

“David Burkett is part Holden Caulfield, part Stephen Dedalus—a young man who has exchanged privilege for guilt. He knows that his work is to find a place in the world, but the finding isn’t easy... A story about love and forgiveness and the trials they entail... Our lives are gripped by forces we only dimly understand. The real effort, Harrison implies, is to act in spite of those forces, correct for deviance, and find our own true north.”

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“[*True North*] is a provocative tale that explores the roots of wealth and privilege in America and examines the troubled legacy of our nineteenth-century attitudes toward the land... Harrison’s writing is superb, as always, rippling with thematic leaps and poetic insights.”

—*The Oregonian*

“A coming-of-age story, a familial saga of estrangement ... a slow-burning revenge tragedy ... There is no denying the urgency of Harrison’s storytelling, or his passionate involvement in the fate of his embattled hero... In [Harrison’s] portrait of a father and a son he has made an indelible addition to the gallery of literature’s ‘bad dads.’”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“When Harrison writes about a blizzard, you shiver. When he describes a thunderstorm, you see lightning. And when writing about fishing, the author is at his most poetic.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Harrison combines a love of nature and life in the wild, which he describes in splendid, soaring prose, with a rich and troubled conscience tortured by the ambiguities of modern life.”

—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

“Makes the crimes against the land painfully vivid ... His father’s misdeeds propel Burkett into the woods or across international boundaries to unearth secrets. This human story of a son’s attempt to understand a parent’s cruelty is [a] deftly told tale.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“*True North* may be Harrison’s best work.... His work is deep and soulful; superficiality has no place in his world.”

—*Idaho Mountain Express*

“The genius of Mr. Harrison, it seems to me, is that his characters possess a uniquely human and endearing clumsiness as well as a gracefulness in the way they inhabit the sharp and sometimes exuberantly felt physical world and the restless (though also at times exuberant) realm of spirit.”

— Rick Bass, *The Dallas Morning News*

“A worthy addition to the great work [of Harrison], and shows a writer, who, while comfortable with his themes, places and people, is not complacent in them ... The scheme here isn’t man against nature it is man into nature, and it is this scheme that brings the book ... its keenest pleasures.... The land is

beautifully, lovingly described, the writing rich with impeccable detail and the lore of the woods.”

— *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“[Harrison is] an accomplished and worthy writer who has written ... multi-layered, earthy, and spiritual explorations of human appetites and needs, of action, art, sex, violence, love and death.... [*True North*] is a rich and satisfying read ... [that makes] a rustic backwoods cabin in the forbidding frozen wilderness seem the quintessence of hearth and home. It certainly helps elucidate why a character would go to the ends of the world to safeguard his little corner of it.”

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“If [Jim Harrison’s] style can be as clean and clear as Cather’s, he writes with Faulkner’s voluble, untidy spilling forth.... The past twenty-five years has been a timid time in American writing, pinched and cramped by ideology and theory, a time of rules and warnings. Harrison abides by none of these.”

— *The Boston Phoenix*

“A novel in the grand European tradition ... Religion and history figure here on a huge scale, as they do in the works of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy.... An engaging read by a writer to be reckoned with.”

— *St. Petersburg Times*

“*True North* is a richly layered work of art.... As an artist, Harrison does what art is supposed to do whether on a grand scale — or small, one flawed human being at a time. He illuminates. He investigates. He shows us what we know but deny. He enlarges understanding.”

— *Traverse City Record-Eagle* (Michigan)

“A terrific book.”

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“One of our greatest living literary stylists.”

— *Great Falls Tribune* (Montana)

“[Harrison’s] words absorb you and carry you along so that the reading is a delight.... In *True North*, Harrison takes his ‘homeland’ novel a step further, with the Upper Peninsula emerging as a force, as much a fully developed character as many of the humans.”

— *The Burlington Free Press*

“Harrison is a writer of prodigal gifts ... and a keen registrar of impressions. The book overflows with marvelous description and hard-bitten wisdom.”

— *The Buffalo News*

“It takes a writer of Harrison’s maturity and knowingness to elevate [*True North*] from merely another historical novel to an almost mythological story about man’s fate.... It’s a melancholy and beautiful performance by Harrison, taking the story of one prominent family and extending it as a metaphor for

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—*Book Page*

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JIM HARRISON

A Novel



Grove Press
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To Judy Hottensen and Amy Hundley

True North

Father was wailing. I deduced from the morning sun and moving flotsam that we were drifting slowly southward with the force of an unknown current. He slumped on the back seat of the wooden rowboat and I leaned forward grabbing his shirt to keep him from pitching overboard. Both of his hands had been severed at the wrist and the stumps had been tightly bound with duct tape. His normally withered forearms now bulged with an unsightly color. When they had pushed us out from the estuary on a falling tide before dawn I had been given only one oar. When I clearly noted this at first light the humor wasn't lost on me. I was equipped to row in circles with my left hand. The thumb of my right hand was missing and the pain lessened when I raised it high. In the early light I had seen a green or loggerhead turtle and took my thumb someone had stuffed in my pocket pitching it toward the beast but the turtle had submerged in alarm misunderstanding my good intentions. By midmorning the shore had arisen and I could see the coastline south of Veracruz. The current was carrying us toward Alvarado. My father woke from his latest faint. His face was too bruised for clear speech and now rather than wailing he bleated. His eyes made his request clear and I pushed him gently over the back of the boat. It was quite some time before he completely sunk. I would study the stinking fish scales and bits of dried viscera on the boat's bottom and then look up and he would still be there floating in the current. And then finally I was pleased to see him sink. What a strange way to say good-bye to your father.

