I

DELINQUENT

I was born July 16, 1942, three years to the day before the explosion of the first atomic bomb. My father helped prepare the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, at Boeing's Wichita, Kansas, facility. He would have accompanied her to Tinian Island as a member of her ground support crew, but he failed the army physical examination because of bad ears. My earliest memory is a vision of him and my mother in the kitchen, predawn, the rest of the house still dark. He is wearing an aviator style leather coat, and there is a large eagle on the back of it. Though it would be several years before I understood the nuclear shadow that was gathering over us, my admiration for him was tempered by intimations of unnamed threats, of bad things lurking in the dark.

On the other hand, the geography of Kansas was always a comfort to me. Being in the center of the continent made me feel insulated, safe. Even later, when I did come to understand the nuclear threat–that Wichita and missiles scattered around

the Midwest made attractive targets–I irrationally took solace in our geographical isolation.

My father was reserved and spoke little, but when he did, we listened. He was the disciplinarian, and didn't spare his belt. In the beginning I adored him, and I suppose my brother, Danny, did also. Danny was a year and a half younger than myself. Dad never beat us arbitrarily, he never drank. He wasn't quick with his belt, but he was implacable. From the beginning I felt he favored Danny over myself, though I realize now it was more that he had higher expectations of me, being the oldest. I obliged him by providing him more to disapprove of. Also, any mutual trouble that Danny and I got into was presumed to have been instigated by me.

When I was about six, it was discovered that someone had scraped the paint off the underside of the toilet seat with a razor blade. I had no idea how it happened, but it was a given that at least one of us was responsible. So I went under the belt first, three or four good whacks. It was my policy to start screaming before the first blow. Then Danny got the same. After two or three exchanges, Danny confessed. At which point I wanted Dad to beat him senseless, and I was outraged when he let him off with only another three whacks. Since I went first, I figured I got about the same number of blows as Danny, and I was innocent. Unfair incidents like that were rare, however. For the most part the corporeal punishment he delivered, given the times, was measured and commensurate with the offence. He didn't raise welts or break bones. Another generation would consider it child abuse, but to me it was merely the understandable price I paid for crossing clearly drawn boundaries.

My father's silence could be more frightening than his

arm. Years later, when I was going on fourteen, Danny and I were milking cows in Dad's state-of-the-art milk parlor at the farm on the Smoky Hill River, some six miles south of Russell, Kansas, then a healthy county seat of about 8,000 folks. We had left the vacuum driven milking machines on the cows and stepped into the next room, which contained large sinks and a cooler that held half a dozen ten-gallon milk cans. There was a window back into the room where the machines hung on the cows, but it was strictly forbidden to not be in there with them, at least one of us, because when the cow's udder went empty, she could be injured if the machine wasn't promptly removed. Danny and I had recently seen a Lash LaRue movie in which Lash disarmed opponents with a bullwhip. We each had a length of rubber hose, and were trading blows as loud and as close as possible to the other's feet. It was summer, and Danny and I spotted our father almost simultaneously; he stood outside the screen door, hands on hips, saying nothing. Not knowing how long he was standing there made a much deeper impression on me than the beating. He used one of the hoses.

More painful than any beating, however, and probably the fuel that surcharged my ultimate rebellion against him, was my father's inability to express affection or approval. In my late teens, long after I rejected him, I learned the story of his youthful accident. He was a mechanical prodigy who dissembled alarm clocks at age eight, knew more about their new tractor at twelve than his father (who had grown up and into middle age farming with horses). Around age 13 he was melting down old batteries for the lead, a process that produced noxious gases, and his little brother, Harry, somehow breathed the fumes and burned his lungs. My father was left alone with several hired men to tend the farm

while Harry was rushed six miles to the hospital in Russell. Harry died, my grandmother told me, while she dozed beside him, for which she carried guilt and sleep problems into old age. After the death my grandmother took my father's younger sister, Margaret, and left my grandfather and spent a year in Denver, during which Margaret was submitted to a Mormon baptism, which she didn't understand and never really counted. My grandfather came out to Denver in April, around the time of my grandmother's birthday, carrying flowers, and talked her into returning. But I think the event so traumatized my father that he was stunted emotionally, frozen for life at age thirteen.

My mother, Hester Eileen (Watkins), was warm and articulate in contrast, quick with a compliment. From the beginning I learned to put her between myself and my father when I had transgressed. Punishment was inevitable, but it could be slowed and softened. Though she deferred to my father on most things, she didn't hesitate to confront him. Their fights reassured rather than frightened me, because he inevitably melted and gave way to her. He was a burly man, frightening in his anger, and to see him humbled by his love for her was as comforting as a bedtime story. When I later rejected him, in my angriest hours I never questioned his love for her.

Though aviation was his first and last love, my father was constantly pressured by his father to return to the farm. Even during the war he timed his vacations to help with wheat harvest. In 1947 we moved to a dairy farm several miles north of Russell. My first chore was to water and feed the chickens,

and the first chicken I saw beheaded jarred my metaphysical roots. The contrast of the head on the block, beak yawning one last time, eyelid drooping, with the frantic dance of the headless bird, brought death to me up front and personal. Through conversations with my mother I reluctantly came to understand that the plight of that chicken would one day be mine. I didn't trust the idea of Heaven, because it seemed inseparable from the idea of Hell. So I resolved that when my time came I would simply refuse to die.

The farm north of Russell is the first residence I remember in detail. It had a large Gambrel roofed barn, the ground floor of which was the milk parlor. It consisted of 35 or 40 stanchions in a row, and the cows would file into the same stanchion, in the same order, morning and night. I was amazed that such stupid creatures could repeat themselves with such precision. The upstairs was a hayloft where Danny and I played in inclement weather. It was also a favorite place for female cats to hide their litters, the stacked bales of hay providing myriad nooks and cracks. The mothers would move their litters when we found and handled them, and one day we rediscovered a litter we had handled less than two weeks previous. Danny found them, but I exercised an elder's right to reach in first. They attacked my hand, severely biting into the middle finger of my right hand. So it was I learned that an elder's right could be a fool's right.

During the winter of 1947 my mother had us include a clause in our nightly prayers for God to grant us a baby sister. Danny was eighteen months younger than myself, so he was part of the wallpaper as far back as I could remember; any displacement anxiety I experienced with his arrival was prehistory. But when my sister, Cynthia, arrived on February 29, 1948, it was as if God had personally answered

our prayers with the cutest little being I could imagine. Cute but, I soon concluded, boring. She was immobile, and all she did was shit and cry. Even a day-old calf was more interesting. This was the year my focus turned outward from the house. In fact, though I can remember in detail the barn and the twin masonry silo towers, the garage, the chicken house, the pasture that surrounded us, I can barely recall the layout of the house. Most, if not all, interesting things in the world were outside.

