

# Coming of Age in America : A Rite of Passage Away

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## Part One : A View to Live

The College of William and Mary and I did not get off to a good start. Now, after having spent three years there, I am on academic probation. There is one decent semester, just after quitting the football team, with a B average, but as academic study goes on textbooks and classrooms appeal to me less and less. I do find the various lecture forums — open to everyone on campus and free — stimulating, the speakers are all people from outside our school and many from outside academia. I still remember listening to Michael Harrington the famous sociologist and author of *The Other America*, which I'd read in high school and nodded at. David Premack, who at the time was doing vanguard research into primate intelligence. Jeroid X Green, a legal pioneer, early on used racism as legal defense. Leonard Matlovich, kicked out of the U.S. military on charges of homosexuality. John Dean of the Nixon administration came to speak about Watergate. The man who was saying the Kennedy assassination could not have been done by one man. After these forums — all at night — some of us would return to our dormitory rooms and have all night discussions. I am grateful to whoever it was who organized those forums.

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William and Mary isn't where I wanted to go to college. Since my second year of (a four year) high school the image in my head is a small liberal arts college somewhere in New England. This image maybe comes from a summer trip we took there as a family when I was 15. The land is green, rocky and with many clear gently babbling brooks ; my parents would pull off the road at my urging to let me bathe in some.

The schools in New England that interest me (such as Bates or Colby College) do not offer athletic scholarships. William and Mary (in Virginia) does, which is why my father urges me to go there.

Two schools in Pennsylvania heatedly recruit me. One, Bucknell University, offers me early admission. At the time Bucknell does not offer athletic scholarships. Financial assistance, back then, is calculated according to need. There is a document called a Parent's Confidential Statement (PCS) that must be prepared. It tells completely a family's private money matters, and is sent to an agency located in Princeton, New Jersey. On that document we list three schools to which our family's financial information will be sent.

That is standard operating procedure, but, in the case of Bucknell University (BU), the assistant football coach there, the one who actively recruits me (making several visits to school and home, telephoning me often, inviting me as a guest for an all expense paid weekend visit to their campus), instructs my parents to send directly to BU's financial aid office a rough draft — not the official PCS form we send to the Princeton agency — a practice copy.

After BU receives that and performs their calculations, the coach telephones again to happily inform us that it has been determined that our family qualifies for financial aid for the full amount of the tuition cost. If I agree to play football at BU.

At the same time, Penn (University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school in Philadelphia, across the Delaware River from our home in Riverton, New Jersey) is also aggressively recruiting me. We are so close as to make their job easy. I am interested in writing and am told by a guidance counselor at high school that a good way to make a career of writing is through journalism. That is why Penn arranges for an alumnus named Frank Dolson to take me to a fine steak dinner at a ritzy restaurant and then to a professional ice hockey game in the city. Frank Dolson at the time was head sports writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, a large and respected newspaper.

Not long after that, Harry Gamble, head coach at Penn, and an assistant coach named Anderson visit our home one evening to meet and talk with my mother and father and encourage them to send me to Penn. My father pleads that Penn is too expensive. He wants Penn to give me an athletic scholarship, but Coach Gamble explains that, unfortunately, Penn does not award scholarships for sports. He tells us that the financial aid office at the university has reviewed our PCS and has determined that we do not qualify for financial assistance.

At that point my father blurts out that Bucknell has offered full tuition as financial aid. Coaches Gamble and Anderson returned to Penn and contacted whatever regulatory agency oversees matters connected with university sports. Harry Gamble blew the whistle, cried “FOUL” ! Shortly after that we receive a phone call from Bucknell’s coach telling us that unfortunately BU has to retract its offer of financial assistance. He adds, though, that if I agree to attend Bucknell the university will honor its promise of money beginning with my second year.

I decide, at my father’s urging, to attend The College of William and Mary because they come up with a legitimate offer of money. As soon as I get there (football training camp begins in mid August, a few weeks before regular students arrive), all first year players are asked to sign a loyalty oath pledging to uphold the United States constitution. Why ? It’s all so strange to me ; it seems like paranoia. It is 1972. The war in Vietnam continues. Along with the pledge, coaches advise us to enlist in ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps, pronounced by students as “rot-see”). This is just two years after an ROTC building at a state university in Ohio was burnt down by students and activists (such as members of SDS — Students for Democratic Society) from outside the university.

ROTC has not yet been driven off the W&M campus, maybe because two years ago in Ohio the National Guard had been called out and four students had been shot dead (9 others injured).

Unexpectedly being asked to take an oath and advised to sign up for military training is confusing for 18-year-old me. What does any of this have to do with football ? I don’t get it. I am a bit naive, have no political leanings right or left. Still, it doesn’t feel right to be asked to sign papers pledging this or that and to sign up for military training. It is a shock.

I choose not to sign and not to enroll in ROTC. Later they maybe penalized me for my decision. It’s hard to say, and it depends on one’s interpretation of events. Nothing of course can be proved. It’s all in a thick mist, but one thing is certain : football at W&M is no longer football ; it’s politics and money.

The whole push for players to join ROTC is because, in the university’s eyes, we are financial investments. How much money will our play bring to university coffers ? There is a war on and there is a system for conscripting young men for the battlefield. Until recently students in universities have

been exempt from military conscription, but that system has been changed ; now a lottery is being used to determine who gets drafted into the army.

The College of William and Mary (probably other schools as well) devised a way to keep its players (= investments) out of the military draft. They do this by having us join the ROTC program on campus. If we are in ROTC, we are exempt from conscription. The army cannot, while we are enrolled in ROTC, take us off the football field and send us to Vietnam. I'm not saying it's illegal what the college did. They have a rather famous law school there. Neither is W&M the only place where a legal system is manipulated for the benefit of a particular group.

While some American males our age are in Vietnam getting their arms or legs blown off, crippled physically and maybe psychologically for life, getting blown to bits or blowing Vietnamese to smithereens, destroying entire villages, poisoning the natural environment for future generations, we are exempt because we can play football, so that people in America have diversion.

At that moment it is clear to me that these coaches do not really care about us as individuals. They are acting as agents for the institution. I decide not to join ROTC and not to sign their stupid pledge. The pledge is a surreal legalistic way of having us demonstrate that our intent is to behave as unconcerned dumb football players, that it is not our purpose to bring down the United States government along with all its connected institutions including places of higher learning. It means we're not commie red radical rebels.

It is too much for me, too much about fear. College life and I do not get off to a good start. These are difficult times. W&M is supposed to be a "good" university and is respected by many. Thomas Jefferson was there. George Washington was there. Many other early on big wigs. Thanks to the football coaches and to the whole paranoiac power system their behavior links back to, the true religion they worship, my initial impression is that a university is a fraud. Years later, from my life learning, I realize that the whole frantic scene is a madness about maintaining a certain — in this case capitalist — way of life.

I sensed back then — but could not articulate it — that there must be something wrong with a way of life if it has to resort to devious, unscrupulous, and at times ruthless ways to uphold it. (Because

there is big money and power for some in that way of life.) Then again, many might shrug and respond that these are minor examples of the everyday run of the mill corruption that is the way society works in America.

Starting out on my own in the world is a huge disappointment. Not only in athletics, but in scholastics my experience in college is not to my liking. Before arriving I have a dream. It is not about becoming this or that in an occupational world. It is a dream of being able to freely explore, to freely go where my curiosity takes me, to follow my spirit.

I cannot accuse William and Mary of bait and switch or any misrepresentation because the catalog they send me clearly outlines a course of study that has nothing to do with my dream of university life. Still, my imagination persists. The college does its best to kill my dream with required courses in predetermined fields of study. A college destroys many young people's dreams, young people who, in a state of suspended disbelief maybe, imagine college as a place at last to be able to learn what they want to learn. They imagine that college study can be about themselves. (It is about them but only about them in a dimension that is deemed useful by the socioeconomic powers that be, which means how to be put into servitude by the capitalist state, or a communist state for that matter. Work, work, work.)

