



HEIBERG'S TWITCH

Robert Wexelblatt

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GULLS wheeled above the harbor, screeched cheerlessly, then stopped. It was as though they had been trapped in the sky. At the end of the breakwater the flag whipped this way and that. Three girls who had been jumping rope down by the main wharf ran to put on their quilted jackets. A couple of old men played dominoes in the café. “For the love of God, shut the door,” grumbled the one who was losing. Four boys came down the lane from the school yard kicking a leather ball. They hooted into the wind but the girls pretended not to hear them. The sea churned, turned from grey to copper green. On that northern island it took no more than five minutes for autumn to become winter.

Peter Aakenson, ignoring both the boys with their ball and the girls with their rope, ran past the jetty and straight into the café. He had to lean against a table to catch his breath. “Something’s washed. Ashore. Something. Enormous.” He pointed to the north. “Bjelsen’s Strand.”

The proprietor, who did double duty as mayor, shrugged. “Another beached whale that’ll stink if it doesn’t freeze first.”

“Excuse me,” Peter replied with dignity, his chest no longer heaving. “I’ve seen plenty of whales. Besides, it was old Karlson who sent me and you can’t say Mr. Karlson wouldn’t know a whale if he saw one.”

The pensioners rubbed their beards and went back to their game.

The proprietor grew querulous. He was not fond of Karlson. "Well, what if the old fool's seen a beached battleship? What am I supposed to do about it?"

Peter left the café in disgust, eager to tell his friends his news and lead them personally up to see whatever had come ashore on Bjelsen's Strand.

Heiberg lay stretched out under the covers watching Evastina at her cleaning, hoping the place did not smell too sour.

His four-room house lay high above the harbor town. It was built of stone still covered here and there with stucco, an old but sturdy cottage. Five paces behind it sat a stone woodshed half the size of the house itself. Heiberg had ordered the shed well filled before his arrival. The privy was attached to the house by a little walkway that could be covered and heated in winter, detached in summer. This was a sensible feature of houses on the island. At that latitude what filled privies would be frozen for all but two brief months and then people were seldom indoors.

As a child Heiberg had been forced to eat meat. Fearing for his health his parents compelled him to stay put at the table until he had gulped down the bloody gobbets that made his gorge rise. It was more a question of his digestion than his scruples but even before he went off to the university Heiberg had become a vegetarian. To the island he had brought a large supply of canned vegetables and these constituted his staple diet. Fresh food, such as goat cheese and the local bread, was carried to him daily by Evastina. He had been delighted to discover that sometime in the last century Evastina's great-grandmother had spent one summer in the house as a nursemaid to his father and

uncle. Once it had been the home of the Heibergs, but already a century ago it had devolved into a summer house. Neglected for years, it had become Heiberg's property the previous winter on the death of his cousin Albert. The notion of moving there had seized Heiberg during the summer as he felt his health failing. His friends considered it a dangerous eccentricity but they could not dissuade him; his heart was set on it. Dire warnings from his doctors had no more effect. By mid-July he had arranged for the most necessary repairs, and toward the end of August he had thanked his friends and physicians for their concern and bid them all adieu.

Long ago Heiberg had calculated how old he would have been the year the girl was born. He could see her in the kitchen and called to her.

"Evastina, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes?"

"When do you plan to marry?"

The girl turned her head. He relished the sight; she did it so pertly. "I've only just turned eighteen, Professor. There's plenty of time for that and besides, I've no such plans."

"You never think of leaving the island?"

"Every now and then. Of course, why not? Perhaps someday. We have people on the mainland. My aunt and uncle and three cousins. I've been to visit them. I may visit them again."

"Didn't you like it over there?"

"I liked it well enough but I was glad to come home. To tell the truth, my cousins were nasty little boys."

"Anyway, Evastina, I hope you will leave the island."

Heiberg said this not so much out of concern for the girl's future as because he knew for certain that he himself would never leave. That is, he spoke out of no more generous impulse than self-pity.

There was little daylight these days and Heiberg had to strain to watch Evastina move about the house. He put his finger to his eyelid and pressed lightly.

"You can't even see where its eyes were," said one woman.

"If it even had any," replied her neighbor, pulling her shawl tighter with a shudder.

The beast might have been the incarnation of all the terrors the women felt whenever their men put to sea. Most left in horror after a single glance. The men, on the other hand, were fascinated by the huge carcass. Above all they wanted it explained, classified, named. The inexplicable made them uneasy, putting out as they did almost every day on the sea, pulling creatures up from its depths. A name is always reassuring.

Those who had come into harbor first built bonfires on Bjelsen's Strand so those arriving later would be able to see as well. That night the shore was turned into a theater.

Some hypotheses were fanciful. "The damned Kraken," insisted one fellow.

"You idiot. Nothing but a sperm whale, though quite a big one, I admit."

"A sperm? Then just you tell me, where's his blow hole, eh? Where are the flukes?"

"How should I know?"

One who knew his Bible objected with respectful awe, “No, no. It’s Leviathan.”

Of late Heiberg thought chiefly of women and God. He knew that women and God are both consolations but at the same time sources of disturbance, that they are able to be the one only in proportion as they can be the other. In his youth he had run after women, though it would be equally accurate to say that he had run from them. He had thought it his duty to escape from women, that he abandon them for the sake of his work which he believed needed solitude. It was to his work and not to women that he attached what in those days was called Romance. And the work had prospered. Now, at the end of his life, his fame extended beyond his own professional circle.

It must have been the presence of Evastina that started him thinking of women. After all, he saw no one else, no students, no colleagues.

Though he had given his life to theoretical physics, the purest of all the sciences, in his private thoughts Heiberg had never entirely freed himself from the all-too-human superstition that dwells in the unmentionable depths of even a physicist’s imagination. He had always conceived of his powers as flimsy reeds that must be carefully protected. This had much to do with his rather fitful sexual life; for his model was, in a sense, Samson. To give oneself to a woman, to let oneself go in the comfort she provided, could cost him his strength and bring to an end that power that was as tenuous as a human hair. Nevertheless, it was not only in his youth that he had run after women, or allowed himself to be pursued by them. He had satisfied his desires in

middle life too, but always without relaxing. With women he remained a fist that might permit itself to be held tenderly and stroked, but which would never, never unclench.

