
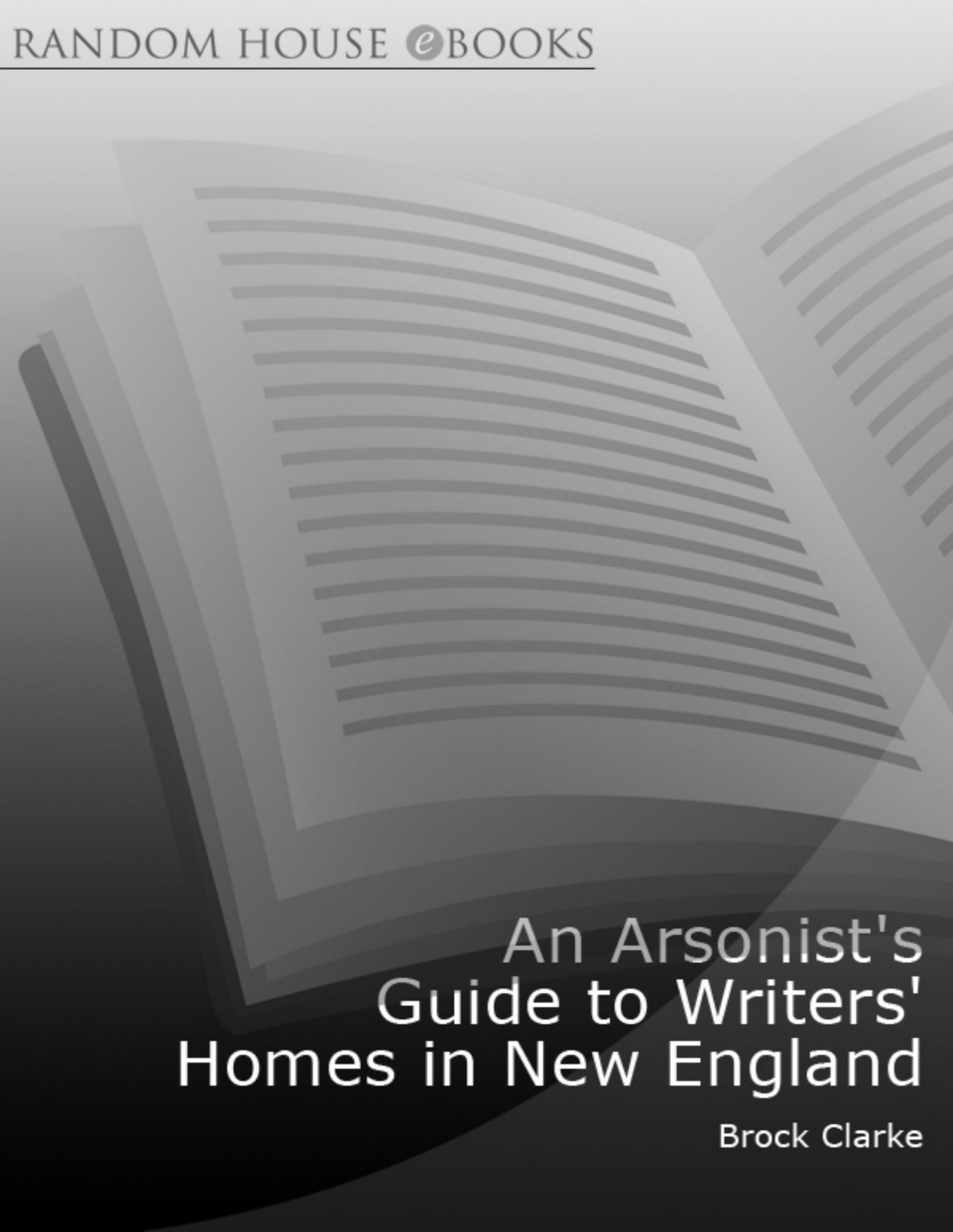


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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An Arsonist's  
Guide to Writers'  
Homes in New England

Brock Clarke

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# About the Book

Sam Pulsifer has come to the end of a very long and unusual journey. He spent ten years in prison for accidentally burning down poet Emily Dickinson's house - and unwittingly killing two people in the process. He emerged aged twenty-eight and set about creating a new life for himself. He went to college, found love, got married, fathered two children, and made a new start - and then watched in almost silent awe as the vengeful past caught up with him, right at his own front door.

As, one by one, the homes of other famous New England writers are torched, Sam knows that this time he is most certainly not guilty. To prove his innocence, he sets out to uncover the identity of this literary-minded arsonist. What he discovers, and how he deals with the reality of his discoveries, is both hilariously funny and heartbreakingly sad.

*An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England* is a novel disguised as a memoir; a heartbreaking story about truth and honesty and the damage they do.