Granted, there is a possibility of taking some elective courses, but those courses are more of a side show in a main event that is the predetermined course of study. It is possible that our dissatisfaction can be addressed by adding a totally free study program to balance the university-planned program, but doing that is too much to ask, maybe, too potentially revolutionary (= the true purpose of education being to change things for the better for all — for humans, and, in the sense that we might stop destroying ecosystems, for non-humans as well), for an atavistic and already paranoid administration and board. It's true too that for most it's not a do-what-you-want-to-do world, which is what education might set out to change if it wants to be truly education and not just indoctrination.

Being able to study freely. Where has that ever been possible? When? "Freely," here, does not have to mean that scholastic rigor is abandoned. It does not have to mean Timothy Leary and experimentation with LSD or using, with Castaneda, peyote with Don Juan. It doesn't have to mean delving into the paranormal or into mysticism or Daoist magic. Neither does free study preclude learning

about something by doing it. Experiencing it.

Liberating a university simply means that a university can be anything we imagine it to be. “Imagine” can mean anything. To me, the division of experience into rational and irrational arises from our human imagination. It is an imagined difference. Looking around at earth and sky, at flowers and moon, I don’t see any rationality or irrationality.

The thing is that liberatory pursuits are more often than not viewed as a threat to the throne of reason, which often is cosmetic for the throne of power. Are investigations into so-called fringe areas intended as threats or are they only perceived as threat because a scholastic institution, along with the particular socioeconomic way of life a school serves, which itself in its inhumanity and destruction does not seem all that reasonable, profits by labeling them as opposition — not as complementarity ?

Like a horror movie bogeyman, the college kills our dreams, devastates our curiosity. Starting out on my own in the world is a huge disappointment. For me, though, it is a private distress, disaffection, disillusion. I do not seek out others who may have similar feelings. I do not seek counseling. I do not join a protest group. I am a bit of a lone wolf. Cynicism is a popular attitude on campus.

Starting out is a worse experience for some. Some it devastates, destroys. Suicides or drug overdose or mental institutions. The violence Americans prove capable of in Vietnam is violence born of culture. It is not necessary for our survival, not instinctual. We don’t know it but we are in a struggle to survive our own society, our own minds. The supposed dangers of the tooth and claw natural world are replaced by a destructive world born of our own minds.

Still others, most others it seems, ones who look at the world only as a place in which to prove themselves successful, do not seem to mind. The more chances for success the more happily they wallow. They paste their lives all over with symbols of success. They don’t even know where their lives went.

I quit the football team before one year is over. Eventually I quit the entire university.

Unable to quit the adult world entirely, what happens ? Do I, with alcohol and other substances, try to numb myself to it ?

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Maybe in our heads viewing a lake is more attractively peaceful than a pond view for those who plan to be dead.

This is a place to be dead in. I work here. That's closer than most get with their periodic visits. Situated right smack off a highway (route 130 in Cinnaminson, New Jersey), this memorial park is in a spot heavy with exhaust fumes and incessant noise from metal traffic. Not a great place for a breather. Night and day, vehicles slave a monotony, droning north and south.

Heading towards the cemetery you pass a squalor of commercial ventures ; dumpy cheap motels, Seven-Eleven, half-deserted shopping plazas, greasy smelling fast food franchises, gasoline stands, junk filled drug stores. Supply lines for our lives.

Then you drive through an entrance to this memorial park ; all of a sudden everything seems different. At first glance. In marble is Christ giving his sermon on the mount. A view spreads out eastward to take in a grass and tree expanse pocked with dark patches that are graves. These are not tombstone graves but ones with bronze plaques as markers that lie flat with the lay of the land.

Flowers are set on some of these. Pull in off the highway with all it's noise ; all of a sudden there's a quiet reverence. For loved ones under grass.

Nowhere are you permitted to see anything connected with death as it is. There is nothing that decays. Everything that rots is removed. Flowers visitors leave are taken away once signs of wilting appear. Nothing defiles loving memory.

It's a fictitious environment. Artificial. Fabricated. Staged. It is a deathless scene presided over and sanctified by statues of a savior of souls and figures of winged angels. The park is obviously Christian. If you go to Disneyland Mickey and Donald move around to set the mood. Here you see

Jesus and angels watching over. It's comforting.

Lakeview Memorial Park. There is no body of water much larger than a pond.

In real estate, property is worth more if it can be said to have a view of an ocean, a bay, a river, or a lake. Even if water can be seen only through a toilet window it's listed as "partial ocean view." They could have named the park Bleak Highway View, or Sky View, but these appellations, though not contrary to fact, do not readily translate into dollar value.

My job is to try to sell chunks of this scene to those who are not ready to make such plans and who are often uncomfortable with the topic of dying. It is my job to try to convince them that they need to prepare for death. Then get them to buy what it is I am selling. I do not present it as if their choice is to buy someplace somewhere or be tossed out with garbage in a landfill site.

No. I give them the sales pitch I learned. The circular sales pitch that always comes back not to death that dreadful topic but to closing a deal, to signing a paper, to writing a check. My job is to offer people an opportunity to take a reasonable, logical, approach to their death, but mostly they don't want to accept the inevitable. To ignore it as long as possible is what most choose to do. Some people just aren't planners, they don't plan for anything. I know where they're coming from.

My title is estate counselor, which is a fancy name for a cemetery plot salesperson. It's like calling yourself a sanitation engineer instead of a trash collector. A graveyard becomes cemetery, memorial park, mall of everlasting remembrance.

There is a one-week training period which enables me to refer to myself in the world as an estate counselor. There is a looseleaf booklet we are given which is a self-contained, step by step sales approach complete with laminated full-page color pictures we are to show "clients" as we go on with our sales pitch counseling.

At the end there is inevitably Lakeview, the photo of the Jesus statue standing at the park's entrance. We present it as if it's the only logical choice a person can make. As with the life insurance business there is an implication that anyone who truly cares must make the intelligent choice and be



prepared. We strive to let people think of themselves as intelligent in order to suck them in.

Other than that, it's probably much like the real estate business. We work from things called leads. These are postcards which have come back from mass canvassing. A potential customer (client) is any card that comes back. The cards are sorted according to a degree of interest reflected in the addressee's response to questions on the card : mild, very interested, contact me at once, dying to hear all about it.

There are three of us. Upon finishing the training session we are given cold, worn out leads. These leads are people who once returned the postcard sent them. Having returned Lakeview's card, they are contacted and contacted and contacted again but never buy. Maybe Lakeview should throw those leads away, but that is not the point. The company pays us on commission. Even if we do not sell, telephone soliciting these people over and over keeps Lakeview's name out there just as a T.V. commercial or other advertisement does. The company plays the odds that someone in a family eventually will die and wants the name in the heads of the grieving to be Lakeview. Having us telephone cold leads is, for the company, free advertising since they don't have to pay us for it.

Meanwhile with everyone on our sales force dialing up people in each surrounding township every working day year round and getting paid nothing to do this, the company has a slick system going.

Besides us newcomers, there are two senior estate counselors, Virginia and Susan. There is the sales manager Eli. And there is Mr. Cole, the director of the whole shebang. He seems really old to soon-to-be-twenty-one me.

Fat jowled and plenty of wrinkles, neither his age nor his substantial weight prevents him from shackling up with Virginia every Friday afternoon at the Super 130 Motel. We hear about it soon enough after we are out of the training period and are rookie counselors.

Virginia is nearing early old age. She's a redhead who some might have found attractive when she was younger or even now maybe. Both she and Susan have been through divorces, more than one for each.

