

It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the
Father without Knowing Him (II)
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JIM NOT THAT WAY JIM. That's no way to treat a garage door, bending stiffly down at the waist and yanking at the handle so that the door jerks up and out jerky and hard and you crack your shins and my ruined knees, son. Let's see you bend at the healthy knees. Let's see you hook a soft hand lightly over the handle feeling its subtle grain and pull just as exactly gently as will make it come to you. Experiment, Jim. See just how much force you need to start the door easy, let it roll up out open on its hidden greasy rollers and pulleys in the ceiling's set of spider-webbed beams. Think of all garage doors as the well-oiled open-out door of a broiler with hot meat in, heat roiling out, hot. Needless and dangerous ever to yank, pull, shove, thrust. Your mother is a shover and a thruster, son. She treats bodies outside herself without respect or due care. She's never learned that treating things in the gentlest most relaxed way is also treating them and your own body in the most efficient way. It's Marlon Brando's fault, Jim. Your mother back in California before you were born, before she became a devoted mother and long-suffering wife and bread-winner, son, your mother had a bit part in a Marlon Brando movie. Her big moment. Had to stand there in saddle shoes and bobby-socks and ponytail and put her hands over her ears as really loud motorbikes roared by. A major thespian moment, believe you me. She was in love from afar with this fellow Marlon Brando, son. Who? Who. Jim, Marlon Brando was the archetypal new-type actor who ruined it looks like two whole generations' relations with their own bodies and the everyday objects and bodies around them. No? Well it was because of Brando you were opening that garage door like that, Jimbo. The disrespect gets learned and passed on. Passed down. You'll know Brando when you watch him, and you'll have learned to fear him. *Brando*, Jim, *jesus*, b-r-a-n-d-o. Brando the new archetypal tough-guy rebel and slob type, leaning back on his chair's rear legs, coming crooked through doorways, slouching against everything in sight, trying to *dominate* objects,

showing no artful respect or care, yanking things toward him like a moody child and using them up and tossing them crudely aside so they miss the wastebasket and just lie there, ill-used. With the overclumsy impetuous movements and postures of a moody infant. Your mother is of that new generation that moves against life's grain, across its warp and baffles. She may have loved Marlon Brando, Jim, but she didn't understand him, is what's ruined her for everyday arts like broilers and garage doors and even low-level public-park knock-around tennis. Ever see your mother with a broiler door? It's carnage, Jim, it's to cringe to see it, and the poor dumb thing thinks it's tribute to this slouching slob-type she loved as he roared by. Jim, she never intuited the gentle and cunning economy behind this man's quote harsh sloppy unstudied approach to objects. The way he'd oh so clearly practiced a chair's back-leg tilt over and over. The way he studied objects with a welder's eye for those strongest centered seams which when pressured by the swinishest slouch still support. She never . . . never sees that Marlon Brando felt himself as body so keenly he'd *no need* for manner. She never sees that in his quote careless way he actually really touched whatever he touched as if it were part of him. Of his own body. The world he only seemed to manhandle was for him sentient, feeling. And no one . . . and she never understood that. Sour sodding grapes indeed. You can't envy someone who can be that way. Respect, maybe. Maybe *wistful* respect at the very outside. She never saw that Brando was playing the equivalent of high-level quality tennis across soundstages all over both coasts, Jim, is what he was really doing. Jim, he moved like a careless fingerling, one big muscle, muscularly naïve, but always, notice, a fingerling at the center of a clear current. That kind of animal grace. The bastard wasted no motion, is what made it art, this brutish no-care. His was a tennis player's dictum: touch things with consideration and they will be yours; you will own them; they will move or stay still or move for you; they will lie back and part their legs and yield up their innermost seams to you. Teach you all their tricks. He knew what the Beats know and what the great tennis player knows son: learn to do nothing, with your whole head and body, and everything will be done by what's around you. I know you don't understand. Yet. I know that goggle-eyed stare. I know what it means all too well, son. It's no matter. You will, Jim. I know what I know.

