

Excerpt from *The Case Against Death*:

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I am acquainted with a very young woman. She is a student who is always quitting or returning to graduate school. She lives with friends in a little house across from mine on an urban street in Philadelphia. The street, too narrow for traffic, is as quiet as a country lane and considered safe, though it is surrounded by the usual city dangers. She is just coming from her job a few blocks away, her bag hanging from a strap across her shoulder. It is nearly midnight, and someone is following her. She will tell me later she was praying to be able to reach Professor Davis's house before the man attacked her. She hoped to God Prof. Davis was at home. (I am inside my own small house eating ice cream from a cup, which I picked up on the way back from a movie.) The man strikes her. I hear the thump of her body on the concrete surface, a sound totally foreign and instantly identifiable, then her exasperated angry shout. These are attached houses. The street is so close it is as if the attack took place in the next room. I rush out pushing my dog ahead of me. (I will tell all this to a friend a few days later.) I see two people, a tall female, a short wiry male. The demands of reality are confusing, and my eyes can't do the work they are supposed to do. If it's a lovers' quarrel, I

reason, I shouldn't interfere. I yell in a useless voice, "Stop that!" as if to say they are both offending the peace. The male is dragging the female's prone body along the pavement by a rope tied to her wrists: a bound woman, some sexual game spilled out of doors. My dog, a huge animal, barks with excitement but does nothing else. Then I recognize my friend: "Is that you?" speaking her name with surprise. All of it happens in three seconds. The mugger, unintimidated by me and my dog, does not let go. He wants that handbag and its money. It is good weather. The doors along the street are open. A neighbor hearing the noise rushes from his small house, at once tackles the mugger and pins him, freeing the woman. Another neighbor runs out of his house and jumps on too. Together they hold the attacker down jammed against a wall, his face crushed into the sidewalk. They keep hitting him with their fists. I will see blood there next day. "Fuck you! Fuck you!" they yell. "I could kill you right now!"--all of them in a heap waiting for the police--"I'd be well within my rights!" The mugger lies as if asleep under their weight, head on the sidewalk, eyes closed. I hear him murmur for us as if from a script, "I did it to get money for drugs"--beginning a process of claims.

He is black, frail-looking.

A half dozen neighbors have appeared by now, all white,

and there is great interest. I had taken my friend into my house, called 911, calmed her (she was frightened but cool and did not need much calming), inquired after her injuries (she will learn she has a mild concussion). The police arrive within five minutes, make their arrest, praise my neighbors for their courage and promptness (citations for heroic civilian conduct will be sent to them). My friend is safe. She has preserved her handbag with its contents. She knows she ought to have let him have it, not risked her life for it. But to have kept it, kept him from having it, is, as it should be, a source of pride.

The neighbors return to their houses. I return to mine. I think uneasily: I should have done more. I should have been heroic too. I think: death is one up on me.

The colleague to whom I offer the story is a Cuban by birth, a sort of exile, though not an anti-Castro one, a scholar and an intellectual. There are no fiercer intellectuals except perhaps among the Russians. For them truth is a physical thing to be pinned as my neighbors tackled the mugger, its secrets stripped and carried off like loot. He is stimulated by what I tell him. As he sees it, a good riddling surrealism is being offered him on a plate. He knows from other talks that I am a writer who is interested in choices. He fixes me with his black-eyed, flaring look. "You failed her," he declares. He

means in my own view.

Yes, but where I was thinking of Tuan Jim, politics and honor, he has in mind Borges and irony--the kind of art which says the real truth is also funny, as in a maze novel. At the same time he knows how good art, like religion, mediates guilt and invites me to make art of this. Neither of us has said anything about the victim except to agree the streets are not safe. It's said the Jews of Mainz in the pogroms of the First Crusade committed suicide not only to evade conversion but to keep their fellow men from the sin of murder. I wrote a novel about it. I am acquainted with an ex-priest, now an artist, and I tell him the story for some reason.

We are in a restaurant off South Street eating lentil soup and waiting for our sandwiches. The signs around us are in Arabic and Hebrew, the grainy blown-up photos all of Jerusalem. The ex-priest, who looks approvingly at our Holy Land surroundings, a gray-haired, red-faced, clear-minded man, remains, he makes plain, the trained enemy of hopelessness he became in the seminary and sees this story about the Jews of Mainz as nonsense, a case of the despair that comes from failed courage dressed up after the fact to look useful. He says, "Wow!" sardonically. On the other hand, if the story is true, the Jews were right to resist forced

conversion but fools to love their Christian killers. Making the case for death against principle, I am sympathetic to the impulse to embrace whatever it is intends to kill us, to resist with suicide. Doctors see this kind of thing as do prison wardens, army officers, and concentration camp commandants. Political leaders make political use of it every day, persuading us to destroy ourselves rather than them as we ought to do. The ex-priest says, No, no. He does not mean that I'm entirely wrong, only that it's all beside a point he does not feel like making. A mutual friend, finding we lived in the same neighborhood and had art in common, thought we might enjoy meeting. This lunch is the introduction. It is late October. He wants to know if I am interested in going to a Hallowe'en party. "There'll be some nudity," he warns, giving The party a rating.

"I'm not much on parties. I'll see."

There are women who pursue men on death row. They read about a case in a newspaper and write a letter. They are to be seen in visiting rooms head to head with the clean, tamed men. Stroking the steel screen he sits behind, she drops into her con's soul as if into a bath. Where it is allowed, she holds him. They hang on like marathon dancers. A soft sand of words slides under them. They engage in correspondence, court, quarrel, patch things up

over the phone or through some passionate go-between, decide to marry, do it either by mail or in the presence of the law in a courtroom after a hearing on an appeal, everyone hot with rue, with tears, gifts. The unanswered question that is a prison is at her service. The worst men, the most dangerous, some of them young and handsome, all now unresisting subjects of the state, are safe in ways fathers, husbands, and lovers can't be. In this formal world love is projected without being resolved, like the perfected nonprogenitive love in pornography or on Keats's vase. The couple invents love as artists do: the killer shackled wrist and ankle, the woman hovering on wings. They involve guards, other cons and their women, everything that is permitted or forbidden. They deal amorously with plate glass seven-sixteenths of an inch thick. They render their bodies like painters, swap pubic hair and parings of flesh, mail themselves in Ziploc bags to preserve the perfume, make a date and, separated by miles, masturbate and come at the appointed moment. He uses a precious call and they say what it was like. The erotic word-freighted bodies rise and tumble like Whitman's eagles in midair dalliance; that is, they are like something freed by words which was only words in the first place. She believes she is opposed to capital punishment and writes her legislators. His death is

their child.

