

MEMORIES OF COKEVILLE

A New One-Character Play

By Tom Attea

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CHARACTERS

PHIL JOSEPH --- our narrator; an easy-going, witty man in his mid-fifties, who has just a touch of genuine, ineradicable folksiness.

PLACE

Cokeville; a small town in the Appalachians of Southwestern Pennsylvania, near the West Virginia border, where coal was once the foundation of the economy and not much has come along to replace it.

TIME

Mostly the 1950s, with a few years on either side.

ACT I

A stage with a wonderful selection of props to help illustrate the tales about to unfold. In fact, the play might be thought of as a talk with props; it has the overall feeling of a man rummaging through his attic and coming up with things that help him make his points.

The way he works with the props -- deciding which one to go to next, spotting one with alacrity, or having difficulty finding something -- becomes part of the tension that holds the evening together.

AT RISE, SPOT picks up PHIL JOSEPH, as HE ENTERS in an easygoing way.

PHIL

Hi, there. I'm Phil Joseph, and I'd like to tell you about the small town in Southwestern Pennsylvania where I grew up. It's called Cokeville, and it's in the Appalachian Mountains, near the West Virginia border. It lies in a river valley, though which passes a narrow, green, and thoroughly polluted section of the Youghiogheny River. There's one main intersection, and the asphalt road that comes down the hill toward it has a long stretch of dips and ripples that bounce the descending driver up and down quite dramatically. I was once told that the cause is, the ground underneath is hollow from the coal mining that went on at an earlier time. Naturally, the expedient answer is to pour more asphalt into the dips and ripples. Since that approach only increases the weight on the weak ground beneath, the bumpy unevenness returns in no time. Sort of reminds you of street maintenance in New York City, doesn't it?

Now, most of the stories I'm going to tell you are autobiographical, for the simple reason that if I wasn't there to experience them, I couldn't relate them. That qualification reminds me of the perennial philosopher's question about whether something exists if you're not there to perceive it. I suggest that the way to arrive at the answer it is to leave the room and telephone somebody who's in it and ask if the furniture is still there. But, of course, such an answer only makes the question of perception get more complicated. And tonight we have a very uncomplicated evening ahead of us. I'm going to tell you stories, and, if they amuse or touch you, we'll all have a wonderful time.

Now, to move along with Cokeville. I don't want to take away from the wonderful human value it has to its dedicated inhabitants or from its very selective charms. But I'm here to tell the truth, despite the complications. So I'd say that if you walk around the streets during the day, you may get a feeling similar to one you'd get being surrounded by a pile of old bricks, just this side of an

ancient ruin; and, if you drive along one of the higher roads at night, you can feel that you're looking down at a shattered mirror scattered about the floor of the valley. It's with tales of this town that I hope to delight you for the rest of the evening. I'll be sharing the best stories I can remember, and while I believe it's within my power to amuse and sadden you greatly, I'm enormously thankful I don't have to interest you in moving there.

The most surprising thing is probably not any of the stories you'll hear but the fact that I somehow got into a situation where I can tell them to you. I hope that claim doesn't sound boastful, but, if it does, perhaps you'll forgive me as the evening goes on and your knowledge increases.

Truth is, the only two people I know who ever got out of Cokeville and made it to New York for keeps are my brother, Frank, and me -- an event that, statistically, now seems astonishing, especially since we arrived separately and with different goals, his to be a musician and mine to be a writer. Sometimes we try to explain it to ourselves by saying that most people are born, but apparently we were launched.

There is, however, one person my hometown is known for -- at least, it was when I was young. He was the All-American football player named Johnny Lujack. He had left by the time I was growing up, but some of his family was still there, and I remember when Lujack's second-hand clothing store opened up.

I guess I also ought to mention that I was once told that the national editor of a very major New York newspaper came from there. The only corroborating evidence I have is an experience that took me by surprise. One very cold winter over a decade ago, there was an article on the front page, headed "Misery in the Coal Fields." And the dateline was none other than Cokeville. Now, since I don't know how anybody who wasn't born there could have featured my town in the story, I'm willing to suspect a coincidence of origins.

Before I go any further, I'd like to mention something about the cast, of which I appear to be the only member. If I could, I'd bring out all the characters I intend to tell you about and let them act out the incidents. But, as you know, the actors have a union and they deserve to be paid fairly. But, the unfortunate result is, we can't afford to hire enough of them. So I had to make a choice. I could bring on a few characters and, in the course of a story built around some of the incidents, have them mention other ones. But I don't think that would do justice to many of the stories. And, if I added a narrator to help the characters out, we might have something like Our Town. So I decided to try something different ...

(walks toward props, as LIGHTS come up on them)

... just come out and tell you the stories with the help of some props and ask you to help out with your imaginations. So let me invite you into what is sort of the attic of my mind as far as Cokeville goes, and we'll get going. I think we'll be OK, because I've told a lot of the stories over the years, and people seem to like them. Here's hoping you do, too.

(picks up inexpensive acoustic guitar)

Now, don't jump to conclusions and think this is going to turn into a corny evening with the one guy in your class who played the guitar. I had my mother buy me one when I was about fourteen years old, and I never played it outside of my own bedroom. But a few years later it would serve as the instrument through which my brother would first explore his musical talent. All I did was fool around with it a bit. I remember it came with a small instruction manual that was illustrated with notes about the size of Ping-Pong balls. I sat on the edge of my bed, figuring out advanced musical concepts like where the "g" string is. Much later in life I added to my own musical education -- enough, I hope, to help us move along.

(strums guitar; sings)

Memories of Cokeville,
 Memories of Cokeville,
 Come along while I tell
 Memories of the town
 Where I spent my whole youth.

Memories of Cokeville,
 Memories of Cokeville,
 Oh, they can cast a spell,
 Memories of my town,
 When you just tell the truth,
 When you just tell the truth!

(puts down guitar and goes to gray stone slab, which is
 propped up by faded red bricks)

Well, we might as well begin with an explanation of the place where I spent a great part of my childhood -- this stone slab. It functioned as the great meeting place of everybody who was anybody on the East Side, which was my section of town. My friends and I would sit on it, two to five across, and make sense of the world, while we watched our part of it drive by. It was actually located in front of the shoemaker's shop, but we thought we were hanging out at the place just to my left, which was Oldmeyer's Dairy Bar. I spent many a half-day and a few whole ones, just sitting here, talkin' with my friends about the most usual subject that occupies a young man's mind -- girls and which ones might be making what guys feel lucky. Of course, we also had more somber concerns, like watching the 3 o'clock shift drive by, heading for Anchor Hocking -- the glass factory that constituted the only viable big business left in town. It employed about three thousand people, and, if it left, as it sometimes threatened to, the town would've just about had to close up entirely. But once Cokeville was actually kind of prosperous, and that curious fact brings me to the real start of my story.

(looks over props)

Hmm, now let me see. I know it's here somewhere.

(sees textbook)

Ah, here it is.

(picks it up)

This is a Pennsylvania history book, and I learned in grade school that my town was actually in it -- with quite an impressive mention, too. How is that possible? It had to do with the most

interesting structural artifact of Cokeville. Despite its size -- at its height, a little over 13,000 people; by my time, down to a bit over 9,000 -- there was something highly unusual about the train yard, which sat beside the "Yough," as we called the ever-fragrant Youghiogheny River. There were thirteen or so railroad tracks side-by-side. Now, what was such a little town doing with so many railroad tracks, when you can hardly find that many side-by-side at Grand Central Station? I learned the answer during my course in Pennsylvania History.

(opens book)

Right in the textbook, it said that Cokeville was at one time, and I quote: "the coke capital of the world." That's right. It said it right there -- in what I then considered the inarguable evidence of black-and-white type.

(closes book)

And now we have the explanation, including the reason that all but one or two of the tracks were rusty. The part my town played in the building of America was to semi-burn coal into coke and ship it off to the surging steel ovens in Pittsburgh. That bit of history brings us to another remnant of those bustling days. Lost in the wooded hills that ring the town are rows and rows of beehive-shaped, white-tiled coke ovens, which reappear each fall like rows of decayed teeth and remind the inhabitants that at its height, Cokeville was a thriving, though, undoubtedly very smoky, metropolis. Then disaster struck. Modern man, in his ceaseless quest to perfect even the smallest aspect of our lives, decided the time had come for the steel ovens to be changed over from burning all that sulphurous coke to functioning on clean, natural gas.

Poor Cokeville. From then on, everything went downhill. When I was growing up, only an occasional B & O passenger or freight train -- that stands for the Baltimore & Ohio line -- went by. And about the only active trace of the "coke is king" days was the scarring left by the mining of coal to feed the coke ovens. The casual observer who drove along the roads just outside of town would see numerous fields of barren red and gray earth, out of which rose plumes of smoke from the underground fires that still burned.

And no bright new industry came to call. So things just became worse and worse. In fact, the county where Cokeville is located got to be and still is listed, at least according to my uncle Don, who lives there, as the poorest county in the nation. Since I think of my childhood, though culturally deprived, as rich in simple, nourishing experiences, I've always found such a fact hard to believe. Yet we were just thirty-six miles from the West Virginia border. And perched on some of the surrounding hills, we did have what seems to have become the usual symbol of Appalachian poverty -- unpainted houses with poorly clothed, dirty-faced kids and sad-eyed adults looking out from the porches.

And now that you've got an indication of how hopeless things were, you're in a good position to appreciate the wonder of the people I grew up among. People who primarily just went to work, or looked for it, and could find pleasure in such things as a Sunday drive. Or gathering by the hundreds at the town park on a summer night each week to watch a free movie. We'd sit on the rows of green wooden benches and be enthralled by black-and-white films that would be projected on the large white wall that passed for a screen. The most usual ones were serials, like

"Green Arrow," who, in case you don't remember, was sort of an up-dated Robin Hood. During the winter, the benches would be removed and part of the area would be flooded, to create a shallow pond for ice-skating. And each January we'd gather at the park for the big bonfire, which consisted of igniting a mountain of discarded Christmas trees, collected from the sidewalks. When the people went home, some of them had to walk through the cemetery on the hill above the park, and there were nights when my thoughtful friends and I would hide behind tombstones, so we could leap out and scare them. Those are very early memories.

(goes to some 50s memorabilia)

Most of the stories I'm going to tell you happened during the 1950s, the decade in which the biggest news seemed to be, not the victory of Dwight Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson, in a campaign that featured "I Like Ike" buttons, or the Korean War, or even the advent of Rock & Roll, although it grew out of an aspect of the last-mentioned topic.

(picks up magazine)

It was the earth-shattering fact that Elvis was drafted. That's right. America's semi-reputable heart-throb was being taken out of circulation by the army. He fought the draft for a while, but finally there he was, right in Newsweek magazine, in an army uniform and, most astonishing of all, with a crewcut. And now all the parents and educators who believed he was a bad influence on their hopelessly innocent children could breathe a sigh of relief. Certainly, they thought, the army would knock the hip action out of that long-haired boy.

(puts down magazine)

Before I go on with the 50s, I'd like you to know how I arrived there myself. I entered the world in February of 1941, about three in the morning, at the Cokeville Hospital. My mother always said I came right out, so apparently I was eager to get started on my passage through life. Yes, sir, you check in; you walk around a bit; and then you check out. And, most astonishing of all, just walking around a bit turns out to be the most important experience.

(picks up an old box camera)

The earliest event I don't remember is running out the back door of our old 3-story white wooden house as my diaper fell down; somebody snapped a photograph of me standing there in that situation and, I confess, I didn't seem at all embarrassed.

(goes to sled)

The first event I do remember is breaking my nose. It's a generous size, and I suppose the problem is it generally arrives at places a split second before the rest of me. During my reckless childhood, I actually broke it three or four times, but I only remember two of them. One time I was running in the living room when I tripped and banged it on the wooden leg of a well-stuffed blue chair. The other time ...

(lies on sled)

... I was sledding down a steep hill one night, nose way out front, when, at the bottom of the hill, I ran into another sled. I bled, I cried, and the straight nose of my childhood pictures was only a faint memory until, years later, I was able to regain it through the miracle of having it expertly re-broken. Of course, the biggest event of the 40s was World War II. I only have one clear memory of it.

(takes some round red and blue cardboard ration money out of his pocket)

The ration money we had to buy food. I'd see the red and blue paper disks on the wooden dining-room table that I was just tall enough to peer across.

There was one other big event of the forties for me. The arrival of our first television set.

(points to old wooden radio)

Until then, all we had to listen to was a classic wooden table radio -- you know, the kind that was round on top, flat on the bottom, with fancy woodwork to hold the speaker covers. We'd gather around it for the evening news, which almost always seemed to be accompanied by a generous supply of static. I remember the day the TV arrived.

(points to vintage TV)

My dad, who was originally against the idea of having one, on the grounds that it was a stupid idea for a variety of reasons, finally gave in and bought one. I was waiting when it was delivered. It was a Dumont in a big mahogany cabinet with doors. Open them and there it was -- a 12-inch black-and-white screen with corners that almost made it seem round. The set was placed in a corner of the living room and, once the antenna on the roof was hooked up, my mother turned it on. I didn't have any idea, as I sat there watching my first Tom Mix, Gene Autry, and Hopalong Cassidy movies that I was part of the only generation that would live through the change from pretty much local communications to mass communications. We weren't baby boomers, but the seldom-mentioned war babies.

There are two other events I'd like to relate before I move on to the 50s. I was what my mother called an ornery child -- at times, Peck's Bad Boy or the black sheep of the family. My orneriness consisted of doing some of the most innocent things, as well as some of the worst. Let's start with something innocent, so you don't think too badly of me right away. It's a piece of misbehavior that became one of my mother's favorite stories about me. I was walking to school one day when I came upon a construction site and couldn't tear myself away. I stood there all morning, gazing at the workmen and the yellow machinery, digging up the street. I was only in the first grade, so the school began to wonder where I might be and called my home to find out. My mother took the walk to school, searching for me. When she found me, she exclaimed a phrase that I seem to have evoked from her on a pretty regular basis, which is "I was worried to death." Then there was the difficulty that arose when she took me to mass for the first time. When she got up to go to communion, I got up and walked right behind her. My presence beside her at the communion rail kind of surprised her, and she had to indicate as discreetly as possible that I was too young to participate.

So much for innocent wrongdoing. As we move into the early 50s, I have to tell you that I became ornery in ways that are much more regrettable. For example, we used to have a woman who slept in and helped my mother take care of us and the house. Her name was Pat, and she made something like three to five dollars a day. Sorry as I felt for her humble station in life, she had more money than I did. Sometimes I'd sneak into her room during the day, snap open her worn red-leather purse and take anywhere from one to three dollars. When I felt guilty, I'd give her a break and slip into my dad's room while he was taking a shower. He always used to keep his cash in his pants pockets in a roll or two. I'd take two, three, or even five dollars with my

heart pounding. Naturally, Pat always missed her money, and sometimes my dad noticed the shortage, too. Since my sister was too good to suspect and my brother was too young, I was automatically the guilty party. And the chase was on.

(takes up old razor strap)

I'd take off, with my father hot on my heels. One day he chased me under the bed, swatting his razor strap at me. Another time, he chased me around the kitchen table, waving his shoe. I bolted out of the screen door and headed up the block. He stayed in hot pursuit and halfway up the block hurled the shoe at me. Another time I was so afraid of punishment that I slept outside in a pile of yellow, razor-thin bricks. They were in the backyard, because my dad had decided to have our white wooden house remodeled by having those slender excuses for brick applied to the outside. Finally, about midnight, my mother rolled open a kitchen window and promised that, if I came in right then, I wouldn't be punished. I consented, and somehow my dad restrained himself.

What, you may wonder, did I do with all that money? Sometimes I went to a movie. It used to cost 15 cents to get in, 10 cents for a bag of popcorn, and 10 more cents for a carbonated beverage, which we called pop. But we only had two movie houses in town -- the Orpheum and the Soisson. So I couldn't spend all my money there. With the rest, I went shopping. Once I bought a shiny but cheap tin fishing reel. Another time I bought a BB gun -- a Daisy Ryder with a Winchester action.

(picks up BB rifle)

I went home on the narrow path behind some of the business buildings that were on the way and shot at everything that looked interesting from cans to birds.