I'm predicting it right here, young sir Jim. You are going to be a great tennis player. I was near-great. You will be truly great. You will be the real

thing. I know I haven't taught you to play yet, I know this is your first time, Jim, Jesus, relax, I know. It doesn't affect my predictive sense. You will overshadow and obliterate me. Today you are starting, and within a very few years I know all too well you will be able to beat me out there, and on the day you first beat me I may well weep. It'll be out of a sort of selfless pride, an obliterated father's terrible joy. I feel it, Jim, even here, standing on hot gravel and looking: in your eyes I see the appreciation of angle, a prescience re spin, the way you already adjust your overlarge and apparently clumsy child's body in the chair so it's at the line of best force against dish, spoon, lens-grinding appliance, a big book's stiff bend. You do it unconsciously. You have no idea. But I watch, very closely. Don't ever think I don't, son.

You will be poetry in motion, Jim, size and posture and all. Don't let the posture-problem fool you about your true potential out there. Take it from me, for a change. The trick will be transcending that overlarge head, son. Learning to move just the way you already sit still. Living in your body.

This is the communal garage, son. And this is our door in the garage. I know you know. I know you've looked at it before, many times. Now . . . now *see* it, Jim. See it as body. The dull-colored handle, the clockwise latch, the bits of bug trapped when the paint was wet and still protruding. The cracks from this merciless sunlight out here. Original color anyone's guess, boyo. The concave inlaid squares, how many, bevelled at how many levels at the borders, that pass for decoration. Count the squares, maybe. . . . Let's see you treat this door like a lady, son. Twisting the latch clockwise with one hand that's right and. . . . I guess you'll have to pull harder, Jim. Maybe even harder than that. Let me . . . *that's* the way she wants doing, Jim. Have a look. Jim, this is where we keep this 1956 Mercury Montclair you know so well. This Montclair weighs 3,900 pounds, give or take. It has eight cylinders and a canted windshield and aerodynamic fins, Jim, and has a maximum flat-out road-speed of 95 m.p.h. per. I described the shade of the paint job of this Montclair to the dealer when I first saw it as bit-lip red. Jim, it's a machine. It will do what it's made for and do it perfectly, but only when stimulated by someone who's made it his business to know its tricks and seams, as a body. The stimulator of this car must know the car, Jim, feel it, be inside much more than just the . . . the compartment. It's an object, Jim, a body, but don't let it fool you, sitting here, mute. It will *respond*. If given its due. With artful care. It's a body and will respond with a well-oiled

purr once I get some decent oil in her and all Mercuryish at up to 95 big ones per for just that driver who treats its body like his own, who *feels* the big steel body he's inside, who quietly and unnoticed feels the nubbly plastic of the grip of the shift up next to the wheel when he shifts just as he feels the skin and flesh, the muscle and sinew and bone wrapped in gray spider-webs of nerves in the blood-fed hand just as he feels the plastic and metal and flange and teeth, the pistons and rubber and rods of the amber-fueled Montclair, when he shifts. The bodily red of a well-bit lip, parping along at a silky 80-plus per. Jim, a toast to our knowledge of bodies. To high-level tennis on the road of life. Ah. Oh.

Son, you're ten, and this is hard news for somebody ten, even if you're almost five-eleven, a possible pituitary freak. Son, you're a body, son. That quick little scientific-prodigy's mind she's so proud of and won't quit twittering about: son, it's just neural spasms, those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of your head revving, and head is still just body, Jim. Commit this to memory. Head is body. Jim, brace yourself against my shoulders here for this hard news, at ten: you're a machine a body an object, Jim, no less than this rutilant Montclair, this coil of hose here or that rake there for the front yard's gravel or sweet jesus this nasty fat spider flexing in its web over there up next to the rake handle, see it? See it? *Latrodectus mactans*, Jim. Widow. Grab this racquet and move gracefully and feelingly over there and kill that widow for me, young sir Jim. Go on. Make it say "K." Take no names. There's a lad. Here's to a spiderless section of communal garage. Ah. Bodies bodies everywhere. A tennis ball is the ultimate body, kid. We're coming to the crux of what I have to try to impart to you before we get out there and start actuating this fearsome potential of yours. Jim, a tennis ball is the ultimate body. Perfectly round. Even distribution of mass. But empty inside, utterly, a vacuum. Susceptible to whim, spin, to force—used well or poorly. It will reflect your own character. Characterless itself. Pure potential. Have a look at a ball. Get a ball from the cheap green plastic laundry basket of old used balls I keep there by the propane torches and use to practice the occasional serve, Jimbo. Attaboy. Now look at the ball. Heft it. Feel the weight. Here, I'll . . . tear the ball . . . open. Whew. See? Nothing in there but evacuated air that smells like a kind of rubber hell. Empty. Pure potential. Notice I tore it open along the seam. It's a body. You'll learn to treat it with consideration, son, some might say a kind of love, and it will open for you, do your

