

Excerpt from *In One Person* by John Irving

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I'm going to begin by telling you about Miss Frost. While I say to everyone that I became a writer because I read a certain novel by Charles Dickens at the formative age of fifteen, the truth is I was younger than that when I first met Miss Frost and imagined having sex with her, and this moment of my sexual awakening also marked the fitful birth of my imagination. We are formed by what we desire. In less than a minute of excited, secretive longing, I desired to become a writer and to have sex with Miss Frost—not necessarily in that order.

I met Miss Frost in a library. I like libraries, though I have difficulty pronouncing the word—both the plural and the singular. It seems there are certain words I have considerable trouble pronouncing: nouns, for the most part—people, places, and things that have caused me preternatural excitement, irresolvable conflict, or utter panic. Well, that is the opinion of various voice teachers and speech therapists and psychiatrists who've treated me—alas, without success. In elementary school, I was held back a grade due to “severe speech impairments”—an overstatement. I'm now in my late sixties, almost seventy; I've ceased to be interested in the cause of my mispronunciations. (Not to put too fine a point on it, but fuck the etiology.)

I don't even try to say the etiology word, but I can manage to struggle through a comprehensible mispronunciation of library or libraries—the botched word emerging as an unknown fruit. (“Liberry,” or “liberries,” I say—the way children do.)

It's all the more ironic that my first library was undistinguished. This was the public library in the small town of First Sister, Vermont—a compact red-brick building on the same street where my grandparents lived. I lived in their house on River Street—until I was fifteen, when my mom remarried. My mother met my stepfather in a play.

The town's amateur theatrical society was called the First Sister Players; for as far back as I can remember, I saw all the plays in our town's little theater. My mom was the prompter—if you forgot your lines, she told you what to say. (It being an amateur theater, there were a lot of forgotten lines.) For years, I thought the prompter was one of the actors—someone mysteriously offstage, and not in costume, but a necessary contributor to the dialogue.

My stepfather was a new actor in the First Sister Players when my mother met

him. He had come to town to teach at Favorite River Academy—the almost-prestigious private school, which was then all boys. For much of my young life (most certainly, by the time I was ten or eleven), I must have known that eventually, when I was “old enough,” I would go to the academy. There was a more modern and better-lit library at the prep school, but the public library in the town of First Sister was my first library, and the librarian there was my first librarian. (Incidentally, I’ve never had any trouble saying the librarian word.)

Needless to say, Miss Frost was a more memorable experience than the library. Inexcusably, it was long after meeting her that I learned her first name. Everyone called her Miss Frost, and she seemed to me to be my mom’s age—or a little younger—when I belatedly got my first library card and met her. My aunt, a most imperious person, had told me that Miss Frost “used to be very good-looking,” but it was impossible for me to imagine that Miss Frost could ever have been better-looking than she was when I met her—notwithstanding that, even as a kid, all I did was imagine things. My aunt claimed that the available men in the town used to fall all over themselves when they met Miss Frost. When one of them got up the nerve to introduce himself—to actually tell Miss Frost his name—the then-beautiful librarian would look at him coldly and icily say, “My name is Miss Frost. Never been married, never want to be.”

With that attitude, Miss Frost was still unmarried when I met her; inconceivably, to me, the available men in the town of First Sister had long stopped introducing themselves to her.

THE CRUCIAL DICKENS NOVEL—THE one that made me want to be a writer, or so I’m always saying—was *Great Expectations*. I’m sure I was fifteen, both when I first read it and when I first reread it. I know this was before I began to attend the academy, because I got the book from the First Sister town library—twice. I won’t forget the day I showed up at the library to take that book out a second time; I’d never wanted to reread an entire novel before.

Miss Frost gave me a penetrating look. At the time, I doubt I was as tall as her shoulders. “Miss Frost was once what they call ‘statuesque,’” my aunt had told me, as if even Miss Frost’s height and shape existed only in the past. (She was forever statuesque to me.)

Miss Frost was a woman with an erect posture and broad shoulders, though it was chiefly her small but pretty breasts that got my attention. In seeming contrast to her mannish size and obvious physical strength, Miss Frost’s breasts had a newly developed appearance—the improbable but budding look of a young girl’s. I couldn’t understand how it was possible for an older woman to have achieved

this look, but surely her breasts had seized the imagination of every teenage boy who'd encountered her, or so I believed when I met her—when was it?—in 1955. Furthermore, you must understand that Miss Frost never dressed suggestively, at least not in the imposed silence of the forlorn First Sister Public Library; day or night, no matter the hour, there was scarcely anyone there.

I had overheard my imperious aunt say (to my mother): “Miss Frost is past an age where training bras suffice.” At thirteen, I'd taken this to mean that—in my judgmental aunt's opinion—Miss Frost's bras were all wrong for her breasts, or vice versa. I thought not! And the entire time I was internally agonizing over my and my aunt's different fixations with Miss Frost's breasts, the daunting librarian went on giving me the aforementioned penetrating look.

I'd met her at thirteen; at this intimidating moment, I was fifteen, but given the invasiveness of Miss Frost's long, lingering stare, it felt like a two-year penetrating look to me. Finally she said, in regard to my wanting to read *Great Expectations* again, “You've already read this one, William.”

“Yes, I loved it,” I told her—this in lieu of blurting out, as I almost did, that I loved her. She was austere formal—the first person to unfailingly address me as William. I was always called Bill, or Billy, by my family and friends.

I wanted to see Miss Frost wearing only her bra, which (in my interfering aunt's view) offered insufficient restraint. Yet, in lieu of blurting out such an indiscretion as that, I said: “I want to reread *Great Expectations*.” (Not a word about my premonition that Miss Frost had made an impression on me that would be no less devastating than the one that Estella makes on poor Pip.)