In those days it had been women with whom he contended most and now it was God. Ever since he had first entered into real consciousness he had fervently wished to understand the physical framework of the world and had pictured his career as an arduous game. God was a useful construct, the worthy opponent whose stratagems it was his vocation to decipher; for there is a kind of comfort to be had in believing even in a Deity whose leading attributes are slyness and evasion. The God of physicists is as stern as that of the stiff-necked Hebrews and not a whit less jealous.

Heiberg had a friend from his undergraduate years who had also been occupying his thoughts of late. Erasmus Jacobson conceived, to judge from his verses, a quite different picture of God from Heiberg's, just as he had a different view of women, judging by his three marriages. What interested Jacobson was what he called the Human Condition, complete with capital letters. Their friendship had eroded over the years, worn away by separate careers. But now the differences in their orientation toward life that had seemed so rudimentary fifty years before struck Heiberg as merely vain. *To the one gate there are many paths*. It was a line from the poem Jacobson had dedicated to Heiberg on the occasion of his winning some academic prize. The physicist might have rated the poet's gesture more highly had his old friend not gone on to publish the poem. But now this line about the Gate kept running through Heiberg's head and he recalled with shame the needlessly acerbic letter he had written to Erasmus at the time. What had he said of this line?

“Perilously near to ‘all roads lead to Rome’ for a Lutheran like yourself, isn’t it?”

There was consternation among the fisher folk. But at least the dead beast did not stink. The weather had grown too cold. Already the field ice was descending from the polar regions, rolling right up to the island like a grey stippled carpet. Soon darkness would embrace the island, the boats would be pulled ashore, and, except for the ice fishers and seal hunters, life would move indoors.

It was Evastina who told Heiberg about the thing that had come ashore on Bjelsen’s Strand.

“You’ve seen it for yourself?”

“No,” she admitted.

“You know, Evastina, there was once a philosopher who reasoned that because hair grows out of our heads, our heads must be full of hair. You see? One must examine all the evidence before reaching a conclusion. To do otherwise is always a capital error.” Heiberg tapped his own bald pate three times as he had done when telling this story to his classes.

He was rewarded by Evastina’s laughter, which he loved to hear; but then the girl spoiled the moment by narrowing her brows and moving closer. He knew that face. “You don’t look very well today.” Heiberg pressed himself against the pillows and coughed. It wasn’t the decline of his health that disappointed him, only that Evastina had ceased to laugh.

The girl came every morning at nine and then again at six to prepare his supper. He paid her once a week and, in his opinion,

far too little. After the first week he had offered to double her salary but she refused, pointing out that her father would object because "It wouldn't look proper." Nor was there any question of their financial arrangements remaining private, for it appeared that too would be improper. Heiberg felt, notwithstanding his consciousness of the difference in their ages, rather flattered by the mention of impropriety.

Here is this dutiful child, he thought as he watched her move about his house, but where is God? Perhaps Jacobson is right and each calling really owns its own relation to Him, a path all its own that winds up at the same Gate. Once every profession had its patron saint. What a lovely idea, thought Heiberg. A patron saint is virtually a household god, but then the prettiest as well as the most suspect aspects of Christianity are precisely those that derive from Paganism.

A physicist thinks of God as the Creator in a more literal sense than other people. What fascinates him is the God who is in the details, the God who is in this sense indistinguishable from the Devil. In Heiberg's private cosmology the Devil was as much a Creator as the Deity. He could never decide which was responsible for the curvature of space-time. To see God as a gigantic displaced parent did not interest him at all; it was too sentimental. That was the God of Jacobson, a loving, adjudicating parent, as much mother as father. For Heiberg the cunning of the universe was the cunning of God, his opponent in a lifelong game of hide and seek. To him God *was* cunning. And women?

Could he have loved a girl like Evastina, a girl without cunning or, at any rate, only the endearing variety proper to a young girl? Would he have done better to have married, and to have married

such a one? Would she have had him? Heiberg wondered if he were merely indulging in romantic fantasies at an age and in a condition when all that ought to have been well behind him. Was he deflecting his fear of death by turning to the dregs of lust? His pride rebelled and he girded up his loins, so to speak, to concentrate on the serious work of dying.

He was alone most of the day. To be continuously alone is to be beyond consolation, and yet in the face of death there is something truthful about solitude, honest and elemental. Death is outside the human circle. More than once he had pictured Evastina discovering his cold body one morning at nine o'clock or one evening at six. The image made him shudder for her sake, though he was surprised to find that it excited him. Would the girl touch his hollow chest and thin legs?

With their heads crammed into fur hats and their bodies bundled in woolens five men tramped up the icy path to Heiberg's house. Evastina, having just completed her morning duties, met them on the way.

"Good morning to you, Evastina," said the mayor. The others stood back and touched their caps. Even though they had known her all her life, the two youngest were embarrassed by the girl simply because she had grown to be so pretty. As Heiberg represented to them the sophistication of the great world, so the girl personified loveliness. To them the old man and the young girl stood, so to speak, as reproaches. Knowledge and beauty were forms of power they could get along without, but to be face to face with either made them feel ignorant and clumsy.

"The old fellow isn't dead yet, is he?" asked the mayor jerking

his head to one side so that the others would be able to hear his witticism over the wind. Evastina made it clear that she did not appreciate this joke, though in a way it pleased her by confirming her as the authority on the great man. Over the last months she had discovered the value of this status. She had been careful not to squander the little she knew of Heiberg, letting drip only a trickle of information so that the people down below would suppose she knew far more. But it was not entirely because of the prestige her job conferred on her that she felt protective of Heiberg; she was genuinely concerned about him. It was owing to this concern as well as curiosity that she turned back and followed the men up to the house and, on a sudden impulse, prevented the mayor from knocking.

“He’s very ill and has to keep to his bed,” she said. “He shouldn’t come to the door. The wind’s too cold. Best let me go in first. I don’t want him to be alarmed.”

“Really, you could almost be his mother, Evastina,” quipped the mayor, who was in a facetious mood. This was because he had argued against appealing to Heiberg during the ad hoc meeting at his café the night before. Nevertheless, when the issue went against him he felt it necessary to his position that he himself lead the delegation. The fishermen grumbled at this but, as the owner of the town’s only café, the mayor had his way.

As it happened Heiberg had climbed out of bed shortly after Evastina’s departure. She had stoked up the fire to warm the house for him and left a pot of water on the stove in case he wanted tea. What he had in mind was to give himself a bath. He had not felt strong enough to have one for three days.

Evastina was surprised to see Heiberg out of bed, standing

near the stove in nothing but his long underwear. Heiberg too was shocked. He just gaped and put his finger to the corner of his eye.