## About the Author

Brock Clarke is the author of three previous books: *The Ordinary White Boy* and two story collections. His stories and essays have appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *OneStory*, the *Believer*, the *Georgia Review*, and the *Southern Review* and have appeared in the annual Pushcart Prize and *New Stories from the South* anthologies and on NPR's *Selected Shorts*. He lives in Cincinnati and teaches creative writing at the University of Cincinnati.

ALSO BY BROCK CLARKE

*Carrying the Torch*

*What We Won't Do*

*The Ordinary White Boy*

*Brock Clarke*

**AN ARSONIST'S  
GUIDE TO  
WRITERS'  
HOMES IN  
NEW ENGLAND**



arrow books

At the end of an hour we saw a far-away town sleeping in a valley by a winding river; and beyond it on a hill, a vast gray fortress, with towers and turrets, the first I had ever seen out of a picture.

“Bridgeport?” said I, pointing.

“Camelot,” said he.

— Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

The memoirs written by the members of the Autobiographical Association ... already had a number of factors in common. One of them was nostalgia, another was paranoia, a third was a transparent craving on the part of the authors to appear likeable. I think they probably lived out their lives on the principle that what they were, and did, and wanted, should above all look pretty. Typing out and making sense out of these compositions was an agony to my spirit until I hit on the method of making them expertly worse; and everyone concerned was delighted with the result.

— Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent*

# Part One



# 1

I, Sam Pulsifer, am the man who accidentally burned down the Emily Dickinson House in Amherst, Massachusetts, and who in the process killed two people, for which I spent ten years in prison and, as letters from scholars of American literature tell me, for which I will continue to pay a high price long into the not-so-sweet hereafter. This story is locally well known, and so I won't go into it here. It's probably enough to say that in the Massachusetts Mt. Rushmore of big, gruesome tragedy, there are the Kennedys, and Lizzie Borden and her ax, and the burning witches at Salem, and then there's me.

So anyway, I served my time, and since the sentencing judge took mercy on me, I served my time at the minimum-security prison up at Holyoke. At Holyoke there were bond analysts and lawyers and day traders and city managers and school administrators, all of them caught with their hands in the till and nothing at all like me, an eighteen-year-old accidental arsonist and murderer with blood and soot on his hands and a heavy heart and plenty to learn and no high school diploma. I flung in and tried. I took a biweekly self-improvement seminar called the College of Me, in which I learned the life-changing virtues of patience, hard work, and positive attitude, and in which I earned my GED. I also hung around this group of high-stepping bond analysts from Boston who were in the clink for insider trading. While they were inside, the bond analysts had set

out to write their fond, freewheeling memoirs about their high crimes and misdemeanors and all the cashish — that's the way they talked — they had made while screwing old people out of their retirement funds and kids out of their college savings. These guys seemed to know everything, the whole vocabulary of worldly gain and progress, so I paid extra attention during their memoir-brainstorming sessions, listened closely to their debates over how much the reading public did or did not need to know about their tortured childhoods in order to understand why they needed to make so much money in the manner in which they made it. I took notes as they divided the world between those who had stuff taken from them and those who took, those who did bad things in a good way — gracefully, effortlessly — and those bumblers who bumbled their way through life.

“Bumblers,” I said.

“Yes,” they said, or one of them did. “Those who bumble.”

“Give me an example,” I said, and they stared at me with those blue-steel stares they were born with and didn't need to learn at Choate or Andover, and they stared those stares until I realized that I was an example, and so this is what I learned from them: that I was a bumbler. I resigned myself to the fact and had no illusions about striving to be something else — a bond analyst or a memoirist, for instance — and just got on with it. Life, that is.

I learned something from everyone, is the point, even while I was fending off the requisite cell-block buggerer, a gentle but crooked corporate accountant at Arthur Andersen who was just finding his true sexual self and who told me in a cracked, aching voice that he wanted me — wanted me, that is, until I told him I was a virgin, which I was, and which, for some reason, made him not want me anymore, which meant that people did not want to sleep

with twenty-eight-year-old male virgins, which I thought was useful to know.

Finally, I learned to play basketball from this black guy named Terrell, which was one of the big joys of my life in prison and which ended badly. Terrell, who had written checks to himself when he was the Worcester city treasurer, was in prison for the last three of my ten years, and whenever he would beat me in one-on-one (this wasn't often, even when I was first learning to play, because although he was very strong, Terrell was also shorter than I was and about as sleek as a fire hydrant; plus, he was twice my age and his knees were completely shot and would crack like dry wood when he ran) — whenever he would beat me, Terrell would yell out, "I'm a grown-ass man." That sounded good, and so after our last game, which I won easily, I also yelled out, "I'm a grown-ass man." Terrell thought I was mocking him, so he started hitting me around the head, and since I get passive in the face of true anger, I just stood there and took Terrell's abuse and didn't try to defend myself. As the guards dragged him to solitary, he promised that he would beat on me a little more once he got out, which he shouldn't have, because, of course, the guards then gave him more solitary than they might have otherwise. By the time Terrell got out, I'd already been released from prison and was home, living with my parents.