Virginia and Susan get all the good leads, the hot leads. As does Eli because he is sales manager and automatically gives himself good leads. I don't know how Susan gets strong leads. Eli tells us it is because she closes a lot of sales, and she is able to do this because she has big boobs. Is he joking? I don't know. Cole is banging Virginia which is why she gets good leads. Is any of this true? Probably anyone who can afford to stay around long enough will someday be in line for the golden leads, the hot leads. Both women are collecting alimony, so they have at least something to live on.

Malone, Mendez and I get all the dead end leads. Mendez is recently retired from a career in the military. He has a check coming in every month from the army. He is not going to starve if he does not sell big time. Malone and I are about the same age, we live with our parents. Malone has spent time at a community college but does not catch fire there.

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I could have continued on at college, graduated, and moved into a decent job, but to me it is a waste of time. To me it is a private disillusionment that is not the cynicism shared by many college students. What is the point of any of it: to graduate into America society and play adult? But here I am anyway, and it's likely I'm worse off than if I'd stayed on at school.

After one semester away, my father's good friend Robert "Shorty" Wallace, persuades me to return to and finish college. He even writes a check for my first semester tuition. I go back to my old school William and Mary, but soon stop attending classes. I don't even bother. I register, go to classes the first week; buy the textbooks, but that is it. Instead of attending lectures I go to the library and read. Just stroll down aisles, pick a book off a shelf. Whatever attracts me at the moment. How to prepare wild game for eating. Marshall McLuhan on hot and cold media. Playboy interviews. Timothy Leary. I take a book to a nearby desk and read until lunch or dinner. That's how my days go, my last semester there. My grades are all failing, which is why I'm on academic probation.

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Americans are being told their country is in an economic recession and that the recession has to do

with what is called an oil shock. It seems likely, to me, we are being lied to or not told the entire story.

It might be said that I am in depression. My personal situation, it seems, is connected with various things going on in the world, or going wrong in the world. All within a few years' span. There is a shared sense that recent years of various counter culture movements have climaxed and that forces of social repression are regaining strength. My suspicion is that the government has artificially induced (is lying about) an economic recession knowing that conservatism will accompany bad times. Students and people in general, they anticipate, will attend to getting or keeping jobs and will dabble less in trying to make a better world, behavior which the government chooses to call rebellion. Nixon, though elected with a secret plan for peace, secretly bombs Laos and Cambodia in his deranged pursuit of a white whale. It's as if the ship of state is being sucked under in a whirlpool of its own lies, as if this is what Melville meant in *Moby Dick*. I'm on board. The Watergate scandal broke then. Lies. The Vietnam War — more lies — is making bad karma for everyone.

In a more personal dimension there is rejection, and there is my disgust about having to enter an adult world. In most adult faces I see people who are really messed up, out of whack, their lives feeding on non-vital things. Nor do I sense anything in an adult world about which to maintain a positive mental attitude. *As a salesman you have to sell yourself*, my father told me. I can't have a positive mental attitude about selling graves and do not have a positive mental attitude about selling myself.

It's three years since I entered college, times are worse than when I started. I am in a slump ; that much I can sense. I cannot articulate all the permeations and permutations of the scene. There is a feeling that something is wrong, something is missing in my life.

With my father down in his little basement office he built for himself, I make up excuses for my lack of ambition, for my poor performance at school, and for accumulated parking fines I have purposely neglected to pay. Suddenly in tears it comes out that I still love a high school sweetheart.

Is it a sly attempt to escape from being interrogated or is it a truth that's been suppressed coming to light all on its own ? A despair in me is looking to love for salvation.

*Well, isn't there something you can do about it, dad wants to know. But she's already married.*

At the time I'm not thinking of anything in my life as being moved by love. In high school there was dating, there was "going steady," but nothing, for me at least, pointed beyond that dimension. One girl seems to have touched me more deeply than others.

If I go to church maybe I will hear about God's love in our lives but I stay away from church. My conscious life, life as I am aware of it, is moved by others : doing what parents want me to do, not doing what they want me to do, doing what others expect me to do, what society expects, or not. Then rebelling against it all. What do I want to do ? Do I even want to do anything ?

In college I live a lie. My heart is not in it. I start off trying to play football there when I really don't care much about football once I get away from home. I try to play student though I don't have much feel for what is being lectured. I have what to me seems a natural interest in certain things. I am curious in certain ways. Not in others.

Living without heart and not knowing it. A heart can be shut away somewhere, somehow. Where does it go ? Where do our lives go ?

Are my tears love's ? It is a shock, a sudden glimpse of how vital heart is once you see you've lost it.

I am living at home and looking in the Burlington County, South Jersey, and Philadelphia newspapers for job listings. Everyday I go out, drive to different businesses, fill out applications, try to get an interview. Many if not all the personnel men — they are all men — tell me I should return to college and finish my education.

One bit in a newspaper is for Lakeview Memorial Park. I go out to be interviewed. It isn't too demanding. *What in particular about myself do I think qualifies me for a position as estate counselor ?* Well, I was a theater major for one semester at school. What am I supposed to say ? *I am qualified because I am a pathetic nothing of a human being with no desire to do anything. So do I get the job ?*

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The Lakeview job just sort of died out. One afternoon I am “on duty,” which means it is me who must attend to and conduct business with any “at needs,” who are people who need a grave right away. It is my first experience. There is no training for this because we need no sales pitch. If someone shows up they are surely wanting a grave. Someone has died. Still, at the beginning of my time on duty, Susan quietly informs me that if someone comes in looking for one plot for the deceased we should try to sell them a family plot. She adds that we get higher commission for at needs.

There is no guidance in how to speak or what tone of voice to take or what to say or how to go about conducting business or how to handle situations when everyone around me is in tears broken up or in shock. Do they just assume it will be solemn ? There is no counseling for the counselor.

A group does come in that day. A family. A child, an eighteen year old son, died last night in an auto crash on this highway not far from here. I go tensely into a spacious, luxurious parlor to greet them. I tell them how sorry I am to hear what happened.

I am supposed to eventually escort them into a sales office where business is conducted. The mother is still in tears, sobbing. She has to be supported by someone next to her, a man. We stand longer in the parlor, people concerned with the mother. Longer and longer. People glance at me. I interpret their looks to mean that it’s up to me to get things going. Uptight, it comes as an electric current that I should say something along those lines, I don’t know what, something probably to calm the mother. Try to calm her, quiet her, then go conduct business. “Mam, you’re going to have to stop crying now.” I meant that she’s going to have to pull herself together if we are to get on with things.

One of the men goes into the office and asks that I be relieved. (That is what I am told later.) Susan comes in. She takes over, conducts the business.

It seems to me that I am a failure here at this adult job. With that comes the implication that I am a failure as a person too, as a human being. Do I believe that ? Maybe because of being in a sense perpetually disoriented I don’t have much belief in how the world measures behavior. I am not really

trying to succeed, nor am I even aware that I'm supposed to try. Is this experience a test of life? Why can't I say the right words that will offend no one and let the sale go smoothly? Is there something wrong with me?

My heart flees their grief. I cannot make pretend, and, with this family who just lost someone dear, I cannot bring myself to do business.

It's not their fault. They don't make the system that sends an inexperienced and untutored twenty year old to tend to a mother who can hardly stand being here. Looking at me, two years older than her dead son, her pangs get worse.

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I am a confused young man. Who do I think I am? I don't want to think I'm anyone, but I feel the world forcing something, someone, on me. An adult identity. Then I will be able to answer the question "Who are you?" Right now I don't know who or where I am in the world. I'm disoriented. Am I supposed to be someone different from the me I have always been or is that me supposed to evolve into something more urbane, polished, and, to me, repulsive?

