# The Christian Roommates

# John Updike

ORSON ZIEGLER came straight to Harvard from the small South Dakota town where his father was the doctor. Orson, at eighteen, was half an inch under six feet tall, with a weight of 164 and an IQ of 155. His eczematous cheeks and vaguely irritated squint—as if his face had been for too long transected by the sight of a level horizon—masked a definite self-confidence. As the doctor’s son, he had always mattered in the town. In his high school he had been class president, valedictorian, and captain of the football and baseball teams. (The captain of the basketball team had been Lester Spotted Elk, a full-blooded Chippewa with dirty fingernails and brilliant teeth, a smoker, a drinker, a discipline problem, and the only boy Orson ever had met who was better than he at anything that mattered.) Orson was the first native of his town to go to Harvard, and would probably be the last, at least until his son was of age. His future was firm in his mind: the pre-med course here, medical school either at Harvard, Penn, or Yale, and then back to South Dakota, where he had his wife already selected and claimed and primed to wait. Two nights before he left for Harvard, he had taken her virginity. She had cried, and he had felt foolish, having, somehow, failed. It had been his virginity, too. Orson was sane, sane enough to know that he had lots to learn, and to be, within limits, willing. Harvard processes thousands of such boys and restores them to the world with little apparent damage. Presumably because he was from west of the Mississippi and a Protestant Christian (Methodist), the authorities had given him as a freshman roommate a self-converted Episcopalian from Oregon.

When Orson arrived at Harvard on the morning of Registration Day, bleary and stiff from the series of airplane rides that had begun fourteen hours before, his roommate was already installed. “H. Palamountain” was floridly inscribed in the upper of the two name slots on the door of Room 14. The bed by the window had been slept in, and the desk by the window was neatly loaded with books. Standing sleepless inside the door, inertly clinging to his two heavy suitcases, Orson was conscious of another presence in the room without being able to locate it; optically and mentally, he focused with a slight slowness.

The roommate was sitting on the floor, barefoot, before a small spinning wheel. He jumped up nimbly. Orson’s first impression was of the wiry quickness that almost magically brought close to his face the thick-lipped, pop-eyed face of the other boy. He was a head shorter than Orson, and wore, above his bare feet, pegged sky-blue slacks, a lumberjack shirt whose throat was dashingly stuffed with a silk foulard, and a white cap such as Orson had seen before only in photographs of Pandit Nehru. Dropping a suitcase, Orson offered his hand. Instead of taking it, the roommate touched his palms together, bowed his head, and murmured something Orson didn’t catch. Then he gracefully swept off the white cap, revealing a narrow crest of curly blond hair that stood up like a rooster’s comb. “I am Henry Palamountain.” His voice, clear and colorless in the way of West Coast voices, suggested a radio announcer. His handshake was metallically firm and seemed to have a pinch of malice in it. Like Orson, he wore glasses. The thick lenses emphasized the hyperthyroid bulge of his eyes and their fishy, searching expression.

“Orson Ziegler,” Orson said.

“I know.”

Orson felt a need to add something adequately solemn, standing as they were on the verge of a kind of marriage. “Well, Henry”—he lamely lowered the other suitcase to the floor—“I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

“You may call me Hub,” the roommate said. “Most people do. However, call me Henry if you insist. I don’t wish to diminish your dreadful freedom. You may not wish to call me anything at all. Already I’ve made three hopeless enemies in the dormitory.”

Every sentence in this smoothly enunciated speech bothered Orson, beginning with the first. He himself had never been given a nickname; it was the one honor his classmates had withheld from him. In his adolescence he had coined nicknames for himself—Orrie, Ziggy—and tried to insinuate them into popular usage, without success. And what was meant by “dreadful freedom”? It sounded sarcastic. And why might he not wish to call him anything at all? And how had the roommate had the time to make enemies? Orson asked irritably, “How long have you *been* here?”

“Eight days.” Henry concluded every statement with a strange little pucker of his lips, a kind of satisfied silent click, as if to say, “And what do you think of *that*?”

Orson felt that he had been sized up as someone easy to startle. But he slid helplessly into the straight-man role that, like the second-best bed, had been reserved for him. “That *long*?”

“Yes. I was totally alone until the day before yesterday. You see, I hitchhiked.”

“From *Or*egon?”

“Yes. And I wished to allow time enough for any contingency. In case I was robbed, I had sewed a fifty-dollar bill inside my shirt. As it turned out, I made smooth connections all the way. I had painted a large cardboard sign saying ‘Harvard.’ You should try it sometime. One meets some very interesting Harvard graduates.”

“Didn’t your parents worry?”

“Of course. My parents are divorced. My father was furious. He wanted me to fly. I told him to give the plane fare to the Indian Relief Fund. He never gives a penny to charity. And, of course, I’m old. I’m twenty.”

“You’ve been in the Army?”

Henry lifted his hands and staggered back as if from a blow. He put the back of his hand to his brow, whimpered “Never,” shuddered, straightened up smartly, and saluted. “In fact, the Portland draft board is after me right now.” With a preening tug of his two agile hands—which did look, Orson realized, old: bony and veined and red-tipped, like a woman’s—he broadened his foulard. “They refuse to recognize any conscientious objectors except Quakers and Mennonites. My bishop agrees with them. They offered me an out if I’d say I was willing to work in a hospital, but I explained that this released a man for combat duty and if it came to that I’d just as soon carry a gun. I’m an excellent shot. I mind killing only on principle.”

The Korean War had begun that summer, and Orson, who had been nagged by a suspicion that his duty was to enlist, bristled at such blithe pacifism. He squinted and asked, “What *have* you been doing for two years, then?”

“Working in a plywood mill. As a gluer. The actual gluing is done by machines, but they become swamped in their own glue now and then. It’s a kind of excessive introspection—you’ve read *Hamlet*?”

“Just *Macbeth* and *The Merchant of Venice*.”

“Yes. Anyway. They have to be cleaned with solvent. One wears long rubber gloves up to one’s elbows. It’s very soothing work. The inside of a gluer is an excellent place for revolving Greek quotations in your head. I memorized nearly the whole of the *Phaedo* that way.” He gestured toward his desk, and Orson saw that many of the books were green Loeb editions of Plato and Aristotle, in Greek. Their spines were worn; they looked read and reread. For the first time, the thought of being at Harvard frightened him. Orson had been standing between his suitcases and now he moved to unpack. “Have you left me a bureau?”

