



1967



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Somebody Save My Parents

How tiny the house has shrunk!

The fall in New York was my first time away from home, really — not counting the summer I spent near Willets, California, at a summer camp run by the Sisters of Charity. So as I climb out of the taxi for Christmas I can't help noticing how cramped the house appears, as though I've grown enormously over the past four months.

It's an illusion, of course. I've had enough University to recognize that. Still, it's strange, as I stride into the kitchen bearing a backpack crammed with a semester's worth of unwashed clothes and the Russian Lit translation I'm determined to finish over the holidays. Because I have important finals coming up and damned if I'm going to be sidetracked by the usual family crap — emerging from the kitchen, I run smack into a bivouac of playpens.

My parents married and came to California during the defense industry boom of the nineteen fifties. But now, fifteen years later, the boom has gone bust, the suburbs have merged into one long concrete urb, and along with almost everyone else in the Valley, my father's lost his job.

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In the beginning Mason conscientiously looked for a new one, but the Bay Area was crammed with overly-qualified applicants, so the mid-period of his quest was defined by taking whatever he could get — swing-shift as a security guard until shooting-pains in his arches forced him to quit; taxi driver for a week of highly-caffeinated nights; piece-work draftsman for a garbage recycling firm until the environmental fad began to fade.

After that, nothing.

So the burden of support has passed to my mother, Virginia, who instituted an informal child-care center in the living room for children of our neighbors — whom themselves are all securely lawyers and dentists.

When Mason was my age or a little younger, he wanted to be an artist — the kind that actually paints pictures. Unfortunately there wasn't much of a market for this kind of thing during the Depression, so Mason went into aeronautical engineering. This turned out to be a prescient decision: in 1937 Hitler appeared to be just about what the rest of Europe deserved, but by the end of the war Mason had made a name for himself as a competent — if self-taught — draftsman. In 1951 headhunters from a West Coast weapons' firm snapped him up and it isn't until now, fifteen years later, that Mason has begun to realize just what he's given up for the security of competence. And like anyone discovering truth at too late an age, it hasn't made him wiser but merely bitter, because he no longer has the youth or energy to do anything but



complain about it, proselytizing to those like myself who are not the slightest bit interested in trading our own meager caches of wisdom for any amount of paternal advice or dilatory self-discovery.

Somewhat in reaction, I left home directly after high school and enrolled in an ultra-urban college on the opposite side of the country, taking a ponderous load of courses: Hellenistic Philosophy; English 143 — “Joyce’s Early Years”; a survey of 19th-century Russian fiction, and an introductory computer course for liberal arts majors titled *Mastering the Man-Machine Interface*. Now I stare at the darkly-panelled family room walls, the cold maw of the unlit fireplace, the pioneer sideboard with its uptilted china plates and tiny heirloom teacups, as if the house is the set to a story whose plot has yet to unfold. Then spy my dad slumped in the worn rocking chair, brown wool afghan tugged over his shoulders and his hair grown shaggy. He’s drinking something, Hearty Burgundy it turns out, poured from the pebbled-glass flagon jar on the carpet by his foot, and scowling at the latest news from Vietnam flickering on the blue-gray TV screen. For a moment I just stare — his hair is much grayer than I recall and his jowls hang loose in turkey wattles as if the person inside is shrinking at a pace faster than his body can accommodate. Mason glances up and catches sight of me; and the knowing cold smile that curls his lips seems like something straight out of *Karamazov*.

After the first confusion of my arrival subsides, the turning-down-of-Chet-Huntley and surreptitious hiding-of-the-Gallo, I go through the house into my old bedroom. Uneasily I gaze around: things haven’t changed much. My experimental pot plant is dead, otherwise it’s the same heavy carved-wood bureau, the same battered bifold closet doors, the same clothes I hadn’t wanted to pack for CUNY still sagging on their same spraddled blackwire hangers. It’s a little depressing, as if I haven’t really left home after all. Quickly I begin to unpack clothes and arrange my textbooks in an impressive pile atop the bureau that once belonged to my grandfather, who brought it here from Texas a long time ago.

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I am not forced to confront the family situation until dinner. So this afternoon I wander around the old neighborhood with my shoulders hunched and fists thrust into my jacket pockets, snuffing up the old neighborhood air and looking for trees my brothers, Vjay, Del, and I climbed as kids. Forging the narrow ditch we dammed each spring’s flood, I end at a swamp where the galvanized culvert empties into a churned, muddy field. Beyond sits a triptych of newly-framed houses, two-by-fours a damp raw orange in the misty wet. They look like plucked chickens. Someone has fenced the field into a dismal corral to house their pair of shivering ponies. The sky above is overlaid with successively darker layers of low drizzly clouds. I walk with shoulders bunched, peering this way and that. It’s strange, but also tuggingly familiar — rather like, I console myself, the early draft of a poorly-translated Russian novel.

