

This may be the last chapter. In some sense, the next chapter is the one that you, the reader, writes, in his or her head, or otherwise. Maybe you can figure it all out better than I could. Who knows? I'll post what you send. Denis141@hotmail.com

Remember, no story is ever finished; it simply ends (until the reader resurrests it).

Many thanks to all who
have stayed interested
over the years. Much
love to you all.

~ Denis

ALONE/TOGETHER

CHAPTER 48: TO THE END: A History Familiar

"I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness -- in a landscape selected at random -- is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern -- to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal."

~Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (1966)

"And I subjected all their powers. For as I came downward, no one saw me. For I was altering my shapes, changing from form to form. And therefore, when I was at their gates, I assumed their likeness. For I passed them by quietly, and I was viewing the places, and I was not afraid nor ashamed, for I was undefiled. And I was speaking with them, mingling with them through those who are mine, and trampling on those who are harsh to them with zeal, and quenching the flame. And I was doing all these things because of my desire to accomplish what I desired by the will of the Father above."

From *The Second Treatise of Great Seth*, Nag Hammadi Library,

translated by Roger A. Bullard and Joseph A. Gibbons

"The brother...taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride."

~William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
Vintage Corrected Text, pp. 77.

I. The Opening.

"Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times....[It] must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history.... Genealogy, consequently, requires patience and a knowledge of details and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material."

~Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," as found in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

The cardboard box was filled with damp-smelling scraps of paper torn from all manner of books and newspapers and magazine. Enos picked a small piece and held it to his nose, studying the pungent mustiness like a sommelier trying to ascertain the appellation of a strange wine. Then he reads what he holds before him, wondering where the words came from, thinking maybe a magazine, *The New Yorker* it looks like, recognizing the familiar typeface, and the spacing of the columns just so, three across, and this one in the middle, thus:

My father's room is filled with boxes. Inside the boxes, he says, are his masterpieces, his novels-in-progress, along with notes for future masterpieces, the blueprints for his stories. But if you open the boxes you find only torn photographs, check stubs, cocktail napkins covered with notes. No one could reconstruct a life from these scraps.

My father tells me he cannot die until his novel is completed. "Can I see it?" I ask, every few months or so, when we're together. He feigns shock, indignant at my doubts, and points to a corner of his room where yet another box is buried beneath a pile of unread newspapers—"It must be

there. It's the only place untouched." I offer to dig into it with him. He asks how much time I have, and if I say a couple of hours he says it'll take ten. If I say a couple of days, he says a week. Of course there's a book, a book he's been working on his entire life, "The Button Man," though sometimes it's called "The Adventures of Christopher Cobb." The letters from Little, Brown and Viking are framed on his walls. He walks to these letters and points to them as proof. At the bottom of one, my father has written, "Ann Hancock and I are still close friends. She loves my work. 'The Adventures of Christopher Cobb'!—It shall be an American classic! I never quit! I never give up!" Yes, I say, I've seen the letters, but can I see the book?

When asked for a synopsis, he says that it is a novel of an innocent dream of glory, of a man who believes that the world can be made whole again by a story, that he can change the world by what he creates.

He notes the irony, of course, of him being surrounded by boxes now too, starting his third week of being here in this long-abandoned house where his grandfather had once lived.

Sniffing it again, he puts the torn-out page he holds down beside the box, starting another pile of papers. He wonders how the boxes started, wonders if like the quote-described boxes that this too might be a novel he was reading, bit by bit, but out of order, out of any order.

This seemed strange to him, but right too. There were rooms upstairs filled with books, so many it was inconceivable to him that all of them had been read. But he remembered his dad say that reading had been grandfather's one consolation after losing his partner and lover, a man who his dad had told him all about—endless stories of a life improbable to him for all of its happiness and beauty, which was, of course, also the source of its tragedy.

