

DOGGEDNESS

Jerry, what did you do in your childhood?
Nothing.

The time may have come to write about talent and attainment at 44 Elm, a household whose genius was denied by no one in the neighborhood of the aqueduct and dump, over which it had a feudal grip. I would like a title with some charm, so will not choose *Tension Capacity*. Instead I may call it after Jerry's old dog, Chick, known to him as *Dogbreath*. (Our dogs were not generally talented, but one—an earlier Chick—appearing in a photograph in a man's felt hat, does have a cinematic look, a look of Cary Grant as a dog.)

Origins of attainment are known to be mysterious, never more so than at 44 Elm. Mine began when I started a collection of paper match-box covers from pawnbrokers, Chicago hotels, speakeasies and fan-dancers, these given to my father by a Necco company salesman. (His name, Ted says, was "Pants" Fayette). Put to bed ever earlier, I sorted them according to color, beauty, and rarity. (Otherwise I stared at the curtain selvage, which had a printed acorn on it.) The taboo which kept me in bed was genuine and must be counted as one of my mother's early achievements. No punishment was mentioned. I simply was unable to cross the boundary between bed and floor.

Ted's talents had their origin in our wastebaskets. What did he seek—and what does he seek? Will he know when the quest is won? Will there be an omen in the *Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, or *Nature*?—heavenly significations most likely found in the last. As we are related, I wonder if what he sought was akin to what I searched for in the Dump—a grail. (Or perhaps cancelled checks, which at that time had mysterious perforations like round moth holes. We could make checks on the sewing machine, but the wandering paper gave them off-hand, non-fiduciary shapes, never included in his treatise, *Modern Banking Forms*.)

Red did not reveal his hopes, but we always remember that he is the only one of us to have danced with Sylvia Plath. Both he and Ted asked many questions—said to be an early sign of genius—and Red's questions today, subtle and sudden, stun the interrogee into an ill-considered response in which there may be useful information. I never asked questions, relying instead on Revelation, a great orb with bright rings of certainty, to appear in the night sky, augury of what I would find at the Dump. (I see that as the Dump increasingly commands my consciousness, I capitalize it.) Jerry too depended on revelation, in his case not so much night visions as day ones. About this he says, “I had fixed parameters based on: 1. Usually nothing happened. 2. If something happened, I would not be included. 3. Billy Henderson would not be allowed to go to the movies.”

The caliph of 44 Elm attainment (vizir of carpet-sweeper slave-eunuchs) was my mother; the demiurge, my grandmother Warren. It was my grandmother who had me write to Peggy Ann Hoover to tell her that my name also was Peggy Ann. Peggy Ann Hoover did not reply to say that she was glad. She probably was as deeply sorry about it as I. One cannot rise to greatness with this name—as Peggy Ann d'Arc or Peggy Ann Hari.

Grandmother Warren also was pleased that Ted was born on Lincoln's birthday. If Lincoln had been alive, Ted would have had to write him a letter. Early on, the craggy face and honest image entered Ted's small-child's soul, and the stark contrast between the great president and his own knobby-kneed self became a matter for self-doubt and occasional ferocity. I believe that Lincoln still inhabits Ted's psyche, an abstracted manner and compassion evidence of the possession.

Grandmother lived to be ninety-two, as it was always evident that she would, so we knew her well, especially I who have inherited her nature, in particular her exaggerated love of heroes. Her heroes were those of 1933—Franklin Roosevelt, Bernard Baruch, and Felix Frankfurter—and the more they were vilified, the greater was her veneration. Her love of achievement is not

surprising as, when she was a child, her father and brother went off to Peru to help John Meiggs, her father's brother-in-law, build the railway over the Andes. They died there of yellow fever (Bob went to their graves when he was in Lima), but her fatherless youth was spent in the company of Meiggs and of Keiths (founders of United Fruit), achievers all.

My own hero-worship seems more erratic. It began with Clara Bow and jumped directly to Einstein. It does not seem to matter that I cannot understand relativity theory. I like to think about it anyway, particularly Special Relativity which has such a feverish mode, buildings flattening as trams pass, only the barrier of the speed of light warding off cataclysmic disaster— infinite flatness. (It is very like a fever dream.) And I like the shock when the strange dynamics are felt to be real.

