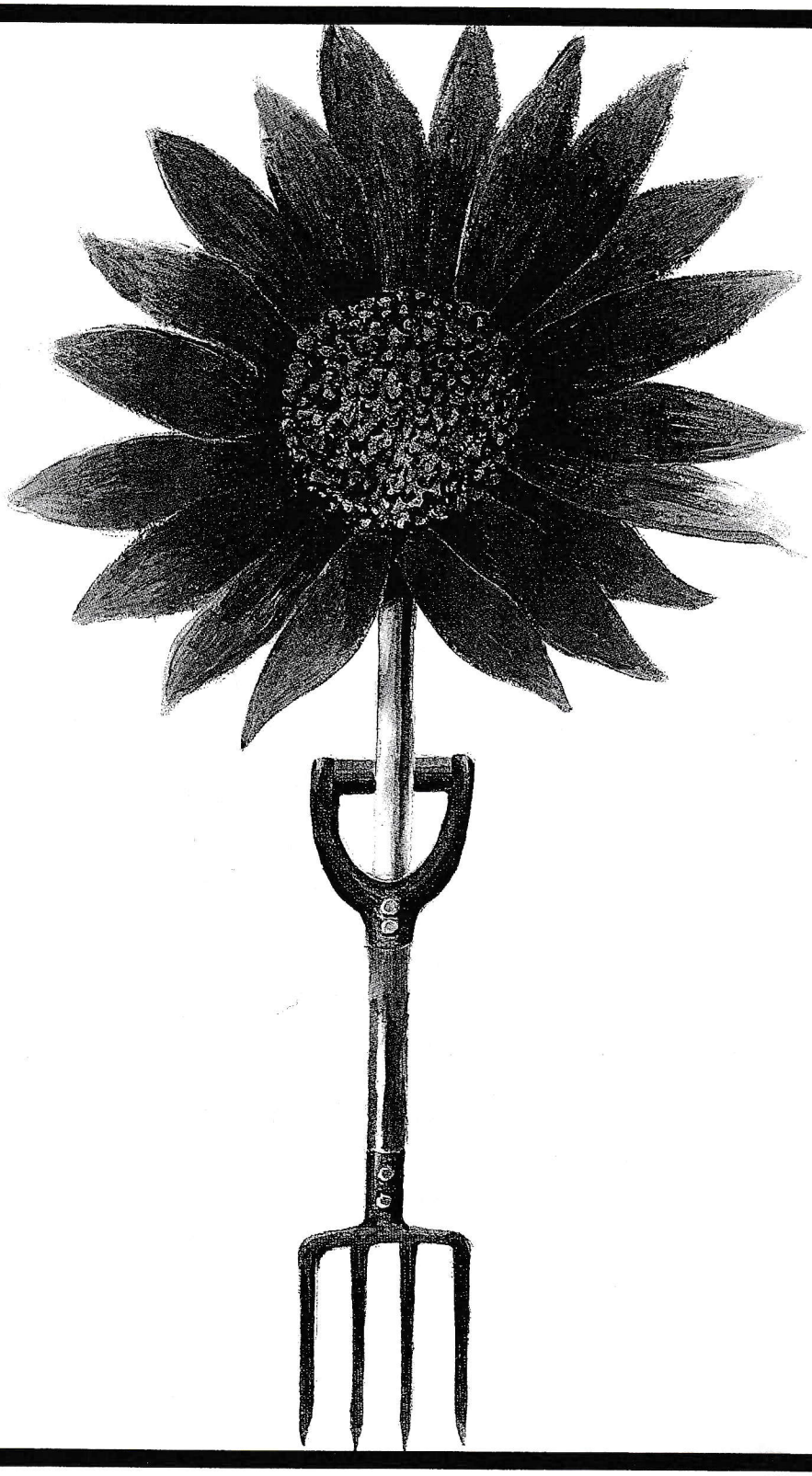
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Oath

BY MARC BOOKMAN

It is a myth that all dreams seem real to the dreamer. In the starriest part of the night, only hours before his mother's funeral, Will Fortas had a dream that he knew was the exact opposite of real. He was in his childhood bedroom, and his parents were standing at the foot of his bed, arguing with each other like drunks over a tab. Will could not recall their ever having an argument, and for a moment he wondered if they actually were drunk; but now both were dead, his father having passed more than three years before, and it occurred to him that his mother's death had prompted this late night visit. What it was they were fighting about he couldn't quite make out—every sentence seemed more cryptic than the one before, every word a step closer to an old wound he barely remembered. Soon it occurred to him that his parents weren't so much drunk as displaced, their dispute sounding as a river might look if it suddenly began to flow backwards. For some reason, maybe just the preternaturalness of the situation, he knew better than to interrupt. He understood, in the same way he understood the difference between truth and reality, that he needed to listen.

