

## *2. Babyhood, Infancy, Childhood*

Going back then to the matter of the extraordinary and its relation to the heroic or rather to what it should be called at this time, the *egoistic*, I think both of these must have been present at the very beginning when a young goddess suddenly arose like the sun and filled up all the sky of my happiness. Irresistibly she won me over and took charge of me and covered me with kisses and dallied with me from morn till night. She loved me as no one could possibly have loved me and yet it never seemed to be enough, oh, never enough! For often she would have to leave me and, if it weren't for the promise of her quick return, how miserable I would have been. How miserable I was even on those occasions when, for some reason or other, she was delayed in coming. When she wasn't there for me as I expected. How then I would rant and rave! How I would sob and stir and cry! But then, as if by magic, she would suddenly return and straightaway wipe away all my tears and all my former grief and grievances.

If this totally captivating deity were ever my mother, the memory of it has long since vanished. Or perhaps it has even been suppressed for it is only by suppressing the memories of her right now that I can conjure up the image of myself as having no interest in anything but her. Or rather no interest in anything but that radiant face, those caressing lips, those voluptuous arms, and those enticing breasts. How long it was before the goddess finally stole off and went back to her heavenly abode I'm not sure. All I know is that at some point the woman whom I would later call my mother stepped forth and gave me the kind of care and attention for which I have always been grateful.

It was those infernal times she was absent that must have created the first breach. It was then that another world started to creep into my consciousness. One which remained cold and aloof when, after all my tears had been shed, I would look around and see what was about me as if for the first time. See how things simply stood and silently gaped at me. See how the impassive door would stay shut and not respond to my inner pleadings. See how, while waiting for it to open as of course it eventually would, I could bide my time by experimenting and wondering about this new and strange relation.

If the opening up of another world was the inevitable leaving behind of my mother, then it must have been so only as a rather complicated phenomenon. As the transferring of some element or dimension of what she was to me as the holy and remembered one to that other world. Some measure of perfect joy or pleasure or contentment which would stay with me like an eternal lure and seduction. Like a vague expectation of some

overpowering happening, some fabulous encounter, some prodigious visitation, some exquisite movement, some excruciatingly tantalizing approach, arrival, takeover, and consummation.

Yes, there was an unpleasant drift and perturbation in this earliest part of childhood and yet, at the same time, one which did not go entirely without recompense. Into the first breach of the still-powerful bond between us came a growing sense of myself, of my own power and weakness, of my power *in* my weakness. The goddess who was quickly becoming the beloved but merely powerful parent was also becoming the one who was supposed to satisfy my each and every whim. But seeing as how she often displayed a will of her own and did not accommodate me as much as I desired and indeed demanded, I found myself getting more upset and intolerant. Often I would feel a mad impulse to throw off all care and constraint and rage against her helplessly.

Perhaps it was hitting this rocky patch of our relationship which made me turn more and more to Him. It seemed that I had gotten on an emotional roller-coaster beyond the power of either one of us to stop. The goddess's strange companion had frightened me at the beginning because I mistakenly took him to be an usurper threatening our sanctuary. Later I learned to tolerate his visits and even take an interest in his face and his different-similar babble. But for a long time it was not nearly so pleasant to see or hear him as to gaze upon my mother's lips and watch her incant magical formulas which soothed me as much as her uplifting arms. Eventually this charm reached my own lips and no greater delight could there have been for either one of us than my first utterances. No greater encouragement could there have been than what I received from her excitement and joy. Nevertheless it was somewhere along this line of development that he finally stepped in and helped dispel her powerful hold on me.

I think of my father now as one who, before the time I can remember, took me in hand in his own way. This changing of the guard in a spiritual or educational sense certainly didn't leave my mother out in the cold. Nevertheless it did involve a significant shift which probably took place when I was showing the first signs of a struggling autonomy. A will to assert myself or a will to control which of course was not always self-control and which dismayed my mother at times as much as it delighted my father. More powerful, playful, and ready to amuse me than she was, less constricting and caught up in the routine affairs of life, he would frequently descend from his proud height and, by transforming himself now into a friendly giant, now into a living playground, now into my friend and ally, now into an equal

partner, astound and delight me. Of course this contrasted sharply with the topsy-turvy relationship I was then having with my mother and which I'm sure made her not unappreciative of his growing participation.

