on the block, concerned with appearances, concentrated their gardening energies on the front lawns, to impress the neighbors. But Dad didn't care much about the front yard, where we never spent any time. He worked harder on the backyard lawn, which our family could enjoy in privacy. And so when we wanted to run around under the sprinkler, creating mud holes in the grass, we did it in front where it didn't matter because only the neighbors could see it.

At the very back of the backyard, however, was a paved area where there had once been a garage, and this was where we had a sort of playground. On the left was a great mound of sand, where we made miniature cities and used the hose to create lakes and rivers. The neighborhood cats and dogs loved the sand too. Once Dad's boss and his wife came to dinner, and the wife, a sweet elderly lady, said gushingly to Vicky and me, "Oh, what a lovely sandpile you two children have to play in!"

"That's not a sandpile," said Vicky, who was five. "It's a shit pit."

Next to the shit pit was a 500 gallon army water storage tank, which was our swimming pool. It was a hideously ugly round black rubber container about ten feet in diameter and three feet high. You couldn't exactly swim laps in it but we weren't into swimming laps, we were into cooling off in the hot summers, splashing each other, doing underwater somersaults, and skinny dipping with our friends when our parents weren't home. The water froze in the winter; before sliding around on it ourselves Vicky and I would plop Danny or Tycho down on the ice first, to see if it was strong enough. In spring we would watch with fascination the thousands of mosquito larvae floating just below the surface, breathing through their tiny probosci, soon to leave this ideal breeding ground and take over the neighborhood.

There was nothing in the large space to the right of the swimming pool until the day before Vicky's sixth birth-day, when she found Dad's present to her there—a pile of lumber. He was going to build her a playhouse, he told her, the best playhouse in the world. "Oh, how wonderful! Can I have my party in it tomorrow?" she naively asked him. He cautioned her that it might not be finished by then.

Eight years later he had completed the foundation, the floor, and three walls. It wasn't only that he was the world's greatest procrastinator. He also did everything with extreme thoroughness. The playhouse foundation alone, Mom used to say, would support the Empire State Building. Dad never finished it, but what there is of that playhouse will probably still be standing long after the house itself has collapsed.

Vicky never did have a birthday party in the play-house. Instead, it was the setting for the seance I con-ducted the summer after ninth grade.

When I was in grade school, Mom had organized many creatively weird parties for me, the best ones being Halloween parties. These parties took place in my room in the refinished attic on the third floor. The house would be darkened; no one would be at the front door to greet the guests. Instead, there was a series of posters to show the guests the way up, painted by my brilliant friend Nicole. They weren't grade-school work, they were very professional. The first one, posted on the front door, showed a man hanging from a noose, obviously dead, because the angle of his head indicated his neck was broken. But one of his arms was outstretched, his boney hand pointing inside the house. And written underneath, in scraggly letters, was the instruction: "Walk in. Follow the spooks."

The only lights inside illuminated Nicole's other posters, located at strategic intervals to indicate the way up the creaky stairs. One showed a Frankenstein monster, holding a dead child in one hand and pointing with the other. The next was a hideously decayed corpse, rotten flesh dangling from its face as it rose from a coffin. Finally there was a leering skeleton in a moonlit graveyard, gesturing at the flight of steps up to the attic.

The third floor was the perfect setting for a Halloween party, because Mom had allowed my friends and I to paint a mural on one entire wall. Several of us participated, but the most gruesomely effective sections had been done by shy, plump Nicole. The central figure was a rather glamorous witch standing behind a bubbling cauldron. She was surrounded by all manner of grotesque creatures—bats, demons, imps, octopus-like things with claws.

We did some of the conventional Halloween things, like bobbing for apples and carving pumpkins. Nicole's pumpkins were always the most unusual, and the most intricately and delicately executed.

Then, with the candelit pumpkins arranged around the room, Mom would read aloud a couple of truly horrifying ghost stories, about haunted houses, nightmares coming true, people being followed by ghouls. Usually a guest or two would have to leave at this point, which was too bad, because the best part came next—fortune telling. Mom wrote the fortunes before the party, typing them on little pieces of paper, and folded them up and placed them in a bowl. Each kid would pick one and read it, and they were all horrible, things like, "You will work hard for many, many years and finally earn a million dollars—and then it will all be stolen from you by your children and you will die penniless," or "You will develop an incurable neurological disorder and spend the rest of your life as a gibbering idiot in an insane asylum." The best fortune, every year, was, "I'm sorry, my dear, but you have no future . . ." I remember when Nicole got that one. She just smiled and carefully folded it up and kept it.

(The fortunes were effective because Mom was a good writer. She helped all her kids write things for school. Actually, she didn't just help us write things, she sometimes wrote the entire paper herself—and then would be indignant if the teacher didn't give it a good grade. In third grade I had to write a poem about Thanksgiving, and Mom wrote a great poem all about Thanksgiving from the point of view of the turkey, the cranberry and the pumpkin, with lines like, "Poor Mr. Cranberry's due for a loss, he's going to be made into cranberry sauce." The school psychologist was so impressed by this poem that he published it in a book he wrote as as example of a poem by a gifted nine-year-old. That was Mom's first publication.)

Naturally, these Halloween parties were a big hit with the kids in grade school, and I was conditionally accepted by all. But things changed in junior high, when peer pressure and the rigid rules of teenage convention reared their ugly heads. Before we became deliberate non-conformists in high school, Vicky had been on the verge of being accepted by the popular kids in junior high (those we would later refer to as pituh-people). I, on the other hand, never had a chance with those people; I was always an oddball, a nothing in their eyes. I'll never forget the time in seventh grade when I was just getting to be friends with Dave. He lived in another neighborhood, but one day rode home with me on the school bus. A popular kid named Steve Kamen asked Dave what he was doing on this bus. "I'm going over to Bill's house," Dave explained. Kamen looked at me, then back to Dave. "You sap," he told Dave, and walked away.

But despite Steve Kamen's disapproval, Dave became my good friend in junior high. Like me, Dave was more interested in music and literature than in sports. Unlike me, Dave had a chance to be popular at the beginning of seventh grade—he was naturally better at sports than I was, despite his lack of interest, and at the start of the year a lot of the girls considered him to be very cute. That changed when he was suddenly struck by virulent acne, which persisted throughout his teenage years, and left him with permanent scars that were not merely physical.

Dave considered himself to be smarter than me, and though I was a better piano player he was more "serious" than I was about music, and was contemptuous of me for listening to music he considered to be trivial.

I had other friends in junior high too, an extremely disparate group. My best friend was still Nicole, who had painted the Halloween posters. She was now a tall, overweight girl, and was generally recognized as the smartest person in the school. In eighth grade we had an English teacher who was new to the school, and he gave Nicole an F on her first paper. Nicole, in her quiet, self-effacing way, did not protest or even ask the teacher why he had given her the F, as I urged her to do when she told me about it over the phone. "It doesn't really matter," she said, no particular emotion in her voice, as though she accepted such injustice as a normal part of life.

A few days later the same teacher had us write an essay in class. When he saw what Nicole came up with on her own, he apologized to her privately for giving her the F on her first paper, explaining that it was so well-written he had assumed she had copied it word for word from a published article. He changed the original grade, and his opinion of Nicole.

Though Nicole always got very good grades, she claimed she hardly ever studied. Mom didn't believe her—she said Nicole <u>couldn't</u> do so well without studying. But Nicole was telling the truth, all right. I knew how much of her own study time Nicole spent writing papers for other kids who were not good writers, though of course I couldn't give this evidence to Mom. (It was okay for <u>Mom</u> to cheat for her own children, but I knew she wouldn't approve of a kid doing it for another kid.)

Mom also didn't believe what Nicole said about her weight problem. No one ever saw Nicole eat much, and Nicole told me that she really didn't overeat; she said she was so heavy because there was something about her metabolism that turned every morsel of food she put into her mouth into fat. Mom said that was baloney, she was sure Nicole overate in secret. On this issue I had no evidence one way or the other—until many years later.

Nicole and I had no romantic interest in each other, but we spent a lot of time every night talking on the phone. We loved discussing the other kids, and Nicole had remarkable insight into human nature. It was Nicole who pointed out to me that Dave had copied his attitudes from his parents, who were intellectual snobs, and that I shouldn't pay any attention when he criticized the music I listened to. She always seemed to understand why people did things—even people who were very different from herself.

Such as Matilda, who was also a close friend of ours, but in many ways Nicole's direct opposite. Matilda was skinny, for one thing, and very self-conscious about her appearance. She was always complaining about her unfashionably frizzy red hair, and her pale skin which was so sensitive she could never tan, only burn. She thought she was too tall, and stood in a slouch. Her grades were even better than Nicole's—her grade-point average of 98.6 was the highest on record in the history of the school system. But unlike Nicole, Matilda's grades were the result of relentlessly compulsive studying. When we did A Tale of Two Cities in English, Matilda read the book so many times that she could recite as much of it as anyone could stand to hear, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times . . ." from memory. She studied all day on weekends and holidays. She didn't stop when she had completed all the required work; she would then write extra papers that were not even assigned by the teachers.

Matilda laughed a little too long when she told us how her parents tried to bribe her to calm down about school work by offering her twenty-five dollars if she would ever get a B in a course, fifty dollars for two B's, and so on. She went right on obsessively piling up A's in everything. It reached the point of pathology when she brought a razor blade with her to school on the day of an important exam, so that she could kill herself if she didn't think she did well on it. But she was so well prepared that she didn't feel the need to slash her wrists—not that time, anyway.

Nicole and I talked about Matilda a lot. We both knew that part of her problem was that Matilda considered herself ugly, she had to excell at something, and that was going to be scholarship. But Nicole, who was more observant than I, thought there was more to it than that. She had noticed the way Matilda's mother looked at her daughter, she had picked up veiled but critical remarks Matilda's mother made to her, and observed Matilda's reaction to them. Nicole was sure it was only Matilda's father who had offered her the money to study less. Matilda's mother, she suspected, would never be satisfied, no matter what Matilda did.

Bart was another close friend. Because he was regarded as one of the smartest boys, it was assumed that he and Nicole belonged together, and they did sort of go out with each other. He worked hard enough, but not anything like Matilda—nor did he always go to great lengths to impress the teachers. The most gentle and beloved English teacher in the school once told us, as an example of man's inhumanity to man, a very sad story about a blind man who got lost on the street and no one would stop to help him. Bart's reaction to this story was to laugh out loud, an act which earned him great notoriety—and problems in English—when it turned out that the blind man in the story had been the teacher's son.

What Nicole told me was that she was sure Bart had known the teacher was talking about her son—and he had laughed anyway. It occurred to no one but Nicole that Bart's strange reaction might have something to do with the fact that his older sister had cerebral palsy.

Tony was different from my other junior high friends because he was more of an athlete than a scholar, a not-very-funny clown who made dumb jokes all the time. We had no interests in common, but what I liked about him was that he was foul-mouthed and never tired of dirty talk, especially about girls. Despite the fact that he bore a certain resemblance to Alfred E. Newman of Mad Magazine, Tony was actually very good-looking. It often puzzled me that he would want to be my friend.

Once Tony and I went on a double date to a carnival held annually by the fraternities at the university. I was with Gail, a popular girl whom I worshipped from afar. It was Tony who gave me the courage to ask her out, insisting to my disbelief that she liked me enough to accept—and he was right. Tony was with a new girl at school, a year younger than us, who was extremely pretty and had very quickly established the right kind of bad reputation. Almost the first thing we did at the carnival was to go on a ride that was essentially a large metal cylinder. Inside the thing you sat in seats on a platform that tilted back and forth while the cylinder rotated around you, lights blinking on and off. Tony immediately began to complain that the thing was making him sick. There was, of course, no way to stop it. In an impressively short period of time, Tony was leaning over the back of his seat and loudly vomiting, while the new girl kept murmuring, "Oh, my God, Oh, my God." That was the end of the date, and Tony's relationship with her.

Nicole didn't think it was odd, as I did, that Tony enjoyed spending time with me. She quoted a remark that the actress Katherine Hepburn had once made about some old movie stars from the 1930's, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: "He gives her class; she gives him sex." Nicole wouldn't explain any further what this obscure statement had to do with Tony and me, but now I know what she meant.

I did not have a Halloween party all through junior high. But the summer after ninth grade I hit on the idea of conducting a seance in the playhouse at the end of the backyard. It was dark out there, and the half-finished wooden building was like something from a ghost town. I planned the seance carefully, with Nicole's help. The only part Nicole didn't help me with was the actual script. I spent several days writing it myself, laughing a lot, and kept the contents a secret from Nicole. Typically, she never tried to coerce me to tell her what was in it.

But Nicole was the brains behind the recording I made on Dad's big, clunky tape recorder. Nicole created sound effects by coaxing weird noises out of various musical instruments and then making them weirder by speeding up or slowing down the tape. Nicole helped me figure out how to disguise my voice by speaking through an electric fan, which gave an effect of windy, echoing distance. But I didn't record the script until Nicole had gone home; I wanted the actual words to be a surprise for her as well as everybody else.

The day of the seance Dad brought home a big piece of dry ice from the lab, which we kept in the freezer until the last moment. (The dry ice was Nicole's idea too.) I carried a table out to the playhouse and with several extension cords set up the tape recorder under the table. I put a cauldron-like cast iron pot on the table, for the dry ice, and on one side of it arranged a flashlight so the beam would hit my face from below. Nicole had loaned me some mascara. I painted wrinkles on my face with it, blackened my lips, and wore a black robe Nicole had found at a junk store. Just before my friends arrived I put the dry ice in the pot, where it began to generate wafting clouds of vapor.

