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When the MS *Irish Oak* sailed from Cork in October, 1949, we expected to be in New York City in a week. Instead, after two days at sea, we were told we were going to Montreal in Canada. I told the First Officer all I had was forty dollars and would Irish Shipping pay my train fare from Montreal to New York. He said, No, the company wasn't responsible. He said freighters are the whores of the high seas, they'll do anything for anyone. You could say a freighter is like Murphy's out' dog, he'll go part of the road with any wanderer.

Two days later Irish Shipping changed its mind and gave us the happy news, Sail for New York City, but two days after that the Captain was told, Sail for Albany.

The First Officer told me Albany was a city far up the Hudson River, capital of New York State. He said Albany had all the charm of Limerick, ha ha ha, a great place to die but not a place where you'd want to get married or rear children. He was from Dublin and knew I was from Limerick and when he sneered at Limerick I didn't know what to do. I'd like to destroy him with a smart remark but then I'd look at myself in the mirror, pimply face, sore eyes, and bad teeth and know I could never stand up to anyone, especially a First Officer with a uniform and a promising future as master of his own ship. Then I'd say to myself, Why should I care what anyone says about Limerick anyway? All I had there was misery.

Then the peculiar thing would happen. I'd sit on a deck chair in the lovely October sun with the gorgeous blue Atlantic all around me and try to imagine what New York would be like. I'd try to see Fifth Avenue or Central Park or Greenwich Village where everyone looked like movie stars, powerful tans, gleaming white teeth. But Limerick would push me into the past. Instead of me sauntering up Fifth Avenue with the tan, the teeth, I'd be back in the lanes of Limerick, women standing at doors chatting away and pulling their shawls around their shoulders, children with faces dirty from bread and jam, playing and laughing and crying to their mothers. I'd see people at Mass on Sunday morning where a whisper would run through the church when someone with a hunger weakness would collapse in the pew and have to be carried outside by men from the back of the church who'd tell everyone, Stand back, stand back, for the lovea Jaysus, can't you see she's gasping for the air, and I wanted to be a man like that telling people stand back because that gave you the right to stay outside till the Mass was over and you could go off to the pub which is why you were standing in the back with all the other men in the first place. Men who didn't drink always knelt right up there by the altar to show how good they were and how they didn't care if the pubs stayed closed till Doomsday. They knew the responses to the Mass better than anyone and they'd be blessing themselves and standing and kneeling and sighing over their prayers as if they felt the pain of Our Lord more than the rest of the congregation. Some had given up the pint entirely and they were the worst, always preaching the evil of the pint and looking down on the ones still in the grip as if they were on the right track to heaven. They acted as if God Himself would turn His back on a man drinking the pint when everyone knew you'd rarely hear a priest up in the pulpit denounce the pint or the men who drank it. Men with the thirst stayed in the back ready to streak out the door the minute the priest said, Ita missa est, Go, you are dismissed. They stayed in the back because their mouths were dry and they felt too humble to be up there with the sober ones. I stayed near the door so that I could hear the men whispering about the slow Mass. They went to Mass because it's a mortal sin if you don't though you'd wonder if it wasn't a worse sin to be joking to the man next to you that if this priest didn't hurry up you'd expire of the thirst on the spot. If Father White came out to give the sermon they'd shuffle and groan over his sermons, the slowest in the world, with him rolling

his eyes to heaven and declaring we were all doomed unless we mended our ways and devoted ourselves to the Virgin Mary entirely. My Uncle Pa Keating would have the men laughing behind their hands with his, I would devote myself to the Virgin Mary if she handed me a lovely creamy black pint of porter. I wanted to be there with my Uncle Pa Keating all grown up with long trousers and stand with the men in the back with the great thirst and laugh behind my hand.

I'd sit on that deck chair and look into my head to see myself cycling around Limerick City and out into the country delivering telegrams. I'd see myself early in the morning riding along country roads with the mist rising in the fields and cows giving me the odd moo and dogs coming at me till I drove them away with rocks. I'd hear babies in farmhouses crying for their mothers and farmers whacking cows back to the fields after the milking.

And I'd start crying to myself on that deck chair with the gorgeous Atlantic all around me, New York ahead, city of my dreams where I'd have the golden tan, the dazzling white teeth. I'd wonder what in God's name was wrong with me that I should be missing Limerick already, city of grey miseries, the place where I dreamed of escape to New York. I'd hear my mother's warning, The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.

There were to be fourteen passengers on the ship but one cancelled and we had to sail with an unlucky number. The first night out the Captain stood up at dinner and welcomed us. He laughed and said he wasn't superstitious over the number of passengers but since there was a priest among us wouldn't it be lovely if his reverence would say a prayer to come between us and all harm. The priest was a plump little man, born in Ireland, but so long in his Los Angeles parish he had no trace of an Irish accent. When he got up to say a prayer and blessed himself four passengers kept their hands in their laps and that told me they were Protestants. My mother used to say you could spot Protestants a mile away by their reserved manner. The priest asked Our Lord to look down on us with pity and love, that whatever happened on these stormy seas we were ready to be enfolded forever in His Divine Bosom. An old Protestant reached for his wife's hand. She smiled and shook her head back at him and he smiled too, as if to say, Don't worry.

The priest sat next to me at the dinner table. He whispered that

those two old Protestants were very rich from raising thoroughbred racehorses in Kentucky and if I had any sense I'd be nice to them, you never know.

I wanted to ask what was the proper way to be nice to rich Protestants who raise racehorses but I couldn't for fear the priest might think I was a fool. I heard the Protestants say the Irish people were so charming and their children so adorable you hardly noticed how poor they were. I knew that if I ever talked to the rich Protestants I'd have to smile and show my destroyed teeth and that would be the end of it. The minute I made some money in America I'd have to rush to a dentist to have my smile mended. You could see from the magazines and the films how the smile opened doors and brought girls running and if I didn't have the smile I might as well go back to Limerick and get a job sorting letters in a dark back room at the post office where they wouldn't care if you hadn't a tooth in your head.

Before bedtime the steward served tea and biscuits in the lounge. The priest said, I'll have a double Scotch, forget the tea, Michael, the whiskey helps me sleep. He drank his whiskey and whispered to me again, Did you talk to the rich people from Kentucky?

I didn't.

Dammit. What's the matter with you? Don't you want to get ahead in the world?

I do.

Well, why don't you talk to the rich people from Kentucky? They might take a fancy to you and give you a job as stable boy or something and you could rise in the ranks instead of going to New York which is one big occasion of sin, a sink of depravity where a Catholic has to fight day and night to keep the faith. So, why can't you talk to the nice people from Kentucky and make something of yourself?

Whenever he brought up the rich people from Kentucky he whispered and I didn't know what to say. If my brother Malachy were here he'd march right up to the rich people and charm them and they'd probably adopt him and leave him their millions along with stables, racehorses, a big house, and maids to clean it. I never talked to rich people in my life except to say, Telegram, ma'am, and then I'd be told go round to the servants' entrance, this is the front door and don't you know any better.

That is what I wanted to tell the priest but I didn't know how to

talk to him either. All I knew about priests was that they said Mass and everything else in Latin, that they heard my sins in English and forgave me in Latin on behalf of Our Lord Himself who is God anyway. It must be a strange thing to be a priest and wake up in the morning lying there in the bed knowing you have the power to forgive people or not forgive them depending on your mood. When you know Latin and forgive sins it makes you powerful and hard to talk to because you know the dark secrets of the world. Talking to a priest is like talking to God Himself and if you say the wrong thing you're doomed.

There wasn't a soul on that ship who could tell me how to talk to rich Protestants and demanding priests. My uncle by marriage, Pa Keating, could have told me but he was back in Limerick where he didn't give a fiddler's fart about anything. I knew if he were here he'd refuse to talk to the rich people entirely and then he'd tell the priest to kiss his royal Irish arse. That's how I'd like to be myself but when your teeth and eyes are destroyed you never know what to say or what to do with yourself.

There was a book in the ship's library, *Crime and Punishment*, and I thought it might be a good murder mystery even if it was filled with confusing Russian names. I tried to read it in a deck chair but the story made me feel strange, a story about a Russian student, Raskolnikov, who kills an old woman, a moneylender, and then tries to convince himself he's entitled to the money because she's useless to the world and her money would pay for his university expenses so that he could become a lawyer and go round defending people like himself who kill old women for their money. It made me feel strange because of the time in Limerick when I had a job writing threatening letters for an old woman moneylender, Mrs Finucane, and when she died in a chair I took some of her money to help me pay my fare to America. I knew I didn't kill Mrs Finucane but I took her money and that made me almost as bad as Raskolnikov and if I died this minute he'd be the first one I'd run into in hell. I could save my soul by confessing to the priest and even though he's supposed to forget your sins the minute he gives you absolution he'd have power over me and he'd give me strange looks and tell me go charm the rich Protestants from Kentucky.

