

Getting a Life

by Daniel Green

When Daniel Gregorian awoke after a night of dreamless sleep, he found he had been transformed into a fictional character. Or, to be more precise, he had become a character in a just-commenced fiction. Commenced by whom he could not say, but he knew as he lay staring at the ceiling, faintly recognizable but at best fuzzy and indistinct, that his dreadful recurring nightmare had indeed come to be his reality. He was being appropriated by some discourse not his own, enlisted as the subject of a story invented by another.

Yet what could his “own” story be? Although he had risen to consciousness with the name “Daniel Gregorian” leading him out of the depths of his slumber, he now realized that this was not the name by which he had always known himself. Unfortunately, with each passing moment his ability to recall what he once was seems to be slipping away, his identity to be resolving itself along with his surroundings into this new and transformed existence. What was his name? The one he has been given has it half right, but he can’t now say which part has been changed, which retained. He knows that he should fight to hold on to his vanishing sense of self, that to no longer be the agent of his own fate is the most terrifying prospect imaginable, but it is not at all clear just how he might force his way back through whatever impalpable membrane separates what was from what may be.

Perhaps it would be best to view his altered circumstances as an opportunity rather than a trick. After all, is he not being offered the chance to begin again, literally a rebirth? (He is relieved, however, that he is being allowed to start in medias res, so to speak. From what he does remember of childhood, he would not want to relive it.) Was real life so glorious that it’s impossible an invented one might present fresh possibilities to one willing to follow it where it will? Certainly nothing is to be gained by remaining in his current posture, spread out prone on an unfamiliar bed, debating with himself over questions that

are now all but irrelevant. The wisest course, he concludes, would be to rise and seek out whatever direction his fictional life is to take.

Carrying through on his resolution proves more difficult, however. Daniel's upper body is able to separate itself from the bedsheets readily enough, but his legs refuse to move in the coordinate fashion required for him to pivot himself up and out of the bed. Tossing aside the top sheet in order to investigate, Daniel cannot at first quite even really identify his legs. Although what appear to be his feet stick up above the bed's plane, as well as the tops of shins, knees, and thighs, he can't finally determine them fully

his life as he reports the following information: $\frac{1}{2}$ TD-0.0005Tc0.0005Twr sscardinaandrina. Somate ilurovof ima

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alter. The bed suddenly extends itself beyond its former spatial boundary, and what was only a kind of vacancy now resolves itself into the semblance of a room, whose far wall is becoming visible. But Daniel's interest in this unfolding process is eclipsed by the reappearance of that image that attracted his attention to these events in the first place. This time it holds its shape long enough for him to identify it as the likeness of a woman, although he cannot say that it actually is a woman—more like a photograph without the frame, a filmed image frozen in time. It again fades, reappears, fades, reappears. Finally it seems to snap into place, and instantly it becomes animate and unmistakably a woman. She meets Daniel's gaze with a look of her own that is languidly seductive, her pose insistent, almost determined, in its overt sexuality. Only now does Daniel see that she too is naked, and he in turn becomes self-conscious about his own nudity, with which he is immediately uncomfortable. Perhaps the woman's next move is partly an instinctive response to this unfortunate signal on Daniel's part, but somehow he knows it is more than that. He watches her face lose its expression of pleasurable anticipation, to be replaced by an increasingly discernible look of what Daniel cannot avoid calling distaste. Her hand, which has been extended in a gesture of easeful affection, is pulled back, and she seems to shrink away from her bedmate, withdrawing into a kind of frightened surprise. Clearly she finds him repulsive.

Before Daniel can muster an appeal of some sort to their shared predicament, the woman disappears. He continues to stare at the space from which her form has now fled and which has already collapsed back into its previous inchoate state, but it is soon clear that the woman (about whom Daniel already has fond and wistful memories) will not be returning. The story her presence by his side might have made possible has been abandoned before it could begin, the identity such a relationship might have helped him establish has been withheld. He will have to look elsewhere for the clues to his new existence, and so he turns away from the scene of his disappointment and recommits himself to getting out of the bed on which he still lies.

His legs swing out into the empty space that envelops him to the right, although "empty" does not quite capture what Daniel encounters as he completes this action. It seems the

very room his legs need is being carved out as they move. Uncertain whether he will encounter solid ground or whether he will simply tumble over into yet more unbounded space, Daniel attempts to plant his feet, and to his relief they do meet with what seems to be a floor. Indeed, as he shifts his weight onto his legs in the initial effort to stand clear of the bed, the floor begins to spread itself out below him, plank by plank.

When finally he is standing fully upright, the void into which he must step if he is to advance further is abruptly transformed—first the bare outlines of walls, which gradually become more and more opaque, then recognizable shapes of windows through which Daniel can see what might be “outside,” of wall hangings of various types, of pieces of furniture arranged here and there. A bedroom, but is he to regard it as “his” bedroom? Are there hints here of the identity he has assumed, or that he will be assuming? Or should he view the door that has now popped into view on the far wall as the means for his discovery of whatever destiny it is that waits beyond it?

Quickly enough Daniel decides there is nothing to be gained by lingering in what is now clearly just an ordinary room. Surely no secrets would be residing behind these undistinguished pictures, the nondescript wooden furniture, or the miscellaneous objects scattered about. Whoever he is, these items cannot tell him anything of importance about his renewed potential as a fictional being. As he approaches the door, Daniel feels a kind of exuberance, a heightened sense of possibility, in anticipation of the adventures that must surely lie on the other side. It seems to him that he has regained a long-discarded innocence, that perhaps he might be able to welcome his new experiences with an enthusiasm he had believed lost.

Thus when I opened the door I had no preconceived notion of what I might find, but I was nevertheless startled by the scene I encountered. Although the first thing to capture my attention was not the sight but rather the sound confronting me. For it was really only then that I realized the world I had entered had been until now a silent one. My struggle to hoist myself from bed, my footsteps as I crept across the floor, even the action of

turning the doorknob and pulling open the door itself were unaccompanied by any noise whatsoever. But now the clamor was overwhelming, although the effect could have been exaggerated by the contrast between the virginal quiet of my first moments of fictional existence and its abrupt, disorienting violation. Within a few moments, the din both subsided slightly and became less undifferentiated. Gradually I was able to discern two dominant sounds amidst the residual background noises: a high piercing wail, something like a siren, and a deeper, intermittent thump I finally judged to be the sound of someone knocking on yet another door.

