

IN RIGHT FIELD

"Life," my mother was fond of saying, "is not a one-way street,"¹ a moral verity which none of us could doubt, especially I who was generally to be found in its fast lane. Neither could we doubt the greater truth of her second favorite adage, known as *The Bad Seed*. "I am convinced," she would say, with a faraway look intended to convey that she meant no one in particular, "that some children are born bad."²

Badness began for me quite early when one evening, aged three, I filled a bathtub with water and put into it the entire contents of my mother's top bureau drawer. The result was spectacular—rivaling, I've always thought, the watery transcendence of lines from *The Tempest*,

*Of his bones are corals made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes.*

While the face powder floated on the surface like delicate peach algae, gathering about some beaded Indian baskets, the handkerchiefs became transparent and drifted half-submerged amongst hair nets and letters. Steel nail files lay glittering at the bottom, Houbigant boxes swelled, and pages of the *Reader's Digest* slowly opened like the gills of a sea creature. No subsequent badness has ever quite equalled this one.

A liking—hardly a strong enough word—for clothes is, for some in our family, original sin. Each year before leaving for Bermuda my mother would say, "Now dear, you will not go into the black leather trunk, will you?" I would say "no" but not even hear myself because this was exactly what I *would* do. The trunk contained remnants of dress materials not used by our dressmaker,

¹ Morally certain, dynamically unsound.

² Genetically certain, morally dubious.

odds and ends carefully rolled up and fastened with a common pin. These were, for me, of such surpassing beauty that I could not have resisted had I to pay with my life. The colors, textures, and patterns were so many and various that morality simply didn't enter into it. With them I would make doll's clothes of rare elegance.

This particular trait (fondness for clothes) I inherited from my mother. Just a short time before she died, and after she had lost a leg, she suggested that we go in to Brookline with Anne, her nurse, to look at fur coats. We went to Kakas, Bloomingdales, and other stores that I'm willing to forget, I trying on coats, Anne trying on coats, and Mother in her wheelchair trying on coats. After a few hours Anne and I were fairly tired, but not Mother. She suggested that we go on to Neiman Marcus, which we did, bringing back a few coats to consider at home. By now Anne and I were staggering with fatigue, but when I looked for Mother I found her standing on her one poor leg, trying on the coats! She was, I should add, when I was young and during the Depression when we had no money, always eager to see that I had new clothes. And finally at the time of my marriage she so insisted on my having a beautiful trousseau and wedding dress (\$35 at R.H. Stearns) that she and my father lost their charge account. This was such a humiliation that she would never again incur a debt, even a mortgage. And when she was quite old she telephoned especially to tell me that Neiman Marcus had written to *her* asking if she would like to open a charge account.

In kindergarten I was persuaded by a younger boy in our neighborhood—I can still remember his physique, skinny, and his name, Norman Crowther—to stop going to school. "It's simple," he said, "You just don't go," so we didn't for two weeks. Our parents were cross, but I can remember having not the slightest sense of wrong-doing. Going to school or not going to school, it was all the same.

Once Ted, my friend Monk Donald, and I filled my mother's washbasin with water, poured lighter fluid on top, and lit it.

Tremendous flames shot up with a great burst of hot, white light.
We were startled but not, I think, contrite.

Before I turn from the subject of sin, I should say that in our school there was a boy who, we told each other, was not expected to live to the age of twelve. Fortunately he was perfectly healthy and no doubt is alive today. But because we thought he was doomed, we went into his garden after dark and jacked up his playhouse. I hope that child psychologists would have something comforting and redeeming to say about this.

Children have no very great sense of morality nor, I think, of reality. And they do not often hear what is said to them. Once when Jeff was about five and had taken to climbing and falling out of trees, I became quite alarmed. "Jeff," I said, "when you climb trees stay close to the trunk and test the branches before you put your full weight on them." Jeff seemed to be staring into space in the particular way that he still stares into space, so I said, "Jeff, what did I say?" He hesitated, then said quite firmly, "You said that when I climbed trees, I shouldn't step on the leaves."

