

# Summer 1974, in Fiction and Memory

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It was a beautiful day in June 1974, clear and windless with the chill of late spring still in the air, held against the coming warmth of summer. I was seventeen, home after my first year in private school, thirty miles away, and I had already resumed my job at the beach and its adjoining estate, mowing lawns and picking up trash and riding around on the back of a pickup truck, gazing down onto the unknowing backs of sunbathing teenaged girls. Later that day, with a few friends from town, I traveled into the city to attend a jazz concert someone had heard about at a club that catered to underage teenagers, like us. By attending the concert, however, I would miss a family gathering to welcome back my older sister from a year in London with her older boyfriend, who, the year before that, had been her high school history teacher. She had graduated, and he, in somewhat murky circumstances, perhaps related to their relationship, was asked to leave. Now they'd returned from their time abroad, with a fancy lobster dinner to celebrate the occasion.

In the late afternoon my three friends and I boarded the train that creaked and swayed into Boston. We flipped one of the seats around to form our own booth, then chatted and joked our way into town. There was Dave Benedix, with whom I worked at the beach, and Chip Parker, newly arrived in town and a fellow skier, tennis player, and, like me, soccer fanatic. There was also Henry MacNeil, a reformed bully who had once terrorized me, but had been rescued and improved by a local minister, then adopted into a foster home. Henry's mother was still in town, but his father had disappeared. Henry had piercing blue eyes and was considered incredibly handsome, and had begun to do well in school, playing sports, acting in the local play, and hanging out with the artsy crowd.

Once in the city we caught the Green Line to Park Street, and the Red Line to Harvard Square. We were very early—what to do? We wandered around the square, went into Truc, a hippie-ish store that sold tie-dyed shirts, zodiac charts, hash pipes, and bongos. I believe we had brought a little pot with us too, a joint or two of the rather mild variety that we grew in the field above the house. We wandered over to the Cambridge Common, a public park, and I became aware that I had fallen into a sudden dark mood, a kind of impenetrable sadness that even my friends could not coax me out of. “What’s wrong, Davey?” Henry asked me, more than once, but I couldn’t tell him, for I didn’t know. I had no apparent reason to be sad: it was a gloriously beautiful late spring day; the summer loomed before me; I had a job, a fancy prep school and soccer season awaiting me in the fall, then college beyond. Yet all I could think about was that I wanted to go home—get back on the subway, to the train, back to the house, my room, my bed, and go to sleep.

We made it, finally, to the concert, held in a low, dark room of a former parking garage. It was a “no alcohol” kind of club, though full of blue smoke, and I may have found some solace in the music, a balm for whatever it was that had come over me, but by the time it was over, as we headed to the subway and then the train, I was in no better a mood than before. The train was at midnight, and there was a further wait in the cavernous vault of North Station. When we did finally board, I curled up in a kind of half sleep as we crept and swayed through the familiar towns leading to our own. It was past one when we arrived. Why was my father’s car there, in the parking lot, waiting? It was not my parents’ habit to ferry us around town: a shudder of dread. Had someone been hurt, or worse?

And now I will defer to another point of view—the narrator of my father’s story “Separating,” in which a man named Richard Maple sits in a car at a train station waiting for his son Dickie to return from a concert he has been attending with friends, in the city. He is there to tell his son some sad news, revealed to the rest of the family during the tumultuous dinner Dickie had missed:

A train whistle caused [Richard] to lift his head. It was on time; he had hoped it would be late. The slender drawgates descended. The bell of approach tingled happily. The great metal body, horizontally fluted, rocked to a stop, and sleepy teen-agers disembarked, his son among them. Dickie did not show surprise that his father was meeting him at this terrible hour. He sauntered to the car with two friends, both taller than he. He said “Hi” to his father and took the passenger’s seat with an exhausted promptness that expressed gratitude. The friends got in the back, and Richard was grateful; a few more minutes’ postponement would be won by driving them home.

He asked, "How was the concert?"

"Groovy," one boy said from the backseat.

"It bit," the other said.

"It was O.K.," Dickie said, moderate by nature, so reasonable that in his childhood the unreason of the world had given him headaches, stomach aches, nausea. When the second friend had been dropped off at his dark house, the boy blurted, "Dad, my eyes are killing me with hay fever! I'm out there cutting that mothering grass all day!"

"Do we still have those drops?"

"They didn't do any good last summer."

