

one

Boyhood

Growing up is hard to do. Growing up Indian in the United States is very hard to do. Growing up a half-blood is painful. Growing up a writer/poet is almost impossible. Filling in the blanks between these various aspects of life may prove to be even more difficult: first locating the puzzle, then the pieces, and discovering the blank spots for the pieces to fit into the jigsaw. The when, why, and wherefore. Plus the possible embarrassments to you and yours. Going from A to whatever alphabet letter you stop on can cause pain and anger to rise up from not only your own being but the downright hostile motives of those who become adjuncts to you, the subject. Where do you begin, end? What do you reveal, eliminate, emphasize, discreetly lighten up on? I believe it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who said that the writer always must seek for truth, and I agree, but is this possible in the composition of an autobiographical piece? Should the truth be abandoned for sincerity? Truth may have nothing whatsoever to do with the vividness of memory, its sparkle or dulled edge.

Years *do* dull the edge, to say nothing of all that comes with them. Nothing remains rapier sharp. Who remembers what he had for breakfast yesterday, the tie worn Monday, why you played the ace of spades when you knew who had the queen of spades in the game of hearts? Can memory be trusted to be utterly truthful? Is truth equal with fact? The scientist deals with facts, the poet with beauty, and is there truth in beauty? Let us ignore John Keats's answer for the moment. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If that is true, then is truth in the eye of the speaker who is a beholder as well? And is the truth of the Mohawk the same as the truth of the Hopi?

All tribal mores deal with the concept of truth. It was wrong to lie to your own people, chief, village, but it was near-heroic to lie to the white invader of your homeland. And what is the truth of Christianity? There are more sects nearly each day. Should we live by the Bible, the sword, the word of Jesus Christ, Emerson's Over-Soul, Jung's collective unconscious or the echoes of time itself? Perhaps we merely count the rings of a virgin pine and claim these rings to

be the absolute, the truth of humanity and all life around us. But, what of the tree's memory? Does it fade after the first one hundred years? Can it be factual? So much depends on a red wheelbarrow. Famines may have passed this pine, insects, snows, or lack of snows. Can the circles be trusted? The tree too has a memory that may fill it from season to season. I would as soon trust last night's dream or nightmare. It rises from the soul, the being, the essence, the fears and joys, the subconscious, through a motif of symbolic images. William Carlos Williams was right: "This is just to say . . ."

And that is what I have done. I have eaten the plums "so cold and so sweet." I remember most things, and yes, I do remember what I had for breakfast yesterday (a toasted roll with blackberry jam and the ever-present mug of black coffee). Memory is fairly sound; beauty is wished for; truth is of the utmost in this presentation, but only as far as memory allows. The art of dodging, I can master that sport.

And, I think, attempt to recall the angry rains. I wasn't always pampered. No, not at all.

What am I doing here?



Biting through skin to the pulp of flesh . . . my mother said I was born on the hottest day of any August she could remember. It was a dark night. She could not tell me the exact hour. Did pain prohibit her memory from functioning correctly, truthfully, or was she hiding something? My sisters, Agnes and Mary, were both autumn births . . . delivery is easier on cooler days, or nights. Perhaps it is for this reason that they received a bit more understanding from my mother than I was fortunate to know. I do not believe it was because they shared a gender that I did not. My mother, although she complained of the cold and hated winter, also always hated the heat of summer. I felt she blamed me for this heat . . . having been born on the hottest August night she could remember. It is possible through records to check the exact temperature that night—August 16, 1929—but, frankly, I don't care to. Some biographical background concerning my mother: she was born a farm girl in the township of Cape Vincent, New York, a few miles from the St. Lawrence River. The family Bible, still in the possession of her sister, my aunt Jennie Sanford, claims my grandfather to be descended from Robert Herrick, the English poet. Her father's people, the Herricks and the Clarks, were in northern New York from the early 1800s onward. She was also a descendent of the Parkers; General Ely S. Parker is specified, if memory serves. Her mother, Leona, was both a Parker and an Oatman. She was born in Adams Center, New York, and was an eighth Seneca. My mother attended the stereotypical one-room schoolhouse, and she later would say that it was red as

well. Exactly how far she went in school is debatable. From her knowledge of books, and so forth, I would guess not further than what they used to call “the Sixth Book,” a fairly rudimentary education, if also more than most of her peers would likely have received. Not necessarily a strong religious woman, she had been baptized a Baptist, though I never can remember her reading or toting a copy of the “good book.” Yet she read most of her life: mainly women’s magazines and, later, biographies of the rich and famous. She had no artistic abilities of which I was ever aware, with the exception of crocheting. The house was choked by doilies. Almost to the day she died, she gave us presents of doilies for Christmas and birthdays. I have some still.

