

# 1.

*Memory is a motherfucker.*

*I myself remember almost nothing. I don't remember the places I've been in the last year, where I've stayed, or the people I've met. It's all a blur, really, all that traveling, all that work, for what?*

*I spent a week in Taos. I had coffee each morning at Tazza, dinner at Orlando's. And still I remember nothing.*

*I spent time in New Orleans—the Camellia Grill, the Atlas Oyster Bar—and in Roanoke—Carlo's New Brazil, the Old Vietnam—but it's all, finally, a blank. Spaces and vacant lots.*

*I don't remember names. Hardly ever. Even names I ought to remember—the names of my students when they look at me expectantly, of my colleagues' husbands at social occasions, of my old teachers. The names I do remember are entirely unremarkable: Jacob Pearle sold me a car in New Jersey once; Sylvan Esperanza rented us a flat above his café.*

*I remember faces vividly—a woman I saw in a bar months ago, her mysterious black eyes pitched close together, now coming out of a restaurant; I smile and she frowns and looks away as if to say, You don't know me, motherfucker—but I do remember her, I really do. Or this tattered, tired-looking young man selling Streetwise on the corner—he was several blocks north last winter, and here he is now, a familiar face and I'm happy to buy a paper from him for a dollar, and even happier that I don't have to know his name. I wouldn't anyway.*

*I never remember presents: Who gave me this gray vest? My earrings? This notebook? I have no idea. What did I get for my last birthday?*

*I routinely forget birthdays. Already this year I've missed my father's, one of my sons', a niece's. And there are many, many months to go, more to forget.*

*My mom doesn't remember even more than I. I mean she barely remembers me, and the scope and scale of her obliviousness is huge. I at least remember to brush my teeth and to eat and to put on my clothes. These things now elude her. I remember to recoil from pain, not to pick at my skin, to cover a cut or a troubled scab with a Band-Aid so that the blood doesn't gush all over the place and the bleeding will stop. And I remember to breathe, to swallow, to move. So while I admit that I don't remember much, my mom points out that there's even more to forget. In the end, I know I'll forget it all. Oblivion trumps memory.*

I remember the overdrawn story of my birth. I do.

On the day I was born my family was bundled beneath a heavy blanket of snow in their neat little bungalow in Glen Ellyn, a promising Chicago suburb, they thought—the schools, of course, the space to grow, the affordable property. At thirty, Tom was already a rising executive, and Mary was raising the kids. They had neither aspirations nor pretensions for the Gold Coast and, though they would outgrow house after house in the years ahead, this midmost of midwestern suburbs was where they chose to be.

That December morning was cold, cold, cold outside, while inside everything was hot and glowing—the flickering red and green lights on the little Christmas tree, the butter cookies fresh from the oven cooling on a rack, the chestnuts, the steaming cider. And, of course, Mom herself, two weeks past her due date, swollen to explosive proportions and absolutely ablaze. The aroma of roasting turkey and sweet potatoes splitting their skins mixed with the close and pungent scent from the nursery, and the air crackled expectantly.

The presents had all been opened, wrapping paper and ribbon littering the living room, when Mom felt me stir and stretch. Here it is, she said, the last unopened present.

A neighbor watched over my brother and sister while Tom and

Mary drove off to Oak Park Hospital, twenty miles east along North Avenue, covered now with slush and ice. Tom maneuvered the car through the snow blurries, struggling to stay toward the center line.

As the journey to my birth was told and retold, stretched and exaggerated, it was as if the young couple had arrived by dogsled having crossed the Alps in a blinding blizzard. Would they arrive in time? Would they survive? Would there be a bed prepared? It blended easily with the story of Christmas and became a story of peril, precariousness, lives in the balance, and, yes, miracle, which is, properly narrated, the story of every birth. In reality mine was strictly middle-of-the-road, routine, par-for-the-miracle course. I missed Christmas by minutes, but that never diminished the intensity of this foundational myth—I was the best Christmas present ever, my life achieved against great danger and risk. And I believed it for years and decades to come.

I was the third baby, Cathy leading the way, followed by Tim a couple of years later, and then—boom!—eighteen months and there I was, scrambling, I imagine now, for space and food in the hatchery, angling for rank in this rapidly expanding household. It didn't take long for me to move up in the kiddyarchy—Rick came along directly, with Juan still a decade off, a kind of blessed mistake or wondrous afterthought.