"They might this." Richard swung a U-turn on the empty street. The drive home took a few minutes. The mountain was here, in his throat. "Richard," he said, and felt the boy, slumped and rubbing his eyes, go tense at his tone, "I didn't come to meet you just to make your life easier. I came because your mother and I have some news for you, and you're a hard man to get a hold of these days. It's sad news."

"That's O.K." The reassurance came out soft, but quick, as if released from the tip of a spring.

Richard had feared that his tears would return and choke him, but the boy's manliness set an example, and his voice issued forth steady and dry. "It's sad news, but it needn't be tragic news, at least for you. It should have no practical effect on your life, though it's bound to have an emotional effect. You'll work at your job, and go back to school in September. Your mother and I are really proud of what you're making of your life; we don't want that to change at all."

"Yeah," the boy said lightly, on the intake of his breath, holding himself up. They turned the corner; the church they erratically attended loomed like a gutted fort. The home of the woman Richard hoped to marry stood across the green. Her bedroom light burned.

"Your mother and I," he said, "have decided to separate. For the summer. Nothing legal, no divorce yet. We want to see how it feels. For some years now, we haven't been doing enough for each other, making each other as happy as we should be. Have you sensed that?"

"No," the boy said. It was an honest, unemotional answer: true or false in a quiz.

Glad for the factual basis, Richard pursued, even garrulously, the details. His apartment across town, his utter accessibility, the split vacation arrangements, the advantages to the children, the added mobility and variety of the summer. Dickie listened, absorbing. "Do the others know?"

"Yes."

"How did they take it?"

"The girls pretty calmly. John flipped out; he shouted and ate a cigarette and made a salad out of his napkin and told us how much he hated school."

His brother chuckled. "He did?"

"Yeah. The school issue was more upsetting for him than Mom and me. He seemed to feel better for having exploded."

"He did?" The repetition was the first sign that he was stunned.

"Yes. Dickie, I want to tell you something. This last hour, waiting for your train to get in, has been about the worst of my life. I hate this. *Hate* it. My father would have died before doing it to me." He felt immensely lighter, saying this. He had dumped the mountain on the boy. They were home. Moving swiftly as a shadow, Dickie was out of the car, through the bright kitchen. Richard called after him, "Want a glass of milk or anything?"

"No thanks."

"Want us to call the course tomorrow and say you're too sick to work?"

"No, that's all right." The answer was faint, delivered at the door to his room; Richard listened for the slam that went with a tantrum. The door closed normally, gently. The sound was sickening.

Joan had sunk into that first deep trough of sleep and was slow to awake. Richard had to repeat, "I told him."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much. Could you go say good night to him? Please."

She left their room, without putting on a bathrobe. He sluggishly changed back into his pajamas and walked down the hall. Dickie was already in bed, Joan was sitting beside him, and the boy's bedside clock radio was murmuring music. When she stood to go, an inexplicable light—the moon?—outlined her body through the nightie. Richard sat on the warm place she had indented on the boy's narrow mattress. He asked him, "Do you want the radio on like that?"

"It always is."

"Doesn't it keep you awake? It would me."

"No."

"Are you sleepy?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Sure you want to get up and go to work? You've had a big night."

"I want to. They expect me."

Away at school this winter he had learned for the first time that you can go short of sleep and live. As an infant he had slept with an immobile, sweating intensity that had alarmed his baby-sitters. In adolescence he had often been the first of the four children to go to bed. Even now, he would go slack in the middle of a television show, his sprawled legs hairy and brown. "O.K. Good boy. Dickie, listen. I love you so much. I never knew how much until now. No matter how this works out, I'll always be with you. Really."

Richard bent to kiss an averted face but his son, sinewy, turned and with wet cheeks embraced him and gave him a kiss, on the lips, passionate as a woman's. In his father's ear he moaned one word, the crucial, intelligent word: "*Why?*"

*Why.* It was a whistle of wind in a crack, a knife thrust, a window thrown open on emptiness. The waiting white face was gone, the darkness was featureless. Richard had forgotten why. ("Separating" 187–91)

So there it was: while I had been away, schlepping around town with my friends, a family drama had been unfolding at the dinner table back at our house, and I, thirty-five miles away, had been somehow attuned to it, somehow affected by the news that my parents, after more than two decades of marriage, would be separating. Is this possible? I will leave it to the psychics and scientists to discuss. But I am certain that my own despondent mood, that lovely June evening, was caused by the events taking place in the family house in Ipswich, somehow communicated to me through the ether.

