American Literary Seminar III:

Contemporary American Literature, After World War Two

Course Packet: SHORT FICTION

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Contents:

Bernard Malamud

* The Jewbird
* The Magic Barrel

Ernest J. Gaines

* The Sky is Gray

Flannery O’Connor

* Good Country People

Jerome David Salinger

* A Perfect Day for Banana Fish

Joyce Carol Oates

* How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction…
* Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

John Updike

* A&P
* Pigeon Feathers

Thomas Pynchon

* Entropy

John Barth

* Lost in the Funhouse

Raymond Carver

* A Serious Talk

Bobbie Ann Mason

* Nancy Culpepper

Bernar Malamud:

The Magic Barrel

Not long ago there lived in uptown New York, in a small, almost meager room, though crowded with books, Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student in the Yeshivah University. Finkle, after six years of study, was to be ordained in June and had been advised by an acquaintance that he might find it easier to win himself a congregation if he were married. Since he had no present prospects of marriage, after two tormented days of turning it over in his mind, he called in Pinye Salzman, a marriage broker whose two-line advertisement he had read in the Forward.  
  
The matchmaker appeared one night out of the dark fourth-floor hallway of the graystone rooming house where Finkle lived, grasping a black, strapped portfolio that had been worn thin with use. Salzman, who had been long in the business, was of slight but dignified build, wearing an old hat, and an overcoat too short and tight for him. He smelled frankly of fish, which he loved to eat, and although he was missing a few teeth, his presence was not displeasing, because of an amiable manner curiously contrasted with mournful eyes. His voice, his lips, his wisp of beard, his bony fingers were animated, but give him a moment of repose and his mild blue eyes revealed a depth of sadness, a characteristic that put Leo a little at ease although the situation, for him, was inherently tense.  
  
He at once informed Salzman why he had asked him to come, explaining that his home was in Cleveland, and that but for his parents, who had married comparatively late in life, he was alone in the world. He had for six years devoted himself almost entirely to his studies, as a result of which, understandably, he had found himself without time for a social life and the company of young women. Therefore he thought it the better part of trial and error--of embarrassing fumbling--to call in an experienced person to advise him on these matters. He remarked in passing that the function of the marriage broker was ancient and honorable, highly approved in the Jewish community, because it made practical the necessary without hindering joy. Moreover, his own parents had been brought together by a matchmaker. They had made, if not a financially profitable marriage--since neither had possessed any worldly goods to speak of--at least a successful one in the sense of their everlasting devotion to each other. Salzman listened in embarrassed surprise, sensing a sort of apology. Later, however, he experienced a glow of pride in his work, an emotion that had left him years ago, and he heartily approved of Finkle.  
  
The two went to their business. Leo had led Salzman to the only clear place in the room, a table near a window that overlooked the lamp-lit city. He seated himself at the matchmaker's side but facing him, attempting by an act of will to suppress the unpleasant tickle in his throat. Salzman eagerly unstrapped his portfolio and removed a loose rubber band from a thin packet of much-handled cards. As he flipped through them, a gesture and sound that physically hurt Leo, the student pretended not to see and gazed steadfastly out the window. Although it was still February, winter was on its last legs, signs of which he had for the first time in years begun to notice. [He now observed the round white moon, moving high in the sky through a cloud menagerie, and watched with half-open mouth as it penetrated a huge hen, and dropped out of her like an egg laying itself.](http://genius.com/4989946/Bernard-malamud-the-magic-barrel/He-now-observed-the-round-white-moon-moving-high-in-the-sky-through-a-cloud-menagerie-and-watched-with-half-open-mouth-as-it-penetrated-a-huge-hen-and-dropped-out-of-her-like-an-egg-laying-itself) Salzman, though pretending through eye-glasses he had just slipped on, to be engaged in scanning the writing on the cards, stole occasional glances at the young man's distinguished face, noting with pleasure the long, severe scholar's nose, brown eyes heavy with learning, sensitive yet ascetic lips, and a certain, almost hollow quality of the dark cheeks. He gazed around at shelves upon shelves of books and let out a soft, contented sigh.  
  
When Leo's eyes fell upon the cards, he counted six spread out in Salzman's hand.  
  
"So few?" he asked in disappointment.  
  
"You wouldn't believe me how much cards I got in my office," Salzman replied. "The drawers are already filled to the top, so I keep them now in a barrel, but is every girl good for a new rabbi?"  
  
Leo blushed at this, regretting all he had revealed of himself in a curriculum vitae he had sent to Salzman. He had thought it best to acquaint him with his strict standards and specifications, but in having done so, felt he had told the marriage broker more than was absolutely necessary.  
  
He hesitantly inquired, "Do you keep photographs of your clients on file?"  
  
"First comes family, amount of dowry, also what kind of promises," Salzman replied, unbuttoning his tight coat and settling himself in the chair. "After comes pictures, rabbi."  
  
"Call me Mr. Finkle. I'm not yet a rabbi."  
  
Salzman said he would, but instead called him doctor, which he changed to rabbi when Leo was not listening too attentively.  
  
Salzman adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles, gently cleared his throat and read in an eager voice the contents of the top card:  
  
"Sophie P. Twenty-four years. Widow one year. No children. Educated high school and two years college. Father promises eight thousand dollars. Has wonderful wholesale business. Also real estate. On the mother's side comes teachers, also one actor. Well known on Second Avenue."  
  
Leo gazed up in surprise. "Did you say a widow?"  
  
"A widow don't mean spoiled, rabbi. She lived with her husband maybe four months. He was a sick boy she made a mistake to marry him."  
  
"Marrying a widow has never entered my mind."  
  
"This is because you have no experience. A widow, especially if she is young and healthy like this girl, is a wonderful person to marry. She will be thankful to you the rest of her life. Believe me, if I was looking now for a bride, I would marry a widow."  
  
Leo reflected, then shook his head.  
  
Salzman hunched his shoulders in an almost imperceptible gesture of disappointment. He placed the card down on the wooden table and began to read another:  
  
"Lily H. High school teacher. Regular. Not a substitute. Has savings and new Dodge car. Lived in Paris one year. Father is successful dentist thirty-five years. Interested in professional man. Well Americanized family. Wonderful opportunity."  
  
"I knew her personally," said Salzman. "I wish you could see this girl. She is a doll. Also very intelligent. All day you could talk to her about books and theyater and what not. She also knows current events."  
  
"I don't believe you mentioned her age?"  
  
"Her age?" Salzman said, raising his brows. "Her age is thirty-two years."  
  
"Leo said after a while, "I'm afraid that seems a little too old.  
  
Salzman let out a laugh. "So how old are you, rabbi?"  
  
"Twenty-seven."  
  
"So what is the difference, tell me, between twenty-seven and thirty-two? My own wife is seven years older than me. So what did I suffer?--Nothing. If Rothschild's daughter wants to marry you, would you say on account her age, no?"  
  
"Yes," Leo said dryly.  
  
Salzman shook off the no in the eyes. "Five years don't mean a thing. I give you my word that when you will live with her for one week you will forget her age. What does it mean five years--that she lived more and knows more than somebody who is younger? On this girl, God bless her, years are not wasted. Each one that it comes makes better the bargain."  
  
"What subject does she teach in high school?"  
  
"Languages. If you heard the way she speaks French, you will think it is music. I am in the business twenty-five years, and I recommend her with my whole heart. Believe me, I know what I'm talking, rabbi."  
  
"What's on the next card?" Leo said abruptly.  
  
Salzman reluctantly turned up the third card:  
  
"Ruth K. Nineteen years. Honor student. Father offers thirteen thousand cash to the right bridegroom. He is a medical doctor. Stomach specialist with marvelous practice. Brother in law owns garment business. Particular people."  
  
Salzman looked as if he had read his trump card.  
  
"Did you say nineteen?" Leo asked with interest.  
  
"On the dot."  
  
"Is she attractive?" He blushed. "Pretty?"  
  
Salzman kissed his finger tips. "A little doll. On this I give you my word. Let me call the father tonight and you will see what means pretty."  
  
But Leo was troubled. "You're sure she's that young?"  
  
"This I am positive. The father will show you the birth certificate."  
  
"Are you positive there isn't something wrong with her?" Leo insisted.  
  
"Who says there is wrong?"  
  
"I don't understand why an American girl her age should go to a marriage broker."  
  
A smile spread over Salzman's face.  
  
"So for the same reason you went, she comes."  
  
Leo flushed. "I am passed for time."  
  
Salzman, realizing he had been tactless, quickly explained. "The father came, not her. He wants she should have the best, so he looks around himself. When we will locate the right boy he will introduce him and encourage. This makes a better marriage than if a young girl without experience takes for herself. I don't have to tell you this."  
  
"But don't you think this young girl believes in love?" Leo spoke uneasily.  
  
Salzman was about was about to guffaw but caught himself and said soberly, "Love comes with the right person, not before."  
  
Leo parted dry lips but did not speak. Noticing that Salzman had snatched a glance at the next card, he cleverly asked, "How is her health?"  
  
"Perfect," Salzman said, breathing with difficulty. "Of course, she is a little lame on her right foot from an auto accident that it happened to her when she was twelve years, but nobody notices on account she is so brilliant and also beautiful."  
  
Leo got up heavily and went to the window. He felt curiously bitter and upbraided himself for having called in the marriage broker. Finally, he shook his head.  
  
"Why not?" Salzman persisted, the pitch of his voice rising.  
  
"Because I detest stomach specialists."  
  
"So what do you care what is his business? After you marry her do you need him? Who says he must come every Friday night in your house?"  
  
Ashamed of the way the talk was going, Leo dismissed Salzman, who went home with heavy, melancholy eyes.  
  
Though he had felt only relief at the marriage broker's departure, Leo was in low spirits the next day. He explained it as rising from Salzman's failure to produce a suitable bride for him. He did not care for his type of clientele. But when Leo found himself hesitating whether to seek out another matchmaker, one more polished than Pinye, he wondered if it could be--protestations to the contrary, and although he honored his father and mother--that he did not, in essence, care for the matchmaking institution? This thought he quickly put out of mind yet found himself still upset. All day he ran around the woods--missed an important appointment, forgot to give out his laundry, walked out of a Broadway cafeteria without paying and had to run back with the ticket in his hand; had even not recognized his landlady in the street when she passed with a friend and courteously called out, "A good evening to you, Doctor Finkle." By nightfall, however, he had regained sufficient calm to sink his nose into a book and there found peace from his thoughts.  
  
Almost at once there came a knock on the door. Before Leo could say enter, Salzman, commercial cupid, was standing in the room. His face was gray and meager, his expression hungry, and he looked as if he would expire on his feet. Yet the marriage broker managed, by some trick of the muscles to display a broad smile.  
  
"So good evening. I am invited?"  
  
Leo nodded, disturbed to see him again, yet unwilling to ask the man to leave.  
  
Beaming still, Salzman laid his portfolio on the table. "Rabbi, I got for you tonight good news."  
  
"I've asked you not to call me rabbi. I'm still a student."  
  
"Your worries are finished. I have for you a first-class bride."  
  
"Leave me in peace concerning this subject." Leo pretended lack of interest.  
  
"The world will dance at your wedding."  
  
"Please, Mr. Salzman, no more."  
  
"But first must come back my strength," Salzman said weakly. He fumbled with the portfolio straps and took out of the leather case an oily paper bag, from which he extracted a hard, seeded roll and a small, smoked white fish. With a quick emotion of his hand he stripped the fish out of its skin and began ravenously to chew. "All day in a rush," he muttered.  
  
Leo watched him eat.  
  
"A sliced tomato you have maybe?" Salzman hesitantly inquired.  
  
"No."  
  
The marriage broker shut his eyes and ate. When he had finished he carefully cleaned up the crumbs and rolled up the remains of the fish, in the paper bag. His spectacled eyes roamed the room until he discovered, amid some piles of books, a one-burner gas stove. Lifting his hat he humbly asked, "A glass of tea you got, rabbi?"  
  
Conscience-stricken, Leo rose and brewed the tea. He served it with a chunk of lemon and two cubes of lump sugar, delighting Salzman.  
  
After he had drunk his tea, Salzman's strength and good spirits were restored.  
  
"So tell me rabbi," he said amiably, "you considered some more the three clients I mentioned yesterday?"  
  
"There was no need to consider."  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"None of them suits me."  
  
"What then suits you?"  
  
Leo let it pass because he could give only a confused answer.  
  
Without waiting for a reply, Salzman asked, "You remember this girl I talked to you--the high school teacher?"  
  
"Age thirty-two?"  
  
But surprisingly, Salzman's face lit in a smile. "Age twenty-nine."  
  
Leo shot him a look. "Reduced from thirty-two?"  
  
"A mistake," Salzman avowed. "I talked today with the dentist. He took me to his safety deposit box and showed me the birth certificate. She was twenty-nine years last August. They made her a party in the mountains where she went for her vacation. When her father spoke to me the first time I forgot to write the age and I told you thirty-two, but now I remember this was a different client, a widow."  
  
"The same one you told me about? I thought she was twenty-four?"  
  
"A different. Am I responsible that the world is filled with widows?"  
  
"No, but I'm not interested in them, nor for that matter, in school teachers."  
  
Salzman pulled his clasped hand to his breast. Looking at the ceiling he devoutly exclaimed, "Yiddishe kinder, what can I say to somebody that he is not interested in high school teachers? So what then you are interested?"  
  
Leo flushed but controlled himself.  
  
"In what else will you be interested," Salzman went on, "if you not interested in this fine girl that she speaks four languages and has personally in the bank ten thousand dollars? Also her father guarantees further twelve thousand. Also she has a new car, wonderful clothes, talks on all subjects, and she will give you a first-class home and children. How near do we come in our life to paradise?"  
  
If she's so wonderful, why wasn't she married ten years ago?"  
  
"Why?" said Salzman with a heavy laugh. "--Why? Because she is partikiler. This is why. She wants the best."  
  
Leo was silent, amused at how he had entangled himself. But Salzman had arouse his interest in Lily H., and he began seriously to consider calling on her. When the marriage broker observed how intently Leo's mind was at work on the facts he had supplied, he felt certain they would soon come to an agreement.  
  
  
Late Saturday afternoon, conscious of Salzman, Leo Finkle walked with Lily Hirschorn along Riverside Drive. He walked briskly and erectly, wearing with distinction the black fedora he had that morning taken with trepidation out of the dusty hat box on his closet shelf, and the heavy black Saturday coat he had throughly whisked clean. Leo also owned a walking stick, a present from a distant relative, but quickly put temptation aside and did not use it. Lily, petite and not unpretty, had on something signifying the approach of spring. She was au courant, animatedly, with all sorts of subjects, and he weighed her words and found her surprisingly sound--score another for Salzman, whom he uneasily sensed to be somewhere around, hiding perhaps high in a tree along the street, flashing the lady signals with a pocket mirror; or perhaps a cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties as he danced his invisible way before them, strewing wild buds on the walk and purple grapes in their path, symbolizing fruit of a union, though there was of course still none.  
  
Lily startled Leo by remarking, "I was thinking of Mr. Salzman, a curious figure, wouldn't you say?"  
  
Not certain what to answer, he nodded.  
  
She bravely went on, blushing, "I for one am grateful for his introducing us. Aren't you?"  
  
He courteously replied, "I am."  
  
"I mean," she said with a little laugh--and it was all in good taste, to at least gave the effect of being not in bad--"do you mind that we came together so?"  
  
He was not displeased with her honesty, recognizing that she meant to set the relationship aright, and understanding that it took a certain amount of experience in life, and courage, to want to do it quite that way. One had to have some sort of past to make that kind of beginning.  
  
He said that he did not mind. Salzman's function was traditional and honorable--valuable for what it might achieve, which, he pointed out, was frequently nothing.  
  
Lily agreed with a sigh. They walked on for a while and she said after a long silence, again with a nervous laugh, "Would you mind if I asked you something a little bit personal? Frankly, I find the subject fascinating." Although Leo shrugged, she went on half embarrassedly, "How was it that you came to your calling? I mean was it a sudden passionate inspiration?"  
  
Leo, after a time, slowly replied, "I was always interested in the Law."  
  
"You saw revealed in it the presence of the Highest?"  
  
He nodded and changed the subject. "I understand that you spent a little time in Paris, Miss Hirschorn?"  
  
"Oh, did Mr. Salzman tell you, Rabbi Finkle?" Leo winced but she went on, "It was ages ago and almost forgotten. I remember I had to return for my sister's wedding."  
  
[And Lily would not be put off. "When," she asked in a trembly voice, "did you become enamored of God?"](http://genius.com/5189059/Bernard-malamud-the-magic-barrel/And-lily-would-not-be-put-off-when-she-asked-in-a-trembly-voice-did-you-become-enamored-of-god)  
  
He stared at her. Then it came to him that she was talking not about Leo Finkle, but of a total stranger, some mystical figure, perhaps even passionate prophet that Salzman had dreamed up for her--no relation to the living or dead. Leo trembled with rage and weakness. The trickster had obviously sold her a bill of goods, just as he had him, who'd expected to become acquainted with a young lady of twenty-nine, only to behold, the moment he laid eyes upon her strained and anxious face, a woman past thirty-five and aging rapidly. Only his self control had kept him this long in her presence.  
  
"I am not," he said gravely, "a talented religious person." and in seeking words to go on, found himself possessed by shame and fear. "I think," he said in a strained manner, "that I came to God not because I love Him, but because I did not."  
  
This confession he spoke harshly because its unexpectedness shook him.  
  
Lily wilted. Leo saw a profusion of loaves of bread go flying like ducks high over his head, not unlike the winged loaves by which he had counted himself to sleep last night. Mercifully, then, it snowed, which he would not put past Salzman's machinations.  
  
  
He was infuriated with the marriage broker and swore he would throw him out of the room the minute he reappeared. But Salzman did not come that night, and when Leo's anger had subsided, an unaccountable despair grew in its place. At first he thought this was caused by his disappointment in Lily, but before long it became evident that he had involved himself with Salzman without a true knowledge of his own intent. He gradually realized--with an emptiness that seized him with six hands--that he had called in the broker to find him a bride because he was incapable of doing it himself. This terrifying insight he had derived as a result of his meeting and conversation with Lily Hirschorn. Her probing questions had somehow irritated him into revealing --to himself more than her--the true nature of his relationship to God, and from that it had come upon him, with shocking force, that apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man. It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was--unloved and loveless. This bitter but somehow not fully unexpected revelation brought him to a point to panic, controlled only by extraordinary effort. He covered his face with his hands and cried.  
  
The week that followed was the worst of his life. He did not eat and lost weight. His beard darkened and grew ragged. He stopped attending seminars and almost never opened a book. He seriously considered leaving the Yeshiva, although he was deeply troubled at the thought of the loss of all his years of study--saw them like pages torn from a book, strewn over the city--and at the devastating effect of this decision upon his parents. But he had lived without knowledge of himself, and never in the Five Books and all the Commentaries--mea culpa--had the truth been revealed to him. He did not know where to turn, and in all this desolating loneliness there was no to whom, although he often thought of Lily but not once could bring himself to go downstairs and make the call. He became touchy and irritable, especially with his landlady, who asked him all manner of personal questions; on the other hand sensing his own disagreeableness, he waylaid her on the stairs and apologized abjectly, until mortified, she ran from him. Out of this, however, he drew the consolation that he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered. But generally, as the long and terrible week drew to a close, he regained his composure and some idea of purpose in life to go on as planned. Although he was imperfect, the ideal was not. As for his quest of a bride, the thought of continuing afflicted him with anxiety and heartburn, yet perhaps with this new knowledge of himself he would be more successful than in the past. Perhaps love would now come to him and a bride to that love. And for this sanctified seeking who needed a Salzman?  
  
The marriage broker, a skeleton with haunted eyes, returned that very night. He looked, withal, the picture of frustrated expectancy--as if he had steadfastly waited the week at Miss Lily Hirschorn's side for a telephone call that never came.  
  
Casually coughing, Salzman came immediately to the point: "So how did you like her?"  
  
Leo's anger rose and he could not refrain from chiding the matchmaker: "Why did you lie to me, Salzman?"  
  
Salzman's pale face went dead white, the world had snowed on him.  
  
"Did you not state that she was twenty-nine?' Leo insisted.  
  
"I give you my word--"  
  
"She was thirty-five, if a day. At least thirty-five."  
  
"Of this don't be too sure. Her father told me--"  
  
"Never mind. The worst of it was that you lied to her."  
  
"How did I lie to her, tell me?"  
  
"You told her things abut me that weren't true. You made out to be more, consequently less than I am. She had in mind a totally different person, a sort of semi-mystical Wonder Rabbi."  
  
"All I said, you was a religious man."  
  
"I can imagine."  
  
Salzman sighed. "This is my weakness that I have," he confessed. "My wife says to me I shouldn't be a salesman, but when I have two fine people that they would be wonderful to be married, I am so happy that I talk too much." He smiled wanly. "This is why Salzman is a poor man."  
  
Leo's anger left him. "Well, Salzman, I'm afraid that's all."  
  
The marriage broker fastened hungry eyes on him.  
  
"You don't want any more a bride?"  
  
"I do," said Leo, "but I have decided to seek her in a different way. I am no longer interested in an arranged marriage. To be frank, I now admit the necessity of premarital love. That is, I want to be in love with the one I marry."  
  
"Love?" said Salzman, astounded. After a moment he remarked "For us, our love is our life, not for the ladies. In the ghetto they--"  
  
"I know, I know," said Leo. "I've thought of it often. Love, I have said to myself, should be a by-product of living and worship rather than its own end. Yet for myself I find it necessary to establish the level of my need and fulfill it."  
  
Salzman shrugged but answered, "Listen, rabbi, if you want love, this I can find for you also. I have such beautiful clients that you will love them the minute your eyes will see them."  
  
Leo smiled unhappily. "I'm afraid you don't understand."  
  
But Salzman hastily unstrapped his portfolio and withdrew a manila packet from it.  
  
"Pictures," he said, quickly laying the envelope on the table.  
  
Leo called after him to take the pictures away, but as if on the wings of the wind, Salzman had disappeared.  
  
March came. Leo had returned to his regular routine. Although he felt not quite himself yet--lacked energy--he was making plans for a more active social life. Of course it would cost something, but he was an expert in cutting corners; and when there were no corners left he would make circles rounder. All the while Salzman's pictures had lain on the table, gathering dust. Occasionally as Leo sat studying, or enjoying a cup of tea, his eyes fell on the manila envelope, but he never opened it.  
  
The days went by and no social life to speak of developed with a member of the opposite sex--it was difficult, given the circumstances of his situation. One morning Leo toiled up the stairs to his room and stared out the window at the city. Although the day was bright his view of it was dark. For some time he watched the people in the street below hurrying along and then turned with a heavy heart to his little room. On the table was the packet. With a sudden relentless gesture he tore it open. For a half-hour he stood by the table in a state of excitement, examining the photographs of the ladies Salzman had included. Finally, with a deep sigh he put them down. There were six, of varying degree of attractiveness, but look at them along enough and they all became Lily Hirschorn: all past their prime, all starved behind bright smiles, not a true personality in the lot. Life, despite their frantic yoohooings, had passed them by; they were pictures in a brief case that stank of fish. After a while, however, as Leo attempted to return the photographs into the envelope, he found in it another, a snapshot of the type taken by a machine for a quarter. He gazed at it a moment and let out a cry.  
  
Her face deeply moved him. Why, he could at first not say. It gave him the impression of youth--spring flowers, yet age--a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted; this came from the eyes, which were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange. He had a vivid impression that he had met her before, but try as he might he could not place her although he could almost recall her name, as he had read it in her own handwriting. No, this couldn't be; he would have remembered her. It was not, he affirmed, that she had an extraordinary beauty--no, though her face was attractive enough; it was that something about her moved him. Feature for feature, even some of the ladies of the photographs could do better; but she lapsed forth to this heart--had lived, or wanted to--more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived--had somehow deeply suffered: it could be seen in the depths of those reluctant eyes, and from the way the light enclosed and shone from her, and within her, opening realms of possibility: this was her own. Her he desired. His head ached and eyes narrowed with the intensity of his gazing, then as if an obscure fog had blown up in the mind, he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow, of [evil](http://genius.com/4960359/Bernard-malamud-the-magic-barrel/Evil). He shuddered, saying softly, it is thus with us all. Leo brewed some tea in a small pot and sat sipping it without sugar, to calm himself. But before he had finished drinking, again with excitement he examined the face and found it good: good for Leo Finkle. Only such a one could understand him and help him seek whatever he was seeking. She might, perhaps, love him. How she had happened to be among the discards in Salzman's barrel he could never guess, but he knew he must urgently go find her.  
  
Leo rushed downstairs, grabbed up the Bronx telephone book, and searched for Salzman's home address. He was not listed, nor was his office. Neither was he in the Manhattan book. But Leo remembered having written down the address on a slip of paper after he had read Salzman's advertisement in the "personals" column of the Forward. He ran up to his room and tore through his papers, without luck. It was exasperating. Just when he needed the matchmaker he was nowhere to be found. Fortunately Leo remembered to look in his wallet. There on a card he found his name written and a Bronx address. No phone number was listed, the reason--Leo now recalled--he had originally communicated with Salzman by letter. He got on his coat, put a hat on over his skull cap and hurried to the subway station. All the way to the far end of the Bronx he sat on the edge of his seat. He was more than once tempted to take out the picture and see if the girl's face was as he remembered it, but he refrained, allowing the snapshot to remain in his inside coat pocket, content to have her so close. When the train pulled into the station he was waiting at the door and bolted out. He quickly located the street Salzman had advertised.  
  
