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## **Acting Is Believing**

**by Douglas Unger**

His performance in “Oedipus the King” took on life through the third rehearsal week, his lines memorized, the blocking and choreography roughly set. Still, Curtis questioned his authenticity as a suffering citizen of Thebes. The Director’s concept was *not* to stage the Chorus as the drama usually was performed—like a group of profoundly affected spectators commenting on the main actions, confining their movements to one edge or the other of the stage until they danced in solemn procession across it for their odes, singing out prayers and responding to the tragedy as elders would, something like a city council. Jon Snyder, a recent graduate of the vaunted Yale School of Drama—indoctrinated by a postmodernism fashionable in the late 1970s—envisioned the Chorus more animated than this, and more actively participating, “like the collective character of an afflicted people. Think of yourselves more like a street demonstration, a political protest,” he said.

He directed their chanted songs to hit high, often grating notes, with selected lines assigned individually among the Chorus to be called out in lamentation. Their dances would be radically more extreme and athletic than any past performance that he knew. Elvi Chong, the Choreographer, had danced with Merce Cunningham, and had learned his colorful abstract expression. She co-conspired with the Director to create angular movements, with asynchronous twists and thrusts, sudden lifts and hunchings of their shoulders, jerky tilts and stretches of their necks and tosses out of their arms, or they raised their arms in supplication with their fingers shaped into odd, arthritic-looking gestures. “The social fabric is ripping apart,” the Director said, giving notes. “People are dying in the streets. Children are stillborn. You’re disturbed at the tyranny of the king who fails to save you, and you’re conflicted, because you remember your gratitude to him for once rescuing the city. At the same time, you’re terrified at the awesome power of the punishing gods you’re praying to, and that’s your job, you *must*

preserve the sacred rites, even as you're losing faith that your prayers will be heard."

This production of "Oedipus the King" would be the headliner for the Hyde Park Summer Theater Festival, a highlight of the summer season. Rehearsals ran well into early evening on a portable stage set up in a shallow grassy bowl in the parklike, blocks-long expanse called the Midway, on the city's South side, dividing Hyde Park from one of its poorest ghettos. As the cast finished in the evenings, the sun breaking through the cloud cover over hazy, stiflingly hot Chicago would be just beginning to set into the gray summer twilight, the mosquitoes just out, swarming in off the nearby lake to sting their bare arms and the backs of their necks. Curtis Reinhart left those rehearsals tired and sore, limping gamely off to the I.C. station for the long train ride north through the decaying inner city neighborhoods, then his transfer to the el downtown, his muscles cramping up so that he had to rub his legs and shoulders with liniments as soon as he got home.

The show seemed to be coming together well enough, still, by the third rehearsal week, he was growing unsure of just what he was really playing. In the Chorus, he sang so many lines of lamentation, such as: *I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and trembling hold my heart*; and: *our sorrows defy number; all the ship's timbers are rotten*; and: *I do not know what to say, I am in a flutter of foreboding*; and on and on. Working from the Director's rehearsal notes was one thing. Curtis could imagine what they would mean in actions, but how could he *play* such emotions convincingly? What did he really know of suffering?

He felt he missed something essential in his rehearsals, an inner quality he was searching for but couldn't yet find. As the acting text he had studied for workshops put it: *You cannot play a character which you cannot understand in terms of your own experience*. Acting classes taught him what to do about this—how to go out into the world to study people, writing down observations in a character notebook. In the first week, over a lunch at The Eagle Tavern, he had been discouraged to do this by the famed British actor cast to play Oedipus. The Eagle Tavern was an informal place with tin ceilings and a pub-like atmosphere where students, artists and intellectuals in Hyde Park gathered in smoky conversation. Sir William invited selected cast members out to lunch there often during the rehearsal weeks.

What an honor to be in the presence of such an actor. His name was William Jenkins—*Sir* William Jenkins—though he told them from the first day not to embarrass him with that "anachronism of useless monarchy" he was born to in England. Even so, everyone still addressed him with his title, *Sir* William, because it seemed to please him. Sir William hadn't lived in Great Britain since his youth. He had spent most of his career in New York and Hollywood. For almost three decades, he had enjoyed no little fame on stage then in movies, his film work mostly

in supporting character roles in the era of the big studios—those CinemaScope historical epics with thousands of extras in which he played villainous Roman or European noblemen. He had been a regular on the boards for The Stage Society in Los Angeles, Theater 40 in Beverly Hills, and every other year or so, he was featured at New York's Lincoln Center in Shakespearean roles. Then he had quit the stage and appeared mainly in films, most recently playing a cheery, rotund vet in a series of movies for Disney featuring a wire-haired, mischievous little dog. "A new *low* for me, really," he said, with characteristic British self-effacement, "but so *damned* hard to turn down all that *money*." Sir William "punched" certain words as he spoke, with a rolling, rhythmic emphasis, adding a deep vibration to his incomparable voice, that voice that could read the words off a cereal box and make them sound like Shakespeare. His much publicized role as Oedipus was to be his comeback performance to serious theater after an absence of nine years from the stage.