I'm not certain whether next I simply became aware of my visual surroundings or whether again they literally came into being when my attention shifted to what could be seen immediately in front of me. In either case, I could now see that the doorway in which I stood opened out onto another room that, judging from the furniture visible to me (couch, armchairs, coffee table), I took to be a living room. A portion of the room was not visible due to a wall extension on my right, and since the knocking sound was clearly emanating from this area as yet inaccessible to sight, I assumed that there I would find the door upon which the sound was being made and through which likely would be discovered its source.

I did not make an immediate move to facilitate this discovery; in short, if I did not at first think I should proceed to answer the door, it was because I could not be sure it was my place to do so. Was this my house? If not, wouldn't someone else soon show up to respond to this urgent solicitation of his or her attention? On the other hand, shouldn't the screaming of the siren (a police siren?) have brought the rightful inhabitants out to investigate such an interruption of their peace and quiet? I continued standing in the doorway for a minute or more, but no other resident appeared. Nor in the meantime did the noise abate in the least, leaving me to finally resolve that I must put a stop to it myself. I walked on through the doorway and turned the corner in the direction I believed would lead me to the front entranceway. There is a door at the far end of the room. I begin walking toward it, while at the same time I look around me at the part of the room formerly blocked from my vision. Bookshelves line one of the walls, but although they

are filled with books, the books themselves lack any distinct identity, as if they are meant to exhibit the shapes and forms of books without necessarily, strictly speaking, being books. Similarly, strewn across the coffee table and part of the floor are objects I know to be magazines, but whatever writing adorns their covers seems only a blur. As I come closer to the door, I notice off to my left another room, in which can be seen a desk overlain with papers that I am also sure would prove upon inspection to be likewise covered with a facsimile of writing.

Before I can really make coherent sense of these fleeting impressions (although I nevertheless have a strong feeling they do indeed make sense in their own way), I am standing in front of the door that is even now vibrating from the intense pounding being inflicted on it from the other side. It is clear I have no alternative to opening the door and admitting whatever furies are there demanding entrance.

When at last the door swings inward, he stands in the doorway as naked as the day he was born. The officers, who had been, it should be said, on the verge of smashing through the door just as their repeated entreaties met with success, look on with visible disgust at the spectacle. Shaking his head, Officer O'Reilly turns and addresses Officer Flanagan.

"Looks like our information about this one was correct," he says.

"You're right on the mark there, Jimmy boy," says Officer Flanagan in return.

"What do you mean coming to the door like that?" says Officer O'Reilly, turning back to the naked man in the doorway. "This is a respectable neighborhood, I'll have you know!"

I know that I attempted a reply to the policeman's gibe, but the words came out in a hopeless jumble. I'm not myself sure what it was I intended to say, and the two policemen merely looked at each other as if my failed speech only confirmed whatever accusation had brought them to my doorstep in the first place.

“Come now. Is that all you have to say for yourself?” says Officer Flanagan. Officer O’Reilly tries, and fails, to suppress a snicker.

Again I resolved to speak, to offer some explanation of the circumstances in which these men had discovered me, but not only was I still unable to find the words (or at least to enlist those words in the physical act of speaking, whose requirements I seemed for the moment to have forgotten), it occurred to me I had no explanation to give. I shrugged my shoulders. For all I knew, perhaps I was the babbling idiot I so far had presented myself to be.

Officer O’Reilly, apparently losing patience, speaks to him more sharply.

“Do you know why we’re here?”

“No.”

“Oh, so you can talk, eh?” says Officer Flanagan.

“Yes.”

“What about it, then?” snaps Officer O’Reilly. “Are you going to tell us what we want to know or aren’t you?”

When he says nothing further but continues to look at the officers with a resolutely vacant expression on his face, O’Reilly and Flanagan take him by the arms and begin to lead him out of the house.

“Perhaps you’ll have more to say if we take you downtown,” says O’Reilly, who is now clearly losing patience with the suspect.

“Can’t I please get dressed?” asks the suspect, suddenly drawing back from the pressure being exerted on his arms.

“Well, now,” says Officer Flanagan, “it seems the lad has become aware of his shame.”

“And it’s a good thing, too,” says O’Reilly. “It’s not the most pleasing sight I’ve ever seen.”

Flanagan breaks out in loud guffaws of laughter. Eventually they subside, but in the meantime both officers have halted in their progress toward the police car waiting at the end of the sidewalk. The car’s flashers have continued to pulse throughout this encounter, and as the trio now stands away from the house the light seems to be escaping from the car like visible bursts of nervous energy.

“All the same,” says Flanagan, recovering finally from his amusement, “we don’t want to tamper with the evidence. He’ll have to come along as he is.”

O’Reilly nods his agreement, and the two policemen continue to escort the suspect down the sidewalk.

Records indicate that Officers O’Reilly and Flanagan left the scene of the crime at 3:27 p.m. According to the report later submitted by these officers, the suspect was read his rights, brought in to the station, and booked, all in the usual manner. We want to emphasize that no evidence can be found that suggests any malfeasance of duty on the part of the two officers. The blame for subsequent public outcry over the so-called “Gregorian affair” cannot, we believe, be laid at their doorstep. Their actions, we have concluded, were in every way consistent with the finest traditions of the force.

Examination of the procedures followed once the suspect was duly processed reveals no serious anomalies. It is true that Gregorian was allowed to clothe himself (standard prison

issue) and to contact an attorney, but these actions are in complete accord with department policy and, of course, with legal requirements that have become accepted practice across the length and breadth of this, our beloved land. Thus, we cannot agree with those who would find our institutions too “permissive.” Everything done by our officials in this case was consistent with the principle that anyone under suspicion is entitled to certain inalienable rights—even the likes of Daniel Gregorian.

If my apprehension by those hoary old police officers came as a rather rude awakening, my involuntary confinement at least forced me to scrutinize the true nature of my dilemma in the harsh light of day. (Although never on my trip from “house” to “jail” did I seem to be travelling through what I recognized as ordinary daylight. I would instead have called it twilight, except that it was brightened occasionally by a more palpable, though weak, current of illumination, only to revert again to its former state of uncertain light/darkness.) Literally, I came face to face with the very images of the fate I eventually became convinced might be awaiting me.

