This Polaroid was taken at the appropriately named Rocky Point Beach, Long Island, July 1971. I'm in the circle of three with my brother and sister just off to the left, stepping gingerly over crabs and sharp rocks, while my mother and youngest sister, in the lower right of the photo, avoid the obvious perils.

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BLUEFISH, SOUTH OF PLYMOUTH

R. Clifton Spargo

I

He lived in a small cottage on a promontory that sticks out not boldly, but just enough to conjure the incoming sea into an East Coast scene one might send as a postcard. Although the house was one of several in a cul-de-sac, it was as a result of the long driveway, a rocky path resembling the beaches of the Massachusetts shore, that you arrived finally at a feeling of seclusion. It was the kind of place that would seem romantic if you were with a woman you loved. What the three of us, Pete and myself, two college kids of twenty, and Mr. Behring, an old friend of my dad's whom I'd known since my early adolescence, were doing here—well, that had something to do with the fact that Mr. Behring was recently widowed, and something also to do with my mother's fear of losing track of Peter and me in the three weeks we were to be gone.

Pete and I were on a suburbanized version of a Kerouac road trip, using as our excuse a tour of universities to which we might be headed for graduate school; but instead of heading into the mythic and western unknown, we'd headed toward the well-worn terrain of the East Coast. Actually, Pete had never before been East, whereas I'd been raised here until the sixth grade. Everything Pete was seeing for the first time I viewed retrospectively, as if from a cordial distance. No doubt Pete benefited from the fact that my experiments with nostalgia were few. I was careful with my past, pursuing it cautiously

Glimmer Train Stories, Issue 54, Spring 2005

and selectively, believing it to be something precious that might be broken irreparably.

Before our trip, I'd scheduled a visit with a childhood friend from Long Island named Eric Z. whom I hadn't seen for almost ten years. Eric had forgotten the time of our arrival and his sister let us in to spend an awkward half-hour waiting for him. Of Eric's lateness, Pete remarked, "He has this, at least, in common with you."

But that was to be all. In fact I cannot imagine a person with whom I had less in common as a young adult than Eric. We had exhausted every possible topic in less than fifteen minutes. Eric had never been a great conversationalist, too absorbed or pained by himself to tolerate much of what someone else had to say, falling instead into monologic tales that seemed both nervous and rehearsed. What had recommended him most to me were his adventurous spirit and his alterity: he was a mischievous and lazy student from a wealthy Old Setauket family, and I was the lower middle-class kid spurred on by his parents to every success, from straight A's to basketball, from prizes in declamation contests to first violin in the school orchestra. Although I myself cared nothing for fishing—having once caught a single fish on a line cast by my uncle—I had planned during the ride over to ask Eric about fishing because it was something he knew a lot about and an interest he shared with Pete.

For clearly Pete was part of the problem. Eric could not pretend to care about our former friendship with my present friend there before him. There was no room for him in the intimacy between two college buddies road-tripping together, no place to stake his claim on my heart's former loyalties, and I was already bored and ready to deny him. Abandoning my plans for conversation, I found myself preferring escape and welcoming Pete's observation in the car not more than an hour later—"I guess that was a long time ago."

If I drove in secret to my old house on the next night, it was because I realized I could no longer subject Pete to my remembrances. Strathmore Village, in contrast to Eric's Old Setauket, was one of those predictable, suburban developments with five variations on three houses: the one-level ranch, the Brady Bunch split level, and the more popular and upstanding square two-story colonial. I found the

turn-in without event. There was a little guard house at the entrance, absurdly weather-beaten, empty now as it had been when we had first moved into the newly opened development. My childhood memories predicting a much larger main drag, I drove by my old house before realizing I was at the end of the street. Returning, I parked the car in front of my diminished home, now a different color and with a fenced-in backyard. Though I had imagined sneaking through the backyard to see the house from the field that ran behind it, as I had seen it so often as a child, I remained in the car, my only perspective that of an adult stranger. And I thought suddenly that if my mom had looked out the window, she would have worried about the strange young man in the parked car, as she guarded her children and awaited her working-late husband.

So here we were ten miles south of Plymouth, or forty south of Boston and the more likely adventures of a city, making yet another familiar stopover. The fact was I'd only won the use of my parents' car and this indulgent time by consenting to visit roughly half the population of the East Coast: my two grandmothers, a bevy of aunts and great-aunts, several cousins and friends of the family, a string of my mother's friends from childhood, and, finally, the only suggestion from my father (although my mom had beaten him to it)—Mr. Behring. She said, "Rich would enjoy the company, and you'll like staying with him. He's practically like a college kid now, living the life of a bachelor in that cottage on the ocean." As she'd spoken, I knew she was worried about him, believing that few men could manage their lives without women, even as she knew—because the men passed on early in my family—that women could do just fine without men. "I'm sure his place is a mess," she said as we loaded up the car, and then she smiled at Pete, "but you boys are used to that." In her eyes, our college sloth recommended us as fit companions for Mr. Behring. We were just what he needed.