A friend of mine is a tough-minded, well-educated thinker, critic, and literary artist. This is a powerful combination in the United States where these things occur individually in individuals rarely and in combination almost never.

She is a Zionist and an aggressive fighter in the battle to keep the memory and meaning of the Holocaust alive. She affirms the Creator of the Universe but is no seeker of personal continuation or paradise. She is a traditionalist. Jews (she means Jews like herself as I understand her) see their shared faith as a conscience derived from a tradition of humane ethical behavior intended to secure social and psychological health. It is a method of sound practice written down in books which are constantly being edited. Since the rules have mystical guarantees, they are law but as law are subject to reasonable interpretation. These Jews do not conceive of a god in any ordinary way, as I take her sense, that is in a superstitious way. Nothing more is claimed as existing above or within, religiously speaking, for her than for me. My own conscience, I now see, has its credentials from a pre-religious instinct. Without tradition to teach it how to stand firm, with only the individual's gentlemanly moral relativism to carry it, without the law, I believe she

means to say, such a conscience may turn slippery in a tight moral place, and then civilization, so hard-fought to achieve and maintain, risks its Alexanders and Hitlers.

The matter of conscience stands between us. "The Jews who went to their deaths in the Holocaust, not knowing why but knowing the meaning of their lives as Jews, were in some sense more redeemed in the eyes of history than those who went with a sense of mistaken identity," she said in an interview in *The New York Times* in 1989. She is opposed to capital punishment. "I am in total agreement with your passion here," she wrote concerning an article of mine about legal killing by the injection of poison. This was in 1990 during the Iraq war. "But then I wonder whether you bring the same passion (no, not the same, but something not far) to the need to stop Saddam Hussein: a need which may involve killing, including some five-year-old born helplessly into Iraq 'citizenship'--i.e. a slave and prisoner of a murderous regime. In short, I am never sure whether your opposition to capital punishment in a democracy (an opposition I share 100%) blends into the sort of pacifism that will not undertake self-defense or uprooting blatant tyranny when the tyrant stands ready (again! those 5,000 dissenting Kurds gassed to death) to germ, gas and nuke."

She adduces the Talmud: "Whoever is merciful to the

cruel will end by being indifferent to the innocent." I need our correspondence because I think she is right in what she says and simultaneously wrong. This impossibility, possible only because it is something of the senses and nothing to do with certainty, requires me to call in and examine views derived from a nonreligious conscience, views I've held thoughtlessly for years, as it were religiously. She is able to make me feel dishonorable because I've refused to let my mind work as if it were inside a Jew. I had thought of the imponderable called honor as a guide. Honor was derived from conscience, which did not come with education but was a talent. Tradition might encourage it but could not give it, let alone effectively enforce it. Innocence is commonplace, evil a choice compelled by evil from which good may come; cruelty, though more common than honor, is not the only option for the cruel to whom I may be merciful.

I know she knows the death of the five-year-old is bad as distinct from wrong. I believe it is always wrong and sometimes "right," certainly bad. I turn out to be merciless to the cruel after all on Wednesdays and Fridays. We work to compose these contradictions. We discuss mercy, necessity, evil, sacrifice, honor, will, and conscience. Chaos, which is death, never eases its hold on our imaginations, but it lets its chaotic character be fractionally organized.

As of January 1977, there were 80 men on death row in Florida State Prison.

"It is a matter of paramount importance to me," Bob Sullivan said without irony, when I asked if he would be willing to talk to me about the death penalty. I looked through the bars at him. His dark cell was heaped with books and writing material. His face hung like a moon.

As to his being the subject of a book: well, he could speak to his counsel. He was considering. He had to be careful how he moved in such a matter. Also, he was busy: a voluminous correspondence. We could have a preliminary meeting and see. That was the way he talked.

The guard who escorted me swung his keys. The cell block was shabby. There was a shower-like heat and smell, a terrific noise of steel slamming steel, of yelling. The death row men slept late like invalids, wrapped in sheets. They hung towels on strings over their barred doors, sat on their stainless steel toilets and stared bitterly at me as I walked past. Each cell had its small TV set mounted in an upper corner. Almost all of these were turned on, volume high, all day long until lights-out: soaps, game shows, cop shows.

Gary Gilmore had just been killed in Utah under its new laws as revised according to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1976 guidelines. Other executions, it was expected, would follow

quickly. In fact, there was to be a pause. Florida would take two more years to execute its first man, then pause again until late 1983. Then, as death row appeals ran out and the pace picked up across the country, Florida would begin to move fast too. Ten years after that it would be second in numbers killed only to Texas among the 38 states with execution laws, the latter with nearly 60 men dead by 1993-94, Florida with a few over 30. These numbers, provided by an organization called the Legal Defense Fund, also show that of the total of nearly 200 executed within 17 years of capital punishment's reinstatement in this country 55% were white, 40% black; of their victims some 84% were white, 13% black, showing that it is safer to kill a black man in America than a white at the end of the 20th century just as it was at the beginning.

Prisons do their work in the countryside. In 1977 the white rural South, still sullen and troubled in the wake of the black liberation movement, knew a cynical Northern press was waiting for a racist bloodbath. There was to be one, as the figures show, but it came later. In those early days death row whites like Sullivan were at ironic added risk. Not only was he white and therefore a likely early execution, but he had had some college education and become a talkative, persistent jailhouse lawyer, which probably irritated the

Florida criminal justice system into a further acceleration of its attack on him.

In the writ room where lawyers and clients meet, Sullivan and I met and talked. R-Wing's counselor and liaison with convicts' families and people like me sat by, put in his two cents when he felt like it.

"His people aren't too well," he said in a kindly way when Sullivan mentioned them. "His father's had a stroke. Nice people"--nodding. "I like them. The truth is I like people," as if the admission in this place were going to surprise me.

Later in the day the counselor would show me the electric chair in which Sullivan was to be killed. It was of heavily cut oak, broad, yellow in color. He looked it over, pointing out this and that, said to the guard on duty in his soft Southern voice, "I believe this thing needs new straps, don't it?" then made a joke (Bob had been on death row for years; he was fat and had grown fatter each year): "When they execute old Sullivan they'll have a tough time getting him in that chair"--indicating the seat broad enough for two ordinary men. "I don't believe he'll fit."

The immediate inspiration for the joke came from the fact that the counselor had arranged for lunch to be brought in to us because my interview would make the convict miss chow,

and Sullivan had worked on him to be permitted two lunches, something I learned his guards, proud of his size, allowed now and then. It was also because the interview was an occasion. The counselor had said he would see what could be done.

