

Hume in the Fifties

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They will be coming by soon now. People line the highway on both sides. It's a narrow, two-lane highway bordered for short distances by shallow red-clay ditches that are dry and brittle this time of year—it has not rained here for weeks but the course we understand is in perfect condition. The road's margins will accommodate only a small crowd but that's all there is—not large enough for small children to be hoisted to their fathers' shoulders. What could they want to see? Two old people waving from the dark interior of a long black car? There are policemen on motorcycles and flashing lights but we're not exactly bumpkins, and the narrow curving highway does yield a wreck with ambulances and police cars every once in a while. They—the old couple—might not be waving either. You really can't see them, there's no way to be sure they're in there at all. But we're all here anyway. Except Father who doesn't come on principle. The principle is unspecified but it has to do with the unreality of politicians. The rest are here, the people from the neighborhood, some I know and some I don't. Amazing that even in such a small collection of houses there can live so many unfamiliar faces. (This is the Fifties. Unfamiliarity of neighbor isn't supposed to exist yet.) I know Mother and Gran, who came out thinking some unnamed movie star is visiting the city seeking escape from an unspecified scandal. You can tell her it's Ike and Mamie but she won't believe you. When Mother complains about Father's lack of patriotism, or curiosity, or simple historical awareness, Gran just looks at her daughter as if she had given birth to a loon. Later she is just as certain and uncomprehending of the other President and his wife passing through the people-lined streets of Dallas. As she watched the news clips over and over she kept repeating, "Why, they shouldn't do that," as if there had been a breach of etiquette.

Mother is wearing a blue polka dot dress and is standing beside me. Her shoulders and arms are bare and freckled and she smells of cinnamon. The smell is probably imaginary because freckles for me always conjure the smell of cinnamon. They do this because since an early age, earlier than the early age of this moment, I've cried long and hard over my own freckled skin and my father has created fantasy after fantasy to make palatable this unbearable condition. ("Pure silliness!" Gran said. "Doesn't he know he's a boy, Will?" she asked my father as if she suspected he had failed to explain one of the facts of life to me, namely, that silliness is a domain reserved for freckled girls.) My father is here in the smell of my mother's freckles, a romantic notion that wouldn't alleviate my mother's suffering one iota if I were to reveal it to her. Her suffering usually takes one of two forms and when she looks down at me and bravely raises the freckled corners of her bright red mouth like a Christmas bow being smartly pulled tight, I know that at this moment she's suffering wistfulness. Wistfulness is for her my father's current manifestation as certainly as for me he is the smell of cinnamon coming off her bare shoulders. When she looks down and pats my shoulder and brushes my hair straight across my brow and takes the glasses from my face, polishing one lens then the other in the pleats of her dress, and puts the glasses back in place, she is minutely adjusting the course of the tiny vessel she and my father launched which is every day frighteningly approaching the waywardness of its male progenitor. Her other emotion is anger but the clear day and light breeze that are outriders of the historic moment have suppressed that.

Across the way, directly opposite us, are my sisters, April and June. (We are all, the three of us, named for months of the year; I am Gus, for August, which even at this age I know could be much worse—I might have been born in December or February. My parents had planned a large family which ended in us three. They had, Gran said, intended to keep up with us by employing the names of the months, the theory being that this limited the possibilities of confusion at least a fraction.) April is seventeen, the oldest, and leaning her whole being at the moment into the muscular bare side of Randy Perlin, her current boyfriend and All-State running back. Her being, in its physical aura, is dark-skinned, delicately-boned and totally anomalous to its kin. Spiritually it is gay and quick and without apparent depth. In truth, her nature is penetrating in the ways of getting its desires. Which is what keeps boys like Randy Perlin interested beyond their understanding.

June is standing next to and slightly behind April. She is

resting her chin on the back of her hand, the top half of her body slouching forward so that the elbow supporting the hand which supports the chin rides into the soft folds of her stomach. It is impossible when looking at June not to assemble her in your mind in this fashion, arranging the pale girl into a structure of angled, awkward and precarious parts. It is absolutely clear to everybody that if we don't perform this operation, if we don't keep mentally assembling and reassembling June, she will collapse. As if to prove my observation, June fans a fly and grazes the head of the little boy, Tim Winton, who's standing in front of her. Grazed, notoriously pugnacious Tim turns and plants his sneaker into June's shin. The sneaker seems to be stuck there, on June's leg, but it is only an illusion caused by the rapidity with which Tim kicks her. It almost looks as if he's trying to unstick himself rather than pound her flesh. This is all over very quickly and unsurprisingly to June, who settles onto the grass to examine her leg, while Tim cuts through the crowd, thinking he's made a bigger impression than he has. Knowing June better would have saved Tim Winton his expense of energy.

