Notes on the Halloway Street Incident

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The antique iron truss bridge spanning Deer Run Creek bent just a little whenever a truck took its narrow deck. A person waiting for his turn could observe it deflect and regain its original form. Then there might’ve been momentary trepidation, before getting on; regulars rarely gave the matter any thought. The only northern access point to and out of Hogar and more populous New Carlyle further south, the bridge was a bottleneck for East-West travelers of route 3_ passing through, especially in summer. On some mornings after Memorial Day, there might have been a single-file line of cars extended ten minutes back, past Mrs. Miller’s diner; although Margaret Castor, her daughter who ran the place, didn’t mind the commotion, since at least a few SUVs and minivans would have pulled off the road for pancakes, homefries, and coffee. Traffic stretched in the other direction as the weekend closed, and headlights would trickle steadily through town like drips in an IV line. In the last twelve minutes, however, only a handful of cars have passed; today was but a month after the longest night of the year. With a pallid sun eight degrees above the crest of pines atop the hill directly ahead, Ralph Eliot Tolman crossed Putnam Bridge on foot and entered streets he could have navigated blind.

By now, three full days after the sensational murdersuicide, media affect had progressed from shock to hysteria, then from hysteria to tragedy. Each step came
closer to satisfying the want for drama. Each would have needed more and more information to set the scene and fill the cast. Therefore, sign-hunters had been dispatched into the reaches of space and time with the common mandate: to discover that exceptional fragment which held the complete image of the truth. Some dug hastily through the usual records: job reviews, military application, recollection from former coaches, elementary school exercises, and yearbook comments to and from friends. Some went down to state college but came back empty-handed. Quite a few shadowed the police in search of the missing girl; even helped comb woods and alleyways. The remainder, as if following some irresistible carrion-call, converged on the sites of violence. Anchors interviewed location reporters, who did their best to convey the seriousness of the matter. Reporters interviewed neighbors, who did their best to reflect the shocking turn of events. There were quotations from patrons of Murphy’s down the street, and even the famous Brakelight Diner nearly a mile away, to show the extent of the trauma. O Brakelight tragedy, Ralph intoned cheerlessly. Bells on the door jingled once before him once after. The emotional aftershocks had diminished enough by now that he felt it hard to tell whether the sense of tragedy came from the observer or the subjects he observed. Mr. Tolman, a man probably in his late twenties, with brown eyes and short, dark hair, standing about two inches taller than the rack on which he hung his knee-length wool overcoat and burrelli scarf, walked the length of the counter and sat at the end. He slid his duffel between two stools and, out of curiosity, took a menu.

The stools were still evenly spaced: slow today, after three days of strangers coming going. His rimless aviators and blackberry sheathed, Mr. Tolman drew no second guess. Only the grill-man. Who looked and motioned to the counter girl wrapping silverware in paper napkins. Who answered subtly, affirmatively. Was it kitchen-fire that made him diabolically flushed? He handled flesh. His belly was of a beast. Gatekeeper on the road to Hogar. Did he get a riddle? Man was the answer. That’s all good, but why have you come? And she, perhaps one of the younger Miller girls. Another pearl of Hogar. Fluorescent light and grease and smoke have stained her youth. Or she kept its precious little light safe beneath a disposable case. Send it away for its own good. Through the valley. Of the shadow. Another vision there. All the girls must have learned to darken their eyes and trace their thin lips from the same ridiculous provincial inspiration. A curious charm on her left
wrist. Two others moved here and there. Career servers. Well-built. Matronly, once upon a time. Could’ve easily tackled a cow. A television on a swivel arm mounted to the ceiling was tuned to the national news. Hieroglyphs scrolled continuously across the bottom, as if forever and without meaning. Bad news. And we interrupt. More bad news. Advertising welcomed. O to live there. Mr. Tolman scanned the laminated menu. Familiar fares, and, right, price-increase did match overall inflation. Or kept high from three years ago, when utilities spiked here and had yet to adjust to cheaper energy. Risked alienating customers. And whose intervention created the combination platters? Prix fixe. All the while. With hellohowareyou and a courteous smile, the counter-girl seated a family in a booth. A middle-aged couple towing a couple of toddlers their replacement. She fetched a booster seat for the littlest one. Greatyourserverwillbewithyoushortly. Then she moved effortlessly through the progression of her responsibilities, filled a glass with tap water from a pitcher and made her way to the man in the corner.