I sometimes screw up. The world creates pressure and fear in me and through pressure and fear I am not able to get a clear sense of what I'm about. A friend, less than a year before, took his own life. He is buried here. In a matter of weeks I too, boozed up, will crash into a pole just off this highway. I work at a cemetery.

A few nights each week I sit on a barstool with chums around my age. We come from the same town, attended the same schools. There are other locals of different generations. Some old timers. It is Mitchell's Tavern. We suck down beers, sometimes shots and beers.

There is a sports game on the bar's T.V. or there is music from a jukebox. Irv the bartender at times, especially Friday and Saturday nights, sings along to Frank Sinatra as the night goes on.

Relaxation and togetherness is at times the mood, which we have to pay for but which the next morn-

ing is gone leaving me in alone again. Then, facing out towards a bleak highway, there is a sales office. There are rubber banded stacks of cold leads to call. There are voices on telephones that do not want to talk with grave marketing me. I don't blame them ; I don't want to talk with them either.

What sort of life is this for anyone ? What sort of fulfillment is there supposed to be ? Where are all the people ? The ones from my high school days ? Life doesn't seem so wonderful to me. What else is there ? In my mind is a kaleidoscope of images ; things to do when you are lost. Going somewhere, getting out. Or Jobs, careers. The Peace Corps. Something fulfilling that doesn't require me to memorize things I don't want to memorize, something that let's me just be me.

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There is no one I can put myself in care of. It's a human care I cannot give myself. Is that what others are for ?

Are booze and the bar scene what life is about ? Is going to college what life is about ?

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This mother seeing in me her dead son : what will help ?

I am here with "at needs." This is what death can do. If there is such a thing as success death makes failures of us all. Not just me. This is sorrow life can be. You can't know anything and look at it fully. It has to be felt, just felt. You feel it expand as if the whole sky is a gaping wound.

Getting on with our lives grows over our eyes.

((Maybe here I should add something uplifting. After a couple years I return to college. By that time I could apply as a fully independent adult, which meant that I qualified to receive full financial aid. I didn't have to pay anything. Somehow, from somewhere, and for some reason, motivation to learn came my way and I became a serious student. Though honors never motivate me my name appears regularly on the Dean's List. The words "cum laude" and "departmental honors" appear on my

diploma. I continue on to graduate school and finish a master's degree. But : so what ? I still suffer, I still die.)))

## **Part Two : Speak Truth to Power**

Out of college on academic probation, my mother gets me a job at the dairy retailer she works for. Mom is office manager there, and, as she gets older, is promoted to administrative assistant to the president. It is a small, family run outfit that buys milk from a bottling plant, has it put in cartons with their own label, and sends their sales force out to establish accounts such as with the city of Philadelphia and what was called a Get Set Program. This, if I remember correctly, is a preschool or day care thing the city sponsors.

At this dairy enterprise is an office, in which my mother works, and there is "the dock," which is where delivery trucks are loaded from a refrigerated warehouse. Milk, juice, and other things are packed in plastic crates that fit into each other and stand as stacks. With a hand-truck we cart a day's order for these into our trucks, which are insulated and cool so the milk will not spoil. It is January and into February I am there.

A fellow named Joe teaches me his route. He is the one I ride with for a week or so until I get the hang of it. He is a Philadelphia man, and knows this city well. I am not. Across the Delaware River in Jersey is my home ; only a few places in Philly are familiar to me.

He is a quiet Italian-American guy. Dark complexion. Forty-something I'd say. Easy to get along with. Nice enough. He knows my mother. Everyone does. She treats people nicely which is why maybe the people there treat me nicely.

Charles is head of it all. He and his two brothers are owners and Charles is president. He is a retired naval commander. The other brothers are Ted and John. Charles's son Walter runs things out on the dock.

He hollers and swears a lot, has a bowlegged stride, talks like he is an officer at a military boot camp. He looks still boyish in his blonde hair and fleshy pasty white face with glossy blue gray eyes



behind tinted gold frame glasses. Walter in fact has been in the military, in the U.S. Marines as an officer, and has served in Vietnam, and has, he tells me, many notches on his weapon, which he says he is ashamed to say, but which he thinks he needs to say to me anyway, whether to impress me or to bring fear into me or what, I don't know.

Walter seems to have a lot of noise going on inside him. Which you can tell by his sound on the job. He comes from a family that is not hurting for money. The military takes care of its officers. While at the same time it seems that his upbringing may have been very strict, like home schooled military ; in all aspects groomed for the service.

His wife, he for some reason tells me, thinks he is cold. I wonder to myself why she would marry a cold man. His telling me these things surprises me. Is he in one of those groups sessions I hear about, is he seeing a counselor who tells him he has to get these issues out in the open, is this his idea of what we civilians talk about, is he trying to make ours a one big happy family workplace with himself and his troubles at its center, or is he falling apart and needing someone to speak to and I seem little brotherly enough or sensitive enough to reach out to. I dunno. Or is it a combination of the above and maybe more going on with Walter ?

From the higher ups he no doubt feels pressure, from his father and uncles. From the father especially. What does it feel like to have someone who is boss and who is father come chew you out in front of those who are working under you ?

Often he speaks of his men, those who served under him in Nam. Has he lost many ? Are their lost lives still clinging to him, freezing him, stiffening him little by little ? He tells me once how his wife wants to leave him. Take their two kids. There is a soap opera accent to these confidences. Life isn't any easier for Walter, not even with all of his military tough upbringing. A strange brew he is.

Supposedly cold and unlovable Walter comes up with odd, twisted turns of phrase like when he becomes angry at one of the office women about something. He's on the phone with one and I am in his prefab office on the dock waiting to receive instructions. Betty made some error (the drivers continually complain about mistakes made by women in the office and women in the office always blame things on the drivers) and when Walter slams down the receiver he shouts, maybe because I am there

to hear or so that someone maybe might care to understand him in all his frustration : “*THAT GOD-DAMNED PLASTIC-TITTED BROAD !*” Wow ! I’ve never heard such an expression as “plastic-titted broad.” This is a different world for sure. Work world. Walter world. An unfamiliar scene there on the murky predawn docks.

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Another driver is Malcomb, a young dark-skinned African-American, small framed, a bit older than me. Friendly. He wears a woolen Africa-colored skull cap, keeps his beard trimmed short. Malcomb knows the ropes, works hard, has kids to support, talks the talk and walks the walk. Uncomfortable in these surroundings maybe.

Horace is a veteran. He drives the big tractor trailer. He is a tall slender African-American with a light complexion. There is a sensitive look to him ; he seems still a child, playful. Like me in a way.

Even in the early hours our work begins, Horace is “up” : wide eyed, talkative. Up on something is sure but it may have been something legal like coffee or No-Doze. I don’t know. Maybe just a morning man. Very very morning. Swigging coffee every free moment. Along with a bun his enormous Seven-Eleven styrofoam cup of coffee is a daily presence on a shelf off to the side of the loading platform. Any momentary break in the action he’s hurriedly there. He too is a hard worker. It is a job that requires much hustle loading our trucks until we get out on the road.

My mentor Joe is a laid back guy. Good sort to guide me. No pressure. Quiet. He’s obviously flustered by the morning pace, more at home with driving and the delivery aspect of the work. He still lives with his mother. Is he unmarried, or maybe divorced ? I forget. Plump, built like a butterball turkey. Balding. Smokes. Joe stops along the route at a bar for a beer, at another for a sandwich at break. He is from South Philly, home of the Stallone character Rocky Balboa. It seems to me Joe is into something. Secretive. Is he running numbers ? He may have some other operation going on. Or is it that he is barely holding himself together ?

