

## Chapter 8

### **MY FATHER'S DEATH: WHY SO SOON?**

Tell us how the soul is bound and bent  
into these knots, and whether any ever  
frees itself from such imprisonment.

— Virgil, speaking to the soul of a suicide, trapped in  
the gnarled thorn trees of the seventh circle of Hell,  
Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (XIII, 87-90).

During the academic year after Cornell's Crisis, my father got grayer and moodier, and behaved erratically in some classes. When he committed suicide in July 1970, there was widespread speculation on the campus and among others who followed political science that the "troubles," Cornell's and the nation's, had kicked away the buttress of his life, the heritage of reason and democracy he had celebrated. In a moving eulogy for President Kennedy that he delivered on a day's notice, my father cited a letter Kennedy had just sent him that included the line from Henry IV, Part I, "call spirits from the vasty deep":

Whatever else we may remember of John Kennedy,  
we can remember him as a president who called  
spirits from the vasty deep of the American nation  
— the spirits of courage, decency, dedication, in-  
telligence, and good will — and called them in the  
hope that they would provide us solutions for the  
terrible problems we face as a people.

My father called on Americans to raise a monument to Kennedy by creating "a culture worthy of our power and a national purpose worthy of our glory." But by the end of the decade, the spirits Kennedy called forth had proven to be violent and racist, and the culture and national purpose my father had trusted had been revealed as tawdry and brutal. It stood to reason that there was a link between the death of a man who was appropriately titled the Professor of American Institutions and the death of his and others' faith in those institutions. It stood to reason that this was a tragedy of a man who felt betrayed by his campus and his nation

because they had not justified his fierce loyalty, a tragedy of a scholar whose style of history, an open admiration and friendly criticism of American politics, was unfit for an era when those politics deserved only pessimism and contempt.

Ted Lowi, who succeeded my father and had been his colleague at Cornell for six years before spending five years at the University of Chicago, said this:

But of one precipitating factor I am certain: his beloved American institutions had let him down...The urban violence of the mid-sixties was disorienting. The breakdown of Cornell was devastating. The polarization of close colleagues, friends, and families was disastrous. His world view was crumbling; his implicit political theory was being disconfirmed ...Clint's greatest virtue — his optimism — may also have been his undoing.

From John Marcham, editor of the Cornell Alumni News, came this analysis:

His death and his career were closely related. American institutions and values he had illuminated and supported for a quarter century were under siege at every point in his life and he had come to feel himself unable to defend them.

Historian James Morton Smith appeared to draw heavily on Marcham when he wrote in the American Historical Review:

Torn between his respect for the existing university rules and his pragmatic assessment of the extraordinary pressures that seemed to him to threaten Cornell, he first led faculty action to apply the rules, then backed the university administration's proposal to waive the rules, which was finally done when the faculty reversed itself. Caught in the middle and too often disowned by both sides, Rossiter became increasingly isolated, frustrated, and disillusioned with American life and ultimately with life itself.

A. J. Mayer, a columnist for the Cornell Daily Sun who had spoken at length with my father during the Crisis, added this:

To many of us, it will, no doubt, be difficult to understand why (his loss of faith in American institu-

tions) would lead a man of Prof. Rossiter's stature to his death. But it was because of his stature — and not in spite of it — that he became so profoundly depressed.

For our part, we in the shocked family had suspicions that the suicide was the act of a man betrayed not just generally by his campus and his nation, but more specifically by his sons. His difficulties with us had escalated almost beyond repair. David had gone ahead with his plans, dropping out of Yale and cutting sugar-cane in Cuba, and at the time of my father's death was organizing in Buffalo for a group affiliated with the Communist Party. Winty had become even more unruly, egged on by David and me, and had been distributing at school the radical newspaper David and his comrades in Buffalo prepared, Cold Steel. My girlfriend Ann Kinner and I had gotten married against my father's wishes only a month before his death; after six months of asking for his consent, we had to travel to Michigan, the nearest state where it wasn't needed. I had refused to apply for a student deferment from the draft, and was spending the summer leafletting the draft board. With funds solicited in a downtown park, I printed an advertisement in the Ithaca Journal that advocated draft resistance and hinted at an impending attack on the draft office: "SONS OF AMERICA, DON'T ACCEPT THEIR LIES!!" read the ad, which ended with my name and a plea to call me to "talk or act."

