

ONE



They and There

THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE TRACKS

My father read the newspaper from back to front, as if it were the Talmud. He read every word of it (though let me not be misleading, he was skeptical about the Talmud), without worrying about origins or the sense of an ending. He was convinced that wherever it started, whatever *it* was, it couldn't be trusted. No matter what was reported about it, there was nothing but thievery from beginning to end. But as though to confirm it again, the irrefutable, the inarguable, he read in reverse scruple, backing through the news, and if a story were continued, so what? he already knew the story, as he also knew the score, but he had to read it all, with headlines, subheads, captions, columns and other commentary, profiles, reviews, letters, stock listings and market statistics, the edgy ups and downs, as in the major-league standings or shifting decimals of batting averages, comic strips and cartoons, the schedule of ship sailings, obituaries, classifieds, everything from the editorials to the finest print of ads, and in every section on Sundays. "They're all the same," he'd say, as he closed the paper with a hard crease, front page up. He didn't care about a referent. *They*. The pronoun could shift all it wanted, he knew who they were. They were all the same.

Hadn't he seen for himself, daily, in *The Daily News*, biggest circulation in the country—well, maybe not then but soon to come as the other papers folded, the *Mirror*, the *Journal*, the *Telegram*, the *Trib*, only the *Post* left in the afternoon. You could hardly believe it today, but the *Post*—that virulent

tabloid of the smirking Right—was for the sympathetic Left, or what passed for liberals then (a word more scarce at the time) or for those too politically pantywaist to be thought of as Trotskyite. Whatever you called them, you couldn't trust them. My father was a socialist, but he worried about them too, as he did about the unions, though he was a card-carrying charter member of Plumbers Union Local #1. Where we lived—with a Communist storefront in the neighborhood (and recruiting parties on Friday nights)—the *Daily Worker* was on the newsstand of the candy store downstairs, but you'd be hard pressed anywhere to find *The New York Times*. And why would you want to, "All the News That's Fit to Print"?—which for my father was worthless too, and not a picture on the page. That's of course changed today, and with color no less in the *Times*, a sort of plaintive washout of color, sometimes adorning atrocities that, as they replicate past the millennium, with no perversion, disease, horror, barbarity unimagined—serial killings, child murder, rape, ingenuities of abuse (not only familial and bureaucratic, but also priestly too), AIDS, genocide, jihads, and in the repertoire of the lethal (preserving virtue or power), amputations, stonings, machetes in the Congo and global weapons of mass destruction, biological warfare, and maybe even cyborgian, as well as the excruciating intelligence of torture never shown—recurrently makes me wonder how we read the news at all. Which I do with the *Times* every morning, like my father with the *News*, almost as compulsive, but going front to back, as if not wanting to escape the worst of it, or what we're waiting for, like the inevitable news of a suicide bomber in a downtown shopping mall, and with the occasional feeling that in any direction my father had it easy.

Still, the fact of the matter was that he had it grievously right; long before the Absurd, none of it made sense. Nor was that an excuse—no more than it was in Beckett, with his excruciating intelligence—for thinking it might get better. "Use your head, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" That outburst, over the years, I've often quoted from *Endgame*. So, if that's a revelation, what's new? my father would say. As for the news *not* fit to print, you might have found some of it back then (more of it now, though it's being printed) had you followed this direction: over the Manhattan Bridge, left off Flatbush onto Atlantic Avenue, then straight out toward East New York, to where the Long Island Railroad cuts below the street, like a coronary bypass of the Jewish heart of Brooklyn.

There was a bridge over the tracks which I patrolled when, in fourth or fifth grade at school, I was captain of the Safety Scouts and, with a quadran-

gular silver badge, tilted and cusped, snug around my arm, had a ritual fight with the leader of a black gang, or his surrogate, several mornings a week, to keep things moving over the crossing. The martial arts were not on the scene, but there was a studied, Kabuki-like formality as the contest began, attaining in its repetitions—not irredeemably brutal, though it could be briefly fierce—a condition of equilibrium, thereby keeping the peace (which made more sense, at least, than the news as my father saw it). We usually fought in silence with a little crowd gathered around, either up on the bridge with its concrete walls, or under the steps below. The black kids were usually more agile, but soon as I saw it coming, no turning back, I had a way of reaching out quick for a collar, holding on tight with the right hand and punching steadily with the left, not down in the belly but crack there on the cheekbone or dead on in the nigger's face. And if the counterpunching was trouble I was damn good at wrestling too, moving from collar to headlock and getting an elbow under the chin, either choking or jabbing with that, when I got him on the ground. I must have done pretty well, because they never took away my badge, which I polished every day.

It meant more to me, I think, than the gold medal the principal gave me at an assembly—I didn't know it was graduation—for being the best student. It was not only embarrassing to be called on stage, but something of a surprise, because I was too busy fighting or playing ball to worry about studying then. Well, I must have somehow used my head, since I did get pretty high grades and was graduating a year early, having been skipped twice. My father, who was not given to bragging about his kids, not only watched me playing ball, and now and then fight as well, but also saved my report cards to show around. As for the fighting, if my mother didn't like it—once coming after me with a broomstick to make me stop—and he couldn't quite approve, he never interfered, except the one time he grabbed me, when he saw me backing away, and pushed me toward a bully, a wop named Nutchie, older than me, bigger, much too much of a match. It may have been because my father was there, but Nutchie was so startled when, crying in a rage at being forced to fight, I went with unceasing fury head first into his groin, grappling, butting, kicking, throwing punches wildly, through whatever he did, that he backed off himself. The turnaround would have been impossible without an accompaniment, of course: cocksucker, motherfucker, shithead Italian prick! the repertoire was endless, out of neighborhood fuck-you contests, fuck you too and up your ass (which you still can't print in the *Times*), but with a pedagogical dividend that came in later years.

That was when, in the process of training the actors who became my KRAKEN group, I upped the ante on what they were doing by starting to curse them, way beyond any critical excess they'd encountered from me before. And then, as they moved from being baffled to being pissed to being charged up enough to tell me to fuck off, I challenged them to summon up every dirty word they ever knew, turning them on each other, making up words if they had to (since most had deficient backgrounds), or dissolving them into sounds, fricatives, dentals, plosives, in every conceivable register or torn from the vocal cords, assault unabating, letting the venom work. This was actually part of a series of exercises in what I called (in quite another language) "the teleology of an instinct," starting at an extreme and letting it take you beyond exhaustion and psychophysical risk to what you otherwise couldn't imagine in some other zone of yourself. Some time before that, in Paris—a far cry from Brownsville in Brooklyn, but in this danger zone of the vocal not so far as it seems—I'd been friendly with Roland Barthes, when he was first moving from "the pleasure of the text" through "the grain of the voice" (a sort of deep-throated outburst, through glottis, mucous membranes, spittle, nose and teeth) to the notion of *jouissance*. The word is untranslatable (something more or other than joy), a certain exultancy in excess that, before I read any texts, I learned back there on the streets, at the leading edge of performance, where—as out on a football field, screaming your head off for motivation—you could also really get hurt. As for that graduation, with punches thrown and fuck-yous, my grades were pretty good too, and if they wanted to give me a medal they could have given me a medal for that.

Meanwhile, I wanted nothing more than to be a football or basketball player, a desire that continued until I was nearly out of college. Better at those sports, but good at baseball too, I studied the moves, strategies, signals, subtleties of form, with a conscientious passion that—as required *in* the game, no excuses there, like making a double play or getting a pass to a spot or blocking someone out or, in the knife-like instant, not letting yourself be faked—may have spawned an attentive reflex that, with part of me somewhere else, I also brought to school, along with a quick impatience for inaccuracy, cover-up, or those who by goofing off showed they lacked staying power. Down in a basement, laying pipes, these are qualities my father had, as everybody attested who knew his work as a plumber. Like him, with unerring eye, I read the *News* backward then, but only the last few pages, because that's where they had the sports. In the summer, with no floods in the schoolyard for night games, and no television at home, I'd wait around

the candy store, jumping over the Johnny pump or playing kick the can, till an early edition of the paper came. I may have heard the score on the radio, or even part of a game, but I wanted to know it all, in detail and with pictures, and they were great in the *News*, a full back page of often crucial plays. What I hoped to see most of all—and here a betrayal, a Yankee fan in Brooklyn! before the Dodgers betrayed it too, selling out to L.A.—was an immaculate swing by Lou Gehrig, no doubt into the bleachers, or Lefty Gomez following through, going all nine innings, or if not, there was Johnny Murphy coming in for relief, along with the advantage of being supported by the sluggers of Murderer’s Row.