This scene came back to me with such force today that it brought with it Tim Winton's name. Before this evening, his name had been lost to me, as had his subsequent history which involved ever more trouble the older he got and ended in Vietnam, a thing I'm sad to say I had also forgotten. But that isn't the point of this story. The point here is that while watching the evening news, finishing my first drink, I saw a man dive through the air at three thousand feet and save a woman's life—well I imagined from the report if not actually saw. This was one of those stories tacked onto the end of the half-hour of death, stocks and corruption that is, I'm sure, supposed to work some alchemical magic on what's preceded it. And in a strange, unanticipated way it did.

A group of weekend skydivers had just left their plane when a man and woman collided. The man regained control of his chute and managed to get it open, suffering when he landed only a broken leg. The woman was left unconscious by the collision. She would certainly die instantly on impact with the ground. But the group's instructor, a veteran of fifteen hundred jumps, saw the accident. Immediately he tucked in his arms and dived—he felt like a bullet, he said later—straight for the helpless woman. With only seconds to spare he intercepted her and managed to pull the lever that opened her chute. Rather than death, she suffered recoverable injuries. Her rescuer was a handsome young fellow who possessed all of the

dash and modesty of a film star who's performed some real heroism that pales any he's acted on the screen. The fellow looked as much like my father as any picture or memory I have of him, even down to the apparently absent-minded casualness of the gestures he used to describe his unbelievable deed.

Now June is just regaining her feet in her characteristically wobbly fashion from the spot of grass by the highway where she's been calmly examining the damage inflicted by Tim's kick. Still absorbed in her bruised shin, half-crouching, she stumbles into the road. Her aim, my guess is, is to get to Gran who will look at her leg and verify, as Gran does about everything not involving scandal, that no harm's been done, it's all extremely silly. June is in the middle of the road as the first motorcycle rounds the curve. It is coming much faster than it usually does when leading the motorcade. The reason that it is coming faster is that it is alone. The motorcade is delayed. Ike and Mamie have not even landed at the airport yet.

Just before the motorcycle can cut the girl down, a figure slices through the crowd, passes between Mother and me—dislodging my glasses and breaking a lens—and tackles the girl, rolling with her body tightly coiled around his own over the asphalt, through the shoulder of the road and down into the dry ditch. Before he stands, blinking blindly into the sun and brushing the red clay from his torn white shirt, I think he is one of the unfamiliar men who've been standing, waiting behind us. But it is of course Father.

Later, standing in a circle of reporters, wearing the torn white shirt as if it might have been inherited from Errol Flynn, Father says he had been sitting at his desk, working on Hume's notion that as there is only one kind of cause so there is only one kind of necessity and growing increasingly irritated with the whole thing. (A reporter asks, Whom? and it takes five minutes for the interview to get back on track.) Mother is trembling and watching a medic apply iodine to June's scratches, which she suffers as stoically as Tim's pounding sneakers. April has attracted the attention of a young reporter, for whom she is filling in details of Father's biography; and Gran and I sit on a bank of fragrant, freshly mowed grass, mowed in honor of Ike and Mamie. Absently running a hand through his long unruly hair, Father says that Hume's denial of any real distinction between physical and moral necessity struck him as so totally absurd—he shakes his head and lifts a hand, welcoming the shared consternation of his audience—he left his desk and

wandered down to the highway where he arrived just in time to save his daughter's life.

Well, now I will tell you the rest, what this means. It means that after that afternoon in the Fifties it became known to us without being clearly known—known to Mother, Father, April, me and even to June and Gran—that the events of that day had turned us from a collection of minor, related, individually propelled eccentrics—that is, merely blood-tied individuals—into a family, people caught up by more than the accident of birth into the web of each other's destiny. I won't say that it meant any of us drastically changed; except possibly in the ways a room changes after a frightened bird flies through the window during supper and bangs itself into a wall or two before finding its way out again—a curious slippage from the norm that's buzzed over briefly and quickly forgotten. In other words, something passed into and something else passed out of Mother. A little ether maybe that changed the proportion of anger and wistfulness and created a concoction a little closer to contentment. It was almost nothing that noticeable, however. Father now paid us all a little more mind, breaking off a portion he'd previously fed Locke, Descartes or Hume, so that we risked a milder, more humorous annoyance when we interrupted him. Gran was largely unmoved, while April, June and I floated along through the years until more useful experience rounded off our sharp edges and smoothed us out into the carpentered innocence of adulthood. I don't think any of us would have identified that afternoon as the moment the tide of our lives changed. And we would have been right not to.

But I will also say this. That while I will not claim a link between a saved skydiver yesterday and a saved little girl thirty years ago and a good-natured skeptic two-hundred years ago, I will claim that when I pick up this phone and dial this number a bell will ring in my wife's house on the opposite coast and my daughter will pick up the receiver as she always does, silencing the bell, and that given my daughter's gentle, stoical tolerance she inherited from her Aunt June and the willful cleverness she got from her Aunt April, she will together with me convince her honey-skinned, practical-minded mother that not to recognize necessity when it calls is just plain dumb and virtually impossible. I will just say this and then . . . Hello, my darling May.□