/ \

/ \

TWO STORIES

on

REDEMPTION

/ \ / \ / \

/ \

/ \ / \ / \

/ \

Text & Photographs

by Ben Kilpela

Two Stories on Redemption

by Ben Kilpela

CONTENTS:

* * *

PREFACE

THESE TWO STORIES, written some ten years apart, study several aspects of the human experience of moral ideas. I have published them together because they concern, roughly, a common theme, one that has graced, in various forms, many of the finest works of literature as frequently as many of the most commonplace melodramas of so-called popular culture. The stories, also, are similar in superficial ways that invite comparisons.

Through these stories, I delve into themes that I have long found to be of great interest and great consequence. One of the most significant themes to my mind is the wide gap between the way the world is or was and the ways people think it should be or should have been. What can and should we do when we see that "is" and "ought" do not match or fit? Such is, simply, the basic issue of moral experience, and this issue is bound with the matter of human mind perceiving, understanding its experience, and forming ideas about the world and the events of human history.

This human comprehension of the world is another subject that has long fascinated me and many others, and it plays a visible role in these stories. The ways in which the human mind or soul makes sense of the world; how our lives are often more heavily influenced by how we understand events through ideas than by what the world actually is or was (by our conceptions rather than our perceptions, using the basic distinction used by William James); how our minds and souls make

sense of and adjust to events and perceptions and experiences -- all these subjects form another set of sub-themes mulled over at some level in these two stories. There is much else to them, I believe -- not to be overlooked, on the most basic level, is their plots concerning cruelty, vengefulness, suicide, and despair -- and some fun, too, I hope.

The relationship between the two stories my readers can determine for themselves as they explore through them my understanding of the human experience of sin (in the broadest non-religious sense), guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and redemption. Neither story directly describes any event in my own life or relates factually to my own experiences of repentance and redemption. None of the characters in either story speaks for me. Rather, the stories as wholes speak to my understanding of the human experiences under study.

It is with some apprehension that I offer the photographs and extracts that accompany these stories on moral guilt and redemption, since it is not wholly clear how they relate to their themes. The photographs are my own, taken over several years in various locations. The purpose of both the photos and the quotations is only to be loosely evocative of the settings and ideas of the stories. As perhaps with the stories themselves, they will suggest many things to many people.

THE BRICK

A Short Story

* * *

Conscience is thoroughly well bred and soon leaves off talking to those who do not wish to hear it. -- Samuel Butler

A stiff apology is a second insult.... The injured party does not want to be compensated because he has been wronged; he wants to be healed because he has been hurt. - G. K. Chesterton

Conscience is a cur that will let you get past but that you cannot keep from barking. -- Anonymous

* * *

MY BROTHER ASKED for an apology. I thought he was kidding, asking me to request his pardon for something that had happened between us 20 years ago, at least. But I would quickly see that he was in earnest. These were his exact words the first time he asked: "I really think you should say you're sorry for doing what you did to me." I laughed at that. I even slapped my thigh. But David didn't laugh along with me, as was customary when we talked about this old incident between us. I looked at him, only mildly doubtful for now, as my laughter died away. He had to be kidding, I thought.

This took place a week ago, when we were at our mother's house for a family get-together. David and I live in towns in west Michigan about 50 miles apart, so we see each other only three or four times a year, usually at Mom's, who lives in a suburb of Detroit. We've laughed about the cruel little prank I played on him, to exact revenge, often over the years -- just about ever since I first pulled it, in fact. So it was natural I thought he was kidding about the request for an apology. He had never requested one before, despite our having talked and laughed about my cruel little misdeed many times over. Who wouldn't have thought he was kidding under the circumstances?

I don't even know how we started talking about that old prank last week. We were just chatting about things, nonchalantly, absently, and then we found ourselves reminiscing about my little offense once again. Then a smile came to my

face, and a brief, clipped smile came to his, and that was when he first asked for the apology. I ignored my momentary confusion and, smiling and chuckling again, I simply started recalling, with the customary relish, the events leading up to my nasty little act of retaliation. There was nothing unusual about my behavior. This was just as we reminisced about that prank every time it came up.

But I didn't get far into the story this time. David still wasn't laughing along as I started in about how rainy it had been that day. He interrupted me, "Really, Chuck, I think you should say you're sorry for what you did." Though this was his second request for an apology, I still thought he was joking. But my laughter became a little uneasy. He went on, "I'm not kidding, Chuck. I know it sounds strange after all these years. I know it, but I think you should… I want you to apologize for doing what you did to me." I looked down at Mom's worn carpet in the den. I had finally realized that he truly wanted me to ask his pardon. I glanced up at him, then averted my eyes from his steady gaze. My older brother, some time comrade in arms but also intense and frequent rival of my childhood, was waiting patiently, righteously. I was silent, unable to decide what to say, befuddled -- and, abruptly, no longer amused.

* * *

WHAT DAVID WANTED me to apologize for was an incident that happened when he was 12 years old and I was ten. It took place on a rainy Saturday afternoon in our neighborhood on the edge of Detroit, some years before our folks moved northwest out of the city. A cousin of my age and my best friend in those days, Bill, had come over for the day. Bill and I had become bored after lunch because the rain was keeping us inside. Fed up with playing imaginary games in the small, hot furnace room in the basement -- where we often played pretending to be knights or cowboys -- we went upstairs to David to ask him to persuade our mother to let Bill and me go outside in the rain. David thought we had a superb idea and agreed to join us if he could convince Mom to let us all out to get wet. It was good David wanted to go along, because Mom was sure not to allow only Bill and me to do something so unusual. We needed the backing of an older brother to lend credibility to our cause. While David went to the kitchen to present our petition to Mom, Bill and I went back down to the basement and listened to him make his presentation from around a corner at the bottom of the basement steps.

It took David and us a half hour to tip the scales in our favor. Mom, of

course, was worried that we would catch "our death of cold" if she let us out to play in the heavy rain; it was only the first week of May. David begged her. "Come on, Ma. It'd be so much fun. Come on. Why not?" David pleaded again and again, ignoring her reasonable objections. Then Bill and I, having become rather anxious as we listened in secret, noisily stomped up the tiled steps to the kitchen to add our voices to his, at the moment when it seemed he was about to fail. Mom finally relented. Though she restricted us to half an hour outside, David and I knew that we had been given license to spend the rest of the day in the rain if we chose. As soon as we were outside, we knew Mom would put us out of her mind for a while and forget when she had told us to return. A good long while would pass before she would miss our begging voices, remember that we had gone out into the rain, and look out the windows to find us or call for us from the back door in the basement.

When we first went out, the rain was falling so thickly that it looked foggy outside. After the three of us had stood no more than 10 seconds in the downpour, our clothes were soaked through. We were very happy. We spent a long time diverting the water that was rushing out of the downspouts on the neighbors' house. We were trying to create a river down their driveway. After a while, we decided

that it would be much more challenging and wicked to try to plug one of the spouts and force the rain over the rim of the gutters. We tried everything we could find: mud, sand, stones, rags from the garage, and then our shirts, which we had to ring out when we took them off. We failed and gave up.

For a minute we stood together in the rain and began to shiver. The rain was falling a little less hard but just as steadily. It was astonishing how prolonged and intense this rainstorm was. We were no longer happy. Bill wanted to go inside; he stood beside the neighbor's brick house, his arms wrapped around his middle, shirtless, his head bowed and his wet hair stuck to his forehead. Because I could think of nothing else to do, malicious or not, I had just about decided to head inside with Bill. But David had an idea. He wanted to play baseball in a large, circular patch of bare dirt in our backyard. That, of course, sounded like an excellent idea. We three promptly set off to inspect the area.

Our father had dug up the lawn and left the bare patch a few weeks before; he was building something on the spot, perhaps a little shed. I can't remember exactly. Because he had dug down a few inches, and because the rain had been falling so heavily, the mud patch had become a pool of muddy water neatly surrounded by tall spring grass. Under the water, the dirt and clay had turned into a squishy mud. We took our rain-soaked shoes off and stepped carefully into the cold, muddy pool. It was the color of coffee with cream. I almost lost my balance as I gingerly placed my foot on the slippery bottom of the muddy pool. Though we could not see our feet as we stood in the brown water, we could feel the mud pushing between our toes and around the sides of our feet. We quickly agreed: the pool was perfect for pretending to slide into home plate.

After we each practiced sliding through the pool a few times, David came up with an idea for a simple game. We would play "Throwing Home," just the kind of game at which, as Bill and I later realized, David could defeat us whenever he pleased. Rotating positions every couple plays, one of us would be an outfielder, one a catcher, one a base-runner. The object of this game was simple: the base-runner would try to run home starting from a small tree over at the edge of our yard and make it safely to home plate, which was a stick David had stood upright in the middle of the pool of mud. Standing in the pool of mud, the catcher was to throw a baseball, which we got out of the garage, over the outfielder's head toward the house, which was, naturally, the centerfield fence. As soon as the outfielder picked up the ball, the base-runner was allowed to leave third base, that small evergreen tree off to the left side of the pool. The base-runner had only one goal: beat the

throw with a slide into the mud. The catcher would try to tag him out before he grabbed the stick.

Getting home safely was not as easy as we had, at first, thought it would be -- at least for Bill and me. David's worn, warped, scuffed baseball quickly became much heavier and very slippery. On every play, it either fell on the wet grass or into the pool. The mitt the catcher was allowed to use (there was no need for the outfielder to have one, and, in any case, David would not permit us to use his good mitt in the rain) also became heavy, soggy, and slimy, not only because of the rain, but because applying the tag to the runner usually required the catcher to douse it in the pool of muddy water.

Quickly, it became clear to Bill and me that we were not going to have much success tagging David out -- it was usually the case with every athletic competition we held against each other that he would win easily. He was taller, heavier, faster, and smarter than Bill or I. He could catch and throw better, too. More than these, he could slide from the edge of the grass through the mud right to the stick in one long, agile motion. David took great pleasure in beating Bill's throws and mine to the plate, and his antics -- hooting and jeering and laughing and cheering his own performance -- began to irritate me. Undoubtedly, I would have taken the same pleasure, too, if I had had the same success. David soon took to sliding with a flourish of his arms and a high kick of his left leg. The footing, of course, was poor. Bill and I slipped and fell in the cold, muddy water many times as we gamely tried to get him out. We finally wised up and stopped trying to tag him on any play that it was obvious that he had easily beaten the throw. But whether we tried or not, we soon figured out, did not matter to David. He started to taunt us for giving up, for being cry-babies, even though neither of us was crying or whining, yet. In a short time, Bill and I were having trouble even getting the ball to home plate. Long after David had slid past Bill or me and grabbed the stick, our throws usually dropped short of the muddy pool, much too late to bother trying to catch. But despite our adopted policy of giving up on most of David's turns as base-runner, David began sliding to the stick with ever greater flourishes -- and leaping out of the mud with ever louder boasts.