There was, as I imagined myself out there, doing what had to be done, and knowing it had to be right, an accretion of discipline not much different from what I later sought in the theater, where no matter what the talent, as coaches say in sports, a lot of it is mental. Or as Whitlow Wyatt, his pitching coach at Milwaukee, said of the Hall of Famer Warren Spahn: “Every pitch he throws has an idea behind it.” And so it was with me, the idea there, but something obsessive about it. From the morning, protecting the crossing, till I fell asleep at night, rehearsing a marvelous steal or an inexcusably botched play, there was—even in sizing up cracks in the sidewalk for casually kicking the can—a sort of thinking with the body that also went to my head.

But then, so did certain images that, if congenital to the neighborhood, were out of another world, like my grandmother putting a towel over her head on Friday nights and, leaning over the *Shabbat* candles, with a faith that was never mine (and never meant to be), wafting up her nose the unassuming fumes. If that’s thinking with the body, it’s more like an outer body. And here, too, I learned something about credibility, as I later came to know it in dramaturgical terms: the appearance of a reality through the reality of appearance. Not believing what she believed, only believing that she believed it, I would find myself believing—for the apparitional moment, against all wish to resist—that what she believed was *there*. That short, unshapely, wispily white-haired woman—was it merely *how* she did it, a matter of performance? I couldn’t have dreamed yet of asking the question, but at some subliminal level was maybe thinking of that. I’m not sure what I was thinking, however, when one Friday night, in an early presumption of atheism, or premature existentialism, I decided to put her on, laying out the proposition that God didn’t exist. My parents were away, and Baba was making me dinner, indulging what was in my rather slapdash demystifications increasingly supercilious, as she cooked and set the table. “Shaa,” she would say, but that’s

it, until I said something that touched a nerve, when she suddenly turned on me with finger pointing and said with a whispered vehemence from the tautened orifice of her lips, “*You’ll see!*” And I thought Jehovah would strike me. What I’d said went out of my mind. I hadn’t read Sartre yet, or Nietzsche on God being dead, but even if I had, I’d have eaten my boiled chicken with *kishka* and never brought them up.

This was just about the time when I should have been bar mitzvahed, but it wasn’t a matter of getting back at her, with some assertion of bolstered doubt, when it didn’t happen. There was no refusal in principle, only the simpler fact—out of the same ubiquitous obsession—that our ball games conflicted with lessons at the Talmud Torah. Even when they brought in a rabbi to tutor me privately, that often conflicted too, and since he was not the intimidating or brutal type you come across in Jewish novels, such as the relentless *Call It Sleep*, I gave that poor man such a hard time that he refused to go on. If I somewhat regret this now, with utter faithlessness as the bedrock of all I’ve come to believe, it’s mainly because of my grandmother, since it almost broke her heart. As she, too, felt that I was the natural scholar in the family and would surely thrive in Hebrew school—“Herbele,” she might say, “could even be a rabbi”—the delinquency was all the more disappointing.

Normally, Baba could absorb the very worst—or somebody’s belaboring too much the unavoidable or unpredictable—with a shrug informed by the ages: “What can I say, it’s all written,” she’d say (long before grammarology and the writing in the beginning, which, whether Derridean or Freudian, was intrinsically Jewish too). And indeed, about my not coming to manhood through the ritual, there’d been some writing on the wall. For even when I went to the synagogue, which was only on holidays, I rarely attended the services, put off by the women caged upstairs, and the prayer shawls and the snuff and the odorous murmurings below, the rocking back and forth of the men with beards and sideburns, and phylacteries on their foreheads or wrapped around an arm. Even in a reform synagogue today, I feel discomfited, out of place, and want to leave as soon as I can. And that’s what I did back then. There were, in a makeshift playground that didn’t belong to the *schul*, swings and monkey bars adjacent to the building, and I either went out there, or downstairs, for the halvah, strudel, and hazel nuts, with which we sometimes played games too, pitching them toward a wall, winner take all, the one whose nut gets closest to it, in a wobbling final roll.

As for the failure to get bar mitzvahed, my parents didn’t like it either, though they shrugged and let it pass—in my father’s case, I suspect, be-

cause there was something more to it: with whatever residues or equivocations, his own lapse of faith, which didn't mean he couldn't be Jewish. Yet it was unthinkable, even when he showed my report cards around, that he'd introduce me among the plumbers as his *kaddish*, even if I could recite the prayer for the dead that would somehow assure through me—the one who comes after—something of an afterlife. “When you're dead you're dead,” my father would say. Still, I wonder what he might feel about his being remembered here, or through memory or its lapses what I'm saying about him now, and whether I'm getting it right. Or whether he'd even know. My own sense is that if he had encountered the oracle's “Know thyself,” he wouldn't have known how to go about it. (But then, with all the rites of memory, and on the current scene, therapeutically endorsed, self-nurturing narrativity, which of us really does?) As for the loss of faith, his or mine, it was not anything we could talk about, nor did we ever discuss anything, either through his readings or an amorphous Marxism, like the philosophical grounds for it, just as he wouldn't discuss what it meant to have been thrown out of Boys High School—perhaps the best in the city, and the one I eventually went to.

Turreted, like a castle, with high academic ambitions, Boys High was in one of the finer neighborhoods of the Bedford-Stuyvesant district (the not yet dreaded Bedford-Stuy) with its bourgeois brownstone houses. But getting there, when he went, from where my father lived, was more than sufficiently threatening. What I did know is that he had been suspended for carrying a gun, as others he went with did, because in crossing over the vacant lots, trash piles, and marshes to school, they'd often meet up with an Italian gang, which sometimes flourished guns, and in the tense encounters the Jew-boys felt they needed protection. On my father's side, he said, the guns were not even loaded, merely show, and because of that, on appeal, others were reinstated. But unfortunately, my grandfather, who had escaped from Austria and its virulent anti-Semitism, and lived first with a certain furtiveness on the Lower East Side, still had the mentality of somebody just off the boat at Ellis Island. An illiterate tailor, with no English, he didn't even know that an appeal could be made, and thus my father was out, and besides—Italians, for sure, but *a Jew with a gun?*—maybe it served him right. When I was secretary of the senior class at Boys, and consulting now and then with the principal Mr. Tausk, he gave me access to the school records, and they confirm it as doubly sad that my father, henceforth, did his reading in private—as if it were somewhat shameful that he had to educate himself.

However it came to be, it was just not in his temperament, even as my curiosity grew, to sit down with me and engage an issue out of his past. Even if I were up to it I could never incite him to it. Intimacy of that kind was somewhere beyond the pale, and the same with emotional intimacy, at least as talked about (no therapy then, of course, which would have been, not only to him, something of a laugh). He had ideas, but whatever they were, he didn't talk about them either. About plumbing itself, no inhibitions, but as he was not inclined to speak out much at a union meeting, he was without the resources at home to explore what he thought any more openly than his gnomic statements about the news. Yet there was something poignant and even eloquent when, on long summer evenings or weekend afternoons, he'd sit at the window, wearing a tank top, and stare out over the avenue, as at some unfathomable emptiness. I hadn't yet encountered T. S. Eliot's lonely men in shirtsleeves leaning out of windows, or that other figure Gerontion, who speaks of the jew (lower case) squatting on the windowsill, with whom, through any semblance of anti-Semitism, he (and Eliot?) seems to identify. But my father, wearily, palpably, had something in common with this unappeasably convoluted self-mortifying figure, who didn't have the words for it, no less "the word within a word, unable to speak a word," the night coming on, "Swaddled in darkness."

There in the window, what did my father wish for? It may seem disproportionate, but many years later, teaching the poem in a class, I found myself thinking of that through the stunning passage about the complexion of history, its "contrived corridors / And issues," deceiving with "whispering ambitions," and through all the vanities and "supple confusions," giving "too late / What's not believed in, or if still believed, / In memory only, reconsidered passion." Or do I say this only because, having with some aversion done a dissertation on Eliot, I still think this is the finest passage he ever wrote, and amidst the predictable historicizing in our graduate schools today, where Eliot has been discredited, much closer to my own sense of history? However that was acquired, through a belated intellectuality or the vicissitudes of a complex career, it may also be in some respects the intellectual legacy of my father, who was kicked out of my high school, and more than wavered in faith.

