

## You

A week or so later I was down at the Hong Fat restaurant on Bayard Street in Chinatown ordering takeout, General Tso's chicken for Sarah and a steaming order of moo goo gai pan for myself. We're talking here about early Saturday afternoon, not the evening or the midnight hour or beyond, when forces for my demise gather and urge me forward. The sun was out and the streets were a pageant of color, with gorgeous young Chinese in their quilted jackets and vegetable stands with the ubiquitous bok choy. You had the sense of community and industry combining to create an atmosphere of safety on these crowded streets, some mammoth intelligence free of the clamoring Western ego. I couldn't really say why certain places are holy, but Chinatown was one of them for me.

Actually, I was back in childhood, with imperturbable Charlie Chan in his white suit in a world not quite my own solving the mystery of the day with the assistance of his ineffectual but well-meaning son. It was a world in which some kind of tranquil order could reign. I was safe from myself and from the world I lived in with the peerless one. *Charlie Chan was the room I could go to where no one could find me. Do you understand? Do you?*

Suddenly, on what should have been a peaceful afternoon, a feeling, almost slight enough to ignore, arose in me, some mild breeze of apprehension. Was it possible? No, that was absurd. Such a thing could never have happened. No way. How could it have? But if it didn't, then where had my morning gone? Why could I not remember? How was it that the afternoon had come without a morning to precede it? All thoughts of General Tso's chicken or the moo goo gai pan being prepared in the open kitchen of Hong Fat dispelled by this growing doubt.

The restaurant provided a pay phone, the availability of which I took as a sign of its readiness to relieve me of the distress my mind was manufacturing and return me to the pristine state where I was innocent of all charges being leveled against me. As if she had been waiting for my call, Celeste picked up the receiver on the first ring. All I wanted from her was one simple word. That was all. Would it be so much to ask that she just say no, as in ‘No, of course you weren’t over here earlier today. What a silly notion.’ But she had no such words of comfort for me. In a voice noticeable for its absence of warmth, I heard her say, ‘You were here all right, and maybe it would be a good idea not to come in such a state again.’”

I did not ask Celeste what I had done. I was afraid to know. I walked back slowly along the Bowery, holding fast to the takeout bag. The wide boulevard had its usual mix of human misery and industry, bums trying to scrounge up money for another taste in front of restaurant supply stores and bars where patrons drank from quart bottles of beer. I wanted to do right by Sarah and not lose her food, even if I did not care so very much about my own. Along the way I passed the Salvation Army residence below Houston Street. Some men were standing about outside, sobered up men of middle age with time on their hands. You somehow knew they didn’t have much more than the clothes they wore and the cigarettes they smoked and the rooms they had been given. Men without women. I shuddered seeing them and moved on.

There had been blackouts before, but this one seemed to be of a different order. It was the fact that my visit to Celeste must have occurred sometime in the morning, not after dark. Had I gotten up during the night and begun to drink? Or had I been drinking straight through the night and showed up at her door after daylight? But whatever had happened was gone from my consciousness. It struck me with sudden force that my life was completely out of control. For the

first time, I was truly afraid of what I might do while in such a drunken state. Weren't there stories of men rotting in prison cells for horrendous crimes they had committed while soused? Didn't I have a measure of recklessness and bad judgment, if not real violence, in me, given the gun incident of the year before? You must try to understand how crushing it was to realize I was completely out of control, at least when I drank, and that it was a given I would drink again.

