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My Lives

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Extract

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My Shrinks

In the mid-1950s, when I was fourteen or fifteen, I told my mother I was homosexual: that was the word, back then, *homosexual*, in its full satanic majesty, cloaked in ether fumes, a combination of evil and sickness.

Of course I'd learned the word from her. She was a psychologist. Throughout my early childhood, she'd been studying part-time for a master's degree in child psychology. Since I was not only her son but also her best friend, she confided everything she was learning about me – her live-in guinea pig – to me. For instance, I was enrolled in an 'experimental' kindergarten run by Dr. Arlett, my mother's mentor in the department of child psychology at the University of Cincinnati. Dr. Arlett, however, decided after just one semester that I was 'too altruistic' to continue in the school. I was dismissed. I suspect that she meant I was weirdly responsive to the moods of the female teachers-in-training, for whom I manifested a sugary, fake concern, just as I'd learned to do with my mother. No doubt I was judged to be an unhealthy influence on the other kids. But my mother, who chose against all evidence to interpret my vices as virtues, my defeats as victories, decided that what Dr. Arlett really meant was that I was too advanced spiritually, too mature, to hang back in the shallows with my coevals.

My reward was a return to loneliness. We lived at the end of a lane in a small, rented Tudor house. My older sister, who disliked me, was attending Miss Daugherty's School for Girls; she sometimes brought friends home, but she didn't let them play with me. I played alone – or talked to my mother when she wasn't at school or studying.

My mother was intensely spiritual; at least she spoke often of her inner life and said she prayed, though I never saw her pray. She'd been brought up a Baptist in Texas, but she'd converted to Christian Science, initially to please my father but later out of a genuine affinity with the thinking of Mary Baker Eddy. Like Mrs. Eddy, my mother denied the existence of evil (except as it was embodied by my father's mistress) and believed in thinking mightily positive thoughts. She had a pantheistic, nearly Hindu conviction that every living creature was sacred and God a wave cresting out of, then dissolving back into, Universal Mind. When my mother was distraught, which occurred on a daily basis, she found consolation in bourbon and Eddy's *Science and Health* and *Key to the Scriptures*. My mother dismissed Mrs. Eddy's hostility to medicine as an ideal beyond our grasp given our current state of imperfect evolution.

She also detected signs in me of a great soul and highly advanced spirituality.

When I was seven my parents divorced. It was a good thing Mom had taken that degree in psychology because now, at age forty-five, she had to go to work to supplement her meager alimony. She labored long hours for low pay as a state psychologist in Illinois and Texas, and later in Illinois again, administering IQ tests to hundreds of grade-school students and even 'projective' tests (the Rorschach, the House-Tree-Person) to children suspected of being 'disturbed.'

True to my status as guinea pig, I was tested frequently. She who was so often overwrought at home, given to rages or fits of weeping, would become strangely calm and professional when administering a test. Her hands would make smoothing gestures, as though the lamplit table between us were that very sea of mind that needed to be stilled back into universality. Her voice was lowered and given a storytelling sweetness ('Now, Eddie, could you tell me everything you see in this inkblot?'). I, too, was transformed when tested, but toward anxiety, since a psychological test was like an X-ray or a blood test, likely to reveal a lurking disease: hostility, perversion or craziness or, even worse, a low intelligence.

I must have been eight when my mother gave me my first

Rorschach, for it was during our last summer at our big, rambling vacation house on Mullet Lake, Michigan, which our newly imposed poverty made her sell for the disappointing sum of fourteen thousand dollars. I think she wanted to impress me, or herself, with how well she could separate out the scientific precision of administering a professional test from the messy, emotional squalor of our everyday life.

She wrote down everything I saw in each plate and exactly where in each inkblot I detected a tomb or a diamond. She then went off for a few hours and consulted her thick dark-blue-bound manual of interpretation with its burgundy label. I was afraid of the results, as absolute and inarguable in their objectivity as they were mysterious in their encoding and decoding.

My mother was nearly gleeful when she told me I was a 'borderline psychotic' with 'strong schizophrenic tendencies.' Apparently the most telling sign of my insanity was my failure to see anything human in the inkblots. All I saw were jewels and headstones.

What remained unclear was whether I was inevitably sliding over the frontier toward full-blown psychosis or whether the process was reversible. Did the Rorschach lay bare my essence or my becoming? Was I becoming better or worse?