bidding, be at your beck and soft lover's call. The thing truly great players with hale bodies who overshadow all others have is a way with the ball that's called, and keep in mind the garage door and broiler, *touch*. Touch the ball. Now that's . . . that's the touch of a player right there. And as with the ball so with that big thin slumped over-tall body, sir Jimbo. I'm predicting it right now. I see the way you'll apply the lessons of today to yourself as a physical body. No more carrying your head at the level of your chest under round slumped shoulders. No more tripping up. No more overshot reaches, shattered plates, tilted lampshades, slumped shoulders and caved-in chest, the simplest objects twisting and resistant in your big thin hands, boy. Imagine what it feels like to be this ball, Jim. Total physicality. No revving head. Complete presence. Absolute potential, sitting there potentially absolute in your big pale slender girlish hand so young its thumb's unwrinkled at the joint. My thumb's wrinkled at the joint, Jim, some might say gnarled. Have a look at this thumb right here. But I still treat it as my own. I give it its due. You want a drink of this, son? I think you're ready for a drink of this. No? Nein? Today, Lesson One out there, you become, for better or worse, Jim, a man. A player. A body in commerce with bodies. A helmsman at your own vessel's tiller. A machine in the ghost, to quote a phrase. Ah. A ten-year-old freakishly tall bow-tied and thick-spectacled citizen of the . . . I drink this, sometimes, when I'm not actively working, to help me accept the same painful things it's now time for me to tell you, son. Jim. Are you ready? I'm telling you this now because you have to know what I'm about to tell you if you're going to be the more than near-great top-level tennis player I know you're going to be eventually very soon. Brace yourself. Son, get ready. It's glo . . . gloriously painful. Have just maybe a taste, here. This flask is silver. Treat it with due care. Feel its shape. The near-soft feel of the warm silver and the calfskin sheath that covers only half its flat rounded silver length. An object that rewards a considered touch. Feel the slippery heat? That's the oil from my fingers. My oil, Jim, from my body. Not my hand, son, feel the flask. Heft it. Get to know it. It's an object. A vessel. It's a two-pint flask full of amber liquid. Actually more like half full, it seems. So it seems. This flask has been treated with due care. It's never been dropped or jostled or crammed. It's never had an errant drop, not drop *one*, spilled out of it. I treat it as if it can feel. I give it its due, as a body. Unscrew the cap. Hold the calfskin sheath in your right hand and use your good left hand to feel the cap's shape and ease it around

on the threads. Son . . . son, you'll have to put that what is that that *Columbia Guide to Refractive Indices Second Edition* down, son. Looks heavy anyway. A tendon-strainer. Fuck up your pronator teres and surrounding tendons before you even start. You're going to have to put down the book, for once, young sir Jimbo, you never try to handle two objects at the same time without just aeons of diligent practice and care, a Brando-like dis . . . and well *no* you don't just drop the book, son, you don't just just don't *drop* the big old *Guide to Indices* on the dusty garage floor so it raises a square bloom of dust and gets our nice white athletic socks all gray before we even hit the court, boy, *jesus* I just took five minutes explaining how the key to being even a potential player is to treat the things with just exactly the . . . here lemme have this . . . that books aren't just *dropped* with a crash like bottles in the trashcan they're *placed*, guided, with senses on Full, feeling the edges, the pressure on the little floor of both hands' fingers as you bend at the knees with the book, the slight gassy shove as the air on the dusty floor . . . as the floor's air gets displaced in a soft square that raises no dust. Like soooo. Not like *so*. Got me? Got it? Well now don't be that way. Son, don't be that way, now. Don't get all oversensitive on me, son, when all I'm trying to do is help you. Son, Jim, I *hate* this when you do this. Your chin just disappears into that bow-tie when your mother's big old overhung lower lip quivers like that. You look chinless, son, and big-lipped. And that cape of mucus that's coming down on your upper lip, the way it shines, don't, just don't, it's revolting, son, you don't want to revolt people, you have got to learn to control this sort of oversensitivity to hard truths, this sort of thing, take and exert some goddamn *control* is the whole point of what I'm taking this whole entire morning off rehearsal with not one but two vitally urgent auditions looming down my neck so I can show you, planning to let you move the seat back and touch the shift and maybe even . . . maybe even drive the Montclair, God knows your feet'll reach, right Jimbo? Jim, hey, why not drive the Montclair? why not you drive us over, starting today, pull up by the courts where today you'll—here, look, see how I unscrew it? the cap? with the soft very outermost tips of my gnarled fingers which I wish they were steadier but I'm exerting control to control my anger at that chin and lip and the cape of snot and the way your eyes slant and goggle like some sort of mongoloid child's when you're threatening to cry but just the very tips of the fingers, here, the most sensitive parts, the parts bathed in warm oil, the whorled pads, I feel them