(takes up a BB pistol)

Another time, I bought a BB pistol. It wasn't as powerful, so I asked my brother if he'd run up and down the street for me while I shot at him from the porch. Frank was kind enough to oblige me. Most of the BB's seemed to bounce off, but one got him in the neck and stung quite a lot. To my great disappointment, he decided to end his career as a moving target.

Now, let me tell you about a couple of times I almost killed myself. The first one came about right after I went to see my first Tarzan movie. Coincidentally, a new coat of tar was being applied to the roof of our house. When I came home, I decided it would be fun to look like an African native.

(picks up can of tar and a roofing brush)

I pried open a can of the tar, took off all my clothes, and applying it with the roofing brush, painted myself black from head to toe. Now, anyone who knows that a great deal of human breathing takes place through the skin knows that I could've smothered. Thankfully, my mother walked out the back door and saw me. She screamed and called my dad. He rushed home and, for the rest of the day and late into the evening, he wiped off the tar with turpentine and any other solvent he or my mother could think of. At least, all the tar came off. Now, for the stuff that didn't.

(points to left side of forehead above eye)

If you were closer, you could see the small gray-black marks under my skin on this side of my

forehead. They serve as the lifelong reminder of my coal-dust origins. I'll tell you how I got them.

(gets on a vintage 20-inch bike)

My dad bought me a 20-inch bike. When he came home from work, I rode up to him and expressed my gratitude. He seemed very gratified. But soon I almost rode it to my death. I was following a friend of mine from school to his house. I liked him, and I liked to play with his red cocker spaniel so much that later in life I bought a blond one. He thought he'd have some fun with me and decided to run as fast as he could. I pedalled after him. He headed down a steep hill that I had never been down. There was only a narrow footpath, but I went right after him. Problem is, at the bottom, there was about a five-foot drop, straight into a black-cinder lot near the railroad tracks. When I got to the brink, my bike shot right off, the front wheel dipped, and I was thrown over the handle bars. I landed in the cinders, face first and knocked out. Apparently, my friend was so far ahead that he didn't even know something went wrong.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up on a couch in the small house near the lot. It was owned by some very poor people who had been kind enough to bring me in, call the police, and try to clean me off a bit. Their kindness is, I guess, one reason I've never been able to make up my mind about people based on their economic standing. When I awoke, a local policeman was towering above me, shaking his head from side to side. He drove me home in the police car. My mother was horrified at the sight of me. She called my dad, who hurried right home once again. And he spent hours gently cleaning out the cuts and scrapes on my face with cotton and alcohol. He managed to get almost all of the black coal and ash out, except those few indelible reminders that I pointed out to you.

Before I go on to larger concerns, I'd like to elaborate a little further about my often disreputable conduct. Some summer nights I'd talk my parents into letting me sleep outside. We had a little porch with its own columns that was perched on the roof of the main porch. I felt safe sleeping there and pretty confident that I could climb down the columns of the big porch without falling and killing myself. At the appointed time, my best friend, Davey, would show up down below, whisper as loudly as he dared, and we'd head off into the night for a good time.

One of our favorite activities had to do with a car that was parked a couple of blocks away. It was a convertible that belonged to a candy salesman. All we had to do to get at the goodies was to carve a little slit in the roof. We'd reach in and make off with enough candy to make us abominably sick. One night, we made off with even more than candy.

The strange adventure began when we saw a big, brown envelope lying on the back seat. We grabbed it, along with a plentiful supply of the usual candy, and went to the playground to indulge and investigate. When we opened the envelope, which was quite well-rounded with its contents, we discovered that it was filled with hundreds of wonderfully odd balloons. Each one was long and white and had a red tip with little flexible spikes sticking out of it. We began to blow them up and tie them on the swings and the sliding board. In fact, we blew them up and tied them all over the neighborhood. The next day when we saw an older friend, named Paul, we

showed him the three or four we had left and told him how much fun we had had with the rest. He almost passed out, and exclaimed, "You assholes! Don't you know what they are?" Then he said two words Davey and I had never heard before, and I, frankly, have never heard since then. He called them French ticklers. And he went on to lament, "They're worth five dollars each. Think how much money you could've sold them for!" But we realized that it was now daylight and too late to go around and reclaim them.

Now, that you know the kinds of things we were capable of on regular nights, I'd like to tell you what we did on Halloween. Oh, sure, we'd go to the cemetery at night and jump out at people who passed by. But we were also much more imaginative. One delightfully dangerous activity began with toilet paper.

(holds up roll; unrolls some)

After it was dark, we'd string it across the road between two telephone poles until we had created a solid white wall. Then we'd duck behind a nearby hedge and wait for a car to come along. The sudden sight of it had a shocking effect on drivers. Most would slam on the brakes and screech to a halt, but a few would speed right through it.

We had another activity that was even worse; in fact, it was so dreadful I hesitate to relate it. But I feel duty bound to proceed. It was our triple trap.

(holds up old-fashioned milk bottle)

To set it up, anybody who felt he could manage the donation would pee in a milk bottle.

(takes up paper bag)

And whoever thought the time was right would go off with a brown paper bag and poop in it. We'd tie the bottle to someone's doorknob with a string and put it on the bannister of the porch. We'd also use the bag to rub some of the donation on the doorknob. Next, we'd put the bag on the porch in front of the door -- and we'd light it on fire. Then we'd ring the bell and run for a hiding place that we could watch from. Our unsuspecting victim would come to the door, see the fire, and tear the door open. The bottle would fly off the bannister toward him with a splash. Undaunted, he'd step on the flaming bag and get the contents all over his foot. Then, cursing, he'd turn to go back inside and grab the doorknob, which we had generously prepared. Oh, what agony we inflicted. And we laughed so hard we were lucky we didn't give our location away. I can only ask why a child must learn to be good as slowly as I did?

No wonder, when my father would reflect on the worst aspects of my conduct, he used to say, "Phil, I'm going to throw you in the river one day when it's nice and muddy, so no one can fish you out." As I grew older, he occasionally even threatened to send me to reform school. I gave him plenty of reasons. Once, I even gave the law a pretty good reason.

It all began about two years after I became an altar boy. It was then that I became an active member of what might be called the altar-boy gang. The alarming result marked the culmination -- and, thankfully, the conclusion -- of my years as a thief. My mother was such a devoted Catholic that I used to say the pope should fly in to confess to her. She'd drag my dad to mass every Sunday, but he never lost his ability to doze off after a few minutes. I guess he had to deal

with the hard edge of necessity so much that he couldn't take the promises of religion as seriously as she wanted him to. She had high hopes for me, too, and encouraged me to become an altar boy. Now, being one required a great deal of sacrifice on my part. I was always a late sleeper, and when I was scheduled to assist at seven-thirty mass, I had to be out of bed by six-forty-five, at the latest. I can't tell you how many wake-up shouts she had to give me to make sure I was on my feet not too much later than that. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who felt the depth of that sacrifice. The fact is, about ten of us did, and sort of one by one we decided that we deserved something for it. Somehow, we all figured out just what that was.

(picks up straw collection basket)

We began to hit the collection basket. Now, how did we manage to do that? After each Sunday mass, we were obliged to go to the communion rail, pick it up, and transport it to the room on the other side of the altar, where the priest was removing his robes and getting ready to head back to the parish house. The passage provided a brief opportunity for us to remove a few of the envelopes and slip them into a pocket beneath our pure-white cassocks. I'd go home, heart pounding, lock myself in the bathroom, tear open the two or three envelopes I'd pilfered, pocket my three-to-five-dollar take, and flush away the evidence.

Things went along smoothly for a few months. Then greed was our undoing. One day Wilbur, a not particularly bright member of the gang, slipped into the little Hungarian Catholic church in another neighborhood, where he had gone just the week before for the same purpose -- to pry open the black-metal change box on the rack in the vestibule that held various religious publications that were on sale for a donation. The priest at that church -- who was young, husky, and vigorous -- had apparently decided not to be robbed again. He was waiting behind a wall and, the moment Wilbur went to work on the box, he leaped out and grabbed him.

The picnic was over for us all. When Wilbur found himself at the police station, he revealed the identity of the whole gang. Naturally, the two priests at our own church were immediately informed of the situation -- and suddenly realized why their tally of donations was somewhat in disagreement with that insisted on by many members of the congregation. Justice came swiftly. We were all suspended from being altar boys ever again, and one evening we found ourselves, with our mortified parents sitting behind us, facing a judge at city hall. The room was filled with the fear that we would all be sent off to reform school. The judge was stern at first, but apparently he felt that so many altar boys deserved at least one break. He decided to let us off with probation and a warning about where we'd be headed if any of us ever got caught committing another serious crime. We never forgave Wilbur for doing what we called "squealing on us," but the disaster did have one undeniable saving grace. None of us would ever again have to get up early enough to serve mass at seven-thirty.

Before I leave this subject, I'd like to address a question that I know may be on some of your minds. How did I, as a young boy being brought up Catholic, think such an offense would affect my immortal soul and my chance of earning eternal life? Well, I knew way before then that I never stood a chance. I felt that my journey to perdition began exactly when I reached the age of seven, which is the time that the Catholic church has ordained that a child reaches the age of

reason. From then on, you can be held accountable for all your sins. Being very well acquainted with how many kinds of sins there are -- from cursing and stealing to thinking too normally about pretty girls -- I had decided before the age of eight that I was doomed to hell forever. That's right. I had even lost the hope of a getting off with a long, hot stay in purgatory. Since I had been baptized, I couldn't even slip off into limbo, which, in case you're not acquainted with it, is the place the church fathers decided, in their infinite mercy, that unbaptized children go to forever if they die before attaining the age of reason. Why, you may ask, didn't I simply make sure to confess all my sins, say a few prayers of penance, and be forgiven? I'm afraid I felt my list of offenses was so long I didn't have the courage to confess them all. I was afraid the priest, upon hearing me go on and on, would burst out of his compartment in the confessional, tear my door open, and drag me out as a hopeless sinner for all to see.

Just think how heavy my burden was. As a parochial-school student, I was supposed to go to 8 o'clock mass every morning. Could I really tell the priest I had slipped in five minutes late almost every morning? Did I dare tell him I used curse words in talking with my friends at the rate of about one every five seconds? Worse yet, as I got older, I felt even more hopeless about my chances for salvation. For instance, when I reached puberty, could I confess how delightfully often I locked the bathroom door and had some fun with myself? Worst of all, how could I tell him that hardly a waking hour passed when I didn't have what were known as impure thoughts about girls? I'm afraid the rules were beyond my capacity to conform, and it never occurred to me that maybe the rules were set up so that a weak human might well fall short and have to depend on the church to make things right. In those days I lived in simple-minded terror, until one day I realized that, if God was taking any interest in my little life but was at least as nice and understanding as I was, I might not have as much to worry about as I had thought. I mean, if I wouldn't punish me forever for such things, how could He? Or, for that matter, how could She? Or They? Or whoever or whatever the creator of life might turn out to be.

But it took me a long time to arrive at such conclusions. I hadn't even gotten there by the time I entered college. I went as a freshman to a Jesuit school about eighty miles from my hometown, in Wheeling, West Virginia. There was one young priest there who had a reputation for being exceptionally forgiving, and he let it be known that he'd be willing to hear any student's confession. I decided the time had come to restart my life with a clean slate. So I remembered as many sins as I could and went in and told him every one of them. To my surprise, he let me off the hook with a few prayers. I left the confessional feeling that, as soon as I said them, I'd be a new person. Now, if I died suddenly, I'd have at least a fair chance of going straight up to heaven. Those were days of innocence, before the first spacecraft got above the clouds, and, like many of our hopeful ancestors, it never occurred to me that I could see right through them every night. Anyway, that's the thing about the Catholic church. It can prepare you to die. Learning how to live, however, is left pretty much up to you. Unfortunately, I must report that I soon returned to my status as a hopeless sinner. Thankfully, a few years later I came to believe that my most important obligations are to this life, which has certainly never had an excessive number of people taking care of it.

Now, you may ask, how is it possible that the person standing before you, who has always been - - at least, in my own opinion, a serious-minded and sensitive soul -- who knew, for example, that he wanted to be a writer from the age of fourteen, how could he conduct his childhood in such a regrettable manner? I will not hesitate to go to the excuse closet and pull out the most convincing one I can find there. And presenting it brings us beyond me to a larger consideration of the town.

There was a certain attitude among the people of Cokeville that grew out of the seldom-mentioned fact that most of them had not gone to college and most of their children had no hope of going, either. In fact, there were, unless you were in some small business for yourself, only two basic career choices. Get a job at the glass factory or, if you were good at the sport, earn a football scholarship. Before I get into the local mania for football, let me elaborate a bit on what I knew of careers at the glass factory.

(picks up a vintage Coca-Cola bottle)

If you got good grades and had some talent, you might be able to land an apprenticeship in the design department. A tall, intelligent friend of mine went for an interview and got such a job. He told me he would have to spend the first year learning how to draw a Coca-Cola bottle. Then he'd be able to move on to other things. On the other hand, if you liked the outdoors, you could ask for a job loading trucks. Out of this frightfully circumscribed choice of careers grew despair, anger, and my excuse. If you merely hoped to go to college someday, most of the other kids regarded you with a little awe and let you get by. But, if you went so far as to read a book, they beat you up.

Now, I always wanted to feel that I was part of the group that considered themselves regular guys. So, despite the fact that my mother had been a librarian and French teacher and would become a librarian again after my brother and I were off to college, I found myself attracted to activities that had absolutely nothing to do with intellectual achievement.

There was, in fact, in the whole town only one kid who liked to read. His name Kenny, and, oh, the pain that was inflicted on that boy. He went to the public school, so, despite the fact that he lived just two houses down the street from me, I didn't have much to do with him and can honestly say I never participated in his torment, but I observed it. His bedroom was on the second floor, facing our porch, and he could often be seen in the lighted window, sitting at his desk, reading. Once in a while, some kids would spot him up there. They'd giggle, pick up some pebbles, and, just to drive the poor soul to distraction, they'd start to toss them at the window one at a time. But the worst thing that happened to him was told to me by a friend of mine who also went to public school. One day when Kenny was walking in the hallway between classes, a kid went up to him and slapped him on the back and asked him how he was doing. In the process, he stuffed the end of an unrolled condom in Kenny's belt. And there went Kenny, walking down the hall to a growing howl of snickers and laughter, until he suspected something might be wrong. He reached back, felt the problem, and fled in shame.

I never wanted something like that to happen to me. But there was one day when I lived in terror

that it might. My mother wanted me to take piano lessons. I knew that agreeing to would violate our unspoken code of dedication to underachievement. But I was finally reckless enough to consent to go for one. The lessons were given in the red-brick residence of the Benedictine nuns next to my school. When no one else was in sight, I slipped up to the door, knocked, and was admitted. Soon I was on the piano bench, with a nun beside me, trying to show me a few basics and perk up my interest. But I'm afraid that studying the piano would have to wait until many years after I was out of Cokeville. At that time, I just felt out of place and fearful. Yet things would soon change. Just a few years later, my brother was able to take guitar lessons without any complications. But back to my predicament. I remember slinking along the buildings on my way home, hoping no one would spot me and ask where I'd been. I knew I'd get beaten up. Many years later, when I finally did get around to studying the piano, I began the way only a writer would. I went to a music store and bought every book I could find on playing one. As a result, I developed into a musician I used to describe as someone who had the brain of Bernstein and the fingers of Frankenstein. Some time later, I made up for my past and took lessons from four different piano teachers.

I'm going to move on to the mid-50s now and, for the time being, I'm going to skip over the event that, when I was eleven years old, destroyed my family as I knew it. I'll tell you about that disaster later.

Now, it's time for another big change I lived through. In the 40s and the early fifties, swing music and jazz were about all you heard on the radio, if you turned it on anymore at all. Television had taken people away from it to the extent that there was talk about the death of radio. A lot of people actually thought television would replace it. Today, at least with young people, it appears that radio has almost replaced television. What renewed radio? The same thing that attracts people to it today. Music -- and something new to listen to. Specifically, it was the advent of rock & roll. I was in high school from 1954 to 1958, which is exactly the period when the change occurred.