So soon?” Miss Frost asked. “You read *Great Expectations* only a month ago!”

“I can't wait to reread it,” I said.

“There are a lot of books by Charles Dickens,” Miss Frost told me. “You should try a different one, William.”

“Oh, I will,” I assured her, “but first I want to reread this one.”

Miss Frost's second reference to me as William had given me an instant erection—though, at fifteen, I had a small penis and a laughably disappointing hard-on. (Suffice it to say, Miss Frost was in no danger of noticing that I had an erection.)

My all-knowing aunt had told my mother I was underdeveloped for my age. Naturally, my aunt had meant “underdeveloped” in other (or in all) ways; to my knowledge, she’d not seen my penis since I’d been an infant—if then. I’m sure I’ll have more to say about the penis word. For now, it’s enough that you know I have extreme difficulty pronouncing “penis,” which in my tortured utterance emerges—when I can manage to give voice to it at all—as “penith.” This rhymes with “zenith,” if you’re wondering. (I go to great lengths to avoid the plural.)

In any case, Miss Frost knew nothing of my sexual anguish while I was attempting to check out *Great Expectations* a second time. In fact, Miss Frost gave me the impression that, with so many books in the library, it was an immoral waste of time to reread any of them.

“What’s so special about *Great Expectations*?” she asked me.

She was the first person I told that I wanted to be a writer “because of” *Great Expectations*, but it was really because of her.

“You want to be a writer!” Miss Frost exclaimed; she didn’t sound happy about it. (Years later, I would wonder if Miss Frost might have expressed indignation at the sodomizer word had I suggested that as a profession.)

“Yes, a writer—I think so,” I said to her.

“You can’t possibly know that you’re going to be a writer!” Miss Frost said. “It’s not a career choice.”

She was certainly right about that, but I didn’t know it at the time. And I wasn’t pleading with her only so she would let me reread *Great Expectations*; my pleas were especially ardent, in part, because the more exasperated Miss Frost became with me, the more I appreciated the sudden intake of her breath—not to mention the resultant rise and fall of her surprisingly girlish breasts.

At fifteen, I was as smitten and undone by her as I’d been two years earlier. No, I must revise that: I was altogether more captivated by her at fifteen than I was at thirteen, when I’d been merely fantasizing about having sex with her and becoming a writer—whereas, at fifteen, the imagined sex was more developed (there were more concrete details) and I had already written a few sentences I admired.

Both the sex with Miss Frost and actually being a writer were unlikely, of course—but were they remotely possible? Curiously, I had enough hubris to believe so. As for where such an exaggerated pride or unearned self-confidence

came from—well, I could only guess that genes had something to do with it.

I don't mean my mother's; I saw no hubris in her backstage role of the prompter. After all, I spent most of my evenings with my mom in that safe haven for those variously talented (and untalented) members of our town's amateur theatrical society. That little playhouse was not a uniformly prideful or brimming-with-confidence kind of place—hence the prompter.

If my hubris was genetic, it surely came from my biological father. I was told I'd never met him; I knew him only by his reputation, which didn't sound great.

"The code-boy," as my grandfather referred to him—or, less often, "the sergeant." My mom had left college because of the sergeant, my grandmother said. (She preferred "sergeant," which she always said disparagingly, to "code-boy.") Whether William Francis Dean was the contributing cause of my mom leaving college, I didn't really know; she'd gone to secretarial school instead, but not before he'd gotten her pregnant with me. Consequently, my mother would leave secretarial school, too.

My mom told me that she'd married my dad in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in April 1943—a little late for a shotgun wedding, because I'd been born in First Sister, Vermont, back in March of '42. I was already a year old when she married him, and the "wedding" (it was a town-clerk or justice-of-the-peace deal) had been chiefly my grandmother's idea—or so my aunt Muriel said. It was implied to me that William Francis Dean hadn't entered into the marriage all that willingly.

"We were divorced before you were two," my mom had told me. I'd seen the marriage certificate, which was why I remembered the seemingly exotic and far-from-Vermont location of Atlantic City, New Jersey; my father had been in basic training there. No one had shown me the divorce records.

"The sergeant wasn't interested in marriage or children," my grandmother had told me, with no small amount of superiority; even as a child, I could see that my aunt's loftiness had come from my grandmother.

But because of what happened in Atlantic City, New Jersey—no matter at whose insistence—that certificate of marriage legitimized me, albeit belatedly. I was named William Francis Dean, Jr.; I had his name, if not his presence. And I must have had some measure of his code-boy genes—the sergeant's "derring-do," in my mom's estimation.

"What was he like?" I'd asked my mother, maybe a hundred times. She used to be

so nice about it.

“Oh, he was very handsome—like you’re going to be,” she would always answer, with a smile. “And he had oodles of derring-do.” My mom was very affectionate to me, before I began to grow up.

I don’t know if all preteen boys, and boys in their early teens, are as inattentive to linear time as I was, but it never occurred to me to examine the sequence of events. My father must have knocked up my mother in late May or early June of 1941—when he was finishing his freshman year at Harvard. Yet there was never any mention of him—not even in a sarcastic comment from Aunt Muriel—as the Harvard-boy. He was always called thecode-boy (or the sergeant), though my mom was clearly proud of his Harvard connection.

“Imagine starting Harvard when you’re just fifteen!” I’d heard her say more than once.

But if my derring-do dad had been fifteen at the start of his freshman year at Harvard (in September 1940), he had to be younger than my mother, whose birthday was in April. She was already twenty in April of ’40; she was just a month short of twenty-two when I was born, in March of ’42.