Like the pony my grandfather Solbach gave me for my sixth birthday. Prince was large for a Shetland, over four feet at the shoulder, not that much shorter than Paint, the small quarter horse Dad kept around for the occasional task or emergency. I was taught how to get the bit in Prince's mouth and adjust the bridle. Saddles were not allowed because of the danger of falling and getting dragged by the stirrup. To mount I pulled him alongside whatever was available—empty truck bed, top of the cistern lid, limestone fence post. Prince was pretty but he wasn't nice. You had to watch him close or he'd bite you. He would sometimes, at the last second, jump away from whatever you were mounting him from. That was only one of the ways I managed to fall off him and generate months of scabs. He would try to roll over when crossing water; if he got his front knees down, there was no stopping him. You had to jump quick to avoid getting squashed. Soon after I got him I was riding him up the driveway to the road, and Danny was walking alongside. Somehow Danny tripped and fell on his back in front of us, and Prince stepped up on his chest and stopped, both front hooves square on his chest. Danny was waving his arms and getting red in the face. I was terrified not only that he was already seriously hurt, but that when the horse stepped off

him it might step on his face or stomach. Somehow I induced Prince to step off to the side without hurting him more, and amazingly, Danny jumped up uninjured. We didn't share this adventure with our parents until we were adults, and I suspect they didn't believe us then.

Rather than fearing fratricide, I was more often fantasizing it during the months it took me to learn to ride. I would have been content to hold Prince to an occasional trot forever if Danny hadn't hopped on him and immediately prodded him into a gallop. Though a year and a half younger, and smaller for his age than I, he was better coordinated, had a better sense of balance, was generally more athletic. The only advantage I had over him was size, which I didn't for a moment let him forget. On the other hand, that couldn't spare me the necessity to make that horse gallop until I didn't fall off. And once I mastered Prince I took on Paint, because Danny made it clear that if I didn't, he would.

Kindergarten and first grade made little impression on me. My cousin Karel, a year behind me, shamed me into taking reading seriously somewhat like Danny made me take riding seriously. But I remember starting the second grade from my grandparents' house. That was the fall of 1949, and things had changed. In the spring my father had become deathly ill with what turned out to be a combination of chickenpox and zinc poisoning. The local doctors were stymied, and presumed whatever it was might be contagious, so they rigged a hospital bed in my grandparents' house in Russell, rather than have him in the county hospital. Because Danny and I had had chickenpox, they drew blood from us for a transfusion. This was after a specialist had been flown in from Kansas City, who determined, from the can of the paint my father had been spraying, that it was a combination of zinc

poisoning and chickenpox. The needle they used to extract the blood from me looked big, and I decided that I was not going to participate. A little bit like deciding not to die, but it took two adults to pin me down while a third injected the needle. Unlike a good beating, after the initial prick, it was nothing. But I told Danny that the needle was a foot long and relished the terror on his face as he slunk into the room for his contribution.

Though he was several months recuperating, my father survived, and was just getting his strength back when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in the fall. I vaguely understood the severity of their illnesses, but the prospect of being orphaned didn't daunt me. In fact, it was an adventurous time for me, because I got to live with my grandparents in their brick house in Russell.

William Frank Solbach, Sr. (my father was Junior) was born in 1889, a generation after the family arrived from Germany. They were Catholic, he was the oldest of a large brood, and his father was a successful farmer in north-central Kansas. He was in his late fifties by the time I knew him, bald and pot-bellied, and often seemed amused by something I didn't quite get. He spent time every day at his desk, something my father never did. His first marriage was annulled on grounds unknown to me, but resulted in the birth of twin girls. I speculate that they were conceived prior to the marriage. I also speculate that he moved to Salt Lake City to be away from the scandal. He worked for an uncle there who operated a truck farm on the edge of town, and legend has it that he became manager of the farm until it was

sold from under him by the uncle. Meanwhile, he managed to graduate from Hennegar's Business School (a branch of it still operates in Provo, Utah), and became a teacher for that institution. My grandmother was a student there, almost ten years his junior, beautiful and Mormon. They eloped and were married in Evanston, Wyoming days after what my grandmother thought was her 18th birthday (it was actually her 19th). After several years in Salt Lake City, where my father and aunt were born, they migrated to Los Angeles, where I assume they worked in business until they returned to Russell County in 1927. They bequeathed our wing of the family a watery Methodism, for which I am ever grateful. When time came for me to shed Christianity, it would have been much more difficult with a Catholic or Mormon upbringing. I used their story as the basis of my novel, *Stonepacker's Gold*.

They were lured back to Russell County by his Uncle Bill Solbach (I suspect the same of Salt Lake City) to be foreman and cook, respectively, on his ranch north of Russell. Although this Uncle Bill helped them acquire the five quarters south of Russell on the Smoky Hill River that were the basis of the farm I grew up on, he was reputedly a conniving businessman who ended up losing his land to a woman over whom he made an old fool of himself. My grandfather rescued him from a dugout in Colorado and brought him home for his last years. Whenever I misbehaved, or when I told my mother that I figured I'd never get married, I was told I'd end up a lonely old man like Uncle Bill.

The most important year in my grandfather's life had to be 1937. First there was a cloudburst upstream on Big Creek, which debouches into the Smoky Hill River on the western

edge of the property. The result was nine feet of water in their house. They built the brick house in Russell and never moved back. This was facilitated by the arrival of oil wells on one of the western quarters. Lastly, his father, my great-grandfather, who had given each of his other children a quarter section of land, gave him a quarter near Stockton, Kansas. This was possible because the drought ravishing Western Kansas was less severe in Central and Eastern Kansas; the problem facing farmers was more how to market their production than lack of it. Among other strategies, my grandfather reputedly went to Kansas City and made the rounds of restaurants and clubs, selling a side of beef here and there until he had enough orders to rent a railroad cattle car. He accompanied the shipment and monitored the slaughter and distribution of the meat.