“There are some men who’ve come up to see you, Professor. I thought I’d better—”

“Men?”

“The mayor and four others. Quick. You’d better get back in bed. What on earth were you up to anyway?”

“Just a bath. You may not believe it but I *do* bathe occasionally, Evastina.”

“A bath? But it’s still far too cold in here,” Evastina chided, grabbing a blanket from the bed and throwing it over his shoulders.

Heiberg was irked and began to cough.

“See?” she said with kindly fury. “Just listen to that nasty cough.”

“What on earth can they want with me?”

“You can’t guess?” She was in motion everywhere, picking up the book of Jacobson’s poems he had dropped by the bed, smoothing his sheets, plumping up his pillows.

“Now get in and I’ll stay and make tea.”

Heiberg did as he was told, feeling less like a child than as if he and Evastina shared the tacit solidarity of a married couple preparing for unwelcome but unavoidable guests.

Only after he was settled and well covered up did Evastina consent to open the door. The men trudged in, stamping their feet. The mayor growled about being kept waiting in the cold, pulled off his gloves, and blew ostentatiously on his fingers.

Evastina went to the kitchen while the men surrounded Heiberg's bed. Of course the mayor did the talking. He explained about the thing on the beach. This he did clumsily and Evastina was pleased to note that Heiberg did not make things easier for him by mentioning what she had already told him.

“. . . And so, Professor Heiberg,” the mayor wound up rather lamely, “it seemed to us that you might be able to tell us what it is.”

“From the little you've just said I can hardly tell a thing. Do you men have anything to add?”

Three of the men shook their heads.

“Maybe you could come and have a look for yourself,” suggested the fourth.

“That's impossible!” Evastina thundered from the kitchen. “Can't you see he's not well enough to go out now the weather's turned?”

They were all abashed. Everyone knew that Heiberg had come to the island to die. It was obvious. He smiled at the men and gave a helpless shrug as if to say, “What can I do? Women rule us all.” Aloud he assumed a professional tone, “If I'm to tell you anything I'll need better information. To begin with some accurate drawings. And a number of technical observations and three or four measurements.”

Evastina carried in a wooden tray with mugs of tea for everyone. “I'll see to it for you,” she announced. “I'm quite good at drawing.”

The two youngest fishermen blushed.

In his late twenties Heiberg developed a condition that plagued him for weeks on end. He finally consulted an eye specialist. This worthy gentleman listened to Heiberg's description of his symptoms with a knowing smile and, when he had finished, nodded twice, leaned forward on his leather chair, and put his hands on his knees.

"Your condition's not in the least uncommon or likely to have serious consequences, though I grant the persistence of the muscle contractions for several weeks is unusual. Unusual and, for you, doubtless unpleasant. As a scientist you'll appreciate knowing the name of your malady. It is called Eyelid Myokymia, which is a sub-form of the uncontrolled spasm of muscle tissue called in general Myoclonus. As you say, it's not particularly painful in itself but a considerable annoyance all the same. In cases more extreme than your own it can manifest itself as a distorting twitch and even occluded vision. The sole treatment in these instances is to inject the muscles of the eye with a relaxant compound. This yields only temporary relief and, frankly, is out of the question in a case as mild as yours."

"So I just have to live with it?"

The doctor shrugged good-naturedly.

The fact of having lost control over even so small a part of his body as an eyelid was all but intolerable to Heiberg. He had tried rubbing, warm compresses, darkness.

"The condition is often exacerbated, some even say triggered, by specific behavioral factors. These include lack of sleep, the consumption of caffeine, stress, smoking, and eyestrain."

"Of all of which I can boast."

The doctor grinned as though Heiberg had just said something droll. "I thought as much. Well, you *could* try sleeping more, reading less, giving up your briar and your coffee. It might help, but then, to be perfectly frank, it might not."

"No rewards even for renunciation?"

The doctor threw up his hands in a paroxysm of mirth. "Your condition is what we medical types call *idiopathic*, Dr. Heiberg."

"A fine word!"

"Indeed it is, one which places a decorous cover over the unplumbed abyss of our ignorance, you might say."

Heiberg left the expert having gained nothing but a very slightly augmented vocabulary.

His condition continued to trouble Heiberg, sometimes waxing, at others waning and, worst of all, without any determinable pattern. He was never free of it for more than a week. Anything might set it off—brushing his eye while washing, a prolonged stare, late reading, even just waking up. He took to studying his face in the mirror, fascinated by the vibrating muscle below his right eye clenching and unclenching all on its own, as if it contained a tiny beating heart. After fifteen minutes or so this twittering made for a slight pressure on his eye to which he responded by placing the tip of his forefinger on the offending muscle and pressing lightly. While this gesture did not by any means end the contractions, it did ease the pressure a little. Before long this gesture became unconscious, itself a sort of tic.

One evening at the end of a university banquet Heiberg found himself seated next to Evald Hanson, an emeritus professor of chemistry. Hanson was asking him about the latest theories

on the nature of light—waves or particles or both?—when he observed that Heiberg kept pressing his finger to his eye.

“A twitch, eh?”

“I’m sorry. Myokymia of the eyelid. It’s driving me crazy.”

“I can well believe it. I myself suffered from myokymia when I was your age. Perhaps it’s a sort of occupational hazard.”

“Perhaps so.”

Hanson stubbed out his cigar and turned his head toward Heiberg. “Would you care to hear an odd story?”

“Certainly.”

Hanson took a sip of port before beginning. “When my own twitching began it was much worse than yours appears to be. I honestly thought I’d lose my mind. Everybody noticed it, you see, so it was an embarrassment to me in company as well as an irritant when I was alone. If people mentioned it I was chagrined, and if they said nothing it was even worse. One day I went to buy a new suit. My tailor was an old Jew named Feingold. I had been going to him for years, ever since my father took me to him for my first suit. He was almost an uncle.

“‘That twitching in your eye,’ he said, ‘it bothers you?’

“I answered him rather sharply. ‘Of course it does.’

“‘You’ve been to see a doctor then?’

“I told him that I had but that nothing could be done for me.

“‘I thought as much,’ Feingold said, and he proposed that I visit a certain rabbi, a refugee who had only recently arrived in the city.

“I assured him that it would be pointless. ‘Not only am I not

a Jew, Feingold, I'm an atheist.'

"The tailor shrugged. 'Suit yourself,' he said, 'but this rabbi is said to be very wise. Over there in the East they know plenty of things we don't. Let me just give you his address. Perhaps you'll change your mind.'