The building he sought was less than a block from the subway, but it was not an office building, nor even a loft, nor a store in which one could rent office space. It was a very old tenement house. Leo found Salzman's name in pencil on a soiled tag under the bell and climbed three dark flights to his apartment. When he knocked, the door was opened by a think, asthmatic, gray-haired woman in felt slippers.  
  
"Yes?" she said, expecting nothing. She listened without listening. He could have sworn he had seen her, too, before but knew it was an illusion.  
  
"Salzman--does he live here? Pinye Salzman," he said, "the matchmaker?"  
  
She stared at him a long minute. "Of course."  
  
He felt embarrassed. "Is he in?"  
  
"No." Her mouth, thought left open, offered nothing more.  
  
"The matter is urgent. Can you tell me where his office is?"  
  
"In the air." She pointed upward.  
  
"You mean he has no office?" Leo asked.  
  
"In his socks."  
  
He peered into the apartment. It was sunless and dingy, one large room divided by a half-open curtain, beyond which he could see a sagging metal bed. The near side of the room was crowded with rickety chairs, old bureaus, a three-legged table, racks of cooking utensils, and all the apparatus of a kitchen. But there was no sign of Salzman or his magic barrel, probably also a figment of the imagination. An odor of frying fish made weak to the knees.  
  
"Where is he?" he insisted. "I've got to see your husband."  
  
At length she answered, "So who knows where he is? Every time he thinks a new thought he runs to a different place. Go home, he will find you."  
  
"Tell him Leo Finkle."  
  
She gave no sign she had heard.  
  
He walked downstairs, depressed.  
  
But Salzman, breathless, stood waiting at his door.  
  
Leo was astounded and overjoyed. "How did you get here before me?"  
  
"I rushed."  
  
"Come inside."  
  
They entered. Leo fixed tea, and a sardine sandwich for Salzman. As they were drinking he reached behind him for the packet of pictures and handed them to the marriage broker.  
  
Salzman put down his glass and said expectantly, "You found somebody you like?"  
  
"Not among these."  
  
The marriage broker turned away.  
  
"Here is the one I want." Leo held forth the snapshot.  
  
Salzman slipped on his glasses and took the picture into his trembling hand. He turned ghastly and let out a groan.  
  
"What's the matter?" cried Leo.  
  
"Excuse me. Was an accident this picture. She isn't for you?"  
  
Salzman frantically shoved the manila packet into his portfolio. He thrust the snapshot into his pocket and fled down the stairs.  
  
Leo, after momentary paralysis, gave chase and cornered the marriage broker in the vestibule. The landlady made hysterical out cries but neither of them listened.  
  
"Give me back the picture, Salzman."  
  
"No." The pain in his eyes was terrible.  
  
"Tell me who she is then."  
  
"This I can't tell you. Excuse me."  
  
He made to depart, but Leo, forgetting himself, seized the matchmaker by his tight coat and shook him frenziedly.  
  
"Please," sighed Salzman. "Please."  
  
Leo ashamedly let him go. "Tell me who she is," he begged. "It's very important to me to know."  
  
["She is not for you. She is a wild one--wild, without shame. This is not a bride for a rabbi."](http://genius.com/4915664/Bernard-malamud-the-magic-barrel/She-is-not-for-you-she-is-a-wild-one-wild-without-shame-this-is-not-a-bride-for-a-rabbi)  
  
"What do you mean wild?"  
  
"Like an animal. Like a dog. For her to be poor was a sin. This is why to me she is dead now."  
  
"In God's name, what do you mean?"  
  
"Her I can't introduce to you," Salzman cried.  
  
"Why are you so excited?"  
  
"Why, he asks," Salzman said, bursting into tear. "This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell."  
  
  
Leo hurried up to bed and hid under the covers. Under the covers he thought his life through. Although he soon fell asleep he could not sleep her out of his mind. He woke, beating his breast. Though he prayed to be rid of her, his prayers went unanswered. Through days of torment he endlessly struggled not to love her; fearing success, he escaped it. He then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God. The idea alternately nauseated and exalted him.  
  
He perhaps did not know that he had come to a final decision until he encountered Salzman in a Broadway cafeteria. He was sitting alone at a rear table, sucking the bony remains of a fish. The marriage broker appeared haggard, and transparent to the point of vanishing.  
  
Salzman looked up at first without recognizing him. Leo had grown a pointed beard and his eyes were weighted with wisdom.  
  
"Salzman," he said, "love has at last come to my heart."  
  
"Who can love from a picture?" mocked the marriage broker.  
  
"It is not impossible."  
  
"If you can love her, then you can love anybody. Let me show you some new clients that they just sent me their photographs. One is a little doll."  
  
"Just her I want," Leo murmured.  
  
"Don't be a fool, doctor Don't bother with her."  
  
"Put me in touch with her, Salzman," Leo said humbly. "Perhaps I can be of service."  
  
Salzman had stopped eating and Leo understood with emotion that it was now arranged.  
  
Leaving the cafeteria, he was, however, afflicted by a tormenting suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way.  
  
  
Leo was informed by better that she would meet him on a certain corner, and she was there one spring night, waiting under a street lamp. He appeared carrying a [small bouquet of violets and rosebuds.](http://genius.com/5190364/Bernard-malamud-the-magic-barrel/Small-bouquet-of-violets-and-rosebuds) Stella stood by the lamp post, smoking. [She wore white with red shoes, which fitted his expectations, although in a troubled moment he had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white](http://genius.com/5171798/Bernard-malamud-the-magic-barrel/She-wore-white-with-red-shoes-which-fitted-his-expectations-although-in-a-troubled-moment-he-had-imagined-the-dress-red-and-only-the-shoes-white). She waited uneasily and shyly. From afar he saw that her eyes--clearly her father's--were filled with desperate innocence. He pictured, in her, his own redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky. Leo ran forward with flowers out-thrust.  
  
Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead.

The Jewbird

THE WINDOW WAS open so the skinny bird flew in. Flappity-flap with its frazzled black wings. That’s how it goes. It’s open, you’re in. Closed, you’re out and that’s your fate. The bird wearily flapped through the open kitchen window of Harry Cohen’s top-floor apartment on First Avenue near the lower East River. On a rod on the wall hung an escaped canary cage, its door wide open, but this black-type longbeaked bird—its ruffled head and small dull eyes, crossed a little, making it look like a dissipated crow—landed if not smack on Cohen’s thick lamb chop, at least on the table, close by. The frozen foods salesman was sitting at supper with his wife and young son on a hot August evening a year ago. Cohen, a heavy man with hairy chest and beefy shorts; Edie, in skinny yellow shorts and red halter; and their ten-year-old Morris (after her father)—Maurie, they called him, a nice kid though not overly bright—were all in the city after two weeks out, because Cohen’s mother was dying. They had been enjoying Kingston, New York, but drove back when Mama got sick in her flat in the Bronx.   
       “Right on the table,” said Cohen, putting down his beer glass and swatting at the bird. “Son of a bitch.”   
       “Harry, take care with your language,” Edie said, looking at Maurie, who watched every move.   
       The bird cawed hoarsely and with a flap of its bedraggled wings—feathers tufted this way and that—rose heavily to the top of the open kitchen door, where it perched staring down.   
       “Gevalt, a pogrom!”   
       “It’s a talking bird,” said Edie in astonishment.   
       “In Jewish,” said Maurie.   
       “Wise guy,” muttered Cohen. He gnawed on his chop, then put down the bone. “So if you can talk, say what’s your business. What do you want here?”   
       “If you can’t spare a lamb chop,” said the bird, “I’ll settle for a piece of herring with a crust of bread. You can’t live on your nerve forever.”   
       “This ain’t a restaurant,” Cohen replied. “All I’m asking is what brings you to this address?”   
       “The window was open,” the bird sighed; adding after a moment, “I’m running. I’m flying but I’m also running.”   
       “From whom?” asked Edie with interest.   
       “Anti-Semeets.”   
       “Anti-Semites?” they all said.   
       “That’s from who.”   
       “What kind of anti-Semites bother a bird?” Edie asked.   
       “Any kind,” said the bird, “also including eagles, vultures, and hawks. And once in a while some crows will take your eyes out.”   
       “But aren’t you a crow?”   
       “Me? I’m a Jewbird.”   
       Cohen laughed heartily. “What do you mean by that?”   
       The bird began dovening. He prayed without Book or tallith, but with passion. Edie bowed her head though not Cohen. And Maurie rocked back and forth with the prayer, looking up with one wide-open eye.   
       When the prayer was done Cohen remarked, “No hat, no phylacteries?”   
       “I’m an old radical.”   
       “You’re sure you’re not some kind of a ghost or dybbuk?”   
       “Not a dybbuk,” answered the bird, “though one of my relatives had such an experience once. It’s all over now, thanks God. They freed her from a former lover, a crazy jealous man. She’s now the mother of two wonderful children.”   
       “Birds?” Cohen asked slyly.   
       “Why not?”   
       “What kind of birds?”   
       “Like me. Jewbirds.”   
       Cohen tipped back in his chair and guffawed. “That’s a big laugh. I’ve heard of a Jewfish but not a Jewbird.”   
       “We’re once removed.” The bird rested on one skinny leg, then on the other. “Please, could you spare maybe a piece of herring with a small crust of bread?”   
       Edie got up from the table.   
       “What are you doing?” Cohen asked her.   
       “I’ll clear the dishes.”   
       Cohen turned to the bird. “So what’s your name, if you don’t mind saying?”   
       “Call me Schwartz.”   
       “He might be an old Jew changed into a bird by somebody,” said Edie, removing a plate.   
       “Are you?” asked Harry, lighting a cigar.   
       “Who knows?” answered Schwartz. “Does God tell us everything?”   
       Maurie got up on his chair. “What kind of herring?” he asked the bird in excitement.   
       “Get down, Maurie, or you’ll fall,” ordered Cohen.   
       “If you haven’t got matjes, I’ll take schmaltz,” said Schwartz.   
       “All we have is marinated, with slices of onion—in a jar,” said Edie.   
       “If you’ll open for me the jar I’ll eat marinated. Do you have also, if you don’t mind, a piece of rye bread—the spitz?”   
       Edie thought she had.   
       “Feed him out on the balcony,” Cohen said. He spoke to the bird. ”After that take off.”   
       Schwartz closed both bird eyes. “I’m tired and it’s a long way.”   
       “Which direction are you headed, north or south?”   
       Schwartz, barely lifting his wings, shrugged.   
       “You don’t know where you’re going?”   
       “Where there’s charity I’ll go.”   
       “Let him stay, papa,” said Maurie. “He’s only a bird.”   
       “So stay the night,” Cohen said, “but no longer.”   
       In the morning Cohen ordered the bird out of the house but Maurie cried, so Schwartz stayed for a while. Maurie was still on vacation from school and his friends were away. He was lonely and Edie enjoyed the fun he had, playing with the bird.   
       “He’s no trouble at all,” she told Cohen, “and besides his appetite is very small.”   
       “What’ll you do when he makes dirty?”   
       “He flies across the street in a tree when he makes dirty, and if nobody passes below, who notices?”   
       “So all right,” said Cohen, “but I’m dead set against it. I warn you he ain’t gonna stay here long.”   
       “What have you got against the poor bird?”   
       “Poor bird, my ass. He’s a foxy bastard. He thinks he’s a Jew.”   
       “What difference does it make what he thinks?”   
       “A Jewbird, what a chuzpah. One false move and he’s out on his drumsticks.”   
       At Cohen’s insistence Schwartz lived out on the balcony in a new wooden birdhouse Edie had bought him.   
       “With many thanks,” said Schwartz, “though I would rather have a human roof over my head. You know how it is at my age. I like the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking. I would also be glad to see once in a while the Jewish Morning Journal and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God. But whatever you give me, you won’t hear complaints.”   
       However, when Cohen brought home a bird feeder full of dried corn, Schwartz said, “Impossible.”   
       Cohen was annoyed. “What’s the matter, crosseyes, is your life getting too good for you? Are you forgetting what it means to be migratory? I’ll bet a helluva lot of crows you happen to be acquainted with, Jews or otherwise, would give their eyeteeth to eat this corn.”   
       Schwartz did not answer. What can you say to a grubber yung?   
       “Not for my digestion,” he later explained to Edie. “Cramps. Herring is better even if it makes you thirsty. At least rainwater don’t cost anything.” He laughed sadly in breathy caws.   
       And herring, thanks to Edie, who knew where to shop, was what Schwartz got, with an occasional piece of potato pancake, and even a bit of soupmeat when Cohen wasn’t looking.   
       When school began in September, before Cohen would once again suggest giving the bird the boot, Edie prevailed on him to wait a little while until Maurie adjusted.   
       “To deprive him right now might hurt his school work, and you know what trouble we had last year.”   
       “So okay, but sooner or later the bird goes. That I promise you.”   
       Schwartz, though nobody had asked him, took on full responsibility for Maurie’s performance in school. In return for favors granted, when he was let in for an hour or two at night, he spent most of his time overseeing the boy’s lessons. He sat on top of the dresser near Maurie’s desk as he laboriously wrote out his homework. Maurie was a restless type and Schwartz gently kept him to his studies. He also listened to him practice his screechy violin, taking a few minutes off now and then to rest his ears in the bathroom. And they afterwards played dominoes. The boy was an indifferent checker player and it was impossible to teach him chess. When he was sick, Schwartz read him comic books though he personally disliked them. But Maurie’s work improved in school and even his violin teacher admitted his playing was better. Edie gave Schwartz credit for these improvements though the bird pooh-poohed them.   
       Yet he was proud there was nothing lower than C minuses on Maurie’s report card, and on Edie’s insistence celebrated with a little schnapps.   
       “If he keeps up like this,” Cohen said, “I’ll get him in an Ivy League college for sure.”   
       “Oh I hope so,” sighed Edie.   
       But Schwartz shook his head. “He’s a good boy—you don’t have to worry. He won’t be a shicker or a wifebeater, God forbid, but a scholar he’ll never be, if you know what I mean, although maybe a good mechanic. It’s no disgrace in these times.”   
       “If I were you,” Cohen said, angered, “I’d keep my big snoot out of other people’s private business.”   
       “Harry, please,” said Edie.   
       “My goddamn patience is wearing out. That crosseyes butts into everything.”   
       Though he wasn’t exactly a welcome guest in the house, Schwartz gained a few ounces although he did not improve in appearance. He looked bedraggled as ever, his feathers unkempt, as though he had just flown out of a snowstorm. He spent, he admitted, little time taking care of himself. Too much to think about. “Also outside plumbing,” he told Edie. Still there was more glow to his eyes so that though Cohen went on calling him crosseyes he said it less emphatically.   
       Liking his situation, Schwartz tried tactfully to stay out of Cohen’s way, but one night when Edie was at the movies and Maurie was taking a hot shower, the frozen foods salesman began a quarrel with the bird.   
       “For Christ sake, why don’t you wash yourself sometimes? Why must you always stink like a dead fish?”   
       “Mr. Cohen, if you’ll pardon me, if somebody eats garlic he will smell from garlic. I eat herring three times a day. Feed me flowers and I will smell like flowers.”   
       “Who’s obligated to feed you anything at all? You’re lucky to get herring.   
       “Excuse me, I’m not complaining,” said the bird. “You’re complaining.”   
       “What’s more,” said Cohen, “even from out on the balcony I can hear you snoring away like a pig. It keeps me awake at night.”   
       “Snoring,” said Schwartz, “isn’t a crime, thanks God.”   
       “All in all you are a goddamn pest and free loader. Next thing you’ll want to sleep in bed next to my wife.”   
       “Mr. Cohen,” said Schwartz, “on this rest assured. A bird is a bird.”   
       “So you say, but how do I know you’re a bird and not some kind of a goddamn devil?”   
       “If I was a devil you would know already. And I don’t mean because your son’s good marks.”   
       “Shut up, you bastard bird,” shouted Cohen.   
       “Grubber yung,” cawed Schwartz, rising to the tips of his talons, his long wings outstretched.   
       Cohen was about to lunge for the bird’s scrawny neck but Maurie came out of the bathroom, and for the rest of the evening until Schwartz’s bedtime on the balcony, there was pretended peace.   
       But the quarrel had deeply disturbed Schwartz and he slept badly. His snoring woke him, and awake, he was fearful of what would become of him. Wanting to stay out of Cohen’s way, he kept to the birdhouse as much as possible. Cramped by it, he paced back and forth on the balcony ledge, or sat on the birdhouse roof, staring into space. In the evenings, while overseeing Maurie’s lessons, he often fell asleep. Awakening, he nervously hopped around exploring the four corners of the room. He spent much time in Maurie’s closet, and carefully examined his bureau drawers when they were left open. And once when he found a large paper bag on the floor, Schwartz poked his way into it to investigate what possibilities were. The boy was amused to see the bird in the paper bag.   
       “He wants to build a nest,” he said to his mother.   
       Edie, sensing Schwartz’s unhappiness, spoke to him quietly.   
       “Maybe if you did some of the things my husband wants you, you would get along better with him.”   
       “Give me a for instance,” Schwartz said.   
       “Like take a bath, for instance.”   
       “I’m too old for baths,” said the bird. “My feathers fall out without baths.”   
       “He says you have a bad smell.”   
       “Everybody smells. Some people smell because of their thoughts or because who they are. My bad smell comes from the food I eat. What does his come from?”   
       “I better not ask him or it might make him mad,” said Edie.   
       In late November Schwartz froze on the balcony in the fog and cold, and especially on rainy days he woke with stiff joints and could barely move his wings. Already he felt twinges of rheumatism. He would have liked to spend more time in the warm house, particularly when Maurie was in school and Cohen at work. But though Edie was good-hearted and might have sneaked him in in the morning, just to thaw out, he was afraid to ask her. In the meantime Cohen, who had been reading articles about the migration of birds, came out on the balcony one night after work when Edie was in the kitchen preparing pot roast, and peeking into the birdhouse, warned Schwartz to be on his way soon if he knew what was good for him. “Time to hit the flyways.”   
       “Mr. Cohen, why do you hate me so much?” asked the bird. “What did I do to you?”   
       “Because you’re an A-number-one trouble maker, that’s why. What’s more, whoever heard of a Jewbird? Now scat or it’s open war.”   
       But Schwartz stubbornly refused to depart so Cohen embarked on a campaign of harassing him, meanwhile hiding it from Edie and Maurie. Maurie hated violence and Cohen didn’t want to leave a bad impression. He thought maybe if he played dirty tricks on the bird he would fly off without being physically kicked out. The vacation was over, let him make his easy living off the fat of somebody else’s land. Cohen worried about the effect of the bird’s departure on Maurie’s schooling but decided to take the chance, first, because the boy now seemed to have the knack of studying—give the black bird-bastard credit—and second, because Schwartz was driving him bats by being there always, even in his dreams.   
       The frozen foods salesman began his campaign against the bird by mixing watery cat food with the herring slices in Schwartz’s dish. He also blew up and popped numerous paper bags outside the birdhouse as the bird slept, and when he had got Schwartz good and nervous, though not enough to leave, he brought a full-grown cat into the house, supposedly a gift for little Maurie, who had always wanted a pussy. The cat never stopped springing up at Schwartz whenever he saw him, one day managing to claw out several of his tailfeathers. And even at lesson time, when the cat was usually excluded from Maurie’s room, though somehow or other he quickly found his way in at the end of the lesson, Schwartz was desperately fearful of his life and flew from pinnacle to pinnacle—light fixture to clothes-tree to door-top—in order to elude the beast’s wet jaws.   
       Once when the bird complained to Edie how hazardous his existence was, she said, “Be patient, Mr. Schwartz. When the cat gets to know you better he won’t try to catch you any more.”   
       “When he stops trying we will both be in Paradise,” Schwartz answered. “Do me a favor and get rid of him. He makes my whole life worry. I’m losing feathers like a tree loses leaves.”   
       “I’m awfully sorry but Maurie likes the pussy and sleeps with it.”   
       What could Schwartz do? He worried but came to no decision, being afraid to leave. So he ate the herring garnished with cat food, tried hard not to hear the paper bags bursting like fire crackers outside the birdhouse at night, and lived terror-stricken closer to the ceiling than the floor, as the cat, his tail flicking, endlessly watched him.   
       Weeks went by. Then on the day after Cohen’s mother had died in her flat in the Bronx, when Maurie came home with a zero on an arithmetic test, Cohen, enraged, waited until Edie had taken the boy to his violin lesson, then openly attacked the bird. He chased him with a broom on the balcony and Schwartz frantically flew back and forth, finally escaping into his birdhouse. Cohen triumphantly reached in, and grabbing both skinny legs, dragged the bird out, cawing loudly, his wings wildly beating. He whirled the bird around and around his head. But Schwartz, as he moved in circles, managed to swoop down and catch Cohen’s nose in his beak, and hung on for dear life. Cohen cried out in great pain, punched the bird with his fist, and tugging at its legs with all his might, pulled his nose free. Again he swung the yawking Schwartz around until the bird grew dizzy, then with a furious heave, flung him into the night. Schwartz sank like stone into the street. Cohen then tossed the birdhouse and feeder after him, listening at the ledge until they crashed on the sidewalk below. For a full hour, broom in hand, his heart palpitating and nose throbbing with pain, Cohen waited for Schwartz to return but the broken-hearted bird didn’t.   
       That’s the end of that dirty bastard, the salesman thought and went in. Edie and Maurie had come home.   
       “Look,” said Cohen, pointing to his bloody nose swollen three times its normal size, “what that sonofabitchy bird did. It’s a permanent scar.”   
       “Where is he now?” Edie asked, frightened.   
       “I threw him out and he flew away. Good riddance.”   
       Nobody said no, though Edie touched a handkerchief to her eyes and Maurie rapidly tried the nine times table and found he knew approximately half.   
       In the spring when the winter’s snow had melted, the boy, moved by a memory, wandered in the neighborhood, looking for Schwartz. He found a dead black bird in a small lot near the river, his two wings broken, neck twisted, and both bird-eyes plucked clean.   
       “Who did it to you, Mr. Schwartz?” Maurie wept.   
       “Anti-Semeets,” Edie said later.

Flannery O’Connor

Good Country People

[Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse,](http://genius.com/3488895/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Besides-the-neutral-expression-that-she-wore-when-she-was-alone-mrs-freeman-had-two-others-forward-and-reverse) that she used for [all her human dealings.](http://genius.com/2951446/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/All-her-human-dealings) [Her forward expression was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck.](http://genius.com/7692695/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Her-forward-expression-was-steady-and-driving-like-the-advance-of-a-heavy-truck) [Her eyes never swerved to left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the center of it.](http://genius.com/3489534/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Her-eyes-never-swerved-to-left-or-right-but-turned-as-the-story-turned-as-if-they-followed-a-yellow-line-down-the-center-of-it) [She seldom used the other expression because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement](http://genius.com/5460579/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-seldom-used-the-other-expression-because-it-was-not-often-necessary-for-her-to-retract-a-statement), but when she did, her face came to a complete stop, there was an almost imperceptible movement of her black eyes, during which they seemed to be receding, and then the observer would see that Mrs. Freeman, though she might stand there as real as several grain sacks thrown on top of each other, was no longer there in spirit. As for getting anything across to her when this was the case, [Mrs. Hopewell had given it up.](http://genius.com/3489064/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Mrs-hopewell-had-given-it-up) [She might talk her head off.](http://genius.com/3492851/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-might-talk-her-head-off) Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong to any point. She would stand there and if she could be brought to say anything, it was something like, “Well, I wouldn’t of said it was and I wouldn’t of said it wasn’t” or letting her gaze range over the top kitchen shelf where there was an assortment of dusty bottles, she might remark, “I see you ain’t ate many of them figs you put up last summer.”  
  
They carried on their most important business in the kitchen at breakfast. Every morning Mrs. Hopewell got up at seven o’clock and lit her gas heater and [Joy’s. Joy was her daughter, a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg.](http://genius.com/2950177/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Joys-joy-was-her-daughter-a-large-blonde-girl-who-had-an-artificial-leg) Mrs. Hopewell thought of her as a child though she was thirty-two years old and [highly educated](http://genius.com/2950422/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Highly-educated). Joy would get up while her mother was eating [and lumber into the bathroom](http://genius.com/3493614/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/And-lumber-into-the-bathroom) and slam the door, and before long, Mrs. Freeman would arrive at the back door. Joy would hear her mother call, “Come on in,” and then they would talk for a while in low voices that were indistinguishable in the bathroom. By the time Joy came in, they had usually finished the weather report and were on one or the other of Mrs. Freeman’s daughters, Glynese or Carramae. Joy called them Glycerin and Caramel. Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant. She could not keep anything on her stomach. Every morning Mrs. Freeman told Mrs. Hopewell how many times she had vomited since the last report.  
  
