

South Side Story

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As I've listened to papers here over the last couple of years, I've been struck by the erudition and scholarship that is reflected in the work. Invariably, I have come away learning something, come away with an insight and overall sense of enlightenment. I'm sorry to tell you that probably won't be the case tonight. I write fiction, short stories. I spin yarns and set scenes. My best hope is to try to keep your attention and maybe entertain you a bit.

The title of my paper, South Side Story, is probably a little misleading, but I've learned that such deception is very much in bounds around here on a Monday night. What I have are really two stories, and neither of the stories even take place on the South Side. The title refers mostly to the influence of the part of Chicago where I grew up. The stories take place in the present time and are told through the voice of a narrator who now makes his life somewhere north of the river. But his stories and his life are informed by set of attitudes and a manner of speech that

comes from a place where the relation to the people around you is more direct, more intimate and, oddly, more suspicious all at the same time. Some of these folks lack the subtlety you and I are accustomed to. And now and then they slip into using language that is a little bit coarse. I hope you'll forgive them, it's just who they are.

MOTHER'S DAY
by
Jim Thompson

The news came on one of those pink message slips that they use in the office. I was on the phone trying to put this deal away and was pounding this guy, Davey, for another eighth when Donna comes in waving the message. She stands there in front of me not a foot away waving it, a big smile, jumping up and down like she had to pee. I had to hold her hand steady to read it while Davey jabbers something on the other end of the phone. It said that Claudia had gone to the hospital and she was in labor. I waved Donna away with back of my hand. "Look, Chump," I said, "I've got a reception room full of guys from Northern and from Phelps. If you want it at forty and a half it's yours. If not I call them in. I've got all afternoon" I let him think about it. You have to have a good set of nuts to work in this business.

Outside the window the traffic was tightening for lunch and people were beginning to pour out into the heat. I could imagine Davey twitching his pasty face, sitting there with his big cuff links scratching away on his note pad. I've been to his office. He's into boats and has a ship's wheel attached to his desk. I dug some crap out from under my nails with a paper clip and

listened to his breathing and to the gears clicking in his head. He whined a little, the way they do and then he came out with the magic words. "Deal," he said. I wanted so badly to tell him I nailed him, that he could have had it for forty flat. I really wanted him to know. But instead I said, "Davey Boy, take the afternoon off." I said, "Go see a ballgame or whatever you mopes do when you do something heroic."

There's a little mirror with a Mother of Pearl frame behind the door in my office. I pulled up my tie and the knot slid up nicely under the collar, and the rest fell flat like a big pancake on my shirtfront. It was the best silk tie I'd ever owned. Claudia had bought it for Father's Day -- mint green background and pink twisted ropes; it makes a nice summer expression. This was the first day I wore it. I told her the day she gave it, "I'm not a father yet." But she had made this big deal Father's Day breakfast -- fresh squeezed juice, cinnamon toast. The crumbs of toast and cinnamon were lying on the bulge of her maternity top as she watched me eat. "Don't question gifts." That's what she said. I put on my coat and stood at attention in front of Donna's desk. She was still quivering. Donna was into it. I had showed her the ultra sound picture that showed we knew it was a boy. I pointed out his little item to her. "I thought it was supposed to be two more weeks," she said. "How do I look," I said. "You look great," she said. Be brave," she said.

The hospital was just three blocks away, walking was as good as a cab. Anyway in half of them there's no air and the drivers smell like cattle. And they drive like screwballs too, cutting off one another, trying to run down the Americans. There's some grudge working there, you can make book on it. It was a scorcher, and it blasted you coming out of the air conditioning. People had some pain on their faces just walking; they carried coats over their shoulder. Two

guys in short sleeves had opened their shirts and walked down the boulevard with their arms spread out like boys playing airplanes.

You get to the hospital by crossing Hamilton at the river where it meets Metropolitan and there are five corners of stoplights. It's a real circus because the cabs try to sneak an edge, and the bike messengers in outfits that make them look like bees weave in and out of the cars and the walkers. The cars come up fast to the light and then hit the breaks at the last minute, setting off the tire squeals and the blowing of horns. There's a young Puerto Rican guy in a Volvo and he's got a big Afro with a rat tail comb stuck in it. His windows are up but the sunroof is open and he's listening to the market reports on the news radio. Sometimes things are very different than you think they are.

Standing there on the safety island you can hear the relays clicking the orders in the traffic box, telling you, "go" and "stop." And the exhaust just seems to hang in the air. The smell is of something burnt and used but still hanging around. To me the idea of chemicals in the air is no big deal. On the South End, when the wind came from the east, the Coleman James Paint Company was always part of the breathing. On hot summer mornings I would sit in the back yard as my mother worked the clothespins onto the bed sheets that flapped and snapped like boat sails, and the smell of the paint making chemicals and sometimes even the steel mills from six miles beyond kind of hung in the air. The stink was as much a part of a summer day as the grass that tickled my legs through short pants.

