The Very Intrepid

Peter Levine

The very worst thing I saw, I saw at a pool, now six years ago. Not *in* the pool, but rather after swimming a mile in the indoor pool at the gym to which I then belonged—a suburb just outside Washington. It was evening, but still light—the light came in from the tall windows above. I was forty-three-years-old. I was an extremely wealthy man. When I rose out of the water, one would look at me, and one would, I will say here, be impressed.

What I saw actually occurred in the locker room. In the summer, when this took place, the pool was split between recreational swimmers, like me, and a children's swim club. The parents of the children (seven to ten year olds) would watch from the observation deck above, behind long windows, situated next to the lobby of the gym. These were all dedicated, caring, professional parents, who took a serious interest in their little kids' activities. The fathers would come down to the locker room to help the boys change, the fathers still in the business suits, and they would ask the boys all about how school was, how they felt the swim practice had gone, when the next meet was.

My then-wife Lucy and I had no children.

The usual thing. I toweled off after I left the lane, put on my sandals, and walked into the locker-room. On the pool deck, the little boys and girls were holding themselves around their bony chests, thumbs in their mouths, skin full of gooseflesh from the cold, waiting for someone to offer them a towel. They were terribly cute children, I must say.

I walked into the locker-room and that is where I saw the worst thing. Which was a little boy, perhaps seven years old, trying to pee into the urinal, which was nearly chest high to him. He was tanned and shaking and had brown hair which had clearly lightened from the summer sun. He had pulled down his long, black, Speedo swim shorts which clung to him like seaweed. The tiles his bare feet were on were filthy.

Only, he wasn't alone, this little boy. There was a man with him. The man was older than I was, perhaps as old as sixty, and he was very clearly touching the boy, helping him to aim, or helping him to coordinate the whole enterprise. The *act* of doing that—offering a little boy assistance, as such—was not so odd, I had thought. A father does that sort of thing all the time, without ceremony—and though I was then not a father, I had seen other fathers help their boys in intimate ways that made me think that this man, presumably the boy's father, was just offering his child assistance.

The dissonance of that event—the parts which made whatever was normal about it seem wrong, was the following: the man was older than most of the other boys' fathers. He had grey hair, dark, bushy eyebrows, a thin face, looked like a runner. At the time, I thought simply that he might have been a man who had had children late in life, or perhaps that he had gotten remarried to a much younger woman—a wealthy man, a man who had traded up, perhaps, and had a young boy, was retired and therefore had the time to come to these sorts of things: recitals, practices—and to enter the locker room to help his young son change. Moreover, the man was in jeans and a black T-shirt, which was unusual, for the practices took place at seven o'clock, and most of the fathers came straight from work, were still in some sort of business dress. However, ours was an international community, many European diplomats lived near us, and so it may very well have been that this man was affiliated in some high position with an embassy, and his situation was entirely different from those of the men my own age.

I could not see exactly what this man was doing for his boy, or *to* this boy (there was a small blue partition separating the urinals), only that the boy was crying, standing still, the man was bending down a bit to help him, but there was not a sound to be heard, no pee splashing against the urinal. There were other fathers in the locker room, in any event, other children, and so all might have been ordinary. The older man and young boy did not speak. The older man did not say something like "It's okay, just let it out," or "I know it feels strange," or "I know it hurts." He did not say anything about it.

There was something clandestine occurring—though I could not bring myself to fully conceive of it, and given the situation (the locker room being crowded, the other little boys and their fathers talking and chirping and discussing) it seemed so *unlikely* that anything as sinister as all that might have been happening right there, at that instant.

But, I thought, the boy should not have been crying the way he had been crying. As if he were trying not to cry. As if something shameful was happening. Little boys cry recklessly, and they ought to—they do not muffle it.

It was a Tuesday. A Tuesday evening in the summer in a nice gym near Washington—how could evil line up so?

What I did? The worst thing. I did nothing. I could not, as I have said, see *exactly* what was going on, and so I walked into the locker room, changed, combed my hair standing in front of my locker, children shrieking from the wetness, the cool air, them being naked, and the fathers trying to get them dressed, like performing surgery in the dark. It smelled like chlorine and mold. Water was dripping from the showerheads, making smacking sounds against the tile. Inside my locker, wedged in the corner, was a piece of gum, which had probably been there for years. A piece of black thread, thick, like a suture, was sitting on the wooden bench. I

then left that locker room, did not look back towards the urinals to see if the little boy and the older man were still standing there. I walked up the stairs, past the observation area, and got into my car, a Bentley Continental GT, one of four cars I then owned, a beautiful machine indeed.