She left the farm, as the other six sisters needed to do, and, also like the others, became a scullery maid for the rich in Watertown, New York. From photos I gather she was a pretty girl, small and thin, but stylish . . . at least as stylish as her income would allow. She married young, and bore her first child, my sister Agnes, young. Although no one has ever convinced me she did not love my biological father, I can’t help but believe she thought always she had made a mistake in marrying and bearing children so young, but maybe that’s Addie Bundren’s complaint ringing in my ears, not my mother’s. I think my mother would have been much happier playing our childish games with us than making supper for us. She never seemed to take much pride in her cooking, nor was she a really fine cook. Her pastry was good, but as to her roast . . . well, perhaps I should not comment. My parents separated when I was nine years old. It was painful for all concerned. I went with her by choice . . . one of the many bad choices I have made in my life. She was not a good teacher . . . but more on this later. I think this marriage could have been saved had either of my parents considered a counselor. My father was stubborn and my mother wispy, neither of which inclined them toward that course.



Andrew Anthony Kenny was born in 1900 on a farm outside a small Canadian village in the province of Ontario. His father, Maurice—pronounced like Morris—was not only Irish, but it was jokingly said that he was born on the boat while crossing the Atlantic. My grandmother was an Indian woman, Mohawk. I know little of her except that she was a West. She died young, having birthed three children, the same as my mother . . . two older girls and one son, my father. I don’t recall exactly how old my father was at his mother’s death, but he was still a young lad. His father married a second time, an Irishwoman, which meant that there was as much Irish nationalism as there was Indianism in my father’s rearing. His cousins have always taken pride in the fact that relatives still live and breathe in Ireland, and when I was younger they supported

the idea that I go and make my visit . . . which I have resisted all my life for varying reasons. As I grew into adolescence, my father began talking more and more to me about his own boyhood, and more frequently told stories concerning his mother. He never ignored his Irish father, though, and spoke many times of relatives still living in Ireland. I even remember once he said that at school, if a teacher asked what my nationality was, I was to tell them that I was Irish and English . . . nothing more. He said it would make for “a better understanding.”

He had only two years of schooling, what he called “the Second Book,” but what most, then and now, would call the second grade. He could—with hesitation—read and write. He was a hard worker, industrious, and serious, not to mention aggressive and competitive . . . he believed deeply in both his ability and his obligation to be a self-made man. When he died in 1957 he was either the proprietor or the lessee of three gas stations and a restaurant. He was continuously ill the last five years of his life, but this illness did not hinder him from building a new home, in which he lived only one year.

My dad was reckless as a youth. He had constant conflicts with his father and buried his head in his stepmother’s bosom when his two older sisters were not binding his wounds. He was allowed to drive the horse and buggy . . . I cannot believe it was a surrey . . . to the church euchre game, but if he overstayed his father’s rule by a minute, Maurice would be there at the church stable to take the horse and buggy home, forcing my father to walk the many miles late on a winter’s cold night.

My father enjoyed telling stories, especially when lecturing me about smoking cigarettes, recounting how he burned his father’s hay barn down. He’d laugh and tell how he smoked one day, rolling his tobacco in some form of paper . . . possibly leaves . . . lit up, took a drag or two, and fell promptly asleep, having stayed out late the night before at the church dance. That was one occasion on which his father came to collect the horse and buggy. Naturally, in his doze, he dropped the lighted cigarette. The hay caught afire, and before long he was trying to stamp out the blazing furnace of the barn. Sometimes he would say that he stayed at the farm only long enough to receive the thrashing of his life. Other times he said he just hightailed it off the place as fast as his fourteen-year-old legs would carry him. The family down the road gave him sanctuary, and then he took off for the States, directly to Watertown where he first stayed with his aunt Libby. Having the good luck of landing a job, he also found a room on State Street in the home of one old lady, a Mrs. Collins, who mothered him like a blood son. He loved this lady greatly. She passed on before I had opportunity of knowing her. He would never admit it, but I believe his smoking and causing the barn to burn to the rocky ground was an act of wish-fulfillment; subconsciously he not only wanted to take some revenge on his father, but he also was

looking for an escape hatch. He hated farming, as did my mother. He was able to groom out the farmer in his character and style rather quickly.

