

SEVEN BLACKBERRIES

I WOULD LIKE to put everything on hold, for I fear running out of string—it is being hacked away in snippets, some too small to remember, surely, but it worries me nonetheless. Snip goes five minutes here, five minutes there. Time does not, as some say, serve us; we are slaves to *it*. It nibbles us away in stealth, thinking we won't notice. But I notice. I worry. I fear. I say to myself, Stop! but time has slid through the word while I say it—even before I began to say it—while I was just thinking of saying it. Most of the time we all idle away five minutes now and then, here and there, and don't even realize that those moments are forever gone. If we could recall those little five-minute chunks of time and recycle them, we'd be rich. I can recall many lost moments—not necessarily idle ones—the kind which seem to have lives of their own. I can call them up now and then for re-examination, but not for reuse. Some are pleasant to recall, some not. Although I do not enjoy the process, it is necessary to get inside oneself to remember. Heaven knows I can't get inside anyone else, which is sufficient excuse for using the confessional first person, and if any object, may their pumpkin pies become cowflops.

What I fear, of course, is that eventually I will indeed run out of string, with this incessant snipping and all, and knowing that we all must, sooner or later, is no comfort. I fear that, and he who says he doesn't, lies. I try to think of it all in everyday terms, such as being fired from a job—depressing, but in the long run probably for the best. It's that long run which worries me; I would like to know more about that. I try not to think of these things, but they rise in my thoughts often and without bidding. Audie ran out of string, and so will I, one day, and it depresses me and makes me look like death on a soda cracker. I am not what you'd call a happy person much of the time.

Once, long ago, I was in a small bank in a very small town when it was robbed by men with guns. One of the guns was pointed at me, and looking down its barrel was like looking at the end of a culvert. All the time this holdup was going on, I commanded time to pass swiftly so it would be over, knowing full well that time does not take orders and that no one, in any way, can mess around with it to any satisfactory extent. One can *beguile* time, but its content and flow are not at all disturbed. I remember thinking, God! I'll be glad when this is over. And I remember trying to beguile time

by thinking that only a few miles from where I was in mortal peril was the place where Dvořák wrote his *American Quartet* and sketched out the *Ninth Symphony*. There were Indians around this place then; now thieves with guns. But most of the time I was thinking, Dear God, please bring me through this next few minutes so it will be only a memory and not going on right now.

As you see, I lived through it. The whole experience didn't actually take five minutes, although it seemed to have drained away half of my life expectancy and to be lasting forever, going on and on. I knew it was over when the young woman who had her feet in my face as we lay on the floor gave a long quavering sigh and said, Well, that was quite a thrill, wasn't it?

I was very brave then, when it was over. The shaking began later. I didn't call Audie in that distant city where we lived, because our first daughter was about to be born and I didn't want to worry her. She read about it in the paper the next morning and called me early at the hotel and she was mildly hysterical about it. You might have been killed! she said. But I wasn't, I said. Don't worry—it was nothing. It will be a good story to tell our kids, I said. But I was sweating and shaking as I said it, even though it had happened more than twelve hours before, that few moments of undiluted fear. It took only those few moments to be held at gunpoint and survive. There was little comfort in that, and even less in the realization that it would have taken even less time to shoot us all. That bit of string I remember.

Another time, longer ago than the bank robbery, I was in a car with a girl in Sunset Park in our home town. It was the girl's car, and we had known each other all our lives, but not as well as we were about to. She was not the woman I truly loved, and I was cheating a little because that woman was in a town at some distance, but this one was right here, and anyway, the one I truly loved didn't know that we would be married at last—nor did I, although I hoped so, even while all this with the girl in the car in the park was going on.

Our clothing was in joyful disarray, and we were getting better acquainted with each passing moment and in some detail, too. She was breathing noisily and so was I, and she kept saying, Oh God! over and over and so did I. Then, in less time than you can imagine, even taking into account its constancy of flow, there was the town marshal shining his flashlight on us, saying, See here now, we don't allow this sort of thing, and you'd better get yourselves together and get out of here or I'll run you in

and call your parents! He called me by name, I being the one most guilty, I guess, and I knew he was not just blowing hot.