With or without faith, and unlike Gertrude Stein's Oakland, there *was* a there there in Brownsville, though you might not have wanted to be there, even secure in faith like my grandmother, in the vicinity of where she lived, because it was turning increasingly black. This was, in actuality, the more dubious margin of Brownsville through which, with urine smells

on the train platform and sour pickles down below, the cramped, redolent Jewish district drains, with an intractable damp sorrow, into something more heterogeneous, even some Gypsies there, who might have predicted—in one of their fortune-telling “parlors,” a curtained hovel in a doorway, with beads around a lamp—what in aching, ruinous, impoverished time all of it came to be. Baba’s two-story house, with its blistered yellow paint and flaking green windowsills, steps up the front stairs buckling, was actually on Howard Avenue, just off the bridge over the railroad, across from the synagogue, a half-block down from which was the playground of P.S. 28, the grammar school I went to.

That’s what they called it then, and taught it—subject, predicate, object, maybe with faulty reference the indeterminacy of *they*, but (whether with *they* or *there*) we came upon the subjunctive with drills and penmanship. I was not particularly intimidated by the regimen at school, merits and demerits, the seemingly incessant daily and weekly testing, midterms and finals, and the chastening record books; nor by the report cards that our parents had to sign, with their (uninflated) double grades, one for “Conduct” too—so that underneath an A there might also be a D, which I was actually rather proud of when it did happen a couple of times. Nor did the teachers seem godlike or overbearing as they instructed us in good manners, good posture, good speech, or insisted we sit there in silence, good boys, good girls, hands clasped on the wooden desks as they diagrammed a sentence on the blackboard and the drill in grammar resumed.

There were those who, despite the parsed syntax, and the devotion of teachers too, remained next to illiterate, but that was less so with the grandchildren of immigrants who still spoke mostly Yiddish, as if with whatever misfortunes we lived on the right side of the tracks. Or at least at a fortunate distance—not from those that went under Atlantic Avenue, but from the El on Fulton Street. Two blocks over, three flights high, the trains clattered past the windows of anaesthetized people there, very few Jewish, mostly Italians, and some potato Irish, who not only because of the trains hardly saw the light of day. But then, as my father saw it, there weren’t many who did. In his cross-cultural judgment, not only confirmed by the news but also his secret reading of Russian novelists, especially Dostoyevsky, that was virtually the human condition.

The tracks over Fulton Street were the somewhat forbidding perimeter of what was—when I was born, on May 3, 1926—known simply as Brownsville, without the prefix of Ocean Hill on the prior side of the hy-

phen. Since the nearest ocean I remember was off in Coney Island, which we reached by the Fulton El (with or without the nickel fare, often sneaking under the turnstiles or climbing up to the station), I still don't get the name. Actually, I never heard of Ocean Hill until many years later, after World War II and Vietnam, when the racial violence that broke out devastated what was already a ghetto as I grew up through the Depression. If that seemed to return with a vengeance, without any sort of New Deal, there was some last-ditch pillage by druggies who ripped off pipes and fixtures from the tenements along the street, selling the scrap metal that most of it really was, to keep their habits going. Last time I looked, more than a dozen years ago, the tenement in which we lived at 2110 Atlantic Avenue (near Saratoga) had all its windows cemented, to keep the predators out, like a vertical field of gray tombstones anonymous in the brick.

I was actually born at 2182 (corner of Rockaway), two big blocks over, none of the buildings spared, all ripped off, then sealed, and ominous everywhere. Thus when, quite recently, I wanted to go back again, to stir up memory for this book, I was warned in no uncertain terms, by Irving Frankel, my oldest friend from Brooklyn (living now off Madison Avenue, in the fashion regime of New York), that even with a bodyguard I'd better stay away. I was also thinking of returning to the nearby Bed-Stuy, whereupon somebody who lives there—actually, a black woman, a friend of a former student, who against his better judgment felt he should go with me—said in a quaint phrasing: “About Bed-Stuy think thrice, about Brownsville not at all.” Just the day before somebody had come up behind a white guy and put a bullet in his head, apparently for no reason except the apparent reason.

Had he still been alive, my father would have known; he could see it coming. But in this regard, so did most of those who lived there, including my brother, who became a plumber like my father and struggled through the Depression to his own construction business. Eventually, anybody who could afford it moved out to Long Island, as the entire neighborhood, not only around the bridge, turned inexorably black, with every social impasse that went impossibly with that. As for my Polish grandmother, born in Kraków—who'd be a saint if Jews had saints—even as the warnings were warranted, dear Baba wouldn't move, not so long as the synagogue was there. When my parents had a telephone installed in her kitchen, so she could call if anything happened, they worried that she wouldn't use it. “Tell her, Joe,” my mother would say in utter exasperation, and when my father insisted it was dangerous, after the *schwartzes* broke in and stole things

from her house, not once, but twice, she said, “So? They need it”—and stayed there, with my crazy Aunt Rosie living above her, till the night dear Baba died.

At the time of that last trip to the neighborhood, my wife and I were staying in Greenwich Village, for the several weeks of a seminar I was giving at NYU. I may have been talking about Brooklyn when Kathy—a *shiksa* from Wheaton, Illinois, just outside of Chicago, who spent her teens in a New Jersey suburb—said she wanted to see where I grew up. So I called my brother out in Long Island (way out in Westbury), who by this time had done more than well enough in his business to have a new car every year—nothing but a Cadillac—and asked if he could drive us out there. “Kathy wants to see where we grew up.” “What does she want to do that for?” he said, with a long-familiar, almost genetic inflection—not at all cynicism, too all-knowing for that—which almost brought me back. But when I told him not to give me a hard time, pick us up, he said he’d meet us at Junior’s, a now-famous diner just over the Manhattan Bridge, where you can still get, it appears, the largest portion of cheesecake anywhere. We had some coffee, but skipped the cheesecake, and waited for Sidney to come. When he pulled up in his white Cadillac, and we got in, he rolled up all the windows, pushed the buttons down on the doors, and said, “We’re only going on the main streets.”

What there was elsewhere, hard to guess, but the main streets, like Atlantic Avenue itself, were a wasteland, or on this block or that corner, like parts of Berlin when I saw it, subsided into grimness, for some time after the blitz. As for residents, there was nobody there as we drove, except for a little girl who was wandering who knows where, since there was—so far as we could see—no place to go, tenement windows sealed, broken glass in the frame houses, walls battered in, some of them collapsed. Where could she possibly live? Only rarely when I lived there did I feel anything like that. I remember certain late afternoons, just before dark, autumn turning to winter, with the wind blowing at me with nobody on the street, and there was on Atlantic Avenue a sense of vast desolation. There was no reason for me to stay out, and I could have gone immediately in—except that I felt, forlorn as it was, some anomalous thrill of endurance. But what about that little girl? The only thing comparable I’ve ever seen was, almost farther than far away, out in the red deserted landscape of the Southwest, where driving through one time, with the mesas out there above, I passed an Indian on a horse-drawn wagon, moving in implacable slow motion through what must have seemed infinite space, with no destination.

Or so it seemed to me. Where could he possibly be going? Probably some cave up there, hidden out of sight. And so with the little girl, one of the back streets, some place we couldn't see. Kathy was devastated; she couldn't believe it, though I assured her that when we lived there it wasn't quite like that.

If today, at best, Ocean Hill–Brownsville is a sort of eerie DMZ, there was once—with a cluster of (sometimes dozing) convivial women sitting on milk boxes on the sidewalk, and somebody hitting two sewers in a game of stickball across the street—a semblance of community, certified by seders and bar mitzvahs, and over among the *goyim*, people going to church. As for the imminence of the cross-cultural, one could see on weekday evenings—fathers home from work, maybe more so when unemployed—some kid carrying a pail, even a Jewish kid, to an Italian bar on a corner, to have it filled up with beer (thus acquiring expertise on how much foam there should be at the top). If that didn't exempt us from gang wars between Jews and Italians, then Jews and blacks, there was—at least at our end of Brownsville—a certain civility in the violence, by which I mean, though you might get hurt in a fist fight, where somebody might pull a knife, or by water bags thrown from a roof, there were rarely gratuitous killings, no rapes so far as I knew (though a gang bang once in a basement, with an onerous sort of consent), nor anything like a drug scene with its weekly quotient of murders. Or somebody just coming up and putting a gun to your head.

