

Extracts from Cousin Mike: A Memoir

Daniel Nester

BECOMING THE TREE

In 1839, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his journal that “there is no history, only biography.” Two years later, he expands on this point in his essay “History.” “All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography.”

We dig into our histories like the archeologist, Emerson writes, who digs and digs “until he can see the end of the difference between the monstrous work and himself.” I keep Emerson’s words close by, taped on my wall. They reassure me and I guess they haunt me as I try to put together my own biography.

I am going to try to tell you about the events in my own biography, events that occur in and around 1985 and center around the time when my father up and leaves our family. I am seventeen years old. I live in a small blue-collar town in South Jersey, Maple Shade. I am a senior at Camden Catholic High School in nearby Cherry Hill. My father, Michael, a truck driver who had been laid off for a couple of years, recently has gotten back on union rolls. He has had an affair that leads to the disintegration of my parents’ marriage.

The state of affairs in my home is bleak; we do not get along; no one talks to each other, and each of us—my sister, mom, dad, and I—try our best to go about living our lives. The backstory of my father: you should know he is a large, hairy man from Arizona; he has a high Mensa-level IQ and is frustrated with his back-breaking job loading trucks at night; he has grown fascinated with an amalgam of astronomy, German philosophy, and European-centered eugenics. All of which is a nice way of saying my father is a bit of a Nazi sympathizer.

I know full well that the “monstrous works” of my father I dig into are not the worst thing anyone has ever done. And my history, the same as anyone else’s, is indeed subjective. And my biography, the same as anyone else’s, is not a series of vignettes and dreams arranged and etherized upon a table. I don’t know for sure if one’s story, one’s biography, can

stand in for history, for everyone else’s story. Emerson seems to say so, and I know it’s the only story I have left to tell.

ROSE GARDEN

TRUCK DRIVER DIVORCE!
IT’S VERY SAD!
Bust yer ass
To deliver some string beans,
Deliver some string beans,
Deliver a whole bunch of string beans,
To
UTAH!
—Frank Zappa

After my father confesses to his affair and before my mom calls us into their bedroom to tell us, she throws her husband out of the house. Since we don’t have real luggage, she stuffs his clothes into trashbags.

She spends the afternoon on her parents’ bed. She can’t believe what is happening. Surrounded by her sister and her mother, covered in three blankets, my mother is in shock. Her body is cold. My Aunt Terry plugs in heating pads and puts them on her feet.

“Of course he wasn’t working overtime all those nights,” my mom says. “He was screwing around with the girl at work.”

Eventually, my father calls my mom from the cheap motel where he is staying, the Sharon Motor Inn on Route 73, about 1.5 miles away from the Maple Shade bar where Martin Luther King was thrown out thirty-five years ago and about three miles away from another motel where I was conceived fifteen years ago.

I don’t have enough money to stay here, he says. I have to come home.

He leaves a bouquet of roses in the bedroom; attached is a note that says

I love you, I always loved you, and I will
always love you.
I'm sorry.

She throws both note and roses out, spreads them out into the backyard. When I come home from school, there are roses on the back porch, across the garden, under the apple tree. He is told to sleep on the couch. While he was away, she has taken every nightgown, every piece of underwear, every piece of clothing that she has worn to try to look nice for him, shreds them and cuts them and rips them, and puts it all in the trash.

At night, I hear my mom cry through the walls. Walloping slaps, sobs. How could you do this? I hear this over and over.

This is when I start to use headphones a lot.

FOUND, 1985: MIX TAPE, TDK CHROME 90

Side One:
The Jam, "A Town Called Malice"
Black Flag, "Rise Above"
R.E.M., "South Central Rain (I'm Sorry)"
Ready For The World, "Oh Sheila"
Chi-Lites, "Oh Girl"
The Cure, "Boys Don't Cry"
The Minutemen, "This Ain't No Picnic"
Joy Division, "Love Will Tear Us Apart"
Hüsker Dü, "Broken Home, Broken Heart"

Side Two:
The Go Go's, "Head Over Heels"
L.L. Cool J, "Rock the Bells"
Power Station, "Still In Your Heart"
Paul Young, "Every Time You Go Away"
Men At Work, "Overkill"
Todd Rundgren, "Hello, It's Me"
Cyndi Lauper, "Time After Time"
Prince, "The Beautiful Ones"

FIRST BILDUNGSROMAN WITH NORTH STAR

The night I finally get my driver's permit, I sing along to my *Purple Rain* cassette and drive thirty miles into Jersey Pinelands. New Jersey is so small, I think to myself, if I just turn around, if I change course, I'll get home.

