

## Domestic Depravities · Tom Grimes

MY FATHER HAD JUST ARRIVED home from work. As usual, he was wearing a shabby raincoat, a fedora, and a suit so tacky it would be resold twenty years later on St. Marks Place as camp. He would not have appreciated the condescension my generation adopted toward his values. His generation harbored a respect for and a belief in social conventions and, although that belief may have been—in many instances—arbitrary, it nonetheless constituted a responsibility. Twenty years later, though, my father would claim that he did not understand that he was confirming his belief in anything, or accepting any degree of responsibility for his actions when he married my mother. His explanation: he was drunk at the time.

He carried the afternoon edition of the *Journal American* under his arm. The sports pages were tracking the final at-bats of Roger Maris' assault on Babe Ruth's single-season home run record. I picked up the paper after he had laid it down and began memorizing the box score from the previous day's game. At that time, the thought of surpassing Ruth's record loomed majestically in every schoolboy's imagination, a herculean feat compared to the works of our fathers.

I had stopped saying hello to my father when he arrived because he always mechanically answered, "Hello, hello," as if I was part of his working day, some figure in a token booth.

"Where's your mother?" he asked.

"In the kitchen," I said, scanning the stats.

He walked by Rudy, my brother, who was lying on the floor, coloring. He kicked the sole of Rudy's shoe. "Don't you say hello?"

Rudy looked up at him over his shoulder, but said nothing. This was not unusual. Rudy never spoke to anyone. He spent all his time coloring, drawing pictures of monsters shackled by chains, or locked in cages. Rudy, I suspected, was a disturbed child.

My father walked into the kitchen.

My mother was reading a paperback novel at the table while the oven reduced her chicken to ashes. Her book: *A Starlet High and Low*, a roman à clef about Desiree, naive and untalented dreamer, who is duped, deflowered, and ditched by Derek Satyriasis, director of over six hundred Hollywood movies—"Homicidal Housewives," "Oral Exam," "Return

of the Death Car,” and other low budget productions.

My mother had read all sixty-three of Leland Cartwright’s novels, all alike in length, character types, sex scenes, and abundance of clichés. “These are the hard times,” she must have thought to herself. “Someday I’ll be rich and famous.” She was a dreamer who condescended to her peers because she believed that our working class status was merely temporary. She had higher aspirations, her father having been a successful coat manufacturer, an unlucky and unwise investor, and now a poor old man. She believed, apparently, that she would reclaim her lost status and respectability by pushing my father up the ladder of corporate success. News of this came as a surprise to my father, who was a clerk (though my mother insisted that he was a junior executive) with a less promising future than Bob Cratchit’s. He didn’t understand, he would claim twenty years later, that he was accepting the responsibility for becoming successful when he married my mother. Perhaps this was a half truth. Perhaps what he meant was that he didn’t understand that he could be made to feel guilty if he didn’t. In any case, he constructed a case for his defense: he incessantly drank himself beyond responsibility.

“What are we eating?” he asked. My mother put her book down.

“Chicken,” she said, though she should have qualified her description and said essence of chicken, which was all that was left.

“Is it almost ready? I have to go out tonight.”

“Where?” My mother greeted the news with surprise because my father had been dry for six weeks and had stayed at home every night.

“We have the wedding to go to this weekend.”

“So what?”

“I don’t want anything to go wrong.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothing. It means that we have things to prepare.”

“So?”

“Where are you going?”

“Lombardi’s wife died. I’m going to the wake. You got any more fucking questions, or is the interrogation over?”

“I’m not interrogating you. And don’t use that language when the children can hear. When did his wife die?”

“Yesterday.”

“Why didn’t you say something then?”

“Because I didn’t know till today, goddammit!”

“All right, all right.”

They paused to loathe each other silently.

“I’ll send a mass card,” my mother said.

My father was removing his tie. “Don’t do nothing. I’ll pay my respects, and that’ll be the end of it. I’m going to change my clothes.”

“But we should at least . . . ”

“Don’t do nothing!”

When he returned to the kitchen he was wearing a dark blue suit that he had bought at Brooks Brothers. It took him nearly a year to pay off the installments on it, but it was something he had to have. He told my mother to mind her own business the day he brought it home and she asked how much it cost. He never wore it to work, and he always wore it with a hand-tailored white cotton shirt he’d had made in England before my parents married. Through the stays of the collar, he wore a solid gold tie-bar.