My grandmother's heroes (she had no heroines) were often those of literature, and David Copperfield was a favorite. Orphaned, disaster-prone, eager, and innocent, he had all the qualities that she felt we lacked. For those who do not particularly adore heroes, I should say that they soon become a different reality. I am still Jean Harlow, Janet Gaynor, Clara Bow, and Fay Wray. I generally have platinum-blonde marcelled hair and wear iridescent kid shoes with silver-lamé evening dresses of preternatural slimness and length. My metallic person shines upon the Silver Screen.

My mother, was, as I have said, the caliph of accomplishment, the ibn-al-Ahmar of effort. (In Arabic the *Mahdi*—she was called Mardie—is, Ted tells me, “the right guided one who will return...to refresh the faithful and restore their sense of purpose.”) Upstairs in our shingled and wisteria-covered Alhambra, she lay on her mahogany day-bed, bracelets sliding on her arms, beautiful legs extended, smoking, telephoning and supervising. (The telephone calls were from all the friends that she felt she never had.) She heartily disliked the telephone and when it rang would, as if about to go on stage, summon every dramatic wile—and the joyous response could in no way be distinguished from the real thing.

This was partly because in a strange way it was the real thing—the response of another persona.

Images of my mother shift and change. Sometimes she is El Cid (whose dead body led troops into battle) and sometimes just the beautiful Arethusa, but medieval Spain does seem the right setting—vassals, thrall, chivalric expectations, love songs, swift and sure punishment, emblematic towels, and intrusion of Visigothic clergy. On Elm Street we had no rival in household activity, except perhaps the Briggs who lived next door. The mother of that family, Eleanor, was a woman of intelligence, perfect gentility and kindness (who deserved less sadness in her life than she had), and she kept up a level of family achievement that at least rivaled ours. She had so little vanity that she wore tattered reminder notes pinned to her person. (Whether or not the Briggs' dogs compared with ours is another question. Jerry says that Penty was not a class dog.)

Her husband, Henry, taught us to ski on the hill above his henhouse, where the chances of running into the henhouse were much greater than of missing it. (He also kindly took us in 1934 to Pinkham Notch, New Hampshire, where there was a primitive rope tow, probably the first in the U.S.). Beyond the henhouse, over the slope of the aqueduct, was an even steeper hill that ended in a stream. With enough momentum and bravery, one could go all the way down and end in the stream. We hoped to excel in skiing, and I, at least, could never understand why I did not.

In a small alcove behind the kitchen Eleanor Briggs each Thursday called S. S. Pierce to order groceries. This store, founded in 1831, made an early reputation in Boston when it sent dogsleds to bring back Russian isinglass, used to make jelly. It stood just opposite the Public Library and was not too far from Symphony Hall, institutions from which, in the Boston mind, it was barely distinguishable. It sold its own canned buffalo tongues and terrapin (these, needless to say, never served at 44 Elm) and other acceptable products.

Commercial products in Boston, like everything else, stood in low or high social esteem, and everyone was finely attuned to this. We kept up a high standard of product acceptability, using Ivory soap and S. S. Pierce household ammonia, and drinking Hood's milk, until my father bought a Crosley, a car in which he seemed to be making a moon landing. (Although my father did not toe the line in social matters, he never went so far as Bob, who once appeared on a Nantucket tennis court wearing a powder-blue terry-cloth hat and smoking a pipe.)

Ted's bedroom, wherever it was (it changed frequently as part of the Idea of Progress), always had a framed photograph of Lincoln, perhaps the Gettysburg Address as well. But his progress towards becoming Lincoln was slowed by a terrible phenomenon, Teddy Latham, the schoolyard bully. I remember Teddy Latham—he had faded, protuberant eyes and wolf teeth. He lived close to the school so could get up early, lie in wait for Ted, and beat him up before the day had even begun. Had we known about this, we (there were nineteen children in our neighborhood) could have taken care of him—pushed him off a roof or sent him a decayed fish treated with ichthyol, argerol and glycothymol. But Ted didn't tell, part of his code of honor, so he was left to face the terror alone. Finally he stopped going to school and went to construction sites instead, which further slowed his progress.

Ted's vengeance has no doubt been life-long, but just then he turned his attention to ballistics and explosives. The ingredients of explosives could always be found in *Popular Mechanics* (they were the "popular" part)—one-third sulphur, one-third potassium nitrate and the rest charcoal. He got these at separate drug stores so as not to arouse suspicion. Then all he had to do was to cap a pipe, tamp down the explosive, fill it with "nails and stuff," drill a hole for the fuse, and go to the sandpit to blow it up. The blast, he says, sent nails up into the trees.