I just get more and more lost. Half-crying, I curse out loud as I drive into a Wawa parking lot, the inky sky full of stars and cowshit-smelling air.

The kid who works there is playing Ms. Pac Man, so I can't ask him. I call home collect from the Wawa's payphone. My father picks up.

"I'm lost," I say. "I can't find the name of the road," I say.

He tells me to look up at the sky. For a second, it feels like we are back in the backyard, looking through the telescope on the stand he built for us. It makes me feel safe.

"Can you find the North Star?"

I start to laugh through my crying. I thought I would be looking for road signs, exits; maybe he'd tell me to buy a map. Now he's got me looking for the North Fucking Star?

I tell him I don't remember how to find the North Star. He reminds me. "Find the Big Dipper," he says. "Look for the two stars at the end of the bowl. Follow the line over to the tip of the Little Dipper. And you'll see it: Polaris, the North Star."

"Then," he says, "go the other way."

BRASILIA CROSSED WITH TRENTON

I wish that I could tell my story

To all the people that listened to my story long ago

—Bob Mould, "Brasilia Crossed With Trenton"

Weeks before he leaves, my dad and I drive up to the northernmost edge of Route 130, where it reaches Route 1. He's taken me along to work on one of his second jobs, the only one that made him money: delivery truck runs for the Post Office from the north end of South Jersey to the

south end of North Jersey. On the way, there's plenty of time to talk. Which is why I always wanted to go along.

We discuss noumena and phenomena and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

"Look at this lunch box," he says, and taps the top of the black dome lunchbox that rests between us. "You know it's there because you can see it, you can put your hand on it. You hear me tap on it. You can even smell it if you open it up. That's called a *phenomenon*—you can verify there's a lunchbox with your senses."

I nod. *Phenomenon. Got it.*

"Now Emmanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, what he did was to pose the question: What if you can't do any of those things? What if you can't verify something's existence with your senses? That's where the noumena comes in."

Noumena. I ask about the prefix, phe-, what it means if it's taken away. It throws him off. He waves off my question, continues.

"Kant says if we can't verify with our senses, we have to overcome our senses. That's easy with this lunchbox. You have experienced it before: you've seen it, felt it. But what if it's something that you haven't experienced on a phenomenal level before? What if the "it" is a concept? Like love, happiness, loss, anger?"

My brain is about to explode. I am twelve years old, for Christ's sake.

"That's when Kant says we have to transcend our senses to grasp the noumenal. And here's the catch: We can never fully know anything. The world of phenomena simply is the world I live in, and the noumenal are ideas outside of it."

If you look at the lunchbox, he says, what you immediately see really is a lunchbox, probably combining it in your memory with a particular one—maybe that one, maybe the one I take to school or the last one I saw. The lunchbox doesn't exist beyond the phenomena; the lunchbox exists through the impression I have of it, and the conception of

lunchbox that I get from the impression.

"All our ideas come from experience," he says. "Whatever it is we see." When I look at this lunchbox, he says, what I see is not the lunchbox itself, but rather the representation of it, a picture, a mental picture. It's the *sensation* of thinking and seeing it.

"You need to use your will to make it appear in your mind," he says. I recognize that word of his, will. "You can will anything into your mind, your perception."

He buys me a big chocolate peanut butter shake at an ice cream stand that seems to be situated at the end of the world. It is, in fact, in the shadow of the Lower Trenton Bridge, the one that says

trenton makes the world takes

I think about this truck Chautauqua each time I cross the Delaware on my home to Jersey. Seeing it marks either my re-entry into hometown memories and family flashbacks or total escape. In either direction, I am so high from marijuana that to grasp noumena or phenomena escapes me. In the years leading up to graduate school, I deal pot in Philly and South Jersey to supplement my temp job as a proofreader and also to ensure a steady supply for myself. I make runs up to New York to get bags pot from H., a friend-of-a-friend who has hook-ups with a major supplier. I buy four or eight ounces at a pop, which is then placed into an airtight bag. On the train, I grab my CD walkman, write bad poems and hit on ladies in business suits.