No more than a minute out of the building I was starting to bead up. A drop of sweat rolled right off the corner of my forehead and it spread on the sleeve of my suit and it stained the tan to a muddy disk the size of a half dollar. I've been told I pay too much attention to my clothing but I have come to terms with it. It's not just a superficial vanity but a deep seated one.

It's out of my roots and therefore not an affectation: it's from the core. There was nothing very fashionable about the South End. So now I'm fashionable. There was not a lot of good news coming out of there. Usually it was a murder or a work stoppage. All the good news was about what people were doing on the North End in the hot bars and the restaurants that people talked about, and in which and the rich people and big business people were seen, and the hotels where there were dances for charity and bandleaders in tuxedos, with polished horns and shiny slicked hair. In our part of town what was famous was good pizza and a place that was known for noodles and liver dumpling soup. But the Coleman James Paint Company sold its cans of paint all over the country, all over the world. The fathers and older brothers in the neighborhood worked there. The rich people, north of the river, painted their big houses and they stained their boat decks with Coleman James paint. My South End attitude, the tough bit, sets me apart from my fellows. They grew up in country clubs. Their mothers served on the garden committee and their fathers were part of the special sub committee to select the new golf pro. I'm just as good with the numbers and can talk mergers and acquisitions with the best of them. But the belief that I could do some violence is a nice little edge.

The yellow clicks on. The pedestrian lamp shows white, a little icon of a man stepping off the curb. I step off the curb. As I'm into the second step a blue bread truck with pictures of happy kids eating sweet cakes painted on the side makes the corner and blows past my knees and my pants legs flutter and my face gets a hot breeze. There's a dirt mark from the bumper on the leg of my pants. The guy actually brushed me. The bread truck makes the intersection and pulls up in front of a White Hen half a block away. I'm shaking from almost being killed, and also from the need to get something from this guy. I'm emotional but I'm also measured. I've learned to hold back some. I wasn't as tough a kid as some of the others were but I was a little smarter. I

wasn't willing to take a beating just on principle. At least not voluntarily. I learned somehow that it was wise to hold back a little, to stay in some control. It was not without a moment of consideration, not without seeing that this bread truck driver was short behind the wheel and that he might even have been sitting on a high cushion, that I freed my feelings. "Hey, Asshole!" I shouted down the block at him, loud enough to get a number of people to look over and certainly loud enough for him to hear. "Hey, you dumb son of a bitch, watch where you're going." I wanted this to register. I faced him directly -- stood strong, not moving. And as I ran out of additional thought I just held out a finger, pointing at him and at his blue truck with the cartoon drawing of kids and loaves of bread. I pointed like Uncle Sam. I could even see his little face in the rear view mirror outside the driver's door looking at me, watching him. My point was made. I started across the street using what was left of my light -- looking both ways, believe me. I was only going to make the next island and would then have to wait for the westbound to clear. I looked at my pants and what I thought to be grease from the bumper was only a little oil exhaust, and it brushed away so that you couldn't see that anything was ever there. I put down my briefcase on the cement of the island and pulled tight with one hand and dusted with the other. I picked up and got ready to cross again and saw that the bread truck driver was hopping out of the sliding door and was trotting toward me. He was working his way through the moving traffic. He was a little guy, short, and we would have come up not much past my chin, but he was thick looking and had one of those muscle-fat torsos like a beef animal. His bread company shirt was unbuttoned and he was showing a lot of bare white chest and belly. The blue shirt, just like the bread truck, had the same kids and loaves of bread stenciled on it. He was working his way through traffic, stopping cars with his raised hands and coming at me double time. "Hey," he shouted. "Hey, Fancy. Hold up there I want to talk to you."

I've been here before. The early moves are the most important. So I squared off to him and when he got within about twenty feet I put my leather case down on the cement and put my hands on my hips and stuck my jaw out into the air. "What's the problem?" I said to him. "I'm *your* problem," he said and stepped right up to me. I could feel his shoe tips touching mine. He wore steel-toed work boots. They must be hot inside. They looked very ragged in apposition to my black loafers, which to me seemed now very shiny, very small and tasseled. He put his hand up along side his face and poked at the air in front of me. "You used some serious language a minute ago. Do you talk to your mother with that mouth."

"You drive that goddam truck pretty recklessly," I said.

"There you go swearing again," he said. He put his fingers on Claudia's silk tie and then looked at his fingertips as if from the feel of it he was expecting some kind of residue. Over his pocket his name, Bobo, was stenciled, in script. I picked up my briefcase. "I'm on my way," I said. "You watch where you drive, I'll watch how I talk."

