

**Q**UARTERLY  
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## Egalitarian Women

by *Garance Franke-Ruta*

In her new book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, recounts a warning she delivered to Harvard Business School students in 2011. "About one-third of the women in this audience will be working full-time" in 15 years, she told them. "And almost all of you will be working for the guy you are sitting next to."

Surveying the stubborn gender inequalities of the early-21st-century workplace, Sandberg has written what might best be described as a cross between a feminist treatise and an airport business book, in which she advocates for structural changes to make corporate America more hospitable to women – particularly mothers. She also issues a bracing call for women to propel themselves ever higher, take more risks, speak up, negotiate, and pull a seat up to the table. But for all the persuasive parts of her argument, a vexing contradiction remains mostly unaddressed. In one impor-

tant arena, women have already, to borrow Sandberg's phrase, been aggressively leaning in: school. Women surpassed men as a percentage of college students in the late 1980s, and by 2009 had become the majority of master's-degree students and doctoral candidates. The majority of Americans older than 25 with college degrees are, today, women. Yet just 4.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. So why hasn't women's success in the academy led them to more leadership positions in the work world?

Forty years ago, Title IX mandated equality for women. But it did so only in schools. In the decades since Congress passed this law, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in education, women have flocked to the ivory tower. There, enforced equal standing is coupled with criteria for success that are transparent, and that reward industriousness. Many parts of the work world, by comparison, are still plagued by sexism, or reward a particular sort of self-promotion that many women shy away from. Studies have repeatedly shown that women get more criticism and less praise in the workplace than men do. They are offered lower starting salaries, and are judged more negatively by prospective employers than are men with identical backgrounds.

And unlike in school, the burden of fighting discrimination rests almost entirely on an individual, who must initiate grievance procedures against her boss.

Just as important, the behaviors that school rewards – studying, careful preparation, patient climbing from one level to the next – seem to give women an advantage academically, judging from the fact that they get higher grades in college than men do. Yet these behaviors aren't necessarily so helpful in the workplace. Out in the work world, people hire and promote based on personality as much as on formal qualifications, and very often networking can trump grinding away. As Whitney Johnson and Tara Mohr put it in an article on the Harvard Business Review's Web site earlier this year, "The very skills that propel women to the top of the class in school are earning us middle-of-the-pack marks in the workplace."

It can take young women years to realize that the professional world is less of a meritocracy than the school world, and that the strategies that lead to success in one realm may not be enough to master the other. In the meantime, many suffer from what Carol Frohlinger and Deborah Kolb, the founders of Negotiating Women Inc., a firm that coaches women in leader-

ship skills, call "tiara syndrome" – the belief that if they "keep doing their job well, someone will notice them and place a tiara on their head." This tends not to happen.

Women begin to fall behind the moment they leave school. Even controlling for their college major and professional field, they wind up being paid 7 percent less than men, on average, one year after graduating, according to a 2012 study by the American Association of University Women. One reason is that they take fewer risks right out of the gate: they are much less likely to negotiate their first salary – 57 percent of men do this, versus 7 percent of women. Compared with their male peers, women also set less ambitious goals. A McKinsey study published last April found that 36 percent of male employees at major companies hope to be top executives, compared with just 18 percent of female employees. I've heard countless stories that reflect this same divide. Stephanie Mencimer, now a reporter at Mother Jones, told me that when she was a hiring editor at The Washington Monthly, she marveled at how, among comparably credentialed applicants just out of school, women were more likely to apply to be interns, while men would apply to be editors at the magazine.

The university system aside, I suspect there is another, deeply ingrained set of behaviors that also undermine women: the habits they pick up – or don't pick up – in the dating world. Men learn early that to woo women, they must risk rejection and be persistent. Straight women, for their part, learn from their earliest years that they must wait to be courted. The professional world does not reward the second approach. No one is going to ask someone out professionally if she just makes herself attractive enough. I suspect this is why people who put together discussion panels and solicit op-eds always tell me the same thing: it's harder to get women to say yes than men. To be female in our culture is to be trained from puberty in the art of re-buffing – re-buffing gazes, comments, touches, propositions, and proposals.

Sensing that they are not prepared for the world they have entered, many professional women seek still more academic credentials. I've come to think of this as intellectual primping – the frequently futile hope that one more degree will finally win notice, and with it, that perfect job or raise. Eight years ago, Anna Fels, a New York City psychiatrist in her 60s, published a book called *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's*

*Changing Lives*. She told me she has since noticed that, in the wake of gains unimaginable when she was young, women today may have a harder time seeing the barriers before them than did the women of her generation. "Women may think the more degrees they get, the more chances they have of being hired," she says, "but they are swimming upstream."

In the 20th century, women often needed to be better-credentialed than men to get to the same place – for example, female Pulitzer Prize winners tended to be better-educated than men who won the same award. But in the 21st century, education is clearly no panacea. ♦

## God Cannot Die

by *Jack Miles*

**I**n a bookstore 40 years ago, having fallen away from the Roman Catholicism of my youth and young adulthood without adopting any replacement for it or resolving much of anything to my own satisfaction, I happened upon Bertrand Russell's essay "A Free Man's Worship" (1903), published with his better-known "Why I Am Not a Christian" (1927) in a book bearing the latter title. I found myself unexpectedly struck, even thrilled, by the following paragraph:

"That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the

noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

The last sentence is the one that thrilled me most. Unyielding despair! Here was the habitation that my soul had been seeking! Throw that master switch and feel the relief spread through your mind and body, feel the burden of hope lift from your shoulders, feel the freedom of no longer needing to make anything happen for anybody, including yourself. I copied the sentence down on a little slip of paper, and for 10 years I carried it in my wallet as something like my secret mantra.

And in all candor, it worked for me. When I came across the book, I was exhausted and depressed in the wake of Richard M. Nixon's 1972 defeat of George McGovern, the candidate I had worked for tirelessly in the vain hope of ending the bloodbath of the Vietnam

War. Ironically, given Russell's lifelong political activism, his gospel of despair calmed me down. It excused me from politics and all such larger efforts and returned me, with paradoxical energy, to the private adventure of young-adult life. As the years passed, I no longer thought about the quote every day, but it stayed there in my wallet, my firm foundation, my good-luck charm.

And then I lost my wallet.

Actually, my wallet was stolen from a gym locker. As I reassembled its contents (driver's license, credit card, etc.), I had to look up and copy out the Russell quote again. But now, a decade later, though I still responded to the rhetorical swell of the prose, I noticed that Russell had claimed only that the science on which he had laid his firm foundation of despair was "nearly certain." I noticed that I had no independent knowledge of the scientific basis for his existential claims. And I reflected that, in any case, science itself must surely have moved on in important ways since his day. But then I noticed something else: My Russell romance had not been my only such love affair. I had been rhetorically smitten at least twice before, and both times the words were very like Russell's.

Though I could read French, I had read barely a dozen or so entire books in that language. Among those few were two that affected me so strongly, I can still recall where I was when I read them, most especially where I was when I read the entrancing passages I might have recalled (but didn't) when I originally transcribed Russell.

The first passage is the famous conclusion to the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus, like Russell, asserts that despair and – going beyond Russell – even suicide are the logical responses to the human condition. But he proceeds to assert that we must rebel against that logic and happily embrace the absurdity of life. The embrace of hope and the refusal of suicide constitute the rock that the mythical Sisyphus, standing in for you and me, must endlessly push to the top of the mountain of existence, knowing that as he reaches the summit – as despair fades and hope nears triumph – the rock will tumble punishingly to the bottom, forcing him to an absurd renewal of his commitment to life and hope.

To him this now lord-less universe appears neither sterile nor futile. Every particle of that rock, every mineral glint from that mountain swathed in night,

forms a world unto itself. The struggle toward the peaks is itself enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

The second passage that so transfixed me was by a French scientist who was a close personal friend of Camus's, as I learned only later. This was Jacques Monod, a molecular biologist and, like Camus, a Nobel laureate. In his book *Chance and Necessity* (1970), he did not just declare that the universe was an accident but went on to explain in mesmerizing detail how the accident might plausibly have happened. If Monod's account of the initial accident and of its inevitable continuation was correct, what did it say about the human condition? How were we to live? Monod answered that question as follows:

If he is to accept this message in its full meaning, man must finally awaken from his age-old dream to discover his total solitude, his radical strangeness. He knows now that, like a nomad, he stands at the margin of the universe where he must live. A universe deaf to his music, as indifferent to his hopes as to his sufferings – or to his crimes. We were to live as gypsies, then, looking in from the outside upon a settled universe deaf to the most plaintive strains from our

violins.

What to say? In my 20s, I was a sucker for such stuff. Worse, I was painfully slow to notice my own posing. Only after the passage of some time and the small, salutary shock of having my wallet stolen did I examine these three professions of secular faith and realize, with an inward blush, that what I had wanted was simply closure, a way to stop thinking about questions whose answers were beyond my reach. Camus may have earned his existentialism in the French Resistance. Monod must have earned his both there and in his laboratory. I could not, I cannot, do other than honor their memory. But my own identification with them seemed a meretricious, adolescent borrowing. It was the secular equivalent of what the German theologian and martyr of the German Resistance Dietrich Bonhoeffer had scorned as “cheap grace.” I felt a little ashamed of myself.

Then, some years later, having begun for no reason that I could easily name to intermittently and anonymously attend services at an Episcopal church, I heard a hymn whose opening stanza jolted me awake with its use of some of Russell's language – specifically, his “firm foundation of unyielding despair”:

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!  
What more can he say than to you he hath said,  
To you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

Given the secular company I then generally kept and the reading habits I had and still have, I was accustomed to the idea that religion was a refuge for those not brave enough to face the uncertainties of the real world. But now I asked: Had not Russell, too, sought a refuge, a “soul’s habitation,” and had he not finally claimed rather more firmness for it than was really there?

The thought came and quickly went, but it would come back. Even granting that faith was “ridiculous” (the word I heard so often from my friends), was it any less ridiculous to pretend that one was Sisyphus and then declare that by sheer force of imagination one was *happy* about it? Absurd indeed! Why should this form of nonsense be regarded as any less ridiculous than religion, once the spell of eloquence was broken? But then, too, why belittle Camus for coping with his perceived dilemma as well as he could? And if we were all becalmed in the same boat – Camus, Monod, Russell, the pious poet who wrote the hymn, and Jack

Miles – what were we to do? Sink the boat? Was I now to be ashamed of all of us? What good did that do them or me, or anybody?