There were no spankings at my grandparents. In fact, the discipline routine was opposite that of my parents. My grandfather was the pushover, whereas Ethelbert Glencora (Glaze–we knew her as Ethel G.) could nail me as thoroughly with a glance as my father did with a beating. If I hadn't understood implicitly that I was a favorite, she would have been terrifying. Her coiffure and dress were always impeccable; her sense of civility and protocol were fine-tuned, and not to be trifled with. I suspect that her obsession with image was rooted in the unconventionality of their marriage, and the failure of the Solbachs to accept her (or so she thought) because of my grandfather's first marriage. I did my best to please them, and generally succeeded, though I did cause them a fright that winter when I set off on my tricycle to find my mother. Nor was I afraid to defy my grandmother if I felt my turf was unjustly invaded. Once we were eating lunch at a self-serve cafeteria and I selected myself a plate of

raw scallions. When we got to the table she leaned over to me and said, indicating the scallions, "You know, David, you ought to think of others when you chose what you eat." I ate with more purpose than relish, but I ate those scallions.

That winter our family was reunited in a house on the north edge of Russell. My mother had endured a mastectomy and radiation treatments, and must have been tired and weak, but I don't remember her as such. Again, I was focused outside our home. I was transferred to the north side elementary school midyear and met my first girlfriend. Her name was Connie. The height of our romance was when we were accidentally stranded in our classroom after school one day, alone, just the two of us. I chased her around the desks, both of us squealing; I was careful not to catch her.

My Aunt Margaret and Uncle Maurice Ramsey lived near us on the north side of town. Maurice and my father were dissolving their partnership in the dairy farm north of town that year, and there were innuendoes impugning his character–character being defined as eagerness to work hard. Maurice's sense of humor in an environment short of it made me uneasy, but I liked him for it. He was kind to me, and I figured if he was slothful, it was a fault I could forgive, because I certainly shared it. My Aunt Margaret, on the other hand, I thought was about the prettiest woman in my world. They had four girls, most of whom were too much younger than myself to count, the exception being their oldest, Karel, previously mentioned as shaming me into learning how to read–in spite of being a year my junior. Margaret always treated me as visiting royalty. I credit her, along with my

grandmother Solbach, and my mother, with imbuing me with a sense of worth, of being special, that I was able to resurrect in my twenties. The disapproval of my father, however, overshadowed such small victories in these years.

We occasionally visited my mother's family in Denver. When my grandparents Charlie and Nellie Watkins had lost their farm in the dustbowl of Western Kansas in the late thirties, they moved to Russell for Charlie to manage a Maytag washing machine franchise. The youngest of five and the only one still at home, my mother had just graduated from high school and went to work for the telephone company. After several years Charlie left the franchise and moved the family west to Denver, but in the meantime my parents had met on a blind date. My mother recalled a conversation in a hair salon soon after they'd met, a conversation in which she acknowledged dating Bill Solbach. The negative reaction of the women, she later realized, was based on my father's childhood 'accident;' possibly, also, the temporary separation of my grandparents that followed, or their mixed marriage. Her reaction was defiance. She wasn't about to let the prejudices of narrow-minded women come between her and a good young man.

By the time I knew them, in the late forties, Charlie and my uncles Vernon and Cecil Watkins were running a small supermarket in Denver. Charlie and Nellie lived in an apartment house that Cecil and Vernon were forever remodeling. It was located at 635 Grant and you never knew whom you'd meet there. Family dinners at my grandparents Solbach were strictly limited to the Ramseys and us–no

strangers, no hired men (unless they were Solbach cousins). In contrast, my mother's sister and brothers provided me with a swarm of cousins, and Charlie and Nellie welcomed various friends and tenants into their home. Everyone was white and Christian, but the atmosphere of inclusion stood me in good stead years later when I moved into the hippie communes of San Francisco.

I had two male cousins the same age as myself who I got to know in Denver. Dwight Norton was a future lawyer, and Boyd Watkins a successful realtor, but on an afternoon in 1950 the three of us were lolling about in the front yard of Grant Street, bored with marbles, watching the one-way traffic go by mostly non-stop. I chucked a marble at traffic and hit nothing. They each had a turn, with similar results. Then I spotted an old Model T, what we dubbed a "yee-yee" car because of the sound of the four-cylinder engine, and I said, "Let's get her." We did. The driver skidded to a stop and two big, angry young men leaped out and ran toward us. We scrambled up the stairs to the entrance, where our shouts of terror produced my Aunt Daisy, Boyd's mother, from behind whose skirts we fearfully faced the consequences of our transgression. Somehow she got rid of them, and our punishment was to sit in separate corners for half an hour. I felt like a bank robber who had found a parking ticket on his getaway car.

In the fall of 1950, we moved back to Wichita, where I began the third grade. Each of the following two summers my father quit Boeing for the summer and rehired in the fall. Our family spent those summers camped at the original

homestead on the farm south of Russell. My parents slept in a tiny house trailer and Danny and I and the hired men slept on cots in a room of the old house, which had been deserted since the great flood of 1937. The original stone portion had been built in the 1880s. We bathed in the river every evening. The water was low, and it was hard to find a hole deep enough to submerge yourself. Danny and I had minimal chores, and spent hours riding our horses. A favorite sport for the hired men and us was to turn the light off at night and give the mice enough time to come out. The light was turned back on and the competition was to see who could kill the most mice. Rolled up magazines or newspapers were the weapons of choice.

Third grade was the year of the war with our neighbors on the other side of the alley. We dug a foxhole in the backyard and waged rock fights. There was a pecan tree in that backyard, and each fall we'd return from the farm and be faced with the drudgery of gathering the pecan nuts. Bicycles replaced horses. We played kick-the-can and dodge ball with the neighbor kids out front. Danny and I went door to door collecting old newspapers in our wagons. We filled the garage with them. Dad hauled them to the recycling station by the pickup load. Ultimately he decided the money didn't warrant the bother, and for the first time I questioned him. I didn't understand the economics, but I understood that we were doing a good job, and he never said so.

At school they tested our singing voices, and I didn't do well. So I was assigned to an instrumental teacher who wanted to put together a clarinet quartet, and I badgered my parents into getting me a clarinet; an indulgence on their part for which I am ever grateful. And surprised. They loved Bing Crosby, but couldn't tell Bach from Brahms. The

instrumental teacher suggested we attend a symphony concert on the Wichita University campus. The evening for the concert came, and we drove around the campus as the sun set, trying to find the hall. In the end the expedition was abandoned, but my disappointment was minor. I had my clarinet.