Or at least where we could see. For the neighborhood was the outer border or principality of Murder, Inc.'s dominion: not the Sicilian, but the Jewish mafia. "What do you expect?" my father would say, in an inflection shared with my mother. Jews were no better, they were all the same, except maybe for the *schwartzes*, who in a kind of huddled and cryptic isolation, but sharing half the block, were still coming up from the South. Among the first about-to-be-urbanized blacks, they were settling into the two-story frame houses, like my grandmother's, left over from when, back in the 1880s, Brownsville itself was being settled. Realtors from the Lower East Side in Manhattan bought land cheap and put up dwellings, often unheated railroad flats, for the more belated immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, who then, needing jobs, went back over the bridge to be exploited by other Jews in the sweatshops and markets emerging on the lettered avenues and around Delancey Street. That's near where my father was born, on Allen Street, conscious of not having been an immigrant, while my mother, who was born in Brooklyn, wouldn't have cared if she were.

Nothing that troubled my father ever really bothered her, at least as it came from the newspapers, which she hardly ever read or might glance at for a moment, usually with a sigh. As for the thievery he assailed, like a muttering Isaiah, maybe yes, maybe not, and if as bad as he thought she'd just as well forget it. "So, it could be worse," she might say, and over the course of time they were in paradoxical accord, for whether ontologically or prophetically, or with her self-regarding indifference, it almost certainly was.

My mother had other things to worry about, her children, to be sure, and getting dinner on the table, but most of all herself: her makeup had to be right, though for us it was always too much. "What do you know?" she'd say, as she put on even more lipstick, with an almost deliberate smudge, never getting the line of it right, insisting that's how she liked it, as if that were her aesthetic, the lipstick there like that until the day she died, and even into the grave. A beauty when she was younger, with long dark hair, she would spend half an afternoon combing it before a mirror with folded sides, giving her the benefit of a triple image of herself, which—though the hair was gradually thinning as her already voluminous body was adding folds of flesh—also provided more of herself to admire, as she turned from side to side, mesmerically, slow, with a certain voluptuous pleasure. If I was given to specularly, it was in watching her from the door, as she sat there combing, oblivious as an odalisque in a sort of buttery slip.

Beside her was the bed on which my father stretched out on his back, unmoving, exhausted, when he came home from work, to which he went off (when the work was steady) before five in the morning, even in the winter, totally dark outside, nobody else awake. My brother and I slept, twin-bedded, in the same small room, knees up to chests in blankets, drawn up over our heads, but once in a while, turning over, one eye open perhaps, I'd watch as my father came in, still dressing, running his fingers over the radiator to see if the heat was coming up. The apartment itself was freezing, because the heat turned off in the basement, by the janitor at night, took some time in the morning to reach our floor again. When my brother, who was seven years older, became an apprentice plumber, my father would get up first, waiting for a knock in the radiator, perhaps, before he woke Sidney up. When Sidney dated on weekends, and had the money to get around, that looked good to me, but when I asked my father, even begged him, to let me work—not in the winter but in the summer when I wasn't going to school—he said, reaching an arm toward me, fingers spread, "If you touch a pipe, I'll break your hand."

The proposition was simple: the grades were still coming, and I was destined for something else. In junior high, St. Claire McKelway, P.S. 178—where we played football, not merely touch but tackling, on the concrete of the playground—I won another medal, for a speech on Theodore Roosevelt, whom I admired for his rough riding, and in the Tenderloin of New York his pre-Giuliani toughness. This honor was not awarded at a school assembly, but instead I received a quite elegant invitation from the Women's Roosevelt Association to a reception in Manhattan, the Gramercy Park area of the fashionable East Side, which I didn't know existed. Though he didn't much like the prospect of all the wealthy people who'd probably be there, my father went with me, and for a moment might have agreed with F. Scott Fitzgerald, in that famous exchange with Hemingway, that the very rich are different from us—yes, as Hemingway said, because they have more money, though Fitzgerald knew a lot better what that amounted to. Anyway, those who greeted us there, an elegant variant of *they*, were surely not the same; indeed, some were more like the characters I eventually discovered in Henry James. As it turned out, my father was impressed, and though I might not become one of them, he was convinced that I'd do all right. And years later I did, with similar types, up to the critical difference, and then with a newer breed, fraught with other controversy. I am speaking of the board at Lincoln Center, which interviewed me at the top of the First National City Bank on Park Avenue, and then, some years later, the one at CalArts, that unorthodox institution endowed by Walt Disney, and whose board consisted of those who became Richard Nixon's kitchen cabinet, and afterward Ronald Reagan's. The head of the board at CalArts, and the man who actually hired me—his fame later established by the Watergate scandal—was H. R. Haldeman.

How that came about, my being in either place, was not only unexpected, but as inconceivable to me as it was then to my father. If there were projected ambitions, they were of another kind, with some favoritism in the family. My brother had started to study accounting at CCNY, but then dropped out, because of the double bind, still needing to work as a plumber, the courses up there at City's non-campus in Harlem, the jobs moving out to Long Island. There was to be nothing, however, keeping me from going all the way, in the desideratum of the tradition, becoming a doctor or lawyer—aside from any distinction, not to worry about money. As it turned out, when I finished my first degree, it was in chemical engineering, which I really liked, was good at, and in which I might have done very well if I'd not gone into the theater, which was, to say the least, con-

founding to my father. In any case, he was quite forbearing about it, as he was, with money scarce, when he went off early and lay there after work—even through his snoring, looking as if he were dead—and I had permission, if I needed a nickel or dime, sometimes even a quarter, to slide my hand in his pocket and take it while he slept, which he did for an hour or so, motionless till dinner. Since he hadn't taken off his clothes, I might be doing that while my mother was also there, making sure I didn't wake him, while loop by careful loop she unlaced and took off his shoes. If his eyes would happen to open, she'd say, "Joe, Joe . . . sleep, sleep."

As for the dinner that had to be ready when she told me to wake him up, no problem for her at all. Despite the afternoon's narcissism, the shopping was somehow done, and with a vigilant eye. "What are you doing, take off the fat, no, leave a little more . . ." I remember her instructing the butcher on just how the meat should be carved, from the slabs behind the counter, or if cut and laid out already, otherwise sliced or ground, including what all of us loved, the liver to be fried with onions or chopped with chicken fat (which I can only dream of eating now, because in the new dietary laws, orthodox or reformed, ecumenical through the media, what's certainly not kosher is cholesterol). A couple of times a week she'd be going downhill to the market, six blocks to Prospect Place, picking the onions, carrots, beets, briny pickles from the barrels, fat peaches we ate right away, or the slightly greenish bananas (so they wouldn't brown too quick on the skin), from the pushcarts along the street. Sniffing with disgust at the *dreck*, or making no bones about it, she was known by all the peddlers, outside whatever the weather, the bundled-up women in winter, non-stop with their Yiddish rap ("Veyba, come, fresh, what are you waiting for?") and the mittened men, who sometimes made sexy jokes but knew she couldn't be conned. "Yetta is betta," they would say, in knowing a bargain too. And when the shopping bags were full, she'd struggle back up the hill, never mind her varicose veins, then climb up all those flights when we moved from the ground floor to the fifth.

But as it became, with veins swelling, and her body too, more difficult for her to walk, she managed to get one or more of the neighbors, or my Aunt Fanny, her younger sister, who lived next door, to do the shopping for her. They all did it quite willingly, as if it were a privilege. She would then make an entire meal—chicken soup with *kreplach* or borscht with sour cream (not the thin supermarket stuff today, but scooped from a tub at the grocery), a thickly gravied pot roast or the plumpest *gefullte* fish—merely sitting beside the stove, hardly getting up. If somebody said the

sour cream (with meat) was not exactly kosher, she'd shrug it away by saying, "So, sue me, you think they're gonna die?" The logic was infallible, and if there were something that she needed, in the fridge or somewhere else, flour perhaps from a neighbor, you'd gladly bring the ingredients when she fondled your name as she did, "Fanny, dear, would you mind," and lovingly told you what. And she'd prepare it all on the oil-clothed table beside her, cutting, sprinkling, stuffing, then slide it into the oven or lower it into a pot.

Warm beyond measure, my mother eventually relaxed into being—though she was pretty relaxed to begin with—the laziest person on the block. Yet everybody adored her, including the *schwartzes* who, when my father became a foreman, were paid a few dollars on alternate weeks to come and clean our house. They were probably the first who came up the block and into the comparative luxury of the tenements, where, actually, there were those who kept things going by doing similar jobs, like the Sicilian woman downstairs who, before she found something better, had been sweeping under the beds and scrubbing our bathroom floor, and even mopping the staircase leading into the apartment. If Yetta Blau had been asked whether it was a little awkward to have a neighbor do it (for maybe a dollar extra), her response might have been like her mother's—saintly Gussie Roth—when the blacks broke into her house: "So, she needs it." And that didn't prevent the two of them, if the Sicilian woman wasn't working and my mother not combing her hair, from rejoining the sidewalk circle, together outside on their milkboxes, and the reality principle there.