"Not so fast," Bobo said, and he took a step back away and looked at me from my tassels up to the top of my head. "You look very nice today." Then he said, "I'm going to put my hand on you now, on your arm, very slowly, I don't want you to move. I just want you to feel something." I looked around; there were a couple of girls from the typing pool who were walking more slowly to watch. "Stay very still," he said. "Let me advise you to make no sudden reaction." He put his left hand on the muscle of my right arm. I flexed my arm as he touched it, but my exercises lately have been racquetball and stair climbing machines and as he touched me I thought of better times when the upper arm would have been more impressive. His fingers dug in like a kind of tool that might be used in heavy carpentry. "I'd like you to follow me," he said he began to walk with me, pulling me firmly back toward his truck. I had to switch

the briefcase to my left hand. I was losing feeling in my right.

We walked the half block back to the bread truck. We passed the large windows at the street level of my office and I saw us reflected there with perfect clarity, this short pudgy, man in a blue bread shirt, tugging a bigger man in a cream colored suit, swinging a briefcase. We got to the truck and he steered me to the passenger side. He used his fingers. Pressing more on one part, easing up on another, the way a rider guides a horse. In the passenger seat, propped up and so tiny that I didn't see her under the window as the car went by was an old lady, wrinkled as a rotten peach, wearing an old blue business suit. The lapels and a cut of the suit looked like the fifties. It was spotted here and there where things had been spilled and smudged. There was a plain red tie knotted up under a little white shirt with a frayed collar. She wore a new pair of Reeboks. Between her feet she had propped a portable TV. She was watching *Geraldo*, and fiddling with the rabbit ears. Scattered on the floor of the truck were the *Journal* and *Barron's* and a binder full of stock charts and a pound box of Fannie Maes with some of the brown paper holders empty and strewn. "Mama, this is the man who said those words." She looked away from the TV to her son, then to me. "Hello," she said, and went back to adjusting the picture. "That was some nasty shouting that you did at my boy." "He called me an S.O.B., Mama," the man said and he squeezed my arm harder. "Ow," I said. "Don't hurt him Bobo," she said. "He's someone's baby." I'd never really thought of myself that way, as somebody's baby.

"Look," I said, "I'm sorry. There was a misunderstanding. I'm in a hurry. I stepped off too quickly and, ah, Bobo was driving too fast."

"Bobo does drive too fast," she said. "But he has such a important route and he has to get it done."

"What do you want me to do," I said.

"First, I want you to say you're sorry to me and for what you said about her."

"It's just an expression," I said. "I didn't even see her in the truck."

"That's a nice tie, he has on, Bobo," she said. "You should wear cheery colors like that."

"I think I'm going to give him two shiners, Mama, one for you and one for me." Bobo made his right hand into a club. The old lady pulled a Pall Mall from her inside pocket and licked the end of it rolling it on her tongue and then attacked it with fish lips. She took a Lady Ronson studded in rhinestones from the side pocket and lit up. She picked a piece of tobacco from her lip and reached under the seat to get the stock page of the *Journal*. She opened it wide and looked up and down out of the bottom of her glasses.

"Do you know about equities young man?" she said.

"Some," I said.

"That tie would look nice with your suit, Mama," Bobo said.

I was getting more nervous with this talk of punching. I started to hyperventilate, taking those short little breaths that Claudia and I learned in the baby classes those times I felt so foolish carrying the big pillow across the parking lot at the hospital, practicing that breathing, *toot, toot, toot*, like you're smoking marijuana.

Mama was interested in something on TV now and she was taking back to the man who was arguing with Geraldo and she was muttering something in support of Geraldo's position. I tried to reason again with Bobo. "Look, my man," I said. "Don't make such a thing of this."

"Just by you saying, 'My man', doesn't make you *my* man." Bobo said. Mama turned away from Geraldo and looked at the two of us, puzzled. "Does he think that we're Negroes, Bobo?"

He still held me by the same spot on the arm. His fingers hadn't moved since the moment they bit into me. My arm was numb all the way now. I felt like I was about to pass out. I thought about POW's. I was getting more sensitive. I smelled things. From the inside of the truck was the smell of fresh bread wrapped in plastic and I could swear in the heat, in the stillness, I could smell even the ink of the wrapper. Bobo was fragrant too. Not overwhelmingly, but he was starting to bloom. There was a sweat crescent under each of his arms. "What the heck smells," Bobo said. He looked at me and he bent closer and moved his wide flat nose like a bunny and turned his head from left to right. Now I smelled it too. It was shit. "Let me see your shoes," he said to me. I showed the bottoms. Now he looked really disappointed. "You stepped in dog-do. Oh my God, Mama. I'm sorry. This *is* an offensive man." He pulled me more out of Mama's sight back alongside the truck. "Look," he said, and he raised his fist right in front of my nose. His fingers and knuckles seemed to disappear into a hard mass at the end of his wrist -- dough colored, with hair growing out. "Look, I'm going to have to paste you in your eyes a little. It's for my Mom, and for your own good too.

"This is crazy," I said.