I fell asleep reading the book and a sailor, a deckhand, woke me to tell me, Your book is getting wet in the rain, sir.

Sir. Here I was from a lane in Limerick and there's a man with grey hair calling me sir even though he's not supposed to say a word to me in the first place because of the rules. The First Officer told me an ordinary sailor was never allowed to speak to passengers except for a Good Day or Good Night. He told me this particular sailor with the grey hair was once an officer on the *Queen Elizabeth* but he was fired because he was caught with a first-class passenger in her cabin and what they were doing was a cause of confession. This man's name was Owen and he was peculiar the way he spent all his time reading below and when the ship docked he'd go ashore with a book and read in a cafe while the rest of the crew got roaring drunk and had to be hauled back to the ship in taxis. Our own captain had such respect for him he'd have him up to his cabin and they'd have tea and talk of the days they served together on an English destroyer that was torpedoed, the two of them hanging on to a raft in the Atlantic drifting and freezing and chatting about the time they'd get back to Ireland and have a nice pint and a mountain of bacon and cabbage.

Owen spoke to me next day. He said he knew he was breaking the rules but he couldn't help talking to anyone on this ship who was reading *Crime and Punishment*. There were great readers in the crew right enough but they wouldn't move beyond Edgar Wallace or Zane Grey and he'd give anything to be able to chat about Dostoyevsky. He wanted to know if I'd read *The Possessed* or *The Brothers Karamazov* and he looked sad when I said I'd never heard of them. He told me the minute I got to New York I should rush to a bookshop and get Dostoyevsky books and I'd never be lonely again. He said no matter what Dostoyevsky book you read he always gave you something to chew on and you can't beat that for a bargain. That's what Owen said though I had no notion of what he was talking about.

Then the priest came along the deck and Owen moved away. The priest said, Were you talking to that man? I could see you were. Well, I'm telling you he's not good company. You can see that, can't you? I heard all about him. Him with his grey hair swabbing decks at his age. It's a strange thing you can talk to deck hands with no morals but if I ask you to talk to the rich Protestants from Kentucky you can't find a minute.

We were only talking about Dostoyevsky.

Dostoyevsky, indeed. Lotta good that'll do you in New York. You won't see many Help Wanted signs requiring a knowledge of

Dostoyevsky. Can't get you to talk to the rich people from Kentucky but you sit here for hours yacking with sailors. Stay away from old sailors. You know what they are. Talk to people who'll do you some good. Read the *Lives of the Saints*.

Along the New Jersey side of the Hudson River there were hundreds of ships docked tightly together. Owen the sailor said they were the Liberty ships that brought supplies to Europe during the war and after and it's sad to think they'll be hauled away any day to be broken up in shipyards. But that's the way the world is, he said, and a ship lasts no longer than a whore's moan.

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There's a letter from my mother to say times are hard at home. She knows my wages aren't great and she's grateful for the ten dollars every week but could I spare an extra few dollars for shoes for Michael and Alphonse? She had a job taking care of an old man but he was a great disappointment the way he died unexpected when she thought he'd hang on till the New Year so that she'd have a few shillings for shoes and a Christmas dinner, ham or something with a bit of dignity in it. She says sick people shouldn't hire people to take care of them and give them false hope of a job when they know very well they're in the throes. There's nothing coming in now but the money I'm sending and it looks as if poor Michael will have to leave school and get a job the minute he turns fourteen next year and that's shame and she'd like to know, Is this what we fought the English for that half the children of Ireland should be wandering street field and breen with nothing between them and their feet but the skin?

I'm already sending her ten dollars out of the thirty-two I get at the Biltmore Hotel though it's more like twenty-six when they deduct the Social Security and the income tax. After the rent I have twenty dollars and my mother gets ten of that and I have ten for food and the subway when it rains. The rest of the time I walk to save the nickel. Now and then I go mad with myself and go to a film at the Sixty-Eighth Street Playhouse and I know enough to sneak in a Hershey bar or two

bananas which is the cheapest food on earth. Sometimes when I peel my banana people from Park Avenue with sensitive noses will sniff and whisper to each other, Is that a banana I'm smelling? and the next thing is they're threatening to complain to the management.

But I don't care anymore. If they go to the usher to complain I'm not going to skulk in the men's room eating my banana. I'll go to the Democratic Party in the Biltmore Hotel and tell them I'm an American citizen with an Irish accent and why am I being tormented over eating a banana during a Gary Cooper film?

The winter might be coming in Ireland but it's colder here and the clothes I brought from Ireland are useless for a New York winter. Eddie Gilligan says if that's all I'm going to wear on the streets I'll be dead before I'm twenty. He says if I'm not too proud I can go to that big Salvation Army place on the west side and get all the winter clothes I need for a few dollars. He says make sure I get clothes that make me look like an American and not the Paddy-from-the-bog stuff that makes me look like a turnip farmer.

But I can't go to the Salvation Army now because of the fifteen dollar international money order for my mother and I can't get leftovers from the Puerto Ricans in the Biltmore kitchen anymore for fear they might catch my eye disease.

Eddie Gilligan says there's talk about my eyes. He was called in by personnel because he's the shop steward and they told him I'm never to go near the kitchen again in case I might touch a towel or something and leave all the Puerto Rican dishwashers and Italian cooks half blind with conjunctivitis or whatever I have. The only reason I'm kept on the job at all is that I was sent by the Democratic Party and they pay plenty for the big offices they rent in the hotel. Eddie says Mr Carey might be a tough boss but he stands up for his own kind and tells personnel where to get off, tells them the minute they try to lay off a kid with bad eyes the Democratic Party will know about it and that will be the end of the Biltmore Hotel. They'll see a strike that'll bring out the whole goddam Hotel Workers' Union. No more room service. No elevators. Eddie says, Fat bastards will have to walk and the chambermaids won't be putting toilet paper in the bathrooms. Imagine that: fat old bastards stuck with nothing to wipe their asses and all because of your bad eyes, kid.

We'll walk, says Eddie, the whole goddam union. We'll close down every hotel in the city. But I gotta tell you they gave me the name of this eye doctor on Lexington Avenue. You gotta see him and report back in a week.

The doctor's office is in an old building, up four flights of stairs. Babies are crying and a radio is playing

*Boys and girls together
Me and Mamie O'Rourke
We'll trip the light fantastic
On the sidewalks of New York.*

The doctor tells me, Come in, sit in this chair, whassa matter with your eyes? You here for glasses?

I have some kind of infection, doctor.

Jesus, yeah. That's some infection all right. How long you had this?

Nine years, doctor. I was in the eye hospital in Ireland when I was eleven.

He pokes at my eyes with a little piece of wood and pats them with cotton swabs which stick to the lids and make me blink. He tells me stop blinking, how the hell do I expect him to examine my eyes if I sit there blinking like a maniac? But I can't help it. The more he pokes and swabs the more I blink till he's so irritated he throws the stick with the swab stuck to it out the window. He pulls out drawers in his desk and curses and slams them in again till he finds a small bottle of whiskey and a cigar and that puts him in such a good humor he sits at his desk and laughs.

Still blinking, eh? Well, kid, I've been looking at eyes for thirty-seven years and I never saw anything like that? What are you, Mexican or something?

No, I'm Irish, doctor.

What you have there they don't have that in Ireland. And that's not conjunctivitis. I know conjunctivitis. That's something else and I can tell you you're lucky you have eyes at all. What you have I saw in guys coming back from the Pacific, New Guinea and places like that. You ever in New Guinea?

No, doctor.

Now what you have to do is shave that head completely. You've

got some kind of infectious dandruff like the guys from New Guinea and it's falling into your eyes. That hair will have to come off and you'll have to scrub that scalp every day with a prescription soap. Scrub that scalp till it tingles. Scrub that scalp till it shines and come back to see me. That'll be ten dollars, kid.

The prescription soap is two dollars and the Italian barber on Third Avenue charges me another two dollars plus tip for cutting my hair and shaving my scalp. He tells me it's a crying shame shaving off a nice head of hair, if he had a head of hair like that they'd have to cut off his head to get it, that most of these doctors don't know shit from Shinola anyway but if that's what I want who is he to object.

He holds up a mirror to show how bald I look in the back and I feel weak with the shame of it, the bald head, the red eyes, the pimples, the bad teeth, and if anyone looks at me on Lexington Avenue I'll push him into traffic because I'm sorry I ever came to America which threatens to fire me over my eyes and makes me go bald through the streets of New York.