I could say he looked good in blue, but trying to render the components of his appearance—auburn hair, blue eyes, classic nose—I find much more than an aggregate of parts. There was something wild and angry about him.

He was taciturn through most of dinner. He rose from the table once and walked across the kitchen to the refrigerator. The layer of fat that drinking had given him seemed to have dissolved; his torso was sinewy and muscular beneath his shirt.

“How are you getting there?” my mother asked.

“I have the company car.”

“You’re sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“Positive.”

She paused. She let the conversation drop to emphasize the incidental thrust of her next remark. “I had thought of going to the movies tonight. *A Place in the Sun* with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor is playing.”

“So go.”

“I don’t want to go by myself. It’s just that I’d thought it would be nice.”

“Do what you want,” he said.

Rudy had his sketch pad and pencils on the dinner table. He ate less than

a Third World orphan. He had put down his fork and picked up his pencils and was drawing another of his monster portraits. The monster had ripped out of his chains, and Rudy had written the word "Roar!" in a speech balloon above its head.

I eyed Rudy's untouched dinner. "Mom," I said.

She was talking to my father about when he would be home, reminding him that he had to wear his suit to the wedding that weekend. She was oblivious to me.

"Mom," I said, and waited. "MOM!"

"WHAT?"

"Rudy's not eating his dinner. Can I finish it for him?"

"No. He's got to learn to eat. Rudy," she said, "start eating your dinner."

Rudy kept drawing, tilting his head a bit further downward.

"Rudy, pick up your fork and start eating," my mother said, measuring her words deliberately.

Rudy was unyielding.

"He's not going to eat it, Mom."

"Rudy, eat your dinner. Do you hear me? Eat your dinner!"

My father, who had been eating his dinner silently, sprang up, reached over and grabbed Rudy's dinner plate from under him. He flung it across the table, aimed at the spot my dinner plate occupied. It skidded over my plate and off my forearm to the floor.

"He wants to starve to death, let him. He'll die of starvation and the other one of obesity," he said.

He left the kitchen. We heard him open the closet door. He put on his overcoat. Then we heard him walk through the living room, slam the door, and trip the lock. Then silence.

My mother looked like she was holding back the urge to cry. Rudy and I stayed at the table, sensing instinctively that our doing so glossed over the brutishness of what had happened. Finally, she rose and began cleaning up the rug where Rudy's dinner had landed.

"Call your grandmother," she told me. "Ask her to come over and watch Rudy so we can go to the movies."

My grandmother arrived when my mother was upstairs in her bedroom. She came downstairs with a sealed and addressed envelope in her hand. She told her mother what pajamas Rudy was to wear and what time he was to be in bed, then we left.

We walked along the quiet, dark streets and stopped at a mailbox. She dropped the envelope into the slot.

“It’s a good thing for your father that I take care of formalities. He would never send a mass card. People notice these things, especially in business. Remember that.”

It is permanently engraved upon my psyche.

In her plans for success, my mother did not overlook my potential. My grades were good and an unwitting teacher was naive enough to tell her my I.Q. Most mothers would have taken in stride the fact that they had a bright child. I was not a rarity. But to my mother it was a sign from God that I was destined to become a figure in the history of Western culture whose achievements would dwarf the combined efforts of Einstein, F.D.R., and Jonas Salk. I became the object of her displaced frustration with my father’s failures. But her efforts to nurture my dependence on her led us into a leapfrogging progression of demands upon each other which drove us apart, each an inferior substitute for the other’s ideal.

We walked along Jamaica Avenue, a commercial street which was now quiet, the traffic and shoppers gone home. At night this was the part of town where chaos bred violence, destruction became order.

The street was wet from an evening shower. My mother continued talking, dreaming her way onto Fifth Avenue, while I listened to the rabid undertones of pain that echoed along the street. It was now roamed only by kids from the neighborhood who had metamorphosed from the meek to the malicious within a year of graduating from Catholic grammar school and who, contrary to the opinion expressed in the New Testament, had managed to inherit at least this portion of the earth. With my mother I was fairly safe from them. Their rage was in its embryonic stage and kept mainly to itself, not yet directed back upon their parents and society. Sipping beer in the recesses of shop doorways, their faces lit violet by the neon signs, they quietly watched us pass by.