When we arrived, the cottage was not nearly as messy as my mother would have liked to imagine, but it gave the impression nevertheless of disarray. It was really just a matter of small things with which he could

not be bothered, such as putting a box of pretzels in the cabinet, or hanging a jacket in the closet, or arranging the papers on the desk; if you multiply such details, you arrive at what my mother would call a mess. I would not have called it a mess. I was used to the pure chaos of clothes tossed on the floor, shirts tried on but passed over for other shirts on top of shirts worn once and briefly, on top of the truly dirty shirts, and books strewn over the bed and desk, and paper (unopened mail, drafts of essays, notices from organizations), and finally the accruing dirt, which would not bother me for another week or two. Sure, Mr. Behring's place could have used some straightening, but it mostly looked like he didn't much care. Then again, he had never been one to let on how much he cared about anything. As my dad would have said, it was just hard to know with Rich.

II

Mr. Behring's driving is an event; it calls for attention—of other drivers who must try to predict his all-over-the-road unpredictability, of passengers who must anticipate the turns and jerks where none seems necessary and who must brace our bodies or wedge them into the right-angle security of seat and door, of the men in orange vests who work on roads and have always more to do because he is on the curb again tearing up the concrete, even of the people who sit behind desks and give out certificates for safe driving. I have heard my father rail about how they give those safe-driver certificates to men like Rich, who is the goddamned worst driver—"You just can't *try* to be that bad!"—one could ever imagine.

And my dad means, first of all, that he hates cops and judges and bureaucrats, all the people who pull him over and charge him and threaten to take away his license when he inevitably speeds, which he does because he is a salesman covering his territories—first the Northwest, later the greater D.C., New York, and Chicago areas—with an ambition built upon a wife and four kids who happened as soon as he was married, scaring him into success. In a traffic class for speeders, they once tried to convince my father that speeding does not pay, that it did not save him time. He told them that though he wasn't much good

at math, it seemed to him if he had to go sixty-five through the great empty roads of Oregon and Montana to get to a town four hundred miles away, instead of doing eighty-five to ninety, he bet he was losing a couple of hours in the deal, which was both money and sleep.

My dad also means he likes driving fast and resents being told he cannot (though I suspect he rather likes the thrill of breaking the law and avoiding cops); and he is certain, no matter how fast he drives, that he has driven so much and in the worst of conditions—including Oregon rains, Montana hail, Chicago blizzards, even a Boise, Idaho earthquake—that he is a more skilled and therefore safer driver than most of those people on the road to whom they give certificates for not speeding and never going anywhere.

But mostly when he carries on about Mr. Behring's driving he means that sometimes Rich just scares him: "The man's mind disappears, Carter. I love the guy but I'd rather drive on five martinis than let that clown take the wheel three weeks sober."

Pete is profoundly doubtful that we will ever arrive at the supermarket. He does not understand Mr. Behring as I do, and so cannot know that the man's obvious lack of method has never prevented him. Somehow he arrives at supermarkets; builds me a room in the basement of my parents' house by showing up on occasional Saturday mornings, often when I have plans, putting me to work on one part of the room, "Now you sand this," and then the other end, as the middle step remains absent from my point of view, buried beneath the recesses of his wild, uncleaned early-Saturday hair. Somehow he sinks thirty-five-foot putts left-handed—all his other strokes on the tee and fairway and mostly in the rough are right-handed—with a putter that looks like a mallet ("He made it himself," my dad explains. "It's a stick and a metal weight tied together like some prehistoric weapon from *The Flintstones*. If the PGA got hold of it, they'd have to disqualify him out of pure embarrassment"); and always these shots come at the precise moment that his opponents and my father, usually his partner, have written him off for dead. Then four holes later he throws the momentum back by scoring a seven on a par three.

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Inside the supermarket he is hard to keep pace with, his big strides not so much the problem as his constant misdirections—a bolt toward one item (beer, his insistence on an East Coast brand; choice: Rolling Rock), a pause, now the pursuit of another path, partly retrograded but ending somewhere new, before another item (lobsters and clams, no worry about regional authenticity here; choice: the best, according to his back and forth with the boy behind the counter, who knows even less than Mr. Behring about what constitutes good lobster), and then he is again retracing our previous steps to arrive at the snacks aisle, which is, as in most supermarkets, near the beverage aisle, where we minutes ago found the beer.

