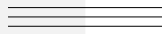


M Y W A R



R U S S E L L F R A S E R

The shadow of another world war, looming larger with each decade, hung over my boyhood. An avid reader of the daily newspaper, I was keenly aware of the growing power of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. At least once a week, I clipped and pasted excerpts from the daily paper in a scrapbook, my young person's "history of the times." Phil, our family's best friend, helped me sort out the clippings. He had a full-time job clerking for Consolidated Edison, but every weekend we expected him at our house, "my home away from home," he called it. In his Plymouth flivver with a rumble seat and running board, we made excursions, to the Rockaways and the ocean or to Luna Park to ride the Ferris wheel. Once in a while my sister Marge and my kid brother Al were included, but Phil always insisted on having me with them. "Riding shotgun," he put it.

My scrapbook involved him almost as much as me. The news of the day put wrinkles in his forehead, and he supplied a running commentary on the events. When we read that Hitler wanted to take over Austria, he grimaced and heaved a great sigh. "Not good!" President Roosevelt and Austria's Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg protested, but Hitler got his way. Phil and I looked gloomily

at the news photo of goose-stepping Nazi soldiers marching into Innsbruck. "I wouldn't like to be trampled by those jackboots, would you?" he asked me.

The news in the paper kept getting darker. Japan, an ally of Germany and Italy, tightened its pincers on China, and France abandoned Czechoslovakia to the Reich. Franco's rebels reached the coast, cutting Loyalist Spain in two. Some American volunteers escaped by swimming the Ebro. Later I got to know one of the survivors of this Abraham Lincoln Brigade, but by now all are probably dead. Russia invaded Finland, Italy invaded Ethiopia, and Mussolini greeted Hitler in a resplendent Rome. In the Soviet Union, twenty-one former leaders too close to the throne were put on trial and executed. Walter Duranty in *The New York Times* took a sympathetic view of the Moscow show trials, reporting that all was well under Stalin. I have a photo of him, smiling at the camera, in my scrapbook.

The last time I looked, its pages were all but disintegrating, and when I turned them they left behind a scurf of brown paper. Everything falls apart. But my instinct is to see life as cyclic rather than entropic, and I want to say how all things falling are built again. Beware of being excessively cheerful, however. Americans, optimistic by temperament, are guilty of that often. Phil, tutored by his Italian blood, guessed at the darkness of history and was wiser.

I called him Phil, short for Raffaello, the name he was born with. For years he had been at the beck and call of his parents, a crotchety old couple from Calabria, then of a pair of unmarried sisters for whom he served as life support, a sickly brother who took forever to die, Mom and Pop, needy in different ways, and finally me, Japheth in search of a father. Some years after he entered our lives, and after the war was over, he married my mother when she and Pop divorced. That was how he became my stepfather. In contrast to Pop, whose mouth turned down at the corners, his mouth turned up, like a laughing man in the comics. But a hint of sadness in his eyes went with the good humor. He knew that nice guys don't always win.

On the morning of 6 June 1944, I got up early to find that the heavens had opened. That day the Allies invaded Hitler's Europe, the beginning of the end of the war. What must the German

soldiers have thought as they peered through the mist at the greatest fleet ever assembled? President Roosevelt thought of a servant of his at Hot Springs, part of the Allied armada. I thought of my stepfather. My war, as I call it, was at least as memorably his, and in my imagination I ran the two together. Others, some who died in action, are part of the story, but he is its principal figure.

When I pictured him clinging to life on the beaches of Normandy, I had already enlisted in the navy but was still in civvies, awaiting assignment. I saw myself coming to his rescue aboard an LST. (I was the coxswain and I dropped the tiller and went overboard as soon as we scraped sandy bottom.) Thanks to the chance on which all grave matters depend, he didn't die in the war, and when at last he came home, he took up where he'd left off. He resumed my education. Now I've lived longer than he did, and am still trying to assimilate what he taught me.

When we went to war, he was still a bachelor, and the army wasted no time in grabbing him. His departure left us all at loose ends, lacking our compass. Soldiers' mail being censored, we could only speculate on where he'd gone, most likely England, training for the D-Day invasion. We were wrong about that, we found out later; he was with Patton's army in Africa, Sicily, and Italy. When Rome fell, he was in Rome. I have a snapshot of him in full battle regalia, looking like a young Ronald Colman – the same snappy mustache and crinkly half-humorous eyes. He is standing on the corner of via Terme di Tito, at his back the Colosseum, across the street the remains of the Baths of Titus, now a soccer field.