With such a stalwart mother and a brilliant father and all other things being equal, I ask myself now: shouldn't I have been one of those destined for high places? Shouldn't I have been one of those who goes on to follow with ardour and skill and determination some strategy for success in life?

It seems strange to think now that two such thoroughly honest and decent people weren't made to live their whole lives together. Strange at least when I forget for a moment the fatal flaw in my father's character. A flaw which I like to think has come to me only as a tendency or orientation and which, if I'm right to flatter myself thus, is probably due to the stabilizing effect of my mother. For however close they were in such matters as child-rearing or managing a house and home, a gulf between them opened up on the ethical and emotional plane. On the level of what might be called the day-to-day business of honouring certain commitments.

But if I speak of a fatal flaw in my father's character, it is not to think of anyone being more victimized by it than him. Remembering how much he loved my mother in earliest years and how much he loved his children when I, the eldest, was of an age to pay attention to such things, I have no doubt that his influence upon me was substantial. On the other hand, if it hadn't been for two or three important factors which determined things another way, this influence would have not only been substantial but detrimental.

One of these factors, even if it didn't come into play right at the beginning, was my mother's constancy and devotion. Neither given to histrionics nor to elaborate displays of affection, she moved through the better part of my childhood like an efficient practical-minded flesh-and-blood presence. Instead of being the adored one of my infancy, she was now the multi-purpose parent: part guardian, part domestic, part disciplinarian, part nurse, part coach, part counsellor. So much of what she did was taken for granted by me that it required no small shakeup of our family before I could truly appreciate the level of her commitment.

But it would be wrong to think that, even if such an appreciation took time to actualize itself, my mother could have been the only one responsible for its development. For whatever in earliest years was errant or dysfunctional in my father was certainly well hidden from my eyes. On the contrary, he came before me like a second sun which, scattering all the clouds of infantile

sorrow and discontent, poured new light into the home. It was he who, while my mother occupied herself with my newborn sister, capitalized on my natural curiosity and brought the world up close to me. It was he who, still at the time I could barely walk or talk, carried me out into the world and explained its marvels to me and read to me and guided me towards an ever-increasing comprehension of an ever-expanding universe.

Given all this and the fact that his interest in my development abated somewhat later on, I wonder now how it could possibly be that his greatest influence on me was other than during these formative years. And I also wonder how could it possibly be that this influence was not at least in part the errant side of his nature. For as many good traits as my father had and as much as I would like to think he passed them on to me, so there is this other one. So there is this warp or bend or orientation or waywardness which is there in me and which is not so easy to explain or to call good or bad. Or at least not by someone like myself who tries to live this errancy and bring it forth as a value, a goal, a meritorious event. Who believes in fact that truth-telling itself is caught up in a certain amount of errancy.

Perhaps a germ of this other trait was planted in my infant brain and then simply remained dormant for many years. Or perhaps it happened a bit later when those traits that came to me as good solid gifts from a caring mother and a tutoring father were being nurtured and cultivated. It is certain at any rate that, whenever or however it was transmitted to me, my father had long been carrying around a poison in himself. A volatile concoction of two different traits which virtually guaranteed he wouldn't carry on forever and which had already seriously hampered him in life. Two traits which are odd in themselves and yet, kept separate from one another, are not necessarily harmful or at least not to the nth degree. Two traits whose potentially maleficent nature I have often thought of in this way: that to be uncompromisingly honest and critical without being sufficiently self-critical is to have an internal strength or force not equal to the external pressures that one inevitably brings upon oneself.

If any of this reached me in the earliest stage of childhood and had an impact on me, it must have been when my parents discussed matters and forgot my presence for a while. Since my mother could also be quite critical but more in a practical than principled sense, there were at least a few scenes between them of the sort which, except for one significant difference, I witnessed later on. Scenes in which my father was far from being a pathetic figure and in fact could assert himself and argue much better than my mother. Scenes in which I daresay he showed his flair and dominance by

castigating all those hypocrites and fools who interfered with him and whom my mother, for some reason, persisted in defending.