I was waiting for my friends in the half-lit playhouse as they made their way down to the end of the dark backyard. The idea was that I was a medium contacting an authority in the spirit world who knew what lay in store for each of my friends. They sat down at the creaking table and joined hands. Mist billowed around my dimly-lit, lined and demonic features. Various wavering hoots and moans floated up from under the table. I sighed and groaned awhile myself, and then announced, "The contact is there, I can feel it coming, it's taking over me, it's . . ." My head lolled forward.

I had seated my friends around the table in the same order as their futures were related on the tape. "And what lies in store for Matilda, Master?" I said dully, as though speaking in a trance. Tall scrawny Matilda, with her thick glasses and unfashionably kinky red hair, who did nothing but study and had never had a date, was sitting just beside me.

"For Matilda . . . Ah, yes, fame and glamor lie in store for this fortunate, ravishing creature," intoned the tape. "She will quickly eclipse Brigitte Bardot as the reigning sex goddess of her time. Clad only in a towel, her image will slither and writhe before vast audiences in all corners of the world. With the advent of the new type of entertainment known as 'the feelies,' her popularity will soar to orgasmic heights."

"I knew it!" Matilda crowed, flattered in spite of herself. The others were also amused, but didn't laugh too hard, in deference to Matilda's feelings.

"For poor Dave, the future is not so bright," pre-dicted the voice. "His sheer lack of talent will make him a failure at all 'serious' musical pursuits. He will become a poorly paid salesman at a flea-bitten record store catering to the tastes of moronic adolescents. He will spend his days listening to the raucous blare of popular idols, and at an early age will grow deafened by the sounds, and end his life in poverty."

Dave wasn't so thrilled by this—he and I were intensely competitive. He grunted, and muttered, "Thanks a lot, Bill." Everyone else was chuckling though. And the next prediction, for Tony, was so ridiculous that even Dave couldn't maintain his resentment of me. "It cheers me once again to be able to relate another bright future," came the voice. "Because of his intense religious fervor, Tony will become a very holy man, leading a life of extreme self-sacrifice, abstaining from all the lower sensual pleasures of sex, alcohol and drugs. He will become the leading evangelist and faith-healer of his day, converting millions to progress to a higher, more spiritual way of life. He will keep none of the money given to him, but will donate it all to worthy charities . . ."

Bart snorted; Nicole giggled. Tony made a pleasantly obscene remark to the effect that the spirit's head must be caught in a certain part of its anatomy.

Bart and Nicole—the two smartest kids in the school—came last; their prediction created the most satisfying reaction of all. "Ah, for these two the future is so hideous that it pains even me to utter it," droned the voice. "For them, only thankless, unceasing toil and drudgery lie in store. Due to their extreme mental incompetence, their career opportunities will be limited indeed. They will spend the rest of their lives cleaning the toilets at Westgate

Junior High . . ."

By this point not only Bart but almost all the others were happily hooting and guffawing. I glanced over at Nicole. Of course she wasn't insulted by her future, as Dave had been. No one could take this particular prediction seriously. But there was something about Nicole's smile that indicated cleaning toilets was exactly the kind of thing she had known I would come up with for her all along.

It would be cute if I could now surprise the reader by saying that these predictions unexpectedly came true. But of course they were intended to be farcical and ironic, the most highly unlikely futures I could come up with for everyone. Naturally Matilda became a psychoanalyst, not a movie star. Bart is a successful scientist, not a cleaner of toilets. And though Dave dropped in and out of college for awhile, and had various jobs, he never worked in a record store, and is now seriously studying musical composition.

But Tony shocked us all by entering Theological school. He is not exactly an evangelist, but he is a Presbyterian minister.

Nicole spent part of her high school senior year as a foreign exchange student in Italy. Previously an atheist, like most of my friends, in Italy she had a deep religious experience, a calling. She lost a lot of weight. And after college, to Matilda's horror, Nicole entered an order of nuns.

It is not a teaching order, as one would have expected of brilliant Nicole, but a more radical group. Though not missionaries, the sisters in her order live with the poor, in the same housing conditions, some in the bleakest projects in the United States, others in the most poverty stricken developing countries. They support themselves by doing the same kind of menial work as the people they live with . . .

Nicole, the smartest person I ever knew, has spent much of her life working in factories, operating steam pressing machines in non-air conditioned industrial laundries in the tropics, carrying urine samples in inner-city hospitals—and cleaning toilets.

Of all my childhood friends, she is the happiest, the most at peace, and the most genuinely satisfied with her life.

8 PITUH-PLAYS

The first true pituh-play was created and always performed by Vicky, for an audience of Danny and Tycho and me. The play's title was "Vanya, the Insane Pianist." It depicted a very emotional musician who is violently carried away by the music she plays.

This drama was entirely Vicky's invention. She made it up years before we had a piano teacher named Alex Minkoff who subtly encouraged his students to rock back and forth and even grunt while performing at recitals. Mr. Minkoff was rotund, and his own stage demeanor was so agitated that he had once actually fallen off the piano stool in the middle of a concert. Vicky knew nothing about this when she invented Vanya.

Danny and Tycho were always begging Vicky to do "Vanya, the Insane Pianist," which was funny, though (we thought) totally meaningless. None of our friends knew about Vanya, which Vicky only performed for our own family. But we did put on other little skits at parties, which we called Pituh-Plays, and were often inspired by real people or situations, or popular movies and books.

Of course we had always made fun of certain books. When we were younger, we used to invent "Dick and Jane" stories, based on the elementary reading series: "See Dick. See Jane. See Dick run. Hear Baby Sally cry! See Jane put her hands on Baby Sally's neck. Baby Sally is very quiet now. Mother is angry. See Dick break mother's face with Daddy's axe. Look at all the pretty red blood!"

The telephone game was another early precurser of the Pituh-Play. Vicky would call a number at random, (I listened on the extension), and when someone answered she would say in a babyish voice, "Can you come to my party?"

"Who is this? Who do you want?" the stranger on the phone might say.

"It's . . . it's my birthday," the childish voice would answer. "My mommy and Daddy forgot. I'm all alone. I want to have a birthday party but I don't have any friends. Will <u>you</u> come to my party?"

Often people hung up at this point. But sometimes they fell for it. "Your mommy and daddy left you all alone? You don't have a babysitter?"

"All alone. And it's my <u>birth</u>day."

The voice on the other end would pause, then say something like, "I'm sure your mommy and daddy really love you. I bet they're planning a surprise for you. And remember, I care about your birthday." One woman even sang "Happy Birthday" over the phone, as we tried to stifle our giggles.

Another of Vicky's phone gambits was to call a random number and say, "Please help me. I'm lost. I can't find my mommy."

"You're lost? Call home."

"Nobody home. My mommy went away on a bus and left me here."

"Call the police."

"Don't have any more money."

"But . . ." If we were lucky, the voice on the phone would start to sound really worried now. "Can you tell me where you are?"

"I'm scared," Vicky said when this happened, sounding tearful. "It's big and dirty here. There's all these busses. There's all these mean-looking men with whiskers and dirty clothes on and they smell funny and talk funny and want to give me candy if I'll go with them."

"Are you at the bus station? Downtown? Your mother went away on a bus and left you there?"

"Uh huh," Vicky said, whimpering.

"Don't talk to anyone. Don't go with anyone. Stay right there and I'll come and get you," the person said, and hung up. We rolled on the floor.

When Vicky grew too old to sound babyish on the phone we began doing real Pituh-Plays at parties with our friends. Sometimes Vicky made up names for the characters, such as Renaissance de McCarthy, or Peristalsis Sperm van Weatherbiddington. One popular character invented by Vicky, (which, unlike Vanya, she performed for people outside the family), was named Nancy Kotex. Vicky did a TV commercial about her. "Poor Nancy Kotex," she recited in professionally cheerful tones. "None of the boys liked her because she smelled like a garbage dump! Then her best friend told her about new floral scent Kotex. Now she's the most popular girl in town!"

Vicky and I did a play which opened with Vicky sitting on a bench with a brown paper bag over her head, and me kneeling in front of her. I was just slipping a ring onto her finger. "Yes, darling, I will marry you!" Vicky cried, embracing me, the paper bag crinkling against my cheek.

I sat down on the bench beside her. "Now, do you think you could, maybe, uh, take the bag off," I hesitantly suggested. "I'd love to see what you look like, just once, before we get married."

"No." She shook her head.

"But why not?"

"I'm too ugly," she said with a mournful sigh.

"You couldn't be <u>that</u> ugly. I'm sure I'll love the way you look, just like I love the way you are."

"No you won't," she insisted. "As soon as you see how ugly I am you'll hate me. You'll be embarrassed to be seen with me, you'll never get married to me or even stand to look at me again."

"No. I promise," I coaxed her. "I love you because you're such a wonderful person on the <u>inside</u>. It doesn't matter what you look like."

"If it doesn't matter what I look like, why do you want to see my face?"

"How can you get married to somebody and never see her face? How can I kiss you? How can I look into your eyes?"

"Well . . ." She began to soften.

"<u>Please</u>, darling," I urged her. "Do you think I'm so superficial that I'd change my mind about you because of your mere outward appearance? You know I'm not that kind of trivial person. I swear to God that I'll love and cherish you forever."

"Well . . . . All right." Slowly Vicky lifted the bag from her head, her eyes squeezed shut, her shoulders hunched as though anticipating a blow.

"Why . . . You're <u>beautiful</u>!" I cried, placing my hands on her cheeks and gently turning her face toward me.

She smiled in relief. Her eyelids fluttered and lifted. She stared at me.

And then her mouth dropped open in horror. "My <u>God</u>! You're so <u>ugly</u>!" she screamed, jumping to her feet and backing away from me. "I've never seen anything so revolting in my life! What would everybody think if I got married to <u>that</u>?" She pulled the ring from her finger and hurled it at me. "I never want to see you again!" she shouted, and ran from the stage.

One of the most popular Pituh-Plays, also performed by Vicky and me, was based on the movie of Tennessee Williams' "Night of the Iguana." In the movie, Richard Burton is a defrocked, dissolute clergyman, staying at his friend Ava Gardner's crummy hotel in Mexico. Also staying at the hotel is a dignified elderly poet in a wheelchair, cared for by his devoted granddaughter, Deborah Kerr, who is always dressed in white. The poet and his granddaughter earn a meager living by traveling to different towns, where the old man recites his poems in public.

One night Richard Burton is tied in a hammock on the veranda, suffering from the DT's. Deborah Kerr, all purity and goodness, sits beside him to give him comfort, and during the long night they trade their life stories. The closest she has ever come to physical intimacy was one evening when she and a gentleman hired a boat in Hong Kong harbor. He never touched her, she explains. All he asked was for her to give him her underpants, and she modestly obliged.

"You didn't think that was disgusting?" Richard Burton asks her.

"Nothing human disgusts me," she says with gentle eloquence, "unless it is violent, or unkind."

In the Pituh-Play, I was Richard Burton, Vicky was Deborah Kerr. We sat beside each other on a bench. While sweet, innocent Vicky told me in her quiet voice about the incident in Hong Kong harbor, I munched complacently on saltines. At the end of the story I asked her thickly, "Didn't you think that was kind of disgusting?"

Vicky folded her hands and lifted her eyes. Fervent with noble sensitivity and compassion, she said, "Nothing human disgusts me, unless it is violent, or unkind."

"Not even <u>this</u>?" I asked her, and spit a big wet glob of chewed up crackers into her lap.

Other Pituh-Plays were performed in public places. Vicky Ann and Emily's streetcar game, "The Pitiful Encounter," was a prime example. There was also Vicky's watermelon baby routine.

On summer evenings, a group of us would go to a fountain in the park, where there was always a crowd of people watching the patterns of colored lights on the falling water. Vicky had with her a small watermelon, carefully wrapped in a blanket and a frilly bonnet, no skin exposed, so that it exactly resembled a very young baby. With the rest of us strategically placed among the crowd, Vicky cradled the baby in her arms, rocking it, murmuring to it about the pretty fountain. Bystanders smiled.

Then Vicky's voice grew louder. "You don't care about the pretty fountain, do you?" she chided the baby. "You don't care about anything but yourself. I'm getting kind of sick of that, you know?"

People were giving her funny looks. "I can't even go to the park without having to drag <u>you</u> along!" Vicky angrily accused the baby. "And your father never lifts a finger to take care of you. And all you do is make messes and scream and cry and keep me awake all night. I can't stand it any more!" she cried, her voice becoming hysterical. "I just can't!"

People moved away from Vicky, murmuring. She stepped toward the fountain. "I can't stand it for one more second, I can't, I can't!" she screamed, lifting the baby over the water.

"No! Stop! Don't do it!" several of us shouted, running toward her.

But we were too late. With a demented shriek, Vicky hurled the baby into the shallow fountain, smashing the watermelon into a pulpy red mush. Then we got out of there, fast, before the stunned bystanders noticed the seeds.

The most elaborate Pituh-Play of all was Albert's brainchild. He had been reading about happenings, a new avant garde art form. Happenings were often multi-media events in which the viewers were invited into a strange environment to interact with the artwork or the performers. In the most effective of them, Albert said, unexpected things actually happened to the surprised audience. Creating an event that would startle and maybe even shock or frighten the viewers was an inspiring concept.

Many of us now took piano lessons from Alex Minkoff, one of the most highly-regarded piano teachers in the city, whose studio was in our neighborhood. It was Albert's idea that the happening should take the form of a recital of some of Mr. Minkoff's pupils, to which an unsuspecting audience of adults and peers would be invited. Mr. Minkoff, who had a great sense of humor, agreed enthusiastically to Albert's plan. The only restriction he imposed was to ask us not to invite any members of the professional musical community, which was fine with us—we weren't interested in shocking them. Five students were willing to perform pieces they had been working on with Mr. Minkoff. We mimeographed programs and mailed them to several dozen people, with The Alex Minkoff Studio as the return address. Then we practiced—and made other detailed preparations, many of them in and around Mr. Minkoff's studio.

