Praise for Leonce Gaiter's *I Dreamt I Was in Heaven: The Rampage of the Rufus Buck Gang*

"The novel's raw, unvarnished portrait of the Old West sounds and feels both grittier and more real than the place frequently seen in Hollywood Westerns and on television."

— Craig Lambert, *Harvard Magazine*

"Gaiter adroitly intertwines the personal stories of Rufus and his cohorts with the larger narrative of the cruelty perpetrated against Native Americans… historically valuable, well written."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

"…Wonderful… Gaiter brings life back into the old west."

— Kristi Bernard, BookPleasures.com

"Only once in a great while does a writer come along who defies comparison and compromise—a writer so original he redefines… historical lore. Leonce Gaiter is such a writer…"

— Alvin Romer, *African American Literature Book Club*

Praise for Leonce Gaiter's *Bourbon Street*

"…New Orleans has long been a streetcar straight to a mystery lover's heart. Now comes a debut book by Leonce Gaiter that deserves a place on that map."

— Dick Adler, *Chicago Tribune*

"Gaiter manages to keep the reader guessing up to the last… a riveting tale of interracial hatred and its effects on both blacks and whites."

— John Broussard, *I Love a Mystery*

"It has been a long while since I read a book as complex and gorgeous as *Bourbon Street*… a sheer joy to read from beginning to end."

— *African American Literature Book*

"The ensuing cycle of Mardi Gras violence is set forth in prose by turns as grandiloquent as Faulkner and clipped and stylized to a fare-thee-well."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

"Debut novelist Leonce Gaiter's thick blend of Big Easy decadence, danger, and deceit had me fiendin' for a box of Zatarain's Red Beans & Rice before I could get to the book's shocking conclusion… you'll definitely want to visit the pages of *Bourbon Street*."

— *Essence Magazine*

"Gaiter's incisive prose slashes through these distorted lives, ripping away genteel facades, a monochromatic wasteland soaked in the bright red of spilled blood reduced to a common hue. Purging his characters' embattled emotions, Gaiter lays bare the truth of racial hatred, the years spent in a silent war, the child paying the exorbitant price of his parents' destructive union."

— Luan Gaines, *Curled Up with a Good Book*

in the company of educated men

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For JY, as always.

Lyrics to “Our Song” by Joe Henry
(Chrysalis Music/Blood Count Music: ASCAP) from the album “Civilians,”
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So much happened so quickly that it's impossible to be tidy and neat. My father's death had a lot to do with it, but that wasn't the only reason. The rumblings, the amorphous need for something either childishly simple or universally complex had started before and intensified after. 'This caused that, which caused the other, which precipitated X…' It doesn't work. The question has been, 'How did one barely-a-man wreak such havoc?' This is my attempt to understand. I will probably misrepresent it, but that's unavoidable. The only way we understand anything is to misrepresent it, especially around ourselves and our actions. It's never as neat as we later portray. We take ravaged spider webs, twist them into geometric shapes, and label the outcome a rational narrative. At least then, I'll have something neat to hold onto.

JUNE 1980

GRADUATION DAY,
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

The beautiful June morning offered a classic picture-postcard vision of the famous university. Like the veins of eternity itself, the deep green ivy clung to the august, columned red brick facades. Sunlight through ancient trees tastefully dappled everything beneath with dancing shadows. I sat in my underwear on a threadbare sofa with springs shooting out of it like weeds, concentrating on the sounds. Six notes. That's all I wanted—to mimic six notes. They had been played with equal parts thoughtless abandon and effortless mastery, mind you, but I sat, biting furiously on my reed and making wretched noises as the sublime 1947 Charlie Parker Dial Records master tape of "Embraceable You" spun on the turntable. I would set the needle down, hear the speakers 'whomp,' set myself on the edge of the sofa, embouchure just right, fingers in position, and try to play along. After note two, I invariably lagged. By note three, I was parodic. About there I'd stop, hop to the turntable, and try it all over again.

After the tenth time, the obligatory "Shut the fuck ups" and "You sucks" faded into ambient noise, easily ignored. I knew they were right, but it didn't matter. Trust me: I didn't sense that I had some grand talent lurking beneath the false notes and wayward time, but I did think

this was important. It was a test that I had set for myself. I meant to determine what kind of person I was and what kind of man I might be: an exercise in sheer will. I would impose my will upon this hunk of alto brass and my lack of native ability. But more importantly, I would understand. By playing those six notes as Charlie Parker had, by mimicking a slice of the solo from the Dial "Embraceable You," I would prove that I could, at least from a distance, enter the realm of The Great. I would understand, at least secondhand, what occurred at such enviable altitudes. I desperately wanted to know how men breathed at those all but unreachable heights. Don't look for logic in it. I was young; there was none, and this was a different time—before our media-technological obsessions had rendered moot the very concept of art, much less great art, to most. Back then, I wanted to snuggle up to brilliance, just as today's young want wealth or fame, though I had none of my own. I wanted to understand the oddity of genius—a thing that, like God, stubbornly defies knowing or understanding unless you happen to be a god or a genius—and decided through a quirk of twisted logic that I would do it through the first six notes of the Dial "Embraceable You."

I heard the heavy wooden door slam into the wall as if kicked (which it had been, by my roommate, Paul) followed by a rhythmically endless *thump, thump, thump*.

"Twenty more an' I got a personal best," he said. "Why aren't you dressed?"