What I expected to find when I was led into the large holding cell and told to “think long and hard about the consequences” of my actions was no doubt influenced by my ever dimming memories of such scenes in stories and movies: snarling criminal types just waiting to let me have it (a result I assumed the authorities themselves were no doubt encouraging). Instead I was tossed among other dazed-looking figures who seemed as confused and downcast as I was. I was asked immediately by one of them to relate the facts of my case, which I did as briskly and clearly as I could. When I finished, all of them began to nod their heads vigorously, as if they recognized the essential elements of their own stories in the one I had told. Since it was now apparent I was in no danger from these fellows (each of whom seemed oddly similar to every other, now that I had the chance to inspect their countenances, although as with so much in this seemingly unfinished world, their features were not wholly distinct to me, beyond the strong suggestion of disappointment emanating from them all), I in turn inquired about the circumstances that had brought them to this cell we found ourselves occupying.

For many of them, I was informed, this was not their first incarceration. Some confessed to being returned to these confines multiple times. ("A five-time loser," one called himself.) Others said they were back for only the second time, having been given the chance to correct the unfavorable impression they'd made through their initial essays at self-reliance, a chance they had obviously failed to redeem. One or two were in the same position as I: only recently arrived, unfamiliar with the customs of the country they had entered, ignorant through no fault of their own of the ways and means of proceeding through its quarters. The recidivists among us were quick to say that it was still possible we might be given a reprieve and allowed to make a life for ourselves, although they were not optimistic we would succeed. They were all too well aware of the difficulties of getting one's bearings in the murky environment outside the relative safety of our cell, all too wary of the unpredictable shifts of fortune to which they had been relentlessly subjected, all too weary of the slippery slope by which one so easily found oneself transported into a scene so disconcertingly altered from that which one had just encountered.

Nevertheless, when word came that I was being released into the custody of my attorney, my fellow inmates urged me to listen carefully to whatever advice he might impart, leading me to believe that this attorney, unknown to me though he may have been, was a wise and influential man indeed. One of the inmates, the admitted five-time regressor, clearly the most downtrodden and dismal of us all, drew me aside to tell me that no one else, at least as far as he knew, had ever received a personal visit from the man, although he had, technically speaking, represented everyone in our cell. This could only mean that he considered me a promising client, that he considered it a worthwhile investment of his time and effort to involve himself directly in my case. I must not fail to take advantage of the opportunity I was surely being given if I wanted to avoid the fate so pathetically embodied in those I saw around me.

Further inquiry among my colleagues revealed no one who had ever encountered this attorney directly. A few had talked to associates, who, from the description given of

them, seemed no better adjusted to their own circumstances than those they were assigned to defend. Others had had no contact with anyone at all before being informed they had been given another chance to, as the expression goes, “get a life.” My last thought before being led out of the jail cell (which I was, to be truthful, coming to regard as a haven of sorts, a port in a storm, as it were) to meet with the man now looming before me as perhaps the true arbiter of my future was that getting a life, seemingly such a simple calibration of means and ends, is in fact an endeavor subject to mysterious influences, flowing from sources unseen if not unfathomable, that suddenly arise and thoroughly overwhelm the firmest intentions of one such as I.

After securing my client’s freedom—and despite what some might say, I continue to believe in his innocence implicitly—I further counselled him that to avoid being thrust back among the vagrants and the malcontents he would nevertheless need to demonstrate a measure of self-sufficiency he had not, in all candor, exhibited heretofore. I made it clear that I did not mean to imply he had deliberately neglected his responsibilities. Indeed, I listened with great interest as he narrated his story—obscene and disorderly as it sometimes was—and exhorted me to extricate him from the unaccountable situation in which he found himself entangled. Surely I could see how unjust had been his treatment at the hands of his tormentors?

I reminded my client that even my powers were limited. That I could give him assistance when necessary, as in the current circumstances, but that he must be responsible for establishing his own credibility as prospective citizen of this land. That while I understood his predicament, he was not the first, nor would he be the last, to face it, not by a long shot. If you want the respect of those who now only look at you askance, I said, you will have to take those measures requisite to assuming a life of your own. (How often has it happened, I wanted to say, that one of my clients has failed to heed this advice, his efforts to affirm the integrity of his existence come to nought?)

These, then, are the directions I gave him, rudimentary though they were: find a job, preferably a professional position with all the middle-class accoutrements such a position entails; look for a mate who will complement your strengths and supplement your weaknesses—if this tack proves fruitless, do not despair, the mere effort will bring you due credit in the estimate of many; acquire the kind of friends who help extend your influence across the community but who can also be counted on to act as confidantes when the need arises; locate your family (for indeed they are nearby) and pay them frequent visits, concentrating your attention especially on your younger sister, whose love for you is strong but who will need the guidance and the wisdom of an older brother if she is to flourish in her own right during the challenging times ahead. I told him finally that I hoped my further intervention would not prove necessary but that I would certainly continue to monitor his progress, and might get in touch with him from time to time.

II

Daniel Gregorian arrived in _____ City, a naïve but ambitious young man on the make. As poor as the day he was born—which was poor indeed—Daniel set about finding himself a job that would help him make ends meet while he perfected the craft by which he would truly make his mark on the world—as poet, novelist, literary critic, in short as a writer of unprecedented range and unwavering seriousness. Given the direction in which his ambitions lay, to work in one of the many bookstores scattered across the great city seemed both a logical and an attainable goal. After all, was his life not consumed by books? Would he not be able to guide the store’s customers to those volumes most likely to bring them delight and instruction? Would he not be able to advise the store’s managers themselves as to the books the store should make available to its customers, books that would help the store establish a reputation as a beacon of enlightened thought and culture?

While Daniel, of course, knew the answer to these questions to be “yes,” convincing a potential employer that his skills were of indisputable cash value to them proved more difficult than he assumed. For one thing, Daniel had unfortunately arrived in the city

during a period of uncertainty in economic affairs, and its citizens seemed to be patronizing its bookstores less frequently than might be expected. Thus, most of the book shops he called on simply had no need for additional help, even though he was assured his tastes in literature were no doubt unimpeachable. For another, those stores with whom he was able to file an application seemed less like the sorts of places one might frequent to satisfy one's intellectual curiosity and more like all the other stores surrounding them that sold the latest in fashions or technological devices. The few books these stores did display seemed to be presented as just another kind of material good, like shoes, blouses, or video games. Even if one of these venues should offer him a position, Daniel concluded, he was pretty sure he wouldn't want to take it, for fear it might so discourage him he would falter in his determination to pursue his literary calling. What real writer would want his book to be sold in such a place, anyway?