The concept behind the game was, of course, to give us all the chance to look like Al Kaline sliding into home at Tiger Stadium. Kaline was a hero for most kids in Detroit and its wide ring of suburbs back in the '60s. I cannot say how many times I saw him slide into home -- perhaps once on television, perhaps never. It was the way we believed Kaline would slide that we were imitating. No one on

our baseball teams could slide on the dusty, hard gravel of the Little League infields with any of the smoothness and elegance of a big-leaguer. The usual painful slide of a Little Leaguer often lasted no more than a foot or two; it looked stubby and clumsy and childish -- and we knew it. In that pool of mud, at last, we believed we looked like we were sliding with the grace and power of the pros. As I hit the pool, the muddy rain water jumped into the air and toppled down onto my chest and face. I felt my rear slipping perfectly over the mud bottom of the pool to the stick. I held my right leg straight out through the whole of every long slide. I could hear the cheering of the crowd in my head, just as I imagine Bill and David could in theirs.

Despite all the cheering I heard and the beauty with which I thought I had slid, during one period of the game David tagged me out five times in a row. What a blow to my dignity and confidence! Bill suffered a worse ignominy: David or I tagged him seven times in a row. We were all carefully counting to ourselves so that we could boast if we did well, though it was only David who announced his achievements. On one play, David stopped me from reaching the plate by standing in front of the stick, in an aggressive crouch, as he waited for the ball to come in from Bill. I slid right into his legs with plenty of time to make it safely home, but he did not budge. His feet were set deep in the mud below. As I scrambled through the muck to get around his legs, he finally scooped the soaked baseball from the water and slammed the mitt down onto my head an instant before I touched the stick. Another humiliation. I protested vehemently that I had beaten the tag. He dismissed me. Then I protested that the tag was illegal. Over by the house, Bill put his arms around his chest, waiting for the dispute to subside. I felt tears coming to my eyes and kicked some muddy water at David. David laughed. Then, with a sudden scowl, he threw the water-logged mitt straight at my face.

We changed the order of the rotation several times, but neither Bill nor I could tag David out any longer. The ball simply had become too heavy for either of us to get it home in time. Even though his legs and arms, just like Bill's and mine, flailed about in a silly way as he ran across the slippery grass toward the pool, David was just too fast and too big and too smart. Perhaps a little bored with how easy it was to score, David started trying to humiliate us on every play. Several times, even when the I did not yet have the ball in hand, David slammed into me and knocked me down into the mud before he took hold of the stick -- just for kicks, I suppose. As we neared the end of our patience, he took to jamming the stick proudly back into the mud and then exalting with his hands raised, dancing in

the water as the rain washed away the muddy water from his back.

We were about done. Bill kept saying he was going in. I was protesting David's antics continuously. But at about the time Bill and I had finally decided to go in for sure, we finally almost got David out. The play was the one that led to the incident for which David expected an apology from me twenty years later. On this play, David slipped and fell beside the evergreen just as Bill picked up the soaked baseball by the house. I yelled at him to make a good throw and, for once in a long while, he did. I caught the ball while David was still struggling to pick up speed on the grass. Despite having the ball and being ready to put on a tag while David was still coming home, I knew I was in trouble. As I turned to face David, stepped in front of home plate, and set my feet apart for the tag, I saw that he had gained a lot of speed quickly and was running harder than ever. He threw out his arms, jabbed his left leg out, curled his right leg under him, and drove his body into the pool with such force that mud and water were thrown all over me, even in my eyes. A moment later, blinded, I felt David's body slide between my legs. I felt him grab my ankle and push up. I tried to keep my balance but fell into the mud on my right shoulder. Then I felt David slam his fist down on the mitt. A blast of pain shot through my hand. The baseball squirted out of the mitt and bobbed away on the waves in the pool. After I stumbled and slipped to my feet in all haste and wiped the mud from my eyes, I found my older brother signaling that he had been safe, crossing and re-crossing his arms. He was laughing raucously.

"No way. No way," I shouted at him above the sound of his laughing and the rain spattering in the pool. "You can't do that -- you're out -- you're out." David looked at me, then laughed some more while I kept on protesting. Shivering, Bill started wandering toward us from the outfield grass. When I slammed the heavy mitt down into the muddy water with a sluggish splash, David took a step toward me and punched both hands, palms out, into my bare chest. In an instant, I landed softly on my rear in the mud. While I sat there in the cold murky water, David lectured me on the rules of baseball. He smugly averred that the play he had made was entirely legal. It was the fielder's responsibility to hang on to the ball; a runner could try whatever he wanted to make the fielder drop it, "even kick him in the balls," he said. Then, pointing imperiously toward the house, he told me to get off my butt and go into the outfield. I obeyed with a whispered curse.

There were some bricks lying in the grass farther back on the lawn that day, bricks my father was intending to use for his project, whatever it was. As I

passed Bill on the way toward then house, I told him we'd take a couple more rotations and then head inside. I had decided that on my next turn as catcher I would use one of those bricks to get revenge, not just for this one incident, as reprehensible as it then seemed to me, but for every time my older brother had lorded it over me, had slapped me imperiously, had ordered me around, had proved he was so much smarter and stronger than I, had beaten me up, had undeservedly gotten me in trouble with our parents -- for every offense, real, exaggerated, or imagined. I should probably admit that I could probably not now, many years into adulthood, any longer recall more than two or three such offenses -- and none of them very consequential.

The next time I was up as catcher and David was base-runner, David walked away from me toward the little evergreen that was third base and Bill, hunched over, walked disconsolately toward the house. Neither of them was watching me. Quickly, I grabbed one of the bricks in the grass near the back of the pool and put it in the water half way from the edge of the pool to the stick. It was a thoughtless deed: I had not bothered to weigh its consequences. I simply saw the bricks, imagined that one of them would effectively stop David and shake him up a bit, hastily grabbed it as he was facing away from me, and planted solidly it in the mud. I even stepped on it to make sure that it was set securely enough that it would not move much when David hit it as he slid.

I tossed the ball toward the house. Bill loped in for it and it dropped in a puddle on the grass in front of him. Bill's lazy disconsolate home dropped into a puddle on the grass several feet in front of the pool; the ball had become almost impossible for us to handle. David was coming hard again, perhaps peeved with my endless protests. I jumped out of his way as he slid into the mud. I chased the ball casually, because I thought I would have plenty of time to tag David out after he hit the brick. A moment later, as I stooped to pick up the ball off the grass, David's foot struck. I was watching, with satisfaction. It was a frightening sight. He screeched in pain, crumpled, and spun around on his back. He was too far from the stick to reach it. I held the baseball firmly in the mitt and waded into the pool to tag him out -- at last. Revenge was mine; it did feel sweet, I clearly remember feeling at the moment. But when I came to stand next to him, I saw the expression on his upturned face. His mouth was wide open but no sound was coming out; the rain was falling down his black throat. His face was twisted in pain, his eyes shut tight. Suddenly, he began gasping for air. Now he clenched his teeth and lie in the muddy water doubled up, clutching his left foot. As he lay there on his back, with

his bloody foot in his hands, I watched him in confusion and waited for him to try to grab the stick; I was not yet certain that he was hurt. The coffee-colored water flowed on and off David's chest as it rose and fell. Little trickles of blood flowed around his hands and drops of blood floated on top of the water. I turned and ran; tagging him out seemed, at that moment, unseemly. Getting the feeling that something had gone wrong, Bill hustled to follow me to the back door, which led into the basement. As we opened the door hurriedly we could hear, just above the heavy rain, the sound of David cursing. Then we heard him scream at us, "I'll get you little bastards."

Bill was terrified. "What did you do?" he wailed in a loud whisper.

As I slammed the door behind us, I turned to him and said with all the serenity I could muster, "I put a brick in the water and he slid into it."

Bill knitted his brow in irritation. "Why'd you do THAT?" I shrugged and sat down on the long wooden bench kept beside the door.

We made all haste to get out of our pants and underwear. My mother came down to the basement. She looked at us disgustedly as the water rolled off our bodies onto the bench and tile floor. First, she asked us where we had left our shirts. Then she asked us where David was. We said our shirts were still outside -- with David. She told us to go back out and get them before we undressed. Bill and I exchanged a glance. Predictably, there was no chance we were going to risk going back out to the muddy pool, where David was still lying in the water holding his foot. I told Mom that because we were cold we would get the shirts after the rain had subsided. From the basement laundry room, she brought out dry clothes for us and again wondered aloud about David.

When she had gone upstairs, Bill demanded that when David came in I tell him that he had had nothing to do with putting that brick in the mud. It was my judgment that we had better both avoid David for the rest of the day than hazard an attempted explanation of who was and was not responsible for the deed. Bill and I quickly dressed in the dry clothes Mom had brought out for us and hid in the hot furnace room. We kept the lights out and chanced only whispers. After some long minutes of anxious waiting, we heard David open the back door slowly and come inside. He groaned as he slumped onto the bench. He sounded so much older than I, as though his injury had aged him. My mother came back down to the basement and gasped when she saw David's foot, from which blood was dripping onto the tiles. Bill and I, holding our breath as well as we could, peered at the scene through a crack in the frame of the furnace room door. "How did that

happen?" Mom asked. Bill and I braced for his story, but David only clicked his tongue and moaned. Then the hot water heater clicked on behind us. Bill jumped in fright and bumped me into the door. David didn't seem to hear us. His head was resting against the wall as he sat on the bench and Mom examined the wound.

She went into the laundry room again and brought out a couple rags. She wrapped one around David's foot and wiped the blood from the floor with another. They quietly left the basement together to clean and bandage the wound upstairs. David had not asked Mom where Bill and I were, but he would surely do so upstairs; we could not be certain that Mom did not know. We considered changing hiding places. We considered going back out in the rain to hide in the garage. What was David going to do with us? We spent an indecisive half-hour in the dark furnace room without hearing David come back to the basement. We heard nothing but the sound of hot water in the pipes. Finally, we summoned enough courage to venture out and look around. Puddles of cloudy rain-water were drying near the back door. A drop or two of blood that my mother had missed were dull and dry. Bill and I were not about to risk going upstairs to find out how badly David's foot had been cut -- even though this was what we most wanted to do. I thought that Mom could protect us from him, but then she would find out what happened. It was a fearful dilemma.

