



Harold Brodkey

First Love
and Other
Sorrows

stories



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THE STATE OF GRACE

THERE IS A CERTAIN shade of red brick—a dark, almost melodious red, sombre and riddled with blue—that is my childhood in St. Louis. Not the real childhood, but the false one that extends from the dawning of consciousness until the day that one leaves home for college. That one shade of red brick and green foliage is St. Louis in the summer (the winter is just a gray sky and a crowded school bus) and the wet footprints on the brown linoleum floor at school), and that brick and a pale sky is spring. It's also loneliness and the queer, self-pitying wonder that children whose families are having catastrophes feel.

I can remember that brick best on the back of our apartment house; it was on all the apartment houses on that block, and also on the apartment house where Edward lived—Edward was a small boy who took care of on the evenings when his parents went out. As I came up the street from school, past the boulevard and its ugliness (the vista of shoe-repair shops, dime stores, hairdressers', pet shops, the Tivoli Theatre, and the closed Piggly Wiggly, about to be converted into a Kroger's), past the place where I could see the Masonic Temple, built in the shape of some Egyptian relic, and the two huge concrete pedestals flanking the boulevard (what they supported I can't remember, but on both of them, painted in brown paint, was a large heart and the information that someone named Erica loved someone named Peter), past the post office, built in W.P.A. days of yellow brick and chrome, I hurried toward the moment when at last, on the other side, past the driveway of the garage of the Castlereagh Apartments, I would be at the place where the trees began, the apartment houses of dark-red brick, and the empty stillness.

In the middle of that stillness and red brick was my neighborhood, the terribly familiar place where I was more comfortably an exile than anywhere else. There were two locust trees that were beautiful to me—I think because they were small and I could encompass them (not only with my mind and heart but with my hands as well). Then came an apartment house of red brick (but not quite the true shade) where a boy I knew lived, and two amazingly handsome brothers, who were also strong and kind, but much older than I and totally uninterested in me. Then came an alley of black macadam and another vista, which I found shameful but drearily comfortable, of garages and ashpits and telephone poles and the backs of apartment houses—including ours—on one side, the backs of houses on the other. I knew many people in the apartments but none in the houses, and this was the ultimate proof, of course, to me of how miserably degraded I was and how far sunken beneath the surface of the sea. I was on the bottom, looking up through the waters, through the shifting bands of light—through oh, innumerable more complexities than I could stand—at a sailboat driven by the wind, some boy who had a family and a home like other people.

I was thirteen, and six feet tall, and I weighed a hundred and twenty-five pounds. Though I fretted

wildly about my looks (my ears stuck out and my hair was like wire), I also knew I was attractive. Girls had smiled at me, but none whom I might love and certainly none of the seven or eight goddesses in the junior high school I attended. Starting in about second grade, I always had the highest grades—higher than anybody who had ever attended the schools I went to—and I terrified my classmates. What terrified them was that so far as they could see, it never took any effort; it was like legerdemain. I was never teased, I was never tormented; I was merely isolated. But I was known as “the walking encyclopedia,” and the only way I could deal with this was to withdraw. Looking back, I’m almost certain I could have had friends if I’d made the right overtures, and that it was not my situation but my forbidding pride that kept them off; I’m not sure. I had very few clothes, and all that I had had been passed to me from an elder cousin. I never was able to wear what the other boys wore.

Our apartment was on the third floor. I usually walked up the back stairs, which were mounted outside the building in a steel framework. I preferred the back stairs—it was a form of rubbing salt in the hurt to make sure it was still there—because they were steep and ugly and had garbage cans on the landings and wash hanging out, while the front door opened off a court where rosebushes grew, and the front stairs were made of some faintly yellow local marble that was cool and pleasant to the touch and to the eye. When I came to our back door, I would open the screen and call out to see if my mother was home. If she was not home, it usually meant that she was visiting my father, who had been dying in the hospital for four years and would linger two more before he would come to terms with death. As far as I know, that was the only sign of character he ever showed in his entire life, and I suppose it was considerable, but I hoped, and even sometimes prayed, that he would die—not only because I wouldn’t have to visit the hospital again, where the white-walled rooms were filled with odors and sick old men (and a tangible fear that made me feel a falling away inside, like the plunge into the unconscious when the anesthetic is given), but because my mother might marry again and make us all rich and happy once more. She was still lovely then, still alight with the curious incandescence of physical beauty, and there was a man who had loved her for twenty years and who loved her yet and wanted to marry her. I wished so hard my father would die, but he just wouldn’t. If my mother was home, I braced myself for unpleasantness, because she didn’t like me to sit and read; she hated me to read. She wanted to drive me outdoors, where I would become an athlete and be like other boys and be popular. It filled her with rage when I ignored her advice and opened a book; once, she rushed up to me, her face suffused with anger, took the book (I think it was “Pride and Prejudice”), and hurled it out the third-story window. At the time, I sat and tried to sneer, thinking she was half mad, with her exaggerated rage, and so foolish not to realize that I could be none of the things she thought I ought to be. But now I think—perhaps wistfully—that she was merely desperate, driven to extremes in her anxiety to save me. She felt—she knew, in fact—that there was going to come a moment when, like a circus acrobat, I would have to climb on her shoulders and on the shoulders of all the things she had done for me, and leap out into a life she couldn’t imagine (and which I am leading now), and if she wanted

send me out wrapped in platitudes, in an athletic body, with a respect for money, it was because she thought that was the warmest covering.

But when I was thirteen, I only wondered how anyone so lovely could be so impossible. She somehow managed it so that I hated her far more than I loved her, even though in the moments before sleep I would think of her face, letting my memory begin with the curving gentleness of her eyelids and circle through all the subtle interplay of shadows and hollows and bones, and the half-remembered warmth of her chest, and it would seem to me that this vision of her, always standing in half light (I probably I had seen her once when I was younger, and sick, perhaps, though I don't really remember) was only as beautiful to me as the pattern in an immeasurably ancient and faded Persian rug. In this vision, as in the rug, I could trace the lines in and out and experience some unnamed pleasure, but it had almost no meaning, numbed as I was by the problems of being her son.

Being Jewish also disturbed me, because it meant I could never be one of the golden people—the blond athletes, with their easy charm. If my family had been well off, I might have felt otherwise, but I doubt it.