My mother told me later that year that when my father saw the ad on June 20, he had said "I don't see how I can live in the same town as Caleb." That just made explicit what I was already feeling, that by disappointing my father I had forced him to kill himself just three weeks later. I saw a "reason" for his death just as the commentators had, except that mine was that I had backed him into a corner of embarrassment with my public behavior, and then had sealed off his escape route with my private failure to show the loyalty and love that might have given him hope. Children see the world revolving around them, so they take upon themselves the blame for the suicide of a parent or a breakup of a marriage: if they had done something better or been less selfish, things would have worked out. That certainly was the belief, conscious and subconscious, I carried away from my father's death. Five years later I wrote and recorded a song about the rage I thought he felt toward me. The verses told of a dream

in which an “old friend” visited me and reminded me that “maybe if I’d listened to the things he had to say, then it wouldn’t be just a dream I’m talking to today.” The chorus said:

I died out of loneliness, in the quiet roar of despair.

I died out of loneliness, and you were all right there.

The reason that my mother’s remark found such resonance in my conscience was my awareness that my necessary years of teenage rebellion had indeed constituted a single, massive act of disloyalty to my father. All my memories of youthful affection and all the respect that was interspersed with my anger could not hide from me the knowledge that I had turned against him, that I did not possess the blind loyalty to him that he expected as payment for his sacrifices. As a radical student who sympathized with those who were attacking his institutions, as well as his son who rejected his authority and even his counsel, I was doubly guilty of the crime of assault and the sin of betrayal in his hour of need. After my mother’s remark, I recalled two such sins.

The first betrayal had been when I used as my high school yearbook photograph a staged picture of me standing on the steps of a building holding a rifle, in the same pose as the members of the AAS emerging from the Straight a month before. All I knew about my father’s role in the Crisis was that he had been involved in some way, since a picture in *Life* of him talking on the phone with my mother and Winty in the background had been put up on the school bulletin board. I hadn’t bothered to follow the ins and outs of the Crisis, because the subtext was so obvious; I simply identified with the blacks and their guns because they had made a dramatic statement of rebellion. The picture was intended to tell the world that I was a radical who rejected the authority of the war-making culture, but to my father I’m sure it felt like a specific statement of support for the leader of the AAS who had called him a racist and threatened him.

The other betrayal was more troubling to me, even though my father never knew of it. A month before my father’s death, I off-handedly told my mother about the antics of SDS leader Dave Burak at a dance the night before, as he defied an injunction against being on the campus and gave a loony speech to a bemused gaggle of summer students. In the speech, he fantasized that he had been “fighting the pigs” outside the Justice Department during the anti-war Mobilization in Washington the previous November, side-

by-side and blow-for-blow with "Rossiter's kids." This was a whopper: David and I had briefly bumped into Burak at the end of the "Mobe" march as we all streamed toward the Justice Department, but before we were dispersed by tear gas, the only conflict we witnessed or took part in was the exchange of middle fingers with Attorney General John Mitchell and his party on the balcony.

Burak then said to the crowd: "Man, Clinton Rossiter's son Caleb has been to Cuba, and I haven't even gone there yet! Now I know we're going to win!" I told this tale to my mother, thinking that she would get a kick out of both the strange reference to our family and a description of the crazy scene, with Burak exiting under a blanket to escape the forces of the Gestapo, coming in the guise of the long-suffering campus safety division. But my mother recoiled as if someone had slugged her in the stomach. Her face literally turned ashen and she said in a voice trembling with both fear and disappointment, "Don't ever tell your father a word about this. It would break his heart that you just stood there and let that awful man say those things." Her reaction was so bewildering to me that I tried to explain myself again, but she refused to listen, and just kept repeating: "Never, never, tell your father." Her demeanor pierced my usual armor of certainty in my own opinion. I tried to reconstruct the scene, to find out where I had acted dishonorably, but I just couldn't see it.

It was clear that my mother thought that a loyal reaction would have been to challenge "that awful man," but in fact, far from challenging him, I had found his speech amusing, and had gone up to him to point out his error about which Rossiter son had gone to Cuba and which one's name he knew from anti-draft activities in Ithaca. He hadn't been too interested in talking with me, though, since someone had said that a campus policeman was walking through the crowded dance, looking for him. "Go away, go away," he hissed as he crouched under a table in the dark, in the blanket that he had wrapped himself in for anonymity but which was, on that sweltering night, sure to attract more suspicion from the police than his face would have.