Maybe Joe doesn’t want to say much to me because my mother works in the office ; she probably has

something to do with his paycheck. Maybe he is hesitant to say anything because he knows I've been in college and he is ashamed at his lack of education. It may be that he is just quiet to the point of making me suspicious. Strange, it's as if he clams up, like I am some foreign entity he is unaccustomed to, or afraid of.

I'm not much a talker either. Timid at first.

It is a relaxed route. We deliver milk and juice, and it has to be there for the kids' lunch or morning snack. There is no frantic rush ; there is no insane taskmaster in an office scolding us for having the truck out longer than necessary, warning us not to burn excess gasoline. There is no mechanic inspecting our truck after each run reporting to an office that we are too hard on the vehicle. Our route is not the whole city but one section of Philly called the Northeast.

Our trucks are not new trucks. The vehicle inspection stickers on their windshields are fake, obtained through the black market. Those trucks have never been inspected and are kept in such a condition that they will run, period. The way this knowledge comes to me almost takes my life and could have taken someone else's. Philadelphia is not what can be called a hilly town but there are a few and my route takes me down one of them. It is a long gentle slope I turn onto, a street lined with parked cars both sides, a residential avenue lined with tan brick homes, trees in a line along the curbs. My stop is a few blocks down after crossing a major intersection but what comes to me as I begin braking on my approach to that intersection is that there are no longer any brakes. Brakes are gone. They are fine until now. The truck is rolling along ; trying to shift into a lower gear the transmission grinds, will not allow it.

No cars are ahead of me. Trying to think of what to do quickly coming to an intersection where a traffic signal is just now turned red. How to avoid a crash, injury to myself or others. How to not wreck the truck. Nothing comes to me. No wonderful Hollywood action movie stunt enters my mind. Sorry to say. No sudden flash of genius or just plain common sense. There is nothing in me to mediate the situation, the rush upon collision.

Time up, horn blaring, truck and terrified me roll into crossing traffic honking horns screeching brakes. Right through ! Only to come to a stop once through the intersection crashing into a car

double parked along the street. The slope levels off at the intersection ; the truck's speed decreases. There is no injury to me. The car double parked is empty. It will need body work. I am shaken. No one is hurt.

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It is Kenny who tells me after this accident that the trucks are never really inspected. Kenny is a good looking tall well-built middle-aged hair greying middle-eastern looking dark-skinned Jew who does quite a few things at the company. He is in sales. He is back and forth with the customers, he helps loading things, supervises that aspect of the work. Kenny has a lot on the ball and I think he likes this work where he does a variety of things as opposed to the same routine day after day. He can drive the tractor trailer if necessary, though I'm not sure he has a license to do so. I drive it once myself, down to a point south of Philadelphia. Paoli maybe. Just one lesson from Horace and now here's this many ton rig I'm driving. Neither do I have a license to drive a tractor trailer.

There is the time driving the regular delivery truck I break some traffic law such as turning without a signal. It is early on. Newly out on the route on my own, I am looking at map while driving and it suddenly occurs to me that here is the street I need to turn onto. Without signaling I make the turn and there happens to be a police officer around. He pulls me over and get out of his blue and white Philly squad car. Pinky white skin. Red hair springs out from around the rim of his cap. An officer of Irish decent. His name is on his uniform. He talks the Philly talk. He levels at me some angry-sounding authoritative gobbledygook which I can make only partial sense of, something about "*on MY beat !*" and ending : "*AND I DON'T CARE IF YOU DO DRIVE TRUCKS FOR A LIVING !!!*" He lets me off with a warning.

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Walter tells me once that I can try sales too. Try to drum up business here and there. I try snack shops over in Jersey in my home town or places I can deliver small goods to on my way back from the city. I can take ice cream. Put a little dry ice in a bag. Cottage cheese. Things like that. Waiting for a sub at a delicatessen in a nearby town I ask the manager if he'd like to try any of our products.

A few days later Walter calls me into his dingy little office and asks me what I'm doing. It is about my pitching that deli. They buy from Maccio, he informs me. That means nothing to me. Who is Maccio? Maccio has Mafia connections. We don't try to introduce our products into a store that sells Maccio's stuff. That's not good business practice.

I can be rubbed out by the mob for trying to sell cottage cheese?! Wholly ravioli! This job is exciting in a strange and indelicate way. The deli owner must have informed someone at Maccio that Franklin is trying to "muscle in" or "move in" on their territory. Maccio calls Franklin. Will "Mr. Big" put out a contract on me? Will someone come "take me for a ride"? Will I get to meet Jimmy Hoffa?

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I am getting nimble with the early morning loading dock palaver. The action jolts, everyone is in a frenzy getting milk on trucks. Often what is said is said in hurried passing, moving quickly in and out of trucks and freezers and coolers. There is job-connected communication about how such and such a children's center has a holiday today so no delivery there, but around this communication, through it, all sorts of expletives are threaded. As if to distance it. Because just naked information doesn't work for these men. Naked details bring too close the drudgery. We move like bats out of hell, all this fuss over cartons of milk.

What the men on the docks do is a sort of whistle while you work routine. Only, instead of whistling, the F word in various ways is worked into every mouthful uttered. Say the F word while you work.

Yet, when one of the women from the office comes out on the dock for some errand, the language is suddenly purified, a throwback to chivalry maybe. Or if someone doesn't see her he is reprimanded: "*Hey watch your mouth!*" But as soon as she leaves they say something crudely suggestive about her: "*Yeah I'd like to give her my order form!*" To which a reply comes such as "*What's she want with your poor little order when she's takin' the boss's big dictation!*"

Dock talk — however humorously irreverent it seems to me at the time — does not express us as we

are. It is work talk, talk of men who have been alive long enough to get a taste of life, who know its flavor is not that of their childhood dreams.

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The vehicle inspection sticker on the truck I drive is fake, obtained on the black market because evidently the truck is too old or run down to pass official inspection. Buying fake documents is cheaper than buying all new vehicles, cheaper than keeping trucks in good running condition, cheaper than inspection. I later learn this is basic business. Bottom line.

I know from my father, who is a vice president at a candy company, also in Philly, that they give all the inspectors who come around cases of candy. Just greasing the wheel. Regular business sense. It makes me wonder if any business operates fully according to the law.

Bottom line. Dollars and cents. Sanitation? Hygiene? Yes and no. Here and there. Some try more than others. Sweat dripped into the peanut brittle. Read Orwell on Paris restaurants. I wonder if even the law operates according to itself.

That incident is my first brush with sort of official, adult, work-world unlawfulness; driving an unlawfully unsafe vehicle that could get me fined. Not to mention injuring or killing someone. Besides getting the whole operation shut down at least temporarily and having all of us without work and unable to support ourselves or our families. It is a practice that is fairly accepted. People look the other way. Philadelphia as a city — in its officialdom — as is told to me years later — is known for corruption. I have no idea the stickers are fake.

My milk truck is repaired and I am back on the road.

I work; I am at work on time and am there each day I am supposed to be there. Polite with customers. Driving around the city isn't all that demanding. I grow fond of it. Cruising around. Early morning it's poetic like in a Wordsworth sonnet:

This city now doth, like a garment, wear

The beauty of the morning ; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky . . .

I am driving a milk truck in all that heart — congested and coldly feverish though it is when awake and smelling of metals, grease and auto exhaust. Solitary now. Dust settled. Along with a sun's rising driving song. It is a mutilated calm, a roughly wrought silence with a hiss. Warehouses run down, smokestacks puffed out exhausted, factories still, crashed, stripped, burnt out abandoned cars, weather worn steel gray raised tanks of something, Acme supermarket out of business boarded up, motionless streets plastic bags blow down, a doorless refrigerator rusting in a vacant lot, an industrial yard its chemical liquids running here and there in pipes running silent now along this interstate running right along these trashed local streets a world abandoned to sleep the red brick city housing, working family houses or out of work houses worked out row after row, smack against one another block after block geometrically exploding dimensions a brain wave of brick regularity stretching off towards a horizon.

