hoping that by overloading the system, my sense of smell would be short-circuited, knocked out of commission.

For Jacques, it was a happy little household, a frame of mind—or soul—that I struggled to achieve. Donald, a former Green Beret, loaded with many milligrams of Thorazine, walked about like a zombie, the last firefight in Vietnam running a continuous loop in his mind. The Professor, who refused to rest in an actual bed for fear that doing so meant he was dying, cadged bits of toast and English muffin into recesses of the Barcalounger, providing a steady food supply not only for the cockroaches but for the mice that eagerly visited him when he lapsed into sleep. He was indignant when I changed his urine-soaked pads, glaring at me with eyes at once alert and distant. Freddie, an otherwise good-natured man, mumbled incessantly, his monologues like verbal Muzak. No dish or glass in our battered kitchen cabinets matched, most of them were chipped. The refrigerator needed cleaning; the stove was crusted with the memories of many meals.

I hated myself for even noticing such things. But then I would come upon Jacques, sitting quietly on the sofa that he changed to and from a bed when everyone was asleep so as not to call attention to himself, reading St. Thomas's *Summa Theologica* in the original Latin. And I would know I was living a truly extraordinary life with an extraordinary man. Or, on a shopping trip with Jacques when money was especially low and I reached for the gallon jug of rotgut Gallo only to have him say, "Oh, no, Paaaul, we must have a wonderful wine tonight. Theees Cabernet Sauvignon!" His joie de vivre, his mellifluous French accent, his sense of beauty and of the importance—in the midst of our poverty—of a good glass of wine, made me see that there was a brighter path than the one I was trudging along. "*Cher* Paaaul, we can be poor of pocket, but we can never let our spirits be poor." Coming from Jacques, it was never an admonition, only encouragement.

Holy Cross parish is set in what was once a blue-collar Flatbush neighborhood of Irish plumbers and policemen and transit workers. It is now a sad area in the midst of urban decay, with a rusting refrigerator teetering over a Church Avenue gutter clogged with paper and garbage, where poor West Indians, Haitians, and Mexicans struggle for their first American toehold. When I was there, it had become predominately black and was called · "transitional neighborhood," but of course the transition had long sin passed, and its fate was obvious. To passersby or to those who once liv

I felt selfish and weak. After all, I was finally living the life I had always hoped to, a life for others. A life where my needs simply didn't matter in the face of the grinding poverty and disease and desperation of my people. I felt so blessed to be at 80 Winthrop where I could share on a daily basis the life of the poor, the mentally ill, the marginalized. And to have CHIPS, which for the past three years had provided me with a passport into people's lives, so that I might be trusted with their agony. Not many people get this opportunity; I knew that well.

> Lord my God, I call for help by day;
> I cry at night before you.
> Let my prayer come into your presence.
> O turn your ear to my cry . . .
> I am reckoned as one in the tomb;
> I have reached the end of my strength . . .
> You have taken away my friends
> And made me hateful in their sight.

The words of Psalm 88 pierced my soul with their searing awareness; I found my heart pounding, both in my own agony and the fleeting bliss I could feel at the same time. I tried to shrug off my inner conflicts as just a symptom of a stage I had to go through. Didn't de Foucauld and John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila go through their desert experiences before they truly encountered the power and the surety of the God, the Christ they sought? Didn't Thérèse of Lisieux have a crisis of faith on her very deathbed?

My life was to be intentional, purposeful, biblical. If I presumed to live a Christlike life, I had to be ready to suffer my agony in the garden, the small daily crucifixions, the abandonment of friends, society's scorn. My mind took me places, both to heights of insight and to forlorn depths I had never experienced before.

There was something, though, that I noticed by their absence. My headaches had completely gone away.

I saved up $600 from a small monthly payment I was receiving from the Navy and bought a 1964 Volkswagen bus, aptly painted red, white, and blue by the young hippie who had been its previous owner. I drove to hospitals and detox centers and the back doors of supermarkets and bakeries ar butcher shops. I was quite a sight, I'm sure, in this rusting, belching V

with Dr. Koltuv, even though I never felt that this outwardly secular Jew had much of a clue as to what this cradle Catholic was talking about.

Some friends from my former life did eventually find me, and I could tell by their tone of voice on the phone or when they saw me at CHIPS that they believed I had completely lost it. Barry Jagoda, a successful NBC producer who would go on to serve in the Carter White House, came by 80 Winthrop one evening, just as I was going out to the garbage chute with a sodden lump of the Professor's diapers. I slipped one hand out from beneath and Barry, without hesitating, shook it. Of such moments are casual relationships transformed into deep, lasting friendships. We sat on a couple of threadbare overstuffed chairs in the dimly lit living room, with Freddie mumbling in the kitchen, the Professor ranting in his room, and Donald marching patrol duty in the long hallway. Our talk was of Columbia classmates ascending the media ladder. Tom Bettag was on his way to becoming the producer of Dan Rather's *Nightly News* on CBS. Mollie Ivins had put her sweater sets and pearls aside, reclaimed her Texas roots and boots, and was a nationally known columnist. Paul Friedman was about to produce the *Today* show. Paul Branzburg, our Harvard Law graduate, had, at twenty-eight, won a Pulitzer Prize with the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. And then there was Richard Stone, who, in the midst of a successful run of front-page stories at the *Wall Street Journal*, had gone to the roof of his West Side apartment building and jumped.

"Go figure," Barry said.

"Depressed. Was he depressed, Barry?"

"We're all depressed. We just don't jump off buildings."

"Right. Right."

I was saying "right," but I knew something was very wrong.

"I'm sorry, could you speak up?" My hand paused over the logbook at CHIPS, ready to document the incoming need. There was a lot of noise in the background, typical, and I couldn't hear well.

"You're from what? You want to do what? Sure, sure, I'll be here all day, anytime."

