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LIFELINES: THE WIT, WISDOM AND WOE OF PAUL HARRY

By

Mark J. Beardslee

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2007

UMI Number: 1442808

UMI Microform 1442808

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ABSTRACT

LIFELINES: THE WIT, WISDOM AND WOE OF PAUL HARRY

By

Mark J. Beardslee

This creative nonfiction thesis is the story of the wisdom, humor and dread of my father, Paul Harry Beardslee, who died twenty years ago when I was only beginning to learn what it meant to be a man, told through a series of "lines" that he often used. Each chapter is titled with one of those lines and is thematically similar to scenes from a novel, the difference being that these stories are true. It is narrated by a man in his forties who is looking back at his father's role in his juvenile development. The child, Mark, observes the events; but it is the more knowledgeable voice of the grown son, standing on his younger self's shoulder, who conveys to the audience the utter perplexity felt by the child while simultaneously explaining the nugget of wisdom or the humorous anecdote or the horrifying scene presented in the given chapter.

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DEDICATION

How could this *not* be dedicated to Paul Harry Beardslee?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I thank Professor Ronald Johnson, my thesis chair, a talented writer and an editor of care, for his close attention to many, many pages, paragraphs and sentences of detail. His acute eye improved the draft of this work immensely. I thank him too for recognizing and encouraging the legitimacy of my presentational voice. For what is good in this memoir, thank him. For the weak parts, blame me. I also thank Professor Zhuang-Zhong Lehmberg, my patient and knowledgeable mentor and the reader of this thesis. Her contributions were crucial to the completion of this work. Thanks also are due to Professors Katherine Hanson and Stephen Burn of the Thesis Selection Committee, who prepared me better than they know. This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English. Thanks to my dear colleague and friend Shannon Cole, who was a constant source of support and wise perspective. Thanks to my brother David for his commiseration during times of difficulty and his glee for me during times of success. Also, thanks to David for remembering so many of Paul Harry's lines. Thanks to my mother, Harriet Beardslee, for her endless prayers and for her priceless knowledge of the past which allowed me to produce this work. Thanks to my brother Steve, his wife Mary, their daughters Lonna and Christina and other members of their extended family for getting me to Marquette in the first place. Thanks to siblings Craig and Jan for memorable scenes from childhood. Thanks to "Uncle Jon." Thanks to Skipper for demonstrating that to which humanity should aspire. Finally, thanks to Dad, for inspiring this labor of love.

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INTRODUCTION

Paul Harry Beardslee, my father, died on May 12, 1987, just two days shy of his 60th birthday. The family (extended, that came to include a great number of folks ranging in age from a few months to almost forty years) had planned a big surprise birthday party for him. But, as was so often the case, it was Dad who ended up surprising his family.

I was his fourth son, his fifth child of six, and a quite tender 22 years old at the time he passed away. Like a lot of people who lose their father at such an age, I suppose, the grief was almost unbearable. When I say "such an age," I mean that it was an age at which I had only recently become an adult myself, and I was learning about but had not yet fully come to know my father as a man. Maybe I was just beginning to, though: maybe all that animosity that existed during puberty was disappearing; maybe a kind of relationship we never thought possible was blossoming; and maybe the two of us arrived at a new, mature understanding just a little too late for either of us to fully enjoy.

Throughout a tumultuous adolescence, I sometimes claimed that I hated my father. "He doesn't appreciate me for who I am," I would lament. "Doesn't he ever understand that life, sometimes, should be enjoyed?" "Why is it just work, work, work, all the time?" "Why won't he let me do what he let my older brothers do?"

These are probably common enough sentiments among male juveniles who find themselves at loggerheads with their fathers over the most unimportant matters, like whether to participate in certain school functions, whether to visit a particular family member on a given day, whether to take a shower instead of a bath, whether to enjoy the outdoors on a summer day or to stay inside and read in the relative cool of the air-

conditioned family room. One sees that these matters are not important. They are inane, inconsequential and meaningless. But when you're a proud and stubborn teenaged son of a proud and stubborn man, disagreements such as these can make for some unpleasant confrontations.

I never regretted leaving home just before turning nineteen. In fact, it came to be a blessing. My father quickly began to treat me as an adult, to ask after my opinions, to show an interest in my pursuits. I was transforming into a man and, like all good fathers, Paul Harry earnestly wanted to know what kind of a man that was. He also made it abundantly clear that should I prove to be a responsible one, he would help me as much as he could as I pursued success in education, vocation and relations.

Sadly, those years from 19 to 22 were the kind of manic years that any young man determined to make a difference in the world will find himself flying through. I say this is sad because I didn't take enough time out to spend with my dad. There were so many things about my personal life that he just never knew, and as it turned out, would never know. His sudden death struck home to me in this regard all too hard. I'd never have a chance to tell him about this realization, that relationship, this experiment, that undertaking. Indeed, I would never have a chance to tell him about any of the new occurrences and developments in my life, ever, I sobbed to myself.

I only remember observing my dad cry twice, although I am sure he did so on more than just these two occasions. The first time was when I was quite young, nine years old to be precise, when he was hospitalized for open-heart surgery, during which it was intended that the cholesterol-clogged arteries of his heart would be bypassed with healthy arteries removed from his legs. That was the plan, anyway, but in 1973, it didn't

work. The new “healthy” arteries soon resembled their nearby cousins. Whatever the outcome or the lack thereof of the surgery, in 1973, hospitals didn’t allow young children into their antiseptic halls. My father had to spend upwards of three weeks in a hospital room during his horrific medical trial, and Paul Harry was the kind of man who did not like to be separated from his family.

One day, through the efforts, or so I have been led to believe, of our family physician of the time, my younger brother David and I were granted special dispensation to visit my father, albeit very briefly, in person in his hospital room. That visit resurrects images that are terribly difficult to forget. David and I arrived in his room, wearing gowns and face masks, with trepidation. We had no idea what to expect. The nurse was stern and guided us swiftly along. Other patients stared at us as we passed. Strange smells and even stranger sounds made their way to us. And when we saw our dad, our big, strong, hefty, muscular hulk of a father, reduced to a quiet, unassuming and frightened looking weakling, we (or I should say I, for I should never deign to speak for my brother) were terrified. I can’t recall if our tears came first, or his, but he was definitely crying as he took us into his arms, and this astounding fact (please understand that I had not only never seen my father cry before that time, but had never even imagined that he did cry, or that he could) led me to cry even more. My fearsome father, the hand of justice, a veritable mountain of strength, the deep-voiced speaker of the gods, as I viewed him at that age, was weeping. Weeping!

Ah, well, I learned then that this father of mine was a man, a human like me, not a god after all, and the effects of that encounter, and of his medical problems in general, would persist to his dying day. I saw my father weep again not long before the ghastly

day of his death. This time I was a young man, one who fancied himself a free spirit, a world traveler, a wayward minstrel, an artist unbound by the duties of work and responsibility. I was leaving my first post-university professional job (and a good job it was) to hitchhike across Europe, embark upon the trans-Siberian Express, and make that way to Japan to "teach English." At least that's how I thought it would work out. My parents visited me in Washington, DC, where I then lived and worked and from which place I was leaving. They, as kindly, loving parents, but also as senior citizens, I finally noticed, had traversed the considerable distance from their home in southern Michigan to the US capital in order to take back home with them those personal items I owned but could not carry with me in a sojourn around the world. The car trunk was filled, the final cup of tea had been drunk, and the three of us bade our goodbyes on the front stoop of the group house I was living in. My father shook my hand and said, "Goodbye, son…" That's when his manly façade fell away, his strong voice cracked, and he gathered me into his arms in a deep embrace, wished me luck, then turned away, tears staining his tired face.

This was expected of my mother, but from my father it damn near broke my heart. I was an adult and I had to make my own way in life, sure. But I also had learned enough by then to realize that the days I had ahead of me with my father were numbered. Nonetheless, I lumbered on. The trip did not end as planned and I was lucky, oh-so-lucky, not to find a job as an English teacher in Japan. For I flew home and was able to spend a few days with my father before a final, sudden, unpredictable but not unpredicted, heart attack took him away from me, from us, from the world, forever.

The story of my relationship with my father could fill an entire volume in itself, with all the time spent with him as I grew from a baby into a young child then into a prepubescent, a surly teenager and thence into a cocky self-assured university student and finally, eventually, into a professional. So many memories, both sweet and bitter, own I of our relationship.

But that is not the intent of this volume. This volume has a different focus, yet the resultant understanding of my father may be the same. You see, my father had a definite set of principles by which he lived his life. And there is no way one could grow up with him as the mentor, the king of his castle, as he liked to say, without learning those principles oneself. The focus of this tribute, then, is that very set of principles, those unique ways in which Paul Harry approached life, the common but deeply insightful sense of wisdom that guided his own life. Not all of his principles were of the high and mighty sort. Many were quite comedic, some, most assuredly, lurid, but they were all honest and true. And he was honest and true to those principles. Yes, some *were* mighty serious, and to break them, whether on his part or on the part of one of his offspring, was to bring forth drastic, dramatic and sometimes dreadful consequences. But every man with a conscience has them – principles by which his life, his being, his existence on Earth shall be measured, evaluated, judged. And by which he shall judge himself.

Often have I said that no one suffers more than I when I behave in a manner which hurts someone else. I take out my frustrations with myself on myself much harder than on anyone I have ever known. I believe this was true also of my father. He never *tried* to hurt others but, being human, he sometimes did. And, boy, did he hate that. And

as much as he may have made those around him miserable when it happened, I have no doubt in my mind that he made himself all the more so. This kind of conscience can be laudable, but it can also be deadly. Though there is no proof, and there never can be any proof, I believe that to some extent my father's own sense of dissatisfaction with himself led to his relatively early demise.

Returning to the subject of my father's principles, I must briefly convey that my father was not a religious man, so his principles were not mere words that could be looked up in scripture of some sort in one of the many versions of the Bible or some other so-called holy book and thereby somehow mystically validated. They had nothing to do with religion, although religions would do well to heed them. They were simple platitudes, sayings, quips, quotes, a set of guidelines, established by experience, by which he lived, loved, played and worked. A humble, quiet, unassuming man was he, and his eighth grade education probably had something to do with his unwillingness to be verbose. Indeed, he detested verbosity and, in most kinds of company, he kept his mouth mostly shut. He listened a lot. As a result, many he encountered throughout his life probably thought him simple-minded.

Not me, nor any of his other offspring, nor his wife, ever thought of Paul Harry as simple-minded. We knew that, far from being simple-minded, he harbored a set of deep-seated values from which his "disposition," as he would have termed it, emerged, and by which he became self-actualized. As any father would do, he tried to pass this set of values on to his children, and it was only as an adult that I was able to see in my father's "lines," as I call them, the brilliant tapestry that embodied my father's essence. He did not preach, not like my mother's father; he did not belabor, as the more earnest fathers of

some of my friends of youth did; he did not cajole or dictate; he did not physically abuse. Today's generation might view his well-practiced ability to insult, threaten and name-call as "verbal abuse." I never looked at it that way though. In the Beardslee household, it was understood simply that Dad's "bark was worse than his bite." Mom was the one who did the spanking and, damn, her hand stung.

But, as the reader shall see, Paul Harry did not abide violations of his principles, at least those violations he knew about, and at least so long as any of his brood lived under his roof. That being said, some rules could be bent – there were gray areas – and all of us kids tested those areas to one degree or another. By doing so, we learned the latitude of my father's parameters. We learned how far we could go before we were treading dangerous ground. Such unspoken understanding guided us, his children, through not only the moral quagmires of upbringing, but the practical, pleasurable and comedic aspects of growing up as well. Gladly, to this day, I still find great strength and comfort, and certainly a great deal of laughter, in complying with my father's approach to life. While his approach was not simplistic, and certainly not simple-minded, it *was* probably quite simple. I believe I am guilty of having made it, over the years, seem more complex than it really is.

These "lines," as I call them, were used ubiquitously by my father in his attempts to instruct and impart wisdom, to discipline, and to emphasize and strengthen what he saw as proper behavior. But they're not all serious. Many are mere comments and observations, wry and dry, on the realities of life. Others are statements of the obvious through which he was still able to teach something, especially to kids to whom nothing

had yet become obvious. And others, well, others are purely comical, prurient, profane, frightening, or a combination thereof.

Thus, what you hold in your hands is an attempt to share, visualize and bring to life this vague sense of philosophy that was my father's. Each chapter below will begin with one of my father's famous (or infamous, as the case may be) lines, followed by this author's ruminations on the larger, perhaps hidden, meanings of those lines, and then anecdotal presentation of those lines in real life, in black and white, or in color. So, dear reader, settle back and get ready to see life through the lens of one dead man's keen awareness. Hopefully, as you read these stories, you will find, as I continue to do, twenty years after his death, that my father lives.

1. "If You Can't Say Nothing Nice, Don't Say Anything at All."

Most readers have heard this admonition in one form or another at some point in their lives. Its meaning as a directive, as an exhortation or (when thundered by my father), as a command, is quite obvious. There is no hidden meaning here. And this is true of most of my dad's lines, but certainly not all. Some are simple, clear and to the point, and when not, they are cryptic, enigmatic, puzzling. But this one is straightforward. We'll explore some of the more mind-boggling ones later on.

Still, like most of my dad's lines, this one is understated. Whether he actually thought about it or not, I'll never know, but it seems my father was a firm believer in the maxim of, "Why say something in two hundred words when it can be said in ten?" Or even one. In fact, some of his most effective one-liners consisted of no words at all, as we shall see.

If there is one really good word that could describe my father, whether in humor, in anger or in simple observation, it is understatement. He wasn't wordy. He didn't like to talk. And he didn't like his kids to talk, at least not *too* much. But, as I mentioned, when he did talk, or scold, or raise his voice in a disciplinary fashion, his bark made us jump. We would shut up and listen. And it never took him long to make his point. Like with this line.

He used this line so many times he probably got sick of saying it well before we kids got sick of hearing it. It just never lost its relevance, its potency or its simple wisdom. In the Beardslee household, kids were not allowed to raise their voices to parents. That was a sin nearly unforgivable. We six kids were also not allowed to whine

at our parents, at least not too often and only to a certain extent. Complaints often fell on deaf ears anyway, so we didn't come to be very old before realizing that it was pointless to complain to Mom and Dad.

These days, my parents' general form of child-rearing might be called "traditional" or "tyrannical" or "dictatorial" or something worse. I'm no social psychologist or child welfare clinician or any sort of what my father would call a "shrink," so all I know is that my parents' methods were "effective." We kids didn't have the distractions of today's cell phones and instant messages and such. We did not have instantaneous electronic access to the globe via personal computers. And we only had four channels on the TV. Nonetheless, as it is for all kids of any era, we needed to be raised, and to be raised right, as my mother proclaims she and Dad tried their best to do.

Traditional or not, my mother worked outside the home, despite the times. She had six kids and, as if that was not work enough, she toiled in the local school's cafeteria feeding other people's children in between having children of her own. Often, she'd carry her latest toddler with her to the cafeteria and keep an eye on him, or her, all while cooking, preparing and serving hundreds of other mouths. This fact leads me to object to analyses that claim to prove that parents of "the greatest generation" had it somehow easier than parents of today because "the times they have a-changed." I'd like to see contemporary parents in traditional Mom and Dad roles raise six healthy, polite and obedient children. And, hell, from a day-to-day perspective, my mother was a single mother; that's why she carried her toddlers to work with her. No, my father didn't go out boozing or gambling with his buddies. No, he didn't leave all the chores of child-rearing to the wife. What he did do was *work*. For much of his life, my father worked seven-day

weeks. Six days if he was lucky. Often, he covered third shift. And he lived an hour away from "the shop," as he called General Motors' Pontiac plant. So, for at least ten hours of every 24-hour period, my dad was working, going to work or coming from work. And then, when he got home, he always had projects to do. For these projects he would usually enlist the help of his able children. And why not? For the time and place from where my father came, that was part of the reason for having kids.

Without digressing into a cavalcade of the kinds of projects my father engaged in, it suffices to say, for now, that he lived far from "the shop" in order to be able to raise his family in a peaceful, rural setting. Upon his five acres sat a compact house, just big enough for all of us. And later, a garage, just big enough for two cars, his outdoor equipment and his tools. Even later, an addition to the house to accommodate additional children. My father prided himself on keeping things neat, tidy and well-maintained. We would *not* live in squalor. That's where all the projects came in. So, while my mother was blessed to have an industrious, faithful husband who came home after work, she pretty much raised six kids, at least during their youngest years, on her own. Sure, Paul Harry's steady, full-time, union-supported income helped enormously, but Paul was not fond of the infant stage, the crying, the diaper-changing, the midnight feedings, the potty-training. When we babies became big enough to help him out with his "projects," that's when Harriet gained a true partner in child-rearing. Part of the reason my father worked so many days, such long weeks, was that he always set aside, every year, at least one week for a family vacation. That he did this and gave it such priority is proof of his true affection for his family. He *liked* to spend quality time with us. And he knew, quite simply, that such enjoyments had to be worked for. And so did my mother.

The point I started to make above, but which required a temporary glimpse into the child-rearing practices and work ethics of Paul and Harriet Beardslee, was simply that we children would not even *begin* to *conjure* the slightest *inkling* of a *thought* of speaking impetuously to our parents. That was a no-no we learned even before potty training.

"Mumma spank!" I remember Mom warning a diapered David with her hand poised in striking position.

But we *could* speak with great impatience, sarcasm and derision to our siblings. We could whine loudly at each other. We could complain with impunity about *any*thing to our brothers and sister. So we did. A lot. Too much, probably, but with kids who want things and can't always have them, there will be frustration. And the frustration has to come out somehow, it has to be expressed; that's only healthy. It was most definitely *not* healthy to vent at our parents, however, so we aimed our vitriole at each other.

"Quit looking at me like that," Jan, in prepubescent insecurity, grumbled at me as we rode home in the backseat of the family car, one of those big, beautiful Buicks Dad always somehow managed to own.

"Okay. I don't want to look at you anyway, ugly!" I shot back, with the sharp, unconsciously cruel tongue of an eight-year-old.

"Ja-an i-is ugly!" David, not quite ready for school, sang, much to my delight, until he sang the second line of his nonsensical song: "Ma-ark is ugly too-oo."

"Shut up, you kids," Craig rumbled at us all, playing the role of the adult in his fresh teenage years. "Act your age."

"Yeah, David, act your age," Jan scolded.

"You, too," Craig warned her.

“Mom, Craig’s being bossy,” Jan said, in a tentative effort to enlist her mother on her side. This was a tactic that sometimes worked, because Jan was her mother’s only daughter.

“Jan started it,” I tried to add to the other side of the scales of justice. “She yelled at me not to look at her.” Such logic seemed entirely reasonable to me at eight years of age.

“Yeah, but you called me ugly!” Jan escalated, her voice rising in pitch.

“You *both* just be quiet,” Craig interrupted, trying to end the pointless conflict before bigger guns were brought to bear, guns none of us wished to see, or more accurately, *hear*.

This was the kind of trivial fight we kids had in the car on the way home from an early dinner or from some Sunday visit to relatives. Dad drove, Mom sat beside him, attempting to ignore us, trying to carry on an adult conversation with Dad, every once in a while looking into the backseat and beseeching us kids to “shush, your Dad’s concentrating on driving.”

Such typical family scenarios weren’t necessarily tense. My father was often in a good mood, enjoying the passing scenery. He was always one to point out certain things, like big, perfectly shaped trees, or maybe a wild animal, or the exquisite care an unknown homeowner had put into his beautiful yard, or how well-maintained and clean another stranger might have kept some old car.

These are the kinds of things I appreciate about my father now, but when I was just a kid, well, I was just a kid, and I didn’t understand very much of what he had to say. I did not yet share his sense of appreciation for quality, hard work and justifiable pride.

“Yeah, you *both* just be quiet,” David chimed in, taking sides with the biggest, oldest, most powerful force in the backseat. “Just be-ee-ee quiet!” David never took the ridiculous “arguments” very seriously at all.

“Shut up, David,” Jan ordered, feeling isolated and frustrated that her plea to her mother hadn’t turned out the way she had hoped. “You don’t know nothing.”

“You don’t know *any*thing,” I corrected, proud to use my grammar skills in a real-life situation. “Tell her, Mom,” I added, seeking approval from the one who taught me more proper English language usage than any of my teachers. “It’s, ‘You don’t know *any*thing,’ isn’t it?”

“Sure, Mark,” Mom offered absent-mindedly.

“See?” I said, smug.

“You smell like poop!” Jan yelled as a parting shot, completely out of her wits, defeated and grumpier than ever.

“Poop!” David laughed in delight. “You said ‘poop!’”

“You *all* smell like poop!” Craig declared.

That’s usually about the point in the whole scene of silliness when those big guns would be aimed our way and fired with sudden and deadly accuracy.

“You kids,” the deep, gruff voice of my father began from the driver’s seat. “I’m going to tell you this once and one time only. *If you can’t say nothing nice, don’t say anything at all*!”

The inside of the car became dead silent.

I did not care that my father’s grammar was incorrect; I didn’t even notice as I sat frozen in place by my father’s bark. Craig gazed out the window, pretending to be above

the fray, with a look on his face that said, "I tried to tell you." Jan glowered even more, but she was done talking anyway. And David just stared with his eyes big and round, wondering what had just happened, but knowing, for sure, not to say anything for a while. Especially not "poop."

This particular line, which had more of an impact on us than we would think at the time, was Dad's updated version of "Children should be seen and not heard." My father was not *that* strict. He'd let us talk. But when we started saying unpleasant things to one another, angry words, phrases intended to hurt, he wouldn't abide it for long. Usually, after such a scolding, when we started talking again, we'd say nice things to one another, even if we didn't mean them. We'd say such nice things because that was what our father had told us to do and, by god, we obeyed our father.

By the time we got home, we kids would be playing a game as we giggled, or laughing with each other at some external absurdity, carefully avoiding saying anything to each other that was *not* nice. And that one line was all my father really had to say.

Until the next time.

2. "Bullshit!"

The previous chapter completely ignored my two eldest siblings, Dennis and Steve. That's because by the time Craig had become a teenager, both Dennis and Steve were old enough to date and drive, and they didn't want to go places with the rest of us little kids. In young adulthood, they were working their own jobs, tinkering with their own cars, making their own grand plans for the future. By the time I was old enough to remember, Dennis, the eldest, was already dating the woman who would eventually become his wife for the rest of his life. And Steve, two years Dennis's junior, was not far behind.

Despite the generational gap, Dennis and Steve are as familiar with Dad's lines as the rest of his kids. They may remember different lines, for Dad was younger (and if they are to be believed, far more strict and more likely to use the strap) in the days of *their* youth. But Dad's infamous (and ubiquitous) one-liner that certainly transcended the ages of his kids was a word that many of us have used, that word being not the somehow more profane-sounding "shit" and not the god-fearing man's use of "bull" as an alternative to the use of a sinful expletive, but the two combined into one powerful and all-consuming curse word, a word that had as many meanings for my dad as the word "fuck" is claimed to have in this generation: Bullshit.

My father was not one of those guys who say "goddamn" this and "goddamn" that every goddamn time they open their goddamn mouths. As far as I know, he never uttered a curse word other than this one. Oh, occasionally he might have called someone a bastard, or used the word "asshole" in a mild fashion: "Old King Cole was a merry old soul," he sometimes sang out of nowhere. "He had hair around his asshole." (I'll never

know the origins of that little ditty.) But the ordinary cadence of four-letter words and other profane phrases that were and still are common amongst the working class were not heard coming from him. His cousin, for example, a fellow named Pete Adams, could cram more swear words into a single sentence than most people could bring themselves to evince in a whole day. My dad was fond of Pete – they had been buddies since childhood – but swearing, or "cussing," as my mom termed it, was one trait they did not have in common.

I recall some of their conversations. The use of curse words came so natural to Pete that if one listened to his voice without hearing the individual words, it didn't even sound like he was swearing. Conversations between Pete and my dad went like this:

"Hey, Paul, what's wrong with your goddamn yard? It looks like you've got more goddamned water back there than a pregnant bitch that's lost her puppies has in her tits."

"Yeah, Pete, don't remind me. The drainpipe is clogged up and I haven't the slightest idea where."

"Well, where the fuck *is* that goddamned drainpipe?"

"Most of it runs through our neighbor's yard, then it empties out into the big drain by the expressway."

"Well, have you called the goddamn road commission? Those assholes should be responsible for this goddamn mess."

"Yeah, I called them but they said it was my responsibility."

"Oh, hell, you're probably gonna have to get your goddamn neighbor to tear the shit out of his yard just to find it."

“I’ve talked to him about it and he sure isn’t too excited about having to do that.”

“Well, you’ve gotta get rid of this fucking mess. I’m sure the bastard doesn’t like looking at this horseshit anymore than you do. Tell ya what, hire one of those big-ass backhoe operators to come here and start at this end and tear the hell out of the goddamn place until you find that goddamn clog. Goddamn mosquitoes must be driving you fucking nuts.”

“Yeah, Pete, thanks for the advice. I’ll get it worked out.”

“Goddamn right you will. Get this goddamn son of a bitch of a mess cleaned up.”

Is it any wonder that when we Beardslee kids grew up we referred to Pete as “Goddamn Pete”?

Anyway, Pete’s coarse language scared me, but it didn’t seem to faze my father in the least. He seemed to be accustomed to it. I surmise that my father knew that his kids would not be corrupted by occasional exposure to his cousin’s filthy mouth. That he knew our proper behavior would be assured by other means. That a man should be allowed to be himself. That good parents will teach their children the difference between dirty and clean language.

When it came to the use of the word “bullshit,” my father never restrained himself, and if I have given the impression that my dad was not verbose, well, I guess you could say that with this one word, my dad did indeed talk quite a lot. And, as I noted, he used it in so many situations. Hmmm. Let me count the ways.

1) When he felt pain.
2) When he felt angry.
3) When he felt frustrated.

4) When he felt irritated.

5) When he felt disgusted.

6) When he didn't believe someone or something.

7) When he disagreed with someone or something.

8) When he became impatient.

9) When referring to a situation he didn't like.

10) When referring to something he thought was a lie.

And so on.

For example, Paul Harry is working on a car and he needs a certain part to fix the gas line where it is leaking, and he is lying underneath the car reaching over his head trying to make the repair. The auto parts store didn't have the exact part he needed so he is trying to jury-rig the repair. This sets the stage for a classic "bullshit" cacophony.

Mark is ordered to run and bring him a certain tool. As always, Mark retrieves the wrong one. "Bullshit! Don't you know the difference between a pair of pliers and a crescent wrench?" That would be irritation.

Mark finally brings the correct tool and Paul Harry uses it to try to repair the leak. Leverage needs to be applied and he pushes, or pulls, to apply that leverage. His hand slips and strikes the exhaust manifold, burning and tearing the skin on his knuckles. "Bullshit!" This time it's pain that causes the word to come forth.

He tries again and again to make the repairs with his sub-par parts and a questionable tool, grunting and groaning down under the car, and keeps failing. "Bullshit! An auto parts store is an auto parts store. Why don't they have the part?" This could be anger or frustration.

Finally, my dad tires of the whole thing and begins the job anew, frantically trying to get it done, get it behind him, because Paul Harry never liked to let the sun set on an unfinished job. “Bullshit! I’m gonna fix this thing, Mark, if it’s the last thing I do.” This time his use of the word comes clearly from impatience.

“Why don’t you try a bigger wrench?” I offer, hopefully helpfully, worried by the sight of my father’s lower body writhing on the concrete floor of the garage.

“Bullshit! A bigger wrench won’t fit in the little space I have.” This time, it’s irritation, some disagreement, probably, and maybe a little frustration thrown in for good measure.

“I could get under there and help you,” Mark offers, again trying to be helpful.

“Bullshit!” And this time it’s disagreement. Or else he doesn’t believe I could be of any help. Or both.

And then he emerges from beneath the car, reaching his hand out to me, panting heavily. “Help me up.”

I do, and once on his feet, he mutters, “Bull*shit*!” This time his use of the word is clearly a reference to a situation he doesn’t like.

“Maybe Grant could help,” I offer again, referring to a nearby family friend who is quite mechanically inclined. “He’s good with cars, and he has more tools.”

“Bullshit!” This time maybe he thinks what I say is a lie, or at least inaccurate. Whatever, it is certainly a proposition with which he disagrees.

Then he walks over to his workbench, holding a piece of plastic-coated metal in his hand, alternately examining his array of tools and the little item in his hand.

“What a load of bullshit,” he tells me, and this is clearly disgust.

Eventually, my father succeeds in fixing the problem and goes inside to get ready for bed.

Bear in mind that the meaning of “bullshit” could change by the cadence and the intonation that Dad used when uttering his favorite expletive. And he wasn’t always unhappy when he said it.

If, for example, he received some surprising and not entirely unwelcome news, he might say “bull” in a very low voice and then finish the word in a higher register, expressing surprise or disbelief.

Or, he would sometimes say “bullshit” in hushed tones of awe when he discovered that something he had been told, and had disbelieved, was revealed to be true.

Alternatively, he could emphasize the “bull” and bite down on the “shit,” so as to observe that someone had stated the obvious.

And sometimes, he would just say “bullshit” in a monotone, meant to express whatever was in his mind at the time or, perhaps, absolutely nothing at all.

My father didn’t have a big vocabulary and felt uncomfortable around people who did, or at least people who did and used it. As I became more educated and started to use words with which he was unfamiliar, he’d express his discomfort by saying something like, “Well, la-tee-da.”

But, more likely, he’d look at me a bit askance, shake his head and say, “Bullshit,” in an ultimate expression of disapproval.

Mom recalls a story so singular that it behooves me to include it. It occurred during their younger days, before I was born, when my father was working to finish off the basement of our modest home. In those days, any utterance of the word in question by the man in question was greeted with dread. I think this is because as a younger man, my dad's versatility with the word was not yet very sophisticated.

Anyway, my father had borrowed a circular saw from Grant, the aforementioned family friend, and had set it up in the basement to cut the boards of paneling that he was planning to use to cover the basement walls. My mother remembers clearly the piercing screech of the saw in action, ripping, slicing, tearing its noisy way through the wood. She says that when the roaring whine of the saw would reverberate into silence, she would hold bated breath, waiting to hear what had become almost the inevitable complaint of "Bullshit" emerge from my father's lips. Apparently, he wasn't that good of a carpenter, and would realize too late that he had made a cut in the wrong place, had made the cut jagged, or in some other way had cut the wood in an incorrect or unfavorable fashion. He was a perfectionist in all his projects, so it's not hard to believe that he would have said "Bullshit" after nearly every cut, as my mother claims. My mother mimics the way he would say the word in this situation. "BuuuuuuuulSHIT!" is how she said he said it, with the first syllable dropping through a range of low notes, then rising abruptly just before the final ejaculation of "shit." If the expletive was not forthcoming, Mom said she would breathe a sigh of relief until the screech of the circular saw began again, and again she'd hold her breath.

Obviously, these dreaded utterances were, in those days at least, frustrated cries of dissatisfaction with himself. This was another of my father's uses for the word, one

which I'm sure if my father had his life to live over again, he would try to use a lot less in that manner. Perfection was something he demanded of himself far more than of others. And if those studies linking heart disease with stress are true, maybe my dad was just too damned demanding of himself and this fact helped kill him. I'm not sure. I'm just glad he was able to use the word with less fearsome intensity as he got older.

My two eldest brothers, Dennis and Steve, both speak of their own days at home and the nearly constant presence of the word "bullshit" whenever they worked on projects with Dad. They, too, say that they came to associate Dad's use of his favorite word with negative things, that it always meant something was awry or about to go there. They say they dreaded hearing that word emanate from my dad's deep chest.

I have said that I know of positive situations in which my dad used the word. The most common was probably as an expression of surprise, or simple disagreement over trivial matters. My younger brother David no doubt has recollections of even more ways in which my dad used the word benignly. It is my theory that my father's use of the word became more expansive as he aged because he found new and more creative ways to use it. I can see him smiling, sitting at a picnic table at some family event, listening to a relative hold forth on some matter, talking about something with which my father is entirely unfamiliar. "Bullshit?" I can see him say, the smile never leaving his face. Or, perhaps, more likely, "No bullshit?" Like I said, he rarely, if ever, just said "shit."

If Paul Harry can read this, and about the metaphysical I know nothing so I can't say for certain, but if he can, he is no doubt shaking his head, grumbling "Bullshit" to

himself, expressing his disagreement with my assertions that he used the word as often, as regularly and in as many situations as I have just described.

3. "You Make a Mountain out of a Molehill."

I awoke one morning with a strange feeling near my asshole. It hurt and it somewhat itched, and I was afraid to investigate because those parts of my body, well, they were supposed to be pure and clean. This feeling was anything but pure and clean. This feeling was as if my body had let out a dirty little secret. Was it related to all my nocturnally non-hygienic masturbatory indulgences? I wondered, worried to death.

In the shower I held the washcloth, sopping with suds, right between the crack of my ass. I held it there tight, hoping that the sensation would go away. It didn't; in fact, it seemed to become worse, more inflamed somehow, irritated perhaps by the soap. Finally, I gathered up the nerve to reach my index finger around my right butt cheek and into the nether reaches of my body. I felt something. There was some kind of growth, about the size of a marble, sticking out of the inside of my ass cheek right next to my rectum.

Oh, man, I gotta tell Mom and Dad about this, I thought, terrified by the prospect. I was not afraid of them and their response; I was mortified as to what this painful growth in my butt could be. They'd take me to the doctor and he'd have to look at my asshole and then he'd send me to the hospital, I was sure, for removal of a cancerous tumor and, who knew, there might be more inside me. It hurt bad enough. This was it; I was going to die of cancer in my ass at the ripe old age of 13. I was convinced of it.

At breakfast, I sat down gingerly on one of the bar stools and grimaced. My dad had built a nice long bar where most of us liked to eat all meals except for our nightly

family suppers. It didn't take Mom long to notice that something was troubling Mark. And Dad soon took notice too.

"What's wrong?" they both wanted to know.

I couldn't say, "Nothing." They wouldn't believe me and Dad would start to get irritated. Besides, I was scared to death and needed to get help. I didn't *want* to, but I *had* to, so that I might still somehow survive this infected dirty ass malady. I didn't want to admit to it but I had to let them know so that the humiliating scenario I had already figured out in my mind could commence. I hemmed and hawed for what seemed like half an hour before I could get out these embarrassing words: "Well, um, in the shower this morning, I felt something down there, you know, in my butt."

"Does it hurt?" my mother asked.

"Yes, pretty bad. It hurts to sit down even."

"Does it itch?"

Well, yeah, kind of, but the pain is worse."

Mom had to have given Dad a knowing look, but I missed it entirely.

"Paul, why don't you take him into the bathroom and see what it is," she suggested.

"I already know what it is," Dad said. "It's piles!"

I was horrified. What was "piles"?

My dad was familiar with it. Was it some kind of venereal disease that he knew about from his Navy days? I hadn't done anything except masturbate but maybe the stuff that came out, maybe if that got in your butt, maybe that could cause a disease. And the more I thought about it, the more that piles sounded like a perfectly apt description of the

thing that was growing out of my ass. It was like a pile, not a pile of shit, but a pile of something shitty, a disgusting growth that would just keep piling on, getting bigger and bigger, necessitating surgery or some other sort of horrible treatment requiring me to shit in a bag or something until my asshole healed. I'd heard about those things. Oh, God, no. Piles. What a frightening word to face at 8:30 in the morning!

Dutifully, my dad grabbed a flashlight, then led me into the bathroom where he told me to assume a position so he could "see what all the fuss is about." He seemed disturbingly calm for such a heinous development. Was I perhaps overreacting? I wondered. That one time when I cut my wrist on a glass I dropped and the blood kept pouring and pouring and my dad kept applying pressure and more pressure to stop the bleeding, he had seemed a bit alarmed, worried, prepared to call the ambulance, or so he had said. But the bleeding stopped and he calmed down. But now, as I was facing this horrific thing called "piles," no less, good ole Dad was calm as a cucumber.

After taking a thorough look with his flashlight, he flipped it off and said, "Yep, just what I thought."

So it was piles, I thought with a mixture of alarm and resignation. But Dad doesn't seem to be concerned so maybe it's not such a bad thing. Or maybe this is one of those things that lead to "the sex talk." We'd never had the sex talk, but I'd heard about them from my friends and from TV shows. Maybe this was some kind of proof of my masturbatory activity and maybe it would let him know that I had been doing it and that I was ready for the talk.

But what about the piles!? That was most pressing to me at the time and Dad just walked out of the bathroom as if he had seen nothing more unnatural than the toilet flush.

Pulling up my shorts and pants, gingerly, I prepared to leave the bathroom myself and face whatever Mom and Dad had to tell me about what I was going to have to go through to battle this malady. I might have to endure the sex talk. Mom might not even be involved. I didn't know. The unknown is scary, but at least a part of the great unknown condition into which I had been thrust that morning was getting resolved. I had piles. Okay, now what?

I gathered up my courage and walked out to the kitchen, squeezing my butt cheeks together. This is horrible, I thought. I'm just supposed to shit out of my ass, not have stuff growing out of it. What embarrassing procedures lay in wait for me? For, surely, something would have to be done about this painful little protrusion into my life, into my butt crack.