Of course they stare at me on the streets and I want to stare back in a threatening way but I can't with the yellow ooze in my eyes mixing with strands of cotton and blinding me entirely. I look up and down side streets for the ones least crowded and I zigzag across town and up. The best street is Third Avenue with the El rattling overhead and shadows everywhere and people in bars with their own troubles minding their own business and not staring at every pair of sore eyes that passes by. People coming out of banks and dress shops always stare but people in bars brood over their drinks and wouldn't care if you went eyeless on the avenue.

Of course Mrs Austin is gawking out the basement window. No sooner am I in the front door than she's up the stairs asking what happened to my head, did I have an accident, was I in a fire or something, and I want to snap at her and say, Does this look like a damn fire? But I tell her my hair was only singed in the hotel kitchen and the barber said it would be better to cut it off at the roots and start all over again. I have to be polite to Mrs Austin for fear she might tell me pack up and leave and there I'd be out on the street on a Saturday with a brown suitcase and a bald head and three dollars to my name. She says, Well, you're young, and goes back downstairs and all I can do is lie on my bed listening to people on the street talking and laughing, wondering how I can go to work on Monday

morning in my baldy condition even if I am obeying the hotel and the doctor's orders.

I keep going to the mirror in my room, shocking myself with the whiteness of my scalp, and wishing I could stay here till the hair comes back but I'm hungry. Mrs Austin forbids food and drink in the room but once the darkness falls I go up the street for the big *Sunday Times* that will shield the bag with a sweet bun and a pint of milk from Mrs Austin's gawk. Now I have less than two dollars to last me till Friday and here it is only Saturday. If she stops me I'll say, Why shouldn't I have a sweet bun and a pint of milk after the way the doctor told me I had a New Guinea disease and a barber shaved my head to the bone? I wonder about all those films where they're waving the Stars and Stripes and placing their hands on their chests and declaring to the world this is the land of the free and the home of the brave and you know yourself you can't even go to see *Hamlet* with your lemon meringue pie and your ginger ale or a banana and you can't go into Mrs Austin's with any food or drink.

But Mrs Austin doesn't appear. Landladies never appear when you don't care.

I can't read the *Times* unless I wash out my eyes in the bathroom with warm water and toilet paper and it's lovely to lie in the bed with the paper and the bun and milk till Mrs Austin calls up the stairs complaining her electric bills are sky high and would I kindly put out the light, she's not a millionaire.

Once I switch off the light I remember it's time to smear my scalp with ointment but then I realize if I lie down the ointment will be all over the pillow and Mrs Austin will be at me again. The only thing to do is sit up with my head resting against the iron bedstead where I can wipe off any stray ointment. The iron is made up of little scrolls and flowers with petals that stick out and make it impossible to get a decent sleep and the only thing I can do is get out and sleep on the floor where Mrs Austin will have nothing to complain about.

Monday morning there's a note on my time card telling me report to the nineteenth floor. Eddie Gilligan says it's nothing personal but they don't want me in the lobby anymore with the bad eyes and now the bald head. It's a well-known fact that people who lose their hair suddenly are not long for this world even if you were to stand up in

the middle of the lobby and announce it was the barber who did it. People want to believe the worst and they're in the personnel office saying, Bad eyes, bald head, put the two together and you have big problems with the guests in the lobby. When the hair grows back and the eyes clear up I might be returned to the lobby, maybe as bus boy someday, and I'd be making tips so big I'd be able to support my family in Limerick in high style but not now, not with with this head, these eyes.

There's a letter telling me report to my faculty advisor in the English Department, Mr Max Bogart. He says my grades are unsatisfactory, B minus in The History of American Education and C in Introduction to Literature. I'm supposed to maintain a B average on my year's probation if I want to stay in college. After all, he says, the Dean did you a favor letting you in without a high school diploma and now you let her down.

I have to work.

What do you mean you have to work? Everyone has to work. I have to work nights, sometimes days, on piers, in warehouses. He says I have to make a decision, work or college. He'll give me a break this time and put me on probation on top of the probation I already have. Next June he wants to see me with a straight B average or better.

I never thought college would be all numbers and letters and grades and averages and people putting me on probation. I thought this would be a place where kindly learned men and women would teach in a warm way and if I didn't understand they'd pause and explain. I didn't know I'd go from course to course with dozens of students, sometimes over a hundred, with professors lecturing and not even looking at you. Some professors look out the window or up at the ceiling and some stick their noses in notebooks and read from

paper that is yellow and crumbling with age. If students ask questions they're waved away. In English novels students at Oxford and Cambridge were always meeting in professors' rooms and sipping sherry while discussing Sophocles. I'd like to discuss Sophocles, too, but I'd have to read him first and there's no time after my nights at Merchant's Refrigeration.

And if I'm to discuss Sophocles and get gloomy over existentialism and the Camus suicide problem I'll have to give up Merchant's Refrigeration. If I didn't have the night job I might be able to sit in the cafeteria and talk about *Pierre*, or *The Ambiguities* or *Crime and Punishment* or Shakespeare in general. There are girls in the cafeteria with names like Rachel and Naomi and they're the ones Mrs Klein told me about, Jewish girls who are very sensual. I wish I had the courage to talk to them because they're probably like Protestant girls, all in a state of despair over the emptiness of it all, no sense of sin and ready for all kinds of sensuality.

In the spring of 1954 I'm a fulltime student at NYU working only part-time on the docks and the warehouses or when the Manpower agency sends me on a temporary job. The first one is at a hat factory on Seventh Avenue where the owner, Mr Meyer, tells me it's easy work. All I have to do is take these women's hats, neutral colors all of them, dip these feathers into different dye pots, let the feather dry, match the color against the hat, attach feather to hat. Easy, right? Yeah, that's what you'd think, says Mr Meyer, but when I let some of my Puerto Rican help try this job they came up with color combinations that would blind you. These PRs think life is an Easter Parade and it ain't. You gotta have taste when you match a feather with a hat, taste, my friend. Little Jewish ladies in Brooklyn don't want to be wearing the Easter Parade on their heads on Passover, know't I mean?

He tells me I look intelligent enough, college boy, right? Easy job like this shouldn't be a problem. If it is I shouldn't even be in college. He's going away for a few days so I'll be on my own except for the Puerto Rican ladies working on the sewing machines and the cutting tables. Yeah, he says, the PR ladies will take care of you, ha ha.

I want to ask him if there are colors that match and colors that don't but he's gone. I dip feathers into pots and when I attach them

to the hats the Puerto Rican women and girls start to giggle and laugh. I finish a batch of hats and they take them to shelves along the walls and bring me another batch. All the time they try not to laugh but they can't help themselves and I can't stop blushing. I try to vary the color schemes by dipping the feathers into different pots for a rainbow effect. I use a feather as a paint brush and on the other feathers I try to make dots, stripes, sunsets, moons waxing and waning, wavy rivers with fish waggling along and birds roosting, and the women laugh so hard they can't operate the sewing machines. I wish I could talk to them and ask them what I'm doing wrong. I wish I could tell them I wasn't put into this world to stick feathers on hats, that I'm a college student who trained dogs in Germany and worked on the piers.

In three days Mr Meyer returns and when he sees the hats he stops inside the door like a man paralyzed. He looks at the women and they shake their heads as if to say there's madness in the world. He says, What did you do? and I don't know what to say back. He says, Jesus. I mean are you Puerto Rican or what?

No, sir.

Irish, right? Yeah, that's it. Maybe you're color blind. I didn't ask you about that. Did I ask you about your color blindness?

No, sir.

If you're not color blind then I don't know how you can explain these combinations. You make the Puerto Ricans look dull, y'know that? Dull. I guess it's the Irish thing, no sense of color, no art, f'Chrissakes. I mean where are the Irish painters? Name one.

I can't.

You heard of Van Gogh, right? Rembrandt? Picasso?

I did.

That's what I mean. You're nice people, the Irish, great singers, John McCormack. Great cops, politicians, priests. Lotta Irish priests but no artists. When didja ever see an Irish painting on the wall? A Murphy, a Reilly, a Rooney? Nah, kid. I think it's because your people know one color, green. Right? So my advice to you is stay away from anything to do with color. Join the cops, run for office, pick up your paycheck and have a nice life, no hard feelings.

They shake their heads in the Manpower office. They thought this would be the perfect job for me, college boy, right? What's so hard about sticking feathers on hats? Mr Meyer called them and said, Don't send me no more Irish college boys. They're color blind. Send

me someone stupid that knows colors and won't mess with my hats. They say if I could type they'd send me out on all kinds of jobs. I tell them I can type, that I learned in the army and I'm powerful.