The only ones who seemed oblivious to the convulsion of general despair were the local crazies: Jimmy Lyons, the forty-two year old failed stockroom clerk, who wore a New York Yankees uniform and played with the grammar school kids in the park; Derby, Bowie knife taped to his polished G.I. boots, who played all his records at 78 so they’d sound like mice and whose lexicon was limited to television’s seven forbidden words. One spring morning, he had gone into the Lucky Seven donut

shop and ordered a sinker; when the waitress, who had turned and plucked a sugar-coated donut from a tray, asked him if he would like it in a bag, Derby, fly open, member enlarged to a size that could have gotten him charged with carrying a concealed weapon, said, "Put it here, Toots." Then there was Stewie, who appeared on the corner of Main Street every morning with a battered briefcase in one hand and put his thumb out, hitching a ride in the direction the traffic was going, then, when the light changed, crossed the street and hitched in the other.

As we rounded a bend in the street, the fatuous ring of my mother's rambling jarred me back into our situation. "All I want for you is to be happy," she said. "If you're going to be happier being a dentist rather than a doctor, I won't be the one to stop you." Later, ensconced in the theater's balcony, nuzzling my third barrel of buttered popcorn, I studied the scene of Montgomery Clift drowning the harpy played by Shelley Winters as if it were a blueprint of my destiny, my mother magically transformed into the image of the screen harridan. I began combing my memory for locations of secluded lakes in our area.

When we arrived it was past ten o'clock. My father wasn't home. My grandmother was stitching another of her needlepoint images. Needlepoint was her hobby. Knitting sweaters for Rudy and me was her vocation. Every room in the house was adorned with no less than two of her cloying representations of children with dogs, dogs with hunters, scenes of Rockwellian innocence which depicted a world where children were "naughty," and "Father," after sipping a glass of holiday wine, was "tipsy," a world forever in quotation marks.

I grabbed several chocolate covered donuts as tasteless as styrofoam, and a glass of milk. Then I slipped through the downstairs rooms undetected. I said goodnight to my mother and grandmother, and went upstairs to the bedroom I shared with Rudy.

When I awoke, I discovered that my mother had been up all night, and that my father had not yet come home. She was in the kitchen crying.

Although I knew the answer, I asked her. "Where's Dad?"

"He hasn't come home yet."

She sat with her elbows on the table, her hands clasped and pressed to her lips. I hated her then for her self-pity: her grief and suffering were her own inspirations. "He'll be home soon," I said, and regretted it immediately. My mother opened her arms and called to me with her fingers. She

hugged me, and I could feel her crying on my shoulder silently.

I was not moved by her sorrow. I had always doubted that my mother loved my father, and suspected their marriage was founded on an amalgam of superfluous circumstances that neither spouse recognized as its motivation. They believed, instead, that it was love. For a time. Right now my mother's sorrow was primarily motivated by the fact that her plans for presenting our family respectably at the wedding were in jeopardy.

She had every reason to be worried. The suit, the borrowed car, this too familiar familial scene had all the earmarks of one of my father's tears. I hoped he would come home safely, as I always did. His desperation touched me: his actions, unlike my mother's, seemed to be based on ethical considerations, rather than ostentation. He liberated himself through the possibility of failure, and then somehow misconstrued this freedom as the sanction to fail at every possible moment.

I suspected that my mother would call my grandparents shortly, then the National Guard. I capitalized on the situation and milked my father's escapades for a day of truancy, convincing my mother that I should stay at home with her. She needed little convincing and, knowing that her antidote for the disruption of domestic tranquility was consumerism—as my grandmother's was preparing a big meal—I hinted, as I milled about the kitchen, that there were several desirable toys on the market, if she happened to be in a store in the near future. My holiday secured, I made myself a gargantuan breakfast. Then I read in the morning paper that Roger Maris had tied Ruth's record, and could break it that afternoon. I was glad for the sign of the world's obliviousness to our home's particular lack of order.

My mother telephoned my grandparents, who lived around the corner, and they came over posthaste. Calling upon them in troubled times was an act of sheer idiocy. My grandmother had a unique manner of succor—censure—her personal shamanistic ritual to drive away the demons of depression and despair. Somehow, she believed that her diatribes against my father's actions and the marriage itself consoled my distressed mother. She would berate my mother for my father's failures, and always summarized her denunciations by expressing her befuddlement over my mother's choice of spouse. My grandfather was less critical, if less lucid because he was running on sixty volts. He had suffered several strokes after age fifty-five, and he was animated, sometimes strangely, by electronic devices

which had been surgically inserted in his chest. The one time I thought to ask him, after he exhibited some rather odd behavior, what was wrong, he answered, "Reality."