“Of course. The better one.” Henry jumped on the bed that had not been slept in and bounced up and down as if it were a trampoline. “And I’ve given you the bed with the better mattress,” he said, still bouncing, “and the desk that doesn’t have the glare from the window.”

“Thanks,” Orson said.

Henry was quick to notice his tone. “Would you rather have my bed? My desk?” He jumped from the bed and dashed to his desk and scooped a stack of books from it.

Orson had to touch him to stop him, and was startled by the tense muscularity of the arm he touched. “Don’t be silly,” he said. “They’re exactly alike.”

Henry replaced his books. “I don’t want any bitterness,” he said, “or immature squabbling. As the older man, it’s my responsibility to yield. Here. I’ll give you the shirt off my back.” And he began to peel off his lumberjack shirt, leaving the foulard dramatically knotted around his naked throat. He wore no undershirt.

Having won from Orson a facial expression that Orson himself could not see, Henry smiled and rebuttoned the shirt. “Do you mind my name being in the upper slot on the door? I’ll remove it. I apologize. I did it without realizing how sensitive you would be.”

Perhaps it was all a kind of humor. Orson tried to make a joke. He pointed and asked, “Do I get a spinning wheel, too?”

“Oh, *that*.” Henry hopped backward on one bare foot and became rather shy. “That’s an experiment. I ordered it from Calcutta. I spin for a half hour a day, after yoga.”

“You do yoga, too?”

“Just some of the elementary positions. My ankles can’t take more than five minutes of the Lotus yet.”

“And you say you have a bishop.”

The roommate glanced up with a glint of fresh interest. “Say. You listen, don’t you? Yes. I consider myself an Anglican Christian Platonist strongly influenced by Gandhi.” He touched his palms before his chest, bowed, straightened, and giggled. “My bishop hates me,” he said. “The one in Oregon, who wants me to be a soldier. I’ve introduced myself to the bishop here and I don’t think he likes me, either. For that matter, I’ve antagonized my adviser. I told him I had no intention of fulfilling the science requirement.”

“For God’s sake, why *not*?”

“You don’t really want to know.”

Orson felt this rebuff as a small test of strength. “Not really,” he agreed.

“I consider science a demonic illusion of human *hubris*. Its phantasmal nature is proved by its constant revision. I asked him, ‘Why should I waste an entire fourth of my study time, time that could be spent with Plato, mastering a mass of hypotheses that will be obsolete by the time I graduate?’ ”

“My Lord, Henry,” Orson exclaimed, indignantly defending the millions of lives saved by medical science, “you can’t be serious!”

“Please. ‘Hub.’ I may be difficult for you, and I think it would help if you were to call me by my name. Now let’s talk about you. Your father is a doctor, you received all A’s in high school—I received rather mediocre grades myself—and you’ve come to Harvard because you believe it affords a cosmopolitan Eastern environment that will be valuable to you after spending your entire life in a small provincial town.”

“Who the hell told you all this?” The recital of his application statement made Orson blush. He already felt older than the boy who had written it.

“University Hall,” Henry said. “I went over and asked to see your folder. They didn’t want to let me at first, but I explained that if they were going to give me a roommate, after I had specifically requested to live alone, I had a right to information about you, so I could minimize possible friction.”

“And they *let* you?”

“Of course. People without convictions have no powers of resistance.” His mouth made its little satisfied click, and Orson was goaded to ask, “Why did you come to Harvard?”

“Two reasons.” He ticked them off on two fingers. “Raphael Demos and Werner Jaeger.”

Orson did not know these names, but he suspected that “Friends of yours?” was a stupid question, once it was out of his mouth.

However, Henry nodded. “I’ve introduced myself to Demos. A charming old scholar, with a beautiful young wife.”

“You mean you just went to his house and pushed yourself *in*?” Orson heard his own voice grow shrill; his voice, rather high and unstable, was one of the things about himself that he liked least.

Henry blinked, and looked unexpectedly vulnerable, so slender and bravely dressed, his ugly, yellowish, flat-nailed feet naked on the floor, which was uncarpeted and painted black. “That isn’t how I would describe it. I went as a pilgrim. He seemed pleased to talk to me.” He spoke carefully, and his mouth abstained from clicking.

That he could hurt his roommate’s feelings—that this jaunty apparition had feelings—disconcerted Orson more deeply than any of the surprises he had been deliberately offered. As quickly as he had popped up, Henry dropped to the floor, as if through a trapdoor in the plane of conversation. He resumed spinning. The method apparently called for a thread to be wound around the big toe of a foot and to be kept taut by a kind of absent-minded pedal motion. While engaged in this, he seemed hermetically sealed inside one of the gluing machines that had incubated his philosophy. Unpacking, Orson was slowed and snagged by a complicated mood of discomfort. He tried to remember how his mother had arranged his bureau drawers at home—socks and underwear in one, shirts and handkerchiefs in another. Home seemed infinitely far from him, and he was dizzily conscious of a great depth of space beneath his feet, as if the blackness of the floor were the color of an abyss. The spinning wheel steadily chuckled. Orson’s buzz of unease circled and settled on his roommate, who, it was clear, had thought earnestly about profound matters, matters that Orson, busy as he had been with the practical business of being a good student, had hardly considered. It was also clear that Henry had thought unintelligently. This unintelligence (“I received rather mediocre grades myself”) was more of a menace than a comfort. Bent above the bureau drawers, Orson felt cramped in his mind, able neither to stand erect in wholehearted contempt nor to lie down in honest admiration. His mood was complicated by the repugnance his roommate’s physical presence aroused in him. An almost morbidly clean boy, Orson was haunted by glue, and a tacky ambience resisted every motion of his unpacking.

The silence between the roommates continued until a great bell rang ponderously. The sound was near and yet far, like a heartbeat within the bosom of time, and it seemed to bring with it into the room the muffling foliation of the trees in the Yard, which to Orson’s prairie-honed eyes had looked tropically tall and lush; the walls of the room vibrated with leaf shadows, and many minute presences—dust motes, traffic sounds, or angels of whom several could dance on the head of a pin—thronged the air and made it difficult to breathe. The stairways of the dormitory rumbled. Boys dressed in jackets and neckties crowded the doorway and entered the room, laughing and calling “Hub. Hey, Hub.”