(picks up 45-rpm record)

Recognize this? If you're my vintage, you do. It's the nifty little device that spread the news. The 45-rpm record. Suddenly, out of this little sucker ...

(holds up more vintage 45-rpm records)

... roared Bill Haley and the Comets with "Rock Around the Clock"; Chuck Berry with songs like "Maybelline" and "Roll Over, Beethoven"; Little Richard screaming ditties like "Tutti Frutti."

And there were groups like The Platters with such songs as "My Prayer" and "The Magic Touch."

Then came every nun's nightmare: Elvis, swinging his hips and belting out hard-driving songs like "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock," and "Blue Suede Shoes" and cooing ballads like "Love Me Tender."

Hold it. I just got the feeling that I'm hosting a rock & roll revival. I am by no means endorsing the quality of the music, especially the lyrics. My only excuse for going on a bit is that when I drove my family's car or went to what we called record hops, those are the kinds of songs we listened to and danced to. I didn't understand then that I was, for better or worse, part of the only

generation that would experience the whole history of rock & roll from its beginnings up to the present. Today, my favorite music is vocal music of any kind, partly because I can only write lyrics for music that has them. And the wonderful thing about popular music is that it can express widely felt sentiments to millions of people; in fact, the lyrics, humble as they may be, have turned out to be the popular poetry, and sometimes the philosophy, of a mass-communications society.

There was another popular aspect of the 50s that affected me.

(pulls down front of hair and makes curl at forehead)

I mean, I really did have long, greasy hair with a curl in the front. And I thought I looked very cool. I achieved the look with what was called Wild Root Cream Oil. Girls seemed to like it, but I must report that the nuns did not approve. They suggested that I get it cut but I ignored their pleas. Then one day the principal called me to her office and expelled me. That's right. I was expelled for having long hair, and she told me I couldn't come back until I had it cut. For my mother's sake, I consented to have it trimmed. But during the summer I let it grow again. And during my first trip to Atlantic city, I had a boardwalk artist do a charcoal drawing of me with that curl right there in the middle, and I think I actually still have it somewhere. I'll tell you a little more about my youthful adventures at the Jersey Shore later. Don't worry. They occurred way before casino gambling arrived, at a time when the big things were still salt-water taffy and the diving horse at the pier.

Let me move on to another great event of my youth.

(holds up a vintage steering wheel, preferably white plastic)

The day my father bought our first family car. He didn't buy it for my humble use. I was only going on eleven years old. He bought it because my sister had just turned sixteen and was now old enough to drive. And my father and mother did everything they could to make my sister feel she was having a full life. No doubt about it. She was the A-student, in fact, the Valedictorian of her class, the head cheerleader, and the family favorite. I was the black sheep, and my brother was still too young to reveal his colors. Now, the car was something the younger members of the audience probably never heard of. A Kaiser, made by the now-defunct Kaiser-Fraser company. My dad, who prided himself on always looking ahead, bought it because it was the first car in history that didn't have fenders. It was kind of sleek, in its green dragon-like way, and my dad had been convinced by the dealer that it would hold its value longer because it was, he said, the car of the future. Who knew that it would cease to exist? Anyway, there it was, parked at our curb, the hottest-looking car on the block. It was supposed to be fast, but, when we went for Sunday drives, a steep hill could slow it down so much you could get out and run ahead of it.

My dad liked it so much he decided to take driving lessons, but my mother refused to teach him, on the grounds that he didn't have the patience to wait for traffic lights to change. So my uncle, Willy, who owned a pool room and would later become a state representative, volunteered. My dad soon progressed so well that Willy decided to let him go on the highway. That's how he killed the cow. It seems that, as they drove over a hill, they came upon a slow-moving tractor.

My dad swerved to miss it. Being a novice behind the wheel, he lost control. The car started to swerve from side to side. My uncle couldn't do anything because he was being tossed all over the place. Finally, the car crashed through the barbed wire fence along the side of the road, hurtled through the field, and smacked into a cow. The misadventure convinced my dad to give up driving. The car could be repaired, but, unfortunately, not the cow.

Five years later, when I reached driving age, I talked my parents into buying what was, at the time, considered a hot car -- a new Pontiac.

(holds up more modern-looking steering wheel)

It was baby blue, and I even persuaded them to let me add things that, at the time, were considered really stylish -- spinner hubcaps, fender skirts, and even a continental wheel, to which I affixed, in silver letters, my first name and my year of graduation. And once I had my hands on that dream car, I spent most of my sixteenth year riding around in it with my friend, Davey. Day after day and night after night we rode through and around the town and then on to the three nearby towns, looking for girls. It was the repressed 50s, so obliging ones were, to understate the case, scarce. Yet on we rode, hoping to come across something exciting to do, and since nothing exciting usually happened in the entire area, all we could do it keep on riding. The most interesting thing is, most of the other kids thought we were the ones who were having an exciting life.

There was another kid in my class who talked his parents into a similar car. It was a black-and-white Ford, continental and all. But he was not able to preserve its thrilling beauty very long. He was dating a girl who worked at the Dairy Queen. One day, when he was leaving, he backed up with a spin of the tires to impress her and slammed the rear end into a telephone pole that was in the parking lot.

Besides just riding around, I eventually got in on what a lot of other kids in the area did for excitement. I began to drag race. In fact, I got so much into the sport that I even sorted through the mechanics at the car dealership until I found one -- his name was Albert -- who took a particular interest in tuning up the car to its maximum pitch of possibilities. When I entered my senior year, things got even more exciting. Pontiac became the first American car to introduce fuel-injection, and rumor was it made cars faster than ever. And a white two-door that was equipped with this amazing new system showed up on the floor of the dealership. In order to persuade my dad to trade the blue one in on it, I told him how much fuel-injection improved gas mileage. No more would a single carburetor just dump the gasoline onto the eight cylinders. Now, efficient separate jets would parcel it out to each cylinder. I don't know if he really believed the story, but he let me have my way.

And, after leaving a few competitors far behind, I acquired the reputation of having the fastest car around. Every time somebody in the area got his hands on a car he thought was fast, he and his friends would come looking for me, and they could often find me parked in front of a hamburger joint called Murphy's. It was that blessed time before fast-food chains took over the highways, and Murphy's was so popular the owner had even built a cement-block dance hall in the big field

behind the sandwich shop. I'd be sitting out front with Davey when someone appropriately cocky would pull up beside me, roar his engine, and challenge me to a race. Naturally, I accepted. We'd drive to a long, straight section of the highway, come to a stop side by side, and then take off as fast as we could. That Pontiac was so powerful I couldn't floor the gas pedal right away, or the car would just sit there with the tires spinning and smoking. I had to put it down about three-quarters of the way till the car began to move forward and then floor it. Whoever got to a certain point first won. The racing wasn't as dangerous as it sounds because when the cars got to the spot we had agreed on as the finish line they usually weren't going more than ninety miles an hour. However, once in a while we long-distance raced the twenty-two miles to a nearby town that was thankfully almost all four-lane highway. Then the cars could get to speeds well up over a hundred. One mistake and you knew you'd be in big trouble. But excitement is what we wanted and that was one of the main kinds that was available.

Nothing could deter us, either. Once a car went around a bend and hit a tree. In those days, there was no such thing as a collapsible steering rod, and the driver was impaled on the bar of solid steel. Another time I arrived at an accident where a carful of kids had flown off the road. When I saw some reddish, shiny stuff scattered around, I asked a trooper what it was. He said, "Brains." I felt sick for a while, but the racing went on. Some nights after a dance, we'd gather at a large lot at the foot of an abandoned quarry. We'd agree who would race and the two cars would pull out onto the highway. After a while, the state police began to arrive. We'd see the lights on top of their car and speed out of both ends of the lot at the same time. The first few occasions, the troopers didn't know who to go after. Soon, though, they began to arrive with two cars. And we went looking for another spot.

Then something happened that made me the slow driver I am today. One afternoon, just to keep the engine loose, I was hurtling down a four-lane highway with the speedometer close to the top speed of 120 miles an hour, when I saw a friend of mine with his girlfriend pull out of a side road on my right in his old gray car. All I had time to do was sort of flick the steering wheel to the left and then to the right again. I managed to shoot past them. But the thought of what I might've done will never leave me. By that time, my family had already suffered the loss that destroyed it. So I had even more reason to slow down.

Now, I'd like to turn to the great savior of Cokeville.

(takes up a football)

Football -- which constituted the only way most of the kids had a chance of getting to college. It was the game played the way only sons and grandsons of miners can play it in a life and death struggle for college scholarships. So great was the town's love of the sport that, despite all the poverty, we had a handsome cement-bowl stadium. That's right -- a real cement bowl, with bleachers and even a press box. The stadium was, in fact, held in such esteem that during my entire childhood only one prank occurred at its expense. One day the alarming news spread throughout the town that somebody had stolen the PA system. Why would anybody want to do such a thing? Worse yet, how could the football season continue if the games couldn't be announced? A wide and desperate search was launched for the culprit. He was caught when he

tried to sell it. And who did this fantastically stupid desperado turn out to be? Just an average public-school student who many years later would actually join the police force.

But back to the glory of the stadium. In the center of it all was a carefully manicured playing field, surrounded by a black-cinder running track. On that green field, under the lights, was decided the fate of every player whose parents couldn't afford to send him off to college. But our players were confident. These were big, tough boys who, year after year, attracted college scouts from far and wide. And it was not uncommon for the team to scholarship down through the third string. That's right. Some years the whole first string would earn scholarships, the whole second string, and even part of the third string. In fact, in my senior year -- I say that loosely, because I'm talking about the public-school team -- the star fullback received 57 scholarship offers.

How is that possible? All you had to do is see these rough-and-ready sons and grandsons of coal miners play. They would run out onto the field and, at the kickoff, they'd almost wiggle an index finger at the visiting team, daring them to come their way. Let me describe some of the players for you. The fullback I mentioned was totally fearless, incredibly fast, and hard as a rock. He could run straight through the line and keep on going with any number of the opposing team affixed to his body. Another square-shaped player had a truly unique way of tackling. Instead of reaching out with his arms, he'd run toward the ball carrier and, when he was six or so feet away, he'd leap at him, shape himself into a ball in mid-flight, and smash into him. The technique was amazing to behold and devastating in effect, except he occasionally missed his target and, if the object of his plunge through the air happened to be running along the sidelines, he'd go flying right past him and crash onto the black-cinder track. He might even skid as far as the base of the grandstand and slam into it. Nothing to worry about, though. He'd get right back up, dust himself off, and re-enter the game. Then there was a player who was a short but amazingly fast halfback. When he got the ball, if he didn't see a hole to go through, he'd start to run in the wrong direction, weaving from side to side, looking for an opening. The members of the other team would run after him. More and more would join the chase. Soon the opposing team would find itself chasing after him in a long line. And he'd speed off toward the goal line. One night I saw him zigzag backwards at least fifty yards. And, just when you were sure he'd get trapped back there, he saw his opening and shot all the way back to score a touchdown. Naturally, he got a lot of scholarship offers. He accepted one, but soon he was back in town and his career was over. He had injured one of his knees.

And now that you've heard the best about sports in my town, I'd like to tell you about some of the worst. I'm referring to my own misguided attempts to become a sports star. As you hear them, you'll realize how slowly I became convinced that I should be a writer. Let's begin with football.

(picks up a football again)

So great was the devotion of Cokeville to the sport that playing in the stadium under the lights in full uniform began in the sixth grade, with the Booster League. There were four teams, one from each part of town -- East Side, West Side, South Side, and North Side. I played for the East Side. Two events convinced me that football was not my game. I was skinny and not especially

tall, but I was made a guard. During a game one night, someone elbowed me and four of my teeth almost went clear through my lower lip. Blood was everywhere. The manager of the team, who was nicknamed Lard and who was known as the fattest kid in town, came out, helped me up and walked me off the field. He laid me down on the bench on my back and, looming above me, asked how I was doing. Despite the gauze I held to the gash, the bleeding kept up. As a way to stop it, Lard began to joke around by saying he was going to sit on my face. There I was, lying there, thinking I might bleed to death, and now I had to worry that his elephantine body -- rumor was that he weighed 350 pounds -- was about to lower itself onto me. Why, I asked myself, have I gotten myself into this situation? Thankfully, he remained upright.

Now, for the second event that convinced me that I didn't have a big future in football. I used to keep all the plays in my helmet, although I have no idea when I planned to refer to them. They were on white paper, drawn with blue lines. I had cut up each page into separate plays and put the stack under the elastic bands inside my helmet. After a kickoff, I was running down the field when someone threw a low block at me. I flew into the air, turned a somersault, hit the ground, and kept rolling. Upon impact, my helmet flew off and all of my plays flew out onto the field. Fear seized me. What if the opposing team got a glimpse of them? I struggled to my feet and began to collect them. Unfortunately, the wind was blowing and my plays were being carried all over the place. So there I was, dashing around under the lights, with my helmet under my arm, gathering up my plays and stuffing them back into it. At that moment, I had a cosmic vision that told me football was not my game.

From then on I satisfied my interest in the sport by going to the high-school games. The majority of kids cheered while they drank Coca-Cola and Pepsi. But some prepared themselves for a game by imbibing large amounts of beer. I had a friend who particularly enjoyed that pregame activity. He was a lively soul who drove a red jeep and dreamed of becoming a truck driver. One night he asked if I'd like to go along with him and a couple of friends. We bought a few six packs of beer and parked the car on a back road. I didn't usually drink beer, but that night I enjoyed five bottles. I never made it to the game. Instead, I found myself standing in the parking lot of a sandwich shop, leaning against the phone booth, and, feeling sicker than I'd ever felt before, I returned my beer to the earth. I swore to myself I'd never get that drunk again. And, while I've learned to enjoy wine at dinner, somehow I haven't.

(picks up a pitcher's mit and a ball)

Next, I decided to try baseball. Like many small towns across America, we had a Little League, and, once again, each section of town had a team. I thought about what position I wanted to play. I decided I didn't want to go out for the outfield, because I didn't want to catch any ball that had flown through the air clear from home plate. Inexplicable daring, I decided to go out for pitcher, despite the fact that I might find myself in the way of a line drive and that prior experience seemed to indicate I had no talent for the position. Now, I've learned over the years that the world will pretty much believe what you tell them about yourself, until you give them a reason to doubt you. I was about to give the coach an inarguable reason. There I was, on the mound, and there stood the coach, a short, hefty fellow with fan-size ears, stepping up to the plate. "Come on, Phil," he said, "pitch it in here." I knew the time to demonstrate my prowess

had come. I quickly worked up my confidence, wound up as skillfully as I could, and hurled the ball in the direction of the catcher's mit. To my horror the undisciplined thing headed straight for the coach. He tried to dance his way out of its path but it smacked him right in the elbow. He let out a shriek and leaped all over the place. The truth presented itself to me with the heavy weight of certainty. I had beamed the coach on my first pitch. I dropped my shoulders, unable to say even a word, and then just walked off the mound and headed for the outfield. I slipped through the break in the red-slat fence that marked the boundary of the field and went on home, knowing my career in baseball was over.

(takes up a basketball)

I had better luck at basketball. In fact, it took me to my freshman year in college to realize it was time for me to give up the sport and devote myself to becoming the person I felt I should be. I used to play basketball for hours a day on the asphalt court of the local playground, and I actually became quite a good shot. Why were I and many of my classmates attracted to the game? Later in life I began to suspect that putting the ball in the hoop was the Catholic substitute for sex. Be that as it may, I could put the ball in there with amazing accuracy. The trouble was, I didn't have a coach to teach me I'd have to get the ball down the court to take a shot. As a result, I hardly spent any time learning how to move the ball along. Dribbling and passing were activities I reserved for actual games.

Later, I also realized that my body has a built-in shortcoming. It isn't the fact that the whole thing is too short for basketball. I'm close to six-foot tall, and in those days that meant I was at least tall enough to be a guard. The problem is more subtle: the top of my body is long and my legs are relatively short. So, try as I did, I couldn't keep up with the players whose bodies were constructed around the opposite disproportion.

