

The Victim · *Joyce Carol Oates*

A LONG TIME ago, Philip Stearns says, always in a low frightened voice, I had a hand in a girl's death.

Sometimes he says: I was a witness to a girl's death. She was tormented by a gang of older children and I was a witness. A long time ago.

It constitutes a dull sweetish ache. It is perhaps not altogether true. A queer sort of confession, an unwanted confidence, thrust upon women who have opened themselves up to him and are about to swallow him up with their love. . . . In a cobwebbed corner of his mind the girl squats, panting, her white skin curdled, her mouth slack with terror. For many years Philip had forgotten her name. For many years, in fact, he had forgotten her. Now, of late, since his separation and divorce, since he now sleeps alone every night and hasn't the solace of a woman's body curved against his, he has begun to think of her again: to think very seriously of her.

Hetty Zimmerman. Her family lived in a trailer outside town. She had red, snarled, frizzy hair. She painted her fingernails, she wore lipstick. She was mildly retarded. We called her "crazy." We hated her. It wasn't my fault. The children were older, well they weren't children, they were twelve or thirteen or fourteen years old, the Gulick boy, the Hogarty girl, Bobbie Stauffer, one or two others, it wasn't my fault, it was just something that happened, I was only ten years old, in fifth grade, no one would have listened to me, I was as helpless as Hetty. . . .

It is his secret, which he has nursed now for three decades. In fact, for thirty-two years. A lifetime! Or so it seems. Hetty Zimmerman, Hetty Zimmerman, she died at the age of thirteen, of "natural causes," how was little Philip Stearns to blame? A preposterous notion. A nightmare notion. His parents wouldn't listen at the time and neither will his wife, after so many years.

As a divorced man it pleases Philip to consider himself invisibly handicapped. He is missing an arm, a leg. One of his eyes is stony-blind. He is a freak, an aberration; his inner organs have atrophied, his heart valves are pockmarked with rust, strangers would stare at him in the street if they knew. Poor Philip, his friends whisper, poor Philip Stearns his associates say, but divorce is so commonplace now, why should he take it that seriously?

He knows himself pitiable but harmless. He is purposefully bland in

conversation though his eyes, at times, dart helplessly about, as if he is looking for someone. He drinks somewhat more than usual—that is, more than “before”—but it hasn’t become a problem yet and he intends that it will not.

An amicable divorce, in fact.

In fact, so Philip persists in telling himself, with an air of incredulity, hadn’t he urged his wife to leave?—hadn’t he urged her (not quite consciously, of course) to stop loving him? I wanted my life simplified, he tells friends, I wanted it pared back, he says, and though this is true enough the actual words that express it sound absurdly false.

He can’t sleep any longer and jokes about giving it up: isn’t sleep an over-rated commodity? And isn’t it a curious custom, undressing for bed, changing into pajamas, when one can sleep as comfortably, or nearly, in his clothes?—taking off, of course, his shoes; and loosening his belt if necessary.

Lying with a woman’s body sloped against his, he had delighted in the warm solidity of the earth; its absolute fidelity; the miracle of its thrumming life. And the anonymity: for it did not require a specific face, this presence.

Alone, Philip thinks of finitude. Eighteen years of marriage now completed. Forty-two years of life. Quite by happenstance it is early December and the sun sets by five in the afternoon and there are days when it doesn’t appear at all: an alarming analogue to the state of his soul.

Alone, Philip thinks of the dead girl. The girl with the rheumatic heart, the girl whose heart stopped, the girl whose lungs were partly filled with water; what was her name, he must cast about for her name, she was one of the Zimmermans who lived a mile out the highway, in a trailer propped up on concrete blocks, in a weedy field, beside her father’s scrap metal yard. For years he can remember how the blazing summer sun reflected on the pewter-colored trailer, he can remember the drawn blinds, the chained German shepherd in the front yard, circling and circling about a spike driven into the ground. He can remember the extraordinary fiery splendor of the scrap metal, in that same blazing sunshine. And his father’s remarks about Mr. Zimmerman, that he was “unsociable.” Not stupid exactly, in fact probably quite shrewd, but ignorant of social customs: the kind of man who was capable of walking away with a shrug of his shoulders, before a conversation

was completed; or fitting a wad of tobacco the size of a fifty-cent piece inside his lip, in the midst of a conversation. (Mr. Stearns was a lawyer and owned a real estate business and he had occasion to meet with Mr. Zimmerman a few times, always in town. Of course this was before the “trouble,” because not long afterward the Zimmermans moved away.)

