

Chapter 1

A childhood spent in the 1930s seems much more distant than sixty years, as though it had taken place a century before that, when the streets of Troy were gaslit. Between then and now, between Troy and New Haven, there is a chasm across which swings only the frayed rope bridge of memory. Besides, like any memoir of growing up, this one is an impersonation. The author, seeking to reenact his boyhood, cannot entirely shuck his manhood. The past remains beyond total recall, no matter the exactitude of the writer. If the telling seems to have a certain staccato rhythm, it is because the past remembered is made up of small, random bursts of turbulence and long periods of stagnation. More than once, I have tied dried apricots and paper leaves to the branches of a long-dead tree to give it the appearance of life. Oh, had I the muse for it, I would do as Homer did: wear vine leaves in

my hair, strike a lyre with the flat of my hand and sing of Troy—tales of heroism, treachery, vengeance, single combat. Instead, I have only these unbaptized scraps to offer in the hope that, taken together, they will provide a glimpse of that time, that place. Perhaps they will also reveal how one boy grew up to become a doctor who writes. To Troy, then. Troy! Where in October even the dogs in the street pause to admire the foliage. Troy! Unfurling down the hillsides like the grayish pink tongue of a spaniel to lap the waters of the Hudson River.

Father was a general practitioner, one of a dozen or so who presided over the physical breakdown of the Trojans exacerbated by the poverty of the Great Depression. In addition to the usual degenerative diseases, there were rampant alcoholism, venereal infections and malnutrition. Birth defects were common and tuberculosis endemic. The phlegm on the cobblestones was apt to be red. In those days, general practitioners set broken bones, delivered babies and performed surgery. Surgery was Father's favorite. It was the "handsomeness" of the craft that he loved. I think now that the ritual and regalia of the operating room satisfied the hunger for religious faith that his natural skepticism denied him. It was from Father that I inherited a passionate interest in craft. The sight of skill and expertise in application is irresistible to me.

Once, Troy had had its day of grandeur. No house but peered out through an ophthalmic bay window at the second story; no stoop but wore a skirt of ornamental wrought iron. And so many

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churches as to make a stranger at the gates think himself about to enter the New Jerusalem. It gave the landscape the effect of wallpaper in which the pattern is repeated all around a room.

I lived in two houses in Troy. The first, on Second Street, was a three-story red-brick building with a high stoop and one of those curved wrought-iron railings. When I was seven years old, a fire caused us to move to an old brownstone on Fifth Avenue. In each house we lived right above Father's office. From my earliest days I sat on the landing and listened to the moans and cries that floated up the staircase. No words, only the howled vowels that were the language of pain, the inarticulate sounds of weeping that rose and fell above the steady rumble of Father's voice.

In the front windows of the first floor were plates of milk glass announcing the office hours: 1:00–3:00 P.M., 6:00–8:00 P.M.—which was absurd because Father would have been happy to see anybody at any time. During Father's office hours, my brother Billy and I were forbidden to speak out loud lest we disturb the sacred rites that were going on downstairs. I still have a little difficulty speaking out loud during those periods of time.

After eight o'clock, when Father came up for his dinner, Billy and I would sneak downstairs to the darkened consultation room and go to the glass front cabinet where he kept his medical textbooks. There, by the shamefaced light of a candle stub, we would look at pictures and spell out the words. Our favorite was the *Textbook of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. It was then and there that I first became aware of the rich, alliterative

language of medicine. I remember that some of the best words began with the letter C. "Cerebellum," I said out loud and let the word drip off the end of my tongue like melted chocolate. "Carcinoma"—it sounded rather like that aria from *Rigoletto* that Mother used to sing. And then I learned the word that made a surgeon of me—"Cholecholejojunostomy." All those syllables marching across the page, ending in that terminal y. It didn't matter what it meant—if that was the way surgeons talked, I was going to be one of them.