Finally, I began to inch past that embarrassment. I began to wonder whether it was really wrong for any of us to seek some kind of interim closure, some way of coping with our own invincible ignorance. Over the decades, I had been an avid reader of popular science, always fascinated by the latest findings but increasingly aware that each new discovery raised at least as many questions as it answered. The research recently conducted at the Large Hadron Collider of CERN (the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire), for example, baffles me as much as it does any other untrained reader, but I followed its development over the past several years not just with interest but also with a little research question of my own. Suppose scientists demonstrate the existence of the Higgs boson, or “God particle,” I asked myself. Suppose they confirm the Standard Model of modern particle physics. Will that not simply raise a host of new questions for further research? Is that not the result of every new discovery?

Well, the scientists did demonstrate the existence of



the Higgs boson. Peter Higgs won his belated Nobel Prize. And the success of CERN has indeed pointed the way to further research. At the same time, that success has increased our ignorance even more than I had imagined. Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in physics, concluded a 2013 article titled “Physics: What We Do and Don’t Know” with the following rather chastened sentences: “Physical science has historically progressed not only by finding precise explanations of natural phenomena, but also by discovering what sorts of things *can* be precisely explained. These may be fewer than we had thought.” If science is the pinnacle of human knowing and physics the pinnacle of science, and if physics is deemed crucially limited even by the gifted few – Weinberg’s “we” – who know it best, where does that leave the rest of us?

Scientific progress is like mountain climbing: the higher you climb, the more you know, but the wider the vistas of ignorance that extend on all sides. Alexander Pope described this experience in the heroic couplets of his 1711 “Essay on Criticism”:

*So pleased at first the towering Alps we try,  
Mount o’er the vales, and seem to tread the sky,  
The eternal snows appear already past,*

*And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;  
But, those attained, we tremble to survey  
The growing labors of the lengthened way,  
The increasing prospect tires our wand’ring eyes,  
Hills peep o’er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!*

I have begun to imagine human knowledge and ignorance as tracing a graph of asymptotic divergence, such that with every increase in knowledge, there occurs a greater increase in ignorance. The result is that our ignorance always exceeds our knowledge, and the gap between the two grows infinitely greater, not smaller, as infinite time passes.

Ignorance was a great human breakthrough, perhaps the greatest of all, for until our prehistoric but anatomically modern ancestors could tell the difference between ignorance and knowledge, how could they know they knew anything? The actual date, the actual occasion, the actual individual who first became conscious of the difference between knowing and not knowing are all beyond historical recovery, but some such moment surely had to have come long before the invention of writing. And how different was that moment in the life span of the human species from this moment?

One thing Russell was right about is that Earth and the human species alike have finite life expectancies: “The whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.” You may die never having learned the one fact that would have changed everything for you. In just the same way, extinction may befall the human species with key questions still unanswered and perhaps even unasked. And as that moment nears, will science have been superseded by something that differs from it as much as it differs from philosophy or philosophy from religion? When we reflect on how slightly, on the one hand, our genome differs from that of the chimpanzee and how greatly, on the other hand, our knowledge surpasses that of our genetic cousin, can we not imagine that a further minor genetic alteration might bring into existence a being whose knowledge and modes of inquiry dwarf ours as much as ours dwarf those of the chimpanzee?

How can we know just how brutal or wonderful – or, above all, how basic – the surprises that lie ahead may be? Kay Ryan, an Alexander Pope for our moment in history, captured this distinctly contemporary kind of uncertainty in a poem titled “On the Nature of

Understanding”:

*Say you hoped to  
tame something  
wild and stayed  
calm and inched up  
day by day. Or even  
not tame it but  
meet it halfway.*

*Things went along.  
You made progress,  
understanding  
it would be a  
lengthy process,  
sensing changes  
in your hair and  
nails. So it’s  
strange when it  
attacks: you thought  
you had a deal.*

So, do we have a deal or not? Those who speak the language of “we now know” think they have a deal, and more power to them, even if – as we have lately learned from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

– the civilization that pays their enormous bills may have only another 15 years before it slides into a decline no technology can reverse. For the rest of us, suffice it to say that if religion rests on human ignorance, it rests on a firm foundation indeed, and the same may be said of the claim that religion rests on a foundation of fear. Of course it does, and how could it not? Though some of us are understandably impressed with what we collectively know (which most often means being impressed with what other people know and we believe), our ignorance still exceeds our knowledge, and we still have eminently good reason to fear the unknown.

And how do we cope with that? However we cope with our ignorance, we cannot, by definition, call the coping knowledge. What do we call it? Let's not give it a name, not even the name *religion*; the dilemma precedes religion and irreligion alike. But if we can concede that religion is among the ways that humankind has coped with the permanence and imponderability of human ignorance, then we may discover at least a new freedom to conduct comparisons. If we grant that we must all somehow go beyond our knowledge in order to come to enough

closure to get on with the living of our lives, then how do religious modes of doing just that compare with irreligious modes? Since the challenge is practical rather than theoretical, the comparison should be of practices and outcomes rather than of theories and premises – yet the hope must be for a reasonable way of coping with the impossibility of our ever living a perfectly rational life.

Religion seems to me to assume one aspect when considered as a special claim to knowledge and quite another aspect when considered as a ritualized confession of ignorance. One may certainly be struck by the peculiar way in which ostensibly authoritative pronouncements made in the course of religious revelation always seem to arrive coupled to the disconcerting proviso that ordinary human knowing could not have reached what is about to be conveyed: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9). So much, it would seem, for empirical confirmation. But rather than construe such language as vicarious boasting, one may take it,

counterintuitively, as Isaiah's way of reckoning with the limitations of his own mind. To this day, most expressions of religious commitment can be understood as utterances in either of those registers. The boastful construction is smug, loud, insufferable, and can sometimes seem omnipresent. The confessional construction is reticent and thus easily overlooked, yet its appeal shouldn't be underestimated. The world harbors many a muffled believer and many a shy practitioner, reluctant to undergo cross-examination about a confession of inadequacy that defies ready articulation.

Not long after Monod published *Chance and Necessity*, Leszek Kolakowski, the repentant Polish Marxist who became a distinguished historian of ideas, wrote of this confessional construction in an essay titled "The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture" (1973):

"Religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith. One can, of course, disperse one's life over the contingencies of every day, but even then it is only a ceaseless and desperate desire to live, and finally a regret that one

has not lived. One can accept life, and accept it, at the same time, as a defeat only if one accepts that there is sense beyond that which is inherent in human history – if, in other words, one accepts the order of the sacred."

Inevitable defeat is the plight of Sisyphus, but while Camus takes irreligion to be a condition for the acceptance of that defeat, Kolakowski sees religion as the acceptance itself. He maintains, in other words, that we cannot even recognize (much less accept) our inadequacy in the face of the human condition without accepting the reality of another, contrasting condition – his "order of the sacred" – in which our deficiencies are made good. I myself do not go that far. I do not assume that there necessarily exists an order "beyond that which is inherent in human history," including the history of the cosmos as humans write it – only that such an order may exist. How can I know, either way? And, just as important, how soon can I know? The mystery need not be absolute or eternal for it to rule out the consolation of existential despair. Kolakowski, no less than Camus and the others, thus returns me to the closure question, and it matters to me that religion rather than irreligion conducts him to the outer limits

of human experience. It matters because there, at that brink, religion and irreligion seem to meet, and in that meeting lie lessons about extending hospitality toward beliefs we do not share.

In practical terms, religious pluralism, by this late date, is very much in the American grain despite recurrent social challenges to it. The question remains: How deep can it go? I have been working as an editor for seven years on the massive new *Norton Anthology of World Religions*, which earnestly aims to put a century of comparative religious scholarship at the disposal of a public, including policy makers, struggling with the political consequences of involuntary religious mingling on a planet without a religious majority. But pluralism is a personal challenge as well. On a spectrum of postures toward religious faith that runs from organized hostility to muffled contempt to resigned forbearance to never-crosses-my-mind indifference to against-my-better-judgment curiosity to serious interest to fellow-traveling to heartfelt engagement to missionary fervor, where do you place yourself, and how does that dispose you to others' positions?

Having put in all this work, how do I feel about the

very different agenda of, say, the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, which for six years now has been diligently seeking nonreligious alternatives to religion? In one light the NSRN seems to me to be fabricating versions of the faith that I lost when I lost my wallet. Yet if a faith of some sort is inevitable, why should the NSRN not devise something that suits it? Its language may teeter at times between assumptions of superiority and professions of humility, but so does conventionally religious language. Professionally, I judge that its work complements rather than undermines the work that my colleagues and I have done on our anthology.

Am I kidding myself? No doubt, but let's be clear: there is a component of self-kidding – a suspension of disbelief – in even the most serious human enterprises. (Does anyone really believe that all men – and women – are created equal? But recognizing the delusional premise of American democracy needn't undermine our faith in it.) The element of play is particularly, though by no means uniquely, prominent in religion. Herbert Fingarette, a philosopher interested in self-deception – that is, self-kidding – has written:

“It is the special fate of modern man that he has a

'choice' of spiritual visions. The paradox is that although each requires complete commitment for complete validity, we can today generate a context in which we see that no one of them is the sole vision. Thus we must learn to be naive but undogmatic. That is, we must take the vision as it comes and trust ourselves to it, naively, as reality. Yet we must retain an openness to experience such that the dark shadows deep within one vision are the mute, stubborn messengers waiting to lead us to a new light and a new vision ... Home is always home for someone; but there is no Absolute Home in general."

Science is immortal, but you are not. History is immortal: Earth could be vaporized, and on some unimaginably distant planet on some unimaginably remote future date, another civilization's historians could still choose to use the terrestrial year as a unit of time measurement. But where does that leave you? You have a life to live here and now. "Tell me," the poet Mary Oliver asks, "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" We never truly *know* how to reply to that challenge, do we, since more knowledge – the knowledge we do not have – could always justify holding current plans in abeyance just a little longer.

But when life refuses to wait any longer and the great game begins whether you have suited up or not, then a demand arises that religion – or some expedient no more fully rational than religion – must meet. You're going to go with something. Whatever it is, however rigorous it may claim to be as either science or religion, you're going to know that you have no perfect warrant for it. Yet, whatever you call it, you're going to go with it anyway, aren't you? Pluralism at its deepest calls on you to allow others the closure that you yourself cannot avoid.