Bobo pulled me even farther away from the door toward the back of the truck. Then he seemed to have an idea. He opened his fist and started to touch my tie but then pulled back to wipe his hand on his shirt and then he took the silk in his fingertips and held it gently, as if he was playing with a baby's hand. He pulled me down so that he could whisper in my ear. "If I had this tie to give her, to give to that lady who is my mother," he said, "maybe I wouldn't feel like such a son of a bitch." I put the briefcase down and started to loosen the tie with my free hand. Right then a little breeze came up and blew a waft of garlic from out of Luigi's and my knees went a little more weak.

"Give this to me to give to Mama and you're a free man. I'll trade you the tie for the poppin' I was going to give you." Now, finally, through the scent of the garlic, the sweat and the dog shit, I smelled a deal. I put the case down and flipped the tie over. "It's from the Carriage Shop," I said, and pointed to the label with the Cinderella carriage that was shaped like a pumpkin. "I'll write you a check. I'll write *them* a check for ninety dollars. They've got this tie. They'll give you a nice box."

"No, this is the one she wants."

"I can't let you have this one. This was a gift."

"It will be a gift again," he said.

"Bobo, listen," I said. "My wife is in labor."

He looked puzzled. "Which local?" he said.

"She's in the hospital! We're going to have a baby."

"You can have a baby without this tie," he said.

"You're not getting this tie," I said. Bobo looked down at the cement and seemed ready to weep. I thought of how the toast crumbs lay on Claudia's maternity top. "Bobo, take your shot. I'm in a hurry." Bobo squeezed my arm tighter than ever.

"Think about what I'm doing on your arm. Concentrate on your arm," he said. It was no problem. Then like two beats of a heart he popped me hard, one under each eye with a fist that wasn't more than three inches away. He did it like he was tapping in a nail to hang a picture. *Bam-Bam*. He pulled me down just a little as he was doing it. It was over. "Go have your, baby, Mister. And don't call people names."

I headed across the bridge. I looked back to see who had seen. There was nothing. Half

a block more on the other side of the river I looked back again and felt under each eye and it felt like a couple of ripe plums. Bobo was hauling trays of bread and cases of Twinkies and cupcakes into the store. My whole face tingled and burned like tiny bubbles were boiling on me. At the hospital, the gift shop was next to the elevators. Inside, the flowers smelled as sweet as Spring and there was a fragrance of colored gift soap coming from a wooden box, and next to it was a bin of pot potpourri. I picked a pair of sunglasses from the rack to cover my shiners. The little clerk had blue hair, newly waved. She wore a pink smock that had the word *Volunteer* on it stitched in big letters over the pocket. She was the same age as Bobo's mother but you could tell she came from a different part of town. She looked a little like my own mother. The way she looks now. A few years ago I bought my mother a condo in Boca Grand. She's down there getting leathery and breathing the sea breezes. I asked the volunteer lady to help with the tag and she cut it off the nose with a nail clipper while the glasses were still on my face. I got on the elevator through those big doors. You could drive a bus onto it. We stopped once on the way to Maternity. One old lady got on pushing an IV. She looked a hundred: bent over, wrinkled and full of brown spots. Her legs stuck out from under her gown and showed little bunny booties that shuffled and scuffed along the floor. On eight, the bell dings. There are two nurses back by the copier chattering. You can tell by the way they move their eyes and roll their heads they are probably talking about some a guy – either that or a vacation they want to take. They see me but they are taking their time. "Hey, how about some help here." I rapped hard on the counter. One of them looks up and gives me the squint and sneer, and then behind me I hear Claudia's voice. "Hey, how about a little courtesy."

"What the hell are you doing here," I said, and I smiled right away because that's not the right thing to say to someone who has come here to be a mother.

"Aren't you nice," she said.

"Why are you dressed? You're supposed to be in a bed, wired up."

"Ever hear of false labor? He took one look and said to go home. What's with the glasses? You look like a thug."

I lifted the shades. "Racquetball this morning with Davey." She touched the bumps with her fingertips, one at a time. "Ooh, does it hurt?" she said.

"Nah," I said. "He didn't even make a point after it happened."

"Such a tough guy," she said, and then looked at her belly, "Your father is such a tough guy."

The baby felt like a rock under her shirt. I lay my hands on top, both of them. "Do I have any bills to pay from this?"

"The Great Provider," she said. "There's no charge, but save your money for a couple of weeks." We walked to the elevators. I held her hand in one of mine and my case in the other. With the dark glasses the world looked a little more relaxed. They cut the neon: they gave Claudia a nicer color. As we walked I wondered about the rest of Bobo's day. He'll finish his deliveries. Probably home by four. He'll cook dinner for himself and his mother. His mother will have forgotten me by tonight. She'd eat the dinner that Bobo would prepare and he might think of what happened but never say another word of it to his mother or anyone else – ever, probably.

I thought about Davey. I wonder if he took my suggestion and went to the ballgame. I could see him there with a beer, hiding from the sun in his floppy boat cap, getting foam on his lips and telling somebody how he really busted my balls today. That's okay. I'm even glad I didn't tell him. Let him have his moment. He's somebody's baby too.

