The Gifts at the Start

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The Farm

APPROACHING THE MAIN HOUSE on my grandfather's farm, you would see a maple tree, standing alone beside the road, tall and graceful. She did not live in a cluster of her own kind, as the fruit trees did; she seemed more self-reliant and self-contained. I knew her for seven summers — from the time I was nine until I was sixteen.

She opened out a good distance from the ground, so I had to leap and scramble to hoist myself up. Straddling the lowest, waist-thick branch and slowly pulling upright, I entered a solitude that was more than my own. It was a protected solitude, like the woods near the north pasture, but different because here one single, living being was holding me. My hands still remember the feel of her: the texture of the gray bark, the way it rippled in folds near the joints, its dusting of powder. As I climbed up into her murmuring canopy, my heart quickened — from fear of falling, and from awe. Caution felt like reverence.

Here in the maple I didn't play games, the way I did in the wide old apple tree near the south barn that my older brother Harty had rigged with platforms. There I played practically every day, not with Harty, who returned to his own pursuits, but with my little brother John. The scarred, angular old apple became a schooner, a submarine, a space ship, cliffs and ledges for our assaults on Everest, jungle encampments in the heart of Africa, bombers and fighter planes dodging Hitler's anti-aircraft batteries. From a high branch hung a swing whose ropes could be drawn up and grabbed from within the tree. And each adventure required, at some point, that heart-stopping leap from the heights: a timeless second of free fall before the ropes caught and the board swung you out over the speeding ground.

The maple tree did not invite pretending games. I only went there alone. It was a place to be quiet, a place to disappear into a kind of shared presence: the being that was tree and me, with the light coming through. The light is

what I remember most of all; high and wide around me, it shaped a luminous, breathing bowl. It danced through the leaves, glowing them green and gold. It stroked the limbs with flickering shadows. When I sat very quiet, the play of light seemed to go right through my body, and my own breath was part of the maple's murmuring.

Being there was sufficient. I didn't think about my life. I didn't talk to the maple about the cares and fears I had begun to carry. The maple took me into a vast, lit stillness beyond all that. She let me glimpse a wild serenity at the heart of my world.

The maple, my cloister, was not remote; she stood diagonally in front of the house, beside the road that linked us to town. She held her stillness and mystery right in the midst of things. Traffic on our farm road passed almost under her branches, although, with gas rationing, the cars and wagons and tractors were few those years, even after the road was paved in 1943. After the war, when the traffic got heavier and faster, the road was widened and the maple disappeared. I had gone by then.

Along the north side of the house ran my grandfather's half-acre vegetable garden. That's where I first saw Spotty, the summer I came to the farm. I was nine that year, and he probably had a dozen years on me, because even then he was known to be old. He still had good strong teeth, though, which makes all the difference if you're a horse.

Ouie, as we called my grandfather because his name was Lewis, had brought him down the road from the big barn, the realm of the tenant farmer, and harnessed him up to the little single-pronged plow he liked to use for cultivating between the rows. I never saw him actually plow with it in the spring, for the same reason I never saw the apple trees bloom: my school in New York City never let out soon enough.

That particular day I looked on with great interest. I could not keep my eyes off the big, raw-boned, piebald horse. He had red-brown markings splotched on a coat of white, a white mane, a black forelock, and a long black tail. He would have looked comical except for his great dignity.

I asked Ouie if I could help out and he suggested that I lead Spotty and make sure he stayed right in the middle between the rows and not reach for bites of the fresh green leaves of corn. Ouie explained that Spotty was not well-trained to farm work and did not much like it either, having been more of a saddle horse in his younger days. So I reached up to grab hold of the halter,

and skipped along in front of him to keep my feet clear of his hooves. That big soft mouth just bobbed along right over my shoulder. I felt his breath blowing on me. When we finished, Ouie gave me a hand up as he unbuckled the harness, and I climbed astride. As my grandfather led the horse up the road to the big barn, I was riding on Spotty's back. I rode him all the way. It was as big a happiness as I had yet experienced in my whole life.

I don't remember asking, but after that Spotty was mine each summer, given over to my care. My grandmother Daidee probably had a hand in that decision, because she'd had her own horse as a girl back in Minnesota — a stallion even. She said how wonderful it was for Spotty at this time of his life to shed his disguise as a draft horse and to rediscover his true nature as a gentle-bred mount. Standing on a box to begin with, I learned how to yank the cinch up around the girth in front of his belly, and to knot it tight. I learned how to handle a pitchfork and clean out the stall every morning; how to be gentle and unafraid with Spotty's mouth, and firm as I fitted the bit behind his teeth; how to brush and curry him out of doors, standing to windward, so as not to start my asthma going.