At those lunches with Sir William, and every moment they rehearsed together, Curtis Reinhart felt the exclusive thrill of being in the company of a celebrity, growing into an unabashed hero-worship, along with an urgent sense that he had to press him, however he could, to teach him about their craft. "What emotional research would you do for being in the chorus?" he asked. "I mean, there's a plague in the city. I know they're frightened. They're old and sick, and they're praying. But to really feel that? I've been thinking about going over to the hospital, to the emergency room, so I can study families in that kind of grief," he said. "Or I'm thinking about ways I might make myself feel sick for at least one rehearsal, you know, come in really hung-over, or take a handful of MSG to give myself a really bad headache, something like that..."

"No, no, no, no, *no!*" Sir William cut him off. "This business of so-called *method* actors and their need to *experience* is bloody silliness. The actor doesn't *live* the part, he *plays* the part. He *imagines* the role. That's what his *art* is all about. The actor accomplishes this art by positively *steeping* himself in the epoch, the culture, the living conditions, the literature, psychology, *everything* he can learn about where his character *is* in time and place." He waved his hands as he spoke, his ivory cigarette holder making emphatic slices or broad, slow circles over the table in a disarming opposition to his voice—a languid waving when he hit a word hard, a sharp stabbing when he let a line roll off, throwing it away in his melodious baritone. "I remember when we were doing the film version of 'Julius Caesar'—what a visionary director, Joe Mankiewicz, very few like *him* around anymore—how Brando would hold up the entire set while he went through such damnable *conniptions*," his cigarette holder made a slow sweep over the table, "*beating* himself up, knocking his head into walls, until he thought he was feeling the right degree of *suffering* to do Anthony. Then after all that, he went up on his lines and had to read from cue cards every other take."

Sir William asserted that acting is “a craft of pure representation,” as he put it, which had been his training in the London school. “Pirandello was right, you know, in ‘Six Characters In Search Of An Author’, a miserably *oppressive* play, really, like most of Pirandello, but still...” Curtis hadn’t yet read Pirandello but would that weekend—that 1920s Italian play in which six characters turn up suddenly on a stage, demanding for an author, any author, to write lines for them so they can know their destinies, only to discover in the end that they never existed. “An actor can at best merely *suppose* how a character really is,” Sir William said. “He can never *really* feel what a character feels inside. At best, he creates an elaborate *illusion* of the character, and grateful he should be *indeed* if he can do that much. As T. S. Eliot once remarked, we live in a world which just won’t tolerate too much reality.” His hand with the ivory cigarette holder waved languorously over the table as he said this, then it stabbed out sharply. “Or it’s as in Ruskin, on *painting*. Nothing can be *true* which is either too complete or too vacant. Every touch is *false* which does *not* suggest more than it represents, just as every space is false which represents nothing.”

Curtis would hear a lot more arguments against what he had been learning about acting—that the best “method” was to find a way to “live the part,” as the great acting teacher, Constantin Stanislavski, first taught. All in the cast heard a great deal about the craft of acting from Sir William. In collusion with the Director, Sir William meant to re-interpret “Oedipus the King” contrary to what many scholars maintained: that the tragedy is about the role of fate, a pre-determined curse by the gods who treat mankind as mere playthings, in violent conflict with the king’s overweening *hubris* that moves him to a tyrannical assertion of his ambitions to control his destiny as a man. No: they meant the play above all to express a basic political conflict, to present a suffering city clinging to hollow beliefs in non-existent gods as its flawed king battles for his own deliverance, for self-assertion, for defense of a whole structure of appearances intimately bound up with his false sense of his own greatness. His arrogance in this belief is what causes him first to murder then fall into sexual perversity, dragging his city and its people down with him. “The drama as *we* see it is entirely about *human* concerns in a godless universe,” Sir William explained, punching his words. “The *tragedy* revolves around appearance and truth as *opposites* between which man is *bound*, chained *between* them. So the *cycle* of building and *destruction* of our civilization is *powered* by our continual consuming *of*, and shattering *by*, the cold metal of our *delusions*.”

This more human-centered, existentialist interpretation of the play also should draw more attention to Sir William’s performance, as he well knew, meant to cause a stir among reviewers and critics. What great actor doesn’t attempt to take center stage and put his own stamp on a role whenever possible? Still, by the third rehearsal week, Curtis

Reinhart was no longer sure the way they viewed the play made sense. Certainly it didn't if the author's intentions were considered out of the question by then, the author now considered irrelevant, declared "dead" still, it seemed to him that Sophocles wrote with sincere reverence, his reach for the spiritual obvious in so many lines and prayers. Curtis knew it wasn't his place to question the direction, and even less an actor of the stature of Sir William. No: his job was to follow directions, and to play his role as best he could. Even so, he couldn't help feeling he missed too much in his performance, that it might be too mechanical, too much on the surface, with all the emotional depth of a trained seal in a circus. So, that Friday night—as he had suggested weeks before to Sir William, who ridiculed the idea—he decided he would drop in at the nearby university hospital, hoping to study suffering.

The University of Chicago Hospital with its famed Pritzker School of Medicine spread out in a vast complex over numerous city blocks north of 59<sup>th</sup> Street and west of South Ellis Avenue. The older buildings were staid red brick, with squared off windows in a neo-classical Greek design; these brick buildings were linked by enclosed, modern glass and steel bridges leading to several newer concrete, bunker-like structures with high, narrow windows of smoke tinted glass that, when the evening sun shone on them, turned to a dull silvery color like polished tin. In the distance, two tall brick smokestacks of the old hospital power plant rose against the scattered gray clouds, giving the whole medical complex the impression of some vast, sprawling factory. The Emergency Room occupied a first floor of one of the modern buildings, and it served as a trauma center for the decaying, mean slums of the South side, along with upscale Hyde Park and South Shore, but mainly, the ambulances unloaded from the direction of the grim ghetto streets of the city.