Sand lot football became a passion in these years. I was large for my age, and not very fast, so I became a lineman. We played both offense and defense, of necessity, but from the beginning I enjoyed defense more. Blocking was boring, whereas blasting past a blocker and then smashing the runner was sweet. Danny learned always to be on my side, because he usually ended up being running back/defensive back. When I got into organized football in Junior High I was pleased to learn that defensive linemen were allowed to use their hands, but not offensive linemen. That stood me in good stead for several years, but my body betrayed me. I grew from tall and large to very tall and skinny, all elbows and knees. I got to six feet and 155 pounds by age fifteen. Football stopped being fun going up against offensive tackles weighing over 180 pounds.

I listened to the Korean War on the radio. My imagination was caught by the description of an American "spearhead" penetrating the communist lines. I took it literally, and envisaged a couple hundred GIs marching in an inverted V. I figured the soldiers at the point must tend to get killed off the fastest, so the guys down the line must move up to take their places. The decision to step up to sure death and replace the point man sounded awful. But I had read enough comic books to understand that good guys do just that, and I was disturbed. I had a series of dreams, nightmares in which I was part of a crowd, each one of us armed with a single arrow.

The setting was a large cave divided by prison bars. On the far side of the bars was another group of people, similarly armed with a single arrow each. On signal both sides rushed forward and slaughtered each other through the bars.

In the fourth grade a boy from Texas transferred into my class. He was bigger than myself and had a swagger to go with his thick accent. He sounded as stupid to us as our Kansas twang would have sounded to a New Yorker at the time. My classmates' derision of his accent lent me the courage to commit the first truly cowardly act of my life. I tackled him from behind at a full run. Monitors grabbed us immediately, or that Texan would have given me my first, and well deserved, pummeling.

Two doors down the street lived Kenny Dunlap. He was my age and size and his father was a fireman. Once his father helped him build an elaborate model airplane out of balsa wood. When it was nearly finished Kenny accidentally sat on it. I happened to be there, and was stunned by how the act crumpled his father, and how Kenny's own grief was considered adequate punishment for the blunder. His mother was our Cub Scout den mistress, and had a rich sense of humor. One day Kenny and I were playing on his front porch and glanced up to see a black man with a gun on his shoulder turn off the sidewalk toward us up the walkway. We screamed and bolted into the house. We slammed the front door behind us and barricaded ourselves in the bathroom. His mother had donned overalls, a hat, and black-face, put Kenny's own BB gun over her shoulder, and frightened us witless. Her sense of humor, and our terror, says much our racial ignorance and the ubiquitous racism that pervaded our world.

In the summer of '53 my grandfather became ill with wheat smut poisoning and an enlarged heart. That fall we stayed in Russell in a house on West 6th St. that my grandfather owned, and I attended the sixth grade at Southside Elementary School, the school where I had begun the second grade. I had by this time decided that although I had to accept my father's discipline, I wasn't going to take it from anybody else. I had seen several classmates whacked, and I decided that if any teacher hit me, I would hit them back. I refused to acknowledge the authority of the crosswalk guards, and was called in for a talk with Mr. Fitzgerald. He was an assistant principal, but he was also my classroom teacher, and I liked him. I explained that the crosswalk guards were no older than I, and no better qualified to know when it was safe to cross. He didn't argue my point, and I suspected he was amused. He dismissed me without sanctions. A week later he called me in and offered me a job as a crosswalk guard. I accepted. But wait. Although I was a sixth grader, he noticed that I was walking across town to play clarinet in the Junior High band, and that would conflict with the scheduling of a crosswalk guard. Too bad, he said. I needed more adults in my life like Mr. Fitzgerald.

I discovered the public library, and became an addict of animal stories generally, horse and dog stories in particular. Though I wasn't sentimental about the animals in my life, I was glad to be drawn into an idealized, anthropomorphic world of fantasy. When I was briefly hospitalized to remove my tonsils someone brought me several animal stories, and one of them was *Moby Dick*. I'm sure it was a well-edited version, and I was so struck by it that I read it twice. It never

occurred to me, nor was there anyone around me to point out, that there was a significant difference between that masterpiece and other animal stories.

That winter I took on a paper route. I didn't mind the delivering, though when the press broke down and we didn't get our papers until after dark, or when it snowed or was icy, it could be a demanding chore. But the part of the job I hated was going door to door and collecting from my customers every month. Their excuses and complaints and digging for pennies while I stood wearing my outdoor clothes in their overheated houses was perhaps a good life lesson, but as soon as I had the fifty dollars for the bicycle I wanted, I quit. One afternoon during my last week I sat on the sidewalk folding my papers, stacking them neatly in my carrier bag. I was next to the entrance to the newspaper office, and another paperboy kicked my neat stack on his way into the office. He was slightly taller than me, and I was willing to assume it was accidental. I straightened them out, and then he kicked them again when he came out of the office. I patiently straightened them again, and again he kicked them on his way back into the office. For the third time I straightened my pile, then I stood up. Without thought or anger, when he came out I hit him in the mouth. We were both surprised. I wasn't strong enough to hurt him, but I did draw a little blood. Neither of us said a word, nor did any of the half dozen other boys folding their papers around us.

The summer of '54 was a big one for me. I turned twelve and was rewarded with a saddle and a shotgun. The shotgun was a 16 gauge single barrel with a plastic stock. Being so

light, it kicked almost as hard as a 12 gauge, and you had to be careful to hold it tight against your shoulder to avoid getting bruised. I took off across the pasture and killed everything that moved, livestock excepted. I couldn't miss. I had the same Zen-like focus with which I hit that paperboy. On the opening day of pheasant season that fall we lined up on the south side of the bridge. We walked thirty feet and a cock flew up in front of me, and I shot it. I shouted at my father that I'd hit him, I got him, and he shushed me. He wanted his own bird, and he did not compliment me on my success.

One day in June I was playing basketball with Danny on the southside courts. A kid named Maurice Burris joined us. It came time for us to leave, but he refused to let us have our ball. He was smaller than me, but he looked tough, and I tried to talk him out of it. Finally I tore the ball away from him. He hit me a glancing blow, so I threw the ball towards Danny and started flailing at him. I backed him across the court throwing wild roundhouse punches, by now crying profusely. No Zen cool that day. I probably didn't hit him, but I cowed him sufficiently to make a run for where Danny waited with the bicycles. A year and a half later, in the fall of eighth grade, he again forced me to fight him. I threw a couple of lucky, wild punches and knocked him down. He disappeared into reform school for about a year and returned doing one arm pushups and with real boxing skills. His nickname was now "Little Abe," and I was terrified I'd have to face him a third and fatal time. But he didn't call me out, and I soon realized that he had an exaggerated notion of my pugilistic skills, and that if I treated him with respect he never would challenge me. Somewhat like a German Shepard puppy getting bullied by a terrier and never outgrowing a

sense of inferiority to the terrier.