As to how the drama played out, we can return to the short story "Separating" for a fictional account. The plan had been for the Maples to reveal their separation to their children one by one, over the weekend, but the father, during the dinner, found that his eyes kept filling with tears. "*Why is Daddy crying?*" the youngest girl asks, and soon the secret is out. She and her brother return from the kitchen:

John returned to the table carrying a bowl of salad. He nodded tersely at his father and his lips shaped the conspiratorial words "She told."

"Told what?" Richard asked aloud, insanely.

The boy sat down as if to rebuke his father's distraction with the example of his own good manners. He said quietly, "The separation."

Joan and Margaret returned; the child, in Richard's twisted vision, seemed diminished in size, and relieved, relieved to have had the bogeyman at last proved real. He called out to her—the distances at the table had grown immense—"You knew, you always knew," but the clenching at the back of his throat prevented him from making sense of it. From afar he heard Joan talking, levelly, sensibly, reciting what they had prepared: it was a separation for the summer, an experiment. She and Daddy both agreed it would be good for them; they needed space and time to think; they liked each other but did not make each other happy enough, somehow.

Judith, imitating her mother's factual tone, but in her youth off-key, too cool, said, "I think it's silly. You should either live together or get divorced."

Richard's crying, like a wave that has crested and crashed, had become tumultuous; but it was overtopped by another tumult, for John, who had been so reserved, now grew larger and larger at the table. Perhaps his younger sister's being credited with knowing

set him off. “Why didn’t you *tell* us?” he asked, in a large round voice quite unlike his own. “You should have *told* us you weren’t getting along.”

Richard was startled into attempting to force words through his tears.

“We do get along, that’s the trouble, so it doesn’t show even to us—” *That we do not love each other* was the rest of the sentence; he couldn’t finish it.

Joan finished for him, in her style. “And we’ve always, *especially*, loved our children.”

John was not mollified. “What do you care about *us*?” he boomed. “We’re just little things you *had*.” His sisters’ laughing forced a laugh from him, which he turned hard and parodistic: “Ha ha *ha*.” Richard and Joan realized simultaneously that the child was drunk, on Judith’s homecoming champagne. Feeling bound to keep the center of the stage, John took a cigarette from Judith’s pack, poked it into his mouth, let it hang from his lower lip, and squinted like a gangster.

“You’re not little things we had,” Richard called to him. “You’re the whole point. But you’re grown. Or almost.”

The boy was lighting matches. Instead of holding them to his cigarette (for they had never seen him smoke; being “good” had been his way of setting himself apart), he held them to his mother’s face, closer and closer, for her to blow out. He lit the whole folder—a hiss and then a torch, held against his mother’s face. The flame, prised by Richard’s tears, filled his vision; he didn’t know how it was extinguished. He heard Margaret say, “Oh, stop showing off,” and saw John, in response, break the cigarette in two and put the halves entirely into his mouth and chew, sticking out his tongue to display the shreds to his sister.

Joan talked to him, reasoning—a fountain of reason, unintelligible. “Talked about it for years . . . our children must help us . . . Daddy and I both want . . .” As the boy listened, he wadded a paper napkin into the leaves of his salad, fashioned a ball of paper and lettuce, and popped it into his mouth, looking around the table for the expected laughter. None came. Judith said, “Be mature,” and dismissed a plume of smoke. (“Separating” 182–84)

Writers pick and choose from their own experience, leave out details of what actually happened (as they remember it), or alter details, or make things up as it suits their fictional mission. So it is in “Separating,” in the description of the drive home, that the father looks up at the lit window of his mistress’s house as he passes the church, when in reality this could not happen, as the two are on different routes, perhaps a quarter mile away.

Nonetheless, these final scenes in “Separating” are, in essence, as I remember them, and although I do not recall, at the end, uttering the “crucial, intelligent word: ‘*Why*?’” I have little doubt that I did. But there were other things my father said during our five-minute drive from my friend’s house to ours that were not

included in the story, things that came out in a blur of openness, of confession—something about how, during the course of their marriage, they both had had relationships, “affairs,” but they had always been able to get past them, or through them, and back to their marriage, at least until now. And then he mentioned the name of a woman who, four years before, had moved into the house we had moved out of (a curious detail, also not in the story) with her husband and three sons. He had “admired” her at first, he told me, but not wanting to disrupt their marriage, had stayed away. When he eventually learned that she, too, was not fully “happy” in her marriage, he had fallen “in love” with her.

In love? This was the phrase that startled me, there in the safe darkness of the car, and would follow me around for days and weeks afterwards.