— So what’ll it be mister, Nell began.

Mr. Tolman looked up from the menu, smiled warmly and introduced himself.

— Call me Eliot. He glanced down perfunctorily. Let’s see. Paused. Then up again. What do you recommend, miss…

— Nell. She returned smile for smile, I’m Nell.

— Very nice to make your acquaintance Nell. What do you recommend?

— Hm. Well we have ham this week and people’ve said it’s very tasty. That comes with any two sides you see here. Nell leaned forward to index the corresponding box. The pasta with meat sauce was just made. It’s near the top, under pasta. Then there’s always Salisbury steak with macandcheese, which everybody sorta knows us for.

Mr. Tolman interrupted.

— I meant what do you, Nell, like?

— Hm, well, I sometimes get the turkeyclub on my break, or at the end of the last shift I might take home some rotisserie chicken.

— Then chicken it is. With steamed vegetables, please. And ½ the normal serving of scallop potatoes. Yes, that’ll do.

— Great. Berightout.
Nell scribbled in shorthand and stuck it to the order wheel, spinning wheel and order halfway. The cook glanced at the scratches, chuckled under his breath, and began the preparation. The grill barely hissed. Not hot enough. Tubers dry. Nell paused before she had gotten too far down the length of the counter. Leaning against a movable cabinet, she watched the last bit of a soft-news segment on how to lose unwanted holiday pounds before the program went to commercial. A carol jingled past its season. Mr. Tolman loaded the line.

— Do you think we’ve seen the worst of it?
— I don’t know. All I know is folks round here’ve seen hard times for awhile now. And now this. Misery on misery. They say it’s bad everywhere.
— I think you may be right, Nell. Everywhere you want to be.
— But ’parently some folks are making out better than others. Now I know you ain’t from around here Eliot. But God knows we were already in pretty bad shape.

Mr. Tolman loosened his tie. The double-windsor knot and perfectly centered dimple might have made him appear overly fastidious.
— Are we to be bounded to the same fates?
— Pardon?

— People have been hit hard, I know. All that you worked for, year after year, the life you were supposed to have been building, gone, with little warning, like alka-seltzer in water. Uncertainty drives everyone mad.

Because not dead. Just nothing. Inconsequential.
— We’ve all come to know that in the last week or so haven’t we!
— Yes, I heard on the way in.
— So you’re not here with the rest of the mob?
— Looking for a story? No. No, I’m just passing through.
— That’s like most folks.

As soon as she uttered it, Nell sensed the phrase had life and will of its own. Take flight. No, flee. It slipped easily from her and was halfway across Putnam Bridge before she realized. Mr. Tolman felt the girl carried away by the last thought. He carefully unfurled his napkin and clinked his silverware as he set them.
— What’s done is done. Clink. The rest may be academic.
— Well it matters to those who care about her. To her family. What was her name, the wife?
   Lucy.
— Lucy I think. And to the unlucky people who happened to be at the car dealership. The poor children who lost their parents. The people of the church where they worshiped.
   So what? What were they to her that she should cry for them? And take her fears out on him? Speak of the dead. Speak for the dead. Born and fed of the same, the girls. By proxy. Why should the dead care? Only the living. Poor boy, indeed.
— No, you’re right.

Nell served the plate and replenished the glass. Mr. Tolman mechanically reached for it. She’d never seen a watchface with large roman numbers before. Old-looking.
— People ‘round here feel we know each other. Then somethin’ like this happens. She paused. What I want to know is why. All those people. And then himself.