“Get up off the floor, Dad.”

“Jesus, Hub, put your shoes on.”

“Pee-*yew*.”

“And take off that bandanna around your neck. Coat and tie required.”

“And that nurse’s cap.”

“Consider the lilies, Hub. They toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

“Amen, brothers!”

“Fitch, you should be a preacher.”

They were all strangers to Orson. Hub stood and smoothly performed introductions.

In a few days, Orson had sorted them out. That jostling conglomerate, so apparently secure and homogeneous, broke down, under habitual exposure, into double individuals: roommates. There were Silverstein and Koshland, Dawson and Kern, Young and Carter, Petersen and Fitch.

Silverstein and Koshland, who lived in the room overhead, were Jews from New York City. All Orson knew about non-Biblical Jews was that they were a sad race, full of music, shrewdness, and woe. But Silverstein and Koshland were always clowning, always wisecracking. They played bridge and poker and chess and Go and went to the movies in Boston and drank coffee in the luncheonettes around the Square. They came from the “gifted” high schools of the Bronx and Brooklyn respectively, and treated Cambridge as if it were another borough. Most of what the freshman year sought to teach them they seemed to know already. As winter approached, Koshland went out for basketball, and he and his teammates made the floor above bounce to the thump and rattle of scrimmages with a tennis ball and a wastebasket. One afternoon, a section of ceiling collapsed on Orson’s bed.

Next door, in Room 12, Dawson and Kern wanted to be writers. Dawson was from Ohio and Kern from Pennsylvania. Dawson had a sulky, slouching bearing, a certain puppyish facial eagerness, and a terrible temper. He was a disciple of Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway and himself wrote in a stern, plain style. He had been raised as an atheist, and no one in the dormitory rubbed his temper the wrong way more often than Hub. Orson, feeling that he and Dawson came from opposite edges of that great psychological realm called the Midwest, liked him. He felt less at ease with Kern, who seemed Eastern and subtly vicious. A farm boy bent on urban sophistication, riddled with nervous ailments ranging from conjunctivitis to hemorrhoids, Kern smoked and talked incessantly. He and Dawson maintained between them a battery of running jokes. At night Orson could hear them on the other side of the wall keeping each other awake with improvised parodies and musical comedies based on their teachers, their courses, or their fellow-freshmen. One midnight, Orson distinctly heard Dawson sing, “My name is Orson Ziegler, I come from South Dakota.” There was a pause, then Kern sang back, “I tend to be a niggler, and masturbate by quota.”

Across the hall, in 15, lived Young and Carter, Negroes. Carter was from Detroit and very black, very clipped in speech, very well dressed, and apt to collapse, at the jab of a rightly angled joke, into a giggling fit that left his cheeks gleaming with tears; Kern was expert at breaking Carter up. Young was a lean, malt-pale colored boy from North Carolina, here on a national scholarship, out of his depth, homesick, and cold. Kern called him Brer Possum. He slept all day and at night sat on his bed playing the mouthpiece of a trumpet to himself. At first, he had played the full horn in the afternoon, flooding the dormitory and its green envelope of trees with golden, tremulous versions of languorous tunes like “Sentimental Journey” and “The Tennessee Waltz.” It had been nice. But Young’s sense of place—a habit of self-effacement that the shock of Harvard had intensified in him—soon cancelled these harmless performances. He took to hiding from the sun, and at night the furtive spitting sound from across the hall seemed to Orson, as he struggled into sleep, music drowning in shame. Carter always referred to his roommate as “Jonathan,” mouthing the syllables fastidiously, as if he were pronouncing the name of a remote being he had just learned about, like La Rochefoucauld or Demosthenes.

Catty-corner up the hall, in unlucky 13, Petersen and Fitch kept a strange household. Both were tall, narrow-shouldered, and broad-bottomed; physiques aside, it was hard to see what they had in common, or why Harvard had put them together. Fitch, with dark staring eyes and the flat full cranium of Frankenstein’s monster, was a child prodigy from Maine, choked with philosophy, wild with ideas, and pregnant with the seeds of the nervous breakdown he was to have, eventually, in April. Petersen was an amiable Swede with a transparent skin that revealed blue veins in his nose. For several summers he had worked as a reporter for the *Duluth Herald*. He had all the newsman’s tricks: the side-of-the-mouth quip, the nip of whiskey, the hat on the back of the head, the habit of throwing still-burning cigarettes onto the floor. He did not seem quite to know why he was at Harvard, and in fact did not return at the end of the freshman year. But while these two drifted toward their respective rustications, they made a strangely well-suited couple. Each was strong where the other was helpless. Fitch was so uncoördinated and unorganized he could not even type; he would lie on his bed in pajamas, writhing and grimacing, and dictate a tangled humanities paper, twice the requested length and mostly about books that had not been assigned, while Petersen, typing with a hectic two-finger system, would obligingly turn this chaotic monologue into “copy.” His patience verged on the maternal. In return, Fitch gave Petersen ideas out of the superabundance painfully cramming his big flat head. Petersen had absolutely no ideas; he could neither compare, contrast, nor criticize St. Augustine and Marcus Aurelius. Perhaps having seen, so young, so many corpses and fires and policemen and prostitutes had prematurely blighted his speculative faculty. At any rate, mothering Fitch gave him something practical to do, and Orson envied them.