And this is not said, I trust, with an overflow of nostalgia. Still, I've been wondering as I write—and my wife Kathy has asked about it (having written much about aging, she is finishing a book on "the emotions")—how much nostalgia is here, as if it were a sin of perception, as it has come to be in theory, though I've never bought into that. And if so, the sin be damned, since I'm still inclined to feel, though not averse to theory, that in thinking over a life there's no perception without it, that is, what we can't help feeling—regret, dismay, shame, and, even in a warp of the worst, some nostalgia too, verging as it may on what we'd rather forget. Among the liabilities of remembrance is that it can't quite manage that, no less the unresolved feelings, summoned up or just there, finding yourself divided, in the embrace of what's remembered. And so about living in Brownsville, which could also be seen as a putrid place where people pissed in the sewers and threw garbage out the windows, while you had to watch your ass in

that cesspool of kikey thugs, with nothing but gangs (as in *The Amboy Dukes*), where illiteracy was the norm because nobody went to school. We might have escaped such charges, technically, by claiming we lived in limbo rather than Brownsville, whose border in our direction was (though nobody knew it) where the pavement of Pitkin Avenue turned green on Eastern Parkway, with a reluctant row of trees. That was at the other end of Howard Avenue from where my grandmother lived with the blacks. For those of us up the block, that was still nowhere but Brownsville.

As it turns out, this book was started as far from that neighborhood as anyone there could imagine, in our apartment in Paris, where Kathy reminded me, just the night before I began, that at the time we bought it, over twenty years ago, I was adamant about refusing to buy another, in some ways more attractive, but in a Jewish quarter—the last thing I wanted from that tradition being the right of return. And now, when I am in New York and take the subway from Manhattan, getting off at Atlantic Avenue, it's not out in the middle of the borough where the railroad goes under, but where I go to the theater at BAM (the Brooklyn Academy of Music), which never existed for us. Nor did we ever go to the theater, at least I never went, not until I wrote a play, when—in my senior year at NYU, finishing that degree in chemical engineering—I felt I ought to see one, after which by a series of accidents I found myself out in San Francisco somehow starting a theater. (As for my father, I seem to recall him saying that, when he lived on the Lower East Side, he went to the Yiddish theater, and one time, fondly, he spoke of Molly Picon, that tiny cross-dresser, with insouciant charm, who was playing on Eastern Parkway, close to us in Brooklyn. I may actually have seen her too, maybe in a movie, *Yiddle Mtin Fiddle*, or is it—since my mother used it as a turnoff when somebody went on about what she didn't want to hear, *Yiddle mtin fiddle!*—that diddling sound I recall?) While I've seen some admirable things at BAM, it's almost of more interest to me because of its proximity to the high-rise Williamsburg Bank, whose clock at the top I once thought I could see at a distance, from way down Atlantic Avenue, if the weather was right.

That may have been an illusion, but I came to know it was there, because I'd see it closer up when, on a Saturday, my father would sometimes take me with him when he drove downtown for a meeting of the plumber's union, near Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn's Times Square then. It was at the magnificent Flatbush Theater where, cartoons aside, I first saw a Disney film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the animators of which I came to know many years later when, before Michael Eisner, I went to work for the

Disneys, even while remembering my father saying, never mind Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney was anti-Semitic and, during the 1930s, a notorious union buster. As for the imperiousness of that bank, it seemed to escape any working-class scorn, and I might see the clock again when, once or twice a month, or after a union meeting, we'd drive over to *The Daily News* building, not to picket in disdain, but to redeem coupons I saved from the paper, with which over the course of a couple of years I accumulated, book by book, a complete set of Charles Dickens and then a complete set of Mark Twain. In making a recent move, we gave about a hundred boxes of books to a university library, but with pages worn and bindings going, those two sets are still in the family. The coupons for the books were perhaps the only thing in the newspaper that my father ever approved.

Despite the reading I started to do, that maybe illusory clock was in the early years of the redemptive New Deal ("Hoover Hoover, rah rah rah / Stick him in the ashcan, hah hah hah!") not merely an emblem or material sign of capitalist hegemony, but without such jargon for it, just viscerally felt, the virtual limit of my world. I was especially conscious of it at sunsets, those last emblazonings right behind the clock, which drew me to it again on steamy summer mornings when, shortly after sunrise, I'd get up to play ball. But first I had to buy, with the few pennies my mother gave me, going back to sleep, a jelly doughnut for breakfast, picking the fattest one off the tray on the shoulder of a limping vendor who almost always showed up with the sun, still moving as I paid him, across the broad avenue with next to no traffic at all. And then, before going off to the schoolyard, I'd eat it right there, in the exact middle of the street, aligned as it seemed with the bank, gazing off toward the clock—with whatever thoughts of beyond, that New York still a mystery.

That image always comes to mind, with a backward rush of thought, when I find myself near the bank, under the clock now, staring the other way, but not quite inclined to venture, especially late at night, out to where there was once a racial issue because whites were still on the block. If we were dominant there then, it was as it moved toward stalemate within an economy of deprivation, live and let live for the most part until we managed to move away. With our five-story brick tenements rising over the frame houses, clapboard falling apart, but rentable to blacks, it was like a graph or relative index of poverty. Here perhaps, if needlessly, I should say something about my using the word *blacks*, as we didn't use it then, at least not much. In an era long before Black Power, and then, hyphenated or not,

African Americans, the going thing on the streets was *niggers*, and while the older Jews said *schwartzes*, *Negro* was what we said mostly at school when there were niggers in class, as they increasingly were. We were, of course, not yet making excuses for what, if the bigotry was endemic, was part of a collapsed economy in another order of things, where the Jew's long experience of prejudice was not, by empathic means, over the color line—the division right there, strange to begin with, increasingly felt as a threat, and there were certainly grounds for that.

Forget the allure of otherness, that fantasy of the academic, which in that setting—come on! historicize—would only make you laugh. (I can see my father now.) None of which means—putting color impossibly aside, or even the possibility of an illicit, then unspeakable attraction to it—that nobody cared about the complexities of difference, most specifically economic difference. This was certainly not the case with my friends Willie and Hymie Kaplan, whose entire family went to the Communist storefront, not only for the parties on Friday night, where as we got older we went to look for girls (not quite yet on the principle that Communist girls were looser, and might be looking for us). And while Willie and Hymie were sometimes made fun of, particularly when, between innings at the schoolyard, we'd hear them speaking of the class struggle and alienated labor, they somehow made us listen. Or at least I did, though it was stupefying when they'd suddenly leave in the seventh inning or with the fourth quarter about to begin, to attend a Party meeting or go off to Pitkin Avenue to join a picket line. I don't remember any of us going with them, but among the older people it was not only the Communists who were sensitive to the material discrepancy between us and the blacks. Yet if one of them broke into a house, to somehow narrow the difference, what would you expect?—there were very few like my grandmother.

Within the family, there were characteristic variations in what we said and did, with residues of the bigotry in our making up of the difference. Well aware as my father was that even in hardship there's not parity, this basically decent man—who was pleased when he could give a job as a plumber's helper to a Negro who might learn the business, and eventually did—was nevertheless amused when we lived on the ground floor, and in the summertime, windows wide open, our bulldog Sporty, black-and-white, would recline on a sill, growling only at blacks and—as he did once when not restrained—jump if they came too close. Many years later, my brother Sidney, who eventually became president of the Master Plumber's Association of New York, with considerable influence in the construction

industry, was still calling them *schwartzes*, while doing more than anyone had ever done to see that blacks could get into the plumber's union, thus making jobs accessible. But back there on the block, where things were tough for everybody, that could hardly have been foreseen. As for me, some of my best friends were not blacks, until Richard Younge in high school, who was also, I'd guess now, gay *avant la lettre*, like a somewhat effeminate Colin Powell. With a fine, assured posture, portly, he had an incomparably elegant wit that was, in a class of exceptional brilliance (an average above 90 percent not much above average there), in a class by itself. I can't recall where exactly he came from, or what his parents did, but if there was nobody quite like him in that high school—up there with Townsend Harris and Bronx Science—there wasn't much of a chance that I'd overlooked somebody like him, black or white, in my neighborhood.