A year or two later Daidee claimed to have unearthed evidence that in his youth Spotty had performed in the Cole Brothers' Circus. Believing her totally, I undertook a program to help him retrieve his circus skills. From a library book I learned about teaching horse tricks, which he learned quickly and loved almost as much as I. Actually, all he learned to do was to say yes and no — vigorously nodding or shaking his head at a secret signal from me — but that was sufficient to amaze anyone I could get to watch.

The farm lay in the western part of New York state, eight hours by train from Manhattan and fifty miles east of Buffalo, where Ouie had his church. It had been home to five generations of my father's people after they came out from New England in the early eighteen hundreds. I only lived there some three months a year, but still the farm felt like the steadiest part of my life. That's because my parents and brothers and I moved around so much — between rented houses in Los Angeles and then rented apartments in New York City — and also because there was this curious sense of belonging. The solemn, bewhiskered men and the thoughtful, overdressed women posing for the daguerreotypes on the parlor wall were my ancestors. The spidery script in the musty leather-bound books and diaries, the butter-churn, the scythe, the sleigh in the barn, where I played museum on rainy days, were theirs.

Even before the Erie Canal opened western New York to trade in 1820, my great-great-great-grandfather Ebenezer Rogers journeyed out from Connecticut with his wife and grown children to preach religion and make a new life. Like most of his Puritan forebears who had come out from England two centuries earlier, he was a working parson. In the glacier-flattened terrain west of the Finger Lakes and south of Lake Ontario, he took title to 260 acres of woods and arable land — he cleared pastureland and fields for wheat and hay, planted orchards, and built for his family the single-story farmhouse now occupied by Ouie's tenant farmer.

Two miles to the south, beside the canal that linked the Hudson River to Lake Erie, the town of Albion was growing up as a way station for the lively traffic of mule-drawn barges. There Ebenezer established a church. It was one of several: there were Methodists and Baptists, circuit-riding preachers and tent revivalists — the religious life in nineteenth-century upstate New York flourished with intensity. The Presbyterians and the Congregationalists, more liberal in theology and less flamboyant in style than the others, made an agreement to pool their resources. In consequence Ebenezer, a Congregationalist in Connecticut, founded the First Presbyterian Church in Albion.

His grandson, Lewis B. — a preacher like his father and grandfather — built the present church across from the Albion Town Hall, and on the farm, a proper quarter mile up the road from the barns and barnyards, a more substantial family residence. Like the new church, the new house was made of brick in strong verticals with gables and angular trim, like surprised eyebrows, over tall, narrow windows. There during the Civil War his first son, Lewis Gould Rogers, my grandfather, was born.

Though he kept in close touch with the farm he inherited, Ouie's life took him farther afield — to college back in New England and then to seminary, later to a city church in Buffalo, and eventually to sabbatical studies in Europe. The overseas travel was surely encouraged by the woman he married. My grandmother Mary Hartley had already seen a lot of the world.

I loved it when Daidee, as we called her, could be persuaded to tell us about journeying by covered wagon from New Brunswick to Minnesota through Indian territory. She was proud that her family had been "loyalists." At the time of the Revolutionary War, her ancestors stayed true to King George, left their homes in Virginia, and moved to Canada. There, two generations later, Daidee and her two sisters and ten brothers were born. The older brothers

ventured west, found land and ore in Minnesota, and brought the rest of the family out to join them when Daidee was ten. Having given her the stallion to ride around the Mesabi Iron Range, these brothers took Daidee's education in hand. Clothing her in furs, they sent her by sail-steamer across the Atlantic before she was twenty. So Daidee, the grandmother who told me about holding her sister as she died of tuberculosis in the covered wagon, the grandmother who taught me Ojibwa words she had learned en route, was also the grandmother who could reminisce about Florence and Paris in the late 1880s and her friendship with the sculptor Auguste Rodin.

Daidee loved languages. At Mount Holyoke College she was teaching classes in Greek, German, and French, when she met Ouie. She didn't let her lot as a minister's wife keep her from returning to the cultural riches of Europe. When their only child, Hartley, was six or seven, she packed off to Paris and put him in a lycée for a year, while Ouie studied theology in Germany. Later she joined her husband for a year in Hannover, and my father found himself in a German school.