He was playing paddleball, a recent obsession. For the past two days he'd constantly held the small wooden paddle with the red rubber ball dangling limply from a rubber band when he wasn't slapping it up in the air. Eyes to the ceiling, the ball's apogee, he sailed into the room following the ball's inevitable shifts and scurries to ensure that his paddle lay directly beneath it. His black gown flowed after him, and the dangle on his black mortarboard bobbed hysterically with every thump.

"Avoidance technique," I replied. "My parents are coming."

"Mine are here already. Had to go to dinner with 'em last night. They reminded me that they sacrificed their life savings to send me here and I'm obligated to achieve all that they never could because they did not have the advantages that they have so generously afforded me."

I settled the horn near its case and walked calmly through the collision of the room's grandeur (oak walls, six-foot fireplace, hardwood floors, Harvard's gifts to the 19th century sons of the rich) and its threadbare Salvation Army castoff furnishings. In my bedroom, next to the packing tape, I found the scissors. I re-entered the living room and froze in the doorway, dangerously snipping the air. Paul dared take his eye off the ball long enough to glance my way. I charged. With a stooped, bent-legged gait, he scurried forward. The rubber ball smacked against the wooden paddle as he rushed this way and that, yanked by the little ball's unpredictability and my pursuit. I leapt on the sofa and sliced the air an inch from his rubber band. He came tragically close to missing the ball, which flew vertically, but with a quick-footed shuffle he made a save as he floated into my bedroom—a fatal move. Trapped. He bobbed and weaved, but he was done; the scissors snapped and the ball flew, disappearing into a pile of dirty clothes.

He fell back on the bed, arms outstretched. "Now I have to figure out what to do with my *life*," he said, as if cause and effect came into play between the lost rubber ball and his existential crisis.

Ignoring him, I returned to the living room and ritually, as always, lovingly, removed the saxophone mouthpiece, wiped it down, cleaned the spit valve and placed the gold horn on its blue velvet padding. I closed the case as if locking a genie back in the bottle, as if securing the concept of possibility itself.

"I said," Paul repeated more loudly, 'Now I have to figure out what to do with my *life*.' Graduation, remember? Liberal arts degree, remember?"

"Get a job," I replied. "Work, retire, and die."

I grabbed my pants. I was about to put them on, but an idiotically irresistible idea beamed into my head. I think I'd hatched it freshman

year, probably hoping I'd have grown beyond it in four years. Unable to resist, I took the scissors and cut the legs off the pants just above the knee. I kept the legs bottoms and discarded everything attached to the waistband.

"Of course, you don't have to worry about that," Paul continued. "Dying, I mean. You have a rich daddy."

I was surprised to hear that rich people didn't die, but my family's wealth was a constant source of wonder for the middle-class (just one step above working class) Paul.

"You get a cushy job with Daddy's firm. People like you live for fuckin' ever."

Graduation loomed, and the future—even to the point of its inevitable end—obsessed us.

"I don't want a cushy job with Daddy's firm," I honestly replied. "Shit, look what it's doing to Daddy. I just wanna…" Knowing what I wanted to say, I hesitated at the cliché of it, the childish naiveté. But what the hell. It was graduation day. "I just wanna *live*," I blurted. "Why can't you do that? Just *live*."

"'Cause I gotta pay the rent. You give that livin' thing a shot and tell the rest of us what it's like."

Never a break from Paul. That's one of the things I liked most about him. He never let me forget the difference between me and him, between my wealth and his comparative poverty, my privilege and his necessities.

The instant of sincerity having passed, I grabbed a roll of silver packing tape. I taped the pantleg bottoms to my bare legs. Four spots of tape did the trick. Once I donned the gown, the full-length mirror showed a guy wearing pants. I removed my underwear.

"The career counselor said I should go to law school," Paul continued. "When I told him I didn't want to be a lawyer, he made me feel like I was six. My own fault… I made the mistake of telling him I wanted something… and I actually used the word 'more.' I could have smacked the

smirk off his face. He said, 'We rarely get what we want,' like he was talking to a child. What's our problem, then? Why the fuck don't we?"

"Lennie! Paul!" a voice from the living room.

Louisa and Eva entered, both sporting caps and gowns. Louisa carried a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and a plastic champagne glass in the other.

"Party! Party!" Louisa falsettoed. She was a lovely girl and you could tell she might grow into a truly beautiful woman. Twenty-one and half-drunk, she showed the potential for depth and grace. Eva, on the other hand, was a bit of a toad. A self-congratulatory New Yorker, she consistently "worked the room," any room—it could be the bathroom—literally scurrying from person to person, touching one and then the other in forced camaraderie and for assurance that she had been noticed as she feigned breathless earnestness in all things.

"Isn't it exciting?" she cried. "I can't believe we're actually graduating. Just think. In a few years, Lennie, you'll be the toast of New York literary society."

"I don't write."

"Oh, but you *should*. And I'll be the editor of the *New York Review of Books*… Louisa…"

"Will be married," Louisa interjected as Paul grabbed the bottle from her and swigged, "to a short, balding man with a large income and a mistress he beats."

She sipped the brown juice from her plastic champagne glass.

"Louisa will be in the drunk tank if she doesn't watch it," Paul said.

At that, Louisa cuddled up to him, pursing her lips and caressing his face. "Will you marry me?" she cooed. "You're not short. Your hair's thick and any woman I know could take you."

"Have another," he replied as he filled her glass.

"Do you know who's speaking today?" Eva oozed, not waiting for a response. "Anna Freud."

"Anna Freud's dead," Paul noted.

"So are half the professors on this campus," I began as Paul and Louisa joined in, "AND IT NEVER STOPPED THEM!"

"Oh, Lennie," Sara chirped. "Aren't you excited?"