He envied all the roommates, whatever the bond between them—geography, race, ambition, physical size—for between himself and Hub Palamountain he could see no link except forced cohabitation. Not that living with Hub was superficially unpleasant. Hub was tidy, industrious, and ostentatiously considerate. He rose at seven, prayed, did yoga, spun, and was off to breakfast, often not to be seen again until the end of the day. He went to sleep, generally, at eleven sharp. If there was noise in the dorm, he would insert rubber plugs in his ears, put a black mask over his eyes, and go to sleep anyway. During the day, he kept a rigorous round of appointments: he audited two courses in addition to taking four, he wrestled three times a week for his physical-training requirement, he wangled tea invitations from Demos and Jaeger and the Bishop of Massachusetts, he attended free evening lectures and readings, he associated himself with Phillips Brooks House and spent two afternoons a week supervising slum boys in a Roxbury redevelopment house. In addition, he had begun to take piano lessons in Brookline. Many days, Orson saw him only at meals in the Union, where the dormitory neighbors, in those first fall months, when their acquaintance was crisp and young and differing interests had not yet scattered them, tended to regroup around a long table. In these months there was often a debate on the topic posed beneath their eyes: Hub’s vegetarianism. There he would sit, his tray heaped high with a steaming double helping of squash and lima beans, while Fitch would try to locate the exact point at which vegetarianism became inconsistent. “You eat eggs,” he said.

“Yes,” Hub said.

“You realize that every egg, from the chicken’s point of reference, is a newborn baby?”

“But in fact it is not unless it has been fertilized by a rooster.”

“But suppose,” Fitch pursued, “as sometimes happens—which I happen to know, from working in my uncle’s henhouse in Maine—an egg that *should* be sterile has in fact been fertilized and contains an embryo?”

“If I see it, I naturally don’t eat that particular egg,” Hub said, his lips making that satisfied concluding snap.

Fitch pounced triumphantly, spilling a fork to the floor with a lurch of his hand. “But why? The hen feels the same pain on being parted from an egg whether sterile or fertile. The embryo is unconscious—a vegetable. As a vegetarian, you should eat it with special relish.” He tipped back in his chair so hard he had to grab the table edge to keep from toppling over.

“It seems to me,” Dawson said, frowning ominously—the merriment of others often spilled him into a bad temper—“that psychoanalysis of hens is hardly relevant.”

“On the contrary,” Kern said lightly, clearing his throat and narrowing his pink, infected eyes, “it seems to me that there, in the tiny, dim mind of the hen—the minimal mind, as it were—is where the tragedy of the universe achieves a pinpoint focus. Picture the emotional life of a hen. What does she know of companionship? A flock of pecking, harsh-voiced gossips. Of shelter? A few dung-bespattered slats. Of food? Some flecks of mash and grit rudely tossed on the bare ground. Of love? The casual assault of a polygamous cock—cock in the Biblical sense. Then, into this heartless world, there suddenly arrives, as if by magic, an egg. An egg of her own. An egg, it must seem to her, that she and God have made. How she must cherish it, its beautiful baldness, its gentle lustre, its firm yet somehow fragile, softly swaying weight.”

Carter had broken up. He bent above his tray, his eyes tight shut, his dark face contorted joyfully. “Puhleese,” he gasped at last. “You’re making my stomach hurt.”

“Ah, Carter,” Kern said loftily, “if that were only the worst of it. For then, one day, while the innocent hen sits cradling this strange, faceless, oval child, its little weight swaying softly in her wings”—he glanced hopefully at Carter, but the colored boy bit his lower lip and withstood the jab—“an enormous man, smelling of beer and manure, comes and tears the egg from her grasp. And why? Because *he*”—Kern pointed, arm fully extended, across the table, so that his index finger, orange with nicotine, almost touched Hub’s nose—“*he*, St. Henry Palamountain, wants more eggs to eat. ‘More eggs!’ he cries voraciously, so that brutal steers and faithless pigs can continue to menace the children of American mothers!”

Dawson slammed his silver down, got up from the table, and slouched out of the dining room. Kern blushed. His high spirits had rubbed his roommate the wrong way. In the silence, Petersen put a folded slice of roast beef in his mouth and said, chewing, “Jesus, Hub, if somebody else kills the animals you might as well eat ’em. They don’t give a damn any more.”

“You understand nothing,” Hub said simply.

“Hey, Hub,” Silverstein called down from the far end of the table. “What’s the word on milk? Don’t calves drink milk? Maybe you’re taking milk out of some calf’s mouth.”

Orson felt impelled to speak. “*No*,” he said, and his voice seemed to have burst, its pitch was so unsteady and excited. “As anybody except somebody from New York would know, milch cows have weaned their calves. What I wonder about, Hub, is your shoes. You wear leather shoes.”

“I do.” The gaiety left Hub’s defense of himself. His lips became prim.

“Leather is the skin of a steer.”

“But the animal has already been slaughtered.”

“You sound like Petersen. Your purchase of leather goods—what about your wallet and belt, for that matter?—encourages the slaughter. You’re as much of a murderer as the rest of us. More of one—because you think about it.”

Hub folded his hands carefully in front of him, propping them, almost in prayer, on the table edge. His voice became like that of a radio announcer, but an announcer rapidly, softly describing the home stretch of a race. “My belt, I believe, is a form of plastic. My wallet was given to me by my mother years ago, before I became a vegetarian. Please remember that I ate meat for eighteen years and I still have an appetite for it. If there were any other concentrated source of protein, I would not eat eggs. Some vegetarians do not. On the other hand, some vegetarians eat fish and take liver extract. I would not do this. Shoes are a problem. There is a firm in Chicago that makes non-leather shoes for extreme vegetarians, but they’re very expensive and not comfortable. I once ordered a pair. They hurt my feet. Leather, you see, ‘breathes’ in a way no synthetic substitute does. My feet are tender; I have compromised. I apologize. For that matter, when I play the piano—‘tickle the ivories,’ as they say—I encourage the slaughter of elephants, and in brushing my teeth, which I must do faithfully because a vegetable diet is so heavy in starch, I use a brush of pig bristles. I am covered with blood, and pray daily for forgiveness.” He took up his fork and resumed eating the mound of squash.

Orson was amazed; he had been impelled to speak by a kind of sympathy, and Hub had answered as if he alone were a serious enemy. He tried to defend himself. “There are perfectly wearable shoes,” he said, “made out of canvas, with crepe-rubber soles.”

“I’ll look into them,” Hub said. “They sound a little sporty to me.”