"Here, eat your breakfast," Mom commanded when I entered the kitchen. It was a bowl of oatmeal. "It will do you good. I've had the same problem all my life, Mark. It's called hemorrhoids and they're painful but you can treat them. And you gotta stop sitting on the toilet so long when you take a crap; that's what Dr. Benson told me. Now eat up, then I'll give you some medicine that usually helps."

Bewildered, I realized I now faced something those TV commercials talked about but never explained. "Shrink swelling of hemorrhoidal tissues," they said. Is this what that was all about? No wonder they didn't say anything more specific than that. What an embarrassing thing, these hemorrhoids!

As I ate my breakfast I began to feel better. I apparently was not going to the doctor, or to the hospital, nor was I going to have surgery. And I didn't have cancer! And my parents didn't know about my masturbation. (Right, uh huh.) And I wouldn't

have to deal with the discomfort of the sex talk. I'd just have to deal with the discomfort of this condition, and the embarrassment of treating it with this medicine Mom had mentioned. I'd have to deal with the humiliation of being afflicted with what was, after all, a scatological joke of a condition called hemorrhoids. Boy, would my friends laugh at me. But the worst was over. The condition had been surmised, examined, diagnosed and would soon be treated. I had thought hemorrhoids were something only old people dealt with; now I knew different.

"I was really scared," I admitted as I ate my mother's oatmeal. "I thought it was a tumor or something. I've never had anything like this before."

"Oh, well, dear, dear," my dad said, rolling his eyes in disdain as he held his coffee cup. "You've got piles! A little thumb sticking out of your rectum. Welcome to the club. You always make a mountain out of a molehill!"

And he was right. I always did make mountains out of molehills and I still do. The slightest pain and it's a tumor, it's cancer, it's a heart attack, I think, just like the worrier I am.

But our respective perspectives, my dad's and mine, had been so dichotomous up to that point. I hadn't had to deal with such things as fierce Pacific combat or taking care of a wicked but dying mother or bailing out an alcoholic petty thief of a younger brother. I hadn't lost an older brother to heart disease, or endured open heart surgery myself or provided for a large brood even after losing my job and going on government disability.

In light of all this, Mark's piles, however unnerving the word and however frightening the development seemed to the boy, surely must have seemed like miniature molehills to Paul Harry that morning.

4. “Snap that Garter.”

That my mother once owned a collection of lingerie to accompany the bland, shapeless nightgowns we kids always saw her in is almost a certainty.

As an adult visiting my mother’s house, whenever I notice the great big thick JC Penney catalogue (a regular resident of the household, for my mom believes in that company almost as fiercely as she believes in God), I immediately find the pages with the lovely little models presenting themselves in those most delicate of intimate clothes, the thigh-high stockings attached to a garter belt around the waist by sexy, lacy little straps, matching bikini panties and lacy bra, in pleasing and erotic colors like black or red or lavender. These are, indeed, the kinds of clothes women put on merely for the pleasure of taking off.

“You’re just like your dad,” Mom says to me as I admire the scantily clad lovelies. “He liked stockings and garter belts, too.” And then she goes, “tsk-tsk,” as if it is beneath her, but not without a certain gleam in her eye.

Well, if Dad liked such intimates, then probably he enjoyed their carnal charms at some point. And since Mom was the second and final woman he ever had sex with (his first was a Chinese whore, appreciatively taking my father’s virginity in exchange for his part in helping to liberate her country, and for a few dollars, surely), she probably wore the stuff. And even though my mother, in her matronly modesty, would never admit to it, I cannot believe that she never wore such things to please my father. At least once.

Once, looking at those JC Penney pages, I recalled something my father said very often. I always understood his meaning; I just never understood the *words*.

“Snap that garter,” Dad would say to me or to Jan or Craig or David, whenever he wanted us to turn on or turn off a light. The sound of the switch’s contact being closed or opened apparently sounded to him like a garter being snapped on a woman’s thigh. But, of course, to the child named Mark, such an image was impossible to conjure. I only knew that “Snap that garter” meant to turn on or turn off the nearest light switch. When I was a bit older and I heard other adolescents or young adults talk about garters, I’d invariably think of light switches. Such was the manner in which Dad could turn language into his own and leave imprinted forever upon his progeny bizarre associations between such disparate objects as garter belts and light switches. Remember, in those days, light switches, when turned on or off, always did so with a snap; the silent switches had not yet been invented. So, it was easy and clear enough for my dad to say to any one of us kids, or even to his wife, “Snap that garter,” without any connotation of sex whatsoever. And I was a dumb kid; I never noticed the slight blush on my mother’s face whenever he issued such a command. She knew what it meant in both senses of the phrase. As a kid, and even well into adulthood, before discovering my own fascination with the sensuality of women’s lingerie, the Victoria’s Secret kind of stuff, I continued to believe that a garter was a mere light switch.

“Snap that garter, Heidi,” I once said to an early girlfriend, who immediately took on a look of shock and asked, “What!?” It took an adult girlfriend to finally explain to me that a garter was not a light switch, but something else entirely and, she added for good measure, she was willing to demonstrate for me.

Well, enough about one of my earliest erotic adventures, but in my youth, to "snap" a "garter" was a clear instruction from my apparently sex-obsessed father to turn on or turn off a light.

It was much like his oft-repeated question, "You work for Consumer's?" Since I had no idea what "Consumer's" was, I simply considered the context in which this critical query was offered. It meant, so far as I could tell, that I was wasting energy, either by leaving the refrigerator door open too long, or not shutting the back door quickly enough upon entering from a cold winter's day, or by opening a window or door during intense summer heat when my father had the air conditioner running. Essentially, "You work for Consumer's?" was a command, telling me to close a door or a window, get the hell out of the refrigerator or turn off the hot water faucet. Consumer's was the power company in those days. Consumer's Power. And Dad hated paying those bills. But did he ever take the time to explain to me what Consumer's Power was? Hell no! He would simply say, "You work for Consumer's?" and I knew that I was, in some way, costing him money and that whatever I was doing at that moment I'd better stop doing. Effective, if not altogether enlightening, parenting.

I no more knew the connection between "Consumer's" and being mindful of wasted energy than I knew the true connection between turning on a light switch and the sexuality of snapping a lacy garter encircling a woman's upper thigh.

5. “Glad to See ‘em Come; Twice as Glad to See ‘em Go.”

I don’t suppose it would be entirely inaccurate to say that my dad was slightly hermitic. Slightly, say I, because, well, a man with a wife and six kids cannot truly be labeled a hermit, can he? With my father, it was a little bit of both. He loved being with his people, those people being his own immediate family members, and he didn’t really like being with anyone else. Oh, sure, he endured the family reunions, weddings, open houses, holiday parties and other special events at which there would be dozens of folks who were related to him in one way or another, but the operative word here is “endured.” It was not that my father was a curmudgeon; it was, rather, that he preferred to keep away from anyone he had not married or who had not sprung from his loins.

It is sad that my father can be remembered by some people as not very welcoming. The truth is that he was. The truth is that he did welcome people into his home. The truth is that he was fulsome and inviting, and he was so with a broad smile.

The truth is also that most of all that was just an act. He was gracious, but he was not entirely genuine in his graciousness.

This is an enigmatic aspect of my father that I cannot speak about with absolute certainty. He liked people yet he didn’t. He welcomed folks, sure, yet he also wanted them to leave. He looked forward to those family gatherings, sure, yet he dreaded the same events. Perhaps this is a trait that is common to us all.

What I remember with certainty is this. After participating in such soirees, Paul Harry would often make it quite clear that he was glad they were over. The man had in his repertoire a unique gesture that I can only imitate, one which I can never convincingly

demonstrate with the conviction with which my father performed it. As the final guests disappeared out the back door, he would invariably, after smilingly wishing the guests a goodbye, a farewell, a safe drive, whatever, walk from the door and, with his arms held down at his sides, swiftly flip both of his hands backward in a shooing manner. This indicated his gladness that whoever had just left was finally gone, and that he hoped they wouldn't come back, at least not soon.

"Glad to see 'em come, Harriet, but twice as glad to see 'em go," he would mutter to my mother.

As he became older and sicker, this attitude intensified. He had more palpable reasons, other than being a private family man, to desire that most others stayed away. Heart disease made him tire quickly, and not just when engaged in such activities as work or play. Just sitting and paying attention to someone could tire my father more and more as his illness progressed. The hustle and bustle of little children tearing around the house tired him out, even though he was only observing it. Lots of chatter wore him out, even if, as usual, he was doing all the listening. Just being in the midst of activity caused him a level of distress I hope I will never fully appreciate. I infer this was so only because of how relieved he appeared when company was finally gone. And, of course, from his oft-repeated line, "Glad to see 'em come; twice as glad to see 'em go."

When I was a little kid, whenever someone would drop a piece of silverware on the kitchen floor, a common enough occurrence when there were six kids sharing dishwashing duties after every meal, we children would gleefully shout, "Company's coming!" I know not the origin of this fable, or this old wives' tale, or whatever it was

that predicted the arrival of unexpected company when silver was dropped on the floor. I only know that it was very often proved true.

Even in those days, my father would sometimes roll his eyes and comment, "I hope not." And, as I said, this mystic silver prognosticator was true often enough that we kids believed it.

In the early 1970s, it wasn't as uncommon for people to just drop by other people's houses without an invitation or previously arranged plans as it is today. Sure, we had telephones, but we didn't use them regularly. If, say, a family trip had brought my Uncle Art and Aunt Shirley (my father's brother and his wife) and their rambunctious son Doug into our general area of town, it was a good bet that they'd drop by. Hell, our family did the same to others. It wasn't considered an imposition. Not in those days.

As soon as the car pulled into the driveway, one of the kids would holler, "See? Company *is* here!"

"Which one of you kids dropped the silverware this time?" my dad muttered, well before the visiting family had made it into the house. Usually, just the grownups would actually enter the house. We kids would run out to play with our cousin Doug.

I never knew what they talked about inside; those adults occupied a different world. Maybe it was serious matters. Maybe it was light-hearted banter. Maybe they played cards and laughed. Maybe my mother and Aunt Shirley compared notes on child-rearing, or on their latest knitting or crocheting project. Maybe my dad and his brother worked on a project in the basement. Maybe they shared a beer or two.

Outside, however, we kids would climb trees, have snowball fights, have dead apple fights, or try to drown each other in the pool, post-1969. For some reason, my

sister and Doug, who were the same age, never seemed to be able to play peacefully. Doug would pull Jan's hair, then Jan would kick him, then Doug would retaliate with a slug to the stomach, then my sister would throw him to the ground and stuff green apples into his mouth.

We had a lot of apple trees.

Doug giggled no matter what my sister dished out and that just pissed her off more.

"Hee hee hee," he'd chortle as she smeared his hair with a rotten pear.

We had a lot of pear trees, too.

"Doesn't hurt. Hee hee hee."

Nothing ever hurt Doug, or at least he never admitted it. Then he'd pinch her on one of her as-yet-to-bud breasts.

"Ow!" Jan yelled. "*That* hurt!" And she kicked him in the shins.

Doug just laughed some more, then started running. "Chase me! Bet you can't catch me!"

And Jan took off after him, determined to prove him wrong. Often enough she did and *when* she did she pulled his hair or tackled him as surely as any boy could do. Then they wrestled, with Doug laughing the whole while, even when Jan ended up on top of him holding him in a headlock and threatening to squeeze his brains out. Doug just kept on laughing.

"I'm gonna kill you," she warned. "I mean it."

"Jan!" Craig scolded.

"Jan's gonna kill Doug," I yelled excitedly. "Come on, David, let's watch!" And David and I ran off to watch the wrestling match unfold. Jan's face was beet red as she wrangled, her eyes determined and her arms and hands powerful as she did her best to "kill" her cousin. And all the while, Doug just went, "Hee hee hee, doesn't hurt," irritating Jan to no end. Finally, Doug's pride flared and he made the necessary physical efforts to prevent himself from getting beaten up too badly by a girl. And when he became determined, his strength was undeniable.

After reversing whatever hold Jan had had upon him, Doug proclaimed, "Who's gonna kill who?"

"Get off me, you poop-face!" Jan yelled as she struggled beneath him.

"I thought you were gonna kill me," Doug taunted. "You're just a girl. Girls can't kill anyone."

"Get off her, Doug," Craig ordered, as usual in his role as monitor of the younger kids' battles. Somehow, Craig was most adept at avoiding physical battles of his own.

Doug's mean language spurred David and me into action, and we naturally sprang to the defense of our blood sister.

"Doug is a poop-face!" David yelled.

"Yeah, let's tackle the poop-face!" I yelled.

And as the two of us knocked him off our sister, he began giggling again.

While we three wrestled, Jan kicked at Doug and hurled more juvenile insults at him until Craig told us boys to knock it off, making sure none of us got too dirty with our antics, or too hurt, or actually punched in the face.

However violent the battle, eventually the sun would drop below the tree line and the parents would emerge from the house.

"Time to go, Doug," was the predictable order from Aunt Shirley. "Come on."

Like all kids, even though we'd been in the throes of fierce combat, and we may have sworn our eternal hatred for one another, we'd still complain when parents told us it was time to quit "playing" and go home or go inside to clean up and get ready for bed.

Then the parents would talk some more on the back porch, striding slowly toward the driveway and the car. Looking over her shoulder, if Doug wasn't making haste, Aunt Shirley would yell, more sternly, "Hurry up, Doug, I mean it!" To which our mother or father would add their own voices. "Get up here, you kids! It's getting dark. Time to come inside now."

Then the adults would say whatever adult relatives say to each other as goodbyes and the Paul and Art Beardslee children would embark on a regular ritual. As the car carrying Aunt Shirley, Uncle Art and Doug made its way west into the sunset, we'd stand out by the road and wave until the car was out of sight. We'd watch Doug's arm, extended high above the roof of the car, wave and wave and wave and we'd laugh and wonder if he'd ever take his arm back in. As the car made its way over a hill the last thing we'd see was Doug's hand, still waving even after the car had disappeared.

Mother, of course, would stay out by the road, too, protective of her brood, and Dad would usually wait by the back door.

As we children finally filed into the house to prepare for bed, we'd just begin to realize how worn out we were from all the fighting. But Dad was apparently worn out,

too, from whatever he'd been doing, or so I'd think, and he'd gesture with his hands and declare, "Glad to see 'em come, Harriet; twice as glad to see 'em go."

6. “When You Get Down by the River, You Know What to Do.”

This chapter certainly seems to contradict the previous, but what man is *not* a walking contradiction?

Dad was a pretty friendly guy. He didn’t speak ill of others, as a rule, and he’d never tell anyone to his or her face that he didn’t want to see them, even when he didn’t.

Still, when older and sicker, he often used his heart disease as an excuse to avoid interaction with other humans. His particular malady was a convenient way out of almost anything.

My mother can attest to the number of times she had to make a call, saying she and Paul and/or parts of the rest of the family who lived at home couldn’t make it because “Paul’s not feeling very well.” She has said that it sometimes embarrassed her, especially when she was fairly certain that whoever she was calling didn’t believe her.

But what does one say to that? What does one say to a woman who says her husband can’t make it to some event, some gathering, some party, some holiday meal, because of his ill health? What does one say to an earnest woman who calls to apologize that her husband, who is still fairly young, doesn’t feel up to doing something because the blood runs too slowly through his body? Because this causes his feet to hurt, and his hands to hurt, and the top of his head to hurt, and he feels cold and tired and irritable? Because, on top of all his physiological discomfort, he worries, worries that the clogged arteries in his heart won’t hold out long enough for him to see all six of his children grow into adults? What does one say to a man who suffers like this, or to his wife, who calls on his behalf, even if he is just playing ‘possum?

The answer is simple. They say they understand. They say they hope Paul feels better next time. They say to call us later when he is feeling better. That's what they say.

As much as I know my father milked his illness for all it was worth to get out of obligations he'd rather not meet, I know too that my father was friendly. Maybe he was friendly just for his kids' sakes, to set an example about how to properly deal with others, how to behave in a civil manner. Maybe he was a pure grump who simply cared enough about his kids not to want to end up seeing any one of them become a grumpy old person like himself. But I doubt it, because I witnessed too many instances of genuine bonhomie in my father. I'll admit that maybe his apparent friendliness was all an act. If so, it was one of the most convincing acts of the 20th century.

But the more compelling reason I doubt it lies in one of my dad's lines.

Even when his head ached and his limbs trembled, even when he was so exhausted he just wanted to fall over, even when he thought he'd had enough of one family or one child or one person to fill the rest of his life, it was rare that my father didn't say to others, as they left his domicile, or as they left his presence at some other locale, or even as he left *their* domiciles, "When you get down by the river, you know what to do."

He would rarely explain, unless people were so dimwitted that they didn't understand. Those who had just been invited by this man to visit his home would invariably fill in what was left implied by that statement.

"We know," they'd say. "Drop in."

"That's right," my dad would say, and that would serve as his goodbye.

7. “Coulda Made it Five Times.”

Many fathers find themselves on the road one day, in a vehicle piloted by a son who is behind the wheel for the first time. The experience fills some fathers with trepidation. Other fathers are calm. It all depends on the son.

In my father’s case, with me, I believe he felt mortal terror.

My sister Jan had purchased one of those Chevettes, a frightening creation in itself, perhaps America’s first sub-compact “economy” car, a contrivance that was meant to provide its owners with fewer trips to the gas pump and thus save them money. It didn’t matter that the damned things were unsafe, made as they were with tinfoil skins, appointed with plastic accoutrements outside and in, featuring engines half the size of those new two-liter Coke bottles and equipped with dubious transmissions to match. It was, in retrospect, a very scary vehicle, but it was my sister’s and she was proud of it and she drove it to work and to school and to her friends.’ Actually, it was my father’s. Although I’ll never know the terms of payment on the thing from Jan to Dad, he always felt free to use it whenever it was available.

And he eventually used it to teach me how to drive.

At first, these lessons were held in the Baptist church parking lot down the road. It was the place he’d taken all three of my older brothers to learn how to drive, he said, so if it was good enough for them, it was good enough for me. (He never told me where he took Jan.) In the parking lot of the church, well before I was to take the state-funded driver’s training program through the local school, I learned to accelerate, brake, turn, signal, swerve and make a three-point turn, all at no more than 15 miles per hour. I also

practiced maneuvering in reverse, during which time I was subjected to the baffling statement, “Go ahead and back up.” My dad chuckled inwardly at this line, one of his many jokes at the expense of the English language, but I took him seriously.

“Go ahead or back up?” I asked in confusion.

“Go ahead and back up,” my dad repeated, refusing as ever to explain himself, with just the slightest smile on his lips as he saw the dawn of understanding break forth upon my furrowed, concentrating brow.

“Oh,” I said, “I get it.” But I wouldn’t laugh. I was too seriously involved in this grand new task to laugh at one of my father’s wry little jokes.

Jan’s Chevette had one of those cheap little automatic transmission consoles between the two front seats. One must understand that in those days, the controls of most other automatic transmissions, and even a fair number of manual transmissions, were located on the steering columns. Ah, the big GM cars of yesteryear! Pontiac Chieftains and Catalinas, Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight and Ninety-Eight Regencies, Chevrolet Impalas and Caprice Classics, Buick Electras, both Limited and 225. Perhaps out of loyalty to his employer, my dad never bought a Ford. He did buy one foreign car – a VW bug back in the 60s – but my dad was primarily a Buick man. When office workers at Pontiac Motors signed the requisite papers to garner him his General Motors’ discount whenever time came to buy a new car, they chastised him for not buying a Pontiac. “Hell, it all goes in the same pot!” was my dad’s succinct reply to that.

And some of those trucks Chevrolet made, particularly the Custom Deluxe (about which there was nothing custom or deluxe), often came equipped with “three on the side,” meaning a three-speed manual transmission with a gear shift on the steering

column, at the exact same place where the automatic transmission levers were situated in those grand old cars. Alas, Jan's Chevette was nothing of the sort and the automatic transmission gear shift being "on the floor" seemed strange to me. Also, those old cars only had lap safety belts; no shoulder harnesses. Seat belts were not much of a concern in those days. Dad never taught me to wear one.

One sunny early summer evening, after going through the church parking lot maneuvers, my father said, "Well, I think it's time for you to take it out on the road. What do you stink?" This little joke also passed me by without comment because I was suddenly faced with the prospect of driving *on the road*.

Remember that by this time my father was not working; he drew Social Security Disability Insurance for his serious heart condition. Stress was something the doctors warned him about. He was to avoid situations that might cause stress, behavior that might cause stress and persons who might cause stress. They had basically warned him to avoid *me*, for Mark driving his sister's Chevette on the road was a manifestation of all three stressors.

But, still, Paul Harry was my father, just as he was the father of the rest of his boys, and he was not about to abandon this rite of passage just because of what some doctors said.

"Sure," I gulped. "I guess."

"You guess or you know?" my father quite reasonably wanted to know.

"I know," I said. "I mean, I guess, if you want me to."

"Do *you* want to?" my father asked softly, seeming to ignore my rising nervousness.

“Well, sure, I guess,” I repeated out of frustration and fear.

“You can’t guess, Mark, you’ve got to know.” He paused. “Are you ready to drive this car down the road to our house? It’s only half a mile at most.”

I hesitated. I drove around the parking lot a few more times, turning the car in ways I knew and with which I had become familiar. “Yes,” I finally said, with conviction, because I knew my father would accept no less than conviction in order to let me do this. I was only fifteen, but I wanted to drive more than anything. That’s what obsessed all fifteen-year-old boys in 1979, and probably in every year since the motorcar had been created. So I spoke with conviction, all right, I spoke with conviction.

“All right,” my father began slowly and patiently. “Steer the car to the exit drive. The other drive is the *entrance* drive, so don’t go that way.”

The car moved at my will and it was with only a slight sense of fear that I took it out to the church exit and stopped. The road on which we lived was not a state highway, but it was traveled well enough to be a major county thoroughfare. I looked left, right, left, right. I hesitated. Dad said, “Go.”

I pulled out onto the road, turning left. The course home involved two lefts, one out of the church parking lot and the second into our home’s driveway. I had been told that left turns were the hardest, but of course I hadn’t been to Australia yet. The important matter was that I had coaxed Jan’s pitiful little Chevette out onto Grand Blanc Road, in left turn fashion, no less, and was puttering toward home. Wow! But then I sped. I hit fifty on a stretch of road where the limit was forty-five and I had hit fifty! I was a bit gleeful but also frightened.

“Slow down; there’s no fire,” my dad stated casually without looking at me, his eyes pinned to the road.

I backed off the accelerator too abruptly and the car chugged down to a relative crawl.

“Go!” my dad instructed. “Go! My god, have you checked your rearview mirror?”

I hadn’t, so of course I immediately did just that. I was instantly horrified to discover that I could see nothing but the front end grille of a truck of uncertain size in the mirror.

And I had been speeding, for god’s sake, I thought. What if I hadn’t been? A deep, throaty blast of a challenging horn came forth. I looked swiftly over at my dad and realized that he did not yet know what was behind us. But the look in my face must have given something away for he immediately turned around to look behind us. Although he kept quiet, I felt him jump. It was one of those big diesel, semi-trucks that rattled past our house so regularly on its way, probably, to the dump three miles down. And it was honking; it was honking its horn at us!

“Move on ahead, son,” my dad said softly. “Just ignore that truck but keep the car moving at at least 45. When…”

He was going to say something about what I should do when we got to our house but he either didn’t know or was frightened to try to tell me. He was in the passenger seat and there was nothing he could do. It was now up to *me* to maneuver the car and follow the rules of the road properly, at least for this stretch of roadway. He came to that conclusion, I am sure, but I kept wishing that he and I could change seats. Certainly,

there had never been any other traffic in the Baptist church parking lot. And, certainly, I could have imagined no traffic more bereft of patience than that of a trucker barreling down the road at 6:30 p.m. of an early summer evening, trying desperately to deposit his last load of the day and get home to his TV and beer, and maybe his wife and kids, before it became dark. And most certainly, at least in my mind, whoever was behind the wheel of the truck that was behind that grille was not interested in slowing down for a student driver, or any driver for that matter, of a little Chevette. But, alas, I had no choice but to continue and then try to make the left turn into my father's driveway before the car and my father and I became so much meat on the front side of the semi, which showed no sign of backing off.

It was at this point that I remember feeling something from my dad. Dad wasn't saying anything, at least not out loud; he was fervently hoping, hoping that I'd do as he instructed me and that I'd learned enough from him to handle this precarious situation. While he was hoping, he was also fidgeting like crazy, himself wishing that he could be behind the wheel instead of me. And I could hear him curse, deep within his chest, I could hear curse words other than "bullshit" being brought forth from the frightened man's throat.

"Now, get ready," Dad advised. "You'll have to signal in a moment."

We were approaching our driveway. To me, it was in the distance, looking like a trickle of a stream shooting straight off from a rapidly flowing river at a dismal pace and at precisely 90 degrees. I was riding a massive, uncaring river, and it reminded me of the time a few years earlier when the family had gone to Niagara, and my dad and David and I saw firsthand how mighty the Niagara River really was, how it plummeted forward

heedlessly, how it wrecked anything in its way, how it created a whirlpool at a bend in the river and how all the flotsam and jetsam of its long journey swirled together like broken toothpicks far beneath the cable car that ran above the whirlpool. That was what driving on this road was like. To simply stop and pull off into a driveway did not seem like something that could happen. Not then. Not with the semi bearing down on our little Chevette, blaring its horn, just at the time when I needed, for the first time in my very short driving life, to execute a perfect left-hand turn into the driveway at 2061 Grand Blanc Road.

"Slow down, now, Mark…brake!" my father coached from his sideline. I did so and at the same time, figuring it was what one needed to do, I activated the left-turn signal, which I guess was a mistake.

"What are you signaling now for?" my father screamed. "He's gonna think you're turning into Lewis's."

There is some truth to my dad's admonishment of that moment. Signal too soon, especially when turning left, and the impatient driver behind you will be angered when it appears you are not making a turn. And angry drivers are not safe drivers. They may honk, try to pass, make swerving motions with their vehicles, any number of actions that can fatally distract another driver. Also, it was a bad idea to signal too late, as I had already been taught by my dad, for that could be an invitation to get "rear-ended." I chose to ignore my father's complaint and left the left-turn signal on.

Thankfully, we were headed away from the sun. This fact was good in that it allowed me to see clearly that there were cars approaching from the east and that I would

have to come to a complete stop on the road to allow those cars to pass before attempting the turn. But, coming to a dead stop with that semi on our tail was not good at all.

"Please don't let him try to pass us, please don't let him try to pass us" were the words my father spoke perhaps unconsciously as he rotated his head like a turret, avoiding eye contact with me as he attempted to see everything that was happening, ready to offer a quick instruction if necessary.

What did happen was a slow braking on my part, a braking of my sister's car which brought it to a stop five or so yards beyond our driveway. The brakes on the little car were spongy, and I had to press unexpectedly hard on the pedal to get them to make the car slow appreciably. Of course, I never before had had to bring the vehicle to a stop from any speed exceeding 15 miles per hour. Just then, I had been travelling at 45 miles per hour. The big truck on our ass made no attempt to swerve, or to attempt any more dangerous move than to mimic my stop, much to our collective relief.

My father yelled, "Stop! Would you stop, already! Where are you going to turn, into the yard?"

But I ignored his berating tone, attuned as I was to the necessity of the maneuver at hand. I'm sure my father himself ignored his own words. His attention was not on precisely where I stopped the car, but on the proximity of the huge grille directly behind us. His attention was focused on whether the truck could stop at least as well as I had made the Chevette stop.

Though I *had* made the Chevette stop, only a "barnyard swing" would allow me to direct the little car into the entrance of our driveway and not onto my father's spectacularly manicured lawn. As several cars sped past us on their ways west, I

impatiently awaited a wide enough gap in the oncoming traffic to make the awkward turn.

That's when Paul Harry spoke his line.

"Coulda made it five times," he muttered softly into my ear as I stared down the approaching traffic.

I had no fucking clue what he was talking about.

"Coulda made it five times," he said again, calmly enough that I sensed we were out of danger. I heard the hiss of the air brakes on the truck behind us; the sound indicated that the driver had frustratingly brought his big rig to a halt right in the middle of Grand Blanc Road, that it was stopped, no more immediate danger to us. Hell, the driver was probably more concerned at that point about being rear-ended himself. It was a busy time of day, and there was nowhere for him to go on that two-lane thoroughfare until Mark got his sister's little Chevette out of the fucking way!

Which was exactly what I wanted to do, but the oncoming cars kept coming, and I had been taught not to make a turn in front of an oncoming car unless it was sufficiently far away that the entire left-hand turn could be executed without posing any danger to your own car or to the approaching car or the people inside them. What I had no idea of at that particular moment in time, not yet having driven on the roads, only having been told certain things, was how much distance this actually required. I imagined that it was at least a hundred yards. That about two hundred yards ahead of me was the rise of a hill over which cars kept streaming added to my reluctance to make the left-hand turn just yet. Further, there was the very important matter of not turning onto my father's lawn, but of making a sufficiently wide "barnyard swing," nearly a U-turn, directly into my

father's blessed driveway. And, finally, the words, "Coulda made it five times, coulda made it five times," kept repeating inside my head as I sat indecisively in the middle of the road in my sister's car in front of the house of my birth, holding up a truck of great commercial import, and who even knew how many other vehicles behind it? And what if the driver of one of those vehicles became so frustrated that he tried to pass the whole mess on the left? I knew I had to get off the road, and soon.

After what seemed an eternal moment of time, no car came screaming over the top of the hill ahead of me, so I accelerated and yanked the wheel sharply to the left, all the way to the left so that the car curled back and I was able to enter the driveway at a right angle to the road. Somehow, somehow, it worked. My maneuver had landed us safely in the driveway, wherein my mother and my brother David and Jan herself all stood with mouths agape.

With a pop and hiss of air, the big semi disengaged its air brakes, rumbled back to life, and began to roar away. I sighed, pushed the transmission lever into "Park," and then scrambled out of the driver's seat, just as my father did the same on the other side of the car. He came around to my side and started screaming, yelling how stupid I had been, swiftly recounting how many mistakes I had made, berating my general lack of driving ability and swearing that I would only earn a driver's license over his dead body.

I hardly heard his words, so relieved I was at the peaceful outcome of the ridiculous predicament I had created. I watched my father rush away toward the back door, flapping his hands backward toward me in that disdainful fashion which said he wanted nothing more to do with me, at least for the time being.

But what was it he had said to me? He had repeated it over and over. Something about five times. That was all I could remember.

My sister sneered at me, gave me a loud “Tsk tsk tsk,” and turned away.

My brother David laughed, choked, farted and said, “Did you *see* that?” in delighted and incredulous tones, as if I hadn’t been there at all.

Five times what? I wondered as I moved to go inside the house myself.

Years later I was driving a car with my brother David riding shotgun, a rare occurrence since whenever we were riding in a vehicle together it was usually he behind the wheel. But, whatever the reason and whatever the time of year and all that, that’s how my brother and I were situated at that moment. The car was pointing north on South Saginaw Street in Grand Blanc and I was waiting for oncoming traffic to clear so that I could make the turn onto Grand Blanc Road and get us promptly home. As I waited for an opening, my brother muttered to me, in a barely audible voice, “Coulda made it five times.”

My head reeled as my memory went into overdrive and I recalled the incident from so many years earlier. “*What* did you say?” I asked in all earnestness.

With complete nonchalance and just a touch of irritation, David said again, “‘Coulda made it five times,’ I said, like just now. Well, not *now*. Would you turn already? Damn!”

After making the turn, I asked him again what he had said.

David told me a little bit impatiently that there was so much space between me and the nearest approaching car that I could have made the turn five times.

“Don’t you remember Dad saying that? ‘Coulda made it five times?’”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I do. I just hadn’t thought about it in a while.” And then the realization of years fell upon me, and I was filled with an odd sense of joy. “God, I remember him saying that, David. ‘Coulda made it five times.’ And I never knew what it meant. He said that to you, too?”

“Of course,” David answered, with a smile of his own. “All the time.” And we laughed about it all the way home.

These days, the expression has become something of a joke between David and me. The understatement of those five words, and the understated manner in which my father said them, has become a point of great glee for us and we guffaw heartily whenever one has the chance to say it to the other. Although I had not known what my father had said or meant that first time I heard him say it, in following years, my brother, who was much closer to my father than was I, must have heard him say it a thousand times. According to what he told me, my father rarely, if ever, used the phrase in as frantic a situation as he had been in that day with me in the Chevette. Apparently, it was something my father liked to say, in his calm, understated manner, to whomever was driving and only when appropriate, of course.

It was his friendly little reminder not to waste time.

8. "They Had to Burn the Schoolhouse Down Just to Get Me Out of the 3rd Grade."

Graduating from high school doesn't seem like such a big deal these days, I suppose. Nearly everyone does, and a lot of those who do can't read. Possession of a high school diploma is but the barest qualification for anyone in the job market of this 21st century. But in my father's day, a high school diploma *was* a big deal. Hell, it was even a big deal in his *children's* days.

Let's start in 1940. We'll touch on 1970 later.

My father never spoke to me about his mother, but I have gleaned that she was not a particularly nice person, not to her kids, not to her husband, not to extended family. How *mean* she may have been I'll never know for sure, for no relative ever spoke ill of the dead and now there's no one alive who really knew her. (Of course, my mom had met her, but she didn't *know* her.) I do know that when help was needed around the house, she kept Paul Harry home from school to do it. The eldest brother Don was injured in his youth and spent much of it in a body cast. He fell on a spike that punctured his leg and struck his femur, infecting his bones. He would limp for the rest of his life. Dad's next eldest brother, Clyde, better known by a shortened version of his middle name of Arthur, thus making him the aforementioned Uncle Art to me, was apparently so stubborn, or "bull-headed" as my dad termed it, that he refused to help his mother. Dad ended up being his mother's assistant in all the household chores because he was, by many accounts, the "easygoing" one.

Judge and jury I am not, but when I compare the hardships endured by my mother's family, and how they were deprived as members of that Great Depression era

generation, and yet how my mother's mother was perfectly capable of handling the household chores at least long enough to allow her kids to go to school, I can't help but wonder what was up in the Beardslee family. They apparently moved around a lot and my father's father was a butcher, but my father's mother was the boss, or so I have been told. No matter her disposition, my father's father, Harry, worshipped the ground she walked on and lived in constant fear of her leaving him, which she often did. I don't know if she wielded violent authority in the house, if she was abusive of her husband and/or her children or if she was just plain lazy. I've heard she was a religious firebrand. For whatever reason, or set of reasons, there was always so much work to do around her string of houses that it fell to my father, as a boy, to do it. Uncle Don, by virtue of being hospitalized so much, was trained in an Ann Arbor hospital to become a radiologist, no diploma required, thank you. Uncle Art set off to join the Marines just as soon as he could.

Later, Clyde would die of alcoholism and would become the first dead person I remember seeing. Uncle Art had a heart attack at age 47, underwent surgery a year before my father did, but continued to drink in excess, and one day, apparently during another heart attack, he fell down the stairs of his home. He lingered in the hospital for days before dying, officially, of heart failure, but the word around the family is that he might have survived had he quit drinking and that maybe he hadn't had a heart attack at all. He'd just been drunk. His wife, Aunt Shirley, believed that he died when he hit the basement floor, and she was probably right, for he never regained consciousness and was kept on life support for three days before the doctors pulled the plug. I was only eight years old when this happened. I liked Uncle Art. He always sat me on his lap and took

out his pocket knife and cut off my ear and showed it to me. It never hurt; actually, Uncle Art's touch tickled, and I was just young enough to believe him when he would show me a piece of flesh clasped between his two fingers that that was indeed my ear. But then he always restored it to its proper place, without any loss of blood or hearing. Amazing!

In those days, my mother had an eerie way of pronouncing "heart attack." For whatever reason, the phrase came out of her mouth sounding like "heart attacked." So, after this calamity, what I heard was, "Your Uncle Art is in the hospital. He had another heart attacked." I was puzzled and frightened by the prospect of having one's heart "attacked." Attacked by *what*? And how could he have *another* heart attacked? I thought we only had one heart. At least that's what they teach me in school. Are they wrong?

Paul's only sister, Verejean, was, by all accounts, a carbon copy of her mother and was apparently spoiled rotten; it was never expected of her to do a thing. My father's only younger brother, Joel, would be in and out of trouble with the law from a very young age, he would live for a time with my father, he was a hopeless alcoholic at a terribly tender age and he ended up dying in prison, his body cremated and his ashes buried in a potter's field. Even the eldest brother, Uncle Don, was an alcoholic. Not a pretty picture of a family to be born into, but somehow my father rose above it. Apparently, my father's father, Harry, too, was addicted to alcohol, and that may have been why his family never seemed to have much of anything, including stability. Alcoholic or no, Harry was not a mean drunk, but a happy one, and he adored his wife, so

much so that he did not contravene when she exercised her "rule of the roost," as people of that generation expressed it.

Furthermore, the mean old woman, named Elizabeth, known as Lizzie, was incessantly leaving her husband. Before my father was even born, this Beardslee family lived, from time to time, in a home next door to my mother's parents in the city of Flint. The Beardslee family of those days moved a lot, usually between Mount Pleasant and Flint, sometimes in other places, but the establishment of a permanent homestead eluded them. It was during one of those times when the first generation Beardslee family was living next door to the first generation O'Dell family that the story is told that my mother's mother, the dear Philena (a woman I would never know; a locomotive crushed her to death in 1959) used to take care of my Uncle Don when he was an infant because Lizzie would leave Harry and ask Philena to temporarily care for her baby. Lizzie never left for good; she always came back; she just liked to keep Harry on his toes, apparently, or maybe she was just punishing him for his drinking. My mother told me that her mother used to ask Lizzie, "Why do you put the poor man through this? You know you're going to come back to him." But the good sense of Philena O'Dell never got through to Lizzie Beardslee.