"Not wishing to offend Feingold, I took the slip of paper he pressed on me, put it in my pocket and promptly forgot all about it. However, a week or so later—another week of unrelieved torment—I was clearing out my pockets before having the suit cleaned and there was the address of the wonder-working rabbi.

"You can well imagine what sort of condition I was in when I tell you that I actually went to see the man. It turned out to be a remarkable experience."

Hanson paused to summon a waiter and fortify himself with another glass of port.

"And did this miracle rabbi from the East cure you?" Heiberg asked facetiously as the old man's glass was being filled.

"No, but listen. I found him living in one room in a building next to the old synagogue; you know, the one near the custom house that burned down it must be twenty years ago. The room was so crammed with books it was a wonder anyone could live in it. I had expected an old man with a long white beard and a fringed prayer shawl. I had always assumed rabbis were all old men, but to my surprise this one was a young fellow of about my own age.

"I knocked and he let me in. He cleared a space for me on the couch that must have done duty as his bed and offered me some tea which he served not in a cup but in a glass and then

he began chattering amusingly about his neighbors who kept chickens in their apartment. I was fascinated by his accent and his exceptional vitality. I listened to the whole story of the poultry without interrupting. Only then did he ask me why I'd come.

"I couldn't hide my embarrassment at being there; in fact, I decided to make up some story or other and get away as soon as possible. But, of course, he noticed my twitch and interrupted whatever cock-and-bull story I was telling him. 'Now, now, you're here because of your eye, aren't you, Professor?'

"I was astounded and complimented him on what I took to be his preternatural insight. He laughed and observed that skeptics are the most gullible of people because they don't know what to believe. The remark was impertinent but made with such good humor that I too had to laugh. Of course then he told me that Feingold had already informed him about my case.

"Judging by your hesitation, Professor, would it be fair to say that you are, in a certain sense, here against your will?'

"That's putting it a little strongly,' I said.

"Then I apologize. You must forgive me. I am merely a humble immigrant while you are a famous professor, a man of science. Let me tell you a little story. If it fails to enlighten at least it may amuse you. Once, in the university town of Lvov, a great scientist, not unlike yourself, was walking through the streets with his students trailing behind him when they came on a little Jewish boy who was hurrying to the yeshiva, the study house. Perhaps the professor was amused by the boy's comical appearance or maybe he wished to take the occasion to make a point to his students. In any event, he grabbed the boy by the shoulder like this.' And here the rabbi actually clapped his hand

on my own shoulder, held me fast, and put his face right up to mine like this. "Look here, my little fellow," said the scientist as he took a coin from his pocket. "I'll give you this gold crown if you can tell me where God lives." The boy, quite undaunted, looked up at the man and answered him in a loud voice, "And I'll give you two crowns if you can tell me where He doesn't!"

Both Heiberg and Hanson laughed at the story, though it was not entirely clear at what or whom they were laughing.

"Wait. There's more," said Hanson. "The rabbi looked me in the eye and told me that there was no cure for my twitch because it was an expression of a portion of my soul that I had denied and was trying to bury. I still remember the quaint way he put it. He said, 'The watch that we have mislaid goes on ticking for a time even though it's lost,' or some such thing. Then he added something. He said, 'But I will tell you this. There is one way and one way only to get relief from your twitching and this is a kiss on the eye from a woman who loves you.'"

"Just like the Flying Dutchman," Heiberg said mockingly. "How romantic!"

Hanson nodded and smiled. "I told him I'd already tried warm compresses but he only laughed at me.

"Either you've willfully misunderstood me, Professor, or, as I suspect, you are being ironic. It isn't the warmth or the moisture of her kiss but the love the woman feels for you that will do the trick."

Old Hanson was exhilarated by telling his tale. With an almost triumphant gesture he turned his stiff torso toward Heiberg, who could see in the candlelight every wrinkle on his face.

“Well, what do you think?”

“It really is a fascinating story.”

“And *true*, Heiberg, a true story.”

“I assure you I didn’t think—”

“No, I mean the rabbi was right—at least in my case. You see, shortly after that I met my wife. One night after a skating party I offered to see her home. We were in high spirits but she quite astonished me when at the door of her house she got up on tiptoe and kissed me right on the eye. Just imagine. No doubt she was aiming for my cheek, as she’s often insisted, but you’ll understand when I say that the pleasure of that moment of surcease was ineffable. Naturally I recalled what the rabbi had said, what I had mocked and even now feel rather silly mentioning to you. I remember that as I was leaving he cited a text. ‘It is written that to have married a good woman is already to have fulfilled the Law.’ A very Jewish sentiment but I hope it is true, for our engagement was announced within a month’s time. Regine and I have been happily married for nearly forty years.”

“Please accept my belated congratulations. And what about the twitching?”

“The rabbi was right there as well, I suppose. It didn’t leave me entirely until around the time I was appointed to my chair. And even today, seeing you . . . Still, just as he promised, I could always find a few moments of solace thanks to Regine.”

God, women, science. No doubt it was because his mind had been trotting behind this formidable troika that Heiberg recalled Hanson’s story; for it involved all three. He thought almost with shame of how he had made use of it, of the rabbi’s

oriental wisdom.

The first time was a few months after his conversation with Hanson at the banquet. He had begun an affair with a young woman of beauty and intelligence, an archivist at the University library. One night, exasperated by the contractions in his eyelid, he asked her if she could stand to put her lips on it. She willingly agreed and at once the twitching ceased.

“Oh, I can feel it,” she cried. “It tickles.”

The very next week Heiberg had broken off the affair.

He was not a marine biologist. Any fisherman on the island knew more than Heiberg about the sea and its denizens. He didn't even like to eat fish. Four generations earlier his family had given up life by the sea for the complicated professions of the city. He might have told the islanders, but could they be expected to distinguish between one species of scientist and another? Wouldn't they think he was simply too lazy or too preoccupied with his dying to trouble himself with their little mystery? Why should he undermine their faith in him, however tentative, however misplaced? After all, he was flattered by it. If they believed he could tell them something worthwhile about some dead animal, why should he protest ignorance? Besides, he really did intend to make an effort through Evastina. He reasoned that, in the end, when the time came to throw up his hands they would be no worse off and, who knows, perhaps more prepared to accept the mystery of the world and the limitations of human science.

