

Chapter 2

BIG MEN ON CAMPUS

Look closely at the ear, if still you doubt me,
 for by the seed it bears is the plant known.

— Dante Alighieri (Purgatorio XVI, 113-114)

My father, Clinton Rossiter, and his band of brothers in Cornell's college of Arts and Sciences taught, studied, and wrote as if the world depended on it. Even from the jaded heights of my belief as an adult that Cornell's primary function as an institution, then as now, was the tawdry one of certifying privileged whites for more privileges, I can see clearly the brilliance of these professors' dedication. In the valley of my awed youth, their presence was blinding.

Unlike the professors of the 1990s, my father and his friends were scholars, not academics. They were broad in their knowledge, not limited in their specialization. They too wrote books and articles at a fevered pace, but they gave far more energy and time to teaching. It was a simple matter of honor: students who worked hard deserved professors' attention to their spoken and written thoughts. Deficiency was to be corrected, not scorned or accepted; time spent in the correction was a valued investment, not a casting of pearls before swine.

How could the professors of the 1950s both write and teach so fully? The truth is that they couldn't — at least not alone. In my parents' circle, husbands and wives were teams. The wives not only maintained an environment at home that made their husbands' professional life unencumbered, but they also assisted with research, editing, and the thinking through of concepts. Born just one or two generations away from taking the lead and not the supporting role, they could only explore their own intellectual interests with their friends, their books and, in a combination of the two, their weekly "reading group," where the discussion was of as high a caliber as any taking place on the campus between their husbands. When my mother and her friends started the reading group, each of the husbands told his wife that he would be glad to come and lead the discussion on a particular book. The

women demurred: they heard what their husbands thought about things all the time.

My mother, Mary Ellen Rossiter, had been the top student at her elite high school in Milwaukee and a superior student at college, first at Smith and then Bennington. She started a career in journalism in Montgomery, Alabama, before withering under the assault of another superior student who came to Montgomery for a ceremony honoring the battleship he had served on during World War II. My father had also been the top student at his prep school in Connecticut, and had earned an honors degree in classics as a Cornell undergraduate and a Ph.D. in government at Princeton by the time he was 25. Both of their fathers were successful businessmen who looked somewhat skeptically upon my father's choice of profession, even after his considerable success.

My parents married in 1947, and through the old-boy network, my father's mentors got him a position in Cornell's government department. My mother raised the children, kept the house, assisted foreign students, and supported my father in every aspect of his work from previewing his lectures to sorting cards for his indexes. Even this litany doesn't do justice to her fundamental contribution to his career, which was to sustain him emotionally, easing his burdens and assuring him that she would be there to do it again. Buoyed by my mother's support, my father wrote one major book about every two years, running the gamut from specialists' studies of constitutional issues and early American political philosophy to popularized treatments of the presidency and the political parties.

Even after he was granted a special chair that exempted him from teaching, my father carried a full load of government and history courses consisting of gigantic lectures, almost performances, and intense seminars. He also regularly took trips to lecture at American universities and, under State Department programs, throughout the developing world, where his enthusiastic vision of a vibrant democracy protected by a stern constitution held out hope to the post-colonial intelligentsia as they tried to chart their way out of the very mess that the great democracies had left them.

In intellectual content, our home resembled one of my father's classrooms on the nearby campus. To endure in a discussion, let alone prevail, my brothers David, two years older than

me, and Winton, three years younger, had to have the facts and a logical analysis of them. There was a respect, indeed an affection, for books and newspapers, and for discussions in which you would acknowledge the force of an opponent's sound argument as certainly and honorably as a fencer would an opponent's thrust that hit the mark. We had the skills needed to guarantee success in college before we even set foot into kindergarten.

Our parents' closest friends reinforced our development. I don't recall discussing matters of great import with the men at Cornell sporting events or with the couples at our house during the parties that were part of the moveable feast of Ithaca's intellectual class. We probably only spoke of my schooling, sports, and stamp collection, since as a child one talks largely of one's own interests. What mattered was not so much the subject of the exchanges, but the fact that this group of burning intellects was teaching me by example, by respecting me, by listening to my ideas and responses, and by weighing them logically and seriously. They were saying: you are important, ideas count, express yourself but be prepared to defend and change your opinion. And if the professors were implying that to me in their free time, one can imagine how clearly these generous people, who were sure enough of themselves to give their energies away rather than hoard them, were imparting it to their students during business hours!