My mother had a cousin whom I called Aunt Rachel, and we used to go and see her three or four times a year. I hated it. She lived in what was called the Ghetto, which was a section of old houses in downtown St. Louis with tiny front porches and two doors, one to the upstairs and one to the downstairs. Most people lived in them only until they could move to something better; no one had ever liked living there. And because of that, the neighborhood had the quality of being blurred; the grass was never neat, the window frames were never painted, no one cared about or loved the place. It was where the immigrants lived when they arrived by train from New York and before they could move uptown to the apartments near Delmar Boulevard, and eventually to the suburbs—to Clayton, Laclede, and Ladue. Aunt Rachel lived downstairs. Her living room was very small and had dark yellow wallpaper, which she never changed. She never cleaned it, either, because once I made a mark on it, to see if she would, and she didn't. The furniture was alive and frightening; it was like that part of the nightmare where it gets so bad that you decide to wake up. I always had to sit on it. It bulged with great curves of horsehair and mohair, and it was dark purple and maroon and dark green, and the room had no light in it anywhere. Somewhere on the other side of the old, threadbare satin draperies that had been bought out of an old house was fresh air and sunshine, but you'd never know it. It was as much like a peasant's hut as Aunt Rachel could manage, buying furniture in cut-rate furniture stores. And always there were the smells—the smell of onion soup and garlic and beets. It was the only place where I was ever rude to my mother in public. It was always full of people whom I hardly ever knew but who knew me, and I had to perform. My mother would say, "Tell the people what your last report card was," or "Recite them the poem that Miss Huntington liked so well." That was when the feeling of unreality was strongest. Looking back now, I think that what frightened me was their fierce urgency; I was to be rich and famous and make all their tribulations worth while. But I didn't want

that responsibility. Anyway, if I were going to be what they wanted me to be, and if I had to be what I was, then it was too much to expect me to take them as they were. I had to go beyond them and despise them, but first I had to be with them—and it wasn't fair.

It was as if my eyelids had been propped open, and I had to see these things I didn't want to see, felt as if I had taken part in something shameful, and therefore I wasn't a nice person. It was like my first sexual experiences: What if anyone knew? What if everyone found out?... How in hell could I ever be gallant and carefree?

I had read too many books by Englishmen and New Englanders to want to know anything but graceful things and erudite things and the look of white frame houses on green lawns. I could always console myself by thinking my brains would make me famous (brains were good for something, weren't they?), but then my children would have good childhoods—not me. I was irrevocably deprived, and it was the irrevocableness that hurt, that finally drove me away from any sensible adjustment with life to the position that dreams had to come true or there was no point in living at all. If dreams came true, then I would have my childhood in one form or another, someday.

If my mother was home when I came in from school, she might say that Mrs. Leinberg had called and wanted me to baby-sit, and I would be plunged into yet another of the dilemmas of those years. I had to baby-sit to earn money to buy my lunch at school, and there were times, considering the dilemma I faced at the Leinbergs', when I preferred not eating, or eating very little, to babysitting. But there wasn't any choice; Mother would have accepted for me, and made Mrs. Leinberg promise not to stay out too late and deprive me of my sleep. She would have a sandwich ready for me to eat, so that I could rush over in time to let Mr. and Mrs. Leinberg go out to dinner. Anyway, I would eat my sandwich reading a book, to get my own back, and then I would set out. As I walked down the back stairs on my way to the Leinbergs', usually swinging on the railings by my arms to build up my muscles, I would think forlornly of what it was to be me, and wish things were otherwise, and I did not understand myself or my loneliness or the cruel deprivation the vista down the alley meant.

There was a short cut across the back yards to the apartment house where the Leinbergs lived, but I always walked by my two locust trees and spent a few moments loving them; so far as I knew, I loved nothing else.

Then I turned right and crossed the street and walked past an apartment house that had been built at right angles to the street, facing a strange declivity that had once been an excavation for another apartment house, which had never been built, because of the depression. On the other side of the declivity was a block of three apartment houses, and the third was the Leinbergs'. Every apartment in it had at least eight rooms, and the back staircase was enclosed, and the building had its own garages. All this made it special and expensive, and a landmark in the neighborhood.

Mr. Leinberg was a drug manufacturer and very successful. I thought he was a smart man, but

don't remember him at all well (I never looked at men closely in those days but always averted my head in shyness and embarrassment; they might guess how fiercely I wanted to belong to them) and could have been wrong. Certainly the atmosphere then, during the war years—it was 1943—was that everyone was getting rich; everyone who could work, that is. At any rate, he was getting rich, and was only a matter of time before the Leinbergs moved from that apartment house to Laclede or Ladue and had a forty-thousand-dollar house with an acre or so of grounds.

Mrs. Leinberg was very pretty; she was dark, like my mother, but not as beautiful. For one thing she was too small; she was barely five feet tall, and I towered over her. For another, she was not at all regal. But her lipstick was never on her teeth, and her dresses were usually new, and her eyes were kind. (My mother's eyes were incomprehensible; they were dark stages where dimly seen mob scenes were staged and all one ever sensed was tumult and drama, and no matter how long one waited, the lights never went up and the scene never was explained.) Mrs. Leinberg would invite me to help myself in the icebox, and then she would write down the telephone number of the place where she was going to be. "Keep Edward in the back of the apartment, where he won't disturb the baby," she would tell me. "If the baby does wake up, pick her up right away. That's very important. I didn't pick Edward up, and I'll always regret it." She said that every time, even though I could see Edward lurking in the back hallway, waiting for his parents to leave so he could run out and jump on me and our world could come alive again. He would listen, his small face—he was seven—quite blank with hurt and the effort to pierce the hurt with understanding.

Mrs. Leinberg would say, "Call me if she wakes up." And then, placatingly, to her husband, "I'll just come home to put her back to sleep, and then I'll go right back to the party—" Then, to me, "But she almost always sleeps, so don't worry about it."

"Come on, Greta. He knows what to do," Mr. Leinberg would say impatiently.

I always heard contempt in his voice—contempt for his wife, for Edward, and for me. I would look standing by the icebox looking down on the two little married people. Edward's father had a jealous and petulant mouth. "Come on, Greta," it would say impatiently, "We'll be back by eleven," it would say to me.