"Vhat vas that?" Janine asked, in that marvelous Austrian accent.

"*Newsweek*. Somebody selling subscriptions, I think. I didn't thir they went door-to-door. Couldn't hear her."

18

THE SCENT OF A

THE YELLOW CAB LURCHED TO A STOP IN
disgorging its fare, the cab squealed away
quickly, its "Off Duty" sign dispelling any ques
business in this Brooklyn neighborhood. It wa
area was served by gypsy cabs, if any at all, a
stream Yellow fleet. And equally rare was t
brought us. She stood there, a huge bag slung c
people with bags—often containing everything
ers to us. But this was a bag of supple Italian le
toward our door, her perfectly coiffed black
meticulously confected face anchored by etc
lipstick that traced the contours of her delicate
fingers, with blazing crimson nails, surgicall
her toes, encased in $300 worth of Ferragamo
usual visitor. And when she came through the
god the perfume. People like this never—I mea

In the year before the founding of CHIPS an
of operation, I had been researching and writ
which followed a statistically average 1970s
their life. Lippincott was to publish the book, w
ten about. Although "You are there" portraits
it was then a relatively new form, immersion
writer simply stayed with a subject for an exte
wove a narrative around real-life events. For m
Island family: foreman father, at-home moth
starting college, sullen teenaged son drifting ai
nd angelic twelve-year-old younger daughte

CHIPS was by now both mystifying various city social service agencies and becoming known as a refuge of last resort in our part of Brooklyn. When social workers, priests, and nuns didn't know where to turn, they turned to us. When neighborhood people knew of a family put out on the street, they came to us. We started an overnight shelter, which at the beginning was the usual gathering of drunks, addicts, and the deinstitutionalized mentally ill. On a bitter cold February night, the first mother and baby showed up at our door, presaging what would be a more common plight in the years ahead. A couple of old bedspreads were nailed into the ceiling, providing as much dignity and privacy as we could afford this modern-day Madonna and Child.

I was sleeping half of my nights at CHIPS now. Getting everyone settled was often difficult—fights, epileptic seizures, drug withdrawal, psychotic outbursts—*Catch-22* had nothing on CHIPS. But then the storm would calm, as if the Lord were there in the boat. The gentle breathing of the young mother, the snoring of men whose nasal passages were ravaged by cocaine, the sudden cry from a storm-tossed mind, the whimper of a baby. Ultimately, all sweet sounds in the peaceable kingdom we were trying so hard to create.

I had read Thomas Merton's famous meditation in the fire tower, and I thought about it as I lay awake on my cot one night, the tiny, crowded room finally quiet. With all the difficulties of this new life, what a fortunate man I was to be able to share my life so intimately with these, God's ambassadors. There was a mystical dignity about the poor, a clarity I had never experienced before through the many, blurring lenses easily summoned in a middle-class life. I hadn't understood this quality in the early days of CHIPS, but now, living at 80 Winthrop with Donald and Freddie and the Professor, spending nights here with an ever-changing group of the homeless, there were moments of blinding grace that sometimes astounded me. The homeless mother tenderly tucking in her tiny baby boy beneath those threadbare blankets. The way the schizophrenic, Roger, carefully folded his jacket into a neat square and placed it under his cot. Morris, who had spent decades on the street, his many layers of clothing suddenly transformed into so many petals of a flower, in so many muted shades; his swollen legs finally allowed horizontal rest; his chapped, gnarled hands folded over his bloated body like an innocent schoolboy. Even the bare forty-watt bulb that shone over the entrance to our wretched bathroom glowed with a radiant warmth, the Christmas star.

"God has given me the sense, the need—I don't know how to put it—an instinct for the Absolute . . . an extremely rare gift of which I ha' been aware from my childhood." I read the words of Leon Bloy by tl

them. I was not that good a person; I was not Jacques. But I saw my father and mother with their six children sleeping in that airless attic. I saw the retarded children I went to school with at St. Benedict's. I saw the encephalitic child my sister Francis bore, whose name also was Paul. I saw the look of hopelessness on Peter Skelly's scab-ridden face. I saw the faces peering through the thick glass at Kings County Hospital, Building K, the psychiatric ward. No, not Christ, but those marginalized by birth or fate.

I turned back to Leon Bloy just as the light went out. We hadn't paid our electric bill, and the city made good on its threat. So much for altruism. This corporal work of mercy had to be ransomed by hard, cold cash in the morning. Another bump in the road to supposed holiness. I had to smile. More purification. I rolled over and fell deeply asleep.

Who was it that brought the March 24, 1975, *Newsweek* into CHIPS? I glanced at the review, winced at the pathetic picture, not believing that I could look so gaunt, so miserable. Surely this wasn't me. I was the rescuing angel, the happy, fulfilled servant of the poor. Clyde, Janine, and Anne were terribly excited about the review, showing it to everyone who came in. Our homeless guests glanced at the magazine, then at me, not quite putting the two together. When someone they knew had a picture in a publication, it was usually a mug shot.

Newsweek's circulation at the time was around three million. At least one of those copies found its way to an eighteenth-floor corner office at 90 Park Avenue, just a few blocks from where I had worked at Harper & Row. A second phone call came into CHIPS that was *not* from or about someone in need. This time it was from the powers that be at Westinghouse Broadcasting. Would Wednesday at ten be convenient for Mr. Wilkes? Anne Enright, the volunteer who in her real life was an executive secretary, took the call with great aplomb, affecting—or was this my imagination?—just the slightest hint of a British accent. She wrote the appointment on the back of the only piece of paper at hand, still another notice from the New York Sanitation Department that we were putting too much garbage at the curb.