Such childhood explorations out of the way, dinner this evening is a dinner to behold. Thanks to courses at CUNY, I find myself shifting back and forth as to whether it’s tragedy or actually a grisly sort of comedy: Turgenev, perhaps. Or Dostoievski, with myself as a sort of hyper-enlightened Raskolnikov. No, wait — Gogol. That’s who it is. Gogol. Definitely Gogol.

After a brief disquisition in which I try to convey the enormity of my university course-load and the mutual impact of Greek Philosophics and the Canon of Western Literature on the future of our world, a slack silence settles over the table that everyone seems resigned to accept.

I fidget. Isn’t anyone the least bit interested in Aristotle’s cosmology? Or Joyce the Giant of 20th Century Lit? The dangling overhead light is off and candles flicker our shadows on the wall as I try to describe Plato’s theory of human knowledge. Pouring a refill of my wineglass, I explain — “It’s like you’re all living in a cave and you’re blind.”



Vjay hasn't even bothered to come home for Christmas, so Del and the rest of us kids are arranged lengthwise down the monastic dining table split by refectory tapers; Mason hulks at the far end while at this, wavering in the sallow candlelight, my mom ladles Christmas gravy over cooked meat.

"As bats," Del sniffs. He's taking pre-med/pre-law courses at Humboldt State, a college far up on the wet edge of northern California.

"Didn't he kill himself?" one of my sisters wonders. "Drank poison or something?"

"Wrong Greek," Del snorts.

Mason tosses down his napkin. "What'd he have to kill himself about?"

Languidly I turn to face my father.

"This fellow you're talking about," he insists. "What'd he have to complain about that's not a helluva lot worse right here and right now?"

My 9-year-old sister, Baby, whom everyone treats like a prodigy because she skipped a grade, asks Mason to define "worse."

Mason ignores her and starts into a litany of gripes: loss of his job and demise of the economy; lack of perspicacity on the part of certain technologists and the venality of the military-industrial complex; possible wind-down of the Vietnam war and this further erosion of the local economy; then complaining in a vague way about a failure on the part of mom to fulfill her "wifely duties."

When I realize what he's up to with this last, my face flushes red. The rest of the family has sense enough to wait Mason out: all the compromises of a lifetime are coming to a boil under the pressure of his layoff and heat of the Christmas holidays. My mother's position is impenetrable; she sighs and folds her hands and refuses to admit there's a problem. And I myself, the first shock over now, gaze down at my parents with that anaerobic indifference I seem to have inhaled with course-work in New York City.

Mason leans towards me, knocking his wineglass: "You telling me the only thing I got to look forward to is getting old and *dying*?"

Spilt wine soaks the tablecloth. My mouth forms a smile as I stare into the candleflames and formulate a response.

But Del gets there first—chuckling, he begins to speak slyly of self-motivation.

"The hell's *that* got to do with anything," my father waves him away. "Wait'll you gotta earn a living. Wait'll you get a family. A wife who doesn't—who won't even—"

"One cannot blame others for failure in self-direction," Del's hands form a diagnostic triangle through which he sarcastically views us. And I smile across the table at my brother as though seeing the shadow of myself.

"Pah," Mason spits. "Get married to a nun like *that*," he jabs the air, "and you'll see where the failure is!"

One of my sisters wearily brings up marriage counseling, a worn-out appeasement whose only value lies in the time it exhausts for expression. Meanwhile Baby describes to me in a whisper who they've seen and with what success. First was the County, who'd embarrassed Mason with their latent disinterest. Then there were a series of private ones, the first of whom Mason couldn't stand—the woman spoke of "self-actualization in the workplace" like it was an experimental ward in a psychiatric clinic—and the next had been way too expensive to see more than once. Finally they even went to the Church, to a pale young cleric barely a year out of seminary who sat ramrod stiff beneath a tintype of Our Lady of Fatima and interrupted only to cough dryly, discreetly, when Mason became too sexually explicit.

All of this Baby relates with a sense of relief, as if the processes are more discussable than the problem itself.