Not only was I surrounded by the stimulation of serious yet supportive discussion, but I was also being exposed to this group's unspoken assumptions, which were also those of my parents. There was an implicit devotion to the duty of the intellectual to argue against small-mindedness and intolerance, and to be a voice for justice and the power of ideas; there was an implicit loyalty and responsibility to the university itself as the place of value where these duties were performed. I can't think of anyone in the core or even the periphery of my parents' friends who left Cornell for another university until the resignations following Cornell's crisis of 1969, and those departures were over a matter of principle, and reflected an anguish at the irreparable damage that those resigning thought had been done to Cornell.

Most of the husbands in my parents' inner circle shared "the box" at the top of the football stadium on cold autumn afternoons, yelling plays and evaluations at the unfortunate coaches. The boxes were open booths in the crescent just above the top row

of seats, and from that height you could look down on the town and the lake as shafts of sunlight lit them up, streaming like biblical commands through iron-gray clouds. The assignment of the boxes was made on a combination of longevity and prestige. Ours was just a few down from the top of the crescent, the presidential box that overlooked the fifty-yard line, separated from this pinnacle only by a few ancient trustees and the local bankers who kept Cornell's accounts.

From third to seventh grades, after selling programs on commission for fraternity boys on the quadrangle before the game, I would always spend the first half of the game in the box with my father and his gang. At half-time, we would banter until it was time to rise and sing Cornell's Alma Mater forcefully and unabashedly. Then I would meet my friends and run onto the field to join the freshmen welcoming the team back from the locker room. The second half was spent roaming the sidelines, preparing for the big moment when the game ended and we could ask the players for their chin-straps as souvenirs.

Even down on the sidelines I could hear the occupants of our box trying to outdo each other with commentary that they would trumpet down the stadium to Cornell's coaches. Bob Kane, Cornell's athletic director, has written how my father and his box-mates once asked that a telephone line be put in from their box to the bench, so that the coaches would be sure to hear their advice. The coaches told Bob that they already could hear it just fine! I noticed the last time I went to a Cornell football game that some coach had finally tired of this tradition of abuse, and moved the Cornell bench to the other side of the field.

I have vivid memories of my parents' closest friends from the glowing days before the discord of the sixties. Most vivid are those of Rosemary and Arthur Mizener. Rosemary was a charming woman with a crackling mind and a British drawl from her childhood in Africa that sounded as if she were letting you in on a private joke. Arthur taught English, and was the biographer of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He was a penetrating, gruff questioner who delighted in making outrageous statements and defending them with caustic points of logic. My father and I would walk the mile to his house every Sunday in the crisp Ithaca fall to watch Yelberton Abraham Tittle, Jimmy Patton, and the rest of the New York Football Giants. Arthur insisted on our attendance at his house, since

he had the best television set by the criterion of “inch-wise,” which became his sobriquet in our family. If I complained about the venue, he would challenge me to identify more important criteria for where to watch the game, and debate my responses.

Another important couple for me were Mike and Ruth Abrams. Mike, who was the editor of the Norton Anthology of English Literature, was a gentle, unhurried man whose warm presence calmed the energetic jousting between Arthur and my father. Ruth was also warm and calm, with a lively intelligence that she willingly turned on us children. Mary and Fred Kahn were also in our parents’ inner circle. Mary was a friendly, confident woman who guided four children, including a relative who came to live with the family only in his teens, into four wildly divergent and fascinating adulthoods. She focused her friendly questions and attention on us boys, but because we identified her with her two attractive daughters, conversation was always a little embarrassing. Fred was an economics professor who later was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and President Carter’s top economic adviser.

Fred was legendary on campus for his seemingly boundless supply of energy. Some stories had him grading papers while waiting in the wings between scenes of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in which he would frequently act, and reading his morning newspaper in the shower under a plastic cover, so as not to waste time. Fred had a funny moniker and a loud, interested greeting for everyone he met, from child to student to professor, and made you feel as if his brightness was especially for you, and it was.

Henry and Rita Guerlac, also the proud parents of devilishly disorienting - and attractive - daughters, were the refinement that this boisterous crowd needed. Henry (or “awn-ree” as we called him for his francophile ways) was a professor of the history of science and Rita was a secret scholar whose work on medieval French literature only started in earnest after her children were grown. With Henry, the affection for knowledge was so palpable, so personal, that it made conversation with him a sort of sitting, a bit stilted but with not a moment lost. Rita was so beautiful and had such inherent dignity that even as an angry young teenager I would look forward to seeing her.