Eventually we saw David that day. He threatened me several times,

mysteriously knowing that Bill had nothing to do with the brick, with dire revenge. "I'll get you for this," he hissed at me once, not even looking at Bill, as he limped toward me in the kitchen. He was wearing a thick bandage under a thick sock. All day I feared for my life, pleaded with David for clemency, and lamented my recklessness. But David never exacted his revenge -- not that Saturday or ever. For some reason he never revealed, he did not have the heart to carry out his threats. Perhaps he accepted that after all he had done to me over the years -- and would do in the years to come -- he had deserved what I had done. But whether or not he believed he had deserved my reprisal, I learned 20 years later that he has always believed, that day and ever after, despite the number of times we had laughed about my putting that brick in the mud, that he deserved an apology from me.

* * *

BUT AN APOLOGY? Now? After all this time? Two decades? As I have said, I was puzzled and irked. As I looked down at the carpet last week at Mom's and hoped David would either withdraw his request or finally tell me it was a masterful joke, the 20 years between my revenge and that moment dissolved in my soul like a thin mist scattered by a breeze. For a few minutes, the years seemed never to have passed. I felt like a ten year old again -- specifically, a ten year old who had just been asked to apologize. Apologies are not easy, I now distinctly remember, for a ten year old, and they had always been a particularly conspicuous weakness of mine. I knew last week that I should apologize. I even wanted to make the apology, to be forgiven at last for having played that cruel, thoughtless prank. It had been, I honestly have no doubt, a stupid, wicked act, one for which I have felt, at times, painfully guilty. But something inside checked the words of apology. I could not release them, as though a valve in my soul had stuck fast. For that cruel deed, I now realize, quite obviously, I do not feel enough remorse or shame or guilt to force that valve open. It is obvious, too, that I still maintain that David deserved just about all that he had received, however cruel the deed might be judged -- though I have harbored this moral verdict for two decades only in secret.

"Don't you think you owe me an apology?" David asked me, breaking the silence.

"After all these years?" I said, a little too quickly, too heatedly.

His voice became tense. "Why not? I still feel you owe it to me."

"After all these years?"

David shrugged. "It's always bothered me that you've never said you're sorry."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you cut me pretty badly with that brick."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" I said, no longer even trying to mask my impatience.

"I don't know -- what does it matter? I'd still like you to apologize." When I did not reply quickly enough, David added, in a slightly patronizing tone, "Don't you feel sorry?" He sounded as though he were imitating one of our parents.

"Well, yeah, I suppose. But it's been a long time." I was bristling at his every word, but still my words of apology kept rising. Each time, they were checked and fell back.

"So why don't you?"

"It just seems a little unfair to expect an apology after all these years."

David sighed manfully. "Well I'm not going to push it. It's not a big deal, but I do think you should apologize, Chuck."

I sounded exactly as I would have as a ten year old: "It just seems pretty strange that you'd want an apology now, twenty years later. And if it's not a big deal, why are you bringing it up?"

David snapped back, "If it's not a big deal to you, why don't you apologize?"

The apology rose, pressed hard against my chest, and fell. Grudgingly, I said, "Okay: if it's so important to you -- I'm sorry." Of course, my childish tone was not even slightly apologetic. David piously and curtly accepted the apology and walked away. I knew he thought I had not meant a word of it. I sneered at his back like I had hundreds of times in our childhood.

A week later, it remains surprising and disturbing to me that that apology had been so difficult for me to give. I have been thinking about what happened between us, it must be obvious, quite a lot. Even though two decades have passed since David has pushed me around, given me orders, or shown me up, clearly, I have never forgotten that David was, in my opinion, which is now and forever unverifiable, unjust and cruel to me when we were children. How durable and fervent that considered opinion has been. Clearly, too, I have been unable to pry loose and put aside the resentment I have always felt for the ways he treated me when we were boys -- when his size and maturity made such an important and

unmerited difference between us. As I was trying to apologize last week, I remember sensing my soul shouting inside me: "He deserved just what you did to him." David's request for an apology seemed in the light of that position no more than sanctimonious moralizing, pretentious posturing, and it so exasperated and infuriated me that I know that if, just last week, at the age of 32, I had seen him once again haughtily walking toward that evergreen tree in our back yard through the thick rain, I would have surely grabbed one of the bricks lying nearby in the grass and would have stepped on it hard enough to keep it from moving when David slid into it. I might even have done it today.

For some reason I cannot sift out, my passionate conviction that I had been just in planting that brick in the mud is still as infrangible as David's belief that he had been wronged. Indeed, I still feel the urge -- even now, as I write these disquieting words -- to reopen the case, to give David a stern lecture on justice and integrity. I cannot shake the conviction, I actually have little desire to shake the conviction, that because he had warranted my taking revenge on him, I have never been under any obligation, not 20 years ago or at any time since, to apologize for the vengeance I had rightfully taken. David was right about my apology last week: it was perfunctory. I apologized just to be a sport, to try to be adult about this matter. It seems juvenile to harbor such old and petty resentments. I tried, weakly, to save face. But as we stood facing each other last week, both of us for a moment looking down at the carpet and absently rubbing it with the toes of our shoes, I have to admit to myself that I almost blurted out that I still believe that he deserved my vengeance. I almost blurted out that I had no intention of apologizing because I had not done anything wrong with that brick twenty years ago. I almost blurted out, too, that I would avenge myself again if David ever treated me as he had when we were children (something I had promised him, in mere jest, many times before). All this, I realized at the instant that I felt these impulses, would have been extremely embarrassing, just as it probably would have been irritating and amusing to David. Expressing such ideas, for adults, even though we might believe them, is simply not worth it.

I should return to the story of the brick for a moment. A day after I planted it in the pool and David slid into it, my mother learned how he had cut his foot. She came to me to ask me why I had done it. I said to her, "He deserved it, Mom. He's always getting me. Now I finally get him and he doesn't like it." It's strange and startling to have discovered that I think exactly as I did twenty years ago. My mother sternly chastised me -- in her mysteriously kind way -- for my

misdeed and decided on my punishment: to sweep and mop our tiled basement floor. Putting on her gravest face and using her most solemn voice, she recommended that I take a "good long look" at the gash on David's foot -- it turned out to be a serious cut, for which David needed a few stitches and a tetanus shot. I was not about to ask David to let me have a peek at it for fear that he would give me a good whack at the moment I was close to him and my head was lowered. My mother warned me with a gentle shake of her index finger in front of my nose that I had better not ever take revenge on anyone in such a spiteful way again. As I looked away from her glaring yet kindly eyes, I remember, I wanted to reassure her that such wicked deeds were conserved only for David.

Her exhortation from 20 years ago, it is revealing and rather awkward to discover, had been lost on me. When I saw what happened as a result of David's sliding into that brick, I had not minded having been so cruel. Though terrified of the possible consequences of the deed, I had felt justified and satisfied with my exaction of revenge. Not even the severity of the cut had ever caused me to question the justice of what I had done. A week ago, I showed myself, for perhaps the first time, that, however much my thoughts mortify and puzzle me, I still feel that my deed was fully warranted. Though it is shameful to admit it, neither my mother nor David has convinced me that I was wrong and should have repented and apologized long ago.

FINIS

* * *

Further Extracts

> The memory and conscience never did, nor ever will, agree about forgiving injuries. -- Marquis of Halifax

> Classic remorse, as all the moralists are agreed, is a most undesirable sentiment. If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean. - Aldous Huxley

> To many people virtue consists mainly in repenting faults, not in avoiding them. -- G.C. Lichtenberg

> … it is rather hard and certainly depressing to admit guilt and to repent. -- Hannah Arendt

Where there is yet shame, there may in time be virtue. -- Samuel Johnson

Love means never having to say your sorry. - Lore Segal, Love Story

HIS GARBLED, HOWLING MIND

A Short Story

* * *

Extracts

Suicide may also be regarded as an experiment -— a question which man puts to Nature, trying to force her to answer. The question is this: What change will death produce in a man's existence and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make; for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer. -- Arthur Schopenhauer

Suicide is not chosen; it happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with pain. -- Martha Ainsworth, "Suicide: Read This First" web site

… alongside of the deliverances of temperamental optimism concerning life, those of temperamental pessimism always exist, and oppose to them a standing refutation. -- William James, "Is Life Worth Living?"

No one ever lacks a good reason for suicide. -- Cesare Pavese

To me death is not a fearful thing. It's living that's cursed. -- Jim Jones

Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. -- Phil Donahue

* * *

ON SATURDAY, A HALF HOUR before dawn, Brad stepped on tip toes into his mother's living room and knelt down on the carpet in front of the television, which stood blank and gray in its cabinet. Dramatically, as he rested on his knees a moment, he held a video-tape cassette in front of him in both his hands and aimed it at the mouth of his mother's VCR on a shelf beneath the TV. His resolve now firm, he placed the cassette into the opening and gently pushed the tape in. Automatically, the machine came on and pulled the tape into position. Brad leaned forward to take the remote control from the cabinet, pressed one button to turn on the TV, and another to select the proper channel on which to view the tape. He had no need to turn the volume down since on this tape there was no sound.

With a nervous yawn and a hard shiver, Brad rose. Rubbing sleep from

his eyes, he backed across the small living room and sat down on the couch across from the television. He found himself farther away from the screen than he wanted to be, so he slid off the couch and sat on the floor again just a few feet in front of the screen, which now cast its ghoulish, silver light across his mother's worn, pea-green carpet. Brad's blue bathrobe looked black in the odd light. He thought about turning on a lamp, but decided for the sake of secrecy to keep the room lit only with the gleaming light of the screen. But it was less dark in the room than in the middle of the night. The very dim purplish glow of the first light of day was beginning to seep around the edges of his mother's thick, light green drapes covering most of the picture window.