Fortunately, Daniel was not faced with making this decision, since no offer ever came forward. In the meantime, he devoted most of his time to his literary efforts, duly submitting each of his compositions to the journals still devoted to publishing serious works of literary art. The time came, however, when he could no longer subsist on the small amount of money he had with him on his arrival in _____ City. He had never been so naïve as to believe he would make much money from his writing at the beginning, although he had hoped he might begin to establish a name for himself that would ultimately pay off in more prestigious, and remunerative, publications. Sooner or later this would still happen, he believed, but until then he could not simply dismiss the obvious necessity to support himself in a minimally comfortable fashion. Without a job, he couldn't pay next month's rent (although leaving the insect-infested apartment in which he found himself wasn't an entirely melancholy prospect); couldn't go to the theaters, the museums, the concerts he considered the most gratifying aspect of life in the city. There seemed no way to avoid a painful choice: either his comfort must suffer, perhaps to a degree he would find intolerable, or his literary ambitions would have to be deferred.

The rest of Daniel's story is, unfortunately, quickly told. After several weeks spent fruitlessly searching for a job that might yet leave room for him to write—the time to spend actually creating, but also to summon his inspiration—he again came up empty-handed. The few possibilities he explored either called for skills he could not demonstrate, or seemed ultimately too mind-numbing to consider. Finally he reached an unavoidable conclusion. If he stayed, he would need to commit himself to a vocation that effectively made it necessary to abandon his literary efforts altogether; if he could not bring himself to do that, he would be forced to return whence he came.

That we leave Daniel at this point, allowing the decision he made to remain a private affair, should in no way be seen as an attempt to avoid the unpleasant truths contained in his story. For whatever he did, are not the consequences the same? Here is Daniel, still living in _____ City, toiling at an anonymous and unsatisfying job, still dreaming of literary greatness but gradually accepting that it will never come, no, not in this lifetime at least. Or there is Daniel, enveloped in his provincial obscurity, in his free hours producing page on page of earnestly polished poetry and prose destined to go unread, even by those friends and family members who dimly remember that he once confessed a desire to be a writer, but who believed him when, after returning from his brief sojourn in the city, he declared himself free of that aspiration.

Daniel first saw her standing in the Women's Issues section, thumbing through a copy of *The Clitoral Revolution*. There was something about the way she gazed intensely at the pages of this book (was she looking at a photo, perhaps?) that both attracted and intimidated him. On the one hand, her face seemed to be absorbing a kind of sexual energy from the pages, giving her already pleasing features an extra jolt of pure sensuality. On the other, the very power her expression implied was scary, or at least it was to Daniel. Naturally a rather diffident man in these matters anyway, Daniel could bring himself only to stroll very casually over to Women's Issues, where in an equally casual way he hid his ulterior motives by perusing the titles packed tightly on the shelves. Perhaps by showing an interest in some of these books he could induce her to speak to

him, he thought. Perhaps she would be impressed with his obvious lack of inhibition at being in this section of the bookstore and would have friendly words for him, words that might lead to But, like all the other times he has employed this strategy, what he has come to think of as a strategy of aggressive passivity, it failed. Without giving him even a glance, she put the book back on the shelf and walked away.

Daniel had been in the habit of visiting this book store, The Ink-Stained Wretch, it is called, once or twice a week, but now he began to show up just about every day, on the chance she, too, found the store a haven, a necessary source of contact with a larger world of thought and beauty. (Although he also hoped she did not have the kind of job that made such a haven seem so appealing—or the kind of life, for that matter.) After eight straight days of dutifully inspecting almost every book the store has to offer—he skips over Gardening, Cookbooks, and New Age Spirituality—Daniel is about to conclude that her previous appearance had been a mere caprice, at best the product of a periodic impulse not likely to be repeated soon, when on the ninth day, as he looks up from browsing through the works of Trollope (he'd judged that this would occupy a good deal of his time), he sees her approaching New Fiction. His surprise is such that he continues staring at her long enough that as she herself surveys the store she momentarily pauses and returns his stare. Daniel hastily puts *The Way We Live Now* back into its slot and moves out of her line of sight, stopping finally in front of Military History. He certainly doesn't want her to think he would have any interest in such books, should she happen to make her way to this part of the store, but he wants to give her the opportunity to turn her attention elsewhere and put him out of mind. He can't leave the impression he was just waiting for her to show up.

When he feels he's allowed enough time for her to move on or turn back to her own browsing among the current novels, Daniel tentatively walks away from the war books and back out into the middle of the store. He doesn't immediately see her, but finally notices she is standing in front of Check-Out. She apparently knew what she was looking for, and is waiting, book in hand, to make her purchase. He would at least like to know what book she's chosen. (If he's read it, it could provide the opening he needs to start up

a conversation; if he hasn't, its identity might nevertheless reveal something useful to him, suggest some other possible angle of approach to take.) He hurries quickly back to Military History and grabs the first book he sees—*Great Bombardments of World War II*, it turns out to be—and heads to Check-Out himself, keeping his attention fastened to the pages he begins to leaf through, as if he doesn't recall that just a few moments earlier he was very rudely staring at her. He keeps his gaze fixed on the book even after he stations himself behind her and he can tell out of the corner of his eye she has turned around and is looking squarely at him. Only when she turns back to the counter and lays her book on top of it does Daniel cease simulating an interest in *Great Bombardments* (Has she seen the title? He fervently hopes not) and looks to the countertop himself. *Eternal Laughter*, by Wallace D. Foster. He has read it! In fact, it's one of the best novels he's read in a long time.

"Good choice. This is one of the best novels I've read in a long time."

The sales clerk has beaten him to the punch. What should he do now?

"You're not the first person to tell me that," she replies to the clerk. "It doesn't really sound like my kind of book, but I thought I'd give it a try."

"What kind of book is your kind of book?" He'd meant the question to seem earnest, sincerely curious about her reading habits, but instead it sounded smarmy, a pick-up line in a bar full of English professors.

"Certainly not that kind," she says, pointing to *Great Bombardments*.

Not only has he come off as an uncool, inept "operator," but she also apparently thinks he's some kind of young militarist. Unfortunately, he can express his embarrassment at being thus misunderstood only through the equally embarrassing act of blushing (he can feel the heat racing across his face) and of blurting out feebly: "I'm buying it for a friend. . . a relative. . . Uncle Alex. . . World War II buff. . . ."