The latter was a lesson that Heiberg himself had been learning all through his career, one which his approaching dissolution

was driving home. Theoretical physics has its proper ironies, he had said in one of his last lectures. A good physicist, he advised his students, must grasp that scientific knowledge has limits but at the same time never presume to know what these limits are.

Heiberg was surprised by the devotion with which Evastina threw herself into her researches. Her visits were now filled with reports and revisions of those reports. He had to examine her preliminary sketches, which he thought genuinely excellent, and reply to her requests for further directions. Soon she herself was proposing measurements and additional physiological investigations.

From Evastina Heiberg learned that the creature was approximately seventeen meters in length, predominantly black in color, with eyes set forward on a rounded head at the end of an elongated neck, rather than on the sides, as with whales. Its mouth had three sets of teeth which, from Evastina's drawings, he could tell were those of a carnivore. Instead of the flukes of a whale its body tapered to a single lateral fin three meters across and shaped something like a manatee's. It had a huge set of gills and, astonishingly, a curiously depressed aperture on the dorsal surface that, though apparently too small for the purpose, might have served as a blow hole. From one unmistakable indication Evastina concluded that the beast had been a male. The body itself was now completely frozen.

Perseus had faced nothing more terrifying in defending Andromeda off the Joppa coast.

One day Heiberg, examining her rendering of the monster's head, said, "Evastina, you ought to have become a scientist

yourself, or an artist.”

The girl blushed with pleasure. “I only want to help you.”

“No, I mean it. You’ve done extraordinarily well. Believe me, nobody at the University could have done better.”

“And yet?” added the girl, catching something in his tone.

Heiberg broke into a terrific fit of coughing and when it had passed he said, “Excuse me. And yet I’m baffled. I’ve no idea what the creature is.”

Unwilling to give up, Evastina suggested that she might get some of the men to saw the creature open so that she could draw its internal organs for him.

“I’m afraid that would be no use. For all I know it may be something never before seen, a new species.”

Her face lit up. “Do you really think so? A new species?”

“It’s possible.”

“Then what if I were to send my drawings to the University? You could tell me where, I mean who should see them.”

Heiberg was surprised again, not so much by the girl’s ardor or her altogether sensible proposal as by the pang of jealousy he felt, as if he were a failed Perseus, as if Andromeda had saved herself. Another fit of coughing covered his discomfiture. Evastina ran to fetch him a glass of water.

His eye had begun twitching again; it had been twitching incessantly for five days. It felt like a punishment, as though God had chosen this cunning way to get back at him for his presumption and vanity, for seeking to see and know but never to love. *And I’ll give you two crowns if you can tell me where He*

doesn't, the Jewish boy had said to get the better of the professor in Lvov. *Even a lost watch ticks*, said the rabbi to Evald Hanson. And now there was this colossal beast that he could not see except through the clear eyes of a girl and about which he understood nothing at all.

Evastina, who desired knowledge more than he did, who had far more of the romance of science in her than remained to him, came back into the room with the glass of water and Heiberg said aloud, "Perhaps the beast is death." He was not even speaking to the girl; he had only meant to allow himself a bitter and self-pitying joke, but as soon as the words were out the idea seized him.

Evastina had never looked lovelier or more vital than now, when she began to cry for his sake, as if he were the Flying Dutchman. He watched her tears with fascinated delight.

"Evastina, my dear," he whispered, "forgive me. I'll tell you where to send your drawings. I'll even go to see the beast for myself. Yes, I want to go to Bjelsen's Strand with you. We'll go over everything together. And I'll take you to the University. And I want to smoke my pipe again too. Why not? But please, please would you do me one very great favor?"

She brushed at her tears. "Yes?"

"Do you think you could give me a kiss right here, just on my eye?"

EDITH FEVRIER

C HANCES are I'd never have met Paul Hanley except for a midweek robbery on Hyde Park Avenue. Bank of America branch office, broad daylight, less than professional. Paul wasn't the sole witness, just the only one worth talking to. Paul made up for the terrified, inarticulate, vague, contradictory others. In fact, he was a marvel. And he was only eleven and a half years old.

When I got to the scene at 1:15 the uniforms hadn't even lined the kid up as a witness, being preoccupied with three hysterical tellers, one shaken manager, and four panicked customers who'd all been inside the bank. When I asked if anyone had seen the getaway, Sergeant Pinkney looked at me like a large pig that's received a tiny nudge, and insisted it had all gone down too fast and anyway there wasn't anybody on the street at the time. I looked at the ceiling. This was Hyde Park, not Los Angeles. Pinkney was porcine in all respects except native intelligence.

So it was Paul who found me, literally pulled at my sleeve.

"You in charge?"

He was short for his age, pre-growth-spurt, slight but wiry. His face was mobile; it looked like a hoodlum's one second, a choir-boy's the next, and then an imp's after that. His red hair was shading to brown and he had the sharpest pair of blue eyes you've ever seen—or that have ever seen you.

"Who wants to know?" I asked him. I could see he liked that come-back.

“Paul Hanley,” he said, and held his hand out and up.

I told him my name and we shook on it.

I pointed to my watch. “So, Mr. Hanley, why aren’t you in school?”

“Suspended,” he said succinctly and shrugged.

“You get suspended often?”

He considered for a moment and allowed as how he got suspended pretty regularly.

“And you walk the streets?”

He pulled a face. “Oh yeah, sure. Like my mother’s going to let me prowl Hyde Park. I’m supposed to be home, of course. She’s working. She’s *always* working. Two jobs. I just felt like a walk.”

I looked down at him and nodded, as if joining him in a male conspiracy against mothers.

He looked worried. “You won’t tell her, will you?”

“That depends.”

“You mean on whether I help you catch the robbers?”

“We’ll see,” I said, a man reluctant to promise what he can’t perform. Then I suggested we go outside. I told the uniforms to go on taking statements from the other witnesses and they gave me dirty looks. Pinkney even made an unmistakable noise.

There were no benches so we settled on the curb, not quite eye-to-eye but closer. My experience is that boys like Paul don’t much like it when adults do a knee-bend, raise the pitch of their voices and smile at them like idiots. It was just as well since I later learned vocabulary-building was one of Paul’s specialties and he probably knew the literal meaning of *condescending*.

“So,” I began, “you saw the robbers?”

Paul didn’t care for rhetorical questions. “Think I’d be bothering you if I didn’t?”

“How many?”

“Two.”

“You saw them coming out of the bank?”

“Sure. Wasn’t here when they went in.” He pointed across the street at a store that sold cigarettes, magazines, candy, and lottery tickets. “I was right over there when they came out.”