Apparently, the only one in the Beardslee family of the generation preceding mine who was not a drunk or a criminal or a bitch was my father. For that I am grateful, but as it has been said, Dad never spoke much about his family, so I'll never know the details and I'll never know precisely how my father was able to avoid the misery of his siblings.

But I can guess.

Dad used to talk affectionately about his own father, the one who taught him how to roll his own cigarettes with one hand; the one who would, at his wife's command, take his male offspring out to the shed for whippings, not touch them and then tell them to start crying so their mother wouldn't know they hadn't had their asses tanned; the one who would gladly give his consent for Paul to sign up for the Navy on his 17th birthday; the one who would follow his wife to the grave only two weeks after her untimely death in 1949, dead, or so the story goes, of a broken heart.

But of Dad's mother I never heard a word, at least not from his mouth. Maybe she's the one who taught him the value of hard work, but I'd be willing to bet that if I could go back in time, I'd learn that it was my grandfather and the Navy who taught my father the value of hard work. My grandmother was probably the one who taught my father the value of an education, by depriving him of one. Stories afloat that Lizzie's excuse for needing my dad home all the time was that she was sickly. Of course, no one is around who can speak to the veracity of this supposition.

It saddened me as I grew up to learn how embarrassed my father was of his semi-literacy. Oh, he could read, but nothing more complex than a newspaper. (When his own illness struck, just a few months after his brother Art died, Paul said that he felt that he, too, would be dead within the year. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on one's perspective, Paul had fourteen years left on planet Earth.) Nonetheless, when heart disease disabled my father and he was forced to jump through bureaucratic hoops just to keep his family alive, he grumbled regularly about the indecipherable paperwork, the puzzling government forms, the impenetrable self-contradictory madness of bureaucracy-speak. He was fortunate to have a wife who did have a high school diploma, but even she

had difficulty with the innumerable statements and determinations and eligibility requirements and form letters they received during his Social Security Disability years, those last fourteen years of his life. And, yes, my father could write, but his penmanship was awful, his grammar even worse, so we rarely saw his handwriting because he was painfully self-conscious about it. The man who raised six kids over thirty-four years, all the while making sure we never went without life's basic necessities, all the while doing what he could to bring some joy and surprises into our lives, all the while teaching us what he could about work and play and family values, all the while remaining sober and faithful, this accomplished man was embarrassed of his own writing and tried to hide it from his better educated kids.

When one examines the matter, it really is depressing. In avoiding the dismal paths followed by his siblings, Paul Harry was a spectacular success. He didn't drink, gamble, splurge, cheat or neglect a family of eight. He knew that there was no substitute for hard work, and I'm sure that he resented his "disability" entitlements. He accepted them because his family needed them, but he didn't like it, not one bit. Despite (or perhaps because of) a possible predisposition to alcoholism, and being raised in a highly unstable home environment, one in which the parents were far from exemplary, Dad struggled all his adult life to create a genuinely stable home environment for his wife and their kids. And he apparently did not inherit the alcoholic gene, if there even is such a thing. This is how he avoided the misery of his siblings, I believe: through determination and "willpower," another of my father's favored terms. Yet, despite such admirable success on the family front, this proud man was ashamed of his writing, or, rather, his lack of writing, skills. The most words of his I remember ever reading were notes that

read simply, "Gone be back," and the ubiquitous "Foo on you" on scorecards for various games at which he had beaten me.

But Dad wasn't without a sense of humor about it all. The community of Grand Blanc was where I was raised. A once-tiny settlement on the shores of the Thread River ten miles south of the Vehicle City, as Flint was known (because of its horse carriage industry) even before internal combustion engines began propelling cars, Grand Blanc grew into a prosperous, well-to-do suburb of Flint. Well, for the most part. Families like ours, who didn't live in the new subdivisions that sprang up all over through the 60s, 70s and 80s were considered, with various levels of scorn by much of the population of Grand Blanc, to be farmers. We had five acres of land and never was there a shortage of upkeep to be done in or around the house, but we were not farmers. My dad worked at "the shop." But few in the community of Grand Blanc understood this. Their fathers *managed* the shops, so the Beardslee children never quite fit in.

Even in the days of my mother's youth, Grand Blanc was considered an enclave of wealth. She should know because she attended Grand Blanc Community Schools, too, and graduated from its high school in 1946. Even then, Harriet tells us, the school district was considered to be wealthy, to have high academic standards, to produce lots of students who would go on to college, to be among the finest school districts in the state. And what did my father have to say about that?

Well, whenever any of we kids did something blatantly stupid, like fumble in our attempts to say something properly, add a set of numbers wrong, make some common sense mistake or just walk absentmindedly into a door, my father would say, "Where did you go to school, Grand Blanc?"

When I was young I never quite understood what this meant. Of *course* I went to Grand Blanc, I would think. I go to Grand Blanc *now*. Doesn't Dad know where I go to *school*?

Only later, when I learned about just how subtle sarcasm could be, did I realize that when my dad asked any of us that question he was not insulting us, but rather the school system that deemed itself so superior.

At the same time, he did not begrudge us that education. Part of the reason we lived where we did was so that we could graduate from high school, and not just any high school, but from one which was reckoned to *be* superior. For my father, that's about as far as schooling went.

One of the many things my father worried terribly about was whether he would see his youngest son, David, graduate from high school. He didn't worry about this because he doubted David's ability to finish high school; he worried about it because he doubted his own ability to live long enough to see it happen. When my father was diagnosed with heart disease and had his unsuccessful open heart surgery to try to correct it, David was but a kindergartner. Dad wanted to see all his kids graduate, but the doctors didn't give him that long. He would need 13 years of life to see his youngest son walk across that stage and receive the diploma that my father never did. Against all odds, he got those years, plus one. At the same time as the family held a celebration for David's graduation from high school, which, it is interesting to note, David did not want, being much like his father in wishing to keep things low-key, my family celebrated my graduation from college, the first of our Beardslees to achieve a Bachelor of Arts degree. I certainly was not the only one of the family to attend college, nor the only one to

receive a degree; I was simply the first of my generation of Beardslees to earn a university degree. (Craig would earn one a bit later; meantime, he was busy working and raising a family of his own.) The combination of being present for that and, more important, being present to see his youngest son earn his high school diploma, must have made for a very special day for my father, a wise man and a smart man, certainly, but a formally uneducated man, one who never had the privilege or the opportunity to know what it was like to do so himself. Dad made it. He lived long enough to see his youngest son graduate from high school. But just barely. Less than a year later he would be dead.

It was said around this Beardslee household that my parents' responsibility for us kids extended only to the age of eighteen and to the attainment of the successful completion of high school. If we wanted to go to college, we'd have to work to pay for it or do well enough in school to earn a scholarship. My father wasn't of the mindset that he had to set aside thousands for his children to attend college. Besides, there were too damned many of us!

Still, there is no doubt in my mind that Dad was extremely, exceedingly, proud, when his eldest, his first, his number one son, was admitted to college, a place that in those days was called Ferris State College. It's now a university and my eldest brother, Dennis, lasted no more than a year there, but hell, not only had Dennis captured what my father had always wanted for his kids, a high school diploma, he had also gone on and studied for a couple of semesters at a college. A college! This was certainly a new thing to my father, probably something entirely beyond his imagination or his hopes.

But it was known that if we had any hope of moving on to such higher education, or of getting a job that paid more than $6.43 per hour (the hourly wage printed on my

father's final paycheck stub, which was received in 1974), first we had to graduate from high school. So, despite all the other demands our father made of us, that we be nice to each other, that we play fair, that we be respectful of our elders, that we be obedient of our parents, that we contribute our fair share to the workload around the house, during our kindergarten through 12th grade years, education was the most heavily emphasized value at our home.

"What did you learn today at school, Mark?" Dad often asked. I hated it when he asked this because it was such a difficult question to answer. We rarely learned a new thing in one *day*. Learning new stuff was a *process*. And, to be honest, when I got out of school, I often wanted to forget it, to just be at home and play with my brother, or go swimming, or putter around the garage with my dad, or go for a drive somewhere. I didn't want to think about *school*.

"Well, I don't know, Dad," would be my invariable answer, said with an uncomfortable shrug.

"Well, you must have learned *some*thing," was Dad's invariable reply. "What kind of school are you going to if you don't even *know* what you're learning?"

The question was rhetorical, of course, but again, I didn't know *that* until I was older and had learned a lot more about how subtle sarcasm can be, particularly my father's brand of sarcasm. He may not have graduated from high school, but he sure was a sophisticated verbal communicator!

Nonetheless, whenever the matter of education would get turned around and focused on my father, and he was asked about his education, he would brush it off with the line, "They had to burn the schoolhouse down to get me out of the 3rd grade."

Of course, I had no idea what *this* meant, either. My dad spoke in riddles, it seemed.

His school burned down? I wondered. And they did it *on purpose*? Just to get my dad out of the third grade? Why didn't they just send him home? What an odd world my father lived in!

Actually, my father achieved an 8th grade education, but my mother is quick to point out that he was very often not in school, and that he did not benefit from school as many of his peers did. His family moved around too much. His curriculum was highly fragmented at best. He retained little from year to year, and if his mother decided he was to stay home and attend to matters there, then the likelihood of his completing that year of school dwindled considerably. As a teenager, he ended up taking odd jobs wherever he could get them. He traveled down to Ann Arbor to stay with his eldest brother and worked as an elevator operator at the hospital. That was his first job. It was during this job that he got his first glimpse of a woman's breasts, too, or so he told me. Also, it was there that he jumped up on a gurney and lay still beneath the sheet until it arrived in the morgue. That's when he rose up to a sitting position, sheet still over his head, scaring the hell out of several nurses.

He spent a lot of time living with his grandparents, who maintained a farm outside Flint. It was during these trips to Flint, and because of his parents' long familiarity with my mother's parents, that he first met my mother, before he shipped off to fight the Japanese Empire in the Pacific. He returned, luckily alive and relatively unscarred, and went to work at "the shop" so that *his* kids wouldn't have to have *their* schoolhouses burned down to get them out of the 3rd grade.

The line is just one of my father's roundabout ways of saying that he had a piss-poor formal education, that he didn't feel he had learned enough to pass even the third grade, let alone the eighth, and that he'd rather not discuss the details.

I was so stupid that I had to become an adult before I fully appreciated how terribly heartbreaking that line really was.

9. "Don't Complain about some other Guy's Back Door until your own Back Door is Clean."

Paul Beardslee loathed pretension (therefore, he would hate this sentence), he loathed sloth, he loathed arrogance, but he may not have loathed these as much as he loathed "sticking your nose where it doesn't belong." Stay out of other people's business. If it doesn't concern you, walk away. Or at least keep your mouth shut.

That's where this line comes from and, typically, it took me years before I understood it. The line conjured, for me anyway, images of Windex and dirty glass, a back porch that needed to be swept, an entranceway with cobwebs on the ceiling, crumbling stones on the walkway to the backdoor, some guy scrubbing away at his back door, the door hinges, the door jamb, the steps leading to that door and the awning hung above that door, a person working furiously to make everything about the back entrance to his house spotless, clean and perfect.

And by the time it finally occurred to me that this would be an impossible task (because rain or snow or dirty hands or just dirt in the air would prevent *any*one's back door from *ever* being *totally* clean), I was starting to get the picture. It *is* impossible to be perfect, so don't expect it of others. It was, indeed, my father's version of "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

When we were younger, the Beardslee kids used to complain a lot about the neighbors. We'd make fun of them and their eccentricities, their idiosyncrasies, their odd (to us) ways of living. And it wasn't just the kids. My father would often participate in the teasing right along with us. That's how we knew it was okay, if Dad was doing it too.

When he was in a more serious mood, he'd give us the line, "Don't complain about some other guy's back door until your own back door is clean." And hell, my father was a hypocrite. He'd admit it, in his usual indirect manner, with another line: "Don't do as I do; do as I say." But this line was a way of teaching us to give proper respect to others, and try to be understanding of the differences of others.

The Vandermeys across the street farmed their land, although the man of the house worked, like my dad, in "the shop." Mrs. Vandermey was a farmer through and through. She walked like a man, acted like a man, worked like a man, even looked like a man. If a raccoon or a skunk had met its demise in the road anywhere near her property, she'd hustle out to the road, grab the poor dead beast by its tail, haul it off the roadway, dig a grave for it and throw it in. From dawn until dusk she worked the land, bringing forth as much of the earth's bounty as her ten acres would allow. She was always tilling the soil, seeding, weeding and hoeing rows, tending to her flower gardens, or bringing in the plants, vegetables and flowers her muscle and sweat had helped to bring into being. Surely, this industrious woman was as responsible for the existence of these miraculous natural creations as was Mother Nature, or some indefinable "god." Her efforts were surely as important to the feeding of her family off the land as any contribution that could have been made by nature itself. And then she'd can the stuff and pickle some of it. I knew what she was doing because my mother did the same in her younger years; it was simply that Mrs. Vandermey did what my mother did times a hundred. She'd pickle cucumbers and beets, can tomatoes and spinach, freeze onions and peppers and corn. What she and her family didn't need or use, Mrs. Vandermey would set on a table out by the road and sell at terribly cheap prices. How often I recall seeing her run from her front

door or run from a far field out to the road to take a quarter for a bunch of flowers, or for three squashes, or for a bushel of corn. And she did all this while raising five kids. Our family did this too, of course, with apples and pears and dill thrown into the mix, but less so as development made the road busier and age made my parents less hardy. But Mrs. Vandermey was unfazed by development or age. She farmed until her last breath. There was always a table out by the road with something for sale on it: flowers and plants in the spring, peppers, corn and tomatoes in the summer, squash, gourds, pumpkins and cornstalks at Halloween.

For her very hard work she became the butt of many a Beardslee joke, I shamefully admit. "She must have eyes all the way around her head," somebody observed, since no roadside customer ever had to wait very long for Mrs. Vandermey's enterprising attention. "Does she ever walk?" one of us asked, noting that she always ran, not a pell-mell kind of run, but a brisk walk verging on a jog. Sometimes she would break into a trot, her manly hips bobbing, her feet parallel to the earth, her eyes apparently concentrating on the ground, her grayish black unkempt hair flying out behind her striped work shirt. That we had many a laugh at the expense of such a wondrous creature speaks to our own ability to be cruel. Even if we never did anything cruel to her face, we weren't very nice behind her back.

The family was referred to by us as the Vanderhoots (the origin of this horrid perversion of nomenclature has unfortunately been lost), and as children we found this dubious nickname much too terribly funny. One time, my mother, who was the least cruel of us all, thanked Mrs. Vandermey for bringing over some extra Cornish hens or some such gift. Always respectful and always addressing the nice neighbor lady with the

honorific "Mrs.", my mother accidentally let slip our derisive fake last name for her family.

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Vander*hoot*," she said. Although my mother turned beet red, I don't think Mrs. Vanderhoot, excuse me, Mrs. Vander*mey*, even noticed. And, of course, it was all the fault of Mom's children because all she ever heard from us was "Vander*hoot*." It was a perfectly understandable slip of the tongue.

That oddball family across the street had other things about them that just didn't fit all too well into the world of the Beardslees. We dreaded going over to the house, which sometimes my mother would ask one of us to do, like when she was baking a pie and needed an extra cup of sugar. We dreaded it because the Vandermey house, well, there's no polite way to say it, *stank*! My dad knew what to say: "They take a bath once a year whether they need it or not." Just another of his unforgettable lines.

I know everyone's house has its own unique smell, but the Vandermey smell was like *manure*, probably because the boots of the intrepid Mrs. Vandermey tracked it in on a regular basis. Her family never seemed to mind, or even notice, but when one of us kids went over there, oh, good god, sometimes we thought we'd throw up. And Mrs. Vandermey, being the kind soul she was, would always insist that we come in and, if not sit down, at least stand in the kitchen and drink a glass of water. "Y'all muss be thirsdy," she'd say, looking every bit as serious as a Sunday preacher. It scared us that her somewhat earnest but serious, thin-lipped facial expression never changed; no matter what she talked about she never smiled. Her voice was another thing that scared us. She was apparently from the South, and her voice was our first exposure to its dialect.

But it was Mrs. Vandermey's daughter, Nancy, who really scared the hell out of us. The unfortunate Nancy was what we would now call, in this politically correct age, developmentally disabled. But, then, we kids called Nancy "retarded"; Mom called her "crippled." Unlike her mother, Nancy smiled all the time. Like her mother, she smelled of pig shit. She walked with a strange gait, one foot curling out and then back in upon itself whenever she took a step, and her upper body seemed always on the verge of stumbling over, it jerked and swayed so much. And her voice! Oh, how we hated it when Nancy would talk to us. She had the impaired speech of many mentally disabled persons, extremely slowly enunciated, with emphasis placed on all the wrong words, or the wrong syllables, and with that stupid smile perpetually plastered to her face, she would sound, even though she didn't mean to, like she was flirting with us.

"Hiiiieeeeya, Mark!" she greeted me, her voice starting at the top of her range, descending down through it and then lifting up again at my name, somehow emphasizing both the r and the k. This scared me to death and I wanted to flee. "Ha-ow yah dooooooin'?" Her voice once again ranged with this simple question.

"Fine, thank you," I spat as fast as I could say it and look away, trying not to breathe through my nose, knowing that my eyes and cheeks were bulging in anticipation of running out of the house as soon as Mrs. Vandermey would get that damned sugar! (It seems my mother raised us right, to some extent at least, because even in the midst of terror, disgust and revulsion we would not be impolite to someone's face, certainly not to someone so well-meaning as Nancy Vandermey.)

A sorrowful aside to this story is that Mrs. Vandermey blamed herself for Nancy's condition, for the mother had once dropped the infant Nancy. This she had confided to

my mother, and even though my mom tried to explain this to us when we were young, it would be much later before we realized the gravity of guilt that Mrs. Vandermey carried on her shoulders for half a lifetime. No wonder she never smiled.

"Iiiiiiieeee huuuurrrd yew jusssst had a birsssssdayyyyyyy," Nancy continued with that awful, uncontrolled wavering voice. "Haaaaa-ow ooohhhhhhd arrrre yew?"

"Eight," I answered quickly, hoping that Mrs. Vandermey would hear the urgency in my voice and get me that cup of sugar so I could hurry up and get the hell out of that awful smelling house and away from the frightening specter of her disabled daughter, ugly despite the smile (or perhaps because of it, as it revealed the gaps between her teeth), long stringy reddish brown hair crawling haphazardly over her oddly shaped pale white face and even more oddly shaped body. Gusts of halitosis blew in my face with each word; that's why I turned away. But Nancy took no offense; she may have been incapable of taking offense.

"Wellllllll, yerrrr a big boooooeeee now, arnt cha? Hee hee hee." And that was the worst, the goofy laugh that sounded like an old man's from the cartoons, not at all matching the rest of her speech, turning her into some frightful ghoul that was either making fun of me or making some sick pass at me.

No, not really," I said at the speed of a machine gun, then snatched the Tupperware bowl that the beast's mother was finally, thankfully, handing to me. "Thank you, Mrs. Vandermey," I shouted as I shot out the door and ran as fast as I could down her long driveway to the road, looked both ways, and crossed, breathing deeply of relief, but not after hearing Nancy call after me to "Cummmmm oooover aginnnnn sometiiiiime." The memory still makes me shudder.

But the worst lay ahead of me, for surely my sister and brothers saw Nancy follow me out of the house, and it has already been demonstrated how cruel we were capable of being to each other.

"Mark's in love with Nancy Vanderhoot!" Jan sang at my arrival at the back door of our own house. We rarely used the front door.

"Yeah, Mark," Craig put in, with that curiously serious tone of his, "you were over there an awfully long time. What did you *do*? Play games with Nancy?"

"Now, you kids," Mother warned. "Thank you, Mark," she said as I handed her the Tupperware container. "Does she want this right back?"

"She didn't say," I replied, terrified that Mom would send me back over there to return the container.

"Well, she might need this for something," my practical mother sensibly noted. "Someone will have to take this back to Mrs. Vandermey."

"Let Mark go back," Jan suggested. "He's the one in love with Naaaaaannnnnssssseeeee Vannnndermaaaaaayy," she teased, trying to imitate our poor retarded neighbor girl.

"No," I begged, "please! It stunk so bad in there. And Nancy Vandermey wouldn't stop trying to talk to me. And her breath smelled so *gross*."

"Now, Mark, be nice," my mother scolded.

"But, please, Mom, don't make me go back."

"How do you *know* her breath smelled bad?" Craig asked slyly. "Were you *kissing* her?"

The thought nearly made me retch and Jan laughed and David hollered, in glee, "Yeah, Mark kissed Nancy Vanderhoot!"

"I did not! Gross! You guys!"

"You're just saying that because you like her," Jan reasoned in a manner that *was* perfectly reasonable in the mind of a twelve-year-old.

"Nooooo!" I insisted, but the more I denied it the more guilty that made me, or so it seemed to my cruel brothers and sister.

"Mark loves Nancy Vandermey," Jan would start to sing again, until Mom had dumped the sugar out of the Tupperware container and said, firmly, "Be quiet, Jan, and run this back over to Mrs. Vandermey."

Then the madness shifted and, to my great relief, I was no longer the target of familial abuse. Jan's face turned down and she whined, "Make Craig do it," hoping she could use that only daughter trick that rarely worked. It didn't work this time because she'd been the loudest of the teasers.

"Hurry up, now, Jan," my mother ordered. With the hilarity suddenly vanished from her face and from her step, Jan begrudgingly headed out the back door and walked with her head down to return the Tupperware container, knowing full well that she would have to face the horrible Vandermey smell, and the horrifying Nancy, and then be the one who got teased when she got back.

What my father hated about the people across the street was their habit of staring out their window at us and at everything we did. My father was a private man and, just as much as he hated being stared at, it doubtlessly disturbed him equally that the Vandermeys made

no secret of their staring, either. They would stand at their own picture window and watch us as we worked on cars in the driveway, puttered in the garage, mowed the front lawn, even as we prepared for bed at night. Mr. and Mrs., with Nancy between them, would stand at their window and watch us, as if they were at the rodeo. Nancy would have her hands way up high on the back of her ribcage, a ridiculous posture that made her bony elbows stick out at unlikely angles. Mrs. Vandermey would stand next to her, with her hands clasped in front of her, head tilted, apparently enjoying the show. And Old Man Vandermey, as Dad called the patriarch of this odd assortment, slouched next to his daughter, face right up to the window, watching every move we made. Whatever we did for work or play, or whenever we climbed into the car in our Sunday best on our way to some special occasion, often taking photos first, the Vandermeys usually saw it.

This was a double-edged sword.

My mother tried to make the best of it and say, "Well, if we ever get broken into, she'll probably be able to identify the thief." And, my mother reasoned, if there were ever a fire and we weren't awake we'd be sure to be awakened by Mrs. Vandermey.

"Who wuz that there car I saw in yer driveway two days ago?" Mrs. Vandermey would often drawl to my mother. She knew the regular vehicles that visited the Beardslee household. If a relative from far away came for a rare visit, my mother would eventually be asked about it by Mrs. Vandermey.

Along with this kind of security, if one can call it that, came the discomfort of knowing you were being watched. So you go out to water the plants and you get the hose all tangled up. Or you're eating an ice cream cone and you drop the scoop on the driveway. Or you're riding your bike and you take a stupid spill. Or you pick your nose

absentmindedly. People in cars speeding by wouldn't notice and, if you were swift enough in your recovery, no one inside the house would notice, either. But you could always be sure that the Vandermeys would notice. They were like a continuous light tap on the shoulder. This drove my dad nuts. He swore he'd plant some privet along the length of the front yard, open only at the driveway. I'm not sure why he never did, but it probably had something to do with the fact that he knew he'd be watched by the Vandermeys while he was planting it.

Later, after my father became disabled, the eyes of the Vandermeys became to Paul Harry even more intrusive, and downright dangerous. Although my father was tested by corporate and government doctors who determined that he was indeed disabled, and therefore entitled to a partial pension from General Motors and disability assistance from the Social Security Administration, he always feared that he could lose this income if it was discovered that he was doing any strenuous activity. And despite his condition, my father was not about to stop working; that's just how he was. Whether it was putting a new roof on the bathhouse by the pool, pruning the apple and pear trees in our orchard, or scraping and repainting the house, my father kept himself occupied with manual labor most of the time. We kids helped out, of course, along with our mother, but Dad was hesitant to let anyone else outdo him over the course of *any* project.

He believed that government agents and corporate investigators spied on him, watching him to make sure he was really as disabled as the doctors said he was. Whether this was pure paranoia or whether it held some roots of truth, I'll never know, but I would never doubt it, either. What really upset him was that if any of those spies came snooping around asking questions of the neighbors about the activities of one Paul Harry

Beardslee, the Vandermeys, being honest folk, would tell the investigators, “Why, ye-es, that Paul Beardslee works all the darned time, he does, and I don’t think he ought to be doin’ the things he does on account of his health and all.”

So, for Dad, anyway, the irritation of knowing you’re being stared at by snoopy neighbors was compounded into a situation that he thought might lead to the dissolution of the diminished income with which he was trying to raise his four youngest kids. That had to have been scary for him. No wonder he often didn’t sleep at night, but got up and stared out his front door, or out his own picture window, at the shadows of the night, wondering how safe, how secure, he and his family really were.

The grimmest prospects entertained by my dad’s dread imagination never came to pass. Further, despite the irritation caused him by the Vandermeys, it did not cause him to give up one of his values, that of not judging your neighbor.

When in a more somber mood, my father would not react kindly to his kids’ incessant mockery of the Vandermeys. I could stand with my hands high up on the back of my ribcage, elbows askew, and perform my best Nancy Vandermey vocal impersonation, but if my dad was being charitable, and thinking of what kind of adults his kids ought to grow into, he’d tell me to stop it, that it was wrong to complain about someone else’s back door until my own back door was clean. “Are you so perfect?” he’d challenge me. Fully humiliated, and properly chastened, I’d have to confess that no, I wasn’t.

Jan could come home from school and complain about some kid who wouldn’t blow his nose, who had snot running down his face all day, and how it had made her sick.

"He is so gross, Mom! Why can't he just go to the bathroom and blow his nose like everyone else instead of making all the rest of us have to watch his snotty face? It looked like puke, and it made *me* want to puke."

Dad could hear this and say, "Don't complain about someone else's back door until your own back door is clean. Do you never do anything that bothers anyone else?"

And Jan, too, would have to confess that she probably did, and would try to learn from her father's lesson about judging not, and would try to be a little more charitable.

Craig could yell, "Mark, you're so stupid! How come every time I ask you to do something you either don't do it, you can't do it or you wreck it?" And Craig had plenty of reason plenty of times to be critical of my ineptitude with tools, or with simple tasks like washing dishes, or with my tendency to break things, because I was a clumsy kid.

But Dad would ask him, "Is your back door clean?"

"No," Craig would admit, despondently, with eyes downcast, realizing immediately that he was wrong to judge so harshly.

"Then don't go criticizing someone else's back door," Dad would conclude.

Sometimes I wonder just how much any of us ever took that grain of Paul Harry wisdom to heart. I also think how much more peaceful our lives and the lives of all the people in the world would be if all of us followed that simple maxim all the time.

10. “Aw, Poor Baby! Wanna Suck on Momma’s Titty?”

My father would put up with whining for just so long, then he’d put a stop to it, a quick stop.

This line was probably *the* most effective way he had of doing just that. Because the line is a little bit lurid, quite graphic and really, really insulting, he didn’t use it that often. If he had, it would have lost its effectiveness. Also, because it’s kind of funny, at least when you’re not its recipient, my father used it only when he was in relatively good spirits, although any child, teenager or young adult who was the target of this line, would be hard pressed to find any humor or “good spirits” contained therein.

Talk about the ultimate in humiliation! To be hit with this line by my father was like being struck down by a conscience from on high, it was like being pummeled to the ground, and you’d want to enter that ground and hide in it forever. It was like being scolded by God. When Dad came out with this one, someone was going to feel so small, so utterly and crushingly ashamed, so completely put in his or her place, that it could take hours, maybe even overnight, perhaps even days, before that someone would even *want* to talk again.

This line was instructive about proper behavior, even though it may be a little improper itself. My father brandished it like a whip, striking fast and receding just as swiftly. Its effectiveness arose from its rarity, its speed and its ability to overwhelmingly humiliate.   In this way, it was a far more productive disciplinary tool than a real physical whipping, or any other kind of corporal punishment. Its purpose was to teach us not to be

whiny little pains in the ass. How many of us, as adults, know people with whom we work or with whom we must deal, whether in our neighborhoods or at the store or at family gatherings, who do little more than whine about every little thing that comes their way in life? And how much do we want to tell them to just shut the fuck up? And how happy would we be if we were able to use this line to make them realize that they are behaving like irritating, petulant, patience-testing, tantrum-throwing children?

And I'll confide that if any reader is ever able to use this line, deliver it as my father did: "Aw, poor baby," he would say, quite swiftly, without a trace of sympathy in his voice. Then, without looking at you, he would gather into his inflections and tone every possible nuance of baby talk he could conjure, and ask, "Wanna sucka mumma titty?" This latter part of the line was delivered with all due swiftness and just a hint of threat in the question, as if he was daring you to say something more. You wouldn't. Trust me, you wouldn't.

And then he *would* look at you, but not just look, mind. Rather, he would glare at you. He would say nothing else. He didn't have to because his glare said, "You are embarrassed and you ought to be. Don't ever whine like that again." Then he'd return to whatever he was doing. Being a man of few words, he didn't have to make a big deal out of it; my father could just deliver that line, follow it up with the requisite glare, and that would be that. Discipline and control of an unruly child in less than five seconds.

To be told this, in the fashion that was uniquely my father's, in the presence of other family members, in the presence of the mother who suckled you, could only produce the effect of reducing you from a prancing, complaining, talkative little boy or girl to a dithering, silent, muzzled idiot in a trance-like state out of which it would be

incredibly hard to grasp enough dignity to merely talk again, let alone carry on a conversation or even make an observation about something. A complaint would not be forthcoming for days, perhaps weeks.

Envision this, if you can. Paul Harry and Harriet Marie take their four youngest kids, Craig, Jan, Mark and David, to the ice cream parlor. It is a sunny evening toward the end of a hot day, and everyone is pleasantly surprised that Dad has treated them to ice cream. But there are so many varieties! Jan gets a double scoop of two different flavors, raspberry fudge and chocolate mint chip. Mom lets me have a double scoop, too, but the parlor is busy, and I am, as usual, indecisive, so when I finally say chocolate marshmallow to the man, I get a double scoop of that flavor and that flavor only.

"But, Mom," I whine as I follow in her skirts toward the car, where we will stand out of people's way and finish our ice cream, "Jan got *two* kinds. I wanted two kinds, too."

"Well, you could have had two kinds," my mother patiently responds, "but you couldn't make up your mind. Here, let me have a taste of yours and I'll let you have a taste of mine. That way, we'll both taste two kinds. See? I only got one kind, too."

"But that's not the same," Mark complains, chocolate marshmallow dripping down his hand. "She got two different kinds on *one* ice cream cone. That's not fair!"

"Here," Mother says, squatting down in front of me, "let me taste your kind." And she licks some of the chocolate marshmallow off my hand. "Mmmm, that's good! Now, here, have a taste of mine."

But I see Jan greedily licking her two flavors and I'm consumed with jealousy and angered by the unfairness of it all. I pay no attention to David happily consuming his

single dip vanilla cone, or to Dad and his chocolate/vanilla twist, or to Craig and his double dip of blueberry cheesecake. All I can see is Jan and her two colors of ice cream, one red and one green, and all I've got is brown.

"It's not fair," I declare again. "I want…"

A deep but sing-song voice bellows from up ahead, high above me. My father has turned around and he is regarding me with barely concealed displeasure. "Aw, poor baby," he mocks at me. "Wanna sucka mumma titty?"

My face turns redder than Jan's second dip of ice cream. For the first time I notice that people are staring at me. I flinch away from Dad's momentary glare. Mom stands and walks away in a manner that says she's had it with me. Jan tries to stifle a laugh, then points at me and grins in that tormenting way all kids have of making other kids who've just been scolded feel worse. Dad and Craig walk to the other side of the car, ignoring me, talking about two hot-air balloons they see in the sky to the south. Dad lifts David and points them out to him, explaining softly what they are. David is fascinated.

Only Dad had been able to get me to shut up. He had other weapons in his arsenal, but on that evening, his almost-but-not-quite-obscene invocation made me feel really, really bad. I was alone, embarrassed beyond belief, completely deflated.

And, I had stopped whining.

11. “He’s Probably out Sitting in the Road.”

There exists an old home movie in which my mother is 36 years old or so and the family is visiting my dad’s eldest brother Don’s family when they lived in the Upper Peninsula. Mom’s got all five of her children on her mind. David has yet to be born, Dennis and Steve are not yet young men, Craig and Jan are little kids, I’m a toddler.

It is painful to watch this movie, really, because it is a vivid portrait of a worrying mother who never, ever, gets any rest. A broad smile crosses her face whenever she looks at the camera, out in the yard on a summer day. But when she looks away, lines of concern creep across her visage. Someone, probably one of her nieces, has engaged her in a game of catch. In between catching a baseball (my mother was a proud and able athlete in her youth), throwing it back and glancing to the camera to give the obligatory smile, her head spins on her neck like the turret of a modern-day tank. She is keeping an eye on every single one of the five, wherever they are and whatever they are doing. Playing on the grass at her feet, I’m the easiest. But where are Jan and Craig? And Steve and Dennis? Between catches and throws she scans the landscape with her worried face to make sure she knows. And, believe me, she knows exactly where they are and what they are doing, or else the game of catch, caught in the camera eye or no, would come to an abrupt end.

Another story of my mother’s fixation with the whereabouts of her kids can be related by the number of times she ran up the hill of our five-acre swathe of land throughout her child-rearing years. Behind our house is a broad low spot, allowing for great winter sledding. Beyond that, the property slopes upward to about the halfway

point of the plot, then slopes downward and out of sight. We called the apex of this particular lay of the land "the top of the hill." The land originally backed up to several dozen acres of state property, open to everyone, that included a sizable pond, or "fishing hole," as Dad called it. The older kids used to hunt and fish back there. But other kids from other neighborhoods used to like to go back there and do other things like play stinky finger with neighbor girls, or smoke pot, drink beer and get stupid, or even actually get down to the actual nasty, as evidenced by the used condoms that could be found on the shores of the pond and in the nearby bushes.

My mother never trusted such kids, imagining them as "dirty" and "bad" and "from broken homes," which meant that such kids could be trusted to do nothing honorable and counted on to do everything nefarious, things like either beat up the good kids who went back there or introduce the good kids to bad influences, like marijuana and loose girls. This meant that from the time Dennis and Steve were able to walk to the end of our five acres and beyond, to the time David and I finally grew up and stopped playing back at "the top of the hill," my mother ran wind sprints up and down the gentle slope of our estate almost every day that was nice enough for her kids to play outside. However, because my elder brothers were into skating and ice-fishing, my mother's mad dashes were not limited to the warm months. She would perform these feats in between her other household chores, mainly the wash (an endless burden for a mother of many kids), which consisted of washing the clothes in the basement washing machine, drying them on the outdoor clotheslines, gathering them up, folding them and stacking them neatly away in our dressers. She was also always preparing meals, planting, picking or canning vegetables and fruit, sewing up old clothes and knitting new ones. Somehow, between all

these responsibilities, whenever her kids went out of sight up there at “the top of the hill,” she’d run up there, just far enough to catch a glimpse of our clothing, and assure herself that we were all right, in no apparent danger of being introduced to sex or drugs, or of being hauled away for ransom. Sometimes she’d call to us, we’d wave and she’d run back to the house. Other times, I’m sure, we never even knew she was keeping a careful eye on us, whatever we were doing. David and I, for example, liked to go back to the end of the property, marked by two huge maple trees, and scour the area looking for treasures. There was the hulk of a rusty old car someone had abandoned back there, several old appliances, a sink and a toilet. We liked to look through the ever-growing brush seeking out new finds. And we’d play hide-and-seek, or eat lunch under the shade of those great big trees and marvel at the size of them, lying on our backs listening to the drones of airplanes passing by far overhead. To us, it seemed perfectly safe, and we were content. But to our mother, if we were over “the top of the hill,” and she couldn’t see us, danger lurked. Whether we were building a fort out of old bricks, playing hide-and-seek among the evergreens or just lying on our backs contemplating the passing day, our days passed easily enough. For us. For our mother, however, these lazy days were anything but lazy. By day’s end she may have made the sprint a dozen times. “No wonder I stayed in such good shape most of my life,” my mother recalls. “I ran a damned marathon every day!”

Probably every child gets lost in a public place at least once. I remember it happening to me. We were at the Eastland Mall and I was walking with my dad, who justly assumed that I’d keep up with him. He stopped at some counter to look at something and I stopped and looked, too. But when I looked up, the guy standing next to me wasn’t my dad. I cried and the workers at the store sat me on a chair and asked if I

was lost and told me to stay there; surely my parents would come looking for me. They were correct, for in a few minutes I heard the blood-curdling scream of, "MAAAAARK! MAAAAARK!" I ran to my mother and heard her scolding my father for allowing me to get out of sight. My father just looked terribly embarrassed at the scene she was creating.