Del is still busily dissecting family counselors. "Trouble is, they're not controlled. By which I mean," he tears a brown dinner roll open to expose its soft inner white, "legally licensed. Nowadays anybody with a Liberal Arts degree," he dips his head to exclude present company,



“can stick an ad in the Yellow Pages and charge you twenty bucks an hour. Check around,” he dares, “you’ll find they’re mostly a bunch of loser Psych majors trying to palm their own neuroses off onto you.”

And, in his opinion, deserve their high rate of attrition.

“Attrition?” mom wonders.

“Suicide,” Del smiles through bread torn by his teeth.

All of which is no satisfaction to Mason; he needs to get down to gritty specifics. Sloshing himself a fresh glass of wine, he mumbles that no wife of *his* is ever gonna support him. “Her father warned me,” Mason grouses, “I was marrying the goddamn Virgin Mary.”

Del smirks. “You mean your problem is sexual.”

“You boys—” Mason’s shaky white hand points his two wise sons out to the rest of the family, “you’re old enough to know what I’m talking about. If,” he makes a motion to rise, “you really want to hear, we can go talk about it in the family room.”

No one rises with him. I most certainly do not want to hear anything more about it, unless it’s going to be strictly on the theoretical level. And dad has made quite explicit his distaste for theory.

Suddenly it becomes too much for Ginnie, my mom. “Well I can’t just go in the bedroom and *per-form!*” she moans, and that is all she has to say about it for the rest of the evening.

And thus we come to Art.

“You should be grateful,” I remember contending, speaking as much now to the rest of the family as to my dad, my head roaring with wine and to tell the truth not entirely clear about the point I’m trying to make, “for this source of inspiration.” Closing my eyes, I pinch the bridge of my nose as though positioning pince-nez. “Use it as an excuse to drive yourself back to being creative. Why don’t you start painting again or something? You used to call yourself an artist. Well *be* one!

Look at Van Gogh,” I insist. “Look at Picasso and Warhol and Jackson Pollack. You got to learn to use your frustrations as an inspiration!”

Mason mumbles something about “implementation of his ideas,” which I recognize as another variant of that same old complaint.

Because from the beginning Mason has viewed himself as a sort of Grand Designer. The family would grow up together and learn to do things as a family unit; he has all the ideas we need—what he lacks is somebody to *im-plement* them!

“You don’t need us,” I groan, “if you’re an artist you don’t *need* people, you just *use* them!” Mom eyes me in dismay. “Well I’m sorry,” I continue unapologetically, “but it’s true. Read James Joyce. Read the Russians. Kafka. Or even any adequate textbook on art—a real artist doesn’t need anybody in order to create. In fact, most of them try to stay the hell *away* from people!”

Mason frowns.

“That’s right,” I insist. It has come to that part of the evening where any point expressed forcefully enough seems credible. “If you’re gonna be an artist, if you’re gonna create truth, you do it *alone* and on your *own*. You don’t need little slaves and you don’t need a family. You know what?” I gaze around the table and take another gulp of the raw red dinner wine before boldly facing my father. “If I had my way I’d stick you on an island. And then—”

“You’d what?” both mom and dad exclaim.

“That’s right. A box on a desert island. And the only thing you’d have would be paint and brushes and canvas. And the only way you could get out of that box and off that island would be to paint your way off.”

Mason frowns. “How would I live?”

“You’d survive. You’d survive.” Four months alone in New York City makes me awfully certain of this.

“But what would I eat?”

“A slot in the box lets food in when you peck the right button,” Del grins. “Guy named Skinner invented it.”



But the subject has been broached and now not even sarcasm can divert its flow. Instead of whining and complaining, I tell him, he should lock himself up someplace and just paint, paint, *paint!*

“Someplace like where?”

“How about the garden shed,” Del grins. “Might have to move that weed-whacker first.”

Both of us ignore him. “What about money?”

It’s apparent now he’s just manufacturing excuses. Increasingly I am aware of the semi-paternal control I’ve assumed over the family. “You’ve been unemployed all this fall,” I counter. “What about the money since then?”

“No no no,” Mason shakes his shaggy head, “don’t you know the law? You want to talk about cages — I’m stuck in a cage here, married to your mother!”

“Don’t be silly,” Gin sighs, “you know the money doesn’t matter. What matters to me is that you’re happy.”

“You know what I need to be happy,” Mason repeats and I feel my eyes mentally glazing over. “I need someone to be interested in my ideas. Who’ll listen and help me implement them.”

Del rocks back and hooks thumbs into his belt like a gunslinger. “Be awful surprised you find someone around here like that.”