The audience arrived at what appeared to be a perfectly normal concert. Mr. Minkoff often did have recitals in his studio, and the chairs were set up facing the large grand piano just as usual. The friends, parents, other adults and a few teachers in the audience were all nicely dressed, and chatted quietly as they looked over their programs. At five after eight, when they had all arrived, Mr. Minkoff stepped in front of the piano to greet them, as he always did at recitals. "Welcome, everyone. It's good to see you here. I'm sure you'll all enjoy the recital tonight. Since the program is a short one, there will be no intermission. Thank you." He bowed his head slightly to their polite applause, and sat down at the back of the room.

Albert performed first, a sad little Chopin Etude. The music sounded more poignant than usual tonight, since the piano was noticeably out of tune. A few of the more astute listeners in the audience glanced at each other, but most of them didn't seem bothered, and the applause was enthusiastic.

The second piece was a Beethoven Sonata, a longer work, performed by a boy named Richard, one of Mr. Minkoff's most advanced students. The opening movement was fast, and Richard played it quite loudly, on purpose. Most people barely noticed, or were able to ignore at first, the very soft grinding noise that gradually began to emanate from the vicinity of the stage. (We had hidden the tape recorder behind a closed, floor-to-ceiling window curtain at the front of the room.)

The second movement was quiet and pensive. Now the inexplicable wavering groans from the hidden tape recorder were clearly audible to everyone. Many people in the audience exchanged puzzled looks, shifting uncomfortably in their seats. The woman sitting beside Mr. Minkoff, a very proper music lover who was a member of his coterie but had no money, whispered something to him. He silently indicated that he didn't know what she was talking about and put his finger to his lips, leaning forward to listen to the music.

At the most moving and delicate moment in the piece, when Richard, as was his habit, was bent over with his head close to the keyboard, breathing heavily, the apartment buzzer bleated. People jerked in their seats, then turned to frown at the door. Vera Lermontov, as planned, clicked into the room in four-inch heels. Though her embarassed manner indicated she thought she was trying to be quiet, her shoes made a great deal of noise on the bare floor. Instead of unobstrusively taking a seat at the back, she headed for one near the front, at the end of a long row of people, stepping on many of their toes as she squeezed past them. "I'm sorry, so sorry," she kept apologizing, loudly enough to disturb the entire audience.

About a minute after she sat down, and people had stopped glaring at her and were trying to listen again—despite the warped wheezing mechanical chirps and grunts from behind the stage—a toilet flushed loudly at the back of the apartment. Most people turned around and looked, really offended now. Mr. Minkoff gave the barest of shrugs, indicating there was nothing to be concerned about. But the applause when Richard finished was not quite so hearty. There was a lot of exasperated conversation during the interval before the next piece, people muttering irritably and looking around the room.

Of course everyone stopped talking when Dave, the third performer, began to play a Bach Prelude and Fugue—everyone, that is, except Vera, who was sitting directly behind me. (All the performers were seated in the front row.) "Hear that wrong note?" she asked me, loudly rustling her program.

"He always makes that same mistake," I confirmed, speaking in a normal voice.

Vera ignored the furious shushing noises from the people seated beside us. "Poor Dave," she said complacently. "He must be so embarrassed."

"I told him that piece was too hard for him," said Vicky, who was sitting beside me, generating a flurry of vehement hisses. Vera sat back in her chair and began fanning herself with her program, cracking her gum.

Just when the audience had begun to settle down again, a loud moan came from the bathroom, followed by retching and choking and the disgusting splash of liquid being spewed into the toilet. Almost the entire audience began whispering, many of them looking a little ill. Dave just went on playing. At the end of his piece several people got up and spoke to Mr. Minkoff. He told them, smiling, to return to their seats. The strange noises from the front of the room were just the heating system, he said, and everything else would be taken care of. He got up and went to check out the bathroom.

I performed next, a Brahms Intermezzo. I played on as though nothing were the matter when the phone began ringing piercingly in another room. Again, people turned. Mr. Minkoff was not in his seat, apparently still taking care of the sick person in the bathroom. The phone went on ringing. Finally the stuffy, matronly woman who was next to Mr. Minkoff's empty seat got up and left the room, and a few moments later the ringing stopped.

That was when the clomping footsteps and the sounds of furniture being dragged across the floor began in the apartment above. Soon the people upstairs switched on a radio. It was quite loud, but not as loud as the pulsating rumbles and crackling noises from the hidden tape recorder.

Some people in the audience were still trying to ignore the disturbances, making a valiant effort to listen to the music. But others were murmuring, despite the fact that I was still playing, shaking their heads in indignation and disbelief. Our cohorts planted throughout the audience, such as Vera, frowned at these people, making it clear that their behavior was distracting them and interfering with the concert.

When I finished, to scattered, tentative applause, the matronly woman marched out of the apartment to speak to the people upstairs. We knew it would be useless, since the people upstairs had been instructed to ignore anyone knocking on their locked door. They went on moving furniture and listening to the radio, the tape recorder went on gurgling and sputtering, as Vicky stepped onto the stage. No one in the audience, even those involved in the happening, knew that they were about to witness the first public performance of "Vanya, the Insane Pianist."

Vicky sedately approached the piano, bowed demurely to the threadbare applause, and began to play a Chopin Prelude. At first her demeanor was very controlled. She sat bolt up-right, her expression serious and withdrawn, her body motionless except for her fingers tinkling delicately on the keys.

But as the music grew more turbulent her torso began to sway. Her head dipped toward the keyboard, then lifted, her back arched, her chin raised, her eyes half closed. She tossed her head, her long hair swinging more and more wildly, falling over her eyes. She began to moan. The music increased in volume. She was making glaring mistakes now, too exalted by passion to bother with trivialities such as playing the right notes. The audience, suddenly dead quiet, watched Vicky in horrified astonishment. Her groans became wails, she convulsed on the bench, no longer producing music, her open hands crashing violently on the keyboard. Finally she leapt to her feet in a disheviled frenzy and ran shrieking from the studio.

There was a long moment of utter, stunned silence. Then a confused disorderly babble broke out. No one could ask Mr. Minkoff what this was all about, since he was still hiding in the back of the apartment. Some people, such as the proper matron, stalked out of the studio. Others were frankly worried; I heard many people wondering if Vicky had had some kind of fit, their eyes moving apprehensively toward Mom and Dad.

Mom and Dad were talking and laughing with some of the more astute adults, who had finally realized that the whole thing was a joke. Others were not so amused at being tricked. It was an interesting test of character to see which people appreciated the humor of it, and which ones were offended.

Later that year Vicky won the starring role in the high school production of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible." Mom had known Arthur Miller briefly in college; he dated one of her roomates. Once he borrowed Mom's bicycle and carelessly left it in the street, where it was run over by a car, which twisted the main bar in a way that made the bike unrideable. He returned it to Mom in this condition. When she complained, he jumped up and down on the bicycle to try to straighten the bar, told Mom it was fine now, and never offered to pay to have it repaired. For this reason, Mom always insisted that Arthur Miller was a lousy writer. But she agreed, along with everyone else, that Vicky was brilliant in the part.

Vicky was not a particularly avid student, and dropped in and out of college. At one point she applied to a prestigious university drama school. They were not impressed by her grades, which weren't up to their standard, but did allow her to audition, though they warned her that she had little chance of getting in. At the audition she had to perform a long, difficult monologue, alone on stage in front of an audience of highly critical judges—in competition with other applicants who had been studying acting for years. The judges unanimously gave Vicky the highest possible rating, and the school accepted her on that basis.

But she never went to drama school, because her boyfriend wanted her to return to the college they had both attended the year before, and she did. He broke up with her a few months later. The idea of Vicky becoming a movie star was really more my fantasy than hers. She tells wonderful stories about her experiences as a nurse, and is the mother of two children.

Once, when Vicky's daughter Julie was a toddler, all four siblings in our family visited Mom and Dad at the same time. It was an unusual occurence, since we are all very spread out around the world, and we did a lot of videotaping. One evening Vicky and Julie stood fully dressed at the edge of Mom and Dad's swimming pool, and Tycho taped Vicky giving a lecture on how to teach your child to swim. "Don't worry about any silly little preliminaries," Vicky said with authority. "Don't bother getting them used to the water in stupid baby pools, or training them to float in a few inches of water. That's all a waste of time. Take my advice. If you want your baby to be an instant swimming prodigy, just pick her up without warning and <u>throw</u> her into the deepest water—like this." Vicky lifted Julie and swung her around over the deep end of the pool. Julie loved it.

But when Vicky set her down on the rim of the pool Julie was a little dizzy. She bent down, reached forward, and tumbled head first into nine feet of water, sinking like a stone. Vicky unhesitatingly plunged in after her in her new dress. Vicky's first words, on emerging from the water with Julie, who was startled but unharmed, were, "Did you get that, Tycho?"

Unlike news cameramen who stand there filming people immolating themselves instead of stopping and trying to help them, Tycho had thrown down the camera and rushed toward the pool. But he <u>had</u> gotten a shot of Julie tumbling in, and picked up the camera a moment later when he saw that Vicky had rescued her. That night we played the tape on TV for Julie, taping Julie as well as the action on the screen to get a record of her response. When Julie saw herself falling into the water she laughed joyously and clapped her hands.

I don't know if Julie really thought it was funny, or if she was actually scared and only <u>pretending</u> to be amused. Vicky claims she can tell the difference between Julie's real laugh and her fake one, but I never can.

Julie is also quite good at coming up with names. It was Julie who decided that her younger brother would be named Spencer. Her nickname for the rambunctious little boy is Fluffy.

Julie and Vicky do wonderful pituh-plays together. Vicky is

often the harsh and abrasive parent or teacher, Julie the perfectly-behaved, mistreated child. Sometimes Julie will suddenly burst into tears in a play and I'll think something has unexpectedly upset her. But it's only part of her role.

9 LEAH'S STORIES

When I was in high school I got to know a strange, smart girl named Leah Moses. She had coarse black hair, an oily complexion, and wore thick glasses. Though she had independently styled her appearance like the girls in our group—long hair, no makeup—she was never accepted as a member of our circle. No one else could stand her because she was such a pretentious intellectual snob. Bart and Nicole and I were the only ones who ever spent any time with Leah at all. Partly, the three of us felt sorry for her. Leah was truly an outcast, not one by choice, like Vicky. Nor were her frumpy clothes an affectation, as Ann's were; Leah's family was poor, she could not afford to dress any other way. But we didn't associate with her only out of pity; we were entertained by the outrageous things she said.

Leah claimed she had a serious and physically intimate relationship with a wealthy and titled English athlete-scholar named Neville Asquith-Smythe. She was always telling us how handsome and well-built Neville was. He was a brilliant college philosophy major. Leah often attended classes with him at the university, and went on at length about his explanations of Hegel and Kant. It was odd that she was never able to produce Neville, and our friends in college knew of no English Philosophy major, nor had they ever seen Leah at any philosophy lectures.

Leah bragged a lot about her older sister Ze'eva, (she never neglected to pronounce the apostrophe), who had been three years ahead of us in high school, was recognized by all as the most brilliant and beautiful student in her class, and now lived on a kibbutz in Israel and fought on the front lines in the Israeli army. Beginning to be suspicious, I asked Vera Lermontov about Leah's sister when Vera was home from college. Vera was three years ahead of us and had known everyone in high school. She said nobody named Ze'eva Moses had been in her class, or in any classes for several years before or after hers, and proved it by showing me her yearbooks.

On the few occasions when Bart and Nicole and I invited Leah to do something with us on a Friday evening, she always refused. Leah said she was a member of an advanced folk dancing group that practiced on Fridays and often performed in public. She couldn't miss a single rehearsal. The director of the group, she told us, was an exceptionally attractive man in his 20's named Russell Davidson, who was independently wealthy because his family owned the Davidson Brothers shoe company. "Russ," as Leah called him, was married, but he was always making passes at her anyway when he picked her up in his Rolls Royce Silver Cloud. Of course, he never picked her up in his Rolls Royce at school, or anyplace else where we might actually lay eyes on it.

Leah said she was a concert calibre soprano. Bart and Nicole and I asked her why she didn't sing in the chorus. Leah was insulted by the question, explaining loftily, as though it should have been obvious to us, that the little amateur high school group was beneath her. <u>She</u> had recently sung the demanding role of the Witch of Endor in a professional production of a difficult Hindemith opera at the university theater. She described her elaborate costume in detail. I mentioned this to a friend of my parents who had been the music critic for the newspaper for the last twenty years. He said that opera had never been produced here.

Bart and Nicole and I didn't confront Leah with these proofs of her pathological lying. To do so would have been cruel and—even worse—embarrassing. It might have been different if Leah's stories were destructive to others; in fact, the only person they hurt was Leah herself.

But once, after we'd been hearing about folk dancing and Russ and his Rolls Royce for several months, Bart couldn't resist saying, "Gee, this Friday folk dancing thing sounds like fun. You think we could ever come too?"

"I doubt it," Leah said with predictable haste. "It <u>is</u> a very exclusive and professional group. They're extremely selective about who they allow to participate; they have to be."

Privately, the three of us wondered what Leah <u>really</u> did on Friday evenings. If she didn't stay at home alone, we figured she was probably forced by her elderly parents to attend religious services or visit even more elderly relatives.

But two weeks after Bart had asked Leah if we could go to folk dancing, Leah phoned me on Friday afternoon to say that Russ had generously granted her permission to invite three of her more mature and sophisticated friends that night—just this once, of course—and she felt Bart and Nicole and I were the only ones who would prove acceptable.