No one spoke of it anymore now that his grandfather was gone now too, dead of his own hand, unable (his dad had said) to anymore stand the misery of being alone. He was found by his nurse atop blood-soaked sheets, surrounded by postcards that he had arranged in careful rows up and down the entire length of the bed, covering every spot except for that where he laid. Each of the postcards had been put in the casket and cremated along with his grandfather, sent (as his dad had said) back to where the postcards had come from—the dead. His uncle disagreed, and he and his dad had almost come to blows over it. But that was years and years ago, when he was barely five, and he might not be remembering it correctly. He wasn't sure, since his older brother Noah

insists that his dad had even threatened, screaming—*I should have fucking killed you before, and I sure as fuck should do it now. How dare you talk about him like that!*

—*Fuck you Seth*, his uncle had screamed back. *There is not a fucking thing you ever got about his or any life. Your still as stupid blind as the day you were born.*

Noah said that he had run away that night, taken his bicycle and disappeared. They spent hours looking for him until his mother remembered the grave, and his fixation with it. Noah said they found him there, his legs pulled tight to his chin, lying sideways in the grass, sleeping sound as if it was his bed back home. He did not remember any of this, not even the grave overlooking the ocean where it was said they had found him, fast asleep. His mother had burst into tears upon seeing him, one hand on her back, the other covering her gasping mouth. She had tried yelling at him, but her joy won out over anger, and she told Noah to carry him to the car. Later, after she got everyone home, she went into labor, and his baby brother Shem Shaun was born, a third boy in the family, not counting Enoch, who had died during birth, or, as his mother always said, “was immediately taken up by God.”

Enos, the middle-child (unlike his dad, who had been the oldest), was a trained historian, having just by gotten his Doctorate from Harvard, the family’s de facto Alma Mater. But being a historian by education was, in his view, not experience substantial enough to leave him confident of his abilities to discover the meaning of what might be in all these boxes. He wondered if this sorting was truly how history was made, or if the creating of a true history was possible. What had Chesterton said? “There is no history; there are only historians.”

The same could be said of any writer, he supposed, especially the writer of a memoir. He remembered a memoir he had read once, and some review of it after, where the daughter of the author was quoted as saying “This book is an erasing of what happened to me. I want people to understand these things don’t go away.” This man—her father—had molested her as a child, or she claimed. But that had been left out of his memoir, perhaps because it had been missing from his memories as well, like the lost chapters of a book.

He was deeply suspicious of memoirs to begin with. No book could contain an entire life, he thought. Who could be trusted to tell their own story truly, to not lie, to not leave out all of the too painful or unflattering things? And then the question for the reader would be: How much was a lie, and how much was true? What pieces had been trimmed to make things fit together better, like a quilt made from uneven and mismatched scraps? What incongruities or incoherencies had been left out for the purpose of keeping the narrative-river flowing? What complexities were just too much to expect a reader, even a diligent and devoted one, to sort through, to make sense of? And what was a reader anyway except for a spirit asked to embody a life not their own, with the writer as the possibly untrustworthy guide who you had to decide whether or how far to follow?

This last question he quickly pushed away, along with all the others were frustrating him so. There were so many boxes to go through, anyway—over a hundred boxes, many broken or overflowing. He had no idea how they had all come to be here, arranged in no particular order, with only a few labeled. He had first learned of the possibility of the boxes being here from his cousin Jim. It had to have been at least ten years ago, long before he had stumbled upon the idea of writing a book about his family.

He retrieved three battered paperback books wedged along the side of the box and looked at each cover and title in turn: *Regeneration*, by Pat Barker, *The Iliad*, by Homer, and *Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner. He opened the first book, guided by a blue string threaded inside. A passage was underlined in what looked like red pencil. It read:

“Your watch is brought back by a runner, having been synchronized at headquarters.” A long pause. “You wait, you try to calm down anybody who's obviously shitting himself or on the verge of throwing up. You hope you won't do either of those things yourself. Then you start the count down: ten, nine, eight... so on. You blow the whistle. You climb the ladder. Then you double through a gap in the wire, lie flat, wait for somebody else to get out—and then you stand up. And you start walking. *Not* at the double. Normal walking speed.” Prior started to smile. “In a straight line. Across open country. In broad daylight. Towards a line of machine-guns.”

He didn't really know what to think of this and set the book aside. Examining the second book, *The Iliad*, the cover fell open, the spine of the book seemingly broken. He noticed that there was sand among the pages, which sifted out as he turned the book over, then set it aside. Opening the third book, a torn page fell out. There was a section of words boxed in by a quivering scrawl of black pen, looking like barbwire around it.