He took to city life . . . Watertown's population was then about thirty thousand, a sprawling metropolis for the time and for the region. He never spoke about it, but I can easily visualize him at pool halls and in the bars, which were still called "buckets of blood" due to the vicious fights that broke out nightly. A cousin was in the position to obtain a job for my dad. His was a most aqueous labor: he became the water boy on the gang of the city of Watertown's Water Department. His job was to carry the water bucket to the workers, to men who were digging new lines. He stayed at the waterworks for many years and by the time he left, he had risen to foreman, the third most important position within that department. As foreman, he had been in a position to hire and fire the work-gangs that did minor, occasional jobs. He hired many immigrant Italians who could not speak much, if any, English but were married to marvelous cooks, and my family and I often partook of rich pastas and still richer red "dago" wine that were prepared for us as tokens of gratitude.

My father also hired many Native men who had come down from the Kahnawake Mohawk community near Montreal or from Akwesasne, a Mohawk community on the St. Lawrence that straddles the U.S.-Canadian border. These Native men who came to Watertown seeking work with their wives and children naturally needed homes. My father was in the position to help, and he did. He was always a just and generous man, though there were times during my adolescence when I questioned his ethics. He became political, and it was not beneath him to ask small favors of elected officials with a quart of bourbon in his hands. The city owned several houses, and for reasons I cannot fathom, these houses came under the jurisdiction of the Water Department. Of course, my father saw that the Natives were given the houses. Rent in those days was something like five dollars a month.

Though he helped get several Native families settled in housing near the house in which my family lived, my father cautioned me not to play with the children. He gave no reason. His word was law, though I was often discovered breaking that law. As a small child my father rarely spoke of his Indian heritage because of the stigma. It was not a time to shout, "Hey, I'm an Indian" in North America, let alone in either southern Ontario or northern New York. He would tell stories or sing songs without identifying the source. He told the stories as though he had just simply used his imagination and had at that precise moment invented the tale or the song. Yet he was teaching, and he meant to teach. He intended that I would learn these stories, though I'm not sure he anticipated my using the tales years later in poems that I would write. I don't think he had any idea that I would become a writer. It wasn't until I entered high school that

I really showed much artistic interest. I painted, but not well. I sang, but shyly. I wrote many poems and stories, but this writing showed little talent to those around me who judged such things. I did write many, many letters to the editor of the *Watertown Daily Times*. In high school I was busy riding horses, working for my father, attending weekend teenage dances at the school or YMCA, camping and swimming.

My father was a hunter, a fisherman, an outdoor man. I most always went along on his fishing trips, but I rarely got to go hunting with him. That was probably due to interference by my mother. She was afraid of guns. She hated cleaning the rabbits or pheasants he would bring home in his game bag. She also hated cleaning the fish he brought home on the string, but complied reluctantly. He talked hunting with me. Talked about his hound dogs. The smells of his rifles, his hunting boots, and his outerwear were always in the house. I always knew that his guns were stored in a closet in my parents' bedroom. It was never locked. I had access to it, but his teachings were strong, and I never had the desire to take the guns out of the closet and play with them. He did ask me to help clean and oil the guns from time to time. And he would tell hunting stories, though they were not tall tales about how the largest rabbit in the woods got away, or how the bear pulled the gun out of his hands and whacked him across the head with it. He never hunted bears. He never shot a bear. He held a distinct aversion for bears. But no . . . no, no, no . . . that is not the correct word; he had not an aversion, but a reverence for bears, who I gradually came to know and to understand as Bear through his perspective.

Bear is a mighty animal, not merely for physical strength, but mighty in tradition, medicine. Bear was a relative: you do not kill or eat your brother, nor walk on his back. Bear is a mystery, spirit, legend; it is the unknown, it is the poetic. Perhaps not as noble a beast as Wolf, Bear is still not without nobility in the animal world, which includes the human species. Bear is the enigma of the woods—not of the wilderness, because there is no such thing as wilderness. The wild is in the human spirit and human mind, and Bear is a wildness beyond humanity. When bears are extinct, then the woods are forever gone. Then the darkness, the shadows, the voices, the healing powers, the medicines of the woods will be lost into the past, the time of the past. Culture will be doomed. Bear's flesh should never be eaten, nor should his spirit be desecrated by making bearskins into a wall decoration or a rug before a fireplace. To wear a robe about one's shoulders made of a bear found dead on the forest floor of natural causes is and will be a compliment, an honor to Bear, but to step on his back with dirty boots is an abominable idea. Bear is the last freedom. His extinction would be the most horrible of tragedies. Bear is the symbol of humanism, not the untamed or conquerable wilderness.