Science keeps revealing how much we don't, perhaps can't, know. Yet humans seek closure, which should make religious pluralists of us all. ♦

## May I Touch Your Hair

by *Julie Hecht*

**A** special family lived around the corner from us at our beach house. How were they special? There were three children when most other families had two children.

As a surprise to everyone, including the parents in the family, later on there got to be four children. That was one way they were special. But there were other ways, too.

Other families lived up the block and down the block but my mother and father were friendly with the mother and father of this family because they had higher I.Q.'s and were more intellectual. The father was a doctor, an obstetrician, and when we visited them at their winter house, the children of this family would take my older sister and me upstairs to their father's study to show us secret medical books. There were illustrations, in color, of all the female reproductive organs, and they were thought by the doctor's children to be something secret and wicked and hilarious.

When the obstetrician father found out about the sneaking into his library he said, "There's nothing funny about medical facts and human anatomy." He reprimanded his children for their immature and silly behavior.

It was at their summer house that we knew them best. We didn't see them that much at their winter house in some hot suburb. There were two older girls – Elinor and Dorothy. Elinor was so much older that the hand-me-down clothes we received from her collection had been made right after the war. One of these hand-me-downs was a pair of thick cotton gabardine shorts with heavy zippers, different from the thinner and flimsier fabric and zippers we knew from the 1950s.

Elinor was in her own upper-teenage world of grown-up girls in college. She was studious as well as boy-crazy. She had a high, tinkling voice and was often laughing at this or that. She pursued some postgraduate doctoral studies – I can't remember which – and she got married at a young age, then made the mistake of having a baby right away, as many in her generation did. This ended her studies and the fun of her marriage to a studious social-science kind of guy. He was tall and serious and he wore dark horn-rimmed glasses. My mother told us she'd heard that Elinor had said to her three-year-old child, "Your parents are young and want to go out, and you can't expect us to be with you all the time. We have our own lives."

This was thought to be a bad thing to say to a child.

The other sister, Dorothy, was taller and thinner than Elinor. She had an unusual look in the face area. Her whole face was the thing. It was like Joseph Cotten's face. Both sisters had brown hair and brown eyes. In our family my parents and older sister had blue or green eyes. Elinor had straight, shiny hair and Dorothy had lighter brown, wavy hair. Since I had light hair I found dark hair to be fascinating. I thought that anything I had couldn't be good.

Then there was the brother, named Richard, called Ricky, the only pleasant boy I knew. Pleasant and good-natured and kind until he lost his childhood chubbiness, his voice changed, and he suddenly became tall and handsome. Many girls fell in love with him. "All of a sudden he's a heartthrob," I heard mothers say.

At that time, after he had turned into the heartthrob, he said to me, "In a few years you'll be a real knockout, and I want to be around then." Since I wasn't even a preteenager, I wasn't sure what that meant. I could tell he meant it to be a good thing, but it caused a lurching feeling of anxiety.

There were two other older boys on the block, and they hung around with Ricky. One boy was bad – not bad enough to be what was known as a juvenile delinquent but bad in these ways: he shot at cats with a slingshot and thought shooting out garage windows

with the slingshot was fun too. He was an only child, most likely because he was so much trouble that his parents couldn't consider taking on another one.

But while Ricky was still an ordinary boy, we all did things together as if we were normal – we played outside and at the beach, climbed trees, played punchball on the little road.

The special family was more normal and happy than our family was. I thought that this was the case because the mother's main occupation was family life. She seemed happy to be the mother. When she wasn't screaming at her children she was laughing. She was happy with her husband – the kind, intelligent obstetrician – even though he wore something called a Cabana jacket, a white terry-cloth one, on weekends. He did this to cover his midsection, which was somewhat large and out of shape.

The mother was interested in her children and the fun life they all had together. My mother missed the glamorous fun life she'd had before as a witty, beautiful, artistic young woman who dressed in a most elegant way and was known for these attributes.

One year when we arrived back home to our winter house I discovered that a doll's green dress was missing. The dress had come with a Toni Doll, a doll whose main attraction was that she could be given a Toni home permanent. She had a platinum-blond wig and came in a box with a booklet of four different



hairstyles with directions showing how to set the wig hair to make each style. A doll's home-permanent kit came in a smaller box with doll curlers and setting lotion. There were instructions showing how to make more lotion when this bottle of lotion ran out. The two ingredients were water and sugar. The smell of this on the doll's nylon hair was delicious and otherworldly.

Later on, when I was twenty and setting my own hair with giant pink rollers and beer to make it puffier and even straighter, I found out that beer wasn't sold in Massachusetts on Sunday. That was the law. I remembered the doll's formula and mixed some water with sugar. I was on Cape Cod with a certain boyfriend and was in a crazed state of constant hair washing and roller setting, even on this beach vacation. I'd get up early in the morning while he was sleeping. I didn't want him to see the plastic dryer hood in operation. I was surprised to find that when I took the rollers out, the most sugary top parts of hair broke off. I was panicked enough to let this boyfriend in on it. We figured out that the mixture was for nylon wigs and not for human hair. I thought I heard him say "Toni Doll" once or twice in an incredulous way.

Back at our winter house, in September, when we were unpacking the car after the summer away, a boy who lived across the street offered to help my father hand some boxes in through the side windows, a shortcut from carrying them through the front door. I

had always liked this boy, who was named Edward, because he wasn't as tough and crude as other boys. He was sweet and good-natured and when I remembered him some years later I took a guess that he was not heterosexual. The next incident made this impression in my mind whenever I thought about it, and I thought about it a lot. As he reached up to the window and handed me the Toni Doll in its original box he said, "Hey, this sounds interesting. What is a Toni Doll?" I explained it to him and showed him the booklet of hairstyles. He was so interested that he stopped and chose his favorites. I said I liked styles two and three and he said he liked four. He was really involved in those styles. He was emphatic about number four. I explained to him that four was the most elaborate and, when attempted, proved impossible to duplicate. We discussed it for several minutes.

For some years I wasted time with the classified ads in doll collectors' magazines trying to find a red-haired Toni Doll – "mint in original box," it was called. Then later on eBay I came close a few times but couldn't spend \$600 on this folly, even though I really wanted to see those four styles again. It is still a minor goal – to get that booklet and doll's home-permanent kit.

My father seemed to think what a nice boy Edward was to help with the boxes. He said so. My father was smiling and having a kind of fun – the surprise of the fun of daily life. Both parents were amused by the

discussion of the doll's hairstyles through the window. This was before there was a world of non-heterosexuals. Or maybe my parents were silently observing and wondering.

It was always a big event on the block when we came back from our summer house and I spoke to my friends. A few of these friends were angry and said mean things like, "You missed all the new things." When I asked what things I was told, "New games like Stuck in the Mud." When they explained the games, they didn't sound like fun.

Before I knew these girls, before kindergarten, I was often bored and complained to my mother that I had nothing to do. Instead of arranging activities, as other mothers did for their precious children, and especially the way those children grew up to do for their children, she'd be cooking, reading, or looking at some curtain material and she'd say, "Go play with those girls outside."

I'd say, "But I don't know them. Come with me."

And she'd say, "Just go over to them and say, 'May I join you?'"

It was impossible to imagine using this phrase. Even now. Does anyone dare to speak that way?

When we returned to our beach house the next spring something happened that seemed miraculous. I noticed a small green object on the little street. I went over to it and found it was the Toni Doll's dress, dirty

and run over and smashed flat, but intact, having been rained and snowed on still lying there all winter. That's what the world was like. Summer-house streets weren't used, garbage trucks didn't travel down them – no trucks, no people, no wrongdoers, no crime, just air and wind and emptiness.

The little dress had lain there month after month. My parents were as amazed as I was even though they had lived through the Depression and the war and many other things.

My mother washed the dress and hung it outside to dry. She might even have ironed it. We put it back on the doll. It looked the same as ever. This was one of the high points of my life.

When we first went to look at the beach house my mother was in a good mood and asked me, "Do you think we should buy the house?" I was four at the time. We were going down the outside back steps from the porch, and I'd seen on the brick side of the steps an old metal fork stuck to the brick with something like putty or glue. It was a sickening color of gray – gray and a worse translucent gray mixed. This might have stayed in my mind during the tour of the whole house, which was old and dark and narrow. The month was March and the house was cold and empty. Maybe I said "Let's go" a few times or a few hundred times. But when my mother asked about buying the house I was looking at that fork. It looked like rusty tin, not like the forks I'd

known as forks – stainless steel, silver, or silver plate.

I said, “No.”

My mother was surprised. “Why not?” she asked.

“Because of that,” I said, pointing to the glued fork.

“We’ll have that taken away,” she said. She was laughing. “Then do you think we should buy it? We’ll have it all cleaned up and painted and wallpapered. We’ll have our things in it – curtains, furniture, our books, and your dolls.”

I couldn’t imagine that. The fork with putty stayed in my mind. How had it gotten there was the question.

“Oh,” I said. “I don’t know.”

The only time I remember her laughing that same way was when I was three. She discovered that my red sandals no longer fit. She was putting one shoe on my foot and said, “Oh, it’s gotten too small.” After getting over the disappointment of not being able to wear these sandals, I said, “Some night I want to stay up all night and watch all my shoes.”

“Watch them? Why?” she said.

“I want to see them get smaller.”

Was that a moment when she was glad to have had children? She laughed and said, “Don’t you know that your feet are growing and the shoes stay the same size? Children grow. Your feet grow, too.”

Other times she said or screamed a sentence that made it seem that she didn’t like us much. A screamed description of my sister and me was “One can’t get her

nose out of a goddamned book, the other can’t get her head out of the goddamned dollhouse – what did I do to be cursed with these two good-for-nothing little bitches?” The sentence is quite literary in retrospect – part of an angry poem, or a dramatic line from a play, maybe from the mother in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, or some character in a John Osborne play, or a play by some other angry-young-man writer.

Some years after the red-sandal incident she said, “It’s the antibiotics they put in the food supply. It’s making you all grow too fast.” She often quoted Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*. How many mothers were so smart and wasted their lives on household chores? What kind of world was the 1950s and how did my mother fall into it?

My ideas of fun things to do came from my reading of Little Lulu comics. I remember the day my older sister suggested these comics for me and then ordered a subscription. This suggestion was made during a conversation in her dreary, blue-green-painted room at our winter house. As usual, she was reading, and I wanted to play a game of imagination and fun. My parents and my sister were always reading, but I preferred to play outside, or even inside, with other children.