Mrs. Hopewell liked to tell people that Glynese and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs. Freeman was a lady and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet. Then she would tell how she had happened to hire the Freemans in the first place and how they were a godsend to her and how she had had them four years. [The reason for her keeping them so long was that they were not trash.](http://genius.com/3494295/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/The-reason-for-her-keeping-them-so-long-was-that-they-were-not-trash) They were good country people. She had telephoned the man whose name they had given as reference and he had told her that Mr. Freeman was a good farmer but that his wife was the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth. “She’s got to be into everything,” the man said. “If she don’t get there before the dust settles, you can bet she’s dead, that’s all. She’ll want to know all your business. I can stand him real good,” he had said, “but me nor my wife neither could have stood that woman one more minute on this place.” That had put Mrs. Hopewell off for a few days.  
  
She had hired them in the end because there were no other applicants but she had made up her mind beforehand exactly how she would handle the woman. Since she was the type who had to be into everything, then, Mrs. Hopewell had decided, she would not only let her be into everything, she would see to it that she was into everything – she would give her the responsibility of everything, she would put her in charge. [Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own](http://genius.com/3489090/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Mrs-hopewell-had-no-bad-qualities-of-her-own) but she was able to use other people’s in such a constructive way that she had kept them four years.  
  
[Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings. Another was: that is life! And still another, the most important, was: well, other people have their opinions too.](http://genius.com/3655037/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Nothing-is-perfect-this-was-one-of-mrs-hopewells-favorite-sayings-another-was-that-is-life-and-still-another-the-most-important-was-well-other-people-have-their-opinions-too) She would make these statements, usually at the table, in a tone of gentle insistence as if no one held them but her, and [the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face,](http://genius.com/5461279/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/The-large-hulking-joy-whose-constant-outrage-had-obliterated-every-expression-from-her-face) would stare just a little to the side of her, [her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who had achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it.](http://genius.com/2951211/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Her-eyes-icy-blue-with-the-look-of-someone-who-had-achieved-blindness-by-an-act-of-will-and-means-to-keep-it)  
  
When Mrs. Hopewell said to Mrs. Freeman that life was like that, Mrs. Freeman would say, “I always said so myself.” Nothing had been arrived at by anyone that had not first been arrived at by her. She was quicker than Mr. Freeman. When Mrs. Hopewell said to her after they had been on the place for a while, “You know, you’re the wheel behind the wheel,” and winked, Mrs. Freeman had said, [“I know it. I’ve always been quick. It’s some that are quicker than others.”](http://genius.com/5461728/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/I-know-it-ive-always-been-quick-its-some-that-are-quicker-than-others)  
  
[“Everybody is different,” Mrs. Hopewell said.  
  
“Yes, most people is,” Mrs. Freeman said.  
  
“It takes all kinds to make the world.”  
  
“I always said it did myself.”](http://genius.com/2950581/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Everybody-is-different-mrs-hopewell-said-yes-most-people-is-mrs-freeman-said-it-takes-all-kinds-to-make-the-world-i-always-said-it-did-myself)  
  
The girl was used to this kind of dialogue for breakfast [and more of it for dinner; sometimes they had it for supper too.](http://genius.com/3489099/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/And-more-of-it-for-dinner-sometimes-they-had-it-for-supper-too) When they had no guest they ate in the kitchen because that was easier. Mrs. Freeman always managed to arrive at some point during the meal and to watch them finish it. She would stand in the doorway if it were summer but in the winter she would stand with one elbow on top of the refrigerator and look down at them, or she would stand by the gas heater, lifting the back of her skirt slightly. Occasionally she would stand against the wall and roll her head from side to side. At no time was she in any hurry to leave. All this was very trying on Mrs. Hopewell but she was a woman of great patience. [She realized that nothing is perfect and that in the Freemans she had good country people and that if, in this day and age, you get good country people, you had better hang onto them.](http://genius.com/2950801/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-realized-that-nothing-is-perfect-and-that-in-the-freemans-she-had-good-country-people-and-that-if-in-this-day-and-age-you-get-good-country-people-you-had-better-hang-onto-them)  
  
She had had plenty of experience with trash. Before the Freemans she had averaged one tenant family a year. The wives of these farmers were not the kind you would want to be around you for very long. Mrs. Hopewell, who had divorced her husband long ago, needed someone to walk over the fields with her; and when Joy had to be impressed for these services, her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell would say, “If you can’t come pleasantly, I don’t want you at all,” to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, [“If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM.”](http://genius.com/2950109/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/If-you-want-me-here-i-am-like-i-am)  
  
  
Mrs. Hopewell excused this attitude because of the leg [(which had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten).](http://genius.com/2950824/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Which-had-been-shot-off-in-a-hunting-accident-when-joy-was-ten) It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times. Her name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home, she had had it legally changed. Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. [Then, she had gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother until after she had done it. Her legal name was Hulga.](http://genius.com/2950446/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Then-she-had-gone-and-had-the-beautiful-name-joy-changed-without-telling-her-mother-until-after-she-had-done-it-her-legal-name-was-hulga)  
  
[When Mrs. Hopewell thought the name, Hulga, she thought of the broad blank hull of a battleship. She would not use it. She continued to call her Joy to which the girl responded but in a purely mechanical way.](http://genius.com/2951290/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/When-mrs-hopewell-thought-the-name-hulga-she-thought-of-the-broad-blank-hull-of-a-battleship-she-would-not-use-it-she-continued-to-call-her-joy-to-which-the-girl-responded-but-in-a-purely-mechanical-way)  
  
Hulga had learned to tolerate Mrs. Freeman who saved her from taking walks with her mother. Even Glynese and Carramae were useful when they occupied attention that might otherwise have been directed at her. At first she had thought she could not stand Mrs. Freeman for she had found it was not possible to be rude to her. Mrs. Freeman would take on strange resentments and for days together she would be sullen but the source of her displeasure was always obscure; a direct attack, a positive leer, blatant ugliness to her face – these never touched her. And without warning one day, she began calling her Hulga.  
  
  
She did not call her that in front of Mrs. Hopewell who would have been incensed but when she and the girl happened to be out of the house together, she would say something and add the name Hulga to the end of it, and the big spectacled Joy-Hulga would scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon. She considered the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. [She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act.](http://genius.com/5092769/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-had-a-vision-of-the-name-working-like-the-ugly-sweating-vulcan-who-stayed-in-the-furnace-and-to-whom-presumably-the-goddess-had-to-come-when-called-she-saw-it-as-the-name-of-her-highest-creative-act) [One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga](http://genius.com/4364176/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/One-of-her-major-triumphs-was-that-her-mother-had-not-been-able-to-turn-her-dust-into-joy-but-the-greater-one-was-that-she-had-been-able-to-turn-it-herself-into-hulga). However, Mrs. Freeman’s relish for using the name only irritated her. It was as if Mrs. Freeman’s beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact. [Something about her seemed to fascinate Mrs. Freeman and then one day Hulga realized that it was the artificial leg. Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago.](http://genius.com/2948557/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Something-about-her-seemed-to-fascinate-mrs-freeman-and-then-one-day-hulga-realized-that-it-was-the-artificial-leg-mrs-freeman-had-a-special-fondness-for-the-details-of-secret-infections-hidden-deformities-assaults-upon-children-of-diseases-she-preferred-the-lingering-or-incurable-hulga-had-heard-mrs-hopewell-give-her-the-details-of-the-hunting-accident-how-the-leg-had-been-literally-blasted-off-how-she-had-never-lost-consciousness-mrs-freeman-could-listen-to-it-any-time-as-if-it-had-happened-an)  
  
[When Hulga stumped into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it—Mrs. Hopewell was certain- because it was ugly-sounding), she glanced at them and did not speak.](http://genius.com/2951297/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/When-hulga-stumped-into-the-kitchen-in-the-morning-she-could-walk-without-making-the-awful-noise-but-she-made-itmrs-hopewell-was-certain-because-it-was-ugly-sounding-she-glanced-at-them-and-did-not-speak) Mrs. Hopewell would be in her red kimono with her hair tied around her head in rags. She would be sitting at the table, finishing her breakfast and Mrs. Freeman would be hanging by her elbow outward from the refrigerator, looking down at the table. Hulga always put her eggs on the stove to boil and then stood over them with her arms folded, and Mrs. Hopewell would look at her—a kind of indirect gaze divided between her and Mrs. Freeman—and would think that if she would only keep herself up a little, she wouldn't be so bad looking. There was nothing wrong with her face that a pleasant expression wouldn't help. Mrs. Hopewell said that people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not.  
  
[Whenever she looked at Joy this way, she could not help but feel that it would have been better if the child had not taken the Ph.D. It had certainly not brought her out any and now that she had it, there was no more excuse for her to go to school again. Mrs. Hopewell thought it was nice for girls to go to school to have a good time but Joy had “gone through.”](http://genius.com/5095256/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Whenever-she-looked-at-joy-this-way-she-could-not-help-but-feel-that-it-would-have-been-better-if-the-child-had-not-taken-the-phd-it-had-certainly-not-brought-her-out-any-and-now-that-she-had-it-there-was-no-more-excuse-for-her-to-go-to-school-again-mrs-hopewell-thought-it-was-nice-for-girls-to-go-to-school-to-have-a-good-time-but-joy-had-gone-through) Anyhow, she would not have been strong enough to go again. [The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five. She had a weak heart.](http://genius.com/3489116/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/The-doctors-had-told-mrs-hopewell-that-with-the-best-of-care-joy-might-see-forty-five-she-had-a-weak-heart) Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about. And Mrs. Hopewell could very well picture her there, looking like a scarecrow and lecturing to more of the same. Here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it. She thought this was funny; Mrs. Hopewell thought it was idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child. [She was brilliant but she didn’t have a grain of sense.](http://genius.com/3491774/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-was-brilliant-but-she-didnt-have-a-grain-of-sense) It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she grew less like other people and more like herself – bloated, rude, and squint-eyed. And she said such strange things! To her own mother she had said – without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full – [“Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!” she had cried sinking down again and staring at her plate, “Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!”](http://genius.com/3489126/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Woman-do-you-ever-look-inside-do-you-ever-look-inside-and-see-what-you-are-not-god-she-had-cried-sinking-down-again-and-staring-at-her-plate-malebranche-was-right-we-are-not-our-own-light-we-are-not-our-own-light) Mrs. Hopewell had no idea to this day what brought that on. She had only made the remark, hoping Joy would take it in, that a smile never hurt anyone. The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, “My daughter is a nurse,” or “My daughter is a school teacher,” or even, “My daughter is a chemical engineer.” You could not say, “My daughter is a philosopher.” [That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans.](http://genius.com/3491929/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/That-was-something-that-had-ended-with-the-greeks-and-romans) All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading. Sometimes she went for walks but [she didn’t like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men.](http://genius.com/2949096/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-didnt-like-dogs-or-cats-or-birds-or-flowers-or-nature-or-nice-young-men) [She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity.](http://genius.com/2950724/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-looked-at-nice-young-men-as-if-she-could-smell-their-stupidity)  
  
One day Mrs. Hopewell had picked up one of the books the girl had just put down and opening it at random, she read, “Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing – how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: [science wishes to know nothing of nothing](http://genius.com/5087572/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Science-wishes-to-know-nothing-of-nothing). Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.” [These words had been underlined with a blue pencil and they worked on Mrs. Hopewell like some evil incantation in gibberish. She shut the book quickly and went out of the room as if she were having a chill.](http://genius.com/3491994/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/These-words-had-been-underlined-with-a-blue-pencil-and-they-worked-on-mrs-hopewell-like-some-evil-incantation-in-gibberish-she-shut-the-book-quickly-and-went-out-of-the-room-as-if-she-were-having-a-chill)  
  
This morning when the girl came in, Mrs. Freeman was on Carramae. “She thrown up four times after supper,” she said, “and was up twict in the night after three o’clock. Yesterday she didn’t do nothing but ramble in the bureau drawer. All she did. Stand up there and see what she could run up on.” “She’s got to eat,” Mrs. Hopewell muttered, sipping her coffee, while she watched Joy’s back at the stove. She was wondering what the child had said to the Bible salesman. She could not imagine what kind of a conversation she could possibly have had with him.  
  
He was a tall gaunt hatless youth who had called yesterday to sell them a Bible. He had appeared at the door, carrying a large black suitcase that weighted him so heavily on one side that he had to brace himself against the door facing. He seemed on the point of collapse but he said in a cheerful voice, "Good morning, Mrs. Cedars!" and set the suitcase down on the mat. He was not a bad-looking young man though he had on a bright blue suit and yellow socks that were not pulled up far enough. He had prominent face bones and a streak of sticky-looking brown hair falling across his forehead.  
  
"I'm Mrs. Hopewell," she said.  
  
"Oh!" he said, [pretending to look puzzled but with his eyes sparkling,](http://genius.com/3492230/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Pretending-to-look-puzzled-but-with-his-eyes-sparkling) "I saw it said 'The Cedars,' on the mailbox so I thought you was Mrs. Cedars!" and he burst out in a pleasant laugh. He picked up the satchel and under cover of a pant, he fell forward into her hall. It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it. "Mrs. Hopewell!" he said and grabbed her hand. "I hope you are well!" and he laughed again and then all at once his face sobered completely. He paused and gave her a straight earnest look and said, ["Lady, I've come to speak of serious things."](http://genius.com/3492305/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Lady-ive-come-to-speak-of-serious-things)  
  
"Well, come in," she muttered, none too pleased because her dinner was almost ready. He came into the parlor and sat down on the edge of a straight chair and put the suitcase between his feet and glanced around the room as if he were sizing her up by it. Her silver gleamed on the two sideboards; [she decided he had never been in a room as elegant as this.](http://genius.com/3492469/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-decided-he-had-never-been-in-a-room-as-elegant-as-this)  
  
"Mrs. Hopewell," he began, using her name in a way that sounded almost intimate, "I know you believe in Chrustian service."  
  
"Well yes," she murmured.  
  
"I know," he said and paused, looking very wise with his head cocked on one side, "that you're a good woman. Friends have told me."  
  
Mrs. Hopewell never liked to be taken for a fool. "What are you selling?" she asked.  
  
"Bibles," the young man said and his eye raced around the room before he added, "I see you have no family Bible in your parlor, I see that is the one lack you got!"  
  
Mrs. Hopewell could not say, "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor." She said, stiffening slightly, "I keep my Bible by my bedside." [This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere.](http://genius.com/4364208/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/This-was-not-the-truth-it-was-in-the-attic-somewhere)  
  
["Lady," he said, "the word of God ought to be in the parlor."  
  
"Well, I think that's a matter of taste," she began. "I think —"  
  
"Lady," he said, "for a Chrustian, the word of God ought to be in every room in the house besides in his heart](http://genius.com/2950895/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Lady-he-said-the-word-of-god-ought-to-be-in-the-parlor-well-i-think-thats-a-matter-of-taste-she-began-i-think-lady-he-said-for-a-chrustian-the-word-of-god-ought-to-be-in-every-room-in-the-house-besides-in-his-heart). I know you're a Chrustian because I can see it in every line of your face."  
  
She stood up and said, "Well, young man, I don't want to buy a Bible and l smell my dinner burning."  
  
He didn't get up. He began to twist his hands and looking down at them, he said softly, "Well lady I'll tell you the truth—not many people want to buy one nowadays and besides, I know I'm real simple. I don't know how to say a thing but to say it. I'm just a country boy." He glanced up into her unfriendly face. ["People like you don't like to fool with country people like me.](http://genius.com/3492685/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/People-like-you-dont-like-to-fool-with-country-people-like-me)  
  
"Why!" she cried, ["good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go ‘round. That’s life!”](http://genius.com/5087776/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Good-country-people-are-the-salt-of-the-earth-besides-we-all-have-different-ways-of-doing-it-takes-all-kinds-to-make-the-world-go-round-thats-life)  
  
“You said a mouthful,” he said.  
  
“Why, I think there aren’t enough good country people in the world!” she said, stirred. “I think that’s what’s wrong with it!”  
  
His face had brightened. “I didn’t intraduce myself,” he said. “I’m Manley Pointer from out in the country around Willohobie, not even from a place, just from near a place.”  
  
“You wait a minute,” she said. “I have to see about my dinner.” She went out to the kitchen and found Joy standing near the door where she had been listening.  
  
“Get rid of the salt of the earth,” she said, “and let’s eat.”  
  
Mrs. Hopewell gave her a pained look and turned the heat down under the vegetables. “I can’t be rude to anybody,” she murmured and went back into the parlor.  
  
He had opened the suitcase and was sitting with a Bible on each knee.  
  
“I appreciate your honesty,” he said. “You don’t see any more real honest people unless you go way out in the country.”  
  
“I know,” she said, “real genuine folks!” Through the crack in the door she heard a groan.  
  
“I guess a lot of boys come telling you they’re working their way through college,” he said, “but I’m not going to tell you that. Somehow,” he said, “I don’t want to go to college. [I want to devote my life to Chrustian service. See,” he said, lowering his voice, “I got this heart condition. I may not live long. When you know it’s something wrong with you and you may not live long, well then, lady...”](http://genius.com/2951311/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/I-want-to-devote-my-life-to-chrustian-service-see-he-said-lowering-his-voice-i-got-this-heart-condition-i-may-not-live-long-when-you-know-its-something-wrong-with-you-and-you-may-not-live-long-well-then-lady) He paused, with his mouth open, and stared at her.  
  
[He and Joy had the same condition! She knew that her eyes were filling with tears but she collected herself quickly and murmured, “Won’t you stay for dinner? We’d love to have you!” and was sorry the instant she heard herself say it.](http://genius.com/2950597/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/He-and-joy-had-the-same-condition-she-knew-that-her-eyes-were-filling-with-tears-but-she-collected-herself-quickly-and-murmured-wont-you-stay-for-dinner-wed-love-to-have-you-and-was-sorry-the-instant-she-heard-herself-say-it)  
  
  
“Yes mam,” he said in an abashed voice. “I would sher love to do that!”  
  
Joy had given him one look on being introduced to him and then throughout the meal had not glanced at him again. He had addressed several remarks to her, which she had pretended not to hear. Mrs. Hopewell could not understand deliberate rudeness, although she lived with it, and she felt she had always to overflow with hospitality to make up for Joy’s lack of courtesy. She urged him to talk about himself and he did. He said he was the seventh child of twelve and that [his father had been crushed under a tree when he himself was eight years old. He had been crushed very badly, in fact, almost cut in two and was practically not recognizable.](http://genius.com/2948696/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/His-father-had-been-crushed-under-a-tree-when-he-himself-was-eight-years-old-he-had-been-crushed-very-badly-in-fact-almost-cut-in-two-and-was-practically-not-recognizable) His mother had got along the best she could by hard working and she had always seen that her children went to Sunday School and that they read the Bible every evening. He was now nineteen years old and he had been selling Bibles for four months. In that time he had sold seventy-seven Bibles and had the promise of two more sales. He wanted to become a missionary because he thought that was the way you could do most for people. “He who losest his life shall find it,” he said simply and he was so sincere, so genuine and earnest that Mrs. Hopewell would not for the world have smiled. He prevented his peas from sliding onto the table by blocking them with a piece of bread which he later cleaned his plate with. She could see Joy observing sidewise how he handled his knife and fork and she saw too that every few minutes, the boy would dart a keen appraising glance at the girl as if he were trying to attract her attention.  
  
After dinner Joy cleared the dishes off the table and disappeared and Mrs. Hopewell was left to talk with him. He told her again about his childhood and his father's accident and about various things that had happened to him. Every five minutes or so she would stifle a yawn. He sat for two hours until finally she told him she must go because she had an appointment in town. He packed his Bibles and thanked her and prepared to leave, but in the doorway he stopped and wrung her hand and said that not on any of his trips had he met a lady as nice as her and he asked if he could come again. She had said she would always be happy to see him.  
  
Joy had been standing in the road, apparently looking at something in the distance, when he came down the steps toward her, bent to the side with his heavy valise. He stopped where she was standing and confronted her directly. Mrs. Hopewell could not hear what he said but she trembled to think what Joy would say to him. She could see that after a minute Joy said something and that then the boy began to speak again, making an excited gesture with his free hand. After a minute Joy said something else at which the boy began to speak once more. Then to her amazement, Mrs. Hopewell saw the two of them walk off together, toward the gate. Joy had walked all the way to the gate with him and Mrs. Hopewell could not imagine what they had said to each other, and she had not yet dared to ask.  
  
Mrs. Freeman was insisting upon her attention. She had moved from the refrigerator to the heater so that Mrs. Hopewell had to turn and face her in order to seem to be listening. "Glynese gone out with Harvey Hill again last night," she said. "She had this sty."  
  
"Hill," Mrs. Hopewell said absently, "is that the one who works in the garage?"  
  
"Nome, he's the one that goes to chiropracter school," Mrs. Freeman said. "She had this sty. Been had it two days. So she says when he brought her in the other night he says, 'Lemme get rid of that sty for you,' and she says, 'How?' and he says, 'You just lay yourself down acrost the seat of that car and I'll show you.' So she done it and he popped her neck. Kept on a-popping it several times until she made him quit. This morning," Mrs. Freeman said, "she ain't got no sty. She ain't got no traces of a sty."  
  
"I never heard of that before," Mrs. Hopewell said.  
  
"He ast her to marry him before the Ordinary," Mrs. Freeman went on, "and she told him she wasn't going to be married in no office."  
  
"Well, Glynese is a fine girl," Mrs. Hopewell said. "Glynese and Carramae are both fine girls."  
  
"Carramae said when her and Lyman was married Lyman said it sure felt sacred to him. She said he said he wouldn't take five hundred dollars for being married by a preacher."  
  
"How much would he take?" the girl asked from the Stove.  
  
"He said he wouldn't take five hundred dollars," Mrs. Freeman repeated.  
  
"Well we all have work to do," Mrs. Hopewell said.  
  
"Lyman said it just felt more sacred to him," Mrs. Freeman said "The doctor wants Carramae to eat prunes. Says instead of medicine. Says them cramps is coming from pressure. You know where I think it is?"  
  
"She'll be better in a few weeks," Mrs. Hopewell said.  
  
"In the tube," Mrs. Freeman said "Else she wouldn't be as sick as she is."  
  
Hulga had cracked her two eggs into a saucer and was bringing them to the table along with a cup of coffee that she had filled too full. She sat down carefully and began to eat, meaning to keep Mrs. Freeman there by questions if for any reason she showed an inclination to leave. She could perceive her mother's eye on her. The first round-about question would be about the Bible salesman and she did not wish to bring it on. "How did he pop her neck?" she asked.  
  
Mrs. Freeman went into a description of how he had popped her neck. She said he owned a '55 Mercury but that Glynese said she would rather marry a man with only a '36 Plymouth who would be married by a preacher. The girl asked what if he had a '32 Plymouth and Mrs. Freeman said what Glynese had said was a '36 Plymouth.  
  
Mrs. Hopewell said there were not many girls with Glynese's common sense. She said what she admired in those girls was their common sense. She said that re¬minded her that they had had a nice visitor yesterday, a young man selling Bibles. "Lord," she said, "he bored me to death but he was so sincere and genuine I couldn't be rude to him, He was just good country people, you know," she said,"-just the salt of the earth."  
  
"I seen him walk up," Mrs. Freeman said, "and Lien later - I seen him walk off," and Hulga could feel the slight shift in her voice, the slight insinuation, that he had not walked off alone, had he? Her face remained expressionless but the color rose into her neck and she seemed to swallow it down with the next spoonful of egg. Mrs. Freeman was looking at her as if they had a secret together.  
  
"Well, it takes all kinds of people to make the world go 'round," Mrs, Hopewell said. "It's very good we aren't all alike."  
  
"Some people are more alike than others," Mrs. Freeman said. Hulga got up and stumped, with about: twice the noise that was necessary, into her room and locked the door. She was to meet the Bible salesman at ten o'clock at the gate. She had thought about it half the night. She had started thinking of it as a great joke and then she had begun to see profound implications in it. She had lain in bed imagining dialogues for them that were insane on the surface but that reached below to depths that no Bible salesman would he aware of. Their conversation yesterday had been of this kind.  
  
He had stopped in front of her and had simply stood them His face was bony and sweaty and bright, with a little pointed nose in the center of it, and his look was different from what it had been at the dinner table. He was gazing at her with open curiosity, with fascination, like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo, and he was breathing as if he had run a great distance to reach her. His gaze seemed somehow familiar but she could not think where she had been regarded with it before. For almost a minute be didn't say anything. Then on what seemed an insuck of breath, he whispered, "You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?"  
  
The girl looked at him stonily. He might have just put this question up for consideration at the meeting of a philosophical association. "Yes," she presently replied as if she had considered it from all angles.  
  
"It must have been mighty small!" he said triumphantly and shook all over with little nervous giggles, getting very red in the face, and subsiding finally into his gaze of complete admiration, while the girl's expression remained exactly the same.  
  
"How old are you?" he asked softly.  
  
She waited some time before she answered. Then in a flat voice she said, "Seventeen."  
  
His smiles came in succession like waves breaking on the surface of a little lake. "I see you got a wooden leg," he said. "I think you're real brave. I think you're real sweet."  
  
The girl stood blank and solid and silent.  
  
"Walk to the gate with me," he said. "You're a brave sweet little thing and I liked you the minute I seen you walk in the door."  
  
Hulga began to move forward.  
  