"Simon, you're not even a member," his mother said.

"That's hardly the point, Gloria," said his father, who had suddenly stopped yelling and was now speaking so softly that Will held his breath to hear him.

"The point?" Gloria asked, still loud but no longer for a reason, at least not because she needed to be heard over her husband. "Of course, Simon, the point. *The point.* I almost forgot. You actually had a reason for doing what you did."

Then his father said something else, but Will couldn't hear him and propped himself up on his elbows. The older man, wearing a gray tweed sports jacket that seemed to catch all the available light in the room—

a guitar-shaped night light, a shaft of neon from the HoJo across the street—was hunched over the edge of the mattress, his head in his hands. Will had seen him sitting like this a million times, deep in thought, rubbing his eyes to alleviate a headache, sometimes just sleeping in such a way that the slightest push might topple him over. But this time he was awake, and Will could hear him talking to himself: no one does anything without a reason, it's the quality of the reason that needs to be considered, it's the quality of the reason that determines the quality of the act. . . . This was the way his father talked, and Will, listening intently to every word, laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Now his mother was quiet, in fact it was possible she had left the room, and all he could hear was the soft buzzing of his father's voice going on about choices and character and how the latter always limited the former. Comforted, calmed, Will fell into a deep sleep of the sort he had not enjoyed in a long time. The sort that does not lend itself to visits.

It was January of 1960, the beginning of the second semester, when Simon Fortas renounced the loyalty oath he had signed nine years earlier. 1960! He was a professor of philosophy, so steeped in academia that he rarely read a newspaper, and of course he'd had no reason to call a press conference or even attend one for that matter. Not knowing what procedure to follow, he called the local paper and spoke to a man who answered the phone, "city desk." Just like in the old movies, he thought.

"I have an announcement to make," he said, "concerning a very grievous mistake made by the university and myself in 1951. I shall make the announcement today at three o'clock on the steps of College Hall." But no member of the press showed up. Why would they? What announcement, nine years coming, could be news? Professor Fortas was left standing on the steps, looking at his watch, kicking the ground with his foot as if he were waiting for a bus. For one hour he stood there in a freezing wind, alternately flapping his arms at his sides and holding an out-of-place gray fedora on his head; then he went back to his office and wrote the following letter to University President Felix Samuelson, a very old and close friend who had received his appointment from the trustees only three months before:

Dear Sir,
As I am sure you will recall, having sat across from me in the

University cafeteria during the luncheon hour of September 6, 1951, we attached our signatures to these words as a condition of our continuing employment: "I am not now nor have I ever been a member of the Communist Party or any organization whose goal is the overthrow of the United States. Nor do I support or espouse any views that would tend to undermine our democratic form of government. So help me God." I now withdraw my signature from that document, and resign my position with the University effective immediately.

Simon Fortas

Later that same afternoon a man appeared in their living room, a man Will recognized from a dinner at their house that summer. He kept saying what a lovely meal it was, and Will remembered thinking how silly that sounded when a man said it. He was old, with dashes of gray through his hair and glasses that rested at the bottom of his nose. Just before his father introduced him he recalled the man's name. Felix.

"This is Mr. Samuelson, William."

"Felix," the man said. He was holding a piece of paper in his right hand, and made a special effort to place it on the coffee table and shake Will's hand. "You remember me, don't you?"

"Hi," Will said. The school bus had just dropped him off, and he was starving. Every afternoon he would get a glass of milk and some cookies and watch afternoon cartoons, but now Felix was sitting where he usually sat. He decided to eat in the kitchen. It was that time of day when the sun pushed through the blinds in lines on the kitchen table, and Will arrangd his snack between them.