My grandmother telephoned the police. I turned the television on to amuse myself while I feasted on a second breakfast. Daffy Duck drove Elmer Fudd out of his provincial mind. Then cartoons gave way to quiz shows and games of chance, and we watched couples win dining sets, vacations, and domestic tranquility for life as we waited for word from the authorities.

The telephone rang. It was my father's boss wanting to know what had happened to the car and my father. My grandmother said that she assumed he had left for work late and would be there soon, but that she was only minding the children and didn't know. She avoided answering any more of his questions, and hung up.

The police came to our door at noon. They had located my father. He was unconscious at the wheel of the company car which he had parked on a city sidewalk, relocating a lamp post in the process. He had been taken to the Sacred Heart hospital where doctors were stitching his septum together: it was separated when he cracked the steering wheel with his nose. The policemen asked us to come with them to verify that the car was the one my father had had in his possession the night before, and then have my father released from the hospital.

I accompanied my mother and grandmother. Rudy and my grandfather remained at home, neither quite sure of who was minding whom.

At the scene of the accident there were two other policemen, two tow truck operators whose jargon consisted solely of exploiting the use of a four-letter word as noun, adjective, and verb, and loitering passers-by speculating on the events preceding the scene of destruction.

The policemen talked to my mother while I surveyed the wreckage. I peered inside the car window and saw that the steering wheel was cracked and dappled with stains of dried blood. The floor was littered with empty beer bottles, a Jack Daniels bottle, a pair of women's pumps, my mother's dreams, my father's necktie. The actual effects of the situation were not immediately known, but I had a vague premonition that this probably put a damper on Mater's plans for a house with a white picket fence and an apple tree in the yard.

The policemen had finished filling out their reports and drove us to the

hospital. When we arrived, we were informed that my father had assaulted two policemen who were going to book him for drunken driving, resisting arrest, and being generally abusive. He had fled the emergency room, stopping at the registration desk to fling stacks of baskets filled with forms into the air.

I looked around the emergency room. The scuffle had occurred only minutes before we arrived and they were still picking up the forms and righting chairs.

Mother spoke with the doctor who had treated my father. My father had broken his nose and cracked his skull, he said, or had it cracked by someone. It was a hairline fracture that would heal quickly. He was physically fine, he said, but so drunk that he could be stitched without sedation.

“Oh, he was fun-ny!” an orderly interjected. “With the bandage he looked like the Invisible Man. One of the cops says to him, ‘Let’s go, buddy.’ And he says, ‘Fat chance, copper,’ like he was James Cagney. Then they started fighting and rolling around the room until the bandaged guy took off.”

My grandmother, mother, and I rode home in the back of the squad car, sharing our collective anxiety in silence. Occasionally, messages issuing from the radio would cleave the stillness. When we got out of the squad car I noticed a single slat of each set of venetian blinds in the windows of the neighboring houses. As we entered our house to wait for word of my father, the slats were lowered into alignment, the simultaneity of execution signalling a collective rebuke.”

Inside, Rudy and my grandfather were carrying on with the lucid and mechanized detachment of schizophrenics. My grandfather was pacing around the room recounting—possibly to Rudy, though he seemed to be addressing another in his coterie of invisible friends—his adventures in the garment business. Rudy was lying on the floor, not quite entranced by our grandfather’s tales of entrepreneurial intrigue. He was drawing stick figures who were running in, yet seemingly unable to escape from, the confines of rhombuses and trapezoids, their pursuers anonymous, their terror mute. I saw for the first time that Rudy viewed existence as a terror-ridden term of imprisonment. His vision, juxtaposed with my grandfather’s incarceration in senility, suddenly revealed to me, in a way I could feel but not understand, the paradoxical dread and absurdity of ex-

istence. I was filled with compassion for Rudy. Yet, the more I wanted just to touch him, the more I knew that I feared to, and I retreated into myself when Rudy raised his eyes and looked up at me.

My mother sat in the armchair in the corner of the living room, holding a handkerchief in her hand.

“If he shows up he’s gonna have the police on him,” my grandmother said, speaking loudly to be heard above my grandfather’s complaining about the production schedule of one of his overcoat lines. “Call me back!” he yelled, and slammed down the receiver of the invisible telephone he had been using. He looked thoroughly disgusted with life as a manufacturer.

“Who says he’s coming home,” my mother said.

“Where else do you think he’s gonna go when he’s tired and hungry? With some tootsie? She’ll throw him out on his ear.”