In an extraordinary book with an extraordinary title, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes describes a right-brained region of the mind in which the early Greeks waited for their gods to speak aloud and tell them what to do, a mode of experience for which he has invented the word "aptic." As I understand it, this is a mental space with no particular exigencies or consciousness where things cannot be found out, only revealed. I am fond of this word "aptic" and imagine, perhaps wrongly, that it describes the world of illogic and transmutation that I remember in childhood. One can get on, but rarely with a grasp of what is actual and crucial.

Take, for instance, the case of poisons. In my childhood nature itself was a source of uneasiness. Caterpillars, wild berries, acorns, sumac, and the ends of bananas were all deadly poison. Wild red currants that grew on Carleton Island were unimaginably poisonous. We sometimes mashed these up in drinks and thought

of offering them with other drinks made with watercolor to grownups who were sitting about sewing and chatting. (Bob says that in Iowa they made drinks with brick dust scraped from the side of the house.) Toadstools were instant death, and inside golf balls (not quite a product of nature) there was a small, black-rubber core that contained dynamite. We unwound the yards of golf-ball elastic until we came to the core. Then we stared, almost irresistibly drawn to pounding it with a hammer. Death was ever present.

Consider also the possibility that my small brothers might have fallen off the second-floor balcony. Only my evening prayer, said once but repeated if any word was out of order, kept them safe. They are alive today thanks to me.

Consider, too, learning difficulties that one may have. Mine were with German, although not only with German. When our teacher, Frau Fein, told me that certain nouns were in the third declension I could not seem to listen. I think my haplessness gratified her teutonic nature, and our relationship became a sort of syndrome. My friends tried to help and advised me to learn the second declension in the kitchen, associating it with the refrigerator, and the third declension in the pantry, associating it with, for instance, a disconnected gas fixture. I tried this, but generally remembered just the gas fixture. I still remember the gas fixture—the image is eidetic. When some years later we moved to the German-speaking part of Switzerland I found that some grammar had lodged in my subconscious and I could speak haltingly. I did not regard this as a vindication of Frau Fein's teaching. It seemed more like vengeance.

Jaynes believes that after the Age of Homer the Greeks began to quit the apic region and learned to function with the verbal and rational left brain-hemisphere, although many people even today linger on in their right brain. These are likely to include women, poets and, as an extreme case, schizophrenics. They may hallucinate, be taken with sudden inspiration, or hear voices that speak aloud. As someone who finds it difficult to escape right-

brain modes of thought, I should observe that they also fail to assess situations, persist with futile projects, and wait for something to happen to them—or suddenly do something outrageous to test reality. While I do not hear voices speaking aloud, there is a voice in my head that calls me “Peggy Ann” and never has anything good to say.

My favorite right-brained vision was one had by my son Jeff when he was four and we were living in Switzerland. He dreamt that he lay under the earth and was pulling down the flowers. My niece, Lisa, used to think that midget rapists were to be found in dry cleaners’ bags.

Twelve always seemed to me to be a token age when fear and confusion would disappear, but when I reached twelve, perhaps because my expectations were too high, I got instead what were called tics. These, it was said, might become Saint Vitus Dance if I didn’t go to bed early. The symptoms were a sense that my shoulders were not at the same level, making it necessary to raise or lower one or the other of them continuously. I also had an involuntary wink that greatly embarrassed me on buses when other people thought they had to wink back. My poor mother put me to bed earlier and earlier—Ted says that anyway we were put to bed an hour earlier each year—and finally this cure was successful.

But twelve was a wash-out in other respects, especially when I did not, like the Little Colonel, go to balls and become the center of attention. I went, on the contrary, to a local dancing school where boys in heavy serge suits and clammy white gloves pushed one about in what was known as a waltz because it made a perfect, unvarying square. The dancing mistress slunk round in a Tom Wolfe “pimp roll,” and at the start of each dreadful dance she would clap her hands and say, “Now, I don’t want anyone to dance until every girl has been chosen.” The boys had to obey, and every girl sitting by the wall wished she was dead.