During this visit and a subsequent one, Sullivan talked about his place in the appeals process, his correspondence on his own and others' behalf (it would include me once he had my address), his family and childhood, his schooling, the prison and its life, capital punishment, and the laws regarding it. He had become a reformer in the cause of abolition as well as a paralegal. All of R-Wing's cases interested him. He was precise, factual, objective. He talked about sex on death row ("How? Through the bars, one man on one side, one on the other, whether it be oral sex or anal sex .") He talked about love as distinct from that, about drugs, about food.

Sullivan must have weighed 280 pounds. He sat hunched over his thick fingers, looking up through curly dark hair. He would turn his massive head and gaze out at the flat pastures of the prison farm, at tractors working, and talk about freedom in his pedant's style, then look to be sure I wrote it down. From where we sat we could see the dogs in the run at the prison's inner perimeter. He knew them all by

sight, had given some names, knew the breeds' characteristics. Most were gentle, he said. He guessed they were meant to give warning, since he knew they would probably not attack. He watched birds flock, said, "They represent freedom, which is my ultimate goal," and waited until I had made the note. Mobilized to save his life, running out of time, his style was that of a conservative businessman in a bind: something had to be realized on even the smallest investment. He was also like the businessman who does his own TV commercial and breeds distrust because he is a bad actor.

I was struck by our likeness, not in the sentimental sense as man to man, though there is always that, nor in particulars since we didn't look alike, but in his focussed use of the Word, which was like a writer's concentration, and, though he was flat and literal, in the hunger with which he appealed to me with it and with which I appeal to you, demonstrating the metaphor hope makes of hunger and also showing common appetite. I was familiar with both.

Even Sullivan's eyelids were fat, even his earlobes. He wanted to explain his compulsion. "My only possible interest in here is eating. It's all I have. I eat. I don't smoke." The counselor left us to have his lunch at home, and our food arrived, brought by a runaround. Bob had been given his

two dinners--chicken and veal--two Cokes, two pieces of cake.

We went at our food with passion. In this place my fish sandwich tasted as good as the food of my childhood, our cook of the year smiling from the stove at her saint eating his worries away: hot, sweet, heavily salted food which worked as only whiskey would later, bringing mitigation and balm. Sullivan finished the food on his plates, wiped them with bread, ate that, ate the desserts, drained his Cokes, and looked for more like a dog.

He would be killed six years later in 1983, Florida's second execution under their new law, ninth in the United States subsequent to the reintroduction by the United States Supreme Court of homicide as a tool to be used in dealing with homicide.

There was a boy in my class in sixth grade who was an odd one out. He was fat, short-armed, frog-necked, awkward, a recess bully. He fell from his seat in a fit at the Christmas play and was later removed from school. But before then he had come to my house once or twice and put on manners. We played marbles using the pattern in the carpet as a circle, cards, Pick-Up-Stix. We looked through new car brochures (my family was about to get a Plymouth), read the comics in the newspaper my father brought home.

These activities made the boy restless, and any pause in them reminded him of his wordless hunger. He lingered in the kitchen as dinner was prepared. He wanted something, he didn't know what: food at least. So we ate cookies, cake, a whole quart of milk, cheese, never spoiling our appetites, which were unappeasable. He did not stay to dinner, I don't know why; there was no shyness on his part; probably he had to go home. He liked me, and I pitied him. When his disgrace, his failure came--the principal moving fast down the auditorium aisle to force a pencil lengthwise between his jaws in order (my mother, Jo, would explain later) to prevent him from choking on his tongue--I had not seen him as a playmate for some time.

Months afterward, recovered from an illness of my own but not well enough yet, Jo judged, to go to school, I was walking in an unfamiliar street of row houses and saw my friend sitting on the front steps of what was evidently his home (I had never been invited). No school for him either, but his situation was permanent, and mine was not. He sat with his knees under his chin smoking a pipe. Twelve years old and smoking where parents and neighbors could see! It was plain he had permission.

I sensed even then that such permission was a capital punishment. Lost to life, he was not denied dangerous

pleasures. The lesson concerned bad luck--a sort of crime--and surrender on one side, activity and the approving support of social discipline on the other: the law is for those who are privileged to be saved.

We talked. I made sober inquiries--"I hope you're okay"--then passed by, an invalid myself, which I always enjoyed, but still under the law, while he drew at his corn cob, face swollen, eyes like pins seeing things invisible to me.

We are flattened into the death-free endless years of being children, our teachers right in thinking themselves critical in our making: scientists, scholars, housewives, salesmen, an artist, a writer, a murderer: we really are molten as advertised, present only in softest, hottest form, filling what we're poured into, spilling out to be poured again. We smell deeply of unwashed bodies, urine, breakfast, and rising bread--the exhalation of the service institution and its inmates. We poke each other, yawn like hippos. It is an illness, this backward-slipping time. Days take weeks, the weeks months, and so on. Our particular teacher is a beautiful young woman, even younger than our beautiful young mothers, so that she could be loved. But she clouds the blackboards with misery and information like tears, and we don't love her. Her psalm of the morning assembly murmurs in the varnished corners, her salute to

the flag, her roll call, her talk of tardiness. The long windows with paper flowers pasted on the lower panes fill up with her fog. There's no end to it. Something called "cooperation," two dots over the second "o," is an event to be reported on. Some of us do not cooperate. "Christopher's cooperation is poor" in 1936, 1937, and 1938. The months of those years remain undigested. They lie like cement against the stomach and make me sad today.

Mrs. Grady fourth grade, Miss Olsen fifth grade.

I get sick, of course. I am frequently ill with abscesses in the ear canal and am kept at home for long periods. It becomes necessary to hire a tutor. She or he has no face, but finally, with Jo's help (we walk on the beach, and I recite), I am able to memorize the multiplication tables and have something to use against the enemy. Fractions is another matter, but a little headway is made even there.

The class sends a book called *The Storybook of How We Live*. It is a '30s book about progress, streamlined, well-produced, written and illustrated by Maud and Miska Petersham. An early drawing represents a cave boy trying to start a fire, the last a fat airplane. I study it with passion as I do any book with illustrations. Preferring that boy to myself, I become him.