On that Friday evening, the waiting area for the Emergency Room seemed to him a depository for collective misery. As Curtis looked around and took a seat, he guessed patients on Medicaid used it like a neighborhood clinic: some glazed-eyed with fever, two with cloths wrapped around minor wounds, one who looked like a drug addict folded into herself in a shivering ball of withdrawal with an older guy standing over her offering her a cup of vending machine coffee she kept waving away. Most people showed no obvious complaints that he could see, hard to tell in some of the muted family groups who was sick and who was an accompanying daughter or husband or brother; here and there, a restless child would be lifted to a shoulder to hush it; an elderly woman rose with difficulty and tottered dangerously off balance to the rest room; a young stocky guy in a dirty orange T-shirt and scuffed work boots held up a left hand wrapped in a crude ball of gauze, closing his eyes in a grimace without making a sound. What struck him most was the sense of oppressive quiet, how people swallowed back making any noises from their pain, how they were just taking it, standing it. They were poor people, most of them, at or near the very bottom, and they spoke in low

voices or even whispers, as they would in a church, the difference that, in here, bright fluorescent lighting bathed the room in a vibrating glare. The air smelled faintly of Lysol and stale urine. He sensed something else in it that had no smell, or it could be just the harsh white lights, that made his eyes sting. The hands on the wall clock had hardly moved when he looked up to check it. His time sense had drastically slowed, like the whole room was pushing through a mysteriously clear, thick substance. He measured his sense of time by shutting his eyes and counting: *one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...* He discovered he counted out eighty-three second minutes, according to the wall clock, and he wrote in his notebook: *pain slows time by at least one third.* He looked around again over the hushed, quiet room, and he saw everyone—people in pain and the ones with them—waiting stoically in the blue, beat-up bucket seats, braced for the slow painful hours it would surely take before one of the admissions clerks slid open a panel of bullet-proof glass and called out a name.

Distant sirens sounded. High gulping shrieks, many more than one, and he noted the sirens shut off one after another as they did when ambulances turned onto the hospital drive. Doctors and nurses in green and blue scrubs began emerging from the elevators and hurrying down the hallway toward the ER. Curtis stood and moved into the hallway, slipping past the security guard talking on his radio at a desk, where he could observe the big double-doors with their stainless steel kickplates opening into the treatment rooms. Through twin chickenwire-mesh embedded windows in the doors, he saw flashes of ambulance lights. Loud voices called out from inside, muffled by the doors. He glimpsed uniforms of police officers and firemen. Doctors and nurses and EMTs bent over several gurneys as they rolled them into curtained-off spaces. In a chair in the busy hall, a fireman still in his heavy jacket and rubber boots heaved his broad shoulders up then back, drawing deeply from an oxygen mask. More medical personnel crowded in. The gurneys kept coming, the patients on them dark-looking, blurred lumpy shapes with blotches of crimson that might have defined faces. The wire-meshed windows were too small. He couldn't be sure what he saw pass by amid the chaotic urgency.

A doctor and nurse hurried past him in the hall, and the nurse punched a red metal plate by the big double doors. The doors swung open. Not twenty feet inside, laid out on a gurney, he glimpsed a face as red as fresh meat, slick and glistening, the hair and scalp black lumps sloughed away. An eyeball like a protruding white marble extended from a mess of crimson strings, what was left of the nose a charred bone. Pink bubbles formed and trailed over black crusts of what must have been lips, the teeth fully exposed, frozen into a hideous, skeletal grin. Automatically, the doors began to swing closed, and the body moved—a jerky inflation under the sheet—*it was still alive!* The noise from inside washed over him, a din of steady weak cries under sharp voices of the

medical personnel, the vibrations of pain and all that attended to pain. Sound faded into an urgent buzzing as the doors swung closed with a pneumatic wheeze.

His stomach turned over, folded over on itself like a heavy mass of dough. His mouth started filling with saliva, his balance unsteady under the dizzying intensity of the lights, the floor and walls all around him distorting into odd, elongated bends and curves. He willed himself to breathe. He moved toward the darker hallway, swallowing back his nausea. He found a men's room. He stood for a long time bent over a sink, fighting back waves of his contracting insides. He wadded up paper towels then wet them under cold water and held them to the back of his neck, avoiding looking at himself in the mirrors. Nothing in his life had prepared him to get so close. He reached for more paper towels but the dispenser was empty. He pulled a half-used roll of toilet paper off the rack in a stall, wadded some up and wet it, daubing at his cheeks and forehead. As was his habit in public restrooms, developed from his poverty as a student, without even thinking about it, he pressed flat and stuffed what was left of the roll into the back pocket of his jeans.