"Now, Simon, I certainly hope and trust that you're going to reconsider this." Will heard the paper bend in the air as Samuelson picked it up. "I'm not sure what provoked you to such a thing, but I want you to know that so far it is entirely between us. I haven't even told my wife. Frankly, I'm afraid that if I did she'd faint dead away."

"Spare me your theatricality, Felix. It's not that I've got some terminal illness, I'm just terminally tired of hypocrisy."

"I ran into Gloria today. She was her usual self, going three directions at the same time. She said she was very excited about her new classes, she's looking forward to an excellent semester." Will stopped chewing at the mention of his mother and leaned toward the door.

"Oh, you're so smart. No, I haven't told her yet. As a matter of fact, I was going to tell her today."

"She'll be a little late. I asked her to pick up a lecture this afternoon so that I might have an opportunity to talk you out of your early retirement. I figured since you hadn't told her yet it wasn't etched in stone; although I would have thought you might discuss the surrendering of a tenured professorship with your wife before sending the resignation letter."

"I've decided to stop teaching, that's all. The word 'surrender' seems a bit melodramatic, doesn't it?"

"You're talking like a nineteen-year-old, but you're a grown man with real responsibilities. What do you think, you're going to throw yourself off a train, dust off, and walk to the next station with a new identity?"

"No, Felix, I don't think that. It's still me. Whatever happens, it's still me. I'm just being myself, only I'm trying to be the best part of myself. I need to get myself back, Felix. Do you understand? I'm not trying to start over, it's exactly the opposite. I took a new identity when I signed that goddamned oath. I'm just trying to get my old identity back."

"You're giving up your career, Simon. Once the board reads this"—Will heard the paper shaking in the old man's hand—"they'll never let you back. No other school will take you, either. You'll be on their rotten list for the rest of your life—"

"Aren't you making my point, Felix?" But Felix did not heed this interruption. His voice had become high and fast, and Will thought that he might need to stop for a breath of air.

"And for what, Simon? So you can feel a little better about yourself? How long do you think that will last? Let me tell you, not long; pretty soon you're going to feel like a damned fool."

Then Felix did take a breath, a deep sigh of a breath that practically echoed in the kitchen and penetrated right to the pit of Will's stomach. He didn't like it when someone spoke to his father this way; he felt that he shouldn't have been listening to the conversation, that he had been intruding by eating his snack rather than going outside to throw a ball against the garage or ride his bike around the block. When he crept to the door—he couldn't decide whether to sneak out of the house or hide behind the refrigerator—both men were touching each other at the shoulders. Neither one said another word, and after a few seconds Felix left their house. Will noticed that he still had the piece of paper in his hands.

"William, would you come out here, please," his father called. Will

knew that he had been spotted; he ran back to the table, guzzled what was left of his milk, stuffed the last cookie in his mouth. His father was looking out the living room window, and he swallowed hard while he waited.

"Do you know why Dr. Samuelson paid us a visit today?" Simon asked. Will said nothing; from his parents he had inherited a well-developed sense of the rhetorical question. "He was acting as a good friend should act, he was worrying about our prospects as a good friend should worry. He knew that I had some objections about things that have happened these past years, but he wanted me to make them quietly, in an occasional classroom lecture or anonymous letter to the editor. He wanted me to be happy." His father still faced the window, and something about the way he stood convinced Will that he was crying; but when he turned around there was hardness in his eyes. An omen of the future.

"Many intelligent people have pointed out the absurdity of the world, William. But if you do nothing more than point, you are merely gesturing. It is the struggle to make the world less absurd that makes the world less absurd. Oh well, perhaps we shall talk about this some other time." Will shrugged his shoulders. Even then he knew that his father had no one else to listen, and if he didn't understand what was being said at least he understood why it was being said.

Five weeks after Simon Fortas stopped teaching, Gloria Fortas moved out of their home in the northwestern suburbs of Philadelphia with their five-year-old son and their two-year-old cocker spaniel, into a fully furnished downtown apartment she had seen for the first time only forty-five minutes earlier. "This will be fine," she said to the landlord after poking her head in the door and turning on the light. She said the same thing to her son and the dog when she raced through a yellow-red light and nearly hit a taxi later that evening, and again when she opened the apartment door that night with luggage in her hands, flipped the light switch, and saw the living room bulb flare out.