I faced her and flashed my gown open. She covered her mouth and smothered giggles.

"Oh God. That's so funny. Lennie, you're so funny."

I walked to Paul and Louisa and whispered, "Kill her."

"Guess what," Eva went on. "Daddy said he might send me to Paris for the summer. I love Paris. It's soooo romantic."

From behind her back, Paul madly waved a ball of twine in one hand and a roll of packing tape in the other. I lured Eva with a fake smile as Paul pulled a chair from the desk and set it behind her.

"Have a seat and tell us about it, hon." I slipped her into the chair.

Louisa shoved her fist in her mouth to keep from laughing.

"Well Daddy knows the editor of the *International Herald Tribune*, who's spending the summer on Onassis's yacht. Can you believe it? What are you doing, Paul? Paul!"

Paul threw rope around her chest and wrapped a quick knot. She tried to stand, but I sat on her lap. Paul slid rope around her legs and tied them to the chair. He tossed me a pre-cut piece of tape (I had no idea when he had the time to do that), which I placed on her mouth. Louisa finally removed her own fist from her mouth and guffawed.

"Why didn't we think of that four years ago?" she sighed.

Eva's reduction to an *objet d'art* was so satisfying it was easy to ignore her muffled screams. But then a concussive thud outside grabbed our attention. We went to the window to check it out. We figured they were setting up the microphones in Harvard Yard. Another mic shot a thunderous *whomp*. We stared down at the pre-graduation bustle in the street. Earlier, I had seen the acre of brown folding chairs facing the grand-columned facade of Memorial Church. Atop its endless steps, between its huge Roman columns, sat the bigwigs' chairs, the microphones and dais.

Workers bustled with final preparations. The church had given the scene a deathly finality.

Right then, the gowned students and proud parents milling about reminded me that our lives, as we knew them, were ending. I had been told what to do all of my life. Go to school. Get good grades. Go to college. Home, schools, Harvard… all pre-arranged, regimented worlds designed with just enough wiggle room to provide the young an illusory sense of self-determination. These places had taken care of me. The track on which I had traveled had been straight and very narrow. It ended today, and disappeared, leaving a future before me that seemed so vast, so daunting in its unchartedness that it might as well have been a void. 'For the first time,' I almost said aloud, but caught myself, 'I don't know what's going to happen.' For the first time, it was not all neatly mapped out. It scared the shit out of me.

The PA system belched another deep thump. In the Yard beyond the buildings outside my window, the chairs on the lawn between Widener Library and Memorial Church were beginning to fill.

I gazed out the window, wistfully self-pitying, when a face appeared before me. I almost fell backwards as I checked to see if she was floating.

"AACHGG!" Paul gagged on Jack, waving his hands before him as if to shoo away a specter.

We both looked down and saw the flimsy-looking mobile platform supporting her. I marveled at both her dexterity and ambition.

"Hi!" she hollered. "I'm Patsy!"

We stared in rank shock and awe.

"I'm here for the Harvard Booster Club, and we know how much we owe this University, and I'm sure you'll share my feelings that we must give back."

"Cool," Paul exclaimed, ignoring Patsy and clambering over the sill and onto the alarmingly swaying platform. Off-balance, Patsy flailed her arms in furious windmills against the concerted tugs of imbalance and gravity.

She did not scream as she fell. I had thought everyone screamed as they fell. Maybe she didn't have time before she smashed into the shrubbery below.

"I'm gonna be payin' off loans 'til I'm eighty," Paul mused as he looked down at her.

Patsy twitched as passers-by rushed to her aid. Paul climbed back inside. We abandoned her to her rescue.

"I hope you didn't kill her."

I felt embarrassed at how happy that voice made me. It filled an emotional need, and I hated recognizing those. The mastery of the Dial "Embraceable You," I knew, I just knew, demanded immunity to such petty things. But every inch of me smiled. Very unsure of myself at the dawn of my blank future, I heard the call of a concrete, comforting past to hold onto. I rushed at her. I hugged her hard, and she hugged me back just as fully. Only then did I stand back to take a look at her. She did not disappoint; she never did. She was stunning in all her paint and armor. Tastefully light on the makeup, just highlighting the glories and masking the few imperfections, she wore a simple, huggy black number that beautifully trod the line between cocktail and after dinner drinks. Her smile acknowledged my appreciation of her art.

"Hello, little brother," she said all full of warmth.

Her eyes darted to the bound girl tied to the chair. Paul jumped in front of Eva, trying, too late, to obscure the view while Louisa hid the bottle behind her back.

"These are my friends," I blurted. "Paul."

Just drunk enough, he bowed, sans irony.

"Louisa."

She hiccupped and over-enunciated in her attempts to sound sober. "We have never met. You must be Lennie's sister. I have heard a lot about you. How do you do?"

"And… that's Eva."

Fury now rimmed Eva's eyes as she gurgled loudly behind her gag and violently shook her chair. Louisa rushed to her and untied the ropes. An

embarrassed Paul assisted. They left the gag as they each took an arm and hustled her from the room.

Becca raised an eyebrow, no more, as the two scurried past with the gagged girl between them.

"YOU FUCKERS!" thundered from the hall.

"Never mind," Becca deadpanned. Her eyes burrowed into me, focusing on me every ounce of her attention and demanding all of mine.

"Oh… you look just the same," she said almost sadly, as if prematurely mourning her own youth. "I haven't seen you all year. I wish you looked older, but you're all grown now. All grown."

Not comfortable with talk about me, I shrugged.

"Why not?" I asked. "Why didn't you visit?"