One of the reasons my mother loved my father so much was that he was, as she says, "easygoing." Therefore, not worrying overmuch about the kids was part of his nature. But when David was a toddler, I remember my mother asking, seemingly endlessly, "Where's David?" if she had been busy with household chores that took her away from the line of sight of David's whereabouts. My dad would often shrug, keep reading the paper or whatever he was doing, and mutter, entirely unconcerned, "Oh, he's probably out sitting in the road."

"Paul," my mother would say in a hurt voice.

The thing is my dad was never right about this. David was *never* out sitting in the road. None of us ever were because we had been taught early enough to stay well away from the road. Dad's unconcerned sarcastic comment served only to remind his wife of that. David was usually playing in his room, playing outside with the older kids (who knew to keep away from the road) or, most likely, sitting at his father's feet.

12. “Look at Ya! Just Look at Ya! You Dumb Mutt!”

The people from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) are surely well-intentioned, but my father was raised in a different time, so he had a different mindset about animals. His era was marked by the Great Depression and a world war whose final outcome was determined by the use of nuclear bombs. Animal welfare wasn’t a high priority. They certainly did not need to be “treated with kid gloves,” as Paul Harry would have put it. In fact, domesticated animals, particularly dogs, were to be trained harshly, beaten regularly and expected to remain obedient and faithful. If not, they were to be shot. That dogs (and not cats) *could* be trained to be obedient and faithful, no matter how many times you kicked them, made canines my father’s pet of choice. All experiments with the ownership of cats, which my mother had been accustomed to having around the pig farm of her youth as mousers, failed miserably. Whenever my mother acquired one, from a neighbor or a friend or a relative, or by chance when a stray started hanging around, the cat would disappear. It took my mother years to learn that the missing cats had not been killed in the road, nor had they run off to someone else’s house. My father had simply gathered them up before his early morning drive to “the shop” and dropped them off at some farmhouse between there and home. And he just conveniently failed to mention these deeds to his wife.

But dogs were a different story.

Enter Skipper. No story about Paul Harry would be complete without mention of the intrepid Skipper, who faithfully served and loved the Beardslee family for seventeen years, and who outlived my father by only a year. This made her (for Skipper was a

female we had spayed) an important companion to my father during his years of "disability" retirement.

A present to Jan on her eleventh birthday in 1971, Skipper entered our lives as a gangly, black-furred puppy dog with closed eyes and huge feet. While all our relatives and friends swore the cocker spaniel/schnauzer would become a monster because of those feet, the old saying that dogs grow into their feet would be proved wrong by Skipper, who would simply have big feet her whole life. She'd be a little clumsy because of it, too, and her clumsiness would provide us kids with a lot of laughs.

The little beast was both blessed and cursed to have been bought by the Beardslees. The lapdog instinct in her which came from the schnauzer part of her bloodline made her an indoor dog, with severe restrictions. She had to sleep in the basement, she couldn't enter a carpeted room, she couldn't sit or lie on any furniture. That was about it, for besides the basement, the only uncarpeted room in our house was the kitchen. Luckily for her, it was a big kitchen, taking up a quarter of the house's square footage. This was something my mother had insisted on when the house was added on to after the birth of Jan. The Beardslee brood needed more room, and by god, my mother, who was sick of serving her family in the home's original cramped kitchen, was going to have the kitchen of her dreams. And she got it. It turned out to be the kitchen of Skipper's dreams, too, for there were rugs on which she could lay, two furnace registers from which to be warmed and lots of space to play with us kids. An added bonus was that an awful lot of food was dropped, intentionally or not, on the floor. Skipper was the designated vacuum cleaner for the kitchen. There were also lots of places to hide from the stern hand (or foot) of Dad.

The cocker spaniel part of Skipper's breeding meant that she was the kind of dog who loved to be outside, whether alone or with one of, or a group of, her masters. She loved to "go for a walk," (words that always brought forth great squeals of anticipation) and she could have walked all day long, every day of her life. By only her second year, Paul Harry had been advised by his doctors to take regular walks, to keep his ailing heart strong and to get it beating hard on a regular basis, and thus Skipper and my father became walking buddies. The entire five-acre parcel owned by my father was too big to mow, but Dad saw to it that a mown path was established around the estate's perimeter, and that path would serve as a never-ending source of fascination for Skipper. The smells were widely varied and apparently endless, the spots where other animals had defecated or urinated changed daily, much to Skipper's interest, and some element of the hunt was always in the air, intriguing Skipper's cocker instinct. The change of the seasons also captivated good ole Skipper. She was not a big dog, but she was strong, and woe unto any other animal who dared trespass within that oft-circumnavigated pathway, which she had memorized, and onto the Beardslee family property. Skipper once killed, after a multiple-hour duel, a hedgehog that was twice her size. Warning to other animals: Beware of Skipper!

Dad needed someone to talk to once his heart condition made it impossible for him to leave home every day and go to work. Mom went to work, the two eldest kids had surpassed eighteen years and were, therefore, out on their own, and the rest of us were in school. This means that Skipper probably heard more of what Dad had to say than any of us. Unfortunately for her, what Dad most often said to Skipper was, "Dumb mutt!" While she was blessed with a family who loved her, and fed her well, and kept her on a

fascinating parcel of real estate on which would unfold untold numbers of adventures, she was simultaneously cursed to have as the master of her many masters a man who looked upon and treated dogs in a painfully nineteenth-century manner. And even if his physical brutality was never more than she could handle, the poor dog suffered the continuous ignominy of being disparaged as nothing more than a “dumb mutt.”

The phrase was so common around the Beardslee household that one of Steve’s first daughter’s first phrases was “dumb mutt, dumb mutt, dumb mutt.” Lonna surely had no idea what she was saying when she hurtled about the house ululating those two words (she was just learning speech, as most tots do), but it couldn’t have done anything positive for Skipper’s esteem to have both the eldest and the youngest of the Beardslees repeatedly uttering the phrase “dumb mutt.” Particularly, when my father said it, the words dripped with disdain and scorn, and without anthropomorphizing Skipper too much, it always seemed that Skipper felt the sting of that disdain, of that scorn, that she felt hurt by the dual insult to her intelligence and to her parentage. She would hang her head, roll her eyes upward and skulk away until someone else would speak to her in more cheerful tones, or at least with less scolding words.

The things that Skipper could do to earn the oft-applied epithet were legion. She could be simply lying in the kitchen, with her paws stretched out onto the edge of the warm and comfortable carpeting of the living room and, if Dad caught her thus luxuriating, she would be called a “dumb mutt.” Actually, I think whenever she was able to get away with such trifling bends of the rules, she was anything but dumb, but that’s still what she got called. She could run after a deer, an animal far faster than she, and once again earn the title of “dumb mutt.” Alternatively, she could chase down a baby

rabbit, catch it and kill it and bring it back proudly to her master and still be called dumb. She could bark at relatives when they knocked on the back door and she would be chastised for being a "dumb mutt." Alternatively, she could bark at the unusual knock of a stranger at the front door and still be labeled dumb. There was simply no getting around it. To Skipper, it probably came to mean little, but she always had to perform the requisite prostration when referred to as such. Once that was over, she could very quickly go back to being her cheerful, and decidedly not dumb, self.

There were two or three memorable occasions when Skipper became anything but cheerful. Life on a major county thoroughfare is fraught with danger for small animals (and small humans, for that matter). Early in her life, when Jan was still a teenager living at home, the dog made the typical blunder of following its nose into the road. Dogs don't usually "look around," as humans do; they sniff around and gauge their surroundings and determine their directions by smell, not sight. In doing just this, Skipper got hit hard by a car traveling at least 45 miles per hour. Her hide was ripped from her hindquarters and, battered, bloodied and belabored in her breathing, she stumbled into the weeds between our property and the neighbor's, sniffed out an appropriately clean spot to lie down in and wait for death to relieve her anguish.

However, it was not yet her time to go.

We kids were always on the lookout for Skipper because we loved her and we loved playing with her and, well, we just loved having her around. She was one of us. Likewise, Skipper loved us and loved playing with us and, like all loyal dogs, loved simply to be in the presence of her human masters. Therefore, it struck the family as

quizzical that Skipper was nowhere to be seen. All-too-familiar with the sorrowful experience of losing past beloved pets to those big metal machines which ply the highways, we had a good idea of where to look for Skipper.

Before long, we discovered her whimpering in the weeds, bleeding, crumpled and torn. We rushed her to the veterinarian. In addition to skin and fur being ripped off her left hindquarter, her pelvic bones had been damaged but not broken, her legs painfully sprained but also not broken. Patched up, she returned home to convalesce for a couple of weeks. The back half of her torso was wrapped in gauze, which had to be changed from time to time, and she could barely walk, so we brought her bed from the basement and let her sleep and eat upstairs for a few weeks. Going outside to poop and pee was probably the most painful part of her recovery, just as it often is for humans with broken bodies. We took turns carrying her outside and, as she improved, we eventually encouraged her to walk down the few steps of our entranceway to get outside and do her business.

In no time, or so it seemed to us uninjured humans, Skipper's hide healed, her bones became strong and she tentatively relearned to run, slowly at first, but eventually with the furious speed she had previously displayed. Still, as she aged, the injury would come back to haunt and hurt Skipper. Arthritis would set in, paving the way for her demise. In that sense, Skipper *had* been killed by that car that dreadful day; death was only postponed. But for the time being, she had learned a valuable lesson: stay away from the road! Only once would she ever approach the road closer than its shoulder again. In the meantime, she went back to being a "dumb mutt."

Another terribly unfortunate drama unfolded when the aforementioned Lonna, who by this time could ambulate more confidently, found great glee in the act of pulling at Skipper's hair. Skipper was *not* dumb, and she knew that the best thing for her to do would be to leave the area. But the kid had learned how to run, too, and chased her around the kitchen, pulling on her hair. Skipper growled, trying to warn the child away, but this meant nothing to Lonna, who went on happily pulling tufts of black hair from the dog's hide. Finally, Skipper snapped her jaws at Lonna, not at all attempting to bite her little hands, but to get the toddler to stop tormenting her. It worked, but it also provoked a wail of fear and a fit of screaming from the justly frightened child.

Somehow, my father knew exactly what Skipper had done and, being protective of his progeny and possessed of that firmly nineteenth-century attitude towards animals, he proceeded to unleash upon Skipper the beating of her life. He beat her so hard, so long and so fiercely, and proclaimed to hate her so much and to never forgive her, that Skipper retreated to her bed in the basement and refused, for days, to emerge. Even in the daytime it was dark down there, but Skipper seemed determined not to show herself ever again. Dad's omnipresent thunderous voice (by this time in his life, he rarely left home) was enough to convince her that she had not only better stay where she was, she would rather eat her shit and drink her piss than venture upstairs.

Jan, David and myself made numerous visits to Skipper's darkened haven. We would pet her softly, try to soothe her with our words, assure her that we loved her, that we understood and that she could safely come out. Despite our efforts, Skipper made it clear to us that she was going to make up her *own* mind about when she would feel comfortable enough to return to the domain of the dreadful man who lived upstairs. At

first, she would whine when we petted her and tried to comfort her, and this broke our hearts and I, at least, cried bitterly for her. "You were only trying to protect yourself," I would tell her, as if she could understand. "You're a good dog; you didn't hurt anyone. Hell, Lonna's forgotten it by now."

But she would just whimper, and I would cry for her. When I tried to feed her, she would refuse to eat. For a while, we were afraid she'd die down there. When word of our fears reached my father, he yelled, "Good! I *hope* she dies down there. Dumb mutt!"

This ugly tableau held in the Beardslee household for much too long: Dad being forbiddingly angry at Skipper, and angry at her defenders; the rest of the humans forgiving her and begging Dad to forgive her, too; and Skipper whimpering and shivering with fear, shuddering fitfully, hiding in a dark corner of the basement.

Somehow, eventually, it broke. It must have happened when we kids were gone because we don't remember it. I *do* remember Dad going downstairs, turning on the light and talking to Skipper in harsh language as if she were human. "Have you learned your lesson? Will you ever bite one of my grandkids again? Did you think you could get away with that without being punished?" And Skipper would reply only by hanging her head, shivering and keeping an eye out for a foot poised to kick.

But by that time, Paul Harry was mellowing about the situation, and rather than being poised to kick, he was poised to forgive. The fact that he was talking to her was evidence enough of that.

One day, Dad decided that he did indeed forgive Skipper and managed to entice her upstairs and outside, for it wasn't long (again, by the standards of those of us who

didn't suffer her anguish) before Dad and Skipper became walking buddies again. Regardless, I have no doubt that the scar left by this incident cut no less deep in our sensitive dog than the scars left by her earlier encounter with the front bumper of a speeding car.

Such was the relationship between my father and our beloved Skipper that even he thought there was something human in her; his physical punishment of the dog, his temporary banishment of her to the basement, his verbal attempts to inculcate within her some sort of lesson, and his eventual forgiveness of her and acceptance back into the fold of his life closely paralleled the manner in which my father meted out justice to his own children.

A happier but probably no less painful experience for Skipper came one summer day when Craig, Jan, David and I lounged beneath the pear tree in the front yard, playing with the dog. Fiercely protective of our property, Skipper leapt up when she noticed someone riding by on a bicycle. This was not an uncommon occurrence in those days: Skipper would simply run toward the offender, bark loudly, stop by the shoulder of the road at our property line, and continue to bark at the bicyclist until he or she was out of sight. Then she'd run back to her masters, tail wagging, seeking approval for scaring that threatening creature away. Sometimes we'd congratulate her and reward her with caresses and words of what a good dog she was. But, after all, we were our father's children, so sometimes we'd just roll our eyes and say, "You think you chased that person away? She was riding away anyway, you dumb mutt!"

But on this particular occasion, when Skipper had been roughhousing with one of us, she jumped up so quickly once she spotted (or smelled) the encroaching bicyclist that she was off-balance even as she began her run. As noted, we'd been playing with Skipper beneath the pear tree and it just happened that the trajectory of Skipper's approach to the trespasser passed directly through the trunk of the tree. With eyes focused on her faux prey, the dog didn't even see the tree trunk and she slammed into it with a loud *thunk* and a yelp. She careened over backwards, regained her footing, refocused her eyes, and took off on a new angle, arrowing in on her target without seeming to be fazed in the slightest by her violent collision with an immovable object.

"Dumb mutt," we laughed, glad that she wasn't, apparently, hurt by the incident.

On cold days, with or without snow, Skipper was often let out to run and walk at her leisure. Paul Harry certainly didn't walk in the rain, nor in the snow, nor when it was too cold for his bones. Skipper was free to roam on these days and, when not in the presence of a master, she sometimes went foraging into neighbors' fields and nearby woods. She would return, invariably, with a coat full of burrs, all wet and dirty and stinking of some dead animal that she had either found that way or made that way. It was on these occasions that my father would look down on Skipper and bellow, "Look atcha, just look atcha. You dumb mutt!" Skipper would be relegated to the basement until one of us kids cut the burrs out of her hair and cleaned her up enough so that she wouldn't create a mess upstairs, where she loved to dwell with her human companions, no matter how often we called her dumb.

Skipper proved her intelligence in many ways, but perhaps most impressive were her circumventions of Dad's rules. The one about warming her paws on the carpet has already been mentioned, but it was also quite regularly that the family would return home from an evening out somewhere and, even though Skipper met us excitedly at the back door, it would not be long before one of us would locate a warm spot on one of the couches or chairs in the living room. A warm spot just about the size of our beloved little black cocker spaniel/schnauzer. I don't remember her ever being physically punished for these infractions, but I'm sure she was verbally scolded, quite inaccurately, by being told that she was a dumb mutt. I viewed such sly efforts to get around the established rules as evidence of her cleverness but, nonetheless, Dad, at least, would label her dumb.

Additionally, there existed a strict rule that Skipper was to stay downstairs while the family ate its evening meal. But Skipper was stealthy, and although Paul Harry's table seat provided him with a vantage point from which the whole kitchen was before him, our dog was often able to avoid his eye and sneak up to Mom's end of the table, obscured from Dad's view. Skipper knew that Mom didn't care if she sat near the table during dinner, and she would sit her butt down silently next to the more forgiving master, and remain silent and motionless as a stone, staring at Mother's food. Occasionally, Mom would surreptitiously drop a morsel of table scraps in Skipper's direction. The dog would catch the food, eat it and swallow it without making a sound. Sometimes she could last the entire duration of the meal without being caught. But often, Dad would crane his neck around to see where she was, because he was no fool either. He knew that she'd usually be sitting at the top of the stairs, staring at us while we ate. If she wasn't there, then she must be closer, my dad surmised. For certainly Skipper would never

willingly remain downstairs while the family ate a savory, delicious smelling meal. And he was right. Once he caught sight of her black fur he'd yell, "Get downstairs, you dumb mutt!"

Skipper would jump toward the stairwell, then slow down to a crawl with her tail between her legs.

"Get going! Go on!"

She'd move a little faster for just a second then creep to a crawl again, hoping that the meal would end and she'd be free to sniff around beneath the table for even the tiniest tasty morsel or that Dad would change his mind and welcome her over to the table. This last did not happen often, but it happened just enough that Skipper knew she didn't have to hurry away from the table. Usually, though, Dad would slam his fist, holler "Git!" and make as if he was getting up from the table. This would be enough to scare her off to the top stair, sure, but her intent stare would never waver from the food she coveted.

Craig and Jan grew up and got married and left the house. I went off to college and left the house. Thus, when Dad passed away, only Mom, David and Skipper still lived at 2061. That's how we thought of Skipper, a member of the family who "lived" at the Beardslee homestead. In the heart-wrenching days of grief that followed Dad's passing, when we were all together as family, Skipper was there, too, as a welcome part of the family, simultaneously consoling us and being consoled. Dogs supposedly are unable to feel a loved one's death as humans do, but nevertheless I felt that Skipper mourned Dad's death in her own way. She was old by that time, so maybe I was just imagining things, but she'd mope around the patio, head hanging, her face not displaying that perpetual

smile that happy dogs with snouts usually have. And she would bark, occasionally, at nothing, looking at nothing, walking slowly to and fro. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that Skipper realized that her walking companion of sixteen years was gone forever?

About a year later, Skipper, who had taken to sleeping outdoors because her tired, aching and arthritic body could barely climb stairs anymore, would wander once again to the road and to her demise. Mom, David, Jan and I grieved at least as intensely, if not as enduringly, for Skipper as we had for Dad. David was especially disturbed, for it had been he who had discovered our father's dead body when he came home from work one afternoon more than a year earlier. I was staying with friends in East Lansing at the time and Mom was at work. David discovered his dad's body, lying on a couch in front of the TV, which was on, but its sound had been muted. The remote control still lay on his chest. David called 911, attempted cardiopulmonary resuscitation and, failing to revive his father, fell into an unknowable pit of agony, grief and despair.

In later years, I am able to look back on the setting of Paul Harry's death and think proudly that my dad's last act on Earth was a defiant one, muting the commercials on TV, which he loathed. I will never have any idea how David can look back on that day at all, let alone what, if anything, he may have thought about the television remote control lying on his father's stilled chest. The thought that this evidence suggests that Dad must have died peacefully provided most of us with some relief, some gratitude, some surety that Paul Harry didn't suffer an excruciating, drawn-out death spasm. But who knows for David?

A mere seventeen months after enduring that horror, David came home from a second shift stint at work and saw Skipper's black, dead body lying next to the road.

"How come every time I come home I find somebody dead?"

The rest of us thought we could feel his pain, but we never would, we never could and we never will.

David buried Skipper that night beneath a tree up on the hill on which she had loved to frolic, run and walk with Dad. He marked the spot with a stone and for years after we would visit her gravesite, more frequently than we visited Dad's. After all, Dad's body is buried in the ground of a cemetery twenty miles away; Skipper's is just up the hill.

He beat the shit out of her. She, the "dumb mutt," taught him something about being humane. And that is how the lives of a man as important to me as my father and that of a simple canine will be forever inextricably linked.

13. “Mrs. Yott”

One of Paul Harry’s more amusing idiosyncrasies was his amazing aptitude for improperly pronouncing words, especially proper nouns. Equally amusing was his amazing *inability* to pronounce the words or names correctly, even when informed.

“It’s Mrs. Ott,” my sister, who worked for the woman, would tell him.

“Right. Mrs. Yott,” he’d reply, without the slightest smile or other indication that he was being facetious.

“No, Ott!” Jan would correct him.

And he would smile knowingly, nod his round head and walk away, saying, “Yott, Yott.”

It would drive Jan crazy.

Other expressions closer to my heart than Mrs. Ott Dad would also pronounce wrong, driving me equally crazy. But what still resonates with me is how I never knew, and never will know, whether his malapropisms were intentional. If they were, it was with unmatched stubbornness, for it was not as if he was resisting the proper pronunciation of a given word, it was, rather, as if he thought he was pronouncing it correctly. Yet, if this was the case, he must surely have known that he *wasn't* pronouncing the word correctly because, if he was, his family members would not have objected to his mispronunciations so stridently. If he did not intentionally mispronounce the words, or phrases, it was with equally unmatched innocence, for he never demonstrated that he could pronounce the words in any other way than that which he did. And he never got into arguments with anybody over it; he would just walk away, nod his

head and pronounce the word the way he pronounced it. Perhaps it was just one manifestation of Paul Harry's unique brand of dry humor. Perhaps he had some real pronunciation problems. Or perhaps it was a little bit of both. I'm not quite sure, and it puzzles me to this day, yet the memory of his subtle smile at such instances forces me to suspect that it was all an act, a consistently convincing act, sure, but an act nonetheless.

There were indeed statements that he made that he knew were wrong, but he would simply never say correctly. These particular statements were so clearly erroneous that even he knew they were so. Still, a kid growing up in the Beardslee household had to be prepared to learn a rather unorthodox vocabulary.

When my father and any of his kids and/or his wife were working on a project – putting something together, fixing a broken appliance, tidying up the garage or the basement, whatever – when we were through, we'd invariably hear the question, "Cow's ass?"

Alternatively, when the job was complete to my father's satisfaction, Dad often offered, "Good snuff." I didn't know what snuff was but at least I knew that he meant "Good enough." I also knew that "good enough" for my father was damn near to perfection by most other people's standards, so "Good snuff" was an expression that I greeted with great relief and much pleasure, for surely a job had been well done.

For the longest time, I believed there actually existed a place called "down there at the corner of walk and don't walk."

But that's just me, perhaps. The other kids were smarter. While I'd bumble about the garage wondering just what the hell our recent cleanup had to do with the butt of a cow, the other kids probably knew instantly that it was dad's way of saying, "How's

that?" He used it in so many ways, for example, when we played cards or other games and he made a move of which he was particularly proud, you could be fairly certain that he'd follow it up with "Cow's ass?" It was with time, I guess, and through awareness of context that I finally learned what he meant, too. Of course, I could never ask my father what he meant, nor my mother, and I'd be taking a great risk to ask one of my elder siblings, especially Jan, who would threaten to "tell on me." For we were not allowed to swear, and "ass" fell squarely within what my parents (or at least my mother) categorized as a swear word. So I'd be left endlessly wondering, until some magic day when the veil fell from before my eyes, and my slow, puny little brain finally figured it out.

Paul Harry had other insidious ways of confounding his fourth son with figures of speech. An expression that I know my father knew was incorrect, but which, as usual, he never would say correctly, was, "Urine, pee-pee." As with "Cow's ass?," I'd be forever trying to figure it out, although this expression was subtly different. I knew almost from the first time I heard it what he *meant*; I just didn't know what he was *saying*.

The only context he used it in was when we were playing a game. He said "Urine, pee-pee" when it was the next person's turn. That much I knew. So if he said it to me I knew that it was my turn to roll the dice, play a card, draw a card, make a bid, whatever. But for me, I was probably in high school before I ever learned the word "urine." It's one of those clinical words that describe unpleasant but necessary aspects of human anatomy. And it was never considered a swear word. It was just never *used*. We had always called it "pee" or "going number one." "Going number two" involved "poop," not excrement or feces. And of course "shit" *was* a swear word, so I couldn't say *that*. And my father rarely said "shit" unless it was preceded by "bull."

So, many years after first hearing the expression, I finally grasped that my father was saying either "Your turn, baby," or "Your turn, pee-pee," in which "pee-pee" was used as a term of endearment. Dad didn't say "baby," as far as I knew, unless he was referring to one of his whining children, as in "Shut up, you big baby." Maybe he used it for his wife outside of his kids' earshot but, whatever the case may be, "Urine, pee-pee" quite simply meant that it was time to take your turn.

How often did I hear, before we were to leave one place or another for a trip of some duration in the car, my father's whisper in my ear, "Gotta go pee-pee?" Countless times, so I knew what "pee-pee" meant. It was that other word, "urine," that I didn't know.

But Paul Harry knew, and he was just making a mild little joke of it, having some fun with language.

And there was the dreaded "Bode o' yas!"

When David and I, or Jan and I, or any pair of Beardslee children heard this bastardization of "Both of you," we knew we were in trouble. My mother might say, "Now, straighten up, both of you." But if Dad was doing the scolding, it was a gruff, "Mark! Jan! Front and center! Bode o' yas!" And obediently we'd take our place in front of him to receive whatever tongue-lashing we undoubtedly deserved.

Never let it be said that my father could not be vulgar when he felt like it or just for the hell of it. As with the aforementioned "urine," this next line also contained a clinical word from *Gray's Anatomy* with which I was unfamiliar; it was also a line I

understood whenever he used it, even though there was one word in the line that just didn't sound right, one word that was entirely unfamiliar to me.

"What's on the vagina for tonight?"

Whenever he asked this, we knew Paul Harry was in a pretty good mood, that he wanted to do something, and that he wanted everyone else's input into whatever that activity would be. He would change it up, depending on the time of day, sometimes asking what was on the vagina for today, or for this evening, or for this weekend, or now. I would learn in time that Dad *himself* wanted to be on the vagina (or, more accurately, *in* it, quite literally) all the time, but when I first heard this expression, the word "vagina" was far beyond my vocabulary's horizon. It mattered not, Dad would have his little joke, my mother's face would flush (although I never noticed this) and we'd all know that Dad wanted to do something and he was asking us what was on the agenda. I probably didn't even know the word "agenda" yet either – context can be an amazing thing.

In downtown Flint was a men's clothing store at which my mother liked her husband to shop. It was called "Hughes and Hatcher." But from my father it was always "Hughes and Hatchery." Not until I drove downtown as an adult and saw the sign for myself from across a parking lot did I see that the name of the store contained no "y."

In the Beardslee household, we often tuned the TV to baseball, basketball or football games. When an underdog basketball team badly swatted its opponent, or when an umpire made a questionable call at the plate that affected the game's outcome, or when a receiver misjudged, bobbled and dropped a crucial pass, Paul Harry often said, "It's transcribed." Once again, it was years before I learned what true transcription was. But I always knew what he meant: the game was fixed. I struggle yet today to find the

connection between “transcribed” and “fixed,” and I think I can make some sense of it. The words “planned” and “pre-planned” come to mind for the first syllable. “Prescribed” and “scripted” arise as possible explanations for the latter. No matter; I knew what he meant when he said it even if it does seem a bit ridiculous now.

I wonder to this day if my father ever said, “How’s that?”, “Your turn,” “Good enough,” “agenda,” “Hughes and Hatcher” or “scripted” in his entire life. I *know* he never said “Mrs. Ott.”

When I was about seven or eight, Paul Harry hit me with one of his infamous – and more vulgar – lines, one gleaned during his time in the Navy. “How’s the tip end of your hang-down?” he asked. All he meant was, “How are you doing?” or something equally benign, but even at that tender age I could sense something lurid in the question, and my father’s devilish grin helped to confirm it. It would be at least another dozen years before my dad explained that one to me, describing how sailors on shore leave would often contract gonorrhea from the local whores and the result would be a painfully hemorraghing penis. That line was how commanding officers welcomed sailors back to the ship, because if the tip ends of their hang-downs weren’t in normal condition, it was off to sick bay with them.

Another vulgar line was one he had apparently used on women to try to get them to have sex with him, a clever ploy designed to get around the necessity of using a condom, which my dad likened to having a wet sock on your dick. It would seem only appropriate that he would have most definitely *not* used this line on my mother, who had had sex with one man and one man only. Nonetheless, my mother had heard him use this

line, perhaps on those nights when she had had one of her convenient headaches. “The clap goes away but the blue balls don’t” was what my dad may have said to a potentially infected young woman he wanted to screw. Unsafe sex, yes, but at least it would be sex that would leave him with an empty sack and pain-free testicles. It meant that he was willing to risk gonorrhea in exchange for assuring that he would not have to suffer through those enduringly painful blue balls. Hell, masturbation doesn’t even get rid of blue balls because it’s too *painful* to masturbate. Somehow, it was comforting to learn from my father that the sexual maladies, pitfalls and frustrations I’ve experienced as a male were around in his days of yesteryear, and probably from time immemorial.

These examples do not address the conundrum presented at the start of this chapter, however. These have all been examples of lines used with strange words, lines that my father knew were grammatically, or syntactically, incorrect, but which he would use without fail. The other kind of lines was more enigmatic. Those words or phrases he used that were wrong, and he was told were wrong, but about which he would act as if it were impossible for him to say in any other fashion. Those words and phrases I wonder whether he was actually *capable* of saying in any other way.

A good example is “45 oat flakes.” Before my father left to go to work at “the shop” in the mornings, he would consume a bowl of his favorite cereal, a brand sadly unavailable today, called “fortified oat flakes.” General Mills manufactured them. And the rest of us loved those fortified oat flakes, too, but they came in rather small boxes and if my dad were to do an inspection and discover that some of his favorite cereal had been eaten by someone else, he’d demand, “Who’s been eating my 45 oat flakes?” Sometimes he’d snicker and claim, “There’s only 25 left,” so we knew that he knew he was making a

mistake, making a joke, having more fun with the English language. Still, to his dying day, I never heard him say the word “fortified.”

It was the same with one of my favorite television programs and motion picture series: the *Star Trek* franchise. Dad knew I loved *Star Trek* and anything to do with it, and whenever I’d say a line from one of the movies or talk about one of the characters or aliens from the program or tell him I was going with my friends to see the latest *Star Trek* film, he’d invariably say, “Star Track,” with a derisive snort.

“No, Dad, it’s *Star Trek*, trek, you know, like a long journey.”

“Mm-hmm,” he’d acknowledge. “Star Track.”

“Noooo,” I’d assert in frustration, “there’s no *track* to the *stars*! It’s a journey *among* the stars, a five year voyage through space, a star *trek*, get it?”

“Mm-hmm,” he’d repeat, not without a little whimsy at the discomfort he was causing his son. “I get it. A star track.”

By this time in our utterly pointless tete-a-tete, the short “a” sound in the word “track” had become a long, emphasized sound, with an irritating (intentional, of course) nasal quality.

“It’s not a star track,” I’d insist, imitating his silly nasal pronunciation and getting grumpier by the minute. “If you don’t know what I’m saying, just look it up in a dictionary. T-R-E-K, trek!”

“That’s right, tra-a-a-ck,” he’d say again.

Completely defeated, I’d walk away, pissed off. Of course, it’s funny now, but I would never, ever hear him say the word “trek,” let alone “Star Trek.”

It was during one of those uncomfortable sex talks during my early teens that Dad explained to me that women "administrated." Again, stupid me, a boy who believed what his father told him and who had not the slightest interest in researching such a disgusting topic, I would tread confidently through puberty believing that women administrate. Sure, some women, like those mean ladies who patrolled the hallways of my high school, actually *did* administrate, or so their titles said. Whatever their job titles, however, it would take me quite a while to learn that *all* women menstruated.

And poor Mrs. Ott. She is an important figure from our childhood. Jan worked as a bookkeeper for the fine lady's in-home business. She employed me to mow her lawn in the summers and, eventually, David would take over that job. Our two families lost touch when we all grew up and, for all I know, Mrs. Ott is in her own grave now. If so, somewhere in the afterlife a spirit which looks an awful lot like Paul Harry is able to torment her for all eternity by calling her Mrs. Yott.

14. “ ”

My father disapproved of talking too much. He did not want to appear ostentatious or like a know-it-all in front of others. He disapproved of his offspring talking too much, too, probably because he did not want to be viewed as a man who raised ostentatious or know-it-all type kids. My father *listened* to others, even the arrogant, and then went away with his own judgments about the topic of conversation and about the talkers themselves. Usually, the latter judgment would be negative because Paul Harry kept his judgments to himself and his family; he never made grandiose displays of his judgments, partly because he was a modest man, and he knew that there was an awful lot he didn’t know, but also because he disapproved of those who *did* make exaggerated dramas out of their own opinions, viewpoints or judgments. And there was no way, if he could help it, that any of *his* kids were going to grow up to be talkative, grandiose, exaggerated or melodramatic.

The title to this chapter speaks to that: nothing between the quotation marks means nothing was said, and this, precisely and paradoxically, was one of the most effective ways Paul Harry had of shutting his kids up when we became, in his opinion, too verbose.

I’ll not forget the scene when our new neighbors came over one evening for coffee and dessert after they had gotten settled in. The previous neighbors had been farmers, the ten-acre plot of land eventually became too small for them, and they moved away. I remember hearing whispers about marital infidelity, drunkenness and rumors of

divorce in that family, but those things were not discussed openly. Still, kids hear a lot. Especially when it is whispered.

Anyway, these new neighbors, a young childless duo named Pat and Ray, had great plans for how they wanted to use the land. Pat, who even to my young eyes, was startlingly attractive, raised horses, and she would use the barn as a stable and teach us how to ride if we wanted. She offered Jan a job, right there and then, feeding and watering the horses on weekday mornings.

Furthermore, Pat was an effusive and enthusiastic conversationalist. Ray was quiet, unassuming, friendly enough, but content, like my father, to remain in the background. With no children of her own, Pat took a great interest in the younger Beardslees and asked after our opinions, our likes and dislikes, our pursuits at school, our extracurricular interests and our attitudes about worldly matters with all apparent genuine earnestness. I was not accustomed to older people taking such an interest in me. My teachers never could because they had too many students; my mother was close to all her kids and knew our "dispositions" (one of my father's favorite words) quite well already, thank you; my older relatives and friends of my parents were all in one way or another distant, frightening or ignorant, and therefore not very talkative around children, or else they were imposing figures (Goddamn Pete, for example, used to say of my mother's strict, Christian father that he "scared the shit right down the legs of my pants."); and other adults were strangers and strangers were not to be talked to, or so we were taught in our somewhat isolated existence on our rural homestead.

So, to have this woman, Pat, talking with us so intimately and interestedly was an entirely new experience for me: I latched right onto it. She and I shared stories, I opened

up about happenings and friends at school about which or about whom my parents may even have been unaware. I listened to her talk with great enthusiasm about her life, too. She had led a fascinating one, filled with travels and adventures and characters entirely unimaginable to me, which led to her marrying relatively late in life. (We learned later, amidst more hush-hush scandalous whispers, that she never married at all; she and Ray were simply living together, another one of those topics my family didn't discuss openly but, again, kids hear a lot. Especially when it is whispered.)

I was not in any manner intimidated by these facets of her character or her life. Rather, I was immensely fascinated, transfixed almost, for, let's face it, I had lived, at least up until that point, a rather sheltered existence. Part of my attraction to this woman was how she talked with me, respecting my viewpoints, trying to understand me and urging me to express myself. Unlike most adults, she never talked down to me or treated me as a child. To be in her presence seemed to set me free, in an odd, childish sort of way, and I reveled in it, talking animatedly well into the dark hours of the evening, as my mother served second helpings of dessert. This was new territory for me, and, in retrospect, I probably responded so agreeably to Pat because that would be the kind of person, female or male, to which I would gravitate as an adult. But that evening, I wasn't thinking about the future, I was just thinking about what next I could say to this woman and how she would respond with approving encouragement.

Through all of this conversational tumult, I had neglected to even look at my father, who sat at one end of the large kitchen table speaking softly with Ray. When I finally did catch his eye – although I'm sure it was more him catching *my* eye – he gave me a gesture with which I was all-too-familiar. Using his forefinger and his thumb, he

briefly clamped his own lips together, avoiding Ray's notice, but making it abundantly clear to me that I'd better put a lock on my mouth and shut it up or else I'd be in for it later. The effective gesture was not lost on me and Pat became suddenly much less interesting, or so it may have seemed to her. She indeed was decidedly *not* less interesting, but I had just been silently scolded, so our conversation trailed off. Although Pat had spoken to Jan, Craig and even young David with equal vigor as she had to me, I was the one who responded most fervently, with uncharacteristic liveliness. Hell, I was the kid my elder siblings nicknamed "Sad-Sack" because I spent so much time moping, appearing serious and gloomy. But growing up is partly a revelation of oneself to oneself, and I had been bitten by a great big self-esteem bug that night, a bug named Pat, and I would never be the same, despite Dad's disapproval.

Not too much later, after feigning the yawns of a couple who know they are keeping friends up too late, Pat and Ray slipped out into the night and back to their house, the one in which they were "shacking up," as my father would have described their living arrangement.

And not too much after that, Dad growled, "Mark, front and center!"

Whenever he used this military expression, I knew I was in for a scolding. Obediently, I faced my father, front and center.