Nor was there anything in my father's physical appearance which could have given me reason not to be in awe and fascination and sometimes in fear of him. Red hair, alert eyes, aquiline nose, military moustache, and firm chin, his proud face as it comes to me now remains an enigma when I think of how much letting go and sloughing off it hid. A face of which it could be said that it radiated strength of character and firmness of will along with uncommon intelligence. A face from which I never saw a tear drop. A face which seemed the measure of all courage and nobility. A face which, when a man once warned me to step away from his moving scythe, was capable of such rage that the scythe was dropped and the man punished and chased away.

As opposed to the growing difference I saw between my mother's and father's personalities and all those differences to be expected between a man and woman raising a family in the fifties, there was an area in which they were absolutely equal in my eyes. To think of it now is to think of what many people throughout all times have benefitted from if they were truly fortunate in their parents. And yet, when honoured in the usual way, it comes across as something rather trite and of no great significance. If I put the matter negatively then, if I say that not once in all my years of growing up was I ever given reason to suspect that either one of them had lied to me, I may be able to do justice to this singular and shared trait of theirs.

Shortly before I was of the age to start grade school, a marvellous thing happened. Taking leave of our old apartment and of the town called Greenfield Park and of even the disagreeable man with the scythe, we moved to another town called Chambly. The brand new bungalow we moved into I had first seen a few months before when we drove out in the car and paid it a visit. At that time it had barely risen out of the ground and earth was piled up all over. I can't quite remember my excitement on that occasion but I'm sure it was tied up with the illusion of leaving behind forever all boredom and discontent.

The several years that followed were of course far from being free of minor setbacks, disappointments, and discomforts. Yet I don't want to dwell on these for I find them now to be of slight importance. On the other hand, it is virtually impossible for me to exaggerate the esteem and even wonder in which I hold these years as an age of discovery. It goes without saying that this sentiment or judgement comes with a certain bias since I am forced to

view this stage of my life through the teleological lens of what I am now and what I have long thought I should be.

Feeling myself warranted to express the emotional side of this matter and to counteract such dry statements as the above, I sing the following hymn of praise to my childhood:

*Oh, days of childhood long and rich!  
How will I ever do justice to you?  
How will I ever be able to describe  
the world you brought before my senses?  
A world so rich and open and free and easy.  
A world so challenging and interesting and promising too.  
A world perfect for the adventurous and imaginative boy I was.  
A boy not at all lonely and introverted as he was to become  
but taken up by friends and family and school and activities.  
Taken up by such a range and diversity of things  
that it staggers me now to think about it.*

After all, did not this boy who is so distant from me now go out regularly on botanical and biological and even geological expeditions in the vast field out back? Did he not collect stamps and coins and leaves and butterflies and bees and spiders and matchbooks and sparkling pieces of granite? Did he not build model aeroplanes of all kinds and birdhouses and tree forts and snow forts and indoor forts with his younger siblings? Did he not also invent household games with them? Did he not play baseball and football and soccer and hockey as well as take swimming lessons and go out for track and field and fish on occasion? Did he not shoot marbles and pitch cards in the schoolyard? Did he not fight with boys who were tough and thought they could get the better of him? Did he not play cards and checkers and chess and other board games with his best friend? Did he not belong to the Wolf Cubs and go out on camping trips? Did he not go to birthday parties and play games like spin-the-bottle and even have – lucky one! – a couple of childhood sweethearts? Did he not have a bicycle on which he could ride all over? Did he not climb a distant mountain on two occasions with a friend? Did he not adventure along the banks of the Chambly Basin and the noisy, fast-flowing Richelieu River? Did he not hold down two paper routes at one time? Did he not play a musical instrument? Did he not draw and sketch? Did he not write short verse? Did he not peer avidly into three sets of home encyclopaedia? Did he not also peer through a microscope and perform experiments with his chemistry set? Did he not give a couple of speeches at the school as part of a competition? Did he not rank consistently at the top

of his class and win awards every year?

Perhaps it is not so strange to look back and find one's childhood an extraordinary thing. Although unique to each and every one of us, it has that common quality, at least in retrospect, of being exorbitant and full. When I look back at mine, it takes on the semblance of rapid growth achieved along several different lines. And though I'm well aware that there are people who could vaunt their childhood much more than I, I remain bedazzled by the number of things I was willing to get into or try my hand at. Apart from what school forced me to do systematically, there was little to discourage me from being as random and wide-ranging in my activities as possible. Certainly I can see this trait carrying on later in life such that, given the norms of specialization, it could easily be considered an aberration.