Questioning children is tricky but no more than debriefing adults. If you get it right, if they see you mean business and let them know you’ll accept no fantasies or embellishments, they can be helpful, though, in my experience, never in court. Questioning Paul Hanley, however, was something else again.

“Moving pretty fast, weren’t they?”

Wrong tone again. He gave me a pitying look. “Wouldn’t *you* be?”

“The car?”

“Van,” he corrected. “Five, six year-old Ford Econoline. Blue. Rust over the left rear fender. Dirty. Stolen probably.”

“Why stolen?”

“Well, it had New Hampshire plates. You know, *Live Free or Die*. HBL964. They must have been over the border recently, I figure. I mean nobody from New Hampshire’s going to take their van to Hyde Park to knock over a bank.”

I acknowledged the level-headedness of this judgment with a nod. “Look, will you wait here a minute?”

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. “I’m suspended.”

I went over to my car and called in the information on the van and practically skipped back to the curb.

“Okay,” I said, getting back on the curb. “Anything more?”

He spread out his hands, as if revealing a treasure. “I’d say they’re both in their twenties. Thirty at the outside. One of them runs funny—not exactly with a limp, but kind of crab-like. You know? Left leg shoots out a little sideways. Probably a bad hip. I’d look for a hockey player. The other one, the one who drove, he’s got these just enormous ears. The buzz-cut doesn’t help. The other one’s vain, the hockey player.”

“Vain?”

“Conceited. Proud of his looks. *Vain*. The minute he was in the car and pulled off the ski mask—they both wore ski masks—what’d he do but pull out a comb. His hair’s long, below the ears, black, straight, but with curves. Irish.”

“Irish?”

“What they call *black* Irish, because of the hair. *Really* white skin. Also his hoodie was bright green. And it wasn’t new or anything.”

“Height?”

“About five-ten or maybe eleven. And the guy with the big ears, the driver? He needs glasses for distance. Put them on soon as he started the car. And they weren’t sunglasses. Dumbo’s got bad skin too. Acne.” He paused and frowned at me, his brow puckered by the suspicion that I wasn’t taking him seriously. “Shouldn’t you be writing this down?”

“Later,” I said. “Anything else?”

“Oh sure. They’re from here. Boston, I mean. Revere or Everett, I’d say.” He looked over furtively to see if he were pushing it too hard. “Maybe Chelsea, Charlestown.”

“They spoke?”

“The one who wasn’t driving, pretty hockey boy, yelled at Dumbo. *Move yah ass, retahrd. Come awn. Let’s get a fuck outta heah.*” It did sound like Revere. “Also, I think it’s not their first robbery, but *is* probably their first bank job.”

“How’s that?” said good, slow Doctor Watson.

“Well, first, don’t you have to work your way up to a bank job? Second, because they weren’t nervous enough but also they weren’t *not* nervous, if you know what I mean. And then there’s the guns. Handguns. Black ones.”

“What about the guns?”

“Not loaded.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because they both just tossed them in the back of the van with the loot. Chucked them in. Well, you wouldn’t do that with a *loaded* gun, would you? *I* wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t, eh?”

“Look,” he said as I started to get to my feet.

I sat back down. “Fire away.”

He was desperate to keep me there. I was glad to oblige. “Okay. Where’s your partner?”

“Went home sick this morning.”

“Hangover?”

I didn't reply.

"So . . . what *kind* of detective are you?"

I laughed. "Not bad."

He exploded with hilarity, spewing air. "No. I mean what *rank*. Sergeant, lieutenant, or captain?"

"Lieutenant," I said. I took out my badge, which he looked at the way a radiologist does an MRI. Then he nodded and handed it back.

"You know what *lieutenant* means?"

"Tell me."

"It's French for place-holder. Like *God's lieutenant on earth*, which is what kings used to claim they were."

"You don't say." I stood up. So did Paul.

He wouldn't let me go. He grabbed at my arm. "Only two more questions. Okay?"

"Why not? You're already suspended."

"Are you, uh, married?"

"No. Not any more."

He nodded, all compassion and sadness, bowed his head like a skinny little Buddha accepting the tragic nature of life and gave my ex-marriage a couple seconds of respectful silence.

"Last question. Got any cigarettes?"

I drove him home. It was just three blocks, second floor of a triple-decker on Dana Avenue. I took him to the door and knocked. Nobody there.

“Told you,” he said with satisfaction.

“Phone your mother as soon as I leave.”

The boy crossed his arms. “Not supposed to. Unless it’s an emergency and this isn’t an emergency. I told you, she’s working.”

“Tell her—” I stopped. His face was pleading, appealing, and appraising all at once. I gave in. It was too hard not to. Besides, I couldn’t force him. “I shouldn’t interview you unless your mother’s there.”

“Now this *is* an emergency,” he said.

“Let’s go,” I sighed.

We didn’t even leave a note.

On the way to the station on Pingtree we passed by Saint Aloysius Gonzaga School. He pointed it out. “The Temple of Learning,” he said.

The trip to the station proved unnecessary. Garcia, behind the desk, motioned me over when we got there and told me that the perpetrators of the great Hyde Park Bank Job were already in custody, the money recovered. They hadn’t even ditched the stolen van.

“Were their guns loaded?” I whispered.

Garcia looked at me funny. He shrugged. “Dunno. Check the report.”

I put my finger to my lips and nodded toward the kid. “Who were they?”

“Pair of dirt bags from Everett, both had sheets, but nothing this ambitious.”

“Thanks.”

Paul's eyes were big, taking in everything he could, cops, posters. I escorted him into an interrogation room and wrote down his statement. He was having the time of his life. I took the report to be typed and got him a soda. He talked about his mother. "You'd like her," he said. When the statement was put in front of him he took his time poring over it. Finally, he signed it with a flourish, a victorious general putting his name to the surrender document after a jolly war, John Hancock mocking King George's myopia.

"When's your suspension over?" I asked, taking the paper from him. I would toss it later.

"Tomorrow. They never give you more than one day. Could become a habit."

"So, it's back to Saint Aloysius in the morning then."

He looked at me sideways. "You Catholic?"

"Not any more."

He laughed. "Just like being married."

I put my hands on the dented metal table and began to get up.

"You know anything about Saint Aloysius Gonzaga?"

"Nope."

