

Defeat

By Fred Skolnik

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Neither first in nor last out, neither out far nor in deep, he held the middle ground in the games boys played. When they chose up sides, Eddie picked Chris and Tommy picked Jay, then Billy, then Jimmy, then Paul, then Ray. When he heard his name it was with a feeling of relief. Relegated to some inconspicuous spot, shunted aside while the true stars took things in hand and shone with their special light, he was nonetheless glad to have played at all and went home dreaming of better days. This consoled him, but it wasn't easy to be himself. Sometimes, when he thought he had something interesting or important to say he'd raise his voice to get people's attention, but no one really listened, and sometimes, sulking and wishing to make his presence felt, at least by his absence, he'd fall behind his friends and linger in the street, but no one really noticed. The only time he really felt a part of things was when they were teasing the wino who sometimes showed up on the block. He knew it was wrong but went along.

John lived in a narrow house with rooms like railroad cars and a little yard in the back blocked off by a slatted wooden fence where his father barbecued steaks from time to time. His father was a factory hand but somehow managed to meet the mortgage payments and the installment payments and the doctor bills and the grocery bills, while his mother kept house in a lackadaisical sort of way, seeming to daydream as she drifted through the rooms, though John could not imagine what she dreamed about. His father, on the other hand, had both feet on the ground and did things with gusto. He ate his meat and potatoes with gusto and drank his beer with gusto and once in a while swatted John with gusto when the boy was out of line. John looked up to his father, thinking he was a real man, and dreamed of being just like him one day.

John had a room upstairs next to his sister's. He was always teasing her and when she ran at him in the narrow hall dodged her artfully as he would have liked to dodge tacklers on a football field. But the moves that worked on her fooled no one at the line of scrimmage.

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Sometimes, when they were on good terms, he dressed her up in his football helmet and shoulder pads and had her run at him in earnest, calling off signals in a deep-throated, professional way. "On three," he'd say to her, and then: "Down, set, uh-one, uh-two ..."

When they got their first TV they watched wrestling mostly and argued about whether it was real or not. Then the baseball games came on and he and his father watched them intently and silently in their small, dark living room. Sometimes a plane coming over their house with its distant drone high up in the summer sky would come over the ballpark too and the camera would pick it up and he would wonder at this unexpected unity and coincidence of things tying him to a larger world. In those years John grew at an average rate. No one could complain about him. He didn't curse much, was polite to his elders and kept his room reasonably clean. But when his parents went out they had a girl babysit and then John got wild, trying to get her to notice him. He was not yet ten but he was already starting to think about girls in an innocent way. He imagined himself being watched from far away. It was that Captain Video thing. There'd be this machine that got into people's houses and you'd be observed in your secret, solitary moments on a screen. So John played for a while at being watched when he was alone. He moved with a certain heaviness as though great things were on his mind, he tried to look grave and pensive, he rubbed his chin and took to carrying a toy gun. He imagined that all the girls in his class were watching him.

Once his father took them to the beach and he watched a girl daintily eating an ice cream pop. First she nibbled off the chocolate coating and then she worked the ice cream into a perfect oval shape. John wanted it but his mother told him he would have to do his own, and he almost cried because he knew he couldn't. Afterwards he looked out at the sea and dreamed about sailing beyond the horizon to some enchanted isle.

His best friend, Jimmy Foyle, lived down the block in a house just like his. Sometimes they would sit on Jimmy's stoop, sometimes on John's, guessing the makes of the cars that came by, or flipping cards on the sidewalk, or shooting marbles in the street. John kept his marbles in a cigar box which he didn't let his sister touch. He kept his baseball cards in the

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drawer where he kept his more personal things: a pocketknife, a rabbit's foot, a few dollars he'd saved. He used the money mostly to buy the packages of gum that contained the cards, so that he was able to maintain a satisfying balance between income and outgo as it were. Aside from buying baseball cards he used his allowance to go to the movies on Saturdays with Jimmy and some of the other kids. For ten cents you'd get three features, a serial or two and maybe twenty cartoons, not to mention the coming attractions. There too he'd sometimes get wild; but that was rare. Usually he sat perfectly still, enthralled by the exciting world revealing itself on the screen: swashbucklers and ladies in distress, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, shining knights doing daring deeds and passing tests to win their true loves' hands. He'd leave these shows in an afterglow.

Jimmy said one day, "When I grow up I'm gonna be rich," and John said, philosophically, "There's lots more important things than being rich," because he'd heard an uncle say it once.

"Like what?" Jimmy said.

John was not prepared with an answer, but he thought and said, "Like being good."

"Like being good?" Jimmy said incredulously. "Boy, you're crazy."

John in fact didn't know what he meant exactly but only in a vague way envisaged some ideal of behavior that corresponded to the gallantry of his movie heroes. It meant standing up for the weak and the poor, fighting injustice, never taking advantage of defenseless women, sacrificing personal interests for a higher good. Thus inspired, John once let his sister keep all of the candy bar their grandmother had brought on a visit, but the thing gnawed at him and in the end he asked her for a piece and they got into the usual fight.

At school John got average marks, but not without an effort. He made the effort because he was afraid of his father, mostly. Recess was his favorite subject, he told one and all, aware that he was making a kind of joke. Nevertheless he knew his multiplication table and when his mother had trouble adding up a bill he'd step in and take charge, the scholar of the house, and she'd give him a hug, which puffed him up with pride, though he'd say, "Aw, Mom,

come on," just like the kids on TV. In truth, he was more his father's son. He didn't understand exactly what his father did down there at the plant but imagined it was manly, honorable work and so he found it easy to tell his friends that his father "built things" for a living, which struck him as more important than driving a cab like Jimmy's father or operating an elevator like Ray's. Besides, his father had fought in the War and had a German bayonet in his own secret place, which was not so secret after all. There John found his father's sergeant stripes, discharge papers, German money, cartridge shells and an effort to keep a diary in which the words "she was lovely" emblazoned themselves in his mind. Occasionally his father told the family his war stories. They had liberated a concentration camp and found the Jews there like skeletons, half-dead. "It's too bad they didn't finish the job," John's father said in a low, hard, angry voice. "Niggers" too aroused his ire. There were Negroes and Jews in John's school. As John was afraid of the Negroes, he found it easier to pick on the Jews, who seldom hit back. When he daydreamed now of performing his heroic deeds it was mostly of protecting girls from Negroes and Jews. But it was also true that some of John's prettiest teachers were Jews and then he would daydream about protecting them from the Negroes, so that he was himself assailed by confusion and doubt and had to improvise strange rationalizations to harmonize his secret thoughts. Once, in the park, in a real fight, one of these Negroes knocked a friend of his down and held him on the ground. John came over and stood close by, not sure what to do. When his friend said, "Jump him," John could not and stood there paralyzed.

John sometimes wondered about deeper things: Did God exist? What happened when you died? Dying worried him. The idea that he would die one day was hard to get around, even if he thought of himself as invincible for the time being. He did not envisage an early death. He knew no one who had died. His grandparents were hale and hearty. His father's father ran a saloon and worked out in a gym. Both his grandmothers dyed their hair and played cards all day. Nonetheless he asked his mother if they, his grandparents, were going to die. His mother said, "Not that I know of." John said, "Will they go to heaven?" His mother said, "Search me." Whether or not by design, his mother, in her dry way, often came across as something of a

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wiseacre, or “tough cookie,” as his father called her when he was in one of his rare affectionate moods. At any rate, it was impossible to get a straight answer out of her about anything, assuming she had one to give, so John stopped asking her deep questions.

In junior high school, when he was not yet thirteen, he awoke fully to the opposite sex and he and his friends made a game of touching girls in intimate places with Mrs. Sussman’s blackboard pointer in the homeroom class. This got him slapped more than once, but the girls really didn’t seem to mind and he would remember that year of awakening as one of the happiest of his life. One evening he and his friends went to see a striptease show. It made him hot and sticky but afterwards he saw one of the girls outside fully and demurely dressed, going home, and the image stayed in his mind the way the plane coming over the baseball stadium had, unfathomable in its incongruous way.