I was unaware that Burak had, as my father's diary put it, "distort(ed) and slander(ed)" him during and after the Crisis, behavior that indeed made any mention at all by him of my father's name an act of contempt, and any friendliness toward him on my

part an act of disloyalty. I admired Burak because I liked the gutsy style of his attack on the established order. If Burak and my father were arguing, I assumed that Burak was right. I was so used to attacking my father's values as an act of teenage self-definition that when I heard someone else do it, I didn't realize that I had an elemental duty to defend him even if I agreed in principle with the attacker. At the time, of course, I hadn't figured any of this out. It just felt like I must have done something shameful to have caused such a strong reaction in my mother. Then when my father died, I replayed the scene in my head many times, wishing that I had gone after Burak, bloodying him a bit before he, being a bigger, older man, beat me up. I envisioned myself coming home bleeding to tell my father of my defense of his honor, and him reacting with such pride that he would have regained the strength to go on living.

How deeply I embedded my shame at not standing up for my father is shown by the fact that even today, as I remembered this incident for the first time in years and wrote about it with the sure knowledge that nothing I could have done would have saved my father's life, I found myself seriously wondering one more time whether my scenario might not have turned things around. Again, I felt the powerful guilt of having been able to save his life by defending his honor but being too scared to try, even though I know that none of the elements of the accusation are true, and that even if they had been, it was my father's own beatings of me that would have been at the root of my cowardice. My mother said when we told her a month or so after my father's death that Ann was due to deliver a baby in December that if my father had known, it might have convinced him to live. Again, I bitterly accused myself of cowardice, because we had not gotten up the gumption to tell my parents. All in all, I was as convinced that I caused my father's suicide as if he had left a note putting it in black and white.

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As it turned out, all of us were wrong, we boys, the commentators, and the remarkable number of people who still ask me tactless questions about the possible causes of my father's death. I wonder if they ask the children of someone who died of a heart attack just which heart valve gave way, or the children of someone who died in a car wreck just how the cars came together. Just

to ask someone you don't know well how someone close to them died is itself insensitive in the extreme; to say, "Didn't your father kill himself?" and to pursue it with, "what led him to do that?" is so egregious that I am always momentarily stunned at the lack of everything from manners to compassion. A teacher from my prep school looked me up in Washington after 20 years and, as we were waiting in traffic after a day observing congress, started out of the blue to grill me. He said that he and the current headmaster — the once-assistant headmaster who had been my nemesis — had been wondering what caused my father's death. No wonder as students we knew instinctively not to trust these two guys.

We were all wrong to follow our understandable desire to find one or a set of explicable, logical reasons for this suicide. I mean really wrong, I mean in the darkest of the dark, I mean ridiculously, laughably, completely wrong. I didn't find that out for 20 years, and then only serendipitously after my mother, when I asked her if she still had the yearbook from my father's battleship in World War II, took me to the attic to try to find it, and off-handedly designated me the keeper of two boxes of family records. The boxes contained fifty years of pictures from my parents' lives, hundreds of letters from college, the Navy, courtship and overseas lectures, and two of my father's annual diaries: 1969 and 1970, the year of the Crisis and the year of his death.

With great trepidation I read the diaries, but I found to my surprise that they did not reveal a broken man brooding on his defeats and disappointments, but rather a strong man meeting each challenge and still making plans for the future right up until his death. The pages pulsed with the intellectual and emotional energy my father poured into his family, his writing, his students, his university, and his country. The entries about the Crisis showed far more pride than despair at the choices he had made. He had willingly accepted the role his prominence required him to play. It would have been impossible, as he had said wistfully at the time, to have "privatized myself over the last 96 hours and quietly walked my own way." The fact that the interview was with the New York Times (in an article titled, "Rossiter Advocates Reason and Order, Not Guns, on Campus" — now who could argue with that?) shows how difficult it would have been for him to have avoided leadership. Cornell's most public figure in the fields of politics and history was going to be sought out by the

press and his colleagues during an outburst of political history whether he wanted to be or not...but without question, he wanted to be.