"What was all that about?" he asked accusingly.

I knew better than to play dumb, so I defended myself with a timid, "I was just talking."

"Just talking? You talked more than anyone. And louder than anyone. It's embarrassing when you talk like that. You don't know those people." It was clear that

he was trying to make *me* feel embarrassed, when it was really *he* who was embarrassed. But it worked: I felt ashamed, like I had made myself a fool in front of an unrelated adult, one whom I really respected and admired, no less.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, hanging my head and feeling genuinely bad.

"You better be," my father warned. "Just don't do that again."

"Okay," I responded meekly, glad that the scolding was over and that it wasn't worse.

I went to bed that night figuring I'd never speak to Pat again, or at least not at that level of intensity. Happily, that prediction turned out to be wrong, but Pat and Ray would only be in our lives for a couple of years. They would break up, move away, cut off ties with the neighbors, sell the house and, in the process, we would learn that the two had indeed never been married. That it bothered our sensibilities (or, at least those of my mom, and some of the other neighbor ladies) probably was embarrassing to Pat and Ray.

These days, when I think about the scolding I got after Pat and Ray left that night, I wonder how necessary it was. My father's gesture of disapproval, the one that told me to close my damned mouth, to keep my lips pressed together, "to just quit talking, for Christ's sake, to button my lip, that's *enough*," inspired sufficient fear in and of itself to produce the desired effect.

I'm sure I have never known another man who could say so much by saying so little or, surely, by saying absolutely nothing at all.

15. "You Go to Hell for Lying just as You Do for Swearing."

Dad was not a very Christian man. Indeed, he was probably not a Christian at all. Oh, he'd make us kids go to church even though we hated it, and he went to church, occasionally, and he'd say the Lord's Prayer. But he did all this for Mom's sake.

If Paul Harry had had religion when he was young, it had probably been scared out of him. Along with the stories of how when he went to school he had to walk five miles uphill both ways (this, of course, put all the Beardslee kids on notice that we were never, ever, to miss the school bus because, oh, what a drama it would be), he told us stories of how when he was young and went to church, the minister preached fire and brimstone. His mother's form of Protestant Christianity was, so Dad said, the Free Methodist sort. I never understood what was so "free" about it because, according to my dad's claims, *Free* Methodists were hardly *free* to do *any*thing. The preacher would warn his family's congregations every Sunday about the host of activities that would send them straight to hell, if not bring hellfire right down upon their living heads.

Jesus, it was scary to hear those stories. It seemed there were so many things you'd go to hell for that the only thing you actually *could* do was work. You'd go to hell if you smoked, to hell if you drank, to hell if you talked back to your parents, to hell if you spoke at the dinner table, to hell if you didn't say your prayers before each meal and before each evening before you went to bed, to hell if you slept in, to hell if you stayed up too late, to hell if you played cards, to hell if you gambled, to hell if you danced, to hell if you went to the movies, to hell if you listened to music, to hell if you associated with Negroes or homosexuals, to hell if you didn't get married, to hell if you didn't have

kids, to hell if you didn't beat them once you had them, to hell if you didn't make them work hard, to hell if *you* failed to work hard, to hell if you ate too much, to hell if you didn't get dirty while you worked, to hell if you didn't clean up afterwards, to hell if you took the Lord's name in vain, to hell if you said anything bad about anyone else (except Negroes and homosexuals, of course), to hell if you said any dirty word, to hell if you said "hell," even. And this didn't even scratch the surface because there was the whole series of carnal sins that would send you straight to hell, too, like masturbation, fornication and contraception, things I didn't even begin to understand until I was about thirteen, masturbation being the first, of course. When my father spoke of the old-time preachers to whose sermons he was subjected as a child, it seemed to me that you could be sent to hell if you "farted crossways," as my dad liked to say as a euphemism for making a mistake.

Nonetheless, by the time my dad was an adult, a husband and a father, he had his own code of ethics and expectations for proper behavior, certainly he did, but not because he was a Christian. Three of his brothers were apparently so terrified of Christianity that they turned to drink to get away from it and one of those turned to a life of crime on top of that. Dad was no criminal, and no drunk, but neither was he a Christian. That extreme "Free" Methodism had served simply to turn Paul Beardslee reasonably away from organized religion. The only reason we kids had to go to church, to the vastly more forgiving and loving brand of Methodism called "United," was because my father wanted to please my mother. And although he may have been turned off religion in his youth, the woman he married hadn't been, and hell itself would indeed freeze over before he would do anything that might cause his beloved wife to fear that her children might get

started on a highway to hell, a road to perdition, a surefire damnation, whatever one might choose to call it. And the best way to assure his wife of that was to strictly enforce Sunday morning church attendance, even though Dad himself, just as often as not, stayed home. Whatever his own beliefs, my dad would never do a thing to undermine my mother's Christianity, my mother's faith or my mother's fierce determination "to raise her children in the way that they should go," as it apparently says somewhere in the Bible.

Except sometimes.

I can only speak for myself, but I hated Sunday mornings more even than school day mornings. Truth be told, I hated mornings, period, still do, but what was particularly excruciating about Sunday mornings was how my mother transformed into a fearsome female version of her father, a frighteningly strict and unforgiving creature, a terrifying apparition straight out of my father's childhood church. As if she were exorcising the guilt she felt from the previous night's sexual antics (as an adult I learned that my parents were "doing it" all the time), my mother approached Sunday mornings with a vengeance. She would turn into a horrifying monster, lacking in compassion, sharp-tongued, demanding perfection of her children in everything from the clothes we wore, to how promptly we moved, to how clean we had scrubbed ourselves the night before, to the parts in our hair, to the way we stood, to the tones of our voices. It was as if we were going to meet God Almighty himself and she would broach no discussions over her harsh, hurried commands.

"But, Mom, I'm still tired," I complained.

“Don’t you talk back to me, young man,” Mom quickly shot down at me. “You hurry up and get those dress pants on!”

Referring to the red ribbons in her hair, Jan asked, “Mom, is this okay?”

“No!” decreed Mom without hesitation. “You know I don’t like red on Sundays! Wear your pink ribbons!”

“All right,” Jan sighed, turning away to walk back to her room.

“Don’t you sass me, young lady!”

“Mom, I can’t get this belt to tighten,” Craig informed her cautiously. “I’m getting too big.”

“Well, you don’t have to wear *those* pants,” Mom quickly determined. “Wear your brown ones that don’t have any belt loops. Mark, would you hurry up and get dressed! I’m not telling you again!”

And when I finally arrived in the kitchen to have some toast and juice thrust down my gullet, she noticed that I hadn’t washed behind my ears very well the night before. Mom’s response to such a discovery was as noisy and frightful, or so I thought, as if the devil himself were walking through our backdoor right then and there.

“Mark!” she shouted. “Look at all this scurvy dirt on the back of your neck! Right around to your ears! This is *filthy*! You get in that bathroom and scrub that off you right now! And hurry up or we’re going to be late!”

As I hurried to the bathroom, I noticed my dad sitting calmly in his chair, watching the news, or maybe cartoons. I’d look at him longingly, despairing in the sure knowledge that he would be no ally against my mother’s Sunday morning wrath.

Scrubbing frantically at the back of my head with a soapy washcloth, I dreaded the sound of my mother's quick footfalls approaching the bathroom door.

"Hurry up!" she demanded. Then, frustrated, she cried, "Oh, let me do it!" And she grabbed the washcloth and scrubbed me until my neck was raw. "Well, I never!" she murmured under her breath as she worked. "There! Now get in your room, put on your nice striped shirt and button it all the way to the top! Then get back in here and comb your hair! And hurry up! If we're late, so help me…!"

Mornings like this scared me away from the church. Hell, the minister may not have preached fire and brimstone, but the way my mother ordered me about on those awful Sunday mornings, there was no doubt in my mind that hell awaited me, and soon, for some ridiculous reason like having a hair out of place. Or, worse, arriving at the church sanctuary after the service had already begun. When *this* happened, and it did happen, all too often, it was the sin to end all sins, and it was invariably my fault.

Standing outside the sanctuary doors, hearing the solemn strains of the organist playing the prelude or whatever they call a religious call to order, I shuddered with fright, for I knew that the ushers would not let us in to go sit in our pew until the music had ended and there was a brief pause between the never-seeming-to-end "Aahhhhhhhhhh-mehhhhhhhhhhhnn!" and the first solemn words out of the solemn preacher's solemn mouth.

"Do you see what you've caused to happen?" Mom hissed at me as we waited in the empty hallway outside the sanctuary, holding David in one arm and Jan by the other hand. My head would just hang, and my little brain expected that at any moment I would be physically dragged down into some horrifying fiery depth somewhere beneath the

church. “I’m so embarrassed!” she vented, as if God himself had invited us to his house and I had intentionally made us late. “You just get in that bathroom with your big brother, comb your messy hair one more time and go pee if you have to because you’re not going to get up and go during the service! Hurry up now and I mean it!”

Craig rushed me off to the bathroom, helped me comb my hair, asked me if I had to pee, and I was unsure because I was so scared. No wonder I ended up growing into one of those adult males with a shy bladder, the kind of guy who finds it hard to start the stream in the presence of other men. I equated having to go pee *later*, like in thirty minutes, thereby having to get up during the service, to my mother’s eternal mortification, with certain damnation. Further, I equated going pee *right now*, with my big brother Craig waiting patiently behind me, with fear, fear that if I didn’t hurry up now because she meant it and get that piss out of me in damned short order, I would make the Beardslee family even later, also to my mother’s eternal mortification, because if that happened we’d have to wait until the middle of the *next* hymn (oh, horror of horrors) to enter the sanctuary. So the question became to pee or not to pee, and more often than not, I’d choose to hold it, usually quite unaware of whether I had to go or not, so gripped was I by fear, and not just any fear, but that indefinable, eternal, dread fear a wide-eyed child harbors of the mystic nether-regions of the impeccably frightening Christian religion.

But then there were those occasional, just occasional, mind you, but oh-so-wonderful Sunday mornings when Dad, while watching his kids being swept up in their mother’s weekly pious propriety, would recall, no doubt, the religious terror of his own childhood,

and say, “Why don’t you kids stay home with me today and watch Abbott and Costello?” Before Mom could lodge her protest, which she always did, but always in vain once “the king of the house” had spoken, we kids would yell, “Yay!” and curl up on the couch with Dad in whatever disarray we happened to be in at the moment when our father said those dear, delightful, relief-inducing words. Mom would storm out of the house and go to church alone and I, for one, never gave church a second thought the rest of the day. My dad had sailed into the gathering gloom of holy battle and, with one brief stroke of his tongue, mercifully saved the day.

I do not say my dad was not Christian just because of these occasional respites. It was in my young adulthood that my dad revealed to me his belief that dying was just a natural thing, that humans, like all animals, would just drop into a deep, dreamless sleep and never awaken. He often said that death is just a part of life, an image I could never quite grasp until I reached adulthood. My dad’s favorite television programs were those about animals, like “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom” and “Nature.” It is probable that his philosophy grew, in some measure, out of perceiving humans as just a higher sort of animal. When the natural lifespan of an animal was reached, it would simply go quietly into oblivion, and it seems to me that Paul Harry thought that the inevitable end result was no different for humans than it was for animals.

As peaceful as this may have sounded to me and to the rest of us as we reached the cognitive levels at which we could ponder such matters, it was also unsettling, especially so because we lived with death always hovering over my father’s shoulder for the last fourteen years of his life, to think that when he died, we’d never see him again. I

suppose my mother still believes she'll meet back up with her dear husband in heaven someday, but I don't. Dad lives on in this world only so long as the memory of him stays alive. That's what he thought; it's what I think, too.

Maybe he believed in reincarnation. He often told us that he wanted to come back as a bird, imagining life as a bird to be among the heights of freedom and peace and joy. To soar this way and that, with no need for an inconvenient contraption like an engine, just your wings upon which to fly away from any danger or discomfort. To fly high, to fly low, with no boundaries, no roads, no obstructions.

To Dad, such images captured freedom incarnate.

It was not long after his passing that we Beardslees began to see the lone Canadian goose pass by overhead at curious times and in curious manners. Canadian geese fly in flocks, so to see a lone one is rare, but flying over our house the day of Dad's funeral? Flying over us in subsequent years as we visited his gravesite? Flying over virtually every major gathering of the Beardslees since he died? Flying over just as our mother and some of the rest of us begin to reminisce about Dad? It has occurred so often we've come to expect it. But when I really think about it, I shudder, and I wonder.

Although no Christian, it was not as if my father had no sense of justice or righteousness or forgiveness or joy. It was simply that, rationally speaking, and in the spirit of humanism, he believed that "heaven on Earth" was a concept only man could create, not some vengeful, jealous, angry god. For it was not just occasionally that I would watch the news with my father and we'd see and hear about all the destruction and hatred and violence in the world and my Dad would shake his head sadly and say, "If we'd put half

as much money and effort and time into trying to help one another as we do trying to hurt one another, we'd truly have heaven on Earth." To a man who had fought in one of those wars, and who never liked to talk about it except to say it was the most terrifying thing to have to endure, I must defer. Who am I to disagree? My dad stared death in the face as a teenager, lived fruitfully as a married man with children, then lived his final "disabled" years once again in the face of death. I'd guess he knows, he knew, more about death than I. Or even Mom.

Church attendance eventually became a much less calamitous affair than it was in my very young days. Dad and David and I would join our mother as often as not, and the mornings became less stressful for all of us as my younger brother and I aged into our teens and young adulthood. Mom would say that all she could do was to try to instill Christian virtues in us as children but that when we became adults her responsibility to raise us as Christians ended; it was up to us then what we decided to believe.

This recollection of churchgoing brings to mind a rather humorous and vivid anecdote, one that takes place in the very United Methodist church sanctuary of my youth, the same place my mom still goes most every Sunday morning. This recollection must be relayed if for no other reason than to demonstrate Paul Harry's humor and lack of reverence for churchgoing. It also makes me chuckle heartily to this day.

One Sunday, my brother David and I were in church with our parents. We'd been taught to sing along with the hymns, whether we could actually sing or not, and thank God there was a choir, for white Methodists pretty much suck when it comes to holding a tune. Dad would always stand respectfully during hymns but he wouldn't even attempt

to sing along. I don't think he ever sang a note in his life. Singing was not something he did. Music was not among his talents, although he appreciated country and classical forms.

But on this particular Sunday morning, one of us, David or I, looked over at our dad and started cracking up, elbowing the other to look. There Dad stood and, in all earnestness, he was opening and closing his mouth along with the words of whatever hymn was being played at that moment, without the slightest bit of sound emanating from his vocal chords. I guess he just wanted to look as ridiculous as everyone else, and he succeeded, for not a hint of humor was betrayed on that face, with its mouth opening and closing senselessly, just as the mouths of all the rest of the attendees opened and closed senselessly, sanctimoniously proclaiming holy vows that were forgotten as quickly as they were vocalized.

To this day, David occasionally joins my mother in church, and when the time comes to sing a hymn, he can be seen mimicking the earnest mockery of my father, who was a merry old soul after all.

It is high time to explain the significance of the line at the head of this chapter, the one in which my dad says, "You go to hell for lying just as you do for swearing." This is something my father would say to my mother whenever he would disagree with her about something or whenever he thought she was saying something untrue and he thought she knew it. Remembering as an adult, it's terribly simple, but for the first several years in which I heard them spoken, they would confound the hell out of me.

Usually, my dad would say this to my mother over dinner table conversation. It was at the dinner table that my dad strictly enforced the rule that we were always to say grace before eating and that we were always to close our eyes while so saying:

"Thank you for the world so sweet, thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the birds that sing, thank you, God, for everything. Amen."

This was one of my mother's favorites. Later in adolescence, I would question it. "Thank you for *every*thing?" I asked, incredulous. "Even for war?"

My mom wouldn't argue. She'd just say, "Shut up! It's grace."

Then there was this one:

"God is great, God is good, and we thank You for our food. By His hands we all are fed; give us this day our daily bread. Amen."

I didn't question this one; I just didn't believe it.

These recitations of grace pleased my mother a great deal, but what did not please her was that, as enforcer of the "closed eyes" rule, her husband never truly joined us in prayer. If one of us dared open our eyes, or even peek one eye open during grace, we were sure to see our dad's eyes, both of them open wide, staring accusingly at us, as if we had just trespassed against God or heaven or Mom. And, just as surely, when the prayer was over, Dad would tell.

"Mom, David peeked," or "Harriet, Mark didn't close his eyes." But this was not big trouble around our house, we kids knew; it was just friendly banter.

"Well, how do you know my eyes were open?" I would ask. "Yours must have been open, too. Mom, Dad's eyes were open during grace." I would mockingly "tell on" my dad.

"Paul," my mother would say, with a tsk-tsk sound and feigned disapproval.

That's usually when my dad would pull out his hypocritical "Do as I say, not as I do" line.

Anyway, as a child, the title line for this chapter caused me much confusion and dismay because, by saying, "You go to hell for lying just as you do for swearing," my father *was* swearing, which to me, at that time, was worse than lying. He was saying "hell," one of the big no-no words around the Beardslee household. As a result, I was so concerned about my father saying a swear word, and so certain that he, according to my mother's principles, would go to hell for *saying* it, that I never bothered to consider whatever it was my father was accusing my mother of *lying* about.

Oh, indeed, baffled and dimwitted was I.

Additionally, for reasons stretching back to when my mother was a little girl, the word "liar" was, to my mother, a swear word, and many were the times that we children had our mouths washed out with soap for saying the word. Even other forms of the word, like "lie" or "lying" or "lied" would make my mother's eyebrows arch, and she would wait with bated breath, staring threateningly at us, to make sure we didn't say the dreaded "liar" word. Still, we'd be admonished to be careful. My mother preferred the word "fib" and all *its* other forms.

So, there I am, a little kid sitting at the dinner table with my family. There's my dad saying something to my mom which contains not one, but *two*, swear words: "hell" and "lie." But it's my *father's* tone of voice which carries the accusation of wrongdoing, such serious wrongdoing, in fact, that he thinks my mother is going all the way to *hell*, no less. Would my parents *ever* be consistent in their definitions of right and wrong? That

is what the confused little kid wondered. He also wondered, and achingly worried over, precisely *which* of his parents actually *was* going to hell.

Realizing as I do now that the line was simply a manifestation of my father's wry regard for religion, just as other lines demonstrated his wry regard for most everything else in life, I feel I must have been an extraordinary dullard as a child and wonder how I ever earned the label "smart" at school. However high my grades may have been, the truly smart one between Paul Harry and I was my father for, not only did his swearing rarely surpass the threshold of "hell" and "bullshit," most important, he certainly did *not* lie.

16. "You Birdbrain! You're Dumber than a Doornail."

The child protective service agencies of today might look askance on the way Paul Harry spoke to his children, especially when he was mad at us or frustrated with us or just plain pissed off, but for us Beardslee children, being called a "birdbrain" and told that we were "dumber than a doornail" were just facts of life, a part of growing up, every bit as essential as being tucked into bed at night, or partaking of the evening meal together, or doing the dishes afterward. We thought nothing of it. No, we didn't *like* it, but we accepted it and figured we deserved it. We were made at least as uncomfortable to see our father in such a state of agitation that he berated us with these lines as we were uncomfortable at being singled out for such belittlement.

Somewhere between my tender years of five and ten Dad and I were alone in the house working on some project. This particular project involved electrical wires, some minor drilling and some screwing and hammering. As always, I was the go-fer, running to get things my dad needed. I was a terrible go-fer, for I almost always came back with the wrong thing, or else I couldn't find the thing, whatever thing it was that Dad required.

We were in the basement for this particular project and if Dad had to send me outside to retrieve something, he'd describe precisely where it was by moving his body in the various directions I would have to take to get to the item. For example, he'd turn in a 180 degree circle to describe reaching the stairway out of the basement. He would, for clarity's sake, hold his forearms out from his sides with his elbows planted firmly against those sides. His hands would be held with palms facing each other, as if he were approximating the length of a fish. Then he'd say patiently, "Go up the stairs, go outside,

turn left," and he'd turn 90 degrees to his left. "Walk to the garage, go in the door, turn right," and he'd turn back 90 degrees to his right. "Go to the workbench and then, when you're standing in front of the workbench" (this required another 90 degree turn to his right), "open the bottom door on the left, reach behind the stuff I use for changing the oil, and get the box that has the drill in it. Not the big box behind it, but the little box with the drill in it. When you find it, bring it to me."

Easy, precise instructions, right? Well, never for me. Because by the time I opened the bottom left door of the workbench, there were *three* boxes between the oil can and the back wall. Afraid I might try to lift one of them and spill whatever was inside, breaking it into a million pieces (an unfortunate occurrence to which I was all-too-prone), I ran back to the entrance to the house and yelled, "Which box is it in?"

"I told you," he shouted back, frustration already rising within him. "The first box behind the oil can!"

"Okay." I ran back out to the garage and collected the first box behind the oil can and carried it down to Dad.

It was, of course, the wrong box.

"These are garbage bags," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Can't you read?"

"But it was the first box behind the oil can."

"Well, I didn't mean *this* box, you birdbrain! Get the one behind it, but not the great big one."

"Okay."

I ran back out to the garage, pulled out the indicated box, noticed the drill bits inside, and chided myself for being so stupid. I put the garbage bag box back away, thinking that I chose that box because I was following Dad's directions exactly. But, somehow, we just saw things differently. To Paul Harry, the box with the garbage bags wasn't a box. It was an item called the garbage bags. To me, however, it was a third box. Literally, I was right. But for practical purposes, I should have understood, in my father's estimation, that the garbage bag container, although boxy and made from cardboard, was not what *he* would call a box.

Back in the basement with the drill, Dad prepared the tool for whatever purpose he had in mind. I just watched or held things, usually both.

"Okay, now I'm going to need a big crescent wrench, and a hammer," Dad said.

My eyes bulged because I didn't know what a crescent wrench was, but I waited, assuming he'd tell me precisely where it was. Dad went through his directional rigmarole again and then said, "Facing the workbench, look to the back wall." (90 degree turn to the left.) "Between the big saw and screwdrivers, that's where the crescent wrench is. The hammer is right in front of you as you face the workbench." (90 degree turn back to the right.) "Make sure you bring the one without the curved pry bar, the one with the straight pry bar, the one with the brown handle."

Okay, easy enough, I was thinking. I got the hammer, no problem. But the crescent wrench, hmmm, there's more than one, I thought. "Between the big saw and the screwdrivers." Okay, there's this smaller saw, so that can't be it, but then there's two wrenches. One's brown and little and doesn't look like it could do a very heavy job.

After all, he had said, “a big crescent wrench.” The other thing is big and heavy and it’s a wrench all right. I’ll bet that’s what he needs.

All that pondering took too much time. I heard my dad shout from the house, “Hurry up, will ya?”

I jumped, grabbed the hammer, heaved a pipe wrench off the garage wall and hurried down to find out if I did good or not. I quickly discovered that I did not.

“What are you doing with a pipe wrench?” my dad asked. “I said the crescent wrench! What good is that thing gonna do me?”

“Is the crescent wrench the little brown one right next to the saw?”

“Yes, yes, yes. I said between the big saw and the screwdrivers. Give me that hammer.”

It was easier not to try to explain that there were two items between the saw and the screwdrivers, because that would have been “obvious” to my dad. I handed him the hammer (at least I’d got *that* right, I thought, trying to keep my heart in the project) and ran back upstairs and outside to put away the pipe wrench and grab the little brown wrench.

This done, my dad went back to work, pounding and reaming, grunting and sweating.

After a while, he said, “Okay, now I need a Phillips head screwdriver. Do you know what a Phillips screwdriver is?”

“No,” I said, embarrassed.

“Bullshit,” he muttered. “There are two kinds of screwdrivers. You know where they are on the back wall, don’t you?”

"Yes."

"The Phillips heads are on the left, the regular flat head ones are on the right. Get me one, oh, right about in the middle."

"Okay," and I ran again, enthused at this, grabbed the screwdriver in the middle (there were five sizes of each, so *that* part was easy) from the group on the left-hand side and ran back downstairs proudly.

My dad took one look at the proffered tool, shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I said a Phillips!" he shouted, beginning to lose his patience. "Don't you know what a Phillips is, you birdbrain?"

"So it's the other kind, then," I said, disappointed more in myself than in my dad for screwing it up. If my dad had to go find something himself, that was usually a bad scene.

"Yes, it's the other kind, what do you think? Sometimes, I swear, Mark, you haven't got a brain in your head."

Again, I figured it was pointless trying to explain that this screwdriver had in fact come from the set on the left, knowing that would just irritate him further. And I was angry at myself for not knowing the difference between a Peter?…a Paul?…a Pull-up?…well, whatever it was called kind of screwdriver and a regular one.

This correction was fairly simple and I ran downstairs with the correct tool and listened to my dad grunt and groan some more.

"Bullshit," my dad said, shining a flashlight into the opening in the ceiling he was working on. "I'll need the wire cutters. They're upstairs in the junk drawer with the blue handle." He was rushing his words so I ran up the stairs knowing it was imperative that I

get that tool down there post-haste. But the only thing with a blue handle in the junk drawer was a small screwdriver. That much I knew. But it had a blue handle and that's what he'd asked for and maybe this screwdriver could do something else, too, like, what was it he had said? Cut something?

So I ran downstairs with the blue-handled screwdriver. My dad, perched in a precarious position on a small stool, saw what I had brought, shook his head in disgust, climbed slowly down from the stool and started insulting me.

"Does this look like a pair of wire cutters to you?" I couldn't respond or I'd cry. "Huh?!? For crying out loud, Mark, I think you're doing this just to irritate me."

Then I did start to cry. "But it's got a blue handle," I blurted.

"Blue handle, orange handle, whatever. I need wire cutters!" He trudged up the stairs to get them himself. "And stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about."

When he came back, I noticed that the wire cutters had *yellow* handles. If he'd only said that, I thought, I wouldn't be crying and he wouldn't be mad.

"Dumber than a doornail," he muttered to himself as he went back to work. "Doesn't know wire cutters from a screwdriver." The rest of the project my father carried out alone. I stood by in case he had something more he wanted me to do, but he didn't. He apparently finished the project successfully without my help.

But there *was* one more thing.

"Now, I want you to go upstairs in Mom's closet and get the vacuum sweeper so I can clean this mess up," Dad ordered.

I stood there not breathing, eyes bulging in fear, motionless. My trepidation must have been all-too-apparent because my dad sighed and said, "Don't tell me you don't

know what a vacuum sweeper is!" There was a hint of incredulity in his voice, but also a very real threat, as if to warn me that I *better* know what a vacuum sweeper was or I'd be in for it. I stood there a bit longer, swaying in fear, thinking furiously. I knew what a *vacuum* was, and a vacuum *cleaner*. But I'd never heard it referred to as a vacuum *sweeper*. Was he talking about something else entirely? Something *similar* to a vacuum?

Mortified, confused and almost too terrified to speak, I just stood there, stupidly staring at my incensed father. Dad pressed the question. "You mean to tell me you don't know what a vacuum sweeper is?"

I had no choice. I had to tell him the truth.

In a small voice I admitted, "No."

"By God, don't you know anything? Haven't you got a brain in your head?" He strode past me on his way upstairs, once again doing my job. He brought down the vacuum cleaner, or vacuum, as Mom always called it, and she was the one who usually used it. "This thing here, Mark, and I know you've seen it, is a vacuum sweeper. I also know you know how to use it. So clean up this mess and bring it back upstairs when you're done."

And as he plodded up the stairs, he muttered, "Dumber than a doornail!"

Some folks might find the above story as indicative of emotional or verbal abuse. Maybe it was. But I miss it, I tell you that. I'd give anything in the world to hear my father call me a birdbrain again.

Just like his own father, mine did not physically abuse us. We received spankings and surreptitious pulls on the hair, but when he took us downstairs to give us a whipping,

he'd more often than not tell us to start crying because that's what my mom expected to see when we got back upstairs. Or he'd explain, to me at least, for I can't speak for the other kids, just why it was that he was angry at me, and make sure I understood. His bark was always worse than his bite, as they say. His deep, gruff, loud, demanding and often berating voice was enough to scare the living hell out of us anyway. We didn't *need* to be whipped.

My two eldest brothers would disagree with me on the part about the spankings. They claim that he'd whip them with a strap very hard when they misbehaved, that we younger kids had it easy. And maybe my dad did mellow with age, or perhaps simply tire of meting out physical punishment.

But Dennis and Steve would not disagree with the part about being called a birdbrain and accused of being dumber than a doornail. That part of Dad's discipline, at least, spanned the generations.

17. "I Like Blue No Matter What Color It Is."

Like most men, my father harbored a healthy interest in sex. Like most kids, I never realized it.

I've already alluded a number of times to the frequency with which my parents had sex. Only because of a series of talks I had with my father once I had grown up and moved out of the house do I know this. Also, in her late years, my mother herself has admitted to my father's fondness for fucking, and that, yes, indeed, although they tried hard to hide it from the kids, they had sex pretty much as often as they could.

Dad had a particular interest in mammary glands, of which my mother was well-endowed, happily, no doubt, for him. In numerous photos taken over the years of his marriage, he can be seen trying to catch a peek of his wife's breasts, always with that silly, mesmerized smile of delight plastered on his face. I guess he was what we might call a "tit man" these days, not so much an "ass man" or a "leg man," although he was, again, happily married to a woman with long legs. I don't know what my mother's butt looked like when she was younger; there are no pictures of her butt that I have seen. But in the photos I have seen of Harriet in her youthful days, she was quite a "looker," as they may have said in those days. I would guess that my father liked her butt well enough, too, and that it pleased him as much as other aspects of my mother's feminine endowments. I guess this because of a family story, one that has been handed down to us Beardslee children and that may or may not be true. I don't care about its truth because it's a good story.

It is said that on one of my father's trips to one set of his grandparent's homes, the set who lived in the Flint vicinity, as my mother did, it just happened that my mother was helping a neighbor pick asparagus. This was before my father joined the Navy, so neither of them could have been much older than in their mid-teens. Apparently, the first glimpse my father had of my mother was of her ass, as she bent over in the field next door to pluck an asparagus sprig. She was situated in such a position that the crack of her ass was pointed right at my father, the position my father called the "picture-taking" position.

"Look out, she's taking your picture," he used to tell anyone who happened to be in her line of fire whenever she bent over.

"Tsk, Paul," was my mother's invariable reply to such remarks.

The story goes that my father said at that moment, before he even saw her face (for she could have been "uglier than a hedge fence," in Paul Harry parlance), "That's the woman for me." He had probably seen the face of the girl who was to become his wife and my mother before, since their respective parents had been neighbors, after all, so he would have known quite well that she was not "uglier than a hedge fence," but we'll never know for sure, because this is the story of the first time my father saw my mother. He went on to flirt with her, to court her, to carry a picture of her with him when he went to the Pacific, telling his fellow sailors that "this," showing my Mom's miniature portrait, this was the woman he was going to marry. (The only other picture I've heard that my dad had with him on the ship was one of Rita Hayworth, a bountifully buxom beauty from the big screen, and appropriately admired as such by my father.) And about a year after he returned from that conflict, the one in which the use of a couple of atomic bombs

probably spared his life and allowed me to come into existence, Paul Harry Beardslee did indeed marry Harriet Marie O'Dell.

I can wax proud about my father's Navy service. As emotional as some folks get about this kind of thing, I don't get that way and neither did my father. Nor did my mother. But it was something to be proud of. Hell, the man was only seventeen when he proclaimed that he was willing, yes, please send me to my death, put me on a boat and send me into the jaws of the Japanese Empire. To be honest, by the time Paul Harry joined the Navy, it was pretty certain that he'd be on the winning side. But that certainty came from the fact that there were so many like him, so many who would gladly give their lives on the shores of Normandy or, in my father's case, somewhere on the shores of Honshu.

Among those brave souls was my Uncle Art and, as if to prove that truth is stranger than fiction, the two ran into each other one day somewhere in the Philippines. Dad, a sailor, Art, a Marine, just happened to be in the same place at the same time. It was entirely coincidental. To hear my father tell it, the brothers enjoyed that day together like they had never enjoyed one before. Perhaps the only time they would be happier to see each other was when they were both out of the armed services, both alive and each in one piece, meeting up once again, this time in the same American town. (Alas, when they finally did get home, they discovered that all the military pay they had received, had had no need for and had therefore sent home, expecting it to be waiting for them as decent nest eggs, had been spent by their mean old mother, with no explanation. This led my mom, when asked what she and Dad had got married on in 1947, to reply flatly, "A shoestring.")

My dad served as a Machinist's Mate First Class, according to his discharge papers, but he didn't just service machines. He was a backup gunner on a ship labeled an LCS, Landing Craft Support, which meant that with its flat bottom, his relatively small craft moved in close during the island-hopping campaigns, strafed the shores with all the gunfire it had to help allow the Marines to land without being immediately wiped out. The big guns from the big battleships, they simply fired the warning shots, their big shells shaking the islands with their mighty impacts, filling the enemy with fright. It was small craft like that on which my father served that truly cleared the way for the landing parties, for those Marines, many of whom died as soon as their landing craft's front door fell open. My father operated a machine gun; he said it was the most terrifying thing in the world to have to shoot at someone and try to kill him just as surely as he was shooting at you and trying to kill you.

That's about as deep as my father ever got in relating to me his experience in the war. I've heard since that soldiers and sailors alike who served in the place and at the time where Paul Harry served, that being very near the Japanese home islands in the summer of 1945, were filled with dread over what they would soon be expected to do. A full-scale invasion of the Japanese mainland was planned, but with far less intelligence than the D-day invaders had, with far less certainty that the country could be taken in this manner, with the murky knowledge that the Japanese islands contained a much more populous landmass, with doubts and uncertainties about a mysterious enemy led by an emperor who was revered by his people as a god. My father had faced enough Kamikazes on the open seas of the South Pacific; he could not imagine what the fanatical Japanese of that time would do if their homeland were invaded. Then, like a special

bulletin broadcast, as my father and his comrades poised ready to perform the impossible, the announcement was made that Japan had surrendered. The dropping of two atom bombs had convinced Emperor Hirohito to give it up. Despite an immediate Japanese *coup d'etat*, General Douglas MacArthur accepted the Japanese surrender and moved his troops onto the Japanese mainland as conquerors and occupiers. My father, like so many other men over there at that time, breathed an enormous sigh of relief, as if a sentence of death had been commuted. The atom bomb, that horrifying creation, had, in an ironic way, saved his life, and he would both praise it and curse it as he went forward with that life.

My parents' wedding photos are quite telling, and what is most telling about them is the knowing smile spread across my father's face like the icing on their wedding cake. Most obvious is the photograph in which the two hug each other in the back of the car which will transport Paul and his lovely bride to their wedding night suite, for his expression tells us that he is about to take my mother out of the land of the virgins, a task to which he is looking quite happily forward. He's got what I call a "shit-eating grin" on his face, the look of a fox in a henhouse, of a kid in a candy store, choose your cliché.

One of the most clearly apparent elements of those photos is the uncomfortable dichotomy between my dad's evident delight and my mother's father's somber and disappointed demeanor. Remember, this is the stern and strict Hiram O'Dell, the one who scared the shit right down the back of the legs of my dad's cousin, Goddamn Pete, and he looks as if he's at a funeral. All-too-aware of Dad's family's unstable background, Hiram believed that my dad would never provide his daughter with a good

home, a stable environment or any semblance of a comfortable, respectable life. (Ah, how good it is that he was wrong.) But perhaps a more simple and basic reason explains Hiram's despondency. Paul Harry wears an expression that reveals that he knows he's on the brink of deflowering a young, sizzling sylph with uncharacteristically large breasts. And Hiram knows that, too. The first is giddily happy about the fact; the second begrudgingly acquiescent.

An element of modern society I've noticed is that it is still nearly taboo to talk about the sex lives of one's parents. Television sitcoms, Hollywood motion pictures, the routines of stand-up comedians, even casual conversation with siblings and friends, all lead me to this conclusion. Kids don't want to admit that their parents had sex, even though they know that they *must* have had sex. It makes them squirm with distaste; the imagery it conjures is apoplectic, odious, disturbing. Obviously, I have gotten over these particular jitters, and I happily flaunt the taboo. Hell, it's reality; talk about it or at least admit to it. Sure, my mother is old and overweight nowadays, no longer the slender siren of her youth, but there are times when she'll think wistfully about the physical passions, lusts and "sins of the flesh" in which she engaged with my father. Those days may be gone but, like my father himself, they live on in memory, and there's nothing wrong with having a laugh or two at the expense of memory. What else is memory good for?

The story of my father's first vision of my mother suggests that he *did* like asses, after all, as has been concluded, but his fondness for them reached nowhere near the extent to which he was fascinated by women's breasts. He offered unto these wondrous bulbous creations upon which most males are fixated from birth to death the questionably sophomoric appellation of "titties," not the more crass "tits," nor the more prosaic

"breasts." He openly spoke of his fantasy, to be let loose upon a vast field of titties, upon which he could roll, squeeze and suck to his heart's, or his groin's, content.

"Tsk, Paul!"