He gazed up past me, and recited: "*I am a crooked piece of iron and am come into religion to be made straight by the hammer of mortification and penance.* Nobleman's son, our Aloysius. Dad didn't like the whole religious vocation bit but Mom loved it, as you can imagine. At nine little Aloysius vowed himself to perpetual virginity and, according to both Sister Rose Emelda and Bishop Butler, was spared by a special grace from any fleshly temptation. In Rome he volunteered to look after the sick during

a plague, caught the fever, kicked the bucket at twenty-three. Irresistible role model, right? Sister thinks so.”

I’m ashamed to say I was thinking about how Aloysius might have benefited from being “made straight” in another way and about how it’s always the saints who have the worst consciences, how sensuality and asceticism aren’t opposites, about Paul’s defiance of Sister Rose Emelda which I found I admired.

On the way back to Dana Avenue he was jumpy, twisting and bouncing.

I pulled over and turned to him. “What’s the matter?”

He looked at me, looked away, rubbed at his pants. “I had a pretty good time today.”

“I’m glad.”

“I mean *really* good.”

“You’d make a fine detective.”

He shot a fluorescent grin at me. “Think so?”

“They caught the robbers.”

“They *did*? So . . .?”

“I told you I’m not allowed to interview you without a parent present.”

He considered. “So then, why did you?”

I gave the child a childish answer. “Because.”

He nodded. “Where were they from?”

“Everett. First bank job.”

“Ha! *Told* you.”

“Yep. That you did.”

“Want to meet my mother?”

“What?”

“Want to meet my *mother*?”

I started up the car.

“She’s beautiful. She’s smart. Patient too. I mean she puts up with me, doesn’t she? You’d really like her. She’s voluptuous.”

“What?”

“*Voluptuous.*”

I knew I shouldn’t but I asked anyway. “What about your father?”

“Unfortunately dead. He was biking. Teenage girl hit him. She wasn’t texting or anything, just a bad driver. Five years ago. I can hardly remember him.” The closer we got to his house the faster he talked. “Mom has to work two jobs. The second one—waiting tables at Cherrystones on weekends—that’s to keep me at Saint Aloysius but she won’t admit it. *Ironic*, huh? Anyway, the seafood’s pretty good there, I mean at Cherrystones. You know, I think if I had only about a thousand dollars I could turn it into a *million* doing foreign currency trades; I mean, I’ve looked into it and it’s not all that hard. But I’m only eleven and a half and they won’t even let me have a job as a busboy. It’s *legal* for Mom to work *two* jobs but I can’t do even *one*.” He blew a raspberry at the Law.

“You’re on your own a lot?”

“I guess.”

“So—what do you do?”

“I read. I get into trouble at school. I witness bank robberies.”

“Why were you suspended?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Everett,” I said dryly.

“Okay. It was for hitting Warren Lynch.”

“Why’d you hit Warren Lynch?”

He crossed one thin leg over the other, the raconteur settling in. “Lynchie’s not a bad kid, really. We’re more or less friends, in fact. I was just stopping him from picking on this shrimp, Carl. Calling him stuff like dork and gay and shoving him around the schoolyard. I *asked* him to stop, asked him nicely *twice*, but he wouldn’t so I hit him.”

By now I was pulled up outside the house but Paul was happy to keep on talking, even about his sins.

“So all of these suspensions of yours are for fighting?”

“Oh no. This is the first one for that. It’s usually for ticking off Sister Rose Emelda.”

“You got something against her?”

He shrugged. “Suppose I must.”

I pointed at the house. “Time for me to be off. Thanks for all your help, Mr. Hanley.” I held out my hand.

He didn’t want to shake it, not yet. “Want to come in?”

“Sorry. Have to get back to work. Crime waits for no man. So long. Take care. Thanks again.”

As he was getting out he said, “You’re not going to tell my mother about this. I mean we got a deal, right?”

“When would I do that?”

“When you come to dinner,” he said with a leprechaun’s grin. Then he jumped out of the car and slammed the door.

Paul Hanley may or may not have been a prodigy, but he was nothing if not persistent. He called the station and left messages for me. *Tell him this is his star witness and I may clam up unless he meets me halfway.* That was a good one. Even better: *Tell him this is Hanley and I’ve got a line on something big going down at Cherrystones so he’d better call back.*

Over the next couple of weeks I drove down Dana Avenue a few times when I was alone, going off duty. I told myself it was more or less on my way home, which was a two-bedroom apartment in West Roxbury, far larger than I needed; the phrase *rattle around in* sometimes occurred to me. Paul’s block had no kids playing in the street. There were old people inching up and down the sidewalk with plastic bags pulling their arms down like plumb-bobs. Could have been a few punks on the block, judging from the beat-up Camaro and Trans-Am and a pair of Harleys but I never saw them.

One afternoon I spotted Paul letting himself in. He had to put down about a dozen books to get his key out. I honked.

He spun around, squinted, shouted “Hey!” and ran down the steps. You’d have thought I was a Christmas tree on Christmas morning.

I didn’t get out of the car, or turn the engine off, just rolled down the window. “How’s it going, Mr. Hanley?”

“Well, actually, kind of dull. Didn’t get suspended the whole

of last week or this one, so far. Haven't seen even one bank job."

"Sounds boring."

He rolled his eyes. "You get my messages? You didn't call back so I'm asking."

I tapped the steering wheel. "You shouldn't do that."

"I know I shouldn't. *Obviously*. It's a risk/reward thing. So look, you want to come in?"

"On my way home."

One hundred watts dwindled to twenty-five. "Oh." Then he said cunningly, "Well, if you're off duty then I don't see why you can't come inside. You know, just for a minute."

I had to admire how the kid used logic like a battering ram.

"Come on. I'll show you some Edith Fevriers," he said. He pronounced the name in the French style—*Aydit*, as in Piaf.

"What?"

"Aw, come on. You'll see why I get suspended so often."

The apartment was attractive, homey and very clean. It smelled good—a woman smell I remembered. There was a large and, in my opinion, very interesting painting over the beige couch. Inside a frame of light oak a woman in a fringed vest reclined on another couch, a gray one, beside a small blue radiator. The empty floor and walls were yellow, separated by curved red lines that somehow made the whole thing balance, even though the woman and the couch were squeezed all the way on the right. It shouldn't have balanced, yet it did. Some trick of geometry I couldn't figure out. The furniture and rugs weren't expensive, but everything looked all right. I spotted a photograph in a

silver frame on the mantel. A smiling man with olive skin and dark, wavy hair.

“He looks Italian but he wasn’t,” said Paul.