"What's your name?" he asked, smiling down on the top of her head.  
  
"Hulga," she said.  
  
"Hulga," he murmured, "Hulga. Hulga. I never heard of anybody name Hulga before. You're shy, aren't you, Hulga?" he asked.  
  
She nodded, watching his large red hand on the handle of the giant valise.  
  
"I like girls that wear glasses," he said. "I think a lot. I'm not like these people that a serious thought don't ever enter their heads. It's because I may die."  
  
["I may die too," she said suddenly and looked up at him.](http://genius.com/2950055/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/I-may-die-too-she-said-suddenly-and-looked-up-at-him) His eyes were very small and brown, glittering feverishly.  
  
"Listen," he said, "don't you think some people was meant to meet on account of what all they got in common and all? Like they both think serious thoughts and all?" He shifted the valise to his other hand so that the hand nearest her was free. He caught hold of her elbow and shook it a little. "I don't work on Saturday," he said. "I like to walk in the woods and see what Mother Nature is wearing. O'er the hills and far away. Picnics and things. Couldn't we go on a picnic tomorrow? Say yes, Hulga," he said and gave her a dying look as if he felt his insides about to drop out of him. He had even seemed to sway slightly toward her.  
  
During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. [True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind.](http://genius.com/4364225/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/True-genius-can-get-an-idea-across-even-to-an-inferior-mind) [She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.](http://genius.com/4364236/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-imagined-that-she-took-his-remorse-in-hand-and-changed-it-into-a-deeper-understanding-of-life-she-took-all-his-shame-away-and-turned-it-into-something-useful)  
  
She set off for the gate at exactly ten o'clock, escaping without drawing Mrs. Hopewell's attention. She didn't take anything to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic. She wore a pair of slacks and a dirty white shirt, and as an afterthought, she had put some Vapex on the collar of it since she did not own any perfume. When she reached the gate no one was there.  
  
She looked up and down the empty highway and had the furious feeling that she had been tricked, that he only meant to make her walk to the gate after the idea of him. Then suddenly he stood up, very tall, from behind a bush on the opposite embankment. Smiling, he lifted his hat which was new and wide-brimmed. He had not worn it yesterday and she wondered if he had bought it for the occasion. It was toast-colored with a red and white band around it and was slightly too large for him. He stepped from behind the bush still carrying the black valise. He had on the same suit and the same yellow socks sucked down in his shoes from walking. He crossed the highway and said, “I knew you’d come!”  
  
The girl wondered acidly how he had known this. She pointed to the valise and asked, “Why did you bring your Bibles?”  
  
He took her elbow, smiling down on her as if he could not stop. “You can never tell when you’ll need the word of God, Hulga,” he said. She had a moment in which she doubted that this was actually happening and then they began to climb the embankment. They went down into the pasture toward the woods. The boy walked lightly by her side, bouncing on his toes. The valise did not seem to be heavy today; he even swung it. They crossed half the pasture without saying anything and then, putting his hand easily on the small of her back, he asked softly, “Where does your wooden leg join on?”  
  
She turned an ugly red and glared at him and for an instant the boy looked abashed. “I didn’t mean you no harm,” he said. “I only meant you’re so brave and all. I guess God takes care of you.”  
  
“No,” she said, looking forward and walking fast, “I don’t even believe in God.”  
  
At this he stopped and whistled. “No!” he exclaimed as if he were too astonished to say anything else.  
  
She walked on and in a second he was bouncing at her side, fanning with his hat. “That’s very unusual for a girl,” he remarked, watching her out of the corner of his eye. When they reached the edge of the wood, he put his hand on her back again and drew her against him without a word and kissed her heavily.  
  
The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity. She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind’s control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka. When the boy, looking expectant but uncertain, pushed her gently away, she turned and walked on, saying nothing as if such business, for her, were common enough.  
  
He came along panting at her side, trying to help her when he saw a root that she might trip over. He caught and held back the long swaying blades of thorn vine until she had passed beyond them. She led the way and he came breathing heavily behind her. Then they came out on a sunlit hillside, sloping softly into another one a little smaller. Beyond, they could see the rusted top of the old barn where the extra hay was stored.  
  
The hill was sprinkled with small pink weeds. “Then you ain’t saved?” he asked suddenly, stopping.  
  
The girl smiled. It was the first time she had smiled at him at all. “In my economy,” she said, “I’m saved and you are damned but I told you I didn’t believe in God.”  
  
Nothing seemed to destroy the boy’s look of admiration. [He gazed at her now as if the fantastic animal at the zoo had put its paw through the bars and given him a loving poke](http://genius.com/4364246/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/He-gazed-at-her-now-as-if-the-fantastic-animal-at-the-zoo-had-put-its-paw-through-the-bars-and-given-him-a-loving-poke). She thought he looked as if he wanted to kiss her again and she walked on before he had the chance.  
  
“Ain’t there somewheres we can sit down sometime?” he murmured, his voice softening toward the end of the sentence.  
  
“In that barn,” she said.  
  
They made for it rapidly as if it might slide away like a train. It was a large two-story barn, cool and dark inside. The boy pointed up the ladder that led into the loft and said, “It’s too bad we can’t go up there.”  
  
“Why can’t we?” she asked.  
  
“Yer leg,” he said reverently.  
  
The girl gave him a contemptuous look and putting both hands on the ladder, she climbed it while he stood below, apparently awestruck. She pulled herself expertly through the opening and then looked down at him and said, “Well, come on if your coming,” and he began to climb the ladder, awkwardly bringing the suitcase with him.  
  
[“We won’t need the Bible,” she observed.](http://genius.com/3489491/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/We-wont-need-the-bible-she-observed)  
  
“You never can tell,” he said, panting. After he had got into the loft, he was a few seconds catching his breath. She had sat down in a pile of straw. A wide sheath of sunlight, filled with dust particles, slanted over her. She lay back against a bale, her face turned away, looking out the front opening of the barn where hay was thrown from a wagon into the loft. The two pink-speckled hillsides lay back against a dark ridge of woods. [The sky was cloudless](http://genius.com/2949923/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/The-sky-was-cloudless) and cold blue. The boy dropped down by her side and put one arm under her and the other over her and began methodically kissing her face, making little noises like a fish. He did not remove his hat but it was pushed far enough back not to interfere. [When her glasses got in his way, he took them off of her and slipped them into his pocket.](http://genius.com/3489497/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/When-her-glasses-got-in-his-way-he-took-them-off-of-her-and-slipped-them-into-his-pocket)  
  
The girl at first did not return any of the kisses but presently she began to and after she had put several on his cheek, she reached his lips and remained there, kissing him again and again as if she were trying to draw all the breath out of him. His breath was clear and sweet like a child's and the kisses were sticky like a child's. He mumbled about loving her and about knowing when he first seen her that he loved her, but the mumbling was like the sleepy fretting of a child being put to sleep by his mother. Her mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings. "You ain't said you loved me none," he whispered finally, pulling back from her. "You got to say that."  
  
[She looked away from him off into the hollow sky and then down.](http://genius.com/3489512/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-looked-away-from-him-off-into-the-hollow-sky-and-then-down) at a black ridge and then down farther into what appeared to be two green swelling lakes. She didn't realize he had taken her glasses but this landscape could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings.  
  
"You got to say it," he repeated. ["You got to say you love me."](http://genius.com/6256888/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/You-got-to-say-you-love-me)  
  
She was always careful how she committed herself. "In a sense," she began, "if you use the word loosely, you might say that, But it's not a word I use, I don't  
have illusions. [I'm one of those people who see through to nothing."](http://genius.com/5097396/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Im-one-of-those-people-who-see-through-to-nothing)  
  
The boy was frowning. "You got to say it. I said it and you got to say it," he said.  
  
The girl looked at him almost tenderly. "You poor baby," she murmured. "It's just as well you don't understand," and she pulled him by the neck, face-down, against her, "We are all damned.," she said, "but some of us have taken. off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation,"  
  
The boy's astonished eyes looked blankly through the ends of her hair. "Okay," he almost whined, "but do you love me or don'tcher?"  
  
"Yes," she said and added, "in a sense. But I must tell you something. There mustn't be anything dishonest between us." She lifted his head and looked him in the eye. "I am thirty years old," she said.. "I have a number of degrees."  
  
The boy's look was irritated but dogged, "I don't care," he said. "I don't care a thing about what all you done. I just want to know if you love me or don'tcher?" and he caught her to him and wildly planted her face with kisses until she said, "Yes, Yes."  
  
"Okay then," he said, letting her go. "Prove it?'  
  
She smiled, looking dreamily out on the shifty landscape. She had seduced him without even making up her mind to try. "How?" she asked, feeling that he should be delayed a little.  
  
He leaned over and put his lips to her ear. "Show me where your wooden leg joins on," he whispered. The girl uttered a sharp little cry and her face instantly drained of color, The obscenity of the suggestion was not what shocked her. As a child, she had sometimes been been subject to feelings of shame but education had moved the last traces of that: as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer; she would no more have felt it over what he was asking than she would have believed in his Bible. [But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail.](http://genius.com/3489645/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/But-she-was-as-sensitive-about-the-artificial-leg-as-a-peacock-about-his-tail) No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away, "No," she said.  
  
  
"I known it," he mattered, sitting up. "You're just playing me for a sucker."  
  
"Oh. no no she cried, It joins on. at the knee. Only at the knee. Why do you want to see it?"  
  
The boy gave her a long penetrating look. "Because," be said, "it's what makes you different. You ain't like anybody else."  
  
She sat staring at him. There was nothing about her face or her round freezing blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her; but she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. [She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her](http://genius.com/2951950/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-decided-that-for-the-first-time-in-her-life-she-was-face-to-face-with-real-innocence-this-boy-with-an-instinct-that-came-from-beyond-wisdom-had-touched-the-truth-about-her). [When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, "All right," it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.](http://genius.com/3489584/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/When-after-a-minute-she-said-in-a-hoarse-high-voice-all-right-it-was-like-surrendering-to-him-completely-it-was-like-losing-her-own-life-and-finding-it-again-miraculously-in-his)  
  
[Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up. The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump. The boy's face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, "Now show me how to take it off and on."](http://genius.com/3489564/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Very-gently-he-began-to-roll-the-slack-leg-up-the-artificial-limb-in-a-white-sock-and-brown-flat-shoe-was-bound-in-a-heavy-material-like-canvas-and-ended-in-an-ugly-jointure-where-it-was-attached-to-the-stump-the-boys-face-and-his-voice-were-entirely-reverent-as-he-uncovered-it-and-said-now-show-me-how-to-take-it-off-and-on)  
  
She took it off for him and put it back on again and then he took it off himself, handling it as tenderly as if it were a real one. "Seer. he said with a delighted child's face. "Now I can do it myself!"  
  
"Put it back on," she said. [She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again.](http://genius.com/3490703/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/She-was-thinking-that-she-would-run-away-with-him-and-that-every-night-he-would-take-the-leg-off-and-every-morning-put-it-back-on-again) "Put it back on," she said.  
  
"Not yet," he murmured, setting it on its foot out of her reach. ["Leave it off for a while. You got me instead."](http://genius.com/3490799/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Leave-it-off-for-a-while-you-got-me-instead)  
  
She gave a little cry of alarm but he pushed her down and began to kiss her again. Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at. Different expressions raced back and forth over her face. [Every now and then the boy, his eyes like two steel spikes, would glance behind him where the leg stood.](http://genius.com/2951322/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Every-now-and-then-the-boy-his-eyes-like-two-steel-spikes-would-glance-behind-him-where-the-leg-stood) Finally she pushed him off and said, "Put it back on me now."  
  
"Wait," he said. He leaned the other way and pulled the valise toward him and opened it. It had a pale blue spotted lining and there were only two Bibles in it. He took one of these out and opened the cover of it. [It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it.](http://genius.com/3490920/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/It-was-hollow-and-contained-a-pocket-flask-of-whiskey-a-pack-of-cards-and-a-small-blue-box-with-printing-on-it) He laid these out in front of her one at a time in an evenly spaced row, like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess. He put the blue box in her hand. [THIS PRODUCT TO BE USED ONLY FOR THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE, she read, and dropped it.](http://genius.com/2949940/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/This-product-to-be-used-only-for-the-prevention-of-disease-she-read-and-dropped-it) The boy was unscrewing the top of the flask. He stopped and pointed,  
with a smile, to the deck of cards. It was not an ordinary deck but one with an obscene picture on the back of each card. "Take a swig," he said, offering her the bottle first. He held it in front of her, but like one mesmerized, she did not move.  
  
[Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound. "Aren't you," she murmured, "aren't you just good country people?"](http://genius.com/3491090/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Her-voice-when-she-spoke-had-an-almost-pleading-sound-arent-you-she-murmured-arent-you-just-good-country-people)  
  
The boy cocked his head. He looked as if he were just beginning to understand that she might be trying to insult him. ["Yeah," he said, curling his lip slightly, "but it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day in the week."](http://genius.com/4364264/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Yeah-he-said-curling-his-lip-slightly-but-it-aint-held-me-back-none-im-as-good-as-you-any-day-in-the-week)  
  
"Give me my leg," she said. He pushed it farther away with his foot. "Come on now, let's begin to have us a good time," he said coaxingly. "We ain't got to know one another good yet."  
  
"Give me my leg!" she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily.  
  
"What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" he asked, frowning as he screwed the top on the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. "You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing. I thought you was some girl!"  
  
Her face was almost purple. "You're a Christian!" she hissed. "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all—say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're..."  
  
The boy's mouth was set angrily. ["I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!"](http://genius.com/2951929/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/I-hope-you-dont-think-he-said-in-a-lofty-indignant-tone-that-i-believe-in-that-crap-i-may-sell-bibles-but-i-know-which-end-is-up-and-i-wasnt-born-yesterday-and-i-know-where-im-going)  
  
"Give me my leg!" she screeched„ [He jumped up so quickly that she barely saw him sweep the cards and the blue box back into the Bible and throw the Bible into the valise. She saw him grab the leg and then she saw it for an instant slanted forlornly across the inside of the suitcase with a Bible at either side of its opposite ends, He slammed the lid shut and snatched up the valise and swung it down the hole and then stepped through himself. When all of him had passed but his head, he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had any admiration in it. "I've gotten a lot of interesting things," he said. "One time I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long](http://genius.com/2950630/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/He-jumped-up-so-quickly-that-she-barely-saw-him-sweep-the-cards-and-the-blue-box-back-into-the-bible-and-throw-the-bible-into-the-valise-she-saw-him-grab-the-leg-and-then-she-saw-it-for-an-instant-slanted-forlornly-across-the-inside-of-the-suitcase-with-a-bible-at-either-side-of-its-opposite-ends-he-slammed-the-lid-shut-and-snatched-up-the-valise-and-swung-it-down-the-hole-and-then-stepped-through-himself-when-all-of-him-had-passed-but-his-head-he-turned-and-regarded-her-with-a-look-that-no-long). And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga," he said, [using the name as if he didn't think much of it,](http://genius.com/2951512/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Using-the-name-as-if-he-didnt-think-much-of-it) "you ain't so smart, [I been believing in nothing ever since I was born](http://genius.com/2949883/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/I-been-believing-in-nothing-ever-since-i-was-born) r and then the toast-co/ored hat disappeared down the hie and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.  
  
[Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who were in the back pasture, digging up onions, saw him emerge a little later from the woods and head across the meadow toward the highway. “Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday," Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He must have been selling them to the Negroes back in there. He was so simple," she said, "but guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple."  
  
Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground.](http://genius.com/3489493/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Mrs-hopewell-and-mrs-freeman-who-were-in-the-back-pasture-digging-up-onions-saw-him-emerge-a-little-later-from-the-woods-and-head-across-the-meadow-toward-the-highway-why-that-looks-like-that-nice-dull-young-man-that-tried-to-sell-me-a-bible-yesterday-mrs-hopewell-said-squinting-he-must-have-been-selling-them-to-the-negroes-back-in-there-he-was-so-simple-she-said-but-guess-the-world-would-be-better-off-if-we-were-all-that-simple-mrs-freemans-gaze-drove-forward-and-just-touched-him-before-he-disa) ["Some can't be that simple," she said. "I know I never could."](http://genius.com/3491284/Flannery-oconnor-good-country-people/Some-cant-be-that-simple-she-said-i-know-i-never-could)

J. D. Salinger

A Perfect Day for Bananafish

There were ninety-seven New York advertising men in the hotel, and, the way they were monopolizing the long-distance lines, the girl in 507 had to wait from noon till almost two-thirty to get her call through. She used the time, though. She read an article in a women’s pocket-size magazine, called "Sex Is Fun - or Hell." She washed her comb and brush. She took the spot out of the skirt of her beige suit. She moved the button on her Saks blouse. She tweezed out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole. When the operator finally rang her room, she was sitting on the window seat and had almost finished putting lacquer on the nails of her left hand.

She was a girl who for a ringing phone dropped exactly nothing. She looked as if her phone had been ringing continually ever since she had reached puberty.

With her little lacquer brush, while the phone was ringing, she went over the nail of her little finger, accentuating the line of the moon. She then replaced the cap on the bottle of lacquer and, standing up, passed her left—the wet—hand back and forth through the air. With her dry hand, she picked up a congested ashtray from the window seat and carried it with her over to the night table, on which the phone stood. She sat down on one of the made-up twin beds and—it was the fifth or sixth ring—picked up the phone.

"Hello," she said, keeping the fingers of her left hand outstretched and away from her white silk dressing gown, which was all that she was wearing, except mules—her rings were in the bathroom.

"I have your call to New York now, Mrs. Glass," the operator said.

"Thank you," said the girl, and made room on the night table for the ashtray.

A woman’s voice came through. "Muriel? Is that you?"

The girl turned the receiver slightly away from her ear. "Yes, Mother. How are you?" she said.

"I’ve been worried to death about you. Why haven’t you phoned? Are you all right?"

"I tried to get you last night and the night before. The phone here’s been—."

"Are you all right, Muriel?"

The girl increased the angle between the receiver and her ear. "I’m fine. I’m hot. This is the hottest day they’ve had in Florida in --."

"Why haven’t you called me? I’ve been worried to - -."

"Mother, darling, don’t yell at me. I can hear you beautifully," said the girl. I called you twice last night. Once just after - -."

I told your father you’d probably call last night. But, no, he had to – Are you all right Muriel? Tell me the truth."

"I’m fine. Stop asking me that, please."

"When did you get there?"

"I don’t know. Wednesday morning, early."

"Who drove?"

"He did," said the girl. "And don’t get excited. He drove very nicely. I was amazed."

"He drove? Muriel, you gave me your word of-."

" Mother," the girl interrupted, "I just told you. He drove very nicely. Under fifty the whole way, as a matter of fact."

"Did he try any of that funny business with the trees?"

"I said he drove very nicely, Mother. Now, please. I asked him to stay close to the white line, and all, and he knew what I meant, and he did. He was even trying not to look at the trees - you could tell. Did Daddy get the car fixed, incidentally?

"Not yet. They want four hundred dollars, just to--."

"Mother, Seymour told Daddy that he’d pay for it. There’s no reason for --."

"Well, well see. How did he behave—in the car and all?"

"All right," said the girl.

"Did he keep calling you that awful--."

"No. He has something new now."

"What?"

"Oh, what’s the difference, Mother?

"Muriel, I want to know. Your father--."

"All right, all right. He calls me Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," the girl said, and giggled.

"It isn’t funny, Muriel. It isn’t funny at all. It’s horrible. It’s sad, actually. When I think how--"

"Mother," the girl interrupted, "listen to me. You remember that book he sent me from Germany? You know, those German poems. What’d I do with it? I’ve been racking my-."

"You have it."

‘Are you sure?" said the girl.

"Certainly. That is, I have it. It’s in Freddy’s room. You left it here and I didn’t have room for it in the—Why? Does he want it?"

"No. Only, he asked me about it, when we were driving down. He wanted to know if I’d read it."

"It was in German!"

"Yes, dear. That doesn’t make any difference," said the girl, crossing her legs. "He said that the poems happen to be written by the only great poet of the century. He said I should’ve bought a translation or something. Or learned the language, if you please."

"Awful. Awful. It’s sad, actually, is what it is. Your father said last night—."

"Just a second, Mother," the girl said. She went over to the window seat for her cigarettes, lit one, and returned to her seat on the bed. "Mother", she said, exhaling smoke.

"Muriel. Now, listen to me."

"I’m listening."

"Your father talked to Dr. Sivetski."

"Oh?" said the girl.

"He told him everything. At least, he said he did—you know your father. The trees. That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda—everything."

"Well?" said the girl.

"Well. In the first place, he said it was a perfect crime the Army released him from the hospital – my word of honor. He very definitely told your father there’s a chance – a very great chance, he said, that Seymour may completely lose control of himself. My word of honor."

"There’s a psychiatrist here at the hotel," said the girl.

"Who? What’s his name?"

"I don’t know. Rieser or something. He’s supposed to be very good."

"Never heard of him."

‘Well, he’s supposed to be very good, anyway."

"Muriel, don’t be fresh, please. We’re very worried about you. Your father wanted to wire you last night to come home, as a matter of f—."

"I’m not coming home right now, Mother. So relax."

"Muriel. My word of honor. Dr. Sivetski said Seymour may completely lose contr—."

‘I just got here, Mother. This is the first vacation I’ve had in years, and I’m not going to just pack everything and come home," said the girl. "I couldn’t travel now anyway. I’m so sunburned I can hardly move."

"You’re badly sunburned? Didn’t you use that far of Bronze I put in your bag? I put it right—."

"I used it. I’m burned anyway."

"That’s terrible. Where are you burned?"

"All over, dear, all over."

"That’s terrible."

"I’ll live."

"Tell me, did you talk to this psychiatrist?’

"Well, sort of," said the girl.

"What’d he say? Where was Seymour when you talked to him?"

"In the Ocean Room, playing the piano. He’s played the piano both nights we’ve been here."

"Well, what’d he say?"

"Oh. Nothing much. He spoke to me first. I was sitting next to him at Bingo last night, and he asked me if that wasn’t my husband playing the piano in the other room. I said yes, it was, and he asked me if Seymour’s been sick or something. So I said –."

"Why’d he ask that?"

"I don’t know, Mother. I guess because he’s so pale and all," said the girl. "Anyway, after Bingo he and his wife asked me if I wouldn’t like to join them for a drink. So I did. His wife was horrible. You remember that awful dinner dress we saw in Bonwit’s window? The one you said you’d have to have a tiny, tiny—."

"The green?"

"She had it on. And all hips. She kept asking me if Seymour’s related to that Suzanne Glass that has that place on Madison Avenue - the millinery."

"What’d he say, though? The doctor."

"Oh. Well, nothing much, really. I mean we were in the bar and all. It was terribly noisy."

"Yes, but did - did you tell him what he tried to do with Granny’s chair?"

"No, Mother. I didn’t go into details very much," said the girl. "I’II probably get a chance to talk to him again. He’s in the bar all day long."

"Did he say he thought there was a chance he might get - you know - funny or anything? Do something to you!"

"Not exactly," said the girl. "He had to have more facts, Mother. They have to know about your childhood - all that stuff. I told you, we could hardly talk, it was so noisy in there."

"Well. How’s your blue coat?"

"All right. I had some of the padding taken out."

"How are the clothes this year?"

"Terrible. But out of this world. You see sequins – everything," said the girl.

"How’s your room?"

"All right. Just all right, though. We couldn’t get the room we had before the war,"’ said the girl. "The people are awful this year. You should see what sits next to us in the dining room. At the next table. They look as if they drove down in a truck."

‘Well, it’s that way all over. How’s your ballerina?"

"It’s too long. I told you it was too long."

"Muriel, I’m only going to ask you once more - are you really all right?"

"Yes, Mother," said the girl. "For the ninetieth time."

"And you don’t want to come home?"

"No, Mother."

"Your father said last night that he’d be more than willing to pay for it if you’d go away some place by yourself and think things over. You could take a lovely cruise. We both thought –."

"No, thanks," said the girl, and uncrossed her legs. "Mother, this call is costing a for-"

"When I think of how you waited for that boy all through the war - I mean when you think of all those crazy little wives who—."

"Mother," said the girl, "we’d better hang up. Seymour may come in any minute."

"Where is he?"

"On the beach."

"On the beach? By himself? Does he behave himself on the beach?"

"Mother," said the girl, "you talk about him as though he were a raving maniac - "

"I said nothing of the kind, Muriel."

"Well, you sound that way. I mean all he does is lie there. He won’t take his bathrobe off."

"He won’t take his bathrobe off? Why not?"

"I don’t know. I guess because he’s so pale."

"My goodness, he needs the sun. Can’t you make him?"

"You know Seymour," said the girl, and crossed her legs again. "He says he doesn’t want a lot of fools looking at his tattoo."

"He doesn’t have any tatoo! Did he get one in the Army?"

"No, Mother. No, dear," said the girl, and stood up. "Listen, I’ll call you tomorrow, maybe."

"Muriel. Now, listen to me."

"Yes, Mother," said the girl, putting her weight on her right leg.

"Call me the instant he does, or says, anything at all funny – you know what I mean. Do you hear me?"

"Mother, I’m not afraid of Seymour."

"Muriel, I want you to promise me."