Back in the hallway, he got his bearings, and he understood he had wandered off into the wing of the building where the administration offices were housed, the hallways carpeted there, the lights dimmed at night, empty of people. He wasn't ready yet to go back the way he came, so he fled further into the building, searching for another way out, turning left into another mostly dark hall which seemed to head in a direction that might lead to the street. Halfway down, he saw a sign extending from the wall for the hospital chapel. The door to the chapel stood open, track lighting overhead filling the room with a dimmed yet warm yellow glow. No one was inside, and so he stepped in—it was a small, blue carpeted space with three rows of short blond oak pews at its center, each maybe big enough to seat six or seven people, set up facing them a simple altar spread with a crisp white cloth under a silver Protestant cross hanging on the wall. Curtis slid into the pew nearest the door and sat down. He glanced at his feet, noting the swing-down prayer cushion, and the oak book tray level with his knees empty of books. On impulse, he swung the prayer cushion out and sank to his knees on it, thinking how he had avoided going to any mass yet in Chicago, the last time he had set foot in a church was midnight mass on Christmas eve in Rockland, visiting his family. Kneeling now felt right, after what he had just seen, and he tried to remember some appropriate prayer.

The vision struck him again: that burn victim on the gurney, the irregular rise of a breath, how it still lived, in that much pain, was it a he or a she? *Oh, God.* Saliva welled again in his throat, and he forced it back, swallowed. He couldn't think of words to pray with at the thought of such pain. If it were him, he'd rather be dead. And here he was now, dumb for words, overwhelmed by a sense of his own smallness, the irrelevancy of his own stupid problems and concerns, nothing compared

to *that*, oh, God. How could any prayer he knew *not* feel stupid and hollow now, those rote words he grew up reciting at mass. He folded his hands and closed his eyes. *Lord, heavenly Father, please relieve that burned man of his pain.* That wasn't enough, or right—he couldn't be sure if it were a man or a woman. *Please let it not be a woman. Please, please take away the pain of that one person. Please relieve the pain of all the suffering people in this hospital tonight,* he prayed. As he was praying, he grew aware that he meant what he said, his muscles tensed, his eyes squeezed hard shut, praying with an intensity he couldn't recall ever praying with before, speaking the words in a whispered voice. This awareness of how intensely he prayed broke the spell—the actor inside him, observing again. Like a plug was pulled, he opened his eyes, disconnected from anything else but the deep quiet and absolute solitude inside the chapel. He unclasped his fingers and pulled out his notebook and pen. He wrote: *closeness to pain can increase the intensity of faith. Why must this be so?*

Something spooked him, and he looked around, sensing he was being watched, though no one was there. He closed the notebook, fitted the pen through the spiral wires, slipped them back into his pocket. He folded his hands and leaned his forehead against them, closing his eyes to try praying again. No words came. His mind began to drift, and he let it go. Slowly, an image of his father took shape—Dad held up a press proof to get better light, working late again in his shop, gazing through his half-lensed reading glasses with an unsatisfied expression, his eyes puffy and tired, his cheeks blue with heavy beard shadow—he saw a brooding, deeply unhappy man. He didn't want to think about his father, tried to fight off that unwelcome vision but it was no use. So OK, his Dad then—what was this about? He let his mind go with this, with thoughts and images of his father. They did not have a good relationship, never had, it seemed, not for years. Home had become an uncomfortable place because of this.

He did not want give in to his usual resentments of his Dad. Curtis forced himself to consider how his Dad saw his own life—his father's belief that he had suffered a life ruined by compromise. He had never wanted to settle down the way he had, giving up his youth and a promising career in news photography—Acme News Pictures then United Press International, that legendary wire service—his life in the press corps with its travel and drama, first as a war correspondent in Korea, then his promotion to a major bureau office in Rome. His ambition had been to continue to travel the world this way, as a wire service photographer, living great adventures, making his fame. He traveled home on a three-week visit back to Rockland, the main purpose to attend his older sister taking her vows as a Dominican nun in Chicago, becoming Sister Mary Agnes, embraced forever into that cloistered, contemplative order, rarely seen by her family again. Curtis remembered



once the family driving up to a convent church in Michigan where they observed this aunt in a big group of nuns gathered in pews to one side of the sacristy dressed in white, like a flock of seagulls, for a service at which her name was praised by a bishop, singled out for her sacrifice and devotion. That childhood memory—Curtis was six years old, and didn't remember much—was one of the few in which his father seemed happy. Dad had met Mom at the Catholic Charities event following that ceremony of solemn vows, and, somehow, they had let themselves go in a delirium of their mutual attractions. What a way to meet! Then to sleep together just after his sister took her vows as a nun?

Hard to believe, but so went the family story. Back in Rome, Dad received the letter telling him the news that Mom was accidentally pregnant with his brother, Justin. Dad's next posting was supposed to be somewhere in East Africa, covering the *Mau-Mau* rebellion, but how could he risk his life like that now? So he did the "right" thing. He returned to Rockland. They married and had seven kids in quick succession, the eldest two only eleven months apart, and so his life became one long devotion to service for all of them. With savings and a bank loan based on the contract he talked his way into with the Rockland school district to do class pictures, Dad set up a small studio and print shop. He condemned himself to snapping pictures hundreds at a time followed by long hours on his feet in the sharp acrid smells of his darkroom grinding out thousands of classroom, wedding, graduation and christening portraits every year for people he mostly didn't like, people nevertheless he put on his best smile for and for whose vanity he worked hard to please with his touch-up brushes, his filters and soft-focus lenses, his technical ability to light and shape plain-looking faces in ways that made them seem as attractive as they could ever be in a photograph. Dad became known as the reliable, meat-and-potatoes town photographer, with his bow ties, his Rolloflex cameras, and his step-ladder—people delighted in watching him balance on the top step of that ladder, holding up his strobe, shooting them with a downward angle that made their double-chins disappear. Later, his printing business took over, more money in press work during those years of the ever-expanding suburban economy. Still, there was never enough to make ends meet, never enough to pay the bills, bills that would keep him up late nights with migraine headaches after his long days spent in the grinding noise and frustration of his machines. Dad came home at all hours, hands black with ink, knuckles bloody from repairs.