singing with nerves and blood I let them extend . . . further than the warm silver hip-flask's cap's very top down its broadening cone where to where the threads around the upraised little circular mouth lie hidden while with the other warm singing hand I gently grip the leather holster so I can feel the way the whole flask feels as I guide . . . guide the cap around on its silver threads, hear that? stop that and listen hear that? the sound of threads moving through well-machined grooves, with great care, a smooth barber-shop spiral, my whole hand right through the pads of my fingertips less . . . less unscrewing, here, than guiding, persuading, reminding the silver cap's body what it's built to do, machined to do, the silver cap knows, Jim, I know, you know, we've been through this before, leave the book *alone*, boy, it's not going anywhere, so the silver cap leaves the flask's mouth's warm grooved lips with just a snick, hear that? that faintest snick? not a rasp or a grinding sound or harsh, not a harsh brutal Brando-esque rasp of attempted domination but a snick a . . . nuance, there, ah, oh, like the once you've heard it never mistakable *ponk* of a true-hit ball, Jim, well pick it *up* then if you're afraid of a little dust, Jim, pick the book *up* if it's going to make you all goggle-eyed and chinless honestly Jesus why do I try I try and try just wanted to introduce you to the broiler's garage and let you drive, maybe, feeling the Montclair's body, taking my time to let you pull up to the courts with the Montclair's shift in a neutral glide and the eight cylinders thrumming and snicking like a healthy heart and the wheels all perfectly flush with the curb and bring out my good old trusty laundry . . . laundry basket of balls and racquets and towels and flask and my *son*, my flesh of my flesh, white slumped flesh of my flesh who wanted to embark on what I predict right now will be a tennis career that'll put his busted-up used-up old Dad back square in his little place, who wanted to maybe for once be a real boy and learn how to play and have fun and frolic and play around in the unrelieved sunshine this city's so fuck-all famous for, to enjoy it while he can because did your mother tell you we're moving this spring? that we're moving back to California finally this spring? We're moving, son, I'm harking one last attempted time to that celluloid siren's call, I'm giving it the one last total shot a man's obligation to his last waning talent deserves, Jim, we're headed for the big time again at last for the first time since she announced she was having you, Jim, hitting the road, celluloid-bound, so say adios to that school and that fluttery little moth of a physics teacher and those slumped chinless slide-rule-wielding friends of