In fourth grade, no matter how mentally ill I might have been, I continued to get good grades in every subject except arithmetic (we moved too often for me to be able to follow a coherent sequence of math courses). Perhaps the only public sign of craziness was my obsession with playing a king on stage. In third grade, in Dallas, I wrote and starred in *The Blue Bird*, a script I'd plagiarized from Maeterlinck (my first piece of writing was a plagiarism). My mother rented a gold, bejeweled crown, a blue velvet doublet and white knee breeches from a costume shop.

When I was eleven, we lived for a year in the Faust Hotel in Rockford, Illinois, a grim industrial town where my mother worked as a state psychologist. For some reason she decided that the local state schools were good enough for my sister but not for me, a decision my sister bitterly resented. I was sent to Keith Country Day, where the classes were small – no more than fourteen students. One of my friends was Arnold Rheingold, perhaps the first Jew I'd ever met. His father was a psychiatrist. When I dined at

Arnold's house I was impressed by the deference paid to their son by his parents just because he was a boy. And I was awed by the father, the first man I'd ever met who read books and sought out new ideas rather than preaching familiar ones. That he had migraines and had to nurse them in his darkened study after dinner struck me as the possible and certainly glamorous price he had to pay for living the life of the mind.

A while later I wrote a play, *The Death of Hector*, in which I starred as the tragic hero; my best friend, a handsome jock, played the nearly silent, sadistic role of Achilles, who killed me and then, in a radical departure from classical tradition, mourned me with noisy, wordless wailing before, rather illogically, setting off to desecrate my corpse by dragging it around the walls of Troy behind his chariot (offstage action seen and reported by a leaden, talentless Chorus, a chubby girl I knew and liked). It was a headily passionate range of emotions to assign to my blond, vacant-eyed Achilles who, in real life, seemed mainly baffled by me to the point of sheepishness. I could make him hang his beautiful, blond head and blush.

When I played with my two girl cousins in Texas or later with friends in Ohio or Illinois, I always had a single game in mind: king and slave. Like Jean Genet's lunatic servants in *The Maids*, I didn't much care which role I played so long as the drama of domination and submission got properly performed. There wasn't much to this pathetically static 'game' beyond procession and coronation for the king and bowing or even kneeling for the slaves. When my cousins Sue and Jean started giggling and became distracted, I redubbed them queens and ordered them to make the solemn entrance. I bowed obsequiously with a grand salaam designed as a silent reproach to their insufficient servitude. I hoped they'd catch on, though they could never quite grasp the grandeur of the ceremony.

In sixth grade in Evanston, Illinois, I played a weak, nearly hysterical King Charles to a tomboyish Saint Joan, acted by my pal Anne Miner who had a thrillingly husky voice and a forthright, big-sister manner that would have served her even better as Wendy in *Peter Pan*.

That summer, at Camp Towering Pines near Racine, Wisconsin, I wrote and starred in my version of *Boris Godunov*; I was imperially robed in the stiff red wool blanket from the Hudson

Bay Company that my mother had bought to keep me warm on chilly northern summer nights. I conflated the coronation scene and the mad scene.

The formula emerges: I wanted to be a king, but I also needed to die, go mad or undergo humiliation for my arrogance, a scenario that resembled the plots of queer novels of the 1950s, though I'd never read one. (The only homosexual narrative I knew of was the life of Nijinsky who, to be sure, had devolved into madness and silence. My mother, who perhaps both feared and hoped for a strange destiny for me, had given me his biography when I was nine or ten.)

Teachers and camp counselors, when I campaigned for yet another royal tragedy starring me, exchanged weary glances over my head – and over my mother's (she was just five feet tall). But Mom was blissfully unaware of any rain on my procession. When one mother said that her son was naturally less talented than I because *he* had never received any professional training as an actor, my mother shouted, 'Neither has Eddie! He is *absolutely* untrained!' As if no better encomium were needed.