Juan was not his given name, of course—no, that would be John Steven. He acquired Juan in late adolescence when, as a school dropout, he went to work as a dishwasher and busboy in a cafeteria in California. John Ayers, he saw right away, was not a good fit here, and so he reinvented and rechristened himself. He's been Juan Chicago to friends and family ever since.

Being the middle child forever stamped me. Cathy and Tim forged the way, set the agendas, pushed some of the bigger boulders aside, while leaving other obstacles in their wakes. Rick and Juan nudged from below and behind, and I learned to look simultaneously up and down, forward and backward. Cathy was the brains of the outfit, a consistent straight-A student, and Tim the most popular in anything

he did. Rick was the true intellectual, wide-ranging and perceptive, with a searching and curious disposition of mind, and Juan was always the most likable. I was faithfully midship, dead center, and from my earliest memories I made friends with the older and the younger generations, moved easily both ways, became larger and smaller as required, dilated and contracted by the hour, comfortably stretching above myself in one moment, and in the next happily coming down.

There were memorable advantages to be sure. When I was little, Tim's bed was inches from mine, and he was under strict orders to face me until I fell asleep—along with my nightlight, which had the power of a sunlamp, Tim's face kept the monsters at bay. Of course, if Tim was in a mood to torment, he would show me a gleeful face and then turn over before my eyes closed. I would howl in protest until he turned back, grinning wickedly. Tim had that power over me, and I was forever awed.

When I was older, Miss Alexander, my frail and venerable Latin teacher, who, it was said, was old enough to have spoken Latin before it became a dead language, simply refused to believe that I was as stupid as I appeared. You're Cathy's brother, she smiled benevolently, showing sharp little yellow teeth as she remembered her star student, winner of the coveted Latin Prize, and I wanted to throw up. But I escaped with a low B. Cathy was, as always, a bit horrified as I trailed her through school, diminishing the family reputation for academic excellence every year, stumbling happily along, but to an indifferent student like me, a low B was pure gold.

There were distinct disadvantages as well. Ken Nardella, an Italian kid from above North Avenue, with his long DA greased up and the shiny fenders of his pompadour swooping suggestively over and down his forehead, had a little gang of hoods and he hated Tim, who was, of course, president of the junior class. Ken was old to be in high school; his family had moved out from Chicago a few years ago and he'd been put back a couple of grades. I knew him from football, and from hanging out at the pool hall next to the Glen Theater. Ken acknowledged me only grudgingly.

I was fourteen, but I'd been playing football since I could walk—I was a chunky kid and my earliest memories include a constant chorus of adults looking me over, smiling broadly, and saying, Oh, you're the football player of the family. The Skinnerian reinforcement worked: I felt destined to the game and threw myself into it, although baby fat proved a poor substitute for skill, strength, and size.

I'd been shooting pool and smoking cigarettes for a couple of years. I knew how to put wicked English on a cue ball, and take a lit butt in my teeth, flip it into my mouth with my tongue, and push two puffy plumes of white smoke out of my nostrils while banking the eight ball into the corner pocket. I could also blow three perfect smoke rings through one another, the first large and lazy and then smaller and tighter and faster, the rings exploding into an impressive cloud, and I was working on the Olympic symbol, five interconnected circles. I practiced at the pool hall on Saturdays, or after football practice. It was an edgy place to hang out, the pool hall, for Glen Ellyn kids in the scrubbed and spongy fifties.

The football field and the pool hall were the only places the hoods and a few of the straight kids met as equals, but most of the kids I knew well stuck to football. Safer that way. I, on the other hand, adored the pool hall—shades of James Dean and Marlon Brando. And, of course, shooting pool beat doing homework.

One afternoon Ken asked me if I'd ever seen a zip gun. It felt like a test. Sure, I said.

Want to see mine? he asked.

OK. I wasn't so sure, but what could I say? It was a test.

I'll go get it. Meet me in the alley behind the Glen in fifteen minutes.

Oh shit, I thought. I was supposed to be home by seven on school nights, and it was almost seven now. Oh shit, I thought. Sure, I said.