COMPOSITE WEAVER STANCE MEMORY

It could have been Super Bowl Sunday 1985 or it could have been Easter Sunday 1985, and the extended family is crammed into my grandparents' living room, working in and out of the kitchen to fetch food for dinner and to watch TV.

My dad, ensconced in the far end of the couch in the corner of the room, as far away as possible from my grandparents' his-and-hers recliners, points at the screen.

He pulls out his imaginary pistol from an imaginary holster and assumes a two-handed weaver stance grip from his seat,

aims at an elderly woman on TV.
“Chick-Chick Boom!” he goes.

He will pause between the aim after the *Chick-Chick* and the fire of the *Boom!* He repeats these mock mercy-killings at the sight of more elderly people, black people, or anyone else on his ever-growing list of unacceptables and inferiors.

This doesn't make people laugh. We just ignore him.

THE MAINSTREAM OF CIVILIZATION SPEECH

Danny, you're my son. You're my stock, my blood. You come from blue-eyed, peasant stock. Your forefathers ransacked the Roman Empire. You're from royal blood. All the kings and queens of Europe descend from us. You come from the kings of Western Civilization, the royals Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. We come from all of them, the mainstream of Western Civilization. You come from huns, Saxons, Vikings. You were bred to rape and pillage.

You and I share this Germanic heritage, the strong peoples of Northern and Western Europe. See that? Grab my arm. Feel that muscle. Strong like a bull. We don't taint our blood. We are Aryans. We are being overrun by Jews and other brown-skinned people, decadent and lawless peoples.

We're not Christians. We are pagans. We are Overmen; Überpeople.

SECOND BILDUNGSROMAN WITH CENTER FIELD

I've been asked to the Sophomore Cotillion by Stacey Donatucci, a five-foot, extremely busty girl from my honors English class. I say yes.

With my car wash pay, I buy a “slightly irregular” suit from the Marshall's clothing outlet, put on my as-seen-on-TV Ambervision sunglasses, and I am in business. I prepare to set out with my Uncle Tom, who, with his white Cadillac, will serve as my chauffeur during these years. He often sports a tuxedo t-shirt to complete the look.

My dad compliments me on my suit and tie, compares our respective heights. He puts his right hand across the tops of our heads; we are eye-to-eye.

Then he hands me two pills. They are zinc tablets. “These will increase your virility,” he explains. He also presents to me a pair of his Naturalamb brand natural membrane condoms. He sticks both items in my jacket pocket.

It is not lost on me, even at age sixteen, that I have been given a vitamin supplement to increase the volume of my ejaculate and the means to contain said ejaculate, all in one kit for my evening.

He leaves me one bit of advice. “Remember,” he says to me on my way out the door, “Italian girls are for recreational purposes only.”

I do not take the zinc, nor do I use the Naturalamb. Tom and his high school friend Timmy take us to get ice cream at the Diamond Diner after the dance. By the time they come back to drop me and my date off, they are completely shitfaced-drunk. I walk Stacey to her front doorstep.

“Grab her tits!” Tom and Timmy whisper to me. “Grab them!”

I do not grab Stacey's tits. I give her a kiss, and I walk back to the backseat of the car. Tom and Timmy continue to ridicule me as we drive back to Maple Shade. I should go on record here that Timmy will be discovered years later and become a world-famous Bill Clinton impersonator, who regularly appears on *The Tonight Show*, CNN, and at corporate affairs.

But tonight, Tom and Timmy drive the white Cadillac onto Little League Field behind my house and drop me off in center field. They lay wheels in the infield and spray my suit with mud. I hop over the fence and go home.

FUCKING MIKE

There is, finally, inevitably, the morning when my father does not come home. That morning is Thursday, October 31, 1985. When I get back from school, I walk inside, look out past the spider plants in the bay window. What I remember the most looking outside is the empty driveway, the strip of overgrown grass gone to seed that leads to the garage door.