That didn't work out too well, living with my parents. For one, my burning down the Emily Dickinson House caused them some real heartbreak, because my mother was a high school English teacher, my father an editor for the university press in town, and beautiful words really mattered to them; they didn't care anything for movies or TV, but you could always count on a good poem to make them cry or sigh meaningfully. For another, their neighbors in Amherst weren't exactly happy that I'd burned down the town's most famous house and killed two of its citizens in the bargain, so they took it out on my parents. People never

had trouble finding our old, creaking house on Chicopee Street: it was always the one with the driveway that had been spray-painted MURDERER! (which I understand) or FASCIST! (which I don't), or with some quote from Dickinson herself that seemed to promise vengeance, but you could never tell exactly what the vengeance might be, because there were a lot of words and the spray-painter always got sloppy and illegible from fatigue or maybe overemotion. It only got worse when I went home after prison. There was some picketing by the local arts council and some unwelcome, unflattering news coverage, and neighborhood kids who cared nothing about Emily Dickinson or her house started egging the place and draping our noble birches with toilet paper, and for a while there it was like Halloween every day. Then things really got serious and someone slashed every tire on my parents' Volvo, and once, in a fit of anger or grief, someone hurled a Birkenstock through one of our bay windows. It was a man's right shoe, size twelve.

All of this happened within the first month of my return home. At the end of the month, my parents suggested I move out. I remember it was August, because the three of us were sitting on our front porch and the neighbors' flags were out, caught between the Fourth of July and Labor Day and in full flutter, and the light was spectral through the maple and birch leaves and it was all very pretty. You can imagine how much my parents' request that I leave home wounded me, even though the College of Me said that life after prison wouldn't be easy and that I shouldn't fool myself into thinking otherwise.

"But where should I go?" I asked them.

"You could go anywhere," my mother said. Back then I thought she was the harder parent of the two and had had high hopes for me, so the disappointment weighed on her more heavily. I remember that my mother was a dry well at my trial when the jury brought back the verdict, although

my father had wept loudly and wetly, and he was starting to cry now, too. I hated to see them like this: one cold, the other weepy. There was a time when I was six and they taught me to skate on a pond at the Amherst public golf course. The ice was so thick and clean and glimmery that the fish and errant golf balls were happy to be frozen in it. The sun was streaking the falling snow, making it less cold. When I finally made it around the perimeter of the pond without falling, my mother and father gave me a long ovation; they were a united front of tickled, proud parenthood. Those times were gone: gone, gone, forever gone.

"Maybe you could go to college, Sam," my father said after he'd gotten ahold of himself.

"That's a good idea," my mother said. "We'd be happy to pay for it."

"OK," I said, because I was looking at them closely, really scrutinizing them for the first time since I'd been home from prison, and I could see what I'd done to them. Before I burned down the Emily Dickinson House, they seemed to be normal, healthy, somewhat happy Americans who took vacations and gardened and who'd weathered a rough patch or two (when I was a boy, my father left us for three years, and after he left us, my mother started telling me tall tales about the Emily Dickinson House, and all of this is part of the larger story I will get to and couldn't avoid even if I wanted). Now they looked like skeletons dressed in corduroy and loafers. Their eyes were sunken and wanting to permanently retreat all the way back into their skulls. A few minutes earlier, I'd been telling them about my virginity and the lecherous Arthur Andersen accountant. My parents, as far as I knew back then, were both modest Yankees who didn't like to hear about anyone's private business, but the College of Me insisted that it was healthy and necessary to tell the people we love everything. Now I was regretting it. Why do we hurt our

parents the way we do? There's no way to make sense of it except as practice for then hurting our children the way we do.

"OK," I said again. "I'll go to college." And then: "I love you both."

"Oh, us too," my father said, and then started weeping again.

"We certainly do," my mother said. And then to my father: "Bradley, quit crying."

Later that night, after my mother had gone to sleep, my father came into my room without knocking, stood over my bed, then leaned down — either to say something to me or to see if I was asleep. I wasn't asleep: I was thinking hopeful thoughts about my future, of how I would go to college and make a clean, honest, painless life for myself, and how proud my parents would be once I'd made it. My father, bent over at the waist the way he was, looked like a crane there to either lift me up with its hook or wreck me with its heavy ball.

"Come downstairs," my father whispered, his face close to mine in the darkness. "I want to show you something."