Meanwhile I tell myself the other life goes on. This

presents a problem which, grown-up, I must address in all my work, including this: how can the school, the chanting classroom go on without me? More to the point, how can its members, teacher as well, exist at all without my presence to confirm them? It is an invasion, not the first but the most poignant so far, of the disease that prevents verification of the other and that loves to breed in the excessively self-conscious. I accept that the class goes on as I accept that I am not the boy in the cave but don't feel either. I also believe it when I'm told that life will make demands, but because I give its uninteresting events no credit for reality I don't bother to learn ordinary things like the addition of fractional numbers; I don't feel them. It makes me anxious of course. (In kindergarten I dreamed of myself living alone in New York, which was where our uncle Marc lived. I sit in my apartment. I have plenty of money. But though I'm very hungry I am unable to go out to a restaurant because I can't tie my shoelaces.) "Christopher Davis, from his classmates and teacher, November, 1936" in Miss Olsen's blackboard hand on the blank front page of the book. I am Kit. The cold gift is not to me.

When I return a month later, my real name whispered as if a celebrity--a father or a fireman--has walked in, I like school briefly. An hour more and the fog is back. She has

explained something. Everyone else is nodding.

Now the 20 years of 1937. We sit helpless, our feet in skinned shoes under the desks growing into stones, our huge heads nodding. Ink wells, penholders, penwipers, rubber erasers. My nibs are crusty and I am dirty too--plump hands inky, the nails and infant creases in the wrists mysteriously filled with dirt by noon. The boys wear their bagging corduroy knickerbockers with shame, wishing for long pants. The speckled cloth, hard as cardboard when new, goes limp in a week. Stockings and Depression sweaters are printed with diamond patterns. The girls wear white socks, dresses to their ankles, collars stiff with starch and polished with ironing, ribbons in their hair. They flare their nostrils, gather up the boring words, and give them back. They are smart and clean. The boys play ball games in the concrete yard. I am not the last chosen or the first. For the right look we stretch the elastic at the knickers' knees and allow them and the stockings to fall at least halfway to the ankles. We pitch bottle caps and pennies against the school wall, trade marbles and chewing gum cards (bright yellow Japanese in uniform, each with a mustache, slaughtering Manchurian women and babies). I go home for lunch and reflect concerning a poor grade: "Anyhow, I have my health back. That's the important thing." The maid opens

a can, feeds me spaghetti in orange sauce, soft white bread with butter, cake, milk. At school again in the undying afternoon I look out of the window to the conclusion of the short street down which I have just walked, see the dunes, a scrap of gray ocean, and white sky. Mouth ajar, I dream of the end of the century to which I have now come.

My family moved to Ventnor on the New Jersey coast when I was nearly eight because Dr. Bob felt the sea air might benefit me. Ventnor is on the same barrier island as Atlantic City. We had come to one or another of the resorts for our summers. Now it appeared we had come to stay. As it turned out, the clean air was of no apparent use, I began to outgrow whatever was wrong, and we moved back to Philadelphia a week before Germany's attack on Poland three years later.

But after that first summer of 1936 when the vacationers had gone we remained. It was odd to have the beach to ourselves as our playground. We made new friends, started new schools. My brother Stephen, nearly three years older, was in the Ventnor Avenue junior High School. I was in the Troy Avenue Grammar School across the common yard behind it. I began the third grade.

My brother was a good scholar. As I've indicated, I did not do well, using charm where I could to push the burden

of confusion and failures aside, falling farther behind as the curriculum's demands increased. I lived by imagination then as now. Imagination was supposed to be restricted to the classroom hour set aside for it, and mine was not. In that school I learned only that I could do almost nothing successfully that anyone else could do with ease. Mild winters, the Atlantic tamed at our elbow, the gridiron garden of streets of middleclass bungalows with here and there the white summer palace of a Philadelphia builder or gangster; the fishy dampness; the flat, salt, intelligent sea light that would addict me to light forever; and the heat-soaked summer when you had only to step outside to be on the silky beach or in the sea. We did not stir. Everything was there for us. Difficulties were deferred; if they could not be, there was plenty of protection.

Mrs. Grady asked me to have a test paper with a failing grade signed by one of my parents, and I felt I could not do it. I was ashamed because I did not like to trouble my friendly family in cases where charm and guile, such as I could work, hadn't helped. Since they guarded me, it was only fair that I guard them from this failure of mine. I took the paper home, brought it back unsigned, and said, as if seeing the empty house had reminded me, I'd forgotten my parents were on vacation, and even supplied the name of a

Florida hotel. I didn't think Mrs. Grady would want the maid to sign it. She sent me to the principal's office and, when she could, came along to prosecute. The male principal made me phone and say what I had done.

"Put him on," Jo said.

He spoke, listened, looked alert. (I would learn she had told him, "I'm coming straight over to take Kit out of school.") She arrived, saw my condition, made a speech ("Can't you come up with a more humane way to handle a child's commonplace lie?"), and we left. Jo advised me not to tell lies but to do a better job of it if I had to.

In this aware family it was understood that a child should be left to deal with his own difficulties where possible. But that reckoned without the conscientious adult's passion for justice, which is as helpless as any of the flesh. If I couldn't or wouldn't deal with my crisis, someone angry would. Jo came and satisfied her general rage in a specific way, and we were both pleased. On the other side, when I had been briefly a boys' room monitor--a cop--and was reporting everyone in sight because everyone was guilty of something, a sullen mob appeared outside our house one afternoon. Jo did not approve of my political position here and made me go out to them, suggesting a line of defense that included my resignation of the office. It came off

because I was good at talking and because I felt Jo at my back.

After the return to Philadelphia, in the seventh grade in junior high school, I was harrassed by a bully. Our school was at a hub of three neighborhoods--Jewish, Negro, and Italian. There was a fourth neighborhood of large brick and stone houses farther off where white Protestants and some Catholics lived, and of course this was where we lived too, though we were nominally Jewish. (Why I say "of course" and "nominally" should become clear.) We were just at the city line. Beyond, out of reach of city taxes and undesirables, lived the very prosperous in a sequence of communities running west called the Main Line.

Among the three neighborhoods a state of quelled war existed. It worked out to Italians (Catholics) against Jews and, less persistently, Italians against blacks. The blacks, Negroes then, kept to themselves and were pacific in the school's neutral territory. I was taken for Italian by a Jewish champion, called a dago, and knocked down. The actual Italian bully (our ways home coincided for a few blocks) more accurately called me a kike and stole the golf ball I had challenged myself in my usual counting auto-hypnosis to bounce without stopping the entire walk home. The boy's name was Gabriel.

It was less the slur that enraged my mother than the insolent theft, however petty. Robbery was the intent and the crime, the fascist's violence only the weapon, and Jo was no more to be distracted from that fact than the prosecutors at Nuremberg would be six years later. Into the car. We tracked Gabriel and discovered him loitering on a street corner in a no-man's-land between neighborhoods. I hid behind the front seat. Jo confronted him and talked to him about democracy and justice. She demanded the golf ball, did not get it (he did not have it). When I looked, I saw, not surprisingly, fear on Gabriel's face and was enlightened by it. Deeply curious about others, fair in victory, romantic, Jo did not forget to point out to me that Gabriel was a beautiful name and that the boy had been "interesting looking."