He's about to just pack it in and slink away to the Self-Help section when she seems to take note of his discomfort and to drudge up a nugget of sympathy, which she presents to him by saying with a smile, "I've got some pretty nutty relatives myself."

Rather than press his luck (or lack thereof) any further, Daniel waits quietly for her to complete her transaction with the sales clerk and leave the store.

"So what's with the book? Are you going to buy it or were you just trying to impress her with your impeccable taste in books?"

Daniel doesn't reply to the clerk's gibe. He turns away from Check-Out, leaves *Great Bombardments of World War II* on the Bargain Books table, and walks out of the store himself, thinking as he does so that he'll not be able to return to this bookstore, at least not for a while. It's not just that he wants to avoid this sales clerk in the future. The place itself will now also remind him of yet another pathetic failure in an ongoing series of disastrous encounters with women.

Perhaps the time has come to end this cycle of ineptitude and disappointment, however. Perhaps finding a more satisfying conclusion to this latest fiasco would help him turn a corner, find a new course on which to navigate his future romantic adventures. He needs to find the woman and apologize for his clumsiness. He could explain that he is aware she has no sexual interest in him and that coming to know his admirable qualities better will not magically provoke her interest. He could explain further that out of his own fear and weakness he had approached her in this oblique and ultimately ridiculous way, ending his confession with the hope that should she see him again somewhere—clearly they frequented the same quasi-bohemian part of town—she would not think of him as simply freakish. (To his disgust, he cannot suppress the lurking thought that such a performance might actually do him some good with her. Maybe she might ask him to the Espresso Place for coffee?) It was possible, to be sure, that she would subsequently

always consider him a mostly pathetic figure, but that would be better than being forever after the object of her active derision.

In order to carry through with his resolution before dismissing it as just another bright idea gone dim, Daniel sets out to track the woman down now. He walks along both sides of Hawthorne Avenue, where most of the popular stores and restaurants are located, on the chance The Ink-Stained Wretch was just her first stop of the day. One by one, he saunters leisurely enough through Sounds Right, The Sandal Stop, Web Surfing USA, The Alternative Drugstore, Uncommon Scents, Brook Farm Outfitters, Electronica, The Postmodern Kitchen, Nat's Used Books, Art's Gallery, In the Spirit, www.Garden.Org, and Hester's Fashion Statement. Also, he briefly surveys the crowds gathered at Goodman's Brew Pub, Ismail's Middle Eastern Restaurant, The Lotus Blossom, Chad's Bar and Grill, The Herbivore, Pilar's, Café Wakefield, and Umberto's Pizzeria. Shopping was evidently not on her itinerary for today, and neither, it would seem, was she in need of food or drink. By the time he has travelled up and down the several blocks over which these businesses are spread, Daniels's inspiration is beginning to flag, so he finds himself almost disappointed when, after deciding to take in an afternoon matinee at the Merrymount Theater, he sees her standing in the ticket line.

His first impulse was to leave, to forget about the movie and retire from the field, but as she had not turned in his direction and did not yet know he was there, he crept on up to the theater and attached himself to the end of the line. He would go ahead and see the movie (it was the latest Martin Lynchberg film, *Tunnel of Death*, which he had wanted to see for a while now), making sure to sit well away from her, so that if she did see him she might plausibly think they had innocently crossed paths once again. Fortunately, he finds once inside that the theater is reasonably crowded, making it less likely she will even notice his presence. The film turns out to be a dud, an exercise in style without substance, so he spends most of his time deciding what to do when it's over. He will try to gauge his exit from the theater with hers, perhaps meeting up with her in front of the concession stand, where he will express his surprise at seeing her and proceed to apologize for his earlier behavior. What happens afterward he leaves to chance.

They do indeed approach one another near the popcorn machine, but there is a sizable crowd of people between them and he cannot speak to her. She does catch sight of him, however, and he cannot say that the look on her face suggests he's a welcome sight. He instinctively hangs back, allowing her to go on outside without further greeting. To give her even more time to conclude he doesn't intend to follow her, Daniel turned to the concession stand and bought a box of Junior Mints. He now had to decide once and for all: to catch up with her and explain himself thoroughly, or slink on home and console himself with his mints. It was by now obvious even to Daniel that nothing could happen between them (nothing positive, at least), so the simplest thing, to be sure, would be just to abandon the whole silly scheme. But since nothing was really at stake except his own self-regard, he could finally see no reason to vacillate further. When it was all said and done, this tendency to vacillation was surely his greatest weakness—in all his dealings, not just with women—and this at least could be the episode that led him to change his ways.

This time he didn't have to track her down. Once outside, he saw her almost at once, flanked on both sides by others, all female, he took to be friends whom she had met at the theater. It is now early evening, and as he follows at a safe distance back up Hawthorne Avenue, he expects them at any moment to turn off into one of the restaurants for an after-movie dinner. (Were this to happen, he might need to head on home after all. He certainly could not say what he wanted to say in front of a group, nor could he stand around for who knows how long waiting for them to come back out.) But they did not. Instead they continued walking on up the avenue toward the residential area abutting the commercial strip, Daniel maintaining a furtive distance in his low-intensity pursuit. One by one, the friends peel off, leaving her to whatever final push she had to reach her destination. She leaves the sidewalk and entered the front yard of what appeared to be a free-standing house, the first he has seen after several blocks worth of apartment buildings. Is it hers? Her parents'? Did she live there at all, or is she stopping by to see yet another friend? A boyfriend?

Daniel crosses to the other side of the street, both to be careful and to better take stock of the situation. It's a pleasant but nondescript house, small enough that it could possibly be hers. (He had no idea what she did for a living, though. For all he knew, she might have actually made a success of her life.) But he can't be sure, and he's not about to knock on that door and expose himself to yet more embarrassment, or worse. Still, he can't yet leave. If she does live here, it's always possible she'll come out and sit on the porch, perhaps, and he'll be able to speak to her after all. If she doesn't, she'll come out eventually, and he could at least find out where in fact she does live. He stays until well after the sun has set and the streetlights have begun to snap on.

When he returned the next day, he reassumed his look-out post, but had been sitting on the low brick wall running parallel to the sidewalk for only about 20 minutes before he noticed someone approaching from the still-quiet neighborhood farther up the street. It was Officer Flanagan.

"Up with you now," he says. "That's the end of it."

