

Name:

# Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character

PHILLIP LOPATE

THE MAILED MAIL ROOM  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
LAW LIBRARY

In personal essays, nothing is more commonly met than the letter I. I think it a perfectly good word, one no writer should be ashamed to use. Especially is first person legitimate for this form, so drawn to the particulars of character and voice. The problem with "I" is not that it is in bad taste, but that fledgling personal essayists may think they've said or conveyed more than they actually have with that one syllable. In their minds, that "I" is swarming with background and a lush, sticky past, and an almost too fatal specificity, whereas the reader, encountering it for the first time in a new piece, sees only a slender telephone pole standing in the sentence, trying to catch a few signals to send on. In truth, even the barest "I" holds a whisper of promised engagement, and can suggest a caress in the midst of more stolid language. What it doesn't do, however, is give us a clear picture of who is speaking.

To do that, the writer needs to build herself into a character. And I use the word *character* much the same way the fiction writer does. E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, drew a famous distinction between "flat" and "round" characters—between those fictional personages seen from the outside who acted with the predicable consistency of caricatures, and those whose complexities or teeming inner lives we came to know. But whether the writer chooses to present characters as flat or round, or a combination, the people on the page—it scarcely matters whether they appear in fiction or nonfiction—will need to become knowable enough in their broad outlines to behave "believably," at the same time as free willed enough to intrigue us with surprises. The art of characterization comes down to establishing a pattern of habits and actions for the person you are writing about and introducing variations into the system. In this respect, building a character is a pedagogic model, because you are teaching the reader what to expect.

So how do you turn *yourself* into a character? First of all, you need to have—or acquire—some distance from yourself. If you are so panicked by any examination of your flaws that all you can do is sputter defensively when you feel yourself attacked, you are not going to get very far in the writing of personal essays. You need to be able to see yourself from the ceiling: to know, for instance, how you are coming across in social situations, and to assess accurately when you are charming, and when you seem pushy, mousy, or ridiculous. From the viewpoint of honest essay writing, it is just as unsatisfactorily distorting to underrate yourself all the time, and think you are far less effective than you actually are, than to give yourself too much credit. The point is to begin to take inventory of yourself so that you can present that self to the reader as a specific, legible character.

A good place to start is your quirks. These are the idiosyncracies, stubborn tics, antisocial mannerisms, and so on that set you apart from the majority of your fellowmen. There will be more than enough time later to assert your common humanity, or better yet, to let the reader make the mental bridge between your oddities and those of everyone else. But to establish credibility, you would do well to resist coming across at first as absolutely average. Who wants to read about that bland creature, the regular Joe? The mistake many beginning essayists make is to try so hard to be likable and nice, to fit in, that the reader, craving stronger stuff (at the very least, a tone of authority), gets bored. Literature is not a place for conformists, organization men. The skills of the kaffeeklatsch—restraining one's expressiveness, rounding out one's edges, sparing everyone's feelings—will not work as well on the page.

The irony is that most of us suspect—no, we *know*—that underneath it all we *are* common as dirt. But we may still need to maximize that pitiful set of quirks, those small differences that seem to set us apart from others, and project them theatrically, the way actors work with singularities in their physical appearances or vocal textures. In order to turn ourselves into characters, we need to *dramatize* ourselves. I don't mean inventing or adding colorful traits that aren't true; I mean positioning those that are already in us under the most clearly focused, sharply defined light. It's a subtractive process: You need to cut away the inessentials, and highlight just those features in your personality that lead to the most intense contradictions or ambivalence.

An essay needs conflict, just as a short story does. Without conflict, your essay will drift into static mode, repeating your initial observation in a self-satisfied way. What gives an essay dynamism is the need

to work out some problem, especially a problem that is not easily resolved. Fortunately, human beings are conflicted animals, so there is no shortage of tensions that won't go away. Good essayists know how to select a topic in advance that will generate enough spark in itself, and how to frame the topic so that it will neither be too ambitious nor too slight—so that its scale will be appropriate for satisfying exploration. If you are serenely unconflicted when you first sit down to write an essay, you may find yourself running out of steam. If you take on a problem that is too philosophically large or historically convoluted, you may choke on the details and give up.

