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Preface

Yesterday my husband and I took our year-old daughter, Naomi Rose, for a stroll in the neighborhood. The weather was ferociously cold – what the forecasters in these parts unaccountably describe as 'blustery.' To escape the icy wind we headed for the Brookline Booksmith. Now when Saul ducks into a bookstore, chances are he's going to be there for some time. I pulled Rosie out of her snowsuit and attempted to distract her with the dust jacket of *Ravelstein*. 'Who's this, Naomi Rose? Who's the man in the picture?' And turning to point at Saul, she answered in that bell-like infant voice of hers that could be heard all through the store, 'Dad, dad, dad.' Now Dad was muffled in turtle fleece to the eyebrows, but his face emerged to give her a most delicious smile.

This morning, as I begin to write, I imagine Rosie the reader, a couple of decades deeper into the century. When Rosie is ready for Saul's books, what memories will there be of Dad at his desk? And does memory need an assist? Will someone produce an accurate portrait of her father at work? Why not begin, I ask myself, with this little preface? To say for Rosie's sake, and for scores of others who will never see the man sitting down to write – this is how it was done.

Proximity has been my privilege. I was there, for instance, when 'The Bellarosa Connection' was born.

It began innocently enough. In the first week of May 1988 en route from Chicago to Vermont we stopped in Philadelphia, where Saul gave a lecture, 'A Jewish Writer in America,' for the Jewish Publication Society. In the weeks before he delivered this talk, and for the remainder of that month – during the drive from Philadelphia to Vermont; while exploring Dartmouth, where he was a visiting

lecturer; and later in Vermont; where we were doing battle with the blackflies to lay in a garden – our conversation was about nothing but the fate of the Jews in the twentieth century. Just then Saul was facing the final revisions on 'A Theft,' and he was wrestling with *A Case of Love* – a novel he would never finish. Meanwhile, he was waiting to hear whether 'A Theft' had been accepted by *The New Yorker*. Both *Esquire* and the *Atlantic Monthly* had already decided the story was too long. It wasn't in Saul to mope alone by the telephone. Every morning over breakfast he diverted me with puns or entertained me with possible subjects for stories, and often he came downstairs to say that he had dreamed up a new way to jump-start *A Case of Love*. Why not introduce an eccentric Parisian pianist of the old school who would teach his heroine about love? We were reading and rereading the proofs of 'A Theft.' Saul habitually revises well beyond the last moment. The ending wasn't right – too many ideas, not enough movement. He would rework it by day and each night I would type and retype the latest pages. In the middle of May we got word that *The New Yorker* had also turned down his story, but Saul was too busy to be checked by bad news. He was reflecting deeply on what should come next, and the weather wasn't being cooperative. Now I ought to explain that Saul is extremely weather-sensitive. High-pressure azure skies – those of late May and early June – have always turned him on. But in that spring of '88 the gloomy rain fell day after day. Saul would light a fire in the kitchen, drink his coffee, and then slosh out to the studio through the blackfly-infested soppy grass. He wasn't writing, he told me; he was going there 'to brood.' And he added, 'That's how I've always done things – you separate yourself from editors, lawyers, publishers. You set down your burdens and you brood.'

Our Vermont friends and neighbors Herb and Libby Hillman, looking to lift our sagging spirits, invited us to dinner. Over Libby's homemade bread and roast chicken, the conversation turned once again to the Jewish question, and Saul introduced an idea we had been debating since his Philadelphia lecture. Should the Jews feel shame over the Holocaust? Is there a particular disgrace in being victimized? I was ferociously opposed to this suggestion. As we

awaited dessert we let go of the argument. The smell of chocolate announced that the drowsy end of the evening was upon us. Serious subjects gave way to gags, jokes, old chestnuts. But as we were getting ready to leave, our host, a retired chemist specializing in house paints, began to tell the story of one of his colleagues. This man, now dying of lung cancer after a lifetime of exposure to toxins, had been a European refugee in the early forties. I have to admit: while I was scraping the last of the chocolate from my plate, my mind was already on the rain and the slippery ride home. I was not attending as closely as I might have been.

May 24: The first fine day of the season. When Saul came back from the studio for lunch he had that shining-eyed look that made me anticipate his announcement: 'I'm on to something new. I don't want to talk about it just yet.' Next day, as we were driving into Brattleboro for our weekly supplies, he elaborated: 'I haven't found a shape for the new story yet, but it's based on what Herb told us over dinner.' Did I remember the details? No. But fortunately, Saul did: A refugee is imprisoned by the Italian Fascists, but prior to his imprisonment, having become aware that his arrest is imminent, he has written overseas to the Broadway impresario Billy Rose on the advice of a friend. (In the story as Saul eventually wrote it, the hero makes no such appeal to Billy Rose and in fact has never even heard of him.) A mysterious plan is concocted while he waits in his prison cell. He learns that his door will be left open at a certain hour on a certain night. Someone will meet him in the street behind the prison and indicate that he has been sent by Billy Rose. There will be money and instructions about which city to go to until the next contact appears. All happens as planned, and with the aid of these emissaries he escapes to the States. There, he is denied entry because of the quotas, but makes it to Cuba. Years later when he is back in the United States he tries to contact Billy Rose and to thank him in person. But it seems Rose, who has helped a lot of people, will have nothing to do with the refugees he has saved, perhaps fearing that they will lean on him or mooch from him indefinitely. The rescued man is quite shaken by the cold shoulder he gets from Broadway Billy.

Such were the bare bones of the story, as sketched by Saul that day on the way to town, a story no longer about Herb's friend, but already about a character – Harry Fonstein – 'Surviving Harry,' as Saul would later call him, borrowing from John Berryman's 'Dream-song' (dedicated to Saul) about 'Surviving Henry.' Saul, it turned out, knew quite a lot about Billy Rose. For in his Greenwich Village days he had known Bernie Wolfe, who was Rose's ghostwriter. A Wolfe-like character might become the intermediary between Rose and the protagonist. Wolfe had been a very bright, very savvy and strange man who took an unusual interest in New York people and their obscure motivations. Such a man would be sympathetic to the Fonstein character. Saul then told me a story about going to Wolfe's place in the Village and noticing an old, worn woman dusting and scrubbing the apartment. On Saul's way out Wolfe turned to him and said, 'That lady is my mother.' He hadn't introduced her or paid her any heed. Why make the confession then? Oh, people had ideas about being open in those Village days, Saul added. They prized their singularity. At that time they worried a great deal about their mental health. What a contrast such low-level American antics would provide to the somber seriousness of the European story.

Saul had also seen Billy Rose in Jerusalem. What did he look like? I asked. 'Well, he was small, Jewish; he might have been handsome but for the tense lines in his face. He looked strained, greedy, dissatisfied with himself.'

When we got to town Saul borrowed a book on Billy Rose from the library. We couldn't turn up any information about Wolfe.

The next day the sun shone again, and when Saul returned from work he said only, 'I've figured out a way to write this story.'

On May 29 we dawdled to the studio together, and Saul read me the first few pages – handwritten on lined yellow legal-size paper. What struck me at first was how intently he had listened to Herb's tale. Saul had remembered that the protagonist was in Italy when he had been imprisoned. In Rome the man had managed to become a clerk at a hotel. Thanks to his gift for languages and his false papers, he had such freedom of movement that he'd even found himself at a gathering where Hitler had made an appearance. And

so on. Now I've always prided myself on my attentiveness – to Saul I am a 'genius noticer.' This time it didn't matter that I'd been less than alert: Saul had been fully present. When he is on to a story, his capacity for hearing and absorbing details expands exponentially. I realized then that a writer does not need to be tuned in all the time. In fact – forgive me, Henry James – being 'someone upon whom nothing is lost' is too distracting. A writer keeps to himself, broods, sits quietly. But from the moment when he attaches himself to a story, everything is rearranged. Suddenly, as Saul puts it, the wakeful writer has 'feelers all over the place.'

From an after-dinner story came one luminous strand of silk, and over the next few days and then weeks I watched as Saul wove event, accident, memory, and thought – what he had read, what we had discussed, and the contents of his dreams – into that oriental carpet of a novella 'The Bellarosa Connection.' This mingling of elements, however, has very little to do with facts, with autobiography. It is so rare and complex and strange a use of human material that even if I were to unravel every thread that found its way into the work, and to describe the process by which each was carded and dyed and woven and tied, I would still come no closer to the secret of its composition.

Saul had already decided that the story would have two central characters: not only this European Jew, Fonstein, who made his escape, but an American Jew as well. He wanted his reader to be able to feel the difference in tone between the two men's lives. He could mine his own experience and call upon his memories of Wolfe for the American, but who would be the model for his European character? On June 2, Saul told me a long story about his stepmother's nephew. Over the winter he had learned that this nephew was dead, and he had been oppressed by the fact that the death had occurred some time ago, and that he hadn't known that the man was gone. At one time he had been very fond of this chess-playing sober young refugee. They had sought each other out at his stepmother's boring Sunday gatherings. What does it mean to say that you are close to someone, Saul wondered, when you discover that you are relying only on scraps of memory about that person? From these musings

came Saul's notion of the 'warehouse of good intentions.' Someone occupies a place in your life, takes on some special significance – what it is, you can't really say. But you have made a real connection – this person has come to stand for something in your life. Time goes by, you haven't seen the party, you don't know what has happened to him, he may even be dead for all you know, and yet you hang on to the idea of the unique importance of that individual. What a shock to discover that memories have become a stand-in for that warehoused person.

So much of our conversation about the Jewish question revolved around memory. Now it would be Saul's memories of this late immigrant arrival with his singsong Polish accent, his gift for languages, and his business smarts that would give flavor to his European character, Harry Fonstein. The American narrator in 'The Bellarosa Connection' would find out about the death of Fonstein in much the same way that Saul learned of the death of his stepmother's nephew.

When pieces of life begin to find their way into the work, there is always something magical about the manner in which they are lifted from the recent – or distant – past or the here and now, and then kneaded and shaped and subtly transformed into narrative. Saul *did* have a nightmare like the one that wakes his narrator. He described what it felt like to be overcome by midnight dread, to be in that pit without the strength to climb out. And he *did* have a stepmother who parted her hair in the middle and baked delicious strudel. And while lecturing in Philadelphia we *had* visited a grand old mansion much like the home Saul's narrator would find himself uncomfortably, awkwardly inhabiting. And there are so many bits that never find their way into the narrative. Here's one I loved: The European, Harry Fonstein, tells the American about the way he grieved for his mother, whom he had buried in Ravenna, by speaking of his aversion to a particular shade of blue-gray. This was the color of the shroud in which he had buried his mother. In our hotel room in Philadelphia, Saul and I had been talking about the way certain colors impress you. He had told me then that his own mother had been buried in a blue-gray shroud.

To watch these details working their way into or out of the novella is nothing like the cutting and pasting of actual events. Biographers, beware: Saul wields a wand, not scissors. He is no fact-collector. Better to imagine Prospero at play. Or to picture Saul as he lights out for the studio: a small boy with his satchel and his piece of fruit.

Most mornings we linger. Work will wait. We tour the 'giardino' and see which flowers have appeared. This June there is a white anemone of which Saul is enormously proud (there's never been another before or since – the moles seem to get at the bulbs). The giant red-orange poppies are budding, the peonies will flower this year in time for Saul's birthday, and there's one early bright purple cosmos blossom. We admire a fat sassy snake curling among the wild columbines. 'The whole world is an ice cream cone to him,' Saul laughs as he disappears into his studio.