"Edward goes to bed at nine," Mrs. Leinberg would say, her voice high and birdlike, but tremulous with confusion and vagueness. Then she would be swept out the front door, so much prettily dressed matchwood, in her husband's wake. When the door closed, Edward would come hurtling down the hall and tackle my knees if I was staring after his parents, or, if I was facing him, leap onto my chest and into my arms.

"What shall we play tonight?"

He would ask that and I would have to think. He trembled with excitement, because I could make up games wonderful to him—like his daydreams, in fact. Because he was a child, he trusted me almost totally, and I could do anything with him. I had that power with children until I was in college and

began at last to be like other people.

In Edward's bedroom was a large closet; it had a rack for clothes, a washstand, a built-in table and fifteen or twenty shelves. The table and shelves were crowded with toys and games and sports equipment. I owned a Monopoly board I had inherited from my older sister, an old baseball glove (which was so cheap I never dared use it in front of my classmates, who had real gloves signed by real players), and a collection of postcards. The first time I saw that closet, I practically exploded with pleasure; I took down each of the games and toys and played with them, one after another, with Edward. Edward loved the fact that we never played a game to its conclusion but would leap from game to game after only a few moves, until the leaping became the real game and the atmosphere of laughter the real sport.

It was comfortable for me in the back room, alone in the apartment with Edward, because at last I was chief; and not only that, I was not being seen. There was no one there who could see through me or think of what I should be or how I should behave; and I have always been terrified of what people thought of me, as if what they thought was a hulking creature that would confront me if I should turn the wrong corner.

There were no corners. Edward and I would take his toy pistols and stalk each other around the bed. Other times, we were on the bed, the front gun turret of a battleship sailing to battle the Japanese fleet in the Indian Ocean. Edward would close his eyes and roll with pleasure when I went "Boom! Boom! BOOOOM!"

"It's sinking! It's sinking, isn't it?"

"No, stupid. We only hit its funnel. We have to shoot again. Boom, Boom—"

Edward's fingers would press his eyelids in a spasm of ecstasy; his delirious, taut, little boy's body would fall backward on the soft pillows and bounce, and his back would curve; the excited, breathy laughter would pour out like so many leaves spilling into spring, so many lilacs thrusting into bloom.

Under the bed, in a foxhole (Edward had a Cub Scout hat and I had his plastic soldier helmet), we turned back the yellow hordes from Guadalcanal. Edward dearly loved to be wounded. "I'm hit!" he'd shriek. "I'm hit!" He'd press his hand against his stomach and writhe on the wooden floor. "They shot me in the guts—"

I didn't approve of his getting wounded so soon, because then the scene was over; both his and my sense of verisimilitude didn't allow someone to be wounded and then get up. I remember how pleased he was when I invented the idea that after he got wounded, he could be someone else; so, when we crawled under the bed, we would decide to be eight or twelve or twenty Marines, ten each to get wounded, killed, or maimed as we saw fit, provided enough survived so that when we crawled out from under the bed we could charge the Japanese position under the dining-room table and leave it strewn with corpses.

Edward was particularly good at the detective game, which was a lot more involved and difficult. In that, we would walk into the kitchen, and I would tell him that we had received a call about a murder. Except when we played Tarzan, we never found it necessary to be characters. However, we always had names. In the detective game, we were usually Sam and Fred. We'd get a call telling us who was murdered, and then we'd go back to the bedroom and examine the corpse and question the suspects. I'd fire questions at an empty chair. Sometimes Edward would get tired of being my sidekick and he'd slip into the chair and be the quaking suspect. Other times, he would prowl around the room on his hands and knees with a magnifying glass while I stormed and shouted at the perpetually shifting suspect: "Where were you, Mrs. Eggnogghead [giggles from Edward], at ten o'clock, when Mrs. Eggnogghead [laughter, helpless with pleasure, from Edward] was slain with the cake knife?"

"Hey, Fred! *I found bloodstains.*" Edward's voice would quiver with a creditable imitation of the excitement of radio detectives.

"Bloodstains! Where, Sam? Where? This may be the clue that breaks the case."

Edward could sustain the *commedia dell'arte* for hours if I wanted him to. He was a precocious and delicate little boy, quivering with the malaise of being unloved. When we played, his child's head would come into its own, and the troubled world where his vague hungers went unfed and mothers and fathers were dim and far away—too far away ever to reach in and touch the sore place and make it heal—would disappear, along with the world where I was not sufficiently muscled or sufficiently gallant to earn my own regard. (What ever had induced my mother to marry that silly man, who had been unable to hang on to his money? I could remember when we'd had a larger house and I'd been happy; why had she let it get away?) It angered me that Edward's mother had so little love for him and so much for her daughter, and that Edward's father should not appreciate the boy's intelligence—I thought Edward was a queer duck, and effeminate. I could have taught Edward the manly postures. But his father didn't think highly of me: I was only a baby-sitter, and a queer duck too. Why, then, should Edward be more highly regarded by his father than I myself was? I wouldn't love him or explain to him.

That, of course, was my terrible dilemma. His apartment house, though larger than mine, was made of the same dark-red brick, and I wouldn't love him. It was shameful for a boy my age to love a child anyway. And who was Edward? He wasn't as smart as I'd been at his age, or as fierce. At his age, I'd already seen the evil in people's eyes, and I'd begun the construction of my defenses even then. But Edward's family was more prosperous, and the cold winds of insecurity (*Where will the money come from?*) hadn't shredded the dreamy chrysalis of his childhood. He was still immersed in the dim, wet wonder of the folded wings that might open if someone loved him; he still hoped, probably, in a butterfly's unthinking way, for spring and warmth. How the wings ache, folded and waiting; that is, they ache until they atrophy.

So I was thirteen and Edward was seven and he wanted me to love him, but he was not old enough

or strong enough to help me. He could not make his parents share their wealth and comfort with me, force them to give me a place in their home. He was like most of the people I knew—eager and needful of my love; for I was quite remarkable and made incredible games, which were better than movies or than the heart could hope for. I was a dream come true. I was smart and virtuous (no one knew that I occasionally stole from the dime store) and fairly attractive, maybe even very attractive. I was often funny and always interesting. I had read everything and knew everything and got unbelievable grades. Of course I was someone whose love was desired. Mother, my teachers, my sister, girls at school, other boys—they all wanted me to love them.