My father had started the week of the Crisis by acknowledging the initial surrender by the administration — “but what else to do? A small civil war could have been touched off.” Then on Monday he voted against nullification and joined in the “(from hindsight) unfortunate statement that we will not withdraw... [the] reprimand.” On Tuesday he was “one of seven ‘threatened’ by Tom Jones.” After listening to the tape at the campus police station, he talked to my mother and younger brother, and they “decide(d) to stay put.” He noted that, “Others, especially Sindlers and Bernses, flee (what other word to use?)” On Wednesday he wrote: “We ‘nullify’ — I help, convinced that this is symbolic hang-up — and must be erased — also convinced (mostly by non-SDS whites) that proceedings against blacks were of dubious legality.” Already on Wednesday, he was turning his attention from nullification to the fight to save his departments from “dissolution” as Sindler, Berns, and Bloom attacked them. By the end of the week, as the lightning rod for public contempt for Cornell, he asserted: “I know now after 51 1/2 years that the only respect that counts is self-respect. (And I have it, despite some mistakes in these days.)”

Even the bitter attack on my father by his departing colleagues was a bit of a compliment: they could not have become so angry at him, out of all the hundreds of faculty who switched their position, unless they thought that his refusal to switch might have swayed more votes than theirs had. They wouldn’t have refused to speak to him for the rest of his life if they didn’t think that his resignation might have carried the day for them. My father believed, and his closest colleagues agreed, that he had shouldered his responsibilities and carried that cross as a voice of reason and loyalty in a time of madness, and that his performance was, as he often crowed when he’d score a goal against us boys in one of our hybrid driveway games, “not bad for an old man.”

A number of years later, when some other challenge to campus order renewed debate on the Crisis, emeritus professor Curtis Nettels wrote in the Cornell Daily Sun that every judicial system worthy of its name envisions a “pardoning power,” and that he assumed that the faculty held that power at Cornell. He said that after taking into account black students’ belief that they

needed to raise a ruckus to get their demands considered, he voted for what was in essence a pardon. Nettels apparently felt that he needed to show that his decision was a reasonable and wise one, and so he closed his letter with this simple statement: "I recall distinctly that Clinton Rossiter spoke in favor of leniency and clemency."

This sentence sums up my father's performance in the Crisis: leniency and clemency, meaning tolerance and forgiveness, were qualities he had extolled in the American political system, and when they were needed, he linked his prestige to them in the interests of the students and of the university. He did suffer his share of slings and arrows from the Crisis, but his diary didn't reveal any deep wounds, either self-inflicted or from enemies' sallies. He passed his great test, but not with the flying colors that history accords the worthy victors, precisely because it was a great test, a real battle with all of the fear, gore, and panicked groping that characterize battles until historians knead them blithely into set-pieces with themes and morals. War is hell, said one of my father's favorite Americans, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, and the aftermath of this biggest battle of the war on Cornell's campus was no jolly occasion with self-congratulatory speeches amid admiring throngs, but rather the draining chores of caring for the casualties and restocking the sutlers' supplies.

The succeeding months in the diary show an almost complete focus on rebuilding from the Crisis in classes, in meetings, and at parties. As noted, the Government department rallied under Arch Dotson's leadership, and my father helped by recruiting new faculty and taking on the mammoth introductory course for the coming fall. In addition, he was asked by a number of colleagues to serve on the executive committee of the Constituent Assembly. After resisting for a while, he agreed, and after the Assembly brought forth the Senate, he was again convinced by persistent colleagues to run for the new body as well as a seat on the Board of Trustees. However, in both elections he was defeated, finishing in the middle but not the bottom of the list. In one, he was singled out by the Cornell Daily Sun as someone not to vote for. While my father was probably relieved with the results, since he could finally get back to work on his book on the growth of modernism and democracy in 19th century America. He wrote in his diary, "Lost for Senate seat - and I really mean "Thank God!",

but it had to hurt to have been rejected by the campus to which he had given his career, and his heart.