I guess Papa got used to being on his own, not only in those foreign schools, but also back in Buffalo where the church took so much of his parents' attention. There Daidee, in addition to organizing church activities, played a leading role in civic and literary societies. With such busy parents, the little boy who would become my father could find himself alone, even at Christmas. Though he never liked people to feel sorry for him, he once told Mama, who then told me, about being left by himself in the house — without a tree or candle or a single present — because his parents were too occupied at church to make Christmas at home.

Papa was the first in his line of Rogers men to choose a life outside the church. After graduating from Yale in the early 1920s, he became a stock broker, and I gather he did quite well for a while, but it was a line of work very hard for me to understand. It preoccupied *him*, though, as if little else mattered.

Mama was the most beautiful and popular girl in Buffalo — I was sure of that from studying her albums filled with news clippings and photographs of her debut in society. Peggy Kinsey was tall and willowy with huge brown eyes that were both fun-loving and trustful; that, I knew, was because she had grown up in such a happy, rollicking family. Her father, Daddy Al, who made a lot of money in real estate, brimmed with affection and laughter and never spoke a cross word, she said. But I didn't know him. After the stock market crash, when I was a baby, he drove to the edge of town and shot himself. No

one ever talked about it, so I couldn't figure out why he thought his insurance policy would be more useful to my grandmother Nonnie than his life.

Mama, who had the pick of anyone, chose Papa, even though he came from such a serious family. She admired the seriousness, not having been to college herself, and I always thought she loved Ouie and Daidee more than their own son did. When Papa decided to move to California and open his own investment offices in Los Angeles and Seattle, Mama followed with their first baby, my brother Hartley. On May 2, 1929, I was born in the Good Samaritan Hospital in North Hollywood, and four and a half years later — not long before Papa decided to move back East — came my brother John.

If it felt special to me to be born in southern California, it was because of the light that came from the western sea. Golden-amber, it suffuses the fragmented memories of my first five years — a warm hazy glow surrounding faces, flowers, leaping dogs. Wherever I meet that light again, toward sunset, I stop still and feel it flood my heart. In my first months of life, Mama took me along to the beach where Papa surfed after a day at the office. She had contracted mastitis and to keep her breasts from becoming impacted, she needed me to nurse for hours at a time. She told me later how good it had been for her, as she sat there on the sand, that I just kept sucking away, so strong and willing. Turning this over in my mind, I found it hard to picture Papa doing anything as wide-open and free as surfing, even though I knew he had been an athlete — I'd seen his trophies for tumbling and high-diving at Yale — and that he'd trained as a war pilot. But I could imagine, always, the scene as a whole: the golden orange glow of sea and sky, and the great waves rolling in, out of a bright vastness as safe as my mother's arms.

By 1934 the stock brokerage offices my father had opened in Los Angeles and Seattle in the boom times of the late 1920s had closed. It was time to start over, but not back in Buffalo; Wall Street itself was the place for Papa to begin again. Because his asthma was worsening, he needed to stay right in New York City — in tall buildings far from pollens and growing things. For the next four years, until I was nine, he lived apart from us. First, Mama, my brothers, and I spent a winter with Ouie and Daidee in Buffalo, where I started school. Then we lived in Rye, an hour north of Manhattan, in a rented house which I loved and which still provides the mental floor plan for most novels I read. Papa came out rarely. That was a relief, because when he did there were often arguments and Mama would cry. It didn't bother me — or even occur to me — that I never saw my parents embrace.

I felt lucky to have an older brother, but we hardly ever played together. Mama said how smart Harty was, skipping grades at school, and he always seemed to have more important things to do than notice me. Once, when his friends came over for one of their very complicated war games, he let me make brown sugar sandwiches for them. Through the kitchen window I could see the boys ambushing each other in the yard, as I buttered each slice of bread and spread the crumbly brown sugar very evenly.

One day we were all playing hide and seek together. I ran up to the third floor and crawled under the eaves, closing a little cupboard door behind me. It snapped shut, latching from the outside. The game was long over when I was finally found, weak from screaming and pounding, and still filled with the horror of finding myself trapped, perhaps forever. Harty told me what happened to the bride who played hide and seek on the day of her marriage and hid herself in an old trunk in the attic. The groom and the wedding guests looked for her in vain. Long years later, when the trunk was finally opened, all that remained was a crumbling wedding gown and a grinning skull.