Laughter swept the table and ended the subject. After lunch Orson walked to the library with the beginnings of indigestion; a backwash of emotion was upsetting his stomach. There was a growing confusion inside him he could not resolve. He resented being associated with Hub, and yet felt attacked when Hub was attacked. It seemed to him that Hub deserved credit for putting his beliefs into practice, and that people like Fitch and Kern, in mocking, merely belittled themselves. Yet Hub smiled at their criticism, took it as a game, and fought back in earnest only at Orson, forcing him into a false position. Why? Was it because in being also a Christian he alone qualified for serious rebuke? But Carter went to church, wearing a blue pin-striped suit with a monogrammed handkerchief peaked in the breast pocket, every Sunday; Petersen was a nominal Presbyterian; Orson had once seen Kern sneaking out of Mem Chapel; and even Koshland observed his holidays, by cutting classes and skipping lunch. Why, therefore, Orson asked himself, should Hub pick on him? And why should he care? He had no real respect for Hub. Hub’s handwriting was childishly large and careful and his first set of hour exams, even in the course on Plato and Aristotle, had yielded a batch of C’s. Orson resented being condescended to by him; the knowledge that at the table he had come off second-best galled him like an unfair grade. His situation with Hub became in his head a diagram in which all his intentions curved off at right angles and his strengths inversely tapered into nothing. Behind the diagram hung the tuck of complacence in Hub’s lips, the fishy impudence of his eyes, and the keenly irksome shape and tint of his hands and feet. These images—Hub disembodied—Orson carried with him into the library, back and forth to classes, and along the congested streets around the Square; now and then the glaze of an eye or the flat yellowish nail of a big toe welled up distinctly through the pages of a book or, greatly magnified, slid with Orson into the unconsciousness of sleep. Nevertheless, he surprised himself, sitting one February afternoon in Room 12 with Dawson and Kern, by blurting, “I hate him.” He considered what he had said, liked the taste of it, and repeated, “I hate him. I’ve never hated anybody before in my life.” His voice cracked and his eyes warmed with abortive tears.

They had all returned from Christmas vacation to plunge into the odd limbo of reading period and the novel ordeal of midyear exams. This was a dormitory, by and large, of public-school graduates, who feel the strain of Harvard most in their freshman year. The private-school boys, launched by little Harvards like Andover and Groton, tend to glide through this year and to run aground later on strange reefs, foundering in alcohol, or sinking into a dandified apathy. But the institution demands of each man, before it releases him, a wrenching sacrifice of ballast. At Christmas, Orson’s mother thought he looked haggard, and set about fattening him up. On the other hand, he was struck by how much his father had aged and shrunk. Orson spent his first days home listening to the mindless music on the radio, hours of it, and driving through farmland on narrow straight roads already banked bright with plowed snow. The South Dakota sky had never looked so open, so clean; he had never realized before that the high dry sun that made even sub-zero days feel warm at noon was a local phenomenon. He made love to his girl again, and again she cried. He said to her he blamed himself, for ineptitude; but in his heart he blamed her. She was not helping him. Back in Cambridge, it was raining, raining in January, and the entryway of the Coop was full of gray footprints and wet bicycles and Radcliffe girls in slickers and sneakers. Hub had stayed here, alone in their room, and had celebrated Christmas with a fast.

In the monotonous, almost hallucinatory month of rereading, outlining, and memorizing, Orson perceived how little he knew, how stupid he was, how unnatural all learning is, and how futile. Harvard rewarded him with three A’s and a B. Hub pulled out two B’s and two C’s. Kern, Dawson, and Silverstein did well; Petersen, Koshland, and Carter got mediocre grades; Fitch flunked one subject, and Young flunked three. The pale Negro slunk in and out of the dorm as if he were diseased and marked for destruction; he became, while still among them, a rumor. The suppressed whistling of the trumpet mouthpiece was no longer heard. Silverstein and Koshland and the basketball crowd adopted Carter and took him to movies in Boston three or four times a week.

After exams, in the heart of the Cambridge winter, there is a grateful pause. New courses are selected, and even the full-year courses, heading into their second half, sometimes put on, like a new hat, a fresh professor. The days quietly lengthen; there is a snowstorm or two; the swimming and squash teams lend the sports pages of the *Crimson* an unaccustomed note of victory. A kind of foreshadow of spring falls bluely on the snow. The elms are seen to be shaped like fountains. The discs of snow pressed by boots into the sidewalk in front of Albiani’s seem large precious coins; the brick buildings, the arched gates, the archaic lecterns, and the barny mansions along Brattle Street dawn upon the freshman as a heritage he temporarily possesses. The thumb-worn spines of his now familiar textbooks seem proof of a certain knowingness, and the strap of the green book-bag slung over his shoulder tugs at his wrist like a living falcon. The letters from home dwindle in importance. The hours open up. There is more time. Experiments are made. Courtships begin. Conversations go on and on; and an almost rapacious desire for mutual discovery possesses acquaintances. It was in this atmosphere, then, that Orson made his confession.

Dawson turned his head away as if the words had menaced him personally. Kern blinked, lit a cigarette, and asked, “What don’t you like about him?”

“Well”—Orson shifted his weight uncomfortably in the black but graceful, shapely but hard Harvard chair—“it’s little things. Whenever he gets a notice from the Portland draft board, he tears it up without opening it and scatters it out the window.”

“And you’re afraid that this incriminates you as an accessory and they’ll put you in jail?”

“No—I don’t know. It seems exaggerated. He exaggerates everything. You should see how he prays.”

“How do you know how he prays?”

“He shows me. Every morning, he gets down on his knees and *throws* himself across the bed, his face in the blanket, his arms way out.” He showed them.

“God,” Dawson said. “That’s marvellous. It’s medieval. It’s more than medieval. It’s Counter-Reformation.”

“I mean,” Orson said, grimacing in realization of how deeply he had betrayed Hub, “I pray, too, but I don’t make a show of myself.”

A frown clotted Dawson’s expression, and passed.

“He’s a saint,” Kern said.

“He’s *not*,” Orson said. “He’s a fake. I’m taking Chem I with him, and he’s worse than a child with the math. And those Greek books he keeps on his desk, they look worn because he bought them second-hand.”

“Saints don’t have to be good at math,” Kern said. “What saints have to have is energy. Hub has it.”

“Look how he wrestles,” Dawson said.

“I doubt if he wrestles very *well*,” Orson said. “He didn’t make the freshman team. I’m sure if we heard him play the piano it’d be awful.”