I had not worn a suit in many years, and when I went to my small closet at 80 Winthrop, there, in a protective bag, pushed to the back, was a blue suit I had bought not long after my discharge from the Navy over a decade before. It looked perfectly fine to me. (Months later, when I wore it a second time, someone noted that both its purplish hue and narrov lapels of another fashion season gave away its age.) As I came out of t'

I never considered myself a journalist or writer "on the news." From the beginning, I had chosen magazine writing, not breaking news. Quite frankly, I never considered myself a quick or incisive thinker. I liked to tell a bigger story by telling a small story that was somehow representative, and that was exactly the thinking behind *Trying Out the Dream.* One family, average income (then about $12,000 a year), suburban, white, Protestant, two or three children, working father, stay-at-home mother, post–World War II migrants from an urban area. I had no idea I was writing about an institution about to undergo the most profound change it had experienced since the Industrial Revolution. I was writing about the kind of family that would in a generation be no more, reconfigured by the emerging role of women in the marketplace. Not only my marriage but half of all marriages would end in divorce. The classic family was about to become an endangered species.

Westinghouse's idea was not for me to film the Neumeyers, but to find representative families from across America, of different incomes, education levels, races, and occupations, and, using the technique of *Trying Out the Dream,* create a documentary portrait of the American family for the bicentennial year, 1976.

Looking back at how I was living in my life devoted to the poor, I am amazed that I just didn't say no. In trying to reach a decision, I employed the spiritual discipline of discernment, imploring God to show me the right path. I prayed, with head bowed at the kitchen table, with eyes upturned after Mass at Holy Cross Church. I read scripture, sifting the spiritual tea leaves. I tried to extract meaning from the parable of Christ being offered the world by a cunning devil. I thought of Peter and the cock crowing the third time. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." I picked up the phone to call Westinghouse to tell them no. I laid it back on the cradle so softly that not even God could hear. I looked for signs, even tiny and obscure ones. Something Freddie would say or a person who came to us with a special need, the way the Wandering Jew plant curled around the cord of a Venetian blind. Was it lovely or strangling? I tried to convince myself that I didn't have to choose. Yes, that could be the answer! I could do the series and continue to live at 80 Winthrop and work at CHIPS.

But my heart was telling me something else, something that made me profoundly sad.

As I looked at my life, I saw the supreme effort I was making. And I saw how deeply unhappy I really was. Try as I might, I did not see the face of Christ in my roommates or the people who came to CHIPS. Whe-

"Don't take this the wrong way," I sputtered. "This isn't a male chauvinist thing, okay? I'm not that kind of guy."

She said nothing.

"You have a beautiful body."

"Thank you."

I bit my lip, hoping it would pass. *Thank you.* I was done in by a simple "thank you" for an honest compliment on a subject off-limits for most of my life. I turned my head.

"It's all right, Paul. Believe me." Her voice was lost in the torrent of my tears that followed.

Should I have felt guilty for having sex outside the state of holy matrimony? Perhaps, but that subject was far from the contortions of my conscience. I had violated my calling, my self-imposed calling. I had disconnected my sexual urges, hadn't I, "offered them up" as we used to say, so that I could love all purely, without expecting anything in return? Without needing anything? Or so I tried to delude myself.

After that afternoon, I prayed, vowing to rededicate myself to the poor. But it was a hollow, forced prayer. Down deep, I knew it was already over. I spent less and less time at CHIPS. I avoided 80 Winthrop, sitting in Prospect Park and pretending I was reading. I drove my red, white, and blue Volkswagen van out to the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, crossed it, made a U-turn, and crossed it again. I lingered late over coffee at Snooky's on Seventh Avenue, a nocturnal creature in the window, right out of a Hopper painting. I walked through the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, carefully reading each tiny sign in the midst of stubbles of brown deadness, killed by the winter, awaiting their spring. Something had died, and I couldn't fake it.

On a blustery, cold, late spring day, Jacques helped me load my few possessions into the van and, as we stood at curbside on Winthrop Street, asked if I needed anything from the apartment to furnish my own. "Take whatever you need, Paaaul; we will find more," he said with that wonderful French lilt to his voice. "The bedspread; you must take eet with you," he said, turning to go back into the building. I took his arm.

"I think it needs to stay here, Jacques. I don't think . . . well, I don't think I'm the guy for it right now."

He looked up at me. He stood no more than five feet tall, so he looked up to most people. "Your face has ze look of a man who has failed Someone who disappointed other people. Eet is not so. You will fin

ladder. Walter Issacson, a barely adequate infielder, will go on to head Time, Inc., then write blockbusters on Franklin and Einstein. John Leo, once a leftie *Commonweal* Catholic, will continue his move to the right and become the intelligent darling of conservatives in his *U.S. News and World Report* column, eventually marrying the best of the women players, Jackie McCord, who will start up *Child* magazine and make them both millionaires many times over. Michael Fuchs, who always seems to be negotiating—and winning—even as he stands there at the plate, steely eyes demanding just the right pitch, will ride a tiny and then unknown startup called Home Box Office on to major media power. Ken Auletta, another writer, his friendliness tinged with just a hint of obsequiousness, cheers for whoever is at the plate. His wife, Amanda (aka Binky) Urban, the rising agent, stands on the sidelines, arms folded, her skin permanently tanned like a fine Coach handbag. Her eyes, like Fuchs's—for these two are an even more aggressive breed, with an even shorter attention span, within an already driven group of people—are always sizing up. In Binky's case, the few she selects will rise to the top of the heap, the 15 percent agent's commission she will extract but a small price to pay for what she will do for them. Then there's John Scanlon, the Friar Tuck of the game, whose counsel is sought by New York politicians and offered graciously to those who can pay handsomely. Nora and Delia Ephron, pale and thin and nervously laughing, will eventually leave the grimy East Coast for Hollywood. The game will draw Mort Zuckerman and Carl Bernstein and various other moguls and media stars of the moment. The Saturday morning softball game on a scraggly field behind Sag Harbor High School is considered the place to kick off a Hamptons weekend, where gossip is rich—and sometimes true—and word of the best parties is discreetly parceled out, but only to the wittiest, prettiest, and best connected.