Below us in the aqueduct lived a family named Standish. With the help of a highly intelligent friend, Donald Henderson, Ted made a catapult out of a car-tire inner tube, capable of launching an

entire bushel basket of rotten apples onto the Standishes' roof. I don't think he had anything against the Standishes—they simply lived below us—but after I challenged Dinny Standish, their son, to swallow a live goldfish, which he did (this was a fashion of the time—many people were swallowing live goldfish), the Standishes probably wished they lived somewhere else.

While Ted was perfecting these talents, I was “playing house,” something I have not since done with the same enthusiasm. To play house all one needs is a space, and spaces are everywhere, under tables, in closets, in trees, and in henhouses. At Forest Street our sand box had a canvas cover for rain, and we played under the cover, very dark, airless, and horizontal—*Flatland*. Under a turned-over Carleton Island rocking chair, with light filtering through a steamer-rug cover, one comes to know the full meaning of *interior*. One could play alone assuming all roles, but it was better with a friend and some smaller children. I was always the mother, so my friend Bev Pratt had to be the father. The small children never stayed long, probably because the scenario was so boring—the father left for the office and in a few minutes was back for supper, and that was about it. But if the script offered no surprises, the refinement of our accents and sentence structure was worthy of Henry James—as, “Might you wish some tea?” Our ultimate house, however, was the Standishes’ garage, a perfect space whose room arrangement we could change from day to day with orange crates. No piece of furniture has more charm than an orange crate. It has shelves and generally a sticker with a color picture of an orange grove, and with bent spoons, deformed egg-beaters, and saucers from the Dump, it becomes a household vision. And the next day at the dump, one may find some other object of perfect domesticity, such as a rusted flashlight with its springs falling out.

Jerry and Red in the early thirties were small, beautiful, and appealing with matching overalls, berets, and sandals. My friends fought over who would come home with me each day to see my little brothers. Like lambs, they were kept in a pen near the garage—it must have been another taboo which kept them there.

Jerry now declares they got out using an orange crate, and as for the clothes he says, "We didn't know any better, and no truck drivers came along and shouted, *Hey, faggots, what you doing in those clothes?*" Once when Red had a boil on his knee Bev and I, who had an extensive supply of free samples—Ipana, Listerine, Nujol, Milk of Magnesia, Odorono, and Lifebuoy, decided to treat it with perhaps Ipana and Odorono.

The memorable drugs of the 1930's were Nujol, Cascara, Milk of Magnesia, Ex-Lax, and glycerine suppositories. The President should have declared *Bowel Day*. My mother, who cared for us tenderly when we were sick and brought us presents and ginger ale from the store, always when she discovered that we had a fever gave us an enema before putting us to bed. Chilled and shivering, we had to lie on the lavender bath mat, which did not entirely cover the icy tile floor, and submit to this unnatural process. And it now seems to me that I can remember in semi-delirium, my astral body rising up and hovering in pity over that on the bathmat.

But just when the genius of our neighborhood intimidation, appearances on the Silver Screen, and gathering of frog spawn from the Station Pond shone brightest, a dark cloud appeared over Wellesley: the arrival of the evangelical Oxford Group with its program of Moral Rearmament. My mother (not unaccustomed to falling) fell immediately under its spell, and as bracelets, love songs, duplicate bridge, and china-dog collections were not on the Moral Rearmament agenda, our life changed. My mother discovered that God had not made her for pleasure—this a surprise to everyone; and neither had He made us for pleasure—this a catastrophe. The great sword of Moral Rearmament was Endeavor, but of a kind to which we were unaccustomed—sober endeavor in serious realms such as character improvement, magnanimity, and confession. Confession took me most by surprise because up until then my life had been dedicated to Deception. I kept two diaries, one to impress all who read it, which was everyone, and another which told the truth. I always preferred the first because it told such a dazzling tale of social success. And I have continued always to have a distaste for the truth. Mother may also have thought that

my father should take up the Oxford Group cause, but this was so unthinkable that I imagine she never mentioned it to him.

So our life, previously devoted to dazzle, seemed briefly to lose its charm. Magnanimity was out of the question, and character improvement appealed to us only as regards one another. Red improved Jerry's character mercilessly, testing his endurance by transferring food onto his plate when he wasn't looking (I notice that he still does this, but his children have become vigilant), and Ted improved Jerry by giving him a kick when he thought of it. We decided that Ted needed discipline, so we locked him into a third-floor bathroom from the window of which he threw out so many rolls of toilet paper that the house looked like a giant maypole. Only Mother concentrated on her own character, reading tracts and *The Prophet*, and going to confession meetings in the homes of the rich and powerful—Moral Rearmament started at the top.