One idea I got from the comic books was to go outside with a friend and set up a stand to sell lemonade. Although Little Lulu used real lemons, my

mother didn't want to deal with the mess of squeezed lemons – seeds, spilled juice – and she provided us with the frozen cans.

An unknown man came by the lemonade stand and said that five cents a cup was too expensive. He was a man working on a construction project down the road. I believed him because he wasn't smiling and I took his criticism as a crushing blow. After he bought some of our product, he said it wasn't cold enough. Soon he went on his way. Maybe he gave a few other criticisms too. But it was the high price he emphasized.

That night in our bedroom my sister asked about the lemonade stand. She was reading, but took a moment out. She asked what we did with the money we earned. She'd seen it in a Hellmann's mayonnaise jar on the lemonade stand – an old bridge table my father had set up.

I told her that we went to Mary's, the Italian grocery store around the corner, and we bought more frozen cans.

“So you reinvest the profits,” she said.

I asked what profits were and she explained. I asked her whether there was supposed to be money left over.

She said, “What do you think, people just sell whatever product they have and earn no money?”

I said I hadn't thought about earning money.

She explained that there had to be money left over. Then she said, “That's capitalism.”

She went back to reading her book. Whatever capitalism was it didn't sound good to me. I wasn't a child-communist. I just didn't know about money. It was the dismal beginning of learning that things were not just fun. Business was involved. A bad note for falling asleep.

At our beach house, this boy Ricky was the best tree climber and could climb to the highest branches. Three branches came together and made a place to sit, a place that he named the King's Seat. I guessed these boys got their ideas from the kinds of books they read, adventure comics, and TV shows. The other girls and I would never think of naming branches.

Another of the older boys I knew was not very happy. He seemed to be unhappy and sad. His parents were strict with him, although I never saw him do anything considered to be bad. They said his name in a critical, scolding way. Who knew what had gone on in his early childhood and babyhood? Maybe, as a baby, he had annoyed them. Maybe he was not a fun-baby. I didn't think of this at the time. I sometimes noticed him on the steps of the screen porch tying his sneakers, looking down, or downcast, while being told by his mother what he was doing wrong, or had done wrong, or was not allowed to do. Feeling sad for the plight of other children was a big part of my life.

He had a little sister who was a playmate of mine, and their parents treated her in a different and better

way. This girl had a headful of curls, something like the tiny tight wig curls of a Tiny Tears doll, but she had bigger and looser curls called ringlets. She was always happy. She had tan skin and brown eyes and looked like a large doll herself. Her parents treated her with love and adoration. They both smiled every time they looked at her. They spoke to her with the kindest words. The boy didn't seem to mind. He appeared to accept this as his fate and didn't show any resentment toward the little sister. Maybe he liked to tease her, but he was always smiling with amusement and love when he did.

The father was a Romanian doctor who had escaped to America before the war. People on the block were afraid of him. He wouldn't allow his children to play with certain other children. My parents also discouraged association with and did not have a good opinion of certain families and their children. One family was extremely eccentric, but not in the way the British are eccentric: they lacked proper manners and household hygiene. Their house was in shambles inside and out. It was scary in there. Two families lived together, two brothers and their wives and children. The two wives were dressed in raggedy housedresses from morning to night. They were usually heard arguing and screaming at each other and their children. We couldn't tell what the nature of the arguments was because both wives had speech defects

of different kinds. One was a high voice with fast talking, the other was a low voice with muttering.

Another family was just not of the same social class as the Romanian doctor and most of the other families, including ours – not economic class, but by education and behavior. For example, the father was a butcher – that alone was horrifying enough – but he also wore Hawaiian shirts. The mother wore shorts with a top that exposed her midriff. This showed rolls of skin caused by her having given birth to three children and making no attempt to deal with the aftermath through exercise or diet. In her defense, there were no Pilates or yoga classes then. There was swimming, calisthenics, tennis, walking, and diet. And there were corseted bathing suits and figure-tightening nylon bathing suits. She didn't bother with any of that.

Her hair was dyed a strange orange-red color. In addition to a permanent that left curled bangs and a curled edge all around her head, this mother, whose name I can't remember, used a comb on each side to keep the hair back off her face. On her feet she wore gold or white iridescent sandals with big wedges.

She often stood on the sidewalk in front of their house. What was she doing? Joking with her daughters or telling them where something was – a beach umbrella, a beach chair, or one of their own things they couldn't find.

My own mother didn't like that style of talking

outside the house on the sidewalk. She didn't want to hear other people's goings-on or want them to hear ours. I wondered how my parents kept a house in a neighborhood with neighbors they found to be so low.

The butcher father had a big, overweight midsection underneath his black, floral Hawaiian shirts. His hair was dark black and wavy and he wore it straight back without a part. I had never seen such a hairstyle or entire man.

There were three daughters with old-fashioned names: Blanche, Jeannette, and Florence. At age nineteen, Blanche married a handsome professional baseball player, then she had a baby and sat on the front steps chewing gum while watching the passing scene, which was not much to see. Her two front teeth stuck out, with space between them, and this made her chewing more visible. She could snap her gum in a really loud way and tried to teach the younger girls her technique.

My mother was against these lessons. "It's a vulgar thing to do, snapping gum," she said.

The second of the butcher's daughters, Jeannette, looked like her father, with a large, flat moon face. She was preoccupied with her social life. "There's no social life here," I once heard her tell her father while sitting on her bed and crying about the situation. Her father was smiling. He seemed amused by his daughter's complaint, but he wanted her to be happy. She was

about fourteen at the time. One idea she had was to go away to Coney Island and walk on the boardwalk, maybe to meet some teenage boys.

Jeannette was sometimes called Jeannettie, and Blanche was called Blanchie. All three daughters were intelligent, but their intelligence was misdirected.

Jeannette was sophisticated beyond her early teenage years, but in a lowbrow way. Seeing no future for a social life in the neighborhood, she wanted to go to a low-class town, to a place called Sorrentino's. She convinced my older sister that she should go with her for "pizza and Coke." Then she invited me to go with them. And this is true: I had never heard of pizza or Coke. But we took a bus to the town, to this seedy place, and she ordered this food. It didn't seem like actual food.

Jeannette tried to be friends with my sister but saw that she preferred reading and other intellectual pursuits. The friendship couldn't go far. Walking the boardwalk at Coney Island was not my sister's goal. "What's the point of that?" she must have thought.

In addition to the trip to the pizza restaurant Jeannette also took us to meet an older cousin who, we were told, had gone on a date with Sandy Koufax. This was thought to be a great, great thing. Jeannette took us on a long walk to something called a "bungalow colony" – a clump of tiny shingled houses all stuck together on a piece of green yard. "This is where she

lives,” Jeannette told us. When we were introduced to this young woman, we were surprised. She looked like a regular person.

The youngest sister in the butcher’s family seemed to be the smartest, or was simply an excellent student. She was considered to be somewhat homely, with a bashed-in nose like a boxer’s or a prizefighter’s. I overheard someone call her homely. I thought that she just looked different. She could not be called Florencie and had to be called Florence. She was a champion at the bouncing-ball game, A, My Name Is Alice. She always won. She was tough and an athletic ball bouncer.

I had the idea, a more refined precursor to the misguided makeover, that if I could fix Florence’s hair she would look better. I thought all girls should have ponytails and this would fix everything about their looks. I was wrong. She had the misfortune to have had a home permanent on her short, light-brown hair.

Home permanents were often the reason girls were absent from school for a day, since the results had to be remedied. One of the worst kinds of mistake was just a whole headful of frizz going out in all directions. This came from leaving the chemical-smelling permanent-wave lotion on for too long. The humiliation of this mistake took a toll on whole families. Mothers worried and tried all methods of undoing the damage. Fathers were sad and bewildered. Another kind of mistake was

small, tight curls that didn’t look like curls but bunches of snails or caterpillars. A third case was no waves but just the original straight hair made to stick out everywhere. These styles are all acceptable now, yearned for by men and women, mostly performers in show business, or high-fashion models, or just very young people trying to look as crazy as possible.

I did see a British historian on the program *Secrets of the Manor Houses* and he narrated a few serious segments while his hair seemed to be intentionally set to stand up and stick out all over. He was nattily dressed in a houndstooth tweed jacket and dark-gray shirt with an olive-green bow tie. Nothing wrong with this, but what was he thinking? The British. I wish I understood them.

The most extreme examples of home permanenting involved two classmates I knew in third grade. They were best friends, the way my friend Cynthia and I were best friends: we were the smartest in the class; Joann and Loretta were the opposite. It would be mean to say stupidest, but their grades were the lowest and they were both slow and dim-witted. Joann was said to have what was known as a “glandular condition,” which caused her to be extremely overweight – though maybe not by today’s dismal standards. There were only a few junk foods in homes: cookies, potato chips, and soda. But who knew what went on at Joann’s house?

As for Loretta, she was normal size. Joann had what seemed to be naturally curly light-brown hair, but Loretta had one of those permanents gone wrong. Her own light-brown hair was still straight on the top of her head, but all around, including the bangs, was a ring of frizziness and scalded-looking fuzz. Loretta was one of those girls who came to school, still crying, after a one-day absence for the hair accident. She had a personality that allowed her to tell the other girls that this was the reason for her absence. She even cried as she told the story.

Both Joann and Loretta seemed oblivious to their low grades in every subject, although Joann did look fearful when teachers showed disapproval. Loretta was more resigned and is probably a happy person now. As my mother said from time to time, “Only stupid people can be happy.”

The most fascinating thing about Loretta was that she held her pencil, pen, or crayon between her third and fourth fingers instead of the usual way – between the thumb, index and third fingers. When teachers tried to correct her, Loretta would not be corrected. She just couldn't do it. Since it was a public school, the teachers gave up after a few attempts.

Once when I stopped by Loretta's desk to see what she was drawing or coloring, I noticed that it was a witchlike creature on a broom – it wasn't even Halloween – but the witch's hair was being colored

with a yellow crayon. I asked what it was and she said, “A witch, of course.” I mentioned that witches had black hair and she said, “No, they have blond hair.” I just stood and watched her special way of holding the crayon as she colored in the hair, and then I went back to my desk. I didn't notice any particular artistic talent in the drawing, but I did think it was interesting that she had her own strange ideas and style. She spoke in a high voice with garbled words and didn't swallow frequently enough, so that there was always a lot of saliva in her mouth. Not that she was spitting or drooling, but there was just enough saliva to make her a most memorable specimen – one to describe to my parents and discuss with my closest friend, the very intelligent and critical Cynthia. Discussion of our classmates was a big topic for us. They were so interesting that maybe public school had this one good thing about it.