I have arrived at a sort of fantastical summer camp for these toilers of word and image, who, for the other nine months in Manhattan, work the tips of their fingers to the bone. Here, no one has a past. Here, no one has an ex-wife. Here, no one has a worry that goes beyond what party to attend, no heartache greater than not being invited to the most desired of those events. A peaceable kingdom. A perfect world.

Back to home plate. The ball floats lazily through the hot morning air. Although I was hardly a great athlete in my younger years, here it is magically different. Everything is different; how could I be so blessed? Playing in the company of men and women who excel at other pursuits besides sports, I have emerged as somewhat of a star, a standout. On the field and off. Handsome, popular, and, despite my own insecurities, quite the lady's man. With a national television series in the works, a guest spot on *Good Morning America*, a lengthy interview with Terry Gross on NPR's

In the Catholic tradition, there are many tales of dramatic conversion. St. Augustine turning away from the lush life of a decaying Roman society to become a towering theologian and apologist, his *Confessions* sounding the early rumble of Thomas Merton's life story sixteen centuries later. Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, ready to wreak havoc on the despicable Christians, blasted off his horse and into an awareness that the very God he hated was a God who loved and had great plans for him. Ignatius of Loyola, dissipated, affected and extravagant in hair and dress, consumed with the desire of winning glory on the battlefield, reconstituted into a soldier for God, whose followers, the Jesuits, would bring the face of Christ to millions and influence the very course of Western civilization. Charles de Foucauld, from champagne, foie gras, and the fleshpots of France to scurvy and isolation in the barren Sahara. Story after story of aimless, sinful lives transformed into lives of virtue.

My dramatic turnabout and latest persona were proving that conversion was a two-way street. I was traveling against the accepted traffic flow. I felt more like Peter, who ate elbow-to-elbow with Our Lord one night, professing his undying love, only to turn his back on him before the sun rose the next morning. Moral and spiritual whiplash. What was the Saint of Sixth Avenue doing, reincarnated as the Courtier of the Hamptons?

After leaving Jacques' community, I rented a modest fourth-floor walk-up at 849 President Street, only a few blocks from CHIPS, still fooling myself that I would live parallel lives, working both on the television series and with the poor of Brooklyn. Frankly, I was a shell of a man, burned out physically, emotionally, spiritually. Only the adrenaline of the next crisis kept me going. I had lost something along the way. The picture in *Newsweek* was evidence of that. The missionary fervor and the sense of purpose and adventure that I felt so palpably when walking the streets of Brooklyn with Father Petroski had dissipated into lifeless and spiritless routine. The closeness to a God with whom I had felt such kinship had slowly faded, like taillights disappearing in a fog. I had tried so hard to maintain a spiritual life, praying and attending Mass daily, but my soul was not up to the hard work of confronting, day after day, the agonies and the needs of the poor, coupled with my own growing sense of loneliness. I did not have, as Tom Wolfe would later summarize what distinguished the astronauts, the "right stuff."

And then I was offered a New York I had only read about and imagined. I had an office at 90 Park Avenue, an unlimited expense account to travel the country, a clothes budget so I could have the "right look" on camera, a handsome, regular salary. Failing at shouldering the mantle of the "right stuff," I readily wrapped myself in the cheap garments comprised

The anthems of alienation and self-adoration spoke so logically and soothingly to my newly callow and hollow heart. Women would come, and they would go, I was assured by no less a prophetess than Stevie Nicks. And what of it? The rain, after all, would wash you clean. Stevie, thank you, thank you so much for these profound insights. They made no sense, of course, but I gustily blasted Fleetwood Mac songs from the tape deck of my sleek new car as I sped up FDR Drive, half tanked-up on the two or three vodkas or scotches I drank in preparation for still another ring on another apartment doorbell, another "Hey, [fill in the name], *great* to meet you!"

The Mommas and Papas; Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young; the Jefferson Airplane—these troubadours of disaffection, self-absorption, and drugs were background echoes to my life. They provided my marching music. I was a little late for the revolution, but I was doing my best to make up for that sexually quiescent period, my sensual Dark Ages. Billie Joel comforted me that I was totally cool, totally right—after all, I was in a "New York state of mind." James Brown assured me, "I feel good!" Why? Because "I got you." And when things didn't go as well, the good den mother Linda Ronstadt was ready with consolation. Sure, I was cheated and mistreated, but when will I be loved? Poor me. Poor me.

The events occurring in those years that would shape America, the world, and the Catholic Church did not register as all that important. The hostages in Iran, Jim Jones and the Jonestown mass suicide, the execution of Gary Gilmore all passed before me like the illuminated, ephemeral news band on Times Square. Nothing touched me. Nothing affected me. And in the Catholic Church, with the declining years of Pope Paul VI, the march of Vatican II reform and openness that had so inflamed me and brought me back to the Church was losing momentum. With the election of a "smiling pope," the affable John Paul I, the promise of a return to the kind of Catholic Church that the beloved John XXIII had hoped for turned out to be short lived. He died thirty-three days after taking office. A new era would be ushered in with the charismatic but orthodox taskmaster, John Paul II.

Not that I would be thinking or writing about such things. My French-cut, nipped at the waist, Jean-Paul Germain blazer was far more important. Custom-made shirts became a necessity. I bought smooth calfskin boots and pelvis-hugging jeans so that I could disco with John Travolta–like agility and raw sexual power. Castoff clothes? *Moi?* One afternoon, walking with Barry Jagoda on Madison Avenue in search of a new suede jacket, I bridled at the fact that they were on sale at Abercrombie's, and promptly went down the street to Brooks Brothers, where I could pay full price. The more venal I was today, the more venal I could become tomorrow.