Her leaving caught Simon by surprise. He had been playing Chinese checkers with his son when Gloria rang their front doorbell. "I forgot my house keys," she explained when he answered the door; she pushed her way past her husband, said nothing to her son studying the configuration of marbles on the board at his feet, and went up the stairs without taking off her coat. She emerged seconds later with a little green

suitcase bulging around the letters W I L L I A M—the name with which they had intended to raise their son—and set it down next to the door. She couldn't have packed a bag that fast, Simon thought, but he didn't say anything about it. She lugged two much bigger suitcases step by step down the stairs over the next fifteen minutes, and he said nothing about those, either. Other than to suggest an occasional marble jump to his son, Simon said nothing at all until Gloria was returning for Will and the dog after moving the three suitcases to the car. On the dog she draped an idiotic plaid jacket of the sort more often seen on a terrier or schnauzer, and over Will she pulled a dirty, white, nappy snowsuit which, coupled with the way she dragged him toward the door, made him look like a lamb on his hind legs being led to the slaughterhouse. The motor was running and the headlights, left on, were shining into their living room, and when Simon went to the window to lower the shade he could not tell if there was someone sitting behind the steering wheel. For a reason he could not articulate, even to himself, he hoped there was. It seemed better to be left for someone.

"What are you doing?" he said.

They had barely spoken since she'd learned of his decision to give up tenure. She had packed her bags and dressed their child for the cold and collared the dog and started the car and he was asking her what she was doing! Going for a cup of coffee, she wanted to say, checking out the newest exhibit at the art museum. Selling your child to a Korean couple who need him to help tend their farm around the Pusan Perimeter. Whatever she said, he was incapable of hearing her. Gloria, the opposite of her husband, was moment to moment; if something bothered her she didn't spend nine years ruminating about it. Yet both understood this: only the most random chance had brought them together, in the shape of a son. A dog. A few suitcases.

Will took everything in, but nothing concrete that returned over time. He wasn't the sort of person who could list his classmates from kindergarten, and at five years old the separation of his parents did not stay with him. At least not entirely. What did was the sense of an ending. He remembered that first night the way a traveler might call back a long-ago journey from a lone photograph, a single image that jolts a larger memory: he is standing outside the door to their new apartment, dragging a suitcase behind him with two hands, blowing his own breath toward the ground so that it will rise and warm his face while his mother searches her pockets for the key. Finally, after how many seconds, she pushes the door open with her shoulder, wedges a suitcase into the room

to stop the door from closing again, turns on the light. And then that little pin-drop noise of filament hitting glass, amplified by the flash of the bulb as it flares out. That's the image. An empty apartment—dull red and green furniture like the day after Christmas, a Zenith radio sitting on some magazines piled up in the corner, a dining table without chairs in the dead center of the room. An ending.

Gloria loved her son dearly, loved taking him for haircuts, picking out his first suit, packing his lunch for school, learning with him the first lessons of arithmetic, the miracle of mixing blues and yellows. But, ultimately, the strain of laying out his clothes before school, of washing the green paint out of his hands, of making his lunch *every day*, proved greater than her desire to be a mother. One night, while she sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee that had grown cold during her son's bedtime story, Gloria admitted to herself that she had taken custody of Will out of spite. This insight did not come to her grudgingly, but rather matter-of-factly, as if it had finally dawned on her, sipping her drink at the table, that coffee tasted better hot than cold. She wiped the corners of her mouth with a napkin, then spread the napkin out in front of herself and wrote the word *options* at the top. She underlined the word with a flourish and doodled around the edges of the napkin for several minutes, but in the end she noted only three choices: return, stay, go. She chose the last; and seven months after she took her son and moved out, she returned him to his father and headed to New York City, where she began a new life as an artist. (Not an art history teacher, she explained carefully to Will when she called him on the phone from her new apartment. An artist.) Her first painting, reprinted on the back of a postcard to advertise an exhibit in a small gallery in Chelsea, was of a woman jumping from a very high bridge into a rushing river, shedding clothes, hat, purse, and shoes, until finally entering the water completely naked. She called it *Third Option*.

"Subtlety always was her long suit," Will's father said to himself when he looked at the mail the day the card arrived. Will nodded his agreement without interest and went back to the Phillies game; but years later the postcard turned up in a thick gray envelope of his personal papers, and somehow he recalled his father's passing comment. For the next half-hour he alternately studied the picture and closed his eyes to remember, careful in the end to place the postcard back in the gray envelope between his birth certificate and second-

grade report card. A few years after that he thought about buying a tiny frame for it and hanging it in his office, but he never did.