We again had minimal chores that summer. We had saddles (Danny got his a week after I got mine) for our horses and the run of the section. I was allowed to take swimming lessons at the municipal pool in Russell. Our Grandpa Watkins came out and camped with Danny and me in the backyard for several weeks. I had my shotgun. During harvest a truck driver explained sex to Danny and myself. How we could have been around farmyards since we were conscious and not at least have asked some pointed questions is astonishing to me now. At the time, however, sex was a revelation that sounded like the best thing since soda pop. I was allowed to go off on a two-week backpacking trip with the Boy Scouts in New Mexico. My cousins Dwight and Jimmy Norton came and camped in the backyard with us. It was a great summer, I had my first orgasm, but I sensed that things were too good to last, and I often told Danny to remember me saying that we'd look back on this as the best summer of our lives. I don't know that he agreed, but whenever we got together in later years he remembered my saying it. After a separation of several years in our late twenties, however, I asked, and he no longer remembered.

Jim Schultz, the son of our family doctor, had the locker next to mine when I started seventh grade in Russell that fall. Almost the first thing I said to him was, "Did you pop any cherries this summer?" He was shocked, and hurried off leaving me feeling like I had snot on my lip. I felt like that a lot in the next few years, because boundaries that seemed obvious even to my peers did not always seem obvious to me.

I learned to be reticent, a habit reinforced by the small-town reality that everything you said to anybody would eventually get around to everybody. Jim forgave me and we became friends for several years. He lived around the block from us, and my father built us a go-kart that was powered by a two-and-a-half horsepower gas engine. We were in the same Boy Scout troop. Most of that year we spent an evening a week at the Church with our Methodist pastor earning the God and Country Award. I retain nothing of those evenings. I was bored by sermons and ceremony, distrustful of doctrine, but I enjoyed meditating alone in the basement of the church. After I was chosen to help pass the collection plate, and could therefore sit in the rear of the church, I would sneak out during services and go downstairs. I would walk and let myself be filled with a sense of loving God, a faceless God of light rather than a God of commandments and sacrifice.

Girls became an obsession and a torment. I fell in love. Her name was Barbara and I met her through our 4H club square dances. She was Danny's age, two grades behind me, and I probably wouldn't have noticed her in school. She had brown eyes that jarred me with a glance. To hold her hand five seconds longer than necessary at the end of a dance was bliss. We rarely talked. It was like a dream over which I had no verbal control, only the power to take her hand when offered, to stare into her eyes when she allowed. The relationship never died because it never really began, it was never articulated. The magic faded to when several years later I hardly noticed when Danny started courting her. Still, it was just as well that he didn't tell me until we were in our twenties that he'd had sex with her when they were in the eighth grade. Not because I would have been jealous of him sleeping with Barbara, but because he got laid at all. I

remained virgin until shortly after high school.

Beginning the summer of '55 I was expected to rise and head out with my father at 6:30 a.m. daily, Sundays excepted. No more catching a ride out with Mom or Grandpa at 10:00 a.m. to go riding. I was taught how to use a grease gun and fuel up vehicles. When helping my Dad on mechanical projects I was expected to learn the size of wrenches by sight–a skill I assiduously avoided acquiring. I was taught to drive a tractor, which was fun and challenging at first. I learned to drive on an old John Deere Model G. Both it and the brand-new Model R that I was allowed to drive to the farm from the agency were two cylinder. We called them "Johnnie Poppers" because of the sound of the exhaust.

During harvest I was allowed to drive trucks in the fields occasionally, not on the roads. My father put me on his lap and taught me how to drive the threshing combine. Next year he would turn me loose with a machine the size of a small house fronted by a ten-foot platform. Keeping the speed of the machine and the height of the platform just right was tricky, but after several days it became routine, and I was soon envying the truck drivers. They got to sit around a lot and then go into town with the wheat and watch girls while they waited in line for the elevator. But even subsequent years, after I turned 14 and got my driver's license, I drove combine, not truck, during harvest. I presumed it was because a truck driver cost a dollar an hour, whereas combine operators made a dollar and a quarter. Also, I was learning that my father didn't enjoy the repetitious jobs any more than I did. He liked driving around in his truck to crises to be avoided or quelled, situations to be monitored. His idea of fun was to get out his acetylene torch and arc welder and

rebuild an experimental bale loader the John Deere dealer should have sold him at cost.

Before harvest was over that first year I was put to plowing a half section. The first day I made 10 rounds. There were no cabs on any of our equipment, for umbrella I had a straw hat. There was always one direction in which you had to eat your own dust. The second day I got maybe 12 or 13 rounds. This was land we sharecropped (a word my father rejected, but we kept two-thirds and the owner kept the other third of whatever we produced), and it was proverbially flat in all directions. Today you might be able to see trucks on the interstate, but the only thing then was the Gorham grain elevator, which could have been a set for *The Last Picture Show*. I watched the clouds for hours, praying for them to come together in a thunderstorm that would force me to shut down the tractor. Seagulls from Cheyenne Bottoms circled round to land just behind the plow, where they plundered the upturned grubs and worms. One day I was resting my hand on a fender and a seagull shat between my fingers. That was my excitement for the day. I learned to masturbate by standing and pressing my penis against the steering wheel. I used the vibration of the tractor to ejaculate a dozen times a day—without once taking my penis out of my pants. The drinking water was left in a double-walled metal container in which the sun warmed the water to a comfortable bath temperature by the end of the day. When I asked for ice, I was told that ice water was bad for your stomach when it was hot.

Somewhere in my twelfth year I had stopped crying when my father beat me. I had crossed an interior threshold of defiance that erupted in confrontation late that summer of '55. We were having supper, and he made a statement of fact

that I knew to be untrue, and I said so. I said so again, and when he locked me in his laser glare, I just glared back. I knew I risked being knocked out of my chair, but I'd grown to the point where I didn't care. To his credit, and the relief of the rest of the family, he didn't backhand me that day. Danny thought I was crazy, and our respective policies toward our father diverged dramatically after that. Danny placated him however he had to, told him whatever he wanted to hear, then went out and did whatever he wanted to do. Maybe Danny didn't adore our father as I did, maybe he had a more realistic view from the outset, and therefore wasn't as outraged to discover his feet of clay. Maybe he was just more pragmatic. For myself, I challenged Bill Solbach every way I could from that day forward.