One of the people who visited our house in Ventnor was a dramatic figure named Alvah Bessie. He was a novelist, later a screen writer. He had been a flier for the Loyalists in the Spanish civil war. After their divorce his first wife married a man who committed a murder. On his return from Spain Bessie went to his ex-wife's aid. He wrote about the case and, as he traveled the country to plead the cause of Republican Spain, spoke privately on behalf of the convict to get support for his defense and later for his appeals.

Jo worked locally in Atlantic City for Spanish War Relief.

I think she helped organize the branch. The committee held pay-parties and meetings with speakers and films to raise money for ambulances and medical supplies. Bessie must have come from New York to address a fundraising meeting and stayed at our house.

In the early years of the '30s Alvah Bessie had lived with his wife on a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. When they were divorced his ex-wife remained in the house, and a drifter (Bessie would call him Ed in the novel he came to write) who had done odd jobs for them stayed on to work for her. She (Norah, a schoolteacher with a child in the book, the widow of a flier) was a writer too. She was educated and worldly. The man had been raised in poverty and known the worst of Depression America. He had been on the dole, traveled by boxcar, stolen, slept on grates and in barns, and done time in prison. He was hopeful and willing, however, and wanted to be a better man. The two became lovers (my brother and I nodded: we understood) and against the odds, the world being what it was, married.

Jo told us these things after Bessie had gone. Her manner was direct, full of sympathy, grownup to grownup: this would be useful for her boys to hear. Jo taught children by assuming the capacity to understand nearly anything. With a lag, we always thought we understood. I knew what divorce

meant, more or less what it meant for people to become lovers. Family friends, people we had met, lived together unmarried. Our uncle Marc, the composer, had done so. Jo and Marc were the children of divorced parents. (It was Jo, though Marc was the creative genius, who had been the injured family's Scheherazade, keeping back the day and its threats with theater.)

There was no money in the farmhouse, no work for the new husband or the educated, high-class wife. The man "adored" the prize he had taken from a life he'd seen only at movies and wanted to keep her in style. He got his money as he had before, by stealing it. One night he robbed a man who had given him a lift in his car. When the victim struggled he killed him. He went home, handed his wife the money, and walked into town to the police. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death.

What mattered to Jo were people, and this in spite of the unforgivingly theoretical political medium in which the family, on her side anyway, swam and by means of which the generalized People were to be relieved. She and a few other individuals were in a war against the death that was quick to sneak in if we and they were not on permanent guard--death in the shape of cops, bosses, Nazis, bad luck, anyone's greed (even that of those on one's side), a mistake

in judgment, common ignorance, the capitalist system that made a man steal for bread or love.

My brother Stephen and I, young deacons of the left, passed wicker baskets full of badges up and down the rows at War Relief meetings, the colors of Republican Spain around our arms, watched the coins and scarce Depression greenbacks accumulate. The current wasn't in that. But a soldier or volunteer field doctor came to give his speech, or The Spanish Earth was projected onto a hairy screen, dragonfly planes sketched on the sky or suddenly dropping, sirens crackling, silent bombs and oily smoke, running people (the very old and children like us running!), the choked music (our uncle Marc had scored it), which, with the narrating voice, told us how to see and what to feel--this shocking participation made possible by art showed us the glamor of offering the self and was, for me, a way to begin to verify others. We got to bed late after these dramas, and Jo would keep us out of school and write notes. I am sure she wanted to say something about the need to stop fascism in its tracks and the importance to her children of what was for her revelation. She wrote instead that we had been kept out for an "educational experience." The school nurse, to whom we had to report, read the notes. She had heard of this war and was sympathetic concerning the dum-dum bullets and

what she called "snippers" who would blacken their faces and shoot a wandering Fascist from cover, which made Stephen and me laugh when it was safe to do so. I've developed an ironic voice over the more than fifty years since. It comes from maintaining the distance required for thought and from the need to hide inside the truth, which is what writers do whether they are wicked or good. Jo, who kept until her death in 1987 the enthusiasm of the young woman for people, villains and heroes alike, and knew how to see them and herself as present in life, just as she managed to preserve her abstract ideals, was no artist and neither timid nor ironic except in a primitive way--"Keep it up, baby," if my brother and I were fighting, with no punishment except her disapproval to follow when we let her down. Her villains, real themselves, were indifferent to others' reality. For them, the workers from whom they stole even as they paid them, who produced the wealth that made the boss strong, were like the machines they were employed to operate when there was work. No work, a man's family went hungry, that did not give her villains any uneasiness, did not threaten them as much as seeing the man's drill press rust. People were less expensive than their extensions. That was irony and who needed it.

Sometime within the next two years, well before the fall

of 1941 when Bessie's book called Bread and a Stone was published (the death is part of the novel), not the man in the book but the actual person was killed in Pennsylvania's electric chair, his reality established by Jo's art. The book would confirm and enlarge it, but Jo had done the work first.

During the few years of my life before 1936 and Ventnor we lived in Philadelphia in a house my father helped design. That time is like looking into clean water with a few stones in it. Even the first nightmares stand out clear. The house was on a suburban street almost empty of other houses called Golf Road because of the course that was within walking distance. It was just inside Philadelphia in case there might be a call from the Republicans, since in those days Ed (we referred to him as Ed and called him Pop) still thought of city politics as an option. In that reduced time Ed is enjoying his weekend on the nearby links. He wears a sleeveless sweater under his Norfolk jacket, plusfours, a soft cap. He is thin through the arms and legs, filled out at the waist in front--his "corporation." A skinny boy from South Philadelphia, heir to 19th century immigrant poverty, he felt no shame in accumulating weight. The well-cut profile with its thin, high-bridged Jewish nose, dark heavy hair and brown gaze, the long empty upper lip, the calm gentlemanly pipe between his teeth--all are turned to a sunburnt fairway,

a sepia sky, a white moon. He is like the doe-eyed golfer in the Pierce-Arrow ad: handsomer. His eyes are opaque, a muddy yellow-brown. They are intelligent and impenetrable, yielding no information to other lawyers and little to anyone else. The glasses that cover them are taken off only for sleep. When I catch him without them--if he removes them to pinch the top of his nose where his headaches begin, or if I invade the body-smelling bedroom while he is in bed--I see that his eyes have become as small and mild as a baby's, which worries me. When he returns to his new house carrying the wood-shafted clubs in their canvas bag he makes an electrifying discovery. It is as if he had found a fifty dollar bill on the sidewalk: he lifts me, holds me against the sky, inhales me, and I inhale his tobacco and whiskery male smell.