It was a while before the last stroke ceased vibrating. It stayed in the air, more felt than heard, for a long time. Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister. Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. *I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames* And when he put Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. When he put the pistol in my hand I didn't. That's why I didn't. He would be there and she would and I would. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. If we could have just done something so dreadful and Father said That's sad too people cannot do anything that dreadful they cannot do anything very dreadful at all they cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today and I said, You can shirk all things and he said, Ah can you. And I

will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind, like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot distinguish even bones upon the lonely and inviolate sand. Until on the Day when He says Rise only the flat-iron would come floating up. It's not when you realise that nothing can help you—religion, pride, anything—it's when you realise that you don't need any aid. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. If I could have been his mother lying with open body lifted laughing, holding his father with my hand restraining, seeing, watching him die before he lived. *One minute she was standing in the door*

I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down.

He knew what happened next, the tearing of the watch hands off, Quentin Compson's fruitless attempt to escape the prison of time. It was only with his suicide that the escape had finally been made complete. That was how his uncle must have seen it too, he thought, remembering when he as a little boy had heard the dry whispers of the grown-up talking in serious tones, and clucking judgments about what a waste it had been, or would have been, had he not been found in time, in a strange twist of fate that no one believed, except his dad, who had been there, he thought.

—We were just stupid teenagers then, his dad had said. He hadn't meant to do it, to hurt himself like that. It was just an accident, a stupid accident. And a misunderstanding. He was always so overdramatic. It was something about a boy he thought he loved, like no other. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*, he kept saying. *Just let me die*. But I couldn't, of course. He was my brother.

Such stories had scared him as a child, and scared him still. He never seemed able to see how all of the pieces fit together, and which parts were true. That was why he was here, to get to the bottom at last, to solve the mystery of how his family had come undone. And so he retrieved another scrap from the box, a long white envelope with penciled letters, corner-to-corner, quick-scribbled, upon its wrinkled back, and he reads:

"Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things."

With a slow drawing of breath, he believes he may recognize the handwriting, who wrote on this envelope, but not the quotation, if that was what it was. Quotations marks can mean many things: words borrowed from another source, spoken-words like dialogue, or words not meant in the ordinary sense, like when a person makes quotation-marks in the air to signal to the hearer that he did not mean what he was about to say, like—She was a “smart” one—meaning that she was not smart at all. But here he thought the words written must be quotation, of something said,

or if not that, something read.

He shakes his head, takes a sniff of the envelope, and then turns it over to have a look for an address, or some sign of where it had come from, or once been. The front of the envelope was blank though, something unsent. It was difficult to tell. The envelope was sealed. He could see that. But it did not feel as if there was anything inside. He held the envelope above his head and looked up at it, translucent in the pale light of the single bulb overhead. Seeing no evidence of a letter inside, he set the envelope to one side, not sure whether to open it, and deciding to wait.

He peered in the box again and took out a single sheet of paper. There was a rusty paper-clip on the top right corner, turned crooked to one side. The envelope might have been clipped to this, he thought, looking closely. There was a faint smudge of rust where the paper-clip had been moved or shoved somehow, perhaps by the envelope being pulled or pushed away by the jostling of the box and its contents. He imagined the box being lifted up on to a shelf, or taken down and looked through, and then put back—like he would do when done.

Touching the paper-clip he moved it slightly, back and forth one-half of an inch, listening to the scratching noise it made, and watching the rust-colored half-moon shape it made at the top of the page. He stopped and licked the top of his finger. It tasted of rust and something else, like blood. The print on the page was faded and hard to read. He looked closely, squinting at the text, and its black-penned underlining.

The situation in Sophocles emphasizes the complexity of moral decisions and their ironies, for one, that a divine gift, the bow, and human suffering, the wound, are inseparable: heroes possess twin natures. For another, the great Greek kings cheated Neoptolemus of his legendary father's armor, Achilles' armor, and he resents it; he has been humiliated and symbolically cast out into the world defenseless without a father's blessing. So, he is psychologically disposed to flout the Greeks' authority and rescue the agonized old man, Philoctetes. So he will turn his ships toward home on Skyros, instead of heading back to the war in Troy. Odysseus's appeal to duty strikes a quite modern response in the boy of skepticism about political need. In the play's three movements, Neoptolemus is pulled towards the hero and then away from him before the conflict is resolved by 'the god (Heracles) in the machine'.