I finished my rack, called home to say I'd be just a little late, and then headed over to the alley, trying to amble. Ken was sitting on a loading dock in the dusk, a brown lunch bag in his lap with what looked to be something hefty inside. And, oh shit, he was with his cousin, Bob Napolito, who was my age, and their buddy Dave

Salerno. I knew them all from the football field and from the pool hall. All three had deep voices and shaved regularly, and although Ken had a pretty face like Sal Mineo's, Dave was huge with dead eyes and a square head like Frankenstein's monster—I could imagine him with a bolt through his neck. Shit, shit, shit. Hey, they said simultaneously, smirking a little. Hey, I said, a little shaky.

Ken pulled a heavy piece of pipe, about a foot long, from the bag. He showed me how one end was open, but the other had a bolt threaded into it, sealing the end tight. A tiny hole had been drilled into the bolt, big enough for a fuse. Ken had firecracker fuses in his pocket, a jar full of match heads meticulously cut from their stems, some paper and cotton wadding, and a ball bearing as big as a marble. He also had a rod that fit the pipe perfectly.

Here's how it works, he said, demonstrating. First you fix a length of fuse in this hole, and then you pour in about two inches of match heads. His comrades and I leaned in toward Ken's subversive seminar. Some gunpowder would be nice, but, what the hell, matches work OK. Then you push some cotton and paper in and use this rod to really punch it down. A match is a lazy explosion because the gases expand so slowly, and everything has time to get away. But when I tighten it up like this, it's an overly excited explosion, and it can wreak havoc.

Shit, I thought. Ken's like a D student or something, but he's a damn good halfback, a clever pool shark, and, good God, a scientific genius in zip guns to boot. Who knew?

If I close both ends securely, he continued, it's a pipe bomb. Real damage. One end open, with a ball bearing packed neatly in, it's a single-shot zip gun. And it can kill a guy at close range. Watch.

We watched. Ken held the thing at arm's length, aiming at a large windowpane across the alley, and told me to stand back and a few feet to his left. Bob and Frankenstein faded to the right as Ken scraped his Zippo across his jeans and lit the little fuse. As the fire danced and sputtered toward the bolt Ken wheeled suddenly and, with big smiles on all of them—shit, shit, shit—aimed the fucking thing right at me. Shit!

There was no time to do a goddamn thing; I never even heard the explosion. But I cried out and, alive, started running in tight circles, feeling myself in flames. And it's true—Ken had not packed the ball bearing in and the joke was to make me think I was being shot, while shooting me only with harmless cotton and paper. But Ken, his scientific IQ predictably falling short, failed to account for the fact that some of the match heads would still be igniting lazily, some of the bits of cotton still flaming wildly. I was ablaze, my chest and stomach and arms lit up.

Bob grabbed me in an instant and smothered the little flames with his jacket. All of them looked mortified. Oh, man, Ken said, red and suddenly sweating. That wasn't supposed to happen. Oh, man, I'm so sorry, man. His voice cracking, he looked like a big whining baby about to cry. Don't tell your parents, man. Please. Oh shit. Don't tell Tim. He was pretty miserable.

My shirt had little black holes all over it, and under each was a blister or a welt on my skin. Bob helped me off with my shirt while Frankenstein ran around the corner to the store for butter and bandages. Oh, man, I'm so very sorry, man, Ken spluttered again and again. That wasn't supposed to happen. I was just pretending to kill you.

Bob dressed my wounds and gave me his shirt. Ken lit a Camel and we passed it around like a peace pipe. Then we piled into Frankenstein's beat-up Plymouth and they drove me home. I never told, and that was an unexpected bit of heroism. Soon Bob became my best friend—he introduced me to the joys of smoking cigars on the sly with a bottle of dago red, and of eating homemade spaghetti with meatballs and whole garlic cloves on stale bread soaked in burgundy. We hunted pheasants together in the fields near his house, and played bumper tag along St. Charles Road with our parents' cars. Soon we called each other Wop, and in our junior years we each left home, me for prep school, Bob for military academy. And I was one of them. I wanted to become Italian. I peeped at my profile reflected in the classroom windows—head up, chin out, not-so-Roman nose pointing like a hood ornament, lips in a superior sneer, DA growing long and

provocative. I practiced the stance and the posture fiercely.