Ed had been a successful lawyer in the '20s and would be again by the end of the '30s. Just before the crash he built, with the help of an architect friend, his dream house into a steep bank on a lot above the street. It was a tall, gabled, romantic-looking place of halftimber and whitewashed brick. It had a slate roof and stone steps, a terrace and rock garden on the broad back lawn. The leaded windows were vertical and swung open. Inside was a dining room that looked down through arches to the sunken living room

where an armorial lion in ceramic relief reared against the chimney wall. Beyond was Ed's lawyerly study--steel engravings on the panelling, pipes and birds with glass eyes in a tree of carved chestnut, a humidior for cigars, a medallion with a bearded god in profile, and framed degrees and certificates. The place remained for years my ideal of domestic architecture. Jo must have teased my father about the lion and its suggestion of royalty, because it was soon covered by a painting of dancing African women with exposed breasts and exaggerated lips in the admiring-defamatory Decorative manner of the period. The painting interested a taste for horror, but I wanted the lion more and would beg to see it; then someone would lift the women and let me look.

The house was a lot to manage in those hard years, and my father soon had to sell it; so that the reason for moving to Ventnor, apart from my health, was money. Years later Jo would tell me she had had to ask each morning if Ed could afford five dollars for the day's necessities, and he would take out his wallet and see. Yet we had servants--a middle-class Depression anomaly--who lived with us for their keep and a few dollars a month.

Curtis drove the yellow Franklin touring car my father had bought used just before the crash. I remember Curtis

dressing me in the mornings, a neat, thin, crisp-haired black man, gentle and humorous. He drove Ed to the station for his commute to town and picked him up at night, shopped, did gardening, and other light chores. Once, while he gardened at the front of the house, I climbed into the Franklin and found out how to release its emergency brake. Curtis ran after the car as it began to roll down our hill, jumped in, and stopped it, a hero.

Effie was in the kitchen. Jo had a job then--a celebrity show on radio (she interviewed Basil Rathbone, Ethel Barrymore, and Alla Nazimova whom she was said to resemble)--so we were often in Effie's charge. Our use of our parents' first names came from her. She called our mother Miss Jo in the Southern style. If there was heavy work, her powerful little husband, called Crump by all of us, arrived to do it.

There were visitors and parties. Effie cooked, Curtis tended bar, served, and collected tips from guests. My memory puts him in a houseboy's white coat, but that's probably from movies I saw later. We had a dog, a stray that followed my father home one day. He was part chow with a blue tongue, and we named him Brownie. A year later he was poisoned by a neighbor, or so we were all convinced. My recollection concerning the event must be well protected

by whatever I was told or by the fact that it had happened out of my sight, because I have no emotions to report. Stephen and I ate in the kitchen. Effie made us plain meals and often, because we demanded it, a silky milk pudding called junket, which I liked. Marc came now and then alone or with Eva. They were recently married or soon would be. I have a single memory of her. She is leaning against a kitchen cabinet, thin as rope, a drink in one narrow hand, a cigarette in the other, just turning her powerful attention to me, having asked one of those questions adults ask who forget the daze in which small children spend their lives. She was a writer: a little boy might teach her something. She had a white, broadcheeked, hollow face like a cat's, hair cut short, a wide mouth, and bad skin. She wore trousers at a time when women did not do that. Within five years she would be dead, having "to all intents and purposes", Jo would say, ceased to live when her father, whom she adored, died of cancer. She had not liked food very much anyhow; after her father's death she ate almost nothing and died from the effects of malnutrition. The story of her death and Marc's response to it became, with that of the executed drifter and a half dozen other serious, educating stories, one of Jo's most potent. Sam, Jo's father, came to the house, Maddie with him, his second wife and Jo's best friend. (She was Jo's age.)

There were always people on the weekends. Ten years later one of them would contribute to the making of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and take pride in it. Another became one of the country's foremost constitutional lawyers and was a friend to the oppressed. His daughter would grow up to be a revolutionary martyr and spend the best part of her life in prison. There was a woman who was a professional designer of ceramic sculpture, a man who would one day write successful Hollywood movies, another who went to Spain with the International Brigades. They were hard-working and serious, also self-mocking, full of weekend energy and having a good time at Jo and Ed's hospitable house. I visualize one of them, the curly-haired younger brother of the physicist. He is called Billy. His eyes are set in a net of black lines because he is exhausted by his medical studies (he is to become a radiologist). Ferociously amused, he rises from his canvas sling chair, stands on his hands, and walks in jolts across the summer lawn, trousers falling upward to expose his pale calves, his boy's old face dark red; we applaud.

Men building the rock garden at the far end of the lawn surprise a large harmless snake, kill him, and show the corpse with pride. I am attracted by the violence and repelled by it. The life cooling on a digging fork has a

breathless focus and is an early push in the direction of art.

Neighbors beyond the rear garden are rich owners of a distillery. Their sons with whom we play are mad, a cloud of danger in all their games. We must have known other crazy children, I see looking back, the madness made to seem usual by the chaotic character common to every childhood. One of the neighbors' sons would grow up, try to save the earth single-handed, and fail. Stephen returns from a birthday party at their house, to which I could not go because I was sick, bringing the basket of candy and party favors that should have been mine. We fight about something. I would have used sweetness as a weapon. Deranged by the party and my loaded goodness, my brother throws the basket away with its paper ruffle and its candy, says he will tell the kids in his class at school that I still, at six, wet the bed. It makes me hysterical to discover injustice and unkindness in the midst of domestic loving.

A mulberry tree like a green umbrella stands in the front yard. Birds eat its fruit and drop purple dung: cause and effect. Filled with an inviting light, the tree offers itself in dreams.

We drive downtown in a warm rain to pick up my father at his office. (He says "ah-ffice, a Philadelphian, and has named his car "Yella Bella." I know his phone number--

Kingsley 4310--and call him from time to time or am put on the phone to say how I am and ask how he is.) The street of smooth red Belgian blocks has blue and yellow roots. An exploding sidewalk, black umbrellas hurrying, a policeman on a box in a rubber slicker just turning his semaphore; the buildings with wet beards: Wanamaker's, the Widener Building, Girard's white temple: I stare, self-hypnotizing, slipping under. Ycars later Elizabeth Bishop will give me a racial context: "Why should you be one too?" Men of affairs, in no rush to go home, sit on in pale old chambers inside the wet city, smelling like fathers of brass, witch hazel, leather, ironed linen, sweat and tobacco; from under their powerful clothing comes an anticipating waxy whiff of sperm withheld. My father runs to us, ducking as if under fire, wrenches open the driver's door as Jo moves over, hurls in his briefcase, the wet Evening Bulletin: "It's pouring!" I sit in back, borne in the deepest V of the human sexual valley, secure as a man with a gun, lips apart, heart hot. I am getting sick.