I got out of bed, followed him downstairs. My father walked into his study, which was — like most of the rooms in the house — lined floor to ceiling with overflowing bookshelves. He sat in a chair, opened the end table drawer next to him, pulled out a Converse shoe box, the sort of box in which you kept your old photos or Christmas cards, and handed it to me. I took the lid off the box and saw that there were envelopes inside, envelopes slit open with a letter opener. The envelopes were addressed to me, all of them. The letters were still inside the envelopes, so I took them out and read them.

There were at least a hundred letters. Some of them, as I mentioned, were from scholars of American literature, damning me to hell, et cetera. There is something underwhelming about scholarly hate mail — the sad

literary allusions, the refusal to use contractions — and so I didn't pay much attention to those letters at all. I'd also received several letters from your ordinary arson enthusiasts, which were minor variations on the "Burn, baby, burn" theme. These particular letters didn't affect me much, either. The fact that the world was full of kooks wasn't any bigger news than the fact that the world was full of bores.

But there were other letters. They were from all over New England and beyond: from Portland, Bristol, Boston, Burlington, Derry, Chicopee, Hartford, Providence, Pittsfield — from towns and cities in New York and Pennsylvania, too. They were all from people who lived near the homes of writers and who wanted me to burn those houses down. A man in New London, Connecticut, wanted me to burn Eugene O'Neill's home because of what an awful drunk O'Neill was and what a bad example he set for the schoolchildren visiting his home, who needed, after all, more positive role models in the here and now. A woman in Lenox, Massachusetts, wanted me to torch Edith Wharton's house because visitors to Wharton's house parked in front of the woman's mailbox and because Wharton was always, in her opinion, something of a whiner and a phony. A dairy farmer in Cooperstown, New York, wanted me to pour gasoline down the chimney of the James Fenimore Cooper House because the dairy farmer couldn't stand the thought of someone being from such a rich family when his family was so awfully poor. "I've had it harder than Cooper ever did," the man wrote. "That family's got money up to *here* and they charge ten dollars' admission to their home and people *pay* it. Won't you please burn that son-of-a-bitching house right to the ground for us? We'll pay, too; I'll sell some of our herd if I have to. I look forward to your response."

There were more letters, and they all wanted the same thing. All of them wanted me to burn down the houses of a

variety of dead writers — Mark Twain, Louisa May Alcott, Robert Lowell, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Some of the correspondents wanted me to burn down the homes of writers I'd never even heard of. All of the letter writers were willing to wait for me to get out of prison. And all of them were willing to pay me.

"Wow," I said to my father when I was done reading. He hadn't said anything in a while. It was interesting: when my mother was around, my father always appeared weak minded and softhearted — a slight, unnecessary, and mostly foolish human being. But now, in that room, with those letters, he seemed to me wise — silent and massive like a Buddha in wire-rimmed glasses. I felt the enormity of the situation, in my throat and face and elsewhere. "Why didn't you tell me about these letters while I was in prison?"

He looked at me but didn't say anything. This was a test of sorts, because this, of course, is what the wise do: they test the unwise to make them less so.

"You wanted to protect me," I said, and he nodded. It heartened me to know I could give him the right answer, and so I persisted. "You wanted to protect me from these people who thought I was an arsonist."

My father couldn't leave this one alone. He went into a violent struggle with his better judgment, wrestling with his mouth as he started and stopped himself from speaking a dozen times. It was like watching Atlas gear up to hoist that big boulder we now live on. Finally my father got it out and said sadly, so sadly, "Sam, you *are* an arsonist."

Oh, how that hurt! But it was true, and I needed to hear it, needed my father to tell it to me, just as we all need our fathers to tell us the truth, as someday I'll tell it to my children, too. And someday my children will do to me what I did to my father: they will deny it, the truth.

"You're wrong," I said. "I'm a college student." I put the top back on the box of letters, handed it back to him, and

left before he could say anything else. When I got back in bed, I made myself promise never to think of the letters again. *Forget about them*, I commanded myself. I thought I could do it, too. After all, wasn't this what college was all about? Emptying your mind of the things you didn't want to remember and filling your mind up with new things before the old, unwanted things could find their way back in?

I left for college two weeks later; it was ten years before I saw my parents again, ten years before I reread those letters, ten years before I met some of the people who'd written the letters, ten years before I found out things about my parents that I'd never suspected and never wanted to know, ten years before I went back to prison, ten years before any of what happened, happened.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. College: Since it was late in the application season, I went to the only school that accepted me — Our Lady of the Lake in Springfield, about twenty miles south of Amherst. It was a Catholic college that had just started accepting men because apparently there weren't enough Catholic women left in the Western world who wanted to pay a lot of money to get an education with no men around except for Jesus and his priests, and even the priests who supposedly ran it didn't want to teach there. A few nuns with nothing else to do other than deliver communion at the early, unpopular masses taught a couple of classes — World Religions 101 and 102 — and the rest were taught by normal, irreligious teachers who couldn't get jobs anywhere else.