He isn't here, but this isn't a surprise. Maybe he's back at the Sharon Motor Lodge, drawers emptied into trash bags again.

Maybe he's off doing super-secret errands. Around this time, he starts hanging out with someone—I have to repeat it to myself when I hear this, *hanging out with someone* Jimmy S., a Maple Shade cop, a younger friend of the family, who works the night shift. They smoke a little pot, drink a little Jimmy Walker.

The question for the next twelve hours: Where is Michael? Where has Michael gone?

My mom notices that our one piece of luggage, a yellow American Tourister one of the nuns from school had given my mom so she can escape to her parents with dignity, is missing.

He calls that night. He calls at 3a.m. He calls from his sister Elena's kitchen in Tucson, Arizona. He is crying and he is shaking. He tells her how, early that morning, he drove the primered van to Philadelphia International Airport, bought a one-way ticket to Tucson. He flies to Tucson.

It is the first time he's been on a plane since he was in the Navy.

"I'm staying," my father says.

"This can't be happening. You can't be doing this," she shouts, crying. "You have to come back." Her back slides down the kitchen wall as she holds the phone.

"I'm not coming back," he says.

The next day, my Uncle Mike and Uncle Tom go to pick up the primered van at Philadelphia International Airport. My father has given the lot attendant ten dollars—"so nobody will fuck with it," he says.

My uncles run out of gas when they cross over to the Jersey side. "Fucking Mike," my Uncle Tom says, "he couldn't even leave enough in the tank to make it home." Inside the van, my Uncle Tom says, is "a pair of really good work boots." He takes them home.

Also inside the van's glove compartment are the keys and a note addressed to me.

I wish I could write what that note says, quote it in a little box right above here. I didn't even know about the note until a couple days ago. But it seems that, while everyone remembers there was a note, no one remembers what it says.

My mom says the note might not have even been addressed to me, but instead to anyone concerned in the parking lot that his son would soon come around to pick up the van. And I'm reminded of the spooky and prescient cover of the Who's *Who Are You*. The band's drummer, Keith Moon, who dies soon after the album is released, poses with the band, sits backwards on a chair. Stenciled on the back of the chair are the words

<p>NOT TO BE TAKEN AWAY</p>

I remember when the album came out, all my record nerd friends, when they weren't in mourning, saw the note on the chair as some prophecy, that they should have picked up the signs. That way, teenage boy Who fans say, Keith Moon wouldn't have gone away in 1978.

THE CRADLE WILL ROCK

This is us drinking. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery and listening to Van Halen. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery and listening to Van Halen really loud on a boombox. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery and listening to Van Halen really loud on a boombox, and seeing a pair of headlights. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery and listening to Van Halen really loud on a boombox, and seeing a pair of headlights and realizing it's the cops. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery and listening to Van Halen really loud on a boombox, and seeing a pair of headlights and realizing it's the cops and running like hell. This is us drinking Old Milwaukeees in a cemetery and listening to Van Halen really loud on a boombox, and seeing a pair of headlights and realizing it's the cops and running like hell, and then wondering where we were going to finish drinking our beer.

I am beginning my senior year of high school, and I am hanging out with a new group of friends. This new group's activity centers around drinking beer. We drink beer in church parking lots. We drink beer behind a furniture store in the Cherry Hill Mall. We finally find our favorite place to drink beer outside in Colestown Cemetery in nearby Cherry Hill. We sit at our favorite spot beside the Dickinson grave, celebrate the family members' birthdays.

I have stopped reading books, stopped looking up at the stars.

THE VISITATION

Harvey Styble, one of my dad's old coworkers, pulls in our driveway in late 1985. He sits at our table and tells my mom that all the guys in the truck barn knew what he was doing.

"The dock is a party at night," he tells her. "Beer and pot. We would get high and have a ball."

"What he was doing was getting oral sex in the parking lot, is what he was doing," my mom says. What this woman did, she says, "is to go after married men. That was what she wanted. She was living with somebody at the time who was an over-the-road truck driver. He was not the father of her baby."

My mom serves him beer, puts a bowl of pretzels on the table. Somewhere, deep down, she must have known it was still *The Other Woman*.