Still, these are technical issues, and I am inclined to think that what stands in the way of most personal essays is not technique but psychology. The emotional preparedness, if you will, to be honest and open to exposure.

The student essayist is torn between two contrasting extremes:

- A. "I am so weird that I could never tell on the page what is really, secretly going on in my mind."
- B. "I am so boring, nothing ever happens to me out of the ordinary, so who would want to read about me?"

Both extremes are rooted in shame, and both reflect a lack of worldliness. The first response ("I am so weird") exaggerates how isolated one is in one's "wicked" thoughts, instead of recognizing that everyone has strange, surreal, immoral notions. The second response ("My life is so boring and I'm so boring") requires a reeducation so that the student essayists can be brought to acknowledge just those moments in the day, in their loves and friendships, in their family dynamics, in their historical moments, in their interactions with the natural world, that remain genuinely perplexing, vexing, luminous, unresolved. In short, they must be nudged to recognize that life remains a mystery—even one's own so-called boring life. They must also be taught to recognize the charm of the ordinary: that daily life that has nourished some of the most enduring essays.

The use of literary or other models can be a great help in invoking life's mystery. I like to remind myself, as well as my students, of the tonal extremes available to us. It is useful to know we can rant as much as Dostoyevsky's Underground Man or Céline's narrators, that we can speak—as the poet Mayakovsky says—"At the Top of My Voice." That we can be passionate as Hazlitt and Baldwin, or even whine, the way Joan Didion sometimes does, albeit with self-aware humor. It is useful to remind students, enamored of David Lynch or Quentin Tarantino movies, that some of that bizarre sensibility can

find a place in their essays—that "outlaw" culture does not have to be left outside the schoolhouse. At the same time, it is necessary to introduce them to the same, thoughtful, considered, responsible essayists like George Orwell or E.B. White. From both sets of models we can then choose how reasonable or hysterical we want to come across at any time: in one piece, seem the soul of reason; in another, a step away from the booty bin.

Mining our quirks is only the beginning of turning ourselves into characters. We are distinguished one from another as much by our pasts, the set of circumstances we are born into, as by the challenges we have encountered along the way, and how we choose to resolve them, given our initial stations in life. It means something very different to have been born the second-oldest boy in an upper-middle-class Korean family that emigrated from Seoul to Los Angeles than to have been born the youngest female in a poor Southern Baptist household of nine.

Ethnicity, gender, religion, class, geography, politics: These are all strong determinants in the development of character. Sometimes they can be made too much of, as in the worst sort of "identity politics," which seeks to explain away all the intangibles of a human being's destiny by this or that social oppression. But we must be bold in working with these categories as starting points: be not afraid to meditate on our membership in this or that community, and the degree to which it has or has not formed us.

When you are writing a memoir, you can set up these categories and assess their importance one by one, and go on from there. When you write personal essays, however, you can never assume that your readers will know a thing about your background, regardless of how many times you have explained it in previous essays. So you must become deft at inserting that information swiftly and casually—"I was born in Brooklyn, New York, of working-class parents"—and not worry about the fact that it may be redundant to your regular readers, if you're lucky enough to have any. In one essay, you may decide to make a big thing of your religious training and very little of your family background; in another, just the opposite; but in each new essay, it would be a good idea to tell the reader both, simply because this sort of information will help to build you into a character.

In this sense, the personal essayist must be like a journalist, who respects the obligation to get in the basic orienting facts—the who, what, where, when, and why—as close to the top of every story as possible.

So now you have sketched yourself to the reader as a person of a

2

first must come the urge to entertain the reader. From that impulse everything else follows.