"Potato chips, we have to have Cape Cod Potato Chips, best potato chips in the world!" Decrying implicitly the mediocre potato chips of the Midwest, he snatches a bag of chips. "I bet you guys have never had these. Well they're the best chips, made somewhere around here," he says, and skims the back of a bag, perhaps hoping to learn where they are made (but if he finds out, he does not let on). He replaces the bag on the shelf. "You ever had Cape Cod chips, Pete?" Pete says he has not. "Well, you've got to have these then," and Mr. Behring snatches up another bag, different from the one he surveyed for secret information.

Mr. Behring is indulging regional idiosyncrasies, letting the loyalty to those roughly thirty-five years lived on the East Coast—where he had grown up, buried his father, met and married his wife, fathered and raised two children (another one lost to miscarriage)—compete with the Midwest, where they had spent less than ten years and his wife had become ill before their return to the East. The East Coast had won, despite the fact—or maybe because of the fact—she had died here. At heart I understood Mr. Behring's regional loyalties, and when we had moved in the fall of my sixth-grade year from Long Island to Chicago, I measured the change most overtly by items such as potato chips and salad dressing, lamenting the unavailability of Wise, not Cape Cod, potato chips, and with my entire family demanding, against the absence of a Midwestern supplier, Ken's Italian salad dressing. Ken's was a token of family solidarity, and my parents would plot the suc-

cessful importation of the dressing—my father often returning from a business trip to New York with a suitcase full of Ken's, each bottle wrapped carefully in a stolen hotel towel, or my grandparents arriving by car from Connecticut with a crate full of the valuable bottles. Or, in the most desperate of situations when the supply was completely diminished, we would have it mailed to us, the cost of packaging and delivery for such first-class, fragile material adding to the value and somehow, I think, the taste of the precious dressing.

Just now Mr. Behring is half a store ahead of us. Pete and I are waiting, as it so happens, near the salad-dressing aisle. We have decided to conserve energy by hanging back, since Mr. Behring is sure to grab some item and remember that he needs another on the opposite side of the store, where we have been only moments before. But he is on to us. "Come on, guys, keep up, you have to help me remember what else we need. Don't worry, we're done with that half of the store." It is a promise he breaks instantly. "Except for horseradish, I forgot horseradish, we need to make cocktail sauce for the clams. What else goes in cocktail sauce, Carter?"

"Well, you need ketchup and chili sauce." I had made cocktail sauce with my father and remembered his careful laboring over the proportion of ketchup to chili sauce.

"Chili sauce, who ever heard of putting chili sauce in cocktail sauce?" He shrugs off the suggestion. "You're right about ketchup and I probably don't have any. But chili sauce? Who taught you to make cocktail sauce?" When I assure him that it is my father's recipe and quite excellent, really, better than any I've ever had in a restaurant, he says, "Your dad, you sure?"—not wanting to contradict my father, even in his absence. For Mr. Behring is loyal. Still, his loyalty endures only so long. "Well, maybe Mike does put chili sauce in it," he muses, "I could almost believe that. But whoever heard of it? We'll do it my way."

I find myself bartering for my father's recipe, for Worcestershire sauce, Tabasco, and lemon, for as many of my father's secret ingredients as I can preserve. It is not just my belief that my father has a way of doing certain things better than other men—like making cocktail sauce, cooking steaks on the grill, or putting together a sharp suit with the

perfect tie—but that Mr. Behring has odd tastes and habits and I am afraid I might not like the concoction he comes up with.

"You're kidding, right?" Mr. Behring says. "Do we need anything else? Pete, you've been quiet. Steaks, how about steaks?"

I have already started worrying about the cost because I know Mr. Behring, and so also know that he will not let us pay or even split it with him, that when I pull out my wallet and Pete his and we try to pay the woman at the register, he will laugh (as in fact he does) and push our arms down and thrust a wad of crumpled-up bills from his pocket into the young woman's hands. So I suggest we might pass on steaks, that we have enough food already; but he will not hear of it, we have to have steaks.

Pete says of Mr. Behring, "He's *ubatz*. I thought we would die in that car. How many times did we hit the curb? His saying, 'See what you made me do' every time he hits a curb or forgets ketchup. How long are we supposed to be here?"

"Why? You want to cut out early?"

"No, he's a friend of your dad's—no, I was just trying to figure my chances of surviving until we leave for the Cape."