It remains a question for me then why I didn't grow up imagining, valuing, or thinking about a special course more than I did. Certainly it wasn't for lack of examples or models coming to me through the school or by way of books and TV. Indeed, a veritable army of professional and accomplished types marched before my eyes and I often dreamed of being now a pilot, now a sailor, now a laboratory scientist. In this of course I was no different from millions of other children who imagine great things for themselves and then either wash out in life or learn to settle for second-best or go on to become successful people. Of these three groups it is probably a tossup whether I belong to the first or to the third but what I surely don't belong to – or at least never wanted to belong to – is the second.

From the beginning I did extremely well in school and, thanks to my father, had a head start on the others. I had also benefitted from a couple of years of pre-school in Greenfield Park. Before I entered the first grade then, I not only knew my alphabet but how to spell a number of words. My report cards full of A's were always a source of pride and personal satisfaction. At the same time I never skipped a year or was involved in any sort of accelerated program. I always did my homework on my own and my parents, as far as I can remember, were not particularly concerned about how I went about it. Being energetic and conscientious by nature, I always did what I was supposed to do and, if there was any intimidation or fear involved, it unquestionably came from what a teacher might have to say and not from anything my parents would do.

No special reason was ever given to me then to think that learning stopped at school or even that school learning was more important than learning outside it. Of course I didn't go about consciously drawing lessons from all

quarters but neither was I in the habit of making a big distinction between one sphere of learning and another. While working on a problem in arithmetic or flipping through one of the *Books of Knowledge* or while going out on a field trip or playing in the field behind our house, I was aware of little more than the line which separates adult authority from free play and independence.

Apart from the usual amount of scoldings, reprimands, and restrictions, my parents pretty much gave me a free rein. At a time when one of the boys in my class wasn't allowed to ride his bicycle further than the end of his street, I was allowed to make the two-mile trip to his house. Already I had been given a bicycle for my birthday which, though a marvellous acquisition, was far too big for me. Standing on the pedals fitted with wooden blocks, I would go about determined to get bigger in order to get better. And after a couple of years had passed and I had succeeded in growing a few inches, I could not only do without the blocks but sit precariously on the seat. From then on it was a matter of spending long summer days exploring Chambly and the surrounding area.

Perhaps I should recapitulate a bit. So far I have said a few things about the extraordinary which would indicate that it first came to me like a heavenly apparition. Of course there were no words or thoughts for what I experienced then but just the wonder and pleasure and rapture of being taken up by the One and Only. But all too quickly this condition changed and I was confronted with a world which, although sometimes cold and distant, strangely beckoned to me. Not yet did I have the sense of inheriting an increasingly expanding kingdom but rather the one of still being caught in a cocoon around which there were vague noises, movements, and activities. Gradually the world changed its countenance to become a vast biodome whose roof was blue or grey or starry black while the rest down below was chequered, coloured, and chambered. The ever-changing sky was grasped and admired by me long before I knew what other marvels lay about.

Down in the basement of our house my father installed a couple of swings. Always the one to invent some sort of game, I would pretend with my oldest sister that, while swinging back and forth, we were two fighter pilots communicating by radio. Sometimes my father would come down and scare us by pretending to be the Old Man on the Mountain. But other times he was busy making things like our large kitchen table and the L-shaped bench that partially went around it. He was particularly active around the house at this time and managed not only to finish off part of the basement but do a fair bit of landscaping. First there were huge piles of sod to make our front and

back lawns. Then there was a huge pile of heavy colourful rocks to make our rock garden. Finally there was a huge pile of square plates to make our patio. But one day, as the most tremendous feat of all, he brought home a TV and set it up in the living room

But it was only sometime later – perhaps when I was nine or ten – that my father spoke to me about the ancient Greeks. It is possible that he was already on the decline for I don't remember him repeating this nocturnal lecture. While pacing me back and forth under a starry sky, he talked about the search for truth. He told me it was a very noble enterprise but not always welcomed or appreciated. In particular he dwelt on a man called Socrates who wasn't afraid to ask questions. When Socrates got into trouble with some influential people and was brought to trial and told to change his ways, he refused. He continued to do just as he always did in spite of knowing he would die for it. My father told me that Socrates had character because he remained true to himself. On the other hand, his accusers, even though seeming to be dignified and respectable, were hypocrites because they were willing to tell lies and half-truths to win their case and be successful.