As it was, my brother Sidney, who died recently of complications from Alzheimer's, came as close as anybody, for he certainly had the elegance if not quite Richard's wit. Above the desk in my study—put there after he died—there is a picture of him dancing, with my sister-in-law Bea, which might have come out of a Hollywood studio, but in the days when glamour was what it ought to be, not merely scandal or hype, there for the paparazzi or late-night Letterman show, but with a reserved presence that has a lot of class. Sidney is in a tuxedo, looking taller than he was, muscular body poised, mustache perfectly trimmed, and Bea, full of life, seductive, luxurious in a long gown, turned toward the camera, leaning slightly back in his arms. It is an image of effortless grace that might have been envied by Ginger Rogers, because my brother was, if equally elegant, much handsomer than Fred Astaire. This was, moreover, not a one-shot deal, a pose, maybe taken at a wedding—to which I can attest, because for some reason Sid and Bea would now and then, if he could borrow my father's car, take me on their dates (and I'd fall asleep in the back while they were necking up front). I loved to go with them because they were champion dancers in high school, winning every contest, not only jitterbugging like crazy, but also doing the Peabody. Supposedly a faster fox-trot, done to ragtime music, I saw it as a kind of waltz without the turnings that, as Sid and Bea did it, nobody does anymore, with its exquisitely gliding steps, she going mostly backwards, and at his merest touch shifting from side to side. No question, the blacks soon outdid us, with steps we'd never imagined, and music to go with them too, but at the time, so far as we knew, they had nothing quite like that.

If they were the newer kids on the block, it wasn't long before they

started moving around, beginning to psyche us out, and then, as on the bridge, test us out as well. The older blacks, meanwhile, probably from custom of long repression, mostly kept their place. Furtively there, wary, they were sometimes seated on the porch, with maybe a woman rocking, just the sort of figure that could be seen, as if in a warp of time, when—during World War II—I was in training with the paratroops at Fort Benning, Georgia, and we’d jump over the Chattahoochie River into some nowhere of Alabama. On one of those jumps, as we were floating idyllically down, a sudden wind dispersed the chutes, and swinging far and wide I landed in a watermelon patch, alone, no one in sight, separated from my unit. After a quick gathering up of my chute, I walked down a road and up to porch where, indeed, a woman was rocking. But along with the *déjà vu*, there was an odd sense of dislocation when I asked her whether she’d seen any other soldiers. She gazed vaguely over my head, no answer, as if I didn’t exist. There, back in Brownsville, when they first showed up on the block, and we happened to pass a porch, no less ask a question, I felt very much the same.

What did they know? we wondered, if anything at all. And what did we know of what they were surviving on, or how they made a living. Actually, there was a period during the Depression when we were briefly on welfare ourselves (in those days called “relief”), and my father—who also had to drive a taxi, which he resented, because plumbers were out of work (“The pipes can go to hell!”)—was even reduced to the ignominy of trying to borrow three dollars from a brother-in-law who refused him, that bastard! served him right that he drove a taxi for the rest of his life. Because of his sister, my Aunt Rose Tiegel (not the crazy one, Rosie), my father didn’t break things off with my Uncle Dave, whose grinning heartiness he put up with, though he knew him for what he was. Yet when things got better for us, and my father looked down the block at the blacks, he couldn’t figure them out, and wondered what made them tick. Something had to be done, but they weren’t doing enough for themselves, and where would things be when they did? What did they know, or anybody? When push came to shove, and everybody was shoving, the *schwartzes* hadn’t caught on yet; they were too dumb. Which was, in one crucial respect, what I happened to think myself.

Would you believe it? Those black kids down the block didn’t even know how to play basketball! We had to teach them the game, or rather demonstrate it, since they kept their distance at first when they began to show up in the schoolyard, wary too at the start, more aggressive in time.

But then we tend to forget that, if basketball was invented in Kansas, it was at that time a New York Jewish sport. And as it turned out, the superstar in our schoolyard was Red Holzman, who became a legend at City College and later went into the Hall of Fame after coaching the Reed-Bradley-Frazier-DeBusschere-Monroe Knicks. Red lived in an apartment a couple of floors above us. If I taught the black kids, it was Red who taught me, though mostly by example or in an understated way. He was equally good at other sports, soft touch on a football, accurate spin, and it seemed as if he'd thrown it when, with the same spinning precision, he'd kicked it out of bounds. Reduce the size of the ball, same thing, same calm, as it was in handball, which he mostly played alone because there was nobody to take him on. We'd watch him setting up shots against the wall with a sort of cunning ease, or placing the deftest killer into a corner not an inch above the ground. Even my father was impressed. *They* may have been all alike, but not on a basketball or handball court, as Red made perfectly clear, with an unpretentious grace (no slam dunks then) that made it seem an art.

If there was any other athlete at the level of Red Holzman, it was Harold Green, who lived next door and was my closest friend from early childhood until I went to junior high, and if the friendship diminished there, and after, it was not only because Greenie couldn't get into Boys High. The fact is he could barely get into any high school at all, and he dropped quickly out when he somehow made it in. Had he been able to stay at Thomas Jefferson, strong as it was in sports, his athletic prowess was such that he might have broken all records there. One thought of power with Greenie, but he also had style; if it didn't seem a thing of grace, as it did with Red, that was because Greenie's gifts were so utterly natural you could hardly believe them at all. He could high jump, broad jump, or literally climb up the side of a tenement building, from the street to the roof, by putting his fingers between the bricks and going with the tenacious finesse of a spider—here you could speak doubly of grace—brick by perilous brick, infallibly straight up. They weren't slam dunking those days, but given his ability to jump, even higher than bigger players, he could easily have done that too. It was the fact that basketball players were getting so big that, by the time I was in college, nearly drove me mad, because—though in a state of denial—I could no longer compete. Soon it was similar in football, where the players were not only bigger but faster, and while I knew what they didn't, and could outfox them, outfake them, deploying the unexpected with a savage will, there was also a limit on that, and I was never that quick on my feet. That wasn't the case with Greenie, who would

surely have made it into the Hall of Fame as either a wide receiver, as balletic as Lynn Swann, or as a tight end, with a toughness almost ballistic—if they had such positions then.

Remarkably for me with Greenie, for some gratuitous reason, or because I had the smarts, faster with my mind than he was with his feet, he brought these resources into my service. And, believe it or not, if we came to fight, as we rarely did—but once when he was so mad he actually went after me with a fork—I could by getting him into a headlock, thereby pulling my weight, hold on for dear life, and manage to hold on long enough until, breathing hard and even crying, Greenie would suddenly stop. I certainly didn't have the psychological resources to know what was really at stake, but he desperately wanted, even needed, my friendship—and in order to assure that, he was also my acolyte, doing my bidding, just about anything I told him to do. Some of the things were sexual, down in the bins of the cellar, though if there were anything homoerotic it was a sort of team play too, since in cold or rainy weather all the guys were down there, flipping cards or throwing dice—and when things really got boring, measuring their cocks and jerking off together, competing for distance when they came.

As for the ball teams outside, there Greenie was a double asset, because among his astonishing abilities was that he was also an expert thief. So when we needed a bat or some gloves or a football, or maybe a jersey or two, Harold would meander into a sporting goods store, check out when nobody was looking, simply pick up the desired objects, not even hiding them, and blithely walk out. No haste, no waste moves, but he could run like hell if they saw him and came yelling after, chasing him down the street. He was around the corner before they knew it, two blocks away, or hiding in an alley, or going some other way after passing the stuff to us there. That was how, on my birthday or just for kicks, he'd get me a present too, and one time when I started to collect stamps, buying singles or little packets, he went into Woolworth's, where they had a huge album of samples chained to the counter. Greenie didn't bother to sort out what I might have had from what I didn't, since I didn't have very much, but simply broke the chain, and walked out with the entire album—whereupon, in a bounteous instant, my stamp collection was one of the best in Brownsville.