She turned away and pretended not to hear. "How are you?" she asked.

"Fine. You?" I could give trite as good as I got.

"Same old."

"Where're the others?" The plan had been for Becca to meet up with my parents and travel here together.

She fumbled in her purse, pulled out a cigarette, and quickly lit it.

"Mom and Dad can't make it, Lennie," she said, staring out the French windows. At the lack of response, she turned and looked at me. I had nothing to say.

"Dad needed a rest," she went on.

"Is it bad?" I asked.

"Pretty bad."

We never discussed my father's condition, the drinking that had progressed to days in bed with bottles. I immediately wished I hadn't asked.

"… And Mom took off. God knows where."

"She left him alone?"

"She's been dealing with this for years…" Becca said, making excuses, but even she couldn't maintain the pretense. She didn't go on. Her eyes

still bored into me, though, gauging my reaction. I resented the pressure I felt to maintain a brave front.

"I thought they'd at least give me the satisfaction, on my graduation day," I said, "of loathing them in person."

"They can't help it," she said. "It all just *happened*. Things *happen*." The last word came with surprising emphasis and she let a scowl of disquiet mar her lovely face. "They don't mean any harm," she said, regaining her stoic smile. "They care about you."

I changed the subject. "I meant to tell you I was sorry about you and Terry." Terry had been her most recent boyfriend.

She made another beeline for her purse. You'd have thought that little bag contained balms for all the world's discomforts. She yanked a compact from it and examined herself as if I'd giggled at a zit.

"The man's a worm," she said.

"I told you that two years ago."

She put away the mirror. "He wore a hairpiece, did you know that? And he still had a mistress from his second marriage. He probably beat her."

Arms outstretched, she suddenly ran toward me and smothered me in a hug.

"You know I love you, don't you?" she whispered in my ear. "My big, little brother. You're so smart and levelheaded. I'm a mess."

She pushed me to arm's length to stare in my eyes again. Her hands vise-gripped my shoulders.

"You listen to me," she said with almost maternal authority.

She stared at me, waiting. Realizing this required a response, I nodded.

"Don't listen to 'em, Lennie," she said. "They don't know anything."

"Who?"

"They. Them, everyone. Only you know what's gonna be right for you. If you chase anything where they tell you to look, you'll never find it."

Her hands slipped from my shoulders. "There," she exhaled. "I feel better." Again she moved to her purse, this time tucking it under her arm. "I've got to go now," she said.

"You're not staying?" I must have gaped. She looked stung.

"Don't be mad at me," she pleaded. "I met someone. A real nice guy. You'd like him. I told him all about you." Every pore in her body screamed guilt, begged forgiveness, and pled weakness as a defense.

"We've got a plane to catch. He's waiting," she begged.

I couldn't speak. It hurt so much that she looked like a stranger to me. Her eyes tried to meet mine, but I stared past her. She moved toward the door. There, she gathered herself to her full height and faced me. She mustered an expansive, beneficent smile.

"You've got wings, brother," she declared with her own combination of sincerity and grandiloquence. "Fly!" She blew me a sad little kiss as if acknowledging the insufficiency of her performance and then she slipped from view.

I had felt alone in the past. I would be alone at a particular moment, or on a particular occasion. A hired stranger would pick me up or take me to where parents should have taken their children. I represented myself at more than one school occasion. I had been disappointed, but I had never felt abandoned—not until today. I was alone—permanently, existentially, whatever you want to call it. An accident of birth, the fault of damaged parents raising damaged children—whether my fault, due to my inability to deserve the love of another human being, or the fault of nothing and no one, I was alone. As Becca said, perhaps it just *happened*.

It changed things. My world shrank around me. I could see out and the world could see in, but a barrier drew up in between. The tape chafed my legs now. The pantless prank seemed puerile and unamusing. I donned real clothes.

Me seated among the sea of black-clad, flat-capped bodies sandwiched between giant neo-classical red brick buildings seemed surreal. Looking left or right I saw young faces which, on the surface,

looked like mine, but from whom I felt as distant as an illiterate ape done up in academia's robes. The intermittent *thump, thump, thump* of Paul's replacement paddleball was a comfort—an aspect as absurd as I felt. I smiled when I saw the little ball appear momentarily above the black-topped heads two rows in front of me. I almost didn't go. This was as much for the spectators as it was for the students, and I had none. But, I decided, this was important. I felt I had to acknowledge it—severance, guillotining me from the patterns and comforts I had known. I went late, but I went. Eva glared at me as I took my seat. Paul, sitting next to Louisa, raised his hands in a 'where the hell have you been' gesture.

I listened as students with good grades opined about the gifts that Harvard had given them. Walter Cronkite intoned movingly about the world we would enter and our place in it. I dismissed it all as chatter, like the sock puppet the doctor used to distract you from the needle's prick, as the speaker dispatched us to the world and welcomed us into the company of educated men.

***

Post-ceremony tears and partings began. Louisa dragged me around like a rag doll, pitying my abandonment and determined to make up for it. Hugs proliferated and tears proved infectious. I struggled mightily to keep mine back. People ran forward with manic airs and threw their arms around me. It became hard to distinguish one from the other. The cumulative effect was one of a slow winding down, a clock ticking ever more slowly, warning of the imminence of whatever it counted down to. Louisa's bottle saved us. It kept us light-headed throughout that mercilessly bright afternoon.

As the sun set, crowds thinned while mounds of trunks and boxes grew outside of family wagons. Beneath my dorm room window, Paul's

mother stood by a particularly poor specimen. Paul's father sat in the driver's seat, turning the key and triggering a sickly whine.