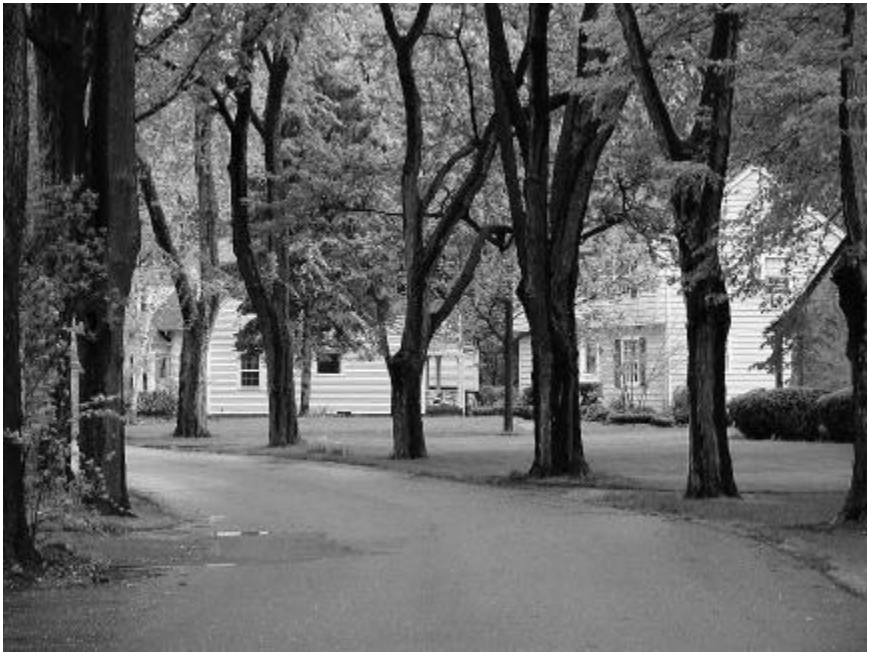
Just a few hours ago, Friday evening, moments after he had arrived at his apartment after picking up this tape and several duplicates on his way home from work, Brad had watched it for the first time. In his own darkened living room last night, the 40 minutes of tape had passed by in a haze of tears and apprehensions, expectancy and dread. When it had ended and his television screen became filled with glittering gray snow, Brad had felt -- a cliche coming true -- as though time had stopped, and he found himself unwilling and almost unable to move a muscle. His television's silver light poured out of the screen across his carpet and smeared his pants from his shoes to his knees. His mouth slightly open, his eyes straight ahead and scalded and weary from all his tears, Brad sat on his couch for 15 minutes before he stiffly and clumsily rose to turn his television and VCR off. He went back to the couch and slouched there in the dark apartment, a dim yellow glow of parking lot lights seeping through his curtains. He sat there for another hour before he laid down on the couch, his chest tight, his breathing slightly difficult, as though someone had jabbed him in the ribs with the handle of a shovel, and fell asleep.

At 9:15 last night, still mentally dazed from viewing the tape, he woke up, packed some clothes and personal articles, and left for his mother's house. He was planning to stay the night there. His sister Sharon was up for the weekend from Springfield, and he wanted to spend some time with her and her children and, perhaps, present her with a copy of the videotape. Since he looked a bit worn and was unusually quiet, his mother kept asking him, "Do you feel alight? Are you sure you're okay?" He said, "I'm just tired, Ma. I'm fine. I'll feel better in the morning." Brad stayed up to see Sharon. She arrived with her kids unexpectedly late, though, and it was long past time for all of them to go to bed soon after their arrival. Brad found no opportunity to tell Sharon about the tape or give her the copy he had made for her. At 4:00 in the morning, the house quiet, after sleeping only

erratically, he came fully awake and started thinking about the tape. He decided he needed to see it again before he showed it to his mother or Sharon, and he got up and quietly made his way to the living room.

In the moments before the pictures came to the screen of his mother's television that Saturday morning before dawn, Brad wondered whether he could ever convince his mother to watch it, or even whether he could bring himself to tell her that it existed. Surely, she had watched the family movies it contained a few times since they were taken in the 1960's, though, probably, he thought, she had not seen them in a decade or more. With a blink, the television snow disappeared and a picture came to the screen; the only sounds in the room were the faint hums of the television and the turning wheels inside the VCR. Brad got to his knees on the floor, his hands on his thighs, his back straight. He leaned toward the TV to study every passing instant. The first pictures were somewhat fuzzy, wobbly, and dulled, the colors washed dim by time and decay. Pictures of a wild, delighted band of children, ten or more, came to the screen. The children were running and prancing around a small grass yard behind a narrow, two-story, suburban house, sided in white aluminum. This house was in Farmington, Michigan, a suburb just outside Detroit. He knew the house well; it was where he had spent the first 15 years of his life. In a moment, he saw himself come on the screen. He was a 12-year-old boy. Amid the other children, most younger than he, he was running around the yard with a fat, joyous grin on his face. His younger self shouted something at the camera as he dashed by. The other kids wore equally enormous, almost silly grins. There was, evidently, squealing and exuberant laughter. Mouths were wide open. The children shouted and laughed and hooted. Even in these moving pictures gone nearly colorless, the children looked to be full of life and joy and frivolity. Then he saw himself, now up by the house, at a distance from the camera, rush down a low ridge, less than a yard high, that ran the length of the yard at an angle. He was the first child following his older sister Andrea, who was about 14 at the time. Behind him came child after child after child, some whom he recognized, some whom he could not recall, try as he might. He was searching his memory as he watched. A couple of the youngest children fell as they ran down the little ridge. They rolled the rest of the way down, leapt to their feet, and laughed some more. He wished he could remember every name, every face, the meaning and importance of every gesture. He wished her could hear their laughter, the words they were shouting out in glee. On the screen, as more children rushed up to and down the ridge, Andrea shot past in a blur, close to the camera. On came everyone else trailing her, one

after another after another, everyone still smiling and laughing, the smiles so wide that they looked painful. At the end of the coiled line of running children came Sharon, Brad's younger sister, just eight years old, the baby of the family, Daddy's "little rhinoceros," which was what Brad's father always had called his dear Sharon, his special little girl, as he claimed in delight. Sharon rushed down the ridge and out of the picture. A few moments later, she emerged close to the camera, her features blurred with motion. Brad saw a smeared flash of her teeth as she went by.



Perhaps all of these kids besides the Broward children were from the Farmington neighborhood of their childhood, over in the backyard on some weekend afternoon nearly 30 years ago for some reason no one now recalled, not even Brad's mother. Besides the memories this movie provided, Brad had no recollection whatsoever of the events of that warm day, nor even very much of ever having seen his father shoot movies. His mother told him once that Dad bought the camera a little less than a year before he took his life. Brad could not recall whether his father had ever played these films for the family on the clattering projector he bought shortly after he got the movie camera in the year before he

consigned himself to his disquieted rest. What Brad could remember distinctly was sitting in the same small living room where he now sat, with the same green carpet on the floor, without the worn patches in it, years and years ago -- long after his mother had moved with her children from Farmington, Michigan to a suburb of Chicago -- to watch these movies played on the same reel-to-reel film projector that his father had cherished, but had not given himself much time to use.

The short sequence of the children romping around the backyard, surely filmed by his father, perhaps his first use of the camera, came to an end, and Brad prepared himself for the more trying portions of the video tape, the sequences in which Charlie Broward made his appearances as a living man. Tears began to well in Brad's eyes, just as they had at this point last night. He blinked rapidly to clear them, grabbed a sharp, deep breath and held it, trying to stifle his escalating emotions. He wanted to watch the scenes and action to come carefully, as objectively, as coolly, as possible, for he had been able to watch very little of these scenes with care last night. He wanted to see them clearly, wholly, unmarred by the razor-sharpness of his sentiments -- to see them for the first time as an adult, a wise, experienced, and learned man, a man older, perhaps wiser, than his father had been when the movies were shot or would ever become in the short time remaining to his life.

As Brad dipped his head to wipe his eyes with a sleeve of his robe, he heard faint footsteps on the carpet in the hallway leading to the bedrooms. Brad quickly raised the remote and shut the television off. There was no time to reach for the VCR. The video tape kept turning as Brad's sister Sharon came around the corner of the entrance arch and looked into the living room. Still seated on his knees on the floor, Brad was looking away from her, at the drapes, with the remote in his hand. He noticed the room was now less dim. Through a gap in the middle of the green drapes Brad noticed that this Saturday was dawning with heavy gray clouds that presaged rain. Sharon stood in the archway for a moment and looked down at Brad, indifferently, sleepily. She seemed about to turn and leave. A tall, slender woman of 38, Sharon's straight sandy hair looked slightly oily and was tossed to and fro. She was dressed in a white but somewhat dingy terry-cloth bathrobe and a pair of her mother's pink slippers, perhaps older than the robe. When Brad took a glance at her, she spoke, her voice thick and heavy with drowsiness.

"What are you doing up so early?" Sharon added a wide yawn and raised her arms to stretch.

"I... just couldn't sleep."

"Were you sitting out here in the dark?" Her voice suggested only mild puzzlement. Brad hesitated, so Sharon said, without any hint of suspicion, "Were you watching TV?"

"Just now?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I thought I saw the TV on."

For a moment, Brad tried to force himself to lie. But when he noticed the remote in his hand, clearly visible to Sharon even in the muddy dimness, he said softly, trying to speak evenly, nonchalantly: "Yeah, I was."

"What?" Sharon said with another yawn, as she shuffled with stiffness into the room and slumped down into her mother's ugly, brown easy-chair. Brad could hear the hum from the VCR as the tape continued to turn; he considered his words with his eyes down.

"Something on tape?" Sharon asked, her chin on her chest.

"Yeah," he answered as he still strained to sound nonchalant. He reached out from his position in front of the television cabinet and pressed the stop button on the VCR.

"What?" Sharon's eyes were narrow and expressionless, from sleepiness, but they were now fixed on him. Brad said nothing. He couldn't seem right then to clear his head to conjure up a lie. His emotions still seethed too powerfully. He wanted her to leave and go back to bed. "What's up? What were you watching, Brad?" she said. Drowsiness beginning to fall away, Sharon sat up and looked at her brother with eyes now wider. She had finally noticed that Brad was behaving oddly, though ever so slightly.

"Nothing. Just something I had taped."

"Why can't you tell me what it is?" Sharon was drowsily amused. "Some big secret."

Brad had so craved just a small block of time before anyone was awake to watch this video tape again and savor its sour, mordant joys, feel once again the piercing, satisfying pain of his response to it, before he introduced it to his mother and sister. But in his excited state he could come up with no good reason not to tell Sharon about it other than a selfish desire that he could not make sense of himself. He said curtly, "If you must know, I had the old movies Dad took back in the sixties put onto video."