Everything must be taken up nimbly, easily, or not at all. You can't read Saul without being aware of the laughter running beneath every word. He has always been playful. Now he is also firm and spare. There is also the matter of taste. Sometimes a detail is borrowed because the flavor is right (like Charlus and the telephone in the narrator's mansion – never mind the anachronism). Saul generally steers clear of puzzles and riddles. Lovers of word games must look to Joyce or Nabokov for the serious pleasures of the anagrammist. What we find instead is Stendhalian brio – laughter, whimsy, lightness of touch. Odd, perhaps, that I should speak of laughter in considering what is essentially Saul's darkest look at one of the century's most serious subjects. But 'Bellarosa' wasn't born in anger. Everything that moved Saul deeply at that time found its way into the novella, and what moved him deeply, no matter how serious, was a source of energy and ultimately of pleasure. This was a time when we were often up toward dawn – discussing the story, his memories of New Jersey or of Greenwich Village, and most often the history of the Jews. But perhaps because we were young lovers then my memories of that spring are anything but dark. Saul was writing this powerful, even horrible book with intense heat and joy, dipping into his brightest colors.

That's not to say the writing always came easily or that the work went on uninterrupted. By early June Saul had begun turning the yellow pages into manuscript. I remember hearing the sound of the typewriter one morning, and feeling a thrill that his breakfast forecast – 'I think I've got something here' – was being realized. He was working in the house, and when I took him his tea, I stood by and listened for another volley of staccato fire. Saul hunts down his words with the keys of his Remington. He revises as he types, and spots of silence are followed by these racy rattling rhythmical bursts. He looks forward to this cup of hot tea with one round slice of lemon floating on top. The proper drink for a European Jew on an overcast day, Saul first observed when he visited the empty Jewish quarters of Polish cities. The lemon stands for the sun; the sugar and caffeine give the jolt you need when the surge from your morning coffee subsides. How he was managing to write at all was fairly mysterious, since he would accept no protection from distractions. And there had been many: a visit from a neighbor; phone calls from an agent, a lawyer, a friend (I could always tell from the roars of laughter when it was Allan Bloom on the line). After each interruption the study door would close and the wonderful *ack-ack-ack* of the typewriter would begin again.

A week before his birthday on June 10, Saul read me the first dozen typed pages of the story. The account of Fonstein's escape from the Italian prison made me hold my breath then, and every time I've heard it since. The narrator would be an older man, recounting a story that had been told to him by Fonstein years earlier.

Though Saul was bushed, he was putting on speed so as to have as much done as possible before we took off for Paris and Rome in the middle of the month. What? Europe, now? Well, we would see Bloom in Paris, and in Italy the Scanno Prize was being offered to Saul. The details of the award – a bag of gold coins, a stay in a hunting lodge in the remote Abruzzi region – had too much of the flavor of adventure to resist. Saul never takes it easy when he is overworked and beginning to feel run down. He continued to ride his mountain bike, to chop up the fallen limbs of an apple tree, to remove

boulder-sized rocks from the garden, to carry in logs for the morning fire. I was convinced he had a horseshoe over his head that spring. He tripped while cutting brush and scraped his face; he had a gashed shin to show for a tumble from his mountain bike; his eye was bloodshot; there was a bleeding nose. Of course he worked the morning of the nosebleed, lying down on the futon in the studio whenever the bleeding started, and then getting up to scrawl out a new paragraph. When he hadn't returned for lunch I carried a bite out to him and found him typing vigorously, his face and his T-shirt covered with blood. Composing for Saul is an aerobic activity. He sweats when he writes, and peels off layers of clothing. When he is concentrating particularly hard, he screws up his left eye and emits a sound that's a cross between the panting of a long-distance runner and a breathy whistle: 'Windy suspirations of forced breath.'

Saul's birthday – at least for the fourteen years I have celebrated it with him – is always a his-kind-of-working-weather day – blue skies, copper sun, the atmospheric high of high pressure. But there would be no writing today. I should add that time off is something unheard of for Saul. No holidays, no Sabbaths. A birthday is like any other day – a chance to type another couple of pages. He was, however, high as a kite. Family was on the way, and at his request I was baking a devil's food chocolate cake with chocolate icing and toasted coconut.

A brief break from words is never a sign that the mental wheels aren't racing round and round. Two days later Saul returned from his morning's work and announced: 'I started my story again from scratch. There are times when it takes over, you know.' At dinner I pressed him about the new beginning and he became very expansive: there were too many ideas piled on at the start – too much to expect the reader to digest all at once. All this stuff about the American versus the European Jew. This must unfold gradually. What the story is really about is memory and faith. There is no religion without remembering. As Jews we remember what was told to us at Sinai; at the Seder we remember the Exodus; Yiskor is about remembering a father, a mother. We are told not to forget the Patriarchs; we admonish ourselves, 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem . . .' And we are constantly

reminding God not to forget his Covenant with us. This is what the 'chosenness' of the Chosen People is all about. We are chosen to be God's privileged mind-readers. All of it, what binds us together, is our history, and we are a people because we remember.

Saul then told me that his narrator was beginning to come to life. He had decided not to give him a name. This elderly man, narrator X, is starting to lose his memory. He is walking down the street one day, humming 'Way down upon the . . .' and he can't remember the name of the river – it torments him, he's in agony over this loss of a word, he feels ready to stop a passerby, to do anything to recover the word (this actually did happen to Saul during the winter in Chicago, while strolling around downtown on his way back from the dentist, and until Suwannee came to him he was beside himself). The narrator can't afford such a lapse because, as Saul explained, his whole life has been built around memory. He will be the founder of this institute – the Mnemosyne Institute – that helps business people sharpen their memories. In order to put it all together and make a coherent picture, he is going to take it upon himself to remember what Fonstein's life had been, to write a memoir about this European refugee.

Over the next couple of days we pored over an essay about Nietzsche's idea of the will to power that Saul felt was central to his thoughts about the American half of the story. The 'nihilism of stone' that Nietzsche talks about has degenerated, in Saul's formulation, into a 'nihilism of sleaze.' Now the will to power supposedly releases creative energy. Is the Hollywood of Billy Rose, the Las Vegas of Fonstein's card-playing son, the chaos of American life the best we are able to come up with by way of new creation? Perhaps the narrator of 'The Bellarosa Connection' means to oppose the idea that human life has become an utterly meaningless chaos with memory – which is another way of saying faith.

The spring that had begun with cold and rain was ending in a heat wave. It was pushing 90 degrees on June 13, and as I made for the pond at high noon I found Saul heading the same way, bending the long grasses and parting the wildflowers. When we met before the green water we had the following exchange: 'Was it a good morning?' I asked.

'Yes. I started something new.'

'What?!'

'I'm loosened up now, I'm just writing something I had it in mind to write.'

Stripped of our clothes (yes, Rosie, your parents were young and wild once upon a time), we went for the first swim of the season, Saul leading the way into the deliciously cold water. Then, as we were drying ourselves on the rocks in the blazing sun, Saul asked: 'You want to hear some of it?' I don't know what I was expecting. Probably a new beginning for 'Bellarosa.' But when he opened the composition book he had brought down to the pond, he began to read the first several thousand words of something *completely* new – what would eventually become *Marbles*, a novel he has written and rewritten for close to a decade now, and has never, to this day, completed.

When thinking of Saul at work, I have before my eyes the image of a juggler – luminous airborne balls, each one a different color, turning against an azure sky, kept aloft by the infinite skill of a magician, who is at once relaxed, wry, and concentrating intensely. Hand him a telephone, ask him a practical question about dinner, or invite him on a walk and he's still working those airborne balls. If you were aware of them, and walking behind him on that road, you would see them circling overhead.

– Janis Bellow

Introduction

I

Every writer is eventually called a 'beautiful writer,' just as all flowers are eventually called pretty. Any prose above the most ordinary is applauded; and 'stylists' are crowned every day, of steadily littler kingdoms. Amidst this busy relativity, it is easy to take for granted the immense stylistic powers of Saul Bellow, who, with Faulkner, is the greatest modern American writer of prose.

But again, many writers are called 'great'; the word is everywhere, industrially farmed. In Bellow's case it means greatly abundant, greatly precise, greatly various, rich, and strenuous. It means prose as a registration of the joy of life: the happy rolling freedom of his daring, uninsured sentences. These qualities are present in Bellow's stories as fully as in his novels. Any page from this selection yields a prose of august raciness, ripe with inheritance (the rhythms of Melville and Whitman, Lawrence and Joyce, and behind them, Shakespeare). This prose sometimes cascades in poured adjectives (a river, in 'The Old System,' seen as 'crimped, green, blackish, glassy') and at other times darts with lancing metaphorical wit ('his baldness was total, like a purge'). Controlling these different modes of expression is a firm intelligence, always tending to peal into comic, metaphysical wryness – as in the description of Behrens, the florist, in 'Something to Remember Me By': 'Amid the flowers, he alone had no color – something like the price he paid for being human.'

Bellow is a great portraitist of the human form, Dickens's equal at the swift creation of instant gargoyles; everyone remembers Valentine Gersbach in *Herzog*, with his wooden leg, 'bending and

straightening gracefully like a gondolier.' In these stories, more eagerly chased by form than the novels, Bellow is even more swift and compactly appraising. In 'What Kind of Day Did You Have?' we encounter Victor Wulpy, the great art critic and theorist, who is disheveled and 'wore his pants negligently': 'By the way his entire face expanded when he spoke emphatically you recognized that he was a kind of tyrant in thought'; in 'Cousins,' Cousin Riva: 'I remembered Riva as a full-figured, dark-haired, plump, straight-legged woman. Now all the geometry of her figure had changed. She had come down in the knees like the jack of a car, to a diamond posture'; in 'A Silver Dish,' Pop, who fights with his son on the ground and then suddenly becomes still: 'His eyes stuck out and his mouth was open, sullen. Like a stout fish'; in 'Him with His Foot in His Mouth,' Professor Kippenberg, a great scholar with bushy eyebrows 'like caterpillars from the Tree of Knowledge'; in 'Zetland,' Max Zetland, with a 'black cleft' in his chin, an 'unshavable pucker'; and McKern, the drunk brought home by the young narrator of 'Something to Remember Me By,' and laid out naked on a sofa: 'I looked in at McKern, who had thrown down the coat and taken off his drawers. The parboiled face, the short nose pointed sharply, the life signs in the throat, the broken look of his neck, the black hair of his belly, the short cylinder between his legs ending in a spiral of loose skin, the white shine of the shins, the tragic expression of his feet.'

What function do these exuberant physical sketches have? First, there is joy, simple joy, to be had from reading the sentences. The description of Professor Kippenberg's bushy eyebrows as resembling caterpillars from the Tree of Knowledge is not just a fine joke; when we laugh, it is with appreciation for a species of wit that is properly called metaphysical. We delight in the curling process of invention whereby seemingly incompatible elements – eyebrows and caterpillars and Eden; or women's hips and car jacks – are combined. Thus, although we feel after reading Bellow that most novelists do not really bother to attend closely enough to people's shapes and dents, his portraiture does not exist merely as realism. We are encouraged not just to see the lifelikeness of Bellow's characters, but to partake in a creative joy, the creator's joy in *making* them look like this. This

is not just how people look; they are also sculptures, pressed into by the artist's quizzical and ludic force. In 'Mosby's Memoirs,' for instance, a few lines describe a Czech pianist performing Schönberg. 'This man, with muscular baldness, worked very hard upon the keys.' Certainly, we quickly have a vision of this 'muscular baldness'; we know what this looks like. But then Bellow adds: 'the muscles of his forehead rising in protest against *tabula rasa* – the bare skull,' and suddenly we have entered the surreal, the realm of play: how strange and comic, the idea that the muscles of the man's head are somehow rebelling against the bareness, the blankness, the *tabula rasa*, of his bald head!