"All right, I promise. Goodbye, Mother," said the girl. "My love to Daddy." She hung up.

"See more glass," said Sybil Carpenter, who was staying at the hotel with her mother. "Did you see more glass?"

"Pussycat, stop saying that. It’s driving Mommy absolutely crazy. Hold still, please."

Mrs. Carpenter was putting sun-tan oil on Sybil’s shoulders, spreading it down over the delicate, wing-like blades of her back. Sybil was sitting insecurely on a huge, inflated beach ball, facing the ocean. She was wearing a canary-yellow two-piece bathing suit, one piece of which she would not actually be needing for another nine or ten years.

"It was really just an ordinary silk handkerchief -you could see when you got up close," said the woman in the beach chair beside Mrs. Carpenter’s "I wish I knew how she tied it. It was really darling."

"It sounds darling," Mrs. Carpenter agreed. "Sybil, hold still, pussy."

"Did you see more glass?" said Sybil.

Mrs. Carpenter sighed. "All right," she said. She replaced the cap on the sun-tan oil bottle. "Now run and play, pussy. Mommy’s going up to the hotel and have a Martini with Mrs. Hubbel. I’ll bring you the olive."

Set loose, Sybil immediately ran down to the flat part of the beach and began to walk in the direction of Fisherman’s Pavilion. Stopping only to sink a foot in a soggy, collapsed castle, she was soon out of the area reserved for guests of the hotel.

She walked for about a quarter of a mile and then suddenly broke into an oblique run up the soft part of the beach. She stopped short when she reached the place where a young man was lying on his back.

"Are you going in the water, see more glass?" she said.

The young man started, his right hand going to the lapels of his terry-cloth robe. He turned over on his stomach, letting a sausaged towel fall away from his eyes, and squinted up at Sybil.

"Hey. Hello, Sybil."

"Are you going in the water?’

"I was waiting for you," said the young man. "What’s new?"

"What?" said Sybil.

"What’s new? What’s on the program?"

"My daddy’s coming tomorrow on a airplane," Sybil said, kicking sand.

"Not in my face, baby," the young man said, putting his hand on Sybil’s ankle. "Well, it’s about time he got here, your daddy. I’ve been expecting him hourly. Hourly."

"Where’s the lady?" Sybil said.

"The lady?" The young man brushed some sand out of his thin hair. "That’s hard to say, Sybil. She may be in any one of a thousand places. At the hairdresser’s. Having her hair dyed mink. Or making dolls for poor children, in her room." Lying prone now, he made two fists, set one on top of the other, and rested his chin on the top one. "Ask me something else, Sybil," he said. "That’s a fine bathing suit you have on. If there’s one thing I like, it’s a blue bathing suit."

Sybil stared at him, then looked down at her protruding stomach. "This is a yellow," she said. "This is a yellow."

"It is? Come a little closer."

Sybil took a step forward.

"You’re absolutely right. What a fool I am."

"Are you going in the water?" Sybil said.

"I’m seriously considering it. I’m giving it plenty of thought, Sybil, you’ll be glad to know."

Sybil prodded the rubber float that the young man sometimes used as a head-rest. "It needs air," she said.

"You’re right. It needs more air than I’m willing to admit." He took away his fists and let his chin rest on the sand. "Sybil," he said, "you’re looking fine. It’s good to see you. Tell me about yourself." He reached in front of him and took both of Sybil’s ankles in his hands. "I’m Capricorn," he said. "What are you?"

"Sharon Lipschutz said you let her sit on the piano seat with you," Sybil said.

"Sharon Lipschutz said that?"

Sybil nodded vigorously.

He let go of her ankles, drew in his hands, and laid the side of his face on his right forearm. "Well," he said, "you know how those things happen, Sybil. I was sitting there, playing. And you were nowhere in sight. And Sharon Lipschutz came over and sat down next to me. I couldn’t push her off, could I?"

"Yes."

"Oh, no. No. I couldn’t do that," said the young man. I’II tell you what I did do, though."

"What?"

"I pretended she was you."

Sybil immediately stooped and began to dig in the sand. "Let’s go in the water," she said.

"All right," said the young man. "I think I can work it in."

"Next time, push her off," Sybil said.

"Push who off?"

"Sharon Lipschutz."

"Ah, Sharon Lipschutz," said the young man. "How that name comes up. Mixing memory and desire." He suddenly got to his feet. He looked at the ocean. "Sybil," he said, "I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Well see if we can catch a bananafish."

"A what?"

"A bananafish," he said, and undid the belt of his robe. He took off the robe. His shoulders were white and narrow, and his trunks were royal blue. He folded the robe, first lengthwise, then in thirds. He unrolled the towel he had used over his eyes, spread it out on the sand, and then laid the folded robe on top of it. He bent over, picked up the float, and secured it under his right arm. Then, with his left hand, he took Sybil’s hand.

The two started to walk down to the ocean.

"I imagine you’ve seen quite a few bananafish in your day," the young man said.

Sybil shook her head.

"You haven’t? Where do you live, anyway?"

"I don’t know," said Sybil.

"Sure you know. You must know. Sharon Lipschutz knows where she lives and she’s only three and a half."

Sybil stopped walking and yanked her hand away from him. She picked up an ordinary beach shell and looked at it with elaborate interest. She threw it down. "Whirly Wood, Connecticut," she said, and resumed walking, stomach foremost.

"Whirly Wood, Connecticut," said the young man. "Is that anywhere near Whirly Wood, Connecticut, by any chance?"

Sybil looked at him. "That’s where I live," she said impatiently. "I live in Whirly Wood, Connecticut." She ran a few steps ahead of him, caught up her left foot in her left hand, and hopped two or three times.

"You have no idea how clear that makes everything," the young man said.

Sybil released her foot. "Did you read ‘Little Black Sambo’?" she said.

"It’s very funny you ask me that," he said. ‘It so happens I just finished reading it last night." He reached down and took back Sybil’s hand. "What did you think of it?" he asked her.

"Did the tigers run all around that tree?"

"I thought they’d never stop. I never saw so many tigers."

"There were only six," Sybil said.

"Only six!" said the young man. "Do you call that only?"

"Do you like wax?" Sybil asked.

"Do I like what?" asked the young man.

"Wax."

"Very much. Don’t you?"

Sybil nodded. "Do you like olives?" she asked.

"Olives - yes. Olives and wax. I never go anyplace without ‘em."

"Do you like Sharon Lipschutz?" Sybil asked.

"Yes. Yes, I do," said the young man. "What I like particularly about her is that she never does anything mean to little dogs in the lobby of the hotel. That little toy bull that belongs to that lady from Canada, for instance. You probably won’t believe this, but some little girls like to poke that little dog with balloon sticks. Sharon doesn’t. She’s never mean or unkind. That’s why I like her so much."

Sybil was silent.

"I like to chew candles," she said finally.

"Who doesn’t?" said the young man, getting his feet wet. "Wow! It’s cold." He dropped the rubber float on its back. "No, wait just a second, Sybil. Wait’ll we get out a little bit."

They waded out till the water was up to Sybil’s waist. Then the young man picked her up and laid her down on her stomach on the float.

"Don’t you ever wear a bathing cap or anything?" he asked.

"Don’t let go," Sybil ordered. "You hold me, now."

"Miss Carpenter. Please. I know my business," the young man said. "You just keep your eyes open for any bananafish. This is a perfect day for bananafish."

I don’t see any," Sybil said.

"That’s understandable. Their habits are very peculiar. Very peculiar." He kept pushing the float. The water was not quite up to his chest.

"They lead a very tragic life," he said. "You know what they do, Sybil?"

She shook her head.

"Well, they swim into a hole where there’s a lot of bananas. They’re very ordinary-looking fish when they swim in. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I’ve known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas." He edged the float and its passenger a foot closer to the horizon. "Naturally, after that they’re so fat they can’t get out of the hole again. Can’t fit through the door."

"Not too far out," Sybil said, "What happens to them?"

"What happens to who?"

"The bananafish."

"Oh, you mean after they eat so many bananas they can’t get out of the banana hole?"

"Yes," said Sybil.

"Well, I hate to tell you, Sybil. They die."

"Why?" asked Sybil.

"Well, they get banana fever. It’s a terrible disease."

"Here comes a wave," Sybil said nervously.

"We’ll ignore it. Well snub it," said the young man. "Two snobs." He took Sybil’s ankles in his hands and pressed down and forward. The float nosed over the top of the wave. The water soaked Sybil’s blond hair, but her scream was full of pleasure.

With her hand, when the float was level again, she wiped away a flat, wet band of hair from her eyes, and reported, "I just saw one."

"Saw what, my love?"

"A bananafish."

"My God, no!" said the young man. "Did he have any bananas in his mouth?"

"Yes," said Sybil. "Six."

The young man suddenly picked up one of Sybil’s wet feet, which were drooping over the end of the float, and kissed the arch.

"Hey!" said the owner of the foot, turning around.

‘Hey, yourself! We’re going in now. You had enough?"

"No!"

"Sorry," he said, and pushed the float toward the shore until Sybil got off it. He carried it the rest of the way.

"Goodbye," said Sybil, and ran without regret in the direction of the hotel.

The young man put on his robe, closed the lapels tight, and jammed his towel into his pocket. He picked up the slimy, wet, cumbersome float and put it under his arm. He plodded alone through the soft, hot sand toward the hotel.

On the sub-main floor of the hotel, which the management directed bathers to use, a woman with zinc salve on her nose got into the elevator with the young man.

"I see you are looking at my feet," he said to her when the car was in motion.

"I beg your pardon?" said the woman.

"I said I see you’re looking at my feet."

"I beg your pardon. I happened to be looking at the floor," said the woman, and faced the doors of the car.

"If you want to look at my feet, say so," said the young man. "But don’t be a God-damned sneak about it."

"Let me out here, please," the woman said quickly to the girl operating the car.

The car doors opened and the woman got out without looking back.

"I have two normal feet and I can’t see the slightest God-damned reason why anybody should stare at them," said the young man. "Five, please." He took his room key out of his robe pocket.

He got off at the fifth floor, walked down the hall, and let himself into 507. The room smelled of new calfskin luggage and nail-lacquer remover.

He glanced at the girl lying asleep on one of the twin beds. Then he went over to one of the pieces of luggage, opened it, and from under a pile of shorts and undershirts he took out an Ortgies calibre 7.65 automatic. He released the magazine, looked at it, then reinserted it. He cocked the piece. Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple.

John Updike

A&P

In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I'm in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I don't see them until they're over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I knowit made her day to trip me up. She'd been watching cash registers forty years and probably never seen a mistake before.

By the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag -- she gives me alittle snort in passing, if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem -- by the time I get her on her way the girls had circled around the bread and were coming back, without a pushcart, back my way along the counters, in the aisle between the check-outs and the Special bins. They didn't even have shoes on. There was this chunky one, with the two-piece -- it was bright green and the seams on the bra were still sharp and her belly was still pretty pale so I guessed she just got it (the suit) -- there was this one, with one of those chubby berry-faces, the lips all bunched together under her nose, this one, and a tall one, with black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right, and one of these sunburns right across under the eyes, and a chin that was too long -- you know, the kind of girl other girls think is very "striking" and "attractive" but never quite makes it, as they very well know, which is why they like her so much -- and then the third one, that wasn't quite so tall. She was the queen. She kind of led them, the other two peeking around and making their shoulders round. She didn't look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white prima donna legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn't walk in her bare feet that much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little deliberate extra action into it. You never know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glassjar?) but you got the idea she had talked the other two into coming in here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

She had on a kind of dirty-pink - - beige maybe, I don't know -- bathing suit with a little nubble all over it and, what got me, the straps were down. They were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tops of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shining rim. If it hadn't been there you wouldn't have known there could have been anything whiter than those shoulders. With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just her, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty.

She had sort of oaky hair that the sun and salt had bleached, done up in a bun that was unravelling, and a kind of prim face. Walking into the A & P with your straps down, I suppose it's the only kind of face you can have. She held her head so high her neck, coming up out o fthose white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was.

She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip. Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, and stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron, and buzzed to the other two, who kind of huddled against her for relief, and they all three of them went up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-ri ce-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft drinks- rackers-and- cookies aisle. From the third slot I look straight up this aisle to the meat counter, and I watched them all the way. The fat one with the tan sort of fumbled with the cookies, but on second thought she put the packages back. The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle -- the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything) -- were pretty hilarious. You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering "Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!" or whatever it is they do mutter. But there was no doubt, this jiggled them. A few house-slaves in pin curlers even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct.

You know, it's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A & P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor.

"Oh Daddy," Stokesie said beside me. "I feel so faint."

"Darling," I said. "Hold me tight." Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

"Is it done?" he asks, the responsible married man finding his voice. I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it's called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something.

What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, and the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less. As I say, we're right in the middle of town, and if you stand at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices and about twenty-seven old free-loaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of Boston and there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years.

The girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something. He pointed, they pointed, and they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints. Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it.

Now here comes the sad part of the story, at:least my family says it's sad but I don't think it's sad myself. The store's pretty empty, it being Thursday afternoon, so there was nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again. The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of. After a while they come around out of the far aisle, around the light bulbs, records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk you wonder they waste the wax on, sixpacks of candy bars, and plastic toys done up in cellophane that faIl apart when a kid looks at them anyway. Around they come, Queenie still leading the way, and holding a little gray jar in her hand. Slots Three through Seven are unmanned and I could see her wondering between Stokes and me, but Stokesie with his usual luck draws an old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice (what do these bums do with all that pineapple juice' I've often asked myself) so the girls come to me. Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 49¢. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as God made them, and I wonder where the money's coming from. Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top. The jar went heavy in my hand. Really, I thought that was so cute.

Then everybody's luck begins to run out. Lengel comes in from haggling with a truck full of cabbages on the lot and is about to scuttle into that door marked MANAGER behind which he hides all day when the girls touch his eye. Lengel's pretty dreary, teaches Sunday school and the rest, but he doesn't miss that much. He comes over and says, "Girls, this isn't the beach."

Queenie blushes, though maybe it's just a brush of sunburn I was noticing for the first time, now that she was so close. "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do when you see the people first, coming out so flat and dumb yet kind of tony, too, the way it ticked over "pick up" and "snacks." All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. Her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them. When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with "They'll Do It Every Time" cartoons stencilled on.

"That's all right," Lengel said. "But this isn't the beach." His repeating this struck me as funny, as if it hadjust occurred to him, and he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a great big dune and he was the head lifeguard. He didn't like my smiling -- -as I say he doesn't miss much -- but he concentrates on giving the girls that sad Sunday- school-superintendent stare.

Queenie's blush is no sunburn now, and the plump one in plaid, that I liked better from the back -- a really sweet can -- pipes up, "We weren't doing any shopping. We just came in for the one thing."

"That makes no difference," Lengel tells her, and I could see from the way his eyes went that he hadn't noticed she was wearing a two-piece before. "We want you decently dressed when you come in here."

"We are decent," Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing, getting sore now that she remembers her place, a place from which the crowd that runs the A & P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring Snacks flashed in her very blue eyes.

"Girls, I don't want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy." He turns his back. That's policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want is juvenile delinquency.

All this while, the customers had been showing up with their carts but, you know, sheep, seeing a scene, they had all bunched up on Stokesie, who shook open a paper bag as gently as peeling a peach, not wanting to miss a word. I could feel in the silence everybody getting nervous, most of all Lengel, who asks me, "Sammy, have you rung up this purchase?"

I thought and said "No" but it wasn't about that I was thinking. I go through the punches, 4, 9, GROC, TOT -- it's more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it begins to make a lttle song, that you hear words to, in my case "Hello (bing) there, you (gung) hap-py pee-pul (splat)"-the splat being the drawer flying out. I uncrease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known were there, and pass a half and a penny into her narrow pink palm, and nestle the herrings in a bag and twist its neck and hand it over, all the time thinking.

The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I say "I quit" to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero. They keep right on going, into the electric eye; the door flies open and they flicker across the lot to their car, Queenie and Plaid and Big Tall Goony-Goony (not that as raw material she was so bad), leaving me with Lengel and a kink in his eyebrow.

"Did you say something, Sammy?"

"I said I quit."

"I thought you did."

"You didn't have to embarrass them."

"It was they who were embarrassing us."

I started to say something that came out "Fiddle-de-doo." It's a saying of my grand- mother's, and I know she would have been pleased.

"I don't think you know what you're saying," Lengel said.

"I know you don't," I said. "But I do." I pull the bow at the back of my apron and start shrugging it off my shoulders. A couple customers that had been heading for my slot begin to knock against each other, like scared pigs in a chute.

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a friend of my parents for years. "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad," he tells me. It's true, I don't. But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it. I fold the apron, "Sammy" stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is theirs, if you've ever wondered. "You'll feel this for the rest of your life," Lengel says, and I know that's true, too, but remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs "pee-pul" and the drawer splats out. One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there's no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes, I just saunter into the electric eye in my white shirt that my mother ironed the night before, and the door heaves itself open, and outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt.

I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'djust had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.

Pigeon Feathers

WHEN THEY MOVED TO FIRETOWN, things were upset, displaced, rearranged. A red cane-back sofa that had been the chief piece in the living room at Olinger was here banished, too big for the narrow country parlor, to the barn, and shrouded under a tarpaulin. Never again would David lie on its length all afternoon eating raisins and reading mystery novels and science fiction and P. G. Wodehouse. The blue wing chair that had stood for years in the ghostly, immaculate guest bedroom, gazing through the windows curtained with dotted swiss toward the telephone wires and horsechestnut trees and opposite houses, was here established importantly in front of the smutty little fireplace that supplied, in those first cold April days, their only heat. As a child, David had been afraid of the guest bedroom--it was there that he, lying sick with the measles, had seen a black rod the size of a yardstick jog along at a slight slant beside the edge of the bed and vanish when he screamed--and it was disquieting to have one of the elements of its haunted atmosphere basking by the fire, in the center of the family, growing sooty with use. The books that at home had gathered dust in the case beside the piano were here hastily stacked, all out of order, in the shelves that the carpenters had built along one wall below the deep-silled windows. David, at fourteen, had been more moved than a mover; like the furniture, he had to find a new place, and on the Saturday of the second week he tried to work off some of his disorientation by arranging the books.

It was a collection obscurely depressing to him, mostly books his mother had acquired when she was young: college anthologies of Greek plays and Romantic poetry, Will Durant Story of Philosophy, a soft-leather set of Shakespeare with string bookmarks sewed to the bindings, Green Mansions boxed and illustrated with woodcuts, 1, the Tiger, by Manuel Komroff , novels by names like Galsworthy and Ellen Glasgow and Irvin S. Cobb and Sinclair Lewis and "Elizabeth." The odor of faded taste made him feel the ominous gap between himself and his parents, the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born. Suddenly he was tempted to dip into this time. From the heaps of books piled around him on the worn old floorboards, he picked up Volume II of a fourvolume set of The Outline of History, by H. G. Wells . Once David had read The Time Machine in an anthology; this gave him a small grip on the author. The book's red binding had faded to orange-pink on the spine. When he lifted the cover, there was a sweetish, attic-like smell, and his mother's maiden name written in unfamiliar handwriting on the flyleaf--an upright, bold, yet careful signature, bearing a faint relation to the quick scrunched backslant that flowed with marvellous consistency across her shopping lists and budget accounts and Christmas cards to college friends from this same, vaguely menacing long ago.

He leafed through, pausing at drawings, done in an old-fashioned stippled style, of bas-reliefs, masks, Romans without pupils in their eyes, articles of ancient costume, fragments of pottery found in unearthed homes. He knew it would be interesting in a magazine, sandwiched between ads and jokes, but in this undiluted form history was somehow sour. The print was determinedly legible, and smug, like a lesson book. As he bent over the pages, yellow at the edges, they seemed rectangles of dusty glass through which he looked down into unreal and irrelevant worlds. He could see things sluggishly move, and an unpleasant fullness came into his throat. His mother and grandmother fussed in the kitchen; the puppy, which they had just acquired, for "protection in the country," was cowering, with a sporadic panicked scrabble of claws, under the dining table that in their old home had been reserved for special days but that here was used for every meal.

Then, before he could halt his eyes, David slipped into Wells's account of Jesus. He had been an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo, in a minor colony of the Roman Empire. By an accident impossible to reconstruct, he (the small h horrified David) survived his own crucifixion and presumably died a few weeks later. A religion was founded on the freakish incident. The credulous imagination of the times retrospectively assigned miracles and supernatural pretensions to Jesus; a myth grew, and then a church, whose theology at most points was in direct contradiction of the simple, rather communistic teachings of the Galilean.

It was as if a stone that for weeks and even years had been gathering weight in the web of David's nerves snapped them and plunged through the page and a hundred layers of paper underneath. These fantastic falsehoods--plainly untrue; churches stood everywhere, the entire nation was founded "under God"--did not at first frighten him; it was the fact that they had been permitted to exist in an actual human brain. This was the initial impact--that at a definite spot in time and space a brain black with the denial of Christ's divinity had been suffered to exist; that the universe had not spit out this ball of tar but allowed it to continue in its blasphemy, to grow old, win honors, wear a hat, write books that, if true, collapsed everything into a jumble of horror. The world outside the deep-silled windows--a rutted lawn, a whitewashed barn, a walnut tree frothy with fresh green--seemed a haven from which he was forever scaled off. Hot washrags seemed pressed against his checks.

He read the account again. He tried to supply out of his ignorance objections that would defeat the complacent march of these black words, and found none. Survivals and misunderstandings more farfetched were reported daily in the papers. But none of them caused churches to be built in every town. He tried to work backwards through the churches, from their brave high fronts through their shabby, illattended interiors back into the events at Jerusalem, and felt himself surrounded by shifting gray shadows, centuries of history, where he knew nothing. The thread dissolved in his hands. Had Christ ever come to him, David Kern, and said, "Here. Feel the wound in My side"? No; but prayers had been answered. What prayers? He had prayed that Rudy Mohn, whom he had purposely tripped so he cracked his head on their radiator, not die, and he had not died. But for all the blood, it was just a cut; Rudy came back the same day, wearing a bandage and repeating the same teasing words. He could never have died. Again, David had prayed for two separate war-effort posters he had sent away for to arrive tomorrow, and though they did not, they did arrive, some days later, together, popping through the clacking letter slot like a rebuke from God's mouth: I answer your prayers in My way, in My time. After that, he had made his prayers less definite, less susceptible of being twisted into a scolding. But what a tiny, ridiculous coincidence this was, after all, to throw into battle against H. G. Wells's engines of knowledge! Indeed, it proved the enemy's point: Hope bases vast premises on foolish accidents, and reads a word where in fact only a scribble exists.

His father came home. Though Saturday was a free day for him, he had been working. He taught school in Olinger and spent all his days performing, with a curious air of panic, needless errands. Also, a city boy by birth, he was frightened of the farm and seized any excuse to get away. The farm had been David's mother's birthplace; it had been her idea to buy it back. With an ingenuity and persistence unparalleled in her life, she had gained that end, and moved them all here--her son, her husband, her mother. Granmom, in her prime, had worked these fields alongside her husband, but now she dabbled around the kitchen futilely, her hands waggling with Parkinson's disease. She was always in the way. Strange, out in the country, amid eighty acres, they were crowded together. His father expressed his feelings of discomfort by conducting with Mother an endless argument about organic farming. All through dusk, all through supper, it rattled on.

" Elsie, I know, I know from my education, the earth is nothing but chemicals. It's the only damn thing I got out of four years of college, so don't tell me it's not true."

" George, if you'd just walk out on the farm you'd know it's not true. The land has a soul."

"Soil, has, no, soul," he said, enunciating stiffly, as if to a very stupid class. To David he said, "You can't argue with a femme. Your mother's a real femme. That's why I married her, and now I'm suffering for it."

"This soil has no soul," she said, "because it's been killed with superphosphate. It's been burned bare by Boyer's tenant farmers." Boyer was the rich man they had bought the farm from. "It used to have a soul, didn't it, Mother? When you and Pop farmed it?"

"Ach, yes; I guess." Granmom was trying to bring a forkful of food to her mouth with her less severely afflicted hand. In her anxiety she brought the other hand up from her lap. The crippled fingers, dull red in the orange light of the kerosene lamp in the center of the table, were welded by paralysis into one knobbed hook.

"Only human indi-vidu-als have souls," his father went on, in the same mincing, lifeless voice. "Because the Bible tells us so." Done eating, he crossed his legs and dug into his ear with a match miserably; to get at the thing inside his head he tucked in his chin, and his voice came out low-pitched at David. "When God made your mother, He made a real femme."

" George, don't you read the papers? Don't you know that between the chemical fertilizers and the bug sprays we'll all be dead in ten years? Heart attacks are killing every man in the country over forty-five."

He sighed wearily; the yellow skin of his eyelids wrinkled as he hurt himself with the match. "There's no connection," he stated, spacing his words with pained patience, "between the heart - and chemical fertilizers. It's alcohol that's doing it. Alcohol and milk. There is too much - cholesterol - in the tissues of the American heart. Don't tell me about chemistry, Elsie; I majored in the damn stuff for four years."