“You seem to miss the point,” Kern said, eyes closed, “of what Hub’s all about.”

“I know goddamn well what he thinks he’s all about,” Orson said, “but it doesn’t go. All this vegetarianism and love of the starving Indian—he’s really a terribly cold bastard. I think he’s about the coldest person I’ve ever met in my life.”

“I don’t think Orson thinks that; do you?” Kern asked Dawson.

“No,” Dawson said, and his puppyish smile cleared his cloudy face. “That’s not what Orson the Parson thinks.”

Kern squinted. “Is it Orson the Parson, or Orson the Person?”

“I think Hub is the nub,” Dawson said.

“Or the rub,” Kern added, and both burst into grinding laughter. Orson felt he was being sacrificed to the precarious peace the two roommates kept between themselves, and left, superficially insulted but secretly flattered to have been given, at last, a nickname of sorts: Orson the Parson.

Several nights later they went to hear Carl Sandburg read in New Lecture Hall—the four adjacent roommates, plus Fitch. To avoid sitting next to Hub, who aggressively led them into a row of seats up front, Orson delayed, and so sat the farthest away from the girl Hub sat directly behind. Orson noticed her immediately; she had a wide mane of coppery-red hair which hung down loose over the back of her seat. The color of it, and the abundance, reminded him, all at once, of horses, earth, sun, wheat, and South Dakota. From Orson’s angle she was nearly in profile; her face was small, with a tilted shadowy cheekbone and a pale prominent ear. Her ear reminded him of Emily; she was Emily with long red hair and Cambridge sophistication. He yearned to see her face, and felt her about to turn. She turned away. Hub had leaned forward and was saying something into her other ear. Fitch overheard it, and gleefully relayed it to Dawson, who whispered to Kern and Orson, “*Hub said to the girl, ‘You have beautiful hair*.’ ”

Several times during the reading, Hub leaned forward to add something more into her ear, each time springing spurts of choked laughter from Fitch, Dawson, and Kern. Meanwhile, Sandburg, his white bangs as straight and shiny as a doll’s wig of artificial fibre, incanted above the lectern and quaintly strummed a guitar. Afterward, Hub walked with the girl into the outdoors. From a distance Orson saw her white face break into a laugh. Hub returned to his friends with the complacent nick in the corner of his mouth deepened, in the darkness, to a gash.

It was not the next day, or the next week, but within the month that Hub brought back to the room a heap of coppery hair. Orson found it lying like an animal corpse on a newspaper spread on his bed. “Hub, what the hell is this?”

Hub was on the floor playing with his spinning wheel. “Hair.”

“*Human* hair?”

“Of course.”

“Whose?”

“A girl’s.”

“What happened?” The question sounded strange; Orson meant to ask, “What girl’s?”

Hub answered as if he had asked that question. “It’s a girl I met at the Sandburg reading; you don’t know her.”

“This is *her* hair?”

“Yes. I asked her for it. She said she was planning to cut it all off this spring anyway.”

Orson stood stunned above the bed, gripped by an urge to bury his face and hands in the hair. “You’ve been *seeing* her?” This effeminate stridence in his voice: he despised it and only Hub brought it out.

“A little. My schedule doesn’t allow for much social life, but my adviser has recommended that I relax now and then.”

“You take her to movies?”

“Once in a while. She pays her admission, of course.”

“Of *course*.”

Hub took him up on his tone. “Please remember I’m here on my savings alone. I have refused all financial assistance from my father.”

“Hub”—the very syllable seemed an expression of pain—“what are you going to do with her hair?”

“Spin it into a rope.”

“A *rope*?”

“Yes. It’ll be very difficult; her hair is terribly fine.”

“And what will you do with the rope?”

“Make a knot of it.”

“A *knot*?”

“I think that’s the term. I’ll coil it and secure it so it can’t come undone and give it to her. So she’ll always have her hair the way it was when she was nineteen.”

“Oh, Lord. How did you ever talk this poor girl into it?”

“I didn’t talk her into it. I merely offered, and she thought it was a lovely idea. Really, Orson, I don’t see why this should offend your bourgeois scruples. Women cut their hair all the time.”

“She must think you’re insane. She was humoring you.”

“As you like. It was a perfectly rational suggestion, and my sanity has never been raised as an issue between us.”

“Well, *I* think you’re insane. Hub, you’re a *nut*.”

Orson left the room and slammed the door, and didn’t return until eleven, when Hub was asleep in his eye mask. The heap of hair had been transferred to the floor beside the spinning wheel, and already some strands were entangled with the machine. In time a rope was produced, a braided cord as thick as a woman’s little finger, about a foot long, weightless and waxen. The earthy, horsy fire in the hair’s color had been quenched in the process. Hub carefully coiled it and with black thread and long pins secured and stiffened the spiral into a disc the size of a small saucer. This he presented to the girl one Friday night. The presentation appeared to satisfy him, for, as far as Orson knew, Hub had no further dates with her. Once in a while Orson passed her in the Yard, and without her hair she scarcely seemed female, her small pale face fringed in curt tufts, her ears looking enormous. He wanted to speak to her; some obscure force of pity, or hope of rescue, impelled him to greet this wan androgyne, but the opening word stuck in his throat. She did not look as if she pitied herself, or knew what had been done to her.