"That's a true story," he said, and I thought about it more than I wanted to. I kept wondering how long the bride had stayed alive, and what it was like for her, confined in that darkness, slowly losing hope of being rescued. I learned how often others meet similar fates. In lurid Sunday supplements I read about doomed coal miners trapped underground by cave-ins; about little children fallen out of sight, out of hearing, in the bottom of wells; about people nailed into coffins before they're really dead and when they come to and open their eyes, they're in the grave. Tom Sawyer was lost a long time in the dark, dripping cavern, and Injun Joe never got out of it. Sometimes people even do it on purpose: they'll bury somebody alive, just wall them up, like the count in the story by de Maupassant. He walled up his wife's lover, brick by brick.

I didn't mind looking after my little brother John. He was adorable and funny, and agreeable to my ideas. He got a little bored, though, with the club I established: the Mister Nobody Club. I was president and he was vice-president and general membership. The club met in interesting places, such as behind the garage or under a spreading bush, but since its main activity consisted in sitting very still and gazing at one or two objects — a leaf, say, or an empty medicine bottle — it never held John's interest for long. When we played church — with me, of course, as minister — there was more for John to do, like getting up and down to sing or pray or pass the plate.

When Papa came out to Rye, it was easy to steer clear of him, because he usually stayed indoors. One day I stopped in my tracks and slowly backed out of the room, when I came upon him and Mama facing each other across the dining table, locked in argument. Over the papers on the table, his face was glowering, hers tearful. The papers were bills, the argument was about how to pay them. Household funds were hard to come by. Papa was the sole disburser of money, but he didn't like it if anyone actually expected him to do it. Even to be asked could anger him, so you had to be careful.

Soon Papa decided that it would be cheaper if we all came to live in the city with him. Mama agreed; she probably figured it would be harder for Papa to ignore our needs if we were living right under his nose in Manhattan. She did not foresee that it would make no difference. So she packed us up and we all squeezed into a thirteenth floor apartment over East 86th Street and started in at city schools.

That meant a private boys school for my brothers and public school for me. After a few months of that, Papa didn't like the street talk I was bringing home. Since I seemed adept at mimicking the speech of others, he decided to send me to a foreign language school, the Lycée Français de New York. He still cherished the memory of his own boyhood year in Paris.

Harty briefed me the night before, teaching me all the French he knew. It consisted of a word and a sentence. The word was *un*, which was useful, he pointed out, since it meant both "a" and "one" — and all you need to do is grunt. The sentence was *"Parlez-vous francais?"* Thus prepared, I embarked on the Lycée schooling that would take me through the rest of my primary and all of my secondary education.

It was during that first year of living in the big city that we began taking the train each June to the farm. The route took us first to the Plymouth Congregational Church in Buffalo. Ouie had been its minister for a long time, ever since his son was a little boy. Daidee helped him, and they lived in a small house three blocks away. Once Sunday service was finally over, you could climb around on Ouie's oaken pulpit and jump from the choir stall. I liked feeling so at home in Ouie's church and considered myself privileged to be allowed to do things like that. I wondered if Papa had been permitted to play in church when he was little, or if back then, as the minister's only child, he was told to behave more like a grown-up.

Ouie's church was a modest, straightforward place, as functional and unpretentious as a ladder or a bus. Clear windows let the light pour in, and the wooden pews helped you sit up straight. "Sit up straight," my brother Harty would hiss at John and me when we started to squirm and peer around at the congregation. Then Daidee would just smile and pull us over against her, so we could lean into her softness, and John could even lie down with his head in her lap. Once in a while, when Ouie's sermon grew long and we grew fidgety, she would rivet our attention with surreptitious entertainment. Knotting the corner of her handkerchief, she would pull the fabric down over her middle three fingers to make the head and arms of a puppet. Sometimes it nodded and gesticulated so emphatically that it was hard not to see the puppet as a pompous little preacher, and hard not to laugh — even for Daidee herself. Consequently, these moments of drollery were usually brief, cut short by Daidee's own efforts to regain her composure.

Our wandering attention was frequently retrieved by Ouie himself, as he preached. Mild-mannered as he was, you could always count on him to get worked up in the course of a sermon. He could really startle you. Once little John let out a loud "Wow!" and the grown-ups laughed. When Ouie shouted and pounded his pulpit, it wasn't to scold people for being sinful so much as to wake people up to being loved. He had strong ideas about what it meant that God had sent Jesus to live with people, just like one of them.