It's a couple weeks later, and Harvey Styble is back at our kitchen table, eating from a bowl of pretzels. He's brought his own beer this time: Bud tallboys. We know where he is, that he is staying. I am surprised to see an older man—he's older than my dad by about ten years—care so much about what's happening.

"This is wrong," he says, "just wrong."

"You are a good woman," he says to my mom at one point, almost to tears. "You're too good for him to do this to you."

I walk toward him and his sweet beer breath, help him get into his car, tell him how to get back to the highway.

MY SISTER'S PROFILE

On Friday, April 19, 1985, the night of my junior prom, after asking out three girls and rejected by all, I stay home and listen to Joni Mitchell's *For the Roses* on cassette. I light candles and sit in the middle of the living room. I cry. My dad is at work, my mom at grandmom's, and my sister is out on one of her many dates.

The night after the junior prom—April 20, 1985—I lose my virginity. It is a rushed, clumsy affair with a Shader girl whose name I forget and will never see her again. She is brought to the house by a hometown friend whose name I forget. My sister has a photographic memory about these things, so I contact her on AOL Instant Messenger.

MerdleCakes (my sister): You rang??

ProfNester (me): hey. I have to ask you couple questions.

MerdleCakes: absolutely. shoot em off

ProfNester: Think back to 1985.

MerdleCakes: k . . . Hair=brownish, braces=final year

ProfNester: Who was that vaguely guido guy from Shade I was hanging with?

MerdleCakes: Hmmm, Joe Spiotti?

ProfNester: Sounds close, but no—he was in your class.

MerdleCakes: Don DiCallo?

ProfNester: Nope. You know, string mustache, fancied himself a ladies' man.

MerdleCakes: I am thinking.

ProfNester: We brought girls back to our house one night.

MerdleCakes: Not Bobby Roberts who I worked with at Kinney is it?

ProfNester: YES!!!! Do you remember the night we brought girls back to the house?

Um, It was the night I lost my virginity.

She was the sister of some guy who was older than us.

MerdleCakes: Debbie McDonall

Shawn McDonall

ProfNester: Oh my god—you remember her name?

MerdleCakes: She was a ho bag extraordinaire . . . Short black hair. bulby nose. brown eyes, skinny-ish . . . tight jeans, striped shirt . . . hoodie jacket

ProfNester: Oh my god.

MerdleCakes: I dont have a problem with remembering outfits and hair styles.

ProfNester: You actually remember what she wore that night?

MerdleCakes: Yeah. tight, slightly faded jordache jeans, comb in pocket, and a grey and navy striped (horizontal) striped ballet shirt and those white roach killer “jazz shoes” that tied.

ProfNester: This is fucking freaky.

MerdleCakes: Frightening, I know.

ProfNester: I am writing about this night, because it was the night after my junior prom at Camden Catholic, which I did not attend.

MerdleCakes: Why are you going there dude??

A week after losing my virginity, another hometown friend, Tom Hartman, drives me to Rutgers University to attend my first real rock concert. He picks me up in his Black 1985 Mustang, and we listen to punk and new wave bands—with exotic names like Microdisney, XTC, Style Council, Red Guitars, Smiths, Undertones—all the way up the Turnpike. We pass around a bottle of peach schnapps on the way up, and when we arrive in Piscataway, we drink bottles of this strong beer called Hacker-Schoor Oktobkerfest. I am fairly blotto by the time my new favorite band, called R.E.M., takes the stage for a free outdoor concert.

There’s about fifty people. I sway on the wet grass and mud on the field. I look around at the college kids in white make-up and long black coats who drink cases of Red White & Blue beer. I wear white jeans, untied docksiders, no socks, and a poncho with a Corona beer logo on it. I throw my poncho away and put on an R.E.M. Murrmur shirt.

“Could everyone turn around, look at the sunset,” Michael Stipe, the band’s lead singer, tells us before their encore. “That’s beautiful.”

We turn around. The empurpled sky gets dark and more cloud-filled. The band starts to play a song I don’t recognize at first. Then Stipe starts singing: “Someone told me long ago/there’s a calm before the storm.” It is a cover of Credence Clearwater Revival’s “Have You Ever Seen the Rain?”

The sun sets at 7:51 in Piscataway, NJ that night.