Somehow, though, I managed to play enough minutes on the high-school team to earn a sweater with two stripes on the sleeve, one for my junior year and one for my senior year. Feeling I might even be close enough to earn one for my sophomore year, I appealed to the principal for a recount and was allowed to order a sweater befitting a true star -- one with three stripes. I was very proud of that sweater; unfortunately, my first wife didn't know its value and, one day when I noticed that it was missing, she confessed that she had given it to the Goodwill. Despite the time I had on the court, the most I ever scored in a real game was, I think, eleven points. For some reason I had, even when we managed to get the ball down the court, what you might call fear of shooting. I was afraid to miss, so I kept passing the ball off, waiting for one of my teammate's to take a shot. Once, though, I did manage to get my picture in the local newspaper. There I was on the sports page, coming down with a rebound and looking as deceptively professional as you can imagine. Nevertheless, the coach didn't think as much of me as I thought he should. I finally got back at him during my last game, when the seniors played the juniors. Somehow, I put my doubts aside and took a shot every chance I got. I even did a big selection of my tricky layups. And I actually scored thirty-six points. My team, the seniors, won, and I was the high-scoring player of the game. The coach was madder than ever at me and asked after the game in the locker room, "Why couldn't you do that all year?" I flirted briefly with the idea of blaming him for not helping the team become better ball handlers, but I settled for giving him the kind of

smile only a person who feels unappreciated can manage right after he has just distinguished himself. I have two lasting reminders of my days as a would-be basketball star.

(points to ridges just below his eyebrows)

Nice, long scars above each eye. I got them both the same way -- standing under the basket looking up when taller guys were coming down with rebounds, swinging their elbows. It happened once at practice, and I was taken to the doctor across the street who stitched up the split. I'm pleased to report that the next time it happened was much more rewarding. It was during a game. Suddenly, my blood was everywhere, and I could hear the cheerleaders on the sidelines and the girls in the bleachers sighing and shrieking. And I could still hear their distress as I was led off the floor to the locker room, where gauze and bandages were applied. I never did get stitches in that side, so the scar there is a bit wider. But during the bus ride home the girls were awfully compassionate.

Despite the two injuries and deep suspicions about my own excellence, I went out for the basketball team in my first year of college. But I only played during the first year. When I'd come home from practice at about seven in the evening, my roommate would be sitting up in bed, relaxing, with all his homework done. And I hadn't even started mine yet. So, after a freshman year spent primarily on the bench, I finally decided to put sports behind me.

(picks up golf ball)

Before I leave the subject entirely, however, I'd like to tell you about the time I almost swallowed a golf ball. It began with wanting to go swimming.

We could go out to the beach at the river, which was made up of mostly brown and yellow boulders with an infrequent patch of sand; the best thing that it had to recommend it is that it was upriver from the town, which refreshed it with numerous pipes that poured forth the most visible kind of pollution. If we didn't want to bathe there, we could venture about seven miles out of town to the large public swimming pool. It cost 25 cents to get in. These were the days before filtration, so the water was green and you couldn't see the bottom. If the pool wasn't cleaned for a while, the bottom would get slippery and downright scummy. Ducks and swans swam in the lake next to it, and the water flowed from there to the pool. I guess chlorine saved our lives. The deepest part was 12 feet, and I could surface dive to the bottom. There was a lot of pressure that deep.

These were also the days before insurance companies frightened the owners of pools into removing diving boards and, as often as not, removing the lifeguards, too. You know the signs you see these days, even at some of the fanciest resorts: "No lifeguard on duty. Swim at your own risk." Now, I learned to jump feet first off the low diving board and ventured a few leaps off the high one. A couple of times I even worked up the courage to dive off the high one head first. But my neck or throat always seemed to suffer from the impact. I decided people who could hit the water from that height had, besides more courage than I did, heads that were much harder.

Now, where do a golf ball and my mouth attempt to occupy the same space at the same time? To

get to the pool, we could ride our bikes along the narrow highway, ask one of our parents to drive us, or we could hitchhike. One day, when we hitched a ride back, I was sitting in the back seat, relaxing, as we drove past the local golf course. The girl in the front seat had her elbow out the window. The first hole was right along the road. Someone teed off, and the ball headed right for the car -- and it smacked into the elbow of the girl who was sitting in front of me. We pulled to a stop and I saw that her elbow had instantly swelled up with a bump almost the size of a baseball. I felt truly sorry for her, but if her elbow had not been stuck out the window in front of my face, I might be standing before you with a golf ball between my eyes.

Now, that sports are behind us, I'd like to turn to a subject that provided me with fantasies far in excess of my achievements. As you might have guessed, I'm referring to girls -- not, for the most part, the giggling, semi-obliging delights young men hope to encounter, but a type entirely different. Catholic girls, especially the ones who grew up with the collateral reinforcement of the restrained 50s. For example, I used to say, "Do you know how you can tell a boy who dates Catholic girls?"

(holds out hand with fingers overlapping)

"Crushed fingers." Proof that there are few parts of the human body that can be pressed together tighter than the legs of such a girl. Now, the kids in the public school managed to produce an occasional rumor of sexual delight and even an infrequent pregnancy, which, for some reason, was always accompanied by the remorseful decision, as if it were some sort of obligatory penance, to quit school and get married. But among the parochial school students, sex was merely the momentary passage of satan through a young man's undisciplined mind. No wonder it was about all we talked about. Of course, we didn't know anything about sharing physical intimacy or being downright grateful that a girl might find you attractive enough to do something delightful with you. No, sir -- refinement was beyond us and the concept of mutual delight, another world entirely. What we talked about was getting it. And, if by chance the rumor broke out that someone succeeded, the girl who poured forth her generosity went immediately from being seen as a virtual angel to being scorned as a irredeemable, but tempting, slut. That such twisted development was viewed as the healthy norm was, I now understand, the only real sin.

The specifics of my sexual development are much more exciting. My first acquaintance with women came about through my sister. When I was about ten, I started to notice how cute her teenage girlfriends were. And one day when she and a girlfriend saw me in a pair of shorts, they decided, to my surprise, to call me pin-up legs. Apparently, they thought I had attractive legs. Now, it had not yet occurred to me that a man might be attractive to a woman, and it would take me decades to understand that a man was the best thing that could happen to a beautiful woman, the poor soul. I would, in fact, soon be so interested in girls' legs that I would become oblivious to the fact that I had a pair myself, although not in the same class as the infinitely obliging women who populated my dreams.

By the time she and her friends paid me that curious compliment, I knew pretty much what a guy is supposed to do with a girl. But I had not yet attained the level of physical development that permitted me to do anything about it. Then a couple of years later, a friend or two mentioned

that they had reached the age when they were ready for women. One day, in a fit of determination, I locked myself in the bathroom and applied myself until I, too, attained the age of readiness.

(takes bottle and demonstrates)

Soon, it seemed that everybody my age had attained, at least, the age of interest. One sure sign was that the girls began to give parties, where we played thrilling games like spin the bottle. I don't know how many of you remember, but that sexually spicy gamble consisted of putting a soft-drink bottle on the floor with people of the opposite sex gathered around it. When your turn came, you'd spin it. Whoever the bottle pointed to was the person you got to go into a dark room with for a whole minute. Once in there, the goal was to get in as much so-called "necking" and "feeling" as possible. I remember some pretty torrid but fleeting moments.

The sexiest memory I have of those days happened on the steps behind the home of one of the prettiest girls in my class. A few of us were gathered there, talking. I was standing, and she was sitting. She happened to lean forward and her white blouse fell a little forward. Stretching my neck just a mite, I enjoyed a momentary glimpse of one of her breasts. There it was, the unfreckled territory I had come to long for as a man's paradise. And that brings up one unfair advantage women have over men. Being cradled there is our first warm, reassuring experience. We enjoy it for a while and then we're hurled away into the cold, demanding world. No wonder we spend most of our lives trying to get back there again. And no wonder I almost leaped with delight.

Admittedly, my situation was desperate. Years passed before anything more significant happened. Even when I began to spend my most interesting moments cruising around in the blue Pontiac, I had not yet experienced sexual delight. Thankfully, my luck finally changed. One night at a dance in the cement-block hall behind Murphy's, I was told, by a giggling friend of hers, that a certain very attractive girl who went to public school liked me. I knew who she was. In fact, I had noticed her more than once. She had long blond hair and that night she was wearing white shorts. Though she was a little heavy, she had a very pretty face and a body that was conspicuously ready. Best of all, the rumor was that she did it. We began to date. One night we parked and, after enough foreplay to give me an idea of what eternal life might be like, she finally agreed and we did do it. I actually managed to have my first orgasm with a woman.

But I also learned that even a young man has only a certain amount of male hormone available at any given time and that, if he happens to stay in a state of readiness for a few hours before the actual event, he may find that his greatest effort is expended trying to maintain the condition that usually happens as naturally as breathing. As the years passed, and I would have an occasional bout of uncertainty, I realized it has taken nature millions of years to make the connection and there is absolutely no way to arrive at an alternate path in one evening. You can't talk to it. It doesn't have ears. All you can do is let things happen. And when you do, what more could a body ask for?

After my few dates with her, I had to wait until my senior year before other developments took

place along the same lines. There was a tall, pretty girl who lived up the street. She was a cheerleader but was nevertheless considered the town virgin. So I felt no hope toward her. But, to my surprise, she began to come by to watch me wash and wax my car -- things I did so often that I almost rubbed through the paint. Sometimes, she'd even help out. And, thrill of thrills, I discovered that she liked me. Unfortunately, at the time I had my heart set on someone else -- a girl from another town who I had been dating but without any of the kind of luck that's under discussion. At any rate, my attractive helper and I became what we were willing to call friends.

One night she went for a drive with me, and we parked by the local golf course. We began to kiss and, as we went along, she became breathlessly excited. She asked me to make love with her, but I felt guilty. How could I, who had his mind on another woman, be the first to enjoy being with the precious innocent in my arms? I was, however, delighted to continue stimulating her. At a particularly high pitch of excitement, she reached up under my dashboard and pulled out an entire handful of wires. I looked at them, wondering if we'd have to spend the whole night at the golf course. Without much hope, I went to work, reattaching them. After I tried what seemed like every possible combination, the engine started and the lights went on. I took her home, feeling proud of my restraint, while she sat in silent disappointment. That was the last time we dated. About six months later, she became pregnant and married a guy who lived on the other side of town. I guess she had just reached the time in her life when she was ready.

Now, we come to the girl who inspired my restraint. She was the only girl I actually went steady with during my high-school years. My relationship with her began in a way you may recognize. I was at a dance -- this time at the fire hall -- when I was told by a friend of mine that a girl from a neighboring town had a "crush" on me. Although she was a bit tall for me, a trifle clumsy in motion, and had a broad forehead with a thin chin, she was actually one of the most beautiful girls around and, proof beyond proof, she was also a cheerleader. I would discover that, despite all the attraction we might feel for each other, she would remain cool emotionally, at least, with me. How many nights I wore away my enthusiasm between my blue jeans and hers. But, though she claimed to love me, she never gave in. And she was not above causing me the kind of agony that only comes from thoughtlessness on the part of someone you love. Sometimes when we made dates, she'd cancel them. At other times, she only wanted to have short phone conversations. I realized I was in an unfortunate situation that I could do nothing about. I loved her more than she loved me. Once, she said she wanted to break up. I was lovesick. To change her mind, I sent her a letter spotted with tears I managed to manufacture with spigot water. She relented, but from then on I felt as uncertain as a trout fisherman with a lightly hooked trophy. Now, comes the great irony. While we were still dating, I happened to be sitting at the counter of a roadside barbecue joint when a guy from her town came up to me without any apparent reason and, using her name, said she was a -- well, he used the crude appellation for what we now joyfully call oral sex. Feeling the necessity to protect her honor, I asked him to step out into the parking lot. He did and I proceeded to do something I had never done before and have never attempted since. I hauled back and punched him right in the face. He actually fell down and his nose began to bleed. I waited but he didn't get up to fight, so I walked back in like a movie hero and retook my seat. When I went off to college, she still had one more year of high school left.

We said a tearful goodbye and exchanged a couple of letters. Then the ones I wrote to her began to get no response. On my next trip home, she broke the news that she was not in love with me anymore. Being certain that I was still in love with her, I was heartbroken. And I carried around a heavy, aching heart for years. I can't tell you how long it took me to meet a woman who made me glad I wasn't able to enjoy a lifetime of my first love's heart-breaking conduct. Now for the great irony: a couple of years after we broke up, I was told she married the guy I had punched out.

The whole episode finally helped me realize how hard it is to win with young love. If you break up, you can spend the rest of your life thinking that no relationship could compare with your first one. And, if you stay together, you may wonder what you missed by getting married so early. Sure makes you glad you only have to go through first love once, doesn't it?

As long as we're talking about my young love life, I'd like to tell you about an accoutrement of it, which, while a pretty usual part of life today, caused me some fearful complications, twice. I'm referring to what we used to call rubbers.

(holds up a condom)

The first time I heard of them was when I walked into a men's room and saw a dispenser on the wall. It was green, and painted on it in white script was the price: "3 for 25 cents." There also appeared the unconvincing admonition: "Sold for the prevention of disease only." Yet, since the things had a texture about as delicate as an inner tube, I can't imagine what else they could've been sold for. That's just an exaggeration. After I learned what they were for, I always carried at least one in my wallet, just in case, despite the telltale circle that eventually formed in the leather. Now, for the start of my problem. What could I do with the other two in the package? I picked a hiding place in my bedroom -- the top slat of the Venetian blinds.

I should have known better. One morning my mother came in to wake me up and, to make her point that it was time for me to rise and shine, she raised the blind to let in more light. You know what happened. The pack of condoms fell right down on her. She picked it up and, visibly shocked, asked me what I was doing with them. Without missing a beat, I reached right into my handy closet of excuses and told her I was only keeping them for a friend who was afraid to take them home. She confiscated them anyway. And, when my dad came home, she told him about them. He confronted me, and I offered him the same excuse. They let me off with a warning that they never wanted to catch me with them again.

They did. And the second time I wasn't as lucky. One day when I came home my mother walked into the living room, holding up an unrolled condom as if it were a dead mouse. "Where did you get this?" she demanded. "I told you," I insisted, "I was only keeping it for a friend." "Do you know who found it?" she asked. "Audry." To understand the impact of that statement, you have to understand who Audry was. Besides being our housekeeper at the time, she was a Jehovah's Witness. As part of the practice of her religion, she was given to falling on the floor unpredictably and rolling around. These were times when, in her words, she "felt the spirit." And, as she flailed about, she'd shout things like, "Praise the Lord!" She was a nice, lonesome

lady in her late fifties who lived alone and her religion was about all she had. So we all looked the other way and just hoped she didn't feel the spirit too often. I had a mental picture of her reaction at the moment of discovery. And my mother went on to make my perception more exact. "And do you know where she found it?" she demanded. "Floating in the washing machine!" Suddenly, I realized that I had forgotten one in a pocket of my jeans, and Audry, the poor dear, was washing the clothes when the thing floated up. I imagined her screaming and pointing as my mother hurried to the rescue. I sunk into the heavy feeling that comes when you know your situation is hopeless and awaited my father's arrival. When he came home, my mother produced the evidence in the same dead-rat manner and told him of the ghastly event that had occurred. My punishment followed swiftly. Holding up the condom, he announced, "I'm cutting off your allowance for the whole week!" I was desolated. Without my three dollars a week, what could I do? I wouldn't even have money for gas.

My dear dad -- he did his best to discipline me, but he was a very unlikely tyrant. In fact, when I think back on him, he still seems to me to be the biggest-hearted, wisest man I ever met. Now, maybe that opinion is colored by my childhood innocence, but I don't really think so. I'll tell you more about him later.

Now let me move on to one of the most special things about my childhood -- my best friend, Davey. His father had remarried and lived in another town. Davey lived with his grandparents. His grandfather was a retired railroad worker with one wooden leg. He spent most of his time sitting on the porch, but when the youth center opened up in the field across the street, he picked up a little extra money taking care of it. Davey's grandmother was a large woman who made the best homemade bread I could imagine. He and I would go to his house after a dance, toast thick slices of it, spread on piles of butter, and eat it while we watched television.