That night I drove back into the city, down Massachusetts Avenue, past the Naval Observatory, and was so upset that I nearly hit a deer, which was crossing its way into the park abutting the memorial for the poet, Kalil Gibran. That Bentley Continental was so expensive it was as if it would not permit itself to be damaged, even if I would, and without a sound it came to a dead stop in the middle of the street when, nearly too late, I pressed the brake. The deer turned to look at me, its eyes wet in the dark, and angry, I thought, irritated; as it stood next to the strange, disembodied head of Gibran, a head sitting atop a ledge, surrounded by copper birds which looked as if they were going to pluck out his eyes.

My then-wife Lucy. A lovely, tall woman, the type of woman only a wealthy man obtains. We had been married nine years, only after I had finished all my schooling, only after I had started and sold a computer company, started and left a hedge fund—found myself so outrageously wealthy that I could spend no more money, had nothing to do but please her, which meant moving to Washington, where she had grown up extremely wealthy and without a material concern in the world. We had been living in San Francisco, which I adored, but I adored her even more, and the decision seemed an obvious one.

Lucy, I knew, was an unfaithful woman. I don't know if it was a side-effect of being so pretty, pretty in a blond way—the kind of pretty that demands constant come-ons, even among the polished company she liked to keep, or if she simply didn't have a final loyalty in her—the kind which a marriage requires.

Lucy and I had a great deal of fun during our marriage: saw the world, saw the country, saw an adventure aboard a yacht I had chartered to take us from the Atlantic to the Pacific, through The Panama Canal, aboard which we made love and I thought, one night, standing on the deck, when you could not see a delineation between the sky and the water, naked, the Caribbean wind on me—I thought I could just steal her away, I could kidnap her. She would not be tempted. She loved me—I knew that. But she was limited. That was all. For example, she didn't want to have kids. Her love was quantifiable. What she had she gave to me. Her passion—well, she had more of that, that was her finest quality, I guess, and that she was a little more liberal with.

There probably should have been something in me which would have made me angered, something which would want to hurt her—for what I knew she had done. But there never was. And still, in retelling it, there is not. It only angers me when I think I *ought* to feel that way. It is likely

my training, which is that of an electrical engineer and a mathematician both, two fields which require testing, a methodology, and patience. One proves. One is not always right to begin with.

I don't really get angry, to be honest. I know this about myself. Nor am I often quick to passion, though I feel I am capable of it. The great passions I have enjoyed in life come in the form of serenity—making love, swimming in the pool, rowing (I was on the crew team in college) the closure of a large deal, a certain discovery which I have successfully proven out and published—these things bring me peace. If there is any sort of angry passion, well—I don't know. I suppose I don't want to admit that.

When I came in she was standing in the foyer, her hip against the table, leafing through the mail.

"What happened?" she said.

"Nothing."

"You look like something happened."

"I almost hit a deer."

"You didn't though, did you?" She thought I had really hit it, of course.

"No, I stopped in time. I guess it was close though."

"Good," she said, and came over to kiss me on my cheek. I recall thinking then, that very day, that moment when she kissed me on the cheek, how much better my life would be if there were to be a child to rise up from the basement, or to come down from the winding staircase. We had parties in that foyer, a disc jockey had set up camp, we had erected a bar—the space was so large—but no children.

I suppose this was not the first time I had thought it.

"Did you eat?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I'm starving."

"I'll cook you something?"

I kissed her. Her smell—that was a thing worthy of remembering. So light. Her neck, the nearly-invisible hair on it, her lean body, a small chest, delicate shoulders, athletic hips—this was a woman who was cursed by her beauty and thereby cursed the man she was with.

That is what a man once told me at a dinner at The Willard. He had been the Undersecretary of Defense four administrations ago. He leaned into me, looking at my wife, scotch on his breath, as Lucy danced with an old classmate from college, danced too closely, danced with a rude familiarity.

"Well," he said to me, as if a sigh.

"Yeah," I said.

"It's all right," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder. "Some women are like that. Is it true what they say, do you think?"

"What?"

"That you could show me the most beautiful woman in the world,

and I could give you the guy who's tired of fucking her? I pray that is true."

I did not respond to him, but I have always thought that gesture a very kind one. He wanted me to not feel so badly, only he didn't know that I didn't really feel badly at all.