The words drifted uneasily, like a poisonous smoke, around the room for some moments. Sharon came awake fully, Brad could see, but barely moved. Brad

rose slowly and stiffly to his feet off the carpet and straightened his robe about him. In the dimness, he turned to Sharon. Stunned, she looked across the room at the brightening drapes, behind which dawn was quickly coming over her mother's quiet suburban neighborhood. Brad's lips tightened; he had expected nothing less than these annoying histrionics. ***Why is everyone in this family always so damned upset about these simple movies?*** he asked himself as he stood awkwardly, facing his younger sister, in front of the television. ***Why can't everyone just grow up and face the facts: the old man killed himself. Big Damn Deal!*** Of course, even as these thoughts swept through his mind, Brad knew that he was deceiving himself, however scornful he felt at this moment at the anguish any mention of his father's ineradicable deed always aroused in the members of the Broward family. The event, after all, was such a "Big Damn Deal" that Brad himself had just the night before been almost unable to sleep thinking about the video and had arisen before dawn to watch it again so that he could appraise and gain control of his own emotions before he presented the tape to his sister and mother.

With a quiet sigh of exasperation, Brad took a step toward the arch leading out of the living room. Her narrow gaze still on the curtains, Sharon said flatly, "Were you going to tell me about this?"

Brad sighed again. "Why do you think I brought it over here this weekend? If I wanted to keep it from you, I wouldn't have bothered. I would have never told you about it at --"

"How long have you had it?" Sharon interrupted him, her voice chilled.

"I just got it last night after work, believe it or not."

Sharon finally looked up at him; her rigid expression relaxed slightly, as though a struggle was what she least wanted. "Have you seen it yet?"

"I watched it last night."

Sharon was silent. She sat up even straighter in the easy chair and turned her bewildered, distant gaze back to the dark, empty living room. Brad looked down as he waited. "What was... what was it like?"

"Weird, though I... I couldn't... I didn't see that much of it. I hadn't seen them in a long --"

"Why would you do something like this, Brad?" Sharon suddenly released the anger straining inside her and spoke more loudly.

"There's nothing bad about those movies. I wanted --"

"Mom will be really upset."

"I didn't know whether I'm going to tell her -- just yet." Trying still to

seem nonchalant, he decided it was time to make a pot of coffee out in the kitchen.

"The tape's in there?" Sharon said thickly, pointing at the VCR. "You were watching it again just now?" She tried to clear her throat and put a fist over her mouth.

"Yeah. I could hardly watch it last night, so I thought I'd be a bit calmer this morning and I could get a better look at... at him… at Dad. It's been on my mind lately, he's been on my mind, I can't say why. I went and found the movies in a box upstairs and brought them in to be transferred to video. I don't think Mom knows a thing."

Sharon let her folded hands fall between her knees and rest on the part of her robe sagging between them. Her expression was again empty; she spoke slowly and evenly, the burst of anger drained away. "I used to think about it all the time, but I've been okay about it for quite a while now."

"You want to watch it?" Brad turned toward her fully and started back toward the television cabinet.

"Right now?"

"Yeah." He stopped and smiled at her, though she did not look up. Her eyes were on the silent VCR. The two of them had seldom talked of their father's suicide and never discussed it at length, even though they shared the same tight embrace with the same horrid childhood events. Brad felt an urge to watch it with her; he wanted for the first time to trust her to hear his thoughts and see him express his feelings about the event that had played such a large role in both their lives.

"I don't think I'm ready for this." Sharon's voice dropped almost to a whisper. Abruptly, as though she were in a hurry, she rose and walked out of the living room. She slowed as she passed Brad and touched his arm at the elbow briefly, and then she was gone down the hall to the first floor bedroom she and her kids had slept in. Standing in the archway, Brad listened to her almost noiseless footfalls as she retreated down the hallway. Faintly, he heard her close the door to her bedroom carefully, so as not to wake their mother or her two still sleeping children. Brad seized the moment, quickly returned to the VCR, turned on the television and the tape, and knelt down on the floor once again. He didn't bother to rewind.

To the shiny screen came a picture of his father, a tall young man with small brown eyes and dark brown hair pasted down with hair oil. His head looked shiny, like it had been painted in shoe polish; he was wearing a pair of dark bathing trunks, the color of which were indiscernible because of the decay of the film.

Amid dazzlingly white sunshine, Charlie Broward was striding into the water at a beach, Brad recalled his mother telling him, on the North Carolina coast. A moment later, into the picture came a boy, his skin white, his hair wet and disheveled, a broad smile on his face. The boy ran past Charlie into the bright, foamy surf. Without looking closely, Brad knew that the boy was himself. Deeper water slowed the boy before he paused to ready himself and then dove into the tumbling surf. The sun glinted off the splash his dive tossed up. His father, a long fresh cigarette in his mouth, having moved farther out into the surf that twirled around his knees, turned back to the camera, smiled, and waved. He pulled the hand with which he had waved to his face and placed the cigarette, with a jaunty squint, in the notch between his first two fingers. He looked out at his son now swimming amid the waves in the distance behind him, took the cigarette away from his mouth, and blew smoke into the sunshine. A breeze sent the smoke on its way. The cigarette still between his fingers, Charlie turned back to the camera and waved again obligatorily. Despite his face being covered in shadow, since he was facing away from the late morning sun, Brad could see ebullience and authenticity in the smile. That smile showed a distinct truth in the black shadows falling over his flat, tanned brow and onto his bony cheeks. Charlie turned back to the surf, flung his fresh cigarette into the foam, and dove into the next approaching wave. For a moment, oddly, Brad felt a pang of irritation that Dad had frivolously thrown away a fresh cigarette; he would wonder later what this brief thought revealed about both himself and his father. But then his attention was drawn back to the scene. From his viewing last night, Brad knew what would happened next, the scenes at Uncle Andy's house, but he hoped to study the moment carefully, without tears or the heaving emotions of yesterday. He leaned forward and tried to watch closely, but the stab of recognition at the depth of feeling behind his father's smile flooded his eyes with tears that obscured his vision. He struggled to regain clear sight, but finally he had to stop the tape to wait until he could see well enough to continue with this ordeal, which he had no desire to avoid.

* * *

SHARON APPROACHED the video cassette recorder. It was now Saturday afternoon. Sunset was nearing somewhere off in the west, out of view, down the narrow streets of her mother's suburban neighborhood, lined with cars on the weekend. Brief morning rains had passed east and the sun had come out. Alone in

the green living room, filled with the yellowish light of late afternoon -- alone in the house -- Sharon had resolved upon watching what she feared she could not bear to watch, this video-tape in her hands, filled with its mish-mash of scenes that she dreaded, yet thirsted, to see again. Gathering her courage, she paused in front of the television cabinet. She guessed that she had not seen the movies her father had taken with his small Kodak 8mm movie-camera for 15 years. During all those years of increasing maturity, of marriage and children and a fitfully progressing career in radio sales, she had always known that some day she would come back to these movies -- would be obliged to come back. She had never discounted their importance. She had thought of them often. Gradually controlling her fear of their contents as the years passed, she had been waiting, patient that some circumstance would emerge that would nudge her or push her to watch them again. It had always been something easy to put off, since to watch the movies, she would have had to explain her intentions to Mom, which could take days, find them in their box in the attic, get out Daddy's old movie projector, figure out how to use it again, and then finally sit down to watch. She had expected that the occasion on which she would finally see them again would most likely be her mother's death, allowing her to skip that first and most thorny step, explaining her intentions to Mom. She and her two siblings, Brad and Andrea, she imagined, would gather, perhaps on the night of their mother's burial, in this small home with its drab, ragged, greenish decor. They would bring out some beer and wine, laugh a little, cry a lot, and lay all their pain to rest. Much sooner, however, Brad, perhaps tormented by potent memories of the movies, perhaps fascinated -- she did not know which, since they had found little time to speak of the matter outside their mother's hearing that Saturday -- had brought this matter to a pass.

Sharon could remember the contents of her father's family movies only in general, but Brad made it plain that they would be profoundly disturbing, somehow "life-changing," as he put it to her in a whisper earlier that day. Perhaps they were not so wrenching, she thought, as she hesitated in front of the TV. To give her time to watch the video, so that, in part, he could get her reaction to it, Brad had engineered an excuse to clear the house for Sharon: he persuaded their mother to join him in taking Sharon's two children to some insipid family movie at the theaters in a nearby mall.

Impulsively, embarrassed still to be looking for some reason to delay starting the video, Sharon decided to close her mother's green drapes. Regardless that this seemed to her foolish, since it was still early and bright outside, an hour or

two before sunset, she pulled the cord and drew the curtains together quickly. She turned around and stood with her back to the closed drapes. No lights were on and the living room was now quite dim, gray and colorless, foreboding. Sharon softly chuckled to herself at the silly feeling of horror that came over her. What was she stalling for? Did she truly fear something real? If so, what was it? She did not know clearly what she expected to discover in that short, simple video that she had not already known and loathed for decades.

Charlie Broward, Sharon's father, had been dead for nearly 30 years, dead of a bullet wound to the head, a wound he had inflicted on himself, and still his daughter Sharon, his precious little baby, had almost no understanding of what had happened to bring that event about. Why had he pulled the trigger in that act of cold desperation, as she conceived it, that act of cruelty against his family, that act that had for decades seemed to Sharon an assault on herself? What had she as his youngest child done to warrant such an offense? What could she have done to deserve anything like the penalty it meted out? Why had her mother done nothing, or at least more than she had apparently done, to stop it? Pray tell her, whoever may know: just what had Sharon done during those dark days -- and years -- to bring about the moment when Charlie Broward was alone in a darkened room in the Farmington house on some weekend afternoon and blew the top of his own head off and in so doing had wrenched Sharon's life out of its calm, secure berth and tossed it into a wild, thrashing sea? Why did she and her siblings speak so little about this? Why was she always unwilling to bring it up with Andrea or Brad, or they with her? What did they think? What did they feel? But did it matter now, 30 years later, to study their feelings about that loathsome event, discuss it and try to draw some new conclusions about it, to try to understand all its ramifications? The answers might await her in the videotape she held in her hand and her reaction to it. It contained the only evidence -- besides her own shadowy, untrustworthy memories, a few dozen fading, unrevealing photographs of Daddy; and a few slapdash, unrevealing letters her father had written to her mother years before his suicide -- the only evidence from which to draw any understanding of the event that had, so she believed and sensed, shaped a large part of her character and her life.

Sharon still stood in front of the drapes. Her arms were folded and her eyes were on the television. Growing dizzy and weary, her mind continued to circle her list of questions. It occurred to Sharon, and a wan smile came across her face at the thought, that this story was like one of those hackneyed plots from the soap operas she had become obsessed with as a college student. The people of

Barton's Valley, the soap city in the show she watched religiously, were continuously uncovering sensational, ludicrous secrets from their pasts -- lost loves, lost children, lost crimes, lost siblings, even lost parents. Every few months or so, it seemed, some character discovered -- as laughably implausible as it was to happen once, let alone so often -- some piece of his past he had no knowledge of. Time and again as the episodes marched on, a new character would walk back into a longtime character's fictional life with some starling revelation from times long gone by. Sharon could remember how the characters, again and again, gaped with incredulity and threw themselves into the arms of complete strangers, or lashed out in angry disbelief. What was that kind of silly story intended to reveal? Sharon had wondered years ago. How could such far-fetched yarns help anyone understand life?