Cynthia liked to laugh at Joann and Loretta and talk about them in a mean way, but I felt sorry for both of them. They were a sad pair. The saddest case was Bruce – so sad it can't be told yet.

The father of the family of the three girls was always smiling and seemed to be pleased and delighted with his daughters and his family life. In winter they lived in Yonkers, New York, which was pronounced “Yonkis” by all of them except the smart Florence.

Their living room had black wallpaper with very



large orange and yellow flowers with turquoise leaves. I had never seen anything like it. Black wallpaper. There were Chinese bamboo stakes separating the room from the front sunporch.

Although my mother disapproved of the butcher's family and their taste in clothes and home décor, it was the Romanian doctor who was most adamant that his children not be allowed to chew gum and blow bubbles. His children had been told, and then they told us, that the polio virus was in the air, that it could land on the bubble and then be sucked in, chewed, and swallowed.

The mother of the sad boy and the adored girl – the wife of the Romanian doctor – dressed in the style of *I Love Lucy*. The mother had that red hair, which was not quite right because her skin was tan. I believed all hair colors were real except for platinum blond.

When going out at night she'd wear flared skirts, white cotton half-slips with lace and ruffles, and an off-the-shoulder white cotton blouse with a ruffle. The most unusual item worn by the Lucy-style mother was a gold ankle bracelet with two hearts as the centerpiece and little pearls all around the chain. She did have well-shaped ankles and legs – not as long as my mother's famous legs – and I thought this was why this one mother alone, out of all the mothers, wanted to wear an ankle bracelet.

When I asked my mother why she didn't wear an ankle bracelet she showed disapproval without saying,

“They look cheap.” She didn't want her opinion repeated. I could tell this was the reason.

Tap dancing was another thing my mother thought was cheap. When I was five I said I wanted to take tap lessons, and she said, “Tap dancing is cheap.” As for ballet, she was in favor of this, but said, “You may be tall and thin, you may look like a dancer, but you have no talent for it.”

My goal was to master the tapping sound while walking and click around in secret with my friends.

This boy Ricky and one of the older boys had the idea of playing in the sand hills of a nearby construction project across the road. He and the sad boy had named the sand hills and environs Lost Creek. Maybe my sister participated in choosing the name.

My parents checked it out while we were over there acting out an adventure story. My father stood with his hands in his pockets jingling his change, pretending to be quite casual and simply interested in the fun of it. I could tell that his real reason was to be sure no one would be buried by a sand avalanche or fall into the creek. I had heard my mother mention these possibilities.

When huge iron pipes were left lying in the road, a fun activity for these boys was to crawl through them. My mother found out about this, and she strictly forbade the activity for us, saying we could get stuck and lie there for days without being found. No matter

how the boys tried to convince me it was safe, I would never join them in the giant-pipe game.

This boy Ricky always knew about things we didn't know about. He invited us to watch TV at their house on Saturday mornings. "You have to come over and watch this show" was the invitation. We never had a TV at our beach house. "Go out and play," "Read a book," and "Practice the piano" were our things to do.

This boy knew about TV programs and had seen *Mr. I. Magination*, a magic-science program, on channel five, when I thought there was nothing good on channel five. He had a recording of the opening song, "Meet Me, Mr. I. Magination," which was mysteriously somehow like real music. These were the days of channels two, four, five, seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen. Thirteen was all black and white dots, called snow. Five, nine, and eleven had almost nothing at all on the screen. This was accepted as the way things were.

He knew of some horror-zombie programs, too. I was afraid to watch those and tried to leave. He laughed and said, "Don't be scared. It's only TV. It's really great."

In the back of the house was the girls' bedroom with beds covered with chenille spreads. During this era summer houses were sold with bedspreads and towels and dishes and everything else. The girls and their mother had chenille bathrobes, too. Maybe those also came with the house. We would never have such

things. The house had what we called double-decker beds in one of the bedrooms. I had never seen this before. I thought they were just a fun invention, but my mother explained they were for small spaces with many children – nothing desirable. The top, she said, would be scary, the bottom claustrophobic and dangerous.

The mother of this special household was often screaming in a high voice at her own mother, who lived in the same house. This grandmother was tiny and hunched over a bit. Her hair was white and set in the style of finger waves of the 1930s, a style I knew to be one some very old ladies still wore. She was never dressed in day clothes but always in a silk kimono, black with colored flowers. Whatever she was saying – and I couldn't understand because she had a strange speech impediment – it made the mother of the house scream at her, "Leave me alone! You're driving me crazy," and other screaming things.

At their winter house they had something I'd never seen before – a home freezer, and full of junk food too. It was a big white chest that opened from the top and was filled with frozen supermarket food like egg rolls and spare ribs. My mother cooked everything out of actual food.

Then there was Cora. Cora was the housekeeper who helped Ricky's mother run everything. She was a member of the family, telling the sisters and brother

what to do, chatting around and helping out with whatever needed to be done. I never saw anyone in the family tell her what to do. She was thin and delicate, and world-weary in the style of Marlene Dietrich and Anna May Wong in *Shanghai Express*. She was prettier than Diana Ross, Lena Horne, and Josephine Baker. Why was she a housekeeper? Those were those days.

She appeared to like the family. The family liked her. She was amused by their shenanigans. She took it all in. She understood their situation better than a family therapist, but she kept it to herself, with a little smile.

When the surprise baby was born into this family my mother was embarrassed for all of them. The baby's mother was happy and entertained by the whole sequence of events. I heard my mother say it was not a good idea to have more babies after age forty. Not for health reasons, but for the shame of how the baby came to be born. Most things of a reproductive nature were embarrassing to her.

Once, in an emergency, she went around the corner to this family's house to ask for something she needed. I wanted to know what it was and wanted to go with her. She wouldn't tell me, and she didn't want to be accompanied on the trip. That was the era of the "Modess... because" ads. Because what? I always wondered. Because the other product's brand name

was unmentionable. It made everyone cringe. The ad in *Vogue* magazine showed a model in an elegant evening dress – something Grace Kelly would wear. That was it: "Because we can't describe what it is, we pretend it doesn't exist. Pretend it's just this model, this dress." In any case, elegant women all used Tampax.

When we arrived, the mother of the family was pushing a stroller around the back yard with the new baby. The baby wasn't that cute. He was kind of out of it, and who could blame him, born into that household? His older siblings found him an amusement – often laughing at his existence and amused that their parents had a relationship that produced this baby. The baby's mother told my mother that she was so happy she might have another one. "Children like to have young parents," my mother advised her.

My mother seemed shocked by the sight of this baby even though she liked babies. She didn't like older children and teenagers. She didn't like us, because we weren't very young children or babies. I remember her standing back and looking into the stroller at the baby. She was wearing one of her elegant one-piece cotton corseted bathing suits, the kind with a plain little skirt showing her long, beautiful legs. The bathing-suit designer had a crazy-sounding name, Carolyn Schnurer. My mother didn't know that everything she said would stick in my mind the rest of my life.

Her large bust was an embarrassment to my sister

and me, and to all relatives and children we knew. We thought it was something to be ashamed of and we wished our mother were more like Audrey Hepburn. Dolly Parton was still a young, unknown teenager.

My mother was talking to the other mother, her close friend, who was wearing an old, stretched-out, faded black bathing suit – her figure gone forever – apparently not having a moment or the inclination to care about that.

The baby's name was Ronald and he couldn't pronounce it, calling himself Ronnin. This was also a source of entertainment for the siblings, who would ask him to say his name, then they'd laugh when he said it. There was a bit of "He's so dumb" in the entertainment.

Once I realized that other families' houses were not exactly like ours, I was interested in going to their houses as often as possible. One girl's mother prepared a dessert called prune whip. My next-door neighbor at our winter house lived in a house with white and pastel figurines. I wondered what was the point of these figurines.

The one thing my mother did at that time – something that was not in her tradition or character – was to prepare these desserts:

(1) Three graham crackers piled up with applesauce in between and Reddi-wip – canned, aerosol, push-button-sprayed whipped cream – on top. The spraying action was the best part.

(2) One slice of canned sugar-sweetened pineapple with Marshmallow Fluff in the center – a product from a jar, a product still made. I recently saw it in a supermarket – even the label was the same. The sight reminded me of the incredibly sweet taste of the glue-like fluff. "What's this?" we should have asked.

(3) Canned peach halves, one half per dessert, with Reddi-wip in the center where the peach pit had made a circle.

When I think of these desserts I wonder how we lived to grow up.

After I came home from my visits to the other houses, at the dinner table I would describe to my parents and sister what I had seen. For example, in other houses the furniture was like furniture on the few TV shows we watched. Some of it was like the furniture on *I Love Lucy*.

This is when they would laugh – not at the other people's things, just at the idea of the noticing and describing. Those days seem more fun and real than these. Maybe these are terrible times. Except for caller I.D. I believe my life would have been different and free of many mistakes had caller I.D. been invented earlier.

The boy, Ricky, was the one who told me about rock and roll. He said he had a record that he wanted to bring over to our house that very night. He said one side was "Rock Around the Clock" and the other side was "Seventeen." I had no idea what he was talking

about. Seventeen, or 17? I knew about *Seventeen* magazine, but that was all. I was still interested in dolls.

The bad boy, the one with the slingshot, had already tried to inform me about the subject. I knew the boy was bad and I didn't like him or trust him or pay attention to anything he said. I stood back whenever I met him on our little street. He had an evil-eyed look, as if he were always thinking about some depraved thing. Brown eyes close together and a smirk-like smile. Later, as a teenager, he grew to look like Tony Perkins. But it didn't matter or counteract the creepiness of his character and personality.

He was all excited and tried to tell me that there was a whole new kind of music. He had heard a record on a radio show with the great DJ Alan Freed. Since I never listened to the radio – this was before Elvis Presley – I didn't know what a DJ was and assumed anyone named Alan Freed was just a regular ordinary man on the street like a dentist or accountant.

I knew popular music was something to avoid – Patti Page singing “How Much Is That D? in the Window?” There were so many terrible songs, but that one is remembered by most music-loving people as the worst. The false sincerity and bad acting that went along with these songs were part of the awfulness. And later I heard that she might be a Republican conservative too.