But I wanted them to love me first.

None of them did. I was fierce and solitary and acrid, marching off the little mile from school past the post office, all yellow brick and chrome, and my two locust trees (water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink), and there was no one who loved me first. I could see a hundred cravens in the people I knew, a thousand flaws, a million weaknesses. If I had to love first, I would love only perfection. Of course, I could help heal the people I knew if I loved them. No, I said to myself, why should I give them everything when they give me nothing?

How many hurts and shynesses and times of walking up the back stairs had made me that way? I don't know. All I know is that Edward needed my love and I wouldn't give it to him. I was only thirteen. There isn't much you can blame a boy of thirteen for, but I'm not thinking of the blame; I'm thinking of all the years that might have been—if I'd only known then what I know now. The waste, the God-awful waste.

Really, that's all there is to this story. The boy I was, the child Edward was. That and the terrible desire to suddenly turn and run shouting back through the corridors of time, screaming at the boy I was, searching him out, and pounding on his chest: Love him, you damn fool, love him.

FIRST LOVE AND OTHER SORROWS

TOWARD THE END OF March, in St. Louis, slush fills the gutters, and dirty snow lies heaped alongside porch steps, and everything seems to be suffocating in the embrace of a season that lasts too long. Radiators hiss mournfully, no one manages to be patient, the wind draws tears from your eyes, the clouds are filled with sadness. Women with scarves around their heads and their feet encased in fur-lined boots pick their way carefully over patches of melting ice. It seems that winter will last forever and that this is the decision of nature and nothing can be done about it.

At the age when I was always being warned by my mother not to get overheated, spring began on that evening when I was first allowed to go outside after dinner and play kick-the-can. The ground would be moist, I'd manage to get muddy in spite of what seemed to me extreme precautions, my mother would call me home in the darkness, and when she saw me she would ask, "What *have* you done to yourself?" "Nothing," I'd say hopefully. But by the time I was sixteen, the moment when the year passed into spring, like so many other things, was less clear. In March and early April, track season began, but indoors; mid-term exams came and went; the buds appeared on the maples, staining a few of their branches red; but it was still winter, and I found myself having feelings in class that were like long petitions for spring and all its works. And then one evening I was sitting at my desk doing my trigonometry and I heard my sister coming home from her office; I heard her high heels tapping on the sidewalk, and realized that, for the first time since fall, all the windows in the house were open. My sister was coming up the front walk. I looked down through a web of budding tree branches and called out to her that it was spring, by God. She shrugged—she was very handsome and she didn't approve of me—and then she started up the front steps and vanished under the roof of the porch.

I ran downstairs. "The bus was crowded tonight," my sister said, hanging up her coat. "I could hardly breathe. This is such a warm dress."

"You need a new spring dress," my mother said, her face lighting up. She was sitting in the living room with the evening paper on her lap.

She and my sister spread the newspaper on the dining-room table to look at the ads.

"We'll just have to settle for sandwiches tonight," my mother said to me. My father was dead and my mother pretended that now all the cooking was done for my masculine benefit. "Look! That suit's awfully smart!" she cried, peering at the paper. "Montaldo's always has such nice suits." She sighed and went out to the kitchen, leaving the swinging door open so she could talk to my sister. "Ninety dollars isn't too much for a good suit, do you think?"

"No," my sister said. "I don't think it's too much. But I don't really want a suit this spring. I'd much rather have a sort of sky-blue dress—with a round neck that shows my shoulders a little bit. I don't look good in suits. I'm not old enough." She was twenty-two. "My face is too round," she added.

in a low voice.

My mother said, “You’re not too young for a suit.” She also meant my sister was not too young to get married.

My sister looked at me and said, “Mother, do you think he shaves often enough? How often do you shave?”

“Every three days,” I said, flushing up my neck and cheeks.

“Well, try it every other day.”

“Yes, try to be neater,” my mother said. “I’m sure girls don’t like boys with fuzz on their chin.”

“I think he’s too proud of his beard to shave it,” my sister said, and giggled.

“I feel sorry for the man who marries you,” I said. “Because everybody thinks you’re sweet and you’re not.”

She smiled pityingly at me, and then she looked down over the newspaper again.

Until I was four, we lived in a large white frame house overlooking the Mississippi River, south of St. Louis. This house had, among other riches, a porte-cochere, an iron deer on the lawn, and a pond with goldfish swimming in it. Once, I asked my mother why we had left that earlier house, and she said, “We lost our money—that’s why. Your father was a very trusting man,” she said. “He was always getting swindled.”

She was not a mercenary woman, nor was she mean about money—except in spells that didn’t come often—but she believed that what we lost with the money was much of our dignity and much of our happiness. She did not want to see life in a grain of sand; she wanted to see it from the shores of the Riviera, wearing a white sharkskin dress.

I will never forget her astonishment when she took us—she was dressed in her best furs, as a gesture, I suppose—to see the house that was to be our home from then on and I told her I liked it. She had nine rooms, a stained-glass window in the hall, and neighbors all up and down the block. She detested that house.

As she grew older, she changed, she grew less imperious. She put her hair into a roll, wore dark-colored clothes, said often, “I’m not a young woman any more,” and began to take pride in being practical. But she remained determined; she had seen a world we didn’t remember too clearly, and she wanted us to make our way back to it. “I had it all,” she said once to my sister. “I was good-looking. We were rich. You have no idea what it was like. If I had died when I was thirty, I would have died completely happy....”

But being practical did not come easy to her. She was not practical in her bones, and every spring brings back the memory of my mother peering nearsightedly, with surprise, at the tulip shoots in her flower border. And it brings back her look of distraught efficiency during spring housecleaning. “You’d better clear your closet shelves tonight,” she would warn me, “because tomorrow Tillie and

are going in there with a vacuum cleaner, and we'll throw out everything we find." Year after year, would run upstairs to save my treasures—even when I was sixteen and on the verge of a great embarkation, the nature of which I could not even begin to guess. My treasures consisted of my postcard collection—twenty-five hundred cards in all, arranged alphabetically by states of the Union and countries of the world (the wonder was that *I* lived in St. Louis)—an old baseball glove, my leather collection, two obscene comic books I had won in a poker game at a Boy Scout jamboree, my marble collection, and thirty-five pages of secret thoughts written out in longhand. All these had to be taken out to the garage and hidden among the tools until the frenzy of cleaning was over and I could smuggle them back upstairs.