I certainly don't want to exaggerate the impact of this story but neither do I want to overlook it. A story which I have been forced to bring forward as the substance of his discourse on that particular night because, truth to tell, I don't remember well what he said. Did he talk about Socrates? Did he talk about him in a way which perhaps I didn't understand? Did he nonetheless talk about him in a way which resonated in me? In a way which had something to do with his own life? With a need to prop himself up in the face of his own Athenian enemies?

It may be that on that particular night he brought me close to something which at least suggested the struggle he was involved in. The kind of struggle which usually goes undetected at the deepest level because it operates not only at the level of pitting one version of the truth against another, but at the level of pitting the value of truth against other values. Such values as are implicated in protecting the state of the world in its diverse manifestations and at any particular moment from too much truth: power, profit, position, prestige, practise, and the like.

Even if my father never had viewed himself as a great fighter, it is possible he still thought he was involved in an important battle. A battle of the kind that Socrates was involved in. A battle not only against the hypocrites of the world but all social pressures to conform. It is possible that under the starry

sky my father signalled to me what he was going through. The story of Socrates then would have simply been a way of passing on to me its universal significance.

It is odd that even to this day I have no precise idea of what he did for a living. Certainly he worked for an aircraft company and at one time had a promising career there. Certainly he occupied a position of some responsibility. But beyond these bare facts all is fragmentary and uncertain. As far as I can remember, he never took me to his office (if, indeed, he had one) or brought somebody home from work or discussed what he had done during the course of a day or complained about some matter which would have prompted questions from me. And yet for several years he provided for my mother and three, four, and then five children and took us, sometimes all together and sometimes one or two of us, on various outings. All of this now puzzles me and still leads me to ask such questions as why did he take me on a tour of a newspaper plant and not to his factory? Or why did he take me to a university to meet some students and not to meet colleagues and workers?

But of course what became a question for me later was hardly one for me then. Whatever minor disturbances registered in my psyche certainly didn't make me doubt the stability of our home. Always active with friends and always doing well at school, I noticed no ominous signs on the horizon. And with five active children in the household, there were certainly no lack of distractions. On a few occasions my father got a bit rough with me but no more than many fathers do with misbehaving children. The worst I can say is that there were times I no longer viewed him as a perfect dad and perhaps even imagined some other. And although it is true he didn't spend much time with me later on, who was I then to think this wasn't perfectly normal?

Who am I now to say what was truly going on then? Did my father have a drinking problem? Yes, but to his credit he kept it out of sight and to my mother's credit she made sure it was. After the first two or three years in Chambly, he hardly ever came home for supper. Caught in a bind between hating his bosses and having to hold onto his job, he resentfully put up with this situation for a number of years. He did this by drowning his anger in alcohol and releasing it in bitter talk with cronies. But of course the drinking only created other problems and didn't address the main one. It was only a matter of time before he finally caused trouble at work and destroyed what was left of his career. Blackballed from the industry, he turned to selling insurance. Now it was apparent even at home that the times were out of

joint. Suddenly macaroni and powdered milk became staples. Suddenly there were harsh words being uttered and suddenly he was taking over my sisters' bedroom while my three sisters joined my mother in the main one.

Just about the time things started to unravel for us, I was making a definite break with childhood. Of course even at an earlier stage I had left behind the habit of confiding all to my mother. What was possible to tell her when I transgressed out of ignorance was no longer so when I transgressed at will. Slowly and often quite painfully I became aware of myself as having a social side forced to be different from a private one – a more personal, self-indulgent, spontaneous, and experimental one. Now as the bearer of necessary secrets, truth-telling became for me a more conscious, careful, and taboo-ridden affair. Society itself seemed to encourage this. Besides certain functions and parts of the body, there were other unpleasant matters everyone knew about but largely kept to themselves. But then there were these other strange impulses which I experienced and seemed unique to me. Shameful impulses such as being attracted to my sister and sneaking into her bed at night and fondling her and committing this act more than once. And of course all this in spite of fear and remorse and guilt. On the other hand, I was made aware of what I was capable of if I thought I could get away with it. And this in spite of all these thoughts and feelings which impeded me. My innermost reason and justification for exploiting my sister based themselves solely on there being no other way to appease my libidinous longings.