And now I come to *Tension Capacity*, a key concept of the Oxford Group which I have never entirely understood. It had, I think, to do with endurance and the seeking out of disagreeable challenges. It may not sound especially pernicious, but it was. In subsequent encounters with the Oxford Group I always felt that it might reach out and grab me, and Ted says that the challenge of *Tension Capacity* probably took him to the tundras of eastern Siberia where tens of thousands of deadly, giant mosquitos bit his bottom. Mother, he says, declared that you must suffer every few years to discover the meaning of your life.

In the summer of 1935 *Tension Capacity* reached its zenith. Dave Henry, a solemn young man who came to tutor us at Carleton, was much influenced and became even more solemn, reporting in a letter which my mother found in the wastebasket that we were idiots. In a fit of misapplied *Tension Capacity* zeal, I started building rafts. None of these floated, but neither did they sink, so I was to be seen floating uncannily about the bay, half-submerged, looking like a funerary figure moving toward the Isle of the Dead. Finally with some empty barrels (my original mistake

had been the ancient one of believing that things float because they are flat) I made a raft that floated and added a diving board. The diving board turned out to be too long; one went under water when standing on its end, so I sawed it off. In doing this I unexpectedly sawed myself off the end—even the Oxford Group might have thought that was carrying suffering too far. Dave Henry then and there decided not to marry me. The raft was part of a scheme to become an Olympic swimmer. My cousins Marjorie Williams and Mary Shick the summer before had swum to Cape Vincent—three miles. Once when crossing to Cape Vincent in a boat they had a fight, and Mary left Marjorie on a buoy where she rocked for several hours while Mary shopped leisurely in Cape Vincent.

The 1920's were a decade of artificial dogs, movie-star dogs, and dogs seen on diamante pins and in china-dog collections—chows, scotties, wolfhounds, and bull-dogs (the bull-dog possibly the most artificial animal known—not unlike Teddy Latham). But the 1930's were an era of real dogs. Dogs ruled, clearing the streets of cars by rushing under their wheels and barking, lying in decadent poses on front porches, and joining in all major sports—especially baseball, when they sat inconveniently close until the ball was hit, then rushed wildly about, barking and attacking the runners. My father in his love of dogs may have credited ours with greater talents than they possessed. When Chick attacked the delivery man from Jordan Marsh, sparing the man from R. H. Stearns, my father thought that showed good dog sense and social discrimination. When the postman came under attack, the Post Office, as far as I know, never complained, only sent a new postman who, as a stranger, was another proper object of attack. People were on the side of dogs, and one child on Croton Street came to believe that she was a dog and had to be taken to a psychologist. Chick was, my father said, a good bird dog, but he may have been more enthusiastic than keen; he was, in any case, a fine and innocent dog, his talents less deranged than ours—more middle of the road.

But what of real achievement? For me this was decidedly uphill. I did not, like Jerry, come home from kindergarten after recess, but when in school I scarcely knew what was taking place. What were the *Weekly Reader* and the sabre-toothed tiger to me? None of us had, I think, a very good idea of what school was. We could read, which was a blessing, but our school progress was erratic, our efforts devoted more to Dump activities.

Amongst strange physical effects there is one called Cerenkov radiation, a glow given off by superluminal events when they move, as they must, into the past. The endeavors of our childhood now have this dim glow, a blue phosphorescence, radiated by talent that, like my mother's cat face and Red's telephone answering-service, may or may not have the genius that I imagine.

All endeavor has its bad moments—like the strings we hung to hold stage curtains in the barn which always sagged so that the curtains wouldn't pull and the play couldn't start—but for every mischance, there is usually some undeserved success. As so many enterprises turn out strangely, I think it is kindest to judge achievement by the quality of the endeavor. Jerry and Mopey Hood, just before the war, decided to collect scrap metal from the Dump to sell and raise money for their club. Jerry isn't sure what the club was, but in Billy Henderson's German iron-wheeled cart (they had to cut Billy in because he had the cart) they hauled back lots of scrap and piled it in Mopey's driveway, and the junkman gave them \$5.10. Jerry remarks that probably it was the last load of scrap that went to Japan before the war.

1990