We know from Wordsworth that the child is the father to the man. That's what these stories are all about. But, through some unintended irony I came to call this first one, Mother's Day.

James Joyce gave us the concept of literary epiphany. No one was able to illustrate it better before or since. One might think that Dubliners are especially prone to the experience. But, I think South Siders might be too. This story is called Happy Hour.

Happy Hour

by Jim Thompson

A lot of people got the axe, lots of them. It was one of those downsizings that seemed to be happening everywhere. I had to take fifteen people out of my department. All the department heads had met yesterday in a long meeting that went well into the night. We agreed we'd get it all done in one day, today. Real fast. Real simple. It was finished now. I was packing up to go home. I decided to call Roger for a drink. He has an office a couple of blocks away from mine. Roger is always game for Friday cocktails. "I'll be right over," he said.

"No, I'll come there. I'll meet you at the Trafalgar." I didn't need to be running into anybody who had just gotten the boot. The company had brought in out-placement people to teach us how to do this. They had workbooks and videotapes. On the tape, actors who pretended to be office people played out the range of reactions. They showed you the kinds of things you'd run into and how you, as a manager, needed to handle it. You had to get it right. You had to be very direct. You needed to have compassion, yes, but it had to be done quickly. You couldn't beat around the bush. We learned the *do's* and the *don'ts* from the tape. One of the big "*don'ts*" was don't let there be any liquor

involved. That's why I didn't want to meet Roger at the bar in my building. I didn't want to run into anybody who'd been drinking and just lost his job.

My packing was finished but I just sat at my desk with my hands folded and let the time pass. I figured I'd hold back and allow traffic to clear. Wait for people to get out of there. When I finally went into the hallway it was empty. So was the elevator and the drop felt like it was going to be one of those straight shots right to the lobby, but then it slowed and made a stop on the seventh floor. It was only the cleaning lady. She got on wheeling a big trash basket on a dolly. She was wearing those big yellow rubber gloves and was prepared for the dirty work. On the sixth floor she backed off the elevator

pulling the dolly after her. "You have a nice *weekend*, Sir" she said. She steered her big bin with its racks, clips and holders for brooms and cloths and spray bottles, humming one of those melodies that you hear in the gypsy part of the werewolf movies. As the door closed she looked up once more with a little smile. At the main floor the lobby was also clear and I waved to the guard and he gave me a quick salute with the fingertips and went back to reading his newspaper. I sailed out the revolving door and hiked across the bridge, walking north, the three blocks over to Roger's office. The night is cool, even for October. About half the leaves were off the trees and they crunched when you stepped on them.

The Trafalgar is a watering hole in the basement of Roger's building. There's an entrance off the street and you step into a dark cellar where the pings and bells of pin balls fight the juke music and electric beer signs are full of popping lights and dazzle. Roger is sitting alone in a banquette with his back to the wall but he's shouting something over to some of his pals at another table. They laugh and make boyish gestures across the room. When he sees me Roger spreads his hands, palms up, preeminent, welcoming.

"What brings you out? Are we celebrating or is it just the siren call of half price drinks?" He tapped his watch face, "Order up. The cheapies end in twenty minutes."

"No, I'm definitely not celebrating," I sat down. The plastic cushion let out a whoosh. "We had to fire a bunch of people today. I had to let go of fifteen."

"Ouch," Roger winced and wrinkled his nose. "I'll bet that leaves a mark." He swirled the last of a silvery margarita in the big curved glass and swallowed it down. "*Trinken Sie und vergessen Sie*" He craned his neck looking for the waitress.

"Did zu hov goot paper on zem?"

“What do you mean good paper?” Roger, when he’s not imitating a Nazi, is a contracts lawyer and frequently talks in a legal slang as if I’m supposed to understand it.

“Good paper -- these people you whose lives you shattered today, did you have performance ratings on them, proof that you had the right to do this? You have to be able to show cause you know. You leave yourself wide open...” He was getting revved up for a lecture. Roger has that endearing talent for making you feel like you’re something of a disappointment. He seems to be surprised that you’re able to even survive. The waitress came and he tapped his empty margarita. I told her I wanted a glass of burgundy. As she walked away he let his head rock back and forth in rhythm with her swaying behind. “*Muchas Gracias*,” he said bouncing his eyebrows. Roger has lost most of his hair in front but oddly his eyebrows have grown bushier. There was a candle floating in a bowl on the table and the light from it cast spiky shadows onto his forehead.

“Our lawyers said that this was not about performance. That it was about legitimate job reductions.” Roger thought about this for a moment and nodded to himself.

“That’s right. That’s right. But they have to be proportional. You need to have proportional minorities, proportional women -- that sort of thing. Proportional old people...

Discrimination... The people you bump off have to be in the same proportion to the employee population. Did you have that?"

