

## FATHER TO THE MAN

Down in the room Leonard asked Sky if he knew where Miltin was and Sky told him, "He hurt hisself." Miltin was standing in the doorway with blood smeared on his shirt. Slashed his wrists with a coffee can lid. Guards found him and carried him to the infirmary where they stitched him up and sent him down to therapy so he wouldn't miss all of the afternoon's session. He came into the room on his own power and sat in the circle. Occasionally his head wagged to and fro like a newborn's; he seemed withered, as if he had shrunk-en in size. He made Leonard feel crushable but the others in the group didn't seem fazed. Sky covered his tight thighs with big hands and sat back on his Sunday school chair so the screws squeaked, "sheeeit...", he murmured.

Leonard led the group. He got everybody, including Miltin, through it. He walked out of there looking like he had just seen a war on the moon. Found his car in the parking lot and pointed himself out of town.

Whitman was eighteen, still living with his mother, Sheila. Their house was in the suburbs west of Chicago; in order to visit his son Leonard had to drive two hours on

truck-crowded Interstate. Leonard rented a cottage in the Indiana dunes outside of Michigan City, site of the State Prison. Past the dunes he faced a bleak trip skirting old industrial Gary, Hammond, Calumet City and Chicago itself. The month was December, but there was still no snow on the ground; the windows of buildings along the way all appeared black.

Leonard made it a point to visit Whitman whenever he could. Sheila was fine about Leonard's coming, but she made it clear she tolerated no bullshit from him. She was a copywriter for an ad agency and once she made a list of adjectives she associated with her ex-husband: bossy, boyish, capricious, cranky.

"Unreliable," Leonard offered, anxious to get to the end of the alphabet.

"Fatal charm," Sheila pronounced, not angry at him anymore but perpetually incredulous at his behavior. Getting his PhD. had depressed Leonard to the point of telling her he did not want to be good at making money, which he wasn't. Their possessions dwindled to the contents of a faded Chevy van that moved them from Chicago to Louisiana to Colorado and Arizona where Leonard dropped psychological research and started making jewelry.

Sheila took Whitman and moved back to Chicago. Leonard kept in touch, but he played by her rules and tried not to distract the boy. Sheila insisted on parental dominion and

Leonard respected that. During his second marriage he stayed away most of the time. His second wife did not want to have kids and, at first, Leonard was glad. But it was not long before his wife's antipathy turned into a dark streak between them. He came to think his wife suffered from some wound; she left him for a skindiver on the Baja peninsula. Leonard went to work at the Indiana State Prison.

On the tenth anniversary of their divorce Leonard brought Sheila a sweet potato pie that he baked himself. It was a gift, he did not intend to eat it with her, he just wanted her to have it. Sheila was not home and Leonard left the pie on the kitchen table and went to watch Whitman do his juggling routine at a neighborhood festival in the city. When Sheila returned she found the pie -- a large slice was cut out of it, a saucer and fork were in the sink. There was a note written in ballpoint pen on a brown paper grocery sack: Peaceful Tenth to You Love, L.

Nobody home. Sheila was gone for the weekend with a friend, Leonard let himself into her house with the key she hid under an overturned flower pot. He stood in the kitchen, quiet as an Indian, admiring the place. Aluminum sink was gleaming, the refrigerator gurgled once and was silent. There was a reed basket on top of the refrigerator with a clump of ripe bananas in it. Leonard took one and peeled it. He pulled off the heavy black oxford shoes he wore to the prison

and stepped on to the livingroom carpet in his stocking feet.

Sheila had a black corduroy couch in her livingroom. Leonard went to it and eased himself down, taking care with his posture and rate of breathing. At last he sighed. The couch, he noted, was impeccable, not a trace of lint. No matter what else was happening, Sheila's spaces were always well attended to.

Whitman's high school Senior picture was on top of the TV. Leonard winced when he saw it. He thought it tidied Whitman up, obscured what was strong and lively in him. Leonard licked banana resin off the tips of his fingers. He had taken a lot of pictures of Whitman over the years and he preferred any one of them to the hack work he was looking at. It represented another order of experience from what he was concerned with. Whitman's smile was dazzling.

Afternoon light, meager to begin with, was practically gone. Leonard went to sleep on the couch.

Whitman turned on a light and stood in the middle of the room. He carried a canvas sack over his shoulder like Santa Claus -- he let it drop to the carpet. Leonard heard bowling pins, daggers, plastic hoops and plates clattering down on themselves. He saw Whitman and got unsteadily to his feet. His son embraced him.

Whitman was juggling the next day as part of the half-time show at a high school basketball game. He had gone out

and taught himself to juggle and Leonard marveled at his dexterity and acrobat's lithe body as well as at his initiative. He liked it that his son was not drawn to academics, that he chose to rely on physical skill. Whitman and his performing partner, Jeff, taught him a couple of their routines and, when he could, Leonard performed with them, playing a comical aide de camp. Whitman had invited him to open their basketball act.

That night they made dinner together. Leonard showed Whitman how to make an apricot curry with dried fruit and tofu they found in the refrigerator. Whitman put candles on the table and lit them. The candles gave a cupped, private light. Leonard and Whitman sat near each other and talked about taking photographs. When the meal was through, they left their dishes in the kitchen sink and Whitman showed slides he had taken the month before when the two of them spent a day in the dunes. There was a close-up of a furry coated mullein stalk. Whitman asked about it and Leonard was able to tell him that mullein blew in on winds from Russia, across the Bering Strait.