It was on one such nocturnal visit, when Billy was ten and a half and I nine, that Billy found a book on the bottom shelf all the way at the back and lying facedown so as to conceal its title. Lifted from the obscurity in which it had lain for heaven knows how long, it revealed itself to be an illustrated copy of *One Hundred Twenty Days of Sodom* by the Marquis de Sade. The cover was done in pale green silk with embossed gold lettering. The feel of it in my hands remains one of the two or three most exotic experiences of my life. O madly beat the hearts of Troy on that night of wild discovery! Of the illustrations I remember only that they were tumefacient. As for the prose, the best parts were walled up in Latin. Imagine the iron gate of Latin slammed in the face of puberty and you can imagine our suffering. It says something about Billy and me that in high school he studied math and physics while I took four years of Latin. By the time I had got to the orations of Cicero, I was able, barely, to translate the best parts of *One Hundred Twenty Days of Sodom*. I read it off to Billy, who was then in his senior year.

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“Big deal,” he said with studied nonchalance. But I was more profoundly impressed. Not so much with the behavior of the Sodomites as with the fact that Father had read it too. What could that mean? By then, he had been dead for two years. The very next day I sat in front of the coal stove and reenacted the biblical fate of Sodom page by page. Now, at last, Father could rest easy. He wouldn’t be found out. It was my finest hour.

While my father embodied the world of science, my mother represented to me the world of art. She was a singer, possessed of a small pure soprano that sounded as though a white mouse were ringing a tiny silver bell. Troy had its share of bards and troubadours, but Mother was its only *artiste*. A woman given to wearing scarves of crushed silk, floating stoles and floppy hats, she used old-fashioned hairpins, the kind that were always falling out of the masses of her dark, polished hair. Throughout the Depression she never stopped singing, both at home and in amateur productions on the stage of the Troy Music Hall. After supper, doing the dishes in the kitchen, she would usually sing. When she didn’t, I’d put down my book, go to the dish rack and start drying. Before you knew it, there would be “Caro nome” or “Ouvre ton coeur.” Then came the long evening over a book, and the ticking of Grandpa’s clock which had to clear its throat before striking the hour.

A hundred times a day, Mother sang. Sometimes no more than a brief burst of melody that blossomed without rhyme or reason in the va-

cancy of her mind, composed on the spot and vented as if to relieve the pressure of an excess of music.

Every June, the same catbird set up its nest in a lilac bush in the backyard. All summer it imitated her vocalizing, up and down the scale. One year she sang "Parigi o cara" from the last act of *Traviata* over and over again until the bird had it down pat and joined her in a duet. Needless to say, this caused a sensation among her next of kin and confirmed our suspicions that she was a witch. Draped about the voice was the ample figure and flamboyant personality of a diva. On the stage of the music hall, in a flowing tunic, with her arms thrown out like wings and an expression of such transport as to suggest headlessness, she looked for all the world like someone who had just flown in from Samothrace. Billy said she looked more like washing blown out on a clothesline. Indeed, she was the most expressive singer in the world, throwing bosom, eyebrows, earlobes and elbows into it. Once she sang "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life" lying supine on the floor. Eyes either awash or ablaze, she ranged over the English music-hall repertoire, French art songs, lullabies and grand opera. A typical musical soiree in the parlor—at which attendance was strongly suggested—might include a pair of Civil War songs of the bathetic genre, which, by the sheer force of her personality, she transformed into touching lament.

From "Just Before the Battle, Mother":

Farewell, Mother, you may never
press me to your heart again
But oh, you'll not forget me, Mother,
if I'm numbered with the slain.

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And its sequel, "Just After the Battle, Mother":

Mother, dear, your Boy is wounded
and the night is drear with pain
But still I feel that I shall see you
and the dear old home again.

These were followed by "Driven from Home":

Out in this cold world, out in the street,
Asking a penny of each one I meet
Shoeless I wander about thro' the day
Wearing my young life in sorrow away

and the equally fraught "Take Back the Heart
That Thou Gavest":

Take back the heart that thou gavest
What is my anguish to thee?
Take back the freedom thou cravest
Leaving the fetters to me.

Her masterpiece was a duet between a brother and sister, Paul and Florence, in which she sang both parts. It was a lugubrious meditation on the roaring of the sea entitled "What Are the Wild Waves Saying?"