Did they not get married when she learned she was pregnant because my dad was not yet eighteen? He’d turned eighteen in October 1942. As my mom told me, “Obligingly, the draft age was lowered to that level.” (I would only later think that the obligingly word was not a common one in my mother’s vocabulary; maybe that had been the Harvard-boy talking.)

“Your father believed he might better control his military destiny by volunteering for advanced induction, which he did in January 1943,” my mom told me. (The “military destiny” didn’t sound like her vocabulary, either; the Harvard-boy was written all over it.)

My dad traveled by bus to Fort Devens, Massachusetts—the beginning of his military service—in March 1943. At the time, the air force was part of the army; he was assigned a specialty, that of cryptographic technician. For basic training, the air force had taken over Atlantic City and the surrounding sand dunes. My father and his fellow inductees were bivouacked in the luxury hotels, which the trainees would ruin. According to my grandfather: “No one ever checked IDs in the bars. On weekends, girls—mostly government workers from Washington, D.C.—flocked to town. It was very jolly, I’m sure—the firin’ of all sorts of weapons on the sand dunes notwithstanding.”

My mom said that she visited my dad in Atlantic City—“once or twice.” (When they were still not married, and I would have been a one-year-old?)

It was together with my grandfather that my mother must have traveled to Atlantic City for that April '43 “wedding”; this would have been shortly before my dad was sent to air force cryptographic school in Pawling, New York—where he was taught the use of codebooks and strip ciphers. From there, in the late summer of '43, my father was sent to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois. “In Illinois, he learned the nuts and bolts of cryptography,” my mother said. So they were still in touch, seventeen months after I'd been born. (“Nuts and bolts” was never big in my mom's vocabulary.)

“At Chanute Field, your dad was introduced to the primary military cipher machine—essentially a teletype, with an electronic set of cipher wheels attached to it,” my grandfather told me. He might as well have been speaking in Latin; quite possibly, not even my missing father could have made the functions of a cipher machine comprehensible to me.

My grandfather never used “code-boy” or “sergeant” disparagingly, and he enjoyed reciting to me my dad's war story. It must have been as an amateur actor in the First Sister Players that my grandfather had developed the capacity for memorization necessary for him to recall such specific and difficult details; Grandpa was able to reiterate to me exactly what had happened to my dad—not that the wartime work of a cryptographer, the coding and decoding of secret messages, was entirely uninteresting.

The U.S. Fifteenth Army Air Force was headquartered in Bari, Italy. The 760th Bomb Squadron, of which my father was a member, was stationed at the Spinazzola Army Air Base—on farmland south of the town.

Following the Allied invasion of Italy, the Fifteenth Army Air Force was engaged in bombing southern Germany, Austria, and the Balkans. From November 1943 till September 1945, more than a thousand B-24 heavy bombers were lost in this combat. But cryptographers didn't fly. My dad would rarely have left the code room at the base in Spinazzola; he spent the remaining two years of the war with his codebooks and the incomprehensible encryption device.

While the bombers attacked the Nazi factory complexes in Austria and the oil fields in Romania, my dad ventured no farther than Bari—mainly for the purpose of selling his cigarettes on the black market. (Sergeant William Francis Dean didn't smoke, my mother had assured me, but he sold enough cigarettes in Bari to

buy a car when he got back to Boston—a 1940 Chevrolet coupe.)

My dad's demobilization was relatively swift. He spent the spring of '45 in Naples, which he described as "enchanting and buoyant, and awash in beer." (Described to whom? If he'd divorced my mom before I was two—divorced her how?—why was he still writing to her when I was already three?)

Maybe he was writing to my grandfather instead; it was Grandpa who told me that my dad had boarded a navy transport ship in Naples. After a short stay in Trinidad, he was flown on a C-47 to a base in Natal, Brazil, where my father said the coffee was "very good." From Brazil, another C-47—this one was described as "aging"—flew him to Miami. A troop train north dispersed the returning soldiers to their points of discharge; hence my dad found himself back in Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

October 1945 was too late for him to return to Harvard in that same academic year; he bought the Chevy with his black-market money and got a temporary job in the toy department of Jordan Marsh, Boston's largest store. He would go back to Harvard in the fall of '46; his field of concentration would be romance studies, which my grandfather explained to me meant the languages and literary traditions of France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal. ("Or at least two or three of 'em," Grandpa said.)

"Your father was a whiz at foreign languages," my mom had told me—hence a whiz at cryptography, maybe? But why would my mother or my grandpa have cared about my runaway dad's field of concentration at Harvard? Why were these details even known to them? Why had they been informed?

There was a photograph of my father—for years, the only picture I saw of him. In the photograph, he looks very young and very thin. (This was late spring, or early summer, 1945.) He's eating ice cream on that navy transport ship; the photo was taken somewhere between the coast of southern Italy and the Caribbean, before they docked in Trinidad.

I'm guessing that the black panther on my father's flight jacket captured all or most of my childish imagination; that angry-looking panther was the symbol of the 460th Bomb Group. (Cryptography was strictly a groundcrew enterprise—even so, cryptographers were issued flight jackets.)

My all-obscuring fixation was that I had something of the war hero in me, though the details of my dad's wartime exploits were not very heroic-sounding—not even to a child. But my grandfather was one of those World War II buffs—you know, the kind who finds every detail intriguing—and he was always telling me, "I see a

future hero in you!”

My grandmother had next to nothing positive to say about William Francis Dean, and my mother began and (for the most part) finished her evaluation with “very handsome” and “oodles of derring-do.”

No, that’s not entirely true. When I asked her why it hadn’t worked out between them, my mom told me that she’d seen my dad kissing someone. “I saw him kiss someone else,” was all she said, as perfunctorily as she might have prompted an actor who’d forgotten the else word. I could only conclude that she’d observed this kiss after she was pregnant with me—possibly, even after I’d been born—and that she saw enough of the mashed-lips encounter to know that it wasn’t an innocent sort of kiss.