Or Jo is seated alone (except for me) in the living room in a deep chair. She smokes a Lucky Strike. Around her on tables are objects Marc has brought or had sent back from Berlin, Dubrovnik, Belgium, Paris, Capri, Ibiza, England--places where he or he and Eva studied or worked--she on

the long novel that will never be published and articles for Modern Music, he on his music and lectures. Jo talks into the upright telephone. The doors are open to the evening and the flagged terrace and garden. My father is on the other end of the line. I know he's there because I hear the dark vibration of his voice, feel its strength. He is saying he must stay late at the office, will be home in time only to go straight out again with her.

The illnesses come deliberately. The room grows small. My olive-skinned, dark-haired mother in her "hostess gown", phone at her ear, her pearls red with sunset, grows small as well, the cigarette a prick of fire; she slides away as if on a track. She has been throwing suspicious looks. Now, far off, she says, "Okay, baby. What is it?" When I realize I am sick and say so, I am scared, also released because the burden of terror has been shifted from me to her.

Probably she was not wearing pearls. She did not begin to smoke until well after I was born in 1928, so this may have been pre-addiction. Like Sam, her charmer of a father, she made theater of taking a drink but was not a drinker. Marc drank too much, as I would, but addiction was not a problem with either of us, nor for my brother. We can stop but would rather not. Both Stephen and I were allowed to smoke if we wanted and have cocktails in the dusk from the

age of sixteen.

Ed, when he comes home, finds me already in bed, Effie hovering. He is frightened, his strength flickering. Jo is practical, pitying, comfortable. I feel their sympathy's heat; I feel their wish to be hurt in my place. However, it is important for business reasons that they go to the dinner party or the banquet, and the prospect increases my pain. "Shall I stay?" Jo keeps asking Ed and Effie. I say yes. Conscientiously, she finally agrees. Or I whisper, "No, it's okay. You can go"--"heaping coals of fire," as she will say years later describing such events.

Stephen had a catastrophe of an illness at five, an infection that required a double mastoidectomy and nearly killed him. Afterwards, as if he had endured enough, he was relatively free of typical childhood illnesses. The abscesses that developed in my ear canals usually required lancing. These painful operations were performed in the bedroom, once or twice with chloroform to put me to sleep--a heartcrushing, brutally invasive smell, vomiting afterward. When I was sick with a contagious disease Stephen moved out of our room, sometimes to live for a week in center city at the Leof house with Sam and Maddie and the rest and go to school from there. When he had one of the diseases I made the trip.

Our room was over the driveway, the stairs from the first floor behind our beds. Stephen whispered weeks' long stories in installments to get us to sleep. In this serial we were bachelors with means, each with a son. It was the sons, fearless projections, who had the adventures while the fathers, Ed-like, made cautious suggestions in regard to health and safety. Our dangerous holidays were in the Florida mountains, which Stephen had created in an earth upheaval of his own. Headlights swept our ceiling, voices below, a long or short wait, then Jo and Ed on the stairs at midnight. We should not be awake, but Jo was not angry when we were. If I was lucky, she would sit on my bed instead of Stephen's to tell us about their evening, her perfumed Persian lamb, a '20s relic, cold and heavy across my feet. If I was sick and alone, I would lie feverish, dreaming and waiting, and greet my mother with love and anger. By the time I was seven I had been thoroughly corrupted by adults who responded in too fixed and pained a way to my demands for sympathy.

Dr. Bob, blond, pink-lashed, and bulletheaded, came in his bright tweeds and red brogans. He sat on the bed as well, an uninvited weight, and talked to Jo who stood by. Snow was on my windowsill, and the wind tore at it. He was cold and clean like the snow. He hurt me and then flirted with Jo,

which I observed carefully, a jealous little novelist. His clean gold-rimmed glasses shone; he used the awful tools. Almost never drawn except with dislike (he did not sympathize sufficiently), Dr. Bob was to become all of my fictional doctors, icy bit players without hearts.

Curtis drank, but there was no difficulty in that, Jo made it clear, since he bothered no one doing it. It was his business. At the end of the month he would buy a bottle, shut himself in his room for the weekend, and get drunk. On Monday morning he would be sober and ready. There was never funny stuff, nothing sexual on his part with her boys--Jo was alert for that--nor with anyone else apparently. When she told us the story of Curtis's drinking later, as always both amused and observant concerning sex, she said Curtis was "not interested" in that side of things, probably not "up to it."

It turned out he stole, perhaps instead. Friends and relatives missed things--money, watches, jewelry--important items. All of it, including handbags, was finally found hidden beneath the rear seat of the Franklin, and Curtis had to go. Or under pressure of growing suspicion he left, and then the loot was found. I don't remember. Everything of this kind had to have its political and psychological subsurface. If his psychology was responsible, then the

hostility of society in its exploitation of Curtis and the vulnerability of being a Negro in America were responsible for the inverted psychology. At the same time there was the practical political sense in which judgments had to be made. When it "came down to it" people were either weak or strong, contributed usefully or did not. Curtis was condemned as weak and more or less useless, though we loved and pitied him--his choice of subservience as a way of life (never mind it was us he served; one's own weakness was not evaded) an interesting further political inference. I learned the beautiful word kleptomania and missed him. He had been a clean, intelligent man for a baby to admire.

He did not go far at first (I thought because he was attached to us) and found a job tending bar on City Line and Bala Avenues around the corner. I suppose my father, being my father, gave him a good reference. Stephen and I on our way to Saturday matinees at the Egyptian Theater (a trip to paradise marred only by Stephen having to hold my hand crossing City Line) waved to Curtis when the bar's door stood open in good weather; and he, the thief, an apron tied high across his flat stomach, his actor's mustache shaved to a line, gave us a crumpled grin and wave in return. In another year he had disappeared from there and our lives.

I lie in the bed looking out. There is ivy growing around

my window. Faceless children without privilege are in school, teachers droning. The pain has been subdued, the fever has gone down, leaving me pleasantly tired. We won't need Dr. Bob, and my week off is as good as a year. The bed is half buried in picture books, comic books, Big Little Books (all one comic strip in a collection the size of a small brick on soft sweet-smelling pulp paper). I draw gentle wars--men lobbing apples across a no-man's-land of paper. A radio is nearby: Helen Trent, Our Gal Sunday, Fibber McGee. Soup and junket on the lunch tray. When she comes home Jo will entertain me with stories of her day, all the reality I need.