After supper, as the season grew warmer, my mother and sister and I would sit on the screened porch in the rear of the house, marooned among the shadows and the new leaves and the odor of insect spray, the light from our lamps sticking to the trees like bits of yellow paper. Usually the radio was on, and my mother, a book on her lap, her face abstracted (she was usually bored; her life was moved mainly by the burning urge to rise once more along the thin edge of social distinction), would listen to the comedians and laugh. When the phone rang, she would get up and go into the house with long strides, and if the call was for my sister, my mother would call her to the phone in a voice mottled with triumph.

Sometimes in the evening my mother would wash my sister's hair. My sister would sit in front of the basin in Mother's bathroom, a towel around her shoulders, smiling. From my room across the hall I would hear my sister chattering about the men she knew—the ones she dated, the ones she wanted to date, the ones she wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. My mother would interrupt with accounts of her own cleverness, her sorties and successes when young, sometimes laughingly, but sometimes gloomily, because she regretted a lot of things. Then she and my sister would label my sister's suitors: one or two had family, one had money, one—a poor boy—had a brilliant future, and there were a few docile, sweet ones who were simply fillers, who represented the additional number of dates that raised my sister to the rank of a very popular girl.

In these conversations, my mother would often bring up matters of propriety. Late dates were improper, flirting with boys other than one's date, breaking dates. Then, too, she would try to instruct my sister in other matters, which had to do with keeping passion in its place and so preventing embarrassment for the boy and disaster for the girl. My sister would grow irritated. "I don't know why you talk like that—I behave very well," she would tell my mother. "Better than the other girls you know." Her irritation would please my mother, who would smile and say that only good-looking girls could afford to be good, and then they would both laugh.

I used to wonder why my mother didn't take my sister's success for granted. My sister was so lovely, she had plenty of dates, the phone rang incessantly. Where was the danger? Why did she always lecture my sister?

Once, my mother said my sister ought not to dance with too many boys or she would frighten the more serious ones. My sister was getting dressed for the spring dance at the country club. Arrogant and slender, she glistened like a water nymph, among her froth of bottles and jars and filmy clothes. She became furious; she screamed that she *liked* to dance. I closed the door to my room, but I could still hear the two of them. "Don't be so foolish," my mother kept saying, over and over again. "Please don't be foolish...." Then my sister, on the verge of tears, said she just wanted to have a good time. My sister's date arrived, and I went downstairs to let him in, and by the time I came back upstairs, the two of them were laughing. My mother said she was just trying to be helpful; after all, my sister was impractical and her looks wouldn't last forever. My sister, as she opened the door of her room, said under her breath, "They'll last a lot longer yet."

I'll never forget the wild rustling of her voluminous white skirt as she came down the hallway toward me. Her face was strangely still, as if seen by moonlight. Her hair was smooth and shining, her hands bent outward at the wrist, as if they were flowers. "How beautiful you look!" I cried. My sister smiled and then solemnly turned all the way around, and her huge skirt rose and fell like a splash on surf. She was so beautiful I could hardly bear it. I hugged her, and she laughed.

Later that night I asked my mother why she got so distraught. Wasn't my sister popular enough? My mother was sitting in the kitchen, in an old, faded yellow housecoat, drinking a glass of warm milk. "You don't know anything about it," she said, with such sadness that I rose from the table and fled to my room.

"I know what I'm saying!" my mother would cry when she argued with my sister. "You must listen to me. People talk.... You don't know who you'll meet on a date; it's good to accept even if you don't like the boy.... Girls have to be very careful. You're thoughtless. Don't you think in fifty years I've learned what makes the world go around? Now, listen to me. I know what I'm saying...." But my sister's face was so radiant, her charm was so intense, she pushed her blond hair back from her face with a gesture so quick, so certain, so arrogant and filled with vanity, that no one, I thought, could doubt that whatever she did would be right.

I wanted to be arrogant, too. I didn't want to wear glasses and be one of the humorless, heavy-handed boys my sister despised. I was on her side as much as she'd let me be. She was the elder, and she often grew impatient with me. I didn't seem to understand all the things involved in being on her side.

Night after night I saw her come home from work tired—she had a secretarial job in a hospital and she hated it—and two hours later she would descend the stairs, to greet her date, her face alight with seriousness or with a large, bright smile, depending on her mood or on where her escort was taking her that evening. A concert or an art movie made her serious; one of the hotel supper clubs brought the smile to her face. She would trip down the stairs in her high heels, a light, flimsy coat thrown over one arm, one hand clutching a purse and gloves, her other hand on the banister. In the

queer yellow light of the hall chandelier, her necklace or her earrings would shine dully, and sometimes, especially if she was all dressed up, in a black dress, say, with a low neck, because they were going out to a supper club, there would be an air, in spite of her gaiety, of the captive about her. It was part of her intense charm. In her voluminous white skirt, she went to the spring dance at the country club and brought back to my mother the news that she had captured the interest of Sonny Bruster, the oldest son of M. F. Bruster, a banker and a very rich man—more than interest, it turned out, because he started calling my sister up almost every day at work and taking her out almost every night. My mother was on the phone much of the afternoon explaining to her friends that my sister wasn't engaged. It was criminal the way some people gossiped, she said. My sister had only gone out with the boy ten or twelve times. They were just getting to know each other. Then my mother began to receive calls; someone had heard from a friend of Mrs. Bruster's that Mrs. Bruster had said her son was very serious about my sister, who was a very charming, very pretty girl, of good family.... My mother rubbed her hands with glee. She borrowed money from her brothers, and every week my sister had new clothes.

My sister would come home from work and run upstairs to change. Sonny would be due at seven to take her out to dinner. My sister would kick her shoes off, struggle out of her dress, and dash around the upstairs in her slip.

“Mother, I can't find my earrings.”

“Which earrings, dear?”

“The little pearls—the little tiny pearl ones that I got two Easters ago, to go with my black...”

My sister was delighted with herself. She loved being talked about, being envied.