But now, here she was, expecting to make some momentous and startling discovery about her past in this video. The plot cliches of the soaps were strangely, forbiddingly, coming to pass in her life. She then understood what she feared. She did not want to make any startling discoveries about Charlie Broward's deed, for anything "new" recovered from this video, any great, inalterable, mind-numbing facts unknown before, might change everything, change the very person she was, and perhaps destroy the equanimity she had achieved and sustained over the past 30 years in the face of Daddy's suicide.

That idea appeared a little silly, too. For everything to be revealed on that video had been there for decades. The movies had not changed, except in color,

and could not by themselves change anything. Only Sharon could change, now that she had grown older and brought children into the world. As for her father, he was forever encased in his final deed, like a bulging, gruesome fly preserved in amber, to be studied and dissected and understood and theorized upon. Nothing has changed or can change, Sharon told herself; just watch the video and put it out of your mind -- for NOTHING has changed. Perhaps there was no reason to watch the video at all. Perhaps her mother had always been right when she blandly told her children, over and again, that she had no desire to see these movies, that there was no good in pondering the appalling events of 30 years past in the light of such homey reminiscences.

Nonetheless, Sharon had made her resolution; some sense of duty, rather than yearning, compelled her now to approach the television and turn it on. To keep herself from stalling yet once more, she hurriedly slid the tape into the VCR and pressed the "play" button. She took in a sharp breath and retreated to the couch. She hunched forward, ready with several sheets of perfumed tissue clutched tightly in one hand and a box of them next to her on the couch cushions.

As it had for Brad, the video unveiled its scenes in a drifting blur, like grains of snow whirling along an open road. The pictures came and went quickly, abruptly, silently -- there was young Brad, older Andrea with her long, straight hair, and occasionally Sharon herself, dauntlessly smiling, probably embarrassed, in part, by the camera, in every scene in which she made an appearance. Daddy's movies looked much the same as Sharon remembered them. The first scene was the backyard romp with the neighborhood children, friends and cousins running to and fro and up and down the ridge in the backyard of the Harris Street house in Farmington, Michigan. Second, the family gathered in late morning, it appeared, on a beach in North Carolina, at the time of Uncle Andy's divorce, when Daddy and Mom had taken the family down the east coast to see what they could do to help his brother's family, all of which family doings Sharon, as a youngster, was thoroughly oblivious to. Charlie appeared in these clipped beach scenes several times. In the bright sunshine, he was always smiling broadly, almost ridiculously, and always smoking a fresh cigarette. He looked similar to Sharon at 38, in some way she could not pinpoint, distracted as she was by her emotions and the heavy tears that were now freely flowing and dripping from her jaw to her shirt.

The third sequence came on: several more brief scenes at Uncle Andy's house, in which Aunt Si, who would shortly thereafter finish off her divorce from "happy-go-lucky" Andy, put in several ominous appearances. Sharon wondered

briefly what happened to Aunt Si, whom Sharon had never seen again; she must ask her mother some day. In one fleeting scene in what was probably Uncle Andy's and Aunt Si's North Carolina living room, a scene shot either by Sharon's mother or Uncle Andy, Charlie was seen hugging Si. Smiling at the camera, holding yet another freshly lit cigarette in the crook of his fingers, he hugged his sister-in-law, at first, jokingly, it was apparent; but then he turned toward Si and looked her in the eyes for about a second and no more, and the continuing hug became in that instant a brief, tender embrace of comfort and understanding. Had Mom and Andy noticed this back then, in '66, as Mom was shooting the pictures? Maybe happy-go-lucky Andy, Sharon thought, was seldom so happy or went so lucky around the house. A moment later, Charlie let his arms fall free of Si, straightened up, faced the camera, and smiled again, this time less broadly, almost obligatorily. He quickly took a drag on his cigarette as the scene ended abruptly.

The fourth sequence: the movies taken at a reunion of her mother's family held near Ludington, Michigan, at some state park on the Lake Michigan shore. People were gathered in summer shade beneath tall trees in a picnic ground. A summery wind was blowing; the women were time and again brushing back strands of hair from their faces. Her mother had apparently taken many of these shots, since she saw many scenes in which her father was garrulously talking to relatives at the picnic tables, again almost always showing that ample smile. His expression was becoming, by the time Sharon had reached this point in the video, a decided irritant. Why had he always been smiling so? What God-damned reason had he to be so happy when he knew somewhere in his garbled, howling mind that he would take his life less than a year after that moment, when he was smiling at the camera held in his wife's hands, as his unsuspecting children, in the background, temporarily forgotten, unconsidered, merrily dashed here and there among the trees and wooden picnic tables with their cousins? What right, what reason, did he have to smile? Was it not plain that this was simple fakery, in light of what was to come? When these scenes were shot, was he not disturbed, broken, tortured in some way? Had he not already for the first time earnestly contemplated suicide? Who could answer such questions? Her mother? Andrea always claimed the Mom knew little about the cause of Charlie's desperation. Sharon thought, ***What was wrong with her, God dammit? How could she be so unobservant, so naive, if not so downright stupid?***

As she watched these scenes go by, as her anger began to swell, and her tears dried, Sharon started to try to recall memories of her father. There were so

few, it seemed. Where had they all gone? Were they all stopped up by some great fear of pain and sorrow and anger and accusation and guilt. She could hardly see his face in her mind, remember a word or a gesture or an event besides the family anecdotes that were common family property.

The fifth sequence started. It was Christmas 1966, at the home in Farmington, where Sharon had grown up until that iniquitous day in '67. Mom and Daddy once again alternated in their roles as photographer in these short scenes of serene holiday cheer. For a time, Mom took shots of Charlie, puffing on another Winston, playing a game of Parcheesi on the living room floor with Brad, near the wan Christmas tree piled with decorations. Parts of a little toy train and several dolls, candy wrappings, crumpled Christmas paper, ribbons and bows, were strewn here and there across the wooden floor with the large oval braided rug laid out in the middle. There was her father smiling again -- obviously happy, unquestionably happy. Sharon looked hard at him, right into his eyes. She was very close to the screen, looking at him. Could he have been faking these expressions and actions? Who could ever read anything other than happiness into his face as the camera gathered him in, as the evidence mounted? Who would ever find in these scenes premonitions of the moment, so soon to come in the late spring of the year to follow, when Charlie's hand would take hold of the pistol and place the end of its barrel against his temple and the finger would quickly, inexpertly jerk the trigger back toward the palm and the bullet would discharge into the brain and all hope of further innocent, untroubled happiness for any of them, in an instant, would dissolve into nothingness? There might have been pains in his life -- yes, there surely had been pains, perhaps even anguish, but it was anguish known only to him both then and now, knowledge which he blasted into oblivion at the same instant he pulled the trigger, knowledge lost forever through the destruction of his own mind, that memory, that cache of experiences, those millions of acts and words and thoughts that filled the days of his life, in all the hundreds of days leading to the moment when he searched for the pistol and loaded it. All this was gone, gone for 30 years until forever. None of it was ever to be recovered. Charlie's thoughts were annihilated. They were never to be found in the fine dust beneath the brittle skull lying on the satin cushion at the bottom of his coffin. These few passing moving pictures and a few mysterious photographs and a few terse letters were all that was left, in addition to the quickly vanishing memories of a wife who had said she neither would nor could ever speak of them.

But yet, Sharon thought too, there was in truth little mystery in these

scenes, as she watched her father cavort around the living room with Brad on that Christmas morning. There had been pains, undoubtedly, but did they entirely cancel the import and value of these moments? Were there so few other moments like these? Were these few minutes of happiness on Christmas morning, of joy and contentment, of family purpose: were they all that her father had ever experienced? Was every other minute of 1964 and 1965 and 1966 and 1967 -- each of those thousands of hours, millions of minutes, billions of seconds, Charlie had spent off camera -- were they nothing but a misery for him, days leading steadily, almost inevitably, as though he were a prisoner being led to the block, to the moment when the soft flesh over his bony finger, impelled by his own free will, compressed against the rigid metal of the trigger? Surely, these movies were conclusive, sure evidence, incontrovertible testimony, that there had been happiness in Charlie Broward's life, that life with his children, with his reticent, sober, longsuffering wife, had been worth it? Why could that happiness not have continued? What pains, what thoughts, what events, could have outweighed all that had been so good?

Again, tears jumped to Sharon's eyes and flowed freely down her cheeks. She struggled with the pastel scented tissues to keep her sight clear so that she could watch all of the seven minutes of film that had recorded Christmas morning in 1966. Finally, she tossed the tissue aside and let the tears flow where they might. A girl of nine at that time, she came into the picture now and then. Over by the Christmas tree next to the piano, there she was playing quietly with a small toy baking set that she had received that day, a certain present which she remembered wanting intensely that year, as commercials did their overmastering work of persuasion. She was playing alone, intently, blissfully, often in the unfocused background of the picture, behind the main subject of the shot. There again were more of her father's smiles -- and some of her mother's strained, shallow smiles. Sharon clenched her teeth in anger. She tried to read Charlie's lips as he faced the camera and his mouth moved, but his words were lost, though once or twice she thought she could discern a phrase or two. "Get a little closer." "Yeah, but not now." She realized that on that distant morning, when she had been concentrating on imagining to bake her first Easy-Bake cake -- the first real one would be baked later that day with Mom's patient help -- she had taken little or no notice of that smile. Surely it would have been unremarkable to her on that day at the end of 1966. Surely she had seen Daddy smile hundreds, thousands of times before that Christmas, had looked right into that smile countless times when he lifted her up and called her his little rhino. Why would she have taken notice of it that day,

when she at last had the Easy-Bake Oven for which she had been longing for months?

It struck into her mind: in those distant days before Charlie Broward's suicide, Sharon realized, she had accepted -- with a feeling beyond intuition, with something approaching certainty, with the sureness of parental love that a young child feels -- that her father was happy that she was alive, that he was happy he himself was alive because, in part, she was alive, that he loved her, loved that she was his daughter and that they were together in the world, that they had come to know each other well in her first years and would grow to know each other better as the years to come passed by. She was his "little rhinoceros", always ready to leap up to him, to place her lips gently on his always scratchy cheek, while he wiggled the cigarette between his lips out of her way, to hug him tightly around his neck. But O how the tears streamed when she suddenly realized, with her mouth agape and her soul crushed like a small, bruised grape inside her, that her father had made that decision, such a short time later, that he did not want to get to know her better in the years that could have come -- that he chose, however maliciously or foolishly or blindly, perhaps powerlessly, to leave her behind, to abandon her forever in the world and turn all his memory, and his memory of her, to nothingness, to harden himself forever into these galling moments captured on film, scenes filled with his happy smiles, moments that were forever stained just a few months later by the hand of destruction, undone by will and power, destroyed in a headlong decision to die.

