

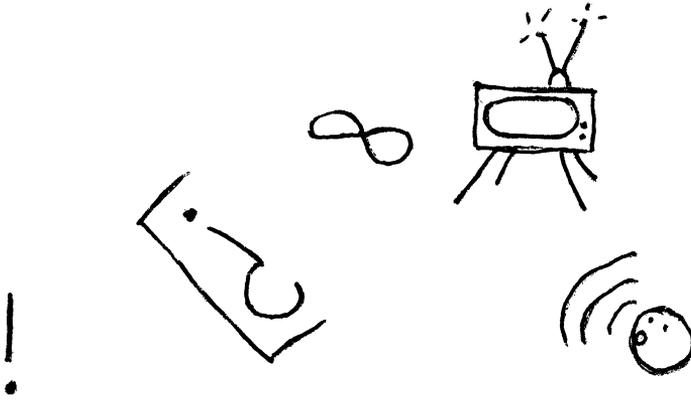
from Memories of My Father on T.V.
Curtis White

a novel about life without pleasure

PROLOGUE

The defining childhood memory of my father is of a man (but not just a man, of course; it is my father— young, handsome, capable!) reclined on a dingy couch watching T.V. Watching T.V. and ignoring the chaos around him, a chaos consisting almost entirely of me and my sisters fighting. Like most brothers and sisters, we fought about everything—who got the last, largest or best (whatever that could mean) piece of fudge, for example. Or the chaos was of a different kind. It was Wendy, my youngest sister, passing rapidly and continuously back and forth before the T.V., through my father’s view, moving a doll or dolls from point A to point B. That’s how desperate she was to be seen. More desperate, even, than a compulsive who must keep her hands clean, clean. But my father never seemed to notice. Wendy might as well have been the infinitesimal black strip of celluloid that separates discrete images on film. He could see easily through the haze her to-and-fro-ing created. Jan, sister number two and nearly my own age, stood obliquely to Dad’s side, posed like a Roman orator, holding forth endlessly on nothing in particular. She would argue eloquently of the injustice of a house with heat in one room only. Or she would complain, as I once heard my grandmother complain (her mind in the squeeze of senile dementia), about the immorality of cowboy serials in general and “Gun-smoke” in particular. Issues of similar profundity. Jan’s speaking voice went out like sonar, never finding what it was looking for. But neither did this act gather Dad’s attention. Me, I stood behind him, completely out of view. Thus my unique strategy: I don’t need to be seen in order to be. But if, dear father, you would happen to turn around, what a feat you’d witness! A true spectacle! Your own son flipping Kraft miniature marshmallows into the air and catching them in his mouth. A whole bag flipped and eaten without missing one! Yes, I was the family’s phenom.

Imagine this scene:



Wendy=8 (like a shuttle)

Jan=O (like a great mouth)

Curt=! (like a marvel)

Dad=? (like an enigma)

Actually, I can see other men in my father's place. Certain men are interchangeable with my father: Frank Sinatra, John Wayne, or even Robert Stack who played Elliot Ness on my father's favorite T.V. show, "The Untouchables." In other words, the strong silent types. Men who can take you apart with a look. They all share that maddening lack of facial expression—*le masque*, the French call it. That immobile face seems to take some dark delight in refusing us a response. This lack of response feels, curiously, like a demand to which everyone, especially a child, is forced to respond, to pay attention, to pay over love. But when no conversation, no act, no capitulation to the father's obscure needs, no matter how abject, seems sufficient, stimulates an acknowledgment, then one feels defeated. In my case, I felt that my father's demand was in fact hostile, exploitive, and—to beat it all—purposeless. For he gained nothing, other than the endless right to his *masque* and to the T.V.