The battle of 1969 was not a conclusive one, since the war on campus wouldn't be over until the United States stopped using the fruits of its modernism and its democratic power to try to impose its will on the people of Indochina. Largely because of the war and what it revealed about the vaunted American values they were to be taught, students were generally skeptical, often disrespectful and at times surly. My father, who like most professors was unused to these traits in students, found it difficult to approach them with his usual enthusiasm and his trademark of exuberance. His famed bantering with students, his method of publicly teasing a train of logic from an untrained mind, which in the good old days had been seen as an act of respect by students who saw themselves as neophytes in the presence of an intellectual superior, was now jarring to the many students who recognized no superiors and who saw it as an act of hectoring, somewhat demeaning and old-fashioned. My father's students were now more like his three sons, prickly and rebellious, and threatened rather than enlightened by his knowledge and his authority. Some of the magic had gone out of being a teacher, leaving mostly the duty behind. But he believed that he had done his duty during the Crisis, and there is no hint in the diaries that he would not continue to do so.

To be sure, the diaries recorded disappointment and frustration with the way the Vietnam War soured both nationally and on campus what my father had earlier celebrated as "the glorious stew of American politics." However, most of these concerns were balanced by references to successes by and with students, and to his pride in the core of friends who remained committed to the university. The same balance held true for his relations with his sons. He recognized that something fundamental was wrong between him and us, that "There is a generation gap, and I can't accept it or bridge it....Despair in eve. My boys are going to make a nightmare of coming years for me — & esp. for MCR (my mother). Why? & What to do?"

At the same time, he just as frequently recorded his pleasant surprise that his sons' strange and at times contemptuous behavior often gave way to lengthy visits and discussions in which we were seeking out his friendship if not his counsel.

There was never a question on either side of breaking off relations, and that meant that while our divisions hurt, my father could also see that they were temporary. He was a man of legendary perseverance, if nothing else, and so was well-suited to weather this particular storm in the family — and many parents with less perseverance and perspective have weathered much more severe ones. He retained his sense of humor about us even as he noted his despair, and as long as there is humor, there is love and hope:

\* WGR hot for Soul on Ice — also fasting for 24 hours each Friday until poverty (or famine?) is eliminated everywhere in world. Many Friday fasts await him, I fear!

\* Marriage?? CSR is about as ready for that as he is to play QB for the NY Giants. Incredible

\* DGR (our junior Lenin) and Buchanans are presenting “facts” (!! ) of Cuba — God!

The diaries reminded me of something that I had forgotten, which was that my father and I had begun a wary rapprochement in the last half year of his life. The disgust and anger I had felt toward my parents the previous summer had dissipated, and if we were not at peace with ourselves, we were closer to being at peace with each other. Over the Christmas break, I had dropped what my father called the “bomb” about planning to get married, and then two days later I must have refused to come to dinner in my pique over his refusal to sanction our decision:

CSR boycotts. The Slob. The Cynic. The Shallow One. In short, the Punk. But my son, and I care. I am an appeaser, but not enough for him.

Even that raw anger was perhaps spurred by the fact that we had actually been enjoying each other just a few days before:

CSR, hairy - but who isn't (among young) these days? - home...amuses us...CSR ran errands - he is friendly to me!

My struggles with the draft board provided me with a pretext for relating to my father during the spring of 1970, and we talked at length at and sometimes with each other about my choices. I either asked him to write a letter endorsing my application to be a conscientious objector, or he volunteered to do so. In any event, he wrote a letter saying he knew that I was sincere in my beliefs,

and that in good conscience I could not fight in this war. He told me that he had thought long and hard about adding a postscript identifying himself as a veteran of World War II who was nonetheless proud of his son's commitment to his beliefs, even though he disagreed with them. He thought that this might be gratuitous, but in the end he decided to include it. I was touched and heartened by the letter, and by the care my father put into it. Although my petition was denied, it was important to me to know that he understood that my opposition to the war did not stem from an unpatriotic attitude.

When I came home for visits in the spring, my father would be frustrated with my refusal to take a student deferment or delay my marriage, but there was none of the anger of earlier times, and I recall none on my part. Now I wanted him to understand me, whereas a year earlier I hadn't cared even to talk to him. The entries included: "Home to greet CSR, hairy and determined. We listen respectfully (on draft - he won't do it.)....Not a good day - mulling over CSR problem - and my problem with CSR....Bad scene at home - what have I done to deserve all this? - some, OK - but not all....CSR takes it well? [This refers to his refusal to sanction my marriage.]....'Rapped' with CSR in AM - got nowhere on draft....Ineffective 'rap' with CSR on marriage."