Part 1

1960s

My name is David Burkett. I'm actually the fourth in a line of David Burketts beginning in the 1860s when my great-grandfather emigrated from Cornwall, England, to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan which forms the southern border of Lake Superior, that vast inland sea of freshwater. This naming process is of no particular interest except to illustrate how fathers wish to further dominate the lives their sons from the elemental beginnings. I have done everything possible to renounce my father but then within the chaos of the events of my life it is impossible to understand the story without telling

My father was so purely awful that he was a public joke in our area but with his having moved to Duluth so long ago the jokes had become quite stale, truly ancient, and were now being raised to life only by older men, mostly retired, sitting near the breakwall in the public park next to Lake Superior watching boats they never boarded going in and out of the harbor.

Perhaps it is strange for a victim of evil to see this evil become more local folklore than a vital force, but then I was a temporary victim abandoning both my parents at age eighteen when I had the strength of my anger though I admit my sister Cynthia at age sixteen beat me to the punch by a full month. Cynthia got herself pregnant by her lover, a mixed-blood Finn and Chippewa (Anishinabe) Indian, the son of our yardman, who was a senior to her sophomore, and a star on the Marquette High School football team. At the time, 1966, for a girl of Cynthia's social standing to get herself pregnant by an Indian boy would be the same as a girl from a prominent Mississippi family becoming pregnant from an affair with a black man. In animal terms Cynthia could be likened to a wolverine, the most relentlessly irascible beast in North America, whereas I, in my teens, was more an opossum who wished to be a bear. Not oddly, it was a grotesque and unprosecuted crime committed by my father that drove us away, but then I have to work up to this dire event.

I'm too impatient to start at the beginning, and besides, no apparent god knows when that might be. I'm averse to the mirror in my cabin toilet, having long ago unscrewed the single lightbulb, but since the toilet is on the north side of the cabin and heavily shaded by a clump of fir trees I never see myself anyway in more than dimmish light. I don't dislike myself but there's enough left of the outward thrust of jaw to remind me of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father. More than a trace of luck came along when my mother's small facial features moderated my own so that the old-timers in Michigan's Upper Peninsula didn't directly turn away in muted fear and nervousness. All but a few of the younger citizens, say those under forty, have forgotten the specifics of who we were.

I'm not going to trap myself here. I wasn't quite eighteen years old when I declared my intention to Lake Superior on a stormy night near the grave of an old Indian on Presque Isle that I wasn't going to use up my life thinking about myself which seemed to be the total preoccupation of my schoolmates and all the adults I knew except Jesse, my father's aide since World War II, Clarence, and my uncle, my mother's brother Frederick who lived in a cabin way down in southern Ohio across

the Ohio River from eastern Kentucky. Fred had been an Episcopalian priest in Chicago who had lost interest in his calling a step ahead of his parishioners losing patience with his terminal eccentricities. He survived on family money and a small pension from the church given for his general mental incontinence. Fred told me when I was sixteen that modern man at the crossroads mostly just stayed at the crossroads. This notion is fine in itself but more importantly Fred taught me how to row a boat on lakes and rivers. He built one for me in two weeks during a hot Ohio June, lifted and secured it in the back of his pickup, and then we drove north straight through to Au Sable Lake near Grand Marais, Michigan, launching the boat at dawn, breaking a bottle of Goebel's beer over the bow, but then Fred became confused over the names we might use to christen the boat. Fred owned an obnoxious dog, a mixed Airedale-bull terrier he had named simply "No" so I suggested "Yes" as a boat name because when we finally rowed the boat out on the lake that summer morning Fred had to forcibly detach No's teeth from the oar and I wanted to put a positive feeling on the experience. Fred subdued the dog and said the name Yes would be "banal." Fred liked to imitate the questionable behavior of his poor white neighbors but he was a learned man, his cabin stuffed with books. He broke another Goebel's bottle over the gunnel and christened my rowboat "Boat." It was then that a male loon flew near us disappearing into the mist at the west end of the lake with that circular and querulous cry which after long silence Fred likened to the laughter before death of an insane saint. All of Fred's frame of reference was Christian though he thought of it as a religion that hadn't "panned out" and after three beers would present a long and repetitive argument that the religion of his calling had done more harm than good to the world. This point was a precarious teeter-totter that daily haunted him but after too many beers and a nap he would withdraw his blasphemies because I was thinking of the ministry at the time and he didn't want to discourage me. How better could I renounce both my father and my own Western preoccupation with self than to take up a primitive form of Christianity? Of course my father ignored this right up to the point that I also refused the family tradition of Yale and enrolled instead at Michigan State University and then he knew that he had truly lost me, not that he seemed to care.