I admit the following: I have blamed my life of depression on my father who, it seemed to me, demanded of me my death, or my endless dying, and for what? His NOTHING TO DO. But what if these Strong Silent Types, these World War II John Wayne clones, were not in fact self-absorbed, manipulative, and destructive of their children's well-being? What if they

were just depressed? What if my depressed father, like his children, was caught in an idiotic, endless and self-destructive drama which consisted at its root of nothing more than the failure of neurotransmitters, serotonin, GABA, even carbon monoxide, to stand by like good soldiers, to be ready to bridge a simple gap? People are meant to brood on life and death, but not every minute of their lives. If they do so brood, one might become Gustave Mahler, the creator of symphonies reflective of a fatal cosmos, which creations eventually accompany him to a thorough madness. Or, if one is no genius, one takes my father's route and finds this drama on T.V., especially the black and white, either/or world of early T.V. Shows like "Combat," "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea," "The Untouchables," "Wagon Train," and "Dragnet," correlate with depression. Life is either good or bad. Life is bad.

Of course, just as clearly, for my father and perhaps yours, T.V. was also a strategy for narcotizing, for self-medication. It was both the disease and the cure. The T.V. drug. But can we be sure that in his own tragic way he didn't ask the world of television to love him? Can we be sure there was no hope in his autistic viewing? Can we assume that the sadness of his failure was any less worthy than our own?

COMBAT

1. In the episode of "Combat" titled "Command," my father was a German pontoon bridge built over a narrow French river. The bridge/my father threatened to provide a means of access for Krauts in order to roll their *Wehrmacht* machines into an area tentatively held by Americans. Therefore, as a strategic priority of the Allied forces, he had to be "taken out."

2. Until failures in North Africa and the Caucasus deprived Germany of the oil reserves needed for their "war machine," German tanks, planes, and armored carriers were feared and envied. They had the first "smart" weapons: guided bombs and the so-called V-2 rocket. They also had the first fighter jets (although by the time they became available there was so little fuel left that they were towed to the runway by cows). They were even able to synthesize their own gasoline from coal. In "Combat," however, the function of these mighty war machines was merely to roar up full of the empty ostentation of late-Wagnerian opera, and be promptly converted to something more like the discarded shells of cicadas. Brown and brittle

things, buzzing in the wind.

3. My father felt a deep sense of shame, guilt, and humiliation for having provided the Germans this service. He gave his good, broad American back, fortified by Midwestern grains, to the purposes of the fascists. He knew it was a terrible thing to do.

4. The DSM III (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) under the heading “Diagnostic Criteria for Major Depressive Episode” states in B. 6. that the depressed patient has “feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach, or excessive or inappropriate guilt (either may be delusional).” Was my father’s fervently held notion, conveyed regularly during wee-hour confessions to his amazed and sleepy children, that he was a pontoon bridge for the Nazis delusional? Was Gregor Samsa’s depressed ideation (“I am a monstrous vermin”) delusional? Or were these things metaphors? Is a metaphor a delusion? Does the probability of Franz Kafka’s depression require us to think less of him as an artist?

5. When I was a student at the University of San Francisco, I took an honors course in 20th century fiction. The course met at the professor’s house. It was during the time when I first began to have opinions. My strongest and most perverse opinion, expressed in the lotus position from the floor of my professor’s living room, was that Franz Kafka deserved no acclaim, was not to be admired, because the lone meaning his fiction had to offer was the effect of his own mental illness. What greatness is there, I demanded to know, in disease? What credit can one claim? My classmates and especially my professor were perplexed. How can you not like a story about a man who wakes up a “monstrous vermin”? It is a magnificent metaphor! It is charming as heck! They were curiously unable, however, to find an aesthetic language to defend the beetled Austrian from my charge that he was just sick. I laughed as I debated, throwing their homilies back in their faces, and said, “Why should we claim to be pleased by this night, this paralysis, this human upon whom foreign objects grow?” But the real meaning of my laughter was, “Don’t you see? This argument of mine is bug scales. I am Kafka. I am his disease.”

6. My father was a lousy traitor and he knew it. Nonetheless, he felt an uncontrollable terror at the thought that the men he loved, “Combat”’s sturdy cast—Vic Morrow as Sergeant Saunders, Littlejohn, Cajé, Kirby—were moving slowly in his direction, climbing through the brush, the dirty hills, and the curious eucalyptus trees misplaced in the French countryside.