I met Nick Rogers shortly after I started graduate school at Mid-America University. He had been a student himself for a short time, but it hadn't taken long for both Nick and the English department to realize that they weren't a match made in heaven. There will still stories making the rounds among the grad students about how Nick had disrupted this class or that class by openly proclaiming that something the prof had just said was for the birds. Nick told me that in every class he'd actually finished he'd been flunked, even though he'd written some papers that he thought were about the last word on their subjects. "Have you ever read some of the crap they publish in these journals, Gregorian? They drain all the life out of poetry. A great poem can't be appreciated by the brain alone; it has to be felt all the way down to the gonads."

Nick considered himself a kind of poet, although to tell the truth I never really thought there was anything special about his poems, at least the ones he let me read. (They

seemed to have been written from the gonads, all right, which to me was not quite what he had been suggesting.) His real talent was for living life with all the colors filled in, as if experience, all experience, would always lead to illumination if only he hung on to it long enough. This is the talent he tried to teach me, although as will soon be apparent I was at best a slow learner. There were others in our group whom Nick tried to instruct in his own version of higher education, but finally only Allen Carlyle and myself could be counted on as his truly faithful acolytes.

Allen had started graduate school the year before me, and was the first friend I had made during my own first semester in Middleburg. It was Allen, in fact, who had introduced me to Nick Rogers when we ran into him at Combinations, the local pool parlor. (Nick immediately challenged me to a game. To my surprise, I beat him. I was not much of a pool player, but Nick, it turned out, was really awful.) I'm not entirely sure what first brought Allen and Nick together, since in so many ways they were so very different. Nick was, to say the least, outgoing, convivial in the extreme. Allen was quiet and reserved, even, at times, withdrawn. Nick was a child of the working class, his father an activist in the machinist's union. Allen was a product of suburbia, both of his parents affluent professionals. Where Nick was a connoisseur of excess, unafraid to test the validity of arbitrarily enforced limits, Allen was cautious, although never judgmental of anyone else's actions. Finally, where Nick was a recreational poet, so to speak, Allen was the real thing, a gifted writer whose poetry showed both sensitivity and intelligence. But since I generally occupied the middle ground, neither too zealous nor overly guarded (a real milquetoast, me), perhaps the three of us formed a kind of organic union of personalities. Or perhaps Allen was simply attracted to a figure who could bring him into contact with a side of life he might otherwise miss altogether.

Truth be told, Nick began subtly to encourage both of us to ditch grad school almost immediately. At first he merely mocked our efforts to stay on top of our coursework (Allen was more earnest about it than I, of course), expressing his incredulity that we would think studying literature in this way had any conceivable value—unless, of course, we intended to be professors, which to Nick seemed no less than a death sentence. (Allen

wanted to be a poet; if that meant he would have to be a teacher of “creative writing,” he was willing to do that. In having done this minimal amount of planning for his future, he was well ahead of me.) Gradually he became more insistent, not just with Allen and me, but with everyone in our group when we gathered at parties or in local watering holes, that if we had any self-respect we’d all reject the grad school mentality and do some real living. Since it was never really clear to any of us just what Nick did with himself during working hours (he did host a jazz show on the local community radio station) or even why he was still in Middleburg at all, these exhortations eventually rang a little hollow.

One day I told him that his apparent contempt for us and our studious ways would be more convincing if he were more obviously setting a counter-example for us to follow. He seemed truly surprised by my remark. He had thought, he told me, that his example couldn’t have been clearer. That I wanted him to “do” something—presumably I meant something tangible in the way of making a so-called living—spoke volumes about my inability to get past the mind games society had been playing on me. Did I really believe that we should measure a person’s life by the work he did? (Not really.) Was grubbing for money my idea of time well spent? (No, it certainly was not.) Had it been another era, I would have expected him to call me “uptight,” a “square,” a dupe of the “establishment.” And possibly I was a square—although assuredly no part of any establishment—even while I enthusiastically embraced the idea of life as an endless party. It was just that I had to acknowledge that my capacity for indulgence paled next to Nick’s, that while I found perpetual dissipation theoretically appealing, in my case where the spirit was willing the flesh was definitely weak. You might say that for me a few extended periods reserved for more mundane pursuits (such as reading and studying) came as welcome respite from my hopeless struggle to keep up with Nick in his exhausting regimen of all-out revelry.

And so it must have been for the others as well. By the time Nick finally gave up trying to convince us to join him in transforming Middleburg into a midwestern bohemia and urged us instead to accompany him on a trip to we knew not where, all but Allen and I politely, but firmly, demurred. It was just before spring break, so we assumed it would be

a journey of short duration. Even so, we too, like our colleagues who successfully resisted Nick's entreaties, had work that should have occupied our time during the break. (We were nearing the end of the school year, and for some of us the question whether we would be back for another one was by no means settled.) To my surprise, Allen seemed most keen on the idea. Why not, he said, just head out on the road, any road, with no fixed destination in mind? Besides, he added, who knew what antics Nick might get himself drawn into, what freshly outrageous behavior he might exhibit for our edification? Didn't I want to see that, if only so we could later on look back at it all and tell the tale?

I should have known that Allen's cheerfully cynical attitude boded ill for the whole enterprise. Nevertheless, on a day in late March that began with a heavy frost unusual for that time of year, Nick, Allen, and I took off on what Nick called our "quest for the route leading straight to America's teeming vitality"—although we didn't exactly get an early start on this quest. Nick insisted on using his old battered Toyota for the journey (I had suggested we take a rental car, an idea Nick predictably dismissed out of hand) and had told us he would pick us up first thing in the morning. We forgot, of course, that for Nick "morning" came no earlier than noon, so Allen and I sat around in his apartment for several hours waiting for Nick to show up. Finally, around 2:00, we hiked on over to Nick's place (needless to say, he didn't have a phone), where we found him out of bed all right, but, ominously, standing in his driveway looking under the Toyota's hood. Just a few final adjustments, he told us, but it was another sign that this adventure might not necessarily proceed altogether smoothly. When he closed the hood and announced we were ready to go, I reminded Nick he would need to run us back by Allen's apartment to pick up our suitcases, but he was surprised we'd taken the time to pack up anything. He was trying to teach us how to be spontaneous, but apparently we didn't get it. We'd find what we needed to get by along the way.