All the kids worked, either with Dad or at other jobs around town. Curtis put in long afternoons in the studio, those tedious, repetitive hours in the red safelight glow of the darkroom—everything on the Agfa high volume enlarger pre-set meticulously by his Dad—hours spent clicking the button, advancing the roll of photo paper, sliding the strip of medium-format negative ahead, clicking the button again, repeat these motions, then again, and again, as in a factory, breathing in the heavy,

sickening fruit juice like odors of the developers and toners, the sharp vinegar sting of the fixer. Bending under that big machine, he made hundreds of prints a week for the volume jobs—faces, faces, baby, baby, couple cutting wedding cake, proud parents, faces, faces, family in arrangement with dog, priest with family, girl in white christening dress like an upside down ice-cream cone, bride with her lifted veil kissing groom, more wedding party, wedding party, priest with bride and groom, priest with dog, just dog, boy at christening dressed like a white-jacketed headwaiter, cat, cat, dog, award ceremony at Rotary Club, class picture, class picture, more class pictures, family with new baby on couch, new baby alone, more baby, reunion of old men in funny hats at the Shriner's all raising glasses, faces, faces, faces, more faces, big family arranged into that characteristic pyramid with kids sitting on the carpet and Mom and Dad at the peak gazing proudly over them—and so on and on. He wandered through his teenage years in school and the streets and shopping centers of Rockland with the strange, alienating sense that he had seen or met almost everyone without their ever knowing, and a deepening ennui settled over him at public and private ceremonies that caused him to avoid them, convinced that the life events people wished to remember were, finally, unmemorable, because so disturbingly the same.

Numbingly, over and over again, he pressed the button, pulled out the expensive reels of photo paper, loaded new paper in, changed the negatives and judged the exposure as he had been instructed to adjust the filter dial—was this a grade 2 or 3 exposure better get it right now don't screw it up, the voice in his head. Hour after hour, afternoons after school, always waiting to screw up, always at the edge of anxiety for the time the paper roll ran off its track in the developer or toner tanks or he didn't change the fixer soon enough; or the temperature of the expensive chemicals dropped without him checking in time; or he didn't wipe and squeegee the shiny steel dryer plates meticulously clean enough so that the larger prints he made might spot; and on he worked, his neck tensing, legs cramping, bracing for his Dad's predictable explosions when, as always happened, he did screw up. Nothing was ever good enough for his Dad. Waiting for him to barge into the red-lit darkroom, into that sweet-sour vomituous stench of the chemicals, then how his Dad would shove him roughly out of the way as he bent over the prints, checking each one, then ripped one through: *Damnit, look at this waste! Am I raising some kind of idiot? Answer me! Does this look like cyan to you? Watch what you're doing!*

Like his brothers Justin and Desmond, he preferred to work with the big printing jobs, keeping the ink and paper supplied, making temperamental adjustments at the press under the warmer lights in the back of the shop, only screwing up at the press could cost so much more, so that was for when he was older. His brothers took other jobs in town as soon as they could—as bus boys and waiters, as caddies at the

Rockland Country Club, anything—abandoning Dad to stew and simmer at his work mostly alone, Mom tucked away in the office piled high with file boxes and tracking down deadbeats on the phone. Besides, who could really stand a job watched all the time by his parents?

For Dad, all of this—the business he had never really liked, his dull routine, and his seven kids, mainly, with their relentless demands—caused a growing distance toward his family, and a resentment Dad nursed inside like a wasting disease against their Mom, as though she were the one responsible. They fought, real shouting matches. Doors slammed. Glasses smashed. Mornings afterward were spent with the kids tip-toeing around them, trading urgent glances like warnings not to make a move that might disturb whatever peace was holding in the house for now, for a few days at least, until the next time, or else. Or else: Dad's belt came off his pants more often than any of them would later like to remember. These stinging punishments were delivered in the big bathroom just off the kitchen, his sons bent over with arms leaning against the sink, forced to watch their screwed up faces in the mirror as Dad whipped away with that doubled up leather belt: *Look at yourself! You like this? You want more? Look at yourself! That'll teach you to smart off at your mother!*

Worse, after a bad night of shouting, Mom—who took out her frustrations on inanimate objects—might sweep her arm over the breakfast table and send dishes flying. She ran from the kitchen in a full shrieking breakdown, Dad following upstairs after her trying to calm her down, and the younger kids started crying, especially Cathy, who would usually be the one who had to supervise the clean up, until, as they all grew older, they learned it was so much easier and wiser just to make their hearts cold. No reaction, not a word—let them have at it—save Desmond or Curtis or little Francis would head off to the utility room for the broom and dustpan before they were finished. Soon, Dad would be out the door to start up the temperamental Studebaker Lark station wagon, that dull green wreck he somehow kept going with blue sticky gasket sealant and jerry-rigged wires, then Mom would pull herself together upstairs, fix her hair, and follow him to the shop in the old Ford Falcon. How could they work through the day so close to each other after what had happened?