Did she? Doesn’t happen here. Community of faith. The shock from reality should have proven otherwise. Mr. Tolman began to understand why Nell slowly shied away from any possible answer after asking her rhetorical question, and delivered his recalcitrant part softly.
— Perhaps there was no reason.

No motive adequate. For anyone. No redemption. No key code for happenings. Still, let the girl recover her light. Let her think life’s not-for-nothing.
— You’re wrong Eliot. There has to be. I guess we’ll keep guessing.

Yea though she walked through.

No longer curious, the eavesdropping cook waddled off to his minion pots and pans in a remote part of the kitchen. Nell turned away, distracted. She and the other two servers convened by the sodapop fountain and exchanged signals in their workmen idiolect, like ants of a mound. Then, armed with fresh pitchers of Coke, the three women scattered to wait their tables.

Mr. Tolman cut into the greasy half chicken. He ate quietly. During the conversation with Nell, he had watched the diner population grow twofold, and glyphs continue to chase each other across the television screen. He knew the mystery of those symbols. He also knew it was just as important
to fathom the reality the symbols were supposed to represent. Separately
the real causes responsible for the changing numbers. And that changing
the numbers was cause, too. Not bad luck, but human volatility, produced
by human actions. Positive feedback. Another cycle. Call it the Romance of
the Gamble. Followed by herd instinct. One big moo at the slaughter. Dad
never knew. Was never curious to learn. To avoid. To take advantage. Made
decisions accordingly. Suffered with the rest accordingly. The potatoes
were old and overcooked. He ate them anyway. For the moment, he put up
with the best this side of Putnam Bridge had to offer. Of the three families
that had just entered, only one presented new coats. And just the children,
who would outgrow them so fast. All five of the work buddies had boots
wellworn yet now too clean. One wore a vinyl letterman jacket celebrating
the recent championship of his favorite team, which happened to also be
the favorite for almost everyone within a certain radius. The industry was
in decline, surviving mostly in name. Symbols of another kind. Living. Self-
fulfilling. Self-casting dramatis personae. Surgeon-like Tolman carved flesh
off the humorous and cleaned out the crevice between the radius and ulna,
and played with actuarial models in his head. One in Five. Through the dirty
windows, he glimpsed darkness and chaos advancing. Everyday.

— Yes, you take care, too, Eliot. They say it’s going to snow. Be careful
not to get stuck overnight.

— I will. And thank you. Nell.

Ralph Eliot Tolman knotted his scarf, buttoned his overcoat, balanced his
duffel. He exited The Brakelight Diner just as the fiery horses reached their
stable. The dusk hunters were already launched, their quick wings constantly
at stroke. The Bull waded out into a deepening blue. An old Ram pulled in
between a Blazer and Corolla. Under it the gravel groaned. No ignorant clash.
Just creaks from old bones. And now Oldbones stepped down, slammed the
doors shut, nodded howdoyoudo, checked the tarp that sheltered the treasure
in his bed, and loitered a bit to finish the smoke that never left his mouth.
Smokeandoldbones watched the stranger walk the length of the driveway
’cause he’d never seen nobody walk down 3_ except for groups of kids.
But they couldn’t drive yet, and they lived down the road. Odd. Ain’t one
to be easily moved, Smokeandoldbones did now imagine some proverbial
starborne observer lost and wandering among wildmen of Earth, immune
to our sickness and untroubled by our problems. Send us the tragic greater
man, he thought, not alien in disguise. When the bells on the door shook as
Oldbones entered Maggie’s place, young Ralph heard them rattle dully from
down the road beyond the headhigh hedgerow.