Davey had sandy hair, a very small nose, an oval face, and a short, strong body. Girls thought he was cute, and he always seemed to be making out with one or the other. He approached the activity with imaginative resourcefulness. To give you an example, he was at one time dating the daughter of a local heart specialist. When the doctor would leave his house on a call, Davey would make his own house call. One night, Davey waited and waited but the cardiologist would not leave. Davey got tired of waiting and walked to the corner where there was a pay phone. He called and pretended he was a patient who needed immediate help. Soon, the doctor pulled out of the driveway, and Davey was at the door.

Between escapades, he'd sit in my car with me while we drove around and around and then around again. One year, he managed to buy a car for himself -- a '51 Ford.

(holds up photo of a Ford of that vintage)

That simple, square model was very popular, but by now Davey's was six years old. In those days, American cars weren't supposed to last more than three years, and Detroit proudly boasted of its business-building concept of planned obsolescence. Don't hear much about that idea anymore. As a result of the car's age, Davey had to become something of a mechanic. There was an empty lot across the street from his grandparents' house, and some days he'd have the car

up on cement blocks there. He'd be under it, doing something like working on the gear box. He loved that car, and it was all he needed to carry on as busy a love life as anyone in town.

During the summer months, he really proved the strength of his friendship. I liked to sleep late, and day after day he'd show up about three in the afternoon, sit down beside my bed, and ask when I was going to get up. Some summer mornings he helped my parents out with the house and earned extra money. If it needed to be painted, he'd do it. If the roof was leaking, he'd climb up and fix it.

Once, when Davey and I were in another town, we walked into a bar and a couple of sexy girls started to look at us. Davey found an incidental way to begin a conversation. They seemed to be the most willing girls we'd ever talked to. And soon we discovered why. They wanted us to be pay for our imagined interlude of enjoyment. We had twenty dollars to spare between us, and, fortunately, they were only asking for ten dollars apiece. We discussed their offer and decided that being with them would be better than going home without anything happening. We followed them out into the parking lot, and they invited us to go with them in their car. I noticed that they had a driver and said we'd follow them in my car. The hotel they took us to was an old one where everything seemed to be painted green. Davey went in one room and I went in another one, while their driver waited in the hall. I had never been with a girl who took her own clothes off, but I tried to act as if I'd had experiences like that to the point of boredom. She asked me to go into the bathroom with her. I obliged and stood there while she washed me off. We got in bed and, though I wouldn't call the environment the most relaxing I've ever been in, she was quite active and my ten dollars was gone in about ten minutes. Davey used his investment up pretty quickly, too.

But I did get a lasting memento of the trip. The next day, I woke up with an awful itch. I searched myself and found a little black bug down there. When Davey arrived, I told him about the creature. By then I had put it on a hand mirror. To study it better, I put the mirror on the floor and we both got down and stared at it. We decided it might be time for me to act according to a saying we used to joke about but never associated with ourselves.

(holds up small bottle of blue liquid)

It went, "Get out the old blue ointment to the crabs' disappointment."

As if that wasn't enough, I soon developed a second memento. When I went to the bathroom, I noticed I had a sharp burning sensation, followed by a little drip, drip. I suspected that the time had come for me to get a shot of penicillin. I knew my parents couldn't find out, so I decided to pay for everything out of my spending money. The only remedy I couldn't afford was sending all my clothes to the cleaners, and, according to the instructions that came with the blue ointment, they all had to go if I wanted to be sure the tiny creatures were eliminated. I told me mother some story about the fact that my clothes had never been to the cleaners and asked if she could send them all there just once so I could see if there was a difference. She said all right. And I told myself it would be a long time before I was ever again with a girl who charged for the pleasure of her company.

There was only one sad note in my friendship with Davey. We both knew his dad wouldn't send him to college, and his grandparents couldn't afford to. I don't know whether it was my imagination or not, but I sometimes felt he was kind of hoping that my parents would come to the rescue. He didn't know how much they'd have to sacrifice just to send me and then my brother. It seemed that nothing could take away from our friendship, though. During my first and second years of college, when I'd come home for a break, he'd pick me up and drive me back.

As you might have guessed, he started to date one really pretty girl who became pregnant. They got married, and he needed to find steady work. There was none to be found in Cokeville, so they moved to Ohio. A few years passed before we met again; in fact, by then I was in graduate school. I had come home for a holiday, and he had called my parents to tell them he was in town to visit his grandparents. I called him, and we got together for a bite at a roadside sandwich shop. He seemed proud and in control. He had become a salesman and liked to talk about the things he owned. I was happy for him, but by then the 60s had arrived, and material things hardly meant anything to me. Hard as it was for me to admit, I knew we had gone our separate ways. All I could do is tell him how great I thought he had done and remember the days when we seemed to have almost everything in common.

Now, I'd like to take a little time and tell you about another good friend of mine, who became something much more surprising. His name was Paul, and he lived in the house next to our backyard. He was a husky boy with a large, heart-shaped face, a small hooked nose, and a blond crewcut. His father worked on the railroad, and both of his parents seemed like the usual working-class couple, but there was something really interesting about them: they were Mohawk Indians. I have to tell you, though, that heritage didn't help his father's fishing much. The doctor across the street, who was of German descent, always seemed to catch the big bass.

Paul made two momentous decisions in his life. The first one took place while we were both kids. One day he decided to become a weight lifter. Today, we'd say a bodybuilder. His hero was Charles Atlas, who, as some of you probably remember, was the first well-known bodybuilder in America. He ran ads that were cartoons that featured, for example, a skinny guy on the beach who lost his girl to a bigger guy; then, after some weight lifting, the formerly skinny guy would return, punch out the formerly bigger guy and get back his girl. Paul stuck to his workouts, and within a couple of years, he grew into a mountain of muscle whose very sight could make most other guys retreat with fear. Sometimes, I'd help him exercise, but the weights grew to such an enormous size that about all I could do is roll the barbells to him.

(points to hefty barbells)

At some point he decided to act out the Charles Atlas cartoon, and, relative waif that I was, I became the means to his achievement. As a result, he became the person who rearranged my front teeth. The cause of this impromptu piece of dentistry was the small grapevine that grew beside his house. Each year, delicious green grapes would appear on it. I used to pick a few bunches and enjoy them. One year, Paul told me not to pick anymore. He liked to enjoy them after he exercised and there weren't enough for both of us. I let fear deter me as long as I could,

but one day I was in my backyard looking across at those beauties. I finally gave in and enjoyed some.

Then I went up the street to play in another friend's yard. He had swings and a sliding board, and we were having fun with them when I saw Paul walking up the gravel alley toward us. He kept coming straight at me, and I noticed that he did not seem happy. I stood up, unaware that I was about to star in his version of the Charles Atlas cartoon. Then it happened. Without saying a word, he pulled back and punched me in the mouth with a closed fist. I flew backward onto my rear. He looked down at me and said, "I told you not to eat my grapes. Don't do it again." Then he turned and lumbered away, with his knuckles almost dragging on the ground. As my friend continued to watch with stunned horror, I realized that my mouth was bleeding a lot. I reached up and touched what seemed to be the source. It was one of my top front teeth, which felt as if it was dangling by a thread of gum and nerve. I pushed it back in place and, holding it there, made my way home. Somehow, I didn't lose it, but my smile would never be the same.

A few years passed before I worked up the courage to upset him again. This time the cause was a tune that was very popular at the time. It was "The Tennessee Waltz" as sung by Tennessee Ernie Ford. He liked it so much that he'd sit in a rocking chair on his front porch and listen to his plate-size, 75-rpm recording of it for hours. I woke up to it. I had lunch to it. And one day I decided to do something about it. I flew out my back door, strode up the stairs of his porch, and said, "Paul, will you please turn that thing off? I can't stand it anymore." "Why?" he wanted to know. "I like it." And he stared at me with confident self-satisfaction.

(picks up 75-rmp record)

I was so desperate I couldn't control myself. Throwing caution to the wind, I grabbed that big record off the turntable and hurled it across the street. It sailed toward the gray-stone garage that was opposite us and shattered against it. Paul couldn't believe what I had done. And before he could collect himself and dismantle me, I ran home and slammed the door behind me.

The funniest thing Paul ever did was get a Rhesus monkey for a pet. He brought me into his house to show it to me. It was in the kitchen in a cage. On one side, tied by a string, was a milk bottle with a nipple that was pointed into the cage. The nervous, wide-eyed monkey would leap at the cage, hang on, and drink milk like a baby. It couldn't be house trained, so the kitchen took on an awful odor, and his mother began to have second thoughts. What pushed her over the limit was what the monkey did when it got loose in the house. It would sprint into the living room and leap from one piece of furniture to the next, while it anointed the fabrics at its pleasure. When anyone tried to catch it, it would scamper up the drapes and walk along the top of them. After it enjoyed a particularly active day around the house, Paul's mother sent it packing.

When I went away to college, I lost track of Paul. Then one summer when I came home, his mother told me that he had become Mr. Virginia Beach. I felt proud of him, figuring he was on his way to some sort of career as a muscleman. Then his parents moved away, and I lost track of him again. A few years later, when I was home for a break, I got a call from him. He was in town and wanted to visit me later. I went out for a while and when I came back, he was sitting

on the couch waiting for me. I didn't even recognize him at first. He was as big as ever, but he had a long beard and was wearing blue overalls. I pretended everything was normal, and within a few minutes he explained his new appearance. He had become a Quaker. He now lived, without any modern conveniences, on a farm in Pennsylvania with his wife and kids. His home didn't have electricity, and he even drove a horse-drawn cart. But he said he was happy. I couldn't imagine what kind of psychological perturbances had caused such a great change in him, but I was glad that he seemed to have found a joyful peace. I couldn't help wishing, however, that he'd found it before he spun my front tooth around.

There was only one other time I got punched. It happened during the first summer vacation I had after I started to go to college. Davey and I prided ourselves on being friends with the local disk jockey. When we were in high school, one of us often drove him to the dances and helped him set up his equipment. We were driving around one night that summer with a couple of other friends when we decided to visit him at the local radio station, which, by the way, seemed to have a range of about twenty miles. When we got to the studio, we were pleased to discover that four pretty girls were visiting the station, too. We found the opportunity to talk with them. They said they were staying at a house in the mountains nearby and invited us to come up for a visit.

Now, earlier in the evening, we had been up the same way and done some regrettable mischief. We were driving along a back road when we saw an old car parked in a small clearing beside it. We figured somebody was inside, making out, and for lack of anything more exciting to do, we decided to disturb the occupants. We stopped and tossed some pebbles at the car. When that didn't seem to stir much up, we sneaked up on the car and bounced it up and down. That got a reaction, and we ran into the night. Now, as we followed the directions the girls had given us, when we drove past a roadside sandwich stop, I thought I noticed that the car we had enjoyed ourselves with was parked in the lot. I thought nothing more of it, and we kept driving.

When we got to the house, the girls welcomed us happily, and soon we were all snacking, dancing, kissing, and generally having a great time. We didn't know big trouble was on the way.

Suddenly, the front door burst open and four guys who could only be described as mountain men strode in. The biggest one, firmly packed with a well-rounded belly and wearing a baseball cap, indicated a tall, lanky fellow he was with and said, "You're the guys who were fucking around with my friend's car and his girl, ain't you?" I happened to be standing near where he made his announcement. Without further hesitation, he drew back his fist and let me have a punch that knocked me back across the room and onto my rear. The girls started to scream, while our surprise visitors went on to decimate us. If you stayed inside, you got beaten up. And, if you ran outside, they followed you and punched you out on the lawn. But punching wasn't the only thing they had on their minds, which I discovered when I stumbled outside and saw my friends lying on the lawn, wasted. Two of them grabbed me, one by the arms and the other one by the ankles. Then they lifted me off the ground and stretched me out between them. I looked up and saw the one who had dealt me my original blow holding a can of motor oil above me.

(picks up can of motor oil)

"Know what this here is?" he said. "Motor oil. And know I'm gonna do with it?" He held up a

pack of matches. "I'm gonna pour it on you and light you on fire." Now, the girls became hysterical and began to plead with even greater intensity for them to leave us alone. One of the reasons I'm here now is that somehow sanity prevailed in one or two of them and they talked him out of torching me. Instead, they dropped me onto the roadside gravel and gave me and all of us a final warning in words you may recognize. "Don't fuck around with us anymore, or your ass will be grass." Then they ambled off to their car and left. The girls began to console us and help us recuperate. We tried to continue the party, but the spirit of fun was gone and the night drifted to a pretty sad close. Not that we deserved better.

Now, I'd like to tell you a couple of stories that have to do with Cokeville as a whole, and that'll bring the first act to an end. I lived through both of them, and somehow so did the rest of the town. They have to do with The Eternal Flame and the bottle of champagne that was supposed to hit the new bridge. As the economy continued to worsen, the town lost more and more of its enhancements. In fact, the only thing that improved was the appearance of Commercial Credit. The street-level office was remodeled, and a green bay window was added. Now, you not only had to walk past it. You had to walk around it. In contrast, the only department store in town went out of business and both movie theaters closed. But the drive-in movie survived, because we liked to go there with dates and steam up the windows. The environment seemed to allow for a little more indulgence than usual. For example, one night I went there with a girl to see Spartacus. I was still watching when the slaves were training to be gladiators, but the next time I glanced up, Spartacus was on the cross.

But to go on. As the town continued to deteriorate, the state of Pennsylvania decided to build a superhighway that would allow motorists to bypass it. The town fathers decided it was time to make a statement of Cokeville's continued existence. A small triangle of grassy land had been created where the highway provided our main street with an entrance and exit. On that spot, they decided to erect what they called The Eternal Flame. It was a thin gray pillar that, if I remember correctly, was about twelve feet high, and at the top there were gas jets. I made it a point to be there the day it was dedicated. About a hundred other citizens were present, and the mayor was there to give a speech. "This flame will burn forever," he proudly announced, "in eternal memory of all the brave boys from Cokeville who have died in the service of our great country." Then he lit it, and the town cheered. From that moment on, it could be seen as a flickering blue wisp during the day and a dancing red torch at night, until a crisis developed. The gas bill arrived at city hall. It would cost, I understood from my uncle, Don, who was a bit of a politician, over thirty dollars a month to keep it lit. Thirty dollars. An appeal was made to Chamber of Commerce and the Junior Chamber of Commerce. The Lions, the Elks and the Knights of Columbus were called upon. Finally, the fate of the Eternal Flame was announced. From now on, it would only be lit for important holidays. So out it went. And most days it could be seen standing there, extinguished. With all due respect for the men for which it stood, I later realized the snuffed-out flame was not an entirely unfitting symbol for the town.

The new highway was also the cause of a much more cheerful event: the dedication of the bridge that took it across the Youghiogheny. Hundreds of people gathered for the occasion. The car

dealerships donated convertibles, which were decorated with cheerleader-like girls waving from the tops of the seats. And a blue ribbon was stretched across the bridge. Here was the plan. A plane would take off from the local airport, which was halfway between Cokeville and a neighboring town that was twice the size. Naturally, the airport was named after the bigger town. By the way, I'm not talking about the kind of airport you may have in mind. Ours was only big enough to handle Piper Cubs and the like. At any rate, the plane was supposed to fly down the river and, when it got to the bridge, the pilot would lean out of the window and drop a bottle of champagne on it. When it hit, the mayor would cut the ribbon.

(picks up a pair of scissors)

As scheduled, the first sound of the plane was heard. Eager eyes searched the sky. The sound increased and then the plane appeared up river. It headed for the bridge. As it swooped toward it, the pilot leaned out ...

(takes up bottle of champagne)

... with a bottle of champagne in hand and let it go -- but a moment too soon. And, as he soared off, the bottle plunged into the river, just upstream from one of the main piers. An understandable moment of uncertainty followed. Then the mayor bravely cut the ribbon anyway. There was some weak applause and the crowd began to wander off. Why can't anything, we wondered, go right for us?

And now, how about an intermission?

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II

Hello, again. I'd like to begin the second act by telling you more about my father.

(picks up old photograph of him)

I was the first son, and he couldn't resist naming me after him. So he was Phil, and I was Phil, Jr.