Just then Mr. Behring enters. He had been standing with binoculars at the far end of his front lawn, where it becomes rock and drops off severely toward the beach. Taking advantage of the evening's last light to look as far out over the surface of the ocean as he could, he seemed to be waiting for someone or something, waiting, now that I think of it, with binoculars in hand, just as he had been that afternoon we arrived. Wherever it is those extended eyes would take him, he has given up the search for the night.

"Too dark to see much now," he says, "but I'd hate to miss 'em."

You can tell Pete is almost afraid to ask, but he does. "Miss who?"

"You don't know?" Mr. Behring says. "Hey Carter, toss me a beer. A Rolling Rock, real East Coast beer, not like all that crap made in Milwaukee and St. Louis."

Mr. Behring catches the beer too close to his ear and walks across the room to where I am sitting to grab the bottle opener. Perhaps it

is the bottle opener that convinces him this is a good beer, since the lack of the twist top places Rolling Rock in the company of many fine imports. "You mean to tell me," he begins again, "you guys don't know what time of year it is?"

"August?"

"Sure, and what happens off the coast during August? What can you see if you're looking?"

"Sharks maybe?" I say, thinking that might be worth a look.

"Sharks, come on. If sharks get in the way of this, they'll be torn up."

Pete says it must be whales then, but Mr. Behring laughs some more. "What then?" Pete demands.

"Bluefish."

Pete is muttering something about who ever heard of bluefish eating sharks when Mr. Behring walks back into the room from the kitchen. "Water's boiling for our lobsters, boys. Carter, why don't you go check that fire while I set Pete straight about bluefish. Pass the chips first."

"We're out," I am sorry to tell him.

"Out," he laments, "how could we be out." Then a thought takes hold of him. "But of course we're out, how could you guys let me get only one bag of Cape Cod chips? Best chips in the world, didn't I tell you you'd love 'em? Of course we'd run out."

"We didn't really have time to think about it," Pete declares, "because by the time we put them in the shopping cart you were on aisle ninety-eight."

"Still, Pete," Mr. Behring says resignedly, "how could you let us get only one bag of chips?"

III

The second day Pete and I travel up to Boston in the late morning. Mr. Behring has some calls to make, but he has asked us to meet him back in Plymouth that evening. Our Celebrity begins overheating for the fourth time on the trip, this time in downtown Boston. Despite my attempts to negotiate a compromise with the engine by cranking

the car's heater, the traffic is heavy enough to make our final overheating inevitable. We leave the car, its white body speckled with dried dirt and some tar from a stretch of Ohio roadwork. The engine sighs exhaustedly with steam and its troubled heat—the car seeming never to have desired this trip of ours, having held back acceleration beyond sixty on hills in Ohio that were nothing to the hills in Pennsylvania or upstate New York where we were sure we could go no farther; having run moderately well in the cool night air, but by day defiantly and without any of the joy we demanded from this trip. After trying several other stations with uncooperative or ignorant attendants, we leave the car at an Amoco station, and even the attendant at this station cannot promise to fix the hose (which has broken) or to examine the car by this evening to find out why it keeps overheating.

"Does everybody in this town thrive on hate?" Pete wants to know. I tell him it's a regional difference. "A nice way of saying," he replies, "that the East Coast is full of miserable, unfriendly bastards." He's not very well disposed to Boston as we tour much of it on foot, trying to find our way to Harvard Square so he can check out the law school, where of course there is not a receptionist or much of anyone willing to entertain a prospecting student, and Pete becomes more convinced by the minute that he will never again leave Chicago.

"Okay, so the architecture's impressive," he concedes. As far as I know, that is the only thing positive Pete will ever say about Boston.

On our way home, traffic isn't bad and the car runs hot without overheating, and our new hose holds its own, although we are still clueless as to the general problem. Which, Pete points out, puts us on a par with that gas-station guy, if he ever even looked at the car this afternoon.

Mr. Behring is standing with binoculars in hand when we pull up. Pete wants to have a beer and kick back on the beach for a couple of hours before we decide what to do tonight; but although Mr. Behring is happy to see Pete drinking the Rolling Rock (he says, "Pete's probably been thinking about that Rolling Rock all day," which is not far from the truth), he tells Pete to hurry up because we've got to get to Plymouth Rock.

"Can't come all the way here just south of Plymouth and not see the rock, can you?"

The logical choice is to take his car, since ours has been overheating all day, but we also know it will mean more of Mr. Behring's driving. The whole way to the rock Pete stares me down from the backseat, letting me know I should have made the offer to drive a little more insistently. Mr. Behring finds the curb (Pete and I rock back against our seats, but he is seemingly unsurprised), bounces off it, and just misses the car in front of us as he decides this space is too tight for us.