Although advancing dark made it hard to see, Ralph was very much
aware of the ditch three feet deep that ran four feet clear of the roadway. Walk
the thin line between. Thick with weedgrass in summer. The ditch trapped
oily run-off from storms and funneled it away from the creek. Good idea.
Civic management. Some hope at least. From Putnam Bridge, route 3 and
Deer Run Creek diverged. At this point the creek was about a hundred and
fifty yards to the left, well behind the first row of ranch houses. Nearly a
quarter mile deeper into Hogar, just before the metal mailbox atop which a
painted hound reliably kept his post, the drainage disappeared underground.
Connected to the municipal sewers, maybe. Who invented? C. the Romans.
Have need. Will engineer. After the ditch, there were no cross street for
about three-eighths mile. Ralph cut short through McIntosh’s unfenced yard,
whistling to announce his benign trespass. Used to mow the man’s lawn.
Damn time maneuvering the machine to avoid the exposed roots of the several
longstanding oaks. Wonder how he’s doing. At his age. He’s got children but
they had never been solvent. At least the splitlevel’s bought and paid for. Then
through the unkempt lot where over the years a dilapidated Beetle ruled over
more and more mechanical junk. Tommy had said he could get it off the guy
cheap and we’d restore it and paint it yellow and race it Saturdays behind the
stripmall. Tommy had never been good at following through. An antique gas
pump at which they used to cast stones still stood guard over the dominion
of the Beetle. But then, what have we here? Half-cleared. Remnants of corn.
Whose toil bestowed on that plot of ground? Never know until you try, sons
of Emer. Highs and lows. 60s. No, low 50s. Per barrel. Bad bet. Having tried,
what did you learn? The lot marked the poorer end of Maple Street. From
there, Ralph headed for the faint rush of running water. Eventually he came
across a narrow trail made by years of trample.

Once upon a time, small herds of the creek’s namesake began to clear a
path as they hoofed repeatedly between ancient pastures north of what was
now fisherman’s point and the dark southern woods. The woods had been
cut down to build the old Carlyle, and poor drainage out of catchment had
turned many of those northern fields to marsh. In the present most of the
remaining white-tails stayed up in the cold hills where snowmelt started or well downstream on the irrigated flats of industrial farms, but there had been the occasional lost visitors. On a few of those occasions, a slightly confused individual leapt clear of the chainlinkfence and ambled aimlessly across the railroad switchyard until the guard mutts picked up its scent. The dead never taught the living; the animals never learned.

To spend time by Deer Run Creek was to lose track of it. Paladins exiled from lost realms founded thirteen new kingdoms on primeval banks full broad and defended them from the dragon that laired beyond the forbidden barrier of Putnam Bridge. Wherein war and wrack and wonder had since taken turns. One day Sir Ralph came with a coat of arms on his pillowcase tunic, and every other gentle knight wanted him their own to draw. Tommy asked for fire—just fire. Couldn’t understand why Ralphie added Renewal the salamander. And poor Lucy stopped playing because she didn’t want to soil her emblem; so a lesser, disposable one had to be made. Then suddenly cowboys and Indians appeared, chasing each other up and down the trail. Neither side could win because no one wanted to play the loser’s part, despite history every boy knew. An intrepid explorer made a new map for new players. The Trail of Deer-run. For several years after that, soldiers stalked the enemy and tried to capture its flag. The Halloway Gang, that was Tom Guthrie and the Tolman brothers, ran elaborate schemes against their rivals the team of Reeds and Coopers. The younger Tolman especially could pick you apart and you’d never know how until, at the end of the day, after you’d lost, you asked him to explain his steps; surprisingly, he explained yours. Tommy and Bobby, older and bigger, rapidly tired of the cat-and-mouse, and with barrages of orange pellets they turned it into a ronin’s game with nothing to guard and nothing to save. The barks deepened. The pursuits grew quicker, meaner, relentless. When woods and creek could no longer support their strife, the adversaries turned to the open fields of organized athletics. That was then. In the past. To the cool waters they returned from time to time. But separately. For different reasons. Once more, a silent shade neither soldier nor cowboy nor knight walked the trail along Deer Run Creek in the direction of the simple earthly plot once bequeathed to him.
Ralph Tolman lifted the clay wild turkey between the toolshed and
swingset. True original native. Guard the yard from redcoats. And these
metal things, means to an end, yet hold so much significance. They dangled
in hoops by the hips of doormen. Transferable. A form for exchange. Anyone
is free to use. Not like a person can give another his index finger to get into
the office or the car. To his heart. To be him. In ziploc, father’s idea. Kept from
oxidizing. The deadbolt to the backdoor turned smoothly. The old man knew
how to maintain his house. A house that was his. And that was enough.