"Yes and I majored in Greek and I'm not a penny wiser. Mother, put your waggler away!" The old woman started, and the food dropped from her fork. For some reason, the sight of her bad hand at the table cruelly irritated her daughter. Granmom's eyes, worn bits of crazed crystal embedded in watery milk, widened behind her cockeyed spectacles. Circles of silver as fine as thread, they clung to the red notches they had carved over the years into her little white beak. In the orange flicker of the kerosene lamp her dazed misery seemed infernal. David's mother began, without noise, to cry. His father did not seem to have eyes at all; just jaundiced sockets of wrinkled skin. The steam of food clouded the scene. It was horrible but the horror was particular and familiar, and distracted David from the formless dread that worked, sticky and sore, within him, like a too large wound trying to heal.

He had to go to the bathroom, and took a flashlight down through the wet grass to the outhouse. For once, his fear of spiders there felt trivial. He set the flashlight, burning, beside him, and an insect alighted on its lens, a tiny insect, a mosquito or flea, made so fine that the weak light projected its X-ray onto the wall boards: the faint rim of its wings, the blurred strokes, magnified, of its long hinged legs, the dark cone at the heart of its anatomy. The tremor must be its heart beating. Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt into your face. There you will be forever, in an upright position, blind and silent, and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called. As strata of rock shift, your fingers elongate, and your teeth are distended sideways in a great underground grimace indistinguishable from a strip of chalk. And the earth tumbles on, and the sun expires, and un- altering darkness reigns where once there were stars.

Sweat broke out on his back. His mind seemed to rebound off a solidness. Such extinction was not another threat, a graver sort of danger, a kind of pain; it was qualitatively different. It was not even a conception that could be voluntarily pictured; it entered him from outside. His protesting nerves swarmed on its surface like lichen on a meteor. The skin of his chest was soaked with the effort of rejection. At the same time that the fear was dense and internal, it was dense and all around him; a tide of clay had swept up to the stars; space was crushed into a mass. When he stood up, automatically hunching his shoulders to keep his head away from the spider webs, it was with a numb sense of being cramped between two huge volumes of rigidity. That he had even this small freedom to move surprised him. In the narrow shelter of that rank shack, adjusting his pants, he felt--his first spark of comfort--too small to be crushed.

But in the open, as the beam of the flashlight skidded with frightened quickness across the remote surfaces of the barn and the grape arbor and the giant pine that stood by the path to the woods, the terror descended. He raced up through the clinging grass pursued, not by one of the wild animals the woods might hold, or one of the goblins his superstitious grandmother had communicated to his childhood, but by spectres out of science fiction, where gigantic cinder moons fill half the turquoise sky. As David ran, a gray planet rolled inches behind his neck. If he looked back, he would be buried. And in the momentum of his terror, hideous possibilities--the dilation of the sun, the triumph of the insects, the crabs on the shore in The Time Machine--wheeled out of the vacuum of make-believe and added their weight to his impending oblivion.

He wrenched the door open; the lamps within the house flared. The wicks burning here and there seemed to mirror one another. His mother was washing the dishes in a little pan of heated pump-water; Granmom fluttered near her elbow apprehensively. In the living room--the downstairs of the little square house was two long rooms--his father sat in front of the black fireplace restlessly folding and unfolding a newspaper as he sustained his half of the argument. "Nitrogen, phosphorus, potash: these are the three replaceable constituents of the soil. One crop of corn carries away hundreds of pounds of'--he dropped the paper into his lap and ticked them off on three fingers --"nitrogen, phosphorus, potash."

" Boyer didn't grow corn."

"Any crop, Elsie. The human animal--"

"You're killing the earthworms, George!"

"The human animal, after thousands and thousands of years, learned methods whereby the chemical balance of the soil may be maintained. Don't carry me back to the Dark Ages."

"When we moved to Olinger the ground in the garden was like slate. Just one summer of my cousin's chicken dung and the earthworms came back."

"I'm sure the Dark Ages were a fine place to the poor devils born in them, but I don't want to go there. They give me the creeps." Daddy stared into the cold pit of the fireplace and clung to the rolled newspaper in his lap as if it alone were keeping him from slipping backwards and down, down.

Mother came into the doorway brandishing a fistful of wet forks. "And thanks to your DDT there soon won't be a bee left in the country. When I was a girl here you could eat a peach without washing it."

"It's primitive, Elsie. It's Dark Age stuff."

"Oh what do you know about the Dark Ages?"

"I know I don't want to go back to them."

David took from the shelf, where he had placed it this afternoon, the great unabridged Webster's Dictionary that his grandfather had owned. He turned the big thin pages, floppy as cloth, to the entry he wanted, and read

soul . . . 1. An entity conceived as the essence, substance, animating principle, or actuating cause of life, or of the individual life, esp. of life manifested in psychical activities; the vehicle of individual existence, separate in nature from the body and usually held to be separable in existence.

The definition went on, into Greek and Egyptian conceptions, but David stopped short on the treacherous edge of antiquity. He needed to read no further. The careful overlapping words shingled a temporary shelter for him. "Usually held to be separable in existence"--what could be fairer, more judicious, surer?

His father was saying, "The modern farmer can't go around sweeping up after his cows. The poor devil has thousands and thousands of acres on his hands. Your modern farmer uses a scientifically-arrived-at mixture, like five-ten-five, or six-twelve-six, or threetwelve-six, and spreads it on with this wonderful modern machinery which of course we can't afford. Your modern farmer can't afford medieval methods."

Mother was quiet in the kitchen; her silence radiated waves of anger.

"No now Elsie; don't play the femme with me. Let's discuss this calmly like two rational twentieth-century people. Your organic farming nuts aren't attacking five-ten-five; they're attacking the chemical fertilizer crooks. The monster firms."

A cup clinked in the kitchen. Mother's anger touched David's face; his cheeks burned guiltily. Just by being in the living room he was associated with his father. She appeared in the doorway with red hands and tears in her eyes, and said to the two of them, "I knew you didn't want to come here but I didn't know you'd torment me like this. You talked Pop into his grave and now you'll kill me. Go ahead, George, more power to you; at least I'll be buried in good ground." She tried to turn and met an obstacle and screamed, "Mother, stop hanging on my back! Why don't you go to bed?"

"Let's all go to bed," David's father said, rising from the blue wing chair and slapping his thigh with a newspaper. "This reminds me of death." It was a phrase of his that David had heard so often he never considered its sense.

Upstairs, he seemed to be lifted above his fears. The sheets on his bed were clean. Granmom had ironed them with a pair of flatirons saved from the Olinger attic; she plucked them hot off the stove alternately, with a wooden handle called a goose. It was a wonder, to see how she managed. In the next room, his parents grunted peaceably; they seemed to take their quarrels less seriously than he did. They made comfortable scratching noises as they carried a little lamp back and forth. Their door was open a crack, so he saw the light shift and swing. Surely there would be, in the last five minutes, in the last second, a crack of light, showing the door from the dark room to another, full of light. Thinking of it this vividly frightened him. His own dying, in a specific bed in a specific room, specific walls mottled with wallpaper, the dry whistle of his breathing, the murmuring doctors, the nervous relatives going in and out, but for him no way out but down into the funnel. Never touch a doorknob again. A whisper, and his parents' light was blown out. David prayed to be reassured. Though the experiment frightened him, he lifted his hands high into the darkness above his face and begged Christ to touch them. Not hard or long: the faintest, quickest grip would be final for a lifetime. His hands waited in the air, itself a substance, which seemed to move through his fingers; or was it the pressure of his pulse? He returned his hands to beneath the covers uncertain if they had been touched or not. For would not Christ's touch be infinitely gentle?

Through all the eddies of its aftermath, David clung to this thought about his revelation of extinction: that there, in the outhouse, he had struck a solidness qualitatively different, a rock of horror firm enough to support any height of construction. All he needed was a little help; a word, a gesture, a nod of certainty, and he would be sealed in, safe. The assurance from the dictionary had melted in the night. Today was Sunday, a hot fair day. Across a mile of clear air the church bells called, Celebrate, celebrate. Only Daddy went. He put on a coat over his rolled-up shirtsleeves and got into the little old black Plymouth parked by the barn and went off, with the same pained hurried grimness of all his actions. His churning wheels, as he shifted too hastily into second, raised plumes of red dust on the dirt road. Mother walked to the far field, to see what bushes needed cutting. David, though he usually preferred to stay in the house, went with her. The puppy followed at a distance, whining as it picked its way through the stubble but floundering off timidly if one of them went back to pick it up and carry it. When they reached the crest of the far field, his mother asked, " David, what's troubling you?"

"Nothing. Why?"

She looked at him sharply. The greening woods crosshatched the space beyond her half-gray hair. Then she showed him her profile, and gestured toward the house, which they had left a half-mile behind them. "See how it sits in the land? They don't know how to build with the land any more. Pop always said the foundations were set with the compass. We must try to get a compass and see. It's supposed to face due south; but south feels a little more that way to me." From the side, as she said these things, she seemed handsome and young. The smooth sweep of her hair over her car seemed white with a purity and calm that made her feel foreign to him. He had never regarded his parents as consolers of his troubles; from the beginning they had seemed to have more troubles than he. Their confusion had flattered him into an illusion of strength; so now on this high clear ridge he jealously guarded the menace all around them, blowing like a breeze on his fingertips, the possibility of all this wide scenery sinking into darkness. The strange fact that though she came to look at the brush she carried no clippers, for she had a fixed prejudice against working on Sundays, was the only consolation he allowed her to offer.

As they walked back, the puppy whimpering after them, the rising dust behind a distant line of trees announced that Daddy was speeding home from church. When they reached the house he was there. He had brought back the Sunday paper and the vehement remark, " Dobson's too intelligent for these farmers. They just sit there with their mouths open and don't hear a thing the poor devil's saying."

"What makes you think farmers are unintelligent? This country was made by farmers. George Washington was a farmer."

"They are, Elsie. They are unintelligent. George Washington's dead. In this day and age only the misfits stay on the farm. The lame, the halt, the blind. The morons with one arm. Human garbage. They remind me of death, sitting there with their mouths open."

"My father was a farmer."

"He was a frustrated man, Elsie. He never knew what hit him. The poor devil meant so well, and he never knew which end was up. Your mother'll bear me out. Isn't that right, Mom? Pop never knew what hit him?"

"Ach, I guess not," the old woman quivered, and the ambiguity for the moment silenced both sides.

David hid in the funny papers and sports section until one-thirty. At two, the catechetical class met at the Firetown church. He had transferred from the catechetical class of the Lutheran church in Olinger, a humiliating comedown. In Olinger they met on Wednesday nights, spiffy and spruce, in the atmosphere of a dance. Afterwards, blessed by the brick-faced minister from whose lips the word "Christ" fell like a burning stone, the more daring of them went with their Bibles to a luncheonette and smoked. Here in Firetown, the girls were dull white cows and the boys narrow-faced brown goats in old men's suits, herded on Sunday afternoons into a threadbare church basement that smelled of stale hay. Because his father had taken the car on one of his endless errands to Olinger, David walked, grateful for the open air and the silence. The catechetical class embarrassed him, but today he placed hope in it, as the source of the nod, the gesture, that was all he needed.

Reverend Dobson was a delicate young man with great dark eyes and small white shapely hands that flickered like protesting doves when he preached; he seemed a bit misplaced in the Lutheran ministry. This was his first call. It was a split parish; he served another rural church twelve miles away. His iridescent green Ford, new six months ago, was spattered to the windows with red mud and rattled from bouncing on the rude back roads, where he frequently got lost, to the malicious satisfaction of many. But David's mother liked him, and, more pertinent to his success, the Haiers, the sleek family of feed merchants and innkeepers and tractor salesmen who dominated the Firetown church, liked him. David liked him, and felt liked in turn; sometimes in class, after some special stupidity, Dobson directed toward him out of those wide black eyes a mild look of disbelief, a look that, though flattering, was also delicately disquieting.

Catechetical instruction consisted of reading aloud from a work booklet answers to problem prepared during the week, problems like, "I am the \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and the \_\_\_\_\_, saith the Lord." Then there was a question period in which no one ever asked any questions. Today's theme was the last third of the Apostles' Creed. When the time came for questions, David blushed and asked, "About the Resurrection of the Body--are we conscious between the time when we die and the Day of Judgment?"

Dobson blinked, and his fine little mouth pursed, suggesting that David was making difficult things more difficult. The faces of the other students went blank, as if an indiscretion had been committed.

"No, I suppose not," Reverend Dobson said.

"Well, where is our soul, then, in this gap?"

The sense grew, in the class, of a naughtiness occurring. Dobson's shy eyes watered, as if he were straining to keep up the formality of attention, and one of the girls, the fattest, simpered toward her twin, who was a little less fat. Their chairs were arranged in a rough circle. The current running around the circle panicked David. Did everybody know something he didn't know?

"I suppose you could say our souls am asleep," Dobson said.

"And then they wake up, and there is the earth like it always is, and all the people who have ever lived? Where will Heaven be?"

Anita Haier giggled. Dobson gazed at David intently, but with an awkward, puzzled flicker of forgiveness, as if there existed a secret between them that David was violating. But David knew of no secret. All he wanted was to hear Dobson repeat the words he said every Sunday morning. This he would not do. As if these words were unworthy of the conversational voice.

" David, you might think of Heaven this way: as the way the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him."

"But is Lincoln conscious of it living on?" He blushed no longer with embarrassment but in anger; he had walked here in good faith and was being made a fool.

"Is he conscious now? I would have to say no; but I don't think it matters." His voice had a coward's firmness; he was hostile now.

"You don't."

"Not in the eyes of God, no." The unction, the stunning impudence, of this reply sprang tears of outrage in David's eyes. He bowed them to his book, where short words like Duty, Love, Obey, Honor, were stacked in the form of a cross. "Were there any other questions, David?" Dobson asked with renewed gentleness. The others were rustling, collecting their books.

"No." He made his voice firm, though he could not bring up his eyes.

"Did I answer your question fully enough?"

"Yes."

In the minister's silence the shame that should have been his crept over David: the burden and fever of being a fraud were placed upon him, who was innocent, and it seemed, he knew, a confession of this guilt that on the way out he was unable to face Dobson's stirred gaze, though he felt it probing the side of his head.

Anita Haier's father gave him it ride down the highway as far as the dirt road. David said he wanted to walk the rest, and figured that his offer was accepted because Mr. Haier did not want to dirty his bright blue Buick with dust. This was all right; everything was all right, as long as it was clear. His indignation at being betrayed, at seeing Christianity betrayed, had hardened him. The straight dirt road reflected his hardness. Pink stones thrust up through its packed surface. The April sun beat down from the center of the afternoon half of the sky; already it had some of summer's heat. Already the fringes of weeds at the edges of the road were bedraggled with dust. From the reviving grass and scruff of the fields he walked between, insects were sending up a monotonous, automatic chant. In the distance a tiny figure in his father's coat was walking along the edge of the woods. His mother. He wondered what joy she found in such walks; to him the brown stretches of slowly rising and falling land expressed only a huge exhaustion.

Flushed with fresh air and happiness, she returned from her walk earlier than he had expected, and surprised him at his grandfather's Bible. It was a stumpy black book, the boards worn thin where the old man's fingers had held them; the spine hung by one weak hinge of fabric. David had been looking for the passage where Jesus says to the one thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." He had never tried reading the Bible for himself before. What was so embarrassing about being caught at it, was that he detested the apparatus of piety. Fusty churches, creaking hymns, ugly Sunday-school teachers and their stupid leaflets--he hated everything about them but the promise they held out, a promise that in the most perverse way, as if the homeliest crone in the kingdom were given the Prince's hand, made every good and real thing, ball games and jokes and pertbreasted girls, possible. He couldn't explain this to his mother. There was no time. Her solicitude was upon him.

" David, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"What are you doing at Grandpop's Bible?"

"Trying to read it. This is supposed to be a Christian country, isn't it?"

She sat down on the green sofa, which used to be in the sun parlor at Olinger, under the fancy mirror. A little smile still lingered on her face from the walk. " David, I wish you'd talk to me."

"What about?"

"About whatever it is that's troubling you. Your father and I have both noticed it."

"I asked Reverend Dobson about Heaven and he said it was like Abraham Lincoln's goodness living after him."

He waited for the shock to strike her. "Yes?" she said, expecting more.

"That's all."

"And why didn't you like it?"

"Well; don't you see? It amounts to saying there isn't any Heaven at all."

"I don't see that it amounts to that What do you want Heaven to be?"

"Well, I don't know. I want it to be something. I thought he'd tell me what it was. I thought that was his job." He was becoming angry, sensing her surprise at him. She had assumed that Heaven had faded from his head years ago. She had imagined that he had already entered, in the secrecy of silence, the conspiracy that he now knew to be all around him.

" David," she asked gently, "don't you ever want to rest?"

"No. Not forever."

" David, you're so young. When you get older, you'll feel differently."

"Grandpa didn't. Look how tattered this book is."

"I never understood your grandfather."

"Well I don't understand ministers who say it's like Lincoln's goodness going on and on. Suppose you're not Lincoln?"

"I think Reverend Dobson made a mistake. You must try to forgive him."

"It's not a question of his making a mistake! It's a question of dying and never moving or seeing or hearing anything ever again."

"But"--in exasperation--"darling, it's so greedy of you to want more. When God has given us this wonderful April day, and given us this farm, and you have your whole life ahead of you--"

"You think, then, that there is God?"

"Of course I do"--with deep relief, that smoothed her features into a reposeful oval. He had risen and was standing too near her for his comfort. He was afraid she would reach out and touch him.

"He made everything? You feel that?"

"Yes."

"Then who made Him?"

"Why, Man. Man." The happiness of this answer lit up her face radiantly, until she saw his gesture of disgust. She was so simple, so illogical; such a femme.

"Well that amounts to saying there is none."

Her hand reached for his wrist but he backed away. " David, it's a mystery. A miracle. It's a miracle more beautiful than any Reverend Dobson could have told you about. You don't say houses don't exist because Man made them."

"No. God has to be different."

"But, David, you have the evidence. Look out the window at the sun; at the fields."

"Mother, good grief. Don't you see"--he rasped away the roughness in his throat--"if when we die there's nothing, all your sun and fields and what not are all, ah, horror? It's just an ocean of horror."

"But David, it's not. It's so clearly not that." And she made an urgent opening gesture with her hands that expressed, with its suggestion of a willingness to receive his helplessness, all her grace, her gentleness, her love of beauty, gathered into a passive intensity that made him intensely hate her. He would not be wooed away from the truth. I am the Way, the Truth. . .

"No," he told her. "Just let me alone."

He found his tennis ball behind the piano and went outside to throw it against the side of the house. There was a patch high up where the brown stucco that had been laid over the sandstone masonry was crumbling away; he kept trying with the tennis ball to chip more pieces off. Superimposed upon his deep ache was a smaller but more immediate worry; that he had hurt his mother. He heard his father's car rattling on the straightaway, and went into the house, to make peace before he arrived. To his relief, she was not giving off the stifling damp heat of her anger, but instead was cool, decisive, maternal. She handed him an old green book, her college text of Plato.

"I want you to read the Parable of the Cave," she said.

"All right," he said, though he knew it would do no good. Some story by a dead Greek just vague enough to please her. "Don't worry about it, Mother."

"I am worried. Honestly, David, I'm sure there will be something for us. As you get older, these things seem to matter a great deal less."

"That may be. It's a dismal thought, though."

His father bumped at the door. The locks and jambs stuck here. But before Granmom could totter to the latch and let him in, he had knocked it open. He had been in Olinger dithering with track meet tickets. Although Mother usually kept her talks with David a confidence, a treasure between them, she called instantly, " George, David is worried about death!"

He came to the doorway of the living room, his shirt pocket bristling with pencils, holding in one hand a pint box of melting ice cream and in the other the knife with which he was about to divide it into four sections, their Sunday treat. "Is the kid worried about death? Don't give it a thought, David. I'll be lucky if I live till tomorrow, and I'm not worried. If they'd taken a buckshot gun and shot me in the cradle I'd be better off. The world'd be better off. Hell, I think death is a wonderful thing. I look forward to it. Get the garbage out of the way. If I had the man here who invented death, I'd pin a medal on him."

"Hush, George. You'll frighten the child worse than he is."

This was not true; he never frightened David. There was no harm in his father, no harm at all. Indeed, in the man's steep self-disgust the boy felt a kind of ally. A distant ally. He saw his position with a certain strategic coldness. Nowhere in the world of other people would he find the hint, the nod, he needed to begin to build his fortress against death. They none of them believed. He was alone. In that deep hole.

In the months that followed, his position changed little. School was some comfort. All those sexy, perfumed people, wisecracking, chewing gum, all of them doomed to die, and none of them noticing. In their company David felt that they would carry him along into the bright, cheap paradise reserved for them. In any crowd, the fear ebbed a little; he had reasoned that somewhere in the world there must exist a few people who believed what was necessary, and the larger the crowd, the greater the chance that he was near such a soul, within calling distance, if only he was not too ignorant, too ill-equipped, to spot him. The sight of clergymen cheered him; whatever they themselves thought, their collars were still a sign that somewhere, at some time, someone had recognized that we cannot, cannot, submit to death. The sermon topics posted outside churches, the flip, hurried pieties of disc jockeys, the cartoons in magazines showing angels or devils--on such scraps he kept alive the possibility of hope.

For the rest, he tried to drown his hopelessness in clatter and jostle. The pinball machine at the luncheonette was a merciful distraction; as he bent over its buzzing, flashing board of flippers and cushions, the weight and constriction in his chest lightened and loosened. He was grateful for all the time his father wasted in Olinger. Every delay postponed the moment when they must ride together down the dirt road into the heart of the dark farmland, where the only light was the kerosene lamp waiting on the dining-room table, a light that drowned their food in shadow and made it sinister.

He lost his appetite for reading. He was afraid of being ambushed again. In mystery novels people died like dolls being discarded; in science fiction enormities of space and time conspired to crush the humans; and even in P. G. Wodehouse he felt a hollowness, a turning away from reality that was implicitly bitter, and became explicit in the comic figures of futile clergymen. All gaiety seemed minced out on the skin of a void. All quiet hours seemed invitations to dread.

Even on weekends, he and his father contrived to escape the farm; and when, some Saturdays, they did stay home, it was to do something destructive--tear down an old henhouse or set huge brush fires that threatened, while Mother shouted and flopped her arms, to spread to the woods. Whenever his father worked, it was with rapt violence; when he chopped kindling, fragments of the old henhouse boards flew like shrapnel and the ax-head was always within a quarter of an inch of flying off the handle. He was exhilarating to watch, sweating and swearing and sucking bits of saliva back into his lips.

School stopped. His father took the car in the opposite direction, to a highway construction job where he had been hired for the summer as a timekeeper, and David was stranded in the middle of acres of heat and greenery and blowing pollen and the strange, mechanical humming that lay invisibly in the weeds and alfalfa and dry orchard grass.

For his fifteenth birthday his parents gave him, with jokes about him being a hillbilly now, a Remington.22. It was somewhat like a pinball machine to take it out to the old kiln in the woods where they dumped their trash, and set up tin cans on the kiln's sandstone shoulder and shoot them off one by one. He'd take the puppy, who had grown long legs and a rich coat of reddish fur--he was part chow. Copper hated the gun but loved the boy enough to accompany him. When the flat acrid crack rang out, he would race in terrified circles that would tighten and tighten until they brought him, shivering, against David's legs. Depending upon his mood, David would shoot again or drop to his knees and comfort the dog. Giving this comfort to a degree returned comfort to him. The dog's ears, laid flat against his skull in fear, were folded so intricately, so--he groped for the concept --surely. Where the dull-studded collar made the fur stand up, each hair showed a root of soft white under the length, black-tipped, of the metal-color that had lent the dog its name. In his agitation Copper panted through nostrils that were elegant slits, like two healed cuts, or like the keyholes of a dainty lock of black, grained wood. His whole whorling, knotted, jointed body was a wealth of such embellishments. And in the smell of the dog's hair David seemed to descend through many finely differentiated layers of earth: mulch, soil, sand, clay, and the glittering mineral base.

But when he returned to the house, and saw the books arranged on the low shelves, fear returned. The four adamant volumes of Wells like four thin bricks, the green Plato that had puzzled him with its queer softness and tangled purity, the dead Galsworthy and "Elizabeth," Grandpa's mammoth dictionary, Grand- pa's Bible, the Bible that he himself had received on becoming a member of the Firetown Lutheran Church--at the sight of these, the memory of his fear reawakened and came around him. He had grown stiff and stupid in its embrace. His parents tried to think of ways to entertain him.

" David, I have a job for you to do," his mother said one evening at the table.

"What?"

"If you're going to take that tone perhaps we'd better not talk."

"What tone? I didn't take any tone."

"Your grandmother thinks there are too many pigeons in the barn."

"Why?" David turned to look at his grandmother, but she sat there staring at the burning lamp with her usual expression of bewilderment.

Mother shouted, "Mom, he wants to know why!"

Granmom made a jerky, irritable motion with her bad hand, as if generating the force for utterance, and said, "They foul the furniture."

"That's right," Mother said. "She's afraid for that old Olinger furniture that we'll never use. David, she's been after me for a month about those poor pigeons. She wants you to shoot them."

"I don't want to kill anything especially," David said.

Daddy said, "The kid's like you are, Elsie. He's too good for this world. Kill or be killed, that's my motto."