There began a phase now of peeping into women’s windows or even surprising his sister. He and Jimmy and a few of the others knew all the places where women undressed carelessly and spent long evenings in patient vigils. A woman preparing herself for bed would make his heart start pumping but best of all was a woman coming out of the shower, pink and scrubbed, and letting her bathrobe or towel fall open. When they were not yet fourteen they all went to the neighborhood whore. The whore lived in a smelly little apartment and when his turn came he couldn’t get it up. It was that sticky feeling all over again. She worked on him a little and he came in her hand, not even hard. It was kind of humiliating but it didn’t stop him from going back, because he wanted to get it right and have the thing chalked up. Going back like that told him something about himself. Spunk or moxie was what he thought he had. These were the intangible qualities that sometimes made up for whatever else it was you lacked. There were ballplayers who had it and were up there in the majors though it was said they couldn’t hit or field or run.

Having gotten the knack of it, he banged the ugly whore a few more times and was also glad to go along with his friends when they half-raped the retarded girl who lived in a basement down the street. You couldn’t tell if she wanted it or not. All she did was whimper

while he touched her. He was experienced now and could control himself, so he took his time.

John was beginning to think of himself as a man. He had dark hair on his chest and smooth, well-rounded biceps which he admired endlessly in the mirror. John still played ball, but it was less important than before, not the center of a boy's life but marginal to the real concerns of a maturing young man, so that he could laugh off his ineptitude like one of his uncles missing an easy catch in their backyard when they threw a ball around. His real concern was hanging out and trying to pick up girls. John was not especially successful at that either but it was what you did. Of course there was a certain high society from which he was excluded where the best girls went to the best boys: the ballplayers, the streetfighters, the smooth Jews who got the A's and cultivated the social arts. That was the other world. There was a black boy called Moses and a white boy called Alfred the Great and they were the kings of the schoolyard, they had the aura and the presence. He had an idea once of what it might be like when he ran six balls in a game of pool with inexplicable ease.

In the poolroom you got these real lowlife types along with the kids. The working stiffs came in to place their bets at the back of the room. The bums just hung around. A few were married and sometimes their wives would storm into the place and make a scene. Some were real lookers too and you had to wonder what was wrong with these guys, throwing it away. Maybe something was missing in some crucial place. John couldn't figure it.

In the meanwhile there were other girls, even if there was a line outside their doors, and there were parties too where everyone started drinking and things got mixed up and out of hand and you found yourself in some corner pawing a girl you hardly knew and then throwing her down on a pile of coats. These conquests boosted his self-confidence. He thought of himself now as conquering not girls but women. In the summers he worked at a resort and occasionally there were indeed women who made themselves available to him and he was able to assert himself without Jimmy and the others there to steel his nerve. Some were kind of old and he learned to help himself to their purses when it was over without the least of qualms. This was not yet stealing. He stole only a couple of times that year: once from the parents of a girl who

invited him to her room, a hundred dollar bill from among many in a half-open drawer; once from an open cash register in one of the shops.

John was restless but he stuck things out and finished high school. The family went out to dinner and John and his father drank to one another's health while his sister drank soda from a straw and looked put out and his mother stared vacantly around the room. His sister was sixteen and starting to get into trouble, as his mother put it. John tried to take her under his wing in a big-brotherly way.

"Still got your cherry?" he asked her one evening in her room.

She looked at him outraged. "That's none of your goddamned business."

"Just trying to be friendly."

"Like fun you are."

"Honest. I know that Willie. They call him Willie Fingers. You know what I mean?"

"Shut up."

As much as he felt obliged to protect her, or at least to appear to be protecting her, the effort quickly degenerated into the old teasing.

"Him and his friends probably sit around talking about what a good lay you are."

She got up and threw her pillow at him. John laughed and they pushed each other around a little. He liked to give her breasts a little tweak now and then just to get her dander up. It was all in fun, though, and they usually lived in peace. They should have been closer maybe, but it didn't work out.

Jimmy had a steady girlfriend now. John continued to play the field. Sometimes he thought they might be drifting apart, for a certain sobriety was beginning to creep into Jimmy's manner. John's mother noticed it. "He's gotten so mature," she said. For one thing he wouldn't talk about sex. For another, he worked after school and helped out at home, where there was a whole bunch of kids and they barely made ends meet. His favorite phrase was, "It's a matter of principle." John liked to kid him. "What if you aint got none," he'd say.

John spent another summer at the resort. He had access to a great deal of money now

and had worked out surefire ways of stealing it, so that when the summer was over he had a real nest egg stashed away. Stealing was nothing to be ashamed of. There was a consensus about that among the staff. Everyone did it.

But this was just a phase, in truth. While he was not ashamed of stealing, he knew deep down that it was wrong and did not intend to make a habit of it, let alone a career. After all, he had his principles too, when all was said and done. John thought of himself, on the whole, as honest. He liked the sobriquet: "Honest John." It gave him a feeling of heft. It was fixed in his mind now that he would be that man of substance known as Honest John, someone you could rely on, someone who always did what was right. But that was for another day.

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When John was eighteen he joined the Navy. They were stationed in San Diego for a while and then shipped out across the sea. This was the way to see the world. And for the first time in his life he belonged to something bigger than himself. The ship was a mobile piece of his country which he was called upon to defend with a select company of fellow Americans. Wherever it went he would stand tall with the others in the front line warding off danger. He was proud to be an American and didn't hesitate to let foreigners know it. In Naples he strolled through the busy piazza near the port as if he owned it, not at all reluctant to stand out. It was drizzling and a stout, handsome whore with an umbrella under her arm winked at him. It took him a minute to catch on, but when he did he followed her to her room. When he tried to assert himself, as he liked to do with women, she laughed at him and disposed of him so expertly that he found himself outside and lost in a maze of alleyways before realizing that his wallet was gone. Not losing his presence of mind, he allowed himself to be taken in hand by one of the urchins pimping in the street and set out to find the little lady. They stuck their heads into a dozen rooms but none contained a trace of her. Getting back to the piazza he stood around for a while, hoping somehow to spot her. She had been wearing a kind of trenchcoat to go with the umbrella. He ran up to a woman and looked at her face. It was

useless. But then he saw her in a pasta shop. He went in and stood beside her. When she saw him she smiled. "Want another one?" she said in pretty good English.

"I want my money, sweets."

"Che?"

"You heard me."

"Mahnee, mahnee, mahnee," she said, mocking the word. Now he noticed that she had bad teeth, which he hadn't noticed before, so charmed had he been.

"Give it back or we're going right to the police. Po-li-zi-a."

Amazingly, she returned the wallet. Already he could see that he had a story here that was going to last him a lifetime. He was so uplifted by this unexpected turn of events that in an excess of goodwill he gave her a sawbuck and a little pat on the ass. She laughed fetchingly, showing her black teeth, and left with her paper bag of pasta.

John was already telling the story before he was halfway up the gangplank. From then on, "like John's whore" became a shipboard epithet for anyone who lost his nerve. John himself, the hero of the tale, assumed a new stature among the men. "John aint no one's John," they'd say after that, and it became his nickname - No One's John or, because it was somewhat unwieldy, simply No-John.

Having outsmarted the whore gave him an enlarged sense of himself. From then on he would regard the world skeptically and think of himself indeed as no one's fool. Practically, he never carried much money when he went ashore and always guarded his flanks, "like a virgin," as the saying went. But drinking and whoring for three years made him neither wealthier nor wiser and at the end of his tour of duty he went back home and let his father fix him up with something at the plant. Jimmy surprised him by getting married in the interim and taking the civil service exam for a cushy post office job. Marriage changed him even more. He'd come home in the evening with a newspaper under his arm like John's own father and the other working men in the neighborhood and on Sundays when John would be hanging out in the schoolyard he'd see Jimmy coming down the street in a topcoat and fedora with his glowing

little wife on his arm in her pink suit and pillbox hat, the two of them off to church. He found himself envying Jimmy and decided it was time to settle down. His sister, who was engaged, fixed him up with the sister of one of her fiancé's friends. At first he wasn't too excited about her. Her looks were all right but it was hard to say what she was like under all those heavy winter clothes.

"Why don't you take off your coat," he said in the restaurant.

"It's cold," she said.

"I'll keep you warm." She gave him a none too friendly look and kept her coat on.

"So what do you do?" he said.

"I'm a secretary."

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Be my guest," she said. He brought out a pipe. "Navy habit," he said. She took a cigarette herself.

"Did you like the Navy?"

"Sure."

"Where did you go?"

"Everywhere."

"Like for instance?"