This is a case where mere fact isn't instructive. I had taken over the rowing and we were close to shore moving through reed and lily pad beds with the dog growling intermittently on the shore. It was already warm at eight in the morning and a slight breeze kept the clouds of mosquitoes enshrouded in the forest. Fred was peeling a hard-boiled egg drawn from the cooler and dosing it with Tabasco. I had just asked a mawkish theological question about Mary Magdalene, a query about forgiveness attached to this woman in part because I was a virgin at sixteen and imagined Mary Magdalene to be a haunted seductress, her robes parted wantonly for those who took interest and gave her a few coins. This boat incident took place over thirty years ago and I see the bits of eggshell floating on the shaded water. Fred was tired and irritable from driving north all night.

"That's your main problem," he said. "You can't have religion without belief. You're just using your religion to decorate your life to protect you from your father. It's like your mother flying down to Chicago to go to a dress shop, say something pastel pink for Easter when the Lord was said to arise. That's no better than your dad driving from Marquette to Duluth to fuck one of his fifteen-year-olds. What I'm saying is that you can't be playing around with your Christianity like it was a tool kit to keep you going. How does that make you better than your dad? Right now you'd give your left nut for an hour with Mary Magdalene." Fred was making light of my recent religious conversion wherein my soul was *saved* at the fundamentalist Baptist church, an event that offended my family's Episcopalian sensibilities including Fred's.

The landscape turned reddish and I pulled hard on the oars and hit shore in a snake-grass reed bed. The dog understood my anger before Fred and barked loudly. I jumped out of the boat and headed into an alder thicket that immediately tripped me three times because my body was trying to move faster

than my feet. I think I was yelling ‘fuck you’ and even now my voice feels boyish and cracking with dry sobs. ~~Two weeks before on the day I hitchhiked south from Marquette my sister Cynthia had been sitting on a blanket out in her special corner of the yard near her disused playhouse. I was in the work shed next to the garage where Clarence our yardman often stayed, and where he slept on an old leather couch. I was near the greasy workbench careful not to touch it in my Sunday suit. I was on my way to the Baptist church while my parents were dressing for a later service at the Episcopalian. I was checking to see if Clarence wanted to trout-fish that afternoon. Many Chippewa are large men and so are the Finnish and Clarence was half of each. I once saw him unload a four-hundred-pound woodstove from his Studebaker pickup and carry it into this self-same shed.~~

One June Sunday morning through the stained window above the workbench while we were talking about where we might fish in the evening and had decided on the Yellow Dog we saw my father walk across the yard and approach Cynthia who was now doing calisthenics in a bathing suit which the priest in me thought far too brief for Sunday morning. He must have said something truly awful because Cynthia grabbed a large wooden stake that propped up a rose trellis and swung it at Father hitting him in the chest, hip, and knee before he could retreat to the back porch where Jesse was standing on the steps. Father was hobbling but Jesse made no move to help him. I made a move toward the work shed door but Clarence grabbed my arm. Jesse brushed off my father’s pant leg where the dirty end of the garden stake had soiled them. I looked back at Cynthia who was now reading a magazine as if nothing had happened. She was fourteen at the time, ruled her own world, and kept her bedroom door locked.

I went out the back door of the work shed and down the alley to the street where Jesse now stood by the old Packard waiting to drive my parents to church. I told him I was going to hitchhike or take the Greyhound down to Ohio while my parents were at church. When something went wrong with my family I always fled for a week or so. Jesse’s real name was Jesus Tomás Sandoval but the people around Marquette couldn’t accept the occasional Mexican custom of naming a son Jesus so he was called Jesse by everyone except my father, who called him Sandy, a private joke that had never been explained to me. They had met at basic training for World War II near Houston and where Jesse had come north from Veracruz when he found out you could earn citizenship by fighting for the United States. They fought together, I think at Corregidor and the Philippines under MacArthur, and my father had quite literally bought Jesse’s life what with his becoming a faithful manservant, “amanuensis,” bookkeeper, valet, travel agent, and whatever to my father. Jesse was efficient rather than subservient while my father’s appearance was such that if you saw him in a bank or airport you’d think there’s a man who knows what he’s doing, always well groomed and tailored, checking his watch as if time was of consequence, a shell actually on which the culture had slowly painted all of the characteristics of a WASP cock of the walk, an alpha white male, while inside there was only a decayed question mark, a living grave soaked with booze and desires so errant that all but a few people wished to run from him.

I told Jesse my intentions only because I didn’t want my mother to launch a search party, or sit there in her nest in the breakfast nook in the kitchen with the table stacked with books of reassurance from theosophy to the further reaches of domestic double-talk.

Jesse was faithful to my father and I don’t recall a single word of criticism to anyone else though once I was in the basement and could hear a conversation in the den up a furnace vent, and then Jesse was brisk and trenchant trying to reason with him.