I assured him that we had all of the information that was required. Again, I referenced our own lawyers to cushion my credibility because Roger assumes right out of the blocks that he's dealing with a bunch of fools and that everyone should thank God that he's arrived in time to keep things from really falling apart. I was beginning to regret that I didn't just go directly for the train and home.

"We had all that. The documents were in order."

Roger gobbled up peanuts from a new dish the waitress had set down. He held them cupped in his hand and shook them like dice before popping them into his mouth. Red skins and peanut bits were strewn on the table. "Okay, so tell me some stories."

"What do you mean tell you some stories?"

"You fire fifteen people, you must have some stories to tell. This was kind of a big day for you. Big day for them, that's for damn sure. Very human. What happened? Did anybody get ugly? Anybody take off after you?"

“We had one guy come in. He was big guy, powerful, used to play semi-pro football. Forty-two. Married, two sons. We had all the personal stuff. We did them all in the Section Head’s office and this big guy comes in and sits down, all pleasant. The Section Head introduced me. The guy brought a pen and a note pad like he was about to get some kind of assignment. The guy said, ‘So what can I do for you fellas?’ And the Section Head looks at me and there is, there is this silence. I say to the guy -- I say his name -- ‘Charles,’ I said, ‘Charles, this is not going to be a good meeting. It’s going to be a difficult meeting.’ I told him, ‘You’re very much aware that the company is going through some difficult financial times and that it’s going to be necessary for us to let go of a number of very capable people, people who have been good and valuable employees and I’m very sad to have to tell you that you are going to be one of them.’ It all came out of me in one long sentence. And the guy, Charles, looks absolutely stunned like he has no idea what to do. He looked over at the Section Head. And the Section Head, the son of a bitch, all of a sudden turns his back on the guy, folds his arms and starts looking out the window. I talk Charles through the severance papers and explain how the company is offering a week’s severance for every year of service and how since he’s put in eleven years that’s eleven weeks and so forth. ‘What do you mean, *offering*. he says. ‘That’s what we’re going to give you,’ I said. He’s just sitting there fidgeting with his pencil and then asks, very nicely, very quietly, ‘Is there anyone I can talk to about this?’ The Section Head is still looking out the window, still has his back to the guy, but then he turns around and walks over to him. He puts his hands on the big guy’s shoulder and says the

following: ‘Charles, I want you to know I had nothing to do with this. I want you to know that I asked that your name be taken off the list.’ I couldn’t believe it. I could not believe what he was saying. So then the guy, Charles, looks at me and he can see from my face that what his boss was saying was all bull. He turns in his chair and says to the Section Head, he says, ‘Get your hands off me you punk. You bastard.’ Then Charles says to me, looks me right in the eye, ‘You did this as well as you could. I’m sure it can’t be fun for you either.’ He picked up his packet of papers and walked out.”

“The boss, whad’da call him, the Section Head,” Roger says. “That’s an asshole. That’s the guy you should be firing.”

“There was another fellow who sat there and listened to me give my little speech. He listened very intently; nodding his head as if he was a step ahead of everything I was saying and understood and was in sympathy with the company’s difficulties. Then when I got to the words that made it clear he was going to be fired he flinched, once left and once right, quickly, like he was in the electric chair. Every part of his body moved all at once. Then he settled, just as quickly and listened and nodded again as I talked him through what was going to happen.”

“Anybody go to pieces on you. Anybody lose it?”

“Not go to pieces, exactly. There was this one woman. Her name is Joan Erickson. She had a hard time with it. She’s thirty-one years old and she’s one of those pretty women – but simple about it, not really showy, you know. She had straight blond hair. A little dingy. A real nice smile. She wasn’t made up like she was trying to be pretty. For some reason I noticed she had a blue plastic comb in her hair and you could tell it was chosen to match her dress. It hit me that it was one of those little decisions that people make in the morning before they know what’s waiting for them. She sat very quietly with her hands folded and listened to what I had to say. When she started to understand what was happening I could see the tears rise up over the bottoms of her eyes. And I don’t know why – I wouldn’t normally – I just reached over and took both her hands and she squeezed and held on for dear life. We’re there holding hands and our hands are lying right on top of the papers that I had to take her through. Her head was down and one of her tears drops on the back of my hand. She told me that she’d just moved into a new apartment and just signed a new lease. She didn’t know if the severance was going to be enough for her to find another job in time, before it ran out, and she didn’t know what she was going to do. I told her, ‘Let’s see what happens. Let’s just see how it plays out. There are so many companies that want to hire our people.’ Then I told her we wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her. I shouldn’t say that. I couldn’t say that. I didn’t have any authority to say that. But I did. She was really sad. I didn’t know what else to do.

Roger didn't look at me. I could tell he was listening but was also intent on lining up peanuts on the table top, making rows and ranks, once in awhile picking one out from the middle for himself and then moving around the others to square up the pattern.