"Japan, Italy, Frahns."

"I'd like to travel."

"Join the Navy."

That got a giggle out of her. After that, things were easy. It turned out she had fine breasts and fine legs. They became a couple soon enough. However, she also nagged at him a little, to better himself, to learn a trade, for instance. John told her he liked it fine at the plant, where there was plenty of room for advancement, to become a foreman, for instance.

"Really?" she said. That was what he liked about her, she backed down fast. All in all, an agreeable woman, and she didn't mind it when he talked dirty in bed, because he was crazy

about her, he said. Then one day he took a deep breath and said, "Hey, let's get married."
"Sure," she said.

They were suited to each other. She indulged him and he grew expansive. She was his momma and he was her big boy. In the first year of their marriage they couldn't get enough of each other. "What's the sense of being married," he'd say, mock-serious, when she wasn't in the mood, "if you can't get it anytime you want." And that broke her up too. They both worked and saved as much as they could, so they bought a house and he let her furnish it the way she wanted, clucking his tongue as though to rue her extravagance but in his heart proud and sure of her taste. The confidence he showed her drew her closer to him and she was fine enough in character not to try to boss him. "Look at the lovebirds," his mother would say when she saw them holding hands. And then to her husband: "You could learn something from your son."

They had a backyard like the old one at home with the same dead-end fence and the same barbecue pit dominating it all and whenever people came over John would barbecue the steaks. By this time his sister was married and had a kid. Sometimes she and her husband fought, but that was only to be expected, for couples always fought, and they always made things up, though you could tell the marriage was wearing thin. Jimmy too came over with his pretty wife and kid and they'd have a couple of beers with the steaks and reminisce about the old times out of earshot of the women. These were pleasant Sunday afternoons. John had settled in comfortably in his new home. He had his favorite chair in front of the TV, a little den in the basement where he worked at his new hobby building model ships, and a shed outside for gardening tools to tend their patch of lawn. As a homeowner and family man John felt solid. Now he too went to church on Sundays and wore a grownup's hat and came home from the plant with a newspaper under his arm.

And just as he'd said, he got promoted with a raise, becoming a crew boss on the floor. Of course, there were far more exalted positions at the plant, out of reach. Pale, middle-aged men with that stern look you could never fake were said to be making a hundred thousand dollars a year and more. In their presence you felt like whispering or walking on

tiptoe, though behind their backs you sometimes said exactly what you thought. John told himself that he didn't want their lives, he only wanted his own, and consoled himself with what he had: the used car and the mortgaged house, the barbecue pit and the ballgames on TV, the good wife and the good friends.

Not everything was perfect though. Sometimes he'd screw up on the line and get chewed out by the foreman and then he'd bring his misery home with him and, unable to share his shame, exclude his wife and brood. For it was unmanly to whine to a woman. That was one of the valuable lessons his father had taught him. His father, thought still young, seemed tired to John, all used up, as if in this line of work you went your twenty years and had everything squeezed out of you. Maybe Jimmy had the right idea, down there at the post office. Or maybe some romantic occupation was more like it. John thought of becoming a cop. That would have been a fine thing, packing a rod. Just to get a rise out of her, he told his wife.

"Don't you dare," she said.

This was just kidding of course, so he went around a few days sticking his finger into her back and saying, "Get 'em up!"

But the truth was he still admired these men of action, such as they appeared to him on the TV screen, or on the big screen at the movie theater, larger than life, invincible, smooth, in control: tough cops, private eyes, intelligence agents, men with missions combating the forces of evil. Or ballplayers. Or master criminals. It hardly mattered what you did as long as you were extraordinary.

John's first child was born when he was twenty-three. "It's a boy!" he told his mom and dad. Everyone was happy. They named it after his saloon-keeping grandfather, who had keeled over in the street one fine day with a massive coronary. These intimations of mortality troubled John. His father, of course, had something to say about that too: eat, drink and be merry. John had always taken his father's advice seriously; however, as much as he looked up to him, it was his mother's laconic wisdom, really, that had shaped his life. "Don't get involved," was what she'd always say. And around that adage she'd spun an elaborate philosophical

system that covered every eventuality: how to deal with bodies in the street, strangers at your door, people in distress, the poor, the needy, the sick, the weak; what to do when called upon to do your civic duty; what to do when called upon to give your time, your money or your heart. John tried to communicate these rules to his wife, who was soft and sentimental, a sucker for a sob story. John explained to her what his mother had explained to him: that the world was a cold, cruel place where everyone was out to screw you, that you had to take care of your own and let others fend for themselves, that dead heroes didn't pay the bills.

When his son was six months old John began enjoying him and planning his future. "He don't need to go to no college," was what he told his wife. "Let him work with his hands." His wife found nothing objectionable about that, and not being by nature argumentative saw no point in arguing about such a distant event. John sometimes got all wound up about "pencil pushers" and "pointy-headed intellectuals." Having backed away from his romantic visions somewhat, he had now entered a salt-of-the-earth phase and spoke vaguely about buying a piece of land somewhere and maybe doing a bit of farming. His wife, who knew him well enough by now, let this pass too. It was part of her husband's charm, to be a harmless dreamer, so long as he was solid at the core. Someone came by and sold them a life insurance policy. Another child, a girl, came two years later. For John the family was now complete. He felt he had built something, rounded it out like the ships in his basement, fulfilled a design: a boy, a girl, a wife, the house, the car; vacations in the great outdoors; Sunday barbecues; nights out with the boys; dinner and dancing with the little woman..

When the president was killed John was twenty-six. It jolted him and made him sad. It made him feel what he'd felt as a sailor, part of something, connected to others, with a common life and purpose. He walked around in a daze for a week or two and showed little kindnesses to people he hardly knew, feeling grateful for what he had. Phrases like "making the world a better place to live in" drifted through his head. But like everyone else he came out of it soon enough and went back to the life he knew. With his wife no longer working, things were a little tight now, though with overtime he did pretty well at the plant. It was enough to pay the

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bills and left a little extra for the things that made life worth living. He was in a way proud of his modest circumstances, making a virtue out of necessity as it were and scornful of the very rich, who were no better than he, he felt, with their dissolute and troubled lives.

John saw that he'd gone as far as he was going to go at the plant. He'd be tightening these nuts and bolts for the next twenty years at least. The next step up was foreman and that was a long way to go. Down on the floor he had some authority and that was all, aside from a good word now and then or something extra in the envelope. He wondered if he should learn a trade. He remembered those talks long ago with his wife-to-be. Maybe she'd been right after all. But he was too tired at night to do much of anything. The job, he said, was killing him. He hated the noise and the belt that never stopped. The line shut down for twenty minutes and you had to eat your sandwich in the toilet standing at the urinal.

John couldn't wait for the day to end and the first thing he did when he got home was to pour himself a good stiff shot of Johnnie Walker Red. He had to unwind, and with the kids old enough to be getting into one another's hair he had to shut out their noise too for a while. His wife didn't always understand these things and was usually ready with a list of things to do around the house. She'd had a hard day too after all. With his mind clouded, things took on a somewhat rosier hue. When that wore off, he'd have another. His wife liked to take one too. But as in all things, he was moderate and by the time supper was done and they all sat down in front of the TV he was stone cold sober and himself again. He smoked his old Navy pipe or the one his wife had gotten him for Father's Day. Though she was often tired they still had good times together. She was "comely." That was the word he was using now, having picked it up from the Reader's Digest in that word power test. Before that she had been "sultry." His wife subscribed to half a dozen magazines. Sometimes, when he was in his alcohol haze, he'd leaf through Good Housekeeping or some such journal, looking at the pictures of food or reading Jackie stories. He liked to look at the tiny books you could buy for ninety-nine cents, wishing he were a reader and might obtain such treasures at such a bargain price. He liked the smell of a brandnew magazine as he liked the smell of all new things and didn't mind at all the money his

wife was spending on the stuff.

Jimmy moved away. He had four kids now, one after another, and that was amazing, so they bought a bigger house out in the suburbs. Jimmy urged John to move out too, but John told him he liked the old neighborhood and wanted to be close to his parents, who babysat for them and were always helping out. Jimmy told him that real estate values were going to drop, now that “Negro families,” as he politely put it, were starting to move in, so this was the time to get out. John said he’d wait and see. His wife wanted to move too. It became a bone of contention between them, but John was stubborn. This was his street, he said, and no niggers were going to drive him out.