So twelve was not much, and neither was thirteen. The only things that got me through this dreadful era were my school and my wonderful friends Pin, Dennen, Nat, Crocker, and Monk (Charlotte Donald—who, I must add, is descended from the Head Gardener at Hampton Court Palace).

Monk lived in Weston, about a mile from me, and I felt that she really understood life. In the early spring when the water was still icy cold, we went to all the nearby ponds and jumped in. We went off the high ski jump at Brae Burn. We played strip poker in a tall tree by her house, dropping our garments to the ground as we lost. We intended to roller skate home from Winsor on Route 9 but were stopped by the school authorities just as we started, and we drove with our heads out the car window to try to make our voices hoarse like Jean Arthur's. We knew a special language which no one else could understand, in which the University of California became the Yegunegavegarsegategiega egof Kegalegafegornegiega, and at Monk's grandmother's house in Barnstead, New Hampshire, we found old, round, crystal clocks which we used for determining which of us could read faster all the titles on the cover of the *Reader's Digest*. Often we played golf at the Wellesley Country Club, starting on the sixth hole because we didn't belong. (My father's friends, all members, were fond of saying to him, "Well, Gorham, we saw your daughter playing golf at the club today.")

We had just one falling out. I declared that I had seen a teacher from Winsor at a Rhode Island beachclub sunbathing in the nude, which I had, and this she, not without reason, refused to believe. So great was the injustice of her disbelief that I burst into tears.

Much later, after we both were married and when I lived in London and Monk in Norway, I called her after a year in which everyone in my family had been in one London hospital or another (St. Mary Abbott's, the Children's Hospital, Guy's, University College, and the London Clinic) and asked her to rescue me. She came immediately with her daughter Lise and her son Christian, and with Mark we all drove off to Wales in a rented car. We went

all the way up the new M1 with the emergency brake on, this by mistake, but we were surely the first car on that road to do it. We let Christian, aged possibly eight, drive the car on the beaches, and we never looked behind us when leaving hotel rooms, with the sure result that we left a lot of things including Christian's comb, so he no longer had to comb his hair. When we got back to London we all felt so revived and happy that Lise almost got run over.

In a memoir one should, I suppose, describe one's own character, but I scarcely knew this. The voice which I've mentioned did tell me that I was not doing well in Algebra and was too eager for fun. My report cards said that I should do better, and I would have liked to but didn't know how. My grasp of reality was too uncertain. Algebra was one example, and maps were another. We were required to draw on blank maps of Europe the routes taken by the invading Huns, Vandals, Goths and Visigoths, name the rivers they crossed, and follow them over the Alps—already indicated on the maps by a series of black worms. We had also to identify the countries into which they went. All of us were very taken with these barbarian hordes, sweeping out of Mongolia with battle cries, fast horses, and fur hats, but we liked less the rivers and countries. If you will note the courses of the Vistula, Danube, Dneiper and Volga, you will understand. I was really eager to succeed, and while the maps started off well, they ended badly. Some years ago when we were in Budapest, I felt a strong sense of familiarity and nostalgia when I saw the equestrian statue of Arpad, the Magyar hero. He had a wild, spiritual look and a hawk on his shoulder, or perhaps his head.

One cannot, I hope, say that I was stupid, but it was a close call. I was too often what my father called "out in left field"—in my case, he must have meant right. In the aptic region of my mind things were not definite, and accuracy was a chimera, which seemed usually to veer off, vanish, or just lead to a very bad mistake. When letters from the school said that I was not working as well as I was able, I secretly knew that I was. Fortunately in my last years at school such matters as the Diet of Worms and the Nailing of the Theses to the Door seemed to take a definite form.

