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A Perfect Start

By accepting one potentiality, we surrender another. By surrendering no potentiality, we lose them all.

—Milton H. Miller, "Time and the Character Disorder"

Starting over was my father's specialty, the central metaphor of his life. There is reason to believe he conceived even of suicide, the ultimate exit, in terms of an entrance, a new beginning. Elaine, his second wife, reports that in the weeks before he killed himself, he asked her: "Do you want to go with me to live on another planet?"

In the years after our barn burned down, in Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania, my father started over with remarkable frequency. It was as if he could not get past the beginning of anything, could not find an adequate point of departure for going on to the rest, the middle, of his life. He tried raising chickens; keeping dairy cows; selling and repairing Hoover vacuum cleaners; peddling air conditioners, hearing aids, and ribbon—all in about four years.

I know what precipitated two of the changes: the chickens succumbed to an epidemic, the dairy operation to my father's depression. It was an afternoon in early spring when he gave up on cows, after returning from a movie with my mother. The couple had taken the jeep into Carbondale to see *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* at the stately Irving Theater. By the time they reached home—after driving nearly twenty miles, partly on unpaved roads—it was late, and my mother was tired. She wanted to go up to the house and start fixing supper, but my father persuaded her to go down to the pasture with him. They walked across the dirt road that ran in front of our house, through the ditch where the creeping myrtle bloomed, past the purplish thistles, golden locusts, and milkweed pods that had split open, revealing tufts of white down. Upon reaching the herd, my father showed my mother a new Holstein calf. "Its nose is like velvet," he said, and urged her to feel it. When my mother declined, he

went to bed for three days, refusing to speak to her, and soon abandoned farming for good.

As significant as this incident seems, it survives only in my mother's oral recollections. Her letters to her parents from that time say little about the onset of disillusionment, the fizzling of hope. What her letters do show is the honeymoon phase of each new job or move—the high expectations and increasingly desperate enthusiasm with which the couple greeted each endeavor. "Our eight chicks average five and a half eggs a day," my mother wrote in 1948. "Not bad, eh? And they're *lovely*. . . . Dick seems more interested and contented than he has since I've known him."

One year and two jobs later, she wrote in a similar vein: "Dick is very interested in his new Hoover job. His supervisor helped him set up a repair shop for the vacuum cleaners in the basement. It's the sort of thing Dick likes to do. Saturday, we went to the Hoover picnic. One man ate a dozen ears of corn. I ate three, and it was all just perfect. The Hoover company seems exceptionally nice."

Always in the background was my father's longstanding dream of being a crooner. When the Pennsylvania coal miners went on strike and Daddy could not sell vacuum cleaners to them, he moved to New York to pursue his singing career while my mother, my sister Ann, and I remained on the farm. My father's cousin Harvey recalls an incident from this period, which he christened the "Farm/Show Biz Days." On a weekend excursion to New York, he and his wife Frances went into the Automat and were amazed to run into my father. Upon hearing about Dick's singing lessons and his search for a place in show business, Harvey and Frances worried about the rest of our family, back on the farm. "We frankly wondered [Harvey wrote me later] how on earth you were making ends meet. It was then I realized how desperately your father wanted that career. Bing Crosby was his idol and I remember Dick's saying from age sixteen that he was going to make it in show business too. It shows a great discrepancy between reality in the Depression era and your dad's dreams."

With my father living in a New York hotel, my mother felt apprehensive on our isolated farm. To keep us company during the summer of 1949, she hired a fourteen-year-old girl, Irene, who lived in a nearby town. Irene would stay with us during the following summer and fall as well, returning to her parents only for those weekends when Daddy was able to come home. Nearly half a century later, Irene remembered my mother's "bubbly personality" and my father's cleverness. "He was neat," she said. "He would use big words with you little-bitty kids on purpose, to expand your vocabulary. And he did trick photography, making these wonderful Christmas cards where it looked like Alex [our

German shepherd] was pulling you all on a sleigh, or where you appeared to be standing on each other's shoulders to put the angel on the tree."

Irene had known our family only after the barn burned down, in a period of financial uncertainty, so I wondered whether she would remember the atmosphere as strained. She said: "I never heard your parents argue, but then I wasn't around the two of them much. I know how excited your mother would get when he was coming home for the weekend; she would make his favorite foods. I had the impression they adored each other. It was like Cinderella to me; they were this young couple with three beautiful children."

By the summer of 1950, there were indeed three children to care for—my sister Laurie having been born in the preceding winter. While my mother was nursing Laurie, Irene would take Ann and me to play in the sandbox my father had built at the side of our house, under the cherry tree. "It was huge," Irene remembered, "like being at the beach; we built all sorts of things there." Daddy had crafted the sandbox out of stone to avert injury from splinters. Years later, in Minnesota, he would make us monkey bars out of an old wooden ladder and cover every inch of them with smooth yellow and blue tape, to prevent our being hurt by slivers of wood. It is strange, I have mused, how reckless my father could be in some circumstances, yet how exquisitely careful when it came to the palms of his children's hands.

In late summer, my father returned to the farm and tried selling air conditioners while making plans to leave the area. "The air conditioning business has been lousy so far," my mother wrote. "It's hot here now, so business should be better this week." Toward the end of the letter, she reverted to her usual sunny voice, but it seems a transparent defense against worry. "I think everything is going to be fine. Everyone has been so lovely to us, and I'm sure we are really going places and everything will be perfect."

Reading over these letters, I feel pity for the young couple who, with no idea what lies ahead, struggle to sustain hope in the face of repeated disappointments. But I also wonder about the meaning of all the fresh starts. Why did my father and mother treat each new beginning as a *tabula rasa*, as if they really could obliterate the imperfect past, return to a state of infinite potential, and start again?