Our arrival in June was the occasion for Ouie and Daidee to move out to the farm for the summer months. From there Ouie would commute back to preach on those Sundays he hadn't arranged for a visiting parson or seminarian to take the pulpit. The Inasmuch Group, Daidee's own Sunday School class for grown-ups, suspended its activities until fall. I thought that was a pretty funny name at first, but Daidee gave me to understand that it had to do with helping the poor and other people in trouble, because Jesus had said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

It took all morning to pack Ouie and Daidee's car for the big move. I danced with impatience by the bags and baskets collecting in the driveway, as ever more stuff was remembered and fetched amidst shouts and banging screen doors. Then my brothers and I climbed in back; our heads pushed against the roof and our feet stuck straight out over the piles of bedding. Once under way, the car trip was endless. The fifty miles to Albion and the farm took the rest of the day. Without bypasses or roads wider than two lanes, there was no way to hurry as we drove eastward along the Erie Canal and through the main streets

of the canal towns. Harty and I chanted out the names of the towns and never tired of it: "Lockport, Gasport, Middleport, Medina. Lockport Gasport Middleport Medina," over and over. The *mantra* had a meaning: It said the world was a safe place, after all. Albion came next, ten miles after Medina, but the rhythm was better without it.

My father rarely visited us on the farm. I wasn't surprised, for I didn't connect him with open spaces or physical labor, or even with leisure, for that matter.

In the dining room at the farm hung a large, framed etching that dated from his and my grandparents' sojourns in Germany. It pictured, in shadowy detail, another dining room — even plainer than ours — and a peasant family about to sit down. The rough table has only a loaf and pitcher on it, so you can tell they're poor; yet the father, with his arms wide open, is welcoming a stranger. His words are written out to see: *"Komm, Herr Jesu, sei unser Gast."* Clearly, it's Jesus who has just walked in. The mother and children raise their eyes from saying grace, with looks of disbelief and reverence and delight. I could experience these feelings myself, as I gazed at the picture and imagined what it would feel like to be sharing what you had to eat with someone who turned out to be God.

In the flatness from Albion north to Lake Ontario even the smallest rise or dip held drama, like the high bridge over the canal, great for flying down on your bike as fast as the wind, or the lazy, low streambeds, perfect for squatting motionless to hunt tadpoles and crawdads. For all the openness of the land, there were hidden places — derelict barns, abandoned orchards, stands of dark woods — that held their own secrets, and you could find them out if you didn't mind getting a little scared and scratched. And everywhere, in every field and ditch, it was so busy — not with people and cars and machines, but with the aliveness of Earth.

As soon as you stopped for a second and let it in, that simmering, seething vitality barraged your senses. When I hurried to the outhouse after the long car trip, there it was right away, and very strong too, in the chorus of flies zooming up from below as I lifted the lid, and in the higher whine from the wasps' nest overhead. I had to try and not be nervous, as I perched there over the smelly abyss, for I feared the wasps, and also I'd heard from Harty that escaped convicts sometimes hid beneath privies, figuring they'd be undetected in pits of human excrement. I diverted myself by studying the yellowing pages from old catalogues and Sunday supplements that papered the walls.

When I pulled up my pants and went out under the sour cherry trees beside the privy, the din of insect life continued all around me — less menacing now. As I listened, it grew louder and wilder. New parts of the orchestra clicked in with new buzzings and dronings — of gnats, bees, June bugs, of dragonflies and horseflies and hornets — in the grasses around my feet and the cherry branches overhead and in the elderberry bushes behind them. And soon I could hear their chorus coming from farther away, from Ouie's garden and the waist-high grasses on the other side, and from the tomato field and orchard beyond, and the hayfields and woods in the distance. The whole world reverberated with their roar — an ocean of multitudes that could absorb you right into their immeasurable, collective presence. Was this always going on — and we were just too busy to hear it, too self-enclosed to hear the world conspiring with itself?

When the breakfast dishes were done and the beds made, I could head off into the morning on Spotty: down the road on an errand to town, or out along the rutted edges of the cultivated fields toward open pastures and woodland. Having no one to ride with, I wished for human companions, invented them. In a remote field surrounded by woods, I would persuade Spotty to run and, charging about on my loyal steed, his noble heart pounding with the effort, I would become Joan of Arc, leading her troops into battle. Or Scarlett O'Hara galloping to the rescue of Tara, or Queen of the Amazons, shirt unbuttoned, defending her jungle realm.

Often, before supper, we'd be under way again, this time to the north pasture to fetch the cows for milking. The small herd, just nine or ten, included a couple of delicate, pretty-faced Jerseys and two or three hefty Holsteins; the rest were Guernseys. I left the reins on Spotty's neck because he knew better than I how to round them up and keep them moving: out the pasture gate and down the long, grassy lane to the road, and then another quarter mile by road till they reached their stanchions in the big barn. The cows took their time about it, so I would just lounge on Spotty and watch the sky turn colors, the land soften.