Philip remembers the trailer, which surprised with its unexpected length; and the high wire fence around the scrap metal yard—as if anyone wanted to break in *there*; and his father’s contemptuous remarks about the Zimmerman family; but for many years he cannot recall the girl’s name. A peculiar name, an ugly name, foreign-sounding. . . .

Philip cannot sleep any longer because his nights are contaminated by Hetty Zimmerman: her plaintive shouts, her cowering figure. He is insomniac at night but also, it seems, during the day. Can one be insomniac by day? Philip idly wonders.

He stares at the “world” about him, he tries to absorb its ostensibly compelling surfaces. It is real enough, he supposes—authentic enough—yet he cannot quite believe in it; he seems to be losing his faith.

Driving westward on the Ohio Turnpike, he catches himself closing his eyes for seconds at a time, succumbing to fleet harmless spasms of sleep, and then jerking awake again, terrified. He is so very tired, he is so very exhausted, perhaps it is a mistake to visit his mother this month: but the visit seems to be necessary, there are, as his mother says, “pressing financial matters,” and he has postponed his annual visit for an unconscionably long time. There is no reason to be frightened, he counsels himself, simply because he is returning to Michigan, to the scene, so to speak, of the crime. It has been a very long time since Hetty Zimmerman’s death and of course Philip has visited his hometown and seen certain sights, and experienced certain futile thoughts, innumerable times over the years.

He sees a body of water, wind-rippled dark water, the convulsive shiver of the water’s surface communicating itself to his flesh, so that he too begins to shiver, convulsively, in dread of something that will appear, emerging from the lake: rearing upward, loosed from the muddy bottom, rising to the surface of the water, triumphant and terrible. —It wasn’t my fault, the child Philip sobs.

It’s past your bedtime, Philip’s father says, more surprised than angry. It’s late. Don’t you have school tomorrow—?

* * *

A long time ago, when I was a child, Philip told his wife, I was a witness to something very ugly. I had a hand in something very ugly.

It was shortly after their wedding and both Philip and his wife were agreeably intoxicated. Neither was drunk, by any stretch of the imagination. But Philip's customarily clipped speech had become somewhat slurred.

Something very ugly involving a girl a few years older than I was, a retarded girl, a kind of freak, with a low forehead, and one eye that didn't focus, and broad flat cheekbones, and an aboriginal look, like an Eskimo. . . . A look of reproach and condemnation. . . . As if she hated us all beforehand.

Hetty was trotting along the railroad tracks, her coat flapping noisily about her fat legs, her panting breath audible. At the sound of Philip's lowered voice she halted, and turned to face him, grinning. He saw that her lower lip was slack and gleamed with spittle, and that her teeth were crooked: a fact he hadn't recalled for years. —But it was a long time ago and I was only ten years old at the time, Philip said quickly, alarmed by his wife's expression of genuine surprise, and at something chill and repulsed in her silence. He had, he realized, expected her to embrace him. To whisper words of comfort to him. But she stood motionless, staring, and he heard his trembling voice continue: It was a terrible thing but I suppose it might be considered an accident because she misinterpreted us, she might not have known who we were, she panicked and ran off into a field, into a marsh, and of course we didn't call her back or follow her, it was getting dark, it had begun to rain and the rain was turning to sleet. . . . The coroner's report was "death by natural causes." I mean it *was* natural, in a manner of speaking. Evidently the poor thing had had rheumatic fever as a child and her heart wasn't strong. . . .

Yes it's ugly, Philip's wife said after a pause. Do you mind?—don't tell me any more.

After that night Philip never brought up the subject of Hetty Zimmerman again, explicitly. Of course he hinted at it, he alluded to it, or to something disagreeable in his past, having to do with his parents as well: but he never dared speak of Hetty Zimmerman again, and how she had died, or why.

Now, when his mother asks discreetly about his wife, and what

“grounds” there were for unhappiness and divorce, Philip says slowly, with an air of making the discovery for the first time (an improvisation calculated to both gratify his mother, and discourage further questions): She was selfish. She was locked into herself. I tried to talk to her but she wouldn’t listen. For eighteen years I tried to talk to her but she wouldn’t listen. And then, suddenly, I discovered that I had nothing more to say. And the marriage was over.

Philip’s mother says gravely and consolingly, looking him levelly in the eye: Yes.