He was five-ten-and-a-half, insisted on walking quickly with his shoulders back, and he had a generally serious demeanor. But he could be amusing. For instance, he had somehow learned to put a quarter between his fingers and, by moving them deftly against one another, he could make the quarter walk along the back of his hand from one space to the next. And, despite his intellectual nature, he had a favorite and conclusive demonstration of his physical prowess, which I was never able to duplicate. He'd drop a penny on the living-room carpet, get down, put his left arm behind his back and, with a one-handed push-up, he'd pick up the penny between his teeth.

(tries the feat but fails)

From time to time he would tell me about his past. He was born about the turn of the century in a land he apparently loved and he led what seemed to me a delightful childhood. Two of his proudest stories relate to his being, as I once was, a crack shot.

One day, he happened to see an eagle circling above city hall. He raised his rifle and shot it. It fell to the ground. At the time, an important city official happened to be walking along the terrace of the building and, unfortunately, the descending bird just missed him. Now, I take it

as a sign of the times, as contrasted with our own, that the direction the falling bird took remained the principle complication, instead of the rather controversial fact that he had fired a rifle near city hall. Thanks to the intercession of his father, who was an important official, my dad got off with a reprimand.

His other story about shooting led to more distinction. The nuns at a local convent told him that a big snake was eating their chickens. He told them he'd take care of it. Now, today perhaps someone would have gotten a loop around the snake's head and carried it off to a more desirable location. But these were the days before human beings had developed such a sophisticated response to intrusive vipers. He went home and got his rifle. When he returned, he went looking for the creature. He said that when he saw it, it was so big it was stretched out along two big rocks, no doubt in the process of ingesting a recently swallowed chicken. He took aim and got it right in the head. The nuns were so grateful they offered him a complimentary chicken, which he politely declined.

When he was old enough to go to college, he decided to study medicine. He began his studies but, after the first year, he decided to visit America. Why would such a content young man leave home? He didn't want to but he had two reasons to agree to the trip. His younger brother had come here at the age of sixteen, and my dad's father wanted him to make the trip to persuade his brother to go back. Second, and more urgent, he got into a fight and decided he should leave for at least a short time. To prove the seriousness of the latter point, he pulled up his pant leg and pointed to a round, dark scar in his calf. It marked, he said, the spot where he had been shot. Any additional particulars were left to my imagination.

When he arrived, he was processed at Ellis Island and, without taking a moment to look over New York, he got on a train and headed for Cokeville. When he got there, he learned that his brother was working in a coal mine for 25 cents a day -- and he was too happy to leave. How is that possible? You guessed it. He had fallen in love with an American girl. Their father asked my dad to stay a while and try to change his brother's mind. Then, just as my father was ready to give up, he received word that their father had passed away. Instead of going back and taking over a substantial inheritance of land, he decided to do what he knew their father would have wanted. He stayed in America to watch over his younger brother, who, by the way, eventually married the woman who had won his heart, and one day he became the proprietor of a pretty nice motel and restaurant.

How could my dad make a living? The first job he landed was in a neighboring town, where he became what he laughingly called "a soda jerk." At night, he'd go back to his one-room apartment and play the violin. I think he must've done more fiddling than that, though, because he was a handsome man who didn't get married until the age of forty-five, by which time, incidentally, he had become a barber. Today, my brother and I sometimes endearingly refer to him, with reference to Cokeville, as "the barber of C'ville."

What persuaded him, as he described the change, "to settle down"? He went to a picnic where

he met my mother. She was in her late twenties by then and, as she once told me, she had been in love with a lawyer who moved away and broke her heart. Although she apparently loved my father, I don't think she ever appreciated him enough to consider him a completely satisfying replacement for the man she didn't get. As I mentioned earlier, that seems to be the way it is with young love. At any rate, my dad used to say that from then on he decided to devote himself to his family.

When I was about five, I still remember him walking home from the barber shop. But he had been taking courses for years and had acquired a caseful of very thick, serious-looking books. Then one day, right where he had been a barber, up went a shingle that announced, to the great displeasure of local physicians and any medical doctors who may be in the audience, that he was now a chiropractor.

It's as a doctor of that profession, which was not then and is still not wisely defined as an especially expert level of physical therapy, that I primarily knew him. He actually became quite good at what he did, and in many ways he was surprisingly ahead of his time. For instance, he was very interested in healthy eating. In fact, he read Prevention magazine before it became respectable. And he'd say unlikely things like, "Rain washes the pollution out of the atmosphere. Grass absorbs the pollution, and cows eat the grass. That's why milk can contain chemicals that are bad for you." Years later, there was talk about Strontium 90 in milk. He was also very particular about what he ate. Way back then he said amazing things like "Fish is good for you."

And, when he concentrated on manipulating joints and muscles, he was really quite adept. I witnessed his abilities a few times. Once, a woman showed up at the back door with her son. He had been playing baseball and the ball had dislocated his thumb and driven it clear back into the palm of his hand. My dad looked over the little tip that still protruded. Then he took it carefully in his fingers and quickly pulled it back out. The kid squealed, but his thumb was straight, he could wiggle it, and his mother was delighted. One of the cases he was proudest of related to a dog that was brought to the back door with a dislocated leg joint. He fixed it with a deft movement of his hands. And from then on, the dog was as grateful to him as the owner. I knew his patients appreciated him very much, not only because they said wonderful things about him, but because every year gifts from them would pile up under our Christmas tree. I still have a glass-crystal bell one patient gave him with his name etched on it.

(picks up delicate glass bell and rings it)

There is one thing about his practice that may be of special interest. His fee structure. It was so modest that it never would've provided big-business with an incentive to go into health care. He charged five dollars for the first visit, and, depending on what the traffic would bear, two or three dollars for every visit after that. On a good day, he made a hundred dollars. And he almost managed to earn enough to send my brother and me to college. When he didn't have quite enough for a semester, he'd say, "Don't worry. I can always wash my face and go to the bank." I drove him there once for just that purpose. I can still see him striding confidently up the sidewalk toward the brass door in his light-green wool suit. When he came back out, he proudly announced that he got the loan, in his words, "just on my signature." I don't know about you, but

my experience with banks is that these days they require a bit more.

Sending us to college still required a lot of sacrifices. Sometimes he'd fall behind on his bills. And he developed an outlook that can only occur to someone who has been under a lot of financial pressure. "Why should I worry?" he once said to me during an especially tough period. "It's their money." That was the best line I'd heard about living through the pressure of debt, rivaled only by what my wife told me her father used to say. "I know I owe you the money, and I will never deny it. And, as soon as I have it, I'll give it to you." I would hesitate to try that one in this much unkind world.

There's another story about my father that I think you'll enjoy. He liked to drink wine after work. Nothing fancy. Not even fancy enough to merit a cork. He'd buy a gallon of what was called Gallo Port, and each night he'd unscrew the lid and pour himself a glass. Then one day, he announced that he was going to make wine himself. That evening, we sat by while he crushed a great load of grapes in a strainer. Next, he added yeast and funneled the result into old wine bottles. Then he screwed on the lids and stored the bottles in our cellar to age. But his wine-making expertise was soon to be called into question. One evening when we were having dinner, there was a loud explosion in the basement. It sounded like a gunshot, and our imaginations ran to one crook shooting another. He headed down, and we followed him. When we got to the far end of the basement, we discovered the source of the sound. One of the bottles of his homemade wine had blown up. There was red wine and glass all over the floor. Apparently, he didn't know or had forgotten that he had to let the gas from the fermentation process escape from time to time. No more bottles exploded but some still disappeared. Here's where one went. I told my friend Paul about the wine. We took a bottle and drank it behind one of the movie theaters. It actually made us feel tipsy. Then we snuck in the back door and tried to make sense out of a Dracula movie.

Before I leave the subject of my father, I'd like to tell you about something I noticed when I'd come home from college. While many people cry when they say goodbye, he's the only person I've ever known who even cried when he said hello. He'd put his arms around me to welcome me, and when we pulled back apart, I'd notice tears in his eyes. My memories of him are only of love, gratitude, and admiration. I always say that if you grow up under a large tree, you can say that it protects you from the rain. Or you can decide that it blocks the sun, and you need to move out from under it. I was glad I got to grow up under the wide, spreading tree of my father's love, even though, once in a while, he swatted me with a branch.

Now, let's go on. Not to get too shocking, but have you ever noticed that many of the best things in life begin with the letter "f"? You don't want to touch that one, do you? Well, let's see. There's family, friends, food, fiction, "filosophy," fine wine, and the pleasant activity some of you might be thinking of. Well, so much for things that begin with the letter "f." That was just my arresting way of getting to a few subjects that, for some unaccountable reason, begin with the letter "s."

Let's start with smoking. My friends and I didn't begin with tobacco. That came later. We used to gather up the long, brown seed pods that dropped from a big tree near one of my friends' houses. We'd snap the foot-long things open and take out the golden-brown, hair-like strands inside. Then we'd slip under the porch of his red-brick house with our questionable treasure, wrap a bit in cigarette paper or, if we didn't have any, in newspaper, light up and settle into throat-scratching indulgence. In time we became more sophisticated and bought a cigarette roller.

(picks up, if available, a red-rubber cigarette roller
and a pack of Bugler tobacco)

It was a little red affair with a thin, rubber rolling belt. You'd lay a piece of cigarette paper in the groove, fill it with a few pinches of Bugler tobacco, lick the edge of the paper, and then flip the handle. The belt would roll up a fair excuse for a cigarette, although a few strands would stick out the ends and get stuck on your tongue. In time, we were able to buy real cigarettes, which sold for about 25 cents a pack. Our favorite brand was Pall Mall. We knew smoking wasn't good for you, and Davey had an uncle who had died of lung cancer. But in those days the principal warning our parents gave us was that smoking stunted your growth. Those were also the days before filters and chemically altered tobacco, so you got the taste of real tobacco in your mouth and, unfortunately, the odor of it in your clothes.

My dad had an amazing nose for the smell, and when he'd detect that I'd been smoking, he'd get red-faced mad. One day, he carried out the punishment he'd always threatened to inflict on me. He sat me down in the kitchen and, determined to reform my ways, he made me chew up and swallow a whole pack of cigarettes. The desired result was achieved. I got sick and threw up. I swore I'd never smoke again, and I didn't go near another cigarette for at least a week. Actually, I smoked part of the time I was in high school and college. Then, feeling it was unhealthy, I quit for a few years. Later ...

(finds pipe)

... I began to smoke a pipe. I liked the fragrance and the fact that I didn't have to inhale to enjoy the taste. I didn't immediately realize that, if the whole room was filled with smoke, I was inhaling. By then I'd become a writer, and I'd sit at my typewriter puffing away for hours. I began to get the feeling that I was treating the inside of my mouth like a blast furnace. And, although George Burns continued to look healthy, I was haunted by the fact that Sigmund Freud, who liked cigars, too, had gotten cancer of the roof of the mouth and died from it. One day I finally made up my mind to quit. I got out a plastic trash bag, gathered up all my pipes, even the fanciest ones, my leather tobacco pouch and other related paraphernalia, walked down the hall and dropped everything down the incinerator.

From then on, I never took another puff of anything. In fact, I became an anti-smoker with the zeal of a reformed sinner. If the smokers in the audience will bear with me, I'd like to share a few of my favorite tactics. When I sat down in a restaurant and someone lit up, I might lean over and say, "Could you please stop smoking. I'm a chest surgeon, and I've been cutting smokers open all day." And I'd tell friends who smoked consoling things like, "You think of that cigarette as your friend, don't you? But the truth is, it's the only thing in your life that wants to kill you. It's like an assassin with a knife, and you take it with you everywhere you go." Once I got a

television executive to quit by hitting his ego right on the head. He had had some success discovering talent and, since television seems to be a business where even the fleeting appearance of competence is described as genius, he had been able to convince himself that he was one. So I asked him if he ever wondered what people thought of him when he lit up. "I'll tell you," I volunteered. "They think you're an idiot." About a week later, he came up to me and, after a salutation that consisted principally of describing me with a curse, he said, "You ruined it for me." "What?" I asked, with feigned innocence. "Smoking!" he exclaimed. "I've been haunted by what you said all week long. Every time I tried to light up, I thought, 'The people I'm with think I'm an idiot.'" "Well," I consoled him, "since you quit, at least the two of us know you're not."

Now, moving on to our second subject that starts with an "s," I'd like to tell you about my ever-so-brief adventures as a boy scout. I had no interest in becoming one, because it seemed to involve various kinds of discipline, which I had an ever-present allergy to. But one day I heard that the troop I would've belonged to was going on an overnight camping trip. Now, that sounded exciting. So I went to the next meeting and told the scoutmaster I wanted to join. He welcomed me and invited me to stay for the rest of the meeting, which was being held in the basement of the parochial school on the intramural basketball court. The floor was smooth cement, with basketball hoops at each end, and, just to make the game more interesting, there were two iron columns in the middle to help hold up the ceiling. That night, the scouts were practicing first-aid. Some of them were lying on the floor while others were bandaging them up. To indicate how seriously they took their training, some of the scouts were lying there with their arms and legs in splints and a few were on stretchers. I observed intently, but my real concentration was on the camping trip.

The following weekend, we were trucked to the country and I was assigned to a cabin by a creek. It had bunk beds, and six of us were lodged there, along with a few dozen mosquitoes. Until then had I never realized how many blood-thirsty bugs a summer night can produce. During the week, I actually had a frightening adventure. One evening we decided to take a long walk on the country road that ran in front of the cabin. I discovered how dark the world can be without street lights and how many strange sounds the forest can produce once fear has perked up your ears. My heart went thump in my chest regularly enough to make me glad when we got back to our welcoming party of mosquitoes. Somehow, we had not been eaten by a bear or attacked by one of the creatures that science fiction has provided to abbreviate our capacity to enjoy the night. I liked a lot of things about the weekend, especially the camaraderie, but another trip wasn't planned until the following year. So, after a bit of self-questioning, I allowed my career as a boy scout to slip into my youthful history.

The next "s" I'd like to tell you about is shooting.

(takes up BB rifle -- an old Daisy if possible)

As I mentioned in the first act, I bought a couple of BB guns. Some mornings, I would sit in my bedroom window, waiting for an unsuspecting sparrow, starling, or robin to land in the backyard. I'm sorry to say I hit a few. But the revenge of the birds was on the way. Here's how I got mine.

(picks up single-shot pump gun)

I bought another BB gun without telling my parents. It was a single-shot pump that worked like this. You dropped a BB in the front of the barrel, pumped it, and then took a shot. I was near the playground, taking aim at some nearby windows, when I made a mistake. I pumped the gun before I loaded it. So there I was with the butt resting on the ground about to drop a new BB into a cocked gun. As soon as it hit the back of the barrel, the gun went off -- and the BB shot up right into the palm of my hand. I looked at the spot that stung. At the base of my index finger, there was a hole and then blood.

I felt I had to keep the accident to myself, so my entire treatment consisted of going home and soaking my hand in salt water, hoping that somehow the BB would disappear. My hopes were not granted. My hand swelled up and, as the days passed, the hole healed but the swelling seemed to get worse. I had a friend who had already lost one eye by setting off a 22-caliber bullet between two rocks, and I didn't want to add my hand to the mayhem, since I wanted to make use of it later in life. Somehow, I had to have the BB removed. I worked up my courage and told my mother what had happened. She was horrified that I had waited so long and made an appointment for me with a doctor who was a general surgeon. I told him what had happened and showed him the result. He asked me to put out my hand on the white-paper-covered table, palm up. I did so, and he gave me a shot of Novocaine right where the swelling was. Then I sat there, watching while he took a scalpel, made a cut about an inch long, took a pair of surgical pliers, reached in, dug around, and drew out the BB with a proud frown. He put in a couple of stitches, told me to return in a week to have them removed, and dismissed me with a cautionary word about BB guns. I never wanted to go back. So, about a week later, when I noticed his incision had healed, I got a pair of scissors, snipped the stitches, and pulled them out myself.

The injury didn't have a lasting deterrent effect. In fact, when I became a teenager, I graduated to a 22-caliber rifle with a scope. I used to set up cans in the woods and shoot them. The only time I had a shooting companion was when my uncle Fred visited us. He had been in the navy during World War II and he liked to joke around. One of his favorite activities was to tie me up on the floor with what he called a Navy knot. He'd tell me to lie down on my stomach, hold my hands back and bend my legs up. Then he'd tie them all together and leave me in that condition until I gave up. He liked to shoot, too. So we'd walk to the woods a few blocks from my house, where there was an old stone quarry, and shoot at cans.