I was simply going to head down the street but Jesse reminded me that I was wearing my Sunday suit. I was confused of course. Seeing your sister beat on your father with a club is an uncommon experience. I thanked him and shook hands good-bye in case I didn’t return before he left on vacation

Every year I could remember Jesse went home for the months of July and December to Veracruz where he had a wife and a daughter. It was less a vacation than a stipulation for his continuing services. Jesse had relatives that grew coffee up near Jalapa north of the city of Veracruz but still in the province. My father would complain about his departures, actually whine because he was quite lonely without Jesse and disliked Clarence as a driver because he drove so slowly. My father had accumulated a number of drunken driving tickets and the family name and political influence couldn't get his license back after he passed a dozen violations. The complaints were meaningless anyway because my parents spent most of the summer at an old-money club about fifty miles north of Marquette and December took them to Florida. It's odd but I've never been able to refer to my father as anything but "Father" while my childhood friends had actual "Dads," many of them quite wonderful, though Fred has often reminded me that in Clarence and Jesse I had dads who were better than most anyone had. The biological collision of parenthood meant nothing to him, even though his sister was half the quotient.

Back to the lake which I couldn't find though I'm fairly good in the woods, especially so when I was sixteen and overconscious of where I was headed. That morning, however, I had mostly thrashed through the underbrush in an enraged state. Fred had said despite my religious beliefs which I thought profound that I was no better than my father whom I loathed, and deserved loathing, or better than my daffy mother about whom I was beginning to have doubts. For instance Cynthia and Father would carry on these brittle, acerbic conversations when my mother was down in Chicago three or four days a month to get a physical condition she called "phantom pain" corrected. My father and I believed in the reality of this infirmity probably because it was suggestive of our own mental ills. Cynthia, however, had told me that the doctor mother was seeing had been a friend of hers when she was at Stephens College and he was a poor kid at the University of Missouri. I couldn't accept this though I didn't inquire how Cynthia knew it to be true. Cynthia merely asked that if you were married to Dad (she called him that) wouldn't you seek outside comfort? A young man can accept a father's unfaithfulness but a mother's is definitely in a much higher category of pain, but then Cynthia added that she didn't mean that they were necessarily sleeping together. She said that my helpless young male imagination construed any male-female relationships as sexual. That Sunday morning when I went back into the house to get out of my suit, nodding to my parents as they came down the steps to go to church with my father still limping from his daughter's assault, I packed a small bag and then went out in the yard to say good-bye to Cynthia who had been joined by her friend Laurie. I simply couldn't understand how she could do what she had done and not feel confused and remorseful. Not a chance. They were singing Beatles songs then laughed at me because I always reddened when Laurie was in her bathing suit, a two-piece flesh-colored suit only slightly less daring than a bikini. I stared off at the lilacs and Cynthia said, "Don't feel badly. You didn't do anything. Dad should be locked in a zoo." And that was that to a fourteen-year-old girl who tried hard to make her brother as tough as she was. Far later when I was a graduate student in theology in Chicago taking a course in Oriental religions I read a Japanese twelfth-century philosopher who said, "No changing reality to suit the self." Cynthia, Clarence, and Jesse were experts at reality while mother, father, and myself were tormented speculators in the area of self-deceit and Fred was a tightrope walker between the two worlds.

By noon I had reached a steep hillside from which I finally could get a firm sense of my location. I had climbed several trees in the lowlands but couldn't get high enough to see anything more than

other trees and I hadn't paid enough attention to the position of the sun when I was first lost to have it be of help. Now I could see miles to the north to the beige and lumpy outlines of the dunes that abut Lake Superior, all too many heartless miles away. My bug repellent was in a kit in the rowboat and my face was so swollen by mosquitoes, blackflies, and deerflies I could see only in a squint. My mouth was dry as dust and my stomach rattled with hunger. I had smeared my face and bare arms with swamp muck which helped with noxious insects. Blackflies, however, had made their way well up my pant legs. The mud poultice had been shown to me by Clarence one evening when we were fishing the Yellow Dog and had forgotten our insect repellent. We built a smudge fire and fried some trout. Clarence always packed along bread, salt, an iron skillet, and a baby-food jar of bacon grease. I can't say Clarence was wise in any orthodox sense. At one time he was a famous bar fighter in the Upper Peninsula but one day his wife took the two children and went back to her parents' home near Ontonagon. Clarence decided to kill himself and jumped off the pier with a cement block tied to a leg but down on the lake's bottom while running out of breath it occurred to him all he needed to do was quit drinking, not kill himself. My father who used to bet on Clarence's more organized fights with his equally despicable cronies hired Clarence when I was about five years old and soon after that I was taught to fish. Around the smudge fire on the Yellow Dog I heard the only story with which I could directly connect Clarence with religion. When he was in the Korean War and it was January several of his friends had lost toes to frostbite and Clarence began to worry about his own. One dawn after he pulled the boots off a crying soldier friend and some toes came with the boot he shot a "gook" running out of a hut. Clarence took off his own boots, slit open the dead man's stomach, and stuck his feet among the warm guts until they began to cool. He still lost the little toe on his left foot which he saved for his medicine bag. The problem was that the Chippewa are expected to have respect for the dead so years later Clarence was still worried about the method with which he had saved his toes. It was especially hard after shooting and gutting a deer. He told me that since he was half Finn he thought it was the Finn in him that forced him to save his toes. It was ten minutes sitting there around the fire before it occurred to me that I was supposed to make a judgment. It was a strain but I said I had heard that it was hard to walk well without toes and perhaps that Clarence's gods knew how badly he would need to walk in the future. After the night of struggling with the knot in the black cold water and nearly drowning Clarence would take off walking for hours in the woods when he felt he had to have a drink. Later in a theology class I brought up Clarence's religious questions but my fellow divinity students found them repellent.