Years after the photo was taken, I found myself living in this same Roman street. In some way not wholly clear to me, I was following in his footsteps. Electric lights strung on stanchions illuminated the soccer field at night, and the jeering and shouted obscenities went on till all hours. The first week I lived there, I hardly closed my eyes. But remembering what Phil had taught me, I did my best to "roll with it," his phrase, and after a while I got used to the lights and the hubbub.

It seemed that everyone was a soldier when I was young, even Pop for a while. A faded photo in the family album shows him as a National Guardsman, complete with puttees and a broad-brimmed hat. My cousin Nat joined the week after Pearl Harbor. In the studio photo commissioned by Aunt Ruthie, he wears his

marine dress uniform, decorated with ribbons that tell of hellish places: Kwajalein, Tarawa, Guadalcanal. Nat was born to be a hero. My stepfather, on the other hand, should never have been drafted, let alone seen combat. He was into his forties, and had come down with pneumonia when his outfit deployed. He had to be carried aboard ship on a stretcher, while eighteen-year-old malingerers who might have gone instead of him were left behind at Fort Dix. They were the squeaky wheel. He was the one who never complained, and that was why they wanted him with them.

After the war, he and Mom came to visit me in Ann Arbor. He loved Italian opera of the nineteenth century, all those tragicomic dactyls, RUM-tum-tum, RUM-tum-tum. In his time in Rome he had talked his way into meeting the great Beniamino Gigli, a tenor who defined the voice. I played Gigli for him on the hi-fi, hooked up to an extension in the backyard under the trellis. We drank Manhattans, getting quietly sloshed, while Gigli sang Verdi and Rossini. He was Almaviva in *The Barber of Seville* singing “Ah che d’amore,” and Alfredo in *Traviata* whose “Un dì, felice” brought us close to boozy tears. When Radames sang “Celeste Aida,” Phil covered his face with his hands. He “empathized,” as we say, but he wasn’t unhappy, only giving the music its due.

Pop was too cast down by life to be of much help to me – that is how I read it now – and it became Phil’s job to get me out of the nest. He was a philosopher. “Queste cose succede alla vive,” he’d say in his fractured Italian. “These things (mostly bad ones) happen to the living.” Then a long face, halfway to a grin. “But when you’re dead, *quando morte*, there’s nothing, *niente*,” and he showed me his empty palms.

But he wasn’t perfect. Not racking his brains, he acted on impulse. Because he was good in the grain, his impulses were generally good. Sometimes, however, they betrayed him. He had a romantic’s fondness for elaborating projects and schemes. For most of his adult life he’d worked for Con Edison, the electric company. Then his great idea hit him, and just before he was due to retire he gave up his job and moved with Mom to Florida, paradise on earth. But paradise had a serpent in it, and after a brief interlude they hurried back to the city. Too late. His pension from Con Edison had gone with the wind.

Undaunted, he got a license to operate a liquor store in Bay

Ridge, a gold mine, he guaranteed it. But the local Mafia don wanted a piece of his action. Twice thugs held up the store. A trigger-happy cop killed one of his customers. Finally he sold out in despair. As if Fate were snickering at him, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, long deferred, went through in the wink of an eye, business boomed, and the new owner made a fortune.

Until my son Alex got old enough to know better, I told him that I'd won the war against Hitler. My war was the other one, against the Japanese, and I didn't win that one either. I did get in briefly, joining at seventeen, the youngest age they would have you in wartime. By then the war was winding down, though I didn't know it, and we wouldn't be invading Japan. So I never saw combat, a source of melodramatic regret. How I wanted to be a hero!

The navy sent me for officer training to Dartmouth, converted by the government to a military installation. I trained to be a deck officer, and had I finished the course I'd have graduated as the youngest ensign in the service. I've wondered how I'd have handled that. Perhaps with luck a grizzled chief petty officer, like Ward Bond in the movies, would have showed me the ropes. I did spend some time in a military hospital. I lay in a ward with other sailors and marines, most of them wounded in action. I had the flu.