Sharon could watch no more. The tape was nearly over. Nothing of importance was left, she recalled. Only fragments of Charlie Broward remained in the remaining minutes. She might see his wide, blithe grin again at a picnic or at some vacation cabin in the remaining scenes to come from early summer in 1967, but they would not greatly change what she had witnessed in the sequences already passed.

Was this all of significance that could be extracted from her childhood: that ironic, dreadful, hypocritical smile? Sharon sat with her head in her hands. She searched her memory again for images of her father that she was certain she remembered, that were not images she had concocted out of family stories and legends, or images that she had not gradually transformed through years of pathetic, anguished brooding on the crime her father had committed. Back in those days so long ago, before she knew what was coming, had she seen any hints of unhappiness, depression, hatred, displeasure? Charlie Broward wasn't a perfect

father. She remembered, dimly, that he had been occasionally querulous and irritable. More often, he became distracted and distant. He could not be described as attentive, tender, or affectionate, though he regularly and graciously singled out Sharon by calling her by his special nickname for her. But these few dim memories now made little difference to her comprehension of the meaning of his suicide. Charlie was much like any dad was expected to be at the time she was a girl. There was nothing about him that pointed to the act he would commit.

The sun had descended closer to the horizon, behind the heavy green drapes, far past the end of the quiet street. The video tape played on in the darkening room. The undulating, silvery glow of the remaining images of her father and his children and his wife spilled across the carpet to Sharon's feet as she sat on the couch with her head in her wet hands, her heart feeling so full of disillusion and dread and longing and anger that she could barely move. She wished, for no more than a pitying moment, that right then she could just die, without violence, right there on the couch, that someone would gently put her out of her misery as she wept for her great loss, though she did not -- nor ever would -- know exactly all that she had lost. For that brief moment, she did not wish or care to go on. The tears still flowed uncontrollably and the tissues in her hands became shreds. Her heart felt flattened under the weight of indifference and pity. She thought about lying down and praying to the unknown higher powers of existence be taken away, to know nothingness, to never see another moment of life. Then, in just a few more moments, that unbidden, overpowering wish receded and her courage began to return. She lifted her head from her hands and sensed with a start the withering horror of the moment that had just passed. How utterly foolish such a wish was. This was the wish her father had contemplated as he kept smiling at the camera, the same wish he had later, terribly, acted upon. It was brutal even to entertain such a wish -- especially considering that she had been the victim of the act that followed it -- while her children were out at a frivolous movie unconsciously reveling in the certainty that she would be there waiting for them when they returned, that when they saw her she would send out to them the subtle yet clear signals that they mattered to her so much that she would do all she could for them, that their lives, their presence in the world, was what, in great part, made the world and life worthwhile.

The video stopped and the screen filled with electric snow. Sharon felt that she never wanted her children to experience this -- this desolation over having lost that deep and simple confidence in a parent, over having become aware that the

certainty was specious. She never wanted them to be without her, not because she was such a wise mother, such a good and saintly person, of such great importance to them, but because they knew she cared to live and know them, however imperfectly. She wanted them to trust to that unconscious knowledge with the confidence of the saints in miraculous Providence, to trust so completely that they need never even become conscious of the trust that underlaid their security. Yes, she knew she could not be a perfect mother, however perfection might be defined, but she wanted her children to experience a faith in her that never had to be questioned and not even be aware that they were not questioning it.

Yet, however she might resolve on being a good parent, the pitying wish from moments ago had revealed to her a great gulf of possibility; that longing for the pain of life to be stopped at whatever hazard, had, for however brief the moment or however slight the peril, endangered her children just as her father, when she had been a child, had unwittingly endangered her time and again through all the months and years he had contemplated his own death before he finally acted. The wish that had coursed through her mind was a recurrence of the instant when her father had first, somehow, for some reason, genuinely considered the idea of suicide -- that inexplicable instant when he had known that he could do it and might do it, that instant when he had felt, too, a forceful surge of desire for it. ***How could I hate my children so, knowing all I do, feeling the sting of my father's suicide right now with all its sharpness, to permit this thought for one instant to get a foothold in my mind?*** She looked up at the snowy, silver light of the television through her tears. ***How could my father have hated me so deeply when it is so clear that he loved me?*** As she sobbed and felt a severe ache in her chest and the room continued to darken, she found, blessedly, that she could think no more.

* * *

SHARON WAITED, the phone to her ear, while Andrea's phone rang. Sharon was distinctly aware of the rapid beating of her heart, and she could feel the phone slipping a little in the cool sweat on the palms of her hands. She could not remember whether she had ever discussed her father's suicide in depth with Andrea, in more than her family's customarily clipped, hushed murmurs of sorrow and regret and gloom.

"Hello," Andrea's clear, distinctive voice from New Mexico came into the receiver.

"Hi, Andrea." Sharon shivered with nerves and then felt slightly more relaxed, now that the conversation had to begin.

"Sharon? Hi, how ya' doin'?"

"Pretty good. How 'bout you?"

"I'm doing pretty darn good -- considering," Andrea said.

"Are you still having trouble sleeping?" Sharon relaxed still more, happy now to be talking about some topic other than the one she had called to discuss.

"No, it's not that. It's the kids again."

"I'm sorry to hear things haven't gotten better."

"Thanks, but we're making progress. Hey: what's up? You call to say hello or what?"

Sharon paused. She stood beside the kitchen counter in her house in Illinois. Down the counter, she looked at the neat pile of dirty dishes she had rinsed and stacked by the sink after dinner. A minute ago, looking for another task with which to stall, she had just about begun to stack them in the dishwasher. Then, on some impulse, or some irritation with herself, she had grabbed the phone to get this phone call over with, a call she had been anxiously planning for a week. Though her ears seemed stopped up with the blood that she felt darting through her veins, she could hear her children in muffled voices talking somewhere far off in the

house, perhaps in one of their bedrooms down the hall. The kitchen light switch was on the wall above the counter; she reached up and shut the light off. In the sudden darkness, a gleam of late evening light oozed in the kitchen windows and glanced off the dirty plates and forks, glasses and knives and spoons. She began, slowly, cautiously, fearfully: "I don't know how to start with this, but did you know that Brad...."

"What?" Andrea's voiced grew deeper and quieter with urgency. "What is it?"

"Don't worry: it's not something like that. Nothing's happened. It's only that Brad had a tape made of the old movies… Dad's old movies."

"God, you had me scared." Andrea drew in a breath and let it out.

"Sorry."

"You're kidding?"

"No, it's true. He did it."

"Why'd he…?"

"He said he wanted to see them again."

"Does Mom know?"

"He was going to tell her -- we were over there last Saturday -- but he couldn't bring himself once he watched the tape a couple of times."

"Did you see it?"

Sharon hesitated. Slowly, she sat down in the darkening kitchen on the cold floor, the phone cord lifting strands of her hair as she lowered herself. She leaned back against the door of one of the cabinets. "Yeah.... He gave me a copy. He's got one for you, too. That's what I'm calling about. I saw it." Sharon felt the tears springing into her eyes once again -- this had happened too many times in the few days since she had watched the tape. "Only once."

Hearing Sharon's clutched voice, Andrea spoke quietly, guardedly, in control of her emotions: "What did you think? It's been awhile since I've since those things."

"Same for me. You know, they haven't change hardly at all -- I mean, I remembered everything pretty much the same. But there was something different about them. I couldn't put my finger on it all week, but I couldn't get it out of my mind."

"I don't know if I really want to see them again."

"I didn't know either, and now I don't know if I should have watched them."

There was a pause, and then Andrea spoke just above a whisper, as if to herself, "Maybe someday."

"Brad says he's going to send you a copy."

Andrea was urgent again. "Did he give Mom one?"

"Not yet.... I don't know what he's going to do. He says he had four made, one for each of us. But I told him I thought Mom wouldn't want it."

"She doesn't want anything to do with it."

"How do you know?" Sharon said.

A touch superciliously, Andrea's voice changed to that of a wise, knowing, gentle counselor she considered herself to be: "She's never wanted to talk about it, never. And maybe she's always been right that it's just best to let it all rest. We're never going to solve the riddle of why Dad did it. Mom certainly couldn't -- or she's never going to tell anyone if she did. So why keep bringing it up all the time? Why keep thinking about it?"

As she began to speak, Sharon quickly stood up and started walking around the dark kitchen as far as the phone cord would allow her: "That's what's been bothering me. Dad looked -- he looked so.... He was smiling all the time, every time he was in the picture." She was gesturing excitedly with her free hand to no one in the kitchen. The soles of her sneakers squeaked on the floor as she strode about. "He looked really happy. Maybe he wasn't deep down, or maybe he was hiding his unhappiness and it was closer to the surface than you could've ever guessed. Could he have been hiding it all that good? That's it -- that's what's bugging me: could he have been just completely faking it, just smiling because he had to, because it was a habit, or something like that?"

Trying dutifully to play her tacit role as the most mature child, Andrea remained studiously composed: "Shar, I don't know. Not even Mom knows. No one knows. It's what we've got to live with. Not knowing."

"That's another thing: what does Mom say about this? Have you ever talked to her much?" Sharon kept pacing in the darker kitchen. She could no longer hear her children's voices, and she wondered, edgily, whether they might be listening to her. She walked over to a spot in the kitchen from which she could see down the hallway to their bedrooms. The passage was empty and unlit; large patches of yellow light lay on the gray carpet in front of the doorways to the kids' bedrooms.

"A couple times, but she doesn't say anything stupendous. I've tried to get her to talk and I'm not sure she knows much. He was a brooding man, she says.

Something always seemed to be on his mind, for years. She didn't know what. They weren't like that, talking all the time. They never talked once they were married. He seemed to be trying to figure something out…. But she never thought it could possibly have led to this, no way. I think she was as surprised as everyone else, though to me and you that seems impossible."

Sharon lowered her voice. "It doesn't make any sense at all to me. I mean, I think I know Tom well enough after 15 years of marriage to be able to tell whether he's thinking about something as serious as suicide."