In one version, offered intermittently during Philip’s mid-thirties, when he embarked upon a sequence of somewhat inexplicable love affairs, the victimized girl was sixteen years old and very attractive, with red frizzy curls, polished nails, high sporty leather boots. She was not driven to her death in a brackish swamp by the coarse shouts and heckling of her classmates, or a barrage of pebbles, rocks, and clumps of mud: her death was mysterious and lurid, much-discussed at school, ultimately a secret so far as Philip Stearns was concerned. Molested she must surely have been, by the older boys; perhaps raped; and in some unclear way murdered.

A terrible thing, Philip was told, by one woman or another, —but how are you to blame, why should you feel guilt? I don’t understand.

I think I could have prevented it, Philip said. Sometimes he spoke lightly and quickly, as if he did not care to pursue the subject at the present time; sometimes he spoke in a slow, dull, numbed way, as if the true horror of the situation was only now dawning upon him. I *think* I could have prevented it, if I’d had the courage to run for help, he said. If I’d had the courage to risk turning those boys against me.

(Though in fact—in actual fact—there had been girls as well as boys, involved in the torment. Agnes Hogarty, and Philip’s cousin Maddy Beck, and wasn’t there another?—shrill and energetic and wild with spontaneous hatred for Hetty Zimmerman? Philip tries but cannot summon her name. He recalls her voice, her exuberant brassy shouts. Freak! Freak! Freak! Freak! Lookit the ugly freak!)

In the alternative, more accurate version, Hetty is only thirteen years old but possessed of—accursed by—a precociously developed body. Her swelling, unharnessed breasts strain lewdly against her cheap, bright-colored, cotton-and-Orlon sweaters, from Woolworth’s. She has wide, undulating hips, ham-like thighs, pale, fattish calves. Her skin has a look

of being curdled, like sour milk. How to account for the cast in her right eye, the winking nastiness, the leer, the spittle at the side of her mouth. . . ? Like several of the retarded or otherwise “strange” students at the school, Hetty has mastered, parrot-like, certain obscene words and gestures, which the older boys delight in enticing her to display. She is sullen and shy yet can be provoked to swing upon the enemy, half-crouched, grimacing, pronouncing those magical words that cause girls within earshot to turn away, embarrassed, and boys to hoot and shout with laughter. She has learned to mimic gestures as well. She is jerky, uncoordinated, fearful to observe, and yet—isn’t she hilarious? Those mechanical muttered curses, shit and fuck, fuck and shit, I’ll ram your shitty balls down your throat, you go and fuck yourself, just go and fuck yourself—isn’t she terrible, isn’t she a scream, shouldn’t something be done about her? Of all the students in Mr. Zelter’s “Special Class,” Hetty Zimmerman is the most troublesome, far worse, even, than her older brother Gilbert (who can be relied upon to turn and rush furiously at his tormentors, but who is, most of the time, mute and impassive inside his lardy blanketing of flesh): the reason being, Hetty won’t stand for teasing and taunting beyond a certain point. Absurd as it sounds, she has her pride.

You always knew she was coming down the corridor at school, Philip said, his expression quizzical, his voice indicating distaste, because the rubber boots she wore were too big for her, they made this annoying scuffing sound on the floor, unzipped, sloppy, half falling off—and she never seemed to care or even to notice. Some of the girls would shiver and squeal and make a show of clapping their hands over their ears: but Hetty never gave a damn. She just swung along the corridor with her coat flapping about her legs and her body jiggling and her rubber boots half falling off her feet. And of course she *smelled*. . . . But I won’t go into that.

The poor thing, Philip’s women invariably said. And then, because they understood they were to comfort him, they said: How horrible for *you*, to be thinking of it all these years, and to have no one to talk to.

Philip meets with his mother’s attorney, Mr. Griswold, grown elderly and more embittered than Philip remembers; and his mother’s accountant, Mr. O’Donnell; and Mr. O’Donnell’s young assistant, Fritz. He meets with them in the book-lined study that is still known as his father’s, though his father has been dead for ten years, while his mother

fusses in the kitchen preparing a luncheon of creamed chicken on biscuits, Brussels sprouts and chestnuts, whipped yams, and peach melba, which no one exactly wants; for even Mr. Griswold, the one “personal friend” among them, has spoken of another appointment for the afternoon.

But certainly you must be hungry, going over those accounts all morning, Mrs. Stearns says with an air of surprise and reproach, —I know it would make me sick and dizzy and depressed half out of my mind, if I had to do it. Columns of figures just intimidate me . . . and interest rates . . . and taxes, the very *thought* of taxes. . . .

