

AND THROUGH THE WOODS

you say to that, Harold?"

"Mr. Gordon—"

"Yes, Harold?"

"Ah, nothing. Or as Ethel puts it, 'Let's not think about it.' Now that raises an interesting point. Does she mean, 'Let's think nought about' or does she mean 'Let's think not about it'? Rather the latter, I suppose, considering the good woman's limitations. I would also find it difficult to think nought, I imagine. In the same category as contemplating infinity, I should think."

"Mr. Gordon, I don't think it's necessary to be so sarcastic in front of the boy."

"Not at all necessary, but then neither are a lot of other things, when you stop to think about it. Eating or breathing, for instance. Not really necessary, either one of them, but they do make life a great deal more pleasant, don't you agree? Or don't you? Living, for that matter, is, I'm discovering, entirely dispensable if not downright unpleasant at times. And conversation with solicitous jellyfish."

"If you'll excuse me, I'll look in on the ladies," said Mr. Howley.

"And if I don't excuse you? What then? Sit here and pout, perhaps? Perish the thought. Perish the body, too. Go, Harold, and tell the ladies the latest exploits of the old tyrant. I'm sure your mother-in-law can embellish and your wife can sympathize."

"Mr. Gordon, you're not exactly being fair."

"Not exactly, but close enough for my purposes. Go on, Harold. Look in on the women."

Mr. Howley left the room and the old man fingered the loop of skin on the right side of his face. It was a semi-rigid roll, about the thickness of a man's thumb, connected just below his ear and under his jowl.

"Looks like a small sausage, doesn't it, Charlie? Oh, for God's sake, boy, don't look so surprised! Did you think I didn't know it was there? My misplaced mutated goiter, that's what I call it. Poetic, in a sense."

"Does it hurt, Grandpa? If you don't mind my asking, I mean."

"Don't mind at all, boy. Enjoy it. In fact, that's the real tragedy of it all. For the first time in my life I have a real-honest-to-God conversation piece and nobody will mention it. What's the point in having an operation if no one wants to hear about it? Nope, that's what! Except for a few possibly salutary effects on the health, of course."

"How do you shave under it?"

"Ha, ha! By glory, boy, there may be hope for you yet. That's the most sensible question I've heard in years. The fact is, it's harder than hell. I use a straight-edge razor—you know, the kind you sharpen on a strop—and I just scratch away and hope for the best. Do a pretty good job of it, too."

"What's it for?"

"For? Well, it's to store spare parts, you might say. Come over here and I'll show you."

The old man cocked his head to one side and pointed to a series of tiny scars under his chin. "You see, they just pulled a hunk of skin from under here and tied it up here." He bent his head so that Charles could see the small scar that ran down the middle of his forehead. "They took some skin off my forehead and stretched what was left a little tighter to replace it. My sausage is in case the skin on my forehead doesn't hold. Interesting, isn't it?"

"Boy, I'll say! But Grandpa?"

"Yes?"

"What are those brown spots on your forehead for?"

"Ha. Those are there to cause trouble. Those come from X-ray and radium treatments."

"Gosh! What for?"

"You don't know? No, obviously you don't. Your poor, naive, ignorant mother. I don't

suppose she intends to tell you about the funeral, either. Good intentions, my boy—you know what road they pave. Well, this doesn't answer your question, does it? I've got skin cancer, Charles. The X-ray was supposed to help but I rather think it spread it."

"You mean you're going to die, Grandpa?"

"That's the ordinary way to terminate things. I doubt that I shall ascend directly. I'm sorry. You don't really deserve my sarcasm. Yes, Charles, I'm going to die and rather subsequently, I imagine. Within a year or so."

"Gee I'm sorry, Grandpa."

"By God, I believe you really are. Thank you, Charlie. For your kindness I shall repay you with some advice. You won't heed it, of course, but no matter. It's the prerogative of the old to bore the young with platitudes, and I'm just selfish enough to take advantage of it."

"Where should I start? Suppose we try the end and work backwards. If you must die, and I think you must, do it with decent alacrity. If you linger on as I have so uncouthly done, people's sympathy soon turns to embarrassment, which, since people do not appreciate being embarrassed, soon turns to anger and dislike. They will take to skulking about, casting surreptitious glances at you to see if your condition has worsened, and conjecturing wistfully about the possibility of an early demise. They will squirm in your presence and their talk, if they talk at all, will carefully avoid any mention of the phenomena which you yourself may find most interesting. You will be treated like a pariah in general."

"That's if you're lucky, mind you. If you're not, they will spend hours on end fawning over you, telling you to take it easy, and inquiring solicitously every few minutes as to your health. I've been lucky."

"Under no circumstances marry below your station. If you are a college graduate, marry nothing less than a college graduate. If you go no farther than high school, make sure your bride has her diploma. Don't be deluded by 'love'; it's fooled wiser men than you. Marry a girl whom you like, who doesn't repel you physically, and most important, one you can talk to. If you're wise, you

won't marry until you're thirty and have been as sinful as possible, but I suppose that's too much to hope for."

"Above all else, if you would be happy, remain ignorant. There is nothing so isolated and lonely as an intelligent man, and nothing so eternally blissful as a fool. The world loves a man who can not, or at any rate does not, think, because he doesn't stir them, he doesn't make them feel inadequate. Intelligence only serves to make other uncomfortable and the intelligent one dissatisfied. Stay as pathetically ingenuous as you are."

The old man stopped and his grandson regarded him in silence. "Didn't understand a word of it, did you? It's probably just as well. Nobody really understands, anyway."

"Will you have to die alone, Grandpa?"

"Good God! What makes you ask a question like that?"

"You just seem so alone, is all."

"We're all alone. All of us."

"Why?"

"Why? Why? Because nobody cares, that's why. Nobody really cares about anybody else."

"I care, Grandpa. I don't want you to die."

"Oh, you don't. Why don't you? I'm certainly not any use to you."

"I like you, that's why. I didn't use to, but I do now. I guess I didn't know you before. I was too young."

"But now that you are mature . . . I'm sorry Charlie, the habits of cynicism are hard to shake. Thank you. You almost restore my faith in mankind. The third generation, they say, returns to hod-carriers, but maybe not."

"Grandpa, would you like to take a walk with me by the river?"

"I haven't been outdoors for months. I don't know . . . Yes, I'd like to. We can go through the woods and I'll show you where I used to hide when I was your age and I had done something bad. It's a little cave with bushes in front of it, so you can't see the entrance until you're right on top of it. Oh, I haven't seen that place for years. Here, give me your hand, boy. Help me up."

In silence, they struggled into their coats and went out into the rain, leaving the chatter-filled kitchen behind them.