The baby began to walk. He put a little inflatable pool into the backyard and sat out there with his newspaper on Saturday mornings while the kids splashed around and his wife straightened out the house. She liked to go out to the big shopping centers on Saturdays and take advantage of the sales. She was looking for carpets now. Theirs were threadbare. The whole house, in fact, was getting a seedy look. You started out with everything so clean and new but nothing could stop the decay from setting in. Everything seemed to hit you all at once. He had a little pot belly of his own now too which he hated to notice, for it depressed him more than the flaking paint and the chipped furniture in the house. He decided that while they were at it he’d look around for a set of weights, but he ended up getting just a pair of barbells. He wife passed on the carpeting, which was not just right, not to mention what it cost.

At the plant they had a big accident. John saw it all but knew enough to keep his mouth shut. Someone was killed. One of the machines ground him up. Everyone knew how dangerous it was but no one had done a thing about it. John got called into the vice president’s office.

“Did you see what happened?” he was asked.

“No,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he said, but looked the vice president straight in the eye, so that he’d know

that John was on to him.

“We don’t want unnecessary complications here,” the vice president said. “It won’t do anyone any good. Do you understand me? Not you, not me, and not the widow. Believe me, she’ll be well taken care of.”

John said, “We’ve got to be more careful about these things.”

The vice president said, “I know, I know.”

John was flattered by this unexpected show of confidentiality, as though the two were equals, and felt in that moment that they really were all in this together.

But then he went to the funeral and visited the widow in that cold, sad, empty house and felt sick at heart. “I should have walked,” he told his wife. She did not encourage him, knowing the consequences of such an act, but consoled him as best she could. He was less stoic now and shared many of his grievances with her, for as the resentments built up over the years he needed this safety valve and always found in her a sympathetic ear.

John was conscientious at first about working with the barbells. He liked to work out on the bed where his wife could watch him before they went to sleep. He’d push and pull and push and pull, conscious always of the growing weight. After a while he could hardly raise his arms, it was as if all the world was pressing down on him and his arms fell back pinned by the iron weights. He gave the whole thing up within a month.

One Sunday they went to visit Jimmy at his new place. Jimmy had a real house set back from the street with a front lawn and some trees. “I’m angling for a job at the local post office,” Jimmy said. “I could walk to work.” John saw that Jimmy’s wife was pregnant again. That would make it five. He wondered how Jimmy supported them. There were crooked cops, he knew. Could there be crooked post office clerks?

Jimmy barbecued the steaks. He wore a chef’s hat and an apron with something cute written on it. He had blond, blue-eyed children and his wife was a neat, trim little woman with bobbed hair who had matured a bit, trading in the heart-stopping sweetness for an efficient air, but without losing her good looks. John still found himself envying Jimmy, though he had

everything he wanted at home and his wife's languorous manner still held mysteries for him.

Jimmy's wife ran the house along military lines, issuing sharp commands to the children, who lined up for inspection like raw recruits. It was clearly she who held the ship together. It turned out that she was bringing in extra money too. It was just like the ads said: make extra money in your spare time. She had her kit and she made her rounds and she brought in fifty or sixty dollars a week, Jimmy told him confidentially, and that made all the difference. John shook his head in admiration. There were women who lay back in marriage and expected to be provided for, as if it was their due, and there were women who took charge and forged ahead. John decided that they too would move out to the suburbs and that he'd get his wife to cut her hair.

And it was none too soon, for sure enough real estate values were beginning to drop, just as Jimmy had said they would, and there was the beginning of an exodus from the street as blacks moved in all around. He had to mortgage himself up to the eyeballs, as he put it, but when he turned his back on the old house it was with the feeling of abandoning a sinking ship. The move rejuvenated their marriage. They got rid of some of the old furniture. John's parents gave them a generous gift. John found a carpool to get him to the plant.

The boy started first grade. It brought back memories. John remembered his first pencil case, the smell of the leather, the newly sharpened pencils, the marble-bound notebooks, the briefcase with all its straps and pockets. In a funny way he wouldn't have minded starting out all over again himself. "Time flies," he told his wife, and she agreed. They had a private place behind the house, a kind of arbor with a bench where they'd take their evening drinks if things were quiet. "Gee, it's nice out here," his wife would inevitably say. They had more space than before, though in fact everything was fenced in neatly in compact little lots and it would have taken a good deal of effort to give the place a special look. But there was a tree here and a shrub there, a flower bed, a hammock, the arbor, a gravel path, an attic. This was the way to live.

John's wife learned how to drive. That was the big project for a while and it was all

they talked about. Now she could get around on her own during the day, shop and maybe find a part-time job. It made a difference in her life and sure enough she cut her hair and overnight took on a more matronly look. She reminded him a little of his mother's friends when he was young, wearing halters and the varicose veins just starting to show. But he liked her fine that way. And who was he to complain, with his thinning hair and the softness in his belly? He never touched the barbells anymore. He joined a bowling team instead. They bowled on Tuesday nights and belonged to a league. John wasn't much good at it; the ball was just another weight pulling him down and he laughed off his ineptitude easily. Besides, these get-togethers were a social occasion more than anything else and John was a valued member of the group, entertaining the boys with his old Navy stories, the pipe his trademark. It gave him a mature and sober look. There were some lines in his face now, a pinched look about the brow. He had a new manner of speaking slowly and gesturing with the pipe: a professorial air. People listened; he noticed that. He took a balanced view of things, philosophized. A new phase seemed to be starting in his life.

3

When John was thirty a cousin of his was killed in Vietnam. It was a family tragedy. Death had hardly touched them all these years. It made him think again of his mortality. For a few weeks he found it hard to sleep and once sat by the window the whole night long in dull contemplation of his own demise. For there was no real way you could beat the thing. Death checked you at every turn, leaving no options, no reprieve. In the end he found that the best solution was to have a drink.

Being thirty had a special meaning in America. You belonged now to the older generation, you parted ways with your youth. These were the years when a man did his most productive work. At forty things began to slip away. At fifty you were finished as a man. His own father was a shadow of himself. He looked as if he might be sick and he asked his mother what

it was. She said it was nothing, just age. The old neighborhood was falling apart but they wouldn't move out. "It doesn't matter," his mother said. "There's just the two of us." John thought they should sell the house and get a little apartment. His mother said they liked the house. "But there's no one in it," John said. "We're in it," his mother said. John felt responsible for his parents. It was part of his new persona, the sober, heavy one he cultivated now, pipe in hand. Just posing as a contemplative man inspired philosophical thoughts. It occurred to him, as he studied an old family photograph, that in twenty years' time, when he was getting old, he would look back at this same tired face with wistful regret, thinking: how young I looked. And maybe his father, when he was truly old, would envy the man he was today. In the end it was not the past or future that was elusive: it was the present.

Occasionally there was sabotage on the line, despite the fact that things had changed and there had been real progress at the plant, new concepts of assembly that gave the men an interest in their work. But the monotony was hard to bear, especially for a reflective type such as John had become. If you daydreamed you could get a hand lopped off, or worse, as John well knew; the system kept you on your toes, always a step behind, and made you push yourself to the limit. When there was sabotage John would get called in and told to keep his eyes open. It had been years since his promotion, years since the big accident, but for management he was still one of the team, still expected to understand that what was good for the vice president was good for the janitor, and vice versa, he was assured. The plant was like a deity, providing for everyone, served by everyone. John himself could not resist tossing in a stray bolt now and then.

It was true that they got bonuses when they had a good year and there were new wage agreements to give you something extra to keep up with the cost of living. With both kids in school his wife did in fact take a part-time job, now that she was mobile. That was a big help. For a time he felt prosperous. They bought a new car. It gave their marriage another lift. Having been "comely" for a while, his wife was now "seasoned" in his eyes. She found all this hilarious. She just couldn't resist his charm. His daughter liked to put on her mother's lipstick, makeup,

high heel shoes, and play at being a woman, which would come soon enough. The thought of her going out with boys didn't trouble him a bit. He wasn't going to be one of those goofy television dads.

But young as they were, the kids had begun to drift away. Other than his philosophical reflections he didn't have much to offer, and these wore thin, so that after a while he was just repeating himself, harping on the same themes with little variation: hard work, character, responsibility, making something of yourself. What it all came down to in essence was getting them to do their homework and pick up after themselves. Occasionally there were tender moments when the family sat around together with a special closeness, but that was rare.