Maybe I never got as accurate as Sergeant York, but my shooting practice led to my proudest achievement at summer camp. I didn't know I was going until a man named Bill Hill visited us one afternoon. He was there to tell my mom about a camp in West Virginia. She asked me to listen to his description of it and asked if I'd like to go. I'm not sure whether she was being generous or just wanted to get me off her hands for a while. But I said sure and, in fact, wound up going there for six weeks, two years in a row.

The camp consisted of long rows of tents, with two bunks and a floorboard in each one. There was also a big white building that served as the location of the dining hall and the game rooms.

The boys' tents were on one side of it, and the girls' tents were on the other. Some kids liked to play ball or ride horses, others liked to box or swat bats with brooms. But my favorite activity took place at the firing range. We'd lie on our stomachs, in a three-walled shed, and point our single-shot 22s at paper targets 50 feet away. We'd get five shots apiece. Then we'd all go out and see how we did. These days, when we witness so much random violence committed with rifles, it pains me to admit that I was such a good shot that during my first year at camp I earned a lot of medals the camp awarded on behalf of The National Rifle Association.

(holds up some medals)

First, I earned a pro-Marksman and then a Marksman. Then a Marksman First Class. But, most significant of all, I actually won a small gold medal for being judged the best shot in camp. And that was just my first year. During my second year, I earned my Sharpshooter medal and a first gold bar to add to it. I also once again won the little gold medal for being the best shot in camp. Yet, sharpshooter that I was, I never took up hunting. The unlucky birds in my backyard had taught me enough about the finality of death.

Before I leave summer camp behind, let me tell you about the lake, the bass, and the biggest snake I ever saw. There was a large lake at the camp that seemed to be filled with enchantment. If you took a boat across the open water and rowed along the narrow channels through the weeds, the dark water was an inviting mystery, filled with frog eggs and who knows what else. I used to fish from the shore and catch sunfish. Then one day a counselor came to the dock in a boat with a couple of largemouth bass that looked enormous. Today, I'd guess they were about five pounds each. I'd spend a lot of the remainder of my life trying to catch bass like that myself but with the refinement of a flyrod. We'd swim in the lake, too. Then one day, when I was playing volleyball, I saw two counselors coming up the path from the lake, with something hanging from a stick that they were carrying between their shoulders. I heard the word "snake," and we all ran over to see. They had caught and killed a water snake that must've been six or more feet long -- and they had done it right near the dock and beach area where we swam. I never felt comfortable going in that water again. Every time I inched my way out I was sure I was surrounded by snakes big enough to drag me under.

Since I mentioned a flyrod, let me move beyond the letter "s" and tell you more about an activity that added great pleasure to my childhood.

(takes up small, old-fashioned fishing rod
and casting reel)

Fishing. I grew up surrounded by experts. Paul and his father used to go. And, as I mentioned earlier, the doctor across the street went, too; in fact, he used to come back from a mysterious place called Hunter Lake with a regular supply of huge bass. Paul and his dad took me with them once. We only went to the river and didn't catch anything, but I was hooked. I began the way most people do, as a bait fisherman. So we were in need of a regular supply of bait. Paul and I would go around to different lawns in the neighborhood at night with flashlights, looking for night crawlers. After a while, Davey started to fish, too, so he joined us. We'd spot the "crawlers" stretched out of their holes, grab them, and pull them out. Sometimes, we'd see a pair of them connected to each other for the purpose we then only knew about through imaginative

conversation and we'd grab them both. On dry nights, not a lot of them would be out of their holes. So Paul tried to invent something to shock them out. It consisted of two metal poles with an electric wire connected to each one. The idea was to push the poles into the ground and turn on the juice. We tried it but nothing came up. Of course, the only way to test whether his invention was working or not was to touch one of the rods. I didn't want to have anything to do with the thing, and we decided that the next day we'd go dig some garden worms.

When we were in possession of a good supply of bait, we'd head for the banks of the Youghiogheny. How many days -- and nights, too, with a Coleman lantern -- we sat there without getting a nibble. But about every three or four trips, one of us would get a bite. The tip of the rod would start to flip a little. You'd pick up the rod and wait for a solid tug, which meant the fish had taken the bait. Then you'd pull back to set the hook. More often than not, there was nothing there. But, if you were lucky, you'd pull in a ten-inch bullhead catfish or an 8-inch perch.

Some of the blacks used to go there with homemade dough balls and catch an occasional carp. We didn't know how to make them and, besides, those fish looked so ugly to us we didn't want to catch them. Not that many people would call a catfish attractive.

(picks up bamboo flyrod)

When I was in the seventh grade, I graduated to flyfishing for trout, and so did Davey. There was a stream about seven miles from town, called Dunbar Creek. And, even in those days, it had a section set aside for flyfishing only. Every year the Pennsylvania Fish Commission would stock a few thousand trout in it. Then on opening day, at the crack of 5 a. m., so many fisherman would wade in that there was hardly any room left for the fish. An old white truck that served hot coffee and hot-dogs would be there to feed us. Davey and I, and later my brother, would be right there among them, watching the mid-April ice form on our rods. We used big flies and caught a occasional trout. But the fellow who owned the sporting goods store in town caught one trout after another. One day he showed us what he was using. They were very small, brown sinking flies called nymphs. We tried them and did better. But the best bait we had was old reliable, night crawlers, or, as smaller worms were called, garden hackle. Of course, they were both illegal in the flyfishing section. So, when no one was looking, we'd hook one or the other on the fly and lob it in. A fish would strike on almost every cast. And, when the game warden showed up, we'd start to backcast furiously to make the creature fly off. We were, with fearfully thumping hearts, always successful. We had to be. The punishment was a fifty dollar fine. And none of us wanted to tell our parents we owed such a fantastic sum of money.

My love of the sport grew so much that when one spring came I wanted to help stock the trout. My mother, kind and understanding soul that she was, let me stay home from school and drove me to the stream. We followed the white tank-truck, and each time it stopped, I jumped out and the men on the truck would let me carry a bucket of trout down to the stream and dump them in. At one stop, I noticed that a man was taking photographs. He wanted to know my name and asked if he could take a picture of me. I said sure, and he snapped one as I bent over and emptied a bucket of trout into the creek. The next day, my mother wrote me an excuse for school, saying that my absence was due to a cold. I gave it to the principal in the morning. That afternoon, I was called to her office. She was a short, plump, stern nun, who said, "I thought you

had a cold yesterday." Then she held up the local newspaper. Right there, printed as big as you can imagine, was a photo of me, tilting the white bucket into the creek and looking at the camera with a big smile. My name was even printed under the picture and I was described as a local boy who was helping with the stocking. I knew my case was hopeless. I admitted I was there. And when my poor mother, that good Catholic, found out, she was mortified, and announced, "That's the last time I'll write you an excuse when you're not sick!"

Many years later that stream became something else to me. When I'd come home from graduate school for breaks, my mother would still insist that I go to Sunday Mass. Now, she knew that I had decided life before death was a far more logical thing to believe in than life after death. But I didn't want to disappoint her. So I'd drive off, ostensibly on my way to eleven o'clock mass. But, instead, I'd head out to the stream. There was a high bank near a broken dam in the flyfishing section. I'd sit on it and stare down into the deep green pool, looking for trout. When I spotted some finning in the quiet depths, I'd think how beautiful life is and hope that someday everyone would appreciate it enough to take good care of it. I had come to the conclusion that caring about life intelligently was the surest way to show our appreciation to whatever made it and the best way, since I allowed for the possibility, to earn any other life that might come later. After about twenty minutes of wonder and contemplation, I'd head home. My mother, wily creature that she was, would sometimes ask, "Who served mass, the younger priest or the older one?" I'd guess. As often as not my aunt and uncle would come over to join us for Sunday lunch. They usually went to eleven o'clock mass, too, and my mother would ask them for confirmation. I'd stand there in fear, hoping I'd guessed right. When I was wrong, I'd mutter something like, "I was sitting in the back, so I couldn't see too well." She'd give me a skeptical look, but in her mercy and wisdom she'd let me off the hook.

Talking about the trout stream has taken me to my college years, so I ought to tell you a little about my precarious journey to get there. Apparently, I had made myself a nuisance at home by the time I was four, because my mother started me in the first grade at that age. I was a couple of months too young to qualify, but she made a special visit to the priest who presided over unusual decisions affecting the parochial school and pleaded with him to let me in. She always said she did it because she didn't want me, in her words, "to waste a year." However generous her sentiments might have been, the unfortunate result was, I was always the youngest kid in my class. People didn't think too much about child development in those days, or she might have known she was putting me at a certain disadvantage. The extent of it became clear my first day in school. The nun covered the whole blackboard with assignments we were supposed to do. The other kids went to work, while I thought and thought. By the end of the day, I had only managed to draw one big number four on my yellow tablet.

Luckily, it turned out that I wasn't as stupid as I felt. A few years later, we were given an IQ test, and, even though I didn't take it very seriously, I apparently did OK, because from then on when the nuns would refer to my grades they'd badger me with phrases like, "For a child with your intelligence, you should be doing much better." I afraid the only class I ever took seriously during my twelve years of parochial school was typing. Why typing? I felt it was a skill I'd need for my distantly imagined career as a writer, and I actually became the fastest typist in my class, a

development that upset the best girl students to no end. Other than that, I spent most of my school days gazing out the window, daydreaming. The habit used to get me in all kinds of trouble. It wasn't until years later that I realized I was being carried away by what finally turned out to be one of the most special things about me, which is that I always seem to have had a good imagination. The great change in my life occurred when I stopped applying it to childhood pranks and turned it to more worthy pursuits.

I must've heard some of the things the nuns were inculcating as best they could, though, because I managed to get all the way through school by remembering what I could from class. I finally relented and studied when I got to my senior year and the time had arrived to apply to college. Finals for the last six-week period before the applications would be sent in were scheduled for the following day. I actually carried home all my books and studied them that night. And, to my own surprise, as well as to the astonishment of the nuns, I made the honor roll. Off went my applications, and I was accepted at the college my parents had decided I should attend. Soon, I would be on my way to a career they had chosen that was entirely wrong for me.

But, before I get to that, I'd like to tell you about two summer vacations I think you'll find interesting.

During the summer after high-school graduation, I went where lots of kids from Pennsylvania go for work -- the Jersey shore. My time there occurred, as I mentioned earlier, way before gambling took precedence over other attractions. The first job I got was in a sandwich shop on the boardwalk, called Sammy Sullivan's Atomic Submarines.

(takes up a spatula)

As luck would have it, the day I began the job, there was a convention of Seventh Day Adventists. To better serve the visitors, Sammy had ordered vegeburgers and vegesteaks. They came packed in tall cans, soaked in oil. And I learned that the bone of the vegesteak was a stalk of celery. The Adventists would walk up to the counter and nonchalantly say things like, "I'll have a vegeburger with ketchup." I tried to take the dear souls seriously, but for some unaccountable reason I couldn't stop laughing. I stood there frying the things with tears streaming down my cheeks. Sammy was quick to detect my affront and told me sternly, "You laugh at my customers one more time and you're fired." About five seconds later, I was out of work.

Within a few days, I landed a job that would never attract a line of applicants. There were two hotels that were owned by the same people. When the one on Atlantic Avenue filled up, the customers were referred to the one on a side street a couple of blocks away. My job consisted of carrying their luggage from one hotel to the other one. I performed that donkey work for about half of a sweltering day before I staggered into the manager and quit.

After that, I couldn't find another job and hardly had anymore spending money than I could write home for. So I limited myself to one meal a day at the same sandwich shop. For a dollar-twenty-five I was able to buy a beverage and a hero sandwich, which was then called a hoagie. The

sandwich man always pulled the bread out of the roll before he added the sliced meat and other ingredients. It never occurred to me to ask him to leave the bread in there, so I could feel a little fuller until my next sandwich.

In those days, Atlantic City had a few nightclubs that offered entertainment. That year Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, who were just then becoming well-known, were performing at one of them. I lived in a broken-down hotel where there was a performer whose entire act consisted of mouthing the words of famous songs to a tape that played behind the curtain. He actually made a living at it, and he invited me to go see him. The audience loved him. I also became friends with a couple of proverbially nice hookers from Philadelphia, but sex wasn't part of my relationship with them. I don't want to attribute that to a sudden burst of will-power. I simply knew them well enough to know they usually had VD. Sadly enough, if you looked closely at the youngest and prettiest one -- a shapely girl with a nicely curved nose and long black hair -- you could see three or four black lumps on her face under her heavy makeup. Rumor among the cognoscenti was that they were caused by an untreated form of such an illness.

I spent one more summer at the Jersey Shore, between my third and fourth year of college. I went with a friend I'd met in school, and we decided to give Wildwood a try. To get a job, I started at one end of the beachfront and drove from place to place. When I got to one motel, the owner said he was only looking for a lifeguard. He asked if I had any experience, and, since I could swim across the Youghioheny River, I said yes. So he hired me. I didn't know much about saving drowning people, so I drove straight to the Cape May Public Library and took out two books -- one on lifesaving and one on swimming lessons. I read them that night, and the next day I showed up, ready to save anyone -- and teach swimming if the occasion arose. Each morning I had to be there by 8 a. m. to vacuum the bottom of the pool. And, in the afternoon, I made a little extra money by giving swimming lessons to children of the guests. The rest of the time, I sat in my chair and worked on my tan, which would leave permanent freckles on my shoulders that I later understood as sun damage. The only time people in the pool had to get along without my attentive eye was when a guest checked in or out. At that time, I had to perform the other job the owner wanted me to do -- carry luggage to and from the rooms. In the morning, I'd help with checkouts. And when a car pulled into the lot, I'd keep one eye on the door of the office. As soon as the new guests emerged and headed for their car, I'd run down to help out. Fortunately, only one person got into trouble in the pool during the summer, and when he began to gasp and shout, I was, through a unlikely piece of fortune, there to leap in and pull him to safety.

My friend had a much shorter stay in Wildwood. In fact, he was driven out of town after two weeks. How did such a thing happen? The job he found was raising money for the local Booster Club. It didn't pay much and he was caught trying to make it pay more. After he left, I stayed in the same house but moved to a smaller room. I spent my nights in the local clubs, standing around observing life like a cigar-store Indian. Then one morning I saw a cute girl go into the room next to mine. She was the new arrival I had been waiting for. We got to know each other, and we both seemed to want to enjoy the pleasures that the fleeing summer could offer. Thanks

to her, I had my first experience of sort of living with a woman, and I decided it was definitely superior to being alone. In fact, she was so nice and pretty she spoiled me, and I would spend the rest of my life trying to recapture the wonder of such a relationship. I discovered that it's kind of a trap to need someone, because you need her before the right woman shows up. I've had my share of attempts that didn't work out and, as a result, I often say that some people took the bridge to the island of love. I finally got there, but I had to wade across the crocodile-infested river. Oh, sure, I had some moments of joy and wonder along the way, but by the time I got to the other side, I had some pretty big bites taken out of me. So much for the delights of questing, ever questing.

Now, for the career my parents had chosen for me. My mother had been an English and a French teacher at West Virginia University. She was also Phi Beta Kappa, and, after I was off to college, she went back to W. V. U. and got her masters in library science. Then she became, until retirement age, the librarian at a nearby school. Unfortunately, when my career was under discussion, academia was far behind her and she had pretty much learned to live within the horizons of Cokeville. As a result, she didn't have much hope that I could make a living as a writer. And my dad didn't have a trace of it. No wonder. In Cokeville, the whole idea of being a writer was very remote. Yet, in my sophomore year, the nun who taught English, who had somehow taking a liking to me, noticed that I had what she called "a way with words" and actually suggested that I should become a writer. And, by the age of seventeen, I had already written, in confident ignorance, a couple of short stories. But my nascent abilities would have no say in the matter. What would?