That same summer at camp, the summer of *Boris Godunov* (in which I clutched at my blanket and staggered before the ghost of the tsarevich I'd murdered while Kremlin bells tolled and Ivan Kipnis half-sang and half-intoned the Mussorgsky monologue), I had my first sexual experience, or rather tasted the first penis that wasn't my own. I put the matter so precisely because before then I'd wrestled for hours and hours with friends in Evanston, Illinois, where we lived when I was eleven and twelve, and while alone I'd actually managed to lick my own penis by lying nude on my back and throwing my legs over my head in the first stage of a backward somersault. By craning my neck upwards off the mattress and pulling my pelvis down with my hands I could just graze the glans with the tip of my tongue and catch one clear drop of liquid as sticky, if not as sweet, as the nectar I liked to work up the honeysuckle blossom. Once I'd drunk long and hard at a big, smelly, teenage cock there at camp I no longer needed to tread the boards as a suicidal monarch. I stopped conspiring to bend everyone to my need to rule or serve; I discovered that I was happiest while serving, and serving under someone else's scepter.

Happy? That's not the word.

Predestined and agonized. Abject. Bewitched. Perhaps that's closer.

I'd read in one of my mother's psychological manuals a long entry on homosexuality that I could scarcely understand. But I did understand that, whereas adult homosexuality was an entrenched ego disorder caused by an unresolved Oedipus Complex resulting in secondary narcissistic gains that were especially hard to uproot, in every early adolescence the individual, the *boy*, passes through a homosexual *stage* that is perfectly normal, a brief swirl around the Scylla of orality and the Charybdis of anality before surging to the sunny open seas of mature heterosexual genitality. I could only hope that I was just passing through a phase.

I was afire with sexual longing and looked for partners everywhere. The same maniacal energy I'd devoted to playing a succession of dying kings right out of *The Golden Bough* I now consecrated to scoring. I haunted the toilets at the Howard Street elevated station, the one that marked the frontier between Chicago and Evanston. A few men let me touch them and twice a man drove me in a car full of children's toys down to the beach. I wasn't ugly but I was jailbait, and life even for a part-time homosexual was hard enough during the Eisenhower years.

Betraying my partners was something I felt drawn to. At Camp Towering Pines I'd let an older boy 'hypnotize' me and press my mouth down on his penis, but I couldn't resist informing my mother, nominally the camp psychologist, of what he'd 'attempted.' Did I hope to shift the blame for unhealthy desires and practices onto someone else? Or did I merely hope to stir up trouble, create a drama? Or was I trying to draw my mother's attention to behavior I was horrified by the moment after I'd ejaculated? Or was I angry with these young men for not loving me as much as they desired me? If they loved me they would have attempted to run away with me, wouldn't they? Love was what I wanted, though I don't think I could have been loved any more than a porcupine can be embraced.

My mother sent me to a Freudian psychiatrist in Evanston for an evaluation. I had just read Oscar Wilde and was determined to be as brittle and brilliant as his characters. I sat on the edge of my

chair, hectic red flowers blowing in my cheeks, and rattled on and on about my condition, my illness, which I was no more able to defend than Wilde. All he or I had to offer was defiance and a dandified insolence. If we were pinned down by a prosecutor or an examining psychiatrist, what could we say – that homosexuality was defensible? Neither of us was *that* clever; no one could escape his particular moment in history, especially since I, as an American living during the tranquilized 1950s, scarcely believed in history at all. For us nature had replaced history. What I was doing was against nature, anti-physical.

The psychiatrist told my mother that I was 'unsalvageable.' That I should be locked up and the key thrown away. My mother promptly reported this harsh, scary judgment to me, and to my father, though I begged her not to. Of course neither she nor I was capable of dismissing this diagnosis as a dangerously narrow-minded prejudice held by a banal little suburbanite in a brown suit. No, it came from a doctor and was as unquestionable as a diagnosis of diabetes or cancer. The man's level of sophistication or humanity was irrelevant.

My mother had a younger friend named Johanna Tabin who had studied with Anna Freud in London and was now practicing as a psychoanalyst in Glencoe. We occasionally spent social evenings with her and her husband and two sons in their big suburban house or at our much smaller apartment beside the lake. They represented everything we aspired toward – wealth and calm intelligence and respectability, social and professional importance and family love. Johanna's husband, Julius, had been a nuclear physicist and had become a patent lawyer for nuclear inventions.