If the Guerlacs were the refinement in my parents' circle, the Elledges were the color. Liana was a wildly-dressed and wildly-conversing Austrian who spoke with a strong accent in humorous bursts and exaggerated inflections. She towered over Scott in volume and height, but he was the perfect foil, softly injecting wry and witty ripostes whenever she would pause in her stream of declamations. Scott was an English professor and the biographer of E. B. White. His impish remarks could quickly become roguish, so I'm sure he was the right person with whom to study Chaucer or Sterne.

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Of all the colorful characters of the Cornell of my childhood, all these vibrant minds and striking personalities, my father was the most colorful, the most vibrant, the most striking. That judgment appears to be shared by his colleagues and students. Other professors gladly acknowledged him as a leader, someone who was bursting with thoughts and exuberance. Former students in the Washington bureaucracy, when catching my last name during a hurried phone conversation, insist on stopping the discussion and talking about his gift for making government and them seem alive and noble.

I idolized my father. The high point of my week as a preschooler would be a chance to sit in his office and draw adventure pictures with colored pencils while he worked at his desk. I still have one of those pictures, in which some 30 magical beings, human and animal and human-animal, are engaged in various acts of enslavement and rescue; appropriately enough, the flip side of the paper reveals a rescue mission as well, being a mimeographed appeal to my father's colleagues for books to ship to a Negro college where his friend Brud Holland was president.

My mother tells me that when I was about five years old I asked her seriously, "When I grow up and go to work and sit at Beet's desk, how will I know what to do?" She told me not to worry, that I'd know by then, but I can still enter a room for a speech or sit down to write and hope that I can approximate his great, democratic gift of respect for people that made him able to speak to the expert, the student, and the layperson at the same time about our country, the intellectual roots of its political system, and their continuing expression.

Even as I write these lines, by good fortune I really am working at my father's stand-up desk, looking at a photograph of him smiling as he worked at it 40 years before. Of course, the mode of writing has changed — my father is holding a pencil, and I'm tapping away on a computer keyboard — and so have the styles. Although he is at home in the picture, he is wearing a spiffy suit and tie, with the jacket buttoned, and he is close-cropped and clean-shaven, looking like he's quite ready to meet the Queen of England; after a decade of monkey suits and face-scraping of Capitol Hill, nothing gives me more pleasure than wandering out to the computer like I did this morning, hair down to my shoulders, unshaven and wearing a pair of shorts and a Hawaiian shirt that's missing a few buttons. On the wall behind my father are some of his diplomas; on my wall are my daughter Sarah's avant-garde collages, including one centered, God help us, with a plaster cast of her own breasts. Despite these superficial differences, though, we are doing the same thing for the same reasons, and I know that my attempt to think and write has value because he chose to invest himself in the same pursuit. A crowd called out the best in my father, and he and others delighted in what ensued, which was almost a performance. And so we boys loved to go with him anywhere...

Like his office, where he held court under a red and white striped flag from the Revolution on which a snake, its sections representing the 13 colonies, hissed the motto, "Don't Tread on Me"; that snake was our model, menacing but decent, strong and silent, threatening dangerous action in the hopes of not having to take it, loyal to country and honor above all else...

Like a hockey game featuring the Canadians who had been recruited to Cornell's agriculture and hotel schools just as today's professional collegiate teams recruit unlikely scholars with a bent for football and basketball; we would cheer wildly as these men in their mid-twenties, hardened by a decade of violence in the grit of semi-pro hockey, skated and cross-checked their way through the boys of the Ivy League with predictable success and even national championships...

Like the tongue-in-cheek campus dog show, which in theory rewarded the mangiest mutt, making us all the angrier when our mongrel Edith, alias the "Tube" she was shaped like, Queen of the mysterious bones she would extract from the gar-

bage bins of the veterinary fraternity next door, would go unrecognized.

We loved to be with him because he would transmit affection and support, hugging us to his strong chest through the soft brown sweater he wore under a suit jacket during the week and under the rough, salt-frayed canvas of his Navy coat during the weekend; because around him, things would happen, there would be excitement, attention focused on him and us, life lived, not observed; because each day was guaranteed to hold an adventure, a memorable event to be happily and loudly remarked upon.

Especially fun for us on the weekends was to badger our father until he would take a break from writing in his room and come play in one of our silly driveway games, which were weird and constantly-evolving conglomerations of normal baseball, basketball, and hockey. As a point of mock honor, he would play with all the seriousness and vigor appropriate for a formal contest. The juxtaposition of his formal persona with our silly ones made us weak with laughter, particularly if the fraternity boys next door looked over, agog, to see Professor Rossiter hopping purposefully around the driveway on one foot, holding a baseball bat as we chased the basketball he had hit and tried to touch the wary Edith with the ball before he hopped home. And there was the indoor season, too...