“It must have been a Frenchy, a tongue-down-the-throat job,” my elder cousin once confided to me—a crude girl, the daughter of that imperious aunt I keep mentioning. But who was my dad kissing? I wondered if she’d been one of those weekend girls who flocked to Atlantic City, one of those government workers from Washington, D.C. (Why else had my grandfather mentioned them to me?)

At the time, this was all I knew; it was not a lot to know. It was more than enough, however, to make me mistrust myself—even dislike myself—because I had a tendency to attribute all my faults to my biological father. I blamed him for every bad habit, for each mean and secretive thing; essentially, I believed that all my demons were hereditary. Every aspect of myself that I doubted or feared surely had to be one of Sergeant Dean’s traits.

Hadn’t my mom said I was going to be good-looking? Wasn’t that a curse, too? As for the derring-do—well, hadn’t I presumed (at age thirteen) that I could become a writer? Hadn’t I already imagined having sex with Miss Frost?

Believe me, I didn’t want to be my runaway dad’s offspring, his genetic-package progeny—knocking up young women, and abandoning them, left and right. For that was Sergeant Dean’s *modus operandi*, wasn’t it? I didn’t want his name, either. I hated being William Francis Dean, Jr.—the code-boy’s almost-a-bastard son! If there was ever a kid who wanted a stepfather, who wished that his mother at least had a serious boyfriend, I was that kid.

Which leads me to where I once considered beginning this first chapter, because I could have begun by telling you about Richard Abbott. My soon-to-be stepfather set the story of my future life in motion; in fact, if my mom hadn’t fallen in love with Richard, I might never have met Miss Frost.

BEFORE RICHARD ABBOTT JOINED the First Sister Players, there was what my domineering aunt referred to as a “dearth of leading-man material” in our town’s amateur theatrical society; there were no truly terrifying villains, and no young males with the romantic capability to make the younger and the older ladies in the audience swoon. Richard was not only tall, dark, and handsome—he was the embodiment of the cliché. He was also thin. Richard was so thin that he bore, in my eyes, a remarkable likeness to my code-boy father, who, in the only picture I possessed of him, was permanently thin—and forever eating ice cream, somewhere between the coast of southern Italy and the Caribbean. (Naturally, I would wonder if my mother was aware of the resemblance.)

Before Richard Abbott became an actor with the First Sister Players, the males in our town’s little theater were either incoherent mumblers, with downcast eyes and furtive glances, or (the equally predictable) overbearing hams who shouted their lines and made eyes at the easily offended, matronly patrons.

A notable exception in the talent department—for he was a most talented actor, if not in Richard Abbott’s league—was my World War II buff grandfather, Harold Marshall, whom everyone (save my grandmother) called Harry. He was the biggest employer in First Sister, Vermont; Harry Marshall had more employees than Favorite River Academy, though the private school was surely the second biggest employer in our small town.

Grandpa Harry was the owner of the First Sister Sawmill and Lumberyard. Harry’s business partner—a gloomy Norwegian, whom you will meet momentarily—was the forester. The Norwegian oversaw the logging operations, but Harry managed the sawmill and the lumberyard. Grandpa Harry also signed all the checks, and the green trucks that hauled the logs and the lumber were inscribed, in small yellow capitals, with the name *marshall*.

Given my grandfather’s elevated status in our town, it was perhaps surprising that the First Sister Players always cast him in female roles. My grandpa was a terrific female impersonator; in our town’s little playhouse, Harry Marshall had many (some would say most) of the leading women’s roles. I actually remember my grandfather better as a woman than as a man. He was more vibrant and engaged in his onstage female roles than I ever saw him be in his monotonous real-life role as a mill manager and lumberman.

Alas, it was a source of some family friction that Grandpa Harry’s only competition for the most demanding and rewarding female roles was his elder daughter, Muriel—my mother’s married sister, my oft-mentioned aunt.

Aunt Muriel was only two years older than my mother; yet she'd done everything before my mom had thought of doing it, and Muriel had done it properly and (in her estimation) to perfection. She'd allegedly "read world literature" at Wellesley and had married my wonderful uncle Bob—her "first and only beau," as Aunt Muriel called him. At least I thought Uncle Bob was wonderful; he was always wonderful to me. But, as I later learned, Bob drank, and his drinking was a burden and an embarrassment to Aunt Muriel. My grandmother, from whom Muriel had obtained her imperiousness, would often remark that Bob's behavior was "beneath" Muriel—whatever that meant.

For all her snobbishness, my grandmother's language was riddled with proverbial expressions and clichés, and, in spite of her highly prized education, Aunt Muriel seemed to have inherited (or she merely mimicked) the ordinariness of her mother's uninspired speech.

I think that Muriel's love and need for the theater was driven by her desire to find something original for her lofty-sounding voice to say. Muriel was good-looking—a slender brunette, with an opera singer's noteworthy bosom and booming voice—but she had an absolutely vacuous mind. Like my grandmother, Aunt Muriel managed to be both arrogant and judgmental without saying anything that was either verifiable or interesting; in this respect, both my grandmother and my aunt struck me as superior-sounding bores.

In Aunt Muriel's case, her impeccable enunciation made her entirely credible onstage; she was a perfect parrot, but a robotic and humorless one, and she was simply as sympathetic or unsympathetic as the character she played. Muriel's language was elevated, but her own "character" was lacking; she was just a chronic complainer.

In my grandmother's case, she was of an unyielding age and she'd had a conservative upbringing; these constraints led her to believe that the theater was essentially immoral—or, to be more forgiving, amoral—and that women should play no part in it. Victoria Winthrop (the Winthrop was my grandmother's maiden name) believed that all the women's roles in any dramatic performance should be played by boys and men; while she confessed to finding my grandfather's many onstage triumphs (as various women) embarrassing, she also believed this was the way drama should be enacted—strictly by male actors.