"You see, Pete, I was rushing to get you guys to the rock before the line forms, and I am not judging my spaces very well."

He finally finds a space you can pull into moving forward and is out of the car and leading almost before the engine has quit.

"That frigging space could've fit a Mack truck," says Pete. "What the hell's he talking about—judging spaces. If he weren't always in blitzkrieg mode. How many sets of tires you suppose he burns through a month?"

"There it is." Mr. Behring is pointing ahead to a small group of people gathered around what looks to be not much more than a country-club-style gazebo set up for refreshments. We catch up and approach him as he supports his heavy body on the white rails. Have I mentioned his size before? It adds to the effect: a six-foot-four-inch man with a slouching frame, lumbering but quickly through supermarkets and over curbs, through bags of potato chips, lobster and steak, and conversation, over oceans with his eyes as over touristy grass, with those clumsy but efficient strides, to arrive at a semicircular rail rising into a brown, triangular roof—and below the rail is a floor of sand some ten to fifteen feet down, surrounding a singular and strikingly unimpressive rock. On a beach falling out of cliffs or real rocky terrain, as say the beaches of the Algarve in Portugal, what we behold would be a small boulder for some kids to dive off with little risk of plummeting too quickly to the bottom.

"I guess it has to be this one," I say. Because there are no other rocks on the beach. I am struck by the arbitrariness of history and briefly

reconsider my notion of the past, as I look at a rock that is important enough not only to have made my grammar-school history books, but to have become one of the only things I can remember about the pilgrims I studied in the fourth grade.

"Well, what do ya think, Pete?" Mr. Behring asks. "Not much, is it? People sometimes get things out of proportion around here acting like this rock is some big deal."

And then Pete, whose voice bursts when he is exasperated, cries, "You've been acting like it was a big deal for the last twenty minutes." He is still appalled at being made to drink his beer too fast and rushed along the curbs of Plymouth, belching the beginnings of an indigestion that is already making him older than he wants to be.

"Exactly," Mr. Behring says agreeably. "I like Pete, Carter, I'm glad you guys are here. Now I want to buy you boys some dinner. Shall we get some clams and lobster again?"

"How far do we have to drive?" Pete asks.

Without answering Pete, Mr. Behring leads us toward a cluster of tourist shops. "There's a good restaurant tucked away in here if you know to look for it." (Is this Mr. Behring's irony again? The restaurant, as we soon discover, is the main feature of the tourist-trap cluster.)

After we have all eaten too much and turned down dessert, Mr. Behring leans back in his chair and says, "I hope the bluefish didn't come while we were away."

IV

On our third day, I awake at 9 a.m. to an empty cottage, the first clue provided by Pete's unoccupied bed along the opposite wall. The door to Mr. Behring's bedroom is ajar and his room is also empty, which leaves the bathroom, kitchen, and living room, all also empty. I walk into the morning air, which holds the scent of the sea's foulness, the smell lifted by a sudden wind that is bending the grass and rushing the air toward the southern end of the beach. The wind makes me cold and makes me think of Kristin, my girlfriend, who is spending the summer in Champagne; it makes me think of holding her, of the

fact that I still haven't picked up anything for her. A two-month-old romance is tough on the imagination because you don't know a person quite well enough to give her the perfect gift, that something she would not think to buy for herself but has always wanted. So you settle your hopes of pleasing on gifts that please you, little somethings you might want but would never think to buy for yourself. I had seriously considered bringing back a chilled bucket of Long Island oysters and cherrystone clams, but we had D.C. to go through before Chicago, and I couldn't bear the thought of those clams and oysters rotting away my good intentions. The wind dies for a moment, then rises up quickly, a spike of air finding my inner ear and prompting my retreat. As I lean into the wind to walk back to the cottage, my boxers are drawn tight over my groin by the wind, making me self-conscious about standing on Mr. Behring's front lawn—above a public beach, in view of at least two neighboring cottages—wearing next to nothing.

As I enter the cottage, I am picturing the soft curves of Kristin's torso, the parts of her I'm still learning and those still unknown, but the cottage banishes her body. I cannot retrieve the pleasure of her, the way I had been holding the thought of her as I stood overlooking the beach. Given to us most often in the early growth of love when everything about another person is possibility, such moments are rare and almost indescribable, fooling us with presence, as if the someone we want right now will always be within reach.