These men were going to attach plastic explosives to his ribs. They had the little electric plunger for detonation. My father felt guilt, doom, and a hollow sense of justice. But he confessed readily that the squad, those grey heroic men, were right as usual. He should be demolished. Blown up before the Kraut treads could cross him. He was not only a bridge, but a bug. A monstrous vermin. A long bug like a walking stick, a grim sort of mantis, extended across a French river. The German tanks would roll across my father's bug back unless he was destroyed.

7. At the beginning of this episode, we learn that Lieutenant Hanley (Rick Jason) has been wounded and will be removed from ETO (European Theater of Operation) for thirty days. In his place comes one Lieutenant Douglas (guest star, Joseph Campanella). Unlike Hanley, this new lieutenant does not fraternize with the men. He gives orders. He doesn't smile. He eats his awful dog soldier K-rations crouched by himself. Throwing down that abject meal, the lieutenant orders one Pvt. Adams to burn a picture of his three-year-old daughter, a picture Adams has only just received from the States. Adams is offended. The squad is outraged. They do not like this new strong and silent lieutenant. His immobile face seems to take some dark delight in refusing them even the most basic human acknowledgment. They prefer their old lieutenant who seems by contrast a lieutenant of infinite smiles. One has to admit, however, that Adams had been warned to bring no personal effects. Well, hadn't he, soldier? No telling how Jerry would use this information if he were captured.

8. Adams was one of the replaceable squad members who rise glorious from the earth with each new episode only in order to provide fresh and expendable fodder for the Germans. How must these men feel? Do they recognize each other? Do they share looks with hurt eyes? Looks that say, "In this episode, amigo, we die, so that these others may find weekly prime time glory." Do they resent Kirby or Littlejohn, off whom German bullets, grenades and mortars bounce like popcorn? I confess to you that the deaths of those also-appearing-in-alphabetical-order affects me. My depressed brain, in which my ill spirit sobs in each blood cell, tells me that this is something worthy of tears. I weep for the lives of the soldiers who will not return in next week's episode.

9. Adams held the little photo of his daughter, tiny Brigitte, between long thin fingers. His fingers did not wish to be burned. Kindly, he started the match in a far corner, distant from his baby's smiling head. But there is no

mercy in fire. It leapt accelerated by photo chemicals. In a moment it was over. Her charred remains lay on the ground. Her little smile lingered before him like an electronic afterimage. He had murdered his own child. He didn't deserve to live.

10. Of course, if he hadn't burnt his daughter, it might only have been worse. "I see, Herr Adams, that your little girl—Brigette it says here on the back of this photograph in the hand of your lovely and tantalizing wife—has just turned three. Wonderful! Well, you know that little Brigette depends on you. She needs you to live. Yes! Above all else, live! She needs you to return home. She would not like you to die now for the silly reason that you will not tell us your soldierly objectives even when such information is of absolutely no use to us at all. Say, for example, that you told us that your mission was to kill the Führer. Goodness knows that we are aware that you would like to kill the Führer under the mistaken idea that we German people would stop trying to kill foreigners and inferior creatures without him. But that is wrong, as history will show, because in fact it is our innate sense of tidiness which compels us to clean up the awkward messiness of so many different colors and what have you. Different shapes. And sexes, *mein gott*. But we already know that you would like to throttle the Führer's long neck like a Thanksgiving goose if you could get your hands on him. But what of your wife and little Brigette? Your wife, for example, is clearly a very, what shall I say?, lovable thing since you have plainly done something very unclean to produce this Brigette baggage. We Germans like to get behind and spread the woman's bottom and see all the dirty, hairy parts. This makes us sick of life and hence we must find all the unclean brown people in the world and kill them because they made us do it hindwise like a hound. Yes, there there, my friend, vomit. It makes you sick to think about. Well, it does me too. Here, I will vomit with you. Yaugh. Feels good, yes? To retch, ah, it is clean and bracing. Like your Old Spice Cologne for men. Nevertheless, I promise you, I will find your wife after this war and spread her to find those soft and complicated things just as you Americans spread your fat Sears catalogues to find the colorful toys or the black and white women's underwear. Yes, there you have it. The big pieces. Of course, I will risk the impulse to suicide such an act will inspire in me. I will transfer my desire to kill myself to your daughter. The only sad part, I think, with the children is the blood that comes from their tiny anuses. Is it not so in your own experience? Now, where do you come from

and where were you going? Where is your headquarters? We wish to take a bite from that part of the map.”