That was all over in a very brief time, too, and I hated that marshal and his intrusion, for there was an overpowering need between us. But I have also learned to be grateful, in a small way, because I did not wholly cheat on the woman I truly loved and later married—the one who called me in that little town after the bank robbery. I was glad for that. I was within a few moments of cheating, and perfectly willing to do so, but I was saved—not by choice, to be sure, but by inadvertence—as later I was spared in the holdup. Some would mention a kindly Providence; I think it only chance, but I learned then that a negative experience is often as salutary as a positive one.

Of course, the girl in the car in the park was intent on cheating, too, and I think it would have been worse in her case, for she was soon to be married. But there she was, within moments of a really monstrous job of cheating—in another minute or two we would have done it, and we would have been either glad or sorry or a little of each. There was no thought of compromise there, before the marshal stopped us. I often wonder if she thinks of those few moments, as I sometimes do.

It is possible that the woman I truly loved cheated on me, too, or wanted to, or was about to, when she was in that distant city and I was in our home town. I don't know. I always wanted to ask, but didn't. And I wanted to tell her about the night in Sunset Park, too, but didn't. We might have wounded each other deeply.

The idiot—now dead, I presume, and good riddance—who first said that time heals all wounds, made the mistake of sounding off without full consideration of the possibilities, and a lot of people have been saying it ever since and it chaps my ass. Some things never heal—there are at least four, and love is one of them. Sweet agony that it is, it leaves scars, at the very least: the girl in the car in the park; the woman I truly loved—both left wounds that do not completely heal. The one is deeper than the other, of course, and was opened forever, never to heal, when her string ran out.

While the wounds, large or small, bleed, one can beguile both time and the wounds by deliberately putting oneself in a position in which the chances of being wounded again are excellent: we are such fools, after all. Be warned that falling in love again, even if not quite in the same way or with as great intensity, is perilous in the extreme.

Yesterday Vicki Versa, my backward friend, brought me the gift of seven blackberries in a small Dixie cup with daffodils on it. I regard her highly as to both intelligence and charm, but each of her gifts carries with it some kind of warning or wonderment, an implied unanswered question. The blackberries: does she love me only seven blackberries' worth? Another time she brought plastic flowers. How does one deal with a gift of plastic flowers? I remember thinking to myself, Well, I guess that puts me where I belong—in the ranks of world-class dinks. Another time she brought zinnias. They were wilted, but she gave them—*bestowed* them—solemnly, as one might a gift of rare magnificence. Was she telling me that I, too, am drooping, my days numbered? Was she saying, in her oblique way, These wilted flowers, and you, are nigh unto death? Is she being playful, wry, cruel? I never know. On my last birthday she brought me a cactus. I wish I knew an old gypsy woman who reads cacti. If she is telling me to hold my ground, to know and observe my insignificant place in her life, to come no closer, why doesn't she simply say so? It would make another wound, but I *live* with wounds—we all do.

Perhaps she is giving me, in these strange gifts, forlorn parts of her own hopelessness. If that is the case, I wish she'd let me help. I could—one doesn't live as long as I have without learning at least something about such matters. It may be that there *is* a kind of love there, one which includes faults as well as virtues. If *that* is the case, I would be pleased; but as these thoughts weave their way through the tangled cobwebs of my reason, I remember the terror she thinks she hides deep in her eyes. Even when she laughs, it is there. I wish she would ask me about terror—I know about that; I know a great deal about terror. But I don't know what she fears; I know only what I fear, and most certainly I do not fear love, wounds or no. What I fear at this moment is her knowing so much about me as to decide that I am worth neither regard *nor* affection. That would rip my string right off whatever it's attached to. I wish I could persuade her that no part of love is either evil or dangerous. Even an interior, unspoken love is healing and pushes all terrors into the darkness where they belong. I am aware that this is not new information.

I wish only that the snipping would stop—for just five minutes, so we could lean back and consider, between us, her gift of seven blackberries, honestly and without any mental or emotional reservations. I suspect she might say, Just eat them, dummy, and shut up. What I'm *afraid* she thinks

is this: Seven is just the right and magical number; eight would appear to promise more than I intend to offer.