Ralph kept the house dark. Stealthily he glided through the kitchen and
hallway and into the living room, and spied through its window. The curtains
were drawn open. That was Gary’s work. Insideout outsidein allthesame. The
cul-de-sac was empty. The vans have departed. Up and down the street about
half of the houses were lit. None at this end save that of Westly. Cordoned off
by tape, the Guthrie house was dead silent. Gary had been to their father’s
twice already, and each time he received condolences from neighbors with
characteristic politic and diligence. Convey our best. Three dead from this
street alone. Including the gunman. Of twelve total. One in critical condition.
One missing and presumed. Such a shame. The second time to fetch dad’s
suit; that was this morning. The first time to fetch the animals. The first time,
mindful Gary took it upon himself to clean the stains off of the street. Some
cameraman filmed the chore out of morbid curiosity. The miscreant staff at
the hospital watched it on television out of the same. That was before dad
died. Held on for two days. Julie arrived from LA before sundown, made
it just in time. The vans would be back to record new reactions to the latest
development. Reactions new but not. The exchangeable forms of tragedy. He
was a brave man. Righteous man. Such a shame. Our best. Ralph drew the
curtains close. For now, the house at the end of Halloway Street remained
unlit and unchanged.

Julie Tolman had emptied the house of much of what she wanted the
day she moved out. All that remained were artifacts dear to dad of a Julie
that was to have been absorbed, transformed, and outgrown. Perhaps to
still time, dad left her room as she had left it. Little could have been done
to reassure him that he would always have memories. That those memories
already belonged to him, and lived as long as he lived. That whatever did not
would invariably create new worlds in which his part could no longer be his.
Ralphie, with youthful impertinence compounded by precocity, had declared
that to memorialize the living was to kill them a little. Hardly wise. Saddened his father to no purpose. And hardly knowing. For the son knew only the Jack who stubbornly fought the tides of time. Jack Tolman, church elder, father of three, was found. Two days later. There were other Jacks. There had been others. Faintly lit in old albums. In the testimonies of friends. As there would be many Julies. The unexpected early death of the only person who could mirror his experiences caused Jack to hold to living memory a little tighter. This was the last Jack, the one Ralphie criticized. The one that held onto others to hold on to himself. Five when mom died. Julie was eight. Gary ten. Although lately his youngest son would tell vivid new stories of her, Jack never really understood the imperial Ms. Tolman who touched down in Hong Kong, shook a few hands, only to take off to some other farflung meetingplace; nor the Jules who threw her baby brother his surprise thirtieth birthday party only to miss it completely. He never understood because he always sought to reconcile the versions.

Gary, too, remained in repository on Halloway Street. Trophies to the champ. Posters of old heros. Declarations and Constitutions. Notes for an uncomplicated bildungsroman. Not even. Archived not so much as effects but as monadic indicators. As though fragments, however many, however few, in whichever combination, would always add up to a constant sum. The perfect coincidence between thought and reality. And whenever Gary Tolman found himself wayward or decomposing, he could always revivify the image of himself by revisiting. He, not dad, kept time there. That was a difference. Yet dad looked forward to those regular visits and enjoyed their peripatetic conversations over memorabilia. They both did. Oddly, the rehearsals encouraged both of them to get on. They took what they created there and moved in the world as such. Which meant, Ralph now realized, that what was thought constant could have changed, too. What changed was brought there to become as if constant. Gary employee of the week was Gary player of the month. Gary the good father was Gary the good son. And the grandchildren who wanted their share of refrigerator real estate thought similarly. Meant to be. To be born. To be part of that household. To confirm Jack to himself in his old age. Whatever they were they would always be true Tolmans.
Of the Tolman house, to each an equal share, no less in space, validity, and pleasure. Fairminded Gary had offered to buy out his siblings. They declined. Nevertheless, Ralph said, they must defy Tocqueville and never divide the estate. Jules laughed and corrected her younger brother, citing themselves as case examples that substantiated the Frenchman’s much more significant sociological conclusions of America. We were uncommon and therefore under threat. We must be part of the middling stories. Of course, Knowitall Ralphie added that, from your argument Jules, the metaphor of landed estates would be incorrect for the current situation, because economies did dramatically increase certain kinds of dividend, and solve the problem of ever-diminishing quotient; and he even quoted something peripherally pertinent from Smith. It wasn’t the same house that had to be passed in ever-smaller pieces from generation to generation. New houses, new stories, all the time. In the mean time, Gary felt like they were playing a joke on him. But no battle here. No drama. The second and third borne agree. When the time comes you may have this middling whole here, Big Brother, to do with as you please. So even now, climbing the stairs to the room that became his alone when Gary moved out, and which ceased to be his almost one and a half decades ago, Ralph felt he disturbed a little the living and the dead.