Whenever someone came with me to fetch the cows, we would go on foot — and once, at least, that someone was my father. I know that because I learned a poem from him then. Walking up the long lane to the pasture, he spied, across a neighboring field, a tree all overgrown with vines. "See yonder ivy-mantled tower!" he laughed, "that's where the moping owl doth complain."

That was from Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," he said, and he soon had me repeating the opening lines with him:

Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
the lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea …

Papa loved poetry. When he was in a good mood, he would recite whole passages from Tennyson and Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, Rupert Brooke, and "The Rubayyat of Omar Khayyam". He would talk about Professor Billy Phelps and the grand, exciting course he taught at Yale. I began to think that if Papa had become a professor of literature, instead of working in stocks and bonds, he would have found more gladness in himself.

In New York City at the Lycée, too, I began learning poetry by heart — a bunch of it for *récitation* every Friday. The very first poem I committed to memory was by La Fontaine, from Aesop's fable about the crow and the fox. Papa would have me recite it for guests — our first years in New York he still invited people home. I would stand in front of some business friend of his who might not know a word of French, and launch myself into the sonnet:

Maître Corbeau sur un arbre perché
tenait en son bec un fromage …

When the fox saw the crow with a cheese in his beak, he called up to him, "Oh, you have such a beautiful voice, please sing for us!" The stupid crow fell for the flattery, dropped the cheese, and the fox straightaway ran off with it. When Papa asked me to recite before guests, I, too, opened my mouth; but there was nothing for me to lose, no cheese to drop, and for a moment there was his smile. For a moment he would see me and hear me — though I sensed even then that it was not me he was hearing, but the language he loved that he had learned as a child in Paris.

To live in the city, surrounded by sooty concrete, to have to wait to be accompanied to the park each time I wanted to play outside, felt hideously confining, though we found a good hill for sledding, and a real Egyptian tomb to walk around in at the Metropolitan Museum nearby. From my bed in the converted dining room I shared with John, I could see the illumined tower of the Empire State Building glowing in the evening sky. At bedtime, with John and me nestled with her against the pillows, Mama would tell us the latest adventures of the rabbit who lived there. The Empire State Building was this rabbit's home, and so, as you would expect, he was quite sophisticated.

But even relaxed moments like these were overshadowed with tension. The apartment began to feel like a pressure cooker. After a day at the office, Papa shut himself in his separate bedroom with the air filter and we kept our voices down. From the moment we heard his keys in the front door, we tried to do nothing that might set him off. But often, late at night, his shouting would jar us awake. I knew Mama was there with him in his room across the hall, though I couldn't hear her voice. That was when John and I would put our pillows, for saddles, over the foot railings of our beds and ride off together into the night. New adventures awaited us always, and it felt so good to do something, rocking in a canter or crouching forward in a flat-out gallop, hanging on to the reins looped round the bedpost. Except for Manhattan's night glow through the window, we rode in darkness, unable to see each other's faces, calling to each other in whispers as we crossed prairies and forded rivers and raced up rocky gulches with our posses and patrols — just in time, usually, to save people.

After a while those night rides became harder to sustain. I would find myself standing in the hall by that closed door, not wanting to hear but needing to know. My father, I thought, could speak even more forcefully and persuasively than all the preachers he descended from, and once he started, it was hard for him to stop. He could take the mildest mistake and turn it into a terrible offense. And you'd believe him. Or at least I was afraid that Mama would believe him. The way she kept apologizing, it sounded as if she did. Apologies didn't stop Papa anyway. He never seemed to think you were sorry enough.

Sometimes, standing in the hall by his bedroom door, I would start hammering on it with my fists, shouting so he could hear me over his own voice, shouting at him to leave Mama alone. When Papa yanked the door open and advanced on me, Mama would plead with me to run off, looking at me as if I were causing her the most anguish of all.

The few times my father hit me hurt less than the tongue-lashings, but they left me with a fear that was hard to shake. On our first Christmas Eve in New York we were decorating the tree when Papa came home from an office party. He seemed unusually friendly and stayed in the living room, lounging on the sofa to watch us. I pulled at him to join us at the tree and teased him when he refused, saying he was a "stick-in-the-mud" who never wanted to have fun with us. That's when he started after me. What I remember most is how his blows sent me sprawling and spinning, bouncing off the walls of the narrow hallway, and how when I scrambled to lock myself in Mama's room at the

far end, he knocked the door down. He did it with his back, by bracing his feet against the opposite wall and pushing. The door, as I watched from inside, bent inwards very slowly, creaking and straining at the hinges more and more, until it couldn't hold out any longer and just gave way. I can't remember what happened next.