I was very surprised that Leah had invited us; she had never suggested introducing us to her non-existent boy-friend, or showed us photographs of her imaginary sister, or invited us to her mythical operatic performances. Why would Leah volunteer to expose her lies and humiliate herself in this case? I told her I'd think about it, hung up and called Nicole and Bart, who were both at Nicole's house. Nicole's interpretation was that Leah probably knew we were going to a party that night to which she had not been invited. Asking us to her imaginary folk dancing group was safe, since she certainly did not expect us to skip the party to go with her. Leah's phone call was nothing but a feeble attempt to improve her credibility.

"What do you think she'd do if we did agree to go?" I wondered.

"It might be interesting to see what kind of excuse she'd come up with," Bart said. "Why don't you tell her we accept?"

I was reluctant to put Leah on the spot, but I was also curious. And it wouldn't be so embarrassing to do this to her over the phone. I called Leah back, and nodded knowingly to myself when she said that unfortunately Russ was not picking her up in his Rolls that night after all. It was so irritatingly predictable that I couldn't keep from saying, "So you weren't really inviting us?"

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone, as I expected. But I was not prepared when Leah asked if one of us could get a car tonight. She didn't have access to a car, but she knew the way. I said sure, and slowly hung up, wishing I hadn't accepted. We would miss the party. And probably all that would happen was that Leah would pretend to get lost, and we'd just drive around aimlessly, listening to more of her stories. Nicole and Bart felt the same way. But it was too late to back out now.

We didn't get lost; Leah gave Bart excellent directions. We could hardly believe it when she pointed out an old warehouse downtown and told him to park at the next space he could find. As we walked back toward the building there was no need for her to draw our attention to the gigantic and gleaming Rolls Royce Silver Cloud reposing majestically in front of the shabby, unlit doorway. No one could not have noticed that car. We exchanged glances of amazement. None of us had ever seen a vehicle like that in our lives.

Lively ethnic music in a minor key grew louder as we climbed the four dingy flights of metal stairs. Leah pushed open a door on a landing lit by an unadorned lightbulb and stepped inside. We shyly followed her into a large room with bare walls and a scuffed wooden floor. Unfamiliar instruments tooted and trilled rhythmically from a phonograph in one corner equipped with two large, expensive looking speakers.

A group of about a dozen people, college age and older, danced in a line holding hands. The women had long hair and no makeup, and wore bright peasanty skirts and blouses. Many of the men had beards and all wore jeans and T-shirts—except one, who stood out from the rest in black trousers and turtleneck. He was tall and very lean, with short hair and no beard or mustache, and danced at the head of the line, leading the others along.

Their feet moved in complicated patterns, hopping occasionally, jumping back and then forward again, as the line snaked around the room. Sometimes the leader would lower his head and glide underneath two other dancers' joined hands, pulling the line around and through itself. Everyone was sweating and smiling. The leader never missed a beat, one arm held above his head, his face lifted almost ecstatically as his feet breezed through the intricate steps. Some of the others, I was relieved to see, stumbled at times, losing count, looking down at their feet, their mouths moving silently as though repeating instructions. They were too involved to pay any attention to our arrival. Leah ran out onto the floor, grabbed the hand of the person at the end of the line, and plunged skillfully into the dance—though being short and chunky, she wasn't particularly graceful.

When the music ended they all dropped hands and began talking and laughing, wiping their brows and catching their breath. The leader rushed to take the needle off the record. Then Leah introduced us to Russ, and his wife Maria.

Russ wasn't nearly as handsome as Leah had described him, but he was good-looking enough, with a narrow face and a long jaw. He didn't say much; he was clearly eager to get on with the next dance, and hurried back to the phonograph. Maria, who had thin brown hair and a round face and wore a knitted shawl, was very gracious. She said in a gentle voice that she was glad to meet Leah's friends, was happy we had come, and told us it was really easier than it looked and she hoped we'd have a good time. "Do Mayim next, Russ," she called over to him. "That's the best one to get people started on. It's an Israeli dance, about water," she said quietly again to us. "You'll catch on right away. Come on."

Though we were awkward and self-conscious at first, Mayim did turn out to be pretty easy. You did a few simple steps around in a circle, then ran into the center and back with your arms raised during the chorus, chanting "Mayim" along with the singers on the record. We felt breathless and invigorated when it was over, and even more invigorated at the end of the evening, after stumbling through, and eventually learning, more complex dances. "Please come back," Maria said as though she meant it, and even Russ nodded encouragingly in his inarticulate way. "Feel free to bring other friends too—the more people, the more fun it is," Maria urged us.

It occured to me to ask Leah why she had told us this group was so exclusive and that the leaders were reluctant for her to bring anybody, when in fact they were clearly eager for more participants. But I was in such high spirits that I didn't feel like pinning Leah down—especially because Leah did not seem to share our ebullience, but was strangely silent on the way home.

Vicky was intrigued when I told her how much fun folk dancing had been, and described to her the seemingly far-out, counter-cultural people who had been there—not to mention the incredible Rolls Royce. Vicky was also somewhat incredulous that dumpy *Leah*, who pathetically invented all those stories about herself, would actually be involved in anything so interesting. But she was free the next Friday and decided to give it a try. She asked Ann and Emily to come too, as insurance, in case it *did* turn out to be boring. I invited Dave, and Nicole asked Matilda to come.

It didn't occur to me to mention any of this to Leah, though I was thoughtful enough to ask her, at school on Friday, if she needed a ride that night.

"A ride?" she said, as though she didn't know what I meant.

"Yeah. To folk dancing."

"You're coming *back*?" she said, a funny expression on her face. "All three of you?"

"Sure. You saw what a good time we had. And Vicky and Ann and Emily and Dave and Matilda are coming too."

"But . . ." Leah's eyes swam around behind her thick glasses. She didn't know what to say.

"It's okay, isn't it?" I asked her. "Maria told us to bring more people. She said the more the better."

Leah lifted her chin. "Thanks, but I don't need a ride," she said. "Russ is picking me up in the Rolls." It wasn't *his* Rolls now; it was "the Rolls."

"I know this is going to be boring," Ann kept saying grumpily, all the way downtown. She stopped complaining when she saw the Rolls Royce, parked grandly in the same spot it had occupied the week before. Since Leah wasn't with us now, we took our time examining it, peering through the smoked windows at the lush leather and teakwood interior, stroking its flanks, murmuring words of awe. It was awhile before we tore ourselves away and clomped up the stairs.

Again we arrived in the middle of a dance. But this time some of the dancers—though not Leah—turned and looked when so many new and unfamiliar faces appeared at the door. Russ Davidson, I noticed, rapt though he was, glanced several times at Emily, without missing a step. And when the dance was over he zipped right over and actually articulated an entire sentence to us, his eyes on Emily.

With more of our friends there we had an even better time than we had the week before. Russ was very patient about teaching us steps to dances that the old hands already knew, focusing his attention on Emily, who learned quickly and was quite graceful, with her slender body and long pale hair. Leah made it clear, by looking the other way and tapping her plump foot, that she already knew these dances perfectly. She also spent more time talking to the other people there than to us. It briefly occured to me that she must have enjoyed her unique position as the youngest member of the group—a group that had clearly accepted her, as no group of her contemporaries at school did. But I never got around to mentioning this thought to Nicole; I was too preoccupied with other people to think much about Leah.

Leah was pleasant enough to us afterwards, smiling and waving when she got into the Rolls with Russ and Maria. As Russ pulled away, he looked back several times at Emily.

We brought more people the next week; now our friends outnumbered the original dancers. We also began to get to know some of these people; holding hands and dancing with them broke the ice quickly. Afterwards, Maria suggested going to a coffee house in a hip nightclub area in the city. Emily, Ann and Vicky rode in the Rolls, though Leah made sure to claim the front seat. Maria was happy to ride with us.

We had fun at the coffee house, where there was a folk singer. Emily's older brother Chuck, who was taking a semester off from Harvard, borrowed the entertainer's guitar and played a few songs himself; the rest of us—except for Leah—sang along with him. Leah seemed bored by the singing, preferring to fill me in on Neville's latest theories about Wittgenstein. But Maria Davidson was very impressed with Chuck's skill. Russ Davidson sat next to Emily, speaking little himself, but listening closely to everything she had to say. It was flattering that these wealthy, youthful and bohemian adults seemed to enjoy spending time with us. It became a pattern to go to the coffee house with the Davidsons after folk dancing. Now we couldn't wait for Friday nights.

After this had been going on for a month or so, Maria telephoned and invited Vicky and me to come to their house for dinner on Saturday—she had invited Chuck and Emily too. "But, uh, maybe you better not say anything about this to Leah," Maria cautioned us. We assured her we wouldn't. We were thrilled by the invitation, and couldn't wait to see what their house was like.

It was not the mansion we had anticipated, but a spacious modern split-level in a subdivision. Maria was savvy enough to figure we had expected something showier from people with Russ's kind of money. "Russ's family has an estate," she explained, "but that kind of place isn't for us. It's stuffy, with all those servants hovering around." She managed to say this without sounding the least bit pretentious, perhaps because of the gentle way she spoke.

We sat in the living room before dinner; Russ played folk dancing records. Batik prints and other folk art hung on the walls; bright woven rugs were scattered over the oak floors. The furniture was Danish Modern, and a lot of it matched. Unlike our parents, who furnished their houses with second-hand stuff, the Davidsons had obviously just gone to expensive stores and bought whatever they wanted.

They were very informal and relaxed. Maria didn't go to a lot of trouble over the food. We had overdone steaks and baked potatoes with margarine and frozen vegetables. Russ, as usual, didn't say much, but Maria was a lively conversationalist. We talked about folk music, and movies and novels, and Maria asked us about our families and friends.

It was Maria who brought up the subject of Leah. "What did Leah tell you about us?" she asked casually, adjusting her shawl.

Vicky, Chuck and Emily turned to me. I was the only one who knew Leah very well. I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted the Davidsons to like me and find me witty, and it would be easy to put Leah down in an amusing way. But they were apparently friends with her; if I were critical of Leah it might offend them. "She told us how much fun folk dancing was. And she did mention Russ's family business—and the Rolls Royce."

Maria leaned forward with what seemed to be a conspiratorial smile. "Did you believe her?" she asked me in her soft, breathy voice.

It would have been an odd question—about anybody other than Leah. I remembered that Maria had specifically asked us not to tell Leah they had invited us here. Maybe I <u>didn't</u> have to be too careful after all. "I didn't believe a word," I said.

Maria laughed. I seemed to have said the right thing. "You'd already heard all about Ze'eva then?" she said, cleverly imitating Leah's pronunciation of the apostrophe.

I nodded. "Then I asked a friend who was in what Leah said was Ze'eva's high school class. She'd never heard of her—and there was no Ze'eva in any of her yearbooks."

Maria glanced at Russ, then back to me. "It's interesting that you found actual proof. We just assumed that Ze'eva inhabited the same world as Neville Asquith-Smythe."

"And the Witch of Endor," I eagerly put in. "I also have proof that opera has never been performed here. God, I was so surprised when it turned out that you two, and folk dancing and the Rolls Royce, actually existed."

This time Russ laughed too. Maria shook her hair back. "Well, we couldn't believe it when you guys started showing up either. We were beginning to suspect that Leah had no friends at all outside that imaginary universe of hers."

"How did you get to know Leah?" Emily asked.

"She just showed up at folk dancing, almost a year ago, I guess. She found out about the group somehow. She seemed interesting—the things she told us about herself were a little more subtle at first. Then, after we were better friends with her, the stuff she told us got wilder and we began to put two and two together. You have to admit, she can be entertaining."

There was a certain edge to Maria's voice now; I wondered if there might be any truth to Leah's remark about Russ making passes at her. But later, Maria did not seem the least bit concerned at how close Russ was sitting to Emily, his arm along the back of the couch almost touching Emily's shoulder. On the way home Chuck mentioned that he was sure Maria had been flirting with him. If Maria had some gripe against Leah, it didn't seem to have anything to do with jealousy over her husband.

We didn't tell Leah that, more and more often, certain of us had dinner at the Davidson's, or that the Davidsons began showing up at parties of ours that Leah was not invited to. She didn't need to have it spelled out for her. It was obvious, simply from our chumminess at folk dancing, that the Davidsons had become part of a group that had never included Leah.

The Davidsons got to know our parents. Mom thought Maria was interesting and intelligent enough. She was baffled by Russ, who hardly ever said anything, and when he did, it was always about folk dancing. "All that money," Mom said, wistfully shaking her head, "and all he can think of to do with it is buy that car, and run a folk dance group."

There were now so many of our cronies at folk dancing that the downtown loft room was no longer big enough. It was also inconveniently located for the majority of the participants. Russ made arrangements with a Jewish community center in our suburb, which was more attractive and had a lot more space. After the move, even more kids began to show up. The pituh-people had always gone to something called "Wigwam" on Friday nights, where they danced to rock music; now we oddballs had our own equivalent. It was in my Junior year that folk dancing became an official high school club, with a very crowded picture in the yearbook. Leah did not come to be photographed.

It was Emily these days, not Leah, who was driven to folk dancing in "the Rolls" (as we referred to it now). Russ was fair, and gave everyone a chance to experience it at one time or another; Emily was the constant. He even began picking us up at school; it was intensely satisfying that all the pituh-people hanging out in front of the building, like Steve Kamen, often saw us getting into that car. Leah never seemed to be around when this happened.

It was the smoothest and most silent car any of us had ever ridden in. The seats were wonderfully plush. We loved opening the teakwood bar in the back seat and pretending we were actually drinking as we floated along—though Russ, who had no interest in alcohol, never bothered to keep it stocked. He had no interest in his executive position at the shoe company either, though he dutifully appeared there and made the motions five days a week. Folk dancing was his single passion.