11. Were these possibilities part of the infinite despair that made Adams such an easy target a few moments later? He was killed by a German sniper. The hole in his forehead in fact looked like a bleeding anus. This is the despair that comes for these nameless men who are brought in fresh for each episode so that they might die from their nameless fears and from the tragic knowledge of their function in the “Combat” world.

12. That man, Pvt. Adams, I sadly report to you, he was my father. Brigitte and I never knew him. He died to save us these indignities at the hands of the Nazis. Yet when I grew up, I joined the neo-Nazi movement. Every spring I carry flowers to the birthplace of George Lincoln Rockwell in Bloomington, Illinois. I parade down the embarrassed Midwestern streets with my fascist brethren. Perhaps if my father had carried a photograph of me, as well, tucked into his dog soldier helmet, this last irony would have been unnecessary.

13. Pvt. Adams, the original man. Brought onto the arboreal scene only to be promptly driven off again, in shame and despair. He must wonder, as he walks head down out of the studios, unemployed for the umpteenth time, “How am I different from these others? No one else is like me. I am uniquely flawed.” There is no way of explaining it to him. He really is one of the world’s chosen expendables.

14. The episode, “Command,” is the first episode I’ve seen of “Combat” since I was a teenager and crouched like a little beast at my father’s side, by the couch, where he reclined in much the same manner as the famous reclining Buddha. I thought at that time to be his henchman and recline on a couch in my turn. But I am halted in this destiny by the following question. Why am I breathing life back into this one episode, “Command”? What wild law of chance brought it to me? And yet it is the perfect episode for my purposes. Through it I intersect with the sublime.

15. And what of Sarge, whose last name never passes a man’s lips. He too has *le masque*. He never smiled, never expressed any emotion except his determination to see his suffering through. And yet for a man who suffered, who had thousands of Nazi bullets enclose him (like the knife-thrower’s assistant at the fair), he was strangely relaxed. He always looked sleepy. He leaned like James Dean against the window frame of an abandoned country cottage, his upper lip pooching over, and peered out into the world looking

for the next Nazi needing a bullet. He was precisely “cool.” Neither warm with life nor cold with death. Show him a horror, any horror. He will have no human response. Ghoulishness holds no terror for the ghoul.

16. A piece of trivia known only to the most ardent “Combat” fans: Sarge had a tattoo on the knuckles of his right hand DAS, and a tattoo on his left EIN. Kraut-talk. Hey, Sarge, why you got kraut-talk on your hands? When he put his fists together, knuckles out, as he often did in the very eyes of the enemy, like Joe Louis in a pre-fight press conference with Herr Schmelling, the tattoos spelled DASEIN. Thus the subtle force of the terror he inspired.

17. During the skirmish in which Adams is killed, the lieutenant is pinned down by German fire. He is behind a fallen tree or similar forest debris. (Why is it that in every episode the platoon is pinned down behind a fallen tree? And how is it that the German fire from a machine gun nest [machine gun “nest”: once again death in life is our theme] hits exactly an inch below the preserving limit of the tree. I think that the men of “Combat” could hide behind toothpicks.) As I say, the lieutenant was pinned down. He escaped because—as always—his fellow Americans lobbed grenades with inscrutable accuracy into the machine gun-birthing-place-for-birds.

18. In the end, it is the thesis of the television program “Combat” that America won World War II because of baseball. It is finally the hand grenade that dissolves the impasse of mutual machine gun fire that cannot hit anything. The GIs have good arms. The grenade is the size of a Grover Cleveland hardball. For Americans, the machine gun is merely “chin music.” It keeps the enemy’s head down. It is the fastball of the grenade that “punches them out,” that “rings them up,” that “sets down the side.”