We knew this woman well, for we had babysat for her three sons, in our former house, where we had once been the same age as her children. In love, with Mrs. Y? In today’s lingo this would qualify as TMI, too much information, and justifies Richard Maple’s self-observation that he had “dumped the mountain on the boy.”

Conversely, Adam Begley, in his biography, *Updike*, writes that my father’s affair remained a “secret” from his children, and from his mother, for “the first fifteen months of the separation”: not so, for we knew of this, and of whom, from the very beginning (372).

How did the rest of the summer go? Bumpily, you might say. Once I got used to the idea of my parents’ separation, and the odd fact that my father no longer lived with us and had taken an apartment in a depressing, generic compound of low, brick apartment buildings on the other side of town, I proceeded with my life as a soon-to-be-senior in high school, who was looking forward to soccer season, then college over the horizon. I continued my work at the beach, played tennis and soccer in the evenings, drank beer, and entered into a rather tentative, fumbling romance with a pretty Greek American girl two years my junior. With any luck, I thought, I would escape this domestic confusion of the family when I headed off to school at the end of August.

My father, meanwhile, was having a terrible summer—granted, of his own making. However much in love he was with Mrs. Y, he was still tormented by confusion and guilt and the curious fact that he no longer lived with us. After a morning of writing in his office downtown, he would drift back to the house and resume some project he was working on, shingling the barn, or building a chicken coop for my sister. Through it all I was trying not to blame him too much for leaving his wife of twenty-one years, and his four teenage children, on the grounds he must have some compelling reasons outside the realm of my own comprehension. In any case I had

problems of my own. I didn't really know how to proceed with my relationship with my girlfriend, who was prone to sudden mood swings and mysterious swales of gloom I could not decipher. Our amorous adventures had proceeded only as far as kissing, for when my hand roved too far into the unexplored territory of her body, I felt, almost to my relief, her fingers lock around my wrist, halting further progress.

One evening I picked her up in front of her house, on the other side of town, in my father's lime-green Mustang. She seemed particularly melancholic that evening and would not speak. In an effort to cheer her up I suggested she drive for a while, as I had let her do before, although she was only fifteen, and unlicensed. What happened next I described in a short story I wrote a decade or two later, titled "In the Age of Convertibles":

A reddish late-summer sun was slanting down through the tired-looking leaves, and I was driving the Mustang that night, as my mother had gone away for the weekend, and my father was looking after us. Julie was sullen, and quiet, and I suspected she was gearing up to break up with me. When I tried to get something out of her she would say it was "nothing," and look down and away, through the window. She was pretty when sad, her wavy brown hair parted in the middle, and she was wearing a white cashmere sweater that made her skin, after a summer on the beach, look even a deeper, darker brown. We drove in silence down Fletcher Road, and we were about to turn down Juniper Lane when I impulsively pulled over and asked if she wanted to drive—a last-ditch attempt to cheer her up and postpone my return to teenage bachelorhood. It worked, too, at first, and Julie looked cute in the driver's seat, peering up over the wheel, and seemed to be getting happier, and at one point I laid my hand on her knee as we rolled along the narrow country road, stripes of sunlight flashing through the trees.

"What's on the radio?" she asked. I reached down to find something on the dial, and she reached down to help me and must have forgotten that she was driving, because when I next looked up the car had just started angling into the woods—mowing down those little white cement guardrails, chunks of cement bouncing up over the car, and once we were finished with those we started in on the trees—clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk—until we met one big enough to put a stop to the macabre charade, and left us, a washed-up teenage couple, sitting in a car in the woods, the crumpled hood hissing out steam and smoke, the radio faithfully playing the final, stickey ballad of our summer romance.

The rest, needless to say, was a bit of a blur—out of the car, quickly, and up onto the deserted road, following Julie as she paced around in small, tightening, circles, mumbling to herself, "Oh my God. Oh my God. I don't believe it. Oh my God." But then, before the police and tow trucks came, I captured her long enough in my arms

to tell her the plan that had come to me even as we were still plowing through trees: that it was I, and not she, who had been driving. She was only fifteen, after all, didn't even have a license, and the only way to get the insurance money and avoid a fuss and a scandal was for me to take the blame. She was unconsolated, and kept pacing around in tiny circles, but when the flashing lights and soft-spoken men arrived and pulled the car out of the woods, I told them that we had both been looking for a station on the radio, and the next time I looked were driving into the woods. I left out the part about Julie being at the wheel. ("In the Age of Convertibles" 35-37)

Once I was back in town I made a preemptive phone call to my father, so he could get used to the idea of what had happened before I got home. He sounded panicky and shocked and, blaming himself, wondered aloud if they had been too "lenient" with their children and the cars. No doubt he was also wondering if his abdication from the family had caused my mishap. By the next day he had regained his good humor, going to the garage to which the car had been towed to take pictures. "It's a wonder no one was hurt!" he said, almost happily. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," I reported, "I think it was all those smaller trees that slowed us down."