We boys would spend hours at invented games in the complicated series of rooms in our basement, and then cajole our father into joining us for a quick round. We were scared to delight by his overwhelming power in the barely-controlled mayhem of rug football. He would shrug us off like water-rats as he chugged on his knees toward a touchdown, or held one of us under each arm as he scuttled after the third, who was unfortunate enough to be holding the ball.

Most of our time in the basement was spent perfecting and playing a sport loosely based on Ping-Pong: Beepies, an abbreviation of "Ball-Past," in which points could be scored only by hitting a Ping-Pong shot past the opponent without him touching it. Single points (the "honest Beep") were almost irrelevant, since batches of points could be scored by hitting the ball into a plethora of rooms and objects, such as the toilet and the sink, and one's opponent would also have to suffer an appropriate indignity for such a successful shot. For example, a "tois" (a shot into the toi-

let) required that the opponent dunk his head in the toilet while it was flushed, or you to suffer the same if your shot missed — Beepies being a “gentleman’s game,” as we called it, fairness was the key criterion. This penalty lasted until our father heard about it and terminated it with a lecture on diphtheria and the uselessness of an Exeter education if David, a junior in high school, for goodness sake, would take part in such an infectious ritual...

Just as single points were incidental to the game, the game was incidental to its rituals. After Edith died from one too many trips to the garbage cans, we added a minute of silence before each game, “In Memory of the Tube,” after which the participants would recount a favorite memory from her adventures, like her clever evasion of the vicious Husky she had encountered while accompanying me to one of the fraternities on my newspaper route, or the record she set in a timed run from the top of the driveway to the kitchen as we chanted the name of her dog-food. There was also the roving reporter, the third party to the game, who would “investigate” every shot by the players while holding plastic bowling pins to his eyes like cameras, until the players knocked him back off the table and into his judge’s chair. The ultimate ritual, though arose from the ultimate Beep.

There was one greater goal that the “tois” in Beepies: if the ball careened around a few corners and came to rest in the laundry room, the cry was “Lights on in Yankee Stadium,” and the players and roving reporter decamped to watch a try for the Royal Flush, the two-sided laundry sink. The ball would be scooped off the ground with a single motion, and if the shot arced into the right sink, the shooter was the new champion of Beepies, regardless of the order of rank at the time, and the opponent had to “sit pretty” in his underwear as the tub was filled with cold water. If the shot went in the left sink, it was the shooter who sat pretty and was demoted to the bottom of the three-boy ladder. The possibility of a change in the championship, even if the current champion was not in the match, required that each player “lay it on the line” before every match by placing his penis on his end of the Ping-Pong table. Exeter training or no, David remained a full participant in Beepies, laying it on the line during his vacations, and even sitting pretty once on his way to a date, honorable to our code even unto humiliation.

Pity our long-suffering mother in this male maelstrom, blessed with three boys interested primarily in copying their father. She recalls the household with good humor, at least now. It was a lively but composed place under her tutelage, featuring lengthy discussions of the day's affairs at lunch or a snack. This scene of maternal care and intellectual grooming, though, would be subject to joyous, tumultuous disruption from my father's forays home from work or down from his room where he had been writing. Similarly, my mother's attempts to send us calmly to bed after she read us quiet, charming books would be undone by him rushing in with exciting stories about Stingo and Pingo, two awful children who lived in the sewer and did all the wonderful things we wanted to do, like push sweet little Fay Schlesinger's face in the birthday cake at her fancy party.

The disruptions were wild and exciting, but truly brief because of the burden of work our father took upon himself and the schedule he had to maintain to sustain it. He was a very disciplined man, and his conception of his profession meant that he had to plan his day, his week, and his year rigidly, down to the smallest usable amount of time. Early mornings on weekends and holidays, vacation or not, he was always working a set number of hours on his latest book. The bulk of our learning about how to live came from our mother. She spent the time with us, followed our school work, although not too closely, being a great believer in personal responsibility. Her analytic mind, which constantly questions all assumptions, both hers and society's, is the obvious source of the weighing, comparing, and searching that has been the way of my own.