They send me to offices all over Manhattan. From nine to five I sit at desks and type lists, invoices, addresses on envelopes, bills of lading. Supervisors tell me what to do and talk to me only when I make mistakes. The other office workers ignore me because I'm only temporary, a temp they say, and I might not even be here tomorrow. They don't even see me. I could die at my desk and they'd talk past me about what they saw on TV last night and how they're getting outa here fast Friday afternoon and heading for the Jersey shore. They send out for coffee and pastries and don't ask me if I have a mouth in my head. Whenever anything unusual happens it's an excuse for a party. There are presents for people being promoted, getting pregnant, people getting engaged or married, and they'll all stand around the other end of the office drinking wine, eating crackers and cheese for the hour before they go home. Women will bring in their new babies and all the other women will rush over to tickle them and say, Isn't she just beautiful? Got your eyes, Miranda, definitely got your eyes. Men will say, Hi, Miranda. Looking good. Nice kid. That's all they can say because men are not supposed to be enthusiastic or excited over babies. I'm not invited to the parties and I feel strange with my typewriter clacking away and everyone having a good time. If a supervisor is giving a small speech and I'm at the typewriter they'll call across the office, Excuse me, you over there, quit the racket a minute, will ya? Can't hear ourselves think here.

I don't know how they can work in these offices day after day, year in, year out. I can't stop looking at the clock and there are times I think I'll just get up and walk away the way I did at the Blue Cross insurance company. The people in their offices don't seem to mind. They go to the water cooler, they go to the toilet, they walk from desk to desk and chat, they call from desk to desk on the telephone, they admire each other's clothes, hair, makeup, and anytime someone loses a few pounds on a diet. If a woman is told she lost weight she smiles for an hour and keeps running her hands over her hips. Office people brag about their children, their wives, their husbands and they dream about the two-week vacation.

I'm sent to an import-export firm on Fourth Avenue. I'm given a pile of papers that have to do with importing Japanese dolls. I'm

supposed to copy this paper to that paper. It's nine thirty a.m. by the office clock. I look out the window. The sun is shining. A man and woman are kissing outside a coffee shop across the avenue. It's nine thirty-three a.m. by the office clock. The man and woman separate and walk in opposite directions. They turn. They run towards each other to kiss again. It's nine thirty-six a.m. by the office clock. I take my jacket from the back of the chair and slip it on. The office manager stands at his cubicle door and says, Hey, what's up? I don't answer. People are waiting for the elevator but I head for the stairs and run as fast as I can down seven flights. The kissing people have disappeared and I'm sorry. I wanted to see them once more. I hope they're not going to offices where they'll be typing lists of Japanese dolls or telling everyone they're engaged so that the officer manager will allow them an hour of wine and cheese and crackers.

With my brother Malachy in the air force sending a monthly allotment my mother is comfortable in Limerick. She has the house with gardens front and back where she can grow flowers and onions if she likes. She has enough money for clothes and bingo and excursions to the seaside at Kilkee. Alphie is in school at the Christian Brothers where he'll get a secondary school education and all kinds of opportunities. With the comfort of the new house, beds, sheets, blankets, pillows, he doesn't have to worry about battling fleas all night, there's DDT, and he doesn't have to struggle to light a fire in the grate every morning, there's the gas stove. He can have an egg every day if he likes and not even think about it the way we did. He has decent clothes and shoes and he's warm no matter how bad it is outside.

It's time for me to send for Michael so that he can come to New York and get on in the world. When he arrives he's so thin I want to take him out and fill him with hamburgers and apple pie. He stays with me awhile at Mrs Klein's and works at different jobs but there's the threat of being drafted into the army and he thinks it's better to join the air force because the uniform is a nice shade of blue, more glamorous than the shitty brown of the army uniform and more likely to attract girls. Once Malachy is out of the air force Michael can continue the monthly allotment that will keep my mother going for another three years and I will have only myself to worry about till I finish at NYU.

For teachers Fridays are bright. You leave the school with a bag filled with papers to read and correct, books to read. This weekend you will surely catch up with all those uncorrected, unmarked papers. You don't want to let them pile up in the closets like Miss Mudd so that decades hence a young teacher will pounce on them to keep his classes busy. You will take the papers home, pour a glass of wine, stack Duke Ellington, Sonny Rollins and Hector Berlioz on the phonograph and try to read a hundred and fifty student compositions. You know that some don't care what you do with their work as long as you give them a decent grade so that they can pass and get on with real life in their shops. Others fancy themselves as writers and want their papers back corrected and graded high. The class Romeos would like you to comment on their papers and read them aloud so that they can bask in the admiring glances of the girls. The ones who don't care are sometimes interested in the same girls and verbal threats are passed from desk to desk because the ones who don't care are weak in written expression. If a boy is a good writer you have to be careful about praising him too much because of the danger of accidents on the stairs. The ones who don't care hate goody goodies.

You intend to go straight home with your bag but you then discover Friday afternoon is the time for beer and teacher enlightenment. An occasional teacher might say he has to go home to his wife

till he finds Bob Bogard standing by the time clock to remind us of first things first, that the Meurot Bar is a few steps away, next door in fact, and what harm would there be in one beer, one? Bob is not married and may not understand the dangers for a man who might go beyond the one beer, a man who might have to face the wrath of a wife who has cooked a fine Friday fish and now sits in the kitchen watching the grease congeal.

We stand at the Meurot Bar and order our beers. There is teacher small talk. When there's a mention of good-looking women on our staff or even nubile students we roll our eyes. What we wouldn't do if we were high school kids nowadays. We talk tough at the mention of troublesome boys. One more word out of that goddam kid and he's gonna beg for a transfer. We unite in our hostility to authority, all the people who emerge from their offices to supervise and observe us and tell us what to do and how to do it, people who spent as little time as possible in the classroom themselves and don't know their ass from their elbow about teaching.

A young teacher might drop in, just graduated from college, newly licensed. The drone of university professors and the chatter from college cafeterias is still in his ears and if he wants to discuss Camus and Sartre and how existence precedes essence or vice versa he'll be talking to himself in the mirror of the Meurot Bar.

None of us had followed the Great American Path, elementary school, high school, college, and into teaching at twenty-two. Bob Bogard fought in the war in Germany and was probably wounded. He won't tell you. Claude Campbell served in the navy, graduated from college in Tennessee, published a novel when he was twenty-seven, teaches English, has six children with his second wife, took a master's degree at Brooklyn College with a thesis, *Ideational Trends in the American Novel*, fixes everything in his house, wiring, plumbing, carpentry. I look at him and think of Goldsmith's lines on the village schoolmaster, And all around the wonder grew/That one small head could carry all he knew. And Claude hasn't even reached the age of Christ at his crucifixion, thirty-three.

When Stanley Garber drops in for a Coke he tells us he often feels he made a mistake by not going into college teaching where you amble through life thinking you shit cream puffs and suffering if you have to teach more than three hours a week. He says he could have written a bullshit Ph.D. dissertation on the bilabial fricative in the

middle period of Thomas Chatterton who died when he was seventeen because that's the kind of crap that goes on in colleges while the rest of us hold the front lines with kids who won't get their heads out from between their thighs and supervisors content to keep their heads up their asses.

There will be trouble tonight in Brooklyn. I'm supposed to have dinner with Alberta at an Arabic restaurant, the Near East, bring your own wine, but it's six going on seven and if I call now she'll complain she's been waiting for hours, that I'm just an Irish drunk like my father and she doesn't care if I stay on Staten Island the rest of my life, good-bye.

So I won't call. Better not to. No use having two rows, one on the phone now, another when I get home. It's easier to sit at the bar where's there's a glow and important matters are discussed.

We agree that teachers are sniped at from three fronts, parents, kids, supervisors, and you either have to be diplomatic or tell them all kiss your ass. Teachers are the only professionals who have to respond to bells every forty-five minutes and come out fighting. All right, class, sit down. Yes, you, sit down. Open your notebooks, that's right, your notebooks, am I speaking a foreign language, kid? Don't call you kid? Okay, I won't call you kid. Just sit down. Report card grades are just around the corner and I can put you on the welfare rolls. All right, bring in your father, bring in your mother, bring in your whole damn tribe. You don't have a pen, Pete? Okay, here's a pen. Good-bye, pen. No, Phyllis, you can't have the pass. I don't care if you're having a hundred periods, Phyllis, because what you really want to do is meet Eddie and disappear into the basement where your future could be determined by one smooth panty drop and one swift upward stroke from Eddie's impatient member, the start of a little nine-month adventure that will end with you squawking Eddie better marry you, the shotgun aimed at his lower frontal region and his dreams dead. So I'm saving you, Phyllis, you and Eddie and no, you don't have to thank me.