My grandmother—I called her Nana Victoria—found it tiresome that Muriel was inconsolable (for days) when she lost a plum part to Grandpa Harry. In contrast, Harry was a good sport whenever the sought-after role went to his daughter.

“They must have wanted a good-lookin’ girl, Muriel—you have me beat in that category, hands down.”

I’m not so sure. My grandfather was small-boned and had a pretty face; he was light on his feet, and effortless at girlish laughter and at sobbing his heart out. He could be convincing as a scheming woman, or as a wronged one, and he was more convincing with the onstage kisses he gave to various miscast men than my aunt Muriel ever managed to be. Muriel cringed at onstage kissing, though Uncle Bob didn’t mind. Bob seemed to enjoy seeing his wife and his father-in-law bestowing kisses onstage—a good thing, too, since they had the leading female roles in most of the productions.

Now that I’m older, I have more appreciation for Uncle Bob, who “seemed to enjoy” many people and things, and who managed to convey to me an unexpressed but sincere commiseration. I believe that Bob understood where the Winthrop side of the family was coming from; those Winthrop women were long accustomed (or genetically inclined) to looking down their noses at the rest of us. Bob took pity on me, because he knew that Nana Victoria and Aunt Muriel (and even my mother) were watching me warily for telltale signs that I was—as they all feared, as I feared myself—my no-good father’s son. I was being judged for the genes of a man I didn’t know, and Uncle Bob, perhaps because he drank and was considered “beneath” Muriel, knew what it felt like to be judged by the Winthrop side of the family.

Uncle Bob was the admissions man at Favorite River Academy; that the school’s standards for admission were lax did not necessarily make my uncle personally accountable for Favorite River’s failures. Yet Bob was judged; by the Winthrop side of the family, he was called “overly permissive”—another reason I thought he was wonderful.

Though I remember hearing about Bob’s drinking from a variety of sources, I never saw him drunk—well, except for one spectacular occasion. In fact, in the years I was growing up in First Sister, Vermont, I believed that Bob’s drinking problem was exaggerated; those Winthrop women were known for their overstatements in the morally outraged category. Righteous indignation was a Winthrop trait.

It was during the summer of ’61, when I was traveling with Tom, that it somehow came up that Bob was my uncle. (I know—I haven’t told you about Tom. You’ll have to be patient with me; it’s hard for me to get to Tom.) For Tom and me, this was that allegedly all-important summer between our graduation from prep school and the start of our freshman year in college; Tom’s family and mine had

granted us a reprieve from our usual summer jobs so that we could travel. We were probably expected to be satisfied with spending no more than a single summer in that doubtful pursuit of “finding” ourselves, but for Tom and me the gift of this summer didn’t seem as all-important as that time in your life is supposed to be.

For one thing, we had no money, and the sheer foreignness of European travel frightened us; for another, we’d already “found” ourselves, and there was no making peace with who we were—not publicly. Indeed, there were aspects of ourselves that poor Tom and I found every bit as foreign (and as frightening) as what we managed to see, in our half-assed way, of Europe.

I don’t even remember the reason Uncle Bob’s name came up, and Tom already knew I was related to “old-Let-’em-in Bob,” as Tom called him.

“We’re not related by blood,” I’d started to explain. (Notwithstanding Uncle Bob’s blood-alcohol level at any given time, there wasn’t a drop of Winthrop blood in him.)

“You’re not at all alike!” Tom had exclaimed. “Bob is just so nice, and so uncomplicated.”

Granted, Tom and I had been arguing a lot that summer. We’d taken one of the Queen ships (student class) from New York to Southampton; we’d crossed to the continent, landing in Ostend, and the first town in Europe we’d stayed overnight in was the medieval city of Bruges. (Bruges was beautiful, but I was more infatuated with a girl who worked at the pension where we stayed than I was with the belfry atop the old Market Hall.)

“I suppose you were intending to ask her if she had a friend for me,” Tom said.

“We just walked all over town—we just talked and talked,” I told him. “We barely kissed.”

“Oh, is that all?” Tom said—so when he later remarked that Uncle Bob was “just so nice, and so uncomplicated,” I took it that Tom meant I wasn’t nice.

“I just meant that you’re complicated, Bill,” Tom told me. “You’re not as easygoing as Admissions Man Bob, are you?”

“I can’t believe you’re pissed off about that girl in Bruges,” I told him.

“You should have seen how you stared at her tits—they didn’t amount to much. You know, Bill—girls know when you’re staring at their tits,” Tom told me.

But the girl in Bruges was of no importance to me. It was only that her small breasts had reminded me of the rise and fall of Miss Frost’s surprisingly girlish breasts, and I’d not gotten over Miss Frost.

OH, THE WINDS OF change; they do not blow gently into the small towns of northern New England. The first casting call that brought Richard Abbott to our town’s little theater would even change how the women’s roles were cast, for it was evident from the start that those parts calling for dashing young men and evil (or plainly bourgeois) husbands and treacherous lovers were all within Richard Abbott’s grasp; hence the women chosen to play opposite Richard would have to match up to him.

This posed a problem for Grandpa Harry, who would soon be Richard’s father-in-law—Grandpa Harry was too much the older woman to be romantically involved with a handsome young man like Richard in the first place. (There would be no onstage kissing for Richard Abbott and Grandpa Harry!)