Johanna's sons, a few years younger than my sister and I, were treated with elaborate respect by their mother. Whenever they would ask her a question or say something to her, she would immediately turn her attention to them, even if she was on the phone listening to my mother. This indulgence was very unhealthy, my mother decided, and she resented it as much as she disapproved of it. But Johanna was intractable. The second there was a treble squeak in the background, she'd put the receiver aside and say, 'Yes, darling, I'm listening. What is it, darling?' She analyzed their dreams and games with an equal attentiveness. I remember when

Geoffrey, the younger son, kept singing a song he'd made up about a tumbleweed, she'd decided that he was the little tumbleweed who made the big horse, his father, rear back in fright – a perfectly normal desire to intimidate the patriarch, she said with a happy smile.

Rather mournfully, I thought my mother was too self-absorbed ever to have interpreted my behaviour so ingeniously, and if she'd managed to detect a sign of defiance in me she would have squelched it rather than nourished it. Now I can see that she was all alone in the world, poor and overworked and profoundly wounded by my father's rejection. Even though she called us the Three Musketeers, we were in fact painfully divided each from the other. My sister was convinced that our mother and I were shamefully bizarre. She herself was unpopular and withdrawn. I was obviously a freak. Only when my mother was administering a test or diagnosing a child did she feel calm and whole and professional.

She must have been jealous of Johanna's happy marriage, because she was always picking up hints of its imminent collapse. 'Poor Johanna,' she'd say. 'The poor little thing is terribly neglected by Julius. It's only a matter of days before he abandons her.'

Despite these dire predictions, Johanna's marriage continued to flourish stubbornly, her career to become more and more distinguished, her husband more and more successful, her sons increasingly brilliant. 'Poor Johanna,' Mother crooned. 'She buries herself in her work because she's so unhappy in her marriage.'

The only thing that amazed me was that Johanna remained so attached to my mother. Did my mother possess undetectable attractions? In a similar way I'd been disconcerted when I'd read my mother's thesis on the religious experiences of children and discovered in it so many big words I didn't know and had never heard my mother pronounce.

One evening at Johanna's, I talked to her about my homosexuality. I don't remember how the subject arose. Had my mother already set it up? All I remember was that we were seated briefly on the glassed-in sunporch just two steps down from the more brightly lit living room. Dinner was over. Johanna kept casting sunny smiles back at her boys, who were out of earshot and racing around the couch, but when she returned her attention to me she lowered her

big sad eyes behind the pale, blue-rimmed glasses and a delicate frown-line was traced across her pure brow. She wore no makeup beyond a faintly pink lipstick. She didn't really follow fashion and was content to appear neat. My mother, who got herself up as elaborately as an *onnagata* in the Kabuki, thoroughly disapproved. Johanna scrunched forward and rested her chin on her palm. She was as lithe as a girl. She had beautiful teeth (her mother was a dentist).

'I'm very worried,' I said. 'I don't seem to be moving out of the normal homosexual stage of development.' I was fifteen.

'Yes, dear,' she said, 'I can feel you're very concerned.' She had a way of reflecting through restatement what her interlocutor had just said, a technique ascribed to Carl Rogers that my mother found insulting and maddeningly condescending but that I liked because it seemed so focused and nonjudgmental. Johanna's life was so manifestly a success that I was happy to bask for an instant in her attention.

'Do you think I should see a therapist?'

She studied my face with her huge, sympathetic eyes and said nothing.

'Could I see *you*?' I asked. I knew that she received many patients a day in the soundproof office in the basement. My mother had also told me that Johanna had cured a lesbian who was now happily married to a New York writer.

'Have you,' she asked with a tentativeness that suggested a sensitivity in me I was far from enjoying, 'have you, dear, ever actually . . .'

'Had sex?' I asked brightly. 'Oh, yes, many times.' For an instant I was proud of my experience, until I saw my admission shocked and saddened her.

'I had no idea,' she said, shaking her head as if it suddenly weighed much much more, 'that you'd actually gone on to *act out*, to act on your impulses.' She looked mournful. Whereas Christianity had taught me that the thought was as bad as the deed, Johanna seemed to think 'acting out' was worse than merely desiring. By realizing my fantasies I'd – what? Made them harder to root out? Coarsened myself?

'You thought I just had a few fantasies?' I was almost insulted,

certainly amused, although I could also see I should downplay the extent of my debauchery if I didn't want to break her heart.