I showered. I scraped the layer of chlorine off me. Children likely peed in that pool. I could have afforded to build my own pool, an indoor one, as many lanes as I liked. But I don't know—I sort of liked the regular pool. It was guarded by college students. They were such punks, these kids, but it was nice to see them, nice to watch them flirt, nice to watch them twirl their whistles. Not a worry, not a care. And I have to confess that the summer children were sweet. One expects so little from a child—that is to say, one expects them to behave a certain way: to be cute, to weep, to laugh, to be wild, to horse around, to want only to play. But one is always surprised, or I have always been, by the way children remember things. Without exception, I would be in that locker-room and I would overhear a child repeating something he had heard his parents say. I had recently recalled an exchange between two boys, so casual they might have been two old men at a bar after work: *I think that Kissinger is a war criminal*, whereby the other little boy said *Oh, same. Of course.* I could never get over that sort of thing.

And I thought, naturally, while showering, about the little boy and the older man—the little boy trying to pee, or actually peeing, or having some kind of problem. Him standing on those dirty tiles—dirty from piss below the urinal, and the dark water that clings to one's feet as they walk about on the deck of the pool and accumulates, like ink. And that man leaning into him, his father, of *course* his father—it *had* to be, no one could be so brazen, even a madman would not be, and the way he, that man, for a second, looked at me. A little smile he might have given me, as if I were complicit. Or as if I too knew how it is with kids.

I wondered, would he have been threatened by me, for I should say that I am a large man, that I have the build of someone who ought to be considered, though I have never had the occasion to use it with violence.

I got out of the shower. It could fit four people. It was all pink marble. It had twelve nozzles on the wall, like silver tentacles. I combed my hair back. I still had all of it. All black. I put shaving cream on my face and ran the blade down it. I was not wearing a towel. My wife might have come in. It was darkening outside. From the window of the bathroom one could see the tops of trees. The curves of the leaves were filled with fire flies, and so too, the entire tree. As if they were set to immolate it. If I wanted, I could look in on the bedroom of the former President, who lived in the house next to ours.

I finished shaving. I went on the scale and then went off it. I went into

our bedroom, into the walk-in closet—we each have our own—and I put on shorts and a T-shirt. In Lucy's closet I have smelled the cologne of at least two men, which is to say two separate colognes—neither of which I use. I have found, against the cream-colored carpet, a man's gray hair, hard to see, yes, but there it was. Once, looking for an invitation to which we were to RSVP, I found in a drawer a business card of an international trade lawyer. This was a man whose hand I once shook.

These things happened upon me, as I think of it, not the other way around. I saw them, I did not go looking for them. That part, perhaps, made me angry. The world decides what you will see, or you will do, or what you will fall victim to. It made everything seem inequitable. All I wanted was equitability in life.

Downstairs, Lucy was sitting at the island in the kitchen—a kitchen which had two giant refrigerators, a kitchen entirely too large for a childless couple, a couple who rarely cooks. She had gone shopping. There was a cold green bean salad, a roasted chicken, braised potatoes. She had divided all this up. She sat perfectly straight. She had opened a bottle of wine. We drank this quietly. She was wearing a yellow tank top and a yellow sweater wrapped around her shoulders. She was very much the type of woman to wear this. Khaki-colored pants, like a rider's pants. She drove—I bought for her—a Jaguar—which we had three times brought into the shop to pound out dents she inflicted on the poor thing.

"Bless you," I said.

"I hope you wanted some," she said, looking at the wine glass.

"Of course. Yes."

"How was your swim?"

We had these light conversations—conversations that required little thought, little engagement. She would have been happy had we not spoken at all. I might have been okay with this too.

"Oh, it was fine. What did you do today?"

She put the mail aside.

"I went out with Jackie. There was a lecture on Klimt at The Phillips. We went to that."

"How was it?"

"Nice."

And then for a while we did not speak. We ate. There was a copy of *The Post*, and I read it. I wanted to tell my wife. I felt that I deserved to tell her. As if all the work I had done over the last twenty years: the schoolwork, the discipline it takes to do what I did—the diligence—as if these things entitled me to say it. To confess: *I saw something tonight, I'm sure it was nothing, but I cannot get it out of my head and I know that it will stay with me for a long time*. One earns these sorts of things. I have always believed in the old fashioned notion of what it means to be a man, and so I choose my moments of weakness so carefully, which is to say, I show them not at all.

"I wonder if we should go away. It's going to be roasting soon."