Have you ever run into a tree or a lamppost at full speed? Have you known the shock and surprise of such a thing? On my next run to Celeste—it did come, oh yes it did—a few days later, when I was *feeling better*, I rang and rang her downstairs bell. Though the light was on in her window, there came no response. Still, I can report that no frustration of a high order took me over. The rumination mill did not have the chance to go into full operation before I heard that buzzer release the front door lock so I could climb the stairs to paradise. Have you ever been met at the door by a lover in a short silk robe, her exquisitely wrought knees and calves and bare feet on display? Have you ever met her looking so kissable? Has the very sight of your beloved unleashed potions of desire in you that you didn't know existed? I thought in my delirium that we were in deeper sync than ever, that having anticipated my arrival, she had simply prepared for bedroom ways. Though I do not like the expression nothing could be further from the truth, I will use it here anyway. She did not receive me into her apartment, let alone her bed. 'I'm afraid I have company,' she said. Her words had iron content in them now. If there was feminine softness on display, it was not the malleable kind. She saw the look of fear that came to my eyes, and stayed with my eyes so she could further see the look of hurt and shock they would thereafter express when, in answer to my question as to whom she might be entertaining, she allowed a red-haired man to emerge and stand bare-chested behind her to make the silent answer on his

own. Have you ever seen a satyr's face? Have you ever seen it tinged with red and his hair and beard on fire? Do you know what it means to have him savoring your beloved's flesh? Do you want me to say I smote him with my fists or calcified him with my words? Do you want me to say that I resorted to the arsenal of primal man?

The truth is as you know it already, of course. I did nothing but flee back into the street from which I had come. If fear is a negative form of prayer and your fear comes true, then what is there to do but flee? Celeste knew exactly what she was doing when she took up with the red-haired beast..She knew with the coldness of an executioner that she had killed my mad flights to her door so very dead. She knew that it was one thing for me to triumph over an indifferent husband but another to deal with a satyr at the height of his lewdness.

The end came that holiday season in December in 1978. A soreness had come to grip me. I couldn't get it together to buy gifts for Sarah and my family. Never mind that I was showing up to work in dirty clothes because drinking interfered with my ability to get to the Laundromat. Never mind that the whole quality of my life had been impaired. It was the fact that I had done no holiday shopping or even sent any Christmas cards. Given the problematic circumstances of my childhood, a measure of control was important to me, and yet even I could see that I had lost all control, and this awareness made me intensely angry.

In this time clothes or other material possessions held no great fascination for me. There wasn't much of value that I owned or thought I needed. But there was one exception. I would stare in store windows at typewriters on display the way another man might spend time in automobile showrooms gazing at the newest models. For some reason my spirits would brighten if I saw an old Olivetti 32 portable with the distinctive square keys and green metal body or an

even older black portable L. C. Smith machine. The sight of these objects brought me to a fever pitch. They were the things I needed to make my life all right and more than all right. I suppose, in a way, they were like all those bottles I had drained in the course of years. They promised to do something for me that I could not do for myself. I imbued these machines with magical properties.

We are talking of a time that is no more, of course, when the IBM Selectric with the interchangeable golf ball elements was state-of-the-art office equipment available to only the chosen few in most offices. Even then, before the widespread advent of the computer, the burden of my attachment to the past was on me, a weight that would not allow me to move forward into the bright light of the current day.

There was this one store on my way to work. As I came to it, my longing would summon itself full force. An almost unbearable pain of desire would grip me, desire I knew even as I stood there staring into the store window was in some way incommensurate with the reward any purchase of another typewriter would bring. And though I did not weep or tremble so even the unfocused eye would see, yet the inward response was substantial beyond belief. Beyond this world of forms and discrete parts there is the one who, when we find him or her or it and plug into the dynamo where all power is to be found, dispels the affliction, that painful ceaseless longing for the object that cannot satisfy and never could satisfy. But I did not know you then. I had no understanding of you then. As I had shunned my father, so was it necessary to shun you, who could only be in his image.

I will tell you the truth. In that window was a Smith-Corona electric typewriter, the Secretarial Coronamatic. In two-tone brown, it showed itself as the model of attractive and

efficient design. And was it ever my good fortune that I could step inside the store and type away on the display model. How crisp and clear the letters formed on the page. How error-free my typing as my fingers struck the big keys. But I could not take the plunge. Questions of a disturbing kind had to be answered. How would the machine fit in with the two manual typewriters I already had? Was I supposed to spurn them for this newer model? Wouldn't that be highly unethical and conspicuously wasteful, given the fact that they still had a substantial amount of writing life in them? But then, if their needs had to be satisfied lest they feel wounded by neglect, wouldn't it look odd to type part of a manuscript on one machine and another part on a second and even third? And suppose Smith-Corona went out of business? What would I do for new replacement parts or new cartridges? In this way, by making myself a slave to absolute certainty, the demand for eternity, did I hold myself back. My whole life a kind of dithering dance.