Simon Fortas adjusted to his role as a parent in much the same way you might dress yourself in a very dark room, worried more about finding the correct articles of clothing than the correct color coordination, and knowing that occasionally you were going to look ridiculous. He did not come naturally to the responsibilities or the joys of raising a child but, unlike Gloria, he soon perceived the actuality of a son to be better than the idea of one. The way the baby frowned just before messing his diaper or dropped his uneaten french fries delicately to the floor when he finished dinner, the way he collected his toys in his hands and then discarded them one by one as he walked to his room, these were bread crumbs in a forest of adult demands and obligations, and soon Simon had found his way. When his wife took their son and left, he recognized that his marriage was over, his fatherhood just beginning. The seven months that passed before Gloria returned his son to him seemed a reasonable price to pay for such a discovery. It gave him time to think.

"I *was* a philosophy teacher, now I'm just unemployed," he told the few friends and former students who felt comfortable enough to call and ask what he was doing with himself. He made a point of the past tense, to quell any rumors that he might reconsider his capricious decision, but he never said more than that. These same friends wondered among themselves what in the world had possessed him to just walk away from the university as he had. After all, he was a beloved instructor, particularly among a sizable group of graduate students who followed him around campus and copied his manner of dress, arcane speech patterns, even the way he opened his classes ("I trust you have all lived your lives with jubilation since our last meeting," spoken in the flattest of monotones). His scholarly work was routinely published in the best academic journals, his tenured seat among the most coveted in the East. Had he become involved with a student? Was he ill? Rumors abounded, but no one had an answer. Until an editorial he wrote, entitled "The Alchemy Of Education" but usually referred to as the "Cough Essay," appeared in *The Nation* on March 22, 1961.

We are all cowards, he began. That was the line people quoted, even years later, when they remembered the article. *We stand before our classes and lecture our young people, we sit on school boards and*

stress our concerns about values, we elect representatives who promise that education is their first priority, we wink and nod and call ourselves Americans and proclaim ourselves citizens of the greatest country in history, but in reality we are all standing in line waiting to be held and told to cough. We are all looking the other way. He went on in this vein for another thousand words before finally arriving at the point. ***His*** point. *You who stand behind the podium and think that it lends you credence stand for nothing. You cannot lecture about the lesser of two evils unless you reference your own pact with the devil; you cannot gather your students to discuss ends over means unless you report the selling of your own soul. You cannot speak about civil disobedience unless you speak about your loyalty oath; you cannot utter a word about our country being a land of laws unless you explain how you knew it was wrong to sign but that everyone was doing it. (After all, what were you supposed to do, lose your job?). In fact, you might even want to say that you were obeying the law. Or better yet, that you were following orders. But above all, justify yourselves.* Which was the last word anyone, even son Will, got from Simon Fortas on his sudden withdrawal from teaching. Quite simply, he was no longer worthy.

His circle of friends found Simon's new circumstances uncomfortable. Everything was different—no wife, no job, no students—and before long the circle had constricted until there was only father and son. Simon felt no bitterness about his new life—how could he, when he'd been the architect? There was still a little money left over from his days at the university, even occasional royalties from a textbook he had authored that some school district or another had not yet been told to remove from its shelves, though how quickly word of his renunciation had spread through the cowardly halls shocked even him. When the money finally ran out, he tore through the usual odd jobs a former academician feels are within his range of qualifications: manager of a grocery store, real estate salesman, bartender. Each paid enough to support them, but he was just passing time, and all the while he was writing in a small ringed notebook. When the last daytime bartending job disappeared, Simon took all the pens—*Take The Edge Off At The Bar In The Bellevue, MA8-3232*—and went home to wait for Will. He had become a writer.

"Where's Mrs. Smirnoff?" Will said, banging the screen door into the rut in the wall. Their neighbor was Mrs. Semiroff, a middle-aged woman whose name Simon intentionally mispronounced around his son because he had his suspicions.

"We won't be needing her anymore," Simon said, as cheerfully as possible.

"Is Mommy coming back?"

"No, I'll be taking care of you from now on."