“Mother, do you know what Ceil Johnson said to me today? She said that Beryl Feringhaus—you know, the real-estate people—was heartbroken because she thought Sonny Bruster was going to get engaged to her.” My sister giggled. Her long hair was tangled, and my mother yanked a comb through it.

“Maybe you ought to cut your hair,” my mother said, trying to hide her own excitement and stay practical. During this period, my mother was living in the imminence of wealth. Whenever she stopped what she was doing and looked up, her face would be bright with visions.

That spring when I was sixteen, more than anything else in the world I wanted to be a success when I grew up. I did not know there was any other way of being lovable. My best friend was a boy named Preston, who already had a heavy beard. He was shy, and unfortunate in his dealings with other people, and he wanted to be a physicist. He had very little imagination, and he pitied anyone who did have it. “You and the word ‘beautiful’!” he would say disdainfully, holding his nose and imitating my voice. “Tell me—what does ‘beautiful’ mean?”

“It's something you want,” I would say.

“You’re an aesthete,” Preston would say. “I’m a scientist. That’s the difference.”

He and I used to call each other almost every night and have long, profound talks on the telephone.

On a date, Preston would sit beside his girl and stolidly eye her. Occasionally, toward the end of the evening, he would begin to breathe heavily, and he would make a few labored, daring jokes. He might catch the girl’s hand and stare at her with inflamed and wistful eyes, or he might mutter incoherent compliments. Girls liked him, and escaped easily from his clumsy longing. They slipped their hands from his grasp and asked him to call them up again, but after a few dates with a girl Preston would say disgustedly, “All she does is talk. She’s frigid or something....” But the truth was he was afraid of hurting them, of doing something wrong to them, and he never really courted them at all.

At school, Preston and I had afternoon study hall together. Study hall was in the library, which was filled with the breathing of a hundred and fifty students, and with the dim, half-fainting breezes of high spring, and with books: it was the crossroads of the world. Preston and I would sign out separately, and meet in the lavatory. There we would lean up against the stalls and talk. Preston was full of thoughts; he was tormented by all his ideas. “Do you know what relativity means?” he would ask me. “Do you realize how it affects every little detail of everyday life?” Or it might be Spinoza that moved him: “Eighteenth-century, but by God *there* was a rational man.” I would pace up and down, half listening, half daydreaming, wishing *my* name would appear on Preston’s list of people who had the elements of greatness.

Or we talked about our problems. “I’m not popular,” I would say. “I’m too gloomy.”

“Why is that, do you think?” Preston would ask.

“I don’t know,” I would say. “I’m a virgin. That has a lot to do with everything.”

“Listen,” Preston said one day, “you may not be popular but you’re likable. Your trouble is you’re a snob.” He walked up and down the white-tiled floor, mimicking me. He slouched, and cast his eyes down, and jutted his chin out, and pulled a foolish, serious look over his face.

“Is that me?” I cried, heartbroken.

“Well, almost,” Preston said.

Or, leaning on the window sill, sticking our heads out into the golden afternoon air and watching a girl’s gym class doing archery under the trees, we talked about sex.

“It starts in the infant,” Preston said. “And it lasts forever.”

“Saints escape it,” I said mournfully.

“The hell they do,” Preston said. The girls beneath us on the hillside drew their bows. Their thin green gym suits fluttered against their bodies. “Aren’t they nice?” Preston asked longingly. “Aren’t they wonderful?”

After school, Preston and I went out for track. The outdoor track was a cinder oval surrounding

the football field. A steep, grassy hill led up to the entrance of the school locker room. “Run up the hill every night, boys,” the coach pleaded—Old Mackyz, with his paunch and his iron-gray wavy hair—at the end of the practice period. “Run, boys, because when you’re abso-lutely exhausted, that’s when you got to give *more*. It’s the *more*, boys, that makes champions.” And then he’d stand there humble, and touched by his own speech.

During our warmup sessions, we used to jogtrot the length of the field and back again, keeping our knees high. The grand inutility of this movement filled me with something like exaltation; and on every side of me, in irregular lines, my fellow-males jogged, keeping their knees high. What happiness!

“The turf’s too springy,” Preston would mumble. “Bad for the muscles.” Preston was a miler. He was thickset and without natural grace; Mackyz said he had no talent, but he ran doggedly, and he became a good miler. I ran the 440. I was tall and thin, and even Mackyz said I ought to be good at it, but I wasn’t. Mackyz said I didn’t have the spirit. “All you smart boys are alike,” he said. “You haven’t got the *heart* for it. You always hold back. You’re all a bunch of goldbricks.” I tried to curb my maimed enthusiasm. As I ran, Mackyz would bawl desperately, “Hit the ground harder. Hit with your toes! Spring, boy! SPRING! Don’t coddle yourself, for Christ’s sake....” After a race, I’d throw myself down on a knoll near the finish line, under a sycamore tree, where the track manager dug a new hole every day for us to puke in. Three or four others would join me, and we’d lie there wearily, our chests burning, too weak to move.

Among my other problems was that I was reduced nearly to a state of tears over my own looks whenever I looked at a boy named Joel Bush. Joel was so incredibly good-looking that none of the boys could quite bear the fact of his existence; his looks weren’t particularly masculine or clean-cut, and he wasn’t a fine figure of a boy—he was merely beautiful. He looked like a statue that had been rubbed with honey and warm wax, to get a golden tone, and he carried at all times, in the neatness of his features and the secret proportions of his face and body that made him so handsome in that particular way, the threat of seduction. Displease me, he seemed to say, and I’ll get you. I’ll make you fall in love with me and I’ll turn you into a donkey. Everyone either avoided him or gave in to him; teachers refused to catch him cheating, boys never teased him, and no one ever told him off. One day I saw him saying goodbye to a girl after school, and as he left her to join me, walking toward the locker room, he said to her, “Meet you here at five-thirty.” Track wasn’t over until six, and I could tell that he had no intention of meeting her, and yet, when he asked me about some experiments we had done in physics, instead of treating him like someone who had just behaved like a heel, I told him everything I knew.

He never joined us under the sycamore tree, and he ran effortlessly. He would pass the finish line with his chest heaving under his sweat-stained track shirt, and climb into the stands and sit in the sunlight. I was watching him, one afternoon, as he sat there wiping his face and turning his head from side

side. At one moment it was all silver except for the charred hollows of his eyes, and the next it was young and perfect, the head we all recognized as his.