It happened that this particular store was owned by a young Asian man with big eyes and a capacity for insight. At first he was nervously solicitous of me as I typed at the display model while *standing up*. Could he help me? Did I know that the store was having a special sale? But he was not oppressive in his bid for my business. When I told him that I was still *simply looking*, he withdrew graciously. How can you buy a typewriter when you haven't even bought your wife a wedding ring? This was only one of my thoughts about the typewriter. My point is that I was thinking about typewriters, simply a means by which to write, and doing precious little writing. Lost to the bottle, lost to things, lost to myself.

But the thing is that on succeeding mornings, my life could not be complete unless I visited the store on my way to work. And so I would stare at my beloved Smith-Corona

Coronamatic and imagine that I was alone and away from this world I did not truly know how to be a part of, and then I would find it was not enough to just stand and gaze through the window but that I had to go in and actually be able to touch it, and yet I also knew this would perhaps not sit well with the owner, who, as I say, possessed these eyes capable of deep perception. And, to be honest, I was a collaborator, an aid to his perception, because before he even saw me as I saw myself, that is, saw me as enfeebled and incapable of doing, *saw me in the totality of my sickness*, I saw myself in this light. Because the Asian man was able to do one thing I could not do and have trouble with to this day: *he could discard what was not useful to him and move on. He did not have to embrace the old at the expense of the new. Sorrow and loss were not part of his nature. There was nothing for him to get back to.* All this information was there at his disposal when our eyes met. I gave him everything he needed so that, at the crucial moment when our eyes met, perception could take place as to who was in his store and he could shudder with disgust and move on to those who were serious in their intent. In that moment you can be very sure that he reflected my illness back to me.

I haven't told you of the times I sequestered myself in unused offices at the publishing company where I worked and tapped away on typewriters that caught my fancy there as well, how, that is, I did not stay faithful to the Smith-Corona Coronamatic but fell in love with a full-size electric office machine made by Olympia or the Royal and Remington models and a myriad of other such machines. And even though the perceptive eye of the Asian man was not upon me, my feeling at the time was that these were stolen moments when my illness was on full display for those who cared to see.

How to make things fit. How to organize an unorganized life. How to keep things together that had always been separate. How to assemble the parts. How to secure eternity from a manufactured good.

And have I told you of Dr. Reiner? He was in my life at this time. A psychotherapist. Harvard-educated. Even today that remains the salient fact about him. He was the model of the centrist, a man who placed himself within the flow of daily life with the large responsibilities he assumed: for getting his Ivy League education, for his military service, for taking on the burdens as well as the joy of fatherhood, for serving as the head of a large hospital department, for the psychotherapy practice he maintained. He saw my frailty. He saw the margins of life I inhabited. I had come to him three years before in the throes of a crisis. For two years prior to that diet pills had been part of my daily life. Three pills during the day and bottles of alcohol at night. *All this explanation. What purpose does it serve?* A kind of madness descended on me. Obsessive fantasies in which, to my horror, I saw a knife plunging into the chest of my wife, Sarah, or into my own. It was the pills and the alcohol, but it was also the distance that occurred from my own feelings. No grief when my father died (had I not killed him?) or when my sister Naomi was found drowned in the East River. Dr. Reiner was there for me. Is that not the hideous expression now in vogue, as spoken by those who are there for no one but themselves?

At first Dr. Reiner had believed in me as a writer, but after a while he saw that I was going nowhere. You can see when a person loses faith in you and is no longer invested in your sense of yourself as being special.. He gave me the support I needed to find *gainful employment*, for I was approaching financial destitution by the time I arrived at his office door.