They would. They did. Years later, the story his kids would finally tell each other about Dad was that he had always done the best he could, tough guy that he was, what a hard worker he was, always, typical of his generation, look at the big family he had raised, that belt he used was just his way, like the way his Dad, old Otto Reinhart, had used a belt on him—it was just a German thing those first Reinharts brought over from lower Bavaria, never ones to spare corporal punishments, those Germans. After all, it wasn't Dad's fault, and he never hit them all that hard or when it wasn't deserved, bless his memory. This would become the story they told about their father.

Dad had never taken any of them fishing. He had never played catch with a baseball. Not once had he ever watched a team they were playing on at school. No picnics. No outings. No family vacations, not even one. Curtis couldn't remember an evening spent together as a family at a movie, or even an hour in front of the television at home. Family hour was dinner, an extra chair squeezed up to that battered cherrywood table meant for eight, Mom and Dad at either end, mealtimes spent passing the heavy platters around with a quiet tension, shoveling down food as fast as their parents allowed before one of them would be singled out for a sharp barb or criticism from Dad. Each child had to report to him: what had been today's activities, what were tonight's plans? They lied about their activities and plans. Afterwards, the kids did the dishes. Dad and Mom spent evenings in their bedroom, in front of their own TV, their door closed. About the only family activity any of his brothers could recall with Dad was when he pulled out his tools from their neat, organized boxes, how one or the other of the brothers helped him with a home repair. All Dad ever seemed to do was work, work, work—*those Germans*. And even though none of them would ever say so, the sad truth was that his sons grew up afraid of him. They resented him for his rage, for the terror he inflicted, so they avoided him. What can be said for a man who lets his unhappiness at raising them drive his children away?

Curtis remembered the big blow up with his father about his own life decision to come to Chicago to study acting. Before he got his April acceptance letters to colleges, it had struck him like a revelation that *being an actor* was what he wanted to do, the only life it seemed he had ever desired. He planned to do what he had been advised by the drama teacher at the high school and register for studio classes at The Goodman, the Art Institute, Steppenwolf, the St. Nicholas Theatre—Chicago became a paradise for actors in those days—paying for conservatory studies with his savings, with odd jobs and student loans. Only when he had to, the night before the deadline for accepting admission to the University of Illinois, did he finally announce this news to his parents, at dinner. "I'm not going to college," he said. "I'm studying to be an actor."

Curtis filled his chest with air and sat up straighter at the table, not shrinking back from Dad's explosion. His younger brothers and Cathy fled the room. He sat alone, taking it, his Dad backed up by his Mom playing her near-to-tears act at his disobedience as she entered and exited the dining room, clearing plates. He preserved a stoic silence to his Dad's comparisons with his brother Justin, who was enrolled in graduate school at the University of Michigan. "He's going to be an engineer, he's going to be something," his father said. And with his next other brother, who had dropped out of school to work at a rivet plant in nearby Skokie. "That bum, Desmond, all he wants out of life is to smoke pot and fuck around." All the old family clichés flooded over him. He stared at his

plate, fighting off a tension-induced smile, which enraged Dad even more. “An actor? What kind of a life is *that*? You’ll take all your mother and I worked so hard for and go waste your life with a bunch of kykes and queers? Get that smug grin off your mug before I knock it off!”

There was nothing Dad could do in the end except shout at him, and they both knew it. He considered studying acting as something frivolous and wasteful, the same way he might look at taking lessons in, say, tennis or golf. His final words on the issue would be delayed until after his going out into the hall to the liquor cabinet to crack open a new bottle of scotch that he would take up to their bedroom, where his parents could share their disgust. Partly unfolded against a cut glass salt shaker on the table where Mom had propped it up shone the acceptance letter from the University of Illinois, what should have been cause for family celebration, with its orange and blue letterhead. Dad came back into the dining room with a bottle and two glasses with ice, Curtis waiting there for him, for his parting shot. “God knows what I would have done for a chance like this,” he said. His hand with the bottle gestured toward the letter on the table, his voice quavering with self-pitying vibrations of the story he had been telling for years about himself—that life had somehow cheated him. “Some of us get a chance in this life and some of us don’t,” he said. “You’re blowing your chance. You’re an ungrateful sonofabitch.”

The ice in the glasses clinked loudly as he wheeled around and left to go upstairs. And so it would be—he *blew his chance, the ungrateful sonofabitch*—his own family story now. Well, he would soon be out of there and find out if he had other chances.

In the hospital chapel, these disturbing thoughts and memories mixed in his head. With an effort actually physical, not unlike the breathing exercise in which he flexed tight his abdomen and diaphragm then let them go, he pushed back at his natural rise of anger at his father. He did his best to expel this from his body, listening to his controlled, exhaling breath. He willed himself to pray: *please, Lord, please lift the unhappiness and disappointment with his life from my Dad*. He opened his eyes, not sure he really meant these words, not able to feel anything close yet to forgiveness, and who did he think he was anyway to forgive his father? That’s what Dad would say. A line from Shakespeare’s “Richard III” ran through his head: *prayer without thought does not to heaven go*. Well, there’s plenty of thought here, he thought. What about sincerity? Shouldn’t Shakespeare’s line be: *prayer without sincerity*?