Finding the couch, I relax into the contentment of those few minutes that, having awakened too early, one may steal back from the day. It is only in these aberrant moments that my sleep, or the prospect of sleep, is not associated with a woman's body or my body before hers. For sleep depends on a balance of images: the beginning image of my naked and supine body, and then the before images of sleep—mostly erotic, the dancing and jumbling of impossible plots and the mix of unlikely and familiar characters. As I lie there on the living-room sofa, trying to let the remnants of nocturnal images dance their post-dawn postlude, trying to beckon sleep without images, my mind is perfectly vigilant and at the same time empty. Finally even the smallest sleep is withheld from me.

It must have something to do with her, the woman whose ashes might be somewhere in this cottage. Her ashes, which are the clue to the return of thought. I cannot quite imagine them, but they are an abstraction close to substance. The remains of Mrs. Behring—her every ash a memory that he is trying to preserve symbolically, but losing to the defeat of her that the world demonstrates. How would he have stored them? Not in one of those marbled or gold-cased contraptions often set on fireplaces—this much I'm sure of. He'd object to its ceremoniousness, as he had objected to a public funeral or service: it would be a misrepresentation of her stark practicality, the unglamorous seriousness with which she had lived life. No, she's probably stored in a coffee can or somewhere similarly inconspicuous.

Of the two of them, Mrs. Behring had always been much more of an unknown to me, and yet there had developed a familiarity between us, formed through countless casual conversations, most of them about Mr. Behring—if she knew where he was, what time I should meet him at the golf course, or if he was coming over today to work on the room. Often he arrived while we were on the phone, just as I had mentioned his name, her uncertain reply interrupted by his bursting through the front door (sans doorbell of course), kissing my mother on the cheek, and bellowing, "Carter, get up and let's get to work on that room. Don't you ever want to move down there? You'll be a lonely old man before we get your bachelor pad ready." (Here he would wink at my mom). "Oh, so you're up and on the phone—well, I wish you would stop socializing so we can get to work." And then when he learned I was socializing with his wife, he'd pause as if he were about to make some exception, before continuing, "You say it's Marybeth? Well, what does she want? Tell her I'm here, for a little while anyway."

"She knows."

"Yes, she always knows where I am." In fact she hardly ever knew where he was, but it never seemed to bother her: he was bound to show up in a few minutes (although having sat with her for up to two hours in their kitchen waiting for him, I knew she had a generous sense of time). She was perhaps the calmest woman I had ever met, a

woman whom you might mistakenly think without heart, who was his opposite, and still his only imaginable complement. Her reliability was far superior to profound feeling or thought in managing the extra drama her husband always brought to the table.

He would have a sketch pad out before I had hung up, already slurping from the cup of coffee my mother had set before him, and drawing up a list of things we needed to do that day—a list that was never followed, which was in fact almost always immediately misplaced and then remembered occasionally throughout the day when Mr. Behring grew bored by a yet incomplete project. Assuring me that I could finish a carpenter's task I did not even begin to comprehend during my free time at night, he would say, "Where did you put that list? Can you at least remember what was next? You get straight A's for crying out loud, you'd think there might be some practical advantage to all those brains you're supposed to have." Most often I had never touched or seen the list, unless it had been to glimpse a piece of paper over which he had slouched at the kitchen table, glancing at it between remarks to my mom about the progress of the room, while I lulled in the tired unthinking of a weekend morning.

As I lie there on Mr. Behring's couch, thinking of his wife without ever quite reaching her, my reverie is finally interrupted by the return of the two early risers. "Carter," Mr. Behring announces, "I've reformed Pete from the college laziness you've taught him, your rebellion—at least this is my theory—against too many years of paper routes and caddying. Isn't it so, Pete?"

Pete tries to explain himself: "I just got up to use the bathroom, fully intending to return to my bed, but Rich insisted that if I'd already missed the dawn I had to catch at least part of the morning."

"And you're glad you did. Carter, imagine this: Pete thinks the Bears' Super Bowl win wasn't a fluke. I've been telling him the Patriots are a team of destiny this year, denied their glory to an inferior bunch of hooligans—dancing, singing-out-of-tune, over-sized linemen, whiny-voiced halfbacks, and wacky quarterbacks included—pansies if you ask me." Mr. Behring, while he lived in Chicago, had sung the praises of the then-losing Bears, but having moved to New England in the

middle of Chicago's one great year he had insisted that the poor Bears were doomed to meet those staunch Patriots in the Super Bowl; and perhaps as much surprised by the fulfillment of even that much of his prediction, he had then bet the Patriots against the Bears with everybody he knew—including my father, on whom he welshed, claiming that my dad should never have taken advantage of his sentimental regional loyalties. Afterward Mr. Behring had overridden his irony-gilded humiliation by calling the Bears classless winners and innate losers, destined never to win another Super Bowl, thus reclaiming his prophetic authority against a single exception.