No one ever talked about it afterwards. No one ever talked about any suffering in our family — except Mama to me, in the privacy of her room. She had begun confiding in me, pouring out her distress and desperation. And they became my own, became a dense mass inside me, growing heavier as I saw how poorly Mama defended herself. I began to fear that my father would break her spirit in some irreparable way. I tried, as hard as I could, to get her to stand up to him.

"Why don't you stand up for Mama? Don't you see what's going on? Don't you care?" I cried at Harty one afternoon, when we were alone in the apartment. He was home from school with a broken arm, and I seized the chance to speak of my fear for Mama. When Harty said nothing, I shoved him in anger — and he fell off his chair onto the cast around his arm. I was horrified at my own vehemence. Harty was the precious genius of the family, and now I'd damaged him. But as I helped him up, he shook his head at my apologies. "I don't blame you for being worried, and I haven't been much help," he said. That, to my recollection, was the only time he actually acknowledged to me that things were hard.

John, at six, was too young to turn to, except for diversion. Already he was developing his own characteristic response to stress: to ignore it with buoyancy and jokes. Even Mama, except when alone with me, appeared trouble-free. Mostly she followed her own dictum: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Only Berthe, a Swiss woman who came one season to cook and clean, was bold enough to name the suffering. She was brawny and outspoken, with a faint mustache, and it awed me that she was not intimidated by my father. Perched on a kitchen stool, I listened intently as she told of going right down to Wall Street to demand the money he owed her and to admonish him for the way he treated his wife. Then Berthe said to me: "I worry about what he will drive her to do. From this height it would be so easy."

The shaking inside me that began then came not from surprise but confirmation, as if I already had been harboring the fears Berthe brought to the surface. Once Berthe was dismissed, as she soon was, to whom could I speak

those fears? I didn't want to add to Mama's anguish by revealing the extent of my own or, for that matter, to give her any ideas. But now, each afternoon when I came home from school, I would run to look in all the rooms and, if I did not find my mother, peer out the windows to the city pavement thirteen stories below.

It was 1939. War was gradually engulfing Europe, and Europe was home for most of my schoolmates. Some had fled across borders with parents who now took asylum in America. Others were children of diplomats, artists, and merchants whose livelihoods had brought them to New York where they were stuck now "for the duration." It seemed that all of them, whether seven years old or seventeen, had lived in places now threatened or occupied by Hitler's armies. All except me.

From newsreels and magazines, I could imagine the scenes that my schoolmates and their families had lived through, and that their relatives on the continent were still experiencing. These ravages were seldom mentioned in the classroom. Ours was the classical Lycée curriculum, unperturbed by current events. It was more important to learn about Vercingétorix, the club-wielding chieftain who defended Gaul from Julius Caesar, than about the ordeal of twentieth-century France. When Madame Brodin, my favorite teacher, mentioned the fall of Poland one morning and wept for about five seconds, her pupils watched solemnly. Then immediately and for the next two days, in the lavatories, hallways, and courtyard, they performed exaggerated imitations.

If the pain of loss and dislocation didn't disappear by itself, there was one thing you could do with it. You could vent it on the place where you were forced to be — on stupid, ugly, barbaric America. Since the New World generously provided much to scoff at, my fellow students never ran out of things to mock and bemoan. So, as I struggled my way into French culture, I heard my own culture demeaned. That was worse than the teasing I received for my beginner's French, but I was not brave enough, let alone fluent enough, to defend my country — and after a while I lost conviction.

As I made my way at the Lycée, I learned to conceal much: my loneliness, my embarrassment for my country, the extent of my ignorance of French, the anxiety I carried with me each morning from home. Concealment helped me survive, but it brought shame in its wake. If feelings have to be hidden, I concluded, they must be unacceptable.

When the moment came in June to board the Empire State Express at Grand Central Station to return to the farm, I felt as if I had been holding my breath the whole year. Once the train finally started, it seemed to rumble on for ages in the dark. In the dirty window I saw my own face against the blackness of the tunnel walls. They were sootier than the subway walls I'd grown accustomed to, but *these* underground passages seemed almost benign, for they were leading out, into a season in the sun. But not straightaway, for when we emerged at 97th Street, the light was gray, shadowed on both sides by blocks of tenements. For miles, we rattled along close to their windows, so close I could see inside, see the dim clutter, see the faces watching us go by, and sometimes meet their eyes, the impassive eyes of those who know they cannot escape.