I'd come home on leave and was staying with Pop at his New York apartment — he was divorced by then and living alone — when I caught whatever was going around. “Cat fever,” they called it, bad enough to warrant a stay in the hospital. My sister Marge was part of the scene, and being her bratty self went to bed with a cigarette, setting the bedclothes on fire. I have a vivid memory of Pop, woken by the fire engines and springing into action, cigarette lighter in hand. He was fusing the lamp cord that ran from the bedside table to the wall socket, hoping to blame the fire on a short circuit, when the ambulance drove up to carry me off. A nice-looking navy nurse held my hand in the hospital, and though she outranked me, I imagined possibilities. Before they could develop, however, she saw my age on the chart.

I wore two uniforms in the navy, jeans on workdays dipped in Clorox to make me look like an old salt, and dress blues, nattier, but their tailored bell bottoms were meant to convey the same impression. In the portrait-photo I commissioned, the colored rib-

bons pinned to my chest seem identical to those worn by my cousin, a real hero. One was for service in the American Theater (shore duty), another for Good Conduct. They resembled the decorations awarded me in grade school for civics, penmanship, and perfect attendance. Just before the photographer snapped the picture, he stuck a pipe in my mouth, like Popeye the Sailor Man.

But I mustn't sneer at my service in the military. It did what it is supposed to do: it made me a man. Admirers of cynical fiction like *Catch-22* will scoff at this, and truth to tell it sounds like machismo. But the fact is that the war, destroying many lives, saved many others. I would never have had a chance of using what is in me without it. Thanks to the war and my entitlement as a veteran, I got my education. My father, without a high school diploma, didn't see the point of graduate work, but it proved the crucial hinge in my fortunes. From it followed a lifetime spent reading and teaching poetry, and being paid to do it, an urge to write books, a passion for travel. I interpret the last as the positive of a negative, the fact that the war left me unscathed. Instead of nursing my wounds at home, I've walked the high wire in remote parts of the world, a surrogate for being shot at.

Between travel to four of the five continents (I skip Australia, devoid of old churches), I went home to New York. Leaving Pop to his own devices, as the cliché has it, I stayed with Mom and Phil. It was home because he was there, getting older but always on an even keel, steady as it goes. He had picked up an all-purpose phrase, rationalizing anything out of season, like exceptionally hot or cold weather. "It's the A-bomb!" he'd say, puffing up his cheeks and blowing out air. This was his version of cause and effect, and though he laughed, I think he believed it. The hair on his head, glossy black, had turned gray, but he continued to work a six-day week, his own fault, of course, and he spoke sheepishly of losing his pension. But he was grateful for his job behind the counter in a local haberdasher's, just right for him with that unfailing smile. "What can we do for you?"

The last time I saw him he was on his deathbed in Maimonides Medical Center, Brooklyn. Blacks and Hasidic Jews populated this area between Atlantic Avenue, Flatbush, and Utica, the Hasidic men bearded and wearing broad-brimmed hats and long black coats, the women in long skirts, almost all the younger ones preg-

nant. Muslims from Turkey and points east had begun to infiltrate their time-honored domain, making a volatile mix, sometimes combustible, and when we visited the hospital we saw them with prayer rugs under their arms. A strange place to die, but cancer isn't particular.

The mummified caricature of the man we loved shocked us, his legs swollen like piano legs, skin dried to parchment, his mind wandering back to the war. He had gone in at Anzio, and later I followed him there, shushing the Italian picnickers among the graves in the American cemetery. We wanted him to die, quitting his misery, but he clung to life like Shakespeare's hero, remembering the best at the worst of times. "World, world, O world! / But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee, / Life would not yield to age."

After his death we endured the funeral parlor with its numbered "chapels" and hurry-up prayers for the deceased. The "prayer director" got his name wrong. The mass wasn't the same as the one we remembered. Pope John XXIII, bringing it down to the least common denominator, had dropped its age-old Latinity, and the modern nonspeech he replaced it with insulted our ears. But the flag that covered the coffin went far to make amends. Precisely folded at the corners, it was handed to Mom, who gave it to me for the future. Then the soldiers fired a volley, the bugler blew taps, and we were done with Raffaello called Phil.