CHATTERBOX

I am arrested the night of August 17, 1985. Before this happens, I drink two beer bongs—three Bud tallboys poured into a funnel and force-drunk from a tube—then walk the Ocean City, NJ boardwalk with a troupe of football team goons. We look for funnel cake. Everything is closed. Everything except Junior’s Miniature Golf Course, which has a left-open gate.

Six offensive linemen, angry about not getting their munchies, tear a post out of the boards. This post holds up a foot-wide wooden golf ball replica, a quarter cut out to serve as a podium for keeping score.

A CALM BEFORE THE STORM

April 28, 1985
 Busch Student Center, Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ; Support: The Neats

Set: Feeling Gravitys Pull / Harborcoat / Green Grow The Rushes / So. Central Rain (I’m Sorry) / Good Advices / Hyena / Seven Chinese Brothers / Driver 8 / Can’t Get There From Here / Sitting Still / Maps And Legends / Talk About The Passion / Auctioneer (Another Engine) / Old Man Kensey / Pretty Persuasion / When I Was Young / Little America

Encore 1: Have You Ever Seen The Rain? / (Don’t Go Back To) Rockville / Life And How To Live It; Encore 2: White Tornado / Theme From Two Steps Onward / Gardening At Night / 9-9 / Windout

R.E.M. Timeline. “1985 Concert Chronology.” 24 March 2007 <<http://members.iinet.net.au/~darryl74/1985.html>>.

I stand lookout as the football players tear what looks like six-foot-tall taffy out from its foot-long bolts. One guy holds it on his shoulder, cavemen-style. As we walk down the plank, a spotlight shines in our eyes.

Everyone scrams. The rent-a-cops surround us, but not before most of us get away. Most, that is, except for me and two slow-footed linemen.

The jocks are eighteen, and are arrested, processed, and released. They will perform community service in the Fall. I am seventeen, still a minor, and so I'm held in a cell overnight.

When I use my phone call to dial home, my mom takes down the details and starts to cry. Then my dad wrests the phone away from her.

"Don't tell these cops anything," he says. I hardly recognize his voice. "All cops are goddamn crooks, and you didn't do anything."

I am picked up by my teary-eyed mother, my disappointed grandfather. We don't even get in the car. We just go up 9th Street to the Chatterbox diner, eat eggs and bacon, and I pretend it's summer and we're just finishing a week with my aunts.

THE ORIGINAL FILTH

As the years go on, to summon the memory of my father turns my head into the grand gesture of opera. I am the Iago who seeks revenge on the world. My father plays the role of hairy king, Othello or "The Father," god and human at the same time, a beast, a monster, and I am the heir to this throne.

Both beasts in my production never believe in each other. I am the childboy stuck on the lower rung, between warning and scold, between the hair and that firm smacking hand down from the Monkey Bump Sky.

Later, in Act III, big monster and little monster will stand off with their jawclenched refusals. How can I kill off this model and not revisit, replay the drama again?

In other words: I want to remember the love and forget the influence, the presence, but doing that has been more difficult than anything I've ever done.

"I believe in a cruel God," Iago sings in the Verdi opera. "I feel the original filth in me." Another translation: "I feel the primeval slime."

TWO PARABLES

On my desk: His copy of *The Possibility of Intelligent Life Elsewhere in the Universe: Report Prepared for the Committee on Science and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety-Fourth Congress, First Session, 1975*. I think of the possibility of my own universe. What if, for the sake of argument, my dad was who he was, but did not leave, did not do A. and B. and C., stuck around, supported our family? Would I have still broken off, still rebelled, still been my own man? How willful would I have been, how much would I have regretted?

What occurs to me is that my father has had the luxury of making conscious choices all his life: a conscious choice whether or not to be a doctor's son. Sure the elder Nester was a quack, a psycho. But he gave him a trailer and a credit card. A fucking credit card. And a trailer. He made a conscious choice to turn into a hood, a delinquent. And he made a conscious choice to leave our family. I try this theory out on my sister.

"He knew we had mom," my sister says. "You know what I mean? He just wasn't the parent mom was."

"He wasn't a dad. He was this weird creature who lived in our house. If he was a regular dad, we might have ended up being some weird brats, or who the frick knows?"

This is the longest I've ever talked about all this with my sister.