I went over to the round oak table and put down the books I’d carried in for Paul. They didn’t look like kids’ books. One was on genetics; there was a history of the Dark Ages and a heavy biography of Theodore Roosevelt. I was amused to see among them *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*.

Meanwhile Paul was pulling out an album. “Here’s a picture of my mom.”

I saw where he got the red hair.

“It’s recent,” he assured me as if I might think he was pulling a fast one. “Want something? Coke? Mom keeps iced tea in the fridge. Home-made.”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

He headed for the kitchen. “Suit yourself. I’m having an iced tea.”

“Who’s Edith Fevrier?” I called after him.

“Wait a minute.”

I heard the refrigerator door open, ice clinking against a glass, the door shut, then open, then shut again.

“Mmm,” he said, sipping as he went over to the door where he’d dropped his backpack. He put his glass down on the floor and began fishing around inside.

“Sister Rose Emelda is, as you might have guessed, Old School. We’re in a war.”

“A war?”

“Well, that’s what I’d call it. A war of national liberation, a war that you get after a declaration—you know, of independence. I’m the Ewoks; she’s the Empire.” He stood up with a fistful of papers. “I drive her nuts. Half the time I don’t even try.”

“Why?”

“If she were any kind of teacher at all, I wouldn’t. But she isn’t, so I do. I got on fine with Sister Alberta last year and Mrs. Halloran the year before. Honest. But Rose Emelda’s out to get me. One time she got me suspended for talking in class even though it was actually Marsha Venanzi. I didn’t mind taking the blame but it *was* kind of insulting. I can’t wait for my voice to change.”

“How about your grades?”

He waved the silly question off in a way that said his A’s were straight. “It’s just memorization, pretty much. Here.” He peeled off the top paper and handed it to me.

It was a mimeographed exercise sheet.

Grade 6-A

Sister Rose Emelda

WEEKLY VOCABULARY DRILL

Use each of the following words in a sentence.

Encumbered

Obstreperous

Anxieties

Emporium

Disport

Meander

Oblivious

Amorous

Languid

Paltry

Next to this surprising list of words in a tight, copybook hand was written, in bright red: *Paul Hanley, this simply will not do. It is not acceptable. See me at the end of the day. Sr. R.E.*

Below, in his big John-Hancocky hand, Paul had written:

Edith Fevrier, lonely but encumbered by few anxieties, meandered through the Jardin des Tuileries, oblivious of the disporting children in sailor suits, the amorous young couples tangled on the grass, the languid, gossiping nursemaids, until at last she came to the chair upon which sat the man who had begged her to meet him, the obstreperous Monsieur Jules Lussac, proprietor of a paltry leather-goods emporium in Montparnasse.

I handed it back with a rueful look.

“I didn’t actually get suspended for that one. I read the directions and told Sister that, so far as I could see, I’d fulfilled the assignment. I also gave her definitions of all the words, including *proprietor*.”

“Still,” I said.

He handed me another exercise sheet. On this one Sister Rose Emelda had written, again in red and bearing down somewhat harder, *Paul Hanley, you are insufferable. You are to give this exercise sheet to your mother and let her read what I’ve written.*

This time the words were:

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
| Anteroom | Beget |
| Choleric | Decibels |
| Ferrous | Glabrous |
| Harlequin | Correspondent |
| Advocate | Remonstrate |

Paul had written:

Edith Fevrier patiently waited her turn in the lawyer's anteroom where she could hear the ferrous tip of the glabrous harlequin's walking-stick as he paced the floor, raising his choleric voice to many decibels as he remonstrated with his advocate that he did not beget the child of Madame de Meuble and so should not be a correspondent in her husband's divorce action, no matter what she claimed.

"That one got me grounded," said Paul proudly, handing over another sheet. "Here's the one that got me suspended."

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Saturnine | Manifold |
| Vitriolic | Stentorian |
| Rhizome | Pullulate |
| Transmogrify | Orate |
| Iniquity | Abominable |

Edith Fevrier was shocked by her son's saturnine teacher as she orated her vitriolic sermon in stentorian tones, her distaste for her charges pullulating like a rhizome through the ranks of desks, her transmogrified countenance turning ever more rubicund as she accused them of manifold abominable iniquities.

It wasn't easy to keep from smiling. "She is a nun," I observed.

Paul favored me with a disappointed look over the top of his iced tea glass. "I don't object to her vocation," he said. "The vocation's fine, but not the education." He paused for another sip, then added, "You sound like my mother."

"Your mother—?"

"Yeah, my mother." He bounced up from the couch spilling

a little tea on his shirt which, speaking rapidly as he was, he ignored. “Look, I want you to do something. I want you to go to Cherrystones Saturday night. You’re free, aren’t you? You could take somebody if you wanted but I want you to go and just *look* at her, at my mom. You’ve seen her picture now, the red hair and all, so it’ll be easy to pick her out, even if you don’t get one of her tables. You could sort of, you know, *reconnoiter*.”

Reconnoiter. Sister Rose Emelda could have been proud of her pupil’s vocabulary. Should have been.

“I don’t know,” I said in a slow-motion verbal stumble.

Paul didn’t in the least mind making me uncomfortable. As an eleven-year-old without boundaries he relished it. Discomforting grown-ups was, after all, just one of his talents.

“Order the baked scallops,” he recommended.

I am a man whose divorce was more amicable than his marriage. Captain Connor tried to cheer me up when the news got to him. *Sorry to hear it. Shit, it’s more common than flat feet around here.*

What kind of men go to restaurants alone, especially on Saturday nights? Pathetic ones. Sad and forlorn ones.

I did go to Cherrystones, to my own amazement, and even ordered the scallops. I looked out for Paul’s mother and watched her work. I could see she was a good waitress. She was obviously tired and the uniform wasn’t exactly flattering—nevertheless, all the same, notwithstanding . . . well, and so on.

The following Tuesday Garcia brought me a square cream-colored envelope with my name on it in fancy script. With

something between a grin and a sneer, he let me know it had been hand-delivered by my “star witness.”

Paul had splurged on the stationery and worked hard on the calligraphy. The paper was thick, the color of melted coffee ice cream. The language was direct, formal, and brooked nothing so uncouth as a refusal.

The pleasure of your company is
requested at dinner on Sunday.
Any time after four p.m.
45 Dana Avenue, Second Floor
No R.S.V.P. required

At the last minute, as I imagined, he had scrawled a post-script in his familiar handwriting:

This invitation is from me but it wouldn't hurt to bring something.

Well, a boy loves his mother that much, what could I do?



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