Ricky and the sad boy kept their distance from the bad boy. When he was in college, the sad boy – still sad, but also angry, in addition – told me, “Everyone on that block would talk about how you were the most beautiful child, but I never agreed.”

“Well, it's news to me,” I said. “No one mentioned it.”

If they did I assumed it was something said to all children. I thought we were all wonderful compared with adults.

The boy Ricky was a good dancer – he tried to teach me but I thought dancing should be left to dancers. Ricky was always clean and his white oxford shirt was washed with Tide, I could tell. This was before laundry detergent had chemical fragrance that could kill you. My mother and his mother both used Tide.

Both our mothers had their hair cut by Maurice the Great. Ricky's mother had given my mother the tip on this guy. My mother explained that Maurice the Great cut into “natural hair,” then “pushed it into place with his hands.” I looked at her and tried to figure out the method of Maurice the Great. It didn't sound so great. Only his name was great and they'd gotten past that.

It was only when my mother sent her house cleaner to help clean my first apartment that I remembered the effect of rock and roll.

“You still love your music,” she said, looking at a collection of LPs with one from the Band on top.

I asked her what she meant and she said, “You had

that pink radio and you always had it on with rock and roll. After school, before school, all the time. I remember.”

Little Richard was one of my many favorite musicians, even though his appearance was shocking, with his combination of tweezed eyebrows, mascara, and thin mustache. One thing about Paul McCartney, as great as he is – vegetarian and musician and songwriter – is the way his eyebrows look tweezed. I always think of Little Richard when I see Paul’s brows. I’d like to give him this advice: Paul, let your eyebrows be the way they were when you were a Beatle.

During the years before rock and roll changed everything, Ricky’s two sisters told us about Shirley. This happened at the beginning of the summer. They were getting ready to go to summer camp and camp was not a choice for my sister and me at such an early age, or even later. My mother did not believe in camp. She said she didn’t believe in regulated activities and playing. Also hygiene and food were other concerns. Bad things happened to children at sleepaway camp.

We were standing at the top of the beach, near the jetty, and Dorothy said that their housekeeper Cora could not work during the summer unless she brought her little niece, Shirley. “She’s your age,” Dorothy said. “But she’s a real terror. You’ll see.” Then she laughed.

In a state of fear and anxiety since birth, I found this warning to cause an extra burst of the two conditions.

What terror could this little girl do? I imagined it. All kinds of things with noise and tantrums.

Then one day at the end of June I was introduced to Shirley. She looked like a little cloth doll. I always wanted a black doll, never seen on the toy-store shelves with the white dolls.

Shirley had a beautiful, thick scar on her leg. The scar was two inches long and raised higher than the rest of her skin. I told my mother about it and she said, “It’s a keloid. Negro people sometimes get them.” I thought this kind of scar was a desirable thing to have, the way thick eyeglasses, braces on teeth, and plaster casts on broken arms were desirable.

When we played together, I never saw anything terrifying. Maybe her real other life was so wretched that it had caused a state of anger and misery during the rest of the year. But when she saw the beach, she became happy.

She had unusual ideas of what to build in the sand. Different kinds of sand pies and sand cakes I’d never heard of. “This is a mud pie,” she might say. “This one is even muddier, with seaweed and pebbles.” She didn’t know about drip castles, tunnels, bridges, and kingdoms.

Other children had come for short visits to the beach, which my mother called “an ideal spot.” Why did she think this? It was a mystery – she had such a high I.Q. and had lived in Paris before she married my

father, who looked like a taller version of the Duke of Windsor. The house wasn't even on the ocean but on some bay, near a part of the real ocean. When my husband first saw it he said, "This isn't the ocean, it looks like some place where poor black people have to go." To think, he said that and I married him anyway.

My mother meant that there was always a breeze. The water was good for swimming. The beach was beautiful, with a view across the water to the other side. What else? There was a big, green, open field across from our little street – the only thing there was an old abandoned building called an orphan-asylum school. Around the corner from our block was the Italian grocery store with fruit and vegetables and basic bad canned food and cleaning products of the era. The owners knew us all by name, not that they liked us. They seemed suspicious of us. We went there with our mothers, but the most fun of all was to be sent there to buy forgotten items: some fruit, some orange juice – something now known to be really bad for us – the dreaded quart of milk. We were told by my mother not to buy those frozen double ice pops because they were made with bacteria-filled water. Only Fudgsicles were allowed.

Once, an old friend of my parents' came to visit. She was divorced, a shameful condition at that time, and she brought her daughter, Caroline. Caroline had waves and curls of red hair. She had the pure white

skin of a person with red hair – even in those days she had to use extra sun lotion. But her ideas of games to play were more fantasy, or even phantasmagoria, than anything I'd heard of before. They had to do with a bakery and baking sand cakes and pies in pails and decorating them with drip flowers, shells and stars, and strange pointy designs. I tried to be polite and followed her plan.

When this girl and her mother left at the end of the day, I told my mother that I liked Caroline and her red hair and wished she lived on our block. My mother said, "Well, she had a wonderful time. I'm sure her mother would have been happy to leave her for the rest of the summer." That sounded sad to me. I asked why and she explained that because of the divorce, Caroline's mother didn't have many opportunities for them and she had to work and worry about what to do with her child for the summer. I asked why Caroline couldn't stay with us and she said that we had a small house with no extra bedrooms.

I pictured this six-year-old child, Caroline, and her divorced mother going back to their city dwelling in hot Greenwich Village. I saw again that everything good had something sad or bad in it – something to drag you down and couldn't be forgotten.

One day at the end of the summer, Shirley told me she would be leaving and the next weekend was her last time at the beach. At first I was surprised, but

then I remembered something I'd been thinking about all summer:

"There's one thing I always wanted to ask you," I said.

She smiled and said, "What is it?"

"I always wanted to ask you – can I touch your hair?"

I knew "may" was correct because my mother was an English teacher, always correcting that error, but I never wanted to offend Shirley or other children with the correct word. People are still offended by correct grammar.

"Yes," she said. She was still smiling. And I reached over and touched her hair as lightly as I could with only one finger.

My parents and other relatives must have been watching. That was when my uncle snapped a photograph, always famous in our family.

Then, to my surprise, Shirley said, "And can I touch your hair?"

I thought for a second. "Yes," I said. "But why? My hair is normal. Your hair is different."

"No, your hair is different," she said. She was laughing.

I thought about that again for another second. I guessed I understood what she meant. So I said yes and she did.

"That's you in a nutshell," my mother used to say when this photograph was shown. "Look at the hands."

We built cakes and pies in the sand for the rest of the day and we never saw each other again.

If I thought I could find Shirley alive and well, she's the one person I'd try hardest to find. There are other playmates, too. Sometimes we have found each other – usually a big disappointment. And the Toni Doll boy, Edward. What life has he led? And what about Little Richard? When I hear him singing on the radio at night in the organic-produce section of the supermarket I wonder what he might be doing now. I've heard and seen him talk about how he was cheated and exploited by the music business. It must be true. But what is he doing right now is something that just pops into my head.

Maybe Shirley and I could meet for tea and look at the photograph together. It would have to be a copy – we wouldn't want to spill anything on the original. If technology didn't ruin most of life, one of us could have it on an iPad. But that's always a complicated kind of hell. Maybe we could try some other form of playing. What would it be? A string quartet with two other girls, but not Florence or her sister. We could tell each other our life stories. It might not be that much fun. ♦



*Side by...*

## The Collectors (II)

by *Rohinton Mistry*

ONE EVENING, WHILE JEHANGIR sat on the stone steps waiting for Dr Mody's car to arrive, Pesi was organizing a game of naargolio. He divided the boys into two teams, then discovered he was one short. He beckoned to Jehangir, who said he did not want to play. Scowling, Pesi handed the ball to one of the others and walked over to him. He grabbed his collar with both hands, jerking him to his feet. "Arré choosya." he yelled, "want a pasting?" and began dragging him by the collar to where the boys had piled up the seven flat stones for naargolio.

At that instant, Dr Mody's car turned into the compound, and he spied his son in one of those scenes which could provoke despair. But today the despair was swept aside by rage when he saw that Pesi's victim was the gentle and quiet Jehangir Bulsara. He left the car in the middle of the compound with the motor running. Anger glinted in his eyes. He kicked over the pile of seven flat stones as he walked blindly towards Pesi who, having seen his father, had released Jehangir. He had been caught by his father often enough

*...by side*

## Bélyeggyűjtés (2. rész)

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

EGY ESTE – JEHANGIR A LÉPCSŐN ücsörgött Dr Mody autójának megérkeztét várva – Pesi a naargolio elnevezésű játékot szervezte. A fiúkat két csapatra osztotta, de rájött, hogy páratlanul vannak. Szólt Jehangirnak, de az nem akart játszani. Pesi szitkozódva odaadta a labdát az egyik fiúnak és odament Jehangirhoz. Két kézzel megragadta a gallérját és felrángta.

– Arré choosya! – kiáltotta. – Megrakjalak? – és a gallérjánál fogva arrafelé rángatta, ahol a fiúk a hét lapos követ halomba rakták a naargoliohoz.

Dr Mody kocsija ebben a pillanatban kanyarodott be az épületek között, az apa épp azon jelenetek egyikében pillantotta meg a fiát, amelyek őt mélyen elkeserítették. De ma elkeseredettségét felülírta a megbotránkozás, hogy Pesi éppen a szelíd Jehangir Bulsarát molesztálja. A kocsit járó motorral az út közepén hagyta. Düh villant a szemében. Fölrúgta a kőhalmot, ahogy vakon Pesi felé közeledett. Az, amint észrevette az apját, elengedte Jehangirt. Olyan gyakran kapta őt az apja csínytevésen, hogy a fiú tudta,

to know that it was best to stand and wait. Jehangir, meanwhile, tried to keep back the tears.

Dr Mody stopped before his son and slapped him hard, once on each cheek, with the front and back of his right hand. He waited, as if debating whether that was enough, then put his arm around Jehangir and led him to the car.

He drove to his parking spot. By now, Jehangir had control of his tears, and they walked to the steps of C Block. The lift was out of order. They climbed the stairs to the third floor and knocked. He waited with Jehangir.

Jehangir's mother came to the door. "Sahibji, Dr Mody," she said, a short, middle-aged woman, very prim, whose hair was always in a bun. Never without a mathoobanoo, she could do wonderful things with that square of fine white cloth which was tied and knotted to sit like a cap on her head, snugly packeting the bun. In the evenings, after the household chores were done, she removed the mathoobanoo and wore it in a more conventional manner, like a scarf.