Leah still came to folk dancing, though she was now only a minor participant, no longer included when we went out afterwards. We didn't discuss folk dancing with Leah, and she never brought it up. When Bart and Nicole and I had time to talk to her, she regaled us with increasingly elaborate stories. We heard about her cousin, the wealthy and critically acclaimed novelist (whose books were only published in Hebrew, of course, and not available in this country). We heard how Neville had proposed to her, wanting to make her Lady Asquith-Smythe, despite his parents' objections that she was an American and a commoner. But Leah was keeping him dangling; she wasn't sure she wanted to live in England, because of the climate. Anyway, she told us, she had taken advanced placement tests and had already been admitted, with large scholarships, to Radcliffe and Smith and Stanford, though she was only a Junior. Once Leah disappeared for a week, telling us afterward that she had been in Israel at Ze'eva's wedding to a famous Israeli film star and director. Leah then mentioned that a long poem she had written had been accepted by a prestigious literary magazine, and would be published at some undisclosed point in the future.

Now I was able to report these stories to Maria. Her laughter was always unusually brittle when we spoke of Leah. I did comment on this reaction to Nicole. "I think the Davidsons must have gone out of their way to be friendly to Leah at first," she said somewhat pensively. "Like maybe they trusted her in some way, and now Maria feels insulted that Leah kept feeding her these lies. You can sort of understand it, in a way. Poor Leah."

"Leah doesn't feed them to her now," I said. "I get the feeling the Davidsons hardly ever talk to her at all any more."

"Poor Leah," Nicole said again. She took a long time adjusting her glasses.

Naturally no one believed Leah when she said she had decided to accept Stanford's offer and would be going to college a year early. But when the rest of us began our senior year, Leah wasn't around—though it took awhile for anybody to notice. I checked with the guidance counselor, who confirmed that Leah had in fact placed out of her senior year in high school and was now at Stanford. We were all amazed—not because Leah wasn't smart enough, but because she had been telling the truth.

"It seems kind of silly to me," Mom said. "Why rush things like that? Your high school years are important. You might as well take the time to enjoy them while you can."

There are more stories about the Davidsons and some wild parties we had, stories about Russ and Emily, and Maria and Chuck. But they seem less important to me now than Leah's stories.

I wrote to Nicole, who was then a foreign student in Italy, about Leah's sudden departure for college. "I think she'll be happier there," Nicole wrote back. "No wonder she wanted to get away. She had only one good thing in high school—and she lost it."

10 THE MAGIC CHALK

In high school, we were friends for awhile with a young history teacher named Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans was small, bearded and very skinny, and extremely clever and amusing. His parents had emigrated from Ireland, and he loved to talk. Mom especially was impressed by his wit, and they enjoyed spending time together. But Mr. Evans was really closer to our generation than to Mom and Dad's. He had an apartment near our house, and when he gave Vicky and me rides to school he let us smoke in his car. When folk dancing became an official school club it needed a faculty sponsor, and Mr. Evans volunteered. He was perfect, since he already came to folk dancing anyway (though he just watched, never danced), and so having him there did not interfere at all with the fun, as almost any other teacher's presence would have.

Mr. Plotkin, the art teacher, was a lot older than Mr. Evans but also a cool guy (his beautiful young wife was a former high school student of his). Mr. Plotkin had once taken a university course in film-making, and had a sixteen millimeter camera. I was a junior when Mr. Evans came up with the idea of a group of students making a movie, with his and Mr. Plotkin's help. (This was years before video cameras came along; making a movie was a very unusual project for high school kids.)

About six of us began by meeting at Mr. Evans's apartment and brainstorming for a plot. I wanted to do something with a slightly fantastic element to it. Mr. Evans didn't have many actual suggestions, but his presence created a certain pressure on us to come up with something, and he did not hesitate to express his opinions of our ideas. In a few meetings we put together what we thought was a really good story, and came up with a title, "The Magic Chalk." With guidelines from Mr. Plotkin, Bart and Nicole and I wrote a professional shooting script, organized into numbered scenes.

The story was about three little boys who find a piece of chalk on the school playground. They break it into three pieces, to share it. One boy immediately draws a picture of a lion on the blacktop; another draws a picture of a horse. The third boy can't think of what to draw, and grows more and more frustrated as he watches the other boys producing their masterpieces, drawing nothing himself, sighing and fingering the chalk.

One of the other boys looks up—and for the first time notices a statue of a lion across the street, in front of the city hall, very much like the picture he has just drawn. He is enchanted by it, and runs across the street to pet the cement lion. Then he dares to climb up on its back. He pretends to ride it through the jungle, joyously bouncing up and down. But soon a dour businessman comes out of the building and interrupts his fantasy, angrily makes the boy get off the lion, and sends him away humiliated.

The second boy, who has drawn a horse, skips away from the playground. Passing a diner, he sees a pinball machine through the window—with a picture of a horse on it, very much like the one he has just drawn. He hesitantly enters the diner, and watches the three tough teenagers who are playing pinball. When they leave the game to eat their hamburgers the boy takes over the machine. He inserts his one dime and begins to play, having a wonderful time, racking up a tremendous score. But the three toughs have been watching him from the counter, and soon one of them nastily slaps the machine, making it tilt. The boy's game is ruined, and his dime is lost. The toughs laugh while he tries to blink back his tears.

The third boy is still on the playground, still unable to draw anything, nervously bouncing his ball. He sees the other boys' pictures again. Even more frustrated now, unable to create a real drawing, he kneels down and scribbles an ugly jagged line, then angrily throws down the chalk and marches away.

He wanders into a seedier neighborhood, still bouncing his ball. He pauses by a storefront. A woman comes out of the store and rudely pushes him out of the way, glaring at him. He begins throwing the ball against the wall of an apartment building, near a window. Suddenly a man rushes out onto the fire escape and screams at him to go away. The boy looks wildly around, confronted on all sides by hateful graffiti, signs reading "Violation" and "Stop." The man is still shouting at him. The boy squeezes his eyes shut and hurls the ball, which smashes the apartment window—in exactly the same shape as the line he scribbled with the broken piece of chalk.

He rushes away, back to the playground. There are the three ominously prophetic drawings and the strange piece of chalk, which is magically whole again. He reaches out for it, wondering if he should pick it up. Then he decides it is too dangerous and runs away. The camera pans back to the piece of chalk, which has written "The End" on the pavement.

Mr. Evans and Mr. Plotkin used the shooting script to apply for a grant from the school board. The grant was approved. Mr. Plotkin said the check was small, but might possibly be enough, if we were careful.

We shot most of the film over spring vacation. Mr. Plotkin was the cameraman. Danny and Tycho and a friend of theirs named Herman were the stars. We picked Herman because he was cutely missing one of his front teeth. Mr. Plotkin was unsure about this. From experience, he knew that we might need additional shots later, and was afraid Herman might have grown a new tooth by then. "If that happens, I'll just knock it out," little Mr. Evans assured him with a genial chuckle. That didn't become necessary. (Though during shooting we often did have to send Herman home to put on the same clothes he'd worn the day before. His mother, who did not at first understand about continuity, wanted him to look nice in the movie, and kept putting different, clean clothes on him every day.)

Tycho was six, Herman was seven, and Danny, who was eight, played the leading role of the frustrated boy who can't create anything, and breaks the window. Dad was the dour businessman, Mom the glaring shopper, and I was one of the toughs in the diner. Vicky, the most photogenic of us all, was oddly enough the only person in the family who did not act in the film.

Tycho and Herman didn't really act. We just told them what to do, and they were so young that they usually behaved naturally in front of the camera. Tycho had his stubborn moments though, especially because we kept asking him to do the same things over and over again. All the scenes had to be shot many times, to be sure we would have several good takes and different camera angles to choose from when editing later. Tycho was in an especially bad mood the day we shot the scene when he sees the lion. He was supposed to look up from his drawing, suddenly notice the lion statue, and beam in surprise and delight. But Tycho was sick of this, he refused to smile, in take after take he would just look up and pout sullenly at the camera. We were wasting a lot of expensive film.

Finally Vicky and I figured out what to do. We stood behind the camera, and when Tycho looked up we suddenly began making the most obscene and violent gestures we could think of. His face lit up in an expression of innocent childish bliss. "Cut and print!" cried Mr. Plotkin.

We also had trouble with Herman at the end of the pinball scene. He was unable to cry on cue, but instead kept grinning at the camera, showing his missing tooth. Mr. Evans solved this problem by making him stare directly into the brightest light for several minutes, ordering him not to turn his head or close his eyes whenever he tried to look away. Soon we had a perfect shot of Herman blinking back tears.

Danny was old enough to know how to act. The nervous, frustrated role suited him, and he never had any problems scowling at Tycho on cue. He also responded well to coaching from Mr. Evans, who seemed especially concerned with the depiction of this particular character.

Danny was also very adept with the ball. We didn't really break an apartment house window. We broke windows in a deserted building downtown that was about to be demol-ished, filming every smash of the glass. We gave Danny the fun of throwing the ball through many of the windows himself, though Mr. Evans playfully insisted on breaking some of them too. We studied the broken windows and picked the one with the simplest, most easily recognizable shape. Then Mr. Plotkin took several still photographs of it. A few days later, using the photographs, he made a series of dots on the schoolyard pavement. All Danny had to do was quickly connect the dots with the chalk, to make a line the same shape as the shattered window.

Editing turned out to be more fun than shooting. Now we were in control; we didn't have the little brats to deal with any more. We didn't touch the original negatives, but used a cheap workprint, which was cut up into individual shots, each numbered and hung from a wire with a clothes-pin. We worked in Mr. Evans's small apartment, which was soon completely taken over by dangling strips of film. We rented a machine called a "Movieola," through which we could run the pieces of film and watch them on a little screen.

The fun of editing was that you could play around with the storytelling. Once you'd selected the best take of a particular shot, for instance, you could cut it in half and then insert a piece of another shot into the middle of it, to keep the camera moving between closeups and long shots, and from one face to another. It was magical the way you could take scenes that had been shot on different days, in completely the wrong order, and rearrange them on screen to make them flow naturally together. Bart and Nicole and I came up with many clever maneuvers while editing that we had never thought of when we were writing the script.

We also made an effort to cut out everything that wasn't completely necessary, to pare down the scenes as much as possible. Mr. Plotkin did not participate in the editing—he was busy with his family now, and his duties as cameraman were completed. But he did give us some pointers before we started. "It's easy to fall in love with a shot and let it drag on longer than it has to," he told us. "Shorter is always better, even if it's just by a few seconds." We took him seriously, and forced ourselves to discard some of our most beloved footage—though often we had to persuade Mr. Evans, who didn't want to cut so much. We started with six and a half hours of usable film and ended up with a thirty-one minute movie.

Bart and Nicole and I did the editing during the summer before my senior year. Mr. Evans worked the movieola, but the rest of us had most of the ideas. Bart and Nicole often had to go home earlier than I did, and Mr. Evans and I would stay alone in his apartment working late. We got to be very good friends. He was twenty-three, only six years older than I was, near enough in age so that he didn't seem like a real adult. But he was also old enough to appear to be an authority on many things I was just beginning to experience myself. Soon I was telling him everything about my life.

I was a little depressed one evening because it had finally hit me that someone I was attracted to had no interest in me that way at all. Mr. Evans assured me that this happened to almost everyone; it did not mean that I was unlovable or unattractive myself. To make me feel better, he described the recommendation he had written about me to Harvard. It said, among other things, that I was the most creative and imaginative person he had ever met in his life. It cheered me up quite a bit to hear that. Mr. Evans asked me not to tell anyone, even my parents and best friends, that he had mentioned the recommendation to me, and of course I promised that I wouldn't.

Once Mr. Evans and I drove to Chicago with a married couple he was friends with, so that I could interview at the university there. Mom and Dad did not want me to stay in the motel with these adults, and had arranged for me to sleep at the apartment of some friends of theirs I had never met. We arrived in Chicago at dinner time, and instead of stopping off first at this apartment we went directly to a Greek restaurant. The restaurant was a lot of fun because there was a belly dancer who would dance especially for you if you inserted money into various parts of her costume. Since my budget was very limited, Mr. Evans gave me several dollar bills for this purpose. He was very appreciative of the belly dancer, and she spent a lot of time at our table, joking with us as well as dancing. It was almost two in the morning when they finally dropped me off at the apartment of these strangers. The husband had waited up for me, and started yelling as soon as he let me in the door. I felt terrible.

After the interview the next day we went to a beach on Lake Michigan. I was a little shocked by Mr. Evans's scrawny and densely hirsute body—

there was so much long black hair all over him that you could barely get a glimpse of the pasty-white skin underneath. I had never seen anything like it, (and later described it to all my friends). We ate in a French restaurant that night, and when I got home from Chicago I made the mistake of telling Mom I had paid \$4.95 for canard a l'orange. She was horrified that I had spent all that money on one meal. She did not seem to find Mr. Evans quite so charming after that.

Meanwhile, I was composing the musical score for "The Magic Chalk." This was more fun than other pieces I had written before, because the music was telling a story. I timed every shot to the second, and then, with projector and screen set up beside the piano, played along with the movie. I loved making the music fit into the exact number of seconds of each particular sequence. And I began to learn how much control the composer has over the emotional impact of the film. I experimented with different sounds, and saw that the same footage could come across as ominous or wistful, tense or humorous, depending on what music I put to it.

At the beginning of my senior year we premiered the film on a Friday and Saturday night at the high school auditorium. We advertised it in advance, with silk-screened posters Nicole made, based on a shot of Tycho in the film. We performed the music live, which was written for a five-piece ensemble with me at the piano. It was a joyous occasion for me. My name appeared many times in the credits, and I loved coming across in public as the genius who had co-written the film, acted in it, edited it, and composed and performed the musical score.