They turned in early, but Leonard had trouble sleeping. Maybe it was the disposition of the heavens, a jarred biological clock, being in Sheila's bed: he ran through the possibilities as they came to mind. He was sweating. Finally he got out of bed and dragged a comforter after him into the living room. He was heading for the corduroy couch when some-

thing -- in the kitchen, wind by the back door, he could not tell -- made him think of Miltin. He looked over his shoulder and for a moment could see Miltin covered with water and shrinking down in the kitchen doorway.

Jeff was a good kid, thought Leonard. Good looking and friendly and he worked hard to keep up with Whitman. His very qualities, Leonard thought proudly, proved Whitman's superiority. Whitman could go all the way, reach juggling's pinnacle, become an ultimate juggler.

The game was already in progress when they arrived. Teenage noise! Leonard could hardly believe his ears. The place was shaking up through the soles of his shoes. They were in a gym, a real basketball hall with pull-out bleachers and a shining waxed blond wood floor. An usher led them to a deserted place under the bleachers where they could get ready for their performance. Crushed Coke cups and dusty blue and silver streamers littered the floor between the steel struts bracing the seating above them.

Whitman and Jeff dressed alike: black bell-bottoms and white sailor shirts, navy watch caps on their heads. They were made-up as mimes. Leonard wore the white shirt he had worn to work the day before with red, white and blue suspenders and a red bow tie. Whitman loaned him the accessories, he also gave him clown white for his face.

Jeff was rummaging in the canvas sack for some bean bags

to warm up with. He found three: red, yellow and blue, and tossed them one at a time to Leonard. They were going to practice the opening where Leonard tossed each bag to Whitman and he tossed them on to Jeff.

Leonard put the first bag into play and then the second. Before he could toss the last bag, the first one -- the red bag -- was coming back at him. He caught it left handed and threw the blue bag on reflex. Yellow bag coming. Whitman with a smile on his face, having fun, turned the blue bag over and tossed it back. They had a rhythm going.

Yellow, red, blue, yellow, red.

Leonard was trying not to laugh with excitement. He was doing better than he had ever done before. Catching and tossing, catching, tossing; air horn blasts and stomping feet overhead. Jeff clapping his hands in encouragement. It was like the first time he ever rode a bicycle -- wobbling front to back but suddenly he was wheeling across the empty parking lot where his Dad had brought him that Sunday evening, laughing out loud as though he was being tickled all over. He felt the laughter coming up and stuffing his cheeks.

Whitman sharpened the pace. Leonard's hands were not quick enough, he was giggling unabashedly. The red bag hit him in the chest. He went with the blow, pretending that its force knocked him on his butt. Hardwood floor, he went down faster than he expected and it hurt, but he sat there like a clowning panda, his legs out and arms akimbo.

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Leonard leaned against the edge of the bleachers watching Whitman and Jeff. They were in the middle of the big polished floor whirling bowling pins and daggers through the gymnasium air. Leonard opened the performance by drawing a train of multicolored kerchiefs from his sleeve. The kerchiefs were feather light, he cast them in the air using both hands, they fluttered open briefly -- for a moment they described a rainbow arc. Leonard caught them and flung them round his shoulders when he left the court. He stood by the bleachers watching Whitman and Jeff and the colors hung down like a mantle, trailing to the ground on either side of him.

Whitman wanted to take him to a hotdog place he thought was great, so Leonard was unable to get away before dusk. Hotdogs were a food Leonard had not eaten in years, not since the days with Sheila. When Whitman was small, they used to buy hotdogs every week or two. In some way hotdogs were reassuring then, they prepared them the same way no matter where they lived -- "Chicago hotdogs" they called them. A Chicago hotdog included fresh sliced cucumber, tomatoes and celery salt. In his suburb, Whitman had found a place that made genuine Chicago hotdogs. They were delicious, Leonard agreed.

Leonard embraced Whitman before starting off. Whitman opened Leonard's car door for him. It was the merest thing to do, but Whitman did it with such offhand knowing grace Leonard felt like crying at the handsomeness of it. He did not



think of her by name, but he thought of Sheila. He got in the car and lifted his hand in farewell to his son. By then it was night.

Leonard had a two-hour drive to think about things. The last part, through the dunes, was on unlit two-lane blacktop. Leonard found that following his headlights down this dark and narrow road helped focus his thinking. He determined to call Sheila as soon as he got home. Thank her for letting him use her house. Tell her how relaxing it was for him to be able to go there. That he liked her couch.

Snow flurries dusted in off Lake Michigan. The snow came in hard little pellets that tingled across the windshield and the car's steel hood. It was colder here than in the western suburbs. Leonard left the car at the end of its sandy track and hurried to his kitchen door. He let himself in and turned on the light -- went into the livingroom where he kept the telephone.

He did not take off his jacket, did not sit. Leonard picked up the phone, blew on his chilled fingers and pressed the buttons of Sheila's number. Whitman answered on the first ring.

Shela was not home yet. She was late. Whitman asked how the drive back to Indiana had been.

"Fine, but it's snowing here."

"Is it? There's no snow here."

"Just flurries. It's too cold to amount to much. It's Lake Effect."

"Probably none will fall out here," said Whitman, "the sky is pretty clear."

Leonard hesitated. He could hear wind blowing around the corners of his house, slapping the plastic sheets he covered his windows with for warmth. "Probably not," he said.