She peered deeply into my eyes, perhaps searching for some reassuring sign of remorse, or the pain I must undoubtedly be feeling. She shook herself free of her thoughts and said, 'I'm afraid I can't see you as a patient, dear, since we're all such friends. But I *can* recommend someone who . . .' Here she put her words together carefully: '. . . who might help you find your way toward a life that would fully express *you*, who you really are.'

With a brilliant flash of lightning over the dark landscape of my personality, I suddenly saw that homosexuality, far from being saturnine or interestingly artistic, was in fact a lack, an emptiness, a deformity preventing a full and happy development.

Already I hoped to be writer but, as I was beginning to realize, successful writing entailed a grasp of universal values and eternal truths, which were necessarily heterosexual. Foolishly I had imagined I could transform the dross of homosexuality into the gold of art, but now I saw I could never be a great artist if I remained ignorant of the classical verities of marriage and child-rearing, adultery and divorce. But if psychoanalysis could convert me into a heterosexual, might it not at the same time ablate the very neurosis that made me want to write? Should I tamper with my neurosis?

I began to read books about psychoanalysis – Freud himself, especially *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but also the softer, less pessimistic American adaptations of his thought by Erich Fromm. I learned that making art was an act of neurotic compensation and sublimation – although Theodor Reik made his unorthodox mark by arguing that art was the highest form of mental health. I couldn't find much about homosexuality in any book, but found enough to know it was sterile, inauthentic, endlessly repetitious and infantile.

Somewhere I came across the theory that homosexuality was caused by an absent father and a suffocating mother. Perhaps my mother had been the one to suggest that my father's absence had queered me, for she was always eager to work out the multiple ways in which his desertion had harmed us all. She was eager to remarry – to bring me the benefits of a suitable father figure – but

no man was willing to take on the burden. I was sent to live with my father for one year in Cincinnati, but he ignored me.

When I realized that I wasn't getting any better, that I was just as obsessed with men as ever, I begged my parents to enroll me in a boys' boarding school. My reasoning was that if I was homosexual because I was suffocated by my mother and deprived of male models, then a tough, nearly military school would be sure to shape me up. Reluctantly they complied, but after a year away from home, when I realized I was more besotted with boys than ever, I asked my father to send me to a shrink.

I had one all picked out. Half the students at my school, Cranbrook, outside Detroit, Michigan, were day boys and half were boarders. We boarding students were occasionally allowed to spend a weekend with a day boy's family if we got written permission from our parents. I was invited home by Stephen Schwartz. His family played classical music (the Mozart Clarinet Concerto, Bach's cantatas) on a stereo that was piped into every room of the compact wood house which, to my eyes, looked half-Hopi, half-Japanese. He was a shaggy-haired mouth-breather, arty and intelligent, who was neither scandalized by, nor interested in, my perversion. He liked to write and knew a lot about jazz; he was neither a grade-grubber nor an athlete, the only two admissible types at Cranbrook. He had a crazy sense of humor. All the grim striving of his fellow students and the severity of our anti-intellectual, martinet masters only made him laugh. We worked together on the student literary magazine, to which he contributed satires.

His father was a psychiatrist who recommended me to James Clark Moloney. I made an appointment with Moloney and my mother wrote a note granting me permission to take a taxi to his office in Birmingham, the nearest large suburb.

My father was reluctant to take on the expense of regular psychiatric fees, which amounted to fifty dollars an hour at a time when a good dinner at a restaurant cost five dollars, for instance, and a general practitioner charged only ten dollars a visit. Someone wealthy at that time earned seventy or eighty thousand dollars a year. Dr. Moloney wanted to see me three times a week, which came to six hundred dollars a month, a sum that exceeded my mother's alimony by a hundred dollars.

My father also objected just as strenuously to the notion of psychoanalysis, which he saw as a form of soak-the-rich charlatanism, an ineffectual and dangerously self-indulgent stewing over problems engendered by idleness and entrenched through the principle of the more you scratch the more it itches. As a good businessman he made me put all my arguments for psychoanalysis in clear, terse letters, which he countered in short missives printed in his neat hand on stationery that read 'From the desk of E. V. White.' He addressed me as 'Dear Ed V.' (I was Edmund Valentine White III.) I wrote to him explicitly about my unsuccessful struggle against homosexuality and about the smothering-mother, absent-father etiology, intended as an indirect reproach against him.