“Another one – a guy our age, as soon as I said the magic words he jumped out of his chair and started pumping my hand and he said, ‘Ed, this is just the kick in the pants I’ve been looking for. Thanks a million. I’ve been needing to make some changes.’”

“It’s a funny world,” Roger said. He sneaked a look at his watch. “Full of funny people.” It’s interesting to me that I was not bothered to see Roger pretty much unaffected by all of what I was telling him. Maybe there was no reason he should be. I said to him that I needed to be heading for the train. The waitress came over with the check. I told him we’d split it even and he nodded his head. We both went into our wallets. As we are doing this Roger said, “You know, you’ve had a hell of a day. But it sounds to me as if you might have learned something. And it also sounds as if you tried not to hurt anybody. So that’s something to feel good about.”

What he said stopped me cold. I pulled two fives out of my wallet and tossed them in the middle of the table. “It’s funny that you should use those words,” I said. Along with the money I also pulled out a handwritten note kept in my wallet inside a small plastic packet.

“Look at this.” The worn paper in the plastic sleeve was starting to split along the lines it had been folded. I opened it and laid it on the table facing him and slid it forward. The handwriting was simple, in royal blue ink that had faded and smeared over time and there was a bit of a clear stain, a grease mark in a corner of the paper. There were only a few words. *Try to learn something today, and try not to hurt anybody. Love, Mom.*

“Ha! Well, great minds,” he said. “That’s what I tell my clients.” He tapped a short drum roll on the table. “Always listen to your mother and always listen to Roger. How long have you carried that thing around with you?”

“Thirty years more or less.” I refolded the paper and put it back in the plastic and back into the wallet. We sat with the money between us. There was not a lot more to say. The pinball was still going and someone had played some Sinatra on the jukebox.

“I’ll tell you one more story. Back in the fifth grade there was this boy named Wesley Fleming. We were what, eleven years old? He was a little guy but really strong. He had really fast fists. His parents had divorced over the summer and ever since school started again he was getting into fights with everybody. It was probably late October, like now, and the leaves were falling off the trees and I remember a fight that I got into with

him. I don't know how it started but we wrapped each other in headlocks and rolled over one another in the schoolyard. We rolled into a huge bunch of raked leaves. Each of us was panting and sweating and holding on in a death grip and there was the loud crackling of dried leaves as we rolled over and over. Someone, some teacher came along and broke it up. That's really all I remember about the fight. But at the end of that week, on a Friday, the morning bell had rung and our teacher, Miss Granger, was taking attendance and saying the children's names to herself, just her lips moving as she looked out over the room. Wesley's seat was empty and I saw her make a little check mark in her book. Half an hour later we're reading Geography and the principal comes in and she whispers something to Miss Granger. They both go out in the hall and then they come back, Miss Granger and the principal tell us to put the books away. They begin to talk to us about what a pretty day it was and the change of seasons. It was all small talk that was about wasting time. They were waiting for something, or somebody. Anyone could see that. Then, in comes Miss Doyle, the old lady that was the Guidance Counselor, and the three of them tell us that there has been an accident and that Wesley Fleming is dead. Everybody gets very quiet and they take their hands off their desks and fold them in their laps the way you did when you were trying to show you were paying attention. The three of them talked about Wesley and how sad this was and they asked us to talk about him and how we felt right now and to try to understand how these things can happen and that sometimes it seems like there's no reason but they happen anyway. A couple of girls

started to cry and one or two of the boys too. Miss Granger was dabbing at her eyes.

Throughout the morning the parents, mostly the mothers, came to pick up their kids and walk them home. The class got smaller one kid at a time. By the time my mother got there only three, maybe four were left after me.”

Roger shifted in his seat. The waitress came back to pick up the check. He put his hands on top of the money and pointed to my glass and then to his for them to be filled.

“Throughout that weekend we heard the word about what had happened. We got the pieces of it. We talked it over and made some sense of it until the pieces of the story pretty much held together. Wesley was late for school. It was about ten after nine and Bernie the patrol lady, the crossing guard, was walking off her post and heading for her car. Wesley, I guess, cut his bike in front of another car and it threw him high in to the air and he hit the pavement and as he lay there, I guess it wasn’t more than a second, a coal truck ran over his head. Absolutely flattened it.