There is also considerable character development in expressing your opinions, prejudices, half-baked ideas, etc., etc., provided you are willing to analyze the flaws in your thinking and to entertain arguments against your hobbyhorses and not be too solemn about it all. The essay thrives on daring, darting flights of thought. You must get in the habit of inviting, not censoring, your most far-fetched, mischievous notions, because even if they prove cockeyed, they may point to an element of truth that would otherwise be inaccessible. When, for instance, I wrote my essay "Against Joie de Vivre," I knew on some level that it was an indefensible position, but I wanted to see how far I could get in taking a curmudgeonly stance against the pursuit of happiness. And indeed, it struck a chord of recognition in many readers, because lots of us are "so glad to be unhappy," at least as much as we "want to be happy." (To quote two old songs.)

Finally, it would do well for personal essayists to follow another rule of fiction writers, who tell you that if you want to reveal someone's character, actions speak louder than words. Give your "I" something to do. It's fine to be privy to all of "I's" ruminations and cerebral nuances, but consciousness can only take us so far in the illumination of character. Particularly if you are writing a memoir essay, with chronology and narrative, it is often liberating to have the "I" step beyond the observer role and be implicated crucially in the overall action. How many memoir pieces suffer from a self-righteous setup: the writer telling a story in which Mr. or Ms. "I" is the passive recipient of the world's cruelty, the character's first exposure to racism or betrayal, say. There is something off-putting about a nonfiction story in which the "I" character is right and all the others wrong, the "I" infinitely more sinned against than sinning. By showing our complicity in the world's stock of sorrow, we convince the reader of our reality and even gain his sympathy.

How much more complicated and alive is George Orwell's younger self, the "I" in "Such, Such Were the Joys," for having admitted he snatched on his classmates, or James Baldwin's "I" in "Notes of a Native Son," for acknowledging how close he came to the edge with his rages about racism in restaurants. Character is not just a question of sensibility: There are hard choices to be made when a person is put under pressure. And it's in having made the wrong choice, curiously enough, that we are made all the more aware of our freedom and potential for humanity. So it is that remorse is often the starting point for good personal essays, whose working-out brings the necessary self-

certain age, sex, ethnic and religious background, class, and region, possessing a set of quirks, foibles, strengths, and peculiarities. Are you yet a character? Maybe not: not until you have soldered your relationship with the reader, by springing vividly into his mind, so that everything your "I" says and does on the page seems somehow—oddly, piquantly—characteristic. The reader must find you amusing (there, I've said it). Amusing enough to follow you, no matter what essay topic you propose. Whether you are writing this time on world peace or a bar of soap, readers must sense quickly from the first paragraph that you are going to keep them engaged. The trouble is that you cannot amuse the reader unless you are already self-amused. And here we come to one of the main stumbling blocks placed before the writing of personal essays: self-hatred.

It is an observable fact that most people don't like themselves, in spite of being, for the most part, decent enough human beings—certainly not war criminals—and in spite of the many self-help books urging us to befriend and think positively about ourselves. Why this self-dislike should be so prevalent is a matter that would require the best sociological and psychoanalytic minds to elucidate; all I can say, from my vantage point as a teacher and anthologist of the personal essay, is that an odor of self-disgust mars many performances in this genre and keeps many would-be practitioners from developing into full-fledged professionals. They exhibit a form of stuttering, of never being able to get past the initial, superficial self-presentation and diving into the wreck of one's personality with gusto.

The proper alternative to self-dislike is not being pleased with oneself—a smugness equally distasteful to the reader—but being *curious about oneself*. Such self-curiosity (of which Montaigne, the father of the essay, was the greatest exemplar) can only grow out of that detachment or distance from oneself about which I spoke earlier.

I am convinced that self-amusement is a discipline that can be learned; it can be practiced even by people (such as myself) who have at times a strong self-dislike or at least self-mistrust. I may be tired of myself in everyday life, but once I start narrating a situation or set of ideas on the page, I begin to see my "I" in a comic light, and I maneuver him so that he will best amuse the reader. My "I" is not me, entirely, but a character drawn from aspects of myself, in somewhat the same way (less stylized or bold, perhaps) that Chaplin drew the Little Fellow or Jerry Lewis modeled the arrested-development goofball from their experiences. I am willing to let my "I" take his pratfalls; maintaining one's dignity should not be a paramount issue in personal essays. But

forgiveness (not to mention self-amusement) to outgrow shame.