Paul's mother warned, "Don't flood it, Marvin." Her voice echoed off the buildings.

I heard her husband's inarticulate grumble of a response.

She looked up. "You folks come on down now. Paul?"

He stuck his head out.

"Is that everything?" his mother asked.

"Just about," he replied.

Paul slouched in the remains of our living room with his sullen fourteen-year-old sister, who was decked out in the height of the day's pop star wannabe rags.

"They gonna throw you outta the house now?" she asked.

"Soon enough," he replied.

"What you gonna do?"

"Not think about it."

An angelic string chorus wafted through the open doorway. I recognized it, and so did Paul. We looked at one another, smiled, and rose simultaneously.

"Tell Mom and Dad I'll be right down," Paul said to his sister while straining for the door.

"No rush," the girl muttered, standing. "The car won't start."

***

Shadows danced in the hallway like ghosts admonishing us to hush and savor what would come. Louisa had concocted this, her gift—something to help us remember her and the moment. It was so much like her.

We entered her room to a scratchy recording of Dinah Washington selling for all it was worth, a slow blues of the transcendent kind—"This Bitter Earth." At least twenty candles lit the room, highlighting its

nineteenth-century elegance, dimming its twentieth-century dinginess, and transforming it into a reverie. The shadows multiplied as Louisa slowly swayed to the music. The lyrics bemoaned the state of man, his bitter, loveless fate, and pleaded to the heavens for meaning amidst the pain.

She twirled toward me, grabbed my hand, and we awkwardly danced.

We loved this song, the lyrics so over the top they skirted comedy, and a voice so knowing it didn't care; it mined heaps of sorrow and pain from them anyway.

"So there you are," Louisa said as my arm slipped around her waist. "Are you deaf? It took you long enough."

Dinah Washington cried how cold this earth could be and how quickly time takes us all.

Louisa looked particularly lovely in the candlelight, foreshadowing the mature beauty she had always promised; silky bronze curls framed a face that made you realize that blush was not a Max Factor invention. This close to her, watching her, smelling her, I knew I should have been more than a little in love with her, and I wondered why I wasn't. She laid her head on my shoulder and though I couldn't see it, I could tell she closed her eyes. Her breath left her in a soft sigh. Of the girls I'd flirted with, dated, or slept with, why did I sidestep the one about whom I cared?

In a final blast of sentiment and hope, Dinah moaned that someone might yet answer her cry for love and make this life less bitter after all.

"We must have a toast," Louisa said, pushing herself from my shoulder as the song sighed to a close. She averted her eyes, but I saw her tears nonetheless as she pulled the needle from the record. At the time, I never would have acknowledged that she loved me just a little, but I must have known. I suppressed an urge to comfort her, to hold her a bit more. I feared the obligation it might imply.

"I thought you'd left already," I said.

"Without saying goodbye? That's ridiculous."

"I almost did it," I confessed.

"But you're an asshole," Paul offered.

"I would not have been surprised," Louisa added, "to see you sneaking past my door with your suitcase in your hand."

She picked up her glass and raised it. "Who does the honors?"

Both looked at me. They always looked to me, and I never asked why.

I thought for a moment. I wanted this one to be good. I thought it should be memorable.

"To friends?" I began questioningly.

Louisa nodded to Paul. "We're touched," she replied.

'What the hell,' I thought. "And to brilliant futures."

No. Not memorable. But I meant it. And on that last day of my consequenceless youth, I could settle for sincerity.

II

Maybe I thought that after graduation, adulthood would club me on the head and drag me to its cave. I clung to the slim chance that the world would pave me an irresistible path that I could follow as inevitably as marbles down a funnel.

Instead, the subsequent months floated past me. Paul was right. I was that rich. I didn't have to work if I didn't want to. Nonetheless, I considered several careers. I grabbed case law books from the library. Resonant snores rose in minutes. I woke in the New York Public Library with my face resting in a small puddle of drool, luckily my own.

Finance itself was, of course, out. It was too close. I had seen what happened to my father, and I blamed the vocation. I was not one of those rich boys who pretended distaste for money. I knew what it bought and what it could bring. I had no illusions about the level of privilege it afforded me and did not romanticize an ideal of living without it.

I volunteered some, which was well and good, but it didn't prompt the self-congratulatory fuzzies that a lifetime of propaganda had promised. Helping the less fortunate was a fine thing to do, but I felt no better about myself for having done so. Of course, I thought I should have. Thought about that for a week and realized that I simply did not love mankind. I did not hold it in particularly high regard. I had no religion, so I could

not regard men as little God replicas and thus unique and immortal. I had read my Kierkegaard and Sartre and held mildly existential views. However, as a code, it offered no more substance or solace than Jesus. Like a mushy cake, I felt undone—strangely unfinished—not a true person. I had nothing to do, no responsibilities, no needs, no dependents, no dependencies. I was barely there, and yet, I had the gall to feel a calling that something substantial awaited me. I just had to find it; doing so would lead to the proverbial home. Some aimless yearning ate at me.

So, quite regularly, I pulled the golden horn from its velvet bed, turntable at the ready, and continued to chase the Dial, "Embraceable You." It was the best I could do.

The same necessity I lacked had dragged Paul by the neck into an 'executive trainee' position with a gigantic business machines corporation. He had no interest in business machines. He had to make a living.