But of course, Bellow does also make us see the human form, does open our senses and discipline our sensibilities, as Flaubert told Maupassant the writer should: 'There is a part of everything which is unexplored,' said Flaubert, 'because we are accustomed to using our eyes only in association with the memory of what people before us have thought of the thing we are looking at. Even the smallest thing has something in it which is unknown.' Bellow exposes this unknown quality, either by force of metaphorical wit (hips like a car jack) or by noticing, with unexpected tenderness of vision, what we have grown accustomed to overlooking: the 'white shine' of poor McKern's shins as he lies on the bed, or Pop's bald head, as remembered by his son in 'A Silver Dish': 'the sweat was sprinkled over his scalp – more drops than hairs.'

And seeing is important, lays an injunction on us, in these stories. Many of them are narrated by men who are remembering childhood experiences, or at least younger days, and are using powers of visual recall to conjure forth vivid characters and heroes. Physical detail, exactly rendered, is memory's quarry and makes its own moral case: it is how we bring the dead back to life, give them a second life in our minds. In fact, these memories become, through force of evocation, a first life again and begin to jostle us as the actually living do. In 'Cousins,' the narrator agrees to intervene in a relative's court case because his family memories exert a pressure over him: 'I did it for Cousin Metzger's tic. For the three bands of Neapolitan ice cream. For the furious upright growth of Cousin

Shana's ruddy hair, and the avid veins of her temples and in the middle of her forehead. For the strength with which her bare feet advanced as she mopped the floor and spread the pages of the *Tribune* over it.'

Bellow's way of seeing his characters also tells us something about his metaphysics. In his fictional world, people do not stream with motives; as novelists go, he is no depth psychologist. Instead, his characters are embodied souls, stretched essences. Their bodies are their confessions, their moral camouflage faulty and peeling: they have the bodies they deserve. Victor Wulpy, a tyrant in thought, has a large, tyrannical head; Max Zetland, a reproving, witholding father, has an unshavable cleft or pucker in his chin, and when he smokes, 'he held in the smoke of his cigarettes.' It is perhaps for this reason that Bellow is rarely found describing young people; even his middle-aged characters seem old. For in a sense he turns all his characters into old people, since the old helplessly wear their essences on their bodies, they are seniors in moral struggle. Aunt Rose, in 'The Old System,' has a body almost literally eaten into by history: 'She had a large bust, wide hips, and old-fashioned thighs of those corrupted shapes that belong to history.'

Like Dickens, and to some extent like Tolstoy and Proust, Bellow sees humans as the embodiments of a single dominating essence or law of being, and makes repeated reference to his characters' essences, in a method of leitmotif. As, in *Anna Karenina*, Stiva Oblonsky always has a smile, and Anna a light step, and Levin a heavy tread, each attribute the accompaniment of a particular temperament, so Max Zetland has his reproving pucker, and Sorella, in 'The Bellarosa Connection,' her forceful obesity, and so on. In *Seize the Day*, probably the finest of Bellow's shorter works, Tommy Wilhelm sees the great crowds walking in New York and seems to see 'in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence – *I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want*.'

Bellow has written that when we read 'the best nineteenth and twentieth-century novelists, we soon realize that they are trying in a variety of ways to establish a definition of human nature,' and his

own work, his own way of seeing essential human types, may be added to that grand project.

2

Bellow's stories seem to divide into two kinds: long, loose-edged stories, which read as if they began life as novels (such as 'Cousins'), and short, almost classical tales, which often recount the events of a single day ('Something to Remember Me By,' 'A Silver Dish,' 'Looking for Mr Green'). Yet in both types of story the same kind of narrative prose is at work, one that tends toward the recollection of distant events and tends also toward a version of stream of consciousness. Here, the unnamed narrator of 'Zetland' recalls Max Zetland, his friend's father:

> Max Zetland was a muscular man who weighed two hundred pounds, but these were only scenes – not dangerous. As usual, the morning after, he stood at the bathroom mirror and shaved with his painstaking brass Gillette, made neat his reprehending face, flattened his hair like an American executive, with military brushes. Then, Russian style, he drank his tea through a sugar cube, glancing at the *Tribune*, and went off to his position in the Loop, more or less *in Ordnung*. A normal day. Descending the back stairs, a short cut to the El, he looked through the window of the first floor at his Orthodox parents in the kitchen. Grandfather sprayed his bearded mouth with an atomizer – he had asthma. Grandmother made orange-peel candy. Peels dried all winter on the steam radiators. The candy was kept in shoeboxes and served with tea.
>
> Sitting in the El, Max Zetland wet his finger on his tongue to turn the pages of the thick newspaper . . . Tin pagoda roofs covered the El platforms. Each riser of the long staircase advertised Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. Iron loss made young girls pale. Max Zetland himself had a white face, white-jowled, a sarcastic bear, but acceptably pleasant, entering the merchandising palace on Wabash Avenue . . .

The narrator, who is not related to Max Zetland, is writing about Max Zetland as if he himself had been there, as if he were recalling

the daily scene, and he is using a style of writing that Joyce perfected in *Ulysses* – a jumble of different recollected details, a life-sown prose logging impressions with broken speed, in which the perspective keeps on expanding and contracting, as memory does: at one moment, we see Grandfather caught in a moment of dynamism, spraying his bearded mouth with an atomizer, and then in the next we hear that Grandmother made candy from orange peel and that this peel spent all winter drying on the radiators. At one moment we see the advertisements for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, the next we see Max entering his workplace. The prose moves between different temporalities, between the immediate and the traditional, the shortlived and the longlived. The narrator of 'Something to Remember Me By' writes that at home, inside the house, they lived by 'an archaic rule; outside, the facts of life.' Bellow's prose moves in similar ways, between the 'archaic' or traditional, and the immediate, dynamic 'facts of life.'

Detail feels modern in Bellow because it is so often the remembered *impression* of a detail, filtered through a consciousness; and yet his details still have an unmodern solidity. At the risk of sounding apocalyptic, one might say that Bellow reprieved realism for a generation, the generation that came after the Second World War, that he held its neck back from the blade of the postmodern; and he did this by revivifying traditional realism with modernist techniques. His prose is densely 'realistic,' yet it is hard to find in it any of the usual conventions of realism or even of storytelling. His people do not walk out of the house and into other houses – they are, as it were, tipped from one recalled scene to another – and his characters do not have obviously 'dramatic' conversations. It is almost impossible to find in these stories sentences along the lines of 'He put down his drink and left the room.' These are at once traditional and very untraditional stories, both 'archaic' and radical.

Curiously enough, the stream of consciousness, for all its reputation as the great accelerator of description, actually slows down realism, asks it to dawdle over tiny remembrances, tiny details and lusters, to circle and return. The stream of consciousness is properly the ally of the short story, of the anecdote, the fragment – and it is

no surprise that the short story and the stream of consciousness appear in strength in literature at about the same time, toward the end of the nineteenth century: in Hamsun and in Chekhov, and a little later in Bely and Babel.

3

'At home, inside the house, an archaic rule; outside, the facts of life.' This is the axis on which many of these stories run, both at the level of the shifting prose and at the larger level of meaning. For most of the heroes and narrators of these stories, Chicago, where 'the facts of life' reign, exists as both torment and spur. Chicago is American, modern; but life at home, as for Max Zetland, is traditional, 'archaic,' respectably Jewish, with memories and habits of Russian life. (Bellow was nearly born in Russia, of course; his father came from there to Lachine, Quebec, in 1913, and Bellow was born in June 1915.) In these tales, Bellow returns again and again to the city of his childhood, massive, industrial, peopled, where the El 'ran like the bridge of the elect over the damnation of the slums,' a city both brutal and poetic, 'blue with winter, brown with evening, crystal with frost.' Chicago, this agglomeration of human fantasies – the protagonist of 'Looking for Mr Green' realizes that the city represents a collective agreement of will – must be reckoned with and recorded as exactly and lyrically as the humans who throng these characters' memories. But Chicago is also a realm of confusion and vulgarity, a place inimical to the life of the mind and the proper expansion of the imagination. The narrator of 'Zetland' remembers that he and young Zetland (Max's son) would read Keats to each other while rowing on the city lagoon: 'Books in Chicago were obtainable. The public library in the twenties had many storefront branches along the car lines. Summers, under flipping gutta-percha fan blades, boys and girls read in the hard chairs. Crimson trolley cars swayed, cowbellied, on the rails. The country went broke in 1929. On the public lagoon, rowing, we read Keats to each other while the weeds bound the oars.'

'While the reeds bound the oars' – Chicago always threatens to entangle the Bellovian character, as also does his family, to stifle him. In these stories, Bellow's characters are repeatedly tempted by visions of escape – sometimes mystical, sometimes religious, and often Platonic (Platonic in the sense that the real world, the Chicago world, is felt to be not the real world but only a place where the soul is in exile, a place of mere appearances). Woody, in 'A Silver Dish,' is suffused with the 'secret certainty that the goal set for this earth was that it should be filled with good, saturated with it,' and sits and listens religiously to all the Chicago bells ringing on Sunday. Yet the story he recalls is a tale of shameful theft and trickery, an utterly secular story. The narrator of 'Him with His Foot in His Mouth' is attracted by the visions of Swedenborg, and to the idea that 'the Divine Spirit' has 'withdrawn in our time from the outer, visible world.' Yet his tale is couched as a letter of apology and confession to a peaceful woman he once cruelly insulted. The narrator of 'Cousins' admits that he has 'never given up the habit of referring all truly important observations to that original self or soul' (referring here to the Platonic idea that man has an original soul from which he has been exiled, and back to which he must again find a path). But again, the spur of his revelations is completely secular – a shameful court case involving a crooked cousin.

Bellow's argument, if that word is not too bullying, would seem to be that a purely religious or intellectual vision – a theoretical intelligence – is weightless, even dangerous, without the human data provided both by a city like Chicago and by the ordinary strategies and culpabilities of families and friends. Zetland, who, we are told, has 'no interest in surface phenomena,' abandons the pure thought of analytic logic after moving to New York and reading Melville. Victor Wulpy may be a great art critic, but he cannot tell Katrina, his lover, that he loves her, even though it is what she most earnestly longs to hear. It falls to a charlatan and producer of science-fiction films, Larry Wrangel, correctly to remark on the painful limits of Victor's all-knowing mind.

Bellow's characters all yearn to make something of their lives in the religious sense, and yet this yearning is not written up religiously

or solemnly. It is written up comically: our metaphysical cloudiness, and our fierce, clumsy attempts to make these clouds yield rain, are full of hilarious pathos in his work. In this regard, Bellow is perhaps most tenderly suggestive in his lovely late story 'Something to Remember Me By.' The narrator, now old, recalls a single day from his adolescence, in Depression-dug Chicago. He was, he recalls, a kid dreamy with religious and mystical ideas of a distinctly Platonic nature: 'Where, then, is the world from which the human form comes?' he asks rhetorically. On his job delivering flowers in the city, he always used to take one of his philosophical or mystical texts with him. On the day under remembrance, he becomes the victim of a cruel prank. A woman lures him into her bedroom, encourages him to remove his clothes, throws them out of the window, and then flees. The clothes disappear, and it is his task then to get home, an hour away across freezing Chicago, to the house where his mother is dying and his stern father waits for him, with 'blind Old Testament rage' – 'at home, inside the house, an archaic rule; outside, the facts of life.'