The winter sun had set. With nothing to be done, I went upstairs to my bedroom and rode out the rest of the day in a stupor, eating and watching television. Detached, I knew without thinking, was what I wanted to be.

The phone rang several hours later as we were eating the dinner my grandmother had prepared. Where was the car, my father’s boss wanted to know. The police would be called if he didn’t get an answer. My mother told him that there had been an accident. My father had been taken to the hospital, and the police were taking care of the car. The tone of the man at the other end of the phone changed, I could tell, by the information given about my father’s injury. He would call the police himself and see what there was to be done. He would telephone in the morning to see about my father, believing his employee was acting responsibly with the company car, hence his “accidents do happen . . . as long as no one was seriously hurt” attitude.

They hung up.

My mother rose from the table and excused herself. She wanted to lie down and rest her eyes, she said.

I finished Rudy’s untouched dinner, which my grandmother had tried to coax him into eating by asking him, in a shrill, sing-song voice, to pretend he was an inanimate object, such as an airplane hangar or a tunnel, and that what he was about to ingest was a plane, or a freight train. I believe that Rudy, perhaps for the first time, saw in our grandmother’s behavior one of the ludicrous guises existence could assume, and had I not

been conditioned to expect his passivity, I may have been certain that he smiled.

Later, the phone rang again. Would I put my father on, a man asked. He was not at home, I said, and hung up, believing, at the age of twelve, that the situation had been handled properly and completely. The idea of taking a message was too vague an abstraction at the time, or perhaps it was merely my bad manners and laziness.

The phone rang again.

“Don’t hang up! I want to talk to your father.”

“He’s not home.”

“Don’t hang up! Where is he?”

“He was in an accident.”

He paused. “When?”

“Today.”

“Mm. Is your mother there?”

“She’s lying down.”

“Don’t hang up! Can you get her please?”

I did, and went to listen in on the other phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Lil. This is Tony Lombardi.”

“Tony,” she said, surprised.

“Your boy tells me that John’s been in an accident.”

“This morning. We had to take him to the hospital.”

“Is he alright?”

“We hope so.”

“Mm. Lil, I have to ask you something straight out. Is your husband out of his mind? Is this his idea of a sick joke?”

“What are you talking about?”

“This mass card for my wife. Does he really think this is funny?”

“What do you mean? I sent that myself.”

“What!”

“I mailed it myself last night. John said he was going to the wake by himself. That’s when he was in the accident.”

“You said this morning he was in an accident.”

“I meant last night . . . early this morning.”

“Never mind that. My wife is sitting right here at the kitchen table. There was no wake. Do you know what it’s like to receive something like

this? To see my wife's name on a card offering prayers for the deceased. This is a disgrace, a sacrilege!"

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"It's a sacrilege!"

"I didn't know." She began to cry.

"Your husband has some imagination. You mean to tell me that he has to dream up stories this morbid to get out of the house?"

"I didn't know when I sent the card. Please forgive me. I didn't know."

Tony Lombardi exhaled exasperation through his nostrils at the other end of the line. "Lil, I'm more sorry for you than I am for my wife and myself. I want to forget this. It gets no further than right here between us. All right? All right?"

My mother tried to control her crying, and sniffled before she said, "All right."

Tony hung up.

My grandmother and I went to join my mother, who sat on the daybed crying, holding the telephone receiver in her lap, my grandmother stood over her, arms folded. She said nothing, but my mother felt the tacit reproof and tried to control her crying, possibly to retain some dignity. The room reverberated with silence as my mother stifled her sobs.

We watched television and waited. When the prime time shows ended and the late news came on, my grandmother switched the set off, and carried Rudy, who had fallen asleep on the couch, to bed. She made a bed of the couch for herself when she returned, and sent me upstairs, where I found Rudy and my grandfather asleep in Rudy's bed, hugging each other.

In the middle of the night I felt the sound of shattering glass and got up to see what it was. I heard my father's voice at the rear of the house below. He was screaming to be let in. It was followed by the sound of a door lock being snapped, as the pounding ceased.

My grandmother was speaking on the telephone in the living room, saying hurry. I went towards the kitchen, towards the sounds of my father's bestial snarling and the cowed entreaties of my mother. My sense of purpose was akin to that of a war correspondent. I approached the spectacle in the role of observer and expected my neutrality to be respected.