It seems to rain every day, he wrote. *I am constantly hugging my briefcase close to my chest as I scurry up to a train platform or down into a subway tunnel. A thousand others dressed just like me in middling suits, maybe cups of coffee in hand and sleep still tugging at the corners of their eyes. I'm just one of many. I feel so undifferentiated. I never thought I was anything special, but at least I thought I was distinct. It's like each day I enter an elaborate, unfamiliar laboratory where tubes are stuck into my body and brain, one sucking out what's there, and another replacing it with god-knows-what.*

Inside the place is pure Old Boy network. The walls are done up in faux mahogany with carved crown moldings to suggest better days gone by. Everything's heavy and dark, even the huge pictures of old, pink-cheeked founders and former CEOs that dot the main floor hallway. They're just like the portraits on most of the walls at Harvard. I don't know if that suggests I've landed in exactly the right place or exactly the wrong one.

I sit in a large room with a bunch of other trainees. There had been just desks, but recently, they put up partitioning panels that create cubicles like horse

stalls or cattle fattening pens, each with desk, light, and an IBM Selectric typewriter. You expect a hay bale to smack you in the head at any minute. I've considered taking a shit in the corner to see if someone comes to shovel it out.

I guess I've already got a bad rep, so I have to be on extra special good behavior, smile a lot and seem consistently thrilled to run around here delivering mail (yes, executive trainees deliver the executive mail). During an initial orientation, all us trainees sat around the huge wooden table in the main conference room while someone from personnel reminded us how fortunate we were to have been selected from

Then a "Sr. Director" (which 'round here is one step below VP and thus requires a mild curtsy vs. the full bow) graced us with a flyby in which he hoped we would come to think of this place as our "corporate home" as he has.

"If you work hard," he said, "you can be richly rewarded. If you don't," he continued with a dramatic pause, "you'll be out on your ear." A hearty chuckle from all. The girl sitting next to me took notes: 'Work hard… rewarded,' she wrote.

"Let's face it," he continued, "you will spend most of your waking hours getting here, working here, and leaving here. You have got to have a passion for the work. It has got to merit your best, your loyalty, and the sincere belief that you are serving something greater than yourself. This company had revenues of 23 billion last year. We earned profits of over 3 billion. We are at the top of the Fortune 500. It doesn't get any better than this."

I got a chill as he spoke, and not from excitement. Then he downright scared me. "We are the best," he concluded. "We deserve you—the best and the brightest. And you deserve us."

I deserve this. I deserve no better than this. When I'm delivering mail, I look into the glass-walled offices with the crisply-dressed secretaries sitting outside. Inside, men in dark suits pore over papers, stare out of windows, talk on the phone. One sneaks swigs from a desk drawer bottle. They seem so far removed from the lives I've imagined for myself. Grant you, being a kid in the late 60s, early 70s, I had some bohemian fantasies, but I pretty much put the hardcore stuff behind me. I sure as hell don't expect to lead "the revolution." As a matter of fact, I am convinced that you could put us all in bits and shackles and there wouldn't be one. We'd just call

it an improved form of liberty. They talk here about how America has gone to pot. They all seem to long for some yesteryear in which everything was peachy keen, but it's like they're imagining a time when they could have been something better than men in dark suits roaming company hallways. But they're slowly convincing me that they are reality and I wonder why we paid through the nose to have our heads filled with fantasies of lives we had almost no chance of living—or I *have no chance of living. I haven't got the money or the raw ingredients to try.*

Louisa, gods love her, had not found a permanent job, despite protean efforts. She would call me up and ask endless variations of, "What's wrong with me?" and add, "I feel like I'm dating on a grander scale and facing the same rejection—except by committee."

Now she spent more time than was healthy in her robe and pink slippers, prompting visions of herself as a fifty-year-old cat lady about whom the neighbors sniggered; and to avoid her mother ceaselessly telling her what she was doing wrong, she'd grown bizarrely addicted to *The Bugs Bunny Road Runner Hour*. She wanted to fancy herself a Daffy Duck, imperturbably dauntless, while she feared she was more like Wile E. Coyote, outwitted at every turn by birds. In her present mood, she said, the violence did her good.

"Oh what heights we'll hiiiit/On with the show this is iiit!"

All through Harvard, me, Louisa, and Paul, we studied great writers and poets, philosophers and musicians—just to experience them, for their own sake. It sounds naïve, particularly today, but we did it… for no reason. We did it… because. Just to feel beauty, to run after it, the kind so sharp it hurts a little, that riffs on love and death and reminds you how grandly ephemeral you are, you and your joys and your piddling little pains. Having immersed ourselves—myself—in all of that nonsense, I wanted to live in accordance with the lofty dreams they'd stuffed my head with. I thought it was no less than my right. This is so important in understanding what happened later. Our well-above-average high

schools (public and private) and Harvard had told us that men were what they thought, dreamt, and left behind, the heights that they could try to climb, not what they earned. I believed that; it was my sin. It didn't matter that Paul was from comparatively humble beginnings, and Louisa from somewhat less humble. You'd be shocked how insular the upper tiers of a first rank public school in a desirable neighborhood could be back then. Paul and Louisa had drunk the Kool-Aid in more public and less rarified surroundings than I, but it was pretty much the same brew. We wanted our highfalutin' versions of living.

III

He had asked for white horses. It was so him—a grand gesture, portentously baroque, but tinged with whimsy. The cement gray sky tainted everything below. Surrounded by it, the white horses shined like beacons. Restless things, they tossed their heads and snorted as if desperate to drag the hearse as fast and far as they could. I wanted them to do it. I longed to see them flying, hooves a blur. Standing next to them and touching them took me away from there. A thousand pounds of strange flesh and heat, they inhabited a world I would have gladly entered. In their world, no one had died. Theirs was not burdened with rituals.