Like him, his son wasn't much of an athlete, wasn't much of anything really, and yet he somehow got along. That was what America was all about. That was what those four fathers had founded it for, as John liked to say - for people like themselves, to let them hold their own and get from one end to the other with a minimum of pain and grief, even if they didn't get any of the big prizes. It was the old bread and circuses thing. But sometimes there was a hollow feeling too. All the nation's festivals and Super Sundays, all the sitcoms and talk shows, were leaving him with less and less of the old afterglow. You looked at the TV Guide and built up expectations for an evening of first-rate entertainment and it was fine while it lasted but it didn't take you anywhere and at the end of the day you were left with a feeling as blank and empty as the TV screen. You were left with yourself.

On his thirty-fifth birthday he said, officially as it were, "I've lived half my life." Because there was a certain heaviness in his voice his wife looked at him oddly for a moment and then tried to cheer him up. "Make hay while the sun shines," she said. She had bought him a shirt. The kids got him some of his favorite scented tobacco and he lit up in their honor and tried on the shirt and poured himself a stiff shot of Johnnie Walker Red.

In the new house, John did his own gardening. He and Jimmy tried golf for a while but couldn't really get the hang of it, so they decided to jog once a week, but that didn't work out either. Jimmy's wife kept having kids, but John had stopped calling her "Ethel" when Bobbie

Kennedy was killed. He'd kind of hoped Bobbie would win, because, he felt, the country needed a lift. At first he hadn't liked him much, resenting the wealth and privilege, but in the end he'd gotten caught up in the old charisma too. Now they had Nixon and the Watergate thing. All the world out there, with its wars and scandals and disasters, was just prime time television as far as he was concerned. Snugly ensconced in his TV chair, waiting to be entertained, he felt isolated from events. History belonged to other people. This being the case, they were all amazed when one of his wife's aunts was interviewed in front of the supermarket and appeared on the evening news. It was all they talked about for days.

That didn't mean he'd lost his dreams. Sometimes, when he moved in a crowd, he went back to his Captain Video days and imagined he was someone special, not a celebrity but undercover, a man with a mission that set him apart. Thinking about himself that way still gave him a boost. Then he played out the fantasy to the end, seeing himself on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson and saying, "Well, Johnny, that's one of the things I can't talk about," but being more open about his personal life, particularly the women his name had been linked to, and of course, to cap the whole thing off, telling a few of his Navy stories, with maybe a few embellishments to give America a good belly laugh. That whore in Naples - it was the great moment of his life.

Pushing thirty-five, John's wife let herself go a little and started putting on weight. John hardly noticed it. He had his own sorry body to think about and she still had the good legs and the good breasts and sometimes flashes of the old sultry look. Then she surprised him by signing up for some night courses at the community college. At first he was big about it, kidding her about having a professor in the house, and even pretending he liked the new look, book in hand, pencil behind the ear, glasses sliding down her nose, but the truth was the whole thing kind of got on his nerves and he felt the threat of it. Fortunately she soon lost interest and gave the whole thing up, which restored his good humor and made him a little more indulgent toward her.

Jimmy surprised him again too when he and his wife adopted a teenage kid. It was the

craziest thing John had ever heard. As if seven wasn't enough. Jimmy told him some cockamamie story about the kid's losing his folks in a car accident and how it had all been arranged through the church where Jimmy and his wife had been active all these years in a life that had pretty much been hidden from John. "That's what being a Good Samaritan means," Jimmy told him. John just shook his head, not believing how Jimmy had let himself get sucked into all this stuff. It wasn't as if he'd been born like that, after all, and when you looked at him next to his perfect family, all lined up in one of their military formations as if they'd been cut out of a magazine, he certainly seemed out of place with his dark hair and dark eyes and a certain sharpness in his face. Clearly great changes had come about in Jimmy's life.

Now and then John too felt that he had it in him to show a generous spirit. The impulse pushed up against him and at those times he was moved to kick in to some worthy cause or give a pedestrian the right of way and instantly he would feel good about himself and think of making the thing a habit; but most often he wasn't in the right mood and wanted no part of other people's misery. Then he'd say, "I gave at the office," which struck him as a fine witticism. His wife, on the other hand, was still an easy mark, sometimes striking up conversations with those homeless people always rummaging around in the garbage. When she seriously suggested inviting one of them in for a hot meal, John hit the ceiling, explaining to her the sacred meaning of the front door. Wiser men than himself had affirmed the sanctity of the home.

When his father died the old feeling came back. The men in the family were dying off too fast. Was it in the genes? There was a void now. Though his mother got along well enough, he felt the weight of the extra responsibility. His sister was in another state and couldn't care less. Besides, she had her own troubles, her husband out of work, a kid on drugs. His own kids too, teenagers now, were getting out of hand. Who knew what they were up to? John had just one rule: make sure no one gets knocked up. He and his wife took the kids aside one day, one on one like high school coaches with their star players, and let them know the score. John told his son about the Italian whore and they had a big laugh. A sense of parental dignity, however,

kept him from turning the heart-to-heart into a full-fledged bull session, though he could see that the boy wanted to hear more. Later they compared notes, he and his wife, and she said, apropos of their daughter, "Well, she sure as hell aint no virgin," and he had a laugh over that too.

The country was changing, that was for sure - in some things for the better, in others for the worse, as he saw it. The openness of the movies had made him uncomfortable at first. But sex on the screen was just a part of life now and soon he was enjoying it, aware that the old categories were vanishing, the old values disintegrating. Charming movie crooks could now get away with outrageous crimes in an atmosphere of unmitigated amorality; nothing had to be rationalized anymore. That was good. John had always been drawn to criminals and found himself pulling for them even when he knew they were going to get caught. Furthermore you didn't have to make excuses about your kids wearing crazy clothes. John summed it up as tolerance and all in all thought it was a reasonable thing. And besides, the sex turned him on and gave him new ideas, most of which his wife, adventurous enough in her day, didn't take a fancy to. Like handcuffs, for instance. She just laughed at him. "You know what you can handcuff," she said.

Sometimes his wife reminded him of his mother. It was the way she let things come to her. That was of course her attraction, that languorous allure and lazy catlike sexiness with its promise of oblivion. For his part, he remembered promising her the world. Didn't everybody? They would lie in bed in one of their chummy moods, her head resting on his chest, his hand resting on her back, and he would paint his rosy pictures. They mostly had to do with having things and going places. She had wanted to see Europe and he had promised to get her there and in their private language she would say, "Are you my sailor boy?" and he would say, "Hop aboard and I'll take you around the world." He never told her about the whore but he had a lot to say about Gay Paree, though in truth all he'd really done there was get the clap. John was faithful to his wife. "I don't play around," he told one and all, and he was proud of that, though he wondered what would happen if he ever got the chance. Like their new president, he only

sinned in his thoughts.

The first vacation they took without the kids was to Vegas. They spent a solid week playing the slots and a little blackjack and roulette, exceeding their thousand dollar limit by just a little. They were so excited about the gambling that they hardly did anything else. John told his wife that the way to beat the system was to keep doubling your bet until you won. He always knew how things were done. Of course, he added in his breezy, self-deflating way, “you’d have to have a few million dollars in reserve to make it work.” “The rich get richer,” his wife replied. Despite dropping a thousand dollars he felt like a successful professional gambler walking around in his chintzy sports jackets and loud ties, so after they flew back he started putting a little money down on the horses from time to time. His wife didn’t appreciate that at all and they had a little fight. Whenever they fought, which was not so often really but often enough, it was mostly about money. His whore had been right after all. What it all came down to was mahnee, mahnee, mahnee.

Now that they’d been to Vegas, his wife started nagging him about that European trip he’d promised her all those years ago, and John said, “What do you want to go to Europe for,” and did his imitation of the French. Besides which, the economy was sluggish and prices were creeping up, so that they could barely make ends meet. And of course the kids never stopped wanting things. The boy wanted a car and the girl wanted clothes. John told the boy to get a job, and he did, in the stockroom of a department store, every day after school, but he got fired for talking back to the boss. The way the boy told it, he seemed completely in the right, and John had a good mind to go down there and straighten those people out, but he never did. “Let them go fuck themselves,” was what he said. They’d sewn the pockets closed on all the stockboys’ workclothes and practically did a body search when they left the store. The indignity of it rankled. No son of his was going to be put through that crap.