Philip makes it a point to waylay his mother in the kitchen, to inform her that her finances are in excellent shape. His father’s real estate investments are doing very well indeed, particularly in the new shopping mall east of town, so she hasn’t any cause to be worried.

She considers Philip’s words. Her powdered face faintly colors, as if she were suddenly overcome by shyness or embarrassment: for perhaps it is somewhat indelicate, to talk of money with one’s son, in lowered voices, in the kitchen, with guests a short distance away.

If only I could believe that, Mrs. Stearns says.

What do you mean? Philip says. Of course you can believe it.

If only I could have faith in it, she says ambiguously, turning away.

Philip wants to seize his mother by her plump shoulders and turn her back to face him. He wants to say, calmly: Why can’t you have faith in what I say? Why can’t you have faith? Are you mocking me? Or is it a game? Are you playing coy, though you’re worth a little over a million dollars?

During the slightly awkward luncheon, Philip’s mother is resolutely bright, vivacious, cheery, “brave.” She is still an attractive woman with her pale-blue eyes and practiced smile, and in any case she is an accomplished hostess, with a will of iron. She knows how to “draw guests out,” she knows how to simulate delighted interest, avoid unpleasant topics of conversation. She smiles prettily if a bit too frequently. Though she is near-deaf in one ear (why can’t Philip remember which?—it’s baffling, his forgetfulness) she rarely asks anyone to repeat himself, she has too much pride.

Philip smiles, Philip tells anecdotes, he is very much the gracious courtly son, a success in another part of the country, a credit to his mother—to his parents, that is. He “takes after” his father: consider the

narrow handsome face, the deep-set cobalt-blue eyes, so dark as to seem black; the straight, rather long nose; the faintly clefted chin. Consider his judicious, clipped, even guarded manner of speaking, as if he believed his words might be recorded; or in some way used against him.

Conversation at the table is resolutely unserious and of course no allusions are made, even discreetly, to that morning's four-hour session. No allusions are made to Philip's personal life, as if, however improbably, these gentlemen already know of the failed marriage, the altered state of his soul. They talk with bemused dread of the weather, which has turned so prematurely cold, and the fact that the sun now sets so early: a fact, Philip thinks, sipping at the sweet, red wine his mother has inappropriately served, that is as old as the planet, yet never ceases to surprise. They talk of a local scandal involving the superintendent of the county's public schools, they talk of the rumor (which Philip has heard innumerable times) that the General Motors radiator shop is going to close down. Philip studies his mother guardedly. He loves her and is fearful of her. Sometimes he finds it difficult to meet her pale unperturbed gaze—the icy-blue eyes, slightly protruding, still very beautiful, still somewhat blank, with a maddening, calculated blankness. Her white hair is stylishly puffed about her head, in a fashion designed, Philip supposes, to disguise its thinness, which he hasn't the heart to ponder. She is wearing a very pretty, navy-blue satin dress with an eyelet collar and cuffs, one of her perpetual mourning dresses, not quite black—for it's been a decade now, and she has outgrown her widow's black, she must make a brave effort to *see things in a healthy perspective*.

Over coffee and dessert the conversation shifts to the evidently unbroken succession of victories the local high school's football team has won (Mr. O'Donnell's son Timmy is on the team), and Philip hears himself asking, in a suddenly and unaccountably nasal voice, about how conditions are at the school these days—for so much is said about alcoholism, drug-taking—perhaps it is exaggerated—perhaps it isn't widespread here in the Midwest—there are newspaper articles, there are shocking documentary reports on television—drinking even in elementary school—drug dealers on playgrounds—but of course it's probably just meretricious journalism—of course it *must* be exaggerated. An incident in California just the other day, Philip says vaguely, offering to refill his companions' glasses with wine, before refilling his own, —a really grotesque and baffling incident, though I suppose it's disingenuous to be surprised, I mean considering *California*, did you read about it?—it

was in the *Times*—a teenaged boy strangled his girl friend and dumped her body in a ravine and the peculiar thing is—how his classmates knew about it and even went out to see the body but no one reported it—in fact I don't know *how* it was finally reported—

There is an uncomfortable silence. Philip's mother stares at him with such benign perplexity that he realizes she hasn't heard—she hasn't heard every word. Mr. Griswold produces a handkerchief from his coat pocket and blows his nose into it and observes, with an old man's indifferent cynicism, that that *is* California—the West Coast—and the East Coast as well: different “life-styles.” And of course no one reads the *Times* here. The *Detroit Free Press* on Sundays, perhaps.