I read once that Miguel de Cervantes, in his youth, tried his luck at writing poetry but failed to win the adulation of either the public or the critics. So painful was the discrepancy between his own estimate of his worth and his contemporaries' reaction that Cervantes decided to seek more immediate honor on the field of battle. Only after his achievements

as a soldier caused the public to confirm his sense of specialness did Cervantes return, in his late fifties, to the métier for which he had been destined, and achieve immortality with *Don Quixote*.

I think that my father, too, with an I.Q. of 147, needed to believe in his own greatness and to have that greatness reflected back to him. In the face of this need, virtually any job was guaranteed to produce frustrations, slights that to my father were unbearable narcissistic wounds. Another occupation, one he had not yet tried, always beckoned like an alluring *fata morgana*, trumping the compromised present.

So in 1950, we moved from the farm to Ridgewood, New Jersey, where my parents bought a home they could not afford, borrowing from my mother's parents for the down payment. I went back to Ridgewood once, in the summer of 1999, and even in the oppressive heat, I was saddened by the loveliness of the place we had left behind. We had lived in a red brick house on a block shaded with maples and oaks, across the street from the elementary school, two doors down from the Episcopal church. For me, as a child, it was a small good place where I could begin to recover from the negative effects of our farm's isolation.

For my father too, our sojourn in New Jersey had a positive impact. He worked across the river in New York City, selling hearing aids while singing in talent shows at night. (Once, he won a big competition, and later I received his prize, a painted cedar chest, for a Christmas present.) Then after a period of worry and wait, he landed a job selling ribbon for Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company. "We are going to a 3M dance tonight," my mother wrote. "And Dick invited the men he's working with for Sunday dinner. So we're off!"

Sounds familiar. But this job with 3M was not to be a mere blip on the screen of my father's employment record, like all the others. For while employed as a ribbon salesman, working in his garage on his own time, my father invented the Magic Bow Machine. In semblance, it was a Rube Goldberg-like contraption, moderately hazardous, with four exposed razor blades for notching the ribbon. But despite its crude appearance, the invention succeeded. It was the first machine to make those bows with all the loops that adorn Christmas and birthday presents, and by all accounts, it was terribly important. Decades later, in a booth in a shabby motel restaurant, I interviewed retired 3M employees who had worked in the Ribbon Division. "Just how significant was the Magic Bow Machine?" I asked in a skeptical tone. One man laughed a long time before replying: "The Bow Machine enabled every sales clerk in every department store throughout the country to make the Magic Bow."

And so my father underwent a change of fortune. Promoted from salesman to "Idea Man," he was transferred to 3M headquarters in St.

Paul—his first change of jobs within a company. After moving, he bought two new suits and enjoyed the status of being, for a time, the fair-haired boy of the Executive Vice President. Harvey still recalls this exciting period in his cousin's life:

"Dick had a car with some of his company's products and a prototype of his new invention, the Magic Bow-Tyer, in the back seat. . . . The company had been trying for twenty-five years to invent that machine, and of course Dick had done it in his garage workshop, and this led the company to boot him upstairs to St. Paul. My impression at the time was: 'Maybe he's on the way now to something really big with 3M and will have a lifetime career with them.'"

But that was not to be. When I was eleven and my father thirty-six, my father moved our family again—this time to California. I am sure it occurred to no one at the time that we were leaving a state ranked thirty-first in suicide for a state ranked second. Not that I really attribute my father's death to the place, but that may be as good an explanation as any. He had reached the region that beat poet Lew Welch called "the final cliffs of all man's wanderings," there in Santa Barbara, on the edge of the continent, a few blocks from the bluffs above Leadbetter Beach. From those final cliffs, my father could no longer resort to his old remedy of starting over—at least not by moving westward.

To be sure, he did make one more half-hearted attempt at that old cure. It happened in 1965, a few years before he died, when he was confined for five months in a mental hospital. Toward the end of his stay, a psychiatrist asked what he planned to do following his release. My father's reply was brief and characteristic: "Go to New York."

But he did not go. And I think it was a loss of faith in such new beginnings that caused him to shoot himself in the temple one April morning. His last letter to me, written at age forty-seven—two weeks before his suicide—did not sound like my father. He had always been an eccentric enthusiast, full of plans and projects, and this letter, with its balanced cadences, seemed too normal, passive, and resigned. Perhaps, like Don Quixote, who died upon giving up his madness, my father surrendered his illusions only to find nothing worthy of taking their place.

If my father had stayed at 3M for many years, having found his calling as an inventor, then doubtless I would hold a different view of the false starts. Rather than reflections of pathology, I would interpret them along the lines of Erik Erikson's "moratorium," a period of delayed commitment in which a person experiments with numerous roles until finding the one uniquely suited to him. After all, Freud, Darwin, and other luminar-

ies did not come upon their true vocations until their late twenties or early thirties.

And I, too, found my calling late, after starting over several times. Most dramatically, I gave up political science, the field in which I had earned a doctorate, to go to law school. I even destroyed all my journals then, sitting cross-legged on the floor of my sweltering New York studio, tearing up the typed white sheets, the records I had kept so carefully—descriptions of my first love affair and dialogues with my first therapist about my father's death—records I would give anything to see again. Sometimes I fantasize that the journals will miraculously turn up, only to realize that it cannot be: I rent the pages with my own hands and threw them in the trash, not in a spirit of violent repudiation, but heedlessly, as my father had thrown away his jobs and our lovely homes. *How could I do it?* I wonder now. The only answer is that I misunderstood my life, underestimating the continuity of character, the persistence of passions, as my parents had done before me. In our separate ways, we—my father, my mother, and I—had looped back repeatedly, like the Magic Bow, in search of a perfect start.