Mr. Evans' name appeared in the credits once. Though he had not directly contributed anything creative—in the story, shooting, editing or music—he did not hesitate to go around telling people during the intermission, and at the party afterwards, that he was the impresario who had made the whole thing possible, a kind of modern Serge Diaghilev. Most people he spoke to didn't know who Serge Diaghilev was.

Both shows were sold out. We used the proceeds to pay for a recording of the music that was made into a real optical sound track on the film.

There was an article about "The Magic Chalk" in the newspaper, most of it focused on me, since I was the most visible at the showing. Mr. Evans was mentioned only in passing, in a boring obligatory paragraph at the end that listed a lot of people's names. The article quoted a real filmmaker in the city who had come to see the movie, who went on and on about how my music was professional quality, though he also mentioned that the film itself was too long. Of course I basked in all the attention, reading the article over and over again. Everyone else was excited about the article too—except for Mr. Evans, who changed the subject.

Mom suggested I enclose the article with my application to Harvard. We all felt it was partly because of "The Magic Chalk" that Harvard accepted me almost immediately, months before the normal notification date of April 15.

Now that the movie was finished I didn't spend much time with Mr. Evans. School was harder this year, and I was also working diligently on another project, a violin and piano sonata I was composing, based on a tune of Dad's. I did see Mr. Evans at folk dancing, since he was still the sponsor, but we couldn't have long conversations there. He didn't come over to our house any more. Mom had decided she didn't like him. She thought it was peculiar that he would be friends with high school kids.

One evening at folk dancing Mr. Evans excitedly showed Bart and Nicole and me a letter he had received from an organization of amateur filmmakers who had seen the article about "The Magic Chalk," and were inviting us to enter it in their annual competition in New York City. They were amazingly generous, offering to fund Mr. Evans and one of the students who had worked on the film to come to the screening in New York—they would pay for the transportation and two nights in a hotel. We were all thrilled. Naturally Bart and Nicole assumed that I, who had done more work on the film in more capacities than anyone else, would get to go to New York.

Mr. Evans surprised us. He said he wanted Bart to go, since I had already received more public attention for the film than any other student involved in it. For a moment, we didn't know what to say. Bart seemed uncomfortable, and of course I was very disappointed, even a little angry. But Bart was now my best friend, and I didn't want to come across as selfishly craving <u>all</u> the acclaim (though I was eager for as much of it as I could get). I told them, without much enthusiasm, that it was okay with me for Bart to go to New York, he had done a lot of work on the film and it seemed fair enough. Mr. Evans gave me an odd look; he seemed less impressed by my generosity than Bart and Nicole were.

We told our parents of course. Mom declared indignantly that the film was more my work than Bart's, but she also seemed relieved that Mr. Evans hadn't asked me to go to New York. "It's just as well. You're too busy right now anyway," she said.

A week or so later, Mr. Evans asked me in the hallway at school to come to his room at the end of the day. I figured he probably wanted to give me more reasons why Bart deserved to go to New York, to try to soften the blow.

When I got to his room Mr. Evans took a while to get to the point, smiling a quirky little smile, tapping his fingers on the windows, pulling at his beard. Then he dropped the bombshell. The letter had been a fake. There was no film competition. He had manufactured the whole thing himself, typing out the letter, getting an Irish relative of his to sign it so we wouldn't recognize the signature. He explained that he had done it for my own good. All the recognition I had gotten for the film had made me too full of myself, and I needed to be taken down a peg and learn that the world wasn't really so easy. He smiled nervously. I had to realize that there were more important things in life than just creating little stories and tunes.

Then he told me another teacher knew all about this clever and funny lesson he had arranged for me. He said that when he mentioned to her how quickly I had agreed that it was fair for Bart to go to New York instead of me, this teacher had laughed and said sarcastically, "How noble of Bill!"

Hearing that remark gave me a terrible, humiliated feeling that hit me right in the stomach. I had thought I behaved pretty decently, and now I felt tricked and shamed that they saw it as a joke. "What about Bart? Did he know too?" I asked.

"Oh, no," Mr. Evans said, with a kind of forced insousciance. "He wouldn't have been able to play along with it convincingly enough."

"You mean, he really thinks he's going to New York? How's he going to feel when you tell him it was just a trick on me?"

Mr. Evans lifted his eyebrows and shrugged his narrow little shoulders. "It wasn't a trick, Bill. And Bart can take it. He's a pretty stolid kid."

At school the next day Bart told me that Mr. Evans had phoned him and told him the letter was a fake. Bart didn't seem particularly upset. But he was always calm on the surface; his behavior didn't mean that he wasn't hurting. "My mother thought it was pretty weird," he said.

"God, so did mine!" I told him. "She went on and on about how Mr. Evans is pathological. She said he wasn't trying to help me, he was lashing out at me for some reason—and using you. She doesn't want me to even talk to him any more."

"I think you'll be able to live with that," Bart said, with characteristic understatement. I agreed. I never spoke to Mr. Evans again. Conveniently, Mr. Evans resigned almost immediately as the faculty sponsor of folk dancing, and was replaced by another teacher.

Soon after that, I fell obsessively in love with somebody, for the first time in my life—someone younger than me, who was hot and cold. I never knew from one day to the next whether my affections would be returned, or spurned contemptuously. I couldn't think about anything else, and was in a bad way for quite awhile because of it. Mr. Evans hardly crossed my mind at all any more.

But when I was unexpectedly rejected by Harvard in April—they lamely explained they had changed their minds because of my grades—Mr. Evans was the first person Mom thought of.

11 DAD'S COOL

"Would you ever like to see a dead body?" Dad asked Vicky when she was six, after affectionately throwing her around for awhile. Vicky clasped her hands, breathing hard. "More than anything else in the world!" she prayed, enraptured at the very thought of seeing a human corpse. Dad laughed, and bragged about her answer to his friends—though he didn't show Vicky a whole dead body until years later.

Dad often hurled Vicky around rather violently, tossing her high into the air, and she loved it. Only once did her head hit the ceiling and begin to bleed profusely. The only person at all perturbed by this was the woman whose house we were visiting. "I was wiping up blood, and wiping up blood," she later described it at a party, to everyone's amusement.

Dad always remained amazingly calm and logical in situations that would drive any other parent (especially Mom) into a frenzy. "Don't get your shirt in a knot," he admonished Mom when she got upset about something he considered to be trivial. He never lost his cool—or at least almost never.

Vicky and I loved going to his lab, a dreary old building at the medical school. The large ancient elevator had no walls, only a wire cage through which you could see the dusty cables creaking past as you rode up into the gloom. Invariably Dad scared us by jumping up and down in the elevator; the contraption would rattle and shake alarmingly. He also liked to scare us in the laboratory cold room, a freezer the size of a small kitchen where chemicals and dry ice and often interesting portions of dead animals were kept. While we were examining them, Dad would suddenly step outside and slam the heavy metal door, which could not be opened from the inside. We never knew how long he'd leave us locked up in there, shivering happily.

One of the other scientists on the same floor kept several large boa constrictors in cages in his lab. It was a treat to watch the snake stretch its jaws at an impossible angle to swallow a whole egg—and then day by day observe the slow progress of the egg down through the snake's sleeping body.

Even more wonderful was to be there when live mice were put into the cage. We would watch enthralled as the three mice sat on a dead tree limb, seemingly unaware of the snake's silent gradual approach. Then, so quickly we could barely see it happening, one of the mice would be wrapped in the boa's skillful, deadly embrace. The jaws would gape and the mouse would be gone. The remaining mice never seemed to be troubled by this; they would just go on sitting there on the limb as though nothing were the matter. Their apparent dopey placidity only increased our excitement as the boa's graceful upper body moved languidly toward them again. Soon the snake was swollen in three places.

We never visited Dad's lab without begging him to drink helium. He usually obliged, breathing the gas from a large metal cylinder. Helium has a peculiar effect on the vocal cords, making them vibrate more quickly than they do in an atmosphere of oxygen. When Dad started to speak after inhaling the gas, he sounded exactly like Donald Duck. Our shrieks of laughter echoed down the long dim corridor.

Once at Dad's lab, Danny, who was prodigiously mechanical but had problems learning to read, deciphered the word "pull" on a red object on the wall and followed this instruction, setting off the fire alarm. Dad handled the resulting uproar with unruffled efficiency. He was not the least bit angry; more than anything else he was gratified by this indication that Danny might turn out to be literate after all.

One summer afternoon, my friend Angela and I arrived at the lab with a bag of balloons. We went to the sixth floor of the new addition, (far from where Dad was working in the old building), where there was a water fountain next to a balcony directly above the main entrance. We filled a balloon with water, leaned over the balcony and waited until someone was just walking into the building. Then we let the balloon fall. It wasn't a direct hit, but close enough so that the person leapt aside and dropped all his books and papers. We did this again and again, never actually dousing anybody, but still laughing hysterically at the startled—and furious—reactions we produced. It was at least half an hour before Dad got to us. He didn't raise his voice, he just firmly told us to stop, and made us mop up the muddy footprints on the floor. His red face was the only sign of emotion he displayed, and that was involuntary.

Often on summer weekends our family went on float trips on a beautiful secluded river in the Ozarks. We had a canvas boat with a collapsible wooden frame, something like a kayak. After we unpacked upstream, a local garage mechanic would drive our car to a point far down the river and leave it parked there overnight. We spent the next two days drifting down the river, pausing to swim in the clear water whenever we came to a good deep pool. Dad steered through the frequent rapids, shouting instructions at Mom who would paddle frantically at the front of the boat. Sometimes Mom, who was not particularly skillful at this, maneuvered the boat into a rock, which would slash a hole in the canvas. Dad would curse briefly at Mom and then patiently dry and patch the boat.

When it began to get dark and the cicadas started their gentle scratchy song ("That noise makes the sun go down," Tycho once said), we stopped and camped at some nice woodsy place on the shore. Dad cooked steaks over an open fire and Mom heated up canned baked beans, which were always delicious in that situation, watching the stars come out and listening to the rushing water as we ate.

Once a medical student of Dad's and his wife came with us on an weekend camping trip at a spectacular swimming hole. You could ride down a series of small waterfalls, which led to a beautiful deep pool surrounded by high granite cliffs from which you could dive into the water. The young couple applauded when Vicky recited a limerick Dad had taught her:

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There was a young fellow named Chris
Who stood on a precipice to piss.
As soon as he started
He violently farted,
And blew himself into the abyss.
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The student's wife had brought fried chicken for Sunday lunch, wrapped in waxed paper in a wicker picnic basket. Everyone was enjoying the chicken, which was nicely crisp on the outside and moist within—until Dad, who ate slowly, smiled and held up a little white grub on his finger for us to see. He had noticed it crawling around the interior of the drumstick he was eating. We all shrieked when we took a closer look at our own pieces of chicken and saw identical white grubs slithering around inside them too. Enjoying our reaction, Dad explained that flies had easily made their way through the wicker and the loosely wrapped waxed paper to lay eggs inside the chicken the day before, and now the little larvae had hatched. He pointed out, amused, that they were probably harmless, nothing but protein. But the rest of us (even Vicky) felt sick and didn't eat another bite—which left more chicken for Dad to consume with his usual leisurely gusto.

On weekends when we didn't go to the country Dad would sometimes entertain his children (when we were ten and under) by blindfolding us and driving us by a circuitous route to some point in the city which he knew was unfamiliar to us. We would then take off our blindfolds and get out of the car and Dad would drive away, leaving us to find our own way home. He never worried, no matter how long it took us. He made sure we had one dime, so that we could call home if we were still lost when it got dark. Vicky and I had fun finding our way back together, feeling like Hansel and Gretel.

The only time we used the dime was when two of our friends came along. These kids got scared when we found no recognizable landmarks after several hours of wandering. Vicky and I weren't worried, but we let our friends use the dime to call their parents from a pay phone. Their parents were hysterical—and though we described our surroundings they couldn't figure out where we were. We didn't have another dime. The parents told us not to move—and not to talk to strangers.

Then they called Dad, who had just started eating his lunch. "Where are they?" they furiously demanded.

"Beats me," Dad said. "I left them in that warehouse district over on the other side of the highway—but that was a couple of hours ago."

"The warehouse district!" they gasped. "We're driving over there this instant—and you better start looking too!"

"Sure," Dad said agreeably. "But I'd suggest that one of you stay at home so that—"

They hung up before listening to Dad's advice, called the police, and frantically set out to find us.

Dad went back to his lunch, meticulously peeling and slicing an apple, toasting pieces of cheese on buttered bread, sipping from a glass of red wine while reading the paper with his usual thoroughness. Then he got in the car and located us in ten minutes.

Our friends' parents had been too hysterical to listen to Dad's rational advice and had both rushed out to search for us, leaving no one at home to answer the phone. There was no way to tell them their kids were okay. They didn't get back for hours. The police went on looking for us the whole time as well; none of us knew the cops had been called so no one informed them we had been found. After that, Vicky and I saw these friends only at their house.

In high school, when Vicky and I became the center of our circle of oddball friends, we always had a special celebration on the Fourth of July in honor of Vicky's birthday, which was actually July 15. Dozens of kids brought food for a potluck supper at our house. One reason this party was particularly festive was that we all sat and ate and drank at one tremendously long table in the backyard, which gave the event the feeling of a royal banquet. Dad helped us make this table out of the many old doors he collected and saved in the basement.