So these were the values our parents had shown us as we came to our teenage years, when we would search for our own: a tremendous sense of tolerance for others' rights and opinions; a related and almost mystical faith in and loyalty to America, democracy, and diversity; an appreciation for learning and reasoned argument; a feeling of responsibility for society, writ as small as someone in trouble on the street and as large as unknown citizens of developing nations who are affected by US foreign policy; a passion for life and its activities, both serious and fun; and an ambition to make a difference, to be a participant rather than an observer.

We were so immersed in our parents' shining rhetoric and gleaming example that when I was 12 and had to make up business cards as part of a course in the school's print shop, I chose the description, "Caleb Rossiter, Philanthropist," and the motto, "My Money is Your Money." When I first heard the Beach Boys' hedonistic anthem, "Surfin' USA," that same year, I insisted to my incredulous and worldly older brother that it was a call to teenagers to walk out of school and fix up dilapidated houses in Appalachia and Harlem, to "tell the teacher we're servin', servin' USA." And I remember even as a grade schooler arguing with Mrs. Pritchard about a saying hanging on her kitchen wall, something on the order of, "Give me the strength to change what I can; the serenity to accept what I can't; and the wisdom to know the difference." But how, I protested to this bemused lady (who was trying to hold her life together as a widow), can you know what you can't change until you give it a shot? That attitude clearly came from my father's crusading sense of responsibility, and his belief that ideas and efforts can change the course of history. And serenity just didn't fit anywhere into our family's equation of life.

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There was a darker side to my childhood that was as important in shaping my notions of self and duty as the bright one I've portrayed. That was the side that made me a defender of others because I knew how bad it felt to be defenseless myself, the side of a hounded and abused child.

Implicit in my father's strenuous example and often made explicit by the addition of my mother's inexorable logic was an impossible set of demands for their sons to meet: be serious but joyful, fun but not frivolous, successful but not proud, studious yet gregarious, excel within the existing system yet be superior to it and question its validity. The inevitable failures to achieve such goals led to bitter recriminations.

The disappointment my parents felt with their own lives was being focused on their children just as surely as was their happiness, intellect, and vivacity. My father, despite his outward success, was often inwardly angry and sad, and his churning, childlike feelings sometimes would, in the sanctuary of his home, burst out unpredictably on him and on us. My mother often revealed the resentment of an innocent victim, which came from her recurring awareness that she had been whisked away from a

promising career before she knew what she really wanted to do with her life, and had been trapped in the roles of mother and help-meet when she knew that she was intellectually capable of being a full-fledged member of academia. Their comments that spurred us on to the future also created a tense air of disappointment with the present; the constant challenge to do better, no matter what you had achieved, implied that you could not be happy with yourself.

The harsh statements of disappointment, disgust, and even betrayal at our failure to measure up to the ever-expanding standards of the family could only have come from people suffering disappointment themselves and hating to see it continued, not ameliorated, by their children's behavior. Even in my earliest memories of the first years of elementary school, to slack off or otherwise mess up in school, to lie, to fail to do what you were told, to be loud and brag in front of company, all these were taken not as a failing in the children, but as a conscious attempt to embarrass and degrade the parents, as if the parents' stock with others and perhaps even faith in themselves and their lives would be damaged by these crimes.

Our parents may have been right that our misbehavior was, in some part, a component of a struggle with them for control of our lives, but the solipsism of the child that makes the accusation of purposeful action by the conscious ludicrous is so strong that it dominates most of the subconscious as well. And even if it were true that as children we were engaged in a conspiracy to embarrass our parents, why was it that the mild horrors we perpetrated should have been so effective at embarrassing them? Only parents constantly on the edge of disappointment with themselves could have been so wounded by the growing pains of their children.

Sometimes the terms of combat would be funny if they hadn't been so confusing. When I was in the eighth grade, my father called me to his room for a talk, a sure sign that he was very upset with something I had done and had been thinking of a clear way to express his thoughts rather than blow up at the time, that he had been nursing a complaint over something I had long forgotten and was going to overwhelm me with carefully prepared arguments for which I would have no ready reply. He looked at me with great sadness and justice in his eyes and told me that he

was going to have to cancel our trip to New York City for the football games.

I was floored. I wracked my brain, trying to recall some sin that would justify this penalty. I lived for Cornell and New York Giants football, memorizing the names of the players and their performances each week, and it was a passion only I of the three brothers shared with my father. He had decided as a treat to me to take me with him to New York in a few weeks to see Cornell play at Columbia on Saturday afternoon and then, ecstasy and epiphany as impossible to describe in this mundane world as Dante's recollections of the light and harmony of Paradise, we were going to go watch the Giants play the St. Louis Cardinals at Yankee Stadium on Sunday. My father knew my passion for the Giants: that was why he had conceived of this special trip for me in the first place; that was why he had mercilessly harassed the lethargic bureaucracy at the Giants' front office for months the year before, offering to make a contribution to any charity named by my hero, tough little Jimmy Patton, if the office would send an autographed picture of him for me, a gift that was so perfect, so insightful, so amazing that I went into a sort of shock after receiving it at Christmas, making a pilgrimage to this same room several times a day to thank him.