Wolf, though he is in great jeopardy from the foolishness of Man, has at least some semblance of immortality in that he is the grandfather of coyote and of the common domesticated house or lap dog. He will continue to be hunted and slaughtered because Man hates him and fears his fangs, and because historically he has competed with Man for sustenance, food. I believe there is a gene in the American/European that insists upon ridding the world of Wolf. Yet humans can learn how to live from Wolf, how to live with one another without genocidal wars caused by religions and overbreeding.

My father taught respect for Bear and Wolf, but he also taught respect for wild iris, or blue flag, for trillium and cattail. He taught respect for corn, berries, water, winds. He knew their strengths. The wild iris renews the premise and promise of beauty and poetry, the song that abounds around us, that circles our natures and is a reminder of that great green ceremony of which the Lakota holy man Black Elk spoke so graciously and wisely: the green ceremony of everyday is to lift the head from the pillow and see the beauties and gifts of the day, and to be thankful.

My father also had many artistic bents, but realized none except song. He loved to sing, particularly Friday nights when a beer or four encouraged the voice:

If I had the wings of a turtle / over these prison walls I would fly.

It was impossible to convince him turtles did not have wings. He was either thinking of the turtledove, or he remembered something his biological mother had told him as a small child: that she was a member of the turtle clan. I believe those early stories stuck and manifested in him as the turtle flying over the prison walls, even if it was originally a wished-for angel that did the flying in that old folk song.

As I said, he was a good storyteller and was also an excellent listener, except when we children were in trouble and attempted to explain a way out of it to him. Then his ears were closed. He knew the reasons better than we did, and he acted upon them. Even then, he was not mean. He was usually considerate, generous, and warm. My grandfather was a “mean” man. My aunt Julia, my dad’s sister, said Maurice was *mean* in an Irish fashion. My father was never a mean man, though he had a most outrageous temper, as on occasion he would prove through his actions. More often than not, though, he was the lamb; he had a soft smile, a twinkle in the eye, and a generous manner . . . usually. He rarely beat us, again something handed down from his Mohawk mother. Indians do not beat their children. They teach bad from good by example.

I did receive one terrifying beating from him, and my sister, Mary, got a vicious one from him when he was drunk. Agnes, his favorite, was never touched. He slapped my mother several times during arguments. She was a nagger. She had been given warnings. But he slapped her regardless. Thinking back now I have the tendency to think that she might have deserved the slaps. But using my head, my reasoning, I remind myself, no, she did not. No woman deserves to be brutalized. He was an extremely strong man: short, heavy, stocky, far stronger than the pitiful little creature my mother was . . . never weighing more than ninety pounds. No man is ever right in striking, let alone beating, a woman. He was wrong. I remember once he hit her, and I, a mere piddle of a runt, picked up a broom and tried to defend her womanhood and physical weakness. He held it against me all his life.

Another example of his anger came out one Christmas, as he was dressing the tree he had gone to the woods to chop. He enjoyed celebrating holidays, indeed ceremonies of all kinds, with the exceptions of birthdays, never accepting the fact that the celebrant should receive a gift for merely having been born. He observed this rite reluctantly. In those days, the 1930s, electric Christmas lights were not the reliably mass-produced perfection they are now. They had, as it is often said, a mind of their own, and the bulbs on the wire frequently found the inclination to light up and spread the colored cheer around the living room at unexpected times. He had the wires strung out straight as a toothpick . . . the colored bulbs all screwed into the tiny sockets, male into female, and plugged the string into the electrical socket. Nothing happened. Not a single spark, not a single blue, red or green, or yellow, or white flashed against the wall where he sat pattering with the set. He worked for at least half an hour. Nothing. No color. No contact. My sisters and I sat near, delighting in the knowledge of the upcoming festivities, both the presents we'd receive and the edible goodies we would push into our young tummies: the homemade taffy my dad had made; the maple walnut fudge my mother's kid sister, Aunt Frances, had whipped up; the roast duck my father had shot and which my mother was cooking in the woodstove; the oranges we were given only on Christmas; the mincemeat pie; the cranberry sauce; the chocolate cake my grandmother Herrick had made and the ribbon candy Aunt Jennie brought one evening before. We knew exactly where my mother had hidden the gifts that would be attributed to Santa's delivery on the night before Christmas. We had watched her buy the wool stockings, the shirts, and the sweaters, clothes we would desperately need to cross the cold northern winters but which, in our hearts, we detested. We hoped she had not forgotten a toy or two, perhaps at least some books. Happiness glowed around the kitchen woodstove.