To memorialize the dead was to make them live a little longer; was that the belated-realized correlative? In faint darkness and broken silence, Ralph Tolman leaned back from his old drafting desk, stared out the window at the dead-end, and tried to remember that man who, in perfect keeping with his tragic character, ran unarmed toward the sound of gunshots.

As he descended the stairs, Ralph resisted the urge to slide down the banister. His hands were full, after all. No windows in the garage. Let there be light. As the instrument had figured importantly in Jack Tolman’s world, it, too, would figure in Ralph’s. Meaningful because it had been so to another. Son to father to son. A handful of times when he’d return from college, Cooper and Billy Faraday would come over to jam. They’d have to move the car out of the garage, which in the snowy months Ralphie was very reluctant to do. Thanksgiving, Christmas, summer. Traditional. Happened across all suburbia. Garageband. But that stopped after Billy moved to New York to start a real project. To keep starting real projects. The William Faraday Project reunion. Poor Billy, grandiose vision, mediocre talent, little skill. At
least he put out his objective eye. Every artist needed to, to continue. Even if
the critics were right. Even if the last one had been a failure, the next would
be revolutionary. But then, artists are prone to hurt themselves, too. Ironic,
or perhaps not so much, that Mr. Ralph Eliot Tolman would become the sole
owner and proprietor of several revolutionary risk-calculators that allowed
his clients to do better than other folks.

The guitar needed new pickups. Maybe it ought to be restored. Somewhere Ralphie had read that Hendrix doubled the length of wire coiled
in his, so of course he tried to do the same. Maybe if he’d been as good. Cross-
purpose. What it did and what his hands wanted to play. The modifications
chopped off the high-end. A little out of phase. And the instrument itself.
Ralph kept the ’72 Stratocaster clone on which his father had taught him how
to play at the house just to have something to mess around with whenever he
visited. Now he stowed it, the duffel, and a box of his other belongings in the
backseat of the Challenger, immobilizing them with rags and beach towels.
Quietly, he exited the backdoor, careful to not lock himself out, and replaced
the key under its hiding place. Then he took a moment and walked to the
edge of the backyard, which bordered the creek. Only, it was three stories to
the water below.

The slope was not so steep that an athletic person couldn’t slide down
and climb back up. Tommy used to bound up and down it like a mountain
goat. Or half-goat satyr. Rise and run. Rise over run. Still, if a person fell wrong.
One wrong fall and. On the other side of the creek were twin sets of railroad
tracks. The switchyard ended about a thousand running strides north, and if
a train came this far south, it had better have been steered right. The tracks
warmed undersun, the creek cooled undershade. Next to the tracks a fence.
Then a strip of woodland. Beyond fence and wood, the wrong side of the
tracks, even worse off than poor Hogar. Here the creek was wide and moved
unhurriedly. In pockets protected by rocks or a fallen tree, the water slowed
to standstill, almost. Gravely still water almost deep enough to swim in. On
the near side, there was a unique spot, wide and self-contained, sheltered by
birches and white pines, that long ago had become one of their favorites. A
spot they had engineered by digging out the muddy bottom and reinforcing
the rim with clay and boulders. A spot from which he felt dispossessed the
first time he spied Tom and Luce gambling on romance there.
For a couple of years, the friends wouldn’t talk about it. The romance had become a fact, like fading hairline, or fall-inducing gravity. Or death. Useless to talk about it unless. Then one day, with Ralph home between the end of a semester and the start of an internship or some other summer project he had lined up, as the two boys were cruising in the car, Tom felt he could finally start.