Becca, my mother, and I would ride in the limo behind the horse-drawn hearse. I had wanted to walk beside the horses, but mother forbad it. She thought it unseemly. It was as if this was her day—not my dead father's—her private mourning and not all of ours. Her acquisitive claim made it seem childish and petulant to deny her anything. Her husband had died, not our father.

I keep remembering the horses. I try to think of other things—more important things—but I can't. I stood near them outside the church, close enough to smell them. They smelled like earth—like a link to something missing in me but essential, a smell that made me want to draw it in like a drowning man draws air. I moved closer and touched

one's face. He immediately rubbed his head against my hand, but with such force that I soon struggled to stand upright against the thousand-pound beast's itchy onslaught. It left a smudge on my coat. Seeing this, the driver snapped his rein and the horse drew to attention, but it kept an eye on me. I leaned over and breathed in its breath again. The overwhelming smell of dirt and grass and sky almost made me swoon. I forgot that my father was dead. I forgot how he had died. I forgot how he had lived—identical to how I feared living. Despite not having a clue how to ride, I wanted to jump on that horse and gallop to freedom. I knew it could take me there.

Becca called out to me. It was time. I looked back at the small clutch of mourners still gathered outside the church and saw Paul and Louisa. I had spoken to them briefly before the service, but it bolstered me to see them before I ducked into the car.

As I sat, Becca grasped my hand tightly in both of hers. She had been crying all day. She never boohooed or broke down. She just continuously and silently cried. My mother sat immobile. The visible combination of pride, resentment, and possibly relief rendered her still. She rarely moved as she looked out her window. Now and then her eyes caught Becca's or mine. She'd offer a momentary aspect of motherly compassion, gone as quickly as it appeared, as her eyes settled again on the view outside.

It was surreal. It was as if I had watched myself and the proceedings on a screen. The paces were so practiced, the sets so elaborate, the players so well-rehearsed that it couldn't have been anything but fake. The corpse was the only real thing in it. A man was dead. He was gone forever. I had both admired and pitied him, and he had been my father.

I dutifully walked through the process, hitting my marks. I wore a black suit and sat in the front pew of the Catholic church I had never entered before. I watched as an ornately-robed priest of some high rank raised and lowered his voice and hands with the studied air of a diva.

Before and after the priest, a string ensemble played slow movements from Beethoven's late quartets.

My father was no more religious than I. We had a church service because that was how it was done. It was expected for a man of his rank and station. To my mother, anything less would have suggested a studied rebelliousness, and it was so much simpler and more pleasant to go along, hire the church, and do the expected thing. She would not have tolerated less than the expected because it would have reminded her too much of my father—what she considered his pointless, self-indulgent rebellions.

We climbed from the limousine and walked to the gravesite on wooden planks laid atop damp ground to keep the mourners' shoes dry. We approached the site and the earth's yawning maw open beneath the shiny, silver casket heaped with flowers. The prohibitively expensive box and the equally pricey aromatics were about to be smothered with the shit we kick from our shoes: the essence of irony.

He would have laughed. I loved that part of him, probably because it was so unexpected and like me. A fifty-eight-year-old man who had mastered the look and airs of successful American business is not supposed to whisper wickedisms into his young son's ear, but he did. He shared with me his overly developed sense of the absurd—a sense that never spared him or his own. As he walked me, for the first time, into the new offices of his brokerage house, he leaned over and said, "Remember *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? Well, I'm Monty, but this is my Money Factory!" He had been outrageously amused by what looked to me like typewriters with black screens covered with little letters in green lights. He called them "personal computers."

"I haven't a clue how they work," he said, "and I just bet the farm on 'em. If it's a success, I'll be a visionary. If it fails, your mother will either learn to cook and take a shine to cleaning (which will be easier in the hovel we'll occupy) or she'll divorce us. Probably the latter." I smiled a nine-year-old smile, half understanding what he said.

His ancestry had been one of slow ascendance. Each generation had grown a little bit richer than the last. By the time my father had come around, there was comfort, but not great wealth. His forebears, however, rested peacefully, knowing that the ground had been tilled, the seeds harvested and handed to my father to sow. His own Columbia education, begun before he entered World War II and completed after, had been a family pinnacle, and he, as he used to say, majored in money— the only subject, he had been told, worth studying in a post-war, post-devastated world.

He learned to consider the familial expectations his destiny. The war had sealed it. He never left its mindset. The grinding on, regardless of anything—blood, bullets, bodies. It's how he approached his life. He did little else for the first twenty years after college than… work. He hated golf and played it, loathed chit-chat and made it. He had the truly romanticized love of nature open to those who've spent little time in it, but he lived in the city and never allowed his rhapsodies to mature into something deeper. He never even bought himself a country cabin. He was like an animal with blinders attached at birth. Later, he noticed the blinders, realized that others didn't wear them, but his world had been so prescribed that some things were simply not open to him anymore. They might as well have not existed, but that didn't prevent him from mourning his lack of access to them.

As far as I remember, he always drank. He got funny when he did. (It was my mother who got mean.) The most exhilarating horseplay, the most hilarious jokes, the most unbearable tickling all occurred when he smelled of the brown liquid. And then, as if exhausted by his revels, he'd collapse in a chair, sometimes drink in hand, and fall asleep.