Something magical protected Hub; things deflected from him. The doubt Orson had cast upon his sanity bounced back onto himself. As spring slowly broke, he lost the ability to sleep. Figures and facts churned sluggishly in an insomniac mire. His courses became four parallel puzzles. In mathematics, the crucial transposition upon which the solution pivoted consistently eluded him, vanishing into the chinks between the numbers. The quantities in chemistry became impishly unstable; the unbalanced scales clicked down sharply, and the system of interlocked elements that fanned from the lab to the far stars collapsed. In the history survey course, they had reached the Enlightenment, and Orson found himself disturbingly impressed by Voltaire’s indictment of God, though the lecturer handled it calmly, as one more item of intellectual history, neither true nor false. And in German, which Orson had taken to satisfy his language requirement, the words piled on remorselessly, and the existence of languages other than English, the existence of so many, each so vast, with so many arbitrary rules, seemed to prove cosmic dementia. He felt his mind, which was always more steady than quick, grow slower and slower. His chair threatened to adhere to him, and he would leap up in panic. Sleepless, stuffed with information he could neither forget nor manipulate, he became prey to obsessive delusions; he became convinced that his girl in South Dakota had taken up with another boy and was making love to him happily, Orson having shouldered the awkwardness and blame of taking her virginity. In the very loops that Emily’s ballpoint pen described in her bland letters to him he read the pleased rotundity, the inner fatness of a satisfied woman. He even knew the man. It was Spotted Elk, the black-nailed Chippewa, whose impassive nimbleness had so often mocked Orson on the basketball court, whose terrible ease and speed of reaction had seemed so unjust, and whose defense—he recalled now—Emily had often undertaken. His wife had become a whore, a squaw; the scraggly mute reservation children his father had doctored in the charity clinic became, amid the sliding transparencies of Orson’s mind, his own children. In his dreams—or in those limp elisions of imagery which in the absence of sleep passed for dreams—he seemed to be rooming with Spotted Elk, and his roommate, who sometimes wore a mask, invariably had won, by underhanded means, the affection and admiration that were rightfully his. There was a conspiracy. Whenever Orson heard Kern and Dawson laughing on the other side of the wall, he knew it was about him, and about his most secret habits. His privacy was outrageously invaded; in bed, half relaxed, he would suddenly see himself bodily involved with Hub’s lips, Hub’s legs, with Hub’s veined, vaguely womanish hands. At first he resisted these visions, tried to erase them; it was like trying to erase ripples on water. He learned to submit to them, to let the attack—for it was an attack, with bared teeth and sharp acrobatic movements—wash over him, leaving him limp enough to sleep. These dives became the only route to sleep. In the morning he would awake and see Hub sprawled flamboyantly across his bed in prayer, or sitting hunched at his spinning wheel, or, nattily dressed in his Nehru hat, tiptoeing to the door and with ostentatious care closing it softly behind him; and he would hate him—hate his appearance, his form, his manner, his pretensions—with an avidity of detail he had never known in love. The tiny details of his roommate’s physical existence—the wrinkles flickering beside his mouth, the slightly withered look about his hands, the complacently polished creases of his leather shoes—seemed a poisonous food Orson could not stop eating. His eczema worsened alarmingly.

By April, Orson was on the verge of going to the student clinic, which had a department called Mental Health. But at this point Fitch relieved him by having, it seemed, his nervous breakdown for him. For weeks, Fitch had been taking several showers a day. Toward the end he stopped going to classes and was almost constantly naked, except for a towel tucked around his waist. He was trying to complete a humanities paper that was already a month overdue and twenty pages too long. He left the dormitory only to eat and to take more books from the library. One night, around nine, Petersen was called to the phone on the second-floor landing. The Watertown police had picked Fitch up as he was struggling through the underbrush on the banks of the Charles four miles away. He claimed he was walking to the West, where he had been told there was enough space to contain God, and proceeded to talk with wild animation to the police chief about the differences and affinities between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Hub, ever alert for an opportunity to intrude in the guise of doing good, went to the hall proctor—a spindly and murmurous graduate student of astronomy engaged, under Harlow Shapley, in an endless galaxy count—and volunteered himself as an expert on the case, and even conferred with the infirmary psychologist. Hub’s interpretation was that Fitch had been punished for *hubris*. The psychologist felt the problem was fundamentally Oedipal. Fitch was sent back to Maine. Hub suggested to Orson that now Petersen would need a roommate next year. “I think you and he would hit it off splendidly. You’re both materialists.”

“I’m *not* a materialist.”

Hub lifted his dreadful hands in half-blessing. “Have it your way. I’m determined to minimize friction.”

“Damnit, Hub, all the friction between us comes from you.”

“How? What do I do? Tell me, and I’ll change. I’ll give you the shirt off my back.” He began to unbutton, and stopped, seeing that the laugh wasn’t going to come.

Orson felt weak and empty, and in spite of himself he cringed inwardly, with a helpless affection for his unreal, unreachable friend. “I don’t know, Hub,” he admitted. “I don’t know what it is you’re doing to me.”

A paste of silence dried in the air between them.

Orson with an effort unstuck himself. “I think you’re right, we shouldn’t room together next year.”

Hub seemed a bit bewildered, but nodded, saying, “I told them in the beginning that I ought to live alone.” And his hurt eyes, bulging behind their lenses, settled into an invulnerable Byzantine stare.

One afternoon in mid-May, Orson was sitting stumped at his desk, trying to study. He had taken two exams and had two to go. They stood between him and release like two towering walls of muddy paper. His position seemed extremely precarious: he was unable to retreat and able to advance only along a very thin thread, a high wire of sanity on which he balanced above an abyss of statistics and formulae, his brain a firmament of winking cells. A push would kill him. There was then a hurried pounding up the stairs, and Hub pushed into the room carrying cradled in his arm a metal object the color of a gun and the size of a cat. It had a red tongue. Hub slammed the door behind him, snapped the lock, and dumped the object on Orson’s bed. It was the head of a parking meter, sheared from its post. A keen quick ache cut through Orson’s lower abdomen. “For God’s sake,” he cried in his contemptible squeaky voice, “what’s *that*?”

“It’s a parking meter.”

“I *know*, I can *see* that. Where the hell did you *get* it?”

“I won’t talk to you until you stop being hysterical,” Hub said, and crossed to his desk, where Orson had put his mail. He took the top letter, a special delivery from the Portland draft board, and tore it in half. This time, the pain went through Orson’s chest. He put his head in his arms on the desk and whirled and groped in the black-red darkness there. His body was frightening him; his nerves listened for a third psychosomatic slash.

A rap sounded on the door; from the force of the knock, it could only be the police. Hub nimbly dashed to the bed and hid the meter under Orson’s pillow. Then he pranced to the door and opened it.

It was Dawson and Kern. “What’s up?” Dawson asked, frowning as if the disturbance had been created to annoy him.

“It sounded like Ziegler was being tortured,” Kern said.

Orson pointed at Hub and explained, “He’s castrated a parking meter!”

“I did not,” Hub said. “A car went out of control on Mass. Avenue and hit a parked car, which knocked a meter down. A crowd gathered. The head of the meter was lying in the gutter, so I picked it up and carried it away. I was afraid someone might be tempted to steal it.”