The boy is clothed by the local barman and earns his fare home by agreeing to take one of the bar's regulars, a drunk called McKern, to McKern's apartment. Once there, the boy lays out the drunk and then cooks supper for McKern's two motherless young daughters – he cooks pork cutlets, the fat splattering his hands and filling the little apartment with pork smoke. 'All that my upbringing held in horror geysered up, my throat filling with it, my guts griping,' he tells us. But he does it. Eventually, the boy finds his own way home, where his father, as expected, beats him. Along with his clothes, he has lost his treasured book, which was also thrown out of the window. But, he reflects, he will buy the book again, with money stolen from his mother. 'I knew where my mother secretly hid her savings. Because I looked into all books, I had found the money in her *mahzor*, the prayer book for the High Holidays, the days of awe.'

There are coiled ironies here. Forced by the horridly secular confusions of his day ('the facts of life,' indeed) to steal, the boy will take this money to buy more mystical and unsecular books, books that will no doubt religiously or philosophically instruct him that

this life, the life he is leading, is not the real life! And why does the boy even know about his mother's hiding place? Because he looks 'into all books.' His bookishness, his unworldliness, are the reasons that he knows how to perform the worldly business of stealing! And where does he steal this money from? From a sacred text ('the archaic rule,' indeed). So then, the reader thinks, who is to say that *this* life, the life our narrator has been so vividly telling us about, with all its embarrassments and Chicago vulgarities, is not real? Not only real, but also religious in its way – for the day he has just painfully lived has also been a kind of day of awe, in which he has learned much – a secular High Holiday, complete with the sacrificial burning of goyish pork.

It might be said that all of these beautiful stories throw out at us, in burning centrifuge, the secular–religious questions: What are our days of awe? And how shall we know them?

– James Wood

By the St Lawrence

Not *the* Rob Rexler?

Yes, Rexler, the man who wrote all those books on theater and cinema in Weimar Germany, the author of *Postwar Berlin* and of the controversial study of Bertolt Brecht. Quite an old man now and, it turns out, though you wouldn't have guessed it from his work, physically handicapped – not disabled, only slightly crippled in adolescence by infantile paralysis. You picture a tall man when you read him, and his actual short, stooped figure is something of a surprise. You don't expect the author of those swift sentences to have an abrupt neck, a long jaw, and a knot-back. But these are minor items, and in conversation with him you quickly forget his disabilities.

Because New York has been his base for half a century, it is assumed that he comes from the East Side or Brooklyn. In fact he is a Canadian, born in Lachine, Quebec, an unlikely birthplace for a historian who has written so much about cosmopolitan Berlin, about nihilism, decadence, Marxism, national socialism, and who described the trenches of World War I as 'man sandwiches' served up by the leaders of the great powers.

Yes, he was born in Lachine to parents from Kiev. His childhood was divided between Lachine and Montreal. And just now, after a near-fatal illness, he had had a curious desire or need to see Lachine again. For this reason he accepted a lecture invitation from McGill University despite his waning interest in (and a growing dislike for) Bertolt Brecht. Tired of Brecht and his Marxism – his Stalinism – he stuck with him somehow. He might have canceled the trip. He was still convalescent and weak. He had written to his McGill contact, 'I've been playing hopscotch at death's door, and since I travel

alone I have to arrange for wheelchairs between the ticket counter and the gate. Can I count on being met at Dorval?'

He counted also on a driver to take him to Lachine. He asked him to park the Mercedes limo in front of his birthplace. The street was empty. The low brick house was the only one left standing. All the buildings for blocks around had been torn down. He told the driver, 'I'm going to walk down to the river. Can you wait for about an hour?' He anticipated correctly that his legs would soon tire and that the empty streets would be cold, too. Late October was almost wintry in these parts. Rexler was wearing his dark-green cloaklike Salzburg loden coat.

There was nothing familiar to see at first, you met no people here. You were surprised by the bigness and speed of the St Lawrence. As a kid you were hemmed in by the dinky streets. The river now had opened up, and the sky also, with long static autumn clouds. The rapids were white, the water reeling over the rocks. The old Hudson's Bay Trading Post was now a community center. Opposite, in gloomy frames of moss and grime, there stood a narrow provincial stone church. And hadn't there been a convent nearby? He did not look for it. Downriver he made out Caughnawaga, the Indian reservation, on the far shore. According to Parkman, a large party of Caughnawaga Mohawks, crossing hundreds of miles on snowshoes, had surprised and massacred the settlers of Deerfield, Massachusetts, during the French-Indian wars. Weren't those Indians Mohawks? He couldn't remember. He believed that they were one of the Iroquois nations. For that matter he couldn't say whether his birthplace was on Seventh Avenue or on Eighth. So many landmarks were gone. The tiny synagogue had become a furniture warehouse. There were neither women nor children in the streets. Immigrant laborers from the Dominion Bridge Company once had lived in the cramped houses. From the narrow front yard (land must have been dear), where Rexler's mother more than seventy years ago had set him cross-strapped in his shawl to dig snow with the black stove shovel, you could see the wide river surface – it had been there all the while, beyond the bakeries and sausage shops, kitchens and bedrooms.

Beside the Lachine Canal, where the 'kept' water of the locks was still and green, various reasons for Rexler's return began to take shape. When asked how he was doing – and it was only two months ago that the doctors had written him off; the specialist had told him, 'Your lungs were whited out. I wouldn't have given two cents for your life' – Rexler answered, 'I have no stamina. I put out some energy and then I can't bend down to tie my shoelaces.'

Why then did he take this trying trip? Was it sentimentality, was it nostalgia? Did he want to recall how his mother, mute with love, had bundled him in woolens and set him down in the snow with a small shovel? No, Rexler wasn't at all like that. He was a tough-minded man. It was toughness that had drawn him decades ago to Bert Brecht. Nostalgia, subjectivism, inwardness – all that was in the self-indulgence doghouse now. But he was making no progress toward an answer. At his age the reprieve from death could be nothing but short. It was noteworthy that the brick and stucco that had walled in the Ukrainian-, Sicilian-, and French-Canadian Dominion Bridge Company laborers also cut them off from the St Lawrence in its platinum rush toward the North Atlantic. To have looked at their bungalows again wouldn't have been worth the fatiguing trip, the wear and tear of airports, the minor calvary of visiting-lecturer chitchat.

Anyway, he saw death as a magnetic field that every living thing must enter. He was ready for it. He had even thought that since he had been unconscious under the respirator for an entire month, he might just as well have died in the hospital and avoided further trouble. Yet here he was in his *birthplace*. Intensive-care nurses had told him that the electronic screens monitoring his heart had run out of graphs, squiggles, and symbols at last and, foundering, flashed out nothing but question marks. That would have been the way to go, with all the machines confounded, from unconsciousness to nonconsciousness. But it wasn't over yet, and now this valetudinarian native son stood in Monkey Park beside the locks shadowed with the autumn green of the banked earth and asked himself whether all this was a justified expense of his limited energy.

Saul Bellow

The cook, she's nam' was Rosie
She cam' from Mo'real
And was chambermaid on a lumber barge
In the Grand Lachine Canal.

Rexler had more than once thought of opening an office to help baffled people who could remember only one stanza of a ballad or song. For a twenty-five-dollar fee you would provide the full text.

He remembered that when a barge was in the locks, the Lachinois, loafing unemployed or killing time, would chat or joke with the crew. He had been there himself, waving and grinning at the wisecracks. His boy's body was clean then. As such things are reckoned he had still been normal during his final childhood holiday in Lachine. Toward the end of that summer he came down with polio and his frame was contorted into a monkey puzzle. Next, adolescence turned him into a cripple gymnast whose skeleton was the apparatus he worked out on like an acrobat in training. This was how reality punished you for your innocence. It turned you into a crustacean. But in his early years, until the end of the twenties, his body was still well formed and smooth. Then his head grew heavy, his jawline lengthened, his sideburns were thick pillars. But he had taken pains to train himself away from abnormality, from the outlook and the habits of a cripple. His long eyes were mild. He walked with a virile descending limp, his weight coming down on the advancing left foot. 'Not personally responsible for the way life operates' was what he tacitly declared.

This, more or less, was Rexler, the last of the tribe that had buzzed across the Atlantic early in the century and found limited space in streets that shut out the river. They lived among the French, the Indians, the Sicilians, and the Ukrainians.

His aunt Rozzy, who was fond of him, often rescued him in July from the St Dominick Street slum in Montreal. His older cousins in Lachine, already adults, all with witty strong faces, seemed to like his company. 'Take the boy with you,' Aunt Rozzy would say when she dispatched them on errands.

He tooted all over Lachine with them in their cars and trucks.

These were solid detailed recollections, nothing dreamlike about them. Rexler knew therefore that he must have come back to them repeatedly over many years. Again and again the cousins, fully mature at twenty, or even at sixteen. The eldest, Cousin Ezra, was an insurance adjuster. Next in age was Albert, a McGill law student. And then Matty, less tough than his big brothers. The youngest was Reba. She had the odor stout girls often have, Rexler used to think – a distinctive sexy scent. They were all, for that matter, sexy people. Except, of course, the parents. But Ezra and Albert, even Matty, varied their business calls with visits to girls. They joked with them in doorways. Sometimes with a Vadja, sometimes a Nadine. Ezra, who was so stern about business, buying and trading building lots – the insurance was a sideline – would laugh after he had cranked his Ford and say as he jumped into the seat, 'How did you like that one, Robbie?' And, playful, he surprised Rexler by gripping his thigh. Ezra had a leathery pleasant face. His complexion, like his father's, was dark and he had vertical furrows under each ear; an old country doctor had cured him surgically of swellings caused by milk from a tubercular cow. But even the scars were pleasant to see. Ezra had an abrupt way of clearing his nose by snorting. He trod the pedals of the Ford. His breath was virile – a little salty or perhaps sour. Over Rexler he had great seniority – more an uncle than a cousin. And when Ezra was silent, having business thoughts, all laughing was shut down. He brought his white teeth together and a sort of gravity came over him. No Yiddish jokes then, or Hebrew with double meanings. He was a determined man out to make good. At his death he left an estate in the millions.

Rexler had never visited his grave or the graves of the others. They all lay together somewhere on a mountainside – Westmount, would that be, or Outremont? Ezra and Albert quarreled when Reba died. Ezra had been away and Albert buried her in a remote cemetery. 'I want my dead together.' Ezra was angry at what he saw as disrespect to the parents. Rexler, recalling this, made a movement of his crippled back, shrugging off the piety. It was not his cup of tea. But then why did he recall it so particularly?

On a June day he had gone in the car with Albert across the Grand Trunk tracks where the parents owned rental property. They had been here no more than fifteen years and they didn't know twenty words of the language, yet they were buying property. Only the immediate family were in on this. They were secretive. At Rexler's age – seven or eight years old – he wouldn't have understood. But when he was present they were guarded nevertheless. As a result, he did come to understand. Such a challenge was sure to provoke him.

Cousin Albert put you off with his shrewd look of amusement. For women he had a lewd eye. And at McGill he had picked up a British manner. He said 'By Jove.' He also said 'Topping.' Joe Cohen, an MP in Ottawa, had chosen Albert to be a student clerk. Clerking for Joe Cohen, he was made. In time he would become a partner in Cohen's firm. He'll stop saying 'By Jove,' and say instead 'What's the deal?' was Cousin Ezra's true prophecy. But Ezra had airs of his own. The look of the firstborn, for example. A few thousand years of archaic gravity would settle on him. The advantage of being in remote Lachine was that he could freely improvise from the Old Testament.

Anyway, Rexler was in the family's second Ford with Albert on the far side of the tracks, over toward Dorval, and Albert parked in front of a large bungalow. It had a spacious white porch, round pillars, and a swing hanging on chains.