Mackyz saw him and called out to him to put his sweatshirt on before he caught a cold. As I slipped the sweatshirt on, Joel shouted, “Aw, go fry your head!” Mackyz laughed good-naturedly.

Sprinkled here and there on the football field were boys lifting their arms high and then sweeping them down to touch their toes, or lying on their backs and bicycling their legs in the air. I got up and walked toward them, to do a little jog-trotting and high-knee prancing. I looked at Joel. “I’m cooling off,” he said to me. I walked on, and just then a flock of crows wheeled up behind the oak tree on the hill and filled the sky with their vibrant motion. Everyone—even Preston—paused and looked up. The birds rose in a half circle and then glided, scythelike, with wings outspread, on a down current of air until they were only twenty feet or so above the ground; then they flapped their wings with a noise like sheets being shaken out, and soared aloft, dragging their shadows up the stepped concrete geometry of the stands, past Joel’s handsome, rigid figure, off into the sky.

“Whaddya know about that?” Mackyz said. “Biggest flock of crows I ever saw.”

“Why didn’t you get your gun and shoot a couple?” Joel called out. Everyone turned. “The hell you’d have some crow handy whenever you had to eat some,” Joel said.

“Take a lap,” Mackyz bawled, his leathery face turning red up to the roots of his iron-gray hair.

“He was only kidding,” I said, appalled at Mackyz’s hurt.

Mackyz looked at me and scowled, “You can take a lap too, and don’t talk so much.”

I took off my sweatshirt and dropped it on the grass and set off around the track. As soon as I started running, the world changed. The bodies sprawled out across the green of the football field were parts of a scene remembered, not one real at this moment. The whole secret of effort is to keep on, I told myself. Not for the world would I have stopped then, and yet nothing—not even if I had been turned handsome as a reward for finishing—could have made up for the curious pain of the effort.

About halfway around the track, Joel caught up to me, and then he slowed down and ran alongside. “Mackyz isn’t watching,” he said. “Let’s sneak up the hill.” I looked and saw that Mackyz was lining up the team for high-jump practice. Joel sailed up over the crest of the hill, and I followed him.

“He’s getting senile,” Joel said, dropping to a sitting position, sighting over the crest of the hill at Mackyz, and then lying down. “Come on, jerk, lie down. You want Mackyz to see you?”

I was uneasy; this sort of fooling was all right for Joel, because he “made the effort,” but if Mackyz caught me, he’d kick me off the team. I pointed this out to Joel.

“Aw, Mackyz takes everything too seriously. That’s his problem,” Joel said. “He’s always up in the air about something. I don’t see why he makes so much fuss. You ever notice how old men make big fuss over everything?”

“Mackyz’ not so old.”

“All right, you ever notice how *middle-aged* men make a big fuss over everything?” A few seconds later, he said casually, his gaze resting on the underside of the leaves of the oak tree, “I got laid last night.”

“No kidding?” I said.

He spread his fingers over his face, no doubt to see them turn orange in the sunlight, as children do. “Yeah,” he said.

From the football field came the sounds of highjump practice starting. Mackyz was shouting, “Now, start with your left foot—one, two, three—take off! TAKE OFF, GODDAMN IT! Spread your Goddamned legs, spread ’em. You won’t get ruptured. There’s sand to catch you, for Christ’s sake. The jumper’s footsteps made a series of thuds, there was a pause, and then the sound of the landing on the sand. Lifting my head, I could see the line of boys waiting to jump, the lead boy breaking into a run, leaping from the ground, and spreading his arms in athletic entreaty.

“It was disappointing,” Joel said.

“How?” I asked.

“It’s nothing very special.”

I was aroused by this exposé. “You mean the books—”

“It’s not like that at all.” He turned sullenly and scrabbled with his fingers in the dirt. “It’s like masturbation, kind of with bells.”

“Maybe the girl didn’t know how to do it.”

“She was a grown woman!”

“Yeah, but—”

“She was a fully grown woman! She knew what she was doing!”

“Oh,” I said. Then, after a minute, “Look, would you mind telling me what you said to her? If I ever had a chance, I wouldn’t know what to say. I...”

“I don’t remember,” Joel said. “We just looked at each other, and then she got all tearful, and she told me to take my clothes off.”

We lay there a moment, in the late afternoon sunshine, and then I said we’d better be getting back. We walked around behind the hill, and waited until Mackyz wasn’t looking before we sprinted out onto the track.

The jumping went on for fifteen or twenty minutes more; then Mackyz raised his arms in a gesture of benediction. “All right, you squirts—all out on the track for a fast lap. And that includes you, goldbrick,” he said to me, wagging his finger.

All the boys straightened up and started toward the track. The sun’s light poured in long low rays over the roof of the school. Jostling and joking, we started to run. “Faster!” Mackyz yelled. “Faster! Whatsa matter—you all a bunch of girls! Faster! For Christ’s sake, faster!”

Since Preston, in his dogged effort to become a good miler, ran three laps to everyone else's on he was usually the last in the locker room. He would come in, worn out and breathing heavily, sometimes he even had to hold himself up with one hand on his locker while he undressed. Everyone else would long since have showered and would be almost ready to leave. They might make one or two remarks about Preston's running his legs down to stumps or trying to kill himself for Mackyz' sake. Preston would smile numbly while he tried to get his breath back, and somehow, I was always surprised by how little attention was paid to Preston, how cut off and how alone he was.

More often than not, Joel would be showing off in the locker room—walking around on his hands, singing dirty songs, or engaged in some argument or other. Preston would go into the shower. I would talk to Joel, dressing slowly, because I usually waited for Preston. By the time I was all dressed the locker room would be empty and Preston would still be towelling himself off. Then, instead of hurrying to put his clothes on, he would run his hand over his chest, to curl the few limp hairs. “Come on!” I would say, disgustedly.

“Hold your horses,” he would say, with his maddening physicist's serenity. “Just you hold your horses.”