His daughter had a new boyfriend almost every month and spent more time looking at herself in the mirror than looking at her books. Meanwhile, Jimmy’s picturebook family was spreading its wings: a girl in 4-H, a boy with a paper route. The families visited back and forth,

though the kids didn't take to each other. Jimmy's girls dressed modestly while his own daughter walked around half-naked, and the kid with the paper route always had his nose in some science project. Jimmy had a lot to say about fertilizers and pesticides and it was undeniable that his grass was very green. John had always had trouble with the weeds. The wives got along just fine. John was always making comparisons and glad to see that his wife was holding her own. She had her depths, no doubt. Sometimes John could sense that there was more to her than met the eye, an introspective strain, but he really didn't know how to get at it. It was that old community college thing that was above his head or shut him out. Sometimes she'd say things that really threw him. Words of wisdom, as it were. But as in his own case they didn't seem to connect with anything. They just floated in the air.

Jimmy said, "The kids are growing up." His wife added, in her cheerful, upbeat way, "Thank God for that," and John's wife said, "Just wait, we'll miss them one day."

John held up his beer can and said, "Yeah, I'll drink to that." Then he told Jimmy he was having trouble with his car again. "If it isn't one thing it's another. Give me one day in this life without problems and I don't know what I'd do."

"I know what you mean," Jimmy said.

"It aint easy, my friend. It aint easy at all."

This was his philosophical mode. He had another beer and began to feel the glow. "You work all your life and what do you have to show for it? They can take it all away overnight. Five hundred men laid off at the plant. You know what that means? It's the Japs - they're taking over everything. And the fucking Arabs. Down in Miami they even own hotels. The Eden Roc. Can you believe that?"

"That's the way it is," Jimmy said.

"You're damned straight. And who foots the bill? We do!"

"Remember that guy who picketed the plant?" Jimmy said. "What happened to him?"

"They fired him."

"Don't you have a union?"

“They’re all in cahoots. Everyone looks out for himself. You’d have to be crazy not to. This guy tells me, the niggers are right to steal, they see white people doing it all the time. Who do you think owns that plant? People with millions. And look what they pay us. I’d burn it to the ground tomorrow.”

“Then where would everyone work?” his wife said.

“That’s not my problem,” John said.

They had some crazy croquet game set up on the lawn and they all started playing. John could hardly hit the ball and was staggering around a little. “Tennis anyone?” he said. His daughter, in a bikini, was being hosed down by one of the smaller children and provocatively shaking her breasts like a dog shedding water. Conceivably she wore the bikini under her clothes wherever she went. At the end of the day, as at the end of so many other days, John’s wife helped him to the car and took the wheel herself.

The drinking got to be a little problem. Sometimes, when he’d had too much, he might declare aggressively to his son’s teenage friends that if they kept their noses clean they might grow up to be just like him. Sometimes he flexed his muscles, sometimes he tapped his skull, to illustrate his point. When he was drunk in company he became maudlin, launching into long, incoherent monologues about lost opportunities and other regrets, and once even breaking down and crying. As he approached the age of forty, he got the reputation of not being able to hold his liquor. Sometimes, when people tried to calm him, he became violent. But the next day he was always himself again, and his wife learned to live with these occasional outbursts as part of the package, even good-naturedly, as with a child who soils his pants.

His wife in fact had a brother with a real drinking problem, a magician who went down to Miami Beach with his big trunk every winter to play the hotels. Sometimes, when he got back, they had him over for dinner. He’d never married and didn’t really have a home. It was sobering to think that this too was what a life could be, how easy it was to let it slip away, and again he thanked his lucky stars. Up north his wife’s brother played the summer resorts and stayed at cheap motels, though he made it seem like a glamorous life, telling them what he’d

said to Vic and Tony and all the rest. He had a nervous habit of glancing to the side whenever he spoke, as though engaged in some illicit transaction. John understood that he'd served time, though his wife never really confirmed it, saying, "Let sleeping dog's lie." They'd all wanted to know how he did the tricks but he wouldn't tell them. It had been all they could do to get him to do a few for the kids. John was peeved. He'd never been behind the scenes so to speak. One spring the brother showed up with a woman, one of these blowzy, overripe types of a certain age, a rummy like himself whom he'd brought up north from the Beach. They all sat around the card table in the den after dinner drinking Johnnie Walker Red. When the magician excused himself and disappeared for a moment, the woman said, "He's a real wizard."

"Tell me about it," John said.

"He's one of a kind."

The magician came back and taught them a matchstick game. You had to pick them up from different rows and not get stuck with the last one left. He never lost. "There's a trick to this one too," he said, glancing to the side.

"What is it?" John's wife said.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

After he left, John and his wife played the game some more. Sometimes he won, sometimes she did, but they really couldn't figure it out. "It's got to be something simple," John said. "It always is."

Now that John's wife was working part-time she took better care of herself, going to the beauty parlor from time to time and getting some decent clothes. John trusted his wife completely but was nevertheless uneasy about having her running loose out there in the workaday world. Not that a bored housewife was any better, with all these salesmen and service people ringing your bell. Once there'd been a locksmith he hadn't liked who'd addressed his wife as if John wasn't there. John had a strange memory from when he was three or four: his mother holding a knife and screaming and a stranger standing by the kitchen door. Only recently had he understood its meaning. He'd lectured his wife incessantly about letting

men into the house and now here was this locksmith with the keys to the kingdom as it were sweet-talking his wife and getting her to blush as he demonstrated his cylinders and bolts. John let her have a piece of his mind, but she just laughed it off. What was worse, the lock got stuck again and she had to have him over when he wasn't there. John felt helpless. He even had a crazy dream where he was locked in a room with the door bolted shut. Then the room became a prison cell and his wife and the locksmith were outside pointing at him and laughing and he couldn't do a thing. The locksmith held up a key and swallowed it.

John gave up the gardening. The weeds were getting to be too much. He had Jimmy's adopted son come over once a week to mow the lawn and keep things in trim. The kid had turned out to be okay and even went out with his daughter for a while. John could see him as a son-in-law and kept after her even after they broke up. "Why don't you go out with him," she said. That was how she talked. At fifteen she was like a grown woman. He knew the type from the movies and was surprised to find one of them in his own home. She was on the pill and probably did a little drugs. His idea was that she would grow out of it.

The pushers were in the suburbs and preying on the kids. Also there were break-ins all along the street. There was a neighborhood watch but John wouldn't join it. "Let the cops do their job," was what he said. He put in an expensive alarm system and they thought about getting a dog. What he would have liked to get was a gun. You could get submachineguns fixed to fire single shots. He had visions of himself holding off whole armies of marauders. These daydreams kept him going for weeks. Then he started thinking about going on a safari. He liked the idea of shooting things. Nature films fascinated him, especially the ones about the predators taking down gazelles or having sex, like those lions who did it every fifteen minutes for days on end and then just as suddenly lost interest. He brought these ideas into bed and they still had some fine old times but sometimes he suspected that his wife was just going through the motions or maybe just responding to some irrepressible urge that had nothing to do with him at all, like a lion in heat herself.

They went out less now. John liked nothing more than a quiet evening at home, drink

in hand, and sometimes the wife beside him. Loosening up and looking around the house, he felt secure. All this was his, shut against the world. He would sometimes coast through days and weeks like this, sleepwalking through the day and settling into his cocoon each night. It was a delicate balance, and when it was upset, things began to unravel very fast, so that there were weeks too when he sank into depression, didn't open the mail and drank more than usual. All these ups and downs, he finally concluded, were what life was all about.

4

When he turned forty, John felt as if he'd reached another milestone in his life. The age of forty had once looked like the end of the line, but now that he was there he found that it was not as bad as it had been cut out to be. Why, there were ballplayers still going strong at that age, and he could see now that time did not pass so quickly after all. There was time enough for everything in fact. "Life is long," he liked to say, puffing on his pipe. "Don't sell it short."