My first major was English, because I knew what a disappointment and sorrow I'd been to my parents and I wanted them to be proud of me despite everything that had happened. Besides, my mother had read to me all the time when I was young, and then when I was older she'd made me read all the important books and give detailed reports about why the books were so awfully important, and so I figured, at least, that I had the proper training and

background to succeed. Plus, there were the bond analysts, with their memoirs and their stories; they didn't get tired of talking about themselves one bit. *Whom else would we talk about?* seemed to be their attitude, and maybe they were onto something. Maybe, I thought, by reading these other stories, I could understand something about my own.

It didn't work out. These things never do. You can't ever repeat the past, and the books I once believed to be so important and wise now seemed ordinary in the extreme, and I couldn't concentrate on them. Instead of thinking about how great Gatsby was or wasn't, I mezzed out on the grilled cheese bits that were lodged in Dr. Melton's goatee. And then there was the time when we were reading Dickinson's poetry and the teacher said that she would have taken the class to the Dickinson House for a tour except that it had been burned down years before, and as she tried to remember the name of the arsonist, I realized that I didn't want to tell my story — I knew it all too well. So in order to interrupt and escape the uncomfortable line of inquiry and the recrimination that was sure to follow, I faked a coughing fit and ran to the bathroom and didn't come back to that class for the rest of the semester, and the only reason I got a D and not an F in that class was the same reason I got a D and not an F in my other English classes: the school didn't want anyone to flunk out, because they needed everybody's full tuition. The school really was in horrible shape. There were piles of fallen plaster in the hallways. The drop ceilings were buckling. Even the crucifixes on the classroom walls were in need of repair.

So the bad grades were one reason I quit English, but there was another reason, a bigger reason: I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else I should be doing, something I hadn't tried or considered, something new and better. There I'd be, sitting in Medieval Literature, supposedly learning to speak the Old English that Beowulf and Grendel spoke, and all I could hear was this voice in

my head saying, *There must be something else*. Asking, *What else? What else?* This was a surprise, since I wasn't much of a striver and had never asked that question — *What else?* — out loud in my life. But there was the voice in my head, asking it for me.

Briefly: I quit English and literature and the people who wrote it — for good, I thought — and became a packaging-science major. This was a good move for three reasons. One, packaging scientists were less likely to know that I'd burned down the Emily Dickinson House, or even know who Emily Dickinson was, or even care. Two, I had a knack for remembering what kind of packing material was best for which fragile object, and I immediately understood why it was better that personal-size bags of chips be torn vertically, while family-size bags be torn horizontally, and where the tabs should be located to allow each sort of tearing. I never got anything lower than a B+ in packaging science and managed to do four years of coursework in two years, and immediately after college I got the job for which I was trained, in product development and testing at Pioneer Packaging in Agawam, just outside Springfield.

So those were two good things about switching over to packaging science. The third thing was that I met my wife.

Her name was (and is) Anne Marie, and I met her in our senior seminar in packaging science, the class where you finally stake your claim and choose your path, et cetera. Anne Marie was pretty, extraordinarily good looking, really, and tall, with long, long legs that looked about ready to run away from her torso, and lovely, curly black hair always fastened and arranged and piled high on the top of her head, and a smart smile that was so beautiful you didn't mind the way it made you feel so stupid. What else? In moments that required contemplation, Anne Marie smoked the kind of very thin, sleek cigarettes that, in my experience as a watcher of women, only very thin, sleek women are inclined to smoke. All in all, she looked like an

Italian goddess, which was about right, since her last name was Mirabelli and her ancestors were from Bologna.

About my looks: I was tall and skinny as a kid, but with a big head. I looked like a vertical matchstick. I lifted weights in prison to some effect, including pulling muscles I didn't know I had, and this was another thing I bumbled. My face is the most prominent thing about me: it's red, and sometimes it looks healthy and windburned and full of what you might call life, and sometimes it just looks enflamed. If I were embarrassed, on a dark night you could find your way by the glow of my face. But the College of Me warned against being too hard on oneself, and so it should be said that I'm probably, everything accounted for, ordinary-handsome. My teeth are only slightly crooked, and most of them are white. I have almost all my hair, which is curly and brown. My chest was concave when I was a child, but if you look closely, this is true of most children, and the weight lifting I did in prison helped with that, and while I don't actually have a barrel chest, I might have a half barrel. My legs aren't nearly as scrawny as they used to be, and have muscles and definition now. My nose would be Roman if my head were smaller. Even though I'm close to legally blind, I don't have to obscure my piercing blue eyes with glasses, because I wear contact lenses. They're the sort of eyes that can see right into your soul, if I'm wearing the lenses. But still, I wasn't what you'd call good looking. Plus, I was a virgin, don't forget that, and all of this is why I'd never spoken to Anne Marie, even though we'd been in five classes together: Anne Marie was clearly much too beautiful for me to speak to.