My father's conviction that mental problems could be cured through willpower and self-discipline seemed designed to fail before the tenacity of sexual orientation. I *wanted* to be heterosexual. Who could want to be sinful, abnormal, sick, criminal, a prey to blackmailers and a pariah in every area of public life? What writer would want to duck aside from all the crucial rites of passage? But the will felt defenseless when confronted by its own stronger desires. It was as if a plant were asked not to flower. Even the Japanese could succeed only in stunting, not in eradicating, blossoms.

I had no idea what to expect at Dr. Moloney's, but I certainly thought he'd be a small man with a varnished pate and an inky comb-over, many books (some in German) and in his waiting room the smell of old tobacco and grief. I was in no way prepared for the cages of shrieking birds, the Papuan deities and, in the garden as seen through a plate-glass window, a gilt statue of a meditating bodhisattva. I fancied myself a Buddhist but of the austere Theravada sort, and I sniffed at Dr. Moloney's idolatry, even though I'd come here precisely because I sought a compassionate intercessor, a bodhisattva of my own.

He didn't have a secretary. Another patient let me in and we sat uncomfortably staring at each other, rigid with sibling rivalry. At last Moloney stumbled out, escorting a sniffling little woman. He appeared surprised that he'd double-booked his next hour.

'Don't worry,' he said to me. 'There are enough teats to suckle the whole litter.' He chuckled, revealing neatly spaced teeth in a handsome red face. He cocked an eye at me.

He had a leonine mane of white hair, a bulbous nose with a sore on one side, close to the tip, which he kept vaguely clawing at, as an old dog will halfheartedly try to free itself of its collar. He wore sandals on big, yellow-nailed feet, shapeless trousers held up with a rope, a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt. He licked his lips constantly. He made me feel very prim, especially since I'd put on my favorite Brooks Brothers sack suit with the brown and black twill. I didn't like the idea that he'd already decided I was a famished pup before I'd said even a word.

He decided to see the other patient first, though not for a full hour, he explained, but more for a patch-up. As I sat in the waiting room I could hear the drone of the patient's voice and the grunt of the doctor's. I couldn't hear words, just the rhythm and intonation of their voices, but the mere possibility of eavesdropping frightened and attracted me.

Moloney had but one master theory and he proposed it to everyone as an answer to every ill. He believed in the introjected mother. Every infant has the right to expect and enjoy unconditional love from his mother, at full throttle and all the time. Modern American women, however, are deformed by societal inhibitions and their own deprivations as children, incapable of giving complete, nourishing love. When I told Dr. Moloney that my mother hadn't breast-fed me because she had inverted nipples, he slapped his knees, let out a great cry and leapt to his feet. 'You see!'

The emotionally starved, alienated child decides to mother himself. He incorporates into his inner pantheon the faint, elusive image of his mother's face and warmth. No longer dependent on her vagaries, caprices and eclipses, he can beam her up whenever he needs her. If he sucks his thumb he is nursing himself. He has become a closed circuit – with only one crucial disadvantage: such total independence is virtually synonymous with madness. He has lost all vital connection to the outside world. He's self-sufficient, but at a terrible price. When he thinks he has fallen in love with a real woman, in point of fact all he's done is to project his mother's imago onto a neutral screen. He is enamored of half of his inner cast of characters. Since he's not relating to a real person in all her shifting specificity but instead to the crude, fixed outlines of the

introjected mother, he cannot interact with the flesh-and-blood woman. If she should break through his defenses by smiling her real smile, breathing her real breath on his cheek, he will panic and break it off. As an infant he learned how dangerous it was to open up to an actual, autonomous Other.

I was taught all this during my very first hour with Dr. Moloney – or rather my first ninety minutes, since he was eager to prove to me he was not like one of those goddam tight-ass Freudians with their finicky, fucking fifty-minute hours. He also needed to lay out his entire theory during our first encounter so that it could begin to sink in.

As I learned in session after session, Dr. Moloney had served in the Pacific as an army doctor. In Okinawa, he observed that infants were fearless and happy because they never left their mother's side; they were carried everywhere, papoose-style, bound to their mother's back, their heads looking out *above* hers – 'That way they feel united to her but in charge.' Once I saw an elegant young father on the streets of Birmingham, a baby peering out at the world from his back, and I recognized one of Dr. Moloney's Michigan Okinawans.