After I had rested on the hill for a half hour Fred's surly cur No showed up and began growling and barking at me. Fred's canteen was wrapped around the dog's neck and I detached it after a struggle laughing to think that the dog owned some of my sister's character. It was after I drank the water that I realized what Fred probably meant about the failure of religion. He knew I went to the Baptist church in part to piss off my parents. He didn't know that I had read the New Testament a dozen times because I hadn't been brought up to read it. Fred was more interested in the long-term socioeconomic aspects of Christianity and lacked confidence in such basic matters as the Resurrection which I believed in irrationally because I had lost faith in rationality.

All the way following the dog back to the lake I felt lightheaded, even amused by the blisters on my feet. When I fell behind the obnoxious dog would bark and wait for me, stopping where I had peed in the morning and giving me a knowing look. Maybe I'm only an animal in human clothes, I thought. Only a month before when Laurie was sleeping over Cynthia had teased her into opening my bedroom door and mooning me. I knew they had been drinking beer and smoking pot. This was the sixties and marijuana had made its way into all the nether regions of America. I was sitting at my desk reading C. S. Lewis, the door opened, and there was Laurie's bent-over nude butt. Then she was gone. I virtually

swooned like a Victorian lady. When I said my long nightly prayers I was unable to dismiss the image of Laurie's butt. Most of me viewed her butt as satanic but when I told Fred while we were building the row-boat in Ohio he laughed and said a butt can be lovely but not satanic. I was already having trouble with my Baptist minister who startled me by disapproving of C. S. Lewis, also Mozart who had helped so much in lifting me out of depression.

It was years before the full comic volume of that day reached me. It was five in the afternoon before the dog and I reached the point on the shore where I had leaped from the boat. I was crestfallen when Fred wasn't there but then I heard him hollering from the dock at the launch site a half mile up the lake. I waved and the dog took off, and then I floundered into the lake rinsing off my mud-caked body before I noticed that Fred had left the rowboat behind for me.

At the campsite Fred joked that an eight-hour walk had been good for my health. He fed me three hot dogs and a can of warmed-up beans, then bathed my blistered feet in hydrogen peroxide. In defiance of my vows to be unlike my father I drank a bottle of beer. I fell asleep and awoke weeping from a bad dream at midnight. Fred stoked the campfire and made coffee. I was embarrassed over my tears and hobbled down to the dock and watched the moonlight glistening on the placid water. In my dream Laurie was thin, red-eyed, and bald, obviously terribly ill (ten years later when I visited her in the Marquette hospital where she was dying of breast cancer she looked similar and I remembered the dream). I composed myself, a state that lasted at best no more than a few minutes, then walked back to the fire, turning to see that the dog who had followed me was still on the dock and apparently staring at the moon, a possible metaphor for man's relationship to God, or so I thought at the time. I mentioned this to Fred who said, "That's pretty good." I asked Fred if he thought that I was a prig and he answered "probably" which destroyed my short-lived composure. "Prig" is what Cynthia called me the day after I confronted her about teasing Laurie into her errant behavior. The word "prig" wasn't used in the U.P. but then Cynthia read a lot, especially long nineteenth-century English novels by George Eliot, Jane Austen, and the Brontës that I didn't care for. Cynthia had said, "I'm tired of having a prig for a brother. All you do is read and mope around disapproving of the world." It had truly pained me to discover that at age fourteen Cynthia was no longer a virgin. Neither was Laurie for that matter. They had selected two boys, one of them Clarence's son, Donald, who was a bright but tough athlete who affected insensitivity in public but in private—we had grown up together—was a wonderful companion.

I sat there by the fire trying to listen to Fred, who poured whiskey in his coffee, rail on about the treachery of governments, the chicanery of the Catholics, the sodden stupidity of the Protestants, but wasn't listening. I was trying to figure out how not to be a prig, how to stop thinking about myself, how to enter real life, the dimensions and specifics of which I had no idea. I kept thinking of a quote in the nightmarishly confusing Book of Revelation that ended the New Testament that said, "I would that you were either hot or cold because if you are lukewarm I will utterly cast you out." A prig was lukewarm for sure.

Over thirty years later while recapturing all of this I become again a tenuous and hormonal prig somewhat frightened of the night, Fred's dog, the glitter of the moon on the water, the power of Laurie's bottom jutting in the door, the madness of girls, the Book of Revelations, my drunken and perverse father, my mother so densely surrounding herself with fluff that she was a ghost, how sometimes I prayed on the hardwood floor on my knees for the clarity of pain. This far away I seem to have exhausted all my fears though I can re-create them.

"Where are you?" Fred asked, bringing me out of my reverie. "There's a sure way to stop being a prig. Just figure out what's wrong with your family and avoid doing likewise. That doesn't mean

doing nothing. That doesn't mean walking around with your head up your ass."

There was an immediate visual image of a man trying to get his head out of his own ass. Fred was close to drunk but that didn't keep me from taking him seriously. It was the first truly important night of my life. Despite my aching bones and blistered feet I sensed a possibility of strength, of a mission that drew solace and the chance of success or victory from the fire, from the dog, from my fellow human Fred, the night, the bright moon and stars, even the owl we were hearing intermittently. This sounds vaguely absurd now but then so many changes in the direction of our lives come as a result of accidents, happenstances, the slightest pushes in any direction, and on the more negative side the girl you met at a gathering you didn't want to attend who infected your life to the extent that the scar tissue will follow you into old age.