It must have been August by then, and aside from the crash, my relationship with my girlfriend was beginning to show fatal flaws. Her parents were no longer crazy about me, and we both knew I was heading back to school in the fall. It was clear to me, too, that my parents would not be getting back together.

At some other point in the summer, in a small act of rebellion, I had quit my steady, low-paying job at the beach, and took up freelance house-painting with my friend Chip. We painted his girlfriend's house an ugly shade of yellow called "Republic Gold," which is what we named the crop of marijuana we had grown in the field above the house, surrounded by raspberry bushes. By September my father had moved into the city and I had gone off to prep school, leaving my mother and two younger siblings in the big white house on the marsh to fend for themselves. It was they who bore the emotional brunt of my father's departure, and the sudden absence of a grown man to protect them from intruders and peril.

I ended my own fictional account of this summer, in the already-mentioned "In the Age of Convertibles," with another family dinner, held on another beautiful summer day, in late August or early September, as if to make up for the one I had missed back in June. The story has a somewhat comic tone, and concerns my role among the children as the family conscience, a self-appointed "Mr. Perfect" who had taken upon himself the task of pointing out everyone else's flaws and imperfec-

tions. But here we are, nonetheless, at the dinner table, late summer 1974. Bear in mind that I still had not told anyone that it was Julie, not I, who had been driving my father's car when we crashed.

A week later, my family held a farewell dinner of sorts for me, lobster and candlelight and evening sunlight, slanting with an autumnal tint into the room. My dad was there, as he'd always been, and Neil [my older sister Lila's boyfriend] had broken into the inner circle of the family, somehow, and he sat in silence, mostly, watching, and gently kneading his beard—like a visiting archaeologist quietly examining the shifting bones of the family. We gave him a good show that night: the old geniality back, wine flowing, jokes flying, my parents, at opposite ends of the table, looking much as they always had—in my eyes, still the perfect couple. I was proud of them, somehow—proud that even though they were at odds, they could still sit down and have a peaceable dinner with their overgrown children, just like old times. And although it was clear by this time that they were never going to get back together, it also occurred to me that night that our family was still intact, somehow, and that whatever was going to happen, we were all in it, more or less, together.

Earlier that day on the golf course my father had told me he was proud of how well I was doing, and was sorry that their marital difficulties had come just as I was getting ready to go off to school, and he hoped it all didn't affect my ongoing, unspoken program for self-improvement. I tried to assure him that it wouldn't and, as if in proof, played well that day.

"You should have seen him on the course," he reported at dinner. "He almost beat me, the little rat."

"He's so competitive," Lila said, in such a way to indicate that she didn't consider competitiveness a virtue. Through his beard, Neil managed a little smile.

"Now all he has to do," Charlie chimed in, "is learn how to drive."

The barb was too crude for a rejoinder, and, if nothing else, I had learned that summer the subtle power of silence.

"Yeah, Pete," Charlie continued, not content with my lack of response. "Are you going to go out with Julie again, or won't her parents let her drive with you anymore after you drove her into the woods?"

This was beginning to irk me, but I held my tongue. Charlie was bigger than I now, and harboring fifteen years of pent-up fraternal animosities. But if he had had a crystal ball there at the dinner table, instead of an oft replenished glass of wine, he would have seen that two family vehicles awaited their destruction at his own hand, on the same bend of road within a half mile of our house—one going into town, the other coming home—both with high levels of alcohol and adolescent confusion coursing through his veins. He still had a hard row to hoe, and it would be he, and [my younger sister]

Mary, and my mother who would bear the brunt of the new family order—spending the winter in the cool and fatherless house.