19. When the platoon reached the home of the French commando, Jean Bayard (who was to lead them to my-father-the-pontoon-bridge) the Jerries had already killed him. (My father felt a contradictory ecstasy: he might still live but his living would be one long treachery.) Sarge and Lieutenant took revenge on Bayard’s German killers, but in the process made enough noise to summon the German platoons which were defending my father. They roared up in their *Wehrmacht* bug husks and a tremendous fire fight ensued, rifles and varieties of machine gun making those deep, reassuring and compulsive sounds (the sound ka-chang, for instance) which my father worshipped.

20. My father would watch “Combat” obsessively if for no other reason than that he had an idolatrous relationship with this sound of guns.

Knowing this, I've taken all my videotapes of "Combat" and transferred just the battle scenes to another tape which I will give to my father for his birthday. Recorded at the slowest speed, I have provided him with better than six hours of bliss. My only fear is that he will die of this bliss, like the lonely masturbating man coming for six hours straight and discovering that it is his very bloody life that puddles on his stomach.

21. I am frizzled, stale and small.

22. There is an outstanding moral complexity to this episode, "Command." Lt. Douglas' sole desire (we discover late in the drama) is to return from this mission with all of his platoon members alive. For he was the famous commander of the legendary and ill-fated Mt. Chatel platoon which lost all thirty-one of its soldiers in the process of wiping out a whole "Kraut company." (This is the secret and the reason behind his apparent indifference to his men: he loves them too well.) It is for this reason that, when a German patrol strolls by, he orders that they be allowed to pass unchallenged. Allowing them to pass means, however, that his squad will not be able to take the road themselves. They'll have to go over hills and directly through brush. Tragically, it is this same German patrol that arrives at Bayard's and kills the valiant French patriot. Now the GIs must kill these same Germans after all, as if for the second time, but for Bayard—the only man who knows the location of the bridge—it is too late. It is a world too late. He has been undone by the force of irony. Moments later, an "old man" is discovered wounded inside the cottage. He confirms new details of the above, to wit: Bayard was alarmed because Lieutenant Douglas was so late (late because he hadn't taken the road). Bayard wouldn't have encountered the Germans at all if he hadn't gone out to look for his old friend Douglas. Worse yet, Bayard is the last survivor, other than Douglas, of the infamous incident at Mt. Chatel. These are the fine, fine consequences of a single "command." They seem to expand and multiply like the hairline cracks in a porcelain glaze.

23. From this lesson we conclude the following disturbing truths:

a) when authority is most brutal and indifferent, it is then that it loves and cares for us most;

b) when one fails to choose death, death will come anyway, later, multiplied;

∴ always choose death.

24. Another way of understanding #23: in order to win the war, the

Americans had to become the moral equivalent (as Field Marshall Reagan would say) of the Nazis.

25. "You know, Sergeant, I had to sit down and write thirty-one letters home to the wives and mothers of those men, I don't want to write any more letters. I can't."

"Lieutenant, if we blow this bridge, we might lose some men, but if we don't the Germans will use that bridge. They might cut right through the whole division. If they do, how many officers will have to write how many letters?"

26. In viewing "Combat," does one have to choose between the orgasmic, irrational bliss of gunfire and the complexity of the moral lesson? It would seem so. And it would seem that my father always preferred the merely darkly blissful, since I recall no post-episode explications of moral and dramatic ironies delivered to a silent son thirsting for enlightenment.

27. My father was a Romantic intent on sublime intimations; he was not a New Critic interested in formal device. These intimations came to my father half-asleep in his dirty green recliner, as strangely as if creatures from outer space had come through his T.V. to deliver the news. A true oracle, the truth of the world visited him, virtually sat on his face, while he dreamed. This explains his patriarch's wrath when his children changed the channel in mid-program.

28. "What are you doing? I'm watching that program."

"But, Dad, you were asleep."

"Turn it back."