Mom didn't survive him by more than a few years, and when she died it seemed time to move on. Bidding farewell to the life of jacket and tie, I lit out for the territories. These days, when I wake up in Hawaii, I look across the lanai to Koko Head, "my volcano," and wonder how a poor Jewish boy from Brooklyn, my adopted persona, had the luck to get here. The island of Oahu, where I have called a truce to wandering, is home to most of what is memorable in this youngest of our states, beginning with the battleship *Arizona*. Almost eighteen hundred sailors are entombed below its decks, casualties of an armor-piercing bomb that ignited the ship's ordnance. On that Saturday night before Sunday, 7 December 1941, the *Arizona's* band was giving a concert in Waikiki, part of a competition with the bands of other ships in the harbor. Men of the *Arizona* specialized in the Glenn Miller sound, and their mimick-

ing of Miller's "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" won second prize in the competition. The ship's sailors were happy with their reward, the privilege of sleeping in late Sunday morning. They were in their bunks when the Japanese bombers came over.

Punchbowl, the National Military Cemetery of the Pacific, is a necropolis, like the *Arizona* in its watery grave. It calls to mind our founding fathers' idea that every man's soul is equal in the sight of his creator. Rank doesn't get you a better grave at Punchbowl. Located in an extinct volcano overlooking Honolulu, it resembles the holy places medieval pilgrims journeyed toward. One is Vézelay in Burgundian France, where St. Bernard preached the Second Crusade. Another, Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, is the grave of St. James, first among the twelve apostles to earn the martyr's palm. This warrior saint, one of the Boanerges, "Sons of Thunder," named by the Lord, returned from the grave to fight against the Muslims. I can testify that powerful manna collects about these shrines of the heroic dead, and when I go to Punchbowl, I find myself both blest and admonished.

My first visit coincided with Easter Sunday, a good time for honoring our war dead. Ancient Hawaiians buried their royalty in the crater, and used it for human sacrifice, Pu'u-o-waina. Almost thirteen thousand men who died in the Pacific lie in this ground. They gave their lives at Guadalcanal, Saipan, Guam, Iwo Jima, as prisoners of war in Japan. More were killed in Korea and Vietnam. A giant statue of Columbia overlooks the cemetery's far end, and on stone tablets that flank it are recorded the names of Americans "whose earthly resting place is known only to God."

Hearing taps played on a single bugle in this quiet valley is hard on the emotions, but the sadness, though appropriate, is tempered. Loving care goes to tending the graves, and at Easter each is bright with tropical flowers. The dead have an afterlife, not in heaven but in the memories of the living. Yeats's lines from "The Wild Swans at Coole" describe them on one side.

Their hearts have not grown old,
Passion and conquest wander where they will
Attend upon them still.

The swans remain vital, not least sexually, so elude death as a species, their youth coming round again in every generation. We,

however, not being types but one of a kind, lie open to mortality. The dead at Punchbowl are different.

Though cut from our cloth, they outlast the years, like friends of mine who died in the war. Ed White, the captain of our football team in prep school, died at Guadalcanal, and Leo Klauberg from the neighborhood on a Normandy beach. My much-loved cousin Nat, one of the “band of brothers,” his phrase for marines like him who took back the Pacific islands from Japan, might easily have died. When he enlisted, his mother bade him good-bye with the words of Leonidas to the men of Thermopylae. “Come back with your shield, or on it.” People used to talk that way when I was young. Nat honored her injunction, but though he survived the war, coming back with his shield, it killed him.

He had gone through a divorce, was a recovering alcoholic, at the very end was ravaged by lung cancer. He spent his last years alone, though perhaps he’d found a semblance of peace. He never lost his fidelity to the Marine Corps, a source of deep pride but also pain: living on, he blamed himself for the friends who didn’t make it. In the end his guilt was unendurable

Donald Hall has a poem that circles about this question. “The Man in the Dead Machine” is a fighter pilot whose Grumann Hellcat crashes in the jungles of New Guinea. His helmeted skeleton sits upright, webbing straps his pelvic cross to the cracked leather of the seat, and the breastbone to the cover of the parachute. But Hall wants an alternative ending, and he achieves it by fiat. “Or say that the shrapnel missed him.” So the pilot doesn’t die, but makes it back to the carrier and his future life in middle-class America. He becomes a businessman. (I am extrapolating a little.) Now he rides another machine, call it the Long Island Rail Road. Every morning he is off to work, upright like the dead flier held in his chair by the webbing. His is a banal life, the poem intimates, an office in the city, a nice house on the island. A sorry dénouement to a powerful poem, done in by the ethos of the sixties.