And so there he knelt, Curtis Reinhart, the *actor* again, questioning his motives, letting his mind track off debating these conflicting positions about praying for his Dad, until a certainty struck him: how it was all OK, even if there were no God, or even if God wouldn’t hear him, in the end. It was the right thing to do because of his Mom. Mom wanted her children to pray for him, as she prayed for him, always the one who reminded them before mass, *pray for your father*. Without sincere prayers

of his own, he honored her prayers. That felt right enough, at least for now, and he imagined he was achieving a genuine feeling of compassion for him through the intermediary of his Mom, and even some sympathy for Dad's unhappiness, the tension easing in his neck and shoulders, his breathing more relaxed, then just at that moment, he heard a noise of people entering the chapel behind him. He turned his head quickly, then back again, fixing his stare into the bunched fingers of his folded hands. A mother and her three boys were moving down the aisle of the chapel, followed by a priest, and as they passed him, they seemed happy, a lightness to their steps.

He watched them over his folded hands. The little family scooted into the pew in front, nearest the altar, on which the priest busied himself by laying out a green cloth embroidered with what looked like the Episcopal cross—that cross with the circle around its T. The priest appeared to be a middle-aged, solid looking man, his black habit crisply ironed, everything in place save for his orthopedic shoes—black shoes scuffed and unshined, the thick rubber soles worn down, more like leather sneakers than shoes. He was overweight but he carried it well, a stubby sureness in his manner as turned to them, opened his missal on the green cloth and spread out his short thick arms. In a pleasant, melodious tenor singing out from the fleshy, throaty folds of his triple chin that bulged and jiggled over his white collar, the priest began reading what Curtis recognized as the service of Thanksgiving—the words somewhat different in the Anglican translation than ones he recalled: *Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, we worship You, we give You thanks, we praise You for Your glory...*

And so on. One then another of the boys kept glancing back at him, uneasily at first, as though embarrassed to be watched—caught out this way by another young person maybe not so unlike them, how uncool to be dragged in here to pray with their Mom, no matter the family emergency—unsure of his presence until they saw the priest direct a quick, approving nod at him, inviting his inclusion, and he nodded back in a way that let the boys know he was with them in this, and better to behave. They fixed their attention to the priest and tried to follow along, clear the boys weren't all that familiar with the words, or the correct responses. Curtis joined them in prayer in that small, glowing space, the priest's sing-song voice absorbed and hushed by the heavy carpeting: *Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word and I shall be healed...*

He noted most a certain tension still evident in this family's relief, a quickening of their breathing, a jumpy quality in their small head movements following the lead of their mother's shaky edginess approaching joy at the priest's specific words of thanks—something about how their father, Robert, this husband and father, had just survived what must have been a severe heart attack, as Curtis gathered when the priest said, *we pray you to keep Robert's heart strong in its*

*recovery*. The oldest boy even reached over to tousle his youngest brother's hair in a fraternal gesture clear the younger boy routinely ducked, then the middle brother punched the older brother in the shoulder, telling him to settle down and pray—this celebratory fidgeting a letting loose of held-in tensions signifying the father must have been declared stable by now, almost surely was going to live, for which they were all relieved. Still, the mother's gasps at certain words as she repeated them, as if fighting to gulp back her emotions by taking in too much air, felt like something close to grief. He observed by this that joy at grief relieved might be close in intensity to actual grief, and this special charged quality of grief no longer grief sparked their nervous energies. Curtis thought he should write this down, as soon as he could do so discreetly. The priest gave a final blessing, and they all said, "Amen."

"Let us pass the peace," the priest said. Following the family's lead, Curtis stood, and they shook hands all around, leaning the short distance over the intimate pews. The mother gripped Curtis by his forearm in a very emphatic way, like she would drag him over the pew if he let her, not yet in control of herself as she drew in a deep nasal breath and said, "peace be with you," and he responded as he had been taught, "and also with you," then patted her arm, gently, so she would let go. He shook the older son's hand and said the peace, to which the kid responded, "you too, man," trying to be cool, like he was their brother now, they had been through something together. He nodded back and clapped the kid on his shoulder. They offered each other blessings. After he had packed up his cloth and missal, while casually mixing in the aisle, the priest shook his hand. Curtis said, "I'm also praying for my father." The words came out without his thinking about them.

The priest wished his father a speedy recovery, then he pulled out his wallet and gave him a business card, with the name *Rev. John L. Rapp*, below it the hospital address and three phone numbers. "I'm on call here, if you need to talk," he said.

They all stood in the aisle in a loose group, hesitating, awkwardly, as if waiting for Curtis to say something more. He felt a tight smile distorting his face.

"Well then, good luck! Bless your mother!" the mother said.

The family followed the priest out, leaving Curtis alone again in the silence that settled back over the chapel. Somewhere over his head, he heard the distant click of an air conditioning vent as it started blowing chilly air. He turned around, uneasily, facing the empty altar and the plain, brushed steel cross. Remembering his observations, he sank to one knee and crossed himself, automatically, then he scooted back into the pew. He pulled out his notebook and pen. For a moment, he stared into its scrawl-filled pages, not able to think what words he should write down, something about grief avoided still grief, but his mouth dried up, the thoughts fled away, and he felt a little spooked. Really, he was like an

intruder here, and what he was doing—*taking notes*—was so insincere, and so, well, so *cheap* of him, wasn't it? Could this also a form of sin? False witness, even though a minor infraction? Could he be punished for this? Why did he have to be raised Catholic, that religion that taught he could be punished for almost anything? *Forget it, man*, he thought, *the hell with that*—the reason he quit going to mass a long time ago. He stood, slamming the prayer cushion into place with a loud, echoing bang. He meant to hurry out of the chapel. Still, despite himself, he stopped in the doorway. Quickly, he turned and dropped to his knee, as though afraid not to do this now. He crossed himself as if reverently, aware that he did this because of superstition. Then he fled off down the hallway.