"I just can't go out in public with a son who is wearing that button," he said. "It attacks everything I believe in." Button? What button? I looked at where he was pointing on my shirt. There was the offending symbol, AU-H20-64, a Goldwater for President button that I was wearing because a girl I was yearning for at school was the daughter of a local Republican party leader and was handing the buttons out. I didn't know what Goldwater's platform was, nor did I care, but wearing the button did give me an excuse to talk to her. I was even hoping we could write a leaflet about Goldwater together to hand out. Then we'd have to get together after school to write it!

"You know the marches you go on for civil rights?" I certainly did. These were events I took part in as a member of the Junior Council on Racial Equality, mostly because it was a way to spend time with another girl I adored, since to attend meetings we had to take the long walk together down from our more exclusive residences in Cornell Heights, the Hill, home of the "gown," to the Southside Community Center on the Flats, the "town."

“Goldwater is against civil rights.” Horrors! I rejected Goldwater on the spot, telling my father I was only wearing the button for a lark. Not only did I actually feel passionately about the Negro’s plight as well as about the girl I went to the meetings with, but I felt more passionately about the New York Giants than about all the girls and Negroes and presidential candidates put together.

We went to the games, after all. Cornell, as always, stomped Columbia. Columbia was the only Ivy League school that didn’t recruit athletes, but instead simply drew them from the regular student body. Columbia was reputed to be a fencing power of the first order, but I’m not sure the other Ivies were recruiting fencers in those days. They surely were recruiting football players though, and poor Columbia paid the price for its anachronism that Saturday. At Yankee Stadium the next day, the Giants were edged by the Cardinals, but that hardly mattered. I had been there, seen my heroes for the first and only time in the flesh, and I was ready to die happy. I quickly forgot the entire incident and my father’s blackmailing of me and our special event over a political issue. When I remembered it years later, I could hardly credit it myself, since it was so at odds with the person he was, and is, to me.

At about the same time, an incident occurred with my mother that was equally baffling to me, and equally illustrative of the degree to which what we did as children was taken by our parents as a reflection upon them. My mother came to some ceremony at the junior high school, perhaps our graduation to the next grade, and had arranged to give me a ride home afterwards. When I came outside, however, she was nowhere to be found. When I finally got home, she had gotten her anger under control, and was ready to tell me just what an ungrateful, awful, mean boy I was, and how I had gone out of my way to make a fool of her to her friends who were at the ceremony watching their children graduate, how she had been so upset that she left the school in tears and would never forget or forgive what I had done to her. Again, I was floored, and tried to remember what I had done, with no success.

“You were the only one with his sleeves rolled up. You did that just to make me look like a fool.” I understood what she meant, but it wasn’t even remotely true. We had struggled constantly about my clothes and hair well back into elementary school,

with her forbidding me from going to school until I would change out of pegged jeans and wash out the Brylcreme hair-grease, and me sneaking back to the house during recess to change and grease up again. She was easily embarrassed by our appearance, let alone our actions and school records, which she must have interpreted as a reflection on her and a spiteful attempt to make that reflection a bad one. I'm not sure if my mother really believed that I had turned my shirt-cuffs inside in the latest style to spite her; maybe it would have bothered her even more as a sin of selfish omission, in which the last thing on my mind as I prepared to follow the train of students onto the stage was how my sleeves would reflect on my mother.

These examples of the Goldwater button and the shirt-cuffs were not particularly traumatizing or special, but such statements of disappointment and betrayal were my constant fare. The two sides of my father's approach to motivation, exuberant reward and bitter guilt, can be seen in his reaction to two of my literary endeavors in grade school. When I was in third grade, he championed a seven-sentence essay on Abraham Lincoln I wrote for the school newspaper, somehow arranging for an excerpt to be printed in the Chicago Tribune's Sunday book review section. I received a congratulatory letter from the Cornell University Press that ended with the observation that, "your fame is widening." At the bottom my father had written, "Maybe this will spur Caleb (Dave too) to write!"