At home, Greenie didn't have it so easy. His father was an off-again, on-again drunk, who used to beat up his wife, and until the son could defend himself, he'd be beaten up too. One time Mr. Green, powerfully built him-

self, picked up a small radiator that was turned over, disconnected, and heaved it at Harold, just grazing a leg, but otherwise fortunately missing. When things got really bad—to be estimated only on a scale of continuous violence—Greenie would come up and stay with us, sleeping in my brother's bed, if he were away, or on the floor between our beds (my mother loved Harold, and called him that, but she put a taboo on the couch). That Greenie's good nature persisted through all this was itself a remarkable thing, and he was really put off by some of the more notorious cruelties that occurred in the neighborhood, like the time a couple of guys took a cat up to the roof of a tenement overlooking the House of Good Shepherd—an orphan asylum for Catholic girls—and whirled it over their heads and threw it over the wall, delirious with the possibility that it might even hit a nun. Greenie was in a rage when he heard about it. Had he been up there he'd have saved the cat and thrown the two of them off the roof.

There was another time, however, when his sense of loyalty, or even devotion, and latent violence mixed. Close by, above Howard Avenue, was another orphan asylum, this one for boys—a building of dirty brick, oppressive in the summer, damp and bleak in the winter, but with a redeeming virtue: it had an indoor basketball court. And when it rained or was very cold, we'd go up there on Saturday afternoons, when they let the boys out on their own, and the staff took off as well, or so it seemed, since there was usually nobody around. I'm not quite sure where we met him, either at school or maybe there, but there was a kid named Ralphie, curly-haired, sweet-eyed, gentle, who would manage to get out on other days, joining us in the schoolyard. One Sunday morning, he and Greenie and I were there, tossing around a football, the yard otherwise empty, when a gang of black kids showed up. At first they leaned against the fence and watched, and then they spread out, most of them bigger, and began to work up a taunting hilarity if a pass were wide or we dropped it. We didn't stop throwing but started to back away, when one of them intercepted the ball, and they lofted it over us as we chased it, until what was a teasing game at first became something rougher, as they'd bump into us or hold an arm to keep us from getting it back. When it bounced at one point, it came right at me, and as several of them rushed and grabbed me, piling on, punching, I managed to swat it toward Ralphie. There was shouting and running as I struggled to get up, when next thing I knew there was a scream, and all of them running off, with Ralphie down, legs drawn up, and blood coming out of his side. As I went to help, I realized that Greenie had tackled the one with the knife and was screaming now on top of him, a head in his hands, Gree-

nie banging it savagely on the ground, until that kid must have been brainless. I'm not sure what happened to him after, but if that black kid wasn't dead it was because—with Greenie out of his mind—I somehow pulled him off. By this time, Ralphie was dead.

What Greenie eventually did with the violence, or the desire to get back, if not at his father, at somebody, somehow, was to bring it to another sport, one more brutal than football, but requiring skills that he couldn't bring to a college then, as he couldn't with football either. It's not quite a matter of thievery, but if Harold Green were in high school today, on the edge of dropping out, every college recruiter in the country would be there to persuade him to finish, with maybe a secret bonus, and he could go to the team of his choice. And if they couldn't tutor him through or rig the grades, no sweat, for he might even go directly from the high school, even before finishing, into the NFL. Or since, unlike the NBA, the NFL has a restriction on that, they'd somehow get him to graduate, and then a giant bonus as part of a huge contract, in figures you couldn't dream of, even if you made it then. But since none of this was possible, Harold became a boxer (forgoing the name Greenie), and one of the best of his time—a middleweight contender, who fought three famous ten-round fights with Rocky Graziano, outpointing him twice, but not getting a crack at the title, and then suffering a double whammy when, in the third fight between them, Graziano presumably avenged the losses with a three-round knock-out of Green.

The real situation was, as we heard it, what might have been expected. Harold was controlled by the Jewish mafia, Murder, Inc., and told to dump the fight (as his daughter said in an obituary after he died, "My father fought in an era when you did what you were told to do"). His career declined after that, going downhill faster when a couple of years later, in New York, he was knocked out by Marcel Cerdan, in two short rounds. The last time I saw him fight was when—completing my doctorate at Stanford, while teaching at San Francisco State—I happened to be in New York, and my father told me Greenie was heading the card at a stadium in Canarsie. We went out there to see him, and though he disposed of a stiff in a few rounds, he was himself overweight and sluggish, and had to supplement his earnings from boxing by running a junk business as well. When we surprised him in the dressing room after the fight, Greenie was sitting there like a has-been, but he brightened when he recognized me, and after a hug and short exchange, invited us over to his house for a party, and also to meet his wife. Sad to say it was a party at loose ends, with an odd lot of

hangers-on, food shabby, not well-catered, atmosphere downcast, rather embarrassing for us all, and we left soon after we came. And that was, too, the last time I saw him. Even for my father, who was very fond of Greenie, and followed his career in the newspaper, that may have been the way it was, but not how it was supposed to be.

Not only for sports, but everything else, the *News* had the best pictures. My father studied them like telephotometry from a U-2, interpreting, interpreting, or like the detectives in *CSI* on television today. But the detective he most resembled, in one conspicuous way—which he didn't mind being kidded about—was from my favorite comic strip, also in the *News*. He had a Dick Tracy nose, broken at the ridge, and (though not the exemplary Dick Tracy) a hacking cough. That was mostly due to his smoking three packs of Camels a day—what he did mind was my mother telling him to stop—though there was also the dampness in the cellars where he impeccably fixed the pipes. The nose didn't help; he never said how it happened, but the passageways were a tangle of cartilage and bone that kept his breathing hard. When he dressed on a weekend, though, he was a dapper man, with a flair to the herringbone coat he'd wear as the weather turned cold in the fall. Somehow he looked like that even when he couldn't afford it, but when things got better through the Depression, he'd buy his clothes at Abe Stark's, the best men's store on Pitkin Avenue—doubly impressed upon me by the biggest advertisement at Ebbets Field, right there below the scoreboard, when the Dodgers were still in Brooklyn. My father also liked cars, the bigger the better, with fins, when streamline first appeared. Not quite like my brother later, who acquired the taste and more, he somehow managed a new one (or maybe used new one) every other year or so, like the blue Pontiac, which he kept in perfect shape, oil checked, tank full, spotless inside, with every service vacuumed. Nothing in the neighborhood ever came close to that. Indeed, when he pulled up at the curb, with a certain distancing pride, just ahead of the circle of milk boxes, and stepped out with that flaring coat, he seemed like one of the Jewish mafia; but though he'd once carried a gun, he was not one of them. Abe Stark maybe, but not him; no honor among thieves, and he was through his jaundiced ethic somebody you could trust.

Even in summer, however, when the temperature was at its worst, my father wore a hat and long sleeves for protection. He had a fine white skin—so fine he'd never sit in the sun for fear of sunstroke, which he once suffered when he'd been swimming. It must have been awful. He was stoic

about pain, but he never swam again. I used to study my father's skin, as if for a sign. It was fine like parchment, with the drawn-out pigment leaving an array of figures or sort of calligraphy, a pinkish writing behind, which corresponded, again despite all jaundice, to his unionized inclination to the Marxist Left, though he was hardly the bleeding heart you'd want to call a pinko. I rarely saw him entirely naked, but when he was undressed the body was pale and smooth. The plumbers called him Whitey, but that was more because of his hair, which was paler than blonde, and smooth. (Years later, I remembered my father's nakedness when I thought of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, that scrofulous figure of an absence, who remembered in lamentation: "All my smooth body.") If he didn't swim, that didn't keep us from going to Coney Island in the summer, which he enjoyed, with the knishes at Sea Gate, a special stand there, and the hot dogs at Nathan's, before it became an institution, not only where the action was, near Steeplechase and the Cyclone, but even in Times Square. He'd wear a soft fedora, brim down, and stay under the boardwalk while we swam, all day long, never sitting, because sand was also too harsh. (There, incessantly, he'd suck on lemon drops, which I happen to remember because I'm doing that right now, not in emulation, but because my doctor said they're good for dry mouth when you sleep, a liability of aging.) On such days his patience seemed infinite as he waited for us—as more painfully so in the window, lost in the amplitude of nothingness—but he was an intemperate and driving man on the job, gutty, tough, coarse, for his uncompromising standards a legend in the business.