29. My father spent so much of his life in his green recliner that it broke down subtly under his weight (my father was 6' 2", 220 pounds), never completely breaking but rather bending, collapsing earthward under his shape until, after twenty years of use, the chair itself resembled my father, as if it were an exoskeleton he'd left behind.

30. "It's been a long time since Mt. Chatel, my friend."

31. The theme music for "Combat" sounds like the theme music for "Bridge Over the River Kwai" reconfigured to sell hot breakfast cereals. Da da da da-dum eat your Maayaapo. Da da da da da dum eat your may-yaa-yaa-yaa-po.

32. It turned out that the old man knew the location of the bridge. It was quite nearby. Sarge volunteered to creep to the bridge and blow it up while the rest of the squad occupied the stupid Keystone Cop Germans in their

rattling bug husks who have surrounded Bayard's and abandoned their crucial duties at the pontoon bridge.

33. Understanding this neglect, my father feels an incredible anxiety. "Idiots and dumb cuffs. I'm surrounded by dumb cuffs." He is having a panic attack. With his feet on one bank and his fingers barely gripping the other, he is completely vulnerable. He wants to curl up in the fetal position, but that is not a posture pontoon bridges are allowed. In later years, during his son's time, there will be drugs for this disorder. Ativan, Valium. Drugs his son will take with gratitude. But for his own moment, there is only this enormous DREAD.

34. Sarge is up to his shoulders in the surprisingly warm river. (*Bien sur*, this river heads toward the tepid Baja and certainly didn't begin in the Alps.) He pulls himself along the bridge from rib to rib pausing only to tuck the tender *plastique* between every other rib. It tickles my father a little, but mostly he feels the explosives' mighty and horrible potential. This feeling is much worse than the actual moment of becoming the meaty geyser that is his destiny. That, after all, takes only an instant. Spread across the sky, one has something of the nobility of a new constellation.

35. Done, Sarge crawls up on the bank and engages the little detonator. He depresses the plunger gently. The explosives go off serially, one, two, three, four, like four strong spasms from a really good come. There is a different and dizzying camera angle for each new explosion.

36. My father would really have enjoyed these explosions/his death. But that contradictory pleasure would be like watching a snuff film in which you are the one to be snuffed. Would that turn you on, dead man?

37. As Sarge walks back to meet his platoon, he feels no joy. He'd done his job, saved lives by the bucketful, frustrated *le Bosch*, and yet he felt gloomy. He couldn't understand, of course, but he had become my father. My father's essence could not be destroyed; it had to reside somewhere. It must have flowed back up the wires to the detonator at the moment of his death. Like me, Sergeant Saunders is now possessed by my father. The undead. They walk among us.

38. When the Sarge arrived back, it was clear to all that he'd changed. He was not the same Sarge they'd known. But he couldn't explain anything, or he explained much more than his men, the gentle giant Littlejohn in particular, desired. Sarge said, "I know I am bad because I killed my father. However, I must be a little bit good because I feel guilty and am paying for

it. If I didn't feel bad about myself, then I would be a completely wicked person. So leave me to my despair, I have earned it, and it is my only virtue."

39. "But Sarge, that wasn't your father," appeals our reasonable Everyman, the likable Kirby. "You just blew up a bridge is all." For Pete's sake. For cryin' out loud. For the love of Mike. You don't use your head, Sarge. Kirby looks around to the others, appealing to them for confirmation of this solid common sense. A tear trickles from the corner of the sentimental Littlejohn's eye. Caje puts a consoling hand on Sarge's disconsolate shoulder. "*Vieux ami, nous voudrions t'aider,*" Caje says.

40. The riddle of the Sarge is undone when, to the astonishment of all (especially my father who pops up from his suburban recliner in awe), Sarge removes his helmet. Under his dirty, dented GI helmet with the chin straps hanging down most sloppily is not familiar blonde hair but a small patch of garden, mostly grasses and a few flowering stems. This grows out of the top of his head.

41. "How did I do it? I took my bayonet and prepared the top soil and then I sowed the seed. No, it didn't hurt too much. I didn't go very deep. Why? Don't you like it? Don't you think it's a nice idea to have a little garden on top of your head?"