When I think now of the beating my father would have inflicted on me had he ever found out, it makes me wonder how I ever could have risked it. Is it possible that I sensed he was having his own problems and in a sense out of commission? Be that as it may, his taking over my sisters' room put an end to the affair. And shortly thereafter the signs of his decline became conspicuous. How else to explain my uneasiness and foreboding when he wouldn't get up until late in the morning and only after my mother had been haranguing him for some time? How else to explain the inordinate amount of time he spent in bed or around the house? Or the black insurance books not filled with appointments but doggerel verse? Or his sudden interest in improving his penmanship? Or the psoriasis which increasingly afflicted him and caused him to set up a private area out back where he would lie in the sun for hours? Or his sudden interest in religion and church-going?

At the very beginning of this growing awareness that all was not well with my father, I still didn't realize how threatened our home and family were. I was in grade seven and, as luck would have it, I was blessed with one of the

best teachers I have ever had. Mr. Beach was an energetic, kind, honest, and demanding young man who wasn't afraid to stray a bit from the curriculum. Always expecting the most from his students, he told us more than once that we should develop good work habits and never be satisfied with a mediocre effort. From the very beginning he took an interest in me and I, for my part, worked hard to please him. I'm sure it was this state of affairs – my admiration for him and my devotion to school work and athletics – which kept me on track the last year in Chambly. No doubt it also helped me to deal with an incident which occurred later in the spring and shook me up quite badly.

Insisting that I accompany him to church one morning, my father waited outside on the street for me while I, hanging back in the house, refused to heed his calls. All of a sudden he came back, took hold of me, and pulled me down towards the basement. Sobbing and desperately trying to fight him off, I lost control of myself and called him some vile names. He punched me once and then went back outside as quickly as he had come. My mother, having stood by helplessly during this brief struggle, then told me for the first time that she was planning to leave him.

A certain brutality now entered my heart which turned me completely against him. To be sure, little did I see of his suffering except perhaps its most flagrant manifestation. But instead of feeling pity for him whenever I saw this outward sign, those hideous psoriatic sores covering his body, I felt offended. I felt there was something indecent about his being naked in the backyard and flaunting his affliction and risking a neighbour or visitor seeing him. I suppose these sentiments were not unnatural for one who had been raised as I had been and then confronted with a person letting himself go so completely. After all, hadn't he been the one to teach me about character? Should he be surprised then if I now turned my back on him? Or did he think that character had nothing to do with being strong and courageous and wise? Or with being true not just to oneself but to others?

But perhaps it was not just being true to others that I had on my mind then. Perhaps it was also being true to myself in a more enlarged or imaginative sense. Is it possible that I, who at age thirteen had never been versed in the Aristotelian or Nietzschean doctrine of the great-souled type (but perhaps the Platonic or Socratic one), already had some such figure as my standard? If so, it must have developed rather idiosyncratically. For years I had been devouring comic books featuring the exploits of various superheroes. This fantasy realm of extraordinary powers and events certainly appealed to me and made me think of other worlds where the limitations of this one no

longer were in force. This childish indulgence would no doubt have been insignificant except for the fact that another current of reading had swept me up at the same time. While I was gorging myself on the trials and tribulations and inevitable triumphs of the indestructible do-gooder, I was also taking in and observing a much more vulnerable, dubious, limited but in some ways more impressive type. With a series of paperback booklets called *Classics Illustrated*, I devoured such works as *The Iliad*, *Moby Dick*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Lord Jim*, and *Hamlet*. In this way I was continually being tossed back and forth between the realm of the fantastic and the realm of the tragic. Inevitably the latter made me think more deeply not only about death and dying, but the whole course of a life leading up to these.