If I've never been bothered by elitism, so long as it's based on merit, thus it was on the ball fields, in the pool hall (where I could bank one in the pocket), and certainly at Boys High, but it may have begun with my father, whose merit was appreciated, hard as it was to put up with. His fame was corroborated any time he took me—not on those frigid mornings, but once in a while on weekends—for bagels (I didn't yet go for the coffee) at Dubrow's on Eastern Parkway, where the plumbers also congregated just before they went off to work, here and there in Brooklyn, then to Astoria, Jamaica, and with the extensions of Grand Central Parkway increasingly out on Long Island. They delighted in telling me, when Whitey was out of hearing, how his temper would erupt at anything like a sloppy job, whether installing a heating system or merely repairing a boiler, fixing a radiator or getting the right bowl for the toilet, as if they still couldn't believe it, the perfection down in the cellar or ("You can't even see it," they'd say), going behind the walls, not a coupling mismanaged or, not by the barest fraction

of an inch (the level always there) anything out of line. If anybody took the brunt of it, however, it was my brother, as he qualified for the union, but it was he who said more than once, with pride, if sometimes anger, that laying a pipe on the level was for my father like a religion, everything perfectly threaded, exactly coupled, the way a job ought to be.

That he was a real trial to work with, no doubt, but that seemed to be a testament to another kind of excess. Sidney wouldn't have stated it thus, but if Joe Blau was never satisfied, enraged by sloppiness, that driving anger, it was some unexplained compensation for the rage of slipped achievement. Even there he would speak of *they*, when he was appraising a job that somebody had screwed up, or when a piece of equipment appeared which was obviously useless, and nobody knew who had ordered it. They did it, as always, and were likely to do it again. I wasn't on the scene when the anger emerged, and with me it rarely happened, although I must have absorbed it, somehow, along with the dedication, an excess without exultancy that sometimes, to this day, I can turn against myself, wanting to do fiercely better what I've already done quite well.

Discipline be damned, it's all mental, but sometimes deranged in sports, and one awful time in baseball. I could bat both ways, from either side of the plate, but I used to go right in the schoolyard, not only because the fence was too short from the left and, if you hit it over, an automatic out, but also because the other way was a challenge. I used to hit a long ball the length of that schoolyard up against the wall of a building at the other end. But one time I was in a slump, and in a late afternoon, relentless, next to berserk practice, I stayed at the plate in a tearful fury because I kept hitting and couldn't reach it, lining one hard drive after another, good for one or two bases, but not lofted and far, or whacked against the wall. I couldn't stand it, but with my friends laughing, pitching to me, I swung until I was exhausted, refusing to go home, and as long as they pitched I hit and hit and hit, lining one savage drive after another, but not to that fucking wall, and finally had to give up, and my father laughed too when they told him, and I nearly shouted fuck you at him, crying with rage even more.

My nickname was Turk at the time, an inspiration of my Uncle Mac (Fanny's husband), because—as he only too often repeated—“gobble, gobble,” I liked to eat, and mostly ate too much, and what did we know about eating. Aside from my mother's sizeable meals, and the usual “Eat, eat, you're on a diet?” you were supposed to drink a quart of milk a day (with the cream still up at the top), and my father would bring home a cheese-cake which we'd share before going to bed, with maybe another half bottle

of milk. My father never gained any weight, but here, no question, I had my mother's genes. Overweight was always a problem, which she didn't much worry about, but which I detested more than anything because it slowed me up on the basepaths and, even worse, though I could feint my way to the hoop, on the basketball court. Yet Mac's resourcefulness was such that the nickname had diverse meanings: Turk as in young Turk, if not for Turkish tantrums, a maybe unspent ferocity (like that of my father, though Mac didn't think of that), not strutting as gobblers do, but at some pugnacious moment only too ready to fight—and one of the things I'd fight about was jokes about being fat, including the stickiness of Turkish candy that also made me fat.

My wife tells me the pugnacity is still on the ready today, but my own, perhaps self-justifying, sense is that I don't pick fights, and I didn't then, but if somebody comes at me—now even in theory, as before in the theater—I'm not inclined to back away. As for giving as good as you get, here analogies fail, it's not at all as on the street, and I rather like the sort of argument in which you can intellectually count on that, the getting as good as you give. But in the ideologized context of the academic world today, which with all its talk about deferrable meaning determines thought in advance, the argument is just about over before it even begins.

If I suffered any major anxiety in those days it was, loving cheesecake as I did, the curse of being fat. Obesity is a national scandal today, and I'm luckily out of that, though the discipline wavers. Now, when I hear the word obesity, I think of it as nothing more than the merest abstraction of fat, and if it had any currency then, which it didn't, it would have been, for me, a repellent euphemism for fat—and not the “Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!” that exuberance of excess in the gaiety of Wallace Stevens, but when all is said, and they said it, humiliating fat. As for Turk, it depended on who said it, and the tone, as to whether I liked the name or not. Mostly I didn't mind, but there was no greater torment than being called fatty or tubby or chubby, or even—though mainly for women—the sparing epithet stout. And I could have killed somebody once, a son of a bitch on a porch, where we were coming on to some girls, who said, in words I still remember, as one surely remembers the worst, “Hey, Turk! if you get any fatter, you'll have tits like a girl,” and then quickly reached out and squeezed a nipple through my shirt. I belted him right there, and we struggled down the steps.

Fat: that's one thing, indeed, that my father didn't worry about, and somehow, too, he didn't mind it in my mother, who in her lovingly self-in-

dulgent way wouldn't have worried about it if he did. (And sometimes, too, she even flirted with it, her fleshiness a come-on, as I remember once at Coney Island, when after a day on the beach, with my Aunt Fanny and her kids, we went over to Stillwell Avenue, for food other than hot dogs, but into a kind of saloon, with music and a little dance floor, and a guy came up to our table, and though she didn't dance, she let him buy her a beer.) Yet, while I envied my father's trimness, I wondered about his anger, or did, mainly, when my brother brought it up, since I didn't see much of it, nor was I yet aware of the degree I might have that too in my genes. If I could lose control at times, or sometimes indulged the excess, or did something wrong in the house, my father might tell me to cool it, but mostly took it in stride. I can hardly remember him shouting, and as I was growing up he hit me only once—or rather kicked me, hard, right through the scrollwork over the brown cloth screen of the radio, a piece of furniture then, with high thin legs, which my careening broke—because I'd insulted my mother.

Did I ever resent my father? Given what I've written about him in journals, many years later on, I certainly must have, and what I say about him there appalls me. But I'll come back to that. Otherwise, though he wouldn't talk to me about the books or ideas, and I never pressed him, he seemed, as I matured through Boys High—with its major football teams that dominated the city, but where you couldn't be unintelligent—to want to be with me, as if in reverse identification, though I was so unformed myself, so random and inchoate in thought, that I wouldn't have had any idea of what he might be identifying with.

What we did share was sports, and he made a point of taking me, not so much to Ebbets Field (which was eventually near where we moved, as I was finishing up at Boys) nor to Yankee Stadium (which is near the campus up in the Bronx that, when I went on to engineering, belonged to NYU), but over to see the Bushwicks in minor-league Dexter Park: no large scoreboard, plain wire fences, the field well-tended but rough, making for odd bounces that could turn a game around. There on a lazy, sun-drenched Sunday, no canopies or bleachers above, maybe a handkerchief on your head, much of the game slow motion, then a base hit, a steal, the catcher blocking the plate, slow again, unrushed, the pitcher rubbing the ball, leaning into the signal, one of the coaches pulling an earlobe, running his fingers down his chest, the batter stepping back, then kicking up dust at the plate, and waiting there for a curve that seemed to take forever. Gestural, ritualistic, drawn out, as I once described it, into the American equivalent of the Japanese Noh drama, it nevertheless seemed in those days more au-

thentic, what baseball ought to be, not as it is now with instant replay and portable videos, showing the fans as they missed it what was right in front of their eyes, with razzle-dazzle on the scoreboard to keep them from getting bored. And there was also the privilege of seeing what you couldn't see in the major leagues, the great black ballplayers, like the pitcher Satchel Paige, who made it up there, regrettably, when he was somewhat over the hill, or the slugger Josh Gibson, who, without steroids like Barry Bonds, but with the power of Babe Ruth, never managed to; and then for something more than novelty, because they were competitive too, the House of David, a team of Jewish ballplayers, who ran out onto the field—with the crowd cheering and laughing, until the umpire cried “Play ball!”—with great big bushy beards.

Somebody invariably made the joke, perhaps what they intended, about their being in the bush leagues, if not the Bushwick district, and you can imagine what might have been said if, maybe there with Netanyahu, Bush were president then. Joe Blau would have loved it, and I loved it when he laughed. Nowhere else was my father so relaxed. It was as if there in the ballpark—even with a hit-and-run or a homer, and everybody on their feet—*they* had disappeared. He'd even sit back with his arm around my shoulder. On those long, seemingly somnolent Sunday afternoons, whatever the outcome, the game itself bespoken, the intimacy was *there*. What else, then, was there to talk about?