Shaken by this experience, after another hurried left turn into a hall where carpet gave way again to the black and white checkered linoleum, he found the employee snack room near the barred, locked gates to the dark cafeteria. He remembered that he hadn't eaten since lunch, so he went in and found enough change in his pockets for a Snickers bar that dropped off its coils behind the glass and landed with a thud. He sat at a table by the vending machines, shoving the candy bar down in three half-chewed swallows.

He was so distracted into his mixing thoughts that he didn't notice for a minute that the room wasn't empty—four tables away, in the corner, sat a nurse in blue scrubs, alone, a can of diet Sprite in front of her. She was a young, heavy woman, her hair a messy afro sticking out every which way, but she had a pretty face, with clear skin like burnished copper, her silver wire-rims and the stethoscope around her neck creating an impression of intelligence, and he could see she had a firm, sensual figure under her smock top. The nurse glanced up from her soda, and he saw something terrible in her face—a harried, exhausted expression, her lips trembling, her forehead lined by a deep sorrow she struggled to contain. She had been crying. She lowered her gaze, took off her glasses and pulled a crumpled tissue out of her smock pocket, shreds of it falling to bits in her fingers as she tried to blow her nose and wipe her eyes. In frustration, she crumpled the pieces in her fist and tossed them aside. Curtis remembered the lump in the back pocket of his jeans—about a third of a roll of flattened toilet paper he habitually pocketed from public rest rooms. He pulled out the thick wad and began unwinding it. At her table, he offered her a ribbon of tissue. He noted her clip-on I.D. tag: *Montoya, Cassie Jean, R.N.*, with its overexposed, unflattering photo.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“No... No...” she said, accepting the tissue. She blew her nose. “Just a hard night, thank you,” she said. She sniffled again, recovering herself, then she took in a deep, rough breath. “Two little girls burned in a fire. Nothing we could do for them,” she said. She fought not to cry. “I don't *do* this! I just *don't*,” she said. “You know, in here, things happen



every day. Only you can never get used to some things.” Her voice broke, thinner and higher, like a slide up a metal string, “You... you *know*?”

“I saw some of it,” he said. “I don’t know how you got through it.”

“Oh, my... I’m sorry... Oh, my, my...”

He unrolled more tissues, pressing them into her hand—elegant, long hands with perfectly square shaped, unpainted nails—meaning to put what comfort he could into the gesture. Her shoulders heaved, and she buried her face in a wad of tissue. He put a hand on her shoulder, gently, meaning to test some stronger impulse he felt to do more. At his touch, she threw her arms around his waist, pulling him in like a person swept away in a flood grabs for a tree. She pressed her face into his shirt, and he felt the soft sensations of her nose and cheeks giving way against his body. His shirt wet through from her steady, muffled sobs. All he could think of doing in response was to continue standing there as solidly as he could, absorbing her weight, which grew heavier. He slid his hand and more of his arm around her back. “There, there,” he said. “There, there.”

Time slowed, thickened, almost stopped. He leaned closer over her, breathing in her odors of medicinal iodine and strong perspiration, and something else, a disinfectant, or a shampoo, maybe, with a faint smell of pine. At some point, his ribs felt discomfort at her pressure, and he had to change positions, kicking a chair out from the table then managing to sink down onto it without letting go, his arm settling more fully around her muscular, rounded shoulders. Soon, he held her with both arms in a more sustainable embrace. “It’s OK,” he said. “Let it loose.”

He closed his eyes from the fluorescent glare. Mixing sensations and thoughts from the day swirled in his mind: the old actor and director with their self-assured notes, directions that were wrong, dead wrong—he was sure now—still, he would follow them, as the minor player he was, and a line sounded in his head: *you would be better dead than blind and living*. For an instant, an image flickered into consciousness of that person burned alive but he shut it off, like with a switch, by a physical effort, by holding tighter to the big woman crying in his arms. He recalled the chapel and a vision of his father: late at night, leaning over the pumping gears and rollers of a high-speed printer kicking out page after page in a monotonous rhythm like counting out the beats of the remainder of his life. He felt a deep, churning sorrow for him, and at his own ingratitude—all the man wanted was gratitude, and he had never thanked him, not even once.

In his arms, the nurse grew quieter, her hot wet breaths settling down more evenly, and steadier, as though she were resting, pulling herself together, gathering strength to break away. He thought of the people in the waiting room tonight, taking it, standing it: pain stilled by pain, sorrow contained by sorrow. He saw the streets of the city as he viewed them each morning and evening through the windows of the

trains: back yards next to back yards of tangled, tumbled down fences with blowing trash, dark blocks of rotten peeling stairs, porches falling to ruins, open lots, wrecked foundations, factory buildings boarded up, shabby slums in which people—her people—still lived. Her body heaved up once, heavier, and a high, whining sound escaped her like a taught string on a musical instrument that snapped. She started to squirm away, and he was sure she had just realized he was a complete stranger. He thought she might feel embarrassed or ashamed. “It’s all right,” he said. He squeezed her shoulders more tightly, one last big embrace, so she would know. “It’s all right,” he said. “I’m here.”