Two of my father's cousins worked for us in those years. Everett and Charlie Solbach were in their early twenties. I liked Charlie because he was understated and thoughtful, the last among us you would expect to lose the ends of several fingers in a combine pulley. But he did. Everett was over six feet and 170 pounds, and had been a very successful high school wrestler. He was on a troop carrier in the Pacific when the Korean armistice was signed, and had just spent two years keeping the peace in Korea. Unlike Charlie, he was loud and full of himself. My mother confronted him about drinking openly, so he kept a secret bottle in our closet. I liked that. He was exciting but vain, too boisterous for my taste. If I needed someone to cover my back in a brawl, Everett would have been my man. But I noticed that he repeated the stories of his prowess. His limited catalogue included virulently

racist anecdotes that I just didn't get. We had three black families in a town of eight thousand. Being so few, and therefore unthreatening, they were universally liked and respected, so far as I knew.

Charlie and Everett were very efficient and intelligent workers. Years later, when I became a carpenter, I modeled my work habits more after them than my father, though he was at least their equal, and had a much broader range of skills. That was largely because Everett never tried to force me to do anything I didn't want to do; he'd just dismiss me with disgust. The one time Charlie tried to force me to wash some dishes I went ballistic and then left the house. He didn't try again.

Football was still fun in the fall of '55, but I had learned that the only sport that mattered in Russell was basketball. I was devastated when I didn't make the team. That I was allowed to play in the high school band was small consolation. There was no more respect to be found in music than in academics. In the spring I went out for track, and was mediocre at throwing the shot put and running the half mile. I did have a moment of glory a year later when I anchored a mixed medley; I took the baton in third place, and in half a mile got into the lead and hung on for second place. Unfortunately, there was nothing I did my eighth year of school that garnered me as much respect as the fight that Maurice Burris forced on me.

The next summer I turned fourteen and got my driver's license. During harvest I operated a combine. Wheat chaff was itchy, but the few acres we harvested of oats and especially barley were torture. It was the same problem as operating the tractor; there was always at least one direction in which you ate your own dust and chaff. Up to this point

the farm was primarily a summertime operation. In fact, several winters my father worked for the local Studebaker dealer. But now he built his state-of-the-art milk parlor, a three-stanchion walk-through design with the cows about three feet above where you stood, which placed their udders at a comfortable height to clean and put on the suction cups. The milk was piped straight into ten-gallon cans in a cooler in the next room–the room where Danny and I would be caught playing Lash Larue.

We milked about 35 to 40 head year-round. Milking with that kind of machinery was not hard work. Each cow got a big scoop of high protein feed, you washed her teats and udder, and when she "dropped" her milk (her teats would become swollen), you slapped the suction cups on her teats. The only part that required a little finesse was making sure you got all the milk and then promptly removed the suction cup when the cow was fully milked. Boring, but not hard work. Occasionally a cow would balk at the door and you'd have to go out and drive her in; we usually had a kicker or two to add a little excitement. When the milking finished the real drudgery began. Every piece of equipment had to be rinsed with cold water, then washed and rinsed in hot water. The pipes had to be flushed and disinfected. Most important, we had to clean the manure that was inevitably spattered around the milking area. Tools included shovel, broom, garden hose, wire brush, and squeegee. The routine took less than three hours, two milking, the rest cleaning, and even the cleaning wasn't as unpleasant as many of the tasks around the farm. What staggered me was the repetition of milking those cows two times a day, 365 days a year. I didn't learn the myth of Sisyphus until years later, but at fourteen I would have grasped it instantly.

The dairy became a black hole that swallowed every hour that wasn't otherwise occupied. On Sunday we returned to town after the morning milking for church and family afternoons, then out to push the rock up the hill again that evening. Saturdays there was always something to keep us busy between milkings, even in the winter. There was at least one blizzard when my father and I took sleeping bags and slept in the wash room of the dairy, because he was afraid of being cut off by snowdrifts, and the cows had to be milked. Transportation was available to get me to the dairy after school if I didn't have anything better to do, so after football season, making the basketball team became critical. This year I was lucky. First I didn't make the team, then it turned out one of the players had bad grades, so I was on as number twelve man. I saw almost no playing time, but I enjoyed practice, and I missed a lot of milkings.

I began making a few friends, all of them guys, most of them social outsiders like myself. Little Abe returned from prison and I drifted away from Jim Schultz, a well-behaved son of a doctor, and became buddies with Jim Schmidt, a disaffected farm boy like myself. We developed a dress style that was different than the upper classmen. We cut the belt loops off our jeans and pulled them low as possible on our hips, a sort of ancestor to Gangsta fashion. Rather than three-or-four-inch pant cuffs, we went for no cuffs. We grew ducktail haircuts that we waxed in place, and bleached a front curl. I was proud that none of the bloodstains on the inside of my leather coat were my own. We imagined ourselves as tough, but I was having misgivings about tough. Firstly, I realized that no matter how bad you got, somebody was going to come along who was meaner. One day Ronnie Dillard got into a fight with a farmer behind the Methodist

church. Ronnie wore his pants lower on his butt than any of us. The farmer reached out and jerked Ronnie's pants down around his knees, then beat him while Ronnie laughed with embarrassment. The next night I was standing alongside Little Abe when he hit a kid for no reason other than he refused to fight. The sound of that impact, the rattle of teeth and saliva and flesh, disgusted me.

I hadn't done well in pheasant season that fall. I missed several easy shots and accidentally killed a hen. I was starting to think too much about what was happening on the other side of my gun, and I was flinching or blinking as I squeezed the trigger. When I finally got called out later that year and had to fight, we met at the back of the old Methodist church on Main Street. He was from out of town, and like most of my opponents, he was shorter but stockier than myself, and thought he could take me because I was skinny. He swung first and missed and I leaped on him and pushed him to the ground, pinned his arms, popped him a couple times in the face, enough to draw blood. His blood revolted me, so I let him go and stood up. I was brushing myself off when he hit me and smashed my glasses. That really pissed me off. So I again carried him to the ground, pinned his arms, and beat him unmercifully. He went to the ER for stitches afterward, but I have no memory of how he looked. There was a lot of blood and he didn't get up the second time. What I can clearly remember is how he looked the first time I hit him, and that still makes me feel sick.