In May, while I was home during the nationwide campus strike after the invasion of Cambodia, I sought my father out to come with me to watch a lacrosse game — hardly a revolutionary act. I could think of nothing I wanted to do more than just hang out with him, get excited about the game with him, and walk back across our campus together. That day, however, he locked himself in his room and didn't answer our knock when Winty and I came to get him for the game. Suddenly shaking with fear for him, I called the campus police, who broke down the door: he had drunk himself unconscious, and an ambulance had to take him to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. We met him as he walked shakily through the ward the next morning. Mortified at the circumstances, he asked with some irritation why we had called the police. We told him that there was no way that thinking he might be there and might be in trouble we could have shrugged our shoulders and said, "Maybe he wants to be alone; maybe he locked the door by mistake when he went out; maybe he's sleeping; maybe, maybe..." My father looked at us quizzically, and

then seemed to accept from our faces how genuinely scared we were for him. He later told my mother, who had been out of town, "I guess the boys really do love me."

When Ann and I returned to Ithaca in June after our marriage and took an apartment for the summer, we liked coming over to see my parents. According to my father's diary, it was working out all right: "Home at 9:30. CSR and Ann for 1st dinner, but I missed it. Called them. Felt OK!" A week later, he noted "The CSRs are here." After another week, David reappeared, and the three of us boys tried to outdo each other in sounding radical, leading to these entries: "Late to bed - talk, talk about boys. Well, we have each other - but not them....MCR and I low - CSR's silly ad in Journal, delivery by thug and sweet girl of copies of Cold Steel from DGR for WGR (Over the edge) to sell (??)" Still, there I was four days after placing my anti-war ad in the Journal, hanging out, trying to be part of the family, as shown by the last time I am mentioned in his diary: "CSR (and Ann!) washing windows!" I was around, I was difficult, but we were aware that we cared for each other.

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An undergraduate who wrote my mother after my father's death recalled that in private discussion, my father had stood up proudly and stoutly for David's radical activities ("He hasn't thrown a bomb yet or hurt anyone; if you don't have your own family, what do you have left?") and for my refusal to take a student deferment or to let him try to use his contacts to have my case resolved quietly. The same student described in detail the many times during the previous year that my father had provided special words and efforts to him, taking delight in his intellectual growth and smiling as broadly as the student when he was accepted to graduate school. It was telling that the student remembered a seminar he took with my father that year as the most stimulating class in his four years at Cornell, while my father told him at the end of the semester that he was disappointed in himself for not making it better:

I remember he was rather depressed because he thought the seminar had not gone as well as it should have, that he had somehow failed us and perhaps himself. What he didn't realize was that he had injected himself into the seminar, giving it

a cohesion and a sense of unity which it had originally lacked.

There were certainly more days in those final months than before when my father recorded a mood of gloom about himself or frustration with his book, but there were still days when he would note that he had rebounded and felt and done well, and there were some wonderful and uplifting times, such as the day he lectured on political philosophy in the class my mother had started to teach at Wells College. There were a few hints of tension with my mother, but far more notations of love and commitment, and of pride in her new career. Above all, there was the steady, draining progress on the book, as with hours of quiet labor every day he finally wrestled it toward a close.

While my father's thoughts of his children and his university alternated between brooding and coping, there was one unmitigated cloud on the horizon, the sudden, terrible, and futile struggle with cancer in which his beloved older brother Bill was engaged. Bill's athletic body, robust since his letterman's days in track and football at Cornell in the 1930s, wasted away to half its weight in a little over half a year, and he died a month after my father. Bill was constantly on my father's mind, and there were more entries in his diary of despair about his condition than about all other woes put together. The day that my father drank himself unconscious was one in which he recorded that Bill was back in one more hospital as a "guinea pig" — Oh, God!"

The last entry in my father's diary, just days before he died, was completely perplexing simply because it was so typical of earlier entries, and presaged no dramatic change in his attitude. In it, he exhorted himself with one of his favorite lines, "Up Guards, and at 'em." This was the Duke of Wellington's command to the troops at Waterloo who had lain behind the crest of the hill all day, hunkered down to avoid the constantly bursting shrapnel, when their time had finally come and the Old Guard of Napoleon was snaking its way in a powerful column up the hill in the last gasp of the empire.