"This man is a mojo, Carter. How can he not admit the present dominance of the Bears?"

Mr. Behring departs for the bathroom, and I am asking Pete about the walk. He tells me they've talked a lot, that it must be hard on Rich (when has he started calling him Rich?) to be here, having already sold the home outside of Boston where he had lived with Mrs. Behring for only two years, while all his better friends, like my father, and even his children, remained in the Midwest.

As Pete speaks of his children, Mr. Behring barges in, announcing that he needs to make some morning calls, but can we meet him for lunch?

"How long are you guys staying, Carter?"

"I don't know. I put that call in to my cousin, and she's going to call us back about visiting her on the Cape. So, we'll have to wait and see."

V

She called not fifteen minutes after he had left, so excited to see me—how long had it been, and how soon could we get there, and could we come right away, because she would be leaving town for the weekend and would deeply hate to miss us.

Pete was down at the beach when I received the call, so I grabbed the hand cooler with the beers, as I had promised, and went to join him. Beer in the late morning was unusual even for my college years, but there is something about proximity to a large body of water and the prospects of a day drenched in sun that puts aside all the rules of

the world. Beer on an almost empty stomach was an indulgence, and though you might have preferred a Coke or an orange juice, you were not about to tell your fellow reveler that there was anything else you could much desire. And right then as I sat beside Pete and drew the Rolling Rock from my lips, I really believed the taste of that beer was the most pleasurable thing I could imagine.

The problem was I didn't want to enjoy the beer. I was trying to treat the day as though no decisions needed to be made, as though I had come to the beach before hearing the phone.

"You see anything yet?" I asked.

"No, although one rough wave almost had me fooled. I thought for a moment he had missed them."

"It'd be something if it did happen as he described it, and when we went to lunch we reported it to him."

"That'd be almost cruel, don't you think?" Pete laughed a little.

"No, I think he'd appreciate it."

"He'd think we were making fun of him, but maybe you're right, he'd appreciate us calling him on it."

"No, Pete. No, you have to remember it would be true."

"Right, but he wouldn't know, would he? So he'd just hear our disbelief in the story."

"But would he call us on it," I speculated, "would he tell us we were lying?"

"Good question."

"No," I waxed enthusiastic, "no, he'd never tell us we were lying unless he believed it was true. So working on the premise that it were true, you have two ultimate possibilities: he would not believe us or care much about what we'd seen, but would still say, 'See, I told you.'"

"Yes," Pete said. " 'Didn't I tell you, Pete,' he'd say. 'Don't worry so much that I missed 'em. I've seen the bluefish before, and God knows they'll be back.' "

"Right, or in the second case, which really fascinates me, he would believe us, recognize the truth in our eyes, and declare us crazy—who ever heard of bluefish tearing up the ocean, eating each other in a red froth."

Pete was silent for a minute. He was not as pleased as I was with these insights into Mr. Behring's perverse logic.

"What were you guys talking about earlier this morning?" I asked Pete.

"I've been sitting here thinking about it. It was confessional, and yet he said so little that was personal. He'd mention his son, and I'd ask his age and where he lives, and the same with his daughter, and he'd mention your father, and I suddenly began to understand that nobody he talked about was anywhere nearby."

"When you two were out, I was thinking about his wife, and I couldn't think of anything that brought her back dramatically. She was just steady and calm and forgettable."

"He mentioned her when we were walking," Pete said, "again almost incidentally. In fact, he was halfway through a story about this woman named Marybeth before I realized it was his wife and that he was talking about years ago."

"What was the story?"

"It was about how she had once seen a dog hit on the highway by two cars, one after the other, yet neither stopped. So she stopped because, she said, if it were her dog and her children's dog, she'd want somebody to call her and say that it was dead. The thing was, it wasn't dead. It was bleeding and trembling all over, and still half exposed in the right lane, but panting with a whole bunch of life left. So I guess she picked the dog up and took it to a vet who operated and saved it, and then Mrs. Behring took up a collection with all their friends to help pay for the operation. And although she'd really wanted to keep it, they were at a pet limit—a big dog and a couple of stray cats and various rodents in cages in the kids' room—so she found it a home with a neighbor."

"Yes, I've heard that story," I said. "It's one of my mom's favorites, and whenever I've heard it, I see only the suffering dog and never what she is like when she picks it up. I remember roughly when it happened too, because he was complaining about Marybeth and her new veterinary vocation, and my mom said wasn't it brave of her and he said he guessed so."

I wondered then if he regretted not giving her a bigger send-off, if he

told the story to Pete to say he'd underestimated the woman he loved.