no now wait I didn't mean it I meant I wanted to tell you *now*, ahead of time, your mother and I, to give you plenty of notice so you could *adjust* this time because oh you made it so unmisinterpretably *clear* how this last move to this trailer park upset you so, didn't you, to a mobile home with chemical toilet and bolts to hold it in place and widow-webs everyplace you look and grit settling on everything like dust out here instead of the Club's staff quarters I got us removed from or the house it was clearly my fault we couldn't afford any more. It was my fault. I mean who else's fault could it be? Am I right? That we moved your big soft body with allegedly not enough notice and that east-side school you cried over and that negro research resource librarian there with the afro out to here that . . . that lady with the upturned nose on tiptoe all the time I have to tell you she seemed so consummate east-side Tucsonian all self-consciously not of this earth's grit urging us to quote nurture your optical knack with physics with her nose upturned so you could see up in there and on her toes like something skilled overhead had sunk a hook between her big splayed fingerling's nostrils and were reeling skyward up toward the aether little by little I'll bet those heelless pumps are off the floor altogether by now son what do you say son what do you think . . . no, go on, cry, don't try to stifle yourself, I won't say a word, except it's getting to me less all the time when you do it, I'll just warn you, I think you're overworking the tears and the . . . it's getting less effec . . . effective with me each time you use it though we know we both know don't we just between you and me we know it'll always work on your mother, won't it, never fail, she'll every time take and bend your big head down to her shoulder so it looks obscene, if you could see it, pat-patting on your back like she's burping some sort of slumping oversized obscene bow-tied infant with a book straining his pronator teres, crying, will you do this when you're grown? Will there be episodes like this when you're a man at your own tiller? a citizen of a world that won't go pat-pat? Will your face crumple and bulge like this when you're six-and-a-half grotesque feet tall, six-six-plus like your grandfather may he rot in hell's rubber vacuum when he finally kicks on the tenth tee and with your flat face and no chin just like him on that poor dumb patient woman's fragile wet snotty long-suffering shoulder did I tell you what he did? Did I tell you what he did? I was your age Jim here take the flask no give it here, oh. Oh. I was thirteen, and I'd started to play well, seriously, I was twelve or thirteen and playing for years already and he'd never been to watch, he'd

never come once to where I was playing, to watch, or even changed his big flat expression even once when I brought home a trophy I won trophies or a notice in the paper TUCSON NATIVE QUALIFIES FOR NATIONAL JR CH'SHIPS he never acknowledged I even existed as I was, not as I do you, Jim, not as I take care to bend over backwards way, *way* out of my way to let you know I *see* you recognize you am aware of you as a body care about what might go on behind that big flat face bent over a homemade prism. He plays golf. Your grandfather. Your grandpappy. Golf. A golf man. Is my tone communicating the contempt? Billiards on a big table, Jim. A bodiless game of spasmodic flailing and flying sod. Someone once called it a game of womanly caution and petty griefs. A quote unquote sport. Anal rage and checkered berets. This is almost empty. This is just about it, son. What say we rain-check this. What say I put the last of this out of its amber misery and we go in and tell her you're not feeling up to snuff enough again and we're rain-checking your first introduction to the game till this weekend and we'll head over this weekend and do two straight days both days and give you a really extensive intensive intro to a by all appearances limitless future. Intensive gentleness and bodily care equals great tennis, Jim. We'll go both days and let you plunge right in and get wet all over. It's only five dollars. The court fee. For one lousy hour. Each day. Five dollars each day. Don't give it a thought. Ten total dollars for an intensive weekend when we live in a glorified trailer and have to share a garage with two DeSotos and what looks like a Model A on blocks and my Montclair can't afford the kind of oil it deserves. Don't look like that. What's money or my rehearsals for the celluloid auditions we're moving 700 miles for, auditions that may well comprise your old man's last shot at a life with any meaning at all, compared to my *son*? Right? Am I right? Come here, kid. C'mere c'mere c'mere c'mere. That's a boy. That's my J.O.I. Jr. That's my kid, in his body. He never came once, Jim. Not once. To watch. Mother never missed a competitive match, of course. Mother came to so many it ceased to mean anything that she came. She became part of the environment. Mothers are like that, as I'm sure you're aware all too well, am I right? Right? Never came once, kiddo. Never lumbered over all slumped and soft and cast his big grotesque long-even-at-midday shadow at any court I performed on. Till one day he came, once. Suddenly, once, without precedent or warning, he . . . came. Ah. Oh. I heard him coming long before he hove into view. He cast a long shadow, Jim. It was some minor