But even that is so depressing, Fritz observes, you wonder why you *bother*. I mean, it isn't as if Detroit's problems are ours.

Most of the problems they have, Mr. O'Donnell says, they've brought upon themselves. Welfare—corrupt judges, I won't say of which race—that sort of thing.

It *is* tragic, though—a tragic situation, Mrs. Stearns says, inclining her head toward O'Donnell, —but I thank God that it doesn't affect us *here*.

O'Donnell is about to agree but Philip adroitly shifts the conversation back to his end of the table. He says to Griswold, with an air of just perceptible impatience: But the Midwest isn't so pristine and blameless, is it? I seem to remember a peculiar incident—the death of a girl—a long time ago—she was retarded, wasn't she—her family lived in a trailer out Medina Road—a gang of kids chased her somewhere—she was lost, or did she drown—by the lake—the swamp—she was found dead the next day—it was all very mysterious and never explained—it must have happened more than thirty years ago—I was nine or ten at the time—the girl was a few years older—she was mentally defective, I think—it was kept out of the papers—

This outburst too is greeted with an uneasy silence, but Philip refuses to be intimidated. He smiles angrily at his mother, and at O'Donnell and his assistant, and at old Griswold, whose shadowy, pouched eyes suggest those of a snapping turtle: he smiles, and finishes off the sickly-sweet wine in his glass, and says: Were you by any chance involved? I mean, did any of the parents contact you?—was anyone worried enough to ask your advice?

Griswold stares at Philip. He has begun to shake his head slowly and ponderously, but his perplexity seems genuine. He says: No. Not to my knowledge. I mean—no, I don't recall any such case.

Philip says: Well, the coroner's report was death by natural causes, so it wasn't a case exactly, I don't know what you would call it, an episode, perhaps—an incident—it *was* kept out of the papers, I think—my memory is fuzzy because it was so long ago—she got lost or drowned in the swamp, in the muck—a derelict was blamed for a while—some poor bastard who lived at the old White Eagle Hotel, d'you remember that place?—and there was some scandal about kids stoning her—injuries to her head—I mean, when she was found, there were unexplained injuries—cuts and scratches—as if she'd been hit by rocks—but she died of natural causes—heart failure—there was water in her lungs—d'you remember? No? None of you? You don't remember?

O'Donnell purses his lips and says in a slow vague voice: Well I think I *do* remember something about a girl being molested by a tramp—yes I think she *did* die—but it wasn't murder—and it wasn't rape—and the man, whoever he was, got off scot-free—the state provided him with his defense—but it never came to anything because there wasn't any case against him—the circumstantial evidence was too weak—for all I know he *didn't* do it—it was a long time ago. As for kids being involved, O'Donnell says, looking Philip frankly in the face, —that was something I'd never heard. But then I must have been, oh maybe twenty, twenty-one at the time, and taking classes at East Lansing. And so many crazy things have happened since then, for instance the murders of those nurses at Ann Arbor, and that *was* by teenagers, back in—when was it—'51, '52—

Yes, says Griswold, it was '51: I remember because my wife's younger sister, she was training to be a nurse at U-M, knew one of the girls—and it was a pretty awful thing—and everybody was scared as hell 'til they caught them. It *was* teenagers in Ann Arbor, that's right.

Fritz is too young to remember and Mrs. Stearns is not inclined to remember and Philip senses himself almost rude, when he says irritably: But here, here in town, not in Ann Arbor or East Lansing or anywhere else, I mean right here, didn't a girl die and didn't it have something to do with kids chasing her?—throwing stones or whatever at her?—and after the derelict was let go the incident was simply forgotten? Erased from memory, Philip says, looking from one face to another, as if inviting these good people to share in his bemused outrage, as if it weren't getting late and time for everyone to rise from the table and thank their hostess for her delicious meal, —*erased from memory*. Or, to alter the metaphor, *sunk like a stone. Disappeared. Kaput.*

I'm afraid I don't remember, Griswold says politely; and Fritz again remarks that "it must have been before my time"; and O'Donnell shakes his head again, gravely. And Mrs. Stearns says, rising with no discernible difficulty from her chair: Will you look at how dark it's gotten, I could almost have used the candles—and it isn't even three o'clock. Or has my watch stopped—?