“Namely, you,” Orson said.

“Nobody tried to stop you?” Kern asked.

“Of course not. They were all gathered around the driver of the car.”

“Was he hurt?”

“I doubt it. I didn’t look.”

“You didn’t *look*!” Orson cried. “You’re a great Samaritan.”

“I am not prey,” Hub said, “to morbid curiosity.”

“Where were the police?” Kern asked.

“They hadn’t arrived yet.”

Dawson asked, “Well, why didn’t you wait till a cop arrived and give the meter to him?”

“Why should I give it to an agent of the state? It’s no more his than mine.”

“But it *is*,” Orson said.

“It was a plain act of Providence that placed it in my hands,” Hub said, the corners of his lips dented securely. “I haven’t decided yet which charity should receive the money it contains.”

Dawson asked, “But isn’t that stealing?”

“No more stealing than the state is stealing in making people pay money for space in which to park their own, heavily taxed cars.”

“Hub,” Orson said, getting to his feet, “you give it back or we’ll both go to jail.” He saw himself ruined, the scarcely commenced career of his life destroyed, his father the doctor disgraced.

Hub turned serenely. “I’m not afraid. Going to jail under a totalitarian regime is a mark of honor. If you had a conscience, you’d understand.”

Petersen and Carter and Silverstein came into the room. Some boys from the lower floors followed them. The story was hilariously retold. The meter was produced from under the pillow and passed around and shaken to demonstrate the weight of pennies it contained. Hub always carried, as a vestige of the lumberjack country he came from, an intricate allpurpose pocket knife. He began to pry open the little money door. Orson came up behind him and got him around the neck with one arm. Hub’s body stiffened. He passed the head of the meter and the open knife to Carter, and then Orson experienced sensations of being lifted, of flying, and of lying on the floor, looking up at Hub’s face, which was upside down in his vision. He scrambled to his feet and went for Hub again, rigid with anger and yet, in his heart, happily relaxed. Hub’s body was tough and quick and satisfying to grip, though, being a wrestler, he somehow deflected Orson’s hands and again lifted and dropped him to the black floor. This time, Orson felt a blow as his coccyx hit the wood; yet even through the pain he perceived, gazing into the heart of this forced marriage, that Hub was being as gentle with him as he could be. He saw that he could try in earnest to kill Hub and be in no danger of succeeding. He renewed the attack and again enjoyed the tense defensive skill that made Hub’s body a kind of warp in space through which his own body, after a blissful instant of contention, was converted to the supine position. He got to his feet and would have gone for Hub the fourth time, but his fellow-freshmen grabbed his arms and held him. He shook them off and without a word returned to his desk and concentrated down into his book, turning the page. The type looked extremely distinct, though it was trembling too hard to be deciphered.

The head of the parking meter stayed in the room for one night. The next day, Hub allowed himself to be persuaded (by the others; Orson had stopped speaking to him) to take it to the Cambridge police headquarters in Central Square. Dawson and Kern tied a ribbon around it, and attached a note: “Please take good care of my baby.” None of them, however, had the nerve to go with Hub to the headquarters, though when he came back he said the chief was delighted to get the meter, and had thanked him, and had agreed to donate the pennies to the local orphans’ home.

In another week, the last exams were over. The freshmen all went home. When they returned in the fall, they were different: sophomores. Petersen and Young did not come back at all. Fitch returned, made up the lost credits, and eventually graduated *magna cum* in history and lit. He now teaches in a Quaker prep school. Silverstein is a biochemist, Koshland a lawyer. Dawson writes conservative editorials in Cleveland, Kern is in advertising in New York. Carter, as if obliged to join Young in oblivion, disappeared between his junior and senior years. The dormitory neighbors tended to lose sight of each other, though Hub, who had had his case shifted to the Massachusetts jurisdiction, was now and then pictured in the *Crimson*, and once gave an evening lecture, “Why I Am an Episcopalian Pacifist.” As the litigation progressed, the Bishop of Massachusetts rather grudgingly vouched for him, and by the time of his final hearing the Korean War was over, and the judge who heard the case ruled that Hub’s convictions were sincere, as witnessed by his willingness to go to jail. Hub was rather disappointed at the verdict, since he had prepared a three-year reading list to occupy him in his cell and was intending to memorize all four Gospels in the original Greek.

After graduation, he went to Union Theological Seminary, spent several years as the assistant rector of an urban parish in Baltimore, and learned to play the piano well enough to be the background music in a Charles Street cocktail lounge. He insisted on wearing his clerical collar, and as a consequence gave the bar a small celebrity. After a year of overriding people of less strong convictions, he was allowed to go to South Africa, where he worked and preached among the Bantus until the government requested that he leave the country. From there he went to Nigeria, and when last heard from—on a Christmas card, with French salutations and three black Magi, which arrived, soiled and wrinkled, in South Dakota in February—Hub was in Madagascar, as a “combination missionary, political agitator, and soccer coach.” The description struck Orson as probably facetious, and Hub’s childish and confident handwriting, with every letter formed individually, afflicted him with some of the old exasperation. Having vowed to answer the card, he mislaid it, uncharacteristically.

Orson didn’t speak to Hub for two days after the parking-meter incident. By then, it seemed rather silly, and they finished out the year sitting side by side at their desks as amiably as two cramped passengers who have endured a long bus trip together. When they parted, they shook hands, and Hub would have walked Orson to the subway kiosk except that he had an appointment in the opposite direction. Orson received two A’s and two B’s on his final exams; for the remaining three years at Harvard, he roomed uneventfully with two other colorless pre-med students, named Wallace and Neuhauser. After graduation, he married Emily, attended the Yale School of Medicine, and interned in St. Louis. He is now the father of four children and, since the death of his own father, the only doctor in the town. His life has gone much the way he planned it, and he is much the kind of man he intended to be when he was eighteen. He delivers babies, assists the dying, attends the necessary meetings, plays golf, and does good. He is honorable and irritable. If not as much loved as his father, he is perhaps even more respected. In one particular only—a kind of scar he carries without pain and without any clear memory of the amputation—does the man he is differ from the man he assumed he would become. He never prays.