Therefore, it should not be surprising that my father had a lot of lines that were of a sexual nature, but always cleverly and never obviously so. "What's on the vagina for this evening?" was one of his subtly prurient lines, but what he was trying to convey was still clear. Another oft-used line of Paul Harry's was uttered when he and one or more of his boys were engaged in one of his countless projects, one that involved inserting a screw somewhere or placing one thing inside something else. If there was even a little difficulty getting it in the hole, or getting it to fit right, Dad would more likely than not say, "Put a little hair around it." This may seem rather crude, and I suppose it is, but it's to be expected of a man. The thing is, because I learned about sex so late, it took me a long time before I understood what he meant when he said that line. For most of my time together with my dad, when I'd hear him say that, I'd wonder inwardly, how will putting *hair* around it help? Wouldn't hair, being bristly or coarse or tangly as it is, make it even *more* difficult to get this part into that part? Wouldn't putting something slippery around it, like grease or oil, be a lot more helpful than *hair*?

And, of course, whenever any of us would say we found a hair, particularly if we were at the dinner table, and one of us said, "There's a hair in my food," my dad would use it as an opportunity to say something dirty. While the thought of hair in any of my mom's food made my cleanly mother sick, both figuratively and literally, and she would get up from the table and head for the toilet, choking and gagging at the nauseous image, my dad would simply say, "Is it curly?" Just like with his other lines that referred to

pubic hair, it would be many years before I would figure out just why it was that Dad had such an interest in knowing whether or not a hair found in our food was *curly*. Does it *matter*? I thought. It's a hair, and it's in the food. Isn't that disgusting *enough*? What difference does it make if it's *curly* or not? And why doesn't he ask its *color*, so that we might know *whose* hair it *is*?

"Tsk, Paul!"

Ah, the safe innocence of naivete!

At the tender age of fifteen, I became involved with a girl for the first time, a lovely lass with dancing eyes and chocolate brown hair. I met her through my eldest brother; the girl was the daughter of one of his co-workers. The event at which we met was a touch football game played in my brother's town about ten miles away. So my father had not yet met the girl when I showed him her photograph.

The first words from my father's mouth, upon spying the portrait photograph of the young lady, my first puppy love, the dear girl with the intoxicating smell and the sweet, smooth lips, will live, at least for me, in infamy. At fifteen, I still did not think of women sexually; it was not part of my plan to take this girl's virginity. Indeed, I valued the girl's innocence, her purity, and found *these* attributes attractive and worthy of defending. Therefore, I was utterly dumbfounded, slightly offended but mostly mortified when my dad observed casually, "She's pretty stacked, isn't she?"

"What?"

"She's stacked, I said."

Few limits had been placed on my naivete in those days. I wasn't sure what he meant by "stacked," but as was Paul Harry's custom, he was not going to tell me. I

suspected that the term had some sexual meaning, and I suspected that it had something to do with the size of her breasts, which were rather nicely developed for a girl of fifteen. But the comment made me suspicious of my father, and I decided at that time that he viewed women only in terms of their sexual attractiveness. This was not true, of course, but I determined nonetheless that *I* wasn't going to be that way, or ever think like that about girls.

Well, that's what this male chauvinist pig thought at the time, anyway.

A certain amount of debate yet stirs over the meaning of the line quoted at the head of this chapter. It is, we Beardslee boys are quite sure, some sort of sexual reference. However, such was the nature and extent of our father's dry humor, sexual or otherwise, that we are simply unable to adequately extract the precise meaning of this line. Dad took this one to the grave with him. Still, we know the context in which he used it. From that, we should be able to render its precise meaning. But it is just *so* odd that we are left only with conjecture.

The line itself is actually, "I like (choose a color) no matter what color it is." If my father noticed a pretty girl wearing a pretty little orange dress, for example, one that was revealing, he would observe, "I like orange no matter what color it is."

I'm pretty sure that from such examples it can be concluded that he was not referring to a woman's skin color, for there are no blue, green or orange-skinned females.

A vivid memory springs to life of when Dad and I were watching women's figure skating and some graceful little darling was hopping about the rink wearing a sexy little red outfit, with an ultra-mini red skirt, one so short that, because of the nature of her

profession, observers were provided with many glimpses of her matching red panties. My father offered, in a soft understatement of appreciation, "I like red no matter what color it is."

Even if I had asked, it is doubtful that Dad would have explained his meaning. He would have replied, as cryptically as ever, that he meant he liked red no matter what color it is.

I guess much of the confusion over this line surrounds the word "it." Just what is "it"?

In my view, when my dad used this line, he was making some general, typically dry, and typically unique, comment about his sexual attraction to the woman in question. To me, "it" is the color of the garment, and he's basically saying that he finds the woman attractive, the color of her clothing notwithstanding, although color is still part of the overall attractive package. After all, Dad never liked pictures of nude women; he said he liked photos that left something to the imagination.

But some of my brothers disagree, insisting that "it," in Dad's mind, was something far more crass than I suppose.

I'm sure that if Dad can listen in on this world, he is laughing at the befuddlement that this line continues to cause us.

18. “Look, Mark, There’s Your Brother.”

Even though Paul Harry was possessed of a great deal of simple wisdom, which is the most profound kind of wisdom, he was also a lot more knowledgeable about world affairs, issues of contention and politics than any of us probably ever thought. I believe he was just knowledgeable enough to make him dangerous and, over the span of my late teenage years and my college years, during which time I plunged my*self* into politics and contentious issues, Dad and I would have many a fight. Not physical fights, fights for domination. Like most cocky youngsters who are absorbed by a particular fascinating interest, and who strive to learn everything about that subject matter as they can, I thought I knew everything about politics, and that my dad knew next to nothing. I could be cruel, in that I would talk down to my father on occasion. Dad didn’t have the vocabulary I did, and he lacked the argumentative acumen I acquired in my first two years of college, so he would volley with sarcastic comments about how I thought I was so much better than he, and the rest of the family, and maybe I should go off and live among university professors, since “your own family doesn’t know anything.”

These hurtful interludes did not help the growing bond between father and adult son. Indeed, Dad did respect my knowledge, and he was happy that I was so passionate about it. I’m sure he believed that I was capable of doing great things, and this became an expectation of me that was passed around to the rest of the family. If he’s so smart, the reasoning went, then we have every right to expect great accomplishments from him.

The arrogance that I displayed at that time of my life, the contempt with which I would speak to my family, are past personal characteristics I have yet to live down. My

siblings all believe that I think I am superior to them in some way. This is one of the more troublesome legacies left by my father in his relationship with me. Especially since it is so untrue. Yes, there was the time when I had that attitude (or disposition), but I outgrew it and have come to respect the other members of my family for their individual abilities, skills and knowledge. And I do not place myself above any of them just because I was the first to earn a bachelor's degree. But it's hard to convince them of that, for I have been schooled, and I value intellect and reason beyond most other abstract concepts. Unlike the rest of my family, I have not accomplished much with my life. I have quit nearly every job I've had, quit out of frustration, I've been unable to build a home or start a family of any kind and I have even turned my back on the political profession at which I lunged myself in young adulthood. So, I haven't really accomplished much. However, if this can be counted, I have learned that my father was no dummy when it came to the topics which so enthused me. I would never speak down to him again, if he were still around; indeed, I would seek his counsel. For, as mentioned previously, my father was interested primarily in two kinds of television programming: what he called "the world news" (he was never much of a fan of local news, except for the weather reports) and nature programs, those zoological examinations and studies of wildlife. Without dismissing engineers or accountants or lawyers or entrepreneurs of any kind, I would surmise that just about all the knowledge a man really needs, both practically and philosophically, reside in the categories of "current events" and "nature." For nature is all there is, is it not?

The line for this chapter arises directly from those nature programs he loved to watch, the ones usually broadcast on public television. When I was young, he would say

this line to me and I would be (what else?) confused. Later, I learned that it was some sort of an insult, but I didn't know precisely how. Finally, when I did understand, I laughed when he used that line, and I would come to use it myself, thinking myself oh-so-clever.

Whenever there was a nature program about apes, monkeys, orangutans, chimpanzees, any of that order of lifeform that resides just below humanity on the intelligence scale, my father liked to poke one of his kids, point at the TV and say, "Look, there's your brother." In typical Paul Harry fashion, he would steadfastly refuse to explain what he meant. For years, I was confused by this line and had no idea that my father was making a joke, partly because my father was not the kind of man who laughed at his own jokes and partly because, like so many of my father's other expressions, this one was subtle and dry as a teetotaler.

When I finally was able to establish that the line was intended as a joke, I stupidly thought that the joke was on one of my brothers, that he was calling Craig, or Steve, or Dennis, or David, an ape. This would make me laugh, but even then I knew that there had to be something to the joke that I didn't quite get, that it wasn't *that* funny, that my father was not so puerile as to constantly derive mirth from calling my brothers apes. I knew that while dumb kids might laugh endlessly at their abilities to call others funny names, my father was a lot more sophisticated than that. And there was some mystery about the fixation on apes. Some aspect of this joke surpassed me.

Fast-forward to high school biology class, the first place I learned about the theory of evolution. Fast-forward to my studying the material intently, to taking examinations on the subject and earning Bs. Fast-forward to the next time I saw a nature

show about Jane Goodall and her apes, and whether I was with Dad or not, I remember a light bulb coming on. Maybe not a very high wattage light bulb, but a light bulb nonetheless.

"Ohhhhhhhhh," I told myself inwardly, and with much embarrassment at my own stupidity. "So *that*'s what he meant."

Indeed, my father had told jokes about evolutionary theory to me before I had the slightest inkling of what it was he was joking about, before I had yet been properly educated, yet I had laughed all the same. My father may have only had an eighth grade education, but he surely found *that* amusing. All he had to do was point at an ape on the screen, mutter, "Look, Mark, there's your brother," and young Mark would fall into hysterics. And he knew quite well that I had not yet been schooled in evolution, but yet I laughed anyway. And I shouldn't have been laughing because the joke was on *me*.

Dad was essentially telling me, "Hey, you, stupid, yeah, that's right, you, Mark, or whatever your name is, yeah, you're no brighter than that there orangutan."

And, true to his accusation, I wouldn't know any better than not to laugh at my own expense. This might have confirmed, in itself, any notion my father may have entertained that I was as dumb as an ape. After all, it had already been ascertained that I was dumber than a doornail, so surely I was dumber than an ape.

Of course, my father needed to amuse himself, and since he was disabled and had ended up spending a lot more time in front of the television at a much earlier age than he had intended, well, this was just one way for him to do just that.

I have since grown, studied and learned to appreciate Charles Darwin's genius. I find political arguments that pit evolution against so-called "creation science" or this

newer “intelligent design” hokum to be absurd. That evolutionists feel compelled to even have to waste their time defending the empirical findings of hundreds, nay, thousands, nay, millions of years of science against some mystic notion of an unnamed but intelligent hand, be it someone’s faith-based (not fact-based) idea of god or some other mysterious “intelligence” simply creating man with a veritable snap of the fingers, or some other appendages, only proves that most of us are indeed no smarter than the very apes with which we eschew having any link. Religion is the realm where we can prostrate ourselves before some supposed higher power to which we are beholden for life and limb, and people should be allowed such practice. But in our schools, let real learning hold sway, let hard science, raw data and objective evidence be taught. Save conjecture about some sort of intelligent force creating us for science fiction or fantasy writers, or for drunken or drugged midnight conversations, and leave stubborn faith that some god created us in “his” image for the churches, the cathedrals, the synagogues, the mosques, those places where people gather to pay tribute to their unknown lords.

Strangely enough, I don’t know where my father stood on the issue because we never talked about it. Maybe he made that joke at the expense of the *idea* that humans evolved from lower lifeforms, as if he was saying how ridiculous it is to suggest that humans and apes share a common ancestry, that elusive missing link. Maybe he dismissed the theory of evolution, or at least that part of it which suggests that humans rose from more primitive forms of sentient beings, as thoroughly as I dismiss “creation science.” Maybe those jokes were my dad’s wry way of expressing his own viewpoint about what is absurd, that, in his view, comparing apes and humans amounted to the height of silliness.

Maybe.

But I doubt it. I doubt it because my father rarely expressed passionate views on social or political issues. I doubt it because he certainly was not indoctrinated with any absurd Judeo-Christian notions about man originating at the hand of some bored god four thousand years ago. I doubt it because he watched those nature programs, and he knew that scientific conclusions about evolution in the animal world are based on intensive study of the past, on ever-unfolding discoveries of an untold amount of archeological evidence, on years upon years of scientific behavioral observation, on genetic mapping, carbon dating, hypothesis testing and earnest study by highly educated, knowledgeable and capable humans who have devoted lifetimes to the effort to unlock the mysteries of the origins of man, of Earth, of the universe. Paul Harry was not the kind of man who pooh-poohed all that.

And although my father didn't like cats, he loved to watch nature programs that explained the behavior and lifestyles of large felines, fascinated by the way a dominant male lion, for example, will eat the young of other males in an attempt to remain dominant. Although he abused his own versions of man's best friend, he loved to learn about the pack behavior of wolves, for example, how they design kills and how instinct instructs them to share the bounty or there may be no bounty next time. I think my father learned a lot about how humans behave from watching his beloved nature programs. And if that is so, just as I know my father would take no loud position on any issue, I know that my father held science in high regard and therefore I cannot even begin to fathom how my father could have been a creationist.

Hell, my dad just appreciated nature, and he knew a good joke when one presented itself to him. He held nothing sacred when it came to humor, as I believe has been demonstrated. Dad studied nature not just on television, but in his almost daily walks around his five acres of “heaven.” He loved the sea and respected its might. He was fascinated by birds, their migratory patterns and their nesting habits. Dad was probably smart enough not to have an opinion on evolution. Or maybe he never thought his opinion was important enough to share with me. Maybe he realized it didn’t, and doesn’t, matter. We are all simply nature, he knew.

And those goofy-looking apes on TV? They’re Mark’s brothers.

19. “Looks like Somebody Ate it once.”

After the honeymoon, Paul Harry and Harriet Marie moved into the upstairs portion of a house down the road from my mother’s parents, within walking distance of the man who had taken my father aside on their wedding day to tell him that his daughter was frail, “so be careful with her,” as a final useless plea to prevent his new son-in-law from taking his daughter’s virginity, but also just a short walk away from my mother’s mother, a woman who, from all accounts, was jolly, big-hearted, generous, loving and, oh yeah, a wizard in the kitchen. According to my mother, during the Depression days, Philena O’Dell was able to whip up hearty, tasty meals out of the barest bits of ingredients, feats which to this day confound my mother. Alas for Paul, Harriet never learned such tricks. Harriet was not the daughter who inherited her mother’s aptitude for cooking; that fell to the other daughter, Helen. My mother, being of heartier stock, and quite “unfrail,” despite what Hiram claimed to my father on his wedding day, was the one who dug up the vegetables, who husked the corn, who split wood for heating the water for cooking, not the one who actually did the cooking. She was the one who tended to the fires, who cleaned house, who managed the chicken coop and the pig barn, who beheaded and plucked chickens, preparing them for the cooking, not the one who actually did the cooking. Harriet was the one who scrubbed the pots and pans when the cooking was done, who cleared the table, who cleaned the dishes, who tidied up the kitchen at the completion of a meal, not the one who actually did the cooking. Thus it was that once Harriet had become a blushing bride, she and her groom had to face up to the fact that the wife didn’t know how to cook, a duty expected of married women in 1947.

Dad had been immediately put to work on the night shift at Pontiac Motors upon his return from his service in the Pacific and Mom, well, she was willing to work, and would indeed work outside the home, but she was expected, not least of all by her own conscience and set of values, to provide wholesome, satisfying meals for her hard-working husband. Sadly, the couple's first evening meal together, prepared before Paul had to make the long drive to work, proceeded something like this:

"Okay, Paul, come and sit down at the table," Harriet called to her new husband. "The macaroni and cheese is ready."

Grinning, Paul leaned over and kissed Harriet on the cheek before sitting down to eat a nice, warm meal on a cold November evening. But he took one bite, chewed for a few seconds, his forehead furrowing into a frown, then swallowed the half-masticated mess with a painful gulp. "I'm sorry, Harriet, but I just can't eat this," he reported in brutally honest fashion.

"Well, why not?" Harriet wanted to know. She wasn't angry; she was disappointed in herself, and she needed to know what was wrong.

"I don't know," Paul answered. "You tell me."

Harriet took a bite and said, "Ew!" spitting the bite out onto her plate. "I don't know what I did wrong, Paul. I followed the directions exactly."

"Well, you must not have followed them close enough."

Embarrassed, frustrated and bitterly dismayed at her failure, Harriet began to cry. "You can just go down the road if you want a better home-cooked meal. I'm sure my mother would cook you one."

"Yeah, and she'd *finish* cooking it, too," Paul replied. Then, softening, he added, "Stop crying, honey, you just didn't cook the macaroni long enough."

"But I cooked it for twenty minutes, just like the recipe said."

And she had. The problem was that in the infancy of their marriage and the paucity of funds, the couple had very few belongings, least of all quality kitchen appliances. Harriet had had to cook the macaroni on a hotplate that just didn't get very hot. She hadn't let the macaroni boil long enough, if it had even been brought to a boil at all. The pair had no oven in the tiny two-room dwelling, no range or stove top either. And Harriet had not been adequately schooled in the culinary requirements of independence, although her mother always bragged that Harriet "could make the best salads you ever tasted." That may have been true, in that Harriet knew how to clean vegetables freshly culled from the garden, cut them up and mix them together, but Paul Harry was not a man who could live very happily on salads alone. Like most men of the time, and men throughout the western world yet today, Paul was a meat and potatoes kind of guy, even though he understood that, for a while anyway, he and his wife might have to live on "potatoes and beans one day and beans and potatoes the next." So, in that sense, macaroni and cheese for their first nuptial meal was actually somewhat special. Unfortunately, in the end, it didn't turn out to be very special at all.

No matter. Harriet made Paul a lunch of mustard and onion sandwiches, one item she had learned expertly from her mother, and off he went to earn the bread that would allow the content of their evening bread-breaking to steadily improve as the days, months and years passed. Harriet vowed never to let her husband down in this manner again, and she was provided with a Betty Crocker cookbook, one which she studied with the intense

scrutiny of a medical student devouring the contents of *Gray's Anatomy*. (In fact, Mother still has that cookbook, and has issued precise instructions that if her house ever burns down, and if whoever is with her has the time to grab just one thing, it must be that cookbook.) Philena helped out, too, of course, and it would not be often during his remaining 39-and-a-half years of marriage that Paul Harry would have much to complain about at the dinner table.

By the time I came along many years later, Dad had implemented some rules at the dinner table, rules that honored our mother and demonstrated respect and gratitude for her work in the kitchen to provide us all with a variety of dishes for our enjoyment and sustenance. We were not to touch any food, not even begin to place napkin in collar nor in lap, nor take a sip of water or whatever beverage was being served that night, nor take any utensil in hand, before my mother had finished placing the prepared courses on their respective pot holders or filling the plates around the table with food (whichever method was most convenient for Harriet on any given evening). We were to remain still and, preferably, quiet, until our mother had had the chance to turn off the oven and the range or whatever, to finish pouring our glasses of milk or water or Kool-aid, to gather her own place setting together and finally sit down to relax and enjoy the meal herself. This rule was sacrosanct and violations were summarily punished with a slap of the hand or of the butt cheeks, or maybe one of Dad's patented, painful tugs on a tuft of hair. We were not to place our elbows on the table, nor to slouch, nor to sit with our legs outside the legs of the table. If we did that, we were invariably asked, "Are you a fireman?" We were to wait patiently for our mother to finish her preparations and sit down, at which time we

were allowed to place our elbows on the table, but only for the express purpose of clasping our hands together in prayer as mother led her brood in the recitation of one of her blessings for the meal.

After the "amen," we could begin eating, but not until Mother had taken her first bite of something. Sometimes, when we were starving, and Mom had forgotten some item or other, she'd stand up after delivering her blessing and hurry to the refrigerator to retrieve a forgotten condiment. All the while, she'd scan the table to make sure all was in place and that we all had everything we needed and that every possible condiment, topping, seasoning or whatever her husband or offspring could desire for that particular meal was on the table. This is how Dad liked it: tidy, neat, orderly, complete. But if Mom stood up to get something before taking a bite, we kids would have to wait before eating. And if we were particularly hungry, we might get a bit impatient and say, "Come on, Mom," or "Hurry up, Mom," and this would make Mom self-conscious and she'd say, "Go ahead and eat" in her vast humility, but we kids would only have to glance at Dad and we'd know that, no matter what Mom had said, we'd better *not* start eating! Then she'd hurry to her place at one end of the table, Dad at the other end, we kids all seated along one side or the other, and hurriedly shovel a forkful of something into her mouth. Then came the sigh of relief and the setting to of partaking in one of Mom's carefully prepared suppertime presentations. Usually, Mom would pop up again and run to turn off the oven or grab yet another item from the cupboard or refrigerator that she felt would be needed or appreciated during the meal. She had only sat down and taken a bite so that the rest of us could start eating. But that was the rule.

And the rule was repeated for dessert. Dad had a sweet tooth, as Mom always described it. I, of course, thought this meant that Dad literally had a tooth that was sweet, and that he could taste it as such. Therefore, in typical confusion, I wondered, if Dad had a sweet tooth, why did this mean that he always wanted to have *dessert*? Couldn't he just run his tongue over his sweet tooth and *taste* its sweetness? And where can *I* get one of these sweet teeth? Later, when I thought I understood that he didn't actually have a *tooth* that was *sweet*, I still had it wrong, believing that my father *needed* to be satisfied with something sweet, and that the tooth, or Dad himself, would somehow *suffer* if he didn't ingest something sweet every day. I was too ignorant to understand that when my mother said that Dad had a sweet tooth, she meant simply that he liked sweets.

Rarely did a supper go by that we didn't have some kind of dessert, either cake or cookies or a pie or ice cream, or a pie *and* ice cream, which was Dad's favorite and which he called "Pie Alamo" (not pie *a la mode*, but what difference did *I* know?) Just as at the beginning of the meal, we had to wait for Mom to take the first bite of dessert before we dug into our own servings ourselves. After dinner, the kids, once big enough to reach the countertop, became part of a rotation by which the table was cleared, the dishes were cleaned and dried and the table and countertops were cleansed and tidied and all chairs returned to their proper places. My father always kissed my mother after a meal and thanked her, but he didn't require us to do so. We were to clean up while he sat in the living room and luxuriated in his "easy chair," either watching TV or reading the newspaper. Mom would either join him or supervise the washing up.

This description sounds all-too-terribly somber and does not suitably convey the usual good spirits that prevailed around the Beardslee dinner table.

So.

“Lettuce, turnip and pea,” Dad would tell us sometimes, apropos of nothing. But his pronunciation turned the statement into “Let us turn up and pee.” The kids usually found this infantile utterance worthy of far more laughter than it deserved.

“Dad said ‘pee,’” David would gleefully yell.

“What does it mean to ‘turn up’ and pee?” Mark, the literalist, would ask.

“Shut up and eat,” was Dad’s usual reply to such stupid questions.

Sure, Dad was set in his ways and he liked things to be those certain ways all the time; it was an element of stability which he lacked as a child and which he made sure his children would not go without, at the same time satisfying his own desire for stability and a sense of being well settled. But this touch of obsessive-compulsive behavior did not detract from Dad’s sense of humor.

From before I was born, my dad had false teeth, dentures, “falsies,” whatever one chooses to call them, for his upper gum, which Dad always pronounced “goom.” Sometimes, just to startle us kids, he’d stare at one of us and, when he finally had our attention, stick out his dentures and offer a grotesquely disfigured picture of his own face. Then he’d suck them back in and stick them out again, sometimes quite rapidly, and his head would take on the appearance of a full-sized Halloween skull toy. He did this amidst roars of laughter, gasps of astonishment or statements of disgust.

“Oh, Dad, that’s gross!”

“Tsk, Paul!” Mom always said.

Then there was the truly revolting and utterly undignified practice of chewing up a bite of food and then, before swallowing it, when it was just a gob of unidentifiable, saliva-covered, half-masticated, colorless slop, Dad would choose a target from among his progeny and, wide-eyed, present the goo with mouth wide open as the food lay resting on his tongue.

"Oh, Dad," one of us would yell, clenching our eyes shut, "that's gross!"

"It looks like poop," another would say.

"No, it looks like puke," would be another response.

"Yuck!" one of us would sum up.

Then, swallowing innocently, my dad would defend himself, saying, "It all winds up looking the same anyway," which of course is true but not something we wanted to be reminded of during our meal taking.

Actually, we kids only feigned disgust; we *loved* it when our father behaved in such juvenile fashion. It made us feel closer to him, and we were able to imagine him young, like us, doing and saying the disgusting things kids do and say to try to gross each other out.

"Tsk, Paul!" said Mom.

It was at loony times like this that we, or at least I, best related to Paul Harry. By acting like a kid himself, he created a comfortable environment.

But, still, his behavior, his words, his "lines," at least to me, were unfathomable and insoluble, imparting nothing but bafflement, as this next anecdote aptly portrays.

Occasionally, my dad, in good humor, would negatively comment about the appearance of something Mom had made. His days of telling his wife, "I'm sorry,

Harriet, but I just can't eat this" were long gone, but sometimes she produced a dish that *looked* positively unappetizing. On these occasions, as often as not, Dad would wrinkle his nose, roll his eyes and proclaim, "Looks like somebody ate it once."

Classic Paul Harry humor. Exaggerated grossness. A benign insult. A moment of entertainment if for no one but himself. Dry. Quickly dispensed with. Forgotten.

But stupid Mark was perplexed, for years. Even when I learned that what he had said was funny, because all the other kids were laughing, and I'd laugh along with them, I didn't get the joke. Not at first anyway.

Always the literalist, I thought about this statement seriously. Partly this was because, as usual, my dad never laughed, or even smiled, at his own jokes. They emerged from him and passed into the past as swiftly and surely as a belch. This was true at least of his less physical humor, his spoken humor, his "lines."

How can it have already been eaten once? I questioned inwardly. And how can it *look* like it? If it *had* been eaten, it certainly wouldn't look like *this*, would it? And how could something be eaten *more* than once? And how does dad know what something that has been eaten once actually *looks* like? And just why is everyone *laughing*?

It is sad, I know, and in retrospect, quite embarrassing to have been so slow, so dim, so unimaginative. But there was a reason for my puzzlement. I could not make the connection between such lines stated by my father and my own fun with scatological humor because Dad never delivered such lines as though they were meant to be funny. Further, I did not imagine my father to be at all like me. He was a big man with broad shoulders who worked hard. He was very serious sometimes. He ran the family, he ordered his kids about with confidence and surety, he carried about him an air of

authority and he had a sophisticated relationship with my mother, one impenetrable by me as a youth, by which they managed the affairs of the family, serious things like money and banking and work schedules and setting priorities and planning for future work as well as future fun. Dad didn't make jokes about "poop" or "pee" or "puke," did he? Surely, sometimes he did and we would all laugh about it, like when he would chastise one of us for "telling on" another with his juvenile rhyme, "Tattle-tale, tattle-tale, hanging by a bull's tail/when the bull begins to pee, you'll have a cup of tea." This was straightforward, and the punch line of the joke was, despite its disgusting conclusion, really the word "pee," at least to me when I was a little kid. But those lines that emanated from him that were more enigmatic, more surrounded by mystery, more confoundedly confusing because of their exceptional dryness, those did not seem to me to be an adult's equivalent of something like, "David pooped his pants; I'm gonna puke." To me, they simply *had* to be serious, and meant to be taken seriously, and literally. Hence, this silly and thoroughly sickening line confused me and never struck me as funny until one day, somehow, I just "got it," and realized that what he'd been saying all along was a joke, a gross joke, a disgusting joke, a funny joke once I appreciated it, but a joke delivered with straight face and apparent earnestness: "Looks like somebody ate it once."

Even Mom's "Tsk, Paul!" didn't tip me off.

Fast forward to Mark as a world-roving adult. He is tutoring a Korean child in English language, composition, vocabulary, and reading. Mark has a good relationship with the child and her mother, and he is often invited to remain after lessons for dinner. One of the mechanisms Mark uses to teach the young lass about the anomalistic nature of

English is the relating of his dad's suspect sense of humor and the manner in which he had once conveyed that humor. The child, whose family had lived in the United States during her pre-school years, thus making English her first social language, is exceptionally bright, and the mother is not far behind in her own level of English comprehension.

One night, the mother (the thought of whose food makes my mouth water) presents some strange, pungent and unappealing appearing (although ultimately quite delicious) dish. Mark decides to use that vulgar old line of his father's and, peering skeptically into the pot full of slimy-looking seaweed, bean sprouts, green broth, and beef chunks, he mutters, "Looks like somebody ate it once."

It takes the girl perhaps a full second before realization and understanding dawn brightly on her face and she begins to crack up laughing.

The mother, querulous, asks, "What?" and Mark repeats the line, once again igniting hysterics in the young girl. Mark grins at the mother, watching her expectantly as she turns the phrase over in her mind for a few moments before she, too, grasps his meaning and, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her own laughter, proclaims that what Mark just said is "disgusting." Yet all three continue to laugh.

Even *she* gets it, I thought, and it's not even her language.

God, was I stupid! As my father had repeatedly told me, I was truly dumber than a doornail.

20. "You Make Me So Nervous"

"Harriet, sit down! You make me so nervous!"

Whenever my mother heard my father say this, it undoubtedly made *her* nervous. Because when Dad was nervous, it was not a good thing. No, not at all. It was never a sign that anything good was going to happen. Indeed, it signaled that very bad things, probably the very worst things about my father, were about to happen.

Oh, how my mother dreaded those words. With time I, too, would come to dread them. Anyone who lived with Paul Harry dreaded them. When Paul Harry was nervous, you can be sure that he wasn't about to let people who were around get off comfortably; they were going to share in his suffering, one way or another.

I sat on the steps leading down to the pool, feeling like a wretched old man, angry, bitter, vengeful and spiteful. Just fourteen years old and already so many conflicting emotions. I loved my father, sure, wasn't that what I was supposed to say? But I also hated him! The sun shone brightly and reflected off the white surfaces of the roof of the back porch, its support beams, the fresh concrete. I waited for the arrival home of my father after one of his many multiple-day stays in the hospital. I wished then that he would not come home. Why can't he just die? I thought. It would help everything. Mom would collect on his life insurance and his pension and his Social Security and she'd be financially secure. And I, well, I would no longer have to endure the negativity, the sarcastic disdain, the spiteful little utterances behind my back that he knew I could hear. So his death would be good for me, too. He treated me like shit, like a dumb animal, in his

nineteenth century worldview. He yelled at me just to be bothersome, he cajoled me whenever he noticed that I was suffering from the strain of being a teenager, from expectations of school teachers, from social pressures from my elite peers, from sexual pressures from the girls I didn't understand. These were all subjects that my father saw as fair game over which to taunt me, to belittle me, to laugh at me.

Yes, I hated him and wished him dead. It was the first time I had admitted those things to myself, at least out loud, and the dawning realization tormented me.

These secrets my mother knew, for she had scavenged my bedroom and discovered my journal. I had written of my dismay at Dad's perpetual misunderstanding of me, of his teasing which was as bad or worse than the bullying I suffered at school, of his utter refusal to enjoy life or to allow the others in his household to enjoy it. My mother challenged me about her discovery, but promised to keep my private thoughts secret, and confided in me that she understood what I was saying. For as bad as he treated me, he treated my mother even worse. She tried to soothe him when his heart disease was causing him physical pain, emotional distress or mental anguish, but she always seemed to just get on his nerves instead.

"Harriet, sit down!" he barked. "You make me so nervous!"

And little things we kids did got under his skin as well. Paul Harry hated it when I took a shower that lasted more than a couple of minutes.

"How big is my body?" he demanded. "It's twice the size of yours! And it takes me half the time to wash as it takes you. What's wrong with you? What do you have to spend fifteen minutes in the shower for?"

Was he no longer able to feel pleasure? Like the transient pleasure of a fleeting shower? So what is the point in living if you can't even enjoy a shower? I reasoned. For him, the point of life was to make sure no one else enjoyed a shower either, or enjoyed anything. He felt like shit and he wanted everyone else to feel like shit. Well, I thought, he might as well die. It would be the best for all of us. For him, too. He's just a miserable old man, anyway.

Nowadays, I lament the fact that my father lived in misery for most of the fourteen years after his unsuccessful coronary bypass surgery in 1973. I lament that he felt compelled to share his misery with those to whom he was closest. I lament that, for far too many moments during those fourteen years, he was so miserable that he felt he had no choice but to behave as a bitter, mean and twisted old fuck.

But how many of us could endure what my father did and not betray the dark side of ourselves? In a matter of days, Dad had taken from him his livelihood, his capacity to abide his own work ethic, his ability to provide for the livelihood of his family, and any surety that he would ever live to see his labors bear fruit in the form of all of his kids graduating, one or more of his kids producing grandchildren, or the luxury of being able to relax in a comfortable retirement. All this and more had been snatched away by an insidious cholesterol gene! What's more, his value system was forced to change because his wife was forced to work for pay, not just because she wanted to but because the family financial situation demanded it. Paul Harry and his dependents qualified for and received Social Security disability payments, which he viewed as a form of handout, a welfare reimbursement, a development that he simply loathed. He believed that a man *works* for his living and *works* to provide for his children; he most definitely does *not* rely

on handouts. Disability payments from Social Security were not handouts, not in the legal, literal sense. But that is how he perceived them.

From that routine medical checkup in the summer of 1973 and the ensuing rush to the hospital to prepare him for open-heart surgery, Paul Harry was removed from a comfortable place of meaningful employment, a plateau of manual labor where he felt most at ease and most proud. Eventually, he was essentially ordered to sit in front of the TV, to take life slowly as it came to him, to ingest a large quantity of life-preserving drugs, to become dependent on regular medical examinations and to surrender to the early atrophy of his innards, the same innards that told him, in his gut, that he was a man and that a man ought not to be reduced to just so much worthless entitlement-ridden sloth. Dad lost – before he was considered by any standard to be a retiree or a senior citizen – his youth, his vitality, his ability to make a living for himself and, perhaps most sadly, his ability to determine how hard he would work and how much he would work in order to pay off the mortgage on his house, his automobile loans, other assorted debts, and even the cost of his eventual funeral and interment. All this and much more my father lost that August day when he left work early to visit his doctor's office. And he was only three years older than I am as I write these words.

Still, this is no apology for my father. His life was altered permanently that summer's day in 1973, and as the years passed, he became more sour, spiteful and bitter than ever.

"Those bastards," he spat at my mother one time after reading another Notice of Mandatory Medical Review from the Social Security Administration.

“Paul,” she objected, for he was not the kind who normally used such invective, and he knew it grated on her sensibilities.

“Paul, what? That’s all they are. Bastards! And the damned neighbors, too. I bet they saw me cleaning the gutters out the other day and got on the phone to Social Security to say, ‘Paul Beardslee’s outside working again.’ Bullshit!”

He did not trust those government-appointed doctors he was forced to visit. And he lived in perpetual fear of having his primary source of income lost to a stroke of some faceless bureaucrat’s indifferent pen. But that does not excuse his cruelty towards those whom he most loved and who most loved him.

The family, consisting of Father Paul, Mother Harriet, Son Mark and Son David (Craig and Jan, like Dennis and Steve before them, have moved on into adulthood, marriage, child-bearing and the like), continues the tradition of taking a vacation each summer. This particular year finds the “happy family” traveling northeast along the Saint Lawrence Seaway, through New York, Vermont and New Hampshire, to the east coast of North America, specifically, Maine, then north into New Brunswick and then back down through Quebec and Ontario to Michigan. Through most of the trip, all is peaceful, and it is a relief to stay in motels because Dad actually encourages us to take long showers.

“I’ve paid for it,” he tells us. “Let’s get our money’s worth.”

“So,” think I, “his obsession with short showers at home has to do with money?” Indeed it did. His demand for short showers at home had to do with his fear that our well might run dry, that he lacked the money to drill a new one and that, as a result, his family

might become dependent on others, or even, God forbid, the government, for such a basic necessity as water.

On our return journey, in the outskirts of Montreal, Mom, as the driver of Dad's big, brown Buick, is flustered by the unusual signs and the unfamiliar traffic patterns.

"What are you doing, Harriet?" Dad hollers in his most insulting tone of voice. "Didn't you see that car? Do you have any idea how close you came to hitting him?"

My mother, with head spinning atop her shoulders so as to try to see everywhere at once, feels obliged to respond, "Paul, I saw him, but he pulled out before I thought he was going to." Her tone is that of a disciplined child trying to defend her actions but feeling properly chastised because she is at fault. I shudder at her acquiescence.

"Well, then pay closer attention," Dad pursues. "My god, Harriet, we're in a big city."

"I know that, Paul; I'm doing the best I can," Mom says meekly.

"Well, if that's the best you can do then maybe I better take over."

"No, Paul, you can't. You've driven enough. You said you can handle only so much stress of driving."

"Well, my god, I'm having as much stress *not* driving."

During a routine stop for gas, the car bumps into something and, from the way Dad reacts, I think the world has exploded.

"My god, Harriet!" he bellows. "Can't you even see that post? For crying out loud, I swear I'm going to get back behind that wheel even if it *does* kill me!"

“I’m sorry,” Mom says. “I was looking at that car. He was coming in so fast I thought I might have to get out of the way. I didn’t see the post. I don’t think I hurt anything. I just bumped it…”

Dad is already out of the car, surveying what he is sure will turn out to be unacceptable damage to his car. “Now, back up,” he instructs Mom from outside the vehicle, in a condescending tone, as if she is a little girl, “and turn the car around so I can pump gas into it. The gas cap is on *this* side. You think you can handle that, honey?” In his use of that term of endearment, there is no love, only surly sarcasm.