Though our unspoken code prohibiting weapons seems quaint in the wake of the carnage of subsequent generations, I was beginning to feel trapped in a universe where if I didn't fight, I would be suffocated for lack of respect, and if I did, I was caught between smashing faces, an increasingly

unpleasant assignment, or getting smashed, a prospect that seemed increasingly likely. I sat in on several boxing rounds with a fellow about my size, and without my glasses I couldn't see his punches coming. Pat Schilling pretty much pummeled me at will. So I got political. I began to advocate that we focus our hostilities on out-of-towners. Russell numbered only eight thousand, but it was the County seat, and had the only theatres in the county. It was a magnet for teenagers who, whatever the reason, didn't attend the consolidated school system. This had the advantage that we usually outnumbered them, and if a visitor looked too dangerous there was no loss of face in not confronting him—he wouldn't be around tomorrow to haze you. But the biggest advantage was that I was less likely to have to confront one of my own comrades.

I read *Up the Down Staircase* and realized that teachers were also fair game. Having long since vowed, having endured my father, that I would accept no physical or even verbal abuse from anyone without fighting back the best I could, it was an easy transition to attacking authority figures any way I could devise. I addressed teachers as "Daddy-O" and pushed my glasses up with my middle finger extended. When called on it, I feigned ignorance—what was the difference between my little finger and my middle finger? One of the more creative teachers held me after school one day and explained the history of The Finger, and how it was called "The Bird." I heard him out. Then I said that just because it meant that to them, and to him, it didn't mean it meant that to me. He dismissed me with a gesture of disgust.

The summer of '57 my father built a house next to the dairy barn. It had a cinder block basement and foundation built to accommodate three small workers' shacks that were

moved from miles away. My uncles Cecil and Vernon Watkins came out from Denver and joined them into one. They brought a sense of humor and openness that characterized my mother's family, in spite of my Grandmother Nellie's conservative Protestantism. I helped the mason and my uncles, an experience that influenced my decision to become a carpenter in later years. I was fifteen, and the last two times my father tried to beat me I hoofed it to the pasture, or in another case jumped out of the moving pickup and headed cross country, knowing he'd never catch me on foot. I didn't know it, but he would never hit me again. I'd had my driver's license for a year, and now I got my own car, a '52 Ford coupe. I smoked Lucky Strikes and bought as much beer as I wanted without using ID. Jim Schmidt and I set out at least one night a week to get laid, but all we ever managed was to get drunk.

The academic value of my education in Russell was negligible to nonexistent, with one notable exception. The band teacher, Mr. Donald Bailey, was the rare talented musician who possessed the charm and wit to disarm my punk façade. I played clarinet in the concert band and was in line for the concert mastership (first clarinet, which corresponded to the lead violin in an orchestra) by the time I left at the end of my junior year. I played tenor saxophone in the dance band. The charts were elementary, and the solos were short and written out, so I didn't learn to improvise. Still I enjoyed it. What I didn't enjoy was marching band. I loathed John Phillip Souza as much as country music. The first improvising I did was over Souza marches and school theme songs so corny they were driving me crazy. The act of marching I hated even more. To be in lock step with twenty-five other human beings made me nauseous. I avoided it

when I could, and when I couldn't I perfected the art of being perfectly out of step. There was a stripe down the outside of our uniform pants, and in the yearbook photos of the band I am extending The Finger onto that stripe.

In the spring of '58 the bank refused to renew my father's loan. My parents and brother and sister moved to New Orleans, where my father became the installation half of a folding door partnership with my uncle Dwight Norton. I was convinced there was nowhere on earth—certainly not New Orleans—that could compare with Russell, Kansas. I asked for and was granted permission to stay with my grandparents. I helped my grandfather clean up and position the equipment for auction. There were two combines, a hay bailer, three tractors and every imaginable implement to go with them, two trucks, a pickup, arc welder, battery charger, silage maker, manure spreader, grinders, acetylene torches, and several chests of tools. Once it was clear that I could keep my car, I was as glad to see these instruments of torture carted off as I had been the day the trucks came for the cows.

My grandfather was able to raise enough money to clear my father's obligations and save the land, I was told, but the situation was more complicated. One of the activities I enjoyed with my grandparents that year was driving around looking at houses for sale, both in Russell and down the road in Hays, which they felt was a better investment than Russell because of its college. They had enough money to buy at least half a dozen houses, so they must have had the resources, if they had chosen, to keep my father in business. My father and grandfather sometimes had screaming fights over matters

that were opaque to me, but I surmise that they fell out over my father's penchant for the best and latest equipment in an era when farm prices didn't warrant it. In any case, my grandmother was tasked with unloading their investments after my grandfather died in 1967, and I had a model to follow when I began investing in real estate in my late thirties.

That fall I dropped out of sports altogether, because I no longer needed to get out of milking. Football had become painful. I had played basketball behind the same ten boys since seventh grade, and I knew that if I made the team, I'd see no playing time. I was too lazy to go out again for the half mile in track. I preferred to hang out after school and cruise up and down Main Street; what we called "drag the gut." I got my first paying job (the paper route excepted). A service station owner paid me fifty cents an hour to change oil, lube, and wash vehicles. I learned to replace or clean and gap sparkplugs, repair flat tires, mount new ones, replace fan belts. Later I worked in stations where I pumped gas and learned to sell windshield wiper blades, air filters, oil and oil additives; there was also a certain amount of reading time, especially late at night when the restrooms and work areas were cleaned up. But on this first job the boss watched the pumps and I worked only if there was work in the service bays. Which was fine by me. Fifty cents an hour seemed generous. I used my first several checks to buy a dual straight-pipe exhaust system for my car. You could hear it idle from over a hundred yards, and when I opened it up it made more noise than an eighteen-wheel tractor.

Mr. Anderson, the high school principal, wrote my parents that I was effectively a gang leader, and would they please take me off to New Orleans. I indignantly denied his

charges; I didn't see myself as the leader of anything. Hindsight makes his indictment plausible, but I think I was more the mouth of the insurgency, the sarcastic gadfly with enough wit to be a royal aggravation. Which isn't to say I wasn't involved in my share of larcenous behavior. I never hit anyone for not fighting, like Little Abe did, but I several times shoved and spat in the face of boys for the same. One evening, about sunset, I was dragging the gut with several friends, a couple of six packs stashed in the backseat, and the local cops flashed their spotlight on me. Their intent was to warn me to turn on my headlights, but I panicked, and hit the gas. My little flathead V8 sounded awesome, but they were on me with their Pontiac like a cat on a mouse. I pulled over in less than three blocks, not enough time to dispose of the beer. They took us into the station. I was polite, and accepted a dressing down with humility. They no doubt knew my father, and grandfather, as well as most of my extended family. They confiscated our beer and let us go. On the way out I left them a smart-ass remark, which I much regretted when they caught me speeding several weeks later. This time I was issued a citation, which was recorded in the crime section of the local newspaper. I got to my grandparents' copy and tried, unsuccessfully, to make it look like my name had accidentally been torn out of the article.