FLORENCE [piu animato]:
Brother! The inland mountain—Hath it not voice
and sound?
Speaks not the dripping fountain
as it bedews the ground?

Hers are the only songs I have learned to play by heart on the piano. I could never sing them for my children without getting a lump in my throat.

Nightly prayers were mandatory, with Mother presiding at the bedside. The litany was ecumenical and depended entirely on what she felt like singing at the moment. "Shema Yisroel" alternated with Gounod's "Ave María" and, my favorite, "Keep Me, O Keep Me, King of Kings, Beneath Thine Own Almighty Wings."

When Father accused her of religious inconsistency, she defended herself: "With prayers, there is no harm in being especially sure."

Oddly, the one part of Mother that did not change with the years was the purity of her singing voice. Even when she was in her eighties, once launched from her lips, the notes fluttered and flew about the room with the same old precision and delicacy. On one of our last visits together she said how glad she was that she had an untrained voice and that she had never learned to read music. This way she wasn't a slave to the rules. It was all done by ear and by instinct. If she heard a song once, it belonged to her ever afterward. Looking at a page of music, she could tell just how a measure ought to go, and she'd just "nail it up" with confidence. It is exactly, I told her, the way a writer, discovering the uniqueness of an object or an instant, "nails it" to the page with words. A tiny smile of fellowship was her reply, my reward.

Nobody knows how it happened, but Troy Music Hall had the most perfect acoustics in North America. It still does. A whispered aside from the back of the stage can be heard in the

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uppermost row of the balcony. It was no wonder that musicians and actors delighted to perform there. They could *hear* each other. In those days, small traveling companies of actors and singers passed through and were suitably awed. Only lacking was a curtain for the stage. For some reason, this was not considered necessary to achieve a "willing suspension of disbelief." A good part of the pleasure came from watching the scenery being changed between acts. Often this was done by the performers themselves. I recall that in a performance of *Rigoletto*, just prior to Act I, the Duke and Rigoletto, in full costume, carried a table to center stage, then proceeded to cover it with a gaily colored tablecloth. But the table was round, while the cloth was square and far too small. No matter how they turned it, the cloth would not fit. At last, the exasperated Duke balled up the cloth and tossed it offstage. What a shock of recognition when in Act III Rigoletto appeared carrying the dying Gilda in a sack identical to the misfitting tablecloth! Father hooted.

"Necessity," said Mother, "is the mother of invention."

It was at the music hall that I learned that some mysteries are meant to be deepened, not solved. The play was *Macbeth*. Between Acts I and II, Mother and I went backstage, and there, standing in her royal robes, was Lady Macbeth, eating a corned-beef sandwich! When she appeared later in the sleepwalking scene, scrubbing her hands and crying: "Out, damned spot, out!" I knew it was not blood she was trying to wipe away, but mustard. I have never seen *Macbeth* since without a touch of cynicism.

Once, when Billy and I were seated in the

balcony of the music hall and onstage in a large floppy hat Mother was in the throes of "What Are the Wild Waves Saying?" we heard two men whispering in the row behind us.

"Phew!" said one. "Too small the voice, too large the temperament." Followed by muffled laughter.

I could feel Billy growing murderous. Anything could happen. Turning, he leaned over and delivered it straight into the startled faces of the men: "You're pigs!" Then, to me: "Let's get the hell out of here." Once we were out on the street, my heart swelled with admiration.

"You should have died at that moment," I told Billy. "Never again will you be so ready to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Will you shut your goddamn mouth?" he replied. It is no wonder that I followed him around like a dog. As for me, that was not to be the last time I would suffer at the hands of the unbeatable arbiters of taste.

On the stage of the Troy Music Hall Mother played the ingenue and was an utterly shameless scene stealer. Billy and I attended every performance. We wouldn't have missed it for the world. Family lore had it that, as a girl, Mother supplemented the household income by singing in the riverfront taverns of Montreal. What in the world could those illegal aliens from Poland and the Ukraine have made of the "Kashmiri Love Song"?

It was no secret that Mother did not share Father's love for Troy. Born and raised in Montreal, albeit in the ghetto of St. Urbain Street, she considered Troy a geographical come-down.