This I owed to teachers at Winsor who never lost hope. There were still bad moments when I seemed to drift backwards, but these I'll forget.

About the Winsor School: It is located on the Fenway in Boston, and after fifty years' absence I still know the school and its region intimately. I could, like one of the dead, find my way from Pilgrim Road to the second floor of a Harvard Medical School building where foetuses were kept in jars, or to the Fine Arts Museum rooms where the Egyptian mummies lay, turquoise in their eye sockets—or so I remember it. Like an initiate, I could go straight to an upper floor of the Gardiner Museum, then called Mrs. Jack Gardiner's Palace, where—over a quite common table—Titian's *Europa* is hung. We knew at an early age that this was a painting of perfect carnality. And I know where, amongst the reeds of Muddy River, there are small, transparent tadpoles whose entire life-support systems beat and pulse in plain sight.

I was sent to Winsor because, to everyone's chagrin, I had failed in fifth grade to pass the Rapid Promotion Test which allowed competent students to skip sixth grade. Just at that time my mother met Valeria Knapp, a Winsor teacher (later its Head), on a street in Boston. They had both belonged to a childhood club in West Newton, called The Seven Little Sisters. Valeria suggested that I come to Winsor, and this I did, despite the 1929 stock-market crash.

Coming to Winsor from public school was for me like coming out of the dark, and I never think of it without a sense of the marvelous. It is strange, I've always thought, that there was more public optimism during the worst of the Depression than I remember since. Initially there was panic, followed for the unemployed by humiliation and fear, but strangely the public mood was optimistic, largely because of Roosevelt. He willed the country to recover, and sometimes it nearly did. I think Winsor shared this optimism. Children could be well taught, and learning could redeem mankind.

What I remember from the first day and through all eight years is a moving, illuminated scrim, so brightly lit as to dazzle, and on it—lepers, martyrs, heretics, tyrants, stylites, plague, pilgrimage, crusade, voyage, intrigue, relics, debauchery—

*The guests remained at the table for five hours.
The meal included spiced elk brains, cocks with ginger....*

—treason, pillage, conspiracy, and madness. And I don't forget Ivan the Terrible. So fearsome were his atrocities and so great his religiosity that they were almost the same thing. On capturing Astrakan he methodically massacred its Tartar inhabitants, excepting only a few whom he baptised.

A required European history course that I had at college seemed different. Political stability, the Age of Reason, and rising democracy had replaced what I remembered from Winsor, and they did not have the same awful charm.

And I remember Grendel. When Beowulf,

*the best of kings, saw
Huge stone arches and felt the heat
Of the dragon's breath flooding down
Through the hidden entrance, too hot for anyone
To stand, a streaming current of fire ...*

*And the Geats'
Lord and leader, angry lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear.*

V. S. Pritchett, an English writer, has said, "There is no more well trained snob than a Boston snob." He doesn't explain how he knows this, and I think what he recognizes may rather be self-

congratulation. Except for some unimportant embarrassments and scandals, Boston in my childhood was considered perfect by those who lived there—and by everyone else. There were small alarms, as when the mother of one of our friends posed for a Camel cigarette ad (she was stunningly sophisticated in the photograph, with smoke curling about her bobbed red hair), or when Mayor James Curley, arrested for embezzlement, continued to govern from the city jail, but so trivial were these that not many people noticed. Wellesley, where I lived, was less perfect than Boston, and Utica, New York, where I was born was not at all perfect—it was imperfect. I always regarded it as a flawed start. The rest of the United States was a large space with Hollywood at its outer edge.

It must be said, however, that until I was ten I had never really heard of Boston. Except for trips to North Station to take the night pullman to Carleton Island and some visits to the Vendome Hotel to see my grandmother, we never went to Boston. I knew only Wellesley, its woods, ponds, and railway stations—three in Wellesley, like stone cottages along the tracks. I knew also the dump, the public library, and the Sunday School—held in a deep basement, an underworld of Episcopal desuetude, with barren rooms and faded pictures of Jesus. (I seem never to forgive this Sunday School its cold concrete floors.)