"Where?" she asked, looking up at me. There was something good in her eyes—the feeling maybe of wanting to be stolen, a certain willingness.

"Maybe we can go to Captiva."

"I would love that. I could tell Jackie. She would *love* to get away."

"You could. I don't know. Yeah, maybe. But what if it were just us?"

Her face fell a little bit when I said this.

"Okay. Sure. Oh, she's just been complaining about things. She feels like she is not living her life. Or the life that she ought to be living."

"Why, because she went to law school at Harvard?"

"I guess that's part of it. And everything with Ashleigh."

Ashleigh, her little girl, was autistic. When Lucy spoke of her, she spoke of her as if she were a terrible burden to her mother, Jackie, a woman I never cared for, a woman who had not an ounce of warmth in her, and if there is such a theory relating autism to poor mothering, I would have put Jackie and Ashleigh up as a prime example. She and Lucy had gone to boarding school together, and then college, and when Lucy had come out to California for law school at Stanford, where she met me, where I was then earning my Ph.D., Jackie stayed east, went to law school, met her husband, clerked in Washington, and then got pregnant with that cursed child.

"I was thinking maybe it could just be me and you."

"Okay," Lucy said. "Well, let me look tomorrow and we'll see if we can't find a time."

"I think it would be nice. Obviously. But I think we could use it."

"We? You or me?"

"I don't know. I suppose both of us. Why not?"

"Well, how long would we be gone for?"

"As long as you wanted, Lucy."

As I have already said, I was retired, and time seemed to go on for a long time. It was unremarkable. Or, had been.

"Okay, Dennis. Let's see. How about that?"

We finished our dinner in silence. She loved me, Lucy did. She really did. She once told me this, like she were telling a secret, when we were graduate students. I had a small bungalow which I rented from a professor of mine. All green around the property. I potted succulents. We had spent that day out near the lake and that night we had entirely too much to drink, she put on a U2 tape, she danced in front of me, let her clothes fall away from her, I watched her like an emperor, and we made love and she said Dennis, there is something you should know about me. I recall being too drunk to feel alarm. She explained that she loved me. She hoped that I knew it. I said I did—for she had told me before and I had chosen then to believe it—to take it at face value.

She went on to say that she knew, and I would come to know, that her loving a man was, perhaps, different from the way other women would love a man. She had friends, she said, who when they fell in love ceased to exist, were simply absorbed, or folded into, the lives of the men they loved. That man's career, that man's habits, she explained, that man's drive—all he wanted to do—this woman would become part of it, not the other way around. She said she was not making a feminist statement—it was not that at all. She said she wanted for me every success. She would share in it with me. She would help me. But she knew, she said, that her love had a capacity. It was bounded.

She was looking up at the small, angled ceiling when she said this. Her breasts were spread out, as it was, against the side of her chest and her nipples—they rose up hard. She had lovely hips—a lovely, flat figure. It was a sad evening, or at least I recall it that way—had become cloudy over the low mountains.

I had told her I didn't think she was giving herself enough credit. Maybe she just hadn't been with the right man before. And when I said this, she started to cry. Lucy didn't cry the way a normal woman cried—tears simply came out of her eyes and her mouth turned downwards. I put my arm across her chest.

"Dennis," she said.

I knew then, of course. I knew when I went on to finish my course-work, when we moved to San Francisco and I started my first company, when I discovered that first transgression on a rainy night in December, which was my wife in an Oldsmobile with another man, as I was being driven back to our home, after our investment bankers from New York canceled our dinner meeting owing to snowstorms in the Midwest. I knew the way her heart formed up, like a unit at reveille, at the 35th surprise birthday party she threw for me, a speech she gave about me, all about my wonderful qualities and what made me a good husband and a good man, and not a mention of what made us a good couple, her a good wife, our love our own, good and full in its own right. Of this she had nothing to say. Nor when we moved back to Washington and I was retired, the way a kind of chitin seemed to form around her, not a strength, exactly, but a distance, a veneer that put a distance between her and the rest of the world; not me, specifically, not that, but a transience that she possessed, as if she was in constant orbit.

I was her husband. I felt I had given her all. I needed to tell her, and so I said, "I saw something tonight."

"What, honey?" she said.

I had by this point had a couple of glasses of wine. Maybe three. Maybe four.

"I don't know exactly what it was. You know how there's that little kid swim club that swims when I do? I told you about them?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, I was swimming, and there was a boy who was in the lane next to me. He was very young—perhaps only as old as eight, maybe younger."