Moloney gave me his books to read and even one of his manuscripts to improve. 'Don't think I'm a castrating asshole like your father, an anal perfectionist who can't admit that another man can help him. I need all the help I can get.' He loved to insult my parents, whom he'd never met and who were not at all the straw men he'd set up. They were as eccentric as he – impoverished rural Texans unprepared for the world they'd created for themselves by earning money and moving North. Moloney cursed them for being uptight patricians, unfeeling aristocrats, but in fact they were self-made crazy people, all too full of dangerous feelings. I would never sink to the indignity of going into Moloney's backyard and hacking away at the logs he painted with the words 'Mom' and 'Dad.'

Yet Moloney was warm, an easygoing bohemian with ethnographic interests who believed he could give me the unconditional love that he thought I craved and that his version of my mother had denied me. He would often interrupt me to say, 'I love you, goddam it.' His eyes would fill with tears and he'd idly pick at

his infected nose, or claw at the sore on his forehead from above, fat fingers stretching down, his elbow cocked to the ceiling. But on some days he had to search for my name.

As best I could figure out, he'd had a more conventional past, reflected in his first, unimpeachably Freudian book, but now he'd become cracked over the introjected mother and the Okinawan papoose cure. He wore heavy turquoise and silver bracelets, black amulets on his hairy chest, and lived surrounded by bobbing, chiming deities from the Pacific, Asia and Africa (Freud himself had inaugurated this taste for carved primitive statues, as photos of his Vienna *cabinet* revealed).

The other Freudian remnant was the couch. After a few intimidating sessions in a chair I was graduated to the couch, while out of sight behind me, at a desk, Moloney took notes (or wrote something, perhaps one of his pamphlets). I could hear him back there coughing or rummaging around for something or scratching with his pen. More than once I caught him dozing. That he was asleep changed his preceding silence in my eyes from a sharp, therapeutic instrument into an obtuse abnegation. I bored him. This man who claimed to love me was zoning out on me. 'I know what you're thinking!' he shouted. 'You're probably mad as hell. And you have a right to be. You have a right to unqualified love. No time limits, no lapses, eternal, unqualified love. But even Homer nods. The baby squalls, and he's completely in his rights. If I were perfect – and you deserve perfection, it's your birthright –' Here he broke off, confused, and began scratching his nose.

When Johanna asked me during Christmas vacation how things were going, I said, 'I'm very disappointed. He's a nice man. But he doesn't remember anything about me and each time I mention a friend I have to situate that person all over again.'

'Surely you're exaggerating—'

'Not at all. He's not really interested in the details of my life. Or my life. I don't think he likes men. Or they don't catch his interest. He constantly accuses me of over-intellectualizing, although he's happy enough to exploit my proofreading skills.'

Over-intellectualizing was considered one of my most serious defenses. If I disagreed with one of Moloney's interpretations he'd laugh, show his small white teeth and say, 'If you go on winning

every argument this way you'll soon enough lose every chance at happiness. No one around here doubts your intelligence. It's just that I want you to break out of your closed circuit and touch another living human being, goddam it. Come on, take a chance on life –' He groped for my name before sketching in a feeble gesture that ended in a shrug. I learned to question all my impulses, to second-guess my motives, to ascribe a devious unconscious purpose to my most unobjectionable actions. If I had a dream about making love to Marilyn Monroe, Moloney would interpret it as a 'flight into health,' a ruse I'd invented to throw him off my track by appearing normal, cured. 'In this dream I'm Marilyn Monroe,' he'd say, perfectly seriously. 'Like her I have long hair, a wide mouth, I'm voluptuously put together.'

Now I'd say the worst consequence of my years in psychoanalysis was the way it undermined my instincts. Self-doubt, which is a cousin to self-hatred, became my constant companion. If today I have so few convictions and conceive of myself as merely an anthology of opinions, interchangeable and equally valid, I owe this uncertainty to psychoanalysis. Fiction is my ideal form because a character, even a stand-in for me, occupies a dramatic moment, wants one thing rather than another, serves the master narration. The novel is a story rather than an assertion, a development in time rather than a statement in the eternal present of truth. Fiction suggests that no one is ever disinterested. It does not ask the author to adjudicate among his characters. It is the ultimate arena of situationist ethics.