Philip stares at the strange, red-haired girl in the cafeteria, where she sits alone, or with her fat, sullen brother, eating her lunch from a paper bag placed right before her, a few inches from her lowered jaw. The broad, low, flat forehead, the queer cheekbones, the absurd, crimson lipstick, the chipped fingernail polish, the deep-set eyes, the air of being *not right in the head, not quite right in the head*. . . . The ravenous appetite with which she devours her lunch. . . . The big slovenly breasts, the gay orange sweater, the fluorescent-green sweater, the red-and-white-striped satin blouse with the foolish little bow, and a matching bow in her hair. . . .

Philip's mouth is dry. His heart is hammering. He watches in horror as his hand reaches out to touch the frizzed kinky hair, the rat's nest, unwashed and snarled. Can it be possible? Is he going to touch it?—sink his hand to the wrist in it? Hetty has been teased about rats in her hair, or maybe spiders, isn't it a spiders' nest, doesn't she ever wash it or brush it, isn't she ashamed, aren't you ashamed, freaky freaky freak—?

He watches as his hand touches her hair, he can't stop what is happening, the dream is too heavy, too lush, the cafeteria's odors too rich and warm and delicious: he smells the burnt macaroni-and-cheese, he smells Hetty's stale stinking underarms, his senses reel with white-hot pleasure and shame.

Awake, he won't be able to recall the circumstances of the dream, or even Hetty's name, or face. Or the year. Or where he is, which bed.

He telephones his wife—that is, his former wife.

The phone rings and rings. I just want to check, to see how you are, he will say, —you know I love you: but I had to give you up. I had to give it up. Do you forgive me?

The phone rings, rings. He sees his cousin Maddy reaching to answer it, grown inexplicably middle-aged, a purse-lipped woman in glasses, still pretty, still with her girlish, breathy voice. Hello, hello? Oh is that you, Philip? Philip Stearns? Well it's been so long—well it's been

years—how is your mother?—yes, she’s all right?—we’d heard something about arthritis—And how are you? How long are you going to be in town?

He hangs up. He locates “Beck” in the telephone directory and begins dialing the number before he realizes that his cousin is married and moved away and of course he can’t remember her married name in any case. He hangs up again. And looks up “Gulick” in the directory. “Gulick, James.” “Gulick, Ralph.” It was Ralph, wasn’t it, who had led the little gang?—Ralph stooping to pick up a handful of pebbles, yodelling Hetty, hey Hetty, stinky freaky Hetty, here’s something for you: and the half-wit had turned to stare at them, a goofy, expectant smile on her face, as if she imagined they were calling to her in friendship, as if she had ever had the experience of friendship: and that stupid smile had provoked them all the more.

Someone threw a rock that landed at her feet. She backed away, she stumbled down the railroad bed, loosening a small avalanche of cinders. Hey Hetty, freaky Hetty, where’re you going, here’s something for you: it was Bobbie Stauffer shouting, it was Agnes Hogarty, or the Ryan boy, or the Stearns boy, the little one tagging along with the others. Freaky stinky Hetty! Where’s your fat-ass brother, Hetty! Where’re you going, Hetty! Come back here’n take your medicine, Hetty!

Philip has dialed the number listed for “Gulick, Ralph.” A child answers and he asks to speak to his father, and while he waits for Ralph to come to the phone he tries to summon up the man’s face—tries but fails—for it’s been a considerable number of years. Ralph Gulick graduated from high school and went into the Navy and Philip heard no more about him and had no interest in him, no interest in him whatsoever, they lived at different ends of the same street and they were very different young men and in any case Philip was perhaps three years younger, which is enough to matter, enough to matter a great deal. By way of his mother, Philip has heard that the Gulick brothers are “quite well-to-do” now—they own “Fence City” at Eastland—but their mother died rather unexpectedly—a very rapid kind of cancer—and *that* was a shame—Mrs. Gulick was so well-liked by everyone and so generous with her time at Volunteer Services.

Ralph comes to the telephone, Ralph says hello, and again hello, more puzzled than irritated, but Philip says nothing: Philip, sweating inside his clothes, feeling a trickle of perspiration run down his side, says nothing: not a word.

Philip is frightened to death. Oh yes frightened. Scared shitless, as the kids would say.

Philip gently eases the receiver into its cradle.

It has been a very long time, he thinks. He is being unreasonable. He is being maudlin. —You're self-destructive to dwell upon such a thing, one of his girls told him, stroking his hair; why do you want to torment yourself, it doesn't seem sensible to me, I'd just forget it if I were you, I mean, after all—you can't do anything about it now, can you?