We woke at midmorning not having turned in until dawn when Fred tipped over backward asleep and rolled him into his sleeping bag and spread insect repellent on his face.

“Don’t believe anything I said last night,” to which he added, “What was the last thing I said last night?”

“You said that I couldn’t comprehend what was good until I comprehended what was bad.” I wanted to take a walk but looked in despair at my blistered feet.

“Disregard that. It might be true but it’s dangerous.”

I had heard rumors that one of the matters that had displeased Fred’s parishioners had been his excessive interest in black culture, including an affair with a prostitute which made his wife cut and run after only three years of marriage. Fred had told me a number of times that he was sick of white language and could “no longer operate on that level of discourse,” a matter of which took me years to understand.

We gave up our heavy talk and spent two days rowing. In my own life strength has come from unfolding, subtracting, rather than adding. We simply took turns rowing the new boat. I didn’t have a fly rod along which robbed me of the chance to show off my expertise to Fred, and also to myself, a skill often becoming a trifling and dishonest thing (Clarence always teased me about making long casts when short ones for were called for—he’d say “stop fishing with your dick”). Fred had a battered spinning rod and we trolled enough to catch a few bass and pike to eat. On the two overwarm afternoons we hiked out on the massive Grand Sable Dunes having discovered that the insects were averse to this sandy terrain. It was hard walking but there were shaded sandbanks of blooming wild sweet pea and sea rose, and wild strawberries which we’d eat despite the sand embedded in them. On the highest edges of the dunes you could sit and simply stare down at the icy clarity of Lake Superior or look far out to sea and note passing ore freighters. The ore freighters irritated Fred because that was the business his and my mother’s father was occupied in to the point that Fred claimed he and my mother were but an afterthought in their life in Lake Forest just north of Chicago. I tried to tease him about the freighters saying “I thought we were supposed to meet this head on.”

“You are. I couldn’t.”

There was a tinge of redness in his face not caused by the sun and I wished I hadn’t said what I had said, dispelling the sense of the idyll, the sand dunes, and Lake Superior growing dullish with the mood change.

“My sister is no longer a virgin,” I said idly, trying generously to change the subject from Fred’s torments to my own.

“That’s no one’s business but hers. Cynthia is fourteen years old going on fifty. She’s the only honest human in the history of your family.” To Fred young Cynthia was a heroine of specific

dimension. From an early age, say about seven, Cynthia had a pungency and lucidity of speech that nearly everyone except her friends found nerve-racking. She had been encouraged in her precocious reading by a gay (a word not yet used in the sixties) teacher out of the University of Michigan who my father had managed to get fired by framing him, an incident that began at the age of twelve her campaign, somewhat merciless, of revenge against Father.

“It’s natural for me to worry about my sister. Didn’t you worry about my mother when she was young?” I asked lamely.

“Not really. I had the reverse of you. She was two years older and a mean-minded girl which she covered with a patina of good manners. She got nicer after Richard died.”

I never knew my father’s younger brother, Richard, who would have been my uncle. My parents’ families were both members of the Club, north of town, an elaborate social retreat for the mogul families of the Midwest containing seventy thousand acres of lakes and rivers on Lake Superior. Many of the members were from Chicago and Cleveland with backgrounds of timber and mining and Great Lakes shipping. When I was about ten and heard the rumor that my mother was first in love with my father’s younger brother I discounted it. The child’s refusal to accept confusion in his parents’ lives is a good protective measure. At that age parents are still gods though growing smaller by the year. Richard had supposedly drowned but those who told me this never appeared to be totally convinced.

On our third evening at the campsite, actually the summer solstice, the warm air seemed to gather a yellow tinge to add to its unnatural stillness. Fred claimed he could feel the drop in barometer in his eyes and ears. The sun had sunk behind the dunes on the day of its farthest northern course but then it grew suddenly darker. Fred immediately started to pack up our messy campsite. We began to hear deep thunder and wind to the west and our vigilant dog trotted down to the dock to threaten the oncoming storm. We were packed and finally in the pickup when the first stiff blast hit and the truck shuddered. Not liking thunder the dog shrunk to the floor and curled around my feet.

We found a slightly shabby tourist cabin on a hill in the village of Grand Marais. There was a kitchenette and two bedrooms barely larger than closets with an obligatory set of deer horns. Fred looked around fondly saying that the cabin held “romantic memories.” My essential but I hoped waning priggishness doubted that as there was a scent of beer, mouse turds, and fish in the air, and the cabin walls shook in the storm as if there was a question that they would hold up. Fred stood puzzled in the kitchenette and I could tell he was trying to remember which of the bedrooms had created the memories. He shrugged when the dog No made the choice for him, sprawling across the pillows and growling for general reasons.