Dad directs Mom with hand motions and gestures. As she works to properly align our car, a little local car careens into the gas station and nearly hits us. Its driver honks his horn, an ear-piercing squeal, and holds it. Mom’s fluster grows into panic. Beneath the cacophony of the horn, Dad is yelling at her inaudibly. He runs up to her window, hollering, “Can’t you see that car? You need to swerve *this* way, for crying out loud!”

“Yes, Paul, I see that car,” my mother responds, too softly to be heard above the blaring horn. “Which way do I go now?”

“Don’t go anywhere *now*!” Dad instructs. “Let this car pass.” Upon a motion from Dad to the driver of the little car to pass by, the horn finally, mercifully, stops.

“Okay, now turn left as you go backwards,” Dad resumes in instruction. “Don’t go too fast or you’ll hit another one of these posts.”

“All right.” Mom finally positions the car properly so that Dad can fill the tank.

But no sooner does Dad return to the car and take his seat than he criticizes Mom for all the mistakes she has made while behind the wheel.

“Paul,” she interrupts once, “your heart condition.”

"Bullshit!" Dad responds. "It's not my heart condition that's going to give me a heart attack; it's your driving!" On and on he vents his anger at my mother, who seems ever-patient, until we finally get to our next designated motel stop.

While Dad checks us in at the motel office, Mom tells us kids, "Now you boys keep quiet. Your father's not used to traveling this far in a single day. He's not feeling well so you'd better not bother him."

Before bed, we go to supper (Beardslees don't "dine") at a restaurant. My father stares at me as I eat, his face darkened by disgust and contempt. I am costing him money, for the food I eat, for the bed I will sleep in later. And I swear inwardly that if I had any money I'd pay my share, but I am too young and have no money. There is nothing I can do but endure my father's stare.

"I hope you appreciate it," he says, as if reading my mind.

"Of course, Dad, thank you." I nod my head while feeling guilty inside.

"Do you know how much I've spent today? Huh!?"

"I don't know."

"Three meals for you, you and you." He points at his kids and his wife in turn. "Five hundred miles worth of gas. A motel room. And who knows how much in repairs and insurance when we get home and I have this car checked over."

I feel horrible. It's my fault. Everything that's gone wrong is my fault. But *nothing* has gone wrong; we're on *vacation*, for Christ's sake, although it certainly doesn't feel like a vacation. Not like the fun, happy vacations of old when we camped

and hiked through woods and walked along lakes and discovered joy in every new thing we encountered.

“Paul, it’s my fault,” my mother says. “I ran into that post.”

“Aw, the hell it is!”

And Dad’s eyes continue to pierce.

That night, I awaken to the sound of my parents arguing. Arguing? I’ve heard them argue before, but not like this. The lights are on bright. My dad is screaming at my mother. My mom speaks softly and sniffles regularly. Her words are meant to soothe, to placate, to calm – all to no avail. My father rants on and on and I dare not let them know that I am awake and can hear their “private” talk. I lie petrified.

David sleeps soundly beside me, I choose to believe.

“Don’t you *see*, Harriet?” Dad pleads, his inner pain apparent beneath his gruff voice. “I can’t *stand* it when you don’t listen to me! And how could you let that happen today at the gas station, for crying out loud? I thought you were smarter than that!”

“I’m…I’m…” My mother tries to say something.

“And your crying!” Dad surges on. “I can’t stand it! Can’t you be strong? What’s wrong with you? Be an adult! The kids don’t cry but maybe they don’t see it.”

“See what, Paul, see what?” my mom implores.

“How screwed up all of this is,” he replies. “Oh, you don’t understand. I can see it in your eyes that you don’t understand. But for Christ’s sake, Harriet, the one time in my life when I need you to understand and you don’t understand! You just keep driving

the car into posts, for crying out loud! Is that what you're going to do every time I need you? Drive one of my cars into a post?"

"Paul," cries my mother, "what are you talking about? If it's just my driving, I'll never drive your car again, I swear. But tell me, I'm here."

"Oh, you're here, are you? Bullshit! You don't understand. You may as well not even be here."

"But, Paul, I *am* here. I'm here!" My mother begs my father to see.

"Bull*shit*, I said!"

He paces silently for a moment.

"That Mark," Dad says, with a new threat in his voice, "*he* understands something. I can tell by the way he looks at me. He sees something but he doesn't talk. He gets under my skin something fierce when he does that! He and I are gonna have to have us a little talk one of these days. He can't look at me like that. I'm his father, for Christ's sake. Like tonight at the dinner table. I ask him something and he doesn't even answer. Always got his nose stuck in a book."

"Paul," Mom tries to defend, "he's just confused, he's a teenager, it's not his fault."

"Oh, bullshit, Harriet, you know that's bullshit! Oh, dear, dear! He's a teenager, is he? Does that mean I have to treat him with kid gloves? Teenager or not, he's my son and he'll not treat me like that!"

"But Paul," Mother says, trying to change the subject, "why do you have to get so angry? He's probably just scared. And keep your voice down; you might wake him up."

“Mark!” Dad’s voice snaps. “Are you awake over there? Listening to everything we’re saying?”

I shudder and squeeze my eyes shut, lying uncomfortably on my side, facing the closed window, pretending to be asleep, clenching my teeth and tightening my muscles.

“Paul, be quiet,” Mom pleads. “Let him sleep.”

“Oh, bullshit!” Then louder, to me again, he rumbles, “I know you’re over there thinking things about me. Why don’t you get up and tell me all about it?”

Eyes pressed shut, trying desperately to keep my body still, I lie transfixed, frightened out of my head, helpless, while feeling the deepest, most unsettling fear of my life: a terror of my own father, who has, apparently, gone quite mad.

Dad says, “Oh, bullshit, I’m yelling at my sleeping son!”

I must be careful not to let myself sigh in relief.

“But you, Harriet, why can’t you just help me calm down? Why do you have to make me so nervous? Why can’t you even drive the car?”

After another verbal assault that covers the same worn-out ground, his tone drops and I hear him mutter, “Oh, Harriet, Harriet, I can’t stand this! I can’t stand living like this! What am I going to do?”

And then I hear him cry too.

And why not? Even that young, I know that Paul Harry prefers being a kind, calm, gentle soul. Sometimes he just can’t control himself, can’t master the beast within.

At last, I fall back to sleep.

When next I am aware, David is shuffling around next to me and Mom and Dad are preparing their baggage. Light emanates from outside instead of in, and there is no

evidence that the bitterness expressed deep within the night before had even occurred. But it had. And I could not reveal my knowledge. So I keep silent, just as my dad hates, with my "nose stuck in a book," for the rest of the journey home.

A couple of years later, still a gloomy teenager, I am immersed in a pointless argument with my father. I am on the defensive as Dad accuses, insults, commands.

"So help me, you're going with your mother and Jan on that walk today," he tells me. "Even David's going. What's your problem?"

"I just don't want to go," I reply.

"Why not?"

"I just don't feel like it."

"Well, you're going to have to get used to doing things you don't want to do, believe me. Now, get your shoes on before your mom gets back."

Begrudgingly, I move to the back entranceway to our house, the three steps we call the gradeway, where we leave our shoes. I sit on the top step, putting mine on. "It's not nice out, and I have homework to do," I whine. "I don't feel like going!"

That does it. A swift kick lands on my tailbone and all hell breaks loose.

"Don't kick me!" I lunge to the base of the gradeway, turning to face him. Tears almost immediately begin to well, for I know I am violating the almost sacred pact against talking back to my dad. I am scared of the consequences, I am afraid of Dad, because I have just crossed a line and now there is no going back. Although I am terrified, the time has come to speak out. With the release of all that pent up violent anger, vindictiveness and vitriol, so too come uncontrolled tears.

My father stares at me in astonishment for just a second, before his face twists into an evil grin and he looks questioningly at me, still with a cocky, self-assured superiority, contemptuous, barely concealing his outrage that I would dare do this.

All I can control are my words: "You never listen to me! Nothing I say matters to you! Everything has to be *your* way! You can't stand me to think about things in any way different than you do! I have to explain every little thing I do, or say, or think, to your satisfaction! Not the truth! Not the truth! I can never speak the truth to you! You can't stand me being *me*, being different! You hate it so much you have to kick me!" And by that time I am spent, the words have stopped and the tears are flowing, obstructing my vision. Yet I stare defiantly at Dad anyway, awaiting my inevitable crushing defeat.

"Well, dear, dear," his soft voice drips. "Is that what this is all about? And you have to yell at me and make such a big scene in front of me, your father, and talk to me like that?" Now his voice is a full-blown bellow. He moves menacingly down towards me, hands outstretched, prepared to manhandle me. "And you think for a second I will allow my son to scream at me like that, like some crazy woman?" His teeth clench in vicious determination. "Well, you've got another thing coming!"

He whacks me across the face, seizes me and drags me bodily up the stairs into the kitchen. On level ground he pummels me. The blows don't really hurt, and they're not hard. They are meant to hurt my pride, to suppress my sense of individuality, to defeat my rebellious instincts, to set me back in my place and, in this, at least, his blows are successful.

“No son of mine will talk to me like that!” he yells, striking with each word, hitting my face, the side of my head, my arms, my chest. I do not offer any physical resistance as his blows back me towards my bedroom. Relentless, he continues his attack, becoming more enraged with each unanswered blow, before knocking me to my bed, on which I lie, vainly trying to protect my head from the humiliating blows that keep pounding down on me. I do not fight back, full of the terrible realization that if I did, he might have a heart attack and die at my hands. Hell, I think, he might have a heart attack anyway, he’s become so wild with unrestrained rage.

As if I was seeing into the future, Dad stops, gasping for breath, standing over me with a look of terror in his eyes. He hyperventilates, unable to catch his breath, walking away, grasping for a nitroglycerin pill from the tiny vial he keeps always in his pocket, swallowing one as he leaves the room, perhaps to his doom, I do not know.

I lie there in misery, afraid for my father, reminding myself that I did not fight back, I did not fight back. If he dies, it’s not my fault.

I listen for the sound of a fall or some indication that Dad is alive. Silent moments pass and I hear nothing. Eventually I succumb to spasms of hysterical weeping, breathless sobs that make my entire insides ache.

When Mom returns home I hear them talking loudly – my dad’s outrage did not kill him, not this time anyway. I rush to the basement, like Skipper, to hide. And I hear the hum of what sounds like an argument above. Or maybe it’s just my dad explaining to my mom the full extent of my horrible and disrespectful abrogation of the one inviolable

rule, that rule that stood for my entire childhood like a barrier to self-discovery, to self-expression, to what the psychotherapists call "self-actualization."

But Mom takes no part in this battle. She leaves, with David, for the charity walk, and I am once again left alone with my father, my nemesis.

Time passes.

I hear him upstairs, pacing to and fro, muttering to himself, and sometimes I hear words like "dare" and "believe" and phrases like "rotten kid" and "his own father."

In time, he calms, slows and, at long last, ventures to the base of the gradeway to call me upstairs. I obey.

"We're going for a walk," he says.

I had been right about the weather. It had looked like a crappy day for an outdoor walk. But as Dad and I begin our stroll around his little slice of heaven on Earth, as he calls it, the spring sun begins to shine. Oblivious to human foibles, Skipper enthusiastically accompanies us, sniffing for a good place to pee. Pine trees shimmer, still wet from the previous night's rain.

"So, what do you think, son?" my dad begins.

Whenever he calls me "son," I know he's being serious and respectful.

"Well," I start, a little shakily, "about what?"

"What happened back there. In the house. In the gradeway."

"I don't know, Dad. I'm really sorry I talked to you like that. And I was afraid…."

"Oh, bullshit. Afraid? I didn't hurt you."

"No, I mean, I was afraid…for you. The way you were breathing…"

Dad doesn't respond right away. He looks around at the trees, the fields, the damp grass beneath our feet that has begun to dry in the sun. He's wearing that pale blue fishing hat that the rest of the family calls goofy but which I kind of like.

"Yeah, I was a little scared, too," he finally admits. "How would you have felt if your old man had kicked the bucket while you were in a fight with him?"

"Terrible, just…terrible." It's all I can think of to say.

"Me, too," he says. "But I'm still kicking."

We listen to the sounds of nature for a while, birds calling, bugs buzzing, leaves rustling. Dad calls back to Skipper, who has buried her face in an anthill. "Get out of there, you dumb mutt! Come on!" The dog prances to catch up to us.

"What you said to me, son…," Dad starts, haltingly. "I love all my boys."

"I know, Dad."

"All I ask, from all of you, is just to respect me as your father."

"I do, Dad, I *do*."

"I know you do, son." This revelation, in the wake of such a nasty confrontation with my father, tugs at my tear ducts. Then Dad stops, faces me and holds out his hand. "Call a truce, then?"

"A truce," I reply, and take his hand. No hugs, no tears, just two men shaking hands on a deal.

Something changed that day. I don't mean the rules of the house; it was more subtle than that. It was almost a secret understanding between father and son, an unspoken

awareness that Mark had taken his first painful step toward manhood, that Dad had resisted it but ultimately, resignedly, accepted it, and that the melodramatic scene which catalyzed it would never need to occur between us again.

Sure, I went on resenting his control of my life and, sure, I couldn't wait until I was eighteen and could move out and, sure, as soon as I had the means I did just that. That day was just the beginning of the process of a boy extricating himself from his father's shadow, his father's domain, just the beginning of the slow but inexorable transformation from boy to man.

21. "Nuttier than a Fruitcake"

Paul Harry could be gracious and generous, wise and witty, but also, as we have seen, wretched and wicked. Something deep, dark and disturbed lay within my father. There was a side effect, a mental struggle that accompanied the physical agony of those fourteen dying years after his open-heart surgery in 1973. It raised its ugly head now and then, and my own experience with mental illness convinces me that my father did all he could to keep his own disturbance at abeyance. But sometimes it just burst forth, unabated, undeniable, unmistakably perverse. At such times, he would yell at my mother, holler stupidities and absurdities, and my mother would endure, either with or without tears, as best she could, watching as the deep-chested, husky man, usually gentle and easygoing, the man she loved, transformed into a miserable creature of his own rendering, something composed of hatred, contempt, bitterness and resentment.

Until one day she had had enough.

It is not surprising that my mother had what people used to call a "nervous breakdown" when she was 58 years of age. She has described it as a time when she no longer cared about anything or anyone, even her family, as a time when she decided she did not care whether she lived or she died, when she became entirely incapable of performing the tasks which had, for all of her previous life, come so naturally to her. She lost her ability to understand simple communication, to recognize what was going on around her, to relate her sense of self to any other, even her family members. What she wanted, she said, what she craved, was for someone to take care of *her* for once.

It was spring, and I was away at university then, in my last year, getting ready to graduate. David was about to graduate from high school. Mom was working as a hostess at a restaurant, a job she needed to do and a job she liked to do, but a job which her husband resented her having to have and who resented even more her enjoying it. Those were tumultuous years, when Dad hated just about every thing and every day, when the monster within him revealed itself all too often, screaming at Harriet for doing a thing she had to do, for the family's sake, chastising her and belittling her, resenting her independence when he himself no longer possessed any sense of independence, when he himself had become, at a relatively young age, utterly dependent upon his wife, upon his youngest son and upon the government.

I remember all too plainly some of those times when, anxious for his wife's return home, to her "proper" place, Dad set out for the restaurant to pick her up far ahead of schedule. And how he panted nervously sitting in the car in the parking lot as he waited for her to come out the back door and join him in the car and go back home with him and cook supper. I remember how angry he got when she would be just a few minutes late getting out of work. And how he dismissed her honest self-defense that it was a restaurant, that she couldn't leave until her replacement arrived, that her shift checkout duties were regularly interrupted and that she could easily be delayed in her departure. He was accustomed to a strict union shop, a place where when the clock displayed quitting time, you quit. Right then. Not later. You didn't give the company one second of free labor. That was how he had been conditioned as a worker, and he couldn't see past it. Likewise, he thought Mother's proper place was in the home anyway, tending to his needs, preparing his meals, making love to him, whatever, anything but working

outside the home when he was left with nothing to do but stare at “the idiot box” all day long.

Surely this was a time of great internal strife for my father, but even more so for my mother, who met the demands of a regular job, the obligations of a full-time mother (even though David was fast becoming an adult), the responsibilities of a devoted wife to an ill husband, the expectations of her older children that she would be available to babysit for them when necessary, all while trying to get along in her own life, in her own mind, in her own way. She couldn’t do all this. It is no wonder that she collapsed one day and became, as she describes it, like a cripple, ready for the nursing home, prepared to spend the remainder of her days drooling down her shirt, slurping smoothies through a straw, absentmindedly knitting articles of clothing as her head shook pointlessly and her body failed ominously.

And Dad just told us kids, “She’s lost her marbles. She’s gone cuckoo. She’s not all there. She’s nuttier than a fruitcake.” And Dad told his wife, “Now, snap out of it, Harriet. You’re stronger than this. You can do it.”

He apparently just didn’t understand mental health issues, although one would think that he should have, given all that he himself had been through.

But Dad also realized that he couldn’t live without Mom and, during those weeks of her convalescence, when my mother was kept in the euphemistically named “behavioral medicine” ward at the hospital, my dad grieved deeply, certainly for himself, and I hope, for I do not know, but I fiercely hope, just as deeply for his wife.

Harriet is the kind of woman who takes well to doctors. Whatever the doctors tell her to do, she gladly obliges. She trusts that they know best, and never questions their

instructions. This makes her a favorite patient among the doctors she has had in her life, and while I personally may think it's old-fashioned and that patients should take a more personal interest in their own treatment plans, my mother is firmly opposed to that approach and just does whatever the doctors tell her. So, she took her medicine as prescribed, she allowed the dosage to be cut down as time passed, and she stopped taking the medication altogether when the doctors said the time had come for that.

Still, the recovery took months and, despite her trust in the doctors, she lived in continual fear of a relapse. Meanwhile, Dad, it seemed to me at least, may have learned something from the ordeal, although he would never admit it, still referring to his wife's emotional catastrophe as a period when her weakness overtook her. But despite what he said, and despite how he tried to appear to the outside world, I think the experience shook him deeply, and he realized his own need for, his own inherent trust of, his own reliance upon his one and only true love, his wife, his Harriet. Within a couple of years he would be dead, so the time was well nigh for him to learn to be at peace with his wife, with his children, with his circumstances, with his home, with his grandchildren and the extended families involved in any marriage of one's offspring, with his lot in life, with his blessings, with his fortune, with his disease, with all the good and the bad and the ugly and the beautiful which washed upon the wasting shore of his waning lifespan.

At the time, Dad called his wife "nuttier than a fruitcake," a line which he had used in humorous situations in the past. As with many of his lines, I did not understand this one when I was younger. And the reason was simple: I had never seen or tasted a fruitcake. So when Dad called a neighbor or a relative or some character on the tube "nuttier than a

fruitcake," I was perplexed. What's *nutty* about a *fruit*cake? I thought. A fruitcake should be *fruity*, not nutty, right? If it's nutty, then it would be a *nut*cake. Oh, does my dad always speak in riddles?

Then came my first encounter with a fruitcake and his line became clear to me.

"Fruitcake," my mom said with a look of revulsion on her face as she opened a gift from a distant relative one Christmas.

"Fruitcake?" I asked, excitedly. Finally, I would learn what was so nutty about a fruitcake. Actually, I was expecting it to be fruity, and I was a fan of fruit; not so much of nuts. But, placing more faith in its name than in its reputation, more faith in its name than even my mom's obvious dread as she prepared to "pitch it out," I said I wanted a piece.

"*You* want a piece?" my mother asked, incredulous. "You hate nuts, remember?"

Why does everyone keep talking about nuts when it's a *fruit*cake, I thought.

"But I like fruit," I said. "Can I have a piece?"

"If you want," my mom said dubiously, dropping the thing on the counter. It made an unexpectedly loud thud. That thud, that solid, non-reverberating *thunk*, was louder than anything I'd heard dropped on the kitchen counter before. It was my first hint that something was wrong because fruit, in my experience, had always been light.

Mom took the big, brown circle of dough out of its container, sat it on a cutting board, drew her heaviest knife, and coaxed a chunk of fruitcake out of the ring, which looked like one of early man's early attempts at a wheel.

I dug in with enthusiasm, not noticing the odd regard with which my mother, my dad and a few siblings were looking at me. I noticed instead bits of green and yellow and

red in the cake, assuming them to be pieces of lime? Lemon? Banana? Cranberry? Plum? It's a Christmas thing; it has to be good. That was my reasoning.

As I chewed, my face scrunched up and my taste buds were overtaken by the taste of nuts, walnuts and pecans, mostly, the two kinds of nuts I hated most. I couldn't chew. My eyes watered. My mouth was full of thick, unswallowable goo.

My family's expectant gazes turned to laughter. I gagged.

"Do you want to spit it out?" Mom asked. "Here, do it in the sink."

"Why are there so many nuts in it?" I exclaimed. "What kind of fruit is in it?"

"That's what a fruitcake is like. Now you know why we never have them."

"Yuck! It's a *nut*cake!"

"But it's called a fruitcake," Mom said, still laughing.

And that's when Paul Harry put in as he left the kitchen, "And you're nuttier than a fruitcake for trying to eat it."

It was not long after my mother's apparent recovery, (apparent, for the nature of psychiatric disease defies the placement of a precise time on one's "recovery" from a bout with these kinds of insidious illnesses) and around about the time of my graduation from college, and David's graduation from high school, that the family noticed a profound change in attitude come over Dad. A year before his death, on Easter, he allowed one of his sons and a grandson to tear up his beloved back lawn with a shovel as they used one of those electronic metal detectors to scan the ground for any treasures that might be buried beneath the soil of the Paul Harry Beardslee backyard. Such desecration had been heretofore unimagined because Paul would have vehemently objected in all of

his wide ranging verbal obtuseness. He would have found it untidy, declaring it anathema to all of his principles as they related to proper order and the perfection that he stood for and demanded. But on that day he did not. He wore his goofy pale blue fishing hat and participated in the excavations himself. And he likewise decided no longer to object to the trivial matters and concerns of life, living his final year in relative contentment.

Mom says Dad was ready to die years before he finally did, and considering the turmoil he endured, the turmoil which he all-too-often forced others to endure, I can imagine that this was indeed so.

Tellingly, a younger Paul was actually excited about his purchase of the burial vaults and headstones at the cemetery to which his body would one day be consigned. He used to visit what would eventually be his final plot of land, lie down stiffly above the spot where his bones now lie, close his eyes, clasp his hands over his abdomen and ask, "Harriet, David, Mark, hey, how do I look?" Perhaps only a man who was quite ready for and comfortable with the concept of the finality of his own death could engage in such nonchalant graveyard wit.

Other people observed the difference in Dad in his final year and supposed that he knew of his imminent demise. It is said that people can sense approaching death, even if only subconsciously. I do not know of such things; metaphysics is beyond me. But it is certainly possible that Dad, in realizing that his days were becoming decreasingly numbered, decided to let go of his burdens, to lay down his cares, to live life simply, one day at a time, without any undue need to control, harass, require or cajole, and that he decided to simply live, for as many, or as few, days that were left to him.

Dad enjoyed his walks around his five acres, he reveled in the smell of flowers, the growth of trees, the abundance of wildlife livelihood. And until his dying day he maintained an impeccable lawn (with the notable exception of that Easter Sunday treasure hunt), so the Beardslee estate always looked quite fine, and probably appeared to be worth a lot more than it really was on the real estate market. And once Dad had released his desire to move into a smaller house in the city, a plan he harbored for several years after becoming disabled for the ostensible reasons that it would be cheaper and easier to maintain, that he and his wife could walk to the store instead of drive to town, and that his wife could afford to quit her job, Dad came to regard his five acres as his little piece of heaven on Earth and, at that point, the Beardslee estate became priceless, its value far outstripping any sum anyone from the real estate market may have sought to place on it.

In his final year, after his wife's close call with institutionalization (in large part because of him), Dad dared not utter those dread words: "You make me so nervous." Because those words ended up making his wife "nuttier than a fruitcake." And because those words meant that Dad, too, was nuttier than a fruitcake, although he never admitted it.

Paul Harry and Harriet Marie deserved, at long last, to have their days of being nervous, and nutty, behind them.

22. "Let's Not and Say We Did."

As surely as "What's on the vagina for tonight?" was indicative of my father's good humor, and the promise of something fun in the offing, all the Beardslee kids knew that the utterance of this line set the stage for a boring, uneventful and somber evening, or day, depending on the hour. I'm not sure any other words, or collection of words, could have just quite the same ability to take the wind out of the sails of a young kid who thinks he has a great suggestion than this cynical, party-pooper of a line. "Let's not and say we did." What a downer! And like just about everything else my dad said, it seems, I didn't understand this line until I had some years behind me.

At first, I just didn't get the mild joke, the weirdly sardonic, anti-social sarcasm, the bitter, cranky, curmudgeonly wit of the line. In certain contexts, sure, it's kind of funny. Maybe as a line in a play, or in a situation comedy, or in a comedy act, when it is said by someone else, like by a character who loathes cheerfulness, who revels in a hermitic existence and hates doing stuff with other people, this line could be appropriately funny. But in real life? It contains in those six monosyllabic words all the excitement of staring at a wall, of watching the hands of a clock move, of drinking a warm glass of water. It embodies the very essence of not just non-participation, but non-anticipation and non-appreciation as well. It says, essentially, "I don't like to do anything, and I get no pleasure out of looking forward to doing anything either." It's not just an exercise in shooting down a particular suggestion; it is indicative of an outlook so unenthused that it is contagious. It contains within it the very denial of living, of doing, of being, of enjoying. It's a letdown, a setback, a weary admission of being fed up with

the meaningless little activities that nonetheless help us pass the time, the petty diversions, the cheap thrills, the minute enjoyments, like the eating of a chocolate bar, the viewing of a familiar but satisfying film, the short drive to the hot dog stand for root beer. Surely, none of these activities, or millions like them, are in any way profound, or important, or of consequence, but they are nonetheless little reminders that we are alive, tiny affirmations which can help us through the dreariest of times, small suggestions that recall for us the value of our senses. So, this line, by dismissing all of these little proofs of life, encompasses everything that life is not: dreary, pointless, mundane, uninteresting, unfunny, not worth a whole hell of a lot.

And when you are the recipient of the line's dismal message, it's like spending your last dollar on a tall, cold glass of iced tea on a parched summer day in the city and having it knocked out of your hands by a passing ruffian, spilled all over the pavement, evaporating into the ether before you fully realize what has happened.

"Let's not and say we did."

Where's the fun in *that*? I would think. What's the point of *saying* we did something if we don't actually *do* it? Does Dad get as much pleasure out of *saying* we went to the hot dog stand when we really didn't go as he does by actually *going* to the hot dog stand? Is my dad *crazy*? Or is there something I'm just not understanding here?

Well, there probably *was* something I just wasn't understanding there, that being that Dad must have felt like shit, or else he wouldn't dismiss a suggestion so gloomily. That much I know and can appreciate now. But as a kid, once I understood the meaning of "Let's not and say we did," the line came to be one of the sets of words I dreaded hearing the most. Because, however spry, enthusiastic and fun-loving we are capable of

being as adults, we can never quite recapture the wonder and excitement endemic to childhood. "Let's not and say we did" had the capacity of dashing to ruin that peculiarly childlike lust for life.

Sometimes when my dad said the line, it was as part of a conversation of a broader context, out of which a suggestion would arise, and be thusly dismissed. In these situations it did not mean my dad was particularly glum; we just didn't have the time or the money to do whatever was suggested, so the suggestion was dismissed casually and out of course.

For example, we could have been discussing world geography and one participant in the conversation could have referred to Victoria Falls in Africa as the highest waterfall in the world.

"Nuh-uh," Mark, the kid who sometimes acts like he knows it all, says to Craig, "you've got it wrong. The highest waterfall is in South America somewhere, Angel Falls or something like that."

"I think you better check your facts, my brother," the elder, more cocksure Craig replies.

"I think you're both wrong," offers Dad, encouragingly. "I think the highest falls are in Asia somewhere. Near Mount Everest."

"No, they're not, Dad," Craig tries to explain. "They're in Uganda, Africa, near Lake Victoria."

"What are you talking about?" inquires Mark. "The highest falls are in South America, in the Andes somewhere, in Venezuela. I *read* it. At *school*." That was supposed to be definitive, at least in my mind and in those days. "Tell him, Dad."

“I said you’re both wrong.” My father’s confidence in his children was a bit overwhelming at times, as one can clearly see.

“Well, let’s go to Africa and find out,” Craig proposes.

“Yeah,” Mark concurs. “Or South America.”

“Let’s not and say we did,” says Dad.

This is an example of the benign use of the expression on my dad’s part. It’s just a natural part of a conversation when someone suggests a course of action that could rightfully be considered outrageous. It hurts no feelings. It brings no air of gloom into the immediate environment. It does not cause one to despair for want of joy, or enthusiasm, or society or activity. It does not mean that Dad is sick, or tired, or sick and tired, or for whatever reason otherwise grumpy, or that he had best be left alone. It is simply a brief snippet of a conversation and it makes its point concisely, leaving no harm.

One should consider the following story to glean a clear understanding of the more unpleasant, and entirely deflating, use of the expression.

Mark heads off to elementary school the morning after he had watched a public television program about the history of flight with his father. Both father and son enjoyed it. On the school bus Mark talks with John, who had watched the same program the night before, and he and John relate information from the program to each other animatedly.

Then, in a strange bit of coincidence, it just so happens that at school that day, a high school scholar is visiting the boys’ classroom to help the teacher instruct students on theories of aerodynamics. The high school student is presumably sharing his time for credit of some sort; Mark doesn’t know nor does he care. What he *does* know is that he

and John are abuzz with excitement over all they are learning about such fascinating concepts as velocity and lift and how the application of these aerodynamic properties allow for the occurrence of such a fascinating thing as a 400-ton jumbo jet soaring away into the sky with as much apparent ease as a duck or a swan. The high school volunteer demonstrates the principles he is explaining with fun experiments. First, different styles of paper airplanes are made to fly, and the teenager teaches the students different ways to fold a piece of paper to make little airplanes that actually will fly if thrown into the air correctly. Then he shows the kids a model of an airplane made from wooden popsicle sticks stuck together with glue. Will it fly, he asks. The kids are skeptical but, using the concepts he has tried to teach us, he shows us that with enough speed, the miniature biplane, complete with wheels, actually can lift from the ground. And then, oh, the finale of all finales, he leads the children outside into the courtyard of the school and demonstrates the concepts more realistically with the assistance of a model airplane, one shaped like a small fighter, one of those kinds they often show on TV war movies, that kind with sharp teeth and a menacing mouth painted on the front, and with angry eyes, to create what appears to be a ferocious tiger flying through the sky ready to eat up its enemies. It’s a miniature Flying Tiger! After carefully setting up the contraption on a makeshift runway, and starting its motor, the high school science student uses a remote control mechanism to make the plane taxi away on the grass and, finally, when sufficient velocity is gained, the lift provided by the wings allows the craft to float easily into the sky! And all of the kids ooh and ah in amazement as the small plane buzzes above the courtyard, making two or three complete revolutions, before being brought down right in front of us in a rather bumpy but ultimately safe landing.

This sure is something, Mark says to himself.

And for the remainder of the school day, Mark finds it difficult to concentrate on his other work because an idea has inserted itself into his brain and he's terribly anxious to set the idea into motion. The next day is a Saturday and he knows his dad sometimes likes to go down to the big airport in Detroit to watch the 747s, those big jumbo jets the size of hotels that look like there is no way they could ever fly but which raise their noses and roar off skyward as naturally as if they are big mechanical birds. He knows it's been some time, at least a year, or so it seems, since his father has taken the kids down to the big airport, and Mark wracks his brain trying to think if there is anything "on the vagina" for the next day that could interfere with just such a trip.

Dad would like to go, he reasons to himself, *because last night he seemed so interested in that program about the Wright brothers. I wonder if there's any reason we wouldn't be able to go.* At that instant he jumps inwardly, because a new thought has entered his mind. Maybe that very night, if the weather stays dry, the family could drive over to the local airport in Flint and at least watch the 727, a smaller but no less fascinating jet plane, make its daily landing at 7:35. His family, he knows, has discovered a precious place, a little-known spot behind the growing industrial park just across the runway from the airport, where people can stop and sit at a picnic table and watch the activity at the airport. His family thinks it is strange that no one else is ever there. Off the pavement of the parking lot behind the buildings of the industrial park is a small gate, never locked, that leads to a two-track drive which in turn curves around to a small square patch of fenced-in mowed grass where a picnic table has been placed. It is set up just for people to be able to watch the airplanes, or so it seems, but no one is ever

there. It is, apparently, the Beardslee family's little secret. They always have to open the gate, but no one ever comes by to tell them to leave and the only reason they ever *do* leave, it seems, is because of the mosquitoes. They always make sure to shut the gate behind them.

Oh, if only the weather stays clear, Mark thinks that the Beardslee brood can that very night view a *real* plane, a jet plane, no less, come in for a landing, either from the east or the west depending on the wind, with its bright forward lights dazzling and frightening them as the big beast of the air first seems to be headed straight towards them, then the twilight catches the plane's fuselage as the plane lowers itself from the sky. Red lights on the tips of the wings and on the top of the cockpit flash importantly, with mysterious meaning, the family notices. Shortly, the plane settles itself gently down on the runway with a screech of the landing gear and finally the jets roar in reverse, slowing the plane down to a near stop before it reaches the end of the runway and then confidently wheels its nose around and glides smoothly up to the terminal. Then the family watches as the odd and tiny (in comparison to the jet plane) ground vehicles speed their way up to the big plane, one for fuel, one for luggage and another with the makeshift stairway for the passengers. And the Beardslee kids gaze with fascination at the people getting off that plane, walking nonchalantly as if flying were an everyday experience for them, no more unusual than riding in a car, and they wonder who those people could be and what it is those people do.

While Mark envisions this in his head, he is certain that if the weather holds, that's what the family can do that very night! He doesn't have to wait for the next day with the far more dubious proposal for the long drive to Detroit to watch the big planes.

This plane will do just nicely. And it's only a couple of miles away. Now, if only the weather will stay clear, Mark continues to hope. And as the afternoon progresses, the boy cannot resist frequent glances out the window to the west, fearing that he will see a line of rain clouds moving in. And he can't concentrate on his school work very well and he doesn't listen carefully to the teacher but that's okay, just as long as the weather holds, he thinks. And Mark crosses his fingers.

At last the school day reaches its end and Mark romps joyfully out to catch his bus, just slightly concerned by a gathering of clouds in the distance. They're light gray, not the more ominous charcoal gray or black clouds that signify rain and storms, so he's not too worried when he informs his friend John that maybe tonight he'll be going to the airport to see a real life-size plane land. John says he always watches that plane fly over his house because it comes from Chicago and when it circles around to prepare for its landing, it usually passes directly overhead, and its engines roar so loud the ground shakes. Mark is so protective of the little airport viewing area that he doesn't mention it to John; he just tells John that the family will be "going to the airport to watch the plane come in." And he smiles as the bus heads for home and he watches the west and no clouds appear to be gathering and it will be a perfect night for this plan.

When he gets home, Mark first asks his mother what she thinks and she says she doesn't know. "It will be up to your father. Maybe."

Mark waits impatiently for Dad to come home from work; these are the days before his dad's confirmed disability. Sometimes he's in a foul mood, but Mark thinks that after the previous night's viewing pleasure, this will be the perfect suggestion.

At the dinner table a couple of hours later, Mark can stand the suspense no longer. The closely watched sky has remained clear, discussion at the table is light and no mention of any other activity that could dash his hopes has been made.

"Dad?" he says, apprehensively.

"Yes, son?" his dad answers quietly, eyes staying within the perimeter of his dinner plate. These bad omens do not deter Mark from his purpose, however. He's already enlisted the support of Craig, who has told him that he wants to go too, but that since it is Mark's idea, Mark should be the one to ask Dad.

"Can we go…? Uh, what do you think about…?"

"Come on, spit it out," Dad coaxes, igniting beneath Mark a renewed spark of hope.

"Well, I was just wondering if we could go to the airport tonight, you know, that little spot where the picnic table is? Let's go there and watch the jet come in."

Without looking up, and without hesitating even a little, his dad answers, "Let's not and say we did."

Feeling as if he's just had a ton of bricks fall out of the sky upon him, the suddenly hopeless boy tries what he knows will be futile efforts at persuasion. "But last night we watched that show about airplanes and today at school we…"

"I don't feel like it tonight," Dad rebuffs him. "Now, shut up and eat."

Mark looks at Craig, who looks down at his plate and shakes his head. He looks at Mom but she ignores him. The decision is final. Unless Dad has a change of heart before seven o'clock, Mark's airy dream of the day will not come to pass, at least not this night.

For when Paul Harry said, “Let’s not and say we did” in that particular tone of voice, it meant that he meant it and the odds were very long, very long indeed, that there would be any change of heart.

23. “Don’t Look at Me in that Tone of Voice.”

One of the wonderful things about being children of Paul Harry was that, at least after his disability, we never wanted for one another’s company. And Dad was interested in so many fascinating things in the world. We younger kids got to go along with Dad on his quests to look at stuff.