And, befitting her superior-sounding voice but empty-minded character, this posed a greater problem for my aunt Muriel. Richard Abbott was too much leading-man material for her. His appearance at that very first casting call reduced Muriel to psychosexual babble and dithering; my devastated aunt said later that she could tell my mom and Richard were “moonstruck by each other from the start.” It was altogether too much for Muriel to imagine being romantically involved with her future brother-in-law—even onstage. (And with my mother prompting them, no less!)

At thirteen, I detected little of my aunt Muriel’s consternation at encountering (for the first time) what leading-man material was like; nor did I recognize that my mom and Richard Abbott were “moonstruck by each other from the start.”

Grandpa Harry was charming and entirely welcoming to the graceful young man, who was brand new to the faculty at Favorite River Academy. “We’re always lookin’ for new actin’ talent,” Grandpa said warmly to Richard. “Did you say it was Shakespeare you’re teachin’?”

“Teaching and putting onstage,” Richard answered my grandfather. “There are theatrical disadvantages at an all-boys’ school, of course—but the best way for young boys or girls to understand Shakespeare is for them to put on the plays.”

“You mean by ‘disadvantages,’ I would guess, that the boys have to play the women’s roles,” Grandpa Harry said slyly. (Richard Abbott, upon first meeting the mill manager Harry Marshall, could not have known about the lumberman’s success as an onstage cross-dresser.)

“Most boys haven’t the vaguest idea how to be a woman—it’s a mortal distraction from the play,” Richard said.

“Ah,” Grandpa Harry said. “Then how will you manage it?”

“I’m thinking of asking the younger faculty wives to audition for roles,” Richard Abbott replied, “and the older faculty daughters, maybe.”

“Ah,” Grandpa Harry said again. “There might be townspeople who are also qualified,” my grandfather suggested; he’d always wanted to play Regan or Goneril, “Lear’s loathsome daughters,” as Grandpa alliteratively spoke of them. (Not to mention how he longed to play Lady Macbeth!)

“I’m considering open auditions,” Richard Abbott said. “But I hope the older women won’t be intimidating to the boys at an all-boys’ school.”

“Ah, well—there’s always that,” Grandpa Harry said with a knowing smile. As an older woman, he’d been intimidating countless times; Harry Marshall had merely to look at his wife and elder daughter to know how female intimidation worked. But, at thirteen, I was unaware of my grandfather’s jockeying for more women’s roles; the conversation between Grandpa Harry and the new leading man seemed entirely friendly and natural to me.

What I noticed on that fall Friday night—casting calls were always on Friday nights—was how the dynamic between our theater’s dictatorial director and our variously talented (and untalented) would-be cast was changed by Richard Abbott’s knowledge of the theater, as much as by Richard’s gifts as an actor. The stern director of the First Sister Players had never been challenged as a dramaturge before; our little theater’s director, who said he had no interest in “merely acting,” was no amateur in the area of dramaturgy, and he was a self-appointed expert on Ibsen, whom he worshiped to excess.

Our heretofore-unchallenged director, Nils Borkman—the aforementioned Norwegian who was also Grandpa Harry’s business partner and, as such, a forester and logger and dramaturge—was the very picture of Scandinavian depression and melancholic forebodings. Logging was Nils Borkman’s business—or, at least, his day job—but dramaturgy was his passion.

It further contributed to the Norwegian's ever-blackening pessimism that the unsophisticated theatergoers in First Sister, Vermont, were unschooled in serious drama. A steady diet of Agatha Christie was expected (even nauseatingly welcome) in our culturally deprived town. Nils Borkman visibly suffered through the ceaseless adaptations of lowbrow pot-boilers like *Murder at the Vicarage*, a Miss Marple mystery; my superior-sounding aunt Muriel had many times played Miss Marple, but the denizens of First Sister preferred Grandpa Harry in that shrewd (but oh-so-feminine) role. Harry seemed more believable at divining other people's secrets—not to mention, at Miss Marple's age, more feminine.

At one rehearsal, Harry had whimsically said—as Miss Marple herself might have—“My word, but who would want Colonel Protheroe dead?”

To which my mom, ever the prompter, had remarked, “Daddy, that line isn't even in the script.”

“I know, Mary—I was just foolin' around,” Grandpa said.

My mother, Mary Marshall—Mary Dean (for those unlucky fourteen years before she married Richard Abbott)—always called my grandpa Daddy. Harry was unfailingly addressed as Father by my lofty-sounding aunt Muriel, in the same black-tie-dinner tone of voice that Nana Victoria unstintingly hailed her husband as Harold—never Harry.

Nils Borkman directed Agatha Christie's “crowd-pleasers,” as he mockingly referred to them, as if he were doomed to be watching *Death on the Nile* or *Peril at End House* on the night of his death—as if his indelible memory of *Ten Little Indians* might be the one he would take to his grave.

Agatha Christie was Borkman's curse, which the Norwegian bore less than stoically—he hated her, and he complained about her bitterly—but because he filled the house with Agatha Christie, and similarly shallow entertainments of the time, the morbid Norwegian was permitted to direct “something serious” as the fall play every year.

“Something serious to coincide with that time of year when the leaves are dying,” Borkman said—the leaves word indicating that his command of English was usually clear but imperfect. (That was Nils in a nutshell— usually clear but imperfect.)

On that Friday casting call, when Richard Abbott would change many futures, Nils announced that this fall's “something serious” would again be his beloved

Ibsen, and Nils had narrowed the choice of which Ibsen to a mere three.

“Which three?” the young and talented Richard Abbott asked.

“The problem three,” Nils answered—he presumed, definitively.

“I take it you mean *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll’s House*,” Richard rightly guessed. “And would the third be *The Wild Duck*?”

By Borkman’s uncharacteristic speechlessness, we all saw that, indeed, *The* (dreaded) *Wild Duck* was the dour Norwegian’s third choice.