“Oh you’re all so wise,” Mason’s gaze sweeps the table; “like I raised a family of little geniuses.”

I sit upright as though my name has been called. Gulping the last of my wine, I splash more into the waiting glass. “What’s the matter with you?” I rage. “How many times does a person have to keep saying it? The only way you’re ever going to get anything done is on your own! Your *own!*” I cry. “You can’t expect other people to do it for you! You do it alone, alone, ALONE!”

But as I jab my finger into Mason’s moody face I see the attention of the family is shifting from him to myself.

“No man is an island,” Mason quotes quite insanely.

“Huh,” I snort, “tell me all about it.”

“Well what about you?” Mason frowns, diverted. “What about this big New York college of yours? Who are you to talk? Have you met any nice girls —”

“Girls!” Their introduction dumbfounds me.

“Yes,” Mason senses he’s found a vein and swerves now to mine it, “that’s your problem. Too busy, always reading books — you should meet a girl.”

“It’s called *studying!*” I cry. “It’s what you *do* in a *university!*”

“Exactly,” he agrees. “And that’s your problem.” His lips spread in a thin smile. “Why can’t you go out and meet some nice girls?”

In New York *City?* I want to scream. Because it’s obvious now the man is mad, crazy, certifiably insane. This whole family —!

I shove unsteadily to my feet and finish off the wine in one great gulp.

“My problem is people who never keep their noses out of what’s none of their *business!*” I roar down at my old man. “Who’ve always got to be poking it into other people’s *lives!*”

“But surely it’s not healthy,” even mom is murmuring now, “alone in a big city like that . . .”

“Healthy!” My voice rises dangerously toward a shriek. “You think Gogol was healthy? When he wrote *Dead Souls?*”

My parents’ eyes goggle as though the man’s very name is answer.

“But some nice girl,” mom insists.

“Oh, *Jesus!*” I clutch my head, turn and plunge from the dining room.

Parents! Is there no salvation for them?

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P a r t I I

airport; each successive encounter with my mother and father only hardens me further, making me less and less inclined to express what it is I'm really feeling. *I tried last night, but you wouldn't listen.* Maybe it's time for them to learn the hard way what the cruel world holds—I see my parents, standing shoulder to shoulder beneath the halo of the driveway light, as a kind of insect, an eight-limbed parasite nibbling away at my thin store of winter wisdom.

And right now I have nothing left to give them.

Behind my parents the wind-buffeted eucalyptus toss their arms. Against this backdrop, Mason's peering face is a featureless void. Ginnie leans and kisses me quickly on the lips—and then suddenly so does my father.

Horribly embarrassed, I scramble into the cab.

The driver is fat, and blowing his nose. Mason comes to the open passenger window and grips the sill as if to keep me from leaving. "Tell me," he whispers hoarsely, "do you really think I should start painting again?"

I wince and glance at the driver. In the seat behind, in the passenger section, an old man is scrunched in the corner and I wonder who he is, another fare? The driver is a heavy-set teenager who looks younger than me. His concession to uniform is a greasy yellow bus-driver's hat shoved as far back as gravity will permit and he turns from eyeing the old man in the rearview to gaze unabashedly at this poignant farewell scene.

"Tell me!" Mason pleads, reaching in and clutching me. With his damp-riddled scraggly white hair, he looks suddenly old and ill and I turn away—fog is sifting through the hills, cold long fingers of gray that erase the landscape like some invisible Artist deciding it might be better to give up and just start all over again. Blobs of water spittle the windshield. My mother stands behind dad, figure shivering in the bathrobe clutched around her body. Her breath hangs in the air and her eyes are black lacunae—and for a moment it is she who is the Erasing God. "Do you really think I should? Tell me!" dad clutches at me again

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That's Saturday night.

The next evening, Christmas Day, I leave. Mom tries to dissuade me, begging me to remain at least till Monday. Because despite my poor showing at last night's dinner, she senses I have something to share, and she's been trying all day to elicit it. Finally she brings out the strange letter they received from me, with blanks in it like wartime censorship, and wonders if I was ill. I say nothing. Because there really is nothing left to say, is there.

So that Sunday evening, as I sling my battered backpack into the trunk of an idling taxi, my parents come out to stand at the edge of the driveway and say good-bye. I refuse to allow them to drive me to the



as his voice rises in anguish, “You’ve got to tell me because you’re my son and I love you!”

Oh, they’re all mad, mad, mad! I jerk away from the open window and mumble something and crank the window up and the fat boy at the wheel knocks his hat forward, slaps the meter and guns the sedan into the street. “Where to, bud?”