— Ralphie, me and you, we must’ve switched at some point bro.
— What, so now you want to drive?
— No that’s not what I meant.
— What do you mean, then?
— For the longest time I didn’t care. You know, I was older and me and Reed and Cooper, we started to do our own thing. So you guys took care of each other, you and Luce.
— Then we grew up.
— Right. Then you grew up, too. And you sorta developed on your own. Like you started to mow lawns, and we’d do it together. Then you fixed them mowers, and stuff like that, and I could help. But then you went down to Carlyle to learn engineering cause the school here didn’t have it and well, we couldn’t go with you. I can crank a wrench but dyno curves be damned!

Lead, follow, or get out of the way.
— So I went away and stopped looking after her.
— Everybody, bro. At that point you were looking out for yourself. But yeah, her especially
— You almost ran out of here, too, as I recall.
— ‘Til in the wider world I found guys that could run circles around me. All the plays that we practiced as kids, that you showed me, you know, the progressions, always have a target for every second, out, drag, slant, post, even splitting the zone, I knew them but I couldn’t keep up. I couldn’t keep up with the other team’s adjustments, their players’ natural instincts. I ran out of talent.

.— And what you learned never really spoke in your own voice, I’m guessing.
— Huh?
— In your head. That’s why your throws were often late.
— Hm. You’re right. It was sorta like you talking me through it, or the coaches. I was never really myself.
— Which brought you back.
— I had to come back, and that’s when we passed each other along the way going opposite.
— Therefore we were never really in competition.
— Nah, Ralphie. Not you and me. You didn’t walked with us anymore, not at the same pace. Plus you were never in it ‘cause you were always willing to leave. You’d already kinda left by the time me ‘n her hooked up. You didn’t have to have her. Want her. Need her. Love her. I did.

Ralph smelled the sentimentality and histrionic as surely as he smelled gasoline vapor. She was running rich. Remember to tune the carburetors. Did he ever plan to come back? That was a legitimate question. For her? For anyone? Even if she called out? Protect them from themselves. Tom and Ralph had pulled into the parking lot of the go-kart track, racing having become a sort of tradition whenever the latter came home. Ralph carefully popped the hood to dissipate the heat. He questioned the carburetor, as JPS would have put it. A relation of being with non-being. A relation of being with being. On their way in, he held Tommy by the shoulders. The change in his tone, like a harsh stroke of hospital light, seemed to age the younger, slender man. It really seemed like they did switch, Ralph chuckled. He questioned the romance, careful not to offend.

— Listen Tom, I know you. We’ve been friends a long time, right? Since you made fun of my valentine card in Ms. Moore’s class and I walloped you for it.
— Yeah, we both have our tempers. But that month of detention forced us to become friends.
In a way.
— We almost went at it again, too. Listen. I know you and I know Lucy. I know what she’s looking for, what she thinks she wants. So I’m telling you now, don’t love her too well. Saveandbesaved is a dangerous strategy. It easily disappoints. And it changes you. To the point where it’s the only clear thing. The only way things can be clear. Don’t stake your futures on the old story. She needs a chance to learn to take care of herself. And fail, too, if it comes to that. When she does she may not love you back, but it’s your only chance to love each other right. Don’t go looking for dragons to fight.

Tom thought about Ralph’s criticism, which lately had grown as elusive as the critic his old friend, but all he could muster was.
— And I know you, Ralphie. Don’t you forget us man, no matter what happens.