"Let's just say he never went off the deep end. He would have wanted to know what we were studying, he would have wanted us to come home from college, and he'd ask what we learned today, and then he would have told us certain things were bullshit."

"Did he need to ask you those questions when you were in second grade? No. But when we were in college, it would

have been interesting questions to pose. It's like he knew he wouldn't be around when the time would come when you would normally ask those existential questions. It's like he was your mental trainer."

My sister has thought a lot of this through, and I did not want to poke holes in her logic here. But the "mental training" my sister speaks of sounds cruel the second it comes out of her mouth, and I can tell from my end of the phone she thinks the same way. It is as if we figure out how my father's Socratic sparring came at the same time the grandfather we never met, the demented Dr. Blanford Nester, gives his son hormone shots to jump-start his puberty before he leaves his sixteen year old with a trailer and a credit card. Both men "speed things up" with their sons before they leave, in some perverse abridgment of fatherhood.

Most of the women in my family lift their heads high to see silver linings; the worse things happen, the higher their chins go. When my aunts, mother and sister pose for group photos, all of them lift their faces up, almost at the sky, to keep their double chins out of the frame, to keep up appearances.

In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus tells this story where a man is going away, and gives his servants "talents"—a block of precious metal worth thousands of dollars. He gives one servant five talents, two to another two, and one to a third. The one who gets five invests them and doubles his money. So does the two-talent servant. But the servant with one talent buries his. When the master comes home, he's proud of the first two servants' work, of course. But the third talent-burier, he scolds. He could have at least deposited it, he says.

The moral of the parable? Here's what Jesus says in Matt. 25: 28-30:

For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

AFTER THE FALL

We have two crabapple trees behind our house. Each fall, fat apples fall to the ground. At night I could hear them thud down to the ground, my own little Eden. That fall, I throw the apples at the tall outfield fence in the baseball field just behind our backyard. I can hear them smooch into the fence. The bigger apples stick there in the fence until winter. That fall, I spend whole nights throwing apples against that fence, until my shoulder is so sore I can't use a pen at school. The fence is so apple-filled it blocks out the moon.

"And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn," Keats writes in "To Autumn."

The backyard fence, my windmill.

BECOMING THE TREE

Once my dad leaves, my life ceases to be interesting. This is true. In the months that lead up to that week in October 1985, as my dad contemplates hauling his ass out of Jersey, my life teeters between a tumble or blossom. Willa Cather once said that "most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen." Graham Greene gives writers five more years: "For writers it is always said that the first twenty years of life contain the whole experience—the rest is observation." For me, it's seventeen years, seven months, and twenty-eight days.

I had a job interview once in which a professor—a pretty famous poet, my father's age, one who writes self-centered, solipsistic poems, neurotic even, all of which I love—asks me about this "problem our society is having" with the self.

"Why do we all think we are so interesting? Why do we all think we're stars?" he asks me. "Will you be able to tell your students they aren't interesting?"

I am taken aback. Here is a guy who butters his bread writing confessional poems about me-me-me, and he's the one with a problem with other people exploiting their biographies? And the obvious occurs to me: Of course he thinks *he's* interesting; he just doesn't think anyone else is.

I tell him that I think that biography is all we have. I quote good ole Ralph Waldo, leave it at that. I don't get the job.

I think my point is that the stories my father and I have, that my family and I have, that's my biography, my history. It's also yours. They are discrete facts of separate people, sure, vignettes and tall tales that hardwire their way into the narrative of *How I Became Who I Am*. And the more complicity I exhibit in these stories, I think to myself, the more I overdepend on family lore, the more I approach the 'history' Emerson talks about.

But it's my family lore, your lore, our lore. "A painter told me that nobody could draw a tree without in some sort becoming a tree," Emerson continues, "or draw a child by studying the outlines of its form merely, — but, by watching for a time his motions and plays, the painter enters into his nature, and can then draw him at will in every attitude."

It's 2007. I'm thirty-nine. I look at myself in the mirror. His wide body has become mine. His malleable, comic facial expressions, the way he coughs in the morning, the way he sneezes, are all mine. I am becoming the tree whether I like it or not. And like him, I never find unfuzzy answers to always-asked questions.