This is talk along the bar that will never be heard in the classroom unless a teacher loses his wits entirely. You know you can never deny the lavatory pass to a menstrual Phyllis for fear of being dragged before the highest court in the land where the black robes, all men, will excoriate you for insulting Phyllis and the future mothers of America.

There is talk along the bar about certain efficient teachers and we

agree we don't like them and the way their classes are so organized they hum from bell to bell. In these classes there are monitors for every activity, every part of the lesson. There is the monitor who goes immediately to the board to write the number and title of the day's lesson, Lesson #32, Strategies in Dealing with the Dangling Participle. Efficient teachers are known for their strategies, the darling new word at the Board of Education.

The efficient teacher has rules for taking notes and the organization of the notebook and there are notebook monitors who roam the classroom to check for proper form, top of page filled with student's name, homeroom class, title of course and date with the month written out, not numbers, it must be written out so that the student will have practice in writing out because there are too many people in this world that we live in, business people and others, who are too lazy to write out the months. There are to be prescribed margins and no scribbling. If the notebook doesn't adhere to the rules the monitor will enter demerits on the student's card and when report card time rolls around there will be suffering and no mercy.

Homework monitors collect and return assignments, attendance monitors preside over the little cards in the attendance book and collect excuses for absences and latenesses. Failure to submit written excuses leads to further suffering and no mercy.

Some students are known for their skill in writing excuse notes from parents and doctors and they'll do it in return for favors in the cafeteria or the far reaches of the basement.

Monitors who take blackboard erasers to the basement to knock out the chalk must first promise they're not taking this important job to sneak a smoke or make out with the boy or girl of their choice. The principal is already complaining there is too much activity in the basement and he'd like to know what's going on there.

There are monitors to distribute books and collect receipts, monitors to handle the lavatory pass and the sign in sign out sheet, monitors to put everything in the room in alphabetical order, monitors to carry the trash can along the aisles in the war against litter, monitors who decorate the room to make it so bright and cheerful the principal brings in visitors from Japan and Liechtenstein.

The efficient teacher is monitor of monitors though he may lighten his monitor load by appointing monitors who monitor the other monitors or he may have dispute monitors who settle arguments

between monitors accusing other monitors of interfering with their jobs. The dispute monitor has the most dangerous job of all because of what might happen on the stairs or the street.

A student caught trying to bribe a monitor is immediately reported to the principal who will enter a remark on his permanent record that will blacken his reputation. This is a warning to others that such a blot could be an impediment to a career in sheet metal, plumbing, automechanics, anything.

Stanley Garber snorts that with all this efficient activity there is little time for instruction but what the hell, the students are in their seats, completely monitored and behaving themselves, and that pleases the teacher, the chairman, the principal and his assistants, the superintendent, the Board of Education, the Mayor, the Governor, the President, and God Himself.

So says Stanley.

If a university professor discusses *Vanity Fair* or anything else his classes listen with notebooks open and pens poised. If they dislike the novel they won't dare complain for fear of lowered grades.

When I distributed *Vanity Fair* to my junior class at McKee Vocational and Technical High School there was moaning in the room. Why do we have to read this dumb book? I told them it was about two young women, Becky and Amelia, and their adventures with men, but my students said it was written in that old English and who can read that? Four girls read it and said it was beautiful and should be made into a movie. The boys pretended to yawn and told me English teachers were all the same. They just wanted to make you read that old stuff and how was that gonna help you if you was fixin' a car or a busted air conditioner, ah?

I could threaten them with failure. If they refused to read this book they'd fail the course and they wouldn't graduate and everyone knew girls didn't want to go out with anyone who wasn't a high school graduate.

For three weeks we toiled through *Vanity Fair*. Every day I tried to motivate and encourage them, to draw them into a discussion of what it's like to make your way through the world when you're a young nineteenth-century woman, but they didn't care. One wrote on the board, Becky Sharp Drop Dead.

Then, as decreed by the school syllabus, it was on to *The Scarlet Letter*. This would be easier. I'd talk about the New England witch hunts, the accusations, the hysteria, the hangings. I'd talk about Germany in the nineteen-thirties and how a whole nation was brainwashed.

Not my students. They'd never be brainwashed. No, sir, they'd never be able to get away with that here. They'd never fool us like that.

I chanted to them, Winston tastes good like . . . and they finished the sentence.

I sang, My beer is Rheingold the dry beer . . . and they finished the jingle.

I chanted again, You wonder where the yellow went when . . . and they finished the line.

I asked if they knew any more and there was an eruption of jingles from radio and television, proof of the power of advertising. When I told them they were brainwashed they were indignant Oh, no, they weren't brainwashed. They could think for themselves and nobody could tell them what to do. They denied they'd been told what cigarette to smoke, what beer to drink, what toothpaste to use though they'd admit that when you're in a supermarket you'll buy the brand in your head. No, you'd never buy a cigarette called Turnip.

Yeah, they heard about Senator McCarthy and all that but they were too young and their fathers and mothers said he was a great man for getting rid of the Communists.

From day to day I struggled to make connections between Hitler and McCarthy and the New England witch hunts, trying to soften them up for *The Scarlet Letter*. From parents there were indignant calls. What is this guy telling our kids about Senator McCarthy? Tell him back off. Senator McCarthy was a good man, fought for his country. Tailgunner Joe. Got rid of the Communists.

Mr Sorola said he didn't want to interfere but would I please tell him was I teaching English or was I teaching history. I told him about my troubles trying to get the kids to read anything. He said I shouldn't listen to them. Just tell them, You're going to read *The Scarlet Letter* whether you like it or not because this is high school and that's what we do here and that's that and if you don't like it, kid, you fail.

They complained when I distributed the book. Here we go again with the old stuff. We thought you was a nice guy, Mr McCourt. We thought you was different.

I told them this book was about a young woman in Boston who got into trouble over having a baby with a man who wasn't her husband though I couldn't tell them who the man was in case it might ruin the story. They said they didn't care who the father was. One boy said you never know who your father is anyway because he had a friend who discovered his father wasn't his father at all, that his real father was killed in Korea, but the pretend father was the one he grew up with, a good guy, so who gives a shit about this woman in Boston.

Most of the class agreed though they wouldn't want to wake up in the morning to find their fathers weren't their real fathers. Some wished they had other fathers, their own fathers were so mean they made them come to school and read dumb books.

But that's not the story of *The Scarlet Letter*, I said.

Aw, Mr McCourt, do we have to talk about that old stuff? This guy Hawthorne don't even know how to write so's we can understand and you're always saying write simple, write simple. Why can't we read the *Daily News*? They have good writers. They write simple.

Then I remembered I was broke and that's what led to *Catcher in the Rye* and *Five Great Plays of Shakespeare* and a change in my teaching career. I had forty-eight cents to get me home on the ferry and the subway, no money for lunch, not even for a cup of coffee on the ferry and I blurted to the class that if they wanted to read a good book that didn't have big words and long sentences and was all about a boy their age who was mad at the world I'd get it for them but they'd have to buy it, a dollar twenty-five each which they could pay in instalments starting now, so if you have a nickel or a dime or more you can pass it up and I'll write your name and amount on a sheet of paper and order the books today from the Coleman Book Company in Yonkers, and they'd never know, my students, I'd have a pocketful of change for lunch and maybe a beer at the Meurot next door, though I didn't tell them that, they'd be shocked.

Small change was passed up and when I called the book company I saved a dime by using the assistant principal's phone because it's illegal to have students buy books when bookrooms are spilling over with copies of *Silas Marner* and *Giants in the Earth*.

Catcher in the Rye arrived in two days and I passed them out, paid for or not. Some students never offered a penny, others less than their share, but the money collected kept me going till pay day when I'd satisfy the book company.

When I handed out the books someone discovered the word crap on the first page and that brought silence to the room. That's a word you'd never find in any book in the English bookroom. Girls covered their mouths and giggled and boys tittered over shocking pages. When the bell rang there was no stampede to the door. I had to ask them to leave, another class was coming in.

The class coming in were curious about the class going out and why was everyone looking at this book and if it was that good why couldn't they read it. I reminded them they were seniors and the class going out were juniors. Yeah, but why couldn't they read that small book instead of *Great Expectations*? I told them they could but they'd have to buy it and they said they'd pay anything not to read *Great Expectations*, anything.