Couldn’t. If he tried. The past was past; what did you do with it? Contain, Ralph supposed. At the time, Ralph had sensed in the urgency of the romance subtle indication of a destructive drama beginning, the kind that relentlessly sought the only cataclysm it wanted to know. Sought. Wrought. And in its wake. Now, more than a handful of years later, he would learn even more. Not just how the world made human sense. How humans tried repeatedly to make a sensible world. To make the story true. And to do so in the absence of an Author often meant doing something to really call Him out. Even through repeated failures. Looked though he did Ralph could not see through the dark to find the place along the crooked banks of Deer Run Creek. But he remembered it distinctly, and for a moment it became a sort of blind spot in his mapping mind.

Our fates had never been permanently written and inextricably bound, Ralph declared solemnly, although much was read into the observation that we worked from, struggled with, and lived by things in common. A ball one threw the other caught. This earth to move one dug the other hauled. This life one died another buried. These were nothing but acts with changing cast. And to each actor on the same stage they were different dramas. Perhaps an inkling of this modern freedom scared Tom very much. Burdened him with its weightlessness. Like and unlike father. There was no Story of Tom and too many stories. Not change, but nothing to change into. Everything was possible, including nothing. Nothing as a possibility. Made him draw his circle tighter. Reinforce the ties-that-bind. Bring the drama to crisis. A drama where nothing is insignificant, for everything is redeemable; that is the promise. Act in hopes that acting would make significance real. Then how to end it. Last Sunday morning, Tom Guthrie resolved.

For the protean cohort, the same had been the opposite. Produced the opposite. Risk. Increase. Multiply. Sad to always be returning to unchanged and ever unchanging places. Inconsolably sad to need to return. The dear places that made us, like water, ought not to have been caught in cupped hands. So, too, ought we to be like water. Let us be half-remembered. Half-missed. Our lives half-finished, and so half-started. In as many varieties as the habitats of our minds would support. Tommy feared it, and groped for a story he knew, and tried to make it his. A vague drama that had already been
lived by someone somewhere else, used by them out of necessity, to deal with something inexplicable, and so here and now could only have been imitated. Could only be real as violent imitation. Capable and lucky, Ralph didn’t need to guard against the deepest fear latent in their common constitution. He learned how to build new bridges, pass through new thresholds, attempt new stories. The fear that shot through Tommy’s veins and led to tragedy agitated in Ralph a kind of joy. Surer under foot, Ralph turned and walked away.

The 340 sixpack throbbed instantly to life. Unfired for so long, it gurgled a bit. Then it burped. Then it drank steadily and settled into a robust hum. At certain harmonies, the firewall vibrated eversoslightly. Pulling out of the garage, Ralph already knew what was to be discovered. He had found the meaningful spot. The night was too dark and he was too outofshape to take the slope, but he felt the spot had been disturbed. Why the search dogs hadn’t dug at it he couldn’t explain. Be that as it may, he left Gary a quick note attached to the refrigerator handle. Sliding out under the garage door as it closed, he laughed a little to himself at his physical decline. The Challenger, painted gunmetal gray with glossy black racing stripes, slid well under the cover of night. But the rebuilt engine that pulled the old beast forward made quite a racket. Now there was a feat, he thought with promethean pride, we had tamed fire, and harvested combustion. A little at a time. Combustible people, too. Put them to work. Somehow the excess roar and inefficiency of these machines became signs of halcyon days. Just to hear the familiar cadence, he revved the engine thrice. Each time, he intoned affectionately: dona eis requiem. Let those who needed to—let them bury the incident in a suitable plot and get on with it. These things I take are mine. With hardly a glance back, Ralph Tolman took off down Halloway Street, turned right at Murphy’s onto route 3, and sped for Putnam Bridge and the ambitious, faraway Metropolis to the EastNortheast.

Gary would conclude matters satisfactorily when he returned to take possession of his father’s house. He was the right man to play the last part properly, as the restless dead might have wanted. The note led him to his mark.