Something called Open Marriage was solemnly proclaimed "not a replacement, but an enhancement of marriage," thus canonizing marital infidelity. At Plato's Retreat, wrapped in a towel, a patron could stroll about the dimly lit basement of the Ansonia Hotel on the Upper West Side, choose a partner, have sex, and casually move on as if he or she had just inserted coins into a slot at the Horn and Hardart Automat for a serving of macaroni and cheese or a bologna sandwich. Two times, four? A dozen? Up to you if you had the stamina. The pill prevented, and penicillin cured. Sex was blame free, name free, attachment free. Plato's Retreat only routinized and commercialized what was happening in bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, and hallways, on couches, beds and carpets, even cool tile, all over the city. Hannah Arendt talked of the "banality of evil" in Hitler's Germany. Seventies New York conspired to make the banality of casual sex a high calling. Singles bars were called meat markets—or meet markets, if you needed a sanitized spelling.

I had purchased a co-op apartment in the Peter Warren, a boxy, somewhat prosaic post–World War II building of red brick, at 45 West Tenth Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues. It was a prime location, the heart of Greenwich Village. As I raised the blinds, I looked out over magnificent brownstones once occupied by Mark Twain, Edward Albee, Hart Crane, and Sinclair Lewis. I was certainly in the right company, at least; the spirits of the greats were here. And sunshine, that most precious of Manhattan commodities, flooded through a wall of windows into my apartment, 3-F, drenching the dining alcove with a soft yellow glow each morning as I sat there at a marble table, in a low-slung white leather chair, reading my *New York Times*. A Pavoni espresso machine produced excellent cappuccino, the Harmon Kardon stereo system provided perfect sound, the hardwood floors glistened. In the bedroom, a spacious queen-size bed was covered with a Marimekko print throw, the ultimate contemporary statement. And, along with sunshine above ground, below ground was a true Manhattan treasure. Accessible by elevator just outside the apartment's door—a crucial and strategic point—my new car awaited me in the parking garage. Like Batman, I was able to swoop in and out, with barely a notice. It was a single man's dream.

The Village was a wonderful place in those days, not yet overrun by people so rich that they hired out laundry, shopping, and dog walking, and even had their morning latte delivered. I loved to stroll those narrow, crowded streets, somehow convincing myself that the weary wanderer had finally found a true home. I strolled down to Puerto Rico Trading for my coffee beans, browsed at the legendary Eighth Avenue Bookshop, stopped at Zito's bakery for its luscious crusty bread and perhaps a chance

explained the symbolism in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I sat across the table from Betty Friedan as she carried on a nonstop monologue on the role of women, and watched her face harden as she told how her husband's physical abuse rose right along with the ranking of *The Feminine Mystique* on the best-seller list.

But my favorite celebrity was a fellow Slovak, who loved this merry-go-round as much as I did. I saw him all the time, party after party. Andrew Warhola also had airbrushed his ethnicity, shortening his first name and dropping the *a* in the second. He would stand motionless, silent, with his corn-silk white hair and vague, completely undiscerning look. His Velvet Underground entourage—crimson-lipped, waiflike boys and girls, nipples startlingly peeking out of knit shirts, eyeliner neither reserved for nor rationed to either sex—giggled at just about everything, having come fortified with the best drugs the city had to offer. Like Kosinski, Warhol "loved to watch."

It was all going so swimmingly.

I took a week off—a week *off* . . . from what?—and flew to Negril, a beach resort in Jamaica. I was four days and two women into my time there when it happened.

I had spent the day sunbathing and drinking at the pool, then was to go on to cocktails at the promontory overlooking the Caribbean. It was a perfect sunset, here on the westernmost tip of the island, a brilliant red ball ever so slowly falling into the blue water, a flash of light marking its nod to the day just past. I was to join a group of people for dinner, including both those women already obliged and those yet to be.

I came out of the shower and splashed on some Yves St. Laurent aftershave. I walked out into the sitting room, with its windows overlooking the beach, now bathed in the gentle light of a new moon. I turned to put on some clothes, but never made it to the closet. My knees suddenly buckled beneath me. I dropped to the ground. The next thing I knew, my face was pressed to the carpeting. No longer was my perfect world filled with the scent of blossoms that floated through the night air, or of my expensive aftershave, but the rank, putrid smell of damp, musty carpet. The rank, putrid smell of my life. How long I was there, I can't remember. I sobbed until the back of my throat ached. The utter hollowness of it all enveloped me, suffocating, searing, awful. I couldn't go anywhere. I didn't want even to be seen.

I crawled into bed, and left on the first plane the next morning.

Even after my Negril breakdown, I refused to take stock of what was happening to me, of the person I had become. As my social calendar was stuffed with events, openings, and parties to celebrate just about anything, I contributed in turn, hosting a few of my own gatherings in my very showable Greenwich Village apartment, doing my best to deepen the shallowness of my life. My thirty-eighth birthday party was at once the highest point of my "standing" in New York circles and one of those moments where an ominous gong should have sounded, or a bolt of lightning pierced that wall of glass overlooking magical Tenth Street and struck me dead. The guest list was impressive that night. Kurt Vonnegut and Jill Kremetz were there; Betty Friedan; my laconic but high-powered agent, Theron Raines, and his wife, Joan; Gordon Parks's ex-wife, Gene Young, who was my editor on *Trying Out the Dream,* the book that catapulted me to a degree of national prominence. Also in attendance were a few of my women friends. I opened my presents, the usual assortment of bottles of wine and popular books, none of which made anything close to a personal statement about giver or recipient. I offered a quick retort or dollop of repartee for each. I purposely mangled the pronunciation of a well-known French vineyard; I pulled a funny line from a recent *Times* review on the book cradled in my hand. How *en pointe* I could be. The last present awaited, this one carefully wrapped by an actual person, not a clerk. As if it were an Academy Award envelope, I ceremoniously removed the satin ribbon and peeled back the Degas-print paper. It was a baseball jersey, personalized. It was from Pamela, one of the ladies of the Hamptons summer past. How considerate of her. A huge 38 was emblazoned on the back. Above it, instead of my name, was another. "Scumbag." At first there was silence. Then an outburst of laughter. What a wonderful touch. Pam-e-la! Touché! How unique.

