

Things as They Should Be

Out of the paradise of childhood, one is driven into the desert of anarchy wherein Whirl is king and chaos the natural order. It is a long way to the other side. For years and years, one lurches on in utter confusion, never knowing what fit will take hold. One minute you're mourning the death of Lord Byron and the next you're entertaining "impure thoughts" of Katherine Dunphy. Worse luck, you can plunge in an instant from that venial dream into the maelstrom of full-bore "self abuse", that is, to the very limit of redemption. What logic, however Jesuitical, can make sense of it all. That Satan, as they say, "roams the world seeking the ruin of souls", is a feeble explication of a condition far more perilous and whimsical. Katie always seemed a more likely portal to perdition and infinitely more hoped for. But I will not tarry in these waters for it is the predicament itself which is the matter at hand.

Its consequences are inextricably tragic and comic, pathetic and heroic. One is no more in charge than Oedipus on the road to Thebes. The merest of accidents can unfold as easily in mortal pollution as in triumph. You can only feel and act, and that in the certain knowledge that you will, sooner or later, be struck by a typhoon of humiliation. And that is because you cannot fail to make an ass of yourself and always - always - to the acclaim and delight of a throng of witnesses.

Wonderful to say, however, this condition is not an unrelieved horror. For it conceals an imaginative capacity of erratic absorption and dreaminess which can sustain the conviction, even in the deeps of self-inflicted gloom, that anything is possible - including sex with Katherine Dunphy, for whom you represent a perfect pariah. It can nourish the delusion that your true worth will suddenly become clear to her, that she will see you for the priapic wonder that you are and grant you her favors - repeatedly - that you will win Wimbledon without losing a set and be a Nobel laureate before Christmas. You get the point, I'm sure. One's fancies stretch like a dune fence across the beach of reality. Anything, anything at all, is likely to get washed into it. Most of it is the flotsam of the ocean of hope. But now and then something splendidly true shines up from the litter and that same fevered imagination which is the fount of so much double-rectified misery, fastens upon it with an astonishing concentration - for no reason at all. Instantly, one sees clearly and, afterwards, one is never the same.

It came to me in the summer of 1954. I think it had something to do with the fact that things were better in those days. For everything then was what it was meant to be and everyone was who they ought to have been. Mr. Wingfield was a kindly grocer, Mrs. Carlin a prim piano teacher, Miss Lucy a tiny librarian. They were transparently themselves. So also was Massie Park. It was a place where mothers sat on benches and pecked at sandwiches and fathers napped, where grandmothers powdered bosoms of splendid circumference and majesty, and warned children not to poke out their eyes - with anything. This eden was a gift to the people of the town by Henry Massie, as green and broad a place as it could be, the whole of its fifty acres thick with hardwood trees of immense gravity and wisdom. In short, it, too, was exactly as it should have been. On the other hand, Mr. Wingfield drank, Mrs. Carlin had been seen dancing the tango, and Miss Lucy was not at all certain that lending books to just

anyone was a sound idea. So too did Massie Park enclose a mystery.

For at its center there was a croquet court. It always lay half in a shadow which, by seven in the evening, turned slowly to cool its whole expanse in shade. A clay court, its topmost surface was formed of red brick, crushed to dust. It was a marvel of order and tranquility and it was the ordained reserve of Edward Massie, Ignatius Macrae, Martin Cooke, and Alan McAtee. They had fashioned it themselves in the late spring of 1919, after the last winter of the Great War in which they had fought together. No one else had ever set foot upon it. There was, however, a bench beneath the maple tree at its northeast corner. There one might sit if one were reverently quiet. More than that was unthinkable. It was a sacred precinct with only four priests.

At three in the afternoon Mr. Macrae stepped out upon it with his sprinkling hose. And this he swept back and forth in long, low, and elegant arcs until the red surface deepened to his satisfaction and no dust rose. At four, Mr. Cooke gave it a sobering roll, and at four-thirty, Mr. McAtee moved judiciously above it with a hand whisk. At five, Mr. Massie approved their labors and himself set the wickets and goals. Together, they gave nods of satisfaction and went home to bathe and have supper.