(On these occasions we benefitted—as we rarely did at any other times—from one of Dad's most extreme peculiarities: he never throws anything away. Our basement was jammed with burned-out lightbulbs, used fanbelts, dead batteries, and piles of decades-old magazines and newspapers that he refused to part with, no matter how much Mom complained. One entire room in the basement was taken up by fifty army surplus mine-detector kits—he had seen them advertised somewhere and quickly snapped up every one of them. I don't remember what the mine-detectors themselves were like, but they were packed in sturdy wooden crates, which was Dad's reason for buying them for a dollar apiece. Most of this stuff he kept forever and never used. One notable exception was the treasured melted telephone he discovered while poking around the ruins of a recently burned-down office building. The body of the phone and the dial were very warped and lopsided where the plastic had been softened by the heat. Dad liked it because it looked like something from a Salvador Dali painting. When Danny was in college he found the melted telephone and actually got it to work. Danny proudly displayed the cartoonlike phone on his desk when he was a scientist at Bell Laboratories, and he uses it to this day. The doors for our banquet table were the other exception.)

Another reason Vicky's birthday celebrations were particularly festive was that Mom and Dad went out, leaving us and our friends to party without adult supervision. Most of the time, of course, it was an advantage not to be restric-ted by parents. But on Vicky's seventeenth birthday it was <u>not</u> an advantage that no adults were around when the police showed up with a warrant for Vicky's arrest. The cops wouldn't explain what they were arresting her for. They just sternly flashed their badges and I.D.'s, thrust legal documents at Vicky, whose long blonde hair was in its usual disarray, and actually snapped a pair of handcuffs on her. "But you can't do this!" Vicky protested as they led her away. "It's my <u>birth</u>day party—and it's the Fourth of July!"

"Crime doesn't take a holiday," one of the cops grimly remarked.

Mom and Dad were at someone's cottage out in the country; we didn't have the phone number and it took us quite a while to find it. By the time they got to the police station Vicky had been there for several hours. They had rudely strip-searched her and then locked her up in a cell, still refusing to tell her what her crime was supposed to be. Only when Mom and Dad arrived did they reveal that she had been arrested for writing hundreds of dollars worth of bad checks.

Vicky was not the most obedient teenager, but writing bad checks was not in her repertoire. Mom was furious at the police. "Shut up, darling," Dad said, and calmly explained that Vicky had lost her wallet, with her driver's license in it, at a downtown movie theater several weeks before. She had already applied for a new license. In the meantime, someone who resembled Vicky's photo on the old license had clearly used it as an I.D. to pass bad checks in her name—Vicky didn't have a checking account.

The cops didn't buy it. "Shut up, darling," Dad told Mom, and called a friend who was a civil rights lawyer. He couldn't take the case, since it wasn't in his field, but he gave Dad the name of a criminal lawyer who knew what to do to get the police to release Vicky on bail. She would still have to undergo criminal proceedings.

As frightening as it had been for Vicky to be locked up without explanation, she made the most of it once she was released. She was the only person any of us knew who had been in jail, and everyone was terribly curious and impressed. Vicky did a hilarious impersonation of the matron who had searched her, right down to her drawl and her particularly disgusting way of chewing gum.

The criminal lawyer was not so amusing. He was a smooth type, who wore a jazzy suit and very expensive pointed shoes. Mom wanted to fire him during his first consultation with Vicky, when he told Vicky it was okay for her to admit to <u>him</u> that she had really written the checks. Dad pulled Mom out of the room and explained to her that criminal lawyers always asked questions like that. But Vicky was upset and worried when he left; she found it horribly frustrating that he complacently refused to believe her repeated insistence that she was innocent.

Later, Dad told the lawyer in private that Vicky wouldn't have written bad checks—she didn't have a checking account, and they gave her money whenever she asked for it. The lawyer said that all middle class teenagers were the same, they cared only about money, and clothes, and being just like everybody else. The lawyer knew Vicky had done it, but he would still take the case. Dad knew Vicky <u>hadn't</u> done it, but since this guy had been highly recommended to him by a trusted friend, he kept him on.

Dad also maintained control during the lineup. The store clerk who had accepted one of the bad checks was summoned to the police station to see if she could identify the criminal. Vicky stood on a sort of stage at the front of the room in a line with several other females chosen by the police from their secretarial staff. All the other women in the lineup were decades older than Vicky and had short dark hair.

The clerk studied them for awhile, then murmured that Vicky was wearing earrings like the girl who had passed the check and declared that Vicky was the culprit.

"Shut up, darling," Dad said, when Mom started to protest, and then quietly pointed out the obvious to the lawyer, who explained it to the police. The girl who had passed the checks must have looked something like Vicky or else she couldn't have gotten away with using Vicky's license, with her photo on it, as an I.D. Naturally the clerk had identified Vicky, who was the only blonde and the only teenager in the lineup.

Now Vicky and Mom were both tense and afraid, and therefore sullen and quarrelsome at home, eating little, snapping at each other more than usual. Dad did not let this distract him, losing himself in the paper, practicing the violin, relishing his food.

The lawyer told him it was really a tough case—despite the complete illogic of the lineup, the police and the lawyer both felt the clerk's identification of Vicky was very incriminating. Dad suggested a handwriting sample. "They have copies of the checks," he told the lawyer. "All we have to do is have the handwriting analyzed and prove it's not the same as Vicky's."

The lawyer, believing Vicky to be guilty, was against this. Dad insisted on getting a copy of one of the checks from the D.A.'s office, and showing it to a police handwriting expert along with an example of Vicky's handwriting. The expert stated unequivocally that Vicky could not have written the checks. On that basis she was declared innocent, her name cleared of any criminal record.

At the party afterwards, Mom made it clear to everyone that the successful outcome was the result of Dad's shrewdness and clear thinking, in spite of the obnoxious lawyer, who had done nothing constructive and probably <u>still</u> believed Vicky was guilty. Now that she was cleared, Vicky felt free to add a scatching version of the lawyer to her repertoire of characters.

When I was a senior in high school I was accepted at Harvard, as an early admission, in January. This acceptance was not based on my grades—I was 87th in a class of 530. What got me in was high scores on the standardized SAT and National Merit Tests, and my many creative extra-curricular activities. The rave recommendation from Mr. Evans probably helped too. Also, I had snowed the Harvard Dean of Admissions, who had come to interview people at our school in the fall—I told him I had gone to the Yale interview in order to get out of gym, which he found highly amusing. (I also told the Yale guy I went to the Harvard interview to get out of gym, but I don't know if that worked as well since I didn't apply to Yale.) Of course Mom was thrilled that I had been accepted by Harvard, and told everyone. I was happy about it too.

April 15 was the day that students were normally notified by colleges. ("April is the cruelest month," Matilda was fond of quoting.) I, like many others, was called to the office for a phone call on that day. I blithely assumed it was Mom informing me that Harvard had granted me a scholarship. But Mom's voice on the phone was hoarse with misery. "They changed their minds and rejected you because of your grades," she moaned.

I was somewhat downcast by this, and felt guilty about my grades, but did not consider it a tragedy, since Chicago had accepted me. But when I got home from school that day Mom was in a woeful state; it was the only time in my life I ever saw her drinking at 3:30 in the afternoon. As truly unconventional as Mom was, as genuinely unconcerned with other peoples' opinions, she was not totally immune to certain forms of status, academic status in particular. She was a lot more unhappy about the rejection than I was.

Mom hadn't been able to reach Dad at work. When he got home that evening he took the news with his usual distant, non-committal "Huh," and sat down with the paper. "That Evans jerk must have written some nasty lie to Harvard about Billy, you know what he did before," Mom railed. "He's obviously a pathological sadist—I'd love to tell the Harvard dean about it myself!"

I tried to tell Mom that I knew Mr. Evans had written me a good recommendation. Just because he had played a trick on me didn't mean he would do something really serious like trying to get me rejected from college. But Mom didn't listen; she kept wanting to tell the Harvard dean about him.

Dad looked briefly up from the paper. "Better let me handle this," he said. Only then did Mom calm down a little.

Eventually Dad made a few phone calls. He spoke to the Dean of the medical school where he worked and other department heads at his university, several of them with Ph.D.'s from Harvard and all of them widely-recognized academics. They were more than willing to write letters to the Harvard Dean of admissions, pointing out that his treatment of me was lacking in professional ethics. Mom wanted to write to him too. Dad advised her not to. Instead, he waited until his colleagues' letters had arrived in Cambridge, and phoned the Harvard Dean himself.

Dad was very polite, and calm and reasonable as always. He even managed to be jocular. In a pleasant conversational voice he pointed out that it was really not the best policy to unconditionally accept someone—influencing him to turn down offers from other schools—and then reject him without warning three months later. The Harvard dean could hardly dispute this impeccable logic, especially since Dad was not the least bit emotional or argumentative, as almost any other parent would have been.

It was almost certainly on the basis of Dad's phone call that Harvard decided to accept me after all—where I went on to spend the four most miserable years of my life.

Dad did have occasional lapses. He made snide remarks to Mom when she did something stupid like overcooking a roast. He raised his voice when Mom complained about all the useless junk taking up space in the basement, or when she tried to insist that he get his income taxes done on time. Unlike everyone else in the family, he spoke rather slowly, always precise about choosing exactly the right word, and would express his irritation if we impatiently tried to interrupt him. Some of our friends were a little afraid of him, misinterpreting his detached demeanor as critical, even menacing. But for the most part we all came to learn that we could go to Dad with any problem—even the most humiliating situations that had resulted from our own ineptitude or selfishness or gross bad judgement—and instead of getting angry he would try to come up with the most efficient solution. This is still true today.

I can remember only one instance when he seriously lost his cool—the time we went to the Florida hotel.

12 THE FLORIDA HOTEL

The summer after my senior year in high school the family went on a vacation to Florida. Before going scuba diving in the Florida Keys, we spent several days in Miami Beach, at a very fancy hotel called the Deauville. We had never before stayed at an expensive hotel; we always camped, or stayed in cheap motels. But this year Dad was the secretary of a very large scientific organization called The Biophysical Society. He would be deciding where to have their annual convention.

During the planning stages of the trip to Florida, Mom hit on the idea of Dad writing to the manager of the Deau-ville that he was considering having the convention at that hotel. Since Dad had no intention of holding the convention there, he said that writing this letter might be a bit unethical. Mom pointed out that people planning conventions always shopped around for hotels, that hotel managers expected it, and we might have something to gain by doing this. Dad wrote the letter. As a result, the manager offered us a very large suite for free, and one free dinner at the hotel restaurant. But only the room and one meal would be free; our parents would be charged for all other expenses.

Mom felt vindicated by this response. Vicky and I were excited about staying in this ritzy hotel. Dad was not as comfortable about it; I wonder now if he might have even felt a little guilty. Guilt, an emotion he was unaccustomed to dealing with, might have had something to do with his unusual behavior on the trip to Miami.

The drive to Miami was long and boring and hot. Mom had prepared a big jug of delicious ice water, which she kept on the floor in the front seat. But, as usual, Dad was obsessed with conserving the water, and wouldn't let her give us any if it had been less than five hours since our last stop. Perhaps his attitude toward the water had the same psychological roots as his perverse inability to throw anything away, however useless it might be. Mom said he had learned this horror of wasting things from his mother, who—before the days of environmentalism—saved short pieces of string, and ironed used wrapping paper and ribbons so she could use them again.

To be fair, Dad's water-hoarding also had a very practical motivation. On a previous summer vacation he had become so dehydrated during the drive across the Mojave desert that he had developed very painful bladder stones; one could hardly blame him for not wanting this to happen again.

But we were especially thirsty on this trip, and kept asking for water anyway. Dad calmly told us that the next time he heard the word "water" he would stop the car and throw out whoever had said it in the middle of nowhere.

Tycho, who was seven, believed him, and started crying. He might have stopped soon enough, but Danny, who was nine, hit him. Tycho wailed for the next half hour or so; Danny's threats to hit him again if he didn't stop only made him cry harder. Dad, raising his voice slightly, suggested we try to make Tycho be quiet by separating the two of them. In an effort to distract Danny, Vicky and I attacked him in the back of the station wagon and tickle-tortured him. We pinned him down, I held his hands over his head, and Vicky tickled him under the arms. Danny was the most ticklish person in the world, and though he couldn't help laughing, he was in agony. Tycho didn't realize Danny was hurting. It made Tycho happy to see his adored older brother—who had so recently been threatening him—having such a good time. Danny fumed when we stopped, but at least Tycho wasn't crying any more.

Vicky and I then entertained ourselves—and tried to keep Danny and Tycho apart—by asking them to choose which one of us they liked better. This didn't last very long, because the marvelous rewards or terrible retribution each of us promised for being chosen or not were never carried out, and Danny and Tycho quickly lost interest.

"I'm thirsty. I want some water," Danny said. He knew this would irritate Dad; that was probably his major motivation for saying it.

"Don't you remember what I said?" Dad coolly reminded him. "The next person who says 'water' gets thrown out of the car."

Tycho's face clouded. In an effort to prevent another outburst, Vicky and I quickly moved on to a new questioning game, asking Danny and Tycho to choose between two fates. The choices were pretty obvious at first. Even Tycho had no problem coming up with the answer to: "Would you rather inherit a huge mansion and be insanely rich for the rest of your life, or die without any money at all in a sewer among rats?"

Questions like that weren't much of a challenge, so we quickly began making them more difficult: "Would you rather be impaled on a bed of nails and take three days to die, or have all your arms and legs cut off and live?" Tycho was quite bothered by this question. He pondered over it for awhile, then began whimpering, then crying in earnest again. Danny smacked him again—which resulted in another session of tickle-torture for Danny. It still makes me shudder to remember how mercilessly long we kept it up that day.

But this time, tickle-torturing Danny didn't make Tycho stop crying. On the contrary, Tycho now began to understand that Danny was suffering, not enjoying himself at all. He felt sorry for Danny, and seeing him in misery only increased the volume of his cries. But as soon as we stopped tickling Danny, he smacked Tycho once again, and Tycho's wailing went up a few more decibels.