I had an uncle in a nearby town who was an optometrist. He had, in fact, not one, but two busy offices, where, as he told my parents, "patients were lined up waiting to be examined." And the generous soul had said he'd like me to take over his practice. Now, as I trust you understand, such an offer seemed to them, in a town as poor as ours, a so-called golden opportunity that only a fool would pass up. So, when it was time to talk about college, my father and mother sat me down on the glider one afternoon and made their case. I resisted, but my dad finally became exasperated, and said, "If you don't go study to be an optometrist, I'm not paying to send you to college." Well, he sounded serious. Then my mother made the gentle point that, if I did try to become a writer and failed, I'd at least have, as those often-repeated words of parental advice go, "something to fall back on." So I made a deal. I said I'd do what they wanted, but when I graduated, I'd go to New York to be a writer. They agreed with a smile, convinced that I'd get over that highly impractical dream.

Although I'd return for visits, my departure to college marked the end of what I consider my Cokeville years. But, since you know so much about where I came from, I thought you might want to know a little about what happened after I left.

A few years later my brother took his turn on the glider. Frank had shown an early aptitude for music, so by now my dear parents really had their hands full. In fact, a few years before he had asked my mother to take him for guitar lessons, and he had stayed with them. But our dad had

plans for him, too. Frank had always been his unspoken favorite, as I seemed to have been my mother's. So, as you might have guessed, dad had chosen him to take over his own practice. Frank wasn't at all interested, but, sure enough, soon he was off to Indianapolis to begin the necessary studies.

While I always felt frustrated, I finally made somewhat of a peace with my college years by deciding that they would function as sort of a literary stipend, so, while I studied the sciences, I also embarked on my own reading program and eventually even signed up for the fiction writing course offered through the mail by what was called The Famous Writers School. The course took three years to complete, and, since I wanted to know if I could pick up anything I didn't seem to know instinctively, I stayed with it. And my brother did something along the same lines. While dutifully pursuing a career that was entirely wrong for him, he began, within a year of his arrival, to study drums with the percussionist of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. And, while both of us felt obliged to complete our studies, we proved to be so cussedly determined that, independently of each other, we came to New York -- and never pursued for a moment the careers our dear father had so passionately dreamed for us.

I don't know many more of the details of my brother's voyage, but I can share some highlights of mine. Although I felt deeply frustrated, I was managing the setup pretty well, until I got to graduate school. Then I made what turned out to be a great mistake. During the first semester, I got the highest grades in my class. Somehow, I had also gotten the highest grade in organic chemistry, and the Ph. D. who was my professor invited me to be his lab assistant. As a result, I spent many hours during my sophomore year mixing reagents, correcting freshman chemistry exams, and making sure the bodies in the anatomy lab were well-preserved. And all my professors thought the world of me.

The trap was, I liked my literary interests more and more and my studies less and less. As a result, I had slipped, by the end of my junior year, to seventeenth in my class out of about forty students. Worse yet, I had been thrown out of class twice for reading -- once for The Complete Poetry of Robert Frost and another time for Anna Karenina. While the faculty effusively commended a student who had gone from about number seventeen to rank fifth or sixth, they were incensed that I had done the reverse, so incensed, in fact, that at the end of my junior year, they expelled me.

How, I asked myself, could I let my parents down after all their sacrifices? So I went around to each faculty member and professed my deep interest in following in their footsteps. They relented a bit and decided that I should take a year off to think about my career. If I still wanted to come back, I'd be allowed to. My parents were relieved, but by now I was a little confused. Was I, little Phil from Cokeville, out of my mind for getting into such a dreadful situation by thinking I could be a writer? I felt I needed some sort of confirmation that I at least had some aptitude. So I took out the yellow pages and found a place in Center City Philadelphia that specialized in testing for aptitude and achievement. I called and learned that three days of testing were required. Then I called my parents and asked if I could sign up. They agreed I might finally have a good idea. When I completed the tests, I was sent for an evaluation to the

elderly Ph. D. who headed the facility. He offered me a seat beside his desk. I asked him how I had done. I'll never forget what happened. He looked at me sternly and said, "Well, I'll tell you, son, if I wanted to send you to hell, I'd send you to optometry school."

Then he went on to show me a chart. The charming thing about it was that there were illustrations of men running across the bottom of the page toward achievement, and he had drawn a series of red lines to indicate the extent my various aptitudes. You're free to make up your mind about how I'm doing tonight, but that day I noticed one of the lines went clear to the edge of the page and was tipped with an arrow pointing beyond it. Then he said more than my uncertain soul needed to hear. "I can't measure your writing aptitude," he told me, "because it's beyond my norms."

And the delightful fellow actually went on to say I should be an author, an English professor, or - you'll love this -- a lawyer. I confessed that I had a year off, and he told me about The Poor Richard Club, which is Philadelphia's gathering place for journalism and advertising professionals. He said the club had a school where most of the courses were taught by people who worked in the two fields. Best of all, it was a one-year school, and he suggested that I go there during my involuntary sabbatical.

Although my mother was more agreeable about the idea than my dad, I soon found myself studying subjects I generally enjoyed. And when I graduated, I received The Poor Richard Club Award for graduating first in my class. Now, you'd think I would have just gone off to pursue some sort of career in writing. But my parents had been generous enough to send me there, and I felt obliged to see things through for them.

So back I went to working on the wrong career. The school operated the largest free-eyeglass program in Philadelphia, and I spent most of my senior year examining eyes in the downtown clinic or at the prisons and many nursing homes we took care of.

At last, the day of my graduation arrived. After the ceremony, my parents asked me what I planned to do. By now I felt I had finally done justice to their efforts, so I said I was going to do what I had always told them I would do. They seemed consoled by the fact that if I failed I could still always take over my uncle's practice. Thankfully, I never had to. It took me a while to get my first job as a writer, but once I got started, I never had to look back.

Before I leave behind the years I spent on the career my parents hoped I'd take up, I'd like to say that all the years of studying science had lasting and, I think, many positive effects on me. First, it made me more logical than I might otherwise have become. Despite Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, studying the ways science has learned to describe the everyday workings of the world does discipline the more unruly proclivities of the mind. And, second, I learned to appreciate the irrefutably helpful and cleansing light science has brought to our lives and, as a result, to feel glad I live in a world that is, at least compared with the past, technologically advanced.

After graduation, I immediately began to look for a job in Philadelphia. I was eager to prove I could get my career going and, during graduate school, I had gotten married and become a father in significantly less than nine months. So I had two other people to take care of.

To my surprise, none of the teachers who had given me an "A" offered me a job. I took a test at the venerable newspaper The Philadelphia Inquirer to be a book reviewer. I was given two books and was instructed to write a short review of both of them in twenty minutes. Feeling awfully exploitative of the two authors' efforts, I looked over the dust jackets and leafed through the books as long as I dared. Then I wrote what I could. I did not get the job.

Not being able to get a start in Philadelphia, I turned my hopes toward New York, even though I couldn't afford to move there. I lucked out and landed my first job. It was with Grolier and consisted of writing pieces that went through the mail to sell The Encyclopedia Americana and the Dr. Seuss books. My salary was \$125 a week. I commuted from Philadelphia every day, and, just when I was turning into an exhausted little green man, I got a copy training job at McCann-Erikson, the large ad agency. I had to take a salary cut to get it -- down to \$100 a week, but now I felt I had a solid beginning. So I moved with my wife and son to an apartment in the closest suburb to New York we could afford.

The training program consisted of sorting and delivering mail, except that once a week I went to a one-hour class that was conducted by two well-known copywriters. They handed out assignments, and the next week they discussed the successes and shortcomings of our efforts.

I remember many a day walking along the hallways pushing my mail cart and hearing a secretary call, "Mailboy!" Meanwhile, my mother continued to send me ads from professional journals that offered quite a lot of money if I'd pursue, in any way, the career she and my father hoped I'd take up. After three months of training, I was sent from the mailroom for a one-month trial as a junior copywriter. By now I was the perfect trainee: I could write a bright ad or a commercial but I didn't have to be paid as if I could. As a result, I was allowed to leave the mailroom behind forever. A few months later, the first ad I had written won an award, and I was on my way to a meteoric career that was only curtailed, some years later, by my determination to write other things. When I was offered a job as the creative director of a large agency, the chairman and the president told me I'd have 250 writers and art directors that, in their words, I'd have "to get in shape and show what good advertising is." Despite the compensation they offered, I knew the amount of input I'd be faced with would be the end of me as the writer I had come to New York to become. So, much to the dismay of the person at Advertising Age who had sent me for the job, I turned it down and went free-lance, forever.

By then commercials I had written had aired in Cokeville. When I was still working in agencies, I wrote 14 humorous commercials for Dr Pepper that became quite well known and won a lot of awards. My mother became proud of me and used to tell her friends that I wrote them. And she told me about how my dad finally made peace with what I was doing. When he saw one of the spots on television, he turned to my mother and said simply, "I guess he'll make a living." I'd like to return to Cokeville for the last time, but before I do let me tell you about the most

important thing that happened after I came to New York in 1966. During the next few years, the Vietnam War was at its height. I felt a deep identification with the movement to stop it. In fact, the war and death that permeated the times seemed to squeeze a scream of life affirmation out of me. I got up at five each morning and, for the next four years, wrote a book about my thoughts and feelings. I called it "Peace and Life" and found an agent who agreed to look at it. I dropped it off in the morning, and he called me in the afternoon to say he thought it would sell millions of copies. I was elated. He sent it off to a publisher. Two weeks later it came back with a letter from the editor, saying he was sure the book would find a wide readership but that it wasn't right for him.

The agent continued to send the manuscript to one publisher at a time, and each of them would take from one to three months to respond. I felt the book would have important value for a lot of people, so I was eager to have it published. To get myself through the long waits, I'd sit on the couch and drink wine and/or smoke grass. Unlike Bill Clinton, I inhaled. But, except for a few parties, that was about the only time I smoked it. There were two reasons I abstained. First, as another writer and I used to say, "When the best fun you have is with what's between your ears, why fool around with it?" And, second, I always felt depressed the next day. And, while I think I'm capable of uncommonly serious thoughts, feeling low for extended periods just isn't like me; in fact, I sometimes say I seem to have the simple-mindedness of a cork. If what's holding me down releases the pressure for a second or so, I float right back up. Once in a while, I reassured myself that I might have written something worthwhile by getting out the laudatory letter the Ph. D. in Philadelphia had written about my aptitude. Trying to do something on your own can make you do things like that.

After about a year, the agent gave up, and I did my best to get the manuscript around myself. The most positive thing that happened is, an editor at a large publishing house was kind enough to sit me down and say, "Phil, I like what you're saying. And, if you were the head of the U. N. or something like that, I'd publish it. But who are you? Nobody. So who cares what you think?" While I didn't find what he told me very encouraging, I found it enlightening. I decided to make one last effort. I made an excerpt of about fifty-pages and sent it out to every publisher I thought might be interested. Still no luck. So I bought two trunks and put the manuscript in them. One wasn't big enough, because by now I had written two versions of the book and had copies of both of them, too. And I've lugged the trunks around with me from apartment to apartment every since. Who knows? Maybe one day. The stress of waiting taught me one of the biggest lessons I think anyone who's pursuing a difficult dream can learn; and that's to keep the wholeness of your life in mind and never subordinate it to one thing, or you sort of create a handle the world can grab you by and shake you. Besides, doing so is actually an injustice to your whole life, of which writing or whatever you dream of doing is only a part.

When I was writing the book, I began to dwell on a thought that I felt could be the basis of an ethic that would be right for the times. It was Albert Schweitzer's concept of "Reverence for Life." Undaunted after all the rejections, I went to the Schweitzer Center near the U. N. and asked for permission to use their library. I wrote a play about him, and I hope one day I think it's

ready to share with you. Then, a few years later, I came across the same phrase in the poetry of Wordsworth, who had mentioned "reverence for life" in passing. Thinking about the subject more, I realized that a similar thought, "the sanctity of life," is a neglected commonplace. So were any of my thoughts original? I think so. And I still try to express them through my work.

We seem to have gone far enough beyond Cokeville now, so let me go back, and I'll conclude with the tragedy that destroyed my family -- shattered it, like a diamond hit the wrong way. As I mentioned earlier, my sister was beautiful, smart, and my parents' pride and joy. One morning when I was eleven years old, and she was sixteen, I came downstairs and saw my parents sitting on the couch with a man I had never seen before. He was holding open a three-ring binder, and they were looking through it with him. I noticed that my mother looked deathly pale, and my dad's hair seemed to have turned yellowish-gray overnight. When I got closer, I discovered that they were picking out a tombstone for my sister.

She had been out on a date the night before with her boyfriend, who was the basketball star of the parochial school. As I heard the story, they had decided to drive to Beaver Falls, a town near Pittsburgh, to see his sister's new baby. On the way, he slammed into the back of a flatbed truck. He dragged my sister out of the car. As an eagle scout, he should have known better than to move her, but it was too late for such considerations. A broken rib had pierced her lung, and she bled to death in the emergency room of the Beaver Hills hospital. He suffered a broken jaw.

The accident was reported on the top left of the front page of the Cokeville Courier. People lined up around the block to come to our home during the viewing. I remember sitting in the kitchen, in the same seat where my father had made me eat the pack of cigarettes, watching the sports hero drink tea with milk in the place where my father had sat. I don't know if he ever made peace with what happened. I know nothing could heal my parents. My mother locked herself in her bedroom for over a year. She had been a devout Catholic before, but now she decided to live for the time she'd be reunited with my sister in heaven. From then on this life meant almost nothing to her. My father spent the rest of his life crying almost steadily. He'd go to the office, attempting to keep busy but the sorrow ate him up inside. He had been a strong, health-conscious man when it happened, who, everybody thought, would live to be the proverbial hundred. But he got Parkinson's from the trauma and died at the age of eighty, no longer able to expand his rib cage enough to clear out his lungs. He was taken to the Cokeville hospital for treatment, but while he was there he developed pneumonia and died. My brother and I weren't able to get back before he passed away.

My mother, who was much younger, survived almost twenty years longer. Eventually she became a little involved in my brother's life and mine. She had been living in our home in Cokeville, and I persuaded her to try to live near us in New York. She gave the idea a try, but the city overwhelmed her. She had sisters and a brother in Wheeling and she wanted to go back there. She sold our home in Cokeville to the only thriving business there, which is burying it. The man who owned the funeral home across the street bought it and knocked it down to put in an extra parking lot. But he didn't go ahead with the project, and for years all that was left of the

place where I grew up was an empty lot with uncut grass.

My mother lived in Wheeling by herself for a couple of years. Then when one of her brothers retired -- the uncle who wanted me to take over his practice -- he and his wife moved in with her. I'd call her every Sunday and see her a couple of times a year. She had arthritis and toward the end, when she landed at LaGuardia, she had to be met with a wheel chair. In the last years, we went to see her. Now, she had loved to play bridge since her college days. One night she came back home, proudly announced to her brother that she had come in second, and went upstairs to pray. He found lying across the bed, unconscious from a massive stroke. She never regained consciousness.

We got back to see her at the hospital before she died. The doctor told us the hemorrhage was so massive that there was no hope. She would lie there, until the seeping blood built up so much it would press against the back of her brain, which contains the center for breathing, and then she'd pass away. There was nothing we could do but wait. We called a priest to give her the last rites. When he got there, he checked and found out that she had been given them before we arrived. He began to complain about being dragged to the hospital for nothing. We felt his behavior wasn't consistent with our mother's devotion. My brother asked him to step out of my mother's room and told him unfortunate things would happen if he didn't just leave. After two days, she stopped breathing.

My mother's funeral mass was at the church where she had attended 7:30 mass every morning since she had moved to Wheeling. The older priest she had known during those years did not officiate. Apparently, he was too busy. A young priest who had only been at the parish for two weeks said the mass. Before it began, he asked me if I could tell him a few things about her, so he could make his eulogy more personal. When he delivered it, he mispronounced her last name.

I was not pleased, but I reconciled myself to the fact that what she had believed at least did her some good during her life. I suppose that one of the reassuring things about providing an uncertain cure for death is that no complaints come back from the graveyard.

A number of years before my mother died, she got to see a showcase performance of some of my writing at The Actors Studio. I wish she could be here tonight. But then, like all of us, she came into life and went out of it. And while sorrow at her passing is natural, I find great joy in the fact that she was able to enter this life and partake of it. I hope being here tonight is something that adds to your own journey through it. Much love and goodnight.

BLACKOUT

THE END