And so, in this holiday season in 1978, I called Dr. Reiner. I will leave it to you to decide if it was an action that my life required. With some premeditation I said to him the following: “I am going to put a bullet in your brain.” I then hung up and drank my wine. A feeling of peace came over me. I was not alone in the universe. Someone—Dr. Reiner—would now be coming toward me. Attention would have to be paid to the one he no longer loved.

If I have never told you this before, as a child I was expelled from grammar school, and even if it explains nothing, I feel obliged to present this incident. We are always doing that, aren't we, seeking to shed light on the present by referencing the past? What is this proprietary attachment to all that has gone before, as if we have accumulated some vast treasure that is to be examined at length? My whole life has been driven by this need to discuss my past. I cannot have a conversation without it coming up. Even in childhood I believed I had a story, if only a story informed by self-pity over what I perceived to be my deprived circumstances in life.

I was in the sixth grade at an Episcopal school in my neighborhood, a school my brother Luke and my youngest sister Vera also attended. It was housed in a former mansion on Riverside Drive, a gloomy building that had sat neglected for years. But expansion is the way of the world. Everyone has an idea on how to grow, and the Reverend Mother, *whose face I could not see apart from the habit that framed it*, was no different. In any case, I stepped into the boys' bathroom on the second floor one afternoon in early spring. As I recall, two boys from the next grade had preceded me. Their names were Billy Baines and Johnny Jones, and so you know that I had found myself in the realm of the truly American. These were boys with agile minds and respectable Riverside Drive homes and with fathers who walked with one hand in the pants pocket of their suits, as was the corporate style back then. *Even if it wasn't, I have to say it was.*

*Punish them with your distortion, Gideon. Punish them with your outright lies. And punish yourself even more.* I had seen their homes and been astonished by their beauty. I did not know how people put together such spectacular rooms with color-coordinated furnishings and plush carpets and complicated draperies. All we had in the way of home furnishings was linoleum laid down in the living room and a bed for a sofa and the chaos of clutter everywhere. *'If only I had the time we would have such a beautiful home as you have never seen.'* So my mother spoke. *Did you know my mother? Did you ever see her walk the face of the earth? I know you did.* We had a Garatdjian home, a home that befit our immigrant, consonant-cluttered name and which I was ashamed to allow Billy Baines and Johnny Jones to enter. But my mother *I know you knew her. I know* it was not infected with this same shame; she had her protection in you from it. *When did she come to you? Was it when I was not looking?* And so when Johnny Jones and Billy Baines came knocking at my door one school day morning as the tandem force they sought to be, my mother was there and responded in the way that you would have her respond, that is, as if she had no secrets to conceal. And why would she? She was not invested in the material world. Her sparks had flown upward to you a long time before. She did not see the smallness of the hearts of my so-called friends and the machinery of judgment with which they were equipped. She did not see their contracted states or the malice in their smiles as, with their heads inside the door, they assessed the territory where I lived sufficient to confirm that they were in all ways superior to my own low worth.

You know what happened next. Having seen the squalor of my home relative to the comfort they lived in, that day Johnny Jones and Billy Baines noised it about the school that Gideon Garatdjian lived in a *pigsty*, a word the other kids taunted me with. So that, already at

that age, I was put in my place, accepted *my station*, learned that there existed a class of people I did not belong with, learned basically that the gap was unbridgeable. You it is who also knows the savagery of self-judgment, how delicious it is to seize on evidence of exclusion, how exquisitely delicious it has been for my whole life to feel cast aside *so I can bathe myself in the pity that no one else will provide me with*. Oh, I could make forays into their world through attraction to their women, but it was understood by me and them that I lacked both the social standing or the requisite abilities to interact on an equal footing. I accepted, in the way that people should, that defeat is final. Too much is made of upward mobility in this country. If you are a dog, you should stay a dog. If you are stupid and you come from a shabby home, then let the verdict stand as to who you are. Go into the defeat posture and spend your days there. A person must accept his station in life. All my life have I been aware of this station in life to which I was assigned by birth and congenital limitation. Exhortations to the contrary will do a person no good. Do not make noise about your failure. Do not pretend it could have been otherwise. Just accept it. Just do that, Gideon Garatdjian. So I have told myself since childhood. It is painful to see this contrary state of non-acceptance so rife in the land. It is imperative that we recognize our superiors. Because without such a proper acceptance, a person tends to cast blame and live his life in the envy key, and then trouble of a violent nature is bound to result.