Dad was into vehicular machinery. He loved tractors, trucks, cars, aircraft, recreational vehicles, boats, especially boats. Whenever there was a boat show, he’d be there, and his kids would be with him. Bishop Airport in Flint (when Flint was a town that mattered, up until about the mid-80s) used to hold an annual air show. A precision flying team from the United States Navy, the Blue Angels, always showed up. Since Dad was a former Navy sailor, he loved the Blue Angels. So did we. But he loved the Thunderbirds from the Air Force just as much. It didn’t really matter all that much what it was, as long as the sight of mankind’s technological prowess was on display, Dad would be there to watch if he could, and he’d have his younger kids in tow.

In the same vein, we’d attend low-tech shows, such as county fairs. Paul Harry’s children loved these fairs, seeing all the animals and touching them at the petting zoo, watching the bull riders, seeing men in old beat up cars smash the shit out of each other in demolition derbies, we loved all that. Dad did too; we could tell from the look on his face. When that look was satisfied and content, it was one of Earth’s most gentle visages.

No wonder Paul Harry was a boat lover. He had served on a ship in the US Navy during World War II and he survived that navy’s assault on Japan’s empire. As an early and reluctant retiree on a fixed income, Dad went to boat shows and dreamed of being the

captain of his own yacht. He was never much of a fisherman; he just wanted a pleasure craft, one big enough that he could entertain on it and sleep on it overnight out under the stars upon a Great Lake. He loved taking us to Port Huron, or sometimes Saginaw Bay or, when we had time, to Mackinaw City and Sault Sainte Marie, just to look at the boats, the yachts and the huge iron ore freighters. Dad knew he could never afford a yacht, but that didn't stop him from dreaming about steering one up the Saint Lawrence Seaway on the first leg of a journey to winter amongst the Florida Keys.

Dad didn't hide this dream, and it was impossible for his kids not to share it to some extent. David and I wanted to be lakeboat captains. Our play placed us in grave danger onboard the bridges of such ships, threatened by weather or by pirates, or by landlubbers gone mad. Or, most frightening, as crewmen aboard the ill-fated *Edmund Fitzgerald*, going down to join the dead that Superior never gives up when the winds of November come early.

RV shows presented yet another dream to Dad. How he would have loved to buy a big Winnebago and lug just what he and Harriet needed onboard to travel the country by road, wheel and rubber! When we attended these events, David and I would be overcome with play scenarios involving a renegade RV driver and his buddy incessantly battling populations of mad folk at every stop. These were fantasies with which we could have some fun; these were dreams about which Dad could only dream and, I remember all too often, sigh over. He knew being a Winnebago Warrior was just as unlikely as being a yacht captain. This knowledge didn't stop him from dreaming, but it certainly aided and abetted his chagrin, his general disappointment with life.

So we would attend the car shows, the truck shows, the county fairs with their old tractor shows, the camper shows, the RV shows, the boat shows, and Dad would gaze and dream. Besieged by salespeople, he gave them barely a word. He didn't travel too far down that road of fantasy in the real world. His mind may have been in Cape Hatteras or some such place, I never knew; but his body, his bearing, remained right there in the middle of Michigan, from where he knew it would never leave.

"Look, Harriet," he would say with a wide grin as he strode from an RV's kitchen to the dining area. "Can't you just imagine serving us dinner right here, and we look out the window at the ocean waves, sea birds flying, palm trees swaying? Whaddaya think, honey?"

Mom wasn't so much into these fantasies. She was a homebody, as she still calls herself, perfectly content to remain at 2061 for the rest of her life. But Dad, well, Dad, he dreamed a little, and his dreams were infectious, at least to me.

These displays of expensive wares that were to remain forever out of Dad's reach presented darker scenarios as well. Once, at an RV and boat show in the Pontiac Silverdome, matters went from enjoyable to ugly in a matter of seconds. The day had started with Dad telling us over breakfast that we were going to a boat show with Mom. Mom never seemed unexcited about such journeys, such visits, such activities, but she never seemed quite as enthusiastic as Dad either. Maybe it was because she knew something we didn't.

Six hours later Dad wasn't very excited anymore. Looking back, as an adult, I can only imagine Dad's sense of dashed hope as he saw others sit down and talk with salespeople about *actually purchasing* a boat or an RV. He had worked every bit as hard

as those other people, but he could not and would not even dare to *begin* to engage the sales folks in conversation about purchasing something that was more expensive than his house! He was too responsible, too realistic, too devoted to his wife, too accountable to his children, to even start talking to some stranger about a dream. But he wanted to! I remember feeling it from him. I looked up at him and watched his swirling head and his wide eyes as he spun around and gazed at the little miracles he would love to own and as he glanced occasionally at the sales booths and as he walked into and out of RVs and boats again and again and, dammit, I know now, had he been a single man he would have made a purchase right there and then! But, alas, he could not. He could only dream, as he had done for decades.

I was thirsty.

"Dad, I want a pop."

"Say 'please,'" Mom instructed.

"Please?"

"Not right now, son," Dad replied, not looking at me. "You've already had one."

I knew not to beg. It never worked anyway. And Dad was distracted. I settled for a frown, a twisting of the lips and a disappointed hangdog look at the ground. Then I looked up again at him, hoping he'd changed his mind. He hadn't. Worse, he'd noticed my lingering despondence, downcast over a pop, for Christ's sake, when he was despondent about so much more.

"Don't look at me in that tone of voice!" he barked, looking straight at me and nearly startling some shit out of my ass.

I had heard the command before, and I understood what it meant. “Don’t look at me like that,” was what he was saying. But as my linguistic sophistication had grown, I began to wonder, how, oh how, can a person *look* at someone in a tone of *voice*? How could I be looking at Dad with my *voice*? I could *talk* to him with my voice. But I could not *look* at him with any *tone* whatsoever. This meant that not only could we not *speak* with disrespect to our father, we could not *look* at him in any possibly disrespectful manner either.

I looked back to the ground and Dad looked away.

On top of the fear of my father’s chastisement, my disappointment at not getting another pop and my general sense of unease with my father’s bearing, I sensed a deeper dissatisfaction, a deeper resentment, a deeper sense of unknown fulfillment. That’s what I sensed from my dad.

I could merely feel it then, but as I grew I came to define it: he was trapped. None of the beautiful boats or RVs could take him away from his responsibilities, responsibilities over which he no longer had sole control. All he could control was the flow of money from the government to him to the grocery store and the telephone and power companies. Paul Harry could not indulge in his dreams; he could only dream them. And while he was dreaming them, he needed not to have some kid beseech him for a pop.

So I tried to stop looking at him in that tone of voice, whatever that meant, and turned silent.

24. “Reveille, Hit the Deck!”

On the evening of September 4, 1964, at 7:52 p.m., just before sundown, Mark Jon Beardslee was delivered into the world about two weeks later than the doctors had anticipated.

“No,” cried the infant, pre-partum. “I’m not going out into that loud, crazy, violent, miserable fray of a world. I’m not, I’m not, I’m not! I’m going to remain here, in the dark, comfortable warmth of my mother’s peaceable womb and dream great dreams, unlimited by any mere human boundaries, borders, horizons or vistas.”

But that’s not the way pregnancy works, and eventually the infant acceded to his fate, but insisted that if he was going to enter that bright, noisy world, he was going to do so in the evening, when the pressures of the workaday world were passed, when the mad rushes to hurry up and get to work or school and hurry up and do a good job or learn a lot and hurry up and get home so you can hurry up and eat before you hurry up and go to bed and hurry up and get to sleep so you can wake up just to hurry up and go to work again were the closest they would get to a kind of perigee, when the petty little frustrations inherent to the maintenance of the life of a family were at their lowest ebb, when the gloaming moved in for its tender embrace of life, and soft lamplight, the flickering of TV screens, or the light of the moon or the stars dominated the landscape. That’s when this infant agreed to be born and, as a result, the child, the teenager and the adult into which the infant would grow would always love that time of day the most, and feel most at peace at that time, and would likewise eschew the morning hours and its rush of expectations and anticipations for the day.

Even so, as an infant, this child decided that out of his resentment over having to be born, he would make someone pay, and therefore he cried loudly and sustained it for hours, throughout the days and the nights, in a condition known in the early 60s as colic.

It drove its father, at least, a little bit crazy. “Harriet, can’t you shut that kid up?”

No, she could not, not for a while. But as the infant became a toddler and the toddler a child, the rules of the father’s world began to press inexorably in upon him, and the human being who presents these words finally had no choice but to acquiesce to the more common rhythms of the world, perhaps not very happily so, but to assent to them he ultimately had no choice.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the child of this narrative came to grimace whenever his comfortable early morning hours of slumber were interrupted by the resonant and undeniably gruff command of, “Reveille, hit the deck!”

This early morning directive was an integral part of the child’s father’s world, and had been since that man was seventeen years old, having enlisted in the Navy with his father’s permission on May 14, 1944. His own time of birth irrelevant, Paul Harry became a morning man through the practice, the drills, the requirements and the order of a military on the move. Through just two years of being thusly awakened, whether in the barracks at the Great Lakes boot camp, the quarters of a Chesapeake Bay naval maneuvers training facility or in the tiny bunk of a warship known only as LCS-41, the method became irrevocably ingrained in him. Because of the same experiences, Paul Harry would just as assuredly rise from sleep for the rest of his life like Skipper did, from the deepest of slumbers to fully alert wakefulness, on his feet in a fraction of a second.

And if this was how he was going to rise, well, then, there was no reason for his children not to be expected to rise in the same fashion.

Dad knew that the world he had created for his family was not of the military sort, and he did not command the household as tightly as the commanders of his late teenage years did. Usually, when he rose to prepare to head off to work at the ungodly hour of 4:50 a.m., Dad did so discreetly, allowing his family the luxury of a few more hours of sleep. But there were days, days when Paul Harry had a project in mind, or a "brainstorm," as he described a fresh idea, and those were the days that he reverted to the morning routine that the Navy had instilled within him. And on those mornings, at least those following his honorable discharge in 1946, and those when his children embodied a captive audience, Paul Harry could play the commanding officer, and Paul Harry could be the one to wake up his snoring charges with the ancient exhortation of "Reveille, hit the deck!"

Indeed, other than the loud, startling and terribly unsettling manner in which this repeated shout brought us children out of our respective slumbers, we had no understandable reason to object to such mornings. For as surely as "What's on the vagina for tonight?" portended my father's desire for an enjoyable evening, his Navy-style wake-up call portended my father's good spirits in full expectation of an enjoyable day. Certainly, that day could be filled with work, like scraping the paint off the house in preparation for applications of fresh coats on a later sunny day, but for my father, who loved to work, both before and after the disastrous summer of 1973, the prospect of undertaking and completing an important household project brought him nearly as much joy as anything could.

The only family activity that might have presented a greater quantity of joy to be had for Paul Harry would be an excursion to a lake, a port or any other place where he could watch large sea vessels sail by. And, to be true, those mornings that started with a “Reveille, hit the deck!” often did transpire into afternoons on the shore, gazing at the monstrous boats that plied the waters of the Great Lakes. Those mornings when Dad had a “brainstorm,” one which said to him, “Hey, you know, I’ve got a tank full of gas, it’s a bright morning, the forecast calls for the same, Port Huron is little more than an hour away, why don’t I get the kids up, have a quick breakfast and head over there? Harriet can fill a picnic basket for lunch on the lawn, and we can watch ships go by all day, have hot dogs and ice cream at London’s Dairy in the evening, leave around seven and be home before dark. Why not? It’s been a while since we’ve gotten away.” When this sort of spirit filled my dad, there was no reason for him not to start the day by hearkening back to his own seagoing days and rousing his roost with a hearty, “Reveille, hit the deck!”

Nonetheless, I still hated it, at least until I was awake and aware and the day had settled into a comforting hum of activity. For unlike my dad, I did not snap awake, I had not been trained to “hit the deck” within seconds of being roused from a somnolent stupor, and I detested being awakened in any manner but a gentle one.

However, if it was to be a joyous day for Dad, chances were it would be a fun one for us kids as well. After the car was loaded and the family filed out the back door towards the garage to take our designated seats in one of Dad’s big, beautiful Buicks, Dad would often stand at the side door to the garage and hold out his arm to block the

way past, as if it were a military checkpoint. Craig would be the first to approach and be stopped.

“What’s the password?” demanded Dad.

“John Wayne,” Craig answered brightly, and without hesitation, for he had been through this drill before. The arm would rise, Dad’s menacing stare would dissolve into an agreeable grin of satisfaction, his head would nod, and Craig would pass unhindered into the garage.

Then came Jan and Dad’s arm would drop and his accusing stare would return. “What’s the password?” he would demand of her. Unblinking, he would stare at her until he received the proper answer. Unlike Craig, Jan didn’t appreciate this game so much, and she probably didn’t even know who John Wayne was, but she would squirm uncomfortably, enduring the little game, and mutter, with just a trace of irritation, “John Wayne.”

And just as swiftly, and with just as much satisfaction on Dad’s part, Jan was allowed to pass.

Then came Mark, the stupid one and the literal one and the one who always had to ask questions and analyze everything. As usual, I didn’t quite understand this whole charade. No one had ever told me about any “password;” surely no one had entrusted me with the knowledge of the password and, to be honest, I thought, at least the first time I was subjected to this test, that the answer of “John Wayne” was just something that Craig had made up on the spot. Jan had been too flustered or annoyed to come up with anything else and, since it had worked for Craig, she decided it was easiest to just repeat it. And Jan was rewarded for her conformity by being graciously, with a smiling

welcome, allowed to pass. But I thought that any reasonable answer would suffice, not yet aware of my dad's vast appreciation of the greatest film icon of his generation. I knew Dad was *fond* of John Wayne, but I didn't realize that it was to such an extent as to be the only acceptable password. Okay, since Dad allowed passage with the name of John Wayne, it would only be fair, or so I reasoned in this "birdbrain" of mine (hey, after all, it *was* still morning), to present a password that indicated someone famous of whom my *mother* was especially fond. It seemed to make sense to me at the time, anyway.

"What's the password?" those round, menacing eyes said to me as my father's infamous stare pierced through my own eyes and on through the back of my head. The arm was again extended, blocking passage into the garage and, from there, onward through the day. Entirely dubious about the "John Wayne" answer, stubbornly believing that that couldn't be the only acceptable response, and determined to be different, determined *not* to conform, as Jan had, I squeaked, "Carol Burnett."

The stare disappeared, the eyes began to close into a smile and the arm started to rise before my father realized that I had not provided the correct password.

Down came the arm, the smile inverted into a frown and the stare returned, this time betraying a patina of threat.

"What?" he roared. "If you do not know the password, you cannot pass."

"It's 'John Wayne,'" the ever-helpful Craig called out from within the shade of the garage. "Just say, 'John Wayne.'"

"Yeah, it's 'John Wayne,' stupid," added Jan, who, aware of the grand opportunity, was entirely incapable of suppressing an insult, for she knew that until Dad

heard *me* say "John Wayne," he wouldn't listen to anything *she* was saying, and he wouldn't admonish her for saying anything that wasn't nice.

I stood frozen for a moment, perplexed, staring back at my father in utter confusion. I heard Mom laugh softly behind me, no doubt appreciating the entry of the name of *her* favorite celebrity into her husband's ritual. The husky arm remained stiff, and I had not passed the test. Until I did, I would not enter the garage and the day would never, or so it seemed to my young mind, get underway.

"Say 'John Wayne,'" my elder brother yelled again.

My father gave no indication of hearing him or of backing off. "You cannot pass until you say the password."

"Oh, Paul, let him through," my mom chuckled behind me, but Dad gave no indication of hearing her. He just continued to stare at me and I never did understand how he could stare so long without blinking.

"Say 'John Wayne!'" hollered Craig yet again.

"Yeah, hurry up, dumb-face, just say, 'John Wayne,' jeesh!" yelled Jan impatiently, with a roll of her eyes.

"John Wayne?" I questioned more than answered, wondering why that name should bear any more import than any other. Even as a question, however, the name worked its magic and the stare subsided into a smile, the arm rose and my father's round head nodded in eminent satisfaction. I entered the garage feeling dizzy with confusion.

One more remained. Little David approached the gate eagerly and Dad assumed his mockery of an imposing military checkpoint sentry. "What's the password?"

“John Wayne!” David shouted with a wide smile and a gleeful heart. David was smart. He knew how to follow orders, how to imitate the approved actions of his older brother and sister, and he was delighted to please his father most readily. He passed into the garage and the game was over. Grinning, Mom passed by carrying the picnic basket, mumbling, “I don’t know why you make them do that, Paul.”

He didn’t answer, but the kids did not fail to notice that Mom hadn’t said the password.

“What about Mom?” came the cascade of voices. “She’s gotta say the password, too.”

“Yeah, make her say it.”

“Yeah, Dad.”

And so one final time Dad assumed his position, holding the gate of his arm out in front of Mom’s path.

“Oh, Paul, come on,” my mom objected. “This is getting heavy.”

“You gotta say the password, Harriet,” Dad explained in all seriousness. “Everyone else did.”

“Okay,” she agreed, before blurting out, “Carol Burnett,” laughing as she pushed her way by.

A mock look of hurt crossed Dad’s face. The kids yelled, “No, it’s ‘John Wayne’!”

“Okay, then, ‘John Wayne,’” said Mom with growing impatience as she placed the picnic basket in the trunk of the car. In moments, we were on our way.

No, I never liked mornings. I still don't. I suppose I never will. But what I wouldn't give to hear my father's deep voice command me, at whatever hour, "Reveille, hit the deck!" just one more time.

25. “That’s for Me to Know and You to Find Out.”

This line troubled me well into my adolescence, perhaps even into adulthood.

If Paul Harry knew something and I didn’t, this was his catch-all line for questions about what he knew. It drove me crazy. *Well, of course you know; that’s why I’m asking you*, my young mind reasoned. *Because I want to find out!*

It just didn’t make any sense. As I grew, I learned that there were many things I did not know. But the only way for me to find the answers to these various “things” was to learn them from my dad or someone else who was older, wiser, more knowledgeable, more experienced. So, to have my dad tell me this (and he knew it irritated me to my core) did absolutely nothing for my knowledge of the world or of how things worked or how to uncover the correct manner of going about *searching* for answers even. Oh, it was so frustrating. *Dad, I’m looking to you for some answers here and you’re just making a joke out of the whole thing at my expense. Thanks a whole hell of a lot!*

True, Dad used this line mostly in good humor, as he enjoyed watching his kids squirm for answers, for knowledge, for understanding. It wasn’t cruel. Rather, it was instructive. *Answers don’t come easy. You can’t expect me to always be here to provide them for you; you have to learn how to go about finding things out for yourself.* So the exhortation which lay behind this line was more than just troubling to the kid and amusing to the father. It was ultimately a subtle, albeit sarcastic, form of imparting wisdom.

Okay, already.

I'm very young. We're playing cards. A game of fish. "Do you have a three?" I ask.

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

Aaarrgghh! It's part of the game for other players to answer honestly when I ask that question! Even as a very young boy I knew that much. But Dad liked to toy with his boys. So I learned, eventually, not to play fish with Dad anymore because he'd never tell me what he *had*!

Her name was Diane, my first puppy love. She was the daughter of one of my eldest brother's co-workers, and we met at a touch football game when we were fifteen. I went ga-ga and, of course, had my heart broken a few months later. She lived in a different school district, one called Holly, which is located several miles south of mine. I guess it was difficult for fifteen-year-olds to maintain long-distance relationships.

Two years later I had a car. I called Diane. Asked her on a date. She said yes.

(I knew it was important to get a car; I just *knew* it!)

So, I picked up Diane in my own silver 1975 Chevrolet Malibu (which I myself had paid for) at her home on Grange Hall Road. This time our relationship was *so* adult. No riding my bike fifteen miles just to catch a glimpse of her, or skipping school and walking twelve miles just to hold her hand for a few minutes outside of class, no more relying on my eldest brother to drive me to his co-worker's house so that I could see her for a few minutes. I had my own car this time, man, and I was cool, man, and her parents seemed to approve, man, and so she got in my car and I got in my car and I drove us up to I-75, man, to get to the movie theater in Flint, which was barely twenty miles north.

When my oldest siblings were young, the government built I-75, turning my home street of Grand Blanc Road (which extends west from the south Flint suburb of Grand Blanc) from a farmer's road into a major county thoroughfare. I-75 passed right near my parents' house and, if one looked closely, one could see our house from the expressway. As kids, Craig, Jan, David and I sat at our front picture window, watching traffic on the freeway move north from Detroit and counting the cars pulling snowmobiles. We also counted the ones heading back south with dead deer strapped across their trunks. It was my plan to demonstrate this little piece of novel knowledge to Diane on the trip into Flint.

Alas, just after passing underneath Holly Road, about a mile south of my house, my anticipation over this impressive revelation apparently led my foot to become too heavy, and a friendly State of Michigan trooper pulled me over. I was doing 69 in a 55. (Yeah, really, the speed limit on expressways was 55 mph in those days!) He wrote the ticket for ten over and I thanked him. Diane giggled at me and we went to the movie and had a make-out session afterwards in the parking lot of the theater before I took her home. Great stuff! It was Diane's smell and Diane's lips and Diane's sighs that I remembered from that night, not the speeding ticket. Hell, I would just put that in the glove box and go take care of it at the courthouse the first chance I got. Dad didn't have to know a thing about it.

But somehow Dad knew. I knew he knew even though he never told me because he started asking me odd questions:

"So, Mark, how does your car perform?"

"Are you happy with the engine?"

"What kind of oil do you use?"

"Do you use high octane gas?"

These were not normal questions from him because he knew that I was no mechanic and I knew that he knew that I didn't really care or know about such things.

A couple weeks passed before Dad caught me in the garage and asked, for the umpteenth time, "Hey, Mark, how happy are you with this car?"

"Oh, I really like it, thanks, Dad." (Even though my money had bought the car, Dad had allowed me to buy it; indeed, he was the one who had located the car, who had negotiated the selling price with its owner and who had encouraged me to buy it.)

"It's pretty fast, isn't it?"

That's when I knew for sure that he knew about the ticket. But how? How the hell did he know? Did he look through my glove box when I wasn't around? If he had, he would have had to have done so soon after the ticket was issued because I paid it just a few days after getting it. Did he check with the police? If so, was he checking with them often? Wouldn't that be a pain in the ass for the police? He didn't have any friends on the police force as far as I knew. Damn! I knew he knew. But *how* did he know? And I was scared to death to tell him I got a speeding ticket because I was covered under his insurance and was afraid he'd kick me off his policy if he knew. *How did he know*? Was he paying such close attention that particular evening that he saw, through the Vandermey yard, the police car's cherry top start flashing? Did he actually grab his binoculars, run across the street and down through the Vandermeys' various gardens and animal pens in search of a suitable perch from which he could identify my silver car stopped there in front of the blue Michigan State Police cruiser? No way. That was not Paul Harry behavior. But, then, just *how the hell did he know*?

“Uh, yeah, I guess it can go fast; it’s got a 350 engine,” I answered cautiously.

“Mm hmm,” he muttered, pretending to look for something on his workbench. “Fast enough to go 69 in a 55?”

I was caught. I was terrified. I had lied to my dad. There was no way I could deny it. What could I do? What could I say?

Dad saved me from myself by approaching and saying, “I know you got a ticket, son. I don’t care that you got a ticket. I *do* care that you didn’t tell me. You don’t trust your old man?”

And what was I to say to that? If I said yes, I trusted him, I’d be lying again. If I said no, I didn’t, he’d probably knock me down.

“Well, I was gonna tell you,” I began.

“Gonna tell me? When? After I got the bill from Bob Harvey Insurance telling me that my premium’s gone up because someone on my policy got a speeding ticket?”

I had no answer for that, of course, and just hung my head, murmuring, “I’m sorry.” Tears began to well up in front of my mighty father, to whom I had lied, or at least from whom I had kept the truth.

“Sorry, sorry, bullshit,” Paul Harry said, remaining remarkably calm. “Listen, son, like I said, I don’t care that you got a ticket. I’ve gotten tickets. I just wish you felt you could have told me, that’s all. No driving for a week.”

And he walked out.

I sat on the bus seat, on the way to school, my precious car sitting in the driveway. I looked at its elegant lines as the bus passed by 2061. How did he find out? I wondered

over and over. I talked with friends about it, I talked with trusted teachers, I even talked to my mom.

Eventually, that line from my childhood, "That's for me to know and you to find out," began dancing in my head. It played in my dreams, tormenting me night and day as I struggled for an answer that made some sense. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

I could stand it no longer and decided to do what my dad had told me to do so many times: find out. It didn't take me long. My younger brother David had been with Dad on the fateful day of that great date. They had listened to it on the police scanner! That damned police scanner which my dad *hated*! All it did was scan, scan, scan and scan. And every once in a while a voice would squelch something you couldn't even *understand*. My dad *hated* that thing. Why was he listening to it *that* day? And at *just* the right time? Hell, had I been a mile or more south or north it would not have been heard. Why, god, *why* did Dad just *happen* to be listening to a *police scanner*, a device he couldn't *stand*, at just the right *time*, and at just the right *place*, so that he could hear a police officer report to dispatch: "One Beardslee, Mark J., 2061 East Grand Blanc Road, male, Caucasian, license number B 623 455 485 698…" *Why*, god, *why*?

I still hear god laughing, responding just as Dad would have: "That's for me to know and you to find out."

26. “Love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

“You think you know somebody, but man, you never do,” croons the hurting heart of a fellow named Todd Snider, a clever country rock songwriter from Georgia.

That one little line has stopped me on many an occasion, made me think, and wonder if I really knew a given best friend, or a lover of the moment, or even members of my family. To really know somebody, that’s just something I’m not sure any of us can ever do, although I have to admit that I’ve met lifelong companions who seemed to be absolutely sure of their complete knowledge, one of the other. Still, you have to wonder. I’ve experienced enough situations in which a person just seems to change overnight, and whether it was a person I knew well, or one a friend or family member knew well, I would have to conclude that I, or my friend or my family member, didn't really know that person very well at all. I’ve had friends, dear friends, disappear into the indecipherable “stuff” of space-time itself and flee all efforts at contact for no apparent reason. I’ve had other friends who have experienced a significant other, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, or a spouse, transmogrify into a being unlike any they had previously known.

Sometimes, my expression of an opinion has sent a person packing for good, someone I may have thought to be a good friend. Sometimes, I’ve observed a person I thought to be a gentle soul turn ugly, as if cursed or spellbound, and become violent and hateful. And such revelations do not always occur under the influence of drink.

I have learned to go through life assuming I *do* know my companions, but knowing that they may do something at any moment that will prove my assumption wrong. The only other course, that of assuming you *don’t* know your companions, leads

to paranoia, and I can't live like that. I can live with someone's decision to disappear, but I can't live day-to-day believing that someone with whom I am associated is entirely disingenuous, that his or her real self remains hidden from me. I think that to do so would drive me quite mad.

But, still, I wonder. I wonder a lot. Does anyone know *me*, I ask myself. I mean, does anyone else *really* know what's in my heart of hearts, what lies in the deepest recesses of my mind, what I would *really* do in a given situation? Invariably, my answer is no. I, myself, am unsure how well I know my own self. Life, it seems, is an unfolding, a continuing sense of revelation, like the paring back of layer after layer of onion peels and, if we're lucky, we get to the heart of the matter and truly know our own selves. Therefore, if it's that hard to know our*selves*, how can we even begin to fathom how to "know" another?

The German author and philosopher Hermann Hesse, whose works fascinate me, postulated that every conceivable human emotion, reaction, belief, value, perception, viewpoint, mood, behavior, all those elements which seemingly tell us apart and grant us a sense of uniqueness, of individuality, are contained within every human. External, environmental events, as well as internal events, whether they be of the chemical sort in the brain or of the conscious sort that we choose to have wrought into being, such as a change of heart regarding our feelings about someone else, or a change of habit meant to enhance or improve our life experience, can bring forth any number of possible personalities in any one of us, Hesse theorized. Without delving too deeply into this philosophy, such considerations cannot be dismissed as irrelevant when it comes to the exploration of a character, especially the character of a real man, one of flesh and blood

who lived, played, worked and died in close proximity with the portrayer, as is the case in this very examination of my own father. We feel a need to know that we can affirmatively answer the question, “Do you really know this person?” In this case, the specific question is, “Did you really know your father?” Certainly, I want to believe that I did, and now that he is dead, and can no longer transform, that indeed I *do* know the man who was my father, the man who sired me, and my siblings, the man who was so intimate with my mother for so many years, the man who helped raise me and who molded me, to some extent, into the man I have become. I *want* to believe this, sure, desperately so, but I cannot honestly say that I do.

Individuals are so complex, and the span of their lives makes them more so. My dad was no exception.

To exemplify the reality of what it is like to stare intently into the past, to remember and to recall and to immerse oneself in those occurrences in life that are associated with one human being, and yet to be so unsure of what that person really believed, what really mattered to that person, I offer up the following line: “Love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

This oft-repeated phrase of my father, placed in the context of his most considered advice to his sons about how to deal with the mysteries of the opposite sex, forces me to wonder, forces me to acknowledge that what he was offering when he said this was, perhaps, an outline of a life entirely different from that which he had led. I gaze upon a photograph at this moment, one which captures the youthful delight of my father, a mere 20-year-old, embracing his equally delighted 19-year-old bride in the back of the car which will take the couple to their wedding bed, and at the same time I recall how many

times my father told me, often even when he was not asked, that I should love and leave women, and it seems as if I am describing two different men. It's not just that my father married a beautiful young woman when he was a handsome young man. Many couples have done this and then realized, sooner or later, that it was a mistake, and have divorced. Embittered men and women who have once been married often advise their peers or their younger acquaintances to beware the trappings of marriage. No, this perplexity, this confounded riddle, wrapped in an enigma, surrounded by a paradox, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, runs far deeper than mere disappointment over a marriage that didn't work out. From all evidence that I can unearth, the marriage of my father to my mother *did* work out.

Oh, it had its trying moments, certainly. I would venture to say that no successful marriage progresses without its doubts, its uncertainties, its disappointments, its various vagaries, sometimes even its infidelities. But my parents were faithful to one another. My father loved his children deeply; he showed it on innumerable occasions. Dad never expressed the tiniest bit of regret over having married Harriet and together bearing six children. And yet that line remains: "Love 'em and leave 'em."

Any man holds within himself hidden desires, secret hopes, partial regrets, vivid fantasies. Was one of my father's to live in a manner entirely opposite to that which he did live?

There are some dreams my father did share with me, like his lifelong desire to captain his own boat, a large one, capable of managing the oceans, not just the Great Lakes, of sailing up the Saint Lawrence Seaway each autumn and then heading south to winter in the Gulf of Mexico, or among the Caribbean islands, or in the Bahamas or in

Florida, and then to return in the spring to Michigan, and choose a port of call from which he could base his mighty vessel, and enjoy each day aboard his craft as his home. He also shared with me his desire to see Australia, fascinated as he was for some reason with the continent down under. I'm not sure he wanted to live there, but he wanted at least to visit it. He never had the money to fly that far away, and given the life he ended up living, there was never any *reason* to go to Australia, except perhaps as a tourist, but my father was thrifty and, we cannot forget, of extremely modest financial means. He would rather spend, or so it seemed, on his children and on his wife and on the luxury of owning a Buick.

He confided to me once that he had always wanted to know what it felt like to smoke a marijuana cigarette. Dad rarely drank, and when he did just a couple sufficed to get him loopy, and he abstained from drugs except for those prescribed him by doctors. Yet, during my drug years, when I confided to him my use of cannabis, Dad exhibited a genuine curiosity, one which I would not appease, although I easily could have, fearing the effect it could have on his heart. Dad smoked cigarettes until his first heart attack at age 39, when he gave up tobacco forever. Why, I wondered, was he so curious about marijuana?

This question leads directly to the central question about my father, the question raised by his exhortation to love 'em and leave 'em. Was he a different man than he portrayed himself to be for most of his life? Did he just pretend to enjoy living the life of a family man, while inwardly he fervently wished to be elsewhere, to have followed a different path, to be unencumbered? Did his illness deprive him of a chance to simply fulfill his familial obligations until David reached age eighteen before doing what he

really wanted to do, before divorcing Harriet and then just disappearing to lead a different life altogether? Or did he just accept the fact that he had only one life to live, that he had chosen early to be a family man, to settle down and nest, so unlike the constant moving of his childhood, and to be content with his choice of a wife and many children, even if he did become somewhat restless and dissatisfied later in that life? Did he know that he had many options available to him but, because of his work ethic, and his determination and ability to provide a better life for his children than that which he had known, he simply acquiesced to the obligations that his choice entailed?

Why, oh why, Dad, did you advise me, over and over again, to love women and then leave them? Was it because you were unhappy with monogamy? Were you unhappy with Harriet?

Or was it because, somehow, whether personally or vicariously, you were well aware of the capacity of a woman to break a man's heart, to wound his spirit, to question the dictates of his own mind? Were you trying to spare us that kind of heartbreak, that kind of pain? Were you able to see into the future and know that what you had with Mom was so preciously rare and becoming rarer all the time that the future held ill for long-term loving relationships?

Or was it just, perhaps, an extension of your desire to see your children have more than you did, and that you advised us to love 'em and leave 'em so that maybe one of us could live that boat life of your dreams, that maybe one of us could visit Australia, that maybe at least one of us could go forth into the world and truly experience it, to know no limits to the exquisite offerings that abound in the world, to sample foods you never even knew existed? Did you know, simply, that *you* could not live thus but, by god, you were

going to raise your children so that they would be able to if they so wished? Did it excite you when you heard Jan proclaim as a young high school student that she would never marry, that she would travel the world, that she would meet strange and unusual people from all over the globe, that she would write about them, teach about them, flourish among them, even though in the end she chose to follow a life even more traditional than yours? Was Jan's refusal to embrace the world part of why you encouraged the next kid in line, me, to be so carefree? Did you realize that it's a vast, vast world and you could at least encourage your boys, this boy, to taste the various fruits, both literal and figurative, as we moved through it? Is this what you meant by that "Love 'em and leave 'em" line, that you hoped your children would take advantage of the potential to see, hear, smell, taste and feel all the things that you knew you yourself never would?

Or did your line mean something else entirely? Were you trying to warn your sons, especially, against trapping themselves in male-female relationships which they could not control? That women were not to be avoided but, rather, enjoyed and, indeed, left if the relationship became too sticky, too clingy? Were you warning us against a phenomenon that did not even have a name in your generation, that which we now call co-dependency?

I'm so sorry if your life was somewhat disappointing to you, Dad, and I hope the darkest of my ruminations are wrong. But, if by telling me to "love 'em and leave 'em," you were trying to convey one or some or all of my conjectures, well, at least in raising me, Dad, you succeeded admirably.

Thank you.

CONCLUSION

How often we hear the expression, “If memory serves…,” as a disclaimer used by people who are about to state something which they believe to be historical fact and to which they were privy. I believe it is so regularly used because memory *doesn’t* serve. We age quickly and time, at times, speeds by us as we involve ourselves in the whirlwind of daily activity, life maintenance, work, play, planning for work and play, short trips, long trips, meals, relationships, amusements, bedtime. The more we age the more memories we have and the more specific memories become vague before slipping away altogether. This afflicts us all to some extent, not just those with Alzheimer’s Disease or with amnesia brought on by some other equally dreadful occurrence. It’s just a natural progression in the degeneration of our brain cells, I would surmise, for it has happened to everyone I know, not the least of whom is me.

This disclaimer is not meant to cast doubt on the accuracy of the stories that have been shared above. Indeed, I know these stories are true; that’s why they are included. Certainly, the precise details of conversations are not accurate to the word, but they are pretty damned close. If I am off a bit, it doesn’t really matter because these stories are not about the details of dialogue, or even of time and space; they are about occurrences in the life and times of one Paul Harry Beardslee and those closest to him.

This brief examination of the nature of memory serves to alert the reader to the fact that I am certain there are many, many more of “Dad’s lines” that I have simply forgotten. It is not possible that the contents of the preceding chapters are *exhaustive*; I’m trying to relay the entire life of a man here, for Christ’s sake. An encapsulation of a

mere twenty-six lines would be a harsh disservice to the memory of a clever, observant and spontaneously witty man. No, this volume provides a set of stories intended to be merely *illustrative* of that man's manner of communication, his sense of ethics, his maddening idiosyncrasies and self-contradictions, his nuggets of humble wisdom, his dry, understated sense of humor and, of course, his endurance of horrific realities and his unwelcome parsing out of his own unique brand of horror. To do this, I have needed only to plumb the depths of my memory, to travel back through time, in a sense, to become the boy and the man I was during the 22 years I knew him. If we dismiss the first four years of my life as out of memory's reach, which they predominantly are, I have, as of this writing, been without my father for a bit longer than I was with him. Thus, it should be expected that this writer was not able to recall *every*thing, and for this I must beg the reader's forgiveness. Surely, other members of the Beardslee family with memories that run concurrent to my own will, upon reviewing these pages, instantly ask why some particular line that stands out in *their* memories was overlooked. My answer to that should be evident by now. Perhaps my memory doesn't serve me, but it serves me well enough, and I can but hope that the reader feels that this volume has succeeded in its purpose. While I believe (to paraphrase another much-admired author) imagination is superior to memory, I also believe what my younger brother David tells me: that the funniest, the scariest, the most profound, indeed, all the best stories, are true stories.

It is in this spirit that this memoir is offered.