I have not touched on some other requirements of the personal essay, such as the need to go beyond the self's quandaries, through research or contextualization, to bring back news of the larger world. Nor have I spoken of the grandeur of the so-called formal essay. Yet even when "I" plays no part in the language of an essay, a firm sense of personality can warm the voice of the impersonal essay narrator. When we read Dr. Johnson and Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, for instance, we feel that we know them as fully developed characters in their own essays, regardless of their not referring personally to themselves.

The need thus exists to make oneself into a character, whether the essay uses a first- or third-person narrative voice. I would further maintain that this process of turning oneself into a character is not self-absorbed navel gazing, but rather a potential release from narcissism. It means you have achieved sufficient distance to begin to see yourself in the round: a necessary precondition to transcending the ego—or at least writing personal essays that can touch other people.

(4)

# From An American Childhood

■ Annie Dillard

After I read *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams* several times, I longed for a microscope. Everybody needed a microscope. Detectives used microscopes, both for the FBI and at Scotland Yard. Although usually I had to save my tiny allowance for things I wanted, that year for Christmas my parents gave me a microscope kit.

In a dark basement corner, on a white enamel table, I set up the microscope kit. I supplied a chair, a lamp, a batch of jars, a candle, and a pile of library books. The microscope kit supplied a blunt black three-speed microscope, a booklet, a scalpel, a dropper, an ingenious device for cutting thin segments of fragile tissue, a pile of clean slides and cover slips, and a dandy array of corked test tubes.

One of the test tubes contained "hay infusion." Hay infusion was a wee brown chip of grass blade. You added water to it, and after a week it became a jungle in a drop, full of one-celled animals. This did not work for me. All I saw in the microscope after a week was a wet chip of dried grass, much enlarged.

Another test tube contained "diatomaceous earth." This was, I believed, an actual pinch of the white cliffs of Dover.<sup>1</sup> On my palm it was an airy, friable<sup>2</sup> chalk. The booklet said it was composed of the siliceous<sup>3</sup> bodies of diatoms—one-celled creatures that lived in, as it were, small glass jewelry boxes with fitted lids. Diatoms, I read, come in a variety of transparent geometrical shapes. Broken and dead and dug out of geological deposits, they made chalk, and a fine abrasive used in silver polish and toothpaste. What I saw in the microscope must have been the fine abrasive—grit enlarged. It was years before I saw a recognizable, whole diatom. The kit's diatomaceous earth was a bust.

All that winter I played with the microscope. I prepared slides from things at hand, as the books suggested. I looked at the transparent membrane inside an onion's skin and saw the cell. I looked at a section of cork and saw the cells, and at scrapings from the inside of my cheek, ditto. I looked at my blood and saw not much; I looked at my urine and saw a long iridescent crystal, for the drop had dried.

All this was very well, but I wanted to see the wildlife I had read about. I wanted especially to see the famous amoeba, who had eluded me. He was supposed to live in the hay infusion, but I hadn't found him there. He lived outside in warm ponds and streams, too, but I lived in Pittsburgh, and it had been a cold winter.

Finally late that spring I saw an amoeba. The week before, I had gathered puddle water from Frick Park; it had been festering in a jar in the basement. This June night after dinner I figured I had waited long enough. In the basement at my microscope table I spread a scummy drop of Frick Park puddle water on a slide, peeked in, and lo, there was the famous amoeba. He was as blobby and grainy as his picture; I would have known him anywhere.

Before I had watched him at all, I ran upstairs. My parents were still at the table, drinking coffee. They, too, could see the famous amoeba. I told them, bursting, that he was all set up, that they should hurry before his water dried. It was the chance of a lifetime.