Unlike earlier translations, this version by the Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, emphasizes a universal agon between a wretched, aging exile and an untried boy, his "nature" against the warriors' code, a reputed 'father' against an untested 'son'. The hero's plight and its apparent injustice touches a chord in him of compassion and idealism, implicit in youth, and the episode on Lemnos becomes his *rite de passage* into manhood. In meeting Philoctetes, the boy must come to terms with all the old

fathers as they are, ten years after launching their great campaign against Troy, no longer glorious and far from invincible: the great Achilles dead and dishonored; Philoctetes rotting alone with his useless bow; and Odysseus detested by all as a steely, unscrupulous politician. For the first time, Neoptolemus questions the edicts of great kings. He will need to base his conduct on a clear eyed view of how deceit, necessity and pragmatism intersect in the real world.

A frown formed on his face as he read too quickly at first, missing the sense of what was written there. He took two breathes, letting the last one out slowly, and then he began again. He had never had much taste for history, and the unfamiliar names confused him. Still, something in him stirred, some hint or intuition that made him blush and his face feel warm. That was when he suspected that he would not stop until he had looked inside every single box, no matter how long it took him, even the rest of his life perhaps. Whatever dispassion he had brought to the task before had now disappeared entirely.

—*Yes*, he whispered, exhaling, the exhalation more than the whispered word, seeming to break the silence he had not noticed before, or had ceased to notice so immediately after that it was the same as not having noticed at all. And now against the silent background, he heard and studied the sound of his voice for a moment, nearly failing to recognize it, for there was a strange timbre to it, an agedness not his, as if something ancestral had spoken through him. Then—*Yes*, he said again, recognizing even less of his voice this second time, thinking, *I am just so tired. Maybe go to bed.* But then deciding not to, he picked up small leather-bound notebook about the size of the palm of his hand. The leather was the color of butterscotch candy, thumb-smudged it seemed at the corners, which were darkened and bent. He fanned the notebook pages, holding the fluttering paper up to his nose, inhaling and listening. The smell was wisteria, dying blooms, and the sound was of a ceiling fan, the old-old kind, like in an upstairs bedroom of an antebellum house, with a tangle of sweat-stained sheets on the bed, and over it hovering sex-scented air. He could have been conceived here, except he recalled part of what he had already read, read—

So I took Anse. And when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it. That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. [...] I knew that it had been, not that my aloneness had to be violated over and over each day, but that it had never been violated until Cash came. Not even by Anse in the nights.

Yet it had to have been different for them, he found himself thinking, legendarily together as they were, the two of them, his progenitors, his ancestors, and so maybe this was who shared

his voice, who spoke through him, and forced him on in this exhumation, this finding, even if not understood, what was written. Had he become the text?

For the speaker no less and for the listener, language is definitely something other than a technique for ciphering or deciphering ready-made significations. Before there can be such ready-made signification, language must first make significations exist as guideposts by establishing them at the intersection of linguistic gestures as that which, by common consent, the gestures reveal. Our analyses of thought give us the impression that before it finds the words which express it, it is already a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt to translate. But the author himself has no text to which he can compare his writing, and no language prior to language. His speech satisfies him only because it reaches an equilibrium whose conditions his speech itself defines and attains a state of perfection which has no model.

But who can hear this? Who can see this?

...what is proper to the visible is, we said, to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth: this is what makes it able to be open to visions other than our own. In being realized, they therefore bring out the limits of our factual vision, they betray the solipsist illusion that consists in thinking that every going beyond is a surpassing accomplished by oneself.

In which case, he was not alone; in fact, he could not be. There was always there a shadow, the shadow, his or someone else's, following him, lurking, as if watching and waiting. But for what? For him to figure this all out, to put the disparate pieces together into some coherent whole. Was he to find the clues he needed sifting through near countless cardboard boxes, reading a collected mass of paper that might have been randomly amassed had he not known—or believed—that that was not so. Why else for example the words printed on the top of this box?

Man is least himself when he talks in
his own person. Give him a mask and

he will tell you the truth.

-- Oscar Wilde

Closing the box, since it was already later than he had intended, he picked up the tattered manuscript which was what he had come for in the first place, this time at least. The envelope it had been kept in had taunted his attention for awhile. But he had always been one to put off for a while an easier task as an incentive to do that which he might otherwise preferred to avoid. To be done with two full boxes before even looking in the envelope, that had been his original promise to himself. But it was a promise soon broken when he snatched the envelope, tested the seal, and found it loose and open. He hesitated before removing the pages inside, but then did so quickly. It was a manuscript, or part of one. Across the top someone had written:

(~~Chapter 1~~)

And beneath this was scrawled, in a similarly reckless hand, as if as an afterthought, in cramped, tiny letters:

A story is a brighter substance when it isn't finished, when it is still hints and guesses, a family matter, like a child's face.—Harold Brodky

He did not know what it meant, beyond what it said, which was, of course, something different.