Scumbag, slang for a condom. A used condom.

I had left friends and family behind, all of life's connective and corrective tissue. There was no one who could confront me with who I was or remind me that I had been an entirely different person not that long before. I did sometimes go to Mass on Sundays, a habit engrained from my past that even this life couldn't break entirely, but I usually sat numbly in a back pew. Otherwise, my prayer life was nonexistent, except for fleeting, panicky incantations when I was drunk and afraid I was going to get in an accident, or when I woke up in a state of hungover dissipation and cried to heaven either to let me die immediately or to heal me quickly. In therapy, I occasionally noticed a furrow in Barbara Koltuv's brow, but the nature of psychoanalysis being what it is, the analysand, not the analyst, makes the value judgments. I careened through

colleges, had been of one political mind during the early part of my time at Columbia, proving our righteousness and patriotism by throwing eggs at that ragtag group of protesting Vietnam veterans. Dick's politics had remained stably conservative since then, whereas mine had veered to the left; nonetheless we remained friends. A friend of his—Ron Kershaw, a junk-food-eating, alcoholic, TV news genius—happened to be in town. The last time I had seen Kershaw was at the Philadelphia apartment of his old girlfriend, Jessica Savitch, who would meteorically rise at NBC before she died some five years later when her Mercedes missed a turn leaving a restaurant and plunged into a ditch. That night I was with her and Kershaw, there was enough cocaine on her living room coffee table to get the entire City of Brotherly Love high. Ron and I howled about that evening, and he wolfed down a dozen Hostess Twinkies within five minutes to justify his reputation. As we traded stories before the show, trying to out-dissolute each other, we smoked a prodigious amount of marijuana. I remember little of that show, but before I went on, I went into the station manager's office and, for a joke, had them bring in the local weatherman. He was black and handsome, a rising star in this niche of programming. Gravely, I told him I was "from corporate," 90 Park in New York. "We" were profoundly disappointed in his on-air appearance and ratings. He was fired. His face went slack; he believed me. Kershaw and I howled again. "Gotcha!"

The videotape recording of the talk show is a harrowing visit with an insane man. There I am, eyes red and glassy, slouched in a chair wearing a Baltimore Orioles baseball jersey that I had somehow stolen from one of the offices. I mumble answers to questions, answers that make absolutely no sense. I laugh at my own answers. No one else does. All the signs were there that I was losing my mind. Still I marched on. The next morning I was on a plane for my last stop, Boston.

If there were party nights, television appearances, dates, Hamptons weekends, hobnobbing with celebrities, and an address book filled with an ever-changing roster of women, there was another, hidden part of my life. I may leave the impression that I was always on my way to or from somewhere or something, with someone fabulous, but there were many more times that I felt overwhelmingly alone and lost. Had an anthropologist made even a cursory examination of the contents of my nightstand, he would have easily unearthed a truer picture of my life. On its polished mahogany top, next to a digital clock, whose face I stared at too many nights as one

As a last resort, I would stroll over to Benchley's, a bar on a corner of Hudson and Tenth, and drink away the evening, my standards for companionship going down as my alcohol level rose. If my barstool perch at Benchley's proved not the best vantage point, there were always the Village streets. It was only later in my life that I would come to appreciate the searing wisdom of the Psalms, but how accurately Psalm 88 applied to me on those nights:

> Friend and neighbor you have taken away
> My one companion is darkness

I walked about the Village in darkness, not so fast that I seemed in a hurry to get somewhere, nor so slowly that I looked like someone you wanted to avoid. On my rounds, women with children, older women, or very young girls could pass without my even registering them. My brain was disciplined, my eyes tightly focused. Yet if I were to say I was just looking for sex, I would be lying. That was the path sometimes taken, but this kind of sex was a dead end, and by now I knew it. If I could have seen more clearly then, I would have realized I was looking for so much more. Not for another diversion, another playmate in New York's sexual sandbox, but for that "other half" that Plato said every human being seeks. I was aching to meet someone with whom I shared true common ground, my old values, not these that I seemed not only to embrace but to embody. I wanted to sit over an espresso at Le Figaro, that wonderful café at MacDougal and Bleecker, and talk about Thomas Merton or Charles de Foucauld. I wanted to be with someone who might not have totally understood, but would have some inkling why I had started CHIPS and lived at 80 Winthrop. Someone who could talk about God without that sanctimonious, bloodless tone that J.C. was so good at. Someone who knew that life was an awful rowing toward God and that sometimes your boat simply got swamped. I wanted someone to see through this silly mask I was wearing, rip it off in fact, and reveal the person beneath: a person who still had at least the potential to be good and decent and kind. A person with whom she wanted to share not just a bed, but a life.

Out of the shadows of the side streets I would come, drawn to the main streets and traffic like a moth seeking the light of a flame. Along Bleecker or West Eighth Street or Sixth Avenue, lights from the businesses tantalizingly illuminated the faces of fast-walking Village women as I came toward them. In those precious few seconds, over and over again, I was looking for any sign—the arch of an eyebrow; a certain sway of the hip; thrown-back, confident shoulders; the gentle swell of breasts, large

St. Joseph's was one of the mother churches of New York, built in 1833 in the midst of a bustling and very Protestant neighborhood, a symbol that Catholicism and immigrant Catholics might also have a place in the city. It was here in 1918 that another weary pilgrim came to exactly the spot where I was standing. Dorothy Day's life was also a mess. A tortured love affair was finally over, but she was pregnant. Almost without thinking, she had an abortion. She felt her life was meaningless, aimless. But beyond those tall, white, wooden doors that shone so brilliantly on this darkened stretch of Sixth Avenue, she found peace. I had been inside St. Joseph's a few times, for Mass. That night I felt the overpowering need to sit in one of those straight-backed pews and take in the clean, almost Puritan lines of the church. Yes, that was exactly what I had to do. Could I once again know the mysterious God whose presence I felt so palpably in such different ways in St. Benedict's in Cleveland, the dental school chapel in Milwaukee, the elegant St. Peter's in Rome, the prosaic auditorium of Brooklyn's St. Francis Xavier? I needed to know that the prodigal son could come home again, even after all he had done.