"What about your job as a bartending?"

"Barten*der*. I won't be doing that, I'm going to be staying home with you. When you're not at school, that is."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I would say that is an open question. I could tell you what I hope to do, but that is very different from telling you what I'm going to do. For that we need to wait a while."

"What do you hope to do?" Will said, as exasperated as a boy of seven could be with his father.

"I hope to tell the truth," his father said. Will grabbed his glove and an old tennis ball off the kitchen cabinet, and ran back outside to have a catch with himself against the garage. Even then he knew he had asked the sort of question for which his father was incapable of a straight answer.

The first six months after that were a whirlwind. *Esquire*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, even a short story in *New World Writing*, his words came out like stars in a darkening sky and seemed to go into galleys the next day. It was one thing to write, and another to write successfully, and a rare mutation of both to write successfully about what one wanted to write about, but for Simon the confluence was lost in the act of writing itself. Some days he was actually bringing a notepad to the corner while waiting with Will for the school bus in the morning. He would write all day, stop an hour before the bus was due to return, prepare dinner for the two of them, and fall asleep in the living room. That was what Will remembered from those days: rocking his father gently side to side until he awakened, often in mid-sentence, as if he had been carrying on a dialogue in his sleep.

"And I suppose you want him back," Simon had said once when he woke with a start.

"Dad, it's me," Will whispered, pushing him again to provide a context for his father.

"Where's your mother?" Simon said, not quite awake.

"She's in New York," Will said. Soon after that he decided to let his father sleep rather than waking him up. On those late afternoons he shouldered their overstuffed living room chair into the fading window of the sun and read biographies of Lou Gehrig and George Armstrong

Custer while his father snored lightly on the sofa and occasionally said a word or two to himself. Simon never slept long—even at night he rose every few hours, no matter how tired—and dinner was generally on time, lukewarm and often the same as the day before. None of it made any difference to Will, who was happy because his father was happy. It did not occur to either of them that the next day might be anything less than the last.

But Simon's happiness didn't endure. It couldn't. His felicity was more a high than a disposition, and it was not long before he felt the dull edge of dissatisfaction. His writing was still in demand—a list that appeared in *The Writing Business* on October 24, 1964, placed him among the highest-paid freelancers in America—but occasionally he felt a pull when dropping a piece in the mail, a passing thought that it might be better to return the advance and keep the article in his drawer rather than have it read by strangers. "I'm not talking about some vague and contradictory invasion of privacy," he wrote to a favorite editor around this time. "After all, no one is holding a gun to my head, no publisher forcing me to bare my soul. Let's face it, couldn't I get paid the same money writing about the irrelevancies of popular culture (is 'love me do' Joycean wordplay, or just poor grammar)? And why am I feeling such a deep sense of malaise these days when I see my work in that nasty artificial type You (the grand plural) insist on using in your lousy magazines? My handwriting is perfectly legible, isn't it? Maybe that would help me remember who I am. When I see my work in print I can't imagine who wrote the words, who thought the thoughts. It's a problem I've faced before, but now I feel as if I've been backed against the wall, as if I've painted myself into a corner and am happy to just sit there, in a state of the most perfect bewilderment you could ever imagine." This was the first step down an old path for Simon, but Will perceived his father's introspection as little more than a passing sadness in the corners of their house. How could he possibly have known otherwise? There was nothing really out of the ordinary, nothing that might sound alarms in a young boy's head. After all, last year Simon had bought him an oboe and ten lessons for his birthday when he'd said it looked like a neat instrument. The year before that he had pulled Will out of summer camp to help him track pollution patterns from South Philadelphia refineries into the Delaware. Theirs was an unpredictable life, sometimes inexplicable. For an entire year, from the fall of 1965 to 1966, his father published under the name "Simon Warren," a little joke at the expense of the Supreme Court and at his own expense as well,

since his work was still accepted for publication but at a third the rate he was used to. Will, almost eleven, could only wonder why his father didn't want to be famous, didn't want to make as much money as people wanted to pay him, didn't want to come to school with the other fathers and tell the kids what he did for a living. The answer came from his mother, as obvious as it had to be and as guileless as an ex-wife could make it: this was the way he was.