local event. It was some early-round local thing of very little consequence in the larger scheme. I was playing some local dandy, the kind with fine equipment and creased white clothing and country-club lessons that still can't truly play, even, regardless of all the support. You'll find you often have to endure this type of opponent in the first couple rounds. This gleaming hapless lox of a kid was some client of my father's son . . . son of one of his clients. So then he came for the client, to put on some sham show of fatherly concern. He wore a hat and coat and tie at 95° plus. The client. Can't recall the name. There was something canine about his face, I remember, that his kid across the net had inherited. My father wasn't even sweating. I grew up with the man in this town and never once saw him sweat, Jim. I remember he wore a boater and the sort of gregariously plaid uniform professional men had to wear on the weekends then. They sat in the indecisive shade of a scraggly palm, the sort of palm that's just crawling with black widows, in the fronds, that come down without warning, that hide lying in wait in the heat of midday. They sat on the blanket my mother always brought—my mother, who's dead, and the client. My father stood apart, sometimes in the waving shade, sometimes not, smoking a long filter. Long filters had come into fashion. He never sat on the ground. Not in the American Southwest he didn't. There was a man with a healthy respect for spiders. And *never* on the ground under a palm. He knew he was too grotesquely tall and ungainly to stand up in a hurry or roll screaming out of the way in a hurry in case of falling spiders. They've been known to be willing to drop right out of the trees they hide in, in the daytime, you know. Drop right on you if you're sitting on the ground in the shade. He was no fool, the bastard. A golfer. They all watched. I was right there on the first court. This park no longer exists, Jim. Cars are now parked on what used to be these rough green asphalt courts, shimmering in the heat. They were right there, watching, their heads going back and forth in that windshield-wiper way of people watching quality tennis. And was I nervous, young sir J.O.I.? With the one and only Himself there in all his wooden glory there, watching, half in and out of the light, expressionless? I was not. I was in my body. My body and I were one. My wood Wilson from my stack of wood Wilsons in their trapezoid presses was a sentient expression of my arm, and I felt it singing, and my hand, and they were alive, my well-armed hand was the dutiful secretary of my mind, lithe and responsive and *senza errori*, because I knew myself as a body and was fully

inside my little child's body out there, Jim, I was in my big right arm and scarless legs, safely ensconced, running here and there, my head pounding like a heart, sweat purred on every limb, running like a veldt-creature, leaping, frolicking, striking with maximum economy and minimum effort, my eyes on the ball and the corners both, I was two, three, a couple shots ahead of both me and the hapless canine client's kid, handing the dandy his pampered ass. It was carnage. It was a scene out of nature in its rawest state, Jim. You should have been there. The kid kept bending over to get his breath. The smoothly economical frolicking I was doing contrasted starkly compared to the heavily jerky way he was being forced to stomp around and lunge. His white knit shirt and name-brand shorts were soaked through so you could see the straps of his jock biting into the soft ass I was handing him. He wore a flitty little white visor such as fifty-two-year-old women at country clubs and posh Southwestern resorts wear. I was, in a word, deft, considered, prescient. I made him stomp and stagger and lunge. I wanted to humiliate him. The client's long sharp face was sagging. My father had no face, it was sharply shadowed and then illuminated in the wagging fronds' shadow he half stood in but was wreathed in smoke from the long filters he fancied, long plastic filtered holders, yellowed at the stem, in imitation of the President, as courtiers once sputtered with the King . . . veiled in shade and then lit smoke. The client didn't know enough to keep quiet. He thought he was at a ball game or something. The client's voice carried. Our first court was right near the tree they sat under. The client's legs were out in front of him and protruded from the sharp star of frond-shade. His slacks were lattice-shadowed from the pattern of the fence his son and I played just behind. He was drinking the lemonade my mother had brought for me. She made it fresh. He said I was good. My father's client did. In that emphasized way that made his voice carry. You know, son? Godfrey, Incandenza, old trout, but that lad of yours is *Good*. Unquote. I heard him say it as I ran and whacked and frolicked. And I heard the tall son of a bitch's reply, after a long pause during which the world's air hung there as if lifted and left to swing. Standing at the baseline, or walking back to the baseline, to either serve or receive, one of the two, I heard the client. His voice carried. And then later I heard my father's reply, may he rot in a green and empty hell. I heard what . . . what he said in reply, sonbo. But not until after I'd fallen. I insist on this point, Jim. Not until after I'd started to fall. Jim, I'd been in the middle of trying to run down a ball way out of mortal reach, a rare blind