His mother said loudly, "Mother, he doesn't want to do it."

"Not?" The old lady's eyes distended as if in horror, and her claw descended slowly to her lap.

"Oh, I'll do it, I'll do it tomorrow," David snapped, and a pleasant crisp taste entered his mouth with the decision.

"And I had thought, when Boyer's men made the hay, it would be better if the barn doesn't look like a rookery," his mother added needlessly.

A barn, in day, is a small night. The splinters of light between the dry shingles pierce the high roof like stars, and the rafters and crossbeams and built-in ladders seem, until your eyes adjust, as mysterious as the branches of a haunted forest. David entered silently, the gun in one hand. Copper whined desperately at the door, too frightened to come in with the gun yet unwilling to leave the boy. David stealthily turned, said "Go away," shut the door on the dog, and slipped the bolt across. It was a door within a door; the double door for wagons and tractors was as high and wide as the face of a house.

The smell of old straw scratched his sinuses. The red sofa, half-hidden under its white-splotched tarpaulin, seemed assimilated into this smell, sunk in it, buried. The mouths of empty bins gaped like caves. Rusty oddments of farming--coils of baling wire, some spare tines for a harrow, a handleless shovel--hung on nails driven here and there in the thick wood. He stood stock-still a minute; it took a while to separate the cooing of the pigeons from the rustling in his ears. When he had focused on the cooing, it flooded the vast interior with its throaty, bubbling outpour: there seemed no other sound. They were up behind the beams. What light there was leaked through the shingles and the dirty glass windows at the far end and the small round holes, about as big as basketballs, high on the opposite stone side walls, under the ridge of the roof.

A pigeon appeared in one of these holes, on the side toward the house. It flew in, with a battering of wings, from the outside, and waited there, silhouetted against its pinched bit of sky, preening and cooing in a throbbing, thrilled, tentative way. David tiptoed four steps to the side, rested his gun against the lowest rung of a ladder pegged between two upright beams, and lowered the gunsight into the bird's tiny, jauntily cocked head. The slap of the report seemed to come off the stone wall behind him, and the pigeon did not fall. Neither did it fly. Instead it stuck in the round hole, pirouetting rapidly and nodding its head as if in frantic agreement. David shot the bolt back and forth and had aimed again before the spent cartridge had stopped jingling on the boards by his feet. He eased the tip of the sight a little lower, into the bird's breast, and took care to squeeze the trigger with perfect evenness. The slow contraction of his hand abruptly sprang the bullet; for a half-second there was doubt, and then the pigeon fell like a handful of rags, skimming down the barn wall into the layer of straw that coated the floor of the mow on this side.

Now others shook loose from the rafters, and whirled in the dim air with a great blurred hurtle of feathers and noise. They would go for the hole; he fixed his sight on the little moon of blue, and when a pigeon came to it, shot him as he was walking the ten inches of stone that would have carried him into the open air. This pigeon lay down in that tunnel of stone, unable to fall either one way or the other, although he was alive enough to lift one wing and cloud the light. It would sink back, and he would suddenly lift it again, the feathers flaring. His body blocked that exit. David raced to the other side of the barn's main aisle, where a similar ladder was symmetrically placed, and rested his gun on the same rung. Three birds came together to this hole; he got one, and two got through. The rest resettled in the rafters.

There was a shallow triangular space behind the cross beams supporting the roof. It was here they roosted and hid. But either the space was too small, or they were curious, for now that his eyes were at home in the dusty gloom David could see little dabs of gray popping in and out. The cooing was shriller now; its apprehensive tremolo made the whole volume of air seem liquid. He noticed one little smudge of a head that was especially persistent in peeking out; he marked the place, and fixed his gun on it, and when the head appeared again, had his finger tightened in advance on the trigger. A parcel of fluff slipped off the beam and fell the barn's height onto a canvas covering some Olinger furniture, and where its head had peeked out there was a fresh prick of light in the shingles.

Standing in the center of the floor, fully master now, disdaining to steady the barrel with anything but his arm, he killed two more that way. He felt like a beautiful avenger. Out of the shadowy ragged infinity of the vast barn roof these impudent things dared to thrust their heads, presumed to dirty its starred silence with their filthy timorous life, and he cut them off, tucked them back neatly into the silence. He had the sensation of a creator; these little smudges and flickers that he was clever to see and even cleverer to hit in the dim recesses of the rafters--out of each of them he was making a full bird. A tiny peek, probe, dab of life, when he hit it, blossomed into a dead enemy, falling with good, final weight.

The imperfection of the second pigeon he had shot, who was still lifting his wing now and then up in the round hole, nagged him. He put a new clip into the stock. Hugging the gun against his body, he climbed the ladder. The barrel sight scratched his ear; he had a sharp, garish vision, like a color slide, of shooting himself and being found tumbled on the barn floor among his prey. He locked his arm around the top rung--a fragile, gnawed rod braced between uprights --and shot into the bird's body from a flat angle. The wing folded, but the impact did not, as he had hoped, push the bird out of the hole. He fired again, and again, and still the little body, lighter than air when alive, was too heavy to budge from its high grave. From up here he could see green trees and a brown corner of the house through the hole. Clammy with the cobwebs that gathered between the rungs, he pumped a full clip of eight bullets into the stubborn shadow, with no success. He climbed down, and was struck by the silence in the barn. The remaining pigeons must have escaped out the other hole. That was all right; he was tired of it.

He stepped with his rifle into the light. His mother was coming to meet him, and it tickled him to see her shy away from the carelessly held gun. "You took achip out of the house," chip out of the house," she said. "What were those last shots about?"

"One of them died up in that little round hole and I was trying to shoot it down."

" Copper's hiding behind the piano and won't come out. I had to leave him."

"Well don't blame me. I didn't want to shoot the poor devils."

"Don't smirk. You look like your father. How many did you get?"

"Six."

She went into the barn, and he followed. She listened to the silence. Her hair was scraggly, perhaps from tussling with the dog. "I don't suppose the others will be back," she said wearily. "Indeed, I don't know why I let Mother talk me into it. Their cooing was such a comforting noise." She began to gather up the dead pigeons. Though he didn't want to touch them, David went into the mow and picked up by its tepid, horny, coral-colored feet the first bird he had killed. Its wings unfolded disconcertingly, as if the creature had been held together by threads that now were slit. It did not weigh much. He retrieved the one on the other side of the barn; his mother got the three in the middle and led the way across the road to the little southern slope of land that went down toward the foundations of the vanished tobacco shed. The ground was too steep to plant and mow; wild strawberries grew in the tangled grass. She put her burden down and said, "We'll have to bury them. The dog will go wild."

He put his two down on her three; the slick feathers let the bodies slide liquidly on one another. He asked, "Shall I get you the shovel?"

"Get it for yourself; you bury them. They're your kill. And be sure to make the hole deep enough so he won't dig them up." While he went to the tool shed for the shovel, she went into the house. Unlike her, she did not look up, either at the orchard to the right of her or at the meadow on her left, but instead held her head rigidly, tilted a little, as if listening to the ground.

He dug the hole, in a spot where there were no strawberry plants, before he studied the pigeons. He had never seen a bird this close before. The feathers were more wonderful than dog's hair, for each filament was shaped within the shape of the feather, and the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across the bird's body. He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him. Yet these birds bred in the millions and were exterminated as pests. Into the fragrant open earth he dropped one broadly banded in slate shades of blue, and on top of it another, mottled all over in rhythms of lilac and gray. The next was almost wholly white, but for a salmon glaze at its throat. As he fitted the last two, still pliant, on the top, and stood up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.

JOHN BARTH

Lost in the Funhouse

For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday, the occasion of their visit is Independence Day, the most important secular holiday of the United States of America. A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type, which in turn is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases as well as the customary type for titles of complete works, not to mention. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for “outside,” intrusive, or artificial voices, such as radio announcements, the texts of telegrams and newspaper articles, et cetera. They should be used sparingly. If passages originally in roman type are italicized by someone repeating them, it’s customary to acknowledge the fact. Italics mine.

Ambrose was “at that awkward age.” His voice came out high-pitched as a child’s if he let himself get carried away; to be on the safe side, therefore, he moved and spoke with deliberate calm and adult gravity. Talking soberly of unimportant or irrelevant matters and listening consciously to the sound of your own voice are useful habits for maintaining control in this difficult interval. En route to Ocean City he sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G —‘ age fourteen, a pretty girl and exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B — Street in the town of D —, Maryland. Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an illusion that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means. Is it likely, does it violate the principle of verisimilitude, that a thirteen-year-old boy could make such a sophisticated observation? A girl of fourteen is the psychological coeval of a boy of fifteen or sixteen; a thirteen-year-old boy, therefore, even one precocious in some other respects, might be three years her emotional junior.

Thrice a year — on Memorial, Independence, and Labor Days — the family visits Ocean City for the afternoon and evening. When Ambrose and Peter’s father was their age, the excursion was made by train, as mentioned in the novel The 42nd Parallel by John Dos Passos. Many families from the same neighborhood used to travel together, with dependent relatives and often with Negro servants; schoolfuls of children swarmed through the railway cars; everyone shared everyone else’s Maryland fried chicken, Virginia ham, deviled eggs, potato salad, beaten biscuits, iced tea. Nowadays (that is, in 19-- , the year of our story) the journey is made by automobile — more comfortably and quickly though without the extra fun though without the camaraderie of a general excursion. It’s all part of the deterioration of American life, their father declares; Uncle Karl supposes that when the boys take their families to Ocean City for the holidays they’ll fly in Autogiros. Their mother, sitting in the middle of the front seat like Magda in the second, only with her arms on the seat-back behind the men’s shoulders, wouldn’t want the good old days back again, the steaming trains and stuffy long dresses; on the other hand she can do without Autogiros, too, if she has to become a grandmother to fly in them.

Description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction. It is also important to “keep the senses operating”; when a detail from one of the five senses, say visual, is “crossed” with a detail from another, say auditory, the reader’s imagination is oriented to the scene, perhaps unconsciously. This procedure may he compared to the way surveyors and navigators determine their positions by two or more compass bearings, a process known as triangulation. The brown hair on Ambrose’s mother’s forearms gleamed in the sun like. Though right-handed, she took her left arm from the seat back to press the dashboard cigar lighter for Uncle Karl. When the glass bead in its handle glowed red, the lighter was ready for use. The smell of Uncle Karl’s cigar smoke reminded one of. The fragrance of the ocean came strong to the picnic ground where they always stopped for lunch, two miles inland from Ocean City Having to pause for a full hour almost within sound of the breakers was difficult for Peter and Ambrose when they were younger; even at their present age it was not easy to keep their anticipation, stimulated by the briny spume, from turning into short temper. The Irish author James Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled Ulysses, now available in this country uses the adjectives snot-green and scrotum-tightening to describe the sea. Visual, auditory tactile, olfac­tory, gustatory Peter and Ambrose’s father, while steering their black 1936 LaSalle sedan with one hand, could with the other remove the first cigarette from a white pack of Lucky Strikes and, more remarkably, light it with a match forefingered from its book and thumbed against the flint paper without being detached. The matchbook cover merely advertised U.S. War Bonds and Stamps. A fine metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech, in addition to its obvious “first-order” relevance to the thing it describes, will be seen upon reflection to have a second order of significance: it may be drawn from the milieu of the action, for example, or be particularly appropriate to the sensi­bility of the narrator, even hinting to the reader things of which the narrator is unaware; or it may cast further and subtler lights upon the things it describes, sometimes ironically qualifying the more evident sense of the comparison.

To say that Ambrose’s and Peter’s mother was pretty is to accomplish nothing; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but his imagination is not engaged. Besides, Magda was also pretty, yet in an altogether different way. Although she lived on B — Street she had very good manners and did better than average in school. Her figure was very well developed for her age. Her right hand lay casually on the plush upholstery of the seat, very near Ambrose’s left leg, on which his own hand rested. The space between their legs, between her right and his left leg, was out of the line of sight of anyone sitting on the other side of Magda, as well as anyone glancing into the rear-view mirror. Uncle Karl’s face resembled Peter’s — rather, vice versa. Both had dark hair and eyes, short husky statures, deep voices. Magda’s left hand was probably in a similar position on her left side. The boys’ father is difficult to describe; no particular feature of his appearance or manner stood out. He wore glasses and was principal of a T County grade school. Uncle Karl was a masonry contractor.

Although Peter must have known as well as Ambrose that the latter, because of his position in the car, would be first to see the electrical towers of the power plant at V —, the halfway point of their trip, he leaned forward and slightly toward the center of the car and pretended to be looking for them through the flat pinewoods and tuckahoe creeks along the highway. For as long as the boys could remember, “Looking for the Towers” had been a feature of the first half of their excursions to Ocean City, “looking for the standpipe” of the second. Though the game was childish, their mother preserved the tradition of rewarding the first to see the Towers with a candy-bar or piece of fruit. She insisted now that Magda play the game; the prize, she said, was “something hard to get nowadays.” Ambrose decided not to join in; he sat far back in his seat. Magda, like Peter, leaned forward. Two sets of straps were discernible through the shoulders of her sun dress; the inside right one, a brassiere-strap, was fastened or shortened with a small safety pin. The right armpit of her dress, presumably the left as well, was damp with perspiration. The simple strategy for being first to espy the Towers, which Ambrose had understood by the age of four, was to sit on the right-hand side of the car. Whoever sat there, however, had also to put up with the worst of the sun, and so Ambrose, without mentioning the matter, chose sometimes the one and sometimes the other. Not impossibly Peter had never caught on to the trick, or thought that his brother hadn’t simply because Ambrose on occasion preferred shade to a Baby Ruth or tangerine.

The shade-sun situation didn’t apply to the front seat, owing to the windshield; if anything the driver got more sun, since the person on the passenger side not only was shadowed below by the door and dashboard but might swing down his sun visor all the way too.

“Is that them?” Magda asked. Ambrose’s mother teased the boys for letting Magda win, insinuating that “somebody [had] a girlfriend.” Peter and Ambrose’s father reached a long thin arm across their mother to butt his cigarette in the dashboard ashtray, under the lighter. The prize this time for seeing the Towers first was a banana. Their mother bestowed it after chiding their father for wasting a half-smoked cigarette when everything was so scarce. Magda, to take the prize, moved her hand from so near Ambrose’s that he could have touched it as though accidentally. She offered to share the prize, things like that were so hard to find; but everyone insisted it was hers alone. Ambrose’s mother sang an iambic trimeter couplet from a popular song, femininely rhymed:

“What’s good is in the Army;

What’s left will never harm me.

Uncle Karl tapped his cigar ash out the ventilator window; some particles were sucked by the slipstream back into the car through the rear window on the passenger side. Magda demonstrated her ability to hold a banana in one hand and peel it with her teeth. She still sat forward; Ambrose pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose with his left hand, which he then negligently let fall to the seat cushion immediately behind her. He even permitted the single hair, gold, on the second joint of his thumb to brush the fabric of her skirt. Should she have sat back at that instant, his hand would have been caught under her.

Plush upholstery prickles uncomfortably through gabardine slacks in the July sun. The function of the beginning of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary. plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the “rising action.” Actually, if one imagines a story called “The Funhouse,” or “Lost in the Funhouse,” the details of the drive to Ocean City don’t seem especially relevant. The beginning should recount the events be­tween Ambrose’s first sight of the funhouse early in the afternoon and his entering it with Magda and Peter in the evening. The middle would narrate all relevant events from the time he goes in to the time he loses his way; middles have the double and contradictory function of delaying the climax while at the same time preparing the reader for it and fetching him to it. Then the ending would tell what Ambrose does while he’s lost, how he finally finds his way out, and what everybody makes of the experience. So far there’s been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a theme. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder. We haven’t even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse.

The more closely an author identifies with the narrator, literally or metaphorically, the less advisable it is, as a rule, to use the first-person narrative viewpoint. Once three years previously the young people aforemen­tioned played Niggers and Masters in the backyard; when it was Ambrose’s turn to be Master and theirs to be Niggers Peter had to go serve his evening papers; Ambrose was afraid to punish Magda alone, but she led him to the whitewashed Torture Chamber between the woodshed and the privy in the Slaves Quarters; there she knelt sweating among bamboo rakes and dusty Mason jars, pleadingly embraced his knees, and while bees droned in the lattice as if on an ordinary summer afternoon, purchased clemency at a surprising price set by herself. Doubtless she remembered nothing of this event; Ambrose on the other hand seemed unable to forget the least detail of his life. He even recalled how, standing beside himself with awed impersonality in the reeky heat, he’d stared the while at an empty cigar box in which Uncle Karl kept stone-cutting chisels: beneath the words El Producto, a laureled, loose-toga’d lady regarded the sea from a marble bench; beside her, forgotten. or not yet turned to, was a five-stringed lyre. Her chin reposed on the back of her right hand; her left depended negligently from the bench-arm. The lower half of scene and lady was peeled away; the words EXAMINED BY — were inked there into the wood. Nowadays cigar boxes are made of pasteboard. Ambrose wondered what Magda would have done, Ambrose wondered what Magda would do when she sat back on his hand as he resolved she should. Be angry Make a teasing joke of it. Give no sign at all. For a long time she leaned forward, playing cow-poker with Peter against Uncle Karl and Mother and watching for the first sign of Ocean City. At nearly the same instant, picnic ground and Ocean City standpipe hove into view; an Amoco filling station on their side of the road cost Mother and Uncle Karl fifty cows and the game; Magda bounced back, clapping her right hand on Mother’s right arm; Ambrose moved clear “in the nick of time.~~

At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever. Narrative ordinarily consists of alternating dramatization and summarization. One symptom of nervous tension, paradoxically, is repeated and violent yawning; neither Peter nor Magda nor Uncle Karl nor Mother reacted in this manner. Although they were no longer small children, Peter and Ambrose were each given a dollar to spend on boardwalk amuse­ments in addition to what money of their own they’d brought along. Magda too, though she protested she had ample spending money. The boys’ mother made a little scene out of distributing the bills; she pretended that her sons and Magda were small children and cautioned them not to spend the sum too quickly or in one place. Magda promised with a merry laugh and, having both hands free, took the bill with her left. Peter laughed also and pledged in a falsetto to be a good boy. His imitation of a child was not clever. The boys’ father was tall and thin, balding, fair-complexioned. Assertions of that sort are not effective; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but. We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of the preliminary rambling seems relevant. Yet everyone begins in the same place; how is it that most go along without difficulty but a few lose their way?

“Stay out from under the boardwalk,” Uncle Karl growled from the side of his mouth. The boys’ mother pushed his shoulder in mock annoyance. They were all standing before Fat May the Laughing Lady who advertised the funhouse. Larger than life, Fat May mechanically shook, rocked on her heels, slapped her thighs while recorded laughter — uproarious, female — came amplified from a hidden loudspeaker. It chuckled, wheezed, wept; tried in vain to catch its breath; tittered, groaned, exploded raucous and anew. You couldn’t hear it without laughing yourself, no matter how you felt. Father came back from talking to a Coast-Guardsman on duty and reported that the surf was spoiled with crude oil from tankers recently torpedoed offshore. Lumps of it, difficult to remove, made tarry tidelines on the beach and stuck on swimmers. Many bathed in the surf nevertheless and came out speckled; others paid to use a municipal pool and only sunbathed on the beach. We would do the latter. We would do the latter. We would do the latter.

Under the boardwalk, matchbook covers, grainy other things. What is the story’s theme? Ambrose is ill. He perspires in the dark passages, candied apples-on-a-stick, delicious-looking, disappointing to eat. Funhouses need men’s and ladies’ rooms at intervals. Others perhaps have also vomited in corners and corridors; may even have had bowel movements liable to be stepped in in the dark. The word fuck suggests suction and/or and/or flatu­lence. Mother and Father; grandmothers and grandfathers on both sides; great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers on four sides, et cetera. Count a generation as thirty years: in approximately the year when Lord Baltimore was granted charter to the province of Maryland by Charles I, five hundred twelve women — English, Welsh, Bavarian, Swiss — of every class and character, received into themselves the penises the intromittent organs of five hundred twelve men, ditto, in every circumstance and posture, to conceive the five hundred twelve ancestors and the two hundred fifty-six ancestors of the et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera of the author, of the narrator, of this story, Lost in the Funhouse. In alleyways, ditches, canopy beds, pinewoods, bridal suites, ship’s cabins, coach-and-fours, coaches.and four sultry toolsheds; on the cold sand under boardwalks, littered with El Producto cigar butts, treasured with Lucky Strike cigarette stubs, Coca-Cola caps, gritty turds, cardboard lollipop sticks, matchbook covers warning that A Slip of the Lip Can Sink a Ship. The shluppish whisper, continuous as seawash round the globe, tidelike falls and rises with the circuit of dawn and dusk.

Magda’s teeth. She was left-handed. Perspiration. They’ve gone all the way, through, Magda and Peter, they’ve been waiting for hours with Mother and Uncle Karl while Father searches for his lost son; they draw french-fried potatoes from a paper cup and shake their heads. They’ve named the children they’ll one day have and bring to Ocean City on holidays. Can spermatozoa properly be thought of as male animalcules when there are no female sper­matozoa? They grope through hot, dark windings, past Love’s Tunnel’s fear­some obstacles. Some perhaps lose their way.

Peter suggested then and there that they do the funhouse; he had been through it before, so had Magda, Ambrose hadn’t and suggested, his voice cracking on account of Fat May’s laughter, that they swim first. All were chuckling, couldn’t help it; Ambrose’s father, Ambrose’s and Peter’s father came up grinning like a lunatic with two boxes of syrup-coated popcorn, one for Mother, one for Magda; the men were to help themselves. Ambrose walked on Magda’s right; being by nature left-handed, she carried the box in her left hand. Up front the situation was reversed.

“What are you limping for?” Magda inquired of Ambrose. He sup­posed in a husky tone that his foot had gone to sleep in the car. Her teeth flashed. “Pins and needles?” It was the honeysuckle on the lattice of the former privy that drew the bees. Imagine being stung there. How long is this going to take?

The adults decided to forgo the pool; but Uncle Karl insisted they change into swimsuits and do the beach. “He wants to watch the pretty girls,” Peter teased, and ducked behind Magda from Uncle Karl’s pretended wrath. “You’ve got all the pretty girls you need right here,” Magda declared, and Mother said: “Now that’s the gospel truth.” Magda scolded Peter, who reached over her shoulder to sneak some popcorn. “Your brother and father aren’t getting any” Uncle Karl wondered if they were going to have fireworks that night, what with the shortages. It wasn’t the shortages, Mr. M -- replied; Ocean City had fireworks from pre-war. But it was too risky on account of the enemy submarines, some people thought.

“Don’t seem like Fourth of July without fireworks,” said Uncle Karl. The inverted tag in dialogue writing is still considered permissible with proper names or epithets, but sounds old-fashioned with personal pronouns. “We’ll have ‘em again soon enough,” predicted the boys’ father. Their mother de­clared she could do without fireworks: they reminded her too much of the real thing. Their father said all the more reason to shoot off a few now and again. Uncle Karl asked rhetorically who needed reminding, just look at peo­ple’s hair and skin.

“The oil, yes,” said Mrs. M

Ambrose had a pain in his stomach and so didn’t swim but enjoyed watching the others. He and his father burned red easily Magda’s figure was exceedingly well developed for her age. The too declined to swim, and got mad, and became angry when Peter attempted to drag her into the pool. She always swam, he insisted; what did she mean not swim? Why did a person come to Ocean City?

“Maybe I want to lay here with Ambrose,” Magda teased.

Nobody likes a pedant.

“Aha,” said Mother. Peter grabbed Magda by one ankle and ordered Ambrose to grab the other. She squealed and rolled over on the beach blanket. Ambrose pretended to help hold her back. Her tan was darker than even Mother’s and Peter’s. “Help out, Uncle Karl!” Peter cried. Uncle Karl went to seize the other ankle. Inside the top of her swimsuit, however, you could see the line where the sunburn ended and, when she hunched her shoulders and squealed again, one nipple’s auburn edge. Mother made them behave themselves. “You should certainly know,” she said to Uncle Karl. Archly “That when a lady says she doesn’t feel like swimming, a gentleman doesn’t ask questions.” Uncle Karl said excuse him; Mother winked at Magda; Ambrose blushed; stupid Peter kept saying “Phooey on feel like!” and tugging at Magda’s ankle; then even he got the point, and cannonballed with a holler into the pool.

“I swear,” Magda said, in mock in feigned exasperation.

The diving would make a suitable literary symbol. To go off the high board you had to wait in a line along the poolside and up the ladder. Fellows tickled girls and goosed one another and shouted to the ones at the top to hurry up, or razzed them for bellyfloppers. Once on the springboard some took a great while posing or clowning or deciding on a dive or getting up their nerve; others ran right off. Especially among the younger fellows the idea was to strike the funniest pose or do the craziest stunt as you fell, a thing that got harder to do as you kept on and kept on. But whether you hollered Geronimo! or Sieg heil!, held your nose or “rode a bicycle,” pretended to be shot or did a perfect jackknife or changed your mind halfway down and ended up with nothing, it was over in two seconds, after all that wait. Spring, pose, splash. Spring, neat-o, splash, Spring, aw fooey, splash.