But do you love me, Philip whispers, pressing his face against her bare, warm, accommodating flesh, —do you love me, do you forgive me?

The girl doesn't hear. Or, if she hears, she says not a word.

* * *

Philip drives aimlessly around town, under the pretext of "looking something up in the library." It is four-thirty in the afternoon of the last day of his visit, a very ordinary and uneventful Monday, eight months to the day after he moved out of the house jointly owned by him and his wife. About the eight months, about the shipwrecked marriage in general, Mrs. Stearns has been remarkably discreet, for which her son is grateful. But then the Stearnses have always been discreet. They can be relied upon, for their well-bred discretion.

One morning his wife told him something valuable, something that impressed him with its acuity; perhaps he had misjudged her all these years?—she had accused him of being at ease only with people who had an erroneous idea of who he was. You don't care what people think, actually, she said, so long as they have the wrong idea. It's amazing. It's sick. I suppose it's fascinating, in a pathological sort of way. But I can't deal with it any longer and I think you're right, I should get out now, I should run for my life.

"Run for your life?" Philip asked. But when did I say that? Did I say that?

A long time ago, Philip Stearns says, always in a low tremulous voice, I was involved in something very unpleasant. I mean—I was a witness. I was just a child and I couldn't do anything to prevent it but—but—I was a witness. And I never told.

Sometimes the words come unbidden, startling both Philip and his female companion; sometimes they are rehearsed, but no less sober and

startling. It wasn't intentional, he goes on to say, feeling tears well up in his eyes, no one intended to injure her, for God's sake, it was really a kind of accident, things got out of hand, and then when she slipped in the mud, in the muck, it was such disgusting black muck, oh then things got out of hand, I don't know why. It was really a girl named Agnes Hogarty who . . . It was really a boy named Ralph Gulick who. . . .

But if the girl agrees with Philip, if she is accommodating and sympathetic, if she quite sees his point, that it couldn't have been intentional, Philip says stiffly: But she wouldn't have died except for us. None of it would have happened, except for us. A kind of frenzy came upon us. . . .

Years of forgetfulness, years of melancholy. Amnesia. He tells himself that it is all ridiculous, the girl had a weak heart, she probably wouldn't be alive today, living in poverty like that, brutish, uneducated parents like that. . . . He tells himself that it is nothing but self-indulgence, a perverse sort of luxury, his guilt. His guilt that comes and goes like bouts of insomnia.

Still, he remembers the dark brackish odor of the water, the stagnant stink of the marsh, the flame-like threads of cloud in the western sky. He remembers Hetty's screams which were frightened rather than angry: and how surprising it was, since she was so often angry at them: and refused to give her ground. But this time she backed away, ducking, and dropped her school-things, and stumbled over the edge of the track, and loosed a small avalanche of cinders, and. . . .

But he really doesn't remember. His memory is patchy, on account of so many headachy sleepless nights.

I didn't ask for the divorce, Philip told his mother, choosing his words with care. But I didn't contest it. The marriage was simply over—I suppose you must have sensed it, judging from a few remarks you made over the years. The marriage was simply over and I had nothing more to say to her and she had nothing more to say to me, that seemed worth saying. Yes, Mother, am I correct? Did you know?

Whereupon his dignified mother disconcerts him by saying, in an embarrassed voice: I—I just don't know how to answer that.

How strange it is, how perpetually baffling, that Hetty Zimmerman's miserable life was so unequal to the infinity of time that preceded it, and followed it. Philip tells himself he must crack that riddle someday.

He bent to kiss her lightly and ceremonially. It was an unrehearsed gesture that surprised him more than it did her.

Absentmindedly she reached into her purse for her little silver compact, and snapped the compact open, and examined her lipstick in the mirror, with a critical half-frown: readying herself, Philip realized, for someone else.

It had been a remarkable incident in their mutual history—this final drink in a hotel cocktail lounge near her lawyer's office, this final kiss. For, staring at his wife, Philip knew himself excluded from her consciousness for the first time. He knew himself supplanted, he knew himself *past*.

She snapped the little compact shut and dropped it into her purse and told him she must leave: and asked what she owed, for her drink.

When he entered the living room his parents looked at him in surprise, and he began to explain at once, he began to cry, I know what happened to her, I saw what they did to her, that girl, Hetty Zimmerman—I know, I was there. He stood in his pajamas, shivering, explaining, trying to explain, stumbling over his words, while his parents stared and stared and something pinched violently in his groin and he was terrified he would wet himself.