Father had stretched out his long legs and was tilting back in his chair. Mother sat with her knees crossed, in blue slacks, smoking a Chesterfield. The dessert dishes were still on the table. My sisters were nowhere in evidence. It was a warm evening; the big dining-room windows gave onto blooming rhododendrons.

Mother regarded me warmly. She gave me to understand that she was glad I had found what I had been looking for, but that she and Father were happy to sit with their coffee, and would not be coming down.

She did not say, but I understood at once, that they had their purses (coffee?) and I had mine. She did not say, but I began to understand then, that you do what you do out of your private passion for the thing itself.

I had essentially been handed my own life. In subsequent years my parents would praise my drawings and poems, and supply me with books, art supplies, and sports equipment, and listen to my troubles and enthusiasms, and supervise my hours, and discuss and inform, but they would not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play the piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection with me, or my poetry collection or stamp collection or rock collection. My days and nights were my own to plan and fill.

When I left the dining room that evening and started down the dark basement stairs, I had a life. I sat down to my wonderful amoeba, and there he was, rolling his grains more slowly now, extending an arc of his edge for a foot and drawing himself along by that foot, and absorbing it again and rolling on. I gave him some more pond water.

I had hit pay dirt. For all I knew, there were paramacia, too, in that pond water, or daphniae, or stentors, or any of the many other creatures I had read about and never seen: volvox, the spherical algal colony; euglena with its one red eye; the elusive, glassy diatom; hydra, rotifers, water bears, worms. Anything was possible. The sky was the limit.

5

your knees. The canoe rocks, slaps the lake, moves forward. Sooner or later, you lose your balance and fall into the water, because the gunwales are slender rails and the stern deck is somewhat smaller than a pennant. From waters deeper than you were tall, you climbed back into your canoe. If you think that's easy, try it.

After three or four splats, and with a belly pink from hauling it over gunwales, you lost interest in jouncing. What next? You sat in your canoe and deliberately overturned it. You leaned hard to one side, grabbed the opposite gunwale, and pulled. Out you went, and into the water. This was, after all, swim period. Now you rolled your canoe—an action it resists far less when it is loaded with water. You could make your canoe spiral like a football inside the lake.

And before long you found the air pocket. Having jounced and spiralled to the far end of your invention span, you ducked beneath the surface and swam in under your upside-down canoe. You rose slowly to miss a thwart—feeling above you, avoiding a bump on the head—and then your eyes, nose and mouth were in air, among chain-link streaks of white and amber light, the shimmets of reflection in a quonset grotto. Its vertical inches were few but enough. Your pals got in there with you and your voices were tympanic in the grotto. Or you just hung out there by yourself. With a hand on a thwart, and your feet slowly kicking, you could breathe normally, see normally, talk abnormally, and wait indefinitely for a change of mood. You were invisible to the upside, outside world. Even more than when kneeling in a fast current, you were one with your canoe.

Kneeling in a fast current. Once in a while, we went to what is now called Bartell Gorge, north of Middlebury, to learn how to deal with really fast, pounding, concentrated flow. Otter Creek, there, undergoes an abrupt change in

JOHN MCPHEE

## Swimming with Canoes

I grew up in a summer camp—Keewaydin—whose specialty was canoes and canoe travel. At the home base, near Middlebury, Vermont, were racks and racks of canoes, at least a hundred canoes—E.M. Whites and Chestnuts, mainly. They were very good wood-and-canvas keeled or keelless canoes, lake or river canoes. We were in them every day whatever we were, in and out of Vermont. We were like some sort of crustaceans with our rib-and-planking exoskeletons, and to this day I do not feel complete or safe unless I am surrounded by the protective shape of a canoe.