Fred poured himself a whiskey and asked if I wanted one. I shook my head and took a shower to get ready for the inevitable trip to the tavern. Fred claimed he liked taverns for the “plain speech” and their admirable lack of Episcopalian patrons. When I came out and Fred took a shower I tasted his whiskey and poured myself a small one. My mother thought of her brother as a “problem drinker” but close observation led me to believe that he drank less than she did. While we built the rowboat he drank two beers before dinner and that was that, and we were up at dawn to beat the heat, while my mother’s daily two martinis were in the direction of the outsized. Fred’s two beers made him relaxed and quite happy while my mother’s two martinis had no visible effect one way or the other except to pacify her errant mind. When Father was there he shook their martinis in a silver lidded container over his shoulder as if he were creating a masterpiece or a ritual without which polite society could not healthily proceed.

At the tavern the owner called Fred "Preacher" from past familiarity but when I was introduced the owner became a little stiff and formal. After all it was only eighty years before that my family had finished laying waste locally to a half million acres of white pine. In the mid-sixties the virtue of this was not in question, and the grandeur of the destruction had been mythologized in story and song. Fred ordered a whiskey and though only sixteen I was served a beer as if it were unthinkable for the owner not to do so. I looked old for my age, was just short of six foot, and had to shave every morning but the reason I was served was my name and as the evening progressed the word got around the fairly crowded tavern and many people, usually middle-aged or beyond, looked over at our table where Fred was buying drinks for two lumpy women in their thirties one of whom was eating a snack of french fries with a ladle of gravy on it, a localized Upper Peninsula custom. A retired logger and trapper who had to be in his eighties and quite drunk stopped by our table to say hello to Fred, but then he looked at me and joked, "I met your grandfather and great-grandfather, the biggest thieving assholes God ever allowed to live." There was silence in the tables around us but I only said "that's probably true" and the ambient chatter began again. I was embarrassed to be looked at as a young potentate and wanted to leave but Fred was making a speech to me about language, drawing my attention to the nature of what those around us were saying about weather, sport and commercial fishing, alcohol, mosquitoes and blackflies, love and adultery. By comparison, Fred maintained, nothing in my father's language was causally related to anything he might actually feel or with any accuracy to the world around him. My mother was close behind him. Their language was wry, ironical, and loaded. Throughout this the two women sitting with us gazed around in puzzled boredom that they didn't try to conceal, then the storm knocked the lights out and everyone cheered. The owner lit two lanterns and in the dim light Fred was kissing the woman closest to him. The other woman had disappeared and I got up to leave but when I reached the door the lights came back on and I nodded at two college-age girls at the door who were drinking pop and watching their seniors with amusement. "Why leave?" asked the prettiest who wore a tight, scanty T-shirt. Lacking an answer I shrugged and went out in the rain. I intended to sit in the truck but No went berserk when I touched the door having decided he didn't recognize me. I walked the mile or so to the cabin in the rain and wind, listening to the roar of Lake Superior rather than thinking long thoughts.

In the middle of the night there was loud banging at the door which was stuck because of the moisture rather than locked. I was slow to respond and Fred shouted at my window. I jerked the door open and was startled to see him with the college girl in the scanty T-shirt. It was the prig in me that would think that Fred in his mid-forties couldn't come home with a girl so lovely. I was standing there like a geek in my underpants and she winked and laughed.

Back in my room I suspected it might be a long night and actually prayed that they were drunk enough to fall asleep promptly. No such luck. The thin wall between our rooms seemed to amplify rather than muffle the sounds of their lovemaking. I had nothing to read but the small leather-bound New Testament (King James Version) I had carried in my pocket for a year and half since being "saved." I flipped through Thessalonians and Colossians, but nothing St. Paul had to say could compete with next door's sexual racket. This was definitely Boy Christian hearing a world he hadn't made, had no part in, and wished for the time being to keep remote to avoid imagining dire consequences as extreme as his parents' marriage. My fishing friend Glenn, a poor kid, had papered his tiny room entirely with Playmates of the Month from *Playboy*, and when we sat there at his desk tying our Muddler Minnows, Adams, and Fan-Winged Coachman fishing flies, I would glance up at the wall amok with tits and butts, feel my loins squirm and face redden, then despondently go back to tying trout flies.

This experience, however, was unequalled and I put away my New Testament for fear that it too could hear the groans, slurps, whimpers, the soprano shriek of “fuck me harder,” the dog’s bark. I turned off the light and could make out Laurie’s bottom in the wall created by the wind-swung streetlight near the entrance to the cabin. My door opened and Fred shoved the dog in my room with “sorry.” Finally after more than an hour by my watch I could hear their alcohol snores and both dog and I were able to sleep.

I slipped out very early for a walk with No. The wind had subsided clocking around to the east and though the air was coolish there were still ruffled whitecaps on Lake Superior. The sky looked washed, glistening blue, and the sunrise made my tired heart ache. No led the way downhill on a path through alders and dogwood to the beach, a path he evidently knew. Fred would come north in the summer for a month or so, stop briefly to see us, go up to the Club for a necessary visit to his old father and a maiden aunt who moved into their log lodge as early as the snow would allow them, usually in early May, then as soon as possible Fred would retreat for a few weeks each in Grand Marais, a shack near Whitefish Point, the Canadian Soo, and then he would drive north all the way around Lake Superior through Wawa and Thunder Bay, on to Duluth (a city he loved), to Houghton, back to Marquette to see me and Cynthia, take an overnight hike with Cynthia near the McCormick tract in the Huron Mountains, back to Marquette to avoid Father and have lunch with Mother, then back to Ohio by Labor Day.