'I have to go in,' said Albert. 'I'll be a while.'

'Long?'

'As long as it takes.'

'Can I go out and walk back and forth?'

'I'd like you to stay in the auto.'

He went in, Rexler remembered, and the wait was interminable. The sun came through the June leaves. Dark periwinkle grew in all the shady places and young women came and went on the broad porch. They walked arm in arm or sat together on the swing or in white wooden Adirondack chairs. Rexler moved into the driver's seat and played with the wheel and the choke – or was it the spark lever? Crouching, he worked the pedals with his hands. A cloven hoof would be a good fit on the ovals of the clutch and brake.

Then it became tiresome to wait.

Then Rexler was fretful.

He might have been alone for as long as an hour.

Did he, Rexler now wondered, have any idea as to what was keeping Albert? He may have had. All those young women passing through the screen door, promenading, swinging between the creaking chains.

Without haste Albert stepped between the green plots to the Ford. Smiling, a pretense of regret in his look, he said, 'There was more business to do than usual.' He mentioned a lease. Baloney, of course. It wasn't what he said but how he spoke that mattered. He had a lippy sort of look and somehow, to Rexler, his mouth had become an index: lippy, but the eyes were at variance with the lower face. Those eyes reflected the will of an upper power center. This was Rexler's early manner of observation. His eagerness, his keenness for this had weakened with time and, in his seventies, he did not care about Albert's cunning, his brothels, his secret war against his brother Ezra.

At the first candy store Albert parked the Ford and gave Rexler a copper two-cent piece – a helmeted woman with a trident and shield. With this coin Rexler bought two porous squares of blond molasses candy. He understood that he was being bribed, though he couldn't have explained exactly why. He would not in any case have said a word to Aunt Rozzy about the house with all the girls. Such outside street things never were reported at home. He chewed the candy to a fine dust while Albert entered a cottage to make the rent collection for his mother. Not a thing a university man liked doing. Although where money came from didn't much matter.

Albert was in a better humor when he came out and gave little Rexler a joyride through the pastures and truck gardens, turning back just short of Dorval. Returning, they saw a small crowd at the level crossing of the Grand Trunk. There had been an accident. A man had been killed by a fast train. The tracks had not yet been cleared and for the moment a line of cars was held up and Rexler, standing on the running board of the Model T, was able to see – not the corpse, but his organs on the roadbed – first the man's liver,

shining on the white, egg-shaped stones, and a little beyond it his lungs. More than anything, it was the lungs – Rexler couldn't get over the twin lungs crushed out of the man by the train when it tore his body open. Their color was pink and they looked inflated still. Strange that there should be no blood, as if the speed of the train had scattered it.

Albert didn't have the curiosity to find out who the dead man was. He must not have wanted to ask. The Ford had stopped running and he set the spark and jumped down to crank it again. When the engine caught, the fender shuddered and then the file of cars crept over the planks. The train was gone – nothing but an empty track to the west.

'So, where did you get lost such a long time?' said Aunt Rozzy.

Albert said, 'A man was killed at the Grand Trunk crossing.'

That was answer enough.

Rexler was sent down to the garden in the yard to pick tomatoes. Even more than the fruit itself, the vines and leaves carried the strong tomato odor. You could smell it on your fingers. Uncle Mikhel had staked the plants and bound them with strips of cloth torn from old petticoats and undershirts. Though his hands were palsied, Uncle Mikhel could weed and tie knots. His head, too, made involuntary movements but his eyes looked at you steadily, wide open. His face was tightly held by the close black beard. He said almost nothing. You heard the crisping of his beard against the collar oftener than his voice. He stared, you expected him to say something; instead he went on staring with an involuntary wag of the head. The children had a great respect for him. Rexler remembered him with affection. Each of his olive-brown eyes had a golden flake on it like the scale of a smoked fish. If his head went back and forth it was not because he was denying anything, he was warding off a tremor.

'Why doesn't the boy eat?' Aunt Rozzy said to Albert at dinner. 'Did he let you stuff yourself with candy?'

'Why aren't you eating your soup, Robbie?' Albert asked. His smile was narrow. Albert was not at all afraid that he, Rexler, would mention the girls on the porch swing or his long wait in the car. And

even if something were to slip out, it would be no more than his mother already suspected.

'I'm just not hungry.'

Shrewd Albert smiled even more narrowly at the boy, bearing down on him. 'I think it was the accident that took away his appetite. A man was killed on the tracks as we were coming home.'

'God in heaven,' said Aunt Rozzy.

'He burst open,' said Albert. 'We came to a stop and there were his insides – heart, liver . . .'

His lungs! The lungs reminded Rexler of the water wings used by children learning to swim.

'Who was the man?'

'A drunkard,' said Aunt Rozzy.

Uncle Mikhel interrupted. 'He may have been a railway worker.'

Out of respect for the old man no more was said, for Uncle Mikhel was once a CPR laborer. He had been a conscript on the eastern front during the Russian war with Japan. He deserted, reached western Canada somehow, and for years was employed by the railroad, laying tracks. He saved his *groschen*, as he liked to say, and sent for his family. And now, surrounded by grown sons, he was a patriarch at his own table in his own huge kitchen with large oil paintings out of the junk shop hanging on the walls. There were baskets of fruit, sheep in the fold, and Queen Victoria with her chin resting on her wrist.

Cousin Albert had turned things around with sparkling success and seemed to be saying to little Rexler, 'See how it's done?'

But Rexler was transfixed by the chicken soup. As a treat, Aunt Rozzy had served him the gizzard. It had been opened by her knife so that it showed two dense wings ridged with lines of muscle, brown and gray at the bottom of the dish. He had often watched the hens upside down, hanging by trussed feet, first fluttering, then more gently quivering as they bled to death. The legs too went into the soup.

Aunt Rozzy, his father's sister, had the family face but her look was more sharp and severe by far. There was nothing so red as her nose in zero weather. She had cruelly thick legs and her

hindquarters were wildly overdeveloped, so that walking must have been a torment. She certainly did not put herself out to be loved, for she was wicked to everyone. Except, perhaps, little Rexler.

'Did you see what happened? What did you see?'

'The man's heart.'

'What else?'

'His liver, and the lungs.'

Those spongy soft swelled ovals patched pink and red.

'And the body?' she said to Albert.

'Maybe dragged by the train,' he said, unsmiling this time.

Aunt Rozzy lowered her voice and said something about the dead. She was fanatically Orthodox. Then she told Rexler that he didn't have to eat his dinner. She was not a lovable woman, but the boy loved her and she was aware of it. He loved them all. He even loved Albert. When he visited Lachine he shared Albert's bed, and in the morning he would sometimes stroke Albert's head, and not even when Albert fiercely threw off his hand did he stop loving him. The hair grew in close rows, row after row.

These observations, Rexler was to learn, were his whole life – his being – and love was what produced them. For each physical trait there was a corresponding feeling. Paired, pair by pair, they walked back and forth, in and out of his soul.

Aunt Rozzy had the face, the fiery face of a hanging judge, and she was determined to fix the blame for the accident on the victim. The dead man himself. And Rexler, walking in Monkey Park and beginning to feel the strain of his excursion, the weakness of his legs, sat down with the experienced delicacy of a cripple on the first bench he came to.

Cousin Reba, always ready to disagree with her mother, said, 'We can't assume he was drunk. He may have been absentminded.' But Aunt Rozzy with an even more flaming face seemed to believe that if he was innocent his death was all the more deserved. She sounded like Bertolt Brecht when he justified the murder of Bukharin. The one thing to be proud of, according to the playwright, the only true foundation of self-respect, was not to be taken in by illusions and

sentiments. The only items in the book of rules were dead items. If you didn't close the book, if you still harked back to the rules, you deserved to die.

How deep can the life of a modern man be? Very deep, if he is hard enough to see innocence as a fault, if, as Brecht held, he wipes out the oughts which the gullible still buy and expels pity from politics.

The destruction of the dwarf brick houses opened the view of the river, as huge as a plain, but swift nevertheless, and this restoration of things as they had been when first seen by explorers opened Rexler himself to an unusual degree, so that he began to consider how desirable it could be to settle nearby so that he might see it every day – to buy or rent, to have a view of the rapids and the steely speed . . . why not? He was a native son, and he had no present attachments in New York. But he knew this was an impracticable fancy. He could not (for how long?) spend his final years with no more company than the river. Since giving up his Brecht studies, he had no occupation. Brecht was light on the subject of death. If he was to live with Stalinism this lightness was essential. Hence the joys of the knife, as in 'Mackie Messer,' so many years on the hit parade. All that pre-Hitler Weimar stuff. It was Stalin, whom Brecht had backed, who should have won in 1932. But Rexler did not intend to go public with such views. He was too ill, too old to make enemies. If he turned polemical the intelligentsia would be sure to say that he was a bitter aging hunchback. No, for him it was private life from now on.

He didn't want to think about the books and articles that had made his Lachine cousins so proud of him. 'Just look how Robbie overcame the polio and made something of himself,' Cousin Ezra would tell his growing children.

Nobody could say exactly how extensive Cousin Ezra's real-estate holdings were.

But toward the end, dying of leukemia, Ezra greeted Rexler by throwing his arms wide. He sat up in his hospital bed and exclaimed, 'A *maloch* has walked into my room.' His color was his father's exactly – very dark and with pleasant folds, and he had become the

Old Testament patriarch through and through – an Abraham bargaining with the Lord God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah or buying the cave of Machpelah to bury his wife.

'Angel,' Ezra said with delicacy because of the mound on Rexler's back: not exactly a pair of folded wings. The truth at that time was that Rexler looked like one of the cast of a Brecht–Kurt Weill production: hands sunk in his trousers' pockets and his skeptical head – it was too heavy, it listed – needing cleverly poised feet to support it. His hair was gray, something like the color of drying oregano. What did his dying cousin make of him, of his reputation as a scholar and a figure in New York theatrical circles? Rexler had gone against the mainstream in the arts, and his radical side was the side that had won.

All those years of error, as it now seemed to Rexler. Hands clasped behind his back he tramped, limped, along the Lachine Canal, thinking that his dying cousin Ezra gave him high marks for his struggle against paralysis.

Here in Lachine, Rexler had had a second family. After Uncle Mikhel and Aunt Rozzy died and Ezra had assumed the role of patriarch, Albert had refused to acknowledge him as such. '*I* recognized, *I* was willing.' In this matter Rexler saw that he had relied on the mainstream. It was an inconsistency.

Strictly speaking, the child with normal spine and arms and legs was transformed into the deformed man in the loden coat, the theatrical hat pulled down over the thick sideburns.

It had been better on balance to be a revolutionary than a cripple.

'Have I ever told you, Robbie, that we are descended from the tribe of Naphtali?' said Ezra.

'How do we know that?'

'Oh, these things are known. It was passed on to me and I pass it on to you.'

In a month's time Ezra was dead. Years ago he had exhumed Reba's body and she was buried beside her parents. They were all to be together. Twenty years later Matty joined them. Only Albert remained. At eighty he was still an *homme à femmes*. But they wouldn't stay put when they found out what was expected of them. Now he

was no longer a seducer, he was a petitioner or suppliant. The meanness, however, hadn't gone out of him. Only he was weakened, he couldn't enforce anything, and he played humble. The last of his wives had left him within a year. Back to Baltimore.

Albert sent for Rexler. He was by now the last of the Rexlers. 'Only the two of us left,' said Albert. 'I'm so glad you came. The family doted on you.'

'When I got polio my childish charm was shot down.'