My first love in high school was Katie Blue, small and dark and dazzling, a junior when I was a freshman. I was playing up. We enjoyed hanging out as buddies and, like a lot of Tim's friends, she treated me like a cute little toy. But, surprise, returning late from a school trip one night, she asked me if I'd walk her home.

Sure, I said.

And when we get there, she said, will you kiss me good night?

Sure, I said, suddenly a little wobbly.

And when you kiss me good night, she pressed on, will you kiss me like a freshman?

What the hell did that mean? I thought, a little frantic.

Never! I said firmly, recovering just in time, trying now to sound convincing. Of course not. How does a freshman kiss? I wondered. And, of course, I was a freshman, so did I have any choice?

Standing at her door, she showed me exactly what she meant, her mouth opening slightly, our tongues touching secretly, sending a sweet shock through my whole body. I gave way to warm joy. The surprise over, I felt the insistent pull of a kind of calling. I drew "Katie Blue" on my hand every day in thick letters with a black pen—a temporary tattoo—and wanted only to be her sex slave, her eager and intense apprentice. I practiced that fiercely, too.

My little brothers were their own gift and challenge. I could play down with them. Juan was cute and cuddly and fun. He's still—now that he's grown up and middle-aged—cute as hell, but he was pure and delicious then. When I was still learning how to change his diaper, I was shocked to discover that he often had a little hard-on, which looked too weird to tell my mom about, even though it made changing him a lot tougher. But I figured out how to bend it up toward his belly button and pin the diaper tight. My friends and I baby-sat for him a lot. Sometimes we'd put him in his crib or playpen and forget about him for hours. No problem. I adored him.

When he was nine or ten and visiting me at college, I sat him on the back of my 1948 Indian motorcycle for a tour of Ann Arbor and the surrounding countryside. My parents, needless to say, had no idea I owned a motorcycle, let alone a classic Indian. I swore Juan to secrecy, and off we went. At Packard and State a car blew through the light and I slammed on the brakes, skidding sideways along the pavement to a rough and terrifying stop. What flooded through my mind at that moment—besides that I loved him—was how pissed off Mom would be that I hadn't told them I owned a motorcycle, and pissed, too, that I'd killed Juan. I was certain she'd look on the bright side, but still. Luckily, Juan was just a little scraped and bruised, and he already knew how to keep a secret.

Years earlier Tim and I almost finished Rick off in another bizarre accident. We'd removed the cover to a floor vent next to the kitchen—Mom was in there somewhere, doing something—and we were taking turns lowering ourselves down, pretending to work in a sewer. The vent and pipe were large, but we could squeeze our big bodies only partway in. When we tired of the game, we simply walked off, forgetting to replace the cover. Rick, about two, strolled out of the kitchen carrying a large wooden bowl in front of him and, just as I looked up, disappeared into the sewer. He was a perfect fit. Tim and I followed Mom as she raced down the cellar stairs in horror, knowing she'd be pissed at us, visions of Rick feeding the old coal-burning furnace, only to find him crawling from a large piece of pipe he'd broken with his weight, filthy but smiling.

Rick was my filthy, smiling sidekick for many years, but by high school he'd taken his own distinct path. He actually liked Latin, and he was the first kid I'd ever known who read the newspaper every morning—not the comics or the sports page, but the entire goddamn thing—who wore black turtlenecks, and who drank coffee when he was thirteen. He's going through a stage, Mom said cheerily as he went six straight years without saying a single word to either Dad or her.

Rick introduced me to the Gate of Horn, a legendary Chicago folk

club, where we saw Lenny Bruce and Peter, Paul and Mary. He took me to a James Brown concert at 47th Street and State where four of us from the suburbs were embraced in a large bronze rock 'n' roll bosom. He uncovered the Second City improvisational theater, the Art Institute, and Studs Terkel. In a way he introduced me to politics.

Years later he would emigrate to Canada to escape the draft, return and enlist with the intention of organizing a servicemen's union, only to desert after Diana was killed. We were underground together all those years. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

There were five of us, then, and I was in the middle, a little dreamy and trying on the possibilities presented to me. I was blond in a crowd of brunettes, chubby in a family of beanpoles. There were always friends over for dinner or the night, and there was always noise, romance, crises, comedy, projects, possibilities. I remember distinctly the new baby-sitter who said after dinner one night, You'll have to go home now, Bill, the Ayers kids are going to bed.