Things so quelled, so dead so quietly coming to light it is good to feel so a good job I give myself to.

Sun up over this junk yard is such a desolate soul. Peaceful music. Things give off warmth as rust, exude a holeyness [*sic*] decomposing to elementary nothingness : song of our own disappearance.

It feels for a moment spent, even poetic, being with sun rays on rust, dust, corrosion, crumbling and decay. Slowly moving through it all, mutely registering things.

Industrial cemetery. For which reason it is easy to be not moved to making sonnets. I don't weep for all the waste. No pity.

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There are those across the river in Jersey who try to hide a sneer hearing what I am "doing." Kids I've grown up with, elementary school, high school : see me as truck driver milk man. They are in college still. Truck driving is what you do when you don't go to college, or go and don't finish like

me ; that is the gist. It could be that there is more life to delivering milk than there is in any job they'll ever know.

I'm raised hearing — not from my folks really (ditch digger was the occupation my father always used to designate the lowliest work a man could do) — things about driving a truck that are mostly negative. Like it isn't something chic to do. It is something then to feel ashamed of. To feel shame when I tell those middle class peers I drive a milk truck. To feel inferior, low. Because that is the thinking I pick up around me. Social junk thoughts I am picking up. Social junk city. Socialization.

One day a big change occurs at Franklin. Walter no longer runs the docks. Now Ted, Walter's uncle, is in charge. Maybe Walter botched something badly. I don't know. He is in hot water a lot. The father is hard to please.

The Marine moves to another job with another company. Ted is hell bent to make things more profitable. So he cuts drivers and combines routes. It is a simple matter of seniority, Ted tells me. Last hired, it is me who has to be first fired. Even though Helen in the office is my mother. Even though I am, he says, a good worker.

I go home. I weep. My grandmother is there. She lives with us. She calls and tells my mother. Mom comes home that evening with solace. She hears in the office what happened. To me things seem so unfair. Unreasonable.

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The world is not necessarily a fair place. I can't report that fairness ever moves the way I am treated in the work world in America. A church of god teaches me about unfairness while I'm still a child. In grade school, 6th grade maybe, I play on a church-sponsored basketball team. It is at the time called the Epworth Methodist Church and it is on Maple Avenue in Palmyra New Jersey. There is a basketball court — not regulation size — in the church basement. The Coach is Mr. Hutton. His son John who is my age is on the team too. Our team isn't good at all. Not much talent. John is an okay guard. He hustles and all that. Fine attitude. His dad is coach. I am tall



for my age and am okay to have around under the boards for rebounding and short shots. Most of the others are not all that helpful on the court.

As our season comes towards its close two players are to be selected for a church league all star game. The coach's boy John is one obvious candidate. I am the other. Everyone seems to think so. One night after practice the coach's selections are announced. One of them is not me but Mark Sitzler. He is a kid whose father is on the church board of directors or whatever it is called. His dad is sort of a small potatoes big shot in our small town. He is in a profession that keeps him local ; he has an office in town, has a shingle out. Realty or insurance or accountant. A member of the Lion's Club or Rotary.

His boy isn't very useful out on the court. He can dribble a little bit is all. Mark thinks that being able to dribble a ball between his legs while bringing it up court — when no opponent is guarding him — is a feat that makes him our star player, even though opponents steal the ball away from him at will. Mark is stiff, not fluid. Anyway we are just kids.

Coach Hutton takes me aside while the others head for the locker room. He tells me he would have picked me but for the fact that Sitzler's father is on the church board and my own folks no longer attend church. So he has no choice, he tells me, but to choose the Sitzler boy, even though, he says, Sitzler is not as good a player. Because it's a church team. He hopes I will understand. I do. I understand about being dumped on in the house of god.

I do not like it. My parents being in church is never a condition for my being a member of the team. I am tall, the team is hard up. Now all of a sudden it has everything to do with being an all star. Coach has to do what he thinks is the political thing even though in his heart he knows it is not the thing to do. (Christ's message is one of conscience, is it not ?) He has to watch out for his own standing within the church, which has little to do with living as Jesus teaches.

Coach caves in ; god bless him. He cares more about church political abstraction than he does about this living being looking him in the eye, a being who will find it more difficult as a result to look people in the eye thereafter.

Henry David Thoreau tells us that humans are the most unstable of all living things. Is he right? I think he has pinned it down. It may be because the symbols we invent, through which we live our lives, do not root us as deeply in life — in survival — as does instinct. How are such unstable beings as us to make a religion? Maybe we try to make a religion to give us stability. Something to grasp, some way to confront the pure and ongoing revelation of livingdying. It's understandable that we might want to try.

It occurs to me, too, that although we are being told in church that with our hearts we are supposed to serve divinity, coach is serving the powers that be in the world. How can he or anyone live such a split? Won't it make us schizophrenic?

It hurts a bit, not being one of the chosen, but not many in my scene give a hoot about church league basketball, no one talks about it at school, few come to watch, a parent or two maybe. It is a disappointment to suffer privately. My dad tries to help; he tells me I'm on HIS all-star team, which is intended to comfort me. Dad's words, though they make me feel a bit better, don't change the unfairness I feel.

“Speak truth to power!”, one might say, expresses my attitude after this experience. Although I do not articulate it as such at the time. That expression originated, according to my reading, with a Christian group called The Friends.

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My stint at Franklin Dairies lasts only a couple months. My mother works for that company until her retirement. Loyal, diligent, all that. On time, steady. Keeps the books straight; once she even discovers an embezzler in their office and saves the company a great deal of money not to mention exposing the bad guy.

Working in a city, in oxygen-depleted health hazard surroundings: miscreant city. Working in The City of Brotherly Love, in a brilliant social dream, in Scamelot [*sic*].

To thank my mother, in the end when she retires the Franklin gang did not honor their promise of a

pension ! On the other hand Charles the president at times does things for mom and others who work there that are at least helpful if not acts of philanthropic or charitable magnanimity. After all he gave me a (brief) job. He and mom are friendly, he and his wife and my mom and dad. He recently passed away.

It isn't Charles himself who wants to take from my mother that which she is promised. It may have been Charles who promises it without his brothers' consent. What backstabbing is afoot among those brothers in that city I can't say. I'm not sure anyone else among the staff there has a pension. Which is why I guess she doesn't sue Franklin Dairy.

Things happen which pain me, strain me. Things happen to us all. It's the scene I go into as myself, inexperienced as I am, it is a scene which makes me worldly, a scene I believe in as the way things are until I grow beyond belief.

### **Part Three : One for the Road**

Baby portraits. Children's portraits. Our job is to profit from this cultural inclination to put our children on display. In the U.S. we like to do that — I don't mean profit but yes that too — like to have images of ourselves — our families — around us in our homes or work environment. Our loved ones. Is it because cameras and photos can be had at not much cost? Is social class involved? Do the Winthrops decorate their homes with photos of themselves? More likely they have portraits painted.

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This is a job I apply for from a newspaper ad. "*Looking for talented sales personnel for a growing photographic studio . . .*" The studio is an apartment in an apartment complex. It might be called a condo now. Ground floor. All over the surrounding area outside is grass turf with a few young trees. Inside is wall board, off-white interior. French Provincial furniture. Matching mirror. Carpet of embossed patterns. This is their home. Harry and Marion. *Marion's Portraits* is the name of the franchise.

They are an aging childless couple. Nice people. Marion I don't get to know well since she isn't out with us on the road. She remains at the "studio"; answers the phone, does the paperwork.