lucky dribbler of a drop-shot from the overgroomed lox across the net. A point I could have more than afforded to concede. But that's not the way I . . . that's not the way a real player plays. With respect and due effort and care for every point. You want to be great, near-great, you give every ball everything. And then some. You concede nothing. Even against loxes. You play right up to your limit and then pass your limit and look back at your former limit and wave a hankie at it, embarking. You enter a trance. You feel the seams and edges of everything. The court becomes a . . . an extremely unique place to be. It will do everything for you. It will let nothing escape your body. Objects move as they're made to, at the lightest easiest touch. You slip into the clear current of back and forth, making delicate X's and L's across the harsh rough bright green asphalt surface, your sweat the same temperature as your skin, playing with such ease and total mindless effortless effort and and and entranced concentration you don't even stop to consider whether to run down every ball. You're barely aware you're doing it. Your body's doing it for you and the court and game's doing it for your body. You're barely involved. It's magic, boy. Nothing touches it, when it's right. I predict it. Facts and figures and curved glass and those elbow-straining books of yours' lightless pages are going to seem flat, by comparison. Static. Dead and white and flat. They don't begin to. . . . It's like a dance, Jim. The point is I was too bodily respectful to slip up and fall on my own, out there. And the other point is I started to fall forward even *before* I started to hear him reply, standing there: Yes, But He'll Never Be Great. What he said in no way made me fall forward. The unlovely opponent had dribbled one just barely over the too-low public-park net, a freak accident, a mis-hit drop-shot, and another man on another court in another early-round laughter would have let it dribble, conceded the affordable, not tried to wave a hankie from the vessel of his limit. Not race on all eight healthy scarless cylinders desperately forward toward the net to try to catch the goddamn thing on the first bounce. Jim, but any man can slip. I don't know what I slipped on, son. There were spiders well-known to infest the palms' fronds all along the courts' fences. They come down at night on threads, bulbous, flexing. I'm thinking it could have been a bulbous goo-filled widow I stepped and slipped on, Jim, a spider, a mad rogue spider come down on its thread into the shade, flabby and crawling, or that leapt suicidally right from an overhanging frond onto the court, probably making a slight flabby hideous sound when it landed, crawling

around on its claws, blinking grotesquely in the hot light it hated, that I stepped on rushing forward and killed and slipped on the mess the big loathsome spider made. See these scars? All knotted and ragged, like something had torn at my own body's knees the way a slouching Brando would just rip a letter open with his teeth and let the envelope fall on the floor all wet and rent and torn? All the palms along the fence were sick, they had palm rot, it was the A.D. year 1933, of the Great Bisbee Palm-Rot epidemic, all through the state, and they were losing their fronds and the fronds were blighted and the color of really old olives in those old slim jars at the very back of the refrigerator and exuded a sick sort of pus-like slippery discharge and sometimes abruptly fell from trees curving back and forth through the air like celluloid pirates' paper swords. God I hate fronds, Jim. I'm thinking it could have been either a daytime *latrodectus* or some pus from a frond. The wind blew cruddy pus from the webbed fronds onto the court, maybe, up near the net. Either way. Something poisonous or infected, at any rate, unexpected and slick. All it takes is a second, you're thinking, Jim: the body betrays you and down you go, on your knees, sliding on sandpaper court. Not so, son. I used to have another flask like this, smaller, a rather more cunning silver flask, in the glove compartment of my Montclair. Your devoted mother did something to it. The subject has never been mentioned between us. Not so. It was a *foreign* body, or a substance, not my body, and if anybody did any betraying that day I'm telling you sonny kid boy it was something I did, Jimmer, I may well have betrayed that fine young lithe tan unslumped body, I may very well have gotten rigid, overconscious, careless of it, listening for what my father, who I respected, I *respected* that man, Jim, is what's sick, I knew he was there, I was conscious of his flat face and filter's long shadow, I knew him, Jim. Things were different when I was growing up, Jim. I hate . . . *jesus* I hate saying something like this, this things-were-different-when-I-was-a-lad-lad-type cliché shit, the sort of cliché fathers back then spouted, assuming he said anything at all. But it was. Different. Our kids, my generation's kids, they . . . now you, this post-Brando crowd, you new kids can't like us or dislike us or respect us or not as human beings, Jim. Your parents. No, wait, you don't have to pretend you disagree, don't, you don't have to say it, Jim. Because I know it. I could have predicted it, watching Brando and Dean and the rest, and I know it, so don't jabber. I blame no one your age, boyo. You see parents as kind or unkind or happy