"That's silly," she said when I told her this after we were married. "I wasn't too beautiful for you to speak to. I never thought so, not ever."

"If you didn't think you were too good looking," I asked her, "then why didn't *you* come up and talk to *me* in the first place?"

“That’s a good question,” she said, and I never did get the answer.

But back to our senior seminar, where we were to choose our paths, and Anne Marie’s path was lids — those plastic travel lids you put on your coffee and soda cups. This was in the spring of our senior year, and Anne Marie had the misfortune of giving her presentation right after James Nagali, the only other male student at Our Lady of the Lake, who gave a masterly speech on new soap-dispensing technologies. James was from Ivory Coast, and immediately after graduation he went to work for Ivory soap, but I don’t think there’s any connection.

Our teacher for the seminar was Professor Eisner, a mostly bald man who looked like a walking advertisement for forehead and who, it was rumored, had screwed up a supposedly revolutionary sanitary napkin packaging design that had cost Procter and Gamble a million dollars or two — which was why, the rumor went, he had ended up teaching us. Professor Eisner gushed over James’s presentation, but not over Anne Marie’s. He pointed out certain structural flaws in her lid designs; he asked her rhetorically if she knew what it felt like to have hot coffee pour not into your mouth but onto your chin and down your neck; he asked Anne Marie if she had learned nothing in her four years as an Our Lady of the Lake packaging-science major; he asked her if she had any contingency plans for when the offers from all the prestigious firms didn’t come rolling in. “Because roll in they certainly will not,” he said.

It’s true that Anne Marie wasn’t exactly a born packaging scientist, and it’s also true that her lids, had they ever been manufactured (they weren’t), would have burned a few faces and spawned a few lawsuits. But still, I didn’t like the way Eisner was talking to her. I looked over at Anne Marie, and while she didn’t look a bit upset, not anywhere near tears — she was a tough one, and still is —

Anne Marie *was* playing with her gold crucifix necklace in an agitated manner, and I felt I had to say something in her defense.

"Hey, Professor Eisner," I said. "Ease up a little. Be nice." It's true I didn't exactly scream this at the top of my lungs, and it's also possible that Professor Eisner might not have heard me at all, because he moved right on to the next presentation, but the important thing was that Anne Marie heard.

"Thank you," Anne Marie said to me after class.

"For what?" I asked, although I knew, because, of course, I'd said what I'd said so she'd thank me, because there's not a pure motive in me or in anyone else, I don't think.

"For standing up for me."

"You're welcome," I said. "Would you like to have dinner?"

"With you?" she asked.

This was just the way she talked — bluntly and always in pursuit of the simple truth — and it didn't suggest anything negative about her true feelings for me. As proof, we did have dinner, at this German place in Springfield called the Student Prince. She was the rare thin Italian girl who liked German food; you couldn't talk her out of the Munich sausage platter, and this was just one of the reasons I fell in love with her. And then a month later we slept together, in my apartment, which happened to be directly above the Student Prince. There must be something of my modest parents in me, because I won't say anything about the sex except that I enjoyed it. But I will say that I missed my virginity, maybe because I'd had it for so long, and right afterward — my face so hot and red it felt like something nuclear — I said to Anne Marie, "I was a virgin."

"Oh, sweetie," she said, "I wasn't." She put her hand on my blazing cheek, and you could see the sweet sadness in her eyes, the pity for the thirty-year-old virgin I'd just been.

I'd never seen a person's heart so over-large and weak with real emotion, and so I asked, "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," Anne Marie said. There may have been pity behind her saying yes, but there was love, too: in my experience, you can't expect love to be unaffected by pity, nor would you want it to be.

Moving quickly now: We graduated. A few months later we were married, with the wedding at St. Mary's, the reception at the Red Rose in the South End. Anne Marie's family paid for it and was in attendance (more on them eventually), but my parents were not, mostly because I didn't tell them about it. When Anne Marie asked, "Why aren't you inviting your parents to our wedding?" I told her, "Because they died."

"How?" she wanted to know. "When?"

"Their house burned down," I said, "and they died in the fire," which just goes to show that every human being has a limited number of ideas, and which, as you'll see, ended up being pretty close to the truth. Anyway, my answer seemed to satisfy Anne Marie. But the truth was more complicated. The truth was, I could hear that voice in my head asking *What else? What else?* and I couldn't be sure if it was my voice or my parents'.

Anne Marie and I took our honeymoon in Quebec City, and since it was December and cold, we skated, which reminded me of my parents' applauding my skating on the golf course pond, so many years ago, and of how nice that was. It should also have reminded me of how badly my parents and I ended up, but I was me, and Anne Marie was Anne Marie, and we weren't my parents, and this wasn't any pond but the mighty Saint-Laurent (St. Lawrence) River, which was frozen over for the first time in who knows how long and everyone was speaking French and things were different enough to make me think that history does not necessarily repeat itself and that a man's character and not his gene pool is his fate. We talked it

over that night in our room at the Château Frontenac and Anne Marie was game, and so we decided to make a baby.