Forty was in fact a pretty comfortable place to be, between youth and age as it were, with nothing left to prove. You are what you are, he told his wife. It was the kids who had to prove themselves, take all the flak, go through hell to prove their worth. John had served his country, built a family, towed the line. In a certain sense he felt more connected to things than he ever had, belonging now to the great Silent Majority whose worth had never been truly appreciated until the Nixon years. And now the Reagan presidency fortified them all. Reagan was a man after his own heart, a conservative upholding traditional values. John made no bones about his politics. He stood four-square against welfare chiselers and bleeding hearts.

His own kids graduated from high school and found themselves gainful employment, though for a time it was touch and go. John and his wife congratulated themselves for doing their jobs. "We gave them all we could," he said. "The rest is up to them." His son married an ambitious woman, a little above him, it seemed, or maybe he had qualities that John had never seen. Before long they had two kids, two cars, and a house that put their own to shame. His son had somehow broken the family mold and worked as a salesman for some food company, doing

not badly at all, though all the hype that was part and parcel of the trade had turned him into too smooth a talker to suit John's taste, so that he never knew when the boy was throwing the old bull at him. His daughter got married and divorced and married again and it turned out she couldn't have kids and her second husband said it was from being promiscuous and he divorced her too.

Two grandchildren were plenty as far as John was concerned. Certainly he wasn't going to be a patriarch like Jimmy with toddlers running around the lawn like mice. Moderation was what John liked to preach. Jimmy's wife, though, still looked crisp and neat. She had opened a flower shop on the Mall and John's wife worked nearby, so sometimes the two men would drop by early in the evening to pick them up. Afterwards they'd all go out for dinner and then to a movie. Otherwise, John's wife would usually bring something home, like Chinks or pizza or something from McDonald's. With the economy straightened out, John felt that his life had suddenly taken an upward turn. There were hardly any money problems now. The mortgage paid off, they were in fact living pretty well, better than most in their modest way. They decided against getting a second car and put off some major repairs but otherwise they didn't have to stint at all, not on eggrolls and burgers at any rate, and what else was there really to give life its spice?

His sister came for a weekend with her second husband. She had just about lost her looks but wore high heels and short skirts to show off her legs and enough perfume to choke a horse. Like John, she had two kids, the one with the drug problem whom no one had heard from for a while and one who'd gone to college and was teaching somewhere. John too hardly saw his kids anymore, now that they had left the state.

His sister said, "How's Mom?" and John said, "Why don't you go and see her?" and his sister said, "We don't get along," and that was that. Her second husband owned a hardware store. Fat and bald, he smoked cigars and had a rasping mobster voice. From the minute they arrived, he stood off to the side looking as if he was just waiting for her to say goodbye. There was nothing likable about him at all.

John and his sister reminisced. The more they talked the more John realized that they had little in common, few memories to share and little affection for one another. In truth, his sister got along better with his wife, who went on talking and talking about women's things, and so in the end John too stood off to the side waiting for her to go. John mentioned to her husband that he could use some new tools. Her husband said, "I can give you a ratchet set for four-ninety-five." That was their whole conversation.

"Wasn't that something," his wife said when they had left.

"Tell me about it," John said.

His wife had some gray in her hair and some lines in her face and got permanent glasses with harlequin frames. She was a grandmother now, in the menopause phase. John had his paunch and furrowed brow, bouts of flatulence and the high cholesterol. He was resigned to growing old and, as an arithmetic exercise, sometimes calculated how many Monday Night Football games were left to him to watch. He was aware that there was a correlation between his drinking and financial pressures, and as things got better and he slipped into a groove, he eased off a bit, but not entirely, because that wasn't all it was about. Sometimes he felt like Lucy in the Peanuts cartoon when she jumped her rope and said, Now what? Now what and where do you go from here - that was always the question. Sometimes he fell asleep in front of the TV in a tobacco haze and woke up in the middle of the night with a start, his wife not even having bothered to call him to bed. Then he felt displaced, not part of the moment or of anything else, his ears ringing and his vision blurred, and quickly sought the security of his bed, the reassuring sound of his wife's breathing and her familiar warmth. Sometimes he fell asleep right away and woke up just a little stiff, and sometimes he stayed awake until the morning trying not to think too much.

"Everyone gets depressed," Jimmy said, and John said, "You?" and Jimmy said, "Sure. It's natural. But you have to rise above it. If you don't rise above yourself, the world will beat you down." Jimmy said he tried to do a good deed every day. Then no matter how things went, he'd at least have that. "It can be the littlest thing, like walking an old lady across the street."

“Are you for real?” John said.

Jimmy smiled and winked. “I may not get to heaven, but I’ll know I tried.”

The one thing John did do was take his wife to Paris. This was after she threatened to go alone. They also went to Rome and Madrid. His wife dragged him to all the churches and museums and he used up ten rolls of film. He walked around with a kind of smirk and the old Navy strut. This was his foreign-country mode. But for all his balkiness, John felt the trip had done him good. He could generalize about the world more knowledgeably now. Plus which, he was surprised to discover that things didn’t really work less well there than in the U.S.A., and McDonald’s, after all, was McDonald’s no matter where you went. That was an eye opener, he told one and all. Up in Montmartre they had their portraits drawn in charcoal. John made jokes while his was being done and came out looking like a clown. His wife insisted that it looked like him. Hers had an almost tragic depth, something inward-looking and self-absorbed that was again beyond his reach. They got them framed and hung them side by side.

The European trip gave John’s wife the appetite for more, but John knew where to draw the line. The older he got, the more set in his ways he became. Once entrenched, he could not be moved. The next year they went back to Vegas and lost another thousand dollars. They had a little reserve that they kept in time deposits at declining interest rates. Sometimes they talked about playing the market but John said that if he was going to gamble he’d rather do it on the horses. He still snuck in a little bet from time to time but rarely won. It was a good feeling to have money in the bank. It reminded him of the time he was a kid and would keep looking into his drawer and gazing at his three or four dollar bills. Now he had a passbook and certificates and sometimes gazed at them too.

His wife’s other brother died of cancer when he was fifty-three. It was one of those cases where they cut you open and find you riddled and sew you up again. They drove three hundred miles to the funeral and the bad weather and cost of gas put John in a bad mood. Watching the burial he thought of himself being lowered into the ground at some future date and tried to imagine what people would be thinking. Would his wife remarry? He decided to be

big about it and tell her that she should. He knew those old people. All they did all day was sit around and stare at things or sleep. Having her remarried really wouldn't hurt. That was what he told her in the car, that she should remarry. "Would you?" she said. "Depends," he said, feeling suddenly jaunty. "On what?" "Circumstances," he replied, giving her a sly look.

Once they had a really serious conversation in the tender aftermath of an impulsive afternoon in bed. "Did you ever want to be with anyone else?" she asked him.

"Nah," he said.

"You swear?"

"Sure, kiddo," he said.

Sometimes she looked like an old woman too. He could see death starting to creep into her face, and when she was asleep, in deep repose, the aging face seemed corpse-like. It made him think of the dead, grinning cats you saw in the road. Then she stirred and came to life again and he was relieved. He thought of death as being nothing more than not being there. But if not there, where? His dead brother-in-law had been a strange little man who was never without earphones - a music lover. He had shut out the world and now the world had taken its revenge. In the end, the world wouldn't leave you even that little place inside yourself. Inside himself, John had a lively life. Nonetheless, he considered himself faithful to his wife in spirit because he never thought of other women when they made love. Jimmy's wife, for instance, was only a passing thought and was not his type.

He even thought she was interested once. That was after her fifth or sixth kid when they were alone in her kitchen and he brushed against her, slightly drunk, and she gave him a look. All's fair in love and war, he thought, and made as if to reach for her but she just slipped away. Jimmy looked at him strangely the next time they met but the whole thing passed.

John was not really attracted to petite women. He preferred his wife's type. Sometimes he found himself having affairs with five or six movie stars. It kept him busy. They didn't talk much. John struck poses and made them beg for it in bed. He recognized the danger in letting his imagination get out of hand but was addicted to it now and when he drank he got

out of hand in public too, addressing women in a crude, suggestive way, though reining himself in when his wife was around. At a certain stage he became physically active again, as in a second youth. He bought some sporty clothes and talked Jimmy into joining a club where you could work out and even ride horses. The horseback riding appealed to him enormously and he got to where he could canter comfortably though afraid to let the horse out in a full gallop. He liked most of all sitting on top of the horse and gazing out at the horizon with a cigarette in his mouth. On the basketball court he'd sometimes get into a game with the older men, playing ineptly just as he had as a boy but barking out commands and waving his hands around impatiently like a seasoned pro. He tried tennis once but never hit the ball across the net.