Step by tentative step, as if the roar of angry God—a God refusing to buy my facile arguments or petty rationalizations—could erupt at any moment, I came closer. Soon I was bathed in the glow of that light. Above the large doors was a forlorn statue of St. Joseph, his shoulders encrusted with the city's dirt and pigeon droppings, his eyes cast down. He looked so weary from watching over this busy street. He knew the secrets of all of us who passed by. The doors beneath this good and patient man were a brilliant white, beckoning, no more than a few yards away. I reached to open the wrought-iron gate. I didn't know how to pray anymore. I didn't know what to pray for. What would I do inside? I just needed a place to rest, a place to calm my mind so that I could get off the treadmill of my life. My hand closed around the cold metal, and I pulled.

The gate was locked.

My salvation was not going to come merely on the strength of an emotional, spur-of-the-moment midnight plea.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and headed back up Sixth Avenue toward the apartment. When I got to 45 West Tenth, I looked up at the lights of my own building. There he stood, like a statue in the second-floor window, bathed in his own soft glow. I never knew his name, but he was legendary in the building. Each night he took up his post, bare-chested and with a towel draped around his hips, waving to any man with whom he could make eye contact. To come up and see him. He waved to me, moving closer to the window. His bulging towel pressed against the windowpane.

A blast of choking, acrid car exhaust roiled out from a rotted, rattling muffler on a rusted and graffiti-covered truck that sped by. My eyes burned, and my nasal passages recoiled. The air was cool that morning, but heavy with humidity and with the odor of every Szechwan dish, dry cleaner load, pizza, and leftover beer of the night before. Leftover smells for a leftover man. For an instant, I held my breath as if I could escape. I ducked my face inside my new London Fog trench coat. The sweet and gentle aroma of my Guerlain Vetiver was so graciously and solicitously there to meet me, only to be enfolded in turn by the redolence of her Hermès. These almost supernatural smells could not have been wrung from mere buds or flowers. Once again, I had fended off the unpleasantness of the present moment.

But deeper, deeper within, there was still myself. Rising up like vengeance from hell to overwhelm these venal vapors, it came: the sourness of her own lower body and my own. I jerked my head out of the supposed sanctuary of my trench coat. I put my hand to my mouth as if someone were about to hit me. I walked faster now. The clotted slime of the gutter, held at bay in the cooler night air, was quickly warming, producing gagging fumes. I walked still faster, trying to outrun the decaying smell of my dying soul.

While I was in Boston for my final stop on the *Six American Families* publicity tour, the Westinghouse station's publicity director, Linda Comstock, noting that I was single, said, "I've got someone you've absolutely got to meet back in New York. The perfect girl for you." I penciled in the name. The following week, I followed up to find that Cathy George was a gorgeous, neurotic, Japanese-Jewish woman who obviously was looking for a much bigger and richer catch than I (and which eventually would be hers). We went out a few times and then lost touch. I was surprised in October 1978 to get a call from her, inviting me to a Halloween party at her East Side apartment.

"I've got the perfect girl for you; do try to make it," she said.

"Didn't I hear this before? About you?"

"Hush. Just come; you'll see. This is the one for you."

I dutifully penciled in time and date—without a name. Cathy had failed to tell me who this perfect girl was.

my silence was short lived when she asked if anything was wrong. After all, she had had a great time; hadn't I? Wasn't this your crowd, writers and all, she asked?

"Look, you were all over him, all over everybody at the party, for God's sake. Putting your hand on his arm. Looking up with that coquettish little look. I'm not blind!" I was screaming.

"I just stand close to people when I talk. I'm animated; what do you want me to do? Go on a heavy dose of Valium?"

"I thought you came with me—"

"And I think I left with you. Is this pure jealousy or pure craziness?"

I was walking down Madison Avenue at a furious pace, with an incredulous "perfect woman" trailing in my wake. Jealous? Mr. No Commitment, the Urban Casanova? Mr. "I Have My Space and You Have Yours and Let's Keep It That Way?" Jealous?

"Well, what is it? We'd better settle this right now."

I turned. I don't know what possessed me. "I'll settle it. I'll settle it!" I picked up the perfect woman, slung her over my shoulder, and dumped her butt-first into the yawning maw of a huge metal mesh trash can on the corner of East Sixty-second Street.

Tracy was laughing uproariously. She thought it was perfectly hilarious that I could be jealous—not casually, a few angry words jealous—but so jealous that I would be driven to unceremoniously dump her into a fifty-five-gallon, three-cubic-foot Department of Sanitation waste receptacle. She had only known me for a matter of days, but, as I now realize, she knew me better than I knew myself. For who was I accusing of infidelity but myself? Of practicing the art of "instant intimacy," that up-close and personal way of talking that seductively focused so intently on the other? That physical closeness that promised more? She was innocent. I wasn't.

When I look back over the record of those years—the photos I took, the random scribbles on scraps of paper, diary notes, the two- and three-page reflections I wrote at the worst as well as the best times—it's a wonder that things turned out as they did. God's grace was surrounding me, the gracious and forgiving God whom I had run from and pushed to the margins of my life, the God who, I would only later *begin* to understand, was at work in his own quirky and mysterious ways.