But other endings are potential, and they rise to greet me as I walk among the graves. Buried beside an army PFC who died at twenty-two is his wife, who died many years later. I think about this couple, the young man just come into his force when death slit the thin-spun life, the woman, doubtless young herself when he died, in my imagination good to be with and dowered with gifts –

but on whom were they lavished and to what end did she live on into an unrecorded twilight? Grieving for these two, we grieve for ourselves, casualties of the blight we were born for. The phrase is Gerard Manley Hopkins's in "Spring and Fall," whose heroine reads her fate in the drooping head of a goldenrod.

A final pairing. With disbelief, I look down at the flat stone grave of a marine, aged eighteen when he died on Iwo. I learn from the gravestone that he was born on my birthday, the same day of the same month of the same year. I've thought often of my Gemini-like twin, wondering what he would have made of his life had more of it been granted. Perhaps we might have swapped years, I giving, he taking. Who would have been the richer? who poorer?

That seems easily answered. My accomplishments are on record, whereas no one has ever heard of my twin. The honor he won in his death seems to dim with time. One inscription on the walls at Punchbowl says of our dead that at the climax of their lives they "were rapt away from a world filled for their dying eyes not with terror but with glory." Words like these make me uneasy. Where do the paths of glory lead? Can honor set an arm or a leg? But possibly I am asking the wrong questions. I fumble at another, so shaking in its emotional affect that I can hardly see round it. Will my Gemini twin's last days of life have screwed him up to a pitch I couldn't hope to attain? Does not that make him the more memorable man, one I would willingly give to and take from? Can it be that his dying eyes filled with glory? I can hardly get the words out.

Questions like these are imponderables, and my memory of the day I enlisted doesn't turn up anything like them. That isn't from chance. I hadn't years enough on my back. A large and affable middle-aged man in uniform greeted me when I walked into the recruiting office. We shook hands, he pulled out a chair for me to sit, and we talked. Not about the navy or the war. We talked about baseball. It was understood that I was a candidate for officer training, and this off-the-point conversation surprised me.

My interlocutor took the lead. He gathered that I was a fan. (The papers he was shuffling on the desk before him will have laid out my life's story.) But did I play the game? Was I any good at it? I played the outfield, I said, not centerfield, I wasn't fast enough to

cover all that ground, but put me in left and I did okay. My unassuming self seemed to please, and he favored me with a smile. Then, leaning forward intently, he asked, Could I hit?

Don't ask me how, but I knew a lot was at stake. Blowing my own horn, I would have flunked the test. But it wouldn't do either to be excessively modest. "Well," I said, "I'm pretty fair with the bat, not every time I come up, of course, but if I get hold of one, I can give it a ride." This got approval, but qualified. "Every time you're up," he said, "especially with men on base, you want to go for the long ball." It could have been an Order of the Day. I saw it posted over the ship's scuttlebutt (drinking fountain), sent to us from CINCPAC, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific. "Always go for the long ball." – Adm. Ernest E. King. Walking back up Boylston Street, I repeated these words, squaring my shoulders.

Less than a month later, in the company of a parcel of other young men, I got off the train in White River Junction, Vermont. On the platform to meet us stood another large man, a bosun, the highest right-arm rate in the navy of my day. The right arm belonged to sailors and warriors, the left to yeomen (pen pushers), chancre mechanics (physician's mates), and chaplains. The demi-god on the platform might have been looking over his deck crew. He wasn't polite, like the recruiting officer, and he certainly wasn't impressed. Without preamble, he launched into an obscene tirade. "Follow me, you goddam blankety-blank andsoforths," he snarled. "Move your asses, now!"

Though today's conventions allow of more latitude than yesterday's, violent language like the bosun's remains beyond the pale, and I draw a curtain before it. It never let up either, and in no time at all became our standard mode of discourse. At sunrise the next day an urgent voice on the intercom woke me from sleep. "Drop your cocks and pick up your socks!" the voice advised us. I wasn't wholly naive, but this shook me to my timbers (as an old salt might put it). After a while, though, my ears became inured, and four-letter words enjoining copulation and other bodily functions went right by me.

Two of my new buddies, men from the fleet and savvier than I, a recruit from civilian life, showed me how to make the action suit the word. The three of us went on Liberty together, the allotted time off from base when you are free to roam as far as a day and a

half will take you. I looped a ditty bag, smaller than a woman's handbag, over my pinkie. It held a change of underwear, a pocket handkerchief, a comb, a toothbrush, and a stash of dollar bills. I didn't use pills or carry a credit card. With this minimum but sufficient equipment, I sallied forth to conquer.