By the time my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the kitchen, my father had my mother pinned in the corner between the sink and the stove. My

mother was bleeding from her mouth, and her face was bruised and cut. This, I realized, was a reprimand for not immediately opening the door. Reason, of course, had flown my mother's mental coop. It was obvious in the one remark she made to me—Help.

My father turned towards me to see who she was petitioning for assistance. His suit, what remained of it, was in tatters. His entire head was wrapped in bandages; the two apertures through which he could see and be seen remained the only humanizing aspect of him. I'm looking at "The Thing" and my mother says, Help.

Just as my father was about to do his Bruno Sanmartino impression on me my grandmother stepped between us. She had one of her knitting needles in her hand and, for once in my opinion, it assumed a sensible purpose.

"Don't you dare touch him," she said.

Now we were getting somewhere, I thought.

I was struck by the lyrical quality of her glasses flying across the kitchen into darkness — as well as amazed by how well she took a punch — and was about to be struck by a more tactile sensation in the form of my father's fist when two blue-suited men came in through the rear door and wrestled my father into submission.

They pinned him prone on the floor, and cuffed him at the wrists behind his back. He struggled, and one of the cops kned him in the kidneys, while the other pressed his face to the floor.

"Don't move," one or the other of them said.

My father bucked and they applied more pressure to hold him down. Finally, his body arched under the pain of his arms being twisted, and then went limp. Something was restored. It was apparently order. But if that is what it was, then it was arbitrary. What was restored, I thought, was between my parents, a mutual recognition of their true identities which lay beneath the masks of appearance.

One of the policemen turned on the light. I saw my mother cowering in the corner and my grandmother lying unconscious on the floor. I was too afraid to cry. I just watched the police check my grandmother's condition by opening one of her eyelids, and then instruct my mother to lie still and not worry. One of them called for an ambulance, and while he was waiting for the clerk at the other end of the wire to process the information, he rubbed my head and said, "Why don't you go sit inside."

I did, assuming he should know what was best.

As I sat with my arms on the rests of the chair and my legs dangling above the floor, I felt small and helpless.

Rudy and my grandfather, I realized, had slept through the whole incident, and now that the first squad car had left with my father, and the ambulance was taking my mother and grandmother away, I told the second set of officers that my brother and grandfather were asleep upstairs. I went to wake them. "Come on," I said, "the police are here."

A neighbor from down the street offered to watch Rudy, my grandfather, and me. The last of the policemen left, and I realized that the sun had been up for a while.

I sat in the living room in the early afternoon, reflecting on the night before. The television was on and through the echo in my mind of the words my father said to my mother as the police took him away came the news of Roger Maris' sixty-first home run. "I did it," my father said, "it's done." I would not argue with the temporal logic of that remark, but I did hear in it the will of the world making itself, a freedom that contained violence and destruction as a viable means. "I did it." Once the expediency of the means was understood, the randomness of the world's events became quite lucid, simple. It was the illusion of order that became untenable.

My father was put into my mother's custody, since she could press charges, and she had him locked up in an asylum in Eastport. She visited him every day by herself. My grandmother, who had been bed-ridden for a week, refused to go, or to let my mother take Rudy or me. My grandfather asked why he was spending so much time at our house when he had a business to run.

Rudy had grown more silent.

My mother and father had never gotten along better.

She wouldn't release him yet; from what she said, he was in no hurry. "It's one place or the other," she said he'd told her, "it don't make much difference to me."

After my begging for weeks to be allowed to visit him, my mother finally took me along. But when we got there we were told that I could not see him within the confines of the asylum, because I was too young. I pitied my father, his chances for passing as sane evidently a longshot in the

views of the institutional thinking that considered psychopathic behavior a communicable disease.

I waited in the reception area until my mother's visit with him was over. She took me outside and around the building's grounds to the rear of the place. My father would come to a window, she said. "Here, he bought you a present."

In the brown paper bag she handed me was a flashlight. I was too overwhelmed with despair over the confinement my father was enduring, realizing that he was living in an environment where all he could purchase as a gift was an instrument to be used in nocturnal emergencies, to analyze the possible symbolism of the present.

My mother and I walked across the parking lot and stopped at the edge of an expanse of dead grass that sloped down from the lot to the building. We looked at the tall windows behind the iron bars on the bottom floor of the building. We waited, then my mother said, "There's your father."

He was smoking a cigarette, and was wearing one of his sport shirts and a pair of slacks, the ones he always wore at home.

"Wave to him," my mother said, and I did.

I lost all hope when my father waved back.