I offer the above to you not as a definitive and final statement of belief but as an example of the contracted cast of mind that accepts so readily it is nothing but a lackluster star invisible to the rest of a shunning universe. Without you that is the state of mind I must live in. My soul does magnify the Lord, but truly it is you who magnifies me, providing the intelligence needed for my

daily bread. And it is you I could not find back then but only your *faux opposite*, this thing called fear.

“My encounter with Johnny Jones and Billy Baines was my encounter with society at large. Their presence shocked me. Opening the door and seeing them in the boys’ bathroom, I recognized immediately that I could not step forward without an annihilation of extraordinary proportions as the outcome. The smiles of unspoken understanding that showed on their faces were arrived at without so much as a glance at each other. They were in perfect accord that someone beneath them was in their midst to sport with as they would. On both their faces was written large the word they would use as a descriptor for all time of not only my family’s apartment but also the totality of my mind and being as well. That word—*pigsty*—now had a roaring quality in my ears.

With such a formidable alliance intact, I had no choice but to deflect attention from myself in the only way I knew how. I *acted out*, as we say today. Though it was a cool spring day, the window was open halfway, and rolls of toilet paper were stacked on a nearby table. Down below I saw the nuns in their black robes and the luminously white interiors of their habits walking double file, as if they themselves were schoolchildren grown old and large and living in the disturbing embrace of their own goodness. It can seem that way with some religions, can it not, as if these faithful are driven by a superstitious dread to practice the sad rituals of perfection-seeking children.

When I tossed the rolls, it was not with any forethought of what the consequences might be. Nor did I frame it in the scenario of a prison revolt, though many were the Saturdays when, in compliance with the punitive norms of the nuns, I would show up for the janitorial duties my

three weekly demerits warranted. Yes, dear God, I had heard the words “more elbow grease” and “You missed a spot over there” from the hovering nuns and yet, to my conscious mind, held them not in the embrace of adversarial relationship but saw them simply as *frozen white in the face of God and devoid of the blood that makes for human warmth*. I was not so much going against the nuns as symbols of authority with these objects for the anuses of the *young and old* as I was seeking to protect myself from the onslaught of Johnny Jones and Billy Baines. I did not mean for my aim to be so treacherously good. I did not mean to bounce the rolls off their habits, to go upside their heads, so they were forced to look up in stupefied wonder at what *God in his wrath was imposing on them*.

“Let me not say a single word more about the incident, except to note the following: intention is not always a conscious activity of the mind. The nuns came, the flock of them, invading the sanctity of the boys’ bathroom. They shepherded me to another room where, sequestered, I stared out another window, this one with a view down to the main staircase below and Riverside Park beyond and the Hudson River beyond that. It was a staircase that seemed to be leading out more than in. When my time in the room went on and on, the idea took shape in my mind that a discussion was taking place in another part of the school. And then I looked and saw that those steps, which had been without people on them, were now being climbed by my mother. Slowly, given her age—she would have been fifty-four at the time (yes, I do keep track of these things)—she made her way to the top. She wore a man’s shoe and rubber support stockings for her varicose veins. She had ailments of which she would not speak and burdens that were large, and her slow step spoke of her careworn ways.