Next day Mr Sorola came into the room with his assistant, Miss Seested. They went from desk to desk snatching copies of *Catcher in the Rye* and dropping them into two shopping bags. If the books weren't on the desks they demanded the students take them from their bags. They counted the books in the shopping bags and compared them with the class attendance and threatened the four students who hadn't turned in their books with big trouble. Raise your hands, the four people who still have the book. No hands were raised and on the way out Mr Sorola told me I was to see him in his office right after this class, not a minute later.

Mr McCourt, you in trouble?

Mr McCourt, that's the only book I ever read and now that man took it.

They complained about the loss of their books and told me if anything happened to me they'd go on strike and that would teach the school a lesson. They nudged and winked over the strike and they knew I knew it would simply be another excuse for avoiding school and not any great concern for me.

Mr Sorola sat behind his desk reading *Catcher in the Rye*, puffing on his cigarette and letting me wait while he turned the page, shook his head and put the book down.

Mr McCourt, this book is not on the syllabus.

I know, Mr Sorola.

You know I've had calls from seventeen parents and you know why?

They didn't like the book?

That's right, Mr McCourt. There's a scene in this book where the kid is in a hotel room with a prostitute.

Yes, but nothing happens.

That's not what the parents think. You telling me that kid was in that room to sing? The parents don't want their kids reading this kind of trash.

He warned me to be careful, that I was endangering my satisfactory rating on the yearly performance report and we wouldn't want that, would we? He would have to place a note in my file as a record of our meeting. If there were no further incidents in the near future the note would be removed.

Mr McCourt, what are we gonna read next?

The Scarlet Letter. We have tons of them in the bookroom.

Their faces fell. Aw, Gawd, no. All the kids in the other classes told us it's that old stuff again.

All right, I said, jokingly. We'll read Shakespeare.

Their faces fell even farther and the room was filled with moans and hisses. Mr McCourt, my sister went to college for a year and dropped out because she couldn't read Shakespeare and she can speak Italian and everything.

I said it again, Shakespeare. There was fear in the room and I felt myself drawn to the edge of a cliff with something in my head demanding, How can you move from Salinger to Shakespeare?

I told the class, It's Shakespeare or *The Scarlet Letter*, kings and lovers or a woman having a baby in Boston. If we read Shakespeare we'll act out the plays. If we read *The Scarlet Letter* we'll sit here and discuss the deeper meaning and I'll give you the big exam they keep in the department office.

Oh, no, not the deeper meaning. English teachers always be going on about the deeper meaning.

All right. It's Shakespeare, no deeper meaning and no exams except what you decide. So, write your name on this paper and the amount you're paying and we'll get the book.

They passed up their nickels and dimes. They groaned when they thumbed the book, *Five Great Plays of Shakespeare*. Man, I can't read this old English.

Whatever happened in that class did not spring from any talent, intellect or careful planning of mine. I wished I could have dominated my classes like other teachers, imposed on them classic English and American literature. I failed. I caved in and took the easy way with *Catcher in the Rye* and when that was taken dodged and danced my way to Shakespeare. We'd read the plays and enjoy ourselves and why not? Wasn't he the best?

Still my students complained till someone called out, Shit, man, excuse the language, Mr McCourt, but here's this guy saying Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.

Where? Where? The class wanted to know the page number and all around the room boys declaimed Mark Antony's speech, flung out their arms and laughed.

Another discovered Hamlet's To be or not to be soliloquy and soon the room was filled with ranting Hamlets.

The girls raised their hands. Mr McCourt, the boys have all these great speeches and there's nothing for us.

Oh, girls, girls, there's Juliet, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, Gertrude.

We spent two days plucking morsels from the five plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV*, Part One.

My students led and I followed because there was nothing else to do. Remarks had been passed in the hallways, in the students' cafeteria.

Hey, wass dat?

It's a book, man.

Oh, yeah? What book?

Shakespeare. We're reading Shakespeare.

Shakespeare? Shit, man, you not reading Shakespeare.

When the girls wanted to act out *Romeo and Juliet* the boys yawned and obliged. This would be sissy romantic stuff till the fight scene where Mercutio dies in style, telling the world about his wound.

*Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door,
But 'tis enough, 'twill serve.*

To be or not to be was the passage everyone memorized but when they recited it they had to be reminded this was a meditation on suicide and not an incitement to arms.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah.

The girls wanted to know why everyone picked on Ophelia especially Laertes, Polonius, Hamlet. Why didn't she fight back? They had sisters like that who were married to bastard sons o' bitches, excuse the language, and you wouldn't believe what they put up with.

A hand went up. Why didn't Ophelia run away to America?

Another hand. Because there was no America in the old days. It had to be discovered.

Whadda you talkin' about? There was always an America. Where do you think the Indians lived?

I told them they'd have to look it up and the opposing hands agreed to go to the library and report next day.

One hand, There was an America in Shakespeare's time and she coulda went.

The other hand. There was an America in Shakespeare's time but no America in Ophelia's time and she cudden'ta went. If she went in Shakespeare's time there was nothing but Indians and Ophelia woulda been uncomfortable in a tepee which is what they called their houses.

We moved on to *Henry IV*, Part One, and all the boys wanted to be Hal, Hotspur, Falstaff. The girls complained again there was nothing for them except for Juliet, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth and Queen Gertrude and look what happened to them. Didn't Shakespeare like women? Did he have to kill everyone who wore a skirt?

The boys said that's the way it is and the girls snapped back they were sorry we didn't read *The Scarlet Letter* because one of them had read it and told the rest how Hester Prynne had her beautiful baby, Pearl, and the father was a jerk who died miserable and Hester got her revenge on the whole town of Boston and wasn't that much better than poor Ophelia floating down a stream, out of her mind, talking to herself and throwin' flowers around, wasn't it?

Mr Sorola came to observe me with the new head of the Academic Department, Mrs Popp. They smiled and didn't complain about this Shakespeare book not being on the syllabus though the next term Mrs Popp took this class away from me. I lodged a grievance and had a hearing before the superintendent. I said that was my class, I had

started them reading Shakespeare and I wanted to continue in the next term. The superintendent ruled against me on the grounds that my attendance record was spotty and erratic.

My Shakespeare students were probably lucky in having the head of the department as their teacher. She was surely more organized than I and more likely to discover deeper meanings.

It's 1969 and I'm substitute teaching for Joe Curran who is out for a few weeks with the drink. His students ask if I know Greek and seem disappointed that I don't. After all, Mr Curran would sit at his desk and read or recite from memory long passages from *The Odyssey*, yeah, in Greek, and he'd remind his students daily he was a graduate of Boston Latin School and Boston College and tell them anyone who didn't know his Greek or Latin couldn't consider himself educated, could never lay claim to being a gentleman. Yes, yes, this might be Stuyvesant High School, says Mr Curran, and you might be the brightest kids from here to the foothills of the Rockies, your heads stuffed with science and mathematics, but all you need in this life is your Homer, your Sophocles, your Plato, your Aristotle, your Aristophanes for the lighter moments, your Virgil for the dark places, your Horace to escape the mundane, and your Juvenal when you're completely pissed off with the world. The grandeur, boys, the grandeur that was Greece and the glory that was Rome.

It wasn't the Greeks or the Romans his students loved, it was the forty minutes when Joe droned or declaimed and they could daydream, catch up on homework for other classes, doodle, nibble at sandwiches from home, carve their initials on desks that might have been occupied by James Cagney, Thelonious Monk or certain Nobel Laureates. Or they could dream of the nine girls who had just been admitted for

the first time in the school's history. The nine Vestal Virgins, Joe Curran called them, and there were complaints from parents that the suggestiveness of his language was inappropriate.

Oh, inappropriate my ass, said Joe. Why can't they speak simple English? Why can't they use a simple word like wrong?

His students said, Yeah, wasn't it something to see the girls in the hallway, nine girls, nearly three thousand boys and what about the boys in the school, fifty percent for Chrissakes, who didn't want the girls, what about that? They had to be dead from the waist down, didn't they?

Then you'd wonder about Mr Curran himself up there shifting into English to talk about *The Iliad* and the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus, he couldn't stop talking about those two old Greeks, and how Achilles was so furious with Hector for killing Patroclus he killed Hector and dragged his body behind his chariot to show the power of his love for his dead friend, the love that dare not speak its name.

But, boys oh boys, is there a sweeter moment in all of literature than that moment when Hector removed his helmet to calm the fears of his child? Oh, if only all our fathers removed their helmets. And when Joe blubbered into his grey handkerchief and used words like piss you knew he'd left the school at lunch hour for a little tot around the corner at the Gas House Bar. There were days he returned so excited from thoughts that had come to him on the barstool he wanted to thank God for leading him to teaching so that he could forget the Greeks for a while to sing the praises of the great Alexander Pope and his 'Ode on Solitude'.