We made one; it was a girl. We named her Katherine, after no one in particular. By the time she was born, I was already turning heads at Pioneer Packaging, helping to make antifreeze containers that were more translucent than previously thought possible. Katherine was a good baby: she cried, but only to let you know she hadn't stopped breathing, and it never bothered us much, and it didn't bother the people downstairs at the Student Prince, either. They would often bring up plates of cold schnitzel for her to gum when she was teething. During our first Christmas we strung blinking lights around our windows, and on Christmas Eve, Mr. and Mrs. Goerman, who'd owned the Student Prince for fifty years, brought up platters of creamed whitefish and several bottles of Rhine wine and we toasted the birthday of the baby Jesus, and all in all, this might have been our happiest time.

Then, two years later, we had another child, a boy named Christian, after Anne Marie's father, and suddenly the apartment we loved got too small, and suddenly the smells from down in the restaurant became too strong and we started eating potato pancakes in our dreams. One day Anne Marie came up to me looking like a less happy, more tired version of the woman I'd married just three years earlier and Christian was shrieking in the background like a winged dinosaur fighting extinction, and she said, "We need a bigger place."

She was right: we did. But where? We liked Springfield just fine, but the Puerto Ricans had moved in and Anne Marie's parents and the other Italians had moved out, to West Springfield and Ludlow and so on, and while we didn't want to live where they lived, we didn't want to live in Springfield, either — not because of the Puerto Ricans who would be our neighbors, but because of what the Mirabellis would say about them when they came to visit. This was

one of the things the College of Me preached — avoid heartache, even at the expense of principle — and it was one of the few things it got right.

So Springfield was out, but we had to go somewhere. One day Anne Marie said, “I hear Amherst is nice. What about Amherst?”

It should be said here that I hadn’t told Anne Marie about my past, and right then I wanted to, badly: I wanted to tell Anne Marie everything — about the Emily Dickinson House and how I’d burned it, accidentally, and the people I’d killed — and by the way, it wasn’t the first time I’d wanted to tell her such a thing. I should have told her right away, I know this now and I knew it then, but new love is so fragile and I thought I would wait until it got stronger. But then time and more time went by, and now my original crime was compounded by the crime of not telling her about it for so many years and things were too complicated and I couldn’t tell her the truth.

So I said yes. Amherst. Why not? We put the kids in the minivan and headed up to Amherst. On the drive up I convinced myself of things, crazy things. I told myself that we’d get to the town and find an old, lovely New England house in old, lovely New England Amherst, move in, then present my house, my wife, my kids, my job, myself, to my parents, who would have by this point begun to miss me. *I’ve changed*, I would say. And they would say, *Us, too. Welcome home*. Because the heart wants what the heart wants, and the heart was telling me, *Don’t be ridiculous, they’ve forgiven you, all of them*. Saying, *It’s time, it’s time, it’s time*.

It wasn’t time. This was on a Friday. Amherst was exactly as I’d remembered it: the leafy, prosperous streets, which were filled with so many Volvo station wagons it was like mushrooms in a cave; the two-hundred-year-old houses with their genteelly overgrown lawns, their tiger lilies and blue mums and birch trees and historical markers; the

white college boys with dreadlocks playing their complicated Frisbee games on the sweeping town green; the white clapboard Congregational churches and the granite Episcopal churches and the soaring spires of the college everywhere visible over the high tree line; the well-scrubbed college girls barely dressed in workout clothes; and the boat-shoed and loafered professors drinking their coffee on the sort of wrought iron outdoor patio furniture that looks too delicate to sit on even if you were as wafer thin as most of the college girls were. All of this was familiar to me, but it didn't make me feel happy, didn't make me feel at home. I felt like a cousin once removed, which meant, I guess, that you weren't really a cousin at all: you were estranged from blood relation in some permanent way, and my remove from Amherst was that I had burned down the most significant of its significant, beautiful, aged houses, had killed two of its loafered citizens. A cousin once removed was not a cousin; a criminal citizen was not a citizen.