'Of course it was very hard. But you fought back. You became a distinguished man. I used to give copies of your books to my literate clients.'

Evidence of wasted years, Rexler thought, if anyone wished to make a case against him. However, you don't waste the time of a dying man with disclosures, confessions, repudiations. 'One day I went with you in the Model T,' said Rexler, 'and you parked in front of a clapboard house across the tracks. Then you went in. Was that a whorehouse?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because you were there for such a long time and I played with the pedals and the steering wheel.'

Albert smiled forgivingly. It was himself that he forgave. 'There were a couple of houses.'

'On this one there was a veranda.'

'I wouldn't have paid much attention . . .'

'And on the way home there was an accident on the Grand Trunk tracks. A man was killed.'

'Was he?'

Albert had no memory of it.

'Minutes before we crossed. His liver was in the roadbed.'

'The things kids will remember.'

Rexler was about to describe his surprise at seeing a man's organs on the ties and stones on the roadbed but he caught himself in time luckily. Albert's skin cancer had metastasized and he hadn't far to go. His still-shrewd eyes communicated this to Rexler, who backed off, thinking that for Albert that afternoon, when he and the girl had lain chest to chest, his heart and lungs pressing upon hers, had added up

to a different sum. Rexler had come to say good-bye to his cousin, whom he wouldn't be seeing again. Albert was wasted; his legs forked under the covers like winter branches, and his courtroom voice was as dim as a child's toy xylophone. He sent for me, Rexler reminded himself, not to talk about my memories, and I think I look alien to him, that seeing me is a disappointment.

In the upside-down intravenous flask a pellucid drop was about to pass into his spoiled blood. If other things could be as clear as that fluid. Probably Albert had asked one of his daughters to telephone me because he remembered how things once were. The uncritical affectionate child. He hoped I might bring back something. But all he got from me was a cripple at his bedside. Yet Rexler had tried to offer him something. Let's see if we can ratchet up some of that old-time feeling. Perhaps Albert *had* got something out of it. But Albert had taken no conscious notice of the man hit by the train. There never was a conversation about that and now Albert too was buried with the rest of the family – 'my dead,' as Ezra spoke of them. Rexler, who didn't even know where the cemetery was and would never go to visit it, walked lopsided in the sunny grass of Monkey Park beside the canal locks. Deep-voiced, either humming or groaning, he turned his mind again to the lungs in the roadbed as pink as a rubber eraser and the other organs, the baldness of them, the foolish oddity of the shapes, almost clownish, almost a denial or a refutation of the high-ranking desires and subtleties. How finite they looked.

His deformity, the shelf of his back and the curved bracket of his left shoulder, gave added protection to his hoarded organs. A contorted coop or bony armor must have been formed by his will on the hint given that afternoon at the scene of the accident. Don't tell me, Rexler thought, that everything depends on these random-looking parts – and that to preserve them I was turned into some kind of human bivalve?

The Mercedes limo had come to the canal for him and he got in, turning his thoughts to the afternoon lecture he didn't particularly want to give.

A Silver Dish

What do you do about death – in this case, the death of an old father? If you're a modern person, sixty years of age, and a man who's been around, like Woody Selbst, what do you do? Take this matter of mourning, and take it against a contemporary background. How, against a contemporary background, do you mourn an octogenarian father, nearly blind, his heart enlarged, his lungs filling with fluid, who creeps, stumbles, gives off the odors, the moldiness or gassiness, of old men. I *mean*! As Woody put it, be realistic. Think what times these are. The papers daily give it to you – the Lufthansa pilot in Aden is described by the hostages as being on his knees, begging the Palestinian terrorists not to execute him, but they shoot him through the head. Later they themselves are killed. And still others shoot others, or shoot themselves. That's what you read in the press, see on the tube, mention at dinner. We know now what goes daily through the whole of the human community, like a global death-peristalsis.

Woody, a businessman in South Chicago, was not an ignorant person. He knew more such phrases than you would expect a tile contractor (offices, lobbies, lavatories) to know. The kind of knowledge he had was not the kind for which you get academic degrees. Although Woody had studied for two years in a seminary, preparing to be a minister. Two years of college during the Depression was more than most high school graduates could afford. After that, in his own vital, picturesque, original way (Morris, his old man, was also, in his days of nature, vital and picturesque), Woody had read up on many subjects, subscribed to *Science* and other magazines that gave real information, and had taken night courses at De Paul and

Northwestern in ecology, criminology, existentialism. Also he had traveled extensively in Japan, Mexico, and Africa, and there was an African experience that was especially relevant to mourning. It was this: on a launch near the Murchison Falls in Uganda, he had seen a buffalo calf seized by a crocodile from the bank of the White Nile. There were giraffes along the tropical river, and hippopotamuses, and baboons, and flamingos and other brilliant birds crossing the bright air in the heat of the morning, when the calf, stepping into the river to drink, was grabbed by the hoof and dragged down. The parent buffaloes couldn't figure it out. Under the water the calf still thrashed, fought, churned the mud. Woody, the robust traveler, took this in as he sailed by, and to him it looked as if the parent cattle were asking each other dumbly what had happened. He chose to assume that there was pain in this, he read brute grief into it. On the White Nile, Woody had the impression that he had gone back to the pre-Adamite past, and he brought home to South Chicago his reflections. He brought also a bundle of hashish from Kampala. In this he took a chance with the customs inspectors, banking perhaps on his broad build, frank face, high color. He didn't look like a wrongdoer, a bad guy; he looked like a good guy. But he liked taking chances. Risk was a wonderful stimulus. He threw down his trench coat on the customs counter. If the inspectors searched the pockets, he was prepared to say that the coat wasn't his. But he got away with it, and the Thanksgiving turkey was stuffed with hashish. This was much enjoyed. That was practically the last feast at which Pop, who also relished risk or defiance, was present. The hashish Woody had tried to raise in his backyard from the African seeds didn't take. But behind his warehouse, where the Lincoln Continental was parked, he kept a patch of marijuana. There was no harm at all in Woody, but he didn't like being entirely within the law. It was simply a question of self-respect.

After that Thanksgiving, Pop gradually sank as if he had a slow leak. This went on for some years. In and out of the hospital, he dwindled, his mind wandered, he couldn't even concentrate enough to complain, except in exceptional moments on the Sundays Woody regularly devoted to him. Morris, an amateur who once was taken

seriously by Willie Hoppe, the great pro himself, couldn't execute the simplest billiard shots anymore. He could only conceive shots; he began to theorize about impossible three-cushion combinations. Halina, the Polish woman with whom Morris had lived for over forty years, was too old herself now to run to the hospital. So Woody had to do it. There was Woody's mother, too – a Christian convert – needing care; she was over eighty and frequently hospitalized. Everybody had diabetes and pleurisy and arthritis and cataracts and cardiac pacemakers. And everybody had lived by the body, but the body was giving out.

There were Woody's two sisters as well, unmarried, in their fifties, very Christian, very straight, still living with Mama in an entirely Christian bungalow. Woody, who took full responsibility for them all, occasionally had to put one of the girls (they had become sick girls) in a mental institution. Nothing severe. The sisters were wonderful women, both of them gorgeous once, but neither of the poor things was playing with a full deck. And all the factions had to be kept separate – Mama, the Christian convert; the fundamentalist sisters; Pop, who read the Yiddish paper as long as he could still see print; Halina, a good Catholic. Woody, the seminary forty years behind him, described himself as an agnostic. Pop had no more religion than you could find in the Yiddish paper, but he made Woody promise to bury him among Jews, and that was where he lay now, in the Hawaiian shirt Woody had bought for him at the tilers' convention in Honolulu. Woody would allow no undertaker's assistant to dress him, but came to the parlor and buttoned the stiff into the shirt himself, and the old man went down looking like Ben-Gurion in a simple wooden coffin, sure to rot fast. That was how Woody wanted it all. At the graveside, he had taken off and folded his jacket, rolled up his sleeves on thick freckled biceps, waved back the little tractor standing by, and shoveled the dirt himself. His big face, broad at the bottom, narrowed upward like a Dutch house. And, his small good lower teeth taking hold of the upper lip in his exertion, he performed the final duty of a son. He was very fit, so it must have been emotion, not the shoveling, that made him redden so. After the funeral, he went home with Halina and her son, a decent Pole like his mother, and

talented, too – Mitosh played the organ at hockey and basketball games in the Stadium, which took a smart man because it was a rabble-rousing kind of occupation – and they had some drinks and comforted the old girl. Halina was true blue, always one hundred percent for Morris.

Then for the rest of the week Woody was busy, had jobs to run, office responsibilities, family responsibilities. He lived alone; as did his wife; as did his mistress: everybody in a separate establishment. Since his wife, after fifteen years of separation, had not learned to take care of herself, Woody did her shopping on Fridays, filled her freezer. He had to take her this week to buy shoes. Also, Friday night he always spent with Helen – Helen was his wife de facto. Saturday he did his big weekly shopping. Saturday night he devoted to Mom and his sisters. So he was too busy to attend to his own feelings except, intermittently, to note to himself, 'First Thursday in the grave.' 'First Friday, and fine weather.' 'First Saturday; he's got to be getting used to it.' Under his breath he occasionally said, 'Oh, Pop.'

But it was Sunday that hit him, when the bells rang all over South Chicago – the Ukrainian, Roman Catholic, Greek, Russian, African Methodist churches, sounding off one after another. Woody had his offices in his warehouse, and there had built an apartment for himself, very spacious and convenient, in the top story. Because he left every Sunday morning at seven to spend the day with Pop, he had forgotten by how many churches Selbst Tile Company was surrounded. He was still in bed when he heard the bells, and all at once he knew how heartbroken he was. This sudden big heartache in a man of sixty, a practical, physical, healthy-minded, and experienced man, was deeply unpleasant. When he had an unpleasant condition, he believed in taking something for it. So he thought: What shall I take? There were plenty of remedies available. His cellar was stocked with cases of Scotch whisky, Polish vodka, Armagnac, Moselle, Burgundy. There were also freezers with steaks and with game and with Alaskan king crab. He bought with a broad hand – by the crate and by the dozen. But in the end, when he got out of bed, he took nothing but a cup of coffee. While the kettle was heating, he put on his Japanese judo-style suit and sat down to reflect.

Woody was moved when things were *honest*. Bearing beams were honest; undisguised concrete pillars inside high-rise apartments were honest. It was bad to cover up anything. He hated faking. Stone was honest. Metal was honest. These Sunday bells were very straight. They broke loose, they wagged and rocked, and the vibrations and the banging did something for him – cleansed his insides, purified his blood. A bell was a one-way throat, had only one thing to tell you and simply told it. He listened.

He had had some connections with bells and churches. He was, after all, something of a Christian. Born a Jew, he was a Jew facially, with a hint of Iroquois or Cherokee, but his mother had been converted more than fifty years ago by her brother-in-law, the Reverend Doctor Kovner. Kovner, a rabbinical student who had left the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to become a minister and establish a mission, had given Woody a partly Christian upbringing. Now, Pop was on the outs with these fundamentalists. He said that the Jews came to the mission to get coffee, bacon, canned pineapple, day-old bread, and dairy products. And if they had to listen to sermons, that was okay – this was the Depression and you couldn't be too particular – but he knew they sold the bacon.

The Gospels said it plainly: 'Salvation is from the Jews.'

Backing the Reverend Doctor were wealthy fundamentalists, mainly Swedes, eager to speed up the Second Coming by converting all Jews. The foremost of Kovner's backers was Mrs Skoglund, who had inherited a large dairy business from her late husband. Woody was under her special protection.