“So then we had the story. All day on Saturday and Sunday, in little groups, we worked over the details of how the bike might have looked, all broken and twisted. We wondered whether he felt anything and who had to make a call to his mother and father

and was there going to be a funeral and were kids supposed to go to it. The next Monday, walking to school, you could see the children in ones and twos and in larger groups slow down as they walked past the spot. Looking to see if there was a stain from him or some leftover sweeping compound which we were convinced they had to have used just as our janitor used it to dry up the spot when kids would get sick in school. Some of them pointed to the area of the street where it happened. Some of the girls with their books cradled in their arms refused to look at all. They would ignore it but you knew they were thinking about it. At recess many of the usual ballgames never happened because so many were out at the back fence looking at the street and talking about the details, like whether any of the coal had spilled when the truck screeched to a stop. At the end of the day when we approached where Wesley was hit we slowed down to look again. I was with a small crowd of boys. They talked about the spot and about the memorial service that was to happen that night at Wesley's church. Everyone was looking to the right, looking at the street as we arrived at the spot. For some reason, I have no idea why; I looked for a moment to the left onto the lawn of one of the houses. Under a small evergreen bush there was a bag made of brown paper. I walked with the others a few steps but then peeled off and went back. They kept walking and talking, forgetting about me. I reached under the bush and saw that it was a lunch bag. I could tell that inside there was a sandwich and some other stuff. The bag had a small stain on the outside where the lunch had kind of made a little mark. Of course I knew what it was. There wasn't even any thinking about it. It was Wesley's lunch that he had been carrying. It must have been

thrown far away from him when he got hit. I sat down on the grass, out of sight beside the evergreen and waited. I sat there with the lunch until I was sure everyone had passed to go home because I didn't want anyone else to see this and get involved with it like they had all the rest of it. I must have waited twenty minutes. I thought about what to do with it. I couldn't just put it in the garbage. I thought about returning it to Wesley's parents but figured it would be stupid for me to bring Wesley's lunch to the memorial service. I knew that doing so would cause a lot of laughing or a lot of crying and that either way it seemed like the wrong thing. So I brought it home with me. I went to my room and closed the door and put the lunch right next to my books on my desk and just sat there looking at it all. Then I realized the only thing I could do was to open up the bag and eat it. I ate Wesley's lunch. There was a sandwich and a thin piece of chocolate cake. I sat there at the desk and stared down at the food, chewing and swallowing and trying not to think about anything."

"Holy Christ!" Roger said and then he started to laugh. He bounced up and down. "Jesus Christ, I love that." He clapped his hands a couple of times and laughed and rocked back and forth and when he gets like this he always gets me laughing too.

After a few more minutes we finished our drinks and paid up. We shook hands and I made for the train. In the station I decided on one more for the road and ordered another burgundy in a plastic cup. I picked up a *Newsweek* at the stand and a small bag of

potato chips from the wire. I worked my way up the narrow metal stairs of the empty dome car. I spread it all out on the seat beside. The chips were gone in a few fast handfuls. The wine was okay, but it had a little bite. *Newsweek* had the story of a plane crash last week and the cover showed the bent metal and the pieces of seats being picked from miles of open cornfield. It seemed like the wreckage had spread over the entire state of Iowa. The pictures inside showed the government investigators trying to piece together the mystery. They had found the black box. I licked the salt from my fingers and then turned the page. In the Science section it showed a small group of scientists walking among green shrubs and saplings that had sprouted strong and new in the Mt. St. Helen's lava bed. I thought about the people who had been plowed under today at the office and that I really did believe what I had told them, that they would be all right. They would be reabsorbed somehow. But there was this too: I know that in a way I was inside each of them. I was a part of a nightmare or a turning that would go with them at some level to their graves. All of them had probably gone now to their homes, to their dinners and their problems. The big guy, Charles, might be having a drink with his wife and talking it over. Not telling their boys yet about what happened. I imagined Joan Erickson working at her kitchen table listing her expenses on a sheet of lined paper and calculating how the company severance might stretch. The faces of the fifteen people mixed with Roger and his eyebrows and the kids in the schoolyard pointing at the spot, and those same children dressed in church clothes filing past the closed box, baffled by the amazing fact that Wesley, virtually headless, lay inside. That afternoon in my bedroom thirty years ago

came back again with its details—the unwrapping of his lunch, and it's as if I could remember every bite of the sandwich – the jelly and the peanut butter having softened, the white bread that had stayed fresh, wrapped in waxed paper. It had been so tightly wrapped with the corners carefully folded into triangles and tucked under. The chocolate cake had held up pretty well too. I could still taste the gooey frosting and the explosive feel of it on my tongue. I remembered the flattening and refolding of the wax paper and slipping it back into the brown paper bag and can after thirty years still feel that other piece of paper that was inside the bag. The note in Wesley's lunch bag, folded twice and written in a simple hand in royal blue ink: *Try to learn something today. And try not to hurt anybody.*

The train was taking me home, stopping at stations along the way. Lights were coming on in the kitchens and bedrooms of the houses that lined the tracks. People were coming home. The forecast was for frost but it was clear and the October moon shined orangey white and with the help of the street lights and shop signs showed people hauling their bundles, holding their collars closed in the cold, waving to one another or passing one another unnoticed. Unlocking their car doors. Getting on their way. The branches of the trees showed only in outline. The leaves in the gusts of wind were being shaken from the trees and would fall and need to be gathered. I could imagine them, tomorrow, having fallen and blown into piles, that their color would be shown sharply again in the morning sun.