I was the sole male heir and it was my task to steer the family ship to the next level of affluence. However, unlike his own father, mine was a poor teacher who demonstrated little love for his subject—perhaps because he'd mastered it so well. He spoke glowingly of his forebears and what they had realized, but spoke derisively of his own doings, as if he had

broken a chain beautifully forged. His inability to revel in what he had done—the money he had made and the business he had helped to build—it was his great sorrow and failure. He knew that he should have taken a deep satisfaction from it; but he couldn't. As I grew older and his drinks grew deeper, he abandoned all attempts to teach me the lessons he'd absorbed when he was young. He grew more solitary, more taciturn. He went his own way and left me to go mine. That was his supreme failure—his inability to find the zeal to make me love what he so loathed. Again, he blamed himself.

His cirrhotic liver had grown cancerous. He didn't want the news to shadow my college graduation. My mother should have told us anyway, but she never understood why a wealthy, attractive man would drink like he did. She seethed at the vice he had so gloatingly nursed all of his life that it would kill him at fifty-eight, and to punish him, herself, us, and the world, she told no one that he would die from it.

A month after graduation, when it couldn't be avoided anymore, my mother told the truth. I wasn't angry at her lies. I was glad I hadn't known. In fact, I wished I still didn't. I delayed going to see him until the guilt grew overwhelming. I have to give him credit, though. He never asked me to come. He never said a word.

I sat in the waiting room, preparing. My mother had warned that he no longer looked himself. I dreaded seeing a walking cadaver. I focused on the news on the waiting room TV. I remember hearing a commentator opine on the coming elections.

> "And so again," he intoned, "images of rugged Americana, of better days, of courageous frontierism take a front seat as Ronald Reagan retains his big lead in the presidential race. His promise of a return to glory, to 'make America great again' appeals to a country that's seen two decades of upheaval and crisis, but a promise

> that ignores the more modern question, 'Whose America?'"

I sat thinking that I knew nothing of America. Born here, raised here, I had traveled more widely in Europe than I had in America. I certainly didn't know the country that was going to elect a cowboy actor to be President. I had led a sheltered life, and I had drawn wild assumptions from it. I sincerely believed that you could stop any college-educated individual on any street and have a heady discussion of Proust and Celine, or Beckett and Camus. I thought that my world was a miniature of *the* world—full of folks with the time for meditations on selfhood, great art vs. the merely good, and one's place or lack thereof in the grand, universal scheme of things. I didn't realize that my world was, in its way, as narrowly prescribed as my father's had been. I had been raised to become an Enlightenment man but had been born at the dawn of the Age of Marketing.

I meditated to the TV's tinny drone until a nurse collected me. Happily, his appearance wasn't what I had feared. He sat in a wheelchair in pajamas. A robe thrown over his shoulders, he stared out the window of the third-floor patient lounge. He looked thin and drawn—ill, yes, but not like he was dying. An IV line dangled into his arm. On hearing my steps, he wheeled himself around and held out his arms. I collapsed into them and buried my head in his neck, enjoying the smell of him again, like when I was a child. I did not cry, but he did. He quickly wiped tears from his face and pointed to a chair.

I stupidly asked, "How are you?"

He cocked his head at the ridiculous question. "Out of time," he laughingly replied, erasing more tears with the back of his hand.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

His smile faded. "The same reason you waited so long to come." He immediately reached out, as if to reassure. "I'm not blaming you. Nothing like that. But it's the same. This is something you want to avoid, deny.

I'd like to postpone it indefinitely. It's particularly galling to know that I did it to myself."

"Why?" I asked. I had never asked before, never questioned. I had always let him be.

He looked at me as if deciding if this was something he could discuss with his son, if I were man enough to understand. "I never knew," he said. "I just did it. Or I only half knew. Hell, I walked through most of my adulthood in absentia. I did what I thought I had to do, what I'd been taught to do. I just didn't realize how little of me there was in it, how counter to me it was until there was nothing but darkness without a drink. I guess it boils down to grotesque weakness, so you can score one for you mother: she nailed it. Had I been stronger, I might have allowed myself to see some things that I chose to pretend weren't there."

"You had money. Why didn't you do what you wanted? Why didn't you just do what you *wanted*?" I felt myself growing angry with him and fearing that I was like him. He read it in me.

"I don't know why. It was all I could do to fortify myself with enough bourbon to pretend I wanted more of what I had."

I couldn't look at him right then.

"Don't worry," he added. "You're better than I am. It won't happen to you."

"Does Mom come to see you?"

"Don't be mad at her. I knew what she was when I married her. Hell, I married her because of what she was. She was the perfect wife for the man I was supposed to be."

Seeing the look on my face, he grabbed my hand. "It won't happen to you," he repeated, smiling. "You're not me."

"I'm still sitting in my room playing bad saxophone. It *is* happening to me."

"You're young and scared. For good reason. It's easy to follow a convenient path and pretend that you chose it. Luckily for you, I laid a

lousy trail. If your grandpa had been around, then you'd have something to worry about."

"I have no more idea of what I want than you do."

"And you're twenty-one, so that's fine. It takes something I never had to make your own path, even if it means… noodling on a saxophone along the way."

That was everything I loved about him, right there.

"You'll look," he said. "That's the difference."

He cringed. Then he gasped and sat up arrow-straight, a stunned look in his wide eyes. "I cut down the meds to see you," he said, gasping. "Go now. Go." He waved his hands at me as he doubled over, clutching for the call button. A nurse ran in and then another as I backed out the door.

Later, I stood enshrouded in a gray haze dotted with headstones and smelling wet dirt as the machinery chunked and whirred to lower my father's corpse into the ground. Mother's impatience emanated like heat from the sealed limousine, but I didn't care. I stayed and watched the coffin disappear.

"I'll leave you my money," he wrote in his last note. "I hope you're spared the rest of me."