Taking the manuscript now, he turned toward the stairs, wondering if there was sufficient wakefulness in him for reading tonight. He did not want to begin reading only to fall asleep. Or, worse, to read to the end but not remember in the morning, except for the fact of having read. He decided to wait until tomorrow, after coffee and some toast. Then he would sit out on the deck, if it was warm enough, and read out there with the sound of the ocean in his ears, and the salt-taste of the air like an aperitif, whetting his appetite for what feast was to come.

II. The Reading.

And just as he had planned, sitting outside the next day, this was what he read:

Jonah had forgotten to bring what he usually slept in so Adam had given him his lacrosse shorts to wear, thrusting them through the half-shut bathroom door to him after he stepped out of the shower. Sliding one foot, then the other, into the shorts, he marveled at the cool slippery feel of the nylon fabric against his legs, tugging the shorts up his thighs until the waistband rested on his hips, loosely, daring to fall. Glancing down, he could see the outline of his penis, thickening at thought of Adam climbing into these same shorts, or stripping them off, or having their elastic band tucked taut behind his balls as he slowly fisted his erection.

"Stop," he harsh whispered, rebuking his reflection in the mirror. "Just stop."

The boxer briefs he had been wearing before sat crumpled on the floor where he had left them before getting into the shower. He considered for a moment putting these back on, to better camouflage, or at least restrict, the movement of his penis. If he got fully erect, or even half so again, he knew there would be no hiding it with just these flimsy shorts on. And while Adam had always been unrepentantly an exhibitionist—by effect, if not intent—he was himself shy about his body, especially when compared to Adam, who had always been outsized for his age. There was no getting away from the fact that they were physically mismatched, even with him almost a year older than Adam. *But what does it matter*, he thought, checking the front of his shorts once more, smiling reassured that his penis was less visible now.

He still felt giddy-drunk from the champagne he'd drank all night, three glasses poured for him by waiters who did not care that he was underage, and many sips stolen from Stephan's glass, and anyone else who willing to share. It

was past two in the morning and he and Adam had been back at the hotel not twenty minutes. Once there, he had told Adam that he wanted to take a shower, in part to try to clear his head, but also because he wanted to be the first undressed and into bed. Adam had agreed, flopping backwards onto the bed with an exaggerated backwards dive that caused the bedside tables to rock and the lamps to wobble and Jonah to laugh-snort and smile as he headed for the bathroom.

Finally opening the bathroom door, Jonah reentered the room and saw Adam standing at the window, silently looking out. Adam smiled seeing Jonah appear behind him, reflected in the window with him. He watched Jonah pull his t-shirt up over his head and then look up and notice that Adam was staring at him, without turning around, watching him in the window's reflection. Jonah blushed and waved and forced a laugh, a small laugh that sounded like a cough. He felt a shyness he could not explain. Not like being seen naked by a stranger, but like being quite young and meeting an older relative for the first time. Adam was neither a stranger, nor an older relative he was meeting for the first time. So Jonah did not understand why he felt the way he did. It was a new feeling, and he suspected a dangerous one, one that risked revealing him for who he really was: a liar and fraud.

Turning his back on the window, Adam smiled and walked toward Jonah, who smiled back him and waited, unconsciously curling and uncurling his toes in the grass-green plush of the carpet. He noticed that Adam had taken his tie and pants and shoes and socks off and now wore only his boxer-briefs, and his tuxedo shirt, with the top button undone. Jonah felt himself blush, and noticed his heart beating as he saw Adam extend his arms, holding his hands out to him palm up. Thinking that he wanted to hold his hands for some reason, Jonah held his hands out too.

"Can you do my cuff-links?" Adam said, shrugging his shoulders in that

way he did, and arching his eyebrows in an apologetic *I-know-I'm-being-helpless* kind of way. "I can't seem to get them unhooked."

"Sure thing," Jonah said, taking a deep breath and stepping forward.

Jonah now stood in front of Adam, his eyes just at chest-level on him. He was five foot five, and Adam was over six feet tall. Glancing up at Adam with a feeling of timidity that he was sure must have shown, and for which he instantly felt embarrassed, Jonah grabbed the right cuff, and made quick work of it, removing the link easily, and then the left one as well, putting each in turn back into the small velvet box from where they had come.