Apparently the first thing we needed to pick up before getting down to our intended business was lunch (or, considering the time, it might have been breakfast). Thus, after reluctantly agreeing to the need for spontaneity, we got into Nick's car only to find

ourselves heading for the Burrito Barn, which was located just this side of downtown Middleburg, three blocks from Nick's house. By the time we finally got on to the interstate—Nick was a prodigious eater who could always go back for more—it was probably around 4:00, and there were only a couple of hours of daylight left. Undaunted, Nick headed west, insisting that the day was young and that we'd be sure to come across plenty to interest us. At this point, an inquiry into Nick's plans, however vague and inchoate, would certainly have been in order, but I knew better than to use the word in his presence, and I could think of no other way of putting the question that wouldn't set him off on a tirade. I looked at Allen to see if he wanted to know where we were going, but he seemed to be deliberately avoiding eye contact with me.

Judging by the speed with which Nick drove once Middleburg was finally behind us, you would have thought indeed that he was hurtling us toward some destination long anticipated, despite his claim to be taking us to nowhere in particular. And the state patrolman who stopped us about a half an hour later made a similar observation, wondering in the usual state trooper fashion just where it was we were going in such an all-fired hurry. At this point I knew that disaster loomed, that there was nothing we could do about it, and that the best thing to do would be to ameliorate as much as possible whatever crude and belligerent responses Nick made to him by acting more like adults when the hostilities broke out. Sure enough, Nick let the trooper have it, throwing in enough foul language and blatant disrespect to ensure we'd be arrested, which more likely than not was actually his goal. What kind of romantic rebels would we be if we weren't hauled in by the cops at least once?

I looked back at Allen, who did not seem inclined to intervene, and in fact looked to be rather enjoying the spectacle. It was then I decided my life was unfocused and misdirected enough as it was, that I didn't need to make it worse by pretending to be the insouciant outlaw I clearly wasn't. I reached over and grabbed Nick by the hair and jerked him across the steering wheel. The shock of it was clearly great enough to shut him up for the moment, and I asked the trooper if he would please just give us our ticket and let us go on. I told him that my friend had evidently lost his mind, that he was a jerk

and an asshole but not really dangerous. He was all mouth, I said, and I, for one, didn't want to get into trouble with the law because of it. I even offered to let him search the car if he thought he needed to, which was something of a risk because it was entirely possible Nick had something illegal stashed away somewhere in that car. The trooper seemed as taken aback by my actions as Nick, but after I threatened to bash Nick's head in if he didn't apologize to the patrolman for his own gratuitous outburst, and after Nick duly did so, he gave us our ticket and told us to be on our way.

Some of you may know that the rest of this trip was recounted by Allen Carlyle in his poetic narrative *American Freeway*. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of Allen's narrative, since I did not accompany them any farther. Nick recovered almost instantly from my blow-up—he even seemed to find the whole episode invigorating—and was hellbent on finding—or provoking—some new excitement. I had had enough, however. If you've read *American Freeway* you know that there Nick, in the poem called "Neal," is portrayed as a whirling dervish of positive energy, an embodiment of the life force itself. Allen is certainly entitled to his opinion. Luckily, I play a very small role in Allen's story. I am the "Jack," who, unable to withstand the power of Neal's aura, decides meekly to stay behind. And to all intents and purposes, Allen has it right. Before Nick could gun us back onto the interstate and off to wherever we might have mindlessly wandered next, I silently escaped from the car and hitched my way back to Middleburg.

Dear Diary,

My brother Daniel disappeared today. Dad thinks he's just off somewhere feeling sorry for himself and will be back in a few days, but I'm not so sure. I think he might be gone for good.

Dad has never really understood Daniel. He always thought that because he liked to read books, or go to museums and stuff, that this made him a "pansy." I could never figure out what Dad thought a pansy really was, but whenever Daniel wasn't around he would tell

Mom and me he was sure Daniel was becoming one. He wanted his son to be smart all right, but he didn't think it was very intelligent to be wasting all your time on such fluff. They wouldn't bring him any money, and his behavior seemed to everyone Dad knew to be just peculiar. Why couldn't he use his brain on something society approved of, like engineering or medicine? (One time when Dad was going on about Danny becoming a doctor, I said something really snotty. I said, well maybe he'd just become a gynecologist. Dad didn't laugh.)

Mom never worried much about Daniel's manhood, but she was always telling him that his various plans for the future were only "pipe dreams." He started out wanting to be a writer, but this was only a pipe dream unless he wanted to be a newspaper reporter, and that did not really interest him. Then he thought he could try television or movie writing, since they actually paid a good deal of money, but this was only a pipe dream because you had to have the right connections to do that kind of thing. Finally he decided to become a college professor, which could also be a pipe dream because those who could afford to go to the best colleges got the good jobs, just like in every other profession, and we certainly couldn't afford to send him to one of those. Besides, college professoring wouldn't be as lucrative as some other jobs she could think of. (She never said what they were.) How would our father take having a son who wanted to be an English professor, anyway?

So he went to college, but changed majors four or five times, each time hoping to settle on one that would satisfy everyone, including himself. We'd thought the last switch, to History, with the intention of trying law school after graduation, might perhaps have done the trick. (Although our mother couldn't stop herself from wondering whether it might be yet another pipe dream.) But we haven't heard from him in weeks, and his roommate said he just packed up all his stuff and left. Mom is worried sick, and I just hope he comes back to us someday.

Dear Diary,

Today I graduated from high school. All the fuss made over me for being the class valedictorian was very nice and all, but I can't really enjoy it as much as I should because my brother isn't here to enjoy it with me. I said in my valedictory address that I could never have accomplished the scholastic achievements I was being honored for without Daniel's advice and encouragement. Most people probably thought I was just expressing my sorrow over Daniel's presumed death, and so they all applauded politely. But I meant everything I said. When we were growing up, Daniel always insisted that I keep up with my school work and that I set firm goals for myself. No one really believes me when I tell them this because they all know Daniel himself didn't do either of these things, so why would he have counselled me in this way? All I can say is he did, and he was deadly serious about it. It was almost like he didn't want me to have the same trouble he was having figuring out what direction in life to follow.

I'll be going to college next fall as a pre-med student. Luckily, this was a goal that turned out not to be a pipe dream thanks to the scholarship I've received. As everyone keeps telling me, my future appears to be laid out before me. I'm pretty sure it's the future I want. Still, there are times when it seems to me I'm assuming a life dreamed up by someone else, in fact, although he isn't even here, that it's Daniel who's guiding me. It certainly is ironic that even though he's absent he has the power to make himself heard so clearly.