“In that case,” Richard Abbott ventured, after the telltale silence, “who among us can possibly play the doomed Hedvig—that poor child?” There were no fourteen-year-old girls at the Friday night casting call—no one at all suitable for the innocent, duck-loving (and daddy-loving) Hedvig.

“We’ve had . . . difficulties with the Hedvig part before, Nils,” Grandpa Harry ventured. Oh, my—had we ever! There’d been tragicomic fourteen-year-old girls who were such abysmal actors that when the time came for them to shoot themselves, the audience had cheered! There’d been fourteen-year-old girls who were so winningly naïve and innocent that when they shot themselves, the audience was outraged!

“And then there’s Gregers,” Richard Abbott interjected. “That miserable moralizer. I could play Gregers, but only as a meddling fool—a self-righteous and self-pitying clown!”

Nils Borkman often referred to his fellow Norwegians who were suicidal as “fjord-jumpers.” Apparently, the abundance of fjords in Norway provided many opportunities for convenient and unmessy suicides. (Nils must have noticed, to his further gloom, that there were no fjords in Vermont—a land-locked state.) Nils now looked at Richard Abbott in such a scary way—it was as if our depressed director wanted this upstart newcomer to find the nearest fjord.

“But Gregers is an idealist,” Borkman began.

“If *The Wild Duck* is a tragedy, then Gregers is a fool and a clown—and Hjalmar is nothing more than a jealous husband of the pathetic, before-she-met-me kind,” Richard continued. “If, on the other hand, you play *The Wild Duck* as a comedy, then they’re all fools and clowns. But how can the play be a comedy when a child dies because of adult moralizing? You need a heartbreaking Hedvig, who must be

an utterly innocent and naïve fourteen-year-old; and not only Gregers but Hjalmar and Gina, and even Mrs. Sørby and Old Ekdal and the villainous Werle, must be brilliant actors! Even then, the play is flawed—not the easiest amateur production of Ibsen that comes to mind.”

“Flawed!” Nils Borkman cried, as if he (and his wild duck) had been shot.

“I was Mrs. Sørby in the most recent manifestation,” my grandfather told Richard. “Of course, when I was younger, I got to play Gina—albeit only once or twice.”

“I had thoughts of young Laura Gordon as Hedvig,” Nils said. Laura was the youngest Gordon girl. Jim Gordon was on the faculty at Favorite River Academy; he and his wife, Ellen, had been actors for the First Sister Players in the past, and two older Gordon daughters had previously shot themselves as poor Hedvig.

“Excuse me, Nils,” my aunt Muriel interposed, “but Laura Gordon has highly visible breasts.”

I saw I was not alone in noticing the fourteen-year-old’s astonishing development; Laura was barely a year older than I was, but her breasts were way beyond what an innocent and naïve Hedvig should have.

Nils Borkman sighed; he said (with near-suicidal resignation) to Richard, “And what would the young Mr. Abbott consider an easier Ibsen for us mortally mere amateurs to perform?” Nils meant “merely mortal,” of course.

“Ah . . .” Grandpa Harry began; then he stopped himself. My grandfather was enjoying this. He had the utmost respect and affection for Nils Borkman as a business partner, but—without exception—every keenly devoted and most casual member of the First Sister Players knew Nils to be an absolute tyrant as a director. (And we were almost as sick of Henrik Ibsen, and Borkman’s idea of serious drama, as we were of Agatha Christie!)

“Well . . .” Richard Abbott began; there was a thoughtful pause. “If it’s going to be Ibsen—and we are, after all, only amateurs—it should be either *Hedda Gabler* or *A Doll’s House*. No children at all in the former, and the children are of no importance as actors in the latter. Of course, there is the need for a very strong and complicated woman—in either play—and for the usual weak or unlikable men, or both.”

“Weak or unlikable, or both?” Nils Borkman asked, in disbelief.

“Hedda’s husband, George, is ineffectual and conventional—an awful combination of weaknesses, but an utterly common condition in men,” Richard Abbott continued. “Eilert Løvborg is an insecure weakling, whereas Judge Brack—like his name—is despicable. Doesn’t Hedda shoot herself because of her foreseeable future with both her ineffectual husband and the despicable Brack?”

“Are Norwegians always shooting themselves, Nils?” my grandfather asked in a mischievous way. Harry knew how to push Borkman’s buttons; this time, however, Nils resisted a fjord-jumping story—he ignored his old friend and cross-dressing business partner. (Grandpa Harry had played Hedda many times; he’d been Nora in *A Doll’s House*, too—but, at his age, he was no longer suitable for either of these female leads.)

“And what . . . weaknesses and other unlikable traits do the male characters in *A Doll’s House* present us with—if I may ask the young Mr. Abbott?” Borkman sputtered, wringing his hands.

“Husbands are not Ibsen’s favorite people,” Richard Abbott began; there was no pausing to think now—he had all the confidence of youth and a brand-new education. “Torvald Helmer, Nora’s husband—well, he’s not unlike Hedda’s husband. He’s both boring and conventional—the marriage is stifling. Krogstad is a wounded man, and a corrupted one; he’s not without some redeeming decency, but the weakness word also comes to mind in Krogstad’s case.”

“And Dr. Rank?” Borkman asked.

“Dr. Rank is of no real importance. We need a Nora or a Hedda,” Richard Abbott said. “In Hedda’s case, a woman who prizes her freedom enough to kill herself in order not to lose it; her suicide is not a weakness but a demonstration of her sexual strength.”

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on your point of view—Richard took this moment to glance at Aunt Muriel. Her good looks and opera singer’s swaggering bosom notwithstanding, Muriel was not a tower of sexual strength; she fainted.