"Do you need help with the shirt-studs too?"

"Yeah," Adam said, giving Jonah that look again. "If you don't mind?"

"I don't mind," Jonah said. "It's easier to do stuff like this with smaller fingers."

"Thank you."

"Sure."

The studs were platinum, each one a perfect flat glinting square. Jonah could see himself reflected in each one, like a vertical series of eight tiny shiny snapshots. Grabbing the lowest one first, Jonah carefully removed it and then set it on the table next to the box holding the cuff-links. As he methodically worked his way up, Adam's shirt fell further open, like white stage curtains, revealing first the front, and then the waist-band, of Adam's boxer-briefs. Above that was a thin crescent of skin revealed where Adam's t-shirt had pulled up. Jonah tried not to notice the twined dark hairs that climbed in a haphazard

line up his lower stomach, so he refocused his attention on what he was doing, staring at the fifth shirt-stud to be removed, and then removing it.

Adam watched as Jonah worked. He could tell that he was paying close attention because the muscles in his neck were pulled taut, and his slow breathing more intense. He could feel the warmth of Jonah's breath against his chest; it was as pleasant a feeling as he could recall feeling, and he found himself wanting Jonah to press his mouth against his chest, to form a tight seal with his lips and exhale as hard as he could against him, like blowing up a balloon almost. That was when he found his hand held near to Jonah's head, unaware that he had lifted it there. He stared at his hand in amazement, surprised at finding it there, and unsure what to do. So he did nothing, waiting for Jonah to be done.

The last stud seemed the hardest to remove because the buttonhole there was smaller and Jonah had to strain to get it out. When he finally had it safely out, Jonah looked up and saw that Adam was looking at him. It was thus their gazes met. Jonah smiled at first, but then his face seemed slowly to relax into an expression that Adam thought was both beautiful and apt. Jonah looked so happy, and so at ease, it made Adam happy and wanted to hug him. He put his waiting hand on the back of Jonah's head, threading his fingers through his hair, noticing the damp traces of his shower still near the roots.

Jonah kissed Adam before he knew that it was even happening. He laid his hands flat on Adam's chest and stood as high as he could manage on his tip-toes and kissed Adam, pressing his lips softly on his mouth, which was warm and tasted faintly of coconut. The kiss did not last long, not too long. But it was a kiss, and Adam knew it. He felt stunned, and then overwhelmed, unable to order his thoughts, or to push thought away enough to feel what was happening. All he could do it seemed was record what was happening.

He knew his eyes had not closed at first, and that he had watched Jonah continue the kiss, gently, not forcing it, his mouth closed, but barely. He had felt Jonah's breath in his mouth, and noticed that it had tasted like toothpaste. That was when he had finally shut his eyes, just now it seemed shut his eyes, and felt suddenly dizzy, as if not sure any longer of where he was, or what he was doing there. He raised his other hand and set it softly on Jonah's shoulder, thinking, *Yes, I had wanted your breath in me, and now here it is.* He pulled Jonah closer, lifting him up in the air almost, like he was weightless almost, like he could carry Jonah anywhere with him, and that he just might. He felt that strong.

Jonah did not know how long the kiss lasted, or really how it had occurred. It was not by instinct, impulse, or plan. It was as if the kiss had come about—at least as far as he could tell—on its own. He trusted the rightness of the kiss immediately, as if faith enough had come with the kiss that was his destiny to deliver. Perhaps that was why he felt so sad when the kiss was over, and he found himself near tears as he looked into Adam's imploring eyes, at how lost he seemed, the frightened, stunned expression on Adam's face.

"Are you in love with me Jonah?" he asked. "Is that what this is?"

Jonah stared at Adam, unable to talk because he was afraid that he'd start crying if he did. He had been struck silent by Adam's question, and stood there unable to answer it, unable to speak the words he wanted to, unable look him in the eyes and say, *You are like every hope I ever had that the world could be a welcome place for me, that there was a place where I belonged, where I was not a stranger, and not a freak, and not alone, a world not of fake feigned or fabricated romance, not a world of myth and make-believe, but a world where love was real, where promises were kept, not broken, and where there could be a man who believed in me, who wanted me and needed me, a world where at*

the end of day I was not alone, not afraid, not ashamed, not full of anger, not full of loathing, a world where there was respect and care, and passion too. So yes I love you, yes I'm in love with you, yes I meant that kiss and everything in it, yes, yes, yes.