So on coming to school in Boston I was still apically at the Wellesley Hills dump discovering bright objects and was not for some time conscious of the existential rightness of Boston—and I still may not have mastered this. One must be born in Boston and early breathe Boston air to appreciate its wonderful feudalism. I would say to V. S. Pritchett that “snob” is too frivolous a word to use in Boston.

While my grasp of social matters was weak, my appreciation of the crucial nature of clothes was instant, and it was not long before I could recognize any solecism of dress, such as not wearing silk stockings and sneakers on Friday. On Friday one was likely to be invited out and want after school to wear high heels and silk stockings—high heels were not, by the way, sold at ordinary

Boston shoe stores like Thayer MacNeil, although this store did have a perilous x-ray machine in which children looked at the skeletons of their feet. Neither were high heels allowed at school, so on Friday the solution was to wear high heels to school, take them off in the coatroom, and put on sneakers. If one was not invited somewhere after school, one wore silk stockings and sneakers anyway so as not to be discovered uninvited. This all ended by a fashion for silk stockings and sneakers *every* day. My mother often asked why I was wearing sneakers with silk stockings and I could, needless to say, not explain.

Another fashion was to wear blue jeans for skiing and particularly not to tuck them into one's boots. When we fell, the snow got inside our socks and went down to freeze our feet—it also went through the jeans together with any icy wind—but the fashion was not abandoned. Fashion does not, of course, need a rationale, but I think we liked jeans because it was important always to seem casual—it was more important than anything else we could think of. The word "tony" represented perfect casualness—I think because it was the first name of the Austrian skier, Tony Matt, and the word "tweedy" represented qualified success. When first I went skiing in Switzerland there was a fashionable woman in a chic outfit waiting to ski down the mountain. I thought to myself that she could not possibly also know how to ski and discovered my error when she shot down the hill like a rocket.

I was, if possible, even more discriminating when it came to men's clothes and did not forgive the smallest deviation from acceptable—in Boston—dress. For either sex the crucial thing was not to appear to have thought at all about what one had on, and this required some study. Bob says that when he came to Harvard from Council Bluffs he had a gabardine jacket, which sounds perfect—but—it was double-breasted! As he says, not only was he in a minority in Cambridge but so were his clothes.

While living in London I had a neighbor who had also gone to Winsor. Her mother, she said, was immensely sophisticated and

bought her clothes in Paris. One day her mother came to Wednesday assembly wearing a Parisian hat—a cloche—and a boa. When another girl said, "WHO is that?" my friend, without a moment's hesitation, replied, "I haven't the slightest idea."

This account has not contained as much badness as I expected, and I've been trying to think of some. I do remember that once, on the evening I was supposed to go to an Eliot Hall (a dance series run by Miss Souther, powerful social arbiter and former basketball coach), I found that I had a high fever. But I went, and afterwards at midnight went coasting in my evening clothes. The next day I was cured. I seem to remember others' badness better than my own. Perhaps this is significant. Once my dear friend Barbara Briggs was tempted to take a candy bar from Miss West's drug store. This is surprising, as she had an allowance of ten cents a week that went up by a penny a year. In any case, Miss West discovered her and called Mrs. Briggs. Mrs. Briggs, a saintly woman, was shocked and told Barbara that she would have to give her entire allowance each week for a year to the Friends of Foreign Missions. When I last saw Barbara she said that she still has requests for contributions from the Friends of Foreign Missions. My greatest struggle with my mother was over the matter of my untidy room. There were many threatened punishments, all carried out, but I still didn't pick up my room. I couldn't—it was just not in my realm of activity.

The only other sin that I can bring myself to remember is taking bribes for kisses in fourth grade. So perhaps one should say that while some children are born bad, others are not born as bad as they have often wished.

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