“Muriel—no histrionics, please!” Grandpa Harry cried, but Muriel (consciously or unconsciously) had foreseen that she did not match up well with the confident young newcomer, the sudden shining star of leading-man material. Muriel had physically taken herself out of the running for Hedda.

“And in the case of Nora . . .” Nils said to Richard Abbott, barely pausing to survey

my mother's ministrations to her older, domineering (but now fainted) sister.

Muriel suddenly sat up with a dazed expression, her bosom dramatically heaving.

"Breathe in through your nose, Muriel, and out through your mouth," my mother prompted her sister.

"I know, Mary—I know!" Muriel said with exasperation.

"But you're doing it the other way—you know, in through your mouth and out through your nose," my mother said.

"Well . . ." Richard Abbott started to say; then he stopped. Even I saw how he looked at my mom.

Richard, who'd lost the toes of his left foot to a lawn-mower accident, which disqualified him from military service, had come to teach at Favorite River Academy directly upon receiving a master's degree in the history of theater and drama. Richard had been born and grew up in western Massachusetts. He had fond memories of family ski vacations in Vermont, when he'd been a child; a job (for which he was overqualified) in First Sister, Vermont, had attracted him for sentimental reasons.

Richard Abbott was only four years older than my code-boy father had been in that photograph—when the sergeant was en route to Trinidad in '45. Richard was twenty-five—my mom was thirty-five. Richard was a whopping ten years younger than my mother. Mom must have liked younger men; she'd certainly liked me better when I was younger.

"And do you act, Miss—" Richard began again, but my mom knew he was speaking to her, and she cut him off.

"No, I'm just the prompter," she told him. "I don't act."

"Ah, but, Mary—" Grandpa Harry began.

"I don't, Daddy," my mother said. "You and Muriel are the actresses," she said, with no uncertain emphasis on the actresses word. "I'm always the prompter."

"About Nora?" Nils Borkman asked Richard. "You were something saying—"

"Nora is more about freedom than Hedda," Richard Abbott confidently said. "She

not only has the strength to leave her husband; she leaves her children, too! There is such an untamable freedom in these women—I say, let your actor who will be Hedda or Nora choose. These women own these plays.”

As he spoke, Richard Abbott was surveying our amateur theatrical society for possible Heddas or Noras, but his eyes kept coming back to my mother, who I knew was obdurately (forever) the prompter. Richard would not make a Hedda or a Nora out of my follow-the-script mom.

“Ah, well . . .” Grandpa Harry said; he was reconsidering the part, either Nora or Hedda (his age notwithstanding).

No, Harry—not you again,” Nils said, his old dictatorial self emerging. “Young Mr. Abbott is right. There must be a certain lawlessness— both an uncontainable freedom and a sexual strength. We need a younger, more sexual activity woman than you.”

Richard Abbott was regarding my grandfather with growing respect; Richard saw how Grandpa Harry had established himself as a woman to be reckoned with among the First Sister Players—if not as a sexual activity woman.

“Won’t you consider it, Muriel?” Borkman asked my superior-sounding aunt.

“Yes, will you?” Richard Abbott, who was more than a decade younger than Muriel, asked. “You have an unquestionable sexual presence—” he started to say.

Alas, that was as far as young Mr. Abbott got—the presence word, modified by sexual—before Muriel fainted again.

“I think that’s a ‘no,’ if I had to guess,” my mom told the dazzling young newcomer.

I already had a bit of a crush on Richard Abbott, but I hadn’t yet met Miss Frost.

IN TWO YEARS’ TIME, when I sat as a fifteen-year-old freshman in my first morning meeting at Favorite River Academy, I would hear the school physician, Dr. Harlow, invite us boys to treat the most common afflictions of our tender age aggressively. (I am certain that he used the word afflictions; I’m not making this up.) As for what these “most common” afflictions were, Dr. Harlow explained that he meant acne and “an unwelcome sexual attraction to other boys or men.” For our pimples, Dr. Harlow assured us there were a variety of remedies. In regard to those early indications of homosexual yearnings—well, either Dr. Harlow or the

school psychiatrist, Dr. Grau, would be happy to talk to us.

“There is a cure for these afflictions,” Dr. Harlow told us boys; there was a doctor’s customary authority in his voice, which was at once scientific and cajoling—even the cajoling part was delivered in a confident, man-to-man way. And the gist of Dr. Harlow’s morning-meeting speech was perfectly clear, even to the greenest freshmen—namely, we had only to present ourselves and ask to be treated. (What was also painfully apparent was that we had only ourselves to blame if we didn’t ask to be cured.)

I would wonder, later, if it might have made a difference—that is, if I’d been exposed to Dr. Harlow’s (or Dr. Grau’s) buffoonery at the time I first met Richard Abbott, instead of two years after meeting him. Given what I know now, I sincerely doubt that my crush on Richard Abbott was curable, though the likes of Dr. Harlow and Dr. Grau—the available authorities in the medical sciences of that time—emphatically believed that my crush on Richard was in the category of a treatable affliction.

Two years after that life-changing casting call, it would be too late for a cure; on the road ahead, a world of crushes would open before me. That Friday night casting call was my introduction to Richard Abbott; to everyone present—not least to Aunt Muriel, who fainted twice—it was obvious that Richard had taken charge of us all.

“It seems that we need a Nora, or a Hedda, if we’re going to do Ibsen at all,” Richard said to Nils.

“But the leafs! They are already color-changing; they will keep falling,” Borkman said. “It is the dying time of the year!”

He was not the easiest man to understand, except that Borkman’s beloved Ibsen and fjord-jumping were somehow connected to the serious drama, which was always our fall play—and to, no less, the so-called dying time of the year, when the leafs were unstoppably falling.

Looking back, of course, it seems such an innocent time—both the dying time of the year and that relatively uncomplicated time in my life.