At seven they returned transfigured, each beneath a straw boater, each in white flannels, each in a bow-tied white shirt with garters upon the sleeves, each with his hand-made mallet—one in mahogany, one in cherry, one in walnut, and one in teak, bound fore and aft with a band of shining brass. From the 15th of April until the end of September, it was their unvarying round.

They had been friends time out of mind and seemed old men and even then, tall old men, in their posture slightly cursive and elegant. Moreover, they greeted

one another with an exquisite courtesy and for all the world as if they had not parted scarcely two hours before. "It is a great pleasure to see you sir," said Massie to Macrae. "Likewise, you may be sure," said Macrae. "I declare," said McAtee to Cooke, "I am honored to meet you on this field." "How kind of you to say so sir," replied Cooke to McAtee. "Very well then, gentlemen," Massie proposed, "shall we begin?" They inclined agreeably, lit cigars, and began to play.

Moving with an admirable economy, precise and serene, they never spoke, their cloistral silence accompanied by the antiphonal hum of cicadas. The blue vapors of their cigars rose slowly aloft and the evening drew down upon them like a vault of calm, shutting out the world beyond entirely. They brought one game to completion-only one game, consummated in the last light, and proffered one another measured praises.

"Your stroke was exceptionally keen this evening," said Cooke to Massie. "Bless my soul," said Massie, "if I was not about to say the same of yours." "McAtee," vowed Macrae, "I have seldom seen you in finer form." "Civil of you to say so," McAtee replied. Each then shook the other's hand and, with a tip of his boater, departed.

Now you will, naturally enough, wonder how it is that I could have made the least sense of what I had seen and heard. You are right to do so for I was seated upon that bench in exile for having fired my stern guns at the dinner table. I was, in short, much the same champion of coarse invention and witless inspiration as ever, just as ashamed and uncomprehending of how such a fine idea could have such awful effects. However, as I have maintained, there are oases in the hormonal wilds of adolescence where the veil of ignorance parts at the oddest times and upon the most enduring secrets.

And this was one of those times. For the simple fact is that, somehow, I instantly understood what they were doing. By what means I cannot say, but the drama they enacted for themselves offered comfort to me. I knew then no more than that - nor needed to. I knew only that I wanted to be one of them, to put on their antique vestments, to take up their courtly speech, to step within the circle of their healing liturgy, and escape the labyrinth of tumults that obscured my passage out of youth. It was wonderful beyond measure.

I came back, therefore, many times, usually in disgrace from a gothic lapse of hygiene or awash in self-pity at my latest failure to move the heart of - well - any female at all. As it seemed then, they paid me no mind, no more than they ever had. But attendance upon their unvaried and sacerdotal rites had always a like effect - the acids of dismay and shame unflinchingly drained away. Along with them, I could forget. For, as I came to learn, they had much to forget, bearing, as they did, the wounds of a youth made desolate by war.

Exactly what had happened to them, no one knew nor asked. They had returned from France strangers to all but each other. And after they had come home, no one could recall their having done anything apart from attending upon the sanctuary at the heart of the park. Nor were they ever seen together save at their game. Where they removed in winter was a complete enigma. They did no work. They never married, and, one by one, departed this life as quietly as at their game's completion - the last of which was played soon before Alan McAtee slept through his noonday nap into eternity.

Thereafter, the incomparable court wore away beneath the seasons. No one ever played upon it again for they had had no children, no successors - save one, and I thought myself unknown to them. And I had fled the town for college, never, really, to come back again - save as much the same sort of stranger as they had

themselves returned in 1918. Yet I know I would not now be telling this if they had not marked me all the same. For there were few trials thereafter that were not made endurable by summoning up the vision of their singular struggle to savage something from the wreckage of contingency and to bind the sinews of friendship.

It is all gone now save for a mute depression in the grass. And it may well be that I am the last to remember them. Sometimes, though, when times are bad and men are worse, I fancy that it is they who remember me for they often then return unbidden. And I see them once more, as plain as day, gliding about the red brick symmetry they had framed against their loss. And always, life fills again with promise.

That is why, last summer, I went again, with my son and his sons. I longed to call up my four old masters and entrust to them the lives I have engendered by their example. But they did not come. And I must say that I was, at first, right saddened that they refused. But then it came to me - they had finished their work. It is my turn now to come when I am summoned.