My mother pattered about, slicing fruit for an applejack pudding; Aunt Frances was preening, applying makeup for her date later that evening; my

sisters and I were crumpled in expectation and delight, frozen in anticipation of the coming act of celebration and joy. My father mumbled. Then he cursed. Took *the* name in vain. Called out something impertinent to my mother, like . . . I told you to buy these at Sears. He never tired of complaining that my mother was a spendthrift, that she always wasted rather than conserved. For example, she bought packaged butter, rather than a less costly pound from the grocer's tub. Suddenly, he rose from the straight chair, numerous strands of electric lights entwined around his body, arms, and legs, whirling the loose wires over his head as if a lasso. He stomped out of the living room and, returned with the tree now tangled in the wire, went to the cellar door, and upon opening it, threw tree and wires and himself as one down the stairs. We all laughed . . . all but our mother. She knew better. She understood the consequences of our laughing in his face at his foolishness and at his failure. In a few moments he crawled sheepishly up the stairs. We continued to laugh. Taking his coat and the hat that he nearly always wore, he went to the kitchen door, pronouncing as he strode through that there would be no Christmas this year in the Kenny household, nor the next, nor the next. He kept his word . . . at least for the following year. That year, we ate hamburgers, which my sister Agnes cooked. My father and mother were not there. Later Agnes said they had gone to the bar on Christmas Eve, were drunk, and had not come home.

I suppose that this outrage and my father's temper helps explain why Christmas has never been important to me. First, the kitchen scene was to leave an indelible mark on my mind. This is a Christian holiday feted with pagan trappings . . . the tree, the lights. I have nothing against celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. I honor Him, pay respect to His codes, words. Christmas can be and should be a spiritual day, the same as Gandhi's birthday, or Martin Luther King Jr.'s and, yes, Crazy Horse's, or the Iroquois Peacemaker's . . . that is, if we knew his day of birth. Such spiritual celebration need not stem from Christian reality. I am not a Christian but a pagan. I was baptized a Roman Catholic but left those teachings behind at a very early age. I think it was in the third grade when I announced to the nun, my teacher, that I thought human beings were descended from monkeys. She had no use for Darwinian thought. I think right then was the first—though not the last—time that I was excommunicated from the church. Spirituality, spirit, religion, faith starts in the human heart, not as a catechism nor a black book that can serve many needs by those seeking rational approval for wrong deeds.

Few high school lads have solid relationships with their fathers. I was no different from any other. I believed my father to be obsessively conventional, tough, restrictive. Thinking back now, I see that he wasn't as tough as I then believed. He was permissive with the exception that I was to rise early in the

morning, and when not in school, I had to work in either his gas station or his restaurant. This he did demand of me. He was teaching a work ethic, trying to give me a business sense, a saving-for-a-rainy-day attitude, and he prompted or persuaded me to think in terms of a business major. What I did in my spare time, such as writing or painting, or even singing, well, that could be the reward for being smartly industrious and a good businessman. My father was no different from most fathers. His life had been hard, with a fraction of an education, and he wanted to ensure that mine would be easier. I, of course, did not think that way, but the opposite. My philosophy was, "Let the future take care of the future. It would in all likelihood happen anyway."

I have no doubt whatsoever that the greatest influence on my life, actions, and thinking was exerted by my father. He encouraged me in all ways, and not only to accumulate goods and monies, but to stop, even with one foot inside the counting house, and to observe the minute things of life: the ant crawling across the cabbage leaf, the tremolo of the loon, the birth of the blossom, the wheeling of the hawk in the sky, the sweet, good smell of the wild strawberry laden with mystery in the sun-drenched field or along the shady path. He was a hunter of flesh, and I became the hunter of words, but he was the first teacher. He taught me how to prepare the gun, how to keep it in good shape, how to fire, and what to fire it upon. How different a man, a human, I would be had my father been any other than who he was! If I write poems or short stories, and if I write them well, it is to show him . . . perhaps to prove to him . . . that I have become a bad business person who spends no time at all in the counting house. Rather, I have become a hunter and bring home to the door the trophies of a hunter of words, of language.