The photos are taken in customers' homes. A fellow named Bob is our photographer and he goes to each home with his equipment, back drop screen and all, takes the shots, develops them and returns to each customer with photos displayed in various sizes and shapes: wallet size, wall size, desk size, heart shaped, oval.

This is the catch. We, the door to door salesmen, take orders, make the initial connection, get a cash or check deposit for five dollars. We take an order for ONE 5 by 11 photo. We receive a deposit, set up a date and time for the shoot. Then on the day scheduled Bob goes there, takes a good number of shots, and when the one that was originally contracted for is developed either Bob or Harry returns with it set in a decorative card backing, but they have all of these other shots in all different sizes and shapes that are so flattering and lovable that the customer only naturally wants to order more. That's where the real money comes in, because Marion's doesn't make anything at all from the one photo sale.

Harry is short, stocky on a small scale; square faced. His gray hair is neatly trimmed, combed, but front strands fall down from behind the ear and hang over one eye. He blows them back or pushes them up with a free hand. He talks in a bit of a whine out of one side of his mouth. Smokes non-stop even though he has a heart condition. Wears short sleeve casual shirts. Banlon. It is summer. Casual slacks. Black wing tip shoes. No tie. Collar open.

Mornings I drive out to their place in Marlton, New Jersey. There are at times one or two other young men with us; they are out of high school or in community college doing this as a summer job. Once or twice Bob the photographer is with us. We'd set out all of us in Harry's Chevy Impala.

Bob is several years older. Married. A Vietnam War vet. Dark, thick hair longish, thick mustache. Large frame. Fleshy. Pot belly from beers. Frank joins us about a month after I go aboard. A frizzy hippy haired dumpy looking kid just out of high school attending a community college. I don't like him. He's obnoxious. He had a public speaking class at community college and

because of that thinks he knows more than me about selling door to door and makes those days I break him in unbearable. Because he tells me after we finish one house what I am doing wrong. Afterwards, and sometimes during my pitch. Frank is ridiculous : when someone answers their door he stands there like he is delivering a prepared speech. Like there is no person standing right there in front of him.

It is a relief when Frank gets another job or Harry fires him for some reason. He is no longer with us, which is fine with me. Another guy named Michael joins our “sales force.” He steals things along the way. Like if he knocks on a door and no one is home, maybe inside a front porch he sees a pair of Adidas that look like a fit for him so he walks off with them and throws them in the car’s back seat. This he does not with Harry but when we are out on our own. He throws them in my car and it is a hard time persuading him to return them.

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My first day on the job we are busted. There are three of us. We are cruising around thinking of good neighborhoods to “hit.” We discover we are driving right by Fort Dix, the army base. It’s as if fate brings us there. No soliciting signs are posted all over as we stop at a guard house. A soldier asks our business. Harry lies. I forget what he tells the guard but it isn’t that we are intending to solicit.

Bob shows me the work. We go around together. He pitches a few places. Shows me how to fill out the forms, how to write a receipt for the deposit and leave a carbon copy of it with the customer. How to negotiate for dates and times so our photographer will have a day’s shots all in one area.

Then he lets me pitch a few homes. We are going along very pleased with ourselves, getting many orders. Many mothers seem eager to have photos done. We are gleeful. Bob explains that it is because other franchises such as Fuji Studio are not on the base soliciting. Fuji is our biggest competitor. Bob teaches me how to criticize and belittle Fuji photos even though I’ve never knowingly seen one. Too glossy. This and that. Fuji is no good. They don’t give you a good deal, etc.

We are making a killing. Raking it in. A couple hours we are going fine. Life is good, beauti-

ful. This is a good job, I think. Our take already — we keep the deposits, they are our commission — is a hundred dollars. Not bad at all for one day and it is still morning I am thinking on my way out of one home multiplying one hundred dollars by three-hundred-and-sixty-five until I see two big brawny MPs waiting for us. Harry is nowhere to be seen. He is off somewhere checking out other neighborhoods. Which is his usual routine. It's not that he abandoned us. He leaves us off somewhere and comes back at a designated time. That's the way we work.

Bob and I are taken away in an MP sedan. They take us to the base station. A desk sergeant, thick and muscular too, questions us. I think the fact that Bob is a vet gives us some pull with the sergeant. They don't throw us in the brig. It is all very military, cut and dried. According to the book. What time did we arrive. How many photos had we scheduled. He explains to us the base policy that photographers are permitted on base to photograph personnel and their families but that we are not allowed to come on base to take orders for such photo shoots. We don't have to return the money we'd collected and the sessions can go ahead as scheduled but if we ever are caught on base again soliciting we cannot be released with just a warning.

Off we go. They escort us off base in that MP sedan. We wait along a civilian road for Harry's return.

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Harry explains to us once that people have no idea what they really want. He tells us that people are in consumer land that is like one big television program collage going on in their heads. He uses the words "people" and "they" as if we are somehow outside that world because we ourselves are right here and now trying to sell something to "them."

Salesmen. You can sell people, Harry claims, a bucket of poop. They buy it because we make them think they want it ; we present it so they think it's something they need. It's all in the presentation, how it's packaged. And it helps a great deal if Jones thinks he needs it too. And Smith, and a lot of other people in the same social economic class. That's the big poop market. According to Harry.

So, wow, far out, I think. Harry is into some ultimate way gone cosmic truth. And he smokes only

cigarettes.

Certainly, hopefully, the photos mean something more than poop to those who look at the pictures, who see the young ones in them as family, who, gazing, feel something unsayable come to life as they look.

The photo speaks to something that is alive inside ; a look of tenderness comes over faces as they look, a gentleness as they dote. People can be wonderful when they are not afraid. Portraits of their children let them feel good inside.

If they'll buy poop, we ought to be able to sell them a few priceless images. Which is Harry's point. That seems logical to me at the time. Maybe. It is hard to tell. I haven't worked things out much. The problem is photos cost money and money shuts people down when they see their tight budget being strained. So a potential customer says something like "*come back when I have money. . .*" It is mostly to the lower class neighborhoods we go. People here have little. Their surroundings might be called dumpy. Deep down these homemakers would like pictures of their kids. They say so, most of them. But money threatens them. Having to pay. Can they afford it?

Some are afraid there might be some gimmick. They might get cheated. Their husbands might get angry. They know they'll want more than that one photo. They'll want one to send some to aunt Martha and some to Grandma Weaver and some to sis down in Georgia. They'll want some to have at home to put in round holes bored in a long curving varnished wood knickknack that junior made in wood shop class, something that hangs on a wall over a spice rack. Little Jamie's face beaming out from a magnet holding a shopping list tight to a refrigerator door.

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It is nice to see the kids all scrubbed and sparkling. Big smiles, corny at times. Innocent. Playful. Overflowingly alive. Will a photo keep them in that blissful dimension, lift them from the smelly diaper world the whining tantrum child world mom has to yell at and scold and nag every day? "*Wash those hands before coming to this table mister!*" "*Didn't I tell you to clean that up!*" "*How many times do I have to tell you!*" The driving her crazy child world. The worried

sick world. All that is transformed now into this budding life set in twinkling eyes looking out from within a portrait.

Where does that sweetness go ?

Bob tells me it is no easy business working little ones into a picture perfect state of childhood, into an image of potential and plenitude, into an essential affirmation of life. It's hard to get them to look like a blessing, get them glowingly divine.

He has a bagful of gimmicks : lollipops, toys, noisemakers, puppets. Sometimes the little ones cry. You can't shoot a child whining. Or they want to be held by mama or they won't sit still. Or there's a spat between siblings. Mommy has to promise them cookies and candy. "*Sit still and mommy will take you to Dairy Queen.*"

Though too there are children here and there he photographs who seem to understand. Getting their picture taken is something elevating. It somehow makes them important. Like being king or queen in a kiddie play. They see it has some value. Future politicians.