My friends helped me clarify the distinction between nice girls and tarts. There wasn't one. We were trolling for girls by whatever name you called them. Vic, a scrawny French Canadian called "Hey! Canuck," sported a black mustache and sly grin. Life to Vic was a comedy, more likely a farce. Hank, blond and open-faced, probably Polish (Polack), wore a young man's innocent smile. Neither cared about his ancestors but lived in the present, devoted entirely to sex.

Sex was at the top of the charts in the navy, not simply with our enlisted men but with our superiors. They weren't into it themselves, but did what they could to be sure we weren't either. "Listen up!" they told us. "There's a war on!" Wanting sound minds in sound bodies, they had us watch educational films. We sat in a dark room while astonishing images appeared on the screen. Atop a hypertrophied scrotum, swollen to the size of the globe in Rockefeller Center, sat its owner, clearly sorry for what he'd done. This updated morality play didn't turn us toward the straight and narrow, however. Sailors make good critics, and know a comic film when they see one.

In some of my mates, comic ran to tawdry. Many years have flown, but I still recoil, scandalized, at Vic's telling me how he'd slipped his hand beneath a whore's pillow and filched back the money he'd paid her. Hank, the open-faced one, made room in his ditty bag for a pint of cheap whiskey, passing it to me when he'd taken a swig. If we were in a bar, he drank bar whiskey with a beer chaser. I did my best to do as he did. But I was still in my teens, not yet suave and debonair (I pronounced it "de-boner"), as I liked to think I became when drink had poisoned my system. Raw whiskey and I didn't get on together, and in our dollar-a-night lodging I became violently ill. Vic rolled his eyes, smiling. Hank said, "Puke in the bed. You paid for it."

I don't emerge as a nice young man in these grungy reminiscences. But they need retelling, being part of the good I got from the navy. First of all, I got the trick of free and easy. I learned to

take fifteen-minute naps, travel light, cut my losses. I almost learned how to roll with it, a work in progress. Much of my learning was useless, not the good kind of useless like reading the classics, but like caulking a boat with oakum, raggedy bits of old rope. I don't begrudge the tedium, aware as I am that many in uniform would gladly have swapped their duty for mine.

My friend Charlie, a fellow instructor at Duke University when we were once more in civvies but before that an infantryman on Okinawa, breaks out in a sweat if he goes back in mind to the war. He had an instant to live when the Japanese soldier dropped from a tree on his shoulders, time enough to see the flash of the knife. He was able to get in first with his own knife – a sensational story, whereas most of mine are quotidian. Some men I've known have told me that the war was the best time of their lives. For others it was the worst. I can't say either. But like bright metal on a sullen ground, it conferred importance on a life where nothing of consequence happened. It upped the ante.

I felt something akin to joy in the on-parade formation I was part of. Marching, I sought to shape up, and if others slouched or stepped off on the wrong foot, I muttered "Shame!" and tightened my jaw. However blemished my escutcheon, I was a straight arrow. As we marched, we chanted. "Follow your left, follow your lo, follow your left right lo." On our flank, the platoon leader chimed in when we fell silent. "You had a good home and you left right lo, your left, your lo, follow your left, follow your right." "Oho your right!" we echoed him, sucking in our bums and bellies, a miscellaneous gang of youngsters from every kind of background, embracing many creeds or none, but welded into an organic whole, the definition of our country's motto, *e pluribus unum*, "out of many, one."

I honored my betters, an old-fashioned word, suspect in today's world, where no person is superior to another. Capt. Cummings, who presided over our V-12 unit, was my young man's idea of God. As I stood before him at my deck court martial – I was about to be sentenced for bringing a case of beer on base – I felt like a drowned sailor preparing to face Davy Jones. The captain as a man was unprepossessing: of medium height, he wore wire-rimmed glasses, and the hair on his head was going fast. But I looked

through him to the office he embodied, and this demanded and got my respect.

At seventeen, I was a fledged bird, but Mom still fretted over the state of my soul. Meaning to keep it in health, she wrote me long letters, heavy on italics. I don't dream of making fun of her letters. But my adolescent piety had gone when she wasn't looking. Unaware of that, she still saw in her son a candidate for holy orders. Then a kindly fate let her and me off the hook.