Now and again, Keewaydin let us take our canoes not so much onto the water as into it, during swim period. We went swimming with our canoes. We jounced. Jouncing is the art of propelling a canoe without a paddle. You stand up on the gunwales near the stern deck and repeatedly flex and unflex

6

physiographic character. After meandering benignly through the marshes, woodlots, and meadows of the Champlain Valley, it encounters a large limestone outcrop, which it deeply bisects. By a factor of three or four, the stream narrows and the water squeezes into humps, haystacks, souse holes, and standing waves as it drops ten feet in a hundred yards. Then it emerges from the high limestone walls and the darkness of overhanging hemlocks into the light of a pool so wide it seems to be a pond.

Like horse people, we showed up some distance above the head of the gorge with trailers—racked trailers that each carried seven canoes. The gorge was a good place to learn how to deal with canoes in white water because it was violent but short. In that narrow, roaring flume, you didn't have to choose the best route—didn't have to look for what the *voyageurs* called the *fil d'eau*. There was pretty much one way to go. But you got the sense of a canoe flying in three dimensions; and the more you did it the slower it seemed, the shoot separating itself into distinct parts, as if you were in a balloon rising in sunlight and falling in the shadows of clouds.

One time, when I was about twelve, I went into the gorge in a very old canoe that was missing its stern seat. (We didn't take the better boats there.) Two of us were paddling it. I was kneeling against the stern thwart, which was so far back it was only eight or ten inches from gunwale to gunwale, the size of my young butt. My right knee was on the canoe's ribs, and my right leg extended so far back that my foot was wedged in the V of the stern when the bucking canoe turned over. Billy Furey was my partner, and we were doing all we could to keep things even, but whatever we did wasn't good enough, and we flipped near the top of the gorge. Billy was ejected. Among the countless wonders of the simple design of

the native American canoe is the fact that it ejects its paddlers when it capsizes.

This one could not eject me, because my foot was stuck. I struggled to pull the foot free, but it wouldn't come. Upside down in billows of water, I could not get out. Understand: I have a life-long tendency to panic. Almost anything will panic me—health, money, working with words. Almost anything—I'm here to tell you—but an overturned canoe in a raging gorge. When I was trapped in there, if panic crossed by mind it went out the other side. I had, after all, time and time again been swimming with canoes. There was a purpose in letting us do that—a thought that had never occurred to me. After I realized I was caught and was not going to be coming out from under that canoe, I reached for the stern quarter-thwart, took hold of it, and pulled my body upward until my eyes, nose, and mouth were in the grotto. There, in the dancing light, I rode on through the gorge, and when the water calmed down at the far end I gave the canoe half a spiral and returned to the open sunlight.

7

5

# Becoming a Writer

Russell Baker

1 The notion of becoming a writer had flickered off and on in my head . . . but it wasn't until my third year in high school that the possibility took hold. Until then I'd been bored by everything associated with English courses. I found English grammar dull and baffling. I hated the assignments to turn out "compositions," and went at them like heavy labor, turning out laden, lackluster paragraphs that were agonies for teachers to read and for me to write. The classics thrust on me to read seemed as deadening as chloroform.<sup>1</sup>

2 When our class was assigned to Mr. Fleagle for third-year English I anticipated another grim year in that dreariest of subjects. Mr. Fleagle was notorious among City students for dullness and inability to inspire. He was said to be stuffy, dull, and hopelessly out of date. To me he looked to be sixty or seventy and prim to a fault. He wore primly severe eyeglasses, his wavy hair was primly cut and primly combed. He wore prim vested suits with neckties blocked primly against the collar buttons of his primly starched white shirts. He had a primly pointed jaw, a primly straight nose, and a prim manner of speaking that was so correct, so gentlemanly, that he seemed a comic antique.

3 I anticipated a listless, unfruitful year with Mr. Fleagle and for a long time was not disappointed. We read *Macbeth*. Mr. Fleagle loved *Macbeth* and wanted us to love it too, but he lacked the gift of infecting others with his own passion. He tried to convey the murderous ferocity of Lady Macbeth one day by reading aloud the passage that concludes

... I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums . . .

The idea of prim Mr. Fleagle plucking his nipple from boneless gums was too much for the class. We burst into gasps of irrepressible<sup>2</sup> snickering. Mr. Fleagle stopped.

4 "There is nothing funny, boys, about giving suck to a babe. It is the—the very essence of motherhood, don't you see."

5 He constantly sprinkled his sentences with "don't you see." It wasn't a question but an exclamation of mild surprise at our ignorance. "Your pronoun needs an antecedent, don't you see," he would say,

very primly. "The purpose of the Porter's scene, boys, is to provide comic relief from the horror, don't you see."

6 Late in the year we tackled the informal essay. "The essay, don't you see, is the . . ." My mind went numb. Of all forms of writing, none seemed so boring as the essay. Naturally we would have to write informal essays. Mr. Fleagle distributed a homework sheet offering us a choice of topics. None was quite so simpleminded as "What I Did on My Summer Vacation," but most seemed to be almost as dull. I took the list home and dawdled until the night before the essay was due. Sprawled on the sofa, I finally faced up to the grim task, took the list out of my notebook, and scanned it. The topic on which my eye stopped was "The Art of Eating Spaghetti."

7 This title produced an extraordinary sequence of mental images. Surging up from the depths of memory came a vivid recollection of a night in Belleville when all of us were seated around the supper table—Uncle Allen, my mother, Uncle Charlie, Doris, Uncle Hal—and Aunt Pat served spaghetti for supper. Spaghetti was an exotic treat in those days. Neither Doris nor I had ever eaten spaghetti, and none of the adults had enough experience to be good at it. All the good humor of Uncle Allen's house reawoke in my mind as I recalled the laughing arguments we had that night about the socially respectable method for moving spaghetti from plate to mouth.

8 Suddenly I wanted to write about that, about the warmth and good feeling of it, but I wanted to put it down simply for my own joy, not for Mr. Fleagle. It was a moment I wanted to recapture and hold for myself. I wanted to relive the pleasure of an evening at New Street. To write it as I wanted, however, would violate all the rules of formal composition I'd learned in school, and Mr. Fleagle would surely give it a failing grade. Never mind. I would write something else for Mr. Fleagle after I had written this thing for myself.

9 When I finished it the night was half gone and there was no time left to compose a proper, respectable essay for Mr. Fleagle. There was no choice next morning but to turn in my private reminiscence of Belleville. Two days passed before Mr. Fleagle returned the graded papers, and he returned everyone's but mine. I was bracing myself for a command to report to Mr. Fleagle immediately after school for discipline when I saw him lift my paper from his desk and rap for the class's attention.

10 "Now, boys," he said, "I want to read you an essay. This is titled: 'The Art of Eating Spaghetti.'"

<sup>1</sup>chloroform: a chemical that puts one to sleep.

<sup>2</sup>irrepressible: unable to be restrained or controlled.



And he started to read. My words! He was reading *my words* out 11  
loud to the entire class. What's more, the entire class was listening.  
Listening attentively. Then somebody laughed, then the entire class was  
laughing, and not in contempt and ridicule, but with open-hearted  
enjoyment. Even Mr. Fleagle stopped two or three times to repress a  
small prim smile.

I did my best to avoid showing pleasure, but what I was feeling 12  
was pure ecstasy at this startling demonstration that my words had  
the power to make people laugh. In the eleventh grade, at the eleventh  
hour as it were, I had discovered a calling. It was the happiest moment  
of my entire school career. When Mr. Fleagle finished he put the final  
seal on my happiness by saying, "Now that, boys, is an essay, don't you  
see. It's—don't you see—it's of the very essence of the essay, don't you  
see. Congratulations, Mr. Baker."

For the first time, light shone on a possibility. It wasn't a very heart- 13  
ening possibility, to be sure. Writing couldn't lead to a job after high  
school, and it was hardly honest work, but Mr. Fleagle had opened a  
door for me. After that I ranked Mr. Fleagle among the finest teach-  
ers in the school.

(9)