The next few months were the happiest and most agonizing of my life since I had become a single man. Dinners over sake and teri maki at the Japanese Garden off Bleecker, long walks around Washington Square park, coffee and cannolis at Ferrara's in Little Italy, drives to Westchester County, snatching the tallest and most perfect cattails from the roadside of the New York Thruway as cars buzzed by. Watching that wonderful

over twenty people. Jacques was his usual ebullient self: "O, my Tra-cee, *ma chère,* you are so beau-ti-ful! And Paaaul, the most famous writer, our good companion who means so much to us." Tracy gamely sat midtable and was having a heady discussion with a very distinguished man wearing an ascot—only slightly stained and tattered along the edges—about some item currently in the news, when he suddenly rejoined, "Well, before the march to Atlanta when I was on General Sherman's staff, he made it absolutely clear to us . . ." I tried to change the subject, or at least bring the conversation up a century. About this time we heard a strange, liquid sound, as if a pipe had sprung a leak. Tracy instinctively glanced toward the kitchen. Then, following the sound, she looked into the living room where the Professor was ensconced in his Barcalounger, and saw him unceremoniously peeing into a tall pineapple can, which beautifully amplified the sound. I leaped up from the table, but then stood there, hands at my side. What was I going to do: stop him?

She looked at me, I at her. Wordlessly she transmitted, *It's okay, buddy. I think I understand.*

We went on with our fancy parties, but that night at Jacques' marked one of those defining moments when all pretenses are wiped away, and either you walk away or grow closer.

With my life now so much in the open, Tracy, guileless by nature, had nothing to hide. She told me more about her early life, finding liquor bottles and making excuses when Mom "wasn't feeling well," wild adolescent years of drinking and drugs, a feeble suicide attempt, a nervous breakdown. One of the highlights of her youthful adventures was the night she ran away from home and showed up at the front gate of the forbidding compound of the Maryknoll fathers and sisters near the Kips' house in Ossining. She was desperately unhappy being bounced between her alcoholic mother and her father, who had remarried and was starting another family. She was ready to join, she assured the nun who answered the door. She might have been only ten years old and an Episcopalian, but she was sure God wanted her to be a Maryknoll nun. The kindly woman took her in and, instead of a habit, gave her a tuna fish sandwich and, with Tracy's permission, called her worried mother. It was such a wonderful story, I left my own remembrance of the gaunt Maryknoll priest for another day.

I know. I had found the perfect woman. So what did I do? I tried my best to screw it up. We would date for weeks, seeing each other daily, and then I would run away, with some phony excuse, just so I could go back out to the playground and act the petulant, testosterone-infused adolescent. Then, quickly realizing that the life I was once again living was

Bridge that day had certainly been quite different, she the WASP only child, I the Catholic from a large ethnic family, but, setting all the window dressing aside, we were alike in the things that really mattered.

If I am to be totally honest, it came down to this: married life seemed too *ordinary*.

I was not stupid enough to fail to realize that even though my playboy life might have a great present, there was no future. I wanted something else for my life. But to be a husband, Joe Husband? To have children, be a father? "Hey Dad, we're home." No drumroll in the background of that kind of life. I could just hear the dissonant anthem of the suburbs and a station wagon door slamming shut. No, no, not me.

I wanted more out of my life. I wanted to respond to a call, something impossible that demanded my every breath, my every waking hour. Something that would bring out the best in me. I wanted to be a hero—or, better put, to live heroically. The world did not have to take notice, but I wanted to know I had been measured to the highest standard. Even as we were breaking up, and even as I was about to descend even further into hell, I was thinking such idealistic thoughts. Churning deep within me was the yearning to feel once again that sensation I first knew kneeling on the grate on Forest Avenue. That presence which came to me in the dank dental school basement chapel at Marquette. The eyes of Dorothy Day searing the skin right off my face, vaporizing all the detritus that made up the external me, leaving behind a true human being. The art, the practice, the power of being *present*.

I didn't want much, just that perfect calling that would once and for all, like a gavel pounding down, settle everything.

Implicit in our relationship "not working out" was that Tracy would have to move out. I helped her find an apartment, over near Abington Square, more expensive and tiny in comparison to her place on Jane Street. Where she used to have a huge bedroom, she now would sleep on a day bed in the cramped living room. No fireplace. Her spacious kitchen was replaced by one ideal for the single woman, as only one person could safely fit in it. In New York, further grounds for murder. I moved her into 229 West Twelfth, got rid of the dog, and, quickly putting aside all those deep thoughts about the great calling, went back to my old ways.

If marijuana and alcohol were once enough to dull my mind and skew my judgment, they were no longer sufficient. Cocaine? Sure, why not? Pills? What's in it? Right, right, not to worry; let's go. One woman at a time? Why not two? Consider the possibilities. I was spiraling—plummeting—downward into my self-made hell. *Six American Families* had received outstanding reviews in newspapers and magazines across the country.

to lunch, avoiding the Bean Sprout and other scenes of other massacres, choosing a small bistro that had just opened on Eighth Street. I had shocked this woman with my snap decisions and masquerades so many times, but this would be, to say the least, unexpected. "Tracy, I'm subletting the apartment. I'm going to live as a hermit near a Trappist monastery up in Massachusetts. I . . . I think I have a monastic calling."

She looked at me carefully, as if to make sure voice, face, and content matched. "So you think you have a monastic vocation?" Her voice was drained of any emotion. "Are you nuts?"

"I didn't say I *did*. But I have to find out. If I don't, I'm going to go through my life always wondering. I've talked about this for twenty years, and, well, I have to see."

Her face hardened. "You keep your monasticism to yourself, Mr. Paul Wilkes. I was in this for another M word; they call it 'marriage,' strange and conventional as that might sound." She crumpled her napkin into a ball and threw it on the table, then stood up abruptly. "Marriage, get it? When you're serious about marriage, come back with a blood test and an engagement ring. Until then, buddy," and now she was bitter, "you're dead to me."