"Yes," Jonah said, his voice quiet and wavering, but clear. "Yes I am, Adam."

"Jonah – stop it," Adam said, stepping away. "I...I...I mean, if this is just a head-game, if this is just your way of testing me, stop it now."

"What are you afraid I'm doing?"

"I don't know. I just know it would be so wrong if I let you down right now, and I want to know if...I don't know. How can you just say you love me like that, like just like that?"

"Because I do."

"Jonah – stop it. Really."

"Yeah, okay," Jonah said, staring at the carpet now, unable to look anywhere else. He felt his face fever hot and knew it must be as red as it had ever been. "I'm stopping now."

"Come here," Adam said, taking Jonah's hand and leading him to one of two king-sized beds in the room. "Let's sit down a second."

"I'm tired," Jonah said, resisting Adam's pull at first, but then sitting down beside him. "I just want to sleep. I don't want to talk. I don't want to make this into a big deal. This night was super perfect and I don't want to ruin

it – I didn’t, did I?"

"No you didn’t," Adam said, wrapping his arm around Jonah’s waist. "But the night’s not over yet either, is it?"

"No," Jonah said, looking across the room and noticing their reflection in the window, a different view from before. "No it’s not."

"So what do you think we should do next?"

"I don’t know," Jonah said. "Any suggestions?"

"Maybe we should kiss again."

Jonah remained silent and utterly still, unsure what to do next. The certain faith he had felt moments ago had left him, leaving few traces behind. He was on his own again, but in a different place, transported by the events of the last half hour. He knew that being flippant would be the easiest escape, the one he was the most used to taking. But to do so would be to lose a chance that he felt somehow he might not have again. And so he turned and kissed Adam, a kiss that this time was his own alone, not one delivered, not one that was of a fate or destiny, not one defined or decreed by meddling gods. This was his kiss, his gift to and for Adam, and with him together, and now theirs alone. Whether it was a true beginning, he did not know. All he knew was that, for him, there was now no turning back. He was in love, and he intended to give himself to Adam, entirely, holding nothing back, until it was as if he was gone, and he and Adam were one person.

He clutched the last page of the manuscript, upheld in his hand, the sun filtering through its yellowed paper, making it glow. The other pages were on the table next to him, held down by a rock that he had lifted and replaced as each page had been read. He had not wanted the wind to scatter the pages like so many dead leaves across the lawn.

Tears scalded his eyes as he read the last sentence again. Now, finally, he thought that he knew for sure what driven all of it, what had brought him here to try to understand the unraveling and the deaths, this endless story of fate foretold and ignored, the stories he had heard endlessly, it seemed, while growing up, and then patched together like a quilt. Here in what he had just read was part of the reason for his journey, what had made him search for the boxes once thought lost, one of the mysteries that had for him come to define—and tarnish—his family, and its seemingly cursed Henchard name. He was of its third generation, and it saddened to think how far he seemed from the pride, authority, and honor represented by his grandfather.

He realized now that this question—"Are you in love with me Jonah?"—it had been their *aporia* it seemed, what had been and become, is and was, the impassable, for his uncle and father both, together and alone, although perhaps neither maybe knowing that, or what, the other knew. The question that not only had not been asked, but also never answered, hung in the air like a last breath of one who lay dying.

He knew now too that there were other chapters to be found, another different chapter 1 or whatever number, and chapters that came after or before, somewhere in a box or boxes, rough and final drafts, with crossed out words and sentences, erasures and revisions, lost or missing or torn-up pages, with notes attached or scratched in margins, manuscripts of a life, of lives, of life. And of death, of course, too. He would begin his search again tomorrow.

III. The Closing.

Enos never found the boxes, or the missing chapters. Eventually, he came to believe that nothing more of this story had been written, and so there had never been any more chapters to be found. He had no way of knowing if this was true thought, whether all the boxes had been kept, or saved, or whether one or more might have been lost. Countless scenarios were imagined and discarded. He pressed anyone who might remember for information that might help his quest, but no one seemed to agree on what the story really was. Worse, with every person he spoke to, the acrimony and accusations within the family, and across family-lines, grew so intense, he feared a complete collapse of what little peace still remained.

So, finally, after years of effort, Enos gave up, just as his father had hoped and prayed.