or miserable or drunk or sober or great or near-great or failed the way you see a table square or a Montclair lip-red. Kids today . . . you kids today somehow don't know how to *feel*, much less love, to say nothing of respect. We're just bodies to you. We're just bodies and shoulders and scarred knees and big bellies and flasks and empty wallets to you. I'm not saying something cliché like you take us for granted so much as I'm saying you cannot imagine our absence. We're so present it's ceased to mean. We're environmental. Furniture of the world. Jim, I could imagine that man's absence. Jim, I'm telling you you cannot imagine my absence. It's my fault, Jim, home so much, limping around, ruined knees, drunk, fat, burping, sweat-soaked in that broiler of a trailer, burping, farting, frustrated, miserable, overshooting my reach, knocking lamps over. Afraid to give my last talent the one last shot it demanded. Talent is its own expectation, Jim: you either live up to it or it waves a hankie, receding forever. Use it or lose it, he'd say over the newspaper. I'm . . . I'm just afraid of having a tombstone that says **HERE LIES A POTENTIALLY PROMISING OLD MAN**. God I'm . . . I'm so sorry. Jim. You don't deserve to see me like this. I'm so scared, Jim. I'm so scared of dying without ever being really *seen*. Can you understand? Are you enough of a big thin prematurely stooped young bespectacled man, even with your whole life still ahead of you, to understand? Can you see I was giving it all I had? That I was *in* there, listening, webbed with nerves? A self that touches all edges, I remember she said. I felt it in a way I fear you and your generation never could, son. It was less like falling than being shut out of something, is the way I recall it. It did not did *not* happen in slow motion. One minute I was at a dead and beautiful forward run for the ball, the next minute there were hands at my back and nothing underfoot like a push down a stairway. A rude whiplashing shove square in the back and my promising body with all its webs of nerves pulsing and firing was in full airborne flight and came down on my knees this flask is empty right down on my knees with all my weight and inertia on that scabrous hot sandpaper surface forced into what was an exact parody of an imitation of contemplative prayer, sliding forward. The flesh and then tissue and bone left twin tracks of brown red gray white like tire tracks of bodily gore extending from the service line to the net. I slid on my flaming knees, rushed past the dribbling ball and toward the net that ended my side. Our side. My racquet had gone pinwheeling off Jim and my racquetless arms out before me sliding Jim in

the attitude of a mortified monk in total prayer. It was given me to hear my father pronounce my bodily existence as not even potentially great at the moment I ruined my knees forever, Jim, so that even years later at USC I never got to wave my hankie at anything beyond the near- and almost-great and would-have-been-great-*if*, and later could never even hope to audition for those swim-trunk and Brylcreem beach movies that snake Avalon is making his mint on. I do not insist that the judgment and punishing fall are . . . were connected, Jim. Any man can slip out there. All it takes is a second of misplaced respect. Son, it was more than a father's voice, carrying. My mother cried out. It was a religious moment. I learned what it means to be a body, Jim, just meat wrapped in a sort of flimsy panty-ho, son, as I fell kneeling and slid toward the stretched net, myself seen by me, frame by frame, torn open. I may have to burp, belch, son, son, telling you what I learned, son, my . . . my love, too late, as I left my knees' meat behind me, slid, ended in a posture of supplication on my knees' disclosed bones with my fingers racquetless hooked through the mesh of the net, across which, the net, the sopped dandy had dropped his pricey gut-strung Davis racquet and was running toward me with his visor askew and his hands to his cheeks. My father and the client he was there to perform for dragged me upright to the palm's infected shade where she knelt on the plaid beach blanket with her knuckle between her teeth, Jim, and I felt the religion of the physical that day, at not much more than your age, Jim, shoes filling with blood, held under the arms by two bodies big as yours and dragged off a public court with two extra lines. It's a pivotal, it's a seminal, religious day when you get to both hear and feel your destiny at the same moment, Jim. I got to notice what I'm sure you've noticed long ago I know, I know you've seen me brought home on occasions, dragged in the door, under what's called the influence, son, helped in by cabbies at night, I've seen your long shadow grotesquely backlit at the top of the house's stairs I helped pay for, boy: how the drunk and the maimed both are dragged forward out of the arena like a boneless Christ, one man under each arm, feet dragging, eyes on the aether.