"Pete," I said, "my cousin called just now."

"I thought she might."

"She's waiting for us on the Cape, ready to show us Hyannis tonight."

While the sun fought the cooler morning air and dissipated the pleasantly noisome memory of the nighttime sea, we sat quietly on the beach, dozing several times as the heat gradually mounted toward day. You could shift the scene about twenty-four hours and we'd be on a beach on the Cape, my cousin Karen stretched between us, incredibly tanned and curious as always, asking Pete how many women adored me and was Kristin really as beautiful as she'd heard. If you shifted it only a few hours, we'd be at lunch with Mr. Behring ("It's too bad they don't have bluefish at this place," Pete says, "I'd like to try one," and Rich laughs), and I'd tell him the news and he'd say you're always welcome here—you too, Pete.

By late that afternoon, we would be among the heavy traffic on route 95—this crowded on a Wednesday! Imagine the afternoon sun pushing the still and humid air upon us and the Celebrity's needle again approaching the red of the temperature gauge, and we are probably wedged in a line of cars that stretches from Plymouth to the tip of the Cape, if one could only see that far ahead. Soon we will have to ride on the shoulder to head for a gas station, and a cop will flash his lights and stop us. Then, forgiven by the law, parked at yet another Amoco station, we will have to wait until our car cools and the traffic thins—the overheating, as I would come to see it, a kind of imprecise guilt, for events over which I had little control.

VI

We are ready to depart. But look at the man there, how he also looks toward us, sensing perhaps the oddity of our newly won status as audience—won only by the coincidence of our being in his way as he looks out over his ocean. I seem to remember that his habit of monologue preceded these circumstances of loss and isolation, but it has come now to represent him as a new person, a voice that sounds

from a lonely peak somewhere below the monumental, mythic smallness of a rock in Massachusetts that founded a country in the collective imagination of generations of school children. He is a prophet to the spirit of this place and he announces the coming of the bluefish as if it held a significance that we—the unbelieving young men who try to take him seriously out of respect for his age, and because he once built me a room in the basement of my parents' house, and because the stories Pete has heard forbid him from speculating any longer on Mr. Behring's sanity—a significance that we cannot see.

"You're not going to stay and see the bluefish," he says. Or maybe he asks. It is hard for me to tell, but perhaps he is asking for more, asking for someone to stay and await the bluefish with him. "It is really something to see," he says. "Of course, it could take a long time and you guys have a schedule, but I wonder if they'll come right when you leave. It makes me think you might wait a day or two just to see if they come. Then again, they might not. It is something to see, though; they come up very close and you can see them from the rocks, and they make a red froth."

We are past incredulity and challenge on the points of their cannibalism and travel patterns. We are for the moment believers in the image that he holds out to us as an event we must let pass us by for the sake of travel and a week of adventures—adventures that seemed from the perspective just south of Plymouth far more exciting than a mere week's time would prove them to be. We owe our urgency to the closing time of youth, the encroaching awareness of enforced obligations and the yet unknown roles of our adult lives. The impatience of youth to move out of the present into the more promising future, the week ahead—after the Cape, yet Connecticut and a second stop on Long Island and finally Washington, D.C.—is upon us, and we will not listen to the sad promises of the years lived by this avuncular, prophetic friend of my family, because surely there must be more to see (even if such a story were true) than bluefish eating each other.

Mr. Behring stands before his cottage and then crosses his yard to the edge of the cliff and looks over the water. In one hand he has a

pair of binoculars, but he doesn't raise them. In the other hand, the left, which is against his outer thigh, he is holding something like a coffee can. When you look down from the cliff, there are rocks and scattered patches of sand and the water twenty yards away; but then you see it from behind him, and it is as if you are out over the ocean, impossibly safe on land, but leaning over the ocean where it is deep and the bottom is no longer quite imaginable from the surface—the border place of a swimmer's fear. Your vantage is close enough: if you were in a boat you might hear the shouts of someone on the shore. Mr. Behring reaches his left hand out and begins to tilt the can, and, gently at first, he scatters the contents, as fine as coffee grounds, until you understand abruptly that they are ashes, and with a sudden jerk he has completely emptied them into the ocean, where the ashes float on the surface like the food you scatter in an aquarium, and the water is perfect and still with only those dirtying specks slowly separating. And then the bluefish do come; they rise to the surface and feed on the ashes, and they are too many to count, and the water is a white froth of commotion, and they are so abundant that they seem piled on the surface of the water, fish upon fish upon fish, too many; and then there is a trace of red among the white, and although you cannot believe it, it is true, they are consuming each other.