The Reverend Mother, the headmistress, it was who had called my mother to the school. In a private meeting she explained the incident that had occurred. It could not be permissible for any student to hurl objects at the nuns, even a soft object such as a roll of toilet paper that could do no real physical harm, the Reverend Mother said. And it wasn't an isolated incident but part of a progression that marked my unfitness for that particular school. Hadn't I been a disciplinary problem, a disruptive presence, all along, throwing pieces of chalk at classmates and the nuns themselves during classes? And hadn't I, on school outings, instigated my school chums to run free of our teachers? And hadn't there been that incident back in third grade when I surprised poor Jenny Johnson with the kiss I planted on her cheek as she and the other girls were trooping up the stairs from their cloakroom? Were these not instances of an impulsive unruliness which, if not checked, would lead me down the road of significant trouble some day? And it wasn't as if redeeming factors were to be found in my scholastic performance. Was I not bringing up the rear of every class, whether it was math or Latin or French or the simplicities of plain English? Had I not failed completely to comprehend the mysterious *pi* or *hic haec hoc* or the *plusque parfait*? And so, having laid out these and other facts, the Reverend Mother was left to ask if it was it not time for this chapter of my life to come to an end?

With some sadness my mother must have heard these words from the Reverend Mother *her liver-spotted hands her unsmiling face the nightmare proposition of what she might look like with her habit removed*. I was supposed to be my mother's shining star. Was it not for me to make up for all the pain and suffering and intense disappointment my older siblings had brought to her life? Was I not to make up for my very much older sister Rachel, who had pushed her backward into the Christmas tree when all Mother wanted to do was welcome her daughter home

from college? Was I not to make up for oldest sister, Hannah, who, though now in her late twenties, had never left home? And what about Naomi, my middle sister, and the suicide watch that had to be applied to her life for it to be ongoing? And must we speak of my older brother Luke, and the failure path he wandered? In any case, here I was, at age eleven, establishing a failure path of my very own.

The truth is that an oppression existed beyond the ability of my mind to put into words. The assaulting action that I took was not simply to distract Johnny Jones and Billy Smith but to secure a degree of clarity in my life so order could begin to accumulate some traction and provide some meaning to my days. The fact was that I had lost the ability to see. Day and night it was the obfuscation of women reprimanding me, scolding me, judging me. Who were these women who wore black over their bodies to assert the whiteness of their souls? Who were these women for whom I had to be perfect and for whom I could not ever be perfect? What choice did I have but to remove myself from an environment in which I could not win and in which I was never supposed to win in the first place?

I don't know anything, dear God. In my more lucid moments I understand this. I know only that beyond the mind, beyond the intellect, there is you, and that I sit in silence for periods of the day seeking to effect that contact. And then, of course, lacking any other directive, I come back to this, the past. Was it you who made me this way, or did I do it to myself?

And so my mother led me away by the hand down those same steps I had seen her slowly mount. We walked quietly the few blocks to the building where my family lived. My mother was a busy woman. It was not an easy thing for her to leave her work. We can discuss her job and the

ramifications of it another time, but for now let me simply say that she did not scold me or hurl the word “expulsion” in my face.

The point here is that, as the toilet paper I hurled those many years ago in childhood was a cry for help, so too was the brutal message I left for Dr. Reiner on his answering machine many years later. A prayer can be made anywhere, whether in a former mansion housing an Episcopal school or in a Bowery loft. Dr. Reiner was fully understanding of the power of prayer. He understood that he was being importuned. He did not call the riot police or the National Guard when he played back the message on his answering machine in which I threatened to put a bullet in his brain. Instead he simply used his strong powers of inquiry to arrive at a truth he already knew. “What was that phone call the other day all about?” he asked. “I was upset. I couldn’t get it together to buy Christmas cards,” I replied. “I got your Christmas card,” he said, indulging in a degree of humor before demanding a more sensible answer. And so I said, not believing my words even as I spoke them, “I saw a typewriter in a store window and was upset because I didn’t have the money to buy it.” And not even the Smith-Corona Coronamatic but an old L. C. Smith portable. All the nights I could have spent with that machine in perfect happiness—admiring it, stroking it, talking to it. “You don’t need a new typewriter. You need a new life.” That is what Dr. Reiner said to me on that day.

I didn’t know that Dr. Reiner’s words would bring me close to you, dear God. I didn’t know that by threatening to kill a surrogate father I would find a real one. I didn’t know.