On one occasion well before all the troubles engulfing my family came to pass (I was probably only eight or nine at the time), I was out with my father on a leisurely drive. At some point we passed an impressive building with spacious grounds all around it. He then informed me that it was a private school and that, if he had been able to afford it, he would have sent me to one. I'm not sure if this remark had an immediate effect on me or made me think that I had somehow missed out in life. Possibly I imagined that, if I had been able to wear a uniform and go to a distinguished school, I myself would have been more distinguished. But whatever the case, such a thought would have played but briefly on my emotions and then been consigned to the might-have-been. As in the case of other such passing thoughts and vague longings, it would have been buried in the recesses of my brain like the remainder of a dream. Like the reminder of a more privileged life being led in some stately palace with storybook surroundings.

But any element of self-pity in me at the time of the family breakup was overridden by childish notions of future glory. Having always distinguished myself at school, I expected to continue in this vein as well as open up other areas of accomplishment. In particular I imagined myself becoming a much better athlete than I had hitherto been. Lying in bed at night and dreaming of such possibilities, I was oblivious to the death of my childhood. It never occurred to me that what lay ahead could possibly turn out to be more distressing and humiliating than what was behind me or even what I was currently going through. As far as I was concerned, suffering and failing in life were not attributable to life itself. It was only weakness or error which caused them. If I did see anything inherently treacherous about this earthly condition, it was only in a dramatic or epic sense. It wasn't possible for me to think that it could be found in a daily and dull routine. In a slow wearing down of the spirit even to the point of its being crippled and broken.

And yet already had the invisible worm of moral incertitude found its lodging in me. Found its little port of entry in that part of me which was torn between one set of values and another. It was at a time when bills weren't getting paid, when money was tight, and, despite all this, my mother was putting aside what she could for our so-called vacation out West. With my father more or less out of commission and in a kind of grotesque stupor, my mother went about making the final preparations. A few close friends and neighbours helped her in this endeavour and I myself helped by turning over my modest earnings. This money came from two paper routes I was holding down at the time as well as an additional job on the weekends. Though I felt an obligation to help her and even took pride in doing so, I didn't particularly like the weekend job which unfortunately turned out to be less honourable than lucrative. Not only did it require going door-to-door and confronting a lot of people who weren't always friendly, but also making use of a prepared spiel which was clearly misleading. Instead of revealing to potential customers that I was being paid a commission for every new subscription, I told them that I would receive a certain number of points and that, if I racked up enough points, I would then win a fabulous prize. All this nonsense was put down on paper for me to learn. Besides the opening address, various arguments were also there to deal with commonplace objections. For example, if a person were to tell me that they got all their news from the TV or radio, I was to reply, with all the wisdom of a thirteen-year-old, that only a newspaper could provide in-depth coverage.

My mother was never one to expect me to do anything against my conscience and so I'm sure she would have advised me to quit the job if it were truly troubling me. But the fact is I didn't mention the problem to her and I think the reason for this is that, if I had used it as an excuse to avoid difficulty at this critical time of our lives, I would have felt weak and ineffectual. I probably would have thought that, having not conquered my misgivings for the sake of the greater good, I myself had failed and was now following in the footsteps of my father.

But if I had truly managed to stigmatize and root out weakness and ineffectuality as I perhaps thought I had, the feeling of being weak and ineffectual had barely begun to afflict me. How much I was going to suffer over the next few years for the lack of a Mr. Beach. For the lack of someone whom I could have admired and looked up to and respected. Someone who, if things weren't going well or if I failed at some task or project or if I was simply feeling bad for no apparent reason, would have offered me good sound advice and encouragement as he had done on more than one occasion.

So it was that the move from Chambly to Winnipeg was the transition from all that I was as a child to all that I would become as a man. It was not only innocence and naivety that I left behind but also the untroubled sense of myself. In Chambly I had enjoyed for several years all the fruits of a nearly perfect childhood. I had lived in a fine house in a beautiful town with a wonderful family and plenty of friends. I had enjoyed recognition and success from a young age and was pleased with the general order of both human and natural events. Only at the very end did I experience some rough handling on the part of life. If it had been otherwise, if my family had kept together and my father had remained reasonably whole and sound, I might have gone down a much different path and not have remained so unconsciously devoted to his.

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