In a town as small as Russell, it's unlikely they didn't hear of most of my misdeeds, and their disappointment must have been cumulative. A cursing match that was a prelude to one of my fights moved my grandmother to excoriate me, whereas she hardly mentioned the fight itself. This was one of two fights I remember losing that year. I did my best to avoid the first encounter, because I outweighed Pat Lally by at least thirty pounds, so if I won I was a bully, and to lose

was to lose much face. But he forced the issue. I was very drunk, he was a good wrestler, and when I tried my usual method of overwhelming him, he got under me and somehow stood upright, hoisting me over his shoulder. I felt like Ronnie Dillard with his pants around his knees. Fortunately, Pat wasn't strong enough to throw me; I pulled him down with me and the match ended as an inconclusive wrestling match. Which is how my other loss occurred, also against an off and on "friend," who tackled me when he mistakenly thought I had stolen his basketball. No blows were landed in either encounter.

I feel fortunate that the drugs of subsequent generations were not available to us. I undoubtedly would have enjoyed them, and they undoubtedly would have exacerbated my social dysfunction and psychological confusion. Cigarettes and alcohol were our entire pharmacopoeia. Which was sufficient to tar myself with utter disgrace by the end of the school year. The final incident was the Junior/Senior prom. Though I managed to dance with several girls, I was too inept to have wrangled a date. The party afterward was the real party. It was a "river party," set on a small beach along the Saline River, some seven miles north of Russell. It had been the talk of the town for days. My Aunt Margaret had cornered me and forced me to promise I wouldn't attend. There were lanterns and blankets and kegs of beer. Just to be sure, I provided myself half a pint of apricot brandy. I flirted with one of the prettiest girls in my class. I was drinking straight from the keg's spigot, and then I was sick in the river. The rest is a blur until I got home. Carefully through the porch and back door, doing fine until the long flight of stairs down to the basement, where my room was located. I tripped and rolled down to the bottom, loose as a bag of sawdust. My

grandmother came to the head of the stairs, alarmed–was I okay?

And so it was that a U-Haul trailer was hooked to the back of my Ford coupe and my Grandfather Watkins came out to accompany me and my things and the last of my parents' possessions to Boise, Idaho, where we met my father. When Grandpa Charlie headed back to Denver, I expected my father to pull over at the first convenient spot and administer the beating I so richly deserved. I feared my response. Not only did that not happen, but he never mentioned the transgressions that moved my grandparents to send me packing. In retrospect I can see that he had just endured the loss of the farm. The folding door business with my uncle in New Orleans had not succeeded, and he was working in the pea fields of Western Washington while trying to get on at Skagit River Steel. He was much less inclined to impose his agenda than he had been a year previous.

I arrived in Mt. Vernon, Washington in June of 1959. I was stunned with the lushness of the landscape. I had spent time in the Rocky Mountains, but nothing prepared me for the beauty of Stevens Pass and the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains. Though there was still plenty of tension between my father and myself, now that the farm and my time weren't an issue, I took his cue and let it lie. Like Danny, I avoided and ignored him. I immediately got a job in a local gas station. I became better acquainted with my uncle Larry Watkins' family. They were Mormon, a religion that seemed even more bizarre than the Protestant absurdities I was trying to unravel. But they were hospitable, full of the Watkins'

good humor. My cousins Joyce and Janet, a year older and younger than myself, provided a useful exercise in communicating with females my own age.

That fall I walked into an academic atmosphere unlike anything I had ever experienced. Mt. Vernon was half again the size of Russell High School's 400 students. Sports were respected, but so were academics. Even music got you a little respect. There was no cognate for the hick thugs I hung with at Russell, nobody called me out to establish my place in the hierarchy. The only clash I had all year was with a boy who stole a jar of car wax from the station where I worked. Mr. Haley's concert band wasn't as good as Mr. Bailey's in Russell, but I alternated between first and third chair in the clarinet section. Several teachers made us write short essays. An English teacher named Joan Stockley got me interested in Shakespeare. She was young and pretty and demanding, and for the most part I complied. I once challenged an assignment; I argued that I was working twenty hours a week and what she asked was impossible. She let me have my say. In a cold, furious tone she replied, "You will not tell me how to run my class!" As she spoke she broke the pencil she held. I had to respect her.

I met the girl next door. Sharon was a junior, a year behind me. She was blond and short and buxom, gray eyes, pretty lips. I was too thick to appreciate her smarts and sense of humor, but I did manage to communicate well enough that she let me hang with her. We began to do movies and dances. Kisses evolved into heavy petting. I never liked listening to rock 'n' roll–I'd had enough exposure to jazz to think that rock was sanitized blues, repetitious, boring chord changes–but I enjoyed dancing to it. I began to incorporate some Elvis-inspired gyrations into my dancing, and Sharon was shocked.

First I desisted, for a moment reduced to an insecure twelve-year-old staring at himself in the mirror, trying to figure out what there was about that face that turned folks off. Then I resumed my improvisations, and after several minutes Sharon relaxed. We engaged in epic petting sessions, with me doing my best with the girdles and brassieres of the era. She held me off till just after graduation. On an anonymous beach, at twilight, we relieved one another of our virginity. My gratitude was complete—and fickle, in terms of what she wanted from the relationship. I was already chary of marriage and parenthood as a trap that would pin me to a dull job. Later that summer there were several weeks when we thought she might be pregnant. I was too myopic to imagine any solution beyond marrying her, if so, but I resolved that, if so, the kid's name, whatever the gender, would be "Too-Soon Solbach."

The second chair clarinet that year was Dwight Johnson. For reasons that were opaque to me, Mr. Haley swapped me with the young lady in third chair several times, but Dwight never moved from second. He was my opposite in many ways. He was short and stocky, dark haired, as enthusiastic about science and mathematics as he was about literature and music. He was a born-again Christian, and we spent hours arguing about his fundamentalism. I still considered myself Christian, but was questioning all the trappings, from the virgin birth to the resurrection of Christ. I'd long since rejected Heaven and Hell. I took note that, for Dwight, the question wasn't whether he was going to college, but where. As the year progressed, I figured I had three options: work, army, or college—if I could get in anywhere with my lousy grades. My Scholastic Aptitude Test scores weren't much better, so I was glad indeed to get accepted into what was

then called Western Washington State College of Education, thirty miles north in Bellingham, as a music major. I was even awarded a "scholarship," which consisted of free clarinet lessons.