And this was the way he remained in Will's mind. Fathers are often frozen in time—some gain weight but stay thin in a child's eyes, others go bald but are remembered as curly-headed; Simon stayed idiosyncratic and charming while he slid further down his own peculiar spiral, moving into a solitude that became an enforced isolation and finally a virtual quarantine over the next seven years. For Will the changes were shades of gray, off days and slightly more-off days and days that were even worse than those, but it was all he knew and it wasn't that bad, except that at some point during his teen years he realized that his father simply couldn't leave the house. In ninth grade his algebra teacher stumped the class with the age-old conundrum of getting halfway out of a room before getting all the way out, and then needing to get halfway to the halfway point, until finally it becomes clear that you never get out of the room. For Will that was the moment the hourglass cracked—it was his father, calculating every step but always coming up short of the door. When Simon did manage to cross the threshold, it was typically for groceries or mail; yet occasionally he might show up out of the blue at his son's soccer games or tennis matches, and once he appeared backstage just before the beginning of the twelfth-grade performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, quoting *Hamlet* at length and even Guildenstern's comment about death and eternity being the worst of both worlds, leaving Will to wonder between acts how his father had even heard about the performance. He had long ago ceased informing Simon of his day-to-day activities.

"What are you doing here?" Will said when they were together at a diner later that night.

"Having a cup of coffee, maybe a piece of pie."

"Ba-dum-dum." Will did a drum beat with his hands.

"I'm keeping up with you," Simon said a few minutes later, as an old friend might say to someone he hadn't seen in a year or two.

"I just didn't think you'd be interested in coming out."

"Don't get around much anymore," Simon sang. He went on this way for the rest of the night, running every conversation into the ground

with silly jokes and then starting afresh on girls or summer plans or college dorm life, which he regretted missing out on during his college years, and could he visit the campus on the third week of October when he thought he might have some free time, and boy that was one hell of a great job on the play, did his class have any plans to do another?

"It was a senior play, Dad. Unless we all have to repeat twelfth grade you've probably seen all there is."

"Yes, of course," Simon said, then went on about a few other things that had come to his mind during his son's answer until finally Will told him he was tired and maybe they should go home.

There were other frenetic nights like this one, scattered and infrequent and ultimately more tranquil as Will's adolescent and college years passed, because both of them knew that there was too much ground to cover. In fact they were attempting to cover ground that couldn't be *covered*, couldn't be revisited over coffee or conversations or even winter vacations; and in the end the knowledge that their time together had come and gone was at the root of their tranquility. Without ever discussing the matter, each had decided to love the other without regret.

Nine days into Will's last year of college, the dean called him into his office to tell him that his father had died. "Apparently some sort of mining accident in South Africa?" the dean asked, assuming that this explanation made some sense to the dead man's son. It did.

"I think I'll use your going away to college as an opportunity to do some going away of my own," Simon said. Will had heard this sort of talk before—when he spent a summer at camp, three weeks at his mother's—but nothing had ever come of it; and now, with his father practically hibernating at home for months at a time, such travel plans seemed particularly unlikely.

"Where are you thinking about?" Will said, intent on masking his incredulity.

"A place called Kimberley," his father said.

But then he went. Kimberley was the heart of the diamond mining region of South Africa, an area rife with strife, Simon later wrote. While Will struggled over freshman comp and organic chemistry, his father spit out postcard after postcard with wildlife reserves and sparkling cities on the front, stark and ominous reports of union busting and race riots on the back. Four months later Simon was home with a first draft—

"Dig Dig Dig," a story of the horrendous working conditions in the mines and the slave-like exploitation of the miners. The book opened with a Disney epigraph—"It ain't no trick to get rich quick / If you dig dig dig with a shovel or a pick / In a mine"—and closed with the last line of the verse: " . . .where a million diamonds shine." Will read it in one sitting, and urged his father to publish immediately, but Simon insisted that he was just starting the process of writing the kind of book he wanted to write. You can't change the words once they hit the air, he said.

Three days after his talk with the dean, Will had the war-time experience of receiving a letter from his dead father. "This is my sixth trip to Kimberley," he wrote, "and I am finally happy with the work. That is everything, you know. Fitzgerald was right, there are no second chances, you should not delude yourself that you'll get one of those. Instead, you will have to grapple with your first chance, your only chance. People will not gather when you are gone to say that you did better the second time around. . . ."