Woody was fourteen years of age when Pop took off with Halina, who worked in his shop, leaving his difficult Christian wife and his converted son and his small daughters. He came to Woody in the backyard one spring day and said, 'From now on you're the man of the house.' Woody was practicing with a golf club, knocking off the heads of dandelions. Pop came into the yard in his good suit, which was too hot for the weather, and when he took off his fedora the skin of his head was marked with a deep ring and the sweat was sprinkled over his scalp – more drops than hairs. He said, 'I'm going to move out.' Pop was anxious, but he was set to go – determined.

'It's no use. I can't live a life like this.' Envisioning the life Pop simply *had* to live, his free life, Woody was able to picture him in the billiard parlor, under the El tracks in a crap game, or playing poker at Brown and Koppel's upstairs. 'You're going to be the man of the house,' said Pop. 'It's okay. I put you all on welfare. I just got back from Wabansia Avenue, from the relief station.' Hence the suit and the hat. 'They're sending out a caseworker.' Then he said, 'You got to lend me money to buy gasoline – the caddie money you saved.'

Understanding that Pop couldn't get away without his help, Woody turned over to him all he had earned at the Sunset Ridge Country Club in Winnetka. Pop felt that the valuable life lesson he was transmitting was worth far more than these dollars, and whenever he was conning his boy a sort of high-priest expression came down over his bent nose, his ruddy face. The children, who got their finest ideas at the movies, called him Richard Dix. Later, when the comic strip came out, they said he was Dick Tracy.

As Woody now saw it, under the tumbling bells, he had bankrolled his own desertion. Ha ha! He found this delightful; and especially Pop's attitude of 'That'll teach you to trust your father.' For this was a demonstration on behalf of real life and free instincts, against religion and hypocrisy. But mainly it was aimed against being a fool, the disgrace of foolishness. Pop had it in for the Reverend Doctor Kovner, not because he was an apostate (Pop couldn't have cared less), not because the mission was a racket (he admitted that the Reverend Doctor was personally honest), but because Doctor Kovner behaved foolishly, spoke like a fool, and acted like a fiddler. He tossed his hair like a Paganini (this was Woody's addition; Pop had never even heard of Paganini). Proof that he was not a spiritual leader was that he converted Jewish women by stealing their hearts. 'He works up all those broads,' said Pop. 'He doesn't even know it himself, I swear he doesn't know how he gets them.'

From the other side, Kovner often warned Woody, 'Your father is a dangerous person. Of course, you love him; you should love him and forgive him, Voodrow, but you are old enough to understand he is leading a life of wice.'

It was all petty stuff: Pop's sinning was on a boy level and

therefore made a big impression on a boy. And on Mother. Are wives children, or what? Mother often said, 'I hope you put that brute in your prayers. Look what he has done to us. But only pray for him, don't see him.' But he saw him all the time. Woodrow was leading a double life, sacred and profane. He accepted Jesus Christ as his personal redeemer. Aunt Rebecca took advantage of this. She made him work. He had to work under Aunt Rebecca. He filled in for the janitor at the mission and settlement house. In winter, he had to feed the coal furnace, and on some nights he slept near the furnace room, on the pool table. He also picked the lock of the storeroom. He took canned pineapple and cut bacon from the flitch with his pocketknife. He crammed himself with uncooked bacon. He had a big frame to fill out.

Only now, sipping Melitta coffee, he asked himself: Had he been so hungry? No, he loved being reckless. He was fighting Aunt Rebecca Kovner when he took out his knife and got on a box to reach the bacon. She didn't know, she couldn't prove that Woody, such a frank, strong, positive boy, who looked you in the eye, so direct, was a thief also. But he was also a thief. Whenever she looked at him, he knew that she was seeing his father. In the curve of his nose, the movements of his eyes, the thickness of his body, in his healthy face, she saw that wicked savage Morris.

Morris, you see, had been a street boy in Liverpool – Woody's mother and her sister were British by birth. Morris's Polish family, on their way to America, abandoned him in Liverpool because he had an eye infection and they would all have been sent back from Ellis Island. They stopped awhile in England, but his eyes kept running and they ditched him. They slipped away, and he had to make out alone in Liverpool at the age of twelve. Mother came of better people. Pop, who slept in the cellar of her house, fell in love with her. At sixteen, scabbing during a seamen's strike, he shoveled his way across the Atlantic and jumped ship in Brooklyn. He became an American, and America never knew it. He voted without papers, he drove without a license, he paid no taxes, he cut every corner. Horses, cards, billiards, and women were his lifelong interests, in ascending order. Did he love anyone (he was so busy)? Yes, he loved

Halina. He loved his son. To this day, Mother believed that he had loved her most and always wanted to come back. This gave her a chance to act the queen, with her plump wrists and faded Queen Victoria face. 'The girls are instructed never to admit him,' she said. The Empress of India speaking.

Bell-battered Woodrow's soul was whirling this Sunday morning, indoors and out, to the past, back to his upper corner of the warehouse, laid out with such originality – the bells coming and going, metal on naked metal, until the bell circle expanded over the whole of steel-making, oil-refining, power-producing midautumn South Chicago, and all its Croatians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Poles, and respectable blacks heading for their churches to hear Mass or to sing hymns.

Woody himself had been a good hymn singer. He still knew the hymns. He had testified, too. He was often sent by Aunt Rebecca to get up and tell a churchful of Scandihoovians that he, a Jewish lad, accepted Jesus Christ. For this she paid him fifty cents. She made the disbursement. She was the bookkeeper, fiscal chief, general manager of the mission. The Reverend Doctor didn't know a thing about the operation. What the Doctor supplied was the fervor. He was genuine, a wonderful preacher. And what about Woody himself? He also had fervor. He was drawn to the Reverend Doctor. The Reverend Doctor taught him to lift up his eyes, gave him his higher life. Apart from this higher life, the rest was Chicago – the ways of Chicago, which came so natural that nobody thought to question them. So, for instance, in 1933 (what ancient, ancient times!), at the Century of Progress World's Fair, when Woody was a coolie and pulled a rickshaw, wearing a peaked straw hat and trotting with powerful, thick legs, while the brawny red farmers – his boozing passengers – were laughing their heads off and pestering him for whores, he, although a freshman at the seminary, saw nothing wrong, when girls asked him to steer a little business their way, in making dates and accepting tips from both sides. He necked in Grant Park with a powerful girl who had to go home quickly to nurse her baby. Smelling of milk, she rode beside him on the streetcar to the West Side, squeezing his rickshaw puller's thigh and wetting her blouse. This

was the Roosevelt Road car. Then, in the apartment where she lived with her mother, he couldn't remember that there were any husbands around. What he did remember was the strong milk odor. Without inconsistency, next morning he did New Testament Greek: The light shineth in darkness – *to fos en te skotia fainei* – and the darkness comprehended it not.

And all the while he trotted between the shafts on the fairgrounds he had one idea, nothing to do with these horny giants having a big time in the city: that the goal, the project, God's purpose was (and he couldn't explain why he thought so; all evidence was against it) – that this world should be a love world, that it should eventually recover and be entirely a world of love. He wouldn't have said this to a soul, for he could see himself how stupid it was – personal and stupid. Nevertheless, there it was at the center of his feelings. And at the same time, Aunt Rebecca was right when she said to him, strictly private, close to his ear even, 'You're a little crook, like your father.'

There was some evidence for this, or what stood for evidence to an impatient person like Rebecca. Woody matured quickly – he had to – but how could you expect a boy of seventeen, he wondered, to interpret the viewpoint, the feelings, of a middle-aged woman, and one whose breast had been removed? Morris told him that this happened only to neglected women, and was a sign. Morris said that if titties were not fondled and kissed, they got cancer in protest. It was a cry of the flesh. And this had seemed true to Woody. When his imagination tried the theory on the Reverend Doctor, it worked out – he couldn't see the Reverend Doctor behaving in that way to Aunt Rebecca's breasts! Morris's theory kept Woody looking from bosoms to husbands and from husbands to bosoms. He still did that. It's an exceptionally smart man who isn't marked forever by the sexual theories he hears from his father, and Woody wasn't all that smart. He knew this himself. Personally, he had gone far out of his way to do right by women in this regard. What nature demanded. He and Pop were common, thick men, but there's nobody too gross to have ideas of delicacy.

The Reverend Doctor preached, Rebecca preached, rich Mrs

Skoglund preached from Evanston, Mother preached. Pop also was on a soapbox. Everyone was doing it. Up and down Division Street, under every lamp, almost, speakers were giving out: anarchists, Socialists, Stalinists, single-taxers, Zionists, Tolstoyans, vegetarians, and fundamentalist Christian preachers – you name it. A beef, a hope, a way of life or salvation, a protest. How was it that the accumulated gripes of all the ages took off so when transplanted to America?

And that fine Swedish immigrant Aase (Osie, they pronounced it), who had been the Skoglunds' cook and married the eldest son, to become his rich, religious widow – she supported the Reverend Doctor. In her time she must have been built like a chorus girl. And women seem to have lost the secret of putting up their hair in the high basketry fence of braid she wore. Aase took Woody under her special protection and paid his tuition at the seminary. And Pop said . . . But on this Sunday, at peace as soon as the bells stopped banging, this velvet autumn day when the grass was finest and thickest, silky green: before the first frost, and the blood in your lungs is redder than summer air can make it and smarts with oxygen, as if the iron in your system was hungry for it, and the chill was sticking it to you in every breath . . . Pop, six feet under, would never feel this blissful sting again. The last of the bells still had the bright air streaming with vibrations.

On weekends, the institutional vacancy of decades came back to the warehouse and crept under the door of Woody's apartment. It felt as empty on Sundays as churches were during the week. Before each business day, before the trucks and the crews got started, Woody jogged five miles in his Adidas suit. Not on this day still reserved for Pop, however. Although it was tempting to go out and run off the grief. Being alone hit Woody hard this morning. He thought: Me and the world; the world and me. Meaning that there always was some activity to interpose, an errand or a visit, a picture to paint (he was a creative amateur), a massage, a meal – a shield between himself and that troublesome solitude which used the world as its reservoir. But Pop! Last Tuesday, Woody had gotten into the hospital bed with Pop because he kept pulling out the

intravenous needles. Nurses stuck them back, and then Woody astonished them all by climbing into bed to hold the struggling old guy in his arms. 'Easy, Morris, Morris, go easy.' But Pop still groped feebly for the pipes.

When the tolling stopped, Woody didn't notice that a great lake of quiet had come over his kingdom, the Selbst Tile warehouse. What he heard and saw was an old red Chicago streetcar, one of those trams the color of a stockyard steer. Cars of this type went out before Pearl Harbor – clumsy, big-bellied, with tough rattan seats and brass grips for the standing passengers. Those cars used to make four stops to the mile, and ran with a wallowing motion. They stank of carbolic or ozone and throbbed when the air compressors were being charged. The conductor had his knotted signal cord to pull, and the motorman beat the foot gong with his mad heel.

Woody recognized himself on the Western Avenue line and riding through a blizzard with his father, both in sheepskins and with hands and faces raw, the snow blowing in from the rear platform when the doors opened and getting into the longitudinal cleats of the floor. There wasn't warmth enough inside to melt it. And Western Avenue was the longest car line in the world, the boosters said, as if it was a thing to brag about. Twenty-three miles long, made by a draftsman with a T square, lined with factories, storage buildings, machine shops, used-car lots, trolley barns, gas stations, funeral parlors, six-flats, utility buildings, and junkyards, on and on from the prairies on the south to Evanston on the north. Woodrow and his father were going north to Evanston, to Howard Street, and then some, to see Mrs Skoglund. At the end of the line they would still have about five blocks to hike. The purpose of the trip? To raise money for Pop. Pop had talked him into this. When they found out, Mother and Aunt Rebecca would be furious, and Woody was afraid, but he couldn't help it.