This was a big disappointment, the biggest, because I'd taken up packaging science, and I'd forgotten my literature, forgotten that you can't go home again, and so I thought that Amherst — the town where I'd grown up, the town where both my parents had grown up, the town where both their families had lived for two hundred years — would still be my hometown. How could it not? Was I not the town's own humbled prodigal son? Did not every town need someone like me, someone — as the song says — who was lost but now was found? But from the driver's seat of our minivan, I had the definite feeling that Amherst would never be my town again, that the town itself wouldn't stand for it, that they didn't need a prodigal son, that a prodigal son was exactly what they *didn't* need. We drove past my old high school: there were bars on the windows where there hadn't been before I went to prison, armed uniformed guards out front where before there'd been old-lady hall

monitors with whistles, and I imagined that the bars and the guards were there to protect the students from me and not some teenage crazy in a trench coat stuffed with homemade ordnance. I could hear the principal during assembly that morning: *We were not vigilant and he burned down the Emily Dickinson House and killed two people in the bargain. But we are ready for him now.* I imagined that after school the students and their parents, and for that matter the whole town, would — à la *Frankenstein* — take up their torches and pitchforks and drive me out of town and leave me — lurching, grunting, monstrous with my scarred and stitched body and the bolt through my head — wandering, lost in the strange, cruel world, never to be heard from again.

“What do you think?” Anne Marie asked me, her face happy and expectant, about the opposite of how mine surely looked.

“Pitchforks!” I said. “Torches! Monster!”

“What?” she asked. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” I said, and I kept driving, in a kind of trance, so that Anne Marie’s cries of “Wait!” and “Where are you going?” and “We haven’t looked at any houses yet — hold on!” were something out of the faint, distant past and I had trouble hearing them. Yes, I kept driving, right past Chicopee Street, where my parents lived, and then out of town, and for five more years I was pretty glad I had. Soon we were on Route 116 and out of Amherst proper, and this, too, was familiar — the small brick ranch houses that housed the Asian grad students at the state university, and the student laundromats and the family-owned greengrocers and the tiny, poorly stocked nonchain video stores in which you couldn’t ever find the movies you wanted. But soon things began to change. First, there came the river of superstores: the super garden-supply stores and super toy stores and super children’s clothing stores and super building-supply stores and super furniture

galleries and super supermarkets and so on. The buildings that housed these superstores were as cheap looking as they were big, just oversize tin pole barns with parking lots so huge that the entire town of Amherst could have fit comfortably inside. Amherst didn't seem big enough to justify all these superstores and their parking lots; it was like building a *sub* without first building the *urb*.

But these stores were just an introduction to what had *really* changed: what had really changed were the subdivisions beyond the stores, the subdivisions where ten years before there had been only broadleaf tobacco and corn fields, subdivisions with signs at the gated entrances that said MONACO ESTATES and STONEHAVEN, and with streets named Princess Grace Way and Sheep Meadow Circle. I drove around these subdivisions, looking for a FOR SALE sign and not finding one until we turned into a subdivision named Camelot — so said the wooden sign carved into the shape of a castle.

Camelot was beautiful. There were no trees anywhere — it was as though Camelot had been nuked or had been the brainchild of the logging industry maybe — and each house was exactly the same except that some had powder blue vinyl siding and others had desert tan. There were elaborate wooden playgrounds in the backyards and mini-satellite dishes on every roof, and each driveway was a smooth carpet of blacktop and there wasn't a sidewalk crack to trip over because there were no sidewalks, and each house had a garage that was so oversized it could have been its own house. There was the constant, soothing hum of lawn maintenance coming from somewhere, everywhere, even though the grass seed in front of most houses hadn't matured yet and I couldn't spot a lawn mower anywhere, and the sprinkler systems were all activated even though it was late September and too late for grass watering, the spray arcing and dancing in the

streetlights, of which there looked to be about 150, all of them on even though it was the middle of the afternoon.

"Wow," I said.

"Wow what?" Anne Marie said. "Are you talking about that?" She pointed at a tan house that was exactly like the others except that there was that FOR SALE sign on the lawn. Anne Marie and I got out of the van; the kids were sitting in their seats, screaming about something, everything, but the windows were rolled up and their screaming noises were as soft and welcome as rain on the roof.

"What are you thinking?" Anne Marie said finally. There was a weary, sighing quality to her voice, which I took for simple human fatigue, but which might have been resignation. I wish I'd paid more attention to Anne Marie back then, but I didn't. Oh, why didn't I? Why don't we listen to the people we love? Is it because we have only so much listening in us, and so many very important things to tell ourselves?

"Sam, what are you thinking?" Anne Marie asked again, because I hadn't answered her, because I was still thinking about Camelot and the house.

"Hello, life," I said back.

"Are you crying?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. I was crying, because I was so happy, because this was my new home, and because it was clean and perfect and I couldn't imagine anyone knowing me here, anyone wanting to know me. My neighbors, were they ever to introduce themselves, and upon hearing that I was an arsonist and a murderer, would start talking about the virtues of Bermuda grass as opposed to Kentucky blue. I could not be normal in Amherst, but I could be normal in Camelot. I felt so happy, so grateful. I wanted to thank somebody. If there were any neighbors visible, I would have thanked them. But there weren't any neighbors visible; they were all inside, minding their own business, and that was one of the things for which I was grateful.