I mutter the airport. Behind me, the old man has a clear polyethylene slicker clutched around himself like a shower curtain, and he’s sitting crunched into the far corner.

“My fah-thah,” the driver explains in what I recognize as the sort of accent I might encounter on any portion of the New York underground. “Don’t mind, do yah? He gets lonesome, I gotta woik nights.”

“What’s this? What’s this?” the old man whines from the rear seat.

“*Shaddup* I tole ya!” the kid yells with startling vehemence.

Satisfied, the old man subsides.

Away from my parents, I look at the driver with fresh new eyes. He has a plump good-natured salt-of-the-earth kind of face but he also has a weird sort of tan—or else it’s dirt. He’s wearing an NYU *School of Arts & Sciences* sweatshirt beneath an unzipped grimy police windbreaker; I wonder if he really attended, or just got the sweatshirt from a thrift store.

Away from my parents though, a sort of emotional equilibrium is returning. Thank God; I made it through the ordeal. On my own terms. Now I’m returning to the university. A place where intellectual enterprise and original thought is valued. Very highly valued, I might add.

“I was just saying good-bye to my parents,” I feel the sudden urge to explain.

“Hyah,” the driver grunts like he’s guiding a stagecoach. The old man skitters in the back and the driver twists his neck and bellows “SHADDUP!” about two inches from my ear and I jump. The old man peers happily at his reflection in the side window.

Outside it’s dark, but we are coming to the airport now. Little by little pleasant suburban houses change aspect and become angular, their windows barred, their exteriors lit with the brutal glow of high-wattage security lights. We’re approaching San Jose and I don’t want to think about the kind of people who have to live in this particular world. People who’ve probably never heard of Tolstoy or Turgenev, yet are serfs just the same. We pass a clump of blacks clotted dangerously outside a wire-mesh liquor store, doors flung brightly open for Christmas, and I wonder if there’s been a holdup. How did Plato describe it? All of human perception mere flickers on the wall of a cave? Jumping a red light, the driver pulls out a tan cigarillo and I smell tobacco and dead cherries. The driver spits a brown glob out his window; he hasn’t even bothered to light it. I shiver and stare out my own window. Salt of the earth. We pause at another red light and beside us is a blank gray building that looks like an abandoned warehouse, its lights on ultrabright as if to prove there’s nothing inside worth stealing. We pulse forward again and pass a tall razor-wire fence behind which convalescent buses are slowly expiring of rust on flat rubber tires. Sodium low-pressure lights turn everything golden weird. Another red light; it’s my night for red lights isn’t it, and a blinking neon sign flashes the orange image of a running-away dog caught midstride and getting nowhere fast—outside the steel security door of the Greyhound station what looks to be the same group of blacks is passing around what they’ve stolen from the liquor store. The window of the bus station exposes a bulky-hipped Mexican woman asleep on the concrete floor as her diapered child tries to break into a padlocked cigarette machine. At the far end of a chained gang of pink plastic chairs a well-dressed matronly woman clutches a small leather purse to her chest as she warily watches the child. Fixing upon her, I see with a jolt a reflection of my own empty heartsickness. I’m leaving my family again for that asteroid named New York; the question is, Why? At this moment I want nothing more than to be out of the cab and back home in the bed I used to have as a child. Arguments about art and vague



feelings of entrapment seem a very small price to pay. I'm beginning to realize maybe I do not understand this world after all, and it certainly does not seem to care anything for me. Staring through the Greyhound window as we wait for the light to turn green, I am suddenly terrified the matronly woman will look up and spot me, demand I show her the way out of this mess. My God, I squeeze my eyes shut, am I responsible for *everyone's* parents? The sedan jerks forward and the kid finally lights his tiparillo; I sneak a peek in the sideview mirror at the well-dressed frightened lady, watching until I can't see her anymore and then turn to stare ahead at the expressway lights, the neon colors of the rainbow blending together in the wet surface of the road like some crazy artist's palette. Abruptly the taxi jars to a halt; we have arrived at the airport. I sit in the front seat a moment without moving, gazing with painful lucidity at the jostling impatient mass of holiday travelers, the thrusting arterial traffic swerving frantically in both directions — past and future. In that instant a flash of transportation sweeps over me and I realize I do love my parents — My God, I *do* love you! — and sitting here I reconsider with a suffocating awareness my own adolescent foolishness, and looming entrance into my parents' world of pain, and responsibility, and redemption.

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