"Sahibji," she said, then noticed her son's tear-stained face. 'Arré, Jehangoo, what happened, who made you cry?" Her hand flew automatically to the mathoobanoo, tugging and adjusting it as she did whenever she was concerned or agitated.

To save the boy embarrassment, Dr Mody intervened: "Go, wash your face while I talk to your moth-

ilyenkor a legjobb egy helyben maradni és várni. Jehangir a könnyeivel küszködött.

Dr Mody megállt a fia előtt, lekevert neki két hatalmas pofont, jobbról, balról, jobb keze tenyerével és kézfejjével, és várt. Mintha azon tűnődött volna, hogy vajon ennyi elég-e, aztán átkarolta Jehangirt és az autóhoz vezette.

Mire Dr Mody leparkolt a kijelölt helyen, Jehangir már ura volt a könnyeinek. A C épülethez sétáltak, s mivel a lift nem működött, gyalog mentek föl a harmadikra. Kopogtattak és vártak.

Jehangir anyja nyitott ajtót.

– Sahibji, Dr Mody – mondta. Alacsony, középkorú asszony volt, csinos, rendezett, a haja mindig kontyban. A fején mindig mathoobanoo, csuda dolgokat tudott csinálni azzal a kis finom szövésű kendővel, amely kényelmesen egybefogta a kontyot. Estére, amikor már végzett a ház körüli teendőkkel, kioldotta és egyszerűen sálként viselte.

– Sahibji – mondta, amikor észrevette a könnyek nyomát a fia arcán. – Arré, Jehangoo, mi történt, ki ríkatott meg? – keze automatikusan a mathoobanoo felé mozdult, azon matatott és igazított, mint mindig, ha valami feldúlta az érzelmeit.

Hogy mentesítse a fiút a kellemetlen helyzetben, Dr Mody közbeszólt:

– Menj, mosd meg az arcod, amíg beszélek édesanyáddal.

er.” Jehangir went inside, and Dr Mody told her briefly about what had happened. “Why does he not play with the other boys?” he asked finally.

“Dr Mody, what to say. The boy never wants even to go out. Khoedai salaamat raakhé, wants to sit at home all the time and read story books. Even this little time in the evening he goes because I force him and tell him he will not grow tall without fresh air. Every week he brings new-new story books from school. First, school library would allow only one book per week. But he went to Father Gonzalves who is in charge of library and got special permission for two books. God knows why he gave it.”

“But reading is good, Mrs Bulsara.”

“I know, I know, but a mania like this, all the time?”

“Some boys are outdoor types, some are indoor types. You shouldn’t worry about Jehangir, he is a very good boy. Look at my Pesi, now there is a case for worry,” he said, meaning to reassure her.

“No, no. You mustn’t say that. Be patient, Khoedai is great,” said Mrs Bulsara, consoling him instead. Jehangir returned, his eyes slightly red but dry. While washing his face he had wet a lock of his hair which hung down over his forehead.

“Ah, here comes my indoor champion,” smiled Dr Mody, and patted Jehangir’s shoulder, brushing back the lock of hair. Jehangir did not understand, but grinned anyway; the doctor’s joviality was infectious.

Jehangir otthagytta őket, Dr Mody pedig röviden elmagyarázta, mi történt. – Miért nem játszik a többiekkel? – kérdezte végül.

– Dr Mody, mit mondjak? Gyakran még ki se akar menni. Koedai salaamat raakhé, állandóan itthon akar ülni és mesés történeteket olvas. Esténként is csak azért megy ki erre a kis időre, mert noszogatom, hogy ha nem megy a levegőre, nem fog nagyra nőni. Minden héten újabb és újabb könyveket hoz az iskolából. Először az iskolai könyvtár csak egy könyvet engedélyezett, de beszélt Gonzalves atyával, aki a könyvtárat vezeti és az most egyszerre két könyvet engedélyez neki. Isten tudja, miért.

– De az olvasás jó dolog, Mrs Bulsara.

– Tudom, tudom, de ez már mánia.

– Van olyan gyerek, aki szeret odakint játszani, van aki nem. Ne aggódjon Jehangir miatt, jó gyerek ő. Nézze meg Pesi fiamat, nahát ő aztán ad okot az aggodalomra – mondta, hogy megnyugtassa az asszonyt.

– Nem, nem. Nem szabad így beszélnie. Nyugodjon meg, Khoedai mindenható – mondta Mrs Bulsara a férfit vigasztalva. Jehangir is előkerült, a szemei kissé vörösek, de szárazak. Ahogy arcot mosott, hajának egy tincsét összevizezte, az most a homlokára lógott.

– Ó, itt jön az én házi bajnokom – mosolygott Dr Mody. Vállon veregette a fiút, a haját félresimította homlokából. Jehangir nem értette, de visszamosolygott, a doktor jókedve rá is átragadt. Dr Mody az any-

Dr Mody turned again to the mother. "Send him to my house on Sunday at ten o'clock. We will have a little talk."

After Dr Mody left, Jehangir's mother told him how lucky he was that someone as important and learned as Burjor Uncle was taking an interest in him. Privately, she hoped he would encourage the boy towards a more all-rounded approach to life arid to the things other boys did. And when Sunday came she sent Jehangir off to Dr Mody's promptly at ten.

Dr Mody was taking his bath, and Mrs Mody opened the door. She was a dour-faced woman, spare and lean – the opposite of her husband in appearance and disposition, yet retaining some quality from long ago which suggested that it had not always been so. Jehangir had never crossed her path save when she was exchanging civilities with his mother, while making purchases out by the stairs from the vegetablewalla or fruitwalla.

Not expecting Jehangir's visit, Mrs Mody stood blocking the doorway and said: "Yes?" Meaning, what nuisance now?

Burjor Uncle asked me to come at ten o'clock."

"Asked you to come at ten o'clock? What for?"

"He just said to come at ten o'clock."

Grudgingly, Mrs Mody stepped aside. "Come in then. Sit down there." And she indicated the specific chair she wanted him to occupy, muttering something

jához fordult: – Küldje át hozzánk vasárnap tízkor. Lenne egy kis beszédem vele.

Miután Dr Mody elköszönt, anyja elmagyarázta Jehangirnak, micsoda szerencse, hogy egy ilyen fontos és tanult ember, mint Burjor bácsi érdeklődést mutat iránta. Titokban azt remélte, hogy a doktor majd kiegyensúlyozottabb életvitel felé terelgeti a fiút, amilyen életet más gyerekek élnek, és ahogy érkezett a vasárnap, pontban tízkor átküldte Jehangirt Dr Modyékhoz.

Dr Mody fürdött, így Mrs Mody nyitott ajtót. Morcos arcú asszony volt, kimért és sovány, Dr Mody külsejének és lelkének pont az ellentéte, de őrzött magában valamit, ami jelezte, hogy nem mindig volt ilyen. Jehangir alig találkozott vele azelőtt, talán csak amikor anyjával a zöldségestől kifelé jövet összefutottak az asszonnyal.

Mrs Mody nem számított Jehangir látogatására. Az ajtóban állva kérdezte: – Tessék? – ami alatt azt értette, mi ez már?

– Burjor bácsi meghagyta, hogy jöjjen át tízkor.

– Meghagyta, hogy gyere át tízkor? Minek?

– Csak azt mondta, jöjjen át tízkor.

Mrs Mody kelleetlenül félreállt. – Akkor gyere be. Ott ülj le – mutatott egy székre, magában motyogott valamit a baapról, aki a saját fia helyett idegen gyerekekre szakít időt.

Jehangir leült, minden bizonnyal ez volt a legké-

about a baap who had time for strangers' children but not for his own son.

Jehangir sat in what must have been the most uncomfortable chair in the room. This was his first time inside the Modys' flat, and he looked around with curiosity. But his gaze was quickly restricted to the area of the floor directly in front of him when he realized that he was the object of Mrs Mody's watchfulness.

Minutes ticked by under her vigilant eye. Jehangir was grateful when Dr Mody emerged from the bedroom. Being Sunday, he had eschewed his usual khaki half-pants for loose and comfortable white pyjamas. His sudra hung out over it, and he strode vigorously, feet encased in a huge pair of sapaat. He smiled at Jehangir, who happily noted the crow's-feet appearing at the corners of his eyes. He was ushered into Dr Mody's room, and man and boy both seemed glad to escape the surveillance of the woman.

The chairs were more comfortable in Dr Mody's room. They sat at his desk and Dr Mody opened a drawer to take out a large book.

"This was the first stamp album lever had," said Dr Mody. "It was given to me by my Nusserwanji Uncle when I was your age. All the pages were empty." He began turning them. They were covered with stamps, each a feast of colour and design. He talked as he turned the pages, and Jehangir watched and listened, glancing at the stamps flying past, at Dr Mody's face,

nyelmetlenebb szék az egész szobában. Most először járt itt és kíváncsian nézett körül. Ám tekintete rövidesen a padlóra korlátozódott maga előtt, amint észlelte, hogy Mrs Mody figyeli őt.

Percek teltek el az asszony fürkésző tekintetének súlya alatt, így Jehangir megörült, amikor Dr Mody kilépett a hálószobából. Vasárnap lévén, a hétköznap viselt keki rövidnadrág helyett egy laza és kényelmes pizsama volt rajta. A sudra kívül rálógott és energikusan lépett, lábán egy pár hatalmas sapaat. Jehangir felé hunyorított, aki boldogan vette észre a szarkalábat a szeme sarkában. Dr Mody a szobájába vezette a fiút, és mindketten megkönnyebbültek, hogy megszabadultak az asszony vizsgáló tekintetétől.

Dr Mody szobájában kényelmesebbek voltak a székek. Az íróasztalhoz ültek, Dr Mody kihúzott egy fiókot és egy nagy méretű könyvet vett elő.

– Ez volt az első bélyegalbumom – mondta. – Nussewanji bácsi adta nekem, amikor olyan idős voltam, mint te vagy most. Minden oldala üres volt. – Lapozgatni kezdte, az oldalak most roskadásig voltak bélyeggel, mindegyik önmagában is a színek és minták kavalkádja. Ahogy lapozott, folyamatosan beszélt. Jehangir hallgatott és figyelte, hogy röppenek el szeme előtt a bélyegek. Néha felnézett Dr Mody arcára, aztán újra a bélyegekre.