Or after all Dr. Bob has come and, because the pain is serious, must return at night to lance the hot, pus-filled abscess. In the meantime he's given me something--probably tincture of opium--and I am dreaming: Death, who has come to my notice, has noticed me, is turning to look. A man is climbing the ivy. He is almost at the window. I awake in the evening, my heart beating inside a second sleepy heart, hear voices below, glass and silver, smell roasted potatoes and meat. I like food and long to be with everyone else. Someone mounts the stairs behind the head of my bed. Who is it? Everyone I love is in the dining room, so it must be someone else coming up. This foreign, absolutely real threat climbs our middleclass stairs.

I no longer remember how I heard about the killing of the man Alvah Bessie's first wife married. A radio is involved in the memory for some reason, as if the event had been narrated. But that can't be since legal killings were as common then as they are coming to be again at the end of the 20th century, and this death was not news. Perhaps I was listening when I learned about it and imagined I heard it from the radio. If Jo told us, the information would have been given firmly: I don't carry this one alone, you're not too young to know.

Though Marx was opposed to capital punishment, leftists are not, not anyhow in what they believe to be a just cause. However that is, what I learned from the moral air I breathed was that the needless destruction of a human life was a murder, whichever side of the law, a wrongful lust, for its victim a passion. I was badly frightened by my imagination's apprehension of men deliberately telling another man what he was to endure because he had offended their anger, of their forcing him into a private room in order coldly to destroy him, and emerging to look for praise, angry again when they did not get it. Where was the father, the mother while this went on? I thought of mice in a court of rats, of the moon watching. It deepened my child's attraction to and fear of the dark. But the death of Bessie's

man also made me begin to see how art might be used--thinking of his novel, the protected man speaking for the unprotected one--as something in opposition to death, a suspicion my uncle's work was to reinforce.

My recollection had been creative--mine and Jo's. Her stories were told often. To avoid boring the teller as much as the listener they evolved in repetition. If a fact was missing, a statistic required, convincing ones were devised. If drama was not there, she put it in--anecdote or dialogue. If someone needed telling off but didn't get it in life, he got it in the story. When Jo was a principal in an event, emotion was recollected so fully in tranquility that she could create whole scenes of dialogue in order to realize form--a closing of the circle that bred pleasure in her sons even when they suspected she was stretching things. In short, she had the creator's need to make use of facts to get at truth, and we had the creative auditor's ability to suspend our disbelief, accepting the fact as raw material, believing in the essence.

Bessie was born in 1904. He was Jewish as was a high percentage of Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteers (I had put him in the golden armor of the renegade Christian). He married twice, lived in poverty with his first wife in Vermont, not Bucks County, himself worked for a farmer there, wrote fiction, and at last won a Guggenheim grant to

finish a novel. He was sent to Spain by the Brooklyn Daily Eagle as their war correspondent, offended the Catholic Church in New York City with his articles, quit before he was fired, and went to the front where he fought with heroism during 1938. He was an infantry soldier, not a flier. Later, long after the war and Ventnor, a successful screenwriter, he acquired a private pilot's license.

When he returned to New York from Spain he worked for the New Masses as a drama critic, published novels including Bread and a Stone, and in 1943 went to work for Warner Brothers writing screenplays. He was not yet a screenwriter when he came to Ventnor. A movie of his, Objective Burma, was nominated for an Academy Award. He was blacklisted in 1947, one of the Hollywood Ten, and served a year in a federal prison in Texas during 1950 and 1951 for contempt of Congress, having refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Later he wrote black market screenplays, did public relations for the International Longshoremen's Union, and wrote books. He died in 1985 while editing an anthology of work by veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

The murder must have taken place in Vermont, and the drifter "Ed" would have been killed by that state, not Pennsylvania. Bucks County, the flying, the homogenized as

opposed to Jewish background of the helpful writer must all have come from Bread and a Stone and from what I would learn of Bessie's later career.

I went over the story with my mother a few years before her death. We sat on a bench in Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia after lunch at the Art Alliance, which was her club (she saw to the recruitment of black members and better pay and hours for its workers while she was on its board). The square was near both the club and the apartment house in which she and Ed lived at the end of their lives. When she sat alone there she fed the pigeons and developed conversations with people who looked interesting, especially the eccentric young and the homeless, asking them about themselves and listening seriously to the long replies. Her direction was outward. She kept dollar bills ready and passed them over to anyone who seemed to want them. That the gesture treated the decaying system's symptoms, thereby supporting it, was cold theory, of no interest in the face of need. (Her father Sam, a fundamentalist, did not give to beggars.) Once, walking on Chestnut Street, she fell near a construction site. A worker having lunch offered his milk crate, and while she sat on it and rested she did not forget to ask about his work, his union local (Ed did not represent it, she told him), to let him know her views, and to listen to his.

When she had recovered and gone on her way she talked about him as if he were a friend, and it's probable he had been "crazy" about her, to use one of the words from the '20s she used all her life, and talked about her too. This uncritical love of strangers was something I had not always liked when I was a child, but I valued it later and wished I could feel it too. People remained urgently interesting to her until her death. She mined their thought, confirming them as extensions of herself, as if they shared blood, as if her hopes depended on theirs.

That day in the square we edited the text to accommodate facts I'd uncovered and agreed on a truer version of the truth. I saw how it mattered to her, the fifty-year-old story of class dislocation and its contagion of killing. She could think of it and still be moved.

Pigeons nodded around Jo's cherrywood cane, people old and young spoke to her as they passed. A once-famous left-wing Washington journalist and wartime correspondent, retired now, stopped, gave the square a worn look, and delivered his views on the most recent damage Reagan's people and Reagan's court had done. The harm, he said, was incalculable. It would take years to get the mess in hand. It might never come right. The Republicans, the Southern Democrats were more than ever at the beck of the military

and big money, despised the people, lied to them, did them every imaginable injury, and expected and got their votes in return. He did not himself despise the people, of course, but he had to conclude there was a kind of unintelligence which could not be touched.

Jo had grown milder with the years (she was 83 that spring) as Marc, who died relatively young, had not. She was still active, now in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, recently on its national board. She said when he had gone that the man's irritability made her think of her father's. She told a story or two about the journalist, recalled him as a youth. He had been "perfectly bright and on the right side." It wasn't that she disagreed with all he'd said by any means, but she did not like the cynicism. She saw how age and the times had made him lose hope, and she was sorry for that.