Happy the man whose wish and care

A few paternal acres bound

Content to breathe his native air,

In his own ground.

And remember, boys and girls, is there a girl here? raise your hand if you're a girl, no girls? remember, boys, that Pope was indebted to Horace, and Horace was indebted to Homer and Homer was indebted to God knows who. Will you promise on your mother's heads to remember that? If you remember Pope's debt to Horace you'll know no one springs fullblown from his father's head. Will you remember?

We will, Mr Curran.

What am I to tell Joe's students who complain that they have to read *The Odyssey* and all this old stuff? Who cares what happened in ancient Greece or Troy with men dying right and left over that stupid Helen? Who cares? Boys in the class say you wouldn't catch them fighting to the death over some girl that didn't want them. Yeah, they could understand *Romeo and Juliet* because a lotta families are dumb about you going out with someone from another religion and they could understand *West Side Story* and the gangs but they could never believe grown men would leave home the way Odysseus left Penelope and Telemachus and go off to fight over this stupid chick who didn't know enough to come inside. They have to admit Odysseus was cool the way he tried to dodge the draft, acting crazy an' all and they like the way Achilles fooled him because Achilles is nowhere near as smart as Odysseus but like they can't believe he'd stay away twenty years fighting and fooling around and expect Penelope to like sit there spinning and weaving and telling the suitors get lost. Girls in the class say they can believe it, they really can, that women can be true forever because that's the way women are, and one girl tells the class what she read in a Byron poem, that man's love is of his life a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence. Boys hoot at this but girls applaud and tell them what all the psychology books say, that boys their age are three years behind in mental development though there are some in this class who must be at least six years behind and they should therefore shut up. The boys try to be sarcastic, raising their eyebrows and telling each other, Oh, law de daw, smell me, I'm developed, but the girls look at each other, shrug, toss their hair and ask me in a lofty tone if we could please get back to the lesson.

Lesson? What are they talking about? What lesson? All I can remember is the usual high school whine about why we have to read this and why we have to read that and my irritation, my unspoken response, is that you have to read it, goddamit, because it's part of the curriculum and because I'm telling you read it, I'm the teacher, and if you don't cut the whining and complaining you'll get an English grade on your report card that will make zero look like a gift from the gods because I'm standing here listening to you and looking at you, the privileged, the chosen, the pampered, with nothing to do but go to school, hang out, do a little studying, go to college, get into a moneymaking racket, grow into your fat forties, still whining, still complaining, when there are millions around the world who'd offer

fingers and toes to be in your seats, nicely clothed, well-fed, with the world by the balls.

That's what I'd like to say and never will because I might be accused of using inappropriate language and that would give me a Joe Curran fit. No. I can't talk like that because I have to find my way in this place, a far cry from McKee Vocational and Technical High School.

In the spring of 1972 the English Department chairman, Roger Goodman, offers me a permanent position at Stuyvesant High School. I'll have my own five classes and a building assignment where, once more, I'll keep order in the students' cafeteria and make sure no one drops ice cream wrappers or bits of hot dog on the floor though boys and girls are allowed to sit together here and romance kills appetites.

I'll have a small homeroom, the first nine girls, seniors and ready to graduate. The girls are kind. They bring me coffee, bagels, newspapers. They're critical. They say I should do something about my hair, let the sideburns grow, this is 1972 and I should get with it, be cool, and do something about my clothes. They say I dress like an old man, and even though I have a few grey hairs I don't have to look so old. They tell me I look uptight and one of them kneads my neck and shoulders. Relax, she says, relax, we're harmless, and they laugh the way women laugh when they share a secret and you think it's about you.

I'll have five classes a day five days a week where I have to memorize the names of one hundred and seventy-five students along with the names of a full homeroom class next year, another thirty-five, and I'll have to be particularly careful with the Chinese and Korean students with their sarcastic, That's okay if you don't know our names, Mr McCourt, we all look the same. Or they might laugh, Yeah, and all you white people look the same.

I know all this from my days as a substitute teacher but now I watch my students, my very own, stream into my room this first day of February 1972, feast of St Brigid, and I'm praying to you, Brigid, because these are kids I'll be seeing five days a week for five months and I don't know if I'm up to it. The times they are a-changin' and you can see these Stuyvesant kids are worlds and years away from the ones I first met at McKee. We've had wars and assassinations since

then, the two Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Medger Evers. Boys at McKee wore short hair or pompadours greased back to a duck's ass. Girls had blouses and skirts and their hair was permed to the stiffness of a helmet. Stuyvesant boys wear hair so long people on the streets sneer, You can hardly tell them from the girls, ha ha. They wear tie-dye shirts, jeans and sandals so that no one will ever guess they come from comfortable families all over New York. Stuyvesant girls let hair and breasts hang loose and drive the boys mad with desire and cut their jeans at the knees for that cool poverty effect because like you know they've had it with all that middle-class crap.

Oh, yeah, they're cooler than the McKee kids because they've got it made. In eight months they'll be at colleges and universities all over the country, Yale, Stanford, MIT, Williams, Harvard, lords and ladies of the earth, and here in my classroom they sit where they like, chatting, ignoring me, giving me their backs, one more teacher obstructing their way to graduation and the real world. Some stare as if to say, Who is this guy? They slump and slouch and gaze out the window or over my head. Now I have to get their attention and that's what I say, Excuse me, may I have your attention? A few stop talking and look at me. Others look offended at the interruption and turn away again.

My three senior classes groan with the burden of the textbook they have to carry every day, an anthology of English literature. The juniors complain over the weight of their anthology of American literature. The books are sumptuous, richly illustrated, designed to challenge, motivate, illuminate, entertain, and they're expensive. I tell my students that carrying textbooks strengthens their upper bodies and hope the contents seep up to their minds.

They glare at me. Who is this guy?

There are teaching guides so detailed and comprehensive I need never think for myself. They are packed with enough quizzes, tests, examinations to keep my students in a constant state of nervous tension. There are hundreds of multiple choice questions, true or false questions, fill in the blank spaces, match column A with column B, peremptory questions ordering the student to explain why Hamlet was mean to his mother, what Keats meant by negative capability, what Melville was getting at in his chapter on the whiteness of the whale.

I'm ready, boys and girls, to march through the chapters from

Hawthorne to Hemingway, from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf. Tonight you are to read the pages assigned. Tomorrow we'll discuss. There may be a quiz. Then again there may not be a quiz. Just don't gamble on it. Only the teacher knows for sure. On Tuesday there will be a test. Three Tuesdays from now there will be an exam, a big exam, and yes, it will count. Your whole report card grade hinges on this exam. You also have tests on physics and calculus? Sorry for your troubles. This is English, the queen of the curriculum.

And you don't know it, boys and girls, but I am armed with my teaching guides on American and English literature. I have them safe here in my bag, all the questions that will have you scratching your little heads, gnawing your pencils, dreading report card day, and, I suppose, hating me because I'm the one who can thwart your high Ivy League ambitions. I'm the one who skulked around the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel cleaning up for your fathers and mothers.

This is Stuyvesant and isn't this the best high school in the city, some say the best in the country? You asked for it. You could have gone to your neighborhood high schools where you'd be kings and queens, numero uno, top of your class. Here you're just one of the crowd, scrambling for grades to bolster the precious average that will slip you into the Ivy League. It's your great god, isn't it, the average? Down in the Stuyvesant basement they should construct a sanctum with an altar. They should mount on that altar a great red blinking neon 9, blink blink blink, the sacred initial digit you're desperate for on every grade, and you should pray and worship there. Oh, God, send me As and nineties.

Mr McCourt, how come you only gave me a ninety-three on my report card?

I was kind.

But I did all the work, handed in the papers you assigned.

You were late with two papers. Two points off for each one.

But, Mr McCourt, why two points?

That's it. That's your grade.

Aw, Mr McCourt; how come you're so mean?

It's all I have left.

I followed the teacher guides. I launched the prefabricated questions at my classes. I hit them with surprise quizzes and tests and destroyed

can demonstrate and shake your fists, burn your draft cards and block the traffic with your bodies but what do you know in the end? For the ladies from the Islands there is one relevance, education. That is all they know. That is all I know. That is all I need to know.

Still there was a confusion and a darkness in my head and I had to understand what I was doing in this classroom or get out. If I had to stand before those five classes I couldn't let days dribble by in the routine of high school grammar, spelling, vocabulary, digging for the deeper meaning in poetry, bits of literature doled out for the multiple choice tests that would follow so that universities can be supplied with the best and the brightest. I had to begin enjoying the act of teaching and the only way I could do that was to start over, teach what I loved and to hell with the curriculum.