I saw Moloney three times a week during my last two years at boarding school. I discovered that one of my favorite teachers was also a patient; we met in the waiting room. Though the teacher looked uneasy, as if unmasked, he soon shrugged it off and if one of our appointments happened to coincide with the other he'd drive me in. He was a reserved man, probably not more than six years older than I, twenty-three to my seventeen, but at that age such a gap is unbridgeable. I always wondered what was his 'presenting symptom,' but I never found out about anything beyond his inability to 'commit.' He'd broken off several engagements to marry. Problems such as frigidity, however, were never treated as the thing itself; what needed to be treated was some mysterious, underlying neurosis.

I could never get Moloney to concentrate on my homosexuality, for it, too, was just a symptom. 'You'll see, old boy,' he'd assure me, moving heavily but serenely like a shaggy, friendly St. Bernard padding in for his daily ration of strokes, 'once we clear away the psychic underbrush all that will wither away.' He made my homosexuality sound like the state in the socialist future. He wasn't even very interested in my sexual adventures at school and elsewhere, though he warned me that 'excessive acting out' would make me less sensitive to treatment. Just as the term *over-intellectualizing* called into doubt my mental faculties, so *acting out* suggested that each sexual encounter with another man could be reduced to every other, all of them a childish and annoying, if not very serious, automatism. Nothing could come of acting out beyond a further pointless delay in the treatment process. If I entered into detail about my love for a teacher or my sexual bribery of a football star, he'd wave his hand as if brushing cobwebs out of his face and say, 'Spare me, spare me.' When I asked him if smoking marijuana was dangerous, he assured me it led directly to heroin addiction. He advised me to report a teacher who was 'turning on' the boys (and who also let me suck his cock). I always regretted squealing on that teacher, though no doubt my penchant toward betraying my sex partners would have sufficed even without Moloney's counsel.

The only moment when Moloney would truly pay attention to me was when I reported a dream to him. To remember a dream I had to write it down right away. On Sundays, when we were allowed to sleep in an extra hour, till eight, I had the greatest likelihood of awakening slowly, not to a bell, and of recalling the last episode or two of a dream.

Moloney was Freudian, I suppose, in believing that a dream was 'the royal road to the unconscious,' although he had a different system of interpretation, more Jungian in that it traced the ponderous movements of an endlessly proliferating tribe of archetypes. Now I agree with an Italian doctor friend who ascribes the primacy of dreams in Freud's system to the Viennese habit of eating cheese after dinner, and who says, 'Cheese produces excessive neural transmitters; dreams are the downshifting of the brain's gears.'

Like Freud, Moloney felt that one of the analyst's main tools is

picking through the transference. Freud, however, insists that the patient must know nothing concrete about the analyst, so that it will be clear even to him that he has invented everything and *attributed* it to the doctor. In the classic Freudian transference, the *analysand* re-creates with his analyst his damaging relationship with his parents; when he recognizes that the doctor has done nothing at all to justify such wrath, resentment or fear, he is forced to admit (and abandon) his habit of endlessly 'projecting' bad motives and harmful feelings onto everyone around him. With Moloney, however, the experiment was compromised because ours wasn't a laboratory-pure isolate. Because he constantly chattered about himself I did know a lot about him, which I had the right to interpret as I saw fit. He might say, 'Stop projecting!' but only his authority lent credibility to such an objection.

He was my first shrink, I had nothing to compare him to and he was my only chance of becoming a heterosexual, of ending the terrible suffering I was enduring as an outcast. He told me so himself; he was certain he was the only qualified doctor around. I contemplated suicide more than once. Never had I met or read anyone who defended homosexuality, although the Kinsey Report had recently done so (I just didn't happen to know anything about it, since copies were kept out of kids' hands).

But even if someone had tried to refute my horror of homosexuality I would have instantly rejected his insinuating proposals, tempting me to settle for second best. I *knew* that only the most insulting pity and condescension could lead someone to recommend that I surrender to my disease.

Moloney convinced me that I should not go away for school (I had been accepted to Harvard) but should attend a nearby state university so that I could continue my sessions with him. All other psychoanalysts were frauds – money-grubbing impostors or unfeeling, straitlaced Freudians. Only he could help people – that's why he kept taking on more and more patients. He had close to fifty now and was seeing them from six in the morning till midnight, seven days a week. To stay awake he was swallowing handfuls of Dexedrine and then coming down in the evening with constant swigs of bourbon.