His father questioned him sharply. His mother sat wordless. It was past his bedtime: it was late: hadn't he school in the morning?

It was past his bedtime. It was late. He was shivering with cold, having come downstairs in his bare feet. He listened too much to the radio—those ridiculous made-up excitable programs. Let's go upstairs to bed, his father said briskly, heaving himself from his chair. Philip cringed. Philip cowered. Doubtless it was a misunderstanding: it was so late, past his bedtime, he hadn't been able to sleep, he had been sucking his thumb, he'd been a naughty boy. Why do you let him listen to the radio so much, Philip's father asked Philip's mother in a reasonable tone of voice, —hasn't he homework to do?

Already his memory was patchy and unreliable. He imagined a great deal, he drew fantastical birds and beasts and human beings in colored crayons, it was true he sometimes fabricated tales, he told lies, he stammered and wept when found out; and he was so small for his age, with those narrow sloping shoulders, that delicate chest. Poor little Philip Stearns with his tiny muscles: in fact, he hadn't any muscles at all: he was a proper object for his classmates' contempt.

It was past his bedtime. It was late. He had to go to the bathroom suddenly, and almost had an accident. But then, afterward, his mother brought him a cup of Ovaltine and six, little, star-shaped cookies, delicious, sugar cookies, decorated with tiny, silver candies. She brought him the tray in bed and sat at his bedside and stroked his warm forehead, but she said very little; and Philip seems to remember dropping off to sleep while she stroked his forehead and brushed his damp hair out of his face, but the memory is doubtless inaccurate. Would he have fallen asleep with a cookie in his hand? It doesn't sound probable. His memory is patchy and unreliable. He has probably invented his entire life.

* * *

Philip drives out along the Medina Road, past the Eastland Shopping Center, past Fence City, Applegate's Nursery, Sea Ray Boats, Getty's Car Wash, the Cadillac-Oldsmobile Agency: trying without success to determine where the Zimmermans' trailer had been, three decades ago. And that sprawling scrap metal yard with the No Trespassing signs and the twelve-foot-high wire fence. . . . But nothing remains of the open, scrubby land. There are no fields, only "vacant lots," zoned for commercial construction.

Philip is driving aimlessly, without haste. Though it is early evening, a Thursday evening, traffic is heavy.

Inertia, and not sentiment, compelled him to prolong his visit; and now inertia—which is in fact the first law of motion—propels him forward, along the highway, east and north of town. He is lazy enough and idle enough to follow the stream of traffic for miles. And then on a whim he negotiates a turn and heads across town, toward the lake. He is in no hurry to return home. So far as his mother knows (and she is too diplomatic to be curious) he is having dinner "with an old high school friend"—improbable as that is, since Philip has systematically broken off ties with everyone here. You'll be home late, I suppose, his mother said, so I won't wait up, and Philip said, Yes, I mean no, don't wait up for me, no, of course not.

Have I invented my own life? Philip wonders. He parks by the railroad tracks and leaves the car's headlights on. The odor of dark, brackish water hits him when he gets out. It is absolutely silent here, absolutely still. In the distance a false sunset flickers and winks against the massed, wintry clouds, reflected from the factories below, seven

miles away on the outskirts of Flint. Was the sky so luridly and beautifully illuminated in the past, Philip wonders,—was it like this thirty-two years ago?

He climbs the weedy railroad bed, already short of breath. The stink of the marsh amazes him: perhaps it is exacerbated by the cold. Debris is scattered everywhere, between the railroad ties, underfoot, at the edge of the marsh. His feet are damp. The black muck is pitiless. But he has brought a pint of whiskey, safe and snug and secret in his overcoat pocket, in a paper bag.

Why do you keep thinking about it, one of his girls said, an Asian beauty, born in New York City of parents from Hong Kong, why do you torment yourself, Philip, she asked, soft-voiced, simulating extreme yet delicate concern; after all, isn't it too late to do anything, I mean—what could you do, what difference could it possibly make?

Philip presses his overheated face against the girl's glossy black hair. He says: But that's the point.

He walks. He is in no hurry. He has begun to feel a melancholy sort of contentment, having been sleepless, by his own estimation, for years. In a minute or two he will call out, to test the potency of his voice, if he can think of anything to say. What words, he wonders idly, what are the correct words?