"Uh huh."

I knew as I said this that I could never tell Lucy what I had seen. And my telling her another version, a fabricated one, would be for her benefit, I suppose, so that she could think me an honorable man, instead of the duplicitous one that I was.

"And, I was swimming, and I noticed that as I neared the end of the lane, in the deep end—it's thirteen feet deep, right—I noticed that he was clinging to the wall. And I was approaching the wall, and was about to turn—and I'm not entirely sure of this—but it looked as if he let go of the wall."

"Was he swimming?"

"No, no. It was like something gave out in him. This little kid. Tan from being in all the sun. He just sort of started to dip into the water. He started to sink."

Lucy put her hand to her chin. Not her mouth, her chin.

"For some reason, it seemed completely wrong. Just wrong. His arms were sort of in the air and he was just falling to the bottom. And so I swam under the rope—the divider—whatever you call it. And I grabbed him. He fought, or I guess, he seemed to fight. I don't know. But I thought that perhaps he had had a seizure or something. Or his heart stopped. And I grabbed him around his body."

I demonstrated this for her.

"And I pulled him out of the water, onto the deck."

"My God, was he all right?"

I felt a little ill, actually, telling her this, but I continued.

"I started to yell—I think I was actually cursing—for those dumb teenagers—the lifeguards, to come over to help. All the parents that were upstairs watching from the deck—they were fucking glued to the glass. And all the little kids—I must have frightened the hell out of them."

"What happened?"

"Well, I laid the boy down because I was going to give him CPR. But he was breathing."

"What do you mean?"

"He was fine. He hadn't been drowning. I just *thought* he was."

"I don't get it."

"I guess it just *looked* as if he were drowning. I think I just panicked. But by the time I had him in my lap, he was crying, because he was afraid of me. You know, I must have scared the hell out of him. And then the boy's mother, she came rushing out onto the deck. She must have been watching. She must have lost her mind."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, God, she was *screaming*. 'Let my fucking kid go, goddam it! Fucking let him go!'"

"What did you say, Dennis?"

"I didn't say anything. I just held him there for a second, until she grabbed him and pulled him away from me. Everyone was looking at me."

She looked down, Lucy did. It was a doomed look, my wife had. She was a beautiful woman, that was certain.

"And then, well, I think I just sat there for a second, with everyone looking at me. I really thought that fucking kid was drowning. I'm not joking. It was so bizarre. He just sort of slipped off the wall, slipped down it. He'd have been dead in minutes and no one would have even noticed."

"Oh," she said, and put her hand around my neck.

"And then I just got up and left. That mother—God, she was about to murder me. Absolutely murder me."

"I guess I would have too, if I were her. It must have looked so strange to her."

"You wouldn't think that this man was trying to save your kid's life? You wouldn't think that?"

"Honestly, I don't know what I would think. Who knows what you would think?"

"Well," I said.

She didn't then tell me that I was a dear man. She didn't tell me that I did the right or proper thing. She did, however, tell me to come upstairs with her, and I did go upstairs with her, into our bedroom which overlooked a Spanish-tiled roof, a bedroom with a balcony, a room that, if one wanted to, one could observe the former first lady putting on her make-up in the mornings.

Lucy took my hand and she started to kiss me. To kiss this woman—it was like Gibran wrote—all else is a form of waiting. She wrapped her legs around me, the way she did when we were young and it was as if it was either the first time or the last time she would make love, and then she did perhaps the most moving act she was capable of, which was not simply sex, but rather the timing of it, on the heels of my admission—that was significant.

The time after we made love, whereby I got up from our bed, Lucy still sleeping, the entire city hot and quiet and unmoving, except for the fireflies, which were cupped in the tall magnolia trees, and as I walked downstairs, seemed to burn like embers outside my home. I put on the television and then turned it off. I sat in the library and tried to read, and then put down the book I had picked up. I went to the side table and fixed myself a drink, I sat and looked at the burgundy curtains, like a pair of giant culottes, the ancient globe in the corner of the room. I noted the very thin, nearly invisible layer of dust on the bookshelves, on the ladder in the library, on all surfaces, and noted whether or not any of it had been scraped away accidentally, by a hand not my own. And then I stopped looking.