Spotty seemed disinterested when I finally located him in a far stretch of the north pasture, but I expected him to be wild and hard to catch after long spring months on the loose. I rattled a pail of oats enticingly. He trotted up close, then shied out of reach, and played the game over and over, until I grew cross and tearful with impatience. Finally he thrust his nose straight into the pail — and let me swing a rope over his head and scratch his neck on his favorite scratching place.

Mud was caked on him from rolling by the stream, and burrs tangled his tail and knotted his mane, but back by the barn I slowly groomed him with currycomb and brush. No impatience then. That June grooming had the effect of ritual: it steadied the mind, eased the heart. How good it was, when we were through, simply to lean against him. My cheek rested higher against his withers than it had the summer before, but it felt the same. In those moments I let myself go still.

That summer on the farm I tried to read the Bible. At night in my cherished, very own room, I sat up in bed with the big heavy book braced on my knees. I had taken it from Ouie's study; it smelled old and musty and earnest, like my Pilgrim ancestors. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." I started on the first page, figuring I would just read straight through. My motivation was strong but vague. I think I wanted to be good, or find some way to become good. But mostly I wanted a vision and a blessing. I figured there *had* to be a meaning to my people's faith more riveting and real than what was conveyed in Sunday School.

Doggedly I persisted through the generations of Noah and Shem and Abraham, but the children of Israel seemed about as relevant to my life as

Vercingétorix, and even less interesting. What interested me was to find out about God, or rather God and me, and whether there was some promise in that mystery, some way of getting at it. I attached little importance to the fact that God did not answer my prayers. When John and I got asthma attacks after playing in the hay loft and I had us kneel together and pray for relief, I was not disheartened, really, that we kept on wheezing. Or when, in Mama's bedroom on that Christmas Eve, I prayed to God that the door would hold against Papa's pushing — and it gave way — I did not take that as a sign that God didn't exist. I hardly expected God to conform to my notions of what God should do. On the contrary, when I didn't surround him with demands and expectations, there was more space — space where we both could breathe and be real.

The God I was reading about in the Bible did not seem very spacious. He wanted you to be good and obedient, period. That felt not very different from the world of the Lycée, which seemed to want you to be smart and cynical, period. Neither allowed much room for fallibility or grief.

From the maple tree I could see Ouie working in his vegetable garden, moving up and down the rows behind the horse and plow. He used Red for the job, now that Spotty was released from farm work, and he proceeded as always without hurry, hour after hour, stopping only to toss a surfaced rock, then lurching forward again, pulled by the plow, the reins slung around his shoulders, his hair ruffling in the air, silver as milkweed. Ouie's attention seemed so steady — he clearly wasn't wondering if he should be doing something else, or if he was tired and should finish another day. Or if this was a suitable activity for a seventy-six-year-old preacher, and he maybe should just ask the tenant farmer to drive the tractor over and do the whole job in forty minutes.

Watching him plod up and down the rows behind the plow, I tried to imagine what it would be like to live that way, with such a calm and doubt-free mind. To live my New York City life like that, without wishing it were different, without hating it so much. To just go to school and not feel stuck inside my loneliness. To ride up the elevator and walk into the apartment and not feel trapped in my own fear. Maybe the secret of being peaceful, like Ouie, was to focus your attention only on what you were doing at that very moment, on what was right under your feet or in your hands — and to close your ears to what you did not want to hear. That would spare you a lot of grief. The problem was that I didn't think I *wanted* to tune things out.

Late one afternoon, when I was ten, my grandfather and I were alone together in the front parlor. He was sitting in the rocker by the window and I perched sideways on his lap, looking out toward the road. I was watching the western sky and the maple tree silhouetted against it. Under me Ouie's knees were bony, and his hand was warm and light on my back. I don't remember what we had been saying, or if we had been talking at all. I rarely, if ever, talked at the farm about life in New York — I didn't want to spoil the summer, and furthermore, Papa was Ouie's son — so I don't know what prompted the words he spoke then. They seemed to just come out of the blue — or out of that apricot-colored sky:

"Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

I had not heard those words before. Instantly I turned on Ouie's lap to face him: "Who said that?"

"Jesus said it," Ouie told me. "God says it through Jesus." And he continued: "'Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, and you shall find rest unto your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' Matthew eleven."

"Say it again," I said, and repeated the words after him: "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden."

I was stunned. I thought of all the people who lived with heavy burdens. They came now to my mind: the faces in the tenement windows, the outnumbered troops fighting for France, even my father. And when I heard that invitation, I knew I was among them.

That invitation did not alter the circumstances of my life; it removed no hardships. Yet it changed everything.