His wife was amused by this new life of his and as with everything else about him thought it harmless enough. She had her own life, after all - the job on the Mall, her circle of friends, even a little charity work. They really didn't need each other much. John enjoyed the club and felt he'd hit his stride again, slipping into one of those smooth stretches when everything went his way. "This is the life," he'd say to Jimmy, taking it all in, the clear air, the bright sky, the lush vistas, all the hollowness banished for a time.

5

When John was fifty he began to think about retirement. It was thirty and out with a modest pension down at the plant and that didn't leave too many years. It was a big step because he would have to give up a lot of income. Whenever he dreamed about retiring, he dreamed of a life of leisure out in the country, lazing away his days on a riverbank, fishing pole in hand, or in one of those retirement villages that were like fancy hotels, though he neither liked fishing nor thought of himself as old. In truth, the thought of retirement frightened him. It was an acknowledgment that the end was near, the end of manhood and then the end of everything, and what would he do with himself day after day? The other option was to find another job, but who was going to hire him?

Jimmy, as always, had an answer. "You've got to keep working as long as you can," he

said, but when the time came you had to devote yourself to community service. There was plenty to do, caring for people less fortunate than yourself. He'd go on helping out at his wife's flower shop even after he picked up his pension, but for the rest he's serve wherever he was needed, and then the two of them with their little nest egg might spend the golden years watching sunsets from their back porch or in Florida or Phoenix where the living was easy. Jimmy just went on and on. Jimmy didn't have a worry in the world.

John stayed on at the plant. He felt trapped. The idea of Florida or Phoenix began to grow on him and it became fixed in his mind that if Jimmy went he'd go too. They'd end their days together, fast friends that they had always been. It amazed him how their lives had been intertwined and he liked to call him "bro" in that new idiom people were picking up from their TV sets.

All these plans were threatened when his son lost his job and his whole world began to collapse. He came to John for a loan to tide him over but John had no intention of digging into his savings and leaving himself exposed to life's vicissitudes. The boy would have to fend for himself. It didn't take long before his wife threw him out of the house. She had some executive position and wasn't going to be buried by a loser, it seemed. The boy wasn't equipped for anything really and couldn't find another job. In the end he started bagging in the supermarket and staying in a rooming house. All this happened overnight. The world, as John's mother had told him time and time again, was indeed a cold, cruel place. Only John's wife helped the boy out from time to time, to keep him afloat.

His daughter also visited them once, with her third husband. He was bald too and looked to be about twenty years older than she but at least he was personable and had married kids so she had a family of sorts though she seldom saw them. That was how things were. This time, his daughter made it clear, she had married for money. Her third husband owned an apartment building in a good neighborhood and lived off the substantial rents. He was crazy about her, they could see, but, though they were married, she teased him in a peculiar way. John had never understood his daughter entirely. They too stayed the weekend, and then were

gone.

“Strange birds,” his wife remarked.

“Tell me about it,” John said.

After the barbells and the bowling and the golf and the jogging and the horseback riding, John stuck to playing poker once a week. He never won big or lost big and saw this as being for the best. People tended to get carried away when they won too big and thought they could beat the system. No one beat the system, he liked to say now. There were no free rides.

He was a fixture at these games, one of the boys. They’d shoot the bull and he always had a lot to say. He fit in here. These were people like himself, unpretentious, down to earth. They had been through the long haul and had come through unscarred. They had earned their place in the sun. John no longer felt he owed the world explanations, no longer felt obliged to tell anyone he’d given at the office. Instead he’d say, “Not today, pal,” or sometimes, “Take a walk,” and that more or less took care of things. He liked this in himself, the way he stood up to moochers and scroungers without batting an eye. He thought it was a mark of character. And having achieved this measure of impermeability, where things bounced off him and he could disdain the evasive actions of the weak, he believed that he had truly come into his own and felt at such times the positive glow of inner strength. Surely his life might serve as a paradigm, no less exemplary than Jimmy’s. Nothing could touch him anymore. He had seen it all.

But when John was fifty-five, his mother died. They could see it coming, and then she was gone. He felt completely adrift for a while. It sunk in that he was really alone now in the world with his wife, not connected to anyone in any real way except maybe for Jimmy, who had another life. It came home to him that what he had thought he had built had really not withstood the test of time: both the children disappointments in their way and the next generation more or less estranged in their mother’s custody. None of this drew him any closer to his wife, however. It was as if, somewhere back in the beginning, they had reached a peak of some kind and after that they had been more or less playing out their hands. It was all a routine now, whether taking out the garbage or making love, everything in its time and place. Even

their fights lacked real energy. They bickered mostly, about the groceries she bought, about his leaving dirty laundry on the floor or leaving on the lights. When they watched television together they fell to talking about the characters in the dramas as though they were actual people and solemnly discussing their behavior, as if already in their dotage. Besides which, they liked to watch Ricki Lake and John still liked to watch the sports, though when he added up the Monday Nights now, he saw that the stock was really getting low. He should have been watching his health too but instead he got a little reckless, thinking that what hadn't killed him in the past wouldn't kill him now. "Lay on the fat," he'd tell his wife when she cooked their meals. She wasn't amused at all.

And in fact he started feeling under the weather soon enough: aches and pains, shortness of the breath. He didn't tell a soul. He told himself it was a passing thing. He figured that as long as he didn't overexert himself he'd be all right. So he spent more time in front of the TV in the old tobacco haze, the good Bud or Johnnie Walker Red right beside him with all his favorite snacks. He enjoyed the Gulf War. Those flashes in the Baghdad sky gave him a little chill. He had the CNN and cables now. His horizons were expanding. He wondered why no one had thought of this before. It would have made life a lot more pleasant.

Life offered many pleasures of course. That was still the way things worked, in a more or less reasonable balance, with some highs and lows but most often carrying you along at an even keel. Who could ask for anything more? They had the AIDS now and all kinds of crazy wars in places he'd never heard of. Nothing short of Armageddon could upset his equilibrium. He was like a rock occupying space, just sitting there awaiting developments.

They flew down to Florida to look around. John didn't like it. "Too many spics and Jews," he said. They stayed in the same hotel as his wife's magician brother, a dump. The magician had another woman, older than the first. They went out together and had a few drinks.

"Things are picking up on the Beach," the magician said. "Younger crowd."

"Tell me about it," John said.

For him the place was like another foreign country. He'd have to tell Jimmy that it wasn't for them. He'd brought down his vacation wardrobe and they went to see his wife's brother do a show. After him there was a comedian and the featured singer crooning old-time songs. John's wife liked this kind of stuff. It put her in a romantic mood. She took his arm when they were in the street and John walked big, a lady's man again. Back in the hotel they made love and the next day they took a walk along the beach. "Let's take off our shoes," his wife said in an uncharacteristically girlish voice. "I'll keep mine on," John said, but he slung his jacket over his shoulder and slipped on his shades, feeling young himself, and then looked out to the sea. It was clear and wide, open toward the horizon, limitless in its view. He gazed and gazed at it and felt a twinge and pull and the old familiar racing of his blood.

6

John died when he was sixty. It was his heart. The world had cheated him perhaps, taking years he should have had, but he had cheated the world as well, giving little back. It was not being ordinary that was his sin, it was not becoming what he could have been. He was mourned and then forgotten. It was as if he hadn't lived.

The End

Fred Skolnik bio: Fred Skolnik was born in New York City and has lived in Israel since 1963. He is best known as the editor in chief of the 22-volume second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, winner of the 2007 Dartmouth Medal. He is also the author of *The Other Shore* (Aqueous Books, 2011), an epic novel depicting Israeli society at a critical juncture in its recent history. His second novel, *Death*, was published by Spuyten Duyvil in 2015. His stories and essays have appeared in over 150 journals, including *TriQuarterly*, *Gargoyle*, *The MacGuffin*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Prism Review*, *Words & Images*, *Literary House Review*, *Montréal Review*, *Underground Voices*, *Third Coast*, *Word Riot*, *The Recusant*, and *Polluto*. His poetry has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Oak Bend Review*, *Free Verse*, *Boston Literary Review* and *Hacksaw*. Under a pen name, he also published two novels in 2014: *Rafi's World* and *The Links in the Chain*.