Which was as true as his father's last words could be. He was right to be happy with the book: Will sold it within three weeks to the university press, and two years later wrote an afterward for a paperback edition detailing Simon's efforts to overcome himself. He made a key for the cage that was his life, opened the door with it, and let a book fly free, Will wrote. And he never penned a sentence that wasn't true when it hit the air.

Including that last letter. Simon Fortas had done the best he was able to do; he could no more help being the sort of father he was than he could switch chromosomes with Robert Young. At least I took the job, he once reminded his ex-wife; although years later when Will thought about his father making that claim, he conjured up the image of a group of soldiers taking a step backward, leaving Simon standing alone in the same place he always was. Even so, his father hadn't refused the assignment when it had been dumped in his lap. And just as his mother had left him with the sense of an ending, so had he learned the sense of a struggle from his father: to make the most of your first chance if it was there to make, to stay the course if it wasn't.

Gloria Fortas, née Borenstein and twice remarried and back again to Borenstein, had been in touch with her son the way a high-school football star twenty years after graduation might be in touch with the

smart friend who used to do his homework. They knew where to find each other, but only in case of an emergency. Fortas had not actually seen his mother in almost two years, even though she was less than four hours away by car; somehow their occasional phone calls had left each with the impression that it was not necessary to visit the other. He was not sure how he felt when he heard about her death.

"Nothing is as simple as you might have thought it was when you were six years old," she whispered during their last conversation. "You have to live *your* life, Will, you can't live someone else's."

"That doesn't sound so complicated to me," Fortas said. Even now, with her in the latter stages of an eating-away cancer, he couldn't let her off the hook.

"Oh, it's complicated," Gloria said, letting the last syllable fade away, the exertion of even saying the word too much for her. "It's the hardest thing in the world."

"It seems to me that you managed to live your life unencumbered by the simple concerns of little boys," Fortas said. While his mother was whispering into the phone, he was responding loudly, rather than lowering his own voice as most people would do instinctively. It made his answers appear even more stark than they actually were.

"You know the old saying that the best way to be a good parent is to love your spouse? Well, you wouldn't have been happy if I'd stayed around. Forget about loving your father, I didn't even know your father, I never *knew* him. Do you realize that he left the university without even discussing it with me? I didn't find out he'd resigned until the third week of classes when one of my own students asked me what my husband was doing with himself! We'd all taken that silly pledge, every single person at the university had signed. It meant nothing, *do you understand*, and the whole mess had blown over by the time your father decided to piss into the wind about it. When I refused to join him there was nothing to do but go. I left him because he left me, only he didn't have the guts to move out." Will took the phone away from his ear and looked at it; maybe some answers might materialize from the receiver itself. When finally he brought it back to his mouth to speak, all he heard was a dial tone.

A few days later she died; at the edge of February he drove to the northernmost tip of Long Island for her funeral. It was a bright sunny day without warmth, and the shadowless trees in the cemetery started from the ground like spikes smashed through the earth into the sky. Will acknowledged a few aunts and uncles from his mother's side, but some

of the more distant relatives did not appear to know who he was. Everything ran together for him—the brightness, the lack of shadow, the white breath that hovered above the mourners for the slightest moment before dissipating into the cold; it all added up to a departure that Will felt as an emptiness. When a rabbi started speaking, he leaned into the circle.

"We shall dispense with prayers for our Gloria, as was her express desire. She often said that her soul did not stretch to heaven, and now is not an appropriate time or place to question her discernment. Let us only say that she never looked back, and that she never settled for less than perfect. Which is not to say that she got it—none of us is lucky enough for that. But Gloria never settled. May she rest in peace."

And then they were lowering her casket into the frozen ground. Will had not expected everything to move so quickly; here he was standing at the perimeter of the mourners while his mother was being buried and suddenly it came to him that she might not even realize he had made the trip. He jostled his way to the rim of the grave, grabbed a handful of the dirt piled up on the side, and threw it on top of the flowers already curling into themselves as the casket found its level. Some people he did not recognize held him by the elbows as he leaned over the site and called down to his mother the question he had never asked: why had his father done it? But the brittle cold air swallowed his words, and all that remained was a hollow sound the other mourners took for grief. While they led him away from the gravesite he repeated his question, this time to himself. Not that there might be an answer; the struggle lay in the asking.