Morris had come and said, 'Son, I'm in trouble. It's bad.'

'What's bad, Pop?'

'Halina took money from her husband for me and has to put it back before old Bujak misses it. He could kill her.'

'What did she do it for?'

'Son, you know how the bookies collect? They send a goon. They'll break my head open.'

'Pop! You know I can't take you to Mrs Skoglund.'

'Why not? You're my kid, aren't you? The old broad wants to adopt you, doesn't she? Shouldn't I get something out of it for my trouble? What am I – outside? And what about Halina? She puts her life on the line, but my own kid says no.'

'Oh, Bujak wouldn't hurt her.'

'Woody, he'd beat her to death.'

Bujak? Uniform in color with his dark-gray work clothes, short in the legs, his whole strength in his tool-and-die-maker's forearms and black fingers; and beat-looking – there was Bujak for you. But, according to Pop, there was big, big violence in Bujak, a regular boiling Bessemer inside his narrow chest. Woody could never see the violence in him. Bujak wanted no trouble. If anything, maybe he was afraid that Morris and Halina would gang up on him and kill him, screaming. But Pop was no desperado murderer. And Halina was a calm, serious woman. Bujak kept his savings in the cellar (banks were going out of business). The worst they did was to take some of his money, intending to put it back. As Woody saw him, Bujak was trying to be sensible. He accepted his sorrow. He set minimum requirements for Halina: cook the meals, clean the house, show respect. But at stealing Bujak might have drawn the line, for money was different, money was vital substance. If they stole his savings he might have had to take action, out of respect for the substance, for himself – self-respect. But you couldn't be sure that Pop hadn't invented the bookie, the goon, the theft – the whole thing. He was capable of it, and you'd be a fool not to suspect him. Morris knew that Mother and Aunt Rebecca had told Mrs Skoglund how wicked he was. They had painted him for her in poster colors – purple for vice, black for his soul, red for hell flames: a gambler, smoker, drinker, deserter, screwer of women, and atheist. So Pop was determined to reach her. It was risky for everybody. The Reverend Doctor's operating costs were met by Skoglund Dairies. The

widow paid Woody's seminary tuition; she bought dresses for the little sisters.

Woody, now sixty, fleshy and big, like a figure for the victory of American materialism, sunk in his lounge chair, the leather of its armrests softer to his fingertips than a woman's skin, was puzzled and, in his depths, disturbed by certain blots within him, blots of light in his brain, a blot combining pain and amusement in his breast (how did *that* get there?). Intense thought puckered the skin between his eyes with a strain bordering on headache. Why had he let Pop have his way? Why did he agree to meet him that day, in the dim rear of the poolroom?

'But what will you tell Mrs Skoglund?'

'The old broad? Don't worry, there's plenty to tell her, and it's all true. Ain't I trying to save my little laundry-and-cleaning shop? Isn't the bailiff coming for the fixtures next week?' And Pop rehearsed his pitch on the Western Avenue car. He counted on Woody's health and his freshness. Such a straightforward-looking body was perfect for a con.

Did they still have such winter storms in Chicago as they used to have? Now they somehow seemed less fierce. Blizzards used to come straight down from Ontario, from the Arctic, and drop five feet of snow in an afternoon. Then the rusty green platform cars, with revolving brushes at both ends, came out of the barns to sweep the tracks. Ten or twelve streetcars followed in slow processions, or waited, block after block.

There was a long delay at the gates of Riverview Park, all the amusements covered for the winter, boarded up – the dragon's-back high-rides, the Bobs, the Chute, the Tilt-a-Whirl, all the fun machinery put together by mechanics and electricians, men like Bujak the tool-and-die maker, good with engines. The blizzard was having it all its own way behind the gates, and you couldn't see far inside; only a few bulbs burned behind the palings. When Woody wiped the vapor from the glass, the wire mesh of the window guards was stuffed solid at eye level with snow. Looking higher, you saw mostly the streaked wind horizontally driving from the north. In the seat ahead, two black coal heavers, both in leather Lindbergh flying helmets, sat with shovels between their legs, returning from a job. They

smelled of sweat, burlap sacking, and coal. Mostly dull with black dust, they also sparkled here and there.

There weren't many riders. People weren't leaving the house. This was a day to sit, legs stuck out beside the stove, mummified by both the outdoor and the indoor forces. Only a fellow with an angle, like Pop, would go and buck such weather. A storm like this was out of the compass, and you kept the human scale by having a scheme to raise fifty bucks. Fifty soldiers! Real money in 1933.

'That woman is crazy for you,' said Pop.

'She's just a good woman, sweet to all of us.'

'Who knows what she's got in mind. You're a husky kid. Not such a kid, either.'

'She's a religious woman. She really has religion.'

'Well, your mother isn't your only parent. She and Rebecca and Kovner aren't going to fill you up with their ideas. I know your mother wants to wipe me out of your life. Unless I take a hand, you won't even understand what life is. Because they don't know – those silly Christers.'

'Yes, Pop.'

'The girls I can't help. They're too young. I'm sorry about them, but I can't do anything. With you it's different.'

He wanted me to be like himself – an American.

They were stalled in the storm, while the cattle-colored car waited to have the trolley reset in the crazy wind, which boomed, tingled, blasted. At Howard Street they would have to walk straight into it, due north.

'You'll do the talking at first,' said Pop.

Woody had the makings of a salesman, a pitchman. He was aware of this when he got to his feet in church to testify before fifty or sixty people. Even though Aunt Rebecca made it worth his while, he moved his own heart when he spoke up about his faith. But occasionally, without notice, his heart went away as he spoke religion and he couldn't find it anywhere. In its absence, sincere behavior got him through. He had to rely for delivery on his face, his voice – on behavior. Then his eyes came closer and closer together. And in this approach of eye to eye he felt the strain of hypocrisy. The twisting

of his face threatened to betray him. It took everything he had to keep looking honest. So, since he couldn't bear the cynicism of it, he fell back on mischievousness. Mischief was where Pop came in. Pop passed straight through all those divided fields, gap after gap, and arrived at his side, bent-nosed and broad-faced. In regard to Pop, you thought of neither sincerity nor insincerity. Pop was like the man in the song: he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. Pop was physical; Pop was digestive, circulatory, sexual. If Pop got serious, he talked to you about washing under the arms or in the crotch or of drying between your toes or of cooking supper, of baked beans and fried onions, of draw poker or of a certain horse in the fifth race at Arlington. Pop was elemental. That was why he gave such relief from religion and paradoxes, and things like that. Now, Mother *thought* she was spiritual, but Woody knew that she was kidding herself. Oh, yes, in the British accent she never gave up she was always talking to God or about Him – please God, God willing, praise God. But she was a big substantial bread-and-butter down-to-earth woman, with down-to-earth duties like feeding the girls, protecting, refining, keeping them pure. And those two protected doves grew up so overweight, heavy in the hips and thighs, that their poor heads looked long and slim. And mad. Sweet but cuckoo – Paula cheerfully cuckoo, Joanna depressed and having episodes.

'I'll do my best by you, but you have to promise, Pop, not to get me in Dutch with Mrs Skoglund.'

'You worried because I speak bad English? Embarrassed? I have a mockie accent?'

'It's not that. Kovner has a heavy accent, and she doesn't mind.'

'Who the hell are those freaks to look down on me? You're practically a man and your dad has a right to expect help from you. He's in a fix. And you bring him to her house because she's bighearted, and you haven't got anybody else to go to.'

'I got you, Pop.'

The two coal trimmers stood up at Devon Avenue. One of them wore a woman's coat. Men wore women's clothing in those years, and women men's, when there was no choice. The fur collar was spiky with the wet, and sprinkled with soot. Heavy, they dragged

their shovels and got off at the front. The slow car ground on, very slow. It was after four when they reached the end of the line, and somewhere between gray and black, with snow spouting and whirling under the street lamps. On Howard Street, autos were stalled at all angles and abandoned. The sidewalks were blocked. Woody led the way into Evanston, and Pop followed him up the middle of the street in the furrows made earlier by trucks. For four blocks they bucked the wind and then Woody broke through the drifts to the snowbound mansion, where they both had to push the wrought-iron gate because of the drift behind it. Twenty rooms or more in this dignified house and nobody in them but Mrs Skoglund and her servant Hjordis, also religious.

As Woody and Pop waited, brushing the slush from their sheepskin collars and Pop wiping his big eyebrows with the ends of his scarf, sweating and freezing, the chains began to rattle and Hjordis uncovered the air holes of the glass storm door by turning a wooden bar. Woody called her 'monk-faced.' You no longer see women like that, who put no female touch on the face. She came plain, as God made her. She said, 'Who is it and what do you want?'

'It's Woodrow Selbst. Hjordis? It's Woody.'

'You're not expected.'

'No, but we're here.'

'What do you want?'

'We came to see Mrs Skoglund.'

'What for do you want to see her?'

'Just tell her we're here.'

'I have to tell her what you came for, without calling up first.'

'Why don't you say it's Woody with his father, and we wouldn't come in a snowstorm like this if it wasn't important.'

The understandable caution of women who live alone. Respectable old-time women, too. There was no such respectability now in those Evanston houses, with their big verandas and deep yards and with a servant like Hjordis, who carried at her belt keys to the pantry and to every closet and every dresser drawer and every padlocked bin in the cellar. And in High Episcopal Christian Science Women's Temperance Evanston, no tradespeople rang at the front door. Only

invited guests. And here, after a ten-mile grind through the blizzard, came two tramps from the West Side. To this mansion where a Swedish immigrant lady, herself once a cook and now a philanthropic widow, dreamed, snowbound, while frozen lilac twigs clapped at her storm windows, of a new Jerusalem and a Second Coming and a Resurrection and a Last Judgment. To hasten the Second Coming, and all the rest, you had to reach the hearts of these scheming bums arriving in a snowstorm.

Sure, they let us in.

Then in the heat that swam suddenly up to their mufflered chins Pop and Woody felt the blizzard for what it was; their cheeks were frozen slabs. They stood beat, itching, trickling in the front hall that *was* a hall, with a carved-newel-post staircase and a big stained-glass window at the top. Picturing Jesus with the Samaritan woman. There was a kind of Gentile closeness to the air. Perhaps when he was with Pop, Woody made more Jewish observations than he would otherwise. Although Pop's most Jewish characteristic was that Yiddish was the only language he could read a paper in. Pop was with Polish Halina, and Mother was with Jesus Christ, and Woody ate uncooked bacon from the flitch. Still, now and then he had a Jewish impression.

Mrs Skoglund was the cleanest of women – her fingernails, her white neck, her ears – and Pop's sexual hints to Woody all went wrong because she was so intensely clean, and made Woody think of a waterfall, large as she was, and grandly built. Her bust was big. Woody's imagination had investigated this. He thought she kept things tied down tight, very tight. But she lifted both arms once to raise a window and there it was, her bust, beside him, the whole unbindable thing. Her hair was like the raffia you had to soak before you could weave with it in a basket class – pale, pale. Pop, as he took his sheepskin off, was in sweaters, no jacket. His darting looks made him seem crooked. Hardest of all for these Selbsts with their bent noses and big, apparently straightforward faces was to look honest. All the signs of dishonesty played over them. Woody had often puzzled about it. Did it go back to the muscles, was it fundamentally a jaw problem – the projecting angles of the jaws? Or was