It took him half an hour to get dressed. He'd stand in front of the mirror and flex his muscles endlessly and admire the line his pectorals made across his broad rib cage, and he always left his shirt until last, even until after he had combed his hair. I found his vanity confusing; he was far from handsome, with his heavy mouth and bushy eyebrows and thick, sloping shoulders, but he loved his reflection and he'd turn and gaze at himself in the mirror from all sorts of angles while he buttoned his shirt. He hated Joel. “There's a guy who'll never amount to much,” Preston would say. “He's a chicken. And he's not very smart. I don't see why you want him to like you—except that you're a sucker. You let your eyes run away with your judgment.” I put up with all this because I wanted Preston to walk me part way home. It seemed shameful somehow to have to walk home alone.

Finally, he would finish, and we would emerge from the now deserted school into the dying afternoon. As we walked, Preston harangued me about my lack of standards and judgment. The hunger I had for holding school office and for being well thought of he dismissed as a streak of lower bourgeois cowardice. I agreed with him (I didn't like myself anyway); but what was to be done about it? “We might run away,” Preston said, squinting up at the sky. “Hitchhike. Work in factories. Go to a whorehouse...” I leaned against a tree trunk, and Preston stood with one foot on the curb and one foot in the street, and we lobbed pebbles back and forth. “We're doomed,” Preston said. “Doom” was one of his favorite words, along with “culture,” “kinetic,” and “the Absolute.” “We come from a dying culture,” he said.

“I suppose you're right,” I said. “It certainly looks that way.” But then I cheered up. “After all it's not as if we were insane or anything.”

“It wouldn't show yet,” Preston said gloomily.

“It’s still in the latent stage. It’ll come out later. You’ll see. After all, you’re still living at home and you’ve got your half-assed charm—”

I broke in; I’d never had a compliment from him before.

“I didn’t say you were charming,” he said. “I said you have a half-assed charm. You behave well in public. That’s all I meant.”

At the corner where we separated, Preston stood a moment or two. “It’s hopeless,” he said.

“God, do you really think so?” I asked.

“That’s my honest opinion,” he said.

He turned toward his house. I jogged a block or two, and then felt my stomach muscles. When I came to a maple with a low, straight branch, I ran and jumped up and swung from the branch, while a big green diesel bus rolled ponderously past, all its windows filled with tired faces that looked out at the street going by and at me hanging from the branch and smiling. I was doomed, but I was very likely charming.

I ran in the front door of my house and called out, “Mother! Mother!”

“What is it?” she answered. She was sitting on the screened porch, and I could see a little plume of cigarette smoke in the doorway. There was the faint mutter of a radio news program turned on low.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m home, that’s all.”

At the dinner table, I would try to disguise myself by slouching in my chair and thinking about my homework, but my mother and my sister always recognized me. “How was track today?” my sister would ask in a slightly amused way.

“Fine,” I would say in a low voice.

My mother and my sister would exchange glances. I must have seemed comic to them, stilted and slightly absurd, like all males.

Almost every evening, Sonny Bruster used to drive up to our house in his yellow convertible. The large car would glide to a stop at the curb, and Sonny would glance quickly at himself in the rear-view mirror, running his hand over his hair. Then he’d climb out and brush his pants off, too occupied with his own shyness to notice the children playing on the block. But they would stop what they were doing and watch him.

I would wait for him at the front door and let him in and lead him into the living room. I walked ahead of Sonny because I had noticed that he could not keep himself from looking up the stairs as we passed through the hallway, as if to conjure up my sister then and there with the intensity of his longing, and I hated to see him do this. I would sit in the high-backed yellow chair, and Sonny would settle himself on the couch and ask me about track, or if I’d picked a college yet. “You ought to think carefully about college,” he would say. “I think Princeton is more civilized than Yale.” His gentle, well-bred voice was carefully inexpressive. In his manner there was a touch of stiffness to remind you and himself, that he was rich and if some disrespect was intended for him he wouldn’t necessarily p

up with it. But I liked him. He treated me with great politeness, and I liked the idea of his being my brother-in-law, and I sometimes thought of the benefits that would fall to me if my sister married him.

Then my sister would appear at the head of the stairs, dressed to go out, and Sonny would leap at her feet. "Are you ready?" he'd cry, as if he had never dared hope she would be. My sister would hand him her coat, and with elaborate care he'd hold it for her. It would be perhaps eight o'clock or a little after. The street lamps would be on, but looking pallid because it wasn't quite dark. Usually, Sonny would open the car door for my sister, but sometimes, with a quick maneuver, she would forestall him; she would hurry the last few steps, open the door, and slip inside before he could lift his hand.

Sonny was not the first rich boy who had loved my sister; he was the fourth or fifth. And in the other cases there had been scenes between my mother and sister in which my mother extolled the boy's eligibility and my sister argued that she was too young to marry and didn't want to stop having a good time yet. Each time she had won, and each time the boy had been sent packing, while my mother looked heartbroken and said my sister was throwing her chances away.

With Sonny, the same thing seemed about to happen. My sister missed going out with a lot of boys instead of with just one. She complained once or twice that Sonny was jealous and spoiled. There were times when she seemed to like him very much, but there were other times when she would greet him blankly in the evening when she came downstairs, and he would be apologetic and fearful, and I could see that her disapproval was the thing he feared most in the world.

My mother didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she hid her feelings. Then one night I was sitting in my room doing my homework and I heard my mother and sister come upstairs. They went into my sister's room.

"I think Sonny's becoming very serious," my mother said.

"Sonny's so short," I heard my sister say. "He's not really interesting, either, Mother."

"He seems to be very fond of you," my mother said.

"He's no fun," my sister said. "Mother, be careful! You're brushing too hard! You're hurting me!"

I stopped trying to work, and listened.

"Sonny's a very intelligent boy," my mother said. "He comes from a good family."

"I don't care," my sister said. "I don't want to waste myself on him."

"Waste yourself?" My mother laughed derisively. I got up and went to the door of my sister's room. My sister was sitting at her dressing table, her hair shining like glass and her eyes closed. My mother was walking back and forth, gesturing with the hairbrush. "He's the one who's throwing himself away," she said. "Who do you think we are, anyway? We're nobodies."

"I'm pretty!" my sister objected angrily.

My mother shrugged. "The woods are full of pretty girls. What's more, they're full of pretty, rich girls. Now, Sonny's a very *nice* boy—"

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