I left my house, my home. I walked onto Massachusetts Avenue and walked up the street. I could see the Naval Observatory, or the lights of it, at least. The Secret Service men would be standing, looking out onto the black lawns, inside the lighted guard house. Nothing was going on. I stepped off the sidewalk and onto the very small garden which served as the memorial for Gibran. I had always thought that garden strange and not altogether welcoming.

The garden consisted of two terraces, an upper one, in which his writings were inscribed on stone benches, and a lower one, with the head of Gibran surrounded by a wreath of oak leaves and acorns, and, of course, the birds. The birds were doves. There were three of them.

There were no deer in the park, not the one I had almost hit, nor any other, though of course I would hardly have known the difference. Across the way, the British Embassy was entirely asleep. A father can help a young boy, I thought, in a personal way, to be sure. A mother will as well. An uncle, if he lives in town and is the only one available—he can assist a young boy. A brother-in-law, a neighbor, if you are very close with them—a man or a woman. A babysitter, of course.

But a man—an older man, a man with black eyebrows and a black shirt standing so close to a young boy, and the boy crying, *weeping* even, looking down at his privates, as if the very worst thing in the world were put in front of him, and the man with him; a knowing, calm look on his face, and then a smile, the flicker of one. That room smelling like chlorine—just toxic. And me, shoulders and chest swollen from blood, a man without a child, so who was I to say, who was I to judge?

About myself I knew the following: having borne witness to such an episode was unacceptable to me. That there was something about me—some clean way of being—which required I excise it quickly, even if falsely. That sitting in the garden I was performing a kind of revisionism, as if I could reinvent the past of only a few hours ago—and the burden of complicity which had already begun—could be dissolved amidst the poet, the wreath, his doves, his language; though complicity, of course, cannot be erased, and I should have known better. I was not the clean man I'd always wanted to be; that had ceased to be a possibility a very long time ago. There was no confrontation, no conversation, no rectitude. It was something I saw and that was it.

Lucy and I, of course, are no longer married. That Tuesday in the summer did not somehow initiate our separation and divorce. It did nothing at all. That all occurred later. Certainly, she has no memory of that conversation earlier in the evening, no memory of me sneaking back into the house in the very early morning hours, no memory of how I climbed into bed with her—guiltily, and permitted myself a moment of what?—weakness?, exposure?, whereby I wept, just as she might have, I suppose—silently. If the former President or his wife were to look in

on our bedroom, they would not see me, they would see nothing.

Lucy and I parted amicably. What I gave her materially I gave her because I wanted to, not because she asked for it, or fought for it. She owns that home now. She lives next to the former President. We exchange birthday cards, and so on. I divested myself of most of that life. The Bentley Continental—I kept that.

I am remarried to a professor of electrical engineering at the University of California-Berkeley. Antonia is ten years younger than me. We have a daughter, Caroline. She is three. I am no longer retired. With a little help from my wife, the university took me on as a full-time professor, whereby I was able to create my own course: The Intersection of Science and Business. I am the Assistant Junior Varsity rowing coach. Antonia knows all about Lucy. They have never met, naturally. My daughter does not know that I was once married, that would be silly, but it is likely we will tell her, sometime.

It was a recent weekend which reminded me of what had happened at the pool in Washington those years ago. Antonia and Caroline and I were at the local grocery store, buying items for a picnic we were going to do in the park. As we entered the store, Caroline began asking me a great many questions about what precisely a picnic was. It hadn't occurred to me when we mentioned it in the morning, but we had never gone on a picnic—she didn't know the word. It was a mystery to her. She got very excited (she is usually mild-mannered like me, and so this display was quite unusual) and wanted to know what a picnic entailed, where do you do picnics, what you are supposed to bring to the picnic, what you are supposed to wear, if Mommy was going with us, how you served the food at the picnic, where you sit, if there were going to be other people there, what we were going to talk about.

"What do you talk about on a picnic, Daddy?"

I said, very patiently, that we were going to talk about the world.

"What *about* the world, Daddy?" she asked.

"Just about it—we're going to have a conversation. Whatever we want to talk about."

I could see that she was going through her head, trying to think of things to talk about. What a little thing, and yet her life would be different now, albeit in a minor way. And I had to turn away from my wife and my daughter, for I was caught up then, caught up short, which is so rare a thing for me, for I am above all deliberate, try so hard not to be sentimental. Because I was reminded of that boy, and wondered where his life might have gone since that one Tuesday night six years ago; if his life was a kind one, and sweet, which would mean that I had been mistaken, or if his life had become eldritch and baroque and wicked, which would mean that I had been correct all along.