The grown-ups had gone on; Ambrose wanted to converse with Magda; she was remarkably well developed for her age; it was said that that came from rubbing with a turkish towel, and there were other theories. Ambrose could think of nothing to say except how good a diver Peter was, who was showing off for her benefit. You could pretty well tell by looking at their bathing suits and arm muscles how far along the different fellows were. Ambrose was glad he hadn’t gone in swimming, the cold water shrank you up so. Magda pretended to be uninterested in the diving; she probably weighed as much as he did. If you knew your way around in the funhouse like your own bedroom, you could wait until a girl came along and then slip away without ever getting caught, even if her boyfriend ~ right with her. She’d think he did it! It would be better to be the boyfriend, and act outraged, and tear the funhouse apart.

Not act; be.

“He’s a master diver,” Ambrose said. In feigned admiration. “You really have to slave away at it to get that good.” What would it matter anyhow if he asked her right out whether she remembered, even teased her with it as Peter would have?

There’s no point in going farther; this isn’t getting anybody anywhere; they haven’t even come to the funhouse yet. Ambrose is off the track, in some new or old part of the place that’s not supposed to be used; he strayed into it by some one-in-a-million chance, like the time the roller-coaster car left the tracks in the nineteen-teens against all the laws of physics and sailed over the boardwalk in the dark. And they can’t locate him because they don’t know where to look. Even the designer and operator have forgotten this other part, that winds around on itself like a whelk shell. That winds around the right part like the snakes on Mercury’s caduceus. Some people, perhaps, don’t “hit their stride” until their twenties, when the growing-up business is over and women appreciate other things besides wisecracks and teasing and strutting. Peter didn’t have one-tenth the imagination he had, not one-tenth. Peter did this naming-their-children thing as a joke, making up names like Aloysius and Murgatroyd, but Ambrose knew exactly how it would feel to be married and have children of your own, and be a loving husband and father, and go comfortably to work in the mornings and to bed with your wife at night, and wake up with her there. With a breeze coming through the sash and birds and mockingbirds singing in the Chinese-cigar trees. His eyes watered, there aren’t enough ways to say that. He would be quite famous in his line of work. Whether Magda was his wife or not, one evening when he was wise-lined and gray at the temples he’d smile gravely, at a fashionable dinner party and remind her of his youthful passion. The time they went with his family to Ocean City; the erotic fantasies he used to have about her. How long ago it seemed, and childish! Yet tender, too, n’est-ce pas? Would she have imagined that the world-famous whatever remembered how many strings were on the lyre on the bench beside the girl on the label of the cigar box he’d stared at in the tool shed at age ten while, she, age eleven. Even then he had felt wise beyond his years; he’d stroked her hair and said in his deepest voice and correctest English, as to a dear child: “I shall never forget this moment.”

But though he had breathed heavily, groaned as if ecstatic, what he’d really felt throughout was an odd detachment, as though someone else were Master. Strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: This is what they call passion. I am experiencing it. Many of the digger machines were out of order in the penny arcades and could not be repaired or replaced for the duration. Moreover the prizes, made now in USA, were less interesting than formerly, pasteboard items for the most part, and some of the machines wouldn’t work on white pennies. The gypsy fortune­teller machine might have provided a foreshadowing of the climax of this story if Ambrose had operated it. It was even dilapidateder than most: the silver coating was worn off the brown metal handles, the glass windows around the dummy were cracked and taped, her kerchiefs and silks long faded. If a man lived by himself, he could take a department-store mannequin with flexible joints and modify her in certain ways. However: by the time he was that old he’d have a real woman. There was a machine that stamped your name around a white-metal coin with a star in the middle: A . His son would be the second, and when the lad reached thirteen or so he would put a strong arm around his shoulder and tell him calmly: “It is perfectly normal. We have all been through it. It will not last forever.” Nobody knew how to be what they were right. He’d smoke a pipe, teach his son how to fish and softcrab, assure him he needn’t worry about himself. Magda would certainly give, Magda would certainly yield a great deal of milk, although guilty of occasional solecisms. It don’t taste so bad. Suppose the lights came on now!

The day wore on. You think you’re yourself, but there are other persons in you. Ambrose gets hard when Ambrose doesn’t want to, and obversely. Ambrose watches them disagree; Ambrose watches him watch. In the fun-house mirror room you can’t see yourself go on forever, because no matter how you stand, your head gets in the way. Even if you had a glass periscope, the image of your eye would cover up the thing you really wanted to see. The police will come; there’ll be a story in the papers. That must be where it happened. Unless he can find a surprise exit, an unofficial backdoor or escape hatch opening on an alley, say, and then stroll up to the family in front of the funhouse and ask where everybody’s been; he’s been out of the place for ages. That’s just where it happened, in that last lighted room: Peter and Magda found the right exit; he found one that you weren’t supposed to find and strayed off into the works somewhere. In a perfect funhouse you’d be able to go only one way, like the divers off the high board; getting lost would be impossible; the doors and halls would work like minnow traps on the valves in veins.

On account of German U-boats, Ocean City was “browned out”: streetlights were shaded on the seaward side; shop-windows and boardwalk amusement places were kept dim, not to silhouette tankers and Liberty ships for torpedoing. In a short story about Ocean City, Maryland, during World War II, the author could make use of the image of sailors on leave in the penny arcades and shooting galleries, sighting through the crosshairs of toy machine guns at swastika’d subs, while out in the black Atlantic a U-boat skipper squints through his periscope at real ships outlined by the glow of penny arcades. After dinner the family strolled back to the amusement end of the boardwalk. The boys’ father had burnt red as always and was masked with Noxzema, a minstrel in reverse. The grownups stood at the end of the board­walk where the Hurricane of ‘33 had cut an inlet from the ocean to Assawoman Bay.

“Pronounced with a long o,” Uncle Karl reminded Magda with a wink. His shirt sleeves were rolled up; Mother punched his brown biceps with the arrowed heart on it and said his mind was naughty. Fat May’s laugh came suddenly from the funhouse, as if she’d just got the joke; the family laughed too at the coincidence. Ambrose went under the boardwalk to search for out-of-town matchbook covers with the aid of his pocket flashlight; he looked out from the edge of the North American continent and wondered how far their laughter carried over the water. Spies in rubber rafts; survivors in lifeboats. If the joke had been beyond his understanding, he could have said:

“The laughter was over his head.” And let the reader see the serious wordplay on second reading.

He turned the flashlight on and then off at once even before the woman whooped. He sprang away, heart athud, dropping the light. What had the man grunted? Perspiration drenched and chilled him by the time he scram­bled up to the family. “See anything?” his father asked. His voice wouldn’t come; he shrugged and violently brushed sand from his pants legs.

“Let’s ride the old flying horses!” Magda cried. I’ll never be an author. It’s been forever already, everybody’s gone home, Ocean City’s deserted, the ghost-crabs are tickling across the beach and down the littered cold streets. And the empty halls of clapboard hotels and abandoned funhouses. A tidal wave; an enemy air raid; a monster-crab swelling like an island from the sea. The inhabitants fled in terror. Magda clung to his trouser leg; he alone knew the maze’s secret. “He gave his life that we might live,” said Uncle Karl with a scowl of pain, as he. The fellow’s hands had been tattooed; the woman’s legs, the woman’s fat white legs had. An astonishing coincidence. He yearned to tell Peter. He wanted to throw up for excitement. They hadn’t even chased him. He wished he were dead.

One possible ending would be to have Ambrose come across another lost person in the dark. They’d match their wits together against the funhouse, struggle like Ulysses past obstacle after obstacle, help and encourage each other. Or a girl. By the time they found the exit they’d be closest friends, sweethearts if it were a girl; they’d know each other’s inmost souls, be bound together by the cement of shared adventure; then they’d emerge into the light and it would turn out that his friend was a Negro. A blind girl. President Roosevelt’s son. Ambrose’s former archenemy

Shortly after the mirror room he’d groped along a musty corridor, his heart already misgiving him at the absence of phosphorescent arrows and other signs. He’d found a crack of light — not a door, it turned out, but a seam between the ply board wall panels — and squinting up to it, espied a small old man, in appearance not unlike the photographs at home of Ambrose’s late grandfather, nodding upon a stool beneath a bare, speckled bulb. A crude panel of toggle- and knife-switches hung beside the open fuse box near his head; elsewhere in the little room were wooden levers and ropes belayed to boat cleats. At the time, Ambrose wasn’t lost enough to rap or call; later he couldn’t find that crack. Now it seemed to him that he’d possibly dozed off for a few minutes somewhere along the way; certainly he was exhausted from the afternoon’s sunshine and the evening’s problems; he couldn’t be sure he hadn’t dreamed part or all of the sight. Had an old black wall fan droned like bees and shimmied two flypaper streamers? Had the funhouse operator —gentle, somewhat sad and tired-appearing, in expression not unlike the pho­tographs at home of Ambrose’s late Uncle Konrad — murmured in his sleep? Is there really such a person as Ambrose, or is he a figment of the author’s imagination? Was it Assawoman Bay or Sinepuxent? Are there other errors of fact in this fiction? Was there another sound besides the little slap slap of thigh on ham, like water sucking at the chine-boards of a skiff?

When you’re lost, the smartest thing to do is stay put till you’re found hollering if necessary But to holler guarantees humiliation as well as rescue; keeping silent permits some saving of face — you can act surprised at the fuss when your rescuers find you and swear you weren’t lost, if they do. What’s more you might find your own way yet, however belatedly.

“Don’t tell me your foot’s still asleep!” Magda exclaimed as the three young people walked from the inlet to the area set aside for ferris wheels, carrousels, and other carnival rides, they having decided in favor of the vast and ancient merry-go-round instead of the funhouse. What a sentence, every­thing was wrong from the outset. People don’t know what to make of him, he doesn’t know what to make of himself, he’s only thirteen, athletically and socially inept, not astonishingly bright, but there are antennae; he has.., some sort of receivers in his head; things speak to him, he understands more than he should, the world winks at him through its objects, grabs grinning at his coat. Everybody else is in on some secret he doesn’t know; they’ve forgotten to tell him. Through simple procrastination his mother put off his baptism until this year. Everyone else had it done as a baby; he’d assumed the same of himself, as had his mother, so she claimed, until it was time for him to join Grace Methodist-Protestant and the oversight came out. He was mortified, but pitched sleepless through his private catechizing, intimidated by the ancient mysteries, a thirteen year old would never say that, resolved to experience conversion like St. Augustine. When the water touched his brow and Adam’s sin left him, he contrived by a strain like defecation to bring tears into his eyes — but felt nothing. There was some simple, radical difference about him; he hoped it was genius, feared it was madness, devoted himself to amiability and inconspicuousness. Alone on the seawall near his house he was seized by the terrifying transports he’d thought to find in tool shed, in Communion-cup. The grass was alive! The town, the river, himself, were not imaginary; time roared in his ears like wind; the world was going on! This part ought to be dramatized. The Irish author James Joyce once wrote. Ambrose M — is going to scream.

There is no texture of rendered sensory detail, for one thing. The faded distorting mirrors beside Fat May; the impossibility of choosing a mount when one had but a single ride on the great carrousel; the vertigo attendant on his recognition that Ocean City was worn out, the place of fathers and grandfathers, straw-boatered men and parasoled ladies survived by their amuse­ments. Money spent, the three paused at Peter’s insistence beside Fat May to watch the girls get their skirts blown up. The object was to tease Magda, who said: “I swear, Peter M —, you’ve got a one-track mind! Amby and me aren’t interested in such things.” In the tumbling-barrel, too, just inside the Devil’s mouth enhance to the funhouse, the girls were upended and their boyfriends and others could see up their dresses if they cared to. Which was the whole point, Ambrose realized. Of the entire funhouse! If you looked around, you noticed that almost all the people on the boardwalk were paired off into Couples except the small children; in a way, that was the whole point of Ocean City! If you had X-ray eves and could see everything going on at that instant under the boardwalk and in all the hotel rooms and cars and alleyways, you’d realize that all that normally showed, like restaurants and dance halls and clothing and test-your-strength machines, was merely preparation and inter­mission. Fat May screamed.

Because he watched the going-ons from the corner of his eye, it was Ambrose who spied the half-dollar on the boardwalk near the tumbling-barrel. Losers weepers. The first time he’d heard some people moving through a corridor not far away, just after he’d lost sight of the crack of light, he’d decided not to call to them, for fear they’d guess he was scared and poke fun; it sounded like roughnecks; he’d hoped they’d come by and he could follow in the dark without their knowing. Another time he’d heard just one person, unless he imagined it, bumping along as if on the other side of the plywood; perhaps Peter coming back for him, or Father, or Magda lost too. Or the owner and operator of the funhouse. He’d called out once, as though merrily:

“Anybody know where the heck we are?” But the query was too stiff, his voice cracked, when the sounds stopped he was terrified: maybe it was a queer who waited for fellows to get lost, or a longhaired filthy monster that lived in some cranny of the funhouse. He stood rigid for hours it seemed like, scarcely respiring. His future was shockingly clear, in outline. He tried hold­ing his breath to the point of unconsciousness. There ought to be a button you could push to end your life absolutely without pain; disappear in a flick, like turning out a light. He would push it instantly! He despised Uncle Karl. But he despised his father too, for not being what he was supposed to be. Perhaps his father hated his father, and so on, and his son would hate him, and so on. Instantly!

Naturally he didn’t have nerve enough to ask Magda to go through the funhouse with him. With incredible nerve and to everyone’s surprise he invited Magda, quietly and politely, to go through the funhouse with him. “I warn you, I’ve never been through it before,” he added, laughing easily; “but I reckon we can manage somehow. The important thing to remember, after all, is that it’s meant to be a funhouse; that is, a place of amusement. If people really got lost or injured or too badly frightened in it, the owner’d go out of business. There’d even be lawsuits. No character in a work of fiction can make a speech this long without interruption or acknowledgment from the other characters.”

Mother teased Uncle Karl: “Three’s a crowd, I always heard.” But actually Ambrose was relieved that Peter now had a quarter too. Nothing was what it looked like. Every instant, under the surface of the Atlantic Ocean, millions of living animals devoured one another. Pilots were falling in flames over Europe; women were being forcibly raped in the South Pacific. His father should have taken him aside and said: “There is a simple secret to getting through the funhouse, as simple as being first to see the Towers. Here it is. Peter does not know it; neither does your Uncle Karl. You and I are different. Not surprisingly, you’ve often wished you weren’t. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how unhappy your childhood has been! But you’ll understand, when I tell you, why it had to be kept secret until now. And you won’t regret not being like your brother and your uncle. On the contrary!” If you knew all the stories behind all the people on the boardwalk, you’d see that nothing was what it looked like. Husbands and wives often hated each other; parents didn’t necessarily love their children; et cetera. A child took things for granted because he had nothing to compare his life to and everybody acted as if things were as they should be. Therefore each saw himself as the hero of the story, when the truth might turn out to be that he’s the villain, or the coward. And there wasn’t one thing you could do about it!

Hunchbacks, fat ladies, fools — that no one chose what he was was unbearable. In the movies he’d meet a beautiful young girl in the funhouse; they’d have hairs-breadth escapes from real dangers; he’d do and say the right things; she also; in the end they’d be lovers; their dialogue lines would match up; he’d be perfectly at ease; she’d not only like him well enough, she’d think he was marvelous; she’d lie awake thinking about him, instead of vice versa —the way his face looked in different lights and how he stood and exactly what he’d said — and yet that would be only one small episode in his wonderful life, among many many others. Not a turning point at all. What had happened in the tool shed was nothing. He hated, he loathed his parents! One reason for not writing a lost-in-the-funhouse story is that either everybody’s felt what Ambrose feels, in which case it goes without saying, or else no normal person feels such things, in which case Ambrose is a freak. “Is anything more tire­some, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?” And it’s all too long and rambling, as if the author. For all a person knows the first time through, the end could be just around any corner; perhaps, not impossibly it’s been within reach any number of times. On the other hand he may be scarcely past the start, with everything yet to get through, an intolerable idea.

Fill in: His father’s raised eyebrows when he announced his decision to do the funhouse with Magda. Ambrose understands now, but didn’t then, that his father was wondering whether he knew what the funhouse was for — especially since he didn’t object, as he should have, when Peter decided to come along too. The ticket-woman, witchlike, mortifying him when inad­vertently he gave her his name-coin instead of the half-dollar, then unkindly calling Magda’s attention to the birthmark on his temple: “Watch out for him, girlie, he’s a marked man!” She wasn’t even cruel, he understood, only vulgar and insensitive. Somewhere in the world there was a young woman with such splendid understanding that she’d see him entire, like a poem or story, and find his words so valuable after all that when he confessed his apprehensions she would explain why they were in fact the very things that made him precious to her . . . and to Western Civilization! There was no such girl, the simple truth being. Violent yawns as they approached the mouth. Whispered advice from an old-timer on a bench near the barrel: “Go crabwise and ye’ll get an eyeful without upsetting!” Composure vanished at the first pitch: Peter hollered joyously, Magda tumbled, shrieked, clutched her skirt; Ambrose scrambled crabwise, tight-lipped with terror, was soon out, watched his dropped name-coin slide among the couples. Shame-faced he saw that to get through expeditiously was not the point; Peter feigned assistance in order to trip Magda up, shouted “1 see Christmas!” when her legs went flying. The old man, his latest betrayer, cackled approval. A dim hail then of black-thread cobwebs and recorded gibber: he took Magda’s elbow to stead~’ her against revolving discs set in the slanted floor to throw your feet out from under, and explained to her in a calm, deep voice his theory that each phase of the funhouse was triggered either automatically, by a series of photoelectric de­vices, or else manually by operators stationed at peepholes. But he lost his voice thrice as the discs unbalanced him; Magda was anyhow squealing; but at one point she clutched him about the waist to keep from falling, and her right cheek pressed for a moment against his belt-buckle. Heroically he drew her up, it was his chance to clutch her close as if for support and say: “1 love you.” He even put an arm lightly about the small of her back before a sailor-and-girl pitched into them from behind, sorely treading his left big toe and knocking Magda asprawl with them. The sailor’s girl was a string-haired hussy with a loud laugh and light blue drawers; Ambrose realized that he wouldn’t have said “1 love you” anyhow, and was smitten with self-contempt. How much better it would be to be that common sailor! A wiry little Seaman 3rd, the fellow squeezed a girl to each side and stumbled hilarious into the mirror room, closer to Magda in thirty seconds than Ambrose had got in thirteen years. She giggled at something the fellow said to Peter; she drew her hair from her eyes with a movement so womanly it struck Ambrose’s heart; Peter’s smacking her backside then seemed particularly coarse. But Magda made a pleased indignant face and cried, “All right for you, mister!” and pursued Peter into the maze without a backward glance. The sailor followed after, leisurely, drawing his girl against his hip; Ambrose understood not only that they were all so relieved to be rid of his burdensome company that they didn’t even notice his absence, but that he himself shared their relief. Stepping from the treacherous passage at last into the mirror-maze, he saw once again, more clearly than ever, how readily he deceived himself into supposing he was a person. He even foresaw, wincing at his dreadful self-knowledge, that he would repeat the deception, at ever-rarer intervals, all his wretched life, so fearful were the alternatives. Fame, madness, suicide; per­haps all three. It’s not believable that so young a boy could articulate that reflection, and in fiction the merely true must always yield to the plausible. Moreover, the symbolism is in places heavy-footed. Yet Ambrose M —understood, as few adults do, that the famous loneliness of the great was no popular myth but a general truth — furthermore, that it was as much cause as effect.

All the preceding except the last few sentences is exposition that should’ve been done earlier or interspersed with the present action instead of lumped together. No reader would put up with so much with such prolixity. It’s interesting that Ambrose’s father, though presumably an intelligent man (as indicated by his role as grade-school principal), neither encouraged nor discouraged his sons at all in any way — as if he either didn’t care about them or cared all right but didn’t know how to act. If this fact should contribute to one of them’s becoming a celebrated but wretchedly unhappy scientist, was it a good thing or not? He too might someday face the question; it would be useful to know whether it had tortured his father for years, for example, or never once crossed his mind.

In the maze two important things happened. First, our hero found a name-coin someone else had lost or discarded: AMBROSE, suggestive of the famous lightship and of his late grandfather’s favorite dessert, which his mother used to prepare on special occasions out of coconut, oranges, grapes, and what else. Second, as he wondered at the endless replication of his image in the mirrors, second, as he lost himself in the reflection that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible, better make him eighteen at least, yet that would render other things unlikely, he heard Peter and Magda chuckling somewhere together in the maze. “Here!” “No, here!” they shouted to each other; Peter said, “Where’s Amby?” Magda murmured “Amb?” Peter called. In a pleased, friendly voice. He didn’t reply. The truth was, his brother was a happy-go-lucky youngster who’d’ve been better off with a regular brother of his own, but who seldom complained of his lot and was generally cordial. Ambrose’s throat ached; there aren’t enough different ways to say that. He stood quietly while the two young people giggled and thumped through the glittering maze, hurrah’d their discovery of its exit, cried out in joyful alarm at what next beset them. Then he set his mouth and followed after, as he supposed, took a wrong turn, strayed into the pass wherein he lingers yet.

The action of conventional dramatic narrative may be represented by a diagram called Freitag’s Triangle:

B

A C

or more accurately by a variant of that diagram:

C

B D

A

in which AB represents the exposition, B the introduction of conflict, BC the “rising action,” complication, or development of the conflict, C the climax, or turn of the action, CD the denouement, or resolution of the conflict. While there is no reason to regard this pattern as an absolute necessity, like many other conventions it became conventional because great numbers of people over many years learned by trial and error that it was effective; one ought not to forsake it, therefore, unless one wishes to forsake as well the effect of drama or has clear cause to feel that deliberate violation of the “normal” pattern can better can better effect that effect. This can’t go on much longer; it can go on forever. He died telling stories to himself in the dark; years later, when that vast unsuspected area of the funhouse came to light, the first expedition found his skeleton in one of its labyrinthine corridors and mistook it for part of the entertainment. He died of starvation telling himself stories in the dark; but unbeknownst unbeknownst to him, an assistant operator of the funhouse, happening to overhear him, crouched just behind the ply board partition and wrote down his every word. The operator’s daughter, an exquisite young woman with a figure unusually well developed for her age, crouched just behind the partition and transcribed his every word. Though she had never laid eyes on him, she recognized that here was one of Western Culture’s truly great imaginations, the eloquence of whose suffering would be an inspiration to unnumbered. And her heart was torn between her love for the misfortunate young man (yes, she loved him, though she had never laid though she knew him only — but how well! — through his words, and the deep, calm voice in which he spoke them) between her love et cetera and her womanly intuition that only in suffering and isolation could he give voice et cetera. Lone dark dying. Quietly she kissed the rough ply board, and a tear fell upon the page. Where she had written in shorthand Where she had written in shorthand Where she had written in shorthand Where she et cetera. A long time ago we should have passed the apex of Freitag’s Triangle and made brief work of the dénoue­ment; the plot doesn’t rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, di­gresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires. The climax of the story must be its protagonist’s discovery of a way to get through the funhouse. But he had found none, may have ceased to search.

What relevance does the war have to the story? Should there be fire­works outside or not?

Ambrose wandered, languished, dozed. Now and then he fell into his habit of rehearsing to himself the unadventurous story of his life, narrated from the third-person point of view, from his earliest memory parenthesis of maple leaves stirring in the summer breath of tidewater Maryland end of parenthesis to the present moment. Its principal events, on this telling, would appear to have been A, B, C, and D.

He imagined himself years hence, successful, married, at ease in the world, the trials of his adolescence far behind him. He has come to the seashore with his family for the holiday: how Ocean City has changed! But at one seldom at one ill-frequented end of the boardwalk a few derelict. amusements survive from times gone by: the great carrousel from the turn of! the century, with its monstrous griffins and mechanical concert band; the roller coaster rumored since 1916 to have been condemned; the mechanical shooting gallery in which only the image of our enemies changed: His own son laughs with Fat May and wants to know what a funhouse is; Ambrose hugs the sturdy lad close and smiles around his pipe stem at his wife.

The family’s going home. Mother sits between Father and Uncle Karl, who teases him good-naturedly who chuckles over the fact that the comrade with whom he’d fought his way shoulder to shoulder through the funhouse had turned out to be a blind Negro girl — to their mutual discomfort, as they’d opened their souls. But such are the walls of custom, which even. Whose arm is where? How must it feel. He dreams of a funhouse vaster by’ far than any yet constructed; but by then they may be out of fashion, like~ steamboats and excursion trains. Already quaint and seedy: the draperied ladies on the frieze of the carrousel are his father’s father’s mooncheeked dreams; if he thinks of it more he will vomit his apple-on-a-stick.

He wonders: will he become a regular person? Something has gone wrong; his vaccination didn’t take; at the Boy-Scout initiation campfire he only pretended to be deeply moved, as he pretends to this hour that it is not so bad after all in the funhouse, and that he has a little limp. How long will it last? He envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet ut­terly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. Nobody had enough imagination. He could design such a place him­self, wiring and all, and he’s only thirteen years old. He would be its operator: panel lights would show what was up in every cranny of its cunning of its multivarious vastness; a switch-flick would ease this fellow’s way, complicate that’s, to balance things out; if anyone seemed lost or frightened, all the operator had to do was.

He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he’s not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator — though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed. (1968)