Is it a generic undertaking ? The business is selling portraits of children — not necessarily individuals. I'm reading Emerson. My readings are in my head as are other things as I go about my work. I am thinking about what an individual is. The word "individual" : does it mean, for many of these people I see every day, idiosyncrasies, crankiness, orneriness, eccentricities, and craziness others who live with them are to learn to put up with or even eventually in some way maybe savor ? Certain twists of character. Peculiarity. Odd, off-beat responses to being alive, but is this something vital to be shared, something that will contribute to the spiritual-emotional well-being of a community ? I wonder if this is what Emerson means.

It's likely that, for these people I'm soliciting, "individual" does not mean being footman to divine infatus. There are various dimensions to the word. At depth are each of us unique, unlike any other ?

I never get to know anyone well enough to say.



It is for most an existence that blisters, rubs in painful ways. Pemphigoid.

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These people aren't looking for a work of art in a photo.

Do those we solicit have any interest in art even if it is their own kids ? Would it be wise to mention the word art to them or would that word get in the moneymaking way ? Would they become suspicious that some high culture sophistication is involved, that this is something they will not "understand ?" Will they think it's not for "people like us ?" Though there might be "somethin' purty" hanging on a wall, some beach scene like you might see in a hotel room or a rented condo.

Do they choose what they do because they don't have to look at it ? They listen to music they don't have to attend to, watch movies they don't need to think about. There are various dimensions to art appreciation too.

They have difficult lives overwhelmed with paying back loans, keeping or looking for jobs, paying doctor bills, having check ups believing they are fighting off sickness and death. These make it difficult to keep your mind in art, on life. Distractions make up the content of their day to day lives, making it difficult to live those lives or to be at all as we most deeply are in our natures : the mystery we are to ourselves. A spiritually charged mystery. Unless we make an effort to attain an original sense of all these undertakings. Make art of distractions they become no longer distractions. Transcend, says Emerson. That doesn't make living less difficult though, does it ? Fuller maybe. Deeper.

If you tell someone hey your life is art they shrug, they look around, think the monotony the boredom the frustration the narrowness the confinement the laundry the diapers the exhaustion the loneliness. Sigh. It could be the detail of a novel. Like if this is art, who cares ? Sitting in front of a t.v. each night, falling asleep in a chair ; snoring. Talking about nearly the same things day after day. What's new is in the newspaper (because "it is difficult to get the news from poems"). Same old same old routine day in day out is all it is, they say.

★★★★★

Usually it's a woman at home daytime. A homemaker/mom. Sometimes a child answers. Once in a while a man's at home, men who work night shifts and these are their sleeping hours we disturb. Grizzly sounds some make finding they've been wakened for door to door sales. Some men come bluster at me. I am frightened they might be holding a gun or an axe. From behind a closed door one bellows "*I'm gonna kick yer ass, ya little shit!*" Has he mistaken me for someone else? Or is he this nasty to all callers?

Some are sleeping even though they are awake. Something that goes to sleep in them because there is no one to listen. They don't listen to themselves so have nothing to say or because they have nothing to say. Inarticulate. Is this where the children we are go? Into a mechanical hum, into a stale face. Too much standing at an assembly line, mind numbed.

They buy into becoming lost to themselves. They don't know any better.

Too much sitting behind a desk. Processing data people. Rules whirring in heads. Things in the world whirling in us. Disoriented, more at a loss than any nonhuman animal can possibly be unless confined in a zoo or removed from its native territory. Eyes gazing out from life unlived [*sic*].

Confronting the particulars of how a spirit is crushed, how vitality is destroyed, in this house at this door standing in front of me. Many don't take kindly to being disturbed and I can't say I blame them.

Starting in with my pitch, fear in my throat. Confronting "life." Though we share a nationality and language, this burly belligerent hairy chested sleeveless T-shirted bundle is a total unknown to me, as am I to him. It's as if we are so different, so distant. Trying to make out is what brings me to him and is what keeps us apart, a world between us. What in the world will let us come together?

Some of the women I come across; this one her hair's up in curlers covered with a net. Still in her night gown, smells of sleep, booze, tobacco. Cigarette hanging out of her mouth, ashes falling as she moves her lips to speak, voice raspy. Or a blonde bikini young one is in her backyard sunbathing,

glistening oil all over her tan body answering her door. Toenails painted. One señorita in Millville, young Puerto Rican girl invites me in. In her hair's a flower. Sixteen she might be, living alone in this bungalow at town's edge. Sweet looking girl though she may be a teenage prostitute for all I know. Posters of Bruce Lee are all over the walls inside her two room bungalow. Sweet of her to ask me in.

Some would offer me coffee. We chat. One young mother and her elder sister who is over for a visit. Probably bored stiff out here in a low cost development. No town, no community to speak of. A few young trees planted here and there. Lawns to care for. Just this development plopped where it is — a 7-11 a mile down a new asphalt road — at the edge of the Pine Barrens, passing which, headed east, takes you to the Jersey shore.

Back in the car we share our experiences, this smorgasbord sensuality, this facial kaleidoscope. This confusion in me this collage of inexperience experienced. What forms it all so variously, so strangely, so singularly ?

Out in the summer heat in a tie and a short sleeved cotton shirt and slacks. With a handkerchief wipe sweat from my brow. My shirt's underarms, chest, and back are dappled with perspiration by ten a.m. Sweat soaks through by afternoon, chills dry once back in Harry's air-conditioned Impala. The tie I loosen, eventually remove.

Harry treats us to soda or ice cream as an afternoon break. He finds some root beer stand or a hamburger joint with a wooden picnic table under a large umbrella. We'd beat the heat in the shade, or try ; shoot the breeze. Speculate, speculate : how to get rich, how to beat the system, all sorts of harebrained schemes, things we all know will never happen.

Most summer afternoons in the sun we are drooping ; our ambition to sell evaporates. Potential customers are wilting in the heat as well, or shut inside, skin gray, dry and puffy, air-conditioners hanging out windows heaving, dripping. They come to the door as if from an inner sanctum of secluded cool, out of a place of soft tones. Subdued funeral parlor tones. A television jingle faint from another room. *THE PRICE IS RIGHT!*

A late middle-aged woman opens her door, squints into the glare, is discomposed (decomposed) by a sudden wave of heat. A coolness escapes from her home ; for me it's like standing in front of a refrigerator with its door open. She's well preserved.

We go on. Through afternoon cooling showers at times. Torrential downpour days Harry calls in the morning, tells me to stay home. There are days when it's too hot to bother. We go out for an hour or so in the morning ; even early it's as if there is no air to breathe. No breeze at all. Just stillness. Unrelenting ruthless heat you can't stay still in. Though you don't want to move either. You have to try something. Finally stillness is all. As the day goes on it seems like a fevered madness trying to do anything : to work, to move, to talk. Imagine being transported to another planet where there is very little atmosphere. Only it is here in South Jersey. It seems pointless to go on living. We are reduced to breathing ; it is hard to do that.

The heat this afternoon — and I am so close anyway — plus out on my own (Harry'd given me my own territory) — leads me to the sea. Keep right on going, cross a caseway to Long Beach Island. Little kids are playing on a beach where an ocean breeze has things a bit cooler. Watching them play, their small bodies' bouncy movements, leaping, running, they seem so brimming with potential, so freely and happily playing, as if they are emanations of hope. New life. Embodiments of love.

Late afternoon from up on grassy dunes look out at a sea at the horizon, noting its deep hue, its jewel-like richness. Cross the hot sand beach, take off shoes, roll up pant legs, step into the surf. Feet sink into wet sand. Ooze. Waves break, make a frothy rush, flatten-spread-fizz, are drawn back. Cupping seawater in my hands it looks so clear : no color at all.