Dear Diary,

As I begin my senior year in college, I am again led to reflect on the course my life has taken since my brother Daniel vanished. (No clues to his whereabouts have ever tuned up, but since his fate is still officially unknown, I choose not to think of him as dead.) I believe that if he were here to take note of it all my brother would be very pleased about the way things are working out for me so far: good grades, lots of friends, a college sweetheart who thinks the world of me (and who comes from a very wealthy family, to

boot). Plus, I've decided medicine is definitely the career I'd like to pursue. I'd like to become an orthopedic surgeon, perhaps specializing in children, which would allow me to improve the lives of lots of kids.

I'm only afraid that since Daniel more than anything wanted to be a writer, he would find my story's plot so far to be without serious drama or conflict. I had an English professor who said that literature and life are in no way alike and should always be kept separate. Maybe Daniel, because he had already experienced so much conflict, understood this only too well.

Mom and Dad don't speak much of Daniel anymore. For a while they both wondered if they had done something to make him want to go away, but later they seemed to convince themselves it was unavoidable that someone like Daniel would become frustrated with his lot, and that there was little they could have done about it. Although they have always been very supportive of me, and are constantly telling people how proud they are of me, I can't help but think that if Daniel were somehow to miraculously reappear they would be at least a little disappointed. It's almost as if they need his failure and my success to reaffirm their own wisdom as parents.

Dear Diary,

I can hardly believe it: I have successfully completed medical school and seem well on my way to fulfilling all my dreams! I know that hard work still lies ahead of me, but somehow I'm sure I'll get through it. All of my professors are certain I'll go far in my chosen specialty.

Even more: in two weeks I'll be married, to a man who understands the demands on a doctor's time and only wants to make things as easy as possible for me. I can't stop the visions of professional accomplishment, domestic happiness, and community

involvement from forming spontaneously in my mind's eye. I think I'd like to have three kids, and perhaps volunteer in my town's homeless shelter.

Finally: both of my parents seem to grow more vigorous, not to mention more prosperous, with every passing year. When I was growing up, I can remember my father constantly complaining about his aches and pains and fretting that his heart wouldn't make it past fifty. My mother had ulcers and other digestive problems, and for her the fear was that she'd develop some deadly type of cancer. But now they're both the picture of health and looking forward to their retirement, which promises to be quite comfortable. In the last few years my father, who had long dabbled in the stock market with very mixed results, finally hit on an investment scheme that has paid off very handsomely. They've bought a nice new home and are making plans for a trip to Europe.

Dear Diary,

I haven't turned to this diary for a long time now, but something truly astounding has happened, and I must try to reckon with it. My brother Daniel has returned! Or at least he has chosen to let his presence be known again, since after the story he told it's hard to say he ever went away.

Apparently, when Daniel left school all those years ago, he didn't run off and get lost in some hostile metropolis or head out on some cross-country journey gone horribly awry. Indeed, he simply came home, but not quite home. He moved to a neighboring town just five miles away! And we never knew it. Or we didn't want to know.

How did he get away with it?

It wasn't that hard, he said. No one in the town knew who he was, and he kept to himself as much as possible. He had no telephone, changed his name just enough to ward off suspicion, and did some kind of work at home. (He was rather vague about the nature of

this work, but I thought it best not to inquire further.) He did occasionally come back to our town (with a beard and his hair grown long, he was never recognized), and even staked out our house a few times, just to see how we were getting along. Once, he said, his ruse was almost uncovered. As he was walking down the sidewalk across the street from us, Mom, Dad, and I came out onto the porch. He momentarily paused from the surprise of it, and he was sure the three of us locked eyes with him. He quickly went on his way again, terrified that we had found him out, but when he next looked back we were all sitting in our porch chairs, apparently having concluded he was just some disreputable-looking local character. I don't remember the incident at all, and I'm not sure whether to believe it really happened or not.

Why did he hatch this plot in the first place?

I confess that at first I had no particular rationale for my actions. I could go neither forward nor backward, or so it seemed, so instead I simply moved sideways. Without further plans or ambitions, not even the ambition needed to become an aimless drifter, but also without the strength needed to withstand my parents' scorn, I did not choose to run back home, but did certainly find my way briskly to its vicinity. I guess I may have thought it would be a nice joke on everyone once I was discovered, but as time passed and my secret remained unchallenged, I began to believe it might be best to keep my location unknown indefinitely, perhaps permanently. I can give no other explanation for this belief than that, since I seemed to myself to have no life to speak of, it would only be logical if the world so thought of me as well. In a way, I could construct an identity for myself only by keeping it hidden. My absence was my only distinguishing characteristic.

Eventually, however, the notion came to me that my very abdication might paradoxically bestow upon me a kind of power I could never have wielded were I to be present in all my ineffectual glory. "Don't be like Daniel," I could hear my parents saying to my sister; for that matter, my example might well be held up to all their students by teachers in the local schools: "Never let this happen to you." But perhaps my legacy might be even more substantial than that, my influence felt more keenly. At the very least, my memory would

remain all the more vivid for my mysterious disappearance, and some folks might even wonder if there weren't in my experience a few "issues" worth pondering seriously. (I myself did not know what they were.) By detaching myself from the world before me, I came to see, I could actually assume an agency otherwise unavailable to me.

Why did I return?

I sensed the force of my influence was waning and could be reinvigorated only through the shock effect my sudden appearance might produce. I have not been disappointed, and was in fact somewhat surprised to hear my sister's account of the influence she believes I did have on her life's direction. I do not really recall saying all the things she says I did say, so I cannot honestly claim to have molded her in just the way I had planned. I did hope she would develop a character much different from mine, one more capable of reconciling itself to the demands of existence in the world as it really is. But I never would have guessed she would adapt herself to those demands so effortlessly and to such great success! If I had written a story about someone like her whose life has turned out as it has, I would probably judge it flawed by an implausibly happy ending (not to mention my parents: who could believe they'd become the richest people in town?). Nevertheless, I told her I had tried to in a sense help author a compelling scenario for her future, if not for mine. And then she said something that brought me up short.

Isn't it just as true, I said to him, that in living out this scenario I helped to confer meaning upon your life? Or that in their actions toward you our parents proved the most omnipotent authors of all? If you could be the hidden creator of my life's design, I added, who can say some other invisible hand isn't responsible for yours?