Certainly it spurred my father to spur me, because in fifth grade I volunteered under his enthusiastic direction to write an extra report on William Tecumseh Sherman in fifth grade — and what fifth-grade boy volunteers to write an extra report? I went with him to the Cornell library to gather the appropriate books for research, but then lost interest in the project soon after he left me there, as I looked out the window of the gloomy library on the warm spring scene on the quadrangle of students riding bicycles and throwing Frisbees to their dogs. He was deeply anguished at my betrayal of his idea and his assistance, and for weeks looked at me with broken-hearted eyes.

The constant moving of the goal-posts of achievement and acceptance made me desperate for external proof of my worth. In fifth grade, I cried out of self-hatred when I failed to score a goal in a hockey game that I could have bragged to my father about; in

sixth grade I came in early and stayed late in a wild drive to be the first in the class to reach the fabled purple level in the SRA reading program; in seventh grade I couldn't sleep for excitement the night before the "student of the month" prize was announced, or for heartbreak the night after I was passed over once more; in eighth grade I cheated with my partner on the school-wide athletic test, so that we both scored a perfect 20 when the finest athletes in the school's history, as the gym teacher tactfully pointed out to us, had never broken 18. Like Tolstoy's Prince Andrei, I burned to be cheered by all, because I thought that would bring me peace.

My parents' demands became internalized, as I learned to carry out the stinging assessments myself, so that I would have a ready response against the most wounding assessment they could concoct. Of course, each defense only suggested the next logical level of attack in the pursuit of perfection. In this way, my parents' critical voice was planted in my head and linked to my affection for myself. They probably made only a tiny fraction of the remarks that constantly assailed me for being a failure, an embarrassment, a fool, not deserving of pride or praise — most of them were my own, trying to beat theirs to the punch.

As a teenager, I found that the only time I didn't hear the voice of disappointment was when I was listening to rock n' roll. The anger and joy of rock in the early 1960s was anger at being young and powerless and joy at being young and in love. The music of the times was perfectly matched to the needs of that time of life, adolescence, and it drew me like a magnet just as it repelled my parents. In elementary school, I had marched happily, my father's ceremonial sword in hand, as he played his record of the stirring Navy anthem, "Anchors aweigh, my boys," and I had listened happily as he strummed out "I ride an old paint" and "Casey Jones, with the throttle in his hand," on his guitar. Every week my teacher and I would suffer through the violin lesson demanded by my mother. When I entered junior high in 1963, though, I put aside these childish things.

My allegiance to the new music was concrete: the fat backbeat of Chubby Checker's "Twist" sent actual chills up my spine like "Anchors aweigh" once had. But it was symbolic as well. The whining pundits were right that rock was rebellion, both to home and society. My father picked up the hurled glove: when I

informed him that Bob Dylan was as great a poet as Shakespeare and the Beatles were as great composers as Beethoven, he at first tried to humor me out of my error, but then flew into a rage of disgust at my willful stupidity. As he screamed at me to admit he was right and I kept refusing, we both must have sensed that it didn't matter that I was as ignorant of his favorites as he was of mine. The argument wasn't about quality, but loyalty.

One spring afternoon, my father jokingly put his tiny speakers out on the porch and tried to compete with the rock band playing at the fraternity next door. He stood on the stone wall overlooking the fraternity party and directed Beethoven's Seventh with his conductor's baton. As he looked back at me to share his joke, I felt the bite of the question of the sixties years before I ever heard it: "Whose side are you on?"

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Scattered upon the backdrop of psychological mistreatment were times in my early teenage years when my father lost his temper and descended into both threats of violence and real beatings. The threats made me wary of his affection and embarrassed at my physical fear and cowardice; the beatings traumatized and shamed me, smashing the bond between us and threatening my own sense of self. In response to both, I'm glad to say, I resisted all the more, over time becoming increasingly stubborn and disrespectful, and although afraid, willing and almost eager to confront him, to dare him to try to resort to violence so that I could show that I wouldn't break. This is a trait that I carried into adulthood and can moderate only by recognizing and questioning it, a quickness to take offense, to sense a power struggle and refuse to step away, since stepping away would be a surrender that reminds me of my powerlessness before my father's attacks.

When I was in nursery and grade school, I don't think I was abused very often, because the memory of one beating could float over my interactions with my father for a long time, and the threat would be sufficient to moderate my behavior. I can recall one time when, enraged by embarrassment after walking me home from one of my escapes to the Pritchards, my father took me into the bathroom and menacingly locked the door behind us. Screaming venomously, he shook me roughly, squeezed my arms to my sides, pulled down my pants, and spanked me. There was no more running away for a while; I was temporarily terrorized into

submission by the knowledge that I would have to face that all again upon the next capture.