When she finally made up her mind to put an end to her unhappy marriage, she went to our parish priest, old Father Churchill. He listened phlegmatically, unmoved by what she told him. I, who knew the tale by heart, thought it must wring tears from a stone. Not from the old curmudgeon, though. "You'll be dead soon enough," he told her. "Hang on until then." With a great wrench, Mom left the church, and thoughts of her son the priest vanished with it. My case was different.

A few months in the navy was all I needed to "change my way of livin', even change the way I strut my stuff." Bessie Smith is my authority, and life has confirmed her. I walked away from my first marriage, the only way to cut the knot, married my second wife by getting on the phone to her mother. I thought of it as an end run, and if it strikes you as trivializing a momentous occasion, I say that going with serendipity puts one's sense of self-importance in perspective. I mustn't overstate this, nor am I promoting reckless behavior. My dear stepfather followed the beckoning of chance and see where it led him.

But he was a man for all that, and I can't say it too often. Looking on the bright side, he didn't miss the dark. It stood for death and defeat, our unshunnable portion. In the ordinary course of a life, this unhappy ending doesn't become apparent until it is almost on us. But the war, his and mine, was a forcing house, and made the darkness visible all that much sooner. Like a hothouse that brings on the flowers, it quickened perception. This gave me my first inkling of things as they are.

In time, I put on the new man. Living in the present, I left off hunting causes and began to enjoy their effects. One Sunday morning I woke up in my bunk bed, aware that I must do my duty and go to mass. "Let's not!" I said, without thinking about it.

Turning over, I went back to sleep. Since then, I've never been inside a church except to admire the fine carving, and have never felt a pang of remorse.

The other day, rooting around in my closet, a version of Fibber McGee's in the old radio show, I found the ancient scrapbook this recollection begins with. That defines serendipity. Of course I set to promptly, turning the pages to see what the dead might tell me. The first thing my eye lit on was a photo from the *Times* saluting the last members of the Grand Army of the Republic. They were marching at the head of the Memorial Day Parade, which fell the day before my birthday. I remember turning fifteen a day later. My godmother Aunt Alice, who bore a part in my upbringing, took me into the city to honor these Civil War survivors. Tiny Alice, as she was known to us, died when I was still a young man.

Every branch of the military was represented in the parade, but the veterans, some walking with a cane, stepped off first in the line of march. All of them have been gone a lifetime now, and the multitudes who fought in my war are hastening to death every day. What does all that dying add up to? I venture to answer, offering a kernel of the wisdom of age. You can call it, if you like, an old chestnut.

All of us are fated to cross over the river, and who doesn't know it? Kurt Schuschnigg, Austria's gallant chancellor who vowed to keep his country free from Hitler, is gone. But so is Hitler, so is Stalin, and at least one of them died in bed, his villainy unrequited. Where is the propriety in that? Worse yet, the evil both personated is still waiting to devour us, and nothing says we're sure to evade it.

I grew up believing that goodness guaranteed salvation, and if you were wicked you burned. That's an equation too neat to be credible, and my brief years in the military, rough-edged, whatever else, called it in question. At the same time, they promoted a certain *laissez-faire* of the spirit. No point in worrying about the future, they told me, nor puffing myself up in the belief that I'd iced it. What will be, must be. That was the rubric at the head of the chapter.

Implicit in this is the bare bones of a philosophy still as pertinent to me in my slipped pantaloons as it was in the beginning.

Putting it like that, I mean to confer a modest approval. Two cheers. But I haven't any thought of laying a pattern of behavior on my son. E.g., "Plastics!" or "And these few precepts in thy memory / Look thou character." Not on your life!

The shape of a life, whether swelling to a ripe old age like a gourd in autumn or only shriveled, no ripeness in it, is largely determined by chance. (We could quarrel over the adverb.) Though I believe in virtue, I believe it's as well to be lucky. I was lucky to have been "in" the war but not "of it," like my cousin Nat or dear Phil, a father to me in all but name. My son can do without believing that his father was a hero, but mustn't believe he had his hands on all the ropes. That way is fantasy, the stuff of bad fiction. Better to jump in, and having engaged yourself, look around. You can't see that far, wearing fortune's blindfold, and in your purblind condition – the old-fashioned word meaning partly blind – you may come a cropper. Or (you can never tell) good things may fall in your lap. You'll find out sooner or later.