The year Maggie was born I told Alberta something my mother used to say, that a child gains her vision at six weeks and if that was true we should take her to Ireland so that her first image would be of moody Irish skies, a passing shower with the sun shining through.

Paddy and Mary Clancy invited us to stay on their farm in Carrick-on-Suir but newspapers were saying Belfast was in flames, a nightmare city, and I was anxious to see my father. I traveled north with Paddy Clancy and Kevin Sullivan and the night we arrived we walked the streets of Catholic Belfast. The women were out banging on the pavements with the lids of garbage cans, warning their men of approaching army patrols. They were suspicious of us till they recognized Paddy of the famous Clancy Brothers and we passed on without trouble.

Next day Paddy and Kevin stayed in the hotel while I went to my Uncle Gerard's house so that he could take me to my father in Andersonstown. When my father opened his door he nodded at Uncle Gerard and looked through me. Uncle said, This is your son.

My father said, Is it little Malachy?

No. I'm your son Frank.

Uncle Gerard said, It's a sad thing when your own father doesn't know you.

My own father said, Come in. Sit down. Will you have a cup of tea?

He offered the tea but showed no signs of making it in his little kitchen till a woman came from next door and did it. Uncle Gerard whispered, See that. He never lifts a finger. He doesn't have to with the way the ladies of Andersonstown wait on him hand and foot. They tempt him daily with soup and dainty things.

My father smoked his pipe but never touched his mug of tea. He was busy asking about my mother and three brothers. Och, your brother, Alphie, came to see me. Quiet lad your brother Alphie. Och, aye. Quiet lad. And you're all well in America? Attending to your religious duties? Och, you have to be good to your mother and attend to your religious duties.

I wanted to laugh. Jesus, is this man preaching? I wanted to say, Dad, have you no memory?

No, what's the use. I'd be better off leaving my father to his demons though you could see from the peaceful way he had with his pipe and his mug of tea that the demons wouldn't cross his threshold. Uncle Gerard said we ought to leave before darkness fell on Belfast and I wondered how I should say goodbye to my father. Shake his hand? Embrace him?

I shook his hand because that's all we ever did except for one time when I was in hospital with typhoid and he kissed my forehead. Now he drops my hand, reminds me once more to be a good boy, to obey my mother and remember the power of the daily rosary.

When we returned to his house I told my uncle I'd like to walk through the Protestant area, the Shankill Road. He shook his head. Quiet man. I said, Why not?

Because they'll know.

What will they know?

They'll know you're a Catholic.

How will they know?

Och, they'll know.

His wife agreed. She said, They have ways.

Do you mean to say you could spot a Protestant if he walked down this street?

We could.

How?

And my uncle smiled. Och, years of practice.

While we had another cup of tea there was shooting down Leeson Street. A woman screamed and when I went to the window Uncle

Gerard said, Och, get your head away from the window. One little movement and the soldiers are so nervous they'll spray it.

The woman screamed again and I had to open the door. She had a child in her arms and another one clinging to her skirt and she was being forced back by a soldier pushing his slanted rifle. She begged him to let her cross Leeson Street to her other children. I thought I'd help by carrying the child clinging to her but when I went to pick her up the woman dashed around the soldier and across the street. The soldier swung on me and put his rifle barrel against my forehead. Get inside, Paddy, or I'll blow your fawking head off.

My uncle and his wife, Lottie, told me that was a foolish thing I did and it helped no one. They said that whether you were Catholic or Protestant there was a way of handling things in Belfast that outsiders would never understand.

Still, on my way back to the hotel in a Catholic taxi, I dreamed I could easily roam Belfast with an avenging flamethrower. I'd aim it at that bastard in his red beret and reduce him to cinders. I'd pay back the Brits for the eight hundred years of tyranny. Oh, by Jesus, I'd do my bit with a fifty-calibre machine gun. I would, indeed, and I was ready to sing Roddy McCorley goes to die on the bridge of Toome today, till I remembered that that was my father's song and decided instead I'd have a nice quiet pint with Paddy and Kevin in the bar of our Belfast hotel and before I went to sleep that night I'd call Alberta so that she could hold the phone to Maggie and I'd carry my daughter's gurgle into my dreams.

Mam flew over and stayed with us awhile at our rented flat in Dublin. Alberta went shopping on Grafton Street and Mam strolled with me to St Stephen's Green with Maggie in her pram. We sat by the water and threw crumbs to ducks and sparrows. Mam said it was lovely to be in this place in Dublin in the latter end of August the way you could feel autumn coming in with the odd leaf drifting before you and the light changing on the lake. We looked at children wrestling in the grass and Mam said it would be lovely to stay here a few years and see Maggie grow up with an Irish accent, not that she had anything against the American accent, but wasn't it a pure pleasure to listen to these children and she could see Maggie growing and playing on this very grass.

When I said it would be lovely a shiver went through me and she said someone was walking on my grave. We watched the children play and looked at the light on the water and she said, You don't want to go back, do you?

Back where?

New York.

How do you know that?

I don't have to lift the lid to know what's in the pot.

The porter at the Shelbourne Hotel said it would be no bother at all to keep an eye on Maggie's pram against the railings outside while we sat in the lounge, a sherry for Mam, a pint for me, a bottle of milk for Maggie on Mam's lap. Two women at the next table said Maggie was a dote, a right dote she was, oh gorgeous, and wasn't she the spittin' image of Mam herself. Ah, no, said Mam, I'm only the grandmother.

The women were drinking sherry like my mother but the three men were lowering pints and you could see from their tweed caps, red faces and great red hands they were farmers. One, with a dark green cap, called to my mother, The little child might be a lovely child, missus, but you're not so bad yourself.

Mam laughed and called back to him, Ah, sure, you're not so bad either.

Begod, missus, if you were a little older I'd run away with you.

Well, said Mam, if you were a little younger I'd go.

People all around the lounge were laughing and Mam threw her head back and laughed herself and you could see from the shine in her eyes she was having the time of her life. She laughed till Maggie whimpered and Mam said the child had to be changed and we'd have to go. The man with the dark green cap put on a begging act. Yerra, don't go, missus. Your future is with me. I'm a rich widow man with a farm o' land.

Money isn't everything, said Mam.

But I have a tractor, missus. We could ride together and how would that suit you?

It stirs me, said Mam, but I'm still a married woman and when I put on the widow's weeds you'll be the first to know.

Fair enough, missus. I live in the third house on the left as you enter the south west coast of Ireland, a grand place called Kerry.

I heard of it, said Mam. 'Tis known for sheep.

And powerful rams, missus, powerful.

You're never short of an answer, are you?

Come to Kerry with me, missus, and we'll walk the hills wordless.

Alberta was already at the flat making lamb stew and when Kevin Sullivan dropped in with Ben Kiely, the writer, there was enough for everyone and we drank wine and sang because there isn't a song in the world Ben doesn't know. Mam told the story of our time in the Shelbourne Hotel. Lord above, she said, that man had a way with him and if it wasn't for Maggie needing to be changed and wiped I'd be on my way to Kerry.

In the 1970's Mam was in her sixties. The emphysema that came from years of smoking left her so breathless she dreaded leaving her apartment and the more she stayed at home the heavier she grew. For a while she came to Brooklyn to take care of Maggie on weekends but that stopped when she could no longer climb the subway stairs. I accused her of not wanting to see her granddaughter.

I do want to see her but 'tis hard for me to get around anymore.

Why don't you lose weight?

'Tis hard for an elderly woman to lose weight and anyway why should I?

Don't you want to have some kind of life where you're not sitting in your apartment all day looking out the window?

I had my life, didn't I, and what use was it? I just want to be left alone.

There were attacks which left her gasping and when she visited Michael in San Francisco he had to rush her to the hospital. We told her she was ruining our lives the way she always got sick on holidays, Christmas, New Year's Eve, Easter. She shrugged and laughed and said, Pity about ye now.

No matter how her health was, no matter how breathless, she climbed the hill to the Broadway bingo hall till she fell one night and broke her hip. After the operation she was sent to an upstate convalescent home and then stayed with me at a summer bungalow in Breezy Point at the tip of the Rockaway Peninsula. Every morning she slept late and when she woke sat slumped on the side of her bed, staring out the window at a wall. After a while she'd drag herself into the kitchen for breakfast and when I barked at her for eating too much

bread and butter, that she'd be the size of a house, she barked back at me, For the love o' Jesus, leave me alone. The bread and butter is the only comfort I have.