"Make him stop," Dad said through clenched teeth, after half an hour of unceasing bellowing from Tycho. Mom took Tycho in the front seat and tried to comfort him. "But I'm thirsty!" Tycho screamed, squirming in her arms as he tried to reach the so-far unopened jug of water.

"Please, Bill," Mom said.

Dad looked at his watch. "We just left," he muttered dangerously, though we'd been on the road for half a day.

"Oh, Bill!" Mom moaned.

Dad was annoyed by her tone, as well as by Tycho's continued howling. "You'll just be training him to cry whenever he wants anything if you give in now," he said, his face red. He took his left hand from the wheel and squeezed Tycho's mouth shut. This muffled Tycho only slightly. Even though he could hardly breathe he continued to squeal piteously, choking and gasping, tears streaming town his cheeks.

Vicky and I and especially Danny—who picked on Tycho himself but never let anybody else hurt him—were all appalled by this gross injustice. It was particularly shocking to see Dad behaving so unreasonably. We threw caution aside. "Water, water, water!" we all shouted in Dad's ear, leaning over the front seat.

Dad removed his hand from Tycho's mouth, swung around and began punching us, not looking at the road, the car swerving wildly. "Stop it, Bill!" Mom shrieked, grabbing the wheel and trying to steer the car herself.

The three of us quickly scrambled out of Dad's reach. He turned back to the road, breathing hard. Mom, her mouth in a hard line, leaned over, unscrewed the jug, and gave Tycho a drink. He gulped it down, then asked for more, still crying.

"That's not fair! I want some too!" Danny demanded.

"Go ahead, drink it all up then," Dad said icily, his uncharacteristic rage abating. "But we are not putting another drop of water in that jug until we stop for the night." And we didn't. We drank as much as we wanted. There was still plenty of water left when we checked into the cheap motel, which had cracked linoleum floors and a tiny bathroom with a grimy tin shower stall.

On arriving at the Deauville the next day it seemed wonderfully luxurious to emerge from the stifling car and find ourselves staying in this spacious, air-conditioned three-room suite with two large, plush bathrooms and a balcony eighteen stories above the ocean. We tested the beds and the bathrooms, rode up and down in the spiffy elevator, and swam in the ocean and the gigantic fresh water pool.

But our initial excitement began to pall when Vicky and I noticed that almost everybody else at the hotel was even older than our parents. There was no one our age there, and no one the least bit glamorous. Maybe these elderly, fat, card-playing people were rich, but that didn't mean it was any fun to be surrounded by them.

And no one in the family particularly enjoyed the free meal in the hotel restaurant, which we took advantage of on our first night there. We were used to diners and truck stops. We weren't wearing suits and ties and expensive clothes like the other people, and felt conspicuous. And the black-suited waiters wouldn't leave us alone, hovering around the table expectantly, watching our every move, refilling our glasses of water every time we took a sip. Danny soon began putting his hand over his glass and scowling whenever a waiter approached, but they still wouldn't leave us alone. We couldn't wait to get out of that dining room.

By the second day there Vicky and I were bored. And being teenagers, we were naturally obsessed with what was going on with our friends at home. That morning our parents were busy with maps and travel books in the suite, planning our itinerary for the Keys. Vicky and I snuck down to the lobby, picked up a phone, and told the hotel operator we were placing some long distance calls which were to be billed to our room.

Vicky talked to Ann for the unheard-of length of half an hour, and I talked to Bart for almost as long. While we talked we smoked cigarettes, which of course was absolutely forbidden by our parents. Ann told Vicky that she and Emily had just met some really interesting college boys; Vicky was not pleased to be missing out on this. Bart told me matter-of-factly that the person I was so unhappily in love with had immediately started going out with someone else as soon as I had left town. (Bart had a special talent for being subtly sadistic while at the same time coming across as merely realistic and rational.)

We finally hung up, both feeling dejected, put out the last cigarette, and stepped away from the phone. At that moment Danny and Tycho emerged from behind a group of potted palms nearby, where they had been hiding, and watching and listening, the entire time.

Danny had not forgotten how long we had tickled him in the car. "Okay," he said, his manner very businesslike. "We heard the whole thing. Either we tell Mom and Dad about the phone calls, or we tell them you were smoking. One or the other. We'll do you a big favor and let you decide which one we tell them."

"Oh, come on, Danny," I tried to reason with him. "If you tell them they'll just get mad and be in a bad mood and make everybody miserable."

"They'll be mad at you, not us. We're telling. Aren't we, Tycho?"

Tycho nodded, his eyes wide. He wasn't a spiteful kid, but Danny's approval was much more important to him than ours.

"You're not telling them a thing!" Vicky said angrily. "If you say one word about what we did we'll throw you off the balcony."

Tycho paled at this, and looked back at Danny. But Danny knew it was an idle threat. "You will not! If you throw us off the balcony they'll be much madder at you than about the smoking or the phone calls. So which do you want us to tell them?" He looked at his watch. "They told me and Tycho they wanted us all back up in the room by now. Hurry up and decide."

Danny really had us this time, and he wasn't going to back down. We had to make a careful and difficult decision. "We'll be right back," I told them, and Vicky and I walked across the huge lobby, with its marble columns and deep red carpeting, to discuss it out of earshot. The phone calls were pretty bad, but Mom and Dad would find out about them when we checked out of the hotel, whether Danny told them or not. And we also might be able to pretend we had thought phone calls were included with the free room. But if they found out we had been smoking we would not hear the end of it for weeks; they'd be nagging and chastising us for the rest of the trip.

We walked back to Danny and Tycho. "All right, you stupid yellow BM, tell them about the phone calls," Vicky snarled.

"That's your decision? Fine," Danny said. "Come on. They're waiting for us.

"You understand, Tycho?" I asked him. "You can tell them about the phone calls, but they're not supposed to know we were smoking."

Tycho nodded earnestly. He was basically good-hearted. "We promise to only tell them one thing," he assured me. "Just about the phone calls. Not the smoking." He turned to Danny. "Right, Danny?"

"Uh huh," Danny said. "Come on, we're really late now."

"How responsible of you to suddenly start worrying about being late," Vicky said. She sighed. "All right. We might as well get this over with."

Danny and Tycho raced across the lobby, eager to get back to the suite. We trudged reluctantly behind them. Danny was so pleased with himself that he gave Tycho the privilege of pressing the elevator button.

Danny banged on the door of the suite, and burst inside ahead of us as soon as Mom opened it. "Where were you?" Mom said, obviously in a bad mood. Dad, who also seemed angry about something, was scowling at a map.

"Billy and Vicky made all these long distance phone calls downstairs in the lobby!" Danny announced triumphantly.

Mom and Dad turned on us.

But before they had a chance to say anything Tycho gravely assured them, "And they didn't smoke at all."

13 DANNY AND TYCHO AGAIN

I lied.

Writers of fiction always do. We take something from life and then tidy it up, tying loose ends together, changing the results of actions, arranging situations to suit our whims, playing God. We do this because it's fun—and to make our stories appear to <u>mean</u> something, which events rarely do in real life.

But—unlikely as it may seem—I have told only <u>one</u> lie about my family in this book. Except for that, everything I've described really did happen, and that's the truth, whether the reader chooses to believe it or not. The single story in which I made one slight alteration of the facts is "The Hypnotist."

Don't get me wrong. Jack did hypnotize Tycho. Tycho really drank water out of the toilet, and appeared to be under the influence of a post-hypnotic suggestion to throw the nearest object to the floor whenever he heard the word "window." The only part I invented was the tidy little suggestion at the end that Jack's hypnotic powers influenced Danny to stop picking on Tycho.

When Danny was around eleven or twelve he did stop abusing Tycho, but it had nothing to do with hypnosis. The ostensible reason for this change was that Tycho suddenly grew larger than Danny. Now that Tycho had superior mass and volume, it was apparent to Danny, who had always had an innate understanding of kinetics, that the physical laws of the universe no longer allowed him to push Tycho around with his fists.

But there was more to Danny's change than the mechanics of the situation, since he knew that easygoing Tycho would never strike back. And for awhile he did go on flinging insults at him.

"<u>You</u> can't come to the movies with us, Tycho," Danny said one Saturday afternoon, as he and a friend were putting on their jackets.

Tycho, who was practicing the cello in the front hall, barely shrugged, not lifting his eyes from the music.

"Come on, Danny, let's get out of here," Danny's friend said, putting his hands over his ears. "That horrible noise is driving me crazy."

Danny turned on his friend indignantly. "That's not noise! Tycho plays really good."

"Gee, thanks, Danny," Tycho murmured, producing a long, rich tone on the C string.

“Tycho was messing things up in my room,” Danny complained to Mom a few days later. “He did something with my Phillips screwdriver, and now I can’t find it.”

“I’ve told you a million times to leave Danny’s things alone, Tycho,” Mom snapped at him. “Don’t you ever listen?”

Tycho placidly turned a page of his book. “Danny left the Phillips screwdriver down in the basement yesterday,” he said.

“Oh,” Danny said, thinking. “That’s right, I did. You shouldn’t get mad at Tycho for something he didn’t do, Mom. It’s not fair,” Danny accused her, and marched out of the room.

Many of Tycho’s friends at this time were younger than he was, and looked up to him. Danny disdained attending Tycho’s tenth birthday party. But at one point during the festivities Danny did step briefly into the room, glanced around, then walked over to Tycho and said loudly, “Couldn’t you get anybody your <u>own</u> age to come?”

“So what?” Tycho said, concentrating on the present he was unwrapping.

Danny sighed and took another look at the guests. “Hey, why isn’t Michael here?” he asked Tycho.

“Michael?” Tycho said vaguely. “I guess I forgot to invite him.”

“You jerk, Tycho! You <u>know</u> how much he likes you,” Danny said. “Call him up right now.”

Danny always excelled in math and science, but had problems in english class, and with any writing that had to be done for other subjects too. Until he was in seventh grade Mom often wrote papers for him, as she did for all of us, which he then copied over in his lopsided spidery handwriting. In seventh grade his writing assignments became more demanding. One Friday at the beginning of the year he came home very worried about a social studies report he had to do that weekend on the country of Uruguay.

“We’ll just do research in the encyclopedia,” Mom said. “I bet I can write it in half an hour.”

Danny shook his head sadly. “No. That’s cheating. I have to write it myself.”

“Danny, what’s gotten into you?” Mom said, astonished. Danny struggled with the paper on his own, and got a C. Tycho continued to let Mom help him throughout junior high, unaffected by Danny’s vociferous disapproval.

Despite their differences, it was apparent now that Danny and Tycho had many interests in common. Together they built a Van de Graf generator in the basement. It was a large silver ball atop a four-foot high cylinder. When you put your finger near the ball a bright bolt of lightning would leap from the ball to the finger, spectacular in appearance but harmless, and not the least bit painful. When Vicky and I had parties we loved demonstrating it to our friends. We would all hold hands in the dark basement, and when one person put his hand near the ball, the fizzling arc of electricity looked just like something out of "Bride of Frankenstein." Everyone in the line could feel the startling but not unpleasant electric jolt flowing through our bodies. Our friends thought Tycho and Danny were geniuses.

Danny was something of a loner in high school. Tycho had a lot of friends, whom he often treated in a cool, distant, off-hand way, which naturally only increased his popularity. He was six foot three, and his first girl-friend, Shelly, was was barely five feet tall. When they danced together Tycho picked her up and held her by her rump, so that her head would reach his shoulder. Danny didn't have a girlfriend in high school.

A few years ago I was Christmas shopping in Boston. Carrying two large shopping bags, I stopped at a fancy gourmet food store, the kind of place that caters to yuppies, to buy a goose for Christmas dinner—the supermarket didn't have geese. The man at the butcher counter handed me the goose, and, thinking about other things, I absent-mindedly slipped the very expensive twenty-five pound bird into one of the shopping bags and wandered out of the store. It was not until I was five blocks away that I realized I had forgotten to pay for the goose, and no one had noticed. I was amused and pleased by this, since the store was grossly overpriced, and I knew their business would not suffer because of my inadvertent theft.

A few days later I was talking to Danny on the phone and described this incident to him, thinking he would find it funny. "You mean you didn't go back and pay for it?" he asked me.

"Are you kidding?"

"I would have," Danny said.

He would have.

Tycho, like me, might have unknowingly stolen the goose and would not have gone back to pay for it either. Vicky was perfectly capable of stealing a goose on purpose, and if caught she would have talked her way out of it with easy aplomb.

Danny is a computer scientist, Tycho a physicist. They both began their scientific careers at prestigious Bell Laboratories. Danny caused a sensation his first year there. The lab had an abundant supply of liquid nitrogen, a super-cold substance that boils at room temperature. Clever Danny poured some liquid nitrogen into an empty plastic bottle, screwed the lid on tight, and left the bottle out in the corridor, chuckling. In a few minutes the nitrogen boiled, and the expanding gas blew up the bottle. The tremendous explosion echoed up and down the long cement corridor, startling everybody on the floor.

All four siblings are close friends now. Our personalities and styles of living have evolved differently, but in one respect the four of us are very much the same: we don't care what most people think about us. Danny expresses his opinions bluntly, even when he knows other people may violently disagree with him—and they often do. Tycho has never owned a television; he would rather play the cello, or go on four-day hikes in the mountains with his wife Marina and her dachshunds, frequently joined by Danny. Vicky, a nurse, has not hesitated to tell doctors that they may have made a mistake about a patient; her husband Dave did a lot of the child rearing while she was at work. I have never had a full-time job in my life, and currenly live in Bangkok, Thailand, because I happen to like it here. We are still generally regarded as oddballs, and sometimes shunned by more conventional types.

We have grown up to be the kind of people Mom and Dad like.