"Me, too, about Jeff. But what can you say? Mom says she doesn't know why he did it. She says she doesn't even have a good guess. He never talked to her about being depressed; she's not even all that sure he had serious depressions. She never noticed anything. He just didn't tell her much, and she didn't ask. That's the way they did things back in those days. You didn't talk about stuff like that -- at least they didn't. That was all off limits. And without a note or anything, she's been guessing ever since, just like us. It's been on her mind for years and years, I'm certain -- it's got to be -- even though she doesn't talk about it. But she doesn't talk about much of anything, when you think about it, and maybe what happened has something to do with the way she is. Who knows? But all sorts of bad things, all sorts of weird stuff that we don't know about and never will, could have happened that caused it, for all we know. Maybe he got mixed up in something bad, some kind of trouble, some money problems, maybe, that we still don't know about, and never will know about. That's what I always think. It makes it better, to think that he didn't do it because I was such a lousy kid or because he hated my mother and his family."

"That's doesn't sound like Dad. He was always so cautious, at least that's what you guys have always said about him."

"Who knows what goes on in a person's inner life? I mean, your life is filled with your own thoughts and your own secret deeds, right? Mom has made peace with it by deciding that Dad just went crazy, or got badly depressed about something -- got overwhelmed for some reason she doesn't know and probably wouldn't understand. I think he got in deep on something. I don't know, maybe Brad thinks he had a chemical imbalance. We'd all probably be shocked to hear the truth if we ever could. But we won't, and that's the point."

"Then it's not his fault. He was just depressed and couldn't talk to anyone. He didn't do anything wrong." Still pacing, Sharon threw her free hand into the air in exasperation.

"That makes Mom feel better.... It doesn't do the trick for me. When I really think about it for long, I'm still mad at him."

After a short silence, Sharon set herself to asking Andrea the questions she had always wanted to put to her older siblings. Was Dad a bad father? Andrea answered that he was not particularly close, but he did appear to love his children and his wife.

Did he and Mom have a distant marriage? Their relationship was a standard one for the times, so far as Andrea could tell. Mom had not been exceptionally affectionate herself -- and still wasn't. They were two reclusive people, and their marriage seemed to have been an act of social conformity and stability.

Was Dad mean to Mom? He gave her the silent treatment from time to time, but they seldom argued or yelled at each other, at least in front of Andrea or Brad.

Why does Mom know so little about him or about the causes of his suicide? She kept her distance because it suited her to stay away from him. They just could not get close to each other once they were married. That was just the way they were, and it wasn't exceptional.

Was Dad a happy man? Yes, Andrea thought, but he brooded. So Mom claims. He seemed often absorbed in thought, as though trying to solve some problem for which all his deliberations would not yield a solution. But Andrea did not know him well; no one seemed to have known him well.

But was he happy? He behaved as though he were happy -- as happy as he was able to be -- most of the time, though he was often quiet and distant.

Did he enjoy his children? Was he mean to them? Not really. He could start brooding and withdraw, but he never spoke with excessive harshness or struck Andrea or Brad.

How did he treat Sharon? He behaved as though she truly had been the "apple of his eye", as she put it. He frequently hoisted her to his shoulders when she was small and always called her his little rhino. Andrea had been intensely jealous of Sharon for the extra measure of attention she received from him. When Sharon was older, he would often lift her and twirl her around, feigning astonishment that he could lift a little rhino.

It was now full night in Illinois. Sharon's kitchen had become much darker as the twilight had failed. The house was silent. She stood at the kitchen counter looking down at nothing. "Could something have been so bad that it could

outweigh everything about us, about staying with us -- staying alive?" Sharon checked her rising tears and just kept her voice from catching.

"I don't know, Shar'." Andrea sounded strangely unemotional to Sharon.

"Do you think he loved us?" Sharon blubbered.

Andrea remain composed. "I think so, by most definitions of love. He provided for us; he came home every night; he played with us sometimes. He wasn't a great father, I'd have to say. I couldn't stand it when he got in those quiet moods. You could hardly look at him, let alone say something to him or try to ask him a question. But something more was going on in his life, Shar'; something must have happened to him. Something was brewing inside him. Something in his mind or his life got a grip on him and wouldn't let go of him until he couldn't think straight. That's the way I see it. Who knows what it was exactly. Mom doesn't, or she's faking it so well that we could never break her down." That their mother could be so full of guile as to pretend not to know this seemed impossible to both women. It was almost certain to them that she was telling the truth about her ignorance.

Sharon said, "Still, no matter what it was -- however bad it was -- couldn't he see what this would do to us?"

"Shar', I wish he could have, but it looks like he didn't or couldn't. But it all depends on what actually caused him to do it, you know."

Sharon drew a deep breath to tamp down her emotions. She said slowly, "You don't want to watch those movies, Andrea. You see him smiling there like all the world's a bowl of cherries, as if there couldn't be anything better than being with us kids. And then you remember that he killed himself, destroyed it all for no good reason -- at least no reason he cared to share with any of us, not even Mom. That's why I think he had to be faking it, all that blub about the little rhino and all the rest; but that thought makes me so damn angry -- and so... so sad." Sharon voice convulsed and she found herself unable to hold back the flood of tears any longer. Andrea had nothing more to say. At the other end of the line, she was wiping a streak of tears off her own cheek, recalling scenes from those blurry movies taken in her clouded youth -- scenes only half remembered, but fully feared.

For now the discussion was exhausted, and they allowed their conversation to drift away to other topics, principally their children. The sisters did not come back to the topic of their father until a dozen minutes later, as they prepared for their good-byes.

Andrea said, "Well, thanks for calling, Shar'. Tell Brad to send me a copy

of the tape."

"You really sure you want one?"

"Yeah. I think I'd better at least watch it once so that I can... I don't know what."

"Know what we know?"

"Yeah. But Shar', call again when you want to talk about it. I don't think I'll have any better answers to any of your questions -- or any of my own questions for that matter -- but I'm always willing to talk and listen."

"Thanks, Andrea. We'll talk soon. Bye."

Here she was, in her darkened kitchen with the dishes waiting, as they always seemed to be. She was no closer to the great discovery about Charlie Broward she had hoped, and dreaded, to make. Would the days continue forever like these of the past week? Childishly perhaps, she had hoped these events would resolve themselves as they do in the soap operas, that a new father would have been discovered in his 30-year-old movies, that he would have walked into her life out of his state of shame and death with reconciliation and healing. But Charlie Broward had ensured, willfully, foolishly, ignorantly or not, that no such future revelations or reconciliations could come about, ever -- that his suicide would forever make no sense. The possible causes seemed endless, from good to bad to ugly to despicable. She didn't know what to believe, but she felt an painful urge, a demand, to believe something. Leaving the cause and meaning of his suicide undecided, leaving all her questions open, seemed untenable, unbearable. She knew and feared that her mind would drift to some conviction even if she tried to make no decision, that she probably would stumble into the explanation that reflected worst on Charlie, that she would then come to hate him fully, hold him blameworthy for a great evil done to her, though she knew she would always be unable to justify this judgment fully. More than all, she was filled with anger at her father that he had done this to her and her siblings and their mother -- and her own children, his grandchildren. For an astounding moment, she wished that Charlie Broward were alive right now, at this hour, in this dark kitchen, so that she could act on the vast enmity she felt toward him and she could kill him herself for what he had done to her -- and all of them.

But the terrifying irony of that thought jarred her a moment after it swept her mind, as she gazed down in the darkness at the phone on its receiver on the kitchen counter. O, how she did indeed wish him alive! She wanted him here to tell her that she was loved so deeply that the joy of her presence in the world would

counteract and overcome any pain in his life. She hated Charlie Broward for his deed, wished him dead and gone, wished herself well rid of him, if he hated her so much that he had done this to her; but in the same instant she felt overwhelmed by a ferocious hunger to have him here explaining to her why he had failed, how he had loved her in spite of what he had done, that he was human and fallible, fallen, weak, insipid, crazy -- that he wished more than anything that he had not made the mistake of ending his life, no matter what had caused the act. She wished that she could tell her father that she would go to her own grave in harrowing uncertainty, caught between her anger against him and her supreme desire to have him alive now at whatever cost, even at the cost of listening to him try to explain why he had killed himself so shortly after he had smiled in joy as he played with his little rhinoceros, so shortly after he had spent years striving to make his children's lives happy and safe. Sharon saw that there was no evil that he could do, or that the world could do to her through him, that she would want him dead at this moment. Yet she saw, too, that the crime he had committed against his family was so terrible that she found herself glad that he was gone. When this hit her, again, that this was indeed the case, that he was gone, and gone forever, she felt a biting spasm of grief and rage in her heart.

A noise came to the kitchen. One of her children, Julia, had rushed down the hall calling out something to her mother. The girl stopped at the arched entrance to the dark room. After a puzzled pause, she flipped the light switch by her, on the far side of the kitchen, and looked quizzically at her mother, standing at the counter, holding on to it, dizzy from the emotions cascading over her, squinting slightly and blinking in the bright overhead light.

"What'cha doing?" Julia giggled uneasily when she saw the remains of tears on her mother's cheeks and her reddened nose.

Sharon looked away from the child. How could she explain the gulf that she had seen, a week ago, open up at her feet -- that is, at her daughter's feet? Though she longed to fathom it and bravely, wisely accept it, she could not yet explain its origin or nature to herself. She could only watch it grow deeper and wider as she struggled to understand.

FINIS

* * *

Further Extracts

We are doomed to cling to a life even while we find it unendurable. -- William James

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest —- whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories -— comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. -- Albert Camus

Suffering isn't ennobling, recovery is. -- Christiaan N. Barnard

Evil is neither suffering nor sin; it is both at the same time, it is something common to them both. For they are linked together; sin makes us suffer and suffering makes us evil, and this indissoluble complex of suffering and sin is the evil in which we are submerged against our will, and to our horror. -- Simone Weil

Should the wide world roll away,
Leaving black terror,
Limitless night,
Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand
Would be to me essential,
If thou and thy white arms were there,
And the fall to doom a long way. -- Stephen Crane

The scene of suffering is a scene of joy when the suffering is past; and the silent reminiscence of hardships departed, is sweeter than the presence of delight. -- Herman Melville

The nightmare view or life has plenty of organic sources; but its great reflective source has at all times been the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is. -- William James, "Is Life Worth Living?"

Cruelty is one of the chief ingredients of love, and divided about equally between the sexes: cruelty of lust, ingratitude, callousness, maltreatment, domination. The same is true of the passive qualities, patience under suffering, even pleasure in ill usage. -- Thomas Mann