Dr Mody nem a megszokott jovialitás emelt hangján beszélt, hanem lágyan, halkán, átéléssel. A gyen-

then at the stamps again.

Dr Mody spoke not in his usual booming, jovial tones but softly, in a low voice charged with inspiration. The stamps whizzed by, and his speech was gently underscored by the rustle of the heavily laden pages that seemed to turn of their own volition in the quiet room. (Jehangir would remember this peculiar rustle when one day, older, he'd stand alone in this very room, silent now forever, and turn the pages of Nusserwanji Uncle's album.) Jehangir watched and listened. It was as though a mask had descended over Dr Mody, a faraway look upon his face, and a shining in the eyes which heretofore Jehangir had only seen sad with despair or glinting with anger or just plain and empty, belying his constant drollery. Jehangir watched, and listened to the euphonious voice hinting at wondrous things and promises and dreams.

The album on the desk, able to produce such changes in Dr Mody, now worked its magic through him upon the boy. Jehangir, watching and listening, fascinated, tried to read the names of the countries at the top of the pages as they sped by:

Antigua... Australia... Belgium... Bhutan... Bulgaria... and on through to Malta and Mauritius... Romania and Russia... Togo and Tonga... and a final blur through which he caught Yugoslavia and Zanzibar.

"Can I see it again?" he asked, and Dr Mody handed the album to him.

géden tovaszálló bélyegek, a dúsan telerakott oldalak súrlódása, ahogy szinte maguktól lapozódtak a csön-des szobában, alátámasztották Mr Mody mondanivalóját. (Jehangir visszagondol majd erre a sajátos, súrlódó hangra, amikor egy napon, egy kicsit érettebb fejjel éppen ebben a szobában, amely akkor már örökre csöndes lesz, egyedül fog állni és Nusserwanji bácsi albumát fogja lapozgatni.) Jehangir hallgatott és figyelt. Dr Mody olyannak tűnt, mintha egy álarc ereszkedett volna rá, tekintete messze révedt és szemei csillogtak, amikben Jehangir korábban csak az elkeseredés szomorúságát, a harag villanását vagy csak egyszerűen ürességet vélt felfedezni, most a korábbi állandó mókázások cáfolatául szolgáltak. Jehangir figyelt és hallgatta az euforikus hangokat, amelyek csodálatos dolgokról, álmokról, ígéretekről üzentek.

Az íróasztalon nyugvó album, amely Dr Mody lelkében ilyen változásokat váltott ki, most rajta keresztül a fiúnak is felfedte varázsát. A hallgató, figyelő, elbűvölt Jehangir igyekezett kivenni az országok nevét a tovatűnő oldalak tetején: Antigua... Ausztália... Belgium... Bhután... Bulgária... aztán Málta... Mauritánia... Oroszország, Peru és Románia... Togo és Tonga... és az utolsók között elkapta Uganda és Zanzibár nevét.

– Átlapozhatom még egyszer? – kérdezte. Dr Mody átnyújtotta neki az albumot.

“So what do you think? Do you want to be a collector?”

Jehangir nodded eagerly and Dr Mody laughed. “When Nusserwanji Uncle showed me his collection I felt just like that. I’ll tell your mother what to buy for you to get you started. Bring it here next Sunday, same time.”

And next Sunday Jehangir was ready at nine. But he waited by his door with a Stamp Album For Beginners and a packet of 100 Assorted Stamps – All Countries. Going too early would mean sitting under the baleful eyes of Mrs Mody.

Ten o’clock struck and the clock’s tenth bong was echoed by the Modys’ doorchimes. Mrs Mody was expecting him this time and did not block the doorway. Wordlessly, she beckoned him in. Burjor Uncle was ready, too, and came out almost immediately to rescue him from her arena.

“Let’s see what you’ve got there,” he said when they were in his room. They removed the cellophane wrapper, and while they worked Dr Mody enjoyed himself as much as the boy. His deepest wish appeared to be coming true: he had at last found someone to share his hobby with. He could not have hoped for a liner neophyte than Jehangir. His young recruit was so quick to learn how to identify and sort stamps by countries, learn the different currencies, spot watermarks. Already he was skilfully folding and moistening the

– Nos, mit gondolsz? Akarsz te is bélyeget gyűjteni?

Jehangir mohón bólogatott, Dr Mody elmosolyodott. – Amikor Nussewanji bácsi megmutatta nekem a gyűjteményét, ugyanígy éreztem, ahogy most te. Majd megbeszélem édesanyáddal, miket kéne beszerezni, hogy hozzákezdhes. Jövő vasárnap hozd magaddal.

A következő vasárnap Jehangir már kilenckor elkészült, de az ajtónál várt, hóna alatt egy bélyegalbum kezdő gyűjtők számára, kezében egy 100 bélyeget tartalmazó levél, különböző országokból. Ha túl korán érkezik, Mrs Mody baljóslatú tekintetét kell kiállnia.

Tíz órakor a falióra tizedik kondulására az ajtócsengő hangja felelt. Mrs Mody ezúttal számított az érkezésére, nem állta útját, szó nélkül engedte be. Burjor bácsi is elkészült már és szinte azonnal kimentette a fiút az asszony felségvizeiről.

– Lássuk, mit hoztál – szólt, amikor már a szobájába értek. Lefejtették a celofán fóliát, a mozdulatokat Dr Mody ugyanúgy élvezte mint a fiú. Legtitkosabb vágya vált valóra: végre megoszthatta valakivel a szenvedélyét. Jehangirnál megfelelőbb novíciust nem is remélhetett, Jehangir olyan ügyesnek mutatkozott a bélyegek válogatásában, azonosításában; hamar beletanult a különböző országok pénznemeibe, hogy lehet felismerni a vízjegyeket. Megnyálazott ujjaival nemsokára ugyanolyan ügyesen illesztette helyükre a bélyegek sarkait, mint a tanítója.

little hinges and mounting the stamps as neatly as the teacher.

When it was almost time to leave, Jehangir asked if he could examine again Nusserwanji Uncle's album, the one he had seen last Sunday. But Burjor Uncle led him instead to a cupboard in the corner of the room. "Since you enjoy looking at my stamps, let me show you what I have here." He unlocked its doors.

Each of the cupboard's four shelves was piled with biscuit tins and sweet tins: round, oval, rectangular, square. It puzzled Jehangir: all this bore the unmistakable stamp of the worthless hoardings of senility, and did not seem at all like Burjor Uncle. But Burjor Uncle reached out for a box at random and showed him inside. It was chock-full of stamps! Jehangir's mouth fell open. Then he gaped at the shelves, and Burjor Uncle laughed. "Yes, all these tins are full of stamps. And that big cardboard box at the bottom contains six new albums, all empty."

Jehangir quickly tried to assign a number in his mind to the stamps in the containers of Maghanlal Biscuitwalla and Lokmanji Mithaiwalla, to all of the stamps in the round tins and the oval tins, the square ones and the oblong ones. He failed.

Once again Dr Mody laughed at the boy's wonderment. "A lot of stamps. And they took me a lot of years to collect. Of course, I am lucky I have many contacts in foreign countries. Because of my job, I meet the ex-

Amikor már lassan indulnia kellett, megkérte Dr Modyt, mutassa meg neki újra Nussewanji bácsi albumát, amit a múlt héten átlapoztak. De Burjor bácsi a szoba sarkában álló szekrényhez vezette. – Ha ennyire tetszenek a bélyegeim, hadd mutassak neked itt valamit – azzal kinyitotta a szekrény ajtaját.

A szekrény négy polca roskadásig volt kerek, négyszögletes és ovális kekszes pléhdozozokkal. A látvány gondolkodóba ejtette Jehangirt. A dobozok zsúfoltsága az öregkori szenilitás felhalmozó jegyeit hordta magán és egyáltalán nem illett a Burjor bácsiról kialakult képbe. De Burjor bácsi kinyújtotta a kezét és találmra felnyitott egy dobozt. A doboz tömve volt bélyegekkel. Jehangir szája tátva maradt, a polcokra pillantott, Burjor Bácsi mosolygott.

– Igen, az összes doboz itt mind tele van bélyegekkel. És abban a kartondobozban ott alul hat album van. Mind üres.

Jehangir gondolatban megpróbálta összevetni az albumok számát a különböző formájú, kerek, szögletes, ovális, elnyújtott alakú dobozok valószínűsíthető tartalmával. Nem sikerült. Nem tudta, mennyi bélyeg lehet az édességek dobozaiban.

Dr Mody újra elmosolyodott a fiú megbűvölt arcát látva.

– Rengeteg bélyeg. Sok évi gyűjtőmunka. Persze szerencsés vagyok, sok külföldi kapcsolatom van. A munkám során sok külföldivel találkozom, akik az in-



perts from abroad who are invited by the Indian Government. When tell them about my hobby they send me stamps from their countries. But no time to sort them, so I pack them in boxes. One day, after I retire, I will spend all my time with my stamps.” He paused, and shut the cupboard doors. “So what you have to do now is start making lots of friends, tell them about your hobby. If they also collect, you can exchange duplicates with them. If they don’t, you can still ask them for all the envelopes they may be throwing away with stamps on them. You do something for them, they will do something for you. Your collection will grow depending on how smart you are.”

He hesitated, and opened the cupboard again. Then he changed his mind and shut it – it wasn’t yet time for the Spanish dancing-lady stamp. ♦

*(To be continued)*

diai kormány meghívására jöttek hozzánk. Akik megtudják, hogy a bélyeggyűjtés a szenvedélyem, egy csomó bélyeget küldenek nekem hazulról, nincs is időm kiválogatni őket, ezért csak a dobozokban halmozom fel. Majd ha egyszer nyugdíjba megyek, az időmet a bélyegeimmel fogom tölteni.

Szünetet tartva becsukta a szekrényajtót.

– Szóval mostantól barátokozz sokakkal és áruld el nekik, hogy a bélyeggyűjtés a hobbid. Ha lesz köztük gyűjtő, cserélhetek, ha nincs, akkor elkérheted tőlük a borítékot, amit amúgy a szemétkosárba dobnának bélyegestül. Teszel nekik valami szívességet, és ők is megtesznek neked ennyit. Attól függ, hogy gyarapszik a gyűjteményed, milyen okos vagy.

Egy pillanatnyi töprengés után újra kinyitotta a szekrényt. Aztán meggondolta magát és bezárta: nincs még itt az ideje, hogy megmutassa a spanyol táncosnőt ábrázoló bélyeget. ♦

*(Folytatás a következő számban)*