To be frank I admired him beyond all other men, followed by Jesse and Clarence. Fred was the black sheep who was so black everyone had ceased talking about it. He was a fact of life I anticipated with as much joy as I could muster every summer. By the time I was ten I was welcomed to walk with Fred and Jesse from the monstrosity of our old house out to Presque Isle for a picnic. For the first few years the two of them would lapse into Spanish when they didn’t want me to hear what they were saying, but then by the time I was fourteen I was allowed to hear everything. For instance, last summer Jesse had paused, looked at me and then at Fred, and said that wealth was like the breast of a pretty woman but there was no woman attached. You had to make up the rest yourself. Fred thought that inheritance taxes should be ninety-five percent while I kept thinking of my recently acquired Baptist experience and the preacher saying, “Idle hands are the devil’s work tool,” or something like that, my father obviously being a case.

I got back to the cabin on the hill in an hour and Fred’s beloved was standing in the yard brushing her wet hair. “Isn’t it beautiful,” she gestured at the landscape with her hairbrush. “You should’ve hung in there last night. My friend was horny as a toad.” Naturally I envisioned an actual toad, but then managed to think of the other girl standing near the tavern door. My stomach flipped over the idea that I had been that close to losing my virginity or not. She offered a hand without the brush and I could smell Ivory soap emerging from her T-shirt and swinging breasts. She seemed to be exuding steamy heat from her shower. “Cat got your tongue?” she teased and I shook her hand, still not having managed a word. Fred saved me, calling us for breakfast.

Robin was her name. She and her friend were from Livonia near Detroit and had just graduated in teacher’s education at Central Michigan, then headed north for an “adventure.” She hugged Fred when she said this then let the dog lick egg yolk with a small piece of bacon off her spoon, and continued using the spoon on a bowl of Cheerios. Both Fred and the dog seemed to be smirking. Robin slurped her coffee and then drew a wrinkled joint from her purse, lit it, and drew deeply, her breasts jiggling with her cough. I naturally turned down a drag, but Fred shrugged and took a puff. “I’m on vacation,”

Robin fairly shrieked. Fred sensed my discomfort and pushed the pickup keys across the table. “Could you come get me in a few days? I’ll give you a call.”

I was passing through Munising and halfway home before my composure fully returned though I recognized for the first time that this composure couldn't be a significant item if it took a full hour to come close to the condition. It meant only that I had succeeded in keeping the world from intruding on the pickup cab. The paper mill in Munising was changing shifts and a dozen cars were pulling up at a tavern for the morning beer. Two heavily laden logging trucks were parked out front and with my windows open there was the heavy scent of torn bark and tree sap that reminded me of Robin after her shower. In stoned enthusiasm she had hugged me tightly good-bye and as I went up the hill out of Munising toward Au Train it occurred to me that it had been a full year of my new fundamentalist religion and I hadn't hugged a girl in that period. The last had been the previous June when my buddy Glenn's girlfriend, a big Finnish girl our age, had hugged me next to our campfire on the Middle Branch of the Escanaba River after I caught a brown trout of at least three pounds. She was far too burly for my taste but I admit that I became excited when she embraced me. She and Glenn would split a six-pack he had swiped from his dad, and I'd drive us home from fishing in my late-model Ford my mother had given me when she bought a Buick. At fifteen it was illegal for me to drive at night on my learner's permit but my parents were too distracted to be aware of this. Anyway, after fishing I'd drive the hour back to Marquette and Glenn and his girlfriend would make out in the backseat and I'd turn on the radio loud to drown out the very audible sounds of Glenn getting a blow job, an act beyond my ken. She had said loudly several times that she didn't want to get "PG." When Glenn came off he'd kick at the front seat and I'd yell for him to stop.

I was short of making the turn in Harvey when I pulled off at an uninhabited beach and dozed for an hour. I couldn't have had more than three hours' sleep and I felt giddy looking at Marquette a dozen miles west along the shore. If I had picked up my binoculars off the seat I could have seen our home looming in the trees on Ridge Street above the harbor. The week before I had gone south to Fred's in Ohio I asked my Baptist preacher what it meant when Jesus said, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," which clarified it as more an individual thing rather than a group effort. The passage sounded strenuous and cruel to me. The preacher was always sucking on hard candy lemon drops and popped a fresh one when he said, "We worship together but we die alone so we have to work real hard to keep our faith on the right track." This struck me as a lame exegesis but the preacher was deeply enmeshed in the problems of his hell-raising oldest son who we could see out the parsonage study window smoking a scandalous cigarette while he washed his car. He was tall and somewhat fat and sold condoms and beer on the side, all in all a poor advertisement for his father's religion though in the folklore of the Upper Midwest the sons of preachers were always problematic items. Many thought the preacher's wife to be too attractive to be suitable. She was a southern woman (Missouri) and her silken voice struck us as sexual. Her breasts were protuberant and when she lifted her angelic chin for a solo of "Fairest Lord Jesus" my body hummed with the lowest chords of the church organ. When I had been baptized by immersion with several others in a big metal tank with

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