Lovely. Up guards, etc.!! 4 weeks to go.

The 'race between creativity and exhaustion.'

Here was my father remarking on and enjoying the weather, calling on himself as he often did to get on top of those last few chapters, and talking about a race that has no hint of tragedy for the loser. For all their wonderful insights into his character, the dia-

ries in the end had brought me no closer to understanding why he died. The very mismatch between his private thoughts and his fate was so great that I began to think that there must have been a mystery in my father's life that would explain his death, a mystery of which both I and the commentators were ignorant, a mystery that was so troubling he couldn't talk about it, even to himself.

For example, I searched in vain for a description of the incident in May with the campus police. The only possible reference to this was an entry the day it happened about an ineffective "rap" my father had with me on the draft, in which he also wrote: "All too much – brooded – calamity – fool!" It's not clear whether the calamity was his drinking or my prospects, and whether the fool was him or me. The next day he merely noted that he and my mother had both come home, but he fails to mention that while she was returning from a trip, he was coming home from a hospital. He simply recorded "Gloom" for the day. This refusal to discuss even in his diary the dramatic events of his personal life seemed to indicate that he preferred not to tangle with whatever problem resided there.

Before reading the diaries, I had planned to write just one chapter about the Cornell Crisis and my father's death in this book, and call it "The War in My Home." Like the commentators, I had believed that his death was linked to his despair over the war on his campus that had itself been caused by the war in Vietnam, although I had added to this mix the war with his children as well, which also appeared to have the same source. This logic allowed me to point the finger at the war-makers in Washington for the ultimate blame for one more casualty; it gave me one more very satisfying reason to hate the war criminals, the Colbys and the Bundys and their modern heirs who were replaying Vietnam in Central America, and it conveniently made them, and not me, responsible for my father's death. Reading the diaries showed me that there was one minor problem with this tight theory, which was that if the War, the Crisis, and the family were what was dragging my father down to his death, he sure didn't seem to think so.

On the trail of the mystery, I turned to the one person whom I had been afraid to ask, for her sake as well as mine, my mother. I wrote and asked her if it would be too upsetting for her to answer some of my questions, and she wrote back that within

the bounds of her duty as a mother to preserve her children's affection for their father, she would be willing to try. Before opening up Pandora's box, I sat down and asked myself why, as my mother had always implied on this topic, I couldn't just let leave well enough alone.

I came up with three compelling reasons. First, it would make me closer to my father. The more I knew, the less mystery there would be, and therefore the less anger to feel about being beaten, being abandoned, and being made to feel guilty for his death. I'd been able, after and because of a few years of expressing my anger and hatred in therapy, to make my peace with him over his physical abuse of me as a young teenager. I had become strong enough in myself to forgive him for losing his temper in the grip of his deep disappointment, since it so obviously wasn't his fault if just years later he could lose his own life in a similar grip. Both the violence against me and against himself showed a man out of control, himself a victim of some power beyond his consciousness, and I had decided to let that be a squaring of our accounts. But I knew that I would always carry some remnants of anger about that and about him leaving us, and I wanted to continue to reduce them. In short, "Tout comprendre, tout pardonner."

Another reason was that I was scared for myself, for David and Winty, that we might have had my father's problems passed on to us by genetics or exposure, and that when we reached the age of his death we might ourselves fall victim to whatever forces drove him to suicide if we didn't dare to understand and defuse them ourselves. Finally, it just wasn't right, it just wasn't loyal to be too scared to find out what had happened to your father. It was fear of what I might find that had kept me from learning about his life, that had kept me from honoring him by trying to understand him.

Here were all these virtual strangers writing for years about my father's life as a tale with a moral, and I, his son, didn't even know if there was a grain of truth in their assumptions and conclusions. Surely, I ought to know as much as them; surely, I should know if he was driven to suicide, as some said and others implied, because he was disillusioned by the university, by the back of the hand he got from some of the faculty, students, and administrators, by the country's crises, by the apparent inability of liberalism to bring out the best in our tradition, by the irrelevance of the founders, by the silliness of his optimism....and, more importantly, by his children's behavior. Daring to know what happened was, for me, an important part of being a compassionate man, and no longer an abused boy.