“Spanked”....What an innocuous, socially-acceptable word for the brutal reality of a particularly sick form of child abuse. Just to use that euphemism is to legitimize the practice in a way that the more accurate phrase, “beaten and sexually humiliated,” does not. The bottom is a private part of the body. For a boy who is powerless to stop this invasion of privacy, spanking is a mock castration; for a girl, it is a mock rape. The pain of the beating of the flesh on the bottom is not the point of the assault at all: there is no bone there to stimulate the sharp pain that is caused by a beating on the arm, the leg, or the face. The purpose is, rather, humiliation, subjugation, a reminder that the aggressor can violate the victim’s most private places at will.

The fact that the beating is being carried out by a parent makes it more, not less devastating. At elementary school in England, we lived in the shadow of the dreaded cane, constantly whispering tales of its terrible uses. In reality, we sort of liked to live in that shadow, egging each other on to display disdain for the cane, breaking the very rules it was rumored to enforce. Scary as the waiting was, and painful as the few blows were, a caning had some positive sides to it, since it was a badge of honor, a mark of resistance to hated authority, a statement to oneself and one’s friends about the strength of one’s will, something to brag about. But no kids bragged about a spanking by their parents. It was too embarrassing, too troubling, too humiliating.

When my father spanked me that day, he became enraged as I pulled my hands out of his grip and put them over my bottom. As he tried to pin down my hands, he hurled me about purposely recklessly, knocking my head into the surrounding porcelain. I continued to resist, so he threatened to add a certain number of blows for each time I tried to impede him. I can’t remember how I responded to this attempt to force me to acknowledge the justness of my punishment, to take part in it like an impressed British seaman forced to make the very cat-o-nine-tails that would be used as he was “flogged around the fleet” for failure to do his expected duty. I hope I outlasted him, but I assume that his implacable rage eventually broke my will.

The last time my father beat me is implanted forever in my bones as well as in my mind. I was in seventh or eighth grade

when he attacked me in the confines of my room with his guitar, the same hollow-bodied Gibson he had played “Casey Jones” on at our childhood birthday parties, which I had long since appropriated to practice rock n’ roll licks. My mother’s mother was visiting, and she, little brother Winty, and my parents were having lunch on the flagstone walkway in front of the house, under my window. There had been an argument between me and one of my parents, and as a result I refused to join them for lunch.

Some combination of his anger at my boycott, his embarrassment in front of my grandmother, and perhaps some drinks touched my father off. He came storming up the wooden steps to my room, swearing and yelling my name at the top of his considerable lungs, while I retreated into the room and closed the door. The others sat silently through this terrible row not more than ten feet above them. My mother was constrained from interfering by the knowledge that my father would take as betrayal any disagreement with him in front of the children, or even any later discussion in private.

“Stay out of my room,” I yelled, but my door didn’t have a lock, and with a smash that splintered the hinge and handle my father kicked it open. The full-length mirror that was on the back of the door shattered against the wall, and the door-knob was driven deep into the wall. “We’re through looking at ourselves,” he said menacingly, looking at the broken mirror, and those are the last words I can recall in the incident, as it remains in my mind a blur of him yelling, knocking me down by the side of the bed, which unfortunately had no space under it for an escape, grabbing the guitar, which was sitting by the bed, and hitting me square across the forehead with all his might.

The back of the guitar cracked down from the force of the blow, which was probably struck with the harder side panels. The shock of the blow paralyzed me. This was not the paralysis of fear, which had kept me from fighting back at the first contact after my father smashed into the room; this was physical shock, a concussion. All I can remember was the CRACK of the wood against my forehead and the dull realization that he was completely out of control, that I was helpless on the ground before him, unable to even put my hands up to cover my face, and that I was going to be beaten to death.

I don't know how it ended, or how the room ever got cleaned up, or what my father felt about it. Later that day he was his usual self, joking around with me affectionately and telling me in a friendly tone that he had heard from my mother that I had said that he had hit me with a guitar, and that I knew that just wasn't true. Whether for fear or shame, I must have wanted to believe my father. Despite the cracked guitar, the absent mirror, the bent hinges, and the perfectly round hole in the wall where the doorknob had penetrated, I forgot the entire attack soon after, burying it in my subconscious for almost 15 years. But the memory was there, making education difficult, and schooling just about impossible.

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