This was the first public mention of my friendship with Julie Markos, and my mother played dumb. “What, who?” she was saying, with a little smile, pretending she knew nothing, but the sound of Julie’s name had caused me to turn inward, like a man in a trance, gazing into the yellow light of the candles, and as the banter of my family went happily on without me, it slowly dawned on me that it was I who had failed her, though I wasn’t certain how, or why: our imperfect love was spawned at the edge of a swimming pool, under a canopy of summer leaves. Her belly was smooth and brown, like a child’s, her lips full and sweet, tasting faintly of coconut. Her hair was frazzled and silken, and her sweated breasts were not large, but wonderfully present, the color of moonlight, and were willing to be held in my fumbling, adolescent hands. I loved her as best I could, which wasn’t, as it turned out, very well. One summer night, in the twilight of our love, I let her drive my father’s car, and together we rode it into the woods, and thereby brought the age of convertibles to a close.

It would be years before, at this same table, I revealed to all my secret—played the final trump card of my youth—but until then it was mine to keep, like a precious jewel—a private cloak of martyrdom. I had Julie’s honor and reputation to protect, after all, and it was the least I could do by way of gratitude, for among the many gifts she had given me that summer, her love among them, she had inadvertently relieved me of the tiresome burden I had been carrying around with me since childhood: after she crashed my father’s car, no one called me “Mr. Perfect” anymore, and I quietly became, in a way that I had never been, just one of the family. (“In the Age of Convertibles” 41–44)

Of course this, too, was a false ending of sorts—*my* attempt, this time, to paint a somewhat rosy picture of a rather difficult reality: the end of my parents’ marriage, and with it the end of the perfect symmetry of my childhood: two parents; two boys, two girls; two cats, one female, the other not. Soon, I would head off to prep school, and a year later, college. My older sister, after her own attempt to go to college, would enter into an ill-advised marriage that would end five years later. The dissolution of my parents’ marriage would take another year or two, well chronicled in the remaining Maples stories. My father eventually remarried, and so did my mother, but that, too, involved another painful restructuring of a family. At about this time, my father stopped writing about his children, now adults, perhaps after my older sister expressed unhappiness about “The Lovely Troubled Daughters of Our Old Crowd,” which describes a group of young women in our town, in their early- to mid-twenties, who seemed reluctant to move forward and were still living at home, not yet married or in established careers, strolling around in gypsy dresses

with a melancholic, winsome air about them. It ends with the somewhat pointed question, “What are they afraid of?”

His wives, however, both first and second, continued to appear, in fictionalized form, in his stories and novels. While his children had been born into the orbit of a writer and were therefore innocent bystanders, the wives knew what they were getting into from the get-go and were therefore fair game. Writers need to be true to themselves, above all, and this would involve a certain amount of collateral damage and possible hurt feelings. In “A Letter to My Grandsons,” a personal essay he included in *Self-Consciousness*, my father remembers what his mother told him at the time he was leaving his wife and four children—the time of his life described in “Separating” and other Maples stories:

At a low time in my life, when I had taken an exit not from my profession but from my marriage, and left your mother and her siblings more in harm’s way than felt right, my mother in the midst of her disapproval and sadness produced a saying so comforting I pass it on to you. She sighed and said, “Well, Grampy used to say, ‘We carry our own hides to market.’” The saying is blunt but has the comfort of putting responsibility where it can be borne, on a frame made to fit. The comfort of my hearing it said lay in its partial release from tribal obligations—our debt of honor to our ancestors and our debt to shelter our descendants. These debts are real, but realer still is a certain obligation to our own selves, the obligation to live. We are social creatures but, unlike ants and bees, not just that; there is something intrinsically and individually vital which must be defended against the claims even of virtue. (211)

My grandmother, Linda Grace Hoyer, my father’s mother, was also a writer and, like me, published two collections of short stories, the second a posthumous volume, *The Predator*, which appeared just months after *Self-Consciousness* in 1989. One of these stories, “Unlike Girls,” takes place in the late spring of 1974, the same month of June as in “Separating,” marking an occasion when my father drove to Pennsylvania with my two sisters to visit his mother: to celebrate her seventieth birthday, and also inform her of this impending separation from his wife of twenty-one years. After he tells her his news, she states, “I want . . . to know why you are abandoning your children” (“Unlike Girls” 37), which echoes Dickie’s question of “*Why?*”

“It’s not easy to say,” he tells her, and then evades. “I’d rather not talk about it.” But then, feeling some sort of further explanation is owed to her, he summons a reply. “No, mother,” he says, “the time has come when I must do something for

the boy I used to be.” (38) This answer, too, is an enigmatic one, but his mother seems to understand: *Do something